



FIRES OF BALLIAN

M. L. RHODES

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He raised an eyebrow and shot Keiran a teasing smile. *::Are you trying to bewitch me, draegan lord? I'm already your hopelessly devoted servant. What more could you possibly want from me?::*

This time Keiran's grin shot straight to his groin...which was where Keiran's hand had gone as well. He curled his fingers around Gaige's shaft and began to stroke it. *::Who's bewitching whom? That stirring of energy you're feeling? It's not me doing it. It's you.::*

Gaige's eyes widened and he experienced a jolt of shock that he'd once again been unknowingly stirring magick. *::Are you sure?::*

Keiran chuckled. In a low voice that caused flares of heat in Gaige, he said aloud, "I'm sure. You shouldn't be so shocked. The magick is yours to use, any time, any place."

Gaige smiled. "If you say so."

But Keiran, suddenly all seriousness, cupped his cheek in one warm palm and gazed deeply into his eyes. "I mean it, *m'aerlas*. You *have* to believe in your abilities. You have to believe nothing is impossible. Once you do, there will be no end to what you can accomplish."

The last was said in a whisper just before Keiran kissed him again and pulled Gaige into the warm press of his hard, welcoming body.

As they tangled together, stroking, tasting, Keiran's words resonated inside Gaige. *You have to believe in your abilities...*

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BY

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FIRES OF BALLIAN
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*This one's for my son J,
who not only is a gifted writer himself, but who's also
one of the kindest, most compassionate men I know. He was a
godsend while I was writing this book, in more ways than one.
He knows why, and I hope he also knows just how very
much I appreciate and love him.*

PROLOGUE

Byram, High Sorcerer of Velensperia, circled the figure kneeling before him on the floor. The fact the object of his attention knelt not of his own free will but because Byram forced the cowed position on him using magick, only made the submission that much more delicious. Byram savored the heady pleasure swelling in him at his own dominance.

As he walked, the *thud-thud* of his booted steps echoed off the gray stone walls of the fortress he'd claimed as his own one hundred years before. *His* fortress. Every stone of the castle, every outbuilding, every village, town, outpost, and citadel across the land, as well as every man, woman, child, and creature in Velensperia belonged to him. One hundred years he'd ruled. And *nothing* was going to prevent him from ruling for another hundred

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and beyond. Not the insufferable draegans and their newly revealed *lord*, nor any human rabble who dared stir up trouble. Soon his control would expand far beyond the world of the humans and draegans, and they, so narrowly focused on their own small slice of Velensperia, had no idea of the surprises Byram had in store. No idea just how long his reach had grown.

True, it had caused an unexpected kink in Byram's plans to discover a draegan with lord blood had survived his purge a century ago. But the new lord was inexperienced, which made him prone to mistakes—as he'd already proven by revealing himself to Byram when he came to rescue the half-breed. A foolish move, to think Gaige Rizik, the traitorous former captain of Byram's High Guard, was worth the risk of entering Thrythgar. And even more foolish for the draegan to expose himself for what he really was when they made their escape. Little did the fledgling lord know just how much Byram was able to learn of him that day.

All in all, it had been an enlightening meeting.

Except for the book.

Byram's eyes narrowed at the memory. During their escape from the fortress, the draegan scum and the traitor had stolen Byram's journal—his record of events that had transpired over the past century. Luckily the journal contained only bare facts. Byram would never be foolish enough to leave his far more detailed grimoire, filled with his spells and machinations, lying about—that object was heavily protected elsewhere. The theft infuriated him nonetheless. How dare the traitorous half-breed breach his inner sanctum and steal from him!

On the other hand, perhaps the traitor had done him a favor. He and the draegan lordling had no doubt thought they'd find all the answers they sought in the book, but once they opened it, they

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would have discovered their error—for the book was written in an ancient language none save Byram knew how to read. And even if, by some fluke, they managed to decipher the cryptic text—which they would *not*—but if they did, they'd only learn that much sooner that Byram could not be defeated. Fear of the unknown was a powerful weapon. But sometimes fear of the known was even more effective.

His good humor restored, a small smile twisted Byram's lips.

The draegans and any human allies they might find would, ultimately, be little threat to him. Back in their glory days the draegans had been potentially formidable opponents. They had been the only possible obstacle to his plans, so he'd decimated them. He'd killed all their leaders in his first strike, and had wiped up most of the rest of the mess that remained over the next few weeks. Even now, a hundred years later, the few remaining draegans not under his control were scattered and weak. No doubt some made their way to the draegan camp already, hoping for protection now that they had a lord again. But most were still out there, hiding amongst the humans, or living in small pockets in hopes of avoiding Byram's troops. Many probably didn't even realize yet that they had a new lord. And even the ones who thought to find protection from the lord himself...well, the more draegans who congregated in one area, the easier it made it to find them and crush them all in one swift blow.

And he would crush them, just as he'd done their predecessors so long ago. Because he had something they did not...

Power.

It pulsed through his veins and deep beneath his skin. Byram had worked long and sacrificed much to ensure he and he alone was the receptacle for a power beyond any ever seen in this world,

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a power that gave him long life and made him all but invincible. The power was a drug so potent nothing else compared. And with it, he could, and would, conquer all.

Which brought his attention fully back to the figure on the floor before him.

“You’re angry. I understand that. And you’ve held your ground admirably. But in the end, your fate,” Byram said with a smirk, “is inevitable. Surely you didn’t think otherwise? Surely you didn’t think for even a second that you would ever do anything except exactly as I wished? The moment you came here it was already written in the stars the role you’d play.”

With the exception of a faint wheeze of breath, defiant silence was his only response. Which caused Byram’s smirk to turn into a self-satisfied smile. *Ah, yes.* The tougher, stronger, and more stubbornly insistent they were that they’d never bend to his will, the harder they fell. And they did fall. Always. This one would, too.

Byram stroked his black beard, which contained not a single streak of gray in spite of his age, and peered down at the stiffly bowed head. “The time has come for you to do your part.”

Another huff of breath—gritty, angry. But no words.

This time Byram didn’t allow the defiance to slide. He grasped a handful of hair and jerked the head up until his companion had no choice but to look at him. Leaning in close, Byram narrowed his gaze and his voice hardened. “You will do as I say. I have what you want and you know there’s no other way to get it. Any deviation from the plan will bring my wrath down upon you. And as you very well know, that is a road down which you do not want to tread, my friend.”

Those eyes—so cold and furious—stabbed shards of black ice

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into Byram, arousing more than his anger. He tightened his grip in the thick hair and tugged the face closer. Closer. Until his mouth lingered only a few scant inches above the sensual lips that he knew wanted to lash out at him and tear him apart with harsh words. But the mouth didn't open, and no sound escaped. Because his companion knew that instead of angering or cutting Byram, the words would only fan the flames of Byram's desires.

CHAPTER 1

Lying on his back, Gaige Rizik stretched beneath the covers, savoring the pleasant pull of muscles in his body and the heat of the man lying on his side next to him.

They'd been awake for a while, taking advantage of this rare morning where they hadn't had to get up and rush off to pressing duties. Quiet, uninterrupted moments like these had become scarce as groups of draegans and humans alike had begun filling camp, seeking the protection of the draegan lord and his *draeganjhere*. Most days, Gaige and his lover, Keiran Hareldson, found themselves busy from well before sunrise until late into the night, often falling into bed too exhausted to do more than spoon together and catch a few quick hours of sleep before starting all over again. But, for once, they had a couple of hours to themselves this

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morning, and they'd managed to find another, much more satisfying, way to start their day than stumbling into the cold dawn to prepare their people for war with the high sorcerer.

In the aftermath of their lovemaking, Gaige felt sated and relaxed. He knew from experience, however, that it would take very little to stir the fires of desire between Keiran and him again. A look, a touch, even a thought could cause the ever-burning spark between them to flare into yet another full-fledged blaze. Their relationship had been like that from the very beginning, as if they'd never be able to get enough of each other.

Keiran's palm, callused and warm, stroked Gaige's chest, skimming over his nipples. Each time he rubbed across the sensitive nubs, a new erotic tremor rippled through Gaige, yet also a feeling of contentment. The two reactions were no longer mutually exclusive—with Keiran he could feel lust and love, excitement and peace, all in the same breath.

"Do you remember what I've told you about draegan magick?" Keiran asked.

Gaige turned his head to look at his lover. "What about it?"

"How it works."

"You mean by concentration and intention?"

"Mm-hmm. Remember how you put up a protective shield over the entrance to the caves when you helped the families with children escape Thrythgar, to keep Byram's troops from finding them?"

Gaige rolled onto his side to face Keiran. As he did, one of Keiran's knees slid between his legs, nudging against his groin in a slow tease, bringing his already half-erect cock fully back to life. His hand moved around to Gaige's back where it traced a sensual motion up and down his spine. Between the two, it was hard for

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Gaige to think about much of anything else.

It took a moment to remember what Keiran had asked. “I wasn’t even aware at that point I was part draegan. I didn’t know I could do anything like that. I didn’t even realize I *had* done it until long afterward.”

Keiran smiled, his eyes sparkling like rich silver gemstones, as if Gaige had just made his point for him—whatever it was. “Exactly. You had the intention of putting up a protective barrier, and so it happened, even though you weren’t aware you were doing it. You were surprised when you found out about the shield.”

“I couldn’t fathom how I had been able to use magick without realizing it. But you said the magick had always been in me because my mother was draegan.”

“That’s right. And now, because we’re mated, you have my blood—draegan lord blood—flowing through your veins as well, Gaige. So you’re capable of even more.” He leaned in closer and stole a kiss. It made Gaige’s skin tingle, and he felt a warm ripple in the air around them, which caused him to suddenly suspect Keiran was using a little magick of his own to seduce him.

He raised an eyebrow and shot Keiran a teasing smile. *“Are you trying to bewitch me, draegan lord? I’m already your hopelessly devoted servant. What more could you possibly want from me?”*

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sure?::

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But Keiran, suddenly all seriousness, cupped his cheek in one warm palm and gazed deeply into his eyes. “I mean it, *m’aerlas*. You *have* to believe in your abilities. You have to believe nothing is impossible. Once you do, there will be no end to what you can accomplish.”

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As they tangled together, stroking, tasting, Keiran’s words resonated inside Gaige. *You have to believe in your abilities.*

Keiran rolled Gaige to his back and thrust deep into him, stretching him, filling him, merging them as one. As always, Gaige felt Keiran’s heart beating in time with his, felt their breathing sync, felt Keiran’s lust and powerful love for him twining with his own, mating as surely as their bodies did.

::I love you, m’aerlas.:: Keiran’s voice, gravelly with emotion, filled his mind. *::You have to believe.::*

Gaige’s heart ached with love. After all the years living and working under Byram’s malevolent shadow, of being angry, lonely, and disgusted with the man he’d become, Gaige had finally found his place, his heart, here, with Keiran and the draegans. If Keiran wanted him to believe in himself, then he’d do his damndest to make it so.

Believe...

And then a gut-wrenching pain tore through his body, ripping

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him away from Keiran with a suddenness that left him reeling.

No! NO!

Darkness closed in around him. Gaige reached out, desperate to find Keiran again, touch him. His hands grasped only cold, empty air.

Not again! I can't lose him again!

But as swiftly as Keiran had been torn from him, a new scene took shape around him. The bitter chill of winter seared his lungs as he dragged in a breath, and the damp scent of snow-soon-to-fall filled the air.

A man lay crumpled on the wintery ground in the inky black of the night, his dark hair tangled around his shoulders, his body nude and battered, unmoving.

Oh, gods...Keiran!

Gaige tried to run to him, but couldn't move. He was paralyzed, his legs frozen in place. He tried to call out, but though the muscles of his throat moved, no sound escaped him.

Desperate, he tried again, this time using the draegan mindspeak. *::Keiran! Please hear me. Answer me. Please!::*

Slowly, too slowly, the dark head lifted and turned toward Gaige, holding his gaze for a brief second before falling back to the ground.

Disappointment, sharp and jagged, sliced through Gaige.

The dark eyes and haunted face that had stared at him...weren't those of the man he loved.

CHAPTER 2

With a jarring shudder, Gaige opened his eyes to the icy sting of wind. The freezing air rushing past him ate through his heavy cloak and clothing, and tore at his body, trying to dislodge him from his precarious perch on the massive, shifting back of the winged creature carrying him. As the realization hit him that he'd allowed himself to drift off, his hands, numb in spite of being encased in heavy gloves, gripped more tightly at the thick, bony spine to which he clung.

Good gods. What if he'd relaxed his grip for even a moment? He could have fallen.

The thought shook him. But not as much as what he'd just seen—bittersweet memories of a time when his life had still been whole.

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Keiran. The memory had felt so real...he'd even been able to smell Keiran's scent, feel his touch, hear his voice as if he'd been right here. But unlike in real life, when they'd made love, then shared breakfast and numerous intimate kisses before going about their duties that morning weeks ago, this time there'd been no such contentment. Gaige winced at how he'd been torn away from Keiran, leaving him even more empty inside than ever.

As he relived the moment again, he remembered the vision hadn't ended there. Out of the dark abyss a new scene had formed. A scene that, like a sharp slap to the face, brought Gaige fully back to the here and now and his current mission—the one that had brought him out on this miserable winter night.

With urgency he shouted against the wind, "He's not at Thrythgar."

::He's not? But I thought—::

At Wen's words in his mind, Gaige remembered he didn't have to shout at the draegan on which he rode. *::He was. But he's not there any longer. They've moved him. Or he's escaped.::*

He felt the great wings slow. *::Then where, my lord?::* came the puzzled question.

It was still strange for Gaige to feel someone else's words in his head. For months he'd experienced only Keiran's. In fact, Keiran's thoughts and emotions had become so integrated with his own, they'd been as seamless and necessary to him as breathing. True-mated draegans, especially those with lord blood, shared a bond, even when in their human forms, that allowed them to be as one in their minds and hearts.

And then, one godsforsaken night three weeks ago, Death had come and stolen Keiran away, and like a cold wind snuffing out a flame, all Gaige's contact with his mate had ceased to exist.

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Gaige had thought he'd go crazy in the silence. But Wen, the young lieutenant now in charge of the *draeganjhere*, had volunteered to carry Gaige on his travels since Gaige did not have the ability to shift into winged form—a limitation of his human half. The first time they'd flown together had been awkward in many ways, not the least of which was riding on the back of a draegan who wasn't Keiran. When Wen shifted forms, however, Gaige had been surprised to discover Wen's raspy draegan voice in his mind. Wen was able to hear Gaige's words as well.

Since then Gaige had found he could also silently converse with his other lieutenants, Marta and Iann, when they changed into their winged shapes. He could not, however, delve into any of their souls as he'd been able to do with Keiran, nor could they read him except for thoughts directed at them, for which Gaige was grateful. Having one's innermost thoughts and feelings, joys and fears, fully exposed, created a powerful intimacy he couldn't imagine sharing—and didn't want to share—with anyone but his mate.

::You had a vision?:: Wen asked.

::Yes:: The lingering painful throb behind his eyes, a side effect of the visions with which he'd been gifted—or cursed, as it often felt—gave evidence it hadn't been just a dream but an actual glimpse of something real. *::Jax is out here somewhere. In the mountains::*

::Any idea where?:: Wen asked.

::It can't be too far from Thrythgar—they wouldn't have had time to travel a long distance since my last vision, especially given the snowstorm earlier this week:: The storm had prevented them from going after Jax several days ago as they'd planned—they'd had to hunker down at Kellesborne and wait it out. And now, if the dampness in the air was any indicator, another storm headed their

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way.

Gaige had had the first vision of Jax being held captive and tortured by Byram the night the shadow world being called Death had taken Keiran. Since then he'd had two more, the second showing the draegan still in Byram's dungeon, and the one tonight. He concentrated, trying to relive what he'd seen tonight and get a better idea of the location. *::It's a small, circular clearing surrounded by mossy pines. The ground is rocky. The place feels familiar somehow—as if I've been there before.::*

::Maybe on our travels as we moved the camp from the forest to Kellesborne, Lord Rizik?:: another gritty, but younger, voice said, startling Gaige.

Wen's younger brother Jarrad traveled with them, but Gaige had never heard Jarrad in his thoughts before. The younger draegan had flown patrol with him and Wen a couple of times prior to tonight, on short trips around the mountains near Kellesborne. Gaige was certain the brothers had conversed on those trips, yet Gaige hadn't been party to their interactions. Why could he hear Jarrad now? Was it possible his draegan abilities were still expanding? Would he eventually be able to hear any of the draegans when they shifted? Or maybe he already could and this was just the first time Jarrad had spoken to him directly.

::The mountains surrounding Kellesborne are well patrolled by the draeganjhere,:: Gaige said. *::Jax would have been discovered already were he anywhere close to the castle. The place I saw feels darker, the trees surrounding the clearing are tighter, with an air of...::* He struggled to find the words. And then it hit him. Yes, that was it. He'd felt it in the vision...the faint rippling of unhealthy magick amongst the trees and in the air. Byram's doing, no doubt. *::With an air of dark magick in the forest. I remember now where*

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the clearing is. It's in the mountains southeast of Thrythgar, on the slopes of Mount Adolixus, south of the Narrows::

Wen and Jarrad picked up speed and headed in that direction. The strength of the wind at the new pace once again buffeted Gaige, causing him to cling more tightly to Wen's neck.

::Let's keep a healthy distance between us and Thrythgar. Circle around to the south of it,:: Gaige cautioned.

::Yes, my lord. This place we're going...you've seen it before?:: Wen asked.

::I have,:: The setting in the vision had felt familiar to Gaige because it *was* familiar—he'd been there in his previous life as captain of Byram's High Guard. He should have recognized it right away. *::The spot is a favorite of Byram's for disposing of anyone he wants to suffer and die a particularly drawn-out, painful death. He chains the person in the clearing on the mountain's slope and lets the beasts have their fun,::*

::What kind of beasts?::

::Large, winged raptors—::

::None bigger than we are,:: Jarrad interjected, the cockiness of youth still full upon him.

::No, none so big as that. But the forest also has a sizable sabeen population, wolves, as well as other aberrant creatures who inhabit the surrounding area. ::

::Aberrant creatures, m'lord?:: Jarrad asked.

::Things that lurk in the dark places, sensed and heard, but not quite seen. The sorcerer works dark magick there sometimes, so who knows what he's drawn to him or called forth,::

Shadows in the dark, red eyes, strange mewlings and growls, and unidentifiable shapes lurking in the trees had kept most of Byram's soldiers, Gaige included, out of the forest on the slopes of

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Mount Adolixus unless their presence was absolutely required. Gaige had felt the skin along the back of his neck crawl for two days after he'd been there the last time—almost as if some invisible foul creature had attached itself to him and followed him home. He shuddered at the memory.

::Is the clearing big enough for us to set down in, my lord?:: Wen asked, always the planner. The one disadvantage for the huge winged draegans was their inability to land or lift off in small, enclosed spaces. Their wingspan could easily reach fifteen meters across.

Gaige swore softly under his breath when he realized this rescue wasn't going to be an easy task. But then it would have been even more difficult if they'd had to get into Thrythgar instead. *::No, unfortunately it's too small, and the trees around it are too large and too close together. We'll have to land above tree line, higher on the mountain, and hike down to it.::* Which meant, with Wen and Jarrad in human form like he was, they'd be open targets for any soldiers or hungry beasts.

::What's the plan for freeing Jax?::

::Move fast. Get in, release him, and get out.::

If Jax was even still alive by the time they got to him. And if they didn't run into obstacles.

Damn it all. If Byram had moved Jax to the clearing it could only mean one thing—Jax had outlived his usefulness to the sorcerer.

Which meant either Byram had tortured the draegan and never gotten the information he sought and now wanted to punish him with a slow death. Or he'd finally broken Jax and knew the location of the draegan camp and gods knew what else.

The thought caused a cold sweat to spread over Gaige's skin,

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which instantly turned to ice as the wind hit it.

They'd set out to retrieve Jax from the sorcerer because Gaige had insisted Jax would never betray the draegans. But Iann and Marta had misgivings. They worried Jax might have talked to Byram if for no other reason than spite because Jax had been banished by the draegans when Jax attacked Gaige and made an attempt on Keiran's life.

Gaige couldn't pretend he liked Jax, and Jax had made it clear from the start that he detested Gaige—a hatred stemming from Jax's distrust of humans and the fact Byram's men had killed his parents when he was a child. Therefore Gaige, who was not only half-human but had also been Byram's right hand for a dozen years had two immediate black marks against him. But the other, more complex reason for Jax's hatred of Gaige, was because Jax had been in love with Keiran for a long time, though Keiran had never seen him as anything but a friend. When Keiran had true-mated with Gaige, Jax's hurt and fury had known no bounds.

How would he react when he found out Keiran was gone?

No doubt he'll blame me for it.

And he wouldn't be wrong.

Gaige winced. Death had found Keiran because Gaige had led the being straight to him—it had followed Gaige out of the dark abyss of one of his visions. Oddly, it had been the vision of Jax in Byram's dungeon.

Guilt sat in a heavy lump in the pit of Gaige's stomach.

Jax won't take the news well. He'll never accept or follow you as draegan lord.

That might be, but Gaige had to try.

In spite of their rocky personal relationship, Jax was a draegan and a fierce warrior. He'd been one of Keiran's best friends and

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trusted lieutenants for years. And in these difficult times, Gaige needed as many strong, well-trained draegans in his arsenal as he could get. He couldn't afford to write off Jax based on his personal feelings, not with the future of the draegan race at stake. When he'd had the vision of Jax being tortured in the sorcerer's dungeon, he'd vowed to bring Jax back into the fold.

::We should be there within the hour, my lord,:: Wen said.

::The sooner the better. I think more bad weather is coming our way.:: The cold seemed to be growing, and not just because of their speed as they tore through the air. Gaige felt ice crystals forming on his eyelashes.

::I think you're right. It could slow us down.::

::All the more reason to take care of our business as quickly as possible and get home.::

Gaige prayed they'd reach Jax before it was too late. He needed to know what Jax had, or had not, divulged to Byram. Because if the sorcerer had discovered the location of the draegan camp in the forest, it wouldn't take long for him to follow the trail to the base of the mountains that housed Kellesborne.

When they'd moved the camp, they'd flown supplies up the mountain to Kellesborne in the dead of night, but it had been too risky to have too many draegans in the air—they would have drawn the notice of Byram's troops on the ground. They'd taken the frailest—the old and very young—by wing, but the majority of souls in camp—draegan and human alike—had had to make the move on foot. They'd traveled only at night, in small groups to be less noticeable and avoid soldiers, and had taken several alternate routes to disguise their way. It had required more time to do it like that, but after an initial scare early on where several rebels were nearly caught by Byram's troops, they'd opted for safety over

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speed.

If Byram knew where to start looking for the forest camp, however, it wouldn't take long for his trackers to realize how many people had passed through the forest over the past few weeks, and the assorted trails would lead straight to the mountains that hid the draegan stronghold.

Although Byram wouldn't be able to approach Kellesborne itself—only those with draegan blood could find the ancient draegan stronghold—the trail to the mountains would still give him an idea of where it might be. And the less Byram knew of their whereabouts and activity—including the fact that Keiran was no longer with them and Gaige was in charge—the safer the souls under Gaige's care would be.

A vise squeezed around Gaige's chest, making it difficult to breathe.

The souls under his care...

With Keiran gone and believed by many to be dead—though they held their tongues around Gaige, who stubbornly clung to the hope that Keiran was alive and would be found—Gaige had been thrust into the role of lord and leader of the draegans. But in these dark times, some of the humans, who'd once shunned and feared the draegans, had begun to side with them against Byram and his tyranny. So Gaige had not only draegans under his protection, but a growing number of humans as well. His responsibility for the safety and well-being of the two hundred souls now living at Kellesborne, with more straggling in each day, weighed heavily on his shoulders. If he thought about it too much, the sheer enormity of it overwhelmed him.

Iann and Marta had assured him he was more than capable, that he'd already been a leader of men for many years and had trained

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all his life for it. But leading soldiers was one thing. Finding himself in the position of lord of an entire race...that was something else all together. Especially when he wasn't full draegan himself. Even Wen and Jarrad, as young as they were, had a better understanding of draegan magick than he did. And they could shift forms, from the human-like shape they wore on the ground, to the massive and powerful beasts of the air.

Gaige would never be able to take winged form and would forever be dependent on riding on the back of another draegan if he wanted to fly. And for thirty-two years he'd believed himself to be fully human—he hadn't discovered the truth of his heritage until a few months ago, which had left him with much to learn of draegan ways.

Keiran had told him he'd develop draegan lord abilities and magick because of their mating and blood sharing. The thin scar across the palm of Gaige's hand where Keiran had cut it and they'd pressed their hands together when they bonded, suddenly tingled. Usually when a draegan lord true-mated, the mate took on the powerful magick and gifts of the draegan lord line. It made the mate a lord in his or her own right and was, in effect, a backup system. Should something happen to the lord, his or her mate could then step into the role with all the same qualifications and abilities.

But in Gaige's case, being part human complicated the matter. No draegan lord had ever mated with a half-human before—with anyone other than a full draegan. Gaige was certain he'd never have the kind of magickal power Keiran had wielded because his human half watered it down—like the inability to take winged form. Keiran, on the other hand, had believed Gaige might instead develop unique capabilities, that the magick might shape itself not into a weaker form, but into a different form altogether that could

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manifest in ways they might not expect.

Still...it had been months since his and Keiran's mating, and although Gaige had developed certain capabilities he hadn't had before, anything beyond simple magick eluded him.

Believe... You have to believe in your abilities. Once you do, there will be no end to what you can accomplish.

Keiran's words to him, still fresh in his mind from the memory he'd relived earlier, whispered to him again. In spite of Keiran's confidence in him, though, Gaige found it difficult to believe he'd ever be more than a half-human playing at being at a lord. He could only hope what he had to offer would be enough.

::My Lord, should we worry about Byram's nets?:: Jarrad asked as they passed south of Thrythgar.

Gaige sighed, wishing, as he always did, that Wen and Jarrad and the others wouldn't call him "lord"—the title still made him uncomfortable—but he knew it was useless to bring it up. *::We should always worry and be cautious,::* Gaige said. *::I've seen a few tonight, but they've been far enough away we've been safe.::*

::They say the sorcerer has many nets cast around Thrythgar,:: Jarrad said. *::Is that true?::*

Gaige sensed an undercurrent of fear in his words.

::It's true. Because Hareldson and I were able to escape from him by air, Byram's not taking any chances now.:: The younger draegans had always called Keiran by his surname, "Hareldson," and Gaige had gotten into the habit of referring to him that way when he spoke to them. *::Byram has the town and stronghold surrounded so no draegans can approach from the sky without getting caught. Had we gone there tonight, we would have been forced to land and approach on foot from outside the village.::*

Even from here, in the faint light given off by Velensperia's

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two moons ducking in and out behind the thick clouds, Gaige could see the faint, shimmering line of nets floating in the air over the sorcerer's fortress. *::As long as we continue this course, we'll avoid the nets around the stronghold.::*

::We're lucky you can see them or the draegans would still be hiding on the ground as we have for the past hundred years,:: Wen said.

Wen's tone was bitter, but not at Gaige...at the ragged despair in which Byram had left the draegans after his slaughter a century before. They'd been grounded, unable to fly free, because Byram had cast the magic, invisible "nets" across the skies to capture and destroy any draegans who took flight. The nets had been his way of cleaning up the last of the stragglers who hadn't been killed in his initial attacks.

When a draegan flew into one of the nets, the nets somehow called forth a race of beings called nyctophans—creatures many called "dark mind dwellers." It was said they had the ability to get inside one's mind and kill by driving the victim insane with excruciating pain. Until he'd met Keiran, Gaige, like most others beings in Velensperia, had believe nyctos to be a myth, a scary story told late at night around the campfire. Byram, however, had not only found the creatures, who were all too real, but had struck some kind of bargain with them so they now worked for him. No draegan who'd been faced with a nycto had survived to tell of it.

The draegans had quickly learned they were only safe on the ground, blending in with humans and never showing their other form to any except their own kind. Most draegans needed to shift into their winged form from time to time for their own health and emotional well-being. And for those who bore children, shifting was imperative in the last weeks of gestation. Those who needed to

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change shape did, in deep secret, always careful to stick to isolated areas. But for the most part they stayed on the ground. Many hadn't flown in long years, and those who had, had risked their very lives when the need to spread their wings and take to the air for a few precious minutes became unbearable. Byram's nets could be anywhere, cast across the skies of Velensperia hither and yon, and in the early days, many draegans had lost their lives by unknowingly flying into the traps.

And then one night a couple of months ago, Gaige had been up flying with Keiran—a short flight, close to camp, risky but one Keiran felt was necessary to see if any of their enemies approached—and they'd discovered Gaige could see the nets. They weren't sure why he could—perhaps the odd mix of his human and draegan blood made him immune to this particular manifestation of Byram's magick.

His ability to see the traps had changed everything for the draegans in the camp because as long as Gaige was with them, they could fly. It had allowed them to begin flying patrols, and it had allowed them to relocate to Kellesborne, high in the White Mountains, something they'd been unable to do when grounded since there was no way to get enough supplies for so many people up the steep mountain path by foot.

See, you do have something to offer that no one else can. That, and the visions.

Gaige grimaced.

::We're coming up on the area,:: Wen said.

Gaige peered over the side of the massive draegan, trying to spot the clearing below. His eyesight and hearing had always been more acute than a human's, though he hadn't realized why until he'd discovered the truth of his parentage after he met Keiran. But

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since he and Keiran had mated, it had grown even better, and he now also had a form of night vision he hadn't before.

::There it is. I see it.:: The general shape and location of the clearing, anyway. Gaige couldn't make out details from this high up. They didn't dare risk flying lower, though, in case Byram had lookouts who might fire on them, although that wasn't his custom. Once he'd chosen to discard a prisoner in this manner, he usually had them chained and then left them. But Gaige wasn't willing to risk Wen and Jarrad's lives for a closer look when they'd soon be on the ground and could approach with stealth on foot.

::I see a place where we can land,:: Wen said. *::There, on the rocks, not too far from the trees. It should put us close to the clearing, only a few minutes walk away.::*

A few minutes walk that could expose them to gods only knew what kind of dark dangers.

They landed on an open, rocky shelf, and once Gaige had dismounted, Wen and Jarrad quickly morphed back into their human forms and pulled clothes and weapons from their packs.

As Gaige waited for them to dress, he was struck by just how young and slight they seemed like this. Appearances could be deceiving, though. He knew firsthand that both of the young men could handle a blade and bow better than most soldiers, and, as draegans, were far stronger than their human counterparts. They also weren't as young as they seemed. Draegans aged more slowly than humans. During childhood and youth, they developed at much the same rate as mankind, but once they hit young adulthood, their aging seemed to slow to a crawl. Wen looked to be barely over twenty, but was really twenty-eight—only a few years younger than Gaige—though for a draegan he was still considered a very young man since the average draegan could live to be almost two

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hundred. Jarrad was twenty-two, but looked no more than seventeen. Thin and wiry rather than muscular, they—along with their two younger brothers, Allend and Edric—had their mother Marta’s green eyes, freckles, and sandy hair. Jarrad’s hair was shorter, curling around his ears, while Wen’s had grown longer over the months Gaige had known him, hanging below his shoulders in a wavy tangle. He’d recently taken to braiding thin strips of it in the draegan way, much as Gaige now wore his. For long years the draegans had done whatever they could to blend in with the human population to avoid being hunted by Byram’s troops. But more and more of them were beginning to revert back to the old draegan traditions as the rebellious spirit grew among them.

“Stay alert,” Gaige told them, keeping his voice low as he led them into the trees. “No telling what might be skulking about in this place.

“There’s something about the air. It feels...wrong,” Wen said, matching Gaige’s quiet tone.

“Like right before lightning strikes, when you’re sure your hair’s going to stand on end any second,” Jarrad whispered.

Gaige felt it, too. An unnatural heaviness in the air, and something else that caused the same unsettling tingle along his spine he’d experienced the last time he’d been in this area...except it was much more intense now. As if the forest lay in wait, a predator all on its own, filled with unspeakable things Gaige couldn’t see, but could sense creeping around nearby.

Several minutes passed as they walked through the dark woods, and the farther they trod, the more certain Gaige became that they weren’t alone.

“Something’s following us,” Jarrad hissed from behind Gaige,

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who was in the lead, with Wen bringing up the rear.

"I hear it." Or them. Gaige couldn't tell if it was one or many. The sounds of the woods were deceptive. "Stay the course, but don't let down your guard."

"Like that's going to happen," the young draegan murmured, sounding scared again, but trying to be cocky to cover it.

"Keep your eyes on the lord," Wen ordered his brother in a harsh whisper. "Your job is to protect him and watch his back."

"Your jobs are to protect yourselves first, understand?" Gaige said, his voice quiet but commanding. He glanced over his shoulder and captured both their gazes with a stern one of his own. "And if anything should happen, if thing goes bad for any reason, you get out of here as fast as you can."

Wen started to speak, but Gaige cut him off, already knowing from the look on Wen's face that he'd been about to protest. After all, the first duty of the *draeganjhere*, of which Wen was now in command, was to protect the draegan lord. But Gaige wasn't about to have these two young draegans die needlessly for him. "I respect how seriously you take your duties, Wen, but if Byram's soldiers attack us, it's imperative someone gets out of here to warn the others what's happened. And since I can't fly, you and Jarrad are the ones who have to escape. You can be far away quickly if need be."

When Wen still looked like he might argue, Gaige added, "This is non-negotiable."

Finally Wen sighed and nodded, and Gaige knew he'd keep his word and they'd leave Gaige behind if it came to that.

"But unless or until that happens," Wen whispered, addressing his brother in a serious tone, "don't stray from your responsibility, which is to protect the lord."

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Gaige turned and began walking again, shaking his head at Wen's stubborn insistence, but at the same time impressed with it. Wen *was* stubborn, but honorable, smart, and loyal to a fault...which was why Gaige had put him in charge of the draegan guard, and why Keiran had allowed Wen into their inner circle of advisors. It was also why Gaige considered the young man a friend. Something else he'd never had until he'd come to live with the draegans.

Which was yet another reason why he'd do everything in his power to keep Wen and his brother safe.

As they walked, snowflakes began to fall, landing on their hooded cloaks and the icy ground.

They had to be getting close to the clearing, if his and Wen's estimates on distance from the air were correct. But as they drew nearer, so did whatever followed them. The tingling up and down his spine had increased, and the hair on the back of his neck stood on end, just as Jarrad had mentioned earlier. He was now sure they had more than one companion, perhaps many more. Gaige had a strange sense they were being herded. Yet he saw nothing. No soldiers he knew would be able to follow as quietly as whatever stalked them, which led him to think their predators weren't of the human variety.

That knowledge didn't offer any comfort—not here, in these woods.

He kept one hand wrapped around the hilt of his sword, and though he never slowed, moving ever onward toward their destination, his gaze constantly flickered about, and he listened for every odd crackle of branch and sigh of the wind.

"Is that it?" Wen whispered.

Gaige thought he saw the clouded night sky through the

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branches ahead. “I think so. Keep your eyes open. We have company.”

“I feel them,” Wen murmured. “Like they’re breathing down my neck. They’re not human.”

Jarrad stayed silent, but Gaige could hear the faint, strained huffs of his breath.

When they reached the clearing, they paused behind a stand of trees to get the lay of the land.

“He’s there, just as you foresaw,” Wen said, not sounding the least surprised that Gaige’s vision had panned out. He’d had too many before that had proven true.

Like in his vision, the nude, bruised and bleeding body lay unmoving in the center of the clearing. But unlike before, this time Gaige held no illusions he was looking at Keiran. That had been pure hope, based on the memory he’d had of being with Keiran right before the vision. Jax was taller and more muscular than Keiran. His hair was jet black, whereas Keiran’s was a rich brown with dark golden highlights. Right now, Jax’s long hair, which he usually wore in several thick braids, had been unbound and lay matted against his back and shoulders.

“It looks like he’s chained down. Is he still alive?” Jarrad whispered.

“I’m not sure.” Between the cold, Byram’s torture, and whatever else might have happened to Jax out here in the woods, Gaige hoped to gods they weren’t too late. Though he held little love for Jax, looking at the horribly battered draegan, he felt nothing but sympathy and a need to get him to safety.

“All’s quiet around him,” Wen said. “Lots of footprints in the old snow on the ground, but from here they don’t look fresh. See how the wind’s blown and swirled over them? Whoever left them

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was here hours ago.”

“Agreed. I don’t see any recent evidence of soldiers.” Even their inhuman followers seemed to have backed off for the moment. “He doesn’t look good. We may have to carry Jax out of here, up to where we can fly, and I doubt he’ll be able to shift.”

“I can fly with him, like we talked about,” Jarrad said.

Which was exactly why Gaige had allowed Jarrad along on this mission...because in his visions, Gaige had heard Byram say he was giving Jax some type of potion that would prevent him from taking winged form. He’d have to ride on another draegan. By air, they could be back at Kellesborne in a matter of hours. By foot, it could take them days if the weather grew worse.

Gaige had one more look around the area. The fact that whatever had been following them was still out there somewhere nearby weighed on him, but they’d come here to get Jax and couldn’t stall. The snow fell harder now, and they needed to hurry. “All right, let’s go. I’ll get him free of the chains while you two keep your weapons at the ready and watch for trouble.”

The draegans, now standing one on either side of Gaige, nodded.

The three of them entered the small clearing and approached the injured draegan on the ground.

Gods, it was even worse than Gaige had thought. Jax lay on his stomach, spread eagle, with his face turned toward them. His eyes were closed. He’d been severely beaten, as well as whipped until the skin of his back lay open in long, raw strips, exposed to the falling snow. Gaige knew from the visions and from personal experience that Byram had forced other atrocities on him as well.

Gaige knelt next to the big draegan as Wen and Jarrad stood guard next to them, swords out, facing the trees. Gaige pushed

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sticky, frozen strands of black hair off the draegan's face and reached to feel for a pulse on his neck, not certain at this point if Jax was dead or alive. Relief shot through him as he felt a faint thrum against his fingers. Alive, then.

Steel shackles had been locked around Jax's wrists and ankles, with short lengths of chain attached to them and then to steel shafts driven deep into the ground.

Gaige pulled out his *vrieg*. The short-bladed knife had been a gift from Keiran, and was made from a strong but very rare metal called elorium. The same metal formed the braided true mate bracelet around Gaige's bicep. He dug the sharp tip of the knife into the keyhole of one of the ankle shackles, but after several seconds of twisting and turning, the lock wouldn't give.

And why would it? he suddenly realized. Byram had probably locked them with magick. Gaige felt a moment of despair. How in *hel* were they going to get Jax away from this place? And it didn't help that he couldn't shake the feeling something about the forest they were in was very wrong.

Damn it all! There had to be a way to do this and get them all out of here.

And then he remembered that Keiran had been able to open almost any lock, including ones the sorcerer had sealed, by using draegan magick. Gaige wasn't sure, though, if it was done with common draegan magick, or the more powerful lord magick.

He could almost hear Keiran's voice in his head. *You are a lord now. Believe, Gaige...*

Tearing off one of his gloves, Gaige held a hand over the shackle, closed his eyes, and concentrated on it. He didn't know the draega words to use, but Keiran had told him that while the proper words could help focus magick, they weren't required.

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Intention was the most important part. He tried to envision the tumblers in the lock turning and the shackle opening.

“Something’s happening out in the woods,” Wen said.

Gaige did his damndest to keep his concentration focused in spite of the interruption, but fear shot through him at Wen’s words.

Come on...open...open...come on, please!

Gaige’s arm and fingers began to tingle. He heard a snick. And then the shackle parted.

He opened his eyes and stared at his handiwork. Holy gods...he’d done it!

But Wen, his voice, as tight and tense as a bowstring, cut into his moment of admiring surprise. “They’re moving out there. Circling us. I feel them...”

An unsettling shiver crept along Gaige’s spine. “I feel them, too. I’m almost done here.” He quickly reached for the shackle on Jax’s other ankle and repeated the process, then moved up to crouch next to his head where he could reach Jax’s wrists. The magick flowed more easily now, and by the time he got to the second wrist, the shackle opened almost as soon as he placed a hand over it.

Jax moaned and his body shuddered, as if he’d been released from more than just the chains. Maybe he had. Gods only knew what kind of magick Byram might have used to keep Jax here, and the shackles might have been a restraint in more ways than one.

“Hang on, Jax. We’re going to get you out of here.”

Jax’s eyelids fluttered open. His gaze, hazy though it was, locked on Gaige, and as recognition hit, hatred glittered in his dark eyes. “You,” he croaked. But then he lifted his head and, as if noticing for the first time where he lay, his eyes widened. The animosity slid away, to be replaced by something else. Something

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that caused Gaige's blood to run cold. As he watched, Jax's expression turned to raw terror—something Gaige had never before seen, or imagined he would see, on the fierce draegan warrior.

“What is it?” Gaige asked.

But even as the question left his mouth, a horrible, gurgling shriek filled the air, and he knew, without looking, that whatever had stalked them before, had returned. In far greater numbers.

“Trap!” Jax gasped.

CHAPTER 3

The gods-awful shrieking made Gaige's ears ache and his skin crawl.

He looked up from Jax, his gaze scanning the area. The clearing was dark and still empty. Flakes of snow fell from the sky like the delicate petals of a crystal flower, silent and serene amidst the cacophony. But in the periphery of the trees... *Eyes*. All around them. Glowing red. And moving closer.

Jax shuddered again, a deep, rippling motion that shook his entire body. He moaned. "Can't let them get in."

In? Gaige assumed Jax meant they couldn't let the creatures get into the clearing. Although how the three of them who were able to stand and fight were going to stop what appeared to be a horde, Gaige didn't know. Possible strategies flew through his mind, all

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considered, most rejected. He thought about giving Jax a blade; even in his weak condition he might be able to defend himself if it came to that. But another glance at the big draegan, weak and shivering on the ground, looking like he'd just seen *hel* coming to get him, made him realize Jax was in no shape to defend anything.

Gaige pulled off his heavy wool cloak and draped it over Jax's nude form, trying to be careful not to irritate his wounds. "Jax, what are they? These things in the woods."

Jax's fear was tangible and startling. He knew something. Gaige felt certain Jax had seen the creatures before, or knew of them. *Trap*, he'd said when the shrieking began. What kind of trap, and for whom? Byram couldn't have guessed they'd come after Jax because in Gaige's visions, Byram knew of Jax's banishment from the draegan camp, knew they'd written him off. So was the trap for Jax?

The questions gnawed at Gaige, but one more pressing than any other right now. "Jax, if you know what these things are, tell me!"

"Can't...let them...in," Jax said again, the words barely coherent. He dragged his arms over his head.

The draegan was terrified. And no help.

"We're surrounded." Wen clutched his sword tighter and spread his legs in a fighting stance. "There must be two or three dozen of them. Maybe more."

"But what are they?" Jarrad asked, his voice wavering. To his credit, however, he didn't back down from his defensive position.

"I can't tell." Gaige contemplated making a run for it—just picking up Jax and charging, balls-out, through the line of whatever the beings were.

But before he could think it through or act, all *hel* broke loose.

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The red-eyed creatures surged out of the trees in a blur of dark shape and shadow, wraith-like, except for the unnerving eyes and the long, thin gray arms ending in strangely gnarled, clawed hands. As they entered the clearing, pain exploded behind Gaige's eyes. A searing agony so severe he doubled over.

No! Not now!

Surely fate couldn't be cruel enough to send him a vision now of all times, not when it risked his and the others' lives. The headaches that came from the visions varied, sometimes mild, and sometimes so blinding he passed out from them. But he'd never experienced anything this intense and penetrating before. He fought to hold back the dark abyss he knew would soon encompass him; it always came with the precognitions.

Determined not to leave his companions on their own against unknown attackers, Gaige staggered to his feet and drew his sword to stand with Wen and Jarrad. But the agony in his head grew more brutal—it stabbed and tortured, burned and bled, and he found himself falling back to his knees, then slumping onto the snowy rocks.

Sorry...I'm so sorry, he wanted to tell the brothers. But he had trouble forming words as black crept in around the edges of his consciousness.

It wasn't until Wen and Jarrad collapsed next to him, their faces pale and twisted in torment, did Gaige suddenly realize, in some fuzzy, still functioning part of his brain not on fire, that the young draegans—and Jax as well—suffered as he did.

Which meant...

Not a vision.

It was an attack.

Oh, shit. Now Jax's terror made sense. Gaige felt a jolt of it

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himself, which only fed the pain, magnifying it. He knew of only one race that attacked this way.

And no draegan who'd faced them had survived.

Have to fight this. Have to...protect...the others.

But even thinking hurt. He felt his body beginning to shut down.

The creatures closed in around them, encircling them. Close enough Gaige imagined the cold slime of their skin beneath their dark, hooded cloaks, even though they hadn't touched him.

The night seemed to grow more frigid, and Gaige struggled to breathe, as if the monsters had sucked away all the air. His head felt as if someone was tearing his brain apart from the inside out with slow, cruel, methodical intent—invisible, hot needles probing, tearing, torturing.

"Hurts!" Jarrad cried, thrashing on the ground. Tears ran down his face. Wen's as well. "Make it stop. Please...make it stop."

Gaige couldn't bear to see them suffering like this. *Have to help them.* He tried to lift himself, with the intention of draping his body over Jarrad's, over Wen's if he could reach him, to protect them. If such a thing could protect them. But his limbs refused to cooperate. He no longer had control over his muscles, no longer had control over anything. Everything was fading into black with a red haze over it.

The pain grew even more intense, and in that moment, as bloodred bursts of light flashed behind his eyes, as his body fought for air, Gaige knew he was going to die. They were all going to die here. There was no way to fight back.

"Gaige..."

The voice came to him from somewhere distant. From a memory of a past where he could still feel joy, and sunlight, and

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warm hands caressing his skin. He tried to reach for that beacon in the dark.

“Gaige...hear me.”

Familiar...so familiar. And comforting. “Keiran?” he heard himself murmur, his voice barely above a rasp.

“I’m here. Look at me. Look at me and listen to my voice.”

Gaige forced open his gritty eyes. As if in a dream, a beautiful, shimmering dream, Keiran leaned over him, his handsome face taut with worry, but his silver-gray eyes, as always, glistening with so much love it made Gaige’s heart squeeze. “You’re here...” Gaige whispered.

“Gaige, listen to me. You have to live. Our people need you.”

“Too late. The pain is...” He gasped for air. “I can’t move, Keiran. I’m lost in the dark.” The icy fingers of blackness began to envelope him again.

“Don’t give in, Gaige. You’re a draegan lord now. You can fight this. You have to believe.”

The words grew distant, hard to hear through the seizures that wracked his body. Keiran’s image blurred and wavered, like smoke being blown away in the breeze. “No! Keiran, please don’t go...”

Gentle, invisible hands cradled his face. Warm lips brushed over his, offering life. Gaige clung to the kiss, making it last as long as he could. But eventually Keiran pulled away. *“Gaige, I need you,”* he whispered in Gaige’s ear. *“Fight, m’aerlas. Live. Remember.”*

The thick cloak of black swallowed Gaige again, shutting off the light and pushing him back down into the maw of torture. But even in what he knew were the final throes of suffering, when all else was gone, he remembered. Remembered Kieran’s words...

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Gaige, I need you. Fight, m'aerlas. Live.

Keiran's plea was a tiny spark of life deep within him. A spark that even in the darkest of darkness, refused to be snuffed out.

You're a draegan lord now. You have to believe.

Believe...

Flashes of thought began to fire again in his brain as the spark flickered into a flame.

Random thoughts, skipping here, there, with no connection.

Or maybe there was a connection.

He remembered the first time he'd talked to Keiran in the draegan mindspeak. They'd been in the forest near the camp, on their way back after Keiran had rescued him from Byram's dungeons. Gaige had still been healing from Byram's torture and the arrow wound he'd received as they escaped, but the need to connect with Keiran again, after all that had happened, had taken over. They'd made love amongst the trees, and had resealed their true mate bond. *I love you so much*, he'd told Keiran. Without thinking about it, without planning, he'd just said it telepathically...and Keiran had heard. One moment Gaige's ability to use the mindspeak hadn't been there, and then it was, as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

Days before that, when he'd gone to Thrythgar to help the villagers with children, to protect them from Byram's threats, he'd guided them to the caves beneath the mountains that would lead them to the eastern realms. As he'd watched the last person disappear into the cavern's entrance, he remembered wishing he were a draegan and had the ability to put up a protective screen to keep Byram's troops from seeing the opening and finding the villagers. A month later, a scout returned to the draegan camp with the news a draegan magick shield had been in place over the

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cavern's opening and the villagers were safe.

His thoughts shifted, and he saw Jax, lying on the ground tonight, shackled. He felt his own despair all over again when he couldn't open the locks with his knife. But then he'd concentrated on what he wanted, and just like that, the shackles had opened.

The magick is yours to use, any time, any place.

Gaige, I need you.

Fight...

Fight!

The night came rushing back around him—the cold, the snow on his face, the creatures attacking, Jarrad's and Wen's suffering...

Damn it...he needed to live! For Jarrad and Wen, who were far too young to die out here like this. For Jax, who difficult as he could be, didn't deserve this wretched fate. For the draegan race, whom he'd sworn to protect the day Keiran clasped the elorium band around his arm. And for Keiran...who needed him.

A ball of energy began to form at his core, around the flame Keiran had ignited. And just as it had been with the mindspeak, it felt right. Natural.

Into the building magick, Gaige channeled his fear for the others, his anger at being attacked tonight, at having Keiran stolen from him by some otherworldly being, at Byram's tyranny...but also his profound desire to get out of here and stay alive.

The ball expanded, white hot, swirling, and as it grew, it consumed the cold, the darkness, his despair, and filled him with something powerful. Something that brought him to full alertness and poured strength into his limbs. His head still ached, but it became white noise in the background.

He opened his eyes, and found the creatures leaning over him, leaning over all of them, their gnarled hands extended as if waiting

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to dig into a feast. Good gods...maybe that's exactly what this was for the nyctophans.

"Get back!" Gaige sat up and thrust his hands out in front of him to ward them off.

Although he didn't actually touch any of them, the front line of creatures fell backward into those behind them as if he'd physically pushed them. For a brief moment, the white noise of pain in his head flickered.

Breathing hard, Gaige stared at the monsters, at what he'd done to them without even thinking.

But as quickly as they'd fallen, they got back up and moved forward again.

The pain rebuilt with even more intensity, creeping in around the edges of the magick holding it at bay, making Gaige wince. But, damn it all, he wasn't going to give into it again. *No more!*

He scrambled to his feet, not bothering to find his sword, wherever he'd dropped it on the ground. He had a different weapon now. Out of his peripheral vision, he saw that Wen, Jarrad, and Jax lay silent around him. *Please don't let it be too late for them.*

Fury that the nyctophans might have already killed one or all of his companions surged through Gaige. "I said, back off!" he growled. He thrust out a hand again, but this time harder, focusing.

The nyctos flew backward much farther this time. But they merely rose and started forward again.

"I've. Had. *Enough!*" Magick swelled in Gaige, thrumming through his veins, coursing into his limbs, filling every part of him. The ground in the clearing, everywhere except a small circle around Gaige and the draegans, began to tremble. Large rocks shifted and cracked, while smaller ones shimmied over the surface as the tremors grew stronger.

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The motion dislodged more creatures, knocking them down, but as one, almost as if they had a collective mind, they rose, not to their feet, but into the air. Floating more than flying, but definitely airborne, they moved once again toward Gaige and the draegans.

Undeterred, Gaige swept a hand through the air and circled it over his head. Wind stirred in the trees, softly sighing in the branches at first, but building quickly into a gale. As it picked up speed, it began to spin in a large vortex with Gaige and his companions at the center, untouched. The nyctophans struggled against the powerful current, but one by one were swept up in it. Loose rocks—everything from small pebbles, to chunks and boulders the size of horses—as well as dead tree branches, smaller trees that had been uprooted, dried leaves, and falling snow churned up into the whirlwind as well.

The noise from the wind boomed around him, making it hard to hear anything but the beating of his own heart. And yet, at some point, Gaige realized the pain in his head was gone.

He looked down to see Wen sitting up, rubbing his temples. Relief flooded him. Jax and Jarrad lay quiet, however, which caused a jolt of fear in Gaige. *Please... let them all be okay.*

“Wen, check the others.”

As he glanced at Wen again, to be sure the draegan had heard him, he found Wen staring up at him, his eyes wide, his mouth open, his chest heaving with quick, shocked breaths.

“You’re doing this?” Wen shouted over the noise, his gaze flying from Gaige’s still upraised arm to the whirling vortex around them.

“I am. Check the others. See if they’re okay and, if you can, get them on their feet. I’m not going to be able to hold this forever.” Though enormous power still surged within him, Gaige felt it

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taking a toll on him. After the ordeal with the nyctos, which had already sapped much of his energy, exhaustion ate at him.

Wen nodded and, efficient as always, switched into practical mode. He crawled to his brother and shook his shoulder. "Jarrad? Jarrad, wake up. It's going to be okay."

Gaige had looked back up at the vortex, needing to keep his focus, but he heard Wen speaking and hoped that meant Jarrad was still alive. He hoped Jax was as well and this trip hadn't been in vain.

He couldn't explain how, but he felt the nyctos trying to free themselves from the whirlwind. He spun the wind faster, tiring, but standing resolute. "Wen, how're we doing?"

Wen slid Gaige's blade, which he'd obviously retrieved from the ground, down into the scabbard hanging from Gaige's belt. "We're ready to move, my lord. But how will we get through?"

Gaige spared a glance and saw Wen and Jarrad, looking pale and ragged, but both upright, with Jax hanging between them, his dark head slumped against his chest. He appeared only barely conscious.

"I'm going to open a path," Gaige told them. "Once I do, I want you to move as fast as you can up above tree line where we landed."

"What about you, my lord?"

Gaige created a doorway at the base of the whirlwind, directing the wind up and over it. "I'll be right behind you. Now, go! And don't look back."

The brothers, towing Jax between them, did as he directed, moving swiftly through the opening and disappearing into the woods.

Gaige exited more slowly. It took immense concentration to

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keep that much magick flowing. His adrenaline rush had worn off, and it was all he could do to put one foot in front of the other as he climbed up out of the trees while maintaining his connection with the tempest he'd created in the clearing. He couldn't hold it much longer—exhaustion dragged at him—but he had to keep it up until the draegans could shift and they could escape.

When he finally pulled himself up onto the rocky outcropping, Jarrad had already shifted and Wen had gotten Jax up onto him. Jax, still in his human form, lay draped over Wen's back, his eyes closed.

"Is there a risk of him falling?" Gaige asked.

"I've cinched him on, and Jarrad will be careful."

Gaige nodded and turned to face down the mountainside to where they'd just come. With a gasp of relief, he broke the link between himself and the storm he'd created. For a split second, all went quiet. And then, with a strange, unsettling *whoosh*, the rocks, branches, and everything else caught up in the whirlwind, fell to the ground. They hit with a jarring rumble that shook the mountainside.

Gaige stumbled and fell to his knees, drained. But Wen was there, helping him up. "I've got you, my lord. Are they dead?"

"A few maybe, but not all," Gaige rasped. "We have to go."

The air around Wen shimmered. One second a young man stood on the rocks, and the next a huge, magnificent, green-scaled winged being towered over Gaige.

Gaige gathered Wen's clothing and weapons and stuffed them into the draegan's pack. When the shift occurred, no clothing was ripped to shreds. Instead, it fell to the ground, in perfect condition. Draegan magick...strange and wonderful.

Wen dipped a wing down, and Gaige used the last of his energy

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to step onto it and drag himself onto Wen's back.

And then they were airborne, in a rush of wind and blowing snow.

Only then, as the mountain and Thrythgar slid behind them, did the reality of what had happened finally hit Gaige.

Nyctophans. That's what Byram kept hidden in the forest of Mount Adolixus. He gave them sanctuary and a steady diet of souls to torment, and in return, they cleaned up his messes for him.

They'd been attacked by nyctophans.

And they'd survived.

Now that it was over, Gaige had no idea how he'd done what he had...no idea if he could ever do it again. He could only be grateful that somehow, he'd found the strength to fight back.

Because of Keiran.

"Thank you," he murmured.

CHAPTER 4

“Is this what they actually look like?” Thomas set a book down in front of Gaige on the massive wooden table in Kellesborne’s library.

The thin, bespectacled human had grudgingly come to live with the draegans after Byram’s troops attacked the small settlement where he’d lived. Thomas was a linguist and historian, and had once been a teacher in one of the human villages. He’d been able to translate large passages of Byram’s grimoire they’d stolen, and thanks to him they now knew why Byram had started the war with the draegans so long ago, and about the unholy pact Byram had made with the shadow world being called Death. Although Thomas often tended to treat books better than people, and had frequently driven Keiran mad because of his know-it-all attitude,

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he'd become an invaluable member of Gaige's inner circle. When they'd moved to Kellesborne and Thomas had discovered the rich and exhaustive collection of books stored at the ancient draegan stronghold—histories and codices dating back millennia about virtually everything in Velensperia—he'd immediately moved into the small set of rooms directly next door to the library so he could be close to the precious books.

The library had also become command central for Gaige and his advisors because it was quiet and isolated in one of the white stone castle's large towers, away from the hustle-bustle of daily life that now filled the stronghold.

Gaige studied the inked picture on the yellowed page of an old tome, and swallowed hard. He didn't think he'd ever purge the sight of those red eyes and gray gnarled hands, nor the excruciating agony they'd all suffered from the nyctos attack. He still felt ghost-like echoes of the pain pulsing in his head. "Yes, that's how they looked," he said.

He slid the book over to Wen, who looked as unsettled as Gaige felt. Wen nodded, then pushed the book away as if being that close to the creatures again, even if it was just a picture, was more than he could stand.

"I still can't believe you're alive and here to tell of it," Marta said, her face pale. She'd been pacing around the table, but stopped suddenly to lean down and hug Wen, her oldest son. And then do the same to Gaige, murmuring, "Thank you for bringing my boys home safe and sound. Thank you for bringing yourself home safe and sound."

When they'd arrived at Kellesborne an hour ago, Jarrad, in a shaking voice, had told the tale of what had transpired, his eyes constantly fastened on Gaige in blatant hero worship. The gathered

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draegans and humans listening had passed through various stages of horror, shock, then wonder at Gaige's magick that had allowed them to escape. And most, including Marta, Iann, Thomas, and Wen, who were now all gathered around the table with Gaige, looked at Gaige the same way Jarrad had. Which made Gaige more uncomfortable than he could put into words. He was no hero. He'd done unspeakable things during the years he'd worked for Byram. Had done them blindly, without question, and, in his younger days, had relished them. Now, his past was anathema to him. He wanted to forget it and pretend he was good and upstanding and worthy of being the leader of these people. But he couldn't forget. His former life haunted him every day, and he feared no amount of super-powered draegan magick or last minute saves could ever earn him full forgiveness for his early black deeds.

"How's Jarrad doing?" Gaige asked Marta. The young draegan seemed to have come through the nyctophan ordeal okay physically, but Gaige worried about how quiet he'd been on the flight back to Kellesborne. They were all exhausted, so maybe it was nothing more than that. However, he knew how shaken he himself still was from the attack and he was a seasoned soldier who'd seen and experienced much. Even Wen had some maturity and several years of experience in a fight under his belt that gave him some tools to deal with the emotional stress. But Gaige couldn't get the sight out of his head of Jarrad thrashing on the ground, tears running down his face, begging for the pain to stop. He'd looked and sounded so young and vulnerable. Gaige felt an enormous weight of responsibility for putting the young draegan in that situation.

"I sent Jarrad to rest," Marta said. "Lilia gave him some herbs to help him sleep. He'll be fine."

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Gaige nodded, but something in his expression must have showed his uncertainty because Marta squeezed his shoulder. “He’s resilient. And extremely proud to be allowed to fly with you. He could talk of little else but you when I went to check on him, even as he was falling asleep. He’ll be fine, Gaige.”

Gaige managed another nod, but Marta’s words only made him feel worse somehow...not better.

“My main concern right now,” Gaige said, addressing everyone, “is keeping anything like this from happening again. I know we had talked about extending our flight patrols out farther, into areas we’ve flown before and haven’t seen nets. But many of the nyctophans who attacked us survived, and the clearing itself where Byram had Jax chained, is decimated. Word will get back to Byram that draegans retrieved Jax, escaped from the nyctos, then flew away.”

“The sorcerer won’t be happy about being outsmarted again,” Wen said. “He’ll probably increase the number of nets in the skies.”

“I agree. Even the skies directly around Kellesborne might not be safe any longer. So for now, I won’t want any draegans flying in or out of here until Wen and I have thoroughly scouted the area to be sure no new traps have appeared on our doorstep. I won’t risk any other lives against these creatures.”

“I’ll speak to the *draeganjhere*,” Wen said. “In the meantime, I’ll double our foot patrols around the mountain to compensate.”

“Good. Just...tell the guards to keep all their senses alert.” His voice grew hoarse as he remembered what had happened earlier. “We know now that nyctos don’t have to attack by air.”

Wen swallowed, hard. And Gaige knew he was remembering as well. “I’ll tell them the signs to be alert for.”

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“And then tell them the best defense, if they experience any of the signs, is to run...if they can.”

“Yes, my lord.”

“Thomas, how is it you have a book with a picture in it? I thought we knew little of the nyctophans.”

“Not true,” Thomas said. “Well, not really. The ancient scholars did know of them—hence the book you’re looking at, which was written a thousand years ago. But to most in modern times, because the nyctophans are seldom seen, they’ve become the stuff of legends, with few even realizing they really exist.”

“The draegans have known,” Iann interjected in his quiet but steady voice. The oldest among them all, Iann had been a member of Keiran’s mother’s *draeganjhere*, and Keiran’s protector after Keiran’s parents had been killed in Byram’s first strike against the draegans. He’d lived long and experienced much, including the halcyon days before Byram came into power, and all the difficult and troubling times since.

“The draegans have known of their existence over the past century because of Byram’s nets, yes,” Thomas said. “But no modern draegans—present company excluded—are known to have lived after direct encounters with them, so details are few. To my knowledge, there have been only two recorded sightings of the nyctophans by living draegans over the past hundred years. Those were from draegans on the ground who saw only the flash of cloaked gray figures surrounding the draegan in flight, heard the shrieks, saw the victim fall to the ground with the nyctophans in pursuit. In one of the accounts, the nyctophans were described as ‘ghostly, terrifying demons, swooping down from the sky.’ In both cases, by the time the draegans on the ground reached the spot where they’d seen the winged draegan go down, they found

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nothing but bits of bone and some blood.”

“They eat people?” Wen asked, looking ill.

“The pain they inflict on the mind is how they overpower and capture victims so they can be eaten. Much like a Triberian lizard shooting poison from its eyes that paralyzes its prey. In this case, once the prey is subdued, the nyctophans feed by tearing strips of skin and flesh from the body using their needle-like claws. From what I’ve read of ancient accounts, it’s a feeding frenzy really,” Thomas said, matter-of-factly, seemingly unaffected in spite of the fact everyone else at the table appeared horrified at his words.

“Gods of Erantz!” Marta whispered, turning so white the golden freckles on her face stood out prominently.

Gaige felt slightly nauseous himself. He’d thought nothing could be more horrific than the way the nyctophans got into one’s head. He remembered again opening his eyes to see the cloaked figures bending over him, their gray-skinned hands reaching...reaching... He shuddered.

“There were no nets over the forest or clearing, you say?” Ian asked, his weathered face thoughtful. “If that’s the case, how did the nyctos know you were there?”

“No nets. There’ve always been stories about that area, though. Of strange creatures. Even Byram’s soldiers don’t like to go into the mountains southeast of Thrythgar. I suspect nyctophans have been living there for a long time and Byram ran across them by accident, or perhaps he lured them there from other places. In either case, he uses them not just to patrol the nets, but as his way of cleaning up any unsavory business.”

“Like Jax,” Wen said.

Gaige nodded. “The soldiers always believed wild animals got the unfortunate souls chained out there. But clearly there are far

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worse predators in those woods than raptors and hungry sabeen.”

“Jax said it was a trap. But a trap for who?” Wen pondered. “The sorcerer had no way of knowing we were coming. *We* didn’t even know it until we were halfway there.”

“I’ve been wondering that myself,” Gaige said, “but Jax is the only one with the answer.”

“Lilia’s looking after him,” Marta said. “I asked her to let you know when he’s awake.”

Jax had been out cold by the time they landed at Kellesborne—his extended torture at Byram’s hands, the nyctos attack, exposure to the cold, had clearly pushed the big draegan to the end of his endurance. Many lesser beings would never have survived at all.

“Good. I have a lot to talk to him about.”

“Yes, like how he ended up in the sorcerer’s clutches in the first place,” Marta said, her tone biting, her distrust of the big draegan creeping into her words. Though she’d lived and worked with Jax for long years, she’d made it clear she would find it difficult to ever forgive him for how he’d treated Gaige and Keiran.

Gaige couldn’t deny he also found it strange Jax had been captured. Jax was smart, and hated Byram and his soldiers. He’d lived with Keiran and the others in hiding for forty years without being caught, so why now? Only one of many questions he had for Jax. Gaige didn’t relish the upcoming encounter with the draegan once he was awake. But whatever Jax knew, Gaige was damn sure going to get some answers.

“Speaking of captures, you’ll be interested to know we picked up Caleb, the man gone missing from Thomas and Selene’s settlement at the Zekklesian,” Iann said. “Our scouts in the Aurion Mountains caught him near the HaldranVale.”

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“Well done, Iann.” They’d been looking for the man for weeks, but recently Gaige had asked Iann to devote special attention to the search. “Was he alone?”

“He appeared to be. The scouts arrived at the west guard camp down below with him last night. Blindfolded, of course, so he doesn’t know where he is.”

“What’s his story?”

“He says he was merely traveling and hunting, and wasn’t aware Byram’s soldiers had attacked the settlement until he returned to it a couple of weeks ago and found it half-burned and empty.”

“And he felt no desire to find out what had happened to his camp mates? He didn’t wonder if they were dead or alive?”

“He claims that’s what he was doing when he was caught. Said he’d been following various detachments of Byram’s troops, looking for information.”

“Do you believe him?”

Iann cocked a gray eyebrow. “What he says is plausible. But with a story as vague as ‘I was out hunting alone when it happened,’ he has no way to prove his whereabouts or who he might or might not have been in contact with. My instincts tell me what he’s saying might be at least partial truth, but there’s far more to his story than he’s sharing.”

Gaige trusted Iann’s instincts unequivocally. He turned to Thomas. “Thomas, you lived with Caleb in the settlement. What do you know of him?”

Thomas shrugged a thin shoulder. “Not as much as you might think. He moved with us when our village was destroyed in one of the sorcerer’s raids four years ago. When we found the ruins of the draegan temple and decided to remain there, Caleb helped us get

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settled. It was he, in fact, who encouraged us to stay there because the location was isolated and we'd have the best chance of avoiding any further encounters with Byram's troops. But once the camp was set up, he began spending most of his time away."

"Did he say why?"

"He said he was too restless to stay in one place. He'd lost loved ones when the village was razed, so Lilia thought that being off on his own might be Caleb's way of grieving. He came back maybe four or five times a year for a week or two, mostly, he claimed, to see if we were all okay. When he was there, he was helpful, but quiet. I'd almost go so far as to call him secretive."

The word filled Gaige with a warning buzz. "Secretive? In what way?"

"He never talked about where he'd been or what he'd been doing. And if anyone asked, he'd say he was a wanderer and went wherever the wind might take him."

"Another vague response," Iann said, his blue eyes glinting.

"Did he ever bring anyone with him when he returned? Did you ever see him with anyone else?"

"No. He was always alone."

Aside from the secretive part, Thomas's memories of Caleb went along with what Lilia, the camp's healer, had already told Gaige. She'd said Caleb didn't talk much, preferred to be by himself, and didn't stay long when he returned. He'd been gone when Byram's soldiers had attacked.

The detachment had been *hel*-bent on retrieving someone from that settlement—someone Byram wanted alive. According to one of the soldiers Keiran, Gaige, and their small group had captured and questioned not far from the camp, the detachment's orders had been to find the target, kill everyone else, then bring the target

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back to Byram at Thrythgar. Unfortunately, the squealer had been a low-level soldier and hadn't known who the target was. The only people living in the settlement, however, had been Thomas, Lilia, an elderly couple, a middle-aged woman and her teenage son, and an old draegan woman. None of them posed any particular threat to Byram, so Byram's decision to send twenty soldiers to attack a tiny camp of innocents who could put up no fight seemed overkill.

Gaige and Keiran had assumed Byram was looking for a draegan at the settlement. But the only draegan had been the old woman who, it turned out, was Gaige's grandmother, Selene. Gaige hadn't known of her existence, hadn't even discovered he was related to her until weeks later. She was ancient, frail, and suffered from an instability of the mind. She hadn't spoken a word in over thirty years, so it seemed unlikely Byram would have bothered with her, even if he had somehow discovered her connection to Gaige.

Which had left only one person in camp unaccounted for...the mysterious Caleb. Why Byram might have wanted him, they didn't know, but it seemed far more likely he was the one the sorcerer had been after that day than any of the other inhabitants. If that was the case, Gaige wanted to know why. Because anyone Byram would send that many soldiers after could be a useful ally. On the other hand, someone had betrayed the location of the settlement to the sorcerer, in great detail, because the detachment had marched straight to it in spite of its secluded location and the difficult terrain surrounding it. And to the best of the inhabitants' memories, only one person besides them knew where it was located...Caleb. Which meant he could also be an enemy in disguise. Either way, Gaige believed the man could give them valuable insight into Byram's plans.

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"I'm assuming you want to question Caleb yourself," Iann said.

"I do. Meanwhile, let's keep him locked up. I don't want him anywhere near Kellesborne until we're certain he's as innocent as he wants us to believe."

Iann nodded.

Gaige glanced across the table at Wen, who still looked unnerved but was doing a masterful job of staying calm and focused in spite of it. Gaige knew he had to be exhausted, though. Fatigue and stress dragged on his own body and mind as well. It was time to wrap this up. It had been a long night, and already the morning was slipping away.

"That's all for now, everyone. Wen, take some time for yourself today and get some rest. You deserve it. Your actions and level head last night were a credit not only to the *draeganjhere*, but to the man you are."

Wen's cheeks turned a faint pink at the praise. "Thank you, my lord."

"Thank *you*."

"When would you like to check for nets and go to the guard camp, my lord?"

"Why don't you meet me atop the north tower after dark tonight."

"I'll be there."

They all rose, and Wen pushed through the huge double wooden doors, making his exit.

"Hmm...I wonder...yes...yes...I need to search for something," Thomas mumbled, almost more to himself than the others. He headed for the winding staircase that led into the upper lofts of the huge tower library. Gaige knew the man's mind often worked ahead, gnawing at the solution to some question or

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problem. He didn't bother to ask Thomas what it was this time...he'd grown used to his odd ways and single-minded devotion, and knew from experience the man was already too lost in thought to answer. If he discovered anything of interest, he'd share it with Gaige and others as soon as he'd compiled his facts.

"You need to get some sleep, too," Marta told Gaige, her tone motherly and her face creased with worry. "When was the last time you actually slept and didn't just depend on a quickly snatched hour or two, Gaige? It's been days, hasn't it?"

More like weeks. Since Keiran had been gone. But rather than share that fact with her and cause her more worry, Gaige offered her a small, forced smile. It felt strange on his face. He hadn't had much reason to smile this past night and day. "I'll be all right. I don't suppose there's been any news from Eliessán?"

Marta sighed and shook her head.

Iann rested a hand on Gaige's shoulder in a gesture no doubt meant to be reassuring, but for Gaige it merely conveyed the same message as Marta's nod...no word.

Gaige nodded slowly, trying not to let his disappointment show. "I'm going to go check on Jax," he murmured, needing to get away from the sympathetic looks Marta and Iann were giving him. He nodded at them both, then made his escape.

He hated feeling like Marta and Iann were pitying him for what they thought was just a fool's hope on his part. But, damn it, he refused to stop believing that Keiran was out there alive somewhere. And right now, all his hope centered around Eliessán and her mission—to find a way into the shadow world where Keiran had been taken. The elves had battled the shadow-dwellers and Moh'dredion—the true name of Death in its own language—thousands of years ago and closed the passage between this world

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and that one. But now Death, thanks to Byram, had grown strong and escaped. If it could get out, then there had to be a way in. Gaige had sent Eliessán to find out where the passage between the realms had once been, in hopes they could use it. But with each passing day and no word from the elf, he worried it was all for naught. He kept telling himself it had “only” been three weeks. But with Keiran’s life on the line, three weeks could make a difference between saving the man he loved and condemning him to death.

If he’s not dead already. How do you know he wasn’t dead the moment Death dragged him into the portal?

For the first time since that fateful night, Gaige let the forbidden thought slip into his head. Then immediately berated himself for it.

No, I won’t believe it. He was with me last night...I felt it. In my thoughts. He couldn’t have come to me that way, talked to me, if he were dead.

Or maybe he could...

A conversation he and Keiran had had the morning they’d donned the elorium armbands danced around the edges of his thoughts like a dark knave, taunting him. Keiran had told him the bracelets were permanent and would stay on until he and Gaige died. Gaige had clung to that memory, using it to reassure himself Keiran had to be alive because Gaige’s bracelet was still fastened and he couldn’t remove it. But the truth was, he didn’t know exactly how it worked. And something else Keiran had told him that day, haunted him. He’d said true mates stayed together for all time, even beyond physical death. What if Keiran really had died in the shadow world, and what Gaige had sensed and heard last night was Keiran helping him from beyond the grave?

Or worse...

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Maybe Keiran's dead and what happened last night was nothing but my imagination?

The thought hit him hard, causing his stomach to knot.

Against his will, hope began to trickle out of him, like a slow leak in a dam.

Gods, was this the way it was going to be from now on? Him alone, with Keiran relegated to an imaginary whispering voice in his mind? Maybe there'd never been much hope. Not for Keiran, maybe not even for the draegans or this war Byram had waged on them.

He suddenly felt overwhelmed. He was so tired. So damned tired. "What am I supposed to do?" he whispered as he rubbed his eyes.

You carry on. You fight for what you know is right.

He could almost pretend it was Keiran's voice he heard in his head, but he knew this time it wasn't.

It doesn't matter how you feel. You'll stand by your people and do everything you can to protect them because you know what the sorcerer will do to them otherwise. You know what kind of depravity and atrocities he's capable of inflicting. Could you stand by and watch it happen because you're too tired and heartsick to bother stopping it?

Gaige already knew the answer. His conscience would never allow him to run away from the coming fight.

Not only that, but you promised Keiran. The moment you put on that armband you swore an oath to take care of these people. And you'll damn well do it.

Or die trying.

Gaige pulled in a deep breath. And as he'd been doing every day for weeks now, he reached down inside himself and scraped

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together the strength to hold back his exhaustion and personal fears so he could focus on his job. He been raised as a soldier. Taught to never let his emotions rule him. Funny how he'd hated being so restricted and forced to be a cold-hearted bastard all those years he'd worked for Byram, yet now, he found himself falling back on some of that training just to get through the days.

He turned a corner to make his way toward the living quarters where Lilia, who'd transitioned from the healer of seven in her small settlement to the healer of more than two hundred here at the castle, had rooms. As he did, he saw something that caused him to pull up short.

Just a few steps away from him, tucked into a shallow window alcove, stood two familiar figures. Their lean, young, masculine bodies were pressed tightly together, their arms wrapped around one another, and their mouths fused in a heated, hungry kiss.

Gaige knew he should turn away and give them their privacy, but something about seeing them caused a hitch in his chest. A good hitch, that made him linger for a moment.

But just as he was about to leave, one of the young men caught sight of him. They quickly jerked apart and faced him.

Gaige was left with no choice but to address them. "Wen. Wesley."

"My lord," Wen said, his voice more than a little husky, and his fair skin turning an even darker pink than it had in the library when Gaige had praised him.

"M'lord," Wesley mumbled, looking flustered and guilty, his lips enticingly swollen from their kisses. He wasn't as tall as Wen, but they had similar wiry builds, and made a good-looking match with Wen's long, shaggy blond hair and fair skin a foil to Wesley's shorter, wavy dark locks and sun-bronzed countenance.

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Seeing the two of them together surprised Gaige a little. Wesley, the human teenager from the camp they'd just been discussing in the library, was closer in age to Marta's two youngest sons, Allend and Edric. Gaige had, in fact, seen the young men hang out together quite often, during daily weapons training sessions and in their free time, usually along with Jarrad as well. Wen had never been part of the group, however, being several years older and in a position of responsibility as the leader of the *draeganjhere*. If any of Marta's sons had been going to pair off with Wesley, Gaige would have thought one of the younger boys would have been more likely.

On the other hand, he knew from experience that desire and emotion knew no such boundaries as age. And something told him that what he'd just interrupted was more than young men scratching a sexual itch. He studied them for a moment, noting their flushed cheeks, the bulges in their leather pants, and the way that in spite of the fact their arms hung down at their sides, their fingertips continually brushed together like they couldn't stop touching even now. But most of all, he saw the way they instinctively leaned in close to one another, as if neither could bear to breathe the air without the other.

It made Gaige miss Keiran with a vengeance. But it also, oddly enough, renewed the hope he'd felt slipping away earlier. If people could still lust and love in the midst of such dark times, all wasn't lost yet.

A small smile quirked at Gaige's lips, not forced this time. "Carry on, gentlemen. Though"—he raised a teasing eyebrow—"you might find someplace with a door you can shut so you'll have more privacy and won't be interrupted again."

Their blushes deepened.

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“I believe the storeroom just around the corner isn’t often used. It’s small, but if you’re creative...”

Wen cleared his throat, his face now the color of flames. “Thank you, my lord.”

“Thank you, sir,” Wesley murmured, not as bold as Wen, keeping his eyes focused on the white stone floor in front of him, but ducking his head in respect at Gaige.

“Well, go on, then.”

Not needing any further urging, Wen curled his fingers through Wesley’s and pulled him past Gaige. They disappeared around the corner.

Unfortunately, when they were gone much of the light the young men had brought into Gaige’s day faded. But not all. Gaige stubbornly clung to what remained.

I’m not giving up on you yet, Keiran. I swore to find you. And I will.

CHAPTER 5

Gaige leaned a shoulder against the doorway of the small room in which Jax had been placed. The draegan lay unmoving on his stomach on the bed. His eyes were closed, and he was either still unconscious or sleeping. He looked battered, but his breathing sounded normal, which, Gaige thought, must be a good sign.

Lilia, her long dark hair pulled back in a loose knot on her head to keep it out of the way, bent over Jax to ease a sheet up over him, careful not to drag it across his healing wounds. When she straightened and saw Gaige, her face broke into a smile. “My Lord Rizik.”

Gaige let out a soft groan. “Please, Lilia, I’ve been ‘lorded’ as much as I can bear for the day and it’s not even mid-morning yet.”

“Well, I suppose since you had a difficult night last night I’ll

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humor you...Gaige.” Another smile.

It was an ongoing jest between them. She knew he wasn’t fond of his title, and so she used it to tease him, always giving it new variations—Lord Gaige, my lordship, or the one she’d come up with a couple of days ago that still made him cringe to think about...esteemed lordliness. In his former life, when he was younger and full of his own self-importance, her teasing would have annoyed him. But now he appreciated more than he could express being able to have someplace he could go in the fortress to find a small slice of normalcy in a world gone mad with death and fear and evil plots.

Though she was only in her late twenties, Lilia’s skills as a healer were far beyond her years. She’d been trained well by her mother, a healer before her. They were lucky to have her here at Kellesborne. But it was her heart, her sense of humor, and her genuine warmth that Gaige found most appealing. He’d liked her from the moment he’d met her. She was like the sister he’d never had.

“How’s he doing?” he asked.

“As well as can be expected,” she said softly. “He’s in pretty bad shape, but he’s strong and will heal. Right now the most important thing he needs is the rest his body is forcing on him.” She felt of Jax’s unshaven cheek one last time, no doubt checking to see if he were fevered, then turned toward Gaige. “Let’s talk elsewhere so we don’t disturb him. I’m assuming you want to see your grandmother?”

Gaige nodded and stepped aside so she could pass him, then followed her to the nearby rooms she shared with Selene. Lilia’s mother had been friends with Gaige’s grandmother, who’d been hiding in their village, living as a human, for many years. When

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Selene became ill with the mind-sickness, Lilia's mum hadn't thought twice about taking her into their home and caring for her. Lilia had once told Gaige that some of her first memories as a child were of Selene sitting by the fire with a faint smile on her face, watching her play. When Lilia's mother died three years ago, Lilia had taken over, looking after Selene like family. Needless to say Gaige was eternally grateful to her for the tender care she offered the old woman.

When they entered the cozy sitting room, warm from the fire burning on the hearth, he saw his grandmother sitting in a chair next to the window, a quilt draped over her lap, her rheumy gaze focused on the snow still falling from the gray sky outside. She didn't look up when they came in, but Gaige crossed to her, kissed her papery-thin cheek, and pulled up a stool to sit next to her, taking her hand in his.

"How are you doing today, Grandmother?"

She didn't look at him, but he knew she was aware of his presence. He was beginning to learn how to read her moods and her level of alertness. This morning her state seemed to be somewhere in the middle of the road. He talked to her for a while, mostly rambling about things around the castle and the weather. He always kept the conversation light, wanting to protect her from any further hurts and evil in their world. She'd been through enough. Gaige tried to stop by to see her every day. He didn't know how much she followed or remembered of what he said, but he found the act of simply being with her, talking, or sometimes reading to her, comforting. Maybe it was because he'd had no real family life growing up...only his father who'd hated him for what he was and who'd barely been able to be in the same room with him. Even though his grandmother didn't speak back, he still

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sensed she appreciated his company as much as he appreciated hers.

After a time, Lilia rested a hand on his shoulder. "I've fixed you a plate. Come over to the table and sit."

He rose and moved to the small table near the fireplace. "I don't come here expecting you to feed me, you know?"

"I know. But since you don't seem to think that taking care of yourself is a priority, I feel compelled to intervene. At least this way I know you get one decent meal a day."

"Lilia..."

"Don't argue. You know I'm right." A smile teased at her lips. "Now, tuck in."

With a shake of his head and a murmured thank you, he did, not realizing until he began eating the thick soup, bread, and dried fruit that he actually was hungry.

"By the way, I'm guessing you probably shouldn't expect Thomas for a meal today," he said. Gaige wasn't the only wayward soul Lilia took it upon herself to keep fed.

"Off on another one of his obsessive searches, is he?" Lilia's eyes twinkled. She nurtured an affection for Thomas that could easily blossom into something much deeper...if only Thomas would do something about it. Gaige suspected Thomas cared for her as well, maybe more than cared, but didn't have a clue how to show it. Lilia seemed to realize that, but rather than getting upset over it, she kept her usual good sense of humor and patiently waited for the day Thomas would speak up. Gaige feared she might have a long wait. Eventually, if she really wanted the man, she was going to have to sweep him off his feet, not the other way around. Or maybe a solid book whacked upside his head would be more effective.

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Lilia sank onto the bench across the table from him and set a mug of herbal tea next to him. Then she rested her chin in a palm, and gazed at him. “How are *you* doing after last night’s events?”

“I’m all right.”

“Which is masculine code for, ‘Even if I’m not, I don’t want to talk about it.’”

A smile tugged at Gaige’s mouth. “Sometimes.”

“You need to sleep, you know?”

“That seems to be everyone’s favorite subject today.”

“Maybe because the people around you who care about you sometimes see you better than you see yourself. You can’t keep going and going without some decent rest, Gaige.”

He lifted the mug, breathing in the spicy aroma of the tea, then looked at her over the rim. “Do I need to be wary of what you might have put in my drink?”

She laughed. “I’d never do that to you without you knowing. Of course...if you go much longer like this, I might reconsider that stance. All in the interest of being a good healer, naturally.”

“Naturally.”

“A bit of crushed vanick leaf and cailleflower powder in your tea might fit the bill quite nicely. You’d drink it and be out within minutes. It’d do you a world of good.”

“You wouldn’t dare.”

“Don’t tempt me.”

Gaige sighed. “If it makes you feel better, I know you’re right. I just...” He struggled to find the words.

“You miss Lord Hareldson.” It was a statement, not a question, and while her eyes conveyed sympathy, it was clear and genuine with no pity attached.

Lilia had a way of getting to the heart of a matter, and Gaige

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often found himself talking openly to her in a way he couldn't to the others. With her he could be a regular person and didn't feel like he had to wear the mantle of captain or leader or lord like he did with everyone else.

He closed his eyes and dragged a hand over his face, scruffy from going several days without shaving. "Yeah, I miss him. Every time I go to our room and lie on the bed, it feels like my chest is going to crush. And at the same time, I feel empty inside. Keiran was always here"—he pointed to his temple—"and here"—he pressed a hand against his chest. "And now it's all quiet. Too quiet to the point its unnerving sometimes. Sleep eventually comes, but it's restless. I end up tossing and turning and after a couple of hours I'm awake and it's useless to try to lie there any longer."

Lilia placed a gentle hand atop his. "Has there been any news about Eliessán or from anywhere else?"

"No. I know I have to give her time, but I worry Keiran doesn't have much time left. That is, if he's even..." The words caught in his throat. It was bad enough to have thought them earlier, but he couldn't bring himself to say them aloud.

Lilia remained silent, but her hand patted his.

Gaige took a deep breath and released it. "I think what bothers me the most is that I don't even have visions about him anymore. For weeks before he was taken I had visions of him climbing a steep path in the dark, with flames all around. And of other things as well. But once the creature took him through the portal, there's been nothing. When I do dream of him, it's always memories from the past and nothing else. I'm afraid of what that means."

"I don't know how such things work—draegan magick, the mental and emotional connection between true mates, and seers having visions are all still new to me. I guess I lived a pretty

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sheltered human life before a few months ago. But is it possible you can't feel Lord Hareldson or see him in visions any longer *not* because he's passed out of this life, but because he's on the other side of the veil between this world and the world of the shadows and the veil is blocking you?"

"To be honest, that's my hope. But unless or until Eliessán finds out where the old passageway the elves closed is, I don't know how to breach that veil. Although..."

"Although?"

"It was strange. Last night..." He lowered his voice, not wanting his grandmother to hear of the nyctophans attack and be upset. She seemed unaware, still gazing out the window. "Last night, when the nyctophans were attacking us and all seemed lost, I thought I heard and saw Keiran. He...well, I suppose it sounds crazy, but he's the reason I was able to fight them off. He told me to fight." Gaige shook his head. "Of course now, in the light of day, I can't help wonder if maybe I just made him up because my mind needed something like that to focus on, to distract it from the pain."

"It's possible. But..."

"But what?"

"Well, from what you've told me, and seeing you and Lord Hareldson together, there's something powerful between the two of you in a way I've never seen before. What if even though normal thoughts can't pass through the veil, in your moment of severe distress, when you were in terrible pain and thought you and the others were going to die, your emotions were so strong they somehow broke through. And Lord Hareldson, Keiran, was able to...I don't know...feel them, grab hold of your fear, and follow it back through. Not his physical body, but his aether spirit. His pure

thought.”

Gaige stared at her, and it was several moments before he realized he’d stopped breathing. He let the air out of his lungs in a slow huff, and felt a strange tingling that made the hair on his arms stand on end. “Lilia...” he murmured. “You’re a genius.”

She laughed softly and blushed. “I hardly think so.”

“No, I mean it. My gods...if you’re right, that might be a clue how to get him back.”

“But if it was his thoughts only, how would you retrieve his body?”

“I don’t know.” Gaige’s mind spun with possibilities, but each was tossed out almost before the thoughts fully formed. Still, this was something he could hold onto, a theory he could work on himself without having to be so damned helpless as he waited for someone else to find answers for him.

For the first time since Keiran’s disappearance he felt empowered to help him.

“If Keiran could sense my strong emotions once, then that means he should be able to sense them again.”

Lilia’s brows drew up and lines creased her usually smooth forehead. “I hope you’re not planning to go out and intentionally put yourself in danger just to test that belief.”

“No. I’m not that foolish.” At least he didn’t think he was. But he suddenly realized the temptation was strong to check Lilia’s theory.

A thump from behind Gaige interrupted that thought. He turned, and Lilia rose at the same time, to find Selene had pushed the quilt off her lap, which in turn had knocked over the low stool Gaige had been sitting on earlier. She was intently fiddling with something on her lap, her expression intense as she looked down at

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it.

“Grandmother?” Gaige stood and went to her.

Lilia picked up the quilt and tried to put it back on Selene, but with a swipe of her arm, Selene pushed it away again. Lilia looked at Gaige in surprise. “I haven’t seen her this riled in a while.”

Gaige dropped to a crouch next to his grandmother. Her small, spotted hands were clawing at a drawstring pouch she wore at her waist, but she couldn’t seem to get the strings untied.

“May I help you open it?” he asked, keeping his voice low and calm.

She looked up at him, her blue-eyed gaze surprisingly alert now. For a second no one moved, and then she thrust the finely woven purple pouch at him.

Gaige worked loose the knot in the strings, then eased open the pouch. Without looking into it, he set it back in her lap.

She dug in it with thin fingers, sorting through who knew what, occasionally frowning as she peered down into the bag at whatever she’d touched, then moving on to jiggle something else around.

Gaige glanced up at Lilia, who shrugged and looked as mystified as he felt.

Finally, after what felt like painfully long minutes, she removed her hand from the pouch with a tiny blue glass vial clutched between her fingers. She looked up at Gaige once again, her eyes piercing through him with intensity, as if she needed him to know something. It was the most cognizant he’d ever seen her.

“What is it? What can I do?” he asked, resting a hand on her knee.

She picked up his hand, tipped it up, set the small vial on his palm, then curled his fingers around it.

“You want me to have this? What do I do with it?”

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She released his hand and held up hers...with her forefinger extended.

“One?”

She nodded.

“One what?”

Her brow furrowed and he saw a flash of frustration pass over her face.

“What’s in the vial?” Lilia asked Gaige. “Is it liquid?”

He held it up to the window light and looked at it. “I think so.”

“Sele, do you mean one drop?” Lilia asked his grandmother.

Her eyes brightened again. She gave another short nod.

“But one drop for what? On what?” Gaige said, trying to keep his voice smooth and not show his own frustration.

::*Sleep*:: he heard in his head, the voice wavery and difficult to understand.

“Sleep?” Gaige asked aloud.

“Sleep?” Lilia looked at him strangely, reminding him she hadn’t been able to hear his grandmother.

“I think she wants me to take one drop to...help me sleep?”

Selene shook her head almost violently and glared at him.

“I’m sorry,” he told her. “I don’t mean to frustrate you. I’m trying to understand.”

She looked at him desperately. He noticed her eyes were beginning to get glazed a bit and realized she was afraid he wouldn’t figure it out before her clarity slipped away.

“You don’t want me to take it to help me sleep, so maybe you want...” He was at a loss.

“Maybe she wants you to take it when you go to sleep. Not to help you get to sleep, but because whatever it is works while you sleep,” Lilia said.

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Selene's shoulder sagged and she let out an audible sigh that sounded an awful lot like relief.

"Is that it? You want me to take one drop before I go to sleep?"

One more jerky nod, then she let her head fall back against the high-backed chair as if her job was now over.

"But what is it?" Gaige wondered aloud.

"Do you mind if I open it and smell it? I might be able to tell you if it's herbal, at least."

Gaige started to hand Lilia the vial, but Selene's head jerked up again and her hands flailed in front of her.

Gaige paused.

"I think she means it's only for you," Lilia said. "She doesn't want me to touch it or open it. Is that right Sele?"

Selene tugged at Gaige's arm until he lowered it from where he'd been about to hand the bottle to Lilia. Once again she curled his fingers over the vial, completely hiding it in his palm. Then her head settled back against the chair again. This time she closed her eyes as if exhausted.

"Well..." Gaige wasn't quite sure what to do now, so he stood. "I guess I'd better be going." He leaned down and kissed his grandmother's forehead. "Thank you," he murmured, though he had no idea what his grandmother had in mind or why she'd suddenly been so fierce about giving him something when she'd never done anything like that before.

::See::

The single word in mind was so faint he wasn't sure if he really heard it or not. When he stepped back and looked at his grandmother, she appeared quiet and peaceful, as if she'd gone to sleep.

Then he heard it again... *::See::*

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It had to be her. But when he tried to reach out with his mind and connect with her, all he found was a blank wall.

Lilia walked him to the door. “Will you do it?” she asked, keeping her voice soft, almost a whisper, so Selene wouldn’t overhear if she was still awake.

“I don’t know. I have no idea what it even is or if it’s safe. And where did it come from? Have you ever seen this bottle before?” He opened his hand and they both looked at the tiny cylinder of blue glass glistening in the firelight.

“No, I’ve never seen it. It must be something she’s been carrying in that pouch for years. She cares for you, though, and she seemed quite aware of what she was doing. I don’t think she’d ever give you anything that would hurt you. Not intentionally anyway.”

“Probably not.” Still, after years of being given little bottles of potion for this and that while working for Byram—potions to change his appearance in various ways when he worked undercover for the sorcerer, and the foulest ones of all...potions that hurt people, made them bleed or caused their insides to slowly eat away—he hesitated to use anything he didn’t know the contents of or its purpose.

“If you decide to try it, you will let me know what happens, won’t you?”

“I promise.” He put the little bottle into the leather pouch he wore on his belt. “Thank you for feeding me yet again. And for listening.”

Lilia stood on tiptoe and kissed Gaige’s cheek. “Please try to get some sleep today, whether or not you open that vial.”

“I’ll try.”

She smiled. “Maybe today’s the day you’ll close your eyes and have sweet dreams.”

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He could only hope.

* * *

With nothing pressing he had to do at the moment—he and Wen couldn't risk going down to the guard camp until after dark, and the daily scouting and training duties were in Iann's and Marta's capable hands—Gaige went to his rooms.

He didn't have much hope for success, but he had to at least be able to tell Marta and Lilia he'd tried to get some rest.

The moment he entered the massive lord's chamber, a wave of missing Keiran hit him hard, as it always did. Though they'd spent so little time together at Kellesborne, most of it had been right here in these rooms. Memories of Keiran were everywhere. Sometimes Gaige could almost imagine he could hear Keiran's laugh and smell his clean, woodsy scent. Which was completely not possible considering it had been months since Keiran had set foot at Kellesborne. The last time, they'd just escaped from Thrythgar. Both of them had been wounded, and they'd flown here because it was closer than the draegan encampment in the forest. They'd spent three days here, but most of that time Gaige had been either unconscious or sleeping as he recovered from Byram's torture and the poison-tipped arrow that had pierced his shoulder.

Gaige stripped out of his clothes and crossed through into the bathing chamber, where he turned on the flow of water that allowed the hot springs below the castle to fill the large stone pool set into the floor. The lord's bathing chamber was one of his favorite things about Kellesborne. The walls and the pool itself were made of a stone that glowed faintly blue, as if it were lit from within. The pool was large enough to hold two big men

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comfortably with room to spare, and deep enough to sit on one of the stone benches down in the pool and be fully immersed. The draegans of old had enjoyed many luxuries and been masters at many things, including plumbing. When the taps were turned on, water from the hot springs flowed into the pool constantly, with a drainage system set up so it never overflowed and the water was always hot. When you were finished, you simply turned off the taps and the pool drained.

When the pool was full, Gaige slid down into the steaming water. As he leaned back, letting the water lap around his shoulders, hoping to ease his aching muscles and maybe, just maybe, relax enough to sleep, he realized even here Keiran consumed his thoughts.

He remembered the morning months ago, when Keiran had filled the tub and brought Gaige in here to soak and help heal his injuries. He'd sat behind Gaige on this very bench, pulled Gaige back against him, and bathed him. As he'd washed him with infinite care, he'd reassured him he could talk to him about anything and that he didn't have to deal alone with all the emotional tumult over the things the sorcerer had done to him. Gaige had resisted, feeling dirty in his soul, and not wanting Keiran to see that. But eventually he'd broken down, purging himself of all the darkness he'd been holding inside, while Keiran comforted him. And then, when Gaige had reached out for physical connection, Keiran had given him that as well, kissing and fondling him, then stroking him off with the most tender of touches, careful not to cause him any pain and only bring him pleasure.

The memory rushed through Gaige, causing his cock to stiffen as he imagined Keiran's phantom hands once again sliding over

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him. Gaige's own hands moved to take their place, squeezing, stroking, caressing his balls, urging his body close to release, then backing off, over and over until his prick ached it was so hard.

His imagination took over from there, no longer trying to replicate the actual events, but instead creating new ones. Gaige closed his eyes. He imagined Keiran sliding his hands under Gaige's ass and lifting him until his cock broke through the water, then capturing it in his mouth. He suckled long and sweet, squeezing Gaige's testicles in one hand, and with the other, sliding a finger up into him. The last was more than Gaige could take. With the hot water swirling around him, and Keiran's face and warm, muscular body vivid in his mind, he brought himself off, groaning as his seed shot free.

He lay still, his head resting against the edge of the pool for several minutes, finding his breath and not wanting to open his eyes back in this reality just yet.

Gaige had never thought he could love Keiran more deeply than he had that day months ago. But that had only been the beginning, and in the weeks that followed, as they grew closer and closer, he'd come to realize he'd spend the rest of his life falling in love with Keiran a little more each day.

Loneliness hit him hard, making his gut ache so much he almost doubled over. *Gods, I miss you, Kieran! I want that life back.*

As he finished the more utilitarian tasks of bathing and shaving, his thoughts turned to Lilia's theory on what might have happened last night. And again he felt a tingle along his skin, as if some force in the universe were trying to tell him, *Yes, this is important! Figure it out!*

Was Keiran indeed alive and Gaige's fear and desperation had

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somehow pierced the veil between the worlds? If so, how could he make that happen again...preferably without putting himself or anyone else in mortal danger?

Think. Damn it, think...

But he was so tired his brain was having trouble putting together any other pieces of the puzzle. He scrubbed a hand over his face. He really did need to sleep. Even a few hours would help.

Which led him to remember the vial his grandmother had given him.

Without bothering with clothes, Gaige paced naked across the stone floor of the bedroom to where he'd unfastened his belt and draped it over a gilt chair upholstered in royal blue that matched the hangings around the huge canopied bed.

He pulled the vial out of his leather pouch and studied it in the gray morning light coming in from the huge, floor-to-ceiling glass-paned window.

One drop when he went to sleep. His grandmother had insisted it wasn't to help him get to sleep, that it served some other purpose. But what?

Gods, he had to be stupid to even be considering this, but...

He pulled out the tiny stopper in the bottle, then carefully tipped the vial until one shimmering drop of a viscous silver liquid fell onto his forefinger.

There was only one way to find out what this stuff did. Gaige lifted his finger and brought it to his tongue.

He expected it to taste bad, or strange at least, given the thick consistency. But it didn't really taste like anything. The only evidence he felt that he'd even put it in his mouth was a faint numbness on his tongue.

He waited, alert to any changes the potion—or whatever it

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was—might bring to his body. With Byram’s potions there’d always been a distinct tingling sensation that signaled a transformation of some type. But after several seconds, and then a minute passed, Gaige felt nothing. Nothing at all.

He looked at the vial again and set it on the table. “Well, so much for that.” After all the wondering, his grandmother’s potion had turned out to be nothing. Maybe she’d had it so long it had lost its effectiveness.

Gaige sighed and forced his overtaxed body to move to the bed. He pulled the heavy curtains around it, shutting out the light, then slid under the covers and sank into the softness of the mattress.

As always, pangs of missing Keiran caused a deep ache inside him. It was still hard to lie in bed alone when, for so long, he’d had Keiran’s body pressed against his. He closed his eyes and rolled onto his side, pulling one of the spare pillows with him, hugging it to him.

As tired as he was, sleep teased him as always, flouncing close, then skipping away just out of reach, coming close again, then pulling away. But finally, finally, the last of the tension drained out of his muscles and he began to drift.

And then he began to dream...

CHAPTER 6

The dream had been getting worse. Each day it grew more intense, more dangerous.

And Keiran knew why.

Moh'dredion was angry.

"Get mad all you'd like," he growled, running along the thin, rocky ridge, fully aware of, but not looking down at, the sheer drop off on either side. Dark clouds billowed in the unnatural, sickly gray-green sky, heralding another storm. And behind him...he could still hear the beasts coming.

"You can throw at me whatever your twisted mind can dream up, but you're not getting what you want, you bastard. You hear me?" Keiran shouted, as big fat drops of rain began to fall, stinging his face. A jagged bolt of lightning split the sky, followed by a

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rolling rumble of thunder. “Is this it? Is this the best you can do?”

The rain fell harder, creating rivulets of water on the rocks, making them slippery. Confident, Keiran didn’t slow his pace—he’d run this path before. So when his foot suddenly slid out from under him, leaving him teetering over a death drop for a horrifying moment, it shook him. He regained his footing, but as he started to run again, his heart pounded. Not so long ago that never would have happened. His body was getting weaker.

When he reached the end of the ridge he went over it and down, scrambling over the slick rocks to a still steep but more maneuverable slope. Now, his boots sank into the mud, slowing him, but he ran on. There was a cave over the next ridge. If he could get to it before they caught up to him, he had extra weapons there. With the giant brutes behind him, he had a feeling extra might be good.

The first of the beasts came over the hill, landing with a thud that shook the ground. It was followed by another. They were close enough now Keiran could smell their stench...like rotting bog wood and long-dead animal.

The rain had turned the mountainside into a slimy mud hole. One with rocks and scraggly trees jutting up everywhere, all further slowing Keiran’s pace. But if he couldn’t move fast, then the creatures couldn’t either. He hit the bottom of the ravine after sliding down the last portion of it on his backside and landing in an undignified heap.

Wincing in pain, he pulled himself up, drew his sword, and took off again, running along the bottom of the narrow canyon. The hill on the other side was too steep to climb here...he had to cover some distance until the terrain was more forgiving and he could get up and over the ridge.

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The beasts caught up to him before he could get that far.

The ground thundered behind him as one of them swung its enormous spiked club at him and it hit the ground just a few steps behind him. Keiran zigzagged back and forth, dodging more blows. Finally, he spied a rock ledge ahead, within climbing distance. Not ideal, but it would do. The damn creatures were at least twice as tall and three times as broad as he was and he had a better chance of fighting two of them at a time if he could be above them or, at least, at their level. If only he could shift into his winged form. The need burned inside him, but he brutally tamped it down. Shifting was out of the question.

He leapt up the side of the ravine wall—noticing once again that he wasn't as sure-footed as he should be. But he couldn't dwell on that fact right now. He pulled himself onto the shelf and turned. One of the huge, misshapen brown creatures had tried to follow him, but hadn't quite made it to the ledge yet. With a growl, Keiran swung his sword. The hit only glanced off the lumpy skin of the creature's upper arm. Keiran sidestepped another blow from the giant spiked club, feeling the spray of rock as it hit the ledge and cracked off a chunk of it. He swung again, but again was blocked by an upraised tree-trunk of an arm.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw activity with the other beast, who'd lagged behind, still standing in the ravine. When Keiran finally had a clear view of what was keeping the other creature, his heart stalled.

No, not this. Not today. The days when Moh'dredion threw this particular twist into the dreams were the hardest.

A tall, regal-looking man with long, pale blond hair ran full speed at the second creature, his sword drawn and glistening in the rain.

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As Keiran fought with the beast tormenting him, he couldn't stop glancing sidelong at the man. Seeing Gaige like this was both a balm to his soul, and caused an aching loneliness inside him. Every time Keiran looked at him, he was struck anew by how magnificent he was, by what a fierce fighter he could be...and by how damned much he missed him. He wasn't real...Keiran knew that, knew it was just another taunting game Death played with him. And yet, he wanted to believe Gaige was really here.

Until he remembered what would happen to Gaige...what *always* happened to him when he made an appearance in the dreams. The thought brought a knot to his gut.

Searing pain suddenly shot through Keiran's shoulder, causing him to stumble. "Gods, damn it!" he cried, clutching at it. His hand came away bloody

Fool! He been distracted and not paying close enough attention. The steel spikes on the beast's club had sliced him open. With a growl, Keiran threw himself back into the fight with a vengeance, trying to ignore the throbbing in his shoulder, and the man fighting nearby. He ducked and dodged the club's vicious blows, while landing a few of his own with his weapon. Each time he did, the concussion reverberated down through his arm, leaving it almost numb. The damned creature's skin was thick as the bark of a redthorn tree.

And then he saw an opening. He jumped across the space separating him from the brutish fiend and landed on its back. The gods-awful stench surrounded Keiran now, making him gag. But the move had caught the beast by surprise. It began twisting and turning to dislodge him. It took all Keiran's strength to hold on. "Oh...no...you...don't!" With a loud grunt and a desperate lunge, he dragged his blade across the beast's throat.

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He knew his sword had cut through to something vital when the beast gurgled and staggered. Then, in slow motion, it fell backward off the slope and crashed to the ground with an earth-shuddering rumble.

Keiran had managed to let go and leap aside before it hit. He landed hard on his back with the breath knocked out of him. He lay unmoving, trying to find air. *Get up. Get up!*

Gasping, he clawed his way to his hands and knees in the mud, then pulled himself to his feet. With resigned determination, he turned to face down the second brute.

But he'd landed in the opposite direction from it, too far for him to make an immediate strike. As he watched, the beast swung its giant club. Gaige was right in its path.

"Gaige, look out!" Keiran shouted the warning out of instinct.

Gaige ducked and the spikes missed his head by inches. Undeterred, the creature hauled back to strike again. As it did, it blocked Keiran's view of Gaige with its broad, lumpy body.

However, Keiran didn't need to see to know what was going to happen.

Gods damn it all, he hated this part. He knew what Death wanted...it wanted Keiran to use magick to stop the creature and save Gaige's life. Except, Keiran knew from painful experience it wouldn't save Gaige's life at all...Gaige wasn't even here. Not really. The being that looked like Gaige was just another manifested player in the shadow dream, a game piece used to manipulate Keiran. Death had one goal and one goal only—to force Keiran to use his draegan magick so Death could harvest it to make himself more powerful.

And that was something Keiran wouldn't do.

Even though he knew what was coming, knew there was no

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stopping it, he lunged toward the beast anyway. He couldn't save the shadow Gaige, but he could damn sure try to take down the creature while it was distracted.

Before he could get there, though, the creature bent forward, and its next blow landed. Keiran heard and felt it vibrating through the ground. And then all was silent.

Keiran's stomach knotted again. He knew it wasn't real, but it still hurt just as much every time. How could he not be affected when he was forced to be present as the man he loved—or the dream being who looked like him—was brutally murdered?

But then he saw the big brute shudder. Heard a strange gasping sound. The creature's club fell into the mud with a heavy, wet *plop*.

What in hel?

As he watched, the beast dropped to its large, knobby knees...then fell over like a grotesque, uprooted tree.

"Holy gods, what is that *smell?*" Grimacing, Gaige stepped closer to the fallen creature and yanked his long blade out of its chest. Then, breathing hard, his hair hanging in long wet strands down the sides of his face, his once white shirt covered in blood and streaks of mud as the rain continued to pound down, he lifted his gaze to meet Keiran's. And in that instant, his blue eyes, so beloved and so beautiful, filled with emotion.

The sight sent shock rippling through Keiran in slow, heavy pulses. What was this? Some new twist on Moh'dredion's game? Some new way to pull Keiran's strings by tormenting him with what he couldn't have?

"Keiran, I thought... Gods, I thought you were..." Gaige's voice broke.

His name on Gaige's tongue, the husky tone and the way he

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said it like it was a prayer—or the answer to a prayer—sent another shockwave through Keiran. But it was the raw love and loneliness tempered with hope on Gaige's face, and the glint of dampness in his eyes, that shook Keiran to the core. He seemed so...real.

"You didn't die," Keiran finally choked out. "Here, just now..."

Gaige's eyes widened and he almost flinched, like that was the last thing he'd expected Keiran to say. "Was I supposed to?" The question was spoken uncertainly, and troubled lines marred the graceful beauty of his face.

"Always. No matter what situation he puts you in...you always..." For some reason he couldn't get the word out again.

Gaige strode toward him. As he drew near, Keiran's skin began to tingle. He stopped only a pace from Keiran. He looked like he wanted nothing more than to reach out and touch him, but he held off. As if he were afraid of Keiran's reaction. "I always die?" he asked.

Keiran nodded, unable to find words.

Something wasn't right here. Something...different was happening. The shadow Gaige had never spoken to him before except, occasionally, to call out and plead for him to save his life. The shadow Gaige always died in whatever Moh'dredion's dream scenario of the day was.

::Keiran...m'aerlas, what it is? What's wrong?::

A lump filled Keiran's throat, hot and thick. Shadow Gaige couldn't share the bond of the draegan telepathic speech. Couldn't probe gently at his thoughts like Keiran felt someone doing right now.

"Oh my gods," he whispered. "Is it really you?"

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“You once promised you’d always find me when I needed you. And I promised I’d always find you, too.”

Tears stung Keiran’s eyes. “Gaige...”

He wasn’t sure who moved first, but in the next instant they were in each other’s arms, pressed body to body, their lips seeking and finding the solace they both craved. Keiran hadn’t realized just how damned lonely and devoid of hope he’d been until that moment, with Gaige’s tall, warm familiar form against his and his thoughts and emotions once again merging with his own. Two halves reuniting to form the whole.

“How is this possible?” Keiran asked when they had to part for air. He rested his forehead against Gaige’s and their gazes locked. Keiran stroked his mate’s smooth-shaven face, his parted lips, his wet hair, still trying to reassure himself he wasn’t imagining this. Gaige was doing much the same thing to him, as if he couldn’t get enough contact with Keiran.

“I’m not sure. Selene gave me a potion to use—one drop before I slept. I didn’t know what it would do. I didn’t think it had even worked. But then I closed my eyes and...and I was here. I think I’m—”

“Dreaming,” Keiran finished for him. It was the only thing that made sense. Gaige had somehow found a way into Keiran’s dreams. “You’re dreaming.”

“But what about before? Last night, when the nyctophans were attacking and you came to me. You talked to me, told me to fight. Then you kissed me. Was that a dream, too?”

Keiran’s heart began to pound almost painfully. “You felt that? That was real?”

“The nyctos attack? Yes, it was real. Very.”

“Bloody *hel*,” he whispered. “I thought...” When he’d felt

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Gaige's terror, it had been so real and alive to him he'd reacted out of fear, without thinking, reaching out to soothe Gaige, to do whatever he could to help him fight. But it hadn't occurred to him that it *was* real. He'd thought...he didn't know. That it was a dream within a dream. Or maybe some new torment Moh'dredion had concocted, making him think Gaige was suffering in the real world.

Nyctos. A chill ran through him just thinking about them. He reached up and cradled Gaige's cheek in his palm. "You're here. You got away from them," he said in wonder.

"Thanks to you, I found the magick you've been trying to convince me I have. Keiran, it was like...like nothing I've ever felt before, burning and pulsing inside me."

Pride thrummed in Keiran's chest. *::I knew you would. Gods, I love you.::*

Gaige's expression softened and his eyes shimmered. *:: I love you, too.::*

Keiran stepped back and wrapped his hand around Gaige's. "We have a lot to talk about. But right now, we need to get under cover. They'll be back."

"More of those?" Gaige stared at the fallen beasts.

Keiran nodded. "Those...and other worse things." He glanced warily around. "But most of all, we don't want him to know you're here."

Gaige's gaze rose to meet his. "Him? Keiran, what's going on? What is this place?"

"Hel."

When Gaige's face blanched, Keiran clarified. "Welcome to my nightmare."

CHAPTER 7

Keiran had discovered when he first came here that though the dreams could and did change, the setting stayed the same. It was always this unforgiving landscape of rugged, rocky precipices and deep ravines, where the sky, even when it wasn't storming, stayed a dreary gray because there was no sun, moon, or stars.

The shelter he led Gaige to was one of a handful of places he'd stashed weapons and supplies. That way, no matter where he might open his eyes and find himself in the limited geographic area that made up what he thought of as the "dream lands," and no matter what horror Moh'dredion chose for him to face, he was usually close enough to one of his stashes to get to it if he found himself unarmed.

Which was frequently.

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Moh'dredion didn't want him to depend on physical arms, he wanted him to use magick. But almost all the creatures he sent after Keiran did carry weapons of some sort—everything from assorted blades, scythes, axes, and maces, to quarterstaves and clubs. It had become simple enough for Keiran to relieve the creatures of any weaponry he might find useful after he'd slain them. He'd managed to procure the occasional blanket and pouch of food as well.

"This is it," Keiran said, holding back several thick, prickly branches to reveal the opening.

Though they had to bend down to go through the entrance, once inside, the cave widened up and out and was big enough not only to stand in upright, but to easily accommodate two men, Keiran's backup weapons, and have some room to move around or even fully stretch out on the floor to sleep. Though this wasn't his actual body, Keiran found he still had to eat, drink, and sleep in order to survive here.

There was room for a fire pit on the floor as well, but he hadn't ever dared light a blaze for fear it would reveal his hideaway, which, thankfully, none of Moh'dredion's dream minions had discovered yet. He'd been able to cope without a fire for cooking, surviving mostly by foraging in the woods. And though it wasn't warm here, it was never quite cold either. In spite of the violent storms Death loved to throw at Keiran, the temperature remained moderate day and night. Almost as if, living in his deep underground cavern where he himself had little exposure to the changing of seasons, night and day, and fluctuating temperature, Moh'dredion didn't realize his dream world climate should be any other way.

Once they were inside, Gaige turned and held a palm up to the

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opening—Keiran knew he was about to put a protective screen over the entrance to hide it and them.

He placed a hand on Gaige's arm. "No magic."

When Gaige looked at him in confusion, Keiran said, "We can't use magick here. I mean, we can use it, but I don't. I won't. And while you're here, you can't either. It's what Moh'dredion wants. He feeds off it. Draegan magick makes his power strong."

"And the magick of a draegan lord even more so," Gaige said, understanding and finishing the thought.

Gods but he'd missed that...the way he and Gaige could often finish each other's thoughts and sentences. "Yes. That's why he taunts me and sends hunters after me. He's trying to force me into using it to save myself. Or to save..." His voice trailed off.

"This isn't the first time you've seen me here, is it? You said I always die." Gaige turned toward him. Even muddy and still dripping from the rain outside, he was the most beautiful thing Keiran had ever seen. It made his breath catch just to look at him. But then again, it had always been that way.

Keiran sighed, sinking into a crouch, his back against a wall of the cave. "I've seen you, but not the real you. Just a creation, a form that looks like you. Moh'dredion puts you in my dreams sometimes."

"You thought you were dreaming me out there today. That's why you reacted the way you did, wasn't it?"

"I am dreaming you. Even though it's the real you and not some farce Death created, this is still just a dream, Gaige. My dream. You've somehow entered it, but it's a dream nonetheless. That's what Moh'dredion does when he brings someone into Ballian."

"Ballian?"

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“Here. Where we are. Well, where my body is.”

Gaige knelt in front of him and rested his hands atop Keiran’s knees, squeezing gently. His face was a study in love, worry, fear—but not fear for himself, for Keiran. “Tell me. I don’t know how long I have here, how long my grandmother’s potion will work, and I need to know everything, Keiran.”

Keiran’s chest tightened. He leaned forward and kissed Gaige, savoring his taste, the feel of his warm lips against his own. “I’ve missed you so damned much.”

“I’ve missed you, too. I was afraid you were dead. I couldn’t feel you anymore. It was like...”

“A part of you was gone.”

“Yes.”

“I know. I know, *m’aerlas*. It was the same for me. I don’t even know...how long have I been here?”

“Three weeks.”

Keiran squeezed his eyes closed. “For me it’s been...” He swallowed hard.

“It’s been what? Does time move differently here?”

“I think so. I don’t know how long it’s been exactly—there’s no day and night here, just gray—but it’s felt like months. Maybe longer.”

Gaige let out a soft huff of breath and his face tightened. “Talk to me. What happened after Death took you from our tent that night?”

“He brought me through the portal to Ballian...that’s the name of the shadow world. Right now my body is lying on a stone table in Ballian, growing weaker. That’s how he feeds. He uses some kind of ancient earth magick to trap his victim in a deep sleep where all they can do is dream. And then he fills the dreams with

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hurt and pain and torment.”

“Like the visions. The ones I had of you for weeks before he took you away.”

“I remember. And, yes, that’s exactly what it’s like. He wants to escalate the victims’ level of fear, which in turn makes their energy all that much more satisfying for him. With draegans, or other beings with inherent magick, he feeds on not only the life energy, but the magic as well.”

“Hence his appetite for draegan children?”

“Children are easy to frighten, and the draegan children also have magick.”

“But then he decided to come after you. Why?”

“Byram told Moh’dredion about me, after you and I escaped from Thrythgar. The moment Death found out one with lord blood survived, he began to plan.”

Keiran sank the rest of the way onto the floor. “Thomas was right. When Byram went to Moh’dredion to bargain with him, Moh’dredion had been on a starvation regime ever since the elves closed the passage between our worlds. He was desperate, and when Byram offered the draegan children, he couldn’t pass it up. But after he began to regain some of his strength, I think he realized he should have held out for a higher price. He should have demanded the sorcerer give him the draegan lords as well. The lords were dead, though, so it was too late to amend the deal.

“When Byram let slip that one with lord blood had survived, Death knew he had a second chance to get what he really wanted. He’d grown strong enough to open a portal and come through himself to get me. But it took more of his reserve strength to come through than he’d planned. He resents being trapped here with limited resources and wants to come and go as he pleases. But that

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would require more energy than he's been getting. So there's only one thing he desires right now."

"You. The lord magick."

"Yes. And he'll do whatever he can to get it." Keiran rested his hands over Gaige's. "Byram still thinks he has control over Death. But if Moh'dredion were able to tap into the draegan lord magick...with that kind of an infusion of power he'd no longer be bound here. He could go anywhere. *Anywhere*. Imagine it, Gaige. He could consume entire villages. Entire races. Entire worlds."

"I think I'm going to be sick," Gaige whispered.

"I know. I felt the same way when I realized it."

"How did you figure it out and know not to use your magick to fight him."

"He took great pains to tell me what he was up to...a villainous bully bragging because he thought he'd just captured, and therefore conquered, the lynchpin to his plan. I don't think he ever doubted he'd get what he wanted from me."

"But instead you've been holding out on him. Fighting whatever creatures and horrors he sends you using only human strength and ingenuity."

Kieran nodded.

"And there's no way to escape this dream state he has you in?"

"Not that I can find. I'm in my body, but detached from it. I have a sense of it, I know the dreams are wearing it down. I feel the aches and pains from the fighting and the running beginning to take their toll."

"Are you saying what happens to you here in the dreams happens to your real body?"

"Yes."

Lines creased the skin around Gaige's eyes, his mouth. "So if

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you die here in your dreams...”

“The real me dies as well.”

“This really is *hel*,” Gaige whispered. Then he swore under his breath. “You have to hold on, Keiran. You have to hold on because I can’t live without you.”

He burrowed a hand through Keiran’s wet hair and pulled him into a kiss, this one almost desperate, devouring, reclaiming Keiran as his own.

Keiran understood the emotion, and met him with equal intensity. It was bittersweet, loving someone so much, needing to be with them, but knowing that no matter what happened between them right here, they were still so far apart, in two different worlds, and there seemed to be no way to resolve it. But as their tongues thrust and retreated, thrust and retreated, as the kiss became far more than just a kiss, suddenly, all that mattered to Keiran was this moment, being with this man who was his soul.

Long suppressed need built like a storm around them, more powerful than the one going on outside. Gaige moved in closer, nudging between Keiran’s bent knees, and Keiran opened them in invitation, craving the feel of his mate’s desire against his own.

But when Gaige wrapped an arm around Keiran to draw him closer, his hand brushed against Keiran’s wounded shoulder and Keiran winced.

Gaige felt it because he instantly pulled back. “Oh, damn, I’m sorry, love.”

“It’s okay.”

“No...it’s not.” Lines tugged at his forehead again. “I didn’t realize how badly this was bleeding. We need to get this cleaned up.”

“You’re bleeding, too,” Keiran murmured. He turned Gaige’s

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arm over, to reveal a long tear in his shirt and a slice along his inner forearm. He kissed Gaige's wrist directly below it.

"It's not that deep. I'll be fine. But your shoulder...it doesn't look good. Here, take off your shirt."

Keiran started to protest, to tell Gaige it didn't matter and that he'd rather get back to kissing and everything else it was about to lead to—if they didn't have much time together, he wanted to make the most of it. But the moment he felt his mate's long, gentle fingers on his skin, he realized there was more than one way to get what he desired. "Are you sure you aren't just looking for an excuse to undress and ravish me?" Keiran teased.

For the first time a smile tilted up Gaige's lips. "I don't need an excuse to ravish you, do I? I thought you were mine, to do with as I please."

The words were light, but Gaige's tone was wholly serious and possessive in a way that made Keiran hard as stone and aching for his mate's touch. Damn, the man was magnificent.

"I am yours."

"Then sit still and let me do this." He eased Keiran's wet shirt up and over his head. When it was off, he pressed another warm kiss to his lips, his chin, his jaw, and then his neck, where he took his time, suckling the sensitive hollow that he knew drove Keiran crazy.

When Keiran moaned and shifted on the ground because his cock throbbed against the tight restraint of his leather pants, Gaige nipped at his earlobe. Then he whispered in his ear, "If you're very good while I clean your shoulder, I'll make sure you get a prize."

"What kind of prize?" Keiran asked, his voice gone hoarse.

Gaige's palm and long fingers closed over Keiran's bulge and squeezed.

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“Holy gods!”

“Feel good?” He continued the motion.

“You know it does.” Keiran spread his legs wider, giving Gaige better access. *::Please...::*

::Please what, love?::

::Please more::

::Have I told you how sexy it is when you beg like this? Who knew the great draegan lord could be so easily brought down by a warm hand fondling his balls and stroking his prick?::

Keiran moaned again. *::Keep talking to me like that and....::*
Another moan.

::And what?::

::And...I don't know. I'm having trouble thinking right now::

The soft, low sound of Gaige's chuckle filled his heart with a joy he hadn't felt in far too long. And it also made him even harder still.

Gaige suddenly unhanding him. Keiran opened his eyes, which he hadn't realized he'd closed until now, and groaned in protest.

But Gaige only smiled at him. “That was just to let you know what you have to look forward to. After we take care of your shoulder.”

“You're cruel.”

“I'll make it up to you. Now, quit distracting me from my job. The longer this takes, the longer until we can get back to what you want.”

“As if you don't want it, too,” Keiran couldn't help taunting.

“You'll just have to wait and see, won't you?” He shot Keiran a final hot gaze before focusing his concentration on Keiran's shoulder. “I'm guessing clean linens of any kind are out of the question, so we'll have to make do.” He stood and stripped off his

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own shirt.

Keiran's throat went dry at the display of sleek, golden skin over defined muscle. And in that instant he knew Gaige had done it on purpose, exactly to get a reaction out of him.

::No, I plan to use my shirt to wash off your wound,:: Gaige said, grinning.

::Just hurry up, damn it.::

::Patience, love.::

::I don't feel like being patient. We might not have....:: The words died, unspoken, in his mind.

But Gaige's expression turned serious, and Keiran knew his mate was thinking the same thing he was...that this time together wasn't going to last long.

After that Gaige worked with quick efficiency to tear strips from his shirt, which he soaked in the rain outside, then used to bathe Keiran's shoulder. When he'd finished, he tore off another strip from the cleanest part at the bottom to bandage the wound.

As he worked, he didn't comment on the other new scars, and half-healed wounds and bruises on Keiran's body, but Keiran knew he saw them. He felt Gaige's anger over them—anger that Keiran had been hurt and he hadn't been here to help him. That he hadn't found a way yet to save him.

"Don't," he told Gaige. "I know what you're doing, and you can't blame yourself for anything that's happened to me here."

"Yes, I can," came the quiet response. "I'm the one who led Death straight to you, Keiran. I'm the reason you're here."

"How can you think that?"

But almost before he got the words out, he was able to see it all play out in Gaige's mind... Gaige's vision of Jax in the sorcerer's dungeon, being pulled back out of the vision and traveling through

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darkness...and being found. By Death. He saw and felt Gaige's terror as Moh'dredion drew close. And then he heard the silent plea Gaige had spoken: *Keiran, help me!* The moment Gaige had the thought, Keiran felt Death stop. Felt his interest pique. He'd heard it. And as Gaige came barreling back out of the darkness and into his body in their tent...he knew Death had followed.

"I told you," Gaige murmured.

Oh, love. Had Gaige been blaming himself for this ever since? Keiran already knew the answer because he knew Gaige so well. No one could ever be harder on him than he was on himself.

Keiran turned to look at him and took his hands. "He would have found me no matter what."

"You don't know that."

"Yes, I do. I'm his obsession now, remember? He would have watched and waited, and sooner or later he would have found me."

"But it might have been later, much later. And in the meantime we might have been able to figure out a way to keep it from happening."

"How? We had only just found out he existed, but we didn't know in what form or how he traveled or that he was after me."

"Selene and I both had vision about Death coming."

"But not with any detail, and we had no way of knowing it was me he was after. In the end, we wouldn't have been any more prepared."

"So you're saying I'm supposed to accept the fact this was inevitable?"

Keiran caressed Gaige's cheek with the back of his knuckles. "I'm saying that sometimes things just happen. And when they do, we can't dwell on the hows or whys. We just have to go on from there."

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Gaige closed his eyes and scrubbed a hand over his face. “Where is Ballian? How do I get to where you really are?”

“All I know was what I saw when we came out of the portal. Moh’dredion lives deep underground—it was like I could almost feel the earth pressing down on us. He roams interconnecting, labyrinthine caverns that have strange rivers running through them...rivers where fire burns atop the water. But I don’t know how to get to the caverns. I don’t even know if they’re in our world or some other.”

“I’ve sent Elliesán to find out where the original passage the elves closed is. I haven’t heard anything from her, though. I keep hoping she’ll show up and have all the answers.”

Keiran stroked his cheek. “How are the others?”

“Shaken—we were all shaken when you were stolen from us. But they’re standing strong, doing their jobs admirably. We got Jax last night. He was chained out in the forest with the nyctos. We don’t know why yet. He’s unconscious, but Lilia thinks he’ll heal.”

“He won’t be easy to deal with.”

“I know. I don’t expect him to be. But he needs to know the draegans have to stick together and that there will always be a place for him, no matter our personal issues of the past.”

Keiran shook his head, again in wonder. “Have I told you what an incredible, selfless man you are?”

“I don’t feel selfless. I’m just trying to do what’s right.”

“Which is exactly why they need you so much.” Gaige would unite the draegans and humans in a way they’d never be able to accomplish without his leadership and true heart.

“We’ve moved to Kellesborne.”

A pang of homesickness hit Keiran. *Kellesborne*. How he longed for it. “Good. It’s the safest place.”

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“I need you to come home, Keiran. To me. To all of us.” His voice wavered, betraying his deep emotions.

“*M’aerlas...*” The endearment was little more than a soft breath laced with a loneliness that matched Gaige’s, but it brought Gaige into his arms.

And then all that mattered was the two of them together, seeking closeness and reconnection.

Keiran laid out a blanket to protect them from the cave floor, and they slowly finished undressing each other, kissing each strip of skin as it was exposed, and all the rest that already was. Nuzzling and licking, kissing and stroking with callused fingers and warm palms, they sought to relearn every hollow and dip, every swell of hard muscle, every soft, tender spot that each knew made the other crazy with need.

Eventually their hands sought each other’s groins. And then Gaige was turning Keiran onto his back and lowering himself between his legs. He kissed the tip of Keiran’s cock and licked over the slit, lapping up the drops of already leaking cream.

::I’ve missed your taste so much.::

His tongue felt like hot, velvet sandpaper against the sensitive tip, making Keiran moan in pleasure. He pulled at Keiran’s shaft with a large, warm hand, sliding the skin up and down as his tongue continued to do its magic, swirling around his cockhead again, around and under the ridge, and then dragging back over the tip, slow and hot. Each pass made Keiran more aroused. He squirmed, silently begging for more. When he thought he’d go insane with the wanting, Gaige sucked the entire crown into the moist heat of his mouth. At the same time, his fingers curled around the base of Keiran’s testicles.

As Gaige’s mouth sank deeper onto his shaft, his fingers slowly

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tightened the vise around his balls. By the time Gaige had taken him all the way, and the crown of Keiran's prick was lodged in the depths of his mouth, Keiran was seeing stars.

::More?:: Gaige voice was gravelly and sexy in his mind.

“Yes!”

Gaige pulled off, then did it again. And again. And again. Each time moving a little faster, sucking a little harder, until, eventually, Keiran lost all sense of reason. All he knew was the hot, wet suctioning heat that consumed him as he slammed up into Gaige's mouth, and the pleasure/pain in his balls that made his skin tingle and entire groin ache.

But Gaige wasn't done yet. His mouth moved down, to kiss and nuzzle Keiran's sac. And then he pushed Keiran's legs up and back, and moved lower still to delve into Keiran's ass with his tongue.

Keiran's hands moved down to burrow into Gaige's hair as bliss spread through him, making his legs tremble and cock grow even stiffer. “Unnnh...gods!”

::You like this, don't you?::

“You know I do.”

Gaige slid a palm up and over his prick again as he continued to lick and suck and spear Keiran open. *::What does it for you? The fact I've got my tongue in your ass or because you know I'm getting you ready for something bigger?::*

::Fuck, Gaige. Both!::

Gaige's soft, gravelly chuckle vibrated through him, fanning the flames of the blaze already scorching him.

Keiran groaned. *::Oh, gods. I can't take much more.::*

::Do you want me?::

::Always. Please!::

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Gaige rose to his knees between Keiran's legs. Even in the dim gray of the cave, he looked like something too good and too filled with light for this world, with his white-blond braided hair, now almost dry, falling around his shoulders, his broad chest that tapered to a lean waist and firm, ridged abdominal muscles, his cock jutting thick and hard, and the braided elorium true mate band around his bicep.

"You look like a warrior god," he said softly.

Gaige's smile ribboned around his heart. "I'm hardly a god." He leaned down and gave Keiran a surprisingly tender kiss considering how hungry and hard they both were. "I'm just the man who loves you beyond anything else in the world."

Keiran's breath caught.

"Need you, Keiran."

"Need you, too, *m'aerlas*."

They kissed again, their cocks rubbing together in an eager grind.

"I want you in me," Keiran said, his voice husky. "Let me get you wet."

Gaige leaned up and over him and offered his cock. Keiran took it gladly, licking and sucking it from tip to base. As he did, he realized that, for the first time, Gaige's shaft was secreting the natural lubricant with which draegans were blessed. In the past, because of his human side, he hadn't had the ability. But now... Keiran smiled. Gaige had finally come into his power, and his body was becoming more and more draeganlike.

Gaige's head tipped back and his eyes closed. *::Gods, Keiran...your mouth is a treasure.::*

::Do you want me to keep going, or do you want to fuck me?::

::I want you to keep going and I want to fuck you.::

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Keiran chuckled. *::A man who likes to have it both ways.::*

::No, three ways. Because after that, I want you to fuck me, too. I want it all, Keiran. It's been too long, and I've missed you too much.::

Keiran's heart squeezed, even as a shiver of desire rushed through him at Gaige's words. If Gaige wanted it all, Keiran would give it to him. He'd do anything for this man. Anything to see him happy.

He sucked him until Gaige was moaning uncontrollably. Then he sucked his balls, pulling them into his mouth and giving each his full attention. By the time he licked his way back up Gaige's shaft, Gaige was shuddering. *::Damn...now I'm the one who can't take anymore.::*

A smiled curved Keiran's lips. *::I'm just giving you what you wanted, love.::*

::And you do it far too well. I need to be inside you now, Keiran.::

"Take me."

Gaige eased his body back down and settled between Keiran's legs. Keiran felt the unmistakable press of his slick knob against his hole...and then bliss as Gaige's long, thick shaft stretched him wide and filled him.

"Aghh...so hot. Gods, I've missed you. Missed this."

Keiran was too overwhelmed to speak. All he could do was hold more tightly to his mate and give himself over to the spikes of pleasure radiating through him each time Gaige stroked into him.

Time slid away. All he heard was the rain falling outside, and the sharp gasps and soft cries he and Gaige made as their bodies slapped together. His own cock rode between them, bouncing against Keiran's abdomen, hard and seeping, begging for release.

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Gaige's mouth sought his and their lips clung together in damp, tender kisses. Sweet, yet somehow still sexy as *hel*.

He knew when Gaige was getting close. Felt the tension in his body, the way his thrusts hit just that much harder. Gaige's eyes closed and his face tightened.

::Fill me, love. Fill me full::

"Keiran!" And then he was coming, pumping deep into Keiran with a hoarse sob.

Keiran felt each burst of seed as it entered him, felt it tingling inside him, and was amazed again at how much magick now flowed through Gaige.

He was so very close to coming himself, his balls and prick ached with the need to explode, but he refused to give in. Not yet anyway.

Gaige shuddered a final time. His mouth found Keiran's once more. Their tongues tangled together. And then Gaige lifted his head and looked down at him.

"I love you."

"And I love you."

"I know," he whispered, dipping his head for yet another kiss. "Now fuck me," he said, his breath warm against Keiran's lips.

With a smile—which earned him one back—Keiran gently pushed Gaige off of him and onto his back.

Gaige parted his long legs and raised them in invitation. His eyes burned with need, shocking for someone who'd just climaxed himself. But draegans had libido to spare, and Keiran almost drooled at the site of Gaige's cock, still mostly hard, slick with cum, and curved up over his belly.

Keiran reached behind himself to swipe his hand over his hole, bringing it away with more seed dripping from his fingers.

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Needing something wet to activate his natural lube, he used it to coat his own prick.

Gaige's eyes went dark with desire as he watched. "So fucking sexy."

"It's all for you."

"Gods, Keiran. Do it."

Without any further lead-up, Keiran lined up the head of his cock with Gaige's opening and pressed in.

They both gasped, and then Gaige let out a long, soft groan. His channel squeezed around Keiran's shaft so tightly Keiran thought between that and the heat, he might explode from the pleasure of just those things without ever moving at all.

But Gaige thrust against him, urging him on. Never one to deny his mate anything he wanted, Keiran surged into him over and over, letting Gaige's sublime body wrap him in an erotic haze. He drove them both to the brink of climax until they were panting and shaking, eased off to make it last, then drove them to the edge again. Gaige leaned up to capture his mouth, and the thrust of their tongues mimicked their fucking.

A flare of heat built at the base of Keiran's spine. His balls tightened. He couldn't hold off anymore.

::Don't want you to. Let go, Keiran. I want to feel you explode in me and know I'm the only one who can make you lose control like this.::

::You are the only one. You're mine.::

::I know.::

::Mine,:: he repeated, a fierce wave of possessiveness flooding through him.

::I know. Always yours. Only yours.::

With a shuddering cry, Keiran pounded into Gaige a final time

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and came...and came...and came. It felt like he'd been saving it all up, weeks' worth, or, for him, months' worth of intense longing, all waiting for Gaige.

Gaige climaxed again, his cum slicking their abdomens.

Finally, drained but sated, Keiran eased out of him. Gaige wrapped his arms around him and pulled him down on top of him, holding Keiran close.

"I've missed this," Gaige said softly. "The closeness. Lying with you."

Unexpectedly, Keiran's eyes stung. "So have I."

"We can't do this anymore, Keiran. Be apart like this. I'm going to find a way to get you home before he kills you."

"He doesn't want to kill me. He needs me too much."

"You can't tell me those creatures today didn't want you dead. It's only going to take one time of you losing focus or them sneaking up on you, and that'll be that."

Keiran's shoulder, which has been a low, dull ache, suddenly throbbed as he remembered all too well that he *had* lost focus today. He couldn't deny it troubled him.

But before Gaige could read that in his mind, he said, "Then I won't lose focus. Moh'dredion's testing me, throwing more and more difficult obstacles at me and using what he knows about me to scare me into using magick. But he never makes it so difficult I don't always have a chance. If he really wanted me dead he'd have sent a dozen of those things today instead of two. I'm of no value to him dead."

Gaige shifted, rolling so they lay on their sides facing one another. His gaze was troubled. "What happens when he realizes you're not ever going to break and use magick? He's not going to let you drag this out indefinitely, Keiran. What happens when your

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time is up and these *obstacles* as you call them turn deadly for real? When he gets tired of playing your game, he will kill you.”

Gaige wasn't saying anything he hadn't already thought of. Keiran knew the score, and, the truth was, he knew the chances were slim he'd be leaving Ballian.

He met Gaige's gaze head-on. “I know he'll eventually kill me. But when you lead the draegans and humans against Byram and defeat him, Moh'dredion will no longer have a steady source of energy coming in from Byram's sacrifices. So if I'm dead, he'll weaken and be trapped here again...which keeps everybody safe.”

Understanding flashed across Gaige's face, and then hurt anger.

“No, Keiran. You're saying you're willing to sacrifice yourself over this, but I won't let you. I'm going to find a way to get you out of here, and when I do, I'm coming back for you.”

Keiran brushed his lips over Gaige's, his heart aching. “You can't come back, Gaige. Not ever. Not in my dreams and certainly not ever to Ballian itself should you find a way. He knows you're my weakness. He looked into my mind when he put me to sleep and saw everything. He knows how I feel about you, knows what I'd be willing to do for you. The real you. If he caught you here, the first thing he'd do is use you to get to me.”

“I'd never—”

Keiran held up a hand to stop him. “It's more complicated than that, love. It's not just about him using you. Think about it. If he caught you, we'd be in an even worse position than we are now. Because instead of one draegan lord, he'd have two. He didn't take you the first time because you didn't have as much power as I did. But now, that's all changed.”

“I've barely started to figure out this magick thing,” Gaige protested. “I could never be anywhere close to as powerful as you

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are.”

His Gaige...always so blind to his own strengths, and unwilling to believe in what he could do. Keiran couldn't help but smile. “I don't know what happened when the nyctophans attacked you, but whatever it was, you didn't just open the doors to the magick inside you, Gaige, you threw them off the hinges and dug into a deep well that had never been tapped. Power is flowing from you with so much force I can see it shimmering and crackling around you.”

“Wh—at?”

“You're a draegan lord in every sense now. And you're every bit as strong as I am. You may have different abilities, but you're unquestionably powerful.”

At Gaige's uncertain frown, Keiran brushed long, finely braided strands of hair off Gaige's cheek. “That's why you can't come back here, *m'aerlas*. You have to go do your job—you have to end Byram. The others need your leadership and strength to hold them together. They can't do it without you. And I have to stay here and play my role.”

“I don't accept that. I won't.”

“It's not solely your decision to make.”

“Fuck that!”

Keiran sighed. “We have to think of everybody, not just what we want. And it's not just about the draegans and humans anymore, but all of Velensperia. We can't let Moh'dredion get free.” He reached for Gaige's hands and twined their fingers together without taking his gaze off Gaige's face. “You know I'm right.”

Gaige swallowed hard. “No. I don't. I think there's always a way.” He tugged his gaze away from Keiran and looked down. But

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his eyes suddenly went wide. “No! Damn it! Not now!”

Keiran glanced down to see what he was staring at, and a sick knot formed in his stomach. Gaige’s hands, still locked with Keiran’s, had become translucent. There, but definitely not as solid as they should be. His arms as well. As Keiran watched it spread to more of his body. Which mean the potion was wearing off and their time together was at an end.

He ached inside, knowing he was about to lose his mate. But they still had things to say before it was too late. “Gaige, listen to me. Listen.” He tipped up Gaige’s tormented face until he was looking at him again. “I love that you’re always so passionate about what you believe in. It’s one of the things I love best about you, in fact. But in the end, I know I can trust you to do what’s right. You have to do what’s right.”

Gaige wrapped a hand around the back of Keiran’s head and tugged him into a fierce kiss. When he pulled back, his eyes burned with love and determination. “Power doesn’t do me any good if I can’t use it to protect our people, our world, *and* you. I won’t desert you and doom you to martyrdom. I’m getting you out of here, Keiran. And then we’re going take down Byram and Moh’dredion together.”

“Gaige...”

“No.” His voice was firm, and it was if Keiran could suddenly see his mate growing into a powerful and resolute leader before his eyes. Even as his physical form continued to lose substance, he felt Gaige’s confidence grow. “This is non-negotiable. I’ll be back for you. And until then, your job is to stay alive.”

Keiran felt his heart rise into his throat.

Gaige was little more than a shimmer now. But Keiran heard his last words loud and clear:

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“I mean it, damn it. *Stay alive!*”

And then he blinked out of existence, leaving Keiran alone.

CHAPTER 8

Gaige came awake with a start. He sat up, confused and disoriented for a moment, until he realized he was in bed—his and Keiran's at Kellesborne—alone.

He yanked back the curtains around the bed, wondering what time it was. The gray light of dusk seeped in through the huge window, and the wall sconces that always burned, night and day, thanks to the magick of the ancient draegan lords, cast a warm orange glow across the room.

It was much later than he'd expected it to be. He'd slept for hours.

Not long enough. The last view he'd had of Keiran hung in his mind and filled him with intense longing.

A ruckus in the hall outside the room drew his attention only a

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split second before the tall double doors were suddenly thrown open. Before he could wrap his mind around what was happening and reach for a weapon, a large figure stormed across the room to the bed and had Gaige by the throat.

“You sonofabitch! You weren’t satisfied until you killed him, were you? I should have finished you months ago!”

The loud growl came from a disheveled wild man, or so it seemed.

“Get off me, Jax!” The magick, without Gaige even thinking about it, flared into a white-hot burn at his core, and with a gesture of his hand, he sent the draegan backward to sprawl on the floor.

But like the damned nyctophans, Jax wasn’t dissuaded. He pulled himself to his feet, wincing as he did, and came at Gaige again.

Gaige was vaguely aware of other activity near the door, and out of the corner of his eye saw Iann and Lilia come in, closely followed by Marta and Wen. Wen, took one look at what was happening, at Jax charging at Gaige with murder in his eye, and immediately drew his knife and went after Jax.

But Gaige had already thrown back the covers and stood. With one hand extended, feeling magick pulse out of it, he caught Jax in an invisible stranglehold. Instead of pushing him to the floor again, he lifted him until his feet dangled off the ground and shoved him against the wall, holding him there while Jax flailed.

Wen stopped in mid-stride and stared wide-eyed at Jax hanging above the floor with no support.

Gaige held the big draegan’s gaze, not letting him pull away from it. The floor of the room began to tremble. Items on the table and other flat surfaces skittered across them. Something fell and shattered. It took a second before Gaige realized he was

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responsible—his anger was driving the magick. He drew in a deep breath and forced himself to calm down and rein it in.

Slowly things settled, and he eased up on the pressure he was using to hold Jax. Jax gulped in air when Gaige released his throat and lowered him, but Gaige didn't let him go. He used the magic to keep Jax pinned against the stone.

As he approached the draegan, his hand still extended, Jax coughed and glared at him. "Go ahead, kill me. That's what you've always planned, isn't it?" he said mid-hack.

Gaige stopped in front of him and, suddenly, much of his anger at being attacked—yet again—by the big draegan faded. Jax looked miserable.

Gaige was a tall man, but Jax had him beat by several inches, and normally his height and muscular build gave him an intimidating air. But this evening not even his size and scowling features could mask his sickly pallor or the fact he'd lost weight over the past weeks. Barefoot, he wore loose-fitting pants and an even looser shirt, untied at the neck. His black hair, still unbound, fell in long, wild tangles almost to his waist. His face was bruised, and Gaige knew he had similar marks all over his body. But it was his eyes that were the most startling, like dark chunks of onyx, with a steady burn of anger, but also grief in them. It was the grief that triggered a wave of sympathy in Gaige.

He sighed. "I don't now and never have had plans to kill you, you stubborn fool. Though sometimes you tempt me sorely when you behave this way."

"I know what happened, what you did. No thanks to them." Jax nodded at the group by the door. "You let that *thing* take him away and kill him."

Gaige glanced at the others, and Lilia looked stricken.

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"I'm sorry," she murmured, about ready to cry. "He woke up and asked for Lord Hareldson. I told him he wasn't here and that he needed to talk to you. Iann was sitting with your grandmother, so I left Jax alone for just a few minutes while I went to ask Iann to let you know. That's when we found him gone."

"He got out of bed and made quite a scene in the great hall, demanding to know where Keiran was," Iann said, his expression none too happy. "A civilian told him."

Gaige grimaced internally, though years of practice allowed him to keep a calm expression on his face. Not exactly how he'd hoped for Jax to find out that Keiran was gone and he was in charge.

"It's okay, Lilia. It's not your fault," Gaige told her. "You had no way of knowing he'd go anywhere."

"Did you think you could hide it from me?" Jax spat, drawing Gaige's attention back to him.

"Nobody was trying to hide anything from you. You only just woke up. You didn't give any of us a chance to talk to you."

"And fill me with your lies? No thank you. At least this way I got the unvarnished version."

"And what version is that?"

Jax ignored the question. "I should have killed you. I knew you'd betray him. Did you hold the door open for this Death creature while he took Keiran? Or maybe you invited him in the first place. Isn't that what you wanted all along? To get in Keiran's good graces, make him fall for you, trust you, take your side in every matter, until he was so besotted with you, in his eyes you could do no wrong?" He sneered. "You got him to mate with you, even. But all the while you were biding your time until just the right moment...so you could strike him down and take his place."

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What's next on your agenda? Kill everyone else and turn Kellesborne over to Byram while you sit on your fake throne and laugh."

"You bastard!" Marta lunged at Jax, but Gaige caught her at the last second with his free arm.

"He's not worth it, Marta. He's trying to get a reaction. Don't give him the pleasure."

She shook with fury, but after a few seconds drew in a breath, then finally nodded. He released her and she stepped back.

But she wasn't done. "I've told you before, and I'll say it again, Jax...you aren't fit to walk on the same ground as this man. While you were out getting caught by our enemy and no doubt spilling every secret we have because of your petty jealousy, Lord Rizik has been protecting our people, risking his life for them to keep them safe from the sorcerer. Risking his life to save you, you ungrateful ass. The rest of us would have been content to let you rot in Byram's dungeon. The only reason you're here right now is because *he* believed in you. *He* wanted to bring you back. You might keep that in mind before you spew any more of your filth." She shook her head in disgust. "I'm done with you." And without another word, she turned on her booted heel and stalked out of the room.

All remained quiet for several seconds after her outburst. Until Jax muttered, "Good riddance," under his breath.

Gaige shot him a black look before turning to Lilia. "Lilia, do me a favor please and see if you can roust Thomas from his books. Let him know the others and I will be coming to the library for a meeting in an hour. You might want to be there as well."

"I'd be glad to." She offered him a faint smile, but wouldn't quite meet his gaze.

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Which seemed odd. Until...for the first time he realized he'd gone to bed nude, and hadn't thought twice about clothes when Jax had come tearing in. The draegans weren't fazed by bare bodies since, when they shifted out of winged form, nudity was the norm. But the humans tended to be shier about glaring displays of skin. To Lilia, he probably looked even more wild than Jax, standing here bare assed naked, making the room shake and rattle, and pushing a man against a wall and binding him to it without ever touching him.

When she'd hurried away, Gaige turned to his two remaining companions. "Iann, please find Marta and let her know about the meeting. I have important information to share, lots of it, and I'm going to need her, need all of you, in top form and ready to brainstorm."

Iann looked curious, no doubt wondering how Gaige could have information to share when he was supposed to have been in here asleep all afternoon. But he was too circumspect to ask in front of Jax.

Gaige rested his hand on Iann's bowed but still strong shoulder and squeezed. "Soon, my friend," he said quietly.

"I look forward to it. We have some to share with you as well."

"Good." Gaige turned his attention to Wen. "Wen, you're on damage control."

"I'm at your command, my lord."

Jax snorted, presumably at Wen's words. But Gaige ignored him, continuing to speak to Wen.

"I don't know what kind of a *scene* Jax made, but we need to soothe anyone who was upset and nip in the bud any troublesome stories that may get started."

"So you can hide the truth," Jax growled.

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“You wouldn’t know the truth if it bit you in the ass, Jax. Shut up.”

“What about him, my lord?” Wen looked at Jax with disdain, like he’d crawled out of some filthy bog somewhere and Wen was seriously thinking of slitting his throat and throwing him back in.

“Jax and I are going to have a little talk.”

“I don’t like leaving you alone here with him,” Wen said, always the true and loyal protector.

“We’ll be fine.”

“I’m stationing a couple of members of the *draeganjhere* outside your door. In case it turns ‘not fine’ at some point.”

“Fair enough. I appreciate it.”

With one last distrustful glance at Jax, Wen took his leave.

Before he turned, Iann gave Gaige a nod and a look that said he had his full support, whatever he might choose to do or say to Jax. Gaige nodded in return. Then Iann exited the room, carefully closing the doors behind himself.

“Well, well...look at you. The grand lord. You have them well-trained, Panther. Fawning all over you, doing your bidding. It’s quite the life you’ve created for yourself here.”

Gaige refused to be baited. “We’re going to have a chat, Jax. And here’s how it’s going to work. I’m going to let you go and trust you to remain civil. And in return, you’re going to tell me how it is you found your way to the sorcerer’s dungeon, as well as every conversation that passed between you two, and finish off by explaining how you ended up chained in the forest surrounded by nyctophans, and what you meant when you said it was a trap.”

“I’d rather die first.”

“Would you?” Gaige stepped right up to the draegan this time and closed his own hand around Jax’s throat, letting the magick

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slide back into its well, where it simmered until it was needed again. He was careful not to press hard enough to choke Jax, yet hard enough to prevent him from moving.

“You know what I think?” Gaige continued. “I think you’re hurt and you’re grieving...and I get that. I think you feel betrayed by Keiran because he was your best friend and you always wanted him to be more than that, but he didn’t feel the same way. Which in turn made you hate me because I was the one who, in your eyes, stole him away. And I get that, too. But I also think that in spite of the bad attitude you use to cover your pain, even you are tired of this anger that eats away at your insides.”

“You don’t know anything about me.”

“Don’t I? When you found out Keiran and I were true-mated, it was the final blow, and your anger spun out of control. You hated me, but in your outburst of rage, it wasn’t me you tried to kill, it was Keiran. The man you’ve loved for forty years. I think that once I stopped you and it sank in what you’d almost done, you were shaken at how out of control you’d become. And then the draegans banished you. You left the camp with a cocky swagger, but I think inside you knew you’d finally crossed one line too many.

Jax gave an inelegant sniff and glared over Gaige’s shoulder without looking at him.

Which led Gaige to believe he was on the right track.

“You burned all your bridges, Jax. You pissed off everyone who’d ever cared about you. You were homeless. Friendless. And your ‘I don’t give a damn’ attitude could only get you so far because at the end of the day, you were alone and knew you had no one to blame but yourself.”

Jax continued to studiously ignore him, while Gaige studied

him, thoughtful.

“I’ve been asking myself why someone who was able to avoid Byram’s troops for decades was suddenly picked up by them only a few weeks after being cast out of the draegan encampment. It’s odd. You hate Byram. You hate his soldiers. The others think you’d have no problem telling draegan secrets to the sorcerer, but I don’t believe you’d do that—you don’t have it in you to turn your back on the draegans in favor of the sorcerer, even if the draegans did turn their backs on you. So that negates the possibility you went to Byram to share information. I suppose it’s possible it was just a fluke and you were in the wrong place at the wrong time, but that doesn’t ring true either.”

Jax remained quiet, but Gaige could see and feel him stewing. “Nothing to add?”

After several seconds of silence, Gaige said, “All right, then let me continue, shall I? After I tossed out the other possibilities, it suddenly occurred to me...what might a hurt, angry draegan who’s got nothing else to lose want more than anything? The way I see it, one of two things. Redemption or death. Or maybe both.”

“Shut up!” Jax finally looked at him. His eyes burned with fury and his chest heaved.

Though the reason for it saddened Gaige, he suspected he was hitting close to home and getting damned near the truth.

“You let yourself be caught, didn’t you?”

He got no response, which he’d expected, but Gaige’s silence said more than words. *Gods, what a brave but stupid fool.* Gaige shook his head. “What were you hoping to find, Jax? You had to have known only someone with a death wish would try to infiltrate Thrythgar and get to Byram.”

“You think you know everything.”

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“I’m sure I don’t have to remind you, but I lived at Thrythgar for thirty-two years and worked directly for Byram for fourteen of those. I know the only games he plays are his own. Whatever you had in mind was doomed before it started. The minute you were picked up and he found out you knew of the draegan camp, he would have had you brought before him. And suddenly, you were no longer the one with the agenda, he was. He’s a snake in the grass, wanting to make you believe he’s calmly lying in the sun and oh-so approachable, but the moment you move or turn away, he strikes.” Gaige’s hand tightened around Jax’s throat to punctuate his point.

Jax’s jaw clenched and released. His breathing continued to come out in ragged huffs. But his eyes—the haunted look in them—were finally beginning to show what was really going on inside the draegan.

Gaige released his hold on Jax and took a step back. “I’m sorry for what he did to you.”

“I don’t want your pity.” Jax’s voice was hoarse and harsh, but to his credit he didn’t try to lash out at Gaige again now that he was free.

“I’m not offering pity. I’m offering you a chance.”

“A chance for what?” His tone was softer, but still a snarl. “To be part of your lordly little universe here?”

“A chance to help your people who need you. A chance to help Keiran.”

“Keiran’s dead.”

“No. He’s not. I’ll tell you something no one else knows yet...I was just with him.”

That finally got him to turn his head. He stared at Gaige suspiciously. “What kind of game are *you* trying to play”

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“No game. The being from the shadow world, the one called Death, came through a portal and took Keiran three weeks ago. We didn’t know if he was dead or alive. I have Eliessán looking for the passage between the two worlds, but other than the few things we learned about Death from Byram’s grimoire Keiran and I stole, we didn’t even know where to start looking. But today that all changed. I was able to enter Keiran’s dreams. He’s in trouble, but he’s alive. And now I know where.”

Jax’s gaze narrowed. “I don’t believe you. I think you’ll tell any story in order to manipulate people and get what you want.”

“Oh, come on, Jax. The time for bandying words and holding onto old grudges is over. Open your eyes and look around you! We’re at war and our leader’s missing and we have to be on a united front...all draegans. All humans. Even those of us who have a less than friendly history. If you want to hate me, fine. But do it after we’ve brought Keiran home and defeated Byram and this soul-sucking demon called Death.”

“Why me? Why would you give a damn about me when you hate me as much as I hate you? Why would you risk yourself to come get me if you didn’t have an ulterior motive...like maybe trying to look noble in front of your fawning lieutenants?”

Gaige scowled at him. “Gods, would you listen to yourself? Only someone as twisted as you would think I’d purposely put myself in mortal danger from the most feared creatures in all of Velensperia, so I could *show off*. Bloody *hel*, Jax. You need to get a grip. It’s time for you to choose between your self-absorbed little world where you’re driven by anger and fear, or man up and put your talents to use saving something bigger than yourself.”

“Don’t you dare lecture me,” he snarled. “I was fighting and defending *my* people before you were ever born, boy.”

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“Yeah? So what happened? Because that’s not the draegan I see in front of me anymore. What I see is a man who’s so riddled with poison thoughts that whatever good person used to be in there is shriveling up and dying away.” Gaige looked him, then shook his head. “Maybe Marta’s right. Maybe you are hopeless. Maybe spending time in Byram’s world drove you so far over the edge it’s too late to help you.” He started to turn away, but Jax’s voice made him stop.

“You think you’re so holier than thou, but you don’t know what it’s like.” Was his voice choking? “You don’t know what he did to me.”

Slowly, Gaige turned back to him. “I’ve been in Byram’s *special* dungeon, too, remember?”

He sneered. “You were there for two days. I was there for weeks. You don’t have any idea what he took from me.”

“I do.” Gaige’s tone softened. “He took away your ability to shift.”

Jax stared at him, his face going slack as Gaige’s words sank in. “How did you know that?” he whispered.

“I had a vision. Several, actually—that’s why we knew where to find you. But in the very first one, I saw Byram taunting you about it,” Gaige said quietly.

Jax winced.

And just like that, he deflated. He dragged in a shuddering breath and faced the window, where he stared out into the darkening sky. “Even if I wanted to—and I’m not saying I do—but even if I wanted to fight with you, I’m useless now,” he murmured. “Impotent.”

“Because you can’t shift? Neither can I, but it doesn’t stop me from fighting.”

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“Don’t you dare compare us. We are *nothing* alike.”

“No, maybe not. But we do have common interests. No matter how hard you try to convince me otherwise, I know you do care about your people. And I know you care about Keiran. Isn’t that enough to engender at least a little trust for me?”

“Why should I trust you?”

“Because I’m the only ally you’ve got right now, Jax. You don’t have to like me. We don’t have to be friends. But I think we both want the same things. And we’re far stronger if we’re allies than enemies.”

A minute passed. Then two. But Gaige didn’t press. He’d said all he could. Now it was up to Jax to decide where he went from here.

Finally Jax turned, moving slowly enough Gaige knew he was hurting. He’d used up most of his adrenaline and bravado and was left with nothing but a battered body that, like a good soldier, he’d push until it gave out or he was dead. For seasoned fighters like Jax and Gaige, rest was seldom a priority, only an option if nothing else had to be done.

Jax’s face twisted into a scowl. “I smell him on you. He’s been fucking you.”

If Jax hadn’t looked so disgusted and serious, Gaige might have smiled. He knew Jax’s change of subject was the closest he was going to get to a cease fire. Which gave him hope that the draegan wasn’t lost for good yet.

And the truth was, Gaige smelled Keiran, too. His scent and probably some of his cum was on Gaige’s skin. Gods knew Gaige’s own was. His ass felt tender, as well, where Keiran had taken him. Keiran had said what happened to their bodies in the dream happened to them in real life. He’d brought evidence of

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their lovemaking back with him, which somehow made the distance between them seem less insurmountable.

"I told you I was just with him. You want proof? There it is."

"You said you were with him in a dream."

"Yeah, well it was a different sort of dream."

"It disgusts me."

"Be that as it may, I'm not going to pretend Keiran isn't my mate and we aren't intimate just because it offends your delicate sensibilities. Get used to."

The scowl stayed on Jax's face, but to his credit, he didn't try to kill Gaige this time when his and Keiran's relationship came up. They were making progress.

"So what did you and Byram talk about?"

That earned him a nasty glare. "I didn't tell him anything."

"I know," Gaige said calmly. "I never thought you did. I'm just wondering what he might have told you that could be useful."

Jax looked taken aback at Gaige's casual acceptance of his word. But then his already drawn face grew even paler and he reached to steady himself on the back of a chair. Gaige knew he was remembering what Byram had done to him. Gaige's own scars, both outside and in places he still had a hard time thinking about, twinged in sympathy.

"The bastard talks all the time," Jax said, his voice hoarse. "But mostly about how brilliant and smart and powerful he is and how everyone else is just a lowly worm for him to crush beneath his feet. And he does it all with this smarmy tone of voice and a smug smile on his face like he thinks you're riveted by his each and every word."

Oh, Gaige knew. He still had occasional nightmares about that voice and smile, mostly as it was doing other things to him that he

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refused to think about.

"In the first vision I had, he said something to you about his 'trusted spy.'"

"I don't know who it is if that's what you're asking. I got the impression he has more than one."

"Undoubtedly. No idea who any of them might be?"

Jax turned to stare out the dark window, his shoulders tense.

"Jax, if you know something, I'm asking you, as an ally, to please share it with me."

"I know one," he finally said, his voice quiet yet deeply angry again.

"Who is it?"

"I am."

Gaige stared at the draegan's back as shock rippled through him. "What?"

"I'm supposed to be here right now earning the draegan lord's trust, gathering knowledge for the sorcerer so he can use it to strike at the heart of the draegan world again."

A knot tightened in Gaige's gut. "And he thinks you would betray your own people because...?"

"Because he has something he knows I want more than anything."

"What's that?"

Jax turned to face Gaige, his shoulders slumped. "The counterpotion that will give me back my wings."

Oh, gods. Byram had stolen from Jax the one thing he valued most, with the exception of Keiran...the epitome of his draegan heart and soul. Taking winged form wasn't just a convenience or a fun trick for the draegans. It was so inherent to their psyche that if they couldn't shift and spread their wings from time to time, many

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suffered from severe depression and even suicidal thoughts. Knowing this, Byram had taken the torture a step further...stealing it away, then offering it back. For an impossible price.

“What did you tell him?”

“I told him to go fuck himself. He’d torture the *hel* out of me, then every few days he’d have me brought to his throne room and he’d talk to me all proper, like we were the best of friends, and he’d tell me what I was going to do for him. And that when I delivered what he wanted, he’d give me what I wanted.”

“You kept refusing. That’s why we found you in the clearing with the nyctos, isn’t it? He only takes people out there if he’s done with them or really wants them to suffer.”

Jax gave a half nod.

“And the trap?”

“Was for me. He chained me down and set those horrors on me, letting them get in my—” His voice caught, and when he spoke again there was a tremor in it that hadn’t been there before. “Letting them get in my head, to give me a taste of how bad it was. Then he called them off and asked me if I’d changed my mind. When I didn’t give him the answer he liked, he let them go again. I...I don’t know how many times he did it. I lost track. Finally he called them off and told them that if any being crossed the line between the clearing and the woods, they were free to attack and kill. He did it to keep me from trying to escape. And then he left. I’m sure he would have been back in a day or two, to see if either I was dead yet or if I was ready to do his bidding.”

The knot in Gaige’s stomach had turned into a full-out nausea. And his respect, and sympathy, for Jax climbed to a whole new level. He still remembered the agony of the nyctos attack and how he’d truly thought he was going to die. For a while he’d wanted to

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die. Anything to make the pain stop. But Jax hadn't dealt with it just once. Byram had let the nyctos attack him over and over. My gods...no wonder the draegan had been so terrified last night.

"You should have just let me die out there," Jax murmured. "I would have welcomed it."

Gaige understood that. To Jax, after all he'd been through, death would have been easier than surviving and having to find a place to fit into the cold reality of the world, in a body that was no longer fully his, with no friends and no place he could call home."

He knew Jax wouldn't welcome any kind of comfort or sympathetic platitudes, especially from him. So instead, Gaige offered the one thing he could...

"If you're up for it, I'd like to have you join us in the library. I'd appreciate your insight."

Jax stared at him for long seconds. Then, without saying a word, he turned his back on Gaige and walked to the doors. His hand paused on the handle for a moment. Without turning around, he said, "Just so we're clear, I'm not doing this for you."

"I know."

CHAPTER 9

After quickly bathing and dressing, Gaige arrived at the library several minutes before the appointed time, anxious to share with the others what he'd learned this afternoon and too restless after the dream and the encounter with Jax to accomplish anything else .

When he entered the tower, it was to find Thomas sitting at the big delik-wood table bent over an open book. A tall, slender female dressed as a warrior stood next to him, her long black hair shimmering in the glow of the wall sconces and the candles on the table. At the sight, Gaige's heart began to pound.

They both looked up at him.

"Thomas," he said, greeting the scholar.

"M'lord," Thomas mumbled, and immediately went back to his book.

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Gaige turned his focus on the female. “Elliesán.”

She gave him a regal nod. “Lord Rizik.”

“When did you get here?”

“A few hours ago. You were sleeping and Marta felt it best you not be disturbed.”

Normally that would have irritated Gaige—Marta knew Gaige had been eager to hear from the elf, and no matter how much he needed sleep, he would have preferred to immediately know Elliesán was here. But this particular day, he wouldn’t have traded the time he had with Keiran while he was dreaming for anything, so he couldn’t work up any anger over it.

“How are you?” he asked her. She looked as calm and elegant as ever.

“Well. And you?”

“Honestly, I’ll be better if you tell me you have some good news for me.”

Not one for mincing words or making pleasantries, she said, “The passage you seek is gone. Buried. Lost to the ravages of time and shifting geology. It existed tens of thousands of year ago, and the shape of the world has changed much since then.”

All the air leaked out of Gaige’s lungs and for a moment he had trouble pulling in more. He grabbed the edge of the table to steady himself. “You’re sure?”

He knew it was a foolish question. Of course she was sure. He’d sent her exactly because he knew she, of all beings, would be able to get to the crux of the matter with thorough efficiency.

“I am. I’m sorry. I know you’d hoped for different news.”

There has to be another way. Damn it, I’m not leaving you there, Keiran!

“She does know the general area where it existed, though,

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m'lord," Thomas said. "I'm not sure if that might have any significance to you, but it is quite fascinating."

"Where was it?"

"Far beyond the Great Plain." He pointed at the large book he'd been studying, and when Gaige looked down he saw a map spread across two full pages. "It was here." His voice grew almost reverent. "Under the G'aereth Peladon."

Gaige stared at the drawing of high, tight, jagged peaks surrounded by a large swelling of dark clouds and shadow. It was at the far left bottom corner of the map with *G'aereth Peladon* inked across the peaks, and below them, the words in draega: *Aile ib dae'malcariia. Da'nath anteir*. Gaige spoke very little draega, but he knew these words because he'd seen them before in the common tongue: *Here there be daemons. Do not enter*.

"The G'aereth Peladon," he said softly, looking up at Thomas and Elliesán.

Elliesán nodded.

An unnatural chill spread through Gaige's body. G'aereth Peladon—no man's land, it was often called. With its densely packed high peaks that came to needle sharp spires at their tops, and perpetually surrounded by heavy, clinging dark mist, it was a place none went by choice. No fair creature had ever been seen near its borders, and it was said those who entered, never came back.

Gods. Of all the places.

Iann, Marta, Wen, and Lilia arrived just then. Gaige greeted them and they took places around the table.

As he was about to start the meeting, the library doors opened again and Jax entered.

All eyes in the room fell on him.

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Gaige nodded to him in welcome. “Jax, come in.”

In a surprisingly civil move, Jax nodded back, then quietly paced to stand a few feet from the table, his back against a wall, facing the door. A classic defensive posture for one who’d spent his life as a soldier.

Marta, in particular, looked none too pleased to see him, but she kept her thoughts to herself.

Gaige was glad to see him. He’d known there was still a possibility Jax would walk away from Kellesborne and that’d be the last they saw of him. He had, in fact, before he’d come to the library, made a point of telling the *draeganjhere* on duty that Jax was free to come and go as he liked, including free to leave the castle.

But Jax hadn’t left. He’d bathed and dressed in clean clothing. His black hair was once again plaited in several long braids. He still looked wan and tired, and his bruises stood out in contrast to his pale skin, but he was here.

“I know you’re wondering why I called a meeting on short notice,” Gaige said to the group. “And I’m sure most of you are already aware of the news Elliesán has brought with her...that the passage to the shadow world the elves closed is gone for good. I’m disappointed by that, but I can’t say I’m surprised. It happened long ago and the odds of finding and using that passage were never really in our favor. However, I haven’t given up hope. If Death can come out, we can get in. And the fact is, we need to get in sooner rather than later.”

He read the questions on their faces and responded before they could ask them aloud.

“Keiran’s life depends on how quickly we can move. He’s alive, but getting weaker, and Moh’dredion’s patience with him

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grows thin. Moh'dredion feeds off not just life force, but magick as well. He's trying to force Keiran to use his magic so he can feed, and Keiran's refusing."

"How do you know this?" Iann asked, his eyes glistening with both hope and caution.

"Because I just spent the afternoon with Keiran."

Deafening silence followed his revelation.

Her green eyes wide with shock, Marta was the first to find words. "How is that possible?"

"You had a vision, my lord?" Wen asked.

"No, not a vision." He set the small blue glass vial on the table.

Lilia, who sat next to him, let out a small gasp of surprise. "Your grandmother's potion. You used it."

"I did."

"Selene's? What is it?" This time it was Iann who spoke.

"I honestly don't know. I was hoping maybe someone here could tell me." He related the story of how his grandmother had given it to him, with Lilia nodding and inserting an occasional comment. And then he told them how he'd tried a drop of the potion and when he went to sleep he'd been inserted into Keiran's dream. "I assume that's what it does...it puts whoever's using it in someone's else's dreams."

"No, not dreams. It puts the user into another being's reality," Elliesán said, her liquid silver voice strangely calm and almost aloof-sounding. Gaige wondered if that was a trait all elves shared.

"You know what this is?" Gaige picked up the bottle.

"Yes. It's called *ingil*. It's very rare and only made by the most advanced elvish potion masters."

"Elvish? How would my grandmother have an elvish potion? The elves have been gone from these lands for a very long time."

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“It’s told in my world that once, long ago, a great winged lord visited our lands over the Onyx Sea. My people don’t encourage outside visitors, but because this was a lord, the lord and her attendants and escorts were treated well and hosted in the castle of our king. While there, the elf king found the lord’s company to be worthy and true. When the lord left, the king sent with her many gifts—elvish cloth, jewels, and a supply of a rare potion that could be used to see.”

“See. That’s what my grandmother said.”

“I didn’t hear her say that,” Lilia said, her face scrunching in thought as if she were trying to remember.

“A few times she’s communicated with me telepathically,” Gaige said. “After she gave me the potion this morning she said, ‘See.’”

“None but a draegan seer can use it,” Elliesán said. “Only the seers have minds strong enough to handle the magick. It’s quite powerful. I assume what your grandmother gave you is the last of what the draegan lord was given so long ago—your grandmother was a seer for Lord Hareldson’s mother, was she not?”

“Yes, she was.”

“When taken, the potion puts a seer in the mind of another being. Allows the seer to see that being’s reality. You can see why it was entrusted only to the draegan lord for use by a draegan seer. It’s something that could easily be abused.”

“But with Keiran it put me directly into his dream.”

“Then that must be his reality at the current time.”

Pieces of the puzzle began to fall into place. “Ahhh, that makes sense. That’s it, exactly. It put me in Keiran’s dream because, right now, his entire reality is in the dreams he’s living. The dreams Moh’dredion feeds him.”

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“Death is making him dream? I don’t understand?” Wen said.

“That’s how Moh’dredion feeds. He takes his victim to Ballian, the shadow world, and puts them into a deep, magickal sleep. While they sleep, he forces them to dream of horrible things, whatever he can find in their minds that scares them. Then he feeds on their fear until their life force is gone. With draegans, he feeds on the fear and the magick.”

“So you were able to see what Lord Hareldson’s dreaming?” Lilia asked.

“No. Not just see it...live it. I was there with him. I fought by his side as he battled strange beasts. I talked to him, touched him.” He waited to hear some kind of untoward remark from Jax, but the draegan remained silent, as he had since he’d gotten here.

“A live dream,” Wen said.

“Very live.” He pulled up his sleeve to show them the ragged gash on his arm he’d received from one of the spiked clubs.

“Good gods.” Marta’s expression was one of shock. “You carried wounds back with you?”

“Yes. And that’s what’s so terrifying. Everything that’s happening to Keiran in these dreams, is happening to his real body as well, where it’s trapped in sleep in Moh’dredion’s caverns. Death is obsessed with Keiran because he doesn’t just have regular draegan magick, he has lord magick. If he were able to feed off Keiran’s magick, Moh’dredion would be strong enough to escape Ballian and go anywhere, any time. He could, and would, feed on entire towns or even worlds.”

“Oh, my gods,” Marta murmured.

“Keiran’s holding him off, refusing to do any magick at all. Moh’dredion’s angry with him and keeps upping the danger in the dreams. Each day it becomes more and more treacherous for

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Keiran as Death tries to push him into using magick to defend himself.”

“Eventually Death’s going to get tired of such a game,” Elliesán said. “If it feels Lord Hareldson won’t ever give up, then he’ll no longer serve a purpose to Moh’dredion.”

“Death will kill him,” Marta whispered.

Exactly what Gaige had told Keiran.

“And it gets worse,” Gaige said. “Time passes differently there. Here, Keiran’s been gone three weeks. On his end, it’s been months, maybe longer. So even a few days here could mean weeks there. And as angry as Moh’dredion is...”

“He may not have long,” Iann said.

“No, he may not.” Gaige fought against the lump that filled his throat.

“But with the passage closed, what do we do?” Wen wanted to know.

“That’s what we have to figure out. Death was able to open a portal and come through at the encampment in the forest. He didn’t need to use the old passage. He came to us. And Byram has to be getting the sacrifices through to him as well.” Gaige frowned. “Thomas, have you found anything in further translation of Byram’s grimoire explaining how he’s been communicating with Moh’dredion?”

“He mentions no details of that. I’ve wondered it myself. It’s almost as if...”

“As if?”

“As if the entire story isn’t written on the pages of the book. As if parts are missing, m’lord. He gives basic facts, but not much detail about *how* he’s doing the things he’s doing.”

Frustration gnawed at Gaige. Missing information? Damn it all.

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What was that all about? But they didn't have time to worry about it right now.

"All right, well, stick with it. Maybe something else will turn up." Though he suspected it wouldn't. It seemed as though Thomas had wrung as many secrets from Byram's journal as it was willing to give.

"There has to be a way for us to open a portal. Keiran said Moh'dredion uses some kind of ancient earth magick to put his victim's to sleep, so maybe he uses the same type of magick to open a door to the outside world."

Silence descended, as if they were all searching for a solution.

"If you can't go to Death, why don't you bring Death to you?" Jax said, speaking for the first time.

Gaige looked up and gazed at the draegan across the room. "What?"

Jax stood stock still, staring back at him. "Why go to the trouble of trying to find a way to open a portal yourself when you already know Death can open them. Let him...it...whatever, do the work for you."

The same tingling feeling Gaige had gotten this morning during his talk with Lilia hit him again. He was beginning to recognize it as a tingle of knowing. "Lure him here," Gaige said.

Jax nodded. "And then let him open the portal. Once he does, you go through it."

Marta blanched. "No, Gaige. Not after the way Death affected us all the last time. I wouldn't want him anywhere near me or anyone else again. It's too dangerous. He's too dangerous."

"No...no, Jax is right." Gaige was warming to the idea. In fact, he could see a simple brilliance in it. "That's smart. Yes, that's smart. And I know just how to lure him. Keiran said Death didn't

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take me last time because I wasn't as powerful as Keiran was. But now, after the nyctophans...something happened. I turned something on..."

"You finally began to believe," Iann said.

Gaige looked at him, surprised. "You sound like Keiran."

"Once you two were mated you began to build lord power. You just didn't believe it. You were convinced that because of your human side you were somehow lesser."

Gaige waited for Jax to say something about how he was less because he was human and had been Byram's hand-fed dog for so long—but once again Jax kept his tongue, surprising Gaige.

"But the magick was there, building all these many months, waiting," Iann said. "Waiting for you to believe in yourself enough to use it. Once you did and discovered it was real...well, you've seen what you can do."

"Are you saying Gaige should use himself as bait?" Marta said. "If that's what you're all saying, no. Absolutely not! I...*we* can't lose another lord. And you heard what Keiran told Gaige...that Moh'dredion wants draegan lord blood so he can escape the shadow world and roam at will. If this thing gets hold of Gaige, it would just torture him the same way it's torturing Keiran."

"I can't free Keiran through the dream world. I have to be where his physical body is. If Death came for me and opened a portal here, he'd have to take me through it to Ballian first and put me to sleep before he could begin to tap into the magick. And Ballian is where Keiran is. We would have to figure out a way for me to overpower him before he put me to sleep, though."

"Maybe not."

All eyes turned to Elliesán, who looked thoughtful. "There might be a way for it to appear to Death that he's overpowered you

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and put you to sleep, but after a time you'd wake up from Death's dream and be with your body, and therefore in the same place as Lord Hareldson's body."

The tingling spread to the back of Gaige's neck. "How?"

"A potion. I was once friends with a potion master. Although I don't have the magick abilities with plants that she did—the ability to bind them in new ways—I am aware of several herbs that would make an effective draught which would allow you to quickly recover from any magick performed on you. I suspect Lilia might have some of them in her stores, and the rest I know where to find."

Lilia nodded. "I'll do whatever I can to help."

"Excellent. Please do it," Gaige told them.

"Have you all lost your minds?" Marta said, her face red. "Are you seriously thinking of inviting that horrible, powerful being to us and letting him steal away Gaige, our only remaining lord? He and Keiran will both end up dead!"

Gaige walked around the table and patted her shoulder. "I understand how you feel. But it's a good plan, and maybe our only chance at rescuing Keiran. I would never, under any circumstances, lure Moh'dredion to Kellesborne and put all our people in danger. If we do this, it will be somewhere else, and I'll be doing it alone. I won't risk anyone else's life."

"But you'll risk your own."

"For Keiran, yes."

Marta look up at him and her face crumpled. It hit him hard to see she was on the verge of tears. "I can't bear to lose you, too."

"You won't lose me. You won't lose either of us if we do it right."

"Um...my lord?"

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Gaige turned to Thomas. “Yes?”

“I have two questions.”

“Let’s hear them.”

“The last time, at the camp in the forest, Moh’dredion came specifically for Lord Hareldson. He implied he’d been looking for him. You said he didn’t take you the first time because you weren’t powerful enough. How will Moh’dredion know to come looking for you? How will he know that you have power now?”

A good question, and one Gaige hadn’t thought of. How would Death know to come looking for him?

“I’ll have to show him.”

“Yes, but how will you know he’s looking when you give a demonstration?”

Gaige frowned. How, indeed. *Think!* And then it hit him...

“In Keiran’s dreams he doesn’t use any kind of magic and he told me I couldn’t either or Death would find me. I could take some of my grandmother’s potion again and enter another of Keiran’s dreams. But this time...I would use magick.”

“Didn’t Lord Hareldson say that Death feeds on the magick, though?” Wen asked. “If you used magick in Lord Hareldson’s dream to attract his attention, wouldn’t it also empower Death and make him more dangerous?”

“I’d have to make it quick. Something powerful enough to make him notice, but then I’d have to cut it off fast and get out of the dream before he fed from it too much.”

“And he’d follow you on the way out and open the portal in our world to get you.”

“Exactly.”

This was going to work. Gaige felt it in his bones.

He could almost see Wen’s brain working through the plan,

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trying to figure out how he was going to protect Gaige during this mission. Gaige didn't have the heart right now to tell him that Wen wasn't going to be anywhere near when Death came calling again. Wen wouldn't like it. He'd argue and insist on staying at Gaige's side, but it was an argument he wouldn't win.

"There is one more question, m'lord." Thomas again.

"Yes?"

"Once you get in, and if everything actually goes as planned and you're able to wake up from the dream and wake Lord Hareldson as well...how will you escape from the shadow world and get home?"

Thomas's words were like a stone gate crashing down on all Gaige's hopes.

If Death opened the portal and brought him into Ballian, who would open the portal from the inside to get them back out? Because it certainly wouldn't be Death. Gaige could almost hear Moh'dredion gloating from here. Once Gaige got in, Death would keep them.

A knock sounded at the library's doors. Wen rose to open them. When he did, two men, both members of the *draeganjhere*, stood in the arch. One's cloak and shirt were torn and covered in dried blood. Both looked grim.

So did Wen when he saw them. "Hamith, Bessel? What's happened?"

The shorter of the two, Hamith, a rugged blond draegan with a beard and only a few years older than Wen, spoke. "Lieutenant," he said, acknowledging Wen, then turned to Gaige and bowed his head, "My lord. There's been an attack."

Gaige was instantly moving toward the door, with Iann, Marta, and Jax right behind him. "Where?"

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“Not here, m’lord...at Gabaxis,” the bleeding soldier, a human, said. “Jain and I were scouting in the Charn River Valley. We stopped to rest for a few hours in the darkest part of the night and, without warning—we didn’t hear them at all, I swear, sir, it was like they were ghosts—they were almost on top of us.”

“Who was?”

“Five hundred soldiers. The sorcerer’s. Coming through the valley headed to the River Road.”

Gaige and Iann shared a look. *Five hundred?* What were that many troops doing in the Charn River valley? “What happened?” Gaige asked.

“We stayed out of sight and followed them. They marched straight into Gabaxis and decimated the entire city. The residents put up a fight, but they were overwhelmed and far outnumbered. The soldiers...they killed everyone, m’lord, even the old and the young. Very few escaped. Jain and I...we tried to help, but...” His eyes had the haunted look of one who’d seen horrors he’d never forget.

Gaige put a steadying hand on Bessel’s shoulder. “Where did they go from there?”

“They left a garrison of about fifty soldiers in Gabaxis. The rest headed north on the River Road. That was three days ago. Jain and I split up. Jain followed them and I came back here to report. I knew you’d want to know what happened.”

“Good man.”

“But, sir,” Hamith said, “we have another problem. Bessel came to the west guard camp for help in reporting to you since he can’t get to the castle on his own. As he was telling us what happened, the prisoner started going crazy.”

“Prisoner?”

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“The man Caleb, m’lord. We’ve been holding him in the caves and ever since Bessel arrived, he’s been throwing himself against the bars of his cell, wailing that he has to get out, he has to go. He’s gone insane, m’lord.”

“Anything else, men?” Wen asked.

“No, sir. Not that I can recall,” Bessel said, looking dazed and about ready to fall over. Hamith shook his head.

“All right, Hamith take Bessel to Lilia’s treatment room,” Wen said. “She’s going to want to look at that injury.”

Lilia was, in fact, already gesturing for the men to follow her.

When they’d gone, Gaige looked to his assembled companions.

“Iann, Wen, you’re with me. We need to get to Gabaxis and find out what happened there and why Byram would have set a battalion of five hundred soldiers on a seemingly peaceful town. I want to know where he even found five hundred soldiers in that area...his field outpost in the Charn River Valley is never manned by more than a hundred or so.”

“Jax, take Jarrad—he can fly you—and I want you to get down to the west guard camp and find out what in *hel* is going on with this man Caleb.”

The draegan looked at him, his face almost as grim as the two soldiers who’d just left the room. Gaige suspected he wanted to protest about having to ride another draegan, but before he could argue, Gaige said, “Do whatever you think is best in dealing with Caleb. But whatever you do, don’t let him out of your sight. There is something going on with that man, and I don’t trust him. He knows something—whether it’s about the sorcerer, or the attack at Gabaxis, or maybe he’s one of Byram’s spies sent here to reveal us. I don’t know. But I damned sure want to find out.”

“You do remember how much I detest humans, don’t you?” Jax

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said. "You might not approve of the way I deal with him."

"It's exactly because you don't trust humans that I'm giving you this job. I don't want you to trust him. I want you to haunt his every step and watch him just like you used to watch me. I know I can trust you not to let him get anything past you."

Jax looked at him, his black eyes glinting, for several seconds. Finally he nodded and left.

"Do you think that's wise?" Marta asked. "Giving him that much power?"

"I trust him to do the right thing."

He could tell she wasn't happy about it, but she acquiesced.

"Marta, you're in charge while we're gone." To the others he said, "Let's go."

The sooner they got in the air, the sooner they could find out what was happening.

Five hundred soldiers... The number disturbed him greatly. The time for small raids was clearly over. To Gaige's practiced eye, this looked like the first strike in a planned campaign. But why Gabaxis?

That was a question he hoped to find an answer to. But whatever the method behind the sorcerer's madness...it seemed the war had begun in earnest.

And though he'd never tell the others, he felt horribly torn between his commitment to his people, and his commitment to get Keiran out of the mouth of *hel* before it was too late.

CHAPTER 10

The devastation in Gabaxis was startling. Byram's troops had, indeed, as Bessel said, left the town in utter ruin. The garrison that had stayed behind, was already at work building an ugly fortress upon the scar that had once been a thriving town of peaceful citizens.

But what unsettled Gaige the most was that the majority of the soldiers weren't human. Whether it had been too dark or the battle had happened so quickly they hadn't noticed, or Bessel had been so traumatized by what he'd witnessed his brain was addled, he hadn't mentioned the fact that much of the garrison, and presumably the attacking battalion, were vorgrals.

The vorgral race from the far south of Velensperia was made up of warlike tribes that spent most of their time fighting with each

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other over territory. They were humanoid in the loosest sense of the term, in that they stood upright and walked on two legs like a human, but thick tufts of gray hair spouted from their bodies, and their faces were elongated like a wolf. They spoke their own garbled language, but also the common tongue when it fit their needs. How Byram had managed to tear them apart from each other and their own tribal wars to fight in his, Gaige couldn't even fathom.

If the sorcerer had managed to recruit vorgrals, what other men and creatures had he also lured into his cause?

Gaige, Wen, Iann, and two other draegans from the *draeganjhere* had been gone a week, flying not just over Gabaxis and the Charn River valley, but farther afield...north on the River Road, east over the Aurion Mountains. Everywhere they went, they discovered signs of unrest. Byram had begun amassing troops, positioning them, it seemed to Gaige and Iann, to be deployed quickly as he called upon them, but keeping them mostly out of sight in the mountains or other remote locales.

"He's trying to keep them secret," Iann had said.

A stealth attack did seem to be the strategy.

By the time they returned to Kellesborne, Gaige felt sick. All these months they'd been keeping such a close eye on the area directly around them, only sending occasional scouts into the farther reaches of Velensperia, that they'd been oblivious to Byram's larger plan.

One thing was now clear...

Byram's war was of a far broader scope than just annihilating the draegans and the human rebellion. He'd secretly been building enough troops to wage war on every peaceful being in Velensperia, from the coast of the Onyx Sea in the north, to the hinterlands and

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Silver Sea in the south, from the easternmost realms to the G'aereth Peladon and the great unknown in the west.

"It's time," Gaige told the others, the morning after they'd returned. He'd tried to sleep for a few hours, but hadn't been able to do more than doze. The temptation to use another drop of his grandmother's potion and see Keiran, reassure himself his mate was still alive, and seek solace and share his distress over what they'd seen had been powerful. But in the end he'd resisted. He couldn't risk drawing Death's attention to himself before the plan was in place.

"We've been worrying about our own problems, but it turns out we're only one cog in Byram's greater wheel of expanding tyranny. We can't ignore what's happening around us. Nor can we ignore the fact that the draegans, few though we are, are still one of the strongest and most powerful races in Velensperia. That's why Byram still sees us a threat. Right now, we're the best hope this world has to defeat the sorcerer. Because of that, we need to look at the larger picture and gather our strength so we can make a stand. And that means bringing the most powerful weapon we have back home."

He looked around at the faces of those he'd come to care for beyond friendship. These people were his family now. But the most important member was still missing.

"I'm going tonight," he told them.

Marta's eyes welled with tears, but she didn't say a word against his decision.

"Wen will fly me to our old campsite in the forest after dark. Moh'dredion came there once, so he knows where it is. And it's far enough away from Kellesborne there's no chance of anyone here being at risk if the lure works and he follows me and opens a

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portal.”

“But we still have no way to bring you back once you get there, my lord,” Wen said, his face tight with fatigue and stress, and his green eyes, so like his mother’s, dark with worry.

Gaige nodded. “I know. But we can’t delay any longer. It’s been over a week here. It’s been a lot longer for Keiran.” *Please, gods, still be alive.* “At this point I just need to get to him and get him awake. We’re better off taking our chances in Ballian, than leaving him vulnerable in Moh’dredion’s dream world. We’re both fast-thinking on our feet. And it will be the two of us facing Moh’dredion together if it comes to that. We’re much stronger together than we are individually. We’ll find a way to get out of the caverns.

“Lilia, Elliesán, please tell me you can have whatever concoction you’re brewing ready by dark?”

“It’s already done,” Lilia said. “I think we all knew you’d want to go as soon as you got back from your scouting trip. I’ve also prepared a vial of stimulant that you can give Lord Hareldson in case you have trouble waking him. Everything’s ready and waiting for you.”

Gaige’s chest tightened. “Thank you,” he said, and meant it from the bottom of his heart. “Thank you all.”

A tear slid down Marta’s cheek. Wen patted his mother’s hand.

“I’ll be back,” Gaige promised them. “With Keiran.”

He hoped to gods he could keep that promise.

* * *

Shortly before dark, Gaige stowed the bottles of herbal brew Lilia had given him, as well as the little blue vial of his

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grandmother's potion, in the small leather pouch he usually wore on his belt. This time, however, he had affixed a long, looped strand of leather to it. He pulled it over his head, then tucked it under his shirt. He didn't know how much of his outer accoutrement—his bow or his weapons belt and blades—he'd be allowed to keep once he got through the portal, and wanted to be sure the truly important items were hidden and close at hand.

After they got to the forest and Wen was safely away, Gaige would take one drop of the *ingil*. Then he'd close his eyes and hope sleep came and he could enter Keiran's dream again. If he was able to get into one of his dreams, he would do enough magic to draw Death's attention. Then he'd leave Keiran's dream and return to his body in the forest. The moment Death came after him and opened the portal, Gaige would then take Elliesán's potion that would, he hoped, allow him to wake up once Death got him to Ballian and put him to sleep. And then, finally, he'd give Keiran Lilia's stimulant to wake him up.

That was the plan.

Oh my gods...do you know how many things could go wrong with this?

Too many to count.

Nothing's going to go wrong. Stay focused. Keep your concentration on Keiran and getting him home safe and sound.

Keiran...

Gaige closed his eyes and thought of having Keiran back—his best friend, his confidante, his lover, his mate. *Just please be alive.*

Gaige had said goodbye to the others already this afternoon, quietly, in private so as not to stir the interest of the other residents of the castle. They'd agreed that rather than make a show of Gaige leaving and frighten people over the newest lord disappearing, they

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would keep the information of Gaige's whereabouts amongst themselves. If any asked about him, they would simply say he was on a mission.

Which was the truth. *The most important mission of my life.*

He'd tried to keep the good-byes light and unemotional, especially with Marta who, he was convinced, had decided he was every bit as much her son as her own children were, and that's why she was taking this whole thing so hard.

Gaige had every intention of returning, damn it all. But he also wasn't a fool. He knew, just as they did, that what he was about to do was a dangerous feat and the odds were against him. He'd given Jax grief over having a death wish for thinking he could infiltrate Byram's fortress. Yet here he was, about to try the same thing with the very being who'd been supplying Byram with power. And instead of finding his way into a regular fortress in the regular world, he was about to taunt a *hel* demon to open a magick portal and take him deep into the bowels of the earth, to a realm out of which no one had returned.

He'd left Iann and Marta in charge, and they'd discussed what needed to happen over the next few weeks. Even if everything went according to plan and his rescue of Keiran was successful, he had no idea how long he'd be gone. If he and Keiran were able to get out the underground caverns of Ballian, and the caverns were where they suspected they were, they'd be a long, long way from home. It would take some time to return, even by wing. Assuming Keiran would be strong enough to fly.

So Gaige couldn't in good faith leave without making sure the safety of the people at Kellesborne was being looked after, and a tentative plan for how they should face the battles of the upcoming war was in place.

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The only bit of unfinished business he was leaving behind was Jax. The day after he, Iann, and Wen left for Gabaxis, Jax had taken off with Caleb. The guards said they didn't know where Jax and Caleb had gone, just that Jax had gone in to talk to the man, and hours later, Jax had informed the guard he was taking Caleb with him somewhere.

Gaige had told the *draeganjhere* that Jax was free to come and go as he liked, and he'd told Jax he could handle Caleb however he wanted. So the guards had no reason to stop them, even if they did find it strange.

It had been niggling at him ever since he'd heard about it on their return. What was Jax up to? Gaige wanted to keep faith in him and believe that his trust in the draegan hadn't been misplaced. But their sudden departure together troubled him. It just seemed a little too...convenient. There was nothing he could do about it now, though.

His mind once again turned to what was to come for him tonight.

Hang on, m'aerlas. I'll see you soon.

As he was fastening his belt, a knock sounded on the door.

"Come," Gaige called.

Wen, with Wesley in tow, came through the door, both of them flushed.

"Gentlemen," Gaige said, eyeing them curiously, wondering what the motivation for this visit was when he'd be seeing Wen up on the north tower in a just a few minutes.

"My lord," Wen said, a sparkle in his eyes that hadn't been there earlier. "Wes figured it out."

"It?"

"I was telling him about some of the things you told me while

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we were traveling this past week, of how Lord Hareldson described Death's realm."

Gaige still wasn't following them. "And?"

Now Wen was outright grinning.

"Wes knows how you and Lord Hareldson can get out of Ballian."

CHAPTER 11

In spite of the flames all around him, the path grew darker the higher Keiran climbed...as if the ebon sky slowly swallowed the mountain.

He'd been climbing for...he didn't know how long. His legs ached. His lungs burned from exertion and the acrid stench of smoke. He was desperate for water to soothe his throat, but there'd been none for hours. When he'd swallowed the last few precious drops, he'd barely been able to feel them going down.

Over the past weeks the once gray sky of the dream world had gone dark. Where once scraggly trees had jutted up from the mountain ridges and ravines, now only dead, charred sticks remained. And instead of angry rainstorms and ankle deep mud, the hot dry air made his skin crack.

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Today—or was it yesterday?—or maybe both, he'd watched everyone he cared about, everyone he loved, turn to ash. Iann. Marta and her boys. Jax. Elliesán. And Gaige. Always Gaige. His Gaige, who he'd loved beyond all others. He hadn't even been able to save him.

And he had no one to blame but himself.

He'd started the flames that consumed everything. He'd made it burn. He'd shifted and breathed fire, and then he'd watched as the world sparked and everything went up in flames.

Now, there was nothing left but him and this damned mountain. He, who was supposed to be the protector of his people, had condemned them all to a fiery death.

The last of the draegans would die. Because of him. Because he was weak.

He stumbled on a rock and fell to his hands and knees. And stayed there.

"Why?" he croaked. "Why do you do this? Why do you keep making me see it?" A sob tore through him, but even though he would have welcomed them, no tears came. There was nothing left to make them. "I've already given you what you want!"

With little strength left, his head hung down. "I'm weak," he whispered. "I've destroyed everything."

A silver light began to shimmer nearby, though he couldn't lift his head to see what it was. Did it matter? *No*. But it kept coming, getting closer. And then it was so bright he winced against it.

Cool hands...so blessedly cool...cradled his cheeks and lifted his head.

::M'aerlas? Look at me::

Pain shot through him. "No, please...not again. I can't watch him die again," he whispered. "I've given you what you want."

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Make it stop!”

“Keiran...look at me. Look at me, beloved.”

The hands were so insistent. Yet gentle at the same time.

“Can’t. Can’t watch again.”

“You’re not going to lose me this time. I promise. Trust me.”

“It’s too late. I already gave him what he wanted.”

“No, you didn’t. Keiran, you didn’t. You’re still in the dream and this is what he’s making you see. He’s playing on your fears. He’s making you think you broke down and used magick, shifted, burned...but you didn’t do any of that. It’s just the dream. Please, love, look at me.”

This time when the hands tried to lift his face, he let them. And looked into the light.

Gaige knelt in front of him, and he was lit from within, shimmering like a white-silver sun in the midst of the darkness.

“Gaige...” It was barely a word. Almost a breath. But he looked so beautiful. And alive.

::I am alive. And I’m here. He’s still taunting you and terrorizing you because you haven’t given in, Keiran. Because in your real body you’re strong and you’re still fighting him.::

Confusion swirled through Keiran.

“You didn’t do it. You’re strong. You’re a draegan lord. And I’m coming to get you.”

Something teased the edges of Keiran’s mind. Something important. And then he remembered. “The real Gaige.”

“I’m here.”

“You weren’t supposed to come back.”

“I told you I would.” His eyes glistened with love. He leaned down and brushed a kiss against Keiran’s dry, cracked lips. “Don’t believe what he’s trying to show you. You’re still strong. Stay

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strong just a little while longer. I'll be with you soon."

He stood, and Keiran's neck ached as his gaze followed Gaige up. But he couldn't stop looking because he was so beautiful. So lordly. The air around him glowed.

Gaige smiled down at him. ::*Soon*::

He held out his hands...and the mountain around Keiran began to rumble. The ground shuddered and rocked. "Moh'dredion! I'm here. And I have what you want!"

The words seared through Keiran along with the pain that shot through him from the ground heaving beneath him. And suddenly he felt a jolt of life. And horror. And he knew in the depths of his mind that this was bad.

Oh gods!

"No," he croaked. "No, Gaige! Stop!"

But Gaige just looked down at him and smiled again. ::*Trust me*::

Then he turned his face up at the sky, which, Keiran saw, had become an angry orange-red. "You want me, Death?" Gaige shouted. "Come and get me!"

The ground gave one final, epic heave, and then settled into an eerie silence. Gaige was gone.

Only a second later, an unholy shriek ripped the air, causing the hair on the back of Keiran's neck to stand on end. Heat consumed him, pouring over him in billowing waves, until he couldn't breathe, and all he saw and felt was a furnace churning around him.

But it was the booming, deep, primeval voice radiating fury, that filled Keiran with terror.

"YOU DARE TO COME INTO MY WORLD? YOU DARE TO TAUNT ME, HALFING? I'M COMING FOR YOU! AND THEN

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YOU'LL PAY!"

Shadow and flame tore past Keiran in a giant fireball, and exploded through a rent in the very fabric of the sky.

"NO!" Keiran shouted, but his voice was barely above a whisper. "No! Gods...Gaike! Gaike!"

* * *

He floated in the dark. No dreams. Just disjointed images. Sounds. And a feeling of deep grief. He'd lost something.

Someone.

Who? What was happening?

With a low tug to his middle he felt himself being pulled back...back... And then he was on the mountain again, in the dark, on his hands and knees, with flames licking at the air nearby.

No, more! he wanted to say. Please! But the words wouldn't come. Not anymore. He had nothing left.

Death stood over him. Fire and terror.

"I HAVE HIM. IF YOU WON'T GIVE ME WHAT I WANT, HE WILL. YOU LOSE, DRAEGAN LORD!"

Keiran pressed his face against the hot, rocky ground, and sobs wracked through him.

::Why, Gaike? Why?::

And then the darkness finally took him.

* * *

"Keiran..."

The voice sounded like it came out of the air. Soft. Whispering. He couldn't...quite...grasp it.

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“Keiran, come on love, open your eyes.”

“Hurts,” was the only word he managed to form on his tongue. And still he couldn’t make his eyelids open.

“I know.” A gentle hand stroked his forehead. His cheek. “Try for me, though. Open your eyes and look at me.”

He felt himself frown, or maybe he just thought he did...he wasn’t sure any of his muscles were working. “Dream...”

“No more dreams. The bad dreams are all gone.”

He tried, he really did, and forced his eyelids to cooperate. They scraped open over his gritty eyeballs. Everything was a blur. The world spun around him, and he struggled to make it stand still. Finally, slowly, things began to take form.

He saw darkness again. But also light. And at the center of the light he saw a beautiful, worried face gazing down at him. And blue eyes the color of the summer sky.

His chest squeezed, and for the first time in he didn’t know how long, it wasn’t out of pain. “You found me...” Keiran rasped, a damp sting welling in his eyes.

“I will always find you, *m’aerlas*. I’m not ever letting you go.”

Warm lips brushed over his, and then against his forehead. A warm drop of liquid fell on his cheek, and he realized it wasn’t his own.

“Gaike...” he breathed. He lifted a hand, though it felt strange, and touched his fingertips against sensual lips and a stubbled cheek.

“I’m here.” He smiled, and it filled Keiran with overwhelming emotion. “Can you do me a favor and drink some of this?” He held a small glass vial to Keiran’s lips.

Kieran swallowed without question, but grimaced at the awful bitter flavor. It caused him to gag.

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"It's okay. Here." This time a flask was held to his mouth and cool bliss poured in. "Now try a little more of this one." The small vial again. Keiran shuddered, but swallowed the rest. Then drank some more water.

Heat began to blossom inside him, starting in his core and slowly spreading to his arms and legs, hands and feet. His skin tingled. His mushy brain cleared a little, but not all the way. It felt like he was fighting through a thick fog.

He struggled to sit up, and Gaige put an arm around him to help.

"Take it easy, love. Give the stimulant a chance to finish working, and your body time to adjust."

"We're still—"

But before he could finish the words, he felt terror and fire again, somewhere nearby. A shudder rocked his aching body. "Death," he croaked.

"Is coming. I feel him." Gaige voice was tight. But oddly, Keiran felt no fear in him. "It's time to go, Keiran. Come on."

He dragged Keiran's arm over his shoulder, and stood, pulling Keiran with him.

Keiran staggered, trying to make his legs remember what they were supposed to do. *Move!*

Gaige ran, half carrying him. "Hang on. Just a little farther," he said.

"There's nowhere to go."

They were surrounded by rivers of fire. Either Moh'dredion would catch them or the wall of flames would. Death by fire or fire.

"No one's dying," Gaige said, reading his thoughts. "Not today. Not on my watch."

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“TWO DRAEGAN LORDS. AND THEY’RE MINE. ALL MINE! THERE’S NOWHERE TO RUN, LITTLE LORDS.”

Terror raced up Keiran’s back. But Gaige’s steady confidence eased it.

They hit the wall of flame over water, and finally Gaige stopped. He turned, still holding Keiran, and faced Moh’dredion.

“You okay, love?” Gaige asked him, settling his love-filled blue-eyed gaze on him.

“I’ve been worse.”

::Everything’s going to be okay.::

Gaige began to shimmer again, with sparks of white and silver dancing in a halo around him.

::Take my hand, Keiran.::

Keiran looked down to see Gaige held out one of his hands, palm up.

And then, with a rush of clarity, he knew what Gaige planned. He looked at his mate, who smiled. Death bore down on them, they stood in the bowels of *hel*, but Gaige smiled. And warmth from it broke through the last of Keiran’s haze.

“I love you so damned much.”

Gaige’s smile widened. “I know. Take my hand.”

Keiran rested his palm atop Gaige’s, and their fingers twined.

The moment they did, Keiran’s own well of magic began to fill as it fed from Gaige’s.

They weren’t in Moh’dredion’s dream any longer. He wasn’t connected to them. He couldn’t feed from them.

And two draegan lords united were far stronger than either one on his own.

His and Gaige’s magick merged, twining together in strands of silver and white, giving them both access to it all.

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Moh'dredion approached them, all flame and shadow and deadly intent. *"WHAT WILL IT BE? WILL YOU RUN SO I CAN HAVE FUN CHASING YOU?"*

"We will not run. You have no more power over us!" Gaige's voice was deep and regal, echoing through the large cavern.

Death laughed...a rumbling agony that made Keiran's head ache.

"I AM THE POWER. AND SOON I'LL BE EVEN STRONGER."

"Soon you'll be dead!"

Gaige lifted his hand, the one holding Keiran's. Keiran felt the white-hot surge of magic coursing through both of them, shooting down through their arms into their locked hands. He felt Gaige's magick, earthy and powerful, different from his own, yet familiar, too. Together, they formed a perfect merge.

The cavern around them began to tremble, the rock walls shivering and groaning, the floor shifting...everywhere except where he and Gaige stood.

"YOU THINK THAT CAN STOP ME? THIS IS MY WORLD. MY DOMAIN. YOU HAVE NO IDEA WHAT I CAN DO."

"No, it's you who don't know what we can do!" Gaige smiled again.

He was magnificent. Keiran had never loved him more than he did in this moment, standing tall and fearless against Moh'dredion.

::You know what to do::

::I know::

::Now!:: Gaige told him.

Keiran focused his energy, which was still not up to par with what it should have been, but thanks to the stimulant Gaige had given him, and Gaige's own strength feeding into him, he was

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stronger than he would have dreamed he could be after months of Moh'dredion's *hel*.

The caverns shuddered harder. Rocks began to fall, tumbling down in a rain of destruction. Moh'dredion dodged them and then lunged for Gaige and Keiran.

Keiran's magick flowed into the bond he shared with Gaige, and a winged shield made of fiery silver light formed between them and Death. The same shield he'd used to hold off Death at the camp the night he'd come there, but this time, with his and Gaige's combined magick, it was far stronger than before.

Moh'dredion hit it at full speed, expecting it to bend as it had before. But instead, it held steady and Moh'dredion slammed into it, his flames spreading and licking along it, before coalescing once again into his form.

He roared in outrage. And tried again. And again.

So intent was he on getting through to them, he seemed oblivious to the destruction being wreaked about him.

Keiran kept his focus on the shield, and he felt Gaige's focus on the cavern. The rocks groaned and cracked against the pressure. The ceiling crumbled. Chunks of it fell around them, some hitting the shield as well, making it spark, but not going through.

"Time to go," Gaige said. "Do you trust me?"

"With my life."

Gaige's eyes sparkled with love. "Keep the shield up as long as you can. And hold your breath."

"My breath?"

Gaige gave a final thrust with his hand, a final, powerful burst of magick...and with a rumbling groan, the cavern's ceiling gave.

"Now! Hold your breath!"

Gaige wrapped his arms around Keiran and pushed them

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backward. Before Keiran could protest, they fell...into the wall of fire behind them.

Heat seared into Keiran. But it was instantaneous.

Before he could scream, the world shifted and he was enveloped in cold and wet. Water closed over his head.

Water beneath the fire.

It swirled around them, catching them, and pulling them away at mind-numbing speed.

Soon Keiran's lungs ached for air. The cold seeped into him. His hands and fingers, then arms and legs began to go numb.

::Hold on, Keiran. Stay with me::

Gaige's words in his mind sounded far away, dissonant. The water current buffeted him, trying to tear him from Gaige's hold. Every now and then they'd bob to the surface and Keiran would drag in a quick breath before they were sucked under again. But those opportunities came too far apart. The times in between were agonizing.

::Hurts...::

::I know. Hold on just a little longer. Don't you dare leave me now::

They'd come too far, through too much, to die now. Keiran dug down into himself and found the last of his strength. *::I won't leave you,::* he promised.

It was the last thing he remembered for a long time.

* * *

Slowly, the world around him began to come into focus again. He felt spongy ground beneath him. The sound of running water nearby. Air on his skin. Warm air. And warm light. And even more

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warmth pressed against him, hard and firm, but infinitely comforting.

He blinked open his eyes...and saw heaven.

“Heaven, is it?”

The deep husky voice curled around his heart, and sent a sweet flare of desire straight to his groin.

Keiran smiled. And it felt good, natural. “Waking up next to you is always heaven.”

They lay on their sides facing each other on a grassy bank next to a river. One of Gaige’s arms was wrapped protectively around his waist, holding him close. They’d obviously been out of the water for a long time—they were dry. Gaige’s pale blond hair caught and held the light. Sunlight...actual sunlight shone down on them, and Keiran couldn’t resist tipping his face up and closing his eyes, to soak up as much as he could. He’d seen nothing but gray and black for so long he’d almost forgotten.

::So beautiful::

“What is?” Keiran opened his eyes and looked at his mate.

“You are.” His callused fingers stroked Keiran’s cheek, and his thumb brushed over his lips.

“Please tell me this isn’t a dream.”

“No more dreams,” Gaige said softly. “Except the good kind.” He leaned in and brushed his lips over Keiran’s.

Keiran snaked an arm behind his head and pulled him closer. He needed to reconnect and remember how good it was between them. Needed to show Gaige how much he’d missed him and how important he was to him. The kiss was sweet and hungry and erotic all at the same time.

It made Keiran want more. So much more. Yet at the same time, he was also completely content to stay just like this, kissing

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the man he loved beneath a sunny sky, and savoring the closeness and simplicity of it.

Gaige seemed to understand and feel the same way. It had been so long since they'd been able to do this.

"How are you?" Gaige asked, toying with a lock of Keiran's long hair, brushing the soft end of it over Keiran's cheek, then lifting it to his own lips and kissing it. The action made Keiran's chest squeeze. "You slept a long time. I would have been worried, but I sensed you were peaceful and not suffering."

"I'm still tired," Keiran said. "I feel like I've been gone a long time. But I'm more grateful than you can know. How are you?"

"I'm okay. Grateful as well. And trying to wrap my head around the fact that you're here, *really* here. That we're together." His eyebrows drew together. "And a little in shock that my plan actually worked without a hitch. Even the river, which was the craziest part of it all."

Keiran smiled. "How did you know to do that? How did you know it would work."

"I didn't for sure, but it was the best plan we had. It was Wesley's idea. All underground rivers have to come out somewhere, he said."

"Wesley? Teenage Wesley? Sarah's son?"

"Wesley the young man, who also happens to be Wen's lover."

Keiran's brows shot up. "I really have been gone a long time."

Gaige brushed the hair off Keiran's face, his expression tender. "But now you're back. Are you ready to go home?"

Home. The word held more meaning for him now than it ever had. Home was Kellesborne. The people he cared about. But above all, it was Gaige. The man who'd risked everything to save him. *::I love you, m'aerlas::*

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::I love you. More than I could ever tell you or show you.::

::You just did show me. You found me when I couldn't even find myself." He leaned in and pressed his lips to Gaige's forehead. To his mouth. *::Let's go home.::*

"They need us," Gaige said softly, his gaze troubled.

"Things are bad?"

He nodded. "We've learned much, and it's not good."

Keiran knew Gaige would fill him in on the all the details before they got there. And he also knew, as he was certain Gaige did, that Moh'dredion was crippled, but not gone.

::It's bought us some time, though,:: Gaige said.

It had, thanks to Gaige's smart thinking and courage.

"Thank you for not giving up on me," Keiran said, his throat tight with emotion.

"I'd be lost with you. I'll always be here for you, Keiran." He captured Keiran's mouth again with a tenderness that tore at Keiran's heart.

They were together again, the way it was supposed to be. There were still many battles to fight, and hard times ahead. But Gaige had shown him unequivocally that together, they could face whatever came.

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M. L. RHODES

Award-winning and best-selling author M. L. Rhodes lives in the foothills of the Rocky Mountains with her physicist husband, two teenage boys, and a menagerie of animals. She's been writing professionally for fifteen years. Her characterization and emotional storytelling have received high critical acclaim and garnered her numerous awards in the writing industry. She's had books published in several genres, but her focus now is entirely on gay male romance, which is her passion!

If you'd like to keep up with what's going on in M. L.'s world and find out about her new and upcoming releases, check out her website at www.mlrhodeswriting.com.

* * *

**Don't miss *Vertigo*
by M. L. Rhodes,
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Each night Simon Saint-Saëns hunts the creatures of darkness that others fear—beings that come through dimensional rifts into our world from a world called Vertigo. Simon has unexplained superpowers that help him fight, but his is a desolate existence, fraught with danger. He works by himself and never allows anyone

to get too close to him because his powers come at a terrible cost—a secret he's never revealed to anyone. Better to be alone than jeopardize the life of someone he cares about.

Enslaved in Vertigo for years, Jaden Cole was one of the innocent lives Simon saved when he first started hunting. Jade had almost forgotten what it meant to be human...until Simon found him and brought him back to this world. But when their friendship turned into something more, Simon sent Jade away and cut him out of his life to keep Jade safe.

Nine years later, when a new, powerful evil stirs to life in Vertigo and targets Simon as its enemy, Jade returns. He's not the same innocent he was all those years ago, though. Now he has his own secret, one that could turn Simon against him, even force Simon to kill him. But Jade's willing to risk everything, even his life, to save the man he's always loved.

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