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THE HORSE MASTER

By Joely Sue Burkhart

Chapter One

He was running out of time.

Instead of mucking out stalls as he'd done for the last five years, Jake stood inside the shining white marble Palace. Again. Praying frantically. Again, although for different reasons this time.

Please, please, don't send me away. Not yet.

A smartly-dressed servant opened the gleaming mahogany door and inclined his head. "His lordship will see you now."

Aware of the manure and straw encrusting his boots, Jake hesitated a moment, then shrugged. Even if the Lord Steward dismissed him, he would find another way to remain in Shanhasson until the last possible moment. Besides, he

was proud of his work in Her Majesty's Royal Stables, even if that meant tracking horse droppings on the spotless marble.

Jake smoothed the queued black tail of hair falling down his back to his thighs, pleased he decided to oil it just this morning. His hair was unusually long for the Green Lands, but he refused to cut it, even for the High Queen. Although if she were to ask, he would cut it, pride be damned.

Taking a deep breath, he stepped inside the darkened room. The impressive display of wealth and treasures overwhelmed him. Shelf upon shelf of fine gilded books, supple leather chairs that made his carefully oiled saddles look like peddler fare, and a massive desk larger than the tent in which Jake was born. Exactly as he remembered, although the man waiting for him looked as if he aged a lifetime instead of a few years.

Without rising, the Lord Steward gestured to a delicate chair placed before the desk. "Please, take a seat. This discussion is rather. . . delicate. We might be here some time, and I would be pleased to offer you refreshment."

Jake pulled his hair over his shoulder and perched very carefully on the chair. Wincing, he waited for the flimsy frame to explode beneath his bulk, but the chair was made of sterner stuff than it appeared.

The Lord Steward poured liqueur into a crystal glass and held it out to him until he accepted it. The fragile wisp of glass didn't shatter, either, despite his

rough paws manhandling such finery. He didn't dare take a sip. Looking at the whiskey was pleasure enough. The darkly golden liquid reminded him of Her Majesty's hair, twisted and coiled at the base of her neck, gleaming like silk against the fine golden cloth of her riding gown.

Dangerous pleasure, such thoughts, in more ways than one. Heat crackled inside him, a fire he dared not release. Fire enough to destroy this very Palace and all who lived here, including her.

Throwing his head back, the Lord Steward drained his small portion of liqueur and cleared his throat, breaking the silence. "As I said, this is a delicate matter. Whether you accept my proposal or not, I must demand your utmost discretion."

"Certainly, my lord."

"This is not something in which I would normally take a personal interest, but circumstances being as they may. . ." Sighing, the Lord Steward poured himself another glass of liqueur, more this time.

Dismay roiled in Jake's stomach, twisting the fire in his gut toward uncontrollable rage. Not yet, he couldn't bear to leave yet! But the rising heat and violent emotions told him he might have already waited too long. He should have returned to the desert months ago. "I'm to be dismissed, then?"

Startled, the Lord Steward laughed shakily. "Blessed Lady, no. We already owe you great honors that you refuse to accept. We certainly will not dismiss you out of turn."

Relief made him dizzy. At least in the stables he could take care of the horses, even the Queen's own mare. A chance to touch her boot while helping her mount. One last glimpse of her face before he must leave her forever.

The Lord Steward's gaze sharpened on Jake. "Have you given much thought to your future?"

"Serving Her Majesty is an honor, my lord. I wish only to remain in her service as long as possible, in whatever position she can make some small use of me."

"Indeed." The Lord Steward's steely gaze pinned him, weighing and measuring until he came to some decision. "In Her Majesty's name, I would ask a boon from you."

"Anything."

"You haven't heard the task I would set you. You might find it repugnant, and rightfully so." Looking away, the Lord Steward frowned. "From everything I've seen of you, Jakon Rav'tellan, you might very well be the only man capable of this task."

Jake slipped his hand down to the whip coiled on his hip, clutching the leather he lovingly braided himself. Few here in these Green Lands knew his true clan name. Did the Lord Steward know of the fire inside? The danger?

Surely not. If these people knew the monstrous blaze stoking inside him with each passing year, they would execute him immediately.

"The whip, yes. I watched you in the courtyard this morning while Her Majesty's carriage was readied. You knocked a fly from the lead horse's ear with that whip and the gelding never even twitched."

"Of course not," Jake retorted. "A Master would never injure the horses in his care."

The Lord Steward stood, turning to gaze out the window at the sprawling village below the Palace. "Could you do . . . damage . . . with that whip? Intentionally?"

Carefully, Jake set the crystal cup on the desk before he crushed it. "*Iyeh*. I could strip the skin off your back with a surgeon's precision, but I've no taste for such cruelty."

"Not such damage as all that. I meant . . ." The Lord Steward turned back, and Jake recoiled from the man's grief-stricken face. "You must understand. To tell you all you need to know will break a very sacred trust. Long ago, I swore to

never tell another soul this secret, and the one who holds my oath could very well destroy me. She could destroy us all."

"Who?"

"Imagine a young girl on the very edge of womanhood, a high-born lady with a great and heavy responsibility. A rose bud, so very, very fragile, taken by the foulest, darkest creature ever spawned in hell. He abused her, horribly. She endured every torture imaginable. Yet she survived to escape, riding for help and even leading the soldiers back to destroy the evil who took her."

His heart pounding, Jake hardly dared to breathe. He knew this woman and her story. He even played a part, though extremely minor. She was the only reason he lingered instead of facing the fire in his desert homeland.

The Lord Steward dropped heavily into his chair, staring at his hands trembling on the polished wood. "You were the first to see her, the one who raised the alarm. You even stayed behind when the envoy from Keldar left, refusing all reward for your service."

Jake opened his mouth, but no words would come. His throat was closed off, strangled with swirling emotion and remembered agony. He tried to join the Guard and protect her, but they refused him. He had no talent with the short sword, and horses whickered a welcome to him and his whip. The stables were his

home, and if he happened to catch a glimpse of her, even occasionally, well, that was reward enough.

"Everyone believes her to be fully recovered from that terror. And for the most part, she is. She lives every day, performing her duty, surviving, as always. Yet there is a kernel of darkness in her, a chain of evil wound about her heart that she can't dissolve. We killed the filthy bastard who hurt her, but he damaged her. Shadow rejoices in the crippling of the Lady's Daughter.

"No magic, no heirs." Lowering his voice, the Lord Steward glanced about the room despite their privacy, as if he feared eavesdroppers. "No hope. She is considering the unthinkable."

Abdication. He didn't have to say it. Only a Daughter of the Blessed Lady could wear the Rose Crown and protect the land with her magic. Jake knew that if she truly thought she was incapable of ruling, the High Queen would step down for the sake of her people.

"Always doing her duty, always in control, always straining to pretend that she is well and strong, while the pain grows inside her. She believes even a distant cousin with little of the Lady's blood would be better than a broken rose." The Lord Steward raised his gaze back to Jake's. "I won't say her name. But you know of whom I speak, yes?"

Jake nodded. He knew. He dreamed of her every single night. "I would do anything for her."

"Would you hurt her to help her?"

His palms were sweaty, his fingers cramping from the furious grip he maintained on the whip. Releasing it to wipe his hands on his trousers, he wondered again at the Lord Steward's mention of the whip. Of damage. Of hurting. . .

"*La*, no!"

"According to the High Priest, her abuser imprinted on her so strongly, so foully, that she's incapable of. . ." His voice cracked under the strain. "Incapable of normal. . . intercourse with a man. Her magic is trapped inside her, warped by the attack all those years ago. Until she can truly experience love with another, enjoy a man instead of fear him, she'll never rule as Our Blessed Lady intended, let alone continue the bloodline. Our only hope is to find a man who can. . . Who's willing to. . ."

Jake threw himself to his feet, overturning the chair in his haste. "Never! You're asking me to hurt her. *Her!* When I would rather die than lay a cruel hand on even her mare!"

The older man's face was ravaged with grief, his voice harsh. "The bastard used a cat-o'-nine-tails on her."

Jake squeezed his eyes shut, but that didn't stop his mind from picturing what horrors had been done to her. What must her delicate body look like beneath the gorgeous gowns she wore if such a vicious whip was used on her? How had she even survived?

"She still bears the scars, inside and out. The High Priest swears that the appropriate use of. . . of. . . pain will help conquer her terror. That she'll--"

Jake wheezed, struggling to draw breath. Wavering, he wobbled on his feet. Flames danced before his eyes. Sweat poured down his face. Dreams of loving her tormented him often, but this? The risk was too great.

"You're so skilled with the whip, I thought maybe. . ." The Lord Steward made a horrible sound, raw, aching, full of self loathing and despair. "We've tried others, but I'm afraid they're only worsening her phobia."

"Others?" Jake croaked. He imagined her small, glorious body, and some oaf raising leather to her flesh. "Take me to her."

"She can't know that you're aware of this secret," the Lord Steward said urgently, coming around the massive desk. "She doesn't know that I've been looking for someone outside the priesthood. She would be mortified, furious. . ."

"I won't tell her, but--" Jake scrubbed his jaw, his hand trembling. With fear? Or something worse? Something darker. He should have ridden hard for the desert years ago and let the fiery beast consume him.

"I don't even know if she'll accept you. We've been trying different tactics for weeks to no avail. Her patience has run thin. If you can help her, no matter what happens, I beg you to do it. Whatever you desire, I will personally make sure you receive it as a reward."

"I want nothing." Nothing but her. Shame thickened his voice, burned his eyes. He must tell them the risk. If the fire escaped his control, if the beast rose in him, he would do worse than the foul bastard who hurt her years ago. He could easily kill her himself. "I--"

The older man placed his hand on Jake's shoulder. "I've seen small signs over the years that she recognizes you. Only duty and her terrible fear keep her from acknowledging you."

"It doesn't matter. She's untouchable, and I'm. . . nothing. She shouldn't remember me at all."

"Everyone swears you're the finest Horse Master we've ever seen. Use that gift to help her, and all the Green Lands will be forever in your debt."

"Whatever she needs, I'll give her." *Blessed Somma, forgive me.*

#

The Lord Steward led him to the cleanest dungeon he'd ever seen. Jake was torn between wildest hope and darkest recrimination. He was a fool to risk her life just to touch her. The Gods must have a cruel sense of humor. To dangle her, the

High Queen herself, before him, a *dra'gwar* savage from the desert on the verge of annihilating everyone around him in a horrendous inferno.

Even if he managed to control the rising flames, could he truly use the whip on a woman? Let alone her, no matter what the priests said.

Torches flickered on the cold stone walls, reminding him of the dangerous flames inside him. His heart thumped frantically and sweat dampened his shirt. Too close, the fire was too close. He should leave, immediately, before he--

"Remember, don't reveal you know her true identity in any way, unless she tells you herself." The Lord Steward paused before a heavy oaken door. "She agreed to try one last time. One of the Lady's priests is with her now, trying to. . . to. . ."

A muffled sound reached him. A sob. Jake threw open the door.

A red-robed priest hesitated, his arm slung back over his head with a flogger at the ready. Her naked back gleamed in the soft candlelight. Her arms were stretched above her head, tied to bedposts; her ankles spread, tied to the footboard. Scarves were tied around her head, blindfolding her and concealing most of her face.

They made some effort to turn the dungeon cell into a safer, more wholesome place of forbidden pleasure, but even the blazing fire and fine

furnishings couldn't dispel the chill entirely. Shadows pooled in the corners, reminding him of exactly where they were. A dungeon, deep beneath the Palace.

A place of darkness.

The priest's arm moved, preparing to lash her again.

"Stop!" Jake strode to the priest and ripped the flogger from his grasp.

"Somma help me, I'll strip the flesh from your bones if you lay a hand on her again."

Panic shattered through her body at the sound of his voice. She bucked in the restraints, fighting the ropes binding her. "Out! Get out immediately! Father, free me at once!"

Jake ignored the startled priest and even the Lord Steward. All he saw was her. The golden ivory flesh, the brutal scars across her back and thighs. Rage pulsed through him, dark and ugly. That anyone could maim such a gorgeous, proud woman sickened him. She was like a terrified wild horse, beaten into a killing frenzy.

Suddenly, he knew exactly how to proceed. How best to approach her. Whispering as he would to an injured, crazed mare, he eased closer, using the traditional sing-song chant of the Keldari to tame their mounts.

"I am come to conquer. I am come to tame. I honor your pride and courage."

She froze, her head cocking to the side. He placed his palm on her shoulder and she shuddered. This close, he could smell the trademark scent of roses all Daughters were said to bear. Faint, fragile, barely present above the sharp scent of terror rolling from her, tainted by darkness.

"Shhh, *za'hira*, lovely one. Shhh now. I come with rope and whip, with bridle and saddle, with sure hand, strong and full of tenderness. With heart open and mind clear, I command you. I tame you. I claim you. I, Jakon Rav'tellan, am your Master."

He jerked his head at the priest, motioning him toward the door. The priest looked to the Lord Steward for confirmation, and then left Jake alone with her, shutting the door behind them.

"They're gone, *za'hira*. No one shall intrude again."

"Your voice is familiar." Her own was raw, ragged, as if she'd been weeping. Or screaming. The thought enraged him all the more, but he pushed the blackening fury away. Right now, she needed calm mastery, not a savage bent on revenge.

Casting his gaze about the room, he noted a basin on a washstand and a steaming bucket on the floor. He stripped off his shirt and washed his hands, face, and chest thoroughly, then prepared a fresh basin for her.

When he touched her with the warm cloth, she jerked away, straining at the ropes again. "Shhh, *za'hira*. I'm merely washing away the lather the fool brought to your flanks. Then I'll check your hobbles and make sure no injury has come to you. These fools know nothing of taming a mare."

"Do you know who I am?"

Terror sharpened her voice, and shame so thick his own heart felt wounded. "You're a mare in need of a Master. I'm a Master sorely in need of a wild mare to heal and tame."

"Damn Petrand. I'll see him banished from Shanhasson for this. Whatever he told you, I don't want this. You must release me at once."

He gently wiped her back and sides. The bastard hadn't drawn blood yet, but some of the welts were quite angry and red. Trapping her with her own desire for anonymity, he asked, "By whose authority?"

Mulish, she tossed her head, drawing his attention to the luxurious mane coiled at the base of her neck. Sinking his fingers into her hair, he worked it loose until the golden sable silk flowed down her back. He would delight in brushing it for long hours. Every mare enjoyed a good currycombing, even his wild-eyed Queen.

She spoke again, her voice fragile. "Do you know why they brought you here?"

His heart crumpled with this woman's courage. "I need no explanations. If I can please you in this one small thing, then I shall die the happiest of Masters."

"Please," she choked. "I don't want to do this."

"Fear must be faced, not fled. I'm your Master, and I'll turn your head to face the fear. We must gallop forward, fearless and proud, until we trample this fear beneath your hooves."

"Are you going to torture me?"

"Never," he whispered. He trailed his fingertips over the fragile skin of her wrists, checking for chaffing or binding. Silken ropes wrapped in another layer of silk bound her wrists and ankles, luxurious and strong yet soft enough that not a single mark would be left on her skin. "Are you thirsty? Hungry?"

She shook her head, lifting her chin but turning her face away from him. Despite his cursory bath, she must smell the stable odors, and worse, the raw sweat and rising heat of a *dra'gwar*. Did he repulse her? She likely preferred perfumed nobles and baby-soft skin, not massive paws and a great hulking brute of a body.

A small sound escaped her throat. Dread, fear, shame, he wasn't sure which, but he felt as though a bucket of icy water sloshed into his face, dousing the fiery urge to risk all for this chance of heaven.

He couldn't do it. She already suffered so much. How could they ask her to endure his touch, even if he kept the dangerous fire at bay?

"I know you." She jerked her head around, breathing deeply. "I can't see you, but. . . Lady help me, I know your voice. I know your scent."

Her breasts rose and fell more rapidly with her breathing, entrancing him. Blessed Somma, she was perfect. All velvet skin, lush body, silken mane, pride and fire and spirit to excite any man. The scars merely reflected her courage, enhancing her steely core of strength. How he longed to kiss each scar, to erase any lingering hurt and shame she might bear.

Flames licked across his skin.

Desperately, he concentrated on her fear, firming the image of an injured mare in his mind. He must help her through this without forcing himself on her, without the singe of flames injuring her even more. The last thing she needed after surviving such a horrible nightmare was to endure an inferno of blood and violence.

"Come closer."

Eyes narrowed, he hesitated. She must accept him as her Master for this to have any chance of working. While every muscle in his body demanded that he obey his Queen, he couldn't for that very reason.

"Please?"

The quaver in her voice brought him another step closer. She leaned toward him, her lips brushing his chest, her breath fanning his skin. He shuddered,

gripping his hands into fists. His skin felt scorched and too damned tight. Flames curled through him.

"You."

Eyes closed, he fought the dark memories with her. He remembered pulling her from the lathered horse's back, her fingers tangled in the mane so badly he used a knife to cut her free. Naked, bleeding, torn flesh, eyes wild and huge like Somma's full moon above. She clung to him, trembling like a flimsy tent in a sandstorm, but no tears. Not from her.

She wobbled, her head darting from side to side, panic increasing her breathing again. It wasn't the whip she feared, or whatever torture she thought the Lord Steward advised him to employ. It was fear that he knew exactly who she was that sent the spasms of terror screaming through her.

"Shhh, *za'hira*. I work in the stables. Of course I smell familiar. Safe and warm stall, sweet bed of hay."

"Leather," she breathed, swallowing down her fear. "I smell leather."

"*Iyeh*, saddles, bridles, harnesses, braided ropes."

Her voice came out strangled. "Whips."

Uncoiling the supple leather on his hip, he trailed the tassled tip against her cheek tenderly. She jerked back, blowing hard, flanks quivering. When no harsh word or blow came from him or the whip, she edged her head forward, breathing

deeply of the leather and oil he rubbed into all his tack each and every night to keep it supple.

"In the miserable heat of the desert, leather dries up to brittle hide if not properly cared for." He spoke softly, letting her smell and feel the leather against her cheek and chin and mouth. "When a mare is first introduced to restraints, a Master rubs her down with each piece to help her accept his command."

He trailed the whip across her neck, her shoulder, down her arm. Muscles bunched, she strained away to the limits of the ropes binding her. Keeping his voice gentle, his touch even more so, he continued the slow and deliberate stroking. No hands, no pain, nothing sexual, just the leather touching her. He listened to her breathing, watched her body, just as he would a mare.

When she ceased fighting the restraint and the touch of whip, he added his hand. He smoothed his palm down her back, across her shoulders, gently kneading her flesh. "When we're finished here, I'll rub you down head to toe with liniment. My own secret recipe, passed down from my mother's mother. Every ache and pain will disappear, and on the morrow you can gallop miles and miles without stopping."

"Your hands." She swallowed again, shifting beneath his palm. "So big. Powerful. Calloused."

He removed his hand, hot shame flooding his face. He mustn't forget that she was his High Queen, and he, the lowly stable hand, work-roughed hands and all. "Forgive me." Barely, he bit back the words, *Your Majesty*.

"No." She turned her face toward him, dipping her head slightly. "I didn't mean. . . Please don't stop." Her voice quivered, shyness trembling through her body. "It's the first time I've been able to bear a man's touch in years. Your hands feel. . . wonderful."

Her scent swirled, ripened, a rose blossoming in the summer sun. Heating. Immediately, all pretenses of wild mare and Master fled from his mind and all he could see was woman. The woman he dreamed of all these years, maimed more than his darkest worries, yet desiring his hands above any other's.

Tears trickled down her cheeks, wetting the silken scarves blinding her. Crying softly, she whispered, "Blessed Lady."

Horror clutched his heart in a vice, fear that he had offended her, hurt her, worsened her terror in some way.

"Thank you."

He sagged, nearly falling to his knees with relief.

"Touch me, Jakon Rav'tellan. Take away this fear I have." A smile curved her soft, full lips, stoking his blood even more. "Tame me, Master. Please."

Chapter Two

"Trust," he breathed into her ear. Standing behind her as closely as possible without actually touching her, he simply let her feel his heat, the breadth and strength of his body so near. "It all begins with trust."

Restless, she made a sound of yearning. She leaned backward toward his voice, but he carefully prevented their bodies from touching.

"You must trust that as your Master, I'll not let any harm come to you. When I touch you with whip or rope or hand, you must trust my guidance, safe and secure that I will not injure you in any way. If I release your bonds but leave you blinded, you should go when I say, turn at my command, confident in step and full of grace, for I will never lead you astray."

"I'll try." Her voice was faint, still shaking despite her awareness of him as a man. The scent of roses was thick in his nose, pure heady temptation.

Hardening his control and his voice, he retorted, "No try."

She jerked, flinching at his tone.

"We shall do this together, over and over, until you obey me without thought or question. Until you trust me in every way. Until you can hear me shout and curse, until the whip cracks at your ear, and you never so much as twitch. Because one thing you must believe, deep in your soul, *za'hira*. Never will any harm come from my hand to you."

Never. He repeated the vow in his heart, tamping the raging desire down. He must control the fire. He must, or leave her now. This would be his greatest test as Master in his entire life.

He repeated the rubdown with the leather whip, followed by his hands. Massaging her back, her thighs, her calves, he finally untied her ankles. He lifted one foot, rubbing the sole with his thumbs in firm, deep circles, and then gave the other the same treatment.

She stood quietly, listening to him, feeling him. If she were a mare, her ears would have been flickering back and forth intently, but her tail would still be clamped tight to her legs. Calm, but not trusting. Not fully. One foolish move on his part, and she would risk a kick to his head.

"Did you ever see me exercise the horses in the Keldari tradition?"

She tensed, afraid, he was sure, that he was trying to discover her identity.

"I know of what you speak."

"Then you know how we use the whip."

Her breathing quickened and she tugged against his hold on her ankle, one quick involuntary jerk.

"You saw when a Master lays the whip on a horse. Never in punishment. Never to harm. Merely to direct." Only when she fully surrendered to his hold did he finally release her foot and allow her to stand normally. "The brush of leather against the horse's side to turn, a flick on the rump to quicken the pace. Just a touch. A caress."

He stepped away from her, deliberately snaking the whip against the floor in an unmistakable rasp of leather against stone, letting her know it was ready in his hand. She shifted her balance but didn't retreat or fight the restraints. A good sign.

Flicking the whip gently, he let the tip graze her shoulder, a whisper of leather as soft as her hair trailing down her back.

She cried out, flinching away despite the gentle care he gave her so far, but she steadied quickly. Another good sign, a step in the right direction. He flicked the whip again, gentle grazes against her outstretched arm, her calf, the sleek curve of her side, the rounded muscle of her buttock.

She sidled, twisting against the ropes binding her hands, turning toward him, away from him, trying to guess where the whip would land. He judged her health

and state of mind critically, keeping a sharp eye on her even as he continued the soft flicks of the whip on the front of her body.

Sweat glistened on her skin, her breathing short and fast, yet she wasn't panicked. She cried out again, more of a moan, a plea, and he couldn't resist smiling. *Iyeh*, she began to understand. He let the leather drape across her breast as it fell away.

"A caress, *za'hira*. I stroke you with the whip, and I wish my hands were on you instead. I kiss you with leather. I urge you to smolder for me, to ache for my hands and mouth to follow. Do you? Do you recognize my whip as an extension of my body?"

With a sharp crack, he snapped the whip feet away from her. She shrieked, leaping sideways to bolt from the threat. Stumbling, she fought the ropes, crying even as she came to a halt.

He went to her and stroked his hand down her sweaty back, crooning to her softly. "Shhh, *za'hira*, no harm came to you."

She sucked in great sobbing breaths. "I'm sorry. I thought I understood, that I believed. . ."

"All is well. You need this time to learn I am worthy of your trust. I must earn the right to be your Master. We shall take as much time as you need."

He left her side to fill a cup of water for her. She drank thirstily, still breathing hard.

"Rest a moment while I ask for fresh water and food."

"Don't leave me." She dipped her head again, fighting back her ingrained sense of command and leadership. "Please, Master Jakon Rav'tellan, please don't leave me."

"You may call me Jake if you wish." Smiling, he trailed the leather over her shoulder and coiled the tail loosely around her neck. "I won't leave you until you're ready."

#

Jake opened the door and the Lord Steward nearly fell flat on his face inside the room.

"Is she. . .?" He saw her unharmed and calm, not even any blood, and he sagged against the doorway. "I heard her scream. My apologies, Jakon. It appears as though you're doing very well."

Stepping outside into the hallway, Jake left the door open. Alert yet quiet, she waited, head high, body trained on him even though she couldn't see. "I have a few requests for her."

The Lord Steward straightened, relief spreading across his face.

"Absolutely. How may I help?"

Lowering his voice, Jake whispered so she wouldn't hear. "I understand her need for secrecy, but I despise this cell. She has fear and shame enough without being reminded every moment that we're in a dungeon. Can we not retire to her private chambers? It's not as though I would know the difference from hers and the guest rooms."

"Very true. We can certainly remove you both to her chambers. Give me a few minutes to clear the halls and prepare her rooms. Anything else?"

"Fresh water, perhaps her favorite wine, fruit, bread, simple, fresh food. This process will take some time, and I want to be sure she's comfortable."

"Of course, of course." The Lord Steward dropped his gaze to Jake's hip, noted the absence of the whip, the sweat trickling off him in rivulets, and likely the bulge in his trousers as well. Nothing he could do about that, yet. "Do you. . . Have you. . .?"

"She is doing well, my lord, but I refuse to rush her."

"Forgive me, I shouldn't have asked." The Lord Steward's cheeks actually colored with embarrassment. "It's truly none of my business. If she chooses to keep you forever, I'll never say a word against it."

The Lord Steward hurried down the darkened hall, calling for a guard. Jake blinked with shock. Breaking her fear was a dream come true. The possibility of one night with her sent his blood roaring in his veins. But forever?

She was the High Queen of the Green Lands, and he, a savage. *Dra'gwar*, dragon warrior, cursed by Somma Herself to flames and blood and death.

He loved her too much to risk her, to hurt her more than she already suffered. He would treasure this time with her. He would heal her, remove all traces of her fear. If she wished, he would awaken desire in her and use every skill he possessed to pleasure her. And then, he would leave her to her throne. He must.

#

Still blindfolded and engulfed in a heavy cape with her hands bound before her, she walked beside Jake. Halting steps at first, shying at any noise, imagined or real. He used his much larger body to offer the protection she sought, shielding her with his bulk. He guided her down the empty hallway and up an endless flight of stairs, down hallways and up more stairs.

When he didn't rebuff or correct her accidental touches, she nestled closer beneath his arm. She even dared to lay her cheek against his chest while they waited for the Lord Steward to open the last door to her chambers. The more she touched him, the calmer and steadier she became.

Inside, the servants laid out a scrumptious feast appropriately fit for a Queen. A cheerful fire warmed the room with cozy intimacy, and candles covered

every flat surface, casting a soft gentle glow throughout the room. Even her bedcovers were turned down, rose petals strewn in the luxurious satin sheets.

At his raised eyebrow and hard stare, the Lord Steward merely smiled. "If you require anything else, sir, please let us know."

Sir? Since when had he progressed from stable hand Jake to sir? The Lord Steward shut the door behind him, leaving Jake alone with the High Queen in her royal chambers. She, blindfolded, bound and naked beneath the cape; he with his whip coiled once more on his hip and naked from the waist up.

Now he was the one uneasy with dread. The Lord Steward's deference merely increased his disquiet. Combined with his words earlier about her keeping Jake forever. . . What did they expect of him? He couldn't stay with her, no matter how much he longed to. No matter how much he loved her.

She shifted her weight slightly, a subtle reminder from mare to Master that she waited expectantly. Despite the blindfold, she watched him on a deeper unseen level that both pleased and unnerved him.

Soundlessly, he eased behind her, circling with absolutely no hint of whispering cloth or movement to draw her attention. Still, she followed, pivoting on the balls of her feet, body perfectly in tune with his.

How? She couldn't see or hear him.

Uncoiling the whip, he drew it in a whistling circle above his head, deliberately giving her warning. He gave it a sharp, ominous crack in her direction.

A small quake shimmied through her at the noise, but her unseeing gaze never left him. She didn't cry out. She didn't even flee. Instead, she took a hesitant step toward him, her delicate nostrils flaring like a wild mare scenting a predator. "You smell different now. Not exactly different, I suppose, but more."

Fire coursed through his veins, blazing away his unease. Could she truly smell him so well that she sensed his very presence? "What do you scent, *za'hira*?"

"When. . . when I was hurt. . . an elderly Keldari woman gave me a gift. Fire Tea, she called it, filled with all sorts of spices. The priests wouldn't let me touch it until they tested it themselves, but I loved it."

"You did?" Startled, Jake laughed. "Fire Tea is a desert staple. We take the precious few plants that survive the blasting heat, roast the leaves and seeds on a rock, throw them in a pot with a little water, and steep it until it's black and thick enough to eat with a spoon. If it doesn't kill you, we call it tea."

Abruptly he realized exactly what the tea meant, how it was used in the desert, and he choked. Why in Somma's name would the *rashida* give a foreigner tea said to feed the dragon fire within?

"It smelled delicious, roasted spices, exotic and nutty, hot and sweet at the same time. It burned my mouth, my throat, my stomach, but it was a nice heat. It lingered for hours, sometimes days, and kept me warm when the . . . memories . . . came. I saved the last bit for years until the aroma was long gone. I even . . . slept with it, beneath my pillow." She laughed softly. "I imagined it kept the nightmares at bay."

Eyes burning, Jake cleared his throat, trying to find his voice. If only he could have held her through those nightmares. "Did it?"

"Yes, but probably only in my head. My heart." She raised her blinded gaze, giving an impatient toss of her head when she couldn't see him. "You smell like that tea. You smelled the same way when you. . ."

Agitated, she twisted her hands in the ropes. Immediately, he went to her, soothing her with a hand on her wrists. She bowed her head, clutching his fingers between her bound hands. "You held me while someone ran to the Palace. You. I remember. I wasn't afraid in your arms then. When I smelled that tea, I could sleep, because it reminded me of you. I could pretend I was all right. I'm not afraid in your arms now. You. . . You know. Don't you? You know who I am."

Gently, he untied the scarves covering her eyes and unwound them from her head. "*Iyeh*. I knew before I ever stepped foot into that room. Think you I would come tame any other but you?"

"My father wouldn't let me out of his sight for years, until his death, actually. We were so terribly afraid." Her voice broke, tears filling her incredible deep blue eyes. She didn't weep when tortured and raped so cruelly, but she cried now. "I . . . I was pregnant."

Jake trembled, fire bubbling up inside him so violently he bit back a roar of fury. That creature of Shadow, torturing her, maiming her, forcing her to accept its child?

"Father begged me to rid myself of the baby before it could be born. It was half me, though, half the Lady, half the Light of the world. The priests told me nothing happened that wasn't part of the Lady's will. No matter how grim, terrible, or hurtful, the Lady was with me, in my heart, and whatever I chose would be right.

"So I . . . I sent the baby boy north. I couldn't keep him, couldn't bear the memory of his father, but I couldn't have him killed, either. He was innocent, no matter what his father did to me."

She shuddered, pain and horror ravaging her face. "We kept it absolutely secret. I was so afraid. Afraid of what the people would think." Her voice dropped so low he could barely hear her. "Afraid of what you would think. I didn't drink the tea until he was gone. The priests weren't sure what it might do to him, and I . . ."

Jake cupped her chin in his hand and tilted her face up to his. She searched his eyes, looking for condemnation, understanding, forgiveness, for what, he didn't know. All he knew was that he loved her, her courage, her compassion, her strength. He let all that emotion blaze in his eyes, roaring to match the fire burning in his veins.

"I loved that tea because it reminded me of you. Because I loved you."

His heart split open, his stomach rolled, his knees shook. "Why didn't you send for me, then? Blessed Somma, I would give my last drop of water for you! My last drop of blood! Five years. . ."

He jerked her into his arms, clutching her to his heart. His blazing agony-filled heart. Sweat dripped off him, burning his eyes. His skin felt sore and tender, baked by the internal furnace blazing to life in him.

Fire threatened to overwhelm him. Burn her. Forge him into something else entirely. *Dra'gwar*. Exactly why he couldn't stay with her forever. He couldn't risk her.

Breathing hard, he doused the flames, calmed the volatile emotions, locked the raging fire back deep inside where she wouldn't be hurt. He would rather strangle himself with his whip than injure or scare her.

"I didn't feel. . . worthy."

"What?" He winced at his own roar. With effort, he brought his voice and rage back under control. "I'm a Keldari stable hand, Your Majesty. I would wipe your boots and count myself blessed."

"Don't call me that," she retorted just as fiercely. Shaking in his arms, she dropped her gaze. "Please, not you."

He tugged her chin back up, horrified to see tears glimmering in her eyes once more.

"You don't understand," she whispered. "He told me such awful things."

"Who? The tainted monster of Shadow that your soldiers executed on sight? Why would you care what he said?"

She jerked her chin, whirling, trying to flee him. "Because he was right."

#

Grimly, he freed her chin to avoid bruising her, but he locked his fingers into the ropes still binding her wrists. Fighting, stumbling over the cape dragging about her legs, she fell, still kicking and crying.

He forced her flat on her stomach, her arms stretched out over her head, his knee planted in the small of her back. He pinned her while she kicked and screamed, just as he would a mare rejecting the Master's bit. Panting, she finally calmed her struggles, but the sound of her sobs shredded his heart.

"Tell me," he ordered harshly. "Tell me what he said."

"I drew him to me. The taint in me called him. He only did to me what I secretly desired, feeding the darkness already there."

"Filthy lies." He bit off the words, trembling as wave after wave of fury pulsed through him. Talons twisted his gut in agony, fire burned his lungs, and oh, Somma, the wings. Wings fought inside him, stretching him until he feared he would burst.

Roses. Pain. Tears. Her need of him calmed him, brought the fire back to a manageable blaze, and lulled the rising beast for a time. But soon, too soon, the beast would slumber no longer.

"He was right," she said flatly, her voice ragged. "At first, I was afraid, but he didn't hurt me immediately. Not so much. Just enough that I . . . I . . ."

"You enjoy small pain." He said it hard, baldly. Any tenderness in his voice and manner could be mistaken by her as weakness or pity. Now, more than ever, she needed the Master. "Say it."

"I enjoy small pain."

"You enjoy my conquering."

"Yes," she whispered, shuddering beneath him.

"Not as High Queen, but as a woman in your bed, you like a man to be in control. You enjoy a Master commanding you."

Shame washed over her, her scent of roses turning to ashes in his mouth and nose. "Yes."

"You like my whip. My leather. My ropes. Say it!"

"Yes, damn you! Yes!"

"Now I will tell you the truth, *za'hira*. I say this as your Master, as one who treasures every inch of your luscious body, every beat of your heart, every drop of blood in your veins. When I say it, you will believe me." He waited for her response, and when it didn't come quickly enough, he gave a little jerk to the rope binding her wrists. "Am I your Master?"

"Yes!"

"Then say it."

"I believe you, Master Jakon Rav'tellan."

"Just because a woman enjoys small pain, does not give a man any right to give large, harder pain. A Master knows the difference. The monster who hurt you might have recognized this need in you. *Iyeh*, you might have been startled by it. Afraid, even ashamed, at first, young and untrained. A Master would have taught you to find pleasure in your body's needs. No one, I repeat, *no one*, had any right to ruin your trust by hurting you so badly."

She didn't disagree, but he knew from the lingering tenseness in her body, the way she hid her face, that she still doubted.

"Let us trade secrets, *za'hira*. Intimate secrets. I'll tell you something only a lover should know, and you judge me worthy or unworthy of love."

He removed his knee from her back and helped her up so they knelt face to face on the floor. Tenderly, he wiped her tears, smoothing her damp hair back from her face.

"I like teeth," Jake said, allowing some of the raging desire to flare on his face. "I like to be bitten when making love to my woman, and I like to bite my woman in return. I'm not talking soft tender little love nips, but teeth hard enough to leave a mark deep in my woman's skin. I want to bite so hard that I can taste my woman's blood when I spill my seed inside her, and if I'm not bleeding in at least a dozen spots when I finally find release, then I have failed to give my woman enough pleasure."

She stared at him, wide-eyed and barely breathing. Shock flickered across her face. Then her jeweled eyes sparked with desire and a wave of smoldering roses filled his nose.

"Now I ask you this. A woman knows this need in me, and instead of biting my neck or chest or arm, or any where I would greatly enjoy, she eats off my manly bits. Is that my fault? Did my need excuse her actions and give her permission to maim me forever?"

A ghost of a smile softened her face, wiping away the shame and agony she bore all these years. "How about your. . . rump? Is that allowed, Master?"

"You want to bite my ass?" He laughed, joy and love swelling his heart in his chest until it hurt to breathe. "Absolutely, *za'hira*."

Her lips twitched. "Manly bits?"

"I didn't wish to offend the High Queen with my crude language."

At the mention of her title, her face turned solemn again. So much lay between them. Politics, countries, years of suffering. A wasteland as endless as the Keldari desert. Not to mention his own dread curse of fire that would eventually force his departure.

Cupping her precious cheek in his calloused palm, he rubbed his thumb back and forth across her lower lip. "You, my love, could put this incredible mouth on my cock, and bite me, and I wouldn't flinch a muscle. I trust you. I love you. I would surrender my whip and my last saddle to lie with you and break your fear, to give you the pleasure you deserve. I want to feel the rush of your magic on my skin and know that you're healed."

He sighed. Ah, this last part hurt, but he must be honest with her. "And then I will leave you to take a proper royal husband, while I return to Keldar where I belong."

The High Queen lifted her chin, her eyes narrowed. "You must be mistaken. This mare is a one-man horse. If you lie with me, my Keldari Master, then I'm keeping you. Forever."

Chapter Three

His heart bled. "I will always love you, but I cannot stay with you, no matter how much I long otherwise."

She drew back, her regal bearing straightening her shoulders. "And why not?"

"Surely you know why. There are many reasons."

"Name them."

Frustration tightened his jaw. "You're the bloody High Queen of the Green Lands!"

She arched her brow at him haughtily. "Indeed. Is that your only pitiful excuse?"

"I'm a Keldari stable hand."

She let her gaze drop to his bare chest, and the open appreciation gleaming in her eyes was nearly his undoing. "And you're my Master. Mine."

"Your Majesty, please, you can't honestly--"

"Don't call me that," she said, her mouth hardening with determination. "Or if you do, at least believe in my authority. As High Queen, I'll marry as I wish. No one will dare tell me otherwise. Any children. . ." Her chin trembled, her voice catching.

His heart broke, remembering her sorrow, her fear all these years that he would believe her impure or tainted.

"Any children we may have will be legitimate heirs to the High Throne by my blood alone. A little Keldari fire mixed in with the Lady's blood will only strengthen the royal line."

Fire. He shuddered. "You have no idea of what you speak."

"Then tell me."

He clenched his hands into fists on his thighs and bowed his head, fighting the most bitter battle of his life.

"Trust. It all begins with trust." She reached up and awkwardly untied the queue with her bound hands, letting his hair fall loose. She pulled the long black strands over his shoulder, pooling his hair into his lap between them. "Oh, Jake, your hair. It's gorgeous." She picked up a handful and buried her face in his hair, shivering with delight. "It smells like you, like your leather. Shiny, soft, wonderful. Why do you keep it pulled back so fiercely?"

"Control," he ground out. "I mustn't lose control. Ever."

"Masters can never be vulnerable? Masters can never let anyone inside their hearts?"

"You are in my heart, *za'hira*, but if I relinquish control, I could kill you."

"Never," she retorted. "You would never hurt me. I know that." She rubbed the back of her hand against his face. "Can you untie me now? I want to touch you. If that's allowed."

He retrieved a knife from the table and knelt again to slice the silken ropes from her wrists. "You may always touch me, *za'hira*. If I wish to limit your natural reactions, I will tell you so in advance. Or simply restrain you."

As soon as the ropes fell away, she raised both hands to his face. Closing his eyes, he let her touch sink into him, easing the strain burning his muscles. She stroked delicate fingers over his eyes, his cheeks, his nose, his mouth, down his neck. Heaven.

Then she pressed her mouth to his.

Fire. It roared up inside him, searing his throat, bubbling into his mouth, hot and hungry and terrible. He scrambled away, breaking contact with her before it touched her. "Forgive me. I didn't mean to frighten you."

Breathing hard, he tried to push the fire back down inside him, but it stayed just beneath his skin. So hot. His flesh felt blistered from the furnace blazing

inside him. Sprawled back on his elbows, he tried not to move for fear of splitting his skin wide open.

"I felt--"

At her whisper, he searched her face, relieved to see she wasn't afraid or hurt by his violent reaction. Her eyes were dazed, her lips soft, her fingers sliding back and forth over her mouth.

Wings stretched. Fire curled inside him. Painfully hard, he tried to adjust his trousers but there simply wasn't room. Her eyes locked on his groin, her fingers stroking her mouth, and he groaned.

"Kiss me again."

"Somma, *la!* I almost burned you."

"I know."

The pleased wonder in her voice made him grind his teeth. "You mustn't kiss me!"

She reached out her pale, slender hand and trailed her fingers across his chest. Her flesh gleamed against the baked tan of his skin, the darkness never fading all these years in the Green Lands. His head fell back, unable to resist the onslaught of fiery need pouring through him.

"Tell me about the fire."

"I'm cursed," he gasped. "A dragon lives in me. The older I get, the less control I have. Eventually, it will tear its way out me and destroy everything in its path."

She let the heavy cape slide from her shoulders, baring her glorious body for his gaze.

He couldn't seem to catch his breath. So hot, blazing with fever, cooking his eyes in his head, stewing his internal organs. "Didn't you hear me? I'm cursed with fire and death. Someday soon, very soon, I'll transform into a dragon."

"That's very interesting." Instead of fleeing or recoiling in horror, she dared to curl against his sweaty, heaving side, her fingers playing with his nipple. "I'm blessed with the Lady's magic, assuming you'll continue teaching me about love between a man and a woman. Surely my blessing will break your curse, just as your Mastery will break my fear. Besides, you can't tell me all Keldari men turn into feral dragons and kill everyone around them, or your people would have died out by now."

He groaned again, trying to remember what they were arguing about in the first place. "Very nearly. There are fewer *dra'gwar* than ever, and the clans are constantly warring among themselves. Besides, you're not Keldari. You have no defense against my fire, no way to survive the flames. I love you too much to risk you."

"If I were Keldari and you felt this fire coming, what would you do?"

"It's a hard land, *za'hira*, and a hard life. I would give my fire to you and pray you survived. If not, you likely wouldn't survive the blasting sands and misery of constant thirst anyway. Then, if my fire didn't kill you, taking you as a *dra'gwar* mate is even more dangerous."

She kissed his chest, her mouth wet against his sizzling skin. "How would you give me your fire?"

"A kiss," he admitted hoarsely. She dug her teeth into the muscle above his heart, and he collapsed flat on his back. "I won't risk you. You're too precious to me, too important to your people. You've suffered violence already, and a full *dra'gwar* mating is all blood and teeth and fire."

"I like your fire so far. It makes you smell even better, and I liked the heat from your people's tea." She licked up his chest, his neck, nibbling on her ear. "I believe I will like your teeth. When you spoke of your secret, I felt. . ."

He didn't think he could get any hotter or harder, but he did. "Tell me."

"I ached, deep inside," she breathed into his ear. "My breasts tingled, heavy and aching. For you. And then I felt a pool of cool, pure water welling up inside me. The Lady's magic, I think. It's there, waiting for you to love me."

"And what of the blood?" Raped and tortured nearly to death, how would she feel about sharing blood with him? "I have no desire to increase your fear."

Slipping astride his abdomen, she cried out, likely because he scorched her tender flesh. "I'm not afraid. I believe the Lady gave me to you, and you to me. When I needed you the most, when everything looked so grim and I was prepared to give up the Rose Crown entirely, you came. You touch me, and all the darkness and fears disappear."

She leaned down, holding his gaze with her own. "I've never wanted anyone the way I want you." Lightly, she brushed her lips against his. "I've never loved anyone the way I love you. If the unthinkable happens and I do die for some reason, then I'd rather die with you, fighting for you, then live alone for years and years, dying a little more each day. I've done that for five years, Jakon Rav'tellan. I'm done with cowering, hiding, and waiting. I want you, Master, and I'm going to keep you. Make me your dragon mate, whatever it takes."

#

Writhing flames surged inside him, engulfing his heart and mind and soul. He opened his mouth and sealed his lips over hers, burying his hands in her hair to hold her close.

Fire raged, pouring from his mouth into hers, bursting from his pores. His skin roasted, his flesh baked, fiery agony ripping through him. He smelled roasting spices, smoke, and melting rose petals.

He feared for her, but he couldn't stop. He couldn't contain the flames any longer. All he could do was hold her, burn with her, and pray to the Lady, Somma, Blessed Moon above, that She would keep Her Daughter safe.

Her tongue slid into his mouth, flooding him with crystal cool water to soothe the inferno within. Mercurial silver, the blessed water mixed with his fire, not dousing it entirely, but taking away the punishing agony.

The Lady's power. She was healed. And more, she survived his fire, easily and gladly, if her hungry mouth was any indication.

Fiercest joy swelled in his heart. He sat up, cradling her in his lap. Breaking the kiss, he surveyed her condition. She was just as sweaty as him, now, her hair dark, damp and tangled, her cheeks rosy, her eyes hot with fever. He thought her eyes beautiful before, but now thousands of sparks blazed in the deep blue depths, blazing like a midnight sky full of stars.

"How--"

He meant to ask her how she felt, but she pushed forward to kiss him again. She wrapped her hands in his hair, squirming in his lap. When he forced her shoulders back, drawing his mouth away, she moaned desperately. Lost in her need, in the rush of magic and fire, she had one thought only. She reached for the closure of his trousers.

Seizing her hands, he flipped her around so her back pressed against his chest. He lowered her to the floor beneath him, using the weight of his chest to control her. "Patience, *za'hira*. A *dra'gwar* mating has certain rules."

She panted beneath him, but his control calmed her. "Rules? What kind of rules?"

"Position, for one, at least this first time." Surrendering to his own secret need, he locked his teeth on her earlobe and tugged firmly. Her body jolted beneath his, but not with fear or pain. "We mate like dragons. Necks winding sinuously, teeth and fire to dominate and conquer. Are you sure you want to attempt such a thing?"

She pushed her ass back against him, seeking, begging. "I want you. All of you."

Pinning both her wrists to the floor above her head with his left hand, he smoothed his other down her flank and around to knead her buttock. "Do you have any fear of me taking you from behind like this? Speak truthfully, *za'hira*. I'll find another way if this position disturbs you."

Breathing hard, she took more of her weight on her knees so she could push harder against him. "Why would this bother me?"

He gave her more of his weight, effectively trapping her beneath him. "I have ultimate control in this position. I can hold you down and take you as hard as

your body will tolerate. A dragon pins his mate, you see. He must prove he's strong enough to dominate her, or she'll turn on him and kill him."

She laughed roughly, some of the darker sense of shame returning to her scent. "You don't have to worry about that. Master."

"A female dragon will also kill her mate if he doesn't give her enough pleasure. You have nothing to worry about there, either. *Za'hira*." He pressed his mouth to her ear, probing with his tongue. "Imagine me filling you up, as deep as I can go, pounding into you hard and fast, and you can't move a muscle. Does that frighten you?"

Her harsh, pleading cry was answer enough. Her body vibrated against his, singing tension tightening her muscles just from his words. Rising up enough to jerk his trousers open, he hissed at the feel of cool air on his heated flesh. Fire still blazed inside him, sizzling but not punishing, not with her magic gurgling inside him like some sacred font in the heart of the desert.

Leaning back over her, he nudged her knees further apart, slipping his palm down the front of her body to cup her mound. So wet, already, so hot, so open. His fingers parted her easily, carefully testing her entrance. She was tight, as he feared, but he couldn't detect any scar tissue that might increase her pain.

She moaned, a sweet cry indeed. Her body pitched against his, as much as he allowed, grinding herself against the heel of his hand.

"*Iyeh*, ready yourself for me."

Her breath caught in her throat, a strangled cry, aching need humming through her. A touch of fear as sudden pleasure soared inside her, fear he read in her scent, the barest shadow, a dip in the heady roses of spice and musk.

"Shhh, *za'hira*. I'm here, and I allow nothing to harm you. Nothing."

She gathered beneath him, muscles readying for headlong, careless gallop in freedom and joy. Steadied, she whispered, "Master."

"Take your pleasure from me. Let it roll through you, a wave of fire that only I can give. Surrender to it as you surrender to me. Take it, *za'hira*. Now."

She climaxed, shuddering on his hand. Thick with spice, heated roses swamped his senses. Fire cloaked his vision with dark smoke and red haze.

He tugged her hands further above her head, stretching her beneath him. Pressing his mouth to her ear, he shifted against her, gliding deeper between her legs. He tested her, letting her feel his size, his need, without penetrating. He must know if she had any lingering fear.

"Give me something to bite!"

Ah, an unexpected but delightful response to his unspoken question. "Who is your Master?"

"You," she moaned. "Jakon Rav'tellan."

Holding her wrists smashed against the floor, he sank into her slowly. Torture, such agony, with her clenching and shuddering beneath him. Fire roared in his ears, consumed his heart, melted his very bones. "Take my body, *za'hira*. All of me. Take every inch, and trust that I will give you nothing but pleasure."

"Oh, Lady, please, hurry!"

Gritting his teeth, he used a fistful of her hair to draw her with him as he rose onto his knees. He arched her back, wrenching her mouth around to find his throat, even while he remained sheathed inside her.

"Take my blood, *za'hira*. Put your mark upon me. Taste my blood, my love, my fire, and bind yourself to me forever."

Her teeth sank into his throat, clamping with such force he could hardly breathe. Rubbing his left palm over her breasts, abrading her sensitive flesh with the callouses she didn't mind, sliding down her stomach, he held her tighter to him while he pushed deeper. No thrusting, just filling her up, rock hard and straining.

He knew the moment her teeth broke his skin. The moment she tasted his blood. Growling, he let the thunderous wave of fire crash through him, through his blood, into her. Her spine bowed and she convulsed, her mouth and body clenching around him, sucking him down in a tidal wave of need.

"*Iyeh*, my love," he rasped, using his fingers to draw her climax out as long as possible, locking her hips to his. "Give me a deep, hard mark that will never fade."

Shaking, she sagged against him. He tenderly eased her back to the floor, pillowing her head on his left forearm. Seated hard and thick inside her, he breathed heavily, gathering all his control, all his desire, all his fire. "Now, *za'hira*, I will take your body."

She wrapped one hand around his bicep, the other gripping his hand. As soon as she was braced, he withdrew ever so slowly, relishing the torment, her ragged cry, the incredible gripping heat of her body. His fire danced inside her, licking hungrily through her veins, through his, melting them flesh to flesh.

Thrusting deep, he couldn't stop the roar from ripping out of his throat. Flames washed over them. *Somma*, so much fire, so much love. He wouldn't last long. He hammered his hips against hers, fighting to keep a rein on his body.

Teeth sank into his forearm. Fire exploded upward, molten lava rushing through his veins. Fisting his right hand in her hair, he jerked her head back, baring her throat in a straining arc. Curling over her, he gripped her neck in his jaws and fought the beast inside him. Fought to keep from shredding open her throat. Blood filled his mouth, and he spasmed, drowning in fire.

Blazing wings unfurled inside him, the dragon screaming with release, and the world erupted in flames.

#

For a moment, Jake feared he slipped his skin entirely. Slowly, though, he realized he was still a man, still buried inside his woman. He crushed her beneath him, but she made no protest until he eased off her to stretch out beside her.

Ah, the cool marble floor was a blessed relief against his steaming skin.

She rolled toward him, but he stopped her with a hand on her chest. He pushed her flat on her back and sat up, determined to examine her for injuries.

Blood trickled from the bite mark on her throat. Her fragile skin already showed bruising, and the imprint of his teeth looked vicious and raw. He leaned down and licked the mark gently, cleaning away the blood.

Fingers scrambling on the tile, she moaned, little aftershocks of pleasure shaking her body against his.

"I should regret such violence done to your precious flesh, but I must admit I love seeing my mark in your skin."

"You touch it, and fire roars through me all over again." She touched the bite she left in his neck, and his eyes rolled back in his head. Laughing softly, she said, "I guess that answers my question. You feel it too."

She lifted her head as though to lick her brand in his flesh, but he kept her pinned to the floor. "Later, you can torment me to your heart's desire, but first, I need to make sure I haven't injured you."

"I'm fine."

He frowned, noting the darkening red skin on her knees and hips. "Forgive me, *za'hira*. The hard marble floor was a most inappropriate way to take you as my mate." He sighed, his heart heavy. "For years, I dreamed of loving you. I knew you'd been hurt badly, so I was determined to lie on my back and let you have your way with me, at least the first time. I wanted to let you accept me at your own speed. Instead, I claimed you like a dragon in rut. After the Shadow you already bore--"

"I loved it." She interrupted, cupping his face in her hands. Her eyes blazed, swirling and sparkling with his fire. Every strand of her hair glowed as if lit with soft golden candlelight. "How could I fear the Shadow with your fire blazing in my heart? I love you."

He pressed his forehead to hers, regret thickening his voice. His heart hurt so badly he couldn't breathe. "My love, my heart, I beg your forgiveness if I hurt you or frightened you in any way. You trusted me, *me*, and I took you as *dra'gwar*. Somma, I could have killed you. I could kill you next time."

She lifted his head and gently nibbled on his bottom lip. Her teeth scraped his skin, a spark to ignite him all over again. "You gave me trust where I had only fear. You gave me love where I had only pain. You gifted me with your blood, your fire, your body, when I knew only suffering and taking and shame. I was broken, Jake. A broken rose, maimed and ruined and afraid, so terribly afraid. And you healed me."

Suddenly, she pushed him over onto his back. Pleased with herself, she sat on his chest and smiled down at him with enough wicked lasciviousness to curl his hair. "I'm going to nibble on some manly bits this time."

Arching his brow, he struggled to keep from laughing. Or groaning, when she wriggled on him and licked her lips with anticipation. "I shall need my whip to keep you in line."

She shuddered. "Oh yes, my Horse Master. Please bring your whip."