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The Heron's Call

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The Heron's Call

Isabo Kelly

Dedication

For my husband Brian, my own personal hero. Thank you for always supporting my mad ventures and being patient with me when I'm not particularly patient back.

For my funny little dog, Eddie Monster, who always knew when it was more important for me to play with the ball instead of work.

And for Mom, Pop and Jenny because I would never have gotten this far without you guys.

Chapter One

Rowena twisted in her bedroll, restless and uncomfortable on the hard-packed earth. Frustration gnawed at her. It was that blasted dream again. The dark bulk of him rising above her, the scrape of callused fingers over her nipples, the feel of his hard cock thrusting into her. She rolled her eyes at the memory and a groan escaped between her clenched teeth. She hated the dream. Especially when she had no chance of experiencing those sensations in real life. Thanks to *him* .

She'd been having the same dream nearly every night for the last week. *Him* kissing her mouth, her breasts, her pussy. *Him* fucking her while keeping her gaze locked to his. His tongue, his teeth, his fingers, his cum spurting hot inside her. She'd barely been able to sleep since she set out on this mission three days ago. And when she had slept, her dreams had been so erotic and so...demanding she woke up as exhausted as when she'd stretched out on her pallet the night before.

She turned again and the bedroll bunched beneath her. In a fit of irritation, she finally threw the blanket off and sat up. And saw the shadows closing in around her.

She surged to her feet, sword in hand, with a speed and grace she hoped the robbers would recognize. She hated to kill people just for being stupid enough to attack someone like her.

As the shadows stepped into the faint light from the crescent moon, she realized they weren't ordinary robbers. Their linen shirts were too clean, their leather trousers and bracers too well-repaired, their weapons and steel breastplates too well-made and maintained. Seven of them in all. Mercenaries, she guessed, noting the rough look of them despite the high-grade of their gear. She turned in a small circle as they surrounded her, gauging their movements.

"I give you fair warning," she said, studying their faces. "Put up your swords and leave. Now. And I won't kill you."

As she'd expected, the standard warning was met with derisive laughter. She shook her head. Mercenaries, of all people, should understand what it meant to face a sword sworn of the Aleanian Temple. "Very well." She lifted her sword. "Shall we?"

And she grinned.

If her movements hadn't given her away, her grin should have. Still they came at her, an all-out attack, seven at once. Not the best tactics, she thought as she danced away from them and into the clear, using only the briefest flicker of mind-hazing. The mercenaries got in each other's way, too many swords in too tight an area. They adapted quickly though. When they turned on her this time, they attacked two or three at a time.

She laughed as the fight got underway, rejoiced in the feel of her muscles moving, her skills being tried, her mind sharp and focused. Seven opponents was a good number—enough to make her work and stretch, not too many for her to handle. She twisted away from an awkward swing by one man, countered a blow by another, and disarmed a third with a back swing. As the disarmed man scrambled for his sword, another took his place. She didn't rush to incapacitate them. She was having too much fun. But she knew she'd have to take care of them soon. No point in exhausting herself. She still had a long way to go before she reached Dorjan's lands.

She hated to kill them, though. They were just doing a job. A job she had no doubt Dorjan had funded. But she couldn't afford to have them at her back either. Maybe if she gave them a thorough enough beating... She disarmed two men and faced the four converging on her.

Suddenly, the air around them darkened, inky blackness too solid to be real. Rowena and the seven mercenaries stilled and looked around. A flash of blinding light, a crack like thunder. And a dark figure rose up in front of Rowena.

Even with his back to her, he was obviously male. His broad, thickly muscled body was encased in leather trousers and vest. His dark blond hair hung just above his collar in a tempting disarray of waves. What she could see of his pale skin gleamed silver in the moonlight.

The stranger raised a sword in front of him. From her position, Rowena watched the long blade come up over his head. The steel glowed purple.

The mercenaries backed away from the man, their weapons at the ready. Rowena kept a tight grip on her own sword in case the stranger turned. A moment later, the fine hairs on the back of her neck stood up. She heard the soft rumble of the stranger's voice, chanting, quiet, vibrating through her bones. She sucked in a breath and it felt as if the air had thinned.

Another blinding flash of light and power rolled over her in a heart-stopping wave. She dropped to one knee, ducking her head to brace against the storm winds of his spell. For an instant, all air was sucked away and she couldn't breathe. And then as suddenly as it happened, the light faded, the air calmed, and the dark night fell quiet.

Rowena dragged in a lungful of air, blinked to clear spots from her eyes and raised her head. All seven mercenaries lay unmoving, their swords blown beyond their grasp. She looked up at the stranger just as he turned around. Their gazes locked. It took a second, no more, before she recognized him, before the jolt of his presence ricocheted through her body.

She rose slowly to her feet, never taking her gaze from his green eyes. When she stood at her full 5'10" height, she straightened her shoulders, flicked a glance at the downed mercs, and said, "Kael, you bastard. You ruined a perfectly good fight. What the hell are you doing here?"

Dark eyebrows rose and his sexy mouth twitched at one corner. "Rowena," he murmured in a voice that made her thighs clench. "It's good to see you again too."

She cursed, long and eloquently, as she snatched up her scabbard from beside her bedroll, sheathed her sword and strapped the scabbard diagonally across her back. Her stomach danced giddily, and the sensation disgusted her. She didn't want her body to react, not to Kael Zyhn of Heron's Deep. She hated that she couldn't control the heady roll of lust pumping through her blood. "Answer my question," she said. "What are you doing here?"

“I came to help.”

“I don’t need your help.” She propped her hands on her hips and glanced at the mercenaries. “Are they dead?”

“No. Unconscious. They won’t wake for two days. At which point, we’ll be long gone.”

Her eyes narrowed. *We? I don’t think so.* “Some strong spell, Heron. To leave me out of it.”

He dipped his head, accepting her reluctant compliment with an arrogant grin.

“But I still didn’t need your help.”

“There were seven of them.”

“Ha! I only have to worry when there’s more than ten. Anything less, I’m perfectly capable of handling.”

He smiled and her body responded. Her womb clenched, her stomach danced, and her heart beat an erratic dance. Damn him. What the hell was he doing here now? She hadn’t seen Kael in twelve years. Not once since that first meeting, the first and only kiss. Not so much as a note. She’d spent years convincing herself he was just another man, no one special. Because if he’d really been *herrynei* he would never have abandoned her. That logic hadn’t stopped her from dreaming about him. It hadn’t stopped her longing for him.

But it had guaranteed she was so royally pissed off at him, she never wanted to see him again.

She glared at his smiling, gorgeous face and stomped past him. “You can go,” she said over her shoulder, bundling up her gear. She couldn’t stay here now. Might as well move down the road a bit and hope she could find a safe place to settle for the last few hours of darkness. She doubted she’d get any more sleep though.

Her heart thudded loudly as she packed. She could feel Kael’s gaze on her back, burrowing into her. The intensity of his stare made her movements stiff and uncoordinated. She had never, in her entire life, felt uncoordinated. That pissed her off even more. She slung her pack across her shoulders so it crossed her back opposite to her sword, then stood without looking at him. She glanced down at the nearest mercenary. He didn’t look comfortable with his legs folded under him and his head wrenched into an awkward position. He was going to hurt when he woke up. He groaned a little in his sleep, but otherwise didn’t move.

Rowena shook her head. “Ruined a perfectly good fight,” she muttered. She started to walk away, past the other unconscious bodies, still without looking at Kael. But his voice stopped her.

“I couldn’t have *myraynia* killed.”

Her shoulders stiffened. Her stomach tightened. Her eyes narrowed and her jaw clenched. Anger so hot it nearly suffocated her flowed through her. How dare he call her that? After all this time. How dare he use that excuse!

“Don’t you call me that again,” she said, her voice harsh and low. When the man nearest her made a slight noise, she turned and kicked him in the stomach. He rolled away slightly but didn’t wake up. She

stomped off, cursing under her breath.

So much for Aleanian compassion, she thought with an inner cringe. All her years of training and in a fit of anger she kicks an unconscious man. That outburst was as good a sign as any that she did not need Kael Zyhn in her life.

Kael watched her stalk away, his body so tight he could barely draw breath. He actually shook with his need to touch her, pull her close, bury himself inside her. *Hisraynia*. His soul twin.

She was a lot angrier than he'd expected. He didn't quite understand why. But the fact that she actually kicked an unconscious man, she a training Aleanian priestess, only proved how furious she was.

He frowned at her retreating back, his gaze drawn against his will to the curve of her ass, the long sweep of her legs. He could practically feel those taut legs wrapped around him. His cock throbbed. He adjusted his trousers to accommodate his erection, but it didn't help. Nothing would help until he was buried deep inside her, bonding them together.

He waited until she was just out of sight then spelled himself into her presence again. He didn't bother with a dramatic appearance this time—his earlier entrance had been fed by his anger at knowing his *raynia* was in danger. Now he simply materialized next to her. Her surprised gasp incited his hunger. Without thinking, he wrapped his arm around her waist and pulled her tight. The feel of her curves pressed against his overheated body made him groan.

He'd denied himself her touch for too long. He lowered his head, intent on tasting her lush, wet lips, but stopped short when he felt the edge of a blade against his throat. He raised his head, frowning.

"Back off, and back off now, Kael," she hissed. "I don't want anything to do with you anymore, so you can just bugger off."

"You're *myraynia*." And that should have been enough. He couldn't understand her resistance. She should be feeling the same fire as him. They wouldn't be completely bonded until they made love, but even now their souls were entwining, meshing together. He could barely see straight for wanting her.

She laughed, a harsh, unpleasant sound. "I don't care what you think I am—"

"I don't *think* you're *myraynia*," he interrupted. "I know it, Rowena. You know it too. You can't deny it."

"I don't want this, and I don't want you. Run on home to Heron's Deep, mage, because I'm not having anything to do with you."

His arm flexed around her, tightening, pulling her closer. But her knife pressed sharply into his throat, a reminder she was serious. Slowly, he loosened his grip and stepped away. She edged the knife from his neck then sheathed it at her hip. With a final glare, she spun around and continued walking. He fell into step beside her.

"What the fuck are you doing?" she shouted, turning to face him. Anger made her cheeks flush pink against the golden tan of her skin. "Go away. You think I want to see you now? After twelve years? Well, I don't. I've been doing just fine without you."

He watched the flash of pain in her dark eyes, the barest hint of an emotion other than anger, before she managed to mask it. His eyes narrowed, and he studied her more closely.

She'd changed in the last twelve years. She was only fourteen when they'd met. At twenty, he'd been too old for her. But she was *hisraynia*, and he hadn't been able to stay away from her. He met her in the city, the day she came with her family to begin her apprenticeship in the Aleanian Temple. That day had changed his life.

Then, as now, he couldn't resist her. He'd had to kiss her, even knowing she was much too young. He couldn't stop himself. And that single kiss had shifted everything. He couldn't remember much after that, not for several months. His trance hit him prematurely, and he hadn't become aware of himself and his surroundings again for a long time. When awareness finally returned, he was in the middle of forging a mage sword. The next six years were subjugated to the sword.

He'd waited too long to claim her, he realized now. His reasons had all seemed logical before, but with her glaring at him, those black eyes snapping with temper, he knew he'd made a mistake. But how to fix it?

"I'm here to help you," he said. "Dorjan is a powerful warlord. He's got a wizard working for him. You aren't a mage. You can't fight the wizard."

Her brow furrowed. He had her, and they both knew it. Despite her stubbornness, she wouldn't sacrifice the life of an oracle, or anyone else for that matter, in the name of her own pride.

There was a reason she'd come so far and was so close to taking her vows.

After a moment, she sucked in a deep breath. He couldn't stop his gaze dropping to the rise and fall of her breasts, pressing against the fitted, light blue tunic of her uniform. She'd grown in the last twelve years, her curves filling out. Despite the constant sword training, she'd still developed a nicely rounded pair of breasts, a neatly tucked waist and a very feminine flair of hips. The tightness of her ass made his mouth water.

When he raised his gaze, caught the moment of breathless desire in her expression, he smiled. She might try to deny it, but she was his soul twin. She wanted him as badly as he wanted her.

Her nostrils flared and her eyes narrowed. "It's not good for you to be near me for long," she said. "We'll bond, and I might be killed. Go away. If you're worried, send another mage. Another Heron if you like. But not you."

His smile deepened at the tone of her voice, logic fighting against anger, and under it all, concern. "I'm afraid you're stuck with me, Rowena. I'm not going anywhere. *I want* us to bond."

She rolled her eyes and stalked away again. He kept his chuckle too quiet for her to hear. "Will you walk the rest of the night?" he asked.

"No. Just far enough away from the ambush."

"I can move us farther away, quicker than walking. So you can get some sleep. There's still hours until sunrise."

“No, thank you.” The polite words belied the bite in her voice.

They walked in silence then, giving him time to contemplate her, and her anger.

Once he'd finished forging the mage sword, he'd needed several years to recover. Only one or two true mage swords were ever forged in a generation. Sometimes not even then. His parents' generation had seen no mage swords formed. The process was demanding, physically and mentally. It drove the smith to the limits of endurance. For six years, he hadn't been able to do or think of anything beyond the sword, the magics being poured into it, the spells, the power, the skill. He'd barely slept, barely eaten. And when it was done...

One of the most magnificent creations in their world was born.

He'd needed the better part of three years to regain his full strength, heal his body completely. But once recovered, all he could think about was claiming *hisraynia*. She would have been twenty-three and old enough by that time. But his family insisted he wait.

The sword needed to be claimed, they said. His newfound mage skills had to be trained—the early inducement of trance had brought about an increase in his powers. Rowena was still sword sworn, his parents said, not yet a full priestess. Until she took her vows, her life was forfeit to the Temple. If they bonded and she died, Kael would follow her. Wait, his father coaxed. Just a bit longer. You'll have your entire lives together, his mother said, why rush into the bonding?

He heeded their advice to an extent. He waited. He trained his powers. He honed his strength. But he couldn't stay away from Rowena altogether. Every trip into Malyk, he contrived a way to see her, from a distance so she wouldn't notice him. He snuck into the Temple to watch her train. He even followed her into town one night when she went with some of the other sword sworn to a pub. She laughed and talked and seemed to enjoy her evening. And to his infinite relief, she turned away any man brave enough to approach her—even when some of her friends went off with other men.

But he wanted more. Each time he saw her, watched her, it fed his hunger. Until all he could think about was having one intimate moment with her. One stolen minute alone. So he snuck into her room, in the darkest hour of the night a week ago, just to watch her sleep. His skills made it easy to materialize in her room quietly to avoid disturbing the Temple guard. He stood in a shadowed corner and stared at her, sleeping on top of her sheets. His body burned, his cock so hard it hurt.

When her dreams took her, made her shift restlessly in the bed, he opened his senses enough to feel the nature of the dream. The eroticism, the sheer sexual heat he felt nearly brought him to his knees. He wanted her so badly he came close to climbing into bed next to her. Willpower alone kept him in the dark corner, watching.

He rode the surging heat of her dream, couldn't stop himself from taking his cock in his hand and stroking as he watched her breathing quicken. When her back arched against the bed, he came, his orgasm so powerful it left him weak. He cleaned himself using one of her towels, a towel he kept because it was hers, and watched her now relaxed body sleep soundly, her breathing even. Some of his tension had eased, but it wasn't enough. The experience left him feeling...lacking. He didn't just need an orgasm, he needed her.

Despite his better judgment, he went back to her room four nights in a row. Each night he rode her dreams, wanting to wake her, knowing he shouldn't. She was one year away from taking her vows. His father still insisted he wait. Once she finished her time as sword sworn, took her vows as a priestess, her

life would no longer be in danger. They could bond without risking Kael's life.

But the wait had gone on too long, the need had become too great. He had to have her. Fully and finally.

And the night he arrived to claim her, he discovered her gone, sent out on another mission.

He'd spent so much hidden time near her they were more tightly bound than she realized. He could feel her, even at a distance, and had tracked her without much difficulty. Seeing her surrounded by seven well-trained swordsmen had stopped his heart.

Logic abandoned him. He came to her aide, using the mage sword to protect her without thinking about his actions. He'd seen her training, knew she was one of the best swordswomen among the Aleanians. But all he'd been able to see was four men converging on his *raynia*. He didn't regret his actions. He'd do the same again. But as he glanced at the hard line of her jaw now, he realized he had robbed her of a good fight. The sword sworn were trained to feel compassion for those they fought, to cherish the lives of others. But they were also trained to enjoy the moment, to savor a life well lived. And so most of them enjoyed the play of battle, the art and act of combat. They never killed easily, but they did get a rush out of the fight.

And he'd denied Rowena that joy.

He glanced at her again, the curve of her breasts, the sway of her hips. Before the night was out, he intended to make up to her for denying her the fight by providing her with another rush. A rush they could both enjoy.

Chapter Two

Rowena fumed as the bulky sword mage glided along next to her, not taking any notice of her anger. She couldn't believe he was here. After twelve years! And he thought they could start up again where they'd left off? *Not in this lifetime, Kael.*

Her traitorous body wasn't cooperating very well, though. She was so wet and needy, so weak-kneed as his scent filled her, she could barely walk straight. He had changed some over the years. His frame filled out with thick cords of muscles. His jaw was harder, more sharply defined, and faint creases framed his beautiful green eyes and firm mouth. But his face was still stunningly gorgeous, maybe more so now, with the hard cut of life etched into it. And his more mature, thickly muscled body did outrageous things to her libido. She tried to blame her earlier dream for the frantic pull of lust, but she knew better. Like it or not, deny it or not, Kael was *hurraynei* and her body wanted his.

Her heart, on the other hand, was still too bruised from his rejection twelve years ago. She wasn't about to risk that pain again.

She forced herself to study the trail, her surroundings. They needed a place to rest. And she needed some space.

The appearance of the mercenaries so early in her journey only proved how determined Dorjan was to keep the Valen horse clan's oracle. The poor oracle had probably told him a sword sworn was on the way. It didn't matter. Rowena knew her approach wouldn't be a surprise.

She also knew she couldn't fight Dorjan's wizard. The priestesses had given her as much protection as they could. But it wouldn't be enough. On missions like this, she envied her mother the mage sword,

Ba'nari. Ba'nari blocked magic. With Ba'nari in Rowena's hands, nothing the wizard threw at her would matter. But Ba'nari refused to leave Kellyn until Kellyn's death, and because Rowena loved her mother, she was happy Ba'nari was still in her possession.

She sighed and studied the scarce trees lining the rutted road. Not much cover, but the night was clear, the stars bright. Anywhere would be as good as anywhere else. She was tired now. The rush of adrenaline from the fight, the sudden appearance of her erstwhile *raynei*, the loss of sleep over the past week left a toll on her body. She needed rest. When they neared a grassy clump, she stopped.

"I'll bed down here. Feel free to go somewhere else. In fact, please go somewhere else." She ignored Kael's raised brow, his sardonic expression. She dropped her pack on the grass and pulled out her bedroll and blanket. When the pallet was made, she hit the release on her chest for the strap holding her scabbard across her back, set scabbard and sword next to her makeshift bed and crawled under the blanket. She wrapped a hand around the hilt of her sword, letting its familiar touch give her comfort. Then she closed her eyes, trying her best to ignore the still looming Heron.

And because of her exhaustion, she succeeded in ignoring him for all of three seconds. Then he moved, sitting on the grass next to her. A moment later, she felt the heat of a fire. She frowned, glanced at the glowing ball hovering just in front of Kael. With a grunt that could have been interpreted as a thank you if he were feeling generous, she turned her back on him and his magical fire and shut her eyes.

She had to suppress a moan when he stretched out behind her and spooned up against her back. "What do you think you're doing?" she demanded, but her voice sounded breathy, not dismissive as she'd intended.

"Keeping you warm." His hot breath brushed across her neck, making her shiver.

"I'm not cold."

"You're trembling."

Damn. How did she explain the trembling without admitting her desire? "I can't sleep like this," she said instead.

"Then we'll find something else to do to pass the night."

His hand slid across her waist. The feel of his big palm spanning her stomach, his thumb nearly touching the underside of one breast, made her entire body flush with hot need. Gods, he felt fantastic. His hips pressed up against her bottom, giving her a tantalizing feel of his erection—a hard, thick bulge encased in tight leather. Her eyes rolled back in her head, and against her will, she found herself grinding her ass against that bulge.

"Rowena," he groaned into her hair, and the hand on her stomach flexed, inching lower.

Oh no. She lurched up and scrambled a few feet from the pallet. This was not going to happen. Not now. Not ever. She'd rather die a virgin. Even if the very idea pissed her off as much as anything else Kael had ever done. "I told you no," she hissed, backing farther away as he eased into a sitting position. "I don't want you."

"Liar."

“Fuck you.” She spun around and stalked off into the trees. She hadn’t gotten more than a few feet before she remembered her sword. Still cursing she returned to the bed roll, snatched up her weapon and stomped away again, ignoring the look in Kael’s beautiful green eyes—a combination of amusement, confusion and hurt she didn’t care to know about.

She strapped her scabbard onto her back absently as she wandered in the dark. She kept near the road, using the dusty track to avoid getting lost. She could feel Kael anyway, so she wasn’t worried about going too far. Her biggest worry was going back.

Years of hurt welled up and clogged her throat. Twelve years! She’d been young when they met, only fourteen, but she’d been positive Kael was *hurraynei*. At the time, she couldn’t have been happier. He was tall, handsome, a gifted smith of the famous sword mages, the Heron, he was nice and sexy. And he gave her a sense of safety. Like nothing in the world would ever hurt her so long as he was near.

So much for that fantasy.

She rubbed a spot on her chest beneath the cross strap of her scabbard. She hadn’t been prepared to see him again. Now her emotions were all over the place. She didn’t know how to deal with his presence. Especially when she had a mission. A woman’s life, an oracle’s life, depended on her. And like it or not, to save the woman Rowena needed the blasted Heron’s help. But how could she spend the next few weeks of travel with him when she could barely stand to be around him for a few minutes?

She wandered until the sky lightened, too numb to do much more than walk. She came back to where she knew he still waited and packed her gear without a word. When she started down the road, he fell into step beside her.

“You’re tired,” he murmured.

“I’m fine. I don’t need much sleep.”

They walked in silence for a while before stopping to break their fast. From out of nowhere, Kael produced a handful of apples and a round of cheese. She raised her eyebrows in question.

“There are advantages to being a sorcerer,” he said with a grin that made her heart hammer. “For one, you can travel light.”

She grunted but accepted the fresh fruit and cheese. Her rations, a bundle of hard oatcakes and a last chunk of fresh cornbread, seemed sad fare in comparison. She didn’t even have any dates left. She hunted for food along the way so she could travel light. As she took a bite of the juicy, crisp apple, she decided Kael’s method had definite advantages.

She glanced up from her next bite of fruit to see him staring. “What?”

He didn’t answer. Instead, he leaned close and wiped a drop of juice from the side of her mouth with one long finger. Her breath hitched at the brief contact. She looked away from the heat in his gaze and concentrated on her food.

“Tell me about your family?” he asked, quietly.

The question startled her. “I suppose you didn’t get to meet my parents last time, did you?” she said, more to herself than to him. Her parents had been there, but by the time they’d arrived...

She inhaled, let her breath out slowly until she could think past the old terror. “My mother, Kellyn, was a sword sworn to the Aleanian Temple when she was young. But she forsook her vows to follow her *raynei* .”

“That doesn’t happen often with the sword sworn. She was to be a full priestess?”

“No.” Rowena smiled at the often-told tale of her parents’ first meeting. “When she went to the Temple to undergo the testing, a priestess had a vision. She gave my mother a prophecy about the way she’d meet her *raynei* . It meant she wouldn’t be...suitable to become a full priestess. But she was sword sworn to the Temple for a year before she met my father.”

“And your father?”

Now she grinned. “He’s Gryphatar.” She watched the surprise shift across his face, his eyes widening, his mouth opening. She loved seeing that reaction when she told people about her father. She didn’t tell many, only very close friends at the Temple. Having a shape-shifter for a father, especially one of the legendary Gryphatar, had its disadvantages. But it was worth telling Kael to see his shock.

“That’s why your mother followed him,” Kael said. “He couldn’t move away from Gryphaldin.”

She nodded. Gryphatar lost control of their ability to shape-shift when they stayed away from Gryphaldin for too long. Their gryphon form would take control, overpowering any human thoughts with the rage and territoriality of the beast. “I grew up in Gryphaldin,” she said. “I missed the aerie for a long time after I moved to Malyk, to the Temple. But Malyk is my home now.”

Kael nodded, as if digesting the information she’d given him. Then his head snapped up, his gaze sharpened. “Kellyn? She’s Ba’nari’s owner, isn’t she?”

Now it was Rowena’s turn to be shocked, although she wasn’t sure why she was so surprised. There were so few mage swords in the world, of course the Heron would know who they were and who they’d claimed as owners. She nodded at his question.

“Strange,” he muttered, looking away, his brow creased.

“What is?” She leaned to the side, trying to see his face. When he looked back, she straightened.

He shook his head. “It’s nothing. I just didn’t expect... Doesn’t matter.” He tilted his head, his gaze sweeping over her face. “You’re obviously not able to shift like your father or you wouldn’t have been able to stay away from Gryphaldin for so many years.”

“My younger sister and older brother are both Gryphatar. That trait skipped me. But I got my mother’s sword skills and my father’s eyes.” She didn’t mention the other things she’d inherited from her father.

Kael reached out and brushed a finger over her cheekbone. “Very beautiful eyes at that.”

Her stomach quivered. “My mother’s eyes are really beautiful. Blue and big. Her best feature, she used to say. I always wished I had eyes like hers.”

He shook his head. “No. Your eyes are perfect.”

His big hand cupped her cheek, and it was all she could do not to rub her face against that callused palm.

A brief, unwanted image flashed through her mind of those thick, rough fingers rubbing up the inside of her thigh, gently parting her nether lips, slipping into the wet heat of her. She could nearly feel his hand on her, his finger inside her and the sensory impact of the fantasy made her lightheaded. She shook herself and eased away from his touch. “We’d better go. There’s a lot of ground to cover before we reach Dorjan’s lands.”

Kael walked beside Rowena, trying his best to keep his lust under control. There’d been something in her eyes when she’d run away last night, something that had stopped him from chasing after her. She was more than just angry. More than hurt. Last night he’d seen another emotion beneath it all.

Fear.

But it didn’t make sense for her to be afraid of him. She’d proven as much by holding a knife to his neck. And he’d seen her face in the midst of that fight with the mercenaries. While *he* might have panicked, she’d enjoyed the battle. Now, she traveled into a dangerous land to rescue an oracle from one of the most vicious warlords in the east. And she never showed a hint of fear.

So what scared her when she looked at him? Why did she keep running away?

To further complicate matters between them, her mother had a mage sword. The weapons were so rare it was unheard of for two people in the same family to be claimed by more than one. Oh, a mage sword might pass from parent to offspring or grandchild, remaining with one family for generations. But two in the same family was... Well, it had never been recorded in all the centuries of Heron history.

He frowned, glancing off into the field they skirted so Rowena wouldn’t see his expression. He’d been positive the mage sword he’d forged was meant for her. He knew it in his soul. And yet...

He’d expected Ca’laez to claim Rowena immediately. The sword hadn’t. Ca’laez had remained silent, leaving him in the difficult position of not being able to explain his long absence to Rowena. After finding out about her mother, he was starting to doubt his instincts. Maybe the sword wasn’t meant for her after all. Maybe it had been forged for someone else.

Damn, that would make things difficult. The mage sword had to be claimed.

He glanced at Rowena, her beautiful face set and distant. She was thinking. Hard enough that a little line had formed between her brows. He smiled, unable to stop himself. Being near her made him feel whole. Not quite settled, though. They’d have to complete the bonding for that. But even now he found it hard to imagine being without her. Unfortunately, until the mage sword claimed her owner, Kael didn’t have much choice about being with Rowena.

She didn’t stop for a middle meal, which surprised him. Instead, she took out a cloth-covered stack of oatcake rations and nibbled at one while they walked. When she wordlessly offered him one, her gaze open as she held the cakes out to him, he felt something in his chest pull tight.

She’d seen him pull food out of mid-air—a mage trick only one of his power could accomplish—yet she offered some of her own food without thought. He had no doubt her rations were sparse. The pack she

carried wasn't large enough for much food. And still she offered him a share. Openly. Easily.

"Thank you," he murmured as he took one of the hard biscuits.

She nodded and color tinted her cheeks. She turned back toward the path, scowling at the fields as she munched her food. He smiled and bit into the dust dry cake. She might try to deny it still, but their bond intensified with each moment they spent together, their souls intertwined.

She offered her water skin as casually as she'd offered her food. As he took a drink, he tried not to think about the fact that her mouth had been in exactly the same spot only moments before. He could still taste her, the hint of her, and it was all he could do not to drop the skin and pull her into his arms.

They stopped for the night inside a copse of trees at the edge of a yellowing wheat field. Rowena laid out her bedroll, collected twigs and bits of wood and started a small fire, all without speaking. She'd been quiet most of the day. Oddly, though, he found her silences as comforting as her talk. She was with him, near him. She didn't try to push him away. He had no doubt she'd give in to the need to bond fully soon enough.

She settled in front of the fire and produced the admittedly-filling-but-tasteless oatcakes again, offering him another. This time he shook his head. "Save them. I'll go get us something nicer to eat."

Her eyebrows popped upward, but she nodded, smiling slightly as she gestured for him to do as he liked. She even put the oatcakes back in her pack, which pleased him immensely for some strange reason. He returned with a pheasant fat enough to feed them both.

"Nice catch," she said. Then she formed a spit for over the fire while he prepared the bird.

It was almost more than he could stand, watching her lick fat juice from the roasted meat off her fingers as she ate. To keep his mind off licking her himself, he said, "Have you always wanted to be an Aleanian priestess?"

She looked up, her eyes widening a bit. "No, actually. I mean I was raised to understand the Aleanians, obviously. It was my mother's way of life, her religion and philosophy. She taught that to all of us. But it wasn't until my first trip to Malyk when I was twelve that I decided I wanted to become a part of that life."

Rowena smiled at the memory of that first trip, remembering the tingle of anticipation fluttering in her stomach as she left the aerie. "It was just my mother and me on that visit," she said, half to herself. "My father hated letting us go alone, but my older brother was in the middle of a difficult stage of the Gryphatar's life cycle. He couldn't leave Gryphaldin at all, and my father had to be with him to help him through. I'd gotten very handy with a practice sword by that time, so my mother decided I had to have a proper one. And once she made up her mind about something, there was very little my father could do."

She glanced up, met Kael's gaze over the fire. With a deprecating chuckle, she said, "The Gryphatar are brilliant artisans, but everyone in the freeworld knows the best swords are found at the base of Heron's Deep. Kellyn thought I'd proven myself and deserved a good blade. It wasn't until later she admitted to hoping I'd choose the Aleanian path. Probably to make up for only serving a single year of her own time as sword sworn."

“Why only a year?”

“She went to rescue my father. After that, she moved to Gryphaldin and had to break her vow.”

“She was sent to rescue your father so young? Did she swear her sword late?”

“No. She was only twenty-two when she went to rescue him.”

“But...” He set aside his food and his brow creased.

Rowena couldn't help but study his face. The strong jaw, the high cheekbones, the temptingly firm lips. She had to shake herself when her mind dipped into a fantasy of licking grease from his chin.

“But,” he continued, “I thought you swore your swords at fourteen, during the Choosing.”

“Ah,” she said, understanding his confusion. “No. That's when we begin the apprenticeship. We don't swear our swords until we're twenty-one. Before that, we're taught the skills, trained, and given a chance to have a bit of fun. The life of a sword sworn can be short. They like to give us time to enjoy our youth before they start sending us into danger.”

He nodded. “In keeping with Aleanian philosophy. I'd just never realized.”

“I'm surprised. The Heron have such close dealings with the Temple.”

He smiled wryly when he said, “And the Aleanians still keep much of their inner workings to themselves. There's a lot those outside the Temple don't know. Not unlike the Heron.”

She laughed. “I've never thought of that before. But you're right. There's a lot we don't know about you.”

His expression stilled, his eyes darkened. The sudden change had her heart thumping. “What?” she asked, swallowing to wet her suddenly dry throat.

“You should laugh more often.”

The intensity in his voice, his expression caught her breath. “I do,” she said as her heart squeezed tight. “Most of the time.” She couldn't explain to him that his mere presence made her ache for something she didn't want, something she knew would break her heart. The hurt she couldn't seem to control around him bit sharply and made it harder to laugh.

He nodded at her statement. “I saw you once, in the city. You were in a pub with friends. You laughed a lot that night.”

Her gaze narrowed. “You saw me? You saw me, and you didn't say anything?” Her throat closed against the punch of pain to her chest. He really had been avoiding her. For twelve years!

Chapter Three

“Damn you, Kael,” she muttered, turning her head so she didn't have to look at him. As the pain swept over the top of her anger, she wondered if she could really blame him for avoiding her. After the way their first meeting ended, she probably would have avoided her too.

“I wanted to talk to you,” he said quietly. “I couldn’t. Not then.”

“Why?” She refused to face him. She hated that he might see her hurt instead of her anger.

“I can’t explain.” She caught his shrug from the corner of her eye. “It’s to do with our ways. The Heron.”

“Can’t explain? Even to your *raynia*?” She snorted, not even trying to hide her disbelief.

“The Heron are as secretive as the Aleanians. As the Gryphatar. We have our reasons.” He was silent for a moment. Then said, “That’s the first time you’ve admitted to being my soul twin.”

She rolled her eyes. “It’s hardly worth denying now, is it? We both know it’s the truth. But that doesn’t mean we have to...” She trailed off, felt her cheeks heating.

“To what?”

Humor crept back into his voice, making her shiver despite the heat from the fire—a fire that had continued to burn even though she was no longer feeding it wood.

“You’re maintaining the flame, aren’t you?” she asked, changing the subject to avoid answering him. His wry look told her he knew what she was doing, but she didn’t care. She didn’t want to talk about sex. She was too angry. And too hurt. He’d seen her in Malyk. And he’d avoided her.

“I am,” he answered her question. “There’s not much wood here.”

“I’m going for a walk,” she said abruptly, lurching to her feet. “To that hill.” She nodded behind her to a field that overlooked their copse. “I don’t want another surprise like last night.”

She didn’t wait for him to respond before hurrying away from the fire. She stayed away long enough she thought he’d be asleep. To her infinite irritation, he wasn’t. He leaned against a tree, his thick arms crossed over his chest, watching her as she returned.

“Feel better?” he asked.

“No.” She tried to pass him, determined to crawl into her bedroll and ignore him until exhaustion made her sleep. He stopped her with a hand on her arm. She glared at the hand, then at him. He didn’t even flinch.

“You’re angry with me. For not coming to you sooner.”

“Damn straight I am. And that surprises you?”

“Actually, I was surprised at first. But I understand a little better now. What I don’t understand is why you keep running away from me? You can feel our bonding as well as I can. You can’t stop it now. Why deny it?”

“Because. I. Don’t. Want. You.” She bit off each word.

“Yes. You do.” He pulled her against him, catching her off guard with the sudden jerk. “And obviously,”

he ground his hips against hers, “I want you too.”

Her stomach danced. There was no denying the very large erection pressing against her belly. Her breathing sped as his gaze held hers, forcing her to acknowledge the attraction. Her heart thumped so hard she thought it might burst. A full out fight with seven armed men hadn't made her blood pound this hard. But Kael, just looking at her, took her breath away.

She didn't protest when he backed her up against a tree, didn't pull away when he ran his hands down her arms and settled his big palms on her waist. His thumbs stroked over her belly, and she was instantly wet and ready.

It would be so easy to give in, so easy to let him strip off her trousers and thrust that thick, hard cock into her. She tried to remember why she kept denying this, why she kept refusing him when she wanted nothing more than to fuck him until dawn. There was a reason. . .

His abandonment, her logic tried to tell her. *He ignored you, avoided you for twelve years. If you give in now, you'll never be free of him.*

But would that really be so bad?

His gaze dropped to her mouth and his head followed, slowly, easing closer as if he couldn't stop himself. His breath brushed hot against her lips, and a sensory memory flashed. Kael, twelve years younger, his face not etched so hard as now. He'd been much taller than her then—she hadn't had her growth spurt. He had her backed up against a building, away from the crowded market streets.

His eyes, so green and intense, fascinated her. He was a lot older, but she didn't care. He was her *raynei*. She knew it, felt it with every fiber of her being. And she wanted him to kiss her, there in the alley. She didn't care who saw.

He leaned in close, seeming to struggle against his urge. Bold and eager, she rose onto her toes and brushed her lips against his. He groaned low in his throat, and his mouth crushed down on hers. His arms cinched around her waist, nearly pulled her off of her feet. Her young body hummed with sensation, thrilled at the feelings he stirred. She wanted more. She wrapped her arms around his neck, tilted her head, let him deepen the kiss.

Then, suddenly, he wrenched away. He took a step back, his muscles tightening as he blinked rapidly. She reached out to him. “Kael?”

He looked at her, his eyes rolled back into his head, and his body began to convulse as he collapsed to the ground. She screamed and called mentally for her mom and dad. They found her crouching over Kael as his body jerked violently.

“Turn him on his side,” her mother said. “And keep him that way. Cushion his head so he doesn't hurt himself.” Her father helped her roll Kael's body onto his side. Then Rowena knelt to cushion Kael's head in her lap while her father kept a gentle pressure on Kael's back. As they worked, her mother unsheathed Ba'nari, murmured something Rowena couldn't hear, and dropped to one knee, driving the sword deep into the ground through the stone slabs lining the road.

Rowena wasn't sure how much time passed. Tears streamed down her face as she held Kael despite the rhythmic jerking of his muscles. She petted his hair, kept saying his name. She looked up when two Heron materialized at Kael's feet. They took him from her arms and an instant later the seizure ended,

leaving him limp and unconscious.

“Will he be all right?” she asked, struggling to her feet.

The Heron exchanged a look. One, an older woman with blond hair, said, “He’ll be fine. We’ll take care of him.” And they disappeared.

Rowena hadn’t seen Kael again until he’d appeared in front of her last night. At least, she hadn’t seen him in person. She’d dreamt about him constantly since that day.

The memory of that first kiss shot terror through her. She couldn’t face that happening again. She had no way to call the Heron this time. Panic blinding her, she struggled out of Kael’s arms before his lips touched hers and stumbled away from the heat of his body. The moisture on her cheeks surprised her. She wiped it roughly away as she sucked in deep, calming breaths. Slowly, the panic eased, but she kept her back to him as she tried to regain her control.

“Rowena?” His voice was soft, colored by concern.

Gods, he’d probably seen her tears. Humiliated, she started back to camp, but he stopped her with a hand on her shoulder. She spun around to face him and without thinking, her sword was in her hands. “Leave me alone, Kael. I mean it.”

“No. Tell me what’s wrong. Why are you crying?”

“I’m not. And it’s none of your business anyway.”

His eyes narrowed, sparked with a dangerous glimmer. “Yes. It is.” He pulled his own sword from the sheath strapped over his back, touched his blade to hers. “Winner take all,” he murmured.

“You don’t want to fight me.”

“You’re right. I want to fuck you. You’re the one insisting on a fight. So we’ll play your way first. Then we play mine.”

Her fear morphed to anger. “Arrogant bastard.” She spun away then swung back to catch his blade with her own, the sound of steel on steel ringing in the dark copse. There wasn’t a lot of room between the trees, but she used what she had, unleashing her anger and frustration, slashing, testing, pushing him to show her just how good he was.

He tried to back her against another tree, she turned the trick on him, had him braced between bulging roots, barely able to deflect her attack as he untangled himself. She laughed at his growl, let the energy rushing through her wash away everything but the battle. Her muscles bunched and flexed, her feet danced, her blood pumped in time to the rhythm of the fight. “You underestimate me, Heron,” she said, swinging her blade to push aside his blow.

“Never.”

But on his next attack, he overstretched. She twisted around behind him and slapped him across the ass with the flat of her blade. She laughed, pleased with his yelp. As he turned on her, she continued to grin, enjoying herself, reveling in the play of skill against skill. He was good. Very good. And it made the battle more exciting.

He got in under her guard once and returned her slap, only he used his hand on her ass instead of his blade. She squealed and jumped away. Rubbing a hand over her stinging skin, she glared. It was his turn to grin, but there was something very serious about his grin, something dangerous that made her hurry to put more distance between them. Despite herself, her body reacted to the gleam in his eye. And she found it hard to think for a moment beyond the way his palm had felt on her butt.

She returned to the matter at hand with a jolt when his blade swung toward her again. He wasn't much taller than her anymore, but he was easily twice as thick, his muscles honed in the smithy. She couldn't take many of his blows directly on her blade, but she knew how to counter superior brute strength. She knocked his blade to one side, stepping in close to keep from taking his full power on her shoulders.

But getting that close to him was a mistake. He used her move, grabbed the strap of her scabbard where it crossed between her breasts and pulled. Before she could protest, before she could gasp, his mouth closed over hers. His tongue plunged between her lips, taking, dominating. For a breathless moment, she fell into the kiss and savored the taste of him as their tongues tangled. Gods, she'd wanted this for so long, the feel of his firm lips covering hers, the heat, the need. She pressed closer, demanding more, and he groaned into her mouth.

Her eyes snapped open. Panic flushed through her system. With a strangled sound, she jerked back and stumbled away without ever taking her gaze off him. Her heart raced, her hands started to tremble. She raised her sword more out of habit than in self-defense and stared. Waiting.

Kael's gaze narrowed as he studied her. Her face was pale beneath the golden tan. Too pale. Her eyes were so wide and dark they dominated the planes of her face. She was breathing hard and her mouth hung open. But instead of anger, he saw panic. That same damned fear he'd seen earlier. But fear of what?

He brought Ca'laez down to his side, relaxing his stance. She kept her sword up. In fact, she didn't move a muscle. A minute ago she'd been laughing and enjoying their battle. Now, she stood like a terrorized statue, staring at him. He didn't understand such a dramatic change just because he'd kissed her.

After a few quiet heartbeats, her grip relaxed, and she straightened. Her brow creased. "Are you okay?"

His eyebrows shot upward. It was the last question he'd expected her to ask. He frowned. "Of course I'm okay. Why wouldn't I be?"

Her cheeks puffed as she blew out a pent up breath and let her sword drop to her side. She blinked a couple of times then shook her head. "You're not going to...? I was afraid... After last time, I thought..."

He could actually see her swallowing. She rubbed a hand over her mouth and turned away.

"Sorry," she said, and sheathed her sword.

"Rowena?" He took a step closer, watched her shoulders rise and fall with her slow, methodical breathing. And then it hit him. The last time they'd kissed, the only time they'd kissed, he'd had a seizure. The fit hadn't had anything to do with her, at least not directly, not the kiss. He'd entered his trance. The

initiation of trance started with a seizure. And his had been triggered early by meeting his *raynia*. Who, until today, he'd been convinced was to be the owner of the mage sword he'd forged.

But Rowena wouldn't have known any of that. Couldn't know any of it. And the Heron who'd come to take him back into the Deep, his mother and uncle, wouldn't have explained. Rowena thought their kiss had triggered his seizure. She thought he'd been avoiding her for twelve years because kissing her had caused a fit.

Hells. "Rowena." Her name came out a sigh. He sheathed his sword and closed the distance between them, folding his hands over her shaking shoulders. "Baby, that seizure had nothing to do with you. It was... Heron biology. Something that some of us go through. But only once in our lives. And it had nothing to do with you. It was just bad timing."

"So...so it won't happen again? You swear it won't happen again?"

The fear trembling in her voice nearly undid him. He pulled her back against his chest, wrapped his arms around her. Her sword pressed across his chest and stomach, but he ignored it. He rested his cheek against her left temple to avoid the sword pommel sticking up over her right shoulder. Rocking her gently, he breathed in her scent, closing his eyes to savor. "It won't happen again," he murmured into her hair. "I swear it."

She nodded and took a long, deep breath. The exhale shuddered out of her. "Good."

Because he couldn't resist the temptation, he nuzzled her neck, kissed the silky skin. Tasted. Bit down gently. "You taste good," he said and moved his lips up her neck to the soft skin at the base of her jaw. Her head tilted to the side, giving him better access. The unconscious gesture made him smile. "Feeling better?" He nipped her earlobe.

"*Mmm...* Well, I'm not worried about making you ill with a kiss anymore."

The wry note in her voice made him chuckle. "Your kisses do a lot of things to me, baby, but making me ill isn't one of them." He reached up and moved the short length of her hair aside so he could taste the back of her neck. At the hairline, he kissed, licked then blew warm air across her skin. She shivered.

"What are you doing?" she asked, her voice breathless even as she leaned into him.

"Tasting you."

"You shouldn't be doing that."

"Why not? I'm enjoying myself. And we've established the fact that I'm not going to collapse from it. Though I may burn up." The arm he still had wrapped around her dropped lower so he could pull her ass up tight against his cock.

"Kael." Her voice strained now. She brought a hand up and clenched his arm where it circled her waist. He'd anticipated her pushing him away and tightened his hold, but instead she gripped his forearm and held him in place.

"There's no reason to run, Rowena," he murmured as his lips brushed over her throat to the collar of her tunic. He nuzzled the material aside to nibble the skin at the curve between her shoulder and neck. "We're soul twins. *Raynyn*. This is right."

He closed his free hand over her breast without losing his hold on her waist. She moaned, her head dropping back toward his shoulder. The pommel of her sword got in the way, but she didn't seem to notice. He did. And he didn't want the hindrance. "That's a Heron blade you have?" he asked against her ear.

She nodded. He reached to the strap crossing between her breasts and found the hidden release catch. For ordinary Heron blades, anyone could press the release and cause the scabbard strap to open and drop away. If they knew where the catch was. Freeing a mage sword scabbard was more complicated—only the owner could use the quick release catch. But Rowena wasn't wearing a mage sword. He pressed the release, heard her gasp as the scabbard loosened and slipped between their bodies to the ground.

"My sword." She tried to lean down to pick it up, but he gave her no room.

"It's fine." He released his own scabbard, gently setting his sword on the ground with hers. "We won't go far." He rubbed his palm over her ass cheek and patted gently to move her forward. When the two swords were no longer underfoot, he turned her to face him and back her up against a tree.

"You've got the nicest ass," he said, continuing to suck and lick the skin over her throat. He closed both hands over her butt and squeezed. "Very tight. Very curvy. I'm looking forward to fucking you from behind so I can feel this lovely ass of yours slapping against my hips."

"You're very crude," she breathed between panting breaths.

"Because you're enjoying it."

"How would you know?"

"I can feel it. And you're melting in my arms."

"Am not."

He laughed at the blatant lie. "No?" He brought his mouth up to hers, swirled his tongue over her lower lip and dipped inside her mouth with a quick, teasing lick. "You'd rather I didn't tell how good you taste? How hot you feel? How much I want to be inside you? How I'm going out of my mind right now with wanting you?"

"*Hmm*. Okay, you can tell me those things."

He chuckled and took possession of her mouth. Her tongue tangled with his, welcoming, wanting. This time, he could feel her curiosity, her hunger overpowering the fear that had haunted her for years. He drank it in, fed it, urging her need higher, tighter. She ground her hips against his straining cock, and he groaned into her mouth, his hands clenching tight on her ass. "Gods. Rowena, you drive me crazy." And he kissed her again.

His hands moved over her, exploring, teasing. She inched her fingers up under his vest, touching skin, and his head spun from sheer pleasure. "Yes," he muttered, "touch me." He shrugged the vest off, leaving his chest bare, accessible to her exploration. Then he buried his hands in her hair and angled her head to deepen the kiss.

He couldn't get enough of her. The feel of her hands on his skin was like fire, burning lines down his back, across his stomach. When her fingers skimmed his lower abdomen, near the top of his trousers, he shuddered and his hands clenched tight in her hair. If he didn't bury himself in her soon, he might just die.

When he came up for air, he was panting and close to losing control. He drank in the sight of her mussed hair, her red, swollen lips, the dreamy daze in her dark eyes. He loved seeing her this way, just like this, drowsy with desire, too needy to think beyond him. "You're so beautiful," he said, cupping her cheek in his hand.

She closed her eyes, rubbed her face against his palm, the gesture so intimate it made his throat tight.

"No. I'm your *raynia*," she said. "You have to think I'm pretty." Her eyes blinked open, twinkling with amusement as they met his.

"Let me ask you, do you think I'm handsome?"

She rolled her eyes. "Gods, yes."

"And am I handsome because I'm your *raynei* or because I'm really handsome?"

"Any woman with half a brain would think you're handsome, Kael."

He grinned, liking the little hint of jealousy in her voice. "And I think we can safely say you have more than half a brain."

She snorted, trying to hide her grin.

"I feel the same way." He leaned in to brush his lips over her cheeks, across her forehead. "Any man with eyes would think you're beautiful. I imagine a number of men have in the last twelve years."

She shrugged.

His eyes narrowed. "How many suitors have you had?"

She didn't hide her grin so well this time. "One or two."

"One or two?"

"Maybe three. Could have been four."

"So that's what you've been doing while I was...?" He took a deep breath, let it out through his teeth. Her grin was huge now, teasing. And he liked it, but he wasn't about to let her know. "So I've been pining away for you, and you've been flirting with other men. That's very hurtful of you, *raynia*."

"Ha! Pining, my ass." She looked him up and down in a way that made his blood boil. "You kiss too good to have been 'pining' for twelve years."

"Do I?" His voice dropped to a low purring growl as he pressed closer to her again.

She scowled. "Yes." His hand closed over her breast, rubbing through the thin material of her tunic. She gasped and arched against him. "And you know what you're doing," she murmured. "You couldn't

have..." Her breath caught when his hand slipped inside her tunic. The only thing separating his palm from her bare skin was the thin wrap of linen binding her breasts. "Couldn't have gotten this good without practicing," she finished.

He watched her eyes darken as he worked the linen wrap loose enough to allow his hand to slip underneath. He twisted a finger around her already peaked nipple, teasing the little bud tighter, then pinched it gently between forefinger and thumb.

She groaned. "Kael." Her voice strained out between her teeth, a plea for mercy.

For her teasing, he intended to show her none. "You think I'm good? You like the way I touch you?"

"Yes." She moved restlessly under his palm, rubbing against him.

He leaned close to nuzzle her neck, still toying with her nipple. "Have you many men to compare me to? Have you let other men touch you this way?"

She shook her head, her hands clenching and unclenching against his waist. "Damn you," she panted. "I met you when I was only fourteen. I haven't been able to stand the touch of another man since." She shuddered as his teeth sank into her skin, biting none too gently. "All your fault," she managed, her voice barely audible.

"You're a virgin." He'd suspected as much, despite the erotic sensations flooding her dreams.

She nodded and her short nails bit into his back. "All your fault," she said again.

Growing more desperate by the moment, Kael pushed her tunic fully open, ripping one of the front buttons off in his haste. The linen binding beneath was pushed up onto her chest, exposing both lush, full breasts to his hungry gaze. He closed his hands over both, squeezed. She inhaled sharply, as if burned, and the sound made his already throbbing cock jump.

"If it makes you feel any better," he said, then trailed off. He watched in fascination as her golden skin flushed, turning her breasts pink, darkening the dusty rose color of her nipples. He licked his lips and leaned down to close his mouth over one hard little nub. She cried out, her hands clenching tight in his hair. He circled the tip with his tongue then pulled her into his mouth again, suckling hard. Her knees buckled. He circled one arm around her waist to hold her upright.

"You were...saying...something about...making me feel better," she said between gasps.

For a heartbeat, he had no idea what she was talking about. Her emotions, her needs were flowing over him, through him, and he knew she was feeling very good at that moment, if a little desperate. Feeling her emotions like this was infinitely better than riding her dreams because now he knew he was the cause of her passion. And he had every intention of making them both feel even better before the night was out.

Then he remembered what'd he'd been about to tell her before getting distracted. He gave her nipple a last lick before straightening. He held her tight, loving the feel of her breasts pressed flat against his chest, skin to skin. "I was saying, if it will make you feel any better, I've been celibate since meeting you, too. And not at all happy about it either."

Her eyes narrowed. "You? You were celibate for twelve years?" Her gaze danced over him. "I find that very hard to believe."

“Believe it.” He took her hand and brought it down to his cock, pressing her palm against the hard bulge of his erection. “This is because of you, only you since we met. And I’ve been this way almost constantly since last night.”

Her fingers squeezed, testing. At his urging, she rubbed her palm up and down the length of him, through the barrier of his trousers. He dropped his head against her shoulder, groaning. “Gods, that feels good.”

“*Mmm...* Yes, it does.”

He released her wrist to clench at her hip as her hand continued to stroke him, gently, slowly. He was going to come in his pants if he didn’t stop her soon, but he couldn’t quite bring himself to end the agony. When she started to stroke faster, harder, he gripped her wrist and forced her hand away. “You’re lucky I’ve lasted this long,” he said when she whimpered in protest. “Twelve years is a long time to wait.”

“You really haven’t had sex with anyone since we met?” There was a quiet wonder in her voice that made him smile.

He touched his lips to hers. “I really haven’t. I’ve only wanted you since that day. You’re *myraynia* .”

Her eyes snapped fire. “Then why the hell did you wait so long?”

Chapter Four

The petulance in Rowena’s voice made Kael grin. He closed his mouth over hers, tasting her impatience, her desire. Without breaking the kiss, he pulled a part of his mind away long enough for a spell.

It took power, more than just transporting food. More than he should probably use while they still had Dorjan’s wizard to face. But he didn’t want her first time to be up against a tree or on the hard, rough ground. He wanted to make love to her in a bed. At least this time. Later, he wouldn’t feel the need to restrict themselves to beds.

Rowena felt the tingle of something beyond her own desire, beyond the heat of his emotions pouring into her. She could feel his lust, his impatience, his need to please. But for an instant, a part of him moved away from her. She could feel it, like she could feel all his other emotions. She was an empath anyway, but the bonding between them made her particularly sensitive to him. She pulled back to look into his face, to ask what was wrong.

And that’s when she saw the bed.

Her eyes widened and her mouth dropped open. It was huge, the mattress thick and covered with white linens that glowed in the deepening gloom of night. Four thick stone pillars in the red sandstone of Malyk and Heron’s Deep cornered the bed. The pillars were rounded and carved with exotic pictures of twining animals and plant life. The bed squeezed into the space between the trees at the center of the copse, so tight one tree actually butted up against one of the shorter sides of the mattress. Her bedroll, pack and the remains of their dinner fire were just visible beyond the bed.

“Where did that come from?” she asked.

He chuckled and nuzzled her neck in a way that made her eyes cross. She loved the feel of his mouth on her throat, his lips brushing against her pulse.

“A present,” he said. “For you.”

“Yes, but . . .” Her thinking blurred when his lips returned to hers. He walked her backward to the bed, holding her tight, his mouth devouring hers. She felt the mattress against the back of her thighs, then his hands gripped her waist. She gasped when he picked her up and tossed her, easily, into the center of the bed. Her stomach danced at the show of strength.

He stood at the foot of the bed, staring at her, the green of his eyes nearly black. “Undress,” he said, without moving.

She swallowed and slipped her already open tunic off. The linen wrap was wrenched up high on her chest, but he’d loosened it enough it was easy to unwind. Still he didn’t move, just watched. Because she could feel his emotions, feel the intensity of his desire, she felt luscious and sexy under his gaze. Any other man, any other time, and she knew she’d have felt awkward and self-conscious. But not with Kael.

She sat up and removed her boots, tossing them aside. Then she unhitched her belt, letting the dagger and sheath drop carefully to the ground. She unlaced the leather bindings on the side of her trousers, slipped the butter soft suede down her hips, watching him, watching the effect she had on him. Naked, she lay back on the white sheets and waited. Her breathing came fast, her pussy flooded with moisture, and her body trembled in the cool evening air. She wanted his heat, wanted the feel of him next to her, the hard length of his cock thrusting into her. But she waited. And he watched.

Finally, he leaned over and took off his boots. His gaze never left her. When he put his hand to the leather straps of his trousers, she shuddered. It was so like her dream. And yet nothing like it. She knew this was real, this was Kael. No illusions, no fantasy. *Herraynei*. All her earlier fear, all the hurt seemed so far away. A part of her still wondered, still worried. But most of her was so centered on him, she couldn’t think beyond the movement of his hands as he pushed his trousers down over his lean hips and stepped out of them to stand naked before her.

Her lips parted as her breath left her on an exhale. He was magnificent. Perfect.

Large.

She swallowed. Sex had never hurt in her dreams, but this was going to. Her friends had assured her it passed, and then it was wonderful. She’d have to trust to their experience. But she couldn’t take her eyes off the sheer size of his cock, the purple head already glistening with a drop of moisture.

Did all men look like that? she wondered as he moved up onto the bed next to her. She’d touched him through his trousers. Did he feel different, flesh to flesh? Her gaze on his, she reached out and touched his cock, just the head. His eyes fluttered closed and his jaw clenched.

“You like me to touch you?” she asked, genuinely curious. She wanted to please him. When he nodded, she ran her fingers down the length of him. His skin was soft over the hardness beneath. With her thumb and forefinger, she stroked him, fascinated when his cock twitched. “I like touching you,” she admitted. She cupped his balls in her hand, squeezed gently, felt them tightening.

His body jerked. He reached down and pulled her hand away, set it against his chest. She could feel his heart racing, matching the pace of hers.

“Twelve years was too long,” he muttered, breathing through his teeth.

She smiled, leaned in and kissed him. He met her hungrily, pressing her back into the mattress as he ravished her mouth, her neck. His lips dropped to her breasts, tugging, sucking her nipples until she thought she'd go out of her mind. Her womb clenched, her legs moved restlessly under him. Then his hand slid down her stomach, making her entire body contract.

He ran a finger over her hipbone, just above the thatch of hair between her legs, down the inside of her thigh. She panted, barely able to draw breath. And then his palm covered her mound, and one finger teased between her nether lips where she was slick and ready. He slid along the crease, rubbing gently. With each stroke, he pressed his fingertip against her opening, never actually pushing inside. She barely recognized the needy, pleading sounds she made, only knew he was driving her mad.

"More?" he asked against her mouth. She nodded. And he dipped inside her, his callused finger moving deep. She arched under him, groaning. This was just as she imagined, just what she thought his finger would feel like moving inside her. Only she had ever touched herself this way before, but she'd fantasized about his hands, his fingers. And now she knew. Her fantasies paled in comparison to the real feel of him.

"Kael." His name sighed out of her.

"You like me inside you?"

She nodded, arched as his thumb found her clitoris while his finger still moved in and out of her.

"It doesn't hurt?"

"Gods, no," she groaned.

"My cock is bigger."

"Yes."

"It'll hurt at first."

"I know."

"It won't last long. Then it'll be nothing but pleasure. I promise."

"I know." She captured his mouth, threaded her fingers into his hair to hold him close.

"I want you to come for me, like this," he said against her mouth. "I want to make you come just like this, with my hands first."

Her hips jerked, but she shook her head. "No. I want you inside me. Kael, I want us joined."

"Don't worry, baby." He grinned even as her body started to spin out of her control, tightening around his finger. "I want us joined, too."

She tried to hold on, to hold back. But he knew, he could feel when his movements hit just the right spots, held just the right pressure. She couldn't hide her emotions from him, not now. She couldn't control her body's reactions. When the pressure was too much, the intensity too sharp, she gave in and let go, crying out with the force of her orgasm.

She trembled and shuddered in the aftermath, curling into his arms, his warmth. “Gods,” she muttered against his neck and felt his chuckle vibrate across her breasts.

He rolled between her lax thighs, lifted them to circle his hips as he settled with his penis poised against her. She was slick with excitement and her own cum, but the press of the head of his cock reminded her of his size. He cradled her face between his big hands, kissed her gently. “Fast or slow?” he asked. “Either way will hurt some. I can’t help that. But I leave the method to you.”

“Fast,” she said after considering. She wanted the pain done with so she could go back to enjoying him. A part of her almost wished she’d had sex before so her first time with Kael wouldn’t be shadowed by the blasted inconvenience of her virginity. But another part was glad he would be her first, her only. It seemed right. She could feel their bond tightening, their souls so intermeshed now there was no separating them. This one last step would complete the process. They would no longer be able to stand being apart for long periods of time. And if one died, the other would follow.

For a brief moment, her fears rose up again. He was Heron. Heron didn’t live outside of Heron’s Deep. And she was to be a priestess of the Aleanian Temple. She couldn’t move underground, couldn’t live away from the Temple. Would they survive living that far apart, seeing each other when they could, but not constantly, not the way her mother and father did?

She reminded herself that her mother traveled without her father to Malyk sometimes, stayed away from him for weeks. And they managed just fine. Maybe it wasn’t so much proximity as the knowledge that the other was there... somewhere.

She tried to latch on to the thought, tried to sort through her fears with logic. But then Kael brushed his lips over hers, sunk deep into the kiss, blurring all her thoughts. She wrapped her arms around his neck, held him close, kissed him hard and clenched her eyes tight when he thrust into her in one quick, hard stroke. The pain only lasted a moment before she was distracted by the feel of him inside her, the utter satisfaction of it, the rightness. *This is how he should feel inside me*. Just like her dreams, just like her fantasies. Only better. He filled her, stretched her. And she felt in that instant the bond sealing. Their souls were joined, their lives now one. From this moment on, they would be whole. Complete.

She sighed, smiled against his mouth as she felt his fascinated awe. And she knew he sensed it too, the final melding of their souls. His kiss turned tender. And he began to move.

At first, his thrusts were slow, steady, coaxing her. She clenched around him, loving the way his hard, thick cock felt inside her. Without the distraction of pain, she could fully appreciate the size of him stretching her tight, the friction of his movements. Her hips jerked against him and she shuddered as her sensitive clitoris rubbed against the dark curls nestling his cock. She moaned and thrust against him again. It was almost more sensation than she could stand.

He reached between their bodies, fingered her clit as his thrusts increased, pounding harder into her. Her head arched back against the bed. She bit her lower lip to keep from crying out, but a taut sound still escaped. Her fingers dug into his shoulders and her entire body clenched and jerked until she came with a ragged scream. She barely had time to recover before he was pounding into her, harder, faster. He propped his hands on the bed beside her head so his upper body towered over her. His gaze bore into her, held hers and before she could stop it, she came again, the force so powerful tears leaked from her eyes.

His hips jerked against hers, his breathing harsh above her. Her vagina pulsed with too much sensation,

overwhelming her nerves. Her inner muscles clenched around his cock as the aftershock of her latest orgasm shuddered through her. He groaned, cursed under his breath. And then his back arched, his neck muscles straining. With a harsh cry, he erupted inside her, spewing hotly into her core.

He collapsed, covering her as he shuddered. She wrapped her arms around his neck and squeezed her arms and thighs, hugging him with her entire body. The hug didn't have much power in it. She didn't have any strength left. But her emotions overwhelmed her in that instant and she needed him close.

When they were both breathing more normally, he rolled to the side, taking her with him. Their bodies still intertwined, he reached up to the tangled mass of her hair and smoothed it back from her sweat-soaked brow. His smile was tender and heart-wrenching.

“That was worth waiting for,” he said.

She laughed, part embarrassment, part pleasure, and buried her face against his chest. She inhaled, pulling in his scent. “Yes,” she murmured, placing a kiss on his chest, just above his nipple. “Yes, it was.”

* * *

Kael let her sleep for a few hours before he couldn't stand the wait any longer and had to wake her. She'd surprised him by falling asleep almost immediately, while he'd felt energized by the sex, even in his exhaustion. He'd dozed some. But mostly, he watched her, studying the curve of her jaw, the soft line of her mouth still puffy and red from his kisses, the curve of her lashes against her cheek. Her skin was dark against the stark white of the sheets. He placed her hand on his chest, studied the contrast of her darker skin against his pale flesh. For some reason, her hand looked perfect, right where he pressed her palm against his heart.

She was all warmth and soft flesh now, her toned body relaxed in sleep. He studied the golden highlights in her dark brown hair. At a certain angle, if he wasn't paying attention, the gold looked almost like feathers woven into her hair. An illusion of light and shadow, probably something she inherited from her father. But it was exotic and tantalizing to see. He absently wondered what else besides her eyes and the golden glints in her hair she'd inherited from her father.

Kael slid his hand down to her breast, squeezing the heavy mound in a gentle massage. She moaned in her sleep, stirred a little, moving closer to him. But she didn't wake up. He grinned. Leaning over, he took her already hard nipple into his mouth, tasting the salty sweetness of her skin as he rolled his tongue around her. Her breathing deepened, but she didn't wake up.

She must be exhausted, he thought, feeling a twinge of guilt. He should let her sleep. They'd have the rest of their lives for making love. But his cock was already hard and straining for release. And his mouth watered for a taste of her pussy.

He skimmed his lips over her stomach, savoring her flavor with quick flicks of his tongue. He felt the change in her, heard the shift in her breathing when his teeth skimmed over her hipbone.

“What are you doing?” she murmured, her voice heavy with sleep.

“Something I’ve been wanting to do for a long time,” he said. He shifted, settled between her thighs. Her scent, sharp and feminine, wafted up to him and he growled. He stared at the dark thatch of curls, the faint glistening of moisture already visible, the swollen flesh of her lips peeking out from the curls. He caught her gaze for an instant before he dipped his head and touched his tongue to her warm, wet pussy.

She arched up on the mattress, her fingers digging into the sheets. “Kael.”

He loved hearing his name straining out of her. He flicked his tongue over her flesh, parted her lips, delved in deeper. He licked and sucked, savored the musky taste of her as she writhed above him. When he pushed the tip of his tongue inside her, her hands clamped down on his head, her grip tightening in his hair. He played her, fed on her until her body jerked and she came hard. She tried to pull away as her body shook with her release, but he clamped his hands on her hips, held her in place and moved his mouth back to her.

“Kael, no. I can’t.” She twisted under him. “It’s too much.”

“You can take more,” he said, his breath brushing against her damp curls. His mouth closed over her again. His tongue brushed once, twice and she came again, screaming. He drove her until she begged, pleaded, until her voice was too strained to beg more. Then he rose above her, plunged his hard cock into her and watched her eyes close against the overwhelming sensations.

“Gods, you’re beautiful,” he murmured. Then lost himself in a hard pounding rhythm. He held himself back long enough to give her one last orgasm then all control shattered. He slammed into her until his balls tightened and he came hard and hot.

When he could move, he rolled onto his back and pulled her over him, blanketing himself with her warm body. She snuggled close, wrapped her arms under his neck. His heart still thumped in his chest. He felt the echoing pound of her heart, and a tenderness he’d never imagined washed through him. He hugged her close and buried his face against her throat.

“That was a nice way to wake up,” she murmured, making him chuckle. “But it’s still dark.”

“I know, baby. Sorry. I couldn’t wait for dawn.”

He felt her grinning, even if he couldn’t see it.

“You’re forgiven,” she said, the humor in her voice unmistakable. “In fact, if you have to wake me again before dawn, I’m sure I’d be able to forgive you for that too.” She yawned and snuggled closer.

He ran a hand up her back in a lazy caress, wondering if now was a bad time to discuss anything she might have to think about. “Baby?”

“*Hmm?*”

“If I’ve gotten you pregnant—”

“We don’t have to worry about that.” Her voice was quiet with sleep. “The priestesses have a spell. Alean herself gave it to them for the sword sworn. Couldn’t have a pregnant woman getting killed in a sword fight.” She said the last with a wry note in her tired voice.

He stilled. “And if you want to have children?”

She yawned again. "They remove the spell when our term as sword sworn is up."

He relaxed, amazed at the relief he felt. Amazed at how much he wanted to have children with Rowena.

"Mom had to take an herbal drink," she mumbled. "Spell wouldn't work on her with Ba'nari. Probably all right though since she was only a sword sworn for a year..." Her voice trailed off into a quiet murmur he could no longer understand.

Within moments, her breathing evened and she slipped back into sleep. He smiled and let his tired body join her.

She surprised him by waking him next, her mouth moving over his cock in a slow, steady rhythm. He groaned and looked down the length of his body. She caught his gaze, held it as she continued to move her sexy lips up and down his erection. He was too big for her to take fully into her mouth so she squeezed and stroked the base of his penis with one hand while she sucked him.

He had no control over his body, no thought beyond the heat of her wet lips, the feel of her hands, the glint of lust in her dark eyes. He came with a shout that echoed among the trees, spurting into her mouth. She continued sucking until she'd milked him completely, then lifted her head, licked her lips and grinned.

The sight was almost enough to get him hard again.

When she crawled up the bed and snuggled next to him, he wrapped her in his arms. "You're right," he murmured, kissing her brow. "That's a very nice way to wake up."

She chuckled, kissed his shoulder then nestled her head on his chest. After only a few minutes, he felt her breathing deepen as sleep took her again. He slipped under with her, knowing he'd wake her again soon. And again before the sun rose.

* * *

Kael blinked against the dawn light, yawned hugely and rubbed his chest. He'd barely slept all night, just a few short naps. Yet he felt better than he had in years. He rolled to kiss his *raynia* awake, only to find the bed empty. He sat up and glanced around. She stood near her pack, still naked, though he noted her sword and dagger where within easy reach. She stared at her trousers, her lips pursed as if she was deep in thought. He almost hated to say anything. He enjoyed watching her when she was unaware of his gaze. The unconscious emotions and thoughts flickering over her face fascinated him.

Finally, his curiosity got the better of him. "Good morning. Is something wrong?"

She glanced up and grinned. The smile was so bright, so unrestrained it took his breath.

"I'm just wishing I had a stream nearby to wash in." She shrugged, and faint color tinted her cheeks.

"I think I can help with that." He shouldn't. It was a waste of power. Power he knew he'd need later. But he couldn't resist her. He closed his eyes, focused, muttered the spell. At her gasp, he opened his

eyes. A few feet from Rowena sat a small red stone tub with a fired enamel interior so dark it was nearly black. Steam rose from the water inside. Rowena's eyes were huge as she stepped up to the tub and gingerly dipped her finger into the water. She groaned, her eyes rolling up.

"That's amazing. Should I even ask how you did this?" She smiled, dropped her trousers and stepped into the tub.

The sheer bliss on her face as she sank into the water up to her neck had his cock hardening. And a part of him was intensely pleased he was able to provide her the small luxury. He'd never been sure if the increase in his powers, induced by his early trance, had been a good thing or a bad thing. Because of those added powers and the prestige of having forged a true mage sword, his position among the Heron had been elevated.

His father had used his son's newfound status on more than one occasion to accomplish his own political aims. Both his parents were encouraging him to enter into the political arena, take a place as a high councilor. But Kael didn't want anything to do with politics. He was a smith, a sword mage at their most elemental. And if his powers hadn't grown so much, he wouldn't have to worry about being anything more than a smith.

But as he watched *hisraynia* sighing happily as she scooped warm water up over her head, he decided the increase in his power was definitely worthwhile. He might have been denied her for twelve years because of it. But now, he could give her things he wouldn't have been strong enough to give her before. And that was worth all the other hassles, and the long, long wait.

Rowena grinned and crooked an eyebrow. "Are you just going to lie there watching, or do you want to join me?"

He was out of the bed and climbing into the tub before she could finish laughing. He slid down behind her, cradling her between his thighs. It was a tight fit, but he loved having her ass pressed up against his cock and wouldn't have traded to a bigger tub for all the wealth in the Deep.

As he settled behind her, he noticed the tattoo on her shoulder blade. He'd seen it the night before, but this was the first time he could study it in the light. He fingered the intricately designed, multi-colored picture—a sword, the point aimed toward the sky, the blade and hilt wrapped in a vine heavy with purple and blue flowers.

She glanced over her shoulder at the tattoo he traced. "A symbol of my status as sword sworn," she said.

"I wouldn't have thought the sword sworn would wear such an obvious sign."

"Why not? We give fair warning to anyone we fight. We don't try to hide who and what we are. It wouldn't be fair to those we face if they didn't know what they were getting into."

His eyebrow arched. "Most wouldn't have such compassion for their enemies."

She shrugged, making the sword jump skyward. "Most aren't Aleanian sword sworn." She grinned. "Besides, it's in a place that's easy enough to cover if we have to hide the tattoo for any reason."

He chuckled and pulled her back against his chest.

“I just thought of something,” she said, leaning into him.

His arms circled her and he cupped her breasts, toying with her hardened nipples. “What?”

For a moment she didn’t say anything, just hummed a sound of pleasure under her breath. Then, “The only towel I have is a hand-sized scrap of material. I don’t usually get to take full baths on the road, unless I stay at an inn.”

“You think I can manage a tub but not towels?” he asked against her ear.

She shivered and chuckled. “I think you could do just about anything. But,” her tone turned serious, “it costs you power to do this kind of thing, doesn’t it? I can feel it.”

His eyebrows rose. “You can? You’re not a mage.”

“I’m an empath and we’re *raynyn* so I can feel a lot of what you’re feeling. Calling the bed last night, the tub this morning, you hesitated over doing it, just a bit. And then I could feel... I don’t know. But all magic costs, doesn’t it? So how much does this cost you?”

“Enough I can’t do it every day, not enough that you need to worry.” He kissed her shoulder, then worked his way up her neck to her earlobe. “I’ll be able to handle Dorjan’s wizard when the time comes.”

“I didn’t doubt that. I just don’t want you to...well, to drain yourself just for me.”

He laughed and pulled her ass tight against his erection. “Actually, I’m feeling quite anxious to drain myself *into* you.” She made a sound between a laugh and a groan and rubbed against him. He held his breath, let it out very slowly. “Too much more of that, baby,” he murmured, “and I’ll be draining myself into the water.”

She laughed outright then, dropped her head back to his shoulder and offered her mouth for a kiss. He accepted the offer eagerly.

“You know,” she said against his mouth as her hand ran down his thigh, “we should probably take care of this for you, before we get on the road.” She reached behind her, under the water and wrapped her fingers around his straining erection.

“Not worried about someone seeing us?” he asked, though it was hard to think coherently with her hand, warm and insistent, stroking his cock.

Her eyes widened. “I hadn’t thought of that. I forgot the road was so close.” She looked over her shoulder then shrugged. “If anybody passes and sees a full bed and a bathing tub in the middle of the trees, they probably won’t believe its real, so I imagine they’ll ignore us, too.”

He laughed then lifted her up in a movement so fast it made her squeal. He stretched his legs beneath her and settled her on his lap. “I think you may be a bit of an exhibitionist, *raynia*. Get onto your knees.” He held her around the waist to help her balance as she crouched so her knees bracketed his thighs.

“Am not,” she said, throwing him a very sexy pout over her shoulder. “I was only thinking of you.”

“Well then, thank you for your consideration. Lean forward.” She did, bracing her hands on his knees.

The sight of her curvy little ass angling toward him made his pulse race. He reached between her spread thighs, dipping his finger into the wet heat of her, spreading her lips. He guided her back until the tip of his cock just entered her, then with both hands on her hips, he pulled her down hard, ramming home. She groaned and arched her back, her hands gripping his thighs.

He didn't need to encourage her to move. She lifted up, slammed back down, setting a hard, steady rhythm. Water sloshed back and forth with her movements, raising a gentle wave. As her pace increased, water splashed over the sides of the tub, but neither of them paid attention. He gripped her hips, his fingers digging into flesh. She was so tight at this angle it took all his self-control to keep from coming too soon. After the night they'd shared, he wouldn't have thought he'd have to worry about that this morning, but with her sexy ass slamming into him, her tight pussy gripping him, it was all he could do not to erupt.

When she reached between her legs and cupped his balls he thought his head might explode. "Rowena," he groaned, straining to hold back.

She answered his unspoken plea by squeezing his testicles, rolling them around as she fucked him harder, faster. Her breathing came in pants, her moans increased. When she came, her muscles clamped hard around him, pushing his own orgasm beyond his control. He collapsed back against the tub, his eyes closed as he tried to calm his heartbeat. He managed just enough energy to rub her hip and bottom with one hand, but the hand shook slightly.

"Do you think we defeated the purpose of the bath?" she asked, her voice breathy.

He grinned without opening his eyes. "Not my purpose."

Her chuckle vibrated through where their bodies were still connected. With a groan, she rose up on her knees, releasing him, and started to climb out of the tub. He grabbed her hips and held her for a moment while he said the spell that would bring two towels to the edge of the tub. She grinned over her shoulder at him as she plucked up a towel and stood to dry off. He watched through eyes narrowed to slits, enjoying the sight of her naked body glistening in the dawn light.

When he could stand, he dried off, dropping a light kiss on her lips before climbing out of the tub. The grass beneath the tub was soggy but thick enough to keep away the mud. She shrugged apologetically as she laid the towel on the dirt near her pack and stepped on it to get dressed.

"What will you do with all this now? Won't it take more power to send it back?"

"It'll return to its original location later this morning. Nature of the spell I used."

She pursed her lips, but didn't comment.

When they were dressed and her gear repacked, they started off again, leaving the bed and bathtub sitting like some strange elfin bedroom in the middle of the trees.

Chapter Five

Rowena sat at the back of the pub, carefully hazed from the men filling the commons. Anyone who looked her way would barely notice her. They wouldn't realize she was a woman, they wouldn't see the sword on her back, but they *would* feel the need to avoid her corner of the room.

This was the fifth pub, in the third town, over the last week. And she'd finally found what she wanted.

Dorjan was here. And he had the oracle with him.

The bulk of his army camped a league from the village, readying to move again, so the rumors said, as soon as Dorjan had finished some business here with the local governor. Dorjan was on a campaign, moving south to the lands currently held by a powerful warlord named Umbrico. Umbrico was one of the few eastern warlords bordering Dorjan's lands still strong enough to hold Dorjan at bay. Rumor had it the "witch" Dorjan traveled with was his secret weapon against Umbrico.

And if Dorjan had managed to break the oracle, then she would be a spectacular weapon against his enemies.

The poor oracle. Rowena hated to think what the woman was going through. During her week's reconnaissance in these lands, she'd learned enough to know the warlord had no pity and no mercy. The oracle was Valen. She would have tried to hold out against him. And he wouldn't have held back in breaking her.

Rowena left the pub, keeping herself carefully hazed as she stepped back into the bright light of the village street. It was still early in the afternoon but already the townspeople looked worn out by their day. She turned toward the top of town, the rich area where the local soldiers barracked and the governor lived.

She wasn't sure whether Dorjan's presence in this particular village was welcome news or not. True, she'd been tracking him. Had known she would meet him somewhere soon. The question was, did he know she was here? He knew she was coming for the oracle. Had the oracle told him where Rowena would be?

Too hard to tell. Even if the oracle could predict Rowena's movements, oracles revealed their prophecies in ways often hard to interpret until after events had unfolded, even when what the oracle said seemed to be perfectly straightforward. Rowena's own parents had fallen victim to false assumptions about a prophecy, so she knew they were easy to misinterpret.

And outside of that first group of mercenaries, Dorjan hadn't sent anything else to stop her or slow her down. Did that mean he didn't know where she was? Or was he simply waiting for her to come to him?

Her only option was to continue with her mission, taking as many precautions as possible. She knew the location of the oracle now, and the warlord. She just had to get the oracle back.

Easier said than done, she thought with a hint of wry humor.

The job of the sword sworn was never easy. And because they were so well trained, and so few in number, the sword sworn almost always worked alone. It wouldn't be the first time one of her sisters faced overwhelming odds, some with less help than she had. Still, getting the oracle away from Dorjan wouldn't be simple.

She did a quick reconnoiter of the area where the warlord was said to be staying. The governor's house, a large white stone dwelling next to the governor's official offices, was an imposing place, more like a prison than a home. Tall walls circled three sides of the building and turned in to blend seamlessly with the front façade of the house. The tops of the walls were lined with metal spikes. The front door looked out onto the road, and was built of thick oak, reinforced with steel brackets. Arrow slit windows broke the solid white front of the house and surrounded the door. City soldiers patrolled the street. Men wearing

Dorjan's crest guarded the door.

The governor's office, a similarly imposing block of a building, rose up to the left of the house. Outside the office, on the side farthest from the house, two corpses still hung from a gallows, their bodies rotting in the heavy air. Rowena thanked Alean the wind was blowing the stench in the opposite direction.

She didn't dare remain in the area longer. None of the villagers came this way, only the soldiers. She left with one last glance at the governor's house and went to find Kael.

She spotted him hovering near a market stall, absently studying a rack of cutlery. The knives were dull and poorly made compared to anything the Heron would have. She watched his slight frown a moment and wondered if he just disliked the state of the cutlery or something else bothered him. He looked up before she was near enough to speak, his gaze locking on to her as she approached.

He looked her over, checking for nonexistent injuries, and she shook her head. His protective instincts were both endearing and a little annoying. She was the sword sworn after all.

"Our man is here," she murmured when she could speak to Kael without being overheard by the passing crowds.

"And the oracle?"

"With him. They're barricaded in the governor's house. I took a quick look. It's a fortress and patrolled by both city soldiers and some of Dorjan's own troops. The rest of his army is camped about a league away. They're supposed to be moving on south from here once Dorjan finishes his business with the governor."

"Did you see Dorjan?"

"No. But the guards on the governor's door wore his crest."

Kael fell silent and Rowena let her gaze run over the crowded street as he digested her news.

Hinsol was a dirty, depressing place, not much different from the other towns they'd been in since entering Dorjan's territory. It wasn't completely desiccated, not like the deadlands held by the southern wizards. In fact, from the look of the fields and bands of woodland they'd passed on their way here, this had probably once been a prosperous area.

Dorjan was draining the land, though, to feed his soldiers and fund his wars. He was greedier than his predecessor, not content to keep the tentative truce the eastern lords had developed. He wanted to expand his territory. And slowly killed his own lands to do it.

Now, the villages were trampled, dust dry except where sewage had gathered wetly on the roads, the fields barren, the few forests thinned and ravaged. There was little game left, and the domesticated livestock looked lean and ragged. As Rowena and Kael moved down the narrow street, they passed a man herding a team of oxen so thin their heavy bones stuck out sharply against their tough hides. The people looked just as desolate, their eyes hard and dead, their expressions bland.

And they had no way to fight back against the injustice, the abuse of their lands. The warlord's armies were too strong, the soldiers policing each village too quick to punish dissent. These milling, grim people lived under a heavy yoke and could no longer see beyond their next, painful step.

It tore at Rowena, clogging her empathic senses. She blocked most of the despondency, but some still leaked in. Her Aleanian soul wanted to help, to aide, to rescue these people who could no longer help themselves. But she was one woman. Even a sword sworn couldn't fix an entire land. She could only hope that by taking the oracle back from Dorjan, his future efforts would fail and the leader who replaced him would be more forgiving and respectful of his territory.

She startled when Kael closed his hand around hers—her left hand, leaving her sword arm free. She turned to see him staring at her, his gaze full of compassion. It still took her breath away, how he knew without any words, how he seemed to understand her instinctively.

She forced a smile. "Let's find an inn. We have some planning to do, and I'd rather do it in the comfort of a room where we're less likely to draw attention."

They tried two inns before they found one that would give them a room. And in that one, Rowena had to use a little mental push on the proprietor. It wasn't that the inns were full. The innkeepers held most of their rooms in reserve in case the soldiers wanted one. The inns lost money, waiting on these whims. But they'd lose their entire business if one of the soldiers couldn't be accommodated. Rowena used her mental nudge in an empty establishment, leaving the innkeeper with plenty of rooms if he needed them. She didn't want to cause these people any extra misery.

"What else can you do?" Kael asked, his voice low and curious as they headed up the creaking back stairs to their second floor room. "Besides haze your presence and influence people's thinking."

She nearly smiled at the admiration in his voice. "I can do lots of interesting things," she said with a wink.

She hadn't had to use her full range of psychic skills yet. And Kael had only experienced one of her talents firsthand so far. In the first town they'd entered, he'd wanted to go with her on her forays into the pubs for information. She refused, insisting he stood out too much and it would be easier for her to go unnoticed. He looked her over with a frank and heated gaze that made her blood pound harder. "I doubt that very much, baby. You're too damn sexy to go unnoticed."

She grinned and gave him a little taste of what she could do. She only hazed his mind a moment, blurred his thinking just long enough that he lost sight of her. He stepped back, glanced around, his brow snapping down over his eyes. He knew she couldn't move the way he did, using magic. He'd be able to feel it if she used magic. The confusion on his face made her chuckle. When she released him and he realized she was still standing in the same place, his eyes widened, then narrowed.

She laughed. "It's harder to do on a mage," she assured him. "But I can make people see and feel what I want them to. No one in the pub will even notice me."

He hadn't argued with her going alone on her fact-finding excursions since. One day soon she was going to have to let him know the full extent of her psychic skills, talents she'd inherited from her father. She might not be full Gryphatar, but she could use her mind almost as well.

When they were safely ensconced in the tiny but remarkably clean inn room, Rowena collapsed on the bed with a sigh. She closed her eyes and drew in her emotions, trying to cleanse herself of the bitterness of the villagers. She couldn't afford to feel pity. If she had to face Dorjan in order to rescue the oracle, she might have to kill him. But doing so would leave this already battered land in chaos. The various groups within the warlord's army, as well as the neighboring warlords and the bands of mercenaries working for Dorjan, would battle until the strongest managed to wrest full control. And even then, the

new leader might be no better than Dorjan himself.

But she couldn't afford to think about that, about whether killing the warlord would be good or bad for the people he ruled. Her mission was to rescue one woman, a very important woman to the Valen. And as sword sworn, Rowena would do whatever it took to complete that mission.

She felt the bed dip under Kael's weight but didn't open her eyes.

"This is hard on you," he murmured, his finger tracing over the creases on her brow. "The way these people are living."

"One of the side effects of Gryphatar empathy. I'll get over it." She pulled in a breath. "We need to plan."

"Later. First you need to relax."

Her eyebrows quirked up but she kept her eyes closed. "I do?"

"You do. You won't be any good to the oracle if your mind is muddled by pity and exhaustion."

His warm palm covered her cheek, slid down her neck, over her shoulder, cupped her breast. She sucked in a breath, amazed she could still feel such fire so fast. Especially since they'd barely kept their hands off each other for the last three weeks. They hadn't allowed the sex to slow down the journey, but when they took a break or stopped for the night, they found time for making love. *At some point, the intensity has to ease*, she thought, arching against his massaging hand. If they went on like this, they were going to exhaust each other.

She reached up to where she knew his head bent over her, intent on pulling him down for a kiss. But he captured her wrists and eased her arms up over her head. "You're feeling responsible for the lives of these people?" he murmured, kissing her jaw.

"No. But what I do might affect what happens to them next."

"And you feel responsible for that. You feel as if you should fix things for them, control the outcome."

She frowned, tilted her chin up as his kisses moved to the hollow of her throat. "Maybe. I know I can't. But..."

"But you want to."

She sighed. "Yes."

"You can't control everything. Sometimes, you just have to let go and leave the world to its own devices."

"That's hard for me. For any Aleanian. It's part of our basic philosophy to protect those not able to protect themselves. It's what we do. And it's hard to let go that responsibility."

She blinked open her eyes. Kael stared down at her, his expression intent. "I know," he said, his deep voice quiet. "But, baby, you can't protect everyone. Sooner or later, they're going to have to take care of themselves."

She curved her lips in a wry half-smile. “Tell that to the high priestess.”

He dropped his lips to hers, his kiss gentle. She sighed against his mouth and arched up for more. When she tried to move her arms, his grip on her wrists tightened. “Kael?”

He smiled, his eyes sparkling with mischief. The look made her instantly suspicious. “Kael...” This time her tone stretched with warning.

His grin grew. “You need to let go,” he said. “You need to get used to the fact that not everything is in your control.”

“Around you? What control have I had?”

He chuckled. “A lot more than you think. You’ve had me wrapped around your finger since you were fourteen. But that’s not the point. The point is that you need to relax, and you need to give over responsibility to someone else.”

“Meaning?”

His eyebrow quirked. She felt that strange tingling sensation she got whenever he used his magic, and an instant later, she felt the cool brush of silk against her hands. She arched her head back to see a beautiful orange and gold scarf lying across her hands and upper arms where they were still held against the bed.

She frowned, completely confused now. “What’s that for?”

In answer, he twirled the scarf into a thick rope of silk. She watched in wonder, keeping her now free hands above her head.

“This,” he said, “is a device to help you relinquish control.”

“Oh?” A suspicion started to dawn. “And if I’d rather not relinquish control?”

“Do you trust me?” He asked the question very seriously, looking directly into her eyes.

She startled, blinked. Paused a moment to consider. Did she trust him enough to give him the control he asked for? They were soul twins. He would never willingly hurt her, not physically. But he had hurt her emotionally. Hurt her enough that she’d been willing to reject the other part of her soul in order to avoid further pain. He never had explained why he’d disappeared for twelve years. If it came up, he changed the subject.

Did she trust him?

She stared into the sincerity of his expression, the patience as he waited for her answer. What could she tell him? *Shedidn’t* fully trust him with her heart yet. But she was about to go into battle with him at her back. And she trusted him to be there when she needed him. She did trust his honor, his strength. She’d already trusted him implicitly with her body.

Did she dare give in to curiosity? Could she abandon control?

“I trust you in this,” she said finally, letting out a long breath as she made her choice.

Something flashed in his eyes but was quickly hidden. She couldn't begin to interpret the emotion she'd seen. What she felt from him was a mixture of lust, concern, a need to please, a wicked thrill at having her under his control. And something else twined into it all. But she couldn't separate the strange feeling or put a name to it. The intensity of his lust overpowered everything else. Before she could think about the elusive emotion too closely, she felt the silk scarf wrap around her wrists, binding her hands together.

Her stomach fluttered with a mix of nerves and excitement. It had never occurred to her that she might like giving over complete control to someone else, letting someone else have all the responsibility. But then again, she'd always assumed she'd die a virgin so what did she know?

Kael secured the free end of the scarf to the edge of the iron headboard behind her, stretching her just enough to keep her secure but not so much that her arms hurt. He kissed her gently on the lips, then moved down the bed, removed her boots and tossed them aside. She wiggled her hips to help him slide her trousers off, and felt strangely exposed lying there with her lower body naked but her upper body still dressed. She squirmed under Kael's stare, impatient to have him finish undressing her.

He stood at the foot of the bed, his gaze raking over her. Her heart hammered. She wanted his touch so badly she could barely stand it. And because her wrists were tied, there was nothing she could do to speed up the process. After a moment, he gripped her ankles and spread her wide. He knelt on the bed between her legs so she couldn't close them, the leather of his pants rubbing her inner thighs.

She tried bending her knees, intent on wrapping her legs around him and pulling him closer but he eased her legs straight again with gentle pressure.

"Shall I tie your ankles too?" he asked, his voice deep and husky.

His excitement at the idea rolled through her, but her own heart jumped in panic. Somehow, she still felt like she had an element of control with only her arms tied. He must have sensed her hesitance, her trembling of fear because his eyes narrowed. A moment later, she felt the delicate touch of silk on her ankles.

"Kael, I'm not so sure about this." Was that actual panic in her voice? She didn't panic. She was a swordsworn.

He grinned, an expression that managed to be both reassuring and wicked. "I won't hurt you."

"I know."

"And I can have you free in an instant if needs be."

She swallowed, nodded.

"Trust me," he murmured, and moved off the bed to bind her ankles.

Almost against her will she found herself tugging at the binding holding her arms.

"Don't pull hard," he cautioned. "Silk is more forgiving than metal, but I don't want you to hurt yourself."

She forced herself to relax, but it wasn't easy. With her legs spread wide and secured to the short posts at the bottom of the bed, she felt more vulnerable than she'd ever felt in her life. Her muscles flexed,

tensing and relaxing as she tried to adjust to her confinement. Her stomach clenched. And to her surprise, she felt herself getting wetter with each passing moment. Fear and excitement boiled through her blood in a heady mixture, similar to the sensation she got during a fight. Except she was never, ever this vulnerable during a fight.

Kael's eyes darkened as he stared. His chest rose and fell with each ragged breath. She could feel the greedy, possessive hunger rolling through him, and her heart pounded hard in answer.

"There's something about having you only half undressed," he murmured. He knelt between her bound legs and laid his palm against her mound. "Especially when it's this part of you that's naked."

He dipped a finger between her lips and caressed in long strokes that made her tremble.

"Not that I don't love your beautiful tits," he added, his full attention on the juncture between her thighs. He dipped his finger just inside her channel, tempting, teasing, not entering far before he pulled out again.

She tried to arch against his hand, and he dropped his touch entirely. She groaned in frustration and dropped her head back against the pillows.

He chuckled. "Stop trying to control what I do to you. My game. My rules. All you get to do is enjoy. But you'll stay frustrated if you don't give in and let me lead."

"But..." She squirmed on the sheets, twisting her wrists. "Kael, you're going to kill me this way."

"No, I won't. Now lay still."

With no small effort, she complied, forcing herself to stop moving. He smiled and her stomach contracted with pure lust. He reached for the buttons on her tunic, easing them out slowly, only opening the tunic when all the buttons were undone. She arched up when he told her to, and he slowly unwound the linen binding her breasts. When the cool air hit her bare skin, she shivered and her nipples puckered. Kael groaned, cupped her, squeezing her nipples gently. She closed her eyes and savored the feel of his hands. She arched into his touch, unable to control herself, but to her infinite relief, he didn't pull away.

"You do have beautiful breasts," he murmured. He leaned forward and pulled one taut peak into his mouth.

Her arms flexed, an instinctive urge to thread her fingers into his hair and hold him close. The silk on her wrists pulled tighter. He took his time, suckling and kissing each breast, toying with her hardened nipples until she thought she might scream. She felt each tug of his lips as a line of fire directly to her pussy, pulling her tighter. An orgasm was building just from the feel of his mouth on her breasts. Her stomach clenched and her thighs flexed. She started to pant.

She wanted to pull her legs together to hold the sensation back, but the silk held her, keeping her open and vulnerable. Her hips bucked up, bringing her into contact with Kael's hard stomach. The feel of his muscles skimming against her overly sensitive skin made her cry out. He reached down and grabbed her hip in one hand, holding her against the mattress so she was no longer touching him.

Her body shook, trembling out of her control. She had no defenses, no relief. She teetered on the edge, so close a single touch would send her over. And still he drove her further, using only his mouth on her breasts. When he stopped, she almost cried. She was wound so tight she thought she might snap at any moment. She watched him, looking down at her, his gaze so hot she could feel it on her skin. Her body

screamed with frustration and need, and there was nothing she could do. Nothing but wait for Kael.

He reached out and trailed a hand over her stomach. Her muscles bunched and shivered. “I had intended to draw this out longer,” he said, his voice rough and quiet.

She moaned as his hand slipped over her hipbone, across her lower stomach. He moved off the bed and removed his trousers. She vibrated with anticipation and just a touch of fear as he crawled back on the bed—terrified he’d leave her hanging on this edge with no relief.

He braced himself above her, his cock poised to enter her. She wanted desperately to rub against him, urge him in, but she stayed perfectly still so he wouldn’t move away. He rubbed his lips against hers, kissed her deeply and plunged into her. He pounded once, twice and she came, crying out against his mouth. Her arms and legs strained against the bindings as pleasure rolled over her. She jerked once against the silk ties and then relaxed, giving over completely to the feel of him inside her, the play of his tongue against hers, the hard rhythm he set.

There was nothing she could do, no way she could move. In the end, she had no choice but to allow him to give her pleasure and take his own. She let go all responsibility, all control and let him do what he wanted with her.

And what he did was heaven.

When he finally released her arms and legs, she was drained, sated and almost too tired to move. Only the overwhelming urge to hug him pushed her to force her slack body into motion. She draped her arms around his neck and held him. He nuzzled her neck, cuddling her close. And it came to her in that quiet moment—whether she trusted him with her heart or not, he had it.

Chapter Six

Rowena edged along the outer wall of the governor’s house, keeping to the shadows and carefully hazing both herself and Kael from the two guards ahead. Earlier in the evening, Kael had discovered a small door through the wall circling at the back of the house. Two soldiers guarded it, but the area was shadowed from the main street at the front, giving Rowena and Kael more privacy to overpower the guards and gain entry to the inner yard. They’d been watching the house since full dark, timing the movements of the soldiers, watching for Dorjan. The warlord himself never showed. But Rowena hadn’t really expected to see him.

They waited for an opening, a moment well past the middle of the night when the soldiers on the back gate looked bored and complacent. Then Rowena and Kael eased toward them.

Kael didn’t dare use magic yet. He’d risk revealing himself to Dorjan’s wizard if he did. Even though none of the rumors mentioned the wizard being in town, Rowena had no doubt the man would be here somewhere. Dorjan knew a sword sworn was coming for the oracle. He wouldn’t be careless enough to bring her anywhere without the protection of his sorcerer.

So Rowena used her own talents to keep the soldiers from seeing her and Kael. It was harder than disguising only herself, but she managed, getting them within touching distance of the guards. Then she stepped up close to one and whispered in his ear. The man’s eyes widened. He held perfectly still for several heartbeats. Then he dropped his sword and charged off between the few buildings that rose up behind the house, leaving his comrade to shout after him. The second guard suddenly realized he wasn’t alone. He spun to face Kael, and Rowena knocked him unconscious with the pommel of her sword. She

reinforced his unconscious state with a mental shove.

Kael raised an eyebrow. "I'm feeling a bit useless here."

She chuckled quietly as she jimmied open the door's lock. "Sword sworn are used to working alone. But you're a handy distraction."

He patted her ass affectionately and followed her through the door.

The courtyard beyond was barren and muddy. Rowena scowled. They must soak it on purpose as it hadn't rained in weeks, maybe months. She thought it an awful waste of water given the parched-looking state of the fields surrounding the town, but she couldn't argue with the logic of such a simple safeguard. It was hard to sneak around unnoticed if you left muddy footprints behind you. No wonder the lock on the door had been so easy to pry open. Unwelcome guests would never get through that back gate and into the house without leaving plenty of evidence of their presence.

Maybe they could take their boots off? Probably broken glass or some other nasty trick at the entrances to prevent that. She sighed. Well, they'd just have to take the chance and hope they weren't spotted before they found the oracle. She prepared to move out into the mud when Kael stopped her with a hand on her arm.

"Allow me," he murmured near her ear.

In a blink, the mud turned to dried, caked earth. Rowena gaped. She'd felt the usual tingle of Kael's magic but so slight, she would have been convinced it was her imagination if not for the evidence of the dry ground. If the wizard felt that use of power at all, it was just possible he'd dismiss it as imagination too.

"Not so useless after all," Kael whispered, his breath brushing warmly against her neck.

"*Hmm*. I suppose you have your uses." She followed him this time, guarding their backs and trying hard not to smile. This was serious business—either one of them could be killed. But Kael had succeeded in relaxing her that afternoon and easing her sense of responsibility for those she couldn't help. She felt focused now, sharp. Able to face any challenge. And a little part of her enjoyed the danger of their situation. If she died tonight, she intended to savor the last minutes of her life. She was an Aleanian after all.

They made it to the house without attracting attention. She'd expected more soldiers to patrol inside the wall, but if they did, they were in another area. She tested the first door they came to leading into the house, found it locked and considered her options. Did she pick the lock or look for another way in?

She stretched out her psychic senses, hunting for the feel of a person beyond the door, a flicker of emotion, the familiar touch of a human mind. When she didn't feel anything, she made her choice. They might not get another chance to get inside without stumbling into a member of the household staff. She re-sheathed her sword, pulled out two thin slivers of metal from the pouch on her belt and knelt down in front of the lock. Kael stood over her, his sword in hand, watching the courtyard.

A few moments later, she grunted softly in triumph and stood. "There's no one in the room beyond," she whispered to Kael, "but I'm not sure any farther than that. I need to find a single soldier, or better a servant. Someone on their own. I only need a few minutes with them to get the location of the oracle, but I'd rather not get caught while I'm interrogating."

He nodded and eased open the door, going through first. Rowena closed the door behind her, carefully locking it again from the inside. Then she studied her surroundings, smiling slightly. As she'd suspected there were sharp metal barbs scattered across the inner floor—painful to bare feet but negotiable with boots. The room they'd slipped into was some sort of storage room, filled to the rafters with barrels and sacks. The barrels looked to hold mostly beer, and the sacks were filled with flour, sugar and various beans. Spices and dried meats hung from the rafters giving the room a pleasant aroma that made her stomach rumble. She grinned when Kael glanced at her and raised a brow. They'd eaten dinner at the inn, but the food hadn't been much better than her oatcake rations. This storeroom smelled like it would produce some very nice meals.

She eased open the only other door in the room and felt the touch of a sleeping mind as soon as she stepped into the large kitchen beyond. She put a hand to her lips to warn Kael, then eased toward the giant hearth at one end of the kitchen. In the ashes in front of the grate, warming his back by the still glowing coals lay the smallest boy Rowena had ever seen.

It hurt her heart to wake him, but if anyone knew where the prisoners were kept, it would be a kitchen mouse. She touched his mind, eased him awake and directly into her thrall. He wouldn't even remember being brought out of his sleep.

He grumbled a little, despite her empathic reassurance, and rubbed his eyes. She gave a gentle mental push to edge his thinking toward what she wanted to know. She wasn't as good at reading minds as her father or even her siblings. She could talk telepathically a little, and because of her empathy, she could usually interpret the information she picked up from other minds accurately. But it wasn't as easy for her as it was for her full Gryphatar family.

Fortunately, a sleepy little boy's mind was easier than most. She coaxed him toward the brief images of chains, the trembling of fear and fascination. And there it was, a clear image of the oracle locked in a dark room. She was sitting on a small bed with a thin mattress. One leg iron wrapped around her ankle and attached to a long, thick chain secured to the opposite wall. Her wrists were cuffed together in front of her, the manacles chained to the leg iron to make standing or walking awkward if not impossible.

Through the more prominent fear coloring the boy's thoughts, Rowena sensed his sympathy for the strange woman in the dark cell. He was terrified of displeasing the governor, yet he'd risked a beating to bring the oracle an extra chunk of bread for her supper. Rowena's heart tugged. She tried to remind herself she couldn't save the boy from his labors. But, oh, how she wanted to.

She stayed with him just long enough to learn how he snuck into the holding cell without having to pass many of the soldiers, then she eased him back to sleep. She hesitated by the hearth, reluctant to leave him behind.

Kael's hand dropped onto her shoulder. He leaned in and whispered in her ear, "He'll be okay, baby."

"The governor beats him, Kael." Her whisper sighed out full of resignation and pity.

"Don't worry. He'll be okay."

She felt a slight tingling, the flashing sense of Kael casting a spell. When the feeling subsided, she looked up at him. "What did you do?"

"Just a little protection spell. The governor won't be inclined to beat him for some time. At least not until

he's old enough to protect himself.”

“You shouldn't have spent the power,” she said, though her eyes misted, and she had to swallow hard around the lump in her throat. “But I'm glad you did.”

She led Kael toward a door concealed behind a cupboard at one side of the kitchen. The door led to the hidden corridor she'd discovered in the boy's memories. At one time, the passage had been used by the servants to get around the house unseen, but it had fallen into disrepair over the years and was too dangerous to use now. The boy discovered it on accident and used it, despite the hazards, to avoid the harsh fists of the governor's men. Only a few people in the household still remembered the doorway even existed.

The corridor was pitch dark. They'd need light to get through, but she didn't want to risk Kael using a mage light spell. After a moment of searching, she found the lamp the boy had hidden just inside the corridor. She used a small coal from the kitchen fire to light the taper. The glass casing around the lamp was smudged and cracked but it still glowed enough to cut through the passageway's gloom.

With the images she'd gleaned from the boy's memories, she led the way through the narrow tunnel, down a flight of stairs, and deeper into the house until they came to the door that opened into the basement holding cells. She left the still burning lamp just inside the hidden passage and opened the door carefully, relieved to hear it didn't squeak. She looked out into a tiny room used for storing barrels of wine. There was barely enough space for Rowena to squeeze through. Kael nearly toppled the head-high stacks of barrels twice trying to ease his bulk through the narrow gap that led to the outer corridor. She could feel his need to curse and almost laughed.

At the uncovered doorway opening into the main part of the basement, Rowena stopped to study the surroundings. To call the place a prison was to flatter the damp, dank grouping of cells that lined the edges of the large square chamber. But to call it a dungeon would have been an exaggeration. It was as if someone had converted storage rooms into holding cells and hadn't bothered to either improve the atmosphere or make it worse.

The single guard on duty at the far end of the room snored softly in his chair—thanks to a mental push from Rowena. There was only one prisoner that she could feel. The oracle.

She pulled her sword from her scabbard and eased closer to the sleeping guard. Kael held back, watching the only two doors into the chamber—the main entrance and the secret tunnel entrance. She glanced back once and smiled a little at his alert and ready stance. It was nice having Kael to cover her.

She eased past the sleeping guard and glanced through the small slit window into the oracle's cell. A small woman with black hair lay curled up on a thin, lumpy looking mattress. The chains binding her arms and ankle were identical to the image in the boy's head, though the chain connecting her to the far wall wasn't as thick, and the chain linking her arm manacles to her ankle was longer than the boy imagined. The oracle still wouldn't be able to stand straight, but she could at least stand.

From Rowena's vantage, the oracle looked asleep. She tested the door latch, found it locked as expected, and eased back to the sleeping guard. The keys were half hanging out of a pocket, but they were attached to a chain secured somewhere inside the guard's clothes. Short of stripping him, she couldn't find a way to release the chain and free the keys.

She frowned, considering. If she had the same power as her father, she could simply make the guard get up and open the door for her. But she wasn't that strong. She could bend his mind so he didn't know she

was standing in front of him but bending his physical movements to her will was a lot harder.

She pulled a sharp Heron dagger from her hip sheath and carefully pried one of the chain links apart. Not subtle, but it got her the keys without having to disturb the guard's sleep.

She unlocked the door to the cell then turned to check on Kael. He glanced back in the same moment and winked. She blew him a kiss and entered the cell. Two steps into the room, the oracle suddenly sat straight up in bed, her black eyes wide, her mouth forming a small "o" of distress. Rowena raised a hand to calm the woman, but the oracle shook her head.

"Get out. Don't—"

In the same instant, Rowena heard Kael shout her name. She turned to jump back out of the cell and felt like she hit a wall. Blackness enveloped her, sucking her under. She had a moment to realize she'd triggered a spell of some kind, an instant to reach out mentally to Kael, and then she knew nothing more.

Chapter Seven

Rowena came slowly awake, her head aching, her arms unaccountably sore. She tried to stretch out her senses to judge if there was anyone near by before she opened her eyes. But her mind felt fuzzy, like it was stuffed with wool. She couldn't sense anything.

A tingle of panic started in her stomach. She controlled the urge to open her eyes quickly, instead taking assessment of her physical state. Her arms were pulled up tight above her head. When she shifted one hand in the tiniest of movements, she felt the cold metal of the manacle holding her up. Her shoulders burned from being confined to the awkward angle and her wrists were numb from holding her unconscious weight. Hot stone at her back burned even through her tunic, and sweat trickled down between her shoulder blades. She shifted a foot and found her legs manacled as well.

Not good, she thought, more annoyed than scared. She imagined she'd be scared soon enough, especially since her mental senses seemed to be blocked. But for the moment, her discomfort overrode her fear. She blinked her eyes open to face her surroundings.

Her head screamed as light speared into her eyes. She clenched her eyelids shut again, wincing. She breathed deep and slow through her teeth until the pain eased, then she opened her eyes more slowly. After a moment, her blurry vision cleared, and she looked around.

Her holding cell was more obviously built for purpose than the cell the oracle had been in—rough walls of thick gray stone, a single high window covered by bars that kept her in but did nothing to keep the weather out, a short wooden door to her left made of hard, impenetrable oak, to her right a straw mattress sprawled on the ground. Her chains secured her to the wall opposite the window. At the base of that wall, a rat scurried for covering shade.

She was alone in the little room.

Straightening to take the weight off her wrists, she groaned as muscles protested. Her legs felt rubbery and she had to lock her knees to keep them from giving out. Feeling came back into her wrists with a stomach-turning combination of tingles and pain. Mid-day light poured into the hot, sticky cell. She'd been unconscious for at least half a day.

As the pain in her head dimmed, she tried stretching out her psychic senses again. And again she came

up against a barrier—like a wall of cotton. She could feel the rat, off to her right under the mattress now, but nothing beyond the walls of her cell.

Cursing under her breath, she forced herself to work out what had happened. A spell trap must have been set into the door of the oracle's cell. The spell had incapacitated her, giving her no time to get out or resist. She wasn't a mage so she couldn't have felt the trap. And obviously the protections the priestesses had given her hadn't been enough to protect against the effects of the spell. She wondered if Kael had felt it and that's why he'd called out to her.

Kael.

Now fear trickled in past her annoyance. Was he okay? What had happened after she'd triggered the spell? Where was he? She had a split second to consider trying to reach him telepathically before the undersized door to her cell swung open.

“So. Awake at last.”

A man nearly as wide as the door ducked into the cell. When he straightened, he stood as tall as Rowena. He was thickly muscled under the jerkin and leather trousers he wore. His dark hair hugged his scalp. His features were large but proportioned well. Three thin scars ran down his left cheek, white against the dark tan of his skin, and she could just see the edge of an intricate tattoo above the collar of his jerkin. He had a sword strapped to his hip, worn with the casual comfort of someone used to having the weapon there, and a second short dagger just visible above the top of his left boot.

Dorjan.

His pale gray eyes sparkled with a gleam of triumph that made her want to snarl. She watched the warlord closely as he stalked toward her, his gaze running over her body. Her hands fisted involuntarily before she could control the reaction. He smiled at the sign of her anger.

“I can hardly believe it,” he said, his voice low and silky. “An actual Gryphatar. Well,” he said with a shrug, “I know you're not full Gryphatar, obviously. You wouldn't be sword sworn if you were a shape-shifter. But you have family in Gryphaldin. An aerie. And I imagine they'll want you back.”

Rowena's heart lurched and her eyes widened despite her attempt to keep the surprise from her expression. He knew she was part Gryphatar. And that's why he'd captured her? Not because she'd come to free his captive?

“Where's the Valen's oracle?” She risked the question, trying to gauge his intent. Frustration gnawed at her. For the first time in her life, she couldn't use her mental skills to read another human. Even her empathy was dampened. So she had to watch him closely for any physical sign of his emotions, something she wasn't as good at as a non-empath might be. She bit the inside of her cheek to keep from cursing in irritation.

“A couple of doors down,” Dorjan answered, “doing what she's supposed to be doing. Awaiting my pleasure.”

He smirked. His gaze dropped to Rowena's breasts and lingered. She gave in to her snarl this time, unable to control her rising anger.

He chuckled. “And you, my tasty morsel, will be serving my pleasure for many nights to come. Until

your family agrees to my terms.”

Rowena’s fury moved deeper then, turning cold. He underestimated her if he thought she’d let him rape her while he blackmailed her family. Her expression closed up, her rage moving beneath a cold mask. She tested her mental skills again, found them still blocked and knew his wizard had put a spell on the room to suppress her natural talents. But outside this room...

She held herself perfectly still and didn’t so much as flinch when Dorjan closed the space between them. He cupped her breast, squeezed hard. She didn’t snarl, didn’t curse, didn’t struggle, didn’t even alter her breathing. She stared at him, straight in the eyes, and showed no reaction to his touch. His smirk dropped.

He paced away, his muscles flexing and bunching as he moved. “That man with you, the wizard?” He swung around to face her, his eyes narrowing. “He abandoned you, you know. You should hire better help next time.”

She knew, without having to feel his emotions, he was trying to goad her into a reaction. She didn’t give him one. She simply stared. Inside, she seethed. What did he know about Kael? Was Kael still alive? He had to be. They were bonded fully now. She’d know, even through the wizard’s spell, if Kael were dead. So where was he?

Then a burst of inspiration hit her. Despite the spell, she *knew* she’d be aware of Kael’s death. Did that mean he could still sense her? Was their bond strong enough to allow her to touch his mind, despite the spell? The wizard might not have known they were *raynyn*. From Dorjan’s reaction, he didn’t seem to know. And if he didn’t, his wizard wouldn’t. Rowena sent up a silent thank you to the oracle for keeping that one secret.

But to reach Kael and give him time to get to her, she would have to distract Dorjan. Her eyebrows popped up. And she smiled.

The warlord’s gaze narrowed, his frown deepening.

She laughed out loud at the suspicion on his face and mentally called out to Kael. “You’re probably right,” she said to Dorjan. “It’s hard to get a trustworthy wizard these days.” She leaned against the wall as if she weren’t chained but merely relaxing there. “Your wizard is good though. I didn’t anticipate that spell in the oracle’s cell.” *Kael? Are you there? If you can hear me, react. I won’t be able to hear you if you try to talk to me, but I can feel you. Give me a reaction of some kind.*

She nearly gasped aloud as a flood of emotions—fear, anger, longing, need, and relief—washed through her. The sheer joy of knowing Kael was okay overwhelmed her. And from the strength of his emotions, he wasn’t far away.

“I pay good money to have the best wizard on hand,” Dorjan said, smiling again. “Waging war can be expensive, though. I need more resources.”

“Is that what you think you’ll get by holding me? Money?” She chuckled. “Not likely. The aerie disowned me when I joined the Aleanians. Too mercenary for their blood.” *Kael? I’m not sure where I am. I’m not in the governor’s house anymore, though. Can you track me through this bond? She felt such an absolute sense of determination from him it was as if he’d shouted “yes” in her mind. She smiled and hoped Dorjan thought the smile was for him.*

The warlord tipped his head to one side, studying her. "I've never heard anyone refer to the Aleanian sword sworn as mercenary. Though, to be fair that is what you are, isn't it? A band of very well paid mercenaries. How much did the Valen pay you to retrieve their oracle?"

"A lot," she lied. The Aleanians and the Valen had an agreement of sorts. For something truly serious that threatened the clan, an Aleanian sword sworn would be sent out to help without charge. In return, the clan quietly protected one of the Malyk borders, a buffer between the Aleanians' homeland and the far northern empire. The link between the Aleanians and the Valen was kept quiet, though, because it could be considered an "act of war" alliance by the eastern warlords.

"Shame you won't be able to collect the fee," Dorjan said, "but I still need my oracle. She's brought me great success in the wars."

"I imagine. But how do you know how to interpret her prophecies? Aren't prophets notoriously difficult to decipher?"

"If she tries any fancy word games, she's punished. She doesn't play those games with me anymore."

A sudden welling of concern from Kael let Rowena know he felt her distress. It took all her self-control not to let Dorjan see her boiling fury. Bad enough he'd kidnapped and used an oracle. To hear he beat her or worse to suit his greed made Rowena furious. Everything in her screamed to protect, to rescue the helpless woman from this brutal tyrant.

The only thing keeping her under control was the knowledge that Kael was closer. She could feel his emotions more clearly now, sense his presence. And the closer he got, she realized with a start, the easier it was for her to feel Dorjan's emotions. The spell keeping her psychic talents in check seemed to be weakening.

"What did your wizard do to the room?" she asked suddenly, pleased when she saw Dorjan start at the change of subject. It was a subtle reaction, just a twitch of his lips, but a reaction nonetheless. And better yet, she could feel his irritation and suspicion. She hadn't reacted the way he'd wanted her to at the mention of the oracle's punishment. He didn't like that she was acting contrary to his expectations. She checked a smug smile, and the tension in her stomach relaxed.

"When the oracle told me you were part Gryphatar," he said, "I knew we'd need protection from psychic challenges. And I was right to assume you'd have some of the famous Gryphatar skills, wasn't I?"

She tried a shrug but it wasn't very effective with her arms wrenched up over her head. "I'm an empath," she said because there was no reason to hide that part of her skill. "Whatever he's done is blocking that. It's kind of nice actually. Quite."

"Is that your only talent?"

His eyes narrowed. She felt his suspicion again. And his disappointment.

"Nothing else but being able to sense emotion?"

"Fraid so. Not enough Gryphatar blood I guess. Not that I mind. Damned inconvenient to be stuck in Gryphaldin your entire life."

“Still...” He sidled closer, watching her carefully.

To her disgust, his lust surged again as he stepped near enough to touch her. The anger she felt flowing from Kael took her breath away. She had to swallow hard to keep from flinching at herraynei’s fury. She didn’t want Dorjan to think she was flinching from him. Any reaction would give him too much power.

“Still,” Dorjan said again as his hands closed on her waist. “You can never be too careful in my line of work.”

His gaze darkened and his attention turned to her lips. She forced herself not to dampen her suddenly dry lips or snarl in response to his nearness. She cringed inwardly, though. Dorjan was distracted all right, but not in the way she’d hoped.

“Where’s your wizard now?” she asked, trying to get him back to the original distraction. “Protecting the oracle? I’m surprised you’d take the chance being alone with an Aleanian sword sworn.” She spaced her words, making sure each came out calmly. Her skin crawled where Dorjan’s hands flexed against her waist. Her stomach turned when one of his hands slid up to cup her breast again.

“I think you’re helpless enough at the moment,” he murmured. He licked his lips and let his gaze wander down to her breasts. “Between the wizard’s spell and the chains...” He met her gaze. “I’d say you’re at my mercy.” He smiled and moved against her so she felt the bulge of his erection pressing into her stomach.

She couldn’t stop her heart from pounding harder now. Couldn’t completely hide her building disgust and anger. He wanted a reaction from her, she could feel it. He wanted her fear, wanted her to struggle. She resisted an intense need to fight, uselessly, only because she could sense Kael closer, very close now.

She hated feeling helpless this way with Dorjan. The feel of his hands on her, his body pressed against hers, made her physically sick. But worse, so much worse, was the obscene parody this made of her time yesterday afternoon with Kael. She tried hard not to link the two in her mind, to ignore any similarities between being tied and helpless for Kael and being chained and under Dorjan’s control. The sheer rage pumping out of Kael now, flowing into her, helped keep her grounded and her disgust under her own control.

And it reminded her strongly that what she and Kael shared was something special, a loving act of mutual consent. What Dorjan wanted was rape.

She stretched out with her mind again. The warlord’s emotions were stronger now. She could sense him easier. The barrier of the spell was coming down. She tried one small mental push, a subtly implanted suggestion. *You want to move your right hand away from my breast.* The hand painfully squeezing her breast lowered to her waist.

Dorjan looked up then, his eyes widening as he met her gaze. And she knew her sense of triumph must have shown. *Back away,* she commanded, pushing harder this time, ignoring subtlety. *Now!*

Anger fed her talent. Dorjan jerked backward. She couldn’t control him physically with her mind, but she could force him to think what she wanted him to think. And she made him see horror in the face he stared at. She forced a nightmare into his mind. A nightmare with eagle wings and lion claws.

Dorjan scrambled away from her until his back pressed against the opposite wall near the window, his eyes wide with terror. He shook his head in denial, trying to force her out of his mind. And because he had a strong will, his efforts might have worked under normal circumstances. Her psychic talents had always been more effective in subtlety and illusion. She could haze a mind better even than most Gryphatar. But she couldn't continue to force terror on someone who recognized the emotion as coming from outside himself.

Normally.

In that moment, though, she knew Dorjan couldn't shake her free, and she poured the illusion into him without mercy.

She didn't have time to analyze the increase in her power, the surge of certainty that she could drive Dorjan insane if she wanted to, because suddenly the door of her cell exploded outward. Door, frame, even part of the wall disintegrated in a flash of dust. And through the dust stepped Kael.

Rowena released Dorjan then, her senses overwhelmed by the sight of *herrynei*. An aura of energy surrounded him, crackling with his rage. His eyes glowed with it, his hair moved in a non-existent breeze caused by the swirling of magic around him.

"You dare touch *myraynia*?" His voice boomed in the small room, deeper, stronger than a human voice should be, thundering with power.

Dorjan's warrior instincts took over where most men would have collapsed into a puddle of jelly at the sight of the angry Heron. The warlord drew his sword, held it at the ready, never taking his gaze off Kael.

Rowena watched in helpless fascination as the two men faced off, circling, swords held in double-fisted grips. Dorjan was a few inches shorter than Kael, his reach not so long, but he was nearly Kael's equal in muscular girth. When their swords met, Rowena felt the reverberating clash through the stones at her feet. The fight was more impressive than any she'd seen, their skills nearly matched. Kael was better, and he was stronger. But Dorjan's movements were fed by the desperation of a man looking at his own death.

When Dorjan slipped under Kael's guard long enough to cut a slice along his arm, Rowena gasped and jerked at the chains holding her wrists. She swallowed the impulse to scream Kael's name. He didn't need the distraction, but that moment of terror had nearly overridden all her training. She forced her arms to relax to prevent the manacles on her wrists from cutting any deeper.

And then suddenly, the air changed. Crackled. Wavered with power like heat. Dorjan slammed backward against a wall, his body pinned, arms outstretched. For an instant, Rowena thought it was one of Kael's spells, but then she looked at him and saw his eyes rolling back in his head.

*No!Not now!*Not another seizure. Dorjan would kill him. And she was chained to the damned wall! She jerked at her bonds, hard this time and felt blood trickle down her wrists. "Kael!" She barely heard her voice above the pumping of her heart, the blood rushing through her veins.

Time slowed, the air thickened, every tiny detail in the room became clear and distinct. The sound of the rat, the strained breathing of Dorjan, the dirt filling the spaces between the gray stones of the wall. Her gaze shifted to Kael. He stood with his sword held in a double-fisted grip in front of him, the point angled toward the ceiling. His eyes were closed now, his expression taut, the muscles of his arms bulging. She drew in a breath to shout his name again.

And stopped.

A whisper wove through her mind, indistinct and overpowering. Not a voice. A feeling. But not Kael and not Dorjan. Something else. Something...familiar. The feeling wrapped itself around her mind, wove through her thoughts, tangled with her senses. There was a knowing, a belonging that tugged at her heart, brought tears to her eyes. *You're mine*, the feeling said. *And I am yours*.

"Yes," Rowena murmured. And the cuffs holding her wrists and ankles exploded.

She stepped away from the wall, her arms aching as they dropped to her sides. Muscle spasms and cramps nearly doubled her over. She winced, rolled her shoulders to speed up her returning blood circulation. Then she looked up and her gaze snagged on Kael's sword. It seemed to be...singing. Almost a purr. She held out a hand and the sword flew to her, slapping gently into her palm. When she closed her fingers around the grip, it felt as if the sword had been made just for her. It felt like coming home.

Sighing out a breath in wonder, Rowena studied the glowing purple blade, the faint but distinct symbols etched into the steel, the sharp edges that winked in the light pouring in through the cell's single window. She glanced up to see Kael watching her. He looked normal again, if pale, no sign of the seizure she'd been so terrified of a moment before. His green eyes sparkled, his lips lifted in a slight smile that was at once hesitant and strangely triumphant.

"I don't understand," she said.

"The sword is yours. I always thought she was supposed to be. Her name is Ca'laez."

"A mage sword? But how is that possible? My mother has one."

He nodded, his smile quirked. "I worried about that too when I heard about Ba'nari. It's never happened in our recorded history that two mage swords claimed members of the same family. But it's happened now. The claiming can't be faked."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"I couldn't. Not until Ca'laez claimed her owner."

Rowena nodded, but didn't really understand. She supposed there would be time later for all her questions. At the moment, she had a warlord to deal with and an oracle to rescue.

She turned to Dorjan.

He still hung against the wall, his arms spread wide, but the sword tightly gripped in his hand. His teeth were clenched, his jaw tight as he fought against the magical hold keeping him in place. *Are you doing that Ca'laez?* she thought. And suddenly Dorjan was released.

Rowena gasped. It seemed she and her sword had a lot to learn about each other. *Did you dissolve the wizard's spell too?* she wondered.

"I don't know what's going on," Dorjan growled, distracting Rowena from her new weapon, "but you're both going to die now. I don't care how much you would have been worth."

Kael raised a hand, but Rowena stopped him with a nod. "I was the one he thought he could use," she said, without taking her gaze off Dorjan. "I'm the one he has to face."

The warlord laughed. "I don't care if you are a sword sworn, bitch. I've been a warrior all my life. I've run over armies. You don't stand a chance."

She grinned. "Well then," she said, barely repressing a chuckle. "Shall we?"

Despite her sore muscles, the wounds around her wrists and ankles, Rowena had never felt stronger, more coordinated, more sure of her skill. The sword flowed with her body, no mere steel tool, but a living thing that knew her thoughts almost as soon as she did, adjusting to her style effortlessly. The sword didn't actually do any of her fighting. It was simply the perfect weapon for her to wield. Adrenaline and joy surged through her blood. This was what a battle was supposed to be like, she thought as she rained blow after blow down on Dorjan's frantic defense. This is the art of it. The beauty.

In the midst of her awe and excitement, she forgot why she fought Dorjan. She didn't even feel rage or anger toward him anymore. He was an afterthought, a sparring partner while she learned to wield her new blade. She saw it in his eyes, the moment when he realized she would win no matter what he did. She was better, she was faster, she didn't need to use her psychic skills. She wasn't even trying hard.

He roared in rage and animal fear. Charging her, trying to drive her into a corner. She laughed and circled away. Shame the cell was so small. She needed more room to get to know Ca'laez better.

She was so caught up in the fierce joy of using her very own mage sword, she didn't anticipate Dorjan's desperation. Between one blink and the next, he shifted and swung his blade to line just under Kael's chin. She sucked in a gasp and took a step closer, but Dorjan shook his head.

"Don't. He's your *rraynei*? Well, if you want him to live, you back off. I have no intention of dying in this stinking cell at the hands of a mere woman."

She would have pointed out that this "mere woman" had outstripped him in skill to such an extent that he'd resorted to taking a hostage, but she was too concerned for Kael to bother. Kael was weaponless now that the sword had come to her. And she could tell by the narrowing of his eyes, his slight grimace, that he hadn't protected himself magically from Dorjan's attack. It wouldn't take much for Dorjan to slit Kael's throat. And she couldn't close the space between them quick enough to prevent it. Fear trickled into her blood stream, spiking her adrenaline.

Can you do something? she asked Kael, mind to mind. She felt a distinct shrug. The sensation didn't make her feel better. *Fine. When the signal comes, move back out into the hall.* She felt his question and said, *You'll understand when it happens.*

Then she turned the full force of her attention on Dorjan.

His eyes widened. He took a startled step forward, his sword moving away from Kael. *Herraynei* didn't hesitate. He faded backward into the corridor. Dorjan swung around in a wide circle, searching for two people he could no longer see. She allowed him to see her again when she knew Kael was well out of the way.

"What did you do? Where is he?" Dorjan advanced on her, but his eyes were bulging with shock.

"Despite everything you've done, I might have let you live," she told him, raising her sword, "if you

hadn't threatened the life of *myraynei*. For that, no mercy."

All her Aleanian-trained compassion for life sank under the weight of her white-hot rage. And Dorjan didn't stand a chance.

When she stepped from the cell, her body shook as adrenaline left her system. Kael was waiting, his arms crossed over his chest as he leaned against the wall not far down the corridor. He lifted away from the wall and uncrossed his arms when he saw her. Without a word, she walked to him and fell into his embrace.

Chapter Eight

They left Dorjan's lands as quickly and quietly as they could with the battered oracle. The upheaval they left behind gave them enough time to get the woman away before anyone thought to come after them. Because of his fight with Dorjan's wizard and his passing of the mage sword, Kael's powers were too drained to transport them all magically, so they stole a couple of horses to aid their escape. To both Kael and Rowena's surprise, just being on horseback seemed to help the oracle.

They returned her to her grateful people two weeks later. She'd undergone such trauma at Dorjan's hands, though, her clan leader felt it might be years before she was fully healed enough to function as oracle again. But she was theirs and they intended to take care of her.

On the journey home, Kael waited with no little patience for Rowena to say something about their future together, something about the mage sword. He hadn't pressed her on the matter as they smuggled the oracle out of Dorjan's lands and back to the Valen. But now they were alone. And it was eating away at him, wanting to talk about what it meant that she owned the mage sword now.

He needed her to ask first, though, to broach the subject. It was left up to the owner of a mage sword to either ask for help from the Heron or not, to start the conversation regarding her new sword. Part of the Heron taboo—if someone didn't ask, there was no reason to tell because the less people knew of Heron business, the better. He was on the verge of breaking that taboo, though, if Rowena didn't start asking the right questions soon.

"Your powers are recovered?" she asked as they walked along the rutted road between wide stretches of grassland. They'd left the horses behind with the Valen. Rowena preferred to travel on foot.

"They are." That wasn't the question he wanted her to ask, but at least she was talking about something that might *lead* to the questions he needed to answer. He tried to make his tone light as he said, "A Heron doesn't usually have to pass on a mage sword to its first owner right after a deadly fight with a powerful wizard." As it was, the battle with the wizard had so weakened him he hadn't bothered fighting Dorjan with magic. Passing the mage sword to Rowena had drained what little he had left.

Despite his attempt to make light of the danger he'd been in, Rowena shivered in the early autumn air. "I'm glad you killed him," she murmured.

The oracle had, after a few days, told Rowena some of what the wizard and Dorjan had put her through. Kael could feel how much those stories hurt Rowena's compassionate heart, and he was only sorry he couldn't kill the wizard again for her.

"I didn't know it would drain your powers to pass on a mage sword," she said.

His pulse started to pump harder. Closer. But he resisted the urge to rush out a lot of information. This had to be handled carefully. “Only the first time. And it only effects the Heron who forged the sword.”

She nodded, fell quiet again. He cursed silently. His patience wasn't this good. He couldn't wait for her to ask. Screw taboo. He needed her to know.

“I always assumed the sword was meant for you when I forged it,” he said, watching the side of her face closely. “Since meeting you triggered my trance.”

Her head snapped up. “You mean, that seizure you had had something to do with Ca'laez?”

He felt some of the tension leave his shoulders. “It was the start of the initial trance a Heron enters when he forges a mage sword. My trance was earlier than normal.”

“How long did it take to make the sword?”

There! A churning of satisfaction started in his chest. “Six years to forge, nearly three years to fully recover from the process.”

Her eyes rounded. “Nine years!”

He watched as comprehension filled her expression.

“That's why I didn't hear from you? That's why you never came back to me?”

He nodded.

“But what about the last three years? Why did you avoid me for another three years?”

The pain in her voice tore at his heart. Gods, she still thought he'd been avoiding her. “My family counseled me to wait. My mage powers increased after forging the sword, and I needed to train them. The sword had to be claimed before I could talk about any of this. And...”

“And?”

“And my family was afraid if we fully bonded before your term as sword sworn was up, you could be killed and I would follow. They wanted me to wait until you were initiated as a full priestess first.”

She turned back toward the road, her brow creased.

“I couldn't stay away though,” he rushed to tell her. The confusion he felt from her was an ache in his gut. “I kept sneaking into town to see you. I thought by keeping my distance, we wouldn't bond. But I'd still be able to...to be near you.”

She nodded but didn't turn to face him. “What made you decide to come for me now, then? I'm still months away from taking my vows. What changed?”

This was the part he wasn't sure he wanted to tell her. But they needed honesty between them now that he could give that to her. “After a while, it wasn't enough that I watched you in crowds, or training in the temple. I needed to be alone with you. So I...I snuck into your room.”

“When?” she interrupted, cocking her head to one side.

“A few days before you left for the oracle.”

She rounded on him then, forcing him to stop and face her. “That’s why I was having those dreams about you? Did you do that to me? I couldn’t sleep for a week!”

“Those only started when I snuck in?” He paused a moment, as her words sunk in, then said, “Your dreams were about me?”

She rolled her eyes. “Of course. Who else would they be about? I already told you, you ruined me the first time we met.”

He couldn’t help it. He smiled. And because he needed to, rather desperately, he pulled her into his arms. They hadn’t been alone since rescuing the oracle. This was the first time they’d had a chance to talk. And the first time they’d been able to hold each other. Gods, he’d missed having her in his arms. As much as he missed being inside her.

To his infinite relief, she sank against him, resting her hands on his chest.

“I’m sorry I didn’t come to you sooner,” he said. “I should have.”

She shook her head. “No. Your family was right. I could have died at any point in my term as sword sworn. I wouldn’t have wanted you to die too. But... Why didn’t you tell me all this sooner?”

“Until Ca’laez claimed her owner, I couldn’t discuss Heron business with you. And if you hadn’t been Ca’laez’s owner, like I thought you were supposed to be, I could never have discussed any of this with you. It would have damaged the honor of my family.”

“Ah.” She nodded, understanding dawning across her face. “Secrets and honor I understand something about.” She leaned in close and kissed him briefly.

Too briefly for his state of mind. His cock was hard, pressed against her soft stomach, and trying to think beyond getting her naked was becoming difficult.

“So then...why did Ca’laez take so long to claim me?” she asked, her gaze on his mouth.

“Damned if I know,” he snarled. “You’ll have to ask her because she’s refusing to tell me. Just says we needed time. Whatever the hells that means.”

Her eyes narrowed. “She talks to you?”

He nodded. “All Heron can talk to the mage swords. You may be able to with time. But not all owners can talk directly with their swords. Depends on the bond.”

“It would be nice to be able to talk to her,” Rowena murmured. “Was she the one to break the spell on my cell that was blocking my powers?”

“That was partly Ca’laez, partly the wizard’s death. The spells weren’t designed to outlive him. I doubt he thought he’d be killed by a single mage. He was pretty powerful. But Ca’laez forced the spells to degrade faster than they would have naturally after the wizard was killed.”

“That was nice of her,” she said. Then she leaned forward and kissed him again, lingering longer this time.

His pulse jumped and his arms flexed around her. There was more he needed to tell her, but that could wait for a little while. The grass was long. And the road deserted. He started to walk backward, taking them into the grass. She followed without resistance.

“I’ve missed this,” she said against his mouth. “I’m glad to know you can sneak into my room at the Temple. That will make things easier.”

“What do you mean?” He was too busy working the buttons loose on her tunic to notice the catch in her voice.

“Since I can’t move to Heron’s Deep and you can’t leave, at least we’ll be able to see each other often.”

She pressed closer and he forgot to breathe for a moment, almost missing the point of her comment.

As he realized what she’d said, though, he eased her back so he could look in her eyes. “Actually, I’ve been thinking a lot about our living arrangements.” She stiffened in his arms and it didn’t take her empathic powers for him to realize she was afraid he’d ask her to live in the Deep. “Now that I’ve passed on my mage sword,” he said, “and forged the only one I’ll ever forge, I’m no longer bound to live in the Deep.”

“You’re not?”

He shook his head. “In fact, I’ve already bought a little house in the city.”

“You did?”

He smiled at her surprise. “I did. You can look out the front door at the Temple.”

“How did you find something so close?”

“Well, it took me three months of negotiation. But I couldn’t pass the place up after I’d seen it. I knew you wouldn’t be able to live far from the Temple.”

Her gaze narrowed and a sly glint touched her expression. “Who owned it?”

He grinned. “Your high priestess is some negotiator. I probably paid twice what the cottage is worth.”

She chuckled, then laughed loudly and wrapped her arms around his neck. “You bought us a house. Already.” She looked into his eyes. “And you don’t have to live in the Deep. You can stay with me? You’ll be there every night and during the day when I can sneak away?”

It was his turn to laugh. “I’ll be there whenever you want me, baby. As often as you want me. Will you live with me there?”

“Of course! Kael. I love you.” She froze the instant the words left her mouth.

He stopped breathing. Her eyes were huge. She looked more vulnerable than he'd ever seen her, even when she was chained to a wall at Dorjan's mercy. "Do you?" he asked, wonder in his voice. She nodded.

They were soul twins. They were only whole when they were together. But hearing this strong, intelligent, sexy woman say she loved him made his world seem right. "Good," he murmured, placing a gentle kiss on her lips, "because I love you too,*raynia* ."

She smiled. And pushed him back into the grass. Kael laughed on his way down, happier than he'd ever been in his life.

About the Author

To learn more about Isabo Kelly, please visit www.isabokelly.com . Send an email to Isabo at isabo@isabokelly.com or join her Yahoo! group newsletter to join in the fun with other readers as well as Isabo! <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/isabokellynewsletter> .

Avalon reborn. . .

Abhainn's Kiss

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Hidden away on a misty island off the Irish coast all her life, Abhainn has no idea she is the last of her Faery race—until a troll tries to kill her.

Her peaceful world shattered, she has only days to fulfill her destiny. She must defy a curse that dooms her to hide from the sun, and take her rightful place in the Great Circle on the Isle of Avalon. Only Abhainn can restore the balance of Dark and Light, and heal the rift between humans and Fae. That's a tall order for a one fragile Faery.

Michael Craig is on a quest of his own, one grounded in cold, hard reality. Fairy tales? They're for children and dreamers. But when he rescues Abhainn from certain death with an accidental kiss, he finds himself thrown into a very different reality. One he's reluctant to accept, even as it unfolds before his eyes. Only one thing holds him there—Abhainn will die without him.

Abhainn's life depends on Michael's kiss, his sword arm. . .and his ability to believe.

Enjoy the following excerpt for *Abhainn's Kiss* .

He grabbed his shirt and pulled it on without buttoning it. He was halfway to the caravan door before he realized the taste on his tongue wasn't just part of the dream. She must have kissed him in his sleep before slipping out. Still, she had no business being out there alone, no matter how many friendly Fae surrounded them.

The familiar tinkle of her laughter drifted in through the caravan's half open door. He stepped quietly outside and settled on the driver's seat to watch the scene before him. The horse, unhitched, grazed nearby; Eoth lay draped across its back, sound asleep. Michael's gaze swept the stone-littered meadow, and at last he found her.

She sat on a boulder, legs folded beneath her, arms thrown wide. Unabashedly naked as the day she'd been born. His groin tightened as, unobserved, he let his gaze pass over her body. Tiny as she was, there was no doubt that Abby was a full-grown woman, all slender curves and high, firm breasts. The morning light glowed on her pale skin, so fair as to be translucent, traced with river-maps of blue veins, flawless from the tips of her toes to the delicate points of her ears.

All around her flitted a cloud of tiny, winged Fae, who tended to her as if she were a queen in waiting. Which, he realized suddenly, she was. As the last of her kind, she by default was the Queen of the Asrai.

Humming like a swarm of honeybees, the Faeries combed and braided her white-gold hair, washed a smudge of dirt from her nose, handed her damp handfuls of moss with which she cleaned herself, rubbing it over her skin—all her skin—in slow, sensual delight.

More Faeries brought her sips of water and a sticky substance that looked like nectar, cupped in spring flowers. She tipped her head back and accepted their offerings on her tongue, smiling and licking her lips after each taste, catching stray droplets on her fingers and licking them, too.

The ache in his groin hardened into a painful knot. Blood pounded in his ears so hard that for a second he couldn't trust himself to move. Despite the lust that roared through his veins, he remained conscious of the delicacy of her small, fragile body. *She's like porcelain. Like one wrong touch could break her.*

Yet for that second, he understood what had driven Blae of CraighMhor to risk everything for one night with a Fae.

And he lost it all, Michael reminded himself.

As if she sensed his eyes upon her, she turned her head and looked at him. She blinked once, slowly, and the smile on her face grew brighter. She held out her hand.

Abruptly, the attending Faeries screeched and scattered. Only one stayed, hovering above and just behind her golden head. Its buzzing grew into a snarl, and before Michael's eyes it changed from a thimble-sized thing to a fox. It bared its fangs and bunched its muscles to spring at Abby's unprotected back.

With a sickening lurch that took him back to his combat days in the Marines, time slowed to a crawl. Every detail of the scene sprang into sharp relief. Before Michael could do more than shout a warning, Abby's face went blank.

Then, as the fox sprang, she changed into a statue of clear, hard ice.

The fox yowled in frustration as it clawed and bit at the back of her neck, but managing no more than a few superficial scratches.

Michael took advantage of the time she had given him by lunging into the caravan to retrieve the rusted sword. He lay hands on his rucksack and threw himself out of the caravan, pulling the sword out and dropping the bag on the ground as he ran, spilling the contents.

He sprinted the few yards that separated him from Abby, a hoarse cry in his throat and the sword raised to strike. The fox saw him coming, issued a series of short, harsh barks, then shapeshifted *again*.

Michael found himself looking up into the face of what could only be described as a vampire-like woman, complete with glistening fangs and black wings sprouting from her shoulders. With a hiss she flew at him, driving him back. He let her come, knowing it would draw the creature away from Abby.

“Come on, come on, bitch! What ya got? Come on!” he growled, goading her with the sword.

The vampiress closed in, and with moves too quick to see, she knocked the sword away then hit him square in the center of the chest with the leading edge of a black, leathery wing. Michael caught his heels on the rucksack and landed on his back, flinging his arms wide to break the fall.

His hand fell on his grandmother’s precious stone, which must have rolled out of the rucksack when he’d dropped it.

Wrapping his fingers around it, he waited, heart speeding to dangerous levels as the vampiress closed within striking distance. Waited, sweating, until her hot breath blistered his face, until he could count the veins in her bulging eyes. Then he swung at her head.

Instead of spurting blood, the broken skin on the side of the creature’s face erupted with huge horseflies the size of golf balls. In moments, the thing had completely dissolved into a cloud of the droning black bugs. Abby’s attending Faeries chased them all away, leaving the morning eerily quiet, as if nothing amiss had happened at all.

Panting, Michael hauled himself to his feet.

“Well done.”

He spun and found a tall, Tolkienesque elf lounging against the side of the caravan, idly examining his fingernails, longbow thrown casually over one shoulder.

Michael relaxed and straightened. “Thanks for the help,” he said dryly.

The elf raised an eyebrow, as if he were actually offended. “You did well enough on your own. Had you needed it, I would have intervened. The Lady chose well.” With that, the elf sauntered away into the trees.

“I will never get used to these people,” he muttered, turning toward Abby as thunder rolled overhead.

Abhainn still hadn’t changed back from the block of ice. It was a perfect replica, captured just as she had been sitting on the rock.

He crouched by the rock, afraid to touch her. “Abhainn. Abby, can you hear me?”

Huge, fat raindrops began to splat the ground.

Maybe she can't change back.

His mind kicked into gear, looking for a way to keep her from melting and running in rivulets down the side of the rock. But as the first drops of rain struck her head, she shifted back into normal form and fell, shivering and blue with cold, into his arms.

“Jesus, you scared me, woman,” he said, gathering her closer, rubbing her arms. The bare skin under his hands felt like the ice from which she’d just shifted. He quickly lifted her hair to examine the back of her neck. Relief flooded through him. Her skin remained unbroken.

“I...I...knew not...I c-c-could do that,” she managed through clattering teeth. “I-I-I sensed the Mei was behind me and-d-d it j-just happened!” Then, incredibly, she began to laugh. “I wonder...w-w-what else I can do?”

Before he could stop it, anger flared white hot in his chest. How could she laugh? She had come within a hair’s breadth of death, and yet she laughed!

Shaking, not trusting himself to speak, he scooped her up in his arms and strode toward the caravan.

“Mícheál?” she gasped between giggles and shudders of cold. “W-what is it?”

“The fate of your people depends on you,” he gritted out. “And you sit there laughing when your quest almost came to nothing.”

She leaned back in his arms, her laughter fading to a gentle smile. “But it did not,” she said simply. “I have you to protect me. All is well. And I have found that I have powers I knew not I had. Why not enjoy the moment?”

He stopped dead in his tacks, light rain tapping on his head. He had no answer for her.

“Mícheál,” she said gently.

He shook his head, surprised at his inability to speak, jaw clenched tight. *She could have died. She could have...*

“Mícheál.” This time her lips touched his ear.

At the touch of her breath on his skin, he drew her to him tighter still, buried his face in her hair, inhaling the fresh-rain scent of her. He could find no words to say other than her name.

The skies let loose with a torrent of rain.

Honor among thieves...

Thief of Hearts

Harper McRae was a woman on a mission. When she'd retired from the life of a professional thief, she never dreamed it would be a family member who forced her back into it. With her stepbrother's reputation on the line, she accepts the task to steal blackmail material a local mobster was using against him. In the midst of one of the most important jobs of her career, she runs into a shadowy figure from her past, Chance, the man who'd broken her heart.

Can two thieves trust each other long enough to escape with their lives?

Enjoy the following excerpt for *Thief of Hearts* .

Was it too much to hope that he'd pined for her, gotten fat and lost his hair She was annoyed that his dark hair was loose and the thick waves made her fingers itch to touch them. He wore a black turtleneck, black jeans and a black leather belt around his still-slim waist.

Her gaze caught on his firm backside. She'd always loved his ass. It was high, tight—he ran for miles every morning—and the perfect size to sink her nails into as he'd thrust into her. Chase had the stamina of three men and was able to maintain an erection for hours. In bed, he was every woman's dream

Too bad he was a complete, amoral dick outside of it.

The safe door opened with a metallic sigh and she glanced at her watch. Two minutes.

Figured.

"You always were good at safe cracking," she muttered.

"And you are quite talented with lock picks, much more so than I." He gave her a wide smile and she couldn't help but return it. "That's why we made such a good team—you were strong in my weakest areas and I was strong in yours." He handed her the microphone.

"And you had so many weaknesses," she drawled.

"You were my biggest weakness and you know it."

Her smile froze. "Your biggest weakness was screwing around with other women and that had nothing to do with me."

"No, my biggest weakness was a King Kong sized ego coupled with immaturity and you're right, it had nothing to do with you." He pulled out the same envelopes Harper had held just minutes before.

She blinked. "Honesty? What a concept."

He shrugged. "It's been a long time, Harper. I'm not the boy you once knew."

"And for that the world is grateful, I'm sure. I'm only glad I discovered your philandering before I made

the mistake of marrying you.”

His movements slowed and his head came up. His dark gaze met hers. “So you would’ve married me at some point?”

“Possibly.” Uncomfortable, she shrugged. “Who knows what would’ve happened if you’d have kept your dick in your pants?”

In reality she’d been dying to marry him though she’d had doubts about his fidelity long before it had been confirmed. It had seemed that every time she’d turned around a different woman was throwing herself at him. His handsome face and accent drew them in and with no effort on his part. While he didn’t encourage them, he also didn’t do anything to discourage them. She’d loved him with all the passion her twenty-four-year-old heart had possessed, and he’d crushed it with his carelessness.

He chuckled and resumed flipping through the envelopes. “You always were blunt.” He selected two, folded them in half then slid them into his back pocket.

“And you always were a shameless charmer.” She shoved away from the desk and headed toward the balcony door. “And I need to leave before we’re caught in here.”

“Ah, not quite so fast.” He replaced the envelopes and shut the door before swinging the painting back into place. “How were you planning to get out of here?”

“Are you talking about this room or the house in general?” She looked down at her party dress. “Through the front door. I, unlike others,” her gaze moved over his mouthwatering physique, “was invited to this event and I have every right to be here.”

“But not in this room.”

“Yeah, well, when one invites people to their house they can only expect that someone will be nosy.” She headed for the balcony door. “Have a good time making your getaway.”

“Harper—”

A noise sounded from the hallway and her heart almost stopped. There was a jingle of keys then a muffled curse.

“I’m telling you, I heard someone in here,” a voice hissed from the other side of the door.

Harper spun and scrambled for the door and Chase cut her off.

“We’ll never make it,” he hissed. His iron hand caught her wrist and hauled her toward the couch. “Lay down.”

“W-what?” She gaped at him.

“Now, Harper.”

“But—”

One minute she was standing and the next she was on her back. His big body covered hers, crushing her

into the supple leather of the couch. He grabbed her light and turned it off, shoving it into her bra. His scent, familiar and arousing, invaded her senses even as he forced her legs apart. He draped one over the back of the couch.

“Just go with it, Harper. Our lives may depend upon it.”

Stunned, she heard the doorknob rattle even as Chase ripped her panties with a single yank. The fragile silk gave way beneath his brutal assault, leaving her bare, exposed. He tore off his gloves then reached between her thighs, parting her damp flesh with nimble fingers. He scooted down her body to perch between her thighs.

His mouth covered her and she moaned, her back arched when his tongue zeroed in on her clit. One finger entered her vagina only to be followed by a second, stretching her, filling her with heat, friction. This man, only this man, had known how to turn her on with a single-mindedness that had never failed to steal her breath.

His tongue stroked her aroused flesh and Harper closed her eyes. Hunger, a hunger she hadn't realized even existed, clawed at her mind and ravaged her body. Against her will, her back arched higher to press against his talented mouth, her hips moving in response to his finger thrusts. Desperate to hold him in place until she received the release she craved, she clenched at his silky hair until her hands fisted. His tongue aggressively stroked her aroused flesh, each touch sent tension to spiral throughout her body.

Harper knew she was lost when, even as the door opened and someone hit the light switch, she came apart with a powerful scream.

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