



A BONDED FANTASY

FLAME WITHIN

Mima

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Blurb

Odan can't imagine a woman less suited to this mission, but he is reluctantly impressed with how hard she works to succeed at it. Delicate, haughty, with aggressive and decidedly fiery tendencies, she's not his type. Until she is.

Vivienne has hidden her true self for years, afraid to lose control of her future. As Odan strips away her masks one by one, she is surprised to discover she loves the world he opens up. He's maddening, but tender, with a sexy, solid strength.

Vivienne and Odan both know the burdens of leadership, living lonely lives of power and isolation. As they train together, their respect for one another grows ... as does their attraction. Furiously working to bring down the lizard birds terrorizing the Cities, they make a beautiful, deadly pair. This enrages the darkmages who control the birds. Vivienne will have to flare brighter than she ever has before, even if it burns all her disguises away.

Author's note

I read runes. They are my meditation, a way to see myself clearly and reflect on all aspects of my life. This story reminds me of a dark time where I became paralyzed by divination. Choice and destiny aren't strange topics for philosophers. They're part of the Spirit. Don't look for answers, omens, or prophecies. Pray, but live. The runes don't control me. They're just a way to see the life around me.

Dedication

To Suzanne, a Southern Lady with great taste, courage, and a big heart

And

To Heather-Anne, a Canuck with powerful simplicity

And

To Jalane, writing me from across the world, whose intelligence is so appreciated
I never expected to get friendly with my fans. Wow.

What came before...

In the land of Vladaya, rimmed by mountains, deserts, and sea, live two intertwined races. The Truxet are shapeshifters divided into eleven Clans who roam the vast and often dangerous wilderness. Only males are born to them, who develop a beastspirit at adolescence. The Kingdom of Seven Cities is a Guild-run collection of Walled human societies, surrounded by despised and exiled wildlings, uneducated humans who have their own clan structure to survive their perpetual state of war. The Royal family and the Council of Truxet have negotiated a pact: the stronger Trux mage-warriors patrol the Cities and bring justice to the wildlings in exchange for female volunteers who are adopted into the Clans. It has worked for millennia, with varying degrees of mutual resentment and contempt. Until the powerful Mage Guild developed a privacy potion to evade the senses of the three-natured Truxet. Within one generation, a group of darkmages, who abandoned the Sacred Couple's way of the Six Elements for forbidden death magecraft, created a diabolical plan to split the allies and destroy the Truxet. Their plan has been discovered, but it is still working. A showdown approaches...

Chapter One

One week since Spirit Within

Odan faced the delicate woman with deep misgiving, making no attempt to hide his unease. She stood in the center of a midday sunbeam shining with stunning force through the diamond-paned crystal windows. Of course, she must have posed there on purpose. Her outfit was a study of rich orange, canary yellow, cloth-of-gold, and the chocolate fur of ... watercoasters. He held down a growl, closing the door behind him softly. Silence ruled as he waited. Deep within, his groundbear awoke, lifting his pointed snout and scratching uneasily. Groundbear always ignored humans. Odan's misgiving deepened into dread.

"You look less than excited to meet me, Skymage Odan." The Flame Curate Vivienne moved with a rustle of silk and velvet over the thick, jewel-toned carpets. Away from him, thankfully.

He stayed put by the deeply carved door, stained dark with age. He had no intention of engaging his new partner if she attacked. Was she trying to test him? Retreat would be the wiser course if it came to that. "Your eyes are bleeding green with your magecraft, Lady. I would have concern for any potential partner I met showing such a lack of control." Keeping his balance ready, he tracked her slow drift toward the apparatus-laden table warily.

"My eyes have looked thus since I was ten. I assure you, I have total control. You'll have to quiet your concern and take my word for my honor. Just as I will quell my concern about partnering with a man who presents himself so disrespectfully." She paused before a crucible set of glass vials and piping. It was well-used, murky with residue and reeking of metals. "If we fail this assignment, both our peoples will suffer from the split this will force between us. Yet you stand there insultingly half-dressed."

His stomach twisted and danced with dismay. Fuck. She was one of *those*. Human to a precise degree, and more concerned with protocol than efficiency.

He decided not to touch the most serious dig in her little diatribe, the one about taking someone's word for their honor. His people defined honor, were assigned by her Royal family to patrol her people's lack of it, but he wouldn't assert his to her. There was no reason to be defensive. "The Truxet are not human, Flame Curate. It is best you learn that right now. I do not follow your ways. At times, I do not even follow your laws. By judging me through your own standards of culture, you insult *me*. You've had two days to prepare for this duty. And yet I see you are utterly *unprepared* to partner with me. Have you ever even spoken with a Trux before?"

Her fingers were long and pale as they measured black sand into a cup the size of his big toe. "Of course I have." She set the cup down with a thump. "Indeed I have."

Odan couldn't believe she'd turned her back on him. It could be an insult or poor tactics, but either way, it did not reflect well on her.

She'd gone completely still, as if frozen. Even her hair was hidden by some sort of stiff veil. Was she trying to appear like crowned royalty? Or was she frightened of him?

Her hand clasped the edge of the table so tightly he could hear her knuckles crack.

She turned. "Your representative has met with our High Guild. Clothed." She barely restrained a sneer.

The Trux representative to the Mage Guild, Rafe, a bear and earthmage, lived in the Royal City much of the year. For this meeting, he'd traveled to Second City's northern forests to assist. He'd met with Odan just briefly to share what he knew about his new partner, High Guild Flame Curate Vivienne. Rafe told him she was haughty, powerful, and fiercely intelligent. Since all of those things applied to any member of the High Guild, Odan had rolled his eyes at the man. Laughing, Rafe added she was a chemist, and gorgeous. Odan didn't see her beauty, personally. Even presented as a fiery jewel in a glistening display, her power-drenched eyes and cold arrogance dominated his perception.

"Tomorrow I'll take you into the field. I will give you a book, and highly recommend you read it before we leave. Just as you are dressed to display your position, I am as well. If you understood my people, this serious and arduous partnership would go more smoothly."

"Are you implying you understand mine? From the distance of your mountains and caves? Shall I give you a book as well?" Her full lips quirked, openly mocking him.

Gritting his teeth, he restrained himself from name calling so early in their relationship. "I would happily read your assigned book. Anything to assist this mission." He was proud his words came out so mild, making hers seem all the more viperish.

She sniffed and stalked to a bookcase. Reaching for a thick binding on a low shelf, she blew the dust from it. Not a favorite of hers, then. She held it out to him, imperiously summoning him to her position. When he merely looked at her, she raised one thin, arched brow. Fuck. *Remember the mission.* Forcing himself to settle down, he advanced past the table littered with apparatus and reeking of poison to take it from her white hand.

Glancing at it, he offered it back. "I've read *The Royal History of the Kingdom of the Seven Cities.*"

He stepped next to her, deliberately standing shoulder to shoulder with her. She shrank from him, shifting away. He glanced quickly over the titles. The shelf at eye level was all herbalist and chemist tomes, the upper seemed to be general books on firemagic, and along the bottom, the usual collection of patriotic and historical fare.

He squatted. He smelled cleanser on her hands, a light, herbal ladies' lotion, and a faint whiff of burning telling him she'd probably been experimenting before meeting him, despite her Court robes. Groundbear was agitated at her proximity, turning in a tight circle inside him. His nose twitched, but he couldn't quite grasp what was wrong with her overall scent when he was working to read so quickly.

He tapped each spine. "*Major Battles of King Tomas, The Illustrated Guide to the Extended Royal Family, The Marriages of the Royal Family for Both Love and Power, The Collected Set of the Seven Cities' Guild History, Geography of the Seven Cities ...* ah." He paused, pulling one from the shelf. "This is one I haven't read." He stood, and she took an even larger step back. It was petty, but he was pleased after her little display of attitude in making him come to her. He slanted it, showing her the cover. "Will this aid me in understanding your people?"

She glanced at the cover, and he despised how the flowing mist of green mage power obscured her feelings. She may as well as have been wearing a mask, the way the haze shifted and writhed over her eyes. The title read *Etiquette and Procedure for Husband*

Hunting. She blushed, then her full lips quirked, and unlike before, the tilt was charming. For the first time he glimpsed a likable woman.

"Yes, that would do." She turned and moved back to her laboratory table. "You may send yours to my private rooms." Her voice grew distant and stiff again. "I've arranged for us to share the evening meal together. I thought we could discuss our plans for the next three days. And it is three days of preparation I agreed to, not one."

Fighting to keep his face blank, he tucked the book under his arm, understanding he was being dismissed. In the middle of the afternoon, with four hours yet until the evening meal. *Despite the fact another attack was likely imminent.*

He knew she wouldn't bend, but he couldn't stop himself from stating the need. "The afternoon—"

"Is scheduled. I'm a very busy woman."

Setting his jaw, he strode to the door, his gaze jumping about the opulent room. The thickly cushioned seats, the gem-encrusted mosaic set above an exquisitely tiled fireplace that burned with real flames, not magelight. Traveling with this woman would be a nightmare. Before he bullied her into actually working with him, he needed to take Rafe by the ear and figure out if there was anyone remotely more appropriate for such a critical, violent mission.

He reached for the golden doorknob, and her voice stopped him.

"Skymage Odan."

He turned to face her, spine stiff, shoulders squared for whatever parting salvo she was sure to offer. She'd moved to the window, and the stark summer sun there made her seem a statue. Her profile was doll-like, her features fine, regular and small. Her lashes lit gold, and for the first time, he wondered what color her hair was under that fur and tapestry headdress. It draped her forehead, behind her ears, and down the middle of her back. Her brows were light brown, but with those pale eyelashes, her hair could be many colors.

She didn't look at him when she spoke. "What bothered you about my dress, when you first came in?"

He blinked, truly shocked she had the honesty and confidence to discuss his initial reaction. There had been many things bothering him about his first impression. Her eyes glowing with power. His summoning to her territory for this introduction. The way she'd vainly arranged herself in a natural spotlight. The unseemly wealth he cared nothing for. Her expectation that he would submit to her superior ways, and her faulty priorities, worrying about her schedule when nothing was more important than stopping the growing advance of the darkmages. He chose one, rather than the whole crushing truth. "You trimmed yourself in the skin of the animal of one of our Clans."

She looked at him, startled. The sharp, bright green swirled across her eyes. Her slender fingers feathered into the thick, soft band at one wrist. "It is?"

That she didn't even know the name of the fur she wore eased something in him, even as it exasperated. "It is the fur of a watercoaster."

She stroked it, contemplating it sadly. "I love to watch the river wolves. They seem to have two natures in one body. They are playful, coasting and frolicking in water, and yet also deadly, skilled hunters who work in a pack. But their fur seems so oily and slick when I see them."

"It is oily when wet." City-bound humans were so blind to the Wild's ways, it pained

him. Yet her observations cut to the heart of truth regarding one of the more human-friendly Clans, and he was impressed she could see them clearly. Many only saw adorable innocence in watercoasters, which was entirely inaccurate. All of the eleven Truxet Clans were predators.

She nodded. "Are the matching creatures of your ... Clans, sacred then? Not to be hunted?"

"The animals who are cousin to our beastspirits are not sacred. But we also do not hunt them for food, sport, or fur. Sometimes for necessity, if they decide to settle too near a clanhome, but mostly we respectfully let them be."

She walked forward, so controlled under her floor-length dress she seemed to float. Moving right up to within a bodylength of him, she stopped. It was positively bizarre, how her eyes glowed and shifted with rising, raw power. They'd been like this since she was a child? It made her seem like some quivering magebeast about to explode into action at any moment, unstable and unpredictable. If she was a youngling in his Clan, he'd reprimand her. Actually, he remembered he had scolded her, and it hadn't worked.

"What Clan are you?"

Shock lanced through him. "You weren't told?"

She shook her head. "Rafe assures me your people want this mission to succeed as much as ours, so I assume you are a highly trained skymage."

He debated whether or not to tell her his status as Champion. And decided she likely wouldn't respect a title not of her culture anyway. More gently, he added, "Our Clans are such a part of us we never introduce ourselves without naming them. I have been remiss."

He gave her the respectful woman's greeting of his people, tucking his chin, and bowing his shoulders by folding in from high on his waist. "I am Odan, a Groundbear, and a Council Skymage." His Council status was why he was skirted and bare-chested, although he was well aware most men wore shirts in the Cities. Quite frankly, his clothes had been the last thing on his mind.

When he lifted, she seemed to be searching his face, studying him for the first time. He returned the look, noting her rounded cheeks, her tiny, perfectly formed blunt nose, delicate jaw, and large eyes with light lashes. Her brows were elegant arches, her skin flawless but too pale. The only unsophisticated thing about her was her wide mouth. It would have dominated her face if not for her eerie eyes. The lips were plump, pouting, and deeply curved to the point of lushness.

He knew she would see no matching polish on his face. He was tan, although not darkly so, and scarred, at a few places on his left cheek, his chin, and across his lower lip. His hair never lay straight, and like most groundbears, wasn't particularly silky. It was more bushy and frizzy, the color of oak bark, a grayish-brown. His eyes were nice, women said, easily shifting from blue to gray. Standing three handspans taller than her, she had to tip her head back to look up at him, even at her distance.

"I don't know what that animal is."

Her hesitant offering was an apology for the whole sorry meeting. He bowed to her again, accepting it, and offering his own. "I will send a drawing with the woman's guide to your room, if you'd like." And when she found out his beastspirit was a gritty burrower, she would no doubt be appalled.

She nodded, again hesitantly, like she wasn't sure she wanted to see it after all. He waited, but she didn't say anything else, so he held back a sigh of irritation and said

simply, "I'll see you at dinner." Maybe. Unless he could get her unassigned.

He left, and this time she didn't stop him.

Striding through the narrow, wooden halls of this grand Mage Guild compound in Second City, he managed to work off only some of his irritation by the time he blew into Rafe's room.

"Rafe! This is a disaster. She's worse than a pampered princess. How on earth did you agree to this? Just because she's at the top of their political rank doesn't mean she's the best person for the duty."

Rafe looked up from the table where he sat looking at a letter, drinking tea. His handsome young face showed initial surprise, but softened into amusement. Vivienne would approve of his velvet jacket, fitted to his wide shoulders, and his fine woolen trousers. He even wore a jeweled ring on one hand, a human affect. "There wasn't anything to agree to. The High Guild was presented with our Council's petition to hunt the beebees in the City, and they insisted on assigning one of their own to the venture. They outmaneuvered us when they had Vivienne assigned by personal Royal decree. Unless we wanted a lengthy political war by challenging the decision, we had to agree."

"What were they thinking! That proper lady in battle! The first time she sees a beebee, she'll cry. Or yell at it for not being properly dressed." Pacing to the tea set, he poured a cup and gulped it down. The dry, herbal taste was unfamiliar, vaguely bitter.

Rafe lounged back in his chair, crossing his ankles. At least he still wore Trux-style leather boots, made for stalking in the Wild. "Tell me what you really think of the Flame Curate," he chuckled.

"What I thought when I first met her doesn't even bear repeating." Odan leaned against the wall of the small room. "This isn't a game. There was another beebee attack last week." Three humans killed in Seventh City, and four Truxet wounded. "We need to stop them."

Odan's gut crawled with too-familiar frustration. Out there, moving freely through the Seven Cities, darkmages had found a way to hide from the Truxet, to build their power in a distant, unknown location. It was a source of rage and outrage among all his brother warriors that they'd failed to find this nest, failed to even discern it until one of the first kidnapped hawks had returned to them two weeks ago.

Odan had been given the assignment to hunt the darkmage's mysterious new pets, and couldn't wait to finally go on the offensive.

"That woman," he jabbed angrily in the general direction of her private study, "will be nothing but a hindrance. It's outrageous I had to wait two days to meet her and now she wants to train for three days, to 'prepare'!"

"She's the most powerful firemage I've ever met." Rafe shrugged. "And I'm not saying she's the most powerful human, I'm saying I've seen her do things that would astound at Autumnal. She's got control you'll need fighting in the Cities or the forests. Vivienne has a gift we'll use to burn the lizard birds to Ash. Enhanced by your Air, I have no doubt whatsoever they will die."

Springing up to pace around the small room, Odan sneered at the lovely tapestry of the Six Elements, the framed painting of laughing children, and the delicately painted wooden slat walls. Humans put such emphasis on such things, then turned a blind eye to what really mattered—honor. "This isn't about catching and killing a few beebees, although I can't say I'm not looking forward to it." Maybe he'd let himself imagine one he

killed to be the one who had taken some of the kidnapped hawks. One of the ones who'd brought them to be tortured and killed to power the disgusting darkmages. "Right now only the Royals, the Mage High Guild, and our people know the beebees are targeting humans who have had contact with Truxet. I need to have an effective partner so we can prevent the beebees from attacking anyone else."

In fact, it had been their first human target, a young girl adopted by a sandcat, who had named them Big Birdies. The Truxet warriors had decided to shorten the name to beebees, although the humans were calling the mage-created creatures lizard birds.

Rafe tossed back his tea with a sigh. "Exactly. We have to stop them before the City populace knows they've been sent to attack anyone who's had contact with us. The hysteria and panic will create such a backlash that the Royals will be forced to ask us to vacate the Cities, playing right into the darkmages' hands."

Images played through Odan's mind, of dark-cloaked figures with bloody hands striding boldly through the streets, killing freely, gleefully, growing more powerful. "They'd ask us back soon enough. The fact is, we're more resistant to darkcraft. We can sense it and withstand it to a much greater degree." His fists clenched and unclenched. What kind of horror had Fynn faced before he'd died in that first, failed foray into the darkmage's secret Fortress? Fynn, his brother-in-arms, a good fighter and better friend. One who knew the bittersweet path of an alpha Council warrior. They would never recover his body. "I need someone who will take this mission seriously. We don't have time for an afternoon off, let alone three days of polite maneuvering and 'preparation'. Surely there's someone else."

"It's easier to hold than it is to take. We don't want to be in a position to siege the people we need. Second City's Flame Curate has been assigned. There's an even bigger play going on here than control of the Cities. This is not the time to be closed out of the loop, out of favor with our allies, because you got your fur ruffled about your partner."

Odan stopped pacing to meet Rafe's hard eyes. "Fuck." It was easy to consider humans weaker, inferior, and less civilized. But for thousands of years, the Truxet had borne no women of their own. None. Every mate painstakingly wooed from her family, Guild, and City was human. "Fucking darkmages." Unmentioned openly, it was on every warrior's mind. The darkmages weren't just fighting to rule the Kingdom of the Seven Cities. They were working to destroy the eleven Truxet Clans entirely by cutting off their access to women.

Rafe nodded. "Just so."

Odan rolled his shoulders. "This is more than me not liking her attitude. She's not a warrior. I don't like the idea of any woman standing before a dark-sent mage-creature, but I've met a few human women who have trained, and could handle it. She's not one of them." More dejected now that he'd been reminded again of the masterful maneuvering the darkmages had set in place, Odan sat across from Rafe. "The woman I met upstairs is an academic. A coddled, pristine—"

Rafe was shaking his head in disagreement and interrupted. "She's not going to wield a sword, but she's tenacious, determined—"

Odan interrupted in return. "She couldn't even stand her ground when I pushed into her personal space, Rafe!"

The man leaned forward, his face sharp and eager. "Really? Did she seem guilty? Did she sting any of your instincts?"

Odan was taken aback. "No, not guilty." His groundbear had been so interested in her. He shook his head. "It felt like shyness, or disapproval."

Rafe relaxed and shrugged. "After your first training session, tell me again she's not right for this duty. Then I'll take your petition before the High Guild, and prepare a request for Royal intervention. In the meantime, keep your senses wide open."

Odan sighed heavily, glowering at the man who sat there looking all too human and soft.

Rafe grinned. "I want to see your face the first time you see her work. She can throw more fire than you can imagine."

Odan worked his jaw. He knew the man understood the stakes. The beebees had to be stopped before they started a backlash against the Truxet who patrolled the Seven Cities. Currently, the Truxet presence forced the darkmages to work in the shadows. If they were driven out of the cities over fear of the beebees, the darkmages would easily overpower human City guards. Odan didn't understand where Rafe's relaxed acceptance of such an unsuitable partner placement came from. "Aren't you old enough to know it's not the size of the cock that matters?"

Rafe burst out laughing. "Aren't you?"

Leaning forward, Odan glared at him. "I don't care how big or how perfect a fireball she can throw. When a tree-sized creature is slashing at her, screaming for her blood, moving faster than thought, she won't have the ability to react with trained response, to improvise in battle. I doubt very much she has a killing instinct. Many humans don't have the dominance and aggression needed to truly want to win a physical fight. I'm not irritated because of her gender. I doubt her skills and attitude."

Rafe stroked his chin thoughtfully. "You're having dinner tonight in the High Guild's private meeting room."

Odan groaned. "I suppose."

"I want you to keep on alert. Also, ask her to play her juggling game with you."

Enough was enough. Surging to his feet, he stomped toward the door. "Sure. We'll play games while the darkmages work toward banishing us from the Cities, while reports of dozens more missing humans come trickling in. I'm sure I'll be very impressed with her juggling. I haven't done it since I was fourteen, after all."

"Odan—"

He wasn't in the mood to listen to any more of Rafe's platitudes. "No, you'll have to excuse me. I have a book to drop off at the Flame Curate's rooms, and one to read myself."

Chapter Two

Vivienne sat on the soft purple velvet cushions before the open window. Pulling the last of the pins from her headdress, she slid it off her head, massaging her wounded nape. So much for impressing her new partner. The river wolves, or watercoasters as he'd called them, rolled and barked in the river below her, one of the few wild creatures allowed inside the Walls of the City. The warm sun was already fading before the cool evening air blowing in. It was high summer for Second City, but barely warm enough for a heat lover like her to go without a coat. She'd already stripped off the heavy outer-dress, sadly stroking the glossy fur. She never wanted to wear it again, which made no sense, as the creatures were already dead, and having the fur they'd been killed for go to waste seemed another insult.

Licking her lips, and ignoring the prickling from the cool breeze blowing over her matted braid, she forced her eyes back to the book lying open on her lap. When her maid Jo had come to her door to tell her a book had been delivered by the Beast himself, and also to gossip that angry raised voices had been heard from Representative Rafe's room, she'd stopped preparing for Alfons' revelation tonight. All their preparation, the months of hunting the defilers of the elements, was about to pay off. Tonight they'd confront the darkmages working among the Guild. Shuffling the reports from the aides of the other elements aside, she eagerly settled down with the book, telling herself she had at least five minutes before she had to approve a final emergency chain of command.

He'd called it a woman's guide. Apparently, it was meant for one of the poor souls who had decided to forsake the Cities and align herself to the harsh isolation and bestial rule of the Truxet. The Beasts called them "the adopted" but many in the Cities named them traitor, slave, or skinlicker. It was true the Truxet expected Guilds to put "volunteer" women forward in return for guard or investigation services, but of course would never admit to such a crass outright exchange. It was simply the way of the world. The Beasts worked for humans because they needed women. That the women were given some choice of husband and some consideration and care was beside the point to her. For truly, they were lost to all they'd known before. Everyone knew that a woman "adopted" by the Beasts was never allowed to return to her home City. She was expected to ignore her former life, and adopt theirs. Such raw injustice had always made her stomach churn.

Vivienne pulled her braid over her shoulder and began to idly undo it as she studied the illustrated sequence before her. A man, large and heavily muscled, stood nude on the left. On the right, a furred animal on four thick paws was labeled "bear." In between the two were several variations on a human shape, showing the progression of a Beast's shifting form.

"Bear." Vivienne said it aloud, studying the snout, the claws, the hulking shoulders and large hindquarters. The drawing was exquisite, rendered by a true artist. The creature's eyes gleamed with the same intelligence throughout the sequence. For indeed, it was the same soul revealed in the stages of an appallingly fascinating transformation.

Free of the braid, her hair sprang into the loose red-gold curls she loathed. The nearly gossamer strands fluttered and floated in the breeze from the open window. Breathing the sun-scented pine air deep, she looked again at each drawing. First the neck thickened.

Then the arms lengthened. Claws sprouted, upper and lower. Fangs, snout, and light fur erupted. Extra muscles bunched on the wider, taller form. Brushing the image before the bear with her thumb, she stared, cheeks heating, at the model's genitals. Oh, yes. Everything transformed. And in this final stage before the beast appeared, the genitals were the most human thing about him.

"Battleform." Again, she tasted the word, stretching it.

She turned the page, heart beating. Yes, the battleform retained human genitals because those genitals were needed for this, their rite of marriage. Only it was more unbreakable, more sexual, more degrading, than a joyous declaration before Skyfather and Earthmother. Her eyes jumped, skimmed, blinked and reread again in disbelief. She'd heard whispers, even though she'd never really sought out information about the Beasts. Some of the whispers were wrong. Most were right. What was staring her in the face, in stark print, wasn't even conceivable to most well-bred Guild women. That the "volunteers" sent as payment by their Guilds, with Royal approval, knew nothing of this ordeal facing them burned in Vivienne's stomach. An outrage.

"A pit. Chosen Clan males gather around as honored witnesses." She licked her lips again, feeling them throb. Hearing her own voice whisper the words aloud didn't make them any less unreal. "Drugged, her mind intruded upon by her mate, his alpha, her spiritmage, and more distantly, a triad providing sacred space..."

Lifting her gaze to the frolicking watercoasters three stories below, she stared at them blindly. Her heart was in her throat. She'd so wanted to impress him. She wanted to be a respected, equal partner. She knew she was powerful, and she knew that wasn't enough. After the debacle with the Water Girl early in her life, Vivienne had struggled to become a better leader, and put her errors behind her. She enjoyed being a teacher, an experimenter, a thinker. She'd been received well as the Flame Curate of Second City. After experiencing five days in Truxet care as the Royal representative a week ago, and surviving the horror of the darkmage, she'd thought she was ready to meet a new partner with dignity. After all, she'd gone outside the Walls once already. She'd moved through the undefended Wild without crying hysterics, and she'd walked their earthen halls unharmed. She'd been more concerned with having to walk among the tangle of plants and hidden creatures than she'd been about her Beast partner.

Her fingers drifted up to her lips, the skin soft and damp. A shiver of sensation at her own touch brought the shock of him back to her. The study door opening, the frame filling with hard, bare skin. His skirt should have been silly, on a grown man. It hadn't been. It had been exotic and enticing, the way the hem shifted over his knees. What was beneath it? His jaw was so hewn and square, and he'd carried the scars of an experienced fighter. She swallowed, as she had then. He'd closed her door and swept the room with one dismissive flick of his light, icy eyes. The look he'd pinned on her had been so cold. So ... disappointed.

She was ridiculous, of course. There was no reason to have his regard. They merely had to kill together. Closing her eyes, she brushed her lower lip again. This time her mouth swelled with saliva. She positively hungered to kill them. *The jagged beak, the beady eyes, the plated neck and spiny back.* Oh, she wanted to see them burn, the lizard birds bred as darkmage hunting pets. She wanted to dance in their ashes.

Her eyes flicked open, blinked rapidly to clear the extra haze of green mist from her sight. She breathed deep, reining in her fury. The image on the page was of three men

standing equidistant around a circular pit, their hands outstretched with a beam of craft soaring the open distance between their palms. A hazy row of more distant men stood beyond. In the pit was a lightly sketched, indistinct suggestion of two bodies entwined. One was considerably larger than the other. She closed the book with a hard thump.

None of it mattered. She was the Flame Curate, tasked with expanding the boundaries of firemagery. She sat on the Senate, and refused to believe one of the other five who sat with her as custodians of the Guild hadn't known about the growing darkness in their midst. Tonight the final act of one long mission would draw to a close, as another opened. Nothing must interfere with either. They were more important than her. More essential than her desires, her fears.

She reached for the cup sitting on the ledge of the open window. Drinking the bitter sludge, she shuddered as it coated her mouth and throat, then burned her sinuses open. Her aide Amriet had argued with her one last time yesterday, but Vivienne had remained steadfast. She drank the potion, even as she knew it was at the heart of her people's failure. The Guild had created this potion, and the darkmages had made good use of it. Yet even knowing that, it had taken years, until the Cities were at the brink of ruin, before the Guild would give up the power the potion had given them to avoid the Beasts. She knew the privacy potion's time had come to an end, and her skin shriveled to think of going without it.

The memory of the Water Girl's tear-filled words hammered at her, as they always did. *When the big birds fly over the Cities, the clawed beast will find you. You'll shed your attachments, your small world surrounded by darkness. He'll strip away your layers, even your fire, until you are nothing but a woman. When he has your scent, no choices will be left to you, and you will be bound.* Those words had struck her young soul, so recently triumphant at breaking free of her mother's control. She'd held the young Truthteller's right fist to the bed as Alfons sealed the collar on her screaming throat. They'd tortured an innocent in the name of their own fear. Vivienne had been twenty-three, and she would remember the look on Rowan's face when the collar closed until the day she died. What had happened to Rowan, the strange watermage, after High Guild members from the Royal City had taken her away? Vivienne shuddered, swallowing hard to push the memories, more bitter than her potion, down.

A decade had gone by and she'd worked so hard. She'd drenched herself in responsibility, yearning to replace the poor decisions of that incident with the strange watermage with a stronger, better Flame Curate. She turned from the old echo of angry words like ice on her soul, setting the glass down with a hard clack. Perhaps she was wrong to still fight against the future the prophetess had lain out. But she gave freely to others, too. She'd faced giving up her life when she journeyed into that Fortress, and she'd give up her life to battle the lizard birds, if necessary. Reaching up, out of time to muse over Beasts, she closed the window firmly.

The Cities were frighteningly close to falling. It might not appear that way to others, but she saw where the coals lay. The High Guild was vain and in denial. The Royals were infected. The populace was seething. The darkmages had a position of power the Beasts couldn't identify, for once. The logs were all in place, and the tinder was smoking. The bonfire was about to begin. All she could do was her part. It wasn't much. But fire was her game, and the old adage about getting burned didn't apply to her.

* * * *

The Cities had existed for as long as the Clans. Where the clanhomes were treasured, secure outposts blending with nature, the Walled Cities were intrusive scars in defiance of it. Odan marveled at how noisy the twisting, composite structure of the Mage Guild was. Every bit of it creaked and groaned, thumping with human movement heard right through the wooden warren. The sun was low on the horizon, but its heat still lingered. The windows were all propped open, and like anywhere inside the Walls, the sounds of people's voices and activity drifted inside.

It didn't bother him, as the Burrow, the clanhome of the Groundbears, was also a closely built warren of tunnels seething with life. Pausing at one open window, he took a moment to appreciate children playing in the courtyard below. It was something he missed, living with the Council's skymages in River Mountain. One of several painful things he missed from home. Like a severed tail.

"If they bother you, I can have the windows closed."

He turned away, suppressing the sigh of dread he felt for this meal. Schooling his face into the bland, carefully noncommittal face he used for his volatile Clan Alpha Gren, he strode forward. Groundbear hissed, shook himself, and turned away.

"They don't bother me." He stood at the table, looking at the lovely setting. He hadn't eaten with a woman, like this, out in an eatery ... in ages. "I'd be worried about someone who found the joyful sounds of children playing a bother."

The Flame Curate sat back in her chair, cradling a wine glass. It was interesting that she'd changed her tactics so openly. A different woman sat before him. Her style was more casual, and it matched an aura of relaxation around her. She'd calmed. "Would you care for some wine?"

"Sure." He poured the excellent-smelling red liquid, trying to get a handle on why she'd been gussied up like royalty earlier, but willing to appear normal now.

Her hair was strawberry-blonde, the loose strands glinting along her hairline where they escaped the drawn-back bun. Her blouse was loose and short sleeved, a simple peach-toned fabric, but with bright embroidered flowers at the neckline. Her brown skirt was long and flowing, extremely modest, ending with a flounce of bright green. The green was pine-dark, as opposed to the fresh-grass vivid wash of her magecraft-tinted eyes, still swirling, still hiding her thoughts. She sipped from her glass goblet, and he thought again that her lips were gorgeously sensual on such a composed, drawn-down woman. The wine tinted them darker, and she rolled them in, licking them as he watched.

He took a sip, too, and for some reason, the burst of tart velvet in his mouth made him think of tasting her. He reached for some bread. "Did you have time to look at the woman's guide?" Hopefully it had clarified to her just how powerful his culture was.

"I did." She picked up an already buttered half roll on her plate and bit into it decisively. "Fascinating. I'm surprised you shared it, when it is obviously full of information you don't freely show unadopted women."

"I hope the information helps us work more smoothly together." He was proud of that phrasing. Way to sidestep her subtle, leading criticism. "Do you have any questions for me about what you learned?" It still niggled at him, that he was missing something important about her. His gaze swept her again. She was lovely, if a little small and pale for his tastes. And ridiculously uptight.

"If you truly respect and care for the adopted women as you say, why then are they kept from all they knew? It makes you look extremely guilty, to banish them from their

families, as if you are hiding them away, preventing them from communicating with any who would support them."

"It's only been during the Tallen Dynasty that women truly have had a nominal say in their adoption." The royal Tallen family had ruled for several hundred years now, and were extremely progressive compared to prior dynasties. "People still perceive the women as payment for our services, but in truth, the exchange is dramatically different from the past, when women were openly given to us, regardless of their wishes. Our ways are as slow to change as your perceptions. Some laws should be changed. That is one I am convinced will change in my lifetime."

She danced her fingers over the soft, loosely woven napkin. Apparently, she considered his words with care. "There wasn't much information about the individual Clans in your guide."

Nothing to say to that, since it wasn't a book intended to clarify them. The bread was delicious, full of seeds and grains, meaty and textured. "Good bread."

She rolled her wine glass, and the red swirled. "You are a groundbear. I had never seen an image of that animal before. I checked the Guild's bestiary reference. The ancient terms used for the creature are harrier, badger, or sand hog. They live in social groups, and are nocturnal."

He cocked his head at her. "Yes?" What kind of response should he give to such a recitation?

"Are you nocturnal?"

"I myself enjoy the night, but all my life I've trained to wake at dawn. I'm also a good sleeper, and so I would say I'm more of a morning person now." Her eyes definitely distracted him. He forced himself to relax his belly and trust she wasn't about to lose control of the surging magecraft the green mist foretold in the Truxet. And he couldn't help but stare into them, wondering if he'd glimpse her true eye color behind the mist. This must be the part of her making him uneasy. The fact he couldn't see her eyes to gauge her mood, or even her line of sight that well. "And you?"

"Excuse me?"

"Are you nocturnal?"

"I do not have a beastspirit. Of course I am not."

He slugged back a big mouthful of the wine. "So, you've never met a person who seemed to gain energy as the sun went down?"

"Interesting. I assumed that was a habit, not a biological urge. Perhaps humans have more beast in us than we are given credit for." She reached for a delicate bell. The sound tinkled out and she set it down.

Her stilted honesty fascinated him. He glanced again at the colorful tapestries. Old, skilled. The room was long, with a door on each end, two fireplaces on the wall opposite the windows, and a high, vaulted ceiling. But their table was set in the corner, near the windows and a tapestry depicting bodycraft.

He decided to let her avoid the ridiculous conversation where she attempted to draw bestial parallels with his groundbear and his human self. "You should know that my best secondary is bodycraft. I hope I'll have no call to need it, but it's there," he said. An image of Vivienne lying still and bloodied came to him. It surprised him. She wasn't meant to be defenseless, lax, wounded. He shook his head once. It wouldn't happen. *Imagine only success, train for failure.*

He nodded to the tapestry and she glanced at it. He grinned at her. "I'm good with flesh." Holding the toothy grin, he met her startled gaze. Where had that flirtatious comment come from? He regretted it instantly. "Do you have a secondary?"

"I've heard that Beas—Truxet can call more than one element."

"Yes. Most of our warriors can use all of the Six to some degree. It's my experience this is not true for most humans, however."

A server came through the door behind her, carrying a tray. He served them each three plates of food, including a soup. Odan stirred his. "Second City is obsessed with soup. It's the middle of summer, but you still want soup."

Her little chin went up. "This is chilled fruit soup. Very refreshing."

He tried it. She was right. He thought he'd save that for dessert. She stirred hers with a reluctance he thought must have nothing to do with the food, but more to do with him.

"I will tell you this, but I am sharing it for the good of the mission. It is not common knowledge and I ask that you keep it that way."

"All right." What did his dour little curate have as her secret?

"I do call another element."

He waited, politely cutting his food into small morsels. The vegetables, like all City greens, were old. The meat was tough and horrendously spiced. He chewed, refusing to gag on the pepper. Something about the scent of spices, bread, and wine stirred his instincts that something was wrong. He paused and glanced at her, pushing her food around. Mentally shaking it off, he focused on eating. He had to maintain his energy.

He was halfway through the main plate before she blurted out, "Aren't you going to say anything?"

"Well, I agree, it is useful to know for the mission. It would be more useful if you told me which one, and if you've trained for offense with it."

She stared at him.

Apparently he was not sufficiently awed over her revelation. He laid down his fork. "Did you fear saying it out loud? What would happen if people knew?"

"I would be..." She breathed sharply.

He leaned forward, and soothed her. "I will not tell your people, Vivienne."

She blinked quickly, the green mist seeping down her cheeks. He had the strangest urge to wipe it away, but it quickly dissipated. She took a bite of meat, chewed quickly. After a hard swig of wine, she put her hands in her lap. "Body. I have some small bodycraft as well. I've barely used it."

He nodded. "All right."

Eventually, she began to eat again, so he did, too.

When he was working on his soup, she whispered, "I've never done anything with bodycraft except aid in healing burns I acquire."

He shrugged. He could handle any burns they acquired. "Where were you intending for us to practice? How private is it?"

"The Guild has a training hall in the basement. I can arrange for it to be private, but..."

He nodded. "Night whispers."

"Just so. After we see how the initial partnering goes, we can discuss how we'll station ourselves. It would be wise to rehearse in the actual location we'll fight from." She had finished, and poured another glass of wine.

The fact she had an orderly expectation for how they'd progress with this, like it was a careful chess match, amused him. He held his glass out for more. "Did you just call it a rehearsal? This isn't a performance."

She rolled the carafe expertly. "A figure of speech. And I beg to differ. We are performing to reassure the citizens, and to defy the darkmages."

He grunted. "We'll focus on the basics tomorrow morning, drilling on speed and accuracy." No need to get her riled over her meal that he had every intention of being deep in the Wild by midmorning. He wasn't about to parade his abilities for the amusement of the Mage Guild. "How often do you drill on offensive craft?"

"Obviously, rarely. I am no guard to train for violence. I taught a class in it for some top powers a few years ago. It's just very costly and difficult to arrange for meetings between members of different Cities."

He almost rolled his eyes, but refrained. Humans acted as if going from one City to another was vast exploration. Only the very wealthy, or the carefully chosen representatives of various Guilds did so. People who changed Cities were looked upon with suspicion. A trip between the two most distant Cities, Second and Sixth, would be a hard two-week run for a Trux warrior. Of course, with their ancient sifting stones scattered across Vladaya, they rarely had to travel such distances unless they wanted to. And then most warriors ran east, away from the sea, toward their clanhomes.

The sifting stones were ancient magic, anchors through which the Clans rode the Six, jumping through space in a heartbeat. Because of the way the elements had to be gathered into control, then carefully loosened, it was likened to *sifting* one's soul through time. It had been a blow a few years ago when a lone alpha discovered darkmages controlled unknown stones. They now knew there were two networks of sifting stones.

She continued, "Since I was assigned the High Guild's offense representative two days ago, I have, of course, trained."

He raised a brow. Gee, two whole days of practice. He doubted she'd given it much time. "Oh? What techniques do you use?"

"I try to increase my reflexes with moving targets, naturally. Then I focus on maximum heat with minimal delay, and collapsing the heat upon itself."

Odan nodded. Leaning back in his chair, he stretched out his legs. "I hope we will not have to fight over City sky. But even over the forest, it would be helpful if we can minimize the damage."

"All City Walls are spelled against weather, including fire. Even if a forest fire starts close, the City will still be safe."

He chewed on his lip before answering mildly, "There are people outside the City Walls who would not be, and the forest is not so easily regenerated. It takes years."

"Wildlings." It was hard to make those lips look thin, but she managed. "You should look to them for your elusive darkmages."

"We have clear, direct reports from the survivors of the Fortress escape that the darkmages are operating in all the Cities under false and changing personas. Directly under the nose of, if not with assistance by, the Mage Guild." She snapped rigid at that dig, but he kept going. "It is to the detriment of the Cities that there is so little contact between them. There is no way to verify someone's credentials or identity."

"The filth clinging outside the City Walls are desperate, violent, and Guildless. They are a step away from being darkmages themselves, the way they feed on misery. The

High Guild petitioned your Council days ago to begin an investigation there. I would like word on its progress before we finish our training."

No comment on his dig about the Guild's failure to notice a massive and long-term movement in their midst. Possibly in her own compound. "I'll work on that for you."

She poured more wine. Her fourth glass with him. The smell was rich in the air, rich in her breath. He shouldn't be able to smell it so clearly... There was something he was missing, by Mist.

"I did my reading as well. I was surprised to learn every young woman of good standing in her Guild should try to attain at least three marriageable beaux before deciding upon a lover."

Her gaze slid to the windows. She smiled. That lush mouth, with that small, private smile, shocked him with sudden heat. He scowled, shifting to distract his tightening groin. None of that. None. Not with her. Especially not with her.

"Did that surprise you? Yes, at least three."

She was still smiling that fond, pleased smile, by Bone. He clenched his jaw. "Did you have any questions for me, about what you read?"

Her smile faded. Perversely, he was disappointed. She looked so different without it. So unlikable.

"It was very enlightening. Thank you for sharing it. I realize now that your bare-chested and skirted appearance denotes your status. You have had to live apart from your Clan, due to the fact your power is a natural goad to your Clan leader."

He nodded, depressed by the fact she'd picked out the one aspect of his life he didn't want to discuss. "I live with the other alpha skymages at the Council's seat, River Mountain. I return to the Burrow sporadically for short visits, and of course, the Clan gathers every year at Autumnal."

"You miss living with your Clan?"

His breath caught at the sudden emotion. *Gren's teeth ripping into his throat. Walking away from his mother. Laughing as he pounded through the twisting tunnels of the Burrow, tripping on the pack who ran around him.* "It's hard to know that you belong somewhere, yet your destiny calls you elsewhere."

She surged forward, reaching out to him across the table. Her grip on the wine glass was white-knuckled. "Why did you say that?"

Holding very still, he glanced at the small hand outstretched to him. Was it polite instinct that made him want to take it? Well, he wouldn't. "We were talking about how I had to live apart from my Clan. I shared my feelings."

Her eyes were enormous, but the green still swirled across them, ever changing. She slumped into her chair. "Oh... Oh."

He could tell she was lost in unhappy thoughts. He was so used to her sass and poise already it was strange to see her appear so ... human. "Flame Curate, we truly should begin at least a demonstration of our abilities tonight. I've been here since early afternoon. To wait until tomorrow to begin our work together is a waste."

She nodded, gathering herself. He could see her pull energy in, her spine straightening, her shoulders and chin again tilting to the haughty angle he'd seen before. "All right. I have a little more time before other duties claim me."

*

She'd drunk too much wine. Vivienne enjoyed wine—the heat, the softening—

almost too much. As she took him to the ramparts, she struggled to contain her puffing breath. She told herself firmly she was done trying to impress him, but her pride wouldn't let her gasp or slow. When they gained the watchman's lane around the edge of the steeply pitched roof, she leaned against the warm slate shingles. *Stay away from the edge, Lady Winelegs.* The sky was alight with color, which she adored. Black was so boring. She flicked a glance at how his skirt rose to mid-thigh when he propped one foot on the knee-high wall that bordered the lane in a poor attempt at safety.

Well, all right. Sometimes black looked good. What would he think if she asked him about the underwear he wore beneath his skirt? Probably stare at her with that flat, snowy silver gaze of his. It had glinted blue once and again at dinner, but generally was a cold gray. Perhaps he wore nothing. She doubted it. After all, a warrior ready for battle at any moment would want to protect his key. She squeezed her tummy in tight as he stood and moved past her, brushing so close his skirt brushed hers. The squeeze tightened lower places too, reminding her that she had a lock made for his key, as the saying went in the tavern.

Remember that pit in the book, she scolded herself. Time to see some performance from the star warrior their Council had sent her. "Show me your fire."

Without even looking at her, he held up his hand and produced a fireball. Literally, it was a sphere of condensed heat shimmering in the air, seething with convection, covered with swirling red tendrils. He did it without even a grounding breath, as a natural gesture, while he continued to peruse the aerial view of the City.

She was shocked. It was one thing to be constantly told Beasts had more raw craft than humans. But suddenly she believed it. And he was a skymage. "Bring the heat corona in. Tighten the sphere of influence."

He glanced at her, and shrank his ball to fist-size, where it still hovered over his open palm.

"No. Keep the ball the same size it was before."

He grew it again, as easy as breathing. Had he trained for ten years, as humans did, before he'd achieved this? But he didn't understand how to control the subtleties of the heat he'd crafted. It was a master's point, and she wondered if he'd be able to perform it.

"Look at your heat signature. It's half again as wide as the ball. Draw that in, trapping the heat closer to the exact size of the ball."

Frowning, he looked at his ball. She studied the thickness of his chest, the width of his neck, how his biceps were as big as her face. He was a very large man. Too big for her, literally. He'd managed to bring the heat in to within a fingerlength of the ball's edge. "Better. Think of drawing the heat off the outer surface, and stuffing it into an inner core."

He nodded. The look of concentration on his face reminded her of her youngest students. The corona wavered, spiked, shrank and shimmered, then stabilized.

"Very good." It was actually a relief to her, to see this proof that he did have to learn and train at advanced magecraft, somewhat. He wasn't perfectly all powerful.

"Have you ever been in combat?" He transferred the ball to his other hand, and the heat corona flared. He stared at it, drawing it in with flares and dives.

The first memory surprised her in a sudden assault, rocking her shoulders back against the warm slate squares. *A black-haired girl in tears, her hands shackled, her throat bound. Curt, hushed voices, and a bodymage to freeze her screams.* Vivienne

swallowed, stuffing that memory back into its box of shame.

She opened her mouth to tell him the truth, and it unaccountably seized closed. No amount of swallowing would let her get the words out. *Why yes, as a matter of fact. Just a week ago, I was in your River Mountain. I was part of the first foray to the darkmage Fortress, and watched five men die without a blow. I saw a lizard bird lunge its massive head through the tiny stone doorway to shatter the chest of a virile warrior while his body was in midfall. Then the sixth died in my arms after pulling us back to safety.* She choked, coughed, and looked out at the rolling hills of pine, forbidding dark green spikes stretching on forever.

"You have." His quiet words of acceptance, without question, let her breathe again. But the way he said them told her he didn't know about the Fortress. Why hadn't his people told him she'd been the Mage Guild's representative on that first disastrous foray after the hawk's escape?

She nodded. Turning to study him as he stood nonchalantly on the precipice of a five-story tower, she wondered if she'd watch a lizard bird spear his chest, before or after his death. Licking her lips, she spoke quietly into the still summer twilight. "I've dispersed wildlings who were attacking the southern Guild Gate. I've also helped shatter several fuzzies who have appeared in the City over the years. My first was when I was only eleven."

He stirred at that. "Where were the Truxet? We should have handled it."

"A fuzzy in a City is a race against time. Your people have dispersed a few as well. But they tend to pop up near the Gates, and near the Mage Guild compound."

"Did anyone die?"

She nodded. "Yes. And injured. And there were fires."

Fuzzies were pockets of Wild craft that drifted in nearly invisible shimmers, burning anything in their path. Beyond the Cities, they didn't set fires often, instead blackening living creatures to char while generally leaving vegetation unharmed.

"I don't understand why your people name such dangerous things with such nonsensical, whimsical names. To call such wisps of floating death 'fuzzies' is absurd. And now you've named the lizard birds 'beebees'."

"Did we name the fuzzy?" He sounded genuinely curious, which made her want to grind her teeth.

"I believe so."

"Interesting. If we did, it was so long ago, the story is not common knowledge among the Clans. I could ask a historian."

"Not necessary." Now her teeth *were* gritted.

"Well, to answer your question, it is an old and time-honored warrior's trick. You do not fear your enemies. You taunt them, you belittle them. You control them, even with your words. In the beebee's case, the first person to survive an attack was a four-year-old human female. She called it a Big Birdy, and as that label is beyond even our dignity, we shortened it, while allowing her the warrior's due of naming it.

"So you see, your belief is erroneous. A human named them."

Vivienne had never heard that story, although she did know of the rescue of the wounded child, and how she'd been whisked away to the Clans, stolen forever. It had been part of her terms of joining the darkmage foray, that she meet the little girl and her mother. Both had been glowing with health and happiness. The little one, Eledi, had

shown no sign of her trauma, not even a scar. Her adopted father hadn't been so lucky.

The meeting had left Vivienne with other reasons to go sleepless, among her nightmares. The women she'd met at River Mountain had been, to a one, happy. She'd witnessed no signs of submission or oppression. It was still causing her a large amount of confusion as she readjusted her perceptions.

"Do you have a wife?" As soon as the question slipped out, she wanted to bite it back. She didn't want to know about loved ones he'd left behind, as she held his dying body.

The wait time he gave the question was odd. "No."

He didn't appear to be sure, the way he spoke the word reluctantly. Then he met her eyes, and it had been several moments since she'd seen the force of his gaze. His silver-blue eyes blazed beneath his shaggy salt-and-pepper hair. He turned and sat on the wall, knees spread, and she abruptly had a view of the tight leather shorts beneath his skirt. Heat rolled through her knees, and she stiffened them, ripping her gaze back to his.

"The Truxet Council has sent two teams into the darkmage Fortress so far. We are committed to identifying the location. I have a secondary mission. If we cannot kill a beebee with sufficient speed, and it appears to be retreating, I'm to follow it, any way possible."

Standing from the roof, she moved closer to him. "I thought they flew too fast for the hawks to trail them."

"I can fly faster."

She blinked. "You are a tunneling beast." Oh, dear. That came out wrong.

But he merely smiled. It was a wide grin that softened his fierce strong jaw and heavy brow. He looked handsome when he smiled, less of a brute. "I'm also an alpha Council skymage. I am the best at levitation in all the Truxet."

Every hair on her body stood on end. Alfons had been working on levitation for his entire life. At seventy-one, the High Guild skymage could levitate himself sedately along walkways, while circling objects around his head, also sedately. Unnerving. Now Odan was telling her he could fly himself fast enough to track a lizard bird.

Fighting the urge to scratch her crawling scalp, she instead murmured, "With me. You'll take me, too."

His smile disappeared. The blue of his eyes had faded with the darkening sky, and now his squint revealed only a flash of glinting paleness. His shoulders appeared to grow, his neck nearly as wide as his head, his jaw tightening into a sharp square. "No. You'll be left behind. Possibly in the Wild. So some of our training will focus on how to get you through the forest safely."

That thought did nothing to settle the hairs still standing at attention along her arms. She resorted to rubbing them. "I've only briefly ventured into the Wild's fringes." And that had been with a Beast guide as he took her to River Mountain and back. "But you're talking about being far from the Cities."

"Yes. Tomorrow morning, an hour past dawn, the time for controlled Guild niceties is over. We're on the hunt." He gestured to her skirt. "Treated leather would be best. I brought an outfit I'll have delivered to your room."

Oh. She did *not* find this acceptable. She squared her shoulders. "I'll dress myself, thank you. I have a battle dress."

"You'll wear what I give you because it's withstood trials, and I set the spells myself."

I'm not bothering with games in your basement or a show for the Guild. We'll head out immediately. I have a backpack for you as well. Bring three pairs of the warmest, thickest wool socks you have, and any mage tools you can use in battle. Nothing else."

"Food? Underwear? Soap?" Her voice was cold with sarcasm, but she didn't care. The softness of the wine had left her system. "I—"

"You'll follow my experienced lead, just as I'll follow yours when it comes to fire attacks. I'll provide the food, *if* you keep that snotty tongue in your head, underwear is a luxury not suited to the Wild, and soap does nothing but announce your presence to every intelligent nose in the area. Which I will not allow."

She inched into his personal space, leaning down toward his face. She knew it was aggressive posture. What a pompous ass. "You are not the leader of this team."

"You're awfully close to my mouth, Lady. Are you sure you want to be there?" His eyes narrowed to slits, shadowed, like his voice.

"This is a partnership. There is *nothing*—"

His hand was hot on the back of her skull, heavy and large. But not as large, heavy, and hot as his mouth when it covered hers. He kissed her! Her! With a strong jaw that forced hers open, soft lips that trampled hers, and a tongue that tasted of wine and skimmed the edge of her teeth. Then the world tipped as he stood, his body sliding, bare skin over her thin embroidered shirt, tight up against hers. His thighs were so hard, and her hands flailed along his arms, stung by his bare skin, too flustered to steady herself on him. His lips pulled away from hers in a slow, savoring glide.

Blinking, caught between shock and fury, she stared at a masked warrior glaring down at her. His face was *striped*. Swooping, slashing black marks trailed up both sides of his nose, between his eyebrows, and up his forehead to disappear into his hair. Another pair flared wide from his nostrils, skimmed his cheekbones, and cut along the outer edge of his eyes and brows to disappear into his hairline at his temples. His eyes were narrow, and his upper lip lifted, revealing sharp white teeth. The passionate kiss she'd just been subjected to couldn't possibly have come from the destroyer's face she now stared into.

"Who are you?" she asked without thinking.

"I'm your partner, your team leader, and your trainer. I'm also royally irritated you're still more interested in having a civilized bottle of wine than *getting started*." His hand tightened briefly on the back of her head, and then he slid away, again with a sensation of reluctance.

He stepped back, *up*, onto the foot-wide wall. She staggered back a step to keep him in her sights, her neck tipped as far as possible so as not to break his gaze.

"Quit arguing with me, Flame Curate and High Guild representative Vivienne who doesn't smell right. You'll wear the clothes I send, without underwear, and pack the bag I send, without wine, and meet me, well fed, after dawn. We'll get the rhythm of a basic attack, and then we'll wait, poised. Because I've lost the last friend I'm going to lose to darkcraft, and every single one of their damned beebees will burn before they ever touch another human. Even if I have to drag you screaming by your sunset hair into the forest to do it."

Her tingling mouth was still damp and hanging open, her heart still pumping fury through her blood, defense of her intentions still roaring in her ears, when he stepped backward off the wall. She lunged for him, but he was four bodylengths beyond in one blink. And then he *stayed there*. The bastard gave her a jaunty little wave and soared in a

tight arc, until his head was pointing down, his arms tight along his sides. He spiraled toward the ground. Her heart stopped. Zooming up at the last minute over the Baker's Guild roof, he vanished in a line of blurred speed.

Vivienne's knees gave out. She sat with a plop on the gray cobbles and watched the last of the lavender light fade into purple and black. She was still shaking with fury by the time the sky multiplied the stars. His power didn't give him the right to judge her.

Footsteps sounded on the scaffolding below, and then a slow tread came up the ladder. She turned to look.

It was Amriet, her assistant. "A report came in that he is in a pub near the Beast's hostel. Since our watches on the exits didn't report him leaving, how did he leave?"

He *flew*. "By flexing the hot air inside his head. What an asshole of a showoff."

Amriet raised her brows. "An asshole, huh?"

She wasn't in the mood to be teased for her out-of-habit cursing. "Yes. A fucking asshole."

Amriet bit her lip.

Vivienne looked at her sharply. "Don't. Laugh."

"All mmright," she murmured while still biting her lip.

"Did he have anything else delivered to my apartment?"

"Not that I know of."

Well that meant he hadn't, because there was little Amriet didn't know of.

"Is there something I should be expecting?"

"Yes. Some clothes. Lay them out with my battle dress. Leave the sack by the one we packed today. I'll go through it again."

"Yes, Lady. The High Guild is meeting within the half hour. You just have time to change to your formal gown."

"I won't be changing. Go to Rafe. I want to meet him in his room in ten minutes. Thank you, Amriet. After that, you're dismissed. If we have the need to write after this confrontation, use the newest code."

She jumped when Amriet threw her soft weight against her, wrapping her arms around Vivienne's shoulders and resting their faces together. Vivienne took her hands up and clasped one of Amriet's arms. Feeling the life in it, the love and respect in her grip, made something tighten and strengthen inside. She would be able to do this tonight. She had reason to. "Be well, my friend."

"I have no doubt you'll succeed tonight. You've prepared thoroughly. It's your coming journey I fear. Come back, Vivienne."

Vivienne forced a smile to her face. "Stay out of Zosh's bed. Honestly, he does nothing but try to sleep his way through votes." Amriet's most recent suitor was ambitious and Vivienne was worried about his intentions.

"I don't vote with my vagina. I can take him for what he is, some handsome skin." Amriet tightened her grip, and then eased back.

Her brown eyes reflected the glowing green of Vivienne's back in the night. Her hands drifted away, but rested on Vivienne's thigh, unwilling to begin their separation. They'd been together for her entire tenure on the Senate, eight years, and even though the clock was ticking, Vivienne wasn't in any rush to see the back of her one true friend either.

"I'm worried about you. If he finds out you've taken the potion, he'll be so angry."

Amriet's soft voice was thick with emotion.

A sharp cramp gripped Vivienne's stomach. Both women knew she wasn't talking about the coming showdown at the Senate tonight, lizard birds or even the darkmages that sent them. Laughing humorlessly, Vivienne closed her eyes. She'd been worried this morning. She'd been more uneasy after meeting him. But after tonight, she was terrified. He'd *kissed* her. *Quit arguing with me, Flame Curate and High Guild representative Vivienne who doesn't smell right.*

"He's already sensed something is off. All I can say is that we'll soon be so busy, so focused on the mission, he won't have much time to pick at it." *Earthmother watch over me.*

"Earthmother watch over you." Amriet hugged her again briefly, and Vivienne fought not to cling. They'd worked so closely for so long she was no longer surprised when Amriet's thoughts echoed hers. She knew Amriet didn't agree with what she was doing, but her friend knew it was too late. The plan was in motion.

Amriet stood and climbed down the ladder. Pausing before her neatly braided head disappeared below, she looked up at Vivienne. "So you're set then?"

"I'll be in Rafe's room. Then I have the Senate meeting, and then I'll go to Mother's." Vivienne breathed through the twin pains that sentence caused. She wasn't sure which one would be worse. "I have to wrap up the last batch I made today in the lab. That would be a good time for Roge to meet me." Roge was her second, and would assume the command of the Flame's students when she left. "After that I'll be in the baths, and I'd like breakfast delivered. He's anxious to leave." She'd argue with him, and not just out of principle. She could really use a few more days to help settle the Guild from whatever trials erupted tonight.

Amriet nodded at the summary. "Good night."

"Good night."

Inhaling, Vivienne rose to her knees, leaning her elbows on the ineffective safety wall. She knew the watch was waiting on the level below to reassume their position up here. She didn't care. Just a few moments of solitude. Of stillness and peace. She loved it up here. Looking down at the buildings nearest the Mage compound, she wondered what it would be like to fly. To be able to go up, away from everyone, totally alone, whenever you wanted.

Around her, the glowing ring of the City Walls eased their ancient and powerful mist into the darkness. Their quiet might simply reinforced her burning desire to protect. This was her City, to a great extent. Darkmages would not sit here, in control and safe in the City Walls. They would not prey on people who had sheltered here for centuries in the midst of Wilderness, nor desecrate the Sacred Couple. They would not bring their slavery and foul needs here. She would see to it.

Chapter Three

For just a small space of time, Odan let himself rub shoulders with his brother warriors. The tavern was friendly ground, run by humans who accepted them, and had been serving the warriors stationed on duty in this City for generations.

He stalked in, heart still pounding with the taste of incredibly soft wine-coated lips. Scanning the noisy group, something inside him eased. It was good to be reminded of where he came from.

Neil called out, "Odan! Huzzah, come sit by me."

Waving to the older gray wolf, Odan nodded. Threading through the tables and benches, Odan called greetings to others. Some he knew, some he didn't. A lucky few of the men present were mated. It was always just a few. A Trux could always smell a mated man's woman on him. Recently, there had been more children, but there were still so few women willing to leave all they knew and join the Truxet Clans. The rumors held for centuries were slowly fading due to a new policy of openness, but even if they believed the warriors were not bestial rapists and slavers, it was still a leap of faith.

Odan swung an empty chair away from the wall and lifted it over a table full of humans engrossed with element dice. So yes, most of the men here were single. Young warriors were a highly sexed bunch, but with the Truxet, it was more than that. They were lonely down to their very souls. They needed the feminine to balance the raging beastspirit inside. It was a craving born at their first Change, and one never quenched until they'd been chosen by a woman who was their spiritual match, sealed with a Bond set by their Alpha.

"Nice to see you, Odan." Neil clapped him on the shoulder. "I heard a bit of how you were assigned to the hawk's woman. Well done of you, to see them mated."

Memories exploded in Odan's mind. *The taste of Sunny's cream, her tanned ribs arching into his touch, the hot orange stare of her mate as Odan eased the stone cock into her ass, making her cry out in need.* "She is a wonderful woman, and a good friend."

Neil nodded, motioning to a young male server to bring two mugs of ale. "I cannot even imagine the strength of those the hawk brought out of that place. To have to face life again with the memory of darkcraft would be horrible. She must be very strong."

Another memory came to him. *Sunny staring up at Fynn's outstretched hand, so exhausted and weak she couldn't even lift her scarred, thin body out of the tub. Her green eyes waited, calculating and troubled, and then she reached out and put her fingers in his.* And now Odan was the only man to hold that memory of her courage, since Fynn had been killed in the first foray to the darkmage Fortress.

"I'm on a new duty now. A more satisfying one." He raised his mug. "A toast! To discovering whether or not beebees make good eating!"

The men all lifted their leather mugs and crashed them together, roaring out for him. A paid woman was being passed around the table. The scent of her lust sweetened the air. The beer was dark in Second City, bitter after an evening of wine. Smiling, Odan tossed back the rest of his mug. He leaned into Neil. Neil leaned back in the comforting way of pack. Groundbears were a small Clan. Along with the wolves and sandcats, they were also social, living in groups even closer than a typical Clan.

"This is Lizzie. She's just visiting at the moment. Lady Lizzie is being picky about who she'll go upstairs with."

Neil's hand stroked down Odan's forearm, settling the last of his agitation. He breathed deep of the scent of men, and the wilder scent of Truxet. This wasn't the time to think of Sunny, or Fynn, or even Vivienne.

Neil turned his head, his dark eyes steady. "I felt you settle." He stroked Odan's arm again. Odan met his eyes, and let the man see his need.

It was a horror to be an alpha in a pack Clan. There could be only two at the clanhome, the Clan Alpha who held a more powerful essential beastspirit, and his Shield. Other alphas had to leave shortly after their maturity. Most went to River Mountain to serve their primary magecraft's expertise with the Council. It had been a long, hard journey of acceptance balanced with frustration and yes, anger. There were no other groundbear skymages. Odan was alone. Everyone knew, intellectually, that it was hard for alpha warriors to exist as Council, under a stricter training regimen, apart. But Neil understood better. To be apart from your pack was to be without a limb, something you relied on and needed psychologically.

"It's been awhile since Gren called me."

Neil's gray eyes glittered. Gren was not a popular Alpha, and indeed worked hard to earn his hated and feared reputation. And still, Odan missed being beneath the man's gaze. It was an alpha's bitter path, to be called to love the Clan Alpha, knowing you could be that man yourself, if you only wanted to offer challenge. And how could you challenge when the love ran so deep?

"Sleep with us tonight. I'm here with a gold pack youngling. He said he was cold last night." Neil huffed a laugh, as did Odan.

Once you were used to sleeping in a pile, it was hard to sleep with just one. It was even harder to sleep alone.

Just then the woman was passed to Neil, so he sat up straight. Instead of making room on his lap, he swung her up to sit before him on the table, ignoring the fact he knocked over half a dozen mugs with her ass. She laughed, clinging to his shoulders with admiring fingers. She had rich brown hair lightening to gold at the tips, and a very pretty face with even, delicate features.

"Hello, Lizzie. I'm Neil." He pulled down the gathered edge of her blouse, popping it beneath her breasts, framing them. The other four men at the table cheered. One pounded his mug.

Laughing, she covered her nipples with her hands. "It's not that kind of place, Neil. We'll be asked to leave!" Teasingly, she let the hard berry of her red nipple peek between her fingers.

"Ah, you caught me out. That's my plan." Neil darted forward and licked her puckered nipple.

She squealed. "But I haven't made up my mind!"

Their server was setting out more mugs. "Lizzie, cover up, or you won't be back."

She pouted, but Neil tugged her blouse back up over her heavy tits, covering her hands as well. She kept them beneath the thin fabric, massaging herself with deep, hard motions. She looked down at Neil, her lids drooping.

The scent of her kicked harder into the air. Something about it bothered Odan. Absently, he reached out and pushed her skirt up her thigh, until he'd drawn the knee-

length edge up to her hip, revealing her bare, damp folds. The men on the other side of the table groaned, leaning in, licking their lips and calling out energetic suggestions. Odan didn't take any of them, instead leaning forward and inhaling deeply. No, it wasn't her scent that bothered him. It was healthy, rich, and made saliva explode in his mouth. Still, something niggled at the back of his mind...

She widened her legs, shifting her ass on the table. One foot braced on Neil's far thigh, and the other braced on Odan's. "Oh, Skyfather send me. You guys are team players?"

All the men sighed at the explosion of cream scent.

Neil answered for them. "Yes." He glanced over at Odan's still face. Nudged him with his elbow. "We're pack. Pack works together."

He'd been on two duty assignments with Neil, and had trained with him a bit in his pre-Council days as well. They'd never shared a woman. He didn't know about the wolves, but even groundbears preferred to do their own fucking. "I have a big duty starting up tomorrow, Neil."

Neil shook his head. Standing, he planted his hip against Lizzie's core. She gasped. He slung one arm under her ass and picked her up one-handed, as if she were a toddler riding his hip. With his other he motioned with handtalk to Odan. *No words. Follow.* Turning his head, he bellowed out, "We're leaving, Mathuin. Come along!"

Odan sighed, but followed.

* * * *

Rafe poured tea when she arrived. "Good eventide, Lady Vivienne."

She'd asked him when he arrived to dispense with her title. She closed the door and regarded the handsome young man dressed in light summer velvet. She thought of Odan's thick neck, the slabs of muscle revealed on his chest, and of the stripes painting his face when he kissed her.

"Hello, Rafe. Why hasn't he been told I was the Mage Guild representative on the first foray to the darkmage Fortress?"

Rafe sat, crossing one leg. "Why haven't you told him?"

"I wanted to speak to you first, in case there was an actual reason. And do not answer my questions with a question." She used her firm teacher voice. The little rooster.

"One of the men in your group, the mountaincat Fynn, was a friend Odan was on duty with." Rafe's voice was soft, and sad.

Her stomach heaved. *Fynn. Young, with lovely shoulders and determined brown eyes.* "So ... you're saying if he knew I was the sole survivor of that team, he'd what? Blame me? Refuse to work with me?"

"Of course not. But one of your stipulations was total confidentiality regarding your identity." He dared to raise his brow at her.

"You know the reason for that is so I can continue my own internal investigation here without anyone in the Guild knowing I'm closely tied with the Truxet." She moved into the room. She had no business being this tired so early in the evening, but she sat anyway.

"We have kept your confidentiality."

Propping her elbow on the table, she covered her mouth, considering him. "What beast are you?"

Now both his brows rose. "Pardon me?"

"I've forgotten what your beast is."

"We call it a beastspirit. We are not a beast, and it is not ours. I am a bear."

His words seemed to contradict each other, but her brain was too full of the images in the women's guide to argue with him. *Battleform. Bear. Mate. Pit.*

"So, you have a large beastspirit, in mass."

"We are the largest of the Clans when we Change, yes."

"I am not a woman to bully, or to be overshadowed by a looming body. As Odan learned twice today." Rafe didn't need to know she had indeed been unsettled by Odan's sheer size, had in fact retreated at one point. Also, with her potion, he couldn't smell a lie. "So quit toying with me. You agreed we'd have three days of training after his arrival. Yet he's under the impression we're leaving tomorrow, first thing. You told me he was a skymage to assist powering my firecraft, yet he tells me he's there to fly off after them if I can't kill them." *Leaving me alone. In the trees.* "You told me he was an honorable and focused warrior, yet he's been rude and judgmental since he arrived. And you're keeping some pertinent credentials of mine from him for no apparent reason. What is going on?"

Rafe took a sip of his tea. He gestured to a cup inquiringly, but she shook her head sharply. She didn't have time for niceties. He took another sip, and she forced herself to breathe. "Vivienne, why have you masked your scent?"

She slapped against her chair back. Everything in her froze, body and mind. She took a breath, noisy and rattled. "You're answering my question with a question again."

"I'll answer yours if you answer mine. Is it a spell or a potion?"

"You'll answer mine, and I will *not* answer yours." Her voice was low and vicious. Heat beat in her hands, eager. "And you will receive a complaint for the manipulation I've encountered."

"Manipulation?" His silky voice pulsed with disgust. "Only very recently have I become aware of the scent-masking. I find it outrageous. Tell me, when did you start masking yourself? Before the Fortress? Or after?"

Vivienne stood up. She was about to face a tense meeting full of pain. She must retain control. "Your role is not to investigate us. Your Council and my Queen want this joint duty to function well." *They both want us to kill the lizard birds dead.* "Now why have you withheld information?"

Rafe inclined his head. He drummed his fingers on the table. "Odan is ... protective. All of us are, but he's just come off a very difficult duty where he tended one of the rescues of the Fortress. He was very resistant to taking you as a partner, because of the dangerous nature of this duty. It was judged if he knew you had already been exposed to a beebee attack, then he would have an even harder time accepting the position."

Vivienne blinked at the young man. She was out of time. She needed to go to the Senate meeting. "Your tale could curdle milk, it's so absurd. I will be telling him the truth tomorrow. I expect he'll want an explanation as well. Maybe you'll have time to concoct a better lie for him."

She stood and stalked to the door. Not for one moment did she believe the Truxet Council would hide information from one of their own warriors to control him.

"He's a good man, Vivienne. You can be honest with him. If you have it in you."

She opened the door and looked back at him, reminding herself he was a Trux, containing a beastspirit. "But there's the thing, Rafe. Since I can't trust a word you now

say, I have no reason to believe that." She had never slammed a door in her life. But oh, she was close to it.

Chapter Four

Neil carried the giggling woman into the Truxet lodging, where all the men on duty in Second City stayed. The room was small and smelled like boots. Mathuin trotted eagerly behind, a warrior still filling into his height. They'd introduced themselves, but Mathuin's eyes had been solely for Lizzie. Neil had settled the price for Lizzie's time this evening. Mathuin undressed first while Neil merely stood at the base of the bed and kissed Lizzie thoroughly. Odan watched. And remembered the kiss he'd had earlier. The kiss he had no right to take, the kiss he'd been goaded into, as surprising to him as it had been to her. She'd been so forceful, leaning over him, and the desire to kiss her had exploded out of nowhere. When he'd stood, it had been a shock to realize she was small, shivering.

Abruptly, Neil passed Lizzie to Odan. He took her, but before he could put her down, she wrapped strong legs around his waist. The heat of her open legs settled against his hips. Her lips took on his jaw, busy and eager. His erection grew, but he was distracted. Her mouth was too small, her legs too long, and her hair too dark. She wasn't as warm. She didn't smell like metal and wine and—his thoughts screeched to a halt. He pulled away and looked down at her. Revelation shook him down to his boots.

"Earthmother's hips, you're huge," the woman whispered in awe. She wiggled against him. "What can I do to help you out here?" She thrust into his pelvis.

"Ready." Kneeling on the bed beside Mathuin, both men stroking their cocks hard, Neil motioned with one hand. *Throw.*

So Odan tossed her onto the bed. She squealed, then laughed as she landed with a bounce. The wolves fell on her, and she moaned, arching.

Odan looked at the door. He could be back at the Mage Guild compound in ten minutes. She'd probably already be in bed, in a frilly nightgown, her soft-as-breath, fiery hair braided tight. He wanted to roar at her, to shout in her face that he knew what she'd done. *She'd hidden her scent.*

A small slipper hit him in the gut. "Are you joining us, or waiting your turn?" Neil said between licks.

"I'll wait."

He'd dismissed it in her study, as part of the experiment she was running. He hadn't noticed at dinner, when he should have. Almost, on the roof, he'd puzzled it out, but it wasn't until now he realized she'd had no personal scent. Why? How?

Pulling out a chair, he sat to unthread his knee-high boots. The sound of skin moving on skin, moans, and moist kisses rose from the bed.

"I want to go first," Mathuin gasped.

"No. You've got to learn to pull it down, or you'll never develop any skills."

More wet sounds, and Lizzie's wail ricocheted around the room.

Dropping his other boot, Odan sat back in the chair, staring. He breathed in the scent of male and female, heating together. It was good. Comforting, to be invited to share like this. He'd shared with Sunny and Ty ... no. He wouldn't revisit that difficult, sensual night. Paid women had taken very good care of him recently, benefitting from that memory. But it was time to let it go. They weren't his duty anymore.

Neil worked on Lizzie's generous round breasts, and the young man was between her legs. His face was buried so deep in her wet folds he surely couldn't breathe. Her head tossed, the dark strands warm against the cream bedding. Thin, insubstantial human bedding, not the furs of home. He admired the hard, sculpted male bodies, with the rounded smooth softness of the woman twisting between them. She was much more padded than Sunny. Much larger boned than Vivienne.

"Please! Deeper!" Lizzie's hands were buried in Mathuin's close-shorn hair, her hips straining.

The man surged forward, arrowing his cock toward her sprawled legs. Neil's body slammed against his, shoving him away so hard he skidded across the bed and hit the far wall.

"Nice try. Sit over there and wait your turn." Neil slid into her open cunt with ease, just one adjustment in his stroke.

Mathuin snarled, but stayed crouched, his hand wrapped tight around his cock. Both of them watched Neil torture Lizzie. He'd stroke deep and hard, and then refuse to move, massaging her belly or breasts, until she was wild beneath him. Another hard stroke, and she'd go rigid, only to be denied again. When her skin glowed rosy and sweat sheened on her, he finally gave in and stroked her hard, deep, steady.

She came, choking, and Neil laughed, a satisfied chuckle. "Oh, yeah. Come take her mouth."

The words hadn't entirely finished before Mathuin was at her side, his hands gently turning her head, one palm stroking her jaw wide to take his cock. She moaned, and Odan admired the stark planes of her face as she swallowed, hollowing her cheeks and highlighting her throat.

Out of nowhere, an image hit him hard. *Sunny kneeling before him, hands behind her back, her scars shimmering with sweat, sucking his cock deep. Warm, wet mouth, glazed, admiring eyes.* Finally, the semi-erection he'd had since Neil had pulled Lizzie's blouse down finished. He stood, loosening his warskirt's band, and undoing the buttons at one hip to accommodate his hard length. Sitting down, he watched Mathuin arch over Lizzie's face, body tight, while Neil let himself loose in her inner clasp. They were beautiful. Apparently wolves did share more as a pack than groundbears did, because he could tell they'd done this before. The scent was amazing, kicking his cock harder.

Odan wrapped his hand around himself under the loose tent of his skirt, thighs clenching at the sensation of his rough palm and tight grip. His cock liked it a lot. But it wasn't the same as a woman's dark depths. He watched Neil's hips pause, set at a new angle, and slam tight into the spread cradle of Lizzie's thighs. Mathuin shouted, and pressed his pelvis lower against her face. Her hands went from grasping his hips to grasping his balls, and the young man broke, concave belly fluttering with his orgasm. She bucked hard against Neil, one long leg twining around his hip.

Odan pictured Vivienne as she'd been at the end of the night. Her hair loosely braided fluff, her clothes pretty but practical. She'd stood canted against the dark slate roof, her shoulders strong but relaxed. He could have stood before her, lifted her against the angled slope, and taken her. The thought shocked him into tightening his grip. His cock fattened in his hand. He could have turned, and draped her over the rock wall, or sat on it and put her on her knees between his legs, letting her work him while he stared at her rose-gold hair in the setting sun.

Neil's head flung back, his teeth clenched. Mathuin had pulled free, one spread hand on Lizzie's upper chest, pinning her jerking torso to the bed. Wet suction sounds filled the room, combining with Lizzie's wild keening, and Odan finally gave in and stroked himself, gripping hard, spiking pleasure and pain through his tight cock. Her head lolled on the bed, tipping toward him, and he met her brown eyes. She stared at him as she came, her pupils dilated, her face slack. He wanted Vivienne like that, empty of everything but pleasure, drenched in the rich scent of her own arousal, lost to her own body as he sank himself as deep as he could go.

Odan came with Neil, both men sighing low and long, with matching tight, pained groans. Neil glanced at him on the next breath, and they both chuckled. As Neil and Mathuin massaged the tremors from Lizzie's body, soothing her and praising her, Odan went to the washstand and cleaned himself. He'd only gotten a little juice on his skirt, but he'd still be able to smell it for a day or two. Maybe it would remind him he was crazy. He had no business remembering another man's mate. And even less imagining his irritating partner as a sexual companion. He wouldn't be surprised to learn she'd never come in her life, not even alone. A shame. That mouth was made for a man's cock. But not his.

When Lizzie was finally escorted out, the three men curled on the bed. The mattress was firm and well made. It was the last comfortable sleep he'd have in awhile, and Odan stretched, settling. They weren't the same as pack, nothing was, but it was generous of them. He closed his eyes and matched his breathing to theirs. All of them slept easily and deeply.

*

The Senate of Second City's Mage Guild gathered in the formal meeting room. The six High Guild mages, one for each of the elements, were among the most powerful in all the Cities, and most had connections to other Cities, as well. Vivienne sat with her spine completely straight, her heart thumping with fury. Her mouth was damp, eager for the revelation that had been brewing for months. Her palms were damp, too, as she had no idea what would happen when Alfons revealed the collated report.

When the Royal City guard appointed as Alfons' bodyguard finished sweeping the room and stepped back, the frail older man stood. He looked tired. "For some time, we have been investigating our own Guild, with an eye to discovering where a breakdown in vigilance occurred." His eyes traveled the circular table, stopping at each person seated in the sumptuous carved chairs.

She held his rheumy gaze when it landed on her, steady and resolute, willing him some of her strength.

"Assuming our own guilt and introducing doubt into our fellow members has been a painful and humbling task. The High Guild has ignored rumblings of deception for years, and now we rededicate ourselves to the Sacred Couple's Light before deeper damage is done. The time has come for us to share our reports, deal with our own failures, and begin to heal."

Alfons sat, and gestured to the guard. The man put a large leather case on the table, and Alfons drew out the six delicate straw folders. "These last two days I have met with each of you, and compiled your private reports. In an attempt at anonymity and privacy, no one but me knows where this information came from. I'll share that sometimes it was from several sources, and sometimes it came from none of you, but my own personal

investigation."

He handed the folders to his left and right. Just like at every Senate meeting, they passed them around. Vivienne took hers from Rita, the Water Curate on her left, and passed them on to Conri, the Body Curate on her right. She focused on her hands, on keeping her expression blank, on stilling the heat coursing eagerly through her body. Always, the heat was so willing. With emotion, it became nearly giddy. Her fingers itched to burn. She rested her hands on her folder and waited for Alfons' signal to read.

Alfons gestured mildly. "It is with deep regret that I name Con—" There was a burst of movement to her side, while cries of shock, horror, and anger rang out along the circle. Vivienne threw up her hands to her right, and set her fire free. It flowed, so amazingly, deliciously powerful. It had always been better than sex, but twined with a purpose, with revenge, it was even better. Conri struck out at her heart, a knife's pain twisting her breath as he stilled it.

Closing her eyes, she kept the fire fed, and thought, *My heart. My heartbeat. Heal. Go.* There was a flurry of activity, with physical struggles and even lightning cracking through the room, leaving harsh ozone. A cry of pain rang out from Alfons at the same moment Vivienne's heart beat, a hard lurch in her chest. She opened her eyes, and saw the bodyguard slumped on the table, along with Tobias the Earth Curate, the youngest on the Senate. Alfons lay back in his Speaker's throne, his face twisted in agony. Horror sickened her stomach. *Keep it together.*

Vivienne stood up and rotated to face Conri. Rita had encased his feet in ice, and Rafe was beating the shit out of him. It was glorious. Conri was bleeding from his nose and mouth, one eye bright red and puffy, but he was still swinging his burning arms to try to throw spells. He must have been a bit successful, because horrific cuts were open all across Rafe's face, sending blood to sizzle into the flames below him.

Focusing on the flames engulfing Conri's hands, Vivienne sent the heat inside. Conri's roars turned into shrieks of pure agony. Rafe was finally able to flip him, grabbing at the smoking, blackened, bleeding meat of his hands to bind them. Conri slumped, apparently unconscious.

"Don't trust it," Rafe panted. "He needs to be totally contained."

Flame erupted on one of Conri's elbows again, and Rafe beat it out. "Shit! Vivienne!"

Mist condensed over the flecks of shredded flesh and steam filled the air as Rita quenched the outer layers. But she couldn't put out the fire burning in his belly, Vivienne thought with a smile.

Rita gasped, "We need help, but the bodymages are all suspect now, and Alfons is unconscious. Only he could tell us who to trust."

"I'll send for more Truxet." Rafe stood. His hands were blistered, and he held them carefully in front of him.

"I think not," Shella murmured. She stood at the back of Rafe. "You were not invited."

Vivienne glanced around the room. She had no idea how Rafe had escaped the bodyguard's sweep, or where he'd been hiding. She shook her head, torn between leaving Conri's body and rushing to Alfons. She agreed with Shella. "No Truxet. This is High Guild business."

"This could be one of the actual darkmages from the Fortress!" Rafe snarled at them.

"It isn't." Shella had moved to Alfons, and said, "He's alive."

The words sent water through Vivienne's knees. The relief was energizing. "Rita, stay on Conri."

The older woman nodded, and Vivienne picked up her skirt to rush past fallen chairs. Kneeling by Alfons, she laid one hand on his cheek. *Heal*. Nothing happened, but she held the chant, pushing gentle heat through her touch as well. Sighing, she continued around to Tobias, and did the same. But her bodycraft was weak, untrained.

Shella opened a folder, and skimmed it. "There's nothing here about which bodymage to trust, although four others are named as Conri's adepts for sure." She looked over at Tobias. "Vaylo and Tiru are darkmages, as well."

Vaylo was Tobias' second, and Tiru was his assistant. Vivienne took her hands off of Tobias, sick that she'd tried to heal him.

"Then you need to secure Tobias, as well," Rafe spat.

"Shut up!" Shella and Rita snapped at him unison.

Rita continued, "As far as I'm concerned, we need to secure *you*, as a spy and traitor to your alliance."

"Calm down. Rita, Rafe is our ally, even if he is a manipulative spy. Rafe, I know you have bodymage abilities, so finish healing yourself as best you can. We need Alfons." Vivienne went to the bodyguard, a watermage highly trained in combat. "He's not breathing!"

Shella hurried over, helping Vivienne pull the man to the floor. Rafe was there, too. Vivienne stared at the man's face. She'd only spoken to him a few times, and here she could have killed him by not checking on him sooner.

A groan mingled with Rita's shout. "Tobias is moving!"

"Fuck!" Rafe snarled. He grabbed Vivienne's hands and planted them on the guard's chest. "Push into his lungs." He lunged up toward Tobias.

What was his name again? Her brain raced to remember it. She pushed her ineffectual *Heal* command in with some heat, trying to envision her schooldays diagrams of anatomy. She fumbled to get her hands on his skin, sliding her grip awkwardly around his throat and jaw, thinking his heavy, contoured-leather vest was a barrier. *Heal. Lungs, breathe*. Shella understood what she was doing and pulled at the laces along one side of his ribs. As she loosened the body armor, Vivienne slid her hands over his collarbone. *Breathe! Heat wants Air!*

The man's torso lifted. Shocked into stillness both women held their breath, staring at him. He breathed again, and Vivienne's ass hit the floor. "Thank Earthmother."

Shella was staring at Vivienne with wide eyes. "You call two," she murmured.

"They're both physically secured, but this is a mess. How did you think you were going to handle this confrontation without backup!" Rafe stomped toward Alfons. He bent over the man, his hand on his forehead, and closed his eyes.

Vivienne sat near Alfons' feet and stared up at his wrinkled face. She reached a shaking hand to his ankle, bony and frail, and sent what she could to him. This man had been her father, her mentor, her friend. He was the family of her heart.

When Rafe eased back, her heart seized. "No. He's alive."

Rafe nodded. "He is. But he's still far from consciousness. His heart was attacked." Rafe's hands looked better, the blisters smaller, but the skin was still red. "How were you planning on containing Conri?"

"We didn't know he'd attack! I thought he was taking payments. He'd be disgraced, and removed from the Senate, possibly sentenced, but to try to kill us!" Rita stared down at the still-smoking body.

Vivienne didn't want to take her hand off Alfons. As if her presence was necessary. "Rafe, thank you for your assistance. Please leave."

"Try to make me." His words were tight, his face tighter.

Vivienne set a fireball free on her shoulder. "That can be arranged."

Shella moved up to Rafe. "You are in violation of your role, and worse, you have ruined your friendship with us. This is *our* problem. The days where Truxet were called to deal with every blip of trouble have ended."

"And how effective that has been." All trace of the affable courtier was gone from the snarling, rage-filled face.

Vivienne had never seen Rafe raise his voice.

Shella ignored his outburst. "We'll solve this. Just as always, the Royal High Guild Senate will get our report, and they will choose what to share with your Council. You are to leave. Now." Shella extended one arm, graceful yet imperious, toward the grand double doors.

Rafe stood, breathing heavily. He glanced toward Conri, then at Vivienne. She raised her chin. The thought popped into her head that he would no doubt go running to Odan with tonight's debacle. Wonderful.

Finally, Rafe stomped toward the door. "I will not remain silent about this to my Alpha. Conri and Tobias will be sought by my people for crimes against the Six. We'll want the other names in that report, too."

"Last I knew, the Royals had not ceded all enforcement entirely to the Trux." Shella had shadowed Rafe on his journey, and now opened the door wider.

The two guards in the hallway looked in on the chaos of the meeting chamber with enormous eyes. The older one, Jan, drew his sword.

Rafe pushed past him, and was gone.

Shella spoke to the guards. "We need two sets of imprisoning bands. Prepare an imprisoning cell with two sets of shackles. Speak to no one. Return with all haste." She closed the door on their pounding footsteps. "Vivienne, for Skyfather's sake, put that fireball out."

Ice slithered down Vivienne's spine. She had yet to read Alfons' report. No one had, except Shella, who was now taking control. And who hadn't contributed in battle. "It's fine where it is."

Shella ignored her, striding toward Alfons. When she reached for him, alarm rang through Vivienne like a bell. She hissed, "Don't touch him."

Shella froze, her blue eyes flared, then narrowed. "Honestly, Vivi! Control your imagination."

"Rita, can you please read Alfons' report aloud?" Vivienne held Shella's gaze as she spoke.

"Ah-all right," Rita said.

Shella folded her arms, glaring at Vivienne.

"There's a paragraph of summary at the top, with a list, oh Father, so many names. Oh! Tsea! Tsea is here! I don't believe it!"

"Rita." Vivienne cut through her friend's sorrow firmly.

Her voice considerably more shaky, Rita said, "I think I shall be sick. Conri's wounds smell horrific."

Did they? Vivienne thought them splendid. She hadn't been bothered in the least by the raw muscle and charred flaps. Sliding her hand sadly from Alfons, Vivienne pulled herself up by the edge of his chair, forcing her legs to hold her, and reached for a report herself.

Rita was crying now. "Andalay. Beron. Oh, Skyfather, such madness. Why?"

Shella folded her arms and smirked as Vivienne realized she couldn't read and watch Shella at the same time. "Well? Are you going to trust me or not?"

Vivienne thought of how Alfons' lightning had forked across the table in several directions. She thought of how Shella had adamantly removed Rafe. She'd worked with this woman, trained with her, taught beside and beneath her. Yet all was shredded now. "Not."

Flame erupted around Vivienne, enclosing her and Alfons in a protective wall, beautiful and deadly. Shella was the Spirit Curate, and if she wanted to, could read the darkest needs of Vivienne's heart, but she couldn't attack with magecraft. Vivienne flipped the folder open and skimmed. As a Senate member, Vivienne knew the Mage Guild was home to 1,593 souls. The folder had pages of names. Estimating, ignoring her thumping heart, she saw there must be over two hundred here. True, the "Known" list was only perhaps fifty, but the fact there were so many on the "Possible" list was appalling.

She couldn't go on the lizard bird mission tomorrow. Her Guild was in disarray. Her head whirled to see three names in the possible list from her own branch. They were all young, none she'd taught herself, but they were there, which meant that all of their instructors were now suspect in her mind. Centering on the moment, she saw clearly the body branch made up the bulk, a terrifying prospect. Few could stand against a bodymage on attack. Conri had been building an army. Focus! There were actually only a few names in earth's branch, although they were indeed high level, as Shella had pointed out. By far and away, the branch with the second highest portion of known darkmages were from Shella's branch, spirit.

Vivienne closed the folder and stared at Shella's flickering face from behind her wall of heat. Shella was talking to Rita, talking fast. Vivienne couldn't hear her. She was lost in the song of flames. The murmur and hiss was music to her, comforting even as it kept her apart.

Shella glanced at her, her eyes no longer cool and condescending, but wide and frantic. She moved quickly toward Rita. Vivienne shifted to stand before Alfons. Irritating smoke filled the air as Rita's power pushed Vivienne's wall, and the curtain around Vivienne parted for a moment.

Rita's voice, pleading, "—got to maintain control, Vivienne!"

Shella's voice, screaming, "—gone insane! I'm not a darkmage, Rita! You have to believe me!" She scooted around behind Rita, whose hands stretched toward Vivienne, curling in graceful spell links.

Vivienne dropped her flames. She would not cast against Rita.

Rita collapsed into a chair, Vivienne's chair, actually, and laid her head on the table, sobbing. Her silvered-blond hair had come out of its elegant twist, and lay disheveled on one shoulder.

Shella stared at Vivienne, her chest leaping in frantic breaths. "Look at what they've done to us," she whispered.

Vivienne shook her head. "No. We did this to ourselves. Through arrogance and neglect. This is just the first price we'll pay." Looking over her shoulder at Alfons, she willed him to wake. He didn't. She glanced at his bodyguard. Still breathing. Tobias moaned again. Tobias, who, like Shella, could very well be innocent ... or not.

"The compound must be sealed."

Rita lifted her head, her dazed gaze staring blankly at Vivienne.

Shella's breathing remained hectic. "There are the four main gates, but who can we trust to hold them?"

"Too many people know about the eastern wall gate and the river gate as well. All seven will have to be taken, including the Senate's private gate in the second library." Vivienne's mind spun with people she thought she could trust.

"We didn't plan this well. They should have been in place." Rita wiped her eyes. "I just never thought there would be so many names."

Pounding footsteps brought all three women's gazes to the door. Vivienne's fireball lit up the room with flickering light once more. A fist pounded, and Jan's voice said, "I have the bands, Curate!"

There was no sound in the room except for the crackle of Vivienne's fireball and Shella's raw gasps. Vivienne looked at Shella. She was absolutely ghostly, drained of all color, even for a blonde. Her eyes gleamed with tears. "I will wear a band, Vivienne. It's not like I have any offensive skills anyway if the others fight back. But do not shackle me in the cell, for I can help organize."

Vivienne went to the door. The guard, Jan, had six bands of spelled collars that muted a mage's powers. She took all six from him. Had he wondered if he'd need to band them all? Perhaps he should. After all, they were all derelict, she thought bitterly. "How many more of these do we own?"

Jan followed her into the room. "I—I don't know, my Lady."

With shaking fingers, Vivienne locked the collar around Shella's throat. She couldn't meet the woman's eyes as she set the spell. Shella jerked, whimpered. Vivienne gritted her teeth. She'd been part of a collaring before, and it haunted her to this day. Knowing Shella offered this, understood why Vivienne was doing it, for the good of the Guild, made it only a little better.

"Should I not send for a bodymage?" Jan's voice was high and tense.

Rita laughed, then burst into tears again.

Shella merely said, "No."

Vivienne locked the collar around Conri's throat with satisfaction. He wasn't quite dead, yet. Hopefully, soon. Her own investigation had revealed his guilt and depravity. For two weeks she'd had to trust Alfons was having his every move watched and thwarted, while she pretended civility and avoided him. After she'd returned from those five horrific days among the Beasts, it had been all she could do not to confront him.

Bending over Tobias, noting his lashes were fluttering and his eyes failing to focus, she said, "Tobias is conscious, Jan. Take caution. Get him in shackles first." She triggered his collar, praying there would be a way to know soon if it could be removed. Three of their own Senate unable to lead, with herself due to be gone in hours. A new Second City Mage Guild would be born tonight.

Jan said, "Flame Curate, what has happened?"

Vivienne stood and stared at the guard, wondering if he could be trusted. He was air, as had been his partner. She couldn't help but think Alfons had set their assignment here, now. Alfons had trusted them.

She said, "We're about to take the Guild back from darkmages in our midst. Unfortunately, only a few are certain. Other names we have are possibly innocent, and I'm sure there are more guilty members we don't even know of."

Vivienne went to the folder. "List the names of ten skilled members you believe you could trust with your life."

Jan rattled off a few names immediately, then hesitated over the rest. Every name he gave her was absent from Alfons' report. It was a gamble she had to take.

"All right. First, we secure Conri and Tobias. Your fellow guard will stay at their cell. Then you go personally to each of those people you've named, and set them to the task of guarding one of our compound's seven exits."

"Seven?" Jan asked, surprised.

"I'll name each one for you. I want an eighth person on the tower roof, the ninth will guard Alfons in his quarters until we can find a bodymage we can trust. The tenth needs to find Rafe and make sure he's left, then he can shadow the Spirit Curate."

Jan stared at Shella's collar, clearly struggling to control his face. "Yes, Lady."

"Only when each of those requirements are in place, will you report back to me to begin the roundup."

"I should prepare more cells first as well?"

Vivienne chuckled at the fact she still hadn't learned her lesson. She'd been so naive! The Senate would have one of their cold, formal meetings? Her stomach curdled with shame at how she'd lain awake for weeks, imagining the satisfying, cutting remarks she would fling at Conri, who would shrivel in humiliation. Yes, it was either laugh, or cry, as Rita had chosen to do.

Nodding to him, she said, "Yes. We'll need to open up all the guest quarters as cells, and divide up the practice hall below, perhaps. Collect all the collars you can, and think of more people you might be able to trust. Maybe the others you've named can contribute." Striding back to Alfons to touch his thin shoulder, she said, "Silence, Jan. And no more running. It might alert someone."

"Yes, Flame Curate. I'll grab a litter from the hall."

Jan left dragging Tobias on a stretcher. Vivienne closed the doors after him.

She took a deep breath, and walked to the sideboard. Pouring herself a glass of wine, she knocked it back in deep gulps. She poured another and set it down hard in front of Rita. "Water Curate, stop crying. Give me ten names you can trust with your life."

* * * *

Something was wrong at the Mage Guild. There was smoke, a thin trail of ghostly white in the green-and-black night sky. Pretar slowed at the last corner before the exposed length of shore at the river gate. He studied the compound wall, and noted the interior was brighter than usual. His contact had not cracked the door, as arranged.

Scowling, drawing his dark cloak closer around him, Pretar gripped his satchel of gold and pearls close. Andalay was an excellent contact, and an even better darkmage. She had passed all his tests, even the one where he demanded she let him fuck her while

he branded their acolyte symbol into her tit. He'd healed it instantly, of course. Physical proof was too easy to discover.

If she'd been found, there was the very real possibility the eight promising recruits she'd made would be found, too. It would be a blow. Nothing devastating, since the bodymages of Second City's Mage Guild were well and truly tied to Thad, but this had been Pretar's own little inroad against their lovely leader. He'd been building his own army over the last two years. While their numbers were smaller than Thad's, and their members of lower rank, he'd made sure they actually received decent training. Unlike Thad, who hoarded his knowledge, Pretar shared pieces of his, so his acolytes were a stronger, more dependable unit.

Gauging the stars, Pretar judged he was on time. He crouched, willing to wait only a few moments. After a few minutes, the sound of pounding feet, some low shouts, and a distinct scuffle came from inside the wall. Sudden wind kicked up, ruffling the rushes at the river's edge. Well, well, well. Yes, Andalay must have been discovered, but there was something else going on here.

Pretar heaved a disgusted sigh. Thad still hadn't recovered from the barrage of hawks that flew through the Fortress last week. They'd only managed to kill four of them for sure, one by mistake, which made Thad very cross indeed. It was doubtful the other three lived. After all, they'd been exposed to the Fortress' devious, brilliant protective spell. An ancient spell the Truxet had created and set themselves, eons ago.

But to lose Second City's crop of Mage Guild recruits would be disappointing, as well as lead to a wave of similar investigations in the other Cities. Pretar ran a hand through his thick red hair. Hmmm. This could change their whole timeline. He still had to meet with his contact at the Smith's Guild. He'd make sure the man worked on what happened here tonight. It took finesse and time to identify and approach a potential darkmage, and tiresome patience to lure them into a craving for power over loyalty. For they'd discovered greed only took a soul so far.

Andalay had had a crucial further component, a desire to endure pain to gain power, a respect for death that didn't come from nostalgia but cosmic awareness. She'd been smart, and excelled at self-control. She was his top recommendation to replace the Idiot Three who'd gotten themselves killed in that fucking hawk's escape. Allowing himself a sigh of regret, Pretar told himself the Smith contact would find the name of the arrogant busybody who'd identified Andalay. He'd get the name, and he'd make him pay.

Chapter Five

Roge sat in her window seat, cradling his swollen hand with its three broken fingers.

They'd been silent for the ten minutes Vivienne had worked to bottle the last of the potion. A quietly tapped pattern on the door made him stumble to it, unbar it, and let Amriet in. Her face was streaked with tears and soot. She helped him back to the window seat.

"Report." Vivienne had chosen thick-walled bottles for travel. She heated wax to seal the wooden plug caps.

"Shella has begun a souldance with some of her branch so that verification of bodyimages can go faster."

Shella had proved her innocence in a most painful way, taking a horrendous hit aimed at Rita, when she herself had no craft to call on. The selfless act had been at the height of their whispered travels through the Guild's sleeping halls, following Alfons' damn list. They'd removed her collar instantly. She'd gone through the rest of the evening wounded, unable to be healed until they found someone of innocence in their own bodyimages. Shella had already taken the time to test five. The fifth was finally found to be innocent, and that woman had been set to heal Alfons first.

Amriet continued. "Alfons remains the same. His guard has settled him into healing sleep. Rafe was seen leaving via the Beast Gate not ten minutes after he was escorted out, before we began the roundup. Your skymage Beast was seen leaving a tavern early in the evening with two other men and a paid woman. She left the Beast quarters well-used and no magelights have been seen in his room."

Vivienne put down the cloudy apparatus she was dismantling. For some reason, after everything that had happened in the last hours, this latest news struck her as funny. The bushy-haired bully who stomped around half dressed in her Guild compound had spent the second-worst evening of her life fucking a skinlicker.

A smile curved Vivienne's mouth. "How are the cells holding?"

"No more escape attempts."

"No one has tried to gain entrance?"

"Not that I know of."

"I'm sorry about your cousin, Amriet." Her fingers stayed steady as she boxed all of her equipment up, unwashed. She didn't want anything left out, easy to tamper with, easier to destroy.

Amriet swallowed, nodded. There was nothing to say. Sometimes a loved one chose darkness. "Rita leaves at first light for the Royal City. Are you still planning on leaving with your skymage?"

"Quit giving him to me. He's not 'mine.' Yes. I'm going. I'll share something he told me. His mission is to kill several lizard birds, true. But at some point, we're expected to fail, and then his mission is to follow them, to track them to the Fortress." Picking up the melted wax, Vivienne carefully sealed all three of her bottles. Enough doses for three weeks. She didn't let herself think past that.

"But, that would leave you alone in the Wild!" Amriet scowled at the potion. "You're still going to take it with you?"

"I am even more settled in my decision. I am totally positive it was the right thing to do. I need to be part of this, not distracted by some mating frenzy."

"I don't know why you're even bothering with that now," Roge grated, irritated. "Hasn't tonight shown you there are more pressing issues than Beasts sniffing out our lies?"

"He's going to find out," Amriet sniffed.

"I don't care if he does. It's no business of his, nor yours, Roge."

Amriet stood from leaning on the seat next to Roge and moved back toward the door. "I believe the reason you're using it is because it *is* his business."

"It is my choice, even in his culture." An image of Odan's throat as he tipped his wine back flooded through her. He'd been calmer at dinner, more contained, almost reticent. Yet his kiss hadn't been. That kiss had been the best she'd ever had. And the last from him.

"Thank you, both, for your help tonight." Such weak words for the horror of standing before loved ones and naming them evil.

Amriet paused at the door. "Your mother has called my room twice." The Guild was outfitted with a bell system for high-level personnel. The ex-Earth Curate still qualified as high-level personnel.

Vivienne nodded, remembering they'd shared their real goodbye up on the roof earlier in the night. Amriet quietly left. Putting the last of the apparatus in the box, she said, "You can rely on her when I'm gone."

Roge's voice was gravel with exhaustion. "I know. I will."

"My recommendation is to insist that every single member of this entire Guild be subjected to a souldance with spiritimages cleared by Shella before the week is ended."

Roge's whisper was pained. "It could kill her, to perform so many in so short a time."

"She'll be fine, eventually. I'm naming you as the Acting Speaker." Closing the last box of her equipment in the wall cupboard, Vivienne spelled it locked. "This room is yours now, but for this cupboard." So many hours of happy experimentation, lost in possibilities. A different kind of discovery was before her.

"What?"

She turned and looked at the young man she'd trained with for a decade. Even though she was only three years older than his thirty, she'd also taught him most of what he knew. She moved to him, the stiff battle dress slapping against her legs. It was much the worse for wear now, but had done its job, repelling poison and lightning, blood and knives.

Kneeling before Roge, she folded her hands against the padded, quilted canvas across her lap. "When we met a half hour ago, Rita and I named a new Senate. With our absence, and Alfons' status, the Guild is adrift. You are the next generation of leader. Shella will be busy, and then she will be wounded from the burden of so many souldances. You'll have to manage the information leak with the other Guilds, and develop a system to check all visitors inside the compound, as well as follow up on all the identified darkmages' prior contacts outside the compound."

Vivienne's head spun with the complexity. The investigation she herself had privately conducted had revealed five guilty darkmages, two of whom were still at large in other Guilds. How the Mage Guild, already generally distrusted for the influence and power they wielded, would gain other Guilds' cooperation, would become Roge's

problem. "This is going to be enormously explosive. It needs to be released in conjunction and support with the Royal presence, so you'll have to go visit Nevie at the breakfast hour."

Visiting Nevie was always nerve-wracking. As the Princess presiding over Second City, she was one of the few voices the High Guild considered outside their own.

"We don't even know if she's a darkmage herself," Roge said, his head falling back against the glass.

Vivienne remembered sitting there yesterday, dressed in her finest, watching the watercoasters play. "If her Trux guard is present, you have to assume he'll have information that Rafe has shared, and that the Trux still trust her. If she's dismissed all her Trux guards, be suspicious and use the generic plague excuse for the short term."

"How much does Rafe know?"

"We're not sure what Rafe knew." It now seemed likely, in hindsight, that he'd known at least about Conri, or he wouldn't have been there to assist in his capture. "My instinct tells me her devotion to the Sacred Couple is genuine. Princess Nevie will help you. Let her host the City Guild meeting, let her lead it. By then Shella will have a sure count of our guilty, and you'll have decided how many to give over publicly."

"How many? You mean, we won't share all the names? But all their contacts will need investigation. If we don't share their names—"

Vivienne eased off her knees, bracing one hand on the floor. The wool carpet was rough on her skin. She wanted to bathe in the worst way. "It would be suicide to publicly share how many of our own were involved. The City will erupt when they discover we harbored darkmages."

"We did not!" Roge bit out the words.

"We did. It's almost worse that we didn't know." Her own history with confronting non-standard magecraft had haunted her, along with her own guilt in using the scent-masking potion. She'd not wanted to repeat that collaring, and not wanted to be forced to give up her own cowardice before the Water Girl's prophecy could be thwarted. And now it was an even more immense burden of shame.

Roge burst up to stalk around her strangely empty worktable, his shoulders defensively high. "It's not a good time for you to go, Vivienne. We need you here."

"Roge, the sad truth is that I have little more idea of how to proceed than you. I trust your judgment entirely. Meet with the Senate after you've been healed." Which couldn't happen until more bodyimages were vetted. There were far worse wounds for the Guild's single honorable bodymage at the moment. She hoped Rita regained use of her hand. "You'll build a plan together."

"But you told me to go to Nevie in two hours!"

"This will all happen by then. You'll see." She dragged herself to her feet and approached his stiff form. Putting a hand on his arm, she said, "Look at what we've done this night. You can do this. You must do this, as I must finish the assignment given to me by Idivy herself."

Vivienne remembered the Royal meeting clearly. She'd been so honored, so scared.

Nevie had set the scrying mirror in motion, connecting her to Royal City, and then given her privacy. The Queen's words had been curt. "Destroy these beebie creatures before our people turn on our best allies. Our citizens must not be driven to distrust the Truxet. The fact the lizard birds attack Truxet contacts will cause widespread fear,

leading to demands that they leave the Cities. It is exactly what the darkmages been working for, and the Truxet won't take kindly to it. I cannot imagine the riots in the streets if our Beast friends refuse to cede the Cities to human-only patrol."

Her braids had looked like ribbons of night as she leaned toward Vivienne. "I thank you for your service in the Truxet's capitol. The report you've shared hasn't revealed anything we didn't suspect and expect. I am very sorry to hear of your experience of loss with the Truxet team and rejoice in your survival. But now that your credentials are set, go on to this new mission. We trust you, Second's Flame Curate. Your Trux partner will be with you soon. Burn them all, and burn them well."

Roge's disgusted voice cut through her memory. "It's a ridiculous assignment, Vivienne. There is no pattern to their attacks. You cannot be in every City, to stop them as they fly at us. The one attack we've had here was so fast, and over even faster."

It had wounded five people before being driven off. She hadn't seen it.

"Roge. I'll likely be gone only a few weeks." But by then the Guild would be completely reformed, both within, and in its image across the City. "Alfons will recover. He's the help you need."

Another failure, to put all their information in his care, and let his elderly shoulders carry the weight of this confrontation. Clearly, he hadn't any grand plan to take the known guilty into custody either. Perhaps he'd wanted to build that as a group after Conri had been removed. She felt a little twitch of pleasure that Conri had died in the night, unable to be healed when so many of his own branch were guilty.

Roge rubbed his forehead with one good hand, smearing something dark across his skin. "Vivienne. Are you running away from this?"

Her head jerked back as his words slapped her.

He turned, pulling away from her touch, his dark brown gaze hard and angry.

She swallowed. "I'm not. I had planned to stay at the beginning of this..." What did she call it? Mess? Fight? Chaos? "I pushed the Truxet for three days of training. But as I gathered up the suspected tonight, it became clear to me that we were still thinking too narrowly. That's when I told you the investigation would have to widen across the City. What happened here tonight will have to happen in every City, and very soon. This is going to be catastrophic to the Mage Guild, the Royal Family, and the entire Kingdom, but eventually, to the darkmages. Oh yes, the time for playing in our own little tub is over. We sent Rafe away, Roge. He was there, in the Senate chamber, and bleeding, shattered, we closed ranks against him and made like this was a private matter."

Her voice started to shake, so she swallowed. Breathed. Pushed the fire growing too used to freedom back down. "We followed our old habits, but those need to be broken. Tonight was ... a start. I want to stay and help, but I am already assigned a different front. This is war, and should have been a coordinated war from when the Trux first shared the existence of the Fortress. I was *there*, Roge. I stood in their lair, faced one of their darkspells, stared in the eyes of a creature they created to hunt *us*."

Now it was his turn to put his hand on her arm. She almost lunged into his hold, but held herself together.

"And did I come back and meet with Alfons beyond my own small investigation? Did we begin to plan a City-wide search? Did I ask the Queen for assistance on how to conduct our own revelation? No. Until this morning, I still didn't understand that *everything* is connected. This war will change us all. This isn't about Second City's Mage

Guild. We have begun to purge our own Guild, but then our entire City will be suspect."

Roge made a choked sound at the thought of what it would mean to demand every citizen be vetted as innocent. There was no way the other Guilds would agree to such an action.

Vivienne ran a hand through her filthy, knotted hair. "Of course it will be horrific. I know. But for now, I've been asked to complete a different mission. That's what I'm going to do."

She glanced at the window. The sky was lightening to a lovely shade of peach that made her stomach lurch at the thought of the fruit. "I have no idea if I'll be of any worth in that mission either. But I'll do what I can, just as you must."

Roge's eyes were still hard, but after a tense moment of silence, he nodded. "Blessings."

"Oh, Roge. Blessings." Vivienne held herself by the elbows, feeling the weight of her skull on her weak spine. Digging her nails in tight, she waited until he left. Bath? Or mother? Mother, because one never knew when a visit with one's mother would lead to the need for a bath. If not physically, then psychologically.

It was a short trip to her mother's room. Vivienne slipped in to the barren apartment. It was nothing but bare walls, one scarred table, and one wooden bed with a thin blanket on top. It hadn't always looked this way. When Vivienne was a minor, before she'd earned her novice status to stay in the boarding room, there had once been a smaller trundle bed for her, exactly the same as her mother's, just a bit smaller.

"I hear you wanted to speak with me, Mother?"

The red in Vivienne's hair she got from her mother. Not that there was much to admire of the rich color when her mother wore it as short as possible and not be called bald. She was in her nightdress, a thin, plain, undyed cream of a cheap, coarse weave.

"Don't play coy," Ruth said softly. "You've had a horrendous night, and are leaving shortly."

Ruth never asked Vivienne about her life. She preferred to watch her daughter through others, rather than dirty herself with actual understanding. "Yes." That seemed a safe enough answer.

"You're running away."

Straight into slashing beaks and deadly claws, to fight a world where maniacs would fling poison into the faces of people they'd grown up with, laughed and learned with.

"No."

Vivienne used to be silent and just listen to her mother's pronouncements. But when she was named to the Senate, she'd begun to mildly push back. It always went well.

"You're a little coward. Clearly, you timed this perfectly. Stir up the mess and walk your wasteful, selfish self away."

Actually, her mother was right to an extent. Vivienne had planned the timing of this. She'd asked Alfons to make sure the revelation of the report happened before she left. She'd so wanted to look in Conri's eyes and know *he* knew he was ruined. How naive her dreams of confrontation had been. The night had been pain, and danger, and now she had to admit Odan was right. The darkmages needed to be attacked on all fronts, immediately. She had no time to shepherd her Guild and Roge through a painful transition. She had no patience for delicate work right now. It was time to burn. Sedately wiping soot from one charred spot on her hip, Vivienne said, "Goodbye, Mother."

"You stupid girl. Do you honestly think you'll be able to gain the Senate seat back when you return? Once that snake Roge gets his claws in, he'll never give it up."

Ruth was a small woman, but nothing was small about her venom. "You're going to throw everything you worked for away on a wild chuck chase. One team, to patrol all of the Kingdom? Even if you manage to arrive at an attack, what will you possibly do when another occurs at the same time? This is a desperate attempt to stop the inevitable, nothing but a delay to give the Royal family a few more weeks of Beast protection before the Guilds finally demand their expulsion."

"I answer my Queen's request."

"You're a moronic puppet. I didn't raise you to be so blind. Think, daughter! The Guild is in flux! You could be the Speaker!"

Oh, Ruth was pulling out the big sword now. Vivienne hadn't been named "daughter" since she'd ascended to the Senate. "I assure you—"

"If nothing else, think about your plush lab and sumptuous room. You'll lose it all!"

Vivienne wanted to rub her gritty eyes, but her hands were so filthy she was sure she'd only harm herself. She wanted to sit, but there was nowhere to sit in this personal prison, just the bed. She wanted to be held, but there was no one to hold her. There never was. Taking a deep, centering breath, Vivienne decided it was a night for burning people. It had worked well for her until now. For the first time in this room, she lit a fireball in the air before her, keeping her hands clasped against the urge to flick it at Ruth.

"Listen to me."

Her mother fell back a step, and it was very gratifying.

"I enjoy comfort and fine things. I find purpose in my experiments and teaching. I am proud of the temperament of control I've developed that led people to trust me with a weighty position."

Ruth spat at her. "How *dare* you—"

"No. You will listen." Vivienne flashed the ball big enough for her mother to feel the heat, and then shrank it down to mouse size. She sent it rolling and swirling around the room, like a child's marble on a tower of invisible ramps.

Ruth's dark eyes followed it warily.

"The Kingdom is about to fall. This City is about to fall. Our Guild *has* fallen, and needs to be rebuilt. Yet you sit here and worry about a legacy of power, an illusion of control. You don't control anything. You're no longer in control of your branch. And by the Sacred Couple, you're no longer in control of me."

"Don't take their name in vain!" Ruth screeched.

"Indeed I don't. I go to try to control one small thing, at the request of my Queen, my symbol of order, in which I believe. You're probably right. No doubt I will fail. Perhaps, I will even die. But I am standing on the side of the Couple, and I am doing something to defend them, while you, who always exhorted me to the depth of your faith, sit in your room and goad me to pull strings and form alliances that mean nothing."

Vivienne winked out the fireball. As always, using her power left her energized, sizzling and stretched. Her mother's eyes jumped to hers. They were far from chastened. Once again, poison was flung at Vivienne, this time silent in the look of utter hatred her mother gave her. This time it scored a direct hit, but she swore it would be the last time she ever drank in that bitter stare.

"We're done here." The words came out before she thought them through, but she

stood by them. Her mother had only been a shadow of responsibility and habit for years. And now she wasn't even that.

"You'll come back. Mark my words, you'll come back and have to fight your way through the jealous powers. Vivienne! Don't you—"

Vivienne closed the door on Ruth and strode to her room. Alfons had been moved to one of the healing suites. Never did she revel in her private bathing tub more than now, on the last time she'd probably use it. Below, there were surely several people still up and bathing in the Guild baths, as well as any people who might possibly have slept through the drama and were merely rising early.

Filling the tub with the sluice, she heated the water by thrusting her hand in. Leaving her destroyed outfit in a pile, she climbed in and washed furiously. After one rinse, she drained the tub, and filled it with the bit left. She washed again, roughly. Wrapping a thick, soft purple towel around herself, she actually contemplated going down to the shared baths and bathing a few more times.

But just then her gaze caught on the bag she'd packed. Sitting right next to it was another satchel. Hers was bigger, dyed lovely shades of green, and embossed with flames and her name. It had padded and adjustable straps, with an outer pocket that closed with a brass buckle in the shape of a leaf. His was tan, and well-used, the leather scarred. The flap closed with a plain, cinching cord.

She rubbed her hair, combed it and dried it with a few passes of her fingers. It flew wildly around her head, the chest-length strands glittering in the low magelight she'd left on. Twisting it, she pinned it with combs carved in deep scrolls. Then she opened his bag. Inside was a pair of leather pants and a leather tunic. Both had been made by the same unimaginative hack that had made the backpack. They were the same tan, the same scarred and sagging look. Taking them out, she saw there was even a pair of calf-high boots. These had pretty bone toggles, but the laces were undyed and thick.

Glancing at her chest of drawers, painted with reeds and inset with carved dragonflies with real jeweled bodies, she mourned the fine silk underwear she usually wore. Life was not meant to be wasted in discomfort when there was means to live well. What did Amriet call it? Ah yes, free-peaching. Such a charming term for going without underwear. She wrinkled her nose. After one day, these leather pants were going to chafe tender places. But that was all right, wasn't it? Because the fierce Beast could call bodycraft.

Biting her lip at the thought of asking the terse man to heal her sore woman's lips, Vivienne pawed through her basket of ribbons. She wanted the red and orange, colors that made her think of courage, but knew the chocolate and black were more sensible choices. She ripped out the ugly laces at the back and front of the trousers. The legs were too long by a foot. She took a knife and cut them, then fringed the bottom. When she pulled them on and laced up the silk ribbons, one at her tailbone, one over her tummy, cinching them tight, the pants were sadly boring, but fit well. They were even loose enough that they might not chafe. The mark at her hip where a darkmage's blast had hit her ached, but no worse than a burn taken in training. She spared a moment to try to heal it.

She added lovely dark blue leather laces to her boots and put those on with an excellent pair of purple socks. Her sharp, ruby-hilted dirk in its woven hilt was tied around her left ankle. Her feet felt secure, but heavy compared to the delicately braided

sandals she'd been wearing in the summer heat. Then she held up the tunic. It had a scoop neckline, three-quarter sleeves, and was long enough to go over her hips. It was wide and square and would fit like a tent.

Scowling, Vivienne pulled it on, thanking the fact her breasts were at least small enough they wouldn't ache without the pretty corset she usually wore. Just as she'd thought, her body was like the clapper in a bell. The tunic was ridiculous. She took it back off. Cutting up the side seams, she cut a triangle of fabric out, then punched holes. Whip-stitching the new seam closed with green laces, she also fringed the neckline, bottom, and cuffs. She put the tunic back on. Nothing could keep it from looking awkward on her small frame, but now it at least fit, and had some small details.

He'd said it was spelled. She ignited fire and drew it near her belly. Sure enough, the heat was repelled a thumb's length away. Toying with the flame on her finger, she drifted her touch in and out, experimenting. When she touched herself, the flame popped to the outer edge of her hand. Perhaps the ugly outfit would be useful. Her battledress would have been better protection, but they might have to tramp in the forest. Who knew what that would be like?

Once in her life she'd left her City to travel with a beast to their mountain. She'd only had to walk a few paces in the forest, but it had been so odd. Vivienne had been reminded of the cellar, with its pillars and arches. But there were small trees with narrower trunks, and some shrubs at their base. The ground was not level... She shook her head, unable to comprehend how strange it was. She'd know more about it soon enough. Checking her satchel, she saw her comb, a large soft cloth of sky blue, two extra hair ties, a healing salve she'd created for burns, several pairs of socks in fun bright shades, and her gorgeously painted waterskin. Checking his, she saw a piece of scooped leather she'd mistaken for the bottom of the bag. She held it up. It was a hood, with shoulder mantle. It was dappled in irregular shades of tan and brown and pale green, and had a beautiful stone carving of a creature she now recognized as a groundbear. She added it to her pack.

Walking to her lab, she bundled the four bottles in. They clinked, so she wrapped two in her spare cloth, and two in the hood. That was better. The pack was definitely heavier now. Then she filled the skin up with a sweet summer wine. No sense in drinking plain water until she had to. Last she added a thin box containing the best result of her recent experiments. Indeed, she'd had the sad occasion to use her burning burrs this past night. The sun had risen by now, and her steps were hurried as she passed several clusters of groups in the hall. They called to her, shouting questions, some crying, but she waved them off with apologies. At Alfons' room, she learned he was still unconscious.

Leaning against the door, Vivienne almost cried. Almost. She thought of Roge and Amriet, who would struggle with the final investigation for any remaining darkmages, and then the City's response to their eventually shared findings. Not to mention the punishment, which could only be death. There was Shella's exhausting journey, and Rita's as she hurried to discuss the disastrous news to the Royals and other Cities.

Yes, there were many hard missions underway this morn. Hers was just one, and the fact that she was personally threatened by it didn't mean she would hide from it. She took a deep breath, adjusted the pack onto both her shoulders, and set off for the front gate. Stopping at a pile of ash that used be a lovely fruit stall, Vivienne held her hand out to make sure the fire was completely dead. There was one deep hotspot left, and she quenched it. So many of the darkmages hadn't gone quietly to their cells. She was moving

across the main courtyard when she saw a guard hurry toward her.

"Flame Curate, your Trux skymage is here. Shall I allow him entrance?"

Shuddering to think what his response would be to the fifty-three identified darkmages the Guild now held in the cellar, she shook her head. "Thank you, I'll go out to him."

The man nodded. She waited until he took his post on the platform above the wall before she bobbed her head at his partner.

She didn't know these two guards personally, but had worked with them when a darkmage had tried to escape. The younger one was Jan's son. He nodded to her.

"Blessings."

She looked at the respect in his haggard face. "Thank you." The words burned and twisted in her throat.

The lock was turned, the door eased out onto the street, and she slipped through. It clanged closed after her.

Odan stood on the stone street. He was still half-dressed in that black skirt, but now he wore a pack twice the size of hers on his back. He held a sausage biscuit in one hand. He looked immensely strong and well-rested. His eyes were bright and sharp, his hair bushy and frazzled. "What's going on?"

"There was an uprising in the Guild last night. There is still disarray. I cannot let you in."

"Disarray? That's a word women use for my hair. How can a Guild be in disarray?"

She *so* wasn't in the mood for this. The guards were listening to everything. "You wanted to leave this morning. Let's go."

He took an enormous bite of his biscuit. The smell rolled her stomach.

Vivienne looked down the street, which angled slightly toward the river. The urge to burn that biscuit out of his hand was tremendous. She'd been setting her fire free way too often in the last hours. It was seductive to rely on bullying to get her way.

He took another bite of his biscuit, staring hard at her, but she wouldn't meet his eyes. If she did she'd start to scream. He had no idea what she'd just survived, while he himself enjoyed a well-rested and no doubt well-laid night.

"Let's go." Vivienne turned left, striding toward the river.

"Where are you going?" His voice had that stiff formality it had had when they'd first met. Sounding entirely polite, it nonetheless portrayed condescension very well.

She stopped, holding onto her patience by a silken thread. An image flashed before her mind, of Andalay rising from her bed with a maniacal laugh, her hand writhing with the most appalling black-flecked puce-green magelight Vivienne had ever seen. Rita had been standing just slightly in front of Vivienne, and so had taken the strike as Andalay had thrown it. She'd screamed as it sank into her arm, pustules erupting into gooey sores. The bodymage had no experience healing darkcraft and her hand had still been infected when Vivienne said goodbye.

"I was heading toward the Mage Guild Gate."

"We'll leave by the Beast Gate."

"All right." She stayed where she was, certain he wasn't done with his criticism.

"That's not the pack I gave you. Go get it."

"No." She folded her hands in front of her belly, posture perfect. The morning was warm already. Today was going to be a hot summer day for Second City, which she

usually looked forward to, but the leather outfit he'd given her would encase her in sweat.

"The pack I gave you is spelled. Go get it." He spoke through gritted teeth.

"No." She had a moment of deja-vu. What did this remind her of? "My pack is spelled as well." It wasn't spelled against heat, just rain, but he didn't need to know.

"Give it to me." He held out his free hand. The last of the biscuit went into his mouth.

"Why?" Oh, now she realized the connection. This was much like facing down her mother.

"I want to see what you've brought."

"I brought only the essentials, but yes, it's more than socks. You're not taking my things. I am responsible for carrying them or discarding them as needed. Let's go."

His silver eyes drifted down over her critically. She forced herself to remain still. Wearing the ugly, ill-fitting outfit made her cross. Being judged by him in these clothes chafed even more. Stupidly, she wondered if the skinlicker he'd had last night was beautiful and big-chested and charming. Had he kissed her?

He dusted his fingers off in a slow, thoughtful way.

"Are you really making a stink about my pack? I wore your outfit." Only because hers was ruined.

Breathing deeply through his nose, she couldn't help but notice how his chest expanded, the muscles practically crisp in their definition. Was he even going into battle undressed? Yet how convenient for whenever he wanted to fuck.

"I lead."

She remained still, hands folded. *You were the Flame Curate of Second City. You have survived a darkmage Fortress and assisted in the capture of dozens of darkmages. You are calm, competent, and in control of your own life.*

He spun and stomped off down the street. She followed.

"Walk in the Light, Lady." A man's voice called from the gate. The thought that one of her people would pray for her, that she might actually get the chance to defend them, filled her with resolve. She followed silently after Odan's long strides. Today, for the second time in her life, she was leaving her City. She had a sinking feeling it was for the last time.

Chapter Six

Odan was so angry he could barely keep his guard up as they wound through the granite-paved streets. Unbelievable. He'd been right. She was spelled to disguise her scent. This was an astounding feat of magecraft. And sickeningly suspicious. Yet his instincts also confirmed that she was no darkmage. No matter how irritating. Her eyes had been as unsettling as yesterday, swirling and leaking power like she was on the verge.

Even now, with her footsteps pattering behind him, he couldn't get rid of the itch between his shoulder blades. He couldn't smell her. He didn't trust her. Why would an innocent mask their scent? When should he confront her about it? He would, no matter the outcome of their first show of power.

The bruises beneath her eyes were darker, deeper today. Her face was so stiff it was hard to tell what she was thinking, without the clues of scent or gaze. It was like working with a puppet. An irritating puppet. He'd actually been surprised she'd agreed to wear his outfit. And shocked at how good she looked in it. The pants and tunic should have been baggy, as he'd brought a larger set than what the humans had told him of her size. Humans always understated their size. Yet the set had settled on curves he hadn't known about. They were subtle. And he hadn't missed her absence of panties or chest bindings. There was no bulk under the leather at all. Just muscled thighs, and high round ass. A flare of hips, and hard nipples. What did those nipples mean? Ash and Sand, it was like being blind without a scent.

"I'm surprised you met me at the gate. I expected more argument about leaving today."

"I have many responsibilities, Odan. You failed to take that into consideration. But yes, I managed to settle them all last night because I agree that our mission is critical."

His eyebrows rose. Grit and Mist, he would not feel guilty about those shadows painting her skin. She'd known when he was arriving and should have cleared her responsibilities sooner. But something adjusted in his view of her knowing she'd been able to adapt new information and change her mind.

He stopped in front of the guarded booth. "Good morning."

He gave the guard his human identity badge, and Vivienne gave him hers. The man recorded them and waved them through. The wolf lying with his paws crossed by the door grinned at him. He saluted in return.

Opening the gate with a Trux spell, he held it with one hand, waving Vivienne through. She passed before him, barely reaching the middle of his chest. Small women made him nervous. He preferred them Sunny's height, but with Lizzie's heft, much like his cousin Shad's mate, Charley. Then when he lay on top of them, he didn't feel like he had to hold his breath. He stepped through and let the gate fall behind him. The wolf yipped softly, telling him it was secure.

Vivienne visibly shuddered before him. A hand rose to her face. Yes, the stench was bad enough even a human could smell it. Waste, and burning, and desperation. Unlike at the other City Gates, there was no barrier keeping the fringe hovels of the wildlings away from the dirt path stretching out before them. Odan felt sad for the thin, generally scarred

faces vanishing into the doorways and alleys around them. Most hadn't done anything to be banned from the City, but were merely the offspring of some unlucky lawbreaker generations before.

"Stay close." Odan stepped past her, but paused when she wrapped one hand around his forearm.

Glancing at her face, he didn't like what he saw. She was the color of fresh snow, and that amazing mouth that had popped into his fantasy last night was a thin, red slash. Her eyes shone like twin balls of green magelight, and her tightly bound hair, in the shadows, looked nearly metallic pink. It shouldn't have surprised him, after the bias she'd revealed yesterday, that she was terrified of the outcasts. But his stomach sank anyway, for if she couldn't hack a walk in the bad part of town, what would she do in a beebie attack?

He turned to face her. "We're walking down this path for a few minutes. At the fifth crossroad, we turn left. It will wind its way through three turns, and then we'll go into a shop. In the shop, we take a tunnel into the woods. None of the people here have ever breached the tunnel. My people are rarely attacked here." Which was more than he could say for in the Cities, where they often faced hidden attacks and accusations. After all, an attack here could be retaliated against swiftly and harshly, but in the Cities, the Truxet were bound by laws and trials and the need to pretend they weren't entirely the predators they were.

"Ready." Her voice was breathy. She ignited a fireball in the air behind her back. He hoped the reason it flickered madly was for show.

Nodding, he turned and strode off, using long strides. Her softly panting breaths were close behind him. With all his senses, he probed the close, crooked buildings. All was well until the turn before the tunnel. He paused. Yes, violence and several kinds of craft were keying up. He wasn't sure if they were the focus or not.

Speaking softly over his shoulder, he said, "Ware. Second story, left."

"The stone house?" Her voice was even quieter than his, but of course he heard her clearly.

"The next one."

No sooner had the words left his mouth than a fireball roared past his shoulder and exploded against the shuttered window there. He actually flinched in surprise. Screams erupted from the building, as well as another on their right. Three people dashed from the neighboring stone house and away down the street, faces panicked.

"Go!" She pushed past him and he threw up a wind funnel, drawing the air from the fire and putting it out, mostly. He overtook her, grabbing her elbow, and pulled her into the house they paid to maintain here. He threw the payment sack of spices and sugar at the wide-eyed man there, and opened the spelled hatch. It had opened only a handspan before she was on her ass, her legs sliding through, bending her back and slithering in before he had it fully open. He heard a soft grunt as she landed. Grimacing, he turned and went down the ladder, pulling the hatch closed and setting the trap that protected it. When he stepped down off the rungs and turned, she'd lit a whole string of magelights in their wall sconces, and stood shaking against the wall.

He watched her for a moment. Yes, this qualified as shock. Shrugging off his backpack, he opened it and took out a flask of beer. "Here. Sip."

She took it, opened the catch, but shuddered at the scent and handed it back. She swung her own backpack, nearly as big as her whole torso, off. When he smelled the

wine in her skin, he snorted. "Sit down. We can rest."

Yes, she would do just splendidly in the Wild. Normally, he'd have patience and sympathy for a human woman thrust into such a dangerous and unfamiliar situation. After all, their adopted women went through a carefully staged series of lessons exposing them to the Wild. She rubbed him wrong, but he needed to remember she was only human.

She looked at the dusty ground, leaned against the stone wall. Unbelievable. She didn't want to sit in the dry dirt.

"Do you want to explain what happened back there?" he asked. Not that he expected her to admit she'd panicked.

"You gave me the location. I took it out."

Odan took a deep swallow of the beer he'd wanted to have at dinner that night. Capping it, he pursed his lips thoughtfully. "You don't think you overreacted?"

She looked away, down the tunnel. "I've been out of the City before. I had just one Trux guard, Josah. As we went out the Mage Guild Gate, we came upon an attack on an incoming caravan. It was shortly after the hawk escaped the Fortress and returned to you, and the Truxet presence was thin in the Cities. The caravan was perhaps a dozen people strong, yet had only one Trux. At least half were dead, and the mob trying to rip two men apart was so huge the Trux couldn't fling them fast enough. There were groups of people ripping the clothes off of the dead, and others swarming the cart. The Trux guarding me turned away from the mob. I screamed at him to go back, but he picked me up and ran, so fast."

Her voice came out in bursts, with angry gasps between phrases.

How shocking the violence must have been for the jewel-box princess he'd met yesterday. "Slow down. You're safe here."

"I was only able to throw one fireball. I hadn't been practicing then. I was slow. I missed the mob and hit the cart, scattering some of them. They're like human rats. They're horrific, and should either be wiped out or rounded up and habituated to civilization. Just ignoring them as we've done for centuries is absurd, as their threat just grows, attached to the very Walls that protect us. They prey on us, and yet we only attack if they do."

"His mission was to secure you." It sounded like a bad scene for a privileged, sheltered human woman to witness. He'd never worked justice duty, and had never envied those who did. It was one of the perks of being a Council skymage.

She rubbed at her forehead. "When Josah had me down here, he left. He came back fairly quick, saying it was over, and that those who had killed would be punished. But what kind of punishment can you give to those already exiled? Death is what they need."

"And maybe it is what they found." It was as close as he wanted to get to sharing the considerably harsher code of his people.

Her head came up. She looked at him. "*Good.*" The relish in the word interested him.

"What happened in your Guild last night?" Now that she was opening up to him, maybe she'd be more forthcoming.

She started walking, that tight little ass churning perkily beneath her decorated backpack. "Bad things. You'll find out eventually, but I really don't want to talk about it. Nothing either of us can do about it now, regardless."

He'd find out eventually? How bad was *bad*? "That fireball was serious."

"Yes."

"You didn't control the heat."

"No."

"Why were you escorted out of the City by Josah?"

She was silent, striding forward.

"Why have you hidden your scent?"

She stopped. Hmmm. He'd wanted to save that conversation for later, preferably when he already had the upper hand. But the anger had been churning since he'd come to the realization of what she was doing. She turned. Her face was no longer as strained, her mouth not as tight. But the shadows beneath her eyes had definitely graduated to bruise status.

"I have hidden my scent because of you."

He looked at her. "I don't think you are a darkmage, or hiding the guilty fear of a crime."

She took one tight step toward him. "I will say this once. I am not a darkmage. If you ever so much as propose I might be again, I will burn that stupid skirt off you, hopefully along with more important parts as well."

She was positively bloodthirsty. Interest stirred in his belly briefly, before being swamped by a greater realization. "And yet, our Council has petitioned the Mage Guild for help combating the darkmages' new ability to slip unseen through the Cities. It is key to our inability to track the darkmages."

Her little hands tightened into bony fists.

As long as the Ash-skinned evil ones didn't conduct actual darkspells in an area, they seemed to be hidden from them. That hadn't been the case for hundreds of years. In the past, any contact with darkcraft left a taint warriors could easily track. This was a new development, and one that was essential to their ability to operate with relative safety over a long enough period to build a following and a significant base.

The thought that she was making use of the same spell which had allowed the darkmages to rise to power made him quiver with frustrated rage. She stood before him knowing the secret to the tool both their people needed to end this. Fynn had died, for some sort of Mage Guild conspiracy. Not even the Royals were worse at skullduggery than the Mage Guild.

"Does the smell of your own sweat offend you so much you'd rather have darkmages for neighbors? Some could be living in your very Guild, and you would just think they're using good hygiene?" His voice rose steadily until it echoed in the tunnel.

She staggered back from him, her green eyes wide. "Your face!"

"Nothing's wrong with it, thanks. I'm waiting to hear your explanation!"

She pointed at him. "You have stripes again!"

He knew the groundbear stripes which appeared with strong emotion made him look fierce. He'd take any leverage he could. "You're betraying the contract of my people! You and your Guild! The secrets you keep give *them* an advantage!" He stalked into her space, despite her backpedaling, crowding her against the wall.

"I know!" she shouted back, jutting her chin out at him.

He loomed over her, breathing hard, stunned.

"I know," she whispered brokenly. "I'm sorry. Within the week, it will end. Rita will see to it."

He took in a harsh, deep breath. Forced himself to step back, to pull the stirring of his stubborn beastspirit inside. "Explain."

She shook her head. "No. It has nothing to do with our mission."

He wanted to strangle her. "You stand here masked to me. This hinders our communication, which is necessary for a good team."

"It actually helps our communication, putting us on equal footing. If all you had to do was sniff to understand me, you'd never explain things the way I need you to. You'd have a far greater understanding of me than I would of you."

Keeping his teeth tight together to keep himself from shouting again, he said, "I am this team's leader. You are denying me access to an ability that can only aide us."

"Who made you the leader?" Her little chin stabbed out.

His roar reverberated in his ribs. "This is not a game!"

"Don't shout at me!" she screeched back.

Memory of their kiss struck him as they stood nose to nose, gasping furiously, again. She'd been small, lax with surprise, and soft.

"It's your beast, isn't it? Those stripes that appear on your face are like the ones on the picture of your animal. It's trying to get out because you're angry." Her eyes searched his face, fascinated.

He stepped back precisely. Turning from her, he leaned one forearm against the wall, and hung his head. *Control*. Three deep breaths later, he turned to face her.

"I lead. As we speak, Truxet are posted along the entire coast between Sixth and Second, and along the eastern mountain range from White Hollow to The Den. As of this evening, we camp at the sifting stone, and wait for notification of a beebie."

His voice was moderated, steady. "When we get it, we immediately sift to the closest point, and I'll fly us or run us in. In order to successfully draw the beebie's attention, you need to be covered in my scent, since that is the trigger that makes them attack."

Pride filled him that he'd made it through to a logical, unmovable point, and remained in control. No sign of impatience colored his words. "We kill it, with my air boosting your fire, with as little surrounding damage as possible. Repeat until we fail, upon which time I follow the thing." Breathing one more deep, steadying breath, he said, "Do you understand?"

She nodded curtly. "If I carry a blanket you've slept on, I will be marked with your scent."

He blinked, stunned, his jaw going slack. She turned and strode down the tunnel like royalty on parade. Everything with her was negotiation, a testing of power, a display.

Odan crossed his arms and bowed his head. As long as he kept his balled fists in his armpits, he wouldn't be tempted to shake her. As long as he kept his gaze off that twitching ass in leather pants, he wouldn't be tempted to spank her. *You are a warrior with honor, in control at all times*. Taking a deep breath, he set a wind barrier at the curve in the tunnel.

Lifting his head, he saw her near it in a few more strides. She struggled forward, leaning into the localized gale he'd set. A few steps farther, and she braced herself on the side of the tunnel, clutching at the earth, using it to pull herself forward. Dirt blowing back hissed against his pant legs, and he breathed shallowly. When she couldn't go any closer, she erupted in flames.

He'd never seen anything so gorgeous. Her figure was in the center, strong shoulders,

barely curving hips, delicate skull and arms. But around her was a shimmering orb of fire. The rich tongues trailed back at least a bodylength in the force of his wind. Then he realized what she was doing, as she took two more quick steps before bracing her muscled legs again. She was devouring his wind in her heat, gobbling it up. So he reversed it, sending her staggering down to her knees. Pulling harder, tighter, he sucked her heat away, sucked her air away. If he wanted to, he could create such a vacuum her lungs would not be able to inflate. Her fire flared before her now, revealing nothing but a shimmer of heat over the back of her form.

Quickly, he sprinted up behind her. The heat scorched him worse than the desert the lizzeed called home, but he forced himself to lean over her bowed form and speak slowly. "You pampered brat. If I could take you back and dump you inside the Main Gate, I'd do it now."

"You started this." Her voice was strained, breathless.

Blinking rapidly against the heat pouring off her, he viciously spat, "And I will finish it. Are we to be enemies then?"

Abruptly, her fire winked out and the instant it did, he dropped the wind. She leaned against the earthen wall, gasping. He straightened, but did not move back, using his body for any kind of dominance he could get. Looking down at the wisps of curling hair that now drifted around her previously tightly bound bun, he tried to pull back on his personal anger.

Look at it from above. What is driving this defiance?

She stood, sooner than he'd have guessed, and dusted her knees off. So close to her, he again noted how delicate she was. When her mouth was making noise, he tended to forget.

She turned, moving back one step to meet his eyes more clearly. Not that he could read hers with that constant mist. "When your people realized the implications of the darkmages having their own Fortress, they contacted mine. When my people asked to be part of the investigation, you argued with the representative the Queen chose, but eventually agreed it was important enough to allow her access. When that initial, rushed exploration of their Fortress failed a week ago, both of our peoples retreated into their own assessment."

She looked away, igniting the three magelights on the curve of the hall that had gone out in their little test. "When this mission was conceived, once again your people argued with the choice of representative. But here I am. Heading into another rushed, unrehearsed, ill-prepared, ill-timed plan."

He crossed his arms, but she was undaunted in her pious little speech.

"I was told we would have a chance to prepare in at least a small part. I was told we would be an equal partnership. Not only do you betray those promises, but you also introduce another aspect of the plan that was not approved. I have yet to hear your thoughts on what I shall do when you leave me alone in the Wild to fly to your death after the lizard bird. I am here when my Guild really needs me, when my City needs me. Why am I here? Because I am a person of my word, and I believe you and I can strike a blow at the darkmages." Looking at him again, she managed to raise her chin, thrusting that perfect button nose imperiously up.

He tipped his head, considering her. "Huzzah?" he offered sarcastically. Something in what she said tickled his brain. But mostly he concentrated on not being drawn into yet

another argument with her. He would not refute that his people weren't right to challenge her assignment, that he wasn't using better judgment to begin the mission immediately rather than waste three potentially deadly days "training" together in the City.

And teams always had a leader. Always. There was no room for differing opinions in the middle of battle. Either a team acted as one, or they separated as two lesser pieces and died. He would teach her how to survive in the Wild, and hawks would mark the location of any battle, making sure she'd have assistance were he to fall in death, or leave. He could see he'd failed to share those details, and that she was leaving her safe City on good faith. But he wouldn't defend himself in a rush.

She was frowning at him now, understanding he wasn't going to elaborate in the silence. "That's all you have to say?"

"When we make camp tonight, I'll go into more detail. But the facts are not up for discussion. I am team leader, and this mission is starting now. The issue that I've caught you using an immoral," her eyes burst with fresh green mist in ire, "if not entirely illegal, personal scent-masking spell, something similar to what the darkmages must have been using for years, will still be dealt with. Tonight."

There was more silence, simmering with unhappiness, as her jaw remained set. Finally, she said, "Well, let's move. It's a long walk to the sifting stone." Her face creased with unease. "At least most of it is in the caves, and we're only in the forest a short distance."

Once again his curiosity spiked at why she'd been escorted through here once before. How was it she had consulted on Fynn's mission? But the time for sharing was well done. His lips quirked in amusement at his own pun. Yes, their ability to communicate with each other was over-done, if not outright burned to Ash.

"Go on," he said mildly, gesturing politely with his hand. "I'll follow until we get to the cave."

She nodded, and spun on one dainty heel. She moved around the curve in the hall, and he took a moment to marshal his patience. They hadn't killed each other yet. Unbelievable.

Chapter Seven

His face had become a savage mask. If she had begun to become accustomed to his bare chest, the stripes that flared across his cheeks and forehead would remind her he wasn't human. She'd tried to walk away from the tension, and he'd dared to use his craft against her. Outraged, she'd let emotion get the better of her. It would have been far more dignified to turn and make him appear the bully with extreme tactics. Instead she'd met his with her own showy display. And lost.

Sort of. She was actually proud of how well she'd done. Remembering his growl in her ear, the size of his presence behind her, sent a shiver down her spine. He'd burned his face a little, his cheekbones and forehead glowing red despite his tan. He'd called her a pampered brat. Her. The Flame Curate. Even funnier, she was the daughter of Ruth, the famous ascetic puritan of Second City.

What a pompous frog. The next time he accused her of being something she so absolutely wasn't, a coward, weak, a darkmage, spoilt, she had a perfectly satisfying reply. *Ribbit*. He was just like the stupid, doomed frogs of summer, who loved to hear themselves cry out in the night, despite the fact the watercoasters could hear them and gobble them up.

Keeping her breathing steady, she shouldered her pack a bit higher, and forced herself to consider the disastrous start they were off to. He knew. He knew she was hiding her scent, and was intelligent enough to make the leap that this sort of privacy potion was in wide use in the Guild. It was at the heart of the Guild's guilt and complicit ignorance of the darkmages growth. The High Guilds of the Cities had been debating for two years how and when to reveal their knowledge of the cloaking potion to the Royals without scarring their reputation and damaging their power base. It simply couldn't be done, so the arguments and hesitation continued.

Vivienne had been on the side for coming out. There was no easy way to reveal you were more dangerous than people had thought. But for the good of all, it had to be done. If only the High Guilds had seen that being part of the solution would erase much of the taint of being part of the problem. To be the villain briefly in order to play the hero would do more to increase the Mage Guild's reputation than any long-term contract. But others had disagreed. Like Conri. A darkmage at her own table. And Tobias, the very person who had taught her how to make the cloaking potion. He could be one as well. But she'd been the one to ask for it. Caught up in her own selfish fear, she'd sought out and used the elixir that would let her control her own life, in an attempt to escape a Truth-teller's prophecy.

Thick dark hair swirling as the girl fought, crying out for mercy. Her black eyes like pits as her struggles stilled, her too-old alto ringing out in a singsong. Yes, Vivienne had been weak. She'd been wrong. They all had done that poor girl wrong. And when the Guild hadn't wanted the reminder of their actions and shipped her from her home City, Vivienne had hidden in the dorms, unable to watch. Inexperience and fear were poor excuses. Accepting that she'd been wrong didn't make it any less of a burden. Even though the girl was long gone, the fear lingered still.

One foot followed another in the dry dust. She kept her gaze on the most distant part

of the tunnel visible, lighting the balled magelights in their niches as she went. Tonight, when he demanded she reveal her scent again, would she? It would destroy everything. It would change the whole mission. She'd left her Guild on the verge of City-wide condemnation. Rita had the job of carrying their mistakes to the Royal High Guild, and Shella had the job of cleansing their Guild from the inside out.

Was Roge right? Was her mother? Was she running away on a silly Beast quest when the whole world she'd known was imploding in betrayal? She had to stop. Not really feigning fatigue, she propped her hands on her knees and breathed, stretching her back, hiding her face. It was too much, too late. She'd made her decision.

Odan came to stand next to her. She eyed his sturdier, black boots and his knees where they showed below his skirt. His legs were massive. One of his was easily the girth of both of hers. Could knees be muscled? She thought they were. He said nothing, and she was grateful. He'd come into their first meeting with low expectations, and through a wardrobe bungle of a sad choice in fur trim, she'd met them. Would he tell his people about the cloaking potion tonight? Would he take her with him into their caves if he did, or leave her behind, alone in the Wild?

Stop it. Too many questions. Deal with the now, with the known.

"Flame Curate—"

"No." She straightened, glad he couldn't use her title in such an irritating formal way anymore. "I'm not the Flame Curate anymore."

He looked at her, his eyes silvery in the shadowed tunnel. "As of last, bad night?"

"As of this morning, when we left the compound on this mission."

He didn't say anything. Another irritating trait, this silence he wore like his own cloaking potion. His reticence screamed of dislike. Something inside her twisted, ached. *Really, Vivienne? You can't care about his respect. He's not for you.*

She turned and continued on, keeping her mind resolutely on imagining new juggling patterns. Juggling was her form of meditation. It was intricate, and repetitive. It trained her mind to retain honed focus. Not long after, they came to the ladder, which led up to the cave. He had to lead here, and she was petty enough to look up his skirt. Excuse her, *warskirt*. The leather shorts clung to muscled thighs, but his ass was lost to shadows. In the cave, there were no magelights. She lit a small fireball, and didn't offer him one. He could call all the elements, so if he wanted one, she figured he could do for himself. She moved carefully through the uneven sections of shifting rocks, and cascading pebbles. The first time she'd come this way, she'd been so hesitant on the uneven terrain. This was her third time passing over it, and she did better.

The fine hairs at her nape lit as soon as daylight filled the cave entrance. Her breath came harder, even though the terrain was a gentle downward grade. At the mouth of the cave, he paused. She heard him take a huge breath, and saw his shoulders ease. Forcing hers down from up around her ears, she focused on breathing through her nose, evenly, despite her galloping heart. Scent exploded in her nose. The smell wasn't anything like the garden in the compound, or even the river that flowed along it. It wasn't like the murky smell of the surrounding lakes that could sometimes drift over the Walls in the summer. It was clean and fresh, crisp and dry. And the sound. The air was alive with chatter and creaks, rustling and movement. Vivienne could very well believe monsters were behind every tree. Her gaze jumped from place to place, but it was nothing but a chaos of green leaves and crisscrossing branches, seemingly impenetrable.

After a dozen breaths, she broke. "What is it?" She kept her voice a quiet breath.

He turned and looked down at her, his face looking more shadowed now that the bright daylight glared beyond them. "What do you mean?" He spoke in a normal tone.

"What's out there?" She kept her voice the same quiet.

Cocking his head, he said, "A couple sparrows and a bobbin are all I hear. But no doubt there's some squirrels, chucks, and hares. Usually some snakes, too, and then there'll be a lot of bugs."

All of that? Just right here at the beginning? Her eyes picked out the faint line of packed brown earth that trailed to the seemingly ordinary lump of stone about ten bodylengths away. She'd traveled that brief distance twice before, and knew it was impossible to move through without the branches and twigs touching her. Her guide, a young blond man named Josah, had moved soundlessly, barely disturbing them. She didn't understand how he did it, when she was smaller and made so much noise, cracking and swishing through the growth.

"I'm ready," she whispered.

He considered her. "For what?"

"To go."

"Where?"

She brought her hands up to grip the shoulder straps of her backpack. Anything to keep from burning his eyebrows off. "Listen, Froggy, I think we both know you really shouldn't bait me. This situation is already hot enough."

He stared at her for a long moment, and she jumped when a breeze ruffled past, making the closest branches jerk and bob as if something was there. If he'd laughed at her in that moment, all hope of respect with him would have been lost, but he didn't.

"We're not going anywhere. I need to get a sense of what you can do."

"Here? We're not going to your caves?"

"I want to be as close as possible to the sifting stone. We don't need the distraction of your introduction to a clanhome, nor the time it would take to instruct you to our basic laws."

The laws had been simple and barbaric in their harshness. It hadn't taken her long to learn them. She could say she already knew them. She could say she'd already visited River Mountain, and they would sleep in a bed, surrounded by semi-civilization tonight. But for some reason, she looked out into the vibrant-smelling green, and said nothing. When was a good time to admit she'd stood next to his friend when he died?

"Time for your first lesson in wilderness survival, the only one you really need." He set off into the woods. Standing in the middle of the first bush, he tossed over his shoulder, "Come on."

She actually had to concentrate to make her legs move forward. She stepped, firming her knees, up out of the shadow of the overhang of rock. Sucking in her gut, she lifted her hands high and tried to edge between the branches. It was no good. They caught in her hair, making her squeak before she was able to control her panic. They scratched at her face, caught on the laces of her tunic, and poked her in the thigh. Pushing through, skin crawling, she burst past the bush to stand stiffly beside a tree trunk as big around as Odan. He stood next to it, just as still.

Her breath was beyond any attempt at control as it struggled to keep up with her heart. Something flitted through the branches of a tree and she cried out, "Behind you!"

A fireball burst around both of her hands, and she crouched into readiness.

Odan turned, paused, and turned back, sighing. "It's a bobbin."

Vivienne could hardly hear him, her breath was coming so hard. Her muscles were like stone, waiting for the attack. When she connected his words and realized there would be no attack, she put the fire out, and struggled to stand up nonchalantly. It was no use. She folded her arms tightly around herself, trying in vain to avoid brushing any of the leaves of a neighboring vine.

Odan sat down, right on the ground. "Come here, Vivienne."

"What?" She sidled one step closer to where he crossed his legs, not understanding what he was doing.

"You're about to explode. Come sit here." He patted a loamy patch of ground next to him that had a stick, a lump of moss, and a tuft of a thin-leafed plant.

If she sat there, she'd get dirty, and damp, and that other plant's branch would poke her in the head. "There's no room."

Something hit the back of her knees, and with a squeak, she fell, then was yanked into his arms. He held her in a loose circle, her ass in the hollow of his legs, hers splayed out in front of them. Her backpack was a barrier between them. She grabbed onto his forearms with a death grip, and felt small. He was warm and large around her, but the trees loomed even taller, waving in a subtle motion that made her nauseous.

"Breathe."

She breathed. "I'd like to get up." She needed to be able to run.

"In a moment. I scanned the area. It's safe here, Vivienne. You're about to break. Just let me show you. Breathe."

"Show me what?" Her voice was high and tight. She could feel the fire ready to loosen, moving under her skin.

"Shhh." One of his hands came up and spread across her upper chest. With his fingers wide, one of them brushed the bare skin of her throat, and the rest spanned her whole chest. "Steady."

The energy moved into her, and she didn't fight it. It was sluggish, cooling, calming. Breathing, she closed her eyes. It smelled so good. So different, but energizing.

"There," he murmured. "There you go."

Her heart slowed, although it still leaped too hard. She inhaled again, and this time, she smelled him. *Earth, alive*. She settled, her panic fading.

He gathered her in, adjusting her. "There is nothing here that can harm you."

"There is so much space out here. You can't know when things move into an area. Dangerous things, like a—a—bear, or a—"

"A bear!"

His laughter against her back sent her upright again, stiff.

"Shhh." He hugged her, jostling her, to her annoyance. "A bear is not dangerous, not at this time of year, unless you startle it."

"Well, a wolf, then."

He chuckled. "Wild creatures want no part of humans. Even mage creatures mostly want no part of them. You're too hard to hunt. The worst things to worry about in this location would be wild men, who have abandoned the clans of the outer City, and roam in gangs, violent and unpredictable. It wouldn't surprise me if the attack you saw at the Main Gate was the work of one such gang, and not the people you call Wildlings at all.

Fuzzies are bad, roaming and unpredictable. They've been getting worse in recent years. But for the most part, vast sections of the forest are totally safe."

"I want to get up." She still didn't like being down here on the ground, like wounded prey.

"Just a minute." He took her hand in his, peeling it off his forearm. "You can't move through the forest horrified by it. There's nothing here but the Six, in all their perfection. Let me show you." He stretched his hand out, forcing her arm to straighten as he extended his. He forced her palm to hover over the trunk of the huge tree. "Touch it. I've got you."

His other hand surrounded her wrist, gentle, his thumb brushing the soft underside. Leaning forward, she brushed the bark quickly. It was cool, and rough. He freed her from his control, flattening his wide spread fingers on the tree next to hers.

"There's a bug!" She pulled her palm away.

"Yes. It won't hurt you." The humor in his voice was gentle. "Want me to kill it?"

She looked at it busily scurrying up the tree, with all its little legs. "No."

She touched the tree again, flattening her palm to it as he did.

"Isn't it good? Just because it hasn't been polished doesn't mean you have to fear it. The Wild is not your enemy." He turned his other arm beneath her clutching grasp, sliding his hand down until he'd captured that wrist as well. He stretched out their arms, putting his knuckles down on the ground by his leg. "Now touch the ground when you're ready."

It took a few moments, but she twisted in his grasp and he let her go, resting his hand on the ground. She saw where a root went into the dirt, and that there were actually two different kinds of brown leaves matted in the hollow by it. She touched the root gingerly. It felt like the tree. She touched the leaves, one leathery, one ridged, then the moss. The moss was lovely. Cushioned, soft, glowing. When she finally set her hand to the ground, she was surprised by how springy it was, almost like carpet.

"The first rule of survival is to call water. Keep your hands where they are." He took his hands away and twisted his torso. She realized he'd shrugged off his pack. He canted to the side, and rummaged. "This is a spelled bracelet we give our adopted women whenever they're off with us away from the clanhome. It's keyed to direct water to you. This is the only survival skill you truly need. Stay hydrated. Without water, you won't last two days." His hands folded a delicate bracelet of leather and silk ribbon around her wrist, where it was flexed against the tree. "The trick isn't to think of water, so much as to think of flowing."

She watched his big, tan fingers tie a knot. With her hands stretched out on either side of her, she felt splayed before him. Watching him tie the bracelet made heat dance in her belly.

"You might not always be near a river or lake. But there is always water in the earth. Trees pull it up. Plants of any kind do, actually, but trees are easier. Key into a plant, and trace the flow of water beneath the ground. This bracelet will give you a basic watercraft ability to summon water." One of his hands circled her forearm, his thumb sweeping a gentle arc back and forth over her fine hairs. "We're going to try it right now. The sooner you know you have control in this environment, the better, I think. This is an old tree. Listen to it. Think of the water flowing beneath it, rising at its demand."

She listened to his voice, hearing it blend with the wind in the leaves overhead. She

pressed her fingertips into the cool looseness of the earth, her thumb mimicking his as she swept it over the moss.

"The forest is connected, as the Six are. The trees call the water from the earth, call the air from the heat of the sun."

She heard the husky rumble of his voice, wished her backpack away so she could press against him.

"They're the body and the spirit of the wild, growing. It's beautiful, and you're part of it. You want some of that water. Bring it to your hand."

Focusing on his words instead of his voice, she imagined the tree reaching fingers below. Imagined herself as part of the tree, one of the fingers seeking. She liked the warmth of his hand on her arm, his legs around her hips.

Her eyes popped open, her gaze whipping around to stare in astonishment at her hand sitting in a pool of water already seeping away.

He squeezed her arm gently. "Good."

His hand came out to cup some of it and then it disappeared behind her and she heard the slurp of him drinking it. She looked at the flecks of dirt and leaves floating in it and thought of her wine longingly. Maybe she wasn't that thirsty.

He chuckled. "It's clean."

"It is not. I can see dirt in it."

"I think it cleaner than City wells."

"Our watermages are perfectly competent."

"Hmmm." With a sigh, he scooted away from her, drawing his legs from beneath her arms.

She picked up her hands from the ground and the tree. Dapples of shade sifted across her leather-clad legs.

Stepping around in front of her, he pulled at some of the branches of the bush. "This is whitesnag, a common shrub that borders forests. Its bark silvers in the winter." He held his hand out to her.

She took it, feeling the calloused palm close gently around hers, so large. He pulled her up, and she dusted her butt off. Reaching out, she brushed the leaves. They were shaped like tears.

Patting the tree, he said, "This is an oak. Those there are maple, and that fallen one is an oak, too."

She didn't look at the other trees. She looked at him, leaning one shoulder into the tree. Topless, his tan skin should have looked fragile among all the sharp branches. But he looked at home. The power and energy so unnerving in the compound had room and purpose here.

"I was with Fynn when he died."

He turned his head to look at her, and she watched the relaxation and peace disappear from his face between one blink and the next. His eyes faded from blue to silver.

"I was one of the few High Guild who had experimented with aggressive magecraft. The High Guild voted me to be their representative to your Council, to be briefed on the hawk's escape, and to join the first exploratory group into the Fortress. I was in River Mountain for two days before we left. Fynn was very dedicated, very determined. He knew one of the escapees, and was vocal about the fact that the mission could be fatal, or

worse, if we were captured."

She stared at him, the forest seeming to fall still with her words. She waited, but he just stood there, blank-faced, body still. "When I landed back in River Mountain, Burban dying in my arms, his last act to get me out, I've never been more ashamed in my life. They died. All of them. Warriors in their prime. Instantly, except for Burban, who had been flying in his owl form. Something must have been in the air, some poison, just waiting. Why it didn't work on me, your bodyimages and ours haven't been able to explain. Burban shifted back to human form in order to sift me away, and I'm convinced that's why he died. They say darkcraft enshrouded his soulair. So I have hope that the second group who went solely in bird form might have survived." She stood there, and pathetically ripped at the leaves on the whitesnag bush.

"What did you see?"

They'd told her it was secret, privileged information, but she knew she needed to tell him. "A tiny stone room, much like the sifting stone room at River Mountain. A magelight in a bracket sconce, not a hollowed niche. A snake was there, and in the arched doorway one bodylength away, a lizard bird, chained in the hall, with its head within striking distance. I had gone in with my fire freed, ready on my shoulder. I only had time to throw one fireball, and it seemed as if it batted it away with its beak. Then my fire winked out, as we'd been warned might happen. The air there is dead to all the elements but Darkness."

Looking down at her fingers, she bit her lip. "You have to understand, I was there less than a minute. We landed." *The stench of gore.* "The men fell." *Only one managed a partial shout. The rest simply dropped, crumpling.* "The bird screamed and struck out." *A grating, wild cry, its jagged beak slashing forward into the chest of one of the men. A bright gush of red blood.* "I fired off the fireball," *she'd thought she was dead,* "and Burban grabbed me, swooping down from his owl form." Her breath shook, and she heard the tears gathering. "I fell under his weight when we sifted, and looked into his eyes as he died." *Don't cry. You can't afford to start because it takes forever to stop.*

She gazed up at him, blinking fast to keep the tears down. "Rafe told me you were Fynn's friend. I asked him why you weren't told about that mission, but he gave me some garbage about you being protective."

He just stood there, that big square jaw locked tight. At least he hadn't gone stripy.

"Say something."

"It worries me that its beak appears fireproof. Were you fully briefed on its anatomy?"

She understood perfectly about focusing on information rather than the personal. "Yes. They showed me all the drawings and models they'd made from the body they'd recovered in the Royal City attack. I also saw the skull of the head they've kept, and the talons."

"So the plating between its wings might be fireproof, too."

"It had some feathers, and eyes. Those shouldn't be."

They stood in silence.

"Fynn died as he wished, on a mission he believed in. Why I wasn't told there's evidence at least part of a beebie is fireproof angers me more than not knowing you have experience working with my people."

She nodded.

He stood. "Is there anything else you're keeping from me that could possibly impact this mission?"

She considered telling him dozens of people she'd lived and worked with were darkmages, that Second City was about to come alive with panic as the news spread. Did that impact their mission to burn as many 'beebees' as they could? She didn't think so. She shook her head.

"No? I disagree." His voice was mild, calm, but her shoulders got tight. "How about you explain the fact you choose to hide your scent, when scent will be necessary to our mission."

The clawed beast will find you. Words from the black-haired girl leapt into her skull. Vivienne quickly doused them like the dangerous spark they were. "They attack humans who have been near Truxet. We only posit that they attack via scent."

"What are you hiding, Flame Curate?" His words stung at her.

She slapped at the branches. "I told you, I no longer hold that position."

"Why would you give up that sort of power, a position of such worth?" He stepped closer.

"Because I might die!" She lifted her chin at him. "It was the prudent thing to do, and I did it during the last mission as well." But she wouldn't be taking her old job back this time. Too much was happening as she stood here playing with water and leaves for her to take back the mantle of authority from Roge.

"What are you hiding, by Ash?"

"Nothing! Everything! This is about privacy, Odan. This is about the fact that for centuries your people have been able to read humans' every emotion, from fear to desire, and use it against us. We wanted a shield, a way to live without your condescending meddling."

"Meddling!" He stepped forward, and now the shadows of his stripes flared out from his nose, rising up to his temples and across his forehead. "That meddling was policing your own sorry, selfish natures from the greed that infects your spirit and drives humans to seek out power at any cost. At your own King's request!"

"You're not better than us! Just because you can't become darkmages doesn't mean you're without your own darkness. Or are you ignoring the fact a rogue bear is now a pet of the darkmages?" She stepped forward, too, quivering with indignant ire. When reading his report, she'd shared the returned hawk's anger over the darkmages' possession of a rogue Trux. Her neck tipped back to meet his glower.

He leaned over her, breathing hard.

She whispered, "The potion was developed out of pride and fear. It was selfish, and it has led to increased freedom for the darkmages. We realize that, and finally, it's ending, now. But you don't know what it's like, to be so easily read, so easily—" *claimed.* The word echoed in her head. She swallowed to keep it back. *By Skyfather's light, don't give him any ideas.*

He raised up a hand and brushed the backs of his fingers over her cheek. "You don't think I know what it's like to have my every opinion known? But I do. Vivienne, we're not immune to this ability. We scent each other constantly, among the eleven Clans. My father knows when I'm horny, my Alpha knows when I'm angry, my friends know when I'm frustrated. You fear something natural to us."

He frowned down at her. "Look at my face. What am I feeling right now?"

"Frustrated?"

He nodded. "See, you can do it, too. Do I go around with a mask on all the time, to keep you from reading me?"

"You have the ability to control your face. We couldn't hide our scent, until this."

"No one controls their eyes, face, and body all the time. People are meant to interact. We're meant to touch and be touched, with all our senses, with all of the Six." He took her hand loosely in his, and lifted it between them. He studied her short nails, the few shiny patches from old burns, the lines of her palm. When he looked up at her, his eyes were blue. "What is there to hide? Why would you want to move through life pretending to be something you're not? Who are you, Vivienne?"

A spark singed her core, stinging. His words were a coal flaring to life in a heart beaten down by responsibility, guilt, and a need for approval. "I don't know."

The words were out. They shocked her. She blinked. Breaking from his confused gaze, she looked around. The shadow of the cave was off to one side, the bushes, the trees, the undulating ground, the sky glimpsed through patches of leaves. She stood in a strange place, knowing she'd shrugged out of her role of daughter, Flame Curate, and Guild member.

"I don't know." She repeated with wonder.

Turning her head, she looked up at his thoughtful face. This man lived with such bravery, every day. He faced everyone with an honesty that astounded her. Oh, to be so strong. He ignited this need to feel, touch, inside her. She laid one hand against his cheek. It was an intimate touch, to put her palm against the planes of his cheek. She could feel the solidity of his jaw under the heel of her palm, and the ridge of his cheekbone under her fingertips. Her thumb swept past the curve of his nose and rubbed the corner of his lips.

It was surprising, even shocking to touch him, like touching the oak. His peppered hair bristled around his head, making him look even bigger. His eyes had faint lines, and there were small scars. His lashes were brown, his eyebrows dark and peaked. She studied him hard, returning his wondering confusion. Odan, of the large frame, thick shoulders, square jaw, and light eyes. They made each other crazy, and yet...

He leaned down, too close, hovering a breath from her face. He paused, and searched her eyes. She waited. He closed the distance, his head tilting so their noses angled, and his lips settled on hers. It was different than last time. Stronger. Her mouth opened, and she thrilled to meet his tongue with hers.

She pushed her hand off his cheek into the dense hair behind his ear, her thumb settling into the cove of his earlobe. His hands came up to cradle her head, taking the weight off her neck as she relaxed into him. Her other hand fluttered onto his ribs, feeling where the layers of muscle faded and the bone rode under tight skin.

Licking his inner lip, the edge of his teeth, stroking into his mouth, she moved her mouth under his, sealing their breath, before releasing it in a tingling rush of taste. One of his thumbs brushed her temple, and her lashes fluttered closed. His mouth was larger than hers, his lips as muscled as the rest of him. He kissed with power, pressing into her, and she firmed her stance, and returned the demand. His tongue was wild and busy, and she trapped it, sucking lightly. He tightened his hands on her head and broke from her, angling his head to the other side, letting them play with the new slant in a flurry of tongue and lips again.

His hips pressed against her belly, the leather cool. She swirled her fingers in his incredibly dense hair, drawing her nails across his scalp. A surging lap of his jaw beneath hers let her know he liked the sensation. Her hand slid higher up onto the rise of a pec, covering his nipple, and she was abruptly aware of her own, chafing under the too-warm leather. Their mouths clung, and ate, licked and nipped, worked and savored. The hard pebble of his nipple was as fascinating as the plump lobe of his ear, and she worked them both with her fingers, wishing she was back in her room, by a bed, without a mission.

The thought broke her from her reverie. She pulled from his mouth, breathing hard, lips sizzling. He darted in and lapped hard across her lower lip, then suckled it. Her neck lost strength, and his hand massaged her nape as he tipped her back up to meet his hard breaths. He kissed her, short, savoring kisses. She knew he was trying to pull back as well. Her thighs trembled, her fingertips throbbed. Settling both hands on his shoulders, she kneaded him, ducking her head to nip along the line of his jaw, dragging her lips along.

He rested his forehead against hers. His hands swept down her back to hold her hips. She could see his pulse pounding in his neck. He darted in to kiss her again, their lips clinging, before slowly pulling away. His hands clenched on her hips, and then he stepped back. Her gaze drifted down over his torso. He was the most muscular man she'd ever seen, even when she'd moved through River Mountain's hallways. She looked at the line of his pecs, his little brown nipples, and licked her lips, tasting him.

His breath huffed, and then he kissed her again, softer, his tongue just drifting along the inner edge of her upper lip. The skin along her spine rippled in pleasure, her belly clenching. It was like his every touch, no matter how gentle, now fanned her higher.

His hands slid from her hips and he stepped out of reach. Her hands were slower to leave his shoulders, drifting over the swells of his biceps. She clenched her grip on her elbows to keep from reaching for him again. He stepped back farther, the bushes rustling.

His eyes had never blazed such a bright blue. He inhaled and exhaled heavily, clenching his fists. "Now's not our time."

She thought so, too. That's how they'd ended up in this moment. She nodded.

He looked away. "We need to get to work. Let's train."

Chapter Eight

He led her through the forest toward a southwesterly lake with a big beach. By Cloud, could that woman kiss. Her mouth was softer than any he'd tasted, her lips strong and her tongue curious. Her sharp teeth and nails had spiked his gut every time she'd used them. Groundbear had approved of everything about her, much more interested in her than he usually was in Odan's bedplay. Pausing to check on her over his shoulder, it was all he could do not to turn and wrap her up in his arms again. He knew she'd open that gorgeous mouth and meet him eagerly. And knew that after a moment, he'd be in the same position of pulling away with a killer hard-on.

She flinched back from a low-hanging dead branch, then tentatively reached up to feel the jagged, bare wood. She eased under it, mist-green eyes darting everywhere. Odan had never been so disoriented in his life. In the course of one morning, she'd had him enraged, aroused, impressed, and shocked. She'd been to River Mountain. She'd been in the darkmage Fortress. She'd attacked humans without provocation and stood against his skycraft. She kept dangerous secrets. She'd given up her position to help on this mission, and she'd defied his leadership at least half a dozen times. How could one tiny woman be appalling, maddening, fascinating, and heartbreaking?

Pointing to one of the most common birds there was, she whispered, "There it is again. Is that a bobbin?" Her hushed tone was amazed.

He nodded, then continued on, moving slowly, as she now seemed to cope with the forest by feeling every single thing she passed. He catalogued the issues he needed to speak to his Alpha about. The cloaking spell, and the Mage Guild's knowing silence on it even when they must know by now that it was how the darkmages had grown so powerful and moved so freely in the Cities. The fact tactical information had been kept from him regarding the beebees. Vivienne's change of status, and that something large and bad had happened in her Guild, probably related to darkmages. He had to find out if anyone had been killed in her attack on the wildlings, although he wasn't worried about serious punishment, because he had truly sensed an imminent attack. He hadn't sensed she'd caused death, but it had been a large fire. There was Vivienne's own demand that the wildling's outer-City be thoroughly investigated to report back to her. And of course a report on how they worked together, if they worked *with* and not against each other.

"Odan! Look!"

Her voice was huskier since their kiss. He liked it a lot. He glanced at her to see her direction and looked.

"It's another bobbin!" Her voice was definitely excited this time.

He nodded, fighting to keep the smile off his face. It was like taking a packmate's child on a walk. "Good eyes. That one's a male. See the white tips on his wings? The females don't have them."

"Oh." She nodded, stealthily peering through the leaves at the small bird. "I see them." Her finger stroked along the edge of a milk mushroom growing out of the side of a tree. She grimaced and wiped her hand on the bark of the tree. "Ew. It's wet."

He couldn't hold the smile back this time. Turning, he continued on. "It produces a slime good for dry skin."

"Really?" She sounded appalled.

"We mix it with goat's milk from your Farm, and some thickening herbs. My Clan's is the thickest ointment, especially good for hands and feet. Our recipe is carefully guarded."

She tripped, again. He turned and looked.

She glared at him. "Keep going. You don't have to stare every time."

He nodded. Moving up the rise, he wondered if he should warn her about the frangi scat he saw. Best not to complicate things. The frangi were generally skittish, and only poisonous in their breeding season, which was well past.

When they got to the beach, she hesitated at the edge of the forest. "Oh! It's so big!"

He stepped down onto the sand, dropping his pack. "Actually, it's only a pond. You should see the great lake where the Cove of the watercoasters and marten is. This will be a good place to practice, so we don't endanger the forest as much."

She bent and sifted her hands through the sand. Again, she didn't seem to care for it much, shaking her fingers out. "What about the water? What lives in there?"

He shrugged. "Lots of things that don't care about us." He swung his arms, stretching his shoulders. "Ready to work?"

She stepped onto the beach, holding her pack in two hands. She scanned the trees, and found one with a broken branch jutting out toward the water. She hung her pack on the branch. "Ready."

He tried not to roll his eyes. He found himself eager to see what they could do together. He was now convinced this mission would have been much easier with a fellow Trux firemage as his pair, but it was also true he was learning a great deal about the secretive Mage Guild's abilities. When the Royals had pressured for a human to be included, the Council had resisted, but agreed in the end for this very reason.

"We'll start with something simple." He picked up a thick, short branch. "Burn this." He threw it with a whirling, two-handed swing, sending it arcing end over end across the pond.

Her face was the picture of concentration and seriousness. The fireball she formed was disappointingly small, slightly smaller than her fist. She pushed with both hands, elbows out, the most unbelievably ridiculous throw he'd ever seen. The fireball streaked so fast he couldn't track it, just a trail of black smoke painting its path. The branch flared in a burst of white light, and was gone. Odan stared hard where it had been. A spatter drew his eyes down in time to see small black ashes raining on the pond's surface, a few sending up wisps of smoke.

She looked at him and smiled. "Next."

Something inside him lurched. His dick was hard, pushing at his waistband, and colors jumped out at him with battle readiness. The bright green of the forest mixed with the olive green and black of the pond. The fawn sand and her darker leathers set off the unnatural green of her mage-ghosted eyes and her amazing fire-touched caramel hair. Her mouth was wide, and red, with a lighter pink riding in her pale cheeks.

"All right, so I won't have to boost your speed in close range. How far can you go?"

"I don't know. I've only ever practiced in the basement."

Scanning the horizon, he pointed to a distant dead pine. "There. Could you go that far?"

She looked at it, and a fireball roiled into being.

"No!" Panic jumped into his chest that she'd get it off before he stopped her.

She looked over at him, and he breathed. "I don't want to start a forest fire. Let me get over there under it, so I can be there to damp the fire in case. So in a few minutes, try to take just the tip."

"I can put out my own fires." Her dainty little rounded nose jutted up.

"There's a lot of tinder between here and there."

She nodded reluctantly, looking around.

"There's nothing here that will hurt you." He looked at the pond for a moment. "Can you swim?"

"All Second City children are taught because of the river."

"Good. Try not to fall into the pond." Well, she'd at least survive until he could get to her.

"I think I can manage." She folded her arms.

Abruptly, he questioned his decision. Maybe he shouldn't leave her alone. Looking out to the tree he'd picked, he judged it to be equal to the distance he'd like to attack a beebee from. It was a good range, and an even better test of accuracy and control. His mind supplied a vision of a path of flames leaping to life between the pond and the tree. He shook it sharply. She was the Flame Curate, or had been. This needed to be proven.

"Don't leave the beach."

"Gee, why not?" Her honeyed sarcasm was accompanied by her batting her golden eyelashes. The innocent effect was ruined by the power leaking over her eyes.

He ground his teeth. "Give me just a minute." Jumping back up onto the bank, he set off weaving through the trees. When he made it to the tree, he jogged around it in a wide circle to judge the best angle. Then he sat down to wait. And waited. Sighed with impatience. Just how long did she think he needed to get over here? He breathed and tried to blank his mind of surging emotion. There was no sound, no coming light to warn him. The tree abruptly rocked with impact. It crackled briefly, rained ash, and winked out. Closing his jaw with a snap, he quickly walked the base of the tree. Laying a hand on the trunk, he assessed for heat that had gone inside, festering, and found only a faint residue. Walking a wider ring, he scanned carefully for stray embers. Finding none, he again angled for a view of the top of the tree. A blackened spike topped the tree, a handspan above a ring of untouched dead branches. Shaking his head in amazement, he tracked in a line back toward the pond, studying the trees for signs of damage.

He was close to the pond when he heard her scream. His heart stopped. In a burst, he ran dead out toward the pond. When he heard the splash and another scream, groundbear uncurled from his ribs and snarled. *Vivienne*. They launched themselves through the brush into the air, soaring on a spelled gust in a massive leap. He took the scene in from above. She flailed in the shallows, sputtering. Nothing was on the beach. No movement that he could see in the trees, no tracks. He landed in a spray of sand, scenting deep. No blood. Standing from his crouch, he turned toward her and she screamed again.

A fireball whizzed toward his head. He barely got a wind wall up in time to stop it. It flared brighter from the rushing air. Before he'd taken a breath, it winked out. He stared at her, on her knees, a pond frond hanging off one shoulder, muck streaking one cheek. It was just as before, when she'd smiled. The moment stilled, crystallized, colors leaping at him.

"I'm sorry," she whispered. "I didn't recognize you in your battleform."

Groundbear stood up inside him, stretching, rising up on his hind legs. Odan faded back, and saw a woman. Delicate, powerful. Exotic, familiar. Ferocious, anxious. He wanted her. They wanted her. No matter how deeply they scented, she smelled wrong. She was female, and smelled like fire, but empty. Groundbear dropped to his short paws, and rocked, agitated. Odan pulled forward again. He turned and scanned the beach.

"It was a lizard. Shiny, deep red. It had a frilled, fluffy head, with claws and teeth and a long spiked tail."

Closing his eyes, Odan groaned. In this form, it came out as a rumbling bass. He breathed, and pushed the adrenaline back. In a few moments he'd returned to human form. He grimaced down at his ripped warskirt and split boots. He'd just broken these in. The skirt hung low, dipping down on one hip. He wiggled his clawed toes in the sand.

"You—you get really big." Her voice was soft.

He waited until groundbear sank into his soul again. Clearing his throat with a harsh cough, he said, "You've seen battleforms before."

"Nils sifted into the Fortress in battleform. I don't remember what beastspirit he had. But he wasn't as big as you. He died just as fast as the others."

For some reason, groundbear became agitated at the thought of her in River Mountain, surrounded by warriors. Thinking of how close she came to being trapped in the Fortress, groundbear surged hard inside.

"Your stripes!" she gasped, averting her eyes.

"I wouldn't hurt you." But the hard-on he had was demanding some force. "The creature you saw was a frangi. They're drawn to heat. They hunt bugs, worms, small rodents. Its bite is poisonous in the spring, but now it couldn't hurt you."

"It looked fierce. It moved so fast."

He nodded. "They live near the Burrow, my clanhome. Younglings train by trying to catch them by hand. They're actually quite intelligent, and learn quickly." Moving into the water, he held out his hand. She put hers into it. Small, white, wet.

"I'm sorry I attacked you. I'm so relieved you were able to stop the fireball. I've been using my fire so much, and I didn't get any sleep last night. It's been a very ... hard ... two days." She stood and sloshed up onto shore. Mud coated her from the thighs down. "Ugh!"

"You need to watch that. We still have to find out if everyone's all right from your attack in the outer City."

"That is *not* part of the City. It is the Dark." She took her hair down and wrung it out.

"So it doesn't matter if they died? Burned? Are homeless?" She was one of the most arrogant and bloodthirsty women he'd ever met.

"I don't know. I'd have to think about it." She shook her arms out and he watched steam pour from her leather as a wave of heat shimmered over her.

"You honestly have to think if you care if someone died?"

Her hair puffed, turning brighter in the sun as it dried, the strands curling into waves. It was fascinating, and he wanted to touch it badly while at the same time he was disappointed in her callousness.

She walked to her backpack. "I honestly have to think whether I regret stopping an attack on us in hostile territory, even if my actions might have caused death and damage. Yes." She shouldered the pack and faced him, her fine hair lifting like a cloud of burning gold around her face. "I have made decisions for my Guild for eight years, Odan. I have

had to look people in the face after I've burned them while training, and I've had to demote people who were afraid to try to reach their full potential. I've done bad things, sometimes with bad information, sometimes out of fear. So yes, if you gave me bad information and my fear caused someone to die back there this morning, I will probably regret it. And no, if you stand by your opinion that we were in danger, and my honed reaction caused someone to die, then I don't regret it."

She walked to his backpack, picked it up with two hands and brought it to him, sliding in the sand. "Call me a bitch, many have. Call me irresponsible and power-mad. I try to be as in control as I can be, but I do go forward with developing the limits of my craft. I try to consider the good of the whole. I've given up large pieces of my life to that belief. I try to improve my skills for our future. But I'm not perfect, and I have to sleep with what I've done."

He took the pack from her and swung it over one shoulder. "You're more of a warrior than I expected you to be."

"You didn't expect much."

Her rebuke stung hard. "I do now. We need to clean up, and get back to training. I'm impressed with what you can do without any enhancement from me. Together, we're going to burn the beebees to ash." He reached out, because he had to, and brushed the dried mud off her cheek. "Vivienne, you're not a bitch. I stand by my information, and I'm not sorry, although I do hope no one was badly harmed."

Her gaze avoided his. "Will I have to stand trial by your laws if they were?"

He wanted to deny it, to gather her up and hide her, to stand before her and protect her. "Yes." Everyone was responsible for their actions.

She nodded. "Are you going to sift and go find out?"

"How does a bath and a meal sound?"

"Wonderful."

"A quick one. Daylight's burning."

"I'll follow you."

He wanted to bury his hands in that amazing sunset-hair. He wanted to fold over her and take her on the sand, shadowing into her body, discovering how she finished in passion. He nodded and led the way into the forest.

* * * *

Pretar stared at the wreckage of the smoking ruins that had been a conglomerate of rooms. Drawing his cloak around him, he drifted closer to the group of shouting people surrounding two who were beating at each other with the short, rounded clubs the people favored outside the City Walls.

"Tell me what happened," he demanded of one young man who bounced on his toes to see over the closer heads to the action.

"Fuck off," the male responded without looking.

Smiling, Pretar sidled closer, wrapping his fist around his belt at the same time he slid a sharp blade deep into the man's side. He screamed, twisting, but Pretar jerked hard at his waist with the belt, staying behind his back. His cry was ignored in the crowd.

"Answer me, you little pain sack. What happened here?"

"Shit! Shit! I don't have nothing!" wailed the boy, shaking, lunging to get away.

Pretar yanked him back, the belt a very helpful tool, with the knife beneath his ribs

another handhold. "Shut up. Focus. Answer me."

The boy's fear and pain soothed Pretar's agitation at failing to get into the Mage Guild compound this morning. The City was buzzing about the fact no traffic had been allowed in or out beyond one well-guarded Senate member who left via the Mage Gate, and another paired with a filthy Beast who left via *their* Gate.

The shivering young man gasped, "They's fighting over some stuff from one of the rooms. Some nice loot."

Pretar swirled his wrist, widening the blade's damage, and the idiot howled. "Shut up. I'm not talking about the fight, I'm talking about the burned buildings." The blood that coated his fingers sank into his skin, firing him with warmth and energy.

"A Beast came through. His crazy bitch burned down the building." He babbled faster and faster. "Geo's Clan was in there, about to do a little toll collecting, is all, and she couldn't have even known that. The fire burned up the other building too, before we got it down. All the good stuff was raided right away, before the wood had even cooled. My buddy Ting burned his hand but got a brass dish. What? What else do you want to know?"

"Nothing. That will do." Pretar wanted badly to kill the pathetic waste of flesh, but knew it would bring too much attention to an already stirred-up area.

He wiped his knife on the back of the man's shirt, then shoved him away. The scrawny kid jostled another person in the crowd who turned and smacked him across the face. Awkwardly trying to clasp a hand to his wound, the boy cast a terrified glance back at Pretar and scurried away into the shadows like the weasely chuck he was.

A cheer went up and items changed hands as the bruised winner hoisted a dirty pillow high in the air. Pretar looked up at the charred ruin, watching the people swarm over it, pulling at boards, ripping it apart. By nightfall, it would be an empty lot. By nightfall the next day, a new shak would be erected. The people who lived by their wits and fists out here were nothing if not efficient. On the second floor, visible through a hole where the front wall used to be, men were fucking a woman with a burned arm. She was chained to the wall by her throat. They stood around laughing, everyone covered in soot.

Pretar wanted some of that. He moved forward, weaving and shoving through the crowd as needed to get to the stairs. A large man blocked the ground-level door, his club out. Some pathetic group's attempt at claiming the remaining bounty, no doubt. Pretar smiled, pulling his hood farther down over his face. Before he returned to the Fortress, he'd be fully powered, and contemplating just why the best firemage the humans had would leave with the Beasts. Had Conri taken over the compound against his orders? Had he tried and failed? Who among the dozens of converts Pretar had personally recruited had been captured?

"Move along, red. This here shak belongs to—" The man's scarred face purpled, horror crawling across his eyes before they rolled up into his head.

Pretar stepped up onto the unconscious body and moved up the stairs, happily swallowing the man's pain. It had been a tense two weeks since the hawk's escape, but today they were releasing a lizard bird for a hunt. The Cities were going to know they were being challenged, no longer able to waffle under the "mysterious" new creature's "unproven" origins. Yes, there would be blood, the blood of Beasts and those who consorted with them, spilled tonight. It was going to be fun.

* * * *

Her boots required a second blast of heat, and her feet were still clammy. She trudged behind Odan's wide, massive back, watching his muscles flex. They no longer looked ridiculously aggressive to her, nor shockingly bare. She'd seen his battleform, and it had been just the reminder she needed. He wasn't a handsome peer. He wasn't an annoying trainee. He was a Beast partner, and he was dangerous.

He greeted a passing warrior by name. The man threw her a curious look and politely murmured, "Lady."

She nodded in return, noting all the warriors they'd passed had managed to wear shirts. It was so strange to be back in this maze of stone tunnels that made up the Truxet capital, River Mountain. She'd been here so recently, leaving with a fire of vengeance and failure. They went down a wide flight of stairs. The intersections all had niches holding amazing statues. The one at the top of these stairs had a thick-bodied, pointy-faced creature. She now recognized it as a groundbear. She hesitated, looking over the round ears, the massive fangs that didn't fit in its mouth, the even longer claws on its inward-facing feet.

Running lightly down the stairs to catch up, she shivered, recognizing the stripes on the creature's face as matching those on Odan's when she really got him going. Only on a human face, they looked even more forbidding. In his battleform, with the beginnings of a snout, and the fangs, and the layers of impossible muscle, the stripes had been a finishing touch to a monstrous nightmare. One that had come from the sky in a rush of air to defend *her*.

A woman walked by arm in arm with a slender warrior, this one wearing a vest, revealing sleekly muscled arms. They were both laughing, talking together in excitement. She wouldn't have thought twice about such a couple in the City, although neither would have been wearing leather, probably. But here, chills crawled down her spine. All she could think of was the drawing of the pit, with the three men standing tall above it, arms outspread along its rim. Every mated woman here had taken a Beast in battleform. They'd all been fucked by a bestial mage-twisted man, and apparently recovered.

She swallowed, averting her eyes, her mind numb now that it had the reality of just how giant Odan could be. His mass had nearly grown by half, ruining his boots and warskirt. But there had been enough of the man left in his semi-shifted face for her to recognize lust. He'd wanted her. Turning a corner after Odan, she considered the rise of his flank, peeking as he adjusted his grip on his sagging skirt. *Admit it, Vivienne*, she told herself sternly. *You coward. Admit it.*

Fine. I was glad he wanted me. I didn't exactly lust for him in that moment, but I was ... satisfied he looked at me with emotion.

Her internal conversation cut off when he stopped at an arched door covered in the claws, snouts, and stripes of the groundbear.

"This is the lair of my Clan when they have to stay at River Mountain for Council duty. You'll be safe here." He stared into the hall with brooding silver eyes, his face a stoic mask again.

Breathing once, he led her in. He was quickly mobbed by warriors, and a few women, who enveloped him in hugs. She got the feeling he didn't visit often, and was deeply respected.

Odan introduced her to one woman. "Vivienne, this is Charley."

The tall woman stared at Vivienne with big black eyes, clearly uneasy.

"Charley is the mate of my cousin Shad. Charley, we're only here half an hour. Will you help Vivienne find her way around the baths, and feed her up? Some portable dinner for us would be great, as we'll be in the forest tonight."

The big-boned brunette nodded at Odan, standing close to him. "My pleasure. Want me to send for Shad?"

Odan nodded. "I'd love to see him if he's free." Looking at Vivienne, he said, "I'll be back soon." He paused and said, "You can swim."

He said it so seriously, she looked hard at him before finding the twinkle in his eye. She relaxed and nodded. "I won't leave the beach."

Charley grabbed Odan's arm. "Can I talk to you a second?" She looked at Vivienne and smiled in a sickly, fake way. "Just a moment, please."

Odan went around the corner. His voice was so deep Vivienne only heard a rumble.

The first few words of Charley's sentence cleared up her confusion. "Her eyes are totally powered up..." The rest of the conversation was lost in whispers as they moved farther away.

Vivienne sighed. She was too used to the people of Second City knowing her. The first time she'd come to River Mountain, she'd been questioned or reminded of her safety by every man she'd met, every one of them thinking she was about to erupt because of her eyes. Vivienne didn't know why her eyes glowed with magecraft. She hardly thought that showing people her childhood eye color would be any more soothing.

When Charley returned, she seemed more sincerely friendly. "I'm sorry, Vivienne, I just had a quick question for Odan. We don't see him around here very often. He's so busy with Council duties and training the other Council skymages."

Vivienne smiled her polite, political smile, sensing an opportunity. "That's fine, Charley. I hope I'm not interrupting your day too badly."

"Not at all, I was just getting ready for the lunch rush in the kitchens, where I have my duty. Come on, the baths are right down here." Charley led her through the smaller halls to a bathroom much like the one she'd used as a guest, only larger. They were unoccupied, but Vivienne braced herself with the knowledge this was a public bathroom for the general Clan, and anyone could walk in. She stripped quickly and slid into the water, soaping hard and fast. It was heated, and deep. Relief at being clean energized her.

After she finished rinsing her hair, she glanced up at Charley, who politely looked away. "So, what can you tell me about Odan's recent duties? He seems a little tired and tense."

Charley nodded sadly. "Yes, very tense. He says you know about the recent escape, and the new darkmage Fortress. We're all just appalled over it, of course. No one imagined they could be that organized, or that powerful."

"Shocking, yes. It's not been made common knowledge in the Cities yet."

"I should think not. The panic would be immense." Charley shot a glance at Vivienne. "As would the pressure on the Mage Guild."

So he'd told her who Vivienne was. "Yes. We have a large role to play in the investigation. Odan seems to be taking it personally." That wasn't quite true, but Vivienne was fishing.

Charley took the bait, nodding earnestly. "He became close to the escaped hawk's mate, as one of the woman's first guards. It was hard for him to watch her adjust from her terrible abuse, not that he will talk about her much. But I can tell he cares for her. He was

so relieved when she agreed to mate the hawk. And then of course his partner was chosen to be on that first horrible attempt to explore the Fortress. They were all killed. Six of our young warriors, gone. So sad."

Six strong bodies, human and beast, standing close around her, her fire seething, ready, as they all placed their hands on the stone. Vivienne pulled herself out of the chest-deep plunge bath and dried herself in a wash of heat, using the woven towel to wrap around herself. She took her clothes to a basin to wash.

"Here, give me the tunic."

Vivienne accepted Charley's help, and they scrubbed at the pond muck.

"Cute laces," the woman said admiringly.

"Thanks. So what's Odan like when he's not being blank-faced and bossy?"

Charley laughed with a surprisingly girlish giggle. "That's so perfect for him. He's a bit of an enigma to me, honestly. I mean, he's been the skymage Champion for years, and takes his job as a trainer seriously. To be an alpha and leave your Clan is hard enough, but for the pack Clans, it's like, well, I think of it as not only going from Guild to guildless, but also to exile as well." She held up the tunic. "How's that?"

"Looks good, thanks. What is a pack Clan?"

"Their beastspirit craves being near others of the same kind. So when an alpha from a pack clan has to go off, it's a lonely road. For someone who only knew love and the comfort of a group, it must be agonizing. I think of Odan so often. He was good to me when I first arrived, the only person who looked me in the eye and told me it was all right to be angry."

"You were angry?" Vivienne kept her gaze on her muddy pants.

"You know the rumors that some Guilds still sell their women to the Truxet in return for services? Well some of those rumors are true. I was in the Potter's Guild in Fourth City. For the price of one newly orphaned young woman, the Guild received the promise of a year's worth of guards on their inter-City caravans. I was not a volunteer. I was not a happy dancer."

"But you are now?" Vivienne put the pants down to turn toward the woman. She judged them to be the same age, in their early thirties. "No regrets?"

Charley giggled. "I regret spending my first year lost in anger in the women's caves, being rude to all the other women waiting for adoption. But when I faced my Bright Moon choosing, and saw those men lined up before me, I knew that I had to step off my old path and start new, or I'd be a miserable old bitch before I was thirty. So I made a real effort, and chose Shad. It wasn't easy, but it's been very, very good."

She looked over at Vivienne with sparkling black eyes, brushing a wisp of her short brown hair from her mouth. "If you get the chance to bed Odan, take it. I heard how he's been incredibly horny since standing as witness to the hawk's mating, and I can just imagine he's the same kind of consuming, gentle, thorough lover my Shad is."

Out of the blue, Vivienne recalled Amriet's report of how Odan had spent the previous night, then compared it to her own. "Thanks for the advice." An image came to her of Odan standing at the edge of a pit, watching writhing sexual forms. She struggled to keep her face pleasantly blank.

The woman picked up one of her boots and wiped at it. "You're welcome. I know a lot of Mage Guild don't hold with taking Beasts for lovers, but you're missing out."

"That's the general consensus women come to here, but there is really no other

option for you, is there?" Vivienne heard the coolness in her voice when she'd wanted to sound teasing.

Charlie just shrugged. "There's a saying here. 'Once you go wild, all other guys are mild.' It's like, human guys are into getting you off so they can get off, and if you're lucky, maybe because they like feeling that they're a good lover. But a Trux will love a woman because getting a woman off is important to them." She put the boot down and stared into space. "It's hard to explain. It's like our orgasm is the goal, not theirs. Like a woman's body is a meditation, almost a form of hope."

"Even if she's just a skinlicker, or just a body passing in the night?" Vivienne snapped the cleaned and dried pants out with a harsh flick, cracking the air.

"There's no such designation as 'just' a skinlicker. All women they fuck are treated with respect. In the Burrow, well, things can get hot in a pack Clan, where the guys like being together, like knowing they're connected, even more than in a normal Clan."

Vivienne looked up from grimacing at her other boot. "You're talking about an orgy."

Charley grinned at her. "I'm talking about the fact privacy is something of a fluid concept among groundbears, that's all. And aside from worrying about whether or not Odan will still respect you in the morning, you need to know he's lonely. Down-to-the-bone lonely. He'll never be part of the Clan's daily, nightly routine. He's there for the skymages, and he's there for our family when we hit a rocky patch, but the man who was born to lead a Clan has chosen to step aside for the good of it. He'll never really be a part of it. It hurts him. So if he's a little grim or blank or serious sometimes, cut him some slack. He's not the bastard he might seem to be."

Vivienne stood staring at the bubbling water in the stone basin, watching it swirl away in a muddy slide. *The man who was born to lead a Clan has chosen to step aside for the good of it. It hurts him.* Tears pricked at her eyes and thickened her throat. "I can understand that." Her heart creaked in her chest, tottering in the foundation she'd built to hold it up. Blinking hard, she scrubbed at the muck embedded around the buttons. "What's for lunch?"

Chapter Nine

Freshly washed, Odan met with the skymages and got a preliminary report on Vivienne's fireball destruction. Seven injured, two seriously, but it was unclear still if those two were injured by their peers after being wounded, or in the blast. Two buildings destroyed. Verbal evidence of a planned attack was widely reported. At the moment, the Truxet opinion was generally the same as the Wildling populace's: They'd gotten what they deserved for even contemplating aggression toward a Trux.

Relieved, Odan went on to sift to the Burrow. With one push of his craft, he reached through his memories and dove from River Mountain to his clanhome a seven-day run away. The stone in a small room changed beneath his palm to the thinner stone on a grassy hill. He hadn't been back in seven months, and as always, his shoulders were tight with regret and bitterness. The younglings were on him before he'd gone deeper than the gardens. Laughing and tumbling with them, he ran and tussled. Every brush of their lean bodies against his peeled away a piece of stress.

His father was there, and then his aunt. He'd seen them more recently, but it had still been a solid month since they'd had dinner together, the seven of them. A rough month. Burying his nose in his aunt's hair, feeling how his father's frame was now thinner than his, the time he'd been gone pressed on him. Half of his life. Seventeen years of living apart next Autumnal.

Gren was coming up out of the earth. He could feel him drawing closer, an excitement stirring eagerly in his groundbear at their Alpha's closeness. He squeezed his father hard, taking the strength his arms provided in return. The men separated when Gren strode up the stairs, rising in a blur of aggressive speed, shoulders up.

Odan faced him, and the moment stretched, as it always did. Would he kneel? Or would he face the man as an equal? Was it in him to bare his throat to the brutal fighter who'd killed Einar when he hadn't needed to? Or was he comforted that kind of strength and ferocity backed his family and Clan?

Odan decided. He knelt, angling his head back. Gren never took the gesture for the symbol it was in the other Clans. Every time an alpha came to the Burrow, he took it as a test against him personally. Without slowing, he slammed into Odan in a slap of muscle, his teeth locking deep on Odan's throat. Growling, he ripped his thick neck in a tossing movement, seating the teeth deeper, shaking Odan's torso. Odan left his hands hanging by his sides, closing his eyes to his groundbear's confused swirl of pride in their strong Alpha, and fury at being so challenged. Gren stood, breathing harshly against Odan's stinging throat for long moments. With a snarl, he pushed off of Odan to stand looming over him, so close his knees brushed his chest.

"Why have you come?"

"I have a report on information from Second City's Mage Guild. I bring it to my Alpha before I bring it to the Council."

Gren finally stepped back, grunting approval. Groundbear rolled happily. Odan opened his eyes and looked at the Clan brother he'd shared a bed with, trained with, grown up with. They were almost the same age, Odan just a few years older, and had moved through the same youngling group. Gren had been his direct competition in every

way, his whole life. Gren had stepped into the challenger's ring first when Einar had declared retirement. And after their beloved prior Alpha's blood had coated the ring, Odan had stared into Gren's striped face and known why he'd done it. He'd killed Einar because of him.

Everyone had known how it was supposed to go. One of them was to challenge Einar and win. And then there was supposed to be the real challenge, between the two youngest alphas. The winner would take on any following challengers, and the Clan would move on. But Gren had killed Einar, sickening Odan while ripping out his heart. And there had been no other challengers. None had dared risk challenging a man who would kill you rather than take the ritual of submission. When Bjorn had stepped in to assume the Shield's position, there'd been no testing. He'd submitted to Gren's mounting, stayed quiet while he shredded his back, and the Clan had witnessed in silent, shocked grief.

Odan had existed in a frozen state of self-loathing for years, for his cowardice, for his failure to act, for the agony of adjusting to sleeping alone, fucking alone, hunting alone in his new home of River Mountain. Sometimes he wondered if he hadn't become the best skymage trainer merely to have some shadow pack around him, the reminder of closeness in men pushing their limits. He endured Gren's cold hostility, something that raised his father's ire every time. Because in his heart, he feared Gren had become such a bastard in order to save *him*, Odan.

If they had faced each other in the ring, in a fight for the Clan's soul, would he have been able to beat Gren? If he hadn't, would he have been able to submit? Or would Gren have shown as little hesitation as he'd shown when he'd ripped Einar's throat out, followed by his heart? Odan knew in his heart Gren would never accept a lesser rank. So when the time came, could Odan have ended Gren?

All this pain, all this history washed over Odan in a ball-shriveling moment, as it did every time he faced Gren's cold eyes. Gren was no longer his childhood nemesis, his youngling rival, his matched pair. This was The Groundbear. The Alpha around which the entire pack revolved. They were all his. Odan had let that lost choice go, and learned to live with it.

He dropped his gaze from Gren's dark stare. "My Alpha." The message was subtle, but consistent. *I know what you sacrificed so we wouldn't have to face each other. I forgive you.* He had no idea if Gren understood, or even cared.

"Odan." Gren never gave him a title, not even after he'd won the Autumnal championship. "Let's talk by the pool." Gren stepped toward Odan's father. "You have something to say to me, warrior?"

Odan willed his father to be humble. There was no point in getting beaten, and moved to a lesser duty, for standing up for Odan's honor. Father didn't understand, like most didn't, the love and hate between them.

His father muttered, "No, Gren." Looking down at Odan, still on his knees, he asked, "Will we have you for dinner?"

Odan shook his head as he stood, half a head taller than Gren. "I'm sorry, no. I'd like to see Mom before I leave, and Uncle, if he's here."

His aunt wiped a tear away. "He is. I'll get him." She was a timid, emotional soul, and her terror of Gren was total, which insulted him, making it all worse. He nodded to his Dad, thanking him with his eyes for keeping his mouth shut about the bloody, aching cuts on Odan's throat that he wouldn't heal until he'd left the Burrow. His aunt fled,

snuffling, off toward the workshop.

Gren turned and led the way. Odan followed, aware he hadn't even had a chance to actually work with Vivienne yet. Something in him told him it was important. The urgency that had driven his impatience when he'd met her yesterday exploded again. He had to move. They had to be ready. Soon.

The pool always looked so small to him now. In his childhood memories, it was huge and lush. Compared to the underground lake at River Mountain, and the Cove, the great lake clanhome of the watercoasters and martens, it was just a small oasis, albeit impeccably maintained by generations of groundbears. Deep in the earth, it was shaded for most of the day. The waterfall was beginning to thin now in the height of summer this far south. The date palms were ripening.

Gren propped one boot on a stone at the pool's edge, and braced his arms on his knee, staring into the teal green depths. "Tell me."

"The Mage Guild has a cloaking spell. They've had it for awhile. They developed it to thwart us, to keep us from reading their emotions, for privacy. Clearly, it's used widely enough that when the darkmages began to use it to avoid detection, no one thought anything of it. It's likely they could even be selling the spell to other Guilds, allowing non-Mage Guild darkmages to avoid detection as well."

He fell silent, looking at Gren's close-cropped brown hair, and the white stripe that had appeared in his temple shortly after claiming the Clan.

Gren spoke to the water. "Rafe came back in the night. He's been closeted with the Council for all of this morning. So far, the Alphas haven't been invited in."

"Hmm. This could be what they're talking about. The Mage Guild has been a thorn to both us and the Royal family for ages, and they will take a major penance for this. At the same time, we need their cooperation. It's hard to believe they would be so stubborn as to deny us access, but their fear of us led to this spell, and it is deep seated."

Odan crouched by the water's edge, admiring a blooming tapa in a deep pink. He was sure Vivienne would like it. "However, he also could be sharing what happened in Second City last night. Something happened to cause the Mage Guild to seal up the compound, and all my partner will tell me is that it was 'bad.' My guess is they caught a darkmage, and are trying to handle it internally."

"That would violate the contract that says we provide justice bound by Royal law in return for dealing with all darkcraft by our law."

"The contract says they have the right to investigate human misconduct first, before they turn over the darkmage. I recommend Rafe get back there, or someone with rank. We need a Trux nose in that compound, and soon."

Gren turned to him, gaze thoughtful. "You mean that literally."

Odan nodded. "We've been blinded by City smells, inattentive to the nuances of scent because of the environment. We need our best trackers to move through all the Mage Guilds soon, and compile a list of people who are cloaked. It's hard to notice even when you know it's there. She—they—still smell like themselves, like their rooms and duties and positions. You have to pay attention to the personal, and not mistake arrogance for controlled emotion."

Gren stepped closer. "Stand up and look at me."

Odan rose, his throat stinging, braced for more dominance posturing. Gren looked into his eyes. All the fine hairs on his arms stood up at the power there. *Alpha*.

Groundbear stretched, relaxing, even as Odan held himself in readiness.

But Gren merely said, "Is there anything else?"

He shrugged. "I'm partnered with the best human firemage I've ever seen. Her control and power are comparable to what I've watched in the Autumnal championship with our warriors. We're training later today."

"Where?"

"We were up by Second City this morning, and being in the dry pine forests there made me nervous. I'd like to take her to the desert, out past Sandhome."

Gren nodded. "Fire will be safer in the desert. You can cut loose there. I'll have a messenger go ahead to prepare the lizzeeds."

"Thank you."

Gren stepped forward, his hand falling on Odan's shoulder. He was proud of himself for not flinching. Groundbear turned in a circle within his ribs.

"It's good to see you."

Odan stared at the hollows of Gren's sculpted face, seeking signs of illness. His mind raced at the implications in that sentence. He didn't know how to respond. "What is it?"

"I'm going to be a father."

Odan blinked at that shocking revelation. He would have heard if Gren had gone to mate-choice. He should have heard about this, even while banished to River Mountain. "Congratulations." It was easy to smile. Children were the heart of every man's quest. Pass the torch, curl the circle, continue. If it had been any other man, Odan would have hugged him, but he stood, accepting Gren's touch, and nodded. "When is she due?"

"In the winter. She's ... she's amazing." Gren smiled, a boyish grin that rushed Odan back to their youth. "Kalani will be a strong mother for my son."

"Do I know her?" The name sounded familiar.

"She served at the last Autumnal as a paid woman. It's possible you met her, although I engaged her services for the most part." Gren frowned.

Odan remembered now. She was tall, well built, and dour. She had reminded him of a grumpy version of his cousin's wife, Charley. It had been the talk of the Clan how smitten Gren had been. Odan wondered how deep the fondness was, if he pursued the woman later. "I saw her, but didn't meet her. The Six blended for your union."

It was desperately hard for Truxet to reproduce. The groundbears were a small Clan, and this baby would be a joy. Perhaps a softening one for the Clan still cautious of their own Alpha after all these years.

"Actually, the Snowcat's Domina assisted me, in return for a favor some years ago."

Odan raised his brows. The woman was a rare fertility bodymage who had brought that Clan back from the brink of extinction. She was an influx of hope for men who knew the odds of them finding a mate were low. With her skills trickling into the Council bodymages, there was anticipation that more unmated men might yet be able to father a child with a willing paid woman.

"How did I miss your presentation party?" Unmated mothers were usually feted as they took up their position as long term-honored guests of the Clan.

"I haven't had it yet. I'd like to hold it the night after next, under the firefly moon. I want you to stand for Kalani."

Odan stared at Gren. The man could have pushed him into the pool with one stiff jab of the finger, and he wouldn't be able to stop it. His Alpha was asking him to stand as

honor guard to the mother of his child. While his blood still trickled down his throat from the man's greeting.

As if he knew what Odan was thinking, which was possible since Gren was a powerful spiritmage, he reached out and touched the marks gently, leaving a healing wash behind. Odan stared at Gren, completely at a loss. "Of course I will. But, Bjorn?"

"Bjorn is my Shield. He cannot stand for us both. You are the only other person who knows me. I would be honored to know you're at her side."

Odan felt frozen. Was this because of his status as skymage Champion? Was it some sort of trick?

The pride bled from Gren's face. "Odan, I know you mean it. When you kneel before me and claim me as your Alpha. I know you remember, and you understand."

Gren was wrong. Odan didn't entirely understand. But he was close. Nodding slowly, Odan looked into his brother warrior's eyes, both of them burdened by the chance of birth with a potential that set them apart. He saw loneliness as deep as his own. Raising his arm up slowly, he put his hand on Gren's shoulder, feeling the thrum of power, the peace of knowing it was held in an iron grip.

Gren's jaw jumped. "When you go into battle against the beebees, kill them all. I know Dom has told you to follow one, to track it. Don't."

Odan kept his face blank. Ignoring the directions of the Council's leader was nothing when his Alpha gave him a direct order.

"This spell you've revealed is the breakthrough we needed. We'll get them. I don't want to risk you entering their territory and being overwhelmed and lost to us as the hawks were. Burn them, smash them, rip them to pieces. I'm not willing to sacrifice you on such a slim chance."

Odan nodded, his heart pounding. "Yes, Groundbear." Gren hadn't said he loved him out loud, but Odan understood the message.

"You need to be at Kalani's party in three nights. Whole."

"Yes, Sir."

"Anything else?"

Odan struggled to return his brain to the mission, to the tornado that was Vivienne. "Did you know the beebees are partially fireproof?"

Gren frowned. "That was in the classified update issued last week. You weren't given it?"

"No." The word held all his disgust and anger. They were entering a war with dangerous opponents. The smooth machine that delivered City justice needed to be adjusted to provide for all the Clans in their hunt for the darkmages now. The closeted meeting, the undelivered report, it was all too fractured. It reminded him of the Mage Guild, huddled in their compound, pretending they were the only island that mattered.

Gren turned. "I'll walk you out. Your mother will want to see you. The report had two pieces of new information. The fireproof head was one, and the suspected spiritcraft was another."

"Spiritcraft! In the beebees?" Odan stopped walking he was so shocked, then hurried after Gren.

"Yes. In the last few attacks, the targets were humans who had specific value to a Trux. There were plenty of opportunities to strike a random person, and plenty more to strike at a person who had contact with a Trux, and shared their scent. It seems they have

the ability to sense who is actually loved."

"That denotes intelligence, and a sophistication of magecraft."

"Not necessarily. It could be instinct, an ability to sense a weakness." Gren took the final set of stairs two at a time. He stood at the top, looking back at Odan. "If you want to use this woman as a lure, find a way to care for her. Fuck her, and mark her. It's worth a try." Gren turned and moved out of sight.

Odan stood, flummoxed. The viciousness was expected of Gren. But the truly shocking thing was the surge in his cock when he'd been given an excuse to take Vivienne to bed.

He bounded up the stairs to meet his family, grinning at his mother's shriek of happiness. These were the people he trained for, with the other lonely skymages in River Mountain. These were the people he lived for, as he worked to put systems in place that bettered their lives. He had his father's hair and his mother's eyes, his uncle's barrel chest, and his aunt's child as a best friend. The beebees would never touch these people. They would burn. Tonight.

Chapter Ten

Back at River Mountain, Odan met with the two men currently in his training group, skymage alphas hoping to pass their Council trials soon. If they succeeded they would be adopted into a group which mimicked a Clan, where they were always welcome and found total acceptance. Failure would mean they be declared lone alphas and banished to an isolated territory beyond the clanhomes. It was a dire prospect, and the men were working very hard.

He bullied a copy of the report he should have had two days ago from the white wolf guarding the Council's door, and skimmed it as he headed back to the rooms assigned to his Clan in River Mountain. River Mountain was clanhome to the bears, hawks, and mountancats, but as the seat of the Council, was similar to the Royal City in that it was a destination for all groups. All eleven Clans and the six Council-directed elemental alpha groups had their own territory within River Mountain. His Clan's was appropriately on a subterranean level, along with the Council earthmages and the marten. Descending from the second level of River Mountain's interior passages from the skymage's rooms, he stopped off at the main plaza for a quick bite to eat from one of the tents.

He was just entering the descending spiral down toward the groundbear lair when he heard pounding feet behind him. He turned, savoring his perfectly seasoned geru bird leg. "Greetings, Rafe."

"What has she told you about what happened last night?"

"That it was bad." Odan took another bite. "Why'd you leave?"

"They threw me out. They'd been conducting their own investigation into darkmages in their Guild. They confronted one of the leaders, a bodymage on their very own Senate, and it got out of hand. They were totally unprepared and should have been thankful I was there." Rafe looked around. "Where is she?"

"In the groundbear lair." Odan licked the juice running down his hand, eyeing Rafe's agitation. *Out of hand?* "So why were you there?"

"I hid. They won't be letting me back, that's for sure." His voice spat bitterly. "So she didn't tell you she burned a man from the inside out last night and showed no remorse?"

Odan lowered the drumstick and considered Rafe. "But you said before it wasn't a man. It was a darkmage."

Rafe's gaze had been scanning the plaza, but now his eyes snapped to Odan. "The Second City Mage Guild is riddled with darkcraft. They know I know it, but I don't think they know we've broken the secret of their cloaking spell that made them *all* an accessory to it. I paired you with her because I sensed it but wanted your confirmation."

Odan wasn't surprised Rafe had wasted no time informing the Council of his news. But he was shocked that the savvy bear had played games with the knowledge, and wondered how long the man had known of the Mage Guild's new trick.

"Now she's walking around our clanhome, *scent-cloaked*, and we're to trust she walks with the Six just because I saw her attack a known darkmage? It's too pat, Odan. She's a plant. She needs to be brought in and given a souldance."

Odan tipped his head, his brain working furiously with what was going on here. He didn't for one moment believe Vivienne was a darkmage, despite her guilt-implying,

prideful refusal to drop the spell she knew was immoral, if not yet illegal. Rafe was fairly vibrating with adrenaline. His all-night meeting with the Council didn't seem to have calmed him down.

"Is that by order of the Council?" Odan asked, looking with disappointment at the tasty geru leg he no longer wanted to eat.

Rafe shifted. A sour scent wafted on the breeze blowing from the arches leading to the river. Odan raised one brow, showing the younger man he'd smelled his intent to lie. Rafe turned, paced away, pivoted, and came back. "It should have been, but her service with the first foray into the Fortress has made them blind to possibility. Just think of how she timed the challenge to the darkmages for the night before she was leaving. Isn't it ever-so-convenient that she left with you at dawn before the proving of her Guild?"

Odan felt his hair bristle on the back of his nape, and the wave of hostility Rafe was pumping out finally made the jump to him. "Yes, let's discuss your withholding the little detail of Vivienne going into the Fortress."

Rafe chuckled humorlessly. "I didn't tell you because I wanted your own opinion about her status as a darkmage. She's been on their territory. She's the woman, the only member of the party, who survived. Don't you think she could have been contaminated?"

Through numb lips, Odan said, "No. I'm quite certain Vivienne is no darkmage. And you know she underwent a souldance upon her return already." He looked down the stairs, golden magelights set in the walls glowing steadily, nothing like her wildly seething flames. *She'd been with Fynn when he died.* She'd been in deathly danger, yet she'd amazingly survived.

"You need to convince her to stay here and be cleared. By our spiritmages."

He tipped his head back, rolled it on his neck. "I have a duty assigned by the Council." He turned and headed down the stairs, still breathing deep and hard.

"You have to see my reasoning! Groundbear! Everything has come together too perfectly for her. If she's innocent, just clear her!"

"I don't have that time, Rafe."

Rafe shouted down the stairs after him. "Oh, but you have time to spend the night with a paid woman, and visit your clanhome, and—"

Odan spun and jabbed his meat at the younger man. "Enough. I am Council-bound, pup, and you are no representative of theirs to *me*. She is one woman, and I have keep of her. I've heard your warning. Let it go."

He thought for a moment the frustrated man would push it, but he wiped his face of emotion and left. Odan bit into his snack viciously, chewing without taste. It was going to be a long fucking day.

He stomped down the stairs and through the elaborately carved stone doorway, decorated with the snouts, claws and flowing stripes of his people. Odan stopped in the doorway of the common room, picking the last of the meat off the leg with methodical precision. His body looked at ease, but every muscle was carefully placed and tightly controlled with continuing heat from his exchange with Rafe. This entire situation was rank, and there sat the delicate center of it.

Vivienne knelt before one of his people's stone tables, her ass on the sling chair that made kneeling more comfortable. Dishes scattered on the table told him she'd eaten, although the teapot was still steaming. She was listening to Charley, smiling faintly as the woman gestured wildly with her hands. For no reason at all, she looked up and directly at

him with her glowing green eyes. He pointedly ripped off a small piece of meat and chewed thoroughly as he held her gaze.

Vivienne's hair was loose. It was like a cloud of orange-pink dawn around her head, looking impossibly like mist. It sparked in the light, throwing pure ruby highlights, delicately outlining her fine features with its mass. Her smile faded as she looked at him. She spoke to Charley, who leapt up happily and came over to him. Charley gave him her wrist and he gently bent to it, loving the scent of his cousin on her, and knowing she was Clan.

"Ready?" she asked him brightly.

"Ready," he nodded to her. "Thank you for helping Vivienne. I appreciate your time and care." She was a wonderful woman, open and strong of heart. Attending her Bonding ceremony had been one of the happiest moments of his life.

She smiled happily at him, "Oh, it was a pleasure. We had very interesting conversations."

The mischievous sparkle in her eyes couldn't reach past his towering anger. "How appropriate." He slid his gaze to Vivienne, who now stood next to Charley and looked up at him with concern. "So did I." The dents between her brows became deeper. "Are you ready, Vivienne?"

She nodded and walked away to pick up her bag. He watched her ass when she bent. Charley smothered a giggle. Moving to their table, he laid his geru leg on one of the dirty plates. "I'm sorry I can't stay to help you clean up, Charley." He wiped his hands on a cloth.

"No problem," she said breezily, meaning it. "I'll get it. I'm sorry Shad couldn't get in from the fields to see you." She clasped her hands, becoming more serious. "Good luck, Odan. Come home safe to us."

He nodded, knowing he'd never really be able to go home. At least to the Burrow. He was an alpha. Any length of time he spent in his home was awkward at best, painful at worst. Turning, he took his pack from the youngling he'd entrusted it to, and strode out.

He heard her hurrying behind him on the stairs and didn't slow from taking them two at a time. He led her past the plaza to the sifting room. He waited for her to put her hand tentatively on his forearm, and then sifted them to Sandhome, the clanhome of the lizeed.

The guard there gave her a formal head bow, and said, "I'll take you out to a good training ground."

"My thanks," Odan said, clasping his forearm. "I'm Odan, this is Vivienne."

"I'm Forsh."

Forsh took hold of the stone, and Odan laid his hand over his, and then Vivienne took his forearm again. The world blinked, and the grasses around them changed to a stone cave. The air went from warm to scalding, harsh in his nose.

Forsh stepped to the edge of the cave's entrance, gesturing out over the dunes. "We train here often, but the Lizeed pulled everyone in when your Alpha sent his message. There's some scrub to the south, and be careful of scurlion who burrow in the valleys of the dunes. Their pinch can't cut through bone, but it feels like it."

"This is perfect. We'll likely be here most of the day." Odan dropped his bag, and gestured for Vivienne to do the same.

"I'll keep it with me."

His fists closed and he breathed to the count of ten. "Leave it. We have to return here, and Forsh doesn't want it, do you Forsh?"

Her cheeks were pink, but it could have been from the heat. "I'll keep it with me."

He strode out into the bright light before he killed her.

At the top of the second dune he heard her call, "Odan! Slow down!"

He turned to see her just descending the first. She didn't use momentum as she should. Instead of sliding in long cascading strides down the slope, like he did, she crab walked sideways, stumbling and flailing sand everywhere. She'd need another bath tonight, and he wasn't inclined to take her back to the comfort of River Mountain.

He didn't help her as she took three steps forward up the hill toward him, sliding back two for every scramble. Finally, she stood panting next to him. At some point in the initial walk from the cave to the dunes, she'd braided her hair. Wisps curled around her forehead and temples, and a dew of sweat coated her face, glistening with sand. He let her breathe for a brief moment, then turned to head down the next dune.

"You found out didn't you!" Her words puffed out heavily.

He stood on the cusp of the dune, the sand lightly shivering away from his weight. The windswept patterns before him in the creamy-pink sand were lovely. He folded his arms to keep from reaching for her. "I'm bogged, Vivienne. What precisely could I find out about you?"

She was getting her breath back, but it still came quick and hard.

He turned. Her white skin and ghostly eyes looked absolutely ethereal in the desert light. Her mouth made her look human. Inside him, groundbear sat up, deadly front feet tucked in to his chest, and sniffed, confused by the lack of scent coming from the woman before them. Heat trickled up his belly and he knew his stripes had appeared on his face. She swallowed.

"Well? Exactly which secret you're keeping, against all logic, could you possibly think I've unearthed?"

She lifted her chin. "You tell me."

Just because he could, just because she was so impossible, he let loose on the lightning that had been building inside him ... oh, since yesterday when he met her. The crack and flare of light struck the dune behind him, but he saw it in her jump and rounded eyes.

"Rafe wanted me to turn you over to our spiritmages. He thinks you're a darkmage plant."

Her wide lips pursed, eyebrows lowering. "Outrageous."

"Is it?" Odan asked silkily. "Is it, ex-Flame Curate who left her sealed compound hastily with a scent-cloak she refuses to drop?"

Her jaw worked round and round on that one. He felt better now that he'd released some pressure.

Her tiny nose tipped up. "What did your Council say?"

Did she know she had allies there? Irritation that Rafe's paranoia clung to him made him shift on the sinking sand beneath his feet. "If they agreed with Rafe, you wouldn't be here now. Just like if they hadn't agreed to accept a Mage Guild representative in the darkmage Fortress investigation, you wouldn't have gone there."

Her high, tight shoulders relaxed. By Heat and Ice, he wanted to spank her so bad his palms itched. "You know what? You're a spoilt, controlling bitch who has no idea of the

repercussions—"

If he hadn't had his arms crossed, he could have checked her abrupt stiff-armed shove that sent him over backward, tumbling head over ass. He curled and twisted and got up on his feet, pinwheeling down on his heels, spitting sand from his mouth. Whirling near the bottom, he took the remaining steps into the trough backwards. He saw her hands in front of her mouth, and knew, just *knew* she was laughing at him.

With a roar, he threw out his hands, wrapped his wind around her, and yanked her down to him. She shrieked, fighting it, limbs flailing. He tore the Ash-benighted backpack from her shoulders. She got a grip on it, but he twisted it away and sent it up onto the slope of the dune behind him.

Fire erupted around her hands, her braid dangled wildly, and she cursed him. "You arrogant Beast bully!"

He dropped her the last bodylength onto the sand before him.

Turning, he sprinted up the dune to her backpack. "I find I'm out of patience with your secrets, princess."

Twin balls of flame smashed on either side of her backpack, but he picked it up through the wall of sizzling heat that singed the hair from his arms.

"That's my private property! I demand your respect or I will report you!"

He actually found her irate words gratifying. He worked the buckle at the top and lifted the flap, noticing the pack was dripping fluid as he did. The scent of the liquid was ripe and smooth. He glanced in and saw her waterskin and two broken bottles. Turning, he looked down at her as she struggled up the dune.

"Don't!" she cried.

"Are you kidding me? Wine? Are you really this stubborn over wine?" He frowned, remembering how she'd savored her glass at their first meal, and how she'd actually drunk enough to soften her. Was she addicted in the way humans could become?

Huffing and gasping, she clawed her way closer to him and ripped the bag from his slack grip. He watched her scuffle through it and swear as she saw the damage. He sniffed the air. "A rich red, probably from the South, near the Farm?"

She plunked her bum down on the sand, and busily sealed her pack up again, sniffing. "Yes. Exactly. Good nose."

He stared down at her nape. Her hair was much lighter in the bright sun. There was more gold than garnet in it now, a lovely strawberry blonde. He sat on the dune as well, just above and to the side of her.

After her breathing had steadied, he gathered himself, and asked softly, "Vivienne... Are you spiritbound to wine?"

*

She could not believe it. Staring at the dampness darkening the sand, trickling downhill from her pack, she mourned. Now she had only a few days worth of privacy. What were the odds she'd finish this assignment, kill the lizard birds, and be back in Second City in mere days? And now he thought she was a lush, a wino, an alcoholic. She closed her eyes, feeling the painful scratch of this endless granulated dirt. She thought of the precious black sand she regularly experimented with. Looking around, she wondered if the Guild was being fleeced. Were there mountains of the "rare" sand, as with this creamy shade she sat on? Exhaustion sapped her limbs. She wished she could just lay back and enjoy the luscious heat pounding down on her head. Instead she had to chase

after this frog, with sweat trickling under her arms and breasts.

"No, Odan. No. I am not an alcoholic. But these things were mine. You had no right." But the words sounded hollow, even to her.

When the lie was caught, and the liar continued on her stubborn, impossible course, what results could she expect? He'd taunted her about not knowing repercussions. The thought of what her Guild was enduring, would endure for months, even years, had lit up her inner fire like a star. She did know repercussions. Including this one. Cringing, she remembered shouting at him, demanding his respect. She knew, better than anyone, that respect was earned. Even innate respect for a mother could be eroded by selfish actions. *Like mother like daughter?*

She rubbed at her eye furiously, then cried out, clutching it.

He scooped down beside her. "What is it? Sand in your eye?"

Again, she nodded, letting him think part of the truth.

He sighed. "Here. Turn toward me and look up."

It was difficult, but she did, lashes fluttering wetly. His touch leaped through her lungs to her belly. Abruptly the uncomfortable heat transformed into need deep in her core. She couldn't stop from shifting, uneasy with the gentle clasp of his palms around her face.

"Shhh. Just a moment."

Heat sizzled into her face. Her eyes flooded with tears, and she tried to pull back.

"That's me. Let them tear. It will flush out the sand. Close your eyes and roll your gaze around behind your lids."

She did as he said, resisting the urge to scrub at her lashes. His breath on her face smelled of spices and man. He was calloused fingertips and leather, a light musk that made her mouth water nearly as much as her eyes.

"Look up again."

She did, and instantly felt the relief of clear eyes. "It's gone."

His thumb drifted along her cheek, wiping away her tears. "Your skin is perfect."

She stayed frozen in the gathering of his hands. It was impossible not to take her gaze from the bright blue sky and look into the silver-blue of his. *Refreshing. Relaxing. Peaceful. Safe.*

The impossible thought made her pull her head away, and he let her go.

"Thank you." His thigh next to hers was massive, thick with muscle she could clearly see through his warskirt.

"I apologize for my arrogant bullying. It was very dishonorable and aggressive of me."

Shame was bitter in her mouth. "Odan..."

He waited.

She looked back at the disarray their path had left in the ripples of sand. "I'm not a darkmage."

He waited.

"When I was asked by the Queen to be her representative on the trip to the new darkmage Fortress, I was terrified. I accepted with regret, knowing I could very well die. I was under command not to tell anyone about it, so I couldn't even say goodbye to my friends. But I was willing. I was willing to do whatever it took to stop them."

He sat next to her, a thick, towering force. He laced those large hands between his

knees. "Whatever it took ... except demand your people stop using the spell that hides them from us. Because that would mean you would lose its secrecy as well."

The sharp stab of the truth hurt.

The sob surprised her, and she bit her lip viciously. "I have reasons." Reasons a warrior like himself, a magical creature gifted with both power and position in this world, would never understand. "And I did take steps to end it. It won't happen overnight. But I've begun the endgame. From what I know, my Guild is the first to do so, but this will start a series of consequences."

He dug his heel into the sand. "I don't understand why you cling to what you know is wrong, if you know it will soon end anyway."

"It's not wrong to want privacy. You warriors have so many advantages over us. Living under your constant scrutiny and judgment is wearing. Not just of pride, but of spirit. Can you not imagine how it would feel if our positions were reversed?"

He rubbed his hands along his forearms, and she saw with regret the blackened stubs of his hair. She could have burned him. It was outrageous to have thrown fire at him. Again.

"I guess that's why I'm so frustrated by your feelings. I do live with that scrutiny, from every single one of my brother Truxet. We live openly, honestly, and there can be no other way because everyone knows when you try to hide who you really are. It's a clean, true way to live."

His bravery was humiliating, because she didn't share it. "Do you have children?" she blurted out.

His head slowly turned toward her, but she refused to look at his strong square face. "To my loss, no. Or I would not be on this duty."

She nodded jerkily. But last night he'd been with a skinlicker. For all he knew, he could be a father now. She wanted to ask about the woman so badly.

"What is it?" he asked.

Her breath burst from her. She turned to him, but couldn't meet his eyes. Her heart thundered. A bead of sweat rolled down his sand-coated, massive throat. "There's no one special in your life? A woman you care for and wish to return to?"

His voice was low. It drew her in, creating a closeness as they sat in the middle of the vast empty space. "My people do not build relationships like yours do, between the sexes. We honor the paid women who enjoy sex with us, and men can become friendly with them, develop favorites. But our duties in the Cities are brief, and the women we contract annually to our clanhomes rotate to other places within that time. I have never even been brought to mate choice. I actually do have a female friend beyond my family's bonded mates, but that is unusual. She's not someone who would keep me from this mission."

The graphic images he'd shown her in that red book leaped into her mind. "How does she bear it? The adopted women who get offered men as choices ... they give up their lives, subject themselves to your world. They can't return, and are stripped of their old status."

He shifted back, bracing himself on his elbows. The position exposed the vast width of his chest. So much tight skin. "We don't have the same stratified society you do. Women are given free choice to duties and positions in our Clans, and are held in deep respect. Their protection is the inviolate duty of every Trux. I think it's wise to keep them

from their birth City, but lately there've been many who disagree. It might be changing. And my friend Sunny has made a new life here." He glanced at her. "A brutally honest one."

Her mind leaped to the fact that she'd already signed over her lab and position to Roge. She'd already cut ties to her mother. She'd already experienced travel beyond the City Walls, and would forever know there was a wider world beyond Second City. Despite all her fears, all her pride and determination, things were already coming together as had been foretold. *He'll strip away your layers, even your fire, until you are nothing but a woman. When he has your scent, no choices will be left to you, and you will be bound.*

When she'd been summoned to their River Mountain before, she'd been afraid every Beast she met might be the one fated to take her choices away. Every single one of them were clawed, so it was frustrating to have no other clue of who to watch out for. She remembered the prominent claws on the drawing of a groundbear he'd sent to her room.

"Scurlion are good eating."

She looked over at him, but his gaze was on the distance. She followed it. He stared at great length down the trough they'd crossed, at a shivering lump of sand. She squeaked and jumped closer to him, her hip against his.

He didn't move. "There's dinner, princess. You form the fireball and let me direct it."

She licked her lips, feeling sand grit against her teeth. "I'm not a princess." Lowering her voice to a hush she asked, "Can't we eat at River Mountain?"

"Focus. It's not as far as at the lake, and it's the same size target."

The lump dodged one way, then lurched another.

"What is it?" she whispered.

The grin in his voice irritated her. "It can't hear us. It's a burrowing creature with a tough carapace on its back, and thick skin on its bottom."

"All right." A thought grabbed her. "What happened with the wildlings?"

"Two are badly wounded, and no charges will be pressed against you."

Her breath shuddered out in relief. She had only a twinge of guilt that it was for her status, not their welfare. "Here."

She set the fireball, a small one, in front of him. He psychically snatched it from her, causing her to jump in surprise at the force with which he shoved it.

Dusting his hands, he grumped at her. "Quit fighting me for it. Give it over."

She tried to relinquish it to him, and it sputtered. She huffed, irritated, and relit it. It jerked through the air as badly as the scurlion's wanderings.

"Try again to let go." His voice was calm, but she felt the intensity in his body.

She tried and it whooshed wildly to the left, so she grabbed it. It slammed into the dune short of the creature. His irritated breath from beside her made her lift her chin.

She summoned another one. "Again."

This time, the ball flew straighter, but still exploded off target. It was close enough to make the scurlion leap in a shadow of menace, and disappear.

"He'll come up within five bodylengths in a few moments." Odan stood, and offered her his hand. It was as square as his jaw. Solid.

She stared at it, heart pounding with regret.

He wasn't looking at her. "That was only better because you were focused on the target. I still felt you directing it. You didn't give it to me, you just worked with me."

She put her hand in his and stood, quickly taking it back and wiping her tingling fingers on her pants. "I've always been the one in control of my fire. Always. Why can't we work together?"

"Because I want to have multiple attacks. I want you to be keeping many fireballs alive, plus a wall of flame and an internal attack, if possible. For you to do all that and direct it, leaves me with nothing to do but buffet it with wind and push the heat. Give the fireballs to me, and I can make them stronger, as well as free you up to concentrate on the other attacks."

Vivienne blinked. Sweat trickled down her temple. The deviousness, the audacity, the raw power and complexity of his plan was ... exciting. "I'll toss it up, like a ball, and let go, like I'm dropping it down on a vertical target. To distract myself from the trajectory you take it on, I'm going to turn, and ignite another over there." She gestured off to her right, away from the nasty leathery creature she had no intention of eating.

He nodded. "Excellent. Go."

The thing hadn't come up yet, but she did it anyway. She set the fireball aloft, tossed it, and forcefully separated herself from it, as if already giving it to a vertical landing. She turned so it was out of her sightline, and lit another.

"Toss it." His voice vibrated with intensity.

"I did." She glanced over, expecting to see a scorch mark on the ground where she'd dropped it. There wasn't one there, but there was a black wisp of smoke on the distant dune. "Oh!"

"Do it again, and this time, try to keep them coming. Like juggling."

Immediately, the concept of what he wanted lit up her mind. She tossed her lit fireball, and shifted her gaze to the left. She lit one and tossed it, and then looking forward, lit and tossed a third. Three more explosions landed in the precise same place as the first.

She turned to him, staggering a bit on the slippery slope, grinning. The thrill was just like at the end of a successful experiment. His gaze narrowed into the bright distance, the lines at the corner of his eyes fanning down his cheeks. The scar on his lip looked white.

"There. Now."

Without looking from his profile, she lit and tossed three fireballs in quick succession. He let two drop. She felt the third move away from them, but knew it was in good hands. His lip curled in satisfaction. He turned and looked down from his great height. His eyes twinkled, happy. "Roast scurlion. Yum."

Her heart kicked. She'd joined her magic with his. "Maybe," she said ruefully. "We'll see."

Chapter Eleven

Two hours later, neither was as proud as their quick initial success had led them to believe. The heat baking her was nothing like her own personal fire, and she'd give anything to have her damn bottle of wine back. His water had been depleted a few moments before, and he'd asked for one last push before they took a break back at the cave, where Forsh had more. Her backpack weighed on her shoulders like a boulder. A flaming boulder.

"You've got to push against my wind. I can't let up on that spot for a moment. Encircle the cactus despite me. You can do it." His words were steady and positive, but he spoke through gritted teeth.

"I'm not just encircling! I'm also enclosing and tightening and juggling fireballs!" She waved her hands wildly at the poor smoldering skeleton of a plant called a cactus. "And you're strong!" It was like trying to force fire through a crack in a stone wall, to get her flame to rise up and capture the cactus beneath the plane of his air.

They'd played with him expanding her fireballs, and she'd showed him how she could explode things internally. They'd toyed with distance and nearness, and at first he'd practiced protecting the cactus from the heat she'd rained down all around it.

But for the last hour, when they were trying to put his vision of the total package together, it hadn't been going well at all.

"I think you're envisioning my wind wall as opposition to your fire wall. Think of it as something to tie your firewall *to*. Connect them."

"You connect them," she snapped, but brought up the flame wall again, knee high around the cactus.

His wind came down at her, and she tried to grab onto it, weave it into her flames. Fire shot fifty bodylengths into the sky. The spike of power ripping through her made her shout, surprised. She fell on her ass in a splash of sand and collapsed the fire. "Fuck!"

"Fucking impressive, I'd say," he chuckled.

Collapsing onto her back in frustration, she beat at the earth.

"Anyone would think you were tired in the middle of the afternoon."

His teasing words were not humorous.

"Some of us," she sniped, "were up all night. Oh, wait, you were too, weren't you?" His shadow loomed over her and that irritated, too. "Only instead of having sex, some of us may have been fighting for our lives." She struggled to her feet, furious.

He stood still, an arm's length away. She dusted herself off, then froze, aware of what she'd revealed.

"I didn't have sex with her. You were fighting for your life?" he asked quietly.

Her shoulders eased. She told herself she was glad he wasn't angry he'd been spied on. She shrugged. "I had help, and we won." Turning, she glared at the cactus. "Again."

Igniting the firewall, she ordered, "Forget the fireballs. Let's just get this. Come in with your air, only instead of coming down as a horizontal wall, imagine a jagged set of teeth. You're the upper jaw, I'm the lower. We mesh."

She thought for a moment he'd pick at her, but sand stirred around the cactus, and she could feel the press of his force. She spiked the flames of the wall, and then wove

them into the reaching strands of his air. The wall ignited as it did before, but she was ready for it, and instead of combining the two, she bound them, each their own separate force, but a unit. The jaws locked. His air ceiling capped her circular wall, sealing a roof over the circle of flame that did not go out. They were amazing together. Energy poured into her, and the possibilities seemed endless. She clapped once in triumph, dispersing the flames.

He released the air. Turning to her, he bowed in a tuck of his chin and shoulders. "Well done. Now we have to do that in mid-air, around a moving target, and add the fireballs."

The sigh was deep and heartfelt. "I'd like more water, please." He was relentless. She'd never stretched her power as she had today. And as amazing as it was, she realized she truly was becoming a bit drained. They'd circled around to the cave, where their charred scurlion and Forsh's extra water bottles waited. Just as they were coming down the last dune toward the rocky expanse before the cave, the thin, bald man with the disconcerting ridge on his scalp burst out of the shadows.

"Odan!" His shout echoed distantly, and she saw him raise his arms up and work them in a graceful, interlocking pattern. This was some sort of hand-speech.

Odan began to run, weaving his hands in the same way. Alarmed, she bungled after him, still unable to move with anything close to control on the sliding slopes.

"What is it?" she cried. But in her heart, she knew.

"A beebee sighting off of the coast to the south of Royal City." He ran and the next thing she knew, she was airborne.

She locked her jaws against the scream, going rigid in the grasp of the wind that scooped her up. Before, she'd been outraged at the indignity. This time, she saw the entrance to the cave hurtle instantly closer. She closed her eyes in terror.

"Open your eyes!"

She opened her eyes. The ground was coming up to meet her, but she didn't know how to move her body while she was in the air like this. She landed and her knees gave out. She skinned her palms on the dry, rocky dirt of the cave.

Forsh took her arm and lifted her to her feet, and then Odan was there. He slammed his hand onto the stone, yanking her from the lizeed.

A reptilian tongue, long and thin, whipped from the man's mouth. "The Six go with you, Sir."

She stared, recoiling. Then there was the roll and dip of him sifting them through space and she stood in a forest unlike anything she'd seen. It was too thick to see through and the air felt wet. She even heard the sound of rushing water, but it was strange, like a drum, or a heartbeat.

Odan turned her by her shoulders and she flopped toward him like a ragdoll. Her palms stung when she grabbed his elbows. She blinked up at his scowling face.

"We burn it, Vivienne." His bass voice rumbled into her spine.

Finally, she understood they were about to go to battle. *Now*. She nodded once, struggling to get her breath.

"I won't drop you. You have to believe that."

She stared at his stripes. They were primal, and she loved them. He was wild and deadly and she wanted to be too. The desire to hunt evil unfurled inside her.

He shook her once, his grip tight on her shoulders. "Say it! You must trust me,

Vivienne."

"I trust you." She said the words, breathless, directly into the glinting silver of his molten eyes. And she meant it. This man would never drop her in any sense of the word.

The echoing scream of a bird pierced the moment and they both looked up. Wind battered the thick leaves around her and her body stretched from its own weight as they rose up into the air. She clutched at him, and he drew her into the circle of his arm. She found herself standing on one of his feet, one arm around his waist, the other sealed to his forearm. It was so much better having his big form against her as he levitated them with his vast control.

There was an endless expanse of vivid green rolled *so far* below her, textured and uneven. Gasping, she followed it out, and then there was blue. Gray blue, sprinkled with white, as far as the eye could see. *The ocean*, forbidden to all but the Royal house.

"There!" The word was more of a rumble against her ribs.

She looked over. A horrific creature three times her height and even wider than that, beat its grey leathery wings toward them. The beebee was so close! The beak was as long as her body, and it was covered in spikes along its back. The long neck swiveled to snap at the two hawks harrying it.

Instinct, deep and necessary, made her form and throw the fireball. It landed, and to her fury, dissipated, splashing away with wisps of smoke among its sparse feathers. She gasped. Remembering bodies falling around her in the stone room, rage filled her all over again. Oh no. It would not avoid her fire *this* time. Then Odan's wind found the creature, and the hawks wheeled away, tumbling. It reared up, clawed feet clutching as if to attack. The serpentine neck swayed as its long, scaled belly was exposed. It cried out, a hissing, hoarse cry.

She tossed three fireballs into the air. As they dropped, she threw a wall of skin-melting flame up in front of the creature, which made it backbeat. It didn't move far with Odan's wind tearing at it, but it did retreat a bit. Odan took up her fireballs and threw them with impressive precision through his wind and her curtain of flame. One of the fireballs landed between its shoulder blades, and the other splashed dead center on its stomach. She circled the fire around the side of it, and hissed when a gust came in from the side. Her flames flared wildly, and the bird turned to face them, so it pointed toward the sea. The last fireball landed on the lashing, spiked tail, and smoke rose up. The creature screamed but remained far too undamaged by three of her fireballs.

Odan's growl rumbled along her ribs, a long, furious vibration. She knew she could do this! She drew the fire behind it, and saw the wings bow as Odan's air pressed down from above. She didn't have the circle closed yet! But the beebee sank under his pressure, and she struggled to draw the ends of the curling flame together.

It flailed, jerked, and with one powerful lunge, broke through the gap in her fire. The roar Odan let loose shocked her into looking at him. Up, and up, and up. The body she clung to was different. *Battleform*. Her mind supplied the understanding, but her jaw hung open, stunned. His ears were higher on his head, and bristling fur cascaded down his nape and shoulders. She wanted to let go, but he was all she had. Glancing at the arm she clutched, the one that curled around her midriff, she saw the massive claws, her fingers so tiny and pale against his huge forearm.

"Iyyyyyyrrrrrr!" He roared again, dagger teeth spraying spittle from his stretched face.

He looked down at her, and rumbled it again, less of a cry, but directly in her face. "Iyyyyyrrrr!"

Fire. She jerked her head back to the beebie, and found it closer, but below them, just above the treetops. The aerial view of it was just as horrifying as the frontal view. But it also gave her a clearer understanding of its torso. The trees whipped in all direction by the wind Odan called to pin it below them. The neck stretched out, and she saw enormous teeth all along its needle-like beak. That beak had killed people. Eaten them. It had lashed through the stone opening at her, at the fallen bodies of the men who'd never had a chance.

She tightened her grip on the wide, solid strength of her skymage, and shouted, "Burn!"

The energy she poured into the heat did not find instant life. She focused it inside the body, right between the wings. It might not be affected immediately, but she had been a Flame Curate. She would burn what she damn well wanted to.

"Hold it still!" she cried, not knowing if Odan could understand her in this form.

She closed her eyes. Then set the Fire free. Not even in the desert with him picking at her had she loosed the flames like this. She wanted her fire there, inside it, and she grew it, feeding it from herself since it couldn't find a natural accelerant. Her chest ached, and energy sizzled across her skin. The air thickened, and drops of water stung like little bites.

Opening her eyes, she saw the creature writhe, flapping hard and deep, but gaining only a few handspans with each try. It tilted, seemingly precarious in the air, possibly tiring. The sky was full of mist. Where had it come from? The mist grew ever darker, and she clung to her hidden fireball with all her might, trying to expand it. The hairs on her arms and nape stood on end, and then there was sonic CRACK! Her ribs thumped with the concussion. A jagged line of white lightning seared her vision.

The beebie exploded. But so did her internal fireball. Lava, flaming flesh, dagger-like spikes, and liquefied, smoking goo sprayed the sky. Even right up onto Odan's thigh. He grunted, and she reached across him to slap at it, putting it out. For a moment, she hung on his hips, dizzy. Then she saw the flames catch on one of the swaying trees. He sucked them away in a pretty, dancing swirl, and put them out. She pointed, and extinguished another fire on her own. The energy that took made something pop inside her.

She clutched at her sternum, looking down, half-expecting to find some gross bit of bone stuck to her. There was nothing but the roar of the wind, the roar of the sea. She slumped, her arms falling slack and for a breathless moment knew she would fall, looking over at Odan's form an armlength from her. Or rather, a long inhumanly-muscled-and-clawed-armlength from her. But before she could even feel that sick sensation, she firmed her knees, and realized she was secure in a tight spiral of pressure. She floated in midair next to her own personal monster, her braid dancing like a whip.

Her breath rasped loud, and her lungs burned like she'd swallowed part of her own fireball. *Now would be a good time to faint.* But she didn't. His claws, Skyfather, they were *so* long, slashed, pointing. She looked and saw another twist of smoke rising. The dark, thick mist faded, and spatters of dampness continued to drift over her face. They felt good.

Licking her lips, she focused, aware he had given her this task while he turned to

others. She tracked the heat back to the small lump of smoldering flesh hidden halfway down a tree merely by sensing it. Taking the heat back from physical, real fire, made her cough, choking with nausea. She hadn't been this weak in over a decade, and that really ticked her off. When she cleared that fire, she searched for smoke, and followed it back to the next hot spot.

They hung in the clearing air eliminating small fires from the strangely thick-leaved trees for several painful minutes, when a spine-chilling sound added to the landscape.

She twisted her neck to Odan, who looked perhaps a little less enormous, and shouted, "What is that?" Visions of having to enter another battle with some other horror with a pounding head and shaking hands filled her.

His shifted face, with a mouth full of large teeth, contorted. "Oooooollvvvsss."

The humor in his voice surprised her. He pointed.

While she'd been putting out fires, he'd been shifting them around the area, changing their view. Now she saw a sight she hadn't noticed from her prior angle. The main chunk of the creature had fallen, grotesquely ripping a hole in the forest. She knew it was part of the lizard bird only because a small bit of the red meat was still grey, and one wing was spread, having been speared and stretched by a broken branch. The other wing, and head, and perhaps half its mass was gone.

As she studied the gruesome mess, noting there was still some heat in it Odan had failed to eliminate, a long, furred creature streaked into the branch-and-blood-strewn clearing. Then another, and another. They were mostly black, but a few were other shades, and they had long furry tails. Their legs were elegant, not too long, but not short, and their necks were thick. They leaped on the carcass and threw up their toothed heads, that undulating sound wailing.

She'd seen this creature once before. These were wolves. One of them had been among those left behind in the darkmage Fortress. He'd stood in her group as they sifted, beautiful fur glowing thick and lustrous. And he'd dropped with the others, dead in two breaths in that small stone chamber, his body left behind with the snapping, lunging neck. Using a chant to help her, she took the remaining heat from the carcass, which left it smaller as it liquefied and steamed. The wolves circled it, barking and howling and snapping.

A hand pointed across her vision again. She glanced at Odan, seeing he was once again in human form, although his stripes were still in place and his boots were in tatters. With a weary sigh, she followed her assigned smoke trail and focused on finishing the job of cleaning up their mess.

After a long while, Odan brought them down near where the wolves had found the head. He offered his hand to her, and she gladly took it, clutching at his thick fingers as he lowered them through the maze of branches onto the shaded earth. He spoke to the assembled hawks and wolves, but she didn't listen to much of it. A summary of the battle, a finding that internal heat was neither fast nor clean as a killing method, and a promise from them to remain in the area for a few days in case they'd missed some fire and it flared up. Some annoying boy-like bravado and teasing, directions to a nearby place, and general satisfaction it had been killed.

Odan led her by the hand off into the growth. "There's a spring very near where we can clean up."

After walking, or rather stumbling, shying, flinching, and tripping in her case, for

about ten minutes, she panted, "What's your definition of 'very near'?"

"We're perhaps halfway there."

She gasped along behind him for a few more steps, proud of herself for not even screaming when she saw a bug the size of her hand skitter up a smooth-barked tree. "Why can't we fly there?"

"Because that battle was a disaster, and I am not an endless well of energy." He stopped and turned to face her.

She was suddenly and overwhelmingly reminded he was topless. The expanse of his pecs rising sharp and thick, of his abs trickling down from them in a measured waterfall, shocked her. He had small nipples, and no body hair, and the caps of his shoulders were actually textured with strips of muscle. His neck melded with his shoulders, sweeps of muscle nearly the width of his head.

"Now do you see why I was so impatient yesterday? We could be called to another sighting at any moment."

"The least amount of time between attacks has been three days—"

"That we know of. There have been many reports of missing people, and before we even knew of the beebees, our hawks would go missing."

She very much doubted the missing in the Cities were unnoticed lizard bird attacks. They were a little hard to miss. But she was so tired. She nodded to him and gestured, and he continued on.

By the time he came to a stop at a muddy depression thick with plants, she really wanted to sit down and cry. But of course, that was not for her. She leaned against a tree, too tired to even flinch at the feel of its strange bark and the possibility some creature could touch her. He stomped into the muck, kicking with his half-booted feet. He found what he wanted when he stepped onto a rise, and began to pull plants out. She watched him, disinclined to help. It was one thing to lean against a tree. It was another to actually put her hands into thick masses of leaves and grab at things-she-knew-not-what.

He'd cleared a space on a wide rock, perhaps a bodylength long, then went off into the bushes. She pushed herself up to follow him, but he came back with several strange, wide leaves.

He stepped onto the rock and looked at her. "Even near the end of your strength, your eyes are still mage-lit."

She shrugged. "I'm not sure I'm near the end of my power. I'm tired, though."

He held out his hand. "Come here."

She frowned at the mud she'd have to cross. Looking at her boots, she saw they were already filthy, and squelched in. Now that she thought about it... "I have sand in my pants."

He chuckled, a rumble of deep bass that made his abs stand stark. "I don't doubt it."

When she stepped up onto the rock without taking his hand, he sighed.

"We'll clean up here, and then I'll take you to a safe place to rest. We need to remain near a sifting stone at all times."

She looked into the darkly lit shadows around them. "This isn't a safe place?" Nervously, she felt a gaze on her back and whipped around. "What's out there?" At his silence, she glanced at him.

He considered her thoughtfully. "You just liquefied a powerful darkmage beast. I don't think you need to worry about being safe in the jungle."

His tone wasn't mocking, but she took issue with his words, lifting her chin. "I can defend myself against a clear enemy, but I am very uninformed about the dangers here." The thought he might leave her because he assumed she was capable chilled her.

"There's nothing in the immediate area to fear. Let's clean up. I need to rest."

Looking at the muck and shredded plants, she asked, "Here? Can't we go back to the baths at River Mountain?"

His jaw clenched. "Wash up here. I don't have the energy for people right now." He knelt on the rock.

Looking at his muscled back in surprise, she considered his revealing statement. Then to her astonishment, she saw water begin to bubble up, and up, and form a small clear pool around the stone. Yearning filled her to be able to call all the elements, to feel such a kinship with the total world, instead of just one piece. It would be so beautiful. She crouched. Putting one hand flat to the rock, and the other on the leather bracelet he'd given her, she tried to assist him in pulling up the water.

When the water lapped the stone, he lowered his face to the surface and drank. Shock rang her system. Crouched on the rock, lapping at the water, he looked so ... wild. The urge to touch his back tingled in her fingertips. Instead, she sat, and scooped a handful of water. Grimacing at the dirt and blood wafting from her filthy hand, she gingerly got on her knees, and looked at how he braced his hands at the edge. She lowered herself, wavered at the sensation she was about to fall in, adjusted herself back, and tried again. The stone was cool and jagged under her hands, and they stung. Her lips awkwardly paddled at the water's surface, but eventually she understood she was supposed to suck. She swallowed, and it was bliss. Fresh, earth-tinged, and cool.

When she'd drank her fill, she sat up on her knees, wiping at her mouth with the back of her hand. He was watching her, and she stilled. Their eyes met. His were silver-blue, and the sound of softly lapping water seemed to be part of them. The awareness coming from him sped her heartbeat. People looked at one another all the time. She'd grown up living in close confines, rarely given privacy. Yet it was very rare her gaze was met so directly, so deeply. *He saw her*, and the uniqueness of it, the fact it was *him*, so big and wild and other, caught her breath.

"I need my bag," she whispered, aching and unsettled and afraid.

He took off his boots, put his feet in the water, and took one of the leaves. The moment was lost. "It's still on your back." He wiped his feet and lower legs with the leaf, and she saw that it fizzed, leaving a residue behind.

Reaching behind her, she felt her pack with surprise. Twisting it off, she wavered, her balance uncertain without it. It was like she'd peeled off a piece of her body. Sitting, she didn't pretend to hide how she opened her last bottle and took a deep drink. The potion was bitter and thick. She shuddered, and swallowed the dose she needed in order to hide. Capping it, she put it back and sealed the bag. She bent to the water and took another drink. Was it her imagination, or could she feel the potion sliding through her body, poisoning her, covering her insides like the muck on her boots?

He stood up next to her, lifted his skirt, only slightly ripped from his transformation this time, and unbuttoned the sides of his shorts. They fell from his hips, and he dropped them, stepping out of them. Her mouth came unhinged, hanging completely open. She hadn't gotten used to his bare chest! His flanks were as muscled as the rest of him, his thighs huge and hulking. His hips were lean, skin on bone, and his ass hollowed as he

stepped. His genitals nestled in a gray-brown coarse bush, the skin slightly darker than his belly. His balls were large, hanging long and pulling at the skin, framing his limp, thick penis.

"Breathe, Vivienne."

Her gaze ripped from his groin to his eyes. He stood looking down at her, a small smile tipped on his lips. She abruptly flushed, her skin sizzling with heat at the knowledge he'd seen her stare. And she was on her knees, her face level with his nakedness. Sudden yearning to taste him filled her. She surged to her feet so hard she lost her balance and staggered off the edge of the rock island he'd made, falling back into the water. Once again, she sat covered in muck, sputtering. A bird cried from over head, raucous and angry.

He smiled, his teeth big but even and white. His gaze moved from the top of her head, down over her tunic, to where her knees jutted from the sloshing water, now murky from the silt she'd stirred up. The lines around his eyes fanned deeper. Hot and cold surged through her body as embarrassment warred with fury.

She coughed, spitting, unable to get her breath. "Dammit!" She slapped at the water, sending a wave of it back in her face. She coughed harder.

He knelt at the edge of the stone. "You're fine." He reached for her leg. His hand was big and warm as it wrapped around her calf and pulled it up. He propped her foot on the edge of the rock, and undid her boot laces.

"What are you doing!" She struggled to pull her foot away, but he clamped his knees around it and she froze, breathless when her gaze went right to the hollow of his groin. In this position, his penis was hidden, but now she had a clear view of a vivid red burn on one of his thighs.

"I'm undressing you."

She blinked at his downturned face, speechless. He hadn't stated more than the obvious, but hearing the words was somehow utterly shocking.

He glanced up at her, and her head reared back at the connection that snapped into place. He *saw* her. Somehow, he knelt in a brighter patch of light, and his eyes lit, turning a purer blue. He still smiled at her. His tan body crouched so naturally on the gray rock, surrounded by black-green foliage was the most beautiful thing she'd ever seen. "What can I say? I'm moved by such a pitiful sight."

The blank, slack-jawed moment passed over her with a shiver of irritation. She scowled at him as he tugged the boot from her, taking her sock with it. "Pitiful! You—"

Her voice choked off when his hands, those large, coarse hands, wrapped around her foot. With a press and a twist, his grip seemed to mold itself to her very bones. He rubbed into the arch, and her elbows trembled. Her gaze caught on his hands wrapped around her pale foot.

"You paint your toenails."

His palm cupped and squeezed her heel, and her elbows did give out, and she was flat in the water, a plant brushing her head. She was still propped on her elbows, so her shoulders and face were above the water. Even though his fingers barely moved, an enormous wave of pleasure swept her when he bent her toes up, and then curled them down.

"Wh-what are you doing?" Her voice croaked.

He didn't answer, just sweeping presses, probing delicately, and gently wringing her

feet until her thighs were quivering in delight and her nipples were hard. He set her heel on the edge of the stone, her sodden sock a pad beneath it. Reaching for her other leg, he lifted and stretched it forward as well. Her boot was soon stripped from her. She wasn't proud of how she lay there, lax, anticipation sizzling in her belly. When his hands set into her foot, the sigh that slipped out was soft but sincere.

"What happened in your Guild last night?"

Her foot jerked, but his hands held it.

"Shhh. Tell me."

"No." The pout in her voice was pathetic, but she resented the topic now, here, with those incredible sensations pouring up her ankles past her knees.

He set her foot down. Picking up a leaf, he lathered his hands and leaned down to wash them between her calves.

She glowered at him. "Your Council will get a report."

"I'm not on the Council. They didn't deem it necessary to even tell me of your experience."

She groaned fervently. "You're blackmailing me."

He cut her a look from under his lashes, silver eyes flashing. "I'm washing my hands."

He was going to find out anyway, and he was one of the good guys. "All right," she mumbled. "Hands on the feet. I'll talk."

Chapter Twelve

Odan picked up her foot, lowered it and scrubbed with the leaf. It felt good, rough but not scratchy. He soaped the other one, and the first began to tingle in a way that reminded her of mint. Sheer trembling bliss showered up her thighs.

Setting the leaf aside, his hands squeezed her heel. "Well?"

"Ever since a significant run of disappearances nine years ago yielded a new wave of concern about the darkmages, the High Guild has been discussing how to openly address the scent-cloaking potion developed about a dozen years ago."

His face was angled down, his hair looking even more disheveled than usual, sticking up every which way. The sun picked out silver glints. He didn't react to the news of how long the Mage Guild had been holding secrets. Instead, his fingers were firm and soothing on her feet.

"I've only been a Curate, and thus on the High Guild, for eight years. And for the last three, I've been on the side of planning on how to reveal the situation to the Beasts."

"Truxet, please."

"I mean Truxet. And of course, now the beebees have come about and even more recently begun targeting the Cities, it has become more essential, as clearly the darkmages are an organized force, to give birth to a new mage-creature." She remembered the storms of weeping that night, when she'd learned the first part of her prophecy had come to pass. "Many in the High Guild fear the beebees are a sign the darkmages have reached political levels, since they would have needed massive resources and a safe haven for some time. For the past two years, there have been serious nightwhispers the Kingdom is about to fall."

"Continue."

She couldn't very well tell him she hadn't feared death because she knew she'd live to be slave to a Beast. Yet at the same time, she fought the prophecy even through wrongful action. "Alfons is the Sky Curate of Second City, and has been for all of my life. He is like a father to me, and has been a mentor in my craft. When he came to me privately to back a Guild-wide investigation, I supported him."

"What of your real parents?" Odan switched to her other foot, again setting her foot down on a sock at the edge of the stone island he knelt on.

The water was cool where it pressed her wet leather to her body, and the ground beneath her was soft. The peace of the moment kept her from snapping. "My father was a powerful spiritmage of Fourth City. My mother met him on a training exchange she was chosen for. I suspect the marriage was due to the pregnancy. Neither was willing to leave their City, to give up the position they'd been working toward. She returned to Second City alone. Shortly before my birth, he was exiled to the Dark for tattooing spells for profit. My mother didn't mourn. Ruth, my mother, is a difficult woman whom I am not close to."

His hands stilled. He looked and met her gaze. "I'm sorry. Every child should be cherished."

Her lip quivered and she snapped her teeth shut. "Are your parents happy?"

"Very. Of course, I am lucky to have been raised in a pack Clan. There is nothing

safer in all the world than knowing the group stands for you. But yes, my father and mother were, are, both active and loving parents. I'm still very close to them, as well as to my father's brother and his mate."

Vivienne had no comment. She'd witnessed many healthy families growing up in the Mage Compound. She'd known quite young that her life with her mother was not normal. She'd had ways to escape, and ways to cope, but mostly, she understood her childhood as a kind of test from the Sacred Couple, preparing her for the flames she would wield when she matured. She cleared her throat, the sound rough and self-conscious in the still glade.

His fingers probed her toes, rolling and squeezing them. What should have been silly or bizarre plucked at her womb. His thumb dug hard into her arch, and her neck lost the battle, tipping back into the water. "And so you and Alfons, what? Found a darkmage in your Guild?"

"No. He found about fifty."

"And you did not request Truxet guards?" His voice was tight, clipped.

This was important to him. She dragged her head back up to consider him. "You must understand, if you've spent any time in the Cities at all, the Mage Guild is the power behind them."

His hands paused, along with his breath.

"The Royals rule the laws, but they rule with the support of the Guilds. The Truxet have historically been a force the Mage Guild has sought to minimize in the Cities. To invite Trux guards into our compound would be impossible. Our people would not cooperate, and the elders would decry us, the sitting Senate, as puppets. We had to handle this ourselves, or we would never have been able to discover the truth."

His hands resumed their gentling work on her feet, but she could see his mind was elsewhere. "The truth you all participate in hiding. As soon as the masking-potion is neutralized, all it would take is one whiff from us, and we would do your investigation for you. This wasn't about efficient success. This was about the powerful not wanting to give up their petty secrets, in order to contain evil."

She drew in a long deep breath, staring at him. "It *isn't* about maintaining power or secrets. Just the opposite actually, as nearly every person on the Senate yesterday is now replaced...or dead. The daily experiments of the Guild and politics of the Senate aren't something I can focus on anymore. The darkmages rose during my lifetime. I want to see them torn down before I die. My Guild has taken a daring stride that will rock its foundations in order to combat evil and I am proud of the work we've done. Others will *have* to follow our example. A corner has been turned in this war."

He set her foot down and covered both of her ankles with his hands. It was bittersweet to feel the comfort and delight of his touch, while suffering his condemnation. Odan was silent, kneeling on the stone, and the forest was warm, nearly as steamy as a sauna, yet shaded. "Rafe told me he watched you kill a darkmage in your Senate chamber."

"He only died later, and most likely because it was his own fault there were no bodymages to heal him. He'd led most of them to the darkness." Now she jerked her foot from his grasp. And this time she pulled hard enough he let her go. She wouldn't think about bugs or worse as she set her feet back in the muck.

"What did you do with them all? How will your Guild hide that kind of loss from the City?"

She sat, struggling up from the water, all her relaxation ruined. They stared at each other. She shivered, exposed. Surely Odan was the clawed man in the prophecy, fated to take all her choices away, stripping her of all that she was.

"We rounded them up and jailed them. Some fought, some protested innocence, two died. Perhaps not all fifty are guilty. Our spiritmages will work on that. I'm sure the guilty will be brought before Royal justice, and that will eventually mean they are given to your people. But first a wider investigation needs to be held, not just of our Guild, but the whole City."

"I am glad you killed him."

She looked back into his eyes, holding his silver gaze, and saw no condemnation or accusation in his gaze, just patience, and perhaps ... respect? She nodded once, her heart thumping hard at his brutal words. "It will be investigated as well. There is a chance I will be found guilty, but as we were all fighting for our lives against him, I hope to be acquitted."

"When I first met you yesterday, I did not guess you housed the heart of a warrior. But after today, after training and battling at your side, I do not doubt you anymore."

Her throat grew tight hearing praise from him. This infuriatingly noble, powerful man understood her heart and worth.

"We'll rest. We'll work harder, and get better. We'll rip their pets from the sky."

She nodded. "Yes." But within a few days, she would stand bare before his Beast senses. What would—

He stood. He was erect.

She whipped her gaze away, cursing her inability to even pretend nonchalance.

"Odan!"

"Vivienne." He said her name, in a calm, deep, matter-of-fact way. This time, heat bloomed in her belly even without his touch on her toes.

He took a step away across the rock and sat, not with his back to her, but in profile. He picked up a leaf and washed himself. "Undress and clean up. We walk back to the sifting stone and will sleep out tonight. I want to be ready to go."

"Sleep out?"

"Yes."

"Out where?" She was dizzy from lurching from fear to shame, heat to shock, anxiety to pride.

"Outside. Don't worry, I'll choose a location with a shelter."

"Outside? What do you mean? In the Wild?" Her voice was getting shrill. Even as irritation bloomed, she couldn't help but take heated glances at his ass on the rock.

He stretched, flexing a web of deep muscle from his back down his flank. "Fine. Sleep sandy, muddy, and sweaty. I don't care."

"What's wrong with River Mountain? We need blankets, and food!"

"I'll provide."

She looked around the pool of water, clear again since she'd sat still long enough. She was with the most tempting, touchable arrogant frog she'd ever had the displeasure of knowing. "You want me to take my clothes off out here?"

"You bathe with others in bathhouses in the Guild. You did it with little fanfare in the groundbear rooms with Charley at River Mountain."

"But—but—this is the Wild."

He looked across at her, and the side view of the depth of his chest took her breath. "You can trust me, Vivienne. I will warn you if there is danger, and help protect you should you need it. I sense none. Bathe. It is refreshing, and you will no doubt soon crash from the adrenaline."

The side view also gave her an excellent view of his erection standing up above his thighs. His skin had darkened even more now that it was swollen with blood, pulled so tight it looked smooth. The head of him had a flared crown with a large lip, and it bobbed as water spilled across it where he pulled handfuls up to scrub at his arms.

Vivienne looked around. She wanted to go back to the rock, but to do so would mean she'd have to stand on the mud she could feel shifting beneath her feet. Her legs were frozen in squeamish disgust. She didn't want to ask for help. Charley's giggling advice to have sex with Odan echoed back to her. Mentally, she slapped herself. Now was not the time.

Gritting her teeth, she stood up, streaming water, and yelped when mud swelled between her toes like it was alive. She scrambled onto the rock. Turning her back on Odan's amazing shoulders, she struggled with the laces on her tunic and pants. Getting them off was a relief. Standing in the open in just her skin felt immensely daring. Her shoulders prickled with the knowledge that at any moment, he could turn and see her naked. The small clearing was cylindrical, like she was at the bottom of a well, with the forest forming tall walls all around them. The air smelled totally foreign, nothing like home.

"You don't sense anything?" she whispered to Odan.

The sounds of him washing came to her. "Nope."

She bent and picked up one of the foaming leaves. Wetting it, she rubbed it over her belly, grimacing as sand scoured her skin. She decided to just focus on the vitals. She slapped it under her breasts, and rotated briskly in her armpits. She wiped her thighs and danced uncomfortably to put it between her legs. Then she knelt and scooped water, splashing it across herself. The sun was shining through the dappled shade, and air stirred across her skin. Her breath came in quick pants. She folded over on her knees and washed her face, scrubbing into the hair around her temples and getting the back of her neck. When she was done, she didn't dry her skin, but left the water there to refresh herself.

Hovering over the water, watching small bits of plants and earth float past, she said, "I can't believe I'm doing this."

"You were hit. This isn't from today. How did you manage to repel a darkcraft attack?"

She froze.

His finger touched her hip, a short slash of heat.

Words babbled out of her in a rush. "There were more of us than them. We had surprise on our side, and most of us had battle leathers."

His touch seemed to drill into her. "Was this from the darkmage you killed?"

She could lie, but didn't. "No, actually, a different one." She shifted away from where he crouched next to her. Her hesitation to sit up irked her. She swallowed.

"Ah. One of the fifty." The tip of his finger was textured as it lazily spiraled over the wound she'd forgotten.

"Yes." The admission hung in the air, and she wondered how wide her ass looked propped on her heels. Abruptly she sat up, giving a bark of laughter at herself. To be

more worried about bare breasts and a spread ass than telling him the group of people she'd identified with were infiltrated by darkmages. "She was the other one to die, a watermage named Andalay. She wounded five of us, and was only brought down by one of my burning burrs."

"That sounds fascinating. You are absolutely beautiful."

Turning with a painfully stiff neck, Vivienne felt a multitude of water droplets easing down her body. She met his blue gaze from an armlength away and her nipples throbbed, hard and aching. The lines on his face put him older than she, but not by much, she guessed. The scars made him more real to her, since his great size was so unbelievable. She'd never been near such a large man.

"Do you have any other wounds?"

"I don't think so."

He stood, and his erection was still there. Before she had time to react, his hand was before her, palm up. *Don't touch him. Don't encourage him. Don't get close to him. He'll take you away.* But her hand rose and set in his. He lifted her to her still slightly muddy feet. Raising her hand above her head, he turned her wrist, forcing her to turn her body in a spiral. Slowly, he rotated her. Her thighs grew shivery, and her feet sizzled. Her breasts ached, and her belly clenched. She drew her ass in, then realized that would only make it look bigger and relaxed it again. Her breath came in short pants.

"I don't see any other marks. Your skin is flawless." He lowered her hand and then slid from her numb grasp. The tips of his fingers reached to brush the top of her chest.

When they landed, she couldn't control the way her body curled in shock, her shoulders bowing forward, her belly hollowing stark at the lance of heat.

His touch fell away. "You never need to fear me, Vivienne."

She tipped her head up to look into his rugged, square face. "I danced on air held only by your craft. I gave my fire over to your aim. I kissed you. I don't fear you, Odan." The core of her words was true, mostly.

"Then don't pull away from my touch." His words were mild, but the challenge was laid down. Their gazes locked, neither willing to look away.

His hand lifted again, and his fingers rested over her heart. This time, she shuddered, but didn't flinch. He swept them idly back and forth, lifting them to trace her collarbone. "Do you want me as a lover?"

He was an infuriating, controlling brute. He was demanding and dangerous. She'd seen the proof of his beastspirit in his altered form. A form he'd summoned once to defend her, and again to fight beside her. She'd argued bitterly with her best friend about her right to make her own choices, to control her own destiny, and hide from the peacekeepers of Royal decree. She'd cloaked herself, possibly to hide from this very man. And still she opened her mouth and said, "Yes."

Twisting his hand, he put the curled backs of his fingers into the hollow of her throat. "Then you shall have me, for you are as lovely as the sun and I want you, also."

She stared into the deepening blue of his gaze, her heart thumping so wildly her pulse danced against the light press of his knuckles. Her mind was frozen by the skin of him before her, and the possibility it was all hers to touch. To lick. Her mouth watered and she swept her tongue across her aching lips.

"We must make for the sifting stone. From now on, I never want to be far from it, and always ready to answer the call. We should rest, and train, but before we continue

our duty, I would give you some pleasure. Some moment to show you what a beautiful woman you are to me."

Her stomach joined her heart in somersaulting through her body. She licked her lips again, lost in the power of his eyes.

"What do you want from my body, for yours?" His voice was so textured it curled over her shoulders like a blanket.

Oh, he was good. She was in a melt from a touch and anticipation alone. And abruptly the thought of having sex with him blazed through her like a warning comet of doom. He was *too* good. Just standing before him like this, she was more exposed than she'd been with any prior lover. His gaze trapped her in fantasies of lying on her rainbow-hued soft bed, his body stretched beneath her. But the stripes creeping up his face reminded her that her vision surely didn't match his. In his, there would be a pit lined with furs, and it was she who was below.

"Vivienne? Shall I choose?" His quiet voice coaxed, but his words were the perfect reminder.

She blinked, dragging her gaze down to his chest. "No. I know what I want." Lifting one hand to sweep his gently but firmly away from her throat, she put her forefinger in the middle of his chest. She drew it down, angling it so her short nail trailed behind her touch. Rubbing over his belly button, pushing the soft crown of him aside with her wrist, she stroked all the way down into his surprisingly silky bush, stopping at his root. She combed through the hairs there, longer than on his head, admiring the way his cock stiffened, thickening.

"Listen, princess, maybe I—"

She knelt, the rocking motion swaying her snarled braid along her back. Putting each of her hands over the deep indentations of his hips, she licked up the length of his erection. He was firm and tight. Pulling her lips back, she nibbled ever-so-gently along the spot where the sweeping crown flattened, in the gap of the lip around his tip. His man-smell hit her hard, sliding into her belly like a decadent dessert. The herbal menthol of the plant sizzled against her mouth.

His hands fisted where they rested against his thighs. "Vivienne, I wanted to give—"

She slid her mouth down the length of him, burrowing her tongue under his balls. Lapping and sucking across their surface, she loved how big they were. Like the rest of him, they were hairless, the skin puckered and excitingly delicate. Nuzzling under their weight, she licked hard into the gap between his legs. His hands gave up the fight and clasped her head.

She nudged his cock with her nose, massaging her hands across the tops of his hips. "Pull yourself down to me." She flickered tiny touches of her tongue across the base, where the vein throbbed and stood stark.

"This isn't what I—"

Wrapping her open mouth along his girth, she sucked hard for two beats, enjoying the way the muscles in his abs and thighs leapt and jerked. "Give it to me."

His hand left her head and wrapped around the damp root, shoving down so he angled directly out from his body, the tip pointed straight at her face. Dragging her tongue in a circle over the head of him, she purred, "Gooood."

"Woman, you are so amaz—" He shouted, the harsh grunt echoed by a startled bird that flew past them.

She never paused, lapping across his tip in hard sweeps with the flat of her tongue. The taste of his skin was everything she'd thought it would be. Wild, strong, decadent. She'd never felt more powerful. Her fingers petted the flexing hollows on the side of his ass desperately as she swiped at him. Mewing, she rolled her hips, her clit aching, throbbing in answer to the fresh burst of taste flowing from his tip.

"Vivienne, yes!" He groaned, and she saw his fist adjust, clenching. His other hand burrowed into her hair, but rested there gently, without force.

She rewarded him by widening her jaw and taking the cap of him into her mouth, the rim of him setting nicely inside the ring of her teeth. Her tongue flew faster now that it didn't need to stretch, and she moaned. Odan's cock was in her mouth, and it was perfect. Rolling her neck back, sinking her hands down onto the slabs of his thighs, she looked up at him. Male, so *other* and fascinating. It had been so long since she'd felt this female, lost in the sensation and eddies of power and skin. But even though it had been a long while, it had never been like this. There'd never been a man like him.

He'd bowed his shoulders, and the forest rose green and shadowed beyond him. His jaw clenched, his cheekbones stark and flushed, his blue eyes glinting from narrow slits. His stripes were black and primal on his face, flaring up into his hair. She clawed down his thighs, leaning all her weight against him, shoved farther down onto the length of him and sucked. Watching his deep chest fill with the force of pleasure she gave him made cream trickle down her thigh. She sucked again, feeling him at the back of her throat, even though there was still a large gap of skin until she got to where his fist tightened on his base. His hand on her head pressed, fingertips working her scalp. She rubbed her tongue on that flat gap again, and watched his lips peel back from his teeth.

Closing her eyes in bliss, she tipped her head at a better angle, and shoved him farther down her throat, swallowing, sucking, lapping, pulling. Her blood raced. His hand closed at the back of her head, his fist pulling on her hair just faintly as his hips began to rock. Urgency wracked her. So close. She withdrew and bobbed down again. He filled her whole mouth, and her lips stretched on his private flesh. Looking up at him again, up the wide massive wall of him, up to his taut face and straining square jaw, she chafed her thighs together, clenching hard inside.

Dropping one hand down, she sent one finger into her slit and pressed on her clit. Frantic, she sucked, stroking, and rolled her fingertip gently across her trapped nub until she found that sweet spot. One scrape of her nail and she came, groaning on the thick taste of him. Swallowing, unable to avoid scraping her teeth against him, the musky scent of him followed his bitter flavor. She shivered in the warm sunlight, thighs jumping. His hips swayed deeper toward her, and his fist, so close to her nose, shone white with strain. She scooped his delicate balls into her hands, and rolled them, pulling, twisting gently. Sucking, always sucking and licking, alternately dragging her teeth on his textured skin and letting her lips glide smoothly, she leaned her forehead on his belly, trembling with echoing pleasure.

His hand whipped from his cock to cup the back of her neck, and he abruptly bent over her. He swelled in her mouth, and burst. Steady, low growls rolled through him as she bobbed quickly on the end of his lovely rod. She swallowed as fast as she could, hot, thick pools of his cream coating her throat, making her moan, which in turn brought a sharp snarl from him. Eventually, his hands loosened from their grip on her and settled, trembling, on her shoulders. She sucked gently at the last of his taste and he gasped, belly

tight. She dropped him from her mouth, where he still arced in a semi-hard state. She licked delicately at his folds.

His hands tightened on her shoulders as he knelt to face her. Soothing down her arms, he caught her hands. She was getting used to how small her fingers were compared to his. She was starting to like it, that he was so big and powerful.

"You fight me even in pleasure." His voice still throbbed huskily. Exasperation sounded in his words.

And even though it could be frustrating, she also enjoyed his intelligence. A slow, satisfied smile stretched her face. Sucking at her humming lips, happiness bubbled up. It had been over a year since she'd had a lover. She'd been too wrapped up in dreading her prophecy and Alfons' dangerous plan. "It was amazing to share that now." Gazing at him from under her lashes, still beaming, she said softly, "We won."

The words echoed through her, and she shifted her thighs again, settling back on her heels to relieve the throbbing still pulsing between her legs. *She'd won*. She'd led the cleansing of her Guild. She'd survived a darkmage Fortress. She'd forayed into the Wild. She'd killed a beebie with new mastery of her craft. And she'd stood her ground as an equal with a Beast. The list of her recent accomplishments was dizzying. There was no one who knew what they'd cost her. No one to appreciate that every success came with a wound.

She was being stripped of the woman she'd grown to recognize as herself. Her whole life had been the Guild, and running it, and teaching, experimenting, growing her craft, enjoying beauty and comfort. She had no idea where her life was taking her now, with the Queen's request a duty she could not turn from. Vivienne was aware in this first quiet moment she'd had, that going back to her old life wasn't impossible because of events happening to her, but because she no longer wanted a closed, rigid life of authority. There was more to the world. More elemental craft than to be discovered within a compound's wooden halls, more people with ideas beyond an insular Guild's. And the danger, so much *life*, where she used all of herself, and mattered.

Odan's hands massaged hers gently. His slate-blue eyes were sleepy with satisfaction, and perhaps curiosity. They didn't know the daily details of each other, and here she sat, nude, with his taste in her throat, on a rock in the forest. Tipping back her head, Vivienne stared up at the scraps of light visible through the layers of trees. There were vines and strangely symmetrical flat bushes that almost grew in a grid. Something flitted through the branches, a flash of red, and she took it as a symbol.

She drew her face forward and looked at Odan. He had a beastspirit in him and could assume two non-human forms. He could call all of the elements. He lived in caves and tunnels, where men held the power of law by right of race. Everything about him should have been alien, horrifying. Why wasn't she horrified?

Pulling on his steady hands, she rose back up onto her knees, and crept forward until their thighs were pressed together. Twisting her hands from his, she wrapped her arms as far around his back as she could reach. She laid her head against his chest, and pressed a simple kiss onto one mighty pec. His arms slowly came around her, wrapping her from hip to shoulder in careful strength. Her nipples brushed his chest, the hair and soft warmth of his privates against her belly. Sighing, she held herself tight to him, and the scent of his skin mixed with the trees around them. He held her. What she liked about Odan the most was sometimes, he let her win.

Chapter Thirteen

"I am not sleeping in that!" Two hours later, Vivienne sat on a rock as if it were a throne. Her legs were crossed and her hands primly folded on one knee.

Odan stared at the woman. His palms actually burned to spank her ass. Especially now that he knew it had fiery-gold peach fuzz on it.

She was so tired she could barely keep her eyes open. Giving their report to Altik after trekking out to the sifting stone had taken up the last of her energy. He reminded himself she hadn't slept the night before, and it had been an extremely stressful two days for her.

"It is clean, and safe." This glen was his favorite spot in all of Vladaya. The stark granite walls cut away in natural handholds, towering three stories above them. A stream trickled down the face of one cliff, sputtering sweetly through the moss and ferns. In the spring it was an impressive waterfall. The rocky base of the cove-like cliffs had a small pool of water. On one edge, shale warped by generations of flow swirled in an elegant design, spilling a lovely thin wall of water into the stream. The water eased away into birches that gathered at the opening of the glen, where the sifting stone was. On another edge was a beach of earth and shale chips. Opposite the waterfall, about a bodylength above the pool, a wide flat area made the perfect balcony to view the scene. At the back of the open space was a shallow cave he'd spent many a night in.

"This is ridiculous. You can take us to River Mountain with one thought. There is clean water, baths, hot food, and beds there."

"It is not ridiculous." He struggled to keep his voice bland. *Control yourself.* But usually such an admonishment would be in regards to keeping a tight rein on his groundbear. Not a roiling desire to shout at a woman. "This is a lovely, peaceful spot."

"I'm not sleeping in that." She angled her delicate face up, nose pointing high.

"That" was the bower he'd made for them, of willow boughs and fern fronds, a soft and fragrant cushion. Odan leaned against the cliff next to the opening, his arms crossed against the desire to reach for her neck. "Then don't. But I am tired. I'm heading to bed."

"This is outrageous. It's still daylight. In River Mountain we'd have our own rooms. *What* is so bad about returning there? I thought you were a pack creature who liked people around him." The cold anger in her words made him pause. This was more than being fussy. He pulled in a deep breath to find the patience to explain his stance to her. Again.

"Listen, princess—"

"I'm not royalty."

"—we have an assigned duty to be on alert for any beebee attack. That means we are go-ready at all times. Just like I wasn't about to have a nice three-day stretch of polite chitchat at your compound, I'm not about to have polite chitchat at mine. We lost an hour and a half of training this afternoon by traveling to River Mountain. I ended up meeting with my Alpha, my Council brothers, a Council representative, Rafe, and Charley. All to give you a bath."

"That wasn't polite chitchat. You were delivering important information. And don't think I didn't pick up on the fact you were talking to that Trux just now with your hands,

having your own private conversation beyond what you spoke in front of me."

He'd actually told Altik about the fifty darkmages being held in questionable containment, with nothing to lose, in the heart of Second City. He'd been impressed with the mountaincat's control in giving none of his anger away beyond his scent. "We've shared our initial report already. There's no reason to go to River Mountain."

He watched her jaw clench. "How about common sense? To expose ourselves like this, and force us to sleep on a pile of branches in a cave—"

"River Mountain is a cave, too," he noted dryly.

"—in a *pitiful* cave, with no security—"

"I told you, it's safe."

"Not as safe as River Mountain! We could both get better rest there!"

Odan scrubbed one hand over his face. He was so tired his eyes burned, and the sun was merely slipping toward the horizon. "Is this about sleeping next to me? Honestly?"

She was silent. She drummed her fingers on her knee, then switched legs in a neat, sexy way that made her simple leather pants look elegant. "No. This is about me. I do not enjoy minimalist living when there is no need for it. I have worked hard to earn a place of respect in this world. I do not see the point in denying us basic amenities because people might want to talk to you. I would be just as able to leap from a comfortable, secure bed there as I am from this, this—" she waved one pale hand in exasperation at the lovely rocky space that was his retreat. "—*place*."

Odan looked down at his feet in their new black mid-calf boots Altik had given him. A late season flower clung to the side of the cave opening. It was purple, so delicate. What it was doing in the dry, rocky cliff was a puzzle. Like Vivienne. Every time he thought he found some way to understand her, she showed some new jagged edge. Were all City women as spoilt as she when they were first brought to the women's caves? He told himself she was a high-ranking Mage Guild member, and she'd done quite well to improve at moving through the forest today. This was actually her fourth habitat of the day. Was he pushing her too hard, demanding an overnight?

Glancing down toward the birches, the tops of their bright canopy glowing in the lowering sun reminded him of her eyes. The sifting stone was just there, one that anchored the shared territory where the clanhomes of the lizzeed, the groundbear, and the wolves overlapped. The thought of all the people he'd have to check in with, and Rafe's lingering hostility toward her, made him shudder. Rolling his shoulders against the stone, he ducked into the cave and sat on the blanket he'd spread over the nest he'd made. He began to pull off his new boots.

"What are you doing?"

"Going to bed."

"I'm not sleeping in that."

"Fine."

She sniffed.

He froze. Pausing with his hands wrapped around one foot in mid-pull, he looked at her from the corner of his eye. "Do not cry."

"I won't." Her voice was definitely thick.

Fuck. "Tears will not change my mind." Was she playing him?

"I have no problem stating my mind. I don't need to resort to childish manipulation."

Well, that was a relief. Because bitchy ranting was so much better. He pulled his

boot off, suppressing a snarl. "Good night. We train at first light."

"What about this food? Won't it attract creatures?"

He glanced at the crusts left from the dinner Charley had put in his pack. He'd eaten as he'd gathered the bedding, leaving Vivienne ensconced on the natural balcony. It would attract attention, but the fact he'd pissed on some trees around the edge of the glen, and that this area was so well-patrolled, meant they'd be fine. "Maybe some rock mice. Nothing to worry about."

Rolling onto the nest, he wiggled his toes, feeling the pull of sleep. As always, he felt exposed, bare, alone without his Clan around him. It didn't matter where he slept. It wasn't with them. The air was iffy. It could rain in the morning. He should have taken her farther south, toward the coast, but he'd wanted his glen. Bunching some ferns into a more comfortable mound under his head beneath the blanket, he closed his eyes. As a warrior, he'd had to train himself to sleep when it was available. He'd overcome his need for his brother warriors, and he'd ignore her seething presence.

"You are a stubborn frog."

He opened his eyes. Bit his lip to keep from laughing.

"Ribbit." She made her voice go low and coarse.

His teeth slammed together to keep his burst of laughter in. He would likely set her off worse if he laughed. She was quiet for a long moment, so he breathed past the urge.

"Rrrrrribbit," she croaked convincingly.

His shout of mirth escaped, echoing loud in the small cave. She pounced on him, and he laughed again, startled.

"Ribbit, ribbit!" She jumped on her knees next to him, pushing on his chest.

Glancing at her in surprise, everything in him melted to see that wide smile. Delight ran in a wash through his aching muscles. He cupped the side of her face, his hand looking coarse and rough next to her pale fragility. "I wish I could see your eyes."

Her smile faded. She blinked at him with those sun-tipped golden lashes. Laying her head on his chest, she curled into his side. "We'll be safe here?"

"We will."

"This conversation isn't over. I'm not becoming some Wildling to scurry about for weeks just to avoid River Mountain."

He settled his hand into her gossamer hair. It was springy, the strands entwining his fingers and grabbing at his calluses. He remembered the feel of it thick in his fist as her amazing mouth sucked him in a burning rush. "Shhh. Rest."

Sighing, she pulled the blanket around her and settled against him. "You're so warm," she mumbled happily.

Her breathing steadied, and he smelled leather, spiced bread, and the sharp scent of newly broken ferns. But he couldn't smell her. Groundbear stirred, nose nudging Odan's ribs in agitation. Even though he now knew her true scent was the lost element, he couldn't calm the agitation that he was still missing something. Something important, something essential.

Her fingers curled into the waistband of his warskirt, and her weight drifted into him as she slept. He gently stroked her skull, fingers twining in her hair. Groundbear rocked from paw to paw, and no matter how Odan asked to rest, it was a long time before he settled enough for them to sleep.

He ran through the dry, rocky hills of his clanhome territory, and sitting by the oasis

in the Burrow with his father. His father was explaining how he'd first met Odan's mother in a chance encounter in Sixth City's morning market. Her scent had haunted him for two months until her Guild agreed to ask her if she'd be willing to be adopted.

Off to the side of the oasis, another Odan was fucking, unable to stop, unable to finish. Lean, pale limbs tangled with his larger ones. Yet another Odan was running laps around the outside of the pool, leaping the waterfall each time.

"What was her scent like?" Sitting-Odan asked his father.

His father pointed at the frantic, fucking Odan. "It was like peace, and freedom, and the most beautiful woman you've ever wanted, and running through the hills in the spring. It was perfect."

She sat up, and he woke at once. It was raining, still dark, and the air smelled rich, clean, and empty. Groundbear dug hard into the core of him, and he grunted, jerking, at his beastspirit's angry scrabbling. His erection throbbed, and he forced himself to relax his grip on her hip.

"Sorry," she whispered. "I just have to pee. Is it safe?"

He checked, and of course it was. If anything dangerous had come close, he would have sensed it even asleep. "Yes. Go left, away from the pool."

"I'll be right back."

She slipped off of the nest, and stood under the lip of the cave's peak. A slender flame lit the dark pre-dawn, hovering by her shoulder. The rain was just a light mist, and she hesitantly eased off the flat area onto the uneven rocks, then moved toward the birches. Odan sent his senses out once more, and found nothing but a few deerish beyond the sifting stone.

Rolling onto his side, he rubbed his eyes, which didn't feel much better than they had the night before. His dream remained with him, nagging him with the same insistent ache of his groundbear that he was missing something. *I know I can't smell her, by Tempest. I'm working on her, but she's afraid.*

He heard rocks clatter as she stumbled and he rolled to his feet, stepping on the smooth stone to where he could see her. With her flame and his groundbear sight, he saw her clearly. She'd found some large rocks near where the grasses started by the birches, and was working her pants open. She paused, looking around. He watched her unrepentantly. Sitting on the edge of the rock, she peed.

He couldn't see the stars, but judged it close enough to when they could rise anyway. He lifted his face to the refreshing mist, and took off his warskirt. The spelled leather had done its job. If he'd been hit by the boiling flesh in a normal pair of pants, he'd have a hole burned in his thigh, instead of a slight burn he'd healed as he walked.

She rinsed her hands in the pool. Watching her delicate form crouch there sent anticipation rolling through him. She picked her way back up to the cave. She didn't notice him until she pulled herself up onto the flat balcony. Her hair was a snarled mass, and her eyes were enormous, the green looking bright and ready.

"Good morning," she said, with some sarcasm.

He stroked his cock, considering her seriously. "Yes, I think it will be."

Her gaze skittered around the cave, and her arms wrapped tight around herself, chafing. "If we were coming to this nice pool, why did we have to bathe in that shallow muddy place?"

Ah, princess. Is that really what you want to know right now? "Because this pool has

glindingshans in it."

She froze. "Excuse me?" Her hands whipped from her arms to hover in front of her face. She turned them over, staring at them with concern.

"They're a mage-driven form of frog. Their bites cause hallucinations."

She looked at him, appalled. "You didn't warn me!"

"I didn't think you'd go swimming without me. They only bite if you disturb the bottom in the deepest part of the pool. I've swum here many times."

She frowned at him.

Even a scowl on her mouth was sexy. His cock tightened and he continued to stroke with a heavy grip. He sizzled in anticipation of her softness. "Why? Did you want me to take you in the water?"

Her eyes snapped wide. "No!" She looked off to the side at the darker blot of the water. The trickle of the waterfall was surely audible to her now, as it picked up volume from the rain. The smooth, constant shush of the pool spilling over the lip into the lower stream soothed him. He saw her study the area with fascination, and noted the moment where the idea switched from astonishing to intriguing.

"Have you ever done something like that before?"

"What?" It was mean of him to make her say it.

"You know." She waved her hand at the water.

"Why don't you be clear?"

She played with the fringe she'd cut into the bottom of her tunic with uneasy fingers. He began to wonder if she was as experienced as her talented mouth had made her seem, or if it was just the concept of him as a lover that was upsetting.

"Have you ever had sex in water?"

"Yes." It was actually distracting because he couldn't focus on the woman like he preferred when he was worried about keeping them both afloat. He tipped his head at her, rolling his balls in his warming fingers. "Are you sure you wouldn't like to try it?"

She shook her head. "So ... you're being awfully presumptuous, aren't you?"

His cock thumped at her haughty tone. She was definitely delaying. He took his hands off himself. Holding one wrist, casually resting his hands on his belly, he gave her a formal shoulder bow, lowering his head, then raising it. "Forgive me, Lady Vivienne. It would be my pleasure to share your body with you. I was wondering if you would consider—"

"Oh, stop it!"

He grinned at her.

"It's just, we're out here, where anything can get to us, and it's raining." She wiped at the droplets that had gathered in her hair like ruby crystals.

"So it is, but the nest I prepared for us is dry." He waited, hands still folded at rest position, confused by her. If he could only smell her...

"I'm dirty." She fussed. "I'm all gross. I feel achy from all the strain of yesterday."

Odan considered the woman before him. The concept of not wanting sex because he was not perfectly clean was not anything he understood. She was definitely avoiding him. He was not used to coaxing his partners. The women he usually interfaced with wanted Trux lovers and enjoyed them. Disappointment, discontent, and dismay curled through him. Why had he just presented himself like that, as if she were a skinlicker used to providing services at his whim?

Stepping to the side of the opening, he waved his hands in. "You do not wish to have a lover now. I meant no disrespect. Come sit. I'll help with your hair." He bent and put on his warskirt, using his bodycraft to force his erection to fade. It stung and ached.

She came to stand close to him in front of the entrance. "Odan..."

"Vivienne, there is no obligation between us." He finished buttoning his shorts at the hip and smoothed the leather pleats down. Obviously the attraction was on his side. He knew passion stirred after a battle. Yesterday she was not in her usual frame of mind. He swallowed on his churning stomach. "Sit on the edge."

She stared up at him, her face pale and still.

The thought she would refuse to sit with him shot through him. "I would never force you," he told her gently. Inside, his groundbear nosed through his ribs, agitated, horny, confused.

She reared back. "I know that!" She spun and sat, keeping her feet off the mound of bedding.

Kneeling, he began to undo her boots. "How did you sleep?"

"Utterly soundly, but the morning came suddenly, and I still don't feel rested."

"Perhaps we'll have time for a nap this afternoon."

"We'll train today?"

"Oh, yes." Both boots were undone, and he slid them off, along with her socks. Her feet were so impossibly tiny, with perfectly descending toes. The red paint she'd added winked at him in her mageflame. "Scooch in, and turn toward the wall."

"Why?" she asked.

He raised one brow at her. She scooched and turned. Groundbear huffed in satisfaction at seeing her in the dark alcove. Odan wondered again why groundbear was so interested in her. He wiped his damp feet off on the corner of the blanket and crawled in behind her. Drifting his hands over her hair, he managed to find where the tie was and undid it.

"You're really going to help me with my hair?"

"I really am." Now he could smell his scent on her. Her hair was thick. His erection struggled in his shorts, and he didn't waste the craft on keeping it down. He'd just have to hold it in submission the entire time.

"Well, use my comb then." She bent forward and dragged that ridiculous pack toward her. It was decorated, for pity's sake. Then the comb she passed back to him was carved as well.

"You like fancy things."

"Not at all. I like practical things that have been well-made with love, and embellished with pride."

He lifted the comb up and started at the tips. The cool morning air shivered over his bare back as he held a fistful of her hair. This would be torture. He'd made himself available to her, showed her how he wanted her, and she hadn't wanted him. It stung him in more than just his uncomfortable flesh. It hurt, inside. Keeping his breath slow, he said, "You like color."

"Oh, yes. Cream and black are boring. They feel ... empty to me. Color makes me feel alive. And if you're going to have a rug, why have a brown, scratchy one? Why shouldn't your comb have a feather on it? I'd rather have a carved feather on my comb than a carved feather knickknack sitting on a shelf, ignored and dusty."

Odan thought of the shelves in his room in the skymage's lair. "I collect carvings of wind." Her hair hissed softly beneath the longer strokes of the comb.

"How interesting! I don't think of carvings being able to capture the wind." She was silent, rocking under the gentle pulls of his work. "I quite like the symbolism of that, though. To capture something so unseen, so fleeting, in such a tactile and visible way. Fascinating." Her voice was quiet when she spoke again. "I didn't mean to criticize your collection. I'm sure it's beautiful. Gathering and appreciating art is the mark of a thoughtful mind, I think."

How like her to step awkwardly into an insult, and then acknowledge what she'd done. He worked on her hair, struggling not to get lost in the rhythm of it. "You did very well yesterday. I think it's clear its outer layer is protective. I won't make the mistake of striking it with lightning again."

She hummed. "What a mess. Yet, for all the interior was completely destroyed, it was still functioning, weakly. Internal heat, and distracting it with external fireballs, seems a slow way to kill it."

"It might have seemed long to you, but we brought it down in under ten minutes. We stopped it before it got to a City, which was excellent."

"So it came from the sea?"

"Yes, they tend to come from either the West, over the sea, or the East, along the mountains. That they come from both directions is a bad sign."

He was working up near her scalp now, and her neck had loosened enough that her head rocked deeply with each pull. The lower strands hanging midway down her back floated in the air, clinging to his hands. He badly wanted to roll his face in it, but controlled himself.

"That is bad, isn't it? Do you think they can travel like you do? There couldn't be two Fortresses could there? Or could some of the beebees have been freed to live in the wild?"

By the Six, she was intelligent. She could look at a problem and assess it instantly. That was sexy. Everything about her was sexy. "I don't know. I'm just assigned to be ready, and kill. Let's leave the figuring to others." Remembering how those who figured had left out significant issues in his own preparation made him pause. His Alpha's command to care for Vivienne rippled through his mind. *Well, duty complete.* Drawing the comb smoothly from her temple, down around her ear, through to the ends made her groan.

"Too hard?" he asked, stopping.

"No. Not at all." Her voice was dreamy, and his lips twitched, understanding he'd relaxed her.

"That's about it. All smooth. Want me to braid it?"

"I'll leave it loose for now. I have some combs I'll wear today, in my bag."

Well, that stank. Watching her hair made him ache. He wished she would put it away.

She scooted around to face him, her legs folded to the side. "Thank you, Odan. That was wonderful. Where did you learn to comb women's hair?"

"My father believed there were certain tasks every man should know how to perform for women. When I came of age he gave me the list." He'd called it his list for being a well-rounded Bonded. Odan had laughed at his father and teased his mother that she'd

created it in truth, which made her blush. It had been a long time since he'd thought of his father's list. After all, he was thirty-six and had never even faced a dark moon ceremony, where an adopted woman met the Truxet who had been found to be compatible with her via a souldance.

"What else was on the list?" Vivienne gathered a knee up to her chest, folding her arms around it.

"I haven't thought about it in years." He looked out at the fog that had rolled in with the end of the rain. The sky was a lighter shade of black. Dawn was coming, but would be overcast.

"How to comb a woman's hair." His mother's hair was a thick, straight, light brown that she wore to her shoulders.

"How to rub her feet." It was a common scene from his childhood, to enter his parent's room and see his mother's feet in his father's lap.

"How to have a long, leisurely meal over wine." His mother didn't always enjoy the boisterous, chaotic meals of the pack. Once a month she insisted on private, relaxing meals.

"How to help her see the beauty in the Wild so she is not afraid." The Wild was so much a part of Truxet life every man worked hard to acclimate City-bred women. They were raised on myths, lies, and exaggerations and needed to be guided to see how perfect, even spiritual, the Wild was in all its deadly danger.

What was the last item... "Oh, yeah. And how to shave her legs." That would likely get her in a pucker. Shaving was considered a lewd and sexually provocative act in the Cities. The Guilds spoke of chastity and fidelity, and women who sold their pleasure were guildless and ostracized by society. Vivienne had probably never even met a paid woman before. They were called "smoothskins" or "skinlicker," and those perfectly interesting terms to him were insults there.

Vivienne looked down at her pale toes. It was nice to just sit and watch her in the flickering warm light of her flame.

"So, do all women who live with the Truxet make themselves a smoothskin?"

Odan shrugged. "It is pleasurable to feel bare skin, and there are many Truxet who are naturally hairless. But no, not all. I've seen many women who did not shave, or who did not keep their light hair away with bodycraft."

She raised her head and looked directly at him. "Do you mind body hair?"

It finally dawned on Odan that Vivienne was concerned about the hair he'd seen growing on her legs yesterday.

"No," he said softly. "I don't mind it at all." Especially when it was the color of ripening strawberries, creamy-golden-red.

"You've done all those things with me, except for the legs."

Her words struck him motionless. Shocked, he stared at her.

"I've always wondered what it felt like. Did you master that part of your father's list as well?"

He swallowed. "Yes." His cock throbbed. She wouldn't...

"Would you shave my legs?"

He was breathing too hard, struggling to control his spiking interest. He could feel groundbear swirling in his chest. She didn't know the list was meant to be a gift to his Bonded. She was just asking out of...

"Why?"

She shrugged. "I think it would be sexy."

He could feel his face getting hot. He couldn't help it. Reaching beneath his skirt, he adjusted his aching cock to a more comfortable position. "Sorry," he muttered. He shook his head, confused. "Aren't you being ... presumptuous?"

"I didn't think so. I mean, you've been hard for me all morning."

His voice was low and gravelly. "Have I?"

"Yes. I'm pretty sure." She peered at him. "Your stripes are starting. I like them very much, Odan."

"So ... shaving your legs would be sexy ... for when we have sex." Had there ever been a more confounding moment in his whole life? Well, Sunny asking him to join her and her hawk, yes, that was up there. But this. "I—That's—I'd—Yes." He took a deep breath. "Yes. All right."

She looked out at the tendrils of fog hovering over the water, and the light gray sky. She frowned. "It would be nice to do it here. But not now, I guess. With dingdanfins."

"Glindingshans. They're cold blooded. They won't be active yet."

"Great." She stood up and pulled her top off in one motion.

Her breasts were as succulent as they'd been yesterday in the jungle warmth. The mounds were a perfect mouthful, firm and plump but small enough to match her frame. Their tips were pink, with slight nipples that angled up. Fuck. He had to maintain enough control to shave her, with the memory of that wide, curvy mouth stretched around his cock.

"Should we use my soap?" she bent and opened her pack.

Her breasts shifted, and saliva jumped into his mouth.

"Vivienne." His voice was a complete snarl. He cleared his throat. "I have to tell you, shaving your legs will be ... intimate." His ability to find words had been going steadily downhill all morning.

She ducked out of the cave and stretched her arms, a small blanket in one hand, her soap in the other. Her hair danced across her shoulders as she looked back at him, smiling. "I'm ready to be your lover now, Odan. I'll freshen up at the pool, and you'll keep me safe from any creatures out there." Issuing that decree, she walked barefoot across the flat area, and sat on the edge. Easing herself over onto the uneven rocks below, she said, "And if you cut me, you have bodycraft. Maybe I can even practice my own bodycraft with your help."

He stood staring at the back of her head. She was fearless. He was humbled by her trust. His warskirt dropped to the bed, and he strode after her.

At the water's edge, she took off her pants. Folding them, she made a square. "Where should I sit?"

"Anywhere here along the edge. If you want to put your feet in the water, that's fine."

She put the pants down and watching her bare ass fold over to sit made his erection thicken an extra painful itch. Groundbear was totally fixated on her, quivering with eagerness. He strode into the water and knelt by her side.

She craned her neck around him. "Should I keep watch? How big are they?"

"No, this won't disturb them. The soap will flow downstream and they don't stir until midday." He had no intention of describing the plate-sized, toothed, warty creatures.

"The water's cold. Is it all right if I heat it a little?"

"Yes." He looked down at her legs. They were small, no bigger around than his arms, but perfect for her. The muscle was clear in her thigh, and her calf. Her lower leg had thin hair, with thicker hair starting midway up her thighs. The patch over her core was blonder than her hair, with a faint orange tint.

"Oh," she said sadly. "You don't have a knife."

"Yes, I do." He took the soap from the edge of the shore. While he lathered his hands, the water warmed to a balmy level around him. He wouldn't look at her in the morning mist, so pale, in his favorite place. No, he had to. He had to remember the vision of Vivienne in her first morning in the Wild, after their first kill, gifting him with this trust and her honesty.

He lifted her lower leg onto his thighs, and soaped it. He kept his motions brisk and efficient, firm, not lingering. When her leg was ready, he looked. She braced back on her hands. She was fingering some of the stones, finer pebbles here on this edge of the shore, and flicking tiny pieces of wet bark away with a slight frown. Her hair had settled into tight curls, not glossy, but the delicate frizz suited her.

"Princess."

She looked at him, a little irritation mark flashing between her brows. "Must you call me that?"

He nodded. "You are a princess to me. Your royalty rules by right of blood, for only the royals have the craft to power the scrying mirrors that link the Cities. Your mastery of firecraft is beyond any I've seen. It's far more impressive than talking through a mirror. I'm proud to be working with you."

She blushed, and he watched her mouth widen into a shy smile. "Thank you. You are the best skymage I've ever seen, although I suppose the Truxet have many powerful mages I've not met. You've spurred me to be better than I ever would have thought I could be. I hope to have many more successful hunts with you."

"I'm going to use my claws now. Don't be afraid. Don't look, if it will help. You need to stay very still. Relax. Let me move your leg for you."

She nodded, and her eyes went straight to his hands. "I won't move."

He drew on groundbear's spirit, and his body meshed with groundbear's on his command. His battleform's claws flowed out of his right hand. They were as long as his fingers, only thick, triangular and black, tapering to a needle point. Each of the razor edges of the triangular length was a blade in its own right.

He set a claw at the base of her leg, and drew it up along her skin with perfect control. Focusing intently, he did three slow sweeps before he was sure of the pressure. It had been a very long time since his father had showed him how to do this. He had to use a knife, and he'd made Odan practice on his own legs, with both knife and claw, then left him to practice on a paid woman. Remembering the laughter they'd shared in the attempts calmed him. The sight of his claws skimming over her skin, the act of learning her this minutely, every dip and rise, was powerful. His shoulders were tight at the responsibility, the utter gift, and the sheer excitement.

"Does this feel all right?"

"Yes. It feels strange, but it doesn't hurt." Her voice was steady, calm.

After he'd finished her shin and calf, she said, "I think I'm going to lie down. Is that fine?"

"Yes." He bent her leg and put her foot on his thigh so he could shave over her knee.

Her soap scented faintly of herbs. He liked it. It was womanly enough for his princess, but didn't overpower groundbear's nose. She laid the blanket behind her and lay back on the shale chipped beach.

Glancing at her, images of him coming down over her flashed through his skull. Swallowing, ignoring the pulse in his tight cock, he focused on her white skin, determined not to mark her once. Over the next half hour, he moved around her legs, rolling her over to shave up to her tight round ass, and rolling her back to do the fronts of her thighs. Spreading her legs wide, holding his breath, he carefully maneuvered his claws along the tissue paper skin at the juncture of her hips. His fingers held down her pubic bush gently as he slicked away the soft hair from her hollows there. He pooled water in his cupped hands and rinsed her. Her thighs glistened, shining and smooth.

Rinsing his hands, he asked huskily, "Shall I do under your arms?"

"All right."

"Just stay there. Your arms behind your head will be fine." He smoothed the soap over her with the backs of his fingers. Crouching down next to her body, he scooped the hair away, then shifted to her other side. "All done."

"No, you're not." She stretched, sighing. "Hmm. I can feel the air on me differently. My legs feel so long."

"Yes." She was color and life laid out against the gray stones, with the black water and gray sky around her.

"You didn't do between my legs. Can you manage that? You could show me how to do it with a knife."

He swallowed, closing his eyes to keep from snatching her up. "Vivienne... If I do that..."

"Yes, Odan. What do you think it's done to me, to lay here and feel your claws skimming every hollow of my body? It's insane, but I loved it. I'm ... soft inside." Her hand pulled from behind her head and skimmed down the light brown hair on his forearm. "I'm ready."

He didn't hesitate a second. "Spread your legs as far as you can."

The shale shivered as she shifted them wide. He knelt by her torso, facing her feet. Scooping the water she'd kept warm, he poured it over her mound until the hairs darkened. Then he took the soap, and lathered his hand. He set his fingers on her. She was warm, and firm. He worked his fingertips in gentle circles across the top of her pubic bone, and then down both sides of her until her hair glistened with soap.

Putting his claw beneath her belly button, he slicked the delicate trail there away, clearing a strip right down to the top of her lips. His breath, that he had fought to keep shallow and steady throughout, was sawing heavily from his aching jaw. By the Clouds, he would do this for her. The thought of his cock driving into her bare folds made heat seep from the tip of it. He skimmed the bald stripe wider. By the time he'd cleared her mound and the beginnings of her outer labia, he sounded like he'd been running all day.

"Are you all right, Odan?"

Her hand on his hip made him jump. She sucked in her breath. A tiny line of red bloomed on the tight sinew between her mound and her thigh. The sight shamed him.

"Shhh. I'm sorry."

"No, I'm sorry. I startled you. It's nothing."

"I'll make it right." He lowered his face and pressed his lips to the cut, sending a

pulse of healing that closed and sealed it. Hovering over her mound, his hands braced on either side of her hips, he closed his eyes. At this point he should be swamped in the scent of a woman. He'd know so much about her level of need. But Vivienne smelled like soap, and heat, and shale. He licked his lips and the tang of her blood lit his tongue.

Groundbear sat up and went berserk. Thrashing and leaping, twisting and ripping his heavy head from side to side, snarling and hissing. Odan stayed kneeling over Vivienne, rocking with his beastspirit's fury. After the initial onslaught, groundbear froze, plastered out flat to their mental ground, the fur down his spine razed in a bristling brush. Odan licked his lips again, and got a mouthful of sour soap. Confused, he watched groundbear on his internal mindscape, but the beastspirit still seemed to be waiting.

Sitting up, Odan looked down at Vivienne's spread legs, the water's edge lapping beneath her thighs. What was that? Why did his beastspirit react so strongly? Odan moved around between her legs, troubled, aching to plunge his body into hers.

He lifted each of her legs, bending them at the knees. "I need you to pull your knees up to your chest. Keep your legs wide."

Vivienne did so, rolling her ass up to him. Odan stared at her spread and presented folds, and couldn't help but lick his lips again. Still sour soap.

"Well. This is not a very inspiring position," Vivienne said wryly.

"I disagree."

He smoothed his hand along her crease. As his finger circled her anus, she tightened her cheeks. Watching the little hole dance almost made him go over, but he held himself back. Shaving the final, most secret places of her nearly brought tears to his eyes. With short, light, rasping strokes, he cleared the last of her hair, revealing the creamy white exterior and the deep pink interior. Her body was slender and small, but designed to cap his, to meet his strength. The mystery of how his thumpingly hard cock would find harbor inside her thrilled him. Her little bud glistened, tight and high, and her vagina was rimmed with slick white cream that didn't rinse away with the soap.

He couldn't smell her need, but he could see it. "You are so indescribably lovely."

"I want you," she breathed, her voice low and raspy.

And he could always rely on her to share her thoughts directly.

"But I'll manage to wait." She lowered her legs on either side of him and sat up.

"Thank you, Odan. That felt awkward, but special at the same time."

"What do you mean, 'wait?'" He growled.

"For you."

He almost choked. "You don't have to worry. I'm ready. I want you, too."

"Well, that's obvious. No, I meant for you to shave yourself."

He blinked at her. "Excuse me?"

"Well, I was thinking, why go to all that bother, when you've got that big thick bush still there, too? Not your legs, of course, unless you want to."

She wanted him to shave his cock's nest. He looked down at his rampant cock, so hard for so long it had turned a gruesome shade of magenta. He glanced at her mound, now hidden to him again, the bare lips looking fragile and vulnerable. He looked back up at her.

There was a softness to her face, and her lips seemed even plumper, full and dark. "It would please you?"

She looked at his cock, too. She nodded. "Yes, Odan. Please shave. Then we will

both be bare together."

He reached for the soap. Kneeling high on his knees, he pulled his cock down, *fuck that hurt*, and lathered up. Starting from the base of his cock, he skimmed with short flicks of his hand. He could feel the coarse strands being pared away, and his skin tingled where he'd cleared it.

"I wish I could do that for you."

She sounded so wistful, he hesitated, thinking of the knife in his pack.

"Never mind," she said briskly. "Hurry up. My knife is too far away."

He finished his groin, angling his legs with some difficulty.

"Good enough," she breathed. "I'm glad your balls are bare. That was nerve-wracking enough." She scooped up the water and splashed it on his belly.

He couldn't contain his gasp as the warm water ran over the bare skin. It felt nothing like water on the bare skin of his chest. It was like his skin had just developed hypersensation. She splashed him two more times, then lay back on her blanket, spreading her legs.

"Give me your hand," she ordered.

He held out his hand, stunned by her.

"Your other one!"

More slowly, he offered her his clawed hand. Struggling to focus, he blinked stupidly at it, but all he could feel was his cock, and all he could think about was Vivienne. Imperious, ferocious, fiery Vivienne. She shackled his wrist and pulled his arm forward, setting his hand in the middle of her chest. He sucked in his breath at the contact. Her skin was different here than on her legs. He could feel her breastbone, and his thumb caressed the lower swell of one breast. His claws were stark against her, reaching nearly up to her throat. He had to keep his fingers rigidly straight to hold the sharp edges up from her skin.

She moaned, arching, writhing. "Earthmother's ass, it's been so hard to lay still! Please, Odan, please, please come inside me."

Chapter Fourteen

Her hands latched onto his forearm, stroking down the skin to his wrist only to lift to his elbow and flow down him again. Her heels dug at the slight incline, as she thrust her hips up at him, her lips open wide. The sky had lightened enough so that her skin glowed in its pure whiteness, and his tan hand framed by her pink nipples tripped some trap in his brain.

Odan held himself still, knowing his control was broken. Knowing it would be disaster to join with Vivienne now. He never in his life had taken a woman without making her orgasm first. It was a form of control every Trux was taught. Sex was something they all craved, and they all feared, for sex was where a man's nature blurred with his beast's. As an alpha, Odan knew his burden of control was greater, and the trick worked for him, as a way to focus on the person he was with, and not his own sensation. For safety, and sanity, in the call of a woman's womb and the instinct that said if he just fucked her hard enough, a child could be his.

The thought of Vivienne swollen with his child made Odan go blind. The world went dark, and Vivienne's thighs brushed along the outside of his as she tried to pull him to her. "Please, please, please! *I need!* Odan! I need you!"

He wrapped his human hand around his cock. He did it because he needed pressure there. He needed something to hold him together. But then soft, scalding skin caught the tip of him. He thrust, and notched into something that made him snarl, guttural and feral.

Vivienne cried out, and he wanted to say, *Don't be afraid. I'll never hurt you.*

But then she shrieked, "Yes!"

His tip was sucked into a tight, wet grip. It was beyond him to pull away. His hand slapped down on the bony curve of her body, her hip, and he pulled sharply, dragging her weight down to cover half his length. His cock caught in a vise of sensation that burned his spine and the soles of his feet.

She wailed and snarled, "Deeper!"

He fell forward, his hand catching him as it buried in shale, his other hand sealed tight to her chest, his forearm lying down the center line of her body. Her legs wrapped around his thighs and ass, silky smooth, perfectly smooth, so warm. He thrust, driving his cock into the heart of Vivienne's flesh. The shock of his groin compacting with the wet, bare folds of her skin snapped his head back on his neck. He shouted. She screeched, writhing like wildfire under him, heat poring over his back like dancing sparks. They blended with the teeth of lava locked around his cock.

He withdrew and thrust in a small spasm, because he had to. The burning took his lungs. She clenched on him, and went stiff and rigid. He was dying, it hurt, it burned, it felt ecstatic, and he needed to reach the depths of her. His hips jerked, and he thrust again, grinding into her, forcing himself to fit into the secret spaces of this woman, his woman. When he came, the fire moved over his body in a cleansing wave. It was like wind. Why had he never realized before that fire was so much like wind? He loved wind. He loved to burn.

The cum shot from his cock, and it was the sharpest, sweetest pain ever. Sealing his hips to hers, it was like they melted together, nothing between them. His bone jerked

against hers. The echo of need whispered to him, trying to lure him deeper into the fire, but he wasn't in a form to go any farther. He heard both of their raw rasping breaths.

His eyes opened, and he was staring at a dried oak leaf. It was a red oak, the tips jagged. Turning his head, he stared down into the face of his lover. He'd called other women that before. It was a term he'd heard. He would never again call any paid woman "lover." He'd barely touched her, and Vivienne had taught him what the term meant. It was ... something he still didn't fully comprehend. But it fit. Vivienne was his lover.

A bead of sweat dropped from him onto her shoulder. He realized his lower body was draped across her, and lifted away, his cock seeping from her secret touch. He smelled blood, sharp and tart. Glancing down, he sucked in his breath. His claws melted into his hand, and he shifted his touch so that his palm covered the three shallow gouges below her throat. What the fuck had he been thinking! He could have pierced her clean through, and not known in the throes of that ... sex.

Her ribs rose and fell, and her misty green-powered eyes stared at him. Her lips were open. Her face and chest were flushed, and her nipples were stark points. He hadn't even touched them, let alone tasted them. He inhaled sharply, but she was cloaked. It hurt, not to smell her.

"Are you all right?" He pushed himself up with his one arm, and knelt.

The image of her sprawled in strawberries and cream radiance on the gray stones would be with him for the rest of his life.

"Are you?" She sounded hoarse.

He took her seriously, and examined himself. He was badly stunned, and as always with her, confused. He was upset and sated and pleasure was still sparking through his nerves. "I think so."

She blinked, transferred her gaze to the sky, and said, "Me, too."

He watched her, studying the bare folds of her lower lips, and the wash of cream across the brown leather skewed beneath her ass.

"Is it always like that for you?" she asked.

"No. Never."

"Oh."

She was quiet for a few more calming breaths, and then she sat up. "I'm hungry." She looked down. "Drat. My pants. I can't believe how many times I've washed these things already!"

Scrambling to stand, she lurched on the stones. He put out a hand to steady her, but she pulled away, laughing.

"Wow, weak knees." She took her pants out into the water, just to mid-calf, with the soap.

He stayed kneeling and watched her wash them, and herself. She shivered and jerked as her hand dipped between her legs. Sending his power out, he checked the area again, and sensed no significant life. A fuzzy could have floated past and fried them both when he was in her and he'd never have known.

Stepping onto the beach again, she looked at him oddly. "Are you sure you're all right?"

He stared at her, trying to hold this moment, to slow it down, and gather the previous ones back in. He wanted to reach out and wrap her in his arms. He wanted to put her on her hands and knees and fuck her all day. In his furs, in his bed. Even her sensibilities

were rubbing off on him. "Yes."

She shrugged, snapping out her pants. With a glance, steam rolled off them. The control it took to heat leather to drying point, without burning it, impressed him. He knew he couldn't do it so easily. She stepped in and pulled the pants up, twisting to lace up the back over her tailbone.

She paused and looked at him, nonplussed. "Oh! Well. Bare legs and no underwear will take getting used to." She smiled and winked. Lacing the pants up over her tummy, she moved toward the cove.

Watching her strong shoulders and the graceful line of her spine, seeing the flare of her shallow waist and her round ass in the pants, held him transfixed. Then she tossed her hair over her shoulder, and groundbear realized she was walking away. He lunged so hard in Odan he grunted, swaying with the psychic force of the beastspirit.

Odan looked down. Her blanket and soap were still on the shore. He was kneeling in cold water. Off to the side of the shaded part of the pool, he'd stashed the wrapped piece of scurlion meat from yesterday. He'd get it. If he could just remember how to walk.

Eventually, he managed to stagger to his feet with her things, get the meat, and pick out a large square rock. He took it all up to the balcony.

She handed him the waterskin, wiping her mouth. "Oh, I forgot those, thanks. What's for breakfast? We ate all of Charley's food last night."

"Breakfast is catkins and roast scurlion. Do you like leeks?"

"In small doses."

"All right. I'll be right back." Before he left, he set the mageheat spell on the rock, turning it into a mini cookery. He pulled on his warskirt and boots. Vivienne dressed in her tunic.

He went off into the birch grove and gathered leeks and catkins. By the time he made it back, the morning light had a firm hold above a sky solid with rolling gray clouds.

Testing the air, he decided that the rain was done for the day.

He dropped the catkins beside her. "Do you know how to peel those?"

"Yes. Catkins are common in Second City."

He stripped the leeks, judged the stone heated enough, and unwrapped the slab of meat they'd blasted yesterday. The pool had kept it fresh overnight.

"Is that safe to eat?"

"Yes." He looked up at her. "I'm going to use my claws. Don't be alarmed."

She blinked those misty green eyes at him, and he shifted his hand into battleform. The spread of his palm was wider, with thicker fingers. He sliced the scurlion slab into thin strips and laid them on the mageheat, where they promptly sizzled. Letting groundbear's presence go, he focused on the meat, not on her stillness. The silence between them didn't bother him. But the fact he'd yet to take her in his arms did. Should he be like her and just ask outright if he could hold her?

In a moment she went back to peeling the brown fluff from the stem of the grass, revealing the soft tender green center. He laid out a wide gorn leaf with his leeks, for her to add the catkin hearts to.

"When do you change into your beastspirit form?" she asked with stilted nonchalance.

He nudged the meat, rolling the long strips to rotate them. "When I want to."

She peeled a few more catkins. "And when is that?"

"Autumnal. When I'm bored, or restless. When I feel like digging. When I want to turn my brain off. When I'm sad."

She swallowed. Cleared her throat. "So, how much time do you spend as ... it?"

"Whole months go by without taking my beastspirit form, sometimes. Other weeks, I'm rarely human. It depends on what duties I'm assigned, if I have a training group for the Council, how I'm feeling." He rolled the meat again. Looking up at her downturned face, he asked, "Would you like to see my beastspirit?"

Groundbear lifted his muzzle, frustrated by her lack of scent, and getting mean about it. He was riveted on her, but Odan didn't know if it was just her mystery, or the nature of Vivienne.

"Ummm. Would that be safe?"

"Of course. I'm an alpha. I have excellent control over my beastspirit. It's true some warriors have little memory of what happens in their beastspirit form, but generally alphas have total recall. Regardless, no Trux would harm a woman in any of his forms."

"Never?"

Odan shook his head. "There are always exceptions, but generally those are caused by extreme stress, or unintentionally while under the duress of finding a potential mate." Odan sat on one ankle and looked out at the line of green moss that marked the trickling waterfall. Something in this conversation was poking at him...

His dream. Swinging his head in a low arc, he stared at Vivienne. She sat on the nest of ferns and blankets, her legs stretched before her as she worked the catkins over her lap. "That's why you take the scent-potion. You don't want to risk a Trux scenting you as his mate."

"I take the potion because I don't like being openly perused by any Trux who walks past me. My emotions are my own, as is my body."

"Any Trux who is lucky enough to scent a potential mate in the Cities is required to report it. A representative of ours approaches the woman's Guild. If she is not already attached, we have the right to request she consider adoption. But she has the right to refuse. You have no reason to hide—"

"This conversation was about your beastspirit. Not my choices."

He looked down at the meat. "You cheat the spirit of our people's alliance. Our warriors fight so hard to maintain hope and honor, dreaming of the possibility of children or a mate." Any man would be honored to have her as his Bonded.

"If I have no intention of abandoning everything I've known, then I don't see the problem in keeping my scent from some lovelorn Trux. I'd think it would be worse to know I was a match and wanted nothing to do with him."

"It's not. Knowing I had a potential mate who feared to join me would be infinitely better than this clawing isolation. The Trux Bonding is a blending of the Six in perfect balance. In your religion, it would be like a gift of the Sacred Couple. Every single mating of my people is confirmed with a souldance, which is more than you can say about the political and economic marriages of the Cities."

"How lovely for them." Her voice had gotten tighter and quieter with each exchange.

"You'd still have the right to say no. I don't understand—"

"These are done." She jumped to her feet and rushed out of the cave, to sit huddled on the boulder at the edge of the balcony, where she'd perched the evening before.

He stared at her slim back. Wrapping the catkin hearts and leeks in the leaf, he set it

on the lowered mageheat and draped the meat over the top of it. Licking his fingers, he walked up to her.

The desire to reach for her, to enfold her, became a need. Only his, it seemed. "Did you witness a forced adoption?"

She shrugged irritably. "I know of at least a dozen women forced to *volunteer*. Charley actually told me she was one."

"And did she tell you how happy she is with us? How Shad worships the ground she walks on, and how she's no longer bullied as she was in her Guild?"

Vivienne sat silent, arms tight around her middle. He stood next to her, struggling to understand this proud, powerful woman's decision.

After long minutes she stood and faced him. The bruises beneath her eyes were still there, and her mouth was a tight slash. "I'll think about it."

He nodded, still confused.

"But I want to sleep at River Mountain tonight."

"You could give lessons in determination."

"I have."

When she reached out for him, groundbear shuddered in happiness, and a shifting in his own heart surprised him. Her fingers were warm as she brushed over his nipple. His cock was folded in his shorts wrong, and pinched as blood surged. Unbelievable. The touch she offered him went a long way toward easing the need to reach for her.

"We won yesterday, but it was a mess. We have a lot of work to do." Her voice was husky, an apology.

The telltale sound of popping catkins clattered from the cave. "Breakfast is done. Ready to try roast scurlion?"

She wrinkled her tiny nose. "All right. Are we training back in the desert again today?"

She was maddening. He was impressed by her, and couldn't wait to become a more effective paired team. "No. Today, I think we need to be in the air."

* * * *

She had thought having to throw an accurate fireball alone in the forest yesterday a stressful test. Working with him in the desert, in a landscape as different as she could ever have imagined, had been distracting. Fighting in the air had been incredibly nerve wracking, but she hadn't really had the time to take it in. It was a moment that had consumed. After her horrible evening of taking back the Senate, it certainly had been a day for the ages. But nothing beat today. Today they drilled, over and over, on capturing and attacking a rock flown at the end of a fireproofed rope held by a hawk. Only this time, they were over the ocean.

Everyone had heard about the ocean. It was the myth and mystique and solace of the royal family, their reward for service. It was not, however, anything she'd ever thought to see. As vast as the sky, it seemed to be an unending mystery, making her feel tiny and fragile. More fragile than a woman who had been scraped bare and fucked in the open air of the wild. His criticism didn't help. He wanted faster, smoother, harder, more. She'd snapped back that he could do better to hold the target still and he'd coolly replied he wouldn't hurt the hawk helping them to satisfy her frustration. Yes, he'd brought two assistants this time, for added stress.

Then he'd had the gall to fly them in a complete circle. A total loop! At one point, her head had been pointed at the ground and her feet had been flailing in the air! She'd ripped into him ferociously. How dare he try to shock and terrify her! He was just trying to make her back down, she knew, and she refused to give him the pleasure of knowing she'd wanted to puke. By midday, she could encircle in flames, mesh with his cap of air, throw fireballs for Odan to toss, and hold interior heat, all with a moving target, in midair.

Now she was perched on a smooth, white log on the beach, worn into lovely flowing lines, and having lunch of fresh fruit, cheese, and bread still warm from the oven. Her feet were anchored in the familiar small stones of a shore, and the ocean mesmerized her into chewing her food too long, in time with the waves rolling in endless pulses.

"Take your pack off for lunch," Odan said quietly as he sat on the dry shore near her. "Rest."

"No, thank you. I'm fine." She put the cheese rind down by her feet. Looking over at the watercoaster she said, "What do you think of our tactics?" The young warrior had a fox-like face and she hoped Odan hadn't told him about her dress with the fur cuffs. He'd watched them from the beach, a safety partner in case anybody landed in the water.

He shrugged sleek shoulders. "You are certainly fearsome together. But every battle is unpredictable. Beyond containing it, the internal burning should be directed at its eyes and wingtips, and that you can't practice." His hair was the deep, warm brown of old wood.

"Why won't you take that backpack off?"

She ignored Odan. Vivienne leaned over to the blonde man who had become a lovely tan hawk capable of lifting surprisingly large stones. "What about you? Do you have any suggestions?"

"Don't ignore me. Do you really not trust us with your belongings?"

"The only thing—" The hawk began to answer her, but she was so incensed she turned on Odan, the big hulking block on her right.

"You mean, like yesterday when you threw it across the desert and ruined my things?"

"I apologized for that. I won't throw it again, or force it from you. But you can't just take along anything you want. Wine is heavy and bulky."

"Maybe I'm protecting"—*a guilty conscience*—"a powerful weapon," she sniffed. "One I forgot to use yesterday."

She took a last large, vicious bite out of her peach. The motion was ruined as sticky juice ran down her chin.

"Then I would remind you we are allies. Put the backpack down and relax."

"No." She put the peach pit down on the cheese rind.

"You know, my uncle's mate makes wonderful peach pie." The watercoaster tried to offer some personal anecdote to soften the climate but she couldn't take it.

The ocean, the flying, the way he managed her fire, it was overwhelming. And it was time for her dose. A dose she very much feared was redundant at this point.

She stood up abruptly. "I'm sorry. I need to go relieve myself." Gesturing into the bushes she asked, "Is it safe?"

"Yes, of course," the watercoaster said.

She looked at Odan, and even though his jaw was clenched and he stared at the

horizon, he nodded.

She went into the bushes, irritated she couldn't just take the other warrior's word for it. The bushes were dry and scraggly, woven through with tall whispering grass. There was sand here, and she felt like all their eyes were on her as she awkwardly scrambled and tottered up the rise at the back of the beach. Walking carefully over the detritus strewn up there, pausing to feel the waxy leaves of one bush and the razor-roughness of another, she eased farther from them. She peed. It ran over her ass, because there was no hair to direct it. Shivering at the sensation of air moving over her sensitive folds that ached from this morning's brief but cataclysmic joining, she dried herself with a puff of power.

Pulling open her pack, she looked at her remaining bottle of potion. Amriet's passionate arguments about denying possibility came to her. Odan's drawn brows and disappointed silver gaze came to her. The collared Water Girl's dazed blank, black stare as she singsonged "*He'll strip away your layers, even your fire...*" came to her. That had always been the most terrifying. Some Beast could have the power to take away the one thing that was her very heart. Impossible.

With a shaking hand, Vivienne opened the bottle. *You only have a few more days' worth. How will you get back to a City to buy more?* What if the Guild had already destroyed all stores of it as an outcome of the infiltration? Had Roge solidified his power? Had Shella begun the painful process of proving every Guild member remaining free innocent? Would Amriet stay away from her cousin?

She put the glass opening to her lips. The Guild wasn't her path anymore. She didn't have time to make more out here. It had become a farce. Odan had known her scent was hidden. *You've become like a toddler crouched behind a ball insisting no one can see her. Either grow up and put the ball aside, or someone will come along and take it from you anyway.*

She lowered the glass, breathing hard. If she didn't hide her scent, a clawed man would find her and claim her, and take her to live among caves. Could she exist like that? Was it Odan? Something in her thought maybe she could do it, if it was him. But they all had claws. It could be the hard-eyed watercoaster, or the clearly disapproving hawk. It could be any of the wolves who had slashed at the beebee's body in the forest yesterday, or some stranger she hadn't met. Vivienne tossed her head back and swallowed a thick mouthful, once, twice.

Capping the bottle with a cold hand, she refused to give in to the swirling nausea. Ten years ago, she'd been part of collaring an innocent watermage, sending the girl to the cellars of the Royal Mage Guild, while she herself gained a promotion to the High Guild. Vivienne had hidden then, knowing what she'd done was wrong, as was her deceit today.

Skyfather saw all, and Earthmother forgave all, and the Sacred Couple would not be denied. At the most, she had a few days more to face her past and future. She just needed more time to prepare. Staggering through the sharp grass toward the sticky breeze on the ocean, she came out onto the clattering stone beach.

The hawk was saying, "The eyes are sure to be shielded, being so near the beak."

But the watercoaster argued over him, "They're mostly water, so shielded or not, they're vulnerable."

The hawk flung his apple core into the sea, shocking her. The sea was too special to have trash flung into it. "It's the wingtips, I tell you. That and the tail."

Vivienne crouched gingerly on the sandy stones, trying not to cringe at the damp strands of seaweed and broken shells. "I think you're right. We hit the one yesterday on its tail and it definitely didn't like that. It's just a matter of being accurate enough."

She got a bland look from Odan.

"I'm not blaming you!"

The conversation settled around her, and she marveled at the endless open horizon, glinting so bright in the clear sun. Her pack was lifted from her bloodless grip and set aside. Glancing at Odan, she noted how he seemed such a quiet, solid force compared to the other men. He was the most grounded skymage she'd ever met, yet could fly the highest. Then again, he was a burrowing groundbear. He had two natures to draw from. He pushed an apple into her hands. It was tart, a bit too early in the season for them. She bit into it, eager to erase the taste in her mouth, trying not to feel she'd betrayed him.

After the conversation had fallen silent with a general consensus that the tactics should be contain, wingtip attack, eye attack, Vivienne cleared her throat. "Has there been any news on the Truxet investigation into the darkmages' presence among the wildlings outside the City Walls?"

Silence.

"Vivienne," Odan sighed, "darkmages want to control the Cities. Your conviction that they are working in the outer Cities doesn't mesh with their goals."

"Of course it does. They want to remain hidden. You police the worst of the violence, but the wildlings are largely ungoverned. It is the perfect breeding place for darkmages. Think of how many people they could steal away, and there's no one to notice or care as long as they deal their violence somewhere else."

"The outer Cities have existed as long as the City Walls themselves. We'd know by now if they were the source of darkmages."

"Haven't you ever wondered why those areas are called 'The Dark'?"

Odan opened his mouth to argue with her, but the hawk spoke up. "That's a good point."

Vivienne beamed at him. "Thank you." She turned to Odan. "I asked you to look into this report, and you said you would. Were you just humoring me?"

"I was a bit busy yesterday." He sounded peeved.

"Well, how lucky that we have no plans for this evening. Surely we can stop off at River Mountain and learn the answer to my silly little question?" She batted her eyes at him over her syrupy words.

"You never give up."

The watercoaster chuckled, and Odan glanced at him.

He shrugged. "It's just funny hearing that come from a groundbear. Stubborn persistence is what your Clan is all about."

Odan scowled, toeing the rocks at his feet. "I want one more perfect drill before we rest."

The dark watercoaster looked over at Vivienne. "Really? Don't you think you've practiced enough today? You should have several days at least before the next attack."

Odan stood. "We'll drill until we can roll it out flawlessly, because no true attack will be anything like what we did before, or do here today. I had a sense of urgency yesterday, and it faded last night. But this morning it's come back. They'll know we stopped yesterday's beebie. They'll break the pattern, hoping to catch us off guard."

Vivienne rose next to him, dusting off her butt with a grimace. "Well, then they won't. We'll be ready." Smiling into Odan's serious square face, she cooed, "Even if we're resting at River Mountain." Feeling daring for touching him in front of the other men, she curled one of her arms through his. "Ready to fly now. Take me up, skymage."

* * * *

Pretar held the slave's body down and rolled in the energy of his pain and humiliation. It was beautiful, the way control begat more control. The ancient ways were indeed the secret to personal power. And anyone with personal power could affect those around him. The man gave up fighting, so Pretar pulled out of his ass and slashed open his back, gnawing at the flesh there. His dinner bucked and twisted, but the chains kept him in place. The sweet, wrenching thickness of feeling his own soul grow with the pain he took went on and on.

When the slave passed out, Pretar moaned in disappointment. Rage flashed through him and he beat the man's head against the floor. He didn't revive, so he stood up and kicked him in the ribs. Useless. This slave was only a week old, but since they had so few now, they were being used more quickly. Pretar focused on the slave command and mentally summoned one of the bound humans they'd captured. He paced, wiping at his face, until a woman scurried in.

"Get him out of here," Pretar ordered.

She pulled at the man's feet, and Pretar released the shackles on the slave's wrists and ankles. Eventually she managed to haul him away. Pretar threw himself onto his divan. None of his usual experiments drew him lately. It just wasn't the same since they'd lost both of their last hawks to play with. Nothing could withstand pain play like a Beast. Now, of course, the Beasts couldn't be brought back to the Fortress to torment, since Thad had triggered the Fortress' inherent defense. What would be the point of dragging one of their muscled carcasses back here just to have it instantly die the second it touched Fortress earth?

Standing, he paced again, his mind full of how it would be so *easy* to just grab some Beast guard out of a City and kill him in the woods. Such a delicious, shivering need filled him, to take all that power for himself. Thad's order to keep away from all Beasts in every regard was cowardly. It was that of a boy who still saw them as the gods that had driven his pathetic mother to suicide. Pretar could practically feel the younger, more powerful man cracking under the weight of his insanity as the plan came to fruition. A dozen years in the making, and that foaming fop endangered them all with his hesitation.

The Beasts had their scent now that the hawk had escaped. It wasn't the time to hunker down and wait for the random groups they sent against them through their damn stone. Now was the time to seize control, and expose the stress cracks they'd carefully carved all these years.

Puffing alerted him that Russ was coming down the hall toward Pretar's suite. Pawing at the thick cloth-of-gold door covering, Russ gasped, "Pretar! Are you up?"

Up. He'd been up for hours, exasperated that he'd had no news of Second City's Mage Guild from any of his sources. "Yes, yes."

Russ trundled in, his round face flushed and his glasses smeared with what could be blood. "They killed another one of the lizard birds. I'm pretty sure, since they've never not come back at dawn if they were delayed the day before."

Pretar squeezed the bridge of his nose, and fought to breathe through his rage. Russ was his ally, an important if irritating one, who saw the way of things with Thad's declining leadership. "I *told* him to start sending them in pairs. I told him that after they killed the last one."

"Thad doesn't listen. I'm not even sure he can actually hear us anymore."

Pretar looked sharply at Russ' nervously bobbing form, but he wasn't making a joke. "Does he know?"

"I was just in their cells because I like to make them fight. It's not like anyone checks on them, except you."

Pretar was the one who released them on their hunts, cycling them around. They were excellent agents of chaos, and it really fried him how Thad was letting them just get picked off one by one.

"I'm going to check some things. I'll tell Thad about the loss."

Growling, Pretar pushed past Russ and stalked to the meeting room, and through it to the staircase that led down to the underground lake room. Keeping his strides steady, he stormed across the stone walkway over the water to the glossy red polished stone in the center of the island. He slapped his hands onto the stone, and pushed his darkcraft through it. The world pitched under his feet and his knees sagged as he traveled an awesome distance in a heartbeat.

He steadied himself, the strike of pleasure that he'd usurped the Beasts' hold on sifting through space equal to the stabbing drain on his energy. He strode down the brick walkway to the ladder leading up into the alleys outside Fourth City. He burst into the garbage heap hiding the entrance, and stormed down the thin aisle to the secret door in the wall of the tavern. Once inside, he cloaked himself and eased through the crowd to the nearest street corner.

"Hag," he commanded.

The scarred, bony woman who huddled around the trash barrel spitting green sparks of mageheat hunched when she saw him, turning slightly away. It was half cower, half urge to run, and he smirked at her.

"Yes, Hag. You'll stay and answer."

"Me name's Pru," she mumbled.

"Was there an attack of a lizard bird on the City yesterday?"

"No."

"Today?"

"No."

Pretar stood in the midday summer heat of the stinking street and breathed through his frustration. One of their last nine birds, lost, and not even an attack? Perhaps it had gone off course, and attacked another City. Whirling, he scuttled into the shadows, cloaking himself as he journeyed by redstone to each of the Cities.

He saved Second for last, and went to the hassle of contacting his unreliable Main Gate guard regarding the Mage Guild. Various Mages had been moving around the City to hold private meetings with other Guilds, and whispers of plague were flitting, but there was no news.

Back in the Fortress, Pretar was so upset he beat another slave to unconsciousness. They were no fucking good unconscious, but getting them there powered him back up. He sought out Thad. Pretar breathed into his power, keeping it ready, dreading this

meeting.

He beat on the padded black silk covering Thad's door.

In a few minutes, he heard dragging footsteps come to the door, but they stopped on the other side.

"Thad, it's Pretar."

The silk drew back, revealing a handsome young blond in his prime. Pretar had always loathed the fact his own thin, craggy face would never be as respected as Thad's, simply from an accident of parents. Thad stood there, holding the silk, and stared coldly at Pretar. He wasn't even to be invited in?

"I have news. We need to talk."

Thad stared, and Pretar lowered his gaze, seething. He only did it because Thad had so many spells he could send via sight, but it would come across as the respect Thad craved.

Because he was staring at the floor, he saw the woman. Chained by her neck on a handspan of chain to Thad's ankle, her face peered up at him, dazed, from the ground. She was middle-aged, and no slave he had seen. Swallowing his anger that Thad had claimed a new slave and not shared her, Pretar winked. She didn't react.

"You sent out the lizard bird yesterday?" Thad spoke slowly, as if drunk. He never touched wine but was possible he was drunk on pain.

"Yes. It died before reaching its target. I don't want to wait five days to send out the next on your schedule." Thad had refused to tell them how he chose the dates and locations of the attacks. He'd insisted there were reasons behind it. "I think we should release all eight, one for each of the Cities plus the Farm."

Thad stroked his free hand down the ruby and amethyst robe he wore. "It did not die. It was killed. It burned. I could feel my pet burn."

Pretar stilled. The implication was immediate and obvious. Yesterday a Beast had taken Second City's Flame Curate out of the City Walls. He'd tested her on the wildlings. And then he'd taken her hunting *their* lizard bird.

"How wonderful your connection to them still runs true." He hoped the death had reverberated back onto the man and sucked some of his power away. "Shall I release them all today?"

"We are going to dance in the ashes of every weak human who ever favored the Beasts with a polite word, when we control the Cities. When our plan has come to harvest, their women will lick our feet while we rape them." He turned and walked farther into his room, dragging the woman's limp body as if she weighed nothing. The cloth fell across the door.

Pretar worked his lips in frustration. Same old, same old. Standing there, Pretar calculated if it would mean he would have to duel Thad if he released the birds without his permission. Signy would back Thad, Russ would back him, but Sverre was an unknown. If only he'd had time to press for Andalay's addition to their dark council! Could she possibly be behind a plague at Second City? That would be a wonderful reference in her favor, if a foolhardy risk of exposure.

The silk whipped up, startling him. Thad sat in an upholstered green velvet chair. His legs were splayed, revealing he wore nothing beneath the robe, and the woman's short link of chain was now in his hand. He tried to haul her to her knees, but her head kept lolling and her spine was slack. Pretar eyed the silk, impressed by the telekinesis. Thad's

control was still excellent.

"Release three pets. All target Fourth City. Two fly out in a pair twenty minutes after the first." Thad rested his elbow on the arm of the chair, and propped his chin in his hand, staring morosely at the woman slumped half-sitting against his leg. "If they bring back three new toys, you can have this one." He twitched at the chain, and the woman flopped like a broken puppet.

Pretar fought not to sneer. The older slaves still had more fight than this one. Some humans broke too easily. "I'll go do it now." He turned to go.

"Pretar."

He looked over his shoulder into the sumptuously appointed room.

"If all three die, you die."

Pretar glared at him, and left. How dare he threaten him like a common acolyte? Besides, it was an empty threat. The bitch might burn one, but she wouldn't be able to burn three.

Chapter Fifteen

Something had happened in the bushes. When she'd come out, her face had been pale and her cheeks bright red, and she wouldn't look at him at first. Something was in that Hail-benighted pack. It had taken him long enough to figure out it wasn't lack of trust in him that kept her clinging to it. It was her own guilt. She'd drunk out of a glass bottle yesterday in the desert that smelled of wine. But last night, she'd used a waterskin dyed and painted with flowers that had also smelled of wine. Even though he knew she still had the bottle from the desert. She could just be saving wine for later. But he didn't think so. He thought he'd been an idiot and the scent-masking "spell" could very well be a liquid taken internally, instead.

As he walked through the halls of River Mountain, Vivienne bouncing perkily alongside him now that she was getting her way, he asked himself, *So do you take it from her?* If he didn't, he'd be missing a key opportunity in the war against the darkmages. If he did, she'd never forgive him. What would have been an easy decision two days ago was not today.

He stopped as they came to the great plaza, the massive cavern where most commerce took place. She looked at him curiously, her hair still tucked up in the combs she'd put in that morning, but completely fuzzed with loose tendrils that had pulled free. "When you were here before—" for the mission where she walked into probable death with a team of powerful, single Council warriors... He had to stop and breathe through the undulating fury groundbear set off inside him. *What are you doing*, he growled back at it. *We have no right to her*. "How long were you here?"

"I was here two days before we entered the Fortress, and I was taken back early the morning of the second day afterward. I had many interviews regarding my recollections, and I wanted to attend Burban's funeral. It was the only one I went to, because I was so upset, and I'm sorry about that now."

He nodded. "He did not die in vain. None of them did. Every attack risks loss, but every attack leads to new knowledge." He had gone to three of those funerals himself, and found them painful indeed. The worst had been Fynn's.

She looked out across the busy expanse of tents and carts. When she looked back at him, he sucked in his breath to see her tears. The mist clung to the silvery trail as it wound across her face. "I know the power of knowledge. But wondering why I lived when they did not is hard." She tightened her grip on the straps of her backpack, her hands up near her shoulders. "I think the Sacred Couple had use for me at my Guild. Especially having lived through the roundup and exposure of our own nest of darkmages. I'm so grateful I was able to be part of that. And now I'm here again, able to bring down more of their power base."

"Did you get to see the river while you were here? Or the lake below?"

"I saw the River from the steps of the arches." She gestured to the trio of pointed arches leading to the great river bend curving past River Mountain.

He nodded. "After dinner tonight, I'd like to take you to the lake." He wondered what she would think of the dark, black waters, with rocky spikes and a damp sand beach. Watching her face fill with awe and peace today at the ocean had stirred him. He wanted

to share all the special places with her.

"Odan!" A voice called from one of the balconies jutting out all across the walls of the large plaza. A brown-haired figure waved frantically.

Pleasure bloomed in him. He waved back, but calling across the expanse was not his way. He ignored the people who turned to stare at the skymage champion. Shifting subtly to stand before Vivienne, he watched his cousin bound from the balcony, only to reappear as a blur rushing down the steps to the plaza floor. As Shad wove toward them at an eager jog, an incredible smile on his face, Odan's heart cramped. Was Charley pregnant? His cousin, mated, already so far beyond him in happiness, a beloved member of the Clan, and now he would have this new joy, while Odan clung to his training and his responsibilities? He mentally slapped himself. *Be happy. You are happy.*

His cousin's smile was infectious and he was smiling in return as Shad came up to them. Vivienne stepped up to his side.

"Shad." Odan opened his arms. It had been over two weeks since he'd seen the brother-of-his-heart.

"Odan! Great news!" Shad stepped up and slapped his long arms around him hard.

Groundbear rolled in ecstasy. *Clan. Pack. Together.* Odan tried not to be pitiful in the way he clung hard for a moment, his nose buried behind Shad's ear. Shad never begrudged Odan's need. He stayed in his arms until Odan released him.

"Shad, this is Vivienne. We are sharing the beebee duty."

Shad eyed her with open speculation, as had the two warriors this morning. After all, she smelled of him. How many people knew Vivienne was masking her scent?

"You've been to the ocean today?" Shad asked her. "How did you like it?"

The Truxet were well aware of the human infatuation with the sea.

She beamed at him. "It was tremendous. Very inspiring, and something I'll remember forever. I never dreamed I would ever see the royal comfort."

"Of course my fire princess should see it." Odan grinned at her when she stared at him. It was impossible not to reach out and brush her arm, a stroking caress reminding him of claws on pale skin with a backdrop of shale chips. To his delight she ducked her chin in a shy feminine way.

Odan suddenly had the overwhelming urge to camp with her on the southern dunes, where the water was like silk, and the sand like powder. Unfortunately, there were the large star crabs, and then there was the dyclo fish in the shallows. But still, she would see stars as never before, and he wanted to show them to her.

Shad nodded, but clearly he was bursting. "Odan, you will never believe it." He paused, breathing deep.

Odan kept his smile on his face, his heart kicking hard. "I won't if you don't tell me."

"Gren is pregnant!" Shad pumped his hand in the air.

Such insane relief poured through him he felt guilty. Oh, yeah. He'd forgotten.

"He announced it today! The women were all screeching with excitement, and Koz cried!"

"Koz cried?" Odan boggled. Koz was an elder so crotchety he made Gren look cheerful.

"Yes! And danced! Charley likes the woman. It's the paid woman he favored last Autumnal. We all knew he had declared sole patron's rights to her when he brought her to the Burrow, but this is such a surprise! Tomorrow night we feast! You have to be there!"

Odan nodded. "Yes, of course." It wasn't for him to tell Shad he'd been asked to stand for Kalani, although the urge to share sat low in his jaw. Shad and his father would both know what an enormous shift it revealed in Gren's thinking.

"I mean, I can't believe you wouldn't be invited. All the alphas should come home for this!" Shad looked awkwardly stricken, as if he'd overstepped his bounds urging Odan to come when everyone knew of the strain between him and Gren.

"I'll come. Definitely."

He nodded, relieved. "Good, good. I'll tell our moms." He looked at Vivienne and smiled kindly. "And congratulations on yesterday's hunt. The word has buzzed through the Clan. Everyone is so proud of you."

His throat thickened, touched that the Clan still remembered him outside of Autumnal. He nodded. "We did it together."

Vivienne wore a polite smile. She looked up at him with those power-crazed eyes. "We make a good hunting team."

And right at that modest moment, Odan knew. *He wanted this woman.* Not just tonight. Not just as a powerful partner. Not as a curiosity who lit his beastspirit. He wanted the peaks and valleys, the snaking ravines, the rocky cliffs and deep pools that were Vivienne, ex-Flame Curate of Second City, High Mage Guild, scent-masked, cloaked-eyes and all. And the want wasn't going to fade for a long time. How many beebees were there? He flashed cold at the thought of protecting her through an endless line of battles, while at the same time such an endless supply would keep her with him.

Vivienne's smile faded. "Odan ... your stripes," she whispered.

He glanced at Shad, who was watching him with gleeful speculation.

Shad cleared his throat. "Yes, an effective hunting pair, clearly."

Odan lifted his lip at his annoying tweet of a cousin. "Indeed. We were just on our way to a bath—"

"Odan!"

Gritting his teeth, Odan pivoted to the new person screaming for his attention across the plaza. Seeing it was the mountaincat on guard duty at the sifting stone they'd just come through, he frowned. "Trouble." Reaching for Vivienne, he jogged to meet the sprinting warrior.

Her fingers threaded between his, so warm, small and soft. Her stride lengthened to its widest as she ran beside him.

"A sighting. Two! Coming over the great swamp, but angling north." The man turned and began to run back with them, slowing to keep to Vivienne's pace.

Odan let his hate roll through him. *Two. Vivienne. They would do this.* "Do I use the coast or the old cypress stone?"

"I'd use the cypress, although the call came in through the coast."

"Six go with you! Burn them!" Shad called, dropping back.

Odan waved a hand, but as they headed into the tunnel leading toward the sifting stone's room, he was surprised at the people running to gather nearby.

"Skyfather protect you!" One woman called.

"Fly true!" A man wearing an owl on his vest shook his fist.

"Go, go, go!" Chanted a group of sandcat younglings.

"Let their blood feed the earth!" Roared an older warrior.

Another woman made the sign of protection as they ran past.

Glancing at Vivienne, he saw her face was composed, almost blank. It was the look he'd seen when he first met her. He was reminded she had been a leader in her own right for years. She nodded to him coolly. He called himself an ass for getting an erection.

At the stone, a pack of wolves waited, milling, snarling, their hackles fluffed.

"Out of the way!" The guard ordered, and they parted.

Odan slammed his hand on the rock and jerked Vivienne tight to his side, his arm latched on her hip. *Six keep her safe. Aid us now.* He pulled on the power of his race, braided the elements, trusted, let himself flow into the sifting, and took them into the swamp with the war cries of his people echoing in his ears.

*

When they landed, Vivienne's heart was in her throat. *Two!* All those people, depending on them to stop the madness. *Two!* A City depending on them, Burban's family, Odan's friend Fynn to avenge. *Two!*

Odan looked down at her, his stripes black now on his face. "Big breath."

She nodded, and he bent his knees, and pushed. It was silly, but she jumped with him, and then they were in the air, swirling past dead branches dangling delicate swaths of fluff. This forest was not dark green like near her City, nor the bright green of yesterday's battle. This one was clearly gray-green, with black water shining between the much sparser trees.

It was clear to her this was a challenge from the darkmages. There shouldn't have been another attack for days. They knew the beebie had been downed, and they were angry. Delight curled through her. Trusting him to hold her, she took her arm from his waist and shrugged out of her backpack, holding it with an iron grip as he rocketed them forward so hard her eyes teared.

Struggling to open it, she fumbled the wooden box's latch open and grabbed two of her burrs in her palm. Their delicate iron spikes pricked at her hand, but didn't puncture it. She twisted to get the backpack up onto her second shoulder, when his roar made her jerk.

There they were. One was perhaps three of their bodylengths in front of the other. They were gray, and spiked, leathery, scaled, and flying much faster than the one yesterday. Their necks were held in an S-curve, and their beaks shone, as if polished. She wouldn't put it past the arrogant bastards.

She held up the burrs so that Odan could see them. "These need to attach to their body!"

He'd slowed, and her feet hung in the empty air. She fought not to cling to him. His wind sheered out of the sky at the first beebie, which staggered hard to the left, faltering toward the trees.

"Odan! These are like a fireball! Take them!" She threw them toward the beebies, hoping he wasn't so lost in bloodlust he didn't understand. At least today he wasn't misshapen in his battleform like he'd been yesterday.

He grabbed them and pushed them directly at the beebie, who was screaming out a rough, high, grating wail of rage. Vivienne called her fire and encircled it far faster than she had yesterday. With the ease of their practice this morning, Odan's air came down on her corral and capped it. She threw three fireballs for him, and then began the more intricate spell to ignite the burrs. Her hands wove and her fingers stretched. She pushed the spell, watching as the three struck at each wingtip and the tail of the beebie. It

thrashed, flying hard but gaining only a short distance with each wingbeat. He was driving it toward the trees, and she could tell his increased accuracy had sheared the tip of one wing. Then her burrs ignited.

With a deep concussion and a spray of blood, the beebee fell into the trees, one wing clearly broken, entrails sagging from its belly. But it wasn't dead. Its wings smacked up great sprays of water. Vivienne tossed three more fireballs, but gasped when Odan threw them at a different angle. Ripping her gaze from the circle of fire lighting up the plants as the first creature flailed among the trees, Vivienne squeaked in shock. The second beebee had flown past them on the right.

"Hold the fire on the first as long as you can. The wolves will be here soon."

Odan flew them forward toward the second beebee so fast her head snapped back and she bit her tongue. Vivienne shrugged her pack to hook on one arm, fumbling to get more burrs.

"Leave the fucking pack!" Odan snarled.

"I'm getting more burrs!" She shouted. But her hands couldn't find the box among all her things.

The wind pulled at the beebee, but it also blew so hard in their own faces she squinted. The beebee flew on, and he took them higher. Much, much higher.

Vivienne cried out. "There! A City!" Her heart stopped to see the glowing green walls. It seemed so close. Too close. They were pink stone, with a flat wide walkway jutting out on all sides. This must be Fifth City!

The bird was still struggling on. Trying to hold the fire on the first bird, she set up a circle around this one, but it was shallow, barely as tall as the bird, which snapped at her flames.

"No, forget the corral. I've got to get in front of it. It's much harder for me to pull back on it than to push it from the front." He jerked them forward, and she moaned as pain shot down her jaw. Blood was tart and metallic in her mouth.

She fired fireballs continuously at it, but they either dissipated or splashed off to sizzle into the water, igniting the stark bare branches of various trees like candles. Power pinched and ached inside her ribs. "I've got to let the other one go!"

"I already have."

How nice of him to tell her. She let go of the forced fire burning the first beebee and focused on the eyes of the one before her, trying to ignore the fact Fifth City was now so close she could make out tiny figures scurrying around on the rampart. They were coming down, barely in front of the beebee, maybe five bodylengths above it, when it angled its beak up at her and looked at her.

It was like she'd been slapped. It saw her! Abruptly, it changed its angle. Where Odan had kept it to a slower crawl when they'd faced it, it was able to fly easier on a slope.

"Fucking Ash!" Odan roared, and wind tore her hair loose to blind her.

Grabbing a handful by the side of her head, she tossed three fireballs for him, and concentrated again on heating up those beady black eyes. The fireballs dropped. Odan hadn't picked them up! The forest ignited in a wind driven whoomp, heat crackling beneath her. Taking the moment to douse the fire made her grit her teeth in frustration.

The eyes were entirely too clear to her now. It was so close! It reared its head back and screamed, a throatier cry than the first. And for some reason, Vivienne was abruptly

terrified. She screamed, high and short. Her hip had been plastered to Odan's, his arm tight to her, but now her hands scrabbled at his shoulders, one reaching behind him and one in front.

Winding one leg around his, she clung to him and screamed, "Go!"

He took them higher, up to the height they'd been before. The wind still tore at her hair. They were perilously close to being caught in Odan's own attack.

Odan's hands pulled at her arm across his chest. He cupped the back of her head and shouted over the wind. "Vivienne! I love you!"

She stared at him, mouth gaping, gasping for breath against the massive rush of air he poured. Shocked to feel her heart leap, she stared at his striped, stark face and thought he was the most magnificent man she'd ever met.

"You've got to trust me!" His hands were on her shoulders now, pulling her from under his arm, pulling her ... *away* from his body.

She cried out, struggling to grab at his arms. They'd gone even higher in the three heartbeats since the last time she'd looked, and now a glance at Fifth City showed her she could see the buildings inside it, like a dollhouse.

"Vivienne! Cross your legs! Hold your elbows!"

Her gaze flew to him and she couldn't breathe. His hands were forcing her arms to cross, and she grabbed her elbows out of instinct, hugging herself.

Her legs flailed as he held her away from his side, and she sobbed, "Odan!"

"Flame Curate! Cross your legs!" Wind whistled so loud it seemed to come from inside her brain.

The air was cold and damp. She looked up at his locked, square jaw. Odan, the beast warrior who had so tenderly handled her body this morning. Odan, the last man in all the world she should want. She saw the bird straining to catch them, coming up below him. Anything Odan needed, she would provide. She crossed her legs, her thighs seizing at the dangling feeling of being over air.

He pulled her in and kissed her, a hard press of lips. "Trust me, princess," he whispered against them, and then he was gone.

She screamed, one straining ache of horror, alone in the sky. The bird seemed to answer her, and then she was flying. She spiraled around, so she faced the ground, and soared, still wailing, toward the City Walls. Where had he gone? Was he going to fight the beebee himself?

Craning her neck, all she saw was the beebee, flying hard after her. Grunting, she rolled her body so that her back was to the ground. She focused, and finally seated her heat in its eyes. It slowed immediately, thrashing its head.

She laughed, and thought, *Fry, you fucker*. It struggled forward, but lost height, and she carefully drew up a small, powerful fireball. Aiming at its tail because that was an easier target than its wings, she fired.

It hit, raining flesh and bits down with a puff of smoke. It fell farther, quite a distance below her, and her speed slowed as well. She focused on its eyes. Her lip split and bled in a stinging strike when her wide smile stretched across her wind-chapped face. When the eyes popped, spurting fire, she shouted a victory roar. The thing cocked its head, almost as if it could hear her, and worked harder to fly up toward her again.

And that was when the tornado came out of the swirling gray clouds that had formed. She knew it was a tornado because she'd read about the fierce storms that troubled

Seventh City. It was both triangular and spherical, and writhed like a fish out of water. It was huge, easily the height of the Guild compound, and as she stared, it grew wider, and deeper, and stretched. When the tip angled suddenly and speared the beebee, it was whirled and flung through the air like a toy. Pinwheeling away back toward the south, its body flopped, clearly broken and snapped.

Vivienne's feet were kicking in the air, but she couldn't help it. It wasn't like swimming, but she struggled anyway, even though she was merely floating in place. When he came up behind her, she kicked him by accident, hard, in the thigh. He grunted. She lunged for him, clawing at his chest to cling.

He wrapped her in his arms. "I have you. Not done, love. Back to the first."

They flew, fast but not lung-sucking fast, past the fires her fireballs had set, to the site of the first beebee. The entire area was blackened and smoking, but there were several men and wolves milling around the bleeding body of the beebee. There was also a cluster of bodies huddled over a bright splash of red some distance away. Vivid ruby tendrils drifted and swirled in the water around the man's legs. Odan took them down, and Vivienne gagged, looking quickly away from the man's shattered chest.

Her nails bit into Odan's arm. This had happened because of them. They'd failed to kill it fast enough, and others cleaning up after them had paid the price.

"No, no, no," she moaned, swallowing her bile.

"Is it down?" One of the men called from the ground.

Odan pointed. "Three minutes southeast."

The wolves streaked away. As she watched, one of the men kneeling by the dead man shimmered, flickered, and an enormous white wolf went galloping after them. She caught her breath, stunned.

Odan was drifting them down to a hillock with a slimy looking stump and some of those lattice-like flat plants. He'd told her the name but she couldn't think.

"Don't be alarmed. I'll revive."

She whipped her head around, searching frantically over his body for injury. Odan landed, and collapsed. She fell to her knees, her arms locked around him, her knees useless. He was too heavy for her and they toppled.

"Aid!" She cried.

Three men hurried over, rolling him out flat on his back, pulling her from him.

"Give us room, Lady," one snapped rather irritably.

Vivienne stared at Odan's face, normally a light tan, but now sickly yellow. "Odan!" She knew it was stupid to call to him, but she couldn't help it. She reached past the man and latched onto his ankle.

"He's unconscious, not wounded, heart shallow. Strain." The man on the far side of Odan looked over at her. "Lady, he's just been weakened—"

A wolf burst through the trees in a splatter of muddy water and barked fiercely. Vivienne lit a fireball over Odan, holding up her hand, palm splayed out, ready to defend him.

"Another!" cried a man by the dead beebee.

"Another!" The chorus was taken up by all the men standing knee-deep in the swampy pond.

The men who had bent to Odan's aid jerked to look at her.

The black-haired man who had reassured her jumped to his feet and held out his

hand. "Quickly, Lady. Come with us!"

She looked at Odan, feeling numb, frozen. "Odan!"

"I'll stay with him," the grumpy man said. "He'll be fine, truly. But another attack is underway, and we could use your power." He glanced meaningfully at the seething, hissing fireball lighting up the clearing.

"But... But Odan—"

Black Hair lunged across Odan's body and grabbed her arm. "He will be cared for! But Sashilli died in this battle and I want every weapon at our disposal for this next one!"

The word weapon made Vivienne grab at her shoulder with her free hand. "My pack! I've lost my pack!"

Black Hair snarled. "Lady! To battle!"

She looked wildly around the clearing at the men, realizing for the first time every single one of them was nude. No doubt because they'd come in wolf form. His grip on her arm was not hard, but didn't falter. She stared at him. "I don't think I can stand."

"Are you injured?" he barked, and his eyes glowed green as a flash of heat fired through her.

"No," she shook her head. "I was never touched." It had targeted her, and Odan had let it, in order to draw back and strike with a tornado. Why couldn't he have done that from next to her? "My legs just don't work."

"Are you willing to help fight?" Black Hair snapped.

"Yes!" What else could she say? It was a decision long since made. It was who she was. Looking at Odan's vast, deep barrel chest smeared with mud, her eyes stung with tears. She wanted to fight, to defend, to kill, but oh, it hurt to leave him.

"Then you will fight."

She yelped, looking at Black Hair sharply. Energy snapped and pricked across her skin, her spine twitching, her scalp rippling. Her thighs jumped. Her heart galloped as he somehow poured adrenaline into her.

"Come on," he said grimly, and lifted her to her feet.

Staggering, she got her balance, fearing for a moment she'd step on Odan. Then he was leaping off the hill into the water, and she was pulled behind him. He ran, and every log he jumped or branch he dodged, she tripped over and flailed around. By the time he got to the sifting stone, her breath was sawing in her seared throat, and her face and arms were covered with bloody welts.

A black-skinned man was standing at the stone. "Will she go?"

Black Hair nodded once.

The man said, "Fourth City."

Black Hair put his hand on the stone, but she didn't have time to take a breath. The world swirled and settled under her feet, and she choked, gasping and coughing, looking around wildly at the sun shining golden rays through an open forest of tall, straight tree trunks with dark green leaves far above.

He set off running again, and she wanted to cry, wanted to ask him to stop, wanted to sit down, but she pushed her legs hard, struggling to keep up. They burst out through some bushes and he turned to her. "On my back."

He mostly scooped her under her ass, but she did manage to somewhat drape herself over his shoulders, although her legs didn't have the strength to close tight around his waist. He ran, *so fast* down a wide flat path. This must be one of the City roads! The

crooked structures of the Dark loomed before them.

There were people walking in the streets, and on seeing them coming, turned and pointed. Vivienne's sand-dry mouth gasped hideously, but she found the focus to light a massive fireball, hollow, all show. The people fell back, melting into doorways and alleys. Black Hair ran them up to the Walls and her eyes darted to and fro, terrified about a rear attack, but none came.

At the main gate, the guards pulled the door wide so that he could go directly in. "What is it?" One cried, looking wildly out behind them.

Black Hair didn't answer, just continued to race in a jaw-jarring pace. If his hands weren't laced behind him under her, she would have fallen by now. Her fingers sank into the meat of his shoulders, but her arms had lost the strength to hold her up and her head flopped. How could the gate guards not know why they were here? Maybe they weren't too late!

He rushed her through the strange City, and she marveled at the bridges, the pebbled walls, and the huge main thoroughfare. By the time he put her down near the hugest tree she'd ever seen, she felt dizzy from her gaze swirling all over.

Two huge, muscled men in City clothes rushed up and growled, "Southwest."

Black Hair nodded, took her wrist, and set out at a fast trot, which for her shorter legs was a run. By the time he stopped in front of a gray square tower with thin arrow slits, she was bent over and coughing again.

"Who is she?" asked the brunette.

"Firemage." Black Hair gasped hard too, and it may have been petty, but she was glad. "How far out?"

"About two minutes. You just made it. We only have about twenty here. We've got another thirty spread throughout the City to react as it picks an attack."

"It—won't—move—past—Walls." Vivienne gasped out.

The auburn-haired one grinned at her. "I like her. Let's keep her." He held out his arms. "I'm Burl, a bear. Want me to help you up top?"

Resigned to being a parcel, she nodded and shuffled forward, reaching for his neck. He scooped under her legs, his arm around her back strong and secure. His hand brushed the edge of her breast as he tossed her and angled them into the doorway. A stone staircase led up, with a wooden railing. He went up them two at a time.

"Show off," she said, her head bobbling with his jerking body. It was interesting to her that not one ounce of heat or interest came to her from his powerful muscles moving along hers. Every flex of Odan's body against hers fascinated.

They bounded up into the sunlight, blue sky, warm breeze, fluffy clouds, and he strode along the wooden balustrade with jagged spikes to a raised platform with a little hut.

He put her down gently. "One firemage reporting for duty."

The half dozen men glanced away after that statement, facing back out over the rolling treetops beyond the ring of staggered filth that was the Dark. Vivienne followed their gazes and saw it. It was flying high, much higher than the ones they'd engaged before. That meant she'd have to wait until it was closer to throw a fireball up at it.

She spoke to Burl without turning her head. "I want to talk to your skymages."

Black Hair was behind her, on the lower level. "I'm one."

A blond at the edge of the railing turned to her. "I am."

Burl pattered off, but she didn't wait for him. Her heart was leaping from the rush here, and she couldn't catch her breath. *Odan was lying in a swamp, alone.* "If you can hold it still, do so. Slow it as much as you can if you can't stop it entirely." Suddenly she remembered there were still fires burning in the swamp back at Fifth City. Her eyes narrowed on the bird.

It was close enough now she could see the shape of its beak, and the fatter ball of the body, and the long snaking tail. "I strike at the wingtips, tail, and eyes."

"Its head is fireproof," one man protested.

"Not against me," she said grimly.

Running feet came up behind her. Burl shouted, "More skymages!"

She didn't have time to share the information. Black Hair and Blondie moved to either side of her.

"Now," Blondie said, and the beebee looked like it went into slow motion.

She was aware of a volley of various spells going off around her, but she floated a fireball, and threw it, aiming for the tail. The wind immediately sucked it down and a huge plume of black erupted from the woods. All right, so Odan was usually the one who controlled her fire through his own wind shear, but she could do this.

Compensating for the downward push, she threw the next fireball far above the beebee, and watched as it whooshed past with a fiery tail. She felt Black Hair look at her. Felt his doubt.

She threw three more, each dropped at precise places above the beebee, and these hit it, but splashed harmlessly off its hide. Odan had a way of impacting them hard, making them stick so the heat had time to do damage. The bird was over the Dark now, approaching the Wall. All the Truxet around her were focused on it, and it was still moving easier than the others had with Odan's wind. She was getting a quick lesson in just how powerful he was, and how strong these things were. She adjusted her fireball, and this time, scored its tail. It smoked and blackened, and a cheer went up. Ice dripped in a jagged lump off one of its taloned feet, and something that looked like thin, snaking lightning slithered around the creature, making it crazed. It cried out and slashed its head from side to side.

The City Alarm was clanging, and she was dimly aware of panicked shrieks from both the front and back of the Wall. She kept feeding her fireballs, and this time she aimed for the left wing. Half a dozen failed attempts later, with a burning house smoking before her from the Dark, she stomped her foot in fury. The thing was over the Wall now, and she scrambled off the platform to keep it in sight.

Setting her goal on its eyes, she found them, and set them to burn. Pouring all her fury and focus into them, it was only moments before flames spewed from its head. A few of the men shouted in surprise.

"No, that's me. I've blinded it." They were now in the wake of the wind, and she staggered as the bird passed overhead, and the wind they were pouring at it blasted them.

Another fireball, not hers, launched, and this one hit the tail as well. The smoking tail fell, spinning like a long, heavy rope. The beebee dropped three bodylengths in the sky, coming close enough she could see the scales on its belly.

She struggled with her anger and frustration. Did she go for internal heat? It was the only sure way she had of striking it, but it was already over the City and she couldn't risk the damage it could do while she took the time to fry its heart. But most of the fireballs

she'd thrown had landed badly, setting a trail of fire beneath the lizard bird.

She stared, eyes narrowed against the wind. Yes. Against the wind. She formed her fireball high in the sky, and it immediately ignited in the wind, developing a tail that crackled back toward her. Pushing it against the wind took enormous concentration. She took it slowly, and held her hands up to visually direct herself.

"Should we let up?" Black Hair called.

"No!" she shouted back.

The rear view of the thing revealed it was bleeding out of its back end, where it had lost the tail. The spikes were laid down tight along its back. It beat its wings relentlessly, gaining more distance from the Wall. She had her fireball behind it, and gathered her focus. She tightened the sphere, made it hotter, and the tail of the fireball stretched longer. On the next downbeat, she shoved the fireball forward, and connected with the entire outer wing, from the peak to the tip. It faltered, its next wingbeat using only one wing, arcing its path toward its wounded wing.

Men began running past her to the stairs, but she didn't blink. It gave a high hiss, and instantly, Vivienne was sure that this was the lizard bird she'd faced a few short weeks ago, its body filling the doorway, its head swinging through the room. Victory and a deep thirst for death danced in her belly. This bird would die. *All those young men, lying on the floor.* This bird would die.

It lost a lot of height, spiraling down toward a lovely cobbled building with many delicate spires. Vivienne lit a wall of flame, but this time she didn't encircle its body. She wrapped the sheet of heat around its sky-pointing good wing, and rolled it tight, like a baby in a blanket. It flapped, writhed, spun, and abruptly plunged past the spired building and out of sight. She took back the flame, pulling the heat from its eyes and wings. Smoke belched into the sky.

Lungs pumping, chest heaving, she stared, willing it to rise so she could strike it again.

Black Hair's hand drifted over her hair softly. "Lady, well done. They will take it down more easily now. Can you help with the fires beyond?"

She shrugged out of his touch, irritated. Approaching the railing, she looked out at the burning home in the winding streets below. The wildlings screeched and scuttled. Many were plainly excited instead of worried. She doubted they were running toward the fire to help.

She looked over at Black Hair. He tipped his head, considering her curiously, then directed his own attention to the fire. The flames spiked high, spinning into the air. She knew what he was doing. He was taking the air away, starving it. She was tempted to let him take care of the Dark, while she worked on the nearest forest fire.

But in the end, she helped erase the heat from the smoldering buildings. And then they worked on the forest fire, and the one beyond that. When massive blankets of smoke hung in the air, he blew them away from the City, to the south.

"We'll have to patrol through to make sure it's completely out."

"I think there's another small one, but it's too far away for me to reach." Was that her voice? She sounded like a frog. Frogs made her think of Odan.

Turning, she stared at the fading smoke where the beebee had gone down. In a City. She had failed *again*.

"We got the bloody thing. It never got its chance to attack." Black Hair leaned back

on the railing next to her. "Thank you for coming with me."

She looked at him. Blinked to see that yes, he was still nude. He'd run nude through the City! He'd carried her on his back! Nude! She bit her lip. "Thank you for taking me." She looked away, cheeks heating.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

She nodded. "Odan ... and there were other fires."

"Odan will be fine. He is our skymage Champion, and I have no idea of the kind of power he'd have used to drain himself like that, but he *was* merely drained. We'll work the fires." He paced to the City-side of the railing. "Lady... I don't want to leave you alone. But I very much want to get to the body."

"You're so sure they can kill it?"

He nodded once. "Yes. The only question is what kind of damage we took."

She gestured. "Let's go."

He looked at her from the side. "I'd like to go as wolf."

She blinked. Nodded. "A-all right."

He tipped his head. "You never smell afraid. You don't smell like anything."

It came on her suddenly. She spun to the Dark side of the Wall, staggering the six steps or so quickly, and puked over the side. It splashed against the stones, and the magnificent spell powering the Wall flared, a spike of green that rinsed her vomit away. Her stomach seethed, and she puked again, a thinner stream, and then her belly tightened on itself, and she gagged. And gagged. And gagged.

A large gray dog leaned against her leg, panting up at her in sympathy. She petted the soft head. Nevie had a dog, and she loved to play with it. But it was knee-high, and white, with black button eyes. This was no dog, and he was huge, with enormous white fangs.

She stroked between his ears, and his eyes squinted. "I don't even know your name," she whispered.

He butted her hand, and looked back toward the beebie.

She sighed, wiping her mouth on the back of her hand. "I'd give all my apparatus for a glass of water." She spat over the edge. "Make that wine." Sighing again, she moved on loose legs off to the stairs. The wolf clattered down them, nails scraping on stone, and waited for her at the bottom. Her legs trembled with every step down. He stayed glued to her leg as he led her through unfamiliar streets mobbed with sobbing and angry people. They came to several Trux who were blocking off the street, despite the efforts of people waving their fists and swords who clearly wanted to get past. It was harder for Black Hair/Gray Wolf to nudge his way through this most furious layer, but he did, and the Trux parted, somehow knowing she was with him. This made the people at the edge of the line even angrier. She shivered as she turned the corner, out of sight of the crowd, and stopped abruptly in horror.

A small army of men, many nude, swarmed over two smashed buildings, the sides torn off, exposing the rooms inside. In one room, the floor was slanted, and clinging to the far wall, hysterically screaming, was a young boy. Two men were climbing the shattered, precarious wreckage toward him, and the rest of the attention was on the hissing creature in the street. The very alive creature in the street.

The wolf bounded forward, but another turned and snapped at him, slamming into him from the side. He snapped back and they rolled in a terrifying wave of fur. Vivienne

sidled off the street, up onto the sidewalk, and leaned against the building. Incongruously, the flower box planted there was full of sweet smelling, cheerful pink flowers.

The men circled the beebie and tossed ropes over it. She was in awe of their bravery as they darted so close, some of them taunting it to distract from others who were binding it. It being blinded, that was perhaps safer than it seemed.

Noxious blood painted the streets, steaming. Vivienne reached out to pull the heat away, but found that it was the property of the blood, not heat making it steam so. The men reached the boy, and brought him down, but he didn't stop crying. She didn't hold it against him.

She watched them for some time, dreading the fact they were going to keep the thing. It should die. It should just die, like Burban had, his brown eyes going from shocked, to blank. She could bury it with Andalay's corpse, and they could rot together, neither worthy of a cremation. After some time, a wolf trotted over and lay down next to where she'd collapsed, sitting on the stone path. She pet him. She wondered what it would be like to pet Odan. Someone brought her a wineskin, and she rejoiced. It was lemonade, the best she'd ever had. She drank it all.

Eventually, they had it completely immobilized. Its eyes still bled. She had no pity for it at all. Her hair was a wild puff drifting into her eyes. She sat in the shade of the pink flowers, and tried not to breathe in the scent of the thing's blood. When a set of boots appeared before her, it took her a few moments to realize someone was waiting for her attention. Dragging her neck wearily up, she squinted against the bright sky at the large, square shape towering above her. Her fingers paused on the wolf's head.

Pure, lush joy swept from her head to her toes. "Odan!"

She struggled to her feet, but he was pulling her up as she pushed to stand. Her arms locked around his thick neck, but his were tight around her, squeezing with vibrant strength.

"Vivienne," he sighed.

"I was so worried!"

He choked. She loosened her grip and pulled back to look at him, concerned.

Shaking his head, he looked at her ruefully. "You were worried?" he said with just enough sarcasm that she noticed.

She touched the side of his face, and looked into his beautiful gray-blue eyes. Leaning forward, she tipped her head and kissed him. Not a press of lips in a dire moment, but a clinging, seeking, passionate joining. His mouth opened beneath hers, and he picked her up off her feet to bring her closer. She painted her lips over his, and floated over the solid presence of him. He tasted clean, like the wind, and she was lost under the sweep of his lips across hers, sliding, so alive.

When the kiss calmed, she peeled her lips from his, flicking her tongue at his lower lip once in goodbye.

"Mmm. Lemonade." He looked at her, and a smile started in one corner of his mouth and spread through to his cheeks. "Do you always get ... excited after a battle?"

She slid her fingers through his coarse hair again and again. He was here. "Thank you for coming for me," she whispered. "And if you ever use me as bait again, I'll shave you bald in the night."

His smile faded, and his thumb rubbed along the line of her jaw, sending shivers down to her breasts. "We'll talk."

She nodded. "What about the fires?"

"They're being worked on."

Relief poured through her, and she sagged against him. His arms curled around her so carefully, she felt precious. She felt ... cared for.

"Are you all right?"

She nodded again, throat thick. "Yes."

He looked down at the wolf who watched them with total understanding. "Thank you." It sounded grudging even to her.

The wolf yipped, pulled himself to his feet, and trotted away.

Odan's hand on her throat soothed her. She laid her head on his chest. "Odan."

He put his face in her hair. She could feel his warm breath on the top of her head. "Vivienne. Let's go home."

Chapter Sixteen

Odan bent to the youngling assigned to his skymages as a runner. "Ask the hawk Tydus to meet me by the Eyrie, and see if Rafe will rendezvous in the small library." The boy nodded, eyes huge, and ran off in a blur of speed that made Odan sigh. His hand was glued to Vivienne's hip, and he guided her through the arch carved with swirling clouds. Several skymages came to meet them, but he shook his head and they murmured greetings, offers to help, and faded away.

He lifted the flap to his room and stepped through with Vivienne. It was idiotic to bring her here. She'd be more comfortable with the families in the groundbear lair he'd taken her to last time. But he'd wanted her in *his* room.

She stood, looking around. Finally, he was able to ease his arm from the tiny span of her ribs. He ducked out, made a pot of tea in the lounge and came back. Putting the tray on the table in front of where she'd sat, he poured a cup into the brown glazed mug and gave it to her. Sitting opposite her, he gratefully swallowed from his own mug.

"I need to step out. I want to find out news of your Guild, and also see if there's more information yet on that Dark report you've asked for. After I come back, we'll bathe, and rest."

"Wouldn't it be more efficient if I just came with you?" she asked, sipping the tea hesitantly.

He thought about it. "You can if you want, but I also want to clarify your status with Rafe." He wanted it clear Rafe was to shut his mouth regarding his erroneous suspicions, or there was going to be trouble.

"Ah. My status."

"Do you like my room? You'll be comfortable here until I get back?"

She looked around. She wasn't as pale and shocked looking as she'd been when he'd found her in the City, but she had that careful mask in place. "If the walls were white wooden slats, it would be very familiar. My mother would approve."

That made no sense to him. Groundbear rolled in happiness to have her here. "You're safe here."

She looked over at him. "I know."

He wondered if she'd even heard his declaration, or if she remembered it in the chaos of battle.

"So are you coming?"

She shook her head. "I'll gather my strength for a bath. Don't be long or I'll fall asleep."

"That's fine. Sleep if you have to."

He left, his legs aching, his ribs aching, his neck stiff and pinched. Rafe first.

The man sat at one of the tables. Only two elders were in the room, and with an exchange of signals, they agreed to leave.

Odan sat across from Rafe. "She's not a darkmage."

"I wanted your own opinion on if she was tainted without knowing she'd been to their Fortress. But I think you became instantly attracted to her and your opinion is clouded."

"But the Council agrees she is innocent."

"She's hidden her scent, which is what they do."

His groundbear stretched, lips lifting to bare massive fangs. "She is not a darkmage. Accept that and back off."

Rafe tapped one finger on the table a few times. "I still want her to take a souldance."

Odan abruptly wondered if a souldance could reveal a mate-match if the woman was cloaking herself. "What did you find out about her suspicions of the wildlings in the Dark?"

Rafe sighed. "What we found out was that we've fucked up. We found multiple traces of recent darkcraft, including several pathways they must travel often, although both endpoint destinations are lost. Those pathways are now under constant surveillance. Clearly, they've been using the Dark's alleys as much as we have, but because we don't patrol there unless we've sensed violent death, we haven't noticed. We're already spread so thin with the heightened protection in the Cities and the watchers for the beebees, it's going slower to completely investigate. Plus, we have little infrastructure there."

Odan nodded. She'd been right. Vivienne's instincts were solid, and she would be so angry with the Truxet for overlooking this. But not as angry as they were. "Any news from Second City?"

"The City is in disarray. Most business has come to a standstill. The princess announced six darkmages were killed and twenty were captured."

Outrage ran sharply through Odan's jaw at the audacity. "The fucking manipulative, arrogant bastards. They think to keep from turning half their suspected darkmages over to us?"

"Vivienne is one of those fucking manipulative, arrogant bastards. And isn't it interesting she gave us a lead to where the real threat could be hiding?"

Odan stared at the smaller man and curled his hands tight around each other to keep from striking out at him. "She's not one of them anymore."

Rafe snorted. "I believe your term for her was "disaster"."

Odan stared the man down. Planting his hands on the table, he rose to leave. "She's *my* disaster, and I've never been more proud of her."

He left the irritating shit and took the internal sifting stone all the way up to the ninth and highest level of River Mountain where the hawks had their Eyrie. Tydus was waiting in the empty lobby at the top of the stairs between the two doors. The man was just shorter than Odan, with lighter skin and long, dark blond hair curling in glossy swirls to his shoulders. His eyes were piercing amber, hardened beyond that of a typical Trux warrior by the torture he'd survived in the darkmage Fortress.

Odan approached him, and when Ty held out his arm for him to clasp, something eased inside of him. While guarding Sunny for a little over a week after her escape with Ty, he'd become her friend. But he didn't know this hawk who had taken her for mate very well. That evening in a stone room would always be between them, a night drenched in sex and domination and healing.

Strange. Even though that night was fairly recent, it was from another life. It was from before Vivienne. She was a new marker in his existence. There was his life in the Burrow, his life as a Council alpha, and his life after Vivienne.

Odan closed his fingers around Ty's sinewy forearm and gripped hard, proud to have helped this warrior. He didn't need to ask about Sunny's welfare, because her mate would

forever put hers first. "I need information."

Ty nodded. "I'm still mostly out of the loop, but I'll try."

Odan shook his head. "It's not like that." He looked at the carved arch of wings and beaks and talons. "When you were in their Fortress, all your magecraft was stripped. You didn't know Sunny was your mate."

Ty watched him, leaning against the rough gray stone walls, arms crossed.

Odan strode to the top of the stairs and looked down toward where she was waiting in his room. "What did it feel like? What did your hawk do when you saw her? Was there any hint at all that you were a match?"

Ty's voice was thoughtful. "It didn't feel particularly different from meeting any human woman. However, I was immediately impressed by her, and quickly became protective of her."

Odan turned to look at him. "Were you attracted to her?"

"No." Ty grinned. "She was a wreck. Filthy, her hair a matted mess, bruised."

Odan nodded, remembering his first view of Sunny in the hall after her escape. Neither man mentioned the scars covering her, as they were now marks of beauty to both of them. He sighed, dejected. When he'd first met Vivienne, he hadn't been impressed. The protectiveness had felt like duty at first. She'd been frustrating and confusing. But he'd become attracted to her at dinner that first day.

There were no parallels here. He was reaching for a dream. Surely, not even a Mage Guild potion could keep a mate from scenting a potential Bonded. He'd fallen in love with a woman hiding from herself, terrified of his people, and not meant for him.

"As far as my beastspirit, then I'd say, yes, that was the clue I didn't pay attention to."

Groundbear jerked his head into the air. "Oh?"

"The hawk knew. He was always focused on her, always upset when she left. In hindsight, I see that he knew she was ours, but couldn't pass that knowledge on to me."

Odan nodded, hope springing back so easily. He hadn't had time to meditate and really connect with his beastspirit since he'd been assigned this duty. It was pitiful, but the thrill Ty's description sent through him couldn't be denied. "Thanks for meeting me."

"Odan." Ty's rebuke called their gazes together. "Anytime."

Ty was offering his friendship, not answering out of obligation or debt. Odan nodded his appreciation.

"Sunny wants to have dinner. She heard about your duty, and the battle yesterday, although I haven't yet told her about the one today yet. I wanted to make sure your sorry carcass came back whole. Is it true there were two?"

Odan moved down the stairs, eager to get back to her. "There were three. We killed two and captured the third."

At the bottom, he looked up at the warrior who'd been taken by one, carried off to their Fortress. "We're going to burn them all, Tydus."

Ty nodded back down at Odan. No words could pass between them. There weren't enough words to express that kind of thanks, or regret.

"Good night," Odan said. "Tell Sunny I send greetings."

"I will."

Blindly, he moved through the halls and down the stairwells, needing the time. When he'd woken to find the wolf had taken her to another battle alone, he'd attacked the one that had told him. His punch had flattened the man, and there would likely be a fine to be

paid. It had taken three wolves to hold him, while another screamed the battle was done and had gone in their favor, with no more deaths.

He'd blurred into battleform and they'd let him go rather than take damage. The wolf at the sifting stone had fought him, arguing he couldn't go into the City in battleform. It was forbidden.

Odan had found the strength to change back, only because the delay kept him from finding her. He'd cursed his skycraft, wishing instead he was a spiritmage, one with the powerful ability to sift without a sifting stone. All during his run into the City and through it, one thought had pounded through his brain. *You left her alone. You left her alone. You left her alone.* Groundbear had been enraged.

Right up until they'd seen her sitting there, pale and dazed, the wolf guarding her. Odan didn't know what he would have done if the man was in human form, but it had been better that he was a wolf. She'd looked up at him, and the absolute relief and joy on her face had stilled his raw panic. They still had to deal with the fact he'd used her as bait, and he'd failed her by passing out like a Council recruit, but she'd been alive, unharmed, protected, and happy to see him. He was damn thankful.

Turning into the skymage lair, he stood outside his door weaving, and breathed. Metal, fire. The scent of Vivienne. Tonight he would claim his lover's pleasure in his own bed furs, until she was slack with it. It wasn't enough for the emptiness inside, but it was good.

Chapter Seventeen

Bathing with Odan in a proper plunge bath was interesting. His gaze was blatantly sexual as he watched her hands beneath the chest-high water. She talked with him honestly about why the new Senate would have low-balled the numbers of darkmages, and what the next steps would be. She didn't feel disloyal in the least as she gave him advice about how to both support and outmaneuver the other Mage Guild Senates as they would soon be pressured into their own revelations or investigations. That wasn't her world anymore. She understood and sympathized with the fears driving the Guild's actions, but they had to be dismantled before the darkmages won. It was easy to talk to him, his sharp mind following all the connections hers made. And if she rinsed more thoroughly than she needed to in order to enjoy his eyes sliding from blue to silver and back, then that was her reward.

Walking back through the stone halls to Odan's barren room, she paused outside his door to study the tapestry covering the arched opening. At first glance it was a merely a pretty cascading pattern, mostly symmetrical interlocking lines, moving from gold into bronze over a field of dark blue. But as she'd sat and waited for him, she'd seen that in truth it was lightning forking down, changing into roots. A stunning representation of his two natures.

"This is pretty," she said, fingers trailing over the texture of the metallic threads.

His heat came up behind her, and her heart thumped. The silver robe he'd given her stuck to her damp body, and the smooth stones were glossy and cool beneath her feet.

"My parents made it for me when I passed the Council tests." His arm reached past her and lifted one side, so she ducked in.

The room was depressing. Gray stone walls, smoother gray stone floor. Coarse black furs on the ground, a plain dark wood table and sturdy square chairs. There was a trunk banded with scrolled metal that was nice, but the bedposts were round, flat stumps. The bed was huge, taking up half the room, and scattered with silky looking brown furs. She swallowed, thinking about lying in that bed with him tonight. She should be pitching a fit, demanding her own room. But she wouldn't. He was warm, and safe. Now that they had a real bed, after a real bath, she felt almost shy about the sensitivity of her bare legs against her cool robe. How would she ask to be his lover again? Could she stand that kind of overwhelming pleasure?

Sucking in a breath of nervous anticipation, she considered the bland space she'd studied earlier. His room was saved from an absolute lack of imagination by his collection. The tiny niches in his walls were indeed full of carvings both fearsome and whimsical, delicate and fascinating. She loved them, and how he'd set magelights behind many, to highlight the swirling branches or tangled grasses. There was one of sand patterns on a dune, and another of a hypnotically regular sea marked with small wave peaks. She was looking at a collection of moments from the past few days.

"What was that sigh for?" He rubbed the towel over his mussed hair once more and tossed it on the floor. She wondered if he ever combed his hair. Or if anyone had ever cared for him enough to comb it for him.

"This barren room reminds me of my mother. That's not a good thing. Your

collection is lovely, though."

"Thank you." He pulled the towel from around his waist, and tossed it in the corner, too. His erection was long and just shy of perfectly straight. It was thick, and she well remembered how soft his skin was, between her lips, pushing between her legs. She licked her lips, shy.

She touched one white, glossy carving of soaring bird. "What material is this?"

"Bone."

Ew. "Ah." She subtly wiped her finger on her robe.

"Vivienne, will you be my lover?"

Her breath slipped her control and came in short bursts. She was afraid to turn and face him. Afraid to experience again what they'd shared that morning. It was too much. His passion had rolled over her so wild and rough, so raw and natural and true. There hadn't been any caresses beyond his care shaving her. There hadn't been any kisses or social words. They had burned together. She wanted it again so much her thighs trembled, but at the same time, she heard the echo of his words at the height of battle.

"Odan... When you fell after the battle, I felt lost without you."

He came up behind her. His fingertip, vaguely rough, trailed from her nape to one shoulder. The echo of his touch remained, sizzling. "I'm so sorry, Vivienne. So sorry I left you alone."

She whirled in a rush of courage to face him. Her head tipped back to look up into his face. His eyes glittered a light, pure blue, and his stripes were faint ghosts on his face. His jaw was tight, square, and his neck was too thick to mark him as handsome. "Don't apologize. I wasn't criticizing you. After all, I left you alone, too. I'm trying to say... *I love you, too.*"

Skyfather, she was such a coward. Her shame from collaring that girl, hearing her ringing prophecy in her soul, had so scarred her she couldn't even face *herself*, let alone this gifted, amazing, infuriating man. She sucked in an enormous breath. "I'm not going to take any more of the cloaking potion."

His eyebrows lowered and his nostrils flared. "How long until I can smell you?"

She shrugged. "I'm not sure. Tomorrow afternoon, probably." Conri had been clear about maintaining her dose schedule.

"Is there a reason you've decided to live honestly, beyond the fact you've lost your pack?"

Crossing her arms, fury swirled with attraction. "Oh! My decision has nothing to do with my lost pack!"

He stared at her. Without letting her eyes go, he reached out and touched the hollow of her throat, tracing down to her outer shoulder. The repetition of his touch further mixed her ire and need.

"It doesn't!" she insisted hotly. "I could find a way to insist I go back, or have some delivered." It would be hugely difficult but she could. Probably.

"Hmmm."

The fact he didn't appreciate the enormous step she'd just taken, that she'd just basically declared her ultimate trust to him, letting go of her strongest fear in order to please him, made her fingers curl into fists. "You're a big square-faced frog."

He smiled, a dangerous curl of his lips while his eyes still glowed with sensual threat. "Ribbit."

"You're condescending." How dare he make a joke, unfazed, from her insult.

"I'm glad you've found your way to the right decision. It's good." His gaze finally let her go, fixing on her mouth. "What's your favorite color?" He licked his lips, and her belly clenched.

"Ummm. Red. Dark, deep ruby red. But I like all colors." Looking up into his narrowed eyes, she added faintly, "Blue is nice."

His fingers captured one lock of her hair from next to her throat. She knew he must see her frantically jumping pulse. "My favorite color is strawberry-blonde, even though I didn't know it. Your hair was darker in the water, and so much longer. Your nipples peeked through the pink strands, nearly a perfect match. Someday I want to stuff your pretty bare pussy full of strawberries and eat from your body."

Her knees simply gave out. His hands blurred and she was against his thick, hard chest. Her hands clung to his strong arms, and her neck sagged completely back to look up into his face. His erection stabbed into her ribs like a brand. Her breath came in soft pants.

"Vivienne, I want to pleasure you now, until you're lost in my touch. Be my lover. Are you ready for me?"

No. This wasn't wise. She could lose herself, all her choices. She was being tricked into this, lured like a moth to the moon, following some impossible, inappropriate path. Because he was the most vivid, real, astonishing thing she'd ever known, and she wanted him with every drop of suicidal will in her.

She summarized her status out loud. "You're ever so presumptuous, but you're already my lover. I'm clean, we have a bed, we've triumphed, mostly, and I want to fuck you, too. I'm not sure I'm ready, but it's time."

Her fingers curled into the hot skin sheathing stone-hard muscles in his arms. She found her footing and pressed herself tighter to him, trapping his cock. It was so insane of her, but she couldn't stop herself from giving him the truth. She slipped the robe from her shoulders in a whisper of promise. It caught on his hands. He took her from irritation to lust to fury to beauty so quickly. Nothing in her careful political life had ever felt so real, so wonderful, even uncomfortable as he was. He wasn't careful of her, and she somehow thrived on his blunt honesty. "Yes, Odan, I will give myself over to you, because I trust you that much."

His body jerked against hers, his head whipping to the side as his eyes closed. She didn't breathe in the moment he held frozen, and then slowly, his fingers left her arms. The robe fell to the floor. He stepped back, breathed. "Get on the bed, my fire princess."

She moved on shaky legs. It was the bravest thing she'd ever done, to climb to her own doom. The wooden frame gouged her shins, but then she was on the tight leather platform that gave just a little beneath her weight, sliding into the thick furs. The room was warm enough that she didn't crawl beneath them, merely laid down, self-conscious, on top.

Odan dimmed the magelights to a low glow, and poured some tea. He drank some, and then carried the cup to the bed, placing it on the floor near the wall. He sat on the side of the bed and looked at her face without meeting her eyes.

She watched him look at her nose, her chin, her ears. His fascination made her muscles melt. She followed his sliding gaze as it traveled down her throat with its jumping pulse, to her chest, where her thudding heart moved her breast faintly. His eyes

lingered on her breast until it swelled, tingled, nipple peaked and begging. Her legs moved restlessly as his gaze caressed her arms, her ribs, lingered on her hips and belly. Lips parting, she panted lightly. He was bold enough to stare long at her bald pussy, before stroking down her thighs. She needed his touch. His head turned to take in her feet, and her toes curled as her arches remembered the press of his big strong hands.

"Aren't we going to have sex now?" she blurted.

"There's much more to pleasure than fucking," he murmured. Merely with the sound of his voice, he dissolved her blood. His voice sounded thick with satisfaction, just from looking at her. Like she was a treasure. "Open your legs."

It was an order, and she hesitated. Earthmother, was this a mistake? Was this the final step to signing herself over and losing all her choices? None of her lovers had been remotely this compelling.

"I thought you were going to trust me with your pleasure."

Her gaze whipped to his challenging, silver stare. Her chest heaved with the weight of this moment. She'd already consigned herself to releasing her scent-mask, already climbed into his bed. "Are you going to trust me with yours?" she asked in a small, uncertain voice she loathed.

His face gentled, his cheeks standing less stark as he tipped his head at her. "Not tonight, lover. Eventually, yes. This is for you. You already gave so generously to me this morning."

She shook her head minutely. "I can't touch you?"

"Oh, yes, that's part of drowning you in pleasure."

She reached for him, and he folded his hand gently around hers. A tremor ran through his grip, and she was able to ease, knowing he wasn't nearly as distant or controlled as he appeared. "All right." She didn't just open her legs, she slid them as wide as the bed frame would allow, until her hips burned.

"Thank you, Vivienne. I won't let you down. I've got you, I promise."

She nodded, not doubting for a second that this was a far cry from normal passion, and that he'd be there for her. "Why are you doing this for me?"

He stood and moved to the foot of the bed. His face was shadowed in the low light that far from her, but his eyes glinted, flashing liquid silver. "Because I love you."

She cried out at the words, hoarse and low, spread and bare before him. Her hips punched the air, her arms writhing in the silky fur beneath her. He stared at her displayed pussy, and heat flushed from her core up through her chest.

"You're so beautifully sensitive. You respond to my gaze and words alone. Imagine what it will do to you when I finally kiss you, lick you, bite you, and pound my cock so deep into your cunt you can't breathe?"

She moaned, twisting her hips, begging silently for his touch. The heat cascaded down her legs.

"Ah, Vivienne. Yes, let me hear your response. Moan and sigh and sob for me. This is the first flush of pleasure, just the ripening of promise, and your voice is an outlet, an escape from the pressure. Soon, I'll take control of your throat, and you won't be able to share those pretty sounds of need. I want it all to build inside you, to boil and grow."

She blinked at him, shocked at his words. Aching from them.

"Pull your knees up, bend your legs."

She trembled to imagine what she looked like, spread so lewdly while he stood at the

end of the bed. In a flash, he knelt on the bed, reached out, and then was standing again. She looked at her stinging chest. One nipple throbbed and swelled. He'd pinched her! So fast!

"You trust me. Your only task this night is to give yourself over to the pleasure. Stop thinking or I'll punish you again, and now you know even my punishment will be pleasurable, mine to control and yours to inhabit."

He was a mountain of strength, so powerful. Why he loved her, she didn't understand. But she valued it. She wanted that, with him. She jerked her knees up, and dragged her legs into a fold that canted her hips forward, splaying her thighs. This was so hard, but pleasing him was something she needed.

"Don't you feel powerful, showing me your woman's body? Your cunt is deep and hot and tight. I don't have any strawberries tonight, but I'll be tasting your cream anyway."

She groaned deep in her throat, biting her lip. He came around to stand beside the bed again, and she tracked him, panicked. He held his hand out over one foot, and his palm warmed her. Slowly, without touching her skin, he floated up over her calf, rotated his hand around her bent knee, and angled it along her thigh. She grappled with her gasping breaths as he came to her hips, but he merely coasted that almost-touch along her outer hip, and over her ribs to her breast. This was the nipple he'd pinched. He circled his hand over her breast, and it throbbed, an echo beating a moment later in her clit.

Then his palm stilled and stayed over her nipple. She stared down at the tiny sliver of space between her nipple and his hand, feeling the energy crackle off him.

She moaned, shivered, gripped the furs with her tight fists. "Odan!" Remembering he'd told her she could touch him, she arched abruptly, trying to grind her nipple into his palm. His hand flew away, her other nipple twisted and burned. Her eyes latched on how small her nipple looked as he held it in a tight vice with his thick fingers. She undulated her torso, but unlike last time his grip didn't waver, and the burn grew brighter, hotter. She gasped, moaned, jerked her chest to the side, and wailed at his brutal, stinging grip.

"You tried to steal control of the pleasure. Take your punishment. Breathe through it."

Her neck rolled in the furs as her head thrashed from side to side.

"Yes, this is my pleasure to give. Yours only to take. There's nothing you can do. Nothing but accept."

His grip tightened, and she shrieked, the spike of sound matching the streak into her womb.

"Use your hips, Vivienne. Stop thinking. Take the pleasure."

Moaning, she thrust her hips up, fucking the air, and it felt so good, she did it again.

"So beautiful. Yes," he whispered.

Thrusting several more times, she wasn't sure when her chest ceased to be the core of her thoughts, but in moments, her vagina clamped, seeping cream, and her belly tightened, straining to grab the pleasure.

He let go, and her hips fell to the bed, stunned, drained. Her breast felt huge and shivers of tingles echoed in her untouched nipple.

"You're to do nothing but accept what I give you. Every time you try to direct any of your pleasure, I'll punish you. Do you understand?"

She nodded, breath sawing in her throat. His hand came under her head and lifted.

Warm stone met her lips and she swallowed the wonderful cool tea.

"Now. Let's begin again." His hand went to hover over her foot.

Her body twitched and trembled beneath the ghostly caress of his heat, and she whimpered, fearing he'd think her uncontrollable reactions were worthy of punishment. But he hummed to her, shushing her with his low, soft words of praise that settled into her muscles, relaxing her. Once again his palm hovered over her aching nipple. It stayed and stayed, and she gave a small sob, biting her lips to keep from begging. *Accept the pleasure.* And she did. She needed more but trusted him to give it eventually and gloried in his almost-touch.

Finally, he moved past her throbbing flesh to her throat, and held his palm over her face. Fascinated, she stared up at it, at the calluses and creases, and small scars. It seemed he would almost touch her nose, but he never did. And then he moved down, his hand flowing over her still pulsing breast, her ribs, her fluttering belly, to rest, hovering impossibly close over the heat pouring from her splayed legs.

"I've never known anyone as warm as you, Vivienne. The Burrow is warm. I remember underground, sleeping with all the Clan around me. I thought I'd never be that warm again. But with you, I am. My bones aren't cold, with you." His fingertip pushed into her body, a strike of lightning to ultra-sensitive skin.

She choked, her fists beating once on the bed, and cried out, "Odan!" Her hips punched against the push of his hand, thrusting his finger into her clasping grasp, and she wailed, "I can't stop it."

"Yes, I know. It's so good." He let her work herself on his hand, twisting his wrist to stuff two of his fingers inside her after a moment. "Sweet fire."

She jerked and flopped on the bed, her hands reaching for him, but he didn't take them and she let them fall. Her core was tightening, straining, and then he pulled his fingers out of her grasp. She growled.

He chuckled. "Look at me." She struggled to focus, and watched him suck both fingers into his mouth. His silver was nearly lost to the darkness of his pupils flaring. He lowered his hand and laid it on her belly. His two wet fingers were like flaming rods against her skin.

"Yes. My groundbear knows. Tasting you makes him insane." He nodded, turning his hips so that he rolled onto bed with her.

She cried out, jerking with the shock of his hard muscle along her side.

"I found you. Vivienne. I want you." He nuzzled his nose into her ear, pushing through her hair. His lips sucked her earlobe, his tongue traced the shell. She tilted her head up to his kiss, her neck locked with need. Her one knee now rested on his thighs, and his erection poked her hip. One of her hands was trapped beneath the weight of his thick chest.

He whispered, "I know you now, Vivienne. Nothing could hide your taste from me. You're mine."

His teeth nipped her ear, and then his lips suckled her lobe again. Her breath came in gasps at the joy of his kiss. His tongue swiped the valley behind her ear and she almost bowed off the bed at the pleasure twining down her spine. His hand massaged her belly so gently, with soft but deep touches. Her hips lifted helplessly.

"I need..."

"Shhh." His hush in her ear made her shudder again, and then his tongue stabbed into

the small folds, and the soft, just slightly damp stroke in the exquisitely sensitive channel made her gasp.

He withdrew his tongue, and then his two fingers slid through her bare folds and curled into her vagina, not as deep as before at this angle, but deep enough she could close tight around them. He pulled them away, and his tongue fucked her ear with a firm touch. Then his fingers at the other end of her body. Then his tongue. Her neck strained to offer him her ear, and her thighs trembled to hold her hips high for his access. Her free hand clenched in the fur.

He rewarded her with three fingers, the push so satisfying she moaned. Then his hand was gone from her core, and damp, fragrant fingers pressed at her mouth. She opened, and her mouth stretched wide by his three fingers. She swallowed in time to his stroking tongue against her ear, the taste of herself dry and frustrating compared to the wild flavor of him. She sucked his fingers, her hand flashing up to grip his wrist.

His mouth moved off her ear, down her neck. She groaned around his fingers, licking between them, as he sucked lightly in the perfect spot between her throat and shoulder. His kisses traveled around to the front of her throat, and up along her jaw, and then all but one of his fingers left her mouth. He licked her lip as she sucked at him.

"You're doing beautifully, Vivienne. You're giving me so much of yourself." He kissed up to her temples, nipped her cheekbones, and licked down her throat. The flat, broad sweeps of his tongue were a new sensation, firm, smooth, but not sloppy. He licked along her collarbone and nipped her shoulder, and then lapped along her outer breast.

She bowed her body as high as she could, holding her breath, sucking hard on his finger, and yes, he rewarded her, his mouth closing over her nipple. What had he called it? *Sweet fire*. His lips moved so firm over her, his tongue flowing first one way, then the other. The tip of him flicked her nipple repeatedly until she cried out around his finger, and her hips punched the air again, aching.

He sucked on her breast until she was dizzy, mewling continuously. She sobbed when he lifted his head, and he took his finger from her mouth. "I've got you, Vivienne. Trust me."

Rising up on his knees, he moved between her legs. His cock was astonishing, his chest stark with two sweeps of muscle, the smaller undulations of his abs below a work of art. His silver eyes swept over her with an arrogant possessiveness that made her thrust her hips up again. The sight of her splayed-open pussy coming so close to his balls undid her, and she slapped both of her sweaty hands onto her chest, squeezing her breasts frantically in the need for more sensation.

"Ah. Not quite ready to trust me, after all." He didn't sound disappointed. Instead, his voice was gravelly and excited. "Take your hands off your breasts, princess. Time for your punishment."

She shook her head wildly, her fingers pulling at her flaming red nipples. She hadn't known they could swell so big. Spikes of pleasure lit up her chest from the hard touch she delivered, proud of her display before him. She couldn't stop touching herself. She needed this.

He bent forward, his hands on either side of her torso, and leaned his head down over hers. She braced for an onslaught, tipping her chin up, mouth open for ravishment to match the tangled coals inside her.

He kissed her with reverence. His lips on hers were soft, gentle. He breathed into her

mouth, and her jaw relaxed, opening beneath his. The way he pressed on her lips unlocked something inside her, and her tongue met his in a smooth push, exploding light behind her closed eyes. His mouth fused with hers, cradled and danced with hers. His hair was wiry and pushed back against her fingers as she shoved her hands through it, clasping his skull. He kissed her again and again, and she trembled and drifted and flickered under the promise, the care, the sweetness.

"There, Vivienne. There you go. Put your hands above your head." His shoulders shifted, and one of his hands stroked under her shoulders, pulling her hair from beneath her where it had caught in her tempest. "Hold your hair."

Her hands fell from his head, limp, and twined into the softer cloud of her own hair. She blinked up at him, her mouth pulsing. She licked her lips, awed by the adoration he'd poured over her in his kiss. He licked over her lower lip, following in her wake, and kissed her again, his taste overwhelming the ghost of her own cream. She swallowed him down on a deep, needy sigh.

"Do we stop? Shall I fuck you instead?"

After that kiss, after the craving he'd built, it would be sheer cowardice. Her throat burned from the force of her working lungs. "No. Pleasure me, Odan. I'm trying."

"Ready for your punishment now?"

Her heart kicked, but she stared into his blue eyes and nodded. His stripes were black slashes painted thick on his face, and the tendons in his wide neck stood stark. Her knees were still splayed wide, legs vaguely numb. Her back was sweaty on the furs, and her breasts throbbed. She could feel how wet her pussy lips were. But none of it mattered. It was all beautiful. Odan was with her. She was his, and he was giving her pleasure.

He smiled at her, a wide pure, peaceful sharing of his joy and pride in her. "Yes, you understand now." He kissed her, feather-light, so gentle, lingering, stroking over her lips, spending time lapping at the corners. "You will still be punished, though."

Her nipples throbbed with memory, but she stretched her arms above her, winding her fingers through her hair. No matter how desperately she needed, Odan would pleasure her.

Odan moved lower, nudging her jaw with his nose. She turned her head. He nudged it again, and she arched her neck back, exposing her throat to him. He growled, low and deep, and it wasn't a masculine sound, but a feral one that raised all the hairs on her arms. "Your pleasure *is* mine. You understand now. Mine to give, mine to share."

His mouth opened and locked on the side of her throat, his teeth setting hard, stinging. She lay underneath him, still, panting. He slowly lowered his body, flattening hers under his hot weight. His hands found her arms, holding her down, and his belly pressed to her splayed, wet core. His tongue swept around the inner rim of his teeth, lighting up her skin, and then he sucked.

She jerked, and he settled his weight against her so completely her ribs creaked. He sucked, and her hips bucked. At the brush of her clit against the slab of his muscled belly, she shouted. He sucked at her throat, and she felt like he'd swallow her pulse. Her arms jerked but he had her in a tight hold. He sucked again, and it ached. He was always burning her! She shoved her hips against him, and he sucked again, and the throb tightened, singing with pleasure-pain.

Her hips pressed tight, and she ground herself, her body swamped with the sensations of his weight, his hold, his mouth, her flattened breasts, her throbbing clit. And

she couldn't breathe. He sucked and it crossed into pain, but she welcomed it, it was all part of him serving her. She stroked her clit along the ridges of his abdomen and moaned in bliss, throaty and low.

He lifted himself away and she shrieked in torment. Soft kisses rained down on her ribs, with lapping licks and sizzling drags of teeth. Shaking, she moaned continuously. Huge, rough hands covered her breasts, molding and lifting them. His thumbs circled her nipples, pressing them gently into her body. Her neck throbbed and ached. Her hips thrashed in the air again and again, helplessly seeking relief for her core, but he only coated her torso in pleasure. Her moans lowered into broken gasps.

Then one of his hands pushed up between her breasts, gliding up her damp throat and over her chin to cover her mouth. "Hush, now. Focus inside."

The low, constant sound of her agonized need cut off, only their mingled heaving breaths filling the room. She tried to cry his name, but it was merely a harder push of air. He went back to kissing her belly, teeth scoring her muscles, plunging his tongue into her navel, his hands working her breasts deep and hard as she twined and twisted.

Everything tightened as she understood each of his kisses was leading him lower. It took forever, but finally his tongue dampened the top of her slit. He nipped the curve of one outer lip, pressed a long kiss to the top of her silky smooth bare mound. The skin of her thighs rippled with sensation. So close. He was so close.

His fingers trailed down her labia, and then gently curled over the edges. He held her wide, flat, spread. A scream echoed inside her brain with the sharp pang of his firm touch. Working himself off his knees, he laid on his belly and breathed over her. Just the press of his hard, hot breaths on her clit made her jerk repeatedly.

"Look at me, lover."

Ripping her blind gaze from the stone ceiling, she stared down her glistening body, reddened from his kisses, at his tan face between her white thighs. The stripes had been there from the first, and she loved them. He licked his lips, and she saw large fangs filled his mouth.

"You can start coming now. Remember, I'm here."

Her heart seized at his words, and then his tongue lapped, impossibly gentle, barely flattening her clit. Light exploded. Body rigid, her scalp stung with the force of her arms jerking taut in her hair. Heat rolled through her.

He licked her again, and it kicked her pleasure sideways. She sagged, stunned, and then he closed his lips around her button of flesh and sucked. His lips held her firm, his tongue rubbed across her softly, and the pressure pulled the heat from her belly out through that one exquisite spot. She thrashed, but he held her. He allowed no sound to break from her throat, and the force of her need imploded.

When it was done, she was aware her heart wasn't working quite right. But then he licked across the gaping mouth of her vagina, and her clit sparked. Literally. She was watching the top of his bushy head, and saw the flash of light. He hummed, and shoved his tongue into her body. The sting of the spark bit her again, and he rolled his face against the soft wet folds of her woman's center.

His tongue plunged deep into the grasping flesh. A pinch, a burn, and her hips lifted high, driven on the shock of his thumb stretching her ass. Both withdrew, and then again, his thick finger shoved into her tight, gripping ass, while his tongue shoved into her hot, gripping pussy. Her mouth ached, jaw stretched wide on a scream he'd trapped inside her.

A third time he shoved her flesh open for penetration, and then his other hand squeezed her clit in a gentle twist. She rolled from side to side, spine snapping in deep curls from the pleasure that took her sight.

"Fuck, yes. Burn me, Vivienne. I'll take all of you."

She opened her eyes and blinked against the shimmering haze covering her vision. Odan braced above her, his face twisted with the same longing she felt. With a shift of his hips, his cock split open her body. She gasped, tightening. He grimaced, and thrust in one long push. His swollen flesh was so much harsher than his careful mouth. The ripples in the air intensified, and he groaned, sweat running in rivulets down his flushed face.

"Touch me. Claim the pleasure I give you."

His slitted eyes held hers, and her hands landed hard on his thick shoulders. He jerked, and thrust.

It was nothing like the morning, where he'd bucked and heaved with sheer strength. Then, the exotic location and his long, repetitive, dangerous touches had driven their mutual need bright and fast. This time, that quick, astonishing reward was denied.

Each withdrawal was a long smooth sweep of his hips, and each penetration was a tight clench of his core. He worked her with the same complete concentration he'd shown when he'd trailed his almost-touch across her body, when he'd carefully driven her past the edge of her control, then punished her for it. His cock inside her was thick and heavy, pushing through the tattered shreds of her awareness. She tightened because she had to, her belly stark where it met his with a steady rhythm. Her lashes fluttered.

"Don't. Let me see you." It wasn't an order this time, but a plea, and she was helpless to deny him.

She stared at him as his hips worked hers up the peak, as his body reached inside hers. She accepted him, and he took her over.

Rapture. Pure fire. Odan, inside her.

He held himself tight against her as she finished and was able to breathe again. Holding his gaze through that moment changed her. His blue eyes welled up, sparkling with tears that didn't fall. He blinked rapidly and they faded. She twitched beneath him, legs lax. More pleasure than she understood. She was lost. But he was with her.

He pulled out of her, still thick and erect, and knelt over her, his hands petting, soothing, stroking her flesh, so that she could relearn her own shape. "Thank you. Thank you," he whispered hoarsely, pressing striking kisses to her breasts, her hips.

He drew her legs down and massaged them, did the same for her arms, which he arranged at her side. Settling onto his side next to her, he shushed her with a steady stream of coos and reassurances while her body worked through the tremors. Her breath steadied, but her heart still leapt in time with her clenching core. She felt honed, like a strong sword fresh from the forge. Too fresh. The metal still needed to be seared with a water bath. She still burned.

She swallowed and whispered, "Odan."

"I'm here."

"The pleasure..."

"I know it hurts. So beautiful."

"I need more. It's just out of reach. Haunting me. Please, help me."

"Tell me. My mouth?"

"No. Fuck me. Just work it out of me. It's like the need is something lodged inside,

that won't let go."

He didn't hesitate. He pushed open her stretched, slack legs and eased his rigid cock inside her. She relaxed. He belonged, natural inside her now. With her legs down like this, her clit throbbed with the pressure of him against her, quick and eager. "Yes. I need..."

"Easy or hard?"

"Easy. Oh, yes, you feel so good. There, it's grabbing onto you, the need, I feel it loosening." He stroked her slow, so that each switch of his stroke was a continuous glide. The fat head of him pumped through raw flesh with pure sensation. For endless moments, it was enough, until it wasn't. She spread her legs wide and wrapped them around his hips. He hissed as his root buried deep in her, their bare skin meeting with such delicacy. His soft strokes never hesitated, although they were shorter now that she'd locked her ankles.

After a few more agonizing, beautiful slides, she whimpered, pressing hot, desperate kisses across his chest. The taste of him salted her tongue, made her lick harder.

He jerked. "What do you need, princess?"

"Deeper!" Had he led her so far into pleasure she'd never be able to grab it again?

"Shhh. I have you."

She gasped when he pulled out. With one twist, he flipped her, leaving her dizzy. With a firm jerk on her hips and push on her shoulders, he angled her ass high in the air. His cock pressed her open, and the new angle changed the press of muscles, making her shout. But she soon saw how he took care of her. This was what she needed. Deep. Painfully deep, her hips speared on his thick heat, her lower body throbbing as his body rammed against the limits of hers. She sprawled sumptuously, trusting his grip on her hips.

"Yes, oh, you knew. I'll go fast now, Odan. Won't you come with me?" He shuttled out, and she choked on the intimate shifting in her body. With a roll, he pressed back inside, steady, flowing, his strength a blessing for her dazed body. "Hold there."

He listened, stilling.

"Deeper! Please!" Her stomach ached from overuse of her muscles, but she clenched. He panted, and her breasts throbbed, grinding into the furs beneath her. His hands tightened, and he pressed farther into her body with sheer brute strength.

It hurt, so lovely, and her groan spiraled up in tone. "Almost! Odan. Fuck me there! Deep!"

Animalistic snarls flew through the air, a hissing and growling that matched the writhing desperate need inside her. His hips lost their gentleness, and pain danced with pleasure with every short, brutal strike of his hips against her ass. He churned against her, lodged so deep. He swept over her previously devastated senses and tumbled her into echoing, bottomless bliss. She ground her face into the furs, pushing back on him with the last of her strength, to claim the wonder. Lava boiled in her blood, and washed her prickling skin clean.

His battleform hands churned the furs next to hers, the claws puncturing through the pile as he jerked and dug into her body. The fresh burning in her core took her by surprise. She'd thought she was done. He pulled himself out with a vicious snarl, the pinching and tingling making her moan and gasp. His cockhead lodged in her opening, and she knew he was so swollen now that if he tried to pull entirely free, he might hurt

her. But he didn't. Hissing, he began short thrusts, fighting to get back into her depths.

Her body started to glow. She saw her hand laying against a brown fur, with his thicker hand beyond, the fingers short, the claws long. Her skin lit up like a lantern, and she smiled, feeling her fire roll out of her. Finally, he was back in, his balls pressed tight to her clit.

"I'm yours, Odan," she whispered. Peace flowed into her. She finally understood. *The watermage Rowan hadn't cursed her.* She'd prophesied a future Vivienne had hidden from because she didn't understand. It wasn't about losing control of her life, of being taken over. It was about making her own choice to give that control to someone else. Because when you loved someone, your choices became much simpler.

He held himself still against her body as he came. His semen soothed her, settled her, coated her, comforted. His moans were low and tortured, and she came one more time on the sheer joy of knowing how much she'd pleased him by finding the strength to lose herself.

"Yesss." She moaned into the fur, trembling with the pure wonder of his body so deep in hers.

In a few moments, her glow faded, and she saw the claws seep into his nails, and his fingers lengthen to human proportions. The pinching burn in her stuffed cunt eased, and cum rolled down her thighs. She shivered, her clit throbbing once. He kept their hips pressed tight, easing them down onto their sides. His arm came tight around her while he surrounded her. She snuggled her head up under his chin.

"You're ... well?" His voice rasped.

She thought about that. He'd led her by the hand into the truth of herself. From agreeing to be his lover, he'd taught her how to accept pleasure, how to ride his trust. She knew who she was now, and the discontent that had followed her all her life was gone.

"Yes. I'm well."

"I'm not sorry."

She smiled at his quiet warning. "Just remember. Someday, you said you'd give yourself over to me to pleasure." But it wouldn't be the revelation it had been for her. When he gave himself into her care, it would be a celebration.

A tremor ran through him. "Yes."

She closed her eyes, and slept. She had no choice. And that was fine.

Chapter Eighteen

She woke to the delicious smell of fresh dark tea and fried meat. Stretching, she grinned wide and slow at how her body felt loose and soft, and still smooth and nude. Well-being and thorough rest shimmered in her. She sat up and blinked at the changed room. The fur that covered her was lighter, and edged in purple banding. The table was blonde wood, with legs that were carved with birds and flowers. The chairs matched, although they were carved as trees. A ruby red rug with a gorgeous frame of green lay on the floor.

The tea set was a study in blues, from teal to nearly black, the glazing thick and shining. And next to it was a matching comb and mirror, carved with feathers. The dark wood was glossy. It wasn't at all the same feather carved on her old comb, but it was beautiful. Standing, she picked up the silver robe on the chair and shrugged into it. She touched the comb, the plate of food with its painted leaves, and sat in the chair.

Swallowing, she stared in amazement at the most delicate gift in the whole room, the gift of his trust. In the middle of the table was a thick walled bottle. Amriet's frustrated voice echoed in her ears. He'd found her bottle of the secrecy potion, or more likely, the wolves had. He had left it here, for her. He'd left her the choice, but she didn't need it anymore. The prophecy wasn't yet quite met, but it was close. All her choices were gone. She wanted to cry. She wanted to dance. She wanted Odan.

The weaving flipped up and she stared as he entered, his bare chest, leather skirt and booted feet dearly familiar. He strode in and drew her up into a hold. Laying her head in the hollow of his shoulder, she sighed, her hands stroking the line of his spine.

"Good morning, Vivienne."

"Good morning." She licked over his tiny, tan nipple. "Won't you come to bed?"

He shuddered. His hands clenched on her hips, but he stepped away. "We need to talk."

"I love your new decor." She gestured to the room. "Thank you for adding color. It's wonderful."

He nodded. "My pleasure."

Her eyes latched onto his at the words. Her body pulsed in memory. She sat in the chair quickly, before her knees gave out.

He poured her tea and set the plate before her. Sweet bread, meat, and fresh fruit. "Eat. You didn't have any dinner last night after the battle."

"Neither did you." The thought of what he did eat instead of food made her womb soften and flutter. "Did you heal me? I'm not sore at all."

His gaze lowered to her neck. He licked his lips. "Not completely. I was selfish."

She took a bite of the fruit, then lifted the mirror. An astonishingly huge, dark purple bruise marked nearly one side of her throat. It was oval, with stark red crescents edging it. Amriet had called such marks "lovebites." This was more like a "lovechomp."

She cleared her throat. "Wow."

He took a sip of tea, his lashes lowered. "Will you wear it?"

She considered it. He might as well have carved "mine" across her forehead. She brushed her fingers across it. It did ache, but it wasn't anything significant. He'd mastered

her body last night. She'd let him. Wearing this through the halls of his people would tell everyone what had happened. But in a few more hours, the men would be able to smell her lust for Odan, as well as every other emotion she had. She'd already made the decision not to hide anymore. "Yes, I'll wear it."

He breathed out roughly. Cleared his throat. "Thank you. I'm honored."

Pleasing him was easy. She wanted to do it forever. "Did you eat already?"

"Yes. Sorry, I was starving." But he reached out and stole one of her sweet rolls.

They ate quietly, and Vivienne continued to admire the bright things he'd added to his room, surely to please her. Did this mean she'd stay here with him? How long would it take to kill all the beebees? Surely they could never quite positive if the attacks were done. There was nothing for her back at Second City. She would have to stay here with Odan, ready to fight. Would he want her here, in his room? For how long?

"Vivienne, I need to talk to you."

She looked up at him. He'd been calm, determined, all morning. She nodded. "Take the bottle. Give it to your mages to study, although I can tell you how to make it."

His nose flared. "I have no intention of trapping you into—"

"Stop." She glared at him over the edge of her cup. "When I tell you something, and you doubt me, it's insulting. I'm not taking the potion anymore. I made my decision yesterday and it wasn't because I'd lost my pack." She put it down on the table with a precise click. "When I accepted your pleasure last night, I accepted a new path. I'm not afraid of the prophecy anymore."

His arm propped on the table, the back of his finger traced swirls on her hand. "Prophecy?"

It was time to tell him, and she was suddenly furious. She picked up the bottle and threw it against the wall. It only clattered, and fell to the carpets. Eager fire wanted to dance on her emotion and she wanted to boil the potion away. Then laughed at herself. Like she could throw away all the years of drinking the stuff, of getting the recipe from Conri, of smiling at the people she passed in the compound who were also cloaked, but she now knew to be darkmages. He drew himself up straighter in the chair, watching her passively.

She sat back down and sighed. "Honorable Trux, have you ever done something you were not proud of?"

"Of course I have."

"Will you tell me? One thing. Something you wish you could take back with all your soul."

He considered the remaining rolls for a few minutes. "I'm not sure there's anything in my life I regret so deeply, that I want to undo. There's what-if's that haunt me. If I had challenged my old Alpha, would he live? If I wasn't alpha-class, would I be happier living at the Burrow? If I wasn't skymage Champion, would they have sent me on that first attack into the Fortress instead of Fynn?" He shook his head. "These things follow me, even though they are wasted thoughts. There's more. I've sent men to their deaths, and I constantly review those assignments, wondering if my choices were poor. I used you as bait, frightening you, endangering you, even though it was the best tactic that increased our overall chance."

Staring at his serious, dear face, she chewed her lip. As Flame Curate, she'd had to make personnel decisions with serious social repercussions, but they'd never been life or

death, until that final night. She didn't understand all the things he talked of, but knew he'd just shared things with her he considered dreadful.

Vivienne would never be like her mother, marshaling secrets and doling them out in pieces, for power, sculpting people's impressions through half-truths. "As an acolyte, I was part of a recommending committee. There was a girl who had come into her powers late. She was from the Weaver's Guild, and they'd sent her to us for training because no one knew what to do with her."

She stood up. There was nowhere to go to outrun this. She crossed the robe more precisely over her chest, and sat again. "She was a watermage, but one I've never seen the like of since. Most of the time, she was catatonic, other times she had seizures. And still others times she spoke in nonsense. Whenever she was aware, she had no knowledge of the riddles she'd spouted."

Snatching up the comb, she worked her hair. "I love the comb."

"You're most welcome." He watched her, and the steady calm waiting in his eyes wasn't pity. It was strength, and she summoned her own to meet it.

"She'd only been with us for a few months before we understood her babble was prophetic. Rita wrote them down. The committee was called to review them, to decide what kind of action should be taken in deciphering them, and to research their immutability. Alfons was quite sure consciousness and metacognition would affect the outcome of the prophecies, changing them before they could ever be realized—"

"Vivienne. I'm not an academic. Use smaller words."

She grimaced. "They were afraid. The prophecies they'd gathered from her in just one month were staggering in their specificity, their exactness. A few came true, and they only made total sense in hindsight. It was decided that until she'd been taught more about controlling her craft, she should be—" She broke off. The gray walls of his room seemed to close in on her. A girl's pained and terrified cries echoed in her mind.

"We collared her. Like a criminal. Alfons, Rita, and my mother explained why it was necessary. She laughed at them and refused to accept it. They put it on her anyway, and a few days later it just fell off her in the middle of dinner.

"They made a stronger one through a joint casting. It was High craft, with the Temple's blessing. My mother wanted me to be part of the group that put it on her, because I was so powerful even then, and she wanted me for the Senate. She thought it would be useful for me to participate, to show my "leadership ability."

"When we came into her room, the six of us, she fought. She had no aggressive craft to speak of, but she struggled and screamed and begged. It was..." Vivienne rested her elbow on the table and cupped her hands over her eyes. She felt old and tired, remembering. "It was horrific. She was just a child, alone. I was holding down one of her arms, and as Alfons closed it around her neck, she gave one last prophecy before falling into a coma. It was about me. My mother tried to tell me it wasn't, but I know it was."

Dropping her hand to the table, she looked into Odan's steady eyes. He was Other. He was Wild. He was Beast and Air, passion and safety. "All my life I've been afraid of what she told me that day. It's why I took the potion. It's why I cried the first time the Queen asked me to go into River Mountain and join the force exploring the Fortress. Not because I might die. Because her prophecy tied me to the Beasts, and I was so afraid of you."

"Us?" He asked carefully.

She stared at his square jaw, strong eyebrows, and multi-hued earthen hair. "You." A smile stretched her mouth. "But not anymore. You're my future. She saw it, and I'm not afraid anymore."

He nodded slowly. "I went to my battleform last night."

She blinked, not following his train of thought. "When you had claws in bed?"

He snorted. "You read the guide."

The image of the pit came to her, shadowy images entwined. Her clit throbbed, and her thighs trembled. The pressure of him inside her toward the end made sense. He'd become huge, inside her. A shaky sigh eased from her as she clenched her ass. How wonderful. "Is that something you regret?"

"No. But it's something I'm afraid of."

"I'm not." She grinned at him.

"You're fearless." His jaw clenched. "It wasn't well done of me, Vivienne. I'm concerned about our ability to share a bed."

"I'm not. I want to be with you. What's going to become of us after we kill them all?"

His face wouldn't look different to the casual observer, but she saw the emotional veil he drew down. "You will have completed your duty to your Queen. You'll be free to return to Second City."

Vivienne held his eyes as she shook her head. "I'm going to apply to be adopted. That should make Rafe happy. I'll take the souldance." She fought not to shiver. Twice she'd endured the ceremony and twice she'd been depleted and depressed for days. "I'll choose a husband. Mate." *You.*

That stupid wall of distance stayed in place. "How wonderful. I'm so glad you've grown to respect us enough to join your life to the Clans. Your desire for adoption will be joyfully accepted."

Standing, she walked over to stand behind him. "Frog. Do you even want me?"

"What. Are. You. Saying."

How had she ever thought him cold? The anguish in his voice broke her heart. She nibbled the outer rim of his ear. "Ribbit," she whispered.

The room whirled and she was on her back in his bed. His hands ripped open her robe, and his chest seared hers where it settled against her breasts. His mouth covered hers, conquered and devoured. He demanded she open to him, and his tongue owned her mouth, subduing hers with a hard stroke. He kissed into her at a new angle, and she moaned, softening. She trembled, her skin flushing, unsure if she could handle the pleasure of him so soon, but his mouth wasn't cherishing this time. He took, and he demanded, and she drove up against his mouth in return, insisting on her right to power.

Pulling away from her, he buried his face in her throat. She wrapped her arms around his bristly head and adored his weight. He breathed, kissed her throat with a gentle brush of warm lips. For long minutes his breath danced on her skin, roaming from the sensitive bruise, to her pulse, to her collarbone, to her jaw. His kisses were soft flickers, and she glowed with happiness. Contentment filled her along with hope. The two of them together were not always going to be this peaceful, but that was life, and she wanted it all, with him.

He rolled to sit on the side of the bed, and she gasped. Two small handprints were burned into his shoulders, and red welts laced over his back in a crazy crisscross. She knelt and brushed her lips over one of them. Pulling up her small bodycraft, she pushed

healing heat into him, and watched the welts fade. He jerked from her, standing, looking down at her. With amazement, she saw his eyes flare as green as hers, powered up.

"Don't take your marks from me. I wear them with pride."

She nodded, swallowing.

"Vivienne, it is with humility and deep appreciation I recognize your willingness to become adopted into the Truxet for hope of Bonding with me." He gave the little bow he'd given to her in her study the day she'd met him, just three days ago. "I love your courage, intelligence, beauty, and ferocity. I love your haughty propriety and delicate fussiness and the way your honesty cuts me. I have so much more to discover about you, but don't doubt for a moment that I'll love every bit."

Folding her lips between her teeth, she blinked up at him, tears stinging her eyes. He was wonderful. "I didn't know you were a poet," she whispered thickly. She smiled at him, and he smiled back.

"I'll return." He left, her handprints like small red wings on his shoulders.

She blinked at the swaying, shimmering door covering. If she could find the Water Girl now, she'd shake her hand, apologize, and beg her forgiveness. A whole new world was open to her. Vivienne stretched, boldly nude in her man's bed, eager.

Chapter Nineteen

Pretar stood on the stone balcony at sunrise, staring into the brightening eastern sky. He held an excellent topical poison in his favorite skull pot. It was the result of much testing. He liked it because it was both hideously painful, and deliciously slow, providing a good long drink.

They hadn't returned, so all three pets were probably dead. That meant they were down to five. Time to make some more, but it took so much fucking power, and they were so close to actually making a move on the Cities, it seemed a waste to expend it on the birds now.

Thad would have a fit, and be difficult. But Pretar hoped laying a scalp of light red hair down before him would soothe him. He wanted to rape her about a dozen times first, but likely wouldn't have a chance. What was certain was that her death would power him with a sweet spike of energy. The stronger the soul, the deeper the drink.

His spies had finally brought news. Second City Mage Guild had cleared out an infestation of darkmages. They were vetting every single one of their own in souldances via trusted spiritmages. There was an uproar because they were using their own spiritmages, and so people were accusing them of hiding more than the twenty darkmages they claimed to have caught. What was certain was that Andalay was dead. Sonofabitch. All that work, all that training, all that waiting ... wasted.

And on the morning after the compound was sealed up, the Flame Curate had crept out with a Beast. Oh yes, it was her. Lady Vivienne was the one that killed his acolyte, surely. He'd seen her a few times from a nice safe distance, and knew she was a freak of magecraft. Respected as well, such a shame. He really would have liked to have had Russ kidnap her, so they could play deep. But they'd been barred from taking high-profile City members after the ruckus caused when Thad had taken a temple priestess.

Pretar rejoiced that the Flame Curate was out there in the Wild, relatively unprotected. He'd kill her, and eat her eyes over her screaming face while he plunged into her gut. That bitch killed Andalay. And now she was killing Thad's pets, when the man shouldn't be pushed too much just now. He was still very uneven about the hawks and owls that had gotten away. And Signy was creeping about, whispering to him, but not appearing at group meetings. It was all a bit worrisome.

One thing about worrisome, was that he did his best thinking while dwelling on plots. He'd get this flame-bitch, and she'd help him save his own ass at the same time. Thad loved redheads. He could add her hair to his collection on his wall.

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He couldn't believe she was still arguing with him.

"You made me sleep in the open wilderness two nights ago because you were so paranoid about us being available for battle." She had the mirror propped against the teapot and was doing some sort of mesmerizing twist with her hair, folding the fluffy curls into smoothly flowing patterns, pinning the strands with the small ruby combs he'd given her. "Of course I have to go with you, to be by your side if a call comes."

"There's never been an attack at night. Clearly, beebees are daylight creatures. You can relax here and rest." Panic and dread warred with lust and excitement at the thought of taking her to the Burrow. He wanted her to meet his family, see his home. He wanted her far from available warriors, most especially Gren.

"Why don't you want me to go your party?" She asked, exasperated. "If there's a reason I shouldn't go, just tell me."

He shifted his feet. "I have a duty to attend to tonight. I won't be able to be by your side the whole time."

She rolled her eyes. "If there's anything my time as Senate member prepared me for, it's schmoozing at parties. I'll be fine. Now if you insist on me not going, then I insist you stay here with me. It's just absolutely not right for us to be separated."

"The sun is an hour from setting—"

She shoved from her chair, her eyes flowing with power. "Honestly, Odan! You've been impossible today! First that woman I didn't want to talk to—"

Last night those eyes had glowed solid green as he'd taken her over. "All women are given a mentor. You'll have a formal orientation to prepare—"

"Then there was that odious chuck-face Rafe coming in every hour to suspiciously sniff me—"

Her body had been pliant beneath his at the end, a perfect gift. "Now, I put a stop to that after the second time. The third time he slipped past—"

"And I really want to petition for that beebee's death—"

She'd roamed like an out-of-control forest fire all day, searing into his life. He was so happy he was disoriented. "The Council will kill it soon, if it doesn't die first—"

"And then you spun me upside down again during training!"

Odan quit trying to get a word in and just grinned. That had been fun. Small recompense for the fact he'd yet to get his cock back into her tiny, shining body.

She put her hands on her hips. "It's been a long day. Let's go to your party. I can sit with Charley, or I'll be fine alone."

He curled his fists at the thought of her alone, perched on one of the sitting stones at the edge of the oasis, a horde of powerful, young warriors flirting with her. It was true, they'd had a lot of meetings today. With stunned shock, he'd told the skymage leader, Akash, about her intent to adopt. In short order, a spiritmage, a female mentor, a Woman's Council member, and Rafe had all come to see her before lunch. Vivienne had taken on her haughty, proper facade with the woman, and they'd both been so coolly judgmental with each other it had driven him nuts. His lover could be very arrogant.

After lunch had come their training, and it had gone well, except Odan could feel his lack of full power, which disturbed him. He was more unsure now if the darkmages would attack quickly, or have to recoup. He'd been on edge all day, dreading an attack. It was one thing to go into battle with a woman. It was another thing entirely to take his probable mate-match. When he'd briefly brought up the possibility of assigning a new human to the duty of hunting the beebees, the Council leader Dom had instantly dismissed it.

There had been meetings regarding the masking potion, and the battles, and Burban's family had found out Vivienne was adopting, and had come by. He'd been touched at how genuine she was with them, openly emotional and supportive of their still-raw grief. It reminded him of his last view of her as he landed her on the ground after yesterday's

beebee battle, her face full of shocked fear as she clutched him close. He knew he was just falling unconscious. But Burban had died with that view. Odan hoped the man knew he'd saved her before he passed. It gave him shivers, to think of Vivienne entering the darkmage Fortress, without any way to sift home herself. It made groundbear want to pin her to a wall and fuck her. Instead he'd watched her listen to Burban's parents, and seen her juggle seven tiny flames shaped like people for the amusement of his two younger brothers.

Now here they were, his skin sparking from being so near her, waiting to scent her, waiting to fuck her, waiting for her fiery energy to flag, even somewhat. It didn't.

She'd somehow managed to have the bed re-strung, since he'd shredded the leather last night. How she knew *how* to get that done, he didn't know. But she was good at delegating and expecting to be followed. When she first announced, seriously, that they should go find and kill the beebee brought back to River Mountain through considerable effort by their spiritmages, he laughed. *That* had been a mistake. She seemed to take it personally that the bird still lived, even though it was blind and in pain, dying slowly. No amount of rationalization regarding the reasons they had to study it changed her mind. It was evil and needed to die. Her bloodthirsty ways excited him.

"What is this duty you have at the party? Can I help?"

He sat on one of the new chairs, and considered her, with her new elegant hairdo. "My Alpha, Gren, and I have a complicated relationship. We grew up together. When it came time for our old Alpha to step down, Gren killed him."

Vivienne sat, spine straight, hands folded in her lap, waiting. He couldn't read her eyes, but he appreciated her poise.

"It shocked us all. It's something the Clan has never recovered from. Our Alpha is more than royalty. We honor and respect him, but the love is so much more personal. He holds our very strength in him. To fear him as much as we love him is..." He didn't have words for how awful it was. Constantly unsettling.

"No one will challenge him?" Vivienne asked quietly, but he read her sub-question. She wanted to know if he'd go against Gren.

Odan shook his head. "No. None of the current alphas will challenge him." It occurred to him Vivienne would make a stunning, capable, wise Domina. His cock thickened just thinking of her in that position, at his side, home among the Clan at last. But a vision of ripping out Gren's throat made it subside. No. That wasn't his path.

"Tonight Gren is celebrating his pregnancy with Kalani. She's a paid woman, and I have not heard she's to be adopted. I think she'll just take a mother's six-year contract with us."

Vivienne's shoulders angled subtly, and just like that, her arrogance was back. "This man will take a skinlicker as the mother of his child? And then she'll just walk away from her son?"

All right, that was a whole other conversation. "It is our way, Vivienne, to bond tighter to our fathers than our mothers. There's much for me to explain, in how we view women, and we do not judge them by how they use their bodies. We'll talk more about this later. I want you to understand, even if you don't agree. But tonight I'll be called forward to stand for Kalani. Gren has honored me. If Kalani ever feels she needs support Gren is not giving, or if anything happens to him, I will be her advocate."

Vivienne's jaw jumped, an adorable tic of irritation. "Tell me this relationship isn't

physical." Her words dared him.

He smiled, reaching for her hands and covering them. "It's merely legal. I've never even spoken to her. We're under no obligation to be friends, although I do hope to get to know her better. Tonight I will be by her side continuously, standing as her guard when Gren is busy."

"I see." Vivienne sat motionless beneath his grip. Then she breathed out, and turned her hands to take his. "The thought of you sleeping with her, taking her into your home, hurt me. I was jealous. But you've told me it's me you love, and I will trust you." She stood and gestured to her fighting leathers. "If you're so sure we won't be attacked, do I have to wear this? I would like to look nice to meet your family."

The thought of her standing with him before his family decided it. He was weak with need for her, having stolen only a few kisses all day. He was giddy with hope and near-triumph that she would prove to be his mate and Bond with him.

He was sure it was safe, so he took her to a room of women's clothing, one of the storerooms the Clans' shared. In his heart he told himself he'd ask her to hurry after the first hour, since he'd like to be on time. To his surprise, she expressed delight in the choices, and had a dress on in moments. It was not his experience that women made quick decisions regarding clothes.

She changed in his room, smiling at him as she pushed the leather pants down over her ass. The dress was a deep purple, offsetting her hair and eyes. It skimmed her waist and fit close along her thighs, ending at the knees. With a modest scoop neck and capped sleeves, there was nothing daring about it. Her calves, smooth and bare, and his bruise on her neck, finalized his response.

He pinned her to the wall and kissed her. He cradled her neck and poured all the hope of the day into her wide, lush mouth. She scored her nails down his chest, and kissed him back, harder, deepening the tangle of their tongues. Already, she so seamlessly blended into his life, eagerly meeting his passion and love with her own. He wanted all of her, the good and the less-than-perfect, because she was real, wonderful, and his. Her pillowy lips moved decisively over his, milking the pleasure, reaping the respect he breathed into her. His tongue stroked her teeth, and she strained against him, her hands gripping his ribs while her hips danced restlessly against his erection.

He pulled back and looked down at her softened face. She smiled at him, and his heart fell over like a child's toy.

"You're always so gentle with me. I love that about you. You flow along, so in control, so totally focused on me, until you snap. Then you're so wild and demanding. I love that even more. You have two natures, and I love them both." Her hands brushed around his nipples, fingers small yet confident. "I love you, groundbear skymage Odan. Thank you for showing me your world, and for letting me be a warrior by your side."

It took a moment for him to breathe. He rested his forehead against hers, still mourning her lack of a scent, still pleased that she smelled like him. "Tonight, I want to make love to you."

Her fingers plucked the little nubs, and his balls pulled up even tighter.

"You say that like it's something new. You've already made love to me three times, in the jungle, by the pool, and in your bed."

Happiness rippled like fur beneath his skin, another entity trying to burst free. "Yes. That's true." How stunning she saw it that way. "But none of those were equal exchanges.

You were more generous to me the first two times, and I wanted to give you the pleasure last night. Tonight, we share."

He needed her hands on him, her mouth, her fire, as much as he needed to smooth over her. He stroked the lines of muscle on her slender throat with his thumbs, still so happy to hold her spine and pulse between his palms. He would never betray Vivienne's trust because it was an addiction, this power.

"That sounds..." she shivered. "Wow."

"Let's go to the party."

Sifting through space to his clanhome always made him sad. With Vivienne, the loss of the Clan chafed less. He was proud to have her at his side. Was she a stronger pull than the pack?

He greeted Jimmu, who had guard duty on the sifting stone. Since it had been discovered that the Fortress had access to their sifting stones, they were now guarded constantly. Jimmu called out his arrival, to his embarrassment, and a cry of welcome came up from the central terrace that faced the main staircases down into the Burrow. Leading Vivienne out of the dry ravine and up over the rocky hill of hardened grasses, he couldn't contain his smile at the crowd down below. People shouted out, lifting their clay mugs high, and then Shad was running up to greet him, and Charley, just as tall.

Vivienne knew them so she laughed as she was hugged by both. His mother came up next, and his aunt. Then his father and uncle swallowed him in a shared hug. Breathing their scents deep, he held tight, unable to relax, because Gren had yet to acknowledge his presence.

The chatter of his family around Vivienne, their blatant fascination with her and Vivienne's poised but friendly manner, all fell away when he felt the first push of the Groundbear. The crowd murmured, parting as Gren stormed through.

Odan eased his arm from around Vivienne, murmuring, "Step aside, princess."

He stood on the edge of the granite flagstones, and the old turbulence hit him. *Anger. Aggression.* Groundbear groveled before their Alpha. *Betrayal. Humiliation.* Every muscle in his body flashed tight, frozen. *Love.* Gren's energy thrummed into his skin. For a second he wanted to step in front of Vivienne and lift his chin, but that wasn't his path. He fell to his knees, his hands tight to his thighs, and bared his throat, turning his face up to the golden evening sky.

Gren hit him hard, his teeth clamping onto his throat in a burst of pain. Pleasure at being claimed by his Alpha twined with the blood stinging his collarbone.

"Get *away* from him." Twin towers of flame shot three bodylengths into the sky, and his aunt screamed. His family pulled away, and shocked gasps erupted through the Clan. "*Now.*"

Gren stood, and Odan held his position. He couldn't see Vivienne standing behind him to his left, but he could see the edge of the spike of seething flame, and feel another at his back. Gren narrowed his eyes at Vivienne, his stripes flashing dark on his face. He wrapped one clawed hand around the front of Odan's aching, bleeding throat.

"This man is mine. You have no say between us, woman."

Groundbear snuffled happily, stretching and wriggling for the Alpha. Odan adored his fearless lover. She was—

"Magnificent." Gren looked down at Odan. "I've never met her like."

No. Odan hadn't ever heard of a woman challenging an Alpha. That was Vivienne.

Her voice was cold, clipped. "Of course I have a say. I claim him as well."

The murmuring crowd burst into further excitement.

"I don't care what he's done to warrant such cruel and demeaning treatment. It won't happen again in front of me, or there will be trouble. Get your hands off him."

"Well, Odan? You don't leap to your woman's defense?" Gren tightened his grip, cutting into his breath. His eyes were flat, merciless.

Odan held himself passive in Gren's claws. "She can take care of herself. But there is the fact you would never hurt a woman. Ever."

Gren ignored Vivienne, staring down at him. Odan averted his gaze, deferring to his Alpha, hoping for Vivienne's sake the dominance posturing was over. Healing warmth pulsed through Odan's throat before Gren took his hand away. Gren crouched in front of Odan, and stared at him. Odan kept his gaze lowered.

"Look at me."

Odan dropped his chin and looked into Gren's gaze. Magefire highlighted the white stripe in his hair.

"You trust me with your woman?"

"You are my Alpha." Confusion rolled through him. He dreaded this man with the soul of a killer. He admired him, and loved him. But yes, he never for a moment feared for Vivienne as she faced him down.

Gren stood and moved away from Odan. He spoke to Vivienne. "Put your fire away, beebie-slayer. I am Gren, the Groundbear. Welcome to the Burrow." He gave her the formal head bow of a warrior to woman, folding his shoulders forward and tucking his head. "You will never need to defend Odan from me again. That was the last time I will demand his submission."

The flames winked out, cooling the air around him. He stood, quickly moving to Vivienne's side.

She was still and stiff, her arms locked straight along her sides, but one of her hands flashed out to wrap tightly around his. "I'm glad to hear that. I find Odan immensely worthy of respect. Generally."

Gren stared at her, his mouth twitching at one corner. It twitched again, and then he threw his head back and gave a great bark of laughter. "Yes. Generally." He laughed again, and those nearest laughed tentatively as well.

"Herod." Odan's father stepped forward at Gren's demand. "Please escort Vivienne to the refreshments. I need a private word with Odan." He nodded to Vivienne. "A respectful private word."

Vivienne threw Odan a furtive glance, and he saw she was uneasy with him now, afraid she'd done something he'd disapprove of. He forced a smile for her, stroking her arm. "Go."

She kept her gaze down but her chin up, and moved in her stiffly graceful, controlled way, like she drifted along the terrace. The crowd parted, murmuring around her, as his family closed tight and led her off. She was a tiny jewel among the brawny leathers of his Clan brothers.

"Laing brings me news that she's asked for adoption."

Odan nodded to his Alpha's subtle question. "Yes, I'm sure she's my match, despite the fact I've yet to scent her. She's ceased taking the potion but it hasn't worn off yet."

"Good." The word dripped with satisfaction. "We're keeping her."

Never once had Gren asked if Vivienne was attracted to Odan. He knew it was because Gren wasn't interested in that small detail.

There was a blur of motion and Odan grunted, staggering, as four furrows tore through his chest. They were fairly shallow, and raked along the muscle instead of across it, as Gren would have done if he'd truly wanted to disable Odan. "That's for allowing the beebee to be taken alive. I told you to kill them all. You failed."

"Yes, Alpha." He stood, using his core to keep his shoulders up and back against the instinct to hunch over the pain. "Vivienne wanted to kill it today, but I thought since the Council already had it, we would risk censure for little gain."

"True. There's no sense in killing it now. Maybe they'll learn something new." Gren turned to stand by Odan's side. He cupped his jaw, considering the Clan milling beyond them. After a moment he asked quietly, "You trusted me not to strike out at her."

"Of course." Gren was a bastard, but he wouldn't do anything that dishonorable.

"You'll sleep here tonight, both of you. I'll come to you at dawn. Fuck her then. I'll Bond you." Gren turned his head, and Odan felt the pull of his stare and turned to meet it.

His heart tripped, tangled, and thundered in his bleeding chest. He stared at Gren's flat eyes, struggling under the urge to shout in triumph. *Gren wanted to Bond them at dawn tomorrow.* He was talking about paying the Council's penalty for taking her without offering choices of mates or even a brightmoon matching.

"I'll ask her." She was in love with him. She might say yes, still disbelieving in that way of women that the spiritmages could truly find equally worthy matches for her soul. Was he really capable of taking her mate choices from her? Could he be that ruthless?

"If you wish. But be there regardless." It was an order.

Odan wondered if it was given to free him from the burden of doubt and guilt. It didn't. He would stand against his Alpha if Vivienne chose to wait. But he would do everything he could to convince her to join with him now. Because he *was* that ruthless. He nodded, but cautioned, "I'll ask."

Gren grunted. Gesturing at his chest, he said, "Clean that up enough to scab. I'd rather not be charred tonight. I plan on dancing. Let me take you to meet Kalani."

He found someone to give him a handscarf and wiped the blood away, healing himself halfway. Gren led him to where the auburn-haired tall woman laughed with a pocket of other paid women.

Gren introduced him. "Kalani, this is Odan. He is the one I recommend to stand for you in the Clan."

Kalani's face was not beautiful. It had a toughness to it that said she was not a light spirit. Pride and strength sat her shoulders easily, and there was an unflinching directness in her gaze that made Odan think of Vivienne. He bowed before her with all his respect, and she offered her wrist. He smelled Gren, and Clan, and the baby, very faintly. "Lady. It is my honor."

She stepped close to him, and he became aware of how scantily dressed she was, in a sheer white sleeveless top and red scarf wrapped around her hips. She put a hand on his chest, the undamaged part, and the tingling itch of a spiritcraft spell pinched his lungs. Without asking his permission, she was scanning his honor. She took her hand away, gave a short nod to Gren, and stepped back. "Maybe we can have dinner sometime."

Odan blew out a breath. Shit. She was perfect for Gren. "I'm sure I can arrange that soon."

She smiled, and abruptly she was incredibly sensual. "Bring that little terror in purple. I'd love to meet her."

Foreboding trickled through Odan, and he knew Gren felt it too, because he shifted uneasily at his side. Kalani and Vivienne paired ... he wasn't sure about that.

"I'd like to make the announcement now," Gren said, holding out his hand.

She put hers into it and Odan followed them through the crowd to the first landing on their lookout tower. Odan breathed deeply of the warm, still air. The scrubland and rocky rises of the Burrow's territory rolled out in all directions, open, familiar, and missed.

The crowd fell silent. Gren took the time to meet the gaze of each and every person below. "My Clan, this is Kalani. She bears my son." He turned to her, still holding her hand. "Who would you have stand for you among us?"

She held out her hand to Odan, and he took it. "Odan."

Gren threw his other hand, fingers spread, out toward the people. "To hope! To the future! To children!"

The Clan's happiness swam through his lungs in a wave. They cheered, clapping and leaping, whistling and shouting. Gren swept Kalani up into a whirling hug, then laid her out in his arms and kissed her passionately. Odan laughed, joy from his Alpha vivid in his blood. For an Alpha's announcement, it was downright austere, but Gren wasn't a talker. Odan cheered and clapped, the cacophony of his Clan so close around him as good as a hug. His gaze flew to Vivienne, and she was smiling and clapping, too. Would she join him at dawn? Would the Clan gather again tomorrow night to celebrate his Bonding? He went hard as a Corpux's tusk.

Gren descended into the crowd, who surged around him. Odan pushed into the crowd, and the Clan clambered around him, patting him on the back, pumping his hand. He grinned so wide his face ached. Their skin rubbed against his and groundbear rolled with pleasure. Through all the congratulations and well wishes regarding Gren's open respect and the recent beebie battles, he kept his gaze pinned on a slim figure in purple. Odan had just pushed his way up to Shad, noting Vivienne was smiling and listening to his aunt, when the call came out.

"Odan! Vivienne! To battle!" Jimmu's voice was urgent.

No. Not tonight. Odan grabbed Vivienne's outstretched hand and they ran forward, the crowd parting for them. Horror kindled through Odan's gut as Jimmu called again. She wasn't wearing battle leathers. He wasn't at full strength. She was his unclaimed match, and the need to throw her into the nearest cave and seal the Bond pounded in his bones.

Jimmu ran ahead of them, slapping his palm on the sifting stone. Odan grabbed his forearm and the world sifted away. They landed in shadow, with a jagged gray mountain looming behind them. A valley of grass rolled out before him. He did not know this sifting stone, so it must be an extremely remote one.

He gathered his woman up into his arms, aching with the necessity of taking her into this duty. "Ready?"

Her eyes were huge. "Wait." She scrabbled at her hair, thrusting four ruby combs at Jimmu. "I don't want to lose these."

"One's just coming up on this range from the west. You're ahead of it." The other warrior standing on the small ledge gave him the message quickly.

She bent her knees, and he jumped with her.

He soared up into the sky, his groundbear hissing, jaw wide, seeking prey. They were on the eastern side of the mountains, because the jagged peak was rimmed in orange from the setting sun.

He scanned, taking them higher, cursing in his head. This was all wrong. The beebees had no night vision. It was much too late for an attack. They were missing something here.

"There!" She pointed, and lit three fireballs. He grabbed them, found the bird flying almost sedately east, just south of their position.

She growled low in her throat, her hair fluttering wildly around her shoulders. Fire ringed the bird as he took them closer and sent the fireballs out. He absolutely loved her. But relishing her power didn't mean he wouldn't go insane for bringing her into danger like this. His hand latched firmly onto her hip as he clamped her to his side. One of the fireballs missed, but he capped her corral with downward-pushing air, and the bird screamed in anger. It did something the others hadn't. It let itself be taken swiftly down, folding its wings tightly in a dive.

She tossed three more fireballs for him, and he saw she'd added a new twist to the encircling flame. She was molding it to its body, more like wrapping it in a blanket than fencing it. The bird pulled up above the ground, and flew low. Its body wrapped in fire, it ignited the grassland below it like an artist spreading paint. He struggled to slow it as much as he could, and the fire flared across the ground even faster in his wind.

Vivienne cursed and flung more fireballs, and the flames began to shrink on the ground. She muttered, her hands gouging at his waist, and its wings erupted in flames, not surrounded any more, but fully lit themselves. Its tail and neck thrashed wildly, and he grimly poured more power into driving it down, pinning it still. He threw the fireballs and they were close enough to hear the thud of all three impacting. She'd almost managed to erase the fire off the ground, and three more fireballs sprang into the air before him. Their fighting was so improved. Pride filled him. *Die*, he thought. *For Fynn*. It rolled on the ground, clawing up dirt with its talons, snapping uselessly with its beak.

That's when the hawk's cry shocked him into looking up. The hawk spiraled behind them screaming in short, sharp bursts. Odan scanned the sky, and his arm reflexively seized on Vivienne, sealing her tight to his side. *No. Fuck no. Not now. Not with her.*

Odan roared at the hawk. "Get help!" Even though he knew there were watchers at the sifting stone who must be working toward that, he couldn't help but pray. The stone was placed so high on such a steep section of cliff that even if the wolves and martens, the fastest beastspirits, arrived now, it would take them a long time to get down onto the plain. And they'd already gone so far south from the stone.

"Odan! Pay attention!" Vivienne snapped at him. She'd blinded the first one, by the fire spouting from its eyes, and it flopped in horrific lurches, with half its wings burned away. She didn't know what was above and behind them. He could put her down on the ground. He could leave her in relative safety. He could—

"Yes!" She screamed in triumph as the head crashed to earth, lolling.

The things were so fucking hard to kill. Their bones were like iron and their skin so protective. He summoned lightning, and took them higher, farther from it, and struck it hard. She hadn't boiled it internally this time, so it didn't explode as that first one did. But it did flop, incapacitated at least, and lie still. Flames still danced along its body.

She crowed, waving her fist.

"Vivienne." The despairing word eased from his lips so softly she couldn't have heard it, but she looked up at him, her face alive.

He saw the satisfaction drain away from her face. Shock and then fear crept in. His stomach cramped from the need to see her safely away. "Oh, fuck." He tore them higher, rotating to face the north.

The first beebee had been nothing but a distraction. Three drove hard directly toward them. Beneath the center beebee hung a man in a stout wicker basket, apparently tied to its legs. He matched the description and drawing Tydus and Sunny had completed of one of the darkmages they'd met in their time in the Fortress. Odan couldn't remember his name at the moment, but he knew his ugly face.

Ice flowed into his body. His battleform erupted without thought, and he kept Vivienne pinned to his side. She would survive this. No mistakes. Focus. Kill.

"There's a man!" Vivienne exclaimed.

"Darkmage." Only with his snout and fangs, it came out "Aaackmmmaaay."

"Oh!" She grabbed onto the ripped waistband of his warskirt and pulled back and forth. "Come back! I can't understand you!"

His mind raced, swirling with his groundbear's vicious gnawing of his ribs. The darkmage was the most important. Flying them beyond the beebees, he angled to keep from being outflanked, and also curled toward the mountains so they'd at least stay closer to the sifting stone. He'd never had to pull his throat and jaw out of battleform before. Groundbear wasn't leaving. He needed to be here for this battle, and Odan feared he needed the beastspirit's strength. But Vivienne had to understand them.

"Quit running away! Stop going so low! If you put me down, I'll paint your toenails when you're asleep!" She twisted in his arms, the soft whooshes of fireballs falling steadily.

She needs us. You must let me share your form more. Through a grinding sensation, his powerful fangs receded, his throat elongated. Groundbear ceded his lower face to human form.

Coughing through the strange feeling, he said, "Our focus is to drop the darkmage. Hopefully the fall will kill him for us. But we can't get in too close and spend the time to fight him. I don't want to engage him in the air. Stop using fireballs. We need larger attacks that will damage at least two at a time. Main target is the darkmage's beebee, but try to make every hit count twice."

One of the beebees was flying so incredibly fast below him, trying to get in front of him to outflank them. Odan took them higher, quivering with bloodlust and fury.

"What about your tornado?"

"Takes me too long to build it." His lightning was only moderately faster, but wouldn't drain him as deeply.

"What if you sent me off alone, so you could fight behind them?"

His heart nearly stopped at the very idea. His arm around her ribs jumped reflexively. "No. We stay together, join our attacks. Fast and hard, princess." Now that Odan focused solely on maneuvering them in the air, the beebees had none of his strong headwind to slow them. They were so fucking fast. He jerked them up hard as one came in from the side, then angled them sharply back to avoid the dive of another.

Fire lit up the colorful twilight sky. Sheets of it rippled and flowed like the winter aurora at White Hollow. He didn't have time to understand what she was doing. He only

knew he'd never seen anything like it. Pull the energy through the Air. Dodge. Scan. Lift. Rub the energy. Heat it. Gather the lightning ... almost ready... Her flames baked his face, his feet, teared his eyes.

One of the beebees finally roared its throaty, rasping screech of pain. It abruptly pulled away from the fight, and he saw it was the one holding the darkmage. They were mostly keeping below him, so it was harder to identify where the darkmage was. He soared after it.

"Right!" Vivienne screamed, plastering tightly to him, burying her face in his side.

They'd never practiced multiple targets, not even today after he knew it had become a choice of the darkmages. He had no idea if she meant *go right* or *incoming on the right*. He looked. It was incoming on the right, and it was too late. With a blast of wind and a tight spiral, he took them up over the back of the beebee, so close he could see the veins in its leathery wings. The flexible neck of the creature twisted with them, striking out with that massive pointed beak. With a slash and a kick, Odan kept it from landing, scoring two sets of white grooves with his claws and feet. Fire moving in an oddly thick way dripped down the center of its back, oozing between the nest of spines between its wings.

No sooner had the lashing tail of the monster knocked the breath from him than another beebee arrowed toward them, beak wide and worm-like tongue dancing in eagerness. The deadly rows of serrated teeth gaped, and he couldn't breathe. *Had the tail hit Vivienne?* He dove beneath this one, and the darkmage was *right there*.

The man was older than Odan, his gaze sparkling with a frenzied glee. His mouth blew spittle as he shouted, "I'll feast on your heart!"

Immense talons clacked, reaching for them, and he cut the wind, dropping like a stone, his hand reaching up in slow motion to keep the tip of one black dagger-point away from Vivienne. He spun, trying to take the strike himself. It speared through her flowing hair, streaming up as they fell, a tuft of pink-gold strands glittering as it was left behind.

Liquid splashed on his back and shoulders. He knew immediately it was darkcraft, the tight filth and wrongness clinging to his blood, trying to worm inside him. But he wore his battleform, and with a spine-cracking rush of pain, his groundbear chased it all out. The agony it left behind was pushed to a dim compartment. He had to breathe, he had to avoid, and he had to help his mate fucking *fight*. Getting a spot on the three circling, rolling beebees through the sheets of flame ribboning the air, he focused again on his lightning.

One beebee fell sharply as its eyes erupted with a burst of flame. He knew from before it would still be able to sense Vivienne and track them that way. A small orb spun through the air and it was mere instinct that had him bat it away, his arm blurring with battleform speed. It exploded against his forearm, and that same clinging blackness ate at his bones before groundbear pounced and wrestled with it.

Had any hit Vivienne? She didn't cry out. He glanced at her, wheezing as the swelling skin on his back split from the first potion's hit. Hot blood poured down his spine. Her hair whipped wildly around her head, her eyes shining green, as his would be now, too. Wide lips pulled away from clenched teeth and her nose was drawn up in a full snarl. One of her hands was out, flowing through the air as it sketched a new spell. The other was clenched in his waistband.

Banishing his fury into the same closet as his pain and terror, he drew in one deep clear breath for the first time in too long, and released the lightning. Forks of white and yellow formed lace over the beebie carrying the darkmage. It wasn't enough to sting and burn the outside of it. He sent the lightning inside, pointing it all toward the brain. He held the energy, squeezing everything he could from Air. His eyes burned in the wind, but he kept his gaze steady. Odan looped them forward to avoid an approaching beebie, and held the lightning on and on as the smoking creature whipped his head, then tipped, falling with lurching movements.

The basket became visible for a moment as the creature listed, wings uselessly limp above it. The darkmage clung to the straps, his face a mask of fury. Odan wanted so much to direct a portion of the lightning to the man, but he didn't dare divide his thoughts and lose his grip on it. He stroked the lightning around the beebie, and *in*. Its weight carried it completely backwards, head, wings and tail all trailing above as it plummeted. *Die you fucker*, he willed.

But just before he had the satisfaction of watching the darkmage impact, Vivienne screamed, "Right!"

He let go of the lightning and poured speed to the left. The air pulled tears from his eyes. Or maybe it was the stench of the creature snapping at them, following behind. Vivienne roared, her feminine high-pitched fury a balm to his focus. She was alive. Taking them up in a loop over the top of the creature, he got to see her melt the flesh from its body. It struggled to turn back towards them, but flailed, screaming as it spiraled and lurched toward the ground. To his horror, his groundbear began to lose the battle against the darkcraft. He his legs hung heavy and numb, and the pain drew up his neck to tunnel his vision. Blood dripped in a trail off his feet.

He spun to find the third beebie had gone higher, poised to plummet down at them. That's when he took a hard breath and scented her for the first time. *Vivienne. His mate.* Determination, protection, fury, and bloodlust pumped off her in waves. But it was her core scent that held him motionless. The skin of his far arm bubbled, oozing pus that stung with renewed bursts of darkcraft, so he couldn't hold her like he needed to. The darkcraft wrapped around his heart, but Vivienne's scent was already there. Literally, love for her filled him with light. No, radiance. Vivienne and her fire let him breathe.

He waited for the beebie to dive, and it did. The dancing walls of flame swirled around the creature. As fast as it was, she was faster. He took a wind shear, and smashed it from the side. It knocked so far and so hard that spines tumbled from its back. This was the blind one, and blood sprayed in an arc around its head as it spun in the air.

"No wind!" Vivienne demanded.

He took it away. Fireballs popped into being in a ring around the tumbling bird, and bombarded it with one massive concussion of heat. Flaming, thrashing, it fell.

They'd done it. They floated in the darkening sky, the lavender horizon to the east hung with the rising full moon. Spasms of torment wracked him. Gasping deeply, he pulled harder on her scent and focused on the ground below. Odan took them down toward earth. Groundbear was shoved out of his body by the creeping darkness, fighting the whole way, and he shrank into his human form. Pain took his sight, and he knew it would soon take his mind.

"Now the darkmage!" Vivienne leaned forward in eagerness. Her delicate form against him was the only reason he was able to swallow down his nausea.

"No." As they neared the ground, the grasses whispered, and the soft lingering heat of summer rose to comfort him off the earth.

"No! NO?" She twisted toward him and gasped. "Don't you dare pass out on me again! We finish this!"

He landed, immediately releasing her so he wouldn't pull her down as he dropped to one knee. Speech took effort against the churning pain. "I'm hit, Vivienne. The darkspell is working quickly." Devastating agony seized his back. But the pain of leaving her like this was worse. Dropping to his hands, he gritted out, "Stay with me. Help comes."

He toppled forward, his mind whirling with cautions he had no time to pass. *Don't set a flame. We're not sure any of them are dead. Listen for chittering, and kill it quick. It might be a rattlesnake. Then there's the hyenas. This is their hunting time, and they'll come to the scent of death. Beware their—*The grass was rough under his face. Pain pulsed over his body, escaping from his hold. Blackness.

Chapter Twenty

Vivienne stared at the bubbling meat of Odan's back and arm with horror. She'd sat on her knees by his side now for over an hour. She had no idea where they were. The slim flame she'd set above her head for light was held ruthlessly still. When it flickered, shadows writhed in the encircling grasses that made her gasp and twitch.

Pain throbbed in her hand. She cradled it to herself, rocking. When she'd put her hand on his uninjured shoulder, the affliction had snapped tight around her palm and fingers. He was bleeding to death, and she couldn't even share her poor, thin bodycraft to stop it. Somehow, that mage had poisoned him, and it was contagious. It hurt so bad she could hardly think, yet he'd had the strength to finish the battle in worse condition.

She'd pulled the tattered bits of his warskirt off and pressed them to his back, but the leather wasn't absorbent or flexible enough. A chunk of her dress was soon saturated. She bore her body weight down, one-handed, over the worst of the wounds, to try to staunch it.

For the fiftieth time, she sent a massive spike of flame towering into the air and screamed for help with all her breath, willing the wolves to hear. Gasping, she held her position, pressing on Odan's back, cradling her arm that now sizzled all the way up to her elbow, and staring at his ruined arm as if her gaze could cauterize it. She'd actually considered that briefly, but discarded the terrifying idea. It was obviously poison of some sort, and she could seal it inside him.

Waves of rage and despair beat at her. It was only recently she recognized that they came in time with the surging pain in her arm. Darkcraft. The bastard was trying to get inside her head. Odan would survive. He would. He had to. She'd just found him. Lifting her face to send another pulse of fire into the sky, she screamed instead at the man standing before her.

He threw a small ball at her, and she dodged. It whispered past her head into the tall grasses behind her. *The darkmage*. Weakness flooded her, so much sorrow, so much fear. They were both wounded. He would kill them both.

With a dim part of her mind, she knew these were his thoughts, and that the weakness sapping her was him feeding off her. Moaning, she staggered to her feet, wanting to die facing him in battle.

One of his legs was broken. He wavered as he stood at the edge of her small flame's light. His face was bloody, and perhaps an arm was broken too. He coughed, and blood sprayed. "Your scalp will hang on Thad's wall, bitch. This beast is not dead yet, so I'll heal him enough to rape him to death. He'll die staring at your slashed body, with my fingers in his guts." As he spoke, he drew himself up straighter, so impossibly strong.

Vivienne sobbed, bit her lip. She had survived Ruth as a mother. She would not give this man the satisfaction. Control. Pride. Stepping across Odan's body, she stood between him and evil. It would go through her before it would touch him.

"Come to me, slave. Come meet your master." Green magelight soared from his fist, striking her squarely in the chest.

Black flecks of evil danced in it, a disease. On her. *In her*. She crumpled to her knees again, her teeth clacking together as she landed. She shrieked, the pain and ugliness a

horror she'd never experienced. Her wounded arm pulsed, and flopped to her side, completely lost to her.

He laughed, and stumbled forward. "This is for Andalay."

A cut opened on her arm, the green light he wielded narrowing, gleaming with control.

"This is for our lizard birds."

Slashes stung across her chest and shoulders. The gaps in her dress bloomed dark with blood. He inhaled hard, moaning with a sick sexual pleasure. He coughed, and only a little blood dribbled from his mouth. Nausea rolled in her stomach.

"This is for what I'll have to deal with when I go back to Thad."

A bloody X bloomed across her stomach. The pain from his first spell toppled her sideways, so that she sat, braced on her good hand, her legs to one side. She struggled to breathe, her brain full of fear of death.

"You fucking bitch, you're so delicious. Give me more." He reached for her, his spread, curling fingers pulsing with black-flecked power.

If he touched her, Odan would be tormented forever. The thought flickered in a moment, and her hand slashed up to knock his away. "No."

He scowled at her, spat in her face. Saliva burned her cheek. "No? Slave bitches don't get a voice, let alone a choice."

Darkness twisted inside her, and she felt an absolute need to lay her face down at his feet. Pain spiraled down her spine, and she choked, struggling to resist. All her life she'd striven to be the best. She'd practiced endless hours, experimented, read and explored to grow her boundaries, always with perfect control. She'd struggled to become her own person, outside of her mother's manipulation. The thought of being this thing's slave broke something inside her. She shook her head from side to side, gritting her teeth as pain boiled her blood.

He reached for her again, and the moment stopped. His hand looked like a skeleton claw, something violent and wrong. He was overtaking her will. She had no one to stand with her. Alone and defenseless, she was bare before his might. *When the big birds fly over the Cities, the clawed beast will find you. You'll shed your attachments, your small world surrounded by darkness. He'll strip away your layers, even your fire, until you are nothing but a woman. When he has your scent, no choices will be left to you, and you will be bound.*

The initial horror when she first heard those words came back to her tenfold. She'd thought it was about the Beasts, about being forced into adoption, being made to live a lesser life than she'd earned for herself in the City. But Rowan's prophecies often only made sense in hindsight. And right here, now, those words took on a whole new level of terror.

His hand was before her face. The prophecy had found her anyway. Her sight etched sharp with fury. No. *No.* Her fire flew in a blast straight out of her chest. From her heart. She poured everything she was into the flames. So when his thick, foul poison rolled through her body and wrenched the heat off, she clutched her chest, shocked breathless. The night went dark as her flame-light winked out. The stars were a great flowing dome across a sky blacker than any she'd ever seen.

He had staggered back from her attack, but now he turned to face her again, his wretched skull of a face grinning at her in triumph. "Hello, slave cunt."

She couldn't breathe. Her heart pounded once, twisting in pain beneath the force it labored under.

"This is the slave spell, a masterpiece of darkcraft. So much pain and anger, all ours to feed on. In just a moment, it will be over, and you will be my puppet."

She lifted her good hand, but her fire did not roll beneath her skin. She was cold. As if she were already dead.

"Get on your back. Right across him will be fine. I'll take you the first time on top of his very useless body." He cackled, lurching toward her. "The first time is always the sweetest. The despair is fresh."

Her body stung and pulsed, and the weight of his will arched her back, driving her to lay across Odan. Silently screaming, her shoulders propped against the bloody pad of leather covering his back.

"Spread your legs." He stood at her feet, both his hands and forearms now pulsing with seething black-and-green light. So clearly, she sensed him draining her, stealing her strength, warping her soul.

She focused everything on keeping her legs closed, and they still began to spread, her muscles taut, pain pounding behind her eyes at her resistance. Her hand clawed at the earth, her poisoned arm laying like deadweight. Her breath rattled, her chest heaving deeply.

When her thighs were spread wide he knelt between them awkwardly, hissing and shouting in pain. She called to her fire, and there was nothing but an echo of her own desperation. She was nothing. Nothing but a woman.

He fumbled with his pants, baring his groin. "Yes. Yes, now your soul will break, and you'll be mine." He chuckled. In the moment he stroked his erection, the control over her faded just a tiny bit.

Her hand flew forward almost before the idea formed. There was no finesse. She merely heaved her limb across her body. Dirt splattered across his downturned face. His control slipped farther. Her knee drew up, and she cocked her heel and slammed her foot forward against his crotch with what strength she could manage. His shout held two parts, one surprise, one agony. She could breathe again, without the despair he'd poured into her. Fury rose to burn away the terror.

Rolling away, she scanned for a weapon. A rock. A stick. Nothing. She staggered to her feet. He hunched, hissing in fury, a dark shape. Then he helped her out by lighting up his hands with his black-specked sickening green darkcraft. She grabbed the tattered, sticky leather off of Odan's back and dove for him. Landing with her full weight, on her knees on top of him, she screeched as his powered hand brushed her calf. Misery throbbed, pulsing in her knee, calf, and foot.

But he also shrieked as something popped in his chest. She got the leather around his head, scrambling to hurt him as much as possible as she rolled him onto his front, getting the leather tight around his face. He slapped one hand against the ground, choking, and she stood on one shoulder. Twisting the folds of leather tight with a wrench of her slippery fingers, she crouched, then slammed her knees straight, hauling straight up with every ounce of rage in her. Oddly, his neck made no sound as she snapped it.

Staggering off his body from her momentum, the leather fell to the ground around his head, like a present unfurling out of its wrapping. She stood, trembling, gasping, sobbing, in the pitch black. Her feet stood on sparse grass and dry packed earth. Where

had her little black sandals gone? Pain throbbed and bit over her entire body, but with every breath it eased. Desperately, she summoned her fire. Nothing.

A groan came from the ground. She squeaked, flailing back, but it wasn't the darkmage, it was Odan.

"Oh! Oh!" She fumbled forward, tripped on one of his feet and crashed to her knees beside him. "Odan! It's alright! You're alive!"

She didn't know if she was trying to convince him or herself. Her hand hovered, needing to touch him, but scared of the pain. She cried out in rage, that *he'd* done this, kept them from touching. His unpoisoned fingers moved, and she gave in to the need, and grabbed him with her working hand. Their fingers folded tight. Joy wove through the pain, and it was sweet.

She leaned down over him, her snarled curls curtaining around his dark profile. "You have to live. I need you, mate. I'm alone out here, and he took my fire away. Please, Odan, don't give up. Groundbear, if you can hear me, stay strong. Survive."

Distant baying rang out in the night. Her head snapped up. She crouched, motionless, clinging to her man, struggling not to cry. Was it the wolves? Or some horrible mage-beast? Should she try to drag Odan away from the dead body, and the blood he'd spilled? The howls were unearthly, something out of a nightmare. They echoed, wavering. She bowed her head over their clenched fists, and prayed to the Sacred Couple.

Skyfather, one of your children lies wounded. You do not want to lose one of your most powerful warriors when his life is still so young. Earthmother, I beg of you, hold us safe. You came for me in my weakest hour, and lent me your power. I thank you, I bless you, I honor you. Don't let it be for naught. I have so much love to share with him. So much more good I could do.

The howls were closer now, mixed with short, excited barks. With one final squeeze of his now slack hand, she untangled their fingers, and somehow found the faith to stand. The creatures were loud and the night seemed even darker, closing around her. She pulled from her core, and fire stayed silent.

A lean shape streaked through the grass on her right. She gasped, spinning, but it was already gone. Another raced off to the left. Two landed on the darkmage's body and set their teeth to it, snarling with hair-rippling ferocity as they whipped powerful heads back and forth, pulling wet chunks from his form. Gagging, she pushed her fist against her mouth, trying to muffle the sound.

More came, crouching at the edge of the flattened grass, muzzles rippling with intent. She sensed them behind her and whirled, crying out, good hand up, but useless. Four lined up, dark dog-like forms she could barely make out. One rose from his flattened posture, sitting, then shimmering.

A man stood, tall and strong, blond hair gleaming in the moonlight. "Lady Vivienne. You are safe now."

"Odan is poisoned!" The relief threatened her knees, hope choking her.

"As are you, my Lady. Please, sit here and rest. Let us tend you both."

Chapter Twenty-One

She sat in the chair clutching Charley's hand. They were in a sort of underground lounge at the Burrow, the groundbear's clanhome. The woman had been a silent fountain of strength, listening, touching her, without comment. His mother and aunt had been there earlier, but the aunt had dissolved into such sobs and moans his mother had taken her out. The men had come and gone, his family, his friends, praising her, offering their help, telling her that Odan was well.

The night had passed with agonizing slowness. Her own healing was painful, but brief. The spiritmages assured her her fire was likely to return. When, they could not say. How strong, they could not say. She ached, but it wasn't anything the bodymages had failed to heal. The bath she'd hurriedly taken had been to get the foul creature's stench thoroughly off, and she wore a ridiculously baggy dress of Charley's. The tea she'd been forced to drink seethed in her stomach. Her question for all of the guests was always the same.

"When can I see him?" her voice rasped. Even the bodymages hadn't been able to fully repair her stretched vocal cords. Some screams left scars.

The Alpha, Gren, stood before her, bare-chested, wearing leather pants. He considered her, rubbing his chin in a thoughtful grip. When he had come out of the night as the wolves worked over Odan, she'd cried at the fear and need stark on his face. He'd crouched over Odan's laboring chest, putting his hands on his throat, easing his breathing. This man loved Odan, although he would probably never say it due to his surfeit of pride.

Vivienne had little pride left. "I'd like to see him." She held the man's calculating gaze, and openly begged. "Please."

Charley squeezed her hand softly, either in caution or support.

"What if I told you that to see him now would mean that you give up both your brightmoon ceremony that finds mate matches among the Truxet, and your ability to choose among those men? Would you really go to him, knowing it would mean a Bonding this very night?"

Charley shrank back against her chair, her breath stilling.

Vivienne laughed, short and bitter. "There is no other. I already love him. I was bonded to him the moment he argued with me on the sand dunes, unafraid of my fire or position, and apologized for taking my pack."

Gren continued to stare at her, fascinated. She would have thrown a fireball at him if she'd had one.

"Who broke the darkmage's neck?" Gren asked casually.

"I did." Satisfaction dripped from both syllables. She lifted her chin.

He nodded. "Follow me. Charley, thank you for your assistance. You can go to bed now. I'll be with Vivienne."

Vivienne glanced at Charley, whose eyes were wild as she stared at Gren. "It's fine, Charley. Thank you for your help." She hugged the larger woman.

In the hallway, Shad and a man she'd met a few times now, Bjorn, stood talking quietly. Both came to attention, facing Gren.

"Shad, tend to your mate. She's tired. Bjorn, I give the Clan over to your watch. We'll

be on the lowest level. No interruptions."

"Yes, Alpha." Bjorn bowed toward her. "May the Six bless you, Lady."

Gren moved swiftly through the winding halls. They were earthen instead of stone, and closer, rounder than at River Mountain. The magelights were farther apart, allowing for more shadows. She jogged to keep up, and the ankle boots she'd been given pinched her feet. He went down curving ramps and steep flights of stairs, past musty rooms and others smelling of spices. Finally, he slowed as they came around another curve. There was only a short stretch of hall before them, with two doors that both had stone covers, unlike the cloth flaps hanging over most.

He turned to face her, not even winded. "He's been healed, but he's struggling with his groundbear. It is very hard on us when we scent a match, and for him to catch his first scent of you, already his lover, in the middle of a battle he feels he failed you in, was hard on him. I haven't taken you to him before this because I've been trying to get his beastspirit to back down, but he won't. Now that you've agreed to the Bonding, his battleform is required, but you need to understand he's been under a lot of stress today."

She swallowed. "Me, too."

He inclined his head. "I'm so proud of you. You've handled the aftermath very well." Any softening she'd detected faded, and he was again the cold, dominant leader she'd met at the party. "I'm Bonding you to Odan now. Do you know what will happen?"

A pit. Battleform. "I'm not sure. I think he fucks me in his battleform."

"Yes. I'll reach inside your magescapes and swap pieces of your soulair, and it will be done. It's beautiful and wild and permanent." He drew a deep breath, and his jaw clenched. "Are you sure you are ready to bind your life to our Clan's?"

It crossed her mind to warn him she had no fire anymore. She decided not to. "I'm sure." And she was. Whichever way the prophecy had meant to slant, between Odan or the darkmage, she'd overcome it. She had no fear of this.

"Undress. We'll begin." He turned and set his shoulder to one door, shoving it open with a grunt.

Vivienne dropped her dress on the floor, and stepped out of her underpants, kicked off the shoes. Her hair was tangled, and the worst cut, the X across her stomach, had left faint red lines. Crossing her arms around herself, she stepped into the open door.

Gren was to her right. When she moved farther in, he rolled the stone shut behind her. The room was round, the floor hollowed like a bowl. At the deepest point was a pile of blankets and furs. Several magelights were lit in niches along the walls. Odan paced along the far wall, four steps to the right, turn, four steps to the left, turn.

He was magnificent. His body rippled with muscle, his hair shone clean, and his skin was whole, tight, and smooth. He was nude, and erect. His claws were out on his hands and feet, but he hadn't thickened to the giant proportions she'd seen in the sky during the battles. It was the most natural thing in the world to go down the slope and sit in the furs. Odan snarled, and it was that grunting cough that belonged to a beast's throat, not a man's.

He kept pacing. She was at a loss. Surely he knew she was here. She glanced at Gren, who surprised her by rolling his eyes. He jerked his head at Odan, directing her attention there, but Odan just kept pacing.

"Odan," she tried calling gently.

Step, step, step, step, turn.

"I'm here to Bond with you. I'm ready."

Step, step, slash the wall, step, step, turn.

"I love you, Odan. I want to share with you, the way you promised."

He stopped.

"I know I'm not supposed to be here now. Gren explained it. This is my choice, Odan. *You* are my choice."

He turned just his head, and his eyes glittered like molten silver.

She smiled, full of wonder at their health, at their triumph. She held up one hand.

"I'm a far cry from the woman you met. But I can say with all my heart, I'm yours."

The air blurred, and she gasped when he appeared before her, crouched on his haunches, coming forward onto his knees, pushing her back with his chest as he moved over her, surrounding her with his life. She cried out, and reached for his shoulders, easing her legs open, relaxing beneath the warmth of him. He was healed, powerful and beautiful. So beautiful to her.

His skin was the most fabulous sensation she knew, better than the most luscious fabric of the Cities. Stroking her hands across his rounded shoulders again and again, she moaned, banishing the memory of being unable to touch him as he lay in the grass. He shuddered.

"Vivienne, I will never let you go." It was a warning, a sorrow, a threat.

She tipped her head back, baring her throat to him. "Yes."

His mouth settled over her pulse, lapping, lips paddling across her skin with such care. She melted, and his cock landed on her thigh, slid to her center, and nosed gently into her folds. Tipping her hips to aid him, she drew her fingers down his chest, along his ribs, and gripped his hips.

"Vivienne."

The word was so thick with love, she rolled her head from side to side, struggling under the joy of it. His body pressed into hers, a long, steady push. His controlled slide hit the depth her channel could take him, and he sighed, settling onto her smaller frame, dwarfing her with his thick muscles. His cock was a bar of heat lodged in her core, and she selfishly, desperately pulled on it, squeezing it over and over, as if he was the source of rediscovering her fire. She wanted to burn. She wanted to fly with him.

The pinch in her brain startled her and she gasped, jerking.

He kissed her temple, nuzzled her hair. "Shhhh. Let him in."

"Hunh!" Her head slashed to the side, as if to avoid the internal probe prying up her sacred inner space, her magescape. Vivienne's magescape was the sky, full of deep color at sunset. The air was warm, and she stood on a stone walkway, similar to her Guild's compound roof. Gren was here, wild and wrong, vicious and wounded.

As soon as she caught her breath, Odan moved. His body slid forward and back inside her, on top of her, all around her. His mouth sipped her breath, lapped the rise of her breast as he withdrew, nipped her earlobe as he thrust in. Her hands roamed his hips and back, his spine and ribs as he moved on her. Slick, warm skin rippled with muscles. Gren was still there, hovering, hunting, but he had no chance against the power of Odan, her warrior, rocking in and out of her body.

"Yes. Burn me," he whispered.

She mourned, and curled her fingers into the bunching muscles that shifted and bubbled under her palms. Groaning, his shoulders rose above her face, his head much

farther above hers. Inside, her walls stretched around his swelling force, pleasure stung her breathless. He rolled them over in a flurry of limbs, and she moaned, feeling the shift and stab of him, now that her body weight pressed him even deeper. She knelt astride his hips, feeling their soft, bare skin grind together.

The man beneath her was a blending of two natures. Sky and Clan. Earth and man. His stripes wrapped his head, and massive clawed hands stroked her thighs again and again yet never cut her. His frame had become so deep, her knees angled steeply down to the furs. She had to use her hands, planting them on his belly, to lift herself up his immense girth, and then let her weight carry her slowly back down. She shoved with her arms, sighing at the sting and chafing, and then slid so gently back down his hot, silky cock. Bending forward she kissed across his chest, the larger nipples lavished with tiny licks of her tongue. Her fingers danced across his flesh. She strained to get him farther inside her, frustrated by the remaining inches she couldn't fit.

Odan's hands skated up her back, curled over her shoulders from behind and held her down. His claws were cool across her collarbone. She moaned at the delicious tightness, accepting the strength locking her in place. His hips punched up, and she shouted, a shock of sharp pleasure slamming through her lungs. Her clit smashed against his pelvis, ground flat. His hands covered her breasts, his claws skimming her nipples, the pads of his thumbs stroking the crease under her breast. Shouting again, she grabbed his biceps and bucked, desperate for more of the trickling heat, the winding lava flowing down her thighs to her curled toes. She thrust wildly on top of him, grunting and straining to work herself on his tremendous cock, leaning her chest into the supporting strength of his rubbing palms.

He curled up around her, wrapping her in massive arms, and her mouth fell in a frenzy on his neck. He hissed into her shoulder as she bit and licked wildly at the strands of sinew bulging there, all while he jerked her brutally faster up and down on his cock. Her abs drew so taut she thought they might snap, and she couldn't breathe, couldn't get enough of his flesh inside her mouth, inside her body. Her hands clawed down his shoulders.

She stood swaying on her stone walkway, surrounded by the sun's fiery goodbye gift of color. The pleasure of Odan taking her, claiming her, sharing with her, sent her launching off the walkway, arms outspread. Warm air whistled past her face as pain stung her shoulder, and her body burst on joy. She fell, the world alive with light and color, knowing she was tight in Odan's arms.

The sky swooped around her and then she was triumphant, thrusting up into warm, wet, welcoming depths, accepted by a soul who was strong enough not to need her. The other chose to need her and she thrust, thrust, stroked, and came, claiming her, swallowing her sweet blood, rolling in the scent of her joy. She was here, inside, floating in the oasis. Her cum stung her tip, nestled deep in gripping flesh, and she knew her flame, knew she'd walk by this soul's side until she died.

The world slipped again, and she hung in Odan's strong arms. He shivered, moaning, and his body shimmered and rolled beneath her hips, as he shrank back to his usual immense human form. His tongue lapped the aching sting at her shoulder, and it warmed, faded. A last dazzle of pleasure clenched across her clit as she settled against him, and laid her head on his shoulder, burying her face in his neck. Her feet were awash in pins and needles and her head swam dizzily.

"Thank you," Odan murmured.

He thanked her? After something soul-shifting like that? She was about to call him a frog-face, when Gren answered, "You're welcome. So beautiful, Odan. That was so beautiful." He cleared his throat, and she heard the door scrape twice.

They were alone. Life thrummed in her, and a sense of well-being and peace that came from knowing who she was, but more importantly, that she was loved. She was draped over her mate's chest, arms curled around his head, his cock still hard in her fluttering belly.

His arms pet her nape, her spine, her hip. With every pass of his calloused, gentle fingertips, she clenched around him, rocking back up toward their fabulous peak.

"Mate," he whispered.

She kissed up his neck to his ear, along his jaw, and claimed his mouth. Their lips moved in perfect unison, opening and closing as they fed on each other, tongues thrusting in time with her hips.

When he rested his face against hers, she whispered, "I love you, too."

He trembled under her. "Vivienne. I need."

The darkness in his voice lit a craving inside her. She licked a hard tendon in his neck. "Anything, Odan. Anything."

With stunning control, he lifted her off his cock, both palms cupping her ass, and pulled her hips into his stomach. His tip lodged at her ass, and she squeaked in surprise as he pushed his cock's cap inside the tight ring of muscle. It stung, and her vagina went into a frenzy, clutching and rippling.

"Mine," he growled with more animalistic fury than he'd shown while in battleform, and shoved his cock into her ass, right to the root.

Heat exploded up her spine, and her neck snapped back at the throbbing, brutal pleasure. He jerked up into her again, her clit rubbing across the folds of his abs.

She sobbed, and he wound his hand into her hair, pulling her face forward to his. "Give it to me. Now."

She writhed in his arms, pinned on his cock, chafing her chest and clit across his stone-hard body.

"Now! Vivienne! No more hiding!"

She wailed, thrusting on him desperately, searing heat building, so close to ecstasy with the shocking joy of his dominance.

"Flame princess! Burn me! Now!"

His arms clamped tightly around her ribs, and he bore his cock into her with his full strength. She screamed at the flaring, stretching bite of him pressing her ass wide. Her core stung, clenching, empty. Her ass clamped down, pain blurring with the sharpest pleasure.

She kindled. Like tinder igniting, the fire roared through her, a release setting her free. Her hands slapped onto his chest as she thrashed in the glow.

He grunted, hissing, "Yesss. *All of you.*"

He pinned her tightly to him, tormenting her need to move, trapping her arms between them, and she clenched, driving her hips on him as best she could. His binding pinned the pleasure in place, stretching it, tormenting it, until she couldn't see, couldn't breathe, could only burn, alive.

When the eternal moment broke, he fell back, holding her more loosely as she

sprawled across his deep torso. Shudders ran continuously through him, arms, belly, and legs twitching. Their ragged breaths echoed for many moments, and his cock slid from her body. His hands clenched compulsively at her hips, then massaged softly, circles of contentment making her sigh.

Propping herself up on her elbows, she looked down at the raised, shiny red burns that covered each of his wide pectoral muscles. Tiny blisters sprinkled across the perfect, spread handprints.

"I'm not sorry." They were the same words he'd given her before, after forcing her to discover the joy of accepting pleasure as his lover. "You make me lose control." She frowned. These burns were severe.

"I need it, mate."

She shivered to hear the word on his lips. The echo of belonging twinged inside, their new bond returning a pulse of power to her.

"When I ask for that pain during our loving, never hesitate, for that's a mark I need sometimes. Never doubt it is beautiful in that moment." He kissed the corner of her mouth, a soft brush of his lips that tingled through her jaw. "Never doubt that you can lose control with me, become lost in pure pleasure. I will survive it."

She returned the kiss, nibbling on his lower lip. "We *will* survive. Your Clan, your Alpha, each other, the darkmages. No matter how many more beebees they send. We're stronger."

"I'm so sorry I wasn't there for you."

She scowled at him. The first time she'd lost him, she hadn't understood what he'd done. He'd given everything to her. He'd given so much he'd emptied himself, and she now knew the horrible hollow loss it left. The second time she'd lost him it was because he'd sacrificed himself to protect her, taking that pure evil in her stead. She kissed him again, petting him with her tongue, so gentle, honoring her protective lover.

He smoothed her hair behind one ear. "But I'm glad you were there for me."

Her heart clenched, and wound the bond between them tighter, strumming it for the thrill of the connection. He trusted her to be as much a warrior as he was. Although, maybe next time, he could be the lead warrior.

His blunt finger traced her jaw, the slope of her nose, the curve of her brow. "Your eyes are red."

She blinked. "Excuse me?"

"Your eyes. They are no longer obscured with magecraft. They are a deep ruby red. They're perfect."

Shy, she tucked her face onto his chest. It had been so long since anyone had seen her eyes. Childhood taunts rose to her memory. *Blood eyes*, they'd screamed. But the echoes faded away against the capable warm arms cradling her.

His hands massaged her nape, tangled in her hair, lifting it, fluffing it. "Someday I want to fuck your hair."

She burst out laughing. "My hair!"

"Yes. It's like air. Fiery air."

"Fiery air hair?" she teased dryly.

He chuckled and rolled them, pinning her to the furs and kissing her senseless.

When her sight returned, she sprawled below him. "Mate," she whispered, awed. This maddening, powerful man was part of her.

He slithered down her body, his eyes holding hers as he poised over her bald mound. Shoving her legs apart, he inhaled, and she watched pleasure slacken his face.

"My woman." His great square jaw opened wide, and lowered against her folds. Lips, teeth, tongue relit need inside her.

The words birthed a cascade of images in her mind. Her mother coldly lecturing her. Her swearing in as Flame Curate. Facing her Queen in a mirror and promising to go into the wilderness to seek out a darkmage Fortress. Staring up at Odan's battleform as she clung to his side, hanging above the treetops. The terror of the darkmage quenching her fire, plunging her mind into literal and spiritual darkness. She was proud of all of it.

She spread her legs, her hands cupping her breasts. Thrusting into his sucking, lashing licks, she smiled and agreed. "Your woman."

The End

About the Author:

Mima is a dreamer in upstate New York. When people query her on what she's reading, she answers proudly and simply, "A really sexy romance." She firmly believes women know the difference between fantasy and reality, and need both. No matter how sweet the kids, husband, mother, cats, house(work), and job are. Mima is at runemima@yahoo.com and www.mimawithin.com

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