



Praise for the writing of Amelia Elias

Pandora's Box

From the very first sentence I was hooked. (Best opening line EVER!) Refreshingly funny and stuffed full of sizzling hot sex, Amelia Elias's take of forbidden passion will keep you glued to your computer desperate to find out how this impossible relationship will unfold.

-- Jenn Andrus, *Enchanted Ramblings*

Pandora's Box is a paranormal novel like no other. I found Amelia Elias's humor throughout the book highly entertaining, especially when mixed with those liquidifying, knee-melting sex scenes... This author has become an autobuy for this reader/reviewer.

-- Anita, *Fallen Angel Reviews*

Wow is all this reviewer can say after reading *Pandora's Box*. Sensual, spicy and oh so erotic, Ms. Elias is like a spider weaving her web around the reader as they read of Tera's journey with the Incubus, Rowan. This is truly one of the most rollicking good paranormal books around.

-- Dawn, *Love Romances*

Take one naughty little incubus made to fit any girl's dream and you have Rowan... Definitely a keeper, both him and the story!

-- Glenda K. Bauerle, *The Romance Studio*

The story evolves quickly, but smoothly. It is a very hot story of a love that seems doomed, but you won't be disappointed with the ending... My advice is to enjoy it with toys at hand!

-- Kirra Pierce, *Just Erotic Romance Reviews*

Pandora's Box is now available from Loose Id.

HAPPILY NEVER AFTER

Amelia Elias

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This book contains explicit sexual content and graphic language.

Happily Never After

Amelia Elias

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Published by
Loose Id LLC
1802 N Carson Street, Suite 212-29
Carson City NV 89701-1215
www.loose-id.com

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ISBN 978-1-59632-249-3

Available in Adobe PDF, HTML, MobiPocket, and MS Reader

Printed in the United States of America

Editor: Raven McKnight
Cover Artist: April Martinez

Dedication

To Kate -- absurdly talented author, long-suffering critique partner, and all-around great friend. This one's for you.

But Ash is still mine.

Chapter One

Steel-shod hooves crushed the new shoots just emerging from the rich earth, trampling crops and spring flowers with equally careless disregard.

We watched the damage in silence. They weren't our fields, but the penalty for the lost production would fall on our heads when autumn rolled around. Still, no one dared to protest. These were the King's Guard of the Harvest, and as such, anything they did carried his tacit approval.

And they didn't look like they approved of anything they saw as they neared the village square.

Miller's Croft had never looked so fine, not even when the last Harvest had come, nine years ago. I remembered it well, though I'd been only fifteen at the time. The fear, the trauma, and the shame our village now tried so desperately to cover. Tried to bury beneath the carefully graveled street and freshly thatched roofs. The fear only showed on the faces of the painfully hopeful inhabitants, obediently lined up like so many docile cattle.

All but one, that is.

My rage simmered hotter as the Guard came nearer, killing any fear of what my father would do to me when the Guard moved on. I didn't care. All I wanted was to still be here in

this squalid little village when they rode away, and if I received daily beatings for a year afterward, that was a price I was willing to pay. Fa glared at me, signaling that I should lower my eyes. I simply looked away from him, choosing instead to examine my enemy as they rode nearer.

Horseflesh like this was a joy to behold, regardless of the evil that rode its back. Taller at the shoulder than most grown men, the warhorses carried the heavily armored guards as effortlessly as our mule carried the youngest babe in the village. Dark eyes scanned their surroundings, alert for any dangers. No guard would ever put blinders on his mount. Tales of the warhorses were legend, and after seeing them at the last Harvest, I believed every one of them. No mere beast could possess such cunning intelligence as I saw behind those eyes.

Of course, no Fae would ride a mere horse.

The guards, too, were spectacular masculine specimens. Even the massive horses couldn't make them appear anything less than they were -- tall, broad, and powerful. The rulers of the world. Their armor glittered in the noon sun, the hard steel polished to such a high shine that the light reflected from it was almost painful. Long hair flowed from beneath every helmet, uniformly golden, uniformly gorgeous, and each guard carried enough weaponry to fight off an army single-handedly. Faces weren't so similar, but each was dazzling in its own way. There was no such thing as a homely Fae.

I shook my head, disgusted with myself for even noticing their beauty. I knew what these things were. I knew exactly what they thought of us, their human peasants, the sentient animals that grew the food for their banquets, provided servants for their palaces and slaves for their beds. I had no business thinking of golden hair and dazzling skin when I looked at them. Their unearthly beauty hid true evil.

Finally, after what seemed an eternity, the Guard stopped in the square and dismounted. All the villagers bowed, some even going to their knees and pressing their foreheads to the gravel. The Guard didn't even seem to notice their obeisance.

It disgusted me. I gave the shortest bow I thought I could get away with.

They made no speeches and didn't make us wait. I was grateful, at least, for that little mercy. Last time, there had been hours of delay as they sought out the missing ones and dragged them to the square.

This time, we were all here. More than that, we were already divided into our lines -- marriageable girls on one side and men on the other. Children hid in the nearest cottages, peeking out the windows when the old women and wives weren't looking themselves.

Only one guard remained mounted. His armor was silver, like the others', but touched with copper at the shoulder and breastplate. His helm was covered in it but for a line of silver around the edges. The commander, for he could be nothing else, swept his eyes over us, taking in every detail of the feminine line before him.

Embroidered skirts fluttered in the sun, stirred by the faint breeze and the uncomfortable shuffle of feet not accustomed to shoes. At the near end were my sisters, May, Ann, and Angel, all three depressingly lovely, compliant, and, to my mind at least, dumb as fever-addled cows. They'd been just faces at the window at the last Harvest, and they clearly didn't know enough to hide their excitement. After them was their gaggle of friends, giggling and smiling, without a clue what fate they flirted with.

Nearer to me, the two sisters I called friends. Linn and Faith held hands, not smiling. Like me, they were old enough to remember the last Harvest as participants, not just observers, and they understood just what was happening here. Their dresses, clean and perfectly serviceable, were nonetheless plain.

I was at the far end, decked out in my version of finery, chosen specially for the occasion, and unlike the other girls, I didn't meekly bow my head when his eye fell on me.

His gaze didn't linger, to my disappointment. He dismounted, pulling off his spectacular helm and hanging it on the pommel, and went to the end of the line opposite me. My stomach clenched. I'd hoped he'd start with me.

He passed my sisters without a word. I sighed with relief, though they would've hated me for it. Likewise, he walked past their friends, his blue eyes barely flickering over them. There weren't many people in Miller's Croft, and fewer unmarried girls, so with each long stride that brought him closer to me, my anxiety knotted and built.

Just before he reached me, he turned his back and went back the other way. He had given just the merest look at my friends and didn't so much as glance at me.

Faith dared to send me a glance, and I could see my own triumph mirrored there.

"There is little to desire here, sir," one of the other guards said in disgust. "I can see now why the king hasn't visited this dump in nearly a decade."

Someone in line gasped at the insult. I tried hard not to smile. Hopefully this meant they'd leave us alone, thank the spirits!

The commander murmured something in the Fae tongue, a language forbidden for us to learn. Half the Guard laughed. I caught a glimpse of the men, my Fa among them, stiffening at the suspected insult, but all my attention was on the commander as he walked to his magnificent horse. His steps were slow, almost disappointed, and I was terrified he'd turn around and decide to have a little fun with us.

I'd had nightmares about their version of fun for the last nine years.

Mount up! I thought at him as hard as I could when he hesitated, putting all my anger and fear behind it. *Just ride away and leave us alone!*

He stopped dead in his tracks. The square fell utterly silent, not even the breeze daring to move. The commander turned slowly, and this time his eyes were sharp as he searched each face in line. There was no giggling now, no batting of eyelashes or flirtatious smiles. Every head bowed before his scrutiny.

And then he was staring at me, and I glared right back. He would get no bow from me.

His eyes narrowed, gaze sliding down my body and back up. Despite the care I'd taken with my appearance, my cheeks flushed. Those eyes wouldn't miss a single one of the

wrinkles I'd so carefully pressed into my dress, nor the tears I'd made and mended with deliberate clumsiness, nor the dirt I'd rubbed into the fabric and onto my skin. His eyes lingered on my hair, or what was left of it after I'd hacked at it with one of the daggers I'd found in Fa's smithy.

As I said, I'd made a very special effort with my appearance.

His gaze returned to mine, and this time I didn't like the calculation I saw in those deep eyes. It was meant to intimidate me, I was certain.

I refused to be intimidated. The Fae liked their bedslaves docile and compliant, and I would not be anything they wanted. *Glare all you want*, I thought, my eyes never wavering. *I won't bow to you*. One corner of his sensual mouth twitched, almost as if he would smile, but the expression went no further.

Finally he turned away. I was just about to breathe a relieved sigh when he spoke again, this time in the common tongue we all understood. "That one at the end is chosen," he said over his shoulder as he mounted his steed with careless grace. "Wash it, then bring it to me."

And every jaw in the village dropped with shock.

Two guards turned my way with reassuring smiles I had no intention of trusting. I danced away from their hands, hardly noticing the sharp edges of the gravel digging into my callused feet. "I am not an it," I snapped at the commander, and even the collective gasp at my rudeness didn't make me stop. To him, I was an it. To the Fae, we all were. "And I can wash myself!"

Settled comfortably atop the stallion again, the commander leaned a negligent elbow on his helmet and smiled at me. "You'll forgive my disbelief," he said, giving me another insulting once-over.

I opened my mouth to protest again, but didn't get a word out before a rush of icy water stole my voice. I whirled to find my Fa beside me, an empty bucket in his hand and no

sympathy on his hard face. More buckets followed, soaking me to the skin, rinsing away my carefully applied camouflage, drenching my perfectly ruined dress and raising goosebumps on every inch of skin. My nipples ached with cold, and I crossed my arms over my chest, trying to hide them from the suddenly avid stares of the men circling me, dumping more water over me.

“Enough,” the commander said, stopping the flood with that one word. The two guards returned, each grabbing an arm and pulling me out of the chilly puddle the men had made around me. I was shuddering with cold -- it was spring, but the days hadn’t yet lost their cool breezes -- and one actually wrapped a rich, woolen cloak around me. Before I could be shocked by his thoughtfulness, he and his partner started rubbing me vigorously, drying me.

Amazing how wet they apparently thought my breasts were.

“Enough,” the commander said again, and this time there was an edge of amusement to his voice. “Bring it here.”

I was brought, wrapped tight in the damp wool cloak that trapped my arms at my sides, and lifted. The commander, helm once more in place, caught me around the waist and pulled me onto his lap. One strong arm kept me from trying to throw myself off again as he reached for the reins with his other hand.

“I am not an it,” I growled at him, swallowing my fear as he nudged his horse into motion. At least the movement made the commander shift his grip, loosening the cloak enough that I could free my hands. I concentrated on my fear in an attempt to ignore my sisters’ jealous faces. Harder to ignore were Faith and Linn’s pity and my Fa’s barely disguised glee at being so abruptly relieved of the thorn in his side.

They were the last glimpses I’d have of them, and every one was horrible.

The commander laughed. “We’ll see,” he said. Once out of the tiny square, the Guard increased their pace. I clung to the pommel, terrified by the height and the power of the beast.

Both the one behind me and the one beneath me.

“Do you have a name, little Not-It?”

I kept my eyes dead ahead, determined not to look back at the village I so hated, and where I had prayed so hard to remain. “Jane,” I answered. “Daughter of Tom the Blacksmith.”

“Jane da’Smithy,” he murmured. “What a plain little name for a mindspeaker. I am Commander Rynnaut. You may call me Ryn, and you can loosen your death-grip on the saddle. I won’t let you fall.”

“I wish you would.” As far as I was concerned, getting trampled beneath the stallion’s steel-shod hooves was a better fate than being given to the Fae king.

Ryn’s body stiffened behind me, making me clutch the pommel tighter. “You should be honored to be so chosen, mindspeaker,” he murmured, the deceptive softness of his voice masking a blade of anger.

This time, the word *mindspeaker* penetrated the fog of shock and reached me. I’d never heard of such a thing. “Why do you call me that?”

Because it is what you are. This time, Ryn’s answer was in my mind, not my ears. *And because I am also a mindspeaker. You would be well advised to guard your thoughts, little Not-It, for I will see them all.*

I closed my eyes, fighting back tears of pure fear. It was just as I had feared it would be, exactly what I had imagined when I’d planned what I would do today. My body was just a thing to be used, a gift for the Fae king, and now not even my mind would be my own.

Being chosen meant going to hell, pure and simple.

We arrived at the camp an hour later, and it was like nothing I could have imagined.

The forest surrounded us, unbroken by any sign of habitation. Ryn suddenly gave a loud whistle and received one in return, and then armed Fae were dropping from the trees to

greet us. These Fae weren't dressed in gilded armor. They wore padded leathers of black and green and brown, and even their golden hair was darkened. My eyes widened as I watched the tents seemingly melt into being out of the shadows of the forest.

I'd been intimidated by the score of guards who'd ridden into Miller's Croft. Now I was surrounded by at least twice that many, and I was almost certain there were more still hiding around us. I wasn't even positive I could see all of the tents.

Ryn halted his stallion in a small clearing and dismounted, leaving me clinging precariously to the pommel again before he remembered to lift me down. He steadied me until I caught my balance, then pushed me toward one of the camouflaged sentries. "Find it something decent to wear," he ordered and walked away from me without another word.

I gripped the still-wet cloak tighter, humiliated. I wanted to scream after him, but the sudden appearance of so many more guards stole my voice. *I am NOT an it!* I screamed with my mind instead. It was as much of a test of this mindspeaking ability he insisted I possessed as it was a protest.

A wiser woman would show some control over her temper. Ryn's reply was cool in my mind. *The king does not appreciate undue shows of emotion.*

I seethed as the sentry led me away. *Undue* shows of emotion? I'd just been kidnapped from my village, taken from everyone and everything I'd ever known, been told I was to be the Immortal King's newest bed toy -- and my fear and anger were *undue*? I was so furious I could hardly breathe.

The sentry led me to the largest tent and waited silently for me to enter. Without Ryn there, my anger died. Suddenly, getting out of this ruined dress and the wet wool were all I wanted, and I went inside without an argument. Fighting now wouldn't help, not when I was surrounded by so many guards and their legendary horses. I would have to plan my escape carefully if it was ever going to work.

I wiped that thought from my mind as fast as I could. Ryn could clearly get inside my head. If he knew I planned to run at the first opportunity, I'd never get one.

Four feminine squeals met me when I dropped the flap closed behind me. I stared, astonished, as four lovely maidens rushed over and hugged me as if I were their long-lost sister.

If anything could make me feel less human than Ryn's mocking insistence on calling me "it," this was it.

"Oh, look, another lucky one!" cried a brunette vixen, her chocolate eyes glowing with happy excitement. "Come in, come join us!"

A pair of copper-haired angels took my arms and propelled me deeper into the tent, where a dusky-skinned beauty was opening trunks with abandon. "There should be something gorgeous in here for you," she said, digging through masses of dresses, tossing them on the floor with careless disregard for their obvious value.

"I don't want anything gorgeous," I protested, only now realizing that the four were all dressed as queens. Creamy ivory silk adorned the brunette's hourglass figure, the light color darkening her eyes into deep pools of mystery. One of the red-haired twins wore green velvet, enhancing the rich emerald of her eyes, and her sister was a vision in lavender brocade. And the dusky one, a woman so slender it looked like the merest breeze would topple her, wore a stunning yellow gown trimmed in real cloth of gold. It made her skin gleam like fine mahogany.

All of them wore shimmering veils of impossibly intricate lace over their long hair, each secured with a twisted circlet of silver and copper.

I clutched the wet wool cloak tighter, hideously aware of my awkwardly hacked-off hair. These beauties had obviously been adorned with the best their villages could provide and been offered as lovely gifts to the Fae. My own gown, the plainest I'd ever owned even

before I'd ruined it, was shameful in comparison. "None of them would fit me," I protested again, but they took no more notice of that than they had of my first words.

There was no way I could dare to don anything like what they so casually wore. I wasn't built like these goddesses. I was the daughter of a blacksmith, and every line and bone of my body proclaimed that fact. My arms weren't slender, and my shoulders were broad -- I'd been carrying wood and raw iron since almost the day I could walk. My breasts were too big and my hips were wider than any of theirs, even without the padding I knew they wore beneath their dresses. My hands bore the calluses of real work, and my feet were more accustomed to being bare than shod.

I was a peasant, born and bred for manual labor, and I was in the midst of ladies.

"I'm Viviana," one of the redheads told me, smiling in what appeared to be genuine friendship. I wasn't sure. No one had ever smiled at me quite so openly, not even Linn and Faith. "My sister is Elana."

"I am Celestine," offered the dark-skinned one, still digging in the trunks.

"And I'm Lisayne," the brunette added.

My heart sank. Each of these perfect creatures had been named for Fae queens. If it had been possible, I would've happily fallen into a pit and pulled it closed over me. "I am Jane," I said, my voice uncharacteristically faint. *Best to get this over with*, I thought, and plunged on. "Daughter of Tom, blacksmith of Miller's Croft."

I closed my eyes, waiting for the gasps of shock and not wanting to watch those pretty faces close as they withdrew their offers of friendship.

"Welcome, Jane," someone said, and I was surprised enough by the warm tone to open my eyes.

They were all still smiling, and Celestine had given up on the trunks long enough to hold out her hands to me. "A blacksmith! How fascinating!" she said, giving every appearance of meaning it. "My Fa would never let me go to watch our smithy at work. He

said the sparks would burn me. Is that why your hair is so short, to protect you from the sparks?”

“Does your Fa make fine jewelry, like this?” Viviana asked, touching the circlet atop her head.

“He’s no silversmith -- he makes nails and horseshoes, mostly,” I replied, unsure what else to say, but Lisayne was speaking even before I finished.

“What think you of the armor the Guard wear?” she asked, eyes sparkling. “Isn’t it lovely? I’ve never seen a Fae before this. Had you any idea they were so beautiful?”

Somehow, while they chattered, one of them had taken my cloak away. I realized with sudden, painful embarrassment that my horrible excuse for a dress was revealed only when they all paused to look at me.

Celestine cocked her head to the side, staring hard. The Fae, desperate for females to wed, since almost all Fae babies were male, didn’t care if their brides were nobility or peasants or anything in between, but humans didn’t share that tolerance. I braced myself again for the sharp dismissal I knew was my due -- humans might be less than Fae, but some of us were even less than others. I had no right to be here with these privileged creatures.

Then Celestine turned her back on me, as I’d known she would. I bowed my head and reached for the wool.

Lisayne already had it, though. She tossed it straight out the flap at the front of the tent, ignoring my gasp. By then, Celestine had turned her attention back to me, and she held a mass of multihued fabric in her hands.

“This, I think,” she said, smiling again, and the four descended on me like furies.

Chapter Two

“Ladies, ’tis the dinner hour. Do you sup here, or join us beneath the stars?”

The deep voice startled me so much that the dress I was attempting to fold slithered through my nerveless fingers to the floor. Over the last hours since the ladies had groomed, trimmed, gowned, and veiled me, I’d learned a thing or two about them.

One surprise was that the trunks of fine garments in the tent were not theirs. Celestine had been avidly emptying and exploring each one, Lisayne trying on almost everything while Elana and Viviana oohed and aahed. I’d been following behind, trying to rescue each bit of finery as they cast it aside.

None of the ladies seemed the slightest bit surprised to hear the Fae calling to us through the tent flap. “Tonight, we will dine with you,” Celestine, unquestionably the leader, proclaimed. The others giggled, and she winked at me.

I couldn’t wink back. It was bad enough for me to be wearing these clothes, things I had no right to touch. To pretend to deserve them was unconscionable.

But the gown! I hadn’t been able to refuse it. Made of fine linen the color of a new leaf, the skirt and sleeves were heavy with embroidery. Flowers of every description bloomed with every move I made. The neckline, plunging lower than anything I’d ever seen, exposed

the swells of my breasts with every breath I took, and I wished for a shawl to cover myself. That scooped neckline made my overlarge bosom look lush, my broad shoulders seem ladylike instead of mannish. The long, intricately stitched sleeves hid my callused hands. No padding added to the girth of my hips. Celestine had even managed to find a pair of fine leather slippers to match, and they were so soft and supple that even my shoe-sensitive feet were comfortable in them.

I patted the lace veil over my short hair self-consciously. At least I'd been able to stop them from giving me a circlet. The veil was held in place by a ribbon, and it was still too fine for me.

Celestine didn't let me pull away from them. She walked over, every step a study in grace, and linked her arm through mine. "You must come out of your shadow, Jane," she said, her voice teasing. "How will you ever catch one of these gorgeous Fae if you don't?"

"I don't want one," I said, but like all my other protests, it was ignored.

Celestine laughed at me as she drew me out of the tent. "I'll have yours, then," she said with another outrageous wink. I ducked my head, embarrassed.

You bow to her and not to me?

Ryn's voice in my head made me gasp. My head jerked up as I searched for him in vain. That copper-and-silver armor was nowhere to be found, and all the Fae were so damned similar!

Lisayne kicked my ankle when I froze, and when I looked at her, her eyes flickered to the left. "Someone's staring," she breathed, speaking without seeming to even move those perfect rosebud lips.

I glanced to the left and found Ryn.

He was dressed all in black this time, his golden hair falling in a braid over one shoulder as he leaned against a tree. That infuriating mouth held a hint of a smile at my discomfort. His face, all hard planes and angles, was almost rugged, by Fae standards. His

eyes were all but black as I met his gaze, and without knowing why I did it, I squared my shoulders in silent challenge.

I'll bow to your horse before I bow to you, I thought back, hating him for everything he'd done to me today.

That hint of a smile became a full-out grin. *I shall let Thunder know of your interest at once, little Not-It*.

I borrowed a move I'd learned from Viviana in the last hour and turned up my nose at him. Somehow, putting on airs didn't seem so bad when they were used to annoy him. Then Celestine was tugging at my arm again, and I turned my back on Ryn's mocking laughter and followed her toward the smell of roasting meat.

It was a feast like I'd never had before. We were tempted with slabs of rare venison tender enough to melt in my mouth. Four vegetables, all fresh, none of them potatoes. Soft, sweet bread, slathered with enough butter to make it glisten. My first taste of wine, the rich, slightly sweet liquid sending a delicious shiver through me with every sip, and my goblet was never empty. We had a choice of three different sweets afterward, and though I was full to bursting, I had to have a bite of each.

"Forgive us for the meager fare," one of the Fae said, smiling at Elana. "You will be greeted at the palace by a fine feast more worthy of you, if you can endure until then."

My breath caught in my throat at the thought of it. More food than this? I knew I was betraying my peasant roots with my astonishment, but when I tried to hide my reaction by looking away, my gaze collided with Ryn's.

Not knowing why I did it, I sighed and let myself stare at him. He really was a gorgeous creature, beautiful and sleek. A walking god with a heart of dung. Still, I could look at him forever. Never had I seen a more perfect set of shoulders, a more capable pair of big hands. *It's almost too bad I won't see him again after I escape*, I thought, and realized my mistake even before his soft gaze sharpened.

Suddenly he was on his feet and striding toward me, and my wine-soaked lassitude vanished. I tried to spring up and get away, but I wasn't accustomed to either the slippers or the voluminous skirt of my gown, and I had barely made it to my feet before his hands closed over my elbows.

"Are you unwell, Jane?" Celestine asked, looking genuinely concerned.

"I'll care for her. Don't interrupt your meal."

Ryn's voice cut across anything I could say. His arm firmly around my waist, he hurried me away from the banquet. "Don't be foolish," he hissed when I tried to dig in my heels and resist him. "No one here will help you get away from me."

"Why can't you let me go?" I said and was instantly appalled at the desperate sound of my own voice. He didn't even hesitate as he dragged me past the tent I'd shared with the ladies and farther into the wood, and I panicked. "I don't *want* to be with a Fae, Ryn. Please let me go! You don't want me for yourself. Why would you give a peasant to your king? I have nothing a Fae wants."

Ryn laughed, and it wasn't a pretty sound. "Oh, you have something we want, little Jane," he said and spun around so abruptly that I collided with his chest, hard. His arms came around me to keep me from falling, and I grabbed his shoulders for balance.

My gasp died against his mouth.

Ryn tangled his fingers in my hair when I would have jerked away, trapping me there while he ruthlessly parted my lips and licked his way inside. I gasped all over again at the invasion. Yes, I'd seen people kiss like this, but never had it happened to me. Now that it was, I didn't have any kind of clue what to do.

He didn't seem to need my help, though. He groaned and dragged me closer, turning and pressing me against a tree, his hard body trapping me there. My heart kicked against my ribs. His tongue caressed mine, withdrew, traced my lips, then plunged deep again. I was mimicking him before I even knew I intended to do it.

Ah, Veru, yes, Jane, just like that, he groaned in my mind, the touch of his thoughts sending heat sizzling between my thighs. *This dress is temptation itself, sweeting. I want to rip it off you and see you again as I saw you today.*

The image filled my mind -- me, standing barefoot in the gravel, my short blonde curls sopping wet and my dress plastered to my skin. The water made the thin material almost transparent. His memory focused on my breasts, their lush curve beneath the wet fabric, my nipples dark, taut, and very obvious. Another cascade of water splashed down my body, tightening my nipples even more, deepening the shadow between my thighs and running in rivulets down my bare legs. It was more revealing than nudity, this, and his vicious arousal at the sight seared my mind. Oh, spirits, had I really looked like that?

I wasn't given time to feel mortified. His hand swept up from my waist, stroking boldly over my breast before yanking the deep neckline aside. I whimpered as his rough hand cupped my tender flesh, his thumb scraping over my nipple.

Feel what a Fae can give you, he growled in my mind as he pinched my stiff nipple, sending a surge of wicked pleasure shooting straight down to my toes, making me moan. His triumph echoed through me. *You should know what you're refusing, sweet Jane. I'll show you.*

I wanted to tell him no, but his mouth was still sealed to mine, and I couldn't seem to get enough air. When he broke the wild kiss, any breath I had left hissed out as he fell to his knees before me and sucked my nipple deep into his mouth. "Ryn!" I tried to scream, but it came out as a choked whisper. He bit down on the tender peak, sending a new jolt of heat shooting down between my thighs.

I reached out and caught the branches beside me with both hands, trying to keep my knees from giving out. Ryn growled and pulled my bodice further down, exposing my other breast. When he pinched both nipples at the same moment, I cried out and almost fell despite the steady grip.

He buried his face between my breasts, his breath coming as fast as mine. "This is more than I intended," he whispered, so softly I wondered if he knew he'd said it aloud. His hands were at my ankles now, then sliding up my legs. "Veru, Jane, you're sweeter than I thought you'd be, and now I need to taste all of you."

"What -- what do you mean?" I gasped, holding on to the tree for dear life as his hands slid higher.

"You'll see." My skirt passed my knees, and he flicked his tongue over the tender skin he'd revealed. "Well, perhaps you'll only feel."

I had no idea what he intended. Maybe I would have stopped him had I known, or at least tried to, but I didn't. The next thing I knew, he'd dropped my skirts down over his own head, his fingers once more toying with my hard nipples while he shouldered my thighs apart and buried his mouth between them.

It was so unexpected, I almost screamed. Only the pinch of his fingers on my nipples kept me from it, stealing my breath so that all I was able to do was moan. I tried to close my thighs, to block his tongue as it zeroed in on the one place no one had ever seen, the place I'd only ever touched when I knew I was alone, and he released my breasts to grab my hips and hold me still.

You're not escaping me, he growled in my head, punctuating every word with a thrust of his tongue deep inside me. *By the spirits, you taste so damn good. I'm going to lick you until you come, Jane, until you fill my mouth with your cream and make these damn woods echo with your screams.*

The heat was building with every flick of his tongue over that ultra-sensitive nub of flesh between my thighs. Missing his hands on my breasts, I let go of the tree and pinched my nipples just as he had, moaning as he suckled my clit between his teeth. When he flicked his tongue over it, fast as a butterfly's wings, something inside me exploded with pleasure. I

couldn't scream, couldn't make a sound, as I ground myself against his face, as his desire and his sharp, vicious pleasure at making me come filled my mind.

He caught me when I collapsed, easing me down to the ground as he pushed my skirts off his head. I just lay there, too shocked by what he'd just done to me to move, watching him stare at me. Slowly, I realized what a debauched picture I must make, my bodice pushed down to free my breasts, my skirt hiked up to my waist. Ryn's eyes were almost black as he watched me come back to myself.

I tried to shove my skirt back down, but he stopped me. "Let me look at you," he murmured, his palm rubbing the front of his pants. "Ah, Jane, what have you done to me? I'm so hard, I won't be able to walk for a week."

No peasant is ignorant of sex for long. We live without privacy, and very, very few girls are virgins when they go to their husbands. I was one of the rare ones, but that didn't mean I didn't know what he was doing. I'd seen enough rutting behind sheds and in fields to know exactly what he was stroking and just what he wanted to do with it.

And for the first time in my life, I hungered for the sight of it, rather than turning away in disgust.

He closed his eyes and drew in a deep breath, as if he'd caught the thought in my mind. "You don't know what you're asking for," he whispered, though I hadn't asked for anything.

And I wouldn't ask, either. Not Ryn. Not this too-proud Fae who wanted to rule me and who'd already commanded this overwhelming response from me. I wanted to command him now, just for a moment.

So I reached up, pushed his hand aside, and pressed my palm against the hard length of his cock.

Ryn threw back his head, clenching his fists. "Don't tease me," he growled as I stroked him, learning the shape of the first cock I'd ever dared to touch. "Either finish me or leave me be, woman."

I untied the laces of his pants and let my hand slide inside. "Say please," I whispered, closing my fingers around his hot length. "Say please, and I'll finish you."

Suddenly my hand was knocked aside and Ryn was on top of me, his cock free of the soft leather pants and riding hard between my thighs. "You will never hear me beg," he snarled, the thick heat of his cock pressing against my still-tingling clit.

He thrust, sliding against my flesh in a delicious caress, riding my clit. Another thrust, and he still didn't slide that cock inside me. "Ryn!" I cried, wrapping my legs around his hips, wanting him to do it. I didn't care that I didn't like him -- my body was on fire, and I wanted him inside me. I was wild with my first taste of sex, as drunk on it as I'd been on my first glasses of wine.

He pinned my hips ruthlessly, stopping me from impaling myself on him. "I won't take what belongs to the king," he said, grinding his cock against me, every word punctuated with a new thrust. He bent his golden head and sucked my nipple into his mouth again, biting me, licking me, and this time when I came, he shuddered and groaned against me. Something hot and wet splashed over my thighs as he thrust again and again, suckling hard, drawing my pleasure out to impossible lengths.

Finally, long, long minutes later, he rolled away from me and closed his pants. Reality returned with a crash. I looked down at his seed on me, glistening white in the moonlight, and wondered how I was supposed to get dressed without getting it all over this lovely dress. Worse than that, how would I get back to camp without everyone knowing what had happened out here?

I couldn't bear the ladies knowing what I'd done with the sexy Fae commander.

Ryn peeled his shirt off and tossed it at me. "Use that."

I glared at him even as I wiped his seed away. "If you Fae are so much better than we mere humans, why don't you know that it's rude to enter my mind without my permission?"

He stared at me as if I'd spoken a foreign language. Then he laughed, just threw back his head and laughed at me. "A peasant is taking me to task for my manners?"

I threw his soiled shirt back at him and tried to pull my bodice back over my breasts. It had been hard enough getting this dress on in the first place, and trying to fix it with trembling hands wasn't easy. "Yes, *it* is," I snapped back at him, unreasonably infuriated by his condescending dismissal. "It might even have feelings."

Ryn laughed again, hauling me to my feet before I could push his hands away. "And did it like what it felt tonight?" he purred in my ear, and my body reacted with another rush of lust.

I ached to wipe the smug superiority from his face. "It thinks you have room for improvement, Fae," I said, giving him Elana's superior glare, Celestine's haughty voice, and a mental bolt of pure venom that was all mine.

His eyes narrowed. "Come," he growled, grabbing my arm and dragging me back to camp. He didn't slow when we reached the tent I'd shared with the ladies today, however. He kept right on walking, ignoring the stares we were gathering, ignoring my protests and demands to know what was going on.

I didn't even see the tent until we were upon it, it was so small. Ryn threw back the flap and pushed me inside, following me in and securing the flap behind him. We were in total darkness, and my heart pounded. "Just what do you think you're doing?" I demanded again, trying to pretend I still had some kind of control over this situation.

But a peasant, as my father had tried so hard to teach me, had no control over anything, especially where the Fae were concerned.

His soft laugh was anything but reassuring. "You wish to escape," he murmured, a velvet threat in the dark. "Or you wish to make yourself unacceptable to King Mazurian by trying to get pregnant by another Fae. I don't trust you, Jane. You're not leaving my sight until we arrive at the palace and I personally deliver you into the hands of the king."

Chapter Three

Not one ray of the dawn's light penetrated the darkness where I lay.

I wished that meant I could stay asleep, but the birds sang dawn's announcement with abandon. Though I itched to get up, I couldn't move. Ryn still slept, wrapped around me like a warm, hard, snoring blanket. I hadn't gotten a wink of sleep last night, and he'd slept like the dead. I'd gotten to experience every instant of my wine-induced lassitude turning into the mead-sickness, and every soft snore seemed louder than the one before it. Besides the annoyance of it, it was almost more than I could believe.

A Fae -- the pinnacle of perfection, a powerful, magical, immortal creature -- *snored!*

So when he pulled me closer, nuzzling my ear and pressing his morning erection against my hip, I was less than receptive. "Let me go, or I'll puke on you," I said, making my voice as hard as I possibly could.

He released me instantly and kicked open the tent flap, coming fully awake faster than I would have thought possible. "You are ill?" He caught my face in his hands, peering down at me in the faint light and frowning.

I knocked his hands away with a groan. Light as his touch was, my skin hurt so badly that it was more than I could stand. "You've never seen the mead-sickness?"

Ryn relaxed. He actually grinned as he sat back, giving me room to sit up. Small as his tent was, there was no way to stand. “The Fae do not suffer such things,” he said, and I didn’t need to touch his mind to feel his smug satisfaction that I, an inferior creature, did. “I’m sure I could find a way to ease you, though, should you ask nicely.”

I’d rather be sick. “It thinks that puking on a Fae would ease it enough,” I said, then stifled a not entirely feigned moan of nausea and put my hand over my mouth.

He scooted out of the tent at top speed. I almost laughed, but didn’t get a chance before he grabbed my arm and dragged me out, too. “Don’t you dare be sick on my bedroll,” he snapped, spinning me around and pushing me toward a bush. “Do it over there, and try to be quick about it. We break camp soon.”

My nausea fled before a surge of anger. I stumbled, catching myself against a tree, and realized only then that Ryn’s tiny tent was at the very edge of the camp.

I made a great show of crouching down by the bush, gathering my skirts out of the way. I retched loudly, as convincingly as I could, moaning as if in agony, and heard Ryn turn away in disgust.

And then I was off like a rabbit, running as fast as my strong peasant legs could carry me.

Ryn swore loudly, and I put on a burst of speed, fear giving my feet wings. *Stop, you fool!* he commanded, his voice furious in my mind, and I didn’t even bother trying to respond. My skirts held high, I leapt over a fallen log, ducked under low branches, and ignored the countless scrapes and scratches slicing my legs as I plowed through the bushes.

It was unnerving, being chased by a Fae. He ran silently. I felt like a blundering ox compared to him, crashing through underbrush and ripping my dress on the snags. I had no doubt he pursued me, though I didn’t dare look back. The uneven forest floor took all my attention. Another fallen log barred my way, and I put on a burst of speed, preparing to jump it as I had the other.

Something dark dropped from the branches overhead as I leaped with all my strength, and Ryn seized me in the air and tackled me so hard I saw stars.

His hard body slammed atop me, knocking the air from my lungs with a whoosh. For an eternity, I couldn't get a breath. Ryn snarled at me in Fae and the common tongue as he pinned me down, his fury barely registering as I struggled to inhale. Finally he rolled off me, jerking me upright, and sweet air rushed into my lungs. I hung limp in his arms as he shook me, still cursing me in every language I'd ever heard, unaware of anything but the fight to catch my breath.

Gradually, I became aware that Ryn was dragging me along, and I dug my heels in with all my might. He glared at me, an infuriated, bare-chested, golden god. "You'd do well to stop fighting now, before I give you the punishment you deserve for this," he snarled, yanking me forward again.

I managed to jerk one arm free of his bruising grip and wrap it around the nearest tree. "Go ahead, then, beat me!" I cried, fighting to get my other arm away. "It's nothing I'm not used to, and no more than I expect from the Harvest Guard!"

He drew back, his eyes boiling with rage. "The Guard never beat the chosen," he hissed, his fingers tight on my wrist.

I kicked him, though my bare feet didn't even make him wince. "You lie!" I said, too terrified to consider that I was accusing a creature who could kill me with impunity. "The Guard are beasts, just like their king! You steal from us, you burn our homes, you kidnap us to be slaves and whores in your master's palace, and rape the ones left behind --"

He was so stunned by my vehemence that he actually dropped my wrist and took a step back. "What lies have you heard about us, Jane?" he asked, staring at me like I'd grown a second head. "Who has filled your mind with such poison?"

I tried to run again, but the mead-sickness was back, and I only managed a few steps before I stumbled and fell. Ryn didn't chase me this time. "Just leave me here," I begged him,

rolling over and burying my face in my bleeding hands to hide my tears. "Tell them you couldn't find me. Tell them I fell in a ravine and broke my leg. Just leave me."

"Were I to do as you ask, you wouldn't survive a day," Ryn said, closer this time, and softer. His hand brushed over my short hair. "I won't leave you to your death."

"Yet you'll take me to it?"

His fingers clenched in my hair. "Tell me what you think will happen to you, Jane," he said. "Tell me where you heard these crazy things you fear."

I curled into a ball, giving him my back. I'd learned from long experience that this was the only way to take a beating. "The Guard stayed longer in Miller's Croft nine years ago," I whispered. "And they delighted in telling us all what awaited the chosen."

"And what fate did they describe?"

The question was soft, but Ryn's tone was not. His hand hadn't moved from my hair. I didn't want to revisit those memories, not even to save myself a beating or worse, but I knew he could enter my mind at will and take them from me. Hiding would accomplish nothing.

Better, then, to share only what I chose to give. "We lined up last time, just like we did yesterday," I said, unable to give any strength to my voice. "Two sisters didn't come, though. They were frightened and hid in the fields. I don't know how the Guard knew they were missing -- Wait. They had a mindspeaker, didn't they? Was it you?"

"No, Jane, not I." His voice still promised violence. "Continue your tale."

I took a deep breath and let it pour out. "They burned a few homes, trying to flush the sisters out. When that didn't work, they searched for them. None of us were allowed to leave the square. It was high summer, burning hot, and any who fainted from the heat were dragged out of sight -- many of them gave birth to stillborn Fae bastards that spring. The Guard told the rest of us all about the palace while we stood there, waiting for the sisters to be found, trying not to faint. How the king likes young virgins and how fast he tires of them. They told of the flesh banquets Mazurian gives for his trusted men, passing around the

concubines he's done with. They told us all about how the ruined bedslaves die when the men have had their fill of them --"

Ryn's fingers tightened to the point of pain in my hair, and I stopped speaking with a whimper. I didn't want to tell him the rest, anyway. "Please leave me here," I begged. "Let me die here rather than there."

His fist loosened, and he sighed. "If a single word of that was true, Jane, I would take you back to your village myself."

I rolled over, daring to look at him. His jaw was tight, and his dark eyes boiled with rage. I saw vengeance in those eyes and fought the need to be sick for real this time. "I don't lie, Ryn," I protested. "I'm telling you exactly what happened. They beat the sisters in the square and dragged them away."

He reached out and I flinched, but he only touched my cheek. "I believe you tell a true accounting of what happened that day," he said. "But nothing they told you of the king and his palace was true."

I couldn't think of a word to say. Ryn sighed and sat back on his heels. "I don't blame you for running, now that I know your fears, but your fate is nothing like what they described to you," he said. "I know the king, Jane. You are not going to the palace to be degraded, but to be honored. He has no bedslaves, no concubines. He wants heirs, and so far he has been unsuccessful in getting them. Every woman chosen for him became his wife, and all of them were treated with honor." His eyes hardened. "And I can promise you, Mazurian does not share what is his."

I was speechless again. Never had it occurred to me that the Guard had told us tales to terrify us that day. We'd believed every word, convinced by their clear delight in telling us. I'd had nightmares for years, imagining what those poor sisters had endured.

He stood and pulled me to my feet, lifting me effortlessly in his arms when my legs tried to give out again. “You will return with me,” he said, his tone making it a command. “And you will tell me if any of the Fae in my camp were in your village that day.”

Shock drove the breath from my lungs again. “No, Ryn! It’s death for a human to accuse a Fae --”

“It will be death to any Fae who lays a hand on you,” Ryn interrupted. “You were chosen for the king, and I have pledged myself to your protection. You do not yet realize the importance that gives you. I ask you to identify the rogues who committed that atrocity in your village nine years ago, Jane, so the king may punish them as he sees fit.”

I pressed my forehead against his shoulder, closing my eyes as he carried me back to the camp. “The king won’t take my word against theirs,” I said. “And everything they do carries his approval. Even I know that.”

Ryn growled. “They may find his approval is less secure than they imagine.”

I expected the camp to be in an uproar when we returned, but I didn’t see a soul. Ryn pushed me gently back inside his low tent and stared at me for a long moment. He looked like he expected something from me. I had no idea what. Touching his mind to find out was too much trouble as the sleepless night, the aftereffects of the wine, and my mad dash for freedom crashed down on me, so I guessed. “Don’t worry. I won’t puke on your bedroll,” I said, lying back wearily and closing my eyes.

“I don’t give a damn about the bedroll.” Ryn tugged a blanket over my ruined dress. “Are you going to run again?”

Run? Right now, I couldn’t even sit up. “Of course not,” I said, burrowing into the blankets. “It’s no fun when you’re expecting it.”

I thought I heard him laugh before sleep claimed me at last.

* * * * *

Warm, soothing fingers stroked comfort over the stinging places on my feet.

I sighed, warm and comfortable, wrapped in softness. The stroking fingers left my skin for a moment, and I stretched, seeking them. I heard a deep chuckle and they returned, again smoothing that warmth over my skin, past my arch and to my ankle.

Those fingers were magic. Every scratch, every scrape and bruise on my legs, received their gentle attention. I scented herbs in the close air of the tent, minty and sweet, as more of the mixture bathed my injuries. It was so relaxing that I didn't bother to protest when my skirt was brushed higher, exposing my thighs.

A hand nudged my legs apart as two fingers stroked a cut that curled around my thigh. When the hand slid upward, I parted my legs further, not wanting the soft ministrations to end. No one had ever cared for my injuries, not like this. Not with such gentle, thorough attention.

Hot breath teased my hip as my dress inched past my waist. "Sweet Jane," Ryn murmured against my skin, his tongue flicking out to trace my hipbone, and my eyes flew open on a gasp.

I tried to close my legs, but his hands still held me open to his gaze. "What are you doing?" I demanded and wished I sounded a lot more indignant and a lot less breathless.

He licked my skin again and nipped the top of my thigh. "You scraped your beautiful legs all to hell," he whispered. "I'm healing you."

"With your mouth?" I squeaked.

He laughed as his hands slid up my legs, still spreading the herbal mixture. When he nuzzled the curls between my thighs, my back arched off the blankets. "Are you objecting?" he whispered, each word sending a warm breath over my rapidly moistening folds. His tongue flicked out again, this time sending a teasing lick over my clit.

"Yes!"

He sighed and rested his cheek against my hip. "What a pity," he said and rolled away from me.

I yanked my skirt down with hands that trembled. Ryn lay on his side, watching me with hooded eyes. I tried to ignore him, but I kept catching glimpses of the hard bulge beneath his leather pants, and every glimpse reminded me of how he'd ground that hot ridge against me last night until I'd exploded with pleasure. My nipples ached, my clit throbbed, and I was just about to forget what little pride I had and ask him to continue when I finally noticed the state of my dress.

I caught the fabric in my hands with a cry of dismay. The gorgeous, elegant gown was ruined, utterly destroyed. Rips and snags mutilated the flowering embroidery. Mud stained the linen, along with blood from my scraped legs. Frantically, I tried to hold the pieces together, trying to see how I could ever repair the damage.

Ryn's steady hands covered mine. "It's merely a dress," he said softly. "Don't worry about it. I will get you another."

"It's not just a dress!" I pushed his hands away and tried to wipe the mud off the fine linen. It had dried on, though, and I couldn't dislodge it. "It's a finer thing than I should have ever touched. All these tiny stitches, all the flowers and vines -- this is a work of months, and I've ruined it in a day!" The rips blurred as tears filled my eyes.

He took my hands in one of his again and cupped my cheek with his other. "Jane, look at me." I dragged my eyes from the ruined skirt and met his dark gaze, and he wasn't smiling. "You will wed the king, Jane. You must stop thinking of yourself as a mere peasant. Dresses like this are beneath even the most minor ladies of his court. He will dress you in jewels and cloth of gold, and you will never wear the same gown twice."

The very thought horrified me. "But that's so wasteful!"

Ryn's eyes softened, and he shook his head with a smile. "Such a frugal, sensible little soul," he whispered. "You will set the palace on its ear." And before I could think of a thing to say, he pulled me close and kissed me.

His tongue traced the seam of my lips, and I opened eagerly, my already aroused body surging back to full-boil at the first taste of him. Ryn groaned and pulled me hard against him, licking deep into my mouth, twining his tongue around mine in a caress that curled my toes. I moaned and wrapped my arms around him, pressing my aching breasts against his chest. *Veru*, he murmured in my mind, *are all peasants this passionate?*

I jolted out of the sensual spell of his kiss and tore my mouth from his, both hating and blessing him for reminding me that I was a mere curiosity to him. "Of course we are," I said, my tone as cold as I could make it, despite my breathlessness. "That's why your king steals us, isn't it? To fuck good breeding stock?"

His body went rigid in my arms at the obscenity. Even his breath stilled. I didn't dare to look at him as anger rolled from him in waves. The silence was thick, unbearable, when he finally broke it. "That delicious tongue of yours will get you in more trouble than you can handle if you don't learn to control it," Ryn growled. "I am sworn to the king, to his service and his honor. Do not speak that way of him in my presence again, Jane. I give you fair warning."

His anger was hot, but he was still in control. I was about to lose mine. Damned if I'd lose it alone. I met his furious eyes with a glare of my own. "You speak of the king's honor, but not yours," I said. "Tell me, does your service to your king include breaking in his maidens? Is that the real reason you won't let me leave your sight?"

Chapter Four

Ryn thrust me away from him with a growl and surged out of the tent without another word. I caught my balance, heart pounding, and wondered what I was supposed to do now.

Moments later, I heard his footsteps approaching the tent. The simple fact that I could hear him at all told me that he was still furious. The flap was yanked roughly aside, and he thrust a bundle of material at me. "Dress," he snarled, slapping the flap closed again. "We have delayed breaking camp long enough."

I didn't dare hesitate. Angry as he was, I didn't doubt that he'd drag me out half-naked if I didn't comply fast enough to suit him. I pulled off the ruined dress, folded it as neatly as I could in the dark, and felt around the velvet bundle he'd thrown at me until I found laces -- a bodice. Or was it a skirt?

Dressing in a tiny tent too small to stand in was difficult enough without the added complication of darkness. I dared to open the flap just a tiny bit, needing to see what I was doing. I found a silken chemise, translucent and soft as butter, and pulled it over my head, wincing at the gold embroidery at the throat and cuffs. A heavy overskirt came next, the bright yellow velvet shot through with more golden threads. Pearls were sewn in swirls along the hem and swung in clusters from the long ends of the drawstring that secured it.

The matching velvet bodice barely fit over my breasts, and the laces were stretched to the limit when I finally managed to tie them. Like the skirt's drawstring, the laces of the bodice were tipped with clusters of pearls that swayed with every breath I took. The hair veil shimmered like a dew-tipped spider's web, so fine it was almost transparent, and he'd brought me a gold circlet to secure it -- a thick, heavy ring of gold, not the twisted silver and copper bands the ladies had worn. It was practically a crown.

Ryn was making a point with this outfit. I felt like a crow in a peacock's feathers.

Still, it was either this or nothing, and although I'd had little privacy in my life, I did not relish the thought of walking nude through a camp of strangers. I drew the line at the circlet, however. He would not make me pretend a superiority to the ladies. I draped the veil over my butchered hair and tied it with a ribbon from the bodice of the ruined green dress before ducking out of the tent.

My back popped in relief as I finally stood straight. I couldn't resist stretching my cramped muscles. The sun was high overhead now, and I was surprised to see that it was past midday. Why had there been such a delay in breaking camp?

"Ah, m'lady, you're awake!"

The cheerful Fae voice made me whirl around. Once again in full armor, one of the guards smiled at me. "We have saved a portion of the meal for you to break your fast," he said, apparently not put off by my lack of a response. "'Tis waiting for you at the tent shared by the other ladies."

"Please don't call me that," I said, feeling more uncomfortable than ever in this ridiculously fine gown. "I am no lady."

He grinned, shrugged, and lifted his saddle to the beautiful warhorse waiting beside him. "Whatever you were, you're a lady now," he said simply. "Go to your meal, m'lady. We'll not ride until you're ready."

I started to protest again, finally realizing to my horror that the delay in getting underway had been due to my laziness, but I was interrupted by a sweet feminine chorus. “There you are, Jane! Come, we’ve been dying to speak with you!” Lisayne called, waving from the mouth of the spacious tent. The others were beside her, beaming and giggling.

I walked toward her, trying not to let my feet drag too obviously. They were arrayed in new finery today, all the colors of the rainbow, but even the most cursory glance was enough to show me that my dress far outshone theirs.

Elana and Viviana seized my hands and ushered me inside, leading me to a table and pushing me down into a chair. A veritable feast lay waiting for me there. “Eat and talk!” Celestine said, sitting beside me and leaning forward eagerly.

“Talk about what?” I asked, trying to drum up some kind of enthusiasm for the food.

They all laughed. “Why, about the handsome commander, of course!” Lisayne giggled. “He drags you away into the woods last night, and then you sleep half the day away in his tent. Come, tell us. What’s he like?”

“Is he really as beautifully made under the armor as he seems?” Elana asked.

“Here!” Viviana thrust a silk pillow at me. “I meant to put that in your chair. You must be saddle-sore!”

I gaped at them. “Saddle-sore?” I repeated, feeling utterly stupid.

They all giggled again. “From riding that stallion all night!”

My cheeks went crimson. Great spirits, they thought I’d been fucking Ryn all night long? “I haven’t touched his stallion!” I spluttered, wanting to die from the embarrassment of it. “I mean, I didn’t -- he didn’t -- we never --”

They laughed again. “Ooh, that explains it,” Celestine said, resting her elbows on the table and grinning.

“Explains what?” I regretted asking as soon as the words passed my lips.

“Commander Rynnaut’s temper, of course,” she answered, her dark eyes full of glee. “He was in a fine rage when he came in here an hour ago, and he demanded the finest dress in the chests. Of course, he’d want to woo you with riches if you’d refused his attentions, wouldn’t he?” She leaned closer. “Will it work?”

For the second time, I was speechless. Refuse Ryn? I’d almost begged him to take me last night! And the thought of him wooing me was absolutely ridiculous. “He won’t touch me that way,” I said, grabbing a piece of bread and tearing it in half. “He’s sworn that he’ll protect me.”

“How wonderful!” Viviana looked positively dreamy at the idea. “You lucky girl, Jane! Any of us would kill to have a chance at him, and he’s sworn himself to you. Oh, if only I could be so blessed!”

I took the biggest bite of bread I could manage to stop myself from replying. If Viviana wanted the endlessly frustrating Commander Rynnaut, she could have him, with my deepest gratitude. The ladies kept chattering as I ate, comparing notes on their favorite Fae guards, and I was far too shocked at their conversation to tune them out.

Had Ryn thought peasants were passionate? He would’ve had a heart attack if he’d heard these four speak.

Lisayne thought that making love on a galloping horse would be the height of romance. Celestine told her it was impossible, and she sounded like she knew exactly what she was talking about. She mused on the possible similarities between the size of each Fae’s sword and the size of his cock. Viviana and Elana debated the best way to seduce a Fae, describing everything from batting eyelashes to chaining their hapless targets to trees and having their way with them.

And I realized that I was the only virgin among them.

My head was still spinning with that realization when Ryn threw the tent flap open minutes later. He was again arrayed in copper and steel, a blood-red cape draped from his

shoulders, his long hair loose down his back, and he looked more myth than real. “Ladies,” he said, ignoring the real ladies and staring straight at me, “we must pack this tent. If you would adjourn to the clearing, we can be on our way at last.”

Ryn didn’t even seem to notice when Viviana brushed against him on her way out, her head lowered, fluttering those gorgeous eyelashes at him. “’Tis our pleasure, Commander,” she cooed as she passed him, and I fought the urge to shove her into his arms. The others giggled as they followed her, bowing their heads with a shyness that I now knew was totally false.

I raised my chin and walked toward the door, determined not to so much as glance at him. Just as I passed him, his arm shot out and blocked my way. “Where is the circlet I brought you, Jane?” he growled in my ear, his hot breath making the veil flutter against my skin.

I hoped he didn’t feel the shiver that went through me. “You will find it in your tent, Commander,” I said, staring straight ahead.

“And why is it not upon your stubborn head?”

I didn’t answer. He knew good and well why I wasn’t wearing it.

His teeth nipped my ear in punishment for my silence, and I gasped. “You will learn your place,” he breathed, swirling his tongue over the tender bite.

“I know my place,” I replied, unable to stop a moan as he bit my earlobe once more. “You took me from it yesterday.”

He growled and released me, and I fought the urge to rub my tingling ear as I hurried out to join the ladies. They gave me eager looks, silent pleas to share what had just happened, but I looked past them and pretended not to notice.

The tent came down with remarkable speed. Bare minutes passed before it was rolled and stashed upon one of the many pack animals. The ladies were guided to a narrow cart, its

heavy wheels sturdy enough to handle the rough forest floor, and I started to follow them before a hand caught my wrist.

Ryn gave me a hard smile and whistled for his horse. "You ride with me, Jane," he said. "I don't trust you not to run again."

My heart sank at the prospect of being pressed against him for hours. How would I ever get through this without humiliating myself? "What if I promised?"

"Not good enough."

Ryn swung into the saddle with the fluid grace only the Fae possess. In the same flowing movement, he reached down and scooped me off the ground. I squeaked at the suddenness of it as I landed hard against his chest, catching his arm between us. His hand covered my breast and squeezed. My nipple peaked in his palm, and he pinched it, sending a jolt of fire straight through me, but his hand slid away before I could so much as gasp. "Hold on tight," he murmured, his eyes glittering beneath the helmet as he gathered up the reins.

The stallion shot forward, throwing me back against Ryn, and I wrapped my arms around him and held on for dear life. I felt the deep vibration of his laugh as I buried my face against his neck, terrified of falling beneath the beast's hooves.

After an eternity, he slowed. "Breathe, Jane," he said, his voice undeniably amused.

Only then did I realize I'd plastered myself against him. The edge of his helmet bit into my cheekbone, and his breastplate dug into the other side of my jaw. He wasn't holding me at all, just letting me cling to him the best I could, and I was suddenly furious with him for scaring me. I struck out at him the only way I could.

I bit him, sinking my teeth into the taut muscle running down his neck, as hard as I could.

Ryn sucked in a sharp breath and caught the back of my head in his palm. "Vixen," he groaned, holding me there when I would have pulled away. "Oh, do that again."

“No,” I said against his throat, trying to ignore the hot taste of his skin on my tongue. “I didn’t do it for you to like it.”

I was vaguely aware of Ryn turning the horse away from the rest of the Guard an instant before his other hand squeezed my ass. “If you’ve marked me,” he whispered, his fingers kneading, pulling me closer, “you should know I’ll mark you in return.”

“You wouldn’t dare.”

He laughed. “I dare anything,” he murmured. “Now, kiss it better, or I’ll turn you over my knee.”

His voice promised that he’d do far more than spank me if I didn’t comply, but I knew I’d already marked him. Well, if he was going to punish me later for it, I might as well make his mark something really spectacular.

I nipped his skin again, drawing another groan from him, and his hand tightened on my ass. His head fell back and gave me full access. I licked him, swirling my tongue over the place I’d abused, tasting the salt and heat of him. He was delicious, and I was getting wet just from the taste of him. I suckled at his throat, scraping my teeth over him, soothing his skin with my tongue and starting over. Ryn’s breath was harsh in my ears, punctuated by deep groans. I rubbed my breasts against his chest and cursed the hard breastplate that didn’t give my aching nipples any relief.

“Enough, enough,” Ryn ground out as I traced the throbbing of his pulse with my tongue. It quickened beneath my lips. “Ah, Veru, this armor’s killing me. Jane, no more, or I swear I’ll have you right here and now.”

Lisayne’s horseback fantasy flashed through my mind. I laughed and didn’t stop what I was doing. “You won’t have me at all,” I murmured. The husky sound of my own voice startled me. “Isn’t that what you keep telling me?”

He pulled me away from his throat with a growl an instant before Guardsmen surrounded us. I blushed crimson and looked away from the sensual threat in his eyes. I didn't need to touch his mind to know I'd gone a little too far this time.

None of the Guard looked like anything was strange about their commander galloping off with one of the chosen, though. In fact, none of them looked at us at all. Ryn wrapped his cloak around me and silently flicked the reins again. This time his horse took a more sedate speed, keeping in line with the rest of the guards surrounding the chattering ladies in their cart.

Ryn's arm stayed around my waist, and I slowly relaxed despite my fear of the huge animal. I couldn't imagine I'd ever enjoy riding, but at least I was reasonably certain he wouldn't let me fall off, and he kept enough distance from the ladies that I didn't feel compelled to join their conversation. I leaned back against his chest, watching the forest thin as we approached the road, letting the gentle rocking of the horse soothe me.

Then Ryn's hand moved, sliding beneath the lower edge of my bodice and plucking at the drawstring of my skirt.

I gasped, but Ryn's voice filled my mind. *Keep silent, little temptress*, he growled. *Keep silent, and be glad I'm not biting you back.*

Be glad? His hand flattened on my belly and slid down to rest over the curls guarding my pussy. The silk chemise was no protection from the heat of his hand. His fingers stroked me through the sheer material, teasing my thighs, dipping between them and soaking the silk in my cream. I shuddered, trying to clamp my legs together to block him and only succeeding in trapping his hand instead.

Like that, do you? he murmured in my mind. His fingers traced teasing patterns on my folds, tempting me to open to him. *Imagine my tongue there again, Jane. Think about my mouth on you, licking every drop of cream from your body. Imagine my hands on your breasts, playing with your nipples. Imagine me sucking your clit as I pinch them.*

I moaned before I could stop it. The erotic images he described built in my mind, and his fingers became more demanding, bunching the silk and diving to find my throbbing clit. When he brushed against it, my entire body trembled. “Ryn,” I whispered, not sure if I was asking for mercy or asking for more.

Hush, he replied, still silent. I’m going to make you come again, just like you did last night. I’m going to keep my hand right here on your pussy until we stop for the night, Jane. You’ll never know when I’m going to play with you, when I’m going to stroke your clit, or when I’ll stop. You’re at my mercy today, and right now I have none.

Heat melted deep in my pussy at the mere thought of it. My thighs parted before I could stop them, and he took full advantage, wedging his hand harder against my pussy. He caught my clit between his thumb and finger, sliding the slick, wet silk over the aching nub of flesh, plucking and rubbing me until I couldn’t keep my hips still. I rode his hand, biting my tongue to keep from moaning aloud, and I felt an overwhelming orgasm building just out of reach when he stopped.

Ryn! I screamed, trying without success to grind against his hand and finish it.

He laughed, the deep rumble against my back incredibly sexy. “When I say, Jane,” he whispered in my ear. “Not one second before.”

I wanted to elbow him hard in the ribs, but I knew all I’d get for my trouble would be a bruised arm. He laughed again, and his fingers moved, giving me one, slow, soft, entirely unsatisfactory stroke.

He kept me hanging on the edge for what seemed like hours, filling my mind with erotic images that made me want to wiggle and squirm, sending me all the things he’d like to do to me and what he wanted me to do to him in return. His thumb settled against my clit, a delicious pressure that made my nipples tighten unbearably.

A chorus of cheers suddenly broke through the woods, and I emerged from my lust-drenched haze long enough to realize that we’d left the forest and now followed a wide dirt

road. Ahead of us, just beyond a narrow bridge, was another small village, and unlike Miller's Croft, its inhabitants greeted the Harvest Guard with cheers.

And I sat in the commander's lap with his hand buried between my legs.

Just as I drew breath to order him to release me, Ryn's fingers moved again, and this time he didn't tease. He rolled my clit between his thumb and finger, stroking the lips of my pussy with his fingertips. He filled my mind with the image of his golden head buried between my thighs, his tongue diving deep inside me, drinking me dry. Another image followed almost at once, a fantasy of me on my knees before him, sucking his hot cock between my lips as he held my head in place with his fingers buried in my hair. Then it was an image of his mouth on my nipples, sucking and biting and driving me out of my mind with pleasure.

One after another, an endless wave of erotic images swamped me as his fingers played with my overheated flesh, and I came so hard I had to bite my lips to keep from screaming.

"One day I'll make you scream," he breathed in my ear as his fingers stilled at last. "One day, sweet little Jane, I'll make you come again and again until you can't keep silent." He stopped stroking me at last, and I whimpered, as much from the loss of it as from the hot words he whispered to me.

I raised my head, still breathing hard. The first riders of the Guard were passing over the little bridge, two abreast. It was too narrow to allow more. Villagers surrounded them with glad cheers, showering them with flowers.

The people surged forward, dancing around the horses as they tried to cross the water. One of the guards laughed and urged them back to the village side, but he might as well have told the river to reverse its course. More and more pressed around us, crowding the bridge, and as Ryn's horse stepped onto the wood and they saw his copper helm, they went mad.

I couldn't believe my eyes. Did these fools not know what monsters they were welcoming?

Ryn raised a hand and waved, inciting another loud cheer. *This is madness*, I thought, staring with disbelief at the villagers surrounding us.

“Not madness,” Ryn laughed, making me aware for the first time that I’d spoken aloud. “This is how it should be, Jane. We come to give their daughters a better life, not harm them.”

Despite his words and the clear joy of those around us, I couldn’t reconcile his words with my own memories. I studied the faces of the celebrating villagers, searching for understanding. Children grinned and threw flowers, watched over by sharp-eyed grandmothers and smiling grandfathers. I saw a cluster of women in various stages of pregnancy standing between two houses, clearly nervous, but still waving in welcome. I watched one point at Ryn and murmur to her son, a wide-eyed boy of perhaps ten, who clung to her skirts. When the mother saw me, she stepped in front of her son and met my eyes with a cold glare.

My stomach clenched in foreboding as the little boy ran away. No matter what Ryn said, something wasn’t right here.

Chapter Five

The choosing couldn't have been more different from the scene in Miller's Croft. The Guard set up camp on the outskirts of town, bypassing the camouflage and secrecy they'd shown when I'd been selected. Although the ladies stayed behind in their tent with their favorite Fae to entertain them, Ryn still didn't trust me out of his sight, and I was forced to witness the entire spectacle from my perch on his lap atop his warhorse.

The villagers had prepared a feast for the Guard, an enormous offering of food. The maidens prepared plates for each Fae and fed them by hand. The guards teased and flirted with them, provoking blushes and giggles. One gorgeous brunette brought a plate to Ryn, and I snatched it from her before she could offer to feed him. She pouted and fluttered her lashes at him, and he laughed as I shooed her away without any attempt at subtlety.

"Jealous?"

"Disgusted," I shot back and proceeded to start eating the food as though it had been meant for me. He laughed again and took a chicken leg for himself, ignoring me when I swatted at his hand. The meat tasted strange, seasoned with herbs I wasn't familiar with. Even so, I finished off most of it -- if there's one thing a peasant knows, it's how to eat faster than others and thereby get the biggest portion.

When the feast ended, the maidens finally lined up in a row, the first thing they'd done that had been anything like what I'd expected. I leaned back against Ryn's shoulder and closed my eyes, exhausted and in no way inclined to witness any more of the maidens' giggling. "Do we have to stay for the rest of this?"

He stroked my hair back from my forehead and dropped a kiss on the skin he'd revealed. "It would be very rude for me to leave early, sweeting, especially after all they've done to celebrate our coming." He shifted me in his arms, cradling me against his chest and wrapping his red cape around me again. "Rest, if you can. It won't be much longer."

I awakened in the dark, shivering with an overwhelming sense of wrongness. My mouth tasted bitter. I sat up too fast and almost fell over again as a wave of dizziness crashed over me. I reached out, panicking, trying to figure out where I was and what had happened to me.

A hand covered my mouth before I could call for Ryn. *Shh*, he murmured in my mind. *You're in my tent. You were drugged, but I've given you an antidote.*

What's happening? I replied in the same way, clutching Ryn's arm in both hands and realizing that he was in full armor. Then I remembered the strange herbs that had seasoned the food, the lack of men in the square or in the cheering crowd, and I understood.

Miller's Croft apparently hadn't been the only village traumatized by the last Harvest. *Have they attacked yet?*

I felt his surprise in my mind at the question, but before he could reply, I got my answer. A loud shout broke out around the camp, followed instantly by the sound of running feet and clashing weapons.

"Stay here!" Ryn hissed at me, and then he shoved aside the tent flap and leapt into the fray.

The dizziness retreated before the rush of adrenaline. Stay trapped in his tent while a battle raged around me? Was he insane? I rushed out right behind him, only to be shoved

roughly back inside. *STAY, damn it!* Ryn roared furiously, and I heard the ringing of sword against sword just outside the tent.

Oh, this was not good. If Ryn fell -- something I couldn't imagine, but it still had to be considered -- there would be nothing between me and the attackers. I felt around frantically, searching for anything I could use as a weapon. I felt cold metal and snatched it, slicing my palm before realizing I'd grabbed the wrong end of a dagger, but I didn't care about the pain.

I might not be a warrior, but at least I wasn't defenseless.

Someone fell atop the tent just then, collapsing the front half, and I scrambled back. The body didn't move, but I wasn't about to wait for the next surprise. I slashed a hole in the back of the tent and scrambled outside.

As before, Ryn's tent was at the edge of the camp, and I caught the brief glimpse of his copper helm flashing in the firelight as I crawled toward the nearest clump of bushes to hide. Relief flooded me that the body atop the tent wasn't his. I crouched down and prayed that my damned yellow dress wouldn't draw attention. I was armed, not stupid -- there was no way I was going to jump into the battle unless I was given no choice.

Ryn had fought his way to join the small cluster of guards who had stayed behind with the ladies, and they cut down their attackers with inhuman quickness and skill. The villagers were putting up a good fight, though, aided no doubt by the drugs they'd given the Fae guards during the feast. They outnumbered the guards at least two to one.

The sedative was clearly taking its toll. I bit my lip to keep from screaming as one villager smashed his club over the head of an unconscious Fae, crushing his skull. Another Fae stumbled as he tried to retaliate, tripping and only avoiding another swing of the club by nothing more than blind luck. As he shook his head sharply to clear it, a third guard managed to tackle the villager.

Screams suddenly split the night, and my blood ran cold as I saw the twins, Viviana and Elana, being dragged away from the camp by four villagers. Ryn gave a shout of outrage,

and his group of guards rushed to the tent, slaying the attackers who were trying to kidnap the other two ladies. Seeing that the Fae were not all drugged, the men scooped the twins off the ground and ran for the forest as their comrades swarmed Ryn's group, preventing them from following.

I didn't think. I just ran after them. There was no way I was going to let these men take my friends away without a fight.

Gathering my skirts up high, I sprinted through the darkness until I was in front of the group, the forest to my right and the river at my left. The barest hint of a plan had formed in my mind as I ran, and I rubbed my still-bleeding hand over one side of my face and throat, smearing my skin and hair with red. After only a moment's hesitation, I stained the yellow velvet with blood, as well. Then I screamed and fell on the ground, making sure the dagger was hidden beneath me and hoping that the men would be greedy enough to try to take me along rather than merely escape with the two prisoners they already had.

I got my answer almost at once. The men crashed through the underbrush toward me, and I heard Viviana scream my name when they got close enough to see me lying there. I kept my eyes closed despite the almost overpowering desire to take just a quick peek, to see where everyone was and how they were armed. Most of the villagers I'd seen had been carrying clubs or farm tools, and I hoped my assumption that these four would be similarly armed would be correct.

"Hey, another one!" one of the men shouted triumphantly. "You, Pete, go get her. The gods know what's been done to that one."

"They didn't do anything to us!" Elana cried, and I heard the panic and fear in her voice. "Let us go!"

My fist tightened around the hilt of the dagger as I heard the sharp crack of a slap. Viviana started shrieking insults at them for hitting her sister, using language I would've sworn no lady would know, including everything from their diminutive cock-size to their

questionable ancestry and propensity for goat-rape. One of the men laughed at her, and I was about to lose patience and go to her aid when someone -- Pete -- grasped my non-bloodied shoulder and rolled me over.

I didn't let myself think about what I was going to do. If I did, I knew I'd lose my nerve. I rolled faster than he expected and stabbed upward with the dagger, eyes still closed, unable to witness my own action.

The blade sank into softness with a horrible, indescribable sound, and Pete screamed. I pushed harder, heard something crunch, and his screams stopped as warm blood spurted over my hands and his heavy, limp body collapsed on me.

Only then did I open my eyes, shaking with nausea and terror and adrenaline, shoving frantically at the dead, bleeding man pinning me to the ground. My dagger was buried hilt-deep in his eye, and I retched as I yanked it free. The other villagers yelled, and Viviana and Elana redoubled their struggles as another man ran at me, club raised high.

The dead man was heavy, and I had no time to free my legs before the second attacker was upon me. I stabbed out again. This time I forced my eyes to remain open and aimed for the one place I knew was sure to disable a man. He screamed as the sharp blade pierced his hose and sank into the flesh of his groin. The club fell from his hands, landing only inches from me, and the dagger twisted in my hands as he collapsed, unconscious, right on top of Pete.

I screamed, buried under bodies and unable to move, knowing there were two more men out there and I was practically helpless now. That scream was a mistake, however, because once I'd emptied my lungs, I had to struggle to draw another breath. Elana and Viviana were shrieking for all they were worth, and I heard their captors cursing at them and struggling. I hoped the twins were having more luck at getting free than I was. My arm was twisted between the second man's legs as I still clutched the dagger. I managed to pull it free as I gasped in another shallow breath. Crushed as I was, any other attackers would have to move the bodies off me to finish me off, and I didn't want to be unarmed when they did.

The sound of shouts and footsteps managed to break through my panic. “Here!” Elana cried. “We’re here!”

My mind froze with mingled hope and terror. With all the screams and shouts, I knew we would attract attention, but part of me really, truly wished Elana hadn’t called out like that. How could she know if the approaching men were friends or foes?

Abruptly, the shouts changed, and I heard someone’s deep grunt of pain. There was another slap, which drove Viviana to renewed heights of cursing, but only for a moment before she stopped screaming and started weeping. My heart stuttered with fear at the sound of the sisters both crying, only to thud hard against my ribs when the body covering my legs was thrown aside. Black spots danced before my eyes from lack of air, but I gripped the dagger and prepared for one last attack before I met my fate.

The second body was shoved off me. I closed my eyes and stabbed upward again with all my remaining strength, hoping to at least wound the bastard who would surely kill me. The blade made a horrible screech as it glanced off metal. I wanted to cry as the knife was twisted from my hand. Unarmed now, despair overwhelming me, I opened my eyes and waited to die.

Instead of death, I saw a copper helm and frantic, worried eyes.

“Jane! Jane, say something, for the gods’ sake!”

Ryn scooped me off the ground, and now I did cry, great, breathless sobs against his breastplate. The twins converged on us, weeping and talking and gripping my hands, telling Ryn in disjointed sentences how I’d saved them, and I fainted with sheer relief.

Chapter Six

Cold water enveloped me from head to toe, awakening me in a spasm of thrashing limbs and shivers. I tried to shout for help, only to inhale a lungful of frigid water. Full-blown panic set in, and I scrambled desperately for something to hold on to.

Someone lifted me out as I choked and struggled. “Jane! Damn it, woman, where are you injured?”

Ryn’s voice penetrated my shock and cold, and I clung to his mailed arms. The memories of the battle in the clearing returned with a rush as I finally managed to open my eyes and saw the bloodstained velvet of my dress floating around me. Again that wet, crunching sound of my dagger punching through a man’s eye echoed in my ears, and I hung limp in Ryn’s arms and retched.

Only when I was done did I finally become aware of the chaos around me. Voices were shouting, women were crying, and the entire forest was lit with blazing torches. I’d never heard noise like it.

Loudest of all was Ryn’s strident shout in my ear. “Jane, for all the gods’ sake! Speak to me now, or I swear I’ll cut this dress off you and find your wounds myself!”

I shoved at him, still coughing and shivering violently. Cold as my dress was, he wasn't cutting it off me without a fight. "Why am I in the river?" I demanded, but my furious tone was dulled by the chattering of my teeth.

"Thank the gods," Ryn breathed. He lifted me fully out of the water and hugged me so tightly to his chest that his armor bit into me. "Don't you ever scare me like that again, do you hear me?"

He didn't even let me reply as he pulled me out of the river, alternately yelling in Fae to his guards and shouting at me. "What the hell were you thinking, Jane? I told you to stay in my tent, and you go running off into the woods! *Ontane telta, ar sin!* Do you have any idea what could've happened to you, you stubborn, foolish woman? *Karne uur ar parka lanne, orme! Tarienna tierno!* Have you no sense at all?"

Trying to keep up with his ranting was impossible with my current headache, so I ignored him and tried to stop shivering. The riverbank was a seething mass of activity as the guards, many of them still carrying naked swords, rushed about in response to Ryn's commands. I caught just a glimpse of the ladies huddled around a blazing fire, surrounded by at least a dozen guards, before Ryn carried me into a hastily constructed shelter and put me on my feet at last.

To call it a tent would've been an overstatement, but at least it mostly shut out the outside world as my trembling legs collapsed under me. Ryn scowled and pulled a dagger from his belt. Before I could so much as gasp, he grabbed my bodice and slit it all the way to my waist.

I gasped in outrage and yanked the torn fabric back together. "What the hell are you *doing?*"

He ignored my hands as he gave my skirt the same treatment and tried to yank it away. I held on tight. "You're covered in blood, Jane," he growled as we wrestled for the ruined dress. "I need to see where you're injured, so let go!"

"I'm not injured!" I protested, but it was no use. I was too shaky to resist his determined efforts, and within minutes I sat naked on the ground before him. I covered my breasts as best I could and managed to keep part of my ruined skirt over my hips, but Ryn barely even glanced at them. He was too busy running his hands down my arms and legs, over my back, and feeling along my scalp.

Only when he was satisfied that I truly hadn't been wounded did he pull me back into his arms. His armor was frigid against my bare skin. "I'm sorry, Jane," he whispered as he rocked me. "Veru, sweeting, I'm sorry. I had to see for myself that you're all right."

My teeth were chattering so hard I couldn't answer him. I heard the flap of the makeshift tent open behind me, and then a blanket fell over my shoulders. It was rough but warm, and I wrapped myself tightly in its folds. Ryn rubbed my back and shoulders as I slowly thawed. "Are the twins all right?" I finally managed to ask a few minutes later.

His hands stilled in their massage. "They're fine, Jane, but what the hell were you thinking, going after them like that? I've never seen anything so foolhardy in all my days! I told you to stay put, and you --"

I lifted my head to cut short his lecture. "I'm not one of the helpless females you came out here to find, and I couldn't just stand there and watch Elana and Viviana get kidnapped. Would you rather they'd been taken, raped, and murdered just so I could stay hidden in the bushes?"

He gripped my shoulders and held my gaze with ruthless intensity. "*Yes*. If it meant you stayed safe, I would sacrifice every single soul in that camp," he snarled. "Do you have the slightest idea what you are, how long we have searched for you?"

For a moment, all I could do was stare at him, utterly speechless for one of the only times in my life. "What are you talking about?" I whispered when I found my voice again. "I am nothing special!"

He closed his eyes and pulled me to him, holding me tight. “You are the answer to centuries of prayers, Jane. You could be the only woman alive who can give the king his heir.”

I wanted to ask him to explain, but he abruptly pushed me away. “You are not to leave this spot,” he commanded, glaring down at me. “Do you hear me?” I nodded, too flabbergasted to do anything but comply, and an instant later he was gone. I huddled in the blanket, shivering and confused.

It just didn’t make sense. I was a *peasant*! All right, a peasant and a mindspeaker -- but that couldn’t possibly be that rare. The Immortal King had ruled for hundreds of years. It stretched the limits of my imagination to even consider that no other mindspeakers had been born in all that time.

Ryn was back within minutes. He held out a bundle of men’s clothing. “I’m sorry for this, but the ladies’ tent burned, and we have nothing else for you.”

Even in my current state, I couldn’t help but smile at his genuine concern that I’d be offended. “There’s nothing to be sorry for. I’ve worn pants before, and truth be told, I’m more comfortable in them than in these fancy frocks.”

The clothes were much too big for me; I could tell that with a glance. It didn’t matter. He didn’t seem inclined to leave, and right now I was far too cold to really care what he saw if it meant I could get warm, so I dropped the blanket to pull the thick, woolen tunic over my head. Ryn made a strangled sound as I stood and stepped into the pants.

I looked up at him and raised an eyebrow. “You just saw everything I have,” I said as I pulled the pants up to my waist and drew the drawstring tight. “Don’t tell me you’re overcome with lust now.”

He closed his eyes and rubbed a hand over his face. “I’m afraid you’ll have to wear the same shoes, as well.”

The toes of my fancy velvet slippers peeked out from beneath the overlong pant legs. The incongruity of my outfit almost made me smile. I rolled up the sleeves of the tunic and rewrapped the blanket around my shoulders. “Do we camp here tonight?” I asked, looking around the makeshift shelter. Weary as I was, I didn’t much care where I slept as long as I got to do it soon.

“You and I aren’t camping at all.”

I blinked at him, not understanding. He didn’t explain further, only took my shoulders and steered me outside, where I was shocked to see Thunder, Ryn’s stallion, saddled and waiting for us. Another Fae steed was tied behind the stallion, with several bags draped over its back. “Ryn? Are we going somewhere?”

He mounted the stallion before turning to answer me. “We’re going to Nahireas ahead of the others,” he said. “Two can travel much more quickly than forty, and after this night, I want you safely behind the castle walls.”

My heart froze. Little as I wanted to go to the Fae capital city, at least I’d had the slim comfort of knowing the journey would take many days. I’d counted on those days to provide me with a chance to escape.

With this once proclamation, Ryn had stripped that hope away from me. “But two are much more vulnerable than forty,” I protested, already knowing I was doing so in vain, but unable to stop myself. “Surely --”

He reached down and pulled me into the saddle before him. “No arguments. We’re going.”

This time, he didn’t hold me across his lap. He turned me so I straddled the horse’s back and guided my hands to the saddle horn before wrapping one arm tightly around my waist. “Hold on tight,” he said, and then the stallion leapt into motion, moving with a speed that made my heart lurch in my chest.

I'd never imagined that anything could go so fast. The sound of hooves pounding the ground all but deafened me, and I understood now how Thunder had gotten his name. The trees raced by in a dark blur, and the wind stung my eyes. I clung to the saddle with all my strength. If I'd been afraid of falling beneath the horse's hooves before, it was nothing compared to the terror that now gripped me.

Don't worry, sweeting. I won't let you fall.

Ryn's voice was low and soothing in my mind. I concentrated on his reassurance, closed my eyes, and prayed for it to be over soon.

Closing my eyes only made it worse. After only a moment, I made myself open them again. Frightening as the view was, it was still preferable to blindly plunging headlong into the unknown at breakneck speed.

In what seemed no time at all, the glow of the fires was out of sight. The dark forest surrounded us in our own world. My hands slowly cramped and my legs ached, and Ryn's stallion wasn't even out of breath. I could tell we'd be going at this speed for a long time before Thunder was exhausted.

Desperate to distract myself, I reached for his mind. *Tell me about Nahireas. Tell me what I should expect, since you say everything I've heard is untrue.*

Ryn hesitated a moment before replying, and when he did, he didn't use words. An image suddenly filled my mind. I saw a bustling city surrounding an immense, ornate castle. Flags of black and gold and blue flew from the turrets and city walls, and those colors were echoed on houses, signs, banners -- everything I saw. Fae walked through the wide, paved streets, and to my shock, I saw men walking beside them. Not behind them, not relegated to the fields or forced to bow when the Fae passed by. These men shared the raised walkways as if they were equals.

The image changed, focusing now on the castle. My breath caught in my throat. Never had I imagined anything so beautiful. The walls were white stone, so bright in the sun that

they hurt the eyes to look upon. Spires and towers reached far into the heavens. Fae in armor patrolled the single gated entry into the inner bailey and lined the high walls, more perfect specimens of beauty and strength.

But more than any of these images, I was captivated by Ryn's emotions as he thought of his city of Nahireas. Pride filled him, and loyalty, and a love so intense it shook me. This was a place that he'd fought for and would gladly do so again. Would gladly die for, should that be necessary.

And his love encompassed every living being in the city.

For a long time, I lost myself in his mind, exploring his favorite places as he recalled them. Nahireas was beautiful. He ached to return, and for a time, I shared his longing. How could I want to escape such a place?

Tell me about the king, I said, forcing myself to remember the cost of living in this apparent utopia. *Tell me of Mazurian*.

The city vanished from my mind abruptly, and this time, no image accompanied his reply. *Mazurian is a just king, Jane. He cares for his people. He will cherish you, I swear it.*

I felt Ryn's certainty and wished I could share it. *He doesn't know me*, I countered. *How can you be so sure he'll cherish a total stranger?*

He was silent so long, I didn't think he'd reply at all. Just as I was about to repeat my question and beg for more information, Ryn sighed and hugged me tighter. *You were a total stranger to me, and I cherish you. How could King Mazurian not?*

That admission stole the breath from my lungs. Ryn *cherished* me? No, surely he was jesting with me. He wanted my body; that was all. I exasperated him and frustrated him at every turn. There was no way in hell that he felt anything for me but lust.

The problem was, I felt that same lust for him. If I had to give myself to a Fae, I'd choose Ryn in a heartbeat, but the thought of lying with a stranger -- even if he was the king -- made my blood run cold. *If you feel anything for me, why give me over to Mazurian?*

I asked silently. *Why not keep me for yourself? The king has a Harvest of new brides every generation. Surely he won't miss one peasant out of hundreds.*

Ryn's laughter took me by surprise. *Sweet gods, Jane*, he said, even his thoughts colored with amusement. *How many women do you think Mazurian has married?*

The question took me by surprise. Mazurian had been king for hundreds of years and had taken uncounted women each generation for his own. I didn't even think I knew enough numbers to try to figure the amount. *Hundreds? Thousands?*

He laughed again. *Four, Jane. Only four. The last was seventy years ago.*

For a moment, all I could do was gape. That just couldn't be right. The Guard had taken three women from Miller's Croft alone during the last Harvest. *You're joking. What does he do with the others?*

He does nothing with them. Every Fae who rides with the Guard is searching for a wife, Ryn said. *They choose a mate from the willing females who present themselves during the Harvest times. Most of those chosen go to the guards, and the rest come to the palace to meet other Fae who want wives. If the woman doesn't want the match, no one forces her.*

But he'll force me.

Ryn sighed, but didn't answer for a long time. Dawn slowly lightened the sky. It was so beautiful watching the ribbons of light gradually brighten overhead, so incongruous after the night I'd had. Had I really killed a man only hours ago? Had I really risked my life to save the twins, or had it all been a nightmare?

Jane, listen to me. Ryn's mental touch shook me out of the gruesome memories, and I focused on him gratefully.

Mazurian is a good king, or he tries to be, he said. *We have had so many rulers who cared only for themselves. He isn't like that. I've watched this kingdom for hundreds of years, and it's become more secure, more prosperous while Mazurian has been on the throne, for Fae and men alike.*

I wasn't convinced of that. Miller's Croft had been anything but secure and prosperous, in my memory. We'd lived in poverty, been raided, had our crops burned for spite, struggled to trade with nearby villages, and that didn't even take into account what had happened the last time the Harvest Guard had ridden through. Still, that was an argument we could have later. *What's that got to do with me?* I asked. *It's not like having me around is going to help him keep his throne.*

You will, Jane. You just might be the woman to bear his heir and silence those who plot to take the throne.

There was only one way to answer that. *Why me? Why not one of the four he married before?*

None of them were ever able to bear a child. He sounded so sad for his king that my heart ached. *After his last wife died, he consulted the court magician, who told him that only a human mindspeaker could give him the heir he sought.*

Well, that explained Ryn's reaction to my accidental mindtouch in Miller's Croft, but I was still skeptical. *And in seventy years, you expect me to believe that no other mindspeaker has been born.*

Don't scoff. You don't know how rare you are. I am one of only a handful of Fae mindspeakers. Apart from you, I've never encountered a human mindspeaker.

Thunder finally slowed, much to my relief. I'd wondered how long even a Fae warhorse could keep up this breakneck pace. "Jane," Ryn said aloud now that we could hear over the sound of hooves on the hard ground, "you won't be harmed in any way. Yes, you will marry Mazurian -- you *must* marry him, for the sake of your people and mine -- but I give you my word that the king won't force you to his bed. You think you're being taken to be some kind of broodmare, one in a harem of thousands, but that's just not true. You are a treasure, and you will be treated like one."

My mind spun with this new information, and I couldn't think of a reply. All my fears, all my desperation to escape, had been based on what the guards had told us so many years ago. Now Ryn told me it was all untrue. Could I dare to believe that? In the time I'd been with the Fae, I'd been treated better than I ever had in Miller's Croft. I'd been dressed in finery, served incredible food, protected.

And Ryn listened to me, worried for me, as no one ever had.

I sat in silence as the forest rolled by, numb with fatigue and unable to quiet my thoughts enough to sleep. If Ryn was lying to me, he was a master at it. I'd felt his emotions when he'd told me of Nahireas and Mazurian. He said I was the answer to so many prayers, and his conviction, his utter belief that he spoke the truth, had colored every word. It was a seductive thought. I'd never been important before, never.

The truth was, I really didn't have anything to go back to. No man in Miller's Croft would ever have wed me. I was too headstrong and opinionated, too independent and defiant. If some fool had dared to marry me, I doubt he'd have put up with my independence. It would've been beaten out of me, as it was beaten out of all the women of the croft.

Much as I exasperated Ryn, he'd never really tried to change my spirit. He'd only requested I do things that would keep me safe.

Would it really be so bad to be a Fae's wife?

The answer came immediately. Yes, it would. I didn't want to marry a stranger, even if he was a king. I cared nothing for politics, or prophecies, and I didn't give much of a damn about the kingdom, either. After all, it had never done anything for me. Why should I give up so much for it?

That left only one answer I could see.

"Ryn?"

"Yes, sweeting?"

I bit my lip, hoping I wasn't making a mistake. "Will you wed with me instead?"

Shock stiffened his body behind me, and I felt it when I tried to touch his mind. Clearly, whatever he'd expected me to ask, it hadn't been that.

I pressed, hoping to cut short the protest I knew was coming. "You said that every Fae who rides with the Guard is looking for a bride. That means you want a wife, doesn't it? Despite what you must think of me, I know I can be a good wife. I won't defy you if you marry me." I bit my lip, but my innate honesty forced me to add, "At least, not all the time."

"Jane, haven't you been listening to me?" he replied at last. "I've told you how rare you are, how we've searched for you. Mazurian --"

"You're a mindspeaker," I interrupted. "I'm a mindspeaker. What if we had a daughter? The gift could pass to her, couldn't it? Mazurian could court her instead."

Thunder slowed as if sensing his master's turmoil. "You would rather be the wife of a commander than to rule as queen?" His tone couldn't have been more shocked. "Jane, think about what you're saying."

"As I keep reminding you, I'm only a peasant. I have no desire to be queen of the Fae -- the very idea terrifies me. I have no desire to bed a king or fulfill a prophecy or any of the rest of it." I paused, searching for the words that would convince him. "Ryn, all I want is a husband who will treat me decently, not beat me, and have some affection for me. You said you care for me, and you've shown you can put up with me. I don't want to hope Mazurian will someday feel like you do."

"Sweet gods," Ryn whispered. He rested his chin atop my head and hugged me tight. "You're killing me, Jane. You're asking me for the one thing I can't give you."

I fell silent then. I wouldn't beg him. If his blasted king was more important to him than having a willing wife, so be it. Much as he lusted for me, much as he said he cherished me, it clearly wasn't enough for him to wed me or even truly bed me. Tears stung my eyes, but I refused to let them fall, clinging to my stubborn streak and what remained of my pride.

Ryn said I was the answer to a prayer, but no one would answer mine.

He groaned, as though catching the thought from me. *Trust me*, he murmured in my mind. *I can't explain to you, Jane. I wish to the gods I could. Will you trust me?*

"Do I have a choice?"

Ryn sighed, but didn't reply. That was fine with me. I was exhausted, both physically and emotionally, and I'd already bruised my pride enough for one day. "Are we going to stop and sleep anytime soon?" I asked, changing the subject.

"We'll stop soon to rest the horses. You can try to sleep, if you like. I won't let you fall."

I opened my mouth to tell him that sleeping on horseback was impossible, but my eyes closed and I knew no more.

Chapter Seven

The rest of the journey to Nahireas passed in a blur. We rarely spoke, and never about our feelings. The wall between us, formed by my proposal and his refusal, seemed impregnable. When Ryn stopped to make camp, which was rare, he held me tight as I slept, but never tried to touch me as he had before. The forced pace kept me in such a state of exhaustion that I was never able to stay awake long enough to put my plans of seduction into play.

It only took two days to reach the capital city. I watched it come into view, and even though it was just as beautiful as Ryn's memories had promised, my heart sank.

I would be queen of this city, and I'd gladly give it all up if I could.

Still, I'd learned much from Ryn as we'd ridden here, and I could understand his determination to see that Mazurian's throne was secured. The raids, the poverty, all the hardships of the peasants in villages like mine -- Mazurian was determined to put a stop to them, but had been hindered at every turn by the politics of the court. It would take many guards to secure the outlying lands, and why should the Fae risk so much for a dynasty that might not continue?

Especially when the most likely candidates to succeed him didn't share one tenth of his concern for humans.

Assassination plots were rampant, forcing the king to keep a great deal of his Guard at the palace. Even though he tried, Ryn couldn't hide his worry from me, linked as we were. Mazurian was a ruler under siege, and in a court obsessed with his childless state, the possibility that I could give him an heir was all-important.

Understanding didn't make me happy about it, though.

Nahireas was ringed with great stone walls. The immensity of them astounded me. I knew I was gaping as we rode through the tall gates, and still I couldn't stop. I'd seen this in Ryn's mind, but seeing it in person was a thousand times different.

Ryn didn't slow to show me the city, however. I felt his tension in his rigid body behind me and in his arm around my waist, in the agitation of his thoughts as I tried to touch his mind. With one short command in the Fae tongue, he conscripted half a dozen guards to accompany us along the road.

And it was only when we were surrounded by guards that I fully realized what Ryn had been trying to tell me all along. If the king was in danger of assassination ...

... I was doubly so.

People stopped and stared as we made our way through the streets at full gallop. Without thinking, I opened my mind to those around us, influenced by Ryn's clear nervousness and my own fears. Little as I wanted to reach what awaited me at the end of our journey, it was still preferable to assassination. The pressure of all the minds swallowed me for a moment before I sorted it out. The crowd was curious, but not nervous, and I could find no trace of aggression around me. I searched their thoughts, their moods, and no one was planning on trying to harm me.

And when I realized what I'd done, it shocked the hell out of me.

Mindspeaker, Ryn had called me, but this ... this was *mindreading*. The task both exhausted and thrilled me. I could read the entire city, if I wanted to -- feel their fears, their joys, touch their moods, and perhaps even feel an attacker's intent to harm before he ever got close to me. Sweet stars above! Was this how Ryn had known the villagers were about to attack before they'd crashed into the camp? No wonder the king wanted mindspeakers -- no wonder Ryn, one of the few in his Guard, held such a high rank.

And no wonder Ryn had kept me close to him at all times. Had I learned this skill sooner, I could've picked up on the slightest inattention of the Harvest Guards, snuck away through the dark, and avoided my pursuers with ease.

Ryn's arm loosened around my waist as we passed through the great gates and into the castle proper, and before I could think better of it, I opened my mind to his as I had to the crowd.

I don't know if he felt my attempt to read him. If he did, he didn't try to stop me. His predominant emotion was anxiety, but he didn't fear attack. I closed my eyes and pressed deeper, not sure what I was hoping to find.

Foremost in his mind was the absolute conviction that my marriage to the king was the right thing to do -- no surprises there, but it still stung that he didn't at least wonder what it'd be like if he kept me for himself. It didn't make sense. His feelings for me were strong on the surface of his mind, and the affection there would've thrilled me, had he not been so determined to see me wed the king.

Tangled beneath this assurance, however, I felt a dark space, impenetrable, secret.

Ryn was keeping something locked away inside himself, the kind of secret that could destroy more than just himself. He was lying to me, his men, his king, everyone. The revelation stunned me.

What could Ryn be hiding?

As I touched that dark place inside him, trying to press deeper, Ryn suddenly shoved me out of his mind. The wordless ejection brought me back to my body with a thud. Only then did I realize how focused I'd been on him, to the exclusion of everything else.

I looked around the vast courtyard with awe and trepidation. It was too much to take in. Wagons, horses, dogs, Fae, children, men and women, the smoke and noise of a smithy, the startled squawk of chickens scattered by our arrival, the scent of fresh hay and baking bread and noisy animals ...

Ryn swung down out of the saddle and lifted me down before I could adjust to the sensory overload. Another guard took Thunder away. Ryn pulled me away from our escort and toward a door into the castle just as three young women rushed out.

"These are your lady's maids," he told me, giving me a gentle push toward them. "They'll help you to --"

As soon as I realized what he was doing, giving me over to their care, I grabbed his hand in panic. *Don't leave me!*

He stopped at my silent plea. "Jane," he whispered, squeezing my hand back and smiling at me. "I'm not leaving you. I won't ever leave you alone. Now, go with --"

I shook my head, clinging to his hand as though it were a lifeline. I had no clue what to do with a lady's maid, much less three of them. I didn't want these women helping me do anything. This place overwhelmed me. Ryn was the only thing here that I knew, and I wasn't letting go of him without a fight.

He must've been touching my thoughts because he stopped trying to push me toward the maids. "All right," he said. "Come with me."

He led me toward the women, who all curtsied deeply to me. Ryn squeezed my hand again when I started to curtsy back, reminding me of the astonishing fact that I was actually above these three. I blushed and followed him inside, through a foyer that could've held my

father's cottage four times over, up staircase after staircase, through sitting rooms and banquet halls and chambers whose use I couldn't even guess at. I was lost within minutes.

Finally Ryn stopped before a closed door and glanced back at the maids, who had silently followed us. "Wait here," he told them and then opened the door and pulled me through.

I barely had time to register the enormous four-poster bed in the center of the room before Ryn yanked off his helmet, dropped it to the floor, and dragged me into his arms. I went up on my toes and met his kiss with all the passion and fear in my heart.

He groaned and buried his fingers in my hair, kissing me fast and hot, devouring my mouth with long, deep licks and sharp little bites, flicking his tongue over mine, branding me with his taste and his desire. I wrapped my arms around his waist and pressed my body against his from knee to shoulder. His armor bit into me, and I didn't care.

I wanted this. I wanted him, and I never wanted this kiss to end.

All too soon, he broke away. "I shouldn't do this," he whispered, resting his forehead against mine.

I nibbled his chin, his jaw, trailed kisses down his throat. "You should do this."

His hands left my hair, and I tightened my arms around him, afraid he meant to push me away. A moment later I heard his gauntlets hit the floor, and then his hands were back, bare palms sliding beneath the too-large shirt I wore, his skin hot on my ribs. I lifted my face, and he kissed me again, ravenous in his desire, his mind open to mine so I could feel his need and frustration.

One more taste, he thought, his mind burning with lust. *I shouldn't, but sweet Jane, I can't resist you.*

Don't try. My pussy was already wet. All he had to do was look at me to make me slick, wet, aching and ready for him.

His hands covered my breasts, and I moaned into his mouth. Gods, his touch was perfect, rolling my nipples between his fingers, pinching them, never too hard or too soft. I knew he was in my mind, reading what gave me pleasure. My pussy clenched, so empty, and more than I wanted my next breath, I wanted him inside me.

His breath caught. Suddenly he spun me around, trapping me between his body and the cold stone wall at my back. I tried to cup him, desperate to feel his cock beneath my hands, to stroke him and guide him inside me, but his armor defeated me. Cold steel separated me from him. I whimpered, frustrated, but the sound turned to a gasp when he pinched my nipples again.

When he broke the kiss, I was too breathless to protest. He held my gaze with his as he slowly knelt before me. His hands slid down, over my belly, tracing my navel, finally stopping at the tie that held my pants closed. "I want to taste you," he whispered. Closing his eyes, he nuzzled my mons through the fabric. "Just like I did the night I chose you. I want to feel you come on my tongue, Jane, and imagine you coming on my cock. Do you want that, sweetie?"

"Oh, Ryn," I whispered. It was all I could do. Waves of erotic images filled my mind, everything he wanted to do to me. "I want everything."

The tie parted under his fingers. He gently pulled my hands from his hair and guided them to my pussy. *Open yourself for me*, he murmured in my mind, and when I obeyed, he kissed each one of my fingers. His hands slid up to my breasts again, and when he flicked his fingers over my nipples and blew a warm breath across my wet pussy, it felt so damn good that I almost came right then.

He groaned, and then his mouth was there, licking and sucking, devouring me. The sight of his head buried between my thighs, the ecstasy on his face and in his mind, the sudden thrust of his tongue deep inside me as he toyed with my nipples ... I'd never imagined anything so sexy in my entire life. My hips thrust against his mouth, totally beyond my control, riding his tongue as I parted my labia for him, giving him all the access he could

want. One of his hands left my breast, and before I could protest its loss, he sucked my clit into his mouth and sank one long finger inside me. Thrusting in and out in time with my rapid breaths, rolling my clit on his tongue like a delicacy and massaging first one breast and then the other, his lust filling my mind and his fantasy of pulling me to the floor and burying his throbbing cock inside me all the way to the balls, Ryn took me far past pleasure to a feeling I'd never known before.

When I came, I had to bite my lips hard to keep from screaming. He pressed a spot deep inside me, and my orgasm reached new heights, robbing me of breath. My vision went black, and all I could do was ride it out.

An eternity later and all too soon, Ryn pulled away and gently lowered me to kneel beside him on the floor. I almost came again when he closed his eyes and licked his finger clean with obvious relish. I tasted myself on his lips when he kissed me. "Jane," he whispered against my lips, making my name into an endearment. "My sweet Jane."

"I love you."

The words were out before I could stop them, and they hung heavy in the room between us. He didn't say anything for a long moment, just held me and stroked my hair. I didn't bother trying to take them back. I could still feel him in my mind and knew he had to have felt the truth of them.

Finally he pressed a kiss to my forehead and helped me to stand. Neither of us said a word as he retied the waist of my pants and straightened my shirt. I couldn't meet his eyes.

When he finished with my clothes, he gathered his helmet and gauntlets and turned to the door. Panicking, using every bit of willpower I possessed not to reach out and grab him again, I couldn't keep from whispering, "Will I see you again?"

He stopped with his hand on the latch and looked back at me. "Not like this," he said gently. "But, Jane, it will be all right. I swear it will. Trust me."

And then he opened the door and left, and all I could do was watch him go.

The three maids came in, heads bowed, and gently closed the door. They drew me to a steaming bath and sprinkled something into the water that smelled of flowers, and I couldn't even acknowledge the luxury. Ryn was gone. He was truly gone, was truly giving me away.

When I sank down into the hot water, I ducked my head under the surface and pretended the moisture on my cheeks was merely from the steam.

Chapter Eight

That evening, I caught my first glimpse of my future husband.

As they'd dressed me after my bath, the maids told me that Ryn had left orders that I was to stay hidden in my room until the moment of the royal wedding. No one was to know that I was the king's chosen, and when I touched their minds, I found that they had no clue that I was a mindspeaker, either.

I didn't enlighten them.

As the hours passed, however, I couldn't stand the seclusion. I'd never had an idle day in my life and didn't know what to do with them. The intricate needlework my maids busied themselves with was beyond me. Several books lay on a high shelf, but even if I'd dared to touch the precious volumes, I'd never learned to read.

I did the only thing I was good at. I cajoled, I pleaded, I persuaded and bullied my maids until they agreed to lend me a servant's gown and let me work during the evening meal.

So, dressed as a kitchen maid, I circled the great hall and refilled wine goblets during the evening meal. Many guards filled the hall, but I didn't see Ryn anywhere. I stretched my newfound abilities to their limits and still didn't feel his mind.

I did, however, feel the excitement running through the hall at the report that the Harvest Guard was only a few days from the castle. Guards and noble Fae alike were anxious to see the chosen women and perhaps find a bride among them. Just as Ryn had promised, I found no hint in any of the minds I touched that any Fae would force a woman to wed him. No, their thoughts were all of courtship, not rape or coercion. I thought of the ladies, and my heart lightened a little despite my own predicament.

At least they seemed to have a good chance of finding happiness here.

Whenever I could, I tried to sneak a glance at the high table where the king sat. Noble ladies served him, not lowly maids like myself, so I couldn't get close -- not that I really wanted to. Still, glances were enough to give me some idea about the Fae I would marry.

He was magnificent, but I'd expected no less. Unlike that of every other Fae in the hall, Mazurian's long hair was dark, a rich, deep brown like some highly polished wood. I couldn't get close enough to be sure, but I thought his eyes were dark, too. His features were exotic and sharp -- almond-shaped eyes, a strong blade of a nose, cheekbones a woman couldn't help but envy. In a word, he was beautiful, but his looks weren't what made him stand out from the Fae around him. Power clung to him, making him look every inch the king even though he wore no crown or diadem.

I'd only ever felt such a compelling aura of command once before, and that was from Ryn. My heart ached at the thought of him, and I risked another glance at the king to distract myself.

My future husband. I still couldn't seem to wrap my mind around the thought. Here was the Fae who commanded such loyalty from Ryn, the Immortal King who'd ruled for generations and looked no older than I did.

Before I could think better of it, I opened my mind and sorted through all the thoughts in the room until I could touch his.

What I read there made my hand slip on the heavy wine pitcher, sloshing the crimson liquid over the rim of the goblet I was filling. I righted it quickly and sopped up the spill with my apron, muttering apologies to the Fae I'd almost splashed. He merely waved me away, and I was only too happy to go.

Mazurian wasn't the devoted king that Ryn had described. His mind was full of dark, locked secrets, blank spaces amid a sea of cruelty and ambition. He didn't care about the humans in his kingdom and only tolerated most of the Fae. His feeling of superiority, his amusement at the fawning of the courtiers and disgust at the sight of the human serving wenches, were all evident as he glanced around the hall. He loved his power, not his kingdom, and he'd kill anyone or anything that threatened to steal that power.

I felt sick and was abruptly glad I hadn't eaten any of the dinner my maids had brought me. All of the assurances Ryn had given me, everything he'd believed would happen to me, were wrong. This wasn't a man who would take the time to seduce me to his bed, not when force was much faster. This wasn't a man who would "cherish" his human wife, whether I gave him a child or not. This was a man who would endure me only until he got what he wanted and then set me aside ... or worse.

Ryn, I thought desperately, wondering if he could even hear me. Why didn't you keep me? Why sentence me to this?

Thankfully the king stood then, signaling the end of the evening meal, and I was only too grateful to lower my eyes to the floor and stand in the shadows as the Fae left the hall. *I only have to stay until they're all gone*, I told myself, trying not to tremble too much, desperate to escape notice. Surely I could hold myself together for a minute more.

Damn the kingdom and everyone in it. I couldn't stay here.

When the hall was finally empty, I carefully put the wine pitcher on the nearest table. I couldn't remember everything about the castle that I'd seen on the way in, but I knew

where the kitchen was, and I'd never heard of a kitchen that didn't have a door that opened to the outside.

Just as I turned to make my last attempt to escape, a hand fell on my arm. I gasped and spun around.

The Fae whose hand clutched my elbow looked older than any I'd ever seen. His golden hair was touched with silver at the temples, and fine lines crinkled the corners of his eyes. Remembering how long Mazurian had ruled and how young he looked, I couldn't imagine how old this Fae must be.

And then I realized I was staring into his eyes, which was unconscionably rude and totally out of character for a serving maid, and I dropped my gaze and curtsied low. "I beg pardon, master," I said, and I didn't have to fake the fearful tremor in my voice as I reached out to his mind to see what punishment I'd just earned.

You truly are a mindspeaker, then.

His voice in my head made me look up with a gasp. I'd only ever felt Ryn touch my mind like that.

The Fae smiled reassuringly. *No punishment for you, my dear, and no running away, either*, he told me. His voice in my head was calm, kind. *Things are not what they seem here.*

I could see no point in either pretending I wasn't a mindspeaker or denying my plans of escape, and I answered him the same way. *Master, I don't understand. Ryn -- I mean, Commander Rynnaut -- he told me things ...* I stopped abruptly before I said any more, wondering if I'd already said too much. It wasn't safe to even think ill of the king.

Just because this stranger was a mindspeaker didn't make him an ally.

His smile didn't waver. "I am Telnau," he said and released my elbow to give a graceful bow. "I am the king's sorcerer. No, don't be afraid. I, too, have spoken with the good commander, and I understand your confusion. Things aren't what they seem, Jane. The king does what he must." His eyes burned into mine. "You must do the same."

"I can't." The words were out before I could stop them. My eyes welled with tears again, and I impatiently dashed them away. "Will you take me to Ryn?"

Telnau sighed and guided my hand to the crook of his elbow before leading me from the hall. *You should not have spoken that aloud*, he said reprovingly. *You will wed tomorrow, Jane. We cannot delay this.* He held up his hand as if sensing my protest before I could speak it. *Delay would be disastrous. Tomorrow you will see the one you love, but you must swear to me that you will not defy the king at the ceremony.*

If that was the price of seeing Ryn, I would pay it. I nodded, with my eyes on the stone floor.

Telnau was silent until we reached the sturdy wooden door of my room. *I will come for you tomorrow*, he said. *Open the door for no one but me, Jane. Not even your commander. Especially not your commander. Don't trust your eyes or your ears. Trust only what you read of people. Remember, a mindspeaker sees the truth, always.*

I nodded even though I didn't really understand. Telnau locked me inside my room, and I fell on the bed, exhausted, brokenhearted, too numb to even be terrified. This intrigue, all these politics ... they were beyond me. How was I to find my way in this place when a single evening left me this bewildered?

The morning came too soon. For the first time in my life, I didn't awaken and jump right out of bed. There was no reason to. I had no chores, no duties, nothing I needed to do, nothing anyone expected of me. I watched the colors of dawn chase across the sky and fade, heard the slow rise of noise and movement in the courtyard far below my window, and waited for Telnau to come.

The sun was high in the sky when I heard a knock at my door. Bored with laziness -- the novelty of lying abed had worn off pretty quickly -- I'd washed my face and made the bed, but my attempts to dress myself had failed. None of the gowns could be donned alone. They required corsets, or layers of petticoats, or laced up the back, or had skirts and sleeves

that needed to be pinned on, or any number of other difficulties. I'd never imagined that the act of dressing could be so complex.

Still in my nightclothes, I reached out with my mind and found Telnau there with the three maids who'd bathed me yesterday. I opened the door and let them in. The Fae smiled at me in a way that was clearly meant to be reassuring as the maids carried in the most elaborate, ornate gown I'd ever seen. "How fare you this morning, my dear?"

I shrugged, wondering what answer he could possibly be expecting me to give. I was in love with one man and about to wed another. It was hardly what I'd call a happy day.

The maids urged me behind the dressing screen, and I closed my eyes as they dressed me. Fine silk shift, then a stiff corset, then three layers of petticoats. They slipped the first under-tunic over my head, a shimmering layer of black and gold brocade. Over that went a second under tunic, this one a dark royal-blue silk that was split from ankle to shoulder at the sides and from hem to waist in front so the black material showed when I moved.

The outer layer settled over me like a shroud. Heavily encrusted with gems, the cloth of gold glowed in the light streaming in through the window. I forced myself to remain still as they laced me in tight and slid the matching sleeves onto my arms, even though the weight of the gown was stifling.

There'd be no running away in this dress. Not only did it weigh almost as much as I did, there was no way I could ever get out of it on my own.

When the maids finally finished pinning and tugging, they led me to the wide bench in front of the mirror. I couldn't stand to look at myself, so I concentrated on the sorcerer's face behind me instead. Telnau's eyes were serious as he watched them brush my short hair and pin gems and flowers amid the curls.

"You are a vision," he said when they finished at last and retreated. "Mazurian could not ask for a lovelier bride." I knew I should thank him for the compliment, but my voice didn't want to work. I couldn't even summon the energy to shrug -- but then again, as heavy

as the gown was, I wasn't sure I could move my shoulders at all. Telnau took my hand and squeezed it as though he understood my silence. *Have faith, Jane.*

You all tell me that, I replied, not bothering to hide my heartache from him. Why bother? All that was keeping me going was the promise of a glimpse of Ryn after the ceremony. *Just take me to the church and let me do what must be done.*

I remember only bits and pieces of the walk through the castle. The gown rustled and swayed with my every step, making a sound like the wind through the tall wheat just before harvest. I remember Fae crossing their hands over their hearts and bowing low as I walked by, flanked by a dozen guards who I hadn't noticed before that moment. I heard someone shush a child's laughter as I passed a room, and I wished they'd let him keep laughing.

Then we were crossing the courtyard, my guard close around me, Telnau before me, and I saw the church rising in front of us.

"Church" wasn't the word for it. It was more than that, more than a cathedral. It was the most incredible thing I'd ever seen. Its spires seemed to touch the very heavens. A choir sang inside, a melody of such perfect beauty, it lifted even my heart.

As we approached, the doors were flung wide open. Telnau continued straight up the long aisle as the guards around me stopped at the threshold and simultaneously lifted their swords in salute. Feeling like the world's worst impostor, intimidated by the pageantry, the sheer magnificence of it all -- the gown, the cathedral, the music, all the gold and gems and splendor -- I closed my eyes and lowered my head.

Surely you do not bow, sweeting?

Ryn's voice in my mind sent a surge of excitement through my entire body. I scanned the gathered Fae, desperate for a glimpse of him. I didn't see him anywhere. *Where are you?* I thought desperately.

I am here, Jane. Walk forward now, love. Follow Telnau.

I did as he asked, hardly aware that the music had swelled to a symphony of divine voices. The weight of the gown was the only thing that kept me from running. Ryn was here, perhaps hidden in the throng, but here nonetheless. One blond Fae in such a vast space was naturally difficult to find, but suddenly I realized the impossible.

I had faith.

I was barely conscious of the king waiting for me. I saw Telnau pass beside Mazurian and stand before the altar, but only out of the corner of my eye. I was too busy searching for Ryn.

Look up, Jane. Ryn's voice, so familiar. I did as he asked, fully expecting to see him near the king, perhaps standing amidst the gilded guards who encircled the holy center of the cathedral. All I saw was Mazurian, dark, crowned, and magnificent.

Terrifying.

His dark eyes were fixed on mine with such intensity that I couldn't suppress a shiver. He didn't glance at my gown or so much as blink at the fortune in jewels scattered carelessly through my hair. Up close, he was even more beautiful than I'd thought last night, but the horrible glimpse I'd had of his mind made me shudder. I didn't dare try to touch his mind again.

Ryn, he's not what you thought -- he's not a good king! I told him frantically. *I touched his mind, last night in the great hall. He's ruthless and loves only power. He hates humans. Please don't make me marry him!*

Easy, love, have faith. Speak your vows to me, then, not to the Fae you read last night.

Mazurian was still watching me, and suddenly I was afraid he'd see through me, somehow know that I spoke with Ryn. I lifted my chin as I ascended the wide steps to where the king waited. Let him stare at me all he wanted.

I hadn't bowed to Ryn, and I wouldn't bow to his thrice-damned king, either.

One corner of Mazurian's mouth twitched in what could almost have been a smile. Before I could be sure, he turned and faced Telnau. I followed his lead.

What followed were the worst moments of my life. In both Fae and the human tongue, Telnau spoke long. We knelt, we stood, we knelt again, and then finally clasped hands. I kept my eyes fixed on the sorcerer as I repeated the words that would bind me, body and soul and life, to the king. In my secret heart, I spoke them to Ryn. Mazurian replied with his vows. His voice was smooth, deep, musical, unhesitating. I could almost believe he meant them. The ring he slipped over my finger was thick gold covered in opals and rubies and diamonds. I had no ring for him.

Telnau blessed us, the choir sang, the corset dug into my ribs, and the weight of the gown threatened to crush me. At least my years of hard labor had given me a strong back and sturdy legs to bear the burden. I didn't know how the frail, willowy ladies around me could possibly manage it.

Just when the ache in my back progressed to the point of agony, Telnau raised his hands high and spoke loudly in the Fae tongue. He then lifted a sparkling diadem from a pillow and placed it upon my head. There was a rustle behind me of the assembled Fae bowing as I was crowned. It felt unreal. Abruptly I flexed my toes, aching for the freedom of bare feet instead of the confinement of these jeweled slippers.

Finally Telnau fell silent. Even before Mazurian took my hand and drew me around to face the rest of the cathedral, I knew it was done. I was married, crowned, bound forever to the Immortal King.

Once a peasant, now queen of the Fae. It was the perfect fairy tale wedding in the perfect fairy tale story, but this one could only end happily never after.

Mazurian squeezed my hand, clearly wanting me to look his way. I refused. Again, I was too busy searching the crowd for Ryn. *Where are you?* I asked him again, starting to feel

truly desperate now. We were about to leave this place, and I still hadn't caught a glimpse of him, despite Telnau's promise.

I will be with you soon, he replied. Don't be afraid.

And no matter how I tried, I couldn't mindtouch him again.

Chapter Nine

Mazurian didn't kiss me at our wedding. In fact, other than taking my hand to lead me from the chapel and to the great hall for the wedding banquet, he didn't touch me at all. That was just fine with me. As was customary, we shared a trencher at the meal, and I ate without tasting any of it.

I ached at being denied the promised glimpse of Ryn. Telnau had lied so I wouldn't disrupt the wedding. I could've killed him for tricking me this way.

The banquet lasted for hours. Unused to the weight of the crown, my head pounded and my neck throbbed. Minstrels sang and danced, a play was enacted for our pleasure, and the wine flowed freely. I didn't hesitate to partake of it just as freely. I needed any courage I could get. The liquid kind was as good as any other, and it helped my vicious headache.

Finally, just when I thought I'd die if I didn't get out of the cumbersome gown soon, Mazurian rose and my maids arrived to escort me away. I saw the king turn toward me, obviously meaning to say something to me, but I pretended not to notice and slipped away. His chuckle followed me out of the hall.

My legs trembled and my knees felt weak -- I told myself it was the wine and not fear. My maids clustered around me, murmuring encouraging words, letting me lean on them

when no one was around to see. I touched their minds and felt empathy, not jealousy. These three knew what it was to work hard, to serve the Fae with everything they were and yet be invisible to them, and they didn't envy me for my elevation in status.

They, probably more than anyone else in the kingdom, knew what it would cost.

They led me to a different suite this time. The massive room was dominated by an equally massive bed draped in blue, gold, and black -- Mazurian's colors. A thick rug of blue and gold warmed the stone floor. Tapestries covered the walls. It was a gorgeous room, and it filled me with dread, but I didn't protest when my maids began the long task of undressing me.

They had only just removed the last under-tunic, leaving me in the fine silken shift, when I sensed someone approaching the door. *Who's there?* I challenged, suspecting I'd find the sorcerer and clenching my fists in anticipation.

I wasn't disappointed. Telnau answered me aloud, not with his mind. "The king approaches, my lady."

The maids gasped, and two of them hurried to remove the final jewels from my hair. The third rushed to find a thick robe and wrap it around me. I was hardly conscious of their attentions in my rage at the sorcerer. *Come in, then, so I can cut out your lying tongue before he arrives.*

His amusement filled my mind, both surprised and admiring. *Ahh, he told me you had spirit.*

How dare you speak of Ryn to me? My rage was so great, I only peripherally noticed my maids bowing out of the room. *Damn you for a liar, Telnau -- you said I would see him, and he wasn't there!*

I also told you not to trust your eyes, Telnau replied gently.

The door opened before I could fire back another scathing reply. I caught a glimpse of the ancient Fae in the background and literally ached to tear him apart, but he stood behind Mazurian.

My rage died in a wave of dread. This was it, then. End of the road, no escape. I didn't dare defy the king to his face. I clutched my robe so tightly my knuckles ached, and curtsied the best I could. "My lord," I whispered through lips numb with terror.

Jane, I thought we'd already discussed your bowing, sweeting.

Ryn's voice in my mind was so unexpected, so shocking, I gasped and jerked my head up so quickly that I lost my balance. I hardly felt my impact with the floor. I was too busy searching the hall behind Mazurian and Telnau, desperate to see him. *Ryn, where are you?*

Mazurian crossed the room and knelt before me. "Right here, Jane."

For an endless moment, I couldn't even get a breath. The king reached out and touched my cheek. That small touch was all it took to break me from my shock, and I closed my eyes, sending my thoughts searching for Ryn again.

I'm here, he said in my mind. In front of you. Touching you.

No. I didn't even think about the denial. It was instinctive. *It's a trick. He made you mindspeak to me, didn't he?* Was this how he expected to get his heir, by fooling me into thinking he was really my beloved?

Mazurian laughed softly. "You always were ready to believe the worst, little Not-It."

My eyes opened in shock at the old nickname. His voice was warm, gentle, and not Ryn's. I had no idea what Mazurian hoped to gain from this, but I wasn't falling for it. I'd read the king last night, and I knew the monster hidden behind the beauty. "I have no reason not to believe the worst," I said, holding his dark eyes with mine.

The door closed quietly. I sensed Telnau standing only a few feet away, but all my attention was focused on the Fae before me, the earnest, anxious expression on his exotic face.

Then he smiled at me. "Very well," he said. "You want proof, and I'll give it to you. I chose you in Miller's Croft. You looked hideous, and your dress was the dirtiest thing I've ever seen. You mindspoke to me just as I started to leave, and you were distraught over being chosen. You're afraid of horses. You ran from me through the woods and cried over a torn dress. I brought you a gold circlet that you refused to wear. Do you believe me yet, or shall I go on?"

I was gaping at him. I knew it, and I still couldn't manage to stop. Either Ryn had given him incredibly complete information about me, down to the smallest detail, or ... or ...

"It's impossible," I whispered.

"Not impossible." Telnau spoke for the first time, stepping closer to us. "Merely a little magic."

Mazurian still hadn't broken our shared gaze. "I know this is hard to believe. I wanted so badly to tell you, and I couldn't. It had to be this way, sweeting." He lifted my hand and pressed it to his chest. "This isn't who you're used to seeing. I know that. You can't always trust your eyes, Jane." *Trust your heart. Feel me, the real me, and know this is true.*

It was a trick. It had to be. When I'd touched the king's mind last night, I'd been certain he wasn't a mindspeaker, yet there was no longer any doubt that Mazurian was mindspeaking to me now. His fast heartbeat beneath my palm betrayed his nervousness. Could it really be true?

Only one way to find out.

I braced myself before closing my eyes and reaching out to Mazurian's mind again. I was ready for deception, for the empty space of his secrets, the cruelty and ambition, his amusement at playing with me.

I felt Ryn.

He showed me the city again, as he had during our ride to Nahireas. His love for it was all-encompassing, just as I remembered. Beneath it I felt his strength, his loyalty, and above all, his fear that I wouldn't believe that the Fae I loved was truly right in front of me.

I love you, Jane da'Smithy, Mazurian murmured in my mind. I love the way you defy me. I love how you demand proof of everything. I love that you would rather be a soldier's wife than become queen. And I love every inch of your body. I have no more secrets from you. Search me all you wish. Just, please, believe.

He brushed gentle fingers over my cheeks, making me aware for the first time that I was crying. I covered my face with my hands to hide the tears. "Why didn't you tell me?"

He wrapped his arms around me and cradled me to his chest, but it was Telnau who answered. "When I cast the spell, I laid a bond of silence on them both. He was unable to tell you the truth, just as Rynnaut was unable to speak of his true identity to anyone."

"Why?" I couldn't look at either of them. "Why do this, fool everyone?"

Again, the sorcerer answered while Mazurian simply held me close. "I know he told you of the assassination plots. We devised this plan to draw the traitors out without putting the king at risk."

"The plan was discovered by Rynnaut," Mazurian said. "He told only Telnau and me. An assassination attempt was supposed to happen while the Harvest Guard were away, and he proposed trading places with me. More than that -- trading bodies. Telnau has the power to move the soul from one body to another. That way, the attackers could carry out the attempt and be caught without ever putting me at risk." He paused, and I could sense his smile through the mental connection we still held. "You were a variable we didn't plan on, sweeting."

The reminder that my beloved now inhabited a different body made me shiver. I couldn't think about that, not yet. "And if he was killed while in your body?" I asked.

Telnau shook his head. "He was protected by layers of security and magic," he replied. "He was never in danger. Still, Rynnaut was known to all as the king's most loyal and trusted friend. If King Mazurian were assassinated, what could be more natural than Rynnaut challenging the usurper for the crown?"

That, at least, made sense to me. I'd seen Ryn -- no, Mazurian -- fight during the ambush. He was an incredible warrior, and I had little doubt he could defeat any opponent. Still, he was a mindspeaker! How could he not have known what Rynnaut was planning?

But then I remembered the ambition and love of power I'd felt from the impostor last night. The black spaces of buried secrets that filled his mind. That Fae would've done anything, killed anyone, to keep the throne. If I'd really been touching the commander's mind instead of the king's, then the entire plan had been a complex trap to steal the throne with no one being the wiser.

I shook my head in a vain attempt to quiet my spinning thoughts. This was complex, layers upon layers of plots and lies. Could such an outlandish tale really be the truth?

"It was a complicated plan to betray me, one he'd been working on for years," Mazurian continued, confirming my unspoken thoughts. "Remember, Jane, we live for hundreds of your lifetimes, and he spent decades making his plans.

"First, he made a travesty of the Harvest. It was the fastest way to turn the populace against the Fae. Then he came to us with this false tale of an assassination plot and convinced Telnau to cast the spell. He took my body, took my throne, and bribed his men to incite violence in the villages during this Harvest in the hopes that I'd be killed in the fighting."

Even I had to admit it was brilliant. No one would ever know the coup had occurred. The people would still see Mazurian on the throne, not a usurper. "Where is he now?"

"In the dungeons." Telnau's voice was hard. "He awaits execution for treason, as do all those who aided him."

Unbidden, I caught an image from his mind -- Rynnaut in chains, locked in a dark cell as Telnau bent over him. I fought not to be sick as the sorcerer's magic tore open Rynnaut's mind and extracted all his secrets. It was a brutal act, no less horrible for its necessity.

I shuddered. Mazurian held me tighter. "Telnau advised me to have him executed before the wedding," he murmured against my hair. "I wouldn't agree. Commander Rynnaut will not die as long as there is any doubt in your mind that what I've told you is true. If you need to see him, Jane, if you need to touch his mind to believe this, I'll take you to him. Telnau has agreed to open his own mind to you or do whatever it takes to convince you of his part in this. Tell me what you need in order to believe, and I will provide it."

And with those words, the last doubts faded. The ruthless Fae I'd touched last night would never have hesitated to execute a traitor. He certainly wouldn't be swayed by something as insignificant as a human's emotions.

I raised my head and looked at Mazurian, forcing myself to really see him, trying to find the one I loved in his dark eyes. There was nothing familiar about the Fae, nothing at all that reminded me of Ryn, and yet ... something in his face, in the taut lines of his body as he waited for my reply, the hope in his eyes, reminded me of the Ryn I'd known. His mind was still open to mine, and I could touch his memories. I felt the wrenching shock of Telnau's spell and the disorientation of awakening to a different body, seeing a different face in the mirror, hearing his words in a different voice. It was all there, laid bare for me.

I cupped his face in my hands. "I don't need to see him," I whispered. "I see you."

Mazurian's smile lit up his entire face. "Telnau, you may go," he said, never looking away from me. "See to it that we are not disturbed until morning."

"As you command, my lord."

The door opened, then closed again. Mazurian caressed my face and closed his eyes with pleasure. "You don't know," he whispered, "how much I've longed to touch you with *my* hands, Jane. Not his."

I ran my hands through his hair. It was thick, sliding through my fingers like ribbons of silk. “Is that why you wouldn’t take me?”

He nodded as his fingertips traced my lips, then feathered caresses across my jaw and down my throat. He opened his eyes and gave me a wicked grin. “Besides, my body is so much nicer than his. I would’ve hated for you to get second best.”

I remembered what I’d seen of the commander. He’d seemed perfect to me, all golden skin and firm muscle. “Prove it,” I challenged, returning his grin with one of my own.

He stood, pulling me to my feet in one smooth motion. In two long strides, he backed me across the room until my back pressed against one of the thick posts of the bed. “You dare to command the king?”

His regal, affronted tone didn’t even make me pause. This was my love, and I didn’t fear him. “I dare,” I shot back. “Strip for me, Your Majesty.”

Mazurian laughed out loud. “As my queen wishes.”

He released me and stepped back. The ornate doublet he’d worn for the ceremony and banquet was already gone, and he drew his under-tunic over his head with one smooth movement. The priceless material was tossed carelessly aside.

Frugal as I was, even I couldn’t protest the abuse of such a fine garment. The sight of my husband’s bare chest robbed me of the power of speech.

King though he was, Mazurian had a warrior’s body -- lean, chiseled flesh, every muscle defined beneath lush golden skin. Two faded scars marred his perfection, one crossing his stomach, the other just under his left nipple. When he reached for the tie at his waist, the ripple of his biceps and chest made my breath catch.

Sweet stars above. He was better than gorgeous. He was perfect.

He kicked off his boots as he unknotted the tie. “Breathe, Jane.”

“Can’t.” That one word was all I could manage. His grin broadened, and I reached out to touch him, to make sure he was real. Surely something this beautiful could only exist in the heavens.

The instant my hand touched him, the playful mood vanished. Mazurian sucked in a deep breath as I traced the scar on his stomach. I let my palm slide over his ribs, then down to his waist.

And then he moved, plunging both hands into my hair and pulling me forward to meet his ravenous kiss.

His kiss was blessedly familiar -- deep, hot, demanding -- but this time, there was an intensity that was new. This time, he wasn’t teasing me. His passion branded me as his, and I returned his kiss with all of my heart.

Chapter Ten

Sweet Veru, Jane. Even his voice in my head was shaken. *Keep kissing me like that, and I swear I'll lose my mind.*

I didn't bother replying. The feel of his bare skin beneath my hands was intoxicating, addictive. I couldn't stop touching him. He groaned and pushed the robe off my shoulders, forcing me to release him for a bare second to let it fall to the floor. His hands were hot through the thin silk of my shift as he cupped my breasts. Through it all, he never broke the kiss.

I wanted to protest that he hadn't finished stripping, but talking was overrated, and I was more than capable of doing things myself. His abdomen jumped as my fingertips slid lower. I found the loosened tie and slid my fingers beneath the waist of his pants.

Mazurian tore his mouth from mine and sucked in a sharp breath. "Gods, sweeting, I'd planned to take this slowly, seduce you, not ravish you."

Already missing his kiss, I leaned forward and nibbled his earlobe. "Consider me seduced," I murmured against his skin. "I've been trying to get you naked for days, you know. When I want slow, I'll ask for it. Now, get on with the ravishing."

His laugh held a slightly strangled note. "Your command is most definitely my wish."

And ravish me he did. He knotted his fists at the shoulders of my shift and tore it from collar to hem with one great tug as I pushed his pants off his hips. When he swept me up in his arms, the sudden press of his bare skin against mine sent a molten wave of heat melting deep in my pussy. He lowered me to the bed, his dark eyes blazing with passion, his cock against my thigh, and all I wanted was to feel him inside me at last.

His weight settled atop me, a hot, incredibly sexy blanket of aroused male Fae. "You feel so good," he whispered.

I wiggled beneath him and gasped as my nipples rubbed his chest. "You feel pretty good yourself."

He bent and sucked my nipple into his mouth. The movement was so fast that I had no time to prepare for it. His tongue was hot, wet, and relentless in wringing pleasure from me. I arched and wrapped my legs around his waist, pulling him closer. He subjected my other nipple to the same glorious torment, suckling, nibbling, flicking his tongue over it until I could hardly breathe.

His rigid cock nudged my pussy. He felt so big, so hot, and this time I knew he wouldn't stop. "Please," I whispered, hardly aware of my own voice, lost in the sensation of his tongue on my nipples and his hard body covering mine. "Oh, please!" I bit my lip to hold back a moan.

He raised his head and suckled my bitten lower lip. *No more of that*, he told me sternly. *I want to hear your moans, Jane. You owe me all the sounds you stifled every time I touched you. You're going to come for me tonight, and I want to hear how good it feels.*

He pressed forward, just enough to press the blunt head of his cock inside me. I gasped at the unfamiliar sensation. He groaned and sank a little deeper, hot and thick, and this time my moan escaped despite my involuntary effort to hold it in.

His rush of pleasure at the sound filled my mind. *Just like that*, he murmured in my mind. *You feel beautiful, Jane, so warm and soft and slick. Moan for me again, sweet.*

He retreated a little, thrust a bit deeper. All the while he rained kisses over my face and throat, still pouring his desire and praise and love directly into my mind. I raised my hips instinctively when he thrust again, driving him deeper than before, and gasped as the pleasure was disrupted by a twinge of pain.

Mazurian froze, allowing me time to adjust. I wriggled a bit and moaned at the delicious friction of him inside me. His muscles went rigid as I did it again. "You're all right?" he asked through gritted teeth.

Gods, it felt wonderful. I arched my back and rotated my hips just to feel that incredible rush of pleasure again. "Oh, yes," I moaned, unable to be still. "I thought it was supposed to hurt more." Drunk on sensation, I cupped my breasts and pinched my nipples as I wiggled again.

"*Veru*," he gasped, and then he thrust deep, over and over, sinking all the way inside me, pushing pleasure into me again and again. I released my breasts and slid one hand down his back to feel his buttocks clench with every thrust, and he bent and suckled my nipple hard.

That was all it took to send me plummeting over the edge. I came, and came again, filled to the brim with love and ecstasy and erotic triumph as wild cries filled my ears. Mazurian cried out and thrust hard and fast as he reached his own peak.

Nothing in my life had ever been more perfect.

Long minutes passed while we fought to catch our breath, his head on my breast, my legs still locked around his waist. I stroked Mazurian's long hair, the dark strands draped across my body like a silken blanket. It was a long time before I could speak, but finally I forced myself to ask the question weighing on my mind. "What happens now?"

He raised his head and kissed me softly. "Now we rest, and then do it all again."

I smiled and shook my head at him, but my heart was still troubled. "Besides that. What will you do with the traitors? How can we be certain they've all been captured? How

will we force the nobles to give you their support to help the human villages? What if I'm a terrible queen and mess everything up for you? When --"

He silenced me with another kiss, this one a little longer, a lot hotter. When he pulled away, his dark eyes were full of love and pride. No one had ever looked at me like that before.

"Already thinking like a queen," he murmured. "The traitors will be dealt with, Jane. We'll do what we must to get the support we need. But the most important thing you need to know about being queen is this." He took my hand and pressed a kiss into my palm. "Never speak to me of court politics when you're naked in my bed. I can't concentrate on a word you're saying."

I laughed and playfully swatted his arm. He retaliated by kissing me breathless, and of the scant conversation that followed, none of it concerned politics at all. Later, much, much later, I lay exhausted and sated in Mazurian's arms and listened to him sleep -- and in his own body, he didn't snore.

I closed my eyes and smiled. Now I was certain I'd live happily ever after.

 THE END 

Amelia Elias

There's nothing better at the end of a long, rough day than flopping down on the couch (or the computer desk chair) and disappearing into a romance.

If the romance is so hot it triggers the fire alarms, so much the better.

Amelia was introduced to romance at the tender age of 12 during a visit to her grandmother, who always packed a paperback for her to read while she played bingo. When bingo was over, Amie would stay up late and, armed with a notebook and pencil, try to fill in the scenes that happened behind the bedroom door. And yes, she still has those first clumsy attempts at writing the good stuff.

Hopefully she's learned a thing or two since then...

Amelia Elias is the nom de plume of a Central Texas home health nurse and mother of ten -- six cats, two dogs, and two monkeys... er, sons. She writes for Loose Id and Aphrodite Unlaced Publishing. You can visit Amelia on the Web at www.ameliaelias.com.