



Him: hunter turned lover. Her: lover turned prey...

At Prince Kaen's court, Ryuan holds a place of honor...and fear. He is wolf-born, and although he uses his shifter abilities to hunt down criminals who threaten the realm, he is considered more beast than man. Only in the chase and killing of outlaws is he truly free to be himself.

While tracking a rogue sorcerer, he encounters Calanthe, who not only is unafraid of him, but dares to tease him. Intrigued—and unaware that she, too, is driven by a purpose—he offers her a drink of water from his hands. It is an offer of more than a simple sip.

Calanthe accepts, for she has been sent by the sorcerer to distract Ryuan however she can, even with her body. Instead she finds herself giving in to the urge to make this grim warrior smile, then to something deeper. A summer of romance, rain and lovemaking.

When Ryuan awakes to find he has lost both her and the sorcerer's trail, he lets his wolf-born side loose with renewed determination. He will serve his prince and kill this sorcerer once and for all. But now, his true prey is Calanthe...

Warning: This title contains explicit sex, earth-shaking confrontations, a hero who could rip your heart out, and a romance that will put it back in.

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Summer-set
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Summer-set

Karalynn Lee

Dedication

For Anna, in lieu of an island. For now.

Chapter One

Monsoons filled that summer, and she filled his heart. Later, during evening storms, he thought of the sudden shadows her breasts made with every flash of lightning. Thought of how the rain would seep into her and give her its wetness, until she was fluid all around him, her skin slick with it, her cries dissolving. They moved with the same steady rhythm of the drumming of the water. And when he called her name in that last desperate delving for her innermost secrets, the thunder drowned his voice.

In the autumn, she slipped out of his hold like the rain.

Ryuan stared at the droplets scattered on his window, his body clenched fist-tight. It had been three seasons and still he thirsted after her. There had been other women, sleek perfumed beauties at court, but he scarcely remembered them. None of them had satisfied him, even when he shut his eyes and imagined their hair to be sable instead of whatever other color it was. And she had been tall and lean. With these other women he had to bend his head too low to cover their mouths with his own, and his hands skimming down their sides only told him with mounting aversion, *No, this is not she.*

Still, he had lingered at court for a long while—too long—hoping to find someone who could ease away her memory. He had stretched even the prince's patience, pursuing this hopeless task. The prince had given him a different task, an old one—a chance to repair a mistake made one year ago. It had been his only failure.

He was the prince's justice and executioner, and he never took his prey standing.

Ryuan pressed one hand to the window. Beyond the clouded skies was a tomorrow, and it was then he would begin his hunt. The quarry the prince had given him was as meaningless as the rivulets down the glass, for he knew whom he truly sought. "Run, Calanthe," he whispered. "I will find you."

Behind him came a soft rustle and footsteps, no doubt one of the court ladies seeking his bed one last time.

"I don't want you," he said without turning around.

A chuckle, one that he knew well. "Just as well."

Ryuan turned. "Forgive me, Kaen. I thought you were someone else."

"You must be distracted indeed to mistake me." Prince Kaen regarded him with all of his old affection. They had been raised together as brothers, and Ryuan remembered wondering at the differences between them—Kaen's dark brown hair next to his own tawny gold, the rangy frame where Ryuan had a thicker build.

Later, the differences had only grown. Smells that cloyed Ryuan's nostrils and whispers that filled his ears were barely noticeable to Kaen. Kaen was right—it was unusual for anyone to surprise Ryuan, because his senses were keener than any human's.

"You leave tomorrow?" asked Kaen.

Ryuan nodded. "I could leave tonight, even."

"The matter's not that rushed. Wait for the morning and a clear sky." Kaen had a touch of weather-ken and knew these things. He hesitated, then went on in a gentle tone. "I've enjoyed your constant company at court these past three seasons. It's just that I think it's best for you to go out, before it overwhelms you."

"I know." And he did. Ryuan had learned the crucial thing that distinguished him from Kaen when the wild-mind had begun to descend upon him: blurred sections of time when movement fascinated him, from running strides to the beat of the pulse in someone's neck. His hunger would be insatiable, whether it was to kill or rut, and the scent of blood became an overpowering, flaring thing...

When those at court had decried him as mad, Kaen's parents had spread the truth before them. Ryuan was one of the wolf-born, those considered as much beast as man because they could take both shapes. Although when roused, there was nothing considered more dangerous, Kaen's parents had reasoned that there could be no more fearsome a bodyguard for their son. They had somehow brought him to court while he was too young to remember, and had him raised as a companion to secure his loyalties. When Kaen later became ruler, he had turned Ryuan's abilities toward other directions. "He will hunt the two-legged hyenas who prey upon my land and my people," the prince had told the court as he secured the signet ring on its chain around Ryuan's neck. "Let no man stand in his path or deny him anything he asks for." Now they called him *the prince's hunter*.

Ryuan didn't begrudge the name. Being able to call Kaen his foster-brother was the most precious gift in his life. There had been a brief summer when he had thought that a woman might overshadow Kaen in his heart, but he knew better now.

He had also believed then that the wild-mind could be sated through lust rather than through killing. But even after bedding most of the court women he remained restless from unfulfilled cravings, the constant effort of staying human leaving him tense and his temper strung taut. Once he had even been driven to hunting just outside the city, taking down a stray boar before the blood-urge subsided, and even then not wholly.

It would not stop until he took down a human.

"I won't return until the sorcerer is dead," Ryuan said, staring blindly out the window again. He had never explained why he had failed last time and Kaen had never asked. When they were boys, there were no secrets between them. But that had been before Kaen became prince.

“Ryu...” Kaen’s voice drew him back, anchor-steady. “Send word if something goes amiss. And whenever you need to, come back. This is your home.”

“And let a rogue sorcerer go unpunished? You’ll set a poor precedent.”

Kaen balled his hands into fists and his eyes blazed with a sudden rage. “This sorcerer hurt you once, and if he does it again— One criminal isn’t worth my brother, damn it!”

The corner of Ryuan’s mouth quirked. Usually he was the quick-tempered one and Kaen patient, but whenever they were together they seemed to reverse roles. Kaen’s presence helped calm Ryuan and stave away the wild-mind, and Ryuan in turn only seemed to incite his foster-brother to more passionate bouts of emotion.

He said with deliberate lightness, “Are you worried about me, or the mass of court ladies who’ll pine themselves away in my absence?”

Kaen’s laugh was choked, but he was unwillingly drawn into the banter. “You think you’re that good?”

Ryuan shrugged. “It’s harder to keep my bed empty than to fill it.”

“It’s true that you’ve been seeing a lot of women,” Kaen said. “A different one each night, it seems. You need to take a wife before you disqualify all of them.”

“You sound like our mother when she was trying to marry you off,” Ryuan said dryly. Their mother—his foster-mother—had been a relentless matchmaker, and finally hounded Kaen into wedding a sweet-voiced girl—pretty enough, but far too timid for Ryuan’s own taste. He knew that the closeness he shared with Kaen disturbed her, and she rarely looked him in the face, let alone addressed him.

He didn’t want anyone who feared him. Even those who came willingly to his bed did so for the thrill of it, the edge of danger. With them he had to keep himself locked into human thoughts and hands, careful to maintain the guise that he was no more than an exotic man, because to do otherwise would send them fleeing. He needed someone who accepted his nature and there had only ever been one such woman. And then it had only been a ploy on her part.

“No one suits you,” Kaen said, reading his thoughts.

“Tell truth, Kaen. What woman would consent to settle with one of the wolf-born?” He stretched out his hands and deliberately brought the claws forth. It hurt when he did so without being in the wild-mind.

Kaen watched him flex his hands, unafraid. He had been with Ryuan when he first discovered the ability. “You found that woman, last summer.”

Ryuan looked up sharply. “You knew?”

“It wasn’t difficult to tell.” At Ryuan’s expression, Kaen added, “For me, at least. You’ve been grieving ever since.”

Ryuan subsided. He felt unaccountably ashamed, not so much by the actual revelation as by the fact that he had never shared this. “I should have told you. But it hurt too much...because I lost her.”

“The sorcerer took her from you,” Kaen said. The words were flatly spoken, not a question.

It had to be so. He remembered asking her whether she had ever heard of the sorcerer, and her evasive non-answer. She had pulled him down over her to distract him. Her entire presence had been meant to distract him, he knew now. “Yes,” he said.

“Hunt that bastard down,” Kaen said fiercely. “Exile is too good for him.”

Ryuan inclined his head as though it had been a royal command and not a vindictive curse.

Kaen hesitated a moment longer, then said quietly, “Safe journey, brother.” He turned and walked out of the chamber.

Ryuan cradled those words, as he had the first time Kaen had called him that. He should have been more considerate of Kaen’s worries, he knew, but his thoughts all dwelled with Calanthe. He returned to his post by the window, watching the downpour.

Lightning lit the sky and illuminated a past summer.

Chapter Two

He had been hunting a man into exile when he first saw her. She was lifting water from a well. Against the dimming sky she was a seductive foretelling of the night, with her smoke-dark eyes, earth-dark skin and raven-dark hair, falling free down her back as no respectable woman would wear it. Gold glinted around her neck with the last of the sun's light.

Ryuan scented no danger, so he turned human. He wore nothing but a chain about his neck, from which dangled a signet ring. It identified him as well as his name would.

She looked up at his approach and her eyes caught on that telltale signet. Then her gaze slipped lower for a moment before she caught herself. She unhooked the bucket. "Water, my lord?"

Grown men blanched at the sight of him, knowing him to be wolf-born, while women turned away from his nakedness. She seemed unfazed. Intrigued more than thirsty, he cupped his palms and let her carefully pour water into them so that he could sip. "My thanks."

"You've been on a long road."

And no one ever spoke to him about his hunts. They were his business and the prince's, the execution of law, not fodder for gossip. "You know who I am?"

Her eyes flickered to the signet again. "The prince's hunter. Lord Ryuan. No other man would be fool enough to wear that. And nothing else."

Her forthright manner was more refreshing than the drink she had offered. "Your name?"

"Calanthe, my lord."

"And what do you know of my journey so far, Calanthe?" He let suspicion harden his voice. He didn't want her to be in league with the sorcerer, a sentiment that surprised him, but how else would she know of the path he had taken to track the man?

She wasn't oblivious to the danger she was in—he heard her pulse grow faster—but she answered readily enough. "It started at the capital, did it not? Perhaps it's shorter as the wolf runs, but for the rest of us, it's more than a tenday away."

He relaxed, chuckling at how he had overlooked the obvious. "My apologies for the interrogation. My journey did start there. And it has been long, even as a wolf."

"And you are parched in either form, I'm sure. They always warn us about the hungers of the wolf-born, but they should mention the thirst." She smiled and gestured for him to cup his hands again.

He did so, but this time he watched her instead of the flow of water. Her hands, like her figure, were slender and graceful yet strong. There was a sureness to her that he liked—not the arrogance of the court women, but an unaffected confidence that his presence did nothing to diminish. She spoke easily of him in his wolf-shape, made light of the wild-mind.

He wondered what this woman would be like in bed. Just as bold and teasing? A touch careless, though, in her attitude.

“You shouldn’t discount danger so easily,” he said. “Not from me, but there are men in this area who would part you from that gold.” There were lawless men in these parts. Ironically, it had been the death of one of them that had brought him here. Ryuan would deal with them if he encountered any, but for now he had greater prey to pursue.

“With the prince’s hunter here to serve justice?” She shook her head. “Surely there’s nowhere safer right now.” Was that a trace of banter in her voice, as though his prowess could be questioned?

“I am on hunt,” he said. “I won’t be lingering long.”

“You spurn my hospitality, my lord?” She tilted her head and looked at him in wide-eyed appeal, still playing her game of innocent challenge, and yet the thought of spending a night with her was a temptation.

It had been long—too many nights spent curled as a wolf in dens he had dug. There had been a court woman the night he had left the capital, but he had already forgotten which one it had been. Those were empty rituals of pleasure, enjoyable but always the same: some woman seeking the thrill of bedding one of the wolf-born, perhaps also trying to win the prince’s favor.

Calanthe would be different. He would stay a night, he decided, if this woman were willing to share more than a roof.

Ryuan nodded to the bucket and said, “I won’t spurn more water.” But this time, after she poured and set the bucket upon the rim of the well, he kept his filled hands still and said, “But I interrupted you just as you were pulling this up. You too should drink.”

There were two choices for her here. He was curious which one she would take.

She looked at him with a sudden awareness that hummed between their bodies. She wore her hair unbound, so she was neither a shy maid nor a wed woman and would know his words for an invitation. He didn’t move at all, though. There were simple ways out for her—she could deny thirst, or reach into the bucket with her own hands. That she was a free woman did not mean she was any man’s.

She was still unafraid, he was glad to see. Her pause was to consider him, and as her gaze moved over him, he felt himself stirring. An expression he couldn’t read passed over her face. Then she said gravely, “A generous gift, my lord. Offering water which I gave to you.” But the corner of her mouth quirked, and she slid her palms beneath his to steady them and drank from his hands.

Her lips were warm, closing briefly to swallow. She didn’t let go when she was done. Instead her tongue traced its way across his palm, and then she took one of his fingers into her mouth.

It was as though she were pulling on his cock. A groan escaped him, and he felt the breath of her laughter as she released that finger, only to begin sucking on the next. Her tongue swirled about it, and then she drew it out just enough to scrape her teeth over the pad, sending a jolt through him. He hadn't realized how exquisitely focused he could become on his fingers. It would be all too easy to fall upon her and take her now, but there was a mischievous look in her eyes that he wanted to change first.

He let the fingers of his free hand drift down her arm and then took one of her hands. He could tell she expected him to echo her own movements, but instead he barely brushed his lips against her palm. He locked gazes with her. Then he pressed his mouth to her wrist. A pause. Her forearm. The inside of her elbow. As he moved up her arm he increased the pressure just slightly, lingered just a little longer. He noticed with satisfaction that she had abandoned his next finger to watch his progress.

He reached her shoulder. Unhurriedly, he blew upon her neck before kissing her there, feeling the flutter of her pulse. When he turned her face toward his, he saw that the impish look was gone, replaced by something far more serious. Then he finally devoured her mouth with none of his previous care, only trying to build the pace into something frantic and unstoppable. His need was a wildfire in his blood, and he made her feel it too with every movement of his lips and tongue.

She made a muffled noise of surprise that drew out into a moan. When she pulled away, panting, she said, "You fooled me with that slow pace."

It felt like a victory. "There'll be nothing slow from here."

She smiled. "Then why am I waiting?"

A sort of madness descended upon him. It was as though the wild-mind possessed him, but instead of urging him to rend her flesh, it made him crave her in another way entirely.

He extended his claws and slashed one down her front, tearing through the fabric of her dress without touching skin. The cloth fell away and he watched as her body was bared to his sight—a mole just below her collarbone, an old scar down the length of her arm, the paleness of her breasts. She did not flinch away, even when he set those same clawed hands upon her hips, carefully, and pushed her back against the wall. She gasped a little with the impact and her breasts rose with that intake of air. He cupped them, molded them—they were small and pert, fitting easily in his hands, the nipples upturned as though pointing toward him. He took hold of them and twisted, and watched her head snap back and her hands clench.

The scent that filled his nostrils was wholly her own, sharp with desire. He moved his hand downward to the source of it, tracing a path over the swell of her breast, the row of her ribs, then the hollow by her hip. Careful with his claws, he rubbed his knuckle briefly between her legs.

Her sex was already drenched. She made a sound low in her throat when he touched her. The hand he placed on her thigh met taut resistance, for she had locked her legs to remain standing.

He fought the urge to thrust into her right then. The wild-mind was a cacophony of lust, and he forced it away, made himself remember that he was a man and that he owed her more than a hasty possession.

Instead, when he ground his hips against hers, he slid his erection between her folds without actually entering her.

He bent to suck hungrily at her breast. "As sweet as the honey-melon," he said. He traced the outer curves of her breasts with the sharp edges of his claws turned away. "The moon could not cast a more graceful shadow than these." He nuzzled her throat again. "And your skin is soft as water. I could drown in it. How will you feel when I'm inside you?" He was gliding smoothly against her now, and his cock was unbearably hard.

He should have known better than to tease her. She said, voice throaty, "Like this," then reached down and wrapped her hand around him to guide him inside her.

Her cunt was slick and tight and wrapped around him glove-like. It made his hips drive in hard against hers, the slide of wet flesh a caress of molten honey. He dragged himself out of her, slammed deep again. The soft, wordless sounds she made were descant to his growl, and as they rose, they pulled the blaze of his lust higher as well.

She raised her legs along his body and wrapped them around him. It changed the angle so that his cock reached the very end of her passage, and he reached it again and again. He tensed as she suddenly began to spasm around him, trying not to follow her over the edge. But when she cried out brokenly, "Ryu," he lost all control and began to pound into her without holding back, caring for nothing but the building ecstasy. When he thought he couldn't take it any longer, his climax spilled out, wrenching a long groan from him. He stayed pressed against her, savoring the feel of her body.

She was still catching her breath. He eased away slowly, letting her legs drop, and caught her when her knees gave out and she began to slide downward. She looked soft and used, her lips swollen and face flushed.

Her eyelids fluttered open and she saw him watching her. She smiled wickedly. "What if I said that wasn't fast enough?"

He was learning her ways. "I would have to try again," he said solemnly.

She stretched luxuriously, fingers trailing up the length of her body, making him react all over again. "Or perhaps I'd prefer long and slow."

He kissed her long and slow. It took almost as long for her to untangle her fingers from his hair. "Any other variations?"

"Let's try them all," she decided. Then, half-seriously, "That was good, Ryu. But what if there's some way it could be even better?"

"Only Prince Kaen shortens my name thus," he said, feeling curiously light-headed.

"I ran out of breath." She tilted her head to one side as her fingers traced the line of his jaw. "How should I know you, then?"

“No, call me that,” he said. It wasn’t lack of privilege that kept others from using the name, but a lack of affection.

Her smile was slow and lovely. He didn’t understand why it washed through him like a warm wind.

It was dark now, too soon for nightfall. When he looked up he saw that clouds had gathered swiftly overhead, covering the sky in gray.

“It must be summer now,” she said, following his gaze. “The monsoons are starting.”

Something was starting indeed, he thought, but it was far deeper than a mere season. The knowledge burrowed into the marrow of his bones and the chambers of his heart, that she would not come and go like the brief summer storms. He wanted to share more than one morning with her—as many mornings as he could have.

A raindrop pricked the back of his hand. Another struck his shoulder, and then he saw them falling everywhere, silver streaks in the air and sudden wetness on his skin.

He grabbed her hand. “Come on!”

She laughed and followed as he began running. Her legs were long and she matched his strides easily. Thunder crashed all too close, spurring them even faster toward the shelter of her home. They ducked inside into merciful dryness, and the pounding of the rain became suddenly distant. Calanthe let go of his hand. “Definitely summer,” she said, still laughing. “I’m soaked.”

He could not resist her like this—her hair slicked with rain, her skin gleaming with it, the jounce of her breasts as she shook her head, spraying droplets of water everywhere. She turned to look at him, and whatever she saw in his face made the laughter stop and something kindle in her own eyes.

“We left our clothes outside,” she said, then grinned. “Or I did, at least. I know you don’t need them, wolf-born.”

“You don’t need them either,” he said.

He strode to her and pulled her against him, wet flesh against wet flesh. Hers was chilled a little. He set about the task of warming it again, but this time with a heat that would last.

Chapter Three

He meant to leave the capital at first light, but Kaen insisted he take a horse and supplies. He did not have to say *It will keep you human*. Ryuan would have no need to hunt if he had unbloodied food to eat, and he would have to stay in his two-legged shape to take care of his mount. It was one of Kaen's worries, that Ryuan would choose his other shape and never return, so Ryuan humored him. It took time to accustom the horse to him, though, for it smelled the wolf on him and was skittish.

Kaen came also with a message. "Our lady mother asks that you take your leave of her," he said.

"You told her?" Their mother had retreated into near-seclusion after their father's death, and Ryuan and Kaen had agreed not to disturb her unduly. It usually meant telling her nothing of the men Ryuan hunted down.

"Melea asked what thoughts I was dwelling on, and..." Kaen shrugged. His wife, whom their mother had championed as a faultless bride, was known to spend time with her mother-by-marriage.

Ryuan was careful never to speak a word against Melea, whom he had nothing against, but he had never understood what either Kaen or their mother saw in her. He only blew out his breath, then said, "I'll go see her."

Their mother had chosen a set of chambers by the private royal garden, and it was outside that he found her. She was dressed in mourning gray, as always, though her erect carriage belied any fragile air of widowhood. At the moment she stood on tiptoe, reaching for an early blossom at the end of a tree branch.

"Here." Ryuan took hold of the branch, then plucked the flower and held it out to her.

Even through her veil he could tell she disapproved. "I wanted only to smell it, Ryuan. There was no need to kill it so thoughtlessly."

He looked at the pale flower in his palm. He could have described its scent even had it been on the highest branch of the tree, but that was not the point. There was real pain in her voice behind the admonishment. He imagined that death in even its slightest form was a reminder of her husband's passing. "Your pardon, my lady mother."

"And now you go to kill a sorcerer." She began walking along the path and Ryuan paced her, scattering the petals behind them.

"But not thoughtlessly. He had his chance at life in exile."

"Yes. Kaen explained that he killed a bandit, a year ago, and that he was willing to grant clemency since the bandit attacked first." She paused briefly to check the leaves of a shrub. "But the sorcerer should

have been executed then. It bothers me that he would make his presence known again, after that. Sorcerers have been rare since the Law of Century was passed, and the few that remain have been careful to keep quiet.”

The sorcerers of old had devastated the land with their wars for a hundred years, until the last of them had gathered and declared that they would use their powers no more, establishing the Law of Century. Many of those sorcerers had been set upon by the people who had suffered under them. The rest had managed to disappear. But their legacy lived on in folk like Kaen, with his minor talent with winds; in the wolf-born, who hunted in two shapes; in small artifacts with strange properties that surfaced from time to time.

Even Kaen had faced his own share of suspicion, but their father had been well-liked and Kaen was much like him. He had won over the people by being a charming man, a fair ruler, and never raising so much as a breeze.

“He didn’t kill anyone this time,” Ryuan said, remembering the confused report Kaen had received. The first time they had heard of the sorcerer, the messenger had come to court still smirched with soot and gasped, “A sorcerer called fire down upon a man, and left but ashes.” Nothing so dramatic this time, only a merchant mumbling, “They say a sorcerer-king is thereabouts.”

“He may yet still. He thinks he’s gotten away with it once, so why not again?”

“Are you worried about me?” he asked, incredulous. His mother was the most imperturbable person he knew. “I’m wolf-born. I can hunt down any man.”

“I know. But sorcerers are more dangerous than you know—their gifts are far greater than the minor ones you’re familiar with. The wolf-born are safe from the worst of their power, but they can still harm you indirectly. And they’ll know of your weakness to silver.” She bent and pushed a seed deeper into the earth. “Kaen thought the people could most easily accept you as a protector of the realm, but I wish it didn’t mean you had to kill.”

“It’s in my nature,” he said, bemused. She had always taken it in stride before.

She turned to Ryuan. “I hope you find her,” she said.

The old, familiar ache for Calanthe filled him. So Kaen had told her about that. He supposed it was inevitable that, having meddled with one son’s love life, she would do the same with the other’s. “I’m seeking a sorcerer.” Not quite a lie.

She only smiled sadly and made him bend down so she could kiss his cheek. He was glad of her blessing, at least, as he finally set off.

As promised, last night’s heavy rain clouds had dispersed. Kaen could always tell. It always mystified Ryuan how he knew, but even that had brought them closer.

“Can’t you *sense* the fog moving in from the coast?” Kaen would ask.

“Can’t you *sense* the pulse of that man’s blood?” Ryuan would counter, and they would grin at each other.

Kaen was the only person to whom Ryuan had ever tried to describe how it felt during the wild-mind. His brother had listened quietly, then said only, “Don’t let it take you away from me.”

It was why Ryuan never removed his signet. That light touch upon his chest was like an anchor. A badge, too, which let people know who he was in either shape.

His way led northeast, toward the savanna ranges that bordered the realm, and he often passed people on the roads. They looked at him curiously until they caught sight of the signet. Although lone travelers were rare because of their vulnerability to ambush, Ryuan welcomed any bandits to try and attack him.

None were so foolish, though, and his ride was uneventful. Lodging was his for the asking, but he preferred to make camp a small distance from the road. Lurking in inns and hoping to hear news was futile, since no one was unafraid enough to speak in his presence and he had little faith in village gossip. He trusted instead in his own tracking skills, which had never led him astray but once, when they directed him to the well where Calanthe stood.

She was always the exception. That failure gnawed at him, and would until he found her and wreaked his exquisite vengeance on her body. She wouldn’t be far from the sorcerer. He was certain they were in league. She had admitted to having a man before him—he had smelled traces of him in her home—but then distracted Ryuan from asking about him.

One last good fuck, he promised himself. Under his terms. And then he would be able to set her out of his mind forever. No more reliving the dawns that might have been missing the sun as well as her, so empty did they feel. She had left unexpectedly, just when he was about to speak to her of what they would do after summer ended. It had left him so stricken that the thought of following her and finding her had been more painful than not. What use, if she cared not for him? He had only been able to stumble back to the capital, back to his heart-brother and the solace of court women. But now he had no softness left for her. He would use her precisely the way she used him.

Chapter Four

Each morning was as hollow as the last. He counted them thus:

The first morning, she was not there. It surprised him, for he had confused a dream of her with her presence. But his arm was thrown over nothing.

The second morn, he woke late and didn't travel as far as he wished. It had been hard to fall asleep the previous night while tormented by yearning.

On the third morning, she still wasn't there. He spent the rest of the day looking for her in every shadow. A bird soared overhead and he thought, *She might as well have flown away on wings.*

The fourth morning, a withered leaf had been blown onto his face, like a dry kiss. He reached up to it and then deliberately crumbled it in his hand. It should have been her lips there at the corner of his mouth.

Finally, when he opened his eyes on the fifth morning, he deliberately brought Calanthe to the forefront of his mind. He recalled every detail of her body and let his thoughts slide over her constructed image. His hand moved down to his growing erection. She was dark and fair, her hair so soft... He grasped his cock and began to slide his hand along it. The undersides of her breasts were incredibly sensitive, and the lightest touch of his fingertips there would make her instantly ready. His arm worked in steady motions. Her voice was low for a woman's, and she would moan his name—

He uttered hers as he spilled onto his stomach. A sweet lassitude began to creep over him but he cursed and shook it off, wiping himself off. More time wasted.

On the sixth morning he flung himself into wolf-shape and lost himself in the thrill of chasing a rabbit. It stood no chance against his keen nose and swift paws, and there was little satisfaction as he tore into its hot flesh. It wasn't what he truly craved. He turned human and left the bloody mess for the vultures.

Of course, he had to catch his horse, as it had bolted free when he shifted.

After that he stopped caring, because the days would pass no matter what he did. He had felt a summer slip through his fingers. And despite his desperate attempts, he had never been able to reverse time. He let the sunrises and sunsets blur together.

Eventually he came to the drylands. He was on the border of the savanna now. The tall, brown grasses were only occasionally interrupted by trees. Sometimes he came across stretches of little vegetation at all, where fires had swept the land. Then he crossed a road, no more than a dirt footpath. It meant there was a small settlement a short way off. It was from there that word had come of a sorcerer.

The message had been confusing. A sorcerer-king, the man had said, clearly too simple-minded to do anything but repeat the words he had been given by a chain of travelers. It was how one might describe one of the sorcerers in the ancient era of chaos, carving out kingdoms petty or vast as according to their whim. It sounded not at all like the sorcerer who had burnt down a man then fled. But there were few sorcerers remaining, as his mother had noted, and the chance of two revealing themselves in a single year was slight. He would find out more at the village.

Strangers were rare enough that curious stares followed him as soon as he entered the town. They would be likely to remember the sorcerer, then. He didn't acknowledge anyone and kept riding toward the center of the settlement. Somewhere, a child called excitedly, "A rider, a rider!"

When a small crowd had gathered around him, he hooked his thumb into the signet and raised it into the air so that they could see it. He was used to the swift exchange of looks and the palpable dread that rose among them. The thoughts behind each face were transparent: had they done anything that warranted the attention of the prince's hunter?

The fear was useful, and he had learned to harden himself against it. "I seek a sorcerer," he said. "He has used his powers to kill, against the Law of Century."

And now the fear shifted, and so did the people, moving to one side to let an older man approach.

"I was the one who sent word of him, my lord," he said. "I am the speaker for these people."

Ryuan dismounted and inclined his head in greeting. "Our lord prince valued your message. But it wasn't entirely clear when it reached us."

"We couldn't spare anyone to travel so far," the speaker said in apology. "I had to trust that traders would pass along our warning. I thought others might say something as well."

Others? Perhaps more reports had arrived after his departure. "How many has he revealed himself to?"

"My lord, he is building a city."

"A city!" Ryuan's eyes narrowed. This was not a man planning to run. "With what people?"

"The sorcerer let it be known that any with the old gifts were welcome with him. Like to like." The man spat.

Ryuan couldn't blame him for his disgust. Most of those with minor talents were harmless and suffered from the prejudice against sorcery. But to join a sorcerer who had used his powers to kill was despicable, and treasonous.

"None of us went," the speaker went on. "We are all pure."

Ryuan almost said, *Our lord prince is not so pure*. But it was unwise to remind people of that. He reined in his temper and said instead, "It is not their birth which condemns them, but their choice."

"You will deal justice, my lord?"

It was like a dark tide rising within him as he thought of the justice he would bring. “I will deal with this so-called sorcerer-king.”

A sigh rippled through the village folk.

“The city is being built to the east,” the speaker said.

“Will one of you watch my horse?” Ryuan was already scanning the horizon.

“We would be honored,” the speaker said automatically, and a boy stepped forward to tentatively take the reins. Then he paused, clearly realizing Ryuan’s intention. “But it’s a fair distance, my lord. You should probably ride.”

“It would only slow me down,” he said briefly.

The speaker backed away. “It’ll be well taken care of.” His nervousness jangled into Ryuan’s perception, a distraction from his true prey.

Ryuan did not look his way. The hunt sang to him. The villagers dropped away from his awareness as his focus narrowed. They weren’t what he sought.

There seemed to be but one direction open to him. Some insignificant creatures were in his path, but when he began to move, they cleared his way.

He managed to wait until he was out of their sight before he cast off his clothes and let the wild-mind sweep over him. Ryuan curved his fingers and felt his claws respond, and then the prickling of fur ran up his arms and along his body. He fell forward onto all fours, his legs stiff until bones twisted and settled, like a taut bow loosened. His jaw lengthened. The earth felt alive underneath his paws.

The wind carried a myriad of scents to him. He lifted his head, then chose one that promised the sweet meat of a gazelle. But as he turned, something tapped his chest, and he remembered.

Kaen’s signet. His duty.

He reshaped his hunger toward a purpose. The sorcerer was in a city, in the direction from which the sun rose. Did a sorcerer’s blood taste any different than that of other men?

Ryuan went eastward.

He didn’t know how far away it was but he could have run forever, he thought, with his prey fixed in his mind and instincts. The sight of walls stopped him as nothing else could have.

The villagers had spoken truly. The sorcerer was building a city. He couldn’t tell how many people or buildings might be within, but the walls were tall and made of stone and impossibly smooth. Raised by sorcery, of course.

Ryuan approached cautiously. There would be a way in somewhere. He caught hints of the presence of men and went that way. He reached the gate, but it made him halt as much as the walls had.

A short line of people waited before the gate, and two guards with swords. One of the sentries was arguing with a man holding a mule’s halter, while the other seemed to be talking to each person who sought

entrance. Ryuan stayed low and crept closer to listen, forcing himself to concentrate so that he could make out human speech. “And what’s your talent?” the guard was asking.

It seemed only sorcerers could enter the city.

Ryuan backed away and began circling the walls in frustration. He didn’t want to attack two armed men who might be innocent of anything more than gullibility. He had changed too soon. He would have to go back and fetch his clothes, then arrive as a man and somehow trick his way in. And he had never been good at dissembling. Perhaps there would be a postern somewhere.

He found, instead, another man.

He was gray-haired but still strong-bodied, testing the wall as though for any cracks or protrusions. Ryuan cared little about the man and focused instead on his clothes—plain garb and a voluminous hooded cloak. He would take the man’s garments, he decided. It wouldn’t harm him.

He was gathering himself to spring forward when the man turned around. Ryuan lurched and then stayed back.

The man nodded companionably to Ryuan and held out a hand. Ryuan’s senses pricked. He knew that scent. It was not that of a man.

Wolf-born.

“Cousin,” the other said.

Ryuan had never met another one of his kind. The other seemed so familiar, even though they had never met before.

“I am Nerav. You know what I am.”

Ryuan did not want to be human—and vulnerable—before this one. He was stronger and swifter and had sharper senses as a wolf. Perhaps it was discourteous not to exchange introductions, but he didn’t understand the situation and preferred to keep the advantage. It would take the other a moment to shift, and for another second he would still be tangled in his clothing, and in that second Ryuan could be upon him.

“You will not greet your own cousin?” Nerav sighed. “You were raised by humans, I remember.”

There was a host of questions Ryuan wanted to ask him, but more important was the mission Kaen had given him. He did not know how the other wolf-born would affect it.

“If you’re going to stay in wolf-shape...” Nerav regarded him thoughtfully. “I think that, together, we may be able to breach this wall. You too want to reach the sorcerer inside?”

That much had to be obvious. Ryuan pawed the earth once. *Yes.*

“An alliance, then, so that we can achieve this.”

Ryuan watched him warily, not responding.

Nerav sat, folding his legs, hands upon his knees in a display of harmlessness. “I’ve waited many years for a single sorcerer. I will be patient with you, cousin, though you mistrust me.”

Ryuan whined and tried to convey his question. *Why?*

“You must know how the wolf-born feel toward sorcerers. They made us to be their perfect soldiers, then forced us to fight their wars. They created us so we could die in their power games. After the Law of Century...” He smiled, not pleasantly. “It was they who died. Those of us who are left seek them out, and take our revenge.”

Ryuan, listening to the undercurrents in the other’s voice, did not doubt his hatred. He could trust that, he decided. They had a common enemy.

He came forward and touched his nose to Nerav’s hand.

Nerav released a long breath. “It is good, cousin. You will need to stay in this shape. But you will have to take that off.” He reached forward and lightly took hold of the chain with the signet Kaen had given him.

It did make him recognizable, but he was loathe to remove it. It was part of his identity—it was how people knew him. But he let the other wolf-born lift it over his head.

“I will wear it for safekeeping, and return it to you as soon as it is safe to do so,” Nerav said, although something in his expression told Ryuan that he scorned the way he valued a mere material object. He tucked it under his shirt so that it wasn’t visible, then stood and began walking back the way Ryuan had come.

Ryuan set aside his misgivings and followed.

They made their way to the gate. The line was gone, but the man with the mule was still trading cross words with one guard. The other looked up at their approach.

“Do you have one of the old gifts?” he asked.

Nerav smiled. “I have some power over animals,” he said.

The guard seemed interested. “Show me.”

“He’s not enough?” Nerav let a hand rest atop Ryuan’s head. Ryuan did his best to look docile. Not snapping off Nerav’s hand at the wrist seemed sufficient.

“Could be a dog,” the guard decided.

Ryuan carefully did not growl, although that would probably cure the misimpression. Nerav was unfazed. He nodded toward the mule. “I’ll make it run off,” he said. As he walked closer to it, Ryuan noted that he was upwind of the beast.

The mule’s nostrils flared, and then it wheeled and fled, braying. Its owner cursed, making a late grab for the lead rope, but the guard laughed appreciatively. “All right. Go in and see Lord Tamel.”

“My thanks.” Nerav started in.

“But the dog will have to remain here,” the guard said.

Nerav stopped, despite Ryuan’s inclination to simply continue moving. “He needs to stay with me.”

“You can control it, right? Just tell it to stay around here and not make any trouble. Orders are for no animals to be allowed in until they get checked out.”

Ryuan could feel Nerav's hesitation. Protests would cast doubt upon his lie. Nerav gave him a pat, outwardly a command, but in truth an apology. "Stay here," he said, then in the merest murmur, "Keep your senses sharp for other sorcerers."

There was one in particular Ryuan hunted. For this other wolf-born to come and cut him off from his prey was infuriating. But Kaen would want to know more about this city, and it was true that other sorcerers could pose as much of a threat.

Reluctantly, Ryuan dropped to his haunches.

"It will be strange to hunt in a city," Nerav said. "I would have welcomed a pack-mate." Then he rose and began walking in the direction that the guard gestured him toward.

At first the guard kept a wary eye on him and Ryuan felt obligated to sit meekly. But too many newcomers were intimidated by even his presence despite the guard's easy explanations that he was an ensorcelled dog, and eventually the guard came over to him and said, "Move over there," making helpless shooing motions.

Ryuan obligingly went to the shaded area indicated, a little further inside the gate and not in direct eyesight of anyone entering.

The guard looked pleased with himself. "You're not so obvious here," he said. "Just don't wander off." He scratched Ryuan behind the ears.

Ryuan suffered this treatment silently. When the guard returned to his post, he had every intention of wandering off.

But as he rose, a short-haired woman passed him. He paused, because upon reflection, he hadn't seen anyone leaving the city. She was the first one heading toward the gates from inside.

She addressed the guard. "Any interesting newcomers?"

The woman's voice held an authority that arrested Ryuan. He sat and cocked an ear their way.

The guard shrugged. "A fire-starter, and a girl who can shape stone with her hands."

"That should be useful while we build our city," the woman said. "You told her to talk to Tamel?"

"Yes. Oh, and a man who controls animals. He made a mule run off." He chuckled at the memory.

The woman didn't share his amusement. "Who would use his power over beasts to send one away, instead of bringing it to him tame? Especially a mule." Her voice turned wry.

Despite his dismay over her astuteness, Ryuan grinned to himself. She was right—overcoming a mule's stubbornness would have been truly impressive.

"He did that too," the guard protested. "He had a wolf by his side." No mention of a dog now.

The woman's puzzlement turned to alarm. "A wolf? You fool!"

Ryuan began to casually lope away, keeping to the shadows of the buildings.

"It's been calm for hours," the guard said. "It's right over there—it's running off—"

The woman shouted, "Wolf-born!"

It was against his instincts to run, but the man in him overrode the wild-mind. There were too many people in too enclosed a space. So he fled, predator turned prey, hoping there was some other way out of the city or at least a place to hide, though he snarled at the thought of cowering.

No man had ever hunted him before. Even if one were so mad as to try to take on a wolf, none had dared the prince's wrath with his signet so visible. But it was gone now, and he was not so sure it would avail him with these folk, who followed a sorcerer.

He dashed around a corner and heard the shouts fade. But there was one set of footsteps still following. He knew without looking that it was the woman who had identified him.

The earth before him suddenly cracked apart. Ryuan tried to leap aside, but the ground beneath his paws crumbled. He changed, reaching for solid ground with his hands, but his fingers found no purchase and he fell into darkness.

Chapter Five

Calanthe still remembered her first sight of him. It was seared under her eyelids, and she saw it whenever she did not guard against it, in unwary dreams. Sometimes it also came to her waking, whenever she drew water from a well, the coarseness of the rope in her hands forever linked with the image of him, four seasons ago.

She had known he would come and prepared herself for it, but she hadn't known that he would look like this, dark and sinewy, his body hard with muscle and sheened with sweat and utterly bared to her gaze. His face was grim-set, the heavy brows slanted over eyes that were gold and hard as amber, and they trapped her just as surely.

She wanted to make those eyes light in laughter.

Everyone spoke of the prince's hunter as though describing the deepest of dreads. She had her own reason for fearing him, but not for her own sake. She was supposed to misdirect him from Tamel's trail. Looking at this road-weary man, with wolf's prints behind him and a mouth that must seldom smile, she thought he needed a great deal more distraction.

Calmly, she'd offered him water. He cupped his hands, large and not as roughened as she thought they should be with the many miles that must have passed under them as wolves' paws. She was curious how they would feel upon her. As he drank, she studied the lines of his face, spare and harsh but still compelling in some feral way. It was better, she thought wryly, than letting her gaze wander down his body as she wanted.

He thanked her with all the courtesy he might offer one of the ladies in the capital. The courtesy undid her, when she had expected something brusque. So she tested words, casual ones she would offer any traveler. "You've been on a long road."

There was an immediate change in him—something coiling inside, ready to spring. "You know who I am?"

How couldn't she, with that signet proclaiming his identity? "The prince's hunter," she said. "Lord Ryuan. No other man would be fool enough to wear that." She couldn't help adding, "And nothing else."

He didn't take her to task for her pertness. Instead, he asked her name.

"Calanthe."

Past and present blurred for a moment; then she realized that Tamel was summoning her. "Yes," she said, although she lingered a moment longer at the well. She wished it were Ryu calling for her.

“Calanthe!” Tamel said again, more sharply this time. “There’s someone you should meet.”

She turned to see Tamel and a man standing next to him in the courtyard. She was tired of these introductions and she didn’t bother to smile. He was always trying to have her interact more with the people who came here, insisting she meet them as they arrived. But she was no sorceress. She was here in this city on Tamel’s sufferance. There wasn’t any point in trying to fit in.

“Calanthe, this is Nerav,” Tamel said. “He has one of the old gifts, with animals.”

“Delighted, I’m sure,” she said, and started to turn away.

Tamel seized her elbow. “A moment,” he said to the newcomer, flicking his fingers so that a wind leapt up to blow away their words before they could be overheard.

He used sorcery so casually now. They could have simply stepped farther away.

He searched her face. “Calanthe, are you well?”

“Never more hale,” she assured him.

“No, I mean...” He ran his hand through his hair. She had always been able to tell when he felt particularly troubled because his hair would be disarrayed. Once, she would have smoothed it back for him. “You spend too much time at simple tasks, like fetching water from the well.”

That was the only one she lingered at, actually.

“You hardly speak to anyone but me,” he went on. “This city will be our home, Calanthe.”

“I know what this city means to you,” she said. She didn’t know how long he had repressed his use of sorcery from fear of the Law of Century, but ever since he had used it that once, one year ago, and faced no repercussions, he had become determined to establish a place where no one had to experience the fear he had.

“I want it to mean something to you, too, even though you have no gift. You need to meet the others who will be living here with us. I don’t want you to be lonely.”

“That’s why you insist on introducing every young man who comes?” she asked, but she was smiling. “Tamel, you needn’t worry. I just don’t need anyone right now. Besides, I like Iril.”

Tamel never believed her. Calanthe had surprised herself by coming to enjoy the company of his current lover. But of course she wasn’t jealous, not when her dreams yearned for Ryuan. In foolish, wistful dreams she had called him *my heart*, and he had smiled and said *beloved*.

She couldn’t tell Tamel, though. How to let her former lover know that she loved the man who had hunted him? She couldn’t tell him how her nights had become empty without Ryuan to shape them around.

But the knowledge had burrowed into the deepest recesses of her being, where she didn’t have to face it. And Tamel’s concern touched her enough for her to yield this once. “I’ll show this Nerav about the city.”

He smiled and kissed her cheek. “My thanks.” Not for taking on the task, but for humoring him. He made a twisting motion with his hand and the wind died.

As he left, she turned to Nerav and actually looked at him for the first time. He seemed strangely familiar, for all that she was sure she had never met him before. Something in his stance... The task she had resigned herself to doing became slightly more interesting.

“Where are you from?” she asked.

He didn’t seem to mind all the consultation that had been necessary before she acquiesced to serving as his guide. “My people are wanderers. They live off the land instead of in settlements.”

“But you chose to come to a city?”

He smiled. “This is where the sorcerers are.”

A pat answer. Perhaps he would open up more later. “Come, I’ll show you your way so you won’t get too lost,” she said. She led Nerav into the dusty street. “This will be paved one day. There aren’t enough folk who work with stone, and Tamel says it’s more important to have more buildings. Most of them are empty, though. Word is only trickling out.”

“What is your talent?”

She shook her head. “I don’t have one.”

“You’re not a sorceress?”

“No. Tamel tried to find any hint of talent in me, but there’s none. I didn’t even know he was a sorcerer when I first met him.”

Nerav digested this. “What are you to him, then?”

“Former lover,” she said lightly. “I helped him once, a year ago, and he’s still grateful.”

“Most people without sorcery despise those who have it,” he said, looking at her curiously.

And most people feared the wolf-born. She had never been one to follow others’ judgments. “People don’t choose what they’re born with,” she said. “It’s the choices they make that matter. Do you know how I discovered Tamel was a sorcerer? He killed a man by fire. But the man he killed was a bandit who was threatening us. How can I blame him for that?”

“And you agree with Tamel’s choice to build this city?”

“I think he’s mad,” she said frankly. “But it’s true that Prince Kaen has done nothing about it. And there are those with harmless talents who need a haven from those who, as you say, despise them.”

It had taken Tamel a few seasons to decide to build the city. At first she had been glad when he spoke of settling in one place. She was tired of running. He was always sensing danger—someone was stalking them, he claimed, even after the prince’s hunter had returned to the capital. She had secretly hoped that somehow Ryu was tracking them, following her. But he had never come.

“I don’t understand why you stay here with him,” Nerav said.

She shrugged, unwilling to explain. Her relationship with Tamel had turned strange. She had loved him before she had found out he was a sorcerer, and had sworn to herself that the discovery would change

nothing. He had saved their lives with that sorcery. But then the prince's hunter had come, and Tamel had asked her to do what she must to distract him. He must have known what he was asking.

Tamel had tried to make love to her after she rejoined him, but she couldn't go through with it. He thought it was because he had asked her to seduce another man. She didn't have the heart to tell him that it was because she had come to feel something for that man. She had been relieved when he found Iril.

She stayed with him even then because there was nowhere else to go. She had loved a sorcerer and one of the wolf-born, and at least the sorcerer felt some obligation toward her. She rather thought she knew how Ryu felt toward her after she left him.

She started when Nerav spoke again. He had been watching her brood. "You're troubled by your decision," he said.

"Troubled by questions," she said with just enough seriousness to warn him away from the topic.

He frowned but changed the subject. "Tell me more about who's come," he said. "Are there others as powerful as Tamel?"

"No." The direction of his questioning troubled her, but Tamel had urged her to be open with all who came to the city, to make them feel welcome. They only gained entrance, after all, upon demonstrating some sorcery. "Only those with a single talent, so far, though some of those are quite strong. One woman, Iril, commands the elements of earth and stone, and she built much of this city."

The ground shuddered. Calanthe caught herself on her hands instead of taking a harder fall.

Nerav had kept his balance easily. "Was that her?"

"It must have been, but we shouldn't have been able to feel it from here..." Shouts were arising from the gate. Calanthe began to run.

The ground had cracked open. People shouted questions and helped each other to their feet. One person was still in the midst of it all—Iril was slumped on the ground as though her legs had simply given out from under her, head bent and shoulders heaving. Calanthe couldn't imagine what the effort had cost her.

She knelt by Iril. "What's happened?"

Iril looked up and took a moment to focus on Calanthe. "We caught one of the wolf-born," she said tensely.

The world might have trembled again, so unbalanced did she feel. "Not the prince's hunter?"

"He bore no signet." Iril shot a dark look at one of the guards, who stood by with a sheepish expression. "At least, I think even he would have noticed it."

Calanthe stilled her wild hopes and told her racing heart to calm. "Are you all right?"

Iril grimaced. "Just drained. I think the city will have to wait a little longer to get built." She held out her hand. They clasped each other's forearms, and then Calanthe braced and pulled Iril up.

“It certainly will if you keep tearing the ground apart from under it,” Calanthe said, looking at the chasm.

Iril shook her head, even though a small laugh escaped her. “Oh, you.”

“Iril!” Tamel skidded to a halt next to them, wrapped his arms around Iril, and pulled her close. “Are you all right?”

With him, Iril let her head come to rest on his shoulder. She murmured something to Tamel.

Calanthe stepped closer to the fissure and looked down, but she could barely make out the shape of a man, dirt loosely fallen over him. Unclothed, of course, as the wolf-born were after they shifted, but she couldn’t tell anything else about him, face-down as he was. He had been knocked unconscious by the fall, she surmised.

Tamel disengaged himself from Iril to stand beside Calanthe and stare down at the wolf-born. “Someone bring me silver,” he said, raising his voice.

There was a hesitation, and then the guard dropped a few coins at Tamel’s feet.

A woman offered a ring. Others drifted away, only to return with whatever odd pieces they could offer: a mirror, a brooch, a belt buckle. Finally Tamel bent down and gathered as much as he could.

The silver began to run molten. Holding it in his cupped hands, he nodded sharply, and the ground in front of him re-formed into a sloping ramp.

“Iril.”

She came when he called, and followed him as he walked down into the chasm. She seemed to know what he wanted, rolling the wolf-born onto his side and bringing his arms in front of him.

Tamel swiftly took hold of the wolf-born’s wrists. When he stepped back, his hands were empty, and Calanthe saw that the silver had been cast into crude shackles.

She had seen him do sorcery before. She had witnessed him kill with it. But his life, and her own, had been threatened then. The wolf-born was already helpless, and her stomach felt unsettled as she watched Tamel and Iril come back up, leaving him lying there.

“He won’t be able to shift now,” Tamel said wearily. “Someone get some chains to hold him—plain iron will do, he’s weaker as a human. Put him in one of the cellars and guard him.”

“Not you,” Iril said to the guard she had spoken of earlier. “You let him in the city in the first place. We’ll trap him in with sorcery.”

The guard found pressing matters elsewhere. The way Tamel was watching him, he was fortunate Iril was weak enough to need the support of his arm around her waist.

Calanthe had forgotten about Nerav. She had thought he would follow her to investigate the source of the commotion, but a quick scan showed that he wasn’t in the crowd. She backtracked to the courtyard, but he was nowhere to be found.

Chapter Six

Ryuan woke to find his wrists bound in silver. It was foolish, but he immediately tried to shift, and failed. There was a flare of pain that eased away once he resigned himself to his man-shape.

He could tell little about where he was being held except that it was dark and he was lying on hard-packed dirt. There was a rich smell to it, like earth just turned. Had they dug out a cell just for him?

Then he remembered the earth opening beneath him. It was sorcery, of course.

He rose to the rattle of metal. They had looped a chain around his manacles and then affixed it to the wall, with just enough length to allow him to stand facing the corner.

Testing the strength of the chains only chafed his wrists. The men who had put them on him were surely more feeble than he was, but he hadn't even had the chance to fight them. He understood now the mistrust people held for sorcery, for power that could overwhelm without recourse. And it hadn't even been used on him, only the ground beneath his feet.

Regrets crowded the small, dark space he was in. He shouldn't have shifted into man-shape at that last moment. He shouldn't have trusted Nerav. He shouldn't have left the village with such haste. He shouldn't have plucked that flower in his mother's garden...

He shouldn't have loved Calanthe.

A light intruded. Ryuan looked over his shoulder, narrowing his eyes against the glare. There were two silhouettes, a man and a woman. The latter, he thought, was the one who had identified him. The other...

"I am Tamel," he said. The light was balanced on his fingertips with no visible source.

"Sorcerer," Ryuan snarled.

"Like all who live in this city. And like your master."

Kaen had never used his gift beyond sensing the winds he could not help but know the paths of. "Sorcerer-murderer then."

Tamel flinched. Then he said, "You're one to speak."

The woman added quietly, "Three men were killed today by one of the wolf-born."

"I had nothing to do with it," Ryuan said, letting the chains clank in sharp reminder of exactly where he had been and what he had been capable of doing, all this time.

"It was at your master's command, I know," Tamel said, impatient. "How many of you did he bring?"

“I hunt alone,” he said flatly. Then he thought of Nerav, but the wolf-born had already abandoned him once, apparently to slay the denizens of this city. And they were no power-hungry sorcerers—he had heard their stories at the gate, and the people here had done nothing but seek a place where children would not taunt them and rocks would not be thrown at them. He had to get free and stop the killings. Once Tamel was gone, he was sure, the others would disperse, and Nerav would not have such a dense cluster of targets.

Tamel released a long breath. “You’ll tell the truth, one way or another. Iril, you have the key?”

The woman’s hands went to a leather thong around her neck. Tied onto it was an iron key. “Yes, but—”

“I won’t free him. Give it to me.”

She did, and he unknotted the key and passed it back to her. She looked as uncertain as Ryuan felt.

Tamel began stroking the leather cord between thumb and forefinger. “My arts won’t work on you,” he said to Ryuan. “Your kind was made to be resistant to sorcery, as you must know. It made you a potent threat. But there are more mundane ways to deal with you.”

The leather strip was longer and thinner now, reshaped by Tamel’s sorcery. Ryuan did not fail to notice its resemblance to a whip.

“Since I did not create you,” Tamel said, “I cannot command you. But there are other ways. We’ll begin with the small miseries. Now, who sent you?”

Ryuan saw no reason to lie. “The prince.”

The whip cracked down. “*Who sent you?*”

A line of fire opened on his back. Ryuan twisted and threw himself against the chains, wanting to snap the sorcerer’s face off. His muscles bunched, striving toward a shift that would not come, and his wrists burned.

“He entered the city with a man,” Iril said. She did not look at Ryuan, but her interjection almost seemed timed to have spared him another blow. “That must have been the sorcerer.”

“Find him.”

“I will,” she said, “and you will take appropriate measures against him instead of his wolf-born.”

Tamel turned to her, clearly caught off-guard. “They were created as warriors, Iril. They can bear far worse than this.”

“He’s being loyal to his master. And he hasn’t actually caused any harm.”

Tamel snorted. “Why else did he trick his way in here? Let him tell me why his master came into my city.”

“*Our* city.” Her voice was low. “Or because we are weaker than you, perhaps we don’t matter? Is that why you worry about this sorcerer? Do you fear someone who might match your power?”

Tamel threw the whip down and pivoted. “I’ll find him and deal with him myself.” He tossed the light over his shoulder.

Iril barely caught it. “Tamel—” She started after him, then recalled Ryuan and spun on him. “If you tell me of your master, I might be able to find him before Tamel does something reckless to either of you.”

He had no weapons but words. “You’re too kind to a chained man,” he said mockingly, knowing it would be worse for her than open anger.

She flushed. “You sound just like—” She stopped. “Your wounds will be seen to. Can you blame Tamel for his anger, though? People have died.”

“He killed a man.”

“A bandit who tried to kill him!”

“Prince Kaen would have offered him exile. But he fled, coward that he was.”

She began pacing, even in this tight space. “He told me about this. He fled any other sorcerers who might hear of how he broke the Law of Century. When none came, he realized that he must be the last one left who knew the full extent of his powers. So he decided to build this city, where those who have a trace of the gift can learn to use it without endangering others.”

“His motives are so pure, you think?”

She stopped. “You can’t build a wall between us.”

“I wasn’t the one questioning him.”

“Enough of this. Tell me why you’re here.”

“To find Tamel,” he said wearily. “Instead I sat by a gate all day, listening to that fool guard call me a dog, before getting caught by you.”

It was clear she knew whom he spoke of. “He’s good with a sword, though,” she said, then shook her head. “Or he was.”

“He was one of the ones killed?”

“Yes.”

Ryuan leaned against the wall. Despite Iril’s assertion, he had never met anyone more harmless. The guard hadn’t been bright, but he hadn’t deserved death.

“Tell me what you know,” she said, “so that I can stop this.”

He thought of telling her about Nerav, but he could not betray his own kind. The wolf-born had left him to this, but unknowingly. If Ryuan had been enslaved by a sorcerer such as Tamel, he would feel the same rage against all such men. And Nerav was the only one who could answer questions about what he was.

Iril waited until it was clear he would say nothing. “Then you must share the blame for these deaths,” she said. “Or perhaps that doesn’t trouble you.” She turned and left.

She was not completely callous. She left the light, so that he could contemplate his dismal cell in its pale glow.

Chapter Seven

Calanthe knelt by the woman's body. It was the fifth that had been found, marked the same way as the others, with the throat torn out in a crushing bite and claw marks raking the body. The wall was scarred by fire, as though the woman had tried to defend herself with sorcerous flame, and missed—except that there was a gap in the scorch-marks, where the firebolt would have hit the assailant instead.

She hadn't known this woman, who had fought to the last. She wished, briefly, that she had taken the time to change that, as Tamel had urged her.

The man who had discovered the body stood next to her, still staring at it in horror. She had heard his call for help, and come to discover this.

"Find Iril," she said to him. Iril, level-headed, handled much of the administration as well as the building of the city.

He tore his gaze away. "I will," he said, voice trembling, "but then I'm leaving."

She kept her voice calm, so as not to provoke him. "Because you think you'll be next?"

"Because I don't know that I won't be. I can't do much, but this sorcerer might not know that."

"You're sure it's a rival sorcerer."

He hesitated. "It can't be the prince's hunter. He wouldn't ambush us like this, would he? His executions are done openly."

She thought of Ryuan hiding in shadows, silently killing off these people one by one—*No*. "It can't be," she echoed.

"Should I go to the prince? Ask him for his judgment against this sorcerer?"

She hesitated. Ryuan had spoken warmly of his foster-brother, but she still did not know what to think of a man who sentenced another to death for killing an outlaw. Would the prince bother to send his hunter here? What could he do?

What would she do, if she saw Ryuan again?

She was silent too long. "Maybe I'll leave now," the man said, inching toward the door. His face shone with sweat.

She hadn't wanted to leave the body, but it wasn't as though any more harm could be done. "Go, then. I'll tell Iril about this."

Calanthe found her in the empty building whose cellar held the wolf-born. Iril was picking up habits from her lover; she pushed her hands through her hair when she heard Calanthe's news. "Another? The whole city's going to have to be locked down to keep people safe. Curse those wretched guards!"

"They're supposed to keep people out, not in," Calanthe said.

"People are leaving?"

"The man who found this body didn't seem to think he was safe here."

"There are safeguards we can take, even if the wolf-born are resistant to sorcery."

"Not everyone sleeps in the same bed as a sorcerer who can set wards at night," Calanthe pointed out.

Iril gave her a quick glance, then conceded the point with a nod. "I just wish we could talk to this sorcerer and try to reason with him."

"Did you try the captive wolf-born?"

"Yes, but he spoke as though he were the prince's hunter."

Calanthe stared at her. "You told me it wasn't him."

"I don't think so. The prince's hunter never removes his signet, right? But there were some things he said..."

"Iril," she said, "I must see him."

"Tamel wouldn't want that."

Calanthe had always thought that Iril supported Tamel because she truly believed in what he worked toward, not because she blindly followed her lover. "If you don't want me to see him, fine. But don't hide behind Tamel. You know I haven't let him rule me, but I see you're different."

Iril hissed in impatience. "Go see him, then!" She gestured and the floor folded downward into a staircase. Grudgingly: "Actually, you might want to feed him and see to his wounds."

"He was wounded in the fall?"

"No." Iril looked away. "Tamel whipped him."

Calanthe couldn't understand why he would do such a thing. "What did the wolf-born do?"

"He wouldn't answer Tamel's questions."

Calanthe had witnessed flashes of temper on Tamel's part, but using a whip on a chained man?

"Give me the key to his chains."

"Calanthe!"

"He'll still have the silver manacles on."

"He could hurt you even as a man with his hands bound."

"He hasn't hurt or killed anyone yet, although I can understand it if he wants to now. Give me something to bargain with, since clearly beating the information out of him won't work."

Iril thrust the key at her. "If he gets free and joins the rampage of kills, you'll be to blame."

“That’s the strange thing,” Calanthe said, puzzled. “The wolf-born don’t massacre indiscriminately like this. They focus on their prey, a single target, and won’t be swayed from it.” She remembered watching Ryuan hunt, always bringing down the same beast he promised for their supper.

“Even if that’s true, how will it help us if this one focuses on you?” Iril shook her head.

Calanthe couldn’t explain the source of her knowledge, so she stalked off in search of bandages, food and water. Tamel couldn’t complain how long she spent at the well if he inflicted wounds she needed to wash. The deaths must feel like a personal affront to him, after he had established the city as a sanctuary for sorcerers. But to whip a man as though he were an animal— That was what he thought, she realized. The wolf-born were not people to him. A cloak too, then, if this one had been locked up naked.

She made her way into the cellar and was relieved to find that it was lit, at least. The wolf-born sat facing the corner, so that she could clearly see the long welt on his back. She wanted to tend it right then, but she knew better than to startle him. She deliberately scuffed her foot on the floor as she walked toward him to alert him to her presence.

His head swiveled toward her. His features were drawn into a feral mask, and there was something so terrible in the way he looked at her, utterly rapt, as though she were not a person but some strange thing to investigate by peeling away the layers of her skin and muscle, that she almost fled what must be the wrong cell. But she recognized him.

“Ryu!” The name was startled out of her, a single, sharp word, and it cut into him. He blinked, and for a moment she saw something vulnerable pass over his face. Then his expression hardened. It was human this time, but even more frightening for it.

“Calanthe,” he said, and there was a gleam in his eyes, that of a long patience rewarded. He nodded toward the key she held.

She hadn’t dared believed it would be him. Words flooded her throat and drowned her voice. She knelt beside him and unlocked his chains, and immediately knew it was a mistake.

Chapter Eight

Ryuan snapped his arms up, shedding the chains, and stood. Calanthe stepped back, but he took that same step toward her, holding her gaze. If she ran, he would follow, and bring her down, and take her again and again until he was indelibly marked on her flesh, so that she could never leave him.

He was almost disappointed when she did not turn to flee. Her eyes were still wide with surprise, and she seemed too shocked to even try to run.

“You didn’t expect to find me here,” he said, working out her reaction.

“No.”

“So you didn’t come to free me.”

“I came to tend your wound, and bring you food and water.”

“Water. A familiar offer. And if I hunger for something else? Are you supposed to offer me that too?”

She did not deny that her seduction had been planned. Something in him wanted the semblance of innocence to cling to, but even that was gone now. Instead she said carefully, “I was waiting there so I could distract you—”

“So that I would fuck you.”

She flinched. “Not for the whole summer. I stayed that long because I wanted to.”

“Ah, so I was worth a summer’s dalliance. And then you wanted to rejoin Tamel.”

Her mouth firmed. “I regret what I did, but I had my reasons.”

She regrets it. Anger simmered in him. “You had reason to defend a murderer?”

“He killed an outlaw who attacked him first!”

“Since then he has raised a city where sorcerers can run amok and return us to the chaos there was before the Law of Century. Exile was too good for him.”

She faltered. “You were going to exile him?” Her hand came up and found the wall for support.

Her reaction checked Ryuan’s rage. “I was,” he said. “Since he had used sorcery in defense of his life. Prince Kaen is a fair man. But now, since he has used it for other purposes, I am commanded to execute him.”

He saw something in her face that went deeper than dismay. “I thought you were going to kill him,” she whispered. “And I couldn’t bear the thought of his execution.”

His guts twisted. “So Tamel is your lover.”

“He was. Before you. Never after.”

“Never?” Could any man truly have resisted that body, that laugh?

“With anyone.”

He could not stop himself. He did not want to. “So it’s been three long seasons since anyone has touched you like this?” He brought his hands to her face, then kissed her.

Incredibly, her mouth was as sweet as he remembered. He had thought such a taste must have been dreamed. She did not respond at first, but it was the motionlessness of a bow pulled too taut to bend further—he could feel her trembling. Then she leaned into him.

He remembered, he remembered. He remembered her lean body and the rich tones of her skin, darker now from hours in sun. He remembered molding those slender curves with his palms, and the memory of her long legs spread for him was emblazoned in his mind. He remembered the way his name sounded in her husky voice when he touched her here, or when he set his mouth on her there. And it was all too easy to fall back into the patterns he had dreamed of for the last three seasons and make love to her lingeringly.

He tried to set his hands at her waist, but the manacles stopped him. He growled and pulled away, remembering himself.

Her face was still upturned from the kiss. Slowly her eyes opened, but they were unfocused. Her hands, on his shoulders now, tried to pull him back to her. “It’s been too long...”

He would not be drawn into this again, not this tender exchange of caresses and teasing kisses. Ryuan kissed her again, but this time raked his teeth over her lower lip. She gasped, and he used his body to herd her against the wall. His hands were trapped low between them, and he twisted them to seek that one place. She made a sound low in her throat when he found it, and he dug his knuckle in against her, trying to ignore how it made his wrist rub against his own shaft.

“Touch me,” he said.

Her fingers scratched down his arms, then reached the manacles. She stilled.

Then she set her palms on his chest instead. The eyes she lifted to his were liquid, full of unshed tears. “I don’t want you to think I was sent here to do this.”

He whipped away from her and went to the opposite wall, pressing his forehead against it as his breath rasped in his throat. Despite what he had told himself, that he would take her no matter what, he could not face her like this, with honest loss on her face.

She thought that, with her betrayal, she had lost him.

And he knew she never had.

When she spoke, her voice held a defeated note he had never heard before. “I was going to tend your back—” She found the cloth she’d brought with her and came to him to wash the lash-mark. Her hands were gentle. He could not help but think of them drifting elsewhere.

“Calanthe...” He turned around. She immediately looked down. “Did you love me?”

Her hands tightened. “Would you believe me?”

He wanted to. That wasn't enough. "Why did you leave?"

She laced her fingers together and studied them. "I thought I was with child."

His breath stopped. "We have a child?"

At last, she met his eyes. "I lost it. In my haste I traveled too hard. But if it had lived... I did not want it to live under a lie. And I couldn't bear to tell you the truth. You would look at me the way you're looking at me now..."

"You were going to raise it with Tamel?"

"I just left, Ryu. I didn't know where I was going. Then I miscarried, and I went where I thought I would be safe without having to deceive anyone. I didn't realize that my feelings for Tamel were gone until I saw him again. I hoped, sometimes, that you would come after me."

He hadn't even tried to follow. "I thought you didn't want me."

"I thought you wouldn't, once you knew what I'd done."

"If you had known I wasn't planning to execute Tamel—"

"I wouldn't have been waiting at that well," she said. "I would not change that."

His anger was slow to fade, but then he reached out, unable to help himself, and traced a line down her stomach. He couldn't imagine the curves of her body being different from how they were now. "You were pregnant with our child."

"We lay together often enough," she said dryly.

For the first time, she sounded like herself. He shook off his contemplation of fatherhood and smiled.

She raised a hand and traced his lips. "The first time I saw you, I wanted to make you smile. You were too serious."

He thought of her standing by the well, drawing him out of wolf-shape. "You were a sight to make anyone smile."

"It took some teasing first, I recall."

"And more..." He let his hands caress her neck, then move downward.

Her face turned anxious at the sight of his shackled wrists. "It'll take a smith or someone with a metalworking gift to get those off."

He kissed her furrowed brow. "If I hadn't been captured," he said, "I might not have met you now. And I would not change that. We'll not let these get in the way." When her expression remained worried, he said impatiently, "I need you now."

She began to smile herself. "I remember someone taking his time once." She shrugged one shoulder out of her dress. The skew of her neckline only just covered one nipple. He could see it peaking the fabric.

Ryuan lifted her breast free, then bent to lick a spiral around the nipple. Because his hands could not wander elsewhere, he lavished attention on each breast in turn. He yanked out her laces with his teeth and her dress slithered to the ground in a soft pile of forgotten fabric.

He had to step back to control his excitement at the sight of her nakedness. Something about the light lit her curves and shadowed others in a way that almost made her body unfamiliar, but at the same time he could have closed his eyes and molded her exact shape in clay.

He nodded toward the ground. "Lie down."

Calanthe looked at him speculatively, and he knew she was coming up with ideas about how helpless he might be while shackled.

He circled her, brushed her hair aside, and kissed the nape of her neck. Then he folded his knee into the back of hers, sending her weight back onto him with a startled cry. He laughed as he lowered her gently, careful not to scrape the silver against her skin. "Thought you had the upper hand?"

"Since yours were bound..." She smiled up at him.

He eased her legs apart and knelt between them. "I can still use my hands." He rubbed his thumb directly over her clit and saw the muscles shift in her legs as she tensed. "And my mouth..." He kissed her hip.

His hand was growing increasingly slick, and he slid one finger into the passage her wetness came from. Then he added another finger.

Her body jerked in time to his pace. The smell of her cream grew into an overwhelming temptation. He wanted it on his tongue as well, so he sank down and brought his mouth to it.

His tongue flickered over her clit, then moved into her. Her taste was rich and heady. He lapped it into his mouth, savoring the helpless sounds she made, like birds' cries. And when she reached a crescendo, he did not stop until she pushed his head away, flushed and heavy-lidded.

He rolled onto his back and she crawled up his body until her mouth reached his and they could share a hungry kiss that tasted of her. Then she sank onto his cock.

He arched his hips upward, trying to fill her to the hilt. Despite her earlier release she was tight around him, and it took an agonizing eternity. He thought he would go mad from the pleasure. But once she had finally taken all of him, she began to move, and it was then that his restraint was truly challenged.

He wanted to pull her hips down over him, but the cursed manacles kept him from it. He half-raised himself, trying to better position himself, but she caught his arms and coaxed them over his head. "Let me..."

"Faster, then," he groaned.

She leaned down and braced her hands, then ground herself against him furiously. He felt himself going and brought his arms down with his hands behind her neck, drawing her in for a desperate melding of their mouths. When he came he wanted to throw his head back, but he forced his eyes to stay open and locked on hers. This moment was full of her, full to bursting.

Her gaze was smoky as she watched his face throughout his release. Her hips finally slowed, but she kept him inside her as she lay her body fully down over his and pressed her face into his neck.

“I missed you,” she said.

With those words, and her warmth enfolding him, he could easily have remained there forever. He settled his hands at the small of her back. But as soon as his eyelids drifted shut, she sat up, ducking her head so that his manacles could pass over and land with a thump on his chest.

“Calanthe?”

“We have to get you out of here,” she said, donning her dress again and gathering the things she had brought.

He came to his feet immediately, recalled to his purpose. “I can’t leave the city.”

“Can you bring yourself to at least leave this cellar?” She unfolded a cloak and settled it over his shoulders.

He wanted to catch her shoulder with one hand and turn her face toward him with the other. Because he couldn’t, he used his eyes instead, holding her gaze and willing her to come to him.

She sighed. “When you look at me like that...” She linked her arms behind his neck and kissed him.

“Calanthe,” he said, only a finger’s width apart from her, “I still have to find Tamel. I can’t ask you to help me when you don’t want him to die.”

“I can’t leave you here,” she said. “And there have been a series of killings. For all I know, you’re vulnerable too.”

He thought of Nerav grimly. “I will bring justice to the killer too.”

“Justice doesn’t always mean death,” she said quietly.

He took a breath. “If I kill Tamel...”

She pressed his hands to her heart. “Whatever happens, I won’t leave you again.”

With that reassurance he followed her out of his prison, and emerged before Tamel’s astonished stare.

Chapter Nine

“Calanthe—”

Ryuan and Tamel spoke at once, stopped at the same time. Ryuan twisted his wrists in the impossible hope that this time the manacles would break. He longed to take his wolf-shape.

Calanthe said to Tamel, “This is the prince’s hunter. Yes, I freed him.”

He must have seen something in her face, or even the muss of her hair. “The two of you...”

“Yes.”

“No wonder you wouldn’t have me afterward.” He laughed bitterly. “I’m glad you didn’t. In love with one of the wolf-born!”

“Your quarrel is with me, sorcerer,” Ryuan said.

“You did as you were commanded,” Tamel said dismissively. “You can do no more, no less. But you—” He reached out and touched Calanthe’s cheek. “You betrayed me.”

She turned her head away, causing his fingers to fall away. “My heart is mine to give.” But her face was pale.

He curled his rejected hand into a fist. Ryuan started forward, but instead of trying to hit Calanthe, the sorcerer flung his hand at Ryuan.

The world exploded, but Ryuan braced against it. The manacles burned his skin as they picked up the heat, but when his vision cleared from the burst of scarlet, he found himself standing otherwise unharmed on scorched ground.

Ryuan began closing the distance between them. “Even in the shape of a man I can kill you,” he said.

Tamel tried again, this time sweeping up both arms. A gale struck with hammer-force, cracking the walls and tearing the roof away.

Ryuan threw his body over Calanthe’s, trying to shield her from the wind-tossed debris. The wind filled his ears with an unrelenting howl. He gritted his teeth and bore it out, knowing that Tamel was in the eye of this wind-storm.

When the air finally stilled, it took Ryuan a long moment to move. He had clenched his muscles so tightly they protested even as he turned his head to look about him.

The sky was open above them. The building had been ripped from the earth, but they still remained.

“Whoever created you was powerful indeed,” Tamel said between long breaths. He looked older, face creased with strain.

There were scattered cries around them, and Ryuan saw people scrambling to their feet and fleeing. One woman ran toward them instead, the one called Iril. She caught sight of him and wheeled on Calanthe as she struggled to her feet. “Why did you let him go?”

“He is the prince’s hunter,” Calanthe said. “And I couldn’t bear the sight of him in chains.”

Iril’s eyes widened and she grabbed Tamel’s elbow. “You whipped the prince’s hunter?”

“You caught him,” he reminded her, jerking his arm back.

“You’re raising a wind-storm on him fit to blow away all the sands of the desert!”

Ryuan felt as though his back had been scoured by those sands. The lash-mark throbbed. He did not let these things stop him from standing and hurtling toward Tamel.

“No!” Iril stood in the way, and it was not her throat that Ryuan wanted to crush. He tried to fling her out of the way but she clung to him stubbornly. He finally tossed her aside, harder than he had wished to, but then he saw how Tamel had circled around and seized Calanthe.

“My sorcery may not work on you,” Tamel said, “but it will on her.”

Ryuan stilled, the wild-mind snapping away. He could not endanger Calanthe.

She smelled afraid, but when she looked at him he saw no surrender in her face.

“You would not kill a woman you once loved,” Ryuan said.

“When she loves me no longer?” He pressed his face into her hair, inhaling. “Go on, pretend you are my master. Tell me what I won’t do, wolf-born.”

Ryuan’s senses alerted him. “You won’t survive this,” he said.

A shadow moved. Silently, Nerav sprung upon Tamel. He had time for a single scream, echoed by Iril, before that scream was ripped out of his throat. His body folded to the ground.

Ryuan was still breathing hard, still focused on that mangled body, but it remained unmoved by even the barest breath. The sorcerer was dead. He could go back to Kaen with his mission completed at last—and yet it had been another who had fulfilled it. He felt cheated of his prey.

What mattered was that it was done, and Calanthe was safe. He calmed himself with an effort and started to go to her, then stopped. Iril knelt by Tamel’s body, weeping. But what caught his attention was the tear that fell from another’s eye—Calanthe’s.

The wolf stepped back, and then it was Nerav in man-shape who laughed. “You mourn him, when he threatened to kill you?”

Ryuan waited for her answer.

“We meant something to each other once,” she said softly. “I didn’t think he would be able to bring himself to harm me.”

“Do you truly believe sorcerers can care for others, when our lives are but brief sparks in the span of theirs?”

Iril looked up. “He loved me,” she said. But her face was drawn, and her voice hollow.

“He used you,” Nerav said. “A builder for his city, where he could rule over minor sorcerers with their petty powers. You were but the first among his subjects.” He took a step toward her. “Sorceress.”

“You’ll not have me or this city,” Iril said, and she flung out her arms.

The walls trembled.

“Move!” Ryuan pushed his shoulder into Calanthe’s back, startling her into motion. They ran, all of them save Iril, united in direction by this sudden new threat.

Slowly at first, the stones began to edge out of their places in the walls. Somewhere behind them a building crashed down, and they felt it as much as heard it. Then another building, and another, until it was a continuous rumbling and the ground they ran upon did not stop trembling.

Ryuan saw to his relief that the gate was still standing, but it began to tilt just as they came near. He threw his body across the threshold, only vaguely aware of Calanthe and Nerav doing the same. Then there came a waterfall of rock, tumbling down in a great roar. Ryuan couldn’t see through the thick curtain of dust raised, and he gasped and coughed even as his bruised body ached against any motion. He could still hear the grind of great stones settling, as though the city shared Iril’s death-throes.

“She killed herself,” Ryuan said, stunned.

“She lost what she lived for,” Calanthe said. Her eyes were shadowed with grief, and he gathered her close. But she moved restlessly out of the circle of his arms to approach the other wolf-born.

Nerav stared at the pile of rubble, clearly regretting that the kill was not his to claim. Ryuan knew how he felt.

“Nerav,” Calanthe said. “The one with a gift for animals. You were the one who murdered all those people?”

“They had the old gifts,” Nerav explained patiently. “They always abuse their power, as they did in the days when they created the wolf-born as slaves and heedlessly cast away their lives.”

“And so you kill the ones who weren’t even alive when the Law of Century was formed?”

“I wouldn’t have bothered normally,” Nerav said. “But gathering in a city, under the rule of a sorcerer? They would have turned dangerous. Now they’re scattered and afraid to use their sorcery. This is best. They won’t dare to flock together again.”

“So your task is done.”

He turned not to her, but to Ryuan. “There is a sorceress we must deal with now.”

“Calanthe has no power,” Ryuan said, bristling. “And Iril must be dead under that.”

“I didn’t mean her,” Nerav said. “I speak of the prince’s lady mother.”

His mother. “A sorceress?” he demanded.

“Did you think she found you as a cub and spirited you off to the capital?” The wolf-born laughed. “She created you.”

Ryuan shook his head. His mother, who had cared for his and Kaen's childhood hurts and dealt with their early squabbles with an even hand? She had treated him no differently than her own son. Not like a creation. And there had never been a breath of sorcery around her. "She can't be."

Nerav looked at him searchingly. "I would not lie to you, cousin."

Neither could Ryuan see any reason for Nerav to construct this accusation. "Whatever the truth is," he said, "I won't let you kill her."

"Your capital is too well-guarded. You must guide me inside."

"Did you not hear what I said?"

"Yes," Nerav said, and moved casually, almost lazily, to settle a hand on Calanthe's shoulder. "So. You value her life as well, no?"

Before Ryuan could reach him Nerav would be able to unsheathe his claws there, so close to her neck. Ryuan choked back the wild-mind rising within him. "You would kill an innocent?"

"You forget. I killed many, men and women and sorcerers all, during the wars. What is one more, if it means I can reach my prey?"

Ryuan tasted defeat. "Let her go. I'll take you to the capital."

Nerav released her but took up her hand. "A single drop," he said, then before Ryuan could say anything, he let his claws emerge and pricked her fingertip. Crimson welled forth, and he delicately licked it away.

Ryuan lunged forward, but Nerav kicked him just hard enough to swing him off-center. When Calanthe tried to slam her elbow into his throat, he moved smoothly to one side, then let her momentum carry her off-balance. He seized her wrist, twisted, and held her in an arm-lock from behind.

Ryuan froze. He could see how Calanthe's mouth was set against any expression of pain. She was angry, not frightened, but he felt fear, for he knew how easily Nerav could kill her.

"I let you try that," Nerav said calmly, "so that you can see how futile such attempts are. From here, I could shift to have fangs and tear out your throat, but even if you ran, I would find you. I know the taste of your blood, Calanthe."

Ryuan said hoarsely, "Do as he says, Calanthe."

She nodded slowly.

Nerav released her. "I'll stay as a wolf while we travel," he said, and Ryuan remembered how he had remained in that shape when they had first met, to hold the advantage.

"You'll have to take man-shape to enter the capital," Ryuan said.

Nerav held up a chain. His signet gleamed upon it. "I did promise you this back." He slipped it over his own head. "But I'll keep wearing it for now. No one will question the prince's hunter bringing in two captives. Keep your head down and your face covered. If someone recognizes you, he will die."

Once, this usurpation would have caused him to launch into an immediate attack. But there was Calanthe to think of.

Ryuan awkwardly reached back with both hands over one shoulder to flip up his hood. The signet was a powerful enough symbol that no one would doubt it, and he had no hope that anyone would actually realize that the wolf did not resemble Ryuan. He rarely showed that shape in the capital, to keep the people from becoming fearful of him.

They left the ruins of the city, silent, dust still filtering down. Ryuan was not so sure there was not more ruin ahead.

Chapter Ten

There was a wet wind rising when they reached the capital. The journey had seemed to pass more swiftly than when Ryuan had first taken this path, the other way. It was because this time he was not counting the days without Calanthe, but instead the days until Nerav confronted his mother.

If Kaen knew, Ryuan thought, he would reach into the skies with his talent and bring down a sword of lightning upon Nerav, even despite the Law of Century. But the rain only began to fall lightly and steadily, undisturbed by thunder.

Calanthe nearly slipped in some mud. Ryuan wanted to draw her close and wrap an arm around her waist to help support her, but he was helpless to do anything but offer her a shoulder that she silently refused to lean on. She had barely spoken since they had left the ruins of the city. Was she still mourning Tamel?

“Calanthe, are you well?” he asked quietly.

She gave him a wan smile. “As much as I can be. Are all wolf-born as cruel as this one?”

Something must have showed in his face, for she quickly added, “All others, I meant.”

Behind them, Nerav growled, and they fell into silence. Ryuan only knew that the other wolf-born would suffer as soon as he was free. But then would she truly see him as no different as Nerav?

There were few people in the streets, as the capital’s denizens were avoiding the rain. Ryuan led them to a discreet entrance to the palace grounds. The guard raised his spear until his eye fell upon Nerav and caught sight of the signet.

“Lord Ryuan. Prince Kaen should be in his chambers.”

The wolf nodded and padded onward, herding Ryuan and Calanthe forward.

Ryuan turned away from the palace proper. There was a way to his mother’s private garden if they circled around. He didn’t want to risk running into anyone he knew in the halls. He dared not allow Nerav and Kaen to meet.

Once they slipped past the gate and into the garden, though, the wolf halted.

“Go,” Nerav said. *“Draw her out. Speak to her. You will learn the truth.”*

It went without saying that Calanthe would remain with him.

Ryuan crossed the remaining distance to the door of his mother’s chambers and tapped upon it. “My lady mother...”

After a moment, the door opened. His mother stood there in her mourning gray as always, heedless of the rain. She missed nothing in her first glance, not his state nor the two who had stayed back. She turned to him with her usual composure. "Ryuan, tell me what's going on."

He matched her calm through an effort of will. "That is one of the wolf-born. He claims you are a sorceress who created me, and he seeks your death."

"And the girl?"

He looked at Calanthe in despair, the wolf-born's body carefully angled where, even if she ran, he would be upon her with a single leap.

"Ah," she said. "You found her."

He did not need to be distracted. "Tell me the truth," he said.

She lifted the veil. Her face was exactly as Ryuan remembered it from his last sight of it when his foster-father died almost a decade ago, her skin still smooth and her eyes still a clear green.

It was not only because she was still mourning, he realized. She hid her face so no one would notice that she did not age.

"I was one of those bound by the Law of Century," she said. "Afterward, I wandered the world, shaping different lives for myself. I was afraid, sometimes. Happy, others. Then I made the mistake of falling in love with a prince."

His foster-father. "Who would need an heir," Ryuan breathed.

"Yes. So I bore him a child. Did you not wonder where Kaen's gift with the winds came from? It's buried in the bloodline, sometimes, but in this case it came directly from me. There were no sorcerers among your father's ancestors."

"That's why you wanted Kaen to wed Melea," he said with sudden realization. He had always wondered why his mother seemed so set on the match, but the shy girl, so fearful of sorcery, had impeccable lineage.

She nodded. "Her family, too, is free of any taint. I hope their children, and theirs, will be safe."

He gathered it all in. "What of myself?"

"I made you to protect Kaen. The wolf-born were the soldiers in our wars, and I could think of no one better able to keep Kaen safe if someone learned of his heritage and wanted him to pay. I do not blame the people or the wolf-born for their anger, but I wanted Kaen to be free of it, if he never misused any powers he might manifest."

"And if he did..."

She met his gaze evenly. "Then I made you to kill my own son, if need be. Because from the first time I held him, I knew that I could not. Even if he killed a hundred men."

"He has killed men," Ryuan said.

“But not by sorcery. He has ordered them killed by executioner’s blade or your claws. And always according to law. We only followed our own desires during the wars. We did terrible things. I, too.”

He knew, suddenly, that she planned to meet Nerav and accept the fate he dealt her. “You changed,” Ryuan said. “You foreswore sorcery after the wars.”

His mother smiled sadly. “But I didn’t. I made you.”

“I can’t regret it,” he said fiercely.

“I treated you like my own son. The other wolf-born were not so fortunate. They have a right to justice too.”

“You can’t give up your life like that!”

She did not react to his outburst, the same way she hadn’t made much of it the first time he had discovered his wolf shape. She had been through a hundred years of wars that had destroyed men and earth; nothing fazed her. She said only, “I wish I could’ve gotten to know her.”

Calanthe was still held captive by Nerav. It was not a choice anyone should have to make.

His mother saw the agonizing indecision on his face. “You will stay here until I am gone,” she said, and her words had the force of some binding in them, so that Ryuan could not have moved had a gale struck him.

“Mother—” His feet were like stone, caught to the earth, unyielding.

“Don’t tell Kaen what happened to me. It’s better for you to know your full nature, Ryuan. You are wolf-born and you must find your own peace with that. But Kaen is content as he is.”

He closed his eyes and nodded. She was protecting Kaen again, even to the last.

She touched his shackles, and they crumbled away—a useless freedom, while her command bound him. Then she touched his face. “One thing I didn’t expect— I never thought I would love you.”

That wrenched him apart. He opened his eyes, but his last sight of her slim, straight back was blurred with tears.

When she reached them, Nerav touched his nose to Calanthe’s leg, releasing her. His mother touched her arm, said something. Then Calanthe ran to him. He held her tightly against his body and kissed her hair, refusing to look away.

His mother lifted her chin. Nerav tore out her throat.

Ryuan was free so suddenly he staggered. He thrust Calanthe behind him, tore off his clothes, and in mid-leap turned wolf.

They snarled and snapped at each other briefly before withdrawing to defensive crouches. Ryuan felt a dizzying pleasure, knowing here was a worthy challenge, feeling the certainty of death for one of them and thrilling in it. He kept staring at his opponent, fangs bared and tail cocked, and when the other rushed forward, he did as well.

Lunge, snap, withdrawal. But this was no game of dominance. Ryuan wanted blood. On the next exchange he committed his full weight and they wrestled briefly. Ryuan sought purchase on the other's throat but only managed to catch a bit of fur and something wound about his neck, setting it spinning free. It distracted him for a moment and the other wolf swiped with his paw, gouging his shoulder.

The scent of his own blood filled his nostrils; he needed to drown it with the smell of the other's. He threw himself onto his opponent, sending them into a roll, and while the world turned over Ryuan's claws shredded the other's hide. He felt the ground on his back and knew it meant his end, so he forced the other back and emerged on top, pinning the other down.

The wolf beneath Ryuan struggled. Then he shifted, his shape changing into one even more helpless: frail skin, blunt teeth, no claws, an awkward tangle of limbs. He gasped in pain, then spoke. "It never changes," he said. "This is what the sorcerers did. They set us upon each other." His head slumped.

But louder than his words to Ryuan was the pounding of the other's heart and the splash of blood upon the ground. He moved closer to the soft, pitiful thing that lay before him, savoring the moment before his jaws would close over the remainder of its life.

"Ryu!"

The sound was familiar. He turned, only to see another soft creature there. She held something out to him, round and hard and bright in the light. It held no interest for him. But she herself...

He knew that scent. It thrilled through him, and then the sure grace of her movements became familiar. She was crouched down in front of him on two limbs, and he had once stood like that, he realized suddenly. And the spill of sound from her throat—

His bones *twisted*—

"—Ryu, Ryu, you have to know this, it's Kaen's—"

His howl warped as his throat became human. She threw her arms around him and he pressed her to him, drinking in her human touch. Skin-to-skin, she drew him back the rest of the way from the brink of the wild-mind.

His senses slowly calmed until he felt safe enough to draw the slightest distance from her. Even so he needed some contact, so he entwined his fingers around hers and found her still holding the signet. "Not even Kaen could bring me back," he said hoarsely, turning it over in his hands. "But you..." The ring dropped to the ground, forgotten as he framed her face with his palms. He said with infinite tenderness, "Beloved."

Her eyes widened. "I dreamed of this..." Her fingers touched his arms, crept up to keep his hands where they were. "My heart."

He touched his forehead to hers and breathed in her presence for a long while. Rain streamed down upon them and he didn't care, even though it hit his bare skin, but there was Nerav to deal with.

The wolf-born was badly injured and unconscious. Ryuan stood over him, and found he couldn't summon the will to deal the death-blow. Behind him was Calanthe, who had freed him from the wild-mind and its relentless demand to kill. He wanted to be an executioner no longer.

He found the rags that remained of his clothing and bound Nerav's injuries with cold efficiency. He did not allow Calanthe to help.

"You could take him inside," she said.

"No. I will not have him under the same roof as my brother. Our kind can heal wounds that men cannot." He set the wolf-born by the gate. When he recovered, he would know to leave. Ryuan had not lived with other wolf-born, but instinctively he knew that, having won this fight, he needed not fear Nerav. And even if the other wolf-born continued his vendetta against those with sorcery, Ryuan had tasted his blood.

Then he went to tend his mother's body. She was still young, and lovely. He closed her eyes.

"She said to take care of the garden," Calanthe said, very soft.

He understood now her love for this place, its growing things an antidote to the destruction she had once caused.

"Ryu? I'm sorry."

He dropped a kiss on her temple. "I'm glad you're safe. And it was her choice." Through his grief, he was fiercely proud of the woman who had made him, raised him, loved him.

He buried her there, where seeds might find root in her grave and grow tall and as lovely as she.

Calanthe took his hand when he was done, not minding the grime. It was a simple pleasure to feel her fingers curled around his own. A reminder that she was there beside him.

"I need to talk to Kaen," he said.

"You can't face him right now," she said gently. "And you should clean up first, or he'll ask about the mud."

She was right, of course. He sighed. "You keep me human, and civilized."

He took her to his rooms and commanded a bath. The first turned murky from dirt and blood as soon as he lowered himself into it, so he took another, trying to soak out the trials of the last several days. Afterward, Calanthe saw to his wounds.

The sight of her, head bent while she tied off a bandage, still moist from her bath, stirred him. It had been too long. He had seen her threatened by a sorcerer and a wolf-born. He desperately needed to know she was with him fully, safe, beloved— He placed a hand on her thigh and slid it upward.

He could smell her reaction, but she moved away. "It's all right, Ryu."

"No. I need this."

She caught his mood. "This, then." She slid downward, her hair moving over him like a living skein of silk, but that was nothing to her lips closing over the head of his cock, warm and liquid.

That sensation moved down his shaft, up, then farther down. He knotted his fingers in her hair. “Ah, Calanthe, your mouth is hotter than summer...”

She twisted her head back and forth throughout the next few strokes. He freed his hands from her hair and slid them down to the tops of his thighs, fingers half-curved from the strain of trying not to push her head down deeper.

She went of her own accord, all the way to the base. He groaned to feel every inch of him inside her mouth. She drew back up teasingly, met his eyes, then buried him down her throat again in a swift motion. From there she quickened the pace, a constant blur of wet heat sliding against his cock, until he knew nothing else but pleasure, a long arc of it, and then shorter bursts following that finally drained the last of the tension from his body.

Her tongue caressed him a last time, and then she moved up the bed to curl herself around his body. They held each other in simple contentment. It was not only the release she had given him that let him finally relax, but the casual way she draped one leg over his, certain of her place against him.

Finally he said, “I should see Kaen.”

They rose and dressed. Ryuan caught her hand in his as they left his chambers, and she gifted him with a smile as they made their way to the royal quarters.

The guard posted there bent his head, then reached out and rapped sharply on the door. “Lord Ryuan,” he announced.

The door opened. “Ryu, you’re back!” Kaen glanced at Calanthe. “With company. Come in.”

Melea rose at their entrance. “Lord Ryuan.”

Calanthe set her hand over her heart and bent her head. “My lord prince, my lady princess.”

“This is Calanthe,” Ryuan said.

Kaen grinned at her. “I couldn’t be happier to meet you at last. Ryuan was brooding over you for seasons, you know.”

“Really?” she said interestedly.

Ryuan said, “Calanthe, I need to speak with Kaen...”

She knew why. Her face turned serious, but then she managed a smile and turned to Melea.

Ryuan and Kaen stepped away.

“How did things go with the sorcerer?” Kaen asked quietly, and his somber tone was so much like their mother’s that Ryuan’s heart ached.

“He had started building a city to draw those with the old gifts.”

Kaen’s eyes widened but he let Ryuan go on.

“He’s dead now, and the city destroyed. The people are scattered. I don’t think they meant any harm, only wanted a refuge.”

“I trust your judgment,” Kaen said. “Are you all right? That looks like a bandage beneath your tunic.”

"I'm fine. Kaen...I went by our mother's chambers first. She's gone. I don't know where."

Kaen passed a hand over his eyes. "You searched the garden?"

"Yes."

"And asked the guard?"

"He saw nothing."

Ryuan hadn't thought out an elaborate lie to explain the circumstances, but to his relief, his brother did not seem surprised.

"No one could stop her once she was determined to do something," Kaen said heavily. "I almost expected her to leave after our father died. I know she traveled much before he convinced her to wed him. It would have happened at some point, I suppose. I wanted her to see her grandchild, though. Melea's convinced it's a son."

"An heir, then."

"I'm hoping not. Then we'll have to try again." Kaen grinned. Then the amusement faded. "I'm actually glad."

"Glad?" He had to remind himself that Kaen did not know she was dead, only gone from the palace.

"Yes. She seemed to be wasting away here, always dressed in mourning and never coming to court. There must be something else out there that she found worthwhile, after our father."

"I think so," Ryuan said, thinking of her sacrifice for Calanthe. His brother's words rang true, even if he did not know the whole story. "You should look after the garden she loved."

"Can't you?" Kaen asked, then, "Not you too, Ryu."

"I think I need to leave as well. I've lost the taste for hunting men."

"You could stay here, without any duties—"

Ryuan shook his head. "I was never a creature of the court."

"No." Kaen sighed. "I never meant to trap you here. I just wanted you close by."

"I know. It's been my home, because of you." When Kaen looked at him, he saw Ryuan as someone who belonged. That had been all he needed for a long time. But when Calanthe looked at him, he knew he belonged to her. *My heart.*

He sought her gaze as he and Kaen returned, expecting her smile and the warmth it always triggered. He was considerably startled to find Calanthe and Melea laughing together. He had never heard Melea laugh in his presence at all. But when he came to tell Calanthe that they were ready to leave, Melea not only looked him in the eye, but smiled as she said, "You must return often. My lord husband will miss you sorely. And you'll want to see your nephew, of course." Her hand dropped to the curve of her stomach.

"Of course," was all he could say before drawing Calanthe to him. They made their last farewells, and as soon as they were out in the hall he asked her, "What did you say?"

She smiled at him. “She asked why I wasn’t afraid of you. I explained exactly how I bend you to my will.”

“Bend me to your will?” He gave her his most menacing look, to no effect. “And how do you do that?”

“Something along these lines.” She stopped, and when he did the same, held his face and studied it with a tenderness that made him realize all over again how dark her eyes were, and how they held the world. Then she kissed him. Slowly, lingeringly, her mouth seeking and making promises.

It took him a moment to recover. Then he said cautiously, “You didn’t go into more detail than that, did you?”

She couldn’t hide her amusement. “Melea said she’d have to try some of it on Kaen.”

He hadn’t thought he could be embarrassed. But at the same time, the thought of his brother’s wife welcoming him, even with an amused smile, was heartening. He now understood a little why Kaen had wed her. He would have to visit. But he didn’t want to stay here—he didn’t need the glittering trappings of court, nor even the company of the other wolf-born. All he needed was Calanthe.

He set his hands low on her hips, his thumbs stroking close to her center. “Why don’t you try some of it on me now?”

Their kiss this time was not so slow and sweet. Then she pulled away and said teasingly, “If you can catch me!”

He cared not at all who wondered why a woman was laughing as a wolf chased her outside.

The storm was just passing. When he caught her, as a man, he pressed her against a tree and watched the raindrops sparkle in her lashes as she closed her eyes in anticipation. She could not have been more beautiful.

“I love you,” he said, and kissed her.

The last of the rain seemed to wash away all the bitterness of their past. All that lingered was a clear sweetness on his tongue, as though he had sipped some of her essence during their kiss. Whatever taste he left in her mouth made her smile. And his lips seemed to be curving too, of their own accord.

The clouds broke apart and sunlight fell warmly upon them.

It was bright all of a sudden, but he didn’t bother shielding his eyes from the dazzle of the sun because he had no need of sight. Each of his senses strained toward her, and always would, he knew. Bending, he pressed his smile to hers.

Let the season of rains end, he thought. She would still be here.

About the Author

Karalynn works at a dot-com in the San Francisco Bay Area, but she much prefers writing fiction to code. When she's not doing either, she enjoys running, dark beer, and music with unusual time signatures, although not at the same time. You can find more of her writing at www.karalynnlee.com.

Magic bites...

Myla by Moonlight

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Created at Prince Taric's birth, Myla is a spell, an enchantment designed to appear and protect him when he needs it most. She has always been content to do her duty...until one night of forbidden passion leaves her longing to experience life—and love—as a mortal woman. Yet the risk is too great. Even if her blood runs as red as his, she can never give him the one thing he needs: a child.

Taric's blessing—and his curse—is knowing the kingdom's future depends on his producing an heir to continue the bloodline. His bond with Myla has always been that of protector and protected. When it suddenly becomes something much more, he unwittingly sentences his people to certain death.

An old enemy is plotting to destroy all he holds dear: his lands, his people, his father, and his lover. And this time, even if they fight tooth and blade, their shared magic may not be enough to save them...

Warning: This book contains a shape-shifting bodyguard, sizzling sex scenes, supernatural lilac mist, swordfighting and heartbreaking sacrifices. No jaguars were harmed in the writing of this story.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Myla by Moonlight:

Once more, he took her hand and they maneuvered across the slick rocks. He eased down beside her, releasing her fingers but only to flatten them to his thigh and cover them with his own. Heat hotter than the sun's blaze burned her palm but she did not remove it.

Side by side, they spoke of minor things, the color of specific blooms nearby, the harvesting schedule and a heron that glided over the stream. Taric explained about wings and flight but Myla barely heard the words. The grace of the bird took her breath. So effortless and serene, it conquered the air with ease and settled on the water with barely a ripple.

Myla found leisure with Taric to be a joyful and an enlightening time. His laugh was something she had not heard much of, its timbre changed from his youth to a deep, rich tone which stirred her belly.

She laughed at him when he fetched the berry pouch, hissing and complaining about the frigid water. The sound surprised her. Had she ever laughed before? It felt good in her throat, tumbling over her tongue like a rolling drum.

Taric knelt before her and opened the drawstring. "Again, close your eyes."

"Taric, I am able to feed myself."

"I know, but I want to. Let me?" Held by his bronze gaze, she looked deep into his eyes and nodded. How could she deny him this simple request? She closed her eyes and parted her lips. One frosty berry landed on her tongue. The flavor had changed, like he'd promised. Before sweet succulence had filled her

mouth but this chilled morsel had a bite. Zest and tang overshadowed the sensual flavor, spiked the sugar and increased the richness to near wine-like taste. An appreciative sound grew in her throat.

“I don’t think I’ve ever envied a berry before.” His murmur opened her eyes and the rapture on his face silenced her.

Perhaps the coldness made the fruit hard to swallow or maybe it was way he stared into her eyes. She read hunger in his gaze and acted instinctively, delving her fingers into his pouch and pulling a blackberry free. Her fingers shook, touching his lips. Tilting his head, he took the offered bite but drew her finger inside his mouth with it, his tongue skating along her skin.

Rough bark scratched into her behind as she pressed down against a sudden ache deep in her hips. Her fingertip left the warmth of his mouth too slowly. Another firm fruit rose and she felt powerless to refuse it. Mimicking him, she flicked her tongue over his skin as the berry entered her mouth. Taric drew a harsh breath. Against her lip, his finger strayed, tracing the fullness along the bottom.

“I like the chilled berries.” She didn’t know she spoke until her voice whispered out. The sound broke whatever haze surrounded them and he dropped his hand. Loss rushed around her like a winter’s breath.

Taric avoided her face and tugged his boots over his wet feet. “I’m glad. I wanted to leave on a pleasant note. I ride for Claverham tomorrow.”

His words chilled her, an icy river on her sun-heated flesh. “Yes, I know. The treaty is vital to ensure the safety of the southland border but I do not trust the Lutas. How many men do you take?”

With a weary sigh, he cupped her elbow and drew her back into the meadow. “A half crew I believe will be enough. It doesn’t seem fitting to ride into peace talks with a full war battalion.”

Myla reviewed the men mentally and nodded her approval. “Yes, it should. I shall be on guard as well.”

“When aren’t you?” he laughed. “Half a crew in full regal dress and a series of long, boring meals, chess games and archery exhibitions when fifteen minutes of frank conversation could accomplish the same. Sometimes it just seems like a waste of energy, doesn’t it?”

“Perhaps, but the civil tone will be aided by the formality. You like the pageantry of the crown, do you not?”

“Most times.” Taric plucked a stray stalk of grass and whirled it idly while they walked. “The rituals are...grounding, familiar. I know what’s expected, what’s been done by a hundred generations before me and my role in the play. Sometimes that’s exactly what I feel like, a performer repeating lines and scenes cast long ago and known by everyone. It’s not me, Taric the man, speaking then, but Prince Taric Batu, Heir Apparent to the Segur throne. He’s the one who wears a diadem and speaks with formal tones and civic duty. I’m just along to swing the sword and clean up the blood.”

“Would you cease to be prince if you had a choice?”

“It’s not a choice I was ever given. No, I like the role enough, have been taught from birth what’s required of me and don’t know any other way. I just wonder what being a prince in a time of quiet is like or will I always be a ruler in wartime?” He flung the blade of grass, now twisted and limp, far into the wind. “But enough war talk. Tell me about you.”

“Me?” Myla halted abruptly and he walked a pace ahead before turning to her. “You know all there is to know of me.”

Tall butter-yellow wildflowers danced in the breeze and he ran a skimming hand over the tops, stirring them further. A bright orange-and-black butterfly flitted about his head and he batted it away with a flick.

The play of colors around him—the shading of a single hue into a million dimensions—captivated her. Somewhere in her breast a fire grew, cast from those same brilliant tones from copper to cream. It warmed her from within like the sunbeams warmed her flesh. Taric was beautiful, golden among the yellow.

One delicate bloom plucked from a willowy stalk appeared before her eyes, held in a hand she longed to feel touch her once more. She took his offering with hesitant fingers.

“I know nothing about you, Myla. Well, I know you’re fierce and stronger than any man. You’re a beautiful woman or a massive cat. Strawberries and blackberries make you close your eyes in pleasure. If needed, you have and will kill to protect me.” His curious eyes searched her face for more. “But tell me about you. Do you dream, Myla? When you’re part of me, do you miss the sunshine? Are you ever apart from me without my knowing? Have you ever thought of me in any other way than a duty?”

Words locked in her throat and choked her. She existed for no reason other than to serve as his guardian. She knew everything about him yet nothing of what made him how he was. They were closer than two beings ever should be and yet separate and alone. Sadness touched her, a butterfly of rainbowed beauty drenched by a sudden rainfall. Steeling her face to hide her emotion, she cocked her head to the side.

“I do not dream within you. I accepted this duty and I stand guard. Sunshine touches your flesh and I know of its warmth through you. I am with you every minute, Taric, even if you do not behold me with your eyes.”

Something close to anger colored his face and he jumped in front of her, his chest brushing her breasts. Vehemence emanated from his body in sheets of blistering heat. *No, not anger, something...close...burning...needing.* “But have you ever thought about me as other than a prize to be protected?”

Myla didn’t have the ability to lie to him but strategic maneuvers could be employed. The wilting flower became a tool of distraction and she twirled it between her fingers. The spinning buttery color quivered with her fraud. “I do not allow those thoughts to linger in my mind.”

A dimple appeared above his jaw and the right side of his lip inched upward. "But you have felt...something for me other than protectiveness?"

Lips parted, she remained silent. For all the strength in her supernatural structure, she couldn't break from his gaze. She saw herself reflected in pools of burnt umber, reminding her she belonged within him. Then the image was gone as he angled his head. His mouth pressed to hers, the burst of blackberry vivid and potent.

So this is how his kiss feels...like magic. Without thought, she mimicked his motion, tasting his lips and then allowing her tongue to touch and stroke his. Heat arced between them, a power she didn't recognize but one that consumed her. He nibbled the lip he'd touched earlier, his fingers straying to her cheek, firm and gentle. A quiver grew from her marrow and spread, wracking her bones, and she trembled in sudden fear.

The pale yellow flower fell to the ground. Taric was her charge, her responsibility. She should not behave in this manner with him. Only the magnetic lure of his touch held her within this realm, halting her escape. He felt so...right. It was so wrong.

Taric shifted and tried to pull her closer, his arm around her waist, but she pushed away from him. "Do not. I should not have allowed that to happen. It can not happen again."

"Why?"

The question threw her. *Why?* Because... She floundered, searching for why his touch should be forbidden, why she could not submit to the raging beat of her pulse, why she could not bask in the taste of his kiss. He was long past the age of manhood and could choose his own path. If he wanted a woman, he had the right to take her be she willing. Myla reluctantly admitted she was most willing to step into his kiss once more. But she was not a woman. Not really.

"I am not real, Taric. I am an enchantment, a spell designed for your protection, not your pleasure."

Flushed color drained from his face at her breathless words.

"I bid you farewell, my charge." She drew on every smidgeon of control not to zing back inside his mark. A tiny breath of lilac vapor swirled regretfully through the yellow blossoms before it too trickled into his body. Sorrow turned the last wisps to dark violet.

Giving in to the lure of passion could lead to disaster.

Lycan Tides

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Guardians of the Light, Book 3

Selkie princess Finora is all too familiar with betrayal. Betrayed by her curiosity, which led her from the sea. By her body, which yielded to a handsome human under the full moon. By the human, who hid her skin and took its location with him to his grave. After seven years of searching, she no longer believes in miracles.

Trystan is a werewolf on a mission to find and return dragons to his homeland. He follows a slim lead westward across an unfamiliar sea. Gravely wounded in a pirate attack, his ship foundered in a storm and sinking fast, he comes face to face with the most unexpected rescuers—Finora and her two half-human children.

Selkie and werewolf. Both creatures ruled by the moon. The attraction is instant, mutual, undeniable...and impossible. Trystan is destined to return to the mountains and Finora can't leave the sea. Their only gift to each other is one night of searing passion—which could lead to the greatest betrayal of all...

Enjoy the following excerpt for Lycan Tides:

What had she gotten herself into? Finora crossed her arms to hide her shaking hands and watched Trystan's broad back lead the way into The Mermaid Pub. The tightness in her womb, the wet heat betwixt her thighs, shocked her. The full moon was last night. The burning need should have been over. She wasn't supposed to respond to a male out of time. Of course, four years was a long time to go without. 'Twas the selkie way to indulge that part of their natures. 'Twas the easiest way to trap them, as she'd learned to her sorrow.

Why now? Why *him*?

Her lips still tingled from his kiss. She quivered at the thought of sharing her bed tonight, of limbs entwined and hot skin sliding against hot skin. What was it about Trystan that made him impossible to resist? She should have put her foot down and left him in town to find his own way. Was it because he wasn't human, either, but a fellow creature of the moon?

He *was* safer with her, away from eyes and questions. But was she safer with him? Ioain wasn't the only one at risk for a broken heart. *He's not staying long. He has a mission to complete, then a family and home of his own to get back to. A family of his own...* "I made a promise t' someone back home, a promise t' keep," he'd stated.

"Trystan, wait."

He turned at the doorway, a question in those piercing blue eyes.

Stars, those eyes...

"The someone back home whom you promised. Is it a woman? Are you married?"

"A woman? Aye. But a wife?" He shook his head and smiled. "Nay, lass. Were I bound t' another, I'd no' be stayin' with ye an' the littles. 'Tis no' me way. Me folk back home have but one mate. There's no one awaitin' me return."

One mate per male? In her world the strongest bulls got the most cows. A bull could have many cows in his household, but each cow answered to but one bull. A pang struck her. Acourse being stuck on land, with Bran gone, she'd had an uncommon spell of freedom. None to answer to, making her own decisions. A small rebellious part of her—the part that had caused her to disregard her sire's warnings so long ago—reveled in that freedom. Even as she yearned for the sea itself, she dreaded going back to the harem, to being just one of many in her sire's household, until he shipped her off to some other bull.

Why her heart flipped at Trystan's unbound status she didn't know. 'Twas of no consequence to her. "You've never taken a wife?"

His eyes twinkled. "I've been asked. But I've ne'er been tempted t' say aye."

Stop talking now. You're making a fool of your— "What? You mean to tell me your *women* do the choosing? And they *ask*?" Finora knew her jaw was surely hanging down around her knees, but she couldn't seem to close her mouth.

"The clans are each ruled by a headwoman. The women govern an' each decides who they wish t' take as a mate an' father their bairns. Doth a mon piss her off enough, a lass is free t' release him an' choose another."

"What do the men do?"

He shrugged. "Whate'er we're good at. We hunt, scout, craft, defend. Those o' us that be guardians, though," a shadow crossed his face, "are sworn t' the clans as a whole. That be above any bond t' one woman. There's no' many women who relish the thought o' a mon that oft disappears for days, weeks or months at a time on clan business, or can be slain in battle."

"Is that what this is?" Finora asked. "This quest of yours? Clan business?"

His eyes sobered. "Nay, lass. 'Twas a promise t' a guardian queen, who wished t' know if she be the last o' her kind."

She sensed a holding back in those words, like there was something he could have added but didn't. One thing was clear to her, however: Trystan was an honorable man, with his own ironclad code of conduct. She could trust him. She moved around him, brushed against his arm as she opened the Mermaid's door and went back inside.

The children sat at the table with Giles and Jan, Niadh and Storm sprawled at their feet. Ealga perched on the back of Braeca's chair. Giles handed Trystan the half-finished whiskey Trystan had set down when he'd stepped outside for their talk. "Would you like something?" Giles asked Finora.

The whiskey was too tempting. She needed a clear head. "Just cider," she replied. Tess unloaded her tray at the next table.

Giles waved Tess over and gave her Finora's request.

Finora sat down in the empty chair betwixt her two children. "Were the scones good?"

Ioain nodded. "Can we bring some home?"

"Please, Mama?" Braeca added, pleading in her big brown eyes.

Finora laughed. "Very well. Enough with those cow eyes, poppet!" When the other woman brought her the cider, she said, "Tess, I think I'll need a dozen of those cranberry scones to take home with us."

"I'll wrap them now," Tess replied.

Trystan held out a hand and Ealga returned to his shoulder. He slouched against the wall, savoring his drink. "They make this back home. Me uncle Cormag's a master. His has a unique nutty flavor an' his barrels're stamped with an acorn."

Finora stared at Trystan, the wild Arcadian mountain man, from his long, grizzled grey hair to his muscled legs. She couldn't help herself. The tattoo down the left side of his face made him look so fierce, but all she could recall was the hot desire in his eyes and the feel of those strong arms around her, holding her close. She wasn't the only one staring at the way his broad shoulders filled out his shirt. Catching herself at it made her frown. Ridiculous to feel possessive over a stranger. She had no claim on him.

"Acorn whiskey's rare," Jan stated. "Hard t' find, an' too rich for the common purse."

"Soon we should be able t' afford it. Cap'n's lookin' for 'nother ship," Giles clarified. "We'll be sailin' 'gain in a few weeks."

Finora's gaze slid to Trystan, who stared at the memorial wall, at all the names of those lost to Cilaniestra. "What is it?"

"'Tis lucky I am t' no' be listed there. Thanks t' him." He saluted Storm with his cup.

"Lighthaven Water Dogs. Mari breeds and trains them," Finora told him. "They've gained a reputation all over Rhattany."

Braeca also stared at the wall. "My da's on that wall."

"Aye, lass." Trystan's face softened. "I'm sorra for yer loss."

Oh, he was dangerous...

"Is your da gone, too?"

"No' t' me knowledge. But I've been gone from home for some months now."

"But ye're *old*!" Braeca indicated his grey hair. "He must be *ancient*."

"Braeca!" Finora's cheeks heated.

Trystan laughed. “Well, I’m no’ as old as all *that*. Simply went grey early. They told me it makes me look wise.” He assumed a solemn expression that made the children giggle.

Finora again sensed a holding back. Trystan shot her a sharp glance but said naught further.

“Time to go home,” Finora said. “I don’t want to be climbing in the dark.” She stood, picked up the wrapped packet of scones and inclined her head to Giles and Jan. “Good night.” The children headed for the door, shadowed by the two canids. Finora followed with Trystan and Ealga bringing up the rear. She tried in vain to ignore his gaze. The back of her neck prickled with awareness.

She stopped at Mari’s. Storm’s dam sprawled against Mari’s makeshift stand but lumbered to her feet at their approach. She looked to be near her time—swollen like a great furry whale. “I need a *kira* of frill and a half of red.” Finora reached down to rub the dog’s ears.

Mari weighed out the two seaweeds. “Pups should be here next week,” she said to the Ioain and Braeca. “You two will have to come see them.”

Ioain stared at his shoes. Finora paid Mari and tucked the wrapped packages under her arm. They continued up the cliffside path. The children sang a counting rhyme Mistress Greta had taught Braeca. Finora and Trystan followed in silence.

“Finora!”

Bree’s call stopped her in her tracks. “*What’s wrong?*”

“Naught’s wrong,” the mermaid replied. *“We’ve been scavenging the ship and I found something your new friend might wish to see.”*

Trystan placed a hand against her back. “What is it?”

She turned around. “Bree’s found something she wants you to see. We’d best go down to the shore.” She shivered. That luring, elusive shore...



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