

## PROLOGUE



MIRA

The dry, flattened grass acted as my pillow as I lay beneath the tree, the rolling fields golden and ripe with this year's harvest. The sun kissed my relaxed muscles as the shade danced from a gentle breeze. A contented sigh escaped my lips. Home. Whole. My inner flame burning strongly within me and I savored the sensation of having it dance to my will, filling the once cold, empty spot. My musings were interrupted by warm lips grazing over my bare shoulder and I cracked my eyes open. Familiar blue ones gazed back, dancing with mischief. The kissing grew in pressure, locating the sensitive spot where my neck and shoulder met. Zorren nipped it with his blunt teeth before sucking hard. My breathing hitched and his lips started tracing the heated spots left by the dappled shade. Stretching my arms over my head, I smiled. "Hello, my love,"

I turned my face to him, Zorren kissed me gently and my lips parted in welcome. Wild energy thrummed through me. Hot and intoxicating, I didn't question it I just reveled in this enchanting

moment. My arms curled around his neck and I pulled him over me with a giggle. My soft curves cradling his hard planes. A hum of appreciation vibrating in his chest, Zorren raised his head, coming up on his arms to take his weight. Soft white eyes gazed down at me; his fingers nimbly tucked a stray curling lock behind my ear.

“How are you feeling?” I frowned, why would he ask that?

“I’m well.” I answered after a hesitation.

He kissed the corner of my mouth. “Good, you’ve been severely ill.”

My confusion deepened, but I was fine, I felt wonderful. A hand snuck under my soft flowing skirt and stroked the sensitive skin of the inside of my thigh. Make that more than wonderful. Despite the heat I shivered and wanting more of his touch parted my thighs in invitation. “I’ve been ill?” He paused, his teeth carefully raking over a taut nipple.

“Yes.”

I gasped, my hips arching into his hardness as molten desire stabbed through my core. “But I’ll be gentle.” My lips curled, always so concerned he would hurt me. My hands threaded through his hair and gave a light tug so I could see his face.

“What if I don’t want gentle?”

Crawling up my body, he smoothed back my cloud of hair from my forehead. “You will have gentle even if it kills me.” He rumbled, getting a stubborn look on his face that I had come to know well.

I quirked a challenging brow. “Really?” My legs parted and I squeezed his flanks with my thighs and attempted to roll us, so I was on top. Zorren wasn’t having any of it and nipped the lobe of my ear in retaliation.

“Naughty, little mate.” His chuckle curled around me, teasing my senses and warmth bloomed in my belly. I opened my mouth to tell him exactly what I thought of ‘gentle’ when his thumb swiped my nubbin and my mind went blank. With a feather light pressure the pad of his thumb circled and teased and I grew wetter. When he slid a finger into my hungry sheath, my head rocked back and my

eyes slid closed for a moment. Opening them again I found Zorren watching me with an intensity that made me giddy, his eyes flaring brighter than ever.

“What do you think of gentle now?” He teased, lazily pumping that finger in and out.

Struggling to focus on his words, I tried to talk, “I might have...” I broke off with a moan when he added a second finger at the exact same moment his lips closed over my breast. My breath became fast and uneven. “...underestimated its virtues.” My hands clutched his shoulders, smoothing over the powerful muscles of his back and sides. Digging my fingers into his skin I tried to urge him to go faster. But no matter what I said, he would grin at me and stick to the same tormenting pace. The first flutterings of my climax rippled through my body. “Please,” I whimpered, “I want you inside me.” It had been so long and I wanted to feel one with him again. To feel connected in the most elemental way.

“Are you sure?”

I reached up and kissed him hard, panting in his ear. “Yes. I want you.”

“Then you will have me.” Zorren withdrew but not before giving one last light pinch of my nubbin.

My heart stopped and the building pressure became almost unbearable. I closed my eyes fighting against the promising climax and Zorren’s weight left me, bringing my breathing back to normal. The man was going to kill me.

When he did not return immediately, I pushed up on my elbows, opening my eyes.

“Zorren?”

Nothing.

Climbing to my feet, my skirt fell back down and I called louder “Zorren!” Dread tiptoed along my spine, where could he have gone? I twisted my head from left to right, hoping to catch sight of him. To no avail. Urgency clawed at me. Something bad was about to happen. Something very, very bad. “Zorren, where are you?” I turned in a

frantic circle and noticed an eerie silence had enveloped the land, as if nature was holding its breath. A piece of white drifted from the sky. I gasped at the shock of cold that landed on my skin and melted. The breeze picked up, whipping my hair into my eyes. More snow fell, the cold stinging my eyes as the howling wind stole my breath. Trapped in the heart of the storm, nothing could penetrate the wall of swirling white. Each flake was painful on the skin and it felt like I was being stung by an entire army of insects. The frigid cold bit into my fingers and toes, my clothes becoming heavy and wet. Then, as sudden as it appeared it stopped. Shivering, my teeth knocked together and I pushed my damp mussed hair out of my eyes. What in sweet Khatri's name was that? I glanced up and swallowed, the sky wasn't clearing. Thick black clouds swirled ominously, bubbling like a writhing sea. An opening appeared and I held my breath. Jagged flames ripped through the clouds and smashed into the land. I staggered to stay upright as the ground rocked and pebbles jumped as if alive. Another beam shot through. Then another. And another, until the fire surrounded me. The fields blazed, plumes of thick black smoke darkened the sky and blocked out all light.

No! It was destroying everything. I reached into myself and stretched forth my hand, attempting to bend the fires to do my bidding. Nothing happened. The flames came closer, hissing and snapping like a feral beast as any trace of moisture disappeared in puffs of steam. I tried again but the fire would not answer my call to cease. I blinked in shock, it wouldn't obey me. The unbearable heat crashed over me. I tried to call out but sucked in a mouth full of ash. Coughing and choking, I doubled over on to my hands and knees. Heat and pain blasted me from all sides and seared my lungs. The branches above me writhed as if sharing my pain; the leaves blackened and shriveled fluttering down on to my exposed skin. I curled in a ball, pushing my face into the dirt and tasted the bitter scorched earth in a vain attempt to protect it. I waited for the fire to feed upon me, the roaring flames getting closer. Sweat leaked

from my skin. Closer. I couldn't breathe or hear anything above the deafening roar of the flames. Closer. My muscles tensed, bracing myself for the ordeal to come. The kiss of heat blistered my skin and I screamed!



I BOLTED upright in the gloom of the room, my heart thumping against my ribs as the illusion of fear still gripped me tight. The urge to fight or flight riding me hard, only there was no one to fight and nothing to run from. I buried my head in my hands, pressing my palms into my eyes and breathed through my nose, it had been so real. Too real. Scooting up the bed until my back was against the headboard, I fumbled blindly for a lamp. Trembling fingers found one and slipping from the bed, I crossed the room to dip a taper into the dying fire and lit the lamp.

The light cascaded out in a pitiful circle that was inadequate to fully banish the darkness. I was in the act of propping it on the mantel when I noticed the dark scorch marks blemishing the stone fireplace. Strange, I bent closer and swiped my finger over it, smearing the ash. Someone must have overloaded the fire at one point. Shrugging, I rubbed my arms, hugging myself tight, the remembered terror digging its talons into me. "It's just a dream," I murmured to the empty room. "Just a dream." I repeated stronger than before.

It didn't help. I didn't want to be alone; I wanted to be in Zorren's strong arms. I wanted to soak up his strength while encouragements rumbled in my ear. But I burned those bridges and damned myself to this isolation. I eyed the bed but doubted I would be able to sleep again. Dragging a fur from the tangled covers, I curled into the wide window seat, my knees tucked up to my chin. Mesmerized by the large fluffy flakes swirling past the window. Winter was well and truly upon us, the capital hunkered down as it

was battered by the ferocious storms. Leaving me at the tender mercies of my maudlin thoughts.

For one moment everything had been right in the world, Zorren and I were together and my inner flame burned bright. My vision wavered; I had *felt* my flame while I reveled in Zorren's touch. I swear it had been there. I squeezed my eyes shut and rested my forehead on the cool pane of glass. It was that blighted hope that hurt the worst and was the hardest to bear. I couldn't do anything about my inner flame. It was gone and I was slowly coming to accept the painful realization. But I could... reconcile with Zorren. My throat closed up. I wanted my mate but pride would not allow me to go to his rooms. Stubborn, stupid pride.

His behavior towards me had transformed. Zorren was considerate, my every need met before I even asked. He demonstrated the patience of a consummate hunter; he was somehow attentive but let me keep my own company. Never pressuring me for more than I was willing to give but remained near. Allowing the passage of time to batter against my defenses like waves upon a cliff face. Days turned to weeks and my rage burned lower. All the while, Zorren was unruffled, kind, and considerate of my needs. I wanted for nothing, except... his touch. The need for him was intensifying, gnawing away at me day by day as my anger slipped.

It was not the first time I'd dreamed of Zorren. I'd replayed our last night of intimacy over and over and he frequently featured in my dreams only for me to awaken wet and desperate. My nipples beaded tightly and aching as I sought the whisper of pleasure. However, whenever I brought myself to completion it was lack-luster and unsatisfying. I kept my lonely vigil at the window until the sky lightened by a shade and the shadows' grasping fingers began to recede. However, it was the muffled sounds of movement in the hallways as the castle came alive and the servants started their day that roused me. Drained of feeling, I began to dress, my eyes flickering back to the window. It was to be another day confined indoors.