



LUST'S SHADOW

By

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Chapter One

"If you are to learn from me, you must dedicate yourself completely to our craft. I will accept nothing less than your very essence." Perrin's voice, as rich and deep as a lion's purr, resonated in the unfurnished marble room lit only by a single muted lantern dangling from the tall ceiling. The mere shadow of his face shown beneath the hood of his black cloak.

Though Livia strained to see the detail, his features eluded her.

"And if I promise, all you know--all your secrets--will be mine?"

"My knowledge--a lifetime of study in Lumeris-noire--shall be yours. I warn you--do not come to me unless you fully intend to accept my will in all things."

"But what if--"

"In *all* things."

Livia watched him carefully. "What assurance have I that you won't use your will to gain illicit favors? What assurance do I have that you won't demand I give up my dignity?"

"If you have dignity, girl, no one can take it from you. As for your other worry, fear not. I have no interest in your feminine wiles. My concern is to pass on my knowledge to a worthy apprentice. Whether or not you prove to be up to the standard is yet to be seen. And you'd best keep your thoughts off acts of the flesh, as you'll need all your strength to endure the education I plan to give you."

Though annoyed by the scathing manner in which he'd replied, Livia felt satisfied by Perrin's answer. Besides, what he offered was something she could get from no one else.

"When shall I begin?" she asked.

"Immediately. You will follow me."

"But you must give me a chance to pack my belongings and speak to my family." Though Livia was often immersed in studies, she loved her family and felt close to them.

"You will write your family a letter that I will have delivered. You may ask them to send anything you require--unless you've already changed your mind?"

"No," she whispered. For the first time since meeting Perrin she nearly panicked. Oh, he'd frightened her from the first with his black cloak, hidden face, and power that seemed to spring from his every pore, but until this moment there had been a chance to escape him. Now, if she followed him deeper into those obsidian tunnels just beyond the open door at the back of the chamber, she would be completely at his mercy--but his knowledge and skill would also be hers for the taking.

"Decide quickly. There are others waiting to accept the challenge if you dare not."

"Yes," she said, her voice sounding like a rasp compared to his magnificent tones. "I accept."

"Before you speak in haste--" He lifted his slender hands and pulled the hood away from his head.

Livia drew a sharp breath, hoping she didn't appear as stunned as she felt. Framed

by long, unkempt sable hair, Perrin's smooth-shaven, hawkish face with its chiseled lips and sharp cheekbones bore the marks of evil. Gleaming black scales covered his forehead and nose to the tip. His wide-set eyes glowed with a pale unnatural green. Only practitioners who had engaged in an illegal ritual in which they gained phenomenal power from masters of Lumeris-noire, called Fiendgens, were marked in such a way.

"I had no idea—"

"Few people do. As you can imagine, the Overlord doesn't advertise that his strongest defense against evil is associated with evil itself."

"Do you expect your apprentice to make the sacrifice you did to attain such power?"

"I wish for no one ever again to make the sacrifice I did," he snapped. "That is why I am here with the Overlord. That is why I have helped him hunt down the masters who taught me, and that is why I have decided to pass on my experiences to an apprentice. In the event of my death, I want my knowledge given to a worthy successor, one who will denounce the sort of evil that gave me this face. I feel that person is you, Livia, if you have the stomach to learn from one who has consorted with devils."

Livia knew she should turn and leave, forget she ever saw him, but something in his eyes captured and bound her to him. Though his revelation terrified her, it also made her more curious than ever to know this man who had given their Overlord so many years of loyal service and wielded such power.

Like all great domains, theirs, called Guthdry, was protected by an enormous dome empowered by the Overlord's most trusted practitioners of Lumeris-noire. Before Perrin, their dome had nearly collapsed beneath attacks from Jotamiana City, a domain that had taken over many others and sought to rule their world. His power had strengthened the dome so that even their fiercest attempts to breach it proved futile and they moved on to weaker domains. Perrin had nearly died while empowering the dome, but once recovered, he dedicated his life to serving their domain. His presence still kept them safe from Jotamiana City and others like it. The chance to study with him, learn his secrets, and truly help in the defense of her domain was not something Livia could pass by for any reason.

"I have accepted the position and intend to stand by my decision," she stated.

Without another word, he turned, his cloak rippling like midnight waves, and headed for the door.

Her heart pounding, Livia followed.

Just like chasing after death, she thought.

Perrin guided them down a long corridor, his hand sweeping the smooth granite walls and activating randomly placed illumination stones that dimly lit their path. Livia's heart beat so fiercely she thought it might leap through her chest. A chill rippled down her spine and she flexed her cold fingers inside the oversized pockets of her long black coat.

At the end of the corridor, they stepped through a door to a spiral staircase so deep that Livia's stomach fluttered when she looked down.

Perrin glanced at her. "Something wrong?"

"No."

He continued downward at a mind-spinning pace. Livia became so involved in keeping up with him that she slowly forgot about the steep decline of the staircase. When

they reached the bottom, they continued down another long, winding corridor.

“Is this a tunnel to the other side of the world?” Livia asked.

“I suggest you keep your poor attempts at humor to yourself.”

“Are you always so friendly?”

He paused outside a dome-shaped metal door and opened it, stepping aside for her to pass. Livia walked into a fairly large room decorated in the ancient style of brick and cobblestones. It even had a fireplace, something unheard of for the past several centuries. A couch covered in a worn burgundy throw stood near the hearth, and in the center of the room was a dining table made of black wood with four matching chairs. A bookcase filled with rare paper books took up one entire wall. Most practitioners of Lumeris-noire had at least one paper book in which they recorded personal spells, since they believed part of their spirit transferred through the written word. Livia kept her own two books tucked in the bag slung over her shoulder. Thankfully, she had taken them with her for the interview with Perrin, thinking he might be interested in viewing her written work. He'd asked her many questions, several unrelated to their art, before offering her the position as his apprentice. Livia could scarcely believe her good luck. She knew how many practitioners had applied, hoping for the chance to work with one of the greatest masters of Lumeris-noire living today. Though the ancient art of absorbing power through touch was practiced by many, few became masters. Perrin was considered a master among masters, his manipulation of Lumeris-noire almost mystical.

Livia had spent her life training for the chance to learn from such a mentor, first with her mother, then with her private tutor, Sabina, who had an excellent reputation. Though her tutor had been serious about the art, her likable nature and endless patience made her a pleasant instructor. One minute with Perrin proved he was not pleasant and Livia doubted he was patient. Still, she couldn't resist the chance to learn from him. Only now, trapped hundreds of feet below the earth, her only companion this icy mentor touched by evil, did she begin to question her decision.

“The kitchen is through that door and my room is there.” Perrin lifted a graceful hand and gestured first to the door on their left, then another to their right. He walked to a third directly in front of them. “This is your room. It has an adjoining bath. The lock is voice activated, but you may also bolt the door from the inside, since you seem to have concerns regarding my intentions.”

“I didn't mean—”

“It matters not. As long as you work hard and obey, I couldn't care less what you think of me.”

“I'm going to be here for quite a while, so couldn't we at least try to get along?”

“We will get along. You have no choice, if you want to learn from me. I don't expect you to begin your duties until tomorrow morning. Feel free to better acquaint yourself with your surroundings. I suggest you write a note to your family so that I may have it delivered tomorrow. Feel free to ask them to send any personal belongings you require under my name to the palace, and I shall pick them up during my next meeting there.”

He turned to leave, but Livia stopped him with a hand on his arm. He turned to her sharply and she dropped her hand.

“Where are you going?” she asked.

“To the temple.”

“May I see it?”

“Tomorrow. Now I must attend to personal business and have no time to begin your training.”

He left abruptly. With a deep sigh, Livia entered her room, wondering what she had gotten herself into.

Chapter Two

Perrin sat at the ancient scribe's desk in the temple, pen in hand and his book open to a blank page. He should have been working with a vengeance as his time was running out, yet his thoughts kept drifting to the young woman in his living quarters. Trapped within the gloomy walls of this fortress, he had dedicated his life to Lumeris-noire. It had been years since a mere female had caught his interest, and even then the stirrings had only been sexual.

Livia reached a part of him he thought long dead. His interest had been kindled in her application letter. When choosing his apprentice, he'd insisted that all application letters be handwritten. No computer screens or audio files. Even old fashioned printouts would not suffice. His fingers needed to touch the same paper as his potential student's. He needed to see the strokes of their pens. Only through such intimate contact could he glimpse their souls. He had been instantly drawn to Livia's letter and looked forward to meeting with her above the others he selected to interview. He had saved their meeting for last.

After speaking with the other applicants, one or two of whom would have been adequate, Livia impressed him so much that he found himself unusually anxious when awaiting her reply to his offer. At first he'd rebelled against selecting her, taken aback by the physical attraction he felt for her. Though not traditionally beautiful, the girl's lovely dark eyes and exotic features--a longish nose and high cheekbones--captivated him. The last thing he needed was an apprentice who sent his pulse racing and stirred him in places he'd rather not think about. He'd questioned her with a ferocity the other applicants had been spared, hoping to intimidate her into faltering.

Unlike several others, she had remained frustratingly calm under his intellectual assault. Yes, he'd sensed her anxiety and even her fear, yet she had mastered both. This was the sort of practitioner worthy of his knowledge, one who could understand its darkness yet not succumb to it. He realized his personal feelings needed to be thrust aside, for this woman was without doubt the vessel into whom he must pour his knowledge. Her final test had been when he'd revealed his connection to the worst evil summoned by Lumeris-noire. Again she rose to the occasion, scarcely flinching at the sight of his half-beast face that had sent men running in terror of a living demon.

A living demon.

Perrin closed his eyes momentarily, as if he could shut away the memories of a past so horrible it still haunted his sleep. Few men had entered hell and returned to the mortal world to tell about it. Perrin had seen. He had felt. He had endured, and none of it had been by choice.

Releasing a pent-up breath, he opened his eyes and began writing, thrusting past thoughts from his mind and focusing on his work.

* * * *

Livia entered the room that would be hers during her apprenticeship. She hadn't expected to share living quarters with Perrin, but thus far nothing had been what she'd

expected. After adjusting the voice activated lock, she glanced around the room, noting it was spacious and appeared comfortable. A touch activated heating unit glittered against the wall by a large bed draped in a white quilt. A plush white carpet covered the stone floor. The granite walls were bare, but a fireplace with an overstuffed chair in front of it lent a homey air to the otherwise cool chamber. A desk unit complete with an updated computer system was built into the wall opposite the fireplace. An old-fashioned ballpoint pen and stationery rested on one of the shelves. This odd combination of modern and archaic once again reminded Livia of the strange occupation she had chosen and the even stranger mentor she had acquired.

With a sigh, she sat at the desk and wrote to her parents. She reassured them that she was well and happy with her decision to become Perrin's apprentice, then listed several of her belongings that she would like them to send. Sealing the envelope, she felt tears well in her eyes. Almost everything she'd written seemed like such a lie. Yes, she'd desperately wanted the chance to learn from Perrin, but now that she was here, she sensed her time with him would be nothing but misery.

She tossed the letter aside, stretched out on the surprisingly comfortable bed and allowed herself a good cry, vowing it would be her last during her time with him. Perrin possessed skills she had spent her life preparing to learn, and she swore to stand up to anything he flung at her, including his icy disposition.

* * * *

Livia rose early the next morning. Seeing no evidence that Perrin had yet awakened, she prepared breakfast and forced herself to eat in spite of her nervous stomach. After pulling on her coat and gathering her tool bag, she decided to find the temple since Perrin, the supposedly perfect example of Lumeris-noire, had overslept.

Outside the house, Livia stood for a moment, glancing from side to side down the seemingly endless corridor. Other tunnels branched off into unknown places and she thought with frustration that it could take her all day to find the temple. Unless....

Livia raised her hand to the wall and after a moment felt a warm tingling against her palm. She smiled slightly and followed the trail of sensation for what seemed like miles until she reached towering, arched double doors. She tapped using the iron door knocker.

"Come in, Livia."

She nearly jumped out of her skin, not having expected Perrin to actually answer. She thought him still asleep in his room. Lord, the man must have risen before dawn.

Beneath her pushing hand the door creaked open and she entered a large stone room, one wall filled with books. Perrin sat at a scribe's desk nearby. The wall across from him contained a complex computer system.

"I was starting to wonder if you'd sleep all morning," Perrin remarked. "Or if you'd have the sense to follow my trail."

"If you think I'm lacking in sense I'm surprised you chose me for this position."

"I can as easily reject you."

"So I should keep my mouth shut?"

His lips twisted into something resembling a smile. "I knew you'd be a fast learner. Come here."

Livia approached and stopped beside him, gazing down at his handwriting on the book's page, noting it was shockingly lovely and precise. His scent--masculine and

woody--filled her with each breath. His thick, ink-black hair bound at his nape so as not to hinder his work, called for her to run her fingers through it, yet she couldn't. Where were these lustful feelings coming from? The man wasn't even fully human. He'd given up that portion of his humanity for the deepest, darkest powers of Lumeris-noire.

"You are familiar with the Stones of the Underworld, are you not?"

"Yes." One of the first lessons her mother had taught had involved the Stones of the Underworld that allowed land folk to mingle with denizens of the sea and use their many resources out of water.

"Please check my work for any inconsistencies."

Livia swallowed and forgot anything to do with sexual attraction when faced with this unexpected task. Her pulse raced, but she took the seat he'd just moved from and turned to the beginning of the book. The very idea of monitoring a practitioner of his level for mistakes was enough to unnerve just about anyone.

Within moments, her self-doubt vanished and she was deeply involved in reading the history Perrin had so carefully recorded. She opened her handheld computer and made notes about any questionable passages. Every now and then she glanced in Perrin's direction. His back was to her as he checked correspondence on one of the computers. She couldn't help noticing the arousing way the dark, silky fabric of his shirt draped the breadth of his shoulders and clung to the sleek muscles of his lean back.

Her physical attraction to him was beginning to annoy her. It was as if he wielded a power over her she had never felt before. Was he somehow using a method of Lumeris-noire to manipulate her emotions? That was utterly ridiculous. The man hadn't so much as given her a second glance. He'd promised to respect her and instinct told her to believe him.

The room was surprisingly warm, so she removed her coat and draped it over the back of the chair. Several hours later, she finished the book. She stood and stretched, her muscles stiff.

Perrin, who had disappeared into an adjoining room, now returned and approached the desk.

"I have a few questions about the text," she said, handing her computer to him.

"Three to be exact."

He glanced at the screen and nodded slowly. "These are not errors, but obscure uses for the Stones discovered by the Fiendgens."

"I see."

Livia paid careful attention as he described--in far too much detail for her taste--forms of watery torture and execution she had until that moment been blissfully ignorant of.

When he'd finished speaking, she held his gaze, looking for any sign of disgust or horror in those strange green eyes.

"The Fiendgen ways are not easy to hear and even more difficult to experience," he said.

It was on the tip of her tongue to ask if such experience was worth the price he'd paid, if dealing in death had truly meant so much to him that he would forfeit his humanity. She refrained. After all, such a question could be deemed impertinent for an apprentice who had experienced his world for merely a day.

"You have other questions?" he asked, his voice soft yet more unnerving than a

bellow.

“Not at the moment.”

“Fine. Come with me. It’s time you toured our realm.”

“Your realm.”

His green eyes flashed. “Make no mistake, Livia, this is your realm for as long as you remain here. There are no guests here. Anyone inhabiting these chambers bears the responsibility that accompanies the privilege. There is great danger if you’re not careful. This is your world now. Never forget it. Remember to bring your coat. The corridors are cold.”

He strode across the room and took his hooded cloak that hung from a hook by the door. While Livia shrugged on her coat, he pulled insulated gloves over his long, pale hands. They moved so gracefully yet with masculine strength that made her long to feel them on her flesh, cupping her face or splaying across her back. He turned on his heel, opened the door, and gestured for her to follow him out of the temple.

Livia fell into step beside him on their way down the corridor that he again lit by swipes of his hand against illumination stones.

“Our domain here below Guthdry is five square miles. There are five ways out. Three lead to Guthdry’s surface and include the staircase we traveled down yesterday. Two exits lead to the Mingling Halls that hold the doors to the oldest, most sacred temples of Lumeris-noire throughout our world.”

Livia thought again how Lumeris-noire was a revered practice, religious in its rituals and beliefs.

Perrin continued, “The doors to the Mingling Halls must be kept locked at all times. Not all practitioners possess the same code of ethics. As you know, many domains are at war and are not above using practitioners to infiltrate their enemies. At the very least there are mischievous races who find it amusing to annoy others.”

“Yes. My mentor had me visit with the Imps on the outskirts of Guthdry’s capital city. It was fun, but their practical jokes can get on your nerves. Their knowledge of the psychological healing powers of our art were amazing, though.”

“Quite. However, the Imps are the least of our worries down here,” he said in a clipped tone.

“I seem to have offended you. Perhaps I shouldn’t have mentioned the Imps. I know Fiendgens don’t get along with—”

He glared at her, but didn’t speak. They continued down the corridor, their breath floating visibly on the chilly air. The tip of Livia’s nose felt like it was about to freeze off and she kept her hands buried in the pockets of her coat, not that it helped much.

Perrin tugged off his gloves and held them out to her.

“No, thank you. I’m fine,” Livia lied.

“Take them,” he ordered.

She did as he commanded and slipped her hands into the gloves. Though far too large for her, they were still warm from his hands. A shock of desire rushed through her when she realized that in a roundabout way his flesh now warmed hers.

Perrin’s hands disappeared into the folds of his cloak.

“I hope you asked for gloves in that letter you sent to your family.”

“I ... actually forgot that.”

“No matter. Send a correspondence when we return home.”

They detoured down several smaller corridors that veered off from the main one. Perrin showed her various supply rooms, libraries, artifact storage chambers, and a wonderful room with a hot spring bath. Finally, they walked a length of the main corridor that had no other doors or passageways. It ended at a square door forged of steel, several shields in the style of ancient warriors beside it. One particularly large shield, polished to a gloss, though scratched and dented from use, hung on the door itself.

"This door leads to one of the Mingling Halls. Tomorrow I will take you to the other, as we won't have sufficient time today. Choose your defense." Perrin extended his hand toward the shields.

Though Livia had trained in the fighting arts of Lumeris-noire, she had thankfully never had to put her skills to actual use. The idea that she might be attacked by whatever dwelled beyond the door both frightened and thrilled her. She had trained her entire life for the chance to expose herself to every form of the art that existed in the world.

Livia studied the shields for a moment. One in particular seemed to call to her. Though oldest in appearance, it radiated power she somehow understood. She rested her hand against the shield and breathed deeply, as she had been taught from childhood. A rush of power filled her--power passed on from every warrior who had held the shield throughout the ages. As it had once protected them, it would protect her on her journey. Though all her other senses were alive, her sense of touch was dulled a bit due to the tingling that accompanied the shield's power.

"You'll grow accustomed to the feeling of its power, and I will teach you how to fight physically, if necessary, while enfolded in the shield's grip," Perrin said. "You've made a good choice in defense. According to legend, that shield belonged to a warrior queen called Siobhan of SeaWay. A woman of great power. I have used that shield often enough to know the legend is true."

"Yes," Livia murmured. "I believe it is."

Perrin touched a newer-looking shield with the face of a tiger worked into the metal.

"Whose shield was that?" Livia asked.

"Adrian's. He was one of the founders of--"

"Our domain. Yes. I know the story. He was one of the most powerful practitioners of our art this world has ever known."

Perrin slid back the door's many bolts then removed a key from his pocket and unlocked it.

Livia had expected the entire world to change the moment she stepped onto the other side of the corridor, yet it looked much the same as the hallway in their domain. Perrin closed the door and locked it, then motioned for her to follow him.

"Seems harmless enough, doesn't it?" he said.

"Yes, actually."

"Don't be fooled, Livia, for a single slip on this side of the door may cost your life."

They continued their journey and Livia noticed that miles now seemed to stretch between doorways. Other hallways branched off from the corridor down which they walked.

"One could get lost here," she said.

Perrin glanced at her. "Until you learn where you're going. Of course, it's

impossible to know every route. One can walk around the world in these tunnels. They run through the oceans and beneath ice and desert lands. Since the dawn of Lumeris-noire practitioners have been building this network.”

“It’s absolutely amazing. We are really connected to every branch of our art in every part of the world?”

“Yes. That is why extreme caution must be used when traveling here. While most branches are open to guests, others allow no trespassers and others still only welcome visitors so that they may torture and kill them. Throughout your time with me, you will learn which doors are friendly and which you should pass by in haste.”

A shiver ran down Livia’s spine. She took his warning very seriously. If anyone knew the wickedness of their art, it was Perrin with his Fiendgen face.

After several moments, Perrin paused in front of a door.

“This leads to the Libidouins’ domain. Though they’re not usually vicious, they often find it amusing to toy with the sexuality of other species. They are a species you might very well meet, as they often wander the Mingling Halls for one reason or another. Remember to keep your guard up at all times.”

Livia knew exactly what he meant. The power drawn from the shield was difficult to penetrate, which accounted for the slight dulling of one’s sense of touch. However if the wearer decided for any reason to step beyond the shield’s protection, the power would vanish.

Throughout the journey, Perrin pointed out several other doors, noting which led to friends and which to enemies. Eventually, Livia grew weary, yet she revealed not a hint of tiredness.

Finally, he paused, his green gaze sweeping the empty corridors. Though his expression didn’t change, she sensed something concerned him.

“It’s time for us to turn back. Would you like to rest first?”

“No.”

His eyes narrowed and he turned, his strides longer and quicker than before, as if he knew how sore her feet and legs were and he was trying to goad her into begging a few moments of relief.

Once back behind the safety of the closed door to their domain, Perrin handed her the key and ordered Livia to lock it tightly. She did so, then turned to him, about to speak. The words stuck in her throat as she stared at him. His eyes were closed, his arms outstretched on either side. His entire body remained stock still, as if his very heartbeat had stopped to accommodate the rush of power that seemed to pulse through the air itself.

Livia had been taught a milder version of this search method, usually enough for her to decide if a room or building had been invaded.

After a moment, Perrin relaxed. His hands dropped to his sides, his chest rising and falling as if he’d run for several miles.

“You were trying to see if anyone followed us back here?”

“Or sent their power after us.”

“It seemed like a strong search. How far did it go?”

“Throughout our entire domain.”

Livia’s eyes widened. “But that--”

“Takes a great deal of practice. I’ll teach you. It requires extreme concentration and excellent physical condition.”

For the first time Livia wondered if she would be able to fulfill his expectations, for as great as her own goals had been for her apprenticeship, his exceeded them. Yes, she was strong, well trained, and had youthful endurance on her side, but the very idea of channeling sufficient power to search a domain that stretched for miles was enough to intimidate any practitioner.

As he checked the bolts and locks on the door, he said, "Eventually you will walk the Mingling Halls on your own, but even then you must swear to tell me if you experience any problem, no matter how slight it might seem. We cannot risk our domain being breached. Is that understood?"

"Yes."

Perrin nodded slightly, then swept down the corridor, Livia close behind him.

By the time they returned to the living quarters she wanted to take a hot shower and curl up by the old fashioned fireplace, doing nothing but watch the dancing flames. Unfortunately, she was even more hungry than she was tired and would have to satisfy her growling belly first.

"I'm heating leftovers," Perrin said. He ran his hand over an illumination stone and glanced over his shoulder at her. "If you'd like some—"

"Yes. Please," Livia said, no longer caring if she sounded anxious. "Would you like help?"

"If we're to share these quarters, Livia, one thing you must know from the start is I don't like sharing a kitchen. Kindly stay out until the food is cooked."

"It will be my pleasure," she muttered, heading for her room. His harsh temperament was worth enduring if he was going to cook dinner while she lounged in the shower.

The first day had gone well enough. Perhaps being his apprentice wouldn't be so terrible after all.

Chapter Three

No sooner had Livia disappeared into her room than Perrin hurried to the kitchen. The dreaded, familiar craving, stronger than hunger or thirst, had been clawing his insides for days.

Those who survived a ritual with the Fiendgens were cursed to spend the rest of their days craving the blood of the demon race. The cravings summoned them back to Fiendgen domain where they paid the full price for knowledge gained from the evil masters of Lumeris-noire. Eventually, they would become a Fiendgen themselves, their humanity lost forever.

Perrin rebelled against this fate with every fiber of his being, yet no matter how he fought, the craving inevitably won.

With trembling hands he unlocked a cabinet by his knee and removed a bottle of Fiendgen blood supplied by the very race who sought to control him. Self disgust rolled through him as he uncorked the bottle, held it to his lips, and gulped the bitter liquid.

After several swallows, the gnawing pain subsided and he lowered the bottle, closed his eyes, and sagged against the countertop. The cravings were growing more painful and harder to control. They came in cycles, worsening throughout the year until he was driven back to the Fiendgens' domain where he would take part in rituals that sickened him.

The time was fast approaching when he would no longer be able to leave the Fiendgens and would become one of them entirely. There were only two ways to break the contract between him and the demon race. One was by death, and the other--well, the other he dared not think about, especially now.

His thoughts drifted to his lovely young apprentice who awaited the dinner he'd promised her. The woman was too stubborn for her own good, yet he respected her refusal to surrender, even to her physical needs. He knew she'd been cold and tired during their long journey in the Mingling Halls. He'd forced her to take his gloves, but had allowed her to travel without rest. Eventually she would learn to ask for her wants and needs. Determination was a useful quality, but she must learn to understand her limits. The better Livia knew herself, the less apt she would be to allow the evil power of Lumeris-noire to corrupt her.

Perrin had avoided taking an apprentice for fear that passing on his knowledge might prove dangerous. Only now, nearing the end of his time, did he agree that he must pass on what he had learned with the hope that his apprentice would continue protecting their domain from the evil that had given Perrin his dreaded face.

With a sigh, Perrin locked the bottle in the cabinet and rinsed his mouth in the sink, trying to rid himself of the taste of Fiendgen blood. Then he began preparing dinner. While the vegetable stew warmed on the heating unit, he sliced bread and brewed tea. Having company during a meal would be strange to a man accustomed to solitary living. Perhaps he shouldn't dine with her, after all, but retire to his room. It would do no good to socialize outside of business, yet even as he tried to convince himself they should

spend their free hours in private, part of him longed to share the meal with her.

Though he hated to admit it, just looking at her made his belly clench and his loins stir with forbidden desires. It wasn't simply her looks that aroused him, but the depth of expression in her dark eyes that reached him in a way he never imagined possible. Not that he would ever act on these unfamiliar feelings, but for some irritating reason he couldn't squelch his attraction to her.

Ignore it, Perrin, he told himself. She is off limits for a thousand reasons, the most important of which is you assured her you would not abuse your position as her mentor.

She had sworn to give herself to him body and soul, and he would only use that surrender to fill her with his knowledge of their art.

He carried the bread and tea to the dining table in the next room. As he lit a fire in the hearth, he heard the water that had been running in Livia's shower stop. Drawing a long, slow breath, he tried not to imagine her standing naked and dripping water on the bathroom carpet, using an oversized towel to dry her lush skin. Though she didn't wear provocative clothes, he had detected the curves of her breasts and rounded hips beneath the loose fitting fabric.

Angry at himself for allowing such lecherous thoughts, he jabbed at the firewood with an iron poker, then placed the tool aside and returned to the kitchen to check on the stew.

* * * *

Her eyes closed, Livia tilted her face toward the warm water flowing from the shower faucet. Soothed yet somewhat refreshed after the journey through the dank corridors, she looked forward to dinner. Hopefully Perrin was a good cook.

Reluctantly, she turned off the water and reached for a thick black towel. After drying off, she wrapped the towel around her hair and rubbed almond-scented lotion over her entire body. While smoothing the lotion over her breasts, the image of Perrin's long-fingered hands cupping and caressing them crept into her mind. No matter how she tried, she couldn't thrust it out. She closed her eyes and brushed her thumbs over her stiffening nipples.

Perrin moved almost like a dancer, strong yet perfectly balanced. She imagined that lean, graceful body claiming hers with unbridled passion. How would his slender lips feel against hers? Would they be firm or soft? Would his kiss be tender or filled with all the passion smoldering in his strange green eyes?

Drawing a sharp breath, she shook her head and opened her eyes, her hands curling into fists. What was wrong with her, having such thoughts about not only her mentor, but a Fiendgen as well? The man was completely off limits in every way and for every possible reason.

Though he'd spent the past decade using his skills to protect their domain, he had still consorted with a race that relished tormenting others. He had bargained with them to gain power and knowledge and such a mistake could never be forgiven. How many innocent people had died at his hands? It was known that unlike normal practitioners of Lumeris-noire, Fiendgens destroyed anyone and anything they drew power from. Though she could well understand why Perrin had turned away from such a ghoulish path, what had made him choose it to begin with? From the moment they'd met, she had sensed such strength in him. It seemed odd that a man like that would surrender to the Fiendgens.

Still, desire for power was a strong lure, and someone with Perrin's natural talent could easily be taken over by his almost godlike gift.

Thinking about Perrin's misdeeds helped rein in her carnal thoughts, though even while she dressed she couldn't quite shake the mental picture of her mentor's hands and lips on her body.

After drying her hair, she stepped out of her room and inhaled the luscious scent of dinner. A fire blazed in the hearth and the table was set, tea and a basket of bread already upon it. Livia knelt in front of the fire, enjoying its warmth on her face. Several moments later, she had the feeling she was being watched. She turned to find Perrin gazing at her from the kitchen doorway, an unreadable expression in his eyes.

A shiver ran down Livia's spine, though whether it was one of fear or lust she couldn't decide. This man frightened her yet for some reason she couldn't overcome her attraction to him.

"I'm about to bring dinner to the table. Please be seated," he said. His soft yet deep tones were quickly becoming familiar to her. Actually, that bewitching, masculine voice was one of his greatest assets--at least from a feminine point of view. It was the kind of voice a woman would love to hear whispering in her ear on a cold winter night.

He disappeared into the kitchen. Livia stood and walked to the table, her stomach no longer growling with hunger--probably because of the butterflies beating away inside it.

Livia, you must get control of yourself right now, she thought. How can you possibly do your job and learn from this man if you're so wrapped up in sexual fantasies? And it wasn't as if her feelings were reciprocated. The cool way Perrin gazed at her and the strictly professional manner in which he spoke proved he had no interest in anything except grooming her to take his place, should anything happen to him.

Guthdry's Overlord had made it plain to all the potential apprentices how greatly their domain's defense relied upon Perrin and his knowledge of Jotamiana City. The inhabitants of Jotamiana City were, in some ways, worse than Fiendgens. At least Fiendgens kept to themselves for the most part. They had no interest in taking over others' domains but seemed content to rule in their underground world, hunting in shadows like assassins and grasping souls offered by those seeking their evil power.

Perrin returned carrying two bowls of delicious smelling stew that made her hunger return in a rush. She dove into hers with enthusiasm. He ate slowly, studying her so carefully that she became uncomfortable.

She placed her spoon down and met his gaze.

"Something wrong?" he asked.

"Why are you staring at me?"

"Out of courtesy. If you would prefer to eat across from someone who deliberately avoids looking at you, I will gladly accommodate."

Damn, the man had a way of twisting everything around. "You call this courtesy?"

"With your lack of respect for authority, I'm surprised you found practitioners willing to teach you anything."

"I don't mean to be disrespectful. It's just--" She shook her head.

"What?"

"Nothing important."

Without further comment he continued eating with those slow, graceful motions that did strange things to her libido.

“Where did you grow up?” Livia ventured, hoping to draw him into the semblance of a normal conversation.

“I have no desire to discuss my past at this time.”

She leaned closer and narrowed her eyes, trying to control the tangle of emotions that ranged from embarrassment to frustration. “Why don’t you want to get to know me?”

“It’s not our duty to--”

“Don’t you care about anything except duty? We’re going to be working together for a long time. Don’t you have any interest in the person to whom you’re giving a lifetime of knowledge?”

He placed his spoon aside and rested his elbows on the table, his fingers creating a steeple over which he stared at her with his otherworldly eyes. “You must forgive me, Livia, if my social graces are less than satisfactory. I have spent a great many years in virtual seclusion of this realm. Prior to that I was a trained killer. My childhood was spent in Jotamiana City, if you must know.”

His response surprised her and struck yet another chord of fear deep in her heart. How had a citizen of their arch enemies become their greatest protector? “Jotamiana City?”

“I had intended to tell you about my past eventually, since it will be important in your studies here.”

“You have piqued my interest.”

“I can well imagine,” he said, a hint of bitterness in his voice.

“Are you going to continue?”

Sighing, he leaned back in his chair. “Now is as good a time as any, I suppose. I was born to a lower class family. Since birth I had displayed an innate gift for Lumeris-noire. At four years of age, I was brought by my parents to a government facility where I was tested. My family then sold me into public service where I was trained in our art. I was among a small group of students who excelled enough to be placed into a secret program that trained elite warriors of Lumeris-noire to not only defend Jotamiana City, but to ruthlessly conquer any lands they wanted. The program included training with Fiendgens. As you know, the only way to accomplish this is to give up part of your soul to them. It doesn’t matter if you choose to give it up or not. If you are given their knowledge, they take their payment. Once you are in their realm, you have no choice but to accept their lessons. They have ways of making you. Ways...” His voice had dropped to almost a whisper, and by the expression in his eyes he was reliving a terrible past. After a moment he shook his head and again met her gaze.

“How old were you?” she asked softly.

“I began my training with the Fiendgens at seven.”

For the first time since meeting Perrin, Livia felt a twinge of sympathy. He was no longer a power hungry monster who had sold his soul to the devil. No wonder he had such a dreadful personality. His entire life had been one of brutal service, first to Jotamiana City, now to Guthdry. They might not be conquering zealots like the rulers of Jotamiana City, but they were still using him as defense--to kill others if necessary and sacrifice himself if the situation demanded.

“I’m sorry,” she said.

His eyes flashed. "You think a killer like me wants or deserves your pity?"

"I didn't say I pitied you. I mean I'm sorry you were forced into such an awful life. How did you manage to change loyalties?"

"Both the instructors at Jotamiana City and among the Fiendgens were experts at destroying human emotions. They kill everything inside their warriors until it no longer matters to them how many people they torture and kill. The only emotion they couldn't crush in me was hatred. Not hatred of my selected enemies, but of my true enemies--them. Every day my hatred of Jotamiana City and the Fiendgens grew until I wanted to lash out at them in the only way I could. By changing sides."

Again his answer took her aback. She had expected him to say something like he couldn't stand any more bloodshed.

A slight smile twisted his finely shaped lips. "Not a pretty answer, is it?"

"At least it's an honest one, but I find it hard to believe hatred is the only feeling left inside you. If that survived, then others have, too."

His eyes narrowed and he shook his head slowly, as if reaching inside himself for the answer to a question that eluded him. "I don't think so. For what it's worth, I regret what I did while under their rule. If I had only found a way to fight them sooner. Perhaps I could have tried harder to take my own life while among the Fiendgens. I--"

"Perrin, you were a child. It wasn't your fault." Impulsively, Livia reached across the table and placed her hand over his where it rested beside his half empty bowl. He jerked a bit, as if scalded by her touch or perhaps the sleeping emotions it roused. He returned her grasp, his hand gently squeezing hers. Their gazes met and she noticed his eyes appeared startlingly human. Emotions churned beneath their surface then disappeared as if they'd never existed. He withdrew his hand from hers and picked up his spoon.

Chapter Four

Livia volunteered to clean up the dinner mess when they'd finished eating. Perrin donned his cloak and gloves, then left the apartment. He walked to the Mingling Hall where he would escort Livia in the morning and stopped in front of a door to the Philztians' domain. He tapped in a secret rhythm and the door opened. The guard poked his equine head into the corridor and allowed Perrin to rest a hand on his nose.

You may enter, the guard's telepathic voice echoed in Perrin's head.

An ancient species, Philztians were one of the first to fully explore the art of Lumeris-noire. These creatures who exuded the characteristics of both horse and dragon usually kept to themselves. With their relatively small domain and no technological expertise, they were relatively safe from domains like Jotamiana City. However they realized that eventually, if such domains continued to take over the world, no one, human or beast, would escape unscathed.

Perrin stepped into a cave so dark that without his Fiendgen eyes, he would not have been able to see his hand in front of his face.

"I'm here for Neih," Perrin told the guard.

You may enter. I will summon her. The guard's cloven hooves thudded against the dirt floor as he led the way out of the cave.

Gleaming black scales covered his powerfully-muscled body, from his head to the tip of his spiked tail. Some found Philztians ugly, but Perrin thought no creatures more majestic than this mythic race.

They stepped out of the cave and into a lush field bathed in moonlight. Several herds of Philztians grazed or stood dozing throughout miles of grass and rolling hills randomly scattered with shade trees. A dark forest loomed in the distance.

The guard nodded. Several moments later, a Philztian covered in pure white scales cantered out of the forest and across the field. She stopped in front of Perrin, her pale blue eyes gleaming in friendly greeting.

Your apprentice has arrived, Perrin?

"As planned. Are you still available to accompany us tomorrow?"

My word is good. My son has agreed to join us. We look forward to meeting your apprentice.

"Thank you again for your generosity, Neih, and thanks to your son, as well."

Perrin bowed from the neck and took his leave of their domain, the guard following close behind him.

On his way home, Perrin couldn't stop thinking about Livia. The physical attraction he felt for her was difficult enough, but tonight when she'd shown him compassion--the first time anyone had ever done so--she'd reached a part of him he hadn't known existed. Even now he could still feel the warmth of her hand on his, could still see the tenderness in her eyes. No one had ever looked at him like that. No one had ever offered words of comfort. When others looked at him, they saw only the pain he caused, never the torture he suffered. Not that he expected sympathy. Perrin felt he

deserved what he got. Trained since childhood to be a creature of destruction, the best he could hope for was release from his violent fate through death.

When he had defected from Jotamiana City, it had been a great loss to his people. Now they would kill him on sight. The only reason the Overlord of Guthdry allowed him to live among his people was because he was their greatest source of protection. And the Fiendgens--well they only wanted to own his soul. Death was his best option and soon he would sink into that merciful oblivion, but not before Livia was properly trained.

She had asked about his life tonight and he had given her partial answers. The rest would come in time if she proved capable of the skills he wished to teach her. She had to be worthy, otherwise all his years of service against Jotamiana City would be in vain.

As he stepped into the house, the delicious scent of Livia's perfume struck him, arousing him and flooding his mind with inappropriate thoughts about his apprentice. Her door was closed and he knew she was asleep behind it, curled in the warmth of her bed with her cheek resting against her pillow. How he longed to touch her face, brush her full pink lips with his.

With a growl of anger he stormed into his room, tore off his clothes, and flung them carelessly onto a chair. After lighting the fire, he walked to the center of his spacious room and began an ancient method of exercise called Breathea-Carni that included stretches and using his own body weight as resistance. It also included movements that were an effective method of self-defense for practitioners of Lumeris-noire and laypeople alike. Perrin usually dedicated several hours to daily exercise. These past weeks, however, as he sensed his time growing shorter, he had spent almost every waking moment preparing for his apprentice and ensuring he left a written record of everything he knew about his art.

He should have been working now, but in his state of mind he needed to expel some of the destructive energy burning inside him. These particular exercises required strong focus that Perrin usually had little trouble harnessing, but tonight Livia kept sliding back into his thoughts.

He stood nearly two hours later, drenched in sweat with aching muscles. Still, he was plagued by his feelings for Livia.

Training her was testing his endurance in a way he hadn't foreseen.

Damn you, Perrin, you must concentrate on teaching her. Nothing else. There is no space in your life for a lover, even if you wanted one.

He didn't want one. At least that's what he had always told himself. Perhaps so many years of solitude had finally caught up with him. Maybe some tiny part of him didn't want to leave this life knowing he had never shared the most basic human emotion with another person--love.

"It's impossible. The potential for that emotion was destroyed in you long ago," he whispered, trudging to the bathroom where he showered in cool water that did nothing to subdue the desire pulsing through him for a woman he could never have.

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Livia stepped into the living room and saw Perrin stretched out on the floor by the fire. At first she thought him asleep, then his hypnotic green eyes opened and gazed at her with such lust that a tremor of desire rushed through her.

Her heart pounded as she approached and knelt beside him. She placed a hand on his chest, feeling the hardness of his muscles beneath the silky material of his black shirt.

Moistening her lips with the tip of her tongue, she unfastened the ties on his shirt with clumsy fingers. Finally, she reached the warm flesh beneath. Her eyes closed halfway and she moaned softly with pleasure, running her hand over his chest, her fingertips brushing his nipple.

With a swift, smooth motion, he pinned her to the floor, his big, steely body covering hers. Livia's pulse raced and her breathing grew ragged. Perrin stared into her eyes, his face so close to hers that she felt his breath on her lips.

"Do you want me?" he said, his voice raw with passion.

"Yes. God, yes," she breathed.

He covered her mouth with a kiss so deep she nearly lost her breath. His firm lips moved gently against hers and he thrust his tongue into her mouth, exploring, teasing, demanding....

* * * *

Livia awoke gasping, a pleasurable ache between her legs and her nipples taut with desire. She sat up and rubbed a hand over her forehead, surprised to find it damp. Her soft nightshirt clung to her perspiring body and her legs trembled with need for a man she could only have in dreams.

"Stop it, Livia," she told herself. *Don't think of him in that way.*

But she couldn't control what she felt for Perrin. He frightened yet aroused her like no man she had ever met. Before tonight, she hadn't considered the pain he might have experienced in the past. She'd automatically assumed he'd been a power hungry practitioner who had made a deal with evil then realized too late how wrong the path he'd chosen. It hadn't occurred to her that he might have been forced.

He'd rebelled against her compassion, yet at the same time had been unable to fully resist it. Realizing that Perrin was not the icy demon she had imagined him to be spurred her interest in him even more.

Before she'd agreed to become his apprentice, she had insinuated he might use his position to demand sexual favors. However she was the one rapidly becoming obsessed with him to the point that she dreamed of touching and kissing him. Even now, the desire to share his bed and feel his naked flesh against hers was almost overwhelming.

She needed to find a way to control her libido before she destroyed her chances of learning from him. No doubt a man like Perrin would not tolerate any sexual advances from an apprentice. She could just imagine the scathing look in his eyes if she attempted to pursue him in a manner she had so self-righteously warned him against.

In spite of how she tried to forget the dream, her body still ached for release. Lying back, she closed her eyes though the room was so dark that all she could see were the burning embers in the fireplace. She raised her nightshirt, parted her thighs, and dipped a hand between her legs. Breathing deeply, she caressed that damp, tender place. Her thoughts inevitably returned to Perrin and it was no longer her touch sending little tremors of pleasure through her body, but his graceful, long-fingered hand pushing her closer and closer to the edge of desire.

Perrin, she thought, her heart hammering and her back arching as waves of ecstasy broke over her. Panting, she lay, physically fulfilled but emotionally empty. If only he was really there beside her. She drifted to sleep, her thoughts still filled with him.

* * * *

The following morning Livia made a point to rise just before dawn. She washed and pulled on warm, comfortable workout clothes, intending to get in a run before breakfast. If yesterday was any indication of what it would be like working with Perrin, she would need to keep herself in peak condition.

She left her room at almost the same moment Perrin, wearing only loose black night pants, stepped out of the bathroom. Livia's pulse skipped and she tried to keep from staring at his lean, sleekly-muscled torso. Dark hair scattered across his broad chest and tapered down the center of his well defined abdominals. Faded scars marked his flesh in many places, but they didn't by any means detract from his beautiful physique. She'd guessed he was well built, but this was even beyond her fantasies. The only way to describe his body was sinfully gorgeous--and unfortunately off-limits.

"You're awake early," he commented.

"I wanted to get in a jog before breakfast."

He studied her carefully, then said, "Give me a moment to dress and I'll join you."

Livia nodded and stared after him as he walked to his room. The black scales on his forehead and nose also extended down the back of his neck and the length of his spine, disappearing beneath the waistband of his pants. A shiver of combined disgust and desire ran through her when she thought about how it would feel to trail her lips over those scales and every inch of his muscular back. What texture did the scales have? Were they hard or soft, rough or smooth? Even when she looked at his face, she often longed to touch his forehead and the tip of his nose, just to satisfy her curiosity.

The idea of sharing morning exercises with him made her both eager and anxious. How was it possible to crave the company of a person who made her feel this nervous? She scarcely had time to think about it before he reappeared, now covered from neck to toe in loose black workout clothes. Not that it mattered. From now on even if he wore a tent she'd constantly think about the sexy body beneath.

In the living room, they warmed up and stretched, then left the house and jogged down the corridors of their domain. Being a tall woman, Livia was a well matched running partner for Perrin. During their run, they discussed their art and he told her about the Mingling Hall they'd be touring that day. When he said they'd be enlisting the help of Philztians, she could scarcely control her excitement. She'd seen pictures of the magnificent creatures but never had the honor of meeting one in the flesh.

"According to your application your healing skills are quite good," Perrin said.

"Yes. I told you I took extra study time with the Imps."

"To repay the Philztians for helping us today, I'll be rendering aid to their sick and injured. I'm not sure how familiar you are with their kind, but the healing aspects of Lumeris-noire are not their strong point. While their telepathic and defensive skills are excellent, their healing skills have progressed little over the centuries."

"I see."

"It will be appropriate for you to join me when I help them, since you're also benefiting from their assistance today."

"I'll be glad to. I'm very interested in learning about them. I've always considered them one of the most beautiful species of our world."

He glanced at her, his lips twitching upward in a slight smile. "So have I."

"Do you help them much?"

“Only when they render me a service. They’re a proud people and often take signs of kindness as charity, something they will not tolerate. They refuse to accept my help unless they give something in return.”

“That’s crazy--”

“I warn you not to voice that opinion to them. They are easily offended and stubborn to the point of stupidity.”

Livia sensed his blunt words were backed by genuine caring for the odd species.

When they returned home, Perrin asked her to join him in the living room to practice Breathea-Carni. That particular exercise provided an important basis for many phases of their art. As they breathed, stretched, and moved into a variety of difficult strength-building positions, Perrin watched her carefully, seeming pleased by her advanced skill. When she had decided to possibly pursue a career in defense, she’d delved into intensive study of Breathea-Carni. Yet even she didn’t possess his finesse or his strength in the ancient art. She told herself that was her reason for being here--to learn from a great master.

After they’d finished, Livia leaned back on her elbows, her legs stretched out in front of her, invigorated and ready for the busy day to come. She drew a deep breath and released it slowly. In spite of the comfortable position, her sweaty clothes were starting to annoy her. A shower was definitely in order.

She glanced at Perrin who sat beside her. Wisps of dark hair clung to his perspiring forehead and neck. A droplet of sweat streaked the side of his face and she had the sudden urge to wipe it away and kiss him, as they’d kissed in her dream. He turned and their gazes met. Though neither spoke, sexual electricity sparked between them and for the first time Livia sensed her attraction to him might actually be reciprocated. As if the thought unsettled him as much as her, they simultaneously broke their gaze.

He stood abruptly and headed for his room.

Sighing, Livia pushed herself to her feet. If Perrin was attracted to her, he certainly knew how to keep control of himself. Not that she blamed him. Their relationship was supposed to be strictly professional, yet that idea in itself was a contradiction. Lumeris-noire was a very deep, emotional art. Teachers and students often spent more time with each other than with their own families. An apprenticeship was probably one of the closest relationships, other than marriage, two people could choose to enter. Perrin seemed determined to keep her at a distance.

Livia showered and dressed quickly, intending to prepare breakfast for them. Unfortunately, by the time she stepped out of her room, Perrin had already left for the temple. She ate alone and then joined him.

At the temple, Perrin was already at work at the scribe’s desk. He looked up briefly when she entered, then returned to his book. Livia glanced at a chair laden with two red blankets and a pair of satchels.

“For our trip?” she asked, resting a hand on the satchels.

“Yes. Please check the bags and make sure I haven’t forgotten anything. One has food, the other healing supplies.”

Livia did as he asked and by the time she’d finished, he stood beside her, draped in his cloak. He handed her an extra pair of gloves, then picked up a satchel and blanket, leaving the other for her.

“As you’ve probably guessed, it will be a long journey today, that’s why we’ve

asked the Philztians to carry us there. We're going to the domain of the Kreindites. I've worked with them often over the past decade and have a strong alliance with their chief. As my apprentice, I want you to get to know them, so that they will learn to accept you as they have me."

She grinned. "It sounds like you're expecting me to take over for you next week."

"None of us lives forever, Livia. The faster you learn, the better for all of us."

His words--or rather the tone of his voice--disturbed her. Was there something he wasn't telling her? Perhaps he was ill, or maybe the Overlord had arranged for him to engage in risky defensive combat.

"Perrin, if there's something you're not telling me--"

"You will learn all you need to know in good time."

"Oh sure. Just pique my interest a little more why don't you?"

"Patience is most important, not only in the study of Lumeris-noire, but in life.

Learn to master your primitive needs and impulses now, Livia."

She bit back a retort, knowing she'd get nowhere in an argument with him. If she studied hard, one day she would be his equal.

She followed him out of the temple. They walked a mile and a half to the Mingling Hall where they again selected their defensive weapon and truly began the day's journey.

"When we enter the Kreindite domain, we must dissolve our defenses, so on the journey home we'll be traveling without them. Keep on your toes."

Livia nodded.

"Tomorrow I will begin continuing your education in self-defense. According to your application, you have reached an adequate level. Of course I'll need to judge for myself by seeing your skills."

"I'm looking forward to learning all I can from you."

While they walked, Perrin asked her many questions about the various systems of Lumeris-noire, concentrating on healing and basic defenses. He seemed satisfied--several times even pleased--by her responses.

Livia realized she was already growing accustomed to him. Just yesterday she would have been a bit unnerved by his questioning, but today she found it a stimulating way to pass the time during their walk. Best of all, she loved listening to Perrin's voice. It was such a deep, soft yet confident voice. Utterly masculine and sexy enough to inspire all sorts of delicious, forbidden thoughts.

When he'd finished his questions, he told her about the Kreindites. Another rather primitive race, they had changed little over the past centuries, but they had effective methods of defense through the use of Lumeris-noire that made them valuable allies.

Eventually, they stopped in front of a door and Perrin tapped on it in a rhythmic pattern. The door swung open and a lovely equine head covered in gleaming black scales poked out. The Philztian guard snorted and glanced from Perrin to Livia.

Chapter Five

Welcome, apprentice of Perrin. The deep voice echoing in Livia's head startled her at first. Though she had communicated with telepaths before and had been expecting the Philztians to speak to her in that way, she hadn't been fully prepared for the sensation.

"Thank you," she said.

The guard stepped back into the blackness of the cave beyond the door and a tall white mare stepped out followed by a lanky colt. Both were white with pale blue eyes, Their cloven feet thudded on the stone floor and their serpentine tails drifted lazily in the air.

Livia couldn't help staring at them. Even holographic pictures hadn't fully captured the magnificence of these creatures. So finely made were they that she couldn't decide whether they were more horse or dragon.

Because we are neither, the female told her. *We are Philztians.*

"I meant no offence--" Livia began.

None taken. We look forward to educating you about our kind and learning about you. I am Neih. This is my son, C'lang.

C'lang nodded his head in greeting.

"This is Livia," Perrin stated. "If it is agreeable with you, I suggest we leave immediately."

A wise idea, Neih said.

Perrin approached her and placed his blanket over her back. C'lang stepped nearer to Livia and she carefully draped her blanket over him.

You're apprehensive, he said in a boyish yet pleasant telepathic voice. *Don't fear, human. I have an easy gait and you will quickly grow accustomed to riding.*

Livia nodded, glad when C'lang was kind enough to bend so she could mount him easily.

Hold my neck for balance, C'lang instructed.

Livia did as he told her, hoping she didn't cling too tightly when she lurched as he rose to his feet. She glanced at Perrin who sat astride Neih and thought how wonderful they looked together, both tall and proud, her white scales a perfect compliment to the dark scales on his face. At that moment she was fully struck by the reality that Perrin was both human and beast. Yet Fiendgens were not kind creatures like the Philztians. Perrin had mastered their evil and rebelled against it, though it must have been painfully difficult. New respect for him washed over her and she began to realize the great man he truly was, even if he didn't see it himself.

They began their journey slowly so Livia could accustom herself to riding. C'lang was a considerate teacher and sooner than she thought possible, they were cantering swiftly down the twists and turns of the Mingling Hall. Two hours later they broke for water and food, which Perrin supplied from the satchel he carried--sandwiches for Livia and himself, oats for the Philztians, and apples and water all around. After lunch, they traveled for another hour and a half before reaching the door to the Kreindite domain.

We will return for you at ten this evening, Neih said. She and C'lang planned to visit friends in a domain farther down the corridor.

After thanking the Philztians, Perrin and Livia entered the Kreindite realm.

"There are no locks or guards on this door?" Livia asked, surprised that Perrin had merely pushed on the door to step inside.

"The Kreindites have a unique method of defense. There is a flower called the Slinking Rose that only grows in their domain. This flower senses when something wishes to do it harm, enabling it to fold its petals in camouflage. Through Lumeris-noire the Kreindites have learned to absorb the flower's power and use it to sense when someone or something wishing to do them harm enters their domain. It is then their warriors attack and capture their enemy."

"What do they do with the captives?"

He shrugged. "It depends on the severity of their crime. Sometimes it's as little as a few days in prison. Other times it's execution. Since entering an alliance with their chief, they have been kind enough to provide us with one of the flowers and trained me in how to best use its power. It is one of our strongest lines of defense for the dome and I will teach you how to keep it running. Obviously that information is secret and to be discussed with no one except me and the Overlord."

"Yes," Livia said, a tingling feeling surging through her. This is what she'd wanted--to use her skills to keep Guthdry safe.

Livia thought over this information as she followed Perrin through a torch lit cave filled with intricate carvings on the walls depicting rulers and practitioners from Kreindite history.

"These carvings are beautiful," Livia commented.

"Kreindites are highly skilled craftspeople. You will see more evidence of this in the chief's village."

When they finally left the cave, they walked through a couple of miles of woods before reaching a field. In the distance stood an enormous wall with tall armed warriors carved into the stones.

"Amazing," Livia breathed. As they neared the iron gates, she noticed two men, even taller than Perrin and twice his weight, standing guard. Other than helmets and plate armor protecting their chest, back, and legs, their bodies were bare. Muscles bulged beneath their alabaster flesh and they each carried a spear.

Upon reaching them, Perrin spoke in the Kreindite language and one of the guards opened the gate, allowing them to pass. Livia glanced around in wonder. The vast stone wall surrounded the entire city. There were many smaller houses, barns, and places of business scattered about the enclosure. There were also taller structures built of stone, probably belonging to the rich. The ground was covered in lush grass except for the cobbled road winding throughout. A particularly large building, the outside decorated with various gemstones, loomed in the center of the city. Perrin pointed to it.

"The chief's palace. Though he and several of the villagers speak our language, you must learn to speak theirs if you are to continue with the alliance. I'll teach you. Once you've grasped the basics, I'll arrange for a Kreindite tutor for you."

"I'm looking forward to it, even though languages have never been one of my strong points."

"I know. I recall seeing that in your application."

Livia wrinkled her nose. "Have you memorized my entire application?" He must have, the way he quoted from it so often, ruthlessly pointing out her flaws, but also her strengths. Yet that's what good teachers did. As much as she was beginning to hate it, she couldn't help appreciating it as well.

"It was my job to learn as much about you as I could, Livia. The apprentice position is far too important to overlook anything." Perrin turned away from her and raised his hand in greeting.

Livia followed his gaze to the vast double doors of the palace that were wide open, revealing the courtyard beyond. A burly man wearing a loincloth, a jeweled headband, and matching wristbands waved in their direction. A long blond braid dangled over one of his broad shoulders.

Once inside, Perrin bowed from the neck. Livia did the same, for she guessed this man to be the Kreindite chief.

Perrin made her introduction in the Kreindite language, but the chief was kind enough to respond in her tongue.

"I am pleased to welcome you to my city," he said in his rumbling voice.

"The pleasure is mine, Chief Hamer."

"Until you give us reason to think otherwise, you are considered a friend and the privileges of your master extend to you."

"Again, thank you."

"I must admit, Perrin, I hadn't expected to see you here today," the chief said.

"You have always avoided our partnering ceremony, though I have said many times it would be good for a man like you. Enjoying yourself with a woman might even bring a smile to your sullen lips. You and Livia will be most welcome guests for the festivities."

Her brow furrowed, Livia turned to Perrin in question and was shocked to find his face had gone pale, his expression tenser than usual.

"I forgot today was the ceremony," he said. "As much as we appreciate your hospitality, we cannot stay for the ceremony--"

"We can't?" Livia asked. "But Neih and C'lang won't be back for hours. What exactly is the partnering ceremony, Chief Hamer?"

"Throughout our domain, men and women join in a celebration with dancing, food, and drink. We seek out possible mates. Many choose to join on this night."

"Marry?"

He chuckled. "Join in bed, Livia. Not all are required to copulate, however everyone present must participate in the festivities. Men and women must seek a partner to dance with and share their food and wine in ritual."

"I think I'd like to witness this." Livia turned to Perrin with a teasing smile. She would love to see the practitioner of ice let go and enjoy himself, with her in particular. This would be the perfect way to explore the attraction between them without either losing face. Using the disguise of a cultural lesson, they could spend an evening as man and woman rather than master and apprentice.

"It is out of the question, Livia," he said. "Unless you wish to join with a Kreindite male."

"I thought you could be my partner--"

Perrin glanced at her with an uncharacteristically stunned expression that she found most endearing. "That would be inappropriate."

“Not if I want to learn more about the Kreindites. Of course we needn't copulate,” she said, glancing at him from the corner of her eye.

“Definitely not.”

Chief Hamer grinned. “I think this is a good idea.”

“You would, old friend,” Perrin said rather sharply.

“At least consider it,” Livia said. “I hate to have spent all those hours traveling here only to leave before really learning something about this domain.”

“There will be many other times to visit. If the ceremony is soon to take place, may I ask you to allow us to see the realm of the Slinking Rose? It is far more important that my apprentice learn about it than a mating ritual.”

“I will escort you myself,” Chief Hamer said, then raised his hand above his head and snapped his fingers. A servant boy hurried out of the courtyard. A moment later an old fashioned motorized coach with the boy at the wheel rolled to a stop in front of the palace. He stepped out and held open the doors for them all.

They drove out of the city gate toward the forest where they left the coach and walked a narrow path deeper into the trees.

“The Slinking Rose only thrives in a clearing in this forest. It is not native to this domain. It came from an ancient island that has since sunk into the sea. The first Kreindites who settled here planted the flower in this clearing and kept careful watch over it. We have continued to ensure that it remains here. Once a Slinking Rose is plucked, it will survive for up to a year, however it will not reproduce. The roots must remain intact for that.”

“The one the Kreindites have given us has no roots,” Perrin explained.

“It is against our laws to allow the flower to breed outside of our domain,” Chief Hamer said.

They reached a clearing with a small pool around which bloomed several large purple flowers.

“Look.” Chief Hamer squatted by one of the flowers and made a striking motion with his hand. Though he didn't actually hit the flower, its petals folded inward, exposing their underside covered in a spiky fur. “Their natural defense. When we absorb their power, as when you take power from the shields before wandering the halls, we are able to magnify it through faultless concentration. Highly effective. They are also difficult to harvest, but with the proper steps, it is possible.”

“They're fascinating,” Livia said.

“You may touch them,” Perrin told her, dropping to one knee. He reached out and ran one of his long, slender fingers over the downy center of a petal. “If you mean them no harm, they allow you to touch them. Be very careful, however. The furred side is razor sharp.”

Livia knelt and caressed several of the flowers, enjoying the velvety sensation of their leaves.

After a moment, the chief said, “We must return to the city. The ceremony will begin soon and I must be present to open it.”

“Thank you for your time,” Perrin said. “Livia and I will leave from here.”

“I would very much like to stay.”

Perrin grasped Livia's arm and, excusing them to the chief, tugged her aside so they could speak privately.

"I don't know what sort of game you're playing, girl, but I have no intention of participating in this ceremony, nor do I want you to take part in it. You are not here to enjoy yourself, but to learn."

"I want to learn," she snapped. "As for enjoyment, a little won't hurt you either."

"What makes you think I would enjoy this ceremony?"

"Maybe you'll hate it, but unless you try it you'll never know. Do I disgust you? If that's the case, then feel free to choose another partner for tonight, though I admit I prefer you to a man I don't know."

"Let me tell you what this involves, Livia. We feed each other with our fingers. We drink from the same cup. And the dancing Hamer told you about isn't that stupid shaking and bouncing while three feet away from your partner like your generation of humans are accustomed to. This is close and extremely provocative. In short, completely inappropriate for us."

She held his gaze. "You are dead set against this?"

"I am."

"Does this have anything to do with what I said to you before accepting your offer for apprenticeship?"

"Whatever did you say?" The sneer in his voice told her he knew exactly what she meant.

"That you weren't to abuse your position for sexual favors."

He laughed. "Your ego astounded me then and it astounds me now. What makes you think I'd want sex from you?"

"I don't. Neither do I want it from you. Like I said, it's strictly to satisfy my curiosity about the Kreindites."

"I see. For the sake of intellectual stimulation you would endure the touch of a demon?"

Livia leaned so close she practically spoke against his lips, her gaze fixed on his, "It's a tough job, but someone has to do it."

His teeth ground visibly and fire shot through his eyes. Again she felt those almost irresistible sparks of sexual tension between them. The sensation combined with his enraged yet lustful expression made her dizzy with desire.

Finally his lips parted and a wicked smile spread across his face. "All right. Never forget, Livia, you asked for this."

"Yes. I did."

Turning on his heel, he stalked toward the chief without looking at her. She followed close behind, her heart hammering so hard she thought it might leap through her chest. She must have been crazy to provoke him in such a way. Yet the thought of surrendering, at least partially, to her passion for him wasn't an opportunity to be missed.

By the time they arrived at the city, the square had been prepared for the partnering ceremony. Torches were assembled to provide firelight when dusk fell and many long wooden tables were arranged, the chief's set on a platform in the middle of the city square. Hundreds of small reddish brown tents littered the grass and the delicious scent of food cooking made Livia's stomach growl. It had been several hours since lunch with the Philztians, and a meal would be most welcome.

"The tents are for visitors to the city or anyone whose home is too small for adequate privacy," the chief explained. "You had best select one now. As you know,

Perrin, once the second part of the ceremony has begun, no one is allowed outdoors, except for several clearly stated exceptions.”

“Which are?” Livia asked.

“To use the washroom, to seek help for a medical emergency, or to leave the domain. Any other reasons must be cleared by a guard. Now I must prepare for the festivities. Enjoy yourselves.” The chief looked pointedly at Perrin, a smile flirting with his lips. “*Both* of you.”

Again Perrin turned to Livia with a wicked grin that she knew was meant to frighten her. She wasn't going to let it. As he strode toward a tent, she followed, wondering a bit about the rashness of her decision. Though she had romantic feelings toward him and sensed he was a good man, the Fiendgens were still part of him. What if he did intend to hurt her tonight as punishment for wheedling him into participating in the ceremony? She shuddered to think of the consequences.

Turning to her, Perrin said softly, “You look a bit pale, Livia. Are you ill, or merely having well-justified regrets?”

“Neither.”

He raised his eyes to heaven. “Just once in your life, I'd like you to tell me the truth. That incessant pride of yours will be your destruction.”

“If you must know, I was wondering if you intended to teach me a painful lesson for what you probably consider impertinence.”

A muscle jerked in his jaw and she thought she detected a hint of sorrow in his eyes, but it faded quickly. “Rest assured, Livia, I will not turn into a full-fledged Fiendgen before your very eyes--at least not tonight. If you have such fear of me, why not find another male to satisfy your curiosity of the ritual? I'm sure you'll have no trouble.”

“Because I don't want to lead anyone on. I want someone who--”

“Feels nothing?” he supplied. “Very wise. In that case, you have made an excellent choice.”

“I didn't mean that. It's just that you've made it plain you have no interest--”

“Such interest would be--”

“Inappropriate?”

“Yes.” He paused outside a tent, ducked his head inside, then stepped away, his lip curled.

“That bad?” she asked.

He grunted in reply and checked in several more tents before reaching into one, pulling out the old, stained blankets, and dumping them outside. He took her blanket and his and arranged them on the tent floor. He then tossed in their packs.

By then, food was being brought to the tables. A guard approached and said the chief had asked Perrin and Livia to join him at the high table. They made their way through the scantily dressed crowd. Many couples were already flirting shamelessly, their bodies locked in sensual embraces, their mouths fused.

“This is like one big orgy,” she said, her lips curled.

He glanced at her in disgust. “What did you expect? This is exactly why I suggested we leave.”

“You're the boss. If you demanded we go--”

“Oh no,” he sneered. “You seemed so adamant about staying that I think you should be indulged.”

To teach you a lesson. He didn't even have to say it. She knew what he meant. Perhaps tonight she would wipe the smug look off his face, because no matter how he appeared, she knew that deep inside Perrin had feelings. Ever since their discussion about his past, she had been thinking about what he'd told her regarding the training that had killed his emotions. She firmly believed if he could hate, then he could love.

"I see no children about, thank goodness," Livia murmured.

"By law they are kept indoors tonight. Anyone under the age of eighteen is not allowed to participate in the ceremony, and those who are must prove they have the financial means to support any offspring that might come of it. Kreindites have very strict codes regarding family and work ethics."

Several members of the chief's council and their mates already sat at the high table, as did a half dozen young women, apparently single.

"Members of the chief's harem," Perrin whispered in explanation. "He relishes the partnering ceremony."

"Obviously." Livia tried to keep the sarcasm from her voice, but didn't quite succeed.

The crowd went silent as the chief stepped out of the palace and strode to the high table. His blond hair was no longer braided, but hung to his waist like a silken veil. He had removed the jeweled wrist cuffs and donned a headband even more ornate than the one he'd worn earlier. An enormous ruby rested in its center and strings of diamonds and sapphires dangled from his temples to his jaw line.

Taking his place at the head of the high table, he lifted a golden goblet filled with wine and spoke in the Kreindite language. No sooner had he taken the first sip than everyone began talking, eating, and drinking.

Livia noted that everyone fed their partner using their fingers. Members of the harem took turns fawning over the chief, feeding him from the bowls of fruit, meat, and sweets. They ran their hands over his shoulders and chest. When one of the women sank to her knees, her head disappearing against his lap, Livia felt a blush rise in her cheeks and glanced away. That was worse. Around the tables, couples were acting in a manner best reserved for the bedroom.

Livia's classic Guthdry upbringing rose within her and she almost demanded that she and Perrin leave after all. Almost. He stared at her with an amused expression that she swore to wipe off his face.

"Ready to go home now, Livia? We can start walking and the Philztians will pick us up on the way."

In response, Livia plucked a ripe berry from the bowl in front of her and raised it to Perrin's mouth. Their gazes locked for several heartbeats before he parted his lips and took the berry from her fingers. The sensation of his lips and the very tip of his tongue against her flesh made her tingle from head to toe. She chose another berry, dipped it in a sticky red sauce and offered it to him. This time when he took it, he held her hand, his tongue sliding up and down her fingers, catching the sauce that had dripped down.

Livia's heart beat out of control. She stared at his tongue and lips, longing more than ever for him to kiss her.

Perrin held a slice of melon to her lips and she took it, surprised by how self-conscious she felt in a situation she had initiated. He fed her again and again. When she lifted her gaze to meet his, she saw he was staring at her lips with enough intensity to

ignite an inferno. With a feather light touch he used his fingertip to trace the shape of her mouth before dropping his hand.

He drew a deep breath, a battlefield of emotions gleaming beneath the surface of his eyes. Livia nearly panicked when she sensed he was about to turn away. She couldn't bear for him to stop touching her.

Stealing the idea from a couple seated at a nearby table, Livia chose a fat berry, stuck it between her teeth, and took Perrin's face in her hands. She leaned so close that he had little choice but to take a bite from the berry. When he did so, he took her face in his hands as well, his touch firm yet gentle. The action of his mouth was far more demanding. He took half of the berry, but refused to let her go. Livia scarcely had time to chew and swallow before his mouth covered hers in a kiss so deep she momentarily forgot where they were. Closing her eyes, she relished the sensation of his tongue caressing hers with long, wet, rhythmic strokes that made her ache with carnal need. Her hands moved from his face to his hair. Sliding her fingers through it, she pulled him even closer. Perrin's arms wound around her, pressing her so near to his rock hard body that she felt his heart pounding against her.

Tentatively she ran her fingertips over his forehead, curious to finally know what those intriguing scales felt like. They were warm, like normal flesh, and surprisingly smooth. Not at all unpleasant.

When the kiss broke, she sat panting, trembling with desire. He glanced at the meal, selected a tender chunk of meat and fed it to her, though her appetite for food had already diminished. She reciprocated, loving the feeling of his tongue, teeth, and lips as he nibbled her fingertip along with the meat.

Livia reached for her wine glass and took a sip of the sweet red liquid. She offered the glass to Perrin. His hand brushed hers as he accepted it and sipped from the same place where her lips had rested. That simple gesture incited her passion even more. It seemed he was enjoying the celebration as much as she was.

Dusk fell and torchlight glowed throughout the city. Music pounded in an ancient rhythm--drums, flute, and string instruments. Everywhere people began dancing, their half dressed bodies gyrating against one another in a manner that resembled lovemaking. Some of the women had discarded their scanty tops, revealing unrestrained breasts decorated with edible black and red paint.

"Dance," the chief ordered in a booming voice. "Everybody dance!"

Perrin turned to Livia with a questioning look.

"The man said dance," she stated, surprised she was able to keep her voice so steady. Just the idea of dancing like that with Perrin created sensations headier than the strongest wine.

Perrin offered her his hand and they stepped down from the platform that was crowded with the chief and his other guests shimmying and rolling their hips. Livia couldn't help laughing at the sheer silliness of the spectacle. She stopped laughing when they reached the base of the platform and Perrin grasped her upper arms, his fiery gaze fixed on her. "You're sure you want to continue?"

"It's okay," she said. "I'm asking for it, remember? Are you a good dancer?"

"Let's find out."

His long-fingered hands rested on her hips, warming and exciting her. Livia braced her hands against his powerful shoulders and was forced to follow his motions as

his legs and pelvis pressed intimately against her.

For a moment the entire world ceased to exist. All that mattered was following the sexy rhythm of this man's lean, hard body. Never in her life had she imagined feeling this way toward someone. Oh, she'd had boyfriends in the past and she certainly had her share of fantasies but nothing like the reality of her emotions toward Perrin. He frightened her, goaded her, irritated her, yet in his presence she felt safe, as if there was nothing he couldn't protect her against. He was brutally honest, a tough instructor, yet incredibly sexy. Until meeting him, she'd only known boys. Perrin was all man.

The music increased in tempo. She felt his hardness pressing against her and knew he was as aroused as she was. Her pulse racing in time with her gyrating hips, she clung to him, her hands sliding over his back and gripping the tense muscles. Perrin's hands moved from her hips to her buttocks, holding her closer. When the song ended, they stared at one another, panting slightly. Livia felt his breath against her lips. Raw passion gleamed in his eyes.

Kiss me, Perrin. Please.

As if sensing her thoughts, he cupped the back of her head and covered her mouth with his. This kiss was even more demanding than the one they'd shared at the table. His tongue thrust into her mouth and he sucked on her upper lip then gently bit her lower. Livia moaned softly, her arms wrapped tightly around his neck. Everything about him--his taste, touch, and scent--turned her into a writhing mass of feminine hormones. To think she had been stupid enough to suggest he keep away from her bedroom.

One of her legs wound around him and she rubbed her pelvis against the enticing bulge in his trousers, hoping to appease the frustrating ache that had her trembling on the verge of something wonderful.

Around them people began disappearing into their homes and tents. The chief and his harem had already left the party.

"Let's go," Livia whispered, grasping both of Perrin's hands and tugging him toward their tent. Inside was just large enough for two people to stretch out. She lay on her back, still clinging to him.

Perrin braced his hands on either side of her head, one of his hard muscled legs resting between hers. She poured all her desire into a single look while she ran her fingers through his silken black hair.

"Perrin," she breathed. "Make love to me."

His entire body seemed to freeze and an absolutely glacial look crept into his eyes. "What do you think I really know of lovemaking, Livia? Fiendgens don't make love. They rape. Each other. Other species. No Fiendgen knows how to make love."

A chill rippled down her spine, but she continued meeting his gaze with confidence. "You're not a real Fiendgen. You're human, Perrin."

"And you think I've learned about lovemaking from humans? No decent human woman would have me. Some have merely wanted to satisfy their perverted curiosity regarding Fiendgens. Is that your reason, Livia? You're curious about the Kreindites' mating rituals, why not Fiendgens? You're curious about everything. It's what makes you a good practitioner, but there is a very old saying among humans. Curiosity killed the cat."

"Then why did you let tonight go this far?" Livia demanded, fighting to keep the hurt from her voice and expression, though she doubted she succeeded. "And don't tell

me it was simply to help satisfy my curiosity.”

“I’m sorry I allowed this, Livia,” he said in a less threatening voice. His anger seemed to fade completely, replaced by another emotion she couldn’t fathom. Sorrow, perhaps? “I apologize for letting it go this far. I should not have agreed to this. I swore you would be safe from me and I meant it.”

“But you haven’t hurt me. You certainly haven’t forced me. If anything I--”

“No. You are the apprentice. I am the teacher. This is my fault. Not yours.”

“You’re attracted to me, Perrin, admit it.”

“If I could feel for a woman, I would feel for you, Livia. You’re beautiful and young. You have a full life ahead of you. Take a long hard look at me. I carry Fiendgen blood. I am wanted for execution by Jotamiana City and I’m only good to Guthdry for as long as my defenses hold.”

“No matter what you might think about yourself, Perrin, you’re worth more than that. I know you are to me.”

“You’ve only known me a couple of days.”

“It’s enough.”

“No it’s not.” He rolled onto his back and stared at the tent ceiling. “We still have time before we meet the Philztians. Get some rest until then.”

Rest. Right, Livia thought bitterly. He was correct. Tonight had been a mistake. Now more than ever she desired her elusive master, but she should have known he’d be unable or unwilling to explore another facet of their relationship. His wounds were too old and deep. Maybe the Fiendgens and the bastards who had trained him in Jotamiana City had destroyed his emotions after all. Perhaps all that was left was a living, breathing tool for defense. If that was the case, then she did pity him after all. Surely even death was better than an existence like his.

Chapter Six

After that night in the Kreindite domain, neither Livia nor Perrin mentioned the partnering ceremony. They worked together with the utmost professionalism. Though they often shared meals and morning exercises, they spoke only of matters pertaining to their art.

Livia's skill and passion for learning exceeded even Perrin's high expectations. He admired her freshness and respected her diligence. As the weeks passed, he realized she had begun to mean more to him than he'd imagined she would. He had expected to train a worthy successor, not look upon his apprentice as a friend--or more.

That night at the partnering ceremony, he had almost gone against his principles and taken her lush young body. He'd wanted her so badly it had been a physical ache. Her taste, touch, and scent were forever imprinted on his mind. Never would he forget the sensation of her body pressed close to his. When she'd clung to him, her soft mound against his aroused cock, he had nearly surrendered to the almost uncontrollable passion inside him.

The way she had tried to conceal her lust by feigning interest in a foreign culture had been absolutely brilliant--the perfect way for both to act on their desires while keeping a clear conscience. However Perrin wasn't young and impulsive like Livia. No matter how much he wanted her, he could not act on a desire that would compromise their professional relationship.

Not only that, she deserved a better mate than a ruthless bastard with Fiendgen blood. She belonged with a man whose background wasn't tainted by evil, for one thing Perrin was certain of was Livia's goodness.

Just a week ago he had discovered that during her rare hours of leisure time she had been visiting the Philztians as a healer.

Already she had mastered the difficult method of searching their entire domain after visiting the Mingling Halls, so he had given her permission to walk the halls alone. He knew that like any good practitioner, she would want to spend as much time in the halls as she could, learning from friendly domains. Though Perrin was glad to find her building strong relations with the Philztians, he was shocked by their willingness to regularly accept her help without "payment". He had often arranged for unnecessary rides from them just to provide care they had proudly--though stupidly--refused to accept without payment.

"You mean they've just been letting you come and help them?"

"Well, it took some persuading."

Unable to contain his curiosity, he'd asked, "How did you manage that?"

"I finally convinced them that friends helping friends isn't charity."

"That's all?"

"That and eating many meals of apples and dandelions."

Perrin snorted with amusement. Apples and dandelions were among the Philztians' favorite foods.

Her patience and kindness touched Perrin in a way he hadn't thought possible.

Sometimes he worried that she was too kind and compassionate to take his place as Guthdry's main defender. Only her skill and determination could save her in the brutal profession she'd chosen.

That concern rolled through Perrin's mind during a pause in recording another volume at his scribe's desk in the temple. When not instructing Livia, he spent hours completing the volumes and checking them over to make certain they were perfect for his successor. He also returned often to the surface of their domain to see that the defenses were strong. Soon he would allow Livia and other defenders to empower them and change the personal rhythms so they could fully control the dome and other defenses, enabling Livia to take his place. Through their concentration and power of Lumeris-noire, they would overtake his waning power over the dome and defenses.

Though he wasn't usually a praying man, he closed his eyes and pleaded for her to keep safe and strong. If only she didn't have to accept the burden he was to pass on to her, but it was her choice. He had no right to make the decision for her, nor had he the right to keep her power from those who truly needed it, just because he was growing attached to her.

He opened his eyes and stood, stretching his cramped limbs. The painful hunger for Fiendgen blood was again overwhelming him. He left the temple and walked home, almost desperate for his evil fix. With all the hours he spent at the temple, it would have been easier to keep a supply there, but he didn't want to taint the sacred place further.

He was surprised to find Livia in the kitchen. It was her day off and she usually wandered the Mingling Halls or visited with her family who sometimes came to the surface chambers for an hour or two. Her travel pack rested on the table and she wore her coat, which was a good sign that she was about to leave.

"Perrin." She smiled. "I was just packing a lunch. C'lang is taking me for a ride this afternoon. Would you like to come?"

"I have work to do, Livia. You know that."

"You work too much, Perrin. Every now and then it's good to take a break."

"I can't afford to."

Shaking her head, she wrapped up a sandwich and slipped it into her travel pack.

Though Perrin usually loved her company, he wished she would just leave so he could indulge in the Fiendgen blood and then get back to work. The time was fast approaching when he would need to tell her the truth, but until then he preferred to keep his problems to himself. Knowing Livia, she would worry--even for the likes of him. She was already burdened enough by her rigorous training. Why add to the stress before it was necessary?

"Are you all right?" she asked, her brow furrowing. "You don't look well. I think you need rest."

"I'm fine. Just go on your trip."

She stepped closer and touched a hand to his forehead, then his cheek. "You're hot and your eyes look funny."

"They always look funny. It's the Fiendgen blood."

"I think I should stay around. I'll cancel with C'lang and help you in the temple. Maybe with two of us working you'll quit early today."

"No you won't." He grasped her arm in one hand, her travel pack in the other, and

firmly guided her to the door. "Go. Now."

"But--"

"My will in all things, Livia." He held her gaze. "That was your commitment, remember?"

"If you were ill, would you tell me?"

"I've lived without a keeper for this long, girl. I surely don't need one now, so out of my sight."

Curling her lip, she snatched her pack from him and stalked out of the house.

He hurried back to the kitchen, tore open the cabinet and gulped the blood. The cravings were becoming painfully intense and much closer together. Before, he could go for nearly a week without the blood but lately he hadn't been able to go longer than four days. Soon it would be three, then two, then one, then he would need to return to the Fiendgens or die.

* * * *

Usually Livia loved her time spent with the Philztians, but today's visit had been tainted by her concern for Perrin. She'd never seen anyone work harder. He rose early each morning and often worked well into the night. With the hours he kept, it was no wonder his disposition was often sour. Today, however, he had looked downright ill and she hadn't liked how feverish he'd felt. If only he trusted her enough to confide in her about his personal life. She was reliable enough to take on the defense of Guthdry, but he wouldn't tell her if he was ill or why he feared thinking of her as anything but his apprentice.

It didn't matter to Livia that he had chosen to ignore the spark that had been ignited between them at the partnering ceremony. She couldn't bury her feelings for him. The longer she worked with him, the more she respected him. Perrin was the strongest person she'd ever known, and not just in his talent for Lumeris-noire. He had overcome a terrible past, dedicated his life to fighting those who sought to ruin others as they had tried to destroy him. He lived in solitude, shunned by those he protected because of the Fiendgen power that enabled him to defend them.

Livia longed to take him in her arms and tell him how she felt, to let him know he wasn't alone anymore. Yet she knew he would have none of it.

Why did he push her away? She'd tasted desire in his kiss. Sometimes when he thought she didn't notice, she found him looking at her with interest that surpassed that of a master for an apprentice.

In spite of his tough training methods and demand for perfection, he seemed to like working with her. Never had she imagined learning so much so quickly. Though she enjoyed the increase of knowledge, the thought that one day this apprenticeship would end saddened her. She didn't want to think about what life would be like away from Perrin.

Her thoughts were interrupted when she turned the corner leading toward her domain and saw a tall figure cloaked in black walking toward her. It wasn't unusual to occasionally meet other travelers in the Mingling Halls, yet something about this figure raised her suspicion.

As if sensing her anxiety, the figure lifted its hand and tugged down the hood, revealing a handsome, almost cherubic face. Gleaming brown eyes met hers and a friendly smile touched his lips. He raised a hand in greeting and Livia did the same.

“Hello,” he said in a pleasant voice. “It’s nice to see somebody. I’ve been walking for over an hour without another soul in sight.”

“These halls can get lonely,” Livia replied.

He pointed at her and winked. “You’re from Guthdry, aren’t you? I can tell by your accent. Usually the only one from Guthdry we see down here is a dark-haired, rather unfriendly fellow. Tall. Pale. Do you know him?”

Livia only smiled. Though this man seemed friendly enough, she had no intention of supplying him with any information about herself or Perrin. For some obscure branches of Lumeris-noire, all that was necessary to gain control over a person was his or her name. Though rare, those attacks were usually simple enough to ward off and Livia wasn’t about to take the risk.

“If you’ll excuse me, I really must be going,” she said.

The man nodded, but as he passed her, he stumbled on a loose stone in the floor. Instinctively Livia reached out to support him and was struck by an awful sensation, as if she’d been dipped in a pool of scalding water.

She gasped and leapt away from him. His eyes now gleamed red and he laughed, a most terrible sound. His cherubic expression turned lecherous and he reached for her.

In spite of the pain still rolling through her, she knocked his hands away and kicked him hard enough to send him sprawling onto the floor. She ran down the hall toward her domain, fully expecting him to follow, but she heard no footsteps behind her. A glance over her shoulder revealed an empty corridor.

Once inside her domain, she bolted the door and, with trembling fingers, turned the key in the lock. She knew he’d attacked her and immediately performed an internal search. Finding nothing wrong, she made a search of their domain. The experience had drained a portion of her power, so by the time she completed the search, she collapsed to her knees. Had her search been adequate? Over the past weeks, she’d had no problem with searching the domain, even if it did require a massive output of energy. Before Perrin had allowed her into the Mingling Halls, he had provided her with intensive search training and checked her work numerous times, never finding flaw in it.

As her breathing slowed to normal, Livia’s confidence returned. If the man she’d met had intended to do serious harm, he would have followed her--or used an attack that would have left permanent damage. From what she’d felt, it was nothing more than a stun. Most likely his intention had been to rob her. Still, on her way home she couldn’t help thinking about Perrin’s warning on the first day of her training. *You must swear to tell me if you experience any problem, no matter how slight it might seem.*

Even though she was certain everything was fine, she should perhaps let him know about her encounter with the cloaked man.

She’d spent a full day and most of the evening with the Philztians, so when she arrived home it was nearly time for bed.

To her surprise, Perrin was stretched out on the couch, a fire smoldering in the hearth. His handheld computer rested on his stomach. Obviously he’d been working late again.

He was deeply asleep and for the first time in weeks some of the tense lines on his face were smoothed away. If anyone needed a good rest, Perrin did. Carefully she took his computer and placed it on the dining table. As she covered him with a blanket, his eyes opened halfway.

“Livia? What time is it?”

“Late. Go back to sleep.” She gently smoothed hair from his forehead and his eyes closed. Seconds later he was asleep again.

She didn't have the heart to wake him and tell him what had happened, so she went to her room, undressed and climbed into bed. Moments later, she drifted to sleep.

Chapter Seven

Livia awoke with a moan, her heart pounding and her entire body throbbing with uncontrollable sexual pleasure. She sat up and kicked away the bedcovers wrapped around her legs.

"What is it?" she panted, standing and pacing the room. Unconsciously she ran her hand over her breasts. The taut nipples were so sensitive that even the feather touch of her fingertips sent ripples of pleasure-pain through her. The tender flesh between her legs ached and pulsed, as if on the verge of climax, yet even when she lifted her nightgown and stroked herself, fulfillment remained just beyond her reach.

"Oh, no," she groaned, her hips squirming in delicious torment. "I can't stand it. This can't be happening. It's a dream--no a nightmare!"

She was about to dive into a cold shower when a guttural moan from Perrin's room drew her attention.

Struggling to control the sensations rolling through her, she stepped into the living room, walked to his door and knocked. "Perrin?"

She heard movement behind the door.

"Perrin!" she repeated, her voice breaking as a wave of pre-orgasmic pleasure rolled through her. Her fists clenched and legs trembling, she sagged against the door and fell in when he opened it.

Perrin caught her before she hit the floor. The sensation of his warm, bare chest and sinewy arms wrapped around her spurred her passion that was already off the scale. His flesh felt as hot as hers and by the thickness of his erection pressing against her through his silky black shorts, he was suffering from the same agonizing state of arousal that threatened to drive her insane.

"Something's not right," she breathed, clinging to him tightly and resisting the urge to writhe against him to satisfy her raging desire.

"If I didn't know better, I'd say it's a Libidouin attack--one of their carnal manipulations of Lumeris-noire." He gasped, running his hands down her back and caressing her buttocks. He thrust her away. "Forgive me, Livia."

"I don't know what it is, Perrin, but I need--" She leapt at him and clung to his neck like a wanton fool. "I want to make love with you. I need you to take me. Now!"

"Livia, this is wrong." He held her at arm's length, his green eyes wild. Sweat misted his face and chest that rose and fell rapidly with each excited breath. "I don't know how it happened, but this has got to be the work of Libidouins. How did they penetrate--"

"Oh, God, Perrin, I'm sorry," she murmured, struck by a horrid realization. "It's my fault. That man ... Oh, Perrin, I can't stand it! I need release!"

"What man?"

"I can't control it!"

"What man, Livia?" he demanded, grasping her shoulders and shaking her.

"The man I met in the Mingling Hall on my way home from the Philztian domain.

Oh!" She panted, squirming, her body aflame. "He stumbled and I ... I caught him. There was pain--like I was on fire. I did a search, P. . Perrin."

"Why didn't you tell me as soon as you returned?" he demanded. "If that was a Libidouin, he must have passed a manipulation to you."

"But I searched--"

"I'll explain later," he said through gritted teeth, the tendons in his neck taut. Muscles in his shoulders, chest, and legs bunched against the strain of unrelenting sexual stimulation.

"How do we stop this? It's unbearable!" she shouted, feeling as if her heart might leap through her chest.

"It's progressed too far to expel. We just have to ride it out, if you'll excuse the term."

"That's not funny!"

"Obviously...." His words trailed off in a desperate groan.

"I can't stand it!" she shouted, tears springing into her eyes.

"We can end it faster by copulating."

"Don't make it sound so romantic," she hissed.

"This isn't romantic. It's manipulation, made worse because even without the fucking Libidouin's intervention I've wanted you so much you haunt my dreams."

Livia stared at him. Somewhere beyond the mind-stealing desire she realized what he had just admitted to, but was it the truth or merely the manipulation talking?

"Please, Perrin!" She clutched his shoulders. "Please. Take me and end this torture for us both."

Battle raged in his eyes for two entire seconds before he took her in his arms and covered her lips in a crushing kiss.

His tongue thrust into her mouth and hers met it with lustful strokes. Moaning, she arched against him.

Perrin traced the roof of her mouth, then sucked on her lower lip. A low growl escaped his throat and he grasped the back of her nightgown. Beneath his forceful tug, the thin material tore.

"Yes, oh, yes," she panted, stepping away just long enough to yank off her ripped nightgown and discard her underpants.

Perrin quickly removed his shorts and strode toward the dresser. He pulled out a contraceptive shield from a middle drawer and rolled it onto his sizeable erection. Heavens, she could scarcely wait to feel it deep inside her!

He's so beautiful, Livia thought, her gaze roaming over his sleek torso and long, steely legs. White scars, signs of his horrible past, marked his pale flesh. Beyond the lustful haze, feelings of tenderness stirred inside Livia.

Perrin's fierce gaze met hers and they stepped toward each other, unable to keep their hands and lips from one another.

Livia whimpered with need and tilted her neck so he could more easily cover it with warm, tender kisses. The sensation of his hair-roughened chest against her supersensitive nipples was almost too wonderful to bear. He bent and ran his tongue across her collarbone then buried his hand in her hair and again claimed her lips with a plundering kiss.

Perrin swept her into his arms, took two long strides toward the bed, and placed

her on it. He knelt beside her and buried his face between her breasts, his hands massaging the soft globes before he took one of the plump nipples between his lips. Livia gasped, passion coursing through her like a bolt of lightning.

“Yes, Perrin, oh yes. It feels so good. Oh, I can't stand it!”

He sucked harder then moved to her other nipple and teased it with tender swipes of his warm, wet tongue.

“Fucking hell,” he whispered between kisses. His long, sleek body covered hers. Bracing most of his weight on his forearms, he gazed into her eyes. “I didn't intend for this. Especially not for you.”

“It's all right,” she said, taking his face in her hands and kissing his lips, then his chin. “I need you so, so much, Perrin. Please.”

She pressed her fingers down the length of his back, relishing the smooth, warm feeling of the Fiendgen scales that marked his spine. Reaching his buttocks, she clutched the taut spheres with eager fingers and thrust her pelvis against him. Her feminine parts throbbed and ached. When the tip of his cock gently prodded her hot, damp sheath, she cried out in pleasure.

“Have you ever been with a man?” he whispered.

“No. But I don't care,” she gasped, wriggling against him. “Just hurry and take me. Fast. Hard. Now! Oh, Perrin, yes!” She cried out as he slid, inch by inch, into her hot, pulsing core. For a brief moment the strangeness of being so filled and stretched by his maleness cleared her feverish mind. She drew a sharp breath and tensed, her fingers gripping the slick flesh of his back. His muscles tightened even more.

“Are you all right?” he rasped, his entire body stock still except for his panting and his heart pounding against her.

“Yes.” She shifted her hips upward.

He groaned and said through clenched teeth, “Livia, sweet darling, don't. I can't control it--”

“Don't try,” she whispered. “Don't even try.”

His eyes closed and his muscles tightened even more with scarcely restrained passion. He began thrusting in a steady rhythm that almost instantly drove her over stimulated body to a breath-stealing climax.

Clinging to him, she throbbed and shook, crying out in mindless ecstasy. As the marvelous pulsations ebbed, her head finally cleared and she fully comprehended their situation. She was lying beneath the man she desired more than anyone in the world, his cock so deep inside her that they melded into one throbbing, lust-driven creature. Livia doubted she could be any happier, except if they had done this without the Libidouin's intervention.

Perrin released a guttural moan and dropped his perspiring forehead against hers. His powerful body trembled with need and his breath came in harsh pants. Still hard inside her, he throbbed with impending climax.

“Livia,” he gasped.

“It's all right,” she whispered, kissing him. She squeezed her inner muscles, dragging another groan from his throat. “Don't hold back, Perrin. Please don't.”

His eyes closed and his face a mask of animal pleasure, he thrust over and over until he came long and hard, his entire body surging into her.

Smiling, Livia held him tightly until he rolled, sated, onto his back. She rested her

cheek against his heaving chest, listening to his heartbeat slow to normal.

His arms encircled her and he squeezed her gently, then said in a stern voice, "We need to talk. You, my dear, have much to answer for."

"Can't it wait until morning?" she ventured.

"I agree that would be best."

"Mmm," she purred, closing her eyes. She expected him to ask her to leave now that the crisis had passed, but he didn't.

Wrapped in each other's arms, they drifted to sleep.

* * * *

Perrin awoke to the unfamiliar sensation of another body pressed close to his. Livia's wonderful scent of floral perfume and natural woman filled him with every breath. The soft cushion of her hair against his face both comforted and aroused him.

Though sleeping with her had been a mistake, he knew that from now until his dying day he would want her beside him, in his bed, sharing his work, his food, his conversation. Still, it could never be.

Closing his eyes, he allowed himself to briefly relish the warm smoothness of her skin and the soft fan of her breath on his chest. Careful not to wake her, he left the bed.

* * * *

Livia awoke in Perrin's bed, encompassed by his scent. The sound of running water in the shower told her where he was.

Last night had been the most horrible yet wonderful experience of her life. Being manipulated by the Libidouin had been painful and degrading, but she could not regret making love with Perrin. She'd wanted him for weeks and now desired him more than ever. If only he had come to her without the Libidouin's twisted use of Lumeris-noire.

Now that it had happened, how would he react? Somehow she doubted he would simply fall into her arms again, yet last night must have made some difference to him. Would he finally see that perhaps they belonged together after all?

She reluctantly left the comfort of his bed. After washing and dressing, she stepped into the kitchen where she found Perrin making tea.

She smiled in greeting.

"Livia. Tea?" he asked.

"Please."

She watched his slender, graceful hands prepare two cups of the steaming drink. In spite of their almost delicate beauty, she knew the strength in his hands and also the tenderness when they'd stroked her so intimately the night before.

Once seated, Perrin stared at her so hard that she resisted the urge to glance away.

"Tell me everything that happened between you and the man in the Mingling Hall."

Livia described the meeting and its effects.

"I searched carefully to ensure--"

"You couldn't have. When Libidouins initiate an attack using Lumeris-noire, the victim has less than three minutes to expel it. After that your power is affected, therefore making any search inferior. If you had come to me immediately upon your return, I could have done a proper search and expelled the attack. Instead it festered throughout the night, infecting me as well."

"I'm sorry. I know that's not enough, but you have my word it won't happen

again.”

“You were warned from the first to tell me about any problem in the Mingling Halls, no matter how small it might seem. You deliberately disobeyed me, Livia. We can be thankful that it was a relatively harmless attack. It could have been far worse.”

“I know,” she said quietly, fresh guilt washing over her.

“I hate to do this, Livia, but I must punish you. From now until I give you permission, your Mingling Hall privileges are revoked. You may not travel there unless in my company. Also, for the next month you will not be allowed to visit the surface and for the next week your free time will be spent in meditation so you may ponder the seriousness of your error.”

Livia nodded, her jaw taut. The loss of so much freedom frustrated her, but it was nothing next to the shame of being treated like a novice. Even worse, she had *acted* like a novice, placing their entire domain in danger.

“Perrin, about last night--”

“We need never mention it,” he replied. “I am sorry for any humiliation it caused you.”

“Other than my foolishness, I wasn’t humiliated. I’ve wanted it, too, Perrin.”

He lifted a sleek black eyebrow, his expression frigid. “Too?”

“You said I haunted your dreams. Don’t tell me you don’t remember.”

“Didn’t you stop to think that I was also under the Libidouin’s power?”

Stunned and more hurt than she wanted to admit, she said, “Then there was no truth to those words? For once be honest with me and admit there could be more between us than business.”

He stared at her for a long moment without speaking.

“I don’t regret making love with you, Perrin. Do you?”

“You’re a lovely young woman, Livia, but master and apprentice is all we can ever be to each other. It’s for the best. Trust me on that. Now I have work to do. Alone. Meet me at the temple in two hours. There are new lessons we need to begin.”

He stood and left the kitchen without glancing back.

Chapter Eight

Two weeks later, Livia found herself immersed in the study of Slinking Roses with an emphasis on how to harvest them. Perrin explained it had been almost a year since the Kreindites had given the Slinking Rose that currently provided part of Guthdry's defenses. Its power would soon be depleted and the Kreindites had agreed to allow them to harvest another flower.

The delicate process of taking one without being hurt by its thorns and without wasting its power required careful manipulation of Lumeris-noire as well as a steady hand with an empowered blade. Perrin had tested her knowledge of the Slinking Rose and even provided simulated practice for the harvest. The actual event would take place two days from now.

Perrin stood over her shoulder, glancing at the test she had just completed on her handheld computer. "Good. No errors. That is important because the next harvest you do will be without my help."

"I'm ready to do it this time," she said with confidence. There was nothing she didn't know about this flower and through intense practice she could now wield the empowered blade with the precision of a highly skilled surgeon.

More than anything Livia wanted to prove to him she was still a worthy apprentice. She wanted to restore his confidence in her ability after that fiasco with the Libidouin.

His discerning gaze swept her. "I believe you are ready, however it's best for me to supervise this time."

Livia watched him walk back to one of the large computers he often worked on, communicating with the Overlord's other defenders and keeping watch on the dome. The play of muscles beneath his black shirt and the curve of his firm backside in his trousers captivated her.

So many nights she lay awake, wishing he was with her, their bodies entwined and hearts beating in unison. Obviously whatever feelings he might have for her weren't as strong as those she had for him. If they were, he couldn't have possibly lasted this long without succumbing to them.

Since the night they'd endured the Libidouin's attacked, neither had mentioned it. They swept it aside, just as they had ignored the partnering ceremony. She had already resigned herself to the fact that they would never be more than master and apprentice, just as he'd said. He had made it plain there would be nothing between them outside of training. With a past so riddled by horror, it was no wonder he didn't know how to get close to anyone.

Though she had already served the first miserable week of meditation during her free time, she had yet to complete a month with no surface visits and still waited for him to restore her Mingling Hall privileges. Without those distractions, life as an apprentice was lonely and frustrating. She knew if he allowed it they could satisfy each other's needs--utterly.

An hour later, Perrin turned from the computer to where she sat at the scribe's desk. "You have a message, Livia."

She approached and took his seat as he stepped away out of respect for her privacy.

She switched on the message, scanned it, then ran to the door, choking back a sob.

"Livia?" Perrin called.

Unable to reply coherently, she threw open the door and ran home where she flung herself onto the bed, weeping.

A short time later, Perrin tapped on her door and stepped inside.

"I'll be back to work shortly," she snapped, wiping her face on her sleeve. "Can you at the very least give me a few minutes alone?"

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"Nothing you'd understand."

He sat beside her and placed a hand on her back. He caressed her gently, in silence, as if waiting for her to continue.

Finally she said, "My old tutor died this afternoon."

"I see," he replied softly.

"I grew up with her. She was as close to me as my own mother."

"I'm very sorry."

"Now because of my stupidity, I won't even be able to attend her funeral." She glared at him through eyes blurred by tears. "Not that I expect you to care."

"When is the funeral?"

"Tomorrow morning. Her religion dictates that the dead must be buried within two days."

"You may attend."

Livia stared at him.

He reached for a tissue from the box on the nightstand and wiped her face. "I'm not so inhuman yet that I have no —"

"Compassion?" She smiled sadly. Sighing, she wrapped her arms around herself, still unable to fully comprehend the loss. Her tutor had always been there for her, encouraging her since childhood and training her up to the time she was accepted as Perrin's apprentice. They exchanged messages often and Livia saw her during visits to the surface.

She took the tissue from him as a fresh onslaught of tears started. Perrin drew her into his arms and held her snugly against his chest. He stroked her hair, his warmth seeping into her, until her tears finally stopped.

Once she'd regained control of herself, she accompanied him back to the temple where she helped him with some mindless cleaning before he suggested they return home.

After they cooked a meal that she didn't feel much like eating, he built a fire in the living room hearth. While he sat in a chair reading a book, she curled up on the couch, staring at the flames and thinking about the years spent with her old tutor.

Finally he placed the book aside and said, "It's late. We should get some sleep."

"Go ahead. I'm going to stay up for a while."

He headed for the door, then paused. To her surprise, he joined her on the couch, slipping an arm around her. Livia melted against him and eventually drifted to sleep.

When she awakened the following morning, tucked in her bed, a warm feeling mingled with the shadow of loss. Knowing he'd carried her to bed touched her deeply.

Later that morning Perrin shocked her again by accompanying her to the funeral. They walked up the long staircase to Guthdry's outer world and took a public shuttle to the burial ground where friends and family members had already assembled in the grassy field. An illumination stone marked each gravesite, all glowing except for Sabina's which wouldn't be lit until the service ended.

This was the first time her family had met Perrin and she knew his stern manner as well as the way he kept his black hood drawn over half his face disturbed them. She couldn't expect them to understand a man as complex as Perrin in a few short hours. Before leaving, she again reassured her mother that there was no place she'd rather be than training with Perrin. Her mother had wrinkled her nose and glanced in the cloaked man's direction, but kept any disagreeable comments to herself.

Back underground, on their way down the corridor toward home, Livia said, "Thank you for coming with me today, Perrin."

"You're my apprentice," he said, as if that explained everything.

She sighed. Perhaps it did, at least in his mind.

No sooner had they returned than Perrin's handheld computer beeped and glowed red, signaling a top priority message from the Overlord. He excused himself to his room and a moment later returned, a pack slung over his shoulder.

"I'm needed on the surface. We're under attack by Jotamiana City."

Livia's heart raced. She pushed aside the problems of the past few days to clear the way for any action necessary on her part to keep their domain safe. "Shall I go with you?"

"No. You're a very good practitioner, Livia, but not trained enough for this yet. From now on your punishment is lifted. You may travel to the surface and have unrestrained access to the Mingling Halls. In the event I do not return, another of the Overlord's defenders will come here to complete your training."

The idea of him dying in the battle was almost too much to bear, yet it was the life they had chosen.

"Be careful," she said.

"I will."

Balling her fists at her sides, she watched him go, longing to kiss and embrace him, knowing it might be the last time. Her tutor's death had been difficult enough, but losing Perrin, she realized, would destroy a part of herself she had just begun to explore. Even if he didn't love her, she loved him. At this moment she realized just how much.

In an attempt to keep her mind occupied, she went to the temple and immersed herself in study. It was late when she headed home, driven by hunger since she had scarcely eaten for the past couple of days.

She heated leftover soup then tried to sleep. It was impossible, so she took her handheld computer, sat on the couch and worked. Finally she drifted off.

The sound of the door opening roused her and a glance at her computer told her it was nearly six in the morning. Her pulse racing, she leapt to her feet, relieved beyond belief to see Perrin closing the door behind him.

She approached, again resisting the urge to hold him. He gazed at her with eyes shadowed by exhaustion. Pale, his face was marked by lines of strain that seemed to have

appeared overnight.

He nodded to her and headed for the kitchen.

Following, she asked, "Are you all right? What happened?"

"Jotamiana City attacked the dome with some new techniques that badly weakened several of our defenses. I've empowered them again but won't be able to go for the Slinking Rose today, as we'd planned. I need to rest first, or else I won't have the power to do it without the risk of error. Please send a message to the Kreindites for me telling them we won't be arriving on schedule."

Livia nodded. "Let me fix you something to eat."

"No. Just please leave me for a moment, Livia."

"But--"

"Why can't you seem to understand what it means to follow orders?" he growled, pausing at the kitchen door, his broad shouldered frame blocking it. "I said leave me."

Gritting her teeth, she walked back to the couch and picked up her computer. She was about to retire to her room, but thought better of it. She was tired of turning tail and running every time he was in a sour mood, which was far too often for her taste. Obviously he was very tired and just needed a meal and some rest.

A moment later, he stepped out of the kitchen and leaned against the doorjamb, his gaze fixed on her. "I apologize for snapping at you."

"I understand."

He sighed and lowered his gaze, whispering what sounded like, "If only."

"What did you say?" she asked.

"Nothing important."

Another thought struck her and she approached him. Lifting a hand to his cheek, she asked, "You're not hurt, are you?"

"Just tired. After a hot shower and a few hours' sleep, I'll be fine."

Livia had witnessed his power many times. Any attack that had depleted him to this extent must have been even more terrible than he was letting on.

"How are you?" he asked, cupping her chin in his hand.

"Better now that you're back."

For a long moment their gazes met. Finally, she said, "Get some rest. I'll take care of the Kreindite situation."

A slight smile tugged at the corners of his mouth before he turned, walked to his room, and closed the door behind him.

Livia was about to send Perrin's message by computer to the Kreindites, then thought better of it. There was no reason to cancel the harvest. Thanks to Perrin, she knew everything about the flower and the harvest. If she got it, not only would it prove to him that her skills were even sharper than before the incident with the Libidouin, but it would be one less burden for Perrin to bear. She might not be ready to aid him in defending Guthdry against a full fledged attack by Jotamiana City, but she could still do her part in protecting their domain. It would most likely be a relief if he woke later that day to find another Slinking Rose in their possession and ready to be empowered for the dome.

After dressing warmly, she gathered tools for the harvest and slung her pack over her shoulder. She left the house and headed for the Mingling Hall where she stopped at the Philztians' domain and asked to speak with C'lang.

When he learned she wanted a ride to the Kreindites' domain, C'lang looked concerned, and she hadn't even mentioned her plan to harvest the Slinking Rose.

Livia, from the very little I know about the Kreindites, you should not travel there without your master. C'lang's telepathic voice conveyed his worry.

"I've been there before. They're pleasant people."

If you're sure....

"I am. Will you take me, C'lang?"

The Philztian nodded and lowered himself to his knees so she could mount. A moment later they were moving swiftly down the corridor, each stretch of his long legs bringing her closer to this personal test that had her tingling with anticipation.

When Livia arrived at the door to the Kreindite domain, she again found it unlocked and unguarded.

A glance at her handheld computer revealed it was the exact time she and Perrin had planned to harvest the Slinking Rose, so she was a bit surprised no one was there to meet them to supervise the harvest. Maybe they were waiting in the forest.

She remembered the way there and walked swiftly, wishing she had asked C'lang to accompany her, but she hadn't dared considering his obvious apprehension toward the Kreindites.

Two hours later, she reached the forest clearing where the Slinking Roses bloomed. After performing several Breathea-Carni exercises to strengthen her body and mind, she knelt and removed the empowered blade from her pack.

A rope caught her wrist and another dropped around her neck. She gasped, choking for breath as she was jerked hard against a tree trunk. Four Kreindite guards wearing plate armor advanced on her.

"You thought to steal our Slinking Roses? A stupid move, you thieving wench," snarled one of the guards--most likely the leader according to his tall, finned helmet unlike the others' simple round ones.

"I am not stealing," she panted, clawing at the rope that threatened to strangle her. By the strength of the ropes, they were also empowered through Lumeris-noire and she found it difficult to loosen them.

"Stop struggling or we will kill you now," another guard said. All four raised their weapons--handguns powerful enough to blow the face off a mountainside.

Livia stilled, her heart pounding. Apparently C'lang had been right in his concerns about the ferocity of the Kreindites. She knew they had reputations as savage warriors, though only toward their enemies. She had been certain they considered her a friend.

In spite of her terror, she stared at them with confidence and said calmly, "My master has an arrangement with Chief Hamer to harvest a single Slinking Rose. I came to complete the task and meant no offense."

"We know and respect your master, but you are not him, therefore you have no right to be here."

"But--"

"Silence." The leader snapped cuffs onto her wrists and dragged her to a motorized prison commonly used by Kreindite guards. She was thrust into the cell section and taken to the palace. There she was brought before Chief Hamer in his court hall. Empty except for Hamer's marble chair that rested upon a raised platform and a pair of

manacles dangling from the back wall, the cold stone room sent a shiver of dread down Livia's spine.

"Kneel, wench," the lead guard roared, shoving her hard. Livia staggered toward the chief. "Chief Hamer, there has been a mistake. I--"

"On your knees, thief!" Hamer bellowed, glaring at her with a chilling expression in his pale eyes. She could scarcely believe this was the man who had welcomed her to his domain just a short time ago.

Torn between rage and fear, she knelt, though her gaze never left the chief's. "You had an agreement with Perrin that allowed us to harvest a Slinking Rose."

"With Perrin. Not with you," Chief Hamer stated. "I can't believe he would risk our alliance by sending you alone without discussing it with us first."

"He didn't," she said softly. "Perrin is indisposed. He asked me to send you a message to reschedule the harvest date and I disobeyed him."

The chief raised an eyebrow. "Why? To steal?"

"To save him the trouble of harvesting the rose. I thought to please him."

"Oh." The chief's lips twisted into a wry smile. "I'm sure he will be pleased to know his apprentice is a disobedient thief. You will be punished for this outrage."

"Must you tell him?"

The chief's lips curled before he spoke to the guards in the Kreindite tongue. Livia had been studying their language and what she understood of their exchange frightened her. It seemed she was to receive some sort of physical punishment for her offense, but not before they sent for Perrin.

The chief turned back to her and continued, "There are four primary crimes among Kreindites--murder, slavery, rape, and theft. None of those crimes will be tolerated."

"Chief Hamer, please. I didn't know I was breaking a law. I assumed--"

"Too much," Hamer snapped. "Your punishment will wait until the arrival of your master. Take her to a holding cell."

Livia was taken to a tiny, windowless cell. Left in cold and darkness, she sank to the floor and wrapped her arms around her knees.

Now you've done it, Livia. If the Kreindites don't kill you, no doubt Perrin will.

Chapter Nine

Livia wasn't sure how much time passed before the guards returned and brought her back to the court hall. The chief again sat on his marble chair, Perrin to his left side, a guard to his right. C'lang stood, appearing rather nervous, at the base of the platform.

The look Perrin leveled at her made Livia want to sink into the floor and disappear.

Again she knelt before the chief who spoke to Perrin in the Kreindite tongue. The chief clapped his hands and a guard guided Livia to the chief's side while Perrin brushed past her, removing his shirt. After draping it over C'lang's back, he walked to the wall with the manacles.

"What's going on?" Livia demanded, jogging down the platform toward Perrin. Guards reached for her, but the chief ordered them to let her go.

She paused in front of Perrin and gazed into his eyes. "What are you doing?"

"You are my apprentice, so I have been given the option to accept responsibility for your crime. The chief has taken into consideration your ignorance of their laws. You were to receive ten lashes with the torture prod. Now the punishment is mine."

"What?" Her brow furrowed and she turned to the chief. "But this is my crime. I'm the one who should be punished."

"Your apprentice is courageous, Perrin, but ill-mannered. For her continued insolence, the punishment has been increased to twenty lashes. Fifteen on the back, five on the front."

"Please don't punish him for my crime," Livia pleaded, but Hamer looked directly through her.

"You're an apprentice, Livia," Perrin said. "Your arguments mean nothing to them and the more you talk the worse my punishment will be, so for once in your life *shut up.*"

Livia silently resumed her place beside the chief while Perrin's wrists were snapped into the manacles, his back facing the guard carrying the torture prod.

The prod is empowered through Lumeris-noire, C'lang's telepathic voice explained to her. Each stroke passes on the pain of the prod's past victims. A terrible device. Some are so old and contain such a buildup of pain that a single stroke could kill a convict.

Livia clenched her fists tightly, longing to look away as the guard began striking Perrin's back. With each stroke of the prod, an angry red welt rose on Perrin's flesh. The skin blistered and bled, as if scorched by fire. Other than a sharp jerk with every stroke, he gave no indication of pain.

After fifteen lashes on his back, the guard released his wrists from the manacles and repositioned him with his back against the wall. Livia met his gaze, tormented by the pain gleaming in his eyes. She didn't know how he kept from crying out with each stroke of the terrible prod. The first blow fell across his chest and he jerked in the bonds, his fists so tight that even from a distance she could see the whiteness of his knuckles. The

second blow crossed the first. With the third over his ribs, he grunted, but his gaze never left her. That was almost worse punishment than if she had been the one beaten. It was then she began to understand the depth of his feelings for her. No matter what he might say, this went beyond a master's duty toward his apprentice.

The fourth and fifth blows fell rapidly, leaving him panting, sweat glistening on his brow and upper lip.

Chief Hamer motioned for the guards to free Perrin, yet even after the bonds were removed, it took several moments for him to garner the strength to walk away. Livia tried to go to him, but this time Hamer allowed the guards to block her path.

When Perrin took several slow steps away from the wall, leaving the stone smeared with blood, Hamer said, "They are free to go. Perrin, this matter is forgotten, providing your apprentice learns to keep her place. If you need the assistance of a healer--"

"No. Thank you. If you would simply provide Livia with the appropriate tools, she will aid me."

The chief nodded. He and several guards dispersed. Moments later, a maid escorted them to an adjoining room where healing supplies awaited them.

"Perrin, I'm so sorry," Livia said, dipping a cloth into antiseptic cleanser and cleaning his burned back.

"So am I," he said in a strained voice, his fists clenched on the table in front of him.

Several lashes had fallen across his Fiendgen scales. Oddly, that area seemed most sensitive. He groaned softly when she washed the scales. When she'd finished cleaning, she applied a lotion made from a healing plant reinforced through Lumeris-noire. They had a similar lotion at home. With consistent applications, Perrin would be almost completely healed in a couple of days.

Livia felt terrible. She had intended to help Perrin and instead he'd been beaten because of her.

"Why didn't you tell me you had to be present for the harvest?" she asked, trying to keep the annoyed edge from her voice.

"Because when I said we would do it together, I assumed you would obey. This disobedience is most disheartening and dangerous, Livia. And I fear my personal feelings for you are getting in the way of good judgment. Any other apprentice who defied me a second time would find herself unemployed."

"I wanted to help you by harvesting the Slinking Rose to save you the trouble and to prove that my skills are still good, even after what happened with the Libidouin."

"It was never your skill that was in question, but your ability to follow orders. When I give instructions, it's for a good reason."

"I know. I'm sorry."

"That's not good enough."

"I know I must be punished for--"

"No." He shook his head, the motion slow and painful, as any movement must be excruciating, at least until the pain killer in the lotion took effect. "No more punishment. This is your last chance. One more episode like this and your apprenticeship is over. If I must pass on my knowledge to one of the more experienced though less talented defenders, I shall. The safety of our domain is too important to risk on a girl with no self

control.”

Livia burned with shame because she knew he was right. She moved so she could gently spread the lotion on his chest, the pale skin crisscrossed with burn marks.

“Livia.”

She lifted her gaze to his.

“One day you will have the skill and experience to make the major decisions. Listen to me. Learn. Become a master. It’s inside you. Don’t you think I could have more easily trained one of the current defenders? I didn’t feel it was right. That’s why I sought out an apprentice. You have more power than you realize, but you must be careful in shaping it. Control that stubborn will. Make it work for you instead of against you.”

She nodded, not finding sufficient words to convey how sorry she was. She vowed to obey him from now on and the only way to prove herself was through actions, not words.

A short time later, Perrin felt ready to travel. C’lang’s powerful Philztian body was strong enough to carry them back to Guthdry’s domain where he left them at the door.

By the time Livia and Perrin arrived home, the pain numbing effect of the lotion had worn off. By his pallor and shallow breathing, the burns were nagging him. After removing his shirt, he allowed Livia to help him bathe the injuries again and apply more lotion.

Eventually he found a tolerable position on the bed and drifted to sleep.

Still concerned for him, Livia sat in a chair by his bed, scarcely believing her plan had gone so wrong. She worked on her handheld computer until she also fell into a light sleep.

* * * *

Livia snapped awake to find Perrin walking painfully toward his bedroom door.

“What are you doing?” she snapped, standing and grasping his arm. The heat emanating from his body frightened her. She touched his forehead. “You have a fever. Let me see if the burns are getting infected.”

“The burns are fine. I need to go in the kitchen.”

“Tell me what you want and I’ll get it for you. Are you hungry? Thirsty?”

“I’ll go myself.” He pulled away from her, his jaw set.

“Perrin--”

“Livia, please!” The desperate edge to his voice took her aback and the wild look in his eyes roused her sense of caution. For the first time since she’d known him, she feared he might do her physical harm. Injured or not, he was still powerful enough to hurt her if he wanted to.

She remained where she stood as he strode to the kitchen.

After a moment she followed him, her concern outweighing her fear and even her oath to obey him in all things.

She found him standing by the cabinet he usually kept locked, gulping what looked like blood from a bottle. He lowered the bottle, his lips stained red, his expression a warped combination of rage and sorrow.

“What is that?” she asked, though she had the feeling she’d rather not know.

“You can never do what you’re told.”

“I don’t care if you cancel my apprenticeship, Perrin. Right now I’m concerned

about you. That's more important than anything."

"Sometimes you are such a child," he said through gritted teeth.

Again he raised the bottle to his lips and took another deep swallow. Slowly his ragged breathing returned to normal. For the first time she could remember he kept his gaze averted from her. He corked the bottle and stooped, wincing from the pain in his burned torso. After putting the bottle in the cabinet, he locked it and stood. Livia reached for his arm, as if to steady him, but he brushed her hand aside.

"What was that?" she repeated.

"If you must know, it's Fiendgen blood. I must drink it or die. There is much you need to learn about Fiendgens, Livia. I had planned to begin those lessons soon, but now is as good a time as any."

"All right, but lie down first."

He agreed and they walked to his room where he sat on the bed while she smoothed more lotion over his torso.

"Talk to me, Perrin," she said.

"As you already know, anyone who receives training from the Fiendgens gives up a portion of themselves to them. This is done by undergoing a manipulation developed by Fiendgen scientists trained extensively in the darkest forms of Lumeris-noire. After the manipulation, practitioners become dependant on Fiendgen blood as they slowly become more and more like their evil teachers. Without the blood, they'll die. Cravings for the blood come in cycles, growing progressively closer throughout the year until the practitioners must return to the Fiendgen domain to participate in a horrible two-day ritual."

He swallowed hard and closed his eyes, as if trying to block out the memories.

"What goes on during the ritual?"

"Horrible things. Unspeakable things no decent species should know about. When the ritual ends, practitioners may return to whatever domain they serve and the cycle begins again. On the twenty-eighth year, the practitioners return to the Fiendgens for the last time to live out the rest of their lives among them. That is the price of Fiendgen power."

Livia stared at him for a moment, numb. Then rage overcame her and she stood, pacing the room, her fists clenched and heart pounding. "How dare they? What right did they have?"

"It is the Fiendgen way. Practitioners go to them. They don't go searching."

"I'm not talking about the Fiendgens. I meant those bastards from Jotamiana City who forced you into this. They made you a slave, Perrin. How can you ... how have you stood living like this?"

"For me, it will soon be over."

Gooseflesh rose on her skin and a sick feeling twisted her insides. "This is your twenty-eighth year since training with the Fiendgens?"

"Yes."

Sighing, she dropped onto the bed beside him and pressed her fingers to her temples. "No wonder you're training an apprentice."

He touched her shoulder and she turned to him, gazing into his eyes as he took her face in his hands. "That's why it's so important for you to listen to me. Before my time comes, all the defenses I control for Guthdry must be purged of my power and passed on

to you and a select few defenders so that my signature no longer remains.”

“Perrin, you’re going to become a Fiendgen.” Tears welled in her eyes, partly for herself because she couldn’t stand the thought of losing him, but mostly for him because she knew how he rebelled against his enslavement with every fiber of his being.

“No. Not me. If a practitioner denies that final summons to the Fiendgen domain, they will die in cycle. I would rather die than give myself to a race that has no respect for life.”

“Isn’t there a way to expel this manipulation? Can’t the scientists at Guthdry do something to reverse it? How about another domain--”

“No. Once merged with a Fiendgen, part of you will always be a Fiendgen. Besides, during the final cycle, the manipulation is no longer physical in the sense that the practitioner needs Fiendgen blood to live. By the twenty-eight year, the growth is complete and the practitioner can survive on their own. The final cycle is completely governed by a Fiendgen attack of Lumeris-noire that has been festering through the decades. There is no way to expel it.”

“So if you somehow managed to stay away from the Fiendgens until the cycle ends....”

A sad smile touched his lips. “You think a few courageous victims haven’t already tried it? No one has survived, unless they surrender.”

“This is a nightmare,” she breathed.

“My life has been a nightmare, but soon it will be over.” He gently touched a fingertip to her lips. “It’s what I want, Livia. I welcome death and I will not surrender to the Fiendgens.”

“Oh, Perrin.” She slipped her arms around his neck, then remembering his injuries, tried to jerk away. To her surprise, he clung to her tightly for several moments.

“All right. That’s enough of that,” he said, gently pushing her away.

“I swear from now on I’ll never go against your orders again. Not for any reason.”

“Good.” He offered a tired smile and brushed a lock of hair from her face. “You have the most potential of any practitioner I have ever known. Just don’t allow your pride or your kindness to be your downfall and you’ll serve Guthdry well.”

“Get some rest,” Livia said.

He lay down and she covered him to the waist with the sheet, then returned to her chair. As she watched him sleep, she vowed to use her free time to delve into her own study of Fiendgens. If there was even the slimmest chance she could find a way to expel the attack that would kill Perrin, she had to try. Perhaps it was arrogant of her to think she could uncover something he and other practitioners throughout the ages had not, but it took a degree of arrogance in the first place to have applied for the position of apprentice to Guthdry’s main defender.

No, Perrin, I love you too much to let you go without a fight, she thought, picking up her handheld computer and beginning her in-depth study of the most demonic practitioners on the planet.

Chapter Ten

Several days later, Perrin had completely recovered. His and Livia's first order of business was to harvest a new Slinking Rose, then bring it to the surface where they replaced the dying flower.

Livia had been surprised by the way Chief Hamer had treated them as if the incident of her capture had never happened. Perrin seemed perfectly fine with this, in spite of the fact that he had been the one beaten with the torture prod. At least Livia hadn't destroyed the relationship her master had worked so hard to build.

When they returned from the surface, before starting work in the temple, Livia and Perrin decided to go swimming in the hot spring. Usually he avoided swimming with her, so she was pleased to have this time with him doing something other than work.

Walking beside him down the corridor, Livia thought about how to best convey the feelings she had been struggling with since their conversation about the Fiendgens. She had been searching in vain for a way to expel the Fiendgens' final attack on Perrin as well as trying to decide what to do regarding her feelings for him. She finally understood the reason behind his contradictory actions. She'd felt his passion for her and by taking her punishment from the Kreindites he obviously bore her some affection. Still, he rebelled against deepening their relationship. Most likely because he knew he was going to die and wished to spare her from a hopeless union.

When they reached the room with the hot spring, Perrin lit the illumination stones while Livia activated the heating system.

"Today we're going to prepare the container for the Rorebra gel. If properly cared for, it will last for a century," Perrin said.

The gel was produced by a female Rorebra bird to protect its eggs. Flexible, impenetrable and almost indestructible, its power could supposedly be harnessed by masters of Lumeris-noire to reinforce many things, including defensive domes.

"You mean if you don't freeze to death trying to get it," Livia said.

The Rorebra birds lived in one of the few unclaimed and unsettled lands on the planet--a place so cold that one could die there if not properly prepared. The rare birds, named for the peculiar sound they made, laid their eggs in a group of caves known as the Eyes of Nestor. Nestor was a legendary master of Lumeris-noire. To protect the birds from power-hungry practitioners who took to stealing the gel before the eggs were hatched, Nestor had placed strong defenses around the caves so that only an unarmed, unclothed being could enter. Rorebra birds fought and could easily destroy almost any predator who approached their unhatched eggs. Other than an uncontrollable protective instinct, the birds were usually peaceful, so a naked, unarmed practitioner, providing they somehow survived the extreme cold, could safely enter the caves and gather gel from an empty nest.

For centuries practitioners from all domains had sought a way to breach Nestor's defenses but had yet to succeed. Others had attempted to gather the gel, but few had survived the extreme weather. It had been over two hundred years since a defender of

Guthdry had managed to get some. Perrin had already tried several times. In two days, he would make another attempt.

"I will succeed this time, Livia. The gel will be a great help to you and Guthdry."

Though he didn't say *after I'm gone*, the reality hung heavily between them.

Livia sighed, trying not to think about it as they undressed to their swimsuits.

Livia couldn't keep her gaze from Perrin's sleek body clad in black trunks. With the help of the lotion his burns had faded to pale pink scars. She noted he was also looking at her appreciatively from the corner of his eye, so she offered him a playful smile. Quickly glancing away, he stepped into the pool and ducked underwater.

He stood, water pouring down his lean torso, and swept drenched tendrils of black hair from his face.

Livia sat on the edge of the pool, water up to her calves, and watched him lean back to float, his eyes slipping shut. His uncharacteristically relaxed expression made him appear even more attractive than usual.

She eased herself into the pool and waded toward him.

"Perrin," she said softly, touching his shoulder.

He straightened abruptly, his gaze fixed on hers. "Yes?"

"There's something I want to tell you." She positioned herself directly in front of him and ran her hands over his chest, loving the sensation of drenched, hair-dusted flesh against her palms. She slipped her arms around his neck.

Grasping her arms as if to remove them, he said in a warning voice, "Livia...."

"No. Please. Hear me out."

Looking wary, he nodded.

"Put your arms around me," she said.

"I don't see what possible--"

"Please."

Again he relented, placing one hand on her hip, the other on her lower back. He seemed to like hearing her plead. A smile touched her lips briefly, but faded as she said, "When I'm finished speaking, I want you to tell me the truth. I think you've fought against taking me as a lover because, in your way, you want to protect me from your fate. I think that deep inside you want me as much as I want you."

"This conversation is ridiculous."

"Listen," she said in such a stern tone that he first looked angry, then amused.

"Forgive me, madam." He gave a mock bow which she ignored.

"If you are trying to protect me, it's not working. Like it or not, Perrin, I already care about you. Nothing is going to change that. I would rather spend months, even weeks, as your lover than spend a lifetime regretting time wasted between us. I'm asking you to give us a chance to enjoy what time we have together."

His hands moved to her waist and gently caressed her through the bathing suit's slick fabric. His lips parted slightly and she sensed he was about to speak, though it took thirty seconds before he did.

"I can change your mind, Livia. All I need to do is tell you the sort of rituals I have participated in with the Fiendgens. I have literally bathed in blood. Dined on raw--"

"Don't." She shook her head, then sighed. "Or do. If you want to go into details, if it will release some of the guilt you carry, I will hear it all, but it won't change how I feel about you. I know none of this has been what *you* wanted."

"I could have ended it before now. Taken my life, if necessary."

"And left Guthdry to Jotamiana City? I know if not for you these past ten years they would have destroyed us, or worse, made us like them. You have done terrible things--"

"*Unpardonable* things."

Livia nodded, taking his face in her hands and caressing his cheeks and jaw with her thumbs, feeling the night's growth of stubble, as he had yet to shave that morning. "I know, but you've also saved thousands of lives that would have been ruined by Jotamiana City. I'm asking you to please give me the chance to show you what you've been deprived of by a past beyond your control. I'm going into this knowing we might not have long--"

"We won't."

"But I want it anyway. I want you. Here. Now."

"I have no protection here."

Livia hoisted herself out of the pool, stooped by her clothes, and removed a contraceptive shield from her pocket. She slid back into the pool and handed it to him.

"Thought of everything, have you?" he said with a hint of sarcasm.

"Everything. Don't deny me anymore." She began covering his face with gentle kisses while whispering in between them, "Don't ... push me away again ... Not again."

He went rigid beneath her tender attack, then without warning locked his arms around her and claimed her lips in a kiss as powerful as Nestor's defenses.

"Livia," he breathed against her lips, entangling his fingers in her hair. "You sweet, beautiful, stupid girl. You don't know what you do to me."

"I think I do."

"You're tempting a Fiendgen."

"I'm tempting a man. One who has loved me before and whose body I have longed for ever since that night."

Her eyes closed when he kissed her again, his tongue thrusting into her mouth, teasing her with long, wet strokes while his hands roamed over her body.

Between the warmth of the spring water and the heat conjured between their bodies, Livia was aflame.

Moaning softly, she slipped a hand between them and grasped the enticing bulge in the front of his trunks. She kneaded and stroked while he kissed her breathless.

Finally he tore his lips away from hers only to slip down the front of her swimsuit and bare her breasts to his hands and lips. He cupped the tender spheres and squeezed them gently then rolled his thumbs over her nipples until they stood out hard and so sensitive that his touch was almost unbearable. Then he bent and took one between his lips.

Livia gasped, arching against him, her hands clutching his head closer as he sucked and licked, making her entire body tingle with need.

Perrin ducked underwater and tugged Livia's bathing suit down her legs. She lifted first one foot, then the other so he could remove the suit completely. He surfaced, his trunks and her suit dangling from his hand. Flinging them onto the edge of the pool, he wrapped an arm around her waist.

"Perrin." She smiled, running her hands down his back to his bare bottom. She squeezed the firm spheres then stroked his hips and thighs before curling her fist around

his cock.

“Livia,” he whispered, cupping the back of her head. His lips brushed her temple. Slowly he covered her forehead with feather light kisses, then he kissed her cheeks and down the length of her nose.

Finally he reached her lips. Their tongues met in the most intimate dance while he reached down and rubbed her soft mound. Using his fingertip he circled her sensitive flesh until she moaned with passion and thrust against him.

He backed her to the side of the pool and lifted her onto the edge.

“What are you doing?” She giggled.

“Something you’ll enjoy.”

“I’m ... sure ... ah!” Her words faded to a gasp of unsurpassed pleasure as Perrin bent, his head between her legs and his tongue lapping her where she most loved to be touched.

His lips tugged and tongue teased until she thought she might die from the pleasure. He licked along the side of her lust swollen flesh, then lapped with relentless upward strokes that pushed her to frenzied heights of passion. Livia’s eyes closed. Weaving her fingers through his hair, she urged him on in breathless whispers.

Within moments waves of climax broke over her. She trembled and writhed, her very core pulsing with desire. As the pleasure waned, she leaned back on her hands, smiling with contentment.

He growled, leaning over her and taking a nipple between his lips. He tugged gently and rolled his tongue over it, then licked his way down her belly until he again reached her ultra sensitive flesh.

“Oh!” Livia cried, squirming so much he was forced to grasp her hips to keep her steady.

Just when she was about to shatter again, he tugged her back into the pool. Pressing her against the side, he slowly filled her with his erection.

Livia clung to him, loving the sensation of his hard, velvet-skinned shaft thrusting into her. He cupped her bottom and raised her higher until she locked her legs around his waist.

“Yes, Perrin! Oh, yes!”

“Livia, I can’t resist you. I--”

“I can’t resist you, either, Perrin.”

Clinging to him tightly, she came, completely enveloped by sensation. Seconds later he exploded, his body taut and straining against hers.

Slowly he relaxed, pinning her to the edge of the pool.

After a moment he moved slightly away and brushed her mouth with a kiss.

They got out of the pool and dried off with the towels she’d brought.

“Now we had no Libidouin manipulation to blame this on, so you’d better not try to pretend it never happened.” She cast him a knowing look.

He glanced at her with flashing green eyes and a wry smile. “Amazing you’re so intent on binding yourself to a Fiendgen. You’re a glutton for punishment, aren’t you?”

“Of course. Who else would pursue a career in defense?”

He snorted. “Right enough.”

“Mmm.” She approached and locked her arms around his neck.

They kissed deeply, tenderly, until he gently broke away and said, “As much as

I'd like to stay here all day and make love with you, we have work to do.”

Chapter Eleven

The domain with the Rorebra birds' caves was such a long way from Guthdry's domain that Perrin arranged to borrow an invislider from the Overlord to save them a trip of several months by foot or Philztian. Even with the invislider, the trip would take several hours. Invisiders were about the size of an antique earth van--small and easy to navigate but with space enough for storage and sleeping. They moved quickly and could circle the entire planet in less than a day.

They packed food, water, and an extra heating system, since Perrin's life would depend on a quick recovery from the extreme cold in the caves.

Livia had taken a course in invislider flying and was a competent pilot. She flew to Rorebra territory while Perrin sat beside her in deep meditation, preparing himself for the trials to come.

When they arrived at the domain, Livia was first struck by the loveliness of the magical realm of snow and ice. Everything gleamed white or frosty blue for as far as the eye could see. Even the mountains were covered in frost.

"It's beautiful," Livia said as she circled the invislider for a landing.

"Very. And very deadly."

The invislider stopped several feet from the Caves of Nester. Livia kept the heating system on while Perrin undressed, then slipped on his heavy black cloak.

Livia shuddered just thinking about how cold he would be, naked and completely vulnerable to the elements as well as the whims of the oversized Rorebra birds. She prayed they would remain as passive as their reputations stated.

"I'm ready," Perrin said.

She nodded and accompanied him out of the invislider to the mouth of one of the smallest caves. In spite of the heavy cloak, he was already trembling. His feet looked positively frigid. He'd be lucky if he got out of this with merely a case of frostbite. She'd learned in her study of the race that Fiendgens detested cold. Their domain was hot enough to be nicknamed hell.

"Why don't you let me accompany you?" Livia asked, though the thought of going naked in this horrific cold was enough to rattle a seasoned defender. "With two of us looking for an empty nest, it should be easier to find."

"As I've told you, Livia, you're more helpful to me waiting here," he said, his voice quivering from the cold. "I can search longer if I know you're waiting to assist me once I leave the caves. Otherwise I must worry about remaining strong enough to save myself and fight off potential attackers who might be wandering this domain. So keep aware."

"And you be careful," she said, brushing his mouth with a kiss. He smiled slightly, removed the cloak, and handed it to her. Covered in gooseflesh, he stepped into the cave. Once he'd disappeared from view, Livia walked back to the invislider and sat inside, staring anxiously at the cave entrance.

Perrin had a limited time to find the gel before freezing to death.

Every now and then Livia searched the immediate area for possible hostile presences. Though she sensed other visitors around, none came close enough to cause alarm.

As time passed, she grew more anxious, frightened that Perrin had lost track of time or worse, been attacked and killed by one of the giant birds who might have felt threatened by him.

Several moments later, Perrin staggered out of the cave, his flesh tinged blue, a thick gray gel oozing from his cupped hands.

Livia took Perrin's cloak and the special container from the seat beside her before leaping out of the van toward him.

"My God," she said, noting several oozing gashes on his back before she draped the cloak over his shoulders. He shook so hard it fell off.

When she reached for it, he snapped, "Forget me. Open the container."

She did as he ordered and helped him to position his trembling hands over the container. Rather than stick to his skin, the gel slid off easily. Quickly she closed the container and ran it to the invislider. She hurried back to Perrin who was walking painfully toward the vehicle on bluish feet.

Livia picked up the cloak again and draped it over him. This time she slipped an arm around him and helped him to the back of the invislider where he managed to crawl in and collapse onto a makeshift bed of thick blankets. She climbed in behind him, covered him with more blankets, and pulled socks over his feet, wincing at the sight of the frozen appendages. She opened the invislider's medical kit and searched for what she needed. He scarcely seemed aware as she injected him with medication that would soon combat the effects of exposure. Next she pulled down the blankets enough to expose his back so she could clean and seal the wounds with a blood clotting spray. Thankfully, they weren't quite as deep as she'd first thought.

"How did this happen?" she asked.

"Rorebra bird. T ... the f ... first cave I f ... found had unhat ... hatched eggs."

Livia nodded, not questioning him further. Once he recovered she could learn the details.

"N ... notify the Overlord," he said.

Nodding, she did as he asked and sent a message to Guthdry that they were returning home with the gel.

After raising the temperature of the heating unit, she removed her frosty coat and climbed beneath the covers with him.

"Wh ... what are you doing L ... Livia?" he murmured. "I ... I'm in no c ... condition to--"

"Don't make me laugh, Perrin," she said in the most teasing voice she could muster.

She cuddled close, sharing her body heat. He was so cold that she shivered just from touching him. Soon, with her nearness, the medication, and the blankets, he stilled, his body temperature returning to normal. Slowly, he draped his arms around her.

"Are you warm now?" she asked.

"Yes," he whispered against her hair.

"Then close your eyes and go to sleep," she said, settling more comfortably atop him.

A short time later, Livia disentangled herself from Perrin, careful not to wake him. Still weak from the Rorebra bird wounds and struggling through the extreme cold, he'd fallen into a deep sleep.

She climbed into the cockpit and used the invislider's controls to scan the area. Her pulse raced upon seeing another invislider approaching. A closer look revealed it bore the military colors of Jotamiana City. Livia immediately took off, but the Jotamiana City invislider was soon on her tail.

"Bastards," she muttered, concentrating on some quick maneuvers, wishing she was a better pilot.

When they fired at her, she managed to avoid getting hit, but knew she needed to fight back. She altered her course to do battle. The Jotamiana City pilots might or might not know about the Rorebra gel, Livia couldn't say. All she knew was that they didn't need any excuse to attack other than seeing by their vehicle they were from Guthdry.

"You Jotamiana City swine," she snarled, "Perrin didn't risk his life getting that gel only to lose it now."

She and the other invislider fired simultaneously, their weapons empowered through their use of Lumeris-noire.

The impact momentarily disoriented Livia, but she recouped more quickly than the Jotamiana City pilot. In spite of the adrenalin flow, she focused her powers as Perrin had taught her. She fired again. Empowered by her manipulation of Lumeris-noire, the projectile struck its target and the Jotamiana City invislider was destroyed on impact.

"Livia?" Perrin hurried to her side. "What's going on?"

"We were attacked by a Jotamiana City invislider. It's gone."

"Why didn't you wake me?"

"I was busy."

"You destroyed it?"

She nodded, the reality that she'd taken the lives of at least two Jotamiana City warriors struck her. It wasn't something she'd planned, but she'd had no alternative.

After pulling on his trousers and shirt, Perrin took his place beside her in the cockpit.

"You all right?" he asked.

"Yes."

He rested a hand on her shoulder. "You did well. I'm glad you were with me today."

A slight smile touched her lips. Praise from him was rare and part of her felt guilty accepting it when others had lost their lives at her hand, but it was the life she'd chosen--the life of a defender.

"They would have killed you," he told her, as if sensing her mixed feelings about the situation.

"They tried. That's why I fought back."

For the remainder of the journey they spoke little and concentrated on returning to Guthdry before any other attacks from Jotamiana City occurred. Without doubt the warriors had contacted their domain about Perrin and Livia's invislider before attacking it.

No sooner had they landed at the Overlord's port in Guthdry than two other defenders met them with news that Jotamiana City had launched another attack on their

domain's west side. They had used the skirmish between Livia and the Jotamiana City invisilider as an excuse.

"No wonder why it was so hard getting clearance to enter the dome," Livia said.

When the dome was penetrated for even a short time, it was more vulnerable to attack. Had they not been carrying the gel, they most likely would not have been allowed inside at all.

On their way to the Defense Hall, Livia noticed a rainbow of colors in the distance and her stomach twisted. Those colors meant that Jotamiana City had attacked again and the dome had repelled their weapons. There was no telling how badly the dome was damaged until they arrived at the control room.

"When we get to the Defense Hall, Livia, you will be in charge of empowering the gel. You must work quickly and accurately, since the Defense Hall is in the front lines. Jotamiana City will hit hardest there, hoping to destroy it."

"Perrin, I've never empowered the gel before--"

"Neither have I, but we know everything about it." He stopped walking for a moment and placed his hands on her shoulders, his gaze fixed on hers. "During the last attack you weren't ready for what might happen. You've come a long way since then, Livia, and *you are ready*."

"Yes, Perrin." From that moment on she buried any self-doubt.

"Then let's do our job," he said.

Perrin strode toward the Defense Hall, Livia by his side, two defenders--Leon and Saree--just below him in rank flanking them.

The Defense Hall was a long, flat gray building near the Overlord's port. Once inside, Perrin and the others hurried to the control room where they could monitor activity as well as empower the dome's activation link and weapons.

Computers filled the control room walls. An archway lead to another room with clear walls through which the Overlord's palace and grounds could be seen. In that open room the defenders empowered the dome. While Perrin and Saree went to view a monitor, Livia and Leon hurried to the open room. He took the container of gel from her and placed it near a permanent holding bin in the floor that was directly linked to one of the dome's main power lines.

Livia knelt by the container and closed her eyes. She drew several deep, cleansing breaths to help her focus on the tremendous output of energy soon to come.

Several explosions shook the room. Livia jumped and opened her eyes. The rainbow colors seemed to make the entire domain glow. A glance beyond the archway revealed Perrin, Saree, and two other defenders working the monitors.

"Livia?" Leon asked, concern in his eyes.

She nodded, burying her fear again and closing her eyes. No matter how the battle raged around her, she must focus on the task at hand.

While the colors and explosions burst around them, Livia opened the container and removed the gel. It felt warm and smooth in her hands. Using all her power and skill, she focused on drawing out and expanding its protective energy. It tingled inside her, filling her, moving through her. Slowly she lowered the gel into the bin, but kept contact with it. She became so lost in the empowerment that she no longer noticed the attacks raging throughout the domain.

Though she felt her strength wane, she held on until she was certain the gel had

properly bonded with the dome. When her connection to the dome broke, she sagged against the wall, completely drained.

"Are you all right?" Leon asked, sealing the cover on the gel's permanent container.

"Yes. I just need a moment."

Leon nodded. "I'm going to help the others. Join us when you're ready."

Livia watched him step through the archway to where Perrin and the others continued to uphold the defenses and launch counterattacks. She knew each of their actions was backed by their manipulation of Lumeris-noire.

She approached, noting by the monitor readings that Perrin's attacks were the farthest reaching and most destructive. His power strengthened the dome more than all the other defenders combined. She marveled at his endurance and hoped one day she would reach his level of control over their art. However that might never be, since much of his strength and skill came from his Fiendgen side.

As soon as she felt recovered enough to help, she joined in the defense.

* * * *

During a momentary break between defense and attack, Perrin cast a glance at Livia who was concentrating intently on one of the dome's monitors. Though he was grateful to have the assistance of Leon, Saree, and other masters of Lumeris-noire who were experienced in battle, he was especially glad Livia was on their team today. Her power had developed to a level of precision that exceeded his expectations and she had proved she had the stomach for battle. Never had he felt such pride as he did for her at that moment, but he also feared losing her to death at the hands of Jotamiana City warriors. Was this love? If so, he understood why Jotamiana City tried to kill the emotion in its warriors. Love made one question duty, yet at the same time made duty seem all the more important because it meant protecting those you love. Perhaps in the end that was why he believed Guthdry and domains like it would win over Jotamiana City. Their defenders fought not simply for political reason or financial gain, but to protect those they loved and provide the best possible life for them.

"Perrin, one of the main power lines is failing," Leon called.

Locking away thoughts about his relationship with her, Perrin immediately returned to the business at hand.

By the following morning Jotamiana City had relented with heavy casualties, mostly sustained by Perrin's counterattacks. Though the dome had been penetrated in a few places, thanks to Livia's manipulation of the gel, Guthdry lost few lives.

For five days, Livia and Perrin remained on the surface, helping repair the dome. Perrin only returned home once to retrieve a bottle of Fiendgen blood, since his cravings were becoming more intense. He knew he had little time left before the final attack that would destroy him, but he couldn't consider it now. There was too much to do.

He and Livia had little time to speak with one another about anything except the repairs. They took shifts for sleep along with the other defenders so the repairs could continue around the clock. Before they left for their underground domain, Perrin removed his signature from the dome's defenses and passed control to Livia, Saree, and Leon.

By the time he and Livia returned below ground, both were tired and their power depleted. Yesterday Perrin had finished the bottle of Fiendgen blood he'd brought to the surface and the craving had progressed from a dull ache to stabbing pain throughout his

body.

“You look terrible,” Livia said.

He glanced at her. “I’ve felt better, and you don’t look very good, either.”

“I’m just tired,” she said.

“I think that’s the first time you’ve ever been honest about a weakness.”

“I’m only human.”

He grunted as they stepped into the house. In spite of the painful craving, a feeling of peace washed over him. It felt good knowing that soon he and Livia would be cuddled close and drifting to sleep in his bed.

He headed for the kitchen where he opened a fresh bottle and gulped several mouthfuls of Fiendgen blood. While Perrin rinsed his mouth with water to rid himself of the bitter taste, Livia poured two glasses of fruit juice and offered him one.

“Are you hungry?” she asked.

“I’m more tired than hungry.”

“So am I. All I want is a warm shower then a good long sleep in your arms.”

She embraced him and for several moments he held her close, inhaling the scent of her hair and relishing the sensation of her body close to his.

By the way she sagged against him, her breathing slow and even, he knew she was almost asleep on her feet. He picked her up. She stirred, wrapping her arms around his neck as he walked toward his room.

“You don’t have to carry me.”

“Quiet.”

He placed her on the bed, then tugged off her boots and socks.

“Need a shower,” she murmured.

“Sleep first,” he replied, unzipping her trousers before tugging them off. Unable to resist, he ran his hand up and down her legs.

She gazed at him with a spark of desire in her sleepy brown eyes.

“Keep looking at me like that and neither of us will get any rest,” he said.

She chuckled tiredly. “And we both need it.”

She sat up so he could tug off her shirt, then settled beneath the blanket and sheets he covered her with.

The sultry look in her half-closed eyes as she watched him undress stirred him in spite of his exhausted state. When they woke, he planned on making love with her until they collapsed into a sated heap.

Naked, he climbed beneath the covers. He and Livia reached for each other. Perrin wrapped his arms around her and she melted against his side. The feeling of her flesh against his soothed and comforted him while at the same time kindling his passion.

She moaned softly in her sleep and shifted position, her knee brushing his shaft. Even as he drifted to sleep, his erection swelled.

“Soon,” he whispered, pressing her small hand to his chest before he joined her in slumber.

Chapter Twelve

Perrin awoke warm and comfortable in his bed. He reached for Livia, but she wasn't there. A moment later he heard water running in the shower. The thought of her naked beneath the hot water brought back the previous night's arousal in a rush. His cock stirred and he drew a deep breath, then released it slowly.

He pushed aside the covers and stood. In the bathroom, he glanced toward the shower, admiring Livia's curvy silhouette through the frosted glass. He brushed his teeth then stepped into the shower.

Livia turned to him with a startled expression that transformed to a smile. "Perrin. Good morn--"

Before she finished speaking, he wrapped an arm around her waist, buried a hand in her hair, and covered her mouth with his.

"Mmm," she purred, running her fingers through his hair. Her tongue met his, tasting and teasing. Her water slicked leg wrapped around his.

Perrin ran his hands up and down her back, relishing the smooth, soft flesh and the feeling of her breasts against his chest.

Slowly he pulled away and reached for a cake of soap. She grinned when he began lathering her shoulders, breasts, and belly. She raised her arms and turned, seeming to enjoy the washing as much as he did. After she rinsed off, she took the soap and returned the favor. Though the sensation of her soapy hands running over his chest and back was pleasant enough, he thought he'd explode then and there when she grasped his cock and stroked under the pretense of washing.

Since meeting Livia, he could no longer imagine life without her. All the years he'd spent either in horror or solitude--sometimes both at once--he'd never fully realized how lonely he was, until meeting her.

There was no way he could fully express the happiness she brought to his life, but he could at least try to give a bit back.

Once he'd rinsed off, he pulled her into his arms. He caressed her back and slid his hands over her buttocks. Gently kneading the firm spheres he sank to his knees and pressed tender kisses to her belly. He dipped the tip of his tongue into her navel then licked where she was so pink, swollen, and sensitive.

"Oh, Perrin," she said, her fingers tightening in his hair. She arched against his lapping tongue and tugging lips. By the breathless mewling sounds escaping her throat, she was enjoying every moment.

So was he. His eyes closed, he concentrated on her scent and texture. Exploring her soft flesh, he noted which places made her moan and grip his head harder. He'd never imagined taking such pleasure in a woman's body. Until Livia, he hadn't stopped to think there was more to sex than a fast release. There was tenderness, teasing, moments to savor and carry deep inside forever.

With a slight smile, he found that perfect place where she most loved to be touched and lapped rhythmically, making her cry out his name sharply, every muscle in

her luscious body tensing.

A few quick upward strokes of his tongue and she came, her legs trembling. Perrin held her steady as he continued licking until the last pulsation.

He stood, still supporting her with one arm, and turned off the faucet. Using his shoulder he nudged open the shower door.

"Come here," he demanded in a guttural tone, his body tense with unfulfilled passion. More than anything he longed to bury his swollen cock deep inside her hot wet sheath. He tugged her out of the shower and onto the floor. After taking a shield from the drawer and sliding it on, he stretched out on his back atop the thick black area rug. He took her hand and guided it to where he most wanted to be touched. Her fist curled around his shaft and stroked in a manner that sent his heart pounding out of control.

"Ride me, Livia. Ride me."

Her gaze fixed on his, she straddled him. Still grasping his cock, she slowly lowered herself onto him. Perrin breathed deeply, loving the sensation of her hot, slick flesh swallowing and squeezing him. The pleasure was almost unendurable.

"Oh, Perrin," she breathed, finally taking him fully inside her. He bent his elbows and she entwined her fingers with his, bracing herself against his hands. She rocked upon him, increasing their pleasure.

"Yes, oh, yes," she cried.

"Livia, my darling girl," he panted, his hips lifting in time with her rapidly increasing rhythm.

She rode him fast and hard, her hair thrown back and her body arched so that her full breasts thrust forward. She leaned over him and he captured one of her taut nipples between his lips. He worried the swollen berry-like flesh with his teeth. Sucking and licking, he teased her until she gave a shrill cry of intense pleasure.

"Ah, Perrin! I need ... I need--"

"Livia," he gasped, close to bursting with desire.

Her fingers gripping his tightly, she came, quivering and pulsing around him, flinging him into a mind-spinning climax.

Livia collapsed atop him. Sated, they lay breast to chest, their legs entwined and heartbeats slowly returning to normal.

* * * *

Two weeks later, Livia grew concerned when Perrin began taking the Fiendgen blood on a daily basis, both in the morning and the evening. One night on their way home from the temple, he took her hand and said, "In two days Leon and Saree will be coming to stay with us for a short time. They're to familiarize themselves with our realm so they can better assist you after I'm gone."

A sick feeling washed over her whenever she thought about how her time with Perrin was growing shorter. In spite of how she'd delved into the study of Fiendgens, even traveled to other domains and asked for access to their libraries, she had found no information on how to fight the attack that would either turn Perrin into a full Fiendgen or take his life.

Though Perrin had continually offered knowledge about the Fiendgens and their systems of Lumeris-noire, he seemed frustratingly disinterested in her questions about possible ways of fighting the attack. Firmly stating there were none, he told her not to waste her time thinking about the impossible when she still had so much to learn in a

very short time.

"All right. I'll see that rooms are prepared for them." She raised his hand to her lips and kissed the back of it.

"Livia, when it happens, I've turned one of the storage chambers on the southern corridor into a cell of sorts. I plan to remain there until it's over. I don't want you to go near it. Leon has agreed to take care of the body."

Her throat constricted and for a moment she thought she might burst into tears then and there. Finally she said with surprising steadiness, "I can't."

"My will in all things."

She smiled sadly and raised her eyes to heaven. "And how many times have I broken that promise yet you've still kept me around?"

"This time is different, Livia. I'm asking you to stay away. I don't want you to remember me like some raving thing. Give me ... give me that at least."

Lowering her gaze, she tried to force another smile. "Why did you have to put it like that?"

He cupped her chin and gently tilted it upward so she held his gaze. "Please."

In all the time she'd known him, she'd never heard Perrin plead for anything. She found herself nodding slowly.

"Thank you," he said and continued down the corridor, Livia beside him.

"Tomorrow afternoon, I had plans to take a trip to the Mingling Halls with C'lang. Is that all right with you, or do you prefer to have me stay here?" she asked. She hoped he wouldn't want her to remain in Guthdry's domain. Tomorrow she intended to ask Chief Hamer if she could search his records for any useful information about the Fiendgens. Though she had tried to avoid asking him, not knowing how the crazy Kreindite would react, she was more desperate than ever to find an alternative to Perrin committing suicide.

"That's fine. Actually, I wanted to ask if you could use some help this week offering medical assistance to the Philztians? Say, the day after tomorrow?"

"That would be great if you feel up to it. I know the cravings have been getting worse. That's really why Leon and Saree are coming, isn't it?"

"Partially, yes."

She stopped walking and tugged on his hand. He faced her, tenderly caressing her cheek.

"Perrin, I don't want to make this harder for you than it already is, but I'm going to miss you terribly." Her embrace was so tight it must have been painful, but he didn't seem to care. He held her close and stroked her hair, then kissed the top of her head.

"I can't begin to tell you how much you've meant to me," he said, his deep voice rough with emotion. "The only real happiness I've ever known has been with you."

Livia held him tighter, unable to keep tears from spilling. After a moment, she regained her self control and released him. She wiped her eyes. "I'm sorry."

"No. I am. You've given me pleasure and I've hurt you. I don't know how you could have come to care about a man like me, but--"

"You're a good man," she said fiercely, squeezing his hands. "I don't give a damn about your past or what you think about yourself. I know your heart, Perrin. You deserve better than--"

"Still such a child." He smiled sadly. Taking her face in his hands, he kissed her

lips. "But I'd want you no other way. Hang onto that innocence and sense of hope for as long as you can, Livia. It's beautiful, just as you are."

"I think that's the most flowery speech you've ever made to me."

"Well don't get used to it. I'm still a miserable old bastard with Fiendgen blood in my veins." He continued walking, her hand clasped firmly in his.

"Bastard," she said, her loving tone at war with the insult.

He glanced at her from the corner of his eye, his lips twisting in one of his slight, stiff smiles that had become so endearing. What would life be like without those smiles? She didn't want to think about it.

* * * *

Perrin stood by the main computer in the temple, reading correspondence from the Overlord, though his thoughts kept drifting to Livia.

He'd known from the first he should keep away from her outside of business. No good could come out of a relationship with a Fiendgen. No matter what the outcome, he could never truly fit into her world. This fact had been reinforced at her old tutor's funeral when Livia's family and friends had looked at him with fear and distaste. They hadn't even seen his Fiendgen face, yet they'd sensed the evil in him.

Perrin had done his best to fight his desire for her, but in the end he had surrendered to the primitive drives of his body. Even now the thought of making love with her had him pole hard and his heart pounding. When he closed his eyes he could feel her body against him, hear her voice whispering in his ear, and catch the fresh aroma of her perfume. Worst of all, the passion he felt for her body was insignificant compared to the love he bore for her entire being.

Thinking himself free of love--the only way in which he'd believed himself completely Fiendgen--he'd foolishly allowed her into his life. Apparently that emotion had survived inside him along with hate. Livia herself had told him one could not exist without the other, but he hadn't believed her. Added to his dilemma was the suspicion that she loved him too. Knowing this tempted him to test her affection in the one way that might save him. However if she tried and failed, she would die.

Still, the idea of sharing his life with her, having her in his bed each night and with him each day was too wonderful a dream to come true for the likes of him.

"Perrin?" Livia stepped into the temple. Draped in her cloak, her pack slung over her shoulder, she looked ready for her trip to the Mingling Halls. "I'm on my way to meet C'lang."

"Enjoy yourself and be careful." He placed a hand to the back of her head and bent to kiss her.

She returned the kiss with fervor, embracing him tightly for an all too brief moment. "I'll be back as soon as I can."

* * * *

Inside the Kreindite domain, C'lang carried Livia to Chief Hamer's palace where the Kreindite ruler agreed to meet with her. While she entered the palace, C'lang was given the freedom of the grounds to gallop and graze as he pleased.

Chief Hamer met her in the courtyard where he and two members of his harem had been picnicking. When Livia approached, he smiled and greeted her pleasantly.

"What do you need from us?" he asked.

"I would like to ask if I may have access to your library of Lumeris-noire. I'm researching Fiendgens and have been unable to find the information I require."

He cast her a discerning look, and after several seconds turned to the guard who had accompanied her. "Show her to my personal library."

"Thank you, chief." Livia bowed her head and followed the guard out of the courtyard. They walked down a long corridor then up two winding staircases to a spacious room filled with paper books and several computers.

"If you require anything, the communication pearl is here." The guard pointed to a milky stone in the center of a polished wood table.

"Thank you," Livia said.

No sooner had the guard left than she dove into her research. She ran her fingertips over the books' spines, feeling power radiate from them. She briefly thought that under better circumstances she would enjoy access to this library that rivaled Perrin's in its collection of historical books.

A short time later, she was seated at a table, deeply involved in a book she thought might prove helpful. Unfortunately she soon grew frustrated that she'd uncovered no new information.

To her surprise, Chief Hamer stepped inside. She started to rise, but he held up his hand. "Please stay seated. I wish to speak to you."

"Yes?" Livia marked her place in the book and held the chief's gaze.

He approached, the thin, silky material of his pale blue trousers clinging to his privates in a manner that was almost obscene. She noted his bare torso and wondered if the man ever fully dressed.

"I believe I know what you're searching for, but you won't find it in books."

Livia's brow furrowed. "Please go on."

The chief's blue gaze fixed on hers. "You won't find it in books because the only people who know about it are of the Fiendgen race, and they would never tell."

"Then how do you know about it?"

He smiled slightly. "Through a private source. You do know what it is I'm referring to, then?"

Wary, Livia said, "Perhaps if you'd be more clear..."

"You're a clever girl. Courageous and powerful. I can understand why Perrin is so taken with you."

"I hardly see what this has to do with him."

"Come now, Livia. It has everything to do with him. You want to know how to save him from his fate among the most dreaded manipulators of Lumeris-noire."

Hope stirred in Livia and she leaned closer to the chief. "Please, Chief Hamer, if you know something--"

"According to legend, there is a way to expel the attack that calls a practitioner to the Fiendgens. That final attack causes intense pain that can only be alleviated by going to the Fiendgens where they perform a final ritual that binds the practitioner to them forever."

"I know, and if they don't go, they'll die."

The chief nodded. "Unless someone embraces them and shares their pain. It's excruciating and powerful enough to kill both parties. Supposedly the attack is channeled through the person who embraces them and returned to the energy that sustains the

universe itself. Then the practitioner is free while retaining everything previously given to them by the Fiendgens.”

“If that’s true, then why is it not recorded? Surely someone has been saved in such a way.”

“Not to my knowledge. It’s sort of the Fiendgen sense of humor. They know it would take a miracle for anyone to willingly accept that kind of pain. Only someone who loves the victim might possibly find the courage to do it, and who could care enough about someone tainted by Fiendgen blood to risk their life for them? Especially since most of the practitioners who make the deal with those devils relish the power they receive. Fiendgens, you see, don’t deal in miracles.”

“Why are you telling me this?”

“Then I am right in guessing that’s what you’re looking for?”

“Yes, but--”

“Only a fool couldn’t see what you and Perrin feel for each other. I believe you are willing to take such a risk to save him. I know Perrin well. He has been a good friend and I can see no reason for him to die for his stupid sense of honor--something rare in those of Fiendgen blood, by the way. He would not tell you about this himself.”

“Then he knows there’s a chance for him to be saved?”

“Of course he does.”

Hurt and anger flared inside her. “Why wouldn’t he tell me?”

“Fear that you could die. Though this has never been proved, it is said that if anyone who doesn’t love the practitioner touches him during the attack, they will die.”

“He must know my love is real.”

“Knowing Perrin, that is another reason he didn’t tell you. Most likely he doesn’t want you to spend your life with a Fiendgen. He despises that side of himself and would not wish to taint you with it.”

“That’s just stupid.” Livia clenched her fists. “I have to explain--”

“If you tell him what I told you, then you risk him running from you so you won’t be tempted to save him. “

“You think he’s that crazy?”

A slight smile touched the chief’s finely shaped lips. “Not only is he that crazy, he is that much in love with you.”

Sighing deeply, Livia closed her eyes for longer than a blink. This was too much to fathom, yet in the least likely place she had found what she wanted to know. “Thank you, Chief Hamer. There’s no way I can repay you for what you’ve done for me today.”

“Repay me by saving your master, if you truly can.”

“I will.”

Livia and C’lang left the Kreindite domain, as she was eager to return to Perrin. Though her decision to attempt to save him had already been made, she couldn’t help feeling guilty over placing their domain in peril.

Perrin had trained her to take over in the event of his death. Now she would risk her life to save his. There was a real possibility both would die, not because she didn’t believe she could endure the attack with Perrin, but because she couldn’t be certain Chief Hamer had told her the truth. What if he had, for some reason, been lying or misinformed?

It was a risk she would have to take.

When Livia arrived at Guthdry's domain she found Perrin still at work in the temple checking texts she'd copied the previous day.

"Have you eaten dinner?" Livia asked.

He shook his head, not lifting his gaze until he'd finished the page he was reading. He rubbed his eyes and glanced at her. "Did you enjoy your day?"

"Yes." She moved behind him and massaged his shoulders.

A contented groan escaped his throat and he relaxed beneath her touch.

"I bet you didn't have lunch, either," she said.

"No."

"Why don't you close this book...." She edged her way around him. Perrin turned in his chair and tugged her between his parted knees. Looping her arms around his neck, she continued, "And come home with me? We can have dinner and a shower. Then you can...." She kissed his lips. "Have your way...." Another kiss. "With me."

"As much as I like the sound of that, I need to finish this book first. I doubt it will take much longer. As usual your work is excellent."

"Another compliment, Perrin? I'm not sure I can take all this praise you've been giving lately."

"Brat." His lips curled in a teasing smile before he playfully smacked her behind.

"While you're finishing up here, I'll make dinner. Don't start another project when you've finished this one because--and I'm now speaking as your girlfriend and not your apprentice--I'm expecting you home, sir."

He didn't reply, but held her gaze with such intensity that a quiver of desire darted through her. Livia turned and headed for the door.

"You'd better not have used too much energy on your trip today," he said.

Glancing at him over her shoulder, she noted his attention was again fixed on the book.

"You'll need a good deal of it tonight, wench."

Smiling, Livia left the temple.

At home she showered and put on her sexiest black nightgown and robe. She prepared Perrin's favorite meal--rice and vegetables with raisin pudding for desert. She'd almost finished cooking when Perrin arrived. He greeted her with a kiss, then leaned against the kitchen counter, his long legs crossed at the ankles, and drank from a bottle of Fiendgen blood. His gleaming green gaze followed her as she stirred the vegetables.

"It will be ready in a few minutes," she said.

"I'll take a quick shower in the meantime."

After putting the bottle away, he approached and took a tendril of her hair between his fingers. He kissed it. "You look beautiful."

"Thank you." She turned to kiss him, but he moved away.

"The blood," he said. "Tastes bad."

She nodded and smiled slightly. "I'll take a rain check."

By the time Livia brought the food to the table, Perrin had showered and built a fire in the living room. He sprawled on the couch wearing loose black trousers that dipped just below his navel. His shirt draped over the arm of a nearby chair and she couldn't keep from staring at his gorgeous torso. With his eyes closed and handsome face relaxed, he looked uncharacteristically peaceful and thoroughly sexy. Gazing at him she felt both aroused and protective. She loved him so much. Knowing there was a chance to save him from the Fiendgens made her happier than she'd been in months. If only she

could let him know she intended to save him, that she wouldn't let him go without a fight.

He looked so comfortable that she hesitated to wake him. When she approached, he opened his eyes and held out his hand to her. No sooner had she slipped hers into it than he tugged her atop him. Burying his fingers in her hair, he kissed her, his firm, moist lips moving tenderly against hers. His tongue slipped between her lips and hers met it, stroking and exploring. His scent of soap, freshly washed hair, and woody cologne filled her with each breath. The gentle stroking of his hands on her head and down her back tempted her to remain on the couch instead of eating the dinner she'd so carefully prepared.

When the kiss broke, their gazes met and she smiled. "I love your kisses."

"And I love yours." His mouth covered hers again. He pressed her closer to his warm, hard body.

Livia purred with pleasure, one of her legs slipping between his. She felt him swell against her, stirring her desire even more. Reluctantly, she tugged away and asked, "Do you want to eat?"

"Mmm." He tried to kiss her again, but she eluded him.

"I made raising pudding for desert."

"Delicious as it is, you're even sweeter," he said, standing.

"Then why are you getting up?" she teased.

"Come, brat." He caressed the top of her head before reaching for his shirt and pulling it on while walking to the table.

Throughout the meal, they discussed business and also their upcoming visit to the Philztian domain.

After dinner, they retired to Perrin's bedroom where they made love until they lay, sated, in each other's arms.

"Goodnight, Perrin," she murmured, pressing a kiss to his chest.

"Goodnight, Livia." His arms tightened around her for a moment.

I love you, she thought, drifting to sleep. *I love you so much....*

Chapter Thirteen

The next day Livia and Perrin arrived at the Philztian domain by late morning. Other than a few sprains and a newborn foal that required some attention, the Philztians needed little help. Livia and Perrin were free to spend the rest of the day with C'lang, Neih, and their herd, relaxing in the fields and frolicking in a crystalline lake.

After lunch, Perrin lay on his back in the sun warmed grass, Livia curled beside him. Her head rested against his shoulder and her leg draped over him.

"It's so nice here," she murmured, languidly unbuttoning Perrin's shirt. She parted the material and ran her hand over his chest, relishing the sensation of hair over warm flesh and loving the hardness of his lean muscles. Feeling the ridges of old scars, she experienced a pang of guilt over the ones that had been caused by her disobedience.

Her fingertips traced his ribs and stroked his chiseled abs. Passion kindled inside her and she knew she should stop touching him, but couldn't seem to control herself.

"I almost wish we could stay here forever."

"So do I," he whispered. "I like the sun and the scent of this valley, but most of I like sharing it with you, Livia."

She lifted her head and gazed into his eyes. Placing his hand to her cheek, he guided her face toward his for a kiss.

They were interrupted by C'lang's approach.

A storm is coming, the colt said. I suggest you take shelter.

They followed the young Philztian to the moss covered caves a short distance away from the lake. Other Philztians had already gathered there. The dragon in them loved the seclusion of caves as much as their horse-like nature adored the freedom of open fields.

Livia and Perrin climbed into a small cave above the spacious one used by C'lang, Neih, and their herd.

Thunder rumbled outside and lightning flashed, but at the moment there was no place Livia would rather be. Wrapped in each other's arms, warmed by their coats and blankets, she and Perrin listened to the pelt of rain through the trees.

"Perrin?" she asked quietly.

His arms tightened around her. "Yes."

"Make love to me."

"Here?"

She turned and stared into his eyes, seeing desire that matched her own burning there.

"But I don't have--"

"I brought them." Livia reached beside her and searched her belongings for a contraceptive shield.

He chuckled when she held one between her fingertips, a coquettish smile on her lips.

"Do you carry those things everywhere?"

“One of us has to be practical and not constantly searching for excuses not to have fun.”

“You are a brat.”

“Uh huh.” Her hand slipped between them and stroked him through his trousers. Beneath her practiced touch, he grew hard and ready. With a low growl, he reached down and unzipped his fly while she pulled down her trousers and panties.

When his warm hand slipped between her legs and gently rubbed her soft mound, she arched against him, her hips moving in time with his stroking palm. His tongue lightly traced the column of her throat before he kissed her neck and jaw. One of his long, slender fingers slipped inside her. He withdrew the digit, moist with her feminine essence, and rubbed the delicate flesh that ached for his touch. Ever so slowly he ran the length of his finger up and down one side of her swollen nub until she could scarcely endure another moment of pleasure.

“Oh, Perrin,” she whispered breathlessly, curling her fist around his velvet-skinned cock. It grew even more in her hand. She gently ran her fingertips over the bulging crown, then explored the shaft, the pad of her thumb tracing the shape of an especially prominent vein along the underside. Having prepared him well, she slid on the shield.

“Livia,” he breathed, pressing her onto her back and covering her body with his. He licked and kissed her neck, then used the tip of his tongue to trace the curve of her ear. Giggling, she writhed with ticklish pleasure and quivered with need. She purred softly and thrust her pelvis against him, eager to feel him inside her.

Stranded in a cave in the midst of a rainstorm seemed the perfect place to make love and she had no intention of wasting a moment of this magical time together.

By the way he kissed her, he seemed to agree. Bracing most of his weight on his forearms, he used his knee to part her legs. The tip of his erection pressed against her in that warm, yearning place while his tongue thrust into her mouth, giving her another hint of the even greater pleasures soon to come.

“Perrin. Oh, Perrin,” she murmured, wrapping her legs around him as he slid into her with almost frustrating slowness.

Once he filled her completely, they lay still for several heartbeats, enjoying the sensation of ultimate closeness. When she had started this apprenticeship, the last thing Livia had imagined was that she would fall so desperately in love with her stern Fiendgen master. Now she couldn't imagine life without him.

His lips gently brushed her temple, then covered hers with such tenderness and intimacy that all thoughts escaped her except the insatiable need to be claimed by this powerful, magnificent man.

He began thrusting with long, slow strokes that became shorter and faster as pleasure grew. Livia closed her eyes and held him tightly, her entire body aflame. Her hips moved in time with his until his motions became so swift that all she could do was cling to him on that marvelous climb to bliss.

“Livia!” he panted. “Livia!”

“Yes, Perrin. Yes!” She gasped and quivered in a heart-pounding climax. Still pulsing, she felt him explode inside her.

Warm and content, they lay together until the storm passed.

Livia and Perrin left the Philztian domain with reluctance, having shared one of

the most blissful days in their lives. If Chief Hamer's information proved right, it would be one of many happy days to come.

* * * *

The following day Leon and Saree arrived early in the morning. Though Perrin loathed the idea of sharing his underground domain with anyone but Livia, he was grateful for the presence of the other defenders.

With his craving so close, the final calling could occur at any time and he didn't want Livia suddenly left alone and grieving.

After so many months sharing the temple only with her, it felt strange having others searching through their books and using their computers. At least Leon and Saree were living in quarters Livia had prepared down the hall from their home.

Knowing their time together was almost over, Perrin found himself battling emotions he never thought to feel. Aside from fear of pain and death, he felt overwhelming sorrow that he would not have a lifetime to spend with Livia. Each night he made love to her with increasing desperation, as if he could take the memory of her with him into the netherworld. He knew she cared for him deeply, and while part of him relished the affection he had been deprived of all his life, he couldn't help feeling guilty over entering a relationship with her, knowing how it would end.

One night when he held her in his arms, she said, "It's not as if any of us live forever, Perrin. And this was as much my decision as it was yours. I have no regrets. I will never have regrets about us. Please tell me you won't, either."

Gazing into her eyes, he was almost overwhelmed by the temptation to confide in her about one last secret. She must have seen the wildness in his eyes or felt his speeding heartbeat because she said, "What? Do you have something to tell me?"

"No," he said softly. "Any regrets I have are because you deserve better than--"

"Don't say it." She kissed him to silence and they spoke no more that night.

The following afternoon, while Livia and the defenders worked in the temple, Perrin took inventory of supplies from a storage room down the corridor. He wanted to leave Livia fully stocked.

The final attack came with such swiftness and intensity that one moment he was on his feet counting containers of food and the next he was writhing in agony on the floor.

Stronger than any craving or past calling to the Fiendgen domain, he could scarcely think for the pain. His primary motive was to reach the Fiendgens so this breath stealing agony would end. Just the thought of returning to his masters subdued the pain enough for him to rise to his feet. Slowly he regained the ability to focus and knew he needed to reach the cell he'd created to hold him during this attack.

I had no idea it would be like this, he thought. He'd imagined the attack would be similar to the cravings, though more intense.

Again the pain flooded him, even worse than before. Each time he thought about going to the Fiendgens, it faded. Whenever he took a step toward the corridor where the cell awaited him, it returned with greater intensity. He needed to get to the cell before he lost his resolve.

Trembling uncontrollably, racked by fiery pain from the roots of his hair to the bottoms of his feet, he staggered down the corridor. Wrapped in a burning haze that made him long for death, he soon lost track of time. Finally the cell came into view.

A wave of agony fiercer than any before knocked him off his feet. He couldn't control the scream that nearly tore out his throat.

* * * *

Livia paused in reading the correspondence on the temple's main computer. She could have sworn she heard what sounded like a muffled scream.

There it was again. Panic clogged her chest. By the expressions on Leon and Saree's faces, they'd heard it, too.

Livia sprang to her feet and headed for the door, Leon close behind her.

"Wait." He grasped her arm, but she broke his hold and ran through the door, both defenders behind her.

"Livia, no!" Leon shouted.

"Don't be a fool!" Saree called.

She turned down a second corridor and saw Perrin on his hands and knees, his body contorted in pain. Somehow he caught sight of Livia and the defenders and crawled away, bellowing, "Don't touch me! Don't come near me!"

"Livia," Leon snapped, both he and Saree grasping her arms before she could reach Perrin.

"Let me go!" She fought viciously, using her physical strength as well as her powers of Lumeris-noire that surpassed even that of the experienced defenders. They momentarily lost their hold on her and she wasted no time before rushing to Perrin's side. She dropped to the floor and reached for him, though he tried to escape.

"Livia, no," he gasped.

"It's all right. I can touch you, Perrin. I can."

Upon contact with his trembling body, she experienced such dizzying pain that she nearly blacked out. She remembered Chief Hamer saying Perrin's pain would become hers. Through terrified of suffering, she knew losing him would be worse than any physical agony.

With a final burst of strength, Perrin pushed away from her and stumbled toward the cell.

"Perrin, listen to me!" she screamed, reaching for him. Saree grasped her ankle before she reached him.

"Livia! It's his time," Saree bellowed.

"No!" Livia kicked free as Perrin closed the door. Her vision blurred by tears, Livia pushed the door with all her strength. Whether her grief gave her added power or Perrin was simply too weak to struggle any longer, the door flew open.

Livia dropped to the ground beside him and wrapped him in a tight embrace. Waves of agony crashed over her. She felt scorched to the bone. A scream pierced the cell, though whether it was from him or her she couldn't tell.

Then the pain vanished.

Gasping, Livia sat numb, her arms weakly supporting Perrin. Drenched in sweat, he completely collapsed against her.

"Livia?" Saree asked.

Both defenders approached, their expressions wary yet concerned.

"Is he alive?" Leon asked.

Livia touched her fingertip to Perrin's damp neck and felt his pulse beating rapidly.

“Yes,” she said. “I need to get him home.”

The defenders looked hesitant, obviously fearful that touching Perrin might still be deadly.

“There’s a motorized coach three chambers down to the left,” Livia said. “We never use it, but Perrin did say it was in working order.”

Leon nodded and went to retrieve the coach.

Saree moved a bit closer, but still kept a safe distance from Perrin. She asked, “How were you able to touch him?”

“I’ll let Perrin explain later,” Livia replied.

“The Overlord will be pleased to hear about this. He wasn’t happy about losing Perrin to the Fiendgens.” Saree narrowed her eyes. “Do you suppose this was the final attack?”

“Yes,” Livia stated. She knew that without doubt.

A few moments later, Perrin stirred. Livia brushed hair from his face. His gaze met hers with a barrage of emotions--surprise, gratitude, and love most plain.

“Livia--”

“Shh. Just rest,” she said.

Leon arrived with the coach and Perrin climbed into it, still supported by Livia.

“How are you feeling?” Leon asked.

“All right.” Perrin nodded, though he still looked and sounded weak. Livia understood why. She’d experienced the attack for mere seconds. She had no idea how long Perrin had been suffering before they’d found him.

At home, Livia accompanied Perrin to his room while Leon and Saree contacted the Overlord.

Perrin sat on the bed and began unbuttoning his shirt with unsteady fingers. Livia nudged her way between his legs and brushed aside his hands so she could unfasten the buttons for him.

“Livia.” He met her gaze, but stopped speaking, as if searching for the words to express what he felt. Finally, he said, “I should be very angry with you.”

“For saving your life?”

“For risking yours,” he snapped, then shook his head. “Thank you.”

“Perrin.--”

“I don’t need to ask how you found out about the one way to expel the attack, but there’s a Kreindite chief who’s going to find out what it feels like to be on the receiving end of his own torture prod.”

“Perrin, stop it! You’re alive. I’m alive. That’s what matters. If anyone should be angry, it’s me. How could you have kept such a secret from me?”

“Because it was best for you.”

“You might be my master in Lumeris-noire, but I’m the mistress of my personal life.”

“Livia, I--”

“Oh shut up for once! I love you, Perrin, and I would risk anything to save you. I know you probably don’t love me--at least not in the same way. I know duty is just about everything to you.”

“I think I’ve loved you since the moment I touched your application and felt even that small portion of your vast and beautiful soul. Then when I met you, I was lost.”

His words filled her with such happiness that any anger she felt drifted away. "Then why didn't you want to take the chance for us to be together?"

"Because you deserve better." He shrugged off his shirt and tossed it onto a nearby chair. "Even if I'm saved, I'm still a Fiendgen."

"You are a stubborn fool." She slipped her arms around him and pressed his head to her breasts.

He embraced her for a long moment. Finally Livia pulled back slightly and caressed his face. "You need rest. That attack was horrible."

"I'm fine now that it's over."

"Just relax. I'll ask Leon and Saree not to disturb us for a while, then I'm sure the Overlord will want a meeting."

He nodded. Sighing, he finished undressing.

After speaking with the defenders, Livia returned to Perrin's room and climbed into bed with him. He tugged her into his arms and kissed her hair.

"I love you, Livia," he whispered.

"I love you, Perrin. Always."

It took moments before he fell asleep. Livia remained awake for a long time, content to be in his arms and grateful they had been given this chance for a new life together, out of the Fiendgens' shadow.

Chapter Fourteen

The following morning, Perrin and Livia reported to the Overlord who ordered both to undergo medical examinations. They were deemed healthy, though Perrin agreed he should not be bonded to the dome until they were certain he was free of his Fiendgen masters. Though he would remain in charge of the underground domain and continue Livia's education, she, Leon, and Saree would remain bonded to the dome for at least one year before gradually switching signatures with Perrin.

On their way home after nearly two days on the surface, Perrin remained lost in thought. Since the last attack, he had no cravings for Fiendgen blood, yet he couldn't fully believe he was free. Only time would convince him of that.

"Are you all right?" Livia asked, resting a hand on his shoulder from where she walked behind him down the narrow, winding staircase leading to the underground domain.

He noted she no longer seemed uncomfortable on those perilous steps, as she had when she'd first entered his world so many months ago.

"I'm fine."

"I'm so glad the Overlord agreed that I should remain with you down here, even after my training is completed."

"I don't know why you suggested it."

"It makes sense to have more than one person stationed down here. What's the matter? Don't you want me around anymore?" she teased.

"I just thought that once the training was over you'd want to return to the real world. Another defender could take your place--"

"Oh really? It took you ages to get used to me. Besides, how many people do you think would put up with your attitude?"

"They'd have no choice. I'm still the main defender of this domain."

"If we weren't walking down this flight of stairs I'd smack you in the head. Arrogant jerk."

He paused and glanced at her over his shoulder, an evil grin on his lips. "Is that any way to talk to your master? I could punish you for that."

Looping her arms around his neck, she whispered close to his ear, "That could be fun. What kind of punishment are we talking about?"

"You are incorrigible."

"But you love me?"

"Yes. I love you. That's why I'm tempted to protest having you stay down here. You belong--"

"Where I'm needed, loved, and want to be. That's right here with you, Perrin."

They walked in silence until they reached the bottom of the stairs. All this couldn't be happening to him. Perhaps it was some kind of hallucination his mind had created to cope with the pain of the last attack. He was really still writhing on the floor, dying, and this was a fantasy.

A slight whack on the back of his head jarred him back to reality.

"What the hell was that for?" He glared.

"For whatever stupidly noble ideas you're having right now about making me return to the surface."

"Livia, what if this isn't over for me? What if we find I'm still dependent on the Fiendgens for some reason? I can no longer go back to them for blood and expect to return home freely."

"Perrin, you're really starting to annoy me." She sighed, folding her arms beneath her breasts.

"All I'm saying is, let's move slowly."

She looked at him as if he'd just sprouted another head, then chuckled. "Fine. We're already in love and have done just about everything imaginable in bed, but we'll move slowly."

"Everything imaginable?" He lifted an eyebrow, his desire stirring in spite of his worries. He swept her into his arms and kissed her. "I can *imagine* quite a lot more."

"I'm your ever eager student," she whispered against his lips.

* * * *

Three weeks later, Livia was thrilled that Perrin's cravings hadn't returned. In her heart, she knew he was finally released from the Fiendgens, yet he still remained hesitant to fully celebrate. She couldn't blame him for being wary. What bothered her was his reluctance to take their relationship a step further. She had understood why he'd kept a certain distance between them when he thought his life was almost over, but a naïve part of her had expected him to relish their hard won freedom by making their relationship legal and permanent.

The Midyear Banquet was fast approaching, the biggest holiday of the year in Guthdry, and she had visions of returning home with a marriage announcement. To disappoint her further, he had refused her invitation to accompany her home for the holiday.

This upset her so much that she'd held a grudge and had been sleeping in her room instead of his for the past several days. To frustrate her even more, he hadn't bothered trying to change her mind. It was as if he'd been expecting the rebuff and had no inclination to fight for her affection.

Finally, just before she left for her parents' home, she stopped by the temple where he had been spending most of his time. She shook her head as she stared at him, bent over the scribe's desk, his lips set in a grim line just as he used to look when they'd first met.

"Perrin?"

To her surprise instead of finishing what he was doing, his gaze immediately fixed on hers with a hint of--was it desperation? "Yes, Livia?"

"I'm leaving. Are you sure you won't come with me?"

"You know I don't celebrate the Midyear."

Sighing, she closed her eyes and whispered, "But I do."

"Livia," he stood and approached, placing his hands on her shoulders, "look at me." She lifted her gaze to his and he continued, "Your family will not approve of me and they're right."

"I don't care if they approve of you or not. Or at least I didn't. I've given you

everything I possibly can, Perrin, but this relationship has to go both ways. Maybe you just want me for sex.”

She turned away and headed for the door.

“Livia.”

Ignoring him, she left without looking back.

The following day Livia's parents' home filled with relatives who were eager to hear about her duties as apprentice to Guthdry's main defender. Though the last thing she wanted to talk about was Perrin, she managed to cheerfully answer as many of their questions as possible without disclosing the domain's many secrets.

In spite of the house decorated with the gray and white flowers and oversized silver mugs filled with food and gifts that symbolized the holiday, Livia couldn't fully enjoy herself. Her thoughts kept drifting to Perrin. She might have saved him physically, but emotionally he was as much a slave as ever. Perhaps his humanity had been neglected for too long for him to ever express his affection like a normal man. She didn't doubt he loved her, but she needed to feel that love on a regular basis, not just in the bedroom.

Sensing her daughter's distraction when she'd arrived the previous day, Livia's mother had asked what was wrong. She'd confided in her parents about Perrin, including his Fiendgen connections. Their first reaction had been to agree with her reluctant lover that he was not a good choice for her. He was obviously trying to set her free and she should take the chance. Livia began to understand that perhaps they were right. She couldn't force him into marriage, and she certainly had no desire to. He needed to want her as a wife as much as she wanted him as a husband.

A buffet of food had been spread on the dining room table. After filling her plate, Livia sat in the kitchen with her aunt and cousins, half listening to their conversation. She picked at her food and wondered what Perrin was doing. Working, most likely. Perhaps he should marry a book of Lumeris-noire. He might be happier that way.

“Livia,” her mother called from the doorway. “You have a visitor.”

Her brow furrowed, Livia placed her food on the table. She followed her mother to the foyer, shocked to find Perrin standing there, draped in his black cloak, his face shadowed by the overhanging hood. Her father, looking rather uncomfortable, was engaged in conversation with him. Perrin turned to her immediately, and their gazes locked for several heartbeats before she embraced him tightly.

“I'm so glad you came,” she said.

“Livia, thank God,” her father muttered, quickly making his exit.

“We'll leave you two alone,” Livia's mother said, smiling reassuringly at her daughter before closing the door to allow them some privacy.

Holding her at arm's length, Perrin gazed at Livia, lingering over the festive, peach colored dress that hugged her curves. “You look beautiful.”

She smiled, warmed not only by the compliment but by the heated expression in his eyes. “Thank you. I--Wait a minute, you did come for the holiday, not because there's a problem?” she asked warily.

“The only problem is how I've been acting. When you left yesterday, I knew you wouldn't take much more of my mixed messages. I've been saying one thing, but doing another. Claiming that you should seek another life, yet unable to keep my hands off you. Livia, you know what I am. I can't change that.”

“I love you, Perrin. Exactly how you are.”

“I love you, too. In spite of all my talk about what’s best for you, I don’t want to lose you.”

“You won’t lose me, Perrin. Not if you want me.”

He drew a deep breath and released it slowly. For the first time since she’d known him, she felt his heretofore unshakable confidence slip. He removed his hood so he could fully meet her gaze without the protection of shadows. Taking her hands, he knelt in front of her and asked, “Livia, will you marry me? You don’t have to answer now. I--”

“Yes.” She smiled and dropped into his arms. “I will definitely marry you.”

He held her tightly for a moment before shifting position to reach into his pocket. He withdrew a delicate silver chain with a blood red bead--a marriage necklace worn by engaged and married women in Guthdry.

Her heart pounding with joy, she stood and allowed him to fasten it on her neck, then she turned to him and accepted a tender kiss. Livia locked her arms around his neck and closed her eyes, her tongue slipping between his lips. His met it and they teased one another with warm, wet strokes. She playfully bit his bottom lip then sucked on it while her hands massaged his shoulders and neck.

He broke the kiss, his eyes aflame, and said in a husky whisper, “This isn’t the time or place to tempt me, but when we get home, Livia--”

“I can scarcely wait,” she breathed and kissed him again. She stepped back, snugly grasped his hand, and tugged him toward the door. “Come on. You have a lot of relatives to meet.”

He pulled up his hood and said with a trace of sarcasm, “Wonderful.”

Smiling, she squeezed his hand. “Don’t worry. I’ll protect you.”

With a chuckle, he followed her to the celebration.

Epilogue

Livia and Perrin were married in a small ceremony one week after the Midyear Banquet. A year later, without a trace of cravings or Fiendgen attack, Perrin once again took over almost full control of the dome. That year Jotamiana City was defeated and taken under control of Guthdry, the Kreindites, and several other allied domains.

The couple continue to work together in the underground domain where they have taken on a new apprentice. On days off they can often be found among the Philztians, resting in the sun warmed grass and frolicking in the lake with their two-year-old twin daughters who already show a remarkable gift for Lumeris-noire.

The End