

ELLORA'S CAVE XANADU



NAKED
Souls
KATE HILL

Naked Souls

Kate Hill

Betrayed and imprisoned, Overlord Lysander is forced to mate with beautiful Queen Flora. Lysander has never found a woman more desirable. Resisting her is impossible, especially when manipulated by carnal magic.

Trapped in a loveless marriage, Flora has dreamed about Lysander since meeting him at the high king's gathering. She never imaged she would one day be forced into his bed by her maniacal husband.

Damaged by an abusive past, King Typhon obsesses about two things—keeping his kingdom safe at any cost, and the innocent maid who stirs his body and soul. Love is a luxury a leader can't afford, especially when he's consorting with the fleshtress, a creature who thrives on mortal lust.

Compelled to love a man she can never have, Crystal longs for brooding King Typhon. She sees past his madness and into his heart, but to save the man she must destroy the king.

In a magical world at war, passion abounds as four people are stripped to their souls, but will love or lust conquer all?

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Naked Souls

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NAKED SOULS

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Chapter One

In the high king's great hall, surrounded by the wealthiest and most influential people in the known world, Flora felt bored and restless. Her husband, Typhon, ruler of Darridge, a kingdom on the southern tip of the continent, had sent her to this gathering in his stead. He disliked social affairs. Most likely he wanted to stay in Darridge, planning more ways to squeeze money from the common people to finance another battle with the Kingdom of Aberhill.

She sympathized with those caught in Typhon's path. All too often, she had felt the sting of his wrath. Before her marriage, she hadn't imagined hating anyone as deeply as she hated her husband. She hadn't always despised him, but over the past few months he had become unbearable.

The only good thing about this gathering was that she had at least some freedom from Typhon. He had sent guards to watch her every move, but she preferred that to looking at his face, hearing his voice and enduring his loathsome touch.

"Are you feeling well, my lady?" asked the young woman beside her. She was the princess of...Flora couldn't recall. She felt almost guilty about paying so little attention to most of the introductions made tonight, but she couldn't seem to keep her thoughts from drifting.

On such a beautiful spring night she wished she were outside, swimming in a moonlit lake or racing on horseback across an open field.

"Actually, I could use some air," Flora said, offering the girl a slight smile. "Please excuse me."

She stepped away from the corner of the room where she'd been talking to a small group of ladies. As usual, most of the men remained seated at the tables, drinking and talking amongst themselves. A select few had joined High King Nik at the stable where he had gone to inspect his new riding horse, a gift from one of the guests.

Flora glanced toward the entrance to the courtyard and noticed that guests filled the sanctuary. She sighed. It seemed she'd get no privacy tonight, short of retiring to her chamber. Then she noticed a balcony across the room. It appeared to be empty, so she headed toward it, weaving her way around other guests. Her two guards followed. She paused and spun toward them.

"Please wait here. I require privacy."

They looked hesitant, but she stared at them with her sternest expression and they relented.

"Yes, my lady," said one of the guards. "We'll keep watch from here."

Of course. What did they think she'd do? Leap off the balcony, run to the woods and live like an animal? Compared to the life she had with Typhon, that might be the better choice.

She stepped outside, walked to the carved stone railing and closed her eyes, drawing a deep breath. The aroma of flowers lingered on the air and she smiled, imagining she were alone in a field of lilacs. No responsibilities. No guards, and best of all, no husband.

A strange feeling swept over her, as if someone were watching her. The guards? Her eyes snapped open and she glanced around. Upon seeing a man standing at the far end of the balcony, half hidden in the shadows, she gave a little gasp of surprise. Tall and lean with broad shoulders, he had long, sinewy legs accentuated by his fitted ebony trousers and leather boots.

"Something wrong?" he asked, his voice soft, but so masculine that a shiver of passion rippled down her spine. Until this moment she believed she'd lost her ability to desire a man.

"I thought I was alone," she said. "You surprised me."

He stepped closer, out of the shadows and into the light of the full moon.

Fascinated and aroused by him, Flora moistened her lips with the tip of her tongue. He had an angular face with sharp cheekbones, a strong jawline and a longish but well-shaped nose. His mouth made her ache with need. She wondered how those chiseled lips, the top forming a perfect little bow, would feel against hers or even better teasing her nipples?

In spite of his understated garments and rugged masculinity, he emanated good breeding. He was almost beautiful, but using such a feminine word to describe a man like this seemed insulting.

By the way he stared at her with his wide-set blue eyes, he found her just as interesting. As he stepped closer, she noticed a leather strip bound his glossy black hair at his nape. His pale skin carried a hint of gold, as if it had been kissed by the sun. That light complexion and the black inner rims of his eyes indicated Fanticaun ancestry.

Many people still practiced magic, but few displayed such obvious characteristics of that ancient race. At one time they were the most powerful race in the world and the founders of most other magical peoples. Pure Fanticauns now bordered on extinction and generally lived in seclusion.

"That's why I came out here," he said, turning his gaze toward the starry sky.

His blunt reply irked her and she said with a hint of sarcasm, "Excuse me for disturbing you."

He didn't respond, but stared at her with those compelling eyes.

"I'm not much for crowds," she said, unsure of why she felt the need to keep talking. "Gatherings like this make me feel...trapped."

The faintest smile curved the corner of his lips. "I understand. There are places I'd rather be."

She didn't doubt it. In spite of his aristocratic appearance, this setting didn't fit him. He'd look more at home riding bareback through the wilderness or worshipping the moon on a snowy mountaintop.

"That's exactly how I feel," she said, her voice scarcely a whisper. Sighing deeply she walked to the rail again and stared toward the silhouette of the dark woods.

"You look like a caged bird."

His words struck a chord in her, whether due to the way he spoke them or because they were too close to the truth, she wasn't sure. Her breath caught in her throat and she turned to him.

"Who are you, sir?" she asked, wishing her father had given her to a man like this instead of Typhon. Though she'd just met him, something told her they were a soul match. Both preferred the stars to the great hall. Each wanted to be somewhere else. Neither seemed comfortable with the life they had been born into.

"Lysander of Aberhill."

A feeling of dread tightened Flora's belly. Typhon sought to conquer Aberhill. Lysander, overlord of that kingdom, defeated him at every turn.

"And you, my lady?" he asked.

"Flora of Darridge."

He lifted a sleek eyebrow. "Typhon's queen?"

She nodded, her gaze locked on his.

This time the smile that touched his lips was nothing short of wicked. He approached and stood so close that she saw the fine lines around his eyes and the thickness of his lashes. He smelled like a fresh spring breeze laced with herbs. Those who practiced Fanticaun magic often carried the aroma of plants and incense. Typhon always did, but he had a bitter scent. Pungent. So unlike the crispness of Lysander.

The Overlord of Aberhill lifted a hand to her cheek. A shiver darted through her, though she couldn't tell if it was one of fear or one of desire. It felt like the unsettling combination of both. She should move away, but she didn't want to. The warmth of his calloused hand against her soft skin aroused her. When he trailed his long, slender fingertip down her cheek and across her lips, she resisted the urge to close her eyes and sway toward him. No one had ever touched her so tenderly, least of all the man who should have.

It was completely improper for her to stand here, allowing her husband's worst enemy to caress her like this, but she wished he'd touch her even more intimately. She wished he'd kiss her with that fascinating mouth. It struck her that to touch the wife of his enemy, he must be as arrogant as his reputation indicated.

"It seems Typhon is as lacking in the bedroom as he is on the battlefield."

This statement forced Flora back to reality. Her teeth clenched, she knocked his hand away from her face.

"How dare you!" she demanded.

"How much would you like me to dare, lovely Flora?"

"You must be mad. Do you realize my husband's guards are watching? A motion from me and they'll have your hide."

"That's very doubtful."

"Attacking another man's wife isn't something the high king will overlook."

"If the look in your eyes is any indication, it wouldn't be an attack but a mission of mercy."

Enraged, Flora drew back her hand to slap his face, but he caught her wrist before the blow landed and pressed a kiss to her palm. She hated how the sensation of his lips sent little thrills of delight through her entire body.

Lysander dropped his hold on her, turned and stepped into the great hall.

Her heart pounding with conflicting emotions, Flora strode to the edge of the balcony and took a moment to calm herself. No man had ever made her feel like this and something told her that no man ever would. These brief moments were burned upon her soul. Lysander's kiss on her palm had been more passionate and satisfying than her husband's fucking had ever been.

* * * * *

"She took her own life," Captain Mikolas of the elite guard informed King Ariston and his brother, Overlord Lysander. King and overlord shared a family resemblance – both tall and graceful with blue eyes and hair like satin, yet the differences between them were more pronounced than their similarities. Ariston usually looked serene whereas Lysander appeared stern at best, fierce at worst.

The king had a fit, slender build, while Lysander possessed the supple yet hard-as-steel muscle of a warrior. No dark inner rims marked Ariston's eyes, nor did he have Lysander's pale skin. The overlord had inherited those characteristics from their Fanticaun descendants. While Ariston wielded magic, his link with the forces of nature wasn't as strong as Lysander's.

Lysander felt more comfortable alone in the wilderness than among crowds. Maybe that explained why people who didn't know him usually feared him. It had been the same at the gathering he'd recently attended at the high king's court. Strangers watched him warily, hesitant to approach him. Except for one woman.

"It must have happened early this morning," the captain continued, interrupting Lysander's drifting thoughts.

All three men stood in the highest tower of Aberhill Palace, staring at the pile of robes on the floor. Ashes of the former chief enchanter dirtied the worn silk. A creature

as old and powerful as Hecta turned to ashes upon her death. The bloodstained ritual knife nearby indicated that she had chosen suicide over retirement.

Ariston, who had taken the throne after his father's death a month ago, had made many changes in the kingdom. Most recently, he had announced that the old chief enchanter, a woman who had served his father for years, would be replaced by an enchanter of his choosing.

Stepping closer to the robes, Lysander prodded them with the tip of his sword. His brow furrowed as he tried to reconcile in his mind the evidence with what he knew of Hecta. Finally he said, "It would seem so."

"There's no other explanation," Ariston said with a deep sigh. "The woman needed to be removed from her position. Seeing how twisted she had become these past few years, Father should have done it."

"She'd served him well," Lysander stated.

Ariston said, "I offered to let her live the rest of her life here in comfort but —"

"While watching someone else perform her duties?" Lysander held his brother's gaze, speaking to the king in a way no one else dared. Ariston ruled, but Lysander protected and defended their kingdom. Their father had wanted it that way.

Ariston had the gifts of balance and diplomacy and the strength to sift through the facts and make reasonable decisions. Lysander knew how to wage war and possessed the courage to fight alongside his people as well as give orders. Men followed him, yet without Ariston's temperance, Lysander's inner fire might lead them into the wrong battles.

Lysander loved his brother and didn't begrudge him leadership, yet part of him still felt anger toward their father for not fully trusting him.

Ariston held Lysander's gaze. "You know as well as I do her time had passed. Her power overtook her reason and her cruelty was unacceptable."

"I agree," Lysander replied. "However we could have found another place for her. She provided a great service and magical training to many in our realm, including us, Brother."

"I know. And I realize you trained more closely with her than I did. While I cannot mourn her passing, I do regret the circumstances of her demise. She will be given a proper funeral and a day of reflection throughout the kingdom."

"I will see to it," said Prytanis, the new chief enchanter, who had just entered the tower.

"I'm sorry your new home has been tainted by suicide," Ariston said.

Prytanis, a dark-haired, willowy man with gray eyes, even more compassionate than those of the king, shook his head. "I'm sorry it ended this way for Hecta. She was one of my first teachers and will be missed."

"I need to return to the field," Lysander stated. Enough time had been wasted in the tower. He had troops to inspect, training to perform and reports to hear. He would leave the funeral plans to those better suited for them.

"I want to meet with you later to discuss the High King's feast," Ariston reminded Lysander. Ariston had been too busy to attend the feast, so he had pulled Lysander away from nearly a week of training to represent Aberhill. He knew Ariston had chosen him because he felt Lysander neglected social events. Few things sickened Lysander more than a room full of pompous, pampered royals trying to impress each other.

This feast in particular had riled him. Since he'd met Queen Flora of Darridge, the woman had haunted his dreams. Her delicate face, lush curves and best of all the fierceness in her dark eyes ignited his passion in a way no one ever had before. Occasional fucking to relieve tension was one thing, but *dreaming* about a woman was quite another. He needed to delve into training. Intense physical exertion would get his mind off the luscious Queen Flora.

"Lysander?" Ariston prompted.

"Of course. There's not much to report however."

"I'll send for you later," Ariston said and motioned for him to go.

Lysander strode out of the tower, grateful to be heading out of the palace and back to the warm spring day – the perfect weather for training. Neither too hot nor too cold and pleasant enough to go swimming in comfort when the day's exercises ended.

In spite of the time spent training with Hecta, Lysander had always hated the tower. His heart belonged to the outdoors. Green fields, winding forests and flowing waters fed his vigorous nature and contented his restless soul. From the time he could walk he'd been trained as a soldier. He'd adapted seamlessly to a regimented life mostly because it allowed him to spend so much time outside, testing his strength and stamina. Part of him had always sought something he couldn't quite reach and he loved the challenge.

Sometimes he thought if he discovered exactly what he wanted, if he became too satisfied, it would take away his purpose in life. That's what he loved about nature. The challenges were endless. One could never truly master the weather and could only hope to become one with the rugged terrain.

Being trapped inside, such as the tower imprisoned the chief enchanter and the palace imprisoned the king, was a fate worse than death to Lysander. Perhaps that explained why he didn't mind being second-in-command of Aberhill. Ariston's word was ultimately law, but the king considered Lysander his most respected confidant. The arrangement had thus far worked well for them. Everyone knew Lysander could overpower his brother physically and magically. However Ariston had the support of the people and rightfully so. Though Lysander loved their kingdom, he couldn't relate to the people as Ariston did.

Maybe if he had spent less time on the field and more with diplomats... But it wasn't meant to be. From the time they were children, their roles had been clearly defined.

Lysander strode across the great hall, through the kitchen and out a door leading to the back of the palace. He drew a deep breath of fresh air, already feeling free since stepping out of the damp stone palace. His gaze riveted toward the training field where his men rode and practiced with their weapons. The shouts, grunts and clashes of steel summoned him and Lysander answered the call, bound by duty and desire.

* * * * *

"No. None of these are good enough," Typhon said, pausing by the walkway that encircled the pen where the newest selection of breeding stock had been herded.

The males had been handpicked from the best in the kingdom and beyond. Naked, except for the heavy leather collars around their thick necks, they strode barefoot over the dirt floor. Some wrestled with each other simply to alleviate boredom, while others sat with their backs against the high stone wall surrounding the circular pen.

All were tall and powerfully built. They would no doubt sire strong sons, but Typhon's successor needed more than physical strength. The one who would carry his name and his throne required keen intelligence and outstanding magical ability as well as physical prowess. While many of these men had some magical gifts, none had the potential to spawn a man powerful enough to crush Typhon's greatest enemy, the kingdom of Aberhill.

"I agree," said the scrawny, black-haired hag standing beside Typhon. The old bitch had come to Typhon months ago. Though his first impulse had been to kill her on the spot, he'd wondered why the former chief enchanter of Aberhill, thought to be dead, sought him. After hearing her proposal, he had accepted Hecta as an advisor.

She would live in safety and secrecy within the walls of his palace. In return, she would use her magic—magic that had for years served his enemies—to help him conquer Aberhill.

Hecta continued, "You're right in believing that other than High King Nik, the Kingdom of Aberhill is your greatest rival, magically and militarily. However it's not their frail new king who keeps them safe. It's Lysander. Without him, Aberhill is as vulnerable as a motherless cub."

The mere mention of Lysander of Aberhill made Typhon burn with rage. "We've tried to kill him for years but he's—"

"A warrior without peer and his magic makes him stronger."

"I wouldn't be so sure that he's a warrior without peer."

A smile tugged at the hag's lips and she cast a sweeping glance over Typhon. "You're powerful and have seen your share of battle, but do you think yourself Lysander's equal?"

"I'd have no fear of finding out."

"You saw what he did to your brother. If you instead of Aqatone had met Lysander in battle, do you think you would have fared any better?"

Typhon leveled a cool stare upon her. "As I said. I don't fear Lysander of Aberhill. I would relish the opportunity to destroy him with my bare hands."

She snorted. "Most males are overcome by the need to prove their strength. Don't be a fool, Typhon, and succumb to that particular weakness. I know Lysander better than anyone. He was a pleasure to teach. Fierce. Determined. Volatile."

"He has to die," Typhon said through gritted teeth. He would love to be the one to do the deed. He hadn't had the chance to destroy the old king, but his sons would not be safe from Typhon's wrath.

"Capturing him will be like harnessing a storm," said the hag, an almost dreamy expression on her face.

Typhon curled his lip. "Capture? You mean kill."

"Eventually." Hecta trailed her fingertips over the wooden railing. She stared down at the naked men below without really seeing them. "But not before he sires your son."

"What?" Typhon demanded. "And give my kingdom to the flesh and blood of an Aberhill pig?"

"What better vengeance than to steal his seed, watch it grow in your bride and turn it against its own kind? He will be your son, Typhon, your successor. With Lysander out of the way, you will destroy Ariston and take his kingdom. Then your son, raised with your values, will rule both lands. Or why stop there? A child with Lysander's power could help you conquer the high king."

Mention of High King Nik made Typhon's gut tighten. The supreme ruler of the Western Realm favored Aberhill, mostly because other than his personal army, they offered the strongest protection in times of war. Overlord Lysander had been in control of their troops for years, long before the old king of Aberhill died.

"I hope to expand this kingdom long before my son is old enough to fight beside me," Typhon stated.

"If that's true, then you should consider my suggestion about summoning a fleshtress."

"You know how I feel about that," Typhon said coolly.

A fleshtress, a creature who dwelled between the physical and spiritual worlds, could increase his powers, but those who bargained with it surrendered in body and soul. Unable to feel "whole" without energy shared while fucking a living person, fleshtresses were rare. They were conjured by demons and unable to procreate.

Typhon loathed the idea of giving anyone such power over him, even for a short time. He had already charred his soul with acts necessary to keep his kingdom secure, but it wasn't the same as handing his soul to a fleshtress.

"I know how you feel yet I still don't understand it," she continued. "But whatever your plans, Lysander's son would be a great prize."

Typhon looked thoughtful. "Yes. It's an interesting idea. Lysander's reputation precedes him, but I wonder, if he has so much power, why doesn't he rule his own kingdom?"

"He's flawed," Hecta replied, her jaw visibly tight. "The magic of our people flows from the land. His heart is linked to nature rather than the desires of men. A man like that will kill to defend what he loves, but if he's left in peace, he's willing to share the world."

Snorting, Typhon said, "Peace? From what he's done to us in battle, I don't believe he knows the meaning of the word."

"You've been attacking our borders from the outside," Hecta stated. "It's time to change tactics. Trust me when I tell you an inside attack will be required for you to achieve your goals. Take Lysander. Drain his seed, then his life and Aberhill will be yours."

"How do you suggest I do this?"

"With a carefully laid trap. One of your foolish, heavy-handed attacks will fail, but I have an idea. Once a year each elite guard of Aberhill goes on a wilderness journey to test his stamina and skills. He's completely alone."

A slow smile spread across Typhon's face. "I presume Lysander is included in this rite?"

"He wouldn't miss it."

"Where and when does it take place?"

"It is on our land, deep in the wilderness yet with boundaries protected by our army. Breaching the soldiers won't be especially difficult. The problem will be determining when Lysander is on his wilderness journey. If I'm careful, I can use my magic to track him."

"I thought you were his teacher. Won't he sense it if you're tracking him?"

"He was my finest student, however I wasn't fool enough to teach him everything I know."

Typhon grinned wickedly, his gaze locked on Hecta's. "Ariston was a fool to let you go."

"I agree. We'll need patience, Typhon. The wilderness journeys should begin next month."

Typhon's fists clenched. That seemed too long to wait, but the hag was right. Without patience, he would never have revenge.

Still he would continue to seek other breeders, should Hecta fail in her plan to capture Lysander of Aberhill. Perhaps he would find a better one to sire his heir.

* * * * *

Flora walked through the courtyard at Darridge Palace. She paused by a rosebush bearing blue flowers that reminded her of the eyes that had haunted her thoughts for over a month. It had been that long since the high king's gathering where she'd met Overlord Lysander.

Since then, the man had scarcely left her thoughts. She couldn't help feeling a hint of glee when she thought of the anger he'd caused Typhon. When the old king had died several months ago, Typhon had launched an immediate attack against Aberhill. He'd hoped the new king would be vulnerable and unprepared. Unfortunately Ariston hadn't hesitated in meeting the challenge. With Lysander in charge of their army, they had not only defended Aberhill, but pushed past the Darridge borders. Only word from Ariston had prevented Lysander from a possible conquest. Soon after their army had withdrawn, Ariston sent a message asking for a meeting to discuss a peace treaty between Aberhill and Darridge.

Enraged, Typhon had refused, doubled the size of his army and increased training, concentrating most of his resources on soldiers with talent for wielding magic. Yet few could compare with the magical warriors of Aberhill, especially Overlord Lysander.

Flora hadn't witnessed his skills, but she had been in his presence and felt his power. She'd wanted to feel other things as well, such as Lysander's kiss on her mouth and his long, slender hands on her body.

Closing her eyes, she inhaled, allowing the scent of flowers to carry her back to that night on the balcony. He'd stared at her with those penetrating eyes and touched her in a way that made her tingle all over.

Typhon had been the only man who had ever touched her intimately and his cold, crude methods left her disgusted by the marriage bed. He thought fucking meant climbing atop her and rutting until he spilled his useless seed, which usually took mere moments. She actually appreciated his swiftness, since it prevented him from touching her for long.

At least he used a special salve on his cock so that the enormous weapon didn't cause her pain. Everything about him, from the feel of his rough skin to the bitter scent of incense that clung to him from his incessant magical practice, revolted her. In truth he wasn't a bad-looking man. Like his father before him, he practiced daily with his personal guards. The kings of Darridge had always been warriors in body as well as in magic. Though harsh training had provided Typhon with a rock-hard body, Flora had never been stirred by it.

Until meeting Lysander, she thought she'd lost all her girlish notions about desiring men. Her feelings for a man considered the enemy of her people might be treasonous, but she didn't care. Her thoughts were her own, the one real freedom she had left.

"Flora, come."

Typhon's voice forced her out of her daydreams of Lysander and she jumped slightly before turning toward the arched doorway where he stood.

She approached and their gazes locked. His lip curled and his hawkish nose wrinkled in a look that might indicate pleasure, irritation or stomach cramps. Even after two years of marriage she couldn't decide.

"Yes?" she asked.

"There were no acceptable breeders in the most recent stock," he stated.

Breeders. Stock. She knew all too well what he meant. When Typhon had learned from the royal seer that he could not beget an heir, his first order of business had been to kill the seer. Next he had sent his advisors to search the countryside and beyond, buying or stealing young, healthy males in the hope of finding one to get her with child.

Typhon wanted a very specific type of male. He would choose her child's sire. Flora had no say in the matter. No one, save her and Typhon's few trusted advisors, would ever know the truth about the child's identity. To hint that he was not the father of the future King of Darridge meant death. She didn't know what he did with the slaves he gathered—bulls as he called them. Breeding stock. Yet she doubted they were returned to the lives from which they had been stolen. No one whose path crossed Typhon's remained unscathed. She should know better than anyone.

"Again you're released from breeding tonight," he said, an eerie grin on his lips. He grasped her chin, not enough to hurt her yet still too roughly for her taste. "But I might come to you myself. I don't want my lovely queen deprived of pleasures of the flesh."

Flora felt ill at the thought of him pawing her again.

"Don't concern yourself, my lord. I wouldn't want to take you away from more important duties."

He curled his lip. "How sweet. I knew you'd be a loyal queen. Not that you have a choice."

That was true enough. He never gave her a moment's peace, having guards assigned to watch her every move. At first he hadn't been so overly cautious, but that was before he'd taken to the notion of breeding her with his "bulls".

"I'm loyal to Darridge," she stated.

"And I *am* Darridge. One day I'll be high king. My son will rule after me. A son you will soon bear me."

"You haven't found a breeder yet."

"Haven't I?" He covered her mouth in a painful kiss. His tongue thrust between her lips and she tried to pull back, but he held her hard, forcing her to suffer his taste and touch.

He broke the kiss and stared into her eyes, his brow furrowed. "Pity you're so cold. Fucking you is like fucking a corpse. The old hag has potions for increasing pleasure. One of these nights when I have the time, I might use one on you. It might improve your mood."

Flora doubted the deepest magic in the universe could make her want him. Her loathing of him ran far too deep. It hadn't always been that way, but Typhon could

drive even the saintliest woman to hatred, and Flora was far from a saint. Since meeting Lysander of Aberhill, her thoughts had been especially wanton.

He strode back inside and Flora turned, spitting on the grass to expel his taste. She dragged a hand across her mouth.

His last words before leaving bothered her. Had he decided upon a breeder? It sounded as if he had his mind set on someone. Maybe he'd stopped his random search and targeted another royal. It would be just like Typhon to want someone of noble blood, even though nobility seemed to mean less to him than strength. He wanted a fierce warrior to take his place, a son who would rule with the same ruthlessness and even more prowess. A lion. Such men were usually found among the warrior class.

Flora closed her eyes for a moment and shook her head. No doubt her questions would be answered all too soon, but not tonight. Tonight she had once again avoided the bulls and she prayed Typhon would change his mind about visiting her chamber.

Chapter Two

Lysander's booted feet practically flew over the rocky path through the trees. He'd paced himself over today's twenty-mile run, saving the last few miles for speed. Like the other elite guards of Aberhill, his strength and stamina surpassed that of average men. He considered today's run nothing more than a pleasant stretch of his legs. The elite guards possessed strong Fanticaun traits, near to that of pure bloods. Lysander felt as close to his elite brothers as he did to his blood family. They shared his love of pure magic and his closeness to nature. Still most of them had taken wives and started families, something Lysander had never seriously considered.

Ahead he saw the quicksand pit and sprinted faster. He sprang into the air, grasped the tree branches that curved over the dangerous ground and swung like a monkey from tree to tree until he cleared the pit. Luckily he and his troop had discovered the pit during a forced march a few years back. One of the men had gotten stuck and they'd pulled him out. If someone had fallen in during a trial, such as the one Lysander now endured, they would have died.

Lysander had been looking forward to this wilderness journey. He considered it an outing. A time to be completely alone without the stresses of his rank hanging over his head. Sometimes he thought about leaving Aberhill completely and living like one of those mad old hermits of legends, but he'd never abandon his duties. Especially not with Ariston so new to leadership and a possible attack from Darridge always a threat to their kingdom.

He dropped to the ground and landed with a grunt, then jumped to his feet and sprinted the last mile. Panting, he stopped in the clearing where he'd spend the night. Tomorrow he would be up at dawn to travel another thirty miles that would bring him to the bottom of Wingedbeast Cliff. The day after that he'd climb to the top, meditate and perform a ritual to reinforce his magical powers. Then he'd begin the trip home so that the next warrior could start his journey.

Once Lysander caught his breath, he stripped off his sweaty clothes and waded into a nearby brook. He then gathered edible roots and fashioned a spear that he used to catch fish for dinner and cooked his meal over an open fire. By then dusk had fallen. Before settling to sleep for the night, he had one more task to complete.

About a quarter of a mile from the clearing stood a *baseco* tree. Like pureblooded Fanticauns, its kind were nearly extinct. The tree bore fruit all year round, even in the iciest days of winter. When eaten, the fruit nourished magic. The skin and seeds were used in ancient spells and rituals of great power. Lysander chose a single teardrop-shaped, rainbow-colored fruit and offered a prayer of thanks to the *baseco* tree. At his campsite, he rekindled the fire, peeled the fruit, wrapped the seeds and skin and stored

them in a small leather pouch he'd brought for this purpose. He ate the fruit, closing his eyes as the sweet juices filled his mouth and flowed down his throat.

His brow furrowed and he wrinkled his nose. This fruit had a bitter underlying taste. Strange.

Before he could contemplate further, dizziness overtook him and he collapsed onto the dirt, engulfed by utter blackness.

* * * * *

Lysander awoke stomach down in the dirt. At first he thought he was still in the clearing, but he heard none of the forest sounds—no water trickling in the brook, no birds cawing or small animals scurrying through the leaves. He did hear human voices, all angry and male. His head ached and his blurred vision took a moment to focus.

He lay in some kind of pen, encircled by a high stone wall. At the far end stood a portcullis, apparently the only exit or entrance. Something snug squeezed his throat and he reached up to pull it loose when a man stumbled over his legs. His warrior instincts kicked in and he sprang to his feet and glanced around. A group of ten men, all naked except for their leather collars, paced their circular prison. Several others fought like animals, punching and kicking each other and grappling in the dirt.

Lysander was naked and collared as well. He tried to slide his fingers beneath the wide strip of leather reinforced with metal but it was fastened too tightly. He felt strange, perhaps from whatever poison he'd swallowed, for he had no doubt the fruit he'd eaten had been tainted.

Lysander's gaze riveted upward to the balcony surrounding the pen. Two hooded figures stood watching the spectacle below. He hadn't time to linger on them because three men turned in his direction, murder in their eyes. Battle cries on their lips, they attacked him, but Lysander had experience facing multiple enemies while unarmed. He blocked and dodged blows and delivered precision kicks and strikes that left the three on their knees. By then he'd caught the interest of the others who ceased fighting each other and turned their attention to him.

His head still spun from the poison so he decided the wise move would be to summon his magic. At least it would give him an added edge as well as cause less bloodshed. Obviously these men were also prisoners, perhaps goaded to fight by the hooded figures watching over them. Whatever their reasons, he refused to be beaten to death.

They surrounded him and he called upon his magic, but it wouldn't come. At least that explained the strange sensation he'd had upon waking. Not that he had time to contemplate it. Several of these men were good fighters and it took every bit of his strength, skill and concentration to overcome them.

He knocked out two, caught one in an arm bar and hurled him into another. Someone kicked Lysander in the ribs and he grunted, unsure if bones had been broken. He returned the kick, knocking his opponent flat onto his back while simultaneously

striking another in the throat. The last prisoner, more skilled than the others, landed a punch in Lysander's face, sending a fresh stream of blood from his nose. Without hesitation Lysander struck back, sending his opponent sprawling flat on his back. Placing a bare foot to the man's throat, Lysander applied pressure, his gaze locked on the prisoner's. The look in the man's eye screamed defeat and Lysander stepped away.

His senses straining, he glanced around to ensure that no one rose to their feet. The portcullis opened and several armor-clad warriors on horseback galloped toward him, their weapons drawn. His body tensed even more and he turned to meet the challenge. Rather than attack, they covered him in a heavy net, knocked him to the dirt and dragged him toward the portcullis.

They pulled him down a long corridor and paused in front of a stone cell. The men dismounted and kicked him into the cell. Lysander grasped their booted feet and pulled them off balance. Though still numb from being dragged so brutally, he had been trained to react in this sort of situation.

He reached through the net and grasped a sword from one of the fallen warriors. Before he could free himself, more guards galloped toward him and in their midst rode the two hooded figures.

"Don't bother fighting. You have no hope of escape," said the larger of the two figures. He reached up and pulled down his hood, revealing Typhon's leering face. "Lysander of Aberhill. How I've longed to see you in this position. Naked. Vulnerable. Beaten."

"I'm far from beaten," Lysander stated.

"Maybe not yet." Typhon motioned for the guards to approach. Still trapped within the net, Lysander used the sword to cut through it, but his strength waned rapidly. The collar seemed to tighten around his neck and burn. All too easily, the guards disarmed him and hurled him into the cell. His head and back crashed against the stone wall and once again he nearly blacked out.

"All the best bulls must be gentled," Typhon observed.

What had the bastard done to him? How had he managed to lock his magic? Now Lysander had no doubt that the collar *was* locking his powers and in doing so draining his strength. Only someone very familiar with him could do such a thing. Only two people had known him well enough to possibly lock his powers—his father and Hecta.

"You're wondering how this is possible," said a familiar voice. The second hooded figure revealed her pale, wrinkled face. Hecta's dark, black-rimmed eyes stared at him. "You of all people should know how I feel about disloyalty, Lysander."

"I should have known you'd never take your own life," he said, holding her gaze.

"You should have told your brother to treat me with more respect."

"I tried to convince him to keep you on duty."

"You didn't try hard enough!" she seethed.

Lysander continued staring at her calmly. "Now I'm glad he didn't take my advice."

She gritted her teeth and the collar tightened again, burning so much that he grimaced.

"Whatever you want from me, you won't get it," Lysander stated.

Typhon smiled. "Of course we will." He turned to the guards and said, "Break this bull then see that he's washed and prepared."

Prepared for what, Lysander wanted to shout, but he knew such an outburst would not only be ignored, but taken as a sign of frailty.

Two guards dismounted and entered the cell. Ignoring the weakness caused by the collar, Lysander prepared for whatever came next. The guards uncoiled the whips hanging from their belts and lashed him into a corner. The leather stung his flesh, leaving shallow, bleeding wounds. All the while the collar sapped his strength, driving him to his knees.

The whipping stopped and he braced his hands against the wall, using it as leverage to stand. Cold water crashed over him, then more struck him hard in the face. Spitting and gasping, he shoved wet tendrils of hair from his eyes and saw other guards approaching with buckets full of water. They bombarded him, forcibly washing away the blood and dirt.

"That's enough," Typhon said, chuckling. "We don't want him gentled too much, otherwise he'll be unable to perform."

Lysander glared at him. If he had been in full control of his magic, the man would have died from the sheer hatred emanating from his eyes. However Lysander had never felt so weak in his life, as if the Fanticaun had been literally cut out of him.

"He'll perform," Hecta stated. "He'll have no choice but to pleasure the lady."

Pleasure the lady? At the moment Lysander couldn't fathom what they meant. He tried to force his mind to work, to figure a way out of this seemingly hopeless situation. Most likely at this time no one from Aberhill even realized he'd gone missing. He was supposed to be on the wilderness journey, which explained how they'd trapped him.

Hecta had shown him the *baseco* tree when he was a boy. She knew he took fruit from it during every wilderness journey, a personal ritual. The bitch knew because he'd always shared the seeds and skin with her, seeing that her age prevented her from making the journey anymore. Apparently he'd been wrong about that, or perhaps not. It would have been easy for her to mix a potion to poison the tree, then send someone to deliver it. Someone had carried him out of the woods. Typhon's guards, no doubt. That meant that somewhere along the Aberhill border, their guards were dead.

The main village and palace were well-protected and the elite guards wouldn't allow anyone to breach their defenses. Still Lysander couldn't help worrying.

"Prepare him now," Hecta said, her voice a bit strained.

It must have been from her fierce hold on the collar. Though it would lock his powers for as long as she lived or until she released him, the strength-sapping, burning sensation took great effort on her part. Of course the sensations affected him most when she was in close proximity. The more distance between them, the less power she had over him, as far as using pain as a motivator.

He continued fighting. Again the collar stung, this time fiercely enough to drive him to his knees. A particularly burly guard approached and snapped manacles on his wrists and shackles on his feet. They were lined with barbs that rubbed against his skin when he struggled.

The guard dragged him out of the cell, mounted his horse and tugged Lysander behind him, like an animal being led to market. Another guard rode behind them. The sheer humiliation of being dragged around naked, wet and beaten, made Lysander's anger rise. He gritted his teeth in rage as he jogged to keep up with the horse, which moved swiftly down a long stone corridor. They paused at the end of a spiral stairway. The guards dismounted and they ascended the stairs. The first guard pulled Lysander behind him while the second followed up the back, his sword drawn. Lysander followed only to keep the barbs from cutting deeper into his flesh.

At the top of the stairs stood another door, this one made of oak and reinforced with iron, like the door to a dungeon cell. The guard opened the door then, while his companion kept Lysander at sword point, unfastened the shackles and manacles.

"Your cell," said the first guard, opening the door. The second one literally kicked Lysander into the room.

The door slammed shut and bolts slid into place.

Lysander glanced around, thoroughly surprised by his surroundings. The windowless room had tapestries on the walls for warmth, a rug on the floor and a bed with pillows and blankets. A narrow door across the room led to a privy and on a table near the bed stood a water pitcher and basin. His gaze riveted to a small, round hole in the stone ceiling, large enough for a man's hand.

This was beyond odd. Lysander's brow furrowed and he walked around the room. He hesitated a moment before sitting on the bed. Closing his eyes, he leaned against the headboard. It felt so good to just relax for a moment. He could still scarcely believe the events of the past few hours. Or had it been more? He had no way of knowing how long he'd been unconscious.

Why had he been brought to a cell like this? What had Typhon and Hecta meant when they'd said he'd "perform" and "pleasure the lady"?

At the moment he had no choice but to wait to find out.

* * * * *

Flora's heart pounded and she tried to jerk away from Typhon but he kept a bruising grip on her upper arm.

"I can't believe you intend to go through with this," Flora said through gritted teeth. "It's bad enough I have to contend with you pawing me without being passed around to any man you choose."

"Pawed?" Typhon chuckled. "I should have known such pleasure would be wasted on you. If I didn't hate this bull so much I'd almost pity him for the night to come, fucking a corpse."

She almost told him that if he made love better he'd find his partners more lively, but she feared he'd take her advice. She didn't want to offer him any encouragement at all. The idea of being fucked by his "bull" terrified her even more. Typhon made love badly, but not so painfully that she feared bodily harm.

She'd seen his "bulls" beat each other bloody in the pen and didn't want to think about what they'd do to a woman in bed. Once in Typhon's clutches, something happened to them. It seemed they lost their humanity.

Rumors circulated about places far north where male slaves fought for the pleasure of their masters. They became little more than animals, living and dying for their owners' entertainment. It seemed Typhon mimicked their spectacles for his amusement, measuring the worth of his "bulls" by who could overpower the others. She guessed he'd selected the most powerful to impregnate her. Typhon didn't want a son, but a guard dog for his kingdom.

"What if I refuse?" Flora demanded.

"You won't. I guarantee it, beautiful corpse."

Loathing twisted Flora's stomach. When she'd first married Typhon, he had kept her under control by allowing her father to continue as overseer of their kingdom. At the time her father had arranged her marriage to Typhon, an attack had been imminent. To avoid bloodshed, her father had bargained with Typhon, agreeing to hand over his lands as well as Flora in marriage if he remained as overseer.

At first Typhon had treated her decently and had often joined her for meals and invited her to visit his private chamber where he practiced magic. She had complied, hoping they might find some common interests, but his obsession with strange magical practices disturbed her. A creature of the night, he worked in moonlight and avoided the day like a monster from a myth.

Though they spent less and less time together, Typhon placed more restrictions upon her. The more obsessed he became with his repulsive magic, the more unbalanced he seemed. By the time her father died, Typhon's possessiveness had reached unreasonable heights. He kept guards on her constantly, fearful that she might reveal the truth about his inability to father children. He couldn't bear the humiliation of being unable to sire a child of his own. How long had he blamed her, calling her a frigid, barren, useless bitch? The old seer had discovered the truth and been slain for it.

Each time Flora disobeyed him, he threatened to torture one of the palace servants. He swore that if she breathed a word about his deficiency in the marriage bed, he would select a group of common folk to die horrible deaths. Typhon had twisted Flora's

compassionate nature, something that made her a favorite among their people, and used it against her and them. For her life had become almost unbearable and under the scrutiny of her personal guards, she couldn't think of a way out, save one.

Suicide disgusted her, but she had started to seriously consider it. At least she would be free of Typhon once and for all.

She would have preferred killing him. At least that way the entire kingdom would be free. Unfortunately Typhon was well protected, not to mention cunning. His greatest weakness was his shame and frustration over his inability to have what he wanted most—a son of his blood. This made him insanely jealous of other men. That jealousy and hatred had no doubt driven him toward his “breeding bull” games.

He dragged her up a winding stairway and paused outside a door of oak and iron. Two guards stood outside and bowed from the neck upon seeing their king.

Typhon pulled a knife from the sheath at his hip and used it to slice Flora's dress down the middle. She gasped in shock, praying he didn't cut her along with the dress, but he didn't so much as graze her flesh. With the outer gown resting at her feet, he grasped the front of her under dress and ripped it off her.

“As your husband, it's my right to undress you,” he said, grasped her chin roughly in his hand and covered her mouth in one of his revolting kisses. When he tore his mouth from hers, his eyes glowed with lust and fury. He lightly squeezed one of her breasts, then said to the guards, “Open the door.”

They complied with his order and Typhon shoved her inside.

Flora flinched as the door slammed shut.

Sprawled on the bed, the man she'd dreamt of since the high king's gathering stared at her.

Lysander of Aberhill's brilliant blue eyes reflected the utter shock she felt. Then his gaze swept her and she instinctively tried to cover herself as best she could, one arm stretched across her full breasts and her other hand dropped between her legs.

This was the most humiliating, frightening and thrilling moment of her entire life.

His look of surprise turned to one of ice. He rose from the bed, his handsome face twisted into a snarl. Flora's gaze raked him as his had done to her. Since the gathering she'd imagined what he looked like naked and he was even more beautiful than she'd dreamed.

Long, lean and perfectly proportioned, he had broad shoulders and beautifully toned muscles. His sleekness was yet another sign of his Fanticaun roots. Because of his ancestry, she guessed he had the strength of men double his size.

Several fresh injuries marked his pale flesh. Lash marks, most still oozing blood, covered his chest, arms and legs. His ribs on his right side were bruised and the collar on his neck had rubbed the surrounding flesh raw.

Typhon would enjoy torturing a captured enemy, in particular Lysander whom he hated above all others. Why had he decided to breed her to the Overlord of Aberhill?

"I should have guessed this had something to do with you," he said in that deep voice that had haunted her dreams, yet in the dreams he hadn't been angry like this. Instead he'd been tender yet lustful. His body claimed hers and she'd awaken throbbing in the aftermath of carnal illusions.

Her heart skipped a beat when she realized he'd been placed here to take her body. He was the "bull", the man who would sire her child. A child raised by Typhon. Flora's head spun. This wasn't happening. Was it?

Lysander's next words snapped her out of her stupor and back to reality.

"Vengeful, evil little slut." He strode toward her and grasped her shoulders so hard that she drew a sharp breath. His furious gaze bore into hers and a chill ran down her spine. Typhon's anger was horrible, but if possible Lysander's was worse. "If you think I'm going to 'pleasure' you, you're more insane than that snake you're married to."

"Release me," she snapped, her anger rising. She struggled in his grasp but couldn't break his hold, so she jabbed her knee between his legs. Unfortunately he moved too quickly for her and shifted his stance so she struck his leg instead.

With a savage growl, he picked her up and flung her onto the bed. She landed with a grunt and immediately tried to leap to her feet, but he jumped upon her. One hand closed around her throat and his powerful body straddled her, almost crushing her.

"What's your game?" he demanded.

She grasped his wrist and forearm, her nails digging into his flesh hard enough to draw blood, but he didn't seem to notice.

"I have nothing to do with this," she panted. "Do you think I want to be here?"

"I remember the look in your eyes at the gathering," he said.

"You're the one who couldn't keep your hands off me."

"And you wanted more."

"I just want to be left alone. Do you think I want any big, stinking man using me to sate his lust?"

"Then why this perverted seduction? Why keep all those naked men, trapped like livestock? Is this your idea of fun, woman? Your husband captures his enemies, pits them against each other like cocks, then you fuck the champion?"

"I have nothing to do with Typhon's affairs," she said with a cold calmness that surprised even her. "And other than my husband, you are the last man I want to fuck."

At that moment a pungent scent filled the room.

Lysander's eyebrows knitted and he loosened his hold on her as he lifted his gaze toward the ceiling. She followed his line of vision to a hole in the ceiling through which a black and red powder floated. The particles drifted about the room.

"What is that?" Flora demanded.

"No," he said through gritted teeth and leapt off the bed. She reached for the sheet to cover herself but he tore it from her grasp.

"Give that back!" she snapped.

Ignoring her, he pushed the bed, Flora and all, across the room. She knelt on the mattress, her arms folded across her breasts. This was among the most humiliating experiences of her life.

"Move," he commanded, climbing onto the bed and practically stepping on her with his long, bony foot when she failed to scoot away quickly enough. He reached toward the high ceiling, his sleek muscles straining, and shoved the bunched-up sheet into the hole overhead.

Flora stared, lust flaring through her at the sight of his muscular shoulders, arms and back, not to mention his tight, rounded ass and sinewy legs. Fucking should be the last thing on her mind but at the moment she could think of nothing else. Unable to resist, she crawled toward him, placed a hand on one of his strong ankles and ran her palm up the length of his leg. Her eyes momentarily closed and she sighed with pleasure. The man felt as good as he looked.

He stepped away from her and jumped off the bed, his gaze still lifted toward the ceiling. "I wasn't soon enough. There's too much dust in the room."

"It smells funny," she said, rising from the bed and approaching him. Heavens his chiseled mouth was even more adorable than she remembered. And that chest! She needed to feel it right away.

She no longer cared about her nudity but actually preferred it. Stepping toward him, she stared at the gorgeous expanse of his smooth, powerfully muscled chest. Placing her hands on it, she stroked it with enthusiasm, her fingers brushing over his tight, dark nipples.

Lysander took her hands, restraining them, yet not removing them from his body. Their gazes locked, lust shining in his eyes.

"When your wiles failed to seduce me, you turned to magic. What a pathetic waste of power."

"What are you talking about?" she breathed, licking her lips, her fingers still rubbing his chest.

"The dust, Flora," he said, leaning so close their noses brushed. "But I'm sure you know all about it. Hecta must have created this powder just for us. It's strong but I won't be manipulated by it. I'm not going to fuck you, no matter how beautiful you are." He spoke against her lips, then pulled back slightly, his teeth gritted. "No matter how much I want you."

"You're saying the dust is making us want each other?"

"As if you didn't know."

"I didn't." She tried to pull away from him though she wanted to wrap her arms and legs around him, drag him to the bed and let him fuck her until she couldn't walk. "Just when I think Typhon's manipulations can't get any worse, he does something like this. He told me I wouldn't have a choice."

"What do you mean?"

She turned to him, her body aching as much as her heart. Why did she feel this inexplicable connection to him? Was it the dust? No. She'd felt it when they'd met at the high king's gathering. She'd kept so many secrets, had been controlled all her life. More than anything she wanted to confide in him. That was a lie. Right now more than anything she wanted him to fill her pussy with his thick cock.

She knew he felt the same nagging desire. His broad chest expanded with every excited breath and his thick, beautiful cock stood at full mast.

"This is his plan, Lysander," she said, her voice breathless yet bitter. With every heartbeat her passion increased, no doubt because they were breathing in more of the dust. "He wants us to mate. All those men you're talking about, Typhon calls them his bulls. He chooses my bed partner, he —"

"What?" He actually looked horrified.

"I don't want this," Flora said, wrapping her arms around her middle. After so many years under Typhon's brutal hand, she'd finally reached her breaking point. Sorrow overcame her, then fury. She glared at Lysander. "Maybe you're the one who wants this!"

"Oh yes, my lady. I wanted to be knocked unconscious and captured by the enemy."

"You're a Fanticaun. Do something to stop the effects of this damn dust!"

"I can't."

"Why not? I thought you're the unstoppable Overlord Lysander." Her voice dripped sarcasm. In the back of her mind she knew she shouldn't blame him. His situation was worse than hers, for she didn't doubt that when Typhon finished using Lysander, he would execute him.

"My magic is bound," he replied, pulling at the collar. His teeth clenched in frustration, he tried to force his fingers beneath the tight leather.

Flora winced when he drew blood from the irritated flesh. She instinctively grasped his hands and tugged. "Don't do that. You're making yourself bleed."

They paused, their fingers entwined and their heated gazes locked. Passion exploded between them. He wrapped an arm around her waist, buried his hand in her hair and covered her mouth in the deepest kiss of her life.

Flora closed her eyes, her hands clutching Lysander's lean hips. No one had ever kissed her this way. She'd never dreamed a kiss could feel like this. Was it because of the dust? No. It was *him*. She'd never forgotten how he made her tingle all over just by kissing her hand on the balcony at the high king's palace.

The dust definitely affected her, though. Fire spread through her body and she wanted to ravage him. By the way he kissed her, he obviously felt the same way. His lips, firm yet soft and deliciously moist, caressed hers while his tongue thrust into her

mouth. Hers met it tentatively at first. When Typhon kissed her she tried to avoid his tongue. For the first time she wanted to taste a man as much as he wanted to taste her.

When the kiss broke, he swept her into his arms. Flora clung to his neck, loving the feel of his damp, silken hair. She placed her other hand against his chest. It felt so warm and hard, like the rest of him.

The throbbing ache between her legs almost hurt, as if she had no control over her body.

"Lysander, please," she said, staring into his beautiful blue eyes. "This is unbearable."

His face tensed, as if he were engaged in an emotional battle. She understood just how he felt. Regardless of the attraction between them, they were still being forced into this, seduced by Hecta's vile magic.

"We have to fight it," he said, though he placed her on the bed and caressed her breasts. His calloused palms ran lightly over her nipples and the pink nubs stiffened even more. Closing her eyes halfway, she arched into his hands. He squeezed her breasts a bit harder, though not painfully. It felt too good for words. Even under the influence of the dust, this man she had met only once touched her with more gentleness than her husband ever had.

She glanced down. Though slender, his hands were large and long fingered, but her full breasts spilled out of his grip. All her life she'd dressed to hide her curves. Her parents had feared she would look too common in most of the fashionable styles. She'd worn plain dresses, high necked with her breasts wrapped beneath to hide their fullness.

Typhon had scarcely paid attention to any part of her, other than to claim her like a goat in rut. He'd never bothered touching her like Lysander did now.

Chapter Three

Lysander's thumbs brushed Flora's nipples, then he bent and kissed her breasts. Her heart fluttered and she ran her fingers through his long, dark hair while his tongue rolled over first one nipple then the other.

"You're so beautiful," he said, his voice rough with passion.

"I am?"

He lifted his burning gaze to her and said, "Goddess yes." Taking her hands, he kissed her palms then stretched out beside her. One hand pinned both her wrists above her head. His other hand slid between her legs, guiding them apart.

She watched him, her pulse racing and mind spinning with anticipation. Most of this was completely new to her. He caressed her inner thighs and she jumped a bit, a smile tugging at her lips. She never realized how ticklish she was there. Lysander's hand covered her soft mound and kneaded slowly, gently, stirring her passion even more. Her stomach clenched with need, the muscles almost painfully tight. Surely these sensations couldn't get any better.

She was wrong. Lysander slid one long finger inside her, then two.

"Oh goddess," she said, her voice quivering with lust.

He withdrew his fingers, now slick with her juices, and rolled them over her tingling clit. This was too much. Between the effects of the dust and her very real desire for him, she teetered on the edge of something indescribable.

Were these sensations due to the dust or did making love usually feel like this? She'd overheard servants talking and knew that many people found pleasure in fucking. Unfortunately her only experience with a man had been with Typhon and she found nothing but disappointment and sometimes even discomfort in their couplings.

Lysander stroked her faster and something seemed to burst inside her. Her entire body convulsed and her hips bucked against his hand.

"I can't wait any longer," he said, his voice practically a growl.

His body covered hers and one of his long, hard legs pushed hers farther apart.

The tip of his engorged cock pressed against her and she welcomed him. He entered her with a long, hard thrust that made her cry out again from the sheer pleasure of feeling him so deeply inside her. Heavens, she never imagined having a cock within her could feel this wonderful. With Typhon, she'd felt as if she couldn't take all of him comfortably inside her, but Lysander fit her perfectly. His stiff flesh rubbed her soft, needy parts in all the right places.

He drove into her and Flora grasped handfuls of his hair. Her hips couldn't match his frantic rhythm, so she wrapped her legs around him. Lysander grasped first one of

her hands then the other and pinned them on either side of her head. Their fingers entwined, gripping each other almost painfully, but Flora didn't care. She needed to feel that connection to him as surely as she needed to feel his cock deep inside her.

His mouth covered hers in another penetrating kiss and his tongue thrust in time with his wildly pumping hips. That marvelous feeling built inside her again. Surely she couldn't live through it a second time? Could a person die from too much pleasure?

"I'm sorry, Flora," he gasped against her lips. "I can't hold back. It's too strong."

She forced her eyes open halfway, unable to resist looking at him. She'd never imagined hearing that kind of emotion in a man's voice. The expression on his face reflected the intense pleasure-pain she felt. His neck arched back and his eyes closed, his long, dark lashes twitching against his cheeks.

"I don't care," she panted, wishing he'd release her hands so she could caress him.

He kissed her again and continued thrusting, his pace even faster than before. Almost before she realized what was happening, that wonderful climactic sensation overtook her again. She cried his name over and over, her legs tight around his waist and her fingers squeezing his harder.

Lysander's entire body tensed, every muscle tight. His heat seeped into her, his cock straining into her body, filling her with his seed. Finally he collapsed on top of her, his body crushing hers, but she didn't care.

This was the most wonderful moment of her life but also the most terrible. What if he'd gotten her with child? The thought of Lysander's child being raised by Typhon, of never knowing his real father, sickened her.

Unable to think any longer, she drifted in the aftermath, welcoming the darkness of sleep.

Flora wasn't sure how long she and Lysander lay, their bodies pressed close and legs entwined. She couldn't tell whether the dust or the intensity of their lovemaking caused their stupor. Perhaps it was both.

He shifted his position and when she opened her eyes, she found him staring at her. His expression was difficult to read. Maybe, like her, he wasn't quite sure how he felt at the moment. They'd been forced into this situation and she hated it, yet she'd never felt anything as wonderful as making love with Lysander. Even now, her body still aching and lethargic, she wanted him. Her mind had cleared, so these feelings had nothing to do with the hag's dust. From the time she'd seen Lysander at the high king's gathering, she'd wanted him.

For a long moment they stared at each other in silence. It should have been an awkward silence, yet it wasn't. His blue eyes softened ever so slightly and he dipped his head toward her, brushing his cheek against her face.

Closing her eyes, Flora relished the sensation of his skin against hers. Light stubble roughened his jawline. He'd been smooth shaven when they'd last met but Typhon never allowed the bulls to shave, nor did he risk allowing the guards to shave them. True to their animallike existence, they were kept naked and hairy.

Flora buried a hand in his long, silky hair, feeling it slide through her fingers as she caressed his scalp. Strange, but in a way this was one of the happiest moments of her life.

His lips against her ear, he whispered, "We're being watched."

That calm, relaxed feeling deserted her and she tensed, her gaze scanning the room.

"Where?" she whispered back.

"The hole above us. The sheet is gone."

Flora sat up and glanced around the room. He was right. The sheet hadn't fallen. Glancing toward the hole, she saw nothing but blackness, yet an eerie feeling crawled through her. She knew Typhon well enough to realize he'd consider watching them fuck entertaining.

Her fists clenched, she glanced around for something to throw at the hole. Not that she believed it would do any good, but it might make her feel better. The only things hard enough to make a satisfying thud when they hit the ceiling were the pitcher and the basin. Gritting her teeth, she jumped up, walked to the table and picked up the basin. Before she flung it her gaze swept the bed where Lysander lay on his side, watching her with a curious look in his eyes.

Blood stained the sheets and she noticed several of his wounds still bled. Crimson rivulets streaked his chest and ribs. The bruise on his side had spread even more, most likely due to their vigorous lovemaking.

Forgetting about whomever might be watching them through the hole, she placed the bowl back on the table and poured water from the pitcher. She'd turned her back to Lysander but glanced over her shoulder when she heard the bed scraping across the floor. He'd pushed it back near the table, away from the hole.

Their gazes locked and she knew his thoughts matched hers. The entertainment was over for the voyeur.

Flora motioned for Lysander to lie down. A questioning look in his eyes, he did as she indicated. She grasped the hem of the bed sheet and tried to tear it. Lysander reached for it, his long, slender fingers brushing hers. His touch never failed to send little thrills of passion through her.

She noticed that his hands, though graceful and beautifully shaped, looked strong. She'd felt the roughness of his palms, calloused from years of using weapons. Though of noble blood, he didn't act like most of the cosseted royals she'd known—men who had no problem ordering others into battle, though they'd never felt the sting of it themselves.

She grudgingly admitted that he and Typhon shared this characteristic. Her husband trained as fiercely as his guards, which added to people's fear of him. Yet she sensed that if Lysander and Typhon met in combat, Lysander would be the victor. Not that it would ever happen now that Typhon had the Overlord of Aberhill at his mercy. The very idea of Lysander imprisoned here sickened Flora. He might be Typhon's enemy but he certainly wasn't hers.

Lysander tore the hemline of the sheet into strips and Flora dipped one into the basin. She wrung it out then began cleaning his injuries. None were devastatingly deep but still looked painful. He gave no indication that they hurt, but muscles rippled in his flat belly as she ran her fingertips over his bruised ribs.

"I'm sorry," she said. "That must be painful."

"I've had worse."

"I can see that," she murmured, this time tracing the ridges of old scars on his chest. He was so beautiful. Somehow even the scars added to his appeal. Though she'd never found Typhon's battle scars particularly attractive, Lysander's were quite different. Flora had always believed flaws could be beautiful, just as she believed a person's weaknesses often told more about them than their strengths.

She touched a fingertip to the damaged flesh around the collar. "This collar is different than the ones I've seen on the other men."

"Don't you mean bulls?" he sneered.

"They're bulls to Typhon because—" She stopped speaking and glanced toward the hole in the ceiling.

"What?" Lysander asked, once again whispering.

Flora drew a tremulous breath. Should she tell him the truth? Why would it matter? They were both prisoners.

She whispered in his ear, "Typhon can't father children. That's why he's been collecting men. He needs a son to inherit Darridge and he'll get one at any cost."

Lysander looked utterly disgusted. "He intends to use my child against my people?"

"It seems that way. As much as he hates you, I don't know why he'd want a child of yours."

"My magic," Lysander replied, his voice still a whisper, though laced with anger.

"It's said the Fanticaun is strong within you. You look almost like a pure blood. That's why I don't understand how he's taken your power."

"Not taken. Locked. This." Lysander jabbed a finger at the collar. "Hecta was once my teacher. She's the only living person who knows me well enough to lock my powers. I never thought she'd turn against me."

"She felt betrayed."

"She's been going mad for a long time. Ariston tried to tell me but I didn't want to listen."

Flora studied him carefully, almost surprised by what she saw in his Fanticaun eyes. "You...cared for her. No, more than that. You identified with her."

"She understood me and still does, but her madness blinded her to my intentions."

"Maybe you've been a little blind too."

When he didn't reply, she resumed her work on his injuries.

Though right now his wounds were her main concern, she couldn't help admiring him. Her gaze kept returning to his cock, thick and perfectly shaped even in its flaccid state. When she ran the cloth over a long slash that extended from his outer to inner thigh, his cock twitched and swelled. Flora's heartbeat quickened and she squirmed a bit, trying to appease the lustful ache between her legs.

Her face flushed and she turned away from him to rinse the piece of cloth in the basin. "Is the dust still affecting us?"

"No. It doesn't last long, even in an enclosed area like this."

"Oh." She looked at his stiffening cock as she once again extended the damp cloth toward his thigh wound.

He grasped her wrist, stopping her before she could touch him. Their gazes locked. Maybe his stiffness had nothing to do with her in particular. After all, he was male and she was touching him intimately. He'd probably have this reaction to anyone who touched him like this. Just because she'd dreamed of him for months didn't mean he felt the same about her.

"I just want to finish getting the blood off," she said.

His head tilted slightly to the side and his almond-shaped eyes narrowed even more, but he released her hand. She quickly finished with his leg, then pushed against his shoulder. "Turn over so I can check your back."

He complied, settling onto his stomach. Flora's breath caught, partly because the lashes on his back were worse than on his front and partly because his body aroused her so much. Washing his front had been carnal torture and doing the same to his back wouldn't be much better. The sight of those broad shoulders, the muscles bunched since he'd folded his arms beneath his head, his supple spine and best of all his tight, rounded ass nearly took her breath away. Still her main concern was the vicious whip marks that left his back smeared red.

Flora worked efficiently, using the rest of the sheets to cleanse away the blood. Then she applied pressure to the gashes that still bled. Since he'd pinned her hands to the bed when he'd taken her, she hadn't felt the wounds. Not that she would have cared while under the influence of the dust. The way it had taken over her completely frightened her.

"Flora," he said in that deep, soft voice she loved.

"Yes, Lysander?"

"If I was too rough with you earlier, it wasn't intentional."

"I know, but you weren't."

In truth he *had* been rough but she'd liked it. He hadn't been harsh with her as Typhon often was, not bothering to see that her juices were properly flowing before impaling her on his cock. Unlike Typhon, Lysander didn't have a grotesquely large cock, but it was powerful and beautifully shaped, like the rest of him. He exuded such

raw, masculine strength. A wicked little smile touched her lips as she thought how he fit the description of “bull” in more ways than one.

Finally satisfied that the bleeding had slowed on his worst injuries, she released the pressure on them. She didn’t need to keep touching him, but she didn’t want to stop. She swept his long hair aside and caressed the back of his neck, then gently massaged his back, once again taking note of several interesting scars. Fascinating as they were, she couldn’t help feeling regret that he’d apparently suffered much in his life.

She sympathized, since she’d suffered too. Her scars might not be visible but they marked her soul forever. At least he’d had the strength to fight back and by his reputation she knew he usually won.

Except this time. This time he had been captured by someone who wasn’t half the man he was. It sickened her to see Lysander at Typhon’s mercy.

Leaning closer to him, she touched her lips to his cheek and whispered in his ear, “I’m sorry this happened to you. Typhon stops at nothing to get what he wants.”

He moved so swiftly that she didn’t have a chance to react before he pinned her beneath him. Rage gleamed in Lysander’s eyes. His lips drew back in a snarl, revealing his gritted white teeth. His hands once again held her wrists to the mattress, this time not in lust. She hadn’t meant to anger him, but to offer comfort. She should have known kindness would be wasted on a man like him. In a way he was as brutal as Typhon. He must be, to have defended his kingdom so well for so long.

“Bragging?” he snapped.

“No,” she said, not bothering to hide her disgust. “Of course not. What kind of woman do you think I am?”

“I have no idea, *Queen* Flora.”

“I should have let you bleed.”

“However did I survive so many battles without you?” he said sarcastically.

Held immobile beneath his powerful body, she had only once recourse. She spat in his face.

Lysander let loose a string of foul curses, some she hadn’t even heard before. He blinked her spit from his eye, then covered her mouth in a crushing kiss.

His tongue thrust between her lips, plundering her, yet his taste and touch also aroused her. He meant to punish her with the kiss, but he still couldn’t hurt her. Flora closed her eyes and thrust her tongue against his. Soon his exploration changed. The kiss softened and the sweeps of his tongue against hers slowed, becoming even more intimate.

A soft moan escaped her and he responded with a deep groan of pleasure. He released his hold on her wrists and Flora wrapped her arms around his neck. Her legs entwined with his and his hard cock pressed against her. Shifting position slightly, he used his knee to part her legs. She opened herself to him, her heart pounding and entire body aching with need. Then she remembered Typhon.

She pushed against him, trying to break the kiss. Finally he pulled away and stared at her, lust gleaming in his eyes.

"This is what Typhon wants," she panted, her voice a ragged whisper.

He looked angry again, then thoughtful. His eyes narrowed and a determined look consumed his handsome face as he said, "This is what *I* want."

This time she didn't struggle against his kiss but surrendered completely. He nipped her lower lip then sucked on it. His hand slid between their bodies, fondling her soft mound. Long, slender fingers, strong as steel, slid inside her and caressed her wet, tender flesh, then he used those moist fingertips to circle the sensitive little nub between her legs.

Flora's passion rose. Her breathing quickened and her entire body flushed as he rekindled her passion. Those marvelous, almost frustrating sensations nearly overwhelmed her. His rubbing fingers pushed her higher and higher. Then he slid his fingers inside her again and stroked her pussy while his thumb swept over her clit. Still fondling her, he edged a bit lower and took her nipple between his lips.

"Oh! Please, Lysander, you shouldn't—" Her words ended when he gently bit her nipple then soothed it with his tongue. Reaching behind her, she found the headboard and grasped it tightly as the pleasure inside her grew.

He lapped the tight little peak and then used the very tip of his tongue to trace her areola, sending little ripples of excitement through her. By the goddess, she needed to touch him.

Moaning with pleasure, she released the headboard and wove her fingers through his long, silken hair. Goddess, she had never imagined being this attracted to a man. It was like a dream—except they were trapped in a very real nightmare.

Lysander moved to her other nipple and sucked it deeply. His hot, wet tongue lashed it and then he teased it with the very tip of his tongue. Flora panted and writhed, her hands roaming over him. She felt the ridges of old scars and remembered his fresh wounds. Immediately she gentled her exploration of his body, not wanting to cause him pain when he seemed determined to give her nothing but pleasure.

When her nipple became so sensitive that his teasing became almost unbearable, he released the plump, tingling peak and rolled her onto her stomach. Sweeping aside her long hair, he gently touched his lips to her nape.

Moaning with pleasure, Flora pressed her face into the pillow and closed her eyes. Lysander slowly covered her shoulders and back with kisses. His lips trailed down her spine to the indentation of her ass, then ran back up the same path. Cupping her bottom, he kneaded and squeezed the spheres, making Flora sigh. No one had ever touched her like this. Lysander's hands roamed over her thighs and lightly stroked her sides. He covered her buttocks with kisses and continued pressing gentle kisses all the way down one leg and up the other. His moist yet feathery kisses soothed yet aroused her. Flora had never imagined feeling this relaxed yet this full of lust.

He rolled her onto her back and sat by her feet. Taking her leg, he raised it and kissed her ankle and calf. He caressed her knee and stroked her thigh, then he moved closer and braced a hand on either side of her ribs. His head dipped to capture first one straining nipple then the other. He sucked her nipples and stroked them with his tongue.

Flora could do nothing except lie beneath him and enjoy these moments while she could.

It struck her that Lysander was in an even worse situation. When they finished here, he had nothing to look forward to but more abuse and eventually death. While she could, she wanted to give him the same pleasure he gave her.

Opening her eyes, she gazed at him. His head lowered and he laved her breasts, so she entwined her fingers in his hair and stroked gently.

"Please let me touch you," she whispered.

He looked up sharply, his brow furrowed, then a faint smile touched his lips. He stretched out beside her and Flora edged closer to him. She trailed her lips across the broad expanse of his chest and rolled her tongue over his stiff pink nipples, much as he had done to her. She loved the look of his nipples. They were so small and tight. So masculine and different from hers. Ever so lightly she brushed her thumbs over them, then licked them again. Reaching down, she curled her fist around his gorgeous ivory cock and stroked him slowly. He swelled even more in her grasp, pulsing and straining as his passion grew.

With a groan that was almost a growl, he pushed her onto her back and covered her body with his. Touching him had stirred her lust again and when he reached between them to fondle her clit, she moaned with need and thrust her hand against him.

Nuzzling her neck, he continued stroking her with his long, talented fingers until she exploded.

Flora couldn't keep silent against such overwhelming pleasure, but he absorbed her cries in another deep kiss. While her body still convulsed and throbbed in climax, he entered her with his thick, hard cock. His hips pumped in a steady rhythm that didn't allow her to fully recover before driving her back up the mountainside. Higher and higher she climbed. Her eyes closed and heart pounding, she thought this next climax might shatter her completely and she didn't care.

One hand supporting most of his weight, Lysander used the other to stroke and knead her breasts while his hips continued pumping into her. Flora could endure no more. The next orgasm overpowered her so that for several moments she couldn't think, only scream and moan and float in a satiny haze of passion.

"Oh goddess," she cried. "It's not the dust!"

Somewhere beyond the pleasure, she heard Lysander cry out in ecstasy, his steely body straining and his lean hips jerking as he joined her in bliss.

He rolled onto his back and pulled her to his heaving chest. His heart pounded against her cheek to almost the same wild rhythm as her heart.

"What did you mean," he panted. "When you said it's not the dust?"

Her face heated and she gave a little laugh. "I meant it wasn't the dust that made me feel so good before. It was part of the coupling. It never happened like this with Typhon."

"I don't doubt it," he muttered, then stroked her shoulder and kissed the top of her head.

The door burst open and guards strode inside.

With an animalistic growl, Lysander jumped to his feet. Flora's heartbeat quickened again, this time in fear. If he tried to fight, they'd kill him.

It didn't get that far. One of the guards blew a dart in his arm and before Lysander could take another step toward them, he fell unconscious.

Flora tried to go to him, but one of the guards caught her arm and handed her a robe. "Put this on, my lady. It's time to return to your chamber."

"What about him?" she demanded.

"The bull will be returned to the pen."

"But —"

"I'm sorry, my lady," the guard said. "We can tell you no more."

Flora pulled on the robe and the guard guided her out of the chamber. She glanced over her shoulder toward Lysander, but the others had already surrounded him.

* * * * *

Lysander awoke to a bucket of cold water in his face. He coughed, sputtered and tried to brush aside his soaked hair but manacles secured his wrists to the wall. Blinking water from his eyes, he glanced around. The small, windowless cell didn't offer enough space for him to fully stretch his legs. In the open door stood Hecta and Typhon. The former had a tight magical hold on his collar, for it burned incessantly. The latter wore an expression even more malicious than usual.

"You did your job well, bull," Typhon said, punctuating the sentence with a sharp kick in Lysander's ribs.

Lysander gasped, hating himself for flinching, but his ribs were already sore from the earlier beating.

"Too well!" Another kick.

"My whore of a wife was pleased by the bull," Typhon practically growled. "Did you enjoy watching her writhe?" He kicked Lysander again.

The Overlord of Aberhill grunted but wouldn't give the bastard the satisfaction of hearing him cry out, no matter what the pain. Lysander's foot lashed out, knocking Typhon off balance. If the room hadn't been so narrow, he'd have landed flat on his back. Instead he smashed into the wall.

"Why don't you release the collar and fight me like a man?" Lysander taunted. "But then you're not one, are you?"

Typhon's eyes blazed. "It would be a pleasure to destroy you in combat, but as king my duty comes first. You'll remain alive until you serve your purpose."

Somewhere beyond his pain and confusion, Lysander caught a strange, pungent scent. He recognized it but couldn't quite place it. Then it struck him. *Wymist*. During his training in the Eastern Realm, he had encountered it, though his mentor had told him to avoid it. When used improperly, it could sicken, even kill, the practitioner. Other herbs were as strong and far preferable for enhancing magic.

The collar burned so much that Lysander moaned. As his strength drained, Typhon straightened, adjusted his tunic, then kicked his prisoner savagely in rapid succession.

His eyes blazing, Typhon grasped a handful of Lysander's hair and pulled so hard he threatened to rip it out at the roots. "All you need to do is fuck her. She doesn't have to enjoy it." He shoved Lysander's head against the wall then stalked out of the cell, slamming the door behind him and leaving Lysander in utter darkness. His Fanticaun ancestry allowed him to see in the dark, almost like an animal. Not that it mattered here. The stone cell had nothing worth looking at.

The bitter scent of *wymist* still hung on the air. Very few magical practitioners, even those who dabbled in dangerous magic, used *wymist*.

Lysander's entire body hurt. Closing his eyes, he succumbed to a low moan. If he managed to escape, Typhon was a dead man, as was that old bitch Hecta. To think he had felt compassion for her.

Flora had been right. He'd felt a connection to Hecta because she'd fed his passion for learning the magical arts, especially the dangerous ones. During his childhood, she'd indulged his every whim regarding the worst types of magic. Lysander hadn't been a vicious child. He had never tortured animals or treated the common folk badly as many royals tended to, but he longed to know everything about the magical world so he could fulfill his duties.

Father had taught him and Ariston respect for all life. Yet he had never protected them from reality, such as the attacks from power-hungry men. Early on he had brought Lysander into battle, knowing that as the future defender of Aberhill he couldn't be sheltered from the horrors he would face alone all too soon.

Lysander wanted a peaceful life for his people. Deep inside he feared losing their freedom to a conqueror who wouldn't respect their ways. He loved good, clean magic, but as Hecta had often pointed out, learning to master evil powers might be the only way to achieve his goals. Lysander had delved into darkness. Still, his heart and soul belonged to the freedom of the outdoors and the magnificent powers found only in nature. Hecta nurtured both. Yet looking back now, he could see that she didn't teach him purely out of the desire to pass on her knowledge. She'd often used his strength, his very blood, to reinforce her magic.

He had given her this power over him and he hated himself for being such a trusting fool. He had placed Aberhill in immediate danger of another attack from Darridge. Lysander knew most people believed the rumor about him being Aberhill's main defense. He didn't deny his contribution to keeping their kingdom safe, but the elite guards of Aberhill were among the best in the world. Though a new leader, Ariston possessed wisdom and a strong will. If Typhon thought conquering them would be easy with Lysander out of the way, then he was in for a rude awakening.

Though he knew Aberhill was in good hands, Lysander was still furious. For a man who had learned to survive by his cunning as well as his strength, he had let Hecta use him shamelessly.

Now she and Typhon used Flora too.

At first he'd been certain she had been part of this scheme against him, but since he'd been with her he doubted it. He could scarcely believe she hadn't understood the pleasures of lovemaking and thought Hecta's dust had incited her climax. He shouldn't have been surprised. A man like Typhon wouldn't care about his wife's pleasure, only about satisfying his own.

Lysander indulged his carnal desires only when they grew so strong that they interfered with his training and duties. He'd never given his heart to a woman, nor bared his soul to one, save the hag who now tormented him with this damn collar. However when he chose to take a woman, he preferred that she enjoy the experience. An enthusiastic, satisfied partner made fucking far more pleasurable.

With Flora he hadn't simply wanted to satisfy her, he'd wanted to give her the best experience of her life. He could have kissed her lush skin, suckled her gorgeous breasts and caressed the soft, wet place between her legs all day without growing bored. It sickened him to think of her bound to a man who cared nothing for her. No one should have to live like that.

Nor like this. He tugged at his manacles but they held tight. His Fanticaun blood made him stronger than most men, but with the beatings, the dust and the collar he felt annoyingly weak. A few times he'd sustained injuries in battle that nearly killed him. Only then had he felt weaker than at this moment.

He closed his eyes and drifted to sleep.

Pounding on the door awakened him and he gasped, his shoulders aching from being held in position by the manacles. Almost every part of him hurt, especially his ribs.

The door opened and he squinted against the light, painful after sitting for so long in darkness. A guard approached and knelt beside him while two others stood outside, their weapons drawn.

"You must think I'm a very powerful man," Lysander said in a voice far stronger than he felt.

The guard didn't reply but unfastened the manacles. Lysander's arms dropped to his sides. The pain in his shoulders increased momentarily from the change of position.

Finally he summoned the strength to rub his wrists. The guard brought him a bowl of stew, a chunk of bread and a wooden mug filled with water.

"King Typhon commands you to eat. You must keep your strength up," said the guard.

A wry smile touched Lysander's lips. "Must I?"

"Eat," the guard said, holding his gaze. Though the man's face remained stern, compassion shone in his eyes.

Lysander's stomach rumbled with hunger. He didn't know how long it had been since his last meal of fish and roots during his wilderness journey. Still he ate slowly, savoring every bite. Who knew when he'd eat again? If he'd gotten Flora with child, this might very well be his last meal.

No, if Hecta sensed that Flora carried his child, they wouldn't be feeding Lysander but executing him.

He wondered what Flora was doing at the moment and if she was all right. The way she'd touched him, cleaned his wounds and responded to his kisses made it difficult to keep her from his heart. If she was all she appeared to be, then she deserved a life much better than the one she had with Typhon.

Chapter Four

Flora stood in her chamber in a remote tower of Darridge palace. The only door was barred from the outside and protected by guards. The comfortable room had a large bed covered in soft sheets, blankets and furs. She was well-fed and allowed outside daily for exercise and fresh air, for as Typhon often told her, “A healthy bitch bears stronger offspring.”

To keep from succumbing to utter boredom, Flora drew and painted. She would have preferred needlework, but Typhon didn’t trust her with the tools of such a trade. He probably feared that she’d plunge her shears into his chest when he came to sate his lust, and he would be right. She would gladly kill him if given the opportunity.

Typhon gave her a maid for company. Most likely he also used the servant as a spy to inform him if Flora said anything that might be of interest to him—such as plans for escape or other forms of treason. Now she doubted if the girl would tell him the truth even if she had something to report. It had taken weeks for the maid to trust her. Flora understood her fear. The woman had originally worked in the kitchen and great hall. Flora could only guess the abuse she’d suffered at the hands of Typhon, his guards and guests. Pretty young women like the maid were used as entertainment. The very thought of it sickened Flora but she could do little to help servants when she couldn’t even help herself.

She walked to the window and gazed out at the moonlit countryside. Far in the distance stood the forest and beyond that the mountains that separated Darridge from Aberhill, Lysander’s homeland.

Right now he must be missing home terribly. By the wounds on his beautiful body he had been treated badly, with the worst abuse yet to come. Once he served his purpose, she hated to imagine the execution Typhon had planned for him. It wouldn’t be swift and merciful, for a vile man like Typhon relished the suffering of others. She used to wonder what had made him so twisted. Perhaps if someone dug deeply enough they might uncover a shred of decency. Now she no longer cared.

She had more important things on her mind. She worried for the servants, she worried for herself and now she worried for Lysander. Yes, he was supposed to be the enemy, but when he touched her so tenderly she couldn’t view him as such.

Enemy. Whose enemy? Typhon’s? Just about everyone was Typhon’s enemy. Darridge would probably be better off if Aberhill took over.

Her door burst open and she gasped and turned toward it, her heart pounding. Typhon strode in, slamming the door behind him. He looked as if he had just come from the training field. Loose trousers and knee-length boots covered his legs and a

black vest that clung wetly to his sweat-drenched body. Dirt streaked his face and a long, bloody scratch marked the upper part of his right arm.

"For a woman who didn't want to mate, you seemed awfully enthusiastic," he said in the soft, patronizing voice she knew meant trouble. Whenever he spoke to her like this, fury bubbled below the surface. He liked to lull people into a sense of safety, then tear them to pieces. By now Flora knew him well enough not to be fooled.

"It's what you wanted," she said flatly. "I thought you'd be pleased."

His lips twisted into what might have been a smile but could have been a sneer. "You've never been interested in pleasing me. No matter what I've done, no matter how indulgent I've been, nothing thaws your heart."

At times Flora still couldn't believe his twisted manner of thinking. He walked closer and cupped the back of her head, stroking lightly at first, then tightening his fingers in her hair. The strong scent of magical herbs emanated from his perspiring body.

"You liked being fucked by him, didn't you? You enjoyed being soiled by that Aberhill swine."

"Why does it matter? You're getting what you want, aren't you?" she said with deliberate calmness. She refused to react to the feel of his fingers twisting her hair or to the furious look in his dark blue eyes. His smoky scent grew with his rage. He spent so much time on his dark spells that the herbs and incense had seeped into his very flesh and she *hated* it. Most likely he'd been perfecting his wicked magic, using it to reinforce his troops to launch a new attack against Aberhill now that he'd imprisoned Lysander.

"I believe you said to him 'it never happened like this with Typhon'. Those were your words, correct?"

"How should I remember? My mind was so clouded by the dust that—"

"Lying bitch!" He spoke against her lips, his teeth clenched and eyes blazing. "The dust had faded by the time you said that. I believe you also said 'oh goddess, it's not the dust'. Remember that?"

"Oh Typhon, I'm sorry," she said with feigned sweetness. "It's just that I never knew mating could be like that."

He released her abruptly and continued staring at her. "It's ridiculous. What does that Aberhill swine have that I don't?"

"You mean other than the ability to father children?"

His hand lashed across her cheek so hard and fast that she staggered into the wall. Flora straightened, tasting blood. Her face stung but she turned to him, a triumphant smile on her lips.

"I hope it takes a very long time for him to get me with child," she said. "I'm already looking forward to the next coupling."

"Maybe you'll find he's not so eager to please you."

Flora's stomach tightened. She didn't like the expression on Typhon's face. Who knew what awful tortures he'd subjected Lysander to out of sheer jealousy?

"You know, Typhon," she said, stepping closer to him and gazing at him with her sultriest expression, "it's said that if a woman enjoys the mating experience, she's more likely to bear a son."

He looked thoughtful. "I believe there's little truth to that."

"Maybe, but why take the risk? You've gone this far to secure an heir for our kingdom."

"Our kingdom?"

"Despite our differences, Darridge is still my home."

"The people do seem to like you. You're not much of a wife, but you have potential as queen."

She smiled, hoping he didn't sense her lies. "Give me what I want and I'll give you what you want."

"You have no choice."

"True, but if you make me happy, Typhon, I'll do what you want with a smile and maybe..." She cast her eyes down as she reached out and lightly cupped his crotch. She couldn't look in his eyes while touching him so intimately or else he might see the disgust burning there.

"Maybe I should have started sending you bulls sooner. It appears the corpse has life in her after all," he said, his voice husky, then reached down to restrain her hand. "But not tonight. I have much work to do. Magic to hone and an attack to plan. Perhaps sooner than expected you'll be Queen of Aberhill as well as Darridge."

The sick feeling in Flora's stomach worsened but she forced another smile.

"Sleep well, beautiful corpse." Typhon kissed her roughly. He licked the blood from her cut lip and groaned with passion, then he turned and left.

Once again alone, Flora sat, trembling, on her bed.

Someone tapped on the door and Flora glanced toward it sharply, hoping Typhon hadn't returned. At the moment she didn't want to face him again, nor anybody. She just wanted some time alone.

The door opened a crack and her maid, Crystal, peered in. "My lady, I'm sorry to disturb you but I thought you might want supper."

Flora had so much on her mind that she'd forgotten about food. Now that Crystal mentioned it, she realized she did feel hungry.

"Yes. Please come in."

The maid stepped inside, carrying a tray of delicious-smelling food.

Flora sat at the round marble table by the window as Crystal approached. The maid's eyes widened a bit and she quickly put down the tray and lifted a hand to Flora's face.

"My lady, you're bleeding."

Flora slid her tongue over her bottom lip, once again tasting blood.

Shaking her head, Crystal walked to the nightstand upon which rested a pitcher and basin for washing. She took a handkerchief and moistened it, then turned to Flora and held it to her lip.

"Did the king —"

"Yes," Flora said.

Crystal looked upset. "I can't believe it. I don't recall him ever striking you before."

"This is the first time," Flora said. Still his action hadn't surprised her. It seemed every day Typhon became more and more obsessed with securing an heir and conquering Aberhill.

"He has much on his mind," said the maid.

"I'm sure."

Though Flora had grown to like Crystal and didn't believe the girl wished to betray her, she knew how persuasive Typhon could be. She never provided Crystal with any information that might be used against her.

The maid finished cleaning blood from Flora's face and said, "Is there anything I can get you, my lady?"

"No. Thank you. I'm going to eat and then go to sleep. I've very tired."

The maid nodded and left the room.

Flora sat and ate slowly while gazing out the window.

There had to be a way out of this hell and she intended to find it.

* * * * *

The next day, Flora had just stepped out of her morning bath and into the robe Crystal held for her when Typhon entered the chamber with two guards. If possible, her husband looked even paler than usual, his eyes shadowed beneath and glittering with fury.

"Leave," he ordered. Crystal bowed her head and hurriedly left the chamber.

"Early morning sessions are better," Typhon told her. "Bulls have more energy after a night's rest. You'll go to the breeding cell now."

Flora stared at him coolly but didn't hesitate when he motioned for her to follow the guards. Already her heart pounded with the anticipation of seeing Lysander again.

This time when she reached the "breeding cell" Lysander had yet to arrive. The bloodied sheets from their first mating session had been cleared away, replaced by fresh bedding. The basin had been cleaned and the pitcher filled with fresh water.

The guards closed the door and Flora stood under the hole in the ceiling, trying to see if the old hag or Typhon watched from above. At least one of them had to be there to deliver the dust. Still she saw nothing but darkness.

She walked to the bed and sat on it, tucking her bare feet under her. Her pulse raced and she closed her eyes for a moment, drawing deep, calming breaths.

Finally the door opened and two guards entered, each with a tight hold on Lysander's arms. He seemed almost too weak to stand unsupported and a quick glance toward the hall revealed the old hag standing there, a grimace on her thin lips.

The guards flung him toward the bed. With a grunt, he landed on his knees beside it.

The door slammed and locked, leaving them alone again.

Lysander tried climbing onto the bed. Flora slipped an arm around his lean waist to help him. She was horrified to see he'd been beaten again. If Typhon kept up this treatment, how could he expect Lysander to mate with her at all?

"Come on," she said, tightening her hold on him. "You're heavier than you look."

He flopped onto his back and she lay beside him, both panting slightly. Flora sat up and lightly touched his blackened ribs. When she glanced back at Lysander's face, she found him staring at her with calm blue eyes.

"Is there anything I can do to make you more comfortable?" she said, her voice scarcely a whisper. If Typhon watched, she didn't want to give him any more reasons to be jealous of Lysander. Not that it mattered. He already hated the Overlord of Aberhill to the point of madness. Sometimes she wondered if he wanted Aberhill so badly because they were one of the most powerful kingdoms in the high king's realm.

Even if he took Aberhill, would the high king allow him to keep it? While minor kings sometimes fought for land, the joining of two such powerful kingdoms as Aberhill and Darridge could prove threatening to High King Nik. Surely he knew his men and understood Typhon's lust for power might one day work against rather than for him?

"No," he replied, reached for her hand and tugged her back to his side. His strength seemed to be returning. Most likely Hecta had been controlling him through the collar. She'd loosened her grip so he'd have the strength to make love to her.

Flora could scarcely wait to feel him inside her, to see the lust on his face and hear his impassioned voice call her name. A sick feeling washed over her and she shook her head.

"What's wrong?" he asked, then smiled slightly. "Other than the obvious."

"I think I must be a terrible person."

His brow furrowed in question and she continued, "You're obviously in pain and all I can think about is..."

He touched a fingertip to her cheek and caressed. "What?"

"Making love," she murmured, then closed her eyes, unable to meet his gaze any longer. "How can I be like this?"

"If the wish for us to mate again makes you a terrible person, then I'm just as bad," he said.

Their gazes locked and he drew her closer, whispering against her lips, "They'll use the dust again, but we don't need it."

As their lips met in a gentle kiss, Flora caught the pungent aroma of the dust and didn't need to open her eyes to see it floating throughout the room.

Lysander broke the kiss and demanded, "What's this?"

She opened her eyes and he ran his fingertip over her lower lip. It came away stained with blood, as her wound had reopened.

"Nothing," she said.

"So he hits you on top of everything else?"

"Just this one time."

"One time too many." The fierceness in his eyes almost frightened her, yet at the same time warmed her to the core. After all Typhon had done to him, it angered him to think he'd struck her just once.

Of course she agreed that one time was too many. If she thought it would have done any good, she'd have struck back, but she'd chosen a better method. By convincing Typhon that she and Lysander should enjoy their sessions, she might persuade him to believe their differences as husband and wife could eventually be reconciled. When the opportunity came for her to strike back at him, she wanted to take him completely by surprise.

"It's the damn dust again," he said, anger and lust glistening in his eyes.

"I know."

Desire seemed to overcome any lingering weakness and he rolled her onto her back. Burying his face between her neck and shoulder, he nuzzled and kissed her.

Flora closed her eyes, not even trying to fight her urges this time. These moments with Lysander were among the happiest in her life. For years he'd been a faceless warrior, one she knew by reputation alone. She never imagined the man would be like this. He had a gentle side, something completely unexpected. He treated her like a woman rather than an object, something no one had ever done before.

The warmth of his body seeped into her, even through the robe. His stiff cock pushed against her and her body reacted to the sensation. Her nipples tightened and she felt that desperate ache between her legs that she knew only he could appease.

He slid down her body, covering her shoulders and the tops of her breasts with feathery kisses. Sighing with pleasure, she wove her fingers through his hair. It was damp again, as if he'd just bathed. At least Typhon allowed him to wash before he came to her. She'd seen some bulls covered in filth.

Lysander's tongue swept across her nipple and he sucked the tight little bud into his mouth. Passion shot through Flora and she moaned, tightening her fingers on his hair, then caressing his shoulders. Everything he'd endured at Typhon's hands hadn't diminished this man's strength and beauty.

His hand dipped between her legs and he fondled her until she trembled and tensed on the verge of ultimate pleasure. His long, slender finger dipped inside her, gathering moisture. Then ran his finger along her clit, teasing the sensitive nub. His every stroke made her flesh swell and throb even more. Still fondling her clit, he caught her nipple between his teeth and tugged on it, then lapped it. He took her nipple and as much of the surrounding breast as he could into his mouth, laving and sucking until she thought she might die from the pleasure. Overwhelmed by sensations, she moaned.

"Oh please," she gasped. "Please, Lysander!"

He released her breast and turned his attention to her other. His eyes closed, he groaned as he lapped her and his stiff cock pushed against her. While he teased her breasts and clit, Flora stroked every part of him she could reach, loving the feel of his warm skin and hard muscles against her hands.

"Lysander," she murmured, teetering on the edge. His hand left her clit to fondle her breast while he continued sucking the other.

Mewling with need, Flora turned and thrust her pelvis against him. It pressed against his rock-hard cock and this time when she moaned with pleasure, he groaned in answer.

Flora loved how he sounded when aroused. Despite their situation, she loved giving him pleasure. She reached down and curled her fist around his shaft, relishing the feel of his velvety flesh and the hard, pulsing muscle beneath. She stroked it tenderly and swept her thumb over the head.

"Harder," he said, his voice rough. "Hold me harder."

She did as he ordered, tightening her fist on the shaft and pumping it until he groaned again. He covered her lips in a deep kiss, thrusting his tongue into her mouth and moving his lips sensually against hers. Everything about his kisses aroused her. She loved his taste and the feel of his lips and tongue. His kisses were tender yet possessive and he made her feel more like a woman than she ever had in her life. Near him she felt fragile yet filled with all the passion in the universe.

Using the tip of her thumb, she teased the underside of his cock head. He jerked and gasped with pleasure and when she swept her fingertip over the swollen crown of his erection, she felt the first droplets of his essence that beaded at the little eye.

Practically growling with passion, he covered her body with his. The tip of his cock pushed against her slick entrance, but he didn't fill her completely. Flora opened her eyes and found him staring at her, his hands braced on either side of her head, the powerful muscles of his arms and shoulders tense and defined as he held back.

He lowered his face toward hers and brushed the faintest kiss across her mouth, as if he feared hurting her injured lip. His tenderness overwhelmed her, spurring on her passion.

"Lysander," she whispered, grasping his neck and trying to draw him to her for a deeper kiss, however she only succeeded in pulling herself toward him. He was so strong and hard. Her stomach clenched. Still clinging to his neck, she kissed him firmly, using her tongue to trace the shape of his mouth. She thrust it between his lips as he had done to her and with a groan he opened to her. His tongue met hers with hungry strokes.

Closing her eyes, Flora moaned, completely lost in his kiss. While their tongues engaged in lustful battle, he eased his cock into her more deeply, filling her so slowly that she thought she might go crazy from sheer frustration.

She wanted him to take her fast and hard. By heavens, she needed him.

The little tremors rippling over his steely shoulders and back told her the dust affected him too, yet he thrust in a slow, steady rhythm. He pushed her closer and closer to the edge without letting her tumble over.

Finally he broke the kiss and pressed his cheek against hers, his panting breath tickling her ear.

"Flora," he said, pumping faster, "look at me."

She forced her eyes open and met his burning gaze. His chiseled face tensed with passion and sweat misted his brow and upper lip.

Passion shot through her like a flaming arrow, making her belly tighten and her entire body quiver.

"Come for me," he said.

The rawness of his deep voice and the swiftness of his thrusts hurled her over the edge. Those wonderful sensations broke over her, making her throb, pant and writhe beneath him.

"That will cost me," he said with a hoarse chuckle. "But it was worth the price."

With a groan of pleasure he doubled the speed of his thrusts and joined her in bliss, his muscles tense and his hips surging against hers.

He rolled onto his back and pulled her close. Resting her head against his shoulder, she draped an arm and a leg over him.

When she had the strength to speak again, she said, "What will cost you?"

"Typhon doesn't like the idea of me giving you pleasure. Strange, considering he insists we keep doing this."

She knitted her brow and whispered in his ear, "Is that why he beat you?"

"I doubt it's the only reason."

She could scarcely believe he'd been threatened with more bodily harm but chose to please her anyway. He was either the most stubborn man she'd ever known or the most stupid.

"It doesn't matter. I've never raped a woman in my life and I'm not about to start now."

Flora lifted her head to meet his gaze, wondering if he noticed her confusion. "I've never met anyone like you. How did Hecta find a way to control you? You're not afraid of anything."

The faintest smile flickered across his lips. He cupped the back of her head and drew her toward him.

"Everyone is afraid of something," he whispered and kissed her lightly.

Flora swept his silken hair aside and spoke in his ear. "You needn't worry about being punished for pleasuring me. I convinced Typhon that a son is more likely to be conceived if the woman enjoys the experience."

He chuckled and playfully swatted her buttocks. "You're a fascinating woman, Flora."

"No more fascinating than you, Lysander of Aberhill." She settled beside him, her finger drawing random shapes on his sculpted chest. She kissed his collarbone, then his cheek. "I'm not sure how long we'll be allowed to stay here. You should rest while you have the chance. I doubt your usual accommodations are as nice as this."

"You mean the closet with the manacles?"

Flora's gut tightened. For a brief time she'd almost forgotten their terrible situation. The very thought of him locked up struck at her heart.

"I'm so sorry," she whispered.

"It could be worse."

"Could it?" She lifted her head to meet his gaze.

"Where there's life, there's hope."

How could he think positively in his situation? Yet what he said made sense. They couldn't give up hope.

Flora settled back beside him. A few moments later, she guessed by the slow, even rhythm of his breathing, he'd fallen asleep. She lay quietly, not wishing to disturb him. She wanted to offer him what comfort she could, knowing that all too soon he'd be taken from this place that had become both sanctuary and prison.

She wondered if she could actually gain Typhon's trust. Despite the rift between them, if she could convince him that she didn't hate him, maybe he'd come to her again to sate his lust. Then she could try to kill him.

Even if she did, that would free her but might not help Lysander. Hecta had come to her after she'd mated with Lysander the first time and declared that she hadn't conceived. Most likely she would visit after each session. With her powers, she would know long before Flora if a child had been conceived and its gender.

Flora had already been informed that a girl would be destroyed. Hecta had a potion that would do it quickly.

"And if I refuse to swallow it?" Flora had demanded.

"Then we'll hold you and pour it down your throat," Typhon had replied.

She closed her eyes against the memory and cuddled closer to Lysander's side. Why hadn't she been given to a man like this? Until Lysander, she hadn't even imagined men like this existed. Her father had been little better than Typhon, which is probably why Typhon had taken such a liking to him.

Flora remembered the way her mother had been treated—like a possession, unworthy of a glance unless a specific social occasion demanded the presence of both king and queen. That's how Typhon seemed to want it as well.

Lysander talked to her. He looked at her and not through her.

Her fingertips hovered over the healing lash marks on his lean sides. He had no spare flesh, so it surprised her that the whip hadn't cut through to his ribs. Of course Typhon's guards, being experienced torturers, could cause great pain with little injury or they could slice a man to pieces. She'd seen them do it.

When it came time for Lysander's execution, part of her feared Typhon would make her watch. It would be just like him to make as big a spectacle as possible of Lysander as well as her. He might even use the execution to test her loyalty. Was it better that she didn't try to manipulate her husband? Which decision would cause Lysander less pain?

It struck her that even though she scarcely knew the Overlord of Aberhill, she cared for him very much.

He moaned softly in his sleep and she placed her hand to his cheek. His eyes opened halfway and focused on her.

Lysander gazed at Flora, thinking that he wouldn't mind a vision like this each time he woke. He momentarily forgot where he was, but the pressure of the collar on his neck and the ache in his ribs when he shifted position quickly reminded him.

He swallowed, lifting a hand to his neck and rubbing, not that it offered any relief.

"Does it hurt much?" she asked, touching a fingertip to his neck, just above the collar.

"Not really, unless Hecta wants it to. When she's not around it's just uncomfortable."

"There's no way you can use your powers?"

He looked at her thoughtfully. As much as he enjoyed her company and pitied her situation, he couldn't help wondering if part of her might be loyal to her husband after all. She was still the Queen of Darridge and he had seen wives and even servants honor cruel masters. They sometimes learned to accept their situation, becoming almost as twisted as the ones who mistreated them.

Flora seemed genuine. He believed she was exactly what she seemed to be—a decent woman trapped by an unworthy husband. Lysander's magic had always given him tremendous intuition and he realized how much he had come to depend on it.

"I'm sorry," she said, sighing and shaking her head. "That was a stupid question. If you could summon your Fanticaun powers, you wouldn't be here but on your way back to Aberhill."

Lysander reached up and caressed her soft cheek. If not for her, his captivity would be unbearable. Being trapped in that small, dark cell had nearly driven him mad. Though exhausted he'd scarcely been able to sleep. He couldn't abide the closed in space. Though his training both as a warrior and a Fanticaun demanded sessions that forced him to endure closed spaces, he had loathed it. This was far worse. Unless he found a way to escape, he would die in captivity, a prisoner of his kingdom's worst enemy.

The very idea of Flora bearing a child he would never know, of having Typhon of all people raise it, infuriated him. He could not, would not allow that to happen.

Flora closed her eyes and leaned her face into his hand. He glanced at her slightly swollen lower lip and the healing sliver marring the soft pink flesh. Leave it to Typhon to hit his wife. If Flora belonged to him, he would never raise his hand to her in anger. A man could deal with his wife in other ways. To him, beating a woman wasn't an option. Except perhaps for a woman like Hecta. He'd slit that bitch's throat in a heartbeat after what she'd done. The same as men, certain women didn't deserve consideration as honorable people.

As if summoned by his hatred alone the door opened and Hecta appeared with her entourage of guards. His collar burned and tightened so much that he gagged. The guards snapped on his shackles and manacles while Hecta approached Flora and reached toward the Queen's stomach.

"Get away from me, hag," Flora spat.

"Unless you cooperate I'll strangle him to the brink of death," Hecta replied.

Lysander wanted to curse his former mentor but the collar prevented him from forming words. He struggled against the guards until dizziness overtook him and he dropped to his knees.

"Stop it," Flora shouted. "Do your revolting duty, Hecta."

Lysander sat for a moment, gasping for breath. His teeth gritted in fury, he watched, seething, as Hecta touched her gnarled hand to the slight curve of Flora's smooth belly.

The hag snarled and shook her head. "Nothing." Glancing at Lysander, she scoffed, "And you look like you could spawn babies with a mere kiss. Perhaps I should increase the fertility properties of the dust."

"Maybe you should try convincing Typhon not to beat him," Flora suggested. "That can't be good for our purpose."

"Our purpose?" Hecta raised a sparse, steel gray eyebrow. "Typhon mentioned you weren't entirely against this, but I find that hard to believe. Have you fallen under Lysander's spell? It's an attraction even locking his power won't diminish. Women have admired him all his life but he scarcely noticed. It was all about training and wilderness journeys, am I right?" The hag stepped close to Lysander and trailed her fingertips over his chest. One of her sharp nails raked down his belly, making him flinch with disgust.

The guards tightened their grip on his chains while she continued her revolting exploration. He could scarcely believe what was happening. Hecta grasped his cock roughly and stared at him with a leering smile. "You're quite fertile, but I've always sensed that. It will be interesting, seeing what kind of son you and the queen produce. Typhon and I have such plans for him."

"You're beyond mad," Lysander told her.

Hecta strode out of the room.

Before the guards dragged him out, Lysander glanced at Flora. Her lovely, dark eyes reflected his rage and disgust. Her full lips parted slightly, as if she wanted to tell him something, then she seemed to change her mind.

The guards took him down the stairs and through the dimly lit tunnel. As they neared the tiny cell, panic almost overtook him. Still he mastered it, drawing a deep breath before entering the confined space. The guards closed the door, leaving him in darkness – naked and cold on the stone floor.

Chapter Five

Lysander had no way of knowing exactly how long he remained in the cell. He guessed it had been about ten days since the last “breeding” session.

During this time, he had seen no one but the guards who brought him food and took him out for fitness training with the other bulls. Usually that meant fighting for his life. His body bore the bruises of the exercise sessions. At least it kept his hand-to-hand combat skills sharp.

His stomach rumbled and he tried to ignore it. Though he wasn’t given enough to satisfy his hunger, his single hearty meal each day prevented him from losing too much weight and muscle. Obviously Typhon had some interest in keeping him healthy until he got Flora with child.

He couldn’t help missing her. Only the thought of seeing her again made his existence bearable. He wished he knew whether or not Typhon had already launched an attack against Aberhill. Most likely not yet. Surely he would have gotten word about the battle, either from overhearing the guards’ conversation or from Flora.

Lysander waited, expecting Typhon and his guards to appear at any moment, yet almost afraid they wouldn’t. What if they left him to rot here? Perhaps Flora had conceived and Typhon intended to keep him locked away until he died. No one had brought him a meal yet today. Or had they? He couldn’t guess the time when he didn’t know day from night. He almost preferred more abuse to being trapped in this dark, closed space.

Fearing that he might go mad, he closed his eyes and concentrated on breathing. The martial arts forms he’d studied, as well as some magical techniques, placed great emphasis on correct breathing. Lysander focused on those exercises and other forms of meditation. He found it easier to meditate in the wilderness, surrounded by forests, water and cooling breezes.

He imagined walking on the white sand beach on the shore of Aberhill. He tried to remember how the spray of the ocean felt on his skin and tasted on his lips. The warm sun beat down, glistening on the water.

If only he could stretch his legs, but the cell was too cramped. The manacles cut into his wrists and he lifted his arms a bit higher to relieve the pressure but eventually dropped them again when the ache in his shoulders became almost unbearable. The guards kept him chained like this for hours each day. It caused less damage than flogging but after so much time, the frozen position became quite painful.

Part of him wished they’d bring him to Flora again. Her soft skin and gentle touches saved his sanity in a way he’d never dreamed possible. Lysander had never thought much about women.

Yes he'd bedded them when he had the urge, always using a potion that prevented him from getting his partners with child. Some men cared little for what they left behind, but when and if Lysander had children, he wanted to be sure they were raised properly and knew the love of both parents. Unless he found a way out of this situation, his efforts might have been wasted.

The door opened and his heart raced. Now what?

Having been disturbed from his meditation, the imaginary warmth of the sun on the beach faded and Lysander shivered from the coldness of the cell. His back and buttocks ached from remaining in one position on the cold stones.

He sighed with relief. The guards were just bringing him food. While two stood outside the door, weapons drawn, the third placed the bowl and mug in front of him and released his wrists from the manacles. It was the guard with the kind eyes, the same one who had brought him food when he'd first been imprisoned. Lysander wondered how a man like this had become a guard in Typhon's palace.

As Lysander ate, the guard left the cell and returned a moment later with a sack of hay that he dumped inside. Their gazes locked and each nodded slightly in understanding. The hay would at least be warmer than the stone floor. The guards left him in peace again. When they returned a short time later to collect the bowl and mug, they left his hands free.

Once they'd gone, Lysander curled up in the hay and closed his eyes.

He dreamed of Flora. They were back at the palace in Aberhill, making love in his chamber. In the dream he felt her smooth skin and caught the subtle scent of lilac that always clung to her. She lay beneath him, her lovely dark eyes gleaming. She arched her back, pushing her full, pink-tipped breasts into his hands.

"Lysander, please," she breathed. "I need you."

Something pulled him out of the dream. Lysander snapped awake at the same moment the cell door opened.

"Get up," said the guard—a different one. Hard eyes.

Lysander rose, glancing toward the door. He didn't see Hecta this time. Every muscle tensed. This might be the only chance he had. The guard stepped closer to snap on the manacles and Lysander snatched them from his grasp and swiftly wrapped them around his neck. He twisted the chain and pressed his knee into the guard's lower back. The man struggled, clawing at the chain cutting off his breath.

The collar burned his neck and Lysander gritted his teeth as Hecta and Typhon stepped into view. They glanced at each other and smiled, then turned back to Lysander and the guard.

"You thought you might have a chance to escape, didn't you?" Typhon said. "I missed you during my time away." His voice dripped sarcasm. "But I'm back now and ready to see you give the queen my son."

The burning increased and Lysander's vision faded as the collar cut off his breathing completely. He fought it and tightened his hold on the guard. Finally he blacked out, unsure if the guard was dead or alive.

* * * * *

"Lysander, can you hear me?"

Flora's voice penetrated the blackness and Lysander struggled to lift his heavy eyelids.

"That's it. Open your eyes," she said, curling her soft little hand around his chin.

At first she looked like a blur of sable and alabaster, then his vision focused and he saw her seated on the edge of the bed in the breeding cell. He lay on his back, covered up to his chest with a blanket.

"Thank the goddess," she breathed, closing her eyes for a moment. "I thought you might never wake up."

"How long?" he murmured.

"About three hours. They haven't bothered sending any dust yet." She stroked a lock of hair from his face, then swept it behind his ear. She poured water from the pitcher into a wooden mug and held it to his lips.

Lysander covered her hand with his and swallowed several mouthfuls. While she placed the cup aside, he closed his eyes again. He felt as if he'd been a prisoner for years. He missed the sunlight and fresh air. Most of all he wanted to be free of the damn collar.

Hecta and Typhon enjoyed every moment of this power game.

He looked at Flora and she continued stroking his face.

"I thought I might never see you again," he said softly. "How long has it been?"

"Ten days since we last met," she replied.

So, his guess had been right after all.

Flora bent, brushed his lips with a kiss and whispered in his hear, "I've missed you, Lysander, so much."

He tugged her closer to him and she lay in his arms. Though he'd lost weight since he'd arrived, he still had a strong, hard body. She trailed her fingertips gently over his sides, feeling the sharpness of his ribs.

"Typhon had better start feeding you more," she murmured.

"I guess I'm lucky he's not starving me altogether, but if he does I won't be able to serve his purpose," Lysander said bitterly.

As if summoned by the turn their conversation had taken, a pungent odor filled the air.

They glanced toward the hole in the ceiling through which the red and black dust floated.

Lysander felt too tired to make love, even to luscious Flora, but the dust would soon take hold and he'd have no control over his actions.

She bent and whispered in his ear, "You have no idea how much I hate them."

"Oh yes I do," he replied, took her face in her hands and kissed her as the dust filled him with every breath.

Flora's body draped his and she responded fervently to his kiss. Her tongue thrust against his and she buried her hands in his hair, her fingers caressing his scalp.

Aroused by her touch and spurred on by Hecta's dust, Lysander's body responded. His cock stiffened and ached with need. He could scarcely wait to be buried inside her soft, wet sheath.

By the urgency of her kiss and the way she moaned with passion, Flora was just as affected. Her body covered his more fully, her forearms resting on either side of his head and her full breasts pressing enticingly against him. He ran his fingertips along the sides of her breasts, then cupped them, relishing their softness and the way her stiff nipples rubbed against his palms.

"Oh!" she cried softly, arching her neck. Her knees squeezed his hips and he grunted with pleasure-pain.

"I'm sorry," she panted, her gaze meeting his. "I forgot about your ribs."

"It's all right. Just come here," he breathed, dragging her face toward his for another kiss.

She moaned, her lips caressing his and her tongue exploring his mouth with penetrating strokes. Her satiny bottom teased his cock and as she rubbed her warm, deliciously furred crotch against him, he felt her dampness on his belly. Hell, he wanted to be buried inside her already.

"Lysander, I want...I need..." she murmured between kisses.

"So do I."

She tugged away from him and he opened his eyes. Still straddling him, Flora had risen to her knees. She gazed down at him with a sultry look in her dark eyes. Thick sable hair tumbled down her shoulders, partially covering her full breasts. Unable to resist, he brushed her hair aside and cupped her breasts again. He kneaded them, loving the sight of his gold-tinged hands against her snowy flesh. Taking her taut pink nipples between his thumbs and forefingers, he rubbed them gently, then pinched them—not enough to hurt her but enough to make her gasp with desire.

Her eyes closed and she covered his hands with hers, pressing them harder to her breasts. Lysander stroked and kneaded, then grasped her slender sides. Her heart beat hard against his palm and lust stabbed him to his core.

"Lysander, let me," she murmured, rising even higher on her knees. She clasped his straining cock and stroked it swiftly, then lowered herself onto it.

Lysander could scarcely believe this was happening. It almost made his captivity worthwhile, to see beautiful Queen Flora on her knees above him, her luscious breasts heaving with passion.

Inch by wonderfully torturous inch she took him inside her. Finally filled with his cock, she opened her eyes and met his gaze. Lysander held out his hands to her and she interlaced her fingers with his. They squeezed tightly, tender while at the same time burning with lust. It struck Lysander that if given the chance he and this woman might share a deep connection.

She rocked atop him, driving their impassioned bodies to even greater heights. Lysander's hips lunged upward as hers swooped down. Groans escaped his throat, mingling with her moans of need.

Overcome by lust, he shifted their position, rolling her onto her back, his cock never leaving her. Bracing his hands on either side of her head, he drove into her fast and hard, forgetting his exhaustion and ignoring the ache in his ribs.

Flora panted and writhed beneath him. Her legs wrapped tightly around him and her fingers wove through his hair. She screamed as her climax struck and the pulsations of her drenched pussy around his cock snapped the final thread of his control.

He came longer and harder than he ever had in his life, his heart pounding, muscles straining and vision stolen by a black and red haze.

When Lysander finally summoned the strength to move, he rolled off her. Her eyes didn't open, but when he pulled her to his chest she made a contented sound and snuggled closer.

Before they had a chance to enjoy more precious time together, Hecta and the guards entered the room. They followed the same routine, the guards restraining Lysander with the shackles and manacles while Hecta rested her hand on Flora's belly.

The hag's wrinkled brow creased even more and a smile slid across her face. "Congratulations, Lysander. It seems my last reading was off. The queen is most definitely with child, though not from this session. If Typhon hadn't been away on business and asked for the breeding sessions to be postponed until he returned, I would have caught the mistake sooner. No matter. In about nine months you'll have a son. Unfortunately for you, you'll never see him. Take him away."

Flora's gaze riveted to Lysander, yet neither spoke before the guards dragged him out of the chamber.

So many emotions battled inside him—rage, sorrow and fear. Few things frightened Lysander. He'd faced his death many times in battle, but this was different. Typhon would no doubt want him executed immediately. He'd gotten what he wanted. Flora and his son would be under his control.

In the stone corridor, rage such as he'd never felt before overcame him. Despite the collar and his physical weakness, something inside him snapped. He pulled so hard on the manacles that both guards holding him stumbled to their knees. Two of the mounted guards leapt off their horses to assist their companions. They jerked on the

chains binding Lysander's feet and he crashed to the ground, grunting from the impact on his injured ribs. Yet his foot lashed out in a kick that hurled the nearest guard into the stone wall.

"Call the chief enchanter," shouted one of the guards. He drew his sword and swung the pommel toward Lysander's head. The overlord rolled out of the way and managed to twist his body around, trapping the guard's head between his crossed legs. He tore the weapon from his hand and deflected sword swipes from the two remaining guards.

If he killed them and took the keys to gain freedom from the chains, then he would have a chance to escape.

The collar seared his flesh and tightened on his neck with more ferocity than ever before. He dropped the sword and instinctively grasped his neck. His glance shifted toward Hecta who stood nearby, her face contorted from the effort of controlling him through the collar. He fought harder, trying to reach the magic locked inside him. Unable to breathe, he surrendered to blackness.

* * * * *

Lysander awoke shivering on damp stone. A foul stench wafted on the misty air. His body ached mercilessly and his flesh stung from a number of fresh lashes. He groaned and closed his eyes again. Tasting blood, he ran his tongue along his lips. His lower one was cut and stinging. The guards must have beaten him again after Hecta rendered him unconscious.

A growl unlike anything he'd ever heard chased off his lethargy and he tried to stand but his wrists and ankles were bound tightly. Lifting his head he saw that he lay on the cobblestone edge of a large, circular door in the ground. The many locks and bolts were pulled back but the door remained closed.

"Good. You're awake," Typhon said.

Lysander rolled over and saw that six armed guards, Hecta and Typhon stood nearby.

The King of Darridge continued, "I wanted the chance to say goodbye and reassure you that your son will be raised to follow in my footsteps. He will help me destroy everything you've ever loved."

"Such a waste," Hecta said, clicking her tongue and shaking her head. "Maybe I'll have better luck training your offspring. You had too much of your father's influence to fully appreciate my teachings. I had such hopes for us, Lysander. Together we could have destroyed Ariston and taken Aberhill. At least I've been able to savor my revenge, first against you and very soon against your brother."

The hag approached and the collar tightened, choking off his breath. She bent and covered his lips in a kiss, her foul tongue thrusting into his mouth. Hecta stood and Lysander spat in the dirt, trying to expel her taste.

"Well I hate long goodbyes," Typhon said with a pleased little grin. He motioned toward the guards. It took four men to open the enormous, heavy door.

"Wait," Typhon called. "Cut his bonds. We don't want him to drown before the beast get his dinner. Bulls are my pet's favorite delicacy."

Beast. Pet.

Lysander thought about that growl he'd heard just moments go. What creature did Typhon have trapped beneath the ground?

His collar burned again and as his strength drained, the guards cut the rope bonds on his hands and feet. The guard untying his hands momentarily leaned close to his ear and whispered, "It sees poorly."

Lysander glanced at him and saw it was the man with the kind eyes. He nodded ever so slightly before he and his companion shoved Lysander into the pit.

Hecta's hold loosened and Lysander shouted on the way down. Water closed over his head and he broke the surface, gasping.

The smell nearly made him sick. This wasn't mere water, but every disgusting bit of waste from Darridge. Urine, feces, rotted food and the carcasses of dead animals created a lake of refuse.

The door above closed with a resounding thud. Lysander glanced around. He thanked the goddess for his Fanticaun eyes that enabled him to make out dim shapes, even in the darkness of this pit.

He swam through the sludge and climbed onto a slimy rock pile. At least he was out of the water. The smell nearly overtook him and his stomach heaved. Somehow he managed to keep from vomiting. After a moment he got hold of himself and glanced around. The bones of many men as well as animals were lodged among the rocks. Disgust shot through him when he thought about how many bulls had been sacrificed here. Obviously Typhon's pet ate quite a bit. Squinting toward the distance, Lysander saw the dank chamber narrowed into a tunnel.

If not for the damn collar he could use his normal strength as well as his magic about now.

Roars and growls sounded in the distance, then grew louder. The stagnant water rippled and Lysander tensed. The unknown creature trapped here was about to make itself known. He needed some kind of weapon. He grabbed a human thighbone wedged between a couple of rocks and picked up a smaller rock, using it to smash the top of the bone to a ragged edge. Though not a sophisticated weapon, it was better than nothing.

The rippling brown water slapped against the rocks and Lysander tensed, his hand tight on his bone weapon. A creature three times the size of an ox emerged from the corridor. Covered in a scaly hide, it had a piggish face and sharp, protruding teeth. This was surely not a natural creature. It reeked of evil magic. Most likely Typhon or Hecta had created it, either on purpose or as a side effect of their practice.

It struck Lysander that this creature, though vile, was also a prisoner. That thought quickly fled his mind as it neared him. Its head lashed out and Lysander leapt out of the way before its teeth snapped him in half.

Something the kind-eyed guard had said popped into his mind. *It sees poorly.*

Lysander ran, trying not to slip on the rocks, and the creature followed so closely that he felt its hot breath on his ass.

He decided to see if the guard had spoken the truth after all and leapt into the water. The monster's head plunged underneath, grazing Lysander's side. The rough scales scraped his ribs and he hoped it didn't take off too much skin. He swam toward a pile of rocks beneath the water and the creature's head searched blindly then it resurfaced. Lysander also rose to the surface, trying hard not to pant. The creature was halfway across the chamber. It turned in his direction and he held his breath.

It swam out of the chamber and Lysander again pulled himself onto the rocks. That had been too close, but the guard hadn't lied. The creature did have poor vision. The bone spear still clutched in his hand, he moved nearer to the corridor. Glancing down it, he saw no sign of the monster and risked swimming the short distance from the cave to another rock pile in the corridor.

He couldn't escape the same way he had arrived. Not only couldn't he reach the door in the ground, but even if he managed to get to it, he couldn't open it.

Hopefully there would be another way out, perhaps farther down the tunnel.

After traveling for what seemed like hours, Lysander paused for a rest. He was quite cold and several of his injuries nagged him. If he didn't die of infection from this filth on raw wounds, it would be a miracle. If only he could get to some fresh water.

"Fresh water," he muttered. "If only I can escape."

The growling resumed and the water churned. He ducked into a crevice amidst the rocks, trying his best to remain hidden and still as the creature passed. Luckily it took no notice of him.

He continued down the tunnel. Ahead he saw a faint light shining on the brown water. Glancing toward the craggy ceiling, he saw a small hole about the size of a well. It would be a narrow fit but Lysander knew he could make it. The biggest problem would be avoiding the beast. The ceiling in this chamber wasn't high and out in the open Lysander would be easy pickings for such an enormous creature.

He glanced behind him but didn't see the beast. Now was as good a time as any to attempt his escape. He continued walking along the slimy stones until they tapered off, forcing him into the waist-deep sludge. As he neared the hole, the muck rose to his chest. It was thicker than the water on the other end of the tunnel and harder to push through. Finally he reached another rock pile. Luckily this one partially extended below the well-like hole.

Before he reached it, the growls rang out again and the creature appeared at the mouth of the tunnel. He saw nowhere to hide in this cavern. Lysander's best chance was to sink into the muck.

The beast raced toward him and he leapt into the air and flipped over the creature's head. It roared with fury and turned, searching for him, but he flattened against the wall. The monster's nostrils twitched and it swung its head toward him. This time Lysander leapt and landed high on its neck. Using the sharp edge of his bone spear, he tried to pierce the creature's thick skin. It was nearly impossible, especially with the monster shaking its head so hard that he nearly lost his seat.

When the creature opened its mouth in another furious roar, Lysander shoved the bone spear down its throat. As the creature lowered its head to cough up the bone, it staggered just below the opening of the well. Lysander didn't waste the opportunity. He grasped the stone rim and grunted, pulling himself into the well. He managed to find footholds along the edge and stood for a minute, panting hard. Gazing upward, he saw that it wasn't all that much of a climb. Scaling Wingedbeast Cliff was far more arduous. Of course when he'd scaled the cliff he hadn't been beaten, half starved and collared prior to the exercise. At least dusk had fallen. It would be easier to escape in darkness.

He drew a few deep breaths before the creature stuck its head partway up the hole. Apparently it had succeeded in coughing up the spear and now it sought revenge. Its teeth snapped close to Lysander's leg, prompting him to begin his ascent as quickly as possible.

Upon reaching the top, he peered over the stone edge and, seeing no one around, climbed out. He stood, panting for a moment and observing his surroundings. A small village stood a short distance away. Most likely they dumped their waste down the hole to feed the creature. Beyond the village stood Typhon's palace and to the north, the mountains of Aberhill.

Home called to him, but something even stronger pulled him toward Typhon's palace. He thought about Flora and his unborn child. He'd be a fool to try to find her now. His best chance would be to return for her with backup. A war between Aberhill and Darridge was inevitable. Abducting Lysander with the intent to execute him indicated that Typhon had no intention of accepting Ariston's peace treaty.

Should they go to war, it could be weeks, even months, before Lysander could rescue Flora. If he felt he were losing, Typhon might even kill her and the child for spite.

Go home. Don't be a fool.

Lysander clenched his fists and growled softly.

Even if he managed to get home, how would he remove the collar? There had to be a way. Actually, in the back of his mind, he knew a way existed. Hecta had taught him the complicated art of locking powers and she'd also taught him how to remove the lock. Unfortunately with his powers locked, he couldn't recall any specifics of his magic, including spells. He felt as if a haze had settled over the part of his mind that housed his magical knowledge.

He'd seek help from Prytanis, his elite guards and perhaps the teachers he had trained with in other kingdoms. Few practitioners had mastered the art of locking powers, but if Hecta had taught Lysander, most likely Prytanis had studied with a teacher who showed him the same.

Of course if Lysander found Hecta and killed her, the collar would be rendered useless. Perhaps he had more than one good reason to gain entry into the palace.

He headed toward the quiet village and saw that someone had forgotten to bring his laundry inside. Lysander never thought he'd sink to stealing from peasants but he couldn't very well make the journey home while naked. He took a hooded cloak and trousers. Pulling the cloak over his head, he made his way toward the palace, keeping to the trees.

His bare feet covered the ground quickly and he thanked the goddess for such a dark, starless night.

The palace's main entrance was heavily guarded and the other entrances at the side and rear also had several guards on duty.

Keeping to the trees, Lysander surveyed the area. He noticed a circular wing with no doors or windows, save one window at the top of a high tower through which he saw someone standing in the candlelit.

Lysander's heartbeat quickened. Could it be Flora?

Chapter Six

Lysander had to risk moving closer to the palace. His feet moved swiftly over the damp grass. Nearing the tower, he saw that it was indeed Flora in the window. She stood, her face pale and her dark hair lifted by the cool nighttime breeze.

She disappeared and Lysander jogged toward the tower. At night, shadowed by the palace and wearing the dark-hooded cloak, he probably wouldn't be seen. He scaled the tower, feeling for hand- and footholds among the stones.

Luckily he and his elite guards spent a great deal of time climbing as part of their training. As he neared the window, he heard voices.

"Your bath is ready, my lady."

"Thank you, Crystal," Flora replied. Just hearing her voice sent an indescribable sensation through Lysander. Why did this woman make him feel such things?

"I'll bring your supper."

"I'm not hungry."

"But you must have something, my lady. After all, you're eating for two now. Typhon won't be pleased if you don't take proper care of his child."

Lysander gritted his teeth. Typhon's child. If Lysander had a chance to kill that baby-stealing bastard before he left this palace, he'd do so in a heartbeat.

"Very well," Flora said with a deep sigh. "For the child's sake."

"The king is so pleased. I know he hoped for a son. Maybe this will put him in better spirits. I know in his way he cares for you, my lady, as much as he can care for anyone."

"I care for my child's father as well," Flora replied. "And hold him in the highest regard."

Lysander's stomach tightened. Did she mean him or Typhon? Had the brief time he and Flora shared together meant as much to her as it had to him?

"I'll be back soon, my lady."

He heard a door close, then another deep sigh, this time closer to the window. Straining his neck to look upward, he saw Flora standing there, a sorrowful look on her lovely face.

"The father of my child," she said wistfully. "Lysander, I pray your death was swift. I can't bear to think of you suffering any longer at Typhon's hands. No matter what Typhon believes, your son will know who his real father is. I will make sure of it."

Lysander's breath caught and he nearly lost his precarious grip on the stones. He hadn't expected her confession to affect him so deeply. He continued his slow climb.

Finally he reached the edge of the window. Staring in, he saw Flora soaking in a tub of water in the center of a richly decorated room. He would have loved to take a few moments to admire her beauty, but he had little time, not to mention his entire body ached from his injuries as well as the climb.

He pulled himself onto the window ledge.

Flora's gaze shot toward him and she gasped in utter shock.

"Heavenly goddess," she said, leaping out of the tub, not even bothering to reach for a robe or towel. At the window, she grasped his arms and helped him the rest of the way in.

He sank to the floor, panting, and she climbed into his arms.

"Lysander, I was told you were dead." She clung to him so hard that her grip almost hurt. Her hot tears fell on his chest and she said, "Is this really happening?"

"It is," he replied, tightening his grip on her. It felt so good, having her in his arms again.

"How did you escape?"

"It's a very long story." He cupped her chin and she tilted her gaze toward his. Tears streaked her face, reddening her eyes and nose but to him she looked beautiful.

"What are you doing here?" she asked, sniffing. "Goddess, Lysander, you smell horrible."

"I wouldn't leave this place without my woman and child."

"Your..." She looked shocked, then deeply touched. "You came here to rescue me? For all you know I might be loyal to Typhon, but you still came?"

"I don't need magic to know what we share is real, Flora, and I'll be damned before I let Typhon have my child."

Tapping sounded on the door.

"Just a moment!" Flora shouted, then whispered to Lysander. "It's my maid."

"See if you can find out where Typhon and Hecta are," Lysander whispered.

"Why?"

"Just do it."

"Hurry. Hide. I don't trust her."

"Hide where?" He anxiously searched the room.

Before she could reply, he climbed out the window. Finding the holds again proved difficult, but he managed to disappear below the window's edge.

"My lady, are you well?" called the maid.

"I'm fine," Flora replied. "You may enter, Crystal."

The door creaked open.

"Here's your supper, my lady."

"Thank you, Crystal. Do you know where the king is at the moment?"

Lysander strained to listen.

"He's at the inner training field practicing with the elite guards. Hecta is observing them."

"Are all the guards participating?"

"Most, except for the two elite guards posted outside your door."

Lysander's lip curled. So much for killing Hecta and Typhon before escaping. In his present condition, without the use of his magic, he could never survive a fight with the entire elite guard.

"I see. I'm very tired, so please don't return for my tray tonight. I'd like to sleep without being disturbed."

"Of course. I'll fetch it in the morning. Sleep well, my lady."

Seconds later, Flora appeared in the window and motioned for Lysander to enter. Once again she helped drag him inside.

"Are you all right?" she whispered.

"Yes." His gaze riveted to the tub and he strode toward it, peeling off the cloak. "Do you mind if I bathe?"

"Please do," she said, practically choking on the horrible stench that trailed after him.

He gratefully sank beneath the warm, scented water. Closing his eyes, he ducked all the way under, washing the muck from his hair and skin. The water turned brown and red with filth and blood and his open wounds stung.

"What did he do to you?" she murmured, her expression one of horror and disgust.

While he scrubbed clean with a bar of lilac-scented soap, she brought towels and salve to treat injuries. He washed quickly, knowing they had no time to waste, nor did he want to remain in the now filthy water for long.

Flora stared, enraged and revolted by Lysander's condition. He'd been covered in the worst grime imaginable. Surely that filth had seeped into the bloody wounds that covered him from head to foot. Typhon had intended to fully enjoy this execution but Lysander had outsmarted him. At least so far. If they didn't escape soon, she hated to think about what would happen.

Lysander rose from the water, his body still sculpted and beautiful even after being so badly damaged. Water glistened on his skin and mixed with the blood that still ran from several of the lacerations on his chest and back.

His long, sinewy legs stepped out of the tub and she handed him a towel, then removed the cover from the container of salve. While he dried off, she applied the salve to the wounds. Not that it would do much good. With all the filth on him, infection might have already set in.

"We need to leave right away," he said. His face tensed and anger flashed across his eyes. "I'd hoped to seek out Hecta before leaving so that I could be rid of this collar, but it sounds like she's too well-protected right now."

"Do you think you could force her to remove it?"

"Doubtful, but if she dies, her spells die with her."

Flora knew she looked as worried as he felt. "How will you ever be free of the collar then?"

"I'm sure there are other ways. I'll just have to find them. As long as she's not in my immediate area, she can't make it tighten or burn."

They spoke in the faintest whispers, knowing that guards waited just outside her door.

"We should eat before we go."

"That's a good idea. Flora, this will be an arduous journey. Do you think you can make it?"

"Yes. I will. Anything is better than spending another hour in this place, under Typhon's rule."

He nodded, his blue eyes gleaming and fierce. No matter what Typhon or that bitch Hecta had done, they hadn't broken his spirit. Flora couldn't help but admire him. Even more, she knew in her heart that she loved him.

She could scarcely believe they were together again. Just being close to him sent waves of heady sensations through her. Tilting her face toward his, she saw desire in his eyes as well.

"I never thought I'd see you again," she whispered.

"That upset you?"

"You know it did." She took his face in her hands, stood on tiptoe and kissed him.

Lysander's arm wrapped snugly around her waist and he buried his free hand in her hair.

Closing her eyes, Flora surrendered to him. She opened her mouth to his searching tongue and her tongue met its hungry strokes.

His cock stiffened against her and she moaned softly, knowing they must keep as quiet as possible so the guards wouldn't hear.

"I never stopped thinking about you," Lysander murmured against her lips, his hips thrusting slightly, his hard shaft rubbing against her. "At times you were the only thing that let me keep my sanity."

"Lysander." She closed her eyes and melted against his chest. He held her tightly for a moment, then caressed her back. Cupping her face, he dipped his head toward hers for another kiss. Again his tongue met hers and they engaged in a heated yet tender dance, tasting and teasing each other breathless.

This time his hands strayed lower and untied the belt on her robe. He parted the silken material and pulled her toward him. Their bare skins pressed close. His warmth felt so good against her. He was smooth in places and rough in others – pure masculine beauty. Her tight nipples pressed against his steely chest and she loved the feel of his strength and warmth.

His hard, velvet-skinned cock stiffened even more and Flora reached down and closed her fist around it. She stroked him slowly, loving the way his hard yet silken cock throbbed and swelled in her hand. His balls pulled up tightly and she cupped them, kneading until he groaned.

“Flora,” he whispered, his lips grazing her temple. “We shouldn’t be doing this. There’s no time.”

“I know. Forgive me.”

“I forgive you,” he spoke against her lips, his hand closing over hers on his cock and quickening her pace.

Flora brushed her thumb along the underside of his bulging cock head and every muscle in his body tensed. He drew a ragged breath and she sank to her knees, wanting – no *needing* – to taste him.

This time no dust could take the blame for their desire. This was *real*.

Clasping his cock in both hands, she moistened her lips and lifted her gaze toward his face. The burning look in his eyes sent an even stronger rush of passion through her. Her nipples tingled and she ached and throbbed in that secret place between her legs.

She wanted him to fill her with his beautiful ivory cock, but she also wanted to feel him in her mouth. Sucking him would bring him so much pleasure. She knew this because Typhon often demanded she use her mouth on him.

Flora never imagined *wanting* to lick and suck a man. She hated pleasuring Typhon in this way. Once she’d even bitten him and he’d nearly yanked her hair out, then locked her in a windowless chamber for a month without allowing even Crystal to visit. That had been the last time she’d sucked a man’s cock – until now.

This was a completely different experience. She wanted to please Lysander.

She swirled her tongue from the base of his cock to the tip and back again, then she took the head between her lips and laved it.

Her tongue swirled over the head, then she used the very tip of it to tease the underside. She felt the thickness of the vein there and trailed her tongue along it. Then she sucked the head rhythmically and he drew a sharp breath of raw pleasure.

Lysander’s hands tightened in her hair, though not painfully. His hips shifted, pushing against her, but not too hard. He seemed to control his passion to keep from harming her. Typhon had never cared how hard he pulled her hair or thrust down her throat.

His breathing quickened and when she tilted her gaze up toward his face, a climactic feeling shot through her with the ferocity of a flaming arrow. His eyes were

closed, the thick, dark lashes twitching against his pale face. The tension in his chiseled features and the way he breathed raggedly through parted lips revealed the depth of his passion.

Seeing his arousal excited her so much that she squirmed, trying to appease the desperate ache between her legs. Only Lysander could truly fulfill her wishes, but not now. Not yet. This was for him.

She sucked him deeply into her mouth and he gasped, the faintest groan escaping his lips.

Finally he stepped away and pulled her to her feet.

His eyes were dark with passion and his warm breath fanned her lips as he whispered, "You're trying to get us both killed."

"No. Really I'm not —"

Before she finished speaking, he kissed her hard, his tongue sweeping across her lips then thrusting between them. He pushed her gently toward the wall, his knee parting her legs. Then he filled her with a long, slow thrust.

Flora closed her eyes and clung to him. Her entire body trembled. No words could describe how much she wanted him.

Over and over Lysander thrust, driving her to the edge of bliss. He buried his lips against her neck and Flora wove her fingers through his hair. Her breath came in frantic gasps and she prayed the guards didn't hear her. More than anything she wanted to moan and cry out, but she couldn't.

"Flora, oh goddess," he said, his voice a ragged whisper.

"Please, Lysander," she whispered back, her body aflame.

Several more thrusts and she burst in ecstasy. He pumped faster and harder, then erupted inside her throbbing body, his breath hot and quick in her ear.

If he hadn't been pinning her against the wall, she'd have fallen. Her hands caressed his lean hips and his head rested in the crook of her shoulder as they caught their breath.

Finally he straightened but kept his hands on her waist. Their gazes met and he said, "Do you have any idea how dangerous that was? How foolish?"

"Then why did you do it?"

His lips twisted into something between a smile and a snarl, then he kissed her again and stepped toward the dinner tray. He was right. They couldn't lose any more time.

They shared her dinner and when they finished, Lysander felt rested enough to begin the journey. Flora dressed in the clothes she used for riding. They wouldn't be good for traveling through the woods. She wished for men's attire but she had only a few articles of Typhon's that she gave to Lysander.

He pulled on the king's black trousers, short tunic and knee-length hooded robe of black material trimmed with gold thread. The men were of comparable height, though

Lysander had a leaner, more sinewy build. Still the clothes fit him well enough and he preferred wearing them to running naked through the woods or suffering in the foul clothes he'd arrived in.

They walked to the window and glanced down.

"Lysander, I can't climb the tower like you did," she said.

"Gather any loose material. Sheets. Clothes. No satin, though. It's too slippery," he said, tearing the sheets off the bed and tying them together.

She guessed what he planned and gathered anything that could be tied together yet strong enough to bear her weight. Why hadn't she thought of this? Maybe she could have escaped long before now.

When they finished, Lysander gathered their makeshift rope and carried it to the window. He glanced out, making sure no guards were in sight.

"Come here," he said.

She approached and stood still as he fastened the "rope" around her waist and buttocks, forming a seat.

"I'll lower you, but try to help by holding onto the rope and bracing your feet against the wall. Can you do that?"

"Yes," Flora whispered, gazing toward the ground. It seemed so far away. She felt both sick and excited.

"The rope doesn't quite reach the ground, so you'll have to drop the last few feet. Pull this knot." He indicated the knot with his finger. "And remember to tuck and roll."

She sat on the window's edge but before she climbed out, she held his gaze. "Don't drop me."

"I won't. Be quick about it. Guards could pass by at any time."

Drawing a deep breath, she climbed out the window and clung to the rope while Lysander slowly lowered her. Finally she dangled a few feet above the ground. Her heart pounding, she pulled the knot he'd indicated. It didn't give as easily as she thought. She struggled, glancing up toward the window. Finally the rope loosened and she fell, grunting as she landed on the grass.

Flora rose and gazed up at the window. Lysander leaned out and motioned for her to look around, which she did. Seeing no guards, she signaled to him and he began his descent. He must have tied the rope to one of the heavy pieces of furniture, for it dangled higher above the ground than when he'd lowered her. The enormous oak bed weighed as much as three large men and could support Lysander's weight.

He reached her in the space of a few heartbeats.

"We have to hurry. There's no way the guards will miss a rope hanging out the window," he said.

They made their way around the side of the palace, toward the forest heading north. Luckily both wore their hoods up. Two guards approached, shouting for them to stop. Luckily they weren't elite guards.

Lysander turned to the side, his hood concealing his face.

"Your Majesty," one of the guards said, recognizing the royal pattern on Lysander's cloak. "We thought you were training with your elite guards."

Flora pulled down her hood and stared at them with her most aloof expression. "As you can see, he has finished his training for tonight."

"Yes, my lady," the same guard spoke again and exchanged skeptical glances with his companion. "What are you doing out here, my lord?"

"Since when do I answer to guards?" Lysander replied, his voice so like Typhon's it sent a chill down her spine. She'd never imagined him sounding so slippery yet pompous.

"My lord, I only meant —"

"Report to your superior. I'll waste no more of my precious time explaining myself to servants."

Again the guards looked at each other, then bowed and quickly left the area.

"That was frighteningly impressive," Flora told him. "For a moment even I thought you were Typhon."

He glanced at her with a crooked grin, then said, "We have to run. It won't take them long to realize we lied."

They headed across the field toward the woods. Flora had to run twice as quickly to keep up with his long strides, though she sensed he moved slowly to accommodate her. By the time they reached the trees, she was panting hard, her heart racing. She enjoyed exercising each day but didn't endure the same harsh conditioning as Lysander.

Once free, she intended to enjoy all the things of which she'd been deprived, including more outdoor activities. Before her marriage, she'd spent much time outdoors, riding, swimming and taking long walks through the forest. Typhon allowed her only an hour or so outdoors, under the "protection" of guards.

Lysander permitted only a brief rest before they continued through the trees. He kept a firm hold on her hand, since she could scarcely see in the darkness. She placed complete trust in his Fanticaun eyes to guide them safely through the forest. Still they had such a long way to travel. This route would take days to reach the edge of Aberhill land.

Not long into their hike, Lysander stopped walking. They stood in a clearing and the faint rays of moonlight allowed even Flora to discern the sculpted curves and planes of Lysander's face.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

He held a finger to his lips, indicating silence. He tugged her toward a clump of small, leafy trees and they crouched, waiting for whatever he'd heard. Was it an animal? Even worse, a guard?

A short time later, she heard a twig snap and saw a pair of booted feet pass by. Flora's heart skipped a beat. Goddess, it was a guard!

Lysander sprang out of the trees, his arms locked around the guard's throat. The slightest pressure would snap the man's neck.

The guard dropped the boots and bag he'd been carrying and instinctively grasped Lysander's arm.

"I mean no harm," the guard choked.

Flora rose and studied him with discerning eyes. He was quite young, little more than a boy. He had hair the color of sand, wide eyes and a rather snubbed nose. She'd seen him a few times at the palace. He'd been assigned to escort her on a ride once and had allowed her more time and freedom than usual to explore the grounds.

Strangely, recognition passed across Lysander's face and he loosed his hold. The guard staggered, rubbing his neck.

"You," Lysander said, his brow furrowed.

"His name is Strom, if I remember correctly," Flora said.

"Yes, my lady," Strom panted, then turned back to Lysander. "When we stopped you near the palace, I knew you weren't the king. You're barefoot."

"Lysander, if he knows, then others will be coming too," Flora said, panic in her eyes.

"I didn't tell anyone." Strom knelt, picked up the boots and offered them to Lysander. "I thought you could use these. And I brought food, water and other supplies."

"You also told me the beast was partially blind," Lysander said, his cool gaze fixed on the guard. "Why?"

"What beast?" Flora demanded.

Lysander motioned for her to keep quiet.

"Why?" he demanded again, taking an intimidating step closer to the guard.

"I have no reason to remain loyal to Typhon any longer and I have no wish to keep serving someone like him. Take the boots and the supplies. All I ask is that you let me travel with you."

"This could be a trap," Flora warned.

"Believe me, my lady, I'm telling the truth," Strom said. "You have no idea how much I despise Typhon."

"Oh don't I?" she said bitterly.

"If he intended to betray us, he could have told the others," Lysander said. "However, you could be a spy. Hecta and Typhon could be using you as a direct link to us and therefore Aberhill."

"Sir, I swear to you that—"

"If you are a spy controlled by magic, they would have given you a mark through which you're linked to them."

Strom's jaw tightened and his gaze locked with Lysander's.

"Undress," Lysander ordered.

"Sir?"

"If you don't have the mark I spoke of, then you have no reason to deny inspection."

The guard's gaze shifted toward Flora and she couldn't mistake his embarrassment. "Is modesty a good enough reason?"

"I wouldn't know," Lysander practically growled. "You see, I've just spent the past few weeks naked as a monkey."

"I'll look away," Flora said. She had no wish to see the guard naked. She wished to see no man but the gorgeous overlord in such a primitive state.

Flora turned and faced a large tree trunk.

She heard the rustle of cloth as the guard undressed. Moments later, Lysander called for her to turn around.

The guard had pulled on his trousers and now lifted his tunic over his head. Though not as tall or broad shouldered as Lysander, he had a wiry body. Scars from lashings marked his back. Flogging was a common punishment for guards who didn't follow the rules. Obviously this particular guard had defied his superiors before.

"No mark," Lysander told her. "He's not a magical spy."

"But he could still be an average one," Flora said.

"I can't force you to believe me," Strom said. "Keep the boots and the supplies. I'll travel on my own."

"I can't allow that," Lysander stated. "Since you know where we are, my only choices are to let you come with us or kill you."

An expression of fear momentarily passed across Strom's face but he continued holding Lysander's gaze. This boy had courage.

"We've already wasted too much time here," Lysander said, pulling on the boots Strom had brought for him. He picked up the supply bag and tossed it to the boy who caught it with an expression of relief.

"I can go with you?"

"Until you give me a reason not to trust you," Lysander told him. "Move out. We have to put as much ground as possible between us and the palace. If we keep heading in this direction, we should reach the river. Following it will be the quickest way to Aberhill."

"The raft should still be there," Strom said.

"Raft?" Lysander asked.

"Yes. We used it to bring you here after you were poisoned."

"If that's true, a raft will save us days of walking," Lysander said. "However if Typhon realizes you've defected, he'll know you'll head in this direction, so the guards will be right on our tail."

"Hopefully he'll believe I'm dead," Strom said. "I left my helmet and weapon by the mouth of the well leading to the beast's den. If anyone finds it, I'm hoping they'll think I ended my life by sacrificing myself to the monster."

"Not a bad plan."

"You're more cunning than you look," Flora observed.

"Believe me, my lady, I didn't become this way by choice."

"I'm sure many of us can say the same thing," Flora replied.

She glanced at Lysander but he strode ahead, his Fanticaun eyes choosing the best route through the nighttime forest.

Chapter Seven

After several hours of travel, Flora's feet and legs ached but she wouldn't complain. If Lysander could keep moving after all he'd been through, then so could she.

Only when he stumbled into a tree did she realize the seriousness of his condition. She reached out a hand to steady him and felt him trembling beneath the cloak.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"Nothing." He straightened and continued walking, though at a slower pace.

Flora didn't believe him for an instant and grasped his arm.

"What?" he demanded, his voice uncharacteristically sharp. She strained to see him in the darkness. The hood cast shadows on his face, so she reached up to remove it. Her hands brushed his flesh and alarm shot through her.

"Lysander, you're ill," she said, touching his burning forehead.

"We don't have time for this," he told her, grasping her wrist and guiding her hand back to her side.

"The river shouldn't be much farther," Strom said. "Maybe we should rest for a while."

"When we get there. If there's a raft, like you say, we can rest on our way downriver," Lysander said in a voice that left no room for discussion.

Flora and Strom exchanged glances but continued following Lysander through the trees. He probably felt sicker than he let on, since he paused several times and seemed less certain of the path he chose, as if his Fanticaun vision were failing.

Finally the trees thinned and they came to the edge of the river.

"At last," Flora breathed.

"There it is." Strom pointed to a wooden raft half buried in a clump of trees.

All three dragged it toward the water. Flora jumped on first, followed by Lysander, then Strom.

While the guard used a pole to guide the way downriver, Flora fussed over Lysander who had flopped onto his side like a half-dead fish.

She struggled to remove the cloak and tunic.

"Lysander, move to the side. Help me," she ordered. It was easier to see on the river, without the cover of trees to hide the moonlight. She wished it were a full moon, or perhaps not. It would have made their escape even more dangerous.

He pushed himself to a sitting position and slowly pulled off the tunic, as if the very motion itself hurt. Once he'd bared his torso, she understood the cause of his pain.

Several of the unhealed slashes on his chest and back oozed pus, the flesh around them enflamed. Flora felt panicked, then heartsick. She knew he couldn't possibly escape infection, not with the filth he'd been covered in.

"He doesn't look good," Strom said, glancing toward Lysander. "There's salve in the supplies I brought, but he needs a healer."

"How long until we reach Aberhill?"

"If we keep to the river, we'll be there within a day but we'll still be in the wilderness. It could be another couple of days before we find people."

Flora searched through Strom's bag. She removed the salve and a water flask. First she offered Lysander a drink, then she sipped and handed the flask to Strom. He drank as well then returned to steering while Flora treated Lysander's injuries with the salve.

When she finished, she helped him put on his tunic.

"Try to get some rest," she said.

Lysander glanced toward Strom, then back to Flora and shook his head. "I'm fine."

She guessed he worried about falling asleep and leaving her with Strom guiding the raft. At this point they had little choice but to trust each other.

"We can rest in shifts. Lysander, if you get too sick you won't be able to travel at all." As she spoke, she tugged him toward her.

He surrendered, lying on his side with his head on her lap. She pulled the cloak over him and lightly stroked his hair. He fell asleep quickly and though tired, Flora couldn't rest. What if Lysander became too sick to travel? What if the guards caught up with them? What if Strom was a spy after all?

She glanced warily toward the young man and he met her gaze. His calm, dark eyes revealed nothing but compassion and the anxiousness she also felt.

"We'll get through this, my lady," he said.

"I know."

"The river will cover our scent if they use the dogs."

The dogs. Flora hadn't even thought of that. She'd had too much on her mind.

"The water gets rougher past the point where we abducted Lysander, but I'm sure I can handle it. That will cut out even more forest. If I'm right, this river flows just behind the palace at Aberhill, at least that's what I heard from the other guards."

"Strom, you realize when we get there they might not treat either of us well. You're a warrior who serves their greatest enemy."

"Served. I'd rather be a prisoner in Aberhill than continue as Typhon's slave."

"Not that it surprises me, but why do you hate the king so much?"

"He killed my older brother. Placed him among the bulls then fed him to the beast in the pit."

The beast. During their journey, Lysander and Strom had told her about the monster Typhon kept underground. She shuddered to think about it.

"My father died years back and my brother cared for me and my mother. I entered the guard but he stayed home and worked the farm. A few months ago, the king took my brother. My mother died soon after he was killed. Anyone who finds it entertaining to collect men merely to fight against each other, is no one I want to serve."

"Do you hope to offer your skills to King Ariston of Aberhill?"

"I hope that he will allow me to settle on his land and become a farmer as I always should have been. All I want is a wife, children and a quiet life."

"I hope you find it."

Strom nodded and gazed at the water.

For some reason Flora believed this young man. Typhon was not popular among the people. Most served him out of fear or the rewards he offered those who did his bidding. His elite guards were almost as wealthy as kings themselves and they were given a free reign with their magical training. Maybe someday one of them would turn against Typhon. She could think of no one who deserved it more.

At the moment she didn't care about Typhon. Lysander moaned softly in his sleep and when she felt his cheek it burned even hotter than before. The infection had spread.

What if he didn't survive? She couldn't bear the thought of him coming this far to die before reaching his homeland. If he didn't live, what would become of her? Would King Ariston listen to her side of the story? Would he allow Lysander's child to be raised in Aberhill or would he turn her away?

Dwelling on such things wouldn't help. She needed to focus on Lysander. After all he'd risked for her, she would do everything she could to keep him alive.

* * * * *

"Get out of my way!" Typhon snarled, shoving past the two guards outside his workroom. "And leave this post!"

"Sir?" one of the guards asked, looking surprised.

Typhon's hand lashed out and grasped the guard's throat. "Did I not speak clearly?"

He released the man and both guards left without question.

Sunlight shone in through the chamber window and with a growl Typhon pulled the heavy curtain, bathing the room in darkness.

He stood, his fists clenched and chest rising and falling with each enraged breath.

Late last night, a guard walking the palace grounds had discovered the queen had fled the castle, climbing down sheets she'd hung from the window of her tower.

No horse had been taken from the stable, so he assumed she hadn't gone far. He and several guards had spent most of the night riding across the countryside, in particular the route leading to her homeland.

When he'd returned just moments ago, Hecta had been awaiting him. The hag informed him that Lysander of Aberhill still lived. She sensed it through the magic binding his collar and ordered a group of reluctant guards into the pit to locate him. Three of the five guards had returned, the other two having been devoured by the beast.

They had seen no sign of Lysander, but a peasant had reported finding a guard's helmet near the well just outside the village. It had belonged to a young soldier called Strom. Lysander must have clawed his way out of the beast's lair and been discovered by Strom. The youth hadn't been a match for the Overlord of Aberhill who had apparently tossed him down the well.

Seething, Typhon realized that Lysander had somehow gotten to Flora too. How had the bastard managed to slip into the castle and past the guards at the queen's door? The bitch must have helped him. Flora had always disliked him, yet part of him had almost believed she felt some loyalty to the people of Darridge.

Of course he had no way to be absolutely sure she had gone with Lysander willingly.

"Typhon," Hecta said.

He spun toward the doorway where the hag stood, an unreadable expression on her parchment-skinned face.

"You see the extent of Lysander's power. Even bound he managed to evade the beast and take your woman. Do you think he won't take your kingdom as well?"

"I thought you had control over him?"

"I locked his powers but now that he's out of my range I'm limited. Yes, his powers are still bound and I can cause him some pain but there's also the possibility that someone in Aberhill might know how to free him."

"I should have killed him quicker."

"Too late. No doubt Ariston and Lysander will launch an attack against Darridge. Your kingdom will suffer because of your mistake. Will you allow Lysander and Ariston to destroy you as they destroyed your father and your brother?"

During a battle last year, Typhon's older brother, Aqatone, had been killed by the Overlord of Aberhill. The king had greatly favored his eldest son. His death hurled the old ruler into a kind of madness from which he sickened and died. Though it had been intended for Aqatone to inherit the throne, Typhon had been trained to rule as well, should anything happen to his brother.

Typhon had never craved leadership. His soul belonged to his magical practice. His desire had been to become chief enchanter for his brother, however when fate placed Darridge in his hands, he accepted his duties with a single-mindedness that would have pleased even the old king.

Typhon's fists tightened even more, his nails biting into his palms. "That will never happen."

"It might if you don't take my advice about doing everything possible to enhance your magic."

A fleshtress.

"Your wife is gone," Hecta continued in her softest most sinister voice. "You were willing to share her body with another man in order to secure an heir for Darridge, but she has committed the ultimate betrayal."

The hag was right. Typhon had kept his marriage vows while Flora relished mating with the bull. Seeking the pleasure and power of a fleshtress was different than fucking a human woman. Yet a fleshtress would claim a part of him that he didn't want to give.

Now that Lysander had escaped, another battle would soon rage between Darridge and Aberhill. As king, Typhon must give his very soul to defend his land. If that meant seeking a fleshtress, then he would have to do it.

"Leave me," Typhon stated.

"I could help you summon a fleshtress."

He glared at her and curled his lip. "You mean you could satisfy your own perverse desires by watching. No, hag. If I degrade myself with this demon it will be in private."

Hecta's sinister smile faded to a sneer. "Sometimes I wonder if you're more like a monk or madman."

"Out!" he bellowed.

The hag leapt slightly, then left the chamber, closing the door behind her.

Typhon shut his eyes and drew several deep, slow breaths. The lingering scent of *wymist* filled him, numbing him to weaker emotions and giving rise to his evil side.

At first he'd rebelled against the notion of having an evil side, but no one was completely pure. When dealing with the likes of Ariston and Lysander, one had to indulge in evil or else there would be no defeating them.

After everything he had already done to enhance not only his magic but that of his elite guards, what was another compromise? If a fleshtress gave him the edge to ensure the safety of his kingdom once and for all, then wasn't it worth any price?

Typhon paced the room, his brow furrowed. Even if he decided to consort with a fleshtress, there was no guarantee he could summon one.

Despite the fact that Flora had no Fanticaun blood, she hid her thoughts well—an unusual skill for a mere human. A fleshtress could infiltrate minds, usually in dreams. Perhaps if he summoned one she could read Flora's thoughts so she could be located. He would also finally know if she had any loyalty to Darridge.

Hecta had told him the ritual for contacting a fleshtress. He had memorized it but never used it.

Until now.

With a snarl, he slammed his fist into his palm and prepared for the ritual.

He stripped off his clothes, lit *wymist* incense and inhaled deeply, letting the bitter smoke fill him. He would need to work quickly, before the heavy dose of *wymist* rendered him unconscious. After working with the poison, he had built up a tolerance to it. Even a few months ago, mere moments of breathing air tainted by *wymist* incense would have caused an excruciating headache. Now he felt a bit hazy, but that would be good for the state of meditation he must enter to converse with the fleshtress.

He sat on the floor and placed two fat candles—one black and one red—on either side of him. After lighting them, he sliced the fleshy part of his palm and held up his hand, watching blood leave crimson trails down his pale wrist. After a moment, he closed his eyes and thought only of the fleshtress.

I summon you with my blood. I offer you my flesh. I ask you to empower my soul.

Typhon sat, feeling the trickle of blood down his arm and the rhythm of his heart.

She wasn't going to come.

A chill rolled through him, then a wave of heat so intense that it left him bathed in sweat. Rough fingers slid over his shoulders and a heated body pressed close to his. Breasts tipped with stiff nipples pushed against his back and a pair of sinewy legs wrapped around his waist.

"Hecta said you'd be calling," whispered a raspy female voice. A slippery tongue dipped into his ear. Wiry arms slid around him from behind and sharp nails scraped his chest before calloused palms massaged it. The sensations were unwelcome, yet strangely erotic. Torn between revulsion and lust, he didn't respond at first but allowed the fleshtress to continue her carnal exploration.

She grasped a handful of his hair and jerked hard. His teeth clenched with annoyance, he tilted his head to the side and she gave a throaty chuckle before covering his neck with damp, nipping kisses. The tip of her hot tongue traced the tendons in his neck, then she sank her teeth into his shoulder hard enough to make him grunt. Her hand stroked his belly, then edged lower. Before she reached his stiff cock, he grasped her bony wrist hard.

"Can you empower my soul?" he demanded. "Can you enhance my powers?"

"I can and I will, if you give me proper payment. Let me live through your flesh and my power will be yours. Can't you already feel my strength joining yours?"

It was true. His power throbbed even stronger inside him.

The fleshtress moved around him like vapor from boiling water. She straddled his waist, her arms locked around his neck. Trapped between their bodies, his cock grew thicker and harder. He wasn't attracted to *her*, but his body responded to her wicked magic.

Wanting to see what he was about to fuck for the sake of his kingdom, Typhon opened his eyes.

Almost transparent, like smoke, the fleshtress had pale skin and large, dark eyes set in a face so angular it resembled a skeleton. This horrible creature had a weird appeal. A faint smile tugged at her dark lips, revealing the tips of her sharp, white teeth.

"You're handsome," she said, tilting her head slightly to the side. "Usually sharing my power isn't such a pleasant task, but with you..." She covered his mouth in a kiss. Taking his lower lip between her teeth, she bit hard enough to draw blood. She moaned and tightened her arms around him.

The salty taste filled Typhon's mouth and a rush of morbid desire shot through him. He thrust his tongue into her mouth and hers met it. Their hot, wet tongues did battle, each seeking to dominate the other. Typhon's pulse raced and his cock ached almost painfully.

When the kiss broke, both were breathing hard. The fleshtress appeared more solid, her face not quite as bony. Her deep-set eyes burned, reminding him of flames in two caves.

"It's an even trade," she continued. "Your mortal warmth, your living power for my magic." Her smooth pelvis thrust against him, teasing his cock. He felt the soft plumpness of her clit and the almost scalding heat of the wetness seeping from her cunt.

"How does it work?" he demanded, holding the drives of his body at bay. It proved what a useless marriage he had, when this *creature* aroused him more than his wife, yet not as much as...

No! He would not think about other women. The fleshtress was a demon, not a real woman. He fucked her strictly to enhance his magic. A mortal woman would distract him from his purpose, much like his wife had done. He'd been foolish enough to think Flora would be good for Darridge.

Typhon preferred another woman to Flora, but he couldn't marry her. She wasn't of royal blood. Having her would mean abandoning his kingdom and he could never do that, especially while Aberhill rivaled them. Typhon could have taken this woman in body, but to do so would defile her, himself and even his semblance of a marriage.

"Maybe you should have thought about what would be good for you instead of Darridge," the fleshtress said, taking his chin in her hand, her pointed nails biting into his flesh.

Typhon's gut clenched with anger. He needed to be more careful and guard his thoughts around this demonic bitch.

"But reading people is my gift," she purred, those dark eyes gleaming even more. Reaching down, she curled her fist around his cock and stroked it. "I'm willing to share it."

With a growl, Typhon pushed her onto the floor. Bracing a hand on either side of her head, he stared at her hard. Summoning his power, he tried to read her.

Lust. Greed. Power. Lies. Truth.

His brow furrowed and the fleshtress smiled. Locking her legs around him, she thrust her hips against him.

"Fuck me, Your Highness," she purred. "And my power will be yours."

Typhon's hips pressed hers to the floor. The tip of his cock slid into her soaked cunt and he filled her with a long, fast thrust.

The fleshtress growled and grasped his neck, pulling herself upward so she could bit his lip again. This time he jerked his mouth from hers, but that didn't stop her from licking and kissing his throat.

Closing his eyes, Typhon pumped into her tight, wet cunt. It squeezed his cock, making his heart pound. His entire body throbbed with desire and vile, potent magic.

He slowed his motions because if he didn't it would be a matter of seconds before he burst. The longer they fucked, the more power he'd absorb and the more she'd be willing to serve him.

I'll serve you as long as you service me. Her raspy voice echoed in his mind and he growled, disliking the invasion but realizing he had no choice but to accept it.

Her nails dug into his back and she hissed, "Faster! Harder!"

He did what she wanted, his hips pumping and heart pounding. He kept up the pace for as long as he could before the familiar sensations overcome him. Sweat drenched and panting, he ceased moving. A tremor rolled through him and he drew several deep breaths, trying to relax enough to continue. His head throbbed and ached mercilessly, whether from the *wymist* or from the almost overpowering lust inspired by the fleshtress he couldn't be sure.

"Fuck me!" she demanded.

Typhon stared at her through narrowed eyes. Sweat dripped from his face onto her lips and she licked it, then grasped his face hard and kissed him, her tongue devouring him.

Who was this bitch to dominate him? Demon or no demon, she would not be in control.

Typhon pulled out of her and she gave a sharp cry of protest. Rolling her onto her stomach, Typhon snarled. He grasped her hips and dragged her onto her hands and knees.

The fleshtress looked almost completely solid now, her pale body long and sinewy. She rivaled him in height, was thin as a whipcord and just as dangerous, *if* she were allowed to take control.

Steadying her by her hips, Typhon pushed his cock against her pulsing sphincter.

"Oh yes!" she cried. "Fuck me there."

"Here?" Typhon growled, pushing his cock, still slick from her cunt, into her tight ass. He moved slowly at first but she didn't want even the pretense of consideration. This creature wanted the hardest, wildest fuck she could drain from him.

Part of Typhon found this incredibly arousing while another part recoiled. Fucking had become like poison to him—always bitter. Fucking Flora had been like fucking a corpse. Now he fucked a demon bitch. Did everyone feel this way? Why not? Life itself was an exercise in pain, loss and bitterness.

“More!” she bellowed.

Curling his lip, Typhon thrust fast and hard. This drove her mad with lust. Her slender backside heaved against him, matching his desperate rhythm.

When she came, the fleshtress gave a long, shrill cry that reminded him of a bird of prey.

He didn’t have long to consider it because his climax struck. Grunting and straining, he clutched her hips hard and rode those final waves of ecstasy.

Then he moved away from her and leaned back on his elbows, his chest heaving and her power coursing through him.

“You have the ability to read people,” he panted, staring hard at the fleshtress who lay sprawled on her back, an evil grin on her lips. “Tell me where my wife, Flora, is and if she is loyal to Darridge.”

The fleshtress’s eyes narrowed and she drew a deep breath, the nostrils of her flat little nose flaring a bit. “She is difficult to read, especially when she is so far away. If you bring her to me, I could possibly provide more information.”

Anger shot through Typhon and he once again covered her body with his, this time not for coupling. His grasped her throat and squeezed slightly, not enough to cut off her breath but definitely enough to let her know he wasn’t a man to be trifled with.

“If I could find her myself, I wouldn’t have summoned you, bitch.”

“You have quite a temper, don’t you? I like that.” She scraped her nails along his back and Typhon resisted the urge to recoil. Instead he tightened his grip on her a bit more. She curled her lip. “I can’t read her now, but you still have gained power from this coupling. You may use it today or save it for later. I look forward to future liaisons.”

The fleshtress’s grin broadened, fully exposing her pointed teeth, before she faded to smoke and disappeared.

* * * * *

Throughout the remainder of the night, Flora and Strom took turns navigating and watching over Lysander.

By late morning, his condition had worsened so much that Flora could scarcely rouse him to drink. He ate a little but vomited overboard just moments later. When they docked, how could he possibly make another overland journey?

Throughout the day, Strom took over most of the navigation. They’d had very little sleep and were hungry, sore and tired, not to mention worried about what would happen to them at Aberhill. Flora worried most about Lysander. She cared for him

deeply. He was the first man she'd ever felt close to, the first she'd ever loved. She couldn't bear the thought of losing him before they had a chance to fully explore their newfound connection.

At first her concern for Lysander prevented her from realizing that luck hadn't completely abandoned them. There had been no sign of Typhon's guards and they'd already reached Aberhill land. Hopefully Typhon believed both Lysander and Strom had been killed by the monster and Flora had run away on her own. He would probably look for her in her old homeland. No one would suspect her of fleeing to Aberhill.

When they broke for a midday meal, Lysander woke more easily and Flora's hope returned but vanished quickly. He refused to eat at all, though she and Strom managed to get him to drink.

"It shouldn't be too much longer before we reach the palace," Strom said, though he admitted he wasn't quite sure. He'd heard about this route but never traveled it.

About an hour later, Strom said, "Look. The palace."

In the distance, above the treetops, several towers rose.

"Thank the goddess," she breathed.

They continued downriver until the trees thinned then opened to rolling meadows. Not far from the river's edge stood a small village and acres of farmland in which several men and women worked. The palace stood on a distant hillside and, in the company of someone as sick as Lysander, seemed too far away.

"We'll stop at the village for help," Strom said, guiding the raft toward the shore.

Flora shook Lysander gently. "Wake up. You're almost home, Lysander."

He opened his eyes halfway and they couldn't seem to focus. Still he struggled to a sitting position, wincing from the pain of his infected wounds. When he glanced toward the village a faint smile touched his lips.

Turning to her, he didn't speak but held her gaze. The emotions in his feverish eyes tore at her heart. Flora forced a smile and slipped an arm around him. He leaned heavily against her and closed his eyes again.

Strom dragged the raft partway onto the shore and slung his supply bag over his shoulder. Then he grasped Lysander's arm while Flora gripped his other. They helped him to his feet but once standing he tugged away from them.

"I'm fine," Lysander said rather weakly.

"I can help you," Strom said.

Lysander shook his head. "You've done enough."

They walked toward the village. Strom led the way and Flora remained by Lysander's side, her fists clenched against the urge to assist him. She knew every step took great effort. The pain from his wounds must be almost unbearable and the fever combined with Hecta's collar sapped his strength.

Halfway to the village, he stumbled over a rock and fell to his knees.

"Stubborn fool," she snapped, overcome by concern. She knelt beside him and Strom joined her, placing an arm around Lysander. He helped the overlord to his feet and kept an arm wrapped firmly around his lean waist.

"He's burning up," Strom said, glancing at Flora and shrugging off his supply bag. "Get the water flask. See if we can get him to drink more."

The youth helped Lysander toward a tree and settled him beneath it, his back against the trunk.

"I'm running ahead to the village," Strom said. "I'll try to bring back help."

While he jogged off, Flora held the water flask to Lysander's lips. He took a swallow, then turned his face away. He coughed and water dripped down his chin. The collar seemed to be hindering his ability to swallow. Somehow they had to get it off.

Flora tore a piece of her gown and dampened the fabric with water. She bathed his feverish face and the enflamed skin around the collar.

He opened his eyes and stared at her, though she wasn't sure he actually saw her until he spoke her name and reached for her hand. She tightened her grip on him and forced a smile.

"You'll be fine," she said. "Very soon you'll be home."

"Prytanis," he whispered. "Tell Ariston to summon Prytanis."

Ariston, the King of Aberhill, and Prytanis, his chief enchanter. If anyone could rid him of the collar it would be the chief enchanter.

Lysander murmured other words but none that made sense to her. Consumed by the fever, he probably didn't understand her.

She glanced over her shoulder, wishing Strom would hurry, but he'd just left moments ago. He wouldn't be back this quickly.

A short time later, the sound of galloping horses drew her attention. It seemed the boy was faster than she thought.

A troop of Aberhill warriors approached on horseback, Strom seated behind one of them.

"It is Overlord Lysander," said one of the men, leaping off his horse and approaching the tree. This walking mountain stood at least a head taller than Lysander, and was twice as wide, his body pure muscle. As he neared, she caught the strong scent of roses. She hadn't expected a floral scent to cling to a warrior like this, but she didn't have time to think about it.

"He's very sick," Flora said. "I don't think he can walk."

"What happened? The boy said you've traveled a long way," said the guard, then turned to his men. "Urian, ride to the palace and inform the king that his brother has been found."

A soldier riding at the rear turned his mount and galloped toward the palace.

"Who are you?" the warrior demanded.

"My name is Flora. And you are?"

"Captain Mikolas of the elite guard of Aberhill," he replied, though his attention focused on Lysander. He placed a gloved hand to his cheek and slapped it lightly. "Sir. Can you hear me?"

Lysander's eyes opened halfway. The faintest smile touched his lips and he said weakly, "Hear you, Captain? I can smell you."

Flora closed her eyes and breathed a sigh of relief. Maybe now that he was home, among familiar faces, he'd improve.

Again Lysander's eyes closed and this time he didn't respond at all to the captain's prodding.

"How long has he been like this?" Mikolas demanded.

"The infection set in last night," Flora said.

"Is there any particular reason you were traveling when he can hardly stay conscious?"

Flora's jaw set and she glared at the big ox. "Dozens of reasons."

"I'm waiting to hear them."

"I will speak only to your king."

"You'll speak when I tell you and to whom I tell you," growled the captain. He picked up Lysander and slung him over his shoulder. Lysander groaned in protest and struggled.

"It's all right," Flora soothed, resting a hand on his back. "You're safe."

He quieted at the sound of her voice and Mikolas glanced at her. "You can ride with me. We need to get him to the palace so a healer can tend him."

"He told me to make sure the king summons Prytanis."

Mikolas nodded and hoisted Lysander onto the front of a horse ridden by another warrior. The rider supported Lysander and immediately turned and headed for the palace.

The captain then helped Flora onto his horse and mounted behind her. The strong scent of roses filled her with every breath. As captain of the elite guard, he had to possess magical ability. Most likely he used essence of roses in his practice so the scent clung to him, much like the delicious herbal aroma that had surrounded Lysander when they'd first met or the horrible pungent scent that seeped from Typhon.

At least now Lysander would get assistance, but she worried about what would happen to her and Strom.

Chapter Eight

Flora sat in a small yet comfortable room located in a tower in the palace at Aberhill. A guard stood outside the locked door. This reminded her too much of her room at Darridge.

Still she didn't blame the people of Aberhill for mistrusting her. She had arrived in the company of a guard from Darridge and the deathly ill Overlord of Aberhill.

She wished someone would let her know how Lysander fared. Of course he must be getting proper care, but she wanted to make sure.

When they first arrived at the palace, she'd been locked in this room. Shortly after Captain Mikolas joined her and questioned her intensely. Since she felt she had nothing to hide, she told him the complete truth about her identity and what had happened to her, Lysander and Strom.

That had been hours ago. Looking out the window, she watched the sun set and her hands twisted on her lap. This silence, without any word about Lysander, was quickly becoming unbearable.

He'd been so ill when she last saw him. What if he died?

No. She couldn't think that way. Not until she heard something definite.

Someone tapped on the door and she leapt to her feet, her heart pounding.

"Queen Flora," said a soft, smooth voice.

"Yes," she replied, sounding steadier than she felt.

The door opened and the King of Aberhill stepped inside. The guard behind him motioned to follow, but the king held up his hand, signaling for the man to remain outside. Bowing his head to the king, the guard closed the door, leaving Ariston and Flora alone.

She couldn't miss the family resemblance between Ariston and Lysander. The king's eyes were the same ocean blue as Lysander's, though he didn't have the dark inner rims. Though tall, lean and graceful, the king didn't have the warrior look that Lysander possessed. Despite his serene expression, his eyes revealed an underlying strength and intelligence. She wondered if Typhon knew how formidable this man could be. Just looking at King Ariston, Flora already knew that in many ways he had the same strength and stubbornness as his brother.

"Please sit." Ariston indicated the chair by the window where Flora had been seated. He dragged another chair nearer to hers and settled into it.

Flora sat, unsure of what to make of this man.

"A maid will bring you something to eat and a change of clothes," he said.

"How is Lysander?" Flora asked.

Ariston drew a deep breath and released it slowly. He sat back in the chair, his hands resting lightly on the arms. "He's holding his own."

"Please let me see him."

The king nodded. "Once you've rested."

"But, sir —"

"The chief enchanter is with him now."

"Prytanis?" Flora ventured.

"Yes."

"Does he know how to remove the collar? It must come off before it kills him."

"We know." Ariston studied her carefully. "Lysander has regained consciousness and he told us about you and Strom. At first we weren't sure how much was real and how much was caused by his fever, but his story matches the ones you and Strom gave to Captain Mikolas."

Flora nodded, her heart pounding. Did that mean she and Strom would be safe here?

"This is a very difficult situation, Queen Flora," Ariston said. "If your husband so much as suspects you're here, it will cause difficulties."

"I don't want to cause any more problems for your kingdom or Darridge," Flora said. "But I don't want Lysander's child raised by Typhon."

"Neither do we. You needn't worry. We will protect you, but the solutions to our problems won't be easy to find."

"I'm sure Typhon intends to attack you soon," Flora said. "I don't think they know Lysander has escaped."

"Perhaps, but Hecta still has control over Lysander and therefore might sense that he is alive. Lysander's magic as well as his tactical skills are among our most valuable defenses, but we're not exactly helpless without them. Right now my main concerns are keeping Aberhill safe and restoring Lysander's health."

The door opened and a young man entered.

"Yes, Georgios?" said the king.

"Master Prytanis has asked that Queen Flora join him as soon as possible."

"Lysander?" Flora asked, fear clutching her chest.

"He's awake at the moment and he's asking for you, my lady."

Flora instinctively rose to leave, then glanced back at Ariston. "May I?"

He nodded. "I'll have the maid bring the clothes and food to Lysander's chamber."

Flora and Georgios left quickly. The man looked a few years younger than Strom. His unkempt sable hair hung slightly past his shoulders and he had a delicate, almost feminine face.

They descended a winding staircase, walked down a long corridor then another flight of stairs. There they paused outside a wooden door. Georgios knocked and a male voice from within called for them to enter.

The boy opened the door and stepped aside for her to pass. Though afraid of what she might find, Flora entered without hesitation. Lysander was inside and if he needed her, she'd face anything to be with him.

A variety of scents filled the room, most noticeable the aroma of roses. A tall, slender man with long, dark hair tied at his nape stood mixing a potion on the table by the window. Flora noticed the curtains on all the windows were not drawn and sunlight bathed the room. On the wall to Flora's left stood a stone fireplace and to her right double doors led to a small garden area. On the wall ahead of her, an archway led to another room with a bed. Lysander lay there, paler than she'd ever seen him. As she approached she noted he appeared to be sleeping.

"Queen Flora," said the man, walking away from his worktable and approaching her. He smiled faintly in greeting, though concern shone in his large, brown eyes. Like Lysander, the inner rims of his eyes were dark. "I'm Prytanis. You've already met my apprentice, Georgios."

"Chief Enchanter." She inclined her head toward him. "How is Lysander?"

"I've cleaned and treated his wounds but my primary concern is the collar."

"He thought you might know a way to remove it."

"Excuse me," Prytanis said and turned to his apprentice. "Georgios, please continue stirring the mixture on the table."

The boy nodded and did what his master asked.

Prytanis continued speaking to Flora. "I know several ways of locking powers and just as many ways to remove them. So far none have worked on this particular spell. Hecta most likely created her own version of an ancient lock. The only way to open it is through trial and error."

Flora's brow furrowed. "Is there enough time for that?"

She knew by the look in Prytanis' eyes that the collar needed to go as quickly as possible. He went on, "Hecta worked strong magic into that collar. Her link to Lysander is powerful. She influenced him since the day of his birth. I doubt anyone knows him better."

"Then you don't think you can remove it, regardless of what you do?" Flora said, feeling ill at the prospect.

"I didn't say that. What's most frustrating is that Lysander knows how to remove it."

Her brow furrowed. "I don't understand."

"Hecta taught him how to lock powers and also how to remove the lock. Unfortunately, not only does the collar lock his powers but also muddles his knowledge of magic. He can't remember how to remove it."

"Maybe he has it written somewhere, such as a spell book?"

"We've searched this room from top to bottom and one of the elite guards is still reading through Lysander's journals but we've found nothing that can help. Most likely he didn't have the information written down or it's well-hidden and he can't recall how to locate it. It's common practice for certain dangerous spells and rituals. Some of the ancient ones have always been kept by word of mouth and will lose their potency if written down."

Flora thought it foolish to create magical works that couldn't be recorded, but she knew so little of magic. It was probably one of the many things she would never understand.

"I've sent a message to my old mentor in the Northern Realm," Prytanis continued, "He might know other ways to remove the collar."

"Lysander said killing Hecta would break the spell."

"That's true, but I hope to find another way. One that will work faster."

She didn't miss Prytanis' meaning. Time was of great importance in removing the collar.

"If it doesn't come off, he'll die, won't he?" Flora said, her voice scarcely a whisper. If Lysander happened to be awake, she didn't want him affected by her fears.

"Please come with me," Prytanis said, gesturing toward the double doors.

Flora glanced longingly at Lysander.

"It will take only a moment," Prytanis said. "He's resting now. I sent Georgios because Lysander kept calling for you, however I got him to swallow a medicine that helped him sleep."

Flora nodded and followed Prytanis into the garden. He closed the doors quietly behind them.

"The collar has taken a good deal of his strength and locked all his magical powers. He needs all the energy he can muster to fight the infection. While the collar is in place, I fear he won't recover."

"You're the chief enchanter. Can't you do anything?" Flora didn't mean to blame him for Lysander's condition but fear overcame her. If Hecta were here, she'd strangle her with her bare hands.

Prytanis didn't seem upset by her words, merely looked at her with sympathy in his dark eyes. "There's a ritual that might work. It requires a remedy I have brewing in my tower and it won't be ready until midnight."

"I'm sorry. I'm sure you're doing everything you can."

"You're very special to him. His main concern when he arrived was your safety and comfort."

"He means a great deal to me as well," Flora stated. "How can I help?"

"I believe your presence alone will aid his recovery, however I heard you're with child so I don't want you tiring yourself."

"I'm fine. Right now Lysander is all that matters."

Prytanis smiled slightly. "Not according to him, my lady. You and your child are foremost on his mind."

"Then I should be with him."

Prytanis inclined his head and opened the doors for her. Inside, he walked with her to Lysander's bed. He still slept, so she settled into a nearby chair.

"Is it good that it's so bright in here?" she asked. Usually healers kept sick rooms dark and closed off.

"It's a warm day," Prytanis replied. "He said he has missed the sunlight. The cell where he'd been kept was quite unbearable to him. In the case of someone with such strong Fanticaun characteristics, the more natural his setting the better. When he wakes, give him as much water as he'll take. If he refuses, just call to me. I'll be over at the table working on another healing salve. His bandages will need changing soon."

"It doesn't smell much like a sick room either," she observed. "It smells like roses."

"Captain Mikolas makes strong healing oils. We used them in Lysander's bath water and also in several healing sachets." Prytanis nodded toward the bedside table on which rested a pitcher, bowl and mug of water as well as a tan pouch tied with a measure of rope.

Someone tapped softly on the door and Prytanis answered it. Three serving girls, all red haired and apparently sisters, stepped inside. One carried a tray with food, the second towels and a basin and the third a gown. Prytanis gestured for them to enter Lysander's sleeping area.

As they approached, one of the girls glanced toward his bed, a sad look on her face. The others, several years older, were a bit more discreet. Not that Flora took fault in the youngest girl's obvious concern for the Overlord of Aberhill. She imagined many people here had reason to like Lysander.

Even after a few short hours, she already noted many differences between Aberhill and Darridge. The people here actually seemed to *care* about each other.

The youngest girl curtsied to Flora and placed the tray atop the flat-topped trunk at the foot of Lysander's bed. The other girls also curtsied deeply. One offered the gold and burgundy gown to the queen. Though not overly ornate, it was exquisitely made. Flora wondered to whom it belonged, since she knew neither Lysander nor the king were married.

The girl carrying the basin and towels placed them beside the tray on the trunk.

"Would you like us to help you bathe and dress, my lady?" asked the girl who had brought the gown.

"No thank you," Flora said, taking the gown and placing it at the foot of the bed. She glanced at Lysander, glad to see he hadn't been disturbed.

"You may go," she whispered to the girls and they curtsied again and left quickly.

Flora closed the door of the sleeping area so that she could change out of her clothes that were filthy from travel.

Standing at the foot of Lysander's bed, she stripped off her clothes. A cake of soap rested at the bottom of the basin. She reached for it, glad the servants had kindly warmed the water for her. She picked up the smallest towel, moistened and soaped it, then washed her face and neck. She wet the towel again and ran it over her collarbones and under her arms. Water dripped down her torso, tickling her most pleasantly. A breeze blew in through the window and she shivered, her nipples turning pebble hard. Still it felt so good to wash after the journey. She soaped the towel again and washed her breasts, trailing the towel beneath and between them.

"If this vision is caused by my fever, then I hope I never recover," Lysander murmured, his voice scarcely a whisper.

Flora's gaze riveted to him, her heart pounding. His blue eyes, glittering from his fever, lingered on her.

"Lysander," she breathed, dropping the towel and walking toward him, neither remembering nor caring that she was naked.

Flora sat on the edge of the bed, slipped her hand into Lysander's and kissed his lips. Her full breasts brushed against his chest and her stomach clenched as his heat seeped into her. Something had to be done about his fever. Then she remembered Prytanis' orders and reached for the mug of water on the bedside table.

Lysander's fingertips strayed over her breasts, his thumb, sweeping her nipple. Then he dropped his arm. The mere effort of touching her had sapped his energy, but his gaze followed her every movement.

"I thought I might never see you again," he said, his voice softer than she'd ever heard it.

"Here. Drink this." She slid an arm beneath his neck, his hair like silk against her forearm, and held the mug to his lips. He managed two swallows before his eyes closed and he sank heavily onto her arm.

Flora noticed the enflamed flesh around his collar had been treated with some sort of herbal paste, but it didn't seem to help. The sheet had fallen past his chest and she saw that most of his other wounds had been dressed.

Speaking of dressed, she'd better put on some clothes before Prytanis or someone else entered. Lysander seemed to be sleeping, so she quickly finished washing then put on the dress. It smelled strongly of cedar, as if it had been packed away for a long time, but the fabric was clean, very soft and comfortable against her skin.

"It looks beautiful on you," Lysander murmured.

Her heart skipped a beat. She hadn't realized he'd awakened again.

"She was about your size."

"Who?" Flora asked, sitting beside him again and stroking his feverish cheek. She slipped her free hand into his.

"My mother. Did Ariston give you the dress?"

"Yes."

He nodded, closing his eyes again and momentarily tightening his fingers around her hand.

"We have to find a way out of here," he continued.

"What do you mean?"

"Typhon won't have you or our child."

Flora's stomach clenched. A moment ago he'd been speaking rationally, yet now he thought they were still trapped in Darridge.

"Lysander, we're safe. We're with your brother in Aberhill."

Her words were lost as he fell into unconsciousness again.

Someone tapped on the door.

"Come in," Flora said and Prytanis stepped inside.

"I heard voices. Did he wake?"

"Briefly. He drank some of the water, but not much."

"It's better than nothing. I have fresh salve prepared. His bandages should be changed."

"May I help you?"

Prytanis studied her carefully. "It's messy work."

"Messy? You didn't see his condition after the guards used him for target practice or after he clawed himself out of that pit of refuse." Flora didn't mean to sound quite so angry but memories of what she and Lysander had endured at Typhon's hands still enraged her. She held Prytanis' gaze. "I'm sorry. My anger isn't directed at you."

"I understand."

In truth he'd been very understanding. She was a stranger, the wife of their worst enemy, and twice she'd lost her temper with him.

"Your assistance will be most welcome," Prytanis added.

Georgios entered the sleeping area with a pitcher of fresh water and another basin. He cleared away the old pitcher and basin while Prytanis and Flora set to work changing Lysander's bandages.

Prytanis helped him to a sitting position and supported him while Flora unwound the strips of cloth. Though still oozing and enflamed, the wounds didn't look any worse and Flora took that as a good sign. Still his fever and listlessness worried her.

Once the bandages were removed, she spread a towel beneath Lysander and Prytanis eased him onto his back. Together Flora and the chief enchanter cleaned his wounds and treated them with salve.

While they worked, Lysander scarcely stirred, except a bit when Prytanis moved him onto his stomach so they could treat the injuries on his back. When they finished, Lysander fell into another deep sleep.

"We need to get him to eat something," Prytanis said. "He's lost too much weight."

"Typhon fed him just once a day," Flora said, her stomach burning with anger. She didn't think she could hate Typhon any more, but every hour that passed, her loathing of him grew.

Wiping his hands on a towel, Prytanis glanced at Flora who had settled onto the chair beside Lysander's bed. "You must be tired, Queen Flora. I'll call one of the maids to show you to your room."

"No," she stated firmly. "I don't want to leave him."

Prytanis nodded, a sad yet resigned look on his face. "You care for him very much."

"Yes," she whispered. "Very much."

"At least try to get some rest while you're here," Prytanis said. He disappeared into the next room and moments later returned with a blanket that he offered to Flora.

She thanked him and spread it over her knees. Though tired, she found it difficult to sleep when worried about Lysander. Still after some time passed she drifted off but awakened when King Ariston entered the chamber.

She began to rise when he and Prytanis stepped into the sleeping area, but Ariston motioned for her to remain seated.

"He doesn't look any better," Ariston whispered to Prytanis. "How long do you think it will be before you hear from your mentor?"

"I sent my hawk with a message. Depending on how much research Thorfin must do, it could take another day or it might take weeks."

"Does he have weeks?"

Both Flora and Ariston stared at Prytanis, anxious about his reply.

The healer's serious face became even more somber and he shook his head.

"Lysander is one of the strongest men I know," Ariston stated. "If anyone can survive this, he will."

"I agree," Flora said.

The king's blue gaze fixed on her and he asked, "How are you feeling, Queen Flora?"

"Please I wish you would address me simply as Flora."

"Very well," Ariston said.

"I'm feeling well enough," she replied.

"A room has been prepared for you," the king continued.

"If you please, Your Majesty, I would like to stay with Lysander."

The king glanced at Prytanis who said, "Her presence could be quite helpful."

"Then you may stay. I have a request, Flora."

"Yes, Your Majesty?"

"I would like Prytanis to make sure your baby is still well. Please allow him to rest his hand upon you."

Flora's anger rose yet again. "You mean you want him to be sure I'm actually with child."

A faint smile played around Ariston's lips. "You're an astute woman. Do you agree to my request?"

"You're the king. I'm sure I have no right to refuse, nor do I have the inclination. If the hag was correct, and by now I believe she was, then the child I carry can belong to no man except Lysander." Her gaze shifted from the king to Prytanis. "Go ahead, Chief Enchanter. Do what you must. By now I'm quite accustomed to being felt and forced."

Prytanis glanced at the king. Something told Flora he didn't like the idea of pushing her into this examination, but Ariston made no motion to withdraw his request.

Flora sat silently still as Prytanis squatted by her chair and rested his hand lightly upon her belly. He murmured a few words in a language she didn't understand, probably a dialect of ancient Fanticaun.

A moment later, he rose. "Lysander's seed grows within her. I cannot tell if the child will be male or female, for I lack Hecta's foresight when it comes to such things."

"She said it will be a boy," Flora said, her voice scarcely a whisper. For the first time she brushed a hand over her stomach, fully accepting her role as mother of Lysander's child. Her rush of joy was tainted by knowing he might die from this illness and if he survived, they were not husband and wife. She was still the Queen of Darridge. By harboring her, Ariston committed an act of war similar to the one Typhon had committed by abducting Lysander.

She closed her eyes for a moment, feeling slightly ill.

"Are you unwell?" Ariston asked, resting a hand on her shoulder.

"If you must know, I'm a bit afraid," she admitted.

The king smiled almost warmly. "Then you're a brave woman. Most in your situation would be terrified. But I promise, Flora, we will protect you. Lysander would have it no other way and nor would I."

"Thank you, Your Majesty."

* * * * *

Flora remained by Lysander's side for the rest of the day. When he woke, she coaxed him into eating a few spoonfuls of broth. As dusk set in, she and Prytanis drew the heavy drapes against the evening chill. While Lysander slept, she and the chief enchanter shared a meal brought by the servant girls.

When she finished eating, Flora made her way down the corridor to the privy. The sound of a child crying drew her attention to an alcove at the end of the corridor.

There she found the young, redheaded maid seated in a corner, tears streaking her freckled cheeks.

"What's wrong?" Flora asked, kneeling beside her.

"I'm sorry, my lady." The girl stood to leave, but Flora caught her hand.

"Tell me what's wrong," Flora pressed. "Are you hurt?"

"No, my lady. Overlord Lysander..."

"What about him?" Flora took her handkerchief and dried the girl's eyes.

"Is he going to die?"

A pang of sorrow tightened Flora's chest. "I hope not. Is that why you're crying?"

The child nodded.

"What's your name?"

"Mala, my lady."

"You like Overlord Lysander?"

"He tells us stories about the old days when Fanticauns were everywhere. And he gives us grapes from the royal garden."

"You and your sisters?"

"All the children in the village."

Flora smiled. She shouldn't have been surprised since she already knew her bold warrior had a tender side.

"I hope he gets well soon," Mala said, gazing at Flora with wide green eyes.

"I hope so too." Flora cupped the girl's plump chin in her hand.

"Mala!"

They both turned toward one of the elder red-haired girls.

"My oldest sister, Madeline," Mala said, looking scared. "I'm in trouble now."

"My lady, please forgive us," Madeline said, curtsying deeply to Flora, her face tense. Conversing with nobility was frowned upon in most places and severely punishable in others. Flora disagreed with such contemptuous behavior.

"There's nothing to forgive," Flora stated. "I was just having a chat with your little sister."

"She should know better than to bother you with nonsense."

"It wasn't nonsense. She was concerned about Overlord Lysander."

"Of course, my lady," Madeline said softly. "We all are."

"I'm sure he'll be glad to know that."

Madeline looked surprised but curtsied again, took Mala's hand and hurried down the corridor. Mala glanced over her shoulder at Flora and shrugged. Smiling Flora waved to her, then continued toward the privy.

Something about young Mala had lifted her heart in a way she didn't think possible during this dark time. She hadn't thought much about becoming a mother, but now the possibilities filled her mind. Still they were tainted by the thought that the child she carried might never know his father.

She couldn't think that way. Prytanis was a good, attentive healer and seemed to be a competent chief enchanter. With his help, a man with a will as strong as Lysander's had a chance.

When she returned to Lysander's chamber, she found Prytanis nodding off in a chair by the fire. He must be quite tired as well.

Upon seeing her, he rose and said, "You really need to sleep, my l—"

"Please call me Flora."

"You need to sleep. Remember that at this time it's just as important to take care of yourself. It's what Lysander would want."

He was right, of course.

"If you want to stay here, then share his bed," Prytanis said rather awkwardly.

Flora felt just as awkward. Still it was the best suggestion she'd heard so far. At least this way she could get some sleep but still be close to Lysander.

"Has he awakened at all?" she asked.

Prytanis shook his head. "Not on his own. I roused him so that he could drink more, but only managed to get a few mouthfuls into him."

This saddened Flora even more. If something didn't change soon, Lysander wouldn't survive.

In the sleeping area, she sat on the edge of the bed and stroked his cheek. To her horror, his fever seemed even higher than before. She bathed his face with a cool towel and he moaned softly, his brow furrowing in his sleep. Still he didn't open his eyes. Finally, with an exhausted sigh, Flora curled up beside him on the bed. Within moments she fell into a deep sleep.

Chapter Nine

Back at the palace in Darridge, Flora walked through the empty corridors, the stone cold against her bare feet. She shivered and wrapped her arms around her middle.

No wonder she was cold. She wore nothing but a black gauze shift. Her stiff nipples pressed against the thin fabric. She might as well have been naked. Glancing around, she hoped no one saw her.

The stairway leading to Typhon's workroom loomed ahead. Without lantern or torchlight, she could scarcely see in the darkness, yet something pushed her onward.

Filled with a sense of dread, she ascended the stairs, her heart pounding.

She had never felt at home here, but she'd never experienced this kind of fear before. When she reached the top of the stairs, she noticed Typhon's door was slightly ajar. Unusual. He relished privacy.

Perhaps Typhon wasn't there?

She glanced behind her. Strangely the stairs had vanished, replaced by a stone wall.

Upon entering the workroom, the bitter aroma struck her. By the gods she didn't want to be here. This place didn't only frighten her, but saddened her deeply. How could Typhon spend so many hours here?

A breeze blew through the room and she welcomed it, despite the chill. The door to Typhon's morbid garden swung open and she approached. Flora actually preferred the dark, weedy place to his workroom.

She stepped outside, the ground cool, damp and muddy in places. Typhon's strange plants grew best in the swampy atmosphere. It was so different from Lysander's bright, beautiful garden.

She approached a gnarled tree, very thick with moss growing on the trunk. Its size told of its age and it provided so much shade that even by day the garden remained dim.

A thatch of dark purple flowers caught her gaze. They were probably the prettiest thing in the garden but quite deadly. Typhon told her they were used to mix poison. She hadn't asked why he needed them. She didn't want to know about his crimes and morbid practices.

"Admiring my garden, beautiful corpse?"

Flora gave a little gasp upon hearing Typhon's voice. He stepped from behind the tree, his sapphire gaze fixed on her.

"Why do you call me that?" she demanded.

"I wonder what pet names you have for me, wife?" he said, an evil edge to his voice.

"Monster. Beast. Bastard. And that's a few of the more pleasant ones," she said, no longer caring if she angered him. What did she have to lose? By now he was so lost in madness that it didn't matter whether or not she tried to appease him.

He smiled, revealing his white teeth and rather sharp incisors. Sometimes he did resemble a beast. At first she thought it might have been due to his Fanticaun ancestry, but Lysander wasn't like that. Or perhaps his Fanticaun characteristics resembled a different sort of animal. Typhon was like a wolf, a creature of the moon, but Lysander was like a lion that thrived in sunlight.

Typhon approached. Tired of submitting to him, Flora stood her ground in spite of her wish to flee.

He reached out and wrapped her long hair around his hand, dragging her closer to him. Heat emanated from his body, warming her against the cold. Yet it wasn't a welcoming warmth. Pulling her even closer so that her breasts pressed against his chest, he said, "It doesn't have to be this way."

"What way?"

"You know. It could have worked if you tried."

"It's not my fault you're a monster."

His hand loosened on her hair and stroked it. The sensation wasn't entirely unwelcome, yet she didn't trust him. She couldn't.

His sapphire eyes darkened even more and he covered her mouth in a kiss.

Flora remained still, resisting the urge to struggle. His tongue slid between her lips and she closed her eyes, trying to imagine Lysander kissing her instead. It didn't work. Typhon felt and tasted different. He had a rough edge. Even in their most passionate moments, Lysander had never been rough like this.

Typhon's cock pushed against her and her stomach tightened. That part of him was perhaps the most monstrous of all. Yes Flora admired a well-endowed man, but he was too far beyond the norm.

"No." Flora pushed against Typhon's chest.

He gripped her upper arms tightly and kissed her again. One hand slid down and captured her breast. He rolled his thumb over her nipple and it tingled a bit, though she wondered if it wasn't more from the cold than from his touch.

Typhon grasped her shift and tore it in half down the middle. Flora gasped. Why did he have to be like this? Maybe some women liked boorish lovers but Flora wanted a tender one.

Where was Lysander? What was she doing back here with this man she'd grown to despise?

The torn shift dropped to her ankles and Typhon picked her up. Instinctively she locked her arms around his neck and their gazes met.

"Don't do this," she whispered. "It's not right for either of us and you know it. It was never right."

"I know." He placed her on her feet and her back pressed against the tree trunk.

He stroked her shoulder and the tops of her breasts, his gaze following the movements of his hand. To her surprise, he bent and took her nipple into his mouth. He sucked it rather hard, but the sensation felt strangely good. His hot, wet tongue lashed the straining nub and Flora groaned. This wasn't right.

Her eyes closed, she moaned again as Typhon's teeth worried her nipple then tugged upon it almost too hard, but not quite. He released it to kiss his way down her belly. Sinking to his knees in front of her, he caressed her hips and thighs, then he grasped her buttocks. His mouth covered her clit and Flora gasped. Her fingers sank into the tree trunk, though she wanted to hold and caress him. This was wrong. So wrong and so different from anything Typhon had ever done to her before.

His tongue rolled lovingly over her sensitive flesh, stirring her in a way she'd experienced only with Lysander. Every swipe of his tongue made her tingle and throb with need. Her heart pounded out of control and a light sweat broke out over her body.

"Oh please," she murmured.

He didn't reply, but kept lapping her and using his lips to gently tease her.

Unable to refrain any longer, Flora wove her fingers through his hair. To her surprise, it didn't feel coarse and wavy like Typhon's but smooth and silken like Lysander's.

Opening her eyes, she glanced down and her heart beat even harder. Lysander's black hair slid through her fingers. He paused in his carnal work and tilted his face up to meet her gaze. Staring into his beautiful blue eyes, Flora could have wept from pleasure and relief.

"You're not with him," Lysander said in the soft yet masculine voice she loved. "I'll never let him have you. Never again."

"Lysander," she murmured, caressing his forehead and running her fingertips over his prominent cheekbones.

A faint smile touched his adorable mouth. He moistened his lips with the tip of his tongue, then returned to her clit. His eyes closed, the thick, dark lashes casting shadows against his face as he lapped and sucked.

Flora's entire body throbbed and tingled. She stroked his hair and thrust her hips, but his strong, slender hands held her steady.

"Oh, Lysander, please," she panted, writhing against the tree trunk, overwhelmed by the keenest pleasure she'd ever felt.

His tongue rolled over her aching clit. Again, again and again.

"Please my love," she moaned, her entire body trembling with need. The relentless swipes of his wet, silken tongue were almost too much to bear.

* * * * *

Flora awoke to a gentle hand on her shoulder. Groaning softly, she squinted against the sunlight. Still lost in the disturbing yet arousing dream, it took her a moment to remember where she was. Prytanis stood over her and she leapt up, her heart pounding. Had something happened to Lysander? She glanced beside her and saw that he was awake. Georgios offered him water, which he refused.

"Lysander," she edged closer and placed a hand on his shoulder, noting his fever hadn't dropped. Sweat beaded his pale flesh and the skin around the collar was still enflamed.

He turned to her slowly. Focusing on her, the faintest smile touched his lips.

Flora returned the smile, hoping she didn't look as frightened as she felt. She hadn't thought it possible for him to look worse than he had yesterday, but she'd been wrong. She saw a haggardness in his face and a hollowness in his eyes that frightened her.

She reached for the mug in Georgios' hand and the youth passed it to her.

"Maybe you'll have better luck, my lady," he said.

"Here." She placed a hand to the back of Lysander's head. His silky hair was damp with sweat and matted from sleep. When she held the mug to his lips, he took a few swallows then turned away.

"A bath has been prepared for you in a chamber down the hall," Prytanis told Flora. She glanced at the chief enchanter, noting that he looked almost as haggard as Lysander. Then she remembered something he'd told her the previous day.

"You said your remedy would be ready at midnight. Did you try using it to remove the collar?"

"Yes," Prytanis said. "It failed."

"He nearly killed himself in the process," Georgios said, apparently seeing the look of frustration on Flora's face. She'd been about to snap at the chief enchanter in anger again, but this time she bit her tongue. Obviously the man was doing all he could to break the spell, yet it seemed only Hecta's death would free Lysander.

"Prytanis performed a very powerful ritual," Georgios continued. "I doubt many could have done it and survived."

"Georgios, that's enough," Prytanis stated. "Return to the potions."

The boy nodded and walked into the adjoining room.

Flora noticed another bath had been set up nearby.

"We're going to bathe him in some medicinal powders," Prytanis told her.

Before the conversation continued, Captain Mikolas entered the room. He wore black boots and trousers and a sleeveless black tunic that exposed his powerfully muscled arms. By the look of him, he'd recently been on the training field. He carried a pouch tied with a measure of rope. Madeline followed behind him. The girl glanced shyly at Flora who offered her a smile.

"When you're ready, my lady, I'll show you to your bath," the girl said and Flora nodded.

The captain strode into the sleeping area and closed the door behind him, leaving Madeline waiting in the adjoining room.

"It's about time, Mikolas," Prytanis said.

"I got here as quickly as I could. We're preparing for war, in case you've forgotten," growled the captain.

"Has Typhon attacked?" Flora asked, her heart pounding.

"Not yet, but we're prepared for anything, at any time," Mikolas replied. He handed the pouch to Prytanis who brought it to the tub and dumped the contents into the water.

"Help him up," Prytanis ordered the captain who rested a large hand on Lysander's shoulder.

"Wake up, my friend. It's time to get you bathed lest you stink up this chamber any more than it already is."

Lysander moaned and tried to pull away from Mikolas.

"Come." The captain slid an arm around him and forced him to sit up.

"Flora," Lysander murmured.

"I'm here," she called.

"That's more like it," Mikolas teased. "If you're looking for wenches you can't be that ill."

Flora's eyes widened and Prytanis shot the captain an annoyed look.

"Mind yourself, Captain. Queen Flora isn't accustomed to your bad jests," Prytanis snapped as he unwound the bandages from Lysander's torso.

The captain's words regarding Flora seemed to rouse Lysander a bit and he said, "Call her a wench again and it will be twenty lashes for you."

Mikolas chuckled. "Unless you hurry and get well, it surely won't be *you* giving them to me."

Flora nearly flinched at the sight of Lysander's wounds. Even Prytanis looked a bit surprised to find they'd gotten worse, the salve having done nothing to aid their healing.

Mikolas and the chief enchanter exchanged concerned glances. Flora wanted to burst into tears, but that wouldn't help anyone, especially Lysander.

"Let's get your lazy arse into the tub," Mikolas said, still steadying Lysander with his arm.

"I don't need your help," Lysander said weakly, pulling away from the burly warrior. He managed to stand, but his legs buckled and Flora gasped, fearing he'd crash to the floor. Fortunately Mikolas caught him and half carried him to the tub. Lysander settled into the water and shivered violently.

Prytanis gently touched Flora's arm and said, "Why don't you go bathe. We'll take care of him until you return."

She nodded and headed for the door.

"The troops?" Lysander asked, his voice scarcely audible.

"Ariston has placed them under my command until you're back on your feet," Mikolas replied.

"Then what the hell are you doing here?" Lysander demanded.

In spite of her worry, Flora couldn't help smiling a bit. The captain and Lysander apparently had a strange relationship. She'd never heard such banter between an overlord and a subordinate, but the captain's presence seemed to stir Lysander's spirit.

Madeline still waited in the larger room. She stood by the table where Georgios stirred more potions.

"You're very talented," the girl told him, gazing at him with her large green eyes.

"Not really," Georgios replied modestly, then added, "Maybe a little, but I still have much to learn."

"I'm sure that one day you'll be a chief enchanter yourself."

Color rose in his face and he chuckled. "I don't know about that. Of course it is one of my goals."

"I thought that would be *the* goal. You mean you have others too?"

Flora found it refreshing to watch young love bloom in such sorrowful times. It reminded Flora that in spite of her personal problems, life went on. Still she couldn't help praying that she and Lysander would have a chance to be together. He was a good man and far too young to lose his life. Flora couldn't help feeling that, selfish as it seemed, she deserved some happiness as well.

"Of course. A man has to keep an open mind," Georgios said, "and be prepared for —"

He stopped speaking when he noticed Flora had entered the room.

Madeline turned to the queen and curtsied. "Would you like your bath now, my lady?"

"Please," Flora said.

Madeline guided her down the corridor to a spacious room where a large bed stood, an elegant oak trunk resting at the foot of it. The room had a window with sheer curtains that lifted in the warm morning breeze. A door led to a small stone balcony. In the center of the room stood a tub filled with steamy water. The scent of lavender permeated the air.

Flora noticed other dresses had been spread out on the bed.

"The king sent these clothes for you," Madeline explained as she helped Flora undress.

"That is most kind of him," she said. "You've all been very kind."

Madeline smile and inclined her head slightly.

Finally unclothed, Flora sank into the tub and closed her eyes for a moment. A full bath felt wonderful. If she hadn't been so anxious to return to Lysander, she'd have liked to linger in it. Instead she washed.

Madeline approached with a hand towel and soap. She lathered Flora's hair for her.

"You have beautiful hair, my lady," Madeline said hesitantly.

"Thank you. So do you. You and your sisters have lovely coloring."

"I could live without the freckles."

"Why? They're charming. Also one doesn't see green eyes very often. I'm sure you have many admirers, Madeline."

"There's only one I truly hope for."

A smile tugged at Flora's lips and she glanced at the girl. "It wouldn't happen to be the chief enchanter's apprentice, would it?"

Madeline's eyes widened a bit. "Is it so obvious?"

"No more obvious than it was from his end."

"My lady, do you really think so?" Madeline asked, her interest in Georgios overcoming her fear of acting out of place.

"It looked that way to me."

"He's not like most of the other boys. The trainees for the elite guard only care about showing off how manly they are on the training field. Georgios knows about books and the stars and he speaks ancient Fanticaun."

"I can see he's a charmer," Flora said.

"I thought you would. Isn't that what you see in Overlord Lysander?" Madeline's dreamy look faded and she looked almost frightened. "Forgive me for speaking out of place."

"You haven't. And you're right. The overlord's mind is one of his strongest attributes."

"But he's a great warrior too. He protects us." Madeline sighed deeply, her expression reflecting Flora's sorrow. "Now until he's well again, we must protect him."

Flora nodded. The girl was right. Lysander sacrificed himself without hesitation for those he cared about. She wondered if that beautiful, disciplined warrior realized how many people cared so deeply about him? In spite of his gentleness with her, she'd sensed a remoteness in him. Maybe it was the Fanticaun. So few had power as pure as Lysander's. Yes, many people dabbled in magic. Some such as the elite guards had an impressive command of it. Yet scarcely any emanated it like Lysander. And Hecta and Typhon. Not all who wielded power used it for the sake of good.

Flora finished her bath and dressed in a simple yet elegant gown of blue silk. When she returned to Lysander's room, the men had finished bathing him and changing his bedclothes. He had fallen asleep again, so she sat watching him for several moments.

She stood and walked to the adjoining room where Prytanis and Georgios were busy at the table.

"May I go into the garden?" she asked.

"Of course," Prytanis said absently, measuring crushed herbs that he added to a thick green mixture stirred by Georgios.

She stepped through the doors and inhaled deeply. The air smelled of flowers and the aroma of bread wafted from the kitchen. The stone walls of the palace enclosed the garden, so windows and balconies from several other rooms overlooked it.

Rose bushes lined the walls. Two pear trees stood nearby and off to the side a garden of herbs, many exotic and unfamiliar to Flora.

"Good morning, my lady."

She turned, a bit startled to see Captain Mikolas rise from behind a clump of flowering bushes. He carried a sack in one hand and a fistful of weeds in his other. Dumping them into the sack, he said, "I didn't mean to surprise you. I just wanted to do a little weeding so Lysander's garden won't be overrun when he gets well."

"That's nice of you," she said, unsure of how else to reply.

"He uses these plants for his magic. But the roses." Mikolas sighed and shook his head, reaching out to caress one of the beautiful pink flowers. "He still doesn't fully appreciate the importance of roses in regard to magic. So few do you know."

"Oh...I'm sure." It seemed so odd that the most feminine of flowers beguiled this two-legged draft horse. Other than the clinging scent of roses, there was *nothing* feminine about Captain Mikolas.

"Forgive me, Captain, but I don't believe I've ever heard anyone speak to an overlord the way you talked to Lysander earlier."

Mikolas grinned. "In public I show him nothing but the utmost respect but if I ever pandered him in private he'd think he's dying for sure." The captain's smile faded. "I don't want him to feel that any of us are losing hope, no matter how dire the situation."

"And it is dire," Flora murmured.

"Lysander, Ariston and I have been friends since the cradle. Literally. My father was also captain of the elite guard. He and my mother were close friends of the old king and queen. Growing up, Lysander and I were almost inseparable. Ariston is a good man too, but everyone knew he would be king. He trained with us but devoted much of his time to learning social graces. Lysander and I fought side by side through many battles. Trust me when I tell you there is no finer soldier and no better man."

"I believe you but, Captain, he's also lucky to have a friend as devoted as you."

"He doesn't deserve to die like this." Tears gleamed in the captain's eyes, but he blinked them away and his expression turned almost stony.

"He's not going to die," Flora stated.

"Your husband—" Mikolas gritted his teeth. "If his path crosses mine, he's dead."

"For that, Captain, you might have to wait in line."

He curled his lip and stalked out of the garden.

Flora closed her eyes, drew a deep breath and released it slowly. She had just started to relax a bit when commotion from inside drew her attention. Lifting her dress, she raced to the sleeping area where Mikolas pinned Lysander to the bed as he thrashed and ranted. Georgios sat nearby on the floor, blood dripping from his nose. Apparently in his delirium, Lysander had hit him.

Prytanis grasped Lysander's face and managed to force a vial of the green potion between his lips. He clamped a hand over Lysander's mouth until he finally swallowed.

Moments later, he fell unconscious.

"Maybe you should try the ritual again," Mikolas sighed. "Or I can. I don't think you should try again so soon."

"No," Prytanis said, offering Georgios a hand up. "He's far too weak. The ritual would kill him before setting him free."

Flora grabbed a towel from the trunk at the foot of the bed and pressed it to Georgios' nose. The youth nodded in thanks and held it in place on his own.

"I don't think he's as weak as you believe," Mikolas said. "I almost couldn't hold him."

"It was a momentary burst from the delirium," Prytanis said. "His magic is fighting the hold, but this spell is too firmly locked. Hecta must have used almost every bit of her power creating this. I'm surprised the old bitch didn't die in the process."

"No such luck when it comes to people like her or Typhon," Flora said bitterly. She approached the bed, her heart wrenching. Lysander was drenched in sweat, his breathing shallow. Dark smudges stained the flesh beneath his eyes and the hollows beneath his cheekbones, once sensual, now resembled those of a dead man.

She bathed his face with water from the basin on the bedside table while behind her the men continued talking.

"We have to do something," Mikolas practically shouted. "We can't just let him rot here."

"Lower your voice," Prytanis said through gritted teeth. For the first time the calm, soft-spoken chief enchanter bordered on losing his temper.

"There's nothing we can do for him?" Mikolas demanded.

"I'm still waiting to hear from my old teacher."

"Which could be never. I have an idea."

"What?" Both Flora and Prytanis demanded.

"I have to talk to Ariston." The captain headed for the door.

"What plan?" Prytanis growled, chasing after Mikolas and stepping in front of the door.

"Out of my way!"

"Not until you tell me what you want to do."

Mikolas grasped Prytanis and shoved him across the room. The chief enchanter staggered to his knees, but before Mikolas reached the door Prytanis whispered a few words of ancient Fanticaun and gestured with his right hand. The captain sprawled on his face, as if someone had shoved him in the back.

Practically roaring with fury, Mikolas pushed himself to his knees and jerked his fist toward Prytanis, but the chief enchanter gestured gracefully again. This time Mikolas landed flat on his back.

"You're captain of the elite guard but, Mikolas, I'm chief enchanter for a reason," Prytanis snapped. "Use magic against me and you *will* lose."

"If you're so accomplished then why is our overlord dying while under your care?"

"Stop it!" Flora shouted, stepping between the two men. "Look at yourselves. Lysander needs our help and you two are wasting your strength and your time fighting each other."

"She's right," Prytanis said softly.

Mikolas sighed and ran a hand through his hair. "I know. Prytanis, I didn't mean what I said. I know you're doing your best and if anyone can help him, it's you, but nothing anyone does seems to be enough. My plan is this. I'll go to Darridge, sneak into the castle and kill Hecta."

"You won't make it," Flora stated. "She and Typhon are well-protected."

"Don't underestimate me," Mikolas stated.

"Even if you did succeed, you'd never get out alive once the deed is done," Flora said.

"You must know that palace well," Mikolas said. "You'll give me a map."

"I have no issue with telling you everything I know about the palace. Unfortunately it's not much. I was kept like a prisoner for most of my life there."

"What about Aberhill?" Prytanis said, his gaze fixed on Mikolas. "You're the acting overlord and you're still captain of the elite guard. That means you're on double duty and everyone, *everyone*, is depending on you to keep us safe. You can't just take off for Darridge and forget your responsibilities here. If Lysander knew you were even thinking such a thing, do you know what he'd do?"

"I don't want to think about what he'd do," Mikolas admitted. "But I still believe this plan will work and I'm honor bound to speak to the king about it. I don't think there will be a shortage of volunteers among the elite guard."

Prytanis and Flora exchanged glances and the chief enchanter said, "Maybe he's right."

"I have to go. I must speak to Ariston and then return to my troops," Mikolas said.

He left the room and Flora returned to Lysander's side. A few moments later, she felt cramps low in her belly. She shifted uncomfortably in her chair. If she didn't know better, she'd think she had her monthly bleed. The cramps were that irritating.

She left the room and walked down the hall to the privy. Perhaps she'd eaten something that didn't agree with her?

Inside, she raised her skirts and stared in horror at the blood on her thighs.

Chapter Ten

How is this possible?

With trembling hands, Flora cleaned up, then hurried back to Lysander's chamber. Her heart pounded and she didn't know what to do. Prytanis was a healer, but she should probably find a female healer for advice.

"My lady, is something wrong?" Georgios asked.

"I don't know," Flora whispered.

Prytanis looked up from a scroll spread on the table. His brow furrowed, he approached her and touched her arm. "You look pale. Maybe you should sit."

"Prytanis..." she began, then glanced at Georgios. "I need to speak to you privately."

He nodded and turned to Georgios. "Go to the kitchen and ask a maid to send up tea."

The boy nodded and went to do his master's bidding.

"What is it?" Prytanis asked.

"I'm bleeding," she said, her throat suddenly tight with emotion.

"What do you mean?"

Heat rose in her face and she said, "Bleeding. Like...my monthly showing."

He guided her to a chair. "Sit down and relax. You'll be all right."

"But the baby."

Prytanis placed a hand to her stomach and whispered in Fanticaun. His eyes slipped shut and he spoke again.

Slowly he opened his eyes and held her gaze. He didn't need to talk for her to know the truth.

"It's gone, isn't it?" she whispered.

He nodded, his expression sympathetic. "Flora, this happened so early on that it's probably for the best."

"Best for whom?" she murmured, her throat constricting again as she glanced toward Lysander.

"The child might have been malformed. This was nature's way of —"

"I know," she said. "I just...wanted it because it was his."

The chief enchanter's brow furrowed and he placed an arm around her. She leaned against him for a moment, knowing she needed to keep control. The child was gone but Lysander still lived.

"Prytanis, I must speak to King Ariston right away. Will you bring me to him?"

"Of course. As soon as Georgios returns."

When the apprentice arrived a few moments later, carrying a tray with the fixings for tea, Prytanis and Flora left him to watch over Lysander.

The chief enchanter was one of the few people who could see the king without making an appointment. At the moment, Ariston was in his private chamber in discussion with Captain Mikolas. They looked surprised to see Prytanis and Flora.

"My brother?" Ariston demanded. Most likely he thought Lysander had taken another turn for the worse.

"He's still holding his own," Prytanis said. "Queen Flora asked to speak to you immediately."

"Can't it wait?" Mikolas asked, his expression tense.

"No. It can't," Flora stated, locking gazes with the captain. "What I have to say could affect your plan to slay Hecta."

The king and captain exchanged glances.

"Any such plan has nothing further to do with you," Mikolas stated. "We will take care of it."

"You mean you *might* take care of it. You'd have to enter stealthily, make it past the entire elite guard, kill a chief enchanter and leave undetected."

"That's what our elite guard is trained to do," Mikolas reminded her.

"What you need is someone who can gain entrance without harm to him – or *herself* and who can get immediate access to Hecta."

"*Herself*?" Mikolas narrowed his dark eyes. "I think I know what you're proposing and it's insane."

"Give me a horse. Let me return to Darridge alone. Hecta will want to examine me to be sure all is well with the baby and when she does, I'll plunge a knife into her black heart."

"Woman, you *are* insane," Ariston said, curling his lip. "Where will you say you've been? I have no doubt that due to the collar they realize Lysander is still alive and would suspect you've been with him. The only reason they haven't come for you is because we would then have proof of his foul doings and could use it as evidence against him before the high king."

"Then I'll say that Lysander abducted me to prevent Typhon from raising his child."

Ariston and Mikolas exchanged glances, then Ariston said, "Lysander would never allow it and nor will I. You're carrying a child of Aberhill –"

"Is she really?" Mikolas asked, stepping closer to her. "It sounds to me like she wants to report back to her husband that Lysander is dying."

Flora could have screamed in rage, yet she leveled her iciest gaze on the captain and said, "You have no *idea* how deeply I feel for Lysander. He might be your childhood companion but he's my lover. Lysander saved me in more ways than you can possibly imagine. If saving him means I must return to my despicable husband and spend the rest of my days locked in a tower, then I will do it."

"If you're speaking the truth, Typhon might not be content to lock you away this time," Ariston said, studying her carefully. "He might kill you."

"Lysander is worth the risk," she replied without hesitation. "He risked his life for me."

"And your child," Mikolas reminded her. "You have no right to risk his child's life."

"There is no longer a child," Flora said, proud that her voice remained far steadier than she felt.

"What?" both king and captain demanded.

Prytanis placed a hand on Flora's shoulder and said, "She lost it."

Her eyes closed momentarily and the chief enchanter continued, "Mikolas, I understand that you're suspicious, but I assure you the child she carried was Lysander's and I don't need magical intuition to know that she loves him."

Ariston sighed and slowly paced the room. "What she says makes sense."

"Your Majesty, one of my men or I can do this. We don't need her."

Ariston turned to the captain. "You believe it will be easier for you to enter the palace at Darridge than the queen?"

"I didn't say it would be easy but —"

"If we do let her go, Lysander will never forgive us," Ariston said, more to himself than to the others.

"Perhaps not," Mikolas said. "She is no longer carrying his child."

The captain's words stung more than Flora wanted to admit. In her heart she feared that Lysander might have wanted her only because she'd carried his baby.

"Mikolas!" Prytanis snapped. "That remark was uncalled for."

"No, he's right," Flora said. "I'm no longer worth much to anyone here in Aberhill."

"You don't do yourself justice, my lady," Prytanis said.

She glanced at him and smiled, grateful for his kindness.

"We won't ask you to return to Darridge if you don't wish it," Ariston stated. "I promised you protection and I meant it."

"But if I choose to return, will you stop me?" she asked.

He sighed and held her gaze. "No. I will not."

"Then I'll leave as soon as possible," she said. "It will take me about two days on horseback. I would take the shorter route by the river but without Lysander's help I would never find my way through the woods."

"Can you endure a journey so soon after losing your child?" Ariston asked.

"I have no choice," she said but looked to Prytanis. "What is your opinion as a healer?"

"So early on, this is no more dangerous to her health than her regular monthly showing," Prytanis replied.

"You're certain this is what you want to do?" Ariston asked.

"I am," she stated.

"We'll send a guard with you for part of the journey," Ariston said. "You'll go by way of the river and also bring a horse. That way it should take no more than a day for you to reach Darridge."

Flora nodded. Already her heart pounded with fear and anticipation. She could scarcely believe she was returning to the hell from which she'd just been rescued.

Yet to save Lysander it would be worth it.

* * * * *

Typhon snarled and used his blades to block those of his opponents. He'd been training with his elite guards since dawn and even the intense practice hadn't tempered his frustration regarding Flora and Lysander.

In her tower, Hecta worked on using the collar to drain as much power as she could from the Overlord of Aberhill. Unfortunately from this distance she couldn't do nearly as much damage as when he'd been here in Darridge. Still if the hag held out long enough, the collar would kill Lysander.

A grin tugged at Typhon's lips as he blocked more blows, then attacked. At least Lysander would die a slow, painful death. Unless someone in Aberhill found a way to remove the collar. Growling, Typhon attacked the two guards with a vengeance. Sparks shot from their swords and the ring of steel against steel echoed across the training field.

The guards increased the speed and ferocity of their attacks but they had neither Typhon's skill nor at the moment his rage. Moments later, he disarmed both, leaving one sprawled on his back and the other clutching a shallow arm wound.

Panting, Typhon glanced around the field at the other warriors engaged in practice—some with swords, spears and other weapons. Others locked in a magical battle of wills, staring into each other's eyes and struggling against one another's power.

The fleshtress's power had enhanced Typhon's magic and earlier he had put it to a greater test by transferring some of the magic to his elite guards. He'd empowered their weapons and the difference was quite noticeable, though it lasted only a short time. Still, in battle that would be enough to give them an edge over their opponents.

After a brief word with the captain of the elite guard, Typhon left the training field. In his bedchamber, he cleaned his swords then hung them on the wall with his other weapons.

Someone tapped on the door and Typhon's brow furrowed.

"Yes?"

"Your bath is prepared, my lord," replied a soft voice that he knew well. Crystal, Flora's maid.

A spark stirred deep inside him but he doused it quickly. He didn't need this young, pretty maid distracting him.

"My lord?" she called, a note of hesitance in her voice.

He stood and strode to the door, angry that his heartbeat quickened and his cock sprang to life at the sound of her voice. He opened the door, a scowl on his face.

Crystal's large, slanted eyes stared into his. Meeting her king's gaze was improper, yet he liked her directness. An almost sinister smile tugged at his lips and Crystal averted her gaze.

She bowed her head. "I'm sorry to disturb you but I thought after your training you might like to refresh yourself."

"How thoughtful," he said coolly. "But that duty falls to my manservant, to whom I've given a few hours of leisure time because I don't want to be bothered."

Tension shone in her face and color rose in her beautifully rounded cheeks. Impulsively, he took her chin in his hand and forced her to look into his eyes again.

"Forgive me for overstepping myself," she whispered. "I'm prepared for punishment."

Punishment. The image of the little maid sprawled naked on his lap as he slapped her lovely backside sent another jolt of desire through him. His teeth clenched a bit and his free hand curled into a fist.

With Flora gone, abandoning him and Darridge, perhaps he should indulge his passion and fill this maid's cunt with his cock. Since Crystal had come to the palace, he'd imagined doing that. He remembered the first time had seen her almost a year ago.

She'd been carrying an armload of wood to the kitchen when their paths crossed in the hallway. The girl had stumbled and dropped the wood. Impulsively, Typhon had bent to catch her before she hit the stone floor. Their gazes locked and he'd nearly forgotten she was a mere peasant. Never had he seen such untainted eyes. This woman wasn't harsh or cunning like most people he'd known.

Typhon had summoned a serving boy to gather the wood and carry it to the kitchen. Crystal had apologized profusely for stumbling. Typhon interrupted her, wanting to know where she'd come from since he'd never noticed her at the palace before. Her aunt, who was in charge of laundry, had gained employment for her through her friendship with the head cook.

In the kitchen, a girl this young and pretty would soon lose her innocence. Male servants and even guests to the castle often took the serving wenches to satisfy their desires. Strangely, Typhon didn't like the idea of Crystal enduring this fate. He had her duties changed so that she would serve as a maid on an upper floor. The head housekeeper who looked after Typhon and his advisors protected her staff well. Working upstairs was preferable to the kitchen but it also meant that Crystal's path would be more apt to cross his. For any other man, this would be a dangerous temptation, but not for Typhon. He lived a disciplined life.

Or so he'd thought. Resisting the gentle maid had been more difficult than he'd imagined. After his marriage it had only become harder. Rather than fill a void, Flora had only deepened it. Obviously she felt the same. Why else would she have left? Even worse, she had probably run off with his greatest enemy. She'd certainly enjoyed fucking Lysander of Aberhill. Maybe Typhon should seek some enjoyment as well and not with the repulsive fleshtress but with a human woman.

"My lord?" Crystal pressed. She moistened her plump, pink lips with the tip of her tongue. He imagined that tongue swirling around his cock head.

No. This maid distracted him from more important duties. Fucking her would pacify him and drain his energy, but fucking the fleshtress would feed his power. The fleshtress could help him defeat Lysander and claim Aberhill. A peasant girl could do nothing except sate his momentary lust.

"There's no need for punishment," he replied, dropping his hand from her face. "And a bath might be welcome after all."

She curtsied low and turned away. Typhon followed her to the adjoining chamber where his square marble tub had been filled with steaming water.

"Shall I call a male servant to help you undress?" Crystal asked.

"No need."

"Would you like a male servant bathe you?"

"Close the door," he ordered.

She curtsied again and turned to leave.

A strange, wicked sensation swept over him. This bold little maid who had interrupted him needed to be taught a lesson and by the way he'd allowed her to distract him, he needed punishment as well.

"I said close the door, wench, but I didn't tell you to leave," he stated.

Crystal's cheeks colored again and she seemed to stop breathing, her hand curved around the doorknob.

"My lord?" she asked softly, a tremor in her voice.

"Close the door, then come here. Since you've taken it upon yourself to act as my manservant, you will assume all his duties. You will bathe me."

Not that Typhon's manservant actually washed him. He preferred to do that in private – until now.

Having her hands glide over his wet body would be a delicious torment, and they both deserved it.

Crystal closed the door and turned to him. Her small breasts heaved and her eyes gleamed in a way he'd never seen before.

"As you wish, my lord," she said, her voice just above a whisper.

Typhon walked to a high-backed chair by the fireplace and sat to remove his boots. Crystal approached and Typhon said, "Remove your overdress so that it doesn't get wet."

Crystal's lips parted as she drew another deep breath. Her hands lifted to the simple metal brooches that fastened her overdress. As she removed the brooches, her hands trembled visibly and he wondered if he frightened or aroused her.

Barefoot, Typhon stood and approached. He took her hands and guided them away from the brooches, then he unfastened them. Though he focused on his hands, he felt her gaze upon him and heard her swallow noisily.

She held out her hand and he dropped the brooches onto her palm, then slid her dress down her shoulders. The fabric pooled at her feet and when she bent to pick it up, Typhon stepped behind her, gazing at the gentle curve of her backside in the thin shift. Resisting the urge to grasp her bottom, he occupied his hands with undressing. He tugged off his clothes, still damp with sweat from training, and dropped them on the floor.

When Crystal went to pick up his clothes as well, he said, "Leave them. Come to the bath."

She dropped her dress beside his shirt and trousers and stepped closer as he sank into the hot water. It soothed his sore muscles. He ducked under the surface, wetting his hair. Then he sat up again, wiping rivulets of water from his face.

"You're cut," she said, trailing her fingertips along the back of his left shoulder.

"It can't be bad. I scarcely felt it." He closed his eyes and bent his head forward since she had dipped the cloth into the water and began washing the injury.

Her fingertips trailed over the many scars on his back and she asked softly, "Are these all from battles?"

Why did her question take him off guard? After a moment's pause, he replied coolly, "No."

Some of the scars were from battles, others from training but most from his father. The old king had been a firm believer in strict discipline for both children and warriors.

Crystal rinsed out the cloth again and ran it across his shoulders. Typhon's eyes closed for several heartbeats while she swept the cloth over his chest.

Grasping her hand, he guided her to the side of the tub. This time she didn't look at him but kept her hands focused on his chest which she continued washing for much longer than necessary. Typhon drew a deep breath, relishing the sensations. She ran the towel over his nipple and swept her thumb over the stiff nub. He couldn't tell if the

caress was accidental or deliberate. It didn't matter. He liked the way she touched him. Gritting his teeth, he realized he liked it too much.

Her slender arms, curved with small yet firm muscles, gleamed with water and the front of her shift had also gotten quite wet. The fabric clung to her pert breasts, the stiff pink nipples visible and seeming to beg for his touch.

"Raise your arm, please, my lord," she said, her voice a bit unsteady. He obliged and she ran the cloth down the length of his arm, then dipped it in the water again and swept it over his underarm.

She walked around to the other side of the tub and repeated the motions on his other arm. When she reached for the cake of soap, it slipped from her wet hand and disappeared beneath the water.

Their gazes locked and Typhon smiled wickedly, enticing her to reach for the soap.

"My lord?" she said, a tremor in her voice. Her eyes glistened and her breathing had increased. Typhon's heartbeat also quickened. He and this peasant had scarcely touched, yet she aroused him more than Flora ever had even in their most intimate moments.

"Yes?" he demanded.

"The soap—"

"Is within easy reach."

She drew a sharp breath and her eyes widened with surprise. Taking her lower lip between her teeth in a manner he found most endearing, she reached into the water. Her hand brushed his leg and Typhon's stiffening cock swelled to even greater proportions.

Crystal's palm swept over his inner thigh before she searched the bottom of the tub for the elusive soap. Her forearm brushed his cock and he resisted the urge to groan. The pretty maid had leaned so close that he felt her warm breath against his chest. Again her hand caressed his inner thigh and her lips hovered over his chest, her eyes half closed.

"I can't find it, my lord. Perhaps you could tell me if you feel it?"

Typhon reached down and grasped the soap. The maid sat back, extending her hand. He grasped her wrist and placed the soap in her palm. When she tried to pull away, he tugged her even closer, their lips almost touching.

Their gazes locked and the lustful yet pleading look in her eyes thrust him back to reality.

He dropped her hand and pushed her away from the tub. "Go. I'll finish alone."

"But—"

"I don't accept defiance, especially not from a servant."

A look that might have been anger flashed across her eyes and he resisted the urge to smile. He liked this woman, probably far too much.

Bowing her head, she placed the soap on the side of the tub and turned away. She quickly pulled on her dress and he watched, disappointed, as the thick fabric covered her enticing little body.

Without a word, she hurried out of the room, closing the door behind her.

Typhon snarled with frustration. Not since his youth had he an erection this painful. If the maid had stroked his cock even once he probably would have burst in ecstasy.

His desire would be wasted on the maid, however. He knew another way to gain satisfaction while still serving his kingdom.

Closing his eyes, he tried to focus, difficult with his cock throbbing and heart pounding like he'd just fought every warrior in Aberhill single-handedly.

I summon you with my blood. I offer you my flesh. I ask you to empower my soul.

After coupling with the fleshtress once, they were bound so that he could call upon her through focus and the words alone. He no longer needed the full ritual.

The water became almost painfully hot. Sweat broke out on his face and chest and a hot, bony hand curled around his shaft.

Typhon grunted in pleasure-pain with each stroke of the fleshtress's hand. Her sinewy body covered his, their slick flesh pressed close. Her cheek brushed against his and her scalding tongue dipped into his ear.

"The little maid prepared you well," she said in a husky whisper. "She wanted you."

"I didn't want her."

The fleshtress chuckled, a sound of steel scraping against steel. "That's only a partial truth."

His eyes snapped open and he glared at her, then grasped a handful of her lank black hair and jerked her head back, exposing her grayish throat.

"You can't destroy me, Typhon. My life force is beyond your reach but if you're a good boy, I'll share it with you. How did it feel when you were training today?"

He tightened his grip on her hair and she faded to smoke, then reappeared beneath the water. One hand clasped his cock and the other his balls. She squeezed too hard, while at the same time drawing him deeply into her hot mouth. Her rough tongue flicked his cock head. The sexual ache almost hurt in its intensity. Panting, Typhon gripped the sides of the tub until his fingers ached, hoping to distract himself from the bitch between his legs.

Impossible. Her tongue, teeth and lips conjured sensations that were as terrible as they were pleasurable. Raking her teeth along his shaft, she kneaded his balls, then she sucked them and rolled her wickedly skilled tongue over them.

His breathing ragged, Typhon closed his eyes tightly. His magic coursed through him and mingled with her power that seemed to fill the room.

Apparently the fleshtress didn't need air to breathe, for she continued teasing him with her mouth beneath the water, pushing him almost to the point of no return then pausing. Sexual frustration built inside Typhon until he thought it would drive him mad. His heart pounded and he felt as if he were soaking in a tub of lava.

Finally she licked her way up his stomach and chest where she paused to bite first one nipple then the other. The pain only increased his passion.

The fleshtress straddled him, her cunt swallowing him and squeezing hard.

Typhon's hips jerked upward, matching her wild rhythm. He grunted with every thrust, his head arched back and hands still fiercely clutching the sides of the tub. The fleshtress raked her sharp nails over his chest, then she grasped his face and covered his mouth in a soul-draining kiss. Her tongue thrust against his and he had no choice but to accept it. By now he was too far gone to care. He just wanted the power and release from this unbearable sexual tension.

Her cunt clamped around him even harder and he shattered like glass on granite. Gasping into her mouth, he surged into her, coming so hard he thought he might pass out. His cock strained and his heart threatened to burst through his chest. Magical power crackled around them, filling him with an agonizing strength.

Briefly he wondered if he could survive this to use the power for his kingdom.

The fleshtress tore her mouth from his and screamed—a sound so savage and piercing that the very walls of the palace seemed to tremble. She continued riding him, draining the last of his climax, before he lapsed into unconsciousness.

* * * * *

Flora sat beside Lysander who had again slipped into unconsciousness. This time no one had been able to rouse him.

All attempts by Prytanis and the elite guard to remove the collar had failed. With no word from the chief enchanter's old mentor and Lysander clinging to life by a rapidly fraying thread, Flora knew she was his best hope for survival.

She held his hand and brushed his mouth with a kiss, knowing she would probably never see him again.

"I love you," she whispered close to his ear, not sure if he could hear her.

Her throat constricted but she drew a deep breath and released it slowly. Determined to reach her goal, she couldn't allow anything, including her fear and sorrow, to distract her. She stood and with one last glance toward Lysander, strode out of the room.

King Ariston and Captain Mikolas had selected a member of the elite guard to accompany her to Darridge. The guard named Cledus awaited her in the corridor along with Prytanis and Ariston.

"Good luck, Flora," Prytanis told her.

She held his gaze and said, "Watch over him."

"You have my word."

Ariston said, "Whatever happens to Lysander, Typhon will not take Aberhill."

If she hadn't been so concerned about Lysander, the king's words would have infuriated her, yet she understood his hesitance to trust her. His words were an obvious warning to Typhon. If she was still loyal to her husband, Ariston wanted them both to know that Lysander wasn't Aberhill's sole protection.

"I hope that's true," she replied earnestly. She pitied any kingdom overtaken by Typhon.

Turning to Cledus, she said, "I'm ready."

He glanced at the king who motioned for them to go.

A short time later, Flora sat on a raft guided by Cledus. As promised, King Ariston had also provided her with a horse for the overland part of her journey. She and the guard traveled a different route that would end in a more direct overland path to the palace at Darridge than the one she had traveled with Lysander and Strom.

A quiet companion, Cledus spoke only when necessary. In a way she appreciated his reserved nature. Her mind spun with so many thoughts and concerns. She needed time to focus on the task ahead.

She had a chance for a life away from Typhon, but what good would such a life be if Lysander died though she had the power to save him?

When fleeing from Darridge with Lysander so deathly ill, the voyage had passed with excruciating slowness. Now the hours flew by and all too soon she reached the end of her journey – and possibly the end of her life.

Would she succeed in killing such a strong practitioner as Hecta? If she did, would Typhon kill her in anger? Lately his temper had been nothing short of volatile. When they'd first married, he hadn't been a pleasant man—he'd always been too sullen for that—but he hadn't been violent. His rage had grown throughout their marriage, along with his obsession with evil magic. Typhon's craving for power confused her. Despite his wealth, he didn't live lavishly. His sleeping quarters were sparsely decorated and his clothes relatively simple for a man of his class. He poured all the kingdom's wealth into defenses and magical training for the elite guard.

Flora sighed deeply. Why was she still trying to understand her husband? Clearly just one explanation for his behavior existed. He was a mean-spirited madman.

"I should go no farther, my lady," Cledus said. "However I will wait until sunrise. Should you return—"

"No," she said. "Don't wait. You'll only endanger yourself. I know that once I attack Hecta, whether I succeed or not, I'll never get out of the palace."

He nodded and guided the horse off the raft. On the shore, Flora mounted and rode down the path toward the palace. She'd dress in the same travel-dirtied clothes that she'd worn when she'd escaped from Darridge. Before leaving the forest, she released the horse so no one would wonder where she had gotten the animal.

Soldiers approached her as soon as she neared the palace. Typhon must have the area well-guarded since Lysander's escape. She hoped Cledus started his return journey before someone noticed him.

"Queen Flora," said one of the guards. "Are you hurt?"

"No," she replied. "I must speak to the king right away."

"Of course. We've been searching for you. He sent messengers to the surrounding kingdoms to tell them you're missing."

"Bring me to him. Now." Flora didn't have time to waste explaining to the guards. She had no way of knowing whether or not Lysander still lived, but if he did she needed to act as quickly as possible.

He *was* alive. She couldn't believe otherwise.

Chapter Eleven

At the palace, the guards escorted Flora directly to Typhon's tower where he was engaged in magical practice. Two elite guards protected the door of his chamber. Upon seeing Flora, one of the guards entered the workroom. A moment later, Typhon stepped out, his face pale and eyes blazing.

"Enter," he commanded and she stepped into the chamber. It reeked of smoke and bitter herbs. Even in daylight this room remained dark, the heavy drapes almost always drawn. A shiver ran down her spine. She usually avoided this chamber. It was so unlike Lysander's bright, airy rooms and beautiful garden. Typhon had a private garden as well. A long, narrow staircase led from a porch outside the tower to a yard encircled by a high stone wall. Many heavy shade trees stood, for Typhon grew mostly roots and exotic herbs that thrived in dimness.

During the first weeks of their marriage, he had asked her to his workshop and garden often but she couldn't share his interest in such places. She'd hinted that he might join her outside, riding in the fields and enjoying the sunlight, but Typhon worked by day. He ventured out in darkness, usually long after she fell asleep.

They had been a bad match from the first and Flora couldn't understand why Typhon had asked for her hand.

He slammed the door shut and Flora flinched the slightest bit.

"You were with him, weren't you?" Typhon demanded. "Don't bother lying. We know he is still alive. Hecta has sensed it through the collar."

"I didn't go with him by choice." Flora glared. "He forced me."

He circled her slowly, a predatory look in his eyes and a twisted grin on his lips. "Just like he forced you to fuck him until his eyes crossed."

Flora could scarcely believe what she'd heard. "You're the one who forced us into that. You and that poison dust."

"You didn't need the dust. You enjoyed his touch and his filthy kisses. Admit it."

"Well you and I never made each other's eyes cross, as you so charmingly put it," Flora retorted.

"That's true enough." Folding his arms across his chest, he paused in front of her, staring at her with his gleaming sapphire eyes. "So what are you doing back here? Did he get sick of you or are you now a spy for Aberhill?"

"I escaped." Flora took a step closer to him, her gaze locked on his. Now more than ever she needed to be convincing. "I told you before. Regardless of how we feel about each other, I'm still the Queen of Darridge. I have always been true to my duty and my people."

His arm snaked around her waist and he held her close. He was more thickly built than Lysander, his body hard. The pungent scent of his magic clung to his skin and clothes. Flora tried not to gag.

"For someone with no Fanticaun powers, you've always been difficult to read." Typhon grasped her chin, staring so deeply into her eyes that she nearly squirmed. "That's quite a talent you have for hiding your emotions, Flora. But my intuition tells me you're not being completely truthful."

"I'm sick and tired of men telling me what I think and feel. That arrogant ass Lysander thought I belonged to him because I'm forced to carry his child."

"Speaking of the child, how are you feeling?"

"It's about time you asked. I was starting to think you didn't care."

"Just answer the question."

"I'm feeling well enough, considering I was abducted from my chamber and dragged halfway across the countryside. However I think it would be wise for Hecta to examine me."

"I agree." Typhon grasped her arm. He guided her out of the tower and motioned for the guards to remain behind.

They descended the long staircase, walked down an empty corridor and up yet another staircase to the hag's tower. Two elite guards stood outside her door but stepped aside, their heads bowed, as Typhon entered the chief enchanter's workroom.

Hecta sat at a scribe's desk, writing in a parchment book. She looked up sharply, her wrinkled brow furrowing and her gaze fixed on Flora.

"She claims to have been abducted by your former student, the Aberhill swine," Typhon sneered. He dragged Flora toward Hecta. "Make sure the child is well."

The hag slid off the stool on which she'd been sitting, a wary look in her eyes.

"How did you escape from him?" she asked.

"It wasn't hard once he succumbed to the infection from his wounds. I left him half dead in the woods, the collar draining what's left of his life. You did your job well, Hecta. Now tell me whether or not the heir to the throne of Darridge is still healthy in my womb."

The faintest smile twisted Typhon's lips and he gestured toward Hecta. "You heard your queen's command."

The hag stepped closer, extending her gnarled hand toward Flora's belly. With shocking swiftness, Flora grasped Hecta's bony wrist, drew the knife she'd hidden in her skirt and plunged it into the bitch's heart. Flora used as much force as possible, knowing she needed to succeed in her task because if she failed she wouldn't get a second chance.

Hecta's eyes widened in pain and surprise. Her mouth opened but no words came out, only gasps and a groan before she fell dead to the floor.

"What have you done?" Typhon bellowed.

If Flora hadn't felt sick to her stomach, she would have appreciated his look of utter shock.

Hecta's body turned to ashes, leaving behind her black robes and the bloodstained knife.

The guards burst into the chamber and stared at the remains of the chief enchanter.

"Your Majesty?" asked one guard, looking to Typhon for orders.

"Get out," Typhon roared, his eyes flashing like those of a wildcat preparing for the kill.

Flora's stomach heaved and she thought she might be sick. He was going to kill her. She knew it.

"Out!" Typhon shouted, shoving the guards toward the door. They did as he ordered, leaving the husband and wife alone.

Typhon grasped her shoulders and spoke through gritted teeth. "Why?"

"Why do you think?" she demanded, not bothering to conceal her hatred and disgust. Why should she? She had nothing left to lose.

He stared at her for a moment, his chest rising and falling with each harsh breath. Finally he said, "Because of *him*. That Aberhill swine. You did it to free him of the collar. You lost the child, didn't you?"

It seemed Typhon wasn't as oblivious when it came to her as she believed.

"I shouldn't have trusted you," he said in a deadly soft voice. The wildness in his eyes terrified her but she refused to let him see how much. "You traitorous bitch. I swear you'll rue the day you chose him over Darridge."

"That debt has been paid since the day you and my father forced me into this marriage."

He gritted his teeth and drew back his hand, then paused.

"What's wrong, Typhon?" she demanded. "Aren't you going to hit me again like you did that night in my chamber?"

His brow furrowed and he curled his lip. "What are you talking about, wench?"

"You know what I'm talking about. It seems beating women is what it takes to make you feel like a man. You're pathetic."

"I never struck you."

Was he serious? He had to be lying, but he looked so genuinely surprised that Flora almost believed him.

"When did I ever strike you?" he demanded.

"How can you pretend you didn't? I suppose you were a gentle lover too? And I assume you never threatened servants if I didn't do what you wanted?"

"Controlling one's wife and servants through punishment isn't unheard of. Lovemaking I don't even want to discuss."

"Because you have no idea what it is!"

Typhon's teeth ground visibly and he took a step back from her, as if he didn't trust himself not to do her bodily harm if they remained in close proximity.

"I never struck you," he repeated.

"Yes you did."

"I can't believe I'm standing here arguing with a murderess. You will stay in the windowless tower until I decide what to do with you. Should Lysander survive, I don't doubt he'll come for you."

Flora didn't try to argue with that observation. He was probably right. While she hoped Lysander would stay safe, part of her wished he would rescue her again. Yet that wouldn't happen. Typhon would keep her heavily guarded.

He walked to the door and summoned the guards. "Take Queen Flora to the west tower. Make sure she doesn't leave and has no visitors, including servants. Then clean up the hag's remains. Leave her books and supplies. They might be of use."

The guards brought Flora to the west tower. She'd been there before, as punishment after she'd bitten Typhon's cock. She smiled at the memory. For days after he'd probably been in agony. It had almost been worth the month of isolation in the tower.

She lay on the bed, staring at the ceiling and hoping Lysander had survived.

* * * * *

The emotions battling inside Typhon threatened to drive him mad. He entered his workroom and slammed the door behind him.

His queen had lost his heir and betrayed their kingdom. His worst enemy still lived and his chief enchanter was dead. Worst of all, Flora tried to convince him that their marriage had failed because of him. She had accused him of causing her physical harm. He had never struck her or any other woman. Beating women was beneath him—a sign of weakness. He'd viewed it as a flaw in his father, one of the few failings of the great king. Typhon had vowed to be a better ruler than his father and considered himself a better man, regardless of what Flora said.

The closest he'd come to causing her physical harm had been when he'd decided to breed her to the bull, but in selecting Lysander he had given her pleasure rather than pain. Breeding her to the bull should have been a sacrifice made by king and queen for the sake of their kingdom, but she had warped the act in every way.

His head throbbed with the scent of *wymist* that hung heavily on the air in the chamber, even when the incense wasn't burning.

Now that Flora had returned and admitted her treason, he had no choice but to punish her. But how? He would be within his rights to kill her.

His fists clenched, he closed his eyes and called upon the fleshstress.

I summon you with my blood. I offer you my flesh. I ask you to empower my soul.

Sinewy arms slid around his waist and sharp fingernails raked over his belly.

"It seems you didn't need me after all to discover your wife's innermost thoughts. She told you herself," the fleshtress whispered in his ear. "Lysander of Aberhill must be a remarkable man to inspire her to risk her life for him."

Until hearing those words, Typhon didn't think he could be any more furious.

The fleshtress bit his earlobe hard and Typhon resisted the urge to jerk away from her. Despite his revulsion, he needed her.

"The punishment for treason is death, unless you choose to be lenient?" she said, a taunting edge to her voice.

"I have no intention of killing Flora."

The fleshtress stepped in front of him and slid her arms around his neck. Her naked gray breasts flattened against his chest, her spiky black nipples pressing against him. "Why does a traitor deserve mercy?"

Grasping her hips and thrusting his pelvis against hers, he sneered, "Who said anything about mercy? Traitor or not, she's still my wife. She didn't want this marriage. Her father and I made the decision for her. I can forgive her hatred of me but I can't excuse her betrayal of Darridge. Some punishments are worse than death, are they not?"

A sly grin spread across the fleshtress' skeletal face. "Yes. Some are far worse. Destroying someone's soul is worse than destroying their body. I think I know what you have in mind, but in order to help you, I need the right preparation."

"I knew you would."

"You know that if you use my power to hold her in suspended sleep, I won't be able to help you until you break the spell. My entire focus will be on her."

"It's how it must be. I can't have her distracting me any longer."

"Killing her would—"

"You've heard my decision," he interrupted, tightening his grip on her hips.

"Very well then. Light the incense."

Typhon did as she commanded. *Wymist* smoke filled the room.

"If her lover comes for her, the spell might be broken."

"This time if Lysander of Aberhill tries to take what's mine, he will die."

The fleshtress gazed deeply into his eyes. "And if he kills you?"

Typhon's lips twisted in a frozen grin. "That won't happen."

"He's powerful."

"The best he can hope for would be a draw. I intend to kill him one way or another."

"Even if it means sacrificing your own life?"

"Nothing will stop me, not after all Aberhill has taken from me."

"It seems Flora's soul isn't the only one in danger."

"If I can destroy Lysander's as well I will."

"I wasn't talking about Lysander," the fleshtress hissed, then slid down his body. Her sharp nails ripped the front of his shirt and left bloody scratches down his chest and stomach. Typhon closed his eyes and gasped, then gritted his teeth as she ripped his trousers. The sound of tearing fabric echoed in the otherwise silent room.

Her fist wrapped around his cock and her hot mouth slid around the head. She sucked and lashed it with her tongue. Typhon's body responded, his cock swelling and aching in her grasp while she fed upon him with a vengeance.

Their power crackled around the room and his breathing deepened with each swipe of her rough, wet tongue.

One of her hands reached around and grasped his ass, her strong, thin fingers kneading the taut spheres. His muscles tightened and he clutched handfuls of her lank hair.

Your queen will feel our heat, Typhon. Her suspended sleep will be one of pleasure, pain and desires so dark she'll think she stumbled into hell. If Lysander tries to free her, he'll suffer the same fate.

"Yes," Typhon breathed, his hips thrusting into the bitch's scalding mouth.

With a savage growl, he shoved her away from him. Her teeth scraped along his cock before it popped free of her mouth. Typhon grasped her thin shoulders and dragged her to her feet. He shoved her against the wall and used his knee to spread her long, lean legs.

"Make this good, Fanticaun," she purred, her rough palms stroking his chest. Taking his face in her hands, she spoke against his lips, "For me to properly punish your queen, you need to pay me well."

Typhon's lip curled. His cock ached from her ministrations and a little tremor of arousal and disgust rippled down his spine before his mouth descended on hers in a punishing kiss. Their tongues met in a savage dance and her bittersweet taste filled his mouth. Reaching down, he covered her hairless mound with his hand and kneaded. He thrust two fingers then three into her wet, drenched pussy. At least the fleshtress was always ready to fuck, so unlike Flora.

She's always ready to fuck Lysander. She was always as wet for him as I am for you.

Growling, Typhon withdrew his fingers from the fleshtress and replaced them with his cock. He didn't move carefully but filled her with a long, hard thrust.

Her neck arched and she gave a raspy cry of delight.

Over and over Typhon thrust into her. Her heated flesh pulsed around him and she clung to him tightly and sank her teeth into his shoulder as she came.

"Don't stop," she panted. "You have to pay, Typhon."

He continued thrusting, trying to ignore his rising passion.

"Harder!" she commanded, writhing against the wall.

Typhon doubled his speed, his heart pounding and cock aching painfully. She was so hot and slick, so desperate to fuck. How much longer could he hold out against her carnal magic?

She climaxed again and he paused, every muscle tight and straining as she throbbed around him.

"We're not finished yet, *Your Majesty*."

Typhon dragged her away from the wall and positioned her on all fours in front of him.

"Oh yes! I like it when you take me like a beast." She thrust her slender ass toward him.

Grasping her hips, Typhon pushed into her and her molten body stretched to accommodate him.

"You're like a bull," she panted. "Big and powerful. Fuck me, Typhon. Give me what you could never give your wife – pleasure."

"Bitch," he growled, thrusting faster and harder. The fleshtress grew even hotter and more slick with lust. Her juices had a magical effect on his cock, making it harder than ever but rather numb, preventing him from bursting in the climax he so desperately needed. Between the sexual torment and the *wymist*, his head competed with his cock over which would explode first.

Closing his eyes, he continued thrusting, pushing the fleshtress over the edge two more times before the needs of his body became almost too painful to endure.

Snarling, he pulled out of her and leaned back on his elbows. Sweat-drenched and panting, he glared at her.

She merely smiled and crawled toward him. Mounting him, she shoved him hard in the chest. Though she hadn't the strength to push him down, he wasn't in the mood to wrestle with her and sprawled flat on his back, his hands tight on her waist.

The fleshtress rode him fast and hard, her nails raking over his belly, leaving more scratches. Sweat trickled into the bloody tracks, making them sting even more.

Her breasts quivering, she arched her neck back and rode him even faster, her hips almost blurring.

Typhon closed his eyes tightly, trembling on the verge of a soul-shattering climax.

The fleshtress came again and this time Typhon came with her, a ragged cry torn from his throat. He came so long and hard that he thought he might die from the intensity, but it would be worth it to take revenge upon Flora and Lysander.

* * * * *

The door opened and Typhon stepped inside Flora's tower. Her heart pounded and she made a motion to rise.

"No. Stay where you are," he said and came to sit on the edge of her bed.

Flora's pulse raced with fear. She knew by the look in his eyes and the even stronger scent from his clothes and skin that he'd been immersed in evil magic. His face looked almost haggard. Even his lips were pale.

"What are you going to do with me, Typhon? Kill me?"

A faint yet wicked smile touched his lips. "No, Flora. You might want to convince me that I'm a monster, but I'm not. You're my wife and I will not harm you."

Whenever he used this soft tone it meant trouble. Despite his words and the passive expression on his face, she knew he planned something evil. His madness seemed to increase each time she saw him. No doubt his magical practice affected his mind.

He took her face in his hands and covered her mouth in a kiss. She tasted a bitter herb on his tongue and fought him hard. He seemed impervious to her blows. When she clutched handfuls of his hair and pulled hard, he merely grasped her wrists and pried away her fingers as he would those of an unruly child.

"Forgive me for the taste," he said. "But you'll find it quite painless."

"Poison?" she whispered in horror.

"You'll sleep until I decide to wake you, but don't worry. You won't be alone in the world between wakefulness and sleep. My wife, you refused to give me pleasure, but you willingly gave it to *him*."

"You forced me to it," she murmured. Already Flora's eyes felt so heavy she could scarcely keep them open.

"For the sake of Darridge. I would do anything for Darridge," he whispered.

"You mean anything for revenge?"

"Rest well, my beautiful little betrayer."

"Lysander," Flora murmured before falling into blackness.

* * * * *

Lysander heard Prytanis calling him. He groaned softly and raised his heavy eyelids. The chief enchanter and Ariston stood by his bedside. Despite his muddled thoughts, Lysander couldn't miss the anxious expressions on their faces.

"How do you feel?" Prytanis asked.

Lysander moistened his dry lips and swallowed. His gaze drifted around. The curtains were open and a wonderful springtime breeze floated through the room. The sunlight shining in was the most beautiful sight he'd ever seen, except for one. He knew one vision far more beautiful than any sun or moon and unfortunately she was nowhere to be seen at the moment.

"Where's Flora?" he asked.

"Resting," Ariston replied. "She scarcely left your side but for the child's sake we persuaded her to get some sleep."

Lysander nodded slightly. He'd just awakened but already felt as if he could tumble right back to sleep.

Then it struck him that the pressure was gone from his neck and despite his exhaustion, power simmered inside him once again. He reached up and touched his neck, finding it lightly bandaged.

"You got it off?" he asked.

"Yes it's gone," Prytanis said. "Your neck was rubbed raw, though. I've applied salve that should relieve the discomfort."

"You found the powder."

Prytanis and Ariston exchanged glances and the chief enchanter asked, "What powder?"

Lysander glanced to the shelves across the room filled with various bottles and jars. "Third shelf. Blue jar. The powder is from the *baseco* tree. When prepared correctly, it breaks the lock."

Prytanis' lip curled. "You mean it was here the whole time? Lysander, we tore this chamber apart looking for the remedy."

"Then how did you get it off?"

"It fell off on its own," Ariston replied.

Lysander's brow furrowed. He was too tired to make sense of any of this.

"Not possible," he murmured, then a strange sensation shot through him. "Unless Hecta is dead."

"That's probably it," Ariston said. "She was quite old."

"No. She had too much life left in her. Trust me. If she's dead, someone in Darridge must have killed her. Probably Typhon, now that he got what he wanted. But it would make no sense for him to kill her. Without her he must know the collar would lose its power." Lysander's voice faded to scarcely a whisper.

Prytanis held a mug of water to his lips. "Drink and then get some sleep. You still have plenty of recovering to do."

"Flora is well though?" Lysander asked. More than anything he wanted to see her.

"Yes," Prytanis said. "Drink."

Lysander took a sip of water, then another. Parched, he drained the entire mug then sank back into a deep sleep.

* * * * *

When Lysander awoke again, night had fallen. The curtains had been pulled against the evening chill and a fire burned in the hearth across the room. Georgios sat in a chair near his bedside, reading from a leather bound book.

Lysander sat up and the boy looked away from his reading. He quickly placed the book aside.

"How are you feeling, sir?"

"Like I need the privy."

"I'll help you." Georgios reached for Lysander's arm, but he tugged away.

"I'm perfectly capable of going to the privy by myself, Georgios."

The boy retrieved a robe from the trunk at the foot of the bed and held it for Lysander who slipped into it.

He did feel rather weak and frustratingly shaky, but that was to be expected. Now that his strength and his magic had returned, he'd heal quickly. His recuperative powers were another Fanticaun trait he'd inherited.

As he headed down the corridor toward the privy, he didn't stop Georgios from walking with him. By the time he relieved himself and returned to his room, he was actually trembling a bit. This weakness annoyed him beyond belief.

Sitting on the edge of the bed, Lysander took a moment to collect himself.

"Are you hungry, sir? Prytanis said you should try to eat to regain your strength."

"I'm starving," he said.

The boy smiled. "I'll bring you something from the kitchen."

"Where's Queen Flora?"

Georgios turned to him with wide eyes. "Resting."

"Was she here at all today?"

The boy's mouth opened but nothing came out. Finally, he said, "I'll get your food and send Prytanis."

"Is something wrong?" Lysander demanded, once again standing, his weakness forgotten as concern overtook him. "Is something wrong with Flora?"

"Sir, Prytanis is —"

"I'm not speaking to Prytanis. I'm speaking to you," Lysander said in the voice he used to command his troops.

Georgios drew a sharp breath and said, "I —"

"Answer me. Has something happened to Queen Flora?"

"No."

"Then where is she?"

"Sleeping."

Lysander's magic coursed through him, though he didn't need it to sense Georgios' lie.

He strode closer to the boy who stood his ground at first, then backed up as Lysander continued his advance. They stopped only when Georgios' back pressed against the wall.

"Don't lie to me," Lysander said, his gaze fixed on Georgios. "What has happened to her?"

"She...she left."

Lysander's entire body tensed and his pulse raced. "Left? Where has she gone?"

"Back to Darridge."

"Why?"

"She chose to go, sir. No one forced her to do it. She said it was the best way. The only way."

The reality of what happened struck Lysander like a death blow. He closed his eyes and drew a sharp breath. When he opened them, Georgios was still staring at him with a hint of fear and concern.

"She went to kill Hecta, didn't she?"

"I—"

Lysander's hands shot out and sank so hard into Georgios' shoulders he most likely left bruises. "The truth!"

"Y...yes, sir. She did. You mustn't be upset. You're still healing and—"

His teeth clenched with fury, Lysander strode out of his chamber, down the corridor and up the stairs leading to Ariston's rooms.

Chapter Twelve

Lysander didn't bother knocking on Ariston's door but burst inside, hoping his brother would be there.

Ariston stood talking to Mikolas. Both men stared at him in surprise.

"Lysander, you should be resting," Ariston said.

"You bastard!" Lysander growled, striding toward his brother.

"Calm yourself," Ariston commanded.

"You let Flora return to Darridge."

"She wanted to go," his brother replied calmly. "You were dying and her plan was the best chance we saw for you to survive."

"Do you have any idea the sort of life she has back there?" Lysander doubted he'd ever been this angry. His heart thudded in his chest as if he'd just fought a battle and he could scarcely control his breathing.

After all he and Flora had endured to gain their freedom, she ended up back in Typhon's clutches.

"Lysander, get hold of yourself," Mikolas said.

"Stay out of this, Mikolas," Lysander growled, though he continued glaring at Ariston. "You sent her back with my child."

"We didn't want to tell you any of this until you regained your strength. She lost the child," Ariston said. "That's why she decided to go. If it's any consolation, I believe she's a very courageous woman who cares a great deal for you. I—"

Lysander's control snapped and his fist flew at Ariston's jaw. The king staggered almost to his knees. If Lysander had been at full strength, no doubt Ariston would have gone down entirely.

Striking the king was punishable by death but at the moment Lysander didn't care.

Mikolas attempted to restrain him but Lysander twisted out of his grasp.

"Let him go, Mikolas," Ariston said. He wiped his bloody lip on his sleeve and rubbed his jaw. He and Lysander glared at each other and the king continued, "I could have you punished for this."

"You've already punished me by allowing Flora to return to Darridge."

"We were interested in saving your life. All of us. Including her." Ariston approached and stood chest to chest with Lysander. "I'm taking into consideration that you've been ill and you care deeply for Flora."

Lysander scarcely heard Ariston. He paced the room. "I have to go get her."

"What?" Mikolas wrinkled his nose. "That's madness. She is Typhon's wife. On what grounds can you take a woman who doesn't belong to you?"

"She belongs to me more than she's ever belonged to him," Lysander raged. He had never imagined feeling this strongly about any woman, but Flora wasn't just *any* woman. "I have to get her out of there right away."

"Right away?" Ariston demanded. "You *are* mad. Look at yourself. A day ago you were at death's door. How far do you think you'll get on a rescue mission? If you go there, you'll fail and that will mean everything Flora did was in vain."

Lysander stood, his chest rising and falling with each anxious breath. Part of him knew Ariston was right, but another part also knew that he needed to rescue Flora from Typhon.

"I can't leave her there," Lysander said, glancing from Ariston to Mikolas. "I know neither of you understand, but this is my decision."

"I'm the king," Ariston reminded him. "You need my approval."

"Not if I relinquish my command as overlord and leave Aberhill."

Ariston's brow furrowed. "You would do that?"

"I don't want to, Brother, but I cannot leave Flora under Typhon's control. Especially not now, after she saved my life."

Ariston sighed deeply and scrubbed a hand through his hair. He closed his eyes and when he opened them, held Lysander's gaze. "Then we'll find a way."

"To tell the truth, I think the woman deserves to be rescued," Mikolas said.

Both brothers glanced at him in surprise.

The rose-scented captain shrugged. "What? I recognize courage and honor when I see it. I didn't trust her at first but I was wrong about her."

"I hope we're not too late," Lysander said, his stomach tight with worry.

If Typhon knew Flora had killed Hecta, then he might punish her by death.

* * * * *

Back in Lysander's chamber, servants had already prepared a bath and waited to help him into it, but he dismissed them. After bathing quickly, he dressed and prepared for the journey.

Prytanis and Mikolas entered his chamber and Lysander glanced at them in annoyance.

"Don't you have duties to attend?" he demanded. "Mikolas, you're in charge of defenses. You should be with the troops."

"You can't go alone," Mikolas said. "It's suicide. I know you won't let me accompany you—"

Lysander shot him a deadly look. "Your place is here until I return to relieve you. Get back to your post."

"If you won't take Mikolas, then ask one of the other elite guards to go with you," Prytanis said. "If you're foolish enough to attempt a rescue now, you won't make it. Without help, all you'll do is put Flora's life in greater danger."

Lysander paused, closing his eyes for a moment. His fists clenched. They were right. Though still frustratingly weak, he'd been in worse situations. How many times had he survived battles while injured? This was no different. Yet this time Flora's life also hung in the balance.

"I won't order anyone to accompany me."

"We already have a volunteer," Mikolas said.

Lysander glanced at him sharply. "You've told someone else of my plans without consulting me first?"

"It was Ariston's idea and I wouldn't push him much further. He's already overlooked a punch in the face. I doubt he'll take much more, Lysander, brother or not."

"Drink this," Prytanis said, offering Lysander a mug. The contents carried the aroma of herbs. "You still need to build up your strength."

Lysander held the mug but didn't drink from it. He asked, "Who is the volunteer?"

"Cledus. He accompanied Flora on her return to Darridge," Mikolas replied.

Drawing a deep breath, Lysander walked to the window and gazed out. A breeze fanned his face. It soothed him and helped him think.

He trusted Cledus implicitly, as he did all members of the elite guard. The young man's courage and intelligence made him invaluable.

"Ask him to come here," Lysander said quietly.

Mikolas nodded and left the chamber. Prytanis headed for the worktable, but Lysander said, "Come here."

The chief enchanter approached and held Lysander's gaze, his expression calm as usual.

Holding out the mug, Lysander said, "Listen to me very carefully, Prytanis, for I'll say this just once. If you ever try to poison me again, I will do you bodily harm. Do you understand?"

Moistening his lips with the tip of his tongue, Prytanis took the mug from Lysander. "It was only an herb to make you rest."

"I know what it is."

"It was Ariston's idea. I cannot disobey him."

"That's your problem. Not mine."

The door opened and Mikolas stepped into the room followed by Cledus.

"Now," Mikolas said. "Do you have any plan at all about how to rescue Queen Flora?"

"Yes I have a plan," Lysander said.

"Care to give us a hint?" Mikolas asked.

"I intend to enter the castle and escape with Flora using a Wileenian Bleed."

"Sir, you can do that?" Cledus asked.

Few still practiced this ancient discipline. Everyone who had mastered the Wileenian Bleed risked his life each time he attempted it. As part of a magical ritual, the practitioner would cut himself. As long as the wound bled, he would be unseen by those around him. Unfortunately, many people had bled to death while attempting the Wileenian Bleed. If powerful enough, the practitioner could extend the shield to another person. Lysander hoped he had the strength to hide himself and Flora until they escaped the castle.

"It seems you're full of secrets," Prytanis said, his voice scarcely a whisper. He cast Lysander a wary look, or perhaps it was one of jealousy? It didn't matter. Lysander had greater concerns than the chief enchanter's bruised feelings.

"Few practice that skill anymore," Mikolas said. "Where did you learn and why haven't you taught the rest of the elite guard or at least shown *me* how to do it?"

"It's far too dangerous," Prytanis said. "A Wileenian Bleed can kill a healthy practitioner, let alone one who is recovering as you are."

"It's the only way to enter the palace undetected."

"Don't you think if Hecta taught you how to do it, then she also taught Typhon? That means he and his guards probably have a seal," Prytanis said.

"Do we have a seal?" Cledus asked, his brow furrowed.

"Yes, the palace is sealed," Lysander told him. "And Hecta didn't teach me the bleed. I learned during my travels in the south."

Prytanis looked skeptical, "And you never shared that information with Hecta? Everyone knows how close you were to her."

"Some things I prefer to keep to myself."

"You certainly have earned your reputation as the most dangerous overlord of our time. I'm starting to wonder why the king needs a chief enchanter at all," Prytanis said.

"Ease up, Prytanis," Mikolas said. "Lysander can't be the overlord and the chief enchanter."

Prytanis' eyes widened in surprise at Mikolas' blunt observation, then he curled his lip. "Thank you for that, Captain."

"Keep your robe on, Enchanter," Mikolas growled. "You know I didn't mean that as a slight to your skills."

"I don't have time for this," Lysander said, turning to Cledus. "Are you ready to go?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then saddle our horses and meet me at the stable in half an hour. There are a few things I have to do first."

Cledus nodded and left the room. While Lysander finished dressing, Prytanis and Mikolas packed some additional powders and salves into his bag, most for healing.

"Where is Strom?" Lysander asked Mikolas. "You remember the guard from Darridge who arrived with me and Flora?"

"Ariston arranged for him to work at a farm in the village. Why?"

"Hopefully he'll provide information about the layout of the castle at Darridge."

A short time later, after speaking to Strom, Lysander made his way to the stable. The guard had willingly drawn a sketch on parchment of as much of the castle as he knew. Even as a guard he had not been allowed to explore all sections of the vast building. Strom volunteered to accompany Lysander, but he refused. Though he trusted the man, especially now that his magical perception had been restored and he could read most others easily, he would travel more quickly without Strom. Once inside the castle, he could only worry about himself and Flora. He couldn't disguise three people using the bleed.

Nearing the stable, Lysander saw Cledus waiting with their horses ready to go. Though it would be quicker to travel by water, Typhon would no doubt have that route well-guarded now.

He and Cledus would have less chance of being caught if they traveled over land. He prayed that Flora would be safe until he arrived and that he would have the strength to save her as she had saved him.

* * * * *

Since Flora had returned two days ago, Typhon had spent every free moment in his workroom. He had moved Flora out of the windowless tower and into her regular chamber. He didn't enjoy keeping her in the suspended sleep. What he and the fleshtress had done disgusted him in a way he never imagined possible. He had wanted to punish Flora's soul for betraying Darridge, but in doing so he couldn't help feeling he had destroyed part of his own. Yet he should have known it would end this way for them.

Flora had been difficult from the first. With her excellent bloodlines and strict upbringing, he thought she'd make an ideal queen for Darridge. Instead she had proven to be headstrong, obstinate and imprudent. Flora didn't look toward the future and she didn't consider the grand scheme of things. She would risk their entire kingdom to save one servant from pain or even worse save their enemy.

She had betrayed him, which shouldn't have surprised him, but she had also betrayed their people for that Aberhill swine.

Marrying had been among the worst mistake of his life. He had done so with the hope of selecting a queen fit to rule beside him and of begetting an heir, but he had failed miserably. Part of him had hoped he and Flora would be a meeting of minds and goals, that he might enjoy some companionship from his wife. That was just another of

his weaknesses. Father had always told him a leader had a lonely life. A good leader neither wanted nor required others, except to do his bidding. As usual, he had been right.

He recalled the words his father had spoken on his death bed.

Darridge is yours, Typhon. Let nothing or no one take it, especially Aberhill. Do anything to protect what's ours and avenge our family.

The one thing Typhon truly shared with his sire was hatred of the royal family of Aberhill. They had killed his mother, his brother and ultimately destroyed his father.

The trouble between their kingdoms had started long ago over a piece of land that belonged to Darridge but which Aberhill tried to claim as theirs. Both sides had suffered for those few miles of swampland.

Typhon curled his lip. Nothing could ever be done with the land. No one could farm it or build on it. Now the land no longer mattered. It had become a war of wills. Who was the strongest, the leader of Aberhill or the leader of Darridge? The war had begun with their fathers and wouldn't end until Typhon took his revenge.

Someone tapped on the door of his chamber.

"What?" he growled.

The door opened and he glanced away from the herbs he'd been mixing for part of a storm enchantment. The stench of *wymist* – a poison with strong magical properties – filled the room, seeping into his hair, skin and clothes. It muddled his thoughts and knew he shouldn't work with it much longer. He needed a short break, just to clear his head and be sure the poison didn't make him ill. After working with it for so long, he'd built up a tolerance to the fumes, but no mortal was completely impervious to the poison.

The maid, Crystal, took a hesitant step inside, then covered her nose and mouth with her hand.

"My lord, a bath has been prepared in your room," she said.

"I'll be there in a moment."

"You've been here for hours. Don't you think it's dangerous to –"

"Since when does a servant tell the master what to do?" he said in his softest most sinister voice.

This maid disturbed him, especially since he hadn't been able to forget the time she'd bathed him. Part of the reason he'd assigned her to Flora was her kind, gentle manner and sweet appearance. Flora, in her compassion, would respond to such a woman, or so he'd thought. His cunning wife had never confided in the maid or supplied her with any information that revealed her disloyalty. The other reason he'd assigned Crystal to Flora was to keep closer watch over the maid and ensure no one mistreated her.

Though a mere peasant, something about Crystal had always drawn him and he sensed she felt the same.

Typhon didn't doubt the maid would tell him anything. The woman was obviously attracted to him. At first he assumed she'd hoped to gain his favor simply to enhance her position. Then he realized her interest extended beyond materiel gain. He'd ignored the foolish wench's attempts at seduction. She didn't seem to realize the possible dangers and degradation of an affair with her king.

Faithlessness disgusted him and he was a married man. Fucking the fleshtress was a different matter. His dealings with that beast were for power to benefit his kingdom. He didn't consider his dealings with it a betrayal of his marriage vows. The fleshtress wasn't even human. When he needed to enhance his magic, he went to the fleshtress, but when he had the need to fuck, he used to go to his wife. Not that he did so often. Flora never responded in the marriage bed. He gained far more pleasure by his own hand. Still she was his wife and it was beneath him to betray her with a maid, even a maid who heated his blood and stirred his soul in a way Flora never could.

Now that he knew the kind of lustful, disloyal wench Flora truly was, why shouldn't he allow himself carnal pleasures?

Perhaps because his desires had faded into the shadow of his duties. Usually by the time he finished dealing with the affairs of the kingdom and practicing his magic, he was too tired for anything else. Still something about Crystal always created a spark of passion inside him.

"Forgive me," Crystal said, bowing her head. Still she didn't leave. The timid little wench had more courage than he'd first thought. "But if you stay here much longer, these poisons will make you ill."

"What does an ignorant human slave know about my work?" he demanded. He poured the mixture into a jar and covered it tightly, then dumped the stone bowl into a basin of hot water.

"Nothing, my lord."

"Then who are you to give advice?"

"I was only concerned."

He shrugged off his robe and tossed into a basket. Crystal approached to pick up the basket so the contents could be laundered, but he grasped her wrist snugly.

The woman gasped and lifted her gaze to his. She looked frightened yet curious and he could almost hear her heart racing.

"Tell me something and I want the truth," he stated.

"Of course, my lord."

"Did I ever strike Queen Flora?"

Crystal blinked and swallowed hard.

"Don't be afraid. You won't be punished as long as you tell me the truth."

"I believe you struck her once, my lord."

A strange sensation swept over Typhon, like a combination of revulsion, shame and disbelief. Memories of his father beating his mother surfaced, stoking his hatred and

disgust even more. His father's punishments had always been harsh. He'd ruled Darridge with fists of spiked steel. Typhon understood the need to keep control. As king he must dispense fitting punishments, but he hoped he wasn't as vile as his father.

When he had first assumed leadership, he'd done away with some of the more vicious punishments. His leniency had encouraged the people to ask for a truce between Darridge and Aberhill. They wanted less funds dedicated to defense and more distributed to the villages. It seemed his father had been right. If left to the people, they would surrender to Aberhill, preferring to lose their honor over making sacrifices. If their king made sacrifices and dedicated his life to their protection, then they would do the same, if not voluntarily than by force.

He had tightened the laws, but even so no one in Darridge had been drawn and quartered since he had taken command. Hanging and beheading had replaced the slower deaths that the old king had favored. The worst punishment at his disposal was the creature underground. The worst criminals were fed to it, along with the bulls who refused his terms of release.

Typhon was a fair man, much more so than his father had been, yet the people didn't seem to appreciate the differences between the two. Peasants. Their only concerns were food and shelter. They didn't care who they served, nor did they care about honor.

Now this maid told him he had struck his wife, something Typhon had sworn he would never do. Perhaps she was lying as well, but he knew she was not. Unlike Flora, he could read this woman easily and he had no doubt her words were true.

"When did this happen?" he asked coolly.

"It was the first night the guards took her from the tower. I thought she was going to your bedchamber, but you were in your tower during the time she was gone. Then you came to her when she returned and when you left, her lip was bleeding."

Typhon turned his back to her and closed his eyes tightly for a moment. He remembered only part of that night. After he'd sent her to the bull—to Lysander—he had come here to his tower and immersed himself in the wickedest forms of magic. He'd used large amounts of *wymist* that night, suffered an excruciating headache and some memory loss.

Sighing, he ran a hand across his face. Even now his head throbbed from the *wymist*. He needed to get away from this tower.

"Maybe some fresh air will make you feel better?" Crystal suggested.

He glanced at her and noticed she looked ill, though she had only been in the tower for mere moments.

Typhon nodded and again Crystal reached for the basket.

"Leave it," he ordered. "And come with me."

A hint of fear glistened in her large green eyes. "Where are you taking me, my lord?"

Typhon smiled slightly. She spoke her mind—a severe flaw in a servant but rather enticing.

“You’re questioning me?” he demanded, circling her. He had no intention of harming her but a little intimidation was in order.

“I just wish to know if I’ve reached the end of my life.”

His brow furrowed. Standing behind her, he gazed at the delicate shape of her neck and the slimness of her back. In some ways she reminded him of Flora, yet one was of noble blood and the other a peasant. Why, then, was he more attracted to the peasant?

When he placed a hand to the back of her neck, she flinched a bit and his stomach clenched. He shouldn’t care. Not for her. Not for anyone. Only Darridge mattered.

Yet a king couldn’t rule with a restless soul and an aching cock. Usually the *wymist* deadened his passion, but despite feeling slightly ill from it, his desire stirred. His traitorous wife lay in a magically induced stupor and though Typhon taunted her for fucking like a corpse, he had no wish to take an unconscious woman, even if he had imprinted the lustful dreams upon her mind. Thinking about those dreams stirred him a bit, yet he didn’t want to linger on Flora. Not any longer.

“Beheading would be a waste of such a beautiful neck,” Typhon said. He touched his lips to Crystal’s nape and she shivered, though this time he sensed it wasn’t from fear.

Grasping her upper arm, he turned her toward him. Her gaze met his and she swallowed again, then moistened her lips with the tip of her tongue.

“I think I’ll bathe at the lake instead of in my chamber,” he said. “You’ll join me.”

Her lips parted and she drew a sharp breath, then nodded.

A slow, wicked smile spread across his lips. It had been too long since he’d enjoyed a good fuck, one untainted by the fleshtress. His hand curled around her slender wrist and he tugged her toward the door.

He stopped at his chamber and took his cloak and a change of clothes. Then they walked to the stable. At this late hour the stable hands were asleep. Though he could take any wench he wanted, he preferred to keep this night with Crystal private.

Typhon quickly saddled his horse, then tossed the wench onto the animal’s back and mounted behind her. Beneath the starry sky, they cantered toward the lake.

* * * * *

Lysander and Cledus left their horses on neutral ground a few miles from Darridge and traveled the rest of the way on foot. Despite the late hour, the palace was well-guarded. Watching from the cover of trees, Lysander decided he should start his bleed while in hiding instead of risk being caught nearer to the castle.

After unpacking the incense, candle and herbs for the ritual, he knelt at the base of an enormous tree and chanted softly. He passed his dagger through the flames, then

clenched his teeth and made the cut across his ribs. Warm blood flowed down his side and Cledus, who knelt beside him, quickly wound a loose bandage around him.

"Many layers but not tight," Lysander instructed. "We don't want to stop the flow, only make sure the blood is absorbed. I can't risk leaving a blood trail or else we'll be caught, regardless of whether they can see me or not. Neither Typhon nor his elite guards are that stupid."

"What if they have a seal against the Wileenian Bleed?" Cledus asked. Having taken part in the ritual, Cledus could still see Lysander, though if he had performed the bleed well, he would be invisible to everyone else.

"Doubtful. There are few left in the world who know how to perform the ritual correctly. My instructor in the south was among the last Fanticauns to accept a mixed blood student. Since I trained with him, he has rejoined the other Fanticauns in seclusion."

"It is said no one knows where they are, that their village is hidden by a magic that no one but a pure Fanticaun can breach."

"That's what they say." Lysander drew a deep, cleansing breath. He closed his eyes for a moment and focused inward, summoning all his magic and all his strength. He could not fail in this mission.

He extinguished the candle flame and incense, as it was too risky to leave them burning so near to the castle. Then he stood.

"Good luck, sir," Cledus said.

Lysander nodded, but already focused his full attention on his task.

His first test occurred halfway between the forest and the castle. Two guards on horseback rode toward him and he tensed, his heart pounding. Did they see him or had he performed the ritual correctly?

Moments later, he had to jump out of the way as the horses almost cantered into him. The sudden movement caused pain in his side and he felt the blood flow faster beneath the bandages.

The guards stopped their horses and glanced around.

"Did you hear something?" asked one guard.

"No," replied the other.

"Must have been the wind."

They continued on their way and Lysander breathed a sigh of relief. The bleed worked and he needed to locate Flora before he became too weak to rescue her.

Chapter Thirteen

A short time later, Lysander entered the palace just as another pair of guards exited through the back door leading to the barracks. Most of the guards were asleep and he had luckily entered the quarters of the general army. It would have been far more dangerous to pass by elite guards, since he had no way of knowing if any among them possessed knowledge of the bleed and how to detect it.

The palace was huge, but he recalled the map Strom had drawn for him and started searching the most likely places for Flora, beginning with her chamber. Lysander considered seeking out Typhon and using this opportunity to kill him, but he didn't know if the bastard could detect a Wileenian Bleed. He needed to rescue Flora and that wouldn't happen if he were caught.

He flattened against a wall as two servants carrying buckets of water passed by him on the stairs.

"Why waste all this time heating and lugging water to His Majesty's bath when he ends up going off with a wench?" said one servant, a skinny older man with long gray hair. "One of the stable hands was getting ready for bed and saw them riding off together."

"When you were as young as Typhon, you'd have done the same thing," replied the other servant, a heavyset man with thinning red hair. "Besides, Crystal is a luscious young woman. I tried to get under her skirt myself once, but she would have none of it."

"If you ask me, the king favors her. That's why he had her moved out of the kitchen. He didn't want anyone else pawing her."

"You don't think he'd let other men soil his goods," chuckled the redhead.

"Good luck to her, I say. She should get what she can from him. The king isn't known for his gentleness and generosity."

"Shh! Do you want to get yourself beheaded? This castle is crawling with guards since Queen Flora's abduction. The Overlord of Aberhill treated her viciously. Word is she's been ill in her chamber since arriving home."

"Lucky she got away, if you ask me. The things I've heard about Overlord Lysander are enough to make your hair stand on end."

Their voices faded as they disappeared down another flight of stairs.

Lysander made his way toward Flora's tower. At least he knew her location, but word of her illness concerned him. If anything had happened to her, he'd never forgive himself.

It relieved him to know that Typhon wasn't in the castle tonight. His magic worried Lysander the most.

By the time he reached Flora's chamber, the bleed had begun to take its toll. He felt weak from blood loss. The others had been right that he'd needed time to recover from his ordeal with the collar. Yet he hadn't the luxury of time. Not when Flora's life hung in the balance.

Two elite guards stood outside her door and they sensed trouble as he approached.

"Summon more men to back us up," said the tall, black-haired guard who stood farthest from Lysander.

The other guard—a lanky, dark-skinned man—nodded and approached the stairs. Lysander shoved him hard and he tumbled down, shouting and grunting on the way.

"Ennis?" called the black-haired guard. When his partner didn't reply, he glanced around sharply, obviously torn between leaving his post and seeing to his friend. To him, the small corridor appeared empty, so he hurried down the stairs. Lysander took a dart from the pouch on his belt and blew it at the guard's neck. The man staggered down the stairs. Lysander had treated the dart with a sleeping potion. After taking a moment to see that both men were unconscious, he took the key to Flora's room from the black-haired guard and hurried back upstairs.

In her chamber, Flora lay on her bed. At first she appeared deeply asleep, then Lysander realized she had been placed in a suspended sleep. This magical sleep often twisted pleasant emotions like love and passion and gave rise to darker ones such as fear and lust. No doubt Typhon had called upon the worst characteristics of the spell. The thought of Flora trapped in a perverted nightmare made him furious and desperate in turns.

Damn Typhon to hell.

Fury almost overcame Lysander, then he calmed. Suspended sleep was far better than death. Once he got her back to Aberhill, he could break this enchantment. It wouldn't be long before the guards awoke or someone discovered them unconscious. If he hadn't been weakened by the bleed, rescuing her would be easier.

"Flora," Lysander said, sitting beside her and brushing her forehead and then her lips with a kiss. "You'll be safe soon, my love, and you'll be with me. Typhon will never touch you again."

He lifted her and left the chamber.

Making his way through the palace proved as difficult as he'd imagined, but Lysander vowed to rescue Flora. Once outside, he sat against one of the great stone walls to rest. He held Flora close, not only to keep her invisible, but because it brought him pleasure. His chest and arms ached from carrying her and blood soaked his bandage as well as his tunic.

Perhaps he shouldn't have sat down. At the moment he couldn't bear the thought of rising. He gazed at Flora's sleeping face and thought of what she'd risked for him.

Once again he rose and headed toward the forest. He hoped Cledus still waited there and hadn't been forced to flee because of the guards.

Partway into the haven of woods, Lysander staggered against a tree, his heart pounding.

"Sir," Cledus whispered, approaching them. He took Flora from Lysander and gently placed her on the ground. Then he turned to the overlord who had dropped to his knees, panting and clutching his side.

"How can you see him?" Strom said, his brow furrowed.

"What is he doing here?" Lysander demanded, glaring at the former Darridge guard.

"I can hear him," Strom continued.

"There's no time to explain now, Strom," Cledus said, helping Lysander remove his tunic. He sliced away the soiled bandages, then cleaned the wound with an herbal mixture. "Sir, Strom came on his own. He took the ferry and it's waiting for us at a creek about half a mile from here."

"We agreed it was too dangerous to take the river."

"Yes, it was dangerous for you," Strom said. "But it's just as important that you escape from here as quickly as possible. I took the ferry because if I were caught, it wouldn't matter much. I could convince them that you knocked me out or something when you escaped with Flora."

Lysander curled his lip. "They'd never believe you."

"Maybe, but the point is I made it by way of the river and there are no guards in sight. The creek leads right back to the main river and in less than a day we'll be safe in Aberhill."

While Cledus worked, Lysander's gaze switched from Flora to the path he'd just traveled down.

"We do need to hurry," Lysander said. "It won't take them long to realize she's gone."

"Then the ferry is the best way to go," Cledus said. "Hold still, sir. I'm almost finished."

"Be quick about it, Cledus."

"I have to be sure the bleeding has slowed. I don't know how you made it this far. You're lucky to be alive."

Strom knelt beside Flora. "Has she been wounded?"

"I'd say she's in a suspended sleep," Cledus said. "Can't you smell the potion?"

"Is that what it is?" Strom wrinkled his nose. "I know nothing of magic."

"Once we return to Aberhill, we'll cleanse her of the potion and I'll break the suspended sleep," Lysander said.

Cledus finished stitching and wrapping Lysander's wound.

"I'll take her," Cledus said, lifting Flora.

Lysander almost protested but Cledus was right. At the moment she would be safer with Cledus, not to mention Lysander needed to conserve his strength for the rest of the journey.

They mounted the horses. Cledus supported Flora and Lysander rode with Strom on their way toward the creek.

* * * * *

After swimming in the lake, the scent of *wymist* faded from Typhon and his head cleared. He'd scarcely slept or eaten for the past two days and now, away from the stuffiness of the tower, his human needs fought their way to the surface. His stomach rumbled, he felt almost pleasantly numb with sleepiness but at the same time a deeper need filled him. Lust.

He glanced at Crystal who stood waist deep in the water, wringing out her soaked reddish-brown hair. She'd undressed to her shift and it clung wetly to every gentle curve of her body.

As if feeling his gaze up on her, she turned and offered a cautious smile. Typhon waded closer and stood in the shallow water. He walked toward her. Her stiff pink nipples strained against the drenched material of her shift. She didn't have particularly large breasts. The delicate mounds could fit perfectly into his hands. His cock stiffened almost to full mast.

"My lord," Crystal said, her voice almost a whisper. She stepped toward him and moistened her lips with the tip of her tongue. When they stood close enough, she reached a hesitant hand toward his cock but didn't touch it. She lifted her gaze to his and drew a deep breath. "It's so big," she said.

He didn't miss the desire in her eyes, nor the hint of fear. Most servants avoided his gaze altogether, as they should. If they accidentally made eye contact, they looked terrified. Crystal was different. Perhaps that's why he had always wanted her, and not just in body. They were a joining of souls, separated by fate due to their places in society.

Of course he had never given her reason to fear him. From the first he had wanted to protect her from the groping hands in the great hall. Something about her innocent eyes enticed him and he had no wish to see that innocence destroyed.

Unlike the fleshtress, she was a real woman—soft and human. She was nothing like Flora either. The queen had an underlying viciousness and an almost immovable strength. In a way he admired Flora but she could never stir the feelings in him this peasant girl roused. Obviously his wife felt the same way, which explained her betrayal. She wanted Lysander of Aberhill but she could never have him, no more than Typhon could have this maid. Yes he could fuck her, but they could never be bound in a partnership.

Typhon had nearly given Flora the next best thing to marrying her love. He had almost given her Lysander's child. Fate had taken it from her, just as it had stunted Typhon's ability to father children.

Regardless of how he'd tried or what his father had wanted, Darridge would not carry on under their family's rule. If he allowed it, this could set Typhon free, but he could not surrender to his desire. Duty bound him to Darridge and forced him to seek revenge for his family.

Yet he could take a few moments for himself. Regardless of his inability to father children, he still had the urges of a man and they had been buried for too long beneath the rubble of a passionless marriage. Yes, he'd sated his lust with the fleshtress when his spells demanded her power, but fucking that vile creature didn't compare to making love with a soft, human woman. Fucking the fleshtress was a necessity with some physically satisfying side effects that left him feeling almost as base as the monster itself.

He could take Crystal now and fully satisfy their lust. It wouldn't be like the time when he'd commanded her to bathe him, teasing them both and leaving them teetering on the edge of something indescribable.

But did she deserve this type of affair? Yes, she was a peasant, but when he looked at her he almost didn't care. He might be of royal blood but he had defiled himself with the fleshtress.

"My lord," Crystal said, the look in her lovely eyes offering warmth and passion that he craved more than he wanted to admit.

Without another moment's hesitation, he grasped Crystal's hand that still waited in midair between them and placed it around his cock. It was a small hand, especially when curved around his thick shaft. She had delicate fingers, yet her palm was calloused from work. He didn't mind. He understood and appreciated work.

"Oh, My Lord Typhon," she breathed, her gaze fixing on her hand, still covered by his. He showed her how to move it along his shaft to stir his pleasure. The lovely wench caught on fast and he dropped his hand, giving her free rein to explore him.

He tried to remain still as she stroked his shaft and ran her thumb along the sensitive underside of his cock head.

"So big," she repeated, sinking to her knees in the water. Clasping him in both hands, she pressed a feathery kiss to the tip of his shaft. Typhon groaned softly and couldn't keep from thrusting his hips as she licked and kissed his crown. Her eyes closed, dark lashes dancing against her cheeks.

"Suck it," Typhon commanded softly. He must be insane for requesting this. The last time he'd asked a human woman—his *wife*—to pleasure him in this way, she'd nearly bitten his cock off. The bitch.

His heartbeat quickened both from desire and apprehension as Crystal followed his order. But would she give him pleasure or pain? Her full lips slid over his cock head

and she drew him into her warm, wet mouth. She sucked and licked, swirling her tongue over the head until he thought he might explode then and there.

Typhon grasped her shoulders and guided her to her feet. He covered her mouth in a kiss. She moaned softly and her arms wrapped around his neck. Her body pressed close to his, her soft little breasts pushing enticingly against his chest. When his tongue thrust between her lips, she didn't pull away but moaned again and responded with feverish thrusts of her tongue.

The King of Darridge closed his eyes and held the maid tighter. His hands caressed her back then slid to down grasp her rounded bottom. She squirmed against him, almost purring with pleasure.

Crystal's hand slid up his neck and cupped the back of his head. Her fingers tightened in his hair and kneaded his scalp.

In their years of marriage, Flora had not once responded to him like this.

Typhon tore his mouth from hers and licked the side of her neck. A little shiver of passion rippled through her and she murmured, "Please, my lord, please take me."

Her words made his cock ache even more. Typhon buried his face against her shoulder, kissing and licking her soft flesh. Her freshly washed skin carried a faint, musky scent all her own and it aroused him so much that he couldn't wait a moment longer.

With a growl of desire, he swept her into his arms and carried her to the shore. He knelt and placed her on the grass, then covered her body with his. She was rather small, so he bore most of his weight on his forearms.

Crystal stared into his eyes. The fear had all but disappeared from her expression, replaced completely by lust. This was a woman—one full of passion, one who looked at him with unguarded emotions. This woman understood her place and his.

The tip of his cock pushed against her slick, tight cunt. Flora had been tight as well, but not like this. Crystal's eyes widened at the sensation of his thick cock head and he felt her tense beneath him. This wouldn't do. Her response was too much like Flora's.

He stopped thrusting, his cock head partway into her. Their gazes locked. "What's wrong?" he growled, hating to admit that there might be a problem with his fucking. Women were so difficult to understand. He had been under the impression that to please a woman a man need only be hard. Unfortunately for him, that's usually where the problem began.

"You're just so...big," she said, the fear once again returning to her eyes. Did she fear him ravishing her or did she fear his reaction to her reply?

"And that's a problem?" he demanded, trying to keep his temper in check.

An almost obstinate expression crossed her face and she looked about to speak, then changed her mind.

"Go ahead," he said, a bit calmer. "Be truthful."

"I need a little time to...adjust," she admitted. Her hand slid between them and her fingertips danced along his shaft. The faintest smile touched her lips and she said, "It is very big."

Typhon knew he had a decent-sized weapon, yet he didn't make a habit of ogling other men so he hadn't noticed whether or not he was *that* much bigger than most. Not that it did him any good. It was useless when it came to begetting heirs.

"I see," he stated. His brow furrowed as he considered her request. He enjoyed oral stimulation as a prelude to fucking. Maybe she would appreciate the same?

He slid down her body, guided her legs over his shoulders and pushed his hands beneath her taut little ass. Without prelude, he covered her clit with his mouth and lapped.

"Oh goddess of the land and sky!" she panted, burying her fingers in his hair.

Good. She seemed to like it.

He lapped her stiff little nub, then thrust his tongue into her pussy. This was more pleasant than he'd imagined. He liked the softness of her flesh against his tongue, the way she throbbed as her passion grew. He even liked her scent. Typhon explored her cunt slowly, savoring every moment, then he licked her clit again. His tongue swept over her in a steady rhythm and he knew by the way she trembled, her ass wiggling in his hands, that she hovered on the brink of ecstasy.

A few more licks and she came so hard that he had to tighten his hold on her to keep her from bucking out of his grip.

She panted and moaned as he mounted her again. Her legs spread wide and she seemed to take him more easily into her drenched, throbbing pussy. Typhon didn't enter her fully. He didn't need to. For a moment he remained unmoving and enjoying the feel of her pulsing around his cock. Why did this woman bring peace to his soul that he'd never known before? Perhaps he'd been wrong. A woman like this could be more dangerous than the fleshtress and Flora. She could reach his heart if he let her.

As her climax ebbed, he began thrusting. Crystal's passion rekindled quickly and pushed him closer and closer to the edge.

"Oh, Typh—I mean, my lord," she panted, wrapping her arms and legs around him. Her neck arched back and he kissed her throat then licked it.

He groaned and thrust, his heart pounding. The wonderful yet frustrating tension overtook him and he resisted the urge to quicken his pace, not until she came again. Typhon wanted her to come with him inside her. He'd never experienced the sensation of a female climax with anyone but the fleshtress. Not once had Flora climaxed for him.

A few more thrusts and she cried out sharply, coming even longer and harder than before. Her pulsations hurled him over the edge and he plunged into her, his hips pumping, heart pounding and mind adrift in a haze of passion.

When it ended, Typhon rolled onto his back and closed his eyes. It felt so good to fuck like this.

Crystal edged closer to him and rested her head against his chest. He felt her gaze upon him and he opened his eyes to look at her. She appeared apprehensive, as if she expected him to push her away. Instead he held her closer, though he didn't know why. For several moments they lay beneath the starry sky, then he stood.

"I must return. I still have work to do," he said, offering her his hand.

She slipped hers into it and let him tug her to her feet.

They dressed quickly, then rode off. As they neared the castle, Typhon immediately sensed trouble. Many lanterns burned and soldiers surrounded the area. He approached the first elite guard he saw.

"What's happened?" Typhon demanded.

"Queen Flora is missing, my lord."

Confusion and rage shot through Typhon.

"Missing?" he growled. "How?"

"We're not sure. The guards at her door were rendered unconscious, but no one saw anyone or anything."

Typhon and Crystal dismounted and he summoned a regular guard to take his horse, then he strode into the palace.

In the great hall, another elite guard met him, his face pale. Typhon knew he carried bad news.

"Speak," Typhon demanded.

"We found blood by one of the doors," the guard said.

"Blood?" Typhon's eyes narrowed and a horrible suspicion grew inside him. It seemed impossible, yet when it came to the Overlord of Aberhill, he believed just about anything. Could it be that the evil swine had mastered a Wileenian Bleed? It would explain how the queen had disappeared. After all, in a suspended sleep she couldn't walk out of the castle on her own. Someone had to take her.

If only he had stayed home instead of going to the lake. He might have detected the bleed and —

Typhon turned his gaze to Crystal who stood beside him, looking concerned.

"Come with me, my dear," he said in a deceptively soothing voice. He took her hand and dragged her upstairs to his chamber.

Once alone, she tried to tug away from his grasp. "You're hurting me."

Typhon released her and paced the room. *He* was hurting *her*. Why did women believe they could act as viciously as they wanted to but no one was supposed to hurt *them*?

"You had something to do with this, didn't you?" he demanded. "You were loyal to her after all."

Crystal looked confused. "What are you talking about?"

"You liked the queen and felt sorry for her, so you helped the Overlord of Aberhill infiltrate this castle to steal her."

"Yes, my lord, I do like Queen Flora and I feel sorry for any woman in a loveless marriage, but I did not betray you," Crystal said, then gasped and closed her eyes. "I'm sorry, my lord. I have no right to pass judgment on your marriage."

"No you don't," he said coldly. Standing in front of her, he grasped her chin and forced her to look at him. "But you spoke the truth. I told you that's what I wanted from you. Now tell me again, how did you assist her in escaping? Did you wish to distract me at the lake so he could take her?"

"I didn't," Crystal said, her gaze never faltering. "I remind you, my lord, that it was your idea to go to the lake. I merely came to tell you the bath was ready in your chamber."

The girl was right. Their little excursion had been his idea. *His* fault. *He* had neglected his duties for an hour of pleasure. He couldn't blame her for his poor judgment.

At the moment he was almost too furious to think straight. Of late he hadn't been as in control as he'd have liked. After all, he had struck Flora without remembering it, and there had been other memory lapses as well. Of course it was due to overwork, but until Darridge was safe from Aberhill, that couldn't be avoided.

He walked across the room to a carved wooden trunk, opened it and removed a leather pouch filled with coins.

"Take this," he said, handing the pouch to her, "and leave this castle. Do not stay in the nearby village. There's enough in that pouch to buy you safe passage to any village in Darridge or elsewhere and settle there."

Crystal's brow furrowed. "My lord, I have no wish to leave—"

"I said go!" he snarled, grasped her shoulders and leaned so close that their noses touched. "I don't want to see your face again, wench. Do you understand?"

Crystal swallowed hard, her gaze spitting fear, anger and...could it be sorrow? Without a word she turned and left, closing the door behind her.

Typhon strode to the window and gazed toward the tree-covered hills between Darridge and Aberhill.

* * * * *

During their journey to Aberhill, Strom and Cledus took turns guiding the ferry, giving Lysander a chance to recover. Despite the blood loss and weakness from his earlier illness, Lysander found it difficult to rest for the first few hours after their escape. Everyone aboard, save Flora who remained in her enchanted slumber, expected Typhon's guards to attack at any moment. As a precaution, they had taken a different route to the main river. Though it took several hours longer, it was worth the delay, as they met no guards along the way.

Toward the early morning hours, Lysander drifted to sleep. It seemed like mere moments later that Cledus woke him. He jerked to a sitting position and reached for his sword. His side hurt from the bleed and his neck still ached from the ordeal with the collar. The short sleep had scarcely refreshed him and he still had a difficult day ahead, but Flora was safe and they were going home, so the good outweighed the bad.

"We're home, sir," Cledus said.

Nodding, Lysander glanced at Flora who lay beside him. Cledus lifted her and carried her to his horse. Lysander felt a twinge of annoyance, but he allowed the guard to ride to the castle with her.

Mikolas approached them first. He glanced from Flora to Lysander with concern.

"Suspended sleep," Lysander said before the captain had a chance to ask about Flora's condition.

"And how are you?" Mikolas asked.

"I'm alive, so I must have done it right."

"I had no doubt you would."

Lysander raised an eyebrow. "Oh no? What is the situation here?"

"Everything is under control. We've kept the seals around the castle and grounds. Both the elite guard and the general army are prepared for attack."

"I don't doubt we'll be fighting sooner than later, but first I must see to Flora. I don't know how long she's been in the suspended sleep and we need to revive her as soon as possible."

"I'll ride ahead and tell Prytanis to meet you in your chamber."

Lysander nodded. Mikolas turned his mount toward the castle and galloped off.

A short time later, Lysander sat by Flora who lay on the bed in his chamber. She didn't look peaceful, as in a real sleep. Instead she looked like a wax carving, hovering somewhere between life and death.

He tugged off his gloves and caressed her face and hair. Part of him almost expected her to respond but she remained trapped in Typhon's magic.

The door creaked open and he glanced over his shoulder, thinking Prytanis had arrived. Instead the two red-haired servant girls, Mala and Marjorie, glanced in the doorway. Each carried a pitcher of water but by the expressions on their faces, they knew they had no business here. A hint of fear gleamed in the older girl's eyes, but the younger, Mala, stared at Flora.

They usually weren't so shy around him. Lysander liked children. They weren't nearly as judgmental or tainted as adults, even after enduring difficult circumstances. These two girls and their sister, Madeline, had lost their father several years ago during a battle with Darridge. Two years later, their mother had died during a riding accident. Since they had no relatives, Lysander had arranged for them to live at the castle, under the care of the head housekeeper.

"We brought you water, sir," Marjorie said softly. No doubt the head housekeeper hadn't requested this. He nearly ordered them out, but what was the point? They had already seen Flora.

"Come inside," he said.

"Is she sick?" Mala asked.

"Mala!" the elder girl whispered sharply, though she looked just as curious as her sister.

"In a way," Lysander replied softly, once again focusing his attention on Flora. He took her hand and held it in both of his. It felt cool and limp. Where was she? Was her spirit near, watching, or was it trapped in blackness?

"I hope she's well soon," Mala said, taking a bunch of lilacs from her apron and placing them by Flora's feet.

Lysander glanced toward the flowers, then his gaze drifted to the sisters and he smiled slightly. "Thank you."

"Mala! Marjorie! Get out here!"

Lysander and the maids glanced toward the door where the girls' older sister, Madeline, stood, looking stern.

"Forgive us, Overlord Lysander," Madeline said, "We have no business here."

"Now that you are here, come in."

Madeline looked startled but did as he asked and joined her sisters who still stood at the foot of the bed.

"Until I give you further instructions, you must tell no one that Queen Flora is here," Lysander said. "From now on, your duty will be to serve her. I'll let the head housekeeper know."

"It's an enchantment, isn't it?" Madeline asked softly, staring at Flora.

"What do you know about that?" Lysander asked, surprised since the girl had no Fanticaun blood.

"Nothing really, sir. From what I've observed, it looks like an enchantment."

"You're very perceptive," he said.

At that moment, Prytanis, Mikolas and Ariston entered the chamber.

Chapter Fourteen

"You may go now," Lysander told the girls. "I'll summon you when Queen Flora needs you. Remember, speak of this to no one."

The girls bowed their heads and left hurriedly.

"What was that about?" Mikolas demanded. "Should you let them go so easily, after they've seen Flora here?"

"I'm sure they aren't the only ones who've noticed her arrival. Besides, those children won't talk."

"Little girls?" Mikolas snorted. "It's difficult enough getting the full grown ones to hold their tongues."

Ignoring him, Lysander turned to Prytanis and Ariston. "She's trapped in a suspended sleep. I don't know how long she's been in it but we must break it as soon as possible."

"I agree," Prytanis said. "There have been cases of suspended sleep damaging the minds of those who remain in it for too long."

"One of us should do it," Ariston said, studying Lysander's face. "You don't look well. Push yourself much more and you'll do yourself serious damage. We can't afford that now. With the impending war with Darridge, we'll need you."

"I'll do it," Lysander stated without room for argument. Not that it mattered. His brother and the captain were ready to disagree anyway.

"I understand why you wanted to rescue her, but now you're just being foolish," Ariston stated. "I will not allow it."

"It shouldn't matter who wakes her," Mikolas said, though even he didn't look convinced about it.

In truth, it mattered greatly. Suspended sleep mingled fantasy and reality through carnal magic. No doubt Typhon had summoned a fleshtress to initiate the enchantment. The very thought of it sickened Lysander.

The one who roused Flora from this sleep would share great intimacy with her and Lysander wouldn't easily hand over such an experience to another man. The one who woke Flora should love her. Despite the short time they had known each other they had shared enough hardship to have forged the beginnings of a very strong love.

Prytanis held up a defensive hand. "I understand why Lysander wants to do it. I'm sure we all understand."

The king and the captain exchanged glances.

"We know how intimate it can be to break the suspended sleep," Prytanis said. "In his place, how would you feel?"

Ariston nodded. "All right. Lysander should make the first attempt. But, Brother, should you not have the strength and things go badly, which of us do you want to take over?"

The idea of anyone but him intertwining so closely with Flora made his gut clench, yet her life meant more than any petty feelings on his part. If he were too weakened to break the spell, someone else would have to complete the task. But who to choose?

Lysander studied his companions. Each man had more than enough skill to waken her. Ariston possessed the least skills of the three but still had a strong foundation in Fanticaun magic. Also they were brothers. Mikolas had great skill in magical and common healing and he was very loyal to Lysander. They loved each other as if they were joined by blood. Prytanis was undoubtedly the most accomplished magically, possibly an even match for Lysander, and he was a good man.

"Who is it to be?" Mikolas asked.

"Prytanis," Lysander stated.

Ariston and Mikolas looked stunned.

Curling his lip, Mikolas said, "No offense to the chief enchanter, but why him?"

"It's simple," Prytanis replied. "Ariston is his brother. Mikolas, you're his closest friend. Regardless of which one of you he chose, the other would feel slighted."

"So he chooses the coward's way," Ariston muttered.

"Coward?" Lysander snapped, his anger rising despite his concern about Flora.

Prytanis spoke before a full-blown argument broke out. "No, he chose the wise man's way. He already has enough to handle without dealing with the wrath of king and captain. We all have enough to handle."

Ariston nodded, his gaze fixed on Lysander's without a hint of his previous anger. "Prytanis is right. My apologies."

Lysander rose from the bed and stood eye-to-eye with Ariston. "We've all been under a great strain, especially you, Brother, with all of Aberhill looking to you for guidance, myself included."

With a wry grin, Ariston said, "One thing you've rarely needed, Lysander, is guidance."

"If we're finished building each other's morale, there's work to be done," Mikolas said, his voice almost a growl.

"Let's leave Lysander and Prytanis to their business," Ariston said, gesturing for Mikolas to follow him out of the chamber. "We have defenses to oversee."

"Good luck," Mikolas said, holding Lysander's gaze.

"Would you find Georgios and tell him to prepare a bath for Lysander," Prytanis asked Mikolas. "If you have spiritual cleansing salts, give him some to add to the water."

"Done," Mikolas stated and followed Ariston out of the chamber, closing the door behind them.

While Prytanis walked to the worktable to prepare incense and herbs for the ritual, Lysander returned to Flora.

"It won't be much longer," he whispered, caressing her soft cheek. He could scarcely believe all that had happened to them in a relatively short time. This woman had risked everything for him and he would do anything to see her safe and happy.

* * * * *

Lysander heard Georgios and Prytanis preparing his bath but he didn't so much as glance in their direction. Even when Mikolas brought the cleansing salts, he remained staring at Flora, holding her hand and focusing on her completely. He needed to concentrate on her alone and pour all his strength and magic into breaking the suspended sleep. He knew none of the details of the ritual Typhon had used to bring about this sleep. Each Fanticaun's magic was different. When he slipped into the realm of suspension, he had no idea what he might find, or the battles his lover now fought. He simply knew that to reach her he must summon the fleshtress who held her in this sleep.

It twisted his heart to think of Flora, a woman without magical ability, trapped in this filthy spell.

Prytanis approached and touched Lysander's shoulder. Deeply focused upon Flora, he started a bit at the contact, then turned to the chief enchanter.

"The bath is ready. I've dismissed Georgios. Would you like me to stay and help you prepare?"

"Yes. Thank you."

After giving Flora's limp hand a final squeeze, Lysander stood and removed his shirt. His wounded side smarted but he hadn't bled through the bandages. Cledus had tended the injury well. Once he rescued Flora from the spell, Lysander would finally have a chance to rest. With his powers fully returned, he'd heal quickly.

Lysander walked to the trunk at the foot of his bed and removed a small book, the pages yellowed with age. This first magical journal he'd ever kept contained notes and spells from Hecta. He'd been thirteen when she'd told him how to conjure a fleshtress and warned him never to do so unless he intended to surrender, body and soul. Of course that kind of warning only piqued his curiosity and he'd used the spell that night. He'd felt completely humiliated and invaded for months after.

Though he hadn't so much as glanced at the fleshtress ritual since that night, he had no trouble locating it in the book. He turned to it and read it, but for the first time none of those old feelings of disgust rose in him. He focused solely on rescuing Flora.

The ritual called for smoke and blood.

More blood. He was surprised he hadn't already bled to death. Typhon might just kill him indirectly, he thought with a twisted grin.

The smoke must be from a powerful plant.

"What kind of incense do you want?" Prytanis asked.

Lysander glanced at him from the corner of his eye. "*Baseco*."

"It's not a poison."

"But it's powerful and will submit to my will, not the other way around."

"Sometimes, Lysander, I can't tell if you're arrogant or wise."

"Maybe both. All I know is that if I'm not careful, the fleshtress will have my soul and Flora's."

Without further comment, Prytanis retrieved the incense.

Instead of performing the ritual at his worktable near the garden, Lysander would do it here, close to Flora.

He took the same dagger he had used for the bleed. The dagger had been a gift from his father many years ago when Lysander had completed his first stages of magical training. The sturdy yet beautiful tool had a fine, sharp blade and *baseco* leaves carved into the handle. Lysander used the sharp blade to cut away his long black hair, cropping it close to his scalp and initiating the ritual that would break Flora's suspended sleep.

"Shorn. An offering to the feathered ones to ask the winged spirits to guide me through the other world," Lysander said, gathering the long, black tendrils.

Fanticaun legend said that birds were a connection to the spirit world where winged guides met those who crossed over in dreams, meditation or death. Flora's soul hovered in this realm, lost in the suspended sleep, and Lysander's soul would meet her there. In summoning a spirit guide, he would have an untainted ally in the spirit world, if the winged guides deemed him worthy.

He walked through his chamber and stepped into the garden where he left the hair among the trees for birds to line their nests.

Back in the chamber, he finished undressing and sank into the tub of warm water. The cleansing salts, supplied by Mikolas, only soothed him a bit. His worry for Flora almost overwhelmed him. No one had ever touched him this deeply and though her very presence enhanced his life in ways he'd never imagined, everything about their joining endangered them and their kingdoms. She was still Typhon's wife and it wouldn't take the bastard long to figure out who had taken her from him a second time.

Leaning back, he closed his eyes and said, "Purified in body and focused in mind. The otherworldly wilderness has many paths. Think only of what I seek and then I will find the right direction."

To succeed in this spiritual journey, he needed to thrust aside everything—fear, anger and desire, and focus completely on his goal. Flora must remain foremost in his mind. His love for her would guide him to her and he would make the fleshtress set her free.

Finally he opened his eyes and found Prytanis standing a short distance away, staring at him with a pensive look.

"You're sure you want to do this?" asked the chief enchanter. "You're weak, Lysander."

Prytanis was right. He wasn't at his best, yet in this battle physical strength meant little. His will was stronger than ever and it would stand between Flora and her vile captor.

He rose from the tub and stepped out, accepting the towel Prytanis handed to him.

"I see you're resigned," Prytanis continued, a faint yet sad smile on his lips. "I should probably pity the fleshtress. You're all Fanticaun, Lysander. Soft as a gentle breeze but with the spirit of a tornado."

Lysander scarcely heard Prytanis. All his attention fixed on his lover who still lay in that deathlike sleep. He shrugged on the dark blue robe Prytanis brought to him and belted it loosely at his waist.

"It's time," Lysander said softly. "You may wait outside the bedchamber, Prytanis."

The chief enchanter nodded and left, closing the door behind him.

Lysander placed the *baseco* incense on the bedside table along with a violet candle and a black one. He lit them and soon the strong aroma filled the room.

Sitting on the edge of the bed, he took her hand and made a shallow cut on the fleshy part of her palm, then made a deeper cut on his own. His blood would draw the fleshtress from her. Taking her hand, he felt their blood mingle, hot and slick against their palms.

I summon you with my blood. I offer you my flesh. I ask you to empower my soul.

Moments passed and he wondered if he'd done something wrong. Had Prytanis been right? Did he need to be at his physical peak to—

"Lysander of Aberhill, it's been a very, very long time," purred a raspy voice close to his ear. The fleshtress' scorching breath fanned his cheek and her hot body pressed close to his back.

His stomach clenched and he fought the sensations of disgust that trickled through him like blood from a wound.

"You were just a gangly colt when we last met," she continued. Her hands slid inside the front of his robe and she trailed her sharp nails over his chest. "But you've grown into a fine stallion. Sleek and vigorous. I so look forward to riding you."

"You have something I want," he said flatly.

"Power? I'm more than willing to share it for the right price." She dipped her tongue into his ear and he jerked away. Grasping her bony wrist, he rose and dragged her up. They stood eye to eye, for she was quite tall. Anger and lust flickered in her obsidian eyes.

"You know what I want," he stated. "And you will bring me to her."

"Or what?" she snarled. "You have no power over me. No one does."

The cry of a hawk echoed overhead and when they glanced up, the ceiling had been replaced by the night sky. A white hawk circled above them and the fleshtress drew a sharp breath.

"Looks like I have another guide," Lysander said.

"But this realm is much bigger than your pathetic mortal realm," the fleshtress told him. She grasped the belt on his robe and tore it off. The robe fell open, baring his chest, legs and cock.

Tilting her head to the side she said, "Such pretty lines. Built for speed but with enough stamina for a long journey. Without my help, you'll need it because you can wander here forever."

Ignoring her, Lysander closed his eyes and concentrated on Flora. He recalled the beauty of her eyes, every curve of her body, her scent and the sound of her voice. The hawk cried out again and when he opened his eyes it swooped over his head, then flew off, as if beckoning him to follow.

Using the bird as a guide, he made his way over the barren land, ignoring the sharpness of the rocks beneath his feet and the chill in the wind blowing across him.

After what seemed like hours, a hill rose in the distance upon which sat a funeral pyre. A body lay upon it and a shiver rippled down his spine. He instinctively knew it was Flora.

As he neared, the hawk disappeared into the darkness. Flames leapt to life beneath her pyre and a pale gray creature leapt out of the shadows and onto Flora. It straddled her, its long, wiry legs pressed against her sides.

Furious, Lysander quickened his pace. His robe caught on a sharp rock protruding from the ground and he cursed, shrugging off the robe and jogging, naked, up the hill.

The creature atop Flora turned to him, flames reflected in its black eyes. The angular face twisted into a smile and it trailed its talon-like hands over her breasts, squeezing the soft mounds.

Her eyes closed, Flora moaned softly, a sound of pleasure-pain. She writhed and the creature turned to her, nuzzling her neck and pinning her wrists on either side of her head.

"She's mine," the creature rasped, then faded to smoke, its shape changing to that of the fleshtress. "Typhon gave her to me."

"Flora isn't his to give," Lysander stated.

"They're bound by law."

"But not in spirit."

"You think she belongs to you?" the fleshtress taunted.

"No."

"Then why protect her?"

"Love."

When he spoke that one word, the fleshtress recoiled. Her lips curled back, revealing her sharp teeth. "You think love will save her or you? You think it will protect your kingdom from Typhon's wrath? Fanticauns embraced *love* and look what it got them—near extinction."

Lysander stepped closer to the pyre, so near that the flames stung his skin.

Still smoky, the fleshtress stepped through the flames and wrapped her arms around his neck as she became solid once again. Her scalding body pressed close to his, the tips of her sharp nipples like hot coals biting into his skin. Her smooth pelvis thrust against him and his cock sprang to life. It throbbed and ached with almost unbearable tension.

"That's right. Give me something and I'll give you something. A fair trade," the fleshtress said, pressing kisses to the side of his neck.

Grasping her upper arms, he held her away. His gaze locked on hers. "You have nothing I want."

"I have her."

"No longer."

Growling, the fleshtress again turned to smoke. A heavy gray mist enfolded him, blinding him. He felt as if a thousand warm tongues were lapping him from head to toe. Sharp nails tickled his inner thighs and a hand clutched his balls, kneading and squeezing, while a hot, wet mouth slid over his cock head. It sucked deeply, rhythmically.

Lysander resisted the urge to groan. His legs trembled and his heart beat so hard it threatened to leap through his chest.

Flora.

His teeth clenched, he took an unsteady step forward. Flames from the fire burned even hotter than the mist around him.

A tongue of hot velvet flicked the underside of his cock head and this time a moan escaped him. The next step proved even more difficult than the last. His feet burned and his body caught fire in every imaginable way. The pleasure and pain made his mind spin.

Forcing his eyes open, he moaned again. His cock slid even deeper into that unseen mouth. The head brushed against the back of a slick throat and he nearly lost control.

Flames engulfed him as he continued toward Flora. His hands reached past the smoke and flames and finally brushed against her.

"Flora," he said in a hoarse whisper.

"Lysander," she replied, a tremor in her voice. "I can't see you."

"I'm here." He climbed onto the pyre, lay beside her and took her in his arms.

The flames and smoke disappeared and with it the pain.

Lysander gazed at Flora who clung to him tightly, her face buried against his chest.

"I never thought I'd see you again, or anyone," she said. "Except that...*thing*. It wouldn't let me go. It wouldn't—"

"I know," he said softly, caressing her hair and holding her even closer.

Flames, higher than a palace gate, leapt around the pyre. Flora screamed and Lysander jerked in surprise.

"We're going to die here," Flora said. "You shouldn't have come."

"You shouldn't have returned to Darridge."

"I had no choice."

Gently cupping her chin, he held her gaze. "Neither did I."

The flames didn't come any closer, instead they rose higher, stretching toward the dark sky.

"It's the fleshtress," Lysander said, staring at the flames before he turned back to Flora. "She feeds on our power. There's only one way out of here, but after what you've endured—"

"I'll do just about anything to get us out of there, Lysander."

"We have to surrender to each other, body and soul."

Flora smiled, her eyes glistening with the same emotions that filled Lysander. "That won't be difficult. I am yours, Lysander."

"And I'm yours."

A wail tore through the night—the fleshtress bemoaning her failure.

Grasping his hands in her small yet strong ones, Flora said, "Please, Lysander. Take me away from this place. Do whatever you must but get us out of here."

He nodded and covered her mouth in the most gentle kiss he had ever pressed to any woman's lips. After what she'd endured in this hellish place, he wanted to protect her, replace pain with pleasure and fear with love. That's how it had been for them from the first. In the most horrible situations, they had been a source of comfort and strength to each other.

Typhon was a fool. His torments had made the love between Lysander and Flora stronger. Nothing and no one would *ever* come between them now.

Flora's hands stroked the back of his head and she parted her lips to his gently probing tongue. Lysander's eyes closed and he forgot about everything except giving

her pleasure. After what she'd been through, she deserved to be treated with the utmost tenderness. She always deserved that.

Her tongue met his and they caressed each other with warm, wet strokes that stirred his passion. Lysander swept his hand over her hip and cupped one of her full breasts. All soft curves and supple limbs, she fascinated him with her beauty. Her smooth legs entwined with his and she brushed her feet along his calves.

Groaning softly, he deepened the kiss. He swept his thumb over her nipple, then slid down her body and took the pink nub into his mouth. He lightly nipped it, lapped and then sucked it. Flora gasped and wrapped her arms around him, holding him even closer.

"Lysander, you don't know how much I've missed you. It seems like I've been here forever. I thought I was lost."

"No matter what, my spirit will never be far from yours."

Lysander had never imagined having a soul mate, but since meeting Flora so much had changed in his life. He had never thought anything would compete with his duty and had never dreamed of falling in love. Marriage hadn't even crossed his mind. Begetting an heir was Ariston's worry. Now Lysander realized a wife and children weren't a chore but a pleasure.

Wife? She already belongs to another. The fleshtress's raspy voice echoed in his mind but he ignored her. Yes she was right, but she intended to distract him, to keep him from making love to Flora and breaking the spell.

"Please, my love," Flora said, arching against him. "This is the first time I've felt safe in so long." Her words touched him deeply and her gentle caresses on his neck and shoulders felt so good, as did the feel of her plump nipple against his tongue. He wanted to taste every part of her, then fill her with his stiff, aching cock. He remembered how good it felt inside her, to have her cling to him and cry his name in the midst of her passion.

He was glad she felt safe with him because he would risk everything to protect her, just as she had done for him. As overlord, he'd never dreamed anyone would feel protective enough toward him to sacrifice as much as Flora had. She'd stirred emotions he didn't think he possessed.

Lysander moved to her other nipple and his hand slid between her legs to caress her silken thighs. He cupped her soft mound and kneaded it with his palm. Flora's hips thrust against his hand and she moaned with need.

He eased two fingers inside her lust-soaked pussy and explored the soft, warm flesh. Little tremors of passion coursed through her and she spread her legs farther to accommodate him.

Lysander's cock throbbed. He wanted her so badly it almost hurt. The fleshtress's flames crackled around them, creating almost unendurable heat, but neither seemed to care.

Pressing tender kisses over her breasts and down the gentle curve of her belly, Lysander relished the feel of her skin against his lips. Guiding her legs over his shoulders, he licked his lips and leaned nearer to the delicate nub between her legs. He slid his hands beneath her buttocks and lifted her toward his mouth. His lips moved over her clit, then he lapped it with long, slow strokes.

His eyes closed, he savored her taste and scent. To Lysander, her impassioned little cries were like the sweetest music. Her voice rose higher as her passion grew and he lapped more quickly, his steady rhythm driving her nearer and nearer to the brink. Her buttocks tightened against his hands and she held his head snugly, her every muscle tense and straining.

"Oh, Lysander. Oh please!"

Gasping and moaning, she came so hard that he needed to tighten his grip on her bottom to keep her from writhing out of his grasp. He held her steady and continued lapping her clit until the final seconds of her climax.

His cock ached mercilessly, though not with the same kind of pain as when the fleshtress had touched him. This wonderful, teasing pain could be appeased only by the woman he loved.

Covering her body with his, he pushed the very tip of his engorged cock into her drenched pussy.

"Yes, my love," she breathed, caressing his chest and shoulders. Her legs wrapped around his waist, drawing him so close that he had no choice but to thrust fully into her. "Lysander, I need you so much."

"I need you too," he panted. It felt so good buried deep inside her warm, wet pussy. Her soft flesh pulsed around him, nearly shattering his self-control.

"Come for me," she whispered, slipping her arms around his neck and pulling herself upward until their lips met.

He kissed her, pressing her back down, his tongue thrusting into her mouth. Her tongue joined his, meeting his every heated caress.

Pumping into her, he tried to draw out their pleasure. Though he wanted to be gentle with her it proved difficult not to pump hard and fast with her clinging to him so tightly, her tongue teasing his. Flora's hands moved down his back and clutched his buttocks.

Lysander tore his mouth from her and gasped, then buried his lips against her neck, licking and kissing it as he pumped into her straining body.

"I'd almost forgotten it could be like this," she said, her voice husky with emotion. "I thought it was a dream. No one has ever made me feel like you do, Lysander."

"That's how I feel." He braced his forearms on either side of her head, gazing at her with all the love he felt. He kissed her damp temple, the taste of her perspiration salty against his lips.

Sweat trickled down the side of his face, over his chest and between his shoulder blades. The flames seemed to grow even hotter.

"She wants to kill us," Flora said.

"No. She just wants to own us."

"I belong to one person only." Flora's dark gaze met his with a look of utter devotion that reflected his feelings for her.

"As do I."

Again his mouth descended on hers and she held him snugly. His eyes closed, Lysander pumped faster and harder. Flora's legs tightened around his waist and she cried out in pleasure, her wet pussy pulsing rhythmically around his cock as she came.

Lysander's control snapped and he groaned, every muscle painfully tight before he burst inside her. His body strained into hers and he shouted her name in ecstasy.

For several moments, Lysander swirled in darkness, though the feel of his lover's body and soul never left him.

When he opened his eyes, he was back in his chamber, seated on the edge of the bed, his hand still clasping Flora's, but now she clung to him as well. Her dark eyes, glossy with unshed tears, fixed on him.

"Is it over?" she whispered.

He nodded, relief and utter weakness sweeping over him. Swallowing hard, he realized he felt near to tears as well. With his free hand, he caressed her face. She sat up and embraced him.

Lysander held her tightly. His eyes closed and his cheek pressed against the top of her head. Her sobs muffled against his chest and he rocked her gently, murmuring endearments he never dreamed would fall from his lips.

Someone tapped on the door.

"Come in, Prytanis," Lysander called wearily.

The door opened and the chief enchanter glanced inside. "Are you well?"

"Yes," Lysander replied. "It's finished."

"Or perhaps it's just begun," Prytanis whispered.

Lysander glanced at him sharply but at the moment he was far too tired to argue. The events of the past weeks had finally caught up with him.

Prytanis stepped in and doused the candles. Lysander noticed with surprise they had burned low and the incense had gone out. He had been under for longer than he thought.

"You both need rest," Prytanis said. "I'll inform your brother and Mikolas that you're well, after I treat those wounds on your hands."

"I'll take care of the cuts," Lysander said. "Thank you, Prytanis."

The chief enchanter nodded and left Lysander's room.

Flora had stopped crying and lay against his chest, still holding him tightly. After a moment, he rose and she sat back on the bed.

"I feel so tired," she said.

"That's normal. Suspended sleep isn't meant to be restful. It's meant as punishment." Lysander walked to his supply cupboard in the next room and gathered salve and bandages. His deeper wound bled more freely than Flora's, so he quickly cleaned and wrapped it. Then he walked to the bed and sat again, taking her hand in his.

"I'm sorry I had to cut you," he said.

"Don't be silly. You saved my life."

"You saved mine." He lifted his gaze to hers. "Thank you for what you did."

"I couldn't stand what Hecta and Typhon were doing to you." She touched his neck that still bore bruises and scars from the collar.

Lysander finished bandaging her hand, then kissed her fingertips.

"You look very tired," she said.

He nodded and placed the salve and bandages on the bedside table, then lay beside her and pulled a blanket over them. Flora curled up close to him, her head resting against his shoulder. Holding her, he closed his eyes and within moments fell into a deep, cleansing sleep.

Chapter Fifteen

In his garden, Typhon swung his twin swords in the moonlight. He'd spent most of the night in the workshop and needed exercise. Too many hours of intricate magical work made him tense. At this hour most of the guards were asleep, so he practiced alone. He fought imaginary opponents, blocking and thrusting in the open area between the ancient oak tree and the *wymist* patch. Soon he was drenched in sweat from the hot night and vigorous exercise.

"You really think all this training will do you any good against Lysander of Aberhill?"

In spite of the heat a chill rippled down Typhon's spine.

The fleshtress.

This was the first time the bitch had approached him without being summoned.

The smoky figure floated from behind the tree and leaned against the trunk, her deep set eyes staring at him and a strange half smile on her thin lips.

"So he drove you off and broke Flora's suspended sleep," Typhon sneered. "So much for your power."

"He's a fascinating creature, Lysander of Aberhill, but you're rather interesting yourself, Typhon. Normally I couldn't care less about the problems of mortals, but I'll be curious to see how this battle ends. If I were to wager, I'd place my coins on Aberhill."

A frigid grin twisted his lips and he swung his swords. "Why?"

"Lysander will be almost impossible for you to defeat. He has an indomitable will, a clear mind and a pure heart."

Typhon curled his lip in disgust. "Pure heart? He slaughtered my brother."

"In a fair fight. Your brother would have done the same to him."

"Whose side are you on?"

"I'm on no one's side. Unlike the women you're accustomed to, I have no master. If you want my power to enhance yours, you had better make it worth my while. And believe me, Typhon, you'll need all the help you can get to defeat Overlord Lysander."

Nearly blinded by rage, Typhon flung one of his swords in her direction. It embedded in the tree trunk, just missing her head.

The fleshtress smiled and stepped through the sword, just to prove that even if he'd chosen to hit her, he would have caused no damage.

She strode toward him and grasped his chin, her dagger-like nails biting into his flesh. He gripped her bony wrist and dragged her hand away from his face.

"Are you turning me away?" she asked.

"I didn't summon you in the first place."

"Maybe not tonight, but you will in the future and I'm not quite sure if I'll answer when you do." She disappeared in a grayish mist.

Good riddance. It seemed consorting with her had been more hindrance than help.

So his slut wife and that Aberhill swine were alive and well. Not that he gave a damn about Flora, but she still belonged to him and no one, especially not the Overlord of Aberhill, took what was his.

* * * * *

Flora awoke to sunlight shining on her face. She leapt to a sitting position, her heart pounding. Glancing around the chamber, a feeling of relief washed over her when she remembered she was back in Aberhill.

Lysander wasn't in the chamber and she wondered how long she'd been asleep. She rose and walked to the basin of water resting on the trunk at the foot of the bed. After cleaning her teeth and face, she unwrapped the damp bandage on her hand and inspected the shallow wound on her palm. It no longer bled and scarcely hurt. She stretched, more refreshed than she'd felt in what seemed like ages.

Though Lysander had rescued her from the horrible spell woven by Typhon, memories of it and the revolting creature that had violated her lingered in her mind. She felt safe here, yet at the moment she didn't want to be alone.

She put on the robe that rested at the foot of the bed and opened the door leading to Lysander's workroom. Three pairs of large green eyes fixed upon her. The redheaded sisters, Mala, Madeline and Marjorie, rose from the table where they'd been engrossed in needlework.

"My lady," they said in unison and curtsied.

"Overlord Lysander had us assigned as your maids," Madeline explained. "We're at your command."

"Would you like your bath now?" Marjorie asked. "And something to eat?"

"A bath would be nice," Flora said. "And tea."

"Mala and Marjorie will go to the kitchen right away and bring the tea. I'll see to your bath."

The two younger girls headed for the door and Flora said, "Please make it tea for four. I'd like you to join me."

Madeline and Marjorie both looked surprised and Madeline bowed her head. "But, my lady, it wouldn't be proper."

"You're at my command, are you not?"

"Yes but—"

"Then there is no argument."

Mala smiled broadly and Flora returned the gesture, then the two girls stepped out of the chamber.

Madeline left moments later and returned with a procession of maids bearing buckets of warm water that they used to fill the tub in the bedchamber.

Soon Flora sat in the tub, letting the water soothe her. Madeline approached with soap and a wash towel. Taking Flora's hand, she gently cleaned her wound.

"Do you know where Overlord Lysander is?" Flora asked. Just thinking about him made her tingle all over and her heartbeat quicken. She could scarcely wait to see and hold him again. If only they could belong to each other in marriage as they had already joined in spirit. Yet she was still married to Typhon. It seemed the only way she would ever be rid of him was through death, preferably his.

"He told us to inform you that he's attending his duties and will return as soon as he can."

"He is well then?"

"Yes. You both slept all day yesterday and right through the night. The overlord awoke shortly after dawn and went to meet with King Ariston and Chief Enchanter Prytanis."

"Good heavens, what time is it now?" Flora asked, scarcely believing she'd slept that long. No wonder she felt so much better.

"Just about noon."

The younger girls entered with a light meal. Flora's stomach rumbled and she realized she was hungrier than she'd ever felt in her life. She finished bathing quickly and dressed, then she and the girls sat down to tea.

"While waiting for Overlord Lysander to return, we'll have to find a way to amuse ourselves," Flora said. "Perhaps I can help with your needlework. I've missed my sewing."

It had been so long since Flora had embroidered. When she'd been younger she enjoyed sitting in the warm grass and creating pictures with needle and thread.

"If you like, my lady," Madeline said.

"It's a beautiful day. Maybe we could sew in the garden?" Flora suggested. "And while we're there we can do some weeding for Lysander."

"You're not like other ladies, are you?" Marjorie asked softly.

Madeline shot her an annoyed look and snapped, "Marjorie!"

"It's all right." Flora smiled. "Please don't feel that you can't speak freely in my presence. I scarcely know anyone here and would very much like for us to be friends."

"I'd like that too," Mala said.

Flora reached out and cupped the little girl's face. "Good. Now let's finish eating so we can get to work."

* * * * *

Lysander and Prytanis sat at the table in Ariston's private chamber, talking to the king about everything that had happened over the past weeks as well as future problems with Typhon.

"I have no doubt the attack he's planning will be devastating," Lysander said. "He is a madman."

"I met Typhon a couple of years back while at the High King's Court," Ariston said, his expression thoughtful. "He wasn't a pleasant man but he appeared sane enough."

"You call what he did to me and Flora sane?" Lysander demanded, his voice deadly soft. Though he remained outwardly calm, deep inside emotions regarding his experiences over the past weeks still raged. He realized that in order to perform as overlord and keep his kingdom and those he loved safe, he must not succumb to wild emotions.

Yes what he'd endured had been difficult but he couldn't allow it to taint his duties. He tried to look at the situation rationally and still came to the conclusion that Typhon was a madman bent on destroying Aberhill at any cost. He also believed that conquering his enemies wouldn't be enough for Typhon. No doubt he had his mind set on overthrowing the high king.

"Of course not," Ariston said. "However I'm trying to reconcile what you're telling me with what I know of the man."

"You think you know him, having seen him once at court? I've been his prisoner. Which of us do you think understands the bastard better? You saw what he did to Flora and you've heard about the lengths he's gone to in an attempt to beget an heir. He intends to rule for ages to come. If we're to survive, we need to stop him now."

"I agree that we need to prepare for battle," Ariston said. "Mikolas has doubled the elite guards' training and ordered the same done with the regular army."

"I know how you feel about keeping peace," Lysander said. "But I think our best chance of defending ourselves is to launch a preemptive attack."

Ariston drew a deep breath and released it slowly.

"He has a point," Prytanis said. "If Typhon is consorting with a fleshtress, then he's already ignoring the established rules of war."

"If he gains too much power, there will be far more bloodshed than if we engage him now," Lysander stated.

Ariston held Lysander's gaze for a long moment. "I will consider your suggestion."

"Why the hesitance?" Lysander demanded. "You've always trusted my judgment before."

"I do trust your judgment, however at the moment you're not at your best. Regardless of your willingness to take up your duties immediately, you've been affected by your imprisonment."

"And obviously having your overlord abducted hasn't affected you enough," Lysander snapped. "If he'd killed me I wonder if you'd have demanded any sort of retribution or if you'd have simply handed Aberhill over to him."

"I have no intention of letting him take Aberhill, but I'm not going to jump into a hasty decision that could wreak havoc over the vicinity. Haven't we seen enough destruction over the past few decades? Our father and the old king of Darridge spent years at each other's throats. Neither would examine options other than war."

Lysander stood, braced his hands on the table and leaned so close that he and Ariston were almost nose to nose. "Listen to what I'm telling you. Typhon is worse than his father. There will be no peace with him."

"For now I want you to do everything necessary to defend Aberhill against Darridge, however at this time I won't sanction a preemptive attack."

Lysander's teeth clenched but he returned to his chair.

"You mentioned that Typhon seemed to be heavily using *wymist*," Ariston said. "Prytanis, I want you to learn everything you can about that herb."

"I'll write to my mentor immediately," Prytanis said. "And I'll research my books and scrolls."

Ariston nodded. "Report back to me and Lysander with your findings. Something tells me the *wymist* might have something to do with Typhon's strange behavior."

"His behavior is the result of a small, twisted soul," Lysander stated.

"Perhaps, however it's easier to build an argument against him if we have solid facts rather than opinion, no matter how true that opinion might be."

Narrowing his eyes, Lysander asked, "Build an argument?"

"To present to the high king. He can remove Typhon from power." A faint smile touched Ariston's lips. "That's an option other than war."

Lysander could scarcely believe his brother's words. Even Prytanis looked skeptical.

"It's very rare that a high king will remove a leader from power, unless that leader either launches a direct attack against him or proves to be dangerously mad. Though Lysander's report can support this, I'm not sure it will be enough to convince High King Nik."

"That's why I want to gather as much information as possible," Ariston said.

Lysander stared hard at his brother. "I just hope the time you take to do that won't cost us Aberhill."

"Then I suggest we work as quickly as possible," Ariston said. "You may go, Prytanis. I'd like to speak to Lysander privately for a moment."

The chief enchanter left the chamber. Once the door closed behind him, Ariston asked, "How are you feeling?"

"Betrayed," Lysander said.

"I'm sorry you feel that way. Don't you think I would love to make Typhon suffer for what he did to you? The best way to do that is by removing him from power. It will save lives on both sides."

"You're being an idealistic fool."

"You're the only person I'd allow that from. Lysander, we both know that a leader can't let his emotions rule over his reason. I'm going to ask you something and I want the truth."

"I always speak the truth."

"Do you feel you can resume your duties now or do you need some time?"

"We don't have the luxury of time."

"That doesn't answer my question."

"If you're asking if I can still keep Aberhill safe, then the answer is yes. Being Typhon's prisoner has actually given me an edge. I know how the man thinks and what he's capable of."

"And it frightens you."

Lysander held Ariston's gaze. "Only a fool wouldn't be frightened of a madman with power."

The faintest smile touched Ariston's lips. "You're right. We have another problem too. Flora."

"She's staying here."

"Of course she is, but Typhon probably knows she's here. If he goes to High King Nik, he will have a legitimate case against us. She is still his wife."

"He won't go to the high king. I told you. Typhon wants a direct battle with us."

"Until we decide exactly what to do, it's best to keep Flora's presence here as quiet as possible."

"So she becomes a prisoner again," Lysander murmured but held up a hand as Ariston protested. "I understand and I agree, but I don't have to like it."

"I'm not suggesting that we seal her in a tower. Just be careful about who sees her. I understand you've assigned the Ashfield children to serve her?"

"Yes."

Ariston nodded in approval. "Other than the girls, the few members of this household who already know about her and our elite guard, no one else should have contact with her."

"Agreed."

"When I present my case against Typhon, I will include a request for an annulment of his marriage, then hopefully you and the woman can be joined in the eyes of the law. You always said you'd never fall in love. I should have known when it finally happened you'd pick the most complicated relationship possible."

"I'm not the one who must beget an heir. That's a duty you've yet to fulfill."

"All in good time. If there's nothing else, then I have work to do."

"There is one thing," Lysander stated. He'd struggled over whether or not to tell his brother about this decision, since he intended to do it with or without the king's permission. "I don't want what happened with the collar to ever happen again."

"I don't blame you. Do you plan on creating a guardianship?"

Sometimes Ariston was more astute than Lysander believed him to be.

A guardianship would prevent anyone from locking his powers, except for a guardian of his choosing. Lysander had always hated the idea of a guardianship. He wanted total control of his powers, but the experience with Hecta had proven that was an illusion. If Hecta had passed on the secret to his soul to anyone, including Typhon, they had the potential to collar him again. A guardianship would prevent that, but the guardian would have to be someone he trusted with his body and soul.

"Yes," Lysander said.

"Who have you selected as the guardian?" Ariston asked warily.

"Flora."

The king closed his eyes and released a sigh. "That's what I feared. You scarcely know the woman. I know you love her but —"

"We know each other implicitly. You couldn't hope to understand."

"I could forbid it, but if I know you, that won't make a difference."

"No it won't."

"I hope you know what you're doing, Lysander. By giving her the key to your power, you're placing not only your life but the lives of everyone in Aberhill in her hands. You should choose someone else. Mikolas, perhaps —"

Lysander's look alone told his brother that he would not change his mind.

"Then I guess this gives me even more incentive to free her from Typhon once and for all," Ariston said. He stared hard at Lysander. "I hope neither of us is making a mistake. Leave me, Brother. I need time alone. I have much on my mind."

So did Lysander.

He left quickly and headed for his chamber. Though he needed to meet with the elite guard, he wanted to see Flora first and talk to her about the guardianship. Just because he wanted her to be the guardian of his power didn't mean she would accept it.

When he stepped into his chamber, some of the heaviness faded from his soul and a smile tugged at his lips. Through the open doors leading to the garden, he saw Flora and the three girls on their knees weeding around the roses.

He approached and Flora's gaze riveted to him. She smiled, her dark eyes meeting his. As always when he saw her, feelings of warmth spread through him. She looked so adorable, sitting there with her sleeves rolled up and her face streaked with dirt.

The girls stood and greeted him and Flora also rose.

"If you don't need us, my lady, we'll go," Madeline said. Apparently the older girl noticed the longing look between the two adults.

"You may go. Thank you," Flora said and the girls hurried off. On her way past Lysander, Mala paused and smiled up at him. He playfully tugged a lock of her red hair before Marjorie grasped her hand and guided her out of the chamber.

As Lysander stepped nearer to Flora, they heard the door close behind the girls.

Finally alone, Lysander took her in his arms and covered her mouth in a tender kiss.

"How are you feeling?" he asked.

"Much better. And you?"

"I'm fine." He kissed her again and brushed his cheek against hers, then gazed into her eyes. "You look beautiful."

She chuckled and touched a hand to her hair. "Oh, Lysander, I must look a mess. We've been weeding and —"

He silenced her with another kiss, this one much deeper than the last.

Moaning softly, she wrapped her arms around his neck and parted her lips to his searching tongue. Her tongue met it, tasting and caressing. After what she'd endured while under that horrible spell, she'd thought she'd never want to be touched again but being with Lysander offered her a sense of comfort.

He touched her so gently, as if she were something precious. No one had ever treated her like this, not her birth family nor her husband. That explained why she had killed Hecta to free Lysander and why, if fate allowed, she would become his wife and the mother of his children.

Lysander slowly drew his lips from hers to press light kisses down the side of her neck. Flora closed her eyes, sighing with pleasure. She caressed his head. Though she missed his long hair, she liked the sensation of the stubble. She ran her hands down the back of his neck and then across his shoulders, loving the feel of his lean, hard muscles beneath his black, knee-length tunic.

He looked so handsome in the uniform of the elite guard—so powerful and aloof, yet when he held her like this he wasn't remote at all.

"Why did you cut off your hair?" she asked.

Still kissing her neck, he replied, "The ritual the other night."

Again his mouth covered hers and she surrendered, leaning against him and relishing his strength. While kissing her, he slid his arms around her and his deft fingers unfastened the ties at the back of her dress. When he finished, she slipped off the overdress and stood on her toes in the puddle of silk, her arms around his neck.

Lysander's eyes burned into hers, the need in them making her heart beat faster.

"Flora, I want you so badly right now," he said. "But if you're not ready —"

"I'm more than ready. I need you, Lysander. You make me feel safe. Please make love to me," she said against his lips. "Please. Right here."

He lifted an eyebrow, then smiled and unfastened his belt. He removed his tunic and Flora stared at his gorgeous chest, sleek stomach and perfectly formed arms with the enticing veins running along the muscular biceps. He was still rather thin from his ordeal but so beautifully proportioned that his looks didn't suffer for it.

Flora's stomach clenched and fury shot through her when she looked at the fading cuts and bruises on his ribs. Thankfully his Fanticaun nature enabled him to heal quickly. She knelt in front of him and pressed light kisses over his ribs, as if through her love she could soothe away any remaining pain. As she kissed him, she caressed his muscular thighs beneath his black trousers, then cupped his bulging crotch.

He groaned, unfastening her hair from its bun and weaving his fingers through it.

She pulled down his trousers and his cock sprang free. Licking her lips, she clasped the root of it and touched her lips to the tip. Her tongue swept over the velvety head, then she covered the shaft with kisses, feeling him swell even more in her grasp.

"You're beautiful, Lysander," she murmured. "I never thought a man's cock could be so beautiful."

"Goddess, Flora," he breathed as she flicked her tongue along the underside of his cock head. His hands trembled a bit and she knew he felt great pleasure. This made her happy but also aroused her so much that her clit and lower belly ached.

Taking him in her mouth, she sucked deeply, feeling him brush the back of her throat.

Lysander moaned and thrust his hips, but not too hard. He restrained himself so he wouldn't hurt her.

She tugged his cock from her mouth then licked the tip again. She squirmed a bit, trying to appease the frustrating ache between her legs, but she knew only one thing could do that.

Obviously Lysander knew exactly what she wanted, for he stepped away and pulled off his boots and trousers. Flora remained kneeling and looking up at him. His gaze burning into hers, he joined her on the grass and gently guided her onto her back.

He pushed her shift up to her waist, then raised her knees and parted them. Settling between her legs, he slid his hands beneath her buttocks and covered her clit with his mouth. He lapped and sucked the little nub with the same attentiveness that she'd teased his cock.

Lost in sensation, Flora closed her eyes. Her heart pounded and breath came in ragged pants. Heavens, he knew exactly how to touch her. He seemed to know when she teetered on the edge because he slowed or paused in his motions. Then his warm, wet tongue returned to her stimulated flesh and she could have screamed from the pleasure.

"Please," she gasped, her muscles tense and straining. With trembling hands she caressed his head and tried to thrust her hips against him, but his strong, slender hands on her bottom kept her steady.

His wet tongue slid up her clit, over and over. This time he didn't stop and hurled her into an ecstatic release. Flora moaned and writhed, her back arched and her entire body flushed with passion. Wave after wave of climax broke over her and he covered her body with his.

"Flora, my love," he said, his voice husky with passion, and filled her with a long, slow thrust of his cock.

Crying out again, Flora wrapped her arms and legs around him.

"Lysander, please," she said. "I want you. I love you so much."

"I love you too." He thrust into her at a moderate pace, pushing her up another hillside of pleasure. Those wonderful yet frustrating sensations built again.

He changed his motions, pulling almost completely out, then grinding into her in a way that made her gasp and moan with need. Flora ran her hands over his chest and back, wanting to touch him all over. She slid her hands down his heated sides and over his pumping hips to grasp his tight, hard buttocks.

All at once her body seemed to catch fire and she no longer wanted to wait.

"Lysander, please, oh please don't stop. It feels so wonderful. I just want—" her words ended in a keening cry of pleasure.

Her climax spurred on his and he thrust faster, his hoarse breath teasing her ear. When he came, he shouted her name in a way that sent waves of passion and love rolling through her.

Lysander relaxed atop her, his face buried against her neck and his long, hard body draped over hers. After a moment he moved aside, allowing her to breathe more freely.

Caressing her shoulders, he kissed her temple and said, "Flora, there's something I must ask you."

Lifting her head, Flora gazed at him. "What is it?"

"Do you know what a magical guardianship is?"

She shook her head and he continued, "It's when a Fanticaun gives the key to his power to someone for safekeeping. They alone have the ability to lock his power once the guardianship is established. In this way, it prevents others from locking it, such as Hecta did to me."

"A guardian must be someone you trust very deeply," she said. "Do you plan on doing this?"

"Yes. I want you to be the guardian of my power."

Flora drew a sharp breath and a look of surprise shone in her eyes. "Me?"

"After what we've been through, we know each other better than anyone."

"But that's such a great responsibility. Do you really trust me that much?"

Taking her face in his hands, he stared into her eyes and said, "I trust you not only with my life but with my heart and my soul."

Her brow furrowed, as if she were surprised by the reality that struck her. "That's how I feel about you. But Lysander, what if Typhon —"

"Typhon is no longer part of your life."

"But we're married."

"It will be annulled."

"Only the high king can do that. How can we be sure that he will? What if I'm forced to return to Typhon? I couldn't go back. I'd have to flee. I cannot live with him any longer."

"That won't happen. I won't allow it."

He would do anything to prevent that, even if it meant leaving Aberhill. Even if it meant destroying Typhon and the high king.

Lysander closed his eyes for a moment. That almost sounded like madness, but after what he and Flora had endured for each other, they now shared a powerful bond.

"Will you accept the guardianship?" he asked.

"Yes," she whispered. "I accept it."

He nodded. "Prytanis and I will work on the ritual and when the time comes I'll let you know."

"There is something I want from you as well," she said.

"Name it."

"I want you to teach me how to defend myself."

A smile flirted with his lips. "What?"

"It's not a jest, Lysander. I want to know how to fight. All my life I've been vulnerable. After being with Typhon, I never want to be helpless again. I know women aren't usually allowed to practice the fighting arts but —"

"Done. We'll begin training this week. Now I have to meet with the elite guard." He threaded his fingers through her hair and kissed her. He would love to spend the rest of the day with her but he had too many duties to perform. Too much danger surrounded Aberhill for him to indulge his passions for long.

He reached for his clothes, then rose and offered her his hand. She slipped hers into it and he tugged her to her feet and embraced her.

Flora held him, her hands caressing his back and her full, luscious breasts pressed against his chest. He breathed the wonderful scent of her hair and enjoyed the feel of her small, curvy body against him.

Reluctantly, he stepped away and dressed. She did the same.

When they finished, he cupped her chin and smiled slightly. "I'll see you tonight."

"I'll be waiting for you." Standing on tiptoe, she brushed her lips against his, then stepped away.

Lysander walked to the door and paused to glance back at her. Flora stood in the doorway to the garden, gazing at him. With her, he lost some of the anger inside him. She stirred emotions he'd never imagined feeling. With her, he experienced peace that he'd known only while in the wilderness, alone with nature and his magic. He and this woman matched perfectly.

Chapter Sixteen

It took Lysander almost a week to prepare for the guardianship ritual. It would have taken less if he hadn't been preoccupied with rallying their forces to keep Aberhill safe against an attack by Typhon. Once they'd secured the guardianship, he promised to begin Flora's lessons in the fighting arts.

Flora felt anxious about both, though the idea of learning to defend herself intimidated her far less than becoming the guardian of his magic. Holding his power was a tremendous responsibility but also an honor. It made her happy to know he trusted her so much, yet it also worried her. She had no magical abilities, but he assured her that didn't matter. He could place guardianship upon anyone of his choosing, regardless of whether they had Fanticaun power.

Lysander chose an early morning in the garden to perform the ritual. This didn't surprise Flora. He loved sunlight and Fanticauns had an innate attachment to their gardens. Even Typhon loved his dank sanctuary.

Thinking about Typhon always sent a streak of fear through her. There had been no word from him, though he must realize where she was. What kind of horrible attack had he planned and when would he strike?

The morning of the guardianship ritual, Flora and Lysander woke just before dawn and shared a bath. They dressed and walked to the garden where she watched him prepare for the ritual. He placed a flat stone on the grass and placed upon it his dagger and a small frosted-glass bottle half filled with a purple liquid. Beside the bottle, he placed a black, white and violet candle, then he burned rose-scented incense in a black bowl. He'd made the candle and incense specifically for the ritual.

Lysander knelt beside the stone and extended his hand to her.

"Come, Flora," he said, his voice soft yet commanding.

She slipped her hand into his and knelt beside him. He'd explained everything about the ritual to her, yet now that the time had come, her heart pounded with anticipation.

His hand, though steady against hers, felt a bit cold and she sensed his anxiousness. If she were in his place, she'd have been terrified of giving such a part of herself to someone else, even someone she trusted.

He released her hand to uncork the bottle and use his dagger to cut his fingertip. He let two drops of his blood fall into the purple liquid. It flared out in a dark circle, then blended with the rest.

"I give you my essence, Flora," he said and handed her the bottle.

She spoke the words he had told her to. "I hold your essence, Lysander." Placing the bottle to her lips, she drank the liquid, then she and Lysander turned to face each other.

He took her hands, their fingers entwined and they closed their eyes.

Flora drew a sharp breath, not of pain but of surprise and pleasure. A tingling warmth wrapped around her body. It grew so strong that she felt as if she were soaring through the summer sky.

This was Lysander's power. This was how it felt to be a Fanticaun.

"Oh, Lysander, beautiful isn't a strong enough word to describe this," she whispered.

His fingers tightened affectionately on hers, then the initial sensation of his power faded. She felt almost normal again, though deep inside she still sensed him. Now she always would, until the end of their mortal lives.

Her eyes opened and she gazed into his, seeing her emotions reflected there.

"Thank you, my love," he whispered, cupping her cheek and using his thumb to caress her face. He leaned closer and brushed her mouth with a kiss.

Flora wrapped her arms around his neck and embraced him tightly, closing her eyes.

They held each other for a long moment, then moved slightly apart.

"The candle and incense need to burn out," he said.

"I'll keep watch. I know you have to get to the training field. The morning meal will be here soon. Do you want to eat before you go?"

He shook his head. "I'll get something from the kitchen on the way to the field."

Since returning, Lysander had been so busy training both physically and magically as well as improving the kingdom's defenses, that she'd scarcely seen him. Though she knew his hard work was necessary, she still missed him.

"Tonight when I return, I'll start your lessons as promised."

"I'm looking forward to it." She meant her words. Though she loved being in Aberhill, in a way she was as confined here as she had been in Darridge. Still she knew that until she and Lysander found a way to be together in the eyes of the law, they must keep her presence quiet.

He kissed her goodbye and shortly after he left, Mala, Marjorie and Madeline brought the morning meal, which they shared with her. Then she began the girls' daily lessons. When she heard they didn't know how to read and write, she immediately offered to teach them. Madeline in particular wanted lessons, since she felt learning would bring her even closer to Georgios who spent most of his time with his magical books.

Flora had always liked children and couldn't help thinking of the sisters almost as daughters rather than mere servants. Thinking of servants, she wondered about Crystal's welfare. She hoped Typhon hadn't been cruel to her because of his anger

toward Flora. Still could do nothing about the happenings in Darridge now, not that she ever had been able to. The only hope for that kingdom would be for them to lose in battle and fall under Ariston's control. At least he seemed to be a decent man who cared for all his people, rich and poor. Like Lysander, he was a strong man, though not obsessed with power.

What if Aberhill lost to Darridge? Just thinking about it made her shudder. No. She had to believe everything would work out in the end, though she realized in life that didn't always happen. But maybe, just maybe, this time...

* * * * *

After spending the morning in intense training with his elite guards, Lysander met with Mikolas and General Orion of the regular army. They discussed new security measures that would be put into effect immediately. Afterward, Lysander joined Ariston in a meeting with Prytanis and several other advisors. When it ended, Ariston dismissed the others but asked Lysander to remain behind.

"I'm pleased with how you've increased the number of guards around the borders," Ariston said. "However I'm not certain the curfew for the villagers is necessary and the magical reinforcements around the borders might put the villagers as well as visitors in danger. This afternoon a child was nearly killed when he accidentally ran off and tried to breach the border."

The reinforcements Ariston spoke of were magical quicksand pits between guard posts. The sand would smother trespassers if they struggled but if they remained still it would merely hold them until the guards arrived.

"Which is the reason for the curfew. My intention isn't to hurt children but keep out trespassers. We agreed that our people are in danger and additional reinforcements are necessary."

Ariston studied Lysander carefully. "All right. That's reasonable, but I wonder if these precautions are meant to keep them out or us in."

"Whichever works. These defenses are to keep our people safe."

"Then you believe that to fight Typhon we must become like him?"

"You dare say that to me? I was a prisoner in Darridge. As I told you before, I know what Typhon and his guards are capable of. My duty is to defend our realm."

"But don't forget which of us is the leader."

"I have known all my life which of us is king. I'm fulfilling my duties as overlord. You had better be certain you fulfill yours. That means abandoning your idealistic dreams of peace when necessary to face the reality that Typhon will attack."

"I might not have the magical skills of you and Prytanis, but I know evil when I see it. Evil inspired by fear. It can be blinding. Be careful not to cross the line between becoming a defender and a defiler."

Rage ignited inside Lysander but he spoke with cool calmness. "I'll do whatever is necessary to keep Aberhill safe. If you don't agree, then find another overlord. I'll take Flora and go because neither of us will ever again be at Typhon's mercy."

"You're afraid."

"Afraid of what will happen if we give Typhon the chance to conquer us, which you seem bound and determined to do? Most definitely I'm afraid. Only a fool wouldn't be. If he does overtake us, do you think he'll be content with that? No amount of land or power will be enough for someone like him."

Ariston sighed deeply. "I know."

"Then you must understand me better than you pretend."

"I understand, but I hope that in fighting him we don't lose ourselves anyway."

Still holding Ariston's gaze, Lysander said, "Everything comes at a price. I wish that wasn't true but—"

"But it is," Ariston said.

"Unless you have more to discuss, Mikolas is waiting for me. We're working on improvements for empowering weapons."

Ariston nodded and waved in dismissal.

Lysander left. On his way to the elite guards' barracks, his brother's words lingered in his mind. In truth he had been greatly concerned when he learned of the mishap with the child, but unless they took precautions, how many children of Aberhill would be slaughtered by Typhon's army? Mercy wasn't in Typhon's nature. Conventional rules couldn't apply when dealing with a man like him. Lysander had also been considering ways to increase his power. He and Prytanis had been learning what they could about *wymist*. The information they'd uncovered thus far wasn't promising. When used properly, *wymist* could greatly enhance a Fanticaun's power. Should Typhon decide to launch a complete magical attack, he could have an advantage over Lysander unless he found a way to compete with the *wymist*.

He had been considering several possibilities, none of which he liked. Yet deep inside he knew that to fight Typhon he would need to delve into the shady practices he'd studied as a youth.

* * * * *

Long after dark, Lysander finally returned to his chamber. Flora had missed him at dinner, though the girls had kept her company.

When he stepped inside, he found her reading by the fire. She rose to meet him and he kissed her and held her close.

After releasing her, he removed his scabbard and placed it aside, then sat on the edge of the bed and sighed deeply. She noticed he looked tired and distracted. That's how he'd been since they'd arrived in Aberhill, but he had so much on his mind.

"Have you eaten?" she asked. "There's some food left from dinner."

"Thanks."

Flora sat beside him and massaged the back of his neck. His eyes closed and a faint smile touched his lips.

"You're tired," she said. "You don't have to teach me tonight."

His eyes opened and fixed on her. "I forgot we're supposed to start your training."

"We don't—"

"No. I promised."

"Eat first."

"No. I hate to train on a full stomach." He rose from the bed, selected a fairly small sword from the collection hanging on the wall and took his scabbard.

She followed him out to the garden where they'd have space to practice.

Flora's heartbeat quickened and she felt nervous but also excited. All her life she'd enjoyed physical exercise and after being cooped up for so many days, she longed for this kind of distraction. She also desperately wanted to learn how to protect herself. Women were so often at the mercy of men, just as she had been. Lysander wasn't that sort of man, however, and a woman didn't need to protect herself around him. He was skilled, powerful and strong as the bull he'd once been named for. Yet he also had the confidence to teach her swordplay.

Moonlight shone on the garden, illuminating it. To provide even more light for her mere human eyes, Lysander lit four torches and placed them on each corner of the square, grassy clearing in the center of the garden.

"Ready?" he asked, a smile flirting with his lips.

She drew a deep breath and said, "More than ready."

An hour later, Lysander stood watching Flora practice the footwork he'd taught her. While he hadn't doubted her ambition to learn the fighting arts, he'd been skeptical of her ability. However once they started working, her determination and potential impressed him.

He'd become so absorbed in teaching her that he'd forgotten his weariness and even managed to focus on something other than Darridge.

"That's good," he said. "Very good but that's enough for tonight."

She paused, her eyes gleaming, and smiled. "I'm going to feel this in my legs tomorrow."

"Most likely, but I'll be glad to massage them for you." He approached, drew her into his arms and covered her mouth in a kiss. His eyes closed and he slid his tongue between her lips. Hers met it with wet, tender strokes. It felt so good just to hold and kiss her like this.

The kiss broke and she leaned heavily against him, tilting her face toward his. "I can hardly wait for the next lesson."

"Tomorrow you can practice what you learned."

"You really must be starving by now," she said.

He was quite hungry, not only for food but for her. As busy as he'd been lately, he should have felt exhausted, but somehow the very thought of making love with Flora rejuvenated him. He looked forward to taking her warm, soft body and falling asleep with her in his arms.

While Flora doused the torches, Lysander put their weapons away then sat at the table where half a loaf of bread, stew and fresh berries awaited him.

Flora poured him a glass of strong red wine then stepped behind him and massaged his neck and shoulders. He groaned with pleasure and a smile tugged at his lips. He'd never imagined having someone like her in his life.

As Lysander sipped the wine while enjoying the feel of her hands on his body, he began to relax.

She stroked his short hair and swept her fingers across his forehead.

It seemed almost wrong to be this happy, to have a woman like her all to himself.

Yet she wasn't. Not yet. Not until all her ties to Typhon were broken, and they would be. Lysander would *never* allow her to be taken by him again.

After a few moments, Flora joined him in eating some of the stew and berries. When they finished, Lysander lit the fire to ward off the night's chill. He sat in the chair across from the hearth and when Flora approached, he tugged her onto his lap and wrapped his arms around her.

She rested her head against his shoulder and thought how good it felt to be close to him.

Lysander took her hand and kissed her palm, then each fingertip. His tongue flicked between her fingers and Flora closed her eyes, relishing the sensation.

He gently cupped her cheek and covered her mouth in a kiss. Flora moaned, loving the feel of his soft, moist lips against hers. He slid his tongue between her lips and Flora opened her mouth to his lustful exploration. She loved kissing and touching him.

The kiss broke for a few seconds during which they silently gazed into each other's eyes. Then Flora took his lower lip between her teeth and bit it gently. She sucked on it and he groaned with pleasure.

Cupping the back of her head, Lysander took control of the kiss, tugging his lip away from her and covering her mouth with his. His tongue stroked hers, his caresses lingering and his pace slow, as if he wanted to savor every moment.

The crackle of flames in the hearth and the gentle hum of insects as well as the breeze blowing through the open window created a sensation of calmness. It was perfect for making love.

Flora's hands caressed Lysander's face. Her fingertips trailed over his sharp

cheekbones and swept over his temples. Goddess, she never grew tired of touching him.

He gathered her more snugly in his arms and stood.

"Come," he whispered, dipping his head and brushing his nose against hers. He walked nearer to the fire and knelt, placing her upon the rug in front of the hearth.

Flora took one of his hands in both of hers and they held each other's gaze, enjoying the simplicity of the moment. They were just two souls who felt safe and warm in each other's company. Flora should have had this sort of marriage. She prayed she and Lysander would have it one day.

He raised her hands to his lips and kissed both palms, then he stood and undressed. Flora shed her clothes as well, then stretched out naked on her back. Raising her arms above her head, she drew a deep breath and smiled. Her heart raced with anticipation as he once again knelt close to her.

His gorgeous blue gaze followed the motions of his slender fingers that swept over her hips and belly. Then he cupped one of her breasts in his hand and squeezed it lightly. His fingertip rolled over her nipple, sending little ripples of pleasure coursing through her body. The gentle touch of his finger made the pink bud pebble hard. He pinched it, just enough to send an even more powerful rush of desire through her.

"Oh, Lysander," she gasped, her eyes closing and her back arching with pleasure.

"Tell me what you want," he said in a husky voice.

"You know what I want."

"But I want you to tell me."

Smiling faintly, she nearly squirmed at the need in his voice. "All right. I want to feel your mouth on my breasts."

Moistening his lips, he lay beside her. He fondled first one breast then the other before taking one of her nipples between his lips and laving it with his tongue.

"Oh yes. I love that," she panted, caressing his face then sliding her hand to the back of his head and cupping it.

Over and over, he licked her nipple. Each sweep of his tongue sent a little pulsation of lust from her breast to her clit. She squirmed, as if that could appease her burning need.

Still sucking and licking her nipple, Lysander dipped a hand between her legs and used his palm to knead her pelvis and clit.

"Inside me," she murmured. "Touch me, Lysander. Oh please."

He groaned and slid his long, slender fingers into her drenched pussy. After exploring for several heated moments, he circled her clit with a fingertip. Flora gasped and thrust her hips against his hand.

Releasing her nipple, Lysander kissed his way down her belly and hip. Lifting her legs, he settled between them.

His warm breath fanned her aching little nub and he said, "Tell me what you want. Would you like me to taste you?"

"Goddess, yes."

Lysander rolled his tongue over her clit and Flora moaned. He lapped her tingling flesh and gently tugged it with his firm, moist lips. Just before she tumbled over the edge, he paused and caressed her buttocks. The tip of his finger swept along the indentation, then he clutched her bottom fully and raised her a bit more. He dipped his head nearer and thrust his tongue into her pussy.

Moaning and trying her best to writhe despite his snug hold, Flora relished the waves of passion breaking over her. Lysander's tongue thrust and swirled inside her.

"That feels so wonderful. Oh, Lysander, I love how you touch me. You know what I want. You always know."

His tongue left her pussy to lap her clit. This time he didn't pause but licked and teased her to climax. Finally, when she lay limp and thoroughly satisfied, he released her.

Moaning with contentment, Flora curled onto her side, her eyes closed and a blissful smile on her lips. The rug and fire kept her warm despite her nakedness and she felt comfortable enough to fall asleep.

She had nearly drifted off when Lysander lay behind her and tugged her close to his warm, hard body.

Her eyes opened and her smile broadened when his thick cock entered her from behind.

His arm slid around her and his fingers teased her clit, rekindling her passion. Flora stroked his hand and forearm while he fondled her. She wiggled her bottom against him and he groaned with pleasure.

Making love like this was so perfect—slow and soft yet pleasurable enough to make her heart pound with desire. Only Lysander could do this to her. He was everything Typhon was not and she loved him for it.

Nuzzling her neck, he thrust a bit faster as his passion grew. Flora also teetered on the edge again. His stroking fingers and thrusting cock sent little ripples of pleasure through her. Lifting her hand to her breast, she stroked her nipples and writhed against him.

Lysander took her earlobe between his teeth and gently tugged. His fingers rubbed faster and he continued thrusting into her drenched pussy. Flora's climax struck so suddenly that it took her by surprise.

As he joined her in ecstasy, he gasped, "I love you, Flora. I love you."

"I love you too, Lysander," she panted. "So much."

* * * * *

Over the following month, Flora experienced emotions such as she'd never felt before. Though in hiding, she was in many ways freer than she had ever been.

She had little contact with King Ariston but when their paths crossed he treated her with kindness, as did Prytanis. She had the company of the redheaded sisters, whom she considered foster daughters rather than servants.

The elite guard had a private training ground within the castle walls. Flora was allowed to walk, ride and practice her weapons there, providing she stayed out of the way while the men trained. Lysander worked with her as often as possible but due to the situation with Darridge, his duties consumed him. To her surprise, Mikolas and some of the other elite guards coached her during their rest periods. Flora thoroughly enjoyed the fighting arts and several elite guards as well as Lysander remarked on her talent for it.

"You do quite well for a woman," Mikolas said one afternoon when they finished a sparring match.

"For a woman?"

He held her gaze and winked. "I almost pity Lysander if you two have a lover's spat."

Lysander. Her smile faded a bit. Lately she'd been concerned about him. He spent so much time on duty that she scarcely saw him anymore. When he returned to their chamber late at night, he looked almost haunted. She knew he was concerned about Typhon. Her husband must be planning something terrible to wait so long before attacking. Lysander also worried about Ariston's reluctance to bring the battle to Darridge instead of waiting for them to make the first move.

"Are you all right?" Mikolas asked.

"Yes. I'm just worried."

"I know. We all are."

"Lysander has been so distant lately."

"He's focused. He has to be." The burly warrior gently rested a hand on her shoulder. "He cares about you very much, Flora. Right now he needs to concentrate on keeping Aberhill safe. Please believe he's thinking about you too."

"I understand and I don't want to be a distraction to him. I'm just worried. My hus...Typhon is a very focused man as well. I saw what obsession did to him. I guess I still have some fear in me because of it."

"That's only natural, but you're safe now. None of us, especially Lysander, will allow Typhon to harm you again. There is no better man to have on your side. Lysander is a great warrior but he hasn't lost his compassion. He cares about every man, woman and child in our realm."

She smiled and nodded. "I know, and he's lucky to have a friend such as you."

Dinnertime neared, so Flora left the training field and returned to Lysander's chamber. In the garden, she continued her sword practice, needing something to keep

her mind occupied until the girls arrived. She had given them the afternoon to do as they pleased, but soon they would return with dinner.

Flora became so involved in her practice, that she didn't realize she was being watched until Lysander said, "Keep that up and soon you'll be able to subdue me."

She spun toward the door, her heart pounding, then she relaxed. Wearing only his boots and trousers, he leaned one of his broad shoulders against the doorjamb, his arms folded across his gorgeous chest. An amused grin curved his lips and his gaze swept her from head to toe.

Touching a hand to her hair, she realized she must look a mess. Dirt streaked her clothes and sweat misted her face. By the lustful look in his eyes, he didn't seem to mind in the least, so she sauntered toward him.

Smiling faintly, she gazed at him with her sultriest expression and said, "I already know how to subdue you."

Still grinning, he cocked an eyebrow. "Oh really?"

"Really." She placed her sword aside and wrapped her arms around his neck. Standing on tiptoe, she covered his mouth in a kiss.

Lysander groaned and embraced her. Pressed close to his lean, hard body, she tingled all over. His tongue slid into her mouth and explored with slow, heated strokes. He swept his hands down her back and cupped her buttocks, kneading gently.

Her heart pounded and her nipples sprang to life. The kiss broke, leaving her breathless. He also breathed heavier than usual and his cock pressed against her, stiff and ready.

"You're here early tonight," she said. "But by the mood you're in I'm guessing nothing is wrong?"

"Not at all. I just didn't want you to feel neglected. I know most of my time has been spent elsewhere —"

"Of course it has." She placed her hand on his chest and caressed it. Her fingertip rolled over his tight, rose-colored nipple. Leaning closer, she pressed delicate kisses across his breastbone. "You're the overlord and we're under threat of attack. I only wish I could help you."

Taking a step back, she gazed up at him, hoping all the affection and desire she felt shone in her eyes.

"You do," he said, tilting his head slightly to the side in a most endearing manner. "Just having you here with me means so much."

"I'm afraid I've caused you far more harm than good." She lowered her head but he gently grasped her chin and tilted her face toward his. The expression in his eyes made her feel warm and tingly inside. Her clit pulsed and that wonderful ache spread throughout her belly.

"No. You have done nothing wrong. It's all Typhon, but I don't want to talk about him. Not tonight." His mouth descended on hers in another heated kiss.

Flora closed her eyes, holding him tightly and savoring every moment with this man she loved so very much.

His cock pressed to her and she thrust against him, her hands sliding over his narrow hips to clutch his tight, rounded buttocks. Lysander's hands cupped her bottom as well, kneading, squeezing and holding her closer to his rock-hard body.

Already Lysander had been more a husband to her than Typhon had ever been. Their marriage had been wrong from the first. On the other hand she and Lysander were made for each other. Despite the legalities, she considered Lysander, rather than Typhon, her husband.

Their mouths still locked, he swept her into his arms and carried her inside where he placed her on the bed. She gazed at him, filled with love and lust.

Bracing a hand on either side of her head, Lysander brushed his nose against hers and smiled, then he kissed her again.

Flora closed her eyes and enjoyed each swipe of his tongue against hers. She caressed his shoulders and back, loving the feel of his warm flesh and the hard muscles beneath. She lightly trailed her fingertips over the roughness of old scars.

He broke the kiss to tug off her shoes and stockings. Flora sat up and removed her clothes while he stood and did the same, kicking off his boots and pulling off his trousers.

Before Flora had a chance to admire his fully naked body, he jumped on the bed.

Grasping her wrists, he pinned them on either side of her head and used his knee to part her legs. Flora eagerly spread her thighs, her pulse racing.

Now that he had her in this submissive position, he didn't intend to rush.

He covered her face with soft kisses, brushing his lips over her temples and across her cheeks and nose.

Moving slightly to the side, he slid a hand between her legs and cupped her, using his palm to stir her soft flesh. While he stroked her, he nuzzled her neck then took her earlobe between his teeth and teased it gently.

Flora moaned and stroked every part of him she could reach.

"I love you, Lysander," she murmured.

"I love you too," he whispered against her ear. His long, slender fingers slid inside her, exploring her drenched pussy.

"Please," she said. "I want you so much."

He covered her mouth in a possessive kiss and once again covered her body fully with his.

By the heavens, she loved it when he claimed her like this.

With a long, slow thrust he filled her soaked pussy with his engorged cock.

Flora clung to him, wrapping her legs around his lean waist.

Goddess, she loved his sleek, strong body. He was like an irresistible wild animal,

tamed only for her.

This was a man—powerful yet gentle, in control yet tender at the right time. Before Lysander, she merely dreamed a man like this could exist.

He thrust over and over, sending passion flaring through her. Overcome by love and desire, she knew it wouldn't be long before she came, not with him pumping into her. The feel of his lean, hard body against her drove her to unimaginable heights of pleasure.

Flora opened her eyes and found him gazing at her with all the lust and affection she felt for him.

Looking into each other's eyes like this while in the midst of making love somehow made the experience even more arousing.

She stared at him until the pleasure become so intense that she had to close her eyes.

"Lysander," she moaned, convulsing beneath him.

"Flora, oh goddess," he gasped and erupted inside her.

She clung to him, her legs tight around his waist and her arms gripping him so hard that they ached.

For several moments they lay, Flora trapped beneath him. She could think of nowhere else she'd rather be.

Finally he moved aside to keep from crushing her. She languidly stroked his back, content to relax with him in silence.

Someone tapped on the door and Lysander called, "Who is it?"

"We've brought dinner, sir," Madeline replied.

Chapter Seventeen

"The girls! I almost forgot," Flora whispered and tried to spring out of bed but Lysander refused to let her go and kissed her again.

"Lysander!" she scolded as he covered her neck with kisses.

Chuckling, he released her and they rose to their feet. Flora pulled on her shift and a simple overdress and Lysander donned trousers and a loose white shirt. He didn't fasten the ties on the front of the shirt, leaving a good portion of his gorgeous chest exposed. She sighed. Looking at him like that all through dinner would be such a marvelous distraction.

She pulled on her shoes and he opened the door to allow the girls to enter. They brought fragrant bread, succulent stew and a pitcher of fresh water to the table. Flora had insisted the girls take their meals with her, so food was plentiful, yet once they'd set the table, they headed for the door.

"Where are you going?" Flora called.

The three looked hesitantly toward Lysander.

"Come and sit down," Flora said.

Mala took a step toward the table, but Madeline grasped the child's arm and said, "But, my lady—"

Flora glanced from the wide-eyed redheads to Lysander and said, "Do you mind?"

Flora had mentioned several times that she considered the girls more than servants. Knowing Lysander, she couldn't imagine him not allowing them to share their meal.

"Of course not," he said.

"But, my lady, this isn't proper," Madeline said.

"Refusing Flora's request is improper," Lysander said, though not unkindly. A smile flirted with his lips and he gestured toward the table. "Come and sit."

All five sat down to eat. At first the girls, except for Mala, remained quiet. The youngest maid had grown accustomed to the openness Flora encouraged and didn't seem at all intimidated by Lysander. Flora understood why as she listened to them talk to each other quite comfortably.

Finally the older girls relaxed as well. Having worked in the palace, no doubt the other servants had given them strict lessons in how to act.

When the meal ended, the girls cleared the table. Then Flora gave them leave to retire for the night while two male servants filled the bathtub in the sleeping chamber with steaming water.

Finally alone, Flora and Lysander undressed and sank into the tub. Flora sat

between Lysander's legs and rested her back against his chest. He slid his arms around her and nuzzled her neck. Then they remained still for several moments, enjoying the warmth of the water and the nearness of each other's bodies.

Flora reached for the rose-scented soap, but Lysander's hands closed over her hand he took it from her. He swept her hair aside and gently rubbed the soap over her shoulders and back.

Closing her eyes, Flora purred softly and relaxed as he bathed her. She extended her arms and he ran the soap over them and swept it along her underarms. Then he soaped her breasts and cupped them, letting the scented cake drop into the water.

He lightly squeezed and kneaded her breasts and teased her nipples with his thumbs, rousing her passion. While fondling her breasts, he nuzzled her neck, then ran the tip of his tongue around the shell of her ear. It tickled and Flora giggled, squirming a bit. His swollen cock pushed against her and she wanted to touch him too.

Flora stretched her arm, feeling around the bottom of the tub for the elusive soap. Finally she found it and turned to face him. She draped her legs over his and bent her knees so that she fit comfortably between his legs.

"My turn," she said, running the soap over his magnificent chest. It was so broad, the pale skin kissed with gold. She trailed her fingertips over his belly, loving how the muscles tightened and flexed beneath her tender exploration. Edging closer, she soaped his shoulders. Still washing him, she kissed him tenderly. He readily parted his lips to her probing tongue and his tongue met it with gentle, sweeping strokes.

For a moment Flora paused in washing him. Still holding the soap in one hand, she slid the other behind his neck as their tongues thrust against each other. She rubbed her pelvis against his cock, quickly becoming desperate to feel him inside her.

Before breaking the kiss, she playfully nipped his lower lip. She ran the soap over his shoulder, but he wrapped his arm around her and tugged her closer for another kiss. When they parted, they gazed into each other's eyes and smiled.

"Raise your arms," she said.

A playful grin still flirting with his lips, he did as she asked and she ran the soap under his arms. No sooner had she finished than he pulled her close and kissed her with such passion that she could only cling to him and moan with pleasure. She opened her mouth wide to him, her tongue brushing his and her water-slicked breasts pressed to his hard, wet chest.

"Goddess, Flora, I want you again," he said against her lips, his voice husky and his eyes gleaming with desire.

"I want you too, Lysander. So much."

He kissed her once more, then they finished washing quickly and stood. Lysander stepped out of the tub and offered her his hand. She took it and followed him. He reached for a towel and wrapped it around her shoulders, then gently rubbed her back.

Gazing into his eyes, Flora thought how much she loved him. Nothing felt as good

as sharing moments like this.

Lysander used the towel to dry her from shoulder to toe.

"Go to bed," he told her, drying off quickly.

Flora obeyed. She turned down the covers and settled onto her back. Not bothering to pull the blanket over her, she lay with her body bare.

Lysander tossed the towel aside and approached. He sat on the edge of the bed and grasped her foot. His fingertips caressed the sole and she jerked and giggled, but he refused to let her go. A wickedly arousing grin on his lips, he lifted her foot and kissed each toe, then he kissed his way up her leg.

"Turn over," he said, his voice just above a whisper. He moved up the bed and she rolled onto her stomach.

Lysander's warm hand stroked and kneaded her shoulders and back gently. It felt so good that Flora closed her eyes and moaned from the pleasure.

Still caressing her, he covered her back with feathery kisses, leaving a trail down her spine to the indentation of her buttocks. Then he nipped and kissed her bottom. His teeth lightly pressed against each sphere while his hands kneaded them.

He rolled her onto her back and settled between her bent knees.

"Lysander," she murmured, gazing at him through half-closed eyes.

He moistened his chiseled lips then touched them to her clit. His tongue swept over the aching little nub. With the very tip of his tongue, he teased the small, sensitive side of her clit, then he lapped with flicking upward strokes.

Moaning with need, Flora arched her back and tried to writhe, but his hands on her buttocks held her steady. Over and over his wet tongue lapped her clit. The passion built inside her until a few rhythmic flicks of his tongue hurled her over the edge.

"Goddess, oh yes! Lysander, yes," she panted.

He continued teasing her with his tongue and lips until she lay completely satisfied.

Flora finally opened her eyes. Lysander still lay between her legs, staring at her with lust burning in his slanted blue eyes.

At the moment she wanted to give him the same pleasure he had just given her.

"Come here," she said, beckoning with her finger.

Wearing a playful yet incredibly masculine grin, he said, "Up there?"

"Yes, my lord. On your back so I can kiss your beautiful blade."

He chuckled and moved toward the pillows. He stretched out on his back, his arms folded behind his head and his legs parted. Despite his languid position, unmistakable passion shone in his eyes. When she knelt between his legs and curled her fist around his cock, raw lust tore through her.

She loved licking and sucking him almost as much as she liked being devoured by his lips and tongue. Starting at the base of his cock, she pressed kisses up the length of it, then she rolled her tongue over the bulging head and flicked the underside.

"Sweet goddess," he breathed in an aching voice.

Flora couldn't help smiling around his cock head, though she didn't stop licking and sucking him. Her eyes closed, she enjoyed the smoothness of his crown and the velvety feel of his shaft against her palm as she stroked him. She tasted the first droplets of his essence and laved his head, then lapped the underside in a steady rhythm that soon had him panting, his every muscle tense.

"Flora, ah! My beautiful love," he cried as he came.

Flora swallowed and lapped. She gripped his cock to keep him from thrusting too deeply into her mouth while at the same time allowing him to enjoy his climax.

When he finally lay sated, she released him and stood to wash in the basin of water on the bedside table. Then she curled up beside him.

With a satisfied groan, he pulled her close to him.

"Goodnight, my love," he whispered against her hair.

"Goodnight." She squeezed his hand and smiled. "My love."

After such a cold marriage, it felt wonderful to finally have a love.

* * * * *

Two days later, Flora returned to the chamber after taking an afternoon walk in the field. Lysander stood at the table, working his magic. His presence didn't strike her as odd, though he usually worked on his magic at night after he'd fulfilled his daily duties. What hit her was the smell.

Instead of the usual clean, refreshing aroma that accompanied Lysander's magic, a heavy, bitter scent hung on the air. It reminded her of the scent that surrounded Typhon and she shuddered.

"Flora," Lysander said, scarcely taking his gaze from the powder he was mixing in a wooden bowl.

"What is that smell?" she asked.

"*Bramroot*," he replied absently. "Quiet for a moment, please, while I finish this."

She walked silently across the room, selected a book from the shelves and sat by the fire. Though she tried, she found it difficult to concentrate on the book. That smell and the intensity of Lysander's demeanor worried her.

She was probably overreacting because of her experiences with Typhon, yet she couldn't seem to control the fear crawling through her.

Nearly an hour later, Lysander completed his work. He opened the windows and the doors to the garden, allowing some fresh air into the room.

"Thank the goddess," Flora said. She placed the book aside and rose. "I don't think I could stand much more of that smell."

"I'm sorry, but *bramroot* is very effective in reinforcing Fanticaun magic and it's less dangerous than *wymist*."

Of course. He needed to fight Typhon on his own ground.

"Is it helping?" she asked.

"It's too soon to say. I didn't want to use it because I'm not keen on the smell and some of the effects, but we need to be prepared. The spies we've sent to Darridge have reported back that Typhon hasn't left the palace in weeks and strong magical activity emanates from his tower as well as the inner training grounds. He and his elite guard are preparing. Even Ariston is starting to realize I might have been right about a preemptive attack. It's still not too late and I'm pushing him hard for it."

"How do Prytanis and Mikolas feel about it?"

His brow furrowed with annoyance. "Why does that matter? I'm the overlord and my voice is second to Ariston's."

His response took her aback. That didn't seem like him. Maybe the *bramroot* affected him. Her head throbbed from the pungent smoke and she could almost taste it on her tongue. She had no idea how long Lysander had been working with it before she arrived.

"Maybe we should sit in the garden for a while," she suggested. "Some fresh air will do us both good."

"I can't. I have a meeting with Prytanis tonight. You enjoy the garden. I'll be back later."

She took a step toward him, hoping for a kiss goodbye, but he turned away, a distracted look on his face, and headed for the door.

Flora swallowed hard, past the lump of fear and hurt in her throat. She was being unreasonable. He had important duties and grave responsibility. If Typhon worried her, then he probably concerned Lysander even more. As overlord he needed to keep Aberhill safe, yet Ariston hesitated to initiate what might possibly be the worst battle of their age.

When and if everything settled down to some semblance of normalcy, Lysander would relax. Until then, she needed to support him.

Then why did she still have such a horrible feeling deep inside?

* * * * *

Over the next few days, Lysander used *bramroot* so often during his magical practice that no matter how much Flora aired out the rooms in his absence, the pungent scent lingered.

He often worked late into the night. Though she kept the door to the bedchamber closed, she couldn't help noticing the flicker of firelight under the door. When she finally drifted off, nightmares about Typhon disturbed her sleep.

On the fifth night, she sat in the garden, trying to take in the cool air, but the stench of *bramroot* drifted through the open doors. She stared at Lysander who sat on the stone floor, meditating within a circle of *bramroot* incense. A little shudder rippled down her

spine.

This type of meditation supposedly enhanced his power, but it reminded her too much of Typhon.

She closed her eyes for a moment then stepped into the room.

"I can't stay here any longer," she said softly.

When he didn't respond, she shook her head and stalked toward the bedchamber where she gathered her few belongings.

"What do you mean?"

She jumped and gasped, started to realize he'd approached and stood in the doorway, staring at her with an intense look in his eyes.

"I mean the smell of that *bramroot* is becoming unbearable. Even when you're not here the place reeks of it."

"I realize it's not the sweetest scent in the world, but I must use it, Flora. I thought you understood that."

"I do. It's just that the smell... If only you could keep the windows open while you're practicing it might help."

A faint smile touched his lips. "That would defeat the purpose of the smoke."

"All I'm saying is maybe I should move into the chamber Ariston let me have when I first came here."

He studied her for a moment, then nodded. "Maybe that's a good idea."

Flora's stomach tightened. His words shouldn't hurt, but they did. Though she knew he needed to work his magic, part of her had hoped he'd at least protest her moving from his rooms. Or maybe he intended to sleep with her in the other chamber.

He probably meant to do that. He would work here and spend his nights with her.

Without another word, he turned, walked back to the adjoining room and settled onto the floor amidst the smoke and candles.

Sighing, Flora took her belongings and walked to the door.

"I'm going, Lysander," she said. "See you later?"

He didn't reply and a flash of anger momentarily overtook her hurt feelings. She left, closing the door harder than necessary.

A short time later, as she and the redheaded girls tidied her chamber, Flora calmed a bit. Lysander had a great responsibility and so much on his mind. To keep Aberhill safe from Typhon, he needed complete focus. She must support and not hinder him. Tonight when he came to bed she'd talk to him.

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To Flora's disappointment, Lysander didn't join her that night.

Without the stench of *bramroot*, she should have slept comfortably, yet she couldn't

stop thinking about Lysander. He'd become a different man than the one she'd fallen in love with. Fanticaun magic could be a beautiful thing, but also terrifying. Power such as men like Lysander and Typhon possessed had to be a temptation to them. Yet she truly believed that Lysander didn't want to enhance his power for his sake, but for Aberhill. She feared that in strengthening his power, he would lose himself.

In the morning, Flora and the girls ate breakfast, then she taught them their lessons and spent about an hour on needlework. By then Flora desperately wanted some fresh air and she was concerned about Lysander. Perhaps she'd upset him yesterday after all? Maybe he was deliberately avoiding her because of it?

At midday, most of the elite guards were training in the outer field with their horses and few were at the inner field. Flora decided she and the girls would eat their afternoon meal there. Deep inside, she hoped that by chance Lysander would be there as well, as he sometimes got in extra training at that time.

They packed some food into a basket and Madeline took a blanket for them to sit on, then they walked to the field.

Several elite guards were engaged in swordplay and a little thrill shot through Flora when she saw Lysander among them. He and Cledus were in the middle of a match. While the younger man had excellent skill, he didn't compare to Lysander.

Madeline spread the blanket under a tree in a far corner of the field, so as not to interfere with the guards. Flora and the girls settled onto it and Marjorie unpacked their meal.

Just watching Lysander made Flora's heartbeat quicken. Tall and lean, he moved with such strength and suppleness. Flora loved the way his tunic tightened across his broad shoulders and back as he moved. She enjoyed watching the play of muscles in his long legs as he shifted his stances.

Seated on the blanket, she stared at him, paying no attention to the food that the girls were eating with enthusiasm.

Finally Lysander and Cledus ended their match. While the younger man headed toward the barracks, Lysander approached Flora and the maids. Her heart gave a little leap. She didn't think he'd noticed them at all.

"Hello," he said. "Is there enough for one more?"

"I should have known food would catch your attention," Flora said with deliberate haughtiness. Just looking at him made her feel as if a dozen butterflies were trapped in her stomach.

"Actually it's the company." He sat beside her, resting his back against the tree trunk.

Madeline passed him some bread and cheese, which he accepted with a smile, but placed aside and turned his complete attention to Flora.

"I missed you last night," he said.

His words made her happier than she wanted to admit, so she said, "You could

have joined me."

"By the time I finished working it was nearly dawn. I didn't want to disturb you."

A smile flirted with her lips and she held his gaze. "Next time disturb me."

"All right. I will." The warmth in his eyes made her tingle all over. This was the Lysander she knew and loved.

They ate the meal and chatted about everyday things. For a short time, they forgot about the danger and impending battle.

When they finished, Mala begged Marjorie to join her in a race.

"You cannot," Madeline scolded. "It's unladylike."

"Girls can run too," Mala protested and turned to Flora. "Can't they?"

"Of course they can." Flora grinned. "I'll join in the race."

Madeline glanced at her and lifted an eyebrow. "My lady?"

"Why not?" Lysander said. "Flora is a great swordswoman in the making. I don't doubt she can run like the wind too."

"I wouldn't go that far," Flora said, standing. She grasped his hand and tried to tug him up. "Come on, Overlord."

"All right. I'll give you a head start," Lysander said and rose.

Mala, Marjorie and Flora formed a line.

"Tell us when to go," Mala ordered Madeline.

The oldest girl said, "One. Two. Three. Go!"

Flora and the two maids tore across the grass. Flora soon took the lead, but mere moments later, Lysander passed her, his long legs devouring the ground. He'd picked up Mala along the way. Giggling, the little girl clung to his neck with one arm while waving to Flora and Marjorie. She and Lysander stood waiting at the end of the field.

"We won," Mala said.

"Let's see you win with your own legs, runt," Marjorie said, though not unkindly. She playfully tugged a lock of her sister's red hair.

Flora gazed at Lysander, thinking how much she loved him and how adorable he and the child looked together. A pang of regret darted through her when she thought of the baby she'd lost. Lysander's baby. She hoped someday they'd have another child, one they could raise together. Sometimes it seemed impossible. Yet she didn't want this afternoon tainted by unhappy thoughts.

"I have work to do," Lysander said and sighed, placing Mala back on her feet.

"Can't you stay a little longer?" Flora asked, taking his hand and squeezing it.

He met her gaze and brushed her mouth with a kiss. "A few minutes."

They rejoined Madeline who had cleaned up the meal scraps and sat weaving crowns from the wildflowers she'd picked. The yellow flowers were plentiful in the grassy field. In her younger years, Flora had enjoyed weaving flowers into crowns too.

While Mala and Marjorie gathered more flowers, Flora sat under the tree. Lysander stretched out on his back, his head on her lap. She stroked his face and he closed his eyes. Since returning from Darridge, moments like this had been far too few.

The girls wove crowns for Flora and Lysander. He didn't protest when Mala placed it on his head.

All too soon, he sat up and kissed Flora again. Standing, he said, "I really need to get back to work. Thank you, ladies, for the food and the company."

Giggling, Flora stood and pointed to the flowers on his head. "And the crown?"

Lysander reached up and chuckled as he tugged off the crown. "Thanks for reminding me. I don't think my men would be too eager to follow my orders if I showed up wearing this."

Gazing into his eyes, Flora said, "I believe they'd follow your orders if you were wearing a dress."

"I wouldn't go that far."

"I would."

He kissed her again, placed his crown on her head and walked away.

Watching him go, Flora sighed. She hoped he would come to her tonight.

* * * * *

Very late that night Flora lay in bed, gazing toward the window through which she could see the moon. It appeared that Lysander had no intention of joining her after all. Most likely he was caught up in work again. Though she knew he needed to focus on his duty, she couldn't help missing him. Their new relationship was strong in one sense, yet fragile in another. She wanted to know if his feelings for her had changed.

A short time later, the door creaked open and her heart raced. She closed her eyes, feigning sleep and waiting for him to join her in bed.

She didn't hear him move and detected only the faint rustle of fabric as he undressed. Then he slid beneath the sheets. His body pressed close to hers and he draped an arm over her waist.

A smile tugged at her lips, then faded when she caught the scent of *bramroot*. She stiffened a bit and slid away from him.

"I'm sorry. Did I wake you?" he asked.

"No. I was awake." She turned over, meeting his gaze. The moonlight glinted off his slanted blue eyes and his long lashes cast shadows on his chiseled face. He looked handsome, yet harsh in a way she'd never seen before.

"Is something wrong?" he asked.

"The *bramroot*."

An expression of annoyance crossed his face. He closed his eyes for a moment and when he opened them the irritated look had vanished.

"Everyone was asleep and I didn't want to wake the servants to carry bathwater."

"Of course," she said and sighed. He had merely tried to be considerate. Unfortunately whether he chose to be considerate of her or the servants, one or the other would be disturbed, either through a broken sleep or the stench of magical herbs.

Lysander rose. Flora's gaze swept his tall, sleekly muscled body and she drew a deep breath. Goddess, she longed to wrap her arms around him and press her face to his chest.

"I'll go to the lake," he said.

"You don't have to," she sat up, allowing the sheet to drop to her waist. She'd slept in the nude and his gaze riveted to her full breasts. He moistened his lips at the sight of them and Flora's belly clenched. Her nipples tingled and tightened and she could scarcely wait for him to touch them. It seemed like forever since they'd made love and she wanted to feel his skin against hers and his cock filling her.

"If it wasn't for the curfew, I'd join you," she said.

He shrugged. "I'm the overlord. I won't arrest you."

Gazing at him with a playful look, she said, "I almost wish you would."

"Hmm. I can devise a punishment just for you, my love." His words aroused her, yet the look in his eyes made her shiver.

Pulling on his trousers and tunic, he asked, "What's wrong? You don't think I'd really punish you?"

"Typhon would —"

His brow furrowed and he approached. Taking her chin in his hand, he gazed into her eyes. "I'm not Typhon. Now come." He picked up her robe and held it for her.

Flora stood and slipped her arms into it. As she belted it, Lysander gently gathered her hair and tugged it from the collar of the robe. He smoothed it down her back, then wrapped his arms around her waist and held her to his chest.

She closed her eyes for a moment, enjoying the security of being in his arms while at the same time trying to ignore the scent of *bramroot*.

"Let's go." He picked up a towel from the trunk at the foot of the bed, then took her hand.

They quietly made their way down the corridor and stairs.

Unlike the previous night, the weather was warm and Flora looked forward to a swim in the lake, especially with Lysander.

They had no sooner left the palace than two elite guards approached. They exchanged a few words with Lysander, then he dismissed them. He and Flora continued on their way. He guided her to a section of the lake secluded among a clump of trees.

At first Flora felt a bit shy undressing out in the open. While Lysander pulled off his clothes, she glanced around.

"We're quite alone," he said, stepping toward her.

She glanced over his chest then her gaze dropped to his cock. The faster she disrobed and they washed, the sooner she'd feel that gorgeous ivory cock deep inside her.

Lysander slid a finger into her belt and tugged her even closer. He kissed her lightly at first, then deeper when she melted against him. His hands unfastened the belt and he slid the robe off her shoulders. It pooled at her feet and she slipped her arms around his neck, closing her eyes. Her breasts pressed against his steely chest and she moaned softly when his hands cupped her buttocks, kneading gently.

When he broke the kiss, she nearly stumbled. A faint smile on his lips, he grasped her upper arms and steadied her. Once she caught her balance, he turned and walked toward the lake, giving her a perfect view of his tight, rounded bottom.

He strode into the water and ducked under. Flora joined him and swam out a short distance. She gave a little gasp when he surfaced beside her. A wicked look in his eyes, he pulled her close and kissed her again. His tongue thrust into her mouth and she met its hungry strokes. Lysander took her breasts in his hands and massaged lightly, his calloused palms teasing the pointy nipples until she sighed with desire.

While he stroked her breasts, Flora caressed his chest and slid her hands over his lean hips to grasp his buttocks. She loved the feel of it—smooth skin over hard muscle that tightened in her hands. His thick cock pushed against her and she moaned, standing on tiptoe and trying to rub her aching clit against it.

"Lysander, I want you so much," she breathed against his lips. "It seems like forever since we were together like this."

"Duty has kept me occupied," he said between pressing kisses down her neck and shoulder. He took her earlobe between his teeth and nibbled gently, then bit a little harder. She yelped and gasped.

"That hurt!"

Gazing into her eyes, he said, "I'm sorry."

Her heart pounding with anticipation, Flora waited for him to continue.

Chapter Eighteen

Lysander's mouth covered Flora's in another kiss, this one very deep and possessive. Though his kiss wasn't painful, it was different than usual. It reminded her of –

No. Her mind had run away with her. Lysander and Typhon were as different as night and day. Due to the circumstances, she understood Lysander's preoccupation and edginess.

He took her lower lip between his teeth and gently sucked on it, then bit it ever so lightly, as if making up for nipping her ear.

"Flora," he said, gazing into her eyes. "I need you."

"I need you too."

Again his mouth descended on hers. She closed her eyes and clung to him. Lysander lifted her and carried her to the water's edge. He placed her on the ground and stretched out beside her. Propped on one arm, he caressed her breasts and belly.

"You're so beautiful," he said. "I love being with you. And I loved sharing the afternoon with you and your young friends. That's how all children should grow up – playing in the sunlight, without fear of being killed by men like Typhon. I'll do anything to keep the people of Aberhill safe, to keep *you* safe."

Flora cupped his cheek. "I know that, Lysander, but in trying to protect us, don't sacrifice yourself. I don't know much about Fanticaun magic but I do know that what you're delving into can be dangerous. Look what it's done to Typhon. He spent all his time in dimness, smothered by pungent herbs and bitter magic. I don't want that to happen to you."

His brow knitted and she almost felt the struggle within him. "I don't like it any more than you do, but if that's what must be done to fight Typhon then I have no choice. It's either him or us and I will *never* surrender to him. Can you imagine what would happen if he were to take Aberhill? Even worse, if he were to overthrow the high king?"

"I don't think he's that powerful," she whispered, though she couldn't be certain. She knew Typhon was just as determined as Lysander. A horrible thought flashed across her mind. What if they destroyed each other?

Before she could think or say anything else, Lysander kissed her. His tongue thrust into her mouth with such passion that she could only close her eyes and let him take the lead. Relieved to surrender to him, she focused on pleasure.

Lysander kissed his way down her neck and over her breasts. He took one nipple between his teeth and lashed it with his tongue then did the same to her other nipple.

Flora's breathing increased and her heart pounded. Her clit and pussy ached, desperate for his touch. As if sensing her need, Lysander kissed her belly and guided her legs over his shoulders. Cupping her bottom, he lifted it and covered her clit with his mouth.

"Ah, Lysander!" she panted, caressing his head and clutching his shoulders.

The overlord devoured her. He lapped her clit and then thrust his tongue inside her, exploring her hot, wet pussy.

Lysander returned to her clit and this time he didn't stop until the pleasure overtook her with the force of a charging bull.

"Oh, Lysander!" She moaned and writhed but he held her fast, licking her while the strong pulsations rolled through her.

Finally she lay still except for the rise and fall of her breasts as she caught her breath. The water lapped her and it felt so good as her body slowly cooled down, but Lysander didn't allow her to rest for long.

"Come here, beautiful wench," he said, his voice almost a growl. It startled her a bit and though it aroused her, it reminded her of Typhon. Lysander didn't generally use words like wench, especially directed at her.

Still she didn't think much about it at the moment, since he'd positioned her on her hands and knees and covered her buttocks with kisses. His tongue dipped between the indentation and tickled her sphincter. Heat rose in Flora's face, not only from the excitement of this new kind of teasing but because she couldn't help feeling a bit embarrassed about it. No one had ever tongued her bottom before. Somehow it was more intimate and forbidden than when he lapped the sensitive nub between her legs.

While he lapped, he slid his fingers into her pussy and explored, then he withdrew his fingers from her and fondled her clit. Flora rocked her hips. Her belly clenched and her entire body throbbed with pleasure. Lysander's wet tongue tickled the tight little ring of muscle in her bottom and his long, slender fingers teased the soft, aching flesh between her legs.

The next orgasm struck with even more force than the one before. Flora tried to keep from crying out but couldn't refrain.

She collapsed into the shallow water, rolling onto her back and smiling from sheer pleasure.

Lysander wasn't finished, though. He knelt in front of her, grasped her hips and tugged her close. When he lifted her bottom, she had no choice but to wrap her legs around his lean waist. His stiff cock slid into her drenched pussy and she closed her eyes. The smooth rocks pressed against her shoulders and back but she didn't care. It felt so good to make love with Lysander.

He thrust easily despite the raw need gleaming in his eyes. While he thrust his cock into her, he kneaded her lower belly with his hand, stirring her passions. Then he fondled her clit. Slowly her desire built again, and he edged her closer and closer toward another peak.

Wanting to see him, Flora opened her eyes. A new rush of passion tore through her at the sight of his lean, strong body claiming hers like this. No one had ever understood her needs like the Overlord of Aberhill. Every stroke of his fingers and thrust of his cock made her feel like the only woman in existence.

"Flora," he said, his husky voice just above a whisper. His hand left her clit and he leaned a bit closer, grasping one of her full breasts. His thick cock pushed even deeper inside her and she closed her eyes and moaned, arching her back.

Lysander gently pinched her stiff nipple, then swept his thumb over it. His hand returned to her clit and he stroked it in a steady rhythm that soon had her teetering on the edge.

"Please," she gasped, writhing against him, her internal muscles squeezing his rock-hard cock. "Oh, Lysander, I'm almost there again."

A wicked chuckle escaped his throat. "I know." His thumb rolled over her clit a few more times and she moaned again as her climax overtook her.

Grasping her snugly, Lysander thrust faster, then stiffened and strained into her pulsing body.

"Flora, oh goddess!" he gasped, his hands hot and tight on her hips.

* * * * *

The following morning, Lysander was engaged in intense sword practice with his elite guards when Georgios approached with a message from Prytanis.

"He wants to see you right away, sir. Something about *wymist*."

Panting, Lysander sheathed his blade and nodded. He wiped his perspiring face on his sleeve and hurried toward the palace, Georgios at his heels.

Inside Prytanis' workshop, the chief enchanter stood by a table covered in books and scrolls. He studied a large piece of parchment. His gaze riveted to Lysander and he said, "This letter just arrived from my old mentor, Thorfin. He finally uncovered some useful information about *wymist*. So little is known about it. He got these details from the grandson of his old mentor."

Prytanis offered the parchment to Lysander who read it quickly, his brow furrowed.

"Prolonged use can cause a complete change in a person's demeanor, prompting delusional and violent behavior." Lysander gave a snort of humorless laughter. "I wonder if the damn fool knows about this next part. Heavy use has been known to prevent the conception of children. However when used under the proper conditions, it can greatly increase one's power."

"Prolonged use of any plants in that family can be dangerous," Prytanis said, glancing at Lysander from the corner of his eye. "Including *bramroot*."

Lysander looked up sharply. "Do you have something to say, Prytanis?"

"Now that you mention it, how are you handling the *bramroot*?"

"I have it under control."

"I'm sure Typhon thinks he has the *wymist* under control too."

Anger shot through Lysander. "Are you comparing me to him?"

"No. I just want to remind you that you're not infallible. Flora has been concerned as well."

"Has she?" he asked flatly. "I don't see how Flora is any of your business."

"I'm merely concerned —"

"Don't be. We had better get this information to Ariston. Maybe now that we have proof that Typhon is dangerously mad, he'll take my advice and launch an attack instead of sitting here like sheep awaiting slaughter."

Both men went to meet with the king.

In his chamber, Ariston listened to them. He sat, his hands resting on the arms of his chair and his expression as calm as ever.

When they finished speaking, he remained silent.

Though Lysander knew his brother was mulling over this new information, he wasn't in the mood for Ariston's contemplative behavior.

"Well?" Lysander demanded. "Do I have permission to attack?"

Ariston's brow knitted and he met Lysander's gaze, unfaltering. "No. I'm going to send a message to High King Nik and ask for an audience with him. Once I present this proof of Typhon's madness, he will be forced to look into the matter and there's a good chance he'll dethrone Typhon. This situation can be settled without bloodshed."

"What if he won't see you?" Lysander demanded. "And what if Typhon attacks in the meantime?"

"Then of course you have my permission to do whatever you must to keep Aberhill safe."

Lysander clenched his teeth. "You keep saying that but your orders contradict your words. Maybe if you had been the one in Typhon's clutches and seen what I saw —"

"Lysander, I understand, but you must agree that a peaceful solution to this problem is preferable to another war."

"Another war? It's the same war, Ariston."

"I will send the message. How we proceed will depend on the high king's response."

"Unless we're attacked in the meantime."

"We've waited this long," Prytanis said. "Is it such a problem to wait a few more days?"

"How are the defenses?" Ariston asked Lysander.

"Stronger than ever."

Ariston nodded. "Excellent. Now if there is nothing else, I have a message to write."

Lysander glared at his brother. At the moment he felt like wrapping his hands around Ariston's neck and choking some sense into him.

He turned and left the chamber, followed by Prytanis.

Lysander tried to calm himself as he strode down the corridor. The *bramroot* made him edgier than usual. He knew it. If he realized it then he was still in control.

"Lysander," Prytanis said, hurrying to keep up with the overlord's furious strides. "Are you all right?"

"I'm well enough, considering the circumstances."

"Surely you must agree that peace is best."

"So far we've been lucky. Typhon hasn't initiated an attack, but that can only mean he's building up his powers. He's using *wymist* and has been consorting with a fleshtress. Who knows how powerful he is by now and what kind of evil magic he has mastered? We can't keep waiting. I don't know why Ariston doesn't realize this."

"He realizes more than you think and the safety of Aberhill rests heavily upon him. He loves this kingdom just as much as we do."

"Then he should start acting like it," Lysander practically growled, strode ahead of Prytanis and didn't look back.

* * * * *

Crystal knew that after Typhon had ordered her from the palace, she should have used the money he had given her to begin a new life far from Darridge. Still she couldn't go too far from him. The sad and desperate King of Darridge compelled her and despite his strangeness, she loved him.

Somehow it was easier to admit how she felt when she was away from the palace. She knew something was desperately wrong with him. He scarcely resembled the man she had met so many months ago. No doubt it had to do with the problems between him and the queen and the bad relations with Aberhill. He spent so much time alone in that stuffy, smoky workroom.

Since leaving, Crystal had rented a room at a village half a day's journey from the palace. She and her aunt exchanged letters often and her aunt had written that no one except the elite guard had seen Typhon for weeks. He remained locked in his workshop and only left in the dark of night to train with his guards. Though her aunt didn't write of her fears, Crystal sensed her terror in her letters.

Crystal knew she should forget about Typhon, but she couldn't. Now more than ever she wanted to see him again. Deep inside she knew he needed help and she doubted anyone at the palace would dare approach him. Many people had reason to hate and fear him, but Crystal could judge him only by how he treated her. A connection existed between her and the king. That link couldn't be broken by social status, evil magic or even physical distance.

Knowing that she wouldn't be content until she saw him again, she rented a horse and returned to the palace. Upon arriving, she met with her aunt and asked if she could arrange for her to meet with the king.

"He won't see anyone, least of all servants," her aunt said, a fearful look in her eyes.

"Surely someone must clean his chamber or attend his bath?" Crystal said. "I'll take the place of any maid who's assigned to serve him."

Her aunt wrung her hands and shook her kerchief-covered head. "I couldn't let you do that. I would be punished and I shudder to think of what he'll do to you."

"He won't hurt me," Crystal said with more confidence than she felt. She didn't believe Typhon would intentionally harm her, but if some sort of madness had affected him, she couldn't tell what he might do.

Her aunt leaned close and whispered, "He's a madman. Take my advice, girl, and get as far from this place as you can."

"I won't leave without seeing him," Crystal stated.

"Why? Why do you care so much?"

"Because deep inside he's a decent man."

Shaking her head, the older woman closed her eyes for a moment. When she opened them, they held a sad and hopeless expression. "That might have been true once, but no more."

Those words struck Crystal hard and she rebelled with every fiber of her being. "I won't believe that. Will you help me or do I have to devise another way to see him?"

With a resigned sigh, her aunt finally agreed.

Early the next morning, Crystal entered Typhon's chamber to change the bed sheets. Her heart pounded and her hands trembled as she worked. Typhon hadn't been to bed yet, but he would most likely be arriving soon to sleep. He worked by night, but from what her aunt said he scarcely slept by day either.

An evil had settled over the palace, and since arriving Crystal had felt it. She had just opened the windows to air out the room when Typhon entered.

Her heart skipped a beat at the sight of him, partly because just being in the same room as him made her tingle all over and partly because his appearance startled her. He was ghostly pale with dark shadows beneath eyes that glittered with what might have been Fanticaun power or could have been madness. She guessed it was a combination of both. Though his tall, broad-shouldered body looked as strong as ever beneath the black vest that clung damply to his perspiring body, he had lost weight, giving him a sinewy, angular look. He wore a sheathed sword at his hip and by the look of him he had just come from training with his elite guard.

"My lord," she said softly, her gaze fixed on his. She remained rooted in one spot, fearful that if she tried to walk her trembling legs wouldn't support her.

"You," he said, curling his lip. He approached, his eyes gleaming with emotion. His jaw tightened visibly and he paused mere inches from her, so close that she felt heat

emanating from his body. Sweat gleamed on his brow and upper lip and glistened in the pit of his throat.

Flora longed to lick that gorgeous throat, wrap her arms around him and hold him close. He looked as if he could use the attention, even though knowing him, he would rather die than accept it.

"I told you never to come back here," he said in a dangerously soft voice.

"I was worried about you. I wanted to see that you're all right."

He spread his arms wide and a sinister grin spread across his lips, "As you can see, I'm splendid."

"You don't look well, my lord."

"Don't I?"

"Please let me help you."

He snorted. "You? A peasant? A serving wench? A skinny little slut? How do you intend to help the King of Darridge?"

She tried not to let his words wound her, yet they cut deeply.

"What can you offer me?" he continued, stepping closer. She moved back and he advanced on her until her back pressed against the wall.

"There is just one thing you have that I might want as a mild diversion," he said and covered her mouth in a harsh kiss.

Crystal had never imagined disliking his kiss, but this wasn't one of affection or even lust. He meant to threaten and punish her with this kiss.

She tried to turn away but he grasped her face roughly and forced her to accept his thrusting tongue. Instead of fighting him, she surrendered. As if compelled, he softened the kiss. Though he still plundered her mouth, the strokes of his tongue were long, slow and tender.

Finally he broke the kiss but remained nose to nose with her.

"I gave you a chance to go," he whispered, his eyes glistening. "You should have stayed away."

"How could I?" She placed her hands on his chest, feeling his heart pounding against her palms. Her heart matched its desperate rhythm. "Typhon, please, tell me what's wrong."

"Everything and nothing." He closed his eyes for a moment and pressed his damp forehead against hers. She loved the feel of him and even the scent of his heated body. Until now, she hadn't realized just how much she'd missed him.

He opened his eyes, grasped her wrists in one hand and pinned them above her head while his other hand fondled her breasts. Beneath her rough woolen dress, her nipples sprang to life. He kneaded first one of her small breasts then the other. Even through the fabric, his touch stirred her so much that the soft, sensitive flesh between her legs ached and throbbed. She couldn't keep from squirming a bit and when she

looked at him through half-closed eyes, she saw his lustful expression and the knowing smile on his lips.

Still caressing her breasts, he kissed her again and Crystal's pulse raced.

He released her hands to roughly unfasten the ties on her dress and tug it off her, leaving her in her thin shift. Typhon bent and took one of her nipples into his mouth, sucking and licking it, dampening the thin fabric until it clung to the sensitive little nub like second skin. His teeth scraped across her nipple and she closed her eyes, her breathing ragged.

"Oh, Typhon, please," she moaned.

He growled in response, pushed the shift up to her waist and cupped her soft mound. His palm kneaded it, teasing her clit.

"So lovely," he murmured, sliding two long fingers into her soaked pussy and sinking to his knees. He lapped her clit while continuing to explore her. The very tip of his tongue teased her swollen nub with relentless upward strokes. Crystal felt as if she'd just burst into flames. Her heart pounded and her breath came in ragged pants but Typhon continued tormenting her and paused only when he sensed her teetering on the edge.

He pressed rough kisses to her belly and dipped his tongue into her navel, making her quiver with need.

"Oh, My Lord Typhon," she panted, clutching handfuls of his thick, black hair.

"Beautiful bitch," he snarled and once again covered her clit with his mouth. This time he lapped quickly, rhythmically, his tongue like wet velvet against her aching flesh.

Crystal thought she might collapse from such keen pleasure, but one of his hands supported her waist. She managed to remain standing, though her legs trembled almost uncontrollably as she approached her climax.

"Please," she sobbed.

His tongue flicked and his fingers stroked. He slid his hand from her waist to her buttocks and pressed the tip of his finger against her sphincter, teasing it to the same rhythm as his tongue lapped her clit and his fingers explored her pussy.

Crystal's neck arched and her eyes rolled back as an intense climax struck her.

Typhon rose and swept her into his arms.

A moment later he placed her on the bed, tore off his clothes and covered her body with his. He filled her with a swift thrust.

Crystal cried out sharply from the sheer pleasure of being filled by his enormous cock.

Over and over, he thrust into her, panting her name. She loved how he sounded, his voice rough and breathless.

Then she became aware of another voice, this one sinister and feminine.

"He fucks beautifully, doesn't he, wench?"

Crystal's eyes flew open and she gasped upon seeing a naked, smoky creature with a skeletal face kneeling behind Typhon on the bed.

"Keep going, my lovelies," she purred, raking her sharp nails down Typhon's back. The creature rose higher on her knees. Crystal could scarcely believe her eyes as the gray pelvis that just moments ago had a smooth, feminine cleft, shifted shape, changing into a thick smoke-colored cock.

The creature's breasts tipped with spiky black nipples, stark against its gray skin, trembled as she laughed. While Typhon continued fucking Crystal, the creature leaned over his bottom, grasped his hips and thrust her tongue between the indentation of his ass.

Typhon growled and arched his neck back, his hips jutting against Crystal's, stirring her passion despite the feeling of revulsion that swept over her.

"My lord, what's happening?" Crystal demanded, her voice quivering. "Who is she?"

Typhon's eyes opened halfway and his lips twisted into an evil grin. "She's the reason I'll defeat Aberhill and she's the reason you shouldn't have come back. You don't belong here, little wench. You never did."

The grayish creature straightened, licking its lips. It grasped Typhon's lean hips and thrust its smoky phallus into his ass. Crystal closed her eyes, partly because Typhon had pushed her to the verge of another climax, but mostly because she couldn't bear the sight of this creature fucking him.

When Crystal's climax struck, she quivered and writhed beneath him, tears leaking from her eyes.

Typhon grunted in pleasure and burst inside her while behind him the fiend gave a shrill cry of fulfillment.

No sooner had Typhon rolled off her than Crystal sprang out of the bed and pulled on her clothes.

Typhon lay on his back. The creature sprawled beside him, its long, thin fingers caressing his chest. It wore a gloating look on its skeletal face. Though Typhon wore a faint smile, something in his eyes told her that he felt as violated as she did. This was a mere semblance of the proud man she had fallen in love with.

He had sunk to the lowest depths of magical debauchery and was obviously quite mad. No longer fit to rule, he threatened the safety of surrounding kingdoms as well. Something told her that unless someone stopped him, he would not only destroy himself but many others too.

"This is your last chance," he said. "Leave and this time stay gone. Should you return again we'll see that you regret it."

Swallowing hard, Crystal nodded and hurried out of the chamber. After exchanging a few brief words with her aunt, Crystal mounted her horse and galloped away from the palace.

Though it broke her heart, she knew what she had to do. The high king needed to be told what Typhon had become. Only then could she hope that her lover might be saved, for she knew that deep inside the real Typhon still existed.

Of course she had no delusions about the high king so much as seeing a peasant like herself, let alone taking the word of one against someone of noble blood. Her only chance would be to go to Aberhill and pray that Flora was there. From her aunt's letters, Crystal knew that everyone in Darridge believed Flora had run off with Lysander of Aberhill. If she could somehow convince them to go to the high king with this information about Typhon, maybe he would believe them.

She needed to do this, not only for the sake of Darridge and Aberhill, but for Typhon. Crystal had no magical abilities but she had intuition and it told her that no matter how the forthcoming war turned out, that horrible skeleton-faced creature would destroy him.

* * * * *

Two days after Ariston sent his message by carrier pigeon to the high king, he received a reply. The supreme ruler wished to meet with him and hear his complaint. Flora volunteered to accompany him, but Lysander adamantly refused. He wanted her to remain safe at Aberhill.

"I believe he's right," Ariston said. "Regardless of whether or not High King Nik agrees that Typhon should be dethroned, he might not be willing to interfere in his marriage. If he orders Flora to return to Typhon, at least she'll have a chance to flee if she's here in Aberhill."

Ariston's craftiness surprised her. Despite his kind treatment of her, she had always felt he disapproved of her. Yet he would give her a chance to keep her freedom, even if it meant going against the high king's orders.

Even Lysander looked momentarily surprised by his brother's words, but the expression vanished quickly, replaced by the stern look he had worn almost since returning from Darridge.

"Shall I accompany you?" Prytanis asked the king.

Ariston shook his head. "I want you here with Lysander, should Typhon attack while I'm away. I'll bring Captain Mikolas with me."

"When will you leave?" Lysander asked.

"At dawn. I'll send a message as soon as the high king makes his decision. Hopefully it will be within the week."

A week seemed so terribly long. It would take Ariston and his party two days to reach the high king's palace, then the high king would probably take a few days to

consider Ariston's charges against Typhon. Most likely Typhon would be summoned so that he could speak on his own behalf.

One way or another, Flora knew she would have to face Typhon and the high king. Just thinking about it made her feel a little sick. She would rather die than return to Typhon.

Chapter Nineteen

Once Ariston dismissed her, Flora returned to her chamber. Lysander had remained behind to discuss affairs of state with the king and Prytanis, but she wished he had been able to join her. Worried and upset, she needed someone to talk to.

In her chamber, Mala and Marjorie sat at the square wooden table by the open window, doing their daily lessons.

"Are you all right, my lady?" Marjorie asked, noticing Flora's concerned expression.

"Yes." Flora forced a smile and joined the girls at the table. "How are the lessons going?"

Before the girls had a chance to answer in depth, Madeline burst into the room, a bit breathless and looking worried. "My lady, there is a woman waiting in the kitchen. Her name is Crystal. She says she knows you."

Flora almost froze. Crystal, her maid from Darridge?

"I told her that no one named Flora is here," Madeline said, her brow furrowed. "How could she know you're here? Only the elite guard and a few loyal servants know you've been living at the palace."

Flora stood and placed an arm around the girl. "Don't concern yourself. Crystal used to be my maid in Darridge. Most likely she's been sent by Typhon and I'm certain he knows I'm here."

All three girls looked frightened.

"Do you think that means he's getting ready to attack?" Marjorie asked.

"I hope not," Flora said, then forced another smile. "You girls continue your lessons. Madeline, please follow me."

Flora swept out of the chamber, followed by the redheaded lass. They walked to Ariston's chamber where they told the guard posted outside that she needed to speak to the king right away.

Moments later, Flora and Madeline stood facing Ariston, Lysander and Prytanis. After hearing about Crystal, Ariston told Madeline to have her brought up to his chamber.

When Crystal arrived, Flora was surprised to find her in good health. She wore an elegant dress of pale blue, the hem and her boots stained with mud from travel.

"My lady." Crystal bowed her head to Flora and also bowed to Ariston. "Your Majesty."

"Why have you come here?" Ariston demanded.

"Because I have no one else to turn to," Crystal stated. "I desperately need you to help me."

"Has Typhon harmed you?" Flora asked.

"No. It's for him that I'm concerned." Crystal held Flora's gaze and though in the past she had doubted the maid's sincerity, at this moment she sensed the woman spoke the truth. The worry in her eyes appeared genuine. "I fear that he has gone mad. He locks himself in his workshop, practicing debauched forms of magic and consorting with this demonic creature. I can't begin to describe how horrible..." Crystal's voice faded.

She closed her eyes for a moment and shook her head, as if trying to expel the memory. When she opened her eyes, they gleamed with a barrage of emotions—fear, anger and most of all concern. Crystal continued, "I know he's preparing to attack Aberhill and when he does I have a terrible feeling that everyone in the vicinity will suffer. This magic will kill thousands and I know it will kill him as well."

"Why do you care about his life?" Lysander demanded. "From what I hear, he treated you and the other servants terribly."

"No," Crystal stated. "He never harmed me and went out of his way to see that I was safe while living at the palace."

Flora's brow furrowed. That's not what Typhon had told her. He'd always threatened to torture, even kill, Crystal and other servants if she didn't obey him without question.

"Crystal, if he's forced you to come here as some kind of distraction—"

"No, my lady. Please. You must believe me. I just want to go to the high king and tell him that Typhon isn't well, that he is sick in the mind and he cannot be allowed to continue like this. I know the high king will never see a commoner like myself, but if you go to him, he'll listen. I would rather see Typhon removed from power than remain free to destroy others and himself. There is something wrong with him. I know it, for he would never behave in such a manner if he were himself."

Crystal's words surprised Flora. Were they talking about the same man? Yet deep inside, she grudgingly admitted that Typhon hadn't always been such a monster. No doubt the *wymist* and the fleshtress had enhanced not only his magic but his worst characteristics as a man.

Flora, Lysander, Ariston and Prytanis exchanged glances.

"You still haven't answered my question," Lysander said in a soft yet commanding voice. "Why do you care about his life?"

"Because," Crystal said, her gaze locked on the overlord's, "I love him."

"Oh no, Crystal," Flora said, her brow furrowed. She placed a hand on the maid's shoulder. "You can't love him. He's—"

"He's been a bad husband to you and he's become a bad king, but I don't want to be queen and I don't care about Fanticaun magic. I simply love the man he is, beneath everything."

The three men in the room looked as perplexed as Flora felt, yet she could almost understand Crystal, for she loved Lysander in exactly the same way. The only difference was, Lysander deserved love.

"Tomorrow I'm leaving to meet with the high king," Ariston told Crystal. "Tonight you will remain under guard here at the palace and accompany me and my party in the morning."

Again Crystal bowed her head to him. "Thank you, King Ariston."

"Prytanis, see to her accommodations," Ariston stated.

The king dismissed everyone. Lysander walked with Flora back to her chamber.

"Do you think she's telling the truth about being in love with him?" Flora asked.

"Yes," Lysander stated. "Unfortunately I believe she is, but that girl has chosen a dangerous path. No one can survive contact with Typhon unscathed."

* * * * *

Typhon lay in his bath, his eyes closed yet his entire body tense. It seemed nothing could relax him lately, not even fucking the fleshtress until he could scarcely walk. His mind spun with the impending battle, his deadly magic, his disloyal wife and his hated enemies. Yet something else tormented him in a way he'd never imagined. Its strength nearly overwhelmed him at times, so he fought against it and buried it deep inside.

The wench. The peasant.

Crystal.

Sharp fingernails raked his inner thighs and he parted them, his pulse racing as the water became almost uncomfortably hot. A hand cupped his cock and another his balls. He gasped and grunted when a tongue swept over his cock head, then drew it deeply into a scalding mouth. Pointed teeth scraped along the sensitive flesh, then the demon bitch sucked him so deeply into her mouth that he thought she might swallow him whole.

The fleshtress eased onto him, sliding her arms around his neck, bracing her legs against his sides and swallowing his cock with her fiery cunt.

He opened his eyes and stared into her dark ones. A wicked grin tugged at her lips and she said, "I told you the maid would betray you. She intends to go to the high king and try to convince him you're mad."

He snorted. "As if the high king will take the word of a peasant."

"What if she has help?" the fleshtress purred. "Such as the support of King Ariston."

Typhon's blood seemed to boil in his veins and he gritted his teeth. "What?"

"Of course I have no way of knowing if the king will help her. I can't read him, but as I told you when she left days ago, I saw betrayal in the girl's mind. I've been thinking of how she could do it, convince the high king that you don't deserve your kingdom. Then it struck me. All she needs is support from someone who wants to see you destroyed."

Typhon shoved her away from him and stepped out of the tub. His fists clenched and his head spun with rage.

"Maybe you should have killed the bitch instead of letting her go?" purred the fleshtress, approaching him.

Sneering, Typhon's hand lashed out and tightened around her throat. "Sometimes I think I'd rather kill you."

She chuckled. "Impossible. What stings more, Typhon, being betrayed by a lover or loving her so much that you couldn't even defend yourself against her?"

"It's not her that I need to defend against. I've prepared long enough. It's time to launch the attack against Aberhill and claim what's mine."

* * * * *

Flora was practicing with her sword in a corner of the elite guards' inner training field when the attack struck.

The sky blackened and the ground trembled. Deafening claps of thunder filled the air.

The guards who were training in the center of the field dispersed, except for Cledus who headed toward Flora.

"Go to the dungeon, my lady," he said. "It's the safest place."

"It's Typhon, isn't it?" she shouted above the storm.

"Yes. This is magic, not nature," he said.

"I have to find Mala, Marjorie and Madeline."

Cledus glanced upward as lightning filled the sky while at the same time the rain turned to hail. Flora gasped when it pelted her, for instead of feeling cold, it burned like acid.

Grasping her arm, Cledus tugged her toward the door. They ducked inside the corridor that connected the barracks to the main palace. "Hurry to the dungeon, my lady. I have to join the other guards."

He turned and left at a run. Again the ground shook and Flora stumbled against the wall. Her heart pounded in fear. Goddess, they'd all known this was inevitable but nothing could have prepared her for this moment.

Thrusting aside her fears, she made her way to the castle. She needed to find the children and what about Lysander? No doubt he and Prytanis were already engaged in battle.

Halfway to her chamber, she found Mala and Marjorie.

"Girls, we need to go to the dungeon," she said.

"Not without Madeline," Marjorie stated and screamed when the palace trembled. A thick crack appeared down the wall the girls had stumbled against.

Flora grasped their arms and pulled them toward the stairs.

"Madeline!" Mala shouted.

"She's probably in the dungeon already," Flora said, though she couldn't help worrying about the eldest sister as well. Still she needed to get these girls to safety.

When they reached the great hall, just about everyone in the palace raced around, most heading toward the dungeon. Two soldiers from the regular army tried to keep everyone under control while a third posted at the door guided in the villagers who rushed to the palace for safety.

"The village is completely destroyed," a woman said, her face white with panic. "Almost all the soldiers stationed there are dead."

Flora's stomach lurched. Goddess, already? Had Lysander been among them?

"Flora!"

Relief shot through her at the sound of Lysander's voice resonating from the top of the stairs.

She turned toward him and he ran down the steps. He wore the black vest and trousers of the elite guard, as he had most likely been training when the attack began. His pale face looked like granite and his blue eyes appeared harder than iron.

"Take these girls to the dungeon and stay there," he ordered. "Don't leave until this is over."

"We need to find Madeline."

"Georgios has already taken her below. Now go." He grasped her arm and pushed his way through the crowd. When they reached the stairway to the dungeon, he shoved her and the girls toward it.

Glancing over her shoulder, she saw him face the wild crowd.

"Attention!" he bellowed so loud that Flora almost winced. "Silence!"

Everyone quieted and he continued, "Form a line, move quickly and silently. If you want to survive, keep calm and follow orders."

He turned the now-quiet crowd back to the soldiers, then disappeared.

Flora continued on her way, hoping this wouldn't be the last she'd ever see of him.

* * * * *

The battle raged throughout the day. Flora and the girls remained in the dungeon, assisting Georgios with casualties. They turned several of the cells into makeshift rooms for the injured.

Soldiers and commoners alike were brought from the surrounding villages, most of which had already been ruined from the magical battle raging between Aberhill and Darridge. On both sides, members of the regular armies had been all but destroyed.

Lysander had sent half of his elite guards to fight Typhon's elite guards on the front line—a piece of heretofore neutral land between Darridge and Aberhill. The remainder of the guards were posted at the palace and villages.

These details of the battle filtered down to Flora and the others from those above. Each arrival provided new and sometimes conflicting information. The only certainty was that the magical combat warped the very essence of nature. It destroyed not only the villages of Darridge and Aberhill but the surrounding kingdoms as well.

Flora kept asking about Lysander but no one had seen him or Prytanis. They guessed that by the sounds and flashes of light from the chief enchanter's tower, they were fighting from there.

Only when Cledus arrived, half dead from a wound that had severed his hand at the wrist, did she discover Lysander's location.

"He's on the roof of the highest tower," Cledus said through teeth gritted with pain. Flora braced her hands against his shoulders while Georgios tended his injury. "I don't think we have many guards left. He alone is holding off Typhon's attack."

Cledus screamed in agony and Flora leaned harder against him.

"I'm almost finished," Georgios said. "The potion I soaked these bandages in will help close the wound faster."

"I think he's fainted," Flora said, loosening her grip on Cledus. When she tried to move away, he reached for her weakly with his good hand.

"They're going to destroy us all," Cledus breathed. "They won't...stop."

"He'll be all right, my lady," Georgios said, but he glanced at her worriedly. "Do you think what he said is true?"

"Yes," she whispered, a feeling of utter despair overtaking her. "I think it's true."

She rose and headed for the door leading up to the palace.

"Flora! Where are you going?" Madeline shouted.

Neither seemed to notice or care that the girl had addressed her informally. By now Flora felt as if these girls were part of her family instead of servants and at this point social status meant very little. Nobles and peasants alike had suffered and died in this war.

"Stay here," Flora said, placing a hand on the girl's shoulder.

"But—"

"Do as I say, Madeline!"

The girl nodded and Flora strode up the stairs. The palace still trembled and when she stepped into the great hall, she saw that broken furniture and shattered glass littered the floor. Several guards, some wounded, huddled in corners, prepared to fight,

though it seemed the hand-to-hand combat had long ended. Now Fanticaun power would decide the fate of Aberhill and Darridge.

Glancing outside, Flora saw that the sky had turned blacker than ever, except for the shower of hail and snow swirling in the raging wind. It blew through the windows, almost knocking her off her feet. A shudder tore through her and she clung to the railing as she made her way up the stairs.

She climbed up the many flights to the highest tower. As she emerged onto the roof, the storm nearly deafened her and the wind took her very breath. She saw Prytanis first, sprawled on the ground a short distance from the door.

"Prytanis!" she shouted, kneeling beside him and checking for his pulse. To her relief, he still lived.

She found it difficult to rise against the fierce wind, but she needed to find Lysander. He stood at the opposite side of the tower, his back to her and his arms lifted. His bellowing voice was scarcely audible above the wind.

"Lysander!" she screamed, but he didn't seem to notice.

Staggering toward him, she grasped his arm. The stench of *bramroot* was overpowering, as if it emanated from his very pores.

With a savage growl, he turned sharply and shoved her so hard that she crashed onto her backside. Propping herself on her elbows, she gasped, her heart pounding, when she saw that his beautiful blue eyes had turned as black as their inner rims.

"Lysander, what are you doing?" she shouted.

"I told you to stay below!"

"It's over! You have to stop this." Flora stood and approached, though for the first time she feared he might actually strike her.

"Typhon started this but I'll finish it," he said. "It's the only way." He reached into the silk pouch at his hip, withdrew a handful of violet powder and tossed it into the air. If possible, the scent of *bramroot* grew even stronger. His lips moved in an almost inaudible incantation and Flora glanced in the distance where an enormous black and violet funnel cloud took shape in the wind. A similar cloud of black and red spun toward it and Flora knew it had been summoned by Typhon's magic.

The red and violet clouds bounced off each other, causing the goddess knew how much destruction to the land beneath.

At that moment she understood what Lysander meant. If he surrendered now, Typhon would destroy them, yet she wondered how anyone could possibly win this war.

The violet cloud slowly overtook the red, seeming to swallow it. The red disappeared but the violet continue to grow.

"Lysander, it's gone!" she screamed. "Does that mean Typhon is gone?"

"He might be dead or he might be unconscious."

"But he has surrendered?"

"He's lost this battle, but I need to know that he's defeated for all time."

In horror, she realized he didn't intend to stop his attack until, as Cledus had said, everything was destroyed.

"Lysander, no!" She grasped his arm again and he shrugged her off, his black eyes focused on his cloud of destruction.

"What is wrong with you?"

"I'm doing what needs to be done for the sake of Aberhill. You can't possibly understand this. You're not a warrior and you're not Fanticaun."

"If this is what it means to be Fanticaun then I thank the goddess I'm not. I don't know who you are anymore, Lysander. You're just like Typhon, and if I wanted to stay married to him I wouldn't have left Darridge in the first place!"

Flora doubted she had ever been more furious or more frightened in her life. Lysander's magic, when used like this, terrified her. Yet she, a mere human, had the ability to lock his power. He had given her that gift but she prayed he wouldn't drive her to use it. She knew the kind of man he was, if she could just find him beneath this evil magic.

He turned to her sharply, his teeth clenched.

"Lysander, listen to me. If you keep this up there will be no Aberhill and no Darridge and probably no more kingdoms at all for miles. Is that what you want? To be the overlord of death?"

His gaze shifted from her to the cloud then back again.

"Lysander, please. I know you had to protect us but it's over. If you do this, you'll carry it with you for the rest of your life. I know you, the *real* you, without the damn *bramroot*. You won't be able to live with it if you destroy lives when it's not necessary."

He closed his eyes and the cloud disappeared, the snow and hail ceased and the wind calmed. Blackness faded from the sky and sunlight bathed the countryside.

Flora stood, her heart still pounding and fists clenched. Slowly Lysander opened his eyes and she sighed with relief to find his beautiful blue gaze upon her.

Swallowing visibly, he shook his head, his eyes gleaming with regret.

"What I did—" he said, his voice husky.

"Almost did. While Typhon was still awake and fighting, you had no choice but to use everything in your power to defeat him."

"You could have locked my powers."

"If I had done that, I might have lost you forever. You needed to make this decision yourself, Lysander."

"If it hadn't been for you, I would have destroyed everything. I don't know what came over me. Goddess, Flora, look at this place." He stared down at the devastated land around the palace.

Still trembling, Flora stepped closer to him and took him in her arms. Lysander held her tightly, his face buried in her hair. For several moments he clung to her, his breathing ragged with emotion.

"All I could think about was defeating him," he said.

"Well," she said tremulously, "I think it's safe to say you did that."

"But look at the cost."

"I think maybe you were right and Ariston was wrong. A preemptive attack might have—"

"Don't," Lysander said, his body stiffening. "I don't want to think about who was right and who was wrong. No matter who started this, both sides were going to suffer. The only thing we can do now is clean up this mess. I doubt we have enough soldiers in one piece to march in and take over Darridge. The good news is Darridge doesn't have any left either."

"What about Typhon?"

"I'll take care of him personally."

"Lysander, you can't leave now. With Ariston gone, these people need you here. Do you think Typhon is dead?"

"I hope so."

* * * * *

Typhon opened his eyes partway. It took a moment for his gaze to focus on the broken stone railing on the balcony outside his chamber where he lay. He'd fought the battle against Lysander of Aberhill from here. Anger tore through him, then bitter defeat.

Snarling, he rose onto his hands and knees, every muscle in his body screaming in pain. He felt as if he'd been dragged through the wilderness by a runaway bull. An ironic smile twisted his lips. In a way that's what had happened to him. Lysander had been his bull once and Typhon should have killed him when he had the chance. No games. No tossing him to the beast. He should have cut the bastard's heart out.

Once on his feet, Typhon glanced around and saw several members of his elite guard lying unconscious on the balcony and within the chamber.

Even with their combined forces and all Typhon's power enhanced by the fleshtress, they had still been defeated.

He paused only to see if the elite guards nearby still breathed, then he left the chamber, ignoring his exhaustion and the pounding in his skull. He had no idea how long he'd been unconscious or if a troop from Aberhill had taken his land.

In the great hall, several servants and soldiers, most of them wounded, picked up the damaged furniture, cleaned up the rubble and aided the severely injured. A captain

from the regular army entered the hall, his arm bandaged and an almost bewildered look on his face.

"Any sign of soldiers from Aberhill?" Typhon demanded.

"No, sir," the captain replied. "If they're as damaged as we are then I doubt they'll have men to spare."

Typhon closed his eyes momentarily and breathed a sigh of relief. That was probably the only good thing that had come of this battle.

"We've gotten word from the surrounding villages. They're all but destroyed, sir," continued the captain.

Typhon's brow furrowed. Strangely, his first thought wasn't of Darridge in its entirety but of Crystal.

He had known Darridge would sustain damage in the battle, but not to this extent.

"The common folk are coming here from all over—the ones who survived, that is," the captain said. He looked almost hesitant. "We've been giving them what aid we can."

Typhon nodded. "How are the casualties among the regular army?"

"Heavy."

"Carry on, Captain," Typhon said. He headed off to locate surviving members of the elite guard. The sooner they rebuilt their defenses, the better chance they'd have to fight if Aberhill soldiers rode in to claim them after all.

* * * * *

Flora squinted toward the setting sun as she walked across what remained of the village nearest the palace at Aberhill. Common folk and soldiers alike had been working hard to rebuild since yesterday's battle.

She carried a basket of fresh bandages toward one of the only storage houses left standing. It was being used as a temporary infirmary, since most of the rooms in the palace were full.

Stepping into the relative coolness and shade of the structure, Flora placed the bandages on a table and approached Lysander. He used a magically enhanced salve to treat a chest wound on the village blacksmith. The man lay on a makeshift cot, his eyes closed.

"May I help?" Flora asked softly.

Lysander glanced at her and she noted he looked as exhausted as she felt. No doubt he was more tired since she had at least gotten some sleep last night. His energy had been sapped during the fight with Typhon but he had been working relentlessly to care for the injured and repair the damages from the battle.

"You can dress this wound," he said and she picked up bandages and did as he asked.

Lysander sat back on his heels and sighed deeply.

"You need some rest," she said.

He shook his head. "There's too much to do."

Offering him a gentle smile, she said, "It will be here when you wake. Fanticaun blood or not, you still need sleep."

"Look at this." Lysander glanced around at the villagers.

"Lysander, this isn't your fault."

"Isn't it?"

"Typhon attacked. If you didn't defend Aberhill, he probably would have destroyed everything or worse, taken over."

"She's right," the blacksmith said, opening his eyes. "We all fought when the soldiers came but your magic drove them off."

"And nearly destroyed us as well," Lysander stated.

"I'm an old man," the blacksmith said. "And I've seen many battles and not one, magical or otherwise, ended without casualties. We all know Typhon is mad. If you had allowed him to win...well I don't even want to think about it. Most of the villagers feel the same way."

Flora finished dressing the blacksmith's wound, then brought him some water to drink.

"Try to rest," she said.

"I can now," the man replied. "Whatever the overlord put in that salve killed the pain."

Lysander rested a hand on the man's knee, then stood.

For the next few hours, Flora assisted him as he helped other injured people. When he headed off to help the soldiers who were rebuilding a barn, she took charge.

Grasping his hand she tugged him hard toward the palace. "Come with me."

"Flora, there's no time for this."

"You're going to rest if I have to ask Prytanis for sleeping powers to do it."

"Speaking of Prytanis, I need to meet with him. He's been working with the elite guard on new defenses —"

"No." She clung tighter to his hand and continued pulling. "Just a few hours of sleep and you'll feel better."

He narrowed his eyes at her, then relented.

In his chamber, he sat on the bed and kicked off his boots. He lay on his back and she covered him with a blanket, then sat beside him, caressing his cheek.

"We should be hearing from Ariston and the high king soon," he said. "This battle wouldn't have gone unnoticed."

"I know. Try not to think about it right now."

He snorted. "I have to think about it. It's my duty to keep Aberhill safe and I failed."

"If you had failed then we'd be under Typhon's rule." She swept her thumbs over his eyes and he closed them, his thick lashes dark against his pale face.

Flora sat with him until he fell asleep. Then she quietly left the chamber, closing the door behind her, and went to assist Madeline and Georgios with the injured in the great hall.

Chapter Twenty

Lysander awoke with a start, his breathing ragged and heart pounding. In his dream he'd been fighting Typhon, not magically but in hand-to-hand combat.

Shaking his head, he glanced around the moonlit chamber.

"Damnation," he said. He had apparently slept far too long. He'd intended to rest for only an hour or two.

He rose and used the basin of water on the bedside table to wash and clean his teeth. No sooner had he pulled on his boots than Flora burst into the chamber.

"Lysander," she said, her eyes wide.

"What's happened?" he demanded.

"Ariston is back. He's arrived on one of the high king's dragons. I've never seen anything like it in my life. I had almost believed they were merely legend."

For thousands of years dragons—elusive beasts that dwelled in mountains so high or oceans so deep no man dared visit them—had served the high kings and queens of the Northern, Southern, Eastern and Western Realms. Only in times of grave trouble did they appear. To be summoned by a dragon to the high king's court was most serious.

Lysander wasted no time before going to his brother. Flora followed close behind.

Just outside the palace, Ariston, Mikolas, Prytanis and Crystal stood near an enormous dragon. It had a leonine face complete with a shaggy black mane and a body covered in black and silver scales the size of warriors' shields. Its clawed feet were trimmed with white fur.

A feeling of awe swept over Lysander at the sight of the beast, but he hadn't time to ponder it.

Ariston wore an uncharacteristically stern expression. His usually calm eyes looked like slivers of blue steel. Though Mikolas appeared collected, concern gleamed in his eyes. Crystal looked white and drawn, no doubt sick with worry over that bastard Typhon.

"Lysander, you appear to be no worse for wear after the battle," Ariston said, holding his gaze.

"Typhon initiated the attack," Flora stated.

Ariston cast her a cool look, but to her credit she held his gaze.

"I never doubted that Lysander would obey my orders," Ariston said. "And Prytanis has already made it clear that Typhon initiated the attack, however the high king is most upset over the damage done by the two of you."

"Did you explain about the *wymist*?" Lysander asked.

"I did," Ariston said with a deep sigh. "Though concerned, the high king is not willing to condemn Typhon on the word of his enemies or a cast-off lover. He had planned to summon Typhon for a meeting when we saw this war raging in the distance. He has already sent help to the affected kingdoms and he wishes to see both of us and Typhon immediately. Flora is to come with us."

"No—" Lysander began, but Flora placed a hand on his arm.

"I have to," she said, holding his gaze. "You know as well as I do the only chance we have to be together is to get this over with once and for all."

She was right, yet if the high king ordered her back to Typhon—the mere thought of it infuriated Lysander and tore at his heart. He would die before allowing her to return to him. It didn't matter what the high king said.

"Captain Mikolas, you will stay here and assist Prytanis. Lysander, Flora and Crystal will return with me to the high king's court. The dragon will carry us, as he travels faster than any horse ever could. Pack a change of clothes. We leave immediately."

* * * * *

During the ride to the high king's palace, Flora and Lysander provided Ariston with more details of the battle.

When they finally arrived, they weren't given a moment to catch their breath before they were brought to the high king. He sat on his high-backed marble throne, his black-rimmed Fanticaun eyes stern and his face seemingly carved from granite.

Lysander's gut clenched when he saw Typhon had already arrived. The king of Darridge turned his pale face toward their small group, rage flashing in his eyes. Lysander's fists clenched at his sides, then he relaxed. Now wasn't the time to let his temper get the better of him again.

Typhon's gaze switched to Crystal and his teeth clenched visibly. He turned away from her, as if in disgust. No doubt he viewed her as a traitor too.

"I have already listened to your complaints against King Typhon," stated High King Nik without prelude. "And I have just listened to his complaints against you."

"What complaints?" Lysander demanded.

"Silence!" the high king growled, then spoke in a calmer voice. "Both of you have caused devastation throughout half my kingdom. I am not pleased with either of you. In truth I have had more than enough of the pettiness and battles between Aberhill and Darridge. It began with your fathers but it shall end with you."

"Your Majesty?" Ariston asked.

"Each king or his representative will engage in hand-to-hand combat. The winner will rule the loser's land."

"What of Flora?" Lysander asked.

"If Darridge wins, the queen will return to her husband. If Aberhill wins, I will annul the marriage of Typhon and Flora. Do you, Ariston and Typhon, agree?" Though for the sake of formality High King Nik asked for their consent, he sounded decisive.

"Yes," both kings replied.

"You may have one day to decide who will fight the match."

"I will fight for myself," Typhon stated. He fixed a hateful gaze upon Lysander, almost as if he knew the overlord would be his challenger.

"Very well." The high king nodded and turned to Ariston. "Do you need time?"

"Only a few moments to consult with my overlord."

The high king motioned with his hand. Ariston and Lysander stepped away from the others.

"Let me fight him," Lysander said.

"It should be me."

"I'm the overlord. That means I'm in charge of combat."

"You're still recovering from the magical battle."

"So is he. Ariston, you know I have a better chance of winning than you do."

Ariston's jaw tightened visibly, but he nodded. "You are a better fighter."

"Not to mention I'm mostly to blame for the situation we're in."

Ariston's brow furrowed. "Lysander, you did what you had to in order to protect our people from him. If anyone is to blame it's me. I'm the King of Aberhill and it was my responsibility. I focused so much on peace that —"

"You were right." Lysander held his brother's gaze. "Not a bit of good came from what Typhon and I did. Now I have the chance to end the battle between us once and for all as well as set Flora free. Let me do this."

Ariston nodded. "May the goddess be with you, for all our sakes."

They walked back to the high king and Ariston said, "Overlord Lysander will fight for Aberhill and Queen Flora's freedom."

A wicked smile spread across Typhon's lips and he and Lysander locked gazes.

Flora edged closer to Lysander and he could practically feel the worry emanating from her.

"You are dismissed to prepare for the challenge," High King Nik stated. "In one hour we will meet again in the inner sanctum of my elite guard where the fight will commence. There will be no weapons and no use of magic. In the meantime, servants will show you to your quarters."

They bowed and quietly followed the red-garbed servant boys out of the throne room. Rather than join them, Crystal followed after Typhon.

In Lysander's chamber, Ariston and Flora helped him prepare for the battle against Typhon. He dressed in his black trousers, boots and a vest.

"I wish it hadn't come to this," Flora said, her voice scarcely a whisper.

"It was inevitable," Lysander replied, taking her chin in his hand and tilting her gaze toward his. "I won't let him have you."

"I'm not worried about myself," she said, staring at him with such emotion in her eyes that his heart twisted.

He drew a deep breath. Feeling and remembering her love would help him through this battle, as long as he tempered those heated emotions with the cool cunning he needed to win.

Typhon had lost total control of himself due to the *wymist*, but as soon as Lysander stopped the *bramroot*, it had faded from him. This gave him an advantage over the King of Darridge.

Someone tapped on the door and Ariston answered it. Crystal stepped inside, looking as worried as Flora.

"Overlord Lysander, I know I have no right to ask this of you, but if possible don't kill him."

Flora's eyes blazed and she snapped, "How dare you come here and ask him that?"

The peasant turned to Flora. "You have reason to despise Typhon, but you know he is sick in the mind."

"It doesn't excuse what he did, not only to me and Lysander but to so many others."

"I know. I admit being selfish in asking this, but I love him. I would rather debase myself now than not try having his life spared."

Flora closed her eyes for a moment and clenched her teeth.

"I never betrayed you, my lady," Crystal said. "Not even to him."

"I never gave you the chance."

Crystal bowed her head and left.

"Pay her no heed, Lysander," Ariston said.

"Do what you must to save yourself," Flora stated. "Typhon doesn't deserve compassion."

A faint smile touched Lysander's lips and he stepped toward her, caressing her face. "Your ability to care about people is what I've always loved about you. Don't let Typhon kill that part of you."

"Typhon isn't a person. He's a monster."

"You need to finish getting ready," Ariston interrupted.

Lysander brushed her mouth with a kiss then stood while Ariston wrapped his hands for the fight.

* * * * *

By tradition, certain Fanticaun tools were used by the high king alone. One of these tools was a ruby cauldron that, when filled with boiling water, emitted a magical vapor that temporarily locked the powers of his Fanticaun subjects.

As ordered, Lysander and Typhon would do battle without weapons or the use of their magic. The cauldron stood in the center of the elite guard's inner sanctum, a vast room with a stone floor and an open roof that allowed the sun and moonlight to pour in.

When Lysander and his small party arrived, the high king and Typhon already waited by the ruby cauldron. Members of the elite guard surrounded the room. Crystal stood alone in a corner.

"Good luck," Flora whispered to Lysander.

"Keep your head," Ariston told his brother.

Lysander strode toward the center of the room, completely focused on the challenge ahead.

He stood across from Typhon, the cauldron between them. Dark red vapors wafted on the bubbling water inside.

"Breathe deeply," the high king ordered.

Lysander and Typhon, their gazes locked in hatred, bent over the cauldron and drew several deep breaths. A strange sensation swept over Lysander. The only time he'd felt something akin to it had been when Hecta had locked his powers.

The magic faded from him and by the look deep in Typhon's eyes, he felt the same.

The high king walked away and took his place on a carved bench against the stone wall at the back of the chamber.

"Commence," the high king ordered.

Lysander and Typhon moved away from the cauldron and circled each other. His fists raised in a defensive position, Lysander studied his opponent. His heart beat fast and his muscles tensed, like an animal on the prowl.

Typhon attacked first, his fists and feet lashing out with impressive speed.

Shifting his stances, Lysander dodged and blocked the blows. Then Typhon's fist smashed into his face. Lysander's head snapped back and he tasted blood, but he didn't stop fighting.

Typhon's foot lashed out toward Lysander's head but the overlord caught his leg and Typhon crashed to the ground. His other leg kicked Lysander's feet out from under him and he landed hard on his back, then tangled his legs with Typhon's.

Locked on the ground, their bodies straining against each other, the men grunted and groaned. Typhon was more thickly built than Lysander and quite strong.

They grappled for what seemed like forever. Their grips slid on their sweat-slicked bodies. Lysander's muscles were aflame and his heart pounded. By the sound of Typhon's ragged breathing, the fight had taken its toll on him as well.

Somehow, Typhon managed to kick Lysander off him and the men pushed themselves to their feet. Gasping, they circled each other again. Simultaneously they attacked with punches and strikes. Lost in battle madness, Lysander scarcely felt the blows, though he knew they'd be far more painful later. Typhon's fist stung his cheek. Blood trickled down Lysander's face. Typhon looked no better. One of his eyes was almost swollen shut and blood ran from his lip, down his chin and neck.

Finally Lysander kicked Typhon in the midsection. The King of Darridge crashed onto his back, his head cracking against the stone floor, rendering him unconscious.

Lysander leapt toward him. Panting, his foot pressed to Typhon's throat, he paused and that moment seemed like a year. His heart pounded in his ears and sweat trickled down his face and back. The taste of blood filled his mouth and every muscle in his body tensed.

Typhon was defeated. It would take mere seconds to end the bastard's life.

Glancing up momentarily, Lysander caught sight of Crystal, her face stark with grief, yet also resigned. Where was Flora? Lysander's gaze traveled past Ariston and the high king to Flora who stood a short distance away. Her face pale, she stared unblinking at Lysander.

An unspoken question passed between them and somehow she seemed to know that whether Typhon lived or died was up to her.

She shook her head and Lysander removed his foot from Typhon's throat.

Panting, Lysander took a staggering step, then paused. With the fight over, exhaustion almost overtook him. Typhon had been stronger and more skilled than he'd expected.

He watched three guards approach, one with a bucket of water that they tossed over Typhon, reviving him. Two guards grasped Typhon's arms and hauled him to his feet, dragging him in front of the high king.

Flora and Ariston hurried to Lysander. She embraced him and he wrapped his arms around her, holding her tightly.

"Typhon, you are hereby stripped of your title and your lands. Your marriage to Flora is annulled," the high king stated. "I give Darridge to Lysander of Aberhill. Under normal circumstances, you would be executed, Typhon. However due to your abuse of *wymist*, I believe you have not been of sound mind. Therefore your punishment is banishment from my territory. You are to leave this continent. Should you set foot in any of my kingdoms or try to contact Flora, you will be executed."

If possible, Typhon's face went even paler, but he said nothing.

"You will need to be weaned off the *wymist*. Until then I will continue the temporary hold on your powers. You will remain in my custody until you have

recovered enough to travel, then you will leave my realm forever. Take him to the dungeon and lock him in a cell." The high king motioned for the guards to remove Typhon from his presence. They obeyed, dragging him off.

Crystal approached Flora and Lysander. "Thank you for sparing him."

"After hearing that sentence I'm not sure I did," Lysander stated.

The peasant curtsied to them, then left.

"Are you well?" Ariston asked Lysander, inspecting the wound on his cheek.

"I'm fine, but there's one last thing that must be done."

Holding Flora's hand snugly in his, he approached the high king.

"Your Majesty, I have a favor to ask," Lysander said. "And also something I must tell you."

The high king gestured with his hand for him to continue and Lysander asked, "Will you marry me and Flora?"

"Now?" asked Flora.

"Immediately," Lysander said, gazing into her eyes. "Unless you object?"

"No." She smiled. "No objection."

"Very well," the high king stated. "Would you at least like to wash first?"

Ariston grinned at his brother. "I think that might be a wise idea."

A short time later, Lysander sat in a tub of warm water while Flora cleaned his wounds. He closed his eyes, feeling his power slowly return. His body still ached and he felt almost numb with exhaustion, but he also felt incredibly relieved. Ariston stood nearby, at Lysander's request, as he had an important matter to discuss with his brother regarding the fate of Aberhill and Darridge.

* * * * *

After Lysander dressed in fresh clothes, he, Flora and Ariston were shown to the high king's private chamber. There, along with members of the elite guard and the high king's chief enchanter as witnesses, Lysander and Flora were married.

"There is something else I must speak to you about," Lysander said to the high king after the ceremony. "You have been generous in making me the King of Darridge, but I'm not meant to rule. In my heart I'll always be an overlord. I wish to give Darridge to Ariston."

"And you accept?" the high king asked Ariston.

Bowing his head, Ariston said, "I do accept, with Lysander as my overlord."

"Then from this day forward Ariston will be the king of both lands."

"From now on it will be one land, called Aberridge," Ariston stated.

The high king nodded. "So be it."

Once High King Nik dismissed them, Lysander and Flora retired to their chamber. On the morrow, they would begin the journey back to Aberhill—or Aberridge.

After undressing, they climbed into the large, comfortable bed.

"I'm so damn tired," Lysander said, tugging Flora into his arms. It felt wonderful knowing she finally belonged to him by law.

"You should be," she said, kissing his chest and snuggling closer. "I was so afraid of losing you, Lysander."

"I told you I wouldn't let him take you."

"And I told you I didn't fear for myself." She lifted her head and stared into his eyes. "I love you."

"I love you too, Flora."

"After you've rested, there's something I'd like to discuss with you."

"What?"

"Later."

He smiled and sighed. "How am I supposed to sleep after you tell me something like that? What is it?"

"I was thinking that I don't want Mala, Marjorie and Madeline as maids."

His brow furrowed. "Why not? They're fine girls and I thought you liked them."

"I've grown to love them. If you agree, I think we should foster them. I know Madeline is almost a woman, but it would be good for her to have someone arrange her marriage and offer a dowry. And the younger girls can use the guidance of—"

"I think it's a wonderful idea." He kissed her forehead. "I already said your ability to care about others is what I love most about you."

"It's funny because that's what I love most about you as well." She kissed his cheek. "That among other things." Her hand slid down and lightly caressed his cock.

Despite being tired from the fight, he couldn't help reacting to her touch.

"This is for you," Flora said, shoving the covers aside and climbing between his legs. He spread them so she could kneel comfortably while her lovely little hands continued stroking his cock and kneading his balls. "Because you saved me and I love you."

"I love you too," he said gently stroking the back of her head.

Smiling, she released his cock and leaned over him, bracing a hand on either side of his head. Her mouth covered his in a deep, tender kiss. Their tongues danced and teased each other. Flora took his lower lip between her teeth and nibbled then sucked on it. She thrust her tongue into his mouth over and over, as he often did to her.

Though unusual, having her take the lead excited him, especially now when he was aroused yet tired from the battle with Typhon. She seemed to sense this and wished to give him everything he desired.

She covered his entire face with feathery kisses, then dipped her tongue into his ear, sending a thrill of delight through him. It settled in his groin and his stiff cock swelled even more. Moving slowly down his body, she kissed his neck, shoulders and chest. Her tongue swept over his nipples and she used her teeth to tease one of them, nipping and tugging on the stiff flesh. Her tongue lapped his chest and ribs, not missing an inch of him and soothing his cuts and bruises from the fight. When she reached his naval, she dipped the tip of her tongue into it, then she continued licking and kissing his hips.

Lysander sighed with pleasure and closed his eyes. Goddess, she seemed to know exactly what he wanted and needed. She slid up his body then moved down it again, sweeping her long hair over his chest and belly. The black, perfumed mass lashed him tenderly. It fanned over his cock and he groaned.

"I love touching you, Lysander."

"You too," he said, grasping handfuls of her hair and gently tugging her toward his mouth. He cupped the back of her head and kissed her hard, their hot, wet tongues caressing each other.

When the kiss broke, Flora grasped his wrists and guided them above his head. "I said this is for you. Let me pleasure you, Lysander. You deserve it. Please let me give this to you."

How could he possibly resist?

He nodded, smiled faintly and threaded his fingers through the carved headboard.

Once again Flora bathed him from neck to groin with her tongue. He closed his eyes and enjoyed the sensation of her wet, velvety tongue trailing over his neck, shoulders and chest. She lapped the sensitive insides of his elbows, then she took first one hand then the other and slid her tongue between each finger. She kissed his palms and sucked each fingertip.

Flora kissed his hips and when she lapped his inner thigh he groaned again, his cock twitching. She licked his entire leg, then kissed her way up it and moved to his other leg. Her hand teased the sensitive flesh between his balls and sphincter.

"Goddess, Flora, I don't know if I can take much more of this," he breathed. "You're a beautiful, wanton tease."

"I know," she whispered and gently nipped his inner thigh, then lapped the spot, making him jerk with pleasure. "But you'll like how this game ends."

"I already like it."

She chuckled and settled between his legs. One hand curled around his straining cock while the other gently kneaded his balls. Then she licked his sac and took part of it into her mouth, sucking and lapping while her hand stroked his shaft.

The wonderful tension built and built inside Lysander. No words could describe how good this felt.

"Oh goddess," he groaned, his hands tight on the headboard. His eyes closed and he let the sensations wash over him.

Her mouth left his balls and she clasped his cock, touching her soft, warm lips to the tip. Her tongue flicked over it and then she drew the head into her mouth and suckled upon in.

Lysander's heart pounded and his chest heaved. He couldn't possibly last much longer.

"Flora, oh goddess. You're going to kill me."

"I doubt it," she said close to his cock head, so that her breath teased his excited flesh. "If you survived Typhon—"

"Typhon was nothing. You're the one who has my heart, among other things, in your soft little hands."

"I love you," she said, then sucked him again. Her tongue intermittently swirled over his cock head.

Lysander's ass tightened and his hips shifted upward, thrusting into her mouth as she sucked harder and faster. Her hand kept hold of his cock, controlling his motions.

She momentarily withdrew him from her mouth and whispered, "It's all right, my love. Don't hold back anything. I want you to give me everything. I want you to enjoy every moment."

"Oh goddess, Flora," he gasped, releasing his hold on the headboard and burying his fingers in her hair as she sucked him with a vengeance.

Lysander's control snapped and he burst in unimaginable pleasure. His hips bucked and his breath came in ragged pants. All the while Flora kept hold of him. She sucked, lapped and swallowed his essence while he rode the waves of passion.

When it ended, he lay thoroughly sated and on the verge of sleep.

She pulled the covers over them and curled up beside him. He fell asleep to the feel of her warm body against his and the delicate lilac scent of her hair.

* * * * *

Typhon had no way of knowing how many days he spent in the dungeon cell at the high king's palace. In the damp dimness, day blended with night and he had no choice but to suffer the pain, heat and chills racking his body as the *wymist* bled from his very pores.

Though guards brought him water and food twice each day, he drank little and couldn't eat at all. Most of the time he lay on the filthy hay in the corner of the cell, trapped between reality and hallucinations.

Lysander appeared to him, ready to run him through with a bloodied sword. His father and brother stood nearby, glaring with reddish eyes, their faces pale in death and words of disgust and hatred on their lips. He knew they weren't truly there, yet they seemed so real.

The fleshtress also came to him, squatting beside him with a gloating look on her skeletal face. He couldn't tell if she were real or not.

Finally the effects of the *wymist* faded and he lay, drained of strength yet his mind clearer than it had been in months – perhaps years.

Covered in filth in this dank cell, his body aching and half starved, he realized that he had forced others to suffer this same fate, many undeserving of it. For the first time he understood Flora's betrayal and her hatred of him, yet he couldn't atone for his crimes against her.

He realized she didn't need repayment from him. She had found someone who cared for her and she didn't want or need him. She never had.

Nor had he truly wanted her.

The cell door opened and he glanced toward it. Crystal stepped in, carrying a basket on her arm. To his eyes, deprived of any vision but this cell, she looked even more beautiful than ever, but most likely she was an illusion too.

She approached and knelt beside him.

"Goddess, you're a mess," she whispered.

He laughed, knowing this vision must be another hallucination.

The compassion in her eyes was perhaps the most painful illusion he'd faced. The others he could endure, but when he so desperately wanted Crystal with him, this was almost too cruel. Yet was anything too cruel for him after what he'd become?

She reached into the basket, removed a small glass bottle and pulled out the stopper. Then she placed a hand to the back of his head and held the bottle to his lips.

After a moment's hesitation, he took a sip. Water with the faintest hint of herbs.

"It's a healing potion," she said.

He drank deeply, then closed his eyes, panting.

"You're real," he murmured.

"Of course I'm real."

Summoning what strength he had left, he rose. Weakened, he stumbled.

Crystal, who had also stood, caught him and they staggered against the wall.

"Get out of here," he growled, pushing her away. He doubted he'd ever felt this humiliated in his life. No matter how badly he wanted her with him, he couldn't bear this shame in her presence.

"Why?" she demanded.

"Because."

Smiling, she shook her head. "You sound like a child. You need help, especially if you ever intend to leave this cell. I begged the high king to let me in here."

"You shouldn't have done so on my account," he murmured, sinking back to the floor and closing his eyes.

A moment later, he felt the caress of her hand on his face and opened his eyes, gazing into her beautiful green ones. In her expression he saw stubborn strength and something he didn't recognize at first. Something soft and tender. Was it love?

"Let me help you," she said.

At the moment he hadn't the strength to refuse.

* * * * *

Two days later, Typhon had enough strength to leave the dungeon. He was to depart from the high king's territory immediately with only the clothes on his back and a portion of food and water. Everything he had ever owned was gone forever and he would have to build a life elsewhere.

As he walked down the path leading away from the castle, people stared at him. Some shouted abuse, but Typhon walked with his head held high. He had done what he thought necessary and he wasn't the first person to have taken a wrong road. It seemed he had two choices—destroy himself or begin again. Typhon had never been a man to surrender to anyone or anything.

He heard hoofbeats close behind him and turned, prepared for an attack. He relaxed upon seeing Crystal mounted atop a sturdy chestnut horse.

"I thought we could use a horse," she said. "I got him at a bargain."

His brow furrowed. "What do you mean 'we'?"

Tilting her head slightly to the side, she smiled. "I'm leaving too and thought we could travel together."

This woman had to be mad. "Why do you want to come with me? I have lost everything. My kingdom. My power. My integrity and my dignity. I have nothing—*nothing*—to offer you or anyone."

Her smile faded and her green eyes fixed on his. "You have your heart."

How could she look at him and see anything but a beast?

"Do I?" he demanded. "One could argue that I have no heart."

"You have one, Typhon. I know you've always cared about me. Even in your worst moments, you never hurt me. I've never had anything, so it will be the same for me regardless of whether I remain here or go with you. At least if we're together we'll have each other. That's more important than land or power. We can build a life together and in that way your dignity will be restored."

With a wry smile, Typhon stepped closer to her and rested a hand on her knee. "If I had you as an advisor, I might not have lost Darridge."

"Well you have me now, if you want me."

"I want you," he murmured. Deep inside he realized he loved her but he wasn't quite ready to say it. Not until he proved worthy of her.

As they continued down the path, he swore he would never make her regret her decision to trust him.

Epilogue

Eighteen months after the match at the high king's palace, Flora sat in the garden outside her and Lysander's chamber. She held their six-month-old daughter, Alethea, to her breast. A faint smile touched her lips as she watched the child feeding. Alethea had her parents' black hair and her father's black-rimmed Fanticaun eyes. Prytanis and Lysander had already commented on the magical power within her and this both pleased and concerned Flora. At least Alethea would have the influence of strong, decent magical people like Prytanis, Mikolas and of course her father.

At Flora's feet, Marjorie and Mala sat reading aloud from a book while inside the chamber, Madeline and Georgios stood by Lysander's worktable. While the young man mixed a powder, Madeline passed him ingredients. Flora saw them clearly through the open door and smiled. A few months ago, Georgios had asked for Madeline's hand and Lysander had consented. The two planned to wait until Georgios completed his training with Prytanis before marrying.

From inside the chamber came the sound of Lysander's voice and Flora's smile broadened. He stepped into the garden wearing his black uniform. She doubted she'd ever grow tired of looking at him. Even when they were old and gray, his beautiful smile and gleaming eyes would always make her feel happy and safe.

Yet they were far from old and gray and the sight of his lean, powerful body sent a thrill through her.

"Father," Mala said, standing and hurrying to him. He lifted her and accepted a kiss on his cheek, then placed her back on her feet.

"You're home early today," Flora said.

"Complaining?" he teased.

"Quite the contrary, but to what do we owe the pleasure?"

"I thought I'd take the afternoon off, get some food and go to the lake with my beautiful wife and daughters."

"Come on, Mala, let's go to the kitchen and pack some food," Marjorie said, placing her book aside.

Grinning, the girls hurried off.

"You made them happy," Flora said.

Lysander bent and kissed her, then squatted beside her and gently stroked Alethea's head. "What about you?"

"You always make me happy," she replied, then teasingly narrowed her eyes. "Well most of the time anyway."

He gave a little snort of laughter, then kissed her again. "I love you, Lady Flora."

"I love you, Overlord of Aberridge."

Somehow she had always known that she and Lysander would be a love for all time.

The End

About the Author

Kate Hill is a thirty-something vegetarian New Englander who likes heroes with a touch of something wicked and wild. Her short fiction and poetry have appeared in publications both on and off the Internet. When she's not working on her books, Kate enjoys reading, working out, and researching vampires and Viking history.

Kate welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her [author bio page](#) at www.ellorascave.com.

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