

# DARK ELVES I: TAKEN

Loose Id



JET MYKLES

## Praise for the writing of Jet Mykles

### *Dark Elves 1: Taken*

*Dark Elves 1: Taken* is sinfully erotic. Like the bad boy your best friend hates and you'd die before introducing to your mother, it tantalizes with the power of deep, dark fantasies and the promise of pleasure unparalleled. Rather unlike most of those bad boys, Dark Elves delivers. Jet Mykles knows exactly what readers want – and serves it up with striking prose and stunning images.

-- Sage Grayson, author of *Computer Crimes: Comming Home* (coming this summer from Changeling Press)

Ms. Mykles has woven a wonderfully decadent and rich tapestry of lusty high fantasy. *Taken* is everything Erotic Fantasy should be!

-- Morgan Hawke, author of *ISD: Victorious Star* (Loose Id)

There's nothing more compelling than art that tells a story, and I find myself following Jet's story through her images, wondering what the next scene will bring.

-- April Martinez, Loose Id cover artist ([www.graphicfantastic.com](http://www.graphicfantastic.com))

Exotic, erotic and sinfully spicy.

-- Daria Karpova, author of *Loose Diamonds* (Loose Id)

*Taken's* graphic imagery, both in words and pictures, is a hot and delicious feast for the senses. The reader will enjoy each bite.

-- Treva Harte, author of *The Deviants* (Loose Id)

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Jet Mykles

LooseId  
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This book is rated:

 SCORCHING

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# Dark Elves 1: Taken

Jet Mykles

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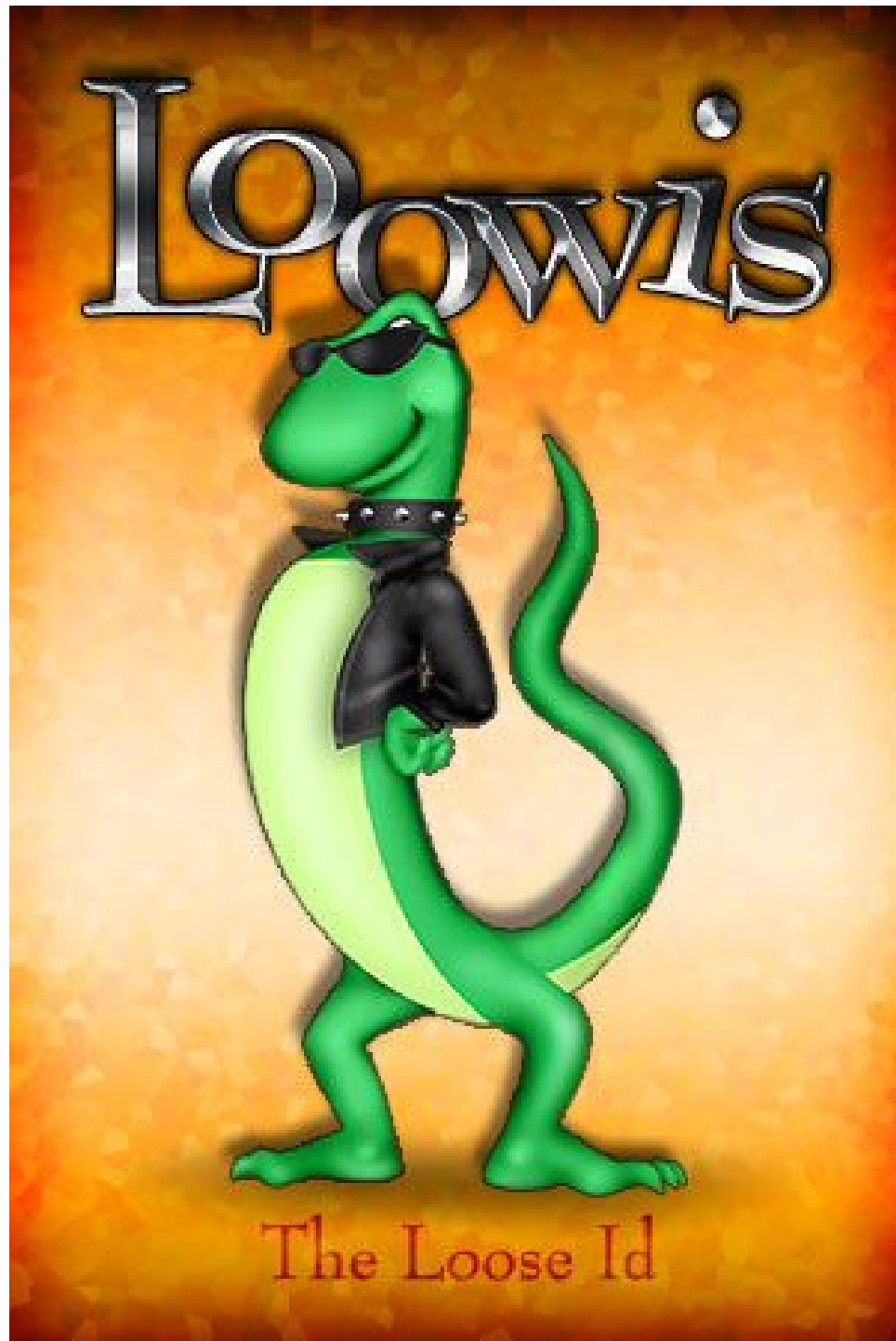
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## Chapter One

Even in the early evening noise of the tavern, Diana's silence was deafening. Gala sat beside her, nursing an ale gone flat. Waiting.

"I'm going after him," Diana finally announced, standing.

Gala shot to her feet, her hand darting out to take Diana's wrist. "You can't!" she protested, even though she knew it was hopeless. Diana had *that* look on her face.

Diana's fine, dark brows lowered. "I can. And I will."

"But you've heard the stories about the mountains," Gala insisted, following as Diana stormed toward the stairs that led up to their rented room.

"Bah! That's just what they are. Stories. I'll agree that passing over the mountains is probably a hard trek, but they've not even been gone a day! We can catch them, get my money back, then come back here."

Gala wasn't so sure. Although they were new to the area, she and Diana had heard tale after tale of both the Rhaen Mountains and the Dark Forest. The mountains, it was said, were impassable save by a very few caravans owned by masters who'd traveled the route countless times. But even they were often beset by natural forces, and people almost always disappeared through travel misfortunes.

The stories about the Dark Forest were more sinister. Those included tales of entire bands entering the depths of the forest and simply disappearing, then the bones of some of the victims showing up neatly arranged toward the safer outskirts of the forest. Neatly arranged so that it was sure no animal could have accomplished it. And the bones, from what anyone could tell, were always those of the male victims. Female victims were never seen nor heard from again. Rescue parties sent after those missing either never returned or returned with wild stories of black phantoms and sinister magic.

But Gala had known Diana since childhood and had traveled with her as her only companion for the past five springs. She was the untrained healer, the pickpocket, the negotiator. While Diana was the fighter, the instigator, the lure. Together, they'd managed to get enough odd jobs to stay alive as they continually wandered.

The previous night, Diana had been cheated, her money stolen, and the culprit had taken off in the morning -- while Diana was passed out cold -- with one of the mountain caravans. It had taken Diana most of the day to recover from the thief's blow to her head, but once she'd recovered, her anger flared. And Diana's anger, once sparked, did not die easily.

Diana hefted her bag, quiver, and unstrung bow and faced Gala across the tiny room they'd shared. "I know you don't like this idea," she said, visibly trying to rein in her anger. "You don't have to go with me. I can be back by tomorrow night."

Resolute, Gala shook her head. "Where you go, I go. We've been through worse before."

Even angry, Diana had to smile. But it was brief. Then she was out the door.

\* \* \* \* \*

The track was easy enough to follow. The thief, in fact, had been the one to tell them what they now knew of the caravans that crossed the mountains. There were only two tracks that any caravan would take, both wide enough to fit the typical merchants' wagons. The High Road was actually faster, but more treacherous, as it went over one of the tall



mountains. The Low Road added weeks to a trek, but it was safer, even if it skirted the edges of the Dark Forest throughout most of the journey.

“Camp is held on the road, as well,” Gala recalled the charming man telling them. “No one’s allowed to step foot off the road.”

“Why not?” Diana had asked, already intrigued by him.

“Too dangerous. Anyone who loses sight of the road never returns.”

Diana had laughed. “Never?”

Gala recalled the oddly serious look in the man’s sparkling blue eyes. “Never.”

Gala, for one, believed him.

Although the twisted oaks and soaring elms that lined the path were gorgeous, there was a sinister cast to them. With true night fast approaching, Gala became certain that eyes were upon them. Diana was mostly silent, still smarting on the back of her skull where the thief had struck her. What words she did utter either had to do with their travel or with the questionable parentage of the thief they now tailed down the Low Road. The forest closed in around them. Sunlight was left behind. Evidence of plenty of wildlife grew around them.

“These people are insane,” Diana said suddenly, gesturing toward a covey of quail that scurried boldly across the road. “This place is a wealth of game.”

Gala stirred at the change of subject, but only nodded. She adjusted her seat in the saddle, yawning to shed the apathy caused by the gentle roll of her horse’s gait.

“Where’s this ‘dark danger’ we were warned of?” Diana scoffed as the last vestiges of sunlight disappeared and plunged them into thick, gray twilight. Even so, Gala saw her friend’s hand drift toward the sword at her belt.

“Should we make camp?” Gala asked, spurring her mount to walk abreast of Diana’s.

“No. Let’s keep going. The caravan will be making camp soon. We should catch them before daybreak.”

Gala nodded, her eyes darting from shadow to shadow. Night had fallen on them abruptly, and only the scant moonlight provided illumination to the path ahead of them. To either side was inky darkness.

They rode in silence for a time.

“It’s warm,” Gala realized.

Diana took a moment to judge, idly rubbing a hand against her chest. “It’s got to be the trees,” she stated. “No breeze.”

Gala nodded, but continued to look about. Why was she flushed? Of a sudden, her tunic was either far too tight or her breasts had swelled. The saddle between her legs grew increasingly uncomfortable as she realized she felt ... aroused?

“Diana,” she murmured, finally convinced that what she felt was not natural.

Diana gasped, and Gala whirled to face the same direction. Oddly, her hand didn’t fall to the hilt of her shortsword. Nor did their horses balk. Both mounts came to a calm halt beneath their riders. But both riders were distracted from that oddity by the figure that appeared before them.

“Appeared” was an apt term, as the dark figure seemed to materialize from the inky shadow of a particularly large oak which overhung the road. The tall figure was completely contained within a voluminous, hooded black robe. Two spots of glowing red were all that pierced the darkness within the hood.

*Red?*

Gala and Diana sat their mounts, riveted. Gala licked suddenly dry lips, aware her breathing had quickened, as the figure raised black hands to the clasp of the hood, just below where a chin should be. In one beautiful, fluid movement, the robe parted and slid to the ground.

Both women gasped.

A man stood before them. A man unlike any either had ever encountered before. Tall and muscular, he resembled the perfect specimen of a lean, human male, but the skin that was stretched taut over chiseled muscle was pure, gleaming black, like the surface of a moonlit pond. The two points of red which had glowed from within the hood proved to be the irises of his eyes, eyes that held them captive from beneath stark white lashes. Snowy white hair fell straight and gleaming over his shoulders and down his back, held back by two braids at his temples and what looked to be one behind his head. Strange white designs, like tattoos, emblazoned his chest and belly, as well as his forehead.

Vaguely, Gala wondered that she saw such detail, until she found that she was now standing just a few feet before the man. How had she gotten there? When had she dismounted, and how had she crossed the short distance to him without being aware of it? Diana stood beside her as well, she noted out of the corner of her eyes. Only the corner, because she could not tear her gaze from this man with his gleaming onyx skin and delicately pointed ears. An elf? She'd never heard of dark-skinned elves, let alone those with skin the hue of the blackest night. She stood now before him, taking the hand that he extended. All the while, her gaze was fastened to his, even when his focus was on Diana. He was so amazingly beautiful! A piece of the most mystical moonlit night made flesh.

His hand was warm as it encircled hers and drew her close. The top of her head was about on level with his shoulder, putting her mouth right in line with the black, puckered nipple to which his hand was gently guiding her lips. She parted them willingly and lapped at his flesh, her hands raised to flatten against his belly and side. His skin tasted like cool spring water and hot cinnamon spice, a heady, strange combination that saturated her tongue and slid down her throat. Her own moan vibrated in her throat as she sucked harder.

She felt lips on her forehead, a sweet caress. Then the hand on the back of her neck pressed until she realized she was meant to kneel. She did, her body sliding sensuously down his until she reached her knees and her eyes were level with his cock. Thick and proudly erect, it thrust at her. She lapped at her own lips, still tasting his nipple, and wrapped her

hand around his beautiful organ. She'd never before thought the male form particularly awe-inspiring, but this creature's entire body was a gift from the gods. She slid her hand down the shaft, finding it was, curiously, already slick to the touch, easily sliding through her grasp. Although Gala had never performed such an act with her few other lovers, she opened her mouth and guided that fleshy tool past her lips.

Diana saw Gala from the corner of her eye. A part of her mind suggested that this should stop. But the beautiful black man's hand was caressing her face. She turned to catch his gaze, riveted on her despite Gala's ministrations to his sex. Murmuring something she didn't understand, he gently pried her lips apart with his thumb, then eased the thick digit into the wet recess of her mouth.

Obediently, she suckled, lulled by his deep, resonant voice.

What was he saying?

What was she *doing!*?

But she couldn't stop. The thumb in her mouth was a small substitute for the organ in Gala's mouth, but it was curiously just as effective. Diana felt things melt low in her belly. At length, he tugged her forward until he could press her against his side. Her leg bumped Gala's shoulder, but she couldn't concentrate on that. Not when his glistening black lips were bending to take hers. His kiss was bliss. Warm as sunshine to a chilled body. Eagerly, she drank from him, sucking his tongue into her mouth before he had a chance to offer it. When he pulled from her, she protested, reaching. Smiling, he backed away. Only distantly did she know her friend stood beside her.

The intriguing creature made an abrupt, downward gesture with his hand, and suddenly everything went blank.



Another black figure peeled from the shadows of the trees, arriving in time to catch the taller woman as she slumped in spelled slumber. The sorcerer caught the smaller. The unconscious women were held tenderly as the black figures stepped off the beaten path into the thick of the forest.

## Chapter Two

Obsidian hands anchored Diana to the bed as her body continued to writhe. She groaned, unable to vocalize the explosive ramp to her orgasm. His cock filled her to bursting, and still she wanted, *needed* more. On all fours, she clawed at the sheets beneath her, bunching a wad of fine linen into her mouth to staunch her screams as he twisted to a different angle and hit her in a spot she'd never known she had. Sweat covered every inch of her body but failed to cool her. Her wet hair plastered in tendrils to her neck, the sides of her face. One heavy lock fell over her eyes, but it didn't matter. She couldn't see. There might be tears in her eyes, but with every other wetness, she could no longer tell.

Her legs threatened to cramp, but still she forced them to slam her hips back against his. The pleasure was torture, but her body wouldn't allow her to stop. With a scream, she came again. Her entire body imploded, so tense her muscles shook. She collapsed to her belly, panting in an effort to get air into her lungs. For precious moments, that was all she could do, all she could think of.

Then as he withdrew, she realized to her astonishment that she wasn't sated! Although she was sore from the inside out, her juices continued to flow, her breasts ached, and her empty cunt was still pulsing.

Desperately, she dragged a hand over her eyes, trying to pull herself from her daze. Moans reached her ears. When she could focus, it still took her precious moments of staring to decide on what she was seeing.

Gala. Her friend. Her companion. Gala lay on her back beside Diana, her smaller body nearly hidden beneath the beast with satiny black skin.

*What is he?* Diana had enough sense to wonder, even as she refused her hand's urge to reach out and stroke the rippling muscles on his bare back. He was shaped like a human, but she was sure he couldn't be. Even in her haze, she knew nothing with skin that color, ears that pointed, nor eyes that glowing red was human. Silky, soft white hair fell in glorious waves, curtaining his face from her and nearly hiding Gala, as well. Gala, who desperately clung to his big body as his hips slid that wonderful, monster cock in and out of her.

A sudden flip of his head tossed his white locks to the far side of his head, and that wickedly gorgeous face turned to Diana. Reason and rationality left, and she crawled on aching limbs to get close enough to press her lips to his. She didn't care that he was fucking her friend. She didn't care that her position brought her close to her friend's naked body. It didn't matter. She'd do anything to touch him again.

Without thought, she slid her hand down his back to his buttocks. Her mouth now laving at the hard muscle at the back of his shoulder, she slid her fingers down the crack of his ass until she found his balls. His groan of appreciation hit her somewhere below her navel, and she continued to fondle him as he pumped into Gala. Growling, Diana repositioned herself so that her legs straddled his hairless calf. The hard muscle there did nicely to rub her aching clit.

Gala came. Distantly, Diana knew it, but she was far more interested in her own approaching climax. She wanted him to fuck her again. How many times had he already fucked her? How many times had he brought her to climax?

Had he yet climaxed?



Thoughts shattered as she came again. This time, her weak muscles wouldn't allow her to continue riding him. She slumped into a pile beside him as he continued to ride Gala.

*What was happening?*

Determined, Diana backed away until she could slide in a clumsy heap to the floor. Glancing up, she saw clear red eyes watching her, but he didn't even break stride. Not even as Gala was clearly biting his neck. Hard.

Sweet god of war, she wanted him again! He smiled, and she was nearly mad with the desire to suck that succulent lower lip into her mouth. Groaning, she buried her face in the rumpled sheet. She concentrated hard on finding control, on finding her voice. Something was wrong.

She had no clue how long she sat there. The coital sounds only a few feet from her were tuned out as she sought her center.

*THWACK!!*

Diana's head shot up just in time to catch sight of the business end of a whip slithering off the beast's shining black back. He was kneeling now, Gala half seated, half lying before him.

*THWACK!*

Diana's mind was suddenly clear, and she scrambled away from the bed. Gala, her face a mask of panic, tumbled from the mattress. They scrambled to the corner and huddled together, heedless of their nudity.

The beast didn't seem to notice, frozen with a look of agony on his face.

A female voice screamed in rage. On the other end of the whip was a woman, or at least a female version of whatever the beast was. Like him, her skin was satin black and her hair shining white, but her ears were not pointed. She wore very little -- a long loincloth draped loosely over her hips, and little slippers. And she was very pregnant.

She drew back and expertly hit him with the whip; at least six feet of supple white leather hissed through the air to cut at his back. He jerked, his head thrown back, but he made no move to escape her. Nor did the whip rip his skin as it should.

“Diana ...?!” Gala gasped.

But Diana had seen it too. He wasn't in pain, not if the bobbing of his erection was any indication. Before their astounded eyes, the cock that had taken them both to countless climaxes burst forth his seed as the female again let the whip go.

With a pleased groan, he crumpled to a heap on the bed.

The female snarled something in what could only be their language, then proceeded toward the bed. The girls scrambled back against the wall, eyeing the whip still uncoiled in her hand.

“We didn't know!” Gala cried.

The female frowned at them. She pointed with the whip handle. “Are you all right?” she asked in clear commonspeak.

Diana scowled, but Gala was effusive. “We didn't know he was yours. We didn't. I mean ...”

“Don't be ridiculous,” scoffed the female, coming to stand beside the male, who was almost purring with contentment. “I know very well what happened. You were under a spell.” She kicked at the male's hand as he reached to stroke her leg. “And you don't even know yet what's happened to you.”

“What's happened to us?” Diana demanded, quickly scanning the room for any sign of their clothing or weapons. Neither were evident.

“Come with me. I'll let you get washed up, get some food for you, and I'll tell you.”

“We'd rather leave.”

The female's clear blue eyes locked on Diana's. “You can't ever leave. They won't let you.”

“To hells with that,” Diana pronounced. She shot to her feet, completely forgetting the state of her body. Her legs protested and buckled. Only Gala’s ready help got her to the ground without injuring her.

The female sighed and called out something in that other language. Instantly, two more of the beasts, these two far more burly than the first, appeared. The female pointed and, much to Diana’s dismay, they came and picked up each of the girls. Diana wanted to fight, but there was nothing left in her. The first beast had used her body beyond exhaustion.

### Chapter Three

The girls were taken to a strange little bathing room. The windowless walls were carved to look like stone and mortar, but the feel of the place was obviously underground. Everything was remarkably well kept. There was only a bit of a dank cave smell. A pool in the ground larger than any tub Diana had previously used was filled with pleasantly warm, lavender-scented water. There was no mold, no slimy walls.

“Don’t get comfortable,” Diana cautioned Gala as her friend was about to step into the pool. “We don’t know what’s happening.”

Although the water was inviting beyond measure, both girls contented themselves with dipping cloths in it and using those to wipe sweat and sex juices from their skin. They avoided each other’s gazes.

“Diana ...” Gala started softly.

“No,” Diana denied. “I don’t want to talk about it. Not now. Let’s get out of here first.”

“But ...”

“No. Please. I ... can’t.”

She couldn't meet her friend's eyes. Each time Diana looked at her, she vividly recalled the sight of Gala's smooth skin, her pert breasts bouncing as that beast fucked her to climax and beyond.

Thankfully, Gala remained silent as they finished their washing. They wrapped their nakedness in long, light cloths left for them, as they were the only covering available aside from the drying cloths. The same two huge men awaited them when they emerged, and escorted them down a short, torchlit hall.

The room in which the female awaited them might have been a parlor in any lord's manor. Fine furniture was spread across a wood plank floor. Even the walls, which must have been more stone, were papered to look normal. Again, the lack of windows was the only hint they were belowground.

The pregnant female reclined on a lady's couch, eating with dainty fingers from a bowl perched precariously on her bulging belly.

"Welcome," she said, a touch of sarcasm in her voice. "Please, have something to eat." With a wave, she indicated a side table covered with a buffet of dishes. "I know you must be hungry."

"Where are we?" Diana demanded, grabbing Gala's arm when she would have approached the food.

The female smiled. "I'll answer all your questions as best I can, I promise. But you really should eat first."

"How do we know that the food isn't part of this spell you mentioned?"

She arched a brow at Diana. "You don't. I can only tell you that it's not. It's just normal food. The spell has already been cast, and the fucking you received sealed it." The last was said with a slight snarl.

Diana felt her blush at the blatant words, but continued to stare the female down. "What spell?"

With an irritating grin, the female shook her head. “Eat first.”

“Diana, please,” Gala interrupted when Diana opened her mouth to refuse. “We can’t go very far on an empty stomach.”

“You see?” said the female, staring into her bowl. “Your friend speaks sense.”

“None of this makes sense,” Diana growled. However, she released Gala and followed her to the table. Most of the food was recognizable, both by sight and smell. Rich venison roasted with small red potatoes and mushrooms dominated, but there was also a hearty stew that smelled like rabbit, as well as vegetables. That didn’t negate the possibility of poison, but Diana had to concede that they were already captured. Poison didn’t seem to make much sense.

Diana and Gala both made plates and took them to the pillows the female indicated on the floor before her couch. Diana wanted to protest. The positions made them seem supplicants to the lady, but for all she knew, this was the queen of these people and therefore due the respect.

Once she’d seen that they’d actually begun to eat, the female spoke up. “First, let me introduce myself. My name is Iana.”

When Diana made no motion to respond, Gala supplied their names. Iana noted Diana’s reaction with a wry grin, but said nothing. She addressed herself to Gala. “I don’t expect you’ve ever heard of *raedjour*, have you?”

Silence indicated that neither girl had. Iana nodded. “No, you wouldn’t have. But that’s where you are, in the underground kingdom of the *raedjour*. It’s quite an extensive city, actually, and goes on for miles underneath the forest and mountains.”

“The *raedjour* are the mystery of the Dark Forest?” Gala asked.

“They are. As well as the dark terrors of the Rhaen Mountains. Fitting, don’t you think, given the skin color?” she asked, holding out her arm to display her obsidian skin.

“The *raedjour* have been killing people in the Dark Forest for centuries?”

“Yes. But not everyone was killed. Males, usually yes. But no female has ever been slain intentionally by a *raedjour* man. Their goddess wouldn’t abide it. Instead, they capture them.”

Gala supplied the question Iana wanted. “Why?”

“Quite simple, actually. You see, the *raedjour* were created by their goddess -- Rhae -- as sexual consorts before the gods left the earth. She’d never expected to leave, you see, so she didn’t think ahead. She only created males. When she left, she had to do something to ensure their survival. So she told them to steal human women. They already oozed sex, so there was no doubt the women would be attracted. The goddess gave them a spell to convert human women to *raedjour* so that the women could have the *raedjourns*’ babies.”

“You were human?” Gala gasped.

The anger and sadness in Iana’s proud gaze was evident as she nodded.

“But they’ve been doing this for centuries. Why continue to take more women?”

“For some reason, only male children have been born.”

“Ever?”

“Ever.” Iana smoothed a hand over her belly. “I myself have had four sons. This will be the fifth.”

“With ...?”

“His name is Nalfien. He’s the most powerful sorcerer among the *raedjour* at this moment. And, as *raedjour* measure such things, I’m his wife. His truemate.”

“I’m so sorry,” Gala bemoaned, reaching out to touch Iana’s hand. “We truly didn’t know ... didn’t mean ...”

“You mean the fucking? Think nothing of it.” Despite her words, it was obvious the “fucking” bothered her. “You’ll find *raedjour* society quite unlike human society where sex is concerned. Even truemated *raedjour* will fuck others, both male and female. In Nalfien’s situation, he fucked you to set the spell. He tells me it’s necessary.”

Neither Diana nor Gala could hide their shock at Iana's direct words.

"But you wanted to know about the spell," Iana continued, ignoring their reaction. "It wasn't just the spell that made you want them. As I said, their ancestors were created as consorts to a goddess. There's something about them that will naturally attract you. The spell, however, made you crazy with lust. I don't understand it all, but as far as I know, the lust distracted you so the change spell could get past your natural defenses and start the change."

"The change?" Diana demanded.

"To *raedjour*."

"No!" Diana cried, shooting to her feet. Although her legs were still somewhat wobbly, she was able to stand.

Iana regarded her mildly. "Where do you think you're going?"

"I won't change."

"And you believe you have a say in this? You do remember the two rather large men that brought you here? They're still out there. I'm surprised they haven't barged in already."

Diana shook with rage, fists bunching and flexing. Iana continued to stare. "Wouldn't you rather sit nicely for the little time I can steal for you, and find out what is in store for you?"

"I won't."

Iana's eyes slitted. "Good. Fight them. I'm the first to hope you'll win. But I don't think you will, and you *certainly* won't if you don't know what is coming in the immediate future."

"Diana," Gala soothed, "please, sit down. Let's hear what Iana has to say."

"I can't sit," Diana muttered, beginning to pace the room.

"Please, Iana," Gala asked, "go on."



“Very well. The spell isn’t very consistent. Some women change immediately; some take longer. I can tell you that becoming *raedjour* means you can no longer stand even the most mild sunlight. I know, I’ve tried. Even on the coldest, most overcast day, a few moments in the sun and your body heats unbearably, and the light is too bright to see a thing. The other side of the coin is that you never get cold. The torches here are mostly for light for those who are still human -- because you also acquire night vision that would put a cat to shame.

“As for what’s about to happen to you, you should brace yourselves. You know now that you’re here for breeding purposes, but that’s not the full extent of it. There’s only one possible man who can impregnate you. Your truemate. No one knows why -- and believe me, it frustrates them no end -- but each man only seems to be fertile with one female in his lifetime.”

“How do they know?” Gala asked.

“Remember I said this is a sexual society. Most, if not all, truemates have, on many occasions, fucked others, truemated or no. The rule still stands. Either they’re only fertile with their truemate, or it’s the truemate’s presence that makes them fertile to others. As no one can really tell, it’s assumed that only truemates are fertile.”

“So what happens to us?”

“You’ll be taken from here to the first of a long line of lovers.”

“No!” Diana cried.

Iana ignored her. “You’ll stay with each man for nine nights. If, at the end of that time, you’re pregnant, a truematch is announced and you’re his.”

“*His?*” Diana demanded.

“How can they tell if you’re pregnant after nine days?” Gala asked over Diana’s objection.

Iana’s eyes shadowed, staring at her belly. “They know.”

“So they just pass us from man to man until we’re pregnant?” Diana cried.

Iana nodded. “You’ll have short breaks after each nine days and when your moontime comes, but even that will stop after a time. *Raedjour* cycles are different from humans.”

“How long does it take?” Gala asked in a tiny voice.

“To find your truemate?” Iana clarified. “It varies. From my own experience, I lost count at forty lovers before Nalfien planted me.”

“Forty!” Diana cried. “No! It won’t happen. I ...” She wavered on her feet, her knees again wobbly.

“Diana, are you all right?” Gala asked, immediately at her side, though she was wobbly herself.

The door opened and the first male -- the sorcerer -- walked in. “Iana,” he greeted his truemate in commonspeak. “I trust you’ve had a nice chat with our guests?”

“You son of a skunk!” Diana spat, still struggling to stand with Gala’s help. She lost the battle and fell to her hands and knees. “What have you done to me?”

“Extraordinary,” she heard him murmur as he slowly approached her. “You have such strength, Diana. But don’t fight the spell. It will only hurt you.”

“I won’t give in to you.”

“That’s the spirit,” Iana cheered, glaring at her mate. “Fight him, Diana. Fight him with all you are!”

“Iana, that’s enough,” he admonished.

“This isn’t happening,” Diana gasped, trying to lock her arms to keep from collapsing to the floor.

“Deny all you like,” Iana said, not unkindly. “But, believe me, it’s happening.”

That was the last Diana heard before the world went black.

## Chapter Four

Diana woke in a softly lit chamber. The bed beneath her was comfortable, and the light blanket was all she needed in the warm room. Open windows were set in the wall across from her, displaying pure blackness beyond.

She glanced about the chamber to find herself alone. Sitting up, she saw that the chamber was quite a normal-looking bedchamber, complete with clothes chests and a side table set beneath a polished disk. Rising, she crossed to the window. It was barred, the space between the bars far too narrow for her to fit between. Experimentally, she tugged the bars. Solid and unmoving.

Beyond the opening, she could make out the rock of the cavern ceiling. Minerals played the part of stars in the stony sky. Below was a perfectly normal-looking courtyard surrounded on three sides by the building she was in. The fourth side was a stone wall possessed of an open but fortified gate. Although the design was more elegant than any she'd seen, the strength of the fortification was evident.

The door's lock clicked. She whirled, the fact that she was naked now apparent to her, but it was too late to do anything about it.

It was, of course, one of *them*.

He wasn't quite as stunning as the sorcerer had been. Not quite as chiseled, and none of the curious white tattoos marked his skin. Still, this one was gorgeous. He was tall, and every inch of him was carved muscle. Snug trousers hugged his thighs and soft boots covered his feet. His chest was gleaming, bare black. This one's hair flowed in a straight ivory flow from the crown of his head to the middle of his back, with a few wispy tendrils brushing his chest. His violet eyes gleamed as he viewed his treasure.

"I am Boutel," he said, taking a step toward her.

She dropped into an attack-ready crouch. "Stay away," she warned.

He raised one silky brow and took another step, but her raised fist stopped him. "You'll fight me?" he asked, surprised.

"With everything I've got," she promised. "I won't be raped."

He chuckled, bracing his hands on his lean hips. "It would hardly be rape, dear woman," he purred. "*Raedjour* do not need rape. Unless --" His eyes dropped to sultry slits. "-- that is what appeals to you."

Her eyes narrowed. "Hardly," she answered. Unbidden, she recalled her time with Nalfien. Remembered not caring that he was fucking her friend. She'd only wanted to touch him. If this man could affect her similarly, was there anything she could do?

Boutel took another step toward her. She sidled away. His gaze sharpened, a feral grin curving his black lips. The bastard was enjoying this!

He circled her, a gleaming panther stalking a defiant doe. She scowled when his hands went to the fastening of his trousers and untied the laces.

"Keep your trousers on!" she demanded.

He only laughed. "Oh, no." From the opening sprang a cock as dark as he was, and every bit as alert. There was no nest of hair at the base of that organ, nothing to relieve the expanse of onyx skin curving from groin to cock tip. The skin would be hot, like the sorcerer's. What else would be the same?

He sprang. She screamed, realizing she'd let herself be distracted by his cock. He caught her arm and twisted, forcing her back to him. She tried to kick at him, but he eluded her, shoving one leg in between hers. The bed was too close behind her -- before her, now -- and he quite easily tumbled them onto it.

She screamed again, bucking underneath him, but he only held her until she calmed. His long hair tickled her left cheek. Spitefully, she bit it.

He laughed outright, infuriating her. Worse, the proximity of his body filled her attention. Carved muscle pressed against her back. His arms pressed against her sides as he held her wrists tightly. He shifted, the new position snugging his cock into the crack of her ass. Groaning, she buried her face in the bed beneath her, shocked at how hard it was not to press back against him.

"Yes," he purred, his breath a caress to her temple. She shuddered when his lips found a tender spot behind her ear. His tongue trailed along the shell of her ear until he could use it to guide her lobe into his mouth. "I promise you only pleasure. We're bred for this."

"Give it to some other woman," she demanded, very little conviction in her voice.

Gently, he bit down. "You're my woman for the next nine days," he said around her earlobe.

She bucked, and they both groaned as the movement fit him more snugly against her. His hands clenched around her wrists. His lips dropped to her neck, gently nibbling her nape. "Relax, Diana," he soothed, retreating enough that his lips reached the curve of her shoulder and his cock eased down until it nudged at her moistened entrance. Warm. So warm. And did she feel a light sheen of oil rubbing from his skin to hers? Not just his cock, but his chest and arms. And it smelled divine! Had he oiled his body before coming to her? She wiggled again, but that only succeeded in wetting the tip of his cock in her juices.

“So sweet,” he murmured, his breath melting the bones of her spine. By tilting his hips, he eased more of his shaft through her juices. The blunt head rasped against her clit, and she gasped.

Her wrists fell free when he released them to better angle himself. *Run!* She ordered herself, but her body wouldn't obey. Filled with his odd, spicy scent, covered by his body, her traitorous muscles were tensed and ready, her very womb drooling at the prospect of his entrance.

His fingers traced a path down her back, lingering over the swell of her buttocks. She refused to hear his murmured words, clenching her eyes shut as his caresses heated her skin. Made a token struggle when his hands grasped her thighs to haul her up into a more accessible position, but he easily subdued her. Then she was positioned.

Then he was inside.

Groaning, she clasped the bedclothes to either side of her face, pressing the sheets to her face to mute the sound he pushed from her as he tunneled endlessly inside.

“Ah, yes,” he cried, seated to the hilt. He paused, letting her inner walls adjust to him. Grip him. “You see, Diana.”

*I see that I'm under a spell that makes ... Ah! Gods!* He was pulling out, the friction sending shivers to her toes.

And in. Slowly. So she could feel every glorious inch. She moaned.

“Life with us can be so good,” he crooned, pulling out. He did it twice more, slowly sinking the sword deep into her heart.

Then, abruptly, he slammed in. She gasped. The sudden move was enough to snap her just a bit from her haze. With a cry, she lurched forward, struggling to escape the sensuous weave that ensnared her.

Startled, he lost his hold on her. She tumbled head over heels from the bed, scrambling on all fours to the farthest corner of the room.

“Diana!”

She heard him behind her and whirled. “You will *not* take me that easily!” she declared, ignoring that he *had*, in fact, done just that.

Standing before her, his cock was just at her eye-level, poking out of the trousers he still wore, and just out of her reach. Bobbing before him, it gleamed even more than before, wet now with her cream. Unconsciously, she licked her lips.

He frowned down at her. “Nalfien said you’d be reluctant,” he grumbled. “But why?”

“I don’t want this,” she snarled.

“You did just a moment ago. What’s changed?”

“I don’t know you,” she answered, reflex. She had to keep him talking. Or was it that she had to distract herself?

He dropped to a crouch before her, close but not so close that she couldn’t breathe. He smiled. “I’m doing my best to let you know me. Intimately.”

She ground her teeth, clutching her arms uselessly about her knees. “Smug bastard. I don’t *want* to know you.”

He cocked his head to the side, hair tumbling over his shoulder. “Must I restrain you?”

Her eyes went wide. It must be the spell. Why else did the picture of his strapping her down make her heart race?

He grinned. “I think you’d like that.”

She shook her head frantically. “No.”

“Oh, yes.”

He rose gracefully and turned toward a chest across the small room from her. Trembling with need, Diana used the warm -- warm? -- stone walls to gain her feet. There were only a few lit candles in the room. No fireplace. No firepit. How were the walls warm?

She had no time to contemplate further. Boutel had taken what he needed from the chest. Rope. Soft and silky, by the look of it, but thick and solid, as well. Grinning, he wound much of its length around both of his hands.

She trembled, forcing herself to believe it was fury and not lust which did this to her muscles. She watched his advance, knowing it was hopeless. He stood half a head taller than she and was twice as wide. She'd heard that elves were delicate creatures with bones as light as a bird's. Obviously, these dark elves were not of that species. Unless the bird were an eagle or a roc.

She darted aside at the last possible moment, not knowing where to go, only knowing that she had to fight rather than submit. He chased her, laughing. They darted about the room. She hurled a candelabra at him, horrified when he caught it and -- it seemed -- extinguished the flames with a look.

When he finally caught her, pinned between the wall and his body, she wasn't sure he hadn't been toying with her. Nor was she sure why she was running. Their scuffle in the warm room sprouted sweat on her naked skin. The heated air was dripping with the scent of him, and she was crazed with lust the instant his chest hit her back.

Grappling, snarling, although she no longer knew why, she finally struggled against the ropes alone. His cock was a searing brand each time it grazed her lower back or buttocks, and her only coherent thought was to deny herself the demand that he fuck her. She wanted it. He likely knew she wanted it. She wouldn't *say* it!

Once she was securely tied, he picked her up and tossed her on the bed. She rolled onto her back, lying on her trussed arms. The position and the crisscross of ropes he'd bound her with presented her breasts as a blatant lure. Her splayed legs were an open invitation.

An invitation he did not ignore. Without giving her any time to muster an escape, he fell on her, thrusting into her pussy in one hard glide. The primal sound that emitted from her throat was somewhere between a scream and a groan. Even the painful wrenching of her



arms couldn't dampen the searing pleasure of his sex pummeling hers. He braced himself above her, elbows to either side of her shoulders, fists tight in her hair. His mouth descended on hers, and she kissed him without thought of denial. His tongue was another necessary penetration.

Her first orgasm was loud and violent, only his heavy weight pinning them to the bed as her strong body bucked and writhed. Her second orgasm found her legs locked about his hips, her heels digging into the soft skin just below his buttocks as she used them to press him inside. Her third orgasm found her mewling, the sensations just as strong but her body depleted beyond fight. She missed his release through the never-ending trembling of her own. She was unconscious before he ever pulled out.

## Chapter Five

*Moons later ...*

Long before the door opened, Nalfien set aside the scroll he was reading. He sat quietly in the large chair, facing the door as Gala peeked around the heavy wood.

“Enter, child,” he greeted her look of apprehension.

She scurried in, closing the door behind her. He took the opportunity to admire her sleek, soft body, only partially hidden beneath the filmy silk wrap that fastened at one shoulder and draped her torso. Her long, wavy blonde hair was a bit lighter than it had been when he’d taken her from the forest, a sign that she would be one to change rapidly once she found her truemate.

She leaned back against the door, her hands behind her. Nervous. He wondered what the cause was. Yes, he could have read her mind, but he tried not to intrude on the thoughts of others unless it was strictly necessary.

He held out a hand, encouraging her to approach. “What ails you, child?”

She frowned as she closed the distance between them. “I’m not a child,” she insisted.

“Very well.” He took her hand and guided her to sit on the padded stool at his feet.

The two of them had developed an odd bond in her past few moons with the *raedjour*. On each of her days between lovers, she asked incessant questions. Entranced by her curiosity, he felt compelled to answer. She was sharp, this one, easily missed behind her veil of quiet. Her down-turned eyes saw more than many who looked at a problem straight on. Because of that, because of her incessant curiosity, he'd quartered her near his own rooms and granted her permission to visit him between lovers.

He waited, watching her fidget, until she asked her questions.

"Why haven't I found my truemate?" she finally asked.

Ah, so that was it. "Unfortunately, my dear, it's not a predictable occurrence. Some women never find their truemate."

"What happens to them?"

"They are given quarters of their own in a place that's come to be known as the brothel. There they are cared for until the end of their days."

She nodded, riveted by her own hands making creases in the flimsy wrap she wore, rather than raising her gaze to his. "Can a person tell if they've found their truemate? Or do only you sorcerers know?"

He smoothed his hand over her thigh, just above her knee. Being *raedjour*, it was difficult for him to be near bare flesh without caressing. He did it without thought. "We confirm the truematch, but some are aware of the truematch before we tell them."

She raised her eyes, but made it only to the tattoo blazoned across his chest, a symbol of Rhae's favor. "How do they know? How did you know? With Iana."

He smiled, allowing his thoughts to drift as he spoke. "I knew by the touch of her. The taste of her. She was home. She was mine."

"Why didn't you know initially?"

"Initially?"

"Don't you lay the initial spell on all women?"

“Ah. No. Most, but not all. At the time, I was seeing Hyle -- one of my apprentices -- through his initial passage into becoming a spellcaster. I was occupied for moons. During that time, Rhicard filled my place.”

Gala nodded absently. Rhicard was the only sorcerer she'd met other than Nalfien.

Nalfien placed a finger below her chin and raised her face to his. “What troubles you, Gala?”

Her clear blue eyes brimmed with confusion. “I feel something I don't understand,” she finally admitted.

“What do you feel?”

“A tingling. Arousal.” She closed her eyes, turning inward. “A warmth like I've never felt before.”

He smiled. “That could be a sign of a truematch.”

“I don't see how,” she said, scowling prettily.

“Whyever not?” he asked, trying to recall who her last match was. And why hadn't she been planted?

Her eyes reopened, focusing on him. “Because I feel this around you.”

He blinked, shocked. “That's quite impossible,” he declared before he could think.

She shook her head, grabbing his wrist when the movement dislodged his fingers from her chin. “It's true. I feel this only in your presence. I crave your touch.”

Disgruntled, he sat back in the chair, eyeing her warily. To do her credit, he carefully checked his own emotions. Nothing. Nothing above the fondness he'd come to feel for her. Certainly not the hot flashes of lust or the simmering tenderness he felt in Iana's presence.

Gala leaned forward, hands braced on his thighs. “Is it possible for you to have two truemates?”

He shook his head. “Not to my knowledge. Not in any history I've known.”

A moment of panic took his heart. Many times he'd wished for a more pliable mate. Although she'd been his truemate for quite some time, Iana had yet to lose her human ways, her human spites, her human jealousies. Many of the tasks he performed sparked her more ugly traits. It was then she brought out the weapons. He closed his eyes as lust overtook him at the thought of her whip biting into his skin. No, despite her faults -- or perhaps *because* of them -- Iana was his own truematch.

Gala's hands slid farther up his thighs, and her determined little fingers undid the knot that held together the wrap about his waist.

"Gala, what are you doing?"

"Please," she begged, sinking to her knees as her tiny hands clasped his erection. "It feels so good."

*Yes, it does*, he thought as he groaned when her hot mouth sank onto his cock. Although he knew he should stop her, Nalfien tangled his hands in her curly locks and guided her mouth as she suckled him. It had been so long since he'd allowed another woman to take him willingly, outside of the initial charm. Iana rarely pleased him like this.

Gala had learned a thing or two from her list of lovers. Nalfien let his head sink back to rest on the chair while she pleased him with her tongue, lips, and hands. He didn't stop her, not even when he allowed himself to climax in her mouth. To his surprise, she swallowed it all. He actually had to pull her away from his limp organ as she tried to bring it back to life. She would know from experience with his kind that it would not take much stimulation to do so.

"This will stop here," he declared, pushing her gently away.

"But what about what I feel?"

"We'll discuss that."

She shook her head, trying to get closer. "Fuck me first."

"No."

“You did the first night.”

“And only the first night. Iana is my true mate. You do remember her whip?”

She winced. “I remember.”

“I’m not the only one she uses it on.”

She blinked big blue eyes at him. “I could never use a whip on you.”

That effectively quelled his lust. He could smile now, could touch her. “But, child, that is what I need.”

Her eyes went bigger in shock. Then she fell back to her knees. “I don’t understand.”

He stood, retying the wrap about his waist. “Remain here a moment.” He walked across the room, ostensibly to retrieve a mug of wine for her. He also mentally summoned Hyle. Of all of Nalfien’s apprentices, only Hyle and Savous excelled at solving riddles. Savous was best at truth and history. Hyle was adept at magical puzzles. Of any of them, he was best to help find a solution to Gala’s problem.

Gala nursed the wine Nalfien gave her, staring into the watered depths rather than watch him roam the room. She didn’t need to watch him. She could feel him. She’d been so certain he was the one. She didn’t know what was happening to her.

Suddenly, an odd burning flared low in her belly, an arousal sharper and more intense than she’d ever encountered. Confused, she looked up just as the door opened.

The man who entered captivated her. He was quite short for a *raedjour*, probably not much taller than she. Diana would certainly be taller than he. Within the loose opening of the short silk robe he wore, a tattoo similar to Nalfien’s flared across his chest. Having asked Nalfien, she knew that particular pattern was a mark of a sorcerer. Although his blazing red eyes were a more blatant clue. His flaxen hair hung heavy and straight to the middle of his back, secured to his head by two braids that began at his temples and joined together at the

back of his neck. He was clearly young, not having grown into the sharpness of the older man.

“Hyle,” Nalfien greeted. “May I introduce you to ... Gala.” The pause due to the fact that Gala had dropped her mug, spilling the remnants of her drink on the stone floor.

The apprentice turned his attention to her. His features were soft, nearly feminine, and his rounded, glowing red eyes did not have that upward tilt which made some of the *raedjour* look evil. The eyes rounded further in shock when he saw the intensity of her gaze.

Or perhaps he felt it too? Did his skin tingle? Were his insides melting? Did he have to hold stock-still or else fling himself at her?

“Hyle,” she breathed, clutching her wrap so hard that she dislodged it from her shoulder. His eyes dropped to her bared breast, and she could not have mistaken his hunger.

It took him two tries before he could say, “Master, I ...” But he paused, unable to tear his gaze from her flesh.

She beamed and took that first step. The first poured into another until she was pressed against him, breast to chest, groin to groin, gathering handfuls of that glorious hair. A look of panic overrode his hunger, but his hands settled on her hips as though they belonged.

They *did* belong!

Unable to wait longer, Gala yanked his face down, pressing those soft lips to hers. They shared a groan. It was he who opened his mouth to her questing tongue.

Nalfien’s chuckle gave her pause, and she reluctantly pulled away from making a meal of Hyle’s mouth. The apprentice blinked down at her, barely able to focus.

“M-master?” he questioned, still unable to take his gaze from Gala’s adoring eyes.

“Gala, would it be safe to assume the feelings you mentioned have intensified?”

Her smile hurt her face it was so large. “Oh, yes.”

“What do you feel?”

“Hot. Beautiful. Safe.” She frowned at Hyle. “Impatient.”

Nalfien chuckled. “Ah, yes. Well, I would ask that you be patient with Hyle. He’s not yet had the pleasure of being with a woman.”

That helped Hyle to break their shared gaze. He tried to pull away, embarrassed, but she locked her arms around his neck to prevent his escape. She turned her head to face an amused Nalfien. “Never?”

“Hyle is young. He’s also quite a serious student. He has ... foregone the pleasure of women in favor of his studies.”

“Hmm.” Gala turned back to the beautiful man, who was indeed not much taller than she. Softly, she kissed his jaw, trailed her lips back to his ear. “We’ll put a stop to that.”

Startled, Hyle jumped back. It was enough to dislodge Gala’s grip. “What ... what’s happening?” Gala let him escape, but tracked him with an intense stare as he put Nalfien’s large chair between them.

“I called you here to help me divine an answer to why Gala had feelings for me as a truemate, although I’m already truemated. It seems, however, that you’ve provided the answer with your very existence.”

“What do you mean?”

“I would be very surprised indeed if you were not Gala’s truemate.”

Hyle’s panic clearly grew at the sight of Gala’s predatory smile. “How can she be my mate?” he asked. “I’ve not lain with her.”

Gala made a happy, purring sound that made Nalfien laugh. “I think Gala would be most happy to rectify that situation.”

“B-but, this isn’t how it happens! How can she know?”

Curious herself, Gala turned to see Nalfien’s reaction -- which consisted of a shrug. “One can only guess. Some feel the bond with their truemate quite intensely. Some do not. As to why Gala felt these things toward me, I can only speculate that it would be our close



association.” He smiled at Gala’s questioning look. “Hyle is not only one of my apprentices, he is also my son.”

Gala accepted this initially, although she couldn’t help feeling a tad embarrassed at wanting the son when a short time previous she’d begged the father to fuck her.

“Yes,” Nalfien was continuing, nonplussed. “I have a strong suspicion about this. Gala seems sensitive to magic, which could also be the cause of her attraction to me.” He smiled at Hyle’s aghast look. “But this is quite fortunate. Who knows when we would have put you on the list of her lovers?”

“Could he be next?” she asked.

“Most certainly.”

“Master!”

“Yes?”

“I have work to do.”

Nalfien shook his head. “Hyle, of all my apprentices, you are the most studious and the hardest worker. I appreciate that I can rely on you. But there is nothing -- nothing! -- more important than a truematch. You agree?”

Hyle eyed Gala warily. “Yes.”

“And if we think there is a truematch, all rules would bend to assure it, yes?”

“Yes.”

“It’s done, then. Gala, would you mind forgoing your day of rest?”

She answered with a smile and a shake of her head.

“I thought not. Hyle, you should take Gala to your quarters now.”

He opened his mouth in what looked like the beginning of a protest, but then his gaze locked with Gala’s. She put all she felt into her eyes, all warmth and promise. “As you say, master” was what came out of his mouth.

She beamed, remaining where she stood as he rounded the chair. Tentatively, he held out his hand to her and she took it. Heat flared between them. He jumped. She shivered.

She silently followed him from the room, heedless of Nalfien's fond gaze. Hyle hesitated once outside the door. "You should, um ..." He gestured at the wrap, which exposed her breast.

She grinned at his embarrassment. Of all the *raedjour* she'd met, she'd yet to see any embarrassed. It was adorable! Her heart swelled as she fixed the wrap, then took his hand again.

It was a short walk to his quarters. Obviously, he was to be near-at-hand for Nalfien. His rooms weren't sumptuous, nor were they tidy. She saw immediately that he tended to leave items wherever he happened to set them, rather in their proper places.

Mumbling something in their purring language, he moved to release her hand, reaching for the nearest pile of clutter. She tugged back, making him face her. "Leave it," she murmured, sliding her free hand up his chest, his neck, until she could tangle her fingers in the hair at the back of his head.

"Gala," he breathed, staring at her in wonderment.

She smiled, gently guiding his lips to hers. She taught him to kiss her, coaxing his tongue from his mouth and into hers. He caught on quickly and, with a ragged groan, released her hand so he had both of his free to fill with her back and buttocks. She didn't protest; rather, she worked with him to press their bodies as close as possible.

She broke the kiss with a gasp, dropping her head back. His wonderfully strong arms held her effortlessly. He bent his neck to nuzzle the soft shallow behind her ear.

"Either you've done this before, or you're a very quick learner," she teased.

He chuckled softly, a sound which warmed her already boiling blood. "Kissing? This I've done before."

“Oh.” Of course. Nalfien had pointed out to her during one of their discussions that in a society where women were scarce, sexual relations between males were inevitable. It had taken her some time to come to terms with this, but she believed she had. “You’ve just never been with a woman before?”

“No.” His lips were doing marvelous things to her earlobe.

A horrible thought occurred to her. “You are ... *old* enough for this, aren’t you, Hyle?”

Again the chuckle. “Yes. I’ve just never --” He shrugged. “-- really wanted to. I don’t socialize much.”

She relaxed, distracting herself by combing her fingers through his glorious hair. She found the braid at the back and began to unlace it. As he nibbled her neck and shoulder, she freed the hair and pulled some forward to drape over his shoulders. Her shoulders. She quivered, wanting to wrap herself in that warm silk and roll around in it.

“Hyle.”

“Gala?”

“Do you have a bed?”

That earned her a full laugh, which pleased her even more than the chuckle.

He carefully pulled back from her, sliding his hands down her arms until their fingers clasped. His face was a picture of joyful anticipation, his fears seemingly melted by the heat of the lust between them. Matching his smile, she followed as he walked backwards, effortlessly guiding them both into the adjoining chamber.

“Are you using magic as a guide, or are you just that familiar with this room?” she teased as they entered the darkened room.

He glanced over his shoulder and two candles in a shared holder flared to life. She started. Neither of the other sorcerers she’d met had made such an obvious show of their power. She chuckled. “Show off.”

He laughed again, stopping when his knees hit the side of a simple but wide bed. She closed the small distance between them, sliding her hands into the opening of his robe. Quickly, she slid it from him, then made short work of the trousers he wore. When he was finally, fully exposed to her gaze, she was overjoyed to find him exactly as she wanted him. As he wasn't as tall as the other men, neither was his cock as long. But this suited her fine because many of the others had had to compensate for organs that wouldn't fit fully in her pussy. His gleaming black organ was thick, however, as she discovered when she encircled it with her hand. She trembled at the thought of the friction it would cause thrusting deep inside her.

He groaned, clutching her shoulders a moment for support. She smiled, leaning forward to nip at his shoulder as she pumped his cock to release some of the natural juices the *raedjour* exuded -- another thing she had learned of them. Created originally for sex, the *raedjour* males exuded a lubricant that covered their bodies in a light, oily sheen that would gather and gain in necessary places when they were aroused.

When she could stand it no longer, she pushed him gently. Obediently, he fell onto the bed, scooting back at her insistence until he lay prone before her. She licked her lips as she studied him, allowing him to see the pleasure she took just at the sight of him. She stripped off her wrap for him, glorying in the simmering warmth in his eyes as he studied her in turn. She smiled. He matched it.

She knelt on the bed at his feet, bending to plant a kiss on his ankle. Taking her time, she kissed her way up his calf, his knee, the inside of his thigh until she could nuzzle her nose in the bend where thigh met groin. She breathed in the warm, musky scent of him, lapping gently at the tender skin of his balls, sucking them slowly into her mouth. Her actions brought his cock to full, bobbing attention, so she trailed the big, throbbing vein up the bottom of the shaft until she could use her lips to pull the plum-sized head into her mouth.

"Ah, Gala!" he shuddered, clutching the bedclothes.

She wrapped her hand around the shaft and devoured him, lapping up the tasty lubricant and happily swallowing the drops of seed that seeped from the head. But soon she couldn't stand it any longer. Promising herself she would suck him to completion sometime soon, she withdrew her mouth and climbed his body, trailing kisses as she had along his legs. By the time she reached his face, he was desperate. His hands were buried in her long, wavy hair, pulling her mouth to his. She allowed it for precious moments as she braced over him with one locked arm and pumped his cock with her free hand. Finally she broke from his kiss to position herself. She no longer had the time or the patience to tease. She needed him inside her. Now! He placed his hands at her hips to help steady her as she raised herself, aimed his cock, then blissfully impaled herself on it.

Her climax -- much to her surprise -- was immediate and intense. She braced over him, her body quaking. Beneath her, Hyle cried out as her clutching channel pulled out his own orgasm. It was a moment of totality, the moment they became one, with no doubts in either's mind.

She collapsed atop him, desperately trying to breathe. He hugged her to him, struggling with his own breath. Finally, she laughed. "I'm sorry, Hyle. I couldn't hold back."

She felt him shake his head as he squeezed her. "Please, no apologies. I couldn't either." He stroked her back, ending with a fond squeeze to her buttocks. "I've never felt anything like that."

She laughed again. "Normally it takes a while longer so you can enjoy it."

"Mmm." He nudged her buttocks, moving her groin just enough for her to realize that he was hardening again. "Perhaps we could try again?"

Gladly, she snuggled against him. "Oh, please. Let's."

## Chapter Six

*Klack! Klack! Whoosh! K-klack!*

From his balcony vantage above the combatants, Commander Salin grunted, crossing powerful arms over his chest. “You should have given her a read blade.”

Nalfien scowled. “We shouldn’t have given her a weapon at all.”

Krael, Salin’s second-in-command, laughed. “How else were you going to tire her out? Fucking wasn’t working.”

The sorcerer grumbled, but the sound was ignored by the two warriors engrossed in the fight below. The small arena was one of many set aside for weapons-training for young or inexperienced *raedjour*. This one, with the soft sand floor, provided both a padding and a footwork hindrance. A hindrance which did not detract from the fighting ability of the woman below.

Her opponent was her latest lover. Garn was winning the match, but she wasn’t making it easy for him. If she’d had a true blade and knew how to use it properly against the tough *raedjour* hide, the match might have been on more level footing.

“Is he playing with her, or did he just miss that opening?” Krael mused.

“He’d best be playing with her,” Salin grumbled. “Perhaps he requires more practice.”

Krael nodded, absently brushing back his long white hair. "I'll see to that."

Salin nodded, but his focus didn't waver from the match. Truthfully, he cared little about Garn's abilities. Over the cycles, Garn had proven himself a capable warrior time and time again. It was the woman who had Salin's rapt attention. Although laboring under the handicap of a dulled wooden blade, the sand floor, and scant leathers evocative of sex more than combat, she handled herself beautifully. He would wager she'd had some weapons-training, but the majority of her skill was through hard-won experience. Rage spilled in a scream from her lips as she ducked Garn's attack and managed to bring up her blade to slice him across the back. Salin wanted to bark at her to shut her mouth and thrust instead of cut, but he held his tongue.

Truthfully, his reaction to the match surprised him. Women were rare to the *raedjour*, but as commander, Salin seldom wanted for female company. There were enough women who had lost a truemate, or had never found one, who had abundant sexual needs. There were even two or three who had been trained in weapons in their human lives and continued the practice once among the *raedjour*. But for some reason, this one intrigued him. Her anger beat against him like a warm breeze, wild and directionless. She lashed out at her captors as easy targets, but he didn't think they were the true cause of her anger. Just the latest cause.

He moved forward to brace his arms on the balcony railing. Below, the woman turned, faltered. Garn nabbed her about the waist and took her heavily to the sand. The practice blades were flung asunder.

Beside Salin, Krael purred as Garn swiftly ripped aside the useless scraps of leather that had barely covered the woman's sex. Both commander and second inhaled deeply, their keen senses easily picking up the heady aroma of her arousal. "Like it or not, Nalfien," Krael mused, "*this* is what gets this particular woman."

"So it would seem."





As they casually discussed her, Garn had freed his cock. Salin watched carefully, gratified to note that despite her sneer, the woman -- Diana, yes, that was her name -- surrounded him with both legs and arms and violently welcomed him into her body.

Diana couldn't think. Sand crept under the hem of the ridiculously short excuse for a bodice and invaded the crack of her ass. Her lungs labored mightily to get enough air. And every nerve twitched and tingled, desperate to get that long length of black cock as deeply embedded in her pussy as possible.

She didn't know why they'd allowed her weapons. It must have been her first lover -- Boutel? -- who told them that she'd used every moveable item in the rooms against him during their time together. After that, she'd been introduced to this sandy arena and given a selection of dulled weapons. She couldn't win the matches. She knew that. Not when the adrenaline from the fight combined with whatever they'd done to her to spike her arousal to feverish pitches -- until, by the end of the battle, she'd fuck anything that moved. The long, hard grips of the practice weapons had even caught her eye on occasion!

And this match was worse. For some reason, they had an audience. And that audience included a man unlike any other she'd seen. How did she know he was different? He was dressed well, in what little he wore. Trousers and an embroidered sash as a belt were all she had glimpsed. The trousers looked well made and the belt flashed with gold embroidery. But his scant garb wasn't it -- the long-haired man beside him, with the exploding star pattern tattooed on his face, was dressed in the same manner. Was it his hair? It was far shorter than any other man's she'd met among the *raedjour* thus far. Cropped just above his sharp jawline, it was a riot of white-gray curls with one long lock obscuring one eye.

No. She didn't know what it was, and she was frustrated she couldn't make out more detail from her place in the arena below the balcony from which he watched. But his presence had distracted her, enraged her, and, unfortunately, aroused her.

She clutched at the hair of the one who fucked her now. She couldn't even remember his name. Couldn't recall if she'd ever asked it. And all she was aware of was the eyes of the other watching. She tried to roll her present lover onto his back, wanting to show herself off to this other man, but the huge lunk held her down. Growling, she scratched at his back, but that, of course, only spurred him on.

Frustrated, she turned her head and gasped. *He* had moved forward, muscled arms braced on the balcony railing, eyes locked on her. Her gaze filled with him, with what she could see of the chiseled features and eyes that glowed a soft red. His small grin was devastating. Her mind's eye filled with the image of that huge body in the place of the one atop her, of those lean hips pounding a matching, beautiful cock at the very entrance of her womb.

The image set her off. She exploded with a scream, tearing at the tough black skin of her lover's back. He cried out, rearing up to brace his upper half on his forearms, giving him a better angle to pound her mercilessly. But she asked no mercy. She clutched the sandy ground, straining to match his rhythm as she closed her eyes and replaced him mentally with the other.

"How many of us has she had?" Salin asked, still entranced as Garn slowed through Diana's second orgasm. He saw the fine tremor that went through the man's back and knew the effort it cost him not to come. *Showing off for his commander*, Salin thought.

"Fifteen," said Nalfien. "All, but the first, from Krael's recommendations."

Salin nodded. His second had recommended the men because Salin had been ... what? He couldn't recall now.

"Is she like this with all of them?" Krael asked for him. He was Salin's second for a reason, often supplying necessary information or asking pertinent questions while Salin put together the pieces.

“As far as I know,” Nalfien admitted, stepping to the railing beside Salin. “I’ve not watched any before this.”

“She’s called the ‘hellcat’ for good reason,” Salin mused.

Krael snorted. “She needs to be put in her place.”

Salin smiled, aware of his lieutenant’s preference for submissive women. Salin, however, craved a good fight.

“Yes,” Nalfien sighed. “She’s destined for the brothel if she doesn’t find a truematch.”

For some odd reason, that statement set Salin’s blood boiling. He imagined this hellcat among the women of the brothel, continuing to welcome men to her bed until she either stumbled on her truemate or she died.

Below, Garn began to pump again. The woman below him moaned, clearly exhausted but, just as clearly, still aroused. Garn fumbled at the lacing of her bodice, loosening it just enough to free one plump breast.

“I want her,” Salin declared as his man latched onto what looked to be a succulent nipple.

Behind him, Krael and Nalfien shared a glance. Although aware of it, Salin ignored it.

“Indeed?” asked Nalfien.

“Indeed.”

“And why, may I ask?”

The question was benign, but the history between the commander and the sorcerer gave it deeper meaning. Long ago, in Salin’s youth, Nalfien had tried to convince Salin to become his apprentice. Once, Nalfien might have helped Salin fan the flames of the magic threaded within him. But Salin had refused. He’d chosen instead to follow in his father’s footsteps, to become a warrior to beat all. In this, he had succeeded admirably. But the rejection remained between them, compounded by the fact that Salin’s younger brother, Radin, was one of Nalfien’s most talented apprentices.

Salin straightened, tearing his gaze from the intriguing woman with an amazing amount of effort. He met Nalfien's red gaze. "Because I do."

Nalfien's lips twitched, but he didn't smile. "I already have a list of men for her after Garn. Supplied by your own lieutenant."

Beside him, Krael stilled, familiar with the tension between the men.

"I know that." Salin gazed down his nose at the sorcerer. "What do I have to do to be next with her?"

Nalfien took a long moment to study the younger man. Truth be known, he admired Salin. Like his father, he was a natural leader with a certain aplomb that made his men proud to follow him. Like his brother, he had a mischievous streak, which got him into trouble as often as it produced brilliant ideas.

At length, Nalfien smiled. "Consider it done, Commander," he said.

Salin scowled. Behind him, Krael's head swung around in shock at the easy capitulation. "No demands? No favors?" Salin asked.

Nalfien's smile grew. "It might be that I could call on a favor sometime in the future."

Salin growled, one black lip curling up to nearly touch his pointed nose. "I don't like owing you, Nalfien."

The sorcerer cocked his head to the side. "I could certainly put you at the end of the list." It was his right. Only one person had power above Nalfien where the human women were concerned, and that was the king himself.

"I could ask Valanth," Salin suggested.

Nalfien shrugged at the mention of the king. It was well known that he and the monarch were not on particularly favorable terms. It was also well known that, as one of the king's personal guards, Salin was. "You most certainly could, Commander. But as his majesty

is in commune with Rhae for at least another fortnight ...” He let his voice trail off. The king, when in commune with their goddess, could be unavailable for moons at a time.

Many a man under Salin’s command wanted his chance at the hellcat. She posed an interesting challenge. Salin didn’t want to wait until he could force Nalfien’s hand through the king. In truth, he didn’t want to involve the king at all, for Valanth might decide to try her himself, and women were always *different* once had by the king.

Salin pondered a long moment. Below, Diana’s body rumbled in a groan that snatched low in his spine and made his cock twitch. The decision was made. “Done. I’ll owe you a favor.”

Nalfien nodded. “I’m honored, Commander.”

## Chapter Seven

This time, two of the hulking guards took her to another set of rooms. They left the rooms in which she'd stayed during her day between men, and strode down the long, brightly lit hallway. At the other end of this hall and through a bare stone courtyard was the small arena where she had sparred with her latest lovers. But her guards took her deeper into what she could only describe as a tower. Although such a term, underneath the stone sky, seemed strange.

Occasionally, young men scurried past on errands. It seemed they did most of the drudge work in *raedjour* society, acting as servants to the older men. All men, young and old, spared hungry glances for Diana in her spare, silken wrap and soft leather boots. She pretended to ignore them, also ignoring the tightness of her nipples and the dampness of her crotch. She was getting good at it.

They traveled up two flights of winding stairs and down a carpeted hallway to a solid door emblazoned with a sinister weblike design. One of the guards knocked. A moment later, a young man opened the door, his sleek white hair pulled back into a tail. Diana tried valiantly not to ogle the youthful muscles of the arms that extended from his open leather vest.

The youth stepped back, bowing slightly. The guards entered, then led her quickly through a sparse, though well-appointed, main room to a second door. This one they opened, pushed her through, then closed the door behind her.

“And good afternoon to you,” Diana grumbled as the lock *snicked*. “Or morning. Or night.” She rolled her eyes. She didn’t have any idea what time of day it was any longer. In this underground kingdom, it was always blackest night.

She glared about the room. Her ire drained somewhat as she got a good look at the furnishings. This latest man had to be more privileged than those she’d seen to date. The bedchamber, to start, was nearly twice the size of the two rooms she’d been given during her time with the *raedjour*. Wall sconces with real candles rather than torches lit the room, along with a cheery fire in a carved fireplace. Expensive woven rugs were scattered across a smooth, clean stone floor. Four clothes chests were lined along one wall. A table near the door was spread with what smelled like a delicious meal, all covered with linen cloths or enclosed in shining pewter tureens. A padded platform, which she assumed posed as a bed, dominated one wall, piled with pillows and silky furs. No blankets. Not that they were needed, as the room’s temperature was quite comfortable.

Misgivings crept up Diana’s spine. To date, the room in which she and Gala had talked with Iana on that first, fateful night was the finest she had ever seen. She didn’t know what to feel or do.

Off to the side, nearly obscured by ornate folding screens, she saw contraptions that boiled the misgivings from her mind. A standing X had obvious purpose, with stout chains dangling from rings at both the top and bottom ends of the X. A small, benchlike contraption sat next to it, with rings and chains similarly dangling in strategic places. Suspicious, Diana went back to the bed and lifted one of the furs to get a look at the side of the bed. Yes. There were rings set into that, as well.

She scowled. Every one of the *raedjour* to which she’d been given had bound her at one point or another, usually when they were weary of physically holding her down. She

was not prepared to admit how she had enjoyed it. How wonderful it had been to unleash all of her anger, to rant, to curse, and yet still be taken.

No. She wouldn't admit that.

The door's lock sounded and the heavy wood swung in soundlessly. She turned only her head and schooled her face into a dismissive sneer, prepared to begin the next battle.

In walked ... *him!*

She froze, the instinctive reaction of prey to predator. Her eyes went wide as he cleared the threshold then calmly closed and locked the door behind him.

He was even more amazing up close. From the balcony, he'd looked magnificent. Up close, he was sinister beauty in motion. He was taller than any *raedjour* she'd met, easily over seven feet if she had to guess, and every inch of it was honed muscle. Buttery-soft, black leather boots draped his feet, marking the end of legs that went up forever within loose linen trousers. An embroidered silk sash wound about an impossibly slim waist. His bare, sculpted abdomen emerged from that sash, fanning out to a hugely broad chest. The same sinister web design she'd seen on the outer door of the suite was emblazoned in one of those curious white tattoos across his pectoral muscles. Bulging arms rippled as he crossed them casually over his chest. His long neck held up a face of wicked pleasures, promised by the full curve of his black lips and the rakish tilt to snowy white brows. His white hair was cut much shorter than any man she'd seen among the *raedjour*, the riotous white-gray curls barely reaching his chin. One thick forelock fell over his right eye but failed to conceal the burning dark red of the iris.

Red. Power. She'd learned a bit during her time with the *raedjour*, and one tidbit was that the more red the eyes, the more magical power they had. Nalfien's eyes actually glowed bright red. One of his apprentices whom she'd seen was clearly red. But this man's eyes smoldered like a banked fire waiting to erupt.



He waited, perusing her every bit as obviously as she did him. He had to be some sort of lord, however the *raedjour* measured such things. The rooms, she could only conclude, were his, along with the sumptuous trappings.

He finally spoke. "Diana."

She shivered. The deep pitch vibrated in her womb, causing something to break and melt in her groin.

"I am Salin," he introduced himself, nodding his head. "Welcome to my home."

She sneered. "This is not my choice."

He shrugged, a slight tilt of his head. "True. But perhaps we can make it pleasant."

"I don't think so."

"Don't you?" he asked, unconcerned. He stepped toward the food table and lifted a tureen cover. "Are you hungry? Thirsty?"

"No."

All the same, he went to a nearby table and picked up a bottle of the light wine they drank in place of water. "Do you need to use the facilities?" he asked, gesturing toward a partially open door she guessed led to a private privy.

She stopped her immediate denial, realizing that it probably wasn't a bad idea. "Yes."

With a nod, he indicated she should proceed.

She skirted the bed platform and stepped into the cool privy room, shutting the door behind her. Once inside, she took a moment to catch her breath and try to still her beating heart. She had to be quiet. Their hearing was better than any creature she'd yet to encounter or hear tale of.

She washed her face with the cool water than ran in a constant stream from a hole in the wall into a basin with a drain, and pulled her hair into a tail. She froze at the sight of herself in the mirrored disk on the wall. Was it the poor lighting of the room, or was her hair a lighter shade of brown? Sweet Mother of us all, was she changing?

More to escape that fact than anything, she exited the room.

He sat on what looked to be a comfortable covered chair with a low back. One long leg was draped over the side, and she stifled a groan, for the position snugged his dark trousers in just the right way to show an impressive bulge between his thighs.

He smiled, which told her that her reaction had been visible. Bristling, she stomped to the table and poured herself some wine. He was silent as she finished it.

Wasn't he going to *say* anything? *Do* anything? All of her previous lovers had begun sex play immediately, eager to shove their cocks into any available orifice.

When she turned to face him again, she caught him in another slow perusal of her nearly naked body. She'd grown accustomed to such looks in the past weeks and could not understand why *his* look was tactile. Could he touch her with magic alone?

Finally, he rose. "Are you well rested?"

She shrugged. "As well as can be expected for a prisoner."

His gaze grew unaccountably sharp. "Have you been treated poorly?"

"What do you call being bound, manhandled, and raped repeatedly?"

"Raped?" he inquired mildly.

"I was taken against my will."

The small smile took her breath. "Against your will? Was your body not wet with your own sweet juices and prepared for the invasion? Were there occasions when you didn't ask for more?"

Scowling, she turned from him, unable to think coherently as she drank in the sight of him. "The spell made me want them."

"No, Diana. The spell wore off long ago."

"Then something made me want them. I've never been such a ... I've never wanted men like that."

“Hmm. You had also not been among the *raedjour*. You’ve been told we were created for a goddess’s own pleasure.”

“Yes!” she hissed.

He chuckled. “Most women would see this as a benefit.”

“I am not most women.”

“On that, I agree.”

She whirled to face him, face hot and body even hotter.

He crossed the room to another table. Reaching under it, he withdrew a sheathed sword. Her breath caught as he turned to face her. She knew that sword. It was hers!

Deftly, he drew the blade, brandishing it in the light. Sized for her, it looked ridiculously small in his broad hand. He cut the air twice, then nodded as he resheathed the blade. “A serviceable weapon. You selected it?”

She knew he was a trained warrior just from the ease with which he held the blade. She nodded.

“Well done. I would imagine that it would have been costly up above.”

She frowned. “How would you know that?”

He grinned. “We’re birthed by humans, recall. Most become loving mothers and teachers. We learn quite a bit about your world, despite our absence from it. How do you think we all learn commonspeak?”

“How convenient.”

“No. But we manage.”

To her shock, he suddenly tossed the sheathed sword to her. She caught it with barely a thought, her hand instantly on the grip. He nodded his approval.

He was unarmed, dressed only in boots, trousers and a sash.

His grin widened. “Draw it.”

Her sense of honor warred with her need to attack. “You’re unarmed.”

His eyes hooded, increasing their resemblance to banked coals. “Am I?”

She paused. Most skilled fighters carried concealed weapons. It shouldn’t surprise her that this one would.

“Draw it,” he prompted again.

Still she hesitated. “Why?”

One silky eyebrow arched. “To use, of course.”

“I’m obviously not of your caliber.”

That seemed to anger him. “That stops you? Even the best of us makes mistakes. You could get lucky.”

“I’m nearly naked.” She spread her hand down her thigh, over the silky wrap.

“I noticed.”

“I can’t very well fight when I’m naked.”

He frowned. “And why not? What does it matter how you are dressed? Your enemies will rarely wait for an opportune moment to attack.”

She bristled, hearing the voices of her father and brothers in his tone. They’d scoffed at her for wanting to learn to use a sword, but when they’d finally given in, their tutelage had been long and frustrating.

“It wouldn’t do me any good to try and fight,” she stated. “You’re a head taller than me and twice as broad.” She didn’t know why she was reluctant to fight this one. With the others, given any type of weapon, even blunted, she’d erupted like an angry cougar. But now, with her own sharpened weapon, she was uneasy.

All smoldering lust drained from his eyes as he straightened to his full, considerable height and mirrored her stance. “Pitiful,” he scoffed. “I had thought you had more fire than this.”

“Don’t you dare patronize me!” she spat, clutching the wrapped leather of her sword’s hilt. “It’s not my ability that I see lacking -- it’s my advantage.”

“And do you only fight when you’re at an advantage? How is it you’re still alive?”

“There’s no possible way I could win.”

“Ah.” He glared, and she would bet he was truly angry. “Then you deserve to be fucked like the victim you are.”

Screaming, she drew. Her upper cut sliced through thin air as he moved, quicker than a cat, to the side. She managed to redirect the sword, but one big hand caught her wrist in a solid lock, jarring her arm to a halt. Grunting, she tried to kick at him, only to tangle her leg with his. In a simple move, he brought his foot back and tumbled her to the rug, her sword in his hand.

She braced herself, knowing he could kill her easily, but also knowing that killing her was not what he intended. She stared up the incredible length of his body to his smiling face. Expertly, he turned her sword and extended it hilt-first to her. Growling, she snatched it, irritated when he released it with nary a cut.

“Again?” he asked mildly, stepping back without offering to help her to her feet.

She cut at his feet, certain she could have injured a man who was less quick than this one. But he only laughed, jumping over the blade.

She climbed into a crouch, thinking. She knew this was an act, a device to wear her out. She’d learned that any exertion caused the *raedjour* to ooze more of that lubricating oil from their skin.

“Is it the oil on your skin?” she asked almost conversationally as they circled each other.

He quirked a smile. “Oil?”

“The oil you sweat. That’s what causes the attraction, isn’t it?”

His smile warmed. “That’s part of it.”



“What’s the other part? A spell?”

She lunged. He dodged, batting away the sword with his bare hand. “Can it not be natural sexual attraction?”

“Nothing about your race is natural.”

Cut. Duck. Slice. Parry. *Whoosh!* He caught her arm as she extended it a wee bit too much, and used her own momentum to yank her past him. His fingers caught in her wrap and loosened the knot at her shoulder. When she turned back to face him, the cloth draped low enough to expose one breast. His interest flared, and she used the split second to attack. He recovered almost immediately, but the hesitation was enough that she did manage to slice across his belly.

She froze, staring in frustrated amazement. The blade was sharp, the cut was solid, but she left no more than a surface scratch on that gleaming obsidian hide. She knew that her own nails couldn’t draw blood, but she’d been sure a sword could cut them open.

He grinned at her consternation, drawing a long finger along the line that would have opened a human man’s bowels. “Thrust, don’t slice,” he advised calmly.

Still reeling, she lost her ready stance and simply stared up at him in amazement. “Are you *all* like that?”

He nodded. “You will be also after the change.”

Her nostrils flared over her snort. “I won’t change.”

“You’ll change.”

Her anger rose again and she attacked. They played their game for quite some time, crossing the room, rolling over the bed platform, knocking over the food table. The damage to his possessions did not seem to bother him at all. He took delight in their sparring, even providing helpful suggestions. Which only enraged her further.

And it was a game. If she hadn’t guessed it before, she knew it now. Although he was now careful of the thrusts, he continued to evade and best her at every turn. Very soon, he

divested her of her wrap so that she fought naked, save for the soft, low boots that covered her feet.

She was tiring, her lungs laboring, her blood pumping. More and more, he caught her in almost embraces, causing her back to slide against the hard planes of his chest, or her breasts to crush against him. Finally, in one such embrace, he twisted the blade from her hand and tossed it aside.

“Enough,” he declared, releasing her with a push that sent her sprawling backwards onto the bed platform.

She remained prone, breathing hard as she locked gazes with him. She’d felt the erection tenting his trousers. Felt it and wanted it desperately, although she wouldn’t voice that aloud.

But he remained standing between her spread thighs, hands on his lean hips as he caressed her naked flesh with his eyes.

“Do you want me to fuck you?” he asked.

She blinked, surprised by the question. Her other lovers had all waited until she was hot and ready, but none of them had *asked*.

“No,” she heard herself lie.

He smiled, nodded, and stepped back. “So be it.”

Her jaw dropped when he turned toward the door. He paused only to scoop up her blade and scabbard, sheathing the sword as he left.

He spared a final glance as he stood in the open door. She remained in the position he’d left her, too shocked to move. “I’ll send Jarak to clean the mess later. Sleep well, my sweet.”

And he was gone.



## Chapter Eight

Diana woke from an exhausted sleep when a young man entered the room with a tray. He must have already been in while she was sleeping, as the mess from the previous night was gone. The tray he carried supported a light repast that the *raedjour* seemed to favor earlier in their “day.”

She watched silently from within the pile of pillows and furs. He was the same youth who had answered the door when the guards had escorted her to Salin’s rooms, so he must be Salin’s personal servant. His hair was long and straight, bound with a simple leather thong at the base of a graceful neck. His leather vest was tied loosely over his bare chest, and his leather trousers lovingly hugged muscles that might one day be as pronounced as his master’s.

“Are you all built like stallions?” She sighed.

He jumped and spun to face her. Thankfully, he had already set the tray and its contents on the table. “Lady,” he said, nodding his head in respect. “I hadn’t realized you were awake.”

She sat up, conscious of her nudity but allowing the supple fur blanket to fall about her waist. True to form, his gaze sank to her breasts, but she gave him full credit for rapidly dragging it back up to her face.

“Are you a servant?” she asked boldly.

He nodded. “I’m Commander Salin’s squire, yes.”

She narrowed her gaze. “May I ask how old you are?”

A ghost of a smile made him look even younger. If his skin weren’t pitch black, she would swear he was blushing. “One hundred eighty-seven cycles, lady.”

She blinked. “Excuse me?”

He smiled. “Humans don’t age as we do. We age about ten times slower than you.”

“How do you know so much about ... Oh, right. Human mothers.”

He smiled, turning back to the tray to lay out the meal as her mind spun.

“My,” she sighed, allowing her eyes to stray over his well-shaped backside. “I’d heard there were other races like that; I’d just never ...” She frowned. “How old is ... Commander Salin?”

“I’m not sure exactly, but I know he’s over five hundred.”

Diana sat in stunned silence. Taking that silence to mean she was done talking, the young man finished arranging the tray and bid her a good night as he exited the room.

She’d heard of other beings, yes. Elves and merfolk were said to live longer than humans. But she’d never personally met any. Until now, it seemed. The length of life astounded her. Her grandmother was the oldest living human Diana had ever known, and at eighty years she was a mere babe compared to the young man Diana had just spoken with.

Overwhelmed, Diana sank back into the furs. What did this all mean? Why would such a long-lived race need humans to procreate? How could a magical race not have other means to reproduce? These were not new questions to her, but she’d yet to find suitable answers.

Frowning, she rose and went to the tray. As she ate, her mind turned to less philosophical topics. Why hadn't Salin fucked her? She knew he thought it his right. They all did. Why had he hesitated? There had been one man who'd preferred, it seemed, to see his seed spurt onto her belly rather than inside her cunt, but even he would sometimes slide it inside her. Why hadn't the commander?

Commander. Yes, that definitely sounded important. She wondered what the term meant to them. Did he command an army? If so, how large? Just how many *raedjour* were there?

She was unable to answer the question before she finished eating. She wandered the spacious room a bit. Finally bored, she curled up in the mound of pillows and furs on the bed platform and slept away the rest of the day.

\* \* \* \* \*

When she woke, he was there. He sprawled in the covered chair again, watching her as he idly masturbated. He was naked! Her gaze riveted to the gorgeous length he caressed. Sleek and long, it was alive in his hand. The one eye stared and wept at the sight of her.

She raised her gaze to meet his. Sheer lust pulsed in the red beneath his seemingly sleepy lids. Slowly, he smiled. "Good evening, sweet. Are you sore from our exercise last night?"

She was, but she wouldn't admit it. She said nothing.

He cocked his head questioningly to the side, then shrugged. Like a big, lazy cat, he pushed from his seat. On his way toward her, he scooped up a pair of wrist and ankle restraints lying on the table beside him.

At the sight of that, she scrambled from the pillows, a cry of protest on her lips. Lightning quick, he was on her. She bit and clawed to no avail as he hauled her to the padded bench at the side of the room. Straddling her belly, he made short work of buckling the restraints around each wrist then attaching them to the chains secured to loops on the

sides of the bench. She cursed him, struggling to ignore the teasing caress of his hairless balls, hot and soft against her belly. She tried also to ignore the bobbing erection that occasionally tapped her breasts as he leaned over her. Once her wrists were secure, he quickly reversed his position, favoring her with an excellent view of his tight, black buttocks as he fought to restrain her legs. She screamed her fury, focusing it on him rather on herself. Herself because she wanted nothing more than to lick her way down the hard contours of his back until she could take a satisfying bite out of that delectable ass.

At last she was bound, and he dismounted to admire his handiwork. Sturdy leather straps encircled her wrists and ankles, each one latched to a chain. The chains were taut enough to keep her spread atop the bench.

The gleam of joy in his smoldering red eyes was unmistakable. "Comfortable?"

"Damn you!" she spat. "I don't want you in my body!"

He paused at that, rubbing at a slight scratch she'd managed to make on his chest, just below his tattoo. "No?"

"No."

He sat beside her, sliding one hand down her belly and along the inside of her thigh. He deliberately skirted her pussy, which wept for him, despite her words.

"Are you sure of that, sweet?"

"Yes. Something makes me lust for you. I know I can't deny it. But I don't *want* you," she used emphasis to make the distinction.

He bent double, lowering his face to hers. It took amazing effort to turn her face aside and deny his kiss. Undeterred, he laid his lips in a butterfly's touch on her temple, his breath softly gusting her hair. "Doesn't the lust mean that you *do* want me, sweet?"

She pulled in a breath, furious that it shook. "No."

He understood well enough. He heaved a sigh as he dropped to her side, his face above her belly. "Pity," he mused, leaning forward to simply breathe on her sensitive skin. "Because I would love nothing more than to fuck you."

"Go ahead. I obviously can't stop you."

He ignored her, intrigued by the way her skin twitched beneath his warm breath. She bit back a groan when he touched his tongue to her skin, sampling her. "Tasty," he murmured, taking another lick. For what seemed like forever, all he did was lick her belly, nibbling her curves and gently sucking at her trembling skin. He went no higher than the tender skin underneath her breasts and no lower than the line of her groin just below her belly.

At length, he moved, positioning himself between her legs, then he repeated the wonderful torture to every inch of her legs, paying particular attention to the crease between leg and groin without touching any sensitive, wet tissues. He even suckled each of her toes, forcing her to fight a groan as she envisioned that hot mouth suckling other, more sensitive portions of her anatomy.

She was a trembling mess by the time he climbed her body to lavish attention on her arms. She stared at the wall behind her head, willing herself not to feel it. Willing her body not to respond. It was impossible. Her skin was hypersensitive, and his strange attentions made her aware of erogenous zones she hadn't realized she had.

Braced on all fours above her, with the fierceness of his erection keeping his cock out of contact with her, he lapped and licked at her chest above her breasts, then worked his way up her neck. He dallied at the curve of her jaw and spent great amounts of time behind both of her ears. He returned to her neck, choosing a sensitive spot to suck. Hard. To her abject humiliation, she actually came, a softly punctuated climax that left her wanting more.

"Mmm," he purred, lifting his head so he could look down at her face.

Flushed, she turned glazed eyes up at him, lips parted.

“Do you want me to fuck you, sweet?” he asked as he had the previous night, nipping at her stubborn chin.

“No,” the answer came on a sigh that spoke the exact opposite. She was even a bit surprised to hear it herself.

With a groan, he straightened and climbed off her. She tamped down the disappointment in her belly when he released her bonds and, like the previous night, made for the door.

He turned when he reached it to throw her a saucy smile, then he was gone.

No sooner had the lock clicked than two of Diana’s fingers were tunneling into her pussy as far as they could go. No stranger to giving herself pleasure, she desperately rubbed the heel of her palm against her clit. Within seconds, she came hard against her hand, a long, rolling orgasm that had her entire body shaking.

It only helped a little. Still quaking, she lay back on the bench and closed her eyes. As if he were with her again, she could feel every tortuous lick.

\* \* \* \* \*

Salin leaned his back against the chamber door, eyes closed as he savored the sound of the last soft moans of her orgasm. In his mind, he replaced himself with the hand he knew she used to pleasure herself, imagined the full length of his rock-hard cock imbedded in the sweet, wet depths of her body as she shook out the end of her climax. He smiled at the sweet torture, promising himself that before the nine days were through, he would feel that.

Sighing softly, he opened his eyes to see Jarak watching him. The younger man stood just inside the outer door of Salin’s five-chamber suite. Jarak’s blue-black gaze met his master’s, then dropped to Salin’s crotch suggestively before returning to Salin’s face. Salin grinned, which the younger man took as a command.

“Not here.” Salin stopped Jarak before he reached him. Groaning, Salin pushed from the door and crossed the main chamber to the other bedroom. Although he didn’t think her ears were sharp enough to hear them from within her room, Salin didn’t want to chance it. Until she was his, there were certain aspects of *raedjour* society he wasn’t ready to divulge. Humans had strange notions where certain sexual practices were involved.

Salin folded into his favorite chair, facing Jarak, who knelt before him. The younger man hesitated at his master’s knee.

“May I ask a question?”

“Always,” Salin responded immediately. Jarak’s final education was a responsibility he took seriously.

“Why don’t you take her?”

Salin smiled. Leaning back in his chair, he massaged his own cock. “I could. I *want* to. But I have to wait.”

Jarak watched Salin’s hand, licking his lips, but obviously he was still confused. “Why?”

“If I just take her, I give her the excuse to dismiss me. Like the others.”

Jarak’s gaze brightened. “So, by not fucking her, you’re different?”

Salin nodded, releasing his cock and scooting his hips forward a bit in a silent request. Obediently, Jarak nodded. But before he bent his head, he once again met his master’s gaze. “I hope you win her,” he said, an odd determination in his gaze. “She suits you.”

Salin would have responded, but Jarak’s head bent and his warm, dark mouth closed over the head of Salin’s cock. Groaning, he dug his fingers into Jarak’s sleek white hair, urging him on. Despite Salin’s iron control over his body, his cock protested the taunting of the past two days. It wanted Diana. Wanted to spear her cunt and get strangled by what it knew would be sweet, tight walls. Jarak’s skilled mouth was nice, and usually more than enough for release, but even as Salin’s cock tightened then spewed forth down Jarak’s throat, Salin recognized neither he nor his cock were satisfied.

Now he was positive of the fact he had kept so far to himself. His latent powers sometimes gave him intuition, intuition his brother Radin warned him not to ignore. And that nagging intuition told him in no uncertain terms that the woman in the other room was his true mate.



## Chapter Nine

The third day, he brought her sword back. They fought again, and she lost. This time she ended up trussed to the standing X, her arms hanging from secured chains over her shoulders and her legs spread to the two legs of the X.

“We’ll get you a leather corset,” he said in a rumbling voice that caressed her from inside. “Yes. Once I tame you, I’ll dress you all in leather. But then it will be white, to contrast with your lovely black skin.”

“You won’t tame me,” she assured him, glaring daggers.

He only smiled, his fingers trailing through the tight curls that protected her sex. “Sweet, you’re already tamed. You just don’t know it.”

“Arrogant bastard,” she spat. “Is that a racial trait?”

He grinned, tweaking one of her nipples. “Arrogance? No. No more so than humans.” He pinched one nipple hard enough to wrench a gasp from her. “I simply have an overabundance.”

“I noticed.”



He chuckled, sliding his fingers underneath her breasts to caress the warm, tender skin.

She asked, suddenly allowing herself questions she'd denied before, "Where did you come from?"

"Me personally, or my race?"

"Your race."

"I thought you'd heard this story?"

"Tell me again."

"Have you heard of the goddess Rhae?"

"No."

He shrugged, still distracted by her breasts. "I didn't expect you had. She seems to only be known to us. At least by that name. It's said it was She who created us, a race of consorts."

"Consorts?" No one had used that particular term before.

He grinned, leaning forward to graze her cheek with his lips. "That's what *raedjour* means: 'Rhae's consorts.' We were created as fuck toys."

She shivered. She'd known that from Iana, but the way he said it made it all the more real. "Is that just legend?" In her travels, she and Gala had seen evidence of the gods through a number of wonders, but she'd yet to encounter a race with such direct ties to their patron deity.

"Actually, no. It's fact. At least that is what our kings have told us, and they're in direct contact to Rhae. High priests, if you will."

"They could be lying."

A flash of anger was quickly squelched. "I don't believe they are."

"So what happened?"

His hands were busy, inciting the fire in her skin with light caresses, but he continued to appease her curiosity. "When the gods left the world, Rhae was forced to abandon us. It

was then She realized She'd missed an important fact about us -- there were no women." He leaned forward again to kiss her temple, undeterred by the fact that she tried to avoid him.

"So now you kidnap and rape innocent human women?" she demanded.

He lapped at her earlobe, causing her to shiver. "You continue to use that label."

"What?"

"'Rape.' Such an ugly word."

"What label would you use?"

His mouth slid sensuously down her neck to nip softly at the top of her shoulder and the mark he'd left the previous night. "You've enjoyed what's been done to you. No pain has been given you that did not go hand-in-hand with pleasure."

"I've been tied and chained and taken against my will," she protested, rattling her bonds to make her point.

His mouth continued downward, now at the top of one breast. "And you look beautiful bound. Your eyes blazing, your body straining for release." He nipped the top of her breast. "You've enjoyed the restraint."

She had. The fact that he voiced it only upset her. She squirmed. "Fuck you!"

"In due time," he promised, finally reaching her beaded nipple. From his great height, he was bent nearly double to reach it, but he didn't seem to mind at all as his hot, black tongue swiped it.

"Besides," he continued conversationally, his breath teasing the taut, wet nub, "we like to think we give something in return."

She gasped when he abruptly captured the hard bud and sucked hard. It took her a moment to recall her line of thought as he alternately laved and bit at the tip of her breast.

"It's not right," she finally managed to say.

"Hmmm?" he inquired, switching to her other breast.

“I don’t have a choice.”

“Mmm,” he agreed. He spent a few glorious moments suckling before he straightened to meet her glazed gaze. He braced those long, powerful arms on the cross just above her, his huge body nearly draping her front like a cloak of darkness. “Not quite fair, I agree. But we were born with the natural instinct to procreate. As we have only the one way, we make do.”

“I didn’t ask for this,” she insisted.

One large hand descended to lightly caress her cheek. Her chin. “I’ve given you the choice, sweet. Have I not asked before I’ve taken you? Have I not restrained myself when you’ve denied me?”

He had. He, alone. The others had only waited for physical signs of acceptance or submitted to her frustrated demands. This one asked permission. This one, who probably had more clout than any of the rest combined.

She avoided the question. “Will you keep me in bondage the rest of my life?” she demanded as he bent toward her breast again.

He glanced up with a devilish glint in his gaze. “Only if that’s what you desire, my sweet.”

“Damn!” she growled, twisting and struggling against her bonds in what she knew was a feeble attempt to keep her breast from his diabolical attentions. He chuckled and allowed her to fight, watching the bounce of her breasts, then infuriating her further by playfully juggling them.

“You’re truly beautiful, Diana,” he mused. “Especially so in your fury.”

“Monsters, all of you,” she cried, yanking at her bonds. “Perverse monsters.”

He stepped away as she struggled, casually going to the table to pour himself a drink. She grudgingly noticed the huge erection which bobbed along before him. His control was astounding to deny *that*.

“Actually, you’re right,” he agreed amicably. “We are monsters. Created by a lusty goddess who wanted an unending string of tireless lovers and fearless guards.” It sounded as though he was quoting a well-known story. But then, among the *raedjour*, it likely *was* a well-known story. “Born to the night, with skin like armor and instincts of the finest predators. Our one main weakness seems to be sunlight.” He grinned as she perked at the tidbit of information. “Consider that a gift, my sweet. I’ve given you our one vulnerability.”

“So now you can’t let me go?”

A strange smile took his lips, determined yet somehow unsure. “I don’t plan to ever let you go, sweet.”

She watched through narrowed eyes as he returned to her, wine cup in hand. “You’ll have to in six more days, won’t you?” she accused. “That’s the rule. Nine days, and if I’m not pregnant, you pass me on.”

He wouldn’t meet her gaze, his eyes trained on the wine cup as he tilted it just enough to dribble red liquid over her breasts.

“That’s the rule, isn’t it?” she insisted.

“That’s the rule,” he admitted, using two fingers of his free hand to smear wine across her sensitive skin.

“At the rate you’re going, I won’t be pregnant, and you’ll have to let me go,” she pointed out, almost cheerily. “You *do* know how babies are made, don’t you?”

A full laugh erupted from his belly. Without answering her, he knelt before her, setting the cup on the floor beside him. That hot, clever tongue commenced lapping up the wine which had spilled down her belly. Not until he had suckled every drop of wine from her skin, used his lips, tongue, and teeth to explore and torture every inch of her breasts, did he straighten and force her to look at him by burying two huge hands in her hair.

“I know how babies are made,” he assured her, wine-scented breath caressing her lips.

For precious moments, she didn't recall what he was talking about. He waited until her eyes focused on his, smiling at her disorientation.

"I know that I'm going to dive into that hot, wet pussy of yours and plant my seed at the very mouth of your womb. And I'm going to do it again and again until you forget that my cock isn't a permanent part of your sweet body."

She shivered, unconsciously licking her lips. "What's stopping you?" she heard herself ask.

He smiled, gently kissing her lips. "Do you want me to fuck you, sweet?" He paused over her parted lips. The denial didn't come, but neither did the request.

On a hard breath, he swept his tongue past her lips, delving the depths of her mouth to mate tongue-to-tongue. Bound by both his hands and the chains, she was helpless to deny him. Helpless, until she recalled herself. Defiantly -- ignoring the inner voice begging her to let the kiss continue -- she bit down hard on his tongue.

His cry was muffled by her mouth. His hands pulled painfully at her hair. She tasted blood.

Horrified by her own actions, she released him.

He pulled back, face averted as he worked jaw and tongue to make sure both were still intact. She swallowed and fought the gorge that threatened to rise as some of his blood slithered down her throat. His fingers remained fastened in her hair, although the painful pull was gone.

Then he turned to face her once again. A dribble of blood escaped the corner of his mouth to run down his sharp chin, so very red against his glossy blackness. She met his gaze. She expected rage. She wouldn't be surprised if he killed her now.

She didn't expect the smile.

"Did you enjoy the taste of my blood, sweet?"

"You ... you *enjoyed* that?"

Carefully he licked his lips, wincing only slightly. "I wouldn't have thought it. But I can if you enjoyed it."

Her eyes went wide. "You can't be real!"

He smiled. "I told you, sweet, my race was created for sex. *All* kinds of sex. If my partner enjoys it and I'm so inclined, I can enjoy a great many things. Even pain." He leaned in closer, grazing her cheek with his lips. "And I'm inclined to enjoy anything that brings you pleasure."

She shuddered. "Get away from me."

Salin sensed that her taste of blood had effectively quelled her pleasure. Unfortunately, it hadn't done the same for him. Much of a *raedjour* male's sexual stimulation stemmed from his partner's pleasure. But although Diana's ardor had cooled, Salin's need for her kept his high.

Knowing he'd get no further reactions from her that day, he nuzzled her ear one last time before kneeling to release her ankles. She avoided his gaze when he stood to release her wrists, and he stepped back to allow her to escape him. Regretfully, he watched her curl up on the bed of furs, her back to him.

"Don't let it frighten you, sweet," he soothed as he replaced the cup he'd abandoned on the floor.

She didn't respond, curled within herself. He felt her confusion over the pulsing arousal.

"I'll send Jarak for a tub and water," he said, swiping at the blood that drizzled from his mouth. She'd cut skin, but she hadn't hurt him as badly as she likely thought. Inside and out, his race was incredibly hard to hurt. And although she had wounded him, the minor cut would be largely healed by the next day. "Would a soak in hot water please you?"

She didn't even turn. "You leaving would please me."



The words cut deeper than her teeth, but he didn't show it. Salin was nothing if not a master of concealing his emotions. "I'll send Jarak anyway. Good day, sweet."

With that, he left her. This day, it was easier to cool his ardor, so he declined Jarak's ready offer to appease him. Instead, he did as promised and sent the boy for a tub and water. On instinct, he sent for one thing more which he thought would make his true mate happy.

## Chapter Ten

Diana watched Jarak and two other young men wrestle a large brass tub into the room. They each took turns leaving the room to retrieve buckets of water from the fresh, streaming supply in the privy. Stubbornly, she didn't move from the bed platform. Her eyes strayed to the doorway initially, but one of the larger, bulkier guards stood sentinel against her escape.

When the tub was full, the youths departed. Jarak left a tray of fruits, cheese, and fragrant nut bread. Diana sulked, knowing the water was cold. Didn't they recall she didn't have their seeming immunity to temperature?

Then another man entered. At first she thought he was another youth, but then she changed her mind. He was certainly young, but there was something of experience about him that the others didn't have. He did have a soft, youthful appearance with rounded features and full, pouty lips. His long, snowy white hair was bound by two braids from his temples that combined to one long braid in the back. It was when she saw his eyes that she reassessed his age. They glowed powerful red, clear with arcane knowledge. The knowledge in his eyes was at odds with the boyish smile he gave her.

"Lady," he said, voice barely above a whisper as he nodded a greeting to her.

He then hovered his hand over the tub. Within moments, Diana saw steam rising.

“She likes it scalding, Hyle,” said a familiar voice from the doorway.

Diana’s head whipped around to see Gala standing by the door guard. At least, she was relatively sure it was Gala. It sounded like Gala and was *shaped* like Gala, but ... “Gala?” she asked, just to be sure.

Laughing, Gala looked down at her body. “Hmm, I suppose I *do* look a little different.” Her tanned skin had paled and had a distinct dark gray tone. Her sandy blonde hair was considerably paler as it fell loose about her shoulders and bare breasts. In fact, all she wore was a skimpy, shimmery wrap about her hips and sandals on her feet. The eyes that looked up and met Diana’s, however, were clearly those of her lifelong friend. “It’s me, Diana.”

Ignoring the presence of the men, Diana scrambled from the bed platform into her friend’s welcome embrace. She didn’t care that she was naked and Gala was mostly naked. She didn’t care that Gala had clearly become a part of this world Diana was struggling to fight against. At present, she needed the reassurance that something, someone, from her former life was there. “I’m *so* glad to see you,” Diana murmured.

Gala laughed, hugging her fiercely. “And I’m glad to see you, too. I’d wanted to, but ...” She shook her head. “Never mind. What’s important is that the commander’s given us some time together.”

“Salin?”

Gala nodded. “Of course. It’s his time with you and his choice to give it up. I’m so grateful to him!”

Some of Diana’s excitement quelled, melting into a scowl. Gala, familiar with the look on her friend’s face, chose to ignore it by turning to the young sorcerer.

“Hyle, I want you to meet my best friend.” She stepped toward him, the handclasp they shared a comfortable one. “Diana, this is Hyle. My truemate.”

The significance of the term froze Diana’s blood. “Then you’re ...”

Gala nodded, her free hand dropping to caress her flat belly. “I’m pregnant.”

Diana couldn't speak. She couldn't congratulate her friend, despite her obvious radiant happiness. In two sentences, Gala had further wounded any hopes Diana had harbored of escape. If she left now, she would go alone. Without her lifelong companion.

Again, knowing Diana's moods, Gala turned to Hyle. "Don't take her lack of greeting personally, my love." She kissed him tenderly on the cheek. "Thank you for the water."

Nodding his understanding, he caressed her cheek with two loving fingers, kissed her lips briefly, then, with a last nod to Diana, left. The burly guard left with him, and the lock clicked.

"That wasn't very nice," Gala chided softly, moving further into the room. "Oh! Salin's rooms are much bigger than ours!"

"*Nice?*" Diana demanded, stomping to Gala's side. "Nice? How can I be nice to one of those monsters?"

"They're not monsters," Gala said calmly, picking up one of the linen cloths and unfolding it.

"Not monsters? They abducted us. Raped us ..."

"I was not raped," Gala chided. "And neither were you."

"I was taken by force."

"Because that's what excited you."

Diana shook her head. "You're not talking rationally."

"And when have you ever talked rationally?"

Diana gaped at her friend, who continued to calmly lay out bathing supplies.

"The fact of the matter is that they took us. Yes. But I've come to the realization that *someone* was going to take us eventually, Diana. If not the *raedjour*, then a team of bandits. Or maybe a guard troop too far away from home. Or maybe we'd wander onto enemy lands and be taken and sold into slavery. The life we were leading as mercenaries wasn't going to

allow us a long, happy life.” She faced Diana. “You should get into the water while it’s still hot.”

“Fuck the water.”

“Gods, Diana! Do you have to fight *everything*?”

Diana gaped again. Only very rarely did Gala lose her temper, and even more rarely did she direct it at Diana.

“We’re here,” Gala continued, reining in her anger. “We’re not going anywhere. There is a lovely bath full of hot water sitting right next to you. I know you haven’t had the pleasure in a long time. Could you *for once* just fucking enjoy the little pleasures in life?!”

That sparked Diana’s anger. “Who the hell do you think you are?”

“I think I’m the person who’s watched you fight against any good thing that’s ever been given to you. I’m the person who’s watched you dismiss every good thing that you’ve worked hard for. I’m the person who’s sick to death of following you on your hopeless quest for happiness.” Gala stood back, crossing her arms over her chest. “Well, guess what, Diana. *I’m* happy. Happy here. Happy with Hyle and the *raedjour*. This is a *beautiful* place, if you’d just open your eyes to see it. And Salin ...”

“I won’t discuss him.”

“Why not? Because he just could be your match?”

“He’s not.”

Gala looked as though she wanted to say more, but didn’t. She stepped back. “You should take advantage of the bath while it’s still hot.”

Mentally battered and emotionally tired, Diana’s anger dissipated. Glum, she stepped into the wonderfully hot water and carefully submerged her body. Gala was right. It had been a long time since she’d enjoyed a full, leisurely bath. Without another word, Gala pulled up one of the ornate wooden chairs and started combing through Diana’s hair.

“You’re happy?” Diana finally asked.

Gala dipped a cup in the water and poured it carefully over Diana's fine brown hair.  
"Yes."

"What's he like?"

"He's wonderful. He's not like most of the rest of them. He's quiet and thoughtful, but he's so smart. And his magic! I didn't know one being could do such things with his mind! Once he ..."

Gala continued, happily chatting about little occurrences between her and Hyle in their short time together. Even Diana had to admit -- to herself -- that her friend had never sounded happier. Tidbits about Hyle drifted into snippets about things she'd seen in the *raedjour* city. Gala declared that Diana would soon need to visit the common bathing chamber, as it was a huge cavern of natural mineral spring tubs that the *raedjour* had painstakingly carved over the centuries. She went on to describe some of the art she'd seen, and then a dancing troupe during one night's festivities. Gala went on and on, long after Diana had finished washing and had simply sat back in the tub to enjoy the lingering warmth.

Animated, Gala wandered Salin's rooms. She explained how well the *raedjour* cared for the women they captured. "We're special to them, for obvious reasons," she declared, examining the standing X to which Diana had been chained the previous day. "Every one I've met has been very careful to show me respect as Hyle's mate."

"As Hyle's mate," Diana repeated. "Not before?"

"I wasn't allowed to roam much before Hyle. As you already know, they watch you very carefully before you truemate. But they treated me very well even before that."

Diana sniffed. Gala sighed and continued to roam.

"Diana, you haven't been ... *hurt*, have you?" she asked, eyeing the chains dangling from the padded bench.

"Does it matter?"

“Of course it does.”

“It wouldn’t change anything.”

“It would. They’re not allowed to hurt you, Diana. Well, unless that brings you pleasure.”

Diana shuddered, vividly recalling the taste of blood and the burn of lust in Salin’s eyes.

Gala continued, now hovering at the foot of the bath. “Their pleasure is tied to ours, Diana,” she explained. “Anything they can do to please us heightens their pleasure. Anything they do to hurt us, hurts them. For the time that they’re with a lover, it’s more than just a physical bond.”

Diana frowned at the cloudy water gently lapping at her thighs. “Is that true?”

“Yes. They monitor you and compare so that every successive lover knows what pleased you before.” She gestured at the bondage equipment. “Diana, they couldn’t *do* any of that to you unless you enjoyed it.”

Diana scowled. “It’s the spell.”

Gala shook her head. “Not all of it. There’s a charm, yes. It’s the one Nalfien used at the start. But that’s only meant to distract us so that he can search our minds. See if we’re capable of living with them.”

That got Diana’s attention. “Capable? What happens if he decided we’re not capable?”

“Not many women aren’t.”

“But what if we *weren’t*?”

Gala frowned. “I don’t know.”

“Of course you do.”

“No, I don’t. I never asked.”

Diana studied her friend’s face. She knew Gala too well not to see the truth of that.

“But what I was saying *before*,” Gala went on, “is that the charm wears off. After that, it’s just their natural appeal. They were made by a goddess ...”

“Yes, yes. I know all that. Made by a goddess as fuck toys.”

Diana rose from the now-cool water. Gala handed her a soft linen cloth to dry herself. Nothing more of import was said as Diana rubbed her hair dry, then combed it out. Finally, however, she sat before a polished disk, looking at her reflection. Gala sat quietly behind her on the bed platform.

“I don’t want to stay here, Gala,” she said.

“Why not?”

She turned to face her friend. “You’ll never see the sun again.”

Gala shrugged. “I’ve discovered beautiful things in the dark.”

“You’ll live in caves the rest of your life.”

Gala let her gaze travel Salin’s sumptuous room. “I see nothing wrong with this cave. And I can assure you that the rest of the city, while maybe not as rich, is just as beautiful.”

“You’ll never see your family again.”

That gave Gala pause. “I will miss Trin” -- her sister -- “but then, I haven’t seen her in cycles. With Mum and Da gone, that only leaves Quince, and I’m not likely to miss him.”

Diana, too, didn’t have any family to miss. Her beloved father had died many years ago, and her brothers were nearly strangers to her now.

Still, she shook her head. “It’s not right.”

Gala sighed. Glancing at the timepiece in the corner, she stood up. During her ramblings, Gala had explained that the small statue of the goddess Rhae had a magical flame in the bowl she held before her and that flame told the time by color. Yellow was midday, blue was midnight. Currently, it was a soft green.



“I have to leave,” Gala said, walking toward Diana. “The commander gave us until daybreak.”

Diana frowned. “I don’t know why he bothered. He’s only toying with me.”

“Why do you say that?”

Diana stood. “I don’t see how he expects to get me pregnant since he hasn’t fucked me yet.”

Gala’s eyes went wide. “What?”

Diana shook her head. “Not once.”

“I wonder why?”

“I told you. He’s toying with me. They all are.” She shrugged, pulling her friend into another hug. “I’ll try and be glad that you found happiness, Gala. Really, I will. But I don’t think there’s any hope for me.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Fresh from a night of training with his men and a refreshing time in the bathing cavern, Salin returned to his suite to find Hyle in the main room. The young sorcerer was seated cross-legged on a bench by the cold fireplace, eyes open but seeing nothing. Salin knew the look. Radin wore it often enough. It meant the sorcerer was using his other senses to see, to feel. Practicing.

Even sensing Salin’s presence, it took Hyle a few moments to break from his trance. It wasn’t instantaneous like Radin. Hyle still had much to learn.

The young sorcerer stood, nodding his head in respect to the older man.

“Hyle,” Salin greeted, dumping soiled clothes on a nearby chair for Jarak to gather and launder later. “Are the ladies still within?”

“They are.”

“And what have they been talking about this night?”

Hyle frowned. "I don't know. I wasn't in the room with them."

Salin suppressed a smile. "You mean you didn't eavesdrop?"

"Well, no."

Salin shook his head, clucking his tongue. "Hyle, what are we to do with you? You've spent entirely too much time with Nalfien and Rhicard. They've made you much too *honorable!* You need to spend more time with Radin."

Hyle didn't always catch on quickly to jokes, but he did catch on. He smiled. "I'm sorry, Commander. I'll try and take after Radin a bit more."

"On second thought, don't. Or if you do, don't tell Nalfien it was my idea."

They shared a companionable laugh.

"On a serious note, Hyle, my thanks for the loan of your truemate."

Hyle shook his head. "You're welcome, Commander, but I should thank you, as well. Gala has wanted very much to see her friend."

"What is it like to be truemated, Hyle?" Salin asked casually.

The younger man's face instantly lit up, his joy obvious. "It's a true wonder, Commander."

Salin nodded, turning away lest the astute young man see the stab of jealousy. Salin wanted personal knowledge of that joy and knew instinctively that he could only have it with the stubborn woman in the next room.

The chamber door opened. Gala stepped into the outer room, Diana hovering behind her. Salin stood still, wondering if Diana would make a bid for escape. Her green-gold gaze clashed with his, but she remained leaning within the doorway, arms crossed protectively beneath her breasts. He wondered if she knew how well she fit, how right she looked in the doorway to his bedchamber.

"Commander," Gala greeted, nodding her head in due respect. "Thank you so much for allowing me time with Diana."

He took the hand she offered and stooped to raise her palm to his lips. She was such a little thing, the top of her head barely reaching his nipples. “It was my pleasure,” he purred, enjoying the tendril of pleasure his kiss caused her.

The white-hot stab of jealousy he felt from across the room shocked him. Diana wouldn’t know he could feel it, and couldn’t have hidden it if she tried. Forgetting Gala’s palm, he turned a triumphant gaze toward Diana.

*Bastard!* She thought, watching him treat Gala with tenderness. *Her* he’d manhandle, but *Gala* he’d treat with kindness?!

The look he shot her confirmed everything Gala had told her this night. He *could* feel her emotions. *Damn!*

Gala glanced over her shoulder at Diana, but neither Diana nor Salin acknowledged the presence of anyone else in the room. Recognizing that fact, Gala went to Hyle and led him quietly from the room.

Salin’s gaze narrowed as soon as they were alone. Rhae’s tits, she was gorgeous! Naked and glowing clean, her silky hair a shining blanket across her shoulders and back. Her smoldering scowl only added to the allure.

Slowly, he walked toward her. “Did you enjoy your visit?”

She swallowed, struggling to stand her ground. “Yes.” Then scowled. “Thank you.”

“Oh, that admission hurt. Didn’t it?”

“Yes. It did,” she muttered. She retreated from his advance. “Why did you do it?”

He shut the door behind them, never taking his eyes off her. “Did it please you?”

She growled, spinning on her heel to stalk to the farthest corner of the room, far away from the bondage contraptions he left to keep her company. “I don’t want to hear any more

about how my pleasure is your pleasure. Gala filled me in, so you don't have to go on about it."

He decided then and there that Gala deserved a gift. A boon. Anything he could do to thank her for talking to Diana. He could easily see that Diana had been thrown by her friend's acceptance of her new life. By the things Gala had said. As usual, his impulse had been right.

He glanced at the cold water of the bath. "Did the bath please you?"

"Stop it."

Smiling, he stalked her. "Do the furs on the bed please you? I chose only the finest for you."

He allowed her to slip past him, watched her firm ass as she crossed the room. "This," she said, pointing imperiously at the bondage bench, "doesn't please me." She pointed at the standing X. "This doesn't please me." She stood beside the small two-tier bench she was sure he had plans for. "I don't know what this is, but it certainly doesn't please me." She snatched the wrist and ankle straps from their resting place on the bench and jangled them at him. "These don't please me."

During her tirade, he'd come closer. She hauled back her arm to hurl the restraints across the room, but he caught her unawares from behind, curling one arm around her waist and catching her throwing wrist with the other.

"I beg to differ, sweet," he drawled, pleased that she didn't lash out. Even more pleased to feel the gentle sweep of twittering pleasure that seeped off her skin. "I think they please you very much."

"Is that what the others told you? The other men who've had me? Did they laugh? Did you compare notes?"

He wrestled the restraints from her hand while carrying her to the large bench. She squirmed, but that only served to rub her ass against his cock through his trousers, increasing the erection he already sported.

“No laughing, sweet,” he assured her. “Every man who had you is thankful for the privilege and would gladly have you again.”

“I’ll just *bet* they would. No!”

The last was as he forced her onto the bench, this time on her belly. The curses again flared as he manhandled her into the restraints and chained her down. Rhae, she was magnificent! Fighting even though she knew she didn’t have a chance, her strong body squirming deliciously against his. He could hardly wait until she turned and her strength grew with her body’s new constitution!

When she was securely bound, he took his time admiring the fine curves of her back and the delectable swell of her ass. He cupped one firm globe with his palm. Instinct again, he pulled back and slapped it.

She jumped, only the bonds keeping her from flying away. “Damn it, no!”

But her body told him the truth. She was shocked, but that didn’t detract from the warmth spreading through her.

“You have a beautiful ass, Diana,” he told her, climbing onto the bench until he was kneeling between her spread thighs. Reverently, he caressed her cheeks again, loving how she clenched them. He smacked her other cheek.

“Salin, no!”

“Ah, I love the sound of my name from your lips, sweet. Say it again.”

“No. Ah!” The last when he spanked her again.

“Say it again.”

“Damn you!” Smack! “Salin!”

He groaned, lowering his face until he could draw his tongue over one edible globe. “Yes,” he breathed, nibbling as she clenched again. “Again.”

She stayed silent, then shrieked wordlessly when he spanked her again. She bucked and cursed, but if he didn’t feel her growing arousal with his *raedjour* senses, he certainly had physical proof when he slid his fingers through the drenched folds of her sex. She gasped when his finger barely touched that sensitive nubbin at the apex of her sex.

No, not tonight. Not yet.

He returned his attention to her ass, forcing her cheeks apart to drag his tongue wetly down the warm center. She was outraged. Shocked. None of the others had taken her this way, he knew. Her anger had been too great, her resistance too strong. No other had seen the need to push the issue, content to sink into the wet depth of her cunt. But Salin was determined to make her want it. She was his, and he would take every orifice of her body and make her beg for it.

He bit her, testing how much she would take. He ignored the string of epithets that burst from her mouth and concentrated instead on the mounting pressure he sensed in her womb. On the intoxicating scent of the hot honey that oozed from her sex.

For Diana, it was a confusing struggle. Only one other had suggested the penetration of her ass, and the mere suggestion had sent her into a rage that had effectively quelled his lust. But this was different. Although Salin touched places she had previously had no desire to ever be touched by another, she felt her arousal as keenly as he.

She stopped cursing him. It didn’t do any good anyway. She turned that attention inward, determined not to enjoy his attentions. But it was futile. He kept her off guard. Just as she could deny his tongue felt good, he’d switch to squeezing her ass. When she could concentrate on that, he spanked her. As her outrage grew, he’d split her cheeks and drag his tongue across surprisingly sensitive skin. This *shouldn’t* feel good!

When she stopped screaming at him, he started talking. Telling her all the wicked things he'd do to her, promising her heights she'd never dreamed. Once his tongue had thoroughly wet her, his fingers started a sneaky, wiggling invasion. With all the sensation, she couldn't even be sure of what he was doing until she felt one long finger sink in.

"Salin!" she cried, but it sounded weak even to her ears.

"Don't tell me to stop, sweet," he rasped, almost begged. "Just feel, sweet. I swear to you, you'll like it."

Sweet Mother of us all, she actually believed him! Her body, heightened by two nights of arousal with no true release, trembled on a fine line between desire and denial.

Teeth bit into her ass as the finger slowly slid out, mostly. His free hand spanked her other cheek as the finger thrust slowly back in. Did he have more than two hands?! She could no longer be sure. His finger pumped slowly, gently. His tongue caressed. Palm slapped. Gods, was that another finger?

"Salin, not this way," she begged, but her voice was a husky breath. Her hips -- damn them! -- were pumping in rhythm to his thrusting fingers. It hurt, but, somehow, it also didn't.

"Oh, yes, Diana," he crooned, lips soft against the burning skin of her bottom. "You're so fucking tight."

"Salin," she cried, arching to lift her hips toward him when an errant thumb slid through her nether lips and lightly rubbed her clit. "Ah, Salin!" This was impossible! Her ardor had succumbed to other men, but never like this! What had he *done* to her?

It no longer mattered. She was lost. He'd found some switch -- hidden deep in her ass, of all places! -- that slowly drove her out of her mind. He pumped her, and she could well imagine his fingers were that gorgeous cock of his. Gods, yes! At the moment, she even wanted that massive piece deep inside her ass!

Salin pumped her harder, pushing mewls from her gasping lips. He paid careful attention to the wash of pleasure that washed through her and over him. It hurt her, yes, but she was past that now. Her body was wound tight from the pent-up desire of the past few days. She struggled now to slam back onto his fingers, and he struggled not to remove them and replace them with his cock. She wasn't ready for that. But she would be. When she was his.

When she broke, she screamed. Her body shook in an orgasm she clearly didn't expect. He bit her quaking ass and groaned, cursing himself his denial of her. His own body shook, and he had to use every bit of his centuries of training to bring it back under control.

Gently, he eased his fingers out, watching as her rosebud, red from loving abuse, contracted back on itself. He gave it one last fond kiss before pulling himself away. Diana lay limp before him, stunned silent. A part of him wanted to demand she acknowledge what had just happened, but a smarter part of him kept him silent. It wouldn't do to push her too hard.

Groaning softly, he adjusted the fit of his trousers. His cock was like to kill him before this was through. He crawled from between her thighs and quietly released her bonds.

She wouldn't look at him. Once free, she curled into a fetal kneel, arms over the back of her neck, forehead nearly on her knees.

"Humans," he cursed, feeling her confusion and guilt. "There's nothing wrong with what just happened, Diana," he told her firmly, afraid her shame would ruin what, to him, was a beautiful breakthrough.

He again considered forcing the issue, but decided against it. Though it broke his heart, he left her.



## Chapter Eleven

Salin tossed in the bed he occupied in his suite's second bedchamber, unable to sleep. That little bit he'd been inside her infected him, making his blood run hotter than normal. He'd declined Jarak's offer of release. Neither the younger man's ass nor mouth was Diana's, and he certainly didn't smell like her. Feel like her.

*Nine punishments of Rhae!* Cursing under his breath, he rolled from the bed. Jarak roused from his own bed platform across the room, but Salin waved him back to sleep.

She was sound asleep when he entered the room, a collection of smooth curves mostly hidden by soft furs. He stood in the doorway a moment, well aware that even if she were awake, she wouldn't see him. He could see perfectly well in pitch darkness, but she wouldn't gain that ability until she turned. Until all that soft, pink flesh darkened to gleaming black.

He took a deep breath and stalked toward her. Carefully, he lifted the pelts that covered her until she lay bare before him. Yes, all that pink flesh, those soft curves, the carved muscle. He slid a hand over the rounded curve of her hip, dipping it around her thigh to pull gently until he rolled her onto her back. She sighed but didn't waken, one hand curled delicately by her softly pouting lips.

Unable to resist, he lowered himself to his belly, stretched out between her welcoming thighs. In her sleep, she was so much that she didn't allow herself to be when awake. Soft. Welcoming. Endearing. In an oddly possessive moment for one of his race, he hoped he was the only one to ever see this side of her.

She was warm and fragrant, vestiges of what he'd scented earlier. Spreading his hands underneath her splayed thighs, he kissed the tender skin where her hip became her leg. Ran his tongue down the crease between groin and leg until he could just nip the undercurve of her bottom. Taking his time, he nibbled her flesh, tormenting himself by avoiding her sex, all the while breathing deeply of her edible aroma. He circled her sex, nipping lightly at the crisp curls on her mons. She sighed, unconsciously angling her hips to give him better access. He smiled, skirting the little nubbin of nerves that peeped from under its protective hood, to reach the fleshy lips below. His body actually trembled at his first, true taste of her. He rolled her flavor on his tongue like fine wine, slowly savoring every nuance. Carefully, slowly, he suckled the lips of her sex, drinking her in.

She sighed again, sliding one leg up until her calf rested on his back, her thigh on his shoulder. He welcomed the pillow for his cheek as he angled his head to slide his tongue into her channel. He played there, exploring her folds and crevices with his tongue until he felt the impatient buck of her hips.

Smiling, he took her subconscious hint. Up he licked, spreading her, until he found that hard nub and pressed firmly. She gasped, her hips rocking. Groaning softly, he sucked her clit into his mouth, nursing, teasing it with his tongue and teeth.

Orgasm woke Diana from a hazy dream of colors in darkness. She opened her eyes, and the complete lack of light did nothing to increase her sight. But she felt him. As the tremors in her body subsided, she felt his arms wrapped around her thighs, hands relaxed on her belly. His mouth -- oh, his mouth! That was locked deliciously on her cunt, sucking her back into another ...

Her back arched, her thighs struggling to close on the intense sensation. He growled, altering his hold so that those strong arms and hands kept her splayed as he continued to devour her.

“Salin,” she begged, reaching down to clutch his silky hair. Only she wasn’t sure what she begged, since she didn’t seem to be pulling him away so much as trapping him where he was.

He growled again, sinking his tongue as deep as it would go into her channel, nodding so that his nose pressed, rubbed her clit.

“Ah, wait,” she cried, writhing beneath him. She knew it was him. The others had done this. Other men -- all *raedjour*, none human -- had made her squirm, but she *knew* it was him. She knew the hot muscles beneath her calves belonged to the tall, arrogant commander.

“Salin!” she screamed as her entire body undulated with agonizing pleasure.

He refused to give her any time to breathe, pausing only long enough to take a breath of his own before angling his head another way. This time he sucked her clit into his mouth and unwound one arm from her thighs so that he could sink two -- three? -- fingers into her clutching channel. She cried out, pounding his back, nearly doubling herself in half to clutch at his shoulders. But again, she didn’t seem to be pushing so much as pulling. Pulling him to her, pulling him into her.

They fought like this forever, it seemed. She fought not to feel, not to soar, and he fought to make her quiver and scream. She was losing. Worse, she couldn’t really bring herself to care.

Finally, she lost all strength. He’d depleted her to a trembling mass of muscle and wet tissues. She fell back to the furs, arms akimbo and legs splayed. Breathing hard, eyes closed, she could only lie at his mercy.

His attentions grew tender once again, acceding to the fact that there was just no more orgasm in her. Smiling in the dark, he lapped up her juices, kissed the inside of each warm thigh, then pulled away. She expected a comment, a confirmation of triumph, but none was forthcoming. He crawled up her body and used his strong hands to roll her limp body to the side. He used a few moments to arrange her body into the warm curve of his, her buttocks nestled against his belly, his rock-hard cock trapped between her thighs.

She awaited his nightly question. The one he'd not asked earlier. Briefly, she considered if she'd deny him again, despite her present exhaustion. When it didn't come, she yawned and settled, not quite snuggling into his embrace. "This means nothing." It was all the protest she could muster.

She felt the small breath of a chuckle near her ear just before he kissed her temple. "Of course not."

## Chapter Twelve

When she woke, he was gone. Candles had been lit and Jarak must have come, because a tray of cheeses and warm bread awaited her.

Had she dreamed it? She reached down between her own thighs and winced at the soreness, but that meant little. For all she knew, she could have masturbated herself to the thought of him.

Sighing, she rolled to her back. The furs that surrounded her smelled like him, but again that meant nothing. They always had. There was no indication that Salin had actually come to her last night and suckled her into oblivion.

But she knew his earlier, anal fucking had happened. She'd yet to come to terms with that. She couldn't deny -- to herself, at least -- that he'd made something that just *shouldn't* feel good, feel wonderful. And while she was making personal admissions, she could admit that he made *everything* feel wonderful.

Disgusted with herself, she rolled from the bed, wincing at her soreness. The timepiece told her most of the day was gone and that it would soon be dusk. Her body had already acclimated to the *raedjour* timetable of sleep during the day and activity at night. Her mouth

watered at the smell of the strange, spicy bread they served her. And, as she looked in the mirrored disk on the wall, she could tell that her hair was noticeably lighter.

She was changing.

Avoiding that thought, she used the privy, washed with fresh, cool water, then ate some of the bread and cheese. While munching, she approached the door to her chamber. Tried the knob.

It turned.

Astonished, she opened the door to see the central room of the suite. The only light came from a fire in the carved fireplace on the opposite wall. She knew the doorway to the left was the exit of Salin's suite. Stepping into the room, she glanced to the right and stopped.

Jarak sat amongst large pillows on the floor, busily polishing or cleaning a bit of leatherwork he held on his lap. He stood as she turned, nodding calmly before he met her gaze. "May I get something for you, lady?"

She crossed her arms, not even aware any longer that she was naked. "I should have known he'd leave a guard."

Jarak smiled. "I'm here to attend my master's lady."

She scowled. "I am *not* his lady."

"You are for four more days, at least, lady."

She sniffed, gaze drifting back to the outer door. "What would you do if I went and opened the door?"

"Would you care for a tour of the city, lady?"

Shocked, she blinked, then returned her gaze to his smiling face. "Excuse me?"

"Commander Salin has given me permission to escort you through some of the city, if that's your desire."

"*Some* of the city?" she asked.

“There are parts of the city that aren’t safe for those who haven’t lived here.” He stepped toward her, brushing dust off his trousers. “Just let me fetch some clothes for you and ...” He caught her staring at him, which gave him pause. She smiled when he ducked his head, sure again that if his black skin would show it, she’d see he was blushing.

“You shouldn’t duck your head away from an enemy, Jarak,” she told him conversationally.

That snapped his head up, his blue-black eyes wide. “You sounded just like the commander.” He shook his head. “You’re not my enemy, lady.”

“Just because I can’t hurt you, doesn’t mean I won’t try.”

A hint of youthful male crept behind his carefully subservient gaze. “You may *try*, lady.”

She couldn’t help it. She grinned. She should give him a run for it, just because.

But she felt entirely too lazy to do that. She glanced at the door again, then shrugged. She stepped into the room and dropped down into one of the chairs. “I don’t feel like walking,” she said.

He cocked his head to the side. “Would you like me to carry you?”

Her eyes went wide, flew to his face. Then she laughed, seeing his impish grin. “All right. Consider me paid back.” She flipped her hand at him, motioning him toward the pillows he’d vacated. “Don’t let me interrupt your work. I’m sure the tyrant will be put out if you don’t finish whatever it is.”

“This?” he asked, picking up the leather studded with metal. “This isn’t for the commander, lady. Well, not directly.”

“Oh?”

He paused, thoughtful. Then he held it up. It took her a moment before she realized it was a collar. When worn, it would stretch from shoulder to chin and lace up the front.

Her gaze narrowed. “Is that for me?”

He didn't answer. When she held out her hand, he gave it to her.

She couldn't deny that the workmanship was marvelous. The gray leather was taut without being stiff, and it was lovingly worked to a buttery softness. The hammered design was cunningly filled with metal brads.

To his utter shock, she raised the collar to her neck and wrapped it on. She tied the laces loosely. As she suspected, it fit perfectly. She stood to see herself in a mirrored disk over the fireplace. "Your work?" she asked calmly.

"Yes, lady."

She nodded, stroking the soft nap with her fingers. "Very nice. You're an excellent leatherworker. What type of skin is this?"

He cleared his throat. "We call it a *yarin*, lady. It's a large deerlike animal with rounded antlers. They're plentiful in the higher reaches of the mountains."

She nodded again, then turned to face him. "How do I look?"

"You're absolutely gorgeous, lady," he said sincerely.

"Thank you. Now, take a good look. Do you see?"

He frowned, but nodded.

"Good." She undid the laces, then ripped the collar from her throat, her brows sinking to a scowl. "Then tell your master what you saw, because he's *not* going to see it on me himself!"

She hurled the collar at him, then stalked to her room. At the last second, she darted toward the outer door. Jarak yelped, but she had to give him credit for reacting quickly.

He needn't have bothered. She bolted out the door and into the muscular arms of a guard.

"What are you doing here, Garn?" Jarak demanded.



Garn held her struggling form easily, infuriating her. “Commander said he didn’t want you to have trouble with the lady.”

She slumped. She knew it.

Garn shook her slightly. “It’s fine to keep struggling, Diana,” he grumbled. Leaning closer, he breathed in her ear. “I like it.”

She recognized the taunting voice and screamed. He’d been one of her previous lovers. He laughed aloud as he avoided her outstretched claws.

“Stop tormenting her, Garn,” Jarak ordered.

“I’ll just put her back, then,” Garn stated, entering the suite and walking to her room. He deposited her none-too-gently inside.

She stumbled, then whirled to face him. His glittering black eyes watched her, his wide mouth grinning. “You going to try it again?” he asked hopefully.

“No.”

He showed his disappointment. “Oh, well.” He left the suite.

Jarak appeared in her doorway, looking abashed. “I didn’t know he was there, lady.”

“I gathered.”

“The commander really *did* tell me that I could escort you through the city.”

“He just didn’t tell you we’d have company, is that it?”

“Well, yes,” he said. By his tone, she knew he didn’t expect she’d believe him.

Unfortunately, she did. Her anger died a cold death.

“Don’t fret it, Jarak,” she said, waving him away. “I’m going back to sleep.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Diana woke abruptly when two pairs of strong hands grabbed her. Before she was fully aware, leather restraints encircled her wrists and ankles, chains chiming.

“What ...?” she cried, feebly struggling to consciousness.

No answer. She was hauled into the air, carried swiftly across the room, and placed upon one of the contraptions Salin had yet to bind her to. This one put a padded bar underneath her arched back. Her legs were spread and bent beneath her, the short chains attached to another padded bar beneath her head. Her arms were pulled back and secured to the bottom of the bar under her back. The final effect left her doubled over backwards, breasts pointed to the ceiling, knees forced wide.

“You slimy son of a skunk! Let me go!”

Salin stood from securing her arms, looking to Jarak. “Thank you,” he said to the younger man, patting his shoulder. Jarak stared down at Diana. She could only see him upside down, which gave her a wonderful view of the erection tenting his trousers. “Go ahead and take the night off. I won’t need you further.”

Jarak snapped from his mesmerized gaze to face his master’s amused smile. He matched it with one of his own. “Thank you, Commander.”

“Did you just send him to go get laid?” Diana asked before Jarak had even left.

“Yes,” Salin replied matter-of-factly. “I did. The poor lad’s been watching you parade naked before him for nights now. He needs some relief.”

“*I’m* not the one keeping me naked!” she screeched.

“Ah, yes. That’s true. That’s why *I’m* giving him the night off, as *I’ve* kept you naked and wanting, so *you’ve* tormented the poor lad.”

She glared sideways at him. “You’re demented.”

He grinned. “Quite possibly.”

She tested her bonds as he moved about the room. Returning to her, he slid an arm underneath her back to lift her from the bar. She gasped at the ease with which he held her weight. Effortlessly. Smoothly. He slid something underneath her back before gently

returning her to her place, then busied himself with lacing what turned out to be a leather bodice.

“What’s this?” she demanded, barely able to see the garment.

“Another of Jarak’s pieces,” Salin explained, smoothing the corset over her belly. It ended just above her hips. “And these are another. Not practical, I’ll admit, but very sexy.”

She frowned, trying to decide what he was doing around her hips and buttocks. Finally, she realized he’d tied what might be a pair of panties about her hips and legs, with a leather thong slid through the cheeks of her ass. Only the panties were completely open over her mound and crotch.

“And this,” he proclaimed, leaning over her body to spear his hands through her hair, lifting her head. She glared when she recognized the leather collar she’d hurled at Jarak earlier. Salin’s wicked grin told her Jarak had relayed the earlier conversation. He took great pleasure in fastening the piece around her neck and gazing at it lovingly.

“Bastard.”

He met her gaze. “Thought I wouldn’t see you in this, sweet?” he asked mildly.

“Fuck you.”

The smile returned. “In due course.”

“You keep saying that,” she told him as he gently released her head and stepped away. “And you still haven’t.”

“Remember, my sweet, I await your sweet invitation.”

“You didn’t need my *invitation* last night,” she spat, glaring at the ceiling.

“Well, I’ll admit I’ve been a little inside your body. But there’s a difference.” He stood above her now, his knees close enough to kiss. Helpless, she gazed up the powerful thighs to the massive erection he cradled in his hand. Where had his trousers gone? “But *this* has not been inside of you.”

She licked her lips, unable to tear her gaze away from the fingers caressing the smooth head of his cock. “So what are you saying? That you *won't* put it inside me?”

“Not until you ask.”

She snorted. “I’m not going to ask.”

“Don’t make promises you won’t keep, sweet.”

“Go to the hells! I don’t want you!”

Grinning, he swung one thick leg easily across her body until he straddled her torso. With effort, she lifted her head to see him bend his knees enough to put his cock on level with her cleavage. She fought a groan as he slid the head against the crest of one breast, then angled further down to smudge a drop of seed into her skin. “How long will you lie to yourself, sweet?” he asked calmly.

“At least four more days,” she sneered.

That stopped him. He frowned, suddenly serious. “If you deny me, you’ll just go to another man.”

“Who won’t be you.”

“Exactly.”

She shuddered. Sweet Mother of us all, he was right. She knew he was right. The thought of another nine days with yet another man sickened her. Somehow, Salin had done the same things to her as many of the others had, but something about him made them special. Add to it that he actually *talked* to her and, damn him, she liked his wicked sense of humor, even though it infuriated her.

She let her head drop back. She couldn’t give in. If she gave in, he won. *They* won. And they shouldn’t. This wasn’t right!

He sighed and left her, to roam the room again. She heard activity but couldn’t see beyond her breasts to make out what he was doing.

She jumped when his hot tongue lapped at the skin exposed at the bottom of the corset.

“Did you enjoy last night, sweet?”

She froze. Instantly, she could again feel his mouth on her, forcing her to climax again and again as she scrabbled in the dark.

Stubbornly, she pushed the images from her head. “You mean you in my ass? No. I don’t know what kind of spell you cast over me to make me come, but I didn’t enjoy it.”

“There was no spell, sweet. And you know it. You enjoyed my fingers in your ass.” He made her jump again by sliding his fingers over said ass and teasing the thong that covered her opening. “But I realize that particular act might catch you off guard.” Another kiss, just at the top of her mons. “But I made up for it later, didn’t I?”

“I -- I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

He sighed, nipping at her thigh. “Don’t try to explain it away as a dream, sweet. I was there. I made quite a feast of you last day, and you were more than willing.”

Damn him! She didn’t want confirmation of that. She wanted to believe it was a dream.

“That meant nothing.”

“So you said. And I let you believe that. I left you before you awoke. But don’t fool yourself. You wanted me last day.”

“And you didn’t take me.”

“No. I want you fully conscious and aware when you ask for me.”

“It won’t ... ah! Happen.”

His lips had found her clit. He didn’t bother with much foreplay this time, but he didn’t need to. The mere reminder of the previous day had her wet. Loudly popping her clit in and out of his mouth, he slid three long fingers deep into her channel. Writhing, she moaned. Fighting the natural buck of her hips in rhythm with his pumping fingers.

“Come for me, Diana,” he murmured, slamming his fingers deep just before he nipped her clit.



She was horrified with herself for obeying. She soared through a colorful haze, crying out the pleasure she didn't want to feel.

But he wasn't done with her. He did it again, wiggling the three fingers in her cunt as he attacked her clit. A finger from his other hand snaked underneath the thong and into her ass. "Salin!" she screeched, just before shooting into another orgasm.

"God of war!" she screamed on the fourth, her body trembling. "Fuck me and get it over with already."

At her words, he eased a bit, allowing her to breathe, although three fingers remained deeply embedded. "Sweet, it is far from my wish to get it over with."

"I said it," she panted. "You wanted me to say it. Get it over with."

Abruptly, all fingers left her body. She tried to breathe, barely conscious of his movements until she felt his wet fingers slide into her hair to lift her head.

Burning red eyes locked with hers, a fury she didn't understand evident in their depths. "What do you want?" he demanded.

"Just fuck me and get it over with."

He shook her head once like a mother cat might shake its young. "What do you *want?*"

She snarled, understanding. He wanted her to admit it. "You want me. Take me."

His snarl made a mockery of hers. Cursing in what she could only assume was the *raedjour* language, he bent to release her from the chains that bound her to the bench. Once done, he stalked away from her.

"Where are you *going?*" she demanded.

He whirled as she slid to sit on one side of the bench, easing the ache in her back.

"Do you want me to fuck you?"

"Yes." That she could say.

"Then say it."

She fisted her hands in aggravation, her pent-up arousal feeding her anger. "I said it. Fuck me, damn you!"

His cock twitched, obviously more than willing. But he remained halfway across the room. "No," he barked. "Not like you're relieving an itch. Admit that you want me!"

She rolled her eyes. "What's the difference?"

Growling, he crossed to one of the four clothes chests. After a moment of rummaging, he came up with a long cylinder that was tapered at one end. Scowling, he brandished it, making sure she saw it clearly, before he tossed it onto the bed furs.

"Use that to relieve your itch, Diana." He crossed to the door. "Tell me when you realize you need more from me."

She screamed her frustration, beating her hands against the bench. Defiantly, she went to the bed and retrieved the object. Yes. It wasn't as large as his cock, but it would do. It was made of a strange, warm material that felt like wax but didn't chip away. *Fine!* She dropped onto the bed on her back, letting her legs flop open. Without any preparation -- from her own ministrations, at least -- she plunged it into her core. Her back bowed in pleasure, her body skyrocketing into an immediate climax. But she knew, as she recovered herself, that Salin was right. She needed more. This felt good, but she knew it would feel much better to have his hips behind those thrusts instead of her own shaky fingers.

She subsided with a whimper, letting the tool slip from her grasp. Staring at the ceiling, she nearly cried in frustration.



## Chapter Thirteen

Salin could feel something was different before he opened the door the next day. When he saw her sitting on the edge of the bed platform, facing the door, his eyes widened. The leather restraints were strapped to her wrists and ankles. She'd put them on herself?

Lifting her chin, she stared at him squarely. Some decision had been made behind that glittering green-gold gaze, but he hadn't a clue what it was. Calmly, she lifted her arms to pull her long hair into a tail. The movement lifted her full breasts, gaining his attention.

He shut the door carefully and leaned his back against it. Waiting.

She finished with her hair and stood. "What's your plan for tonight, Commander?" she purred.

He crossed his arms, pleased that the movement caused her gaze to drop to his bulging arms. At least she enjoyed the look of him. "I had thoughts, but I'm open to suggestions."

Her long, beautiful lashes dropped halfway over her eyes, a sexy, sultry look that made his cock jerk to attention. Her lush lips curled when she noticed. Eyes locked on his crotch, she approached him. Once there, she took hold of his wrists and guided him to uncross his arms and lay them at his sides. He obeyed, entranced. Was this the same woman he'd left before?

Unconcerned with his skeptical frown, she leaned forward and laid her lips above his right nipple. Against his will, he shuddered. She smiled, opening her mouth so that her warm breath caressed the very edges of his tattoo. Her tongue darted out to flick his nipple. He jumped.

“Edgy, aren’t we?” she mused, kissing her way across the broad expanse of his chest to the other nipple.

“A smart warrior is always on edge when an opponent tries something new.”

“Wise,” she agreed, chuckling. Her hands bracketed his waist, thumbs idly tracing the edges of his abdominal muscles. Cautiously, he reached forward to lay hands on her soft shoulders.

“Does this mean nothing, too, sweet?” he purred.

She lifted her chin to meet his gaze. “Absolutely nothing,” she confirmed with a smile.

“Mmm,” he mused as she commenced her soft torture of his skin. Although it was tough as leather, *raedjour* skin was attuned to a lover’s touch. He slid his hands down her arms to her wrists, removing her hands from his waist. She didn’t protest when he started to walk her backwards.

She expected the furs. She *wanted* the furs. Today he’d fuck her. Today she’d have him. She’d spent a long, frustrated time before finally making the decision. She’d seduce him. She’d give him what he wanted, so he’d give her what she’d come to *need*. If he pushed it, she’d even *ask*, damn it! She didn’t believe her “truemate” existed among the *raedjour*, so what did it matter if she took a little -- or maybe a *lot* -- of the pleasure he offered? He was the finest lover she’d had to date -- even without having taken her completely -- and she’d be damned if she missed out on having him fully!

She'd donned the restraints as a sign. He was smart. He'd catch on. He was hot enough for her that he'd take it as an excuse without the ridiculous notion of forcing her to ask for him.

She hoped.

She kissed and nipped his breast as he led her backward into the room. He tasted so good! She'd not allowed herself the pleasure of tasting his skin before this. He tasted of midnight mystery and heady secrets, clean and dark and delicious. That light sheen of oil that coated his skin tasted of dark spices. Cinnamon musk and prime male.

She didn't expect it when he abruptly turned her, raising her arms. The clink of chains alerted her that he'd bound her to another one of his infernal contraptions, this one a free-standing post with a set of rings at the top for restraints.

"Salin," she protested, jangling the chains at her wrist.

"Sweet," he responded, kissing the back of her neck.

She shuddered, melting. Fine. If he wanted it this way, they'd do it this way. *This* time.

He nibbled her shoulder as he loosened his trousers and let them fall to the floor. To keep his attention, she wiggled her ass in his direction, spreading her legs slightly. He groaned as he kicked aside boots and trousers. Finally, his hands slid down her sides to her hips. Those he pulled back, forcing her onto her toes as he ground her bottom to his groin. His cock poked her lower back before he drew back, letting it slide down the crack of her ass.

"Yes!" she moaned, willing to voice her approval as long as he continued. If it were true that his pleasure was magnified by hers, he must be insatiable right now. *Take me now*, she demanded silently.



He purred, pulling all the way back in order to re-angle his cock so that his forward slide took it down and through the wet folds of her sex. They both moaned when the tip grazed her clit, sending a rush of fire throughout her body. She bit her lip, tilting her hips to try and push that sensitive spot harder against him. Salin leaned forward, reaching around her body to cradle the tip of his cock in his palm. Using his hand, he pushed the shaft lengthwise up against her folds, hips pumping to create delicious friction. Gasping, she shoved back, not even caring that he chuckled. At least the chuckle had an edge to it. He was struggling to maintain control. But she wanted him *out* of control. She wanted him rampant and lusty and slamming inside of her like the magnificent stallion he was!

She synchronized her rocking hips to his as he began to thrust, trying to force an angle that would guide him inside. She was so close! His hand remained at her groin, guiding his cock against her clit with each forward thrust. She didn't protest when his strong hands slid to either side of her hips and guided her thighs together. Yes! Getting the idea, she willingly pressed her thighs together, making a warm, wet channel for him to ...

Too late, she realized what he was about. Too late, she felt him erupt. "No!" she shrieked, staring helplessly at the spurting white cream that now covered his hand and part of the post in front of her.

He laughed, backing away as she trembled with rage.

"You bastard!" she growled, yanking at the bonds holding her hands.

He came into her line of sight, an infuriatingly smug look on his gorgeous features. "Anger, sweet?" he taunted, leaning against the pole to which she was chained as he idly wiped cream from his fingers onto his belly, making the muscles gleam even more. "Why are you angry?"

His eyes danced with mirth as he watched her struggle with her own emotions. "Care to ask me something, sweet?" he taunted.

She met his gaze. The words were easier to say than she'd thought. "Please fuck me, Salin."

He paused, quite obviously taken aback. "Say it again."

Hope surged in her breast. Relief was coming! "I want you, Salin. Fuck me. Now. Please!"

He leaned in, studying her face. "What are you asking for, sweet?"

"You. So deep inside me that I forget your cock isn't part of my body," she parroted his words right back at him.

That got him. He practically reeled, clutching the post for support. Eagerly, she met his lips when they swooped in to take hers. She wholeheartedly mated his tongue, sucking him into her mouth like she wanted to suck his cock into her body.

"Now, Salin," she demanded, jerking at the chains that bound her wrists. She nipped at his lip.

"Why do you want me?"

"What?"

"*Why* do you want me?"

She moaned, again yanking at the chains. "Not now, Salin. Not now. Can't this wait?"

He shook his head. "Is it so hard to admit what you want? I *know* you want me." His look turned suddenly serious. Reaching forward, he cradled her face in his big, warm hands and tilted her head up. His fingers smelled of their combined juices, made her thoughts spiral. "I'll make it easier for you, sweet Diana," he murmured, capturing her gaze. "I'll say it first." He paused -- gathering his courage? "I love you, Diana," he murmured, shocking her. "I don't know how I know, but I know you're my truemate. I know we belong together." He planted a soft kiss on her surprised lips. "Ask me. Tell me you want me. Let me make love to you, Diana," he begged softly, breath a warm caress to her lips. "Let's seal the bond between us."

She stared at him, mind whirling. She barely registered when he reached up and released her wrists from the pole. She backed away when he reached for her.

“You don’t know that,” she protested.

“That I love you?”

“Why would you say that? I’ve been nothing but horrible to you.”

“Perhaps that’s exactly what I need.”

She shook her head. “How could you want such a thing?”

“What? A fiery mate who keeps me on my guard? In focus? A woman with stubborn strength of will? A woman whose body’s pleasures make my blood sing?”

She walked away, toward the privy chamber. “Stop saying those things. You can’t mean them.”

He froze, watching her retreat with predatory interest. “What are you frightened of, Diana?”

She whirled. “What?”

“Why does the mention of love send you running?”

“You don’t know what you’re saying.”

“No. But something makes you deny everything that your body feels. I mention ‘love,’ and suddenly all the lust you felt runs cold. Something is making you deny me.” He caught her arm, hauling her up against him. “Tell me what’s wrong!”

“I’m denying you because you’re a killer and a rapist!” she spat, tearing at his grip to escape him. “How could I love something like that?!”

He went stone-still except for the fingers that suddenly released her. Her blood ran cold, her own words, said in fright, sinking in. She backed away helplessly, unable to think of a way to take them back. Confused by the fact that she *wanted* very badly to take them back. He watched her retreat, his sensual mouth smashed in a furious line.

Abruptly he turned, snatching his trousers from the floor. “Deny me for another three nights and you’ll have your freedom,” he said, bending to tug them on.

“What?”

“I’ll tell Nalfien what I suspect. He knows my instincts, and he knows they’re usually true. He can confirm it. If I’m right and you are my truemate, you’re of no use to another man other than as a fuck toy.” He tossed a disdainful glance her way. “I assume you don’t relish a life in the brothel?”

She shook her head, still confused. “What are you talking about?”

“The brothel. It’s where we keep the women who haven’t found a truemate. They still have needs, you see. Needs that only a long line of lovers can try to appease. Only your needs would be worse, because only your truemate could fully satisfy you.”

She gaped, horrified.

He nodded coldly. “Just so. I didn’t think that would appeal to you. And with your reputation ...” He shook his head. “Once Nalfien confirms I’m right, I’ll let him know that I don’t want you. It will take some convincing, but he’ll cast a spell to erase your memories.”

She staggered back against the wall, unable to digest all that he was saying. “*What?*”

He ignored her. “He’ll have to put some alternate memories into your head. After all, you’ll need an explanation why Gala is no longer with you. You’ll think she’s dead.”

“Salin, wait.”

“Why?” he demanded, rounding on her. The fury in his eyes flattened her instinctively against the wall, even though he was across the room. “Isn’t this what you wanted? You haven’t turned fully yet, so it’s still not too late. We don’t tend to tell women that it’s possible to leave, but before a certain time, it is. The problem, of course, is that you’ll never quite be right in the head again. A symptom of having manufactured and missing memories.” He spread his arms. “But you’ll have your wish. You’ll be away from here, away from us.



Away from *me*.” He glared. “Of course, you’ll never be fertile. But that shouldn’t bother a lone warrior like you.”

She scowled. “Now wait just a moment ...”

“No, Diana. This is it. Think very carefully. I offer myself to you, wholeheartedly. Myself and my life. A very *long* life compared to the one you’d have as a human. Or I offer a way out.” His upraised hand silenced her. “Choose one.”

With that, he stomped out.

## Chapter Fourteen

“You told her *what?*” Nalfien demanded.

Salin, sprawled on a bench to the side of Nalfien’s workroom, waved a negligent hand.

“What will it matter? You’ve done it before.”

“That is not common knowledge. Radin should not have told you.”

Salin shrugged.

“And what, pray tell, happens if she decides to stay? That knowledge is dangerous if she imparts it to other women.”

Salin grimaced. “She won’t stay.”

Nalfien studied the top of the younger man’s head. He’d never seen Salin like this. The commander was always in top form, his quick mind often reaching conclusions long before others had an inkling of an issue. Part of it was those damnable instincts that invariably proved correct, but much of it was pure genius. A genius currently without his spark.

“How do you know that?”

Salin shook his head, dragging long fingers through his short hair. “She’s too stubborn. There’s a wall in her mind that she’s trapped by. I don’t seem to have the key.”

“Would you like me to change her mind for her?” Nalfien offered carefully.

“No,” Salin snapped. “If she doesn’t come to the conclusion herself, it’s not worth it.”

“Salin, think carefully on what you say. You still have a few days with her. Perhaps if you ...”

“I know what I say, Nalfien.” Salin lifted furious eyes to meet the sorcerer’s. “My true mate denies me. Do you think I haven’t thought on this? Do you think I want to watch her go to the brothel pit to be used by any man who believes he can handle her? No. I’d rather she was out of sight.”

“But you ...”

“What about me? I’ll be childless. Is that such a horror?”

“Salin!”

“Or perhaps I’m wrong,” Salin continued, wilting back onto the bench. Warily, he closed his eyes. “Maybe she’s not my true mate. You should test her to find out.”

Nalfien wished fervently that Radin were not away on one of his extended treks through the mountains. Radin was one of the few who could talk sense to the commander.

“Salin, if you haven’t taken her, I can’t ...”

“Spare me, Nalfien. Radin’s told me that you can tell.”

“What secrets has Radin *not* told you?” Nalfien muttered angrily. But the anger died quickly in the face of Salin’s obvious pain. “I’ll test her. But, Salin --” The younger man had stood, resigned, and started out the door. He paused at Nalfien’s words. “-- do not give up just yet. As you said, she has a wall in her mind to hurdle. You’ve likely shocked her with words of love. Allow her *some* time to think on that.”

Salin nodded, and left.

\* \* \* \* \*

Salin didn't come to her the next day. Or the next. She waited. She was aware when Jarak came to the room, kept her fed, but she feigned sleep. She *knew* before Jarak entered that he wasn't Salin, and Salin was the only one she wanted to see.

He loved her? How could he know that?

Images of her mother haunted her. The woman had left when Diana was still a young child, but Diana recalled enough. Recalled her spiteful words. Recalled her disdainful tone when she spoke to Diana's father. She never loved him. Never loved them. Four children together, Diana the last, before Diana's father finally gave up. He wished her well, helped her pack, and saw her on her way. The woman had never looked back.

Diana saw reflections of this in herself. She wasn't worthy of love. Her measly few friendships had taken precious, agonizing time to forge and lasted only through the resolve of the other, not Diana. Gala was the only one who'd taken the time and energy, taken the blows and cuts, to be her true friend. Diana knew this.

Gala had been the only one until now. Until Salin. He'd played her game masterfully. He'd shown her the error of her ways without making her lose face. He'd bared his soul and allowed her to rake it apart.

She was just like her mother.

She didn't bother to touch the food Jarak brought. She watched the flame in the hands of the little goddess statue turn midnight blue then sunny yellow then blue again, and still no Salin. Not that she blamed him.

Her body ached, lust coursing through her veins. But she couldn't bear the thought of bringing herself to climax. The toy he'd given her lay unused on a table. It wouldn't help. It couldn't help. She needed him.

Did she love him?

The goddess's flame had turned a greenish blue, indicating the nearing of sunrise on the second night without Salin, when the door again opened. She automatically scowled at the sight of Nalfien.

"What are you doing here?"

"Salin asked me to come test you."

Her heart cracked, recalling his words. "I don't want you tasting me," she warned, although she didn't bother to rise from the bed furs.

"That isn't necessary for this," he said, crossing halfway into the room. He hesitated. "Should I bind you?"

She grimaced. "I won't attack you."

He seemed to take her at her word, for he closed the distance and sat on the edge of the bed platform.

"What do you do this time?" she asked, listless. "Scour my brain with your magic? Shove your fingers inside me?"

"No," he replied softly. "For this, I need to gauge your heart."

She blinked rapidly as he placed a warm hand over the center of her chest. She was *not* crying! She felt nothing but the warmth of his hand. Glancing toward him, she saw him watching her face. No glowing eyes. No sign of magic. Nothing but kindness showed there, a bland warmth that showed a caring for another living creature. She closed her eyes.

Presently, he removed his hand.

"Well?" she prompted when he said nothing and didn't leave. "Is he my truemate?"

"What do you think?"

"You're the sorcerer."

"You're the woman."

She paused. "Is it true you can erase my memories and send me away from here?"

“Yes.”

“Will you?”

“If necessary.”

Another pause. “Why would he want me?”

“Love rarely follows any path we perceive.”

“How could he love me?”

“I’ve known Salin his entire life. He’s never taken the easy road.”

She barked a laugh, little amusement in it. “Then I’m perfect for him,” she sneered.

He stood. “Yes,” he said softly, turning to leave. “You are.”

She scrambled to sit, watching his retreating back. “What’s *that* supposed to mean?”

He was at the door. “If you continue to resist Salin until the end of his nine days, I will cast the spell he described to you.” Red eyes bore into her from across the room. “It won’t be painless, but you’ll not recall any of your time here.”

She swallowed.

“Be certain that’s what you wish, Diana,” he murmured as he opened the door. “Be certain you know what it is you’re giving up.”

## Chapter Fifteen

The ninth day. Panic overwhelmed her.

“Where is he?”

Jarak, having just entered, hesitated in the doorway, tray in hand.

“Jarak,” she warned, sitting up on the bed platform, “where is he?”

“The commander is practicing with his men.”

“Go get him.”

Jarak blinked at her.

Impatient, she stood and stomped across the room to take the tray from him. “Go yourself or get Garn to do it, but I have to talk to him.” Then, when he still hesitated:

“Please!”

“Yes, lady.”

Krael backpedaled from Salin’s furious advance. Their sparring match had taken a decidedly dark turn some minutes back, and Krael was still deciding how to extricate himself from it. That distraction cost him.

He fell with a grunt, Salin instantly atop him, almost pinning him. Almost. Through instinct and practice, Krael had a dagger out and pointed upward at Salin's belly. A good enough thrust and he could gut the other man. Kill him.

Burning red eyes met violet blue. Salin eased up the dulled blade he held at Krael's throat. "Do it," he ordered.

Krael blinked. His mind raced. No one else could have heard the command. No one else could see the pain in the commander's eyes.

"Damn you, I gave you an order!" Salin hissed.

"Salin ..."

"Commander!" cried another voice. Krael stared into Salin's furious gaze as Jarak ran up to them. "Commander, the lady is asking for you."

Krael saw it. The sudden hope quashed by burning anguish. He saw it, but no one else. Of that he was glad.

Suddenly, Salin pushed back to his knees, his angry gaze pointed up at his squire. "What does she want?"

Jarak shook his head, his concern for his master obvious in his gaze. "She begged me to come and find you."

"Begged?"

"Yes, Commander."

Salin took a deep breath, scrubbing a hand roughly through his shorn hair. "Fine. I come."

She *felt* him enter the outer room. She knew he was taking his own sweet time, making her wait. She accepted that. He entered the room to find her waiting, and hesitated.



She knew what he saw. Her. Naked. Kneeling not on the bed platform but on the bondage bench. Leather restraints on her wrists and ankles. The leather collar Jarak had made laced around her neck. A length of chain connected her wrists and lay in a loose S on the bench before her.

She looked up, locking with his skeptical gaze. She let him see the longing, willed him to see the traces of her tears. Taking a deep breath, she lifted her bound arms toward him in a pleading gesture. "Please."

He scowled, not moving from the doorway. "What game are you playing, Diana?"

"No games," she said softly. Although she'd determined to say them, the words came hard.

He crossed the room to stand by the bench. He made no move to take the chain or her hands, although she kept them outstretched toward him.

"Please," she repeated.

"Please what?"

No "sweet." She cringed, lowering her arms. "Do you still want me?"

Did he still want her?! Was the woman daft? He could barely contain himself. Her body vibrated with uncertainty, and he knew she fought every base instinct she had to remain kneeling before him. But he had to push her that extra step. She had to do this, or else she'd accuse him of forcing her into it for the rest of their long lives.

"That's not the way this will work, Diana," he warned.

She risked a glance at his face. Another at his crotch. Evidence of his arousal was prominent, but she'd likely attribute that to his race's high sexual appetite. After all, what *raedjour* male had she encountered who *didn't* have an erection for her?

She swallowed. "Please, Salin," she begged.

"Please what, sweet?"

The endearment worked wonders. He felt the rush of hope that coursed through her veins, perhaps giving her the courage to continue.

Taking another deep breath, she looked up into his eyes. "I want you."

His heart soared, but he struggled not to show it. "Why?"

*Why?!*

She fought the instant rage. That anger had been her ready answer to everything, and the introduction to disaster for nearly every situation she brought it to. She swallowed. She was intelligent enough to know why he asked. But was she brave enough to give him what he wanted?

"Because I ... because ..." Frustrated, she tried to breathe over the pounding of her heart.

His gaze softened, those bulging arms lowering from across his chest. Slowly, he lowered himself to sit on the bench.

She lowered her gaze to the chain before her, unable to look at him and admit her feelings at the same time. "Because I think ... I ... love you," she said softly. "I want to stay with you."

His hand crept out to take hold of the chain. She watched his long, elegant fingers wind about the links. Were they trembling just a bit? He twisted his wrist to wrap the chain around his hand -- once, twice, again and again, until her wrists were snug against his hand and each other. He shifted, and his knees came into her lowered view. His free hand appeared, cupped her chin, made her look up at him.

"Be sure, Diana," he warned gently once their gazes locked. "Once we're mated, it's over. You're mine." There was a moment's hesitation, and a softening of his lips to the barest of smiles. "And I'm yours."

She stared at his face, really seeing him for the first time. Without her blinding sheet of rage between them. He was truly stunning. His face was all sharp angles except for the smooth curves of his lips and the curl of his lashes. The tattoos on his chin and forehead made him look even more exotic. The fall of his curly hair over his eyes made him mysterious, secretive.

“Will I be more attractive to you once I’ve turned?”

He smiled fully, and it lit her heart. “I can’t imagine a sexier woman, with any color skin.”

“Will I be able to see in the dark?”

“Yes.”

“Will my eyes turn?”

“No. Your eyes will remain their perfect golden green.”

She smiled. “But my hair will turn white.”

“Beautiful, snowy white,” he agreed, sinking his free fingers into said hair.

“Will my skin be as tough as yours?”

“Smooth as silk but tougher than leather,” he promised.

“Will I be as fast as you with the sword?”

“Maybe not as fast, but we’ll work to make you the best you can be.”

“I do love you, Salin,” she said before she could think about it.

His mouth closed on hers, her instant reward for bravery. She willingly parted her lips, welcoming the assault of his tongue.



She pulled eager hands toward his face, frustrated to find them still bound. Laughing, he parted their lips only long enough to unwind the chain from his hand and toss it over his head. The cold metal slithered over his back as she let her greedy hands take their fill of his hair, yanking him back to her kiss. She climbed forward into his lap, steadied by his strong grip on her waist. Straddling his hips, she ground her groin against his, drenching the front of his trousers with her juices.

“Salin,” she muttered against his lips, loath to part them for very long, “if you don’t fuck me now, I’m going to have to hurt you.”

He laughed and she gasped as he lurched suddenly backward. To her amazement, he gained his feet in one fluid move, without losing his grip on her or parting their lips any further. “Mmm, you’re strong,” she purred, confident now. “Is that why I have to change? So you won’t pound me into pulp?”

He chuckled, lowering them both into the soft furs of the bed. “Partly,” he admitted, tumbling her onto her back so he could get out of his trousers.

She scrambled to her knees before him, eager to help. “Only partly? What’s the other part?”

She almost didn’t notice his hesitation at her question, too busy unlacing the ties and freeing his cock. She’d never handled it before and was fascinated. Hot and long, soft and hard. She squeezed experimentally, gratified to produce a raw moan from deep within his chest. She bent her head, wanting to taste him.

She couldn’t understand why he put his hands on her shoulders, stopping her.

“Sweet, I’ve got to tell you something.”

She froze, her blood running cold. She hated the tone in his voice. “What?”

“A *raedjour* pregnancy lasts two cycles.”

She blinked, still looking at and holding his cock. The organ that would plant a seed inside her that she would carry for *two* cycles.

“That’s the other reason for the change. Humans can’t survive a *raedjour* pregnancy.”

She licked her lips, still staring at his cock. Slowly, she moved her fingers down the shaft, watching the loose layer of skin slide back with her hand. “Well,” she said as she slowly pulled her hand back up the shaft, watching the skin bunch and nearly cover the head. “I’ll just have to make you suffer every moment of the way, won’t I?”

Salin groaned, releasing her shoulders to allow her to dip her head and finally take the head of his cock into her mouth. He nearly came out of his skin. No mouth had ever felt so good! Even the scrape of her teeth as she struggled to gulp as much of it as she could felt good!

He let her nibble and suckle for precious moments, growled when she slid a free hand to cup and handle his balls.

“Ah, sweet!” he cried, pulling her away just as she’d discovered the sensitive underside of the head with her agile little tongue. She protested, but he shoved her back into the furs, coming down atop her, “We can explore that later,” he promised, reaching down to grab his cock, “but I need to be inside you.”

“Oh, yes,” she purred, spreading her legs and canting her hips to a better angle.

He met her gaze. “You want me inside you?”

“Yes,” she said, without blinking. “I want you inside me. Fuck me, Salin. Now!”

Gladly, he obeyed. With one, smooth thrust, he was inside her to the hilt. Despite his size, he’d known theirs would be a perfect fit.

Diana gasped. They both froze, locked together. His mouth was pressed to the curve where her neck met her shoulder, his massive shoulders hunched over her smaller body. Her cheek pressed against his temple. Her arms wound as tightly as possible about his neck, his

arms twined beneath her back and around her waist. Neither wanted to end this perfect moment, their first as one. Both squeezed their eyes shut, memorizing the feeling.

But she had to move. She had to feel him. Rotating her hips, she gasped again as that huge cock ground against the walls of her channel. Once felt, she couldn't get enough, couldn't stay still. Neither, it seemed, could he. His breath came in gasps as he pumped his hips against hers, slowly, carefully. She wondered if he was being easy on her, or if he was struggling to maintain control. It didn't matter. She wanted him *out* of control.

"Fuck me, Salin," she breathed in his ear.

His whole body shuddered, his cock swelling larger. She groaned, catching his ear again, which made it repeat. She'd found a sweet spot! Experimentally, she reached out with her tongue to trace the delicate tip of his pointed ear. He growled, fingers clutching painfully at her buttocks. But she didn't care about the last, because it was accompanied by firmer, longer thrusts from his cock.

"Yes," she hissed, sure her breath caressed his ear. He moved to pull his head away, but she clutched handfuls of his hair to keep him there. She *liked* this reaction and wasn't about to release him from it.

"Diana," he groaned, using his hands at her hips now to slam her more firmly against his pumping groin.

She muttered into his ear, unconscious of the words, uncaring. She suckled the lobe, delved into the recesses, but -- although he clearly liked it all -- it seemed to be the very pointed tip that was most sensitive.

He broke free, rearing up over her, ear out of reach. She grunted a protest, struggling to pull him back. They fought for supremacy, and he won, trapping her hands with his over her head. Not once during their battle did he stop the rhythm of his hips.

Deprived of the distraction of his ear, Diana lost herself in the feel of his cock. He was so deep! Surely he'd punctured her belly, her chest! She was sure he'd emerge in her throat soon. Oh, but it felt good! Sweet pumping rhythm. Sweet delicious cock. Sweet ...

"Salin!" she cried.

He groaned, halting movement, allowing her to shudder into climax around him, pinning her hips with his, her hands with his, until she stopped writhing.

She blinked up at him, sweat plastering her hair to her face. He grinned.

"Bastard," she spat, grinding against him, ready for the next round. "You have to come, too."

"I will," he promised, pulling out and pushing back in slowly.

"I thought my pleasure was your pleasure," she accused.

"It is. Which is why I'm selfishly prolonging it."

"Bastard," she repeated, this time on a shaky laugh.

"Diana," he purred, releasing her hands and lowering himself to press chest-to-chest. His lips found hers, soft, sweet playing of lips and tongue. And his hips kept pumping.

She let him lead, content to take what he gave her. And he gave so much! She came again. Then, on the third climax, he roared, slamming into her quivering pussy as he came.

Warmth flooded her, body and soul. Followed by an amazing, sated feeling she'd never before encountered.

She cuddled Salin's weight atop her, smoothing his back as his breathing calmed. Presently, he chuckled. She gasped when he twitched his hips and she realized that not only was he still inside her, but he was still hard! After such a hard climax, any of her other lovers -- human and *raedjour* -- had needed *some* time to recuperate!

Still smiling, he propped himself on his elbows so he could look down at her. "Did I mention that you're in heat? And that increases my sexual appetite?"



She grimaced, knowing her true delight showed in her eyes. “No. You failed to mention that.”

“Hmm.” He kissed her lips. “You’ll have to punish me for that.”

 THE END 

## Jet Mykles

An ardent fan of fantasy and science fiction sagas, Jet prefers to live in a world of imagination where dragons are real, elves are commonplace, vampires are just people with special diets and lycanthes live next door. In her own mind, she's the spunky heroine who gets the best of everyone and always attracts the lean, muscular lads. She aids this fantasy with visuals created through her other obsession: 3D graphic art. In this area, as in writing, Jet's self-taught and thoroughly entranced, and now regularly uses this art to illustrate her stories or her stories to expand upon her art. It was through a series of images posted to the erotic art website Renderotika and encouragement from the fabulous Angela Knight that she finished and submitted a story to Loose Id.

In real life, Jet lives in southern California with her boyfriend of nine years, his daughter and father and nine cats. She has a bachelor's degree in acting, but her loathing of auditions has kept her out of the limelight. So she turned to computers and currently works in product management for a software company, because even in real life, she can't help but want to create something out of nothing.

You can find Jet on the Web at <http://www.computerotika.com>.

\* \* \* \* \*

Read on for a tantalizing glimpse of

*Take on Me*

by Lacey Savage

Available Now from Loose Id

## Take on Me

Silwen didn't stop to look behind her as she fled into the kitchen. She wanted to put as much distance between herself and the rogue captain as possible, and if she never laid eyes on him again, that would be just fine with her.

She swiped at a loose tendril that had escaped her carefully bound tresses and picked up a large carving knife. A half-plucked chicken lay on the wooden counter and she headed for it, intent on doing as much damage as she could to something that wouldn't fight back.

“Do you remember the first time we were together?” His voice was smooth and deep, like rich Karavian wine. It traveled down her spine and left a soft warmth in its wake.

Taking a deep breath, she turned to face him. “No.”

“You're lying.”

“As far as I'm concerned, we were never together. If we had been, you wouldn't have left --”

She bit her lip, her teeth digging into the tender skin. Why couldn't she ever keep her mouth shut?

“I can see you're still upset about that. I'm sorry if I hurt you.”

“If?” She stared at him incredulously, knife pointed toward his chest even though he was still halfway across the room.

“I left because I had too. My father...” Drax's voice faltered, his long lashes shielding his eyes as his gaze fell to the floor. Silwen fought the urge to run into his arms, to comfort the obvious tension that had settled upon his strong, broad shoulders.

When it was clear to Silwen he wasn't going to continue, she risked a question of her own. “How is your father?”

He looked up at her, his eyes unreadable. “I don't know. Dead, I guess.”

*Lacey Savage*

“I'd hoped...” She struggled to find the right words. “I didn't know your father was on the *Bravehearted*.” She gestured toward the journal pages. “And when I read that, I'd hoped I misunderstood.”

Drax scrubbed his hand over his face. “The morning we were last together, I learned that the *Bravehearted* never made it to the port in Cauldernon. I jumped on the first vessel leaving the docks in search of them, but the trip amounted to nothing. We never even came close to finding the ship, Captain Barbarosa, or my father.”

“I'm so sorry.” Her heart constricted with the knowledge that Terrem Attir was dead.

Silwen placed the knife down on the table. Giving in to her initial urge, she crossed the distance between them quickly and wrapped her arms low around his waist, pressing her cheek against his chest. The smell of the ocean mingled with the slight scent of sweat, bringing back a deluge of memories. Memories of sounds and images treaded vividly across her mind.

The close proximity of his body was driving her to distraction, so Silwen closed her eyes and tried to focus on something else.

Drax's father -- dead. Unbelievable! Terrem Attir had never been the type of man to succumb to anything, and she'd always thought he'd stare death right in the face and tell it to come back later. But if even he couldn't stand up to the forces of nature, what chance did any of them have?

“Want to take another stab at that question?” Drax asked, his husky voice shattering her thoughts.

“What question?”

He placed a soft kiss on her temple, sending a wave of desire rushing through her body. “You know what question.”

“Ah.” She cleared her throat. “That one.”

“And don't say no again. I won't believe you.” He placed his hands on her hips and held her tightly to him, his fingers swirling in slow, sensual circles. The sensation penetrated right through her clothes and made her shudder in anticipation.

“Why did you really come here?” she asked, avoiding his question.

“I need a navigator. That's the truth.” He placed a finger under her chin and exerted pressure until she looked up and stared into his eyes. She wanted to turn away, knowing that if she studied his handsome face much longer, she'd lose whatever common sense she had left.

“I'm not a navigator anymore --”

The rest of her words were lost inside his mouth. Gently, he parted her lips with his tongue, the silky soft texture, the taste of him invading her senses. She couldn't fight her body's reaction to him. His kiss felt too good, and it had been too long since she'd been in his arms. She opened to him, an unexpected groan escaping her throat as their tongues met, teased, explored.

The force of his kisses drove her back, but Drax moved with her, licking and sucking at her lips like a parched man at an oasis. The firm edge of a table stopped her retreat and she pressed herself closer to his chest, losing herself in the embrace.

He hadn't changed at all. Not a bit in six years. She ran her hand over the firm muscles of his arms as his kisses moved lower, down her neck, stopping just above her breasts.

Drax swept her off her feet before she even thought of protesting, setting her down on the table. The wood creaked and her knees spread almost of their own volition, a wave of pleasure rushing to her pussy. He stepped between her open thighs, his mouth clamped hard around a nipple.

Ecstasy flowed through her, wetting her thighs with cream even as she pushed her cunt closer to him, needing more, yearning to know if he'd feel as good now as he did back then, if he could still fuck her with that same ravenous intensity.

*Lacey Savage*

“May I see them?”

It took Silwen a moment to gather her thoughts enough to figure out what he meant. His gaze was fixed on her hard nipples, one soaked with a wet circle, straining through her cotton tunic.

“You've seen them before,” she murmured, undoing the laces of her tunic. As the only serving maid at this hour, Silwen knew no one was likely to come into the kitchen. She wiggled her wings and held them close together, pulled them through the small slits in the restraining garment and tugged the tunic over her head.

His eyes widened, and she gasped with pleasure as his large, weather-worn hands cupped the full weight of her breasts, squeezing gently.

“You're magnificent,” he whispered.

She groped for composure. Her entire body hummed with a sensual buzz, instinctive and intense.

*Damn him for making this so easy.*

“All right,” she said. “You have a navigator.”

\* \* \* \* \*

*What people are saying about*

## **Take on Me**

*Take on Me* is a gripping tale from beginning to end. I couldn't put it down. Lacey Savage keeps you on the edge of your seat with an action packed plot, sizzling sex, and a first rate romance. This sexy, adventurous tale is a must read.

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