



Jane Atchley

WARRING
HEART

His aura swirled angry purple.

She sat very still trying to accustom herself to seeing his emotions. Such a thing had never happened before. This was not, after all, their first fight, far from it. Of course, she had been a young girl on those other occasions, and Kree had never been anywhere near this angry.

As she studied him, his aura changed, becoming a sort of deep red mist. He stopped in front of her.

“Of all the pixie-stupid stunts.”

Purple streaks arced through the red like lightning. Kayseri felt a hot breeze brush her cheek.

Taking a deep breath and exhaling it slowly through his mouth, Kree made another circuit around the room. It occurred to her that he was not searching for the right words to chastise her. He was searching for the calm to utter them.

He stopped in front of her chair again. Rubbing his forehead with the back of his fist, he took a deep breath. “What the—” He caught his lower lip between his teeth, a crimson cloud enveloped him. “Damnation.”

He took another deep breath, exhaled slowly. He closed his eyes. “What by Namar’s bloody tears do you think you are doing?”

His aura’s heated glow faded a bit. Kayseri was not reassured. She had seen how quickly it flared. But by heaven, she was angry too. “Who was that woman?”

Her question caught him by surprise. He almost grinned. No doubt he had expected her to trot out the usual litany of excuses she used whenever she did some outrageous pixie thing to him. He watched her through narrowed eyes, suspecting a trick. “No one.”

“She must be someone. You were sleeping

with her.”

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by

Jane Atchley

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales, is entirely coincidental.

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Dedication

This one is for the Great Ladies, Patsy and Vikki.

You know what you did.

Special thanks to my ex, Demetri Cassimus,

for dragon's eye blue,

and for loving me enough to let me go.

Si Herreo Acriter Horream

Chapter One

Thunder echoed over the hills. Kree Fawr shouldered two men out of his way and pushed a granite boulder aside. Lightning illuminated the cave-in. The storm howled. Rain pounded. Blinding torrents carved rivulets in the hillside, making treacherous footing.

The mine manager shouted over crashing thunder. "Twenty-six men trapped, My Captain. May the gods help them."

The gods didn't care. Hefting another three-foot chunk of rain-slick granite out of the pile, Kree's foot slipped. Muddy runoff sluiced into his custom-made cavalry boots. A mere half-hour ago, he was warm and dry, gambling with his fellows. Now, he was soaked to the skin, boot-deep in ooze, wondering if the manager smelled liquor on him.

He waited for the next rumble of thunder to fade knowing his soft voice did not carry. "Do they have air?"

The manager raked away another layer of muck uncovering more stones for the muscular cavalry captain to toss aside. "The shafts are buried!"

Kree turned his head and shouted to Sergeant Falconer. "Bird, get up-slope. Dig out the air shafts."

"We could blast our way through, sir." First Lieutenant Duncan offered at his shoulder.

The manager looked panicked. The first lieutenant ignored the man. "It's simple

mathematics, sir. Calculate the correct size and placement for the charges and boom. No more debris."

Simple? Kree glanced at the mine manager.

"Spark off a gas pocket and the blow out will bring down the mountain."

"The danger is negligible, sir. It will save hours of digging."

His first lieutenant sounded confident, and the trapped men did not have hours. "Do it," Kree ordered.

Duncan made quick work of placing the charges. Black smoke and timber-laced mud and rock shot several feet into the air. The mountainside held. Kree congratulated himself. He possessed the finest black-powder man in the Kingdoms and he had the balls to use him. His man was a fucking genius.

Kree sat in the mud, resting his head and arms on his knees. The last man had been carried from the mine. The rain had stopped. Dawn painted the sky. His officers and troopers sprawled in a semicircle around him. People bustled in and out of the makeshift hospital tent. Women moved among exhausted rescuers offering wine or water.

"Kree." Lathan Bruin took in the weary mud-slathered men with a glance. "Everyone's all right here, yes?"

He glanced up at his best friend. "When did you arrive?"

"Not soon enough."

Kree expelled a long breath. *The gods didn't care.* These were his people. He had sworn to protect them. Then something like this happened and he was damn near useless. "How many?"

Lathan shrugged. "I can heal anything, but

death.”

“How many?”

“Three.”

“Namar’s tears.” Kree laid his head back down on his knees. In a town the size of Qets, three was a bona fide disaster. Families of dead miners became immediately destitute. The gods didn’t care, but he did. He would visit the families and arrange relief. Miners always carried heavy debt. He did not understand why, since they earned almost as much as his troopers.

Lathan moved toward the next muddy group of rescuers, stopped, and turned back. “Kayseri arrives on the noon post. You still plan to be there?”

Kree lay back on the muddy slope and massaged his temples with the heels of his hands. “Wouldn’t miss it. I’ll just grab a couple of hours sleep. Aye?”

“She’d understand.”

“No. I’m looking forward to seeing her.”

Kayseri Burin smoothed her hand down her fine elfin gown’s narrow skirt and settled herself comfortably in the coach. She had reached her first stasis period, frozen in the full bloom of womanhood for the next two hundred years or so until her next aging cycle began. Soon she’d be reunited with the man she loved. Life was good.

She caught her bottom lip with her teeth. It had been five long years since she’d last seen him. He would have changed some in that time. Humans changed. Still, she could not imagine sharing her mate bond, that mystical Wilderkin union of soul and mind, with any other male. Furthermore, she was so sure of her choice, and had been for so long, she never tried to imagine such a silly thing.

Kree Fawr dried his face on a clean white towel.

He caught his friend Lathan's reflection in the mirror and gave a lopsided smile. Together they had prevailed against a powerful Star-wizard back when he'd been nothing but an oversized boy with a sword, and Lathan a young man who'd come to the garrison seeking glory. Glory, a fickle mistress, had gone to Kree, evidence that life was not fair. His had been the killing stroke, and no one had cared that Lathan had made it possible. He owed his life and his place in the world to Lathan Bruin. He admitted no matter how the man plagued him, the bond between them, forged by shared experience, was stronger than blood.

Lathan's restless pacing took him past Kree's desk. The desk, like all Kree's furniture, was black oak, simple, and serviceable. Lathan picked up an unfinished letter lying on top, and read aloud, "Honored Ladies of Elhar, regarding your inquiry concerning renegade sorcery..." *Blah. Blah. Blah.*

"This is terrible."

Snatching the letter from his friend's grasp, Kree scanned it quickly. He scruntinized the letter with a frown. "Don't see any mistakes." He passed it back to Lathan.

Returning to the mirror, he worked a tight braid into his hair. The end result hung like a heavy cord between his shoulder blades. Traditionally, Goddess-born did not cut their hair, but he had in a fit of temper.

Goddess-born. What rot. He knew his parentage. He was the product of selective breeding. He was not divine, and he was past having any use for Temple traditions.

"Let your secretary handle correspondence

with Elhar. That's why the Ladies sent him to you."

"Thank you, Lathan. I needed you to tell me that."

"You know, you used to have a better sense of humor."

"You know, I used to soar on Goddess nectar every day." How he missed that exhilarating high and the buoyant, damned near indestructible feeling that came with it. He rubbed his arms. His skin felt too tight.

Lathan crumpled the letter into a tight ball, tossed it into the trash, and glanced at his friend. "I've told you I can stop the pain."

"And I told you, no."

"Then at least let Duncan crush some herbs—
"

"No, means no. No magic. No *different* potions."

Lathan shook his head. "I don't see how constant pain serves you."

"I suppose not." Kree fastened the frogs down the front of his bright dragon's eye blue jacket. "It reminds me, that's all." He shrugged. "It's not bad today."

From the way Lathan stared at him, his friend understood *not bad* meant bearable. To his credit, Lathan returned to the subject of his daughter's imminent arrival.

"Why are you taking such trouble for a youngster who'd be just as happy to see you if you were still nose-to-toes mud? Tell me that?"

"I live to serve." Kree touched his heart, gave a slight mocking bow. "One, I ordered an honor guard for our little Katie. Pretty horsies always delighted her. I must match their magnificence. Two, I am consoling with the miners' families this afternoon. Three, I am meeting a lady afterward

and will not have time to change.”

“The first lieutenant’s widowed sister-in-law again?”

“Why not? She’s beautiful, she knows what she wants, and she’s leaving soon. Three traits I like in a woman.”

“Everyone’s talking about her.”

“*Everyone* or just you?”

Lathan flopped down on the captain’s bed. “What does Duncan say?”

Kree made a weighing motion with one hand. “My first lieutenant keeps his own counsel regarding my love life. *You* should try it.” The gleam in Lathan’s eyes told him just how much hope there was of that.

“Can’t. I am the voice of your conscience.”

Kree tugged his jacket straight. “More like the pain in my ass.”

“People are saying you’re ready to take another wife.”

Pausing in the act of buckling the shoulder harness that supported his long gryphon knives, Kree fixed his closest friend with the stone-cold stare that made his enemies tremble. Lathan was immune. “I’d sooner take hemlock.”

The coach rocked, churning along the rain-rutted road. Kayseri Burin leaned out of the window. The wind tangled her long black hair. Like all pixies, all Wilderkin actually, she loved sun on her face and wind in her hair. She longed to sit up in the box with the driver, but that would not be grown-up or proper. Being grown-up was important today, because she would see him. But, it was also hard because pixies were mischievous and exuberant from cradle to grave. It was their nature.

Humans were different. She understood that.

They thought when one reached a certain age one had to act and dress in certain ways. So she endured the stuffy coach while sunlight and color beckoned to her from the coach window. She smoothed her skirt down again. The provocative way the gown hugged her curves made her feel grown up, but that was not the reason she'd chosen it. The green silk, the color of rich old jade, was a match for her beloved's eyes.

Familiar landscape moved slowly past the window, far too slowly for Kayseri's avid pixie spirit. Mud dragging at the wheels slowed the horses' progress, the green hills dotted with sheep crawled by the window. Summer was in the air, and Kayseri smelled the fruit orchards heavy with peaches and apricots. She was so close to home it was hard to sit still.

There was the big tree she had climbed when she was a girl even though her father had forbidden it. She had lost her nerve halfway to the top, afraid to move until *he* came to her rescue. He'd reached up, plucked her out of the branches like ripe fruit and she felt safe in his arms. Best of all, he did not tease her, and he did not tell her father. She'd fallen in love with him that day.

The coach rounded the last bend and began the ascent into town. High on the hillside the blue tiled roofs from which the garrison and surrounding town took its name sparkled in the afternoon sun. The Blue Garrison. Qets, in the old language. Behind it stretched the forest where her family lived among the Leafy River Clan pixies.

Her fellow travelers stirred. A blade-sister, newly posted to the garrison, plied her with last minute questions about garrison life in general and about Captain Fawr in particular. The sister confided that she'd heard he had a fearsome and

uncertain temper.

Kayseri's family waited on the platform, five brothers, her pixie mother, whom she noticed was days away from delivering another child, and her wonderful human father. She loved her family fiercely, but her heart's eye went to the big trooper standing beside her father. The sun sparked copper highlights in his garnet colored hair making it both brighter and richer. He looked dashing handsome in his uniform. The little scar on his cheek, the mark he called *proud flesh*, lent just the right touch of danger to his handsome face. He was the candle flame, and she was the poor moth who could not wait to burn. Just the sight of him caused her stomach to do a funny little flip-flop.

The honor guard in attendance surprised her, the cadets' corps by the look of them, a group of handsome young men in brilliant light-armor mounted on gorgeous horses. Had he assembled them for her pleasure? He must have. Another little thrill zipped through her.

The coach rolled to a halt, as close to being on schedule as it ever was in Qets, splattering Kree's spit-shined boots with red mud. A farm couple got off, followed by a blade-sister, who saluted him smartly. Kree returned her two fingered salute automatically.

His attention was fixed on the last passenger, an exquisite, raven haired Wilderkin beauty with dark eyes. She was all decked out in high Thallasi fashion. Not a Thallasi. *Oh no*. This beauty was petite and dark, not at all his usual type. Still, there was something extraordinary about her that captured his attention. He could not look away. The Wilderkin beauty met his bold gaze and smiled at him.

Kree's heart raced. He had the niggling feeling he knew her. It was impossible of course. No one dallied with Wilderkin no matter how willing they seemed. Their pesky mate-bond got in the way.

The beauty swept past Lathan's family and stretched herself against the long line of his body. She pulled his head down and pressed an innocent kiss to his lips. Her lips were rose petal soft against his. Their gentle pressure stole his breath. The vanilla scent drifting from her wild black curls made him lightheaded. He felt disembodied, weightless, and then as her identity registered, terrified.

Kayseri sighed as Kree gently held her away. She opened her eyes and looked up at him. "What's the matter, My Captain? It's me, your Katie, home from Elhar City. You look as though you don't know me."

Whatever he had expected her to say, it was not that. He couldn't have been more stunned if she had hit him between the eyes with a war hammer. She reached out for him again, but her family closed in around them jostling him aside.

Chapter Two

“My Captain?”

Some instinct, call it self-preservation, urged Kree to ignore Kayseri. His cowardice irritated him. It would take more than the embarrassing events of last evening to make Kree Fawr hide from a slip of a girl like Kayseri Bruin.

She slid the door open wide, stepping into the stable. Standing where the shaft of sunlight slashed the dim interior, she could not see him, but he could see her. *Too well.* Gone was her slinky gown, replaced by one of the form-fitting rawhide garments pixies preferred. Not an improvement to Kree’s way of thinking. He had to admit five years had worked some delicious and...well, disturbing changes in Kayseri. His throat went dry. Goddess help him, he was in so much trouble.

Kree forced volume into his soft voice. “Over here.”

Kayseri smiled at him over the side of the stall where he groomed a golden coated horse. “I brought your jacket. You forgot it when you ran off last night.”

Ran off? She’d lived around a fort her whole life. She should have recognized a strategic retreat when she saw one. Kree gave a sharp irritated snort. “No need. I have dozens.”

Kayseri blinked at his harsh tone. She tossed his jacket on a nearby hay bale. Instead of leaving as he hoped, she roamed up and down the sally port, trailing her fingers over the tack. Kree’s gaze

tracked her movement.

“Well...that’s not the only reason I came.” The way she caressed a saddle horn had him catching his breath. “Today is our birthday.”

As though he could forget.

She peeked at him from behind an oak support beam. “I wish you’d written to tell me mother was expecting?” She signed dramatically. “Again.”

What does that have to do with anything? Why can’t pixies stick with one topic? “It’s not my business.” Kree spoke to the space where Kayseri had been an instant before. The fine hairs on his arms stood on end. He was sensitive to magic, even low level pixie-mischief.

Kayseri reappeared atop the wall separating the stall where he worked from its neighbor. *Damnation.* He hated pixie-mischief. It brought nothing but trouble. In fact, he did not like any magic, and magic, other than his Goddess’s own, did not like him. Kayseri tiptoed along the wall like a ropewalker in a carnival.

“Don’t.” Realizing Kayseri would not understand he meant ‘pixie-mischief’, he grumbled. “You might fall.”

She made a face at him just so he’d understand how unlikely falling was. “Mother and father would be a scandal in Thallasi. Too many children.” Kayseri shook her head. “It’s not the Wilderkin way.”

“I like children.” Kree gave his attention to the horse in front of him so Kayseri could not read his expression. More than anything in life, he’d wanted a family of his own—children, a wife who loved him for himself, not for his power and position. It didn’t sound like a lofty goal, but it was beyond his ability. Infertility was a side effect of Goddess nectar, a solid fact, and one he

couldn't change. Would he have changed it given the chance? He didn't know. He did know his Goddess didn't give choices, and he resented the hell out of her for it.

"You don't have to share a bathroom with them." Kayseri made a smart pirouette, starting back toward him. "My father's sole ambition is to remake the pixie nation in his own image."

Kree laughed. All of Lathan's children shared a certain homogeny. His gaze followed Kayseri's progress, as he knew she intended. Her body was lithe and graceful, ripe for the taking—and it would be still, he reminded himself, long after he was dust.

Kree was willing to bet his hands could span her waist. As soon as the hypothesis formed, he longed to test it. He was ten kinds of a fool.

"Please land somewhere, Katie. You're making an old man dizzy."

Quick as a cat, she sprang onto the mare's broad back, leaned over, and planted a kiss squarely on his mouth. His body, already aroused from watching her, reacted to the sweetness of her lips with embarrassing speed, forcing him into another strategic retreat around the mare's rump.

He would entertain lusty thoughts about Kayseri Bruin *never*. He might be a fool, but he wasn't that big a fool.

She gave him her scolding face. "My Captain is not old."

Until two days ago, he would have agreed.

"What makes you say such things?"

He felt blood rushing to his face and cursed. The daughter of his oldest friend should not be able to make him blush. Namar's tears. What was wrong with him?

"You're angry." She pushed out her bottom

lip.

It was all he could do not to kiss it.

"I haven't spent two minutes in your company since I got home. You're always too busy to talk to me, and now you're angry." She crossed her arms over her chest, pushing those already delectable little breasts higher and raised a finely arched eyebrow in challenge.

Hell yes, I'm angry! You grew up! Kree felt betrayed somehow. It made him feel foolish and feeling foolish made him angry. *Damn it all.* He had expected the little girl whose charming antics made him laugh, not this alluring dark haired beauty whose sweet smiles and bewitching eyes stole his breath and broke his heart.

Two days ago, he'd have sworn no living woman could touch his heart, let alone break it. Then Katie Bruin kissed him, and everything changed. "I'm not angry."

He could tell Kayseri did not believe him, but mercifully, she let it go.

She fingered the pink ribbon braided in the mare's silky white mane. "These are odd trappings for a captain's horse."

"It happens this mare is a gift for my best girl."

"Do you mean the blonde beanstalk with the big bazooms who I saw you kissing yesterday?"

Kree glanced up to find her glaring at him with the exact expression of someone smelling cauliflower cooking. "Have you been spying on me with your mischief again, Katie? Because, let me remind you, we've been all over that issue." And they had, so many times he had lost count.

Rolling her eyes as if to say, "Who needs mischief?" Kayseri jerked her chin up a fraction. "You kissed her right out on the street in plain sight. She's ugly, and I hate her!"

Kree ducked his head hiding his grin in the mare's neck. Katie said what she thought. She was refreshing. She was adorable. "Watch your tongue, my girl. Good manners cost nothing, so your papa tells me almost every day."

She pulled a face transforming the temptress into the young girl who was safe for him to love. Gone was the saucy vixen flirting with him as though he were a raw boy unable to see through her clumsy seductions. He laughed again. He could not help himself. She had a way about her that had always reached out to him. She was everything innocent and unspoiled, as spirited as a wild mountain pony. Her vivacity made him feel lighthearted. He could not imagine anyone breaking her to harness. What a shame, he thought it would be, if they did. She needed someone to protect her beautiful free spirit, not tame it.

"I said this mare was for my *best* girl?" Kree grinned broadly. "Happy birthday, Katie Mae."

Kayseri's face lit up like sunlight chasing across a wheat field. She leaned over and hugged the mare's neck. "Oh, My Captain. Really? What's her name?"

"Mistral."

Kayseri looked at him with wide shining eyes. "After a storm? Like one of yours?"

"She's the first of Sirocco's get. As soon as I saw her golden coat, I thought of you."

She stroked the animal's neck, murmuring the mare's name. Then she gave another of her long drama filled sighs. "Father won't let me keep her."

Kree's heart filled, and his lips curled. "Contrary to popular belief, muscle and intellect are not mutually exclusive. I asked him."

Lathan had responded, "Pixies and horses

don't mix." Which wasn't no...exactly.

"Will you teach me to ride?"

The way her eyes sparkled when she asked this innocent sounding question bespoke mischief. But caught up as he was in the pleasure of the moment, he missed that warning sign. He touched his heart and bowed. "I live to serve."

Kayseri swung her other leg over the mare's neck, sliding off the horse so fast he had to back up a pace to keep her from landing on top of him. Flinging her arms around his waist, she snuggled against his stomach.

"You are the most wonderful, most generous man in the world."

Kree felt himself melting. What harm was there in a hug anyway? She pulled a small wrapped package from her belt pouch and offered it to him. "Open mine." Before he could do so, she snatched the package out of his hand. "Here. You're too slow."

He went still, starrng at a black silk cord looped with an intricate knot tied in one end.

"Don't you know what it is?" Kayseri teased.

Oh, he knew. It was a lovers' knot. Town girls gave them to men they wanted to court them. In his youth, he knew several lads who made a game of collecting them. He had not.

Well brought up young ladies might giggle at an oversized Goddess-born boy from behind the sheets on washday or over the vegetable cart at market, and they might squabble among themselves for the chance to dance with him at harvest festivals. But they did not give him lovers' knots. It was not done.

He was Goddess-born. The Goddess Namar was mother, wife, and lover. It was tradition. The only proper young lady who had ever looked twice

at him was his late wife, Molly. He had spurned tradition for her sake and look how well that turned out. Guilt over Molly's death still haunted him. Now, here was Katie Bruin smiling up at him expectantly, looking so damn sweet, he couldn't have refused her if she'd asked him to slit his own throat.

"I-I." Instead of saying, "I can't accept this," which he knew was what he should say, he settled for, "I've never had one before."

Looking pleased by his confession, Kayseri took the corded silk from his palm. "Bend down. Let me put it over your head."

Standing on tiptoes, she slipped the loop over his head, her soft hands rested on each side of his neck. She leaned in close, so close Kree smelled the honeysuckle sprig tucked behind her pointed ear, and did not move away.

"I love Mistral. She's just like the horses the highborn Thallasi ladies ride."

Her breath whispered across his cheek sending a shiver thrumming through him. "I-I." *Namar's eyes*. She had him stammering like a green recruit. "I can't have a bunch of uppity elves thinking my Katie is some country bumpkin when you go back."

Still on her tiptoes, Kayseri tilted her face up to his. "Your Katie is not going anywhere."

She licked her lips setting his blood on fire. Dark chocolate eyes beckoned him. When had he started thinking brown eyes were irresistible? His traitorous hands slipped around her waist. Sure enough, his fingers met. Flexing his knees to compensate for his height, he lowered his mouth to hers.

His last rational thought was, Lathan is going to *kill* me, and I will deserve it. Someone coughed. Kree jumped back about a foot, and felt foolish.

His senior cadet stood in the doorway. "My Captain? Am I interrupting?"

Kree rubbed the space between his eyebrows, a gesture borrowed from Kayseri's father. He dropped his hand to his side. "What do you want?" His sharp tone frightened the cadet. He did not like to frighten his people.

"The dailies are in, and the Malachite Ambassador is waiting for you. You said to come get you when he arrived."

The Goddess Namar loved all of her sons, even lost ones such as he, or so he had been taught. It must be true. This cadet's timing was nothing short of miraculous. Kree gave the boy a reassuring smile. "I did." Snatching up both jackets in one hand, he headed for the door.

"My Captain, you promised you'd take me riding."

Kree felt besieged. If he turned back to face the disappointment he heard in Kayseri's voice, his battle was lost. Instead, he barked at the cadet, "Take Miss Kayseri riding."

The lad glanced at the beautiful half-pixie woman. "But, My Captain, I have weapons practice this afternoon." Davi's protest earned a sharp look from Kree. The cadet snapped a quick salute. "Yes, My Captain."

Kree crossed the marshaling yard briskly, telling himself the urgency of the dispatches quickened his stride, not a desperate need to put distance between himself and Kayseri Bruin.

His office was jammed with people, all of whom stood when he entered and loudly pressed their cases. While his secretary struggled to regain order, Kree strode across the room to a black oak sideboard and snatched up a silver decanter of well-aged whiskey. He poured a double shot, tossed it back in one gulp, and

turned to the crowded room.

"Your pardon, ladies and gentlemen, I will not hear grievances today."

The town folk filed out, leaving Kree to contend with his Elharan secretary, a handful of troopers, and a fat, oily looking man he assumed was the current Malachite ambassador. He gulped another double shot.

"Dismissed." He poured again, swallowed, then closed his eyes against the burn. When he opened them, his secretary stared at him as if he had sprouted another head. The ambassador's look said he had always suspected Kree Fawr was unhinged, and now he had the proof.

"Out." Kree shouted. Pain lanced down his throat. He knew better. Shouting was outside his damaged larynx's comfort range. In the field, his first lieutenant did his shouting. He raised his voice so rarely, the effect was like kicking an anthill. In seconds, he was alone.

Damn! Damn! Damn! He almost kissed Kayseri Bruin. He would have if that blessed boy had not arrived.

Kree poured another drink and brought it to his lips savoring the smoky taste. What was he going to do? He could not avoid her. Qets was too small a town, and the truth was, he did not want to avoid her. Katie made him feel...*fun* again. But he must never be alone with her. Ever. It was a feat easily accomplished. He had half a dozen cadets in his personal service.

Snagging the bottle off the sideboard, Kree carried it into his bedchamber. High-pitched yelps greeted him. A small fluffy dog turned sightless eyes in his direction. He owed a lot to this little dog. Nursing the injured pup back to health had given him something to focus on, besides his own agony throughout the long bitter

winter as he struggled to break his lifelong addiction to Goddess nectar.

It had been said, soldiers love comfort, perhaps because they got so little of it. Kree was quick to admit he was no exception. It showed in his opulent, custom built bed, so large a man of six-foot seven could stretch out in comfort. He threw himself down on plump down-filled pillows stacked four deep against a high brass headboard. The dog draped itself across his lap and dozed off again.

The trouble with the never alone solution was he could not stand having people around him all the time. They fawned over him. *My Captain*. Katie herself started that nonsense as a little girl tagging after him in the practice yard. It spread through the garrison and then through the town like a wildfire. Now he was stuck with it. No one called him by name except when he made risky or unpopular decisions.

A wry grin tugged at the corner of his mouth. He was, like it or not, the beacon around which the citizens of Qets ordered their lives, and by the Hells, they wanted him to shine. If their beacon sometimes feared the dark, they did not want to hear about it.

"Respect is a great thing, Moppet. Papa always said so." Kree sipped his whiskey. "Damn lonely too." The dog gave a low moan and rolled onto its back in a show of solidarity.

Gulping down the remaining liquid in his glass and carefully rearranging his dog, he got up. He poured another drink, resolved to get sock-eyed drunk if he remembered how and returned to his desk with the bottle and his glass. It would not solve the Kayseri problem, but just for a little while, he wouldn't care.

Back in the stable Kayseri did not know whether to howl with rage or shout for joy. Kree almost kissed her. He would have too if that cursed boy had not arrived.

Years ago, she had confided her dream of Kree Fawr to her father. Her father, who by some accounts was the most powerful wizard in the Kingdoms, tucked her into bed, kissed her forehead, and said she was infatuated with the captain. It was natural for young girls, he had said. She would grow out of it, he had promised. Within a week of her revelation, Father had packed her off to her half-elf grandmother in Elhar City, some six hundred miles away, to make sure she did.

Presented at the Thallasi Court, Kayseri attended balls. She had danced and flirted, but she had not grow out of it. There was only one male who spoke to her heart. Now he'd called her his best girl, and he'd almost kissed her.

Kayseri cut her eyes to the cadet saddling her horse. *Her horse*. He chattered away, as children do, about what a fine animal it was. She crossed her eyes at him. The boy would soon regret his interfering ways.

Kayseri was not pixie-stupid. She could not think of a single acquaintance who had grown up to marry their childhood crush. That being the case, the odds were clearly not in her favor. She had not considered age a problem before now. Numbers meant nothing to races who aged slowly, but Kree did not see things the same way at all. Here he was at the peak of his strength and prowess, calling himself old. It must be a human thing.

She had spent enough time spying on him to know exactly what he liked in women. Sadly, she did not measure up. She was not tall or blonde.

Whereas cornflower-blue eyes usually drew him in like beacons, hers were a plain brown. He craved pale complexions, not skin like sun-kissed caramel. And rather than strengthening her claim on him, his connection to her family worked against her. Avoiding emotional attachments at all cost had been his credo since his wife's death.

Make no mistake, getting him over these hurdles is going to take some doing. A kiss would have helped. She just knew it.

That almost-kiss taught her to hope as nothing else could. It proved Kree felt an attraction to her, but it also proved his desire for her did not exactly please him. She knew how Kree's mind worked. He intended to deny his feelings for all he was worth.

She needed a plan, something he could not resist. But what? Then it came to her—the perfect lure—a riding accident.

Chapter Three

Boom. Boom. Boom.

The captain slumped across his desk, head cradled on his thick forearms. It was full dark, and someone had the colossal gall to pound on his door. Several of the mail packets had fallen off the desk and scattered across the fine Thallasi rug. His blind dog lay beside his foot chewing on the corner of one of the packets. Kree cracked open his eyes. He did not feel drunk. At least not drunk enough, and whoever was pounding on his door had just pulled stable duty for the next three cycles.

He raised his head. "GO AWAY." The stabbing pain that followed reminded him once again why he did not bellow.

Instead of being warned off, the sound of his voice renewed the offender's hope.

BOOM. BOOM. BOOM.

Make that six cycles of stable duty.

He lurched to his feet. The room made a crazy tilt and he caught himself on the edge of the desk. Maybe he was drunk. Taking a more-or-less direct route to the door, he closed his eyes and paused with his hand resting on the knob. *This fort had better be burning down around my ears.* He yanked open the door.

Davi stood in the hallway, soaking wet. Kree's chest started hurting, and for a second he thought he was going to be sick. Something terrible had happened, or this boy would not be here risking his wrath.

"Where's Katie?"

"I don't know, My Captain."

I don't know.

Funny, how three little words sobered up a man.

I DON'T KNOW.

Kree envisioned every sort of disaster. In his mind's eye, Kayseri bled out her life at the bottom of some gully. The vision made him weak-kneed. For a moment, the simple act of drawing in enough breath for speech was beyond him.

The cadet filled the silence with explanation. "She seemed like a good rider, My Captain. We were having a fine time. I told her it was coming on dark and we ought to head back, but she said pixies see just fine in the dark. Then something spooked the horses. I don't know what. I didn't see anything.

"That sand colored she-demon you gave the lady—Wow! She can run. Anyway, the thing is, I was thrown. By the time I caught my horse, I couldn't find Miss Kayseri anywhere." The boy gulped. "Do you suppose her father will turn me into a toad?"

Kree's head cleared. "Where did this happen? How long ago?"

"On the north river road, My Captain, not a half-hour ago."

Kree opened the door and ordered the young cadet stationed there to fetch coffee, hot comfort brought to his world by his patroness in Elhar. At the dry sink, he emptied a full pitcher of cold water over his head and came up sputtering.

"Go to the stable, Davi. Have Storm saddled. Then get yourself out of those wet clothes and get something hot in your stomach." Kree stripped off his shirt and struggled into another one. When his head popped through the neck, his senior

cadet had not moved.

Kree was just six and ten when he assumed captaincy of the garrison, younger than the boy trembling before him. He had needed all the experience available to him. For that reason, he did not stand much upon military protocol. To this day, his senior officers were quick to give him large pieces of their minds when they felt the occasion merited. Although, when he gave an order to a cadet, he expected to be obeyed.

"Is there something else, Davi?"

The cadet drew himself to attention. "Sir, it is my duty to inform My Captain he is deep in his cups and in no fit condition to ride out."

Kree's voice was a dangerous flat whisper. "Has there been a coup?"

Misery filled Davi's eyes, and Kree instantly regretted his temper. It was not this cadet's fault, if something had happened to Katie. Kree had been the one who promised to take her riding. If he weren't such a fucking coward, she'd be tucked up safe at home right now. Her father's words mocked him. *Pixies and horses don't mix*. Kree glanced at the ceiling then back at the cadet just as another knock at the door distracted him.

Coffee arrived, sweet and heavily creamed the way he liked it. He waited until the younger cadet withdrew before addressing his insubordinate senior. "Your concern is duly noted, Davi. Rest assured your captain has ridden to combat in worse condition. I'll admit it has been awhile, but I ought to be able to handle a slow ride up a smooth road."

Kree took a gulp of the steaming beverage, burned his tongue, and cursed roundly. Davi fled.

Downstairs, some ten minutes later, Kree found his horse in the marshaling yard as he had ordered. Chana Falconer, whom the men called,

Lady Bird, held the reins.

"Come to help?" He held out his hand for the reins.

The crusty swordswoman tossed them to him. "You don't need help making a fool of yourself. You've been doing a fine job all day."

"I'm still conversation fodder. Who'd believe it?"

Chana stared at him, fists propped on her slim hips. "She is a trifle young for you, don't you think?"

A Sister of the Sword, Chana was the garrison's current sword-master. She had served his father as a tracker. The upshot was she had known him from his youth and still thought he needed feminine guidance. Most times, he found it humorous.

"She's in stasis." He'd give a lot to take that comment back. He was the *fucking* captain. He didn't *need* justification. "You are out of line, Sister. We are talking about Lathan's daughter."

"I know who we're talking about. Do you?"

"If you have something to say, spit it out. You know I hate riddles."

"Kayseri Bruin is not hurt. She is infatuated with you. Has been for years. She wants you chasing out into the night after her."

Kree swung into the saddle, giving the sister a curt nod. "I live to serve."

"You hear him?" Chana said to no one in particular. "I am trying to keep him from making a complete ass of himself, and he gives me *Temple-talk* for, 'I'll do as I damn-well please.' Kree, be reasonable, just once in your damn life."

Ah. There it was, his given name. Testimony to just how foolish she found his present determination. "I gave her that damned horse. She's my responsibility."

Sister Chana threw her hands in the air and walked away muttering, "Blind, stupid, stubborn man. Might as well give advice to a fence post."

Kayseri urged Mistral through the woods at a trot. When the wind tugged the ribbon from her hair, her tight curls streamed free behind her. Moonlight painted the landscape with a silvery glow. It was glorious. Dunking the cadet in the river was not part of her plan, but she didn't regret it. He deserved a soaking for costing her that kiss

Slowing Mistral to a walk, she surveyed the area for a likely spot to fake being thrown. She would sham a sprained ankle, then Kree would carry her. If she let Mistral run free, she could ride back on *his* saddle. His arms, his strong arms, would be around her the whole way. She shivered, delighted by the prospect.

She never doubted Kree would come looking for her. His overblown sense of responsibility made a riding accident the perfect lure. Too bad, she'd expended so much mischief. Mischief attracted trouble the way a lodestone attracted iron. But what other choice did she have? She shook off her momentary concern. Nothing bad happened in her father's woods. She believed that right up until an elf lurched out from between the trees in front of her.

"Help me," he cried out in High Thallasi, before pitching forward, sprawling on the ground.

She urged her horse near. As soon as she came within arm's reach, the elf surged to his feet and grabbed at the reins. Mistral danced away. Kayseri saw that even if he had succeeded in grabbing her reins, he'd never hold them. Holding on to consciousness taxed the poor elf's strength. Losing his battle, the elf slumped on the ground

again. Kayseri dismounted and crouched beside him, noting a deep gash on his forehead. She eased him onto his back and set her canteen to his lips. The cool water revived him enough to gaze at her with pain glazed eyes.

"They abducted my princess. I must save her." He tried to push himself up, failed, and fell back with a moan.

She fetched her saddlebag and elevated his head.

"Help me."

"My Captain's coming." Kayseri forced more water between his lips. "He'll help you."

The elf closed his eyes. "I am Eldren of Thallasi, Son-heir of the Fourth House, Envoy of Allon, Sar el Thallasi."

She rolled her eyes. Pedigree. Trust an elf to stand upon his all-important pedigree even when he was dying. Eldren of Thallasi watched her through pale almost colorless blue eyes. Taking a deep breath, she tried to make her own pedigree as interesting as possible. "I'm Kayseri Marea Bruin, daughter of Lathan Bruin of Elhar City and Lethea of the Leafy River Clan."

A trace of a smile touched Eldren's lips. "Good fortune has brought me to the god worker's daughter. Take me to your father."

Fortune, good or ill, had nothing to do with it. Mischief landed this elf in her lap. "I can't. Father does not allow us... He doesn't like strangers coming to our home."

Eldren squeezed her hand hard enough to hurt. His strength surprised her. Kayseri bit her lower lip and glanced down the path stretching back through the trees. "My Captain's coming. He will help you."

Kree rode the north road at a walk. What a

pretty pass he had come to, terrorizing his cadets by day and chasing after half-pixie girls by night. In two days, Kayseri Bruin had turned his well-ordered life upside down. He had not felt so alive in years. When he caught up with her, he would... His head filled with images of Kayseri's dark chocolate eyes dilated with passion, her full pink lips swollen from his kisses, her glorious raven curls spread wild across his white pillowcases, her pert breasts pressed against—Kree banished these images. None of those things was going to happen.

When he reached the spot his cadet had described to him earlier, Kree reined in, listening for another horse. Hearing nothing, he silently lamented turning his back on his Goddess. His curses felt impotent.

The captain pressed northward. Given its head, a self-respecting saddle horse would stay on a nice smooth road. Having trained Mistral himself, he doubted the mare would have gone far, before calming enough for even a novice rider to control. Still, he decided to ride a little further north, dismount, and walk back the way he'd come. Tracking in the dark was not an easy prospect, and he was not the garrison's best tracker by a long shot. Chana's skill would be welcome about now. He cursed his temper. Losing it never served him.

Around the next curve, Kree caught sight of an overturned carriage. Moonlight limned the bodies sprawled nearby. Dread knotted his stomach. Saber drawn, he kneed Storm forward. Once Kree was sure no danger lurked in the moon's shadow, he sheathed his saber and slid off his horse. Close investigation revealed a fine carriage, black lacquer, with blue velvet interior and gold hardware. A very fine carriage indeed,

the sort elfin nobility preferred. A small porcelain doll dressed in a white gown lay upside down against the far door. He reached through the window and plucked it out.

Elfin. Interesting.

Tucking the doll into his belt pouch, Kree inspected the bodies. There were three in all, two men and a...something. Both men wore Temple braids, but nothing else about them said Templeman. Why would someone pretend allegiance to Namar? Whoever they were, they died by mage-fire. Even if he hadn't recognized the signs, his sensitivity to magic confirmed it. This had not been a simple working, his skin tingled with its echo.

The third body was a puzzle. It was an elf. At least, Kree thought it was. He had never seen an elf as tall as this one, nor quite so alien looking. The Thallasi, with whom duty forced him to deal, looked almost human, aside from their pointed ears. There was nothing human in this elf's fierce frozen beauty.

The confusion of tracks told Kree a large party had attacked the carriage. Half a dozen sets of prints headed south and another group moved west toward Malachite. No surprise there. Malachite was a cesspool for the discontent. On the far side of the road he came upon a set of narrow prints headed north into the woods. Those tracks were partially obscured by the tracks of a single horse with a tiny gryphon engraved on its shoes.

The answer to his puzzle was moving north, and so was Katie.

Judging from the staggering, erratic footprints, Kree thought the person he followed might be injured. Whoever it was, made no effort to conceal his trail. Broken branches marked the

route as clearly as if someone had posted a sign reading, "This way." The captain walked slowly, leading Storm by the reins.

Deep in the forest, a horse nickered. Dropping Storm's reins, Kree drew one of his fighting knives and advanced through the trees at a crouch. Fifty paces farther, he crossed a deer path where he found a bit of pink ribbon caught on a branch. His heartbeat accelerated, his muscles tensed ready to spring.

Up ahead, the horse nickered again. Kree moved through the trees parallel to the deer path, until he came to an opening in the trees and spotted Kayseri sitting on the path. Mercenaries in the woods, murder on the road, and Katie right smack in the middle of it meant only one thing as far as he was concerned. Mischief.

Relief washed over him, an odd feeling given the circumstances. Surely, he should be angry. He promised himself he would be, as soon as he had time. Right now, he had a puzzle to solve, and the elf, whose head rested on Kayseri's lap, was the missing piece. Kree stepped out onto the path.

"Katie."

If pixies had wings, Kree would have sworn she flew into his arms babbling about the elf being a prince and mortally wounded. After a swift inspection to make sure Kayseri was unhurt, he cleaned and stitched the elf's head wound, all the while she chattered at him about their encounter. The elf remained unconscious, a blessing really, considering the cut was deep, and his kit did not contain origanum to numb pain. He never carried any. Pain, in his experience, was a friend. It told him when to quit the field, a thing a man on Goddess nectar might not realize. The elf's other injuries were minor, a cut here, a

bruise there. By the time he finished cleaning them, the elf regained consciousness.

Kayseri pressed Kree's flask to the elf's lips, but the pointy-eared prig spit the amber liquid on the ground. His pale eyes glared at Kree. "I am Eldren of Thallasi, Son-heir of the Fourth House, Envoy of Allon, Sar el Thallasi."

Are you now? Kree rehearsed various titles in his mind. He owned a butt-load of them. He could say he was a Goddess-born Gryphon or he was Captain of Qets Garrison. He could say he was the Knight Protector of the frontier, but with the fellow being an elf prince and all, he opted for the title guaranteed to give the most offense.

"Kree Fawr, bastard." He sucked his teeth. "Nice to meet you."

Kayseri's shocked expression provoked a quick grin that Kree was certain the elf saw as cocky. *Let him.* "That's good dwarf rum you're wasting, elf." He took the flask from Kayseri and offered it again. "Does more to restore a fellow when swallowed."

Eldren shoved his hand away.

"Suit yourself." Kree took a quick swallow, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, and slipped the flask back into his field kit. "Was that your carriage back on the road?"

Eldren narrowed his almond-shaped eyes into slits. "Where is the Nhurstari?"

Nhurstari? That race had died out before the Stars fell into Elhar. Kree frowned. "The what?"

The Thallasi raked a slender hand through pale blond hair. It trembled. "The other elf."

"Ah." *Maybe they didn't. Interesting.* "I'm sorry for your loss."

Eldren bowed his head. A sigh escaped him. Beyond that, he held his silence.

"What business does a pair of elf lords have

in my frontier?"

The prince gave him a narrow-eyed look again, the same look he had given him when he had asked about the carriage. The look said the elf did not want to tell him anything.

"The Nhurstari lord and I were transporting a gift from my people to his. We were set upon, robbed. The gift was stolen. I must recover it."

Interesting. Out of the corner of his eye, Kree saw surprise flash across Kayseri's face. *Not true, but interesting.* There was a time in his life and not all that long ago, when he would have called the elf a liar on the spot, but the years had taught him some discretion. They really had. He nodded, all sympathy.

"You'll be in shape to travel tomorrow. I tell you what. I'll stay here tonight. In case there's any more trouble." He shot a quick glance at Kayseri, a silent warning against further mischief. "Not that I'm expecting any."

Slapping his knees as if that settled everything, Kree stood, stretched. "I'll see to the horses." He patted his stomach looking down at the elf. "Are you hungry, Prince Eldren? Maybe I'll set a snare. Give me a hand will you, Katie?"

Kayseri dimpled. "I'd love to, My Captain." She rose gracefully and slipped her hand into his. Her touch sizzled through Kree's blood. *Damnation.* He needed to get away from her.

Kree found a grassy spot to picket the horses and drove in the stakes. All the while, he felt Kayseri's gaze on his back. Women stared at him. Always had. It was a fact of his Goddess-born life. Having this particular woman stare at him was, he admitted, a bit unsettling. Who was he kidding? It was a lot unsettling for a host of reasons he didn't care to examine. They should be on their way back to the garrison right now.

Instead, he chose to spend the night in the woods. Why? Because he wanted to steal a few hours in Kayseri's company chaperoned by someone who did not know them. He was a trice-damned fool.

"What are we going to do now?"

Kree favored Kayseri with his most congenial grin, the one he used in council meetings when he wanted his officers to understand debate was over. "We are not going to do anything. You are going home in the morning. That elf is going to sit in my stockade until he decides to tell me the truth."

"You can't do that!" Outrage filled Kayseri's voice. "Eldren is a Prince of Thallasi!"

He had forgotten she was distantly related to that supercilious bloodline. His temper, already badly frayed around the edges, unraveled. He gripped her shoulders. "A Prince? So he says. You say he tried to steal your horse."

"Only because he's desperate. Just because an elf is desperate doesn't mean he doesn't deserve our help. Besides, I promised him."

Kree wanted to shake her until her teeth rattled. He wanted to kiss her until she melted in his mouth. Namar's tears, he was losing his mind. Kayseri Bruin was driving him mad. Maybe he was allergic to pixie pheromones. *Was that even possible?* He would ask Duncan as soon as he got back to the garrison. Maybe his genius first lieutenant could come up with a cure. One thing for sure, if he did not take his hands off Kayseri, he was going to do something...unadvisable. He stepped back and growled. Actually growled.

"Maybe you shouldn't have." Rage and frustration strained his voice to a ragged whisper. "Like you shouldn't have dumped my cadet in the

river. Like you shouldn't make me think you're in danger when you aren't.

"Sweet Namar's tears, Katie, didn't you stop to think how worried I'd be? Don't ever do anything like this again. Don't run away. Don't take your anger out on my cadets. If you're angry with me, fight with *me*. I can't go through this again. Promise me."

Having gotten his anger out of his system, Kree felt better. Much better. A hundred times better. It was like recovering his balance after being nearly unhorsed.

His balance lasted until he saw the first tear slide down Kayseri's cheek. *Damn her*. Tears were not fair. His heart broke, cracked open, and his newly won equilibrium leaked through the cracks. He gathered Kayseri into his arms.

"I'm sorry, My Captain." She sobbed against his stomach. "I wanted to spend time with you." She sniffed loudly. "Like we used to."

"Hush." Kree squeezed his eyes shut against the echo of his dead wife's voice, *'When will you have time for me, Kree? I hate your Goddess. I hate you.'* He smoothed his hand down Kayseri's dark curly hair. The soft springy feel of it against his callused fingers sent a shiver down his spine. Sweet Namar's breath, he wanted to rub his face in it. Clearly, he was insane. "It's all right. Everything's all right. Your Captain's here." He wrapped his arms around her pulling her against his chest.

Kayseri breathed deeply, filling her lungs with his scent. He smelled of horses, steel, and leather... and Kree. The clove and nutmeg scent of Goddess enchantment clinging to him was fainter than she remembered, but it was there, branded into his flesh. Many Wilderkin found his natural scent offensive, but she loved it. She

snuggled against his taut muscled stomach, hearing his strong heart beat just above her ear. The warmth of his body delighted her as did the soft breathy sound of his voice. Nothing was more wonderful.

Then Kree proved her wrong. He raised her tear-streaked face, flexed his knees so his big body cradled hers and kissed her. It was a tender chaste kiss, a butterfly light brush of lips against lips, but it heated her to the core. She smiled.

"Better." Kree sighed. "A man would do anything for a smile like that."

Kayseri touched his cheek. He turned his head into her palm pressing another kiss there. "So will you help Eldren?"

The spell was broken. "No."

He sounded like a man with a troublesome itch he could not scratch. Where had her tender lover gone?

After a quick supper of rabbit and wild greens, they settled down around a small campfire. Kree rested against his saddle with his beautiful gryphon knives near to hand. Before long, his soft snoring filled the camp, and Kayseri's thoughts turned to Eldren's missing princess.

Why didn't he tell Kree about Sandahl? He would have agreed at once if he'd known there was a child involved. But Eldren was a prince of Thallasi. He must have his reasons. Whatever they were, Kayseri could not allow Kree to imprison a prince of Thallasi, definitely not a prince of Thallasi whom she had promised to help. Clearly, Eldren needed their help. In his condition he would never rescue his princess. There must be a way to change Kree's mind. She bounced a fingertip on her lower lip considering

her options. With just the right touch of pixie-mischief she could... Kayseri focused on Eldren and reached out with her mind.

"Eldren?"

Eldren's near colorless eyes snapped open. *"Kayseri?"*

Kayseri clapped her hands over her ears. Eldren's mind-speech sounded like hundreds of bells inside her skull. She and her brothers used Wilderkin telepathy to conspire against their human father, but had never used it outside the family. She was not prepared for the force of a true elf. Wincing and pressing her fingertips to her temples, she sent, *"It hurts."*

His laughter sounded in her mind as wind chimes. *"My apologies. I shall whisper."*

Better. *"My Captain wants to put you in the stockade. We have to get away."*

Still weak from his injuries, the elf lord struggled to his feet. He glanced quickly at the sleeping captain. *"Give me your horse. The man will think I stole it."*

Kayseri shook her head. *"Oh, no. I'm going with you."*

Again, the prince glanced at Kree. *"The man will follow."*

"Yes, he will." She picked up her saddle pack and moved toward the horses. *"What he won't do is send a squadron after me. Pride won't let him. Besides, he knows you lied to him. He told me. And face it, you need his help."*

"The man does not want to help me."

"He'll change his mind." She hoped. Kayseri swung onto Mistral's back and held out her hand to help Eldren mount behind her.

Eldren hesitated. *"I will take his horse."*

"No!" Kayseri's made a helpless gesture and whispered. *"You can't take Storm. He loves that*

horse. He'd never forgive me."

Eldren pulled himself up behind Kayseri hissing his disapproval. With a last regret filled glance at her sleeping love, Kayseri flicked mischief into Storm. As the stallion wandered away, she chewed her lower lip, suddenly uncertain. *Forgive her?* She'd be lucky if he didn't kill her.

Chapter Four

Pixies and horses don't mix. Damn the girl! Kree stuck his fingers in his mouth and blew, producing a shrill whistle. This time he got results. Storm sauntered into the clearing. The horse nuzzled Kree's ear, looking none the worse for its pixilated night. Damn the girl.

Kree was glad he was alone because he wanted to put his fist through something. Preferably a prince of Thallasi, but just about anything would do. He cursed a soft steady stream as he saddled Storm.

She'd picked the elf over *him*. He was hurt. He was enraged. He was... All right face it, he was *jealous*. If anything, anything at all, happened to Kayseri, Kree promised himself, prince or no prince, he would hang that lying elf up by his balls. The Gods help any fool who got in his way. As for Kayseri, if she insisted on behaving like a child, he'd treat her like a child. He'd give her such a hiding it would be a long time before she'd sit a horse again, let alone run off on one.

Damn the girl.

It would take him an hour to get back to Qets, and at least another half hour to pack his kit and brief his troopers. Kayseri and the elf would have a good half a day headstart by then. He toyed with the notion of provisioning along the way and discarded the idea. He could, and often did, disappear for a single night, but disappearing for two or three days without telling anyone would cause a full-scale panic at his fort. Oh, and

then there was Kayseri's father to consider. What in the nine hells was he going to tell Lathan Bruin?

Holy crow, Lath, I am as sorry as I can be about this, but your daughter ran off with an elf, who I think is in a lot of trouble. Only I don't know what kind of trouble 'cos he's a lying pointy-eared goat like they all are. Oh, by the way, maybe he's the rogue magic user the Ladies warned us about.

Not a pretty speech. Good thing he had a whole hour to work on his explanation. Maybe he'd go with, "*Do you remember telling me that pixies and horses don't mix? I should have listened.*"

Kree pushed his aging charger as much as he dared, reaching Qets in just under an hour. The sun was full up, reflecting cheerfully on the garrison's blue tiled roofs. The sight brassed him off—he was not in the mood for cheerful. Most of the cadets were already hard at their chores. Two of his boys groomed and exercised the horses in the marshalling yard as he thundered past, scattering a flock of speckled chickens in a hundred directions.

He vaulted from the saddle with Storm at a canter, a dangerous, impressive dismount. The very same dismount, done with more daring than skill, precipitated the accident injuring his larynx. At the time, he'd thought it would end his military career, but it turned out having a soft voice forced people to listen.

His cadets ran to attend him. Storm, having lost his two hundred eighty-five pound rider, slowed to a walk, stopping a few feet away. The captain was already halfway to the garrison by the time the boys caught up.

"Nolie, I want my officers in the ready room in fifteen minutes. Get them."

"Yes, My Captain." The young cadet sprinted away.

"Davi, see that Storm is cooled down and fed. Have the stable master saddle Sirocco. I'll need three days' rations for four and feed for the horses within the half hour."

He took the stairs two at a time. One floor below, he heard Nolie banging on doors and hollering, "Captain's ready room. Fifteen minutes." He also heard the curses following each piercing soprano announcement.

Kicking open the door to his office, Kree stopped dead. Lathan Bruin sat at the desk in Kree's oversized leather chair, his feet propped upon the desk, casually spinning the empty whiskey bottle with one hand.

"Don't start on me, Lathan. I'm not having a good morning, and I'm just a little on edge."

Lathan followed him into his private quarters, leaning against the doorframe while Kree stripped to the waist to wash up.

"You must know what happened, or you wouldn't be here." He lathered his face to shave.

"Oh, aye. But just for grins, let's say I don't know my daughter kicked you to the ditch and ran off with an elf."

Pulling his nose to one side, he drew the razor along his cheek. "She did not kick me to the ditch." *Why the hell was he defending himself?* He flicked soap into the basin. "She did, however, run off with an elf."

Lathan's lips twitched.

"Don't make me kill you."

"Kayseri has changed some, wouldn't you say?"

Drawing the razor up under his chin, Kree said, "The girl is a damn catastrophe."

"A damn catastrophe on a fast horse. Don't

say I didn't warn you."

Kree gestured with the razor. "Do you want me to admit the mare was a mistake? Fine. I made a mistake. Don't start on me."

Lathan held up his hands in surrender. "Never. Not while you have a razor in your hand. I know your reputation with edge weapons."

Kree noticed Lathan's kit bag on the floor by the door. "You're packed. That'll save time."

"Sorry to disappoint, I'm bound for Othoni. They have plague there, fifty souls dead, most of them children. My God sends me. I am entrusting Kayseri to you. But hear me on this Kree, my daughter is full of mischief where you are concerned. You can't handle her. You need someone between you. Trust me. I've been married to a pixie for years—I am an expert on mischief."

The captain blew out a breath, exasperated. "I'm taking Chana. She can track a hawk through clouds, and she'll make a suitable chaperone."

"Good choice." Lathan opened Kree's clothes press. "What can I pack for you?"

"Uniform. Clean underwear. Socks."

"Chain mail?"

The question in Lathan's voice caused him to glance at his friend. "I don't expect the elf will fight me for her, Lathan, but if he does, he'll use magic. Chain mail isn't worth dirt against magic. Fact is, dirt's better. I could throw it in his eyes."

As Kree reached over the smaller man's shoulder to grab a sleeveless buckskin tunic, he saw Lathan's eyes focus on the lovers' knot still around his neck.

"Please tell me my daughter didn't give you that."

The captain shrugged.

"You accepted it?"

He felt heat rush to his face. Blushing made him feel ridiculous, and that made him angry. "What did you expect me to do? Spit in her eye. I'll return it. As soon as I can do it without hurting her feelings."

"And you think you can do *that*? My daughter has loved you since she was a child."

"That's not true. We're friends who share a birthday." Kree said while Lathan stared at him like he was an idiot. *All right, it was true.* "I'll think of something."

Lathan sighed. "You know, Chana is right. You are an idiot."

"I try not to be." He jerked the lovers' knot over his head, breaking the cord and tossed the offending thing on top of the pile of clothing. "I really do. Damnation. Why did you bring her home anyway? I thought you wanted Katie to have... How did you put it? *The advantages of Elhar.*"

Against his will a hint of bitterness crept into his voice. "Or maybe it was just the advantages of Thallasi? Do you really want Katie bound nice and tight to some pointy-eared Thallasi who will, by his very nature, strangle her spirit?"

"And of course, *you* wouldn't strangle her spirit?"

Kree glared. "We're not talking about *me*."

He rolled his clothing into a tight bundle, lovers' knot and all, and stuffed it into a worn leather pack. His friend stretched out on the bed and watched as he turn himself into a walking arsenal. The look in Lathan's eyes made Kree twitchy, and he braced for a real ass-chewing.

"My children are mixed blood, Kree. To Wilderkin, they're human. To humans, they're Wilderkin. Me? I want my daughter to be happy. You understand?"

Kree's fiery temper died to a smolder. "I'm an idiot. Draw me a picture."

"The hell you are. You are schooled in history, geography, music, and warfare. You speak five languages. For the True God's sake, you draw topographical maps. Who does that? Don't you realize indulging Katie's fantasy about you is pure foolishness? Worse. It's cruel."

Kree moved his shoulders again to adjust his weapons-harness, not in reply.

"Keeping her lovers' knot. Letting her believe she has a chance with you... It's not like you." Lathan was relentless. "Unless, she does? How *do* you feel about my daughter?"

Kree paused, blew out a long breath, gave a low chuckle. "Frustrated." When he glanced up and met Lathan's gaze, all his white hot anger burned away. He shrugged.

Lathan shook his head. "Think of something. I want my daughter to be happy."

"I got that the first time."

The assembled men and women rose when Kree entered the ready room. They always did. He hated it. "Take your seats gentlemen. Ladies.

"Some elves got themselves into trouble out on the north road last night. Two of the attackers and one elf died. I planned to bring the other elf in for safekeeping, but he escaped. You all know how personally I take it when folks refuse my hospitality."

Everyone laughed.

"The men wore Temple braids. Bird, take a detail out there. Hustle the bodies over to the Temple Koppras. See if the Matriarch knows them. I don't know what to tell you to do with the elf. He is...unusual. For now, I think the fewer people who see him the better. Handle it however

you think best. The carriage." He let a slow grin spread across his face. "We'll find a use for it.

"Duncan. I don't like thinking an armed force of say, fifteen or so, can waltz through our protectorate without our knowledge. Set up twenty-four hour patrols. We are supposed to *protect* folks here."

"The pixie woods too, sir?"

"It is part of the protectorate last I knew ."

"Mister Bruin could police it more efficiently, sir."

Duncan's statement, while true, was met with snickers and a few jokes by the other officers. Kree was gratified to see his first lieutenant take their jibes in his customary gentlemanly fashion.

First Lieutenant, Aimery Duncan, was in his early twenties. The men tagged him "Shug" either because his family held the largest cane plantations in the Addir Islands, or because of his stunning good looks. Kree suspected the latter. The man was genetically blessed, or cursed depending on point of view. Having chosen the military life, Kree felt sure Duncan saw his physical beauty as a curse. Fortunately, the man was also a tactical genius and a black-powder savant. He had stepped Duncan up to first lieutenant after only eighteen months' service, pensioning off one of the veterans who had served under his father to do it. What a dustup that had caused.

"Yes, he could." The captain replied with mild amusement. "But we have a system. I don't wizard. He doesn't warrior. It works for us." Kree patted his young officer's shoulder, taking the sting out of his tease. He loved the man. "Pixies are near the bottom of the magical power chain, Shug. They're here and they're pretty damn harmless. It's past time you got used to them."

"Yes, sir."

"Any other questions? Anyone?"

"What force do you muster?" This from his new blade sister. Kree thought her name was Berl. She had arrived on the same coach as Kayseri, and he had not interviewed her, nor, he recalled now, formally accepted her service. It was disgraceful and needed immediate remedy.

"I thought Chana."

A rumble greeted his pronouncement, and Kree slammed his hand on the table restoring order. He grinned his business grin. "There's no reason to think we'll encounter resistance. All we're doing is tracking one unarmed elf and a runaway half-pixie girl. I need a tracker and two fast horses. It's a solid fact."

There were no protests. He expected none. These people knew the rules.

Kree turned to his aide, who was busy scratching down every word he said in a garrison's daybook. "Nadal, go over the Malachite petition. If there is anything there beyond the usual whining about the border, parley with their ambassador. See if we can work out some sort of accommodation."

Accommodation. The word made him want to spit. He was a warrior not a diplomat. All his instincts urged him to pound Malachite into submission. Oh, how he longed for the good old days.

He scooped his kit up and stood. They all stood. They always did. He hated it.

"That's all then. Sister Berl, welcome to Qets Garrison. You'll handle administrative duties in my absence." The sister's eyebrows shot up, and Kree grinned. "You mistake me, Sister. Duncan has command. You'll be handling day-to-day internal things. It'll give you a chance to see how

our garrison runs. Don't worry, Nadal will make you look good. The same as he does for me."

Everyone laughed.

"I'll see you people in a few days. Be careful."

"First chance we get," they responded in unison.

But he was already out the door. Their parting comments followed him down the hall.

"...so, that is our Goddess-born captain."

"Forget it, Berl."—

Kree's lips twitched. Chana warned every Sister posted to Qets off him. Sometimes it even worked. Not often, but sometimes.

The sky was clear, and the sun was bright. It was going to be a hellish hot day. Davi waited with Sirocco. The horse was high-strung, anticipating exercise, and the boy struggled to hold him. Davi wore a hangdog expression that said he thought this whole sorry business with Kayseri was his fault. Seeing him, Kree figured he would have to think up something to rebuild the lad's confidence.

"Sirocco looks well, Davi. You're taking good care of him."

"He is a devil horse, My Captain. I do my best."

Kree handed his kit to the cadet. Beginning with the right hoof he checked the animal over with expert hands. The admonition, *be careful*, was a joke. He was always careful. His command style only looked reckless. He never rode out without making sure his weapons, mount, and gear were what they should be. He never allowed any of his people to do so, either. Sister Chana joined him in the yard, while he was still inspecting their gear.

Satisfied, Kree gave young Davi an approving nod and drew him confidentially close. "Take

charge of Nolie while I'm gone. You are senior. See to it he stays on top of his lessons and does his chores." He winked. "Try to make him think it's his idea."

Davi squared his shoulders. "My Captain may count on me."

He touched his fist to the lad's chest. "I never doubted it."

Swinging effortlessly into the saddle, Kree barely touched Sirocco's sensitive flanks before the gray desert-bred stallion exploded into motion. Chana's horse thudded along behind.

His fellows had laughed when he bought a horse good for nothing but pleasure riding. They howled that first cold winter when he had to build a heated stable for "Fawr's Folly" as they dubbed his stallion.

But Kree understood selective breeding. He was proof of it. He recognized what they did not. If he bred a third of Sirocco's impulsion and stamina into his stable, he would produce the finest cavalry horses the Kingdoms had ever seen. No one would laugh then. They'd line up to buy his horses.

Thinking of horses made him think of Kayseri. She and the elf needed another mount. The closest place to get one was Tarburg a good-sized town on the northwest side of the forest. It was a gamble, but one Chana agreed was worth a try. If they did not find their quarry there, they'd double back and pick up the trail.

They reached the town about four in the afternoon. The houses and shops were soundly built, indicating Tarburg must have been a prosperous town at one time, but that time was long passed. Paint peeled on most of the buildings, and there was a dingy feel about the place Kree could almost touch.

He asked a ragged man carrying a bundle of firewood on his back for directions to the livery and received a hostile stare and leftward jerk of the head.

At the livery Kree received more hostile stares and surly answers. "No, I ain't seen no elves. Hope never to," said the stableman with a glance toward the conifer covered mountains looming to the north. "Did the warrior want elves? Best he keep riding."

What in the blue eyed world did the man mean? There were no elves to the north, no elves anywhere except in Thallasi down near Elhar. But that wasn't true, was it? There were these new, or rather, old elves. These Nhurstari.

"Ain't seen no pretty woman either. Do the warrior want a woman? There is a house above the tavern. O' course there's farmsteads. Do the warrior want directions? He ought a say so. No, them horses ain't for sale. They belongs to the squire. Do the warrior want the squire? He be in the tavern."

Kree paid the stableman a gold lady for his dubious information and assured the man he did not want the squire. It was a generous bribe. One he thought might inspire the fellow to wait at least an hour before running down to the tavern carrying tales of warriors and elves. Chana disagreed, chiding him for wasting gold. Well, it was his gold to waste.

A quarter hour after riding into friendly little Tarburg, Kree rode out thinking about all the interesting things a Knight Protector might learn if he rode his protectorate without banner, escort, or uniform.

Chana suggested they check the surrounding farms. The same sullen hostility met them everywhere they stopped. The farmers looked

poor, although their land looked rich enough to grow gold ingots. They all said the same thing, they hadn't seen...*no elf. None o' their horses were missin'.*

Confident that he was scarier than Eldren, Kree believed them. Something had happened to delay Kayseri and the elf. All he had to do with the daylight left to him was find out what that something was.

The trail Chana eventually picked up showed them where Kayseri's horse had been chased into a canyon. Crouched low over Sirocco's neck, Kree let his prized stallion fly down the rock strewn gully and hoped like the very hells the horse did not catch a hoof. Chana followed behind at a more careful pace. He saw what looked like lightning flashing ahead, then another flash and another. Sirocco balked, reared.

The captain steadied his skittish thoroughbred with a firm hand and kneed Sirocco forward a few more steps before another burst of light caused the horse to refuse again. Kree put his spurs to its flanks, which he hated doing. Logic told him where the mage-fire was, the elf was, and where the elf was, Kayseri was. Outraged by this abuse, Sirocco shot forward, and Kree found himself riding a thunderbolt.

Three men had Kayseri and the elf pinned against the rocky canyon wall. Kree wrapped the reins tightly around his left hand. Sirocco was not combat trained. If he met resistance, the stallion was going to be hell's own to control. Drawing his saber, he gave himself up to fate. Everyone excelled at something. Fighting was Kree's *something*. Everything about it appealed to him, the danger, the rush. Battle was his birthright.

The garrison's battle cry echoed off the canyon walls. His damaged larynx made the

sound all the more eerie.

Startled, the men turned to meet him. He sliced through their feeble lines of defense before they knew what had come howling out of the gully at them.

He slid off his horse and stalked toward the elf with his saber clutched in a bloodied fist. Battle rage still burned in his eyes.

Kree stopped about a foot away from the prince and pointed to the fallen men with his saber. "These are awfully persistent highwaymen, elf. Do you suppose they're looking for this?" He tossed the porcelain doll at the elf's feet. Its face broke upon the rocks.

Eldren scrambled for the doll, but Kree grabbed him one handed and slammed him up against the rocks.

"I hate killing men when I don't know why or even if I should." Kree's forever soft voice was a menacing whisper. He brought his saber up under the elf's chin. "But once I get started, it's damned difficult to stop."

"My Captain!" Kayseri shrilled.

"Shut up, Katie."

A slight movement of Kree's wrist produced a bright spot of blood under the elf lord's chin. "Now, you're going to tell me what's really going on, and you had better pray I like the story."

Chapter Five

Eldren, Prince of Thallasi, collapsed the moment Kree let go of his tunic. Kayseri squatted beside the elf and dabbed at the blood running down his neck.

“My Captain,” she cried, her brow furrowed. “What are you doing?”

Kree shot her a fierce, quelling glare. He was not to blame for the elf’s weakness. Magic had a price. The universe demanded balance. He had seen it before. Hell, he had lived it. The year plague blew down from the mountains, Lathan had been so weakened by the use of the healing power, Kree had to carry his theurgist friend from house to house to lay hands upon the sick. The same year, Kree earned his hundredth Temple degree and took the gryphon brands on his shoulders. As he remembered the event now, he had screamed like a girl when the Matriarch laid hot iron to his flesh. Despite his lack of stoicism, he had been declared perfect, and titled Gryphon. He was not now to blame for the elf’s distress. Eldren had brought the weakness upon himself by excessive use of magic. All the miserable elf needed was rest and nourishment.

On the other hand, there were three men, whose blood even now soaked into the porous canyon floor, who would not recover. A cursory examination indicated the men were merely farmers. There was not a warrior among them. While Kree found dredging up pity for the used up elf difficult, he did pity these men. As he often

did, he longed for the numbing buzz of Goddess nectar so he could see these men as enemies, enemies without faces, without wives and children who would go hungry because no one would be there to bring in the crops. Kree felt responsibility for that. He was to blame... *No, Eldren was.*

Fetching a wine skin and bag of fruit from his saddle pack, Kree tossed them to Kayseri. He paced, kicking loose rocks out of his path while she forced sips of wine and bits of fruit down the elf prince's throat. Before long, Eldren was alert and sitting up. Kree hunkered down in front of him. "All better?"

The elf eyed him, wary now, realizing his vulnerability, chewing on his answer or maybe thinking up more lies. "Thank you for your help."

"I didn't do it for *you*."

As always, the battle cry had left his voice raw. He coughed, clearing it, reached out and plucked the elf doll out of Eldren's lap. Seeing how the elf had used the last bit of his failing strength to repair it, Kree asked, "What's so special about this doll?"

The prince of Thallasi waited until Kree glowered at him before he answered. For a moment the captain wondered if the elf had a death wish.

"What do you know about elves, Captain?"

"I don't like them."

"My Captain!"

"Shut up, Katie"

"I see." Eldren sighed. "Besides that?"

"Talk to me about the doll."

"The doll is nothing. The young lady it belongs to, Sandahl, Sara el Thallasi, is everything. A jewel without price. Irreplaceable. The Nhurstari envoy and I were escorting her to

her betrothal when our carriage was set upon, and Sandahl was taken."

Kree's lip curled. Already, he hated this story.

"Let me begin at the beginning, Captain Fawr. There are two Elven nations. Thallasi and Nhurstari. I should say Nhurstari and Thallasi. Nhurstari is the mother of the People."

"I saw the Nhurstari elf," Kree interrupted. "He didn't look a thing like you."

Eldren dismissed Kree's remark with a wave of his hand. "The rift between Thallasi and Nhurstari occurred before the Stars fell into Elhar, before the founding of the Kingdoms. Nhurstari became an isolationist nation, hidden by strong magic. As time went by, Thallasi fell under the influence of the Star-wizard adepts in Elhar. We embroiled ourselves more and more in the affairs of humans. Nhurstari remained pure. Thallasi became polluted. We are both in danger."

"What kind of danger?" Kree smelled Elfin intrigue. *Goddess!* He hated these people.

"Extinction. Elfin children mature slowly, more slowly than other Wilderkin races. Thallasi bear few and, of those we do, more than a third are of mixed race. Due to eons of inbreeding, Nhurstari bear even fewer. Of their progeny surviving to maturity, most are male. They must reunite with their Thallasi kin, or they will die out.

"Thallasi is polluted by other races as I've stated. Even such a one as Kayseri here may call herself a cousin to our king. My people have lost much of our magic, our elfishness, if you will. We must reunite with Nhurstari, or we will cease to exist as a unique people."

Eldren pushed pale hair off his alabaster forehead. "We could not sit idly by while extinction and cross-race breeding carried us

away. Nhurstari's First House had an infant son and heir, and our seers promised a daughter, heir to the First House of Thallasi. The match was set. Our princess would be fostered in Nhurstari. Our High Council believed having her come to stasis there would make the match more palatable to the Nhurstari. The augury did not foretell we would have to wait ninety-six years for the birth of our princess. Rian, Sar el Nhurstari has grown into maturity, yet he is as committed to this alliance as his father has been these many years."

The elf lord paused in his narrative for a moment, he bowed his head and took a deep breath before he continued. "Two weeks ago, an envoy arrived at my door with news that the Majority, Rian's father, was dying. Nhurstari tradition forbids the ascendancy of a bachelor heir. I was requested to deliver Rian's bride at once, thus, insuring he could assume Majority before his father's death."

Eldren smoothed the doll's pale hair. His fine featured face was profoundly sad. "My princess is not yet the age of fosterage, being but fifty years old, about the human equivalent of twelve. What else could we do? Rian's house must not lose the Majority, and Sandahl understands her duty. I have made sure of that. She will live under Rian's protection until she comes to stasis and is bonded with him. Rian Sar el Nhurstari will wait for her. Sandahl is the hope of his people. She is the hope of mine. That, Captain Fawr, is the truth of the matter."

By the time the elf finished speaking, Kree was pacing furiously, pounding his iron hard fist into his left palm, again and again. He really hated this story. *Betrothed. Fostered.* Pretty words for what amounted to one thing. This little elf girl was a pawn in the political games of her elders, a

young girl, for Goddess sake, who still played with dolls. The very idea twisted Kree's stomach into knots. Oh, he accepted that such politically advantageous marriages were made. From time to time, his own people made them. And it was a solid fact, the Addiri did. His first lieutenant's father sent the man marriage offers on a monthly basis, but damnation, Kree did not have to like it.

Worse, now that he had a few facts to go with his theories, Kree was certain, absolutely certain, this poor little elf princess had been in Tarburg. Probably, at the same time he had. It explained why the townsfolk were so hostile. They feared getting involved in the affairs of their betters. Missing an opportunity to rescue the child because of Eldren's evasiveness made Kree angrier. It was some time before he trusted himself to speak.

"That explains why you're desperate to find her. It does not explain why humans took her, or why they attacked you here. Who opposes this arrangement?"

Eldren sighed again. The elf was so tired he could hardly hold his head up. "I know nothing of what motivates humans. Why do your people do anything? There are some Nhurstari who would rather die as a pure race. Some Thallasi fear Nhurstari magic will reduce us to second class citizens. But both our peoples value our children highly. I find it hard to believe either faction would harm Sandahl."

Kree spat. "Well, someone sure as hell would." He walked over to the bodies of the dead men Chana had lined up in the shade by the canyon wall. "Someone hired farmers to keep you pinned down while they, whoever they are, moved your princess."

Eldren jumped to his feet, his weariness

forgotten. "You know where Sandahl is?"

"I know where she was. Chana, ride back into Tarburg. Pose as a hired sword looking for work and see what information you can uncover." Well aware his physical presence and soft voice drew all eyes to him, like as not the citizens of Tarburg would not remember if his companion had been male or female.

"I'll bring the bodies in early tomorrow."

"Aye, My Captain." Chana tucked her ponytail up under a slouch hat, took off her garrison issue jacket and sword belt, and strapped her sword on her back after the mercenary fashion. "I'll see you in the morning."

Throughout Eldren's discourse, Kayseri sat wrapped in private misery. Kree had said only three words to her since he charged into the canyon like an avenging spirit. "*Shut up, Katie.*" Six, if you counted that he said it twice. She hugged her knees tighter, tears welling up in her eyes. The tears were for her dashed dreams. They would not help her with Kree, not this time.

He settled himself on the other side of the narrow canyon without once looking in her direction. Eldren's long fingered hand touched her hair, and she gazed up into the elf's beautiful face. His chime like telepathy filled her mind.

"I regret that I have caused you trouble with the man."

Kayseri wiped her cheeks with the heel of her hand. "I have never seen him so angry, Eldren. He will never, ever, forgive me."

"He will."

She chanced a glance at Kree's thunderous visage. "I wish I shared your confidence."

"I will tell him I coerced you. He will want to believe it, and so he will."

Kayseri smiled at him, tears drying on her

cheeks. She shook her head. "I think we've told My Captain enough fibs. Isn't lying how I got into this mess in the first place? I'll confess and throw myself on his mercy."

"The man is a Temple demon. There is no mercy in him."

"Oh, you're wrong, Eldren." Kayseri sniffled. "He's kind and good. Once, when I was a little girl, he took me to a carnival in Koppras. On the way back, we found a raven with a broken wing. He took it home and nursed it back to health. It was a worthless bird, one that not even my father would have troubled with, but he taught the raven to talk. He still has the bird. It flies freely now." A wistful smile tugged Kayseri's mouth. "He also keeps a blind lap dog."

"Really." Eldren dropped out of mind-speech gazing thoughtfully at the captain. "I would not have believed it."

"Well, you're not exactly seeing his best side." Kayseri wiped her face with her fingers and fluffed up her curls. "How do I look?"

The elf prince smiled at her. "You are very beautiful, Kayseri Marea Bruin, daughter of Lathan of Elhar and Lethea of the Leafy River Clan."

Kree sat a few yards away on the hard stony ground with one long leg stretched straight out and the other pulled up so the back edge of his saber rested between his instep and his knee. Crunching gravel warned him of company, and he glanced up. Seeing Kayseri, he went back to rubbing harder than necessary to clean the blood off his saber.

She sat across from him, not too close he noticed, but close enough to make him uncomfortable just the same. Another quick glance showed him, her eyes were like a

frightened fawn's—a fawn that had been crying. Kree hardened his heart. Tears were not fair.

"I guess you're pretty angry, huh?"

How perceptive she has become. Kree seethed. He blew out a sharp breath he had not realized he was holding. "Katie, three men died today, and somewhere out there a little elf girl is in danger because I could not trust you. Don't you think I have a right to be..." he paused for effect, "angry?"

"You *can* trust me."

"Do you think so? Because, I don't." Kree raised his gaze from the weapon and stared at her. "Last night, you promised me *in tears* you would not run away from me again, and all the time, you planned to slip off with that damned Prince of Thallasi."

"I didn't plan that."

Kree laughed, but it was not a happy sound. "It didn't just happen, Katie." Kayseri started to protest, but he raised his hand silencing her. "Maybe it did. Maybe it was like the time Molly's favorite vase got broken, and you swore to me you weren't even in the room when it fell off the table. Was it like that?"

She blushed. Her brown cheeks turned a lovely bronze shade. "No! And it's not fair to bring up things that happened when I was a child."

She was right. It was not fair, but by Namar's eyes, she'd lied to him, and men died for it. Kree wanted to punish her. "You are still a child."

"I am not!"

"Then don't act like one. Why did you go running off? I'm listening. Make me understand."

"You were so unreasonable. I couldn't think of any other way to keep you from putting Eldren in the stockade, and I couldn't let you do that because the princess—"

Kree's breath hitched. "You knew about her?"

She cut her eyes away too quickly. No matter what she told him now, he knew the truth.

"Damnation, Katie! Why didn't you tell me? I could have done something."

"I wanted to." Kayseri rose to her knees and inched toward him, ringing her hands. "I did! I told Eldren he should, but he said no. He said if word of Sandahl's abduction got out, elves on both sides would take up arms. Eldren is a Prince of Thallasi and—"

"I am the bastard captain of a flyspeck garrison on the back side of nowhere," Kree finished for her. He stared at her through the gathering twilight. His voice was like sandpaper. "Say no more, Kayseri, I understand your dilemma."

Kayseri's eyes widened. "My Captain, you can't think I'd ever compare—" Her chin quivered. "I only meant I took Eldren's word about what elves would do."

Damn the girl! What witchery did she possess to make him say things like that? *Never!* Never had he wasted one heartbeat being ashamed of his origin. Why should he? He knew who his parents were. Privately, neither ever denied him. He was Goddess-born. With relevance to Temple degrees, a Gryphon, the Goddess' highest level of achievement. At banquets, he sat with kings, and they deferred to him. His flyspeck garrison boasted, among other things, the finest cavalry in the world. They were The Kingdom's combat elite. He scrubbed his hand across the lower half of his face. Without a doubt, he was losing his mind.

Suddenly, he wanted to touch her, *had* to touch her. Leaning forward, he palmed Kayseri's cheek with his battle calloused hand and shook his head. His voice lost its rough edge. "I know

what you meant. Don't pay attention to me, Katie. I'm a very stupid man." *Goddess, you are so beautiful.*

A single tear slid down her cheek and pooled against his fingers. "How long is My Captain going to be angry with me?" Kayseri smiled into his eyes and blinked a couple of times. "A day? A week?" *Blink. Blink.* "The rest of my life?"

Whenever Kayseri misbehaved as a girl, she had been able to get around him with her shy smile and enormous brown eyes. Here was an old tactic he was very familiar with. He marveled at his continued susceptibility. By the Goddess, though, her five-year absence had greatly improved its potency. Her sweetness created a swell of sensations within him, melting every other feeling. Kree knew he should hold on to his anger. It was better for her and, he suspected, much, much better for him. He gave a ghost of a smile, a slight acknowledgment of his weakness.

"You sure know how to get my fur up, little girl, but hells..." Kree shrugged. "I'm damned if I can stay angry with you."

His surrender appeared to satisfy her for the moment at least, and he returned to the business of cleaning his weapons. Wiping each one with an oiled cloth taken from his kit, he searched for imperfections along the cutting edges before carefully sharpening each blade on a whetstone.

For a while, she sat quietly beside him watching him work. But before too long, she began to squirm and fidget. Kree glanced at her out of the corner of his eye and grinned. Pixies were not a people known for sitting still.

Unable to contain herself another second, Kayseri blurted out, "Why are you wasting so much time. You didn't use half those weapons today?"

Kree laid the cloth aside and carefully sheathed the knife he had been working on. He gave Kayseri a hint of a smile. "Because I don't know what I will face tomorrow. Making sure my weapons are what they should be is not a waste of time. It is my life. Do you see? "

"Oh, I see what you mean."

She gave a huge yawn before rising up on her knees, stretching her arms over her head, and arching her back so her pretty little tits stared him right in the eyes. He wondered if she realized what a luscious picture she presented.

His smiled turned into the real thing. "Your adventures are catching up to you. Get some sleep, little girl." He glanced up the canyon. "Look, your elf prince has already turned in."

"He is not *my* elf prince." Kayseri stretched her arms up over her head again. "Is My Captain going to sleep?"

Mmm. "Not. A. Chance."

"Then I'll sit with you."

"I need to think, Katie."

"You can think with me here."

Bet me.

"I'll be so quiet My Captain won't even know I'm here." Stifling another yawn with her delicate fist, she curled up on her side pillowing her head on his thigh.

Suddenly, Kree had no place to put his hand. *Oh, yeah, I won't even know you're here.* After a few moments of awkward indecision, he opted for the region near her right elbow. Leaning his head back against the hard canyon wall, he watched the stars come out.

To his everlasting amazement Kayseri stayed quiet. It was not long before he realized she was asleep and so was his leg, but the relief filling his heart was worth all the prickly discomfort his leg

cared to give him.

He smoothed Kayseri's inky curls off her brow enjoying the silky texture of her hair sliding through his fingers, a small stolen pleasure. She smiled in her sleep, and he wondered what she dreamed.

His fingers uncovered a slightly pointed ear reminding him more than years separated him from this beautiful woman. It made no difference, he wanted her so much it was a physical pain in his chest, and an ache in other, lower places he thought best not to think about.

With a bit of effort, he forced his mind back to the problem of Eldren's missing princess. He was still pondering the problem when the elf prince approached a couple of hours before dawn, offering to take the last watch. Kree surprised himself by saying yes.

The captain woke with a cramp in his back from sleeping upright and a stiff leg because Kayseri had used him for a pillow all night. On the whole, as he hobbled around swinging his arms trying to limber up, Kree thought he would have done better not to sleep at all.

During the night, as he guarded Kayseri's slumber, he came face to face with the uncomfortable truth. Pixie pheromones were not the source of his problem. He was not losing his mind. It was much, much worse. He was in love with his best friend's daughter. This revelation did not calm his warring heart. All in all, he preferred the notion of madness. Many mad men had made fine military careers. It was a rare man who made a cross-race marriage work especially one as one-sided as any marriage to the likes of him would be.

Kayseri brought him coffee and a hard flat oatcake for breakfast. The aroma warned him the

coffee was bitter camp stuff, so far from his preference, he almost refused it. The first sip lived down to his expectations. Where in back of hell's pantry had Davith found this crap? He turned the hard oatcake over in his hand, eyeing the thing with disgust. Horse fodder. It looked every bit as nasty as the coffee.

Kayseri, on the other hand, looked very tasty, tousled and heart-stopping beautiful. Kree wanted to take her in his arms, consequences be damned, and make love to her right there on the canyon floor. He wanted too much, and now that he had acknowledged it, he did not know how he was ever going to stop wanting her. Lathan's voice echoed in his mind. *I want my daughter to be happy.*

What Kree wanted did not matter. Kayseri was not for him any more than his first wife, Molly, had been for him. He'd had nothing to offer Molly, and he had even less to offer a free spirit like Kayseri.

"Did My Captain sleep well?"

"Mmm, just dandy," Kree mumbled around a mouthful of the dry tasteless oatcake, washing it down with a gulp of acerbic coffee. Why did she have to be so damn pretty? Shoving the mug at her, he stalked off grumbling about seeing to the horses.

"What did I do?"

Behind her, Eldren said, "I do not believe Captain Fawr is entirely pleased with his present situation."

"I can't blame him." Kayseri fetched up a deep sigh. "We tricked him into it."

The prince's lips twitched in a quick smile. "I do not speak of that situation, my dear." He gave her shoulder a squeeze, then he walked over to help Kree.

As Kree slung the second body across the horse's back, he shot Eldren a questioning edgewise glance.

"May I assist you, Captain?"

"Tie off this rope while I get the other body."

"You are inordinately distressed by the deaths of these men, Captain. Having seen you fight, I would think you have killed dozens."

"Hundreds, probably. I saw my first action at fourteen. After your first kill, who keeps track?" Kree grunted as he heaved the last body across the horse's back. "I never murdered anyone until yesterday. I didn't have to do this, Eldren. I just—I saw Katie threatened, and I lost my temper. It never serves me."

The elf's eyebrows shot up clear to his hairline. "I am afraid I do not understand."

Kree gave a curt laugh. "You haven't seen me fight, elf. You've seen me butcher. In a fight your opponent has some chance to win."

"These men were armed. They outnumbered you three to one."

"They were farmers," Kree shouted, winced. He was doing far too much shouting. If he kept up this level of abuse, he would have no voice left at all. "They were farmers, elf. Probably never held a sword before in their lives."

Eldren stepped back from Kree's lightning flash of temper and tilted his head to one side. "You said that last night. Someone hired farmers, you said. How do you know?"

"Because I can see, and I can think." Kree thrust his scarred, calloused hands out for Eldren's inspection. "These are a swordsman's hands, a warrior's hands. These men," Kree jerked his head at the bodies, "have calluses too. The sort you get from pushing plows. They were farmers. It's a solid fact."

The prince walked around to the other side of the horses and bent down to inspect one of the dead men's hands. "Why would someone send farmers to attack me?"

"You tell me?" Kree tied off the last body.

"Last night you also said you knew where Sandahl was. Do you know that the same way you knew these fellows were farmers?" The new note of respect in Eldren's voice made Kree want to smile.

He fought the urge and shook his head. "No. That's more in the nature of a hunch."

The elf's hopeful expression died, and Kree did smile. "Don't worry, elf. I've had some fair hunches in my time." He flexed his shoulders and twisted his head from side to side, working out a few more kinks. "I think she was back in that town. Now? Who knows?"

"I will." Eldren said this with such conviction it got Kree's attention. "Sandahl and I are spirit-bound. It is an ancient rite. Through it, I became Sandahl's *Vashada*. Her slave. I shall serve her until I die. If she dies before me, I will follow her."

The prince pointed north. "Sandahl is that way. If she is in that town, I cannot help but know."

The captain nodded. Elves astonished him. Even though he disliked them, they amazed him. He finished with the last knot and called for Kayseri to mount up. He wanted to get shut of the bodies before the sun made them go stale.

Chapter Six

As hard as it was for Kree to imagine, Tarburg looked even shabbier in the crisp morning light. He glanced across Kayseri at Eldren. The elf shook his head almost imperceptibly. He did not *feel* his princess.

They moved at a slow pace toward the tavern in the center of town. News of their coming ran before them. By the time they reached the tavern, a small group of townspeople were assembled on the steps. Kree reined up in front of the knot of people. No one spoke. After a few minutes, some of the men came forward and untied the bodies.

"The horses go to their widows." Kree slid out of his saddle. "I'll only need the one the elf is riding."

The crowd shifted and the helpful stableman from the previous day stepped forward. "Them's the squire's horses."

"That is not true." Kree gave the man a flat stare. "They were the squire's horses. Now they are mine by right of conquest. Unless *you* are challenging me for them?"

"Ah, naw, warrior. They's yours, right enough." The stableman's nervous grin exposed stained broken teeth. "I see you found yourself the elf and the woman you was asking after. You'll be moving on now, I warrant."

"I don't think so. I have an urge to speak with this squire of yours."

The man spread his hands wide in a what-can-I-say gesture. "The squire is gone. If the

warrior want the squire, he ought a seen him yesterday."

Kree studied his fingernails. "I can wait."

"The warrior might wait a long time."

He tossed a copper lady to one of the dirt-caked children. "We'll be in the inn. Bring me word when the squire returns."

Kree tied Sirocco to the hitching post and crossed the dusty road, keeping to the slow lazy pace he had been taught was terrifying in big men. Dismounting quickly, Kayseri and Eldren hurried after him. He held the door for them to precede him into the inn, paused in the doorway, and turned back to face the stableman who had followed them as far as the center of the road.

He forced enough volume into his soft voice so it carried to the cluster of folks on the steps. "If you or anyone else, so much as touches one of my horses while I am inside, I will cut off the right hand of every man in this sad excuse for a town. Do I make myself clear?"

The stableman hid his grimy hands behind his back and nodded vigorously.

The inn was a pleasant surprise. Given the town's sorry state, Kree expected sparse accommodations, a common room where travelers might lay out a pallet, or perhaps one or two private rooms above stairs for the occasional important guest. Instead, he found a polished oak sign-in desk flanked by a graceful curving staircase. There was a large common dining room on the right, dominated by a red stone fireplace surrounded by several smaller dining alcoves offering privacy to those who desired it. He also noticed a sunny sitting room with bright floral wallpaper through an arched opening to his left. The hand-scraped oak floors, accented by fine Elharan carpets, testified to Tarburg's better

days. *What in the bloody hell happened to this town?*

The balding man behind the desk wore an expensive coat, a bit frayed at the cuffs, true, but finer than anything Kree had seen so far. A green velvet curtain behind the innkeeper blocked the view to what was surely the man's residence and a private entrance. Sweat beaded on the fellow's shiny pate. The poor innkeeper was as afraid to cross the trio entering his establishment as he was to cross the squire. Not a comfortable position to be in. Kree almost felt a little sorry for him.

Eldren hurried to overtake him. "You would do that? Cut off their hands."

Cutting his eyes away from the innkeeper, Kree met Eldren's near colorless gaze. "I don't make threats."

He chuckled when Eldren blanched, surprised the elf could be paler. *Who would believe it?* "I do play the odds, and I'd say the odds of having to carry out that threat are about a million to one."

He pushed past the elf prince, headed for the man behind the desk, but Eldren dogged his steps. "But, you would?"

The register lay open on a craved swivel platform. Kree turned it around and wrote on a pristine white page without looking up. "It's not going to happen, Eldren. But, yes, I would. I am a monster. You would do well to remember it." He stared down at the register and muttered, "I could buy this town twice over for the price of Sirocco alone." He raised his eyes to the sweating innkeeper. "We'll take a room upstairs overlooking the road."

"I don't think I have a vacancy, sir."

Kree spun the register around so the man

could read it and slammed two gold ladies onto the counter with enough force the innkeeper jumped. "Think again."

The man took one look at his book and mopped his brow with the towel he had been twisting in his hands. "Oh, dear." He scooped the coins off the counter. "Follow me, sir."

In short order Kree, Kayseri and Prince Eldren were shown to a small suite. As the man took his leave, Kree asked him to send up tea, biscuits, and a pitcher of ale. When the innkeeper closed the door, Kayseri clapped her hands like a delighted child.

"What did you write in his book, My Captain?"

She is not frightened at all. Her confidence in him overrode all thought of personal safety and that was a heady tonic. Her belief in him was almost as exhilarating as Goddess nectar.

He grinned at her. "My name, Katie. That's all."

Crossing to the window, Kree twitched the curtain back a fraction so he could watch the street below. Kayseri's slender arms slipped around his waist. He felt her cheek press against his back. The floor seemed suddenly unsteady, and through the roar in his blood, he thought, why not enjoy this moment? It's innocent. But he knew why not, so he gently disengaged himself from her embrace. He led her by the hand to the window on his right. "Keep your eyes on that end of the alley for me, little girl. Elf, you take the other window."

The innkeeper returned and left a tray, having augmented the captain's order with a wedge of white cheddar and several slabs of delicious smelling honey-glazed ham.

Kree layered cheese and ham onto a biscuit,

and poured himself a mug of brown ale, before returning to his window.

"Do not tell me we are going to eat *now*." Eldren sounded incredulous.

People had begun to mill around in front of the tavern. Kree took a pull on his ale and watched them over the rim of the mug. He wiped his mouth on the back of his hand. "The first law of campaigning, Elf, is eat when you can. The second is like it, rest when you can. I'd advise both."

Kayseri slipped over to the table and hurriedly helped herself to biscuits and cheese, before scurrying back to her post.

Sister Chana joined them, slipping silently into the room. "If you intended to make their bungholes pucker, My Captain, you've succeeded. If you were looking to make friends, you need to work on your people skills. Ah, breakfast." She made her way to the table pulled up a chair and sliced off a piece of cheese.

He made a circular beckoning motion with the hand holding his biscuit, knowing she had more to report.

"You were right. A mercenary with a young girl passed through here." Chana took a sip of ale to wash down the cheese. "They stayed right here in this very inn and left at sundown yesterday."

Kree sat down across from her. "And?" He piled ham onto another biscuit.

"And the mercenary figured out prince fancy-pants here," Chana tilted her head at Eldren, "was following him, so he paid this squire to hire some locals to slow him up. It seems he is meeting his contact somewhere nearby to deliver the goods, so to speak, and collect his fee."

"Will they give me this mercenary?"

"In a heartbeat. These people don't have any

loyalty to a here yesterday, gone today mercenary. You, on the other hand, are very much here today, and you have the power to visit misery upon them for the foreseeable future. The problem, as I see it, is they won't give up their squire. I don't think they can do one without the other. So they are kind of caught in the middle. Pass me a slice of ham."

Eldren left his task and stared at Kree as if unable to believe his pointed ears. "These people know Sandahl's whereabouts. You should force them to talk."

A muscle ticked in Kree's jaw, betraying anger. "These people are citizens of a territory I am sworn to protect."

"Fine words coming from a man prepared to sever hands over a horse only a moment ago."

Kree moved fast. In a blink of an eye he was in the elf's face, jabbing his finger just inches from the prince's nose. "Listen to me, elf, because I'm only going to say this once. I will do whatever it takes to get your princess back, for her sake not yours. If I have to squeak every one of these people, I will. I will not like it, but I'll do it." Kree stalked to the window. "The thing you don't understand is, I won't have to. You don't understand human nature. In their effort to save their squire's sod-rotted backside, they'll lead us right to your princess. Now, get the hell over there and watch your end of the alley."

Prince Eldren moved slowly toward the window. "Eldren, you and Katie ate all of my rations last night. This morning you ate most of Sirocco's. Eat something. That's an order."

Kayseri turned to look at the captain. "Sirocco's?"

"Watch the alley, little girl," Kree admonished. "You did not think those dried out

oatcakes were meant for people, did you?"

She glanced at him with bright delighted eyes. "You ate them."

He gave her a wink. "I have eaten worse tasting things. Usually at your house."

She nodded. "My mother is a terrible cook."

The captain was intent on the street below, but a crooked smile lurked at the corner of his mouth. "Your words, not mine. Your mother can't make up her mind if she likes me. She thinks I stink."

"Oh, pooh," Kayseri chided. "You are my father's covenant brother, unanimously loved by all of clan Bruin and you know it."

The note of approval in her voice was unmistakable, but it was the wrong thing to say. It reminded him of his proper place in her life. He frowned at the street below losing all trace of his teasing good humor. Below them, a chambermaid stepped off the rough plank sidewalk and hurried across the street. "Here we go." He twitched the curtain back into place, but continued to watch through the lacy fabric.

In a matter of minutes, Eldren said, "A man just came out of the alley."

"Do you recognize him?"

"Yes. It is the ruffian who spoke to you."

"I've got one too." Kayseri was practically jumping up and down. "It's the boy you gave a coin to."

"Which one do we follow?"

Kree grinned into his beer mug. Eldren's agony was a thing of beauty.

"My money is on the stableman." Chana popped another piece of cheese into her mouth.

Kree scratched the red stubble, which had sprouted on his chin overnight and considered his options. What did he have? A kidnapped

Thallasi princess of the First House no less, who was touted as the last hope of two races. If he failed to recover her and humans were behind her abduction, there would be an all out race war. In addition, he had Kayseri whose adoring gaze told him he could do no wrong in her eyes. Her regard spread warmth as thick as honey in his middle, but its sweetness was a distraction he could not afford.

Then, there was Prince Eldren, waiting for his decision with the look of a man on the rack. As much fun as drawing out his decision would be, he could not afford maliciousness just now either. Goddess willing, he'd get another chance.

"I agree with Chana. We go with the stableman."

The captain wrapped their leftover breakfast in the tablecloth and handed the bundle to Kayseri with a playful wink. "Be careful."

"First chance I get." She darted out the door, so clearly enjoying her great adventure Kree could only shake his head and chuckle.

"Why did you say that?" Eldren demanded. "Is Kayseri in danger?"

"No, elf. It's just something troopers say. It means—well—it means good luck."

"Why not say 'good luck'?"

The elf was obtuse. Chana rolled her eyes at him as she went out the door. Eldren's confusion was so plain, that in a rare show of compassion, Kree placed a hand on the elf's fine boned shoulder. "I should have, Eldren." He used the same hand to propel the elf prince into the hall with enough force Eldren crashed into the wall with a satisfying thump.

The boardwalk in front of the tavern was deserted except for a dog that barked at them while its tail wagged. Kree saw Kayseri standing

beside her mare and shot her a quick admonishing look before realizing she waited for a leg-up. In the fraction of a second he wasted fantasizing about her weight in his palm and the touch of her hand on his shoulder, the damn elf prince stepped forward and robbed him. It was probably for the best.

Kree turned Sirocco's head in the opposite direction to that taken by the stableman and clicked his tongue, easing his horse into a smooth trot. Kayseri and Eldren trailed out behind. Chana brought up the rear. As soon as they rounded the corner, out of sight of the tavern Kree reigned in. Catching hold of a low roof overhang, he lifted out of the saddle and flipped heels-over-head onto the roof.

"What are you doing?" Eldren demanded.

Kree lay flat on his stomach grinning down at the peevish elf. "Playing a hunch." As he crawled up to the ridgepole, he could hear Kayseri and Eldren arguing about something in the alley below. The low buzzing conversation pulled at the edges of his concentration. He slid down a little way, so he could sit up and not be spotted from across the street. Resting his forearms on his knees, he coughed very softly. They glance up, and he made a sharp cutting gesture just below chin level with his thumb. Kayseri covered her mouth with her hands and raised her pretty shoulders a fraction. Her look said, "*Oh, sorry.*" Eldren pursed his lips, his eyes were pale icy blue slits of arrogant impatience, but he remained quiet. Chana gave Kree a look that said plainly, "*They're your problem. You deal with them.*"

The captain crawled back to the ridgepole. From his vantage point, he could see the livery clearly. Less than five minutes later the gap-toothed stableman emerged from his shack and

entered the barn. Kree grinned as he slid down the roof and dropped onto Sirocco's back. The horse, unused to such treatment reared in protest, but his sure hand brought the high-strung stallion under control.

"What were you looking for, My Captain?" Kayseri asked as soon as Kree moved up beside her.

"Our helpful stableman just went into the barn." He watched Kayseri's nimble pixie mind work.

Her eyes widened. "He's going to the squire."

"That would be my guess."

"Guess!" Eldren exploded. "Does it not occur to you the man might be going about his work, and you are allowing the real messenger to get away?"

Kree turned to look into the elf's too pale eyes, he held on to his temper by a thread, applying years of discipline to do so. *Goddess!* He loathed the haughty point-eared prig. "No. It doesn't. If the real messenger is getting away, *I* am a prince of Thallasi."

From the corner of his eye, Kree saw Chana's lips twitch. To her credit, she smothered her smile with her hand. He changed to a less combative tone. "Third law of campaigning, elf, is always go with your gut. My gut has kept me alive in the field for twenty years. I know that does not seem like much to someone like you, but the thing is, Goddess nectar makes a man feel indestructible. Consequently, we Goddess-born tend to be reckless impulsive types. Usually, we don't get more than a year or two in the field before death gobbles us up.

"You asked me why troopers say 'be careful'? So I'll tell you. When I was a lad, my recklessness convinced my father I would not survive my

teens. He told me to 'be careful' every time I left his sight. He meant, I should use my head for something besides a battering ram, trust my gut, and not let myself be dragged into other people's fights. My father wanted me to come home alive. You see? It became a running joke around the garrison, and we say it still today.

"Although, I never got the knack of staying out of other people's fights, which I'm guessing is lucky for you, I did learn to use my head and trust my gut. If you want me to find your princess, you are going to have to trust it too, because I'll tell you right now, Eldren, I intend to come home alive."

Eldren did not appear the least bit convinced by his explanation. The elf's gaze shifted to Kayseri. *"Do you believe this?"*

"Trust him, Eldren. If there is a way to save Sandahl, he will. Has he not said so?"

Eldren made a sound as near a snort as Kree had ever heard an elf make. Kayseri's expression became pleading, and Kree realized something passed between Kayseri and the elf in which he had no part. Not magic, he'd know. Jealousy burned through him.

"You think he would give you the moon if you asked it, but I say to you, Kayseri, the man hates our race."

Kayseri's eyebrows arched. She favored the elf with her *I smell cauliflower cooking* expression.

"Maybe he just doesn't like you, Eldren."

"Nor I him. Never the less, I read the truth in his mind."

Kayseri threw the elf as murderous a look as Kree had ever seen. Whatever the elf was doing, she did not like it.

"How dare you violate him?"

"His mind is a maelstrom. I cannot help

hearing the roar. The roar mostly concerns you. He alternates between sexual fantasies and self-loathing brought on by those fantasies. He holds that insanity is preferable to loving you."

Kayseri pressed her hands to her ears. It was all the incentive Kree needed. A gentle pressure of his knees sent Sirocco crashing into Eldren's horse. The elf's poor gelding reared in terror, dumping the elf prince on his velvet clad butt, all in about the space of a heartbeat.

"Your pardon, Prince. This beast gets the bit in his teeth sometimes." Making a great show of getting his stallion under control, Kree leaned over and offered the prince a helping hand.

The elf rose with the fluid grace of his kind, pointedly ignoring the captain's outstretched hand. Eldren dusted off his tunic and hauled himself back into the saddle. Kree schooled his face into a study of compassion. Inside he cheered.

They continued to follow the alley to the end of the block, then took a left into another alley. This one took them into what had been Tarburg's carriage district. Most of the businesses were boarded up. From there, they had a clear view of the livery. Shortly, the stableman came out of the barn leading a sorrel horse and whistling an off-key tune. Glancing around to make sure he was alone, the man mounted and rode off still whistling his flat little ditty.

"It appears you may have been right," Eldren said.

Kree watched the stableman's slowly diminishing form, not sparing the elf a glance, and whispered, "There's a surprise."

"See here. If I can be magnanimous enough to admit I was wrong, you could at least be gracious enough to accept my apology."

Kree stared the elf full in the eyes, his expression tight-lipped and anything but gracious. A muscle ticked in his jaw. Tense moments passed in which neither elf nor man broke eye contact.

"My Captain, shouldn't we follow?" Kayseri's gentle touch on his hand broke the silent challenge.

His eyes slid to hers. "I want him to have a good lead. Besides, we need some of his sweet feed and oats. I don't intend to see Sirocco broken down. Come on, let's see what we can find."

Ten minutes later, they left the livery with feed for their horses and supplies for themselves. They trailed the stableman easily northward toward the mountains.

In the more open county, Kayseri urged her horse up alongside Kree's. He glanced at her quickly and gave her a nod. "Was the elf pulling some kind of magic on you back there?"

"No."

He glanced at her again. "Then what was going on between the two of you?"

Kayseri dropped her gaze to her hands. "Do I have to tell you?"

"Does it concern the princess?" His voice sounded cold to his own ears. Her eyes widened just a little, and she glanced away. *Damnation!* She was about to lie to him.

His gaze slid to her and held, waiting for her to look up at him. "Unless it affects my ability to do my job, you don't have to tell me anything you don't want to."

"I don't want to."

Her refusal to confide in him sent him into a silent fury. He should have let her spin a lie for him, at least that justified his anger, instead of raging jealousy.

Kayseri was the first to break their angry silence.

"You don't like Prince Eldren, do you?"

He turned his head and shot her a cold look. "Don't have to."

No one needed to tell her his curt answer was a danger sign. Anyone who knew him, knew it. His temper was barely tamped and liable to explode any second. Further conversation with him on this or any other subject was unwelcome.

Disregarding the warning signs, she pushed on. "Why not?"

In spite of his bad throat, or maybe because of it, Kree excelled at mimicry. He affected Eldren's haughty sharp accent. "He is a prince of Thallasi. Do I need another reason?"

The censure she heard under his mocking tone shocked her. She recalled Eldren's words. *The man hates our race.* "So is my father."

Kree's language became that of the coarsest foot-solider. "Horse shit!" His eyes, fierce as twin jade dragons met hers, but his voice was his own, breathy, soft, almost gentle. "Your father is a man, little girl, a round-ear, like me. Thallasi had no use for him when he needed them, and if they claim him now, it's because they covet his glory, not because he is a quarter elf. Heaven knows they haven't had any glory of their own in the last several millennia."

He jerked his head in Eldren's direction. "He thinks because elves live for thousands of years it somehow makes them superior to us mere humans. I don't see it. I am only four and thirty, but I've done more to affect the world I live in than most elves ever do. Look at him. His big mission in life is to deliver a little girl into a marriage she probably doesn't want, to a male she has never met, and he can't even do that

without my help. By Namar's sweet breath, little girl, I've never met one of the pointy-eared snobs I'd give you two copper ladies for. That is a solid fact."

Before he joined Chana inspecting the trail ahead, Kayseri adjusted the dark curls concealing her own pointy ears. "Why is My Captain bothering to help him then?"

Kree straightened slowly, turned and looked at her. "Now, you didn't give me much choice about that, did you?"

His temper sparked again. He wiped his hand on his britches and expelled a long breath. "Because children are children, and no one has the right to hurt a child. Not on my watch. Not in my territory. And, because it's politically expedient." He swung back into the saddle.

Kayseri couldn't believe it. Eldren was right. Her wonderful captain hated her race. Their relationship took on a different hue. Stunned and pale she trembled under the weight of her new clear cruel vision. All his kindness to her meant nothing. Kree Fawr loved her father. Not her.

"You're looking wrung out, little girl." He ran the knuckles of his right hand along the curve of her cheek. His touch was so tender she almost burst into tears. "Hold on just a little while longer, then you can take a bubble bath and sleep for a week."

Chapter Seven

The sun beat down, directly overhead. Wiping his forehead on his arm, Kree stole a glance at his Wilderkin companions. Kayseri and Eldren had their heads bent close, one midnight dark and the other moonlight pale. He sensed they were doing it again, that thing they did, that thing so precious she would not speak of it to him. She had picked Eldren over him time after time since the elf arrived on the scene. He should be happy, it solved all his *Kayseri* problems. *Damnation*. He wanted her to pick him.

For reasons the captain did not want to examine, he found himself engulfed awash in a reckless raging white-hot fury for which he had no outlet. He did not even know with whom he was angry. Eldren. Kayseri. Himself. He was pathetic.

Making things worse, the craving for Goddess nectar screamed through his system louder than it had in years. Three drops of the golden elixir and he'd be flying high, mind and body humming with sharp clear singularity of purpose. Just three drops and he would feel the fighting edge he remembered so well, the edge that, for all his skill, Kree knew he lacked without it.

Deprivation burned in his every pore, evoking a memory so sweet, he reached into his kit for the little vial he kept there. A token, so he told himself, kept as a symbol of his freedom. A *lie*. He knew. He kept the Goddess nectar because he was afraid one day his strength would not be

enough to save those he loved. Against that possibility, he kept his Goddess nectar. Not today. He would not become Goddess bound again when all he really needed was a little self-discipline. He slipped the vial back into his kit.

He kicked the pace up, bringing Sirocco to a canter. When the trail forked to the left, he stopped, and let the others come abreast. They could see a small stone and timber cottage about fifty-five yards in the distance. The stableman's sorrel horse was tied out front, and an enclosed carriage was parked beneath the branches of the lone shade tree near the front door. A low holly berry hedge ran from the paddock to the house. Otherwise, the approach was open all the way to a thin stand of trees bordering the road on the far side. One look at the elf's anxious face, told Kree the princess was inside.

"It's a good setup," Kree remarked to Chana, since she was the only one who could appreciate it. The sister nodded.

Kayseri asked, "My Captain, do you want me to use a little mischief, scoot down the hedge row and get a look inside for you. "

What a stupid question? "You know I don't."

"But you need it. Let me help you."

Kree smiled. "All right, sweetheart. We'll come around and meet you in those trees over there. I do need to know the lay out, where the princess is being held, how well she's guarded, and how the guards are armed. Can you manage all that?"

"Yes, My Captain."

Recalling another occasion when he and Lathan gave a similar job to a pixie, Kree had his doubts. "Repeat it."

Kayseri rolled her eyes, obviously thinking him dull-witted. "You want to know what the cottage is like inside. You want to know the

princess's location. You want to know how many people are with her and what kind of weapons they have."

He grinned. He had underestimated her again. He should know better. "Get going, little girl. We'll give you a hundred count."

Kayseri slid out of her saddle and handed Eldren her reins. Looking up at the captain, she asked, "Do you want anything else?"

Kree caught his lower lip between his teeth. *You*. "Be careful."

She beamed at him, looking happy for the first time since they left Tarburg. "First chance I get." Calling up mischief, Kayseri vanished.

The tickle of pixie mischief whispered along Kree's skin, leaving goose bumps in its wake. He rubbed his arm on reflex.

He and the others skirted around the cottage to the opposite stand of trees. He tied a strip of cloth around his head to keep sweat from dripping into his eyes, and worked a tight fitting pair of fingerless gloves onto his hands. Using his teeth and free hand, he tied off the four eyelets, lacing them tight at his wrists.

Eldren whispered, "What is our next move?"

Kree glanced at the elf. "I don't know. What spells do you have besides the fire ball?"

"My weak magic is purely defensive."

"It wasn't really all that effective, was it?" He shook his head. Personalities aside, he and Eldren needed to work together for the princess's sake. Hell, maybe for the sake of peace between humans and elves. "Your pardon, Eldren, I was out of line. How are you with a sword?"

The elf prince shrugged his fine-boned shoulders. "Compared to you? Worthless."

The captain studied the long expanse of open ground sloping up to the stone cottage.

"Somehow, I knew you were going to say that."

"My Captain."

Kayseri appeared at Kree's side. He heard her voice. He felt the crawly sensation on his skin, and then she was *there*.

"There's only one room and not much furniture, a table and two chairs." Kayseri pulled herself back into the saddle. "The princess is in the center of the room."

"*Is Sandahl unharmed?*" Eldren pushed at her mind.

"There are four men. The stableman, a man dressed as a Templeman, he has five braids, a tall weird looking elf wearing a robe kind of thing, and a fat man in a fancy suit."

Kree was impressed, especially by the braid detail. "Which ones are guarding the princess?"

"The elf and the Templeman. My Captain, they have the poor thing in a cage."

Eldren made a strangling sound in his throat, and Kayseri finally looked at him. "It does not look as if she's been hurt."

The elf stared hard at the cottage. "You must take care, Captain. The Nhurstari is likely an enchanter."

"Did you notice a back door, Katie?" When she nodded, Kree turned to Eldren. "I want you to go around to the back and hit the door with the biggest fire ball you've got."

"But Sandahl—"

Kree raised his hand cutting Eldren off. "The biggest one you've got, Eldren, or I swear by the Goddess, I'll kill you myself. The diversion will provide cover for our advance across all this beautiful wide-open space. I want enough fire and smoke to send some of them out to Chana and me. I want a big one. Do you understand me? A big one."

"May I at least warn my princess?"

"How?"

"By telepathy of course."

"Of course." The secret thing was all mischief and magic. He should have known. Kree narrowed his eyes at Kayseri. She was making a habit out of deceiving him. "Sure, Eldren. Do it just before you cast. We don't want her to tip them off accidentally. Get going."

The captain dismounted, adjusted the bastard sword on his back, and removed a large axe from one of the many loops and straps, which held the attached weapons to his wide saddle skirt.

"Katie, once we have the princess, bring the horses up as fast as you can. Chana, you take out the mercenary. I'll take the mage."

They advanced together to a point just inside the tree line and stopped, waiting for Eldren's diversionary action. Chana drew her sword, looping the sword knot over her wrist. Holding the blade before her with her hands in a prayerful position on the hilt, eyes closed, she centered herself for battle.

At her side, Kree went through his own ritual, drawing air into his lungs through his nose and exhaling slowly through his mouth, purging fear with every breath. Here was another chance to beat death. The thought sent a thrill through his system. He swung the axe, side to side loosening his muscles, getting the feel of the weapon.

"Are you sure you can kill the mage?" Chana kept her eyes closed.

Kree exhaled. "Theoretically."

The swordswoman cracked her eyes open and slanted a glance at him. "Theoretically?"

Swish. Swish. Kree took another big breath. *In. Out.*

"It's all timing. Will he give away his cast? I'm sensitive to magic, so maybe. Will I have enough time to counter if he doesn't? No way to know. It's...exciting."

"Ah."

Inhale. Exhale.

"This axe head is made from lodestone. Lathan thinks it will disrupt magic. Guess we'll know for sure in a bit."

Inhale. Exhale. Swish. Swish.

"I'm feeling...good about it."

"Aye. Well. That's what matters." Chana closed her eyes again. "Be careful."

"First chance I get."

There was nothing weak about Eldren's magic. When it came, the fireball lit up the sky like a second sun resulting in a deafening explosion. Kree and Chana sprinted across the open ground reaching the front door just as the stableman burst out. Her stop thrust dropped the gap-toothed fool before he'd taken two steps. The fat squire was out next, tripping over his man. Advancing on the run, laughing like a lunatic, Kree swung the axe. There was a solid satisfying thud. The squire fell, split from clavicle to sternum. That left the mercenary and the mage. Even odds.

Smoke swirled through the interior pouring in from the rear of the cottage. The hired man in Temple braids rushed them. He darted around Chana, shouting, "I want the Temple champion!"

Chana's steel rang against his. "Life is just filled with little disappoints. Get past me, you can have him."

Kree sized up the Nhurstari magic user. The elf crouched beside the cage, working on the lock. Slow going, he kept darting glances over his shoulder. Smoke stung Kree's eyes and burned

his lungs like demons. In the next few minutes he might die. What a rush! He was euphoric.

“Stand away.”

Abandoning his task for the moment, the Nhurstari stood, turning slowly. The smoke did not appear to affect him. There was no urgency in his movements. He had inhuman yellow eyes. Cat’s eyes. He was thin, tall, maybe an inch or two taller than Kree, putting him somewhere close to seven foot. His challenging smile showed way too many sharp white teeth. *So this is what they look like when they’re not dead.*

“Foolish, interfering round-ear. What does this business have to do with you or your kind? Where is that idiot Thallasi? I smell the taint of his inept casting.”

Inept? He blew out the whole rear of the building. Kree could not smell Eldren’s magic, but he could feel it. It crawled all over him. With so much residual magic in the air, he did not have a hope in hell of sensing this elf’s cast. An Axe would never be his weapon of choice, but he had trained with it, and he had the physique to wield it. Axes required momentum much like his cavalry saber. You did not just chop with it. He swung it in wide arcs storing energy with every swing. His eyes fixed on the Nhurstari on the slim chance he could read the elf’s body language. He’d fought a mage before, a long time ago, but not alone.

“What is that toy you challenge me with?” For all his condescending taunts, Kree saw the Nhurstari’s eyes narrow. The elf apprehended his danger right enough. He edged around the cage trying to put it between himself and his attacker.

Kree could not allow that. Swinging the axe before him, he advanced with careful measured steps, cutting off the elf’s retreat. His eyes never

left the mage's.

The Nhurstari made a sweeping arc with one hand as if grabbing something out of thin air. The elf had fast hands. Kree had fast reflexes. He charged, swinging the axe at the elf's head. His cross-sweep met the cast, slashing through a viscous white magical ball. Magic burst apart. Splatter hit Kree's shoulder, neck and exposed biceps. The expression on the mage's face as he ducked under the axe, told Kree the casting did not perform as expected. They hardly ever did, seeing as he was drenched in Temple enchantment, something he thought of as his secret weapon.

The magical splatter from the elf's failed casting felt like icicle spears on Kree's skin. Numbing cold shot down his arm. *Damnation! This is bad.* For a split second he wondered what the spell was supposed to do. Then the elf cast again, and Kree concentrated on his grip. He could not feel the fingers on his right hand anymore, but somehow he kept the axe in motion. The next casting ricocheted off the spinning blade, slammed into the wall, and melted the stone.

The Nhurstari cursed. Kree did not recognize the language, but the tone was universal. The elf pulled a knife from the folds of his robe. A knife against an axe, you could not ask for better odds. Just as Kree's axe reached the top of its arc, the elf lunged, a blur of motion. Kree sidestepped, felt the razor sharp blade sting along his ribs. The axe swung around, and his cold numb fingers lost their grip. *Damnation!* The axe flew out of his hands propelled by stored momentum. It hit the elf with the dull thunk of a butcher's cleaver. The elf's head bounced off the far wall. The axe skittered across the floor.

Coughing on the smoke, his right arm hanging uselessly at his side, Kree retrieved his weapon. He was the luckiest son of a bitch in the world, and he knew it. He nudged the Nhurstari's body with his booted toe. "Huh, it worked." he said through lips going numb.

Hacking the lock free, he one-armed the princess against his shoulder sheltering her as best he could against the smoke and the gore. He heard Chana taunting the hired man. "Five braids and this the best you've got? You expected to fight My Captain?"

He turned toward the door cradling the princess to his side. "Stop playing with that fellow." He coughed. "We've got to move."

"Such a waste, My Captain." Chana knocking the mercenary's blade aside and blasted thirty-five inches of deadly Elharan steel into the man's chest. She jerked the blade free as he fell, wiping the blade clean on his tunic. "He had potential."

Chapter Eight

Kree stumbled out of the burning cottage into the sweet clean air. His lungs purged themselves in a fit of coughing that drove him to his knees. For a few heartbeats he knelt in front of the cottage, his numb right hand dragged the axe, as his left arm supported the princess. Kayseri ran to him, and crouched beside him.

"Oh bright mercy, My Captain, you're bleeding."

Soldiers do. "Scratch." His voice sounded funny to his ears, funnier than usual. He tried to smile. Judging from the alarm on Katie's face, he must have fallen a little short. She pried the axe out of his grip. He never felt it.

Kree turned his attention to the princess. "Deep Breaths." His speech slurred. The biting cold rendering his sword arm as good as dead had spread into his cheek. He pushed himself to his feet and carried the princess to a watering trough next to the paddock. Seating the elf girl on the edge, he fumbled a handkerchief out of his pocket with his left hand, wet it, and covered her nose and mouth. He tried to say "deep breaths." It sounded like, "Dep befs." His tongue felt fuzzy. He could not form the words. His mouth worked, but nothing came out. Then, Eldren rushed over and snatched the girl away.

The captain slumped against the trough. His lips were numb, his tongue thick, choking off his air. His fog clouded brain told him to get the gooey stuff off his skin. He pulled a short knife

out of his arming harness and scraped at his shoulder ineffectually.

When Kayseri knelt beside him and pried the knife from his hand, he attempted to push her away. He didn't want her near the magic, but he couldn't do anything but blink.

"Let me help you." She kissed his forehead."

Lightheaded, Kree had just enough time to think, *she picked me*, before darkness claimed him.

He heard soft chanting in darkness where he floated. He did not recognize the language, but the sound called to him. He chased it, struggling to catch the words, and the darkness receded bit by bit. The chanting stopped. Kree opened his eyes to an azure sky. Birds chattered. He was lying on the ground with his head cradled in Kayseri's lap. Her cheeks were wet. Her hand rested on his chest. It felt so right Kree brought his left hand up covering hers, trapping it where it lay. "Don't cry. Smile for me, sweetheart." Somewhere, something burned.

Sister Chana's face appeared over him. "Blessed Goddess! He's coming out of it."

Memory rushed in. Kree tried to rise, made it as far as his elbows, and sank back. He was weak, and his tingling right arm would not support his weight.

"Chana, get the girls onto Katie's horse. We've got to get out of here." Again he made to rise, this time reaching his knees.

Eldren's face came into his field of vision. "You should have died. It was a vile casting."

On hands and knees, Kree crawled toward his horse. "I'm Goddess-born. Magic never works right on me, but it came close this time. Whatever you did, I owe you."

"I peeled off the casting. Nasty." The prince

shuddered, lifted his shoulders. "You should rest until your strength returns."

Kree glared. "A big fire is bound to draw a crowd, probably not a friendly one. Right now, I couldn't fight a kitten. I'm not sure I can run away, but run is what we're going to do, and we are going to do it now!" Kree reached for his stirrup, tried to pull himself to his feet, but Sirocco danced away dragging him a couple of feet before Chana caught the animal's head. The captain made a few more unsuccessful attempts to pull himself up by the stirrup.

"For Goddess sake, Eldren," Chana shouted. "Help him."

Once he got the captain's boot in the stirrup, Eldren used a combination of steadying and pushing to boost the much bigger man into the saddle.

"Thank you for my life, Eldren."

Again, the elf lifted his thin shoulders. "You have your life. I have my princess. We are even."

Chana came to Kree's side holding Sirocco's reins. She studied him a minute as he swayed in the saddle. "You gonna' stick?"

He leaned forward, resting his upper body along the horse's neck, and wrapped his arms around its neck locking his good hand around his right wrist. "Yeah. I'm good."

Chana nodded. "I'll take rear guard. Kayseri, lead My Captain's horse."

They galloped single file. Eldren led them north toward what Kree now thought of as the Nhurstari mountain. There was something wrong with the mountain. It looked... That was the strange thing, he couldn't really look at it. His eyes sort of just shied away.

Sparsely wooded rolling foothills rapidly gave way to steeper going. After the first mile or so,

Eldren slowed the pace sparing the horses. The pine forest thickened, green foliage filtered out the worse of the oppressive sun beating down upon their heads, baking the pale skinned elves.

By mid-afternoon Kree recovered enough to resume command. His first action was to call a rest beside a sparkling brook. An underground spring fed the little run splashing water over granite, cold and clear. They watered the horses. Then his exhausted company collapsed gratefully onto the cool grass.

Concerned as he had been with his own weakness, Kree took the opportunity to take stock of his companions. Sister Chana sat with her forearms resting on her knees, her back propped against a tree trunk grabbing a little rest like the veteran she was. But his beautiful pixie flower was decidedly wilted, and his elves—his elves looked fit to die on the spot, especially the little princess. Sun had blistered her skin nearly scarlet and baked the life right out of her. She lay against Eldren's chest, as glassy-eyed and lifeless as that stupid doll in her hand.

Favoring his right arm, Kree dug out the bread, cheese, and ham he had saved from the morning and handed the food to Kayseri. "Share this with Eldren and the princess." It was little enough to lift their spirits, but it was all he had.

"What about you and Sister?"

"Don't worry about us." He hoped Katie did not hear his stomach rumble. "We'll find a safe place to layover, and we'll hunt something." He noticed Chana opened her eyes when Kayseri mentioned her. Now she closed them again.

Leaving his charges to enjoy their meager meal, Kree untied the rain slicker he kept behind his saddle. He cut two large squares out near the bottom. There was no sense in ruining the thing.

He brought these, along with his field kit over to the princess. The elf girl raised listless blue eyes to him. From deep within, she summoned a regal dignity, far beyond her years, and smiled at him.

"I have forgotten my manners, entirely." She tottered to her feet. "Thank you for my freedom Captain Kree Fawr, Goddess-born Gryphon from Qets Garrison. Thallasi is much in your debt."

The same regal dignity in Eldren would have made Kree furious, but in Sandahl, it humbled him. He hunkered down to her eye level. "I have ointment here that will ease your pain. It does not smell very good, mind you." He gave her a wink. "That's how we know it works. Will you allow me to touch you?"

She dimpled. It looked painful. "Yes, please."

Kree scooped a dollop of buttery looking goop onto his fingertips and dabbed it onto her shiny upturned nose. She winced. Her breath drew between her teeth in a little hissing sound. Pulling his hand back in horror, he glanced at Kayseri. "This business needs a gentler hand, Katie. Would you—" His words were cut off as the princess captured his large calloused hand between her soft small hands.

"You have not harmed me. Although we have just met, I do not believe you ever would." She released his hand, raised her face. "Please continue."

Kree gently dabbed salve across her right cheek, smoothing it in with quick light strokes.

"Captain Kree Fawr, Goddess-born Gryphon from Qets Garrison is a great mouthful to say."

Kree gave her a crooked smile. "I suppose it is. Folks don't call me that most of the time. Just like your people probably don't call you Sandahl Sara el Thallasi, Daughter heir of the First House, every time they speak to you." She laughed. It

was a lovely sound. He savored it. Children should laugh. Often. Even little serious children like this one. "Do they?"

"They do not. Your given name is Kree?" Sandahl caught her lower lip between her teeth as he applied the salve to her other cheek.

"It is."

"It is an unusual name. Is it dwarfish?"

Kree stopped spreading ointment long enough to tilt his head back and look down his nose at the princess. She had to be teasing. Kayseri giggled, but hid her amusement in her hands when his gaze slid in her direction.

"Kree is my sire's maternal family name." Kree's mind drifted to a distant childhood memory. As Goddess-born he had no family names, so his sire had given him two. "My papa thought it a very clever name for his Goddess-born son."

"Then I shall call you Kree, if you do not think it very disrespectful."

"I think it's fine." Kree wiped his fingers on his britches and settled a makeshift bonnet fashioned from one of the squares of cloth on Sandahl's silvery-blond head. He handed the other square and the ointment to Eldren. He was about to leave when the little elf girl caught his hand again.

"You must call me Sandahl."

He made a slight bow as he extracted his hand from hers. "I'll try to remember, Princess."

Kayseri watched the captain walk toward the horses. Sunlight picked up the coppery highlights in his dark red hair. His movements were awkward and he rubbed his right arm vigorously as he went. Clearly, he still suffered the effects of the Nhurstari spell, yet he did not complain. It was so typically Kree.

He was exhausted. She could tell by the way his shoulders slumped just a bit, which was not typical at all. His posture was never anything less than perfect. Instead of resting as they all were, he fiddled with her horse, running his hand over its hindquarters, talking to it, making little reassuring clucking noises in his throat as he checked its hooves.

It was foolish to hold on to her dreams. It was worse than foolish. Her mischief making had nearly gotten the man she loved killed. What sort of love was that? But the dream was hard to give up. She had loved him for so long, dreamed of him for so long, and never, had he seemed more loveable than now, tired and hurting.

Finally, he sat down in a shady spot near the edge of the little run, not far from where Sister Chana leaned against a tree, and began working the muscles in his right arm with his left hand. Kayseri drifted over.

She took his arm between her palms over a token protest and massaged his biceps. While her fingers worked his arm, he watched her with a fierce intensity, making her heart race.

"You were wonderful with Sandahl just now," Kayseri murmured when she could find her voice. "If you aren't careful, people will learn the truth about you."

Sister Chana made a noise that sounded like *piff*. It caused Kree's half-smile to appear briefly. He smoothed back an errant lock of Kayseri's hair letting his hand linger at the nape of her neck. His tired voice whispered. "What truth is that, darling mine?"

Kyseri's breath caught in her throat. Did she see desire in the jade-colored gaze holding her own so steadily? "You're not the monster you pretend. You're really just a softy for any broken,

weak thing."

"Oh, you're so wrong, sweetheart." He winked at her. "I am the monster they send out to punish monsters. Makes me the worst of the lot, I'm thinking." Kree nimbly touched the fingertips of his right hand to his right thumb. "I couldn't do that an hour ago." His crooked smile appeared. He touched the tip of Kayseri's nose. "There is nothing weak about Princess Sandahl."

The way his hot gaze seared her skin made Kayseri's stomach flutter. She wished he would not look at her that way. She wished he would never stop. "You *like* Sandahl?"

"Why are you surprised? Being born to duty and obligation is something I know about. I'd say, we're sort of kindred spirits, the little princess and I."

Kayseri tilted her head and arched one eyebrow. "But Sandahl is an elf."

"So she is." Kree dropped his hot gaze. The hand that moments before warmed her neck, now lay flat on the ground supporting his weight. He leaned forward. His lips grazed her temple. "A hit. Acknowledged." He teased as if they sparred with swords instead of words.

"And Prince Eldren? Do you like him better now since he saved your life?"

"I expect it benefited his cause a little." He flashed that grin again. "I sure don't like him less."

Something behind her snagged his attention. His whole body tensed, as he sprang to his feet dragging her with him. "Chana. Eldren. To horse." He ran across the clearing and practically tossed her onto her mare's back. "Move! We're about to have more company."

The elf lord snatched up his princess and ran for the horses. The captain plucked Sandahl from

Eldren's arms, settled her behind Kayseri and slapped the mare's hump sending the girls away at a gallop. Eldren mounted and galloped after them, his poor beast already falling far behind.

"Chana! Stay with the Wilderkin, no matter what happens. That's an order. Go! Go!" Kree swung onto Sirocco's back. "Soon as I see what we're up against, I'll be right behind you." The big desert-bred stallion caught Kree's agitation. It tossed its head, danced impatiently.

When the mercenaries crested the crease that had hidden them from view, Kree was not surprised to see what looked like a pair of Templemen. Digging his heels into his horse's flanks, he crouched low over the stallion's neck. Minutes later, he passed Eldren in a smoky equine blur.

Coaxing every bit of speed he could from Sirocco, he came abreast of Kayseri's mare. Reaching over, he pushed her forward so she too rode low over the horse's neck. He grabbed Mistral's bridle and veered off toward the forest. The horses were nearly spent. Even Sirocco couldn't maintain their breakneck pace much longer. The trees offered a place for the Wilderkin to hide, while he and Chana circled back and dealt with their pursuers.

Far to their rear, Eldren screamed.

"Prince Eldren!" Kayseri shouted. Both the girls sat up in the saddle.

Damnation. Kree shoved Kayseri's face down against the mare's neck as Eldren's rider-less horse shot past.

"Keep down. Keep going. Hide among the trees." Kree wheeled Sirocco around, Chana tight on his flank. "Stay with them," he ordered again. She nodded once and moved off after the Wilderkin.

He spied the elf lying face down in the tall grass where the trees thinned out for a short space, and spurred toward him.

He jumped off his horse and ran. There was no time. The prince had taken a crossbow bolt just inches below his left shoulder blade. Blood bubbled up around the wound. He struggled to his knees as Kree reached him.

“Leave me. Stay with Sandahl. She needs you. I am done.”

Kree threw a quick glance at the fast approaching mercenaries. Another minute and they’d both be done. He grabbed the elf, heaved him onto Sorocco’s back, and snatched his own crossbow out of its loop in almost the same motion.

“Now, we’re even.” Kree slapped his horse across its hump. Hard.

Chapter Nine

Kree planted his feet wide apart, pulled back the cocking mechanism on his over-under crossbow, and counted to ten. *Come to me. Almost there.* Two shots. No room for error. No time for reloads. He had to hit his mark. *There.* He squeezed the trigger on the top bolt. It streaked wide, over the lead man's right shoulder.

Damnation. Where had his luck gone? He brought the stock back to his shoulder and squeezed off his last bolt. It buried itself in the mercenary's chest. One down. The other one was almost on top of him.

He dodged under the horse. Not fast enough. Iron-shod hooves crashed into his ribs. He rolled to his feet, pulled his gryphon knives. The other man turned his mount in a tight circle and charged.—

The wind carried occasional snatches of wild laughter. Each time Kayseri caught the sound, she knew Kree lived and fought behind them. Chana set a blistering pace. Tall trees pressed in around them, offering safety, but the sister did not slow. Kayseri worried Sorocco would catch a hoof in the undergrowth. Kree had such big dreams for his prized stallion.

Much too soon they out ran the sounds of battle, leaving Kayseri with nothing but her own fear. Chana finally slowed their pace. They stopped once so Kayseri could climb up behind Eldren and hold him in the saddle. Prince Eldren

had lost so much blood by then, Kree's gray stallion wore red streaks as war paint. A fool could see Eldren was in a bad way. If they did not find help soon the elf lord would die. Kayseri was not pixie-stupid. No one needed to tell her mischief was to blame. How many times had her father urged caution? She could hear him in her head even now. *Actions have consequences, daughter.* The consequences of mischief to Eldren were proving steep indeed. And what about her captain?

Up ahead, smoke curled into the early evening sky marking a homestead or a trapper's campsite. They followed the smoke to a woodcutter's cottage built of river rock and rough timbers. Several cords of wood stood in neat rows awaiting delivery, a week's worth of washing flapped on the clothesline.

In front of the house, a young man chopped wood. He was dressed in rough brown britches of homespun wool, but he was bare-chested. His occupation left his chest and arms well muscled, but not in the sculpted way she was used to seeing on Kree. This young man's build was stocky, his musculature overlaid with a thick layer of flesh, where Kree appeared carved from solid rock. Kayseri thought the captain's form far more pleasing.

As they reined up before the cottage, the woodcutter rested his axe on his shoulder and regarded them with quiet brown eyes before glancing to where he had tossed his shirt across a cord of wood.

"We have an injured elf here." Chana called to the young man. "We need water and a spot in your barn."

Before he could answer, a plump gray haired woman with a kind, grandmotherly face came to

the doorway. She wore a simple midnight blue dress topped by a bright red apron. "Good God of Mercy! Hob, get those children in this house where I can see to 'em proper."

"They ain't children, Mama. They're guardians."

"I can see that, son. I ain't in my dotage. Where are your wits, boy? Yon forest lord is bleeding to death. You help the warrior woman move him into this house. Right now!"

"Thank you, Good-wife." Kayseri slid wearily from the saddle. Her legs ached so badly, she swayed against her horse.

"There's no need to thank Greta, child." The woman wrapped one arm around Sandahl's waist. Supporting Kayseri with her other arm, she herded them into the house. "There are such in these parts what don't like guardians, but your folk have always been kind to me and Hob. To my Jess too, afore he passed."

Their house was warm and homey. The front door opened on cozy sitting area where a pile of red and blue knitting lay abandoned in the seat of a well-worn favorite chair. There was a large spinning wheel in the corner near the window. A large stone fireplace, used both to cook and heat, dominated the back wall. Next to it was a hutch containing matched rose patterned dishes. The prominent display of cups and saucers showed them to be the good-wife's pride and joy. A small table with four chairs completed the dining nook. Sleeping areas were to the right of the fireplace. Woven partitions lent each bed a modest sense of privacy.

Hob laid the wounded elf on the smaller bed. "He looks bad, Mama," he called over his shoulder.

"The bolt's punctured his lung," Chana said.

“Do what you can for him.” Greta clucked sympathetically. “I’ll get these two children cleaned up. The poor dears are near dead on their feet.”

“Sister,” Kayseri asked. “Aren’t you going back for My Captain?”

“His orders were stay with the princess.”

“But...”

“But *nothing*. Orders are orders. Suppose those men get past My Captain. I am the only one left to protect her.”

“I will suppose no such a thing.”

Chana glared at Kayseri annoyed by her snippy tone. “Grow up, little girl.”

“Don’t call me that.”

“Whatever you like to think, little Miss Bruin, Kree Fawr is just a man. He bleeds red like all the rest of them. Trust me. I’ve seen him bleed often enough to know. Now, go with the good-wife. Try to stay out of the way. I have work to do.”

Kayseri did not want to wake in the midst of such a wonderful dream. She slept in a soft feather bed on sheets smelling of sunshine, and Kree held her hand, but a delicious aroma lured her toward consciousness. Her stomach growled. She recognized the smell of chicken and dumplings. She thrashed her head from side-to-side fighting the return to reality where Prince Eldren lay dying, and her beloved captain might already be dead. But, oh that wonderful smell, it was relentless.

She cracked her eyes open. It was not a dream, not entirely. She was in a bed, and someone was holding her hand, a beefy stranger with spiky blond hair and the saddest brown eyes she had ever seen. *Hob*. The woodcutter. She remembered him. Her stomach growled louder,

and she levered herself to a sitting position.

The young man dropped her hand, a blush rushing up his neck all the way to his hairline. "You must lie back, Miss. You gave us a fright fainting like you did."

I fainted? I never faint. Kayseri glanced around the room. Sister Chana lounged in a chair with her eyes closed. Sandahl sat beside Eldren's bed. Hob's mother busied herself cooking. No Kree. He had not come. Maybe he never would.

Seeing Kayseri awake, Sandahl rushed over and hugged her. "My prince is very bad, Kayseri. The captain is not here. I am afraid."

"Me, too." Kayseri absently smoothed the elf girl's pale hair, brushing away a stray tear that had somehow found its way down her own cheek with her free hand.

"Please sir," Kayseri begged. "You know these woods. Will you please search for our captain?"

The young man's already sad eyes filled with sympathetic tears. He blushed bright red, blinked them away. "It won't do no good looking till morning, Miss."

He looked so sad, she turned her mind to something he could do. "Something smells wonderful."

Hob leapt to his feet upsetting his chair. "Rest here, Miss. I'll fetch you a bowl."

"Hob." His mother shouted. "Leave off pestering that young lady. I've done got a bowl dished up for her here on the table. The only thing you'll be fetching is more wood. Gods above, son. A body would think you'd never seen a pretty woman afore."

The young woodcutter retreated red-faced, returning with an armload of wood a few minutes later. "There's a man watching the house, Mama." He dropped the wood into the box beside the

fireplace.

Without a word, Chana drew her saber and took a defensive position beside the door. Kayseri and Sandahl hugged each other.

Hob fetched his axe and joined Chana. "He's the biggest man I've ever laid eyes on, damned near a giant, ma'am. Pardon my language."

The Sister's grim face broke into a wide smile. Stepping away from the door, she sheathed her blade. Kayseri and Sandahl lit up like sunshine and nearly knocked the Sister down in their eagerness to reach the door.

Tension melted out of Kree's shoulders when he saw Kayseri running toward him. They had found safety. Good. There was no telling friend from foe in the present circumstances. Not knowing which one he would find inside, he had watched the cottage a good while trying to gauge how much fight he had left in him. Not much. He kicked his recently acquired steed into motion. Sure, it looked like a warhorse, but the plug had flanks of steel and a mouth of pig iron. It might be deaf. He was not sure. It would have been funny if he were not so tired.

He just managed not to fall out of the saddle before Kayseri leapt on him. One of her legs draped over his hip, her arms encircled his neck. On reflex, he cupped her bottom with one hand while cradling her head with the other, and kissed her like a drowning man sucking air. The long gash on his thigh made him stagger under her added weight. He found he could not hold the only thing he wanted. Slowly, letting her slide down his body, he groaned.

Kayseri stepped back. Kree saw by her startled expression she realized she had hurt him. She placed her hands on either side of his

blood-smeared face very gently, peering up at him through the gloom. Tears pooled in her eyes, but thankfully she did not let them fall. Tears would have ended him on the spot, and she seemed to understand. She stretched up on her tiptoes. Reading her intent, Kree leaned down. Careful not to touch him anywhere else she pressed her lips to his.

He gasped equal parts pleasure and pain. His hands encircled her tiny waist, pulling her closer. Namar's tears, she fired his blood like nothing since Goddess nectar, and he was too tired, too hurt to resist the heat. His head screamed, *folly!* But his heart was past caring. Kayseri's arms slipped around his neck, her mouth opened under his, and he flexed his knees compensating for his height. Big mistake. Fresh pain screamed down his injured leg, helping him regain control of his runaway emotions.

Reluctantly, he broke their embrace. Kayseri gazed at him, dazed and shaken. Had his passion frightened her? *How not?* Covered with blood and sweat, his own and that of other men, he smelled like a filthy beast. He *was* a filthy beast. The bloody smear on her trembling, innocent lips testified to it.

Kree opened his mouth to beg pardon, but the little princess was there pressed against his good leg sobbing her heart out. He sank to his knees to better accommodate the little elf's embrace, and he remained on his knees long after Chana shooed both Wilderkin back inside the cottage.

A worried line creased the sword-woman's brow. "You can't get up, can you?"

"I can." Kree closed his eyes against the throbbing pain in his side. His legs were numb. He was spent. "Give me another minute."

"How about I give you a hand instead?"

"Katie will see."

"So what if she does?" Chana protested. "My Captain, the chit is Wilderkin, not completely witless. She knows you're hurting." Chana helped Kree stand. "Lean on me you big idiot. How much of this bloody mess is you?"

"More than I'd like to own. I nearly got my ass handed to me on a platter."

"Ah, but you didn't, did you? And do you know why?"

"Skill?"

"Nope." They reached the front door and Chana braced Kree against the wall. "You are the luckiest son-of-a-bitch in the world."

Inside the cottage, their hosts radiated anxiety. The young man stood protectively in front of his mother. Kree knew he looked horrible if a warhorse like Chana called him a mess. He should do something, say something, make some gesture to reassure these kind folks who had opened their home to his people, but he could not think of just what to say. It was hard to think of anything over the roar of his stomach. As soon as he entered the cottage and got a whiff of the good-wife's cooking, he realized he was starved. The aroma made him lightheaded.

He extended his hand to the young man. "Kree Fawr, captain out of Qets Garrison."

"Hobson Woodstock." The young man's good nature reasserted itself. "Hob. This here's my mama, Greta."

"Ma'am, whatever you're cooking smells like heaven. I'm not in fit condition to sit at your table, but if you could spare a bite, I'd happily stand out on the porch."

"Stuff and nonsense. The day an honest man ain't welcome at my table is the day they put me

in the ground. You just let Hob fetch you some water so's you can wash your hands a bit, whilst I fix you a bowl."

Kree limped over to the bed, touched the back of his hand to Eldren's forehead. The prince's fevered eyes fluttered open.

"You look a perfect horror," Eldren wheezed.

Kree wanted to smile at the elf's insult, but it felt like way too much effort.

Swallowing hard, Eldren struggled to bring another breath. "Take Sandahl. Flee into Nhurstari. Tonight."

"Tomorrow, elf."

Pain glazed eyes focused upon Kree. "Now—must go to Rian. Time is short." Eldren's voice faded. He lost consciousness.

"Sure, Eldren," Kree whispered. "I live to serve."

"Sit here, My Captain." Kayseri pulled a chair away from the table and patted the seat. "Eat something."

Kree limped over and sat where she indicated, trailing his hand over her hair along the way. "I'm fine, Katie. Stop worrying." She smiled at him, if you could call that wobbly thing a smile. She was so adorable. He could hardly remember the last time someone worried about him.

He tore off a chunk of fresh hot bread, sopped it in his bowl, and popped it into his mouth. He closed his eyes, savoring the taste for a minute, before picking up the spoon and devouring the bowl of chicken and dumplings Good-wife Woodstock placed in front of him. After the second serving, he started feeling human enough for conversation.

"That crazy elf," he gestured toward Eldren with his spoon, "wants us to take the princess to the Nhurstari tonight. Like I could, even if I

wanted to. The Nhurstari are behind this kidnapping. Mark me, Chana. With Eldren out of play, how am I supposed to know which Nhurstari to trust?"

After taking a sip of the good-wife's home brew, Chana palmed her mug. "Probably only this Rian."

"Right. Just how close to a reclusive, elfish prince heir do you think I'm going to get?" Kree barked a short laugh, winced, pressed his hand to his side. "Not close enough for talking. That's a solid fact."

He pushed up from the table. "Ma'am, is there some place private where I can clean up?"

"Hob'll show you, sir."

"Chana, fetch my field kit. I'm going to need stitching."

While Hob stoked a small iron stove to heat water for his bath, Kree eased himself onto the bench running the length of the bathhouse. He'd just finished cutting away his britches leg when Chana came in with his field kit. She knelt beside him, flipped open the box, gave a low whistle at the ugly seeping gash running from his hip to his knee, and pulled out a flask of whiskey.

"Do you want to hold or sew?"

Kree snagged the flask. After taking a gulp of whiskey, he poured a liberal portion over the gash sucking in his breath at the burn. His eyes watered.

"Sewing is women's work."

"Good to see you're not dying. Unless, of course, your smart mouth gets you killed."

He jumped when she stuck him.

"Keep still. You big baby."

"Your pardon." Kree took another gulp of whiskey, flinched again on the next stitch.

"Hob, get over here and hold his skin

together.” Chana glanced up at the Kree then back to Hob. “Talk to him.”

Hob nodded. “The scar by your ear means you’re Goddess-born. Right?”

Leaning back with his eyes closed, Kree sipped whiskey. “Uh huh.”

“How come your hair is not real long? I heard Goddess-born don’t cut their hair. How come you’ve got no blessing braids? You look like you’d be a monstrous good fighter to me.”

“Good? No. I’m lucky. Ask Chana.” Kree opened his eyes and gazed at the young man. “I lost my temper and cut my hair some years back. I don’t wear braids, because I don’t go to Temple. I quit.”

“I didn’t know Goddess-born could quit.”

“Well, this one did.” He closed his eyes again. “Are you interested in the Temple?”

“That stuff—Goddess nectar, is what made you so monstrous big?”

“Combined with a lot of hard work, yeah. It doesn’t hurt to be genetically blessed with a natural predisposition, either. I was bred for size.”

“Kree.” Chana chided.

He smiled at her use of his given name. That, along with her tone, told him she thought he was being crude. *Women*. “It’s true. You know it. Are you almost done?”

“Just about.”

Kree sipped whiskey and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “You didn’t answer my question friend, Hob. Are you interested in the Temple?”

“I might be.” Hob picked up Kree’s emergency Goddess nectar and held it up to the lamplight. “Is this the stuff?”

Kree’s eyes popped open. “Put it down.”

“If I drink it, will I look like you?”

Kree threw back his head and roared with laughter. Pain shot through his side. His laughter turned into a groan. He pressed his hand to his battered ribs. "If you drink that, you'll look dead. That extract is for the Goddess-born, not Templemen. They start us on it as soon as we're born. You seem like a good man, Hob, so I'm going give you the solid facts. The most the Goddess Namar can do for you is to add some definition to the muscle you already carry and increase your stamina. They'll give you an extract designed specifically for you. It will make you feel stronger and more powerful than you really are, and after awhile, you won't be able to do without it.

"Temple life isn't what it was, say, ten years ago. My advice to you, lad, is stay as you are. Find yourself a sweet wife and raise some babies. But if that's too boring for you, you're welcome to come down to Qets. We can tell you in very short order whether you have a talent for fighting."

"Finished." Chana tied off the suture and packed away the catgut and needle. "Now, let's see what's under here." She yanked his shirt out of his pants.

A searing pain lanced across Kree's chest and down his side all the way to his toes. He drew in a quick breath. Sweat popped out on his forehead. "Cut it away. Damnation, Chana! Are you trying to kill me?"

Using the tip of her knife to slit the garment from hem to neckline, Chana laid it open assessing the damage to Kree's ribs with a practiced eye. "Bloody sodden hell, My Captain. How many times did you let them ride you down?"

"I didn't count. And, I didn't *let* them."

"I can't fix this. You need a healer." She eased

the shirt off his shoulders, working carefully.

Kree limped around for a minute testing his weight on his newly stitched leg and found it sound. The stitches held. There was no seepage. "I know what I need, and I'm not going to get it anytime soon. We both know you've got to fight with the army you have, so be a good little soldier. Help me bathe and tape up my fucking ribs. Then, I'll decide what to do about Sandahl."

Once the painful process of taping his ribs was completed, Kree and Chana walked to the barn. Slowly. Hob trailed along behind. The woodcutter had a young man's lust for adventure. Kree could not fault him. He understood, even sympathized with him. Besides, the lad knew the area. For that alone, Kree was willing to let him tag along.

A quick search through Eldren's pack yielded the map Kree wanted. He spread it flat on the square hay bales. His finger traced a line from Tarburg to the forested foothills. "I think we're about here." He glanced at Hob for confirmation.

"About." Hob pointed to a thin blue line representing a stream. "This is our water source. It runs behind the house."

Kree pointed at an unidentified X mark farther into the mountain range along the watercourse. "This is where Eldren wants me to go. Do you know what's there?"

"Guardians. Sometimes. They have a hunting lodge up there. Belongs to one of their high lords. We supply the firewood."

The captain studied the map for a few more minutes before lifting his eyes to Chana. "Take Sirocco. Go back to Qets. Push him. He has speed and endurance you can't imagine. Tell Duncan I need him to bring Red Fist to me. Here." Kree tapped the city of Arabla southeast of their

present location. Hob excused himself.

"What do I tell Duncan about his mission? You know how he is. He'll want minute details."

"Tell him I need him. Here." Kree tapped the map again.

"It'll make him crazy. You know that. He'll have us sleeping in our saddles."

"Good."

"What's there?"

"A major Temple. I'll see a healer, rest up for a day or two. Our enemy does not know we've lost Eldren. They won't expect us to move south. I should be able to make it in a day." He thought about the jarring horseback ride and the state of his ribs. "Maybe a day and a half."

Chana saddled the gray stallion while they talked. "Is that a smart move, taking the princess to a temple? Aren't Templemen working against us?"

Kree snorted. "I am Goddess-born. A Gryphon. We'll be safe. Besides, I am not convinced these fellows are Templemen. I have a relationship with the Matriarch at Arbala. If I mind my manners, jump through enough hoops, she'll help me sort it out."

Chana stopped tightening the saddle girth, and stared at Kree, amazed. "Don't tell me you've slept with a Matriarch."

He regarded her in silence for moment, his lips pressed into a thin line. "Not at Arbala. Arbala is—was my home Temple. The Matriarch is my mother."

Chana returned to her task. "I didn't know you had a mother."

"What did you think? I sprouted on my papa's stoop one night like a mushroom, or that he was such a rounder he didn't know whom he got me on?"

"Temper. Temper. I simply meant I thought Goddess-born were not supposed to know who their mothers were. Being as you are *supposed* to be sons of the Goddess Namar and all."

Kree shrugged before he thought. It hurt. "My papa was no Templeman. You know that. He believed I had the right to know where I came from, who I was. The point is, my mother will know who's hiring Templemen around here. And if Duncan can't get to me before I'm ready to ride, I can leave orders and a map with her."

Hob returned carrying a large sack. "I asked Mama to pack some food for your journey, Sister."

"Thanks." Chana mounted. "We won't need your stinking map, My Captain. I could track you across water."

Kree watched her ride away. *I should never have left the fort without Red Fist.*

"So why did you?"

Realizing he'd spoken aloud, Kree raked his hand through his still damp hair. "Because, Hob, I am a prideful man. It makes me imprudent sometimes." He blew out a long breath. "I could justify it by saying I didn't have the facts when I made my decision, but I won't. Point is, I promised to keep Katie safe. Instead, I'm dragging her deeper and deeper into danger." Kree scrubbed his hands over his face. Goddess, he was tired. "Damnation, I wish I had another option."

"Miss Kayseri could stay," Hob offered. "With Mama and me. I mean, until you and the little Guardian finish your business on the mountain."

"She could?" Kree's face split into a grin. "She could!"

Hob nodded. "I'll tell Mama." He turned toward the door, and stopped. "Do you need help

getting back to the house?”

“I’ll be along directly. I need a minute—to see to my horse.”

The barn smelled of animals and hay, a combination Kree always found comforting, peaceful. He bent to pick up his pack, wincing as pain lanced down his side, despite the fact Chana had wrapped his ribs so tight, he could scarcely draw a breath. Leaving the pack where it lay, he eased himself onto a hay bale, his injured leg outstretched, and waited for the pain to pass. He had been in much worse shape and he’d survived. Granted, he was younger then. Not to mention, higher than a kite.

Chapter Ten

Kayseri watched Kree from the shadows where she hid cloaked in mischief. He had dressed in his uniform, black trousers, and a short black tunic style shirt of finely woven cotton. A thin line of shocking blue piping set off the neckline. The jacket, completing his uniform, lay atop a hay bale. The jacket was the same shocking blue, dragon's eye blue they called it. Like the soft stretchy fabric, the dye for it came from Elhar, manufactured there exclusively for Qets Garrison. He looked extremely dashing, but she mourned the loss of his fine Wilderkin tunic. He owned very few civilian clothes. She let her mischief go.

"I won't stay here."

"Damnation, Katie! How many times do I have to tell you? Don't sneak up on me. I might hurt you."

"I won't stay here and let you ride away alone, hurt." Kayseri picked up the saddle pack he had reached for and put it on his lap. "My Captain, you need rest. You need to take care of yourself. We are not at war."

Kree took her hand and kissed it. His unhappy face told her he knew what she'd been up to. "We will be if you don't stop spying on me with your mischief. Listen, Sweetheart, I can think of twenty good reasons to leave you behind and not one good reason to take you with me." He gazed into her eyes with enough intensity to make her stomach do flip-flops. "This is fatal business

we are tangled up in. People are dying. People are going to die. You will not be one of them. You're staying here, and that is a solid fact."

"Prince Eldren is dying?"

"He won't last the night, Sweetheart. I am very sorry, so very sorry I couldn't prevent it."

Sweetheart. Her heart melted. She liked the sound of it so much better than little girl. Her gaze traveled the length of Kree's body. "And you?"

"Not today." Kree flashed a brief half-smile. "My body can take a lot more punishment than this. Believe me. I know my limits. Tomorrow?" He made a little balancing motion with one hand and winked at her.

"Don't joke. Not about your death. You're not dragging me into danger. I dragged you. If I hadn't been so childish, you would have taken Eldren to the garrison. He would have told you about Sandahl, and you would have the Red Fist with you right now. Eldren wouldn't have gotten shot. You could have been killed today, and it would be my fault."

"I could be killed any day. I am a trooper. We don't exactly have safe, quiet jobs." Kree's thumb traced lazy circles on the back of her hand. "No one can predict outcomes, Katie. Battle is all about chaos. Soldiers give up their hopes and dreams, give themselves up to fate. We have to. Don't worry about me. I glory in it. Someday death will win, but we accept the risk. If we didn't, we'd be so paralyzed by fear, we couldn't fight at all."

He paused, pushed a stray curl off of her cheek, smiled wistfully. "It doesn't matter when death claims me because I signed on for it. What does matter is, should it be tomorrow, I'd feel better knowing I don't have to worry about what

happens to you. Please stay here. Please be safe.”

The expression on his face puzzled her. He had kissed her as if he wanted to devour her. It was scary, and wonderful. Maybe he did not love her. But he did care for her and he wanted her. Wanted her in the way a man wants a woman. Inexperienced though she was, she was not pixie-stupid. Was wanting enough? No. Once the act was done, a Wilderkin was bonded. There was no undoing it, and Kree knew that as well as she did.

“Kree.” He looked as stunned as if she’d hit him between the eyes with a board. “What do you know about taking care of girls? Sandahl has nothing. She will have to have clothes made for her in Arbala. She’ll have to have someone to dress her for this Prince Rian. Can you do that?” Kayseri laid her palm against his chest. His heart beat fast. “You help people all the time. Just once, let someone help you. Let me help you. Let me do this for you.”

Plainly, Kree had not considered any of these practical girly things. Kayseri saw it in his eyes, felt it in the sigh beneath her hand.

“Promise me you’ll do what I tell you *when* I tell you. No mischief either, or it’s no deal. I’ll bring you right back here.”

“I promise.”

Kayseri watched Kree pluck the vial of Goddess nectar out of his field kit and turn it between his long fingers. There was an odd look on his face...wistful.

“Are you going to use your nectar to make yourself better?”

Tucking the vial into his belt, Kree stood slowly like an old man. “It doesn’t work that way, little girl. This is no magic elixir. Oh, sure, I’d feel better, but it’d be an illusion, one meant to keep a Goddess-born on the battlefield long after he

should quit. I'm going to feed a few drops to Eldren. You want to help me? Keep Sandahl busy while I do it."

Kayseri entwined her arm through his. She was back to being *little girl*. "How will it help Eldren?"

"It will give him a quick peaceful death."

Drawing herself up to her full four-and-a-half feet, every inch, a princess of the First House, Sandahl fixed Kree with a steady gaze. "I have heard Templemen accept contracts. Is this true?"

Kree regarded the little marvel of a princess with frank admiration. Just less than two hours ago, she was weeping inconsolably because he told her they had buried Prince Eldren in the ground. She shuddered when he said ground. Apparently that was the wrong thing to do. Kree didn't know shit about the elfish idea of the afterlife. All he knew was he wanted Eldren's body out of sight. Now she stood before him, full of regal composure, asking about Temple contracts.

"Some do, Princess."

"Do you?"

"I am not a Templeman. I am Goddess-born. There is a huge difference. I have not practiced my faith in years, but, yes, in a way, I guess I do. My garrison and I are contracted to the Great Ladies in Elhar."

Sandahl wet her lips with the tip of her tongue. "Exclusively?"

Kree frowned. "Are you offering me a contract, Princess?"

Sandahl advanced two steps and spread her hands in supplication. "My prince-protector insisted I do so."

Kree could feel his face turning dark as a thunderhead. *That thrice-damned elf had not*

trusted him. All right, maybe he hadn't given Eldren much reason to trust him, but hell...it brassed him off. Seriously.

Contracts, like everything having to do with the Goddess Namar, required an offering of passion or pain, almost always from the one making the contract. Since passion was out of the question here, Kree sank to his right knee, so he could rise on his uninjured left. It was not the correct form, but it was preferable to pitching over on his teeth when he tried to stand again. The princess would never know. Besides, it was his blood sealing the pact, not the form. He held one of his gryphon knives parallel to his chest the razor sharp edge resting on his palm, he glanced at Sandahl. "Place your hand on top of mine." She did as he instructed and he closed his hand tight on the blade. Blood welled, overflowed his fist, staining the steel and Sandahl's tiny hand.

"I will see you to your destination. This promise, I give you in my blood." Kree brought the knife to his chest so their bloodied hands touched his heart. "I live to serve."

He stood, slower than he would have liked. "There. You have a blood contract, Princess. May it satisfy your damned prince-protector." Anger roughened his voice, turning velvet into sandpaper. He quit the house without another word, slamming the heavy wooden door so hard the windows rattled.

"My prince said the captain would not like it. He did not say he would be furious." Sandahl shuddered. "I should not have done this thing."

"You two are traveling with a lion with a thorn in his paw now. That's a certainty," Greta said, as she finished packing a hamper full of bread, cheese, apples, and roasted venison for their journey.

Kayseri carried the hamper to the door. "My Captain gave you his oath freely. No one forces him to do anything, Sandahl. He'll be fine." *I hope.* She had no wish to spend the rest of the trip tip-toeing around a surly Kree Fawr.

She glanced at him through the window as he packed their gear onto the horses with Hob Woodstock's aid. He laughed at something Hob said. Out of view, as he believed he was, Kree moved slowly, paused often, favored his injured leg. What a strange creature he was.

Mistress Greta assured her, men in love behaved strangely, but Kree was not in love with her. He hated her race. Hadn't he said so himself? She used to be able to read Kree, but not anymore. How had five short years changed her open easy-going captain into a quick-tempered, complicated riddle? He was fire and ice, sunlight and thunder all wrapped up in one yummy package. And he was yummy, no denying it. Kissing him last night made her heart go *wa-boom*. Just looking at him made her stomach tingle, and made her feel hot between her legs. Kayseri heaved a heartfelt sigh. What was *that* all about?

The homey scene greeting Kree when he came inside to collect his charges did not improve his mood. There was Kayseri, heart-stopping beautiful, *damn her eyes*, bustling about the kitchen while the old woman and the little elf princess washed and dried the breakfast dishes. It echoed of home and family. Something he wanted, envied, and would never have.

"The horses are ready, Princess. We'd best be going." Kree picked up the hamper. "Thank you for your hospitality, Ma'am. Today or tomorrow men will come looking for us. Say I forced you to

help us. Say nothing about the Garrison at Qets. Tell these men I am Goddess-born, a Gryphon of the Temple.” He flashed a quick crooked grin. “It’s a solid fact, and if they are Templemen, it might make them regret their choice of contract. I’ve told Hob the same. I’d not see your household suffer for your kindness.”

“I’ll do that, sir.” Greta gave Kree a motherly buss on the cheek and whispered. “Don’t be too hard on the little one, sir. It weren’t her idea.”

He knew that right enough, but it changed nothing. He was through playing warrior-fool for a pair of Wilderkin. All he wanted was to finish the contract he had been cozened into, get Kayseri safely home, and then hoped he could avoid her for the rest of his days. His gaze flickered over her. *Damnation*. Maybe he’d make war on Malachite. There was nothing like a nice little war to make a man forget his troubles.

Kree’s thoughts conspired to fire his anger. Anger made his voice harsher than he intended. “Let’s get underway, Princess. Daylight’s wasting.”

The princess darted an anxious glance at Kayseri. That was a good sign. He hoped to the hells they were frightened of him. They’d be a lot less trouble that way.

Chapter Eleven

Their party traveled southeast throughout the morning, leaving the foothills behind. The sky was a bright clear blue promising another fine hot day. Kayseri and the princess rode before Kree shaded from the sun's bright glory by broad brimmed straw hats courtesy of Good-wife Woodstock. He followed exactly one horse length behind. The arrangement allowed him to watch the trail and afforded him an ample reaction zone. Best of all, it discouraged conversation. He was in no mood for talking. It did not, however, prevent the ladies from trying to engage him. Twice they dropped back alongside him. Twice he ordered them back to their place.

It was a joke really. He was only going through the motions and he knew it. If they came under attack, he could do little to protect his charges. He had lost too much blood. This was what? Three days in the saddle with only a couple of hours sleep. He was too tired to plan anything beyond their next rest stop.

His ribs plagued him with every jarring movement, making it difficult to breathe. The newly closed gash on his leg throbbed in time with the horse's gait. His craving for Goddess nectar was—Namar's tears. It did not bear thinking about. Still a man did what he could. Accordingly, Kree arrayed his party for optimum defense, sure that the only thing he could do for his charges was to die well. Hells. He'd have to work pretty damned hard just to manage that.

What would happen to Sandahl then? What would happen to Katie? He let go of a soft stream of curses. He should have left Kayseri at the Woodstock cottage.

Kree's gaze shifted to the wild half-pixie woman who commanded his heart and mind these days. Luscious black curls spilling down her back, brushed against the saddle's tall cantle. It was a sight to see. She rode in strict emulation of the troopers she had grown up watching, backbone straight as an arrow with a good steady hand on the reins. Kayseri had a good seat, a *very good seat*. She'd needed no lessons. *Pixies and horses don't mix*. What a fool he was.

When she had kissed him last night, Goddess help him, he lost all control. The memory of his passion shamed him. Where was his discipline? Discipline had been drilled into him until he thought his head would explode. Damnation, control was practically his middle name. It was a good thing too, because he was a *see-the-hill-take-the-hill* sort of fellow, with the all the natural restraint of a twelve year old.

The mere sight of Kayseri's bottom moving in the saddle set a fire in his groin he found hard to ignore, adding one more layer of discomfort to his already miserable ride. What the hell was he going to do about Katie? *Not one damned thing, that's what*. She shot a glance over her shoulder he could not interpret. Kree huffed. He used to be able to read Kayseri. Not anymore. How had five short years changed a charming, sweet little girl into a temptress bent on his destruction?

He moved his horse up alongside his charges. "According to the map, Princess, there is a small lake over the next rise. We'll stop there and get out of the sun for a while."

Sandahl brightened. "What a splendid idea."

Then she raised her chin a fraction. "If you think it is necessary."

Elves. I'll wager she can't even feel her legs, and she asks me if I think it's necessary. Kree wiped the sweat beading his upper lip off with the back of his hand covering the weary smile lurking there. "I'm pretty whipped, Princess."

The Wilderkin reined in at the top of the rise and waited for him to come abreast again. The glen was secluded, inviting and, best of all, shaded by tall trees. The lake looked so cool and clear the captain felt refreshed just looking at it. He lifted Sandahl off her mount's broad back, watched as she tottered painfully into the shade to stretch out on the cool grass.

Kayseri swung down from her horse, tugged his sleeve. "My Captain, we have to travel slower. I don't think Sandahl can keep up this pace."

She looked up at him expectantly, but he said nothing. The only words that came to mind were not anything she needed to hear. After half a day's hard riding in the blazing sun, a woman ought to look—he didn't know. Weary? Sweaty? Not Katie. Oh, no. Velvety lashes framed deep brown eyes so warm they melted the door to his very soul, a door he had thought bricked over years ago.

He fought the temptation to take her in his arms the only way he could. He ignored her. It proved more difficult than he imagined. Kayseri stood so close he smelled Good-wife Woodstock's homemade almond soap on her skin. It was enough to make the ground he stood on shaky. He could see the delicate flare of her nostrils and the spots of anger bronzing her cheeks. Goddess above. He was in for it now.

She snatched the hamper from him, stalked over to the princess, and laid out their picnic of

venison, apples, and cheese on the red blanket the good-wife provided. Fortified by several deep breaths, he followed with a wineskin.

What should have been a delicious repast was dust for all the pleasure Kree took in it. To her credit, Sandahl tried to break the tension between Kayseri and himself. She talked of Nhurstari art and protocol subjects in which Eldren had thoroughly educated her. She strove, without success, to draw them into the conversation.

Kayseri, for her part, was not interested in anything beyond staring daggers at him. He could almost see the wheels turning in her head plotting ways to get even with him for snubbing her. Her ire was fine with him. Anger was a far safer emotion. At the very least, it was one he could to deal with.

For his part, he cared for nothing elfish and he was too tired for pretense. The torturous meal finally ended, and he stretched out on his stomach in the deep shadow of a Cypress tree. He loved Cypress trees. The air always seemed so much cooler under them. It was heaven.

"I'm going to close my eyes for a few minutes, ladies. Enjoy yourselves. Keep alert, and don't wander out of ear shot."

Sandahl and Kayseri walked arm in arm along the lakeshore. "You must settle your differences with the captain for whatever you've done. Apologize to him."

"My differences? You're the one he's been brassed-off with ever since you asked him for a contract. He's..." Kayseri sputtered with impotent rage. "...impossible! He cut me dead just now. *He owes me an apology.*"

Sandahl sat on the bank and took off her

slippers and stockings. "I don't see that happening. Do you? You and my prince-protector tricked him into accompanying us, did you not?" She dipped her feet into the water and leaned back on her arms with a satisfied sigh. "We cannot continue on like this. He is scarcely speaking to either of us. Someone has to make the first move."

"Then you make it. You apologize for insisting on a contract. That's what set him off. He was fine before that." Kayseri slipped off her moccasins and dipped her feet in, too. "I haven't done anything to him...lately. Did I tell you he wanted to leave me at the Woodstocks' cottage?"

The princess bundled her skirt up and waded out the clear water. "Oh, I'm so glad you talked him out of it, Kayseri. I wanted to ask you to stay with me in Nhurstari. I feel so alone without Eldren. My *Sar Vashada* believed your captain would not help me unless I bound him to me in some way. I think he was mistaken. I think I should have trusted in him."

Kayseri waded out to her. "So you're going to apologize to him?"

Sandahl nodded. "Yes. Yes, I am, and I think you should too."

"But I haven't done anything!"

Giggles woke Kree, high-pitched, delighted, girlish giggles mingled with splashing water. His whole face grinned at the sight of his Wilderkin charges shrieking and darting about in the lake like a pair of mermaids. He was not much of a swimmer himself. His first lieutenant claimed it was because he had too much dense muscle and too little buoyancy. The man was probably right. Duncan knew everything. Still and all, splashing around in the water was a fine way to cool off on

a hellish hot day.

For a moment he considered joining them. Only for a moment, the idea of being nude in close proximity to Kayseri invited the very kind of disaster he was desperate to avoid. Better he stayed right where he was.

He reach for his pack with a groan and spread out the map he'd taken from Eldren.

They were making better time than he had thought possible, mostly because his body could take tremendous punishment. He was beginning to think the princess's could too. If he pushed them just a little harder they could reach Temple Arbala by evening. Not having to spend another night out in the open was a very appealing notion. For one thing he could finally get some sleep.

He pushed himself to his feet, got Kayseri's attention with a whistle and wave.

"Turn around." Kayseri yelled back at him.

Kree made a show of turning his back. He heard the girls splash ashore, and he did not try to sneak a peek at Kayseri's delectable body. If that was not discipline, he did not know the meaning of the word.

Chapter Twelve

Arbala spread before them, a vast city by any standard. Lamps glowed in the windows like stars in the gathering darkness, piquing Kayseri's pixie curiosity. Just as the garrison dominated Qets, so the Temple complex, its high walls lit by dozens of lamps, dominated Arbala. Supporting businesses and private residences had grown up around it haphazard.

Eager to explore as she was, Kree's reluctance to enter the city puzzled her. He had insisted on coming here, had pressed them to hurry even though she could tell every mile was agony for him. Now as they had arrived, he sat on his horse staring down at the twinkling lights as if it were the last place in the wide world he wanted to go.

He dismounted, wet the tail of his shirt with water from his water skin, and scrubbed the trail dirt off his face. How very puzzling. A little dirt never bothered her captain. A lot of dirt never bothered him. Kayseri had never known him to give a hoot about his appearance and she had known him her whole life.

She was even more surprised when he exchanged the plain rawhide strip holding his hair in a queue for the golden gryphon shaped filigree that decorated his scabbard. Despite the heat lingering into the night he donned the bright blue jacket, which completed his uniform and slipped on his arming harness. Kayseri saw his eye narrow as the added weight of two long ivory-handled fighting knives slightly changed the angle

of his shoulders. His unusual behavior caused her to wonder how serious his injuries really were. And more importantly, why he thought he needed his knives?

Kayseri shifted in her saddle. "I thought this was a safe place."

Kree looked up at her, his expression was what? *Apologetic*. "It is. But here... In this place... Among Namar's faithful Goddess-born is not a synonym for illegitimate. While we stay here, I must *be* Goddess-born."

What was he talking about? "You are always Goddess-born."

He pulled himself back into the saddle with effort and a little grimace. "You do not understand what Goddess-born is. Not really. I don't live *that* way at Qets." He shrugged to settle the weapons, winced again. "When I was a boy, juggling the two halves of my life was not too difficult, but the older I got, and the higher I rose in the faith, the more difficult it was to step from one to the other. Finally, I stopped trying." He flashed his beloved grin. "Help me out here, little girl. Once we are inside, try not to make me look the fool."

"I don't know what you mean."

He grinned. "I am sure you don't."

There were fancy wrought iron gates set in the city's whitewashed wall meant for show rather than defense. The gates were closed for the night, but there was a small gatehouse set into one side of the wall. The gatekeeper, alerted by the sound of shod hoofs ringing on the cobbled street, stood on the stoop with a lantern in his hand.

"Who comes?"

"Kree Fawr."

The man stepped forward raising the lantern as he came. "Is it truly you, Gryphon?" The man

sketched a bow. "I can hardly believe my eyes. We have not seen you for—must be—nigh on five years or more."

"Or more." Kree narrowed his eyes at the man

"Is this some sort of gathering then, Gryphon?"

Kree blinked. "Are there other Goddess-born in residence?"

"Oh, yes." The gatekeeper made stair steps with his free hand. "Young ones." He hung the lantern on a hook and opened the gate. "It will be a treat for them meeting you. Does the Matriarch expect you?"

"She does not."

"Then I should ring the bell?"

"Yes." Kree sighed. "Ring the bell, Trevor." He kneed his horse forward.

The man smiled broadly, and Kayseri realized with wonder, he was pleased beyond measure that Kree called him by name. How odd? Everyone knew Kree was devilish good with names.

"Good evening to you, Gryphon, and a good evening to you young ladies, as well. Welcome to Arbala. Enjoy your stay."

The avenue they traveled was wide enough for two wagons to pass easily. Kree encouraged them to ride on his left leaving his sword arm clear. Bells began ringing as soon as they passed through the gate, three peals, a pause, three peals, and a pause repeating.

"What does the bell pattern mean?" Kayseri asked.

Kree glanced at her with a quick grin. He seemed to like it when she noticed little things. "They announce a high-degree Goddess-born is returning to the temple."

People poured out of the shops and

restaurants to watch their progress. Women, young and old, rushed into the street offering flowers to Kree. He tucked their offerings under his arming harness. Once he kissed the offered blossom and handed it back to the middle-aged woman whose offering it was. Her friends crowded around her as if he had handed her a purse full of gold. Old men doffed their hats, bowed their heads. Little boys darted into the street and touched his boots.

Kayseri felt sorry for her captain. Kree discouraged every sort of display among his troopers, refusing honorifics, shunning salutes. She leaned in and whispered to Sandahl. "My Captain hates people fussing over him."

They watched a woman hold up a baby to him. Kree touched the child's head in passing. "He does not seem to."

By the time they reached the Temple its gates stood open. They rode through without challenge. No one approached them here as they had out in the city. Templemen stood gathered in the doorways and on the porches of their barracks and watched Kree pass by. Kayseri, creature of the woodland that she was, found such scrutiny claustrophobic. She was relieved when they reached the temple compound.

It was an imposing structure. Built entirely of pink granite, it stood three stories high. Kayseri had not seen a grander building, even in Elhar. A plump priestess in a green gown stood just inside the arched doorway. Despite the bright light from the open doorway spilling a warm glow upon the steps, she held a candle.

Kree slipped off his horse and helped Sandahl then Kayseri dismount. Two young girls in simple white shifts hurried to take charge of their horses. He gave Kayseri's waist a little squeeze

then turned toward the open door.

The plump priestess dropped a deep curtsey. "Welcome home, Goddess-born Gryphon." Ushering his Wilderkin before him, he followed the women inside.

Two more women, these dressed in blue, waited beside a marble table upon which sat a large white porcelain bowl. One of the women held a cut crystal pitcher filled with water, the other a soft white towel. Kree held his hands over the bowl and let the first woman poured water over them. The scent of cinnamon and cloves filled the air. The second woman dried his hands. Ritual completed, they made a deep curtsey, and then Kree turned and blew out the candle.

Setting the candle on the table beside the bowl, the priestess in green spoke with down-swept eyes. "I regret you may not immediately take your ease, Gryphon, but the Matriarch is most eager to see you.

"I live to serve." Kree touched his fingertips to his heart, a gesture Kayseri had seen a million times—only, this time, it meant more somehow.

The priestess led them down a long white marble hallway. Kayseri gazed around trying to take everything in at once. Colorful tapestries depicting the Goddess Namar in various poises of battle, play and passion decorated the walls. Kayseri was spellbound. Could people really bend like that? Only the pressure of Kree's hand on the small of her back kept her moving.

A great many rooms opened off of this central hallway. Kayseri noticed two boys, both wearing long braided hair, making war, it could not be termed anything else, upon a piano in what was obviously a music room before Kree ushered her into the Matriarch's study at the far end of the hall.

Designed to intimidate and impress, this was still very much a woman's room. Intricate patterned rugs artfully softened the white marble floor. Two large opulent couches in mauves and creams bordered a massive carved marble fireplace. The far corner of the room was devoted to music holding another fine piano and a great harp. Various smaller stringed instruments were propped upon their stands. There were several intimate seating areas, colorful chairs and ebony side tables, arranged throughout the room.

It was from one of these seating areas that the Matriarch rose to greet them. She was a very tall woman dressed in a simple soft white robe. Vibrant crimson trimmed the robe's high collar. Her blond hair was frosted with gray and pulled back in a severe bun at the nape of her neck. Her jade-green eyes reminded Kayseri of Kree's.

Kree motioned for Kayseri and Sandahl to wait while he greeted the Matriarch. He took the Lady's hands, kissed them, and sank to one knee as gracefully as he could manage on his injured leg. He remained in his kneeling position with his head bowed.

"Mother," he said.

The Matriarch lifted his single braid and let it fall from her fingers.

"What have you done, Goddess-born?"

"I have lost my faith, Mother."

"Lost it or cast it from you?"

Kree glanced up. "Does it matter, Mother?"

It seemed to Kayseri, the woman softened a fraction, but she quickly masked herself in austerity.

"I do not suppose it does, Goddess-born. But if what you claim is so, what is it you seek here?"

He took the Matriarch's hands again. The gesture begged favor. Kayseri felt a twinge of

anger. Her Captain did not beg.

"I seek rest, Mother, a day or two, no more. I have taken injury. My contract is weary. I need a healer for myself and for them."

The woman's cold eyes flickered over Kayseri and Sandahl. "Namar loves all her sons, even her lost ones. You will have all you desire, Goddess-born, and more. You may rise.

"Claudine, take charge of these Wilderkin. Feed them, bathe them, and provide clean clothing for them. We will send the healer to them after he has seen to our son. Make Kree's suite ready for his use." She paused, considering. "He will want his contract close I think. Put them in the solar."

"Yes, Mother." The priestess bowed. "If you young ladies will follow me, we will make you comfortable."

Sandahl hesitated and Kayseri understood why. She did not want to leave Kree with this menacing old woman either. If she was his mother then she needed nurturing lessons.

Seeing their reluctance, he took a step toward them, stopped and turned to the Matriarch. "May I have permission to withdraw?"

"You may not. I wish to speak with you privately."

Kree took a parade-rest stance and mouthed the word *go* to Kayseri. Seeing her autocratic captain subjugated filled her with fear as no mercenary attack had done. She hated this place, and she hated her mischief for bringing them here. Holding tight to Sandahl's hand lending a confidence she did not feel, Kayseri allowed the priestess to lead them away.

The moment the door closed the Matriarch embraced Kree, careful of his ribs. Like mothers everywhere she had a sixth sense about her only

child. He was never able to hide anything from her.

"With those whiskers you look exactly like your father."

"So people tell me."

She stepped back. "You do not remember your father?"

"Sure I do. I remember his love. I remember the things he taught me. I remember how he used to say, if you live one more day, boy, I'll be mighty impressed. As for how he looked...Not so much."

"What a shame. He loved you so." The Matriarch crossed to a small writing desk, picked up a hand mirror and angled it so he could see his reflection. "Picture yourself with kind brown eyes instead of those chips of green ice you inherited from me."

Taking his hands in her own, she held his arms away from his sides appraising him. "Look at you. You have lost weight. You are exhausted." She hurried to the mantle and opened an ivory box with rows of tiny silver flasks inside. "How long has it been since you tasted nectar?"

His hand covered hers forcing the lid closed. "Three years, seven months, two days. Tell me the time and I can give you hours and minutes."

She stared at him incredulously. "How is that possible, son?"

Kree dreaded this. For years he had dreaded it. How could he tell his mother he had forsaken not just Goddess nectar, but everything she believes in? "Lathan Bruin helped me break its power." He rushed on before she could speak. "It's true, what you say. I have lost muscle. I have to work much harder to maintain my form than I used to, and I am not as quick as I once was. But, Mother, no one can hold me prisoner and use my dependence against me ever again. In a

way I am stronger.”

The Matriarch studied him for a moment in silence. Finally she said, “You do not miss it?”

Kree snorted. “I never said that. I do miss it. Most days I feel like I’ve rolled naked in a patch of nettles. Some days it’s even worse.”

“And you are content with that?”

“A man does what he must. You taught me so.”

“Yes. You are right of course.”

The Matriarch lowered herself onto the couch. Kree could not blame her for being shaken. Cutting his hair was one thing. Many a disillusioned Goddess-born had done so over the years. She would forgive him. But this? Goddess nectar made him Namar’s own almost as much as the small cartouche branded alongside his right ear. He may as well have gotten rid of it as well. In the whole history of their faith, such a thing had never been done.

“You have become a follower of Lathan Bruin’s invisible nameless god?”

Kree sat beside his mother and took her fine-boned trembling hands between his own battle-roughened ones. “No, Mother. I can safely promise you I am currently without deity.”

“That will never do. It is not for you, a life without faith. You are born to serve.”

“I do serve. I serve the Ladies of Elhar and the garrison at Qets.” He gave a tired laugh. “And I serve Sandahl of Thallasi at least for the present.”

His mother had recovered enough from the shock of his confession to fix him with a sharp eye. “With your head and your strong right arm.” She touched his chest lightly with her fingertips. “What about your heart, Kree?”

“My heart is...” No sense in lying to himself. “...otherwise engaged.”

"I see." The Matriarch rose to her feet bringing him with her. "I have kept you too long. Master Healer will wonder why we disturbed his supper. Please return and take supper with me. I long to know how my celebrated Goddess-born son, whose distaste for elves is legend, comes to have a contract with an elf girl and a pixie half-cast."

"Things change." He kissed her cheek, relieved that she accepted him, forgave him, loved him in spite of his faithlessness. "I'll tell you all about it tomorrow. It is a long story and I-I'm whipped."

She smiled fondly at him. "Let it be breakfast then. Cook will prepare your favorites."

Of that, he had no doubt. He touched his fingers to his heart. "I live to serve."

Kree hurried to the solar. There was one more thing to do before he slept, check on Kayseri and Sandahl. The little princess needed the healer, and Kree knew there was no way in the hells she would let the scarecrow Templeman touch her without his reassurance. He would make the introductions and afterwards, he'd have a bath and a bed, in that order. Nothing had ever sounded so good. He could almost weep for joy.

He knocked at the door and Kayseri let them in. She was getting ready for bed herself and held her nightgown closed with one hand at an awkward angle behind her back. The healer took Sandahl behind one of the tapestry partitions to work his art in private.

Kayseri kept moving her arms at awkward angles trying to fasten her nightgown. Finally, she turned her back to Kree and pulled her hair over her shoulder. "Do me up, My Captain."

Kree's gaze followed the smooth curve of her

back. He did not dare touch her silky looking skin, but, damnation, he wanted to. "I don't think that's a good idea, little girl. I'll call an Initiate to help you."

For the first time since she arrived home, she glanced at him over her shoulder with a weary look he had no trouble interpreting. *Quit being an ass.* He hesitated another instant, then stepped up to the task.

The problem, he soon discovered, was obvious. The garment's tiny fabric loops were designed to fit snugly over equally tiny pearl buttons. Small wonder she could not manage it on her own. A woman would have to be a contortionist. Truth to tell the buttons did not willingly surrender to his fingers either. Kree slipped one hand inside her gown so he could hold the round button in place from the underside.

Kayseri's warm golden brown skin felt as smooth as silk. He let the back of his hand rest at the small of her back for a heartbeat or two savoring the sensation. Slowly, so slowly it was as if he were not aware of it, his hand slid it upward. The back of his finger brushed the side of her small breast. She made a soft little sound in the back of her throat. He flexed his knees adjusting his height to hers. Dipping his head he placed a light kiss on soft skin where her neck joined her shoulder.

She dropped her head to the side baring the graceful column of her neck. Buttons forgotten, his other hand skimmed across her bare midriff. His cock was so hard he thought it would burst free of his trousers. He had lusted after a lot of women in his life, made love to a lot of women, but what he felt for Kayseri was beyond anything. Everything about her aroused him, her laughter,

her courage, even her damned mischief. When he touched her, dear Goddess, he felt like he could fly.

His fingers slid up, cupping one small high breast. Kayseri's nipples hardened to little pebbles at his light touch. The way she responded to him filled him with possessive male pleasure. He rolled the sweet little pebble between his thumb and forefinger, tearing a moan from her. He ached to be inside her, and she must have felt an answering need for she pushed against him pressing his needy member into the sweet curve of her bottom with delicious friction.

Oh. Yes. Give me more of that.

Kree kissed his way up her neck, nuzzling her ear. His tongue traced the outline of her ear from lobe to point as he rocked against her. Kayseri shuddered and arched her neck giving him greater access to her pointy little seashell ear.

You like that?

He flicked his tongue along her ear again, this time his lips closed over the sensitive point, and Kayseri bucked in his arms.

Yes, you do.

They charged pell-mell into disaster, Kree leading the charge. The last rational corner of his brain screamed *retreat*, but his rogue hand had other orders. It stroked the taut, silky plain of her stomach, moving lower and lower, brushing over the tight curls between her legs. Her thighs opened for him, his fingers teased her soft fold so hot, wet and ready. The scent of her arousal permeated the air, filled his senses. Utterly lost in her now, all thought of retreat vanished—

Suddenly, Kayseri went still in his arms. *Damnation! What kind of monster was he?* Kree opened his eyes. The healer watched them, a slight smile on his thin lips. He had told the man

he wanted a full report. No one disobeyed a Gryphon. No one interrupted one, either. Kree glared at the man over Kayseri's head until he lowered his eyes, and his smile vanished.

"Forgive me, Gryphon."

Kree held Kayseri tight against his stomach while his racing heart calmed and his breathing slowed. She shivered in his arms. Was she cold? Was she humiliated? He had no idea. He decided on cold, because he could not bear thinking he had shamed the woman he loved. A patchwork quilt on the back of a nearby chair caught his eye. He grabbed it and wrapped it around her shoulders.

"I'll send an Initiate to attend you," he whispered next to her ear.

Taking a deep calming breath, he addressed the healer. "How fares my contract, Master Healer?"

"There is nothing to concern you, Gryphon—severe sunburn, heat exhaustion, mild dehydration, in addition to the aches and pains expected when one is unaccustomed to days on horseback. I performed a comprehensive healing, and I can assure you, she will sleep soundly through the night." The healer shot a glance toward Kayseri.

"Sleep is a good thing," Kree stepped toward the man, blocking his line of sight. "I could use a little myself. Come, Master Healer, let us leave these ladies to their rest. Sweet dreams, Katie."

In his own suite of rooms, a priestess and two novices waited to attend him. Normally he would have sent them away, preferring, as he did, to do things for himself. Tonight he was so tired. Letting someone take care of him held an appeal he could not deny.

Later, soaking neck-deep in a steaming hot

bath with his head resting on soft towels while expert hands scraped three days of itchy stubble off his face, he wondered why he ever resisted such simple luxury.

In the end though, he dried himself off. A man had to draw the line somewhere.

He entered the bedroom still toweling his hair dry, tossed the towel onto a leather chair, and shook his hair out. A novice stood near the foot of his bed.

"I am for you, Goddess-born." First night ritual words. He had forgotten the custom. It had been a long time since he slept in a temple.

The novice's simple diaphanous gown hid none of the lady's charms. She was tall, full figured, and blessed with the flawless porcelain skin he so admired. Her generous mouth smiled an invitation. Wide cornflower-blue eyes sparkled with an eagerness that made his cock twitch appreciatively. Glossy honey-colored hair spilled around her shoulders in soft waves.

She was everything that usually stoked his fire, and while his body might appreciate her, his heart was filled with another vision—a vision of a woman whose dark skin was kissed by the sun, whose high firm breasts did not fill his hands, but might fill his mouth if he were ever fortunate enough to taste them. Kayseri filled his heart, his mind, even his soul, so completely he heard himself say, "Not tonight."

The woman dropped a very deep curtsy. "As you will, Gryphon."

"Wait." If he sent her away she would lose face. He'd been away a long time, but not so long he had forgotten how catty novices were. "Are you trained in the art of massage?"

She nodded, neither meeting his eyes nor speaking, her warm inviting smile gone.

Damnation. “Stay then.

He threw himself face down on the bed. The mattress sagged as the novice crawled onboard. Her smooth warm thighs straddled his hips. Another time the gentle pressure of her knees at his waist would command a response, but his thoughts were on his encounter with Katie, and it just seemed wrong.

Was he now one of those pathetic chumps who pined over women they could not have? Goddess! He hoped not.

Strong hands stoked the back of his neck easing tension, aches and pains almost magically. The novice’s hands hesitated at his shoulders. He felt her fingertips brush across the gryphons burned into his flesh. Likely, she’d never seen gryphon brands before. Not many men boasted the Goddess Namar’s highest honor. Her hands resumed their soothing movements.

“Are the rumors we hear of you true, Goddess-born?”

“Almost never. You have a particular rumor in mind?

“How about the one where you lose your beloved, and our Goddess, touched by your grief, frees you from nectar? It’s so romantic.”

“Hum...” He yawned. He opened his mouth to tell her it was not romantic, it was painful, but the only sound that came out was *aah*.

The novice knew her stuff. He’d give her that. Muscles relaxed he didn’t know he had.

He slept.

Chapter Thirteen

'Sweet dreams, Katie.' Kayseri tossed and turned on the soft feather mattress. Sleep eluded her. She tried counting the stars winking at her through the wide windows. It didn't help. The only stars Kayseri wanted to count were the stars she'd seen when Kree suckled her sensitive ear-point.

How had he known to do that when she had not known it herself? Her breasts still tingled with the ghost of his touch. Kree's calloused hands were rough, yet his touch was magical, and when his magic fingers stroked the sensitive flesh between her legs, something wild sparked into life. Pleasure she had not known existed clamored for immediate release. The memory of it made her body hot and restless—hungry—unsatisfied.

Though she could not say how, she knew the satisfaction her body craved was just down the hall. She needed the magic in Kree's hands and lips. If she could just lie down beside him, she would fall right to sleep. She knew it.

She spent several minutes trying to convince herself he would not mind if she slipped into his bed as she used to do when something frightened her, but in her heart she knew he would mind. He would mind very much. He hated mischief, and he acted so strange of late. She no longer believed it had anything to do with her race.

But if not race, then what? She stared up at the stars, but could not find an answer there. The stars looked lonely. Staring at them made her feel

an overwhelming need for Kree, and she could not, would not ignore it. Cloaking herself in mischief, she slipped from her bed.

Kree's door was unlocked. The hinges protested when Kayseri opened it. She went dead still. Waiting. Listening. Nothing.

She found herself in a parlor furnished with large scale overstuffed couches and big wing-backed chairs—furniture made for a big man. Books lined the wall behind a long mahogany table upon which lay an open violin case. Kayseri remembered Kree played the violin. He favored sad tunes.

The opposite wall displayed trophy heads. Below each animal was a small brass plaque. Natural pixie curiosity drew her to them. Below a fierce looking wild boar she read, *Kree Fawr 1424*. Under the next animal, a mountain cat, the plaque read, *1425* and so on ending in *1429* the year the garrison fell and his father died. Kree had just turned sixteen.

She crept over to the opposite door and eased it open. Soft snoring greeted her. Kree's saber hung on a brass hook inside the door. His broad hand-and-a-half sword and his ivory-handled fighting knives rested in a wall rack. Assorted smaller knives lay on an inlaid marble table below it. He sprawled in the huge bed, his back to the door, a good ten feet from his weapons. He did not stir as she eased the door shut behind her. He felt safe here, that much was clear. She knew for a fact his gryphon knives hung from his headboard at home in his own garrison.

Holding mischief tight around her, Kayseri skirted the enormous bed and froze. A woman slept beside Kree. Jealous rage rocked her, making her mischief slip.

The woman was one of those pale skinned,

blonde beauties, whose lush bodies Kree was stupid for. He had married such a woman, once, and just look at the misery that had caused him.

Kayseri felt a crushing pain in her chest. After what had happened in her chamber, she had dreamed—she had dared hope. The pain of her heartbreak tore a gasp from her.

The stupid woman woke and peered sleepily around the room. She had cornflower-blue eyes. It was too much to bear. Kayseri exchanged her hold on mischief for a hold on the trollop's honey-colored hair.

Kree heard a woman screaming. He shook off sleep and instinctively reached for weapons that were not there. *What the—*

He rolled out of the bed coming to his feet in a fighter's stance. Kayseri Bruin was on the floor straddling a screaming novice. Using a fist full of the woman's yellow hair as a handle, she slammed the novice's head against the floor. For a moment, he could not comprehend what his eyes told him. And then he did. Fury flashed though him like wildfire. It scourged the air around him.

"Katie!"

Kayseri sprang up, broke for the door, but Kree's reflexes were honed by combat. He trapped her between the wall and the bed. She tried darting under him, but he anticipated her move. She called up mischief. He grabbed her wrist.

"Don't you dare pull your disappearing act on me." Kree's voice was low and dangerous. "Don't even *think* about it."

He was an earthquake. He was fire on the mountain. His was crushing her wrist. Kayseri did the only thing she could think of, she punched him. He blocked the blow, caught her

fist. She stomped his bare foot. Hard. He did not expect that. He let go.

She sprinted for the solar. Other people crowded into the hall drawn by the ruckus, but she sped past them. Bless god. There was a bolt on the door. She shot it home with shaking hands and leaned against the smooth wood. Hearing Kree's angry strides pounding down the hall, she backed away, watched the knob rattle impotently. There followed a whispered soliloquy of expletives containing references to mating, colored by words she had never heard before. Kree's bare foot hit the door with a resounding boom. Once. Twice. The door crashed open.

He paused in the broken doorway, a storm hurling thunder and lightning. Kayseri saw his rage. It flowed off him in searing purple fire, scorching her cheeks and raising the fine hairs on her arms. *Was this how he looked in battle?* She marveled that his foes did not throw down their weapons and run away screaming. God knew she wanted to.

Wait. She had never seen the color of rage before. Kree seized her wrist again, in his crushing grip, and dragged her up the hallway. She struggled against him as a minnow struggles against a tidal wave. The more she wiggled and tugged and dragged her feet, the tighter he gripped her wrist.

"You're hurting me!"

She snagged his attention at last. He paused for a heartbeat then yanked her forward. Catching her up with his left arm, he draped her over his shoulder like a sack of flour. From this new undignified position, Kayseri kicked her feet and pounded his back with her fists.

Responding to her latest attack, Kree swatted her bottom.

“Stop.”

She stopped.

He carried her into what seemed, from Kayseri’s upside-down view, a sort of split-level library, where he dumped her into a deep wingback chair. As soon as her butt hit the cushion, she made an abortive break for the door.

Kree glared at her and raised one finger. Just one. His aura lashed her. “Sit.”

She sank back in the chair as far as she could, trying to look small and helpless. In past arguments, small and helpless worked wonders on him. Not this time. He paced around the room clenching and unclenching his hands. The muscle in his jaw jumped. His aura swirled angry purple.

She sat very still trying to accustom herself to seeing his emotions. Such a thing had never happened before. This was not, after all, their first fight, far from it. Of course, she had been a young girl on those other occasions, and Kree had never been anywhere near this angry.

As she studied him, his aura changed, becoming a sort of deep red mist.

He stopped in front of her. “Of all the...pixie-stupid stunts.”

Purple streaks arced through the red like lightning. Kayseri felt a hot breeze brush her cheek. Taking a deep breath and exhaling it slowly through his mouth, Kree made another circuit around the room. It occurred to her that he was not searching for the right words to chastise her. He was searching for the calm to utter them.

He stopped in front of her chair again. Rubbing his forehead with the back of his fist, he took a deep breath. “What the—” He caught his lower lip between his teeth, a crimson cloud

enveloped him. "Damnation." He took another deep breath, exhaled slowly. He closed his eyes. "What by Namar's bloody tears do you think you are doing?"

His aura's heated glow faded a bit. Kayseri was not reassured. She had seen how quickly it flared. But by heaven, she was angry too.

"Who was that woman?"

Her question caught him by surprise. He almost grinned. No doubt he had expected her to trot out the usual litany of excuses she used whenever she did some outrageous pixie thing to him. He watched her through narrowed eyes, suspecting a trick.

"No one."

"She must be someone. You were sleeping with her."

"I was *not* sleeping with her. She was *sleeping* with me."

"Excuse me? Is there a difference?"

"I am not your business." Garnet sparks shot through his aura.

"Yes you are, Kree, I love you."

There it was again, that pole-axed look Kayseri had first seen in the Woodstock's barn. How were the two occasions alike? She used mischief. He was angry. She called him by his name. Was the stunned look in response to his name? Hadn't she ever called him by his name before? No. She did not think she ever had. His name was a weapon. One she could beat him to death with if she kept her courage and held to her course.

"You don't know what love is." Kree said and gave her his back. The red aura surrounding him bled into a soft pink. His shoulders rose and fell. "What happened tonight between us, Katie, was a mistake. *My* mistake. You did not do anything

wrong. Don't ever think you did. I let things go too far. You don't love me. You think you do, but you don't. You don't see the real me."

It was Kayseri's turn to take a deep breath. "I am not a little girl anymore, Kree. I am the woman I will be until my next aging cycle. What's more, I know everything about you. I have known you my whole life."

He snorted, not impressed.

Kayseri stood. You could not win a fight sitting down and she meant to win this one. "You don't think so, I'll prove it. You cannot father children. Goddess nectar stole your seed. You think it makes you less of a man. You are angry with your Goddess because of it. Listen to me, Kree Fawr. You have six cadets all looking to you to shape them into men. Do you love those lads less, do you give them less of yourself because they are other men's sons?"

"You feel guilty about your wife's death. You think you failed her. Maybe you did. I was young when Molly died. I adored you. I cannot be the judge of that. But Kree, I *know* Molly's death was not your fault."

His soft pink aura vanished replaced by a shield like black ice.

"You don't know that. There is no way you could."

She raised her chin a fraction. "I was there, Kree. There was a pixie-moon. Do you remember? I came down to the garrison to see if you would play some games with me. You and Molly were fighting, as you often did, so I hid myself with mischief. Molly said terrible things to you. You raised your hand like you were going to slap her, but you didn't. You just stood there staring at your hand as if you'd never seen it before. You tried to pull her into your arms, but Molly pushed

you away. She told you to go to your whore-goddess, to get out of her sight. She said she hated you.”

Kree retreated to the window, bowed his head against the dark glass. The icy black shield covered him from head to toe.

“Molly cried after you left. I think she was sorry for what she’d said. I came out of hiding and held her hand. She asked me to spend the night. She said you would find your comfort in someone else’s bed. I didn’t know what she meant, but there was a pixie-moon, so I stayed.

“We made lemonade. We played *Fox in the Hen House*. Later, we went into the bedroom. Molly took your Goddess nectar out of the dresser drawer. She asked me if I ever wondered what it was like to kiss a Goddess. I said I didn’t.”

Kayseri heard Kree make a sound. He might have said something, but his voice was too soft for her to be sure.

“Molly didn’t know Goddess nectar was poisonous. How could she know when she saw you drink it every day? She wondered what it was like for you. That’s all. We danced under the pixie-moon. She got tired and laid down in the grass. Her lips turned blue. I was scared. I ran to my father. By the time father got there it was too late. Molly was dead. Even my father can’t heal dead. It was an accident, Kree.”

Kree knew it was true, everything she had said. The air had been full of lemons. He remembered the rinds on the kitchen counter, the game on the parlor floor. He heard a labored gasping sound, realized he struggled to breathe. He fought to control his emotions, gripped the window ledge so hard his knuckles turned white. *Can this night get any worse?*

Kayseri came up behind him and laid her

hand on top of his. "You must have known it was an accident. That's not why you punish yourself, is it Kree? You didn't love Molly, did you?"

Yes. *The night could get worse.* Kree glanced at Kayseri's slender hand resting lightly on his. Bruises darkened her delicate wrist, bruises he put there. Stark reminders of what fighters like him were good for. It sure as hell was not love.

He pulled his hand away and stared into the darkness outside. "I did. Just not the way she deserved. I know you were young, but you remember what I was like back then."

Yes. She remembered an impossibly tall young man who shortened his stride so the little girl tagging after him did not have to run. She remembered a young man with a cocky crooked grin who made men of rank wait while he gave his attention to whatever bit of silliness that same little girl wanted to impart. He remembered someone else.

"I was such a *selfish* bastard. She was the prettiest girl in town. You wouldn't have known that. She could have had her pick of the townies. I loved having the prettiest girl in town on my arm. I scared her suitors away for no other reason than because I *could*. Before too long, all her town friends were married and having babies. She wanted babies. You know, I always did too. I didn't know I was a mule—not then. I didn't know squat about being married, either. I knew I had a duty to Molly, and I do my duty. It seemed like a good idea at the time."

Kree picked up Kayseri's hand and gently stroked the ugly bruises on her wrist. "I'm sorry I hurt you, Katie. Sometimes I forget how strong I am."

"It's nothing. You didn't mean to."

"No, it's not nothing, and 'I didn't mean to', is

a piss-poor excuse for hurting someone you...ah... Well, it's a poor excuse. That's all."

She pulled him away from the window. "Kree, Sandahl told me she is afraid of being left alone in Nhurstari. She asked me to stay with her. If you look me in the eye and tell me you don't love me, don't want me, I'll stay with her. You will be free of me and my mischief. But, you have to tell me now."

Kree trailed the back of his hand down her cheek until he cupped her chin between his thumb and forefinger. He tipped her chin up, leaned forward and slanted a kiss across her lips. Pulling back, he looked down into her soft brown eyes and whispered, "I do not love you, Kayseri Bruin."

She blinked back the tears welling in her eyes. She touched the side of his face with her fingertips in brief farewell. Squaring her shoulders like a soldier, she turned and walked out of his life. *Goddess. She is magnificent.* Kree sank into a chair burying his face in his hands, too raw in his spirit to do anything more.

"A courageous young woman, that one. She is a departure in type for you, too," came his mother's voice. "It's clear to me you are mad in love with the half-cast chit. Why did you lie?"

Kree jumped to his feet and wiped telltale moisture off his cheek with the back of his hand. "Mother! She's not—I'm not. You should have made your presence known."

"Interrupt such an astonishing display of mixed signals? Not in this lifetime. You are in my private library, Goddess-born. You should have asked permission to use it if you wanted privacy to play out your melodrama."

"Your pardon, Mother."

The Matriarch came down the steps from the

book stacks and stood studying her son for a long moment. "Why did you lie to her?"

"For the best reason, Mother. I am not for her. May I have permission to withdraw?"

The Matriarch poured two glasses of brandy offering one to him. "I noticed you did not say she is not for you."

"What I want is not the issue. She is Lathan Bruin's daughter. There must be hundreds of other men who mean nothing to me, whose daughters' lives I may ruin." Kree drained the glass and set it down on a nearby side table with a *thunk*. "May I have permission to withdraw?"

"Where did you get the idea your wants are insignificant?"

He felt the first pinpricks of temper. He knew her game. His mother manipulated him with bold questions the way other mothers manipulated their children with guilt. Tonight he would not be manipulated.

"Here. I learned it here. I live to serve. *Remember?* May I have permission to withdraw?"

The Matriarch lifted her brow. "When you give me the real answer to my question, you may. Not before. I ask again, why did you lie?"

"Wilderkin mate for life! What is my life, my pitiful handful of days, to someone with hundreds of years before her? I did the honorable thing."

"I did not know Wilderkin took only one mate. However, if true, I'm sure your young lady knows it. If your longevity or lack thereof is not a concern of hers, who are you to decide to whom she may give her heart? Have you become a seer?"

"May I have permission to withdraw?"

"You may have permission to answer my question."

Kree dropped to one knee and glared at his

Matriarch. His mother. His eyes blazed. His jaw muscle ticked. "It doesn't take a seer to perceive the inherent unhappiness in this circumstance. May I have permission to withdraw?"

She raised her eyebrows. "Do not show your famous temper to me."

"Your pardon, Mother."

The Matriarch tucked her hands into the wide sleeves of her robe. "Life has dealt you deep wounds, son. Lick them and move on. Cowardice does not become you. You have permission to withdraw."

Chapter Fourteen

His mother laughed. "She didn't!" So great was her mirth, she had to dab tears from her eyes with the edge of her napkin. "A brave young woman. And you say, she did all that to be with you?"

Kree nodded. Hers was not the reaction he anticipated, and he was not certain where she might be leading. "Near as I can tell, yes."

Another fit of laughter shook his mother's shoulders. She dabbed at her eyes again. "She must love you very much."

"The situation is not funny, Mother." Her laughter was contagious. He grinned in spite of the seriousness of his problem. "I have killed six men and an elfin sorcerer in the handful of days since I set out to bring home one runaway pixie. A High Thallasi prince is dead. An important Thallasi princess is not with her equally important Nhurstari intended. I am running out of time. And did I mention I nearly got myself killed? Twice."

"Yes." The Matriarch's fine china cup chimed against the saucer. "You are right, of course, Templemen involved in elfin politics is not at all humorous. A plot to make it look that way is even less humorous. I will look into the matter. In the meantime, how may Temple of Arbala assist Namar's Gryphon?"

"Katie says the princess needs a trousseau, whatever the hell that is."

Kree swallowed a last bite of steak sopped in

egg yolk. This was his favorite breakfast. The coffee they shared in his mother's hand-painted china cups was flavored with hazelnut. Another favorite. He had not been home for nearly seven years, yet his preferences were perfectly anticipated. Arbala truly was home, more so than Qets, and now that he was here he realized how much he missed it.—

The Matriarch brought her napkin back to her lips to hide another smile. Her eyes sparkled. "Wise as well as courageous. I like your young lady more with every revelation. She is correct, a princess of Thallasi can hardly go into a hostile court in her shift."

"Katie is not my young—"

Her laughter cut through his denial, and he gave up the pretense. His mother was no one's fool. Protesting so obvious a truth made him look foolish, and his mother thought him foolish enough already. But in his opinion, the cost of loving him was too high, and Kayseri was not going to pay that price, not if he had anything to say about it.

The Matriarch rang the silver hand bell beside her plate summoning the priestess, Claudine. "Please, bring me paper and a quill."

The priestess hurried away, returning almost at once with the items requested. His mother scribbled a note on the paper and raised her gaze to Kree. "What else do you need?"

Taking a sip of coffee, savoring its flavor, he narrowed his eyes in thought. "Proper kit. Camping gear. A horse suited to the princess's size.

"I've sent for backup, but my first lieutenant's squad may not arrive before we push on. I need to hire a couple of Templemen." Initiates came to clear the table and Kree waited until they

withdrew. "Are there men in residence who would have me?"

Surprised by his question the Matriarch gave a soft chuckle. "Are there any who would not? You are the Namar's Gryphon. Because you spurn her nectar does not change who you are. The real question is...are there any you would have? I will think on it while you take your young ladies to visit the seamstress in town. Here." She passed Kree the letter of credit she'd prepared. "This should cover everything."

Kree's eyebrows shot up. He gave a low whistle. He knew the value of kit and ponies. "Trousseaux must be expensive."

The Matriarch's humor returned full force. "Of the quality a princess requires, made-up in a day or two? Yes, my beautiful son, trousseaux are expensive."

His mother was having a high time at his expense. "You're really enjoying watching me squirm aren't you?"

She dabbed her eyes. "You will find your way. You always do."

If outfitting his Wilderkin was this big a task, Kree figured he had best get started. He had to face Kayseri again, sooner or later. It may as well be sooner, but he dreaded the hatred he'd see in her eyes. He'd rather be staked on an anthill.

Two boys stood just outside the broken doorway. One was lanky with dark hair and olive skin, who Kayseri judged was perhaps fifteen, the other stocky and freckled, sandy haired, eleven or twelve at best. Their braided hair and branded cheeks declared them Goddess-born. The darker one swept a graceful bow.

"Good morning, ladies. I am William." The older boy gestured toward the other, who also

made a bow. "This is Roland. We are come to escort you down to breakfast."

Kayseri glanced down the hall where Kree's door stood slightly ajar.

William followed her gaze. "Not to worry, *he* is not there. He worked out in the gymnasium before dawn and now breaks his fast with Mother. *In private.*"

"You've met My Captain?"

"Oh no, lady." Roland said. "We've not had that honor, but everybody knows where he is. He can't so much as fart without the whole temple talking of it."

Kayseri and Sandahl were shocked into laughter.

William gave Roland a sharp elbow to the ribs. "Please, excuse him." He glared at the younger boy. "Our Roland has the manners of a wharf-rat. We heard you had a terrific dustup with *him* last night." He touched the splintered doorframe. "We wish we could have seen it." Admiration brightened his eyes. "You must have the heart of a lioness."

Boldness, it appeared, was a trait Goddess-born at whatever age had in abundance. William's praise for last night's folly embarrassed Kayseri, but since this Goddess-born was on her side rather than *his*, she accepted his arm. Sandahl took Roland's, and together, they were escorted down two flights of stairs into what William called the dining hall.

It was a hall. The room boasted half a dozen trestle tables seating four per side. A mixture of young women in simple blue shifts and little girls in white jumpers occupied most of the tables. These were the novices and the Children of the Temple, William explained as he guided them to a round table at the heart of the hall. Children of

the Temple were Namar's offspring, the ones not fortunate enough to be sons.

As the four of them crossed the dining hall, the chatter changed becoming a buzz of whispers. William settled Kayseri into a chair with all the flare one might employ displaying a prize. "They're talking of you, my Lady. Everyone is— About how you fought the Gryphon. Most of the people here wouldn't have the courage to speak to him unless he spoke first." William laughed delightedly. "You actually hit him! And more than once, the way I heard it."

"Try not to make me look the fool," he'd asked. Kayseri stomach clenched. She had made herself and her captain ridiculous.

Roland pushed his chair in and picked up his napkin. "It is William's day. Aye. So I hope you both like scrambled eggs, toast, and strawberries. He always asks for the same thing. Of course, if the Gryphon were eating in here, we'd be stuck with whatever he likes. I heard you grew up with him. What does he like?"

Kayseri started to say she did not know what Kree's culinary preferences were, since he ate whatever was placed before him...including oatcakes meant for horses. But the boy had already turned his attention to Sandahl.

"You're an elf, aren't you? I've never seen an elf. We don't have Wilderkin where I'm from, Belton by the Sea. I wish we did because you're really, *really* pretty." He never took a breath.

Sandahl's smile dimpled her cheeks. "Thank you."

Breakfast arrived, scrambled eggs, toast, and strawberries just as Roland predicted. Kayseri found herself liking these young Goddess-born. They were funny and, oh so, cocky—sure of themselves. She wondered if Kree had been like

them as a child. Recalling the trophies lining the wall in his room, he had probably been far worse.

Between one bite and the next, laughter and conversation all over the hall stopped. The boys shot to their feet. Roland's chair overturned with a loud crash. Kayseri's gaze followed theirs. Kree stood in the doorway, resplendent in dragon's eye blue. The carved hilts on his fighting knives jutted above his shoulders. His saber hung in a slight curve against his powerful thigh. Kayseri could not help the sigh that escaped, not anymore than the half a dozen other women in the hall could.

This morning his hair was dressed in blessing-braids, small tight, crop-rows braided away from his face to a point just behind his ears, and from there it fell in thin braids brushing his shoulders. The braids looked too numerous to count, but Kayseri knew there were exactly one hundred. One hundred was Namar's perfect number, and Kree was the Goddess's Gryphon—her perfect champion.

Kayseri had not seen his hair in this fashion since the day of his wife's funeral, right before he had hacked it all off with a knife. The style suited him. He was so fine looking she wanted to cry.

Kree crossed the room in long strides dragging a dust devil of color with him. It made Kayseri dizzy once she realized with dismay she was seeing his soul colors, an ability that *only* came with the mate bond.

How was this possible? They had not mated—not that she did not want to. She wanted Kree with all her heart. Whatever was she to do?

Kree was mundane as mud-pie, deaf and blind to Wilderkin magic, he would never share or understand this mystery. This was a pickle, this was.

He said he did not love her.

He stopped behind Sandahl's chair, inclined his head to the boys. "Good morning Goddess-born. How are you lads called?"

"William."

"Roland."

The boys bowed from the waist. "How are you called, Gryphon?" They asked, in unison. Kree's dust-devil aura resolved itself into a silvery-blue touched with green, flaring out toward the boys.

Eager for the understanding she could not glean from Kree himself, Kayseri sought Sandahl's mind.

"Sandahl, do you hear My Captain's thoughts?"

"Don't you?" Sandahl sounded surprised. "He conceals nothing. I've been filtering him out ever since I met him."

"Something terrible happened last night, and now I can see his soul colors." Kayseri was desperate. "Tell me what he's thinking."

"You bonded with him. How? When?"

"No! We fought. That's all. Please, Sandahl."

"You are mated!"

"No. I don't know what happened. One minute he was mad enough to strangle me, and next, I'm seeing his soul colors."

"It does not work like that."

"Please, tell me what he is thinking?"

"They are his brothers. He wants them to like him. He thinks he should sit down so he will seem less intimidating."

"Kayseri, what you're claiming happened is not possible. Intimacy brings bonding."

"I know, but you have to believe me. We had a fight. A very big fight. The biggest ever and then... It was just there."

"Have you told him?"

"No. And I'm not going to. He'll think he has to do something."

"He does have to do something."

Kree pulled out a chair and sat beside Sandahl. "I'm called Kree."

The boys sat, following his lead. He gave them his lopsided grin, reached over and helped himself to a strawberry from Roland's plate. Roland, who said he did not care for strawberries, pushed his plate toward Kree in case he wanted more. He leaned forward on his elbows. "Is it true you killed a sorcerer?"

"It's nothing to brag about. I nearly died battling him."

The boys' eyes were huge. Kayseri watched Kree's aura send soft green tendrils out to touch their faces. He glanced at her with a wary smile, making her a part of the conversation.

"Katie's father and I have worked for years developing weapons we thought would be shields against magic. He'll be glad to know it worked."

"But you said you nearly died?"

Kree let his gaze rest on both boys one at a time. "It was not the fault of the weapon. It broke the casting as it was designed to do. My timing was faulty. Fortunately, there was another mage there so I live to tell you the tale. Next time, I'll know where to compensate. The sorcerer," he gave them his grin again, full and fierce, "does not have the same option."

"May we see this weapon?" William asked.

"If you like." He turned his attention to Kayseri. For the space of a heartbeat his aura exploded into a riot of color.

"What?"

"A snarl of thought," Sandahl sent. *"I can't untangle any single thread."*

The colors settled around him, silvery blue

with a hint of pink warming its core. "I thought I'd take you and Sandahl shopping after breakfast. Would you like that?"

"And now?"

"He is adding figures in his head."

"What?"

The princess shrugged. "*One plus one equals two. Two plus two equals four and so on.*"

Kree took Sandahl's shrug as dissent. "I thought all ladies loved to shop," he teased.

"Of course we do, My Captain." Kayseri assured him with a bright smile. "It is a lovely morning for a walk."

"We're going," the young Goddess-born chorused.

Kree's gaze flicked back to them. "If you like."

Walk. As a cavalryman, Kree was not of a mind to walk anywhere when he could ride. He pondered the absurdity of it while exchanging his saber for his bastard sword. The others waited for him downstairs. He could squash this idea if he wanted to, but it would please Kayseri and after shattering her so cruelly last night, he wanted very much to please her wherever he could.

She had given him a wonderful gift, greeting him with warmth as she had. He was in her debt. Now that he knew relations between them would still be companionable, he felt immense relief. Provided he did not allow himself to become so fatigued that it took every ounce of his willpower to put one foot in front of the other, he could keep his hands off Kayseri and keep his feelings buried under simple ciphering until the stars fell down.

Kree rotated his shoulders, settled the sword's weight on his back, and chuckled under his breath. He was so damn melodramatic. He wondered from which of his parents he inherited

the trait. He need not bury his feelings quite so long. Just long enough to finish his contract would do. Afterwards, she would have her new life in Nhurstari, and he would have his old life in Qets. It was the right thing to do.

He rejoined his companions in the drawing room and saw the boys mark his change of armament. They were curious, these boys. Clearly the use of arms was something of a mystery to them. Given his own upbringing, Kree wondered for what sort of lives these boys were meant.

Their walk into town was surprisingly pleasant. The boys kept his Wilderkin occupied with a steady stream of conversation. Very few townspeople approached them since no bells proclaimed their passing, and they reached the dressmaker's shop with only two delays, a bakery and toy shop. Sandahl and Kayseri assured him four outfits each would satisfy their needs, two for riding and two for court.

Dame Couturier, an elegant middle-aged woman with auburn hair and a foreign accent, cooed over the Wilderkin, and eyed Kree with bold interest as he explained his need and showed his letter of credit. After which, she informed him that he asked for the impossible and swept his charges away, calling for a small army of assistants as she went.

Kree and the boys stationed themselves in front of the shop, settling in for a long wait. He watched the young Goddess-born twitch and pine over his weapons until he could stand it no longer. "Don't speculate. Ask."

They did. Roland wanted to hold the gryphon knives. He also wanted to see the gryphon marks. Kree promised to show him later.

"Why did you change swords?" William wanted to know.

"I didn't. I changed from saber to sword. A saber is curved. It is a slashing weapon, meant for use on horseback. You need the momentum of a gallop behind the driving force for it to be fully effective. That's not to say I can't thrust with it. I can, but I'd be disadvantaged, and that is not a position from which I like to fight." He put his hand on the hilt of the bastard sword. "This weapon thrusts and slashes. It's a better choice for standing combat." Handing one of the gryphon knives to Roland, he added, "Knives are best in close combat where there isn't enough room to swing a sword. Do you see?"

William studied the sword. "Why did you put it on your back?"

Kree slid the fifty-six-inch blade free of its scabbard and handed it to the boy. The point dropped to the ground. Using both hands, William brought it level with his waist.

"See." Kree nodded at the sword. "It's much heavier than you expected, isn't it? I don't like that much weight dragging at my waist, and since I wear the arming harness anyway, I indulge myself."

"Are you expecting trouble, Kree?"

"Someone is trying to take my contract, William. That's a solid fact. I find that if I look like I'm ready for trouble, sometimes it avoids me." He flashed his crooked grin. "For a while at least. Aren't they teaching you weaponry at the temple?"

Roland gave the knife an awkward flourish before handing it back to him. "The rapier. Do you know it?"

Gentlemen. They're to be gentlemen. Times change. "I know it. It's not a soldier's weapon, and only a fool would challenge me with a thrusting sword." Kree shrugged. "It's bad luck to kill a

fool.”

“Why a fool?” Roland wanted to know. For his answer, Kree extended his arm.

“Oh! Reach,” the boys said in unison.

“This is fearsome.” William swung the bastard sword side-to-side in a reckless manner. “I’d dearly love to know how to use this. Will you teach me?”

Kree took the blade away from the boy before he hurt himself or someone else. “I’ll show you the patterns this afternoon. Beyond that, you will have to seek out the Temple’s sword master. I’ll be picking Templen for a job tomorrow afternoon. Should be a fine display of sword work. You could squire for me if you like. Both of you.”

Kayseri moved swiftly along the stone pavement. Sunlight warmed the honed marble. It was their second full day in Arbala. She had seen Kree ride away early this morning, a clear, silvery-blue nimbus crowning his head. She did not know if he had returned.

Observation combined with Sandahl’s telepathic skill told her silvery-blue meant he was at peace. It was pure. It was balanced. People upset the balance and influenced the hues. People muddied the colors. She muddied them most of all.

Kree had positively sparkled when he practiced long sword patterns with Roland and William yesterday afternoon. The boys struggled through them, but Kree danced through the same patterns with flow and precision. For him it was a moving meditation. The young Goddess-born were dazzled. They were his creatures now. Sparkle in Kree’s aura meant pleasure. If she could puzzle out what more of the colors signified,

maybe she could understand the man. Sadly, the addition of his soul colors proved he had spoken the truth. She did not know him.

Last night, gathered in the music room after dinner, he had played the piano. Kayseri had no idea he played that instrument. When the Matriarch requested a song, he protested he had not been a songbird before he had damaged his throat. In the end, he let himself be persuaded. Choosing a ballad that did not tax his range, Kree's soft, airy voice turned each note into a velvet caress. By the end of his performance, Kayseri was more in love with him than ever. Of course, so were a dozen novices, and a priestess or two.

William had played after Kree, while Roland sang in a pure boyish soprano, and Kree took turns waltzing first the Matriarch, then several of the priestesses around the room. He had even danced with Sandahl, to the amusement of all. He had not danced with Kayseri. In fact, the only time during the evening's entertainment his aura was not a perfect sparkling silvery-blue was when he looked at her or talked to her.

"Kayseri!" William jogged across the courtyard. "Good day to you."

Putting her ruminations aside, she smiled at the tall boy. "Do you know if My Captain has returned? I need to talk to him."

Falling in beside her, William threaded her hand through his arm. "He got back just after the noon meal."

"Where is he?"

"Sleeping."

Pain touched her heart. She did not want to repeat mistakes. "Is he alone?"

William made a snorting sound. "Of course, my Lady. He said he wanted to rest before this

afternoon's combat." The lad gave her a wink. "I don't think he needs it."

Kayseri pulled William to a halt. "What combat? He's fighting?"

The boy's face brightened. "Combat for pleasure. He is hiring an escort for the princess." He puffed out his chest. "Roland and I are his squires. I was on my way to tell him the candidates await his pleasure. Walk with me?"

William raised his hand to knock on Kree's door, but before he could, it opened, and Kree's aura slammed into Kayseri with dizzying riotous color. It swirled around her, pulling her down. The next thing she knew she was sitting in William's lap on the floor.

Kree pulled her into his arms and snapped at William. "Fetch the healer."

She stretched out her hand to stop him. "Wait. I'm fine." And she was. She was in Kree's arms. Her body knew its mate. Relishing the feel of his smooth skin over hard muscles, she relaxed into him, inhaled deeply, and filled herself with his dark spicy scent. She didn't want to move. Her fingers found his cheek. "You..."

"What is it, sweetheart?" He smoothed her hair back from her face. His gaze searched her face.

"Smell good." She felt his quick smile under her fingers, there and gone.

"William, hurry with the healer. She is hallucinating."

"No. I was dizzy for a moment." Bracing herself for another vertiginous wave, Kayseri opened her eyes. Kree's silvery-blue corona was infused with a warm pinkish glow, reaching almost to the outer edges. The terrible chaotic swirling was gone. She smiled at him. "I'm fine now." *Oh, the look on his face.*

“Really?”

Kayseri nodded and gave him a reassuring smile. He and William helped her to her feet. Kree’s silvery-blue balance reasserted itself as he stepped away.

“You wanted me?”

Only my whole life. “The seamstress came for our final fitting while you were out this morning. Our new wardrobe arrives sometime tonight.”

Sandahl joined them in the hallway drawn by the commotion. Kree gave Kayseri his beloved grin. “That is good news. We’ll leave in the morning.”

“But Duncan isn’t here yet.”

“He’ll catch up. Probably pushing Red Fist to the point of mutiny as we stand here.” Kree’s gaze drifted to William.

The boy’s excitement came back in a rush. “They’re waiting for you in the arena.”

William found a choice shady spot on the wall surrounding the Temple arena where Kayseri and Sandahl could watch the combat in comfort. Word of the afternoon’s sport had spread. Novices and lower-ranking priestesses crowded around the two Wilderkin. The Templemen, who were not chosen to meet Kree, leaned or sat on the wall, as eager as anyone else to watch his sword work. Kayseri even spotted the Matriarch watching from a tower window.

The seven chosen men stood in the arena making small talk with Kree while William and Roland inscribed a large circle in the arena’s center.

William had explained the rules for this day’s combat to Kayseri and they were simple. One won by disarming his opponent, by landing an otherwise killing blow with blunted blades, or by

forcing his opponent out of the circle.

When all was ready, Kree pointed to the youngest man in the group. The fellow stepped into the circle radiating confidence.

Turning his back on the man, Kree crossed to where the boys waited and stripped down to the handkerchief-thin sleeveless undershirt he always wore. Some of the bolder novices shouted for him to strip it off as well, but he raised his hand, shook his head. For reasons Kayseri had never been able to learn through mischief or questioning, Kree was ashamed of the scars on his back and almost never bared his torso in public.

Kree accepted the blunted sword William offered him gave it a couple of practice swings and turned on his opponent with a loud burst of laughter.

Startled, the fellow jumped back, lost his footing and fell on his backside, outside the circle. Just that fast it was over.

He bent and offered the man his hand. Kayseri saw the young man was talking, but Kree shook his head in response to whatever he'd said. So the afternoon went, one man after the other. Most of the men put up a good fight. Some never laid a blade on Kree. No one defeated him.

He sparred with each man one-on-one. After the first round, Kree paired the men up selecting the first young man to fight as his partner. Then he went through the routine again, fighting the men in pairs. He did not rest, only paused to gulp water between bouts. Kayseri worried he would tire, but his aura shined like the sun. He was having fun.

Next he matched men up fighting them against each other, critiquing strengths and weaknesses with William and Roland. By sunset

he had found the pair he wanted, Fergus, the young man he had beaten with bravado, and an older fellow named, Biggs, whose sword work was responsible for most of the welts on his arms.

Chapter Fifteen

Kree led his reinforced party out of the city around mid-morning the next day. Rested, properly outfitted, with Red Fist probably less than half a day behind, he felt almost light-hearted. He entertained thoughts of success for the first time. True, he lacked a plan for approaching this Nhurstari prince, Rian, but that was such a small thing. He would think of something. He always did.

They traveled due north and soon left the cultivated farmlands supporting Arbala behind. The sky was azure, the sun bright, but an overnight cool snap brought a softer day. Kree cherished the hope that the scorching summer was finally losing its grip on the frontier. Cooler weather was easier on the horses. It made for better traveling.

It was easier on the Thallasi princess too. Four hours on the road and Sandahl still looked fresh as a new day, dressed in a light blue riding habit complete with matching hat and gloves. Comfortably mounted on her new chestnut pony, she sung the epic tragedy *Averill and Tam* in an impossibly high, clear soprano only elves could hope to achieve. Kayseri joined in on the choruses. The song told a long, tortured tale of star-crossed lovers who come to a bad end. Personally, Kree hated the song, but Biggs and Fergus were enchanted.

His beautiful Katie was dressed in bronze velvet accented with creamy lace. She had pulled

her glorious curls up in a high ponytail. For coolness presumably, but it showed off the lovely column of her neck very fetchingly. Kree licked his lips. He remembered the silky texture and the taste of her neck too well for his own good. Golden topaz glinted at her ears. It hurt his chest to look at her. He took the vanguard to spare himself heartache, giving Biggs and Fergus the wing and the companionship.

They stopped for lunch just as the terrain turned mountainous, where the pleasant foothills were lightly forested. Kree loosened the girth on his horse, stripped off his weapons harness and slung it across his saddle. Biggs saw to the other horses. Fergus appointed himself cook, leaving Kree with nothing much to do.

Unbuttoning his jacket, Kree made himself comfortable under a tree. He pulled up a long piece of grass and twirled it between his fingers. After a while, Kayseri came to him carrying an apple in each hand. She sat down on her knees across from him. Close enough to touch, he noted. What was she about?

He gave her a crooked grin. "You make that outfit look beautiful, little girl. Unless I miss my guess, you are well on the way to adding young Fergus' heart to your collection."

She tossed her head setting her ponytail dancing. "One heart hardly makes a collection."

"What about mine? It has been your poor captive since you were a wee little thing?"

She looked at him long enough and hard enough to make him regret his jest, then she smiled. "You're teasing me."

"Yes. I am." Kree tickled her nose with the fuzzy headed grass. "Not about the outfit though."

"Thank you. A friend bought it for me." Offering him one of the apples, she took a bite out

of the other.

“Do I know him?”

“You might. He’s a tall redheaded gentleman. Very kindhearted.”

He swallowed a bite of the apple. “Hmm. You must know more than one redhead.”

She leaned forward, pushed at his shoulder playfully and he fell back onto the grass as if she had the power to move him. Companionable silence fell between them. Kayseri finished her apple, tossed the core to the birds.

“When do you think the Red Fist will find us?”

Kree rolled up on one elbow and tossed his apple core after hers. “Duncan is pushing while I am not. I figure he’ll overhaul us sometime tomorrow. Probably around midmorning.”

Fergus and Biggs had fallen into a sparring match while they talked. Kree watched them in silence. Each time Biggs brought a hawking strike the younger man retreated and ended up with Biggs’ blade at his throat.

“If you make the same mistake every time you’ll get the same result every time,” Kree called.

Fergus picked himself up off the ground once more dusting off his trousers. “What mistake?”

“He’s gulling you, laddie. Ain’t no defense for that strike.”

Kree pushed to his feet, grinning. “I don’t do defense. Next time Biggs hawks down, step into the strike, not away.”

“He’ll split my skull open.”

“Not if you do what I tell you to. Look.” Kree took the sword out of his hand and brought it to high guard. “Go for my head, Biggs, slowly, so he can see what I do.” The man swung. Kree stepped to the right and dropped the sword to a left in a backward move, stopping Biggs’ attack. A quick

pivot brought him around to parry the next strike. Then he grasped his blade. He used it as a club, blocking and knocking Biggs' blade down, trapping it under his arm.

"Wow!" Fergus cheered.

"Let me see you do that." Kree watched them go through the moves. "Again," he coached from the sideline. "That's better. Remember perception, distance, timing, and technique. Do the routine again, concentrate on timing. You can work on technique later."

Fergus panted, sweat poured off him. "Man, you're tough," he gasped.

Kree laughed. "Do it again. This time, punch Biggs in the face with your pommel when you come around." Biggs favored him with a skeptical look, but brought his sword to guard.

"That's not very knightly." Fergus protested.

"I don't do knightly. Knightly is your concern. Men ask me all the time what it takes to make Gryphon. I tell them, 'Win challenges.' Do what I told you. Punch him."

A dozen or so repetitions later, Fergus finally managed to trap Biggs' blade, and after a short victory dance, he dropped to the ground beside Kree. "Why didn't you let me fight you in the area?"

"Mother chose you because she wanted me to see something in you. I thought I might see it better if I didn't pound you into the ground."

"Are you sure you would have?"

"Aren't you?"

The young fellow laughed. "Yeah. You would."

"Shouldn't we push on, boss?" Biggs poured water over his head to cool off, shaking off like a dog, throwing off droplets of water in the direction of the ladies. They shrieked in mock outrage.

"We should." Kree stood and offered a helping

hand to Kayseri. He bowed to the princess. "Perhaps your highness can find happier songs to sing us on our way."

Sandahl looked up at him with merry eyes. "You don't like *Averill & Tam*, My Captain? What could be happier than a tale of true love?"

"They die, Princess."

"Yes." Sandahl gave him a delicate lift of her shoulders. "But they live together in perfect bliss for three hundred glorious love-filled days."

"At the end of which a demon devours them," Kree stubbornly pointed out.

"But they have three hundred days," Kayseri chimed in.

"Three hundred days," Sandahl echoed.

He shook his head. *Must be a girl thing*. "Sing as you will, Princess." He went to see to his horse.

The afternoon was fair. His little company traveled steadily northward unmolested. Kree felt confident he had lost their tail by sidetracking to Arbala. Toward evening Kayseri began singing *The Star-Slayer Saga*. If there was ever a song Kree liked less than *Averill & Tam*, this was it and not solely because it featured himself. He shot her a sharp look stopping her in mid-note. Funny. Kayseri was very obliging today. Maybe she was making good on her promise to be helpful. More likely, she was plotting some really fine piece of pixie revenge for the disastrous night in his mother's library. He could hardly blame her.

They reached the first heavily forested slopes of the Nhurstari mountain range at twilight. There was magic in these mountains. Kree felt it dancing along his skin. They pitched their tents, and Fergus started cooking supper. It was a peaceful ending to a peaceful day. He had just decided to camp out and wait for Duncan when it all went to hell.

Kree shoved Sandahl into Kayseri's arms. "Mischief. Now." The Wilderkin vanished.

"What in the hells!" Fergus said.

Biggs chuckled low in his throat. "It might fool 'em, boss, least for a while."

Kree's sword swished from its leather scabbard. "Get behind us, Katie. Be silent." He felt her hand touch his waist.

A lone man rode into the circle of their fire's light. The wiry, mustached stranger wore black leather. He had a weathered face and dark oily hair. Hard eyed. Professional. He spit a stream of tobacco juice into the pine needles.

"Well, lookie here what I found. You northern boys sure do love braids, don't ya?" His gaze traveled over Kree. He spit again. "Guess you're the hero who's been killin' my men. I'll take the elf girl now, Hero."

Hero. The man made the word sound like a slur. Kree adjusted his grip on his sword. "Come get her." Normally, he did not talk to men he meant to kill, but he wanted to give Fergus a few extra minutes to settle down. The boy was jumpy as a cat.

The stranger slid off his horse and walked toward them with supreme confidence. "If you insist." He made a gesture with his hand and more than a dozen men armed with eight-foot spears came out of the trees.

"I'm good for two, maybe three," Biggs' voice was calm and sure at Kree's shoulder. "The laddie'll get at least one. Do you figure you can handle the rest?"

Damnation. Kree threw down his sword.

Keeping his gaze on Kree, the man bent at the knees and picked up the sword. "A very good choice, Hero. I'll have your pretty knives too."

Kree shrugged out of his weapons harness.

Fergus and Biggs tossed their weapons on the growing pile.

The leader spit a stream of tobacco at Kree's feet. "All your knives, Hero. Slowly."

Kree's boot knives joined the others.

More men came out of the tents shouting, 'not here'. The fellow looked around the campsite. "The elf girl, Hero. Now."

Kree said nothing.

The man spit again and looked at Kree out of hooded eyes. He nodded slightly as if to say, 'have it your way'.

"Kill the boy."

"Colt! My Lord, Hueil said no killing." A voice shouted from the darkness.

The mercenary held his hand up staying his man. A tall slender Nhurstari moved out of the shadow of the trees and came to stand at the mercenary's shoulder. He whispered something in his ear.

"Is that a fact?" Colt invaded Kree's space. "My friend here tells me the elf girl might use some sort of enchantment to keep us from seeing her. Is that so, Hero?" He poked Kree's chest with one finger. "Is that the deal?"

"Drop the tents." The canvas fluttered to the ground. The mercenary captain spread his arms wide encompassing the campsite. "Not there, Hero? Where is she I wonder?"

At his signal, the spearmen brought their weapons to waist-high and closed in on the spot where Kree stood shoulder to shoulder with Fergus and Biggs. Just as the spears pressed into their clothing, the advance stopped. The mercenary captain thrust his arm into the triangular space formed by the three men's bodies and caught hold of Sandahl's arm. He tore her out of Kayseri's grasp.

Kayseri dropped her mischief. "I'm sorry, My Captain."

Kree squeezed his eyes shut. *Damnation. They had not known about Katie. If only she'd kept quiet.* "It's not your fault, little girl."

Colt shoved the princess at the tall Nhurstari. "*Your Captain* is he?" He studied Kree for a long moment. "Ah, the little blue horse soldiers. I passed your tiny fort just t'other day." He spat at Kree's feet barely missing his boots. "Pitiful."

The man grabbed Kayseri's arm, pulled her against his body. "You know you look good enough to eat, little tart." He licked her cheek. "Maybe I'll find out just how tasty you are." His gaze never left Kree's. "You got any more revelations for me, Hero?"

"Just one." Kree shifted a spear point away from his midriff with one finger. "Before this is over, I will kill you."

Colt flung Kayseri away. She lost her balance and fell to her knees. Sweeping Kree's sword out of the pile of confiscated weaponry, he tossed it at Kree's feet. His hard eyes glittered as his own blade slid free. "Why wait?"

Kree let his gaze travel the circle of spearmen before locking onto the mercenary leader's hard black glare. "I don't care for the odds."

"Too bad. Cos they're the best you'll be gettin'. I've got the elf girl." Burying a fist in Kayseri's thick hair, he dragged her to her feet. "I've got your little caramel tart. I've got news for you, Hero. It is over."

"Bring 'em," Colt ordered.

The mercenaries shouldered their spears and closed ranks around their captives, herding them up the mountain. The Nhurstari male led the way carrying Sandahl in his arms. Colt bore Kayseri before him on his saddle staying near enough so

Kree could see them even in the gloom. The man's free hand roamed over her body, squeezing her breast here, rubbing between her legs there. Kayseri trembled with fear. Kree saw from the man's expression that he drank her terror up like fine brandy.

Kree felt pressure building inside his skull, the herald of the peculiar madness, which sometimes rode him in battle, compelling him to actions other men called heroic. He had come to recognize this battle madness made him reckless, endangering the men under his command. Freed from the affects of Goddess nectar, he had taught himself to suppress it, control it. But as he watched the stranger paw Kayseri, the madness swelled inside him until control was just a fantasy. The more he reached for it, the more it slipped away until nothing was left inside him except the highly charged mania wanting the right spark to touch it off.

Three or four hours of hard hiking brought them to the hunting lodge. Four gigantic living trees formed the corner posts and spread their interwoven leafy canopies over the roof. The structure, built of natural split timber, was complimented by a wide quarried stone porch.

Another Nhurstari male stood on the broad porch dressed in a bronze colored silk tunic over black leggings and boots. Despite his unlined face a touch of gray frosting his blue-black hair hinted at great age. A thin silver coronet sat on his smooth brow. Kree sensed the elf's power dancing along his skin even through the haze of his madness, but dismissed it. Rage narrowed his vision to himself, his enemy and Kayseri. He had nothing left to waste on the elf.

Their Nhurstari guide stood Sandahl on her feet before the elf. "Lord Hueil, Second of

Nhurstari." He touched his forehead in a kind of salute before indicating Sandahl with a graceful sweep of his hand. "I have the honor to introduce to you, Sandahl, of Thallasi."

At the same time, Colt dragged Kayseri off his horse and pulled her against his sinewy body. He kissed her. Brutally. Struggling against his grip, unable to break away Kayseri did the only thing she could do. She screamed, "Kree-e-e-e!"

Violence erupted. His world went up in flames. Kree grabbed the man in front of him, snapping his neck with one quick hard jerk. Snatching up the man's spear, he clubbed the next guard to the ground and surged toward Colt.

He heard, Biggs yell, 'Holy Hells!' behind him as the two Templemen jumped in to block the mercenaries threatening to take him down from behind. He pushed his way toward Kayseri's tormentor propelled by roaring madness. Colt shoved Kayseri aside at the same time Sandahl broke away from the old elf and ran to her. Kree saw his Wilderkin huddle together on the porch safe from Colt's reach. He saw the ancient elf gliding down the wide stone steps.

Colt drew his sword, his black eyes glittered eagerly in the moonlight. "Come on Hero," he growled.

Fergus screamed. Somewhere behind him he heard Biggs go down. Hard. Kree swung his spear up using it as a staff, blocking Colt's downward stroke. With a hard push to the left, he brought the spear shaft over top of his adversary's blade following through with a vicious kick to the mercenary's weight-bearing knee.

Colt's leg cracked backward, but before Kree could swing his spear around for the killing thrust, the old elf reached out, touched him, and spoke a word sounding like "*Radam.*" Kree

dropped like a rock. Dimly, far away, he heard Kayseri screaming.

Chapter Sixteen

Red Fist squadron reached the abandoned campsite at midday. First Lieutenant, Aimery Duncan, raised his hand, signaling halt. He had pushed the men hard. He scanned the clearing seeing nothing but ruin and felt keen disappointment.

"Maybe they took him by surprise," Chana said from his right.

Duncan's gaze swept the wrecked campsite again. His voice betrayed none of his agitation. "The man is our captain and concerned enough to hire Templemen. How is it possible he would be taken by surprise?"

Sliding out of her saddle, Chana bent to read the ground. "I didn't say he was. Tracks will tell the tale, but I don't discount it. The Bruin girl has turned him addle brained."

Duncan caught an amused glance from Chana's longtime consort. If Duncan listened to his tracker, this one, half-pixie woman was somehow responsible for everything from drought in the east, to typhoons on the southern seacoast. Whatever she had done to earn Chana's ire it must have been considerable.

Bird rolled his eyes in a moment of shared mystification. "I think she's jealous."

Chana glared at him. "Scoff if you want, but you know what kind of man My Captain is. 'See the hill, take the hill.' It's a marvel to me he doesn't have a string of by-blows from here to Elhar. With this Bruin girl...the way he acts..."

She gave a dramatic shudder. "You'd think he was twelve years old for all the sense he shows. I should know. I remember when he *was* twelve years old."

"Now, I think *I'm* jealous," Bird quipped. He liked to get his partner's hackles up.

The men around them sniggered. Duncan raised a hand silencing them. Having heard variations on this theme five or six times in the last three days, he suspected Chana's familiarity with their captain's youthful past clouded her perception. For himself, he wanted to find the man he had crossed the sea to serve, and he wanted to find him alive. Concrete, useful information would facilitate that end, not speculation on his captain's love life. If he were curious, he could have full color details from his widowed sister-in-law.

"Is there anything we can learn here?"

"It looks like he was taken by a dozen men. Maybe more. They came through the trees on foot and surrounded him. Look at this." Chana picked up the overturned kettle, closed her eyes and let her mind flow back envisioning the attack. "The captain is still setting up the camp. He doesn't hear them coming until they are almost on top of him. What does he do? He is out numbered. He knows we are right behind him. He does the safest thing for the Wilderkin. He surrenders."

The First Lieutenant digested this theory. Pulling a map from his pocket, he consulted it briefly. The lodge Kree had marked on it was the only likely place to take prisoners. "Our mission, in this event, becomes extracting our captain. We will swing around this ridgeline and come down on the lodge, thereby gaining control of both the water course and the high ground."

Kree's head had exploded. Nothing else accounted for such intense pain. He was sure should he open his eyes he'd discover little bits of his brain smeared across... He moved his hand. *Wood. Smooth wood. Wood floor...* little bits of his brain would be smeared across the wood floor.

"You are whole," a voice said from above him, speaking heavily accented Elharan. "Let me say in defense of my people, Hueil could have as easily called for your death. It is within his talent. Instead, he put you to sleep. I cannot guess why you are in pain. You should not be."

Kree's eyelids cracked open just a little. "That's good to know."

The speaker crouched at his side peering down at him, another amber-eyed Nhurstari with moonlight pale skin. Sunlight coming in from somewhere overhead touched off bronze highlights in the rich brown hair curling around his pointed ears. He wore a pale green tunic of raw silk over dark green leggings and soft butter-yellow leather boots.

When he rose, he was tall in the way Kree had come to expect of Nhurstari, but his lean body gave him an unfinished look betraying his youth. He bowed from the waist. "Rian, Majority Apparent."

His accent made it sound like *Ree-an*. Kree levered himself slowly to a sitting position and took the measure of the young lord. His gaze traveled around the space they occupied, a cellar of some sort, and found Fergus, Biggs and four other Nhurstari before coming back to rest on Rian. "You don't look all that apparent to me."

If he was offended, Rian gave no sign of it, only a slight lift of one shoulder, a curious bird-like tilt of his head. "You do not look like a legendary warrior either, though your men say

you are.”

The elf lad gave as good as he got. Kree snorted. He rubbed his temples with his finger tips. “That was a very long time ago. I haven’t done much lately, but I do take your point. We are neither of us at our best just now.” Gaining his feet, he extended his hand. “Kree Fawr, Captain at Qets Garrison.” After a long pause, Rian shook his hand.

Kree flashed a crooked grin at his Templemen. “I’m glad to see my mad gesture didn’t get the two of you killed.”

Biggs shrugged, nodding toward Rian. “Thank him for that, boss. Turns out he’s a right fine healer.”

“Blood talker.” Rian corrected.

What place is this? Kree thought.

“We are imprisoned in the wine cellar under my hunting lodge.”

A glance at Rian drew a smile from the elf, showing way too many pointed white teeth for Kree’s comfort. The sunlight steamed in narrow windows set near the ceiling.

What day is it?

“This is the morning of the second day since you were taken.” Rian gestured to the other Nhurstari. “These are my companions. The twins are my cousins come down with me to greet my betrothed, Eoin and Eamon.”

Kree made it *OH-in* and *AY-mun*. They nodded as one. Identical square-jawed young males clothed in russet tunics over brown leggings and brown boots. Their hair was cropped short falling in jagged uneven spikes over their foreheads. They were the first blond Nhurstari, he had seen. They were strikingly handsome fellows. Except for their dark amber eyes, they put him in mind of his first lieutenant.

"The big fellow there is my brother, Garen."

This elf was taller, broader, and while still young, more mature than the others. His hair was the same warm brown as Rian's, but longer, held off his brow by a silver circlet. He wore a short fur lined cape rakishly flipped over one shoulder. His tunic was a sort of deep scarlet.

"And the elder over there, is my mentor, Alrick."

The elf was gaunt, bent with age. *Elder? He must be older than dirt.*

Rian's eyes went wide. He barked a laugh. A moment passed and then another, he cocked his head again. "Who is Katie?"

Kree's mind flashed to Kayseri.

Another big toothy smile accompanied by another of those slight pauses. "What is Katie?"

"His lady love."

Biggs swatted Fergus on the back of his head.

"Well, she is." Fergus rubbed his head.

"That is for the boss to say, and for you to stay clear of."

"Rian," Alrick's voice was diminished like tarnished silver, but Kree could still make out rich undertones. "The human is not telepathic. You are making him uneasy answering questions he has not asked. Can you not scent death on him?"

The young lord turned back to Kree, a look of horror on his too perfect face. "I do apologize, Kree Fawr. I did not mean to intrude upon your privacy." Rian shot a helpless look at Alrick. "Are you certain? He is so loud. And he knows something about Sandahl."

"Rian, get out of his mind. Now!" Alrick crossed the room in a flash of speed Kree did not think possible in one so old and laid his hand flat against Kree's temple. "*Shelet,*"

Tingling magic traced along Kree's scalp. He pushed the elder away. "Don't touch me." He glared at the Nhurstari. "That goes for all of you."

Rian sat down on a wine cask cradling his head with his hands, rocking slowly back and forth, while Alrick made quick placating gestures. "Rian means no harm. The Majority Apparent is young and extraordinarily telepathic. I took the liberty of shielding you, since you do not seem to possess natural shields. I only meant to help."

"Yeah, well, the next one of you who *helps* me is going to be picking his pointy teeth up off the floor." Kree glared around. "You got that?"

"They are solid, boss."

One of the Nhurstari twins, Eoin or Eamon, Kree could not tell which, handed him a cup of wine. "We are not trying to anger you. Why would we? You killed a Nhurstari enchanter not long since. I smell his death on you. These others are fighters, and they have killed, but you... Your scent proclaims you are a predator, a mighty killer."

Rian jerked his head up. "A man cannot change his scent, Eamon." He sniffed the air like a hound. "He smells true enough to me. Have a seat, beloved cousin. All is well."

Kree drained the cup and set it on top of a nearby cask. This was going badly. He moistened his lips and addressed himself to Rian. "Eamon is right. Several days ago, I've lost track, I killed the Nhurstari who abducted Princess Sandahl."

Turning his attention to Eamon, Kree said, "Unless I'm the one doing the calling, I don't like being called a killer. I am a cavalryman, a soldier. I know Wilderkin don't like the way I smell, not even the ones who like me. I can ask your pardon, but as Prince Rian pointed out, I cannot change it."

"It is just Rian." The elf motioned for more wine for himself and for Kree. "Wilderkin? I don't know the term."

"It's the term we humans give to your race. It includes elves, pixies, and fairies, all your basic long-lived, pointy-eared types.

"You asked me what Katie is. She is a pixie-human hybrid with just a touch of elf thrown in on her father's side. She's what the folks who locked you down here are likely afraid will happen to your race if you go through with your alliance. Katie is...someone I failed to protect. Just like your little princess."

Rian took a sip of wine and gave a wistful smile. "I saw your Katie in your mind, a dark little beauty. Very dear to you."

Kree eased himself onto a wine cask. This was better. "I wish I knew if she's...unharm'd."

Rian tilted his head in that curious way of his again. His amber eyes sparkled with a look Kree knew too well. Mischief. "Can she hear you?"

A frown puckered Kree's brow. He remembered Kayseri and Eldren with their heads bent together. Talking without words and the unsettling way Rian answered questions he had not asked. He thought about all the times she had used pixie mischief to spy on him. "Absolutely not. If she could do that, I'd know about it by now. Besides, I can't."

"But I can." Rian grinned. "I can act as a conduit to anyone who has ever heard you. Does Sandahl?"

"I don't know."

Rian smiled. "You are, no offense, very loud, I do not see how she could fail to hear you if only in passing. Would you like to try?"

Kree's natural aversion to magic other than Goddess magic made him hesitate, but his desire

for news of Kayseri was overwhelming. "What would I have to do?"

"Open your mind to me. Show me a clear picture of Sandahl. I have never seen her."

That was easily done. Kree had years of military discipline to draw on. He concentrated on Sandahl. Only Sandahl.

An inner radiance lit Rian's face. His breath sucked in. "Oh. How pretty she is. I see you admire her."

"Yeah, I do. How's this work?"

"If Sandahl touched your mind, she left trace. I will find it and follow it to her. The method is sort of like hunting." Rian tilted his head, studying Kree's expression. "Be easy, Kree Fawr. Not all Nhurstari can do this. Alrick could, but I know of no other. I will speak aloud so you can hear. I will repeat her answers for you. However, I am not an enchanter. I cannot cast. I will need to touch your skin. Most Nhurstari talents pass through touch."

Kree offered his hand.

Rian expected to find a maze of trace in a mind so open. To his surprise, there was only himself, Alrick, an old trace of a mature elf, and a soft recent trace of a young elf resonating the image Kree held of Sandahl. He wound himself around it.

"Sandahl?"

No response.

"Sandahl."

"Who are you?"

Rian was delighted. His princess was strong and unafraid. "Rian."

"Prince Rian? How?"

"Just Rian. I'm following the trace you left behind when you touched Kree Fawr. He doesn't look happy about it. I'll remind him that without

your small transgression, I would not be able to ask his all-important question. How is his Katie?"

"She is well. We have been together since the captain went crazy on the lawn. We are worried about him. Kayseri's bond to him allowed us to know he was not dead. He suffered."

Rian blinked. *"Bond?"* He met Kree's tense, eager eyes. "Your Katie is well. They are together."

"Do not tell him what I send?"

"Why not?"

Another pause. *"Kayseri does not want him to know. It is a great mystery. That's why I touched him. Please, do not tell him."*

"Ask her where they are and under what sort of guard," Kree said.

Rian repeated the questions and answered. "At the moment they are with Hueil in the great hall. They are quartered in the south wing, in the upstairs corner bedchamber. They are not locked in, but they are guarded."

"Ask if Katie could mischief her way out and find Red Fist?"

Rian did so. "Her talent is known to the man, Colt. He watches her."

"Colt is here. Something is happening."

Silence.

"Sandahl?" Rian dropped Kree's hand. "She said the Colt person was there. She said something was happening. She broke our connection."

"Get her back."

The young lord shook his head, an economy of motion. "I cannot. She's gone."

Rian heaved a sigh and accepted the goblet of wine Alrick pressed into his hands. "Sandahl is strong and beautiful. Alrick, what do you think Hueil means to do?"

"I think Hueil means to raise our House to

Majority. Once that is done.” The elder shrugged eloquently. “There will be no reason for you to complete this abominable marriage. He will send the girl back to her people.”

Kree gave a loud snort. “You go ahead and think that, old man, if it gives you comfort. The truth is, Rian’s enemy is going to do one of two things. Kill Rian and the princess, or hold them captive indefinitely. I believe he will kill them. Blame their deaths on humans and call for war. It’s a call the Thallasi will answer.”

He rapped Rian’s knee with his hand. “If it were my coup, I’d have killed you already. Dead hostages are easier to handle. It’s a solid fact. This Hueil must have a compelling reason for not doing so.”

Rian stared at his mentor a long moment. “My father negotiated a good match for me, Alrick. Now since I’ve talked to the female and felt her promise, I want this match. She is well-worth the wait.”

He paced the floor thinking. His long fingered hands were folded into the small of his back. “My father still lives, Kree Fawr. The council has not confirmed my succession. If I am not allowed to press my claim, there will be other contenders. Hueil’s House is by no means guaranteed Majority. Beyond that, win or lose, he will want to ransom me.” He stopped his pacing. “This is how the Nhurstari play the game of Majority, else we would revert to the old days of endless blood feuds. But your perspective gives me a troubling new vision. What can we do?”

Kree stood, squinted at the windows tucked under the ceiling beams, and judged them too high and narrow for an escape route. Still, once he escaped, he might find a use for them.

“Tell me about this building. How many

exterior doors and windows are there? Can you draw a floor plan? What are the servants' routines?" He didn't wait for an answer as he took the stairs to the landing above two at a time. Once there, he ran his hand over the heavy oak door, then thumped it hard with his shoulder. From the other side of the door a muffled voice ordered him back downstairs.

Three Temple-trained warriors locked in a wine cellar with a single guard? Too easy. He bounded back downstairs and stopped Rian in mid-pace. "Tell me about this fellow, Hueil, and the people loyal to him. What magic, ah...talents does he have available to him? Are there more enchanters out there like the one I killed?"

Rian's eyebrows slanted down toward his nose.

"I can tell you everything but what good will it do?"

A crooked grin tugged at Kree's lips. "There's an old saying among my people, Rian. It goes like this: You can't hold a demon unless you chain him to the wall. This cellar cannot hold me."

"And if you were chained to the wall?" Rian laughed.

Kree grinned. "It would take a bit longer."

Was it Kayseri's imagination, or did the air actually turn cold when Colt swaggered confidently into the parlor? Thanks to Nhurstari healers, one would never know Kree had shattered the man's kneecap only two days past. She shivered as his hungry black gaze raked over her. She had chosen her gown's daring décolletage to tempt her captain into repenting his choice. In Arbala it had seemed a good idea, now she wished for something less revealing than the clinging cloth-of-gold. One hand came up to

cover her bosom. The devil winked at her as he made his way to their host. Hueil insisted they call him their host.

"My Lord Hueil, the men and I are ready to depart. I trust our service was everythin' you expected?"

"Everything and more."

"Then there's jus' the matter o' my payment."

Hueil shifted in his chair. "I understood my steward had seen to that."

Colt closed in on the Nhurstari lord, placed his hands on the arms of the elf's chair and leaned in. "You hired me to kidnap a child not to go up against a Goddess-sucking temple champion. I've lost several good men. It takes a heap o' time recruitin' and trainin' men. I demand compensation."

A look of pure astonishment, maybe even a dash of fear bloomed on Hueil's face. Under other circumstances, Kayseri would have laughed at the old elf's discomfort.

"You want more gold?"

"I want the champion's tart."

Kayseri noticed a number of Nhurstari guards slipping into the room. Hueil noticed them as well, his confidence returned tenfold.

"The female is the worst sort of mongrel. However, she is under the protection of a Thallasi princess. She is, therefore, not mine to give. You may take the templemen for ransom, and you may take the champion's life for those you have lost."

"No!" Kayseri jumped to her feet. Sandahl yanked frantically on her hand, she shook her off.

Colt smiled at her, cold as winter. "No?"

Kayseri chewed her lower lip, thinking fast. "If My Captain goes free, I will come with you. Him for me. Do we have a deal?"

“Such a devoted little tart. How *does* he inspire it, I wonder?” Colt reached Kayseri’s side in two strides. His fingers dug into her arms. His hard gaze traveled the length of her body. Icy panic shot through her, but the image of Kree strong, alive, free gave her the courage to lift her chin defiantly.

“Colt, I leave it to you,” Hueil said.

“Deal.” Colt hauled Kayseri toward the door, stopped, turned back to Hueil. “A last piece of advice free o’ charge.” Leaving Kayseri standing by the door, he crossed to elf and whispered something in his ear.

Chapter Seventeen

The morning wore toward afternoon, the cousins gathered around offering a few details Rian had overlooked. Biggs and Fergus listened intently. For the first time since their imprisonment, their noon meal did not arrive. Alrick, rebuffed by his prince, sat quietly in one corner nursing a mug of wine.

The Nhurstari surprised Kree. He liked the Majority Apparent. He liked the young lord's companions too. They were impatient with their captivity, eager to take action. They were fresh and alive, and as unlike the staid Thallasi as he was.

Kree had Rian rehearse every detail a second and even a third time as they all bent over the floor plan the young lord had drawn on the top of a wine cask. Suddenly, Garen cocked his head to the side in that odd bird-like way the Nhurstari had.

"They are coming." He propped his hip on the edge of the cask just as the door opened at the top of the stairs. The tail of his cloak covered the drawing.

Kree recognized the newcomer as the elf whose magic had felled him. There were several other elves with him, all of them armed, one of them carrying a coil of rope.

Rian stood, all his youthful awkwardness vanished. Kree stationed himself behind and slightly to the right of the Majority Apparent forming a stout bulwark behind the young male,

plainly declaring his allegiance. His Templemen moved into position on either side.

The older elf inclined his head to the younger. "Are you comfortable, Rian? Do you have all you need?"

"I am surrounded by the best Nhurstari vintages. I am making interesting new friends. There are hardly any rats. Aside from liberty, I lack nothing."

Hueil favored Rian with a razor thin smile. "I did not come to spar with you First Heir, though it is always amusing. I came for the large human." A slight nod directed Hueil's elves toward Kree. "You sir, will place your hands behind your back, kneel on the floor, and allow my guards to secure you. The other humans will stand away."

Rian blocked the guards' path. The look of puzzlement on the young lord's face amazed Kree. *Rian was what then? A hundred-year-old innocent.*

"Explain yourself, Hueil."

Two Nhurstari tied Kree's wrists and elbows, and dragged him to his feet.

"You are so noble, Rian. So trusting. It is your greatest fault." Hueil shook his head in mock wonder. "How could a babe such as yourself rule the Nhurstari for a day? Allow me to keep things simple. So simple even you can understand them. This human has been ransomed. I have seen him in action, as it were. I want no more violence from him."

Kree's head snapped toward Hueil. *Ransomed?* He could not imagine Duncan, who was as fierce as any trooper when the occasion demanded, paying ransom. Then again, it was a possibility, his first lieutenant possessed a far cooler head than most men of war, often

preferring words to swords. An accommodation might suit his purpose.

“How?” He demanded.

“Ah.” Hueil folded his hands before him. “It is quite romantic actually. The mongrel female sold herself to my man, Colt, in exchange for your freedom.”

His words hit Kree as a blow to the chest. His heart stuttered. Suddenly, there was not enough air in the room. There was not enough air in the world! His legs failed. On his knees, arms bound behind him, he threw back his head and howled.

Nhurstari guards hauled Kree to his feet, manhandled him toward the stairs. He broke away and lunged toward Biggs.

“Be ready.” Kree snarled at the startled Templeman.

The guards caught him again and pushed him up the stairs. They dragged him into the yard where the shadows were already lengthening toward evening. Two more guards armed with Nhurstari long bows fell in beside him. They led him deep into the forest. He wondered if they planned to set him free or execute him. Who had promised Kayseri his freedom? Had she made her bargain with Colt? If so, he didn’t give a copper lady for his chances. Whatever else Colt was, he was a professional killer.

He could not tell how long they marched. The moon had not risen and the forest canopy blocked out the stars. He lost all sense of time. Finally they reached a small clear patch. Night creatures crawled in the dense undergrowth around them. In the distance a wolf called mournfully to its pack. The Nhurstari guards seemed pleased with the spot.

Their leader pushed at Kree’s shoulder. “You sit.” His grasp of Elharan was poor.

Kree went first to his knees, then over onto his hip.

“Legs front.”

Two Nhurstari knelt on his thighs and another held a drawn bow pointed directly at his chest. Still another pulled Kree’s boots off and tied his ankles. When his legs were secure, their leader moved in and cut the rope binding his elbows, leaving his wrists bound. The elf scored Kree’s arms with shallow cuts meant to bleed freely, not to kill. He pitched the knife into the underbrush and stared down at Kree.

“Orders. No honor.”

Kree gave the elf a curt nod. He understood. He was a soldier, too. Leaving him for predators kept the letter of Kayseri’s bargain. If he freed himself and survived, fine. If not, fine.

The moment the elves disappeared into the trees, he closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and tried to relax the muscles in his arms and shoulders. What he was about to do would hurt like hell, there was no doubt about it.

To free himself, the moves the contortionist taught to him were not a sure thing. He’d managed the trick just once and once had been enough. He took another steadying breath, centering himself. Leveraging the pressure of the ropes against his own muscle, he dislocated his left shoulder, rolled onto his back, and rocked back and forth until he worked his hands under his hips. With a little more painful wriggling and rocking, he worked his legs through the circle of his arms.

Kree lay on the ground panting. A light sheen of sweat coated his skin. *Damnation. That hurt.* But his hands were in front where he wanted them. He sat up and set to gnawing on the knots. His left arm was throbbing and useless. He

wished he could pop it back in place as easily as the contortionist had done in the demonstration. Unfortunately, he was not double-jointed.

A bird call sounded in the darkness off to his left, a sea bird's cry out of place in the mountains. *Duncan*. Kree left off chewing the knots and answered the call. It wasn't long until he heard horses approaching through the trees, and moments later, Aimery Duncan led Red Fist into the tiny clearing.

His first lieutenant knelt at his shoulder and cut the ropes. He cleaned the shallow cuts on Kree's arms, and with a quick economy of motion popped Kree's shoulder into place.

"Davith, bring the Captain's horse and his clean uniform, please." Duncan glanced at Kree's stocking feet. Clearly, perturbed by his failure to plan for a footwear contingency, a line appeared between his brows. "Patrick!" A very large cadet rode forward. "Lend the Captain your boots, please."

"But I only have—" The cadet's protest died under the force of Duncan's glare. The first lieutenant's vivid blue eyes were practically shooting off sparks. "You're a hard man, sir." The cadet hopped off his horse and shucked his only pair of boots.

Once Kree was dressed and mounted to Duncan's satisfaction, the young officer swung up into his saddle and snapped off a sharp two-fingered salute. "Captain Fawr, Red Fist is at your service."

"The Fist is light." Kree observed as they rode toward Duncan's base camp.

"Yes, sir. I have been watching the lodge for the better part of two days looking for a weakness that would give me access to you. When the mercenaries withdrew today, they took with them

someone whose whereabouts I judged you would wish to know. I assigned two men to tail them.”

“Did you find one?” They reached base camp and dismounted. Kree handed Storm off to his senior cadet, taking the time to tousle young Davith’s hair by way of a hello.

“Sir?”

“A weakness? Did you find one?”

The First Lieutenant pulled a face, clearly dissatisfied with his efforts. “Nothing I was comfortable with using. I do not know anything about these people.”

“Cheer me up, Shug.”

Duncan shrugged. “The mercenaries have withdrawn. We are above average fighters. We have food if you are hungry. I am afraid I cannot think of anything else you might find cheerful, sir.”

“Above average, you say?” Kree chuckled. “We are lions, Duncan. *Lions*. Don’t ever forget it. We have any ale to go with that food?”

Red Fist kept a cold camp. No cook fires. No lanterns. The two men made their way to the supply wagon for dried meat, bread, cheese, and the lifeblood of all armies, ale. Kree settled on a campstool and propped his feet on another one. The borrowed boots pinched.

Duncan sat opposite him. “How soon do you want to strike, sir?”

Kree wiped foam off his upper lip with the back of his hand. “Soon. Tonight. And I’ve told you before, Duncan, you don’t have to *sir* me. No one else does. Unless they’ve managed to seriously brass me off.”

“Yes sir.” Duncan waited until Kree put the mug to his lips. “I am aware how difficult it is to brass you off.”

The captain snorted laughter. His feet came

off up of the stool, he turned his head quickly and spewed ale on the ground. "Point taken." He set the mug on the ground beside his stool.

"Thank you, sir."

"What did you bring me?"

"Lady Bird did not describe your situation to my satisfaction, sir. I brought the whole pantry."

Kree leaned forward, took his reserved young officer's face between his hands, and kissed him soundly on the mouth. "I love you, Shug! I swear it on Namar's eyes!"

"Thank you, sir." The First Lieutenant raked his hand across his mouth. "I think."

His first lieutenant's diffident response to his unexpected burst of affection amused him. First Lieutenant Duncan was, in his opinion, too controlled and too controlling for so young a man.

"Get the Fist to the council tent." Kree winced as he pushed to his feet. The damn boots were tight. "We've got a raid to plan."

The captain meticulously reproduced the lodge's floor plan from memory. He described Rian and his people in such minute detail that each member of the Fist could recognize them on sight. The plan Kree proposed included dropping weapons to the captives. Red Fist's strength was in shock and speed. They hit fast, relying on surprise and confusion, as much as skill. It would not do to kill Nhurstari's young Majority Apparent by mistake. During the planning, one of the men assigned to trail the mercenaries reported in. The man was eager to join the action, but Duncan refused citing the trooper's obvious fatigue.

Just after midnight, the Red Fist, armored in blackened chain mail to protect them from the touch of Nhurstari Talent, paused inside the tree line overlooking the lodge. Each of the six assault

members carried two crossbows, adapted for two bolts each. Once the bolts were fired, they would fall back to lances, eight footers, and then to their sabers. Two stationary bowmen were perched in the trees. Their job was to place fire-arrows as Duncan directed and provide general cover. Although Rian had assured Kree that the Nhurstari talent would not transfer to animals, Kree insisted on horse armor. Horses were sentient to anyone who spent as much time with them as cavalrymen did.

Duncan reined in at Kree's shoulder. He was not surprised to see him. The man planned things to death. Maps were wonderful things, but his first lieutenant liked to say, you never really saw the field until you saw the field. Kree pointed out the creek running alongside the lodge.

"What do you think, Shug, what if we post cadet slingers along that ridge and salt the creek with Natris non-stop?" Duncan nodded and spoke briefly to his senior cadet. The youth ran to put the order into action.

Studying the building through a field glass, Kree marked smoke curling from the side chimneys warming the bedchambers. According to Rian, the south wing quartered the women, the north, Hueil and his followers.

"Can we get a black-powder charge down the north chimney?"

Duncan squinted into the darkness. "Maybe."

"Yes or no, Shug."

Raising his own glass, Duncan studied the building a long moment, rode down the line to the bowmen, conferred briefly, nodded and returned to the captain's side.

"Yes, sir. We can."

"On my signal."

"Yes, sir."

“It’s almost moon set. Be careful.”

The horses and the men were high, itching for action. Pitching his practiced voice to a carry, Duncan called to the assembled troopers. “Dress the line.” The men brought their mounts under control. “Red Fist, Captain Fawr bids us be careful.”

Red Fist responded as one. “First chance we get.”

Ritual observed. Kree nodded. “Step them off, First Lieutenant.”

Chapter Eighteen

Playing solitaire with Nhurstari cards was difficult, but it was possible. Biggs had been at it since supper. He assessed his companions. Rian possessed the eerie talent of sitting perfectly still for hours on end. Biggs had not seen the elf so much as blink. It made a fellow jittery.

He could not help but notice the fine tremble in his hands as he laid the cards one atop another. Maybe it was a lack of Goddess nectar making him jittery and not Rian's utter stillness. Biggs knew he was luckier than most. He needed the nectar every couple of days. Goddess-born like the Boss needed it every day. Be ready, the boss said. Biggs could not remember seeing Kree take nectar once. Maybe it was true what people said about him. He wondered how the boss fared.

Over in the far corner, Fergus was teaching rock, paper, and scissors to one of the twins. Eoin maybe. The elf had won the last five bouts. *The poor foolish lad, nobody loses five times in a row, even if he takes paper every time. The elf was probably reading his mind.*

Alrick and Garen deliberated over a board game, the strategy of which was blocking your opponent's progress by placing little round stones on a grid. Eamon watched the play, volunteering advice, first to the one then the other. *Maybe that one's Eoin.* The first explosions nearly made Biggs jump out of his skin.

Rian moved, lifting his eyes toward the cellar's high window a mere second before it burst

inward. A cloth wrapped package dropped through the window. *Be ready.* Biggs was on the bundle before it hit the floor, passing out the enclosed weapons—swords for the Nhurstari and Fergus, an axe for himself. Biggs attacked the cellar door. More explosions rocked the night, the sounds of running feet and of people screaming drifted through the broken window.

Natris was a wonderful thing, a volatile solid. It required special handling, but then, Kree had someone *special*. He'd fallen in love with this stuff the first time Duncan demonstrated it. The soft metal exploded in water in a spectacular fiery show. It produced heavy clouds of steam like thick rolling fog. Superior in Kree's mind to black powder, because it did not make him cough or sting his eyes. Duncan disagreed, preferring, as he always did, things he could control.

Red Fist struck fast, less than a quarter hour from step-off until the site was secure. Any longer, and Duncan would abort. The unit was the First Lieutenant's passion, his invention. He handpicked and trained its personnel. The raid would be fast and flawless in execution. All of this Kree knew, and it still seemed to him they charged in slow motion.

Duncan's booming voice shouted, "Get on the ground, stay down, and live," over and over and over as a mantra. Nhurstari ran in all directions, only to be caught in the squad's scissor formation. The order to 'get on the ground' echoed around Kree from the rest of the squad members. Leaving enemies on his backside ran contrary to Kree's Goddess-born training. Namar was not merciful to her enemies. She did not teach mercy to her sons. He saved his voice and pushed forward. By the time the black powder charge

exploded in the upstairs bedchamber, His crossbow bolts and lances were long gone and his saber was slick with Nhurstari blood.

He urged his horse up the wide stone steps fronting the lodge. Guarding his flank, Duncan followed tight at his back. The man took holding formation seriously even if Kree did not. Clouds of stinging acrid smoke billowed down the stairs. Battle music, steel clashing on steel, came from the rear of the building. His Templemen were free. Kree started laughing.

The lodge boiled in chaos. Hueil leaned out of the casement huffing. *Stars of heaven!* The creek was ablaze. Flaming geysers shot into the air every few seconds. There were humans—armored humans on the lawn shouting, shooting any Nhurstari coming within arms' distance. Deprived of touch, their Talents were useless. Hueil stumbled to the top of the stairs, paused, squinted through the smoke. Humans on horseback were in the great hall. Pushed on by smoke, Hueil stumbled down the stairs.

Rebel Nhurstari poured down the smoke-filled stairwell. Duncan shouted 'get down, stay down' nonstop. Kree killed any who did not comply. Hueil burst out of the stairwell almost onto his blade, at the same time Rian raced from the alcove underneath the stairs.

"Kree Fawr! Do not kill him!"

Kree's saber point rested beneath Hueil's ear. "Live snakes raise new rebellions, Rian. I don't mind ridding your realm of snakes."

Rian glanced at the carnage in his great hall. "I can see you don't. But killing is not the Nhurstari way. I will ask for hostages as a part of his ransom. All will be well."

Kree wiped the bloodied steel on his saddlecloth and glanced at the Templemen panting at Rian's shoulder. "Biggs, you and Fergus help Rian put this place in order. We'll leave our cadets here to help out."

"Garen and twins will see to the clean up." Rian looked up at Kree. "I am coming with you."

"Don't take this the wrong way, Rian. I appreciate the offer. I really do. I just don't want the responsibility."

"I can help, if your lady is injured."

Kree considered this. "Duncan, take him up behind you. You're responsible for him. Call the Fist to formation."

Colt's rough fingers scraped along the back of her neck. Kayseri shuddered. Pressed as she was between the pommel of his saddle and his body, she felt him chuckle. His body was hard where his crotch pressed against her backside. She felt a scream crawling up the back of her throat and swallowed it. Terror fired this evil man's lust. She would not give in to it.

With a subtle twitch of her fingers, Kayseri sent his troop's packhorses crashing willy-nilly into the murky forest for a third time. Simple pixie mischief. Colt cursed in her ear.

"You are bringin' me hell's luck, tart." A stinking steam of tobacco arced past Kayseri's cheek. "You had better be worth it."

She licked her swollen lower lip. Backtalk fired his fists.

Red Fist wormed its way through trees that seemed to stretch out roots with the intention of entangling the horses' hoofs. They had been paralleling Colt's trail for more than three hours. Duncan would not step up the pace. He saw no

reason for haste, even under the threat of severe injury.

Kree swore to pound his man senseless, again and again, but Duncan remained unmoved. In the first lieutenant's place, he would do the same. Protect the horses. The fact brought him cold comfort. He fretted at the snails-pace.

Fear for Kayseri's safety crouched like an ice dragon on his chest. Battle madness licked the inside his skull. A near crushing desire for Goddess nectar raked fiery claws across his stomach from the inside out. He wanted to run wild. Fishing the vial of Goddess nectar from his belt, he worried it between his thumb and forefinger. Something in the formula made the metal vial warm to the touch. Just the feel of the vial soothed him, a little. He felt the weight of Duncan's gaze.

"Don't piss about, Shug. If you have something to say, spit it out."

"You don't need to resort to that, sir. We have been in worse jams."

"Do you think so?" Kree barked a laugh. "Clearly you don't appreciate the magnitude of the jam in which I find myself. I cannot control my emotions. Believe me, I've tried. I *want*. I don't know how to stop wanting. Do you know what it's like to want something every minute of the day knowing you cannot have what you want?"

Something in Duncan's expression said he understood Kree didn't mean the Goddess nectar. "Sir, you are a powerful man, a man of rank and distinction. No one will refuse you anything. Who are you answering to?"

"You're saying I can take what I want, because I can." *I've been down that road*. "Answer me this, does that kind power make me right or make it mandatory for me to do what's right?"

Aimery Duncan stared at him, trying to gage his mood in the moonless gloom. There was a heavy pause. "I- I do not have the answer to your question, sir."

Kree gave a bitter chuckle. "I don't either, Shug. Until I figure it out, I think I should lean a little on the side of doing what's right." He glanced at Rian perched behind Duncan clutching the First Lieutenant's waist for dear life. "You're a leader of men—uh, elves. What do you think?"

"I think you do not understand the nature of the Nhurstari Majority, and I do not understand the nature of men."

Another small victory, Kayseri smiled. It had taken Colt's men more than an hour to round up their packhorses. Full night caught them still on the mountain, forcing them to make camp. What would she do now? She needed to keep them on the mountain or escape tonight while there were still forested slopes offering places for a pixie to hide.

The mercenaries sprawled around the cook fire passing around bottles of Nhurstari wine. They battered her with insults and crude jokes as she stirred the simmering stew. Colt had not raped her. There had not been time, what with rounding up packhorses. But she knew what to expect as soon as he sucked enough cruelty and libido out of the wine. It should not take long. Colt had cruelty to spare. He craved her pain, hungered for her terror. A shudder rocked her in spite of her resolve to be as fearless as her captain. She steadied herself with deep breathing as she had seen Kree do before a fight. She was not helpless, not quite yet. She had mischief in her fingertips and it was going right into the stew.

Chew on this, tough guys.

A gull's cry cut through the night. Duncan reined his horse, gave an answering call. Five minutes later the scout joined them. The trooper gave a crisp two-fingered salute to the First Lieutenant and then to Kree.

"My Captain. Well met."

The captain returned the gesture with only the smallest trace of impatience. Red Fist was Duncan's squad. Duncan wanted—No, demanded military protocol from subordinates. Kree was indifferent to it.

"Stephan," Kree acknowledging the man with a slight nod. "What do we know?"

"They've made camp a little more than a furlong down slope. You should lose the horse armor if you're counting on surprise because you are clinking and clanking worse than an army of tinkers."

Dropping out of his saddle, Kree began stripping his horse. "How's Katie holding up?"

"That little lady has spunk. I'll give her that. She's been dealing mischief all day long. She's pulled out every pixie trick my mama ever warned me about. If she had not run off their packhorses three times, it's likely we would have lost them. Now, I think she's curdled their rations. They are all sort of groaning and holding their stomachs. Looks to me like that bunch don't know much about pixies."

Stephan grinned. "You'd be right proud of her, My Captain. I know troopers who ain't got half as much brains or courage." Low-pitched chuckles filled Red Fist's close-packed ranks. Even his normally reserved first lieutenant smiled. Kree brushed at his eyes with the back of his hand, glad of the darkness.

"You bitch! You've poisoned me!"

Kayseri darted away, but Colt's fist was lightning quick. The blow made her ears ring. She fell hard, and rolled into a tight ball.

Colt grabbed a fist full of her hair, pulling her to her feet. "You don't think it's going to save you, do you, tart?" He staggered backward a step, tore open his trousers. "I'll have you first, then I'll strip you naked and watch my men have at you."

Putting action to his threat, Colt twisted his fist in her bodice and ripped it to the waist. He pulled her close, assaulting her mouth with a hard brutal kiss. His teeth cut into her lower lip. Blood filled her mouth. His breath smelled of vomit, and Kayseri fought down bile.

A commotion outside the tent saved her from another stinging blow. Shouting! Horses! Ringing steel intermixed with the sound of raspy laughter and the thrum of crossbows. Kayseri's heart soared. *Kree!* And not a minute too soon. She was fresh out of mischief.

Colt tightened his fist in Kayseri's hair and dragged her to the tent flap. A single glance told them the battle was not going his way. Some of his men fought, but the stomach gripe had weakened them. Most were all ready on the ground.

"You must really be a tasty little tart. Too bad I won't be gettin' a taste." Pressing his dagger to Kayseri's throat, Colt stumbled out of the tent.

Kayseri held her tattered gown tight over her breasts. Her first thought was not one of relief. Her first thought upon seeing Kree was how wrong she had been. The purple rage and searing white-hot fury she'd felt back in the temple had nothing to do with battle rage. This was battle rage. Kree was a void, a terrible dangerous

emptiness. No colorful aura surrounded him. There was no trace of emotion in his eyes. Cold, certain death stared out of their jade green depths.

His bravado was firmly in place. Colt did not seem to notice. "You've got me, Hero, and I've got your little tart." He yanked Kayseri's head back. The knife caught the sun's first soft rays of daylight. "My question is, how bad do you want her?"

Kree set his crossbow to his shoulder, tilted his head very slowly to the right, sighting down the length of the bolt.

"Take it easy there, Hero. Let's talk about this a minute. Maybe you're that good a shot. Maybe you're not. I'm guessin' not. Do you really want to risk her?"

Kree closed one eye.

Kayseri felt Colt's tremor of disappointment. He had hoped to distract Kree with dialogue, now the man realized death had come for him. Death did not dialogue. Colt put just enough pressure on the knife to break the skin. Blood bloomed below her ear.

Kree's crossbow thrummed. Kayseri felt a brief stab of searing pain, her world filled with blood, and she fell, dragged down by Colt's weight. She felt strong arms lift her, and someone touched her neck, someone so filled with magic his touch seared her skin. Heat coursed through her veins. Kree shouted, his voice ragged and broken. She could not make out his words. Then she knew nothing more.

Chapter Nineteen

Kree sat on the floor outside Rian's bedchamber, knees pulled up to his chest, arms hanging loose over his knees. A swarm of Nhurstari women swept Katie and Rian away as soon as they returned to the lodge.

Day's ago. *Hours*. It was only hours. They told him he could not stay with Kayseri. They would not have said that if they knew how close he was to madness.

The door opened, a pale hollow-eyed Rian appeared. "I've called blood to replace what she lost. The healers have repaired the damage, but your lady needs rest, Kree Fawr. She has been through an ordeal."

"Did she ask for me?" Rian's gaze slid to the right.

"I'm going in."

"Your body needs rest too. Do all humans push themselves as you do?" Rian smiled. "You will see her tonight at the banding ceremony. The healers say she will be quite recovered by nightfall. I would be honored if you walked with my companions."

Rian squatted beside Kree mimicking his posture exactly. "You cannot sit in the hall any longer, my friend. My ladies will not have it." He leaned conspiratorially close. "You scare them. They say you hulk outside the door like a gargoyle. Elves do not love gargoyles."

"Here is the way it is, Rian. I see Katie, or I run wild. You're in charge. Decide right now."

Rian tilted his head very slightly, his amber eyes wide and amused. "You have a flair for drama."

Yeah. I do.

Pushing to his feet, Rian offered the captain his hand. "Perhaps a short visit would do both of you a spot of good. A very short visit."

The Nhurstari ladies scattered like frightened sheep before a hungry wolf when Kree entered the chamber. Only one old woman had the courage to remain at Kayseri's bedside, perhaps because Rian was at Kree's shoulder. He gazed at Kayseri, small and pale in the grand bed belonging to Rian. His big blunt fingers caressed her cheek. She took a deep shuttering breath and smiled in her sleep.

The old woman said something in Nhurstari, and Kree's questioning gaze moved to Rian.

"She says," Rian nodded at Kayseri. "The little one draws strength from your touch. She says I was wise to bring you in here."

It was about time someone around here showed some sense. Kree bent down, pressed a kiss to Kayseri's forehead. "Sleep well, sweetheart. I'll see you later."

"Come, Kree Fawr." Rian tugged his sleeve. "Let me show you to a room where you can bath and rest. Oh! We've found your belongings. My people will clean them before tonight's celebration."

Kree and Rian had not gone far before they saw Duncan striding down the wide hallway with the captain's hired Templemen hard on his heels.

"Captain, sir," Duncan hailed. "May I speak with you a moment?"

"I live to serve."

"These gentlemen tell me that the mercenary captain seemed to have something against you,

personally. Did you sense anything ?”

“I did, but I’m sure I have never met the man before.”

“Sir, I need you to examine his body, please.”

Please. Not a request, an order. Duncan was giving him orders. It was a day for wonders. “Why?”

“He bears a rectangular mark, sir, beside his right ear. Could he be Goddess-born?”

Kree frowned “I’ll come. Give me a minute. Rian—”

“Go on, Kree Fawr. When you’ve finished your business, ask anyone to show you to your room.”

Nhurstari lords did not keep horses, so there was no stable. Kree could not imagine how they traveled. Red Fist had laid the dead beneath the trees out of sight of the lodge. Duncan led him down the line to the mercenary captain’s body. Squatting down, he turned the dead man’s head to the right.

“Well?”

“It is not a Goddess mark.”

“But you do recognize it, sir. I see it in your expression.”

The captain pushed to his feet, dusting his hands together. “I think I may have seen this mark before, a long time ago. I’m not positive. Have Davith fetch my drawing tools.” Duncan turned and shouted orders to a nearby cadet. “Where are the rest of his men?”

Disgust darkened the First Lieutenant’s perfect features. He shifted his stance, glanced away. “Following standard procedure, Chana took their parole. We returned their weapons and released them. Afterward, when your Templemen came to me, I suspected this man was more than he seemed. I am sorry, sir.”

Kree pressed the heels of his hands against

his eyes. Fatigue swept him. "You did the right thing, Shug. Don't beat yourself up. Get a burial detail on this right away. Tonight's *banding* ceremony marks the promise of an important alliance between Nhurstari and Thallasi. Princess Sandahl and the Majority Apparent have both suffered through a great deal to bring it to pass." He toed the mercenary's body with his boot. "If it all shakes out the way I think it's going to, it might be an important alliance for us too. We don't want the smell of decomposition marring the occasion."

His senior cadet arrived with his drawing kit. "Thank you, Davi." Flipping open the sketchpad, he painstakingly drew the design. It was well into afternoon before he found his bed.

Kree's recovered possessions, his gryphon knives, his saber and bastard sword, three Temple knives, and, blessed the Goddess, his custom made boots, polished to a mirror finish, awaited him when he woke. His uniform was cleaned and laid out for his use. The dragon's eye blue coat shocked the eye with its brilliance. He dressed quickly and hurried downstairs, following the lilting sound of feminine voices, hoping to find Kayseri. There was much he needed to say to her, starting with, *I love you*.

Some magic of Rian's willpower, or an army of servants, had transformed the great hall from a battlefield into a ballroom. Nhurstari continued to arrive for Rian and Sandahl's *banding* throughout the afternoon. Preparations moved forward. Colorful tents had sprouted up under the tall trees like mushrooms. The lodge swarmed with a host of new servants, cooks, waiters, and musicians. A string quartet had assembled on the landing overlooking a room where mere hours before Hueil had witnessed the end of his

rebellion. Kree skirted around them, bounding down the stairs two at a time.

The hall was crowded with guests. Snippets of conversation drifted to him as he passed among them in search of Kayseri. It seemed Rian's Nhurstari guests had never seen a Thallasi before. Most were curious, eager for a glimpse of their new princess. They regarded the humans huddled together near the door as an exotic treat. *Damnation*. Kree did not see Kayseri anywhere among these shining folk.

"Kree Fawr!"

He veered off his course and joined the party hailing him.

"You look beautiful!" The young elf lord declared.

Kree gave a small bow, unsure of propriety in this company. "Scrubbed, polished, and smelling better, eh..." He paused, eyes narrowing. "Eoin." The elf's glow of pleasure told him he had gotten it right.

"It was very wrong of me to say that. How did you recognize me?"

Kree winked, flashing Eoin his cocky off-kilter grin. He held up his hand with his thumb and forefinger pressed so close together a hair could not have fit between them. "You're taller. As to the other, I'm not easy to offend. Forget it. Where did all these elves come from?"

"Oh, all over. This is the most exciting thing to happen since..." Eoin lifted one shoulder in what passed among the Nhurstari for a shrug. "I'm not old enough to know since when."

"Rian asked me to *walk* with his companions. What do companions do? Exactly."

"Not much. Our legends say our *banding* rite comes from a time when magic drove our males wild. A female, seeking a mate, worked an

enchantment. In the sun's dying rays, she summoned her chosen to her side trapping him with a mighty casting. An ancient, I guess she is sort of like a priestess to you, performed the *banding* rite. The male was well and truly caught. The thing is, under the female's compulsion, a male is helpless to resist. It falls on his companions to insure his safety. Otherwise, he might be slain and replaced by some other male who has seen the female wants her for himself."

Kree was amazed. "Really?"

Eoin blinked bright innocent amber eyes. "I have no idea. It's a legend. Anyway, Sandahl will summon Rian. The guests will light their lamps and go out onto the lawn. They will try to hinder him, but we, his companions, will clear his way."

The captain nodded gravely.

"It's all symbolic, Kree Fawr. The only enchantment is sealing the *bands*. The ancient still does that."

"Don't worry." Kree laughed. "I won't hurt anyone."

Eamon and Garen drifted over to join them.

"Who is the man over there by the door, Kree Fawr?" Eamon asked. "The one with the amazing blue eyes."

The captain looked in the direction that Eamon pointed. "Aimery Duncan, my first lieutenant."

Eamon gave a one-shouldered shrug. "He is—"

"Genetically blessed," Kree offered.

"Well, yes. The maker favored him. But I was going to say, he looks uncomfortable."

"He's shy of Wilderkin."

"He won't be after tonight."

Kree saw the twins exchange a portentous glance and shook his head. "Don't hurt him."

The twins laughed.

"Look," Eoin said, "here's Rian."

Nhurstari's Majority Apparent glided toward them draped in his House colors, a long carmine robe heavily embroidered with gold leaves. It covered him from neck to toe. A crown of braided leaves held his wavy hair off his brow. Grinning a wide toothy grin, Rian flashed the robe open revealing nothing underneath it but a rough leather loincloth and crudely made boots.

"Kree Fawr." Rian nodded a greeting. "You clean up well." His smile took in his little group of companions.

"Why is everyone so surprised?" Kree clapped Rian on the shoulder. "You look nervous."

"It's funny. I am as excited as if this were my true wedding night. You cannot imagine what a momentous day this is for my people."

A ram's horn sounded. The guests trimmed small lamps and moved toward the open doorways. Duncan and the Red Fist shied over to their captain. Rian caught his lower lip between his teeth. The horn trumpeted again.

"This is it." Rian strode out onto the wide stone step, trailed by his chosen companions and Red Fist.

The sight greeting them stole Kree's breath. The lamps twinkled like stars. Dying sunlight limned three figures standing on a platform at the edge of the lawn. Sandahl, wearing a tight fitting cloth-of-gold gown topped with a flowing duster of carmine lace inset with rubies, stood beside a shriveled ancient elf. She held a thin length of silver chain in her hands.

Kayseri stood on Sandahl's right, dressed in a form-hugging carmine satin shift, overlaid with flowing gold lace simmering with yellow gems. Her raven curls, piled high on her head, were

threaded with the same yellow gems. Inky curls spilled down her back in a splendor of sheen and sparkle. Kree's breath rushed out as if someone had punched him in the stomach.

Chana poked his shoulder. "Close your mouth, My Captain. I don't care what you've heard. Women don't really go for that slack-jawed vacant look."

At the third blast from the ram's horn, Sandahl stretched out her hands, the sun's rays glinted on the chain. In a strong melodious voice, she called out, "Nhurstari Rian, First among the Houses, I, Sandahl Sara el Thallasi, summon you."

With shaking fingers, Rian removed his robe and handed it off to Garen.

"Nhurstari Rian, First among the Houses, I, Sandahl Sara el Thallasi, compel you. Surrender to me."

The moment Rian stepped off the porch, a guest blocked his path. Eamon touched the elf's shoulder, but as he moved aside, another took his place giving Rian hard a push. He stumbled, but Garen steadied him with a hand under his arm. A female elf blocked Rian's path. Laughing, Eoin pulled her aside.

Kree judged the next challenger as his duty. It went on, the mock challenges, until Rian knelt before Sandahl, and the sun dropped below the mountains.

Sandahl looped the silver chain around Rian's neck and handed the ends of it to the ancient. The ancient pulled gently on the chain until the young lord lifted his face to hers.

"Rian, speak your House gift?" The old woman's voice was smooth, cool as silk. Kree was surprised by such a voice in an old crone.

"Healing."

"What is your talent?"

"I am a blood talker."

"What do you offer?"

"Hope." Rian raised his right hand.

The ancient turned to Sandahl, looping the other end of chain around the princess's neck.

"Sandahl, speak your House gift."

"The Thallasi nation," Sandahl answered without hesitation.

"What is your talent?"

"Diplomacy."

"What do you offer?"

"Hope." Sandahl pressed her palm firmly against Rian's.

With a whispered word of power, the ancient touched the point where the chain looped across itself, one point with each hand. Kree felt the hairs on his arms stir. His skin tingled as it always did in the presence of magic. The ends of the chain melted, leaving only thin silver bands without beginning or end. The ceremony complete, Garen draped Rian's robe around his brother's shoulders.

Holding tight to Sandahl's hand, the young Nhurstari lord led his Thallasi child bride back to the lodge. The guest held their lamps high, lighting their passage while they cheered the young royals. Kree hoped to have a word with Kayseri now that the ceremony was complete, at the very least, a chance to tell her how beautiful she looked. But she took Garen's proffered arm, and the tall Nhurstari escorted her inside.

His first instinct was to rush after her, but his participation in the *banding* ceremony had made him approachable. Like Pixies, the Nhurstari were a naturally curious people. There were new friends to make here, and his duty to his patroness in Elhar demanded he make them.

In a manner reminiscent of the ceremonial hindering, Nhurstari after Nhurstari turned Kree aside for a bit of conversation.

By the time he reached the hall, Rian and Sandahl were nowhere to be seen. But he spotted Kayseri standing near a raised platform, set up for the Majority Apparent and his new queen, deep in conversation with Garen. She tossed her head, laughing at something the elf said. *Trust her to target the biggest one of the bunch.*

She looked gorgeous and happy in the shining throng. The tall Nhurstari swain attended her every word, and he somehow seemed to smile at her with his whole body. Even at a distance, Kree could see clearly that poor Garen had lost his heart. Did Kayseri feel the same, he wondered?

Garen could give her a long life filled with all the love and enchantment she deserved. He could share her bond, and most of all, Garen could give her children, while he could not. He'd just made up his mind to do the right thing, slip out unnoticed, when Kayseri turned her head, and looked straight at him. Their gazes locked, and her face lit up. The radiance of her smile was so bright, it was a wonder Garen didn't see his shadow.

To hell with the right thing. Kree changed direction.

Mounting the platform, Garen addressed the assemblage. "My lords and ladies, Captain Kree Fawr, honored troopers. It is my great pleasure to present Rian, *Majority* Apparent." Stress on the word, majority, brought wild applause from the guests. "And his bride, Sandahl of Thallasi, Nhurstari Regina."

A flushed Rian waved to the guests and hugged his brother. His youth was never more

evident to Kree's eye. The young lord had changed into a cloth-of-gold shirt, topped by a hip length leather vest dyed carmine tooled in a gold leaf pattern, and gold leggings. Soft carmine boots turned down at the knee completed his outfit. The colors echoed those in Sandahl's gown. A circlet of leaves, this one fashioned of beaten gold, held his hair off his brow. Sandahl stood beside him in her wedding finery, cool and regal, accepting the Nhurstari accolades as her due. Again, Kree marked the difference between the two elfin races, one free and natural, and the other staid and proper. Bringing their people together would not be an easy task. No, indeed. There was a world of hard work ahead for Rian and Sandahl. He wished them well.

Sandahl Regina! The Nhurstari shouted it again and again, while Kree worked his way toward the platform's base and toward Kayseri. He reached her as the quartet struck the first chord. Music swelled.

Rian led Sandahl onto the dance floor stepping through a smooth dance resembling a waltz. The dance floor filled with couples. Time and again, Kree tried to claim Kayseri's hand, but someone always beat him to her. All too often, the someone was Garen. At one of the hesitations, Rian passed his bride to Kree and swept Kayseri away.

"You'd better let me dance with My Captain." Kayseri smiled up into Rian's laughing amber eyes. "I'm afraid this game of cat and mouse is eroding his temper. Believe me, you *don't* want to see that."

She nodded to where Kree stood against the wall surrounded by his troopers. "Look at him. Any minute now he'll be chewing the legs off the Red Fist."

The young elf laughed, delighted. "Why would he?"

"Because he isn't foolish enough to chew on you."

They swept past the spot along the wall that Red Fist had claimed as its own and overheard the captain grumbling. "Bird, dance with your wife. Duncan, why are you standing around like a dunce? Dance with some of these beautiful elves. They are swooning for you, man. Don't you have eyes?"

"Well, milady." Rian laughed again. "This is a celebration. We can't have violence breaking out, can we?" A little skillful maneuvering left the couple in front of Kree when the music ended. Placing Kayseri's hand in Kree's, Rian bowed and turned to find another partner.

The next set began. Kree took Kayseri in his arms, but he could not think of a single thing to say. Inexplicably, he felt shy.

"I was beginning to think you weren't going to dance with me," Kayseri teased.

He huffed. "I was beginning to suspect a conspiracy."

Kayseri stifled a giggle. "What kind of conspiracy?"

He made a weighing motion with his head while his gaze drifted to the right. "Nhurstari, without a doubt. I know I'm not the first to say this, but you make that gown look amazing. You've grown into a beautiful woman, Katie. No, tonight, I think you look very much like a Kayseri."

"And you, with your blessing-braids and shiny boots, look every inch like the Captain Fawr I used to know."

"You may call me Kree."

His aura churned like molten silver. The

crooked smile she loved so well touched his lips. Her heart did flip-flops. "Thank you. I believe I will."

Kree seemed to have run out of conversation. His face wore such an expression of woe, Kayseri hardly knew what to make of it.

"I didn't mean for this to happen."

With a toss of her hair and aiming a coquettish look from under thick lashes, she pulled a little pout. "Here I thought you were foaming at the mouth to dance with me."

He smiled again, his charming crooked smile, fleeting, there and gone. She cast about for something else to say. "I didn't know you played the piano."

For a moment, he looked at her as if she had spoken a foreign language. He blinked. "Also violin and flute. Music disciplines the mind and makes for clever fingers. Both are useful to a soldier."

"Oh." She had hoped for a different story or at least a longer one. They glided across the floor, floating together on the music. She tried again. "And you dance and sing. You are a marvel, Kree."

He shook his head. "I don't sing. Except in three circumstances, too much drink, my Matriarch commands it, or I lost a challenge at bonfire." His gaze came to hers, and he gave her that intense puzzled look she had seen once or twice before. "Do you want me to sing for you, Kayseri? Because I will."

The music was loud, but the pounding of her heart was louder. It was difficult to hear Kree's velvety voice. In mid-step, he stopped on the dance floor, brought her hand in against his chest.

"This is impossible. I can't talk to you over

this music. Come outside with me. Come away from this noise, Katie. Just for a minute.”

She let him lead her through the crowd. After the heat and press of people inside, the air on the veranda was cool. She shivered, but he did not notice. He started pacing almost at once.

“I didn’t mean for this to happen.”

Kyseri forced herself to sound calm when inside she wanted to scream. “You said that before. What is it you didn’t mean to happen?”

He came back to her, took her hands, quickly let them go. His expression was enough to wilt flowers. “All my life...” He was off again, pacing. She pictured a large caged animal.

“All my life I’ve been a soldier. It’s all I ever wanted, and I’m a damn good soldier. You’d think I’d be happy, but there was always something missing. Satisfaction—I had none. A stone on my heart weighed me down. You stepped off that coach, Katie, and with one chaste little kiss, you rolled it away. Just like that.” He snapped his fingers. “Lathan Bruin’s daughter.”

He did not sound very happy about it. Kayseri’s stomach clinched. She had hoped for the confession of love Rian promised her she could expect. Kree was giving her raw grief. She could not bear it.

He stared through the door at the colorful swirl of dancers and said nothing more for what seemed an age to her. When he did speak, his voice was so soft she had to lean forward to hear him.

“I’ve spent the last several years since Molly’s passing learning to do without attachments. I thought I could do without you. I think I could have as long as I pictured you in a place like this, among shining people like these whose beauty never fades. When I heard the elf say you’d sold

yourself into a life of horror—that you’d done it for me—Namar’s tears, you humble me.”

He sat on the stone balustrade holding his head with both his hands. She could not bear to be the cause of so much grief. Better she had never come home at all. She put her hands on his shoulders. She *had* to comfort him.

“Thinking of that fellow touching you was worse than any death I could imagine. Why did you do it Kayseri?” His hands moved up her arms. He looked up. “I’m not worth it.”

The answer was so simple, Kayseri responded without a second thought. “You would have done the same for me.”

Kree stood, paced away. “It’s my fucking job! What could the sod-rotted bastard do to me that hadn’t already been done?” He looked very close to tears, an alarming prospect. She shivered again. This time he noticed. “You’re cold?”

Not trusting her voice, Kayseri shook her head.

Music drifted from the great hall. Dancers whirled by the windows in time with the sweeping tempo. The darkness softened the melody. He drew her close, warming her with his body, and moved slowly into a waltz.

“Do you remember the night in Arbala when I said I didn’t love you?”

She dropped her gaze. “I’m not likely to forget it. You broke my heart.”

“I broke mine, too.” Kree’s aura changed, filled with a trembling rose hue. “I’ve always loved you, Katie. You are the best birthday present I ever got. Amusing you made me happy, and you know, I devoted myself to it when you were young. Then you came home so grown up, and it was plain to me we couldn’t be playmates anymore. My feelings changed so fast it rattled

me. I thought there was something wrong with me. Don't you see? I couldn't be your champion anymore. It wasn't safe for you or for me, so I lied.

"I had a hundred reasons. You are so young. Your father will kill me. I am so mortal. Your father will kill me. You'd be throwing away your life. Your father *will* kill me. But, mostly, I just didn't trust you to know your own heart, because I was so busy denying mine. It all comes down to this, Katie, I'm afraid."

His expression was so raw, there was nothing she could say to sooth him. She scarcely dared to breathe.

"You're speechless. I don't blame you. Imagine how I felt. I like to think I'm fearless, but you terrify me. You do. I am scared to death that if I give in to this thing between us, one day you will look at me with those beautiful brown eyes of yours and tell me you hate me."

He paused in their slow dance, pressed his open hand over his heart. "I won't survive it, Katie. I won't. Stay here with Sandahl and Rian. They're good people, good elves. Bond with Garen Nhurstari. He wants you."

Kayseri fought for and found her voice. "I don't want Garen, I want you. I love you. I have always loved you, too. I will always love you."

His answer was a crooked smile touched with winter. He held her closer while the music moved them around the porch that was their private dance floor, their private world lit by moonlight.

"Kree." Kayseri's voice was just above a whisper. "What happens now?"

He pressed a kiss on the top of her head. "I think poets recommend tears and a journey?"

Her heart was as ashes. "My tears and your journey?"

He looked as if she had slapped him. His aura flashed black. "So that's your opinion of me? Already?"

"My opinion of you was fixed when I was six and you plucked me out of a tree. It has never wavered."

His aura warmed, ablaze with silver and roses. "I can't think why. What's in it for you? I'm no hero in a romance ballad who can promise three hundred days of bliss. I can't promise you won't be eaten by a demon. Damnation! Sweetheart, I have just proven I cannot keep you safe from a common hooligan. You'll never have the kind of life you deserve if you pick me. What good am I to you?"

Kayseri laid her palm upon his cheek with utmost gentleness. "I might be some good to you. Did you think of that?"

Kree crushed her to his chest. "Ah, Katie. Look at us. It's bad enough now. What will people say when I'm raising sixty?"

"They'll say, isn't Captain Fawr lucky to have such a beautiful young wife." Mischief sparkled in her eyes. "We will turn heads everywhere we go."

"That's not funny."

"Then, why are you laughing?"

"Because, I just don't care anymore." He swung her around in the moonlight. "I will speak to Rian. Maybe we can do this *banding* thing they do. Although, I don't know how in the hells I can answer those questions. That's a solid fact."

"Don't you want to ask to my father for my hand?"

Pressed as she was against his chest, she felt more than heard his chuckle. "I'm not that brave on my best day. Come on. Let's find Rian."

Kree headed for the ballroom, but Kayseri tugged on his hand until he stopped and looked

at her. "Don't you want to ask me something?"

He threw his arms wide in complete surrender, hers for the taking. "Will you marry me Katie?"

She walked into his wide-open arms. "I thought you'd never ask."

When he heard their request, Rian was downright giddy. "Of course, we can do it. I'll speak to the ancient right away."

He started down to the hall, only to rush back and catch Kree in a crushing embrace, quickly broken. "Forgive me, Kree Fawr. I know you asked me not to touch you, but this is the most wonderful news!"

The witnesses gathered upstairs in the ladies drawing room. Aimery Duncan, Chana and Kevin Falconer, Eoin and Eamon, Sandahl and Kayseri. Garen was left playing host to Rian's guests in the great hall. The twins sat on the sofa playing rock, paper, scissors. For some reason, they loved the stupid game. Kayseri and Sandahl giggled and hugged. Kree wished Rian would hurry. He was desperate to have it done before every ounce of his courage leaked away. His troopers were no help in that quarter. You would think he had asked them to witness his execution—particularly, Duncan.

Remembering that he had been keeping company with the man's sister-in-law, Kree beckoned his first lieutenant aside. "I'll speak to your sister-in-law myself, Duncan. I won't stick you with it."

"Sir?"

"That's what's troubling you, isn't it?"

"No, not at all. It is just...well, I am ashamed to admit it, but I loathe my duty as a kinsman redeemer. I do not relish the idea of fathering a child who may stand between me and an

inheritance.”

So, that was it. “You didn’t think I would get her with child, did you?”

“No, sir. I thought you might offer for her. If she married out of my family without an heir, I would move up.” Duncan shrugged. “I should not have listened to gossip. This is your wedding day, sir. Your bride is beautiful, and you are mad for each other. I will do my duty to my family. Do not concern yourself with me.”

Kree chewed on his lower lip for a moment. “I don’t want to lose you over this. I don’t want the garrison to lose you.”

“Lose me, sir?” Duncan brightened. “Where would I go? Do you know of another garrison captain anywhere who has the means and the intestinal fortitude to support my passion for explosives?”

It seemed a hundred years later that Rian came back with the old woman. Sure enough, she had another length of fine silver chain in her hand.

“Come here, children.” In spite of her endearment, she did not sound motherly. “Let me get a look at you. Rian tells me you are bound to this human. Is it so, child?”

“Yes, ancient,” Kayseri said.

“What does she mean by that, Katie?”

“He took you without ceremony?”

“Katie?”

“It’s nothing, Kree.” She touched his arm quieting him. “No, ancient. It’s a mystery.”

The old lady pursed her lips and turned her stern amber eyes on Kree. “Do you know what you are doing human?”

I don’t have a clue.

“Do you understand that once the ceremony is done, the bond cannot be undone?”

"That's the general idea," Kree said.

"Kneel down, both of you." The old elf woman placed the chain around their necks.

"Kree Fawr, speak your house gift?"

"I don't have a house. I don't have a gift or a talent beyond my will to fight." He turned his gaze to Kayseri. "I promise I will love you every minute of every day of my miserably short life. I will keep you near me. I will not die on some far away battlefield. I will die in your arms and nowhere else." Pulling a small knife from his arming harness, he sliced open his hand, and held it up dripping blood. "Is my oath enough, Kayseri?"

Sparkling eyes beamed up at him, understanding what he did. She snatched the blade from him, sliced her own hand, and pressed it against his open palm. "More than enough, Kree."

The ancient hesitated, glancing to Rian before saying the words that would seal the band.

Kree felt the enchantment crawl over his skin for the space of a heartbeat or two, while the chain sealed around his neck. Then, following a purely human tradition, he pulled Kayseri into his arms and kissed his bride.

Chapter Twenty

Kree sat with Rian and his inner circle, drinking wine and swapping tales, long after the official celebration broke up. Hours earlier, a group of delighted Nhurstari ladies spirited Kayseri upstairs to prepare. *Whatever that meant.* But Duncan was the surprise of the party. He stayed behind when the rest of the squad returned to their camp. The young man had served with him for nearly three years, and he could not recall seeing him take more than one drink on any occasion. The other officers teased him about his temperance. Tonight, the twins had conspired to get Duncan blind sock-eyed drunk and they had succeeded beyond their wildest dreams.

“Seriously, Aimery Duncan,” Eoin was saying, “Eamon and I want to come to Qets. We want to be cavalrymen. We want to be part of your Red Fist.”

Kree grinned into his glass. The Nhurstari twins had fallen in love with the reluctant first lieutenant. Kree chuckled to himself. *Goddess!* His man was foxed.

“I serve at Captain Fawr’s pleasure.” Duncan belched. “We all do. If you want to soldier in Qets, you will have to speak with him.”

The twins turned their eager amber eyes in his direction. “Qets is a garrison of cavalry,” Kree said. “Has either of you ever ridden a horse?”

“We can learn.”

Duncan laughed so hard he choked.

"We are excellent archers."

"I'm sure you are, but can you shoot from the back of a horse at a full gallop?"

"How hard can it be?"

Duncan found this question hysterical. He could not stop laughing. Kree worried his man might hyperventilate.

"Oh, sir," Duncan gasped out, pounding the table with his fist. "Take them. Please. *Please* take them."

"Would your people like them?" Rian asked. "I would let them go if they would be welcome."

Kree pressed his arms into the air in a huge stretch. "My people are soldiers, Rian. If I tell them they like Nhurstari, they *will* like Nhurstari."

"That is correct, sir." *Thump*. Duncan's head hit the table.

"Duncan?" No response. "First Lieutenant?"

Unfocused eyes turned toward the sound of Kree's voice. "Sir?"

"I think you've celebrated enough."

The First Lieutenant lurched to his feet. "Yes, s-sir," he said. Then he fell flat on his face.

"Go to your chamber, Kree Fawr. Your bride awaits." Rian laughed. "The terrible twins will take good care of your beautiful first lieutenant."

"Yeah? That's what I'm worried about."

"Be off with you. I give you my word. My cousins will not ill-use your officer."

Kree climbed the stairs slowly. Truth was, he worried how Kayseri would respond to him after what had happened with the mercenary. He knocked on the chamber door before opening it. Goddess, he wanted everything to be perfect.

The room was filled with roses from... The Goddess alone knew where. Roses were not in season. Candles glowed from every flat surface,

lending the room, which was Rian's and therefore masculine, a sort of romantic softness. Kayseri jumped up from the big overstuffed chair where she'd been dosing curled up like a kitten. Kree doubted she had thought of the candles, one of the Nhurstari ladies must have. Just as one of them must have dressed her in the slinky bronze wrapper she wore. He knew he had never purchased such a thing in Arbala. Most of the candles were burned half way down, reminding him he had stayed downstairs longer than was acceptable. Damnation, even the fire needed tending.

"Your pardon, sweetheart." Kree hung his saber on the doorknob. "The time got away from me." *Stupid. Stupid. Stupid.* She looked small and fragile, reminding him how large a man he really was. He sat down and pulled off his boots, making himself shorter by a whole half-inch.

"You've been drinking with Rian and the others all this time?"

"Talking mostly. The twins want to join the cavalry. Imagine that." He tossed his jacket on the chair. Kayseri turned her back on him. *Stupid ass. She does not want to hear about the twins.*

"I worried you weren't coming."

He padded up behind her in his stockinged feet and put his arms around her waist, flexed his knees—compensating for her height, and pressed a kiss to her temple. "Why would you think that? You are my bride."

"I thought maybe... I don't know... Maybe you had second thoughts. I thought maybe you were... sorry."

"I am sorry. I kept you waiting as I should not have done." He pulled her against him so she stood between his bent knees. "And I have *hundreds* of second thoughts, but not a single

one is about you.

"You're shivering. Are you cold? I could stir up your fire."

She shook her head.

He turned her around so she faced him. "I will never force myself on you. Don't be afraid, Katie."

All he could think was they needed to sit down. He was too damn tall. Too damn broad. Too damn everything with a foolish case of nerves. Kayseri had known him all her life, and she had never given the slightest sign his size intimidated her.

She trailed her fingertips down his strong jaw. "I'm never afraid when I'm with you."

"What is it then?"

"I don't know what you expect. The ladies all said..."

"Ah."

She may have known him all her life, but tonight was different. It was different for him, too. For one thing, she had never seen him nude. She had never seen the honorable scars he carried on his body or the furrowed ruin on his back. What if she found him ugly? He bent to kiss her lips, butterfly light. His knees and calves protested his prolonged half-crouched posture. He needed to get her to sit down with him, or better yet, lie down with him.

"I expect to make love to you, but it doesn't have to be tonight. After all that has happened to you, nothing will happen in this room unless you want it to happen. I came so close to losing you today, that I'm content to hold you."

"Kree, I know what you think happened, but that man—"

"Is dead, sweetheart. His life was over the moment he touched you. If he'd come out to me

with his hands in the air, I would have killed him anyway. Forget him.”

“But I need you to know what happened.”

“Hush. There is nothing men do to their captives you need to tell me. I’ve seen it all. On some level, you’re probably a little sorry he’s dead, because the sod-rotted bastard stole your bond. But I’ll make it up to you, and if there is a babe, I’ll love it as my own. It’ll be a part of you. That’s all that matters.”

“Will you listen?” Kayseri pounded his chest with her fist. “He did not rape me. I kept him busy with mischief. He hit me, and, yes, he would have raped me if you hadn’t come in time. But you did come, Kree. You didn’t fail me. You have never failed me.”

He wanted to laugh and cry at the same time. Scooping her up in his arms, he deposited her on a soft fur rug spread before the dying fire. Raining hungry little kisses on her lips as though they were fine candy and he could not get enough of it, they were both soon breathless.

Kayseri snuggled into his chest, and he held her, thinking he must really be the luckiest son-of-bitch alive

“You smell so good,” Kayseri whispered.

Hearing her say such a thing made him laugh. “I’m glad you think so.”

“I can feel your heart beating.”

“What? You can’t hear it?” Kree gave her his crooked smile. “With those ears?” His tongue teased her sensitive ear-point, and when he blew a breath across it, she shivered in his arms. “Are you sure you don’t want me to stir up your fire?”

“Please.” Kree’s hands stroked her breasts, and his lips followed his fingers, teasing her nipples until she arched her back giving him greater access. “The fire, Kree,” she gasped.

"Are you feeling it yet?" He trailed kisses down her taut stomach and across her hips to the tender skin inside her thighs.

"You said... What are you doing?" His tongue flicked across the cleft at her core.

"Oh, that feels... Oh! It feels so *good!*"

Kree raised his head, chin wet with her dew and smiled. "We're just beginning, sweetheart," he whispered.

It was amazing. Kayseri lay cradled in the circle of Kree's arms her cheek resting on his chest, a contented smile on her face. There had been a moment when she had seen him in his fully aroused glory and feared it would never work. But everything worked just fine. It worked better than fine, actually.

Had there been pain? The women told her there would be pain, but she did not remember it. Nor did she remember how they got into bed or when exactly Kree shed his clothing. Evidently, her beloved captain had a bit of mischief to call his own.

"Can we do that again?" Kayseri asked and felt him chuckle under her cheek.

"In a little while, my little vixen. I'm *only* human."

"Did they teach you to deflower virgins at your temple?"

The breath rushed out of him. "Do not ask me such questions."

She leaned on her elbow and gazed into his eyes. "You said I could ask you anything."

Kree rolled his eyes, grinning. "I did. Only, this one is a lose, lose sort of question." She punched him in the ribs. "Can you phrase your question in a way that won't get me in trouble with my wife?"

Twisting one of his blessing braids around her finger Kayseri formed a new question. "Is there anything they don't teach you at your temple?"

He pretended to consider it, raised his head and kissed her nose. "Nothing comes to mind. Anything else you want to know?"

Kayseri studied his beloved face for a moment, leaned over and pressed a kiss to his eyebrow. "Where did you get this scar?"

"In a tavern brawl when I was—" His eyes cut to the right. "Fifteen."

"And this one?"

"The sword-flick is a lesson in humility, courtesy of Chana Falconer."

"This?" Kayseri kissed the slight bump on the bridge of his nose.

"Lathan Bruin."

She rose so she could see his expression. Surely, he was joking. "My father broke your nose?"

Kree smiled at her, sleepy eyed. Her heart melted. "I deserved it."

"Were all your scars inflicted by your friends?"

He pretended offense. "I will have you know, I have taken nine, no make that ten, counting this trip, honorable wounds. But if you want to see those scars, you will have to look..." Kree cut his eyes evocatively and added, "lower."

Kayseri's erotic kiss-and-tell exploration of his body continued until his answers were more like gasps of pleasure, and his body was hard with desire. She took him into her mouth, doing for him as he had done for her. Then she straddled his hips and took him inside her. She marveled at the way her body stretched to accommodate his shaft. It was true magic.

Resting his hands on her hips, Kree helped her set a rhythm that soon brought them both to a shattering climax.

Sweaty and tangled in the sheets, she rested her head on Kree's chest. "Did my father really break your nose?"

His heart hammered under her ear. "Mmm." His voice was heavy, satisfied, and sleepy. "He probably will again."

Chapter Twenty-One

Their *banding* breakfast took place the following morning. Warned of the custom, Kree hoped to spare Kayseri embarrassment, but only succeeded in keeping the eager Nhurstari from storming their bedchamber by camping most of Red Fist in the hall.

A king's ransom in crystal, gold, and silver tableware filled the long tables arranged under the tall trees. Kree and Kayseri sat at the high table alongside Rian and Sandahl. Although technically, this was the royal couple's *banding* breakfast, the captain and his lady were the couple being honored. It was their bed linens being proudly displayed.

The guests were in high good humor. Jokes and well wishes flew. Everything was perfect, except the place at Kree's left, the place reserved for his first lieutenant, sat empty. This worried Kree because Duncan was never tardy. Then again, the man had been uncharacteristically sozzled last night. Likely, he had a tremendous head this morning. Kree leaned in to ask Rian to send someone in search of his missing man, when a chorus of whistles and applause from the elves and catcalls from Red Fist brought him up short.

The First Lieutenant approached the high table resplendent in Nhurstari tunic and hose of deepest sapphire. The cloak fastened at his shoulders by gold oak leaves was spider web-fine blue silk. Some sort of intricate sepia tattoo

encircled his right biceps.

"Oh Kree!" Kayseri squeezed his arm urgently. "Duncan is beautiful."

She said it as if she had only just noticed. He covered her hand with his, and leaned toward Rian. "I thought you said he'd be safe."

"I said they would not ill-use him. My cousins find him beautiful, Kree Fawr," Rian laughed. "Have they harmed him by making him more so?"

Kree could not fight that bit of Nhurstari logic. He decided to measure Duncan's discomfort before getting angry on his behalf. "You're out of uniform, First Lieutenant."

"Yes, sir." Duncan took his place beside his captain and watched the servants pile his plate with food. "The terrible twins stole my uniform. Pray, take them into your service, sir. I deserve a chance at retribution." Duncan shot a hopeful glance at Kree. "I have a uniform in my tent, sir."

"You look a little tattered around the edges, Shug." Kree grinned. He could not help himself. "Are you well?"

Duncan eyed his plate. "There is an excellent chance I will cast up my accounts at any moment, sir."

"Would you like to be excused?"

"Not if you will lose face with the Nhurstari, sir?"

The man was funny in unexpected ways. "Not nearly as badly as I will if my first lieutenant pukes on their Majority."

Duncan slowly got to his feet. "I am in your debt, sir."

"Duncan," Kree called after him. "Have the cadets start folding laundry. My lady and I want to move out as soon as we're done here."

"Yes, sir. I will give the order to strike tents at once." Good-natured hisses from the Nhurstari

and the Fist protested his departure.

They took their leave shortly after noon, a good deal later than Kree had hoped. Besides the twins, who persuaded him their lives were worth nothing if they could not be cavalrymen, Garen had joined their party, carrying a letter from the Majority Apparent to the Thallasi apprising them of Sandahl's safe arrival, and expressing Nhurstari's grief over Prince Eldren's death.

Kayseri and Sandahl's goodbyes were longer and wetter than Kree expected. He finally pried the friends apart by promising to visit, soon. Stepping outside, he found Garen mounted on Kayseri's mare, but he said nothing about it. She must have offered the mare, and he found he did not mind the idea of sharing his saddle with his new wife in the least.

There was another short delay while Duncan instructed the twins in basic horsemanship. It was a total failure. Finally, Kree appointed a cadet to lead them, declaring they could learn as they went.

"This is going to be so much fun, sir." Duncan murmured to him in passing as he made his way to his own spotted gelding.

They rode slowly due to the twins' general ineptitude. Garen, however, proved a surprisingly strong horseman. Kree dropped back to ride beside him.

"I understood the Nhurstari didn't ride."

Garen gave him a bright toothy smile. "The High Families do not. Though Rian is my brother, I was not born a Lord of Nhurstari."

"How did that happen, if you don't mind my asking?"

"Not at all. Rian and I have the same mother. My sire was a gardener on my grandsire's estate. Mother saw him and loved him. It happens that

way with us, more often than not. Anyway, Mother was of the First House, and my sire was... I do not know the right word. Eoin," he called. "What is the Elharan word for *charash*?"

Eoin screwed his face up in deep thought for a moment. "Dependent. Sort of. It is not the precise definition, but close."

"Ah." Garen glanced at Kree riding at his shoulder. "The mate bond cares nothing for station, but of course, Mother's family did. The lovers met in secret, stealing moments together among the trees and flowers my sire caused to grow. That's my talent too, growing things. I hope you both enjoyed my roses. Anyway, this arrangement worked well until Mother conceived, then of course, they could not conceal their relationship. Mother's parents sent my sire to one of their outlying farms. When I was weaned, they sent me to live with him.

"My sire died in an accident some years later. Rian's father was Majority Apparent at the time and a close friend of my mother's family. He had loved my mother from their youth. In due time, he offered for her hand, and she accepted him. He was, he is, the kindest of elves. For a bride gift, he restored me to my mother and reared me as his own. Even after Rian's birth, his affection for me never wavered. And I became the champion of my beloved legitimate brother."

Kayseri sighed and leaned her head on the captain's shoulder. "That's so romantic."

"I thought Wilderkin mated for life," Kree said.

"You are thinking of the mate bond. That is once in a lifetime." Garen's gaze touched Kayseri's face and lingered for a moment. "But its loss does not render us unable to love in ordinary ways. Imagine, Kree Fawr, the bitterness of a lifetime

stretching for millennia with only a single chance at love. If it were so, many of us would not wish to continue long after losing a mate."

Kree reined in before the Bruin lodge deep in the pixie wood. Kayseri slid from her mare's back and dashed inside shouting for her mother. The captain dismounted more slowly, followed by Garen.

Seated on a stump by the front door, Lathan looked up at Kree. "My daughter returns home none the worse for wear it seems. What took you so long?"

"Some things happened that I didn't plan on." Kree cleared his throat. He was ridiculously nervous. "We need to talk."

"I surmised as much." Lathan nodded toward Garen. "What is this stranger you've brought to my door?"

"He's Nhurstari. There is a mountain range full of them only an eight-day ride north of here. Hard to believe, isn't it?"

"Yes. Who is he?"

The captain blushed. "Your pardon, Lathan, meet Garen Nhurstari. Garen is an envoy for Rian, Majority Apparent of Nhurstari. I'll explain later. Garen, this is Lathan Bruin. Lathan is our god-worker, Katie's father."

"It is a pleasure, Mister Bruin." Garen offered his hand after the human fashion.

Lathan eyed his outstretched hand. "We'll see."

Kayseri came out of the house carrying an infant in her arms. Her five brothers followed on her heels. She showed the child to Garen while the younger Bruins crowded around him. Strangers did not visit their home, and this stranger was stranger than most. They all wanted

to talk to him.

Kree took advantage of the distraction. "Come aside with me, will you, Lath?" They walked a few yards into the surround woods. "Lathan, you know you mean more to me than any man—"

"My sweet lord." Lathan interrupted. "When you rode up, your expression told me you had something appalling to say. You've never been good at hiding your feelings, but I never imagined anything so horrific it needed to be prefaced in such a way."

He glanced back at Garen. "That creature... What did you say he was? Nhurstari? He is in love with my daughter. One merely has to look to see it. Have they put you up to persuading me to give my consent to a total stranger?"

"No, Lath. Let me explain without interrupting." A note of desperation crept into his voice. He hoped Lathan didn't notice.

Lathan folded his hands before him and waited. Kree stared at the toes of his boots for a moment or two, collecting his thoughts.

"Come on, Kree. As you are so fond of saying, we've known each other too long to piss about."

Kree took a deep breath. "All right. Here it is. Garen is in love with Katie, but she is not in love with him. For some mysterious reason, she picked me. She loves me and well, Lathan, it turns out I love her too."

"Are you asking permission to court my daughter?" Lathan replied with a doubtful little chuckle.

"No. I'm trying to tell you I took her to wife in a Nhurstari ceremony eight days ago. I'm just doing a shoddy job of it."

Lathan stared at him, opening and closing his mouth like a beached fish.

"This was nothing I set out to do. You have to

believe me. I know I'm likely to be killed in battle, and I don't want her left alone any more than you do. But then I met Garen. Do you see?" Kree nodded toward the elf. "Suppose for a minute, I am killed. He'll be there for her. Or, let's say I live to the end of my days. What is fifty years or so to the likes of him, a blink of the eye? I've been a fool for Katie since she was a girl. Is it so surprising I might be a bigger fool now that she's a woman grown?"

He stared at his friend, distress rolling off him in waves. "Say something, Lathan. Punch me in the nose. Anything!"

The subject of his confession chose that very moment to join them, leaving Garen to the mercy of her brothers and a growing crowd of curious pixies. Kayseri took his hand, lacing her fingers with his, a gesture at once possessive and loving. She studied her father's stunned countenance, and then gazed up at her new husband with her heart in her eyes.

"You told him?"

Kree nodded.

"Is he going to break your nose?"

"It's too soon to tell."

Kayseri fixed her gaze on her father. "I told him you think him the best man of your acquaintance. I told him you'll be happy for us, but he does not believe me. Tell him, Father. You can't see how anxious he is. He has no sparkle at all."

Her oblique reference to the Wilderkin mating-bond snapped Lathan out of his stupor. He started to chuckle. "So you caught him, Daughter. You always claimed you would!" He laughed heartily, catching his daughter up in a bear hug, then hugged Kree in turn. "I will not pretend this will be an easy adjustment—thinking

of you as my son—but my daughter looks happy. That's all I want. Where will the two of you live?"

"I hadn't thought much about it." The captain shrugged. "I still have a town house."

"I won't live there."

Kree was surprised. It was a very pretty house. "Why not?"

She looked up at him. "Because you hate that house. It's full of bad memories. I want us to make new memories. Good ones."

He could not argue with her logic. "So, what are your thoughts, wife?"

"The officers' quarters will do for us." She caught her lower lip between her teeth for a moment. "I do wish we had a parlor and our own dining room."

"You see why I love her, Lath? She's smart and low maintenance." Kree hugged her to his side. "I can manage a parlor and a dining room. Go rescue poor Garen while I finish my business with your papa."

They watched her sprint toward the house. "If anyone can tame my wild headstrong daughter, you'd be the man. I'll give you that."

"Tame her? Why would I want to do that? I like her the way she is. I don't want to change her."

Lathan laughed. "No, I guess you don't since you're so fond of a good brawl. I've never met a more stubborn person in my life. But let me warn you, my daughter is just like you. She's just not as high-handed. You've made a great match. If you don't murder each other inside a year, you should both be very happy. I don't know why I didn't think of it myself."

"I am not high-handed, and I'm not stubborn either. I'm authoritative."

"Of course you are." Lathan dismissed Kree's

protest with the self-satisfied grin of a man whose point is proven. "So tell me, do you plan to keep your replacement at your side until he's needed?"

"*Piff*. Don't think I wouldn't, but the fact is Garen's bound for Thallasi on an errand for his brother. Since we are going to Elhar too, I thought it would be safer for him to travel with us."

Lathan gave Kree a quizzical glance. "What makes you imagine for an instant, oh, authoritative one, that *I* am going to Elhar?"

"This." Kree drew a folded sheet of paper from his pocket and watched his friend unfold the page, saw his eyes widen, and noted the sudden tightness around his lips.

"Shit."

"I believe I invoked the Goddess, but my sentiment was the same. It was tattooed on a mercenary captain's cheek." He touched the small rectangular scar beside his right ear. "Here, in a mockery of a Goddess mark."

"Did you kill this man?"

"I had that pleasure."

Lathan shot him a quick glance. "That sounded personal."

"It was. Let's sit down somewhere and I'll fill you in."

Beginning with the attack on Eldren's carriage and finishing with Duncan's discovery of the tattoo, Kree rehearsed the tale with practiced military clarity. He did not gloss over or leave out a single detail, much as he wished to. When he had finished, Lathan folded the drawing away.

"How soon do we leave, *Son*?"

"Don't make me kill you."

Kree and Lathan joined the crowd of pixies gathered around Garen. The elf was demonstrating his talent on a dormant rose bush,

just as the bud burst forth into crimson perfection. Garen plucked it and handed it to Kayseri with that whole-body smile of his. Kree put his hand on Kayseri's slim waist, jealous in spite of himself. She turned into his touch and tucked the rose bud underneath one of the frogs on his jacket.

There was a moment when the two men's eyes met over her head in perfect understanding, the tall cavalry captain and the shining young Nhurstari. Lathan's children laughed, clapped their hands, and demanded more flowers. Watching them, Kree tightened his arms around his wife and heaved a contented sigh. Eight days ago he'd had no family and no hope of one, now he had a large boisterous family. He was bound for Elhar and from there to war, but for the first time in his life, his heart was at peace.

A word about the author...

Jane Atchley's Texas roots reach back to the Republic. Trapped in a world of user manuals, she dreamed of something beyond technical writing. One night, over nachos and margaritas with special friends, a world of elves, pixies, and a certain Goddess-born cavalry captain beckoned. She and her two terriers have lived there ever since.

Jane is a member of Dallas Area Romance Authors (DARA), her local chapter of Romance Writers of America, and a finalist for paranormal in Rose City Romance Writers 2008 "Golden Rose" contest. "Warring Heart" is her first novel.

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SI HERREO ACRITER HORREAM
(If I tremble, let me tremble bravely.)

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