



Kisri

and the Beast

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SAMHAIN

His duty...her pleasure.

...and the Beast, Book 2

After three years at war, Ennon bears the burden of seeing the High Lord's vast armies home. Keeping thousands of fiercely independent lions in line isn't easy. When his soldiers discover a beautiful, *royal* female hidden beneath an illusion spell, the lure of her inheritance threatens the order of his camp.

The men of her family protected Kisri, until the war stole them away. Tired of defending herself from greedy suitors, she's in search of her only remaining male relative. Instead she finds Ennon, her cousin's most dangerous warrior. Perhaps the only man in the kingdom who has no interest in claiming her birthright. Which makes him unique...and tempting.

Delivering Kisri to his High Lord's side—while keeping his distance—is Ennon's one and only duty. Yet Kisri's untutored advances crack his formidable resistance. And she proves to be a dangerously adept student. Especially when their passion wakes a magic beyond their control...

Warning: This story contains a dangerous shapeshifter warlord, a lioness with a sword, innocent passion, sexual awakenings and a happily-ever-after worthy of any fairy tale.

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Maira Rogers

Dedication

This is for everyone who believes in fairy tales.

Prologue

Once, the kingdom stood united.

It was strong then, strong enough to stand against invaders who sought to break it apart and seize parts of the whole as their own. The four races of shapeshifters fought together, died together and emerged victorious.

It wasn't until later, when the threats had died, that the kingdom fell apart. With no one to fight, no one purpose to unite them, they began to fracture.

And then they began to fight one another.

The four nations warred for generations, until the High Lord of the Plains and the High Lord of the Forest chose to put aside past grievances, though wolves and lions have ever been natural enemies. Together they brought peace to their people, and commanded their most trusted generals, the First Warlords, to help them drive the armies from the mountains and the navies from the seas back to their own territories.

Brutal war reigned for years, but the new alliance emerged victorious. The High Lords and First Warlords parted as brothers and returned to their own lands, where they sought to enjoy the peace they'd struggled so hard to secure.

The First Warlord of the plains bore the responsibility of seeing their army home. He dreaded this task, one of administration rather than glory. All that changed when he found an unusual soldier hidden under his nose, a soldier whose very presence created chaos in his carefully ordered camp.

Chapter One

They called her untameable.

Men came from the four corners of the plains to woo her. Not because she was a great beauty—though most would insist they found her pretty enough—and not because of her skills and accomplishments, as those who were honest would admit she had few suited to life as a noble lady.

They came to her father's house for her fortune and her bloodline, because she was the cousin of the High Lord of the Plains. To conquer a lioness is to be the master of all she calls hers, though few would dare enrage her male relatives by attempting to conquer by violence.

They called her untameable until the war began to claim those male relatives, one at a time. And with her cousin the High Lord so far away, some began to think this lioness looked very tameable, indeed.

Ennon stared down at the cracked gem in the palm of his hand. "I don't understand, Pritt. What am I looking at?"

"Witchcraft." The grizzled old lion spat in the dirt. "There was a scuffle in the meal line and one of the green soldiers got caught in the middle. That got ripped off a his—*her* neck."

"Her?" he asked sharply. "Tell me you're joking, and quickly."

"Wish I were, Warlord. She's a wee bit of a thing, but a spitting little cat. Took two guards to drag her to your tent, and the gentle goddess only knows how long they'll put up with her clawing at them."

A glamour charm. Ennon had heard of women going to such lengths in order to join battles when they should have been tending matters at home—you couldn't flip through a tome of poetry without running into an ode to a warrior queen—but in *his* camp... "She must be here alone. No husband or father would allow such a thing."

"No sane man at all." Pritt frowned and scratched his cheek. "She's familiar, but I can't say why. Something in the eyes."

Lesser nobility, with his luck. "Thank you for coming to me, Pritt, and for handling this with your usual quick efficiency."

Pritt executed a sharp salute. "If you don't mind me saying, my lord...you might want to step quickly."

"I'm heading there now." Ennon barely managed to keep the exasperation from his voice as he dropped the ruined charm and left his maps unrolled on the table.

Odd, now that he thought of it, that Pritt had not brought the girl to him. It would be easy enough to question her and send word to her family. Securing proper transportation or lodgings for her would, likewise, be a simple matter.

No reason to sequester the girl in his tent, none at all.

Curiosity as much as concern quickened his steps, and he knew the answer to those questions as soon as he entered his tent. "Oh, hell and damnation."

Kisri's long dark hair was braided tight to her head, and her clothing was cut in a man's style, but without magic, not even a blind and drunk fool would have taken her for anything but a woman. One guard held her arms behind her back in a brutal grip, and the other eyed her warily over bleeding scratches across his cheek.

Huge brown eyes found his, and her struggles ceased abruptly. "Hell and damnation is right."

Her resigned tone barely registered as rage thundered through Ennon at the sight of her arms wrenched behind her, the angle and pressure no doubt painful. He addressed the guard who held her, his voice amazingly even. "Unhand her and get out. Both of you."

The men had fought alongside him long enough to recognize danger. They retreated hastily, one leaving a belt and scabbard on the table as he backed toward the flap of the tent.

When they were gone, Kisri stretched her arms carefully, as if they ached. "Ennon."

He had to remain calm. It wouldn't do to terrify the High Lord's favorite cousin. He reminded himself of that a few times as he poured two cups of wine. "How long have you been here, hiding behind your charm?"

Her wary gaze followed him. Not frightened, but cautious. "In your camp? Only a few days."

"Why did you come?" He asked as a courtesy, because it didn't matter what her answer was. She'd put herself in danger, and now he was responsible for her.

"I am seeking my cousin." A wry smile curled her lips as she drifted toward the table. "You'll be pleased to know that your army keeps his location very quiet."

"Your cousin's safety is, in fact, my job." Ennon watched her edge toward the weapon and smiled as he held out the wine. "Leave the blade for now. Have a drink."

She arched one elegant eyebrow. "Surely the First Warlord can handle one little lion, whether she bears a sword or not."

"Do you wish to fight me, Kisri?" His body tightened at the thought. He'd never sparred with a woman without the skirmish ending in the blinding release of sex.

Color rose in her cheeks, as if she knew the path of his thoughts, but she lifted her chin and closed her fingers around the hilt of her sword. "I've had my fill of fighting. A lifetime of it, in the past few months."

“Mmm. Why are you searching for Malrion?”

Her fingers tightened until her knuckles stood out white against her skin. The scabbard rattled on the table. “The war has been hard on the High Lord’s family. So has illness. As of two moons ago, Malrion is the only male relative I have left.”

The words stopped him cold, and Ennon frowned, searching her face. “Your uncles. Both of them?”

“Within the last two moons, along with my father, last year. And my brother, three years ago.” She swallowed hard. “Malrion knew about them, but he may not know the rest. His court will be in chaos when he finally makes his way home, but my concerns have been more personal.”

Only one thing could have happened in the absence of a protector. “Who’s trying to force your hand?”

Her spine stiffened, as if the reminder summoned long-forgotten rage. “Plenty of the men too cowardly to fight for their lord. As if I’d lie down for a craven weakling.”

No, she wouldn’t. A woman like Kisri would fight, and a man would have to prove himself. He would have to be worthy to be chosen.

Ennon’s cock stiffened even more.

She jerked the steel blade from the scabbard in one smooth gesture and held it in front of her, her grip easy. Familiar. “I won’t lie down for any man. Not even you.”

He blinked and bit back the curse that rose to his lips. He knew only two things for certain—one, that he shouldn’t have let her see his attraction. And two, that she was lying.

But none of it mattered, because he had a very specific way to resolve this situation. “You’ll stay here until we break camp. I can guard you myself, and there’s plenty of room for a second bunk. Then, I’ll escort you directly to Mal. Untouched,” he added, “in case you have thoughts about using that blade.”

The tip of the sword wavered. A heartbeat later it dropped, until the point came to rest on the coarse rug. “Will you take me running soon?” she asked in a soft voice. “I haven’t dared. The magic would not have been strong enough to disguise me.”

Unexpected sympathy made his chest ache. How terrified she must have been, and yet she’d pressed on. “You are a lioness, Kisri, and a true warrior. We can go tonight, after dusk.”

“Thank you, Ennon.” She smiled, still bluster and bravado instead of the weariness he knew must linger under the surface. “It is good to see you. It has been many years, since before the war.”

“It’s good to see you too.” She’d been little more than a child then—though he supposed, in a way, they all had been. “Did you eat before they dragged you away from dinner? What can I bring you?”

“Food would be welcome. And sleep.”

“Then you shall have both.” He ducked his head through the tent flap and bellowed an order for a tray.

He didn’t wait to see that his orders were followed. He didn’t have to. They always were.

She slept with naked steel close by.

It wasn't that she didn't trust Ennon. Of all the men left in their world, he surely numbered among the few who would never harm her. He was First Warlord, her cousin's most trusted ally. He had long been a friend to the royal family.

She trusted him as far as she trusted any man who was not Malrion, but it didn't lessen the terror of recent weeks. A bed was the last place she felt safe, even a rough army cot like the one he'd had brought for her.

So she slept with her sword on the ground next to her, her dreams fitful and restless. Darkness came late in the summer, especially on the vast plains where the sunset lit the endless skyline. The need to run had become a painful ache, a magic that cut at her from the inside, a thousand tiny slices that would only be healed when she felt dirt under her paws.

Dusk, he'd said. But he was an important man, the entire vast armies of the lions under his command. For that reason it surprised her when she started from another half-dream to find him standing in the last lingering hint of twilight.

"Up, Kisri," he murmured. "It's time."

Small aches and pains vanished as she rose so quickly she nearly tripped. Her heartbeat pounded in her ears, a primal throb that would soon match the rhythm of her paws slamming against the earth as she ran and ran. Sheer gratitude made her dizzy. "Thank you."

He eyed her, his arms crossed over his strong chest. "These clothes, are they attuned to you? If they're not, I can wait for you outside."

A detail she had not considered—one she'd had no reason to consider, not with her other form too dangerous to assume. At home she had an embarrassing abundance of gowns and trousers alike, all enchanted to vanish when she became a lion and return when she regained human form.

The army had a wizard who did nothing but attune armor and uniforms to the soldiers, but Kisri had studiously avoided him. He would have seen through her glamour too easily.

She swallowed hard and hoped her cheeks weren't pink from the furious embarrassment churning in her gut. "I'll join you outside."

Ennon opened his mouth, then closed it with a nod and vanished from the tent with silent steps.

The overwhelming masculinity of her surroundings was so much more threatening as she worked at the fastenings on her clothing. Commoners might regard nudity as a natural state, but the nobility could afford to have all of their clothing attuned to them. One undressed to bathe or to mate and, with Ennon's musky scent curled around her, the act of stripping off her clothing seemed painfully significant.

Foolishness. At least he'd brought her bag to her. Crammed into one corner, she found the only thing she had from her own wardrobe—the gauzy shift she'd been wearing the night she'd fled her home. Scant protection, but she felt better slipping it over her head. Less vulnerable.

The change had never come so easily. She curled her toes against the rough carpet and closed her eyes, and magic spilled free in a relieved rush. Giddy, joyful even, and soon enough she stretched all four legs, heavy claws pricking at the rug as she padded forward and nudged aside the tent flap with her nose.

Ennon waited as a lion, on four legs instead of two, with lush fur and a thick ginger mane in place of his dark blond hair. “*Ready, Kisri?*”

His voice, stroking inside her mind in a dark caress. She wasn't small for a lioness, but she still felt dwarfed by his size as she stopped next to him. Around them, men had begun to gather, their murmurs low but their gazes all too telling. She wasn't so naive as to think there weren't women stashed somewhere, the quiet camp followers who sold their attentions to the soldiers who could afford them. But they were tucked away. Hidden.

She felt on display. “*I wish to run.*”

When the soldiers moved too close, Ennon snarled, a low, angry rumble, and they scattered. “*I know a place.*” He dug in, the muscles in his haunches rippling, and shot off toward the edge of camp.

Fast, but not fast enough. A child could have seen he was checking his speed, going easy, as if she was a fragile creature and not a woman grown. She shoved her claws into the dirt and launched herself after him. No holding back, no pacing herself. The need to be free burned through her, so she trusted in her new protector and ran.

She soared.

They cleared the camp in no time, soldiers flinging themselves from the path of their wild flight. For so long she'd been locked up, trapped in her fragile human body. As a woman she was half of herself, a song with only a few notes or a story with every other page torn away.

Like this, sprinting across the plains, able to claim two legs or four paws as it suited her—like this, she was *whole*.

Ennon avoided the small stands of trees scattered here and there as they crossed the plains at a ground-devouring lope. Only when they neared the forest did he round in a wide arc.

They had to be miles from the camp by now, and the sweet thrill of exertion filled her, the quiet burn in muscles too-long neglected. She slowed to a walk, her sides heaving with panted breaths as she padded through the gentle night, the sky stretched above her like black glass with thousands of twinkling diamonds spilled upon its surface. This close to the woods everything was wild grass, green and fragrant. She inhaled and dragged in the scent of clean air and the nearby woods and—

Ennon.

“*Feel better, Kisri?*”

She'd shared thoughts with dozens of family and friends. Hundreds, maybe. Never before had another lion's words brought with them such delicious warmth, an intimate touch that would have brought color to her human cheeks. It made her wonder what he felt in her quiet reply. *"Very much so."*

He'd stopped on a small, elevated knoll that would afford a useful view of the surrounding plains. He sank to the grass, rolling once before turning his head to watch her. *"Does this bother you?"*

"Does what bother me?"

He didn't blink. *"My thoughts in your head."*

Kisri turned and circled behind him, stretching her legs with every slow step. *"No, it does not bother me."* The truth, as far as it went, since she liked the brush of his mind *too* much.

"But it unsettles you."

The danger of such communication was the inability to lie. Anyone who grew up with royal connections, however, learned to shroud their fibs in false truth. *"You are very male, Ennon, and I have had cause to be wary of a male learning the secrets of my heart."*

He actually yawned. *"A few days more, and you will be safe in your cousin's care. That is what you want, yes?"*

The casual dismissal cut for reasons she did not care to examine. Her tail swished angrily as she studied his profile and considered biting him. *"Of course."*

Something in his eyes sharpened, as if she'd answered a question. *"Of course."*

Kisri hissed and crouched low, digging her paws into the grass as she sought the best footing. The urge to pounce was overwhelming, to fling herself at him, test her strength. To play, or fight—the same thing, perhaps. It simmered inside her, a pulsing need. *"You are too accustomed to being obeyed."*

He merely stretched, though she knew somehow that he could be ready in a breath to meet any attack. *"Is that not what I am? I am the First Warlord, a commander of lions."*

"A commander of lions," she agreed. Anticipation shivered through her as she settled her back legs, felt muscles tense. *"But I am a lioness."*

With a challenge so blatant hanging between them, he would expect her to lunge. Lunge she did, not at him but past him, drawing on the speed of her compact body as she dove into the grass and savored the thrill of being alive. Wild.

He crashed through the grass behind her, his greater bulk bearing down on her as her muscles tired and she slowed, just a bit.

Enough for him to catch her. He pounced with a roar, tumbling both of them to the ground in a roll. She twisted and bit at his jaw, a teasing nip, then wiggled away and crouched low, her tail whipping through the grass.

Play. Easy, perfect play, with no fear and no violence. Even when she pounced again and he rolled them easily, no darkness intruded. She didn't feel threatened when he wrestled her to the ground, when one enormous paw batted at her, claws carefully sheathed. Ennon did not seek to conquer, to hurt.

She shuddered beneath him and went passive, her muscles trembling with exertion. He growled, a low purr, and held her for a moment longer.

Then he released her and backed away. *"I sent a messenger to your cousin. If I know Mal, he will trust no one but me with your safety. When we hear back from him, we'll travel on."*

Which meant soon she'd be safe under the watchful eye of her cousin, whose wrath no one would dare test. The long months of guarding her virtue against men determined to claim her birthright would be over.

So would her long months of relative freedom. When Mal turned his attention once more to the mundane matters of day-to-day life, the unmarried state of the youngest royal lioness would not go unnoticed.

That he might force her into an undesired mating was unimaginable, but his tolerance was limited. She doubted it would extend to open-mindedness when it came to her observance of the rules of courtship. She'd go to her husband's bed a virgin, ignorant of all of the ways one found pleasure in a mate. Ignorant of passion, and how to choose a man who could inspire it.

This was her last chance...and perhaps her greatest opportunity. Ennon was a man with little to gain. He had the High Lord's ear, estates and riches beyond the average man's imagining, not to mention his pick of women. Claiming her could cost him more than he could hope to gain.

Foolishness. Kisri rested her chin on her paws and relaxed, banishing temptation. Ennon might stir her curiosity, but even her inexperienced instincts recognized the danger. A girl should not play games with a warlord.

Even if learning the rules from him would be—

No. She'd ignore Ennon's grace and strength and the odd way her body tightened when he stalked past her with such intensity.

She *would*.

Perhaps.

Chapter Two

The sun was high in the sky the next morning when Ennon finally ventured to Kisri's corner of the tent. She barely stirred, still deep in sleep.

It was a sleep that had claimed the last twelve hours, but he found himself reluctant to wake her. How exhausting must it have been for her to stay on constant guard, fending off unwanted advances?

It ignited his temper, and rage bubbled up inside him in a low boil. She'd had enough of men humping her leg, and it strengthened his resolve not to touch her, no matter how the sweet curves of her body called to him.

He could have taken her during their run. She'd wanted to play, nothing more, but the way she'd felt when he'd pinned her... Ennon knew it would only have been a matter of saying the right things. Seduction, not force, though sometimes the line between the two was thin, indeed.

"Kisri." He knelt by her cot, putting himself lower than her out of instinct. "Kisri, wake up."

She murmured and tugged at the coarse blanket, bundling it under her chin as she nuzzled her cheek deeper into the pillow. "Is it morning?"

"A bit past. I can hear your stomach rumbling."

Her nose scrunched up. "That is a rude thing to make note of, First Warlord."

Rude, yes, and that made it safe. Safer than having her stare up at him with soft, dark eyes. "'Tis the truth, is it not?"

"I could tolerate breakfast." She emerged from beneath the covers and stretched, showing off bare, well-toned arms, no doubt strengthened from training with the sword she carried. When her eyes opened, amusement stood plain in her gaze. "I hope you polish your manners better when you set out to woo ladies."

"I don't woo ladies," he answered seriously. "They usually swoon in my presence, and then I have only to catch them."

"How positively lazy of them." She sat, keeping the blanket pressed to her chest with one hand. "Do I have to dress myself in front of you too? What if *you* swoon? You're far too heavy to be caught."

"Better if I go, then," he agreed. "I can fetch your lunch, if you like. I'm afraid it is far too late for breakfast."

Her sweet, open smile tugged at him and transformed her face from striking to beautiful. “That would be welcome, thank you.”

He nodded and rose. “Call out if you need me. I will hear.”

It was the quickest trip he’d ever made to the cook tent, only long enough to fetch a kettle of soup and a basket packed with breads and fruits. Ennon paused outside his tent and rapped on the frame, to be sure Kisri had had time to dress.

“Ennon?” No more than his name, but tension wreathed the word.

Immediately, he cursed himself for his lack of thought. “Just me. May I come in?”

“Of course.”

Something clattered as he pushed aside the tent flap in time to see her removing her hand from the hilt of her sword. She smiled wryly. “I should know better. Who would dare cross the First Warlord?”

If only it were that simple. If the need to mate could drive a sane man crazy, drive him to claim a lioness against her will, it could most certainly make a smart man stupid. “Yes, who?” She held the flap as he carried in the kettle and basket. “I have wine. If you’d like something else, I shall have to fetch that too.”

“This is fine,” she promised. She was dressed in men’s clothing again—or boy’s clothing. Small enough to fit her frame, and tight enough to hug her hips and outline the firm swell of her breasts. She sat on one stool and pulled her heel up to the edge, resting her chin on her knee as she watched him. “You are worried, aren’t you? Surely you have things to do, but you don’t stray far from this tent.”

The moment her charm had shattered, she had become his priority. “I have left instructions to notify me if—” A loud roar interrupted his words, and he nodded toward the edge of the camp. “See there? Our messenger, hopefully returned with word of your cousin.”

An odd emotion flickered in her eyes, something that might have been disappointment. “He’s close then? We could be with him by sundown.”

“No, of course not.” Would she be sad if they parted ways so soon? “The messenger simply traveled to a nearby camp to see a wizard there, one who can communicate with a colleague traveling with Mal.”

“I see.” He definitely detected an edge of relief as she lowered her eyes and reached for a piece of bread. Her body language was different this morning, a mixture of shyness and bravery. “I’d better eat, then, if we have a long way to travel.”

He wouldn’t know how far until he received Mal’s message. “I’ll be right back.”

The messenger was out of breath and carefully sipping water when Ennon strode outside. “Have you news from the High Lord?”

A jerky nod. The soldier dragged in a deep breath and managed to get out the message. “The High Lord bids you leave the main army under the command of the Second Warlord and bring the Lady Kisri to him at once. Personally. He’s at the far western camp.”

It was exactly as Ennon had anticipated. "I've already begun preparations to do so. We leave in one hour."

Kisri had run with him the night before, and sadness had overtaken her when the messenger had returned so soon. She seemed to want to spend time with him...but how would she feel about traveling alone with him, with nothing to fend him off but his own honor?

Honor that could soon find itself in short supply.

No matter. The High Lord had spoken, and Ennon would obey.

They made good time, but it was still only a matter of hours before they had to make camp. Ennon had carefully paced their travel, and he watched Kisri closely for signs of overexertion.

She was tired. A fool could see it, but every time he drew too close she snarled, ears pressed back against her head, teeth bared. It wasn't until she stumbled that she allowed him to check their progress. Even then her back was stiff with the same pride that laced her thoughts. *"I am no weakling."*

It sparked his own temper. *"Only a fool flouts his limitations without reason. We are in no danger. We should not push ourselves."*

Her footsteps faltered. She stopped, her head low, and capitulated with an attempt at grace that failed to hide her trembling anger. *"I will be guided by you."*

"But you will not like it."

"You have my obedience. Would you demand my submission too?"

Her submission. He almost stumbled at the thought. What would she be like, on her belly for a man? Being of such high birth, she was almost certainly a virgin...or was expected to be one, at least. Plenty of noble women had successfully played the part of the innocent when they were anything but. Hell, he'd had his share of them himself.

But not like Kisri.

He shifted forms, but even his attuned clothing did little to hide the arousal she'd elicited. "I demand nothing of you," he told her as he slid the similarly enchanted packs from his shoulders.

Magic tripped up his spine. She blurred, became a human woman kneeling in the grass, clad only in a thin, flimsy shift that did little to conceal her body. "You demand nothing of me," she agreed, lifting her chin. "It should be a relief."

He ordered himself not to ask, for all the good it did. "Is it not a relief, sweet Kisri?"

"I wish it to be a relief." She shivered, and the fabric clinging to her breasts couldn't hide her tight nipples or the flush rising toward her neck. "I have never—" An awkward pause. "I liked boys. They would steal kisses, and I would slap their hands if they wandered too freely, and I was always in control. But I grew bored of boys."

His hands moved of their own volition, stripping off his leather vest, and he could barely hear his own words over the blood pounding in his ears. “Men are not so easily controlled.”

“I know.” She didn’t seem alarmed by his actions. Anticipation sparked in her eyes, as did nervousness. “I enjoy my freedom. What man would take me without taking my independence? *My life?*”

He was the wrong man to ask. Plenty of soldiers had mates waiting for them to return from the battlefields now that the war was over, but Ennon had never even flirted with the idea. “I don’t know. The right man?”

Her eyes lit. “You don’t want a mate. You don’t need my fortune.”

“No.” The only thing he desired was to take her, make her cry out as he pleased her with his tongue.

She fisted her hands and rested them on her thighs. “Perhaps we could come to an arrangement. If you found me appealing enough to bed, that is. I could...satisfy my curiosity about men. And you would be free to go your own way once you delivered me to my cousin.”

Malrion would murder him, pure and simple, and the knowledge didn’t stop him from considering her offer. “It’s a dangerous game to play, Kisri. If we were found out...”

“Then I’d be like every other noble woman who dared to take her pleasure into her own hands. I’d be no less valuable than I am now. It’s not my body that brings them to my door, touched or untouched.”

A convenient truth, one that made it too easy to step closer. What harm could it do? As she said, she would be fine, no worse for the wear. And Ennon could take care of himself, even if he had to brave Mal’s wrath. “Are you certain?”

She rocked to her feet. Her shift fluttered around her thighs, leaving her long, lean legs bare. “How can I be certain when I barely understand my own needs? I’m asking you to let me learn with you. Is it so different than any other type of sparring?”

She deserved the truth. “It could be exactly like that, and you should know how that can end.”

“With mating?” She tilted her head and studied him. “I’m aware of the risks. But I understand if you find them sufficient deterrent.”

“You’re the one who’s worried about her freedom. I can’t think of a worse hell than being mated to someone I could not have.”

She flinched a little, drawing in on herself. Backing away. “I don’t need you to fret over my heart or be gentle with my ego. If you don’t wish to bed me, for whatever reason, simply say so.”

The words startled him. “You think I’m talking about *you*?”

“I don’t know *what* you’re doing.” It was very close to a snarl, the anger not strong enough to hide the sting of rejection in her eyes. “I’m practically naked in front of you and all you care to do is talk. Even a virgin can tell that you don’t want to touch me. At least be man enough to admit it.”

"You're mistaken." Ennon kept a tight leash on his temper, and he gave her plenty of time to escape before dragging her close to his body, to his arousal. "Say it once more—that I don't want to touch you. Say it with my cock pressed against your belly."

Her breath came in short little hitches, and her head fell back, her eyes fluttering shut. "Your body wants me. It makes me float. I want to know how high I can fly."

So many years at war had given him a highly developed sense for danger, and that's exactly what she was. "I accept your proposition."

Small but strong fingers curled around his arms. She stroked him, exploring, and eased her hands up. Her nails pricked his skin, and a sleepy smile curved her lips. "Play with me, Ennon. I don't know the rules, but I've always been a most attentive student."

"I believe it." She might fumble, but she was eager, and that was the most pleasurable thing of all. "Would you like to kiss me?"

She was fast, limber. One hop and she had those legs wrapped around his hips, her arms around his neck. Her lips found his chin first, fluttering tiny little kisses along his jaw, her nose nuzzling his cheek. Then she licked the corner of his mouth and all but purred. "I like how you taste."

Or perhaps she wouldn't fumble at all. His cock throbbed as he wrapped his fingers around her bare thighs and captured her mouth, urging her lips apart. *Heaven*. He sipped her and hungered for more, insane when his mouth had not yet left hers.

Eager though her body was, her kiss was awkward. Curious. She licked at his tongue and shivered, a reaction impossible to miss with her body pressed to his. So easy to read her responses in her unashamed moans and eager squirming—easier when her shift rode up and her naked cunt pressed to his abdomen.

He groaned. She was wet already, and his head spun. He wanted to spill her to the ground, but he hadn't laid out bedrolls or even started a fire. "Kisri."

This time her nails dug into his shoulders. "What?"

He marveled at how calm he managed to sound. "We need to set up camp before we do this."

Dark eyes studied him, the slightest hint of suspicion there, as if she anticipated a trick. "And then you will take me?"

If he tried to walk away, his traitorous body would root him to the spot. "Yes, I will take you. *My way*."

"Your way?"

"My way." He set her down and turned to his packs. She'd never known a man's touch, much less the sweet way one could lose control. She would spit and scratch, fight the pleasure until she was ready to give in.

The thought weakened his knees, and he moved faster, hurriedly readying their camp.

Chapter Three

By the time Ennon had built a fire and smoothed out their bedrolls, Kisri was sure she would break under the heavy weight of anticipation that made every moment last twice as long as the one before.

She felt edgy. Hungry. She was not so innocent that she did not know her own body and what touches could give it pleasure, but the memory of her own fingers seemed to pale when compared to Ennon's mouth over hers.

If he walked away now, she might weep from the throbbing frustration.

He stared down at the fire long after it had caught. "Are you hungry?"

"Yes." Not for food, and he was a fool if he believed she was. "I'm starving. I'm *hurting*."

Ennon rose to his full height and held out his hand. "Come here."

If she'd moved any faster, she might have tumbled to the ground in a graceless heap. Her fingers closed around his, and even that touch felt like holding her hand too close to a flame.

He placed her hand on his chest and slipped one arm around her waist. "We start with more kissing."

Impatience bubbled up, and she curled her fingers, scoring his chest lightly in warning. "You won't stop again, will you?"

"No." A simple denial, echoed by the hot shadows in his eyes. "I won't stop this time, not until you've found your pleasure."

Not his pleasure, she noticed, but there was time enough to convince him otherwise. To satisfy her curiosity about the heavy erection that had pressed against her stomach, hard and unyielding. "Should I kiss you?"

He tilted her head back. "Open your mouth." As soon as she obeyed, he pressed his parted lips to hers. His tongue glided over hers, hot and wicked.

This was what she wanted. Needed, even. She spread her fingers wide on his chest and appreciated the way he was built. Strong. Solid. He would be a fitting tutor in the arts of pleasure, because she would never need to be less than she was with him.

His hand dropped to the curve of her ass, and he squeezed gently. "Take it off. The shift."

She could number the times she'd been naked in front of a grown man on one hand. Her hands shook as she eased the flimsy fabric up, over her head, and let it fall to the ground.

Ennon groaned. "You're a vision, Kisri. Beautiful."

“Thank you.” A soft breeze tickled her skin and stirred her hair. Her nipples were painfully tight, aching in a way that would be soothed by nothing except him. “Will you touch me?”

He made a quiet noise and took her hands, tugged her down to the wide bed he’d laid near the fire. “Lie back and let me look at you.”

Slow. Deliberate. She’d expected passion and hasty touches, something so wild she could lose herself. Stretching out before him felt like an offering, one she had to choose.

She did, leaning back on her elbows with her fingers fisted around the blanket. Pressing her legs together didn’t help relieve the ache, but it gave her the tiniest shred of modesty. “I think I should be able to look at you too.”

Ennon knelt beside her and drew one finger slowly down her middle, from the hollow of her throat to her navel. “You wish me naked, do you?”

“Of course.” The heat from her cheeks wasn’t from the fire. “Or are you so well-endowed you fear my virgin nerves will shatter and I’ll flee into the woods?”

He laughed. “If you fled, I would have to chase you.” He drew his tunic over his head before reaching for her again, this time to stroke the pad of his thumb over her hipbone.

His broad chest was strongly muscled, which she’d known well enough from being crushed against it. The knowledge didn’t make studying the wide set of his shoulders and the spattering of scars any less arousing.

Not as arousing as the thought of being chased. She arched a little, then rolled to her hands and knees. “Maybe I will run, if you plan to tease me endlessly.”

He moved quickly, his hands steely strong as he flipped her onto her back once more. One hand snuck beneath her to soften her fall to the bedroll, and Ennon leaned over her. “We do this my way, Kisri. And my way is slow.”

She sucked in a breath and curled her hands around his shoulders. Hot skin, and a tension that reassured her, oddly. He desired her. Holding himself apart was a challenge. It made it easier to agree. “Slowly, then.”

“Yes.” His teeth scraped her collarbone, and his mouth brushed the curve of her breast, just above her nipple. Her body jerked without her permission, and she arched up and clenched her hands in his hair.

Ennon whispered a pleased noise and slid his mouth, wet and hungry, down to cover her nipple. His hand tickled over the tops of her thighs, parted them and eased between.

She twisted and gasped in a breath as instinct tried to drive her legs together again. Only the need to feel him kept her from squirming away. She moaned and pulled at his hair. “Ennon...”

His fingers parted her, and one teased inside her. “Yes?”

It felt good but passive. She didn’t want to lie quietly—she wanted to explore him. “When can I touch you?”

He exhaled a shaky breath. "That depends. What do you want to do?"

"Everything." She relaxed one hand, slipped it down his chest and pressed her fingers against the hard length of his erection.

His teeth ground together as he thrust against her touch. "If you rush me, I'll have no choice but to drive you mad quickly." His finger pressed deeper and curled, rubbing inside her.

It was good at first, and then it was incredible, lights behind her eyes and fire in her veins, but no release. Just sparking pleasure that lifted her hips and made her moan and clutch at him, willing to do anything if only he wouldn't stop.

He didn't, but his mouth dropped close to her ear. "I will take you once you've let go, Kisri. Once you come for me."

Oh, how she wanted to. She fairly trembled with the need, but the closer she got, the more the lioness inside scratched and snarled. *Too easy*, the wildness whispered as Kisri dragged her nails down his back with a frustrated moan. *He should fight for us.*

His snarl echoed the one inside her. "You're holding back."

Kisri hissed out a breath, and the lioness overtook her for a moment. Wild instinct made her twist away from Ennon, though the last thing she wanted to do was escape. She ended up on her knees, trembling with indecision—and mortification. "I don't know how to do this," she whispered, hiding her face with her hands. "I'm an ignorant, foolish girl."

"No." He touched her back in slow, soothing strokes. "Instinct is pushing you to tease me. To make me work hard for the reward of your pleasure."

It seemed distinctly self-defeating when pleasure would be *her* reward too, but it echoed the wariness inside her. Even now, when the callused fingers tracing her spine made her want to arch into him, that voice urged her to rock to her feet and run, to see if he'd give chase.

She didn't have to obey, but she couldn't quite relax, either. "Will it stop?"

"Do you want it to, or do you want to give in?"

"Both." Rubbing her thighs together only accentuated the throbbing ache. She'd been so close to bliss—to relief—and now she felt feverish and unsettled. "I want to run. But I need you so badly...and I'm afraid you won't want to catch me."

She felt the sudden scrape of teeth across her lower back. "Run, Kisri. Set her free and see what happens."

Glee. She came to her feet as a human and stayed that way. He'd found a beautiful clearing to camp in, one of the many fields of wild, soft grass that separated the border between plains and forest. The ground was soft enough under her bare feet, and she wanted to feel his skin when he caught her.

If he caught her.

A tiny thread of doubt lingered, even with his confident challenge in her ears. She launched herself toward the distant tree line and wondered if he was still by the fire, laughing at her for thinking she was worth the trouble of the hunt. A clumsy girl who wouldn't know how to please him, whose cousin would be furious—

Ennon's hands closed on her hips, and they tumbled to the ground. She landed on his chest and barely had time to take a breath before he claimed her mouth, took it for his own.

This wasn't the gentle kiss of before, or even the hungry one. Ennon was a warrior—the First Warlord of the plains—and he knew how to stake his claim. His teeth bit into her lip and his tongue stroked at hers until she moaned and squirmed.

After several dizzying seconds, he dropped her to her knees on the soft grass. “Will you accept me, Kisri?”

She was panting, and every breath she dragged in brought with it the heady scent of him, of leather and lion and sweat. He was so aroused that his erection strained his trousers, and a wicked urge seized her. So she leaned forward and nuzzled her cheek against the hard ridge of flesh. “If you can handle me.”

Ennon wound his hands into her unbound hair and held her in place for just a heartbeat. “You like to tease.”

“Yes,” she admitted readily. “How will you know where the boundaries lie if you never test them?”

“Some of us simply know.” His fingers tightened. “I know how far I can push you. Where the line between pleasure and pain lies.”

She had no explanation for the thrill she got from his hands tugging at her hair. Not rough, but not gentle, either. Caught somewhere between pleasure and pain, arousal twisted with a sharpness that drove a gasp from her.

This was why she'd chosen him. “Show me,” she whispered. Pleaded. “I need release. I need you.”

He let go of her and opened his pants. “Stay where you are, but turn around, Kisri, and I will. I'll show you.”

At first she couldn't quite decipher what he wanted. Gossiping maids and illicit books had expanded her vocabulary and given her a rough idea of how sex worked, but the intricacies and variations were something of a mystery.

She started to turn her back to him, thinking perhaps he might mean to forgo this endless teasing and take her body. But he hadn't risen to his knees, or moved at all, beyond freeing his erection from the confines of his trousers.

That sight all but wiped the memory of his instructions from her mind. His cock rose hard and thick, impressive enough to make her doubt her understanding of the practicalities of sex. Oddly, it didn't diminish her longing—heat pooled between her legs as she wet her lips. “How do you wish me to be?”

"I will let you choose, for it depends on what you want." He closed his hand around his cock. "I can take you, let you ride me. Or we can pleasure one another with our mouths."

Turn around. He'd meant for her to position herself so he could use his mouth—and she could do the same.

It was so appealing that she moved before she'd voiced a decision, sliding her leg across his chest. She sat up and glanced over her shoulder. "Like this?" she asked as she brushed her fingertips over the head of his erection.

He tensed and groaned. "Like that, Kisri. Just like that."

Power thrilled through her at his reaction. Untutored and inexperienced she might be, but her slightest touch could make the second most powerful man in her world pant and shudder. Smiling, she turned and wiggled back a little, enough so she could bend over and tease his cock with a tiny lick.

Oh yes, she would enjoy this power a great deal.

She had no idea that her position left her open to this touch. Ennon considered warning her, then shuddered again and slipped his fingers against her wet cunt.

Her back arched, and a gasp feathered her breath over his erection. Strong legs squeezed his chest, like instinct was trying to force her thighs together. "Ennon..."

"Our mouths on each other, Kisri." He delved deeper. "This is what I meant. At the same time."

A pause. A shaky laugh. Her cheek pressed against his hip as she curled her fingers around his shaft. "I'd forgotten," she admitted, easing her thumb up and down his length. "I was distracted."

"By me? I'm flattered." He wrapped his free hand around her hip and drew her down, closer to his mouth.

She shivered again, but her body rocked toward him. "You're distracting. You're...very large."

She sounded more worried than impressed. "You needn't be alarmed. We can go slowly."

"Not alarmed." Loose strands of her hair tickled his legs as she lifted her head again. "I trust you, Ennon," she whispered. Then she closed her lips around his cock with a throaty moan.

He tried to choke back his groan, but it was impossible with the sweet heat of her mouth on him. All he could do was take her with him, so he parted her slick flesh with his thumbs and licked her firmly.

Her hips jerked, and he steadied her. Tiny, helpless moans hummed against his erection as she trembled, aroused so quickly she had to have been riding the edge all this time.

Ennon gathered his self-control and pushed one finger inside her, testing her readiness.

"Oh!" She dragged her lips from him and dropped her forehead to his thigh, as if she couldn't hold her head up. The slick warmth of her clenched tight around his finger, and she moaned. "I—I don't want to hurt you by mistake."

“You won’t.” He couldn’t keep the tension from his voice, and he stopped trying as he eased another finger into her tight channel. “Just let go.”

In the next moment he felt her teeth, sharp against his hip as she bit him to muffle a keening cry. Her release was wild, as unrestrained as she and as unashamedly passionate. He didn’t want it to end, so he curved his fingers inside her and rocked his hand.

“Ennon!” She was panting. Shaking. Another spasm shook her, and she raked her nails along his leg and whimpered. “I—I can’t... Oh *goddess*, it’s good.”

He pressed his open mouth to her thigh. “Shall I stop?”

“I don’t—” Her voice sank to a raspy whisper. “I need to catch my breath.”

Ennon turned her, gathered her against his chest. “Are you all right?”

As bold as she’d been before, now she seemed shy. She nuzzled her cheek against his chest and shivered. “I thought I knew what release felt like. My own...explorations were apparently insufficient.”

“That sounded almost like a compliment, sweet.”

“Almost?” She inched higher and brushed a kiss to the corner of his mouth. “And here I thought it would please your ego to know you were the first one to show me pleasure.”

It should have—but he’d already known her to be untouched. “Ah, but I also like the notion of you taking your own pleasure.”

One small hand slipped down his body and came to rest at his hip, her fingers fanned wide. “I’d rather pleasure *you*.”

She had no idea how his body tightened at the thought. “Not if you need time.”

“I—” Her cheek warmed against his chest. With a soft noise she slipped away, sliding down his body until her unbound hair tickled his skin. “This, tonight,” she murmured, her breath skating over his aching erection. “Tomorrow, you can teach me something else.”

If they weren’t careful, her magic would bind to his. If they weren’t— The thought dissolved as the flat of her tongue touched him, wet and eager. “Kisri.”

She smiled, her satisfaction in his reaction evident. “You tasted me.” Another lick, this one firm. Demanding. “My turn.”

Her mouth closed around him, and his entire body jerked as pleasure overwhelmed him. The sight of her bending over him, trembling with her eagerness, threatened to strip him of the little control he’d retained. “Deeper.”

Inexperience made her awkward, but she obeyed, working deeper in tiny movements that grew more confident when he arched up and touched the back of her head.

Ennon could have let her go on, but instead he tugged at her hair. “Kis—I’m going to come.”

The noise she made was encouraging, so enthusiastic he could feel the vibrations in his bones. She gripped his hips and kept up her steady, determined pace until he had to dig his fingers into the grass so he wouldn't push at her head. Take her mouth and find his release deep in her throat.

When she began to pull back on an upstroke, almost releasing him, he let go. Pleasure sang through him, pulsing in time with his clamoring heart.

Her touch gentled, became almost soothing until he sprawled on the grass, utterly spent. Then she prowled her way up his body and collapsed against his chest with a purring noise of contentment. "I can please you too."

Answering took far more effort than it should have. "Did you doubt that?"

"Perhaps."

He swept her hair back and kissed her temple. "You shouldn't have. You please me greatly."

A tiny sigh. "Now we have to run back to camp. Perhaps being chased is more fun in the moment than in the aftermath."

With her body on his, she was shielded from most of the chill. "We could rest here for just a little while."

Her cheek rubbed against his chest as she nodded. "Mmm."

Soon, she would drift into sleep, and he'd be left to carry her back to camp.

Ennon relished the thought.

Chapter Four

Two days of travel and two nights in Ennon's arms, and she was still a virgin.

Well, mostly.

Kisri stretched her arms over her head and laughed when one hand bumped a wall of solid muscle. Still sleeping, though not so soundly that he didn't stir at her movement. "Good morning, Ennon."

He grunted and slipped an arm around her. "Kisri."

Sleeping in his arms was warmer than being curled in front of her hearth, and more comfortable too. She snuggled closer. "The sun has been up for hours. I think you must not have been getting enough sleep."

His laugh rumbled under her cheek. "There's a reason to move?"

Perhaps not. Hiding her smile, she stroked her fingers down his side. Amazing, how many burdens seemed lifted from her shoulders now. "I wouldn't mind lingering."

"Nor would I." He held her still as he stretched. "Now, see? We can sleep all day if we so desire."

Her cousin would believe easily enough that she hadn't had the stamina for a hard run. "Is that what you want to do? Sleep?"

He rolled her suddenly—and with a wicked grin. "There may be other things we desire."

"Many things." Intriguing, illicit things that she couldn't help but imagine with his unyielding body pressing her down into the bedroll. It was a pity her nervousness lingered. "You don't mind that we haven't done all of them yet, do you?"

Ennon laughed low in his throat. "We've done our fair share, and then some. No, I don't mind at all."

Was she blushing? Her cheeks felt warm, but so did the rest of her, as if his presence burned hotter than the sun. "I don't know if I should be embarrassed at how little I know or relieved at how much you do."

"Or, as a third option, you could refrain from worrying quite so much about it."

Wrinkling her nose, she lifted her head just enough to nip at his chin. "I suppose men don't worry so much about their first times."

"Mmm, only if they cannot seem to make it happen, no matter how hard they try."

"Somehow I doubt you suffered any such concerns."

He groaned and rolled away. "Surely you don't want to discuss the idiocies of my misspent youth."

She certainly did not, for so many reasons, not the least of which was the tickle of inappropriate jealousy at knowing how many women had felt the touch of his hands, or the pleasure of his mouth. Still,

the words had tumbled out, because talking filled a need that touching him didn't—comfort of an entirely different sort.

Not the sort of intimacy he'd agreed to, though. He might risk her cousin's rage if the reward was a few extra days between her thighs. But idle chatter? What could she possibly have to say that would interest a warlord? "I'm sorry."

Ennon sat up with a lazy stretch. "Sorry? Whatever for?"

Staring at his back was less intimidating than being forced to meet his too-knowing gaze, at least. "I must seem like I don't know what I want."

He found her hand as he turned and looked down at her. "You seem like a lioness on the verge of discovering what she wants."

"If I hadn't been born to the family of the High Lord, I might already know."

He agreed readily. "Yes. I've never met a more protective man than your cousin."

"He has more resources at his disposal than most." And he used them ruthlessly. Ennon's mere presence was a testament to that—how many women would have been given the most dangerous soldier on the plains as a personal escort?

He lifted her hand to his mouth. "Are you worried about what he might think?"

"No." She managed a smile. "Are you?"

"Not for a heartbeat."

With that reassurance, Kisri rocked to her knees. "Run with me? Not to get somewhere. Just...to run."

His eyes clouded. "We *could* pull up camp and go."

"Do you want to?"

"Not particularly, though my reasons are far from honorable."

Relieved, Kisri smiled. "Can we take another day or two to be dishonorable, then?"

Ennon trailed his fingers up her arm, over her shoulder to the back of her neck. "The important thing is that you're safe, yes?"

"Yes." Or maybe the important thing was the way she felt when he touched her. Not so wild as the first night, when nerves had turned her inside out. The warm promise of true pleasure grew inside her, now that she knew what it felt like. How release could shake through her and bring bliss.

Now she knew how much she had left to learn—and how much she had to lose.

"Kisri?"

When the power had been in her hands, she hadn't feared for her heart. No boy had ever threatened to strip her of her defenses, but in choosing the only man who had nothing to gain by claiming her, she'd miscalculated. He might not take her dowry, but he could so easily abscond with something far more precious.

Even knowing that, she wanted him. Needed him. “I want to—” *Make love* sounded too much like romance and mating. *Fuck* sounded like she was trying too hard to be the exact opposite. Trapped somewhere in between, she groped for words before settling on the ones he’d used. “Show me how to ride you.”

His blue eyes heated. “I thought you wanted to run.”

“I’m beginning to think the urges come hand in hand. Can’t we skip the chase and you can catch me now?”

He laughed and drew her closer, onto his lap. “I caught you once. Does it take more to satisfy you?”

“Yes.” Giving in to another urge, she trailed her nails down the strong curve of his biceps, not quite firmly enough to scratch. “Would you expect me to be easily tamed?”

“Never,” he whispered. “I would expect you to be this spirited. To make me fight for it every single step of the way.”

“So tame me.” His jaw tempted her with its fascinating roughness, and she pressed a kiss to his skin before giving him a hint of teeth. “Just for today.”

“Mmm.” He stroked her back, all the way down to the swell of her ass. “Are you ready for that?”

“In general?” She licked his ear this time and smiled when he shuddered beneath her. “Or right this moment?”

“Either.” He bit her ear—quick but sharp. “Both?”

With her body pressed to his, he couldn’t miss her own shudder of reaction. “I’m ready for you.” She eased back, then slid her fingers down his chest until they reached his cock. “You’ll need to help me be sure I’m ready for this.”

Ennon hissed in a breath. “To take me?”

No turning back, but this time she’d keep her control. She needn’t offer submission to accept his guidance, and Ennon seemed unlikely to demand it of her. Not when they both understood the danger in playing such games. “Yes.”

He stroked one hand against her, his fingertips teasing over her entrance. “And how shall I prepare you?”

Kisri kissed his cheek and his jaw. She teased her tongue along the stern firmness of his lips and moaned at the perfect taste of his mouth. “I trust you,” she whispered and kissed him hard enough to banish her lingering worry, until nothing remained but heat and him.

He thrust those fingers into her, slow but unyielding. He began to rock his hand, a slight, careful movement that shouldn’t have unraveled her world. Swaying, Kisri clung to his shoulders and closed her eyes, savoring everything from the silken brush of skin on skin to the way stretching discomfort gave way to an aching need for more.

It would hurt, but it wasn't fear of pain that made her shiver as she pressed her cheek to his. Every moment must be fixed into her mind. The scrape of his stubble along her jaw, the soft scratch of the hair on his chest when he held her close. So little time to memorize the feel of his fingers tying her into skillful knots and the rumbling noises of encouragement he made every time she whimpered.

That was all they could be. Memories, and ones she couldn't savor too closely until after, when there was no danger that longing and affection could bind her to him in ways that could never be undone. Somehow—*somehow*—she had to hold something back. She couldn't give him everything.

His voice rumbled, rasped in her ears. "Open your eyes, Kisri. Look at me."

Obedying him had everything to do with her need to cling to that image of him, blond hair disheveled, dark gaze hungry for her pleasure.

She opened her eyes, and it was better than she'd imagined. He rocked his hand one more time and curled his fingers inside her, oddly intent. The feelings inside her shifted lightning fast, from lazy to so intense her body jerked. "Ennon—" He did it again and again, inexorably driving her toward madness. She didn't know if she wanted to twist closer or squirm away, not until his final touch sent her flying, release gripping her with such fury that she cried out.

He moved his hand and lifted her, his lips brushing her chin as a different sort of hardness prodded against her. "Yes, darling?"

With her body still shaking in the grip of climax, all she cared about was having him back inside her. She hissed her displeasure and fought his grip, taking half of his length inside her with one desperate movement.

He cursed and held her still, gripping her hips. "*Kisri*—"

She closed her teeth on his jaw hard enough to bruise. "Now."

Ennon dragged her down with a snarl, driving deep. Her hips slammed against his, and he stifled a groan against her cheek.

Maybe it *had* been too fast. Kisri squeezed her eyes shut so Ennon wouldn't see the pain there and took a deep, unsteady breath. "I'm all right."

He trembled under her. "Are you certain?"

She hadn't been before, but each passing moment eased her discomfort. Kisri nuzzled his cheek and slid her hands down to his, where they curled tight on her waist. Wrapping her fingers around his wrists, she urged them up. "Touch me, Ennon. I want you to touch me."

He sank his hands into her hair first, tilting her head back a moment before his mouth descended on hers. He kissed her fiercely, but with an unmistakable edge of tenderness echoed in the way he stroked her shoulders, her arms. Her breasts. When his fingers found her nipples, she moaned into his mouth a moment before turning her head. "Ennon. *Ennon*."

"Yes." He teased at her nipples, rolled them between his fingers. "Say it again."

“Ennon...” She rocked, and pressure began to give way to the sweetest friction. Not quite pleasure, not yet, but so far from pain that she could barely remember hurting. “I like the way you feel inside me.”

He dropped his hands to her hips and guided her, showing her how to move as he spoke through gritted teeth. “I like the way you feel around me.”

“How?” She lifted her body, just a little, and moaned at the stretch as she sank onto him again. “How do I feel?”

“Like—” His head fell back, his throat working. “Like heaven and hell, all at once.”

“Yes?” She couldn’t resist the lure of his neck, strong and beautiful. With a quiet snarl of satisfaction she closed her teeth on his skin.

Ennon tensed and drew her closer with a rough clutch of his hands. “*Fuck*, again—”

“Mine.” She didn’t care how foolish it made her sound, how he might misunderstand. Need consumed her as she closed her teeth over his pulse and thrilled at the taste of him. “I want to make you come.”

He squeezed his eyes shut for a moment and shuddered. Then he caught her gaze. His eyes blazed amber, wild and out of control, as he thrust up into her.

The air escaped her lungs in a sharp gasp and the world danced, pleasure turning everything blurry. His fingertips dug into her hips, forcing them to an angle that made every touch before seem tame in comparison.

Light sparked every time he dragged their hips together, until tension unspooled so suddenly she could do nothing but cling to him when release claimed her. Hard and beautiful, and more intense with his body buried so deep in hers that for one perfect moment they were one.

Ennon shouted her name and jerked in her arms, but he didn’t stop. He kept moving for what seemed an eternity, prolonging pleasure with every thrust, until finally he drew her against him with a harsh groan and stilled. “Kisri.” He pressed his face to her shoulder, his hair damp with sweat, his and hers.

“Yes.” She slid her fingers to the back of his head, cradling him to her chest as she fought for breath. He was the one trembling now, undone by pleasure, and she’d never felt so safe. Ennon might tear apart the world to protect her, but in her arms, the most dangerous man on the plains was tamed.

“One more day,” he whispered, “and we’ll be on our way again, yes? Surely no one will miss us for one more day.”

One more day wouldn’t be enough, but somehow she’d make sure it was everything.

He’d fucked up horribly, and Malrion was going to kill him.

Ennon didn’t blame him, of course. He’d been given a mission—clear and simple. Return the High Lord’s cousin to the safety of his custody, unharmed and unmolested. Instead, it could be argued he’d done both, and worse. Because taking her hadn’t only bound together their bodies, but their magic, as well.

He'd mated Kisri, and now he was going to die, to say nothing of what might happen to her.

He watched her as she gathered her few items of clothing and rolled them neatly into the pack he'd provided. She seemed oblivious to his turmoil, her thoughts clearly somewhere else. A faint smile tugged her lips up, an almost daydream-like satisfaction that proved her utterly pleased with him and the world at large.

At least she was oblivious to his lapse. She'd been caught up in pleasure when the mating bond had taken hold, and there was no reason for her to have noticed the flare in magic unless she'd been looking for it. But she hadn't been—because what could be more reckless than mating her without her consent?—and now she would never know what a fool he'd been.

He'd make sure of it.

He hefted two bags and secured them. "Almost ready?"

"I suppose I'll have to be." Her smile faltered. "My cousin will eventually begin to wonder where we are, I suppose."

"Yes." And dreading Mal's angry, disappointed reaction was no excuse for dallying even longer. Especially not if it might bring the same down on Kisri. "We can make his camp by daybreak."

"I can run, even if I didn't sleep enough last night." She rose and pressed both hands to his shoulders, leaning up. "One last kiss?"

He caught her around the waist, though it took him a moment to speak. "Surely we can steal a few more before we reach our destination."

"As many as you'll let me," she whispered, then covered his mouth with her own. She'd learned to kiss, how to stroke her tongue against his lips, half plea, half demand.

It stoked an already-familiar fire to life inside him, one only she could quench, and he clenched one hand in her hair and kissed her harder.

By the time she pulled away, she was panting. "I think I'll miss kissing you more than I should," she whispered, and it sounded like an uncertain confession.

Ennon wasn't ready to talk of such things, not when he knew his need for her would not abate—even if he had to let her go. "We have a ways to go yet."

"Yes, we do." She kissed his chin and nuzzled his cheek with sweet, open affection. "Thank you for giving me this, Ennon."

"It was no favor, Kisri."

"It was more than I could have hoped for." Stepping back, she eyed what remained of their camp, her gaze tripping over every place he'd had her. His imagination couldn't have painted the sadness on her features as she nodded once. "Shall we run?"

The smart answer hung in his throat. "In a bit. A nice day, isn't it?"

“Beautiful.” Sadness faded, replaced by a wicked little smile as she waved toward the nearby trees. “Maybe we could walk awhile. I’ve never had much luxury to stroll through the forest without worrying about bandits.”

Her fire burned brighter than ever now, without the prickly defensiveness she usually wrapped around herself. He swatted her ass with his open hand and smiled. “Fancy another chase?”

Just like that, she was gone, her strong legs carrying her across the rolling grass in confident strides. Ennon dropped the packs instinctively, diving after her into the trees.

Four heartbeats, long enough to let her get up to speed, and he caught her around the waist. She shot off her feet with a shriek, and Ennon turned her around and backed her against a tree. “You like that so much,” he whispered. “I can *feel* how much.”

“Because you want me enough to chase me.” Those lean legs locked around his hips as she brought her fingers to the ties on his breeches. “And when you catch me, you deserve me.”

He ripped her clothes, and he didn’t care. All that mattered was this—her desire, her pleasure. “I don’t deserve you.”

“You do, you do—” Words faded to a groan as she wrapped her fingers around his cock and stroked. More confident, now that she knew what he liked and what she wanted. “Help me, Ennon. Take me. I need you.”

He pulled her hands up and pinned them to the rough bark as he drove into her. As he sank *home*, sating the instinctive need that twisted him while fanning another desire to life. He gritted his teeth and forced himself to move more slowly.

Not that she made it easy. She fought his grip, teasing him with the thrill of subduing her even as the heels digging into his back urged him to quicken his pace. A wild lioness, hungry for passion and for him.

He released her wrists, and she slipped her hands under his shirt, scratched his back. Ennon shuddered through a groan. “Yes?”

“Yes.” Her lips parted, and she tilted her head back. “I want to come. Help me, help—”

Lifting her a little more provided the leverage he needed, changed the angle of his next thrust, and her body obeyed his silent command as if he held the key to her pleasure. She was beautiful in release, free and unashamed. Her voice rose, meaningless pleas in time with the sweet spasms gripping him, and Ennon let go.

Home.

An eternity later, soft fingers stroked his shoulders, and her lips tickled across his throat. “Ennon.”

Her voice and touch barely pierced the haze of pleasure that still surrounded him. “Are you all right?”

“I’m wonderful.” Her breath blew warm over his ear, the only warning before she nipped at him lightly. “Are you?”

“I’m—” He couldn’t even explain it, because she wouldn’t understand. “I wish it didn’t have to end.”

She hesitated. Stroked him. “Does it?”

Ennon pulled away and set her down, tried his best to right her clothes. “You know your cousin, do you not?”

“I don’t need his permission to—” The words cut off abruptly, her teeth sinking into her full lower lip. A moment later she continued, her voice softer. “But your life would be difficult, if it did not end. You serve him.”

He’d be lucky to escape claw or blade if Mal found out what he’d truly done. “Your cousin desires better for you. I am his second, but I fear he knows me too well.”

“Oh?”

She was so wary, and Ennon forced a smile. “I am, apparently, not to be trusted. Not when it comes to women.”

Kisri retied her tattered shirt and reached for his hand. “I trust you.”

“I would not hurt you.” It wasn’t her fault, and none of it was fair, especially not to her. “But I’m a careless bastard, Kisri. I always have been.”

It looked like she wanted to fight him, to argue in favor of his honor, Instead she brushed her thumb over his fingers before her hand slipped away. “We need to run.”

To relieve tension or to reach the High Lord’s camp faster? It didn’t matter. Ennon nodded. “You’re right, of course.”

“Of course.” A small smile played at the corners of her mouth, mysterious but amused. “Perhaps I’ve tired you out enough that I’ll be able to keep up with you.”

“I have no doubt.” Too bad he couldn’t say the same in a broader sense. He had nothing *but* doubts about what would happen to them once they reached the High Lord’s camp.

Chapter Five

Years at war had changed many things about her cousin, but not the way Mal commanded attention and respect simply by being who and what he was.

He met them at the edge of camp, broader than she remembered, and clad in the rough leathers of a warrior instead of the ceremonial armor of a noble lord who held himself above the fray. Kisri found herself relieved that Ennon had insisted they stop and cover the last quarter league on foot. Her attuned chemise was packed safely away, and she was in the same clothes she'd been wearing when Ennon had found her. Judging by the stern set of her cousin's jaw, arriving in anything else could have been disastrous.

But he opened his arms wide to her. "Kisri. It's good to have you here, safe."

Just like that she was young again, throwing herself into the arms of the man who had been her friend and protector. The man who had taken her into his heart like a sister and encouraged her to learn the ways she could protect herself while quietly ensuring she'd never need to use them.

Until that moment, she hadn't realized how desperately she'd missed her family.

"Shh," he whispered, holding her tight. "You're all right now."

She shouldn't tell him that she *had* been all right. That the relief washing over her was that of a woman who'd found her loved ones, not a girl afraid of the world. She hadn't been afraid since the first night Ennon had run with her, when he'd tumbled her to the grass and let her go. All that strength at her disposal, and how could anyone be frightened with the First Warlord of the plains at her back?

She couldn't tell him, couldn't open Ennon to her cousin's suspicion, so instead she eased back and fought for the bored disinterest of a noble lady complimenting an underling. "Ennon was an excellent guardian."

Mal's brows drew together in a fleeting frown, one that vanished in an instant. "Ennon?"

The other lion stepped forward. "My lord?"

The High Lord glanced at his second with enough shrewd curiosity to make Kisri wonder if she'd tipped her hand, exposed them both. But he only said, "You have my gratitude."

Ennon dropped his gaze to the ground. "My lord."

She wished she'd said her goodbyes properly. She wished she'd kissed Ennon another time, had whispered to him that it wouldn't be the last time. She wished she'd had the courage to ask him if he wanted it to be the last time, or if he'd fight for her as she wanted to fight for him.

Now they had only awkwardness and silence, for nothing of substance could pass between them under Mal's watchful gaze. So she cleared her throat and tried to say with her eyes what she could no longer say with her words. "Thank you, First Warlord. I owe you a great debt."

"You owe me nothing." The words were innocuous enough, save for the fine thread of pain that wound through them, a pain that took root in her heart and made her entire chest ache.

It would work out, if only she kept Ennon from leaving the camp. At least until she found a way to talk to him without her cousin standing over them. "Perhaps you could dine with us tonight?"

He was shaking his head before she finished the words, but Mal cut in. "Of course he shall. Where else would he dine?"

Ennon's mouth snapped shut, and he nodded. "Of course."

The camp was likely ill-equipped for her to play lady of the palace for them, but she'd never been very accomplished at the quiet tasks of a gently bred noble woman. That she felt the lack now was truly the height of folly. Here she was, saddled with a helpless desire to seduce Ennon with her suitability as a wife, even though the skills required had never interested her before.

One thing was certain—if she didn't retreat and gather her senses, her desperation would show all too clearly on her face. She turned her back on Ennon as if she'd already forgotten him and smiled at her cousin. "Do you have a place where I can clean up and rest for a few hours?"

He answered absently. "I've cordoned off a section at the center of camp with extra guards. Use it as you wish."

"Will you show me?"

Mal muttered something under his breath, so low even she couldn't understand, and offered her his arm. "Cousin."

There were undercurrents here she didn't understand, perhaps *couldn't*. So she settled her hand on Mal's arm and promised herself she wouldn't let Ennon suffer the consequences of her curiosity.

Mal patted her hand, deep in thought. "How was your journey?"

"Well enough." Her cousin navigated the camp effortlessly, though she supposed it was easy enough when his men all but flung themselves out of the way, creating an unencumbered path between the long rows of tents. The encampment itself was almost identical to the ones in which she'd been hiding—browns and tans, endless canvas and rope, and a field turned to dirt by thousands of boots.

Eventually they reached a large tent, indistinguishable from the others save for the sheer number of armed guards surrounding it. "This is yours," Mal told her. "I stocked it as best I could."

Inside, she found the closest thing to luxury that she'd seen in months. A simple cot, perhaps, but piled high with blankets and pillows. A soft rug covered the ground, and sturdy furniture provided a table large enough to share meals as well as another chair more suited to lounging, perhaps with one of the leather-bound books stacked on the side table beside the glass lantern.

Care and thought had gone into everything, and tears stung her eyes until she blinked them away. “Thank you, Mal.”

“You’re welcome.” He drew in a deep breath. “We’ll finish breaking camp tomorrow and head back to the palace. You can decide then what you want to do next.”

Kisri sank into the more comfortable chair with a tiny sigh of relief. “What will you do?”

“Get used to ruling in a time of peace, I suppose.” He crossed his arms over his chest. “Take up a few new hobbies?”

“And will you follow in our uncle’s footsteps and try to marry me off?”

His gaze sharpened. “I rather thought I’d let *you* decide that matter.”

It would not be wise to forget her cousin was a shrewd tactician—and that he’d known her for her entire life. Kisri glanced at her hands, which had somehow ended up tangled up in her lap, fingers entwined so tightly they ached. “I know I could have already been married, but most of the men who might have appreciated a lady with more spirit than decorum were at war. I didn’t desire an old man who only wanted me in hopes of gaining your ear.”

“You sound as though you’ve given it some thought,” he said casually.

She sidestepped. “I gave plenty of thought to what I did not want when it was being forced on me day after day.”

Mal flashed a feral grin. “No one will force you to do anything, cousin. On pain of death.”

That, at least, she believed. “And you’ll respect my choice, whether he’s a peasant or a noble or not a lion at all?”

He nearly winced. “Not a lion at all? Isn’t that taking things a bit far?”

Kisri laughed and teased him with a careless shrug. “We’re allies with the wolves now, are we not? Surely your friend the High Lord has many handsome wolves under his command.”

“None fitting for a royal lioness,” he grumbled.

“Oh, Mal.” She rocked to her feet and up onto her toes to kiss his cheek. “Don’t be so grumpy, cousin. The war is over, and now you can go home and marry a pretty lioness and have dozens of babies who will keep you too busy to frown at me.”

“I still worry about you, and about Ennon.” He paused. “He was very quiet when you arrived.”

He was circling like any good lion, stalking the truth as his prey. Kisri evaded him by patting his cheek. “You should glance in a mirror. Your scowl is even more intimidating than it used to be. If I weren’t a royal brat, I might be quiet too.”

Mal sighed and ducked away from her. “My scowls have never affected him that way before.”

She had to be careful to skirt around an outright lie. “I *was* a trial to deal with. I imagine he finds silence safer than such an admission.”

“Perhaps.” Mal strode to the tent’s makeshift door and turned to look at her. “Dinner. I’ll have the cooks prepare something special tonight, in your honor.”

“I’ll be prepared,” she replied, hoping her smile was as easy as her voice. It would give her a few hours’ time, in any case. A few hours to devise a plan that would steal her precious secret minutes with the First Warlord. In the midst of the High Lord’s own camp.

She could only hope tactical cunning ran in their family.

The first thing Mal did was hit him.

Ennon took the punch because he deserved it, and because the High Lord wouldn’t have doled it out if he hadn’t already figured out what had happened.

At least partly. No way did he suspect what Ennon had really done, because he wouldn’t have limited himself to a punch. No, he’d have come at him with claws and teeth, and Ennon would have been fighting for his life instead of rubbing a sore jaw.

“You son of a *bitch*,” Mal growled. “I gave you one task—*one*.”

“I know.” Ennon rose and waited for the next blow. “I brought her back safe.”

“But not untouched.” The High Lord’s biting stare dared him to deny it.

He couldn’t, of course. “No, not untouched. But I took nothing by force.”

“Oh, I don’t give a damn, En,” Mal spat. “I didn’t accuse you of rape. I accused you of flouting my orders, and of taking advantage of an innocent.”

How could he possibly defend himself when it was all true? He’d known that taking her, initiating her into the ways of sex, was better saved for the man who would take her as his wife as well as his mate. Anything less wasn’t fitting for a royal like the High Lord’s cousin.

He squared his shoulders. “I did things I should not have done, but Kisri didn’t suffer. She won’t, not after I’m gone.” Too bad he couldn’t say the same for himself.

Mal closed his mouth abruptly and stared at Ennon. “You mated her. I felt the echo of it when the two of you came into camp, thought it must have been my imagination, but it’s real. You mated her.”

It felt like more of a damnation than a blow from Mal’s fist. “Kisri—she doesn’t know.”

He’d thought Mal couldn’t look more surprised, but his friend’s mouth dropped open. “*Why?*”

“It was an accident,” Ennon ground out harshly. “I never meant for it to happen, and she can’t know. She *can’t*. She’s already had idiots fighting over her because of her royal birthright, and I refuse to let her think I did this so she’d have to pick me.”

“Too bad, because now she’s bound to you, whether she likes it or not.”

“Temporarily.” The reminder brought pain, but not as much as he deserved. “For a short time. Then she can let go, and it will be as if it never happened.”

His friend watched him intently. “Not as simple for you, though. You’ll be mated to her until you die, even if she rejects you. Even if you mate another, you’ll feel her loss.”

He hoped he would. At least he would have that much of her to hold, no matter what happened. “I know.”

“Dinner,” Mal said abruptly.

Ennon blinked at the non sequitur. “Dinner?”

“Dinner. In honor of Kisri’s arrival, so it would hardly be fitting for you to skip it.”

He was certain that Mal’s intention had been to eject him from the camp, but he wasn’t sure how to broach the subject. “I still have my things packed. I was going to go—”

“Dinner,” Mal said again, his tone implacable. “That’s an order, Ennon. And try to follow this one.” With that, he turned and stalked off.

Chapter Six

Dinner was miserable, mostly because Ennon had no idea what Mal had up his sleeve.

Kisri seemed in good spirits, though she spent the first part of the meal darting frantic looks at Ennon's jaw while Mal ate and drank and pretended not to watch them.

No matter. Whatever future hell his friend had planned for him, it couldn't be worse than the torment of not even being able to offer Kisri a reassuring look or smile.

A particularly long silence fell as Kisri refilled her glass. Her third serving of wine, and her cheeks were flushed. She took a sip, then shifted her gaze from Ennon to Mal and back. "If dinners at the palace are going to be this awkward, I may eat in my rooms."

Mal lifted both eyebrows and picked up his own goblet. "Ennon won't be accompanying us to the palace. Will you, En?"

He dropped his fork and laid his napkin on the table. "No, I won't."

Kisri's eyes narrowed. "Are you staying to oversee the disbandment of the army, then?"

"In part." That much he would be doing, anyway. "Then I'll be headed to my own home."

She was still watching him with that shrewd, suspicious look. "I suppose your estates suffered for lack of your attention."

"I've been away a long, long time." Perhaps the less said, the better.

"Of course." But she was stubborn, and turned her gaze on her cousin. "If the two of you have some great secret, you can excuse yourselves and see to whatever matters you deem too serious for me to handle."

"On the contrary, I've no great secret." Mal shrugged and rose. "Ennon, however, has something to discuss with you before he leaves, so I shall leave you to it."

Damn him. "Mal—"

"Shut up and get to it, Ennon," he said pleasantly, already walking away.

The tent flap had barely closed behind him when Kisri bit off an entirely unladylike curse. "He hit you, didn't he?"

"Just once." Ennon rubbed his jaw. "Really, I deserved more."

"Because you seduced his foolish little cousin who doesn't know better, I suppose." She drank half of her wine in one gulp, then leaned forward. "Did you tell him that it was my idea? Or did you let him think I'm too witless to want a man without being coerced?"

He bristled. “No one *lets* Mal think anything. Not that it matters. I knew very well when he put you in my care that I was meant to keep my hands to myself.”

“And you did not.” Her fingers tightened around the edge of the table. “Are you being punished for it? Banished from court? Because I won’t allow it to happen.”

There was no way out of it now, no way to keep his secret. “Mal is upset that I bedded you, but that isn’t the—I—damn it.” He couldn’t do it.

Now she simply seemed confused. “What could he possibly find more—” Her teeth snapped together. Her dark eyes widened. “No. I would *know*.”

“Would you?” he asked wearily. “Because I mated you, Kisri. Not on purpose—I wouldn’t have done that to you for the world—but it still happened.”

For an eternity she simply watched him, her eyes unreadable, her breathing ragged. The noises of the camp drifted on outside, soldiers making rounds, the wind tugging at the tent, fires crackling in a hundred tents as men prepared to return to their homes.

Finally, Kisri frowned. “Why would he be angry at you? You’re the one who will suffer if you return to your home without me. I can be mated again, unless I hold you in my heart. Or would I be the first of many, now that you have leisure to take mates?”

The thought ripped at his heart. “No,” he told her hoarsely. “No other mates.”

“Just you, on your estate.” A brittle edge filled her voice. Danger filled her eyes. “You intended to leave without telling me. To leave me bound to you until I realized what had happened.”

His own pain lent his voice a defensive tone. “Because you deserve better than an accidental mating with the first man to touch you.”

“You’re right,” she replied sharply. “I deserve a choice, and a man strong enough to face me. I was ready to—” The words cut off as she dug her teeth into her lip and looked away. “Well, it hardly matters. You’ve clearly decided what’s best for me.”

“Yes, I suppose I have.” More than anything, he was *tired*. “Better that you’ve discovered my cowardice now, Kisri. Run while you still can.”

She moved—fast—but not to run away. Instead she shoved the table aside, mindless of the plates that clattered to the floor or the wine that pooled on the carpet. She lunged at him and curled her hands around the back of his chair, as if she could trap him with her small body straddling his legs. “What are you so afraid of?”

Only the truth, if anything, could defuse her righteous anger. “I’m afraid of having you hate me.”

“Are you sure?” she whispered, her arms trembling on either side of his body. “Dismissing me, lying to me, abandoning me... *Those* are the things that would make me hate you.”

Against his will, he lifted his hands to her face. “At least then you’ll be rid of me. But I could not stand waking up every morning with the knowledge that I’d bound you to me, and that you despised me for trapping you.”

Kisri bared her teeth at him in an angry snarl. “Are you listening to what you’re saying? Or do lions truly think we’re helpless before you? Yes, you can mate us without our knowledge or will, but you *can’t keep us*. If I despised you, I wouldn’t be trapped. I’d be free to offer myself to another.”

“Would you have that freedom,” he asked, “if you weren’t the High Lord’s cousin?”

At least she paused to consider it, which was something, considering her arms still trembled under the force of her furious grip on the back of his chair. She worried at her lower lip as she studied his face, then shook her head once. “No. I imagine not.”

“Take your freedom now,” he urged quietly. She had to. A few more small steps, and she would be as irrevocably bound to him as he was to her. “Kisri.”

Instead she frowned at him. “You’ll never be free of me. Are you so afraid of having me hate you that you’d rather watch another man mate me, even if you’ll feel the loss in your soul forever?”

Ennon looked away. “You forget your cousin has a say in the matter, as well.”

This time she took his face between her hands and forced him to meet her gaze. “And on what grounds do you imagine he’ll object? Because he wishes to override my happiness for a more advantageous union? The only lions with more wealth and power than you are related to me.”

No, Mal would likely object because he knew him better than Kisri did, and had judged him unsuitable. “Wealth and power aren’t the sum total of the things that make a marriage happy.”

Her fingernails bit into his scalp. “For such a celebrated warrior, you *are* a coward. How many excuses will you find before you confess that you simply do not wish to take me as your mate?”

It was too much. His fingers bit into her hips, but he couldn’t force himself to release her. “You’ve been spoiled, Kisri. You’ve gotten everything you ever wanted, including me, with no thought of consequence or denial.”

“I’ve been spoiled,” she agreed softly. “I got a taste of what it is like, to live without the protection of the royal family. To have men desperate to conquer me, to mate me and hope they can break my spirit before I fight free of the bond. You are the only one who had nothing to gain and everything to lose, and I’m sorry.” Her hands fell to the back of the chair again, struggling to push away, to break his grip on her hips. “I’m sorry.”

He held tight. “If it were up to you, what would we do?”

Her face was closed off to him, eyes hard and unyielding. “If it were up to me, I would be mated to a man who wanted me. Who would fight to have me, not shame me into leaving by reminding me that he is a slave to my selfish, royal whims.”

The words found their mark, and a fresh well of pain surged through him. He dropped his hands. "I think I prefer your cousin's blows. They're cleaner."

Kisri surged out of his lap and strode to the opposite side of the tent, skittish energy rolling in a wave after her. "What do you expect me to say? I forced you into an intimacy that will shadow the rest of your life. *You're* the one who is trapped. Perhaps I do not wish to wake up every day next to a man who hates me. Who is only with me because I was stupid enough to voice a desire that my royal cousin might enforce with his wrath."

Ennon rose. "Your cousin has the power to make life difficult for you. He could disown you, Kisri."

Oddly, the words made her laugh. "And you could cross the room and snap my neck with your bare hands. How do you think I became spoiled, Ennon? Malrion defied family and tradition to let me live free of royal expectations. To be a girl who climbed trees and fought with swords and had the childhood no one allowed him. He won't disown me."

It gave him hope. "Even if you marry a thoroughly unsuitable cad?"

"I imagine that would depend on if the unsuitable cad planned to make me miserable. He'd be a fool to marry me if he intended to continue being a cad." Kisri didn't smile. "Do you?"

"Plan to marry you, or plan to keep being a cad?"

She didn't answer. Instead she looked away, her shoulders slumped, her entire posture full of defeated misery. "I could love you so easily, Ennon, but in this I have no desire to be spoiled. If you have a care for me at all, do me the favor of following your heart. Rejection will sting far less in the long run than having you choose me out of duty or fear instead of desire and affection."

Somehow, his foolish, clumsy words had confused her. "My duty and my fear would drive me to leave you be, Kisri. To let you live a life free of me."

A shiver made her entire body tremble. "And your heart?"

He could not lie. "My heart? My heart is yours," he confessed hoarsely.

"Follow your heart, and you can claim mine."

Could it be so simple after all? No more complicated than making the choice to try? Ennon took a step closer. "Marry me, Kisri."

She tilted her head and considered him, the first hint of a smile playing around the edges of her full lips. "You're a cad and I'm a spoiled brat. Are you brave enough to see if we can simply be a lion and lioness in love?"

"If you're certain it's what you want." That was the one thing on which he could not bend, the one thing that would break him. "I cannot be a mistake you wish you had not made."

Kisri rocked onto her toes to frame his face. "I can't predict the future. Not for either of us. But you are not a mistake to me. Not today. My mistake was almost letting you drive me away."

And his mistake had been to try. “Do you think Mal left us hoping that I would leave, or that I would stay?”

“High Lord Malrion does not hope for people to leave.” Her hands slid to the back of his head and dropped to his shoulders. She hopped up easily, her legs around his hips. “My cousin wraps his royal hand around the backs of their necks and drags them wherever he thinks they should be.”

And, this time, Ennon had no choice but to agree. “His methods may leave something to be desired, but this time...”

“Disband the army,” she whispered against his jaw. “Do your duty as the First Warlord, and if you still want me when it’s over...” She pressed her next kiss to his ear. “Mal will be pleased to be able to celebrate victory with a royal wedding, and doubly pleased if it isn’t his.”

“A worthy list of tasks to be completed.” He licked her earlobe. “What of right now? This moment?”

She moaned softly and rocked against him, her legs tightening. “I believe you owe it to me to make love to me again, now that I know I need not hold myself back. If I had not been so frightened of losing you, I might have noticed the mating bond.”

“Here? In the High Lord’s dining tent?”

“Can you clear a way through the guards for us?”

He bit her ear with a growl and lifted her higher. “Hold on.”

They drew more than their share of astonished looks and snickers from the guards and soldiers milling about the camp, but no one dared stop them until they reached her tent, when a stone-faced elder warrior stared them down.

He didn’t move. Not until Kisri leaned over his shoulder and gave him a winsome smile. “Did my cousin bar the First Warlord from my tent?”

The guard cleared his throat. When the tips of his ears turned pink, Ennon laughed. “Stand down, man. I haven’t dragged her here against her will.”

“You can report to the High Lord if you wish,” Kisri offered. “However, since he left me in Ennon’s care in the first place, it’s entirely unnecessary.”

The man’s blush deepened, and he stammered out an apology and stepped away. Inside, Ennon surveyed the tent. Though it contained the same spare furnishings as his own, rich fabrics and cushions had been strewn about.

Ennon dropped Kisri onto the cot. “Your cousin is quite serious about your guard detail, it seems.”

“Are you surprised?” She scrambled to her knees and reached for the fastenings on his vest, fingers nimble and determined. “The first guard he assigned to me was you.”

He drove his fingers into her hair. “And, in a way, the last.”

“No.” When his vest hung open, she jerked at his tunic until she could reach underneath. “The final assignment is mine.”

“Is it, now?”

“Mmm. I choose the man who will guard me for the rest of my days.” Her fingernails dragged over his chest. “Teach me what it means to be mated. Surely there’s more to it than a bond I can’t feel.”

“There is...if you accept my claim.” He dropped to his knees beside the cot. “Do you, my love?”

The gentle endearment seemed to thrill her. She wet her lips and nodded, deadly serious instead of playful. “With everything in me.”

He ran one hand up her leg to her thigh. “Feel it when I’m inside you, and you’ll see. You’ll feel when the magic makes itself known.”

She pounced on him, riding his body as he let her knock him backwards onto the plush carpeting. She straddled his legs and reached for his pants. “Then I want you inside me.”

Ennon gripped her wrists. “In good time. Like after I’ve made you scream my name.”

She laughed. “In the middle of my cousin’s camp? A better goal would be to make me moan it into a pillow.”

He flashed her what he hoped was a wicked smile. “My evening won’t be complete until I’ve embarrassed *all* of your guards.”

“And what do you intend to do?” She lifted her hips, inched forward and settled herself firmly on his lap. “Wouldn’t this be so much more pleasant without our clothes?”

Even the banter was fun, joyous, because she was his. Ennon lifted her onto the cot once more and unfastened her pants. “You should most certainly be naked.”

She obliged him by loosening the ties on her tunic and slipping it over her head. Underneath, her skin was pale and bare, gilded in light that came from expensive lamps instead of sooty fires. “You’re incredibly bossy.”

“If you tell me you don’t like it, you’ll be lying.” His mouth went dry at the sight of all that bared skin, and he hurried to pull off her pants.

“It has its occasional charms.” The first time she’d stood nude before him, self-consciousness and uncertainty had twisted her features. Now she was bold, shameless as she reached for him and began to tug at his tunic.

He let her pull it over his head, then urged her legs apart, his ardor making his hands shake. “Lie back.”

“Bossy,” she whispered again, but she obeyed, relaxing back against the cot with her body stretched out before him.

In time, he would tease her slowly, take her inch by inch with his tongue and with his body. For now, he parted her with his thumbs and stroked through her slick wetness. “Beautiful.”

“Impatient,” she retorted hoarsely, her fingers groping for his hair. “Ennon, I want you.”

“Shh.” He touched his tongue to her clit, circled it gently.

She muffled her helpless moan against the back of her wrist as her hips rocked up toward him, and he watched her as he eased lower and thrust his tongue inside her.

Another moan—more frantic, this time, though still muffled—and then her hand fell away from her lips. “I want your cock inside me. I want you to put me on my knees and bend me over this cot and show me how a lion claims his mate.”

“You want it more than my tongue?” he whispered, knowing she would hear.

Her fingers tightened painfully in his hair. “Yes.”

Ennon urged her over to her stomach, kissed the small of her back. “I love you.”

Unsteady breaths fell from her lips in rasping pants. “I love you too. I want you.”

He fumbled his pants open, but instead of driving into her, he went slowly, thrusting into her bit by bit.

Her back bowed. Her dark hair flew wild around her body as she fisted the covers and pushed into his slow advance. “I—I don’t know how to submit. Help me.”

He trailed his tongue up her spine, between her shoulder blades, and whispered against her skin. “You know how. Accept me, darling. Let me in.”

A fine trembling shook her body. “I’ve been protecting myself too long. Even from you.”

Ennon didn’t stop until he was buried to the hilt inside her, and he unleashed a tiny bit of magic as he leaned over her. “Let me in.”

This time she arched, pressing her back to his chest with a soft whimper. Skittish, as she’d been in the woods the first night, so eager to test herself against him.

And eager to be won. She gave in to him with a sigh, her steely defenses crumbling as she opened her heart to him with the boldness and bravery that defined her.

The satisfaction was nothing compared to the tenderness that suffused him. “That’s it, darling. Nothing to fear in this submission.”

“Just to you.” She bit his jaw, a quick teasing nip followed by a low laugh. “As long as you earn it every time.”

He would, with every breath. “Every time.” He punctuated the promise with a hard thrust.

A moan escaped her, unchecked, as she spilled forward. Onto her elbows at first, then lower, muffling her noises against her forearm as the sharp angle of her hips let him take her deeply.

Deep, and every thrust hit a spot that made her clench around him. Ennon gritted his teeth and slowed to a careful, intense rocking grind. “Every time, love.”

Her pleasure spilled free and he felt it, her giddy joy and her sharp relief, emotions that flashed through him in the moment of total acceptance. The ache inside him vanished, replaced with *her*, prickly and warm, then wild as her muffled cries filled his ears.

His self-control couldn't stand against such an onslaught of ecstasy. One more thrust and his body tightened, spilled with a pulsing, helpless pleasure that made his head pound with the echoes of both their hearts.

He pressed his forehead to the back of her shoulder and panted for breath. "Kisri?"

Turning her head, she rested her cheek against the rumpled blankets on her cot. "Is that what it felt like for you the first time?"

"Yes." There were no words for it, no way to describe the completion of it.

She didn't try. Instead, she made him a promise that warmed his heart and brought peace to his soul. "When the army has disbanded, come to the palace. I'll marry you."

He said it because the words felt good on his tongue. "You'll be my wife?"

"Until you cannot stand another moment in my presence."

He laughed. "That will never happen."

"So confident." Smiling, she twisted up to press her lips to his. "We'll talk again in fifty years or so."

"A hundred?"

"So you plan to chase me into the next life as well?"

"I've been chasing you from the beginning, Kisri. It's become something of a habit by now."

"Then perhaps I'll let you catch me from time to time." She arched lazily and all but purred, the satisfied rumble of a lioness who had been tamed...for now.

He would never tame her completely, and that suited Ennon just fine. *She* suited him, perhaps more than she knew, and he would gladly use every one of the hundred years she'd promised him showing her how much.

Epilogue

Sweat stung her eyes. Her arm ached, fingers very nearly numb from their desperate grip on her practice sword.

Across from her, Mal held his own weapon easily. “Your fingers are going to fall off if you keep clutching the hilt like that.”

If she admitted that it was the only way she could keep it in her grasp, he might call a stop to their sparring. Not that there would be shame in that—she’d lasted several rounds against the High Lord himself, for all that he’d pulled his more punishing blows. But the nervousness twisting in her belly would only be relieved by physical exhaustion.

So she eased her grip—just a little—and launched her attack.

Mal met it easily. “If you’re too tired to spar, we should stop. You could injure yourself.”

“I’m not going to injure myself,” she ground out between clenched teeth. But after he parried her next three swings with equal laziness, she had to admit that being too tired to spar and being too tired to spar with a warrior trained from birth might be two entirely different things.

Besides, her pride was beginning to sting as wickedly as her eyes. “Very well,” she panted finally, lowering her sword to the dirt. “I admit defeat.”

He plucked the dull blade from her hand and shook his head. “Never. This was practice, you know. No one loses here.”

“I always lose,” she countered as she began to pace, stretching her legs out so they wouldn’t grow stiff. “But I don’t mind so much. There’s no shame in losing to someone of your skill.”

“You flatter me, cousin.” But his tone made it clear he had no doubt her words were truth.

Arrogant ass. Even as she thought it, she knew the words as a lie. The only man who could hope to best Malrion in single combat was Ennon. And *he* was the reason butterflies had taken up residence in her midsection, tormenting her with their wild, giddy dance.

Tomorrow. Tomorrow, he would reach the palace and put an end to the tedious month of worry and longing. If missing her family had been heartache, missing the man whose magic had twined with hers was a pain that grew day by day until every sleepless night was an agony of loneliness.

“He’ll be here, Kisri.” All traces of teasing humor had faded from his voice. “I’ve seen the way he looks at you. He would let nothing stop him.”

"Because we're mated," she whispered. "I didn't know it would hurt so much, to be apart. How do people tolerate this, over months and years? All of your soldiers who went to war and left mates behind..."

"Everyone sacrifices in times of war," Mal said matter-of-factly. "You were lucky, yes? To discover your mate in a time of newly minted peace?"

She had been lucky, fortunate in ways that she unspooled in her mind a hundred times. If she hadn't escaped their uncle... If her charm hadn't broken in Ennon's camp, with one of his trustworthy soldiers close enough to summon him quickly. If she hadn't found the courage to ask him for something insane at a time when sanity was returning to their people.

So many *ifs*, and the biggest one of all stood before her. "Thank you. Thank you for forcing the family to give me freedoms, and for letting me choose the man I'll spend my life with. Thank you for everything."

Mal's eyes went suspiciously bright. "You're welcome."

Her resolve broke, and she threw her arms around her cousin and hugged him. "And promise me that you'll spoil your own daughters just as much. I want unmanageable nieces."

"That will be a long time yet." But his arms came around her, and he hugged her tightly.

"Looks like I missed sword-fighting practice."

Kisri jumped so quickly she knocked her forehead into Mal's chin. A curse spilled from her lips as she whirled and found Ennon standing there, a growth of beard on his jaw and his pack on the ground.

She was in her worst leathers, covered in sweat and dust. Her hair was no doubt frightful, with flyaway strands stuck to her face. All her careful plans crumbled into ash. No soaking in her tub tonight, no dressing herself in silks and satins and pretending, if only for a few hours' time, that she had it in her to be a great lady.

No, Ennon had come home to find her every bit as grubby and uncivilized as she'd been in the midst of an army camp, and now there would be no pretending. Her feet carried her two steps forward before she checked herself, unaccountably shy. She had to wet her lips twice to speak. "Ennon."

"Come here," he rasped, moments before sweeping her off her feet. His smile turned to a laugh, and he pressed his lips to her ear. "I missed you."

Nervousness broke in a rush of relief as he silently filled all the aching, empty places inside her. Warm magic, twisting and beautiful, until she wanted to laugh at how glorious it was to be a lioness in the arms of her mate. "I missed you too."

About the Author

How do you make a Moira Rogers? Take a former forensic science and nursing student obsessed with paranormal romance and add a computer programmer with a passion for gritty urban fantasy. To learn more about this romance-writing, crime-fighting duo, visit their webpage at www.moirarogers.com, or drop them an email at moira@moirarogers.com. (Disclaimer: crime-fighting abilities may appear only in the aforementioned fevered imaginations.)

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A curse can erase her from his mind, but never from his heart.

Sabine

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...and the Beast, Book 1

After three years at war, the High Lord of the Forest returns to his lands, a victorious wolf leader intent on claiming his mate. Instead Ciar finds an empty bed and a court with no recollection of the woman he loved. Following her long-cold trail proves far easier than facing what awaits him at the end.

Sabine's first instinct is to beg her beloved to leave. The High Lord's mother hired a witch to curse Sabine, desperate to wipe the lowborn wolf from her son's mind. But the spell worked too well, and Sabine has vanished from the thoughts of everyone who sees her. Including her own family.

The edges of his memory already blurring, Ciar and Sabine must race to find a way to reverse the spell. Yet every searing moment together is not enough to stop the curse's inexorable progress. His only chance is to bind Sabine to him too tightly to be forgotten, before she disappears once and for all.

Warning: This story contains cruel betrayal, destined love, vile curses, smoldering reunions, wicked deeds between wanton shapeshifters and a happily-ever-after worthy of any fairy tale.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Sabine:

When the innkeeper had gone, Sabine wrapped her arm around one of the bed's four posters and smiled ruefully. "He probably thinks I'm another man's wife, you know."

"Perhaps." Ciar closed the door and turned the giant brass key for good measure. If Nadia arrived and found the door locked, she would leave the food, knowing better than to disturb him. "Were it mine to choose, you'd be naked already."

Her breath hitched. "You are the High Lord, leader of all the wolves. I imagine everything is yours to choose."

"Is it?" Oh, what a dangerous game he played—but what could brand her in his memory more fully than the sight of her lost in ecstasy? "You never bent to me unless it pleased you, sweet Sabine. And you never let me forget the power you could wield from your knees."

She toyed with the end of one blonde curl. "Was that what enchanted you, Ciar? That I never gave a damn about your birthright? That I only wanted you?"

Enchanted him, bewitched him. "It's a heady thing for a lord, to be craved as a man."

"Yes, I craved you." Her fingers trailed from her hair to the laces of her bodice. "I dreamt of you. Your hands on my body."

He couldn't have the triumphant homecoming he'd dreamed of, but he could have her. He backed up, dropped onto a padded chair and reached for the laces on his left boot. "Show me," he commanded. Not the

High Lord to a subject—a man to a woman. A strong wolf to his mate.

“You will not touch me?” She seemed torn between relief and disappointment.

“You will touch yourself at my command. Your hands, my will.” He smiled at her as he tugged his boot free, a wicked smile with a feral edge she would recognize. He had taken her so many ways, and this was just one more. A game to be played, until the pleasure made the rules irrelevant. “Unlace your bodice, my love.”

She swayed as if weak-kneed, though it took her only a moment to steady herself. “Say it again,” she whispered as she unknotted the lace.

“My love.” He traced her features, studied the sweep of her pale brows and her high cheekbones, how color flooded her cheeks when he watched her. It was impossible to believe that magic could erase this beloved face from his memory when the years and endless bloody battles had not.

Her bodice loosened, and she let the dress billow to the floor before reaching down to gather her gauzy shift in both hands. “I remember your smiles,” she whispered. “The way you held me. Even the way you would stroke your thumb over the back of my neck as you rested your hand on my shoulder. Everything. And you’re beautiful.”

She kicked off her slippers, stripped the shift over her head and stood there, naked and waiting.

Three years had changed so much and yet nothing. She was still gorgeous, lush and desirable. But her curves were more pronounced now, her hips more rounded, her breasts fuller. He ached to touch, to trace his fingertips over every inch of her. To taste her. To possess her.

Instead he stripped off his other boot and reached for the fastening on his leathers. “I’m not as beautiful as you are. No one could be.”

Her gaze lingered on him, a caress that she echoed by skimming one hand lightly over her own skin. “I don’t believe you. You’re...Ciar.”

“Only with you.” His sturdy vest hit the floor, and he nearly snapped the ties on his shirt in his haste to pull it over his head. “Kneel on the bed. Facing me.”

She did, moving gracefully. When she knelt, her knees parted wide, he could see the wet glisten of arousal. He remembered how it felt to slide deep into her cunt, to have her hot and tight around him.

His cock strained against his pants as he reached for his belt. “Lick your fingers.”

Sabine touched her mouth, and her tongue snuck out to slick over her fingertips. “Can I see you?”

“Soon.” Not too soon, though. He slowed his movements. “I would take your nipple between my lips. Tease you until your back arched, then use my teeth.”

She held his gaze and caught her nipple between her fingers. “How hard would you bite me?”

“Until you whimpered, and I knew it was close to too much.”

She twisted the hard peak and moaned. “Never too much, Ciar. Never *enough*.”

He dropped his belt and reached for his pants. “Now the other one.”

Her back arched as she squeezed her other breast. “You don’t even need to touch me, do you?”

Oh, he needed to touch her. Needed it more than his next breath—but he’d never pain her with that knowledge, wouldn’t break the spell and make tonight *not enough*. “Do you want to see how hard I’ve grown from watching you?”

She shook, her hunger painted plainly on her features, and one hand dropped to her thigh. “Please, Ciar. Show me your desire.”

He stripped off his pants and stood before her, naked and aroused. On display, and unaccustomed nervousness stirred. The years had changed him, too, and there was always the chance she could look on him now and find him lacking.

Sabine studied him, not even breathing. Finally, she exhaled a shaky sigh. “You’ve saved me. No matter what happens now, you’ve already saved me, love.”

“I *will* save you.” He allowed himself two steps forward. Just two, so he could stand at the foot of the bed, close enough to pretend their scents were entwined. “This is only a reminder. When the spell is broken, I want you shaking at the thought of how many ways I’ll take you.”

She nodded slowly. “A reminder.”

“Yes. Of how good we can be.” His cock ached, so he wrapped his hand around it without looking away from her. His own touch was nothing—he’d had more of it than he cared to think of. It was her gaze on him, the way she watched him, that made pleasure tingle at the base of his spine. “Lie on your back.”

Her eyelids fluttered as she obeyed, but when she lay before him, her thighs spread, she kept her gaze on him. “Yes?”

“Yes.” He wanted to bury his face between her legs, lick her cunt until she screamed for him. He curled his free hand around the bedpost so he would not reach for her. “Touch yourself. One finger only.”

There was that smile again, wicked this time as she trailed her fingertip up the inside of her thigh. “Where?”

Arousal grew into a painful throb. “Open yourself for me. Let me see that sweet little pearl before you touch it.”

Sabine fidgeted on the bed, but her voice was a tease. “How am I to do that with only one finger?”

His low growl would have sent brave men running in fear. “*Sabine*.”

“Ciar,” she chided. “I am not one of your soldiers.” As she spoke, she slipped her fingers through blonde curls and lower, revealing the tiny bud he longed to feel beneath his tongue. “I am your lover.”

“Sometimes you obey my commands,” he whispered. “When it pleases us both, you’re quick enough to show your throat and bend to my will.”

“Like I said...” She dipped her finger inside her body, made it wet and silky before circling the sensitive flesh he’d ordered her to touch. “I am your lover.”

She was his lover, and more. He knew that—his heart *swore* to it, but his analytical mind could

already see the blurry edges. Pieces missing, like an inexorable tide carrying his memories out to sea a grain at a time.

That gave him the strength not to touch her. Instead he stroked his cock, too slow and gentle to give relief. “Not so much longer. Then you will have my tongue where your fingers are. My lips. I remember how sweet you scream when you come under my mouth.”

“I remember, yes.” She trembled, touching herself as she watched his hand. “I could taste myself on your tongue.”

“And then you would taste me.” His fingers tightened, and he groaned. “You always did like to tease me. Thrust your fingers deep into your cunt. I would see your ecstasy.”

She obeyed with a soft moan, and her teeth sank into her bottom lip as she rocked against her palm, two fingers nestled inside her body.

If he didn’t stop stroking himself, he would come before she did, but he couldn’t force his hand to still. His callused fingers dragged over his length in the same rhythm as her hand. “Faster, Sabine. Make yourself come.”

After this much foreplay, something's bound to combust.

The Seven Year Witch

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That Old Black Magic, Book 2

As head mistress of Beaumont coven house, Clarissa Miles has perfected two things: keeping her sister witches from accidentally turning innocent bystanders into toads, and resisting the sexy overtures of her familiar, werewolf Logan Scott.

But her resolve is vanishing—fast. Seven years ago she sold her soul to save her father, and that contract is coming due. The allure of spending her last days indulging in some dirty, naked loving is too tempting to resist.

Logan has patiently ridden out the past seven years, content to do Clarissa's bidding and ignoring his consuming need to mark her as his. Now that the ban on witch/familiar fraternizing has been lifted, he's off the leash and ready to launch a full-on sensual assault on her defenses. They're destined mates, and he'll do whatever it takes to convince her.

It's delightfully easy to get her in bed. Get at her heart? Not so much. Especially when a deadly predator stakes its claim on her...and Logan faces a battle not only to win her heart, but save her soul.

Warning: This book contains a villain with more personalities than Sybil, a witch in search of redemption and a dirty-talking werewolf hell-bent on claiming his mate in every wicked, sexy way possible. Spontaneous howling may occur.

Enjoy the following excerpt for The Seven Year Witch:

Logan stepped into the service entrance of Tatum's and bypassed the kitchen, following the corridor to the main section of the restaurant. He coughed, nearly hacking up a lung as the acrid smoke from what undoubtedly amounted to ten thousand packs of cigarettes ambushed him. His heightened lupine senses always made walking into a bar a dicey prospect.

Steeling himself, he strode toward the jam-packed bar. After elbowing a path through the throng and requesting a beer from the bartender, he moseyed out of the way and scoped the room for an available seat. The majority of tables close to the stage were already taken, but he spotted a vacant booth that still afforded a decent view.

Hoping to sweet talk his way into the primo spot, he swiveled toward the hostess stand, only to slam to a standstill when he spied Clarissa sitting at a table near the back of the dining room. She wasn't alone. Even while his brain scrambled to process that disturbing revelation, he watched the stranger's hands bracket Clarissa's face, right before the guy leaned in and kissed her.

Numb disbelief froze him. *What. The. Fuck.*

Jealous fury detonated inside him, instantly eradicating every thought but the one screaming in his mind—the fucking asshole had his tongue rammed in Clarissa’s mouth. *His* woman.

Fists balling in preparation of punching the dickwad’s nose off kilter, Logan growled low in his throat and stalked in Clarissa’s direction. A seat suddenly swerved in front of him, almost jabbing him in the hip. He snarled at the clueless guy straddling the chair before shoving the seat out of the way. Ignoring the guy’s sputtering retort, Logan jerked his focus back to Clarissa. And did a double take.

She was alone.

He took a quick scan of the dining room, not seeing the dickwad anywhere. It was almost as if the dude had vanished into thin air. Another possibility knocked against his consciousness and he grunted. *Or maybe I imagined the whole thing.* The idea wasn’t completely out in left field. Fuck knows this obsession with Clarissa had messed with his head on more than one occasion. Tunneling a shaky hand through his hair, he continued forward. When he was less than two table lengths away from Clarissa, she looked up and locked stares with him. Every ounce of color leeches from her face. Her gaze darted sideways, toward the back hallway, and he lengthened his stride, fully intending to tackle her if her butt so much as inched off her chair.

Apparently reading his intention, Clarissa muttered beneath her breath. He didn’t need to be a lip reader—or rely on his acute hearing—to make out the words “*Fuck me.*”

Her irritability, along with her choice of words, stirred the wicked beast within him. Drawing to a halt at her table, he awarded her his best wolfish smile. “Just name the time and place, shug.”

“You know damn well that isn’t what I meant.”

“No? Because I’m thinking that’s precisely what I’d like to do.”

Her cheeks bloomed with a vivid splash of red. “I’m not in the mood for this tonight.”

Clarissa’s testiness only managed to rekindle his anger. “Well, now, I’m real sorry you feel that way, shug. ‘Cause the last thing I’d wanna do is piss on whatever urgent plans preempted our dinner tonight.”

“There’s no need to be a prick.” She stood, her eyes narrowing as he strategically blocked her path. “Or make a scene. Please move.”

“What are you gonna do if I don’t? Whammy me? Might be kinda hard explainin’ that one to everyone here, darlin’.”

“Logan, please.” Her voice broke on the last word, stunning him. She glanced down, but not before he caught the faint glimmer of moisture in her eyes. The sight hit him like a sucker punch in the gut, making him feel like the prick she’d accused him of being.

If there was one thing guaranteed to shred him to pieces, it was a woman’s tears. Having that woman be Clarissa only made it a thousand times more terrible. “Clarissa...”

Without saying another word, she rushed past him and hurried toward the rear hallway. Even her strongest holding spell wouldn’t have kept him from chasing after her.

He caught up with Clarissa before she could duck out the door or into the ladies' restroom. Not that either location would have deterred him. He tugged her into his arms, the ferocity of her expression revealing just how much she hated showing the vulnerability hidden beneath that legendary icy exterior she'd perfected. Tucking her against his chest, he nuzzled her forehead. "Rissa, I'm sorry."

She stiffened. "Please don't call me that. I—it's very inappropriate."

"Hush." Unable to help himself, he followed the delicate, silky arch of her eyebrow with his lips. She trembled and sighed, making both man and wolf silently growl in triumph at her tiny show of capitulation. Holding her this close was both heaven and hell, a heady torment that teased every single one of his heightened senses. She smelled luscious and feminine, a delicious main course he could easily feast on all day and night. His hands slid down the slopes of her shoulders, a not entirely unconscious marking of his territory.

Her breath stuttered in her throat. "This isn't the place to be doing this." She must have caught her slip of words because she jerked her gaze up to his. "I mean we shouldn't be doing this at *all*."

Tuning out her weak protest, he traced her mouth with the pad of his thumb. "That's where you're wrong. Right now, I need to kiss you more than I need to breathe. I wanna taste you. Eat you up." *Make you mine*. The thought sprang full born from the most primal part of him, where wolf overruled man.

Clarissa's eyes widened, but she didn't draw back as his head descended. Their lips met, clung briefly, before he gave in to the fierce hunger burning low in the pit of his gut. Intent on making his possessiveness—and his desire—known, he nudged the hard ridge of his erection between her thighs. "Feel that, baby? That's what you fuckin' do to me."

He filled his palms with her ass and squeezed, deliberately rolling his hips against hers. Yeah, he was dry humping her against a wall right outside the damn restrooms. But if the frequency of her gasps were any indication, she was enjoying the hell out of it just as much as he was.

His tongue slicked past the nonresistant barrier of her lips, and he relished the soft, breathy moan that escaped Clarissa. She was even more intoxicating than he remembered. Her magic shimmered around them, mingling with his energy and creating a charged buzz that tingled across his skin. He broke off the kiss, his breath ragged against her cheek. "Come home with me."

She licked her lips. "That would be an epically bad idea."

"Why?"

"Because we both know where it would lead."

He ducked his head and nibbled a path along her jaw before exploring the soft hollow behind her ear with the tip of his tongue. "If you're referri' to you tied to my bed, then yeah, damn straight."

Her shallow exhale whispered against the side of his face. "Th-that's not what I..." She swallowed. "You want to tie me to your bed?"

“More than you could imagine. God knows *I’ve* imagined it more often than I can count.” He released the tempting swells of her ass and glided his palms up along her hips, taking his time to properly enjoy her lush curves. “You’d be spread-eagled, your whole body tremblin’ and your nipples unbearably tight.”

“W-why would I be trembling?”

He grinned against her neck. “Don’t you also want to know why your nipples are tight?”

“I figured you’d get around to telling me, regardless.”

“Aw, shug, am I that predictable?” Yeah, he was. No way in hell he could temper the urge to tell her everything he wanted to do to her. In precise, Technicolor detail. “You’re tremblin’ because I’m eating your pussy. Lickin’ you inside and out, nice and slow. Savoring you.”

Her pulse skittered beneath his lips. “Logan, please—”

“Yeah, those are exactly the words you keep repeatin’ while my tongue is workin’ your clit and your sweet honey is filling my mouth.” He groaned and shifted, resting his forehead against hers. The fantasy had him hard as granite and desperate to sink into her softness. “Christ. Have mercy on me, Rissa. Say you’ll come home with me.”

He will have his revenge—one wicked seduction at a time.

Primal Pleasure

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Pendragon Gargoyles, Book 3

Emma is used to getting dragged into her twin sister's magical messes, but this time her predicament is more than a minor annoyance. She's chained to a cat shifter that her sister encased in a curse of stone. Worse, the unfortunate gargoyle's waking up. And her sister's not there to take the heat.

After a century suspended in stone, Cian would do anything to get his hands on the sorceress who put him there. Strangely, his dreams of revenge turn into an animal hunger to put his hands all over her—in every delightfully wicked way imaginable.

Never as talented as her sister, Emma doesn't trust her own magic. But for now she must let Cian believe she's the culprit in order to strike a bargain: to permanently lift the curse in exchange for his tracking skills to find her missing sister. The longer she is near him, though, the closer she comes to surrendering much more than her body to the brutal warrior.

As their attraction catches fire, Emma dreads what could happen when he learns the truth. If he will sacrifice her to break the spell...or fight for a love that goes beyond animal instinct.

Warning: This book contains adult language, violence, bone-melting explicit sex and a stubborn alpha male who likes his revenge served hot, wild and strong enough to bring him to his knees.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Primal Pleasure:

"You would risk your family to keep me?"

For all the practice she had at masking her fear—thanks to Elena—the gargoyle's steel-edged conviction made it hard not to take him seriously. As worried as she'd been over her fate, some small part of her had dared to hope he might willingly release her.

The look on his face, the unwavering blue depths locked on her, told her he meant every word. He really had no intention of releasing her.

"My family can handle themselves."

She swallowed past the momentary panic clawing at her throat. "So revenge is all that matters to you?" She certainly hadn't gotten that vibe when she'd touched his belongings and experienced those memories.

"Not all that matters, no." He dragged his shirt over his head and tossed it behind him.

"Whoa there, Chippendale. Let's keep this PG rated."

Unfazed, he moved his hand to the fly of his jeans, drawing her attention down his toned abs—and how had she missed those on the roof?

“Is there a problem?”

Hell yeah, there was a problem. She just couldn’t remember exactly what it was as the button gaped open just a fraction.

Focusing, she went with the obvious. “You just took your shirt off.”

“And yours is next.”

“In your dreams, gargoyle.” She slipped around him, finding it easier to keep a clear head when she wasn’t pinned between him and the wall.

He tugged his zipper down and circled her, pausing behind her long enough to whisper, “In my dreams the only thing covering your body is me.”

Her stomach grew hot at the image that unfolded in her mind. She shook her head to erase it as much to discourage him—as if that were possible—and preferably before the jeans riding low on his hips slid any lower.

Avalon help her, there was no way he was wearing any underwear beneath them.

She needed to stay focused on finding a way out of this mess, preferably with her clothing intact.

Given the way the corners of his mouth tipped up, as if amused by her white-knuckled grip on her shirt, the odds didn’t seem to be in her favor. That fact alone spurred her retreat.

Cian tensed like an animal about to take down its prey, but after a few feet, he still hadn’t moved. How was it that he managed to make her feel like she was being stalked when he hadn’t taken a single step in her direction?

She searched his face, finally understanding the wicked glimmer in his eyes. He was enjoying it. He wanted her to run, wanted to catch her.

Which only forced her to acknowledge that she wanted to be caught.

Caught. Kissed. Touched.

And it was all so damn crazy. She didn’t do one-night stands with men under normal circumstances, let alone with one who was casually eyeing the chain she dragged along the floor like it was part of the trap he couldn’t wait to spring.

“I am not some sex slave.”

When he took a step toward her, she wished she hadn’t said a damn thing.

“You’re right about that,” he drawled innocently, and she scrambled back another step, realizing too late he was herding her toward his bedroom.

“Slaves,” he continued, “need to be coerced in the beginning. You want it. Want me.”

A hint of uncertainty echoed beneath all that slick feline arrogance, surprising her. Distracting her. Otherwise she might have noticed how quickly he closed the distance between them, forcing her to tip her head back to meet his gaze. He towered over her five-foot-four frame, but she didn’t find it as intimidating as she should have given the magic-nulling handcuff locked around her wrist.

Everything about the situation left her at a disadvantage, but she refused to play the submissive female.

He stared at her throat before finally lifting his hand and tracing the soft hollow, then moving on to her collarbone. The teasing brush of his thumb was at odds with the tension she felt radiating from him.

“You didn’t deny that you want me.” His hands slid beneath her jacket and over her shoulders.

“And give you a reason to prove I was lying?”

He laughed, and the rough sound washed over her. A little dazed by his smile, she was slow to process her jacket sliding down to her arms.

Her eyes snapped open—when the hell had she closed them?—and she stumbled back. He might have been too distracted when she’d been in the shower to realize how few tracings she had, but risking it a second time was a really bad idea. It wouldn’t take him long to realize the cuff would null any ability to mask her tracings.

A tug on her wrist pulled her forward. She immediately retreated, stepping inside the dark bedroom at her back.

Could he see well enough to notice her tracings—or lack thereof—in the dark?

He stopped in the doorway, the light behind him casting his face in shadows. Maybe she’d been a little premature with the whole not-intimidated thing. She managed another step, and he countered with another tug on the chain until she was forced to meet him halfway.

“Cian.”

He stopped, only a foot away now. “Again.” He stepped forward, and her thighs connected with his.

“I don’t—”

“My name. Say it again.”

Her lips parted soundlessly.

“Please.”

Inches separated them. “Cian.”

His palm caressed her jaw, guiding her closer. “Again,” he murmured.

“Ci—”

He slanted his mouth across hers.



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