



Legend of the Beesinger

Adrianna Dane

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“You have enchanted me, Beesinger.” His voice was filled with dark desire.

Her lashes fluttered, then her eyes widened. “No. You must not.”

“Before this journey is done, I vow you will be in my bed.”

“Please, let me go.” She struggled against him like a butterfly fluttering ineffectually, seeking escape. As fragile and beautiful as that creature, he knew how to handle such delicacy. He’d wooed many a butterfly in his boyhood days and he’d not forgotten how to hold them without damage.

“One kiss is all I ask. Only one. I won’t hurt you.”

“Why?” she gasped.

“I want to see if paradise tastes as sweet as I imagine it to be.”

“Your words flatter, but I am not so susceptible to such sweet words. I will not lay with you.”

He pulled her closer, felt the rapid beat of her heart, his gaze fastened on the intriguing pulse at her neck. He lowered his head. “Have you ever lain with a man, Ambrosia de la Courte? Has any man sipped your sweet nectar, impaled you with his desire?”

He saw the rosy blush of innocence spread along her neck and flood her cheeks. “No man has touched me in such a manner. No one would dare.”

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*Many thanks to my grandfather,
the first beekeeper, and poet, in my life*

CHAPTER 1

“They’re dying, Lord Gerrick. Nothing seems to be working. The fever is growing worse; ten more fell ill today. The whole village will be decimated and there will be no one left if we can’t find a cure.”

Gerrick stood gazing into the flames in the stone fireplace. The warlock had voiced a curse upon Blakely and all who resided there before he’d been put to death. A week passed before his father suddenly fell ill from the fever. From that point it began to spread rapidly.

As the fierce flames had leapt into the air engulfing the warlock, his voice boomed out through the smoke and acrid smell. “Cursed you will be, Blakely Lord, and all this land holds dear. My death will not save you from my wrath. Upon the rising of the next full moon, all shall succumb to the fever that even now rises within the land as you set fire to my pyre. First the Lord and last his only heir, until finally I shall be avenged.”

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Every word uttered by Tovak had branded itself into Gerrick's memory. He'd watched his father set the torch to the brush, the look on his face unforgiving and filled with hatred, as though carved from the granite face of the mountain settled to the far north. He'd never known what lay between Tovak and his father, only that his father had denounced him as warlock and sentenced him to death. Mutual loathing had exuded from every pore.

Embracing the mantle of leadership weighed heavily with Gerrick. He had not been prepared to step into his father's place so quickly and under such conditions. Gerrick paced the length of the great hall. There had to be a way to circumvent Tovak's curse. Coming to a decision, he turned back to the healer.

"Send for Samara. She may have the answers we seek."

The old healer looked at him, surprise and fear evident in his eyes. "Are you certain, my lord? It has been many years since the old hag has set foot inside the castle. Your father banished her when your mother died."

"I know how long it has been." He pinned the man with a hard look. "Can you provide any other answers then? A way to save our people you have overlooked?"

The old man sighed. "We have tried everything we know. Nothing touches the fever."

"Some other wisdom, then, you have failed to share with me?"

"No, my lord."

"Then fetch Samara. She is our last hope." He turned away from the healer, ending any further discussion.

He heard the echo of retreating footsteps behind him. Samara was a last, desperate attempt to save the people of his land. When he'd been a child, Gerrick recalled her as a servant in the castle who had advised his mother on a regular basis and his father on occasion.

She held the ability to see beyond the veils of time, was able to

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interpret the signs of the gods, as well as having the gift of healing.

But something had occurred while his mother was carrying Valonia, his sister. At the moment of her birth, his mother had died. Samara was banished from the castle, and Gerrick's infant sister was sent to be raised by the nuns. He had not laid eyes on his sister since the moment she'd been bundled up and taken away. Fifteen years had passed. His father forbid mention of his mother or his sister and refused to give his reasons. The mystery surrounding her death permeated the lives of everyone in the castle and the surrounding villages.

When Tovak arrived at the castle, it was as though a gangrenous wound had been sliced opened and poured forth a dark, venomous hatred touching everyone, seeping into the very walls of the castle. It hadn't dissipated with Tovak's death, but had escalated until it now cloaked the entire land, holding it prisoner in the shackles of this fever.

Gerrick always thought one day he would know the answers, but now his father lay delirious and near death, and he felt the truth would never be revealed. He was also determined to bring Valonia home. His father must see reason in this. She should be with her family, not locked away in some nunnery.

Now was not the time to ponder the reasonings of the past. First he must heal his people and find a way to destroy the curse.

He found himself wondering what Valonia would be like now? Would she look like his mother? Delicate and fragile. Or would she have strong features like their father? Like Gerrick.

Since his mother's death the castle had become a dark and dismal place—silent to laughter and light. Maybe if he brought Valonia home that would change. Once again there could be happiness within the walls.

But that couldn't happen until they found a way to circumvent this curse. What had brought the warlock to Blakely in the first place? He had disguised himself as a passing minstrel, but somehow his father

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had pierced the ruse and denounced Tovak for what he was. His father had immediately declared him a danger to his land and had him arrested. Without preamble Tovak had been executed.

Gerrick had thought Blakely was shadowed by sad memories before, but since the curse had been uttered, the despair of the land clung close and dank. His only hope was that Samara would have an answer.

He whirled about and strode from the empty great hall, out the door, and towards the stables. He couldn't wait around doing nothing. Mounting his horse, he rode to the village. Not that he would be able to offer much succor to the ill and dying. He had no answers for them.

There was an old barn near the edge of the village that was now filled with beds for the sick. Every inch of the barn was filled with people—young and old alike. The common denominator was the fever. An illness that held no tangible source, hitting first one person, then another, with no way to discover a cure.

Gerrick walked along the rows of beds, moans and pleas filling his ears.

"Sir?" a small, hot hand reached out to clasp his and he turned toward the tiny, weak voice.

He knelt next to the bed. "I am here."

Large brown eyes filled a face flushed with fever. "Will you help us, my lord?"

Gerrick felt totally inadequate to assuage the pain he saw in the young face. He patted the small hand and released his grip. "I promise you I will do my best."

The boy weakly fell back upon the bed and closed his eyes. "Thank you, my lord."

Such trust. If only it was deserved. He swept his gaze over the room. So many people looking to him to protect them. How did he begin? He could only hope the old hag would have the answer he

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needed.

* * *

The knock at his door yanked him from the nightmare hands reaching out to pull him downwards. He fought the blanket seeking to imprison him. Standing, he reached for the robe draped over a chair. “Come.”

A servant entered the bedroom. “Samara is here, my lord. She awaits below.”

“Offer her something to eat. I will be with her shortly.”

The servant nodded and left. Gerrick hurriedly donned black pants and a white linen shirt. He sat on the edge of the bed and pulled on the long black leather boots, then added a thick black leather belt.

Glancing out the window, he realized the sun had not yet risen and wondered at the hour. She must have traveled swiftly to have arrived before daybreak.

Striding into the dining room he found Samara seated at the long plank table. She presented a diminutive, fragile-looking creature. Long, coarse white hair straggled down her back, her thin shoulders hunched forward as she sipped at the soup set before her.

She looked up as he entered the room, her cat-like eyes trained on him for an instant before turning back to concentrate on the meal before her. Gerrick halted next to the table, studying the woman who had played a prominent role in his boyhood years.

Long bony fingers grasped the handle of the spoon. How had she sustained herself during the years of her exile?

Hands clasped behind his back, he attempted to contain his impatience. If he had learned one thing in his life, it was not to push an elder for answers before they were ready, no matter the urgency.

And Samara seemed in no hurry to turn her attention to him, nor did she appear the least bit curious as to why she’d been summoned. He turned to look out the long window and noted the sun was just now

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beginning to rise over the land. Another day to stand by and watch his people succumb to the fever.

“What do you want of me, boy?”

Gerrick whirled about to face her, surprised at the strong, demanding voice that belied her aged fragility.

Her eyes wore the faded demeanor of the sky on a rain swept, fog-shrouded morning, yet appeared alert and wary. She’d apparently lost none of her belligerent manner. Samara had never been one to mince words or beat around the bush.

“You arrived quickly.”

She nodded, leaned back in the chair, and tilted her head to meet his gaze. “I was told there was some urgency.”

“You haven’t changed Samara. Somehow after all these years I thought you might have...softened.”

“Why? Because you father banished me? He thought by sending me away and entombing Valonia in the convent it would all be forgotten. But it didn’t help, did it?”

“What are you talking about? What would all be forgotten?” Maybe whatever mysteries he’d thought locked away in the depths of his father’s soul could be revealed by this woman sitting before him.

A look of surprise passed over her face. “He never told you?” She cackled. “Why does that not surprise me? Is that why you’ve brought me here? To find answers to the past? You should have asked him. I’ll not talk about what’s dead and buried.”

“Valonia is not dead,” he reminded her quietly.

“No,” she admitted. “But she might as well be, stuck in that convent.”

“I plan to bring her here. First, I need your help on another matter.”

“And that would be?”

“My father executed a warlock named Tovak. Before he died, he cursed Blakely. The people are sick with a fever and it’s killing my

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father and our people. I have two weeks to find an answer. I need to discover a way to end the curse and cure them before everyone is dead at the next rising of the full moon.”

She stared at him silently for a long time, yet her expression told him nothing of her thoughts. Then her gaze slid from him to the window. “Tovak was here and met with your father?”

“Yes. Do you know him?”

“It was a long time ago. I find it hard to believe he returned here after all these years. He had to have known your father would kill him.”

“Then my father was well acquainted with him?”

She shrugged. “Aware of his existence. It was a long time ago. And you say he cursed everyone with fever?”

“He cursed my father, the people, and me. We will all die unless you can help me find a cure.”

She leaned back against the chair and closed her eyes. “It would have been easy if Tovak was still alive. He could have lifted the curse. But at least now I understand.” She reached a hand into the pocket of her skirt and drew out an old parchment scroll rolled and bound with a rawhide strip. She held it out to him.

“What is this?”

“Open it.”

He removed the rawhide strip and flattened the curling parchment on the table. It was an old map. The map’s focal point appeared to be an island and was neatly labeled “Isle of the Singer.” Gerrick studied the map closely and then looked up at Samara. “I don’t understand.”

“The Isle is where you will find the antidote you seek. The honey elixir can cure all manner of ills.”

“Why do we need to go to the island? Isn’t this something you can brew here?”

Samara shook her head. “It is a magical elixir that can only be created by the Beesinger.”

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“Beesinger. What is a Beesinger?”

“The Beesinger serves Oriana, Mistress of the Elixir, an immortal goddess. The Beesinger is the only one who can create and administer the honey elixir. Although human, she is bound to Oriana by ancient ties and imbued with certain abilities. But you will have to travel to the island to plead your case. It will not do to send another. Oriana would be offended by such a lapse of manners.”

“It’s impossible. I cannot abandon my people when they are in such dire need. Who would lead them if we were attacked? I can’t leave them without protection.”

Her ancient, wise eyes pinned him. “Your people are dying. There is no one to fight your battles. Even without that, I expect word has spread of the fever that has overtaken the land. It is doubtful anyone would be foolish enough to want to contract the fever. They won’t take the chance. Either you go or they all die, including you, and possibly your sister as well.”

He narrowed his gaze. “Valonia is not here. The curse should not touch her.”

She shrugged. “If you wish to take the chance. Here. There. A curse is not affected by boundaries of land. You would do well to remember that. The Beesinger is your only hope. If the elixir can counteract the fever in those who are ill and break the chain before the next moon rising, there is a chance the curse will be broken.”

He looked at the map laid out before him. “Is there no other way?” The question was voiced more for himself than directed to Samara.

“None that I know of.”

“It is a sad day when I must trust in a legend for the remedy.”

“You will need to believe very strongly that the elixir will work and that the Beesinger can heal.”

He turned his head to look at her. “You will stay in the castle until my return.” It was more command than request.

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She nodded. "I will stay. I will do what I can until you return. And my lord—"

He was in the midst of re-rolling the map, but halted, looking up at her. "There's something else?"

"Valonia must be summoned."

"I had planned to wait and speak with my father once the sickness lifted."

"No," her voice was firm. "She must be here when the healing takes place."

"Why?"

"It is as it must be. Nothing will be right until she is returned from her imprisonment."

"Valonia is not imprisoned. I'm sure my father sent her there for protection. Our mother was dead, she needed female guidance at such a tender age." He had often questioned his father's actions in sending her to the convent and never allowing her to return to Blakely in all these years. Gerrick had assumed it was painful for him to see Valonia, knowing her birth was the cause of his wife's death. But now he began to wonder if that was the real reason.

There would be time enough for answers later. "If you think she should be here, I will send word to the convent with an escort for her return—if I can find enough men who are untouched by the fever. You will guide her until my return?"

"I will keep her safe. I have seen. She is in no immediate danger. Bring back the Beesinger and the elixir and all will be made right."

CHAPTER 2

His desperate need surged through Ambrosia. It gnawed at her as the urgency always did, weighing her down with its responsibility. It was time to prepare the elixir. The ritual would weaken her, so it had to be completed now, before his arrival. Once he successfully entered the labyrinth, found his way to her, and made his plea to Oriana, he would want to leave quickly. She must be prepared. His test would be in navigating his way through the many winding passages to the meeting place where she always greeted the seekers. Would his quest be true enough to guide him safely?

She'd seen him in her vision. A tall man, solid and dark, with piercing black eyes. His name was not revealed to her, or the land where he dwelled. Nor did she know why he needed the elixir. She simply knew his need existed. And it was a great one.

Lying on the wooden table was the amber-handled dagger that had been thoroughly cleansed. She surveyed the octagonal chamber

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representing the core of her simple existence. It lay at the very heart of the labyrinth.

A narrow bed stood near the wall at one end, a table and chair at the other. In the far corner was the healing pool. In another nook of the chamber was a shelf containing the herb jars she would require, together with jars of the amber honey that had been processed.

Several clean empty bottles waited on the table in readiness to hold the potent liquid once the elixir had been prepared.

Ambrosia sensed from her vision the need was far more encompassing than had previously been required. It wasn't a single ill child; she felt the suffering of many.

Yes, everything was in readiness, and it was time to call for the bees. Taking deep breaths, she untied the belt of her long white gown and lay it on the bed. She removed the tunic, carefully folded it, and placed it there as well. She then applied the fragrant lotion used to entice their interest. Her preparations completed, she walked naked to the adjacent chamber.

The steady hum of workers filled the room. Her song would call them to her, their venom mingling with her blood would produce the needed ingredient to complete the elixir. They would give their lives to save those in need. How many times had she hovered at the edge of death to complete her task?

The hum lessened. She felt their knowledge. Walking to the center of the chamber, she lifted her arms, spread them perpendicular to her body, and inhaled deeply, cleansing her thoughts. Centering. Closing her eyes, she released the breath captured in her diaphragm, her song filling—echoing through the chamber. The clear, crystal chords were meant to lure them to her, to lull and soothe. The notes evoked visions of the most succulent flower, punctuated by the scent of the lotion combined to produce the essence of the sweet nectar they sought to survive.

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They covered her body and she continued to sing to them, until subtly the tenor changed to a discordant sound, meant to anger them. She felt the first stinging bite of their venom as she absorbed it into her body. The notes shuddered within her throat, pain overwhelming her, her mind hazed with the agony.

The song ended and she fell to her knees, gasping for breath as the venom took control. The bees left her as one, her skin littered with the remains of their anger. Through the pain she knew she must move quickly. It was as though a band encircled her chest. Wheezing and gasping, she rose and with halting steps made her way to her own chamber.

As she reached the table where the dagger lay, she grasped the table's sharp edge to steady herself. Lifting the dagger she sliced a thin line along her forearm and watched as the blood pooled around the gash. Quickly she lifted the first vial and filled it, then a second, and finally a third. She stoppered them and whirled toward the pool.

Staggering, she tried to move towards the life-restoring healing waters. Had she left it too late? Falling to her hands and knees, she lifted one hand, clawing at her throat as she tried to draw breath, knowing the deadly venom sought to consume her.

Dragging herself forward across the length of the chamber, she finally fell forward into the eucalyptus-scented liquid warmth. The tight band wrapped around her chest began to ease almost immediately.

She lay back against the smooth stone edge, allowing the waters to do their task, to heal what the ritual of the bees and their venom had wrought.

This was her lot, the obligation of her family. It was her duty to serve Oriana, Mistress and Queen of the island. To do otherwise would mean the agonizing death of Ambrosia's whole family—her father, her mother, and her younger sisters and brothers.

Hazily she gazed down at her arm, noting the wound she'd made

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with the dagger had already sealed completely. Lying back against the edge of the pool, she closed her eyes and a vision of the man came to her.

The only men on Oriana's Isle were the drones who served the Queen. Their only purpose—to pleasure Oriana. Ambrosia had never desired any of them. But this man who came to her in her visions touched her differently. She responded to him as a woman to a man. To dream of him hurt no one. And dreams were all she had, all she was allowed.

She lay in the water a long time, allowing the liquid to caress her. What would it feel like to have a man's hands stroking her body? Touching her breasts? Oriana was not known for subtlety and Ambrosia had witnessed her coupling with her drones on more than one occasion. And even though she hadn't wanted those men, watching them had made her wish for something beyond her lonely existence in the labyrinth. Would Oriana ever release her from these obligations?

It was a futile hope. Her family had served the goddess for generations. It was unlikely she would consider the debt paid in Ambrosia's lifetime.

Oriana was immortal, but Ambrosia was not. Although she was imbued with the essence and magic of the bees, she was still human, with a human's life span.

The pain was gone, no mark left behind and her lungs and throat were clear again. She pulled herself from the pool, but was unable to find the energy to rise. A moment, just one moment, and she would find the strength to stand and complete her task. She lay on the cool stone floor next to the pool and released a deep sigh. This was her life. She'd willingly taken the oath of the Beesinger as those in her line before her. When her life was ended, another would take her place, and so it would continue.

She attempted to stand, but was overcome with waves of dizziness.

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Staggering, she sank once again to the stone floor, her eyelids fluttering downward as darkness enveloped her.

* * *

Gerrick's ship laid anchor in a small inlet off the coast of the lush island. He surveyed the small mass of land. It had taken them two days to reach this destination. He still wasn't convinced this magic honey elixir would save his people, yet he had no choice but to follow any and every possibility.

He turned his head to study the young cabin boy standing next to him. It was his first voyage and his eyes were round with wonder as he watched the busy activity on the deck. Gerrick remembered how he'd held the same innocent awe at that tender age. That first voyage with his father seemed long ago, the excitement of being away from Blakely and experiencing new things. His father had been a different man back then—full of life and joy. His mother's death had changed him, and not as much lay in the balance of life and death.

It had been difficult to put together a crew of seaworthy men. So many of the people were ill with fever and he had no way of knowing who might fall ill on the voyage. But it was a chance he took. If the elixir was as Samara stated, it could be administered to his crew before it crippled their return. So far, it appeared no one suffered from the symptoms.

Once he found the Beesinger he would plead his cause. But whether she agreed or not, he would have the elixir. He had to have it and he prayed it would succeed.

"Take word to have the boat lowered," he directed the boy.

"Yes, my lord. Who will accompany you?"

Gerrick saw the gleam in his eye, the hope he would be allowed to travel with him to the island.

"I go alone."

"But my lord—" the boy stuttered.

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“Go,” his firm command halting further discussion. “See to it quickly. There’s no time to waste.” Gerrick turned away in silent dismissal and again gazed out toward the island.

What awaited him? As far as he could see there was no movement, no sign of life. He unrolled the map and studied it closely. The island was detailed. He pinpointed the position where they were now anchored and followed the direction to where the labyrinth was marked on the map with the word “Beesinger” clearly noted.

How did he find his way through the labyrinth? Although the location was marked, there was no key to the puzzle of its layout. He could be lost forever in the intricacy of its patterns.

He re-rolled the map. He would know more once he set foot on the island. For a short time longer he watched the crew. The boy talked with several of the men and then they turned to lower the small boat to the sparkling blue water.

They’d been lucky on this trip as there’d been no storms to delay their progress. Gerrick turned away and walked back to his cabin. Picking up a long deadly-looking knife, he slid it into the belt at his waist. Another small dagger he shoved into the sheath inside his tall boot.

He would follow Samara’s instructions and go to the island alone, but he would not do so unarmed.

The gods were not known for their trustworthiness, and Oriana was a goddess, therefore any contact with her merited caution. He must be on his guard and keep his mind sharp to duel with an immortal.

If it turned out the Beesinger presented any danger to his people, it would be countered by the threat of the sharp point of his blade.

Striding from the cabin, he mounted the steps and walked toward the ladder he would descend to the boat waiting below.

“Are you sure you should go alone, my lord?” the captain asked as he was about to step onto the ladder.

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He turned and stepped onto the rung prepared to descend. “I go alone, captain. See that all is in readiness upon my return. Our departure cannot be delayed.”

“I’ll see to it, my lord. Be watchful, we don’t know what might await you out there.”

Gerrick patted the knife in the sheath at his side. “Don’t worry. I do not go unprotected. Hold firm until I return.”

The captain nodded. “Aye, my lord. We will prepare for departure and be ready upon your orders.”

Closing in on the shore, he noticed the steady humming he’d been vaguely aware of from a distance was now much louder, filling the air with its deep vibrations.

As he leaped from the boat and drew it to the shore, the overpowering fragrance of the flowers clung. It was almost sickening in its heady aroma.

Settling the boat to make sure it didn’t drift back out to sea, he then unrolled the parchment map yet again. Looking up, he narrowed his gaze to closely survey the line of flowering shrubs and trees, seeking a break, the path leading to the entrance of the labyrinth.

There. To the right. He re-rolled the map, slid it into the pocket of his vest and walked across the fine white sand to the path. Was it the right path leading him to the labyrinth? He had no choice but to follow it.

It was a clearly defined footpath bordered by blossoms—a colorful kaleidoscope of red, white, yellow, and purple. All lush and vibrant with life. He was careful not to disturb them as the bees hovered all around, seeking pollen to harvest and return to their hive.

It felt as though they watched him as he passed, but none disturbed his progress. Their hum remained steady. It was an eerie feeling to know there were enough bees on the island, carrying more than enough venom to cause his death and most likely all aboard his ship. His blade

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would be no match for an angry swarm if it should decide he posed a danger.

The path abruptly ended and before him was what looked like the entrance to a cave. An eerie yellow glow welcomed him, beckoning him to enter. He moved to the entrance and stopped, trying to pierce its dense interior.

The walls were ivory in color and appeared to be made of some smooth, glossy material. Tentatively, he reached out and was surprised to feel a waxy texture to the structure. He peered closer and noted the walls were made up of small interlocking sealed cells like that of a honeycomb.

By the gods! Was the whole thing one giant honeycomb? He shuddered at the thought of what he would find inside. Taking several cautious steps, he noticed farther along the tunnel there were torches in iron brackets along the walls placed at even intervals. A step further and he discovered an array of intersecting tunnels also lined with torches. This then must be Oriana's Labyrinth. Somewhere within these tunnels was the Beesinger—and the elixir. But how did he begin to know which passage to follow?

There must be something to help him find the correct route. The only sound that greeted him was the steady hum of bees. He thought it encompassed a sound that could drive a man insane if exposed long enough.

Suddenly the pattern changed and there was another sound. A crystal, pure voice raised in song. It must be the Beesinger. He'd never heard such a beautiful voice. It vibrated inside him, called him, and he knew instinctively which tunnel to follow.

Onwards he went as though pulled and directed to the source of that voice. He was possessed by the need to find her, to touch her, to know her. There was a pain in his chest, a pull, forcing him forward with an urgent need to reach the source. And then it stopped, as though a light

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had been doused, plunging him into darkness.

“No,” he shouted as he quickened his steps. He must find her. He was halted by another series of entrances.

“Which way?” he demanded of the walls. Silence met his call. Even the bees were quiet. He circled again and again, trying to decide which passage would lead him to her.

He stopped and cocked his head. Something about the aroma of the air was different. The sickening scent of the flowers was overshadowed by the healing fragrance of eucalyptus—and it only came from one tunnel. He followed the scent. It grew stronger and seemed to sweep through him. It mingled with another scent—a hint of deep, rich sweetness that made him salivate as a desire such as he’d never known swelled through him.

Was this place somehow bewitching him? It would not be unheard of in dealing with immortals. It was known they would try to outsmart a mortal in order not to fulfill a request. They could be jealous creatures, unwilling to share their gifts.

Would Oriana attempt to sway him from his purpose? Gerrick’s mind grew hazy entombed in the stillness that now surrounded him.

It felt like the path he followed was endless. Had he circled back to the entrance without knowing it? All sense of direction was lost to him long ago. He hadn’t thought to bring the compass from the ship, instead depending on the sun and the sky to act as his guide.

But here within the depths of these resin-like walls there was no hint of his position or direction. There was only the aroma that he could not deny. On and on he continued. To turn back was to admit defeat, and that he would not do.

It seemed hours, if not days, later, he came to a large octagonal chamber. He paused at the entrance and scanned the room.

In shock he saw the figure of a woman sprawled on the stone floor near a pool. He strode across the length and knelt beside her.

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She lay on her stomach, arms outstretched, her long, golden, shimmering hair splayed around her. He touched the damp locks and brushed them away from the side of her face. Eyes closed, her sunlight-colored lashes fanned against her flawless pale complexion. Was she asleep or unconscious?

As gently as possible he clasped her shoulders and rolled her onto her back. It was only then he realized the thick mass of her hair was the only covering she wore. Now revealed to him was the most perfect female he'd ever seen.

He lay a hand against her supple skin over her heart and felt its strong beat. His gaze slid over her delightful form seeking a reason for her unconscious state, but he found no marks to indicate she'd been wounded or had fallen and hit her head.

Unable to help himself, he smoothed a hand along the curve of her cheek. Soft as the petals of a newborn flower, pale and flawless as a lily. He trailed his knuckles along the delicate line of her neck to the roundness of a breast, the dusky aureole reminiscent of a succulent, ripe berry.

He cupped a hand beneath the warm curve and unable to resist, lowered his head. One taste. He suckled gently, drawing the bud deeper. Closing his eyes, he savored the heady flavor she exuded.

Her essence sank deep inside, the need to know more of her overwhelmed him. Had any mead ever tasted as divine? As he laved her hardened bead, greedy for more of her, she moaned softly. Reluctantly, he drew back. Her lush pink lips parted and, as he watched, her tongue darted out to circle them. Her eyelids fluttered and he knew she was about to awaken.

CHAPTER 3

Ambrosia again dreamed of the man. She could actually feel his hands, warm and callused against her skin. She felt his mouth at her breast and her skin tightened with pleasure. Warmth spiraled in the pit of her stomach arrowing downward.

She should not be experiencing this intensity from a mere dream. Her sleeping state began to dissolve as she became aware of another presence near her. Opening her eyes, she attempted to focus, and her gaze encountered the dark, piercing intensity of a stranger—the very image of the man in her dreams.

Like a rush of ice wind splashed over her, she came fully alert. The first thing she realized was that she was naked and laying in the arms of the stranger.

Gasping, she quickly rolled away, and struggled to her feet.

“How did you get here?” She hurried to the bed where her robe lay and quickly donned the gown and belted the sash. She spun back to

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him. There was an odd energy emanating from inside her, a strange, needy awareness, and she surveyed her body now discreetly covered. Her breasts felt sensitive and tingled—in response to her dream? Or something the stranger had done while she lay unconscious? Embarrassment flooded her knowing the sharp definition of her aroused nipples against the bodice of the robe was clearly visible.

She watched the man slowly rise from the ground. He turned and faced her across the room. Where his molten silver eyes had held heated desire before, his expression now was studied and remote. Still, she recognized him from her visions. She knew why he was here. But how had he managed to find his way to the very core of the labyrinth without her assistance?

“I am Gerrick of Blakely and I have come for the elixir. My people are in need. You are the Beesinger?”

“Yes. How did you find your way to this chamber? No one has ever navigated the labyrinth to its center without assistance.”

“I followed your voice. You were singing. That was you, was it not?”

It had never happened before. It was usually only the bees attuned to the pitch of her voice; mortals were never affected. Why would it have called to him and led him directly to her in this instance?

She walked to the table and picked up the vials of blood. She didn’t know how long she’d been asleep, but it was imperative to mix the elixir quickly before the potency of the venom-laced blood was lost. Left to cool too long, the venom would separate from the blood and it would be worthless.

“Well, Gerrick of Blakely, it has never happened before.”

As she started to walk past him, he reached out and clasped her arm. “You have the elixir.” She didn’t dare look at him, his presence seemed to have an unsettling effect on her and she needed to remain focused on her task.

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“I must prepare it.”

“My people cannot wait.”

“It is not something one stores like a shopkeeper, my lord. To maintain its potency, it must be as fresh as possible.” She looked up at him. “Release me so I may prepare what will be needed.” She glanced pointedly at his hand still restraining her.

He removed his hand and she walked to the cupboard containing the rest of the herbs and honey she would require.

“How long will it take?” he asked.

“As long as necessary.” She reached up and pulled down several of the jars, then pulled out a pestle and bowl to finely crush the dried herbs. Finally, she pulled a jar containing a honeycomb and honey and drizzled some of the dark liquid into the bowl, added several drops of the blood, and mixed. She worked quickly, could feel the tension of the man waiting on the other side of the chamber.

She glanced over her shoulder, then turned back to concentrate on her task. “Sit, my lord. Would you like something to eat? There is honey bread on the shelf next to the table.” Then she turned back to focus on carefully combining the necessary portions.

“I’m not hungry,” he said. “But thank you for the offer. You knew I would be coming here?”

“Yes. I saw your people with a great need. Once the elixir is ready, I will take you to Oriana so you may formally request her intervention for your people.”

“She doesn’t reside here? In the labyrinth?”

Ambrosia laughed. “Gods, no. This,” she waved her hand in the air, “is the sanctuary of the bees and home to the Beesinger—caretaker of the bees.”

“You are the Beesinger,” he again affirmed.

“For now, yes.”

“You are mortal? You seem very young to be sequestered away like

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this. How is it you come to be here?”

“Yes, I am mortal. It is a long story. Suffice it to say I perform a family obligation.”

“Do you have a name, Beesinger?”

“My name is Ambrosia—Ambrosia de la Courte. Tell me of your urgency. Why do you need the elixir?”

“A warlock placed a curse on my people. A wise woman from my land told me of you and the elixir. It may be their only hope.”

The chamber fell quiet as she concentrated on her task of mixing the proper amounts of each ingredient. She felt the heat of his gaze upon her, following what he could see of her movements, but he did not disturb her.

Finally, cleaning the work table and returning the herb jars to their proper location, she turned to him, several large bottles containing thick dark liquid in her hands. “It is ready. We must now seek Oriana.”

He accompanied her from the chamber. “What if she refuses?”

“She won’t. You would not have been led to the labyrinth if she meant to refuse you. You would never have found the island for that matter. She likes her games though. It is only those who seek to steal from her she punishes.” She turned her head to look at him. “Do you wish to steal from her? I sense your purpose is honest. Am I misled?”

“No. My people are dying. The warlock who invoked the curse is dead. So there has to be another way to break it.”

“Very well, then let us find Oriana. I cannot leave the island without her permission.”

“Why can’t you simply give me the elixir? Why do you need to leave the island at all?”

“Because the elixir can only be administered by the Beesinger. For any other to do so would mean certain death. The elixir can offer life, but it can also bring painful death.”

* * *

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Gerrick followed Ambrosia, marveling at how she navigated the mysterious intricate passages with ease. It had been a long time since he'd had a woman beneath him and his body was more than aware of this honeyed creature.

He'd held her, tasted her for brief moments only, but it had been long enough to know he wanted her in his bed. His cock thickened at the image of having her naked and spread beneath him.

Watching her walk along the passage, her slender hips swaying sensually had him ready to take her here and now. He wanted to rip aside the robe covering her and feel her tender lips wrapped around him as he slowly pierced her with his rod. Ah, gods, he would lift her and she'd wrap her long golden limbs around him and pull him deep.

First he'd suckle one beautiful nipple to attention and then the other as he stroked inside her. She would coat him with her own brand of honey and he would slide easily within her depths, teasing at her bud. She'd burn for him before he'd allow her to come. Oh, yes, he would have her before this journey was completed or go mad for want of her.

Suddenly she turned and looked at him. "Is something wrong?"

Gods, yes. I have an erection hard enough to break stone. But he didn't say it. "Nothing." Maybe he'd made some small sound. His mind had been so entrenched in his fantasy of having her wrapped around his body he hadn't noticed.

She stared at him for a moment longer, then turned back and continued along the passage until they arrived at the entrance. She walked out into the sunlight and he was almost blinded as the rays of the sun caught in her hair. It shimmered in so many shades of gold and amber it carried a life of its own. Unable to stop himself, he reached out to touch what appeared to be liquid fire.

Again, she whirled around, but was halted as his fingers tangled in her hair. "What are you doing?" she gasped, trying to disengage from his grasp.

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He saw the doe-like fear in her autumn eyes as he wound his hand more tightly within the silken locks, drawing her closer. When her lips were within a breath of his, he gripped the back of her head, his hungry gaze roaming over the perfection of her features.

"You have enchanted me, Beesinger." His voice was filled with dark desire.

Her lashes fluttered, then her eyes widened. "No. You must not."

"Before this journey is done, I vow you will be in my bed."

"Please, let me go." She struggled against him like a butterfly fluttering ineffectually, seeking escape. As fragile and beautiful as that creature, he knew how to handle such delicacy. He'd wooed many a butterfly in his boyhood days and he'd not forgotten how to hold them without damage.

"One kiss is all I ask. Only one. I won't hurt you."

"Why?" she gasped.

"I want to see if paradise tastes as sweet as I imagine it to be."

"Your words flatter, but I am not so susceptible to such sweet words. I will not lay with you."

He pulled her closer, felt the rapid beat of her heart, his gaze fastened on the intriguing pulse at her neck. He lowered his head. "Have you ever lain with a man, Ambrosia de la Courte? Has any man sipped your sweet nectar, impaled you with his desire?"

He saw the rosy blush of innocence spread along her neck and flood her cheeks. "No man has touched me in such a manner. No one would dare."

"I dare, Beesinger. You will be mine."

He swallowed her gasp of denial as he claimed her lush lips, and by the gods her taste was truly ambrosia. He nipped with his teeth, caressed with his tongue, until finally she opened to him and he sank his tongue deeply into her warm, wet chasm. He plundered and demanded from her, his tongue tangled with hers until he felt her

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surrender, her hands clutched the cloth of his shirt, as she sought to draw him closer.

The sound now coming from her throat was not denial, but a purr of desire. He lifted his head to look at her. Arousal was evident on her face, her lips wet and rosy, engorged from his perusal. Her eyes dilated with passion. Slowly, he released her.

She stepped quickly away from him and brought a hand to her well-kissed lips. "You shouldn't have done that. I will help you with your people, but I will not lay with you. I am no whore, Gerrick of Blakely."

"I want no whore." But what did he want? She was right—she wasn't a woman to be bedded and forgotten. What had he been thinking? He needed the elixir for his people. Obviously, he had let his cock lead him, almost forgetting his reason for being here. The tension left his body. "My apologies, Beesinger." She was right, she was merely an instrument by which his people could be healed and he would have jeopardized that by his lack of self-control.

She stared at him for long moments, nodded, and turned away. He would fight this attraction he felt; it was unreasonable, unacceptable. There were plenty of other women to assuage his needs. He required her strictly to save his homeland. But before she'd turned away, he was certain he'd seen a hint of something in her eyes. Sadness? Regret? He couldn't be certain.

He followed her in silence until she stopped at a large clearing, and he looked around. "Where are we? There's nothing here."

"Oriana. It is I, Ambrosia, your Beesinger. I'm here to seek permission to leave the island. There are people in need."

Gerrick wondered what she waited for. There was obviously nothing there. The minutes ticked by. He blinked, then blinked again, as something shimmered. His eyes widened as before them appeared a large white marble structure with tall columns. It solidified and Ambrosia walked toward the bottom of the steps and stopped.

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A tall woman with thick, dark hair, dressed in a long, flowing red dress girdled in gold stepped from the recesses of the building followed by three men, all solidly muscled. The only items they wore were gold collars about their necks, and thick gold bands about their wrists and ankles.

Ambrosia knelt and bowed her head. “Queen Oriana.”

Oriana sauntered to the steps, stopped, and turned to the three men following her. “Wait here,” she commanded, then turned back to Ambrosia and descended.

Gerrick stayed at the edge of the clearing, uncertain what was expected of him.

Oriana reached the spot where Ambrosia knelt and place a finger beneath her chin. She tilted her head towards her and studied her face. Then she pinned her gaze on Gerrick.

“I see our young lord would sample what belongs to me.” She turned back to look at Ambrosia. “Rise, Beesinger.” Then in a louder voice. “Gerrick of Blakely, come forward, you have a request, I believe.”

Gerrick strode to her across the clearing and knelt on one knee before her. “My people are dying, I seek your permission to have the Beesinger accompany me to administer the elixir to save them.”

“I know of your plight and you have my permission. Rise, my young lord.”

He breathed a sigh of relief knowing he’d at least have a chance to reverse the curse. “Thank you, Queen Oriana.”

She circled him, an elegant finger to her chin as she studied him. “I believe there’s something else you want as well.”

“Something else?”

A smile lingered at her ruby red lips. “I smell your lust, young lord. You hunger to possess my Beesinger with that fierce weapon that hangs heavy between your thighs.” She moved closer to him. “You’ve already

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stolen a kiss. Is that what you plan to do? Try to steal from me?" She pinned him beneath a hard, glittering look.

"No, Queen Oriana, I only seek help for my people. It was a mistake for me to steal the kiss. I apologized to the lady for the lapse."

"Ah, I see."

Again, she circled him, studying him intently. Had he ruined everything by claiming that kiss?

She halted before him. "You will return my Beesinger to me once your people are healed."

"Yes, my lady."

"But, I give you a present until such time as she is returned. She is yours, treat her kindly and pleasure her well."

Gerrick heard a gasp from Ambrosia. His gaze shifted and he saw her eyes widen in shock.

"My queen! You can't mean it," she gasped.

"Teach her well, my young lord. I do not grant such a gift to everyone." She turned to Ambrosia. "He is strong and maybe his seed will provide you with the next Beesinger, Ambrosia. Did you think I would forget your family's obligation to me? You could save the rest of your family from service for another generation."

"No, no, my queen," she whispered.

Oriana turned and ascended the steps. "Return her soon, my young lord. Try to steal what is mine and payment will be exacted. Ask Ambrosia what the penalty is for stealing from me."

She stopped before the three men and pointed to the one on the end. "You. Come with me. Today, you fulfill your destiny, drone. Let's see how you measure up, shall we?" As she turned to walk inside the elegant structure, she released the golden girdle and the red dress fluttered away on a breeze. The building shimmered and disappeared as though it had never been.

CHAPTER 4

Ambrosia paced the deck of the ship. How could Oriana do that? She made her feel like nothing more than a piece of chattel. Standing near the gangway leading below decks, she watched Gerrick as he conferred with the captain some distance away.

He faced away from her and she studied his broad, muscular shoulders. His dark hair glinted with chestnut highlights beneath the sun. It wasn't that she found him repulsive. On the contrary, she found him more than desirable.

She raised a hand to her lips, remembering the all but consuming kiss he had branded her with. Again the heat of desire surged through her. No man had ever touched her, let alone kissed her. She'd often dreamed of what it would be like to be with a man. Someone who loved her. But she'd known her obligation; her fate drove her in another direction, away from family, away from the chance at happiness with a husband. Her path was a solitary one.

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Dedicating her life to Oriana was never a choice, it was a necessity. To not submit would have meant death for her whole family. It was a long-standing debt, passed through many generations. Would it ever be paid in full? Not soon enough for her to find happiness.

But Oriana asked too much. To offer her to this man, to expect her to bear a child who would one day carry the burden of the Beesinger. No, she couldn't do it, not even to save another of her family from the same fate.

To give herself to anyone without love was impossible. To create a child through lust alone was an abomination. She dreamed of love, not simply desire. And no matter how much she desired Gerrick of Blakely, she would not give herself to him willingly.

Turning away, she headed for the steps leading below. She looked upward at the sky, noticing the sun was beginning to set on the horizon. Her stomach fluttered, knowing he would come for her soon.

When she'd first stepped on board, he'd led her to this cabin and informed her she would sleep there. Before she'd been able to question him, he'd stalked out and up the companionway. As she looked around, noting the masculine tone of the room, she knew it was his cabin and that he expected her to share it with him. That she would not do. But for now she had no place else to go.

The door opened and a young boy stepped inside carefully balancing a tray piled with plates of food, two tumblers, and a jug.

"Let me help you," she said as she hurried to relieve him of his burden.

"I can manage," he quickly assured her as he lowered the tray to the table with a thump. "See? It was not a problem, my lady."

"Call me Ambrosia. I am no fine lady to be addressed so formally."

He shook his head. "Oh, I couldn't do that. You are my lord's lady, it wouldn't be right."

Ambrosia drew herself up to her full height. "I am not his lady. I am

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here to help administer to his people, that's all."

The boy ducked his head. "I didn't mean to offend, my lady. Forgive me."

"What have you done to offend?" a deep voice inquired from the doorway.

Both Ambrosia and the boy turned in surprise. Gerrick filled the doorway, his eyes dark, his expression foreboding. She saw the frightened look in the boy's eyes and hurried to intercede. "It was nothing, my lord. A slight misunderstanding."

"What was the nature of the misunderstanding?" He turned his fierce, slate-dark gaze on the boy. "Speak up."

Ambrosia would have again spoken, but Gerrick raised a hand to halt her, his gaze holding that of the quaking boy.

"She asked that I call her Ambrosia, my lord," he whispered halting. "I-I didn't think it was proper. I mistakenly thought she was your lady."

Gerrick laid a hand on the boy's shoulder and his expression softened. "You have done no harm." His gaze shot to Ambrosia, pinning her beneath his heated stare. "She is indeed my lady and should be addressed so. She is under my protection for the length of her stay with us." His expression dared her to deny his assertion.

She whirled away from him, afraid of what she would say, of what he meant to do.

"You may leave us," she heard him say behind her. Light footsteps scurried across the floor and the door shut, leaving her alone with Gerrick.

She felt his eyes burning her, watching her. "I won't sleep in this cabin. With you."

She heard the scuff of a chair as it was moved away from the table. "Come and eat. You must be hungry."

She spun to face him. "Did you hear what I said? I won't—I won't

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lay with you,” she finally dragged out and lifted her chin. “I don’t care what Oriana said.” Then waited for his reaction.

“I didn’t ask to fuck you, I asked you to sit and eat.”

She felt her cheeks burn at his words, but refused to rise to the bait. Warily she made her way to the table and sat in the other chair. She could not glean anything from his expression. He placed one of the bowls before her and then filled her tumbler with wine.

She sat with her hands in her lap, staring at him. How was she expected to eat? Her stomach churned with fear at the thought of what would happen once they’d finished.

He pointed to her food. “Eat.”

She picked up the eating utensil. There was a bowl of soup and some thick, crusty bread. She assumed it was some form of fish stew. She dipped her spoon and tasted it. It was actually quite good. Before she knew it, she’d finished the soup and the bread, then leaned back in her chair and waited anxiously.

“What do you think I’m going to do to you, Ambrosia?” Gerrick inquired as he took a sip of the wine from his cup.

She couldn’t meet his gaze. “I don’t know. Oriana should not have said what she did.” She felt angry heat spread into her face. “She had no right.”

He leaned toward her, close enough she could smell the sweet wine on his breath. “Do you think just because she offered you to me, that I will take from you what you are unwilling to give?”

Reaching out, he stroked a finger along the curve of her cheek and then cupped her neck. Her breath caught in her chest. He leaned closer. “When I take you, it will be because we both want it. It will be slow and you will burn for me the same as I do for you.”

She jumped up from her chair and raced across the room, needing space. “That will never happen,” she cried. “I won’t give myself to you. I can’t. I am not a thing, a possession to be offered in this way.”

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He didn't follow her, didn't try to corner her in the small room. Instead, he leaned back in his chair, watching her. "How did you come to be the Beesinger? Oriana said something about an obligation of your family? Talk to me Ambrosia. Just talk, nothing more."

Did she dare trust him? She wanted to, gods she wanted to. Living on the island was a lonely life with only the bees as company. Oriana rarely made an appearance unless she wanted something. Her drones kept her more than occupied.

"Ambrosia?"

She looked at him. "You want to talk." She couldn't quite believe he meant it.

"Yes. Tell me about your life. It must be very lonely on the island."

"I am alone. But I keep busy with the care of the bees."

"When was the last time you left the island?"

"I arrived on the island when I was thirteen. This is the first time I have left, other than to visit my family once a year."

"But what about administering the elixir? How have you healed people, if you haven't left the island?"

She shrugged. "Usually, it is for one or two people only and they come to me. There has been no necessity for me to leave."

"How many have been men, Ambrosia? How many of the men who've come for your help have you lain with. Besides me, of course."

How dare he! "I've been with no man. Ever. Is that what you think of me?" She blinked rapidly, holding back the tears of hurt and anger as she turned away. Did he really believe she was like Oriana?

She heard him rise from his chair and she held her breath. Waiting. Feeling his fierce heat at her back, he gripped her shoulders, and turned her to face him. With the tip of his index finger to her chin he forced her to look at him. "No one has ever touched you? No one you've wanted to be with?"

"No. No one," she whispered. *Not until now.* She suppressed that

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thought. To be with him and know they had no future was not something she was willing to chance. Being alone on the island was far easier if one did not yearn for a lost love. Did not hurt for more. The agony that would cause was beyond bearing.

He removed his hand and guided her back to the table. “Who are the men with Oriana? Have you never spent time with them? Wanted them?”

Ambrosia shook her head. “No. They belong to Oriana. They are her drones.”

“Her what?”

She didn’t think he would understand. “Her drones. They exist to please her, to serve her.”

“In what way?”

“I—they,” she stopped and licked her lips nervously. How did she explain? “They mate with her.”

“They fuck her? That’s their purpose?”

She felt the heat suffuse her cheeks. “Ah—yes.”

“Must be a difficult life for them.”

“A drone mates and then he dies. Like the bees. His purpose is to please the Queen and he will receive ultimate pleasure. Unlike the bees, Oriana’s drones are sterile, so they will not breed her, but they will die nonetheless when she is finished with them.”

“Well, I wouldn’t want to be in their place.” He leaned closer to her. “How do bees mate, Ambrosia?” He stroked a finger along her arm and she trembled at his touch.

“Why?” she whispered.

“Tell me. Explain how your charges mate.”

“Please—”

He leaned closer to her. “How are they different than what Oriana does with her drones?”

She felt his hot breath against her skin, knowing she should move

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away from him, but unable to bring herself to do it. “Oriana is queen of all queens. She rules all on the island, and although she is immortal, she mates as a human and her drones are human. The phallus of the males is not ripped from their bodies as happens with the bees.”

She saw him wince at her words.

“You would find that painful, I believe.”

“Damned right. I’m not convinced the pleasure of one fuck is worth dying for or being emasculated, even for an immortal.”

She shrugged. “For the bees, it is the way of nature. Drones are created to service the queen. If they cannot mate with her, they are banished and will die. If they do mate with her, they die. At least with the latter they have served the purpose for which they live.”

“And what of you, Ambrosia? What do you live for?”

A sad resignation overtook her. “I live to do my duty for my family. I serve as Beesinger, caretaker of the bees, no more, no less.”

“But what about your pleasure? Don’t you deserve to find some happiness?”

“I am content to know the rest of my family lives well because I fulfill their obligation.”

“Don’t you want to love? To be loved?” He reached for her hand and brought it to the hard heat of his groin. “Do you feel that?”

His desire to mate with her was obvious. He held her hand firmly in place. “It grows hard for you. I desire you. It will not lessen until I take you. Do you have any idea what pleasure you will know when I do?”

“Please let me go,” she whispered, desperately struggling against him. Hunger to experience what he offered, surged inside her.

“I’ll touch you first, make sure you’re ready to take me. I’ll taste you, stroke you until you purr, like you did when I kissed you, except it will be more. Better.”

Still holding her hand steady and firm, he leaned closer, nuzzled her neck with his lips, suckled at her pulse. She whimpered as the heat of

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his desire seeped through her.

“Your own sweet honey will bathe my cock when I finally enter you. Your pleasure will ease my way. I’ll enter you slowly as you become accustomed to me filling you. You’ll feel so good as I press deeper and deeper. You’ll wrap your legs around me and I’ll take you to heights you’ve never known, beyond where the gods live. We’ll go together, rise above them all.”

She couldn’t breath, couldn’t move. He made her want him so badly. Her fingers instinctively tightened on the cloth covering his hard shaft. She heard him groan, just before she tore herself from the chair and fled from him and her own thoughts.

“No more,” she begged him. “You don’t know what you’re asking of me. I can’t do this.” She took a deep, rasping breath. “Let me go, please let me go.” Her desire to give in to him was so desperate it felt like her whole body would ignite at a touch.

The only sound in the room was their ragged breathing as they faced each other, a soundless duel of need. Finally, he stood and walked to her and she looked up at him, pleading silently for his understanding.

He picked her up and carried her to the bed. He stood there looking down at her. “Sleep, Ambrosia. You have nothing to fear from me. It is not my intent to cause you pain. But the time will come when you are ready to accept the pleasure I offer. And you will come to me.”

She watched him turn away from her and stride from the room. In her heart she knew he was right. He could have broken her self-control tonight and she wondered why he hadn’t done so. She’d been so close and yet he had walked away.

She turned over on her side and tried to calm the raging fire inside. Why hadn’t he taken advantage of her weakness?

CHAPTER 5

He wanted her, most assuredly there was no doubt about it. His body ached with his desire. But he'd maintained distance, deciding that pushing her would not gain him what he truly sought. Her total trust, her complete possession. So instead they talked and he tried to put her at ease, to trust him, while his body raged.

Why couldn't he simply ignore these feelings? Even if she came to him it would only be for a brief span of time. Only until the elixir worked its magic. She could never truly belong to him.

He'd watched her as she'd walked the deck, his young steward accompanying her. Gerrick had remained close in case any of the crew should step out of line.

He should have assigned another because watching her only magnified his discomfort. These were definitely a couple of the longest days of his life.

Her hair shimmered beneath the late afternoon sun. The serene, yet

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self-possessed demeanor in which she handled the attentions of even the most recalcitrant and surly of his men impressed him.

Always in her manner there seemed some part of her that remained distant. Even with people close by she appeared a solitary figure. He wished he had the right to change that.

What sin had her family committed that chained her to Oriana? How isolated she must be with no one for companionship other than the self-centered goddess.

When they finally dropped anchor at port, he escorted Ambrosia from the ship to the stable where the horses awaited. They still had several days' journey before arriving at Blakely. The time of the full moon was fast approaching.

At his direction, the horses were saddled and ready in moments. He turned to assist Ambrosia to mount. It caught him by surprise when she stepped away and stared first at the horse, then at him. Finally, the reason occurred to him.

"Ambrosia, have you ever ridden a horse?"

She shook her head.

"Are you afraid of them?"

She licked her lips. "I haven't been near one in a very long time. We don't have need for them on the island. They still seem very big."

Silently he transferred her satchels to his own horse and motioned for the stable boy. "Unsaddle this one, he won't be needed." He would arrange for the horse to be retrieved later. Then he turned back and walked to Ambrosia.

"Why did you do that?"

"If you've never handled a horse before, it will slow us down. You'll ride with me. It will be quicker." He encircled her waist with his hands.

So small. He had the urge to explore further, but instead he lifted her onto the horse.

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She gasped and grabbed for his hands to steady herself. Her fingers whispered over his, her touch warm and soft. So close, her smell enveloped him and he had a moment's headiness. Holding her steady, he waited a brief instant allowing his mount to adjusted to her weight. Unable to stop himself, he lifted one of her hands to his lips, turned it over and kissed the heart of her palm. A tremor passed through her before she pulled it away and grasped the curve of the pommel in front of her.

He looked up and met her warm honey gaze. "You'll be fine. There's no reason to fear."

He watched her lift her small chin in a determined fashion. "I'm not afraid." But he saw her quick glance at the horse as it turned its head to eye Gerrick. Placing his foot in the stirrup, he mounted behind her.

As she sat nestled between his wide-spread legs, his cock immediately springing to attention, something told him this wasn't going to be an easy trip. His promise to himself to leave her be was going to be very difficult to keep. He inhaled and could smell the clean fragrance of her hair. He raised a gloved hand to thread his fingers through its sparkling masses, but stopped, knowing if he touched her, it wouldn't end with a simple caress.

She was temptation at a distance, this was far worse. He studied the curve of her cheek. Smooth. Creamy. Perfect.

Carefully he moved his hands around her to take up the reins. Her posture remained stiff and ramrod straight as she tried to maintain a distance between them. He kneed the horse and it began to meander out of the stable yard.

"That won't work, you know."

She didn't turn to look at him. "What do you mean?" He could see her white-knuckled grasp of the pommel.

"If you stay that stiff, you're going to ache badly by the time we stop for the evening."

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Her grip tightened. “What do you expect me to do?”

“Lean back and relax. I’m not going to hurt you. Do you trust me?”

She hesitated for a moment and then nodded. “To a degree.”

He grinned. It was a start. “All right then. Lean back and don’t tense up. Just move with the motion of the horse.”

He nudged the horse with his heels and they broke into a slow canter.

“Ohhhh,” she gasped and grabbed at his arm.

“It’s all right,” he tried to soothe her. “I won’t let you fall.”

Eventually he felt her relax as they gained a rhythm and the countryside flew by. It was a more moderate pace than he usually kept, but he wanted Ambrosia to become used to balancing with the slower gait before he moved into a full-blown gallop.

“My family didn’t own a horse. We lived in the village. When my father needed to travel outside the town, he rented a wagon and horse.”

The gait rocked her against him and he wanted to tip her head up for a kiss, to feel her lips beneath his and to hear the little purr she made, like on the island. He wanted to feel her hands against his skin. With each mile they covered, his need to bed her grew sharper—and more obvious.

“You have nothing to be ashamed of. Not everyone knows how to ride. Not everyone needs to ride. When was the last time you saw your family?”

“It’s been almost a year. I will visit them soon.”

“You said you visit them once a year?”

“Yes, Oriana allows only the one. I spend two weeks with them.”

“You must get very homesick. Are they a long way from the island?”

“Yes. Oriana arranges for a ship to take me there and back.” She turned her head away to look around her. “This is very similar to the countryside where I grew up.”

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He felt her hand curl into the cloth of his shirt and his ache surged once again.

“Ambrosia, don’t you ever yearn for your family? For a husband?”

She was silent for a long time. “It does no good to wish for something I can’t have.”

“How long do you need to stay on the island?”

“Until I die,” she answered him quietly.

“There’s no way to fulfill your obligation before that?” He couldn’t imagine her alone forever. “Is there no one else to take your place?”

“It’s the way it has to be. If I were to leave the island without Oriana’s permission, my family would be killed, just the same as if I don’t return when I am finished here.”

“It seems a harsh payment for whatever took place. How did you become the Beesinger?”

“It was a long time ago. I’m not even sure anyone still remembers exactly what happened. One of my relatives stole a honeycomb from a hive protected by Oriana. His daughter had become ill and he’d heard of the elixir made from the honey. Oriana would have destroyed them all, but they struck a bargain. Legend has it that she healed the daughter and she became the first Beesinger. Beyond that, the eldest daughter must serve as Beesinger and protector of Oriana’s bees until her death. The next eldest daughter in line will then be called to serve forevermore. Anyone who attempts to thwart her demand for justice will cause the death of the whole de la Courte line.”

“Has anyone ever attempted to cross her?” It seemed a harsh payment for stealing one small honeycomb.

“No, never. Would you want to be the cause of your whole family being wiped out? One life seems a small price to pay for the safety of my family.”

Knowing her reasons, it did not set well to try to tempt her away from her course as much as he wanted to, yet still—

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“She offered you to me for your time here. I know you aren’t totally unmoved. Why fight it? I know I could make you happy, if you give me the chance.” He pulled her closer and felt her stiffen.

“Please, don’t tempt me.”

“Why? I know you are not immune.”

“I won’t take the chance. I know you can’t understand it, but you are a man it would be easy to fall in love with. And to love you and then be required to return to my empty years as Beesinger knowing what could have been.... I don’t want to live with that kind of pain for eternity. Maybe I’m just a coward.”

“I don’t think you’re a coward. I think you’re dedicated to your family. I cannot fault you for that.”

“Then you won’t tempt me further?” she asked hopefully.

“I can’t promise you that. But I also won’t rest until I find a way to free you from Oriana’s demands. There has to be a way.”

Ambrosia shook her head. “There is none. My family has sought a way out for many years, but Oriana refuses to listen. The gods can be very harsh in their punishments—and very possessive.”

Again, he pulled her close, wanting above all things to protect her. Determination anchored deep inside him. He would find a way to free her. Once his people were cured, he would concentrate on Ambrosia’s plight. One way or the other.

* * *

Ambrosia was never more thankful than when Gerrick brought his horse to a halt before the stable door of an inn. The sky had turned black and her body throbbed with pain. Gerrick helped her down and as she would have fallen when her aching muscles refused to respond, his strong arms steadied her.

“You are unused to the long hours in the saddle. Give it a moment before you try to walk. I should have stopped sooner. I apologize.”

“There is no need. I know you worry about your people and it is

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imperative we reach your home as quickly as possible. I'm sorry my lack of expertise is slowing our progress." She took a step and decided her legs would hold her after all. "I'm fine now."

She watched as Gerrick handed the reins to a stable boy and tossed him a coin. "Care for him well, boy and there will be another like that for you when I leave."

"Thank you, sir. I'll take extra good care with him." Ambrosia surmised the boy was about fifteen or sixteen, tall and lanky. He led the horse into the darkened stable.

She didn't think she'd ever been quite so exhausted and she stumbled on the uneven ground as they moved toward the door of the inn. Gerrick's arm snaked out and prevented her from tumbling forward.

"You're tired. We'll have something to eat and then rest. We need to start early in the morning."

She nodded and lifted the hem of her skirt, taking careful steps so as not to stumble again. She was certain a hearty meal and a good night's sleep would set her to rights. She had no idea where they were and was too tired and sore to care.

Ambrosia followed Gerrick inside the inn where they were met by the innkeeper. Loud, rowdy voices and the strong scents of ale and smoke assailed her and Ambrosia stepped closer to Gerrick.

"Innkeeper, I have need of two rooms for the night. And a good meal. Can you provide them?"

"Yes, good sir. That won't be a problem. If you'll follow me, I'll show you to a nice table and when you've eaten, my wife will show you to your rooms."

As he finished speaking, he turned and led the way to a table in what appeared to be a large dining room. Several women in low-cut dresses carried serving trays, others carried mugs of drink. Ambrosia was hesitant about entering the room, but Gerrick's hand on her arm

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encouraged her forward.

The innkeeper motioned to a large, buxom woman and she hurried over to them. "This is my wife. She will see to your needs and have a girl prepare your rooms. If you should require anything else, just let me know."

Ambrosia turned to Gerrick. "I would like to freshen up before we eat. Could I be shown to my room first?"

"That won't be a problem, my lady," the innkeeper's wife said. "I'll take you right on up."

"I'll wait for you here," Gerrick said as he pulled out a chair and sat down. He motioned to one of the passing serving women. "Take your time. I'll go ahead and order food and it should be ready when you return."

"Thank you. I won't be long."

"Follow me, then," the innkeeper's wife said, and turned to lead the way up the stairs.

As Ambrosia turned, her gaze met the glare of one of the serving women. She had long curly blazing red hair, a more than ample bosom, and rounded hips. There was a calculating, hungry gleam in her eyes. The woman turned away from Ambrosia and focused on Gerrick.

Suddenly, Ambrosia felt a stab of jealousy spear her. She had no right to those feelings, but it didn't stop her. The longer she was in his company, the more she wanted to give in to her feelings, and she couldn't allow that.

She turned away from the serving woman and followed the innkeeper's wife up the stairs. There was no choice but to help cure his people and then return to the island. It simply would not do to fall in love with someone who could not be hers. The knowledge left her with a deep aching chasm of loneliness inside.

CHAPTER 6

Ambrosia hurried back down the stairs and into the dining room, but came to a quick halt at the scene that met her. The red-headed serving girl flirted with Gerrick, and he was laughing up at her as she handed him a tankard of ale. Ambrosia then saw him wink at her.

Somewhere in the region of her chest, an ache pierced her, and her stomach tightened into a hard knot. Slowly, she made her way towards the table, feeling like an outsider.

Gerrick looked up as she neared the table. Rising, he moved to hold her chair out for her. She glanced quickly at the woman.

“This is Bridget,” Gerrick informed her. “She’s the innkeeper’s daughter and she brought our dinner for us.”

Ambrosia shifted uncomfortably beneath the hard, calculating stare of the woman. Then Bridget’s eyes slid away from her to settle on Gerrick once again, reminding Ambrosia of a predatory feline eyeing a bowl of rich cream.

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“Anything else you need, my lord, you let me know. I’ll be more than happy to oblige.”

A wide grin spread across Gerrick’s lips. It changed his appearance, lightened it. If it was possible, it made him look even more handsome, and roguish in a certain fashion. Again, she felt like an interloper, knowing she didn’t belong.

“Thank you, Bridget, I’ll let you know if we need anything else.” Ambrosia saw him wink again.

She looked down at her bowl and picked up the spoon lying next to it. Her stomach rumbled as the aroma of the stew teased her nostrils, smelling delicious. There were also slices of a hearty dark bread. She sipped at the soup and sighed with pleasure. It was quite good, and she was very hungry. Picking up a slice of the bread, she dipped it into the stew.

Once her first hunger pangs had been satisfied, she looked up to see Bridget standing against the bar on the other side of the room, her intense, dark gaze on their table—on Gerrick.

“You like the innkeeper’s daughter,” she blurted out.

Gerrick, about to take a swallow of ale, halted the tankard in midair. “What?”

“I said you like the innkeeper’s daughter. You were very friendly with her.”

Lowering the tanker, he stared at her intently for a long moment and she squirmed beneath the assessing look.

“She’s a friendly girl and pleasing to look at.”

His answer shouldn’t upset her. She had no right to feel possessive of him. Gerrick had needs, he was a man. He found the woman attractive. And Ambrosia had already turned him away. She couldn’t deny him and then expect him not to look elsewhere.

“What bothers you, Ambrosia? What do you want me to say?”

She shook her head and picked up the spoon again, but she was no

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longer hungry. She laid the spoon back down. “Nothing bothers me.” But it did, and she couldn’t let him know how much.

“I think something does. Is it Bridget? Did she do something?”

She couldn’t look at him. If she did, she might actually give in to her feelings for him. To admit her need was bad enough, but she couldn’t allow him to know it.

“No, she didn’t do anything. All I said was that I thought you liked her.”

He leaned across the table. “Why do you care?” The piercing intensity of his black gaze seared her.

“I don’t care,” she hurried to assure him, feeling a betraying fever burn inside. “I was just making an observation.”

“You think I fancy her? That I want her in my bed tonight. Is that what you’re asking?”

She felt the surge of heat flood her face, yet she raised her chin and answered the challenge she heard in his words. “I have no interest in who you take to your bed, as long as it isn’t me.”

“Since you obviously have no interest, I may just decide to seek her companionship.” His eyes bore into her as if waiting for something—for her to bend to him. “That is, of course, if you’re sure you have no interest?”

“No, I...I...” She rose from her chair. “I’ve had enough to eat. I think I’ll retire to my room.” The heat of her craving for his touch blasted through her and if she didn’t remove herself from this close proximity, she’d make a complete and utter fool of herself.

Throwing her napkin on the table, she whirled around and raced from the room, toward the stairs.

“Ambrosia, wait!” she heard him call to her, but she didn’t look back. He would bed the woman and she couldn’t stay there to witness their dance of seduction, knowing where it would eventually lead. She couldn’t bear it.

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In her room, she flung herself onto the bed, and tried to suppress the tears that threatened to release. She would not feel sorry for herself. She had an obligation to fulfill. It couldn't matter that every time she was in his presence she wanted to feel his lips pressed against hers again, yearned for him to possess her the way he had outside the labyrinth. For weeks she'd dreamed of him, and now her body sought to betray her. The fantasy was safe—reality was not.

It couldn't matter that she wanted to touch him and be touched by him. Nor that she wanted to feel his naked body next to hers. Her hands clenched in the pillows as she fought the emotions trying to consume her. Oh, gods, how she ached for him. Her pussy throbbed with the instinctive pulsing of a woman for the man she desires above all others. And the ache in her heart and soul would not be assuaged. Not ever.

She buried her head into the covers of the bed, trying to shut out her yearnings. She did not want to visualize him in bed with another woman. It hurt too much.

For a long time she fought for control, eventually succeeding in bridling her lustful thoughts. She sat up, brushing her hair from her face and looked around the room. Something was missing. It was only then she remembered they hadn't brought up her sacks containing the precious bottles of the elixir. They must still be in the stable.

How could she have forgotten them? Grabbing her cloak from the bottom of the bed, she hurried from the room and down the stairs. She didn't dare look into the dining room, unwilling to confront the scene of Gerrick flirting with Bridget. Nor did she want to see an empty table, knowing he'd probably taken her to his room.

Quickening her pace, she hurried out the door and across the short distance to the stable. As she stood in the doorway, she peered into the darkened interior. Several lamps were lit, offering just enough illumination to see the interior. Her intent was to find the young stable boy who had taken care of their horse. He should know where the

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saddle and her satchels would be stored.

She saw a door towards the end of the aisle and made her way to it. Rapping against the worn wood, she waited a moment for someone to respond. No one did, so she knocked again and then hesitantly lifted the latch and pushed the door open.

A lantern was lit inside the small room. Two burly men dressed as soldiers seated at a table playing cards looked up at her as the open door revealed the small interior.

A broad leering smile spread across the heavily bearded face of one of the men as he spotted her. "Well, well, look who's here. This must be the wench the innkeeper promised us." He and the other rotund man stood and too quickly reached her, yanking her inside and slamming the door.

"No," she mumbled, struggling against their containment. "I've made a mistake. I was looking for the stable boy—"

Their grasp on her arms tightened to iron manacles. "We paid for company, and you aren't backing out now. The innkeeper promised us a wench for the night and you're it. Now come on and give us a kiss. We'll get you warmed up real nice."

"No!" she screamed as they yanked her forward. One of them tore her cloak off, as the other sought to push the top of her dress down, lowering his head to seize her lips. He stank of stale ale and tobacco. She wrenched her head back, struggling against his grip. "Let me go, you don't understand. I'm not—"

The bigger one held her head in a vise-like grip and forced her to accept his savage kiss, his taste making her want to vomit. Tears sprang to her eyes. Gods, this couldn't be happening. She screamed as they bore her down to the ground, ripping at her dress.

Tearing her lips from his, and inhaling deeply, it wasn't a scream that burst forth, but a desperate song, the call of distress—one only the bees would interpret. And she prayed they would come.

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* * *

He shouldn't have baited her the way he had. It was his frustration at wanting her, unable to have her, and the long ride with her held close against him, without surcease. He thought better of racing after her because he'd probably just say more hurtful things. She didn't deserve that. He truly did feel like a monster who'd ripped the wings from a butterfly.

After she'd left, he'd retreated to the stables to retrieve their belongings. He should go to her, she would need her clothing. But he wasn't ready to confront her after the altercation in the dining room.

His encounter with the innkeeper's daughter as he got up to leave didn't help matters. She'd attempted to cajole him into letting her accompany him upstairs. He'd been tempted if for no other reason than his body burned for release. A lusty hour with the buxom beauty would have allowed him some sense of comfort, but when he thought about fucking her, he envisioned Ambrosia beneath him, wanting him.

He couldn't bring himself to do it, even for the brief moment of temporary relief it might have afforded. So he'd turned down the seductive invitation and instead walked out to the stable to obtain the bags. A little night air wouldn't hurt him either and might actually serve to settle him by creating some distance from the source of his frustration.

Slightly revived, he made his way back inside and asked the innkeeper's wife to direct him to his room. She led him upstairs and told him the door to the right was where Ambrosia resided.

He'd hesitated outside her door, of two minds. Then moved away, unwilling to face her.

Unable to relax, he paced his room like a caged tiger. An edge of uneasiness arrowed through him. He halted, listening. The threads of a song filtered through from outside, but something was very wrong about the tune.

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Spinning around, he raced for the door, a knot tightening his stomach. It was Ambrosia's voice, but unlike the singing in the labyrinth that had been almost seductive, this had an undercurrent of panic and fear. His gut screamed danger.

Racing down the stairs and out the door, he halted for a brief moment as he determined where the music originated. The stable? Why would she be in the stable at this time of night? At a run, he made for the stable door.

The singing stopped abruptly, but shouting ensued. As he entered the stable two men raced toward him surrounded by hundreds of angry, buzzing bees. Instinctively he pulled away from them, allowing the men and bees wide latitude.

"Ambrosia!" he yelled, frantic to locate her. He scanned the dim interior, and his eyes focused on an open door at the end of the aisle. His heart pounding in his chest, he sprinted toward it.

His blood ran cold as he spotted her slumped on the floor. "By the gods! What's happened?" She clutched at the ripped bodice of her dress. There were angry red lines across her shoulders and down her arms.

"Ambrosia." Rushing across the room, he knelt in front of her. She cringed away and skittled across the floor. When she looked up, her eyes were wide with fright, dilated in shock. He followed her, but didn't reach for her. "It's Gerrick. I'm not going to touch you, but tell me what happened?"

Her lips trembled. She blinked, then blinked again. "Are they gone?" she whispered, a tinge of desperation shrouding her words.

The men he'd passed. It had to be them. The bastards had attacked her. His body coiled with rage. "They're gone. You're safe now. I doubt they'll be back." He felt an overwhelming urge to hunt them down, but guessed with the swarm of bees surrounding them, they'd get the job done much more efficiently, and painfully, than he could.

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His sole need now was to care for Ambrosia.

She wouldn't meet his gaze, remaining focused on the door. Tears rained down her cheeks. "I came to get the elixir. We forgot the bags earlier and I didn't want to leave them. I was so tired when we arrived, you see." She stopped, shuddering as she attempted to suppress a sob. "I was looking for the stable boy who helped us earlier. That's when they...they..." A trembling hand flew up to cover her mouth. "They thought I was a...a..."

He inched toward her, unable to bear the pain he saw in her face, heard in her voice. "They're gone. They won't come back." He opened his arms and she practically flew into them, clutching him tightly, pressing her face into the cloth of his shirt.

Gods, if it hadn't been for her singing he would never have known she was here. He'd failed her because of his damned stubbornness.

"They wouldn't listen to me," she sobbed against his chest. "I tried to tell them I wasn't sent by the innkeeper, but they wouldn't listen. They grabbed me and—"

"No more," he stroked her hair, pressing her closer. "You sang for the bees and they came in time." His words asked a question he was afraid to find out the answer to.

He felt her nod. A shuddering breath escaped her. "They came in time. I didn't know if they would hear me." She raised her tear-stained face to look up at him. "How did you know?"

"I heard you singing. It's what led me here. We need to get you back inside." He slowly rose to his feet drawing her with him, supporting her.

"The elixir—"

"I already have it. I came out earlier."

"Oh. I see."

Near the door he bent down and picked up her discarded cloak and wrapped it tightly around her.

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She looked up at him, her hands clutching at him. “I feel so dirty,” she whispered. “I feel their hands on me. I still smell them. Their scent clings to me. I must get clean. I wish I had the healing pool here.”

He led her out the door. “I’ll have the innkeeper’s wife send up water for a bath.”

“Yes, yes. A bath. Oh, gods, they meant to rape me. You’re sure they’re gone?”

“The bees were in swarms all around them. They couldn’t get out fast enough. If they’d stayed, I would have killed them. As it is, the bees will make them suffer longer. No less than they deserve.”

“I’m sorry to cause you this trouble. I’m sorry I interfered with your evening.”

His arms gripped her more securely. It was wrong of him to let her think he was interested in Bridget. Somehow he would make it up to her. If she hadn’t thought he was with Bridget, she would have come to him before venturing out to the stable alone. This was his fault for venting his frustrations on her.

“You have nothing to apologize for. I never meant to spend the evening with Bridget and I shouldn’t have allowed you to think I planned to be with her. Now let’s get you inside. Nothing like this will happen again, I promise you.”

CHAPTER 7

True to his word, Gerrick ordered a bath for her. Even as shaken as she was by what had happened, she made him leave before she would undress. There was a door adjoining their rooms and the only stipulation he made was that she locked the hallway door, but leave the door between their rooms unlocked in case he needed to get to her quickly.

At first she'd been hesitant to agree.

"You trust me, don't you? You know I would never do anything to hurt you."

"Yes."

"Then leave it unlocked. I don't want to have to break down the door to get to you."

Still shaken by the encounter in the stable, eventually she agreed.

Now she lay back into the bath. At least she could wash away the filth of those men. Why had she ever gone to the stables by herself?

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She should have known better.

She'd been upset. Had thought he would be with the innkeeper's daughter and couldn't bear to see them together. She stroked the wet cloth along her body.

But he hadn't been with her. He'd never meant to lay with her at all. She felt some sense of pleasure in that knowledge. And when he'd heard her desperate song, he'd come to her, even though she'd turned him away time and time again.

She'd almost been raped. As horrible as the experience had been, it anchored her with a different understanding of reality. She'd turned Gerrick away, had practically forced him into the arms of another woman. Was it pride that kept her from giving herself to him? Was it because Oriana had told Gerrick to bed her, tried to take the decision from her hands, that she turned him away?

She wanted him. If she were honest, she'd admit to herself that she desired what he offered her—an opportunity to know what it was to be loved by a man.

She'd often watched Oriana with her drones. True, she knew what Oriana did with the drones was purely lust-driven, there was no love involved in their matings.

But Ambrosia had come to know Gerrick over the past days and it wasn't simply lust that drew her to him. She wanted *him*, not just any man, but Gerrick of Blakely. He had shown her tenderness and compassion, strength and honor. To withhold herself because she was annoyed at Oriana held no validity. She hurt only herself and Gerrick.

Oriana could care less whether she was bedded by Gerrick or not. Her taunt of the possibility of a child created from the joining was meant as a threat to keep her from mating. Ambrosia saw the knowledge in her eyes when she'd looked at her that she sensed the attraction between Ambrosia and Gerrick. The allusion to a bargain was her way of suffocating any seeds of desire. She played her games

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viciously. The only pleasure she sought to obtain was her own—and she would use everyone and everything else to provide her entertainment—no matter the cost. She enjoyed frightening Ambrosia, had attempted it before and always the threat for her family's safety hung like a sword above her head. Oriana loved to dangle temptation. If by some unlikely chance a babe were to be conceived, Ambrosia would dicker with the underworld guardian to her last breath to protect her child.

The desire to tempt fate—to grasp the chance to know Gerrick, to give and receive pleasure from him, and hold onto a fleeting instance of happiness drove her to make a decision she might come to regret. None had tempted her before and instinctively she knew a man like Gerrick would not enter her life again. She'd never lain with a man and the intimacy of the act frightened her. Once Gerrick's people were cured, she would return to the island and to her isolation as the Beesinger.

He was everything she would envision for herself in a lover. More than she ever could have expected. He wanted her, and by the gods, she wanted him. There would be no more waiting.

With her decision made, she rose from the bath water, stepped from the tub, and wrapped a toweling robe around her. Once dried, she rubbed fragrant lotion into her skin, and pulled on a long white shift.

Taking her comb from her satchel, she combed her hair until every last tangle was gone and it lay in shimmering waves down her back.

As she studied her reflection in the mirror over the dresser, she wondered if he would find her pleasing. There was a long red scratch running down the length of her neck, a visible remembrance of her encounter with brutal force. Or would Gerrick decide she had been tainted by the hands of her attackers?

Straightening her shoulders, determination settled over her. No longer would she allow fear to guide her. Turning, she walked to the door separating their rooms, and slowly released the handle.

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* * *

Gerrick lay on his bed, hands threaded behind his head. Was she all right? The only way he'd know for certain she was well was to be with her. But she hadn't wanted him to stay. He'd seen the uncertainty tinged with fear in her eyes, but he'd also admired her resolution when she remained firm, informing him she didn't want him in the room while she bathed even if he had promised to turn his back.

Had it strictly been modesty or something else? Like a strong distaste for his presence. Had he ruined everything by taunting her with Bridget? He shuddered to remember that his pride and stubbornness had almost cost Ambrosia dearly.

Should he go to her? Strictly to be certain she was all right. He started to rise from the bed, deciding he had waited long enough, when his door opened.

His eyes darted to the entrance, narrowed, and then widened. Ambrosia stood beneath the arch like an angel dressed in white, her hair shimmering in waves of honey gold across and down her shoulders. With the light from her room shining behind her, the thin white shift she wore was practically transparent, leaving little to his imagination. His cock sprang to immediate awareness, the blood in his veins heating quickly.

"Is something wrong?" he asked her before he said or did something utterly asinine, like walk across the room and strip the shift from her body.

"Nothing's wrong," she responded in a low voice. She left the door open and walked toward him.

He held up a hand. "Don't come any closer."

She stopped in the middle of the room, tilting her head as she looked up at him. "Why?"

"I would suggest you return to your room, because if you come any nearer I'm likely to lay you down on this bed and make you mine."

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He watched her lick her lips with a nervous flick. How he wanted to be the one doing the licking.

“What if I said I was wrong? That I want to lay with you. I want your hands on me.”

He couldn't have heard her right. She'd fought him for the last three days. She'd just survived a vicious attack. “Why now?”

She turned her head away, offering him her delicate, creamy profile. Did he have the strength to turn away from what she appeared to be offering him? Was it fear that led her to him? Or was it something else?

“You no longer desire me. I understand. I won't bother you further.” She turned away from him to leave.

If he let her go now, he knew she would retreat into her shell and wouldn't come to him again.

“Wait.”

She stopped, but didn't turn to look at him.

“I want you as much now as the first time I saw you. Possibly more, because now I know you as I didn't before.”

Her rigid back seemed to ease somewhat at his words. “I thought maybe after what happened, you wouldn't want me any longer.”

“That is unlikely ever to happen. Turn around and look at me.” He quickly stripped off his shirt and unbuttoned and dropped his pants.

As she turned, when her focus alighted on his hardened shaft her eyes widened. “Oh, my.”

“You've seen naked men before, with Oriana.”

“Well, yes. But they aren't usually, ummm, attentive, when I meet with her.”

“This,” he fisted his throbbing cock with one hand, “is what you do to me. Come here.”

She seemed to float across the room to halt in front of him, seemingly mesmerized by the sight of his thrusting shaft. He stroked his hand along the length and watched her face. He heard her breathing

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quicken.

“Touch me,” he rasped.

She looked up at him with a question in her eyes. “You look like you are in pain. Will it hurt you if I touch you?”

“It’s not pain you see. I’m trying to control my need to fuck you, to feel you surrounding me, taking me inside.”

“Oh.” Warm color suffused her face.

With one tentative hand she reached out and gently encircled him beneath the head. Her touch felt like a taste of heaven. He placed his own hand over hers and guided her along his shaft.

“Oh, yes, that’s it. Your hand is so soft. Don’t stop.”

He removed his hand and brought it up to cup her face and draw her toward him. “I think I will always want you. Now let me see if you still taste as sweet as I remember.”

His lips claimed hers. He licked lightly, outlining the rim of her soft mouth. He sucked until finally she parted her lips and he plunged inward with his tongue.

She moaned and leaned toward him, bringing both of her hands up to steady herself against his shoulders. This was more than he could have imagined. He raised his head and, grasping her shift, he directed, “Raise your arms.”

She lifted them, and he pulled the shift over her head and tossed it aside. He stepped back and consumed her with his eyes. Unable to resist, he reached out, teasing at the bud of one breast. Like satin, smooth and silky. Perfectly formed, rounded and so responsive to his touch as the nipple beaded tightly beneath his ministrations.

“Gerrick,” her voice was but a thready whisper.

“Do you like that?” he asked her, knowing already what her answer would be.

“Yes. More please.”

He pulled her to him with his other hand, wanting to feel her naked

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skin against his.

“Are you sure you want this?”

“Yes. Teach me how to please you.”

“You do please me.”

She raised a hand and teased his nipple. “Do you like that, as much as I do?”

“Gods, yes. Touch me wherever you like. Explore all of me, because rest assured before the sun rises, I will know every inch of you.”

He twisted and lay her on the bed. Trailing a hand over her firm, rounded breast, down across her ribs and stomach, it tangled in the silky curls at her mound. “You are so beautiful. Spread your legs for me.”

She shifted slightly.

“More,” he growled.

She spread them wider. When he sat down next to her on the bed, she reached a hand out to stroke his cock the way he’d taught her and he marveled that she would do it so willingly.

His hand cupped her mound and with one finger he traced the slit of her lips, felt the damp desire lingering there. He had to taste her.

Removing her hand from pleasuring him, he slid between her legs, lowering his head to her feminine center.

“What are you doing?” she gasped as his mouth fastened on her labia. “Oh, Gerrick.” She arched upwards and he pierced her vagina with his tongue, sinking deeply into her.

Her juices flowed around him, her scent—sweet nectar. She smelled of wildness and woman, a siren calling to him. Her passage was tight and wet. With one hand he teased her clitoris, already swollen with her passion.

He felt her rising, could sense her spinning out and upward and he meant for her to fly as high as possible before he sealed himself with

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her.

His tongue flicked and circled back and forth, pierced and retreated, then back to her nub. With one finger he entered her passage, easing his way inside. So very tight, his cock throbbed in demand to feel her snug channel gloving him with her luscious heat.

“Ohhh,” she groaned as he slid in slowly, then out again, and in until he felt her stretching around him. With his tongue he suckled at her passion as he added a second finger to the first, widening her, preparing her to receive him.

He felt her spasm around him, her juices flowed, she bucked, her center pulsing as she shattered.

He refused to allow her to descend completely. Slowly he wooed her back to the edge, until she teetered yet again at the brink of fulfillment. He retreated and moved up her body to nuzzle again at her sensitive breast, swirling with his tongue, grazing with his teeth. She undulated beneath him, begging for release.

She tossed her head restlessly back and forth; her skin was covered with the damp evidence of her raging fire. He felt her frenzy, she belonged to him, body and soul and she would know it before this night ended.

He nestled the tip of his needy cock at the entrance to her vagina between her lips. Slowly he entered, retreated, drove deeper. Fucking shallow and steady, a sheen of sweat broke out as he controlled his penetration. She countered his movements, whimpering, crying for more. Drinking deeply from her lips, he thrust fast and deep.

She gasped and stiffened beneath him, her tight sheath gloving him so deliciously, it took every ounce of control not to climax right then. He stopped, waiting for her to become accustomed to his presence, allowing him to harness his desire. His mouth captured her gasp of pain. If there'd been any way not to cause her discomfort, he would have done it.

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Remaining motionless inside her, he enclosed her in his embrace and waited. Moments later he felt her begin to relax, her tension easing. Only then did he again thrust in long slow strokes. When she began to counter his movements, he altered his rhythm, fucking her deep, then shallow, then deep again, varying his penetration, grinding against her clit. And again she spasmed around him, her passage grasping him so tightly he felt every tremor that rocked her within its grip.

His own climax was fast approaching, mounting inside him. He controlled it as best he could, reveling in her hot, hungry heat surrounding him, not wanting it to end. She was his, every speck of her fiery, splendid desire belonged to him.

Mindlessly she stroked him, gripped him, releasing him until his own orgasm was about to overtake him. He felt it building, building and he pulled from her body scant breaths before he exploded and his seed spurted free in powerful surges beyond anything he'd known before in his life.

She had given him more than he could ever have expected, branding his heart and soul forever. He pulled her to him, stroked her damp body, vowing they would find a way to make Oriana release her. She belonged with him and he would fight for her with his last breath.

CHAPTER 8

Ambrosia lay draped across Gerrick's body, one of her legs nestled between his. She raised her head and saw his eyes were closed. Lowering her head to his chest, she listened to his slow, steady breaths, the strong beat of his heart.

There was a tingling between her thighs, a faint remembrance of the knowledge she was no longer a virgin. Giving herself to him was not a decision she regretted.

She trailed her fingers along his hard chest. Touching him gave her pleasure, feeling his warm, supple skin beneath her fingers. Contact with another person in this intimate fashion was so much more than she thought it would be. The tenor of his breathing changed and she knew he was awake.

"What are you thinking?" His deep voice rumbled in his chest. His hand smoothed a line along her spine and came to rest at the curve of her buttocks. He shifted her until she lay splayed across him. His half-

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hardened cock lay nestled between the lips of her pussy and desire for him surged again. She fought the urge to grind against him, wanted to feel him inside her. There were scant hours left before they must depart and she wanted to savor every moment.

"I was thinking that the night is not long enough," she said as she teased his nipple, then lowered her head to suckle. She heard his gasp.

"Such teasing will find you speared yet again, my beauty," he growled.

She raised her head to look at him and, unable to resist, rocked her hips with invitation. "I want you again, Gerrick. Is that wrong?" Was she a wanton woman after all? Had watching Oriana with her drones affected her in ways she hadn't realized—had always resisted?

Having tasted of Gerrick, she now wanted more. Had sampling the delights of the flesh released something inside her, making her a slave to her desires?

Gerrick cupped her face and brought his lips to hers, capturing her breath. All coherent thought left her as she allowed him to bind her tighter with sensations of pleasure. He raised his head, his dark eyes mesmerizing her. "There is nothing wrong in what we have done. I would make you my wife if it were possible. I would not have allowed you to give yourself to me so completely had I not wanted you so much it hurt inside. You have touched a part of me no one has ever reached before."

She released a long held breath. "I didn't know. These feelings I have for you, I've never known before. It's like I want to climb inside of you and stay there forever. Keep you close." She lay her head against his chest. "It will hurt when I must leave you."

His fingers threaded through her hair. "Don't think of it now. Morning will come soon enough when the world will require our attention."

"Tell me of your family." Suddenly she had the urge to know

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everything about him.

“My mother died a long time ago. My father still lives. He was the first stricken with the fever.”

“Have you any brothers or sisters?” She reached up to trace the line of his strong jaw now shadowed and slightly scratchy. She liked the texture of it and smoothed her palm along the ridge of cheek and curled her fingers in his long midnight hair.

“I have one sister. Her name is Valonia. My mother died giving her life.”

“How much younger is she?”

“Valonia is fifteen. She’s been raised by the nuns at the convent, but I’ve sent for her. You should be able to meet her when we arrive.”

One of his hands cupped her breasts. She turned slightly to give him better access and murmured in satisfaction.

“You’re purring again,” he said with laughter tingeing his words.

She sat up and straddled his hips, sliding both hands along his hard abdomen and up his chest, then back down, hovering above his groin, threading through the thatch of dark curling hair.

“And you growled before,” she countered, as her fingers gripped his burgeoning shaft.

She began a slow exploration of his thick, steely length, swirling a finger along the tip, spreading the ejaculate glistening at the tip. “Your manhood feels like hard iron draped in velvet.”

He groaned in response, his breathing becoming raspy and uneven.

“I want to taste you, the way you tasted me. Would you like that?” She inched along his thighs and lowered her head, her hair offering a seductive curtain trailing along his body.

“Gods, yes. Take me into your mouth. I want to feel your lips, your tongue.”

With the tip of her tongue she traced the slit, tasted his male heat, then slowly she brought him deeper, swirling beneath the ridge and

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down his length. She felt his pleasure as he arched closer. He pulsed and hardened even more.

“Yes, your mouth is sweet heaven. Suck me deeper. Oh, gods, yes. Come here to me. Now, before I offer you more than you want to receive.”

She lifted her head to look at him. “I want to bring you the same bliss you brought me. Come for me Gerrick, let me drink your pleasure.” And she again enclosed him within her mouth, sucked and teased, felt him harden even more, took him deeper until the tip of his cock touched the back of her throat and she could take him no further.

His release exploded and she swallowed his male essence, reveling in her ability to bring him such pleasure.

“Ah, ’Rosia!” he yelled, his hands cupping her head, his fingers fisted in her hair.

She loved him with her mouth until the last spasm had ended and she felt the tension ease. Only then did she release him and glide up his body.

He pulled her tightly to him. “I will find a way to keep you with me, this I vow to you. You are everything, my beautiful Beesinger, everything.”

A moment of sadness overwhelmed her, but she would keep it hidden. There was no way to break the obligation to Oriana. And it was going to shatter her heart to leave him, but leave him she must. Or she would be responsible for his death.

* * *

Gerrick was much satisfied with his conversation with the innkeeper. All was in readiness for their departure for Blakely. He was eager to return. Not only because the elixir was sure to cure his people, but he wanted Ambrosia to see his home. And after all this time, he would finally greet his sister. How would she act? Had she been pleased to receive the summons to return home? Soon enough he would

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have his answers.

He loved Ambrosia, there was no other term for it. It was more than lust, more than need—encompassing a burning, overpowering determination to keep her safe and near him always. To possess and be possessed by her, representing the eternal light in his world. And so much more than simple words could define. How it had happened so quickly he didn't know. Once his people were well and the threat of the curse removed, he would face Oriana and offer whatever was required to free Ambrosia.

He stopped at her door and knocked. They had loved most of the night, which would make their journey today difficult for her. But they could delay no longer. The remaining two hours before they rose, he'd held her, feeling a wholeness that was new to him. He'd been unable to sleep himself, which was no great hardship as he'd been trained to survive on little sleep. He'd stopped at the inn to allow Ambrosia a much needed respite. Unfortunately, for her, it hadn't worked quite the way he'd planned.

Daylight was barely upon them and if he pushed hard they would reach Blakely by nightfall. He could only hope the elixir would help them as Samara suggested it might. The inn cook had prepared food for them to take, and when they were far enough into the journey they could stop and partake of it.

"Come in," she called and he opened the door.

His breath was taken away by the vision before him framed in the aura of the first rays of dawn. She was an ethereal image of loveliness. He strode across the room and took her in his arms. Lowering his head, he stole a moist, passionate kiss from her lips.

She emitted a soft sigh and surrendered to him. Raising his head to study her face, he looked for the signs of the long, passionate, yet sleepless night.

Her amber eyes were warm and bright, hints of gold fire sparkled

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within their depths. Her complexion held the satin warmth of an autumn day, smooth and unblemished. Her sunlit hair was plaited into a long braid and spilled down her back. “You look exceedingly well for such an arduous, sleepless night.”

One of her golden eyebrows rose and a glint of a smile trembled on her full lips. “Arduous? I feel imbued with energy this morning. It’s as though life has taken on a new depth for me.” She trailed her fingers along the curve of his face and down his neck. “I would have had it no other way.”

He studied her intently. “You’re sure?”

The smile that had hovered broke free, like the sun’s appearance from the shelter of clouds. “I am happier than I have ever been. My soul is somehow freed, my heart is lighter. I never knew it could be like this.”

She walked past him and toward the door. “We should be on our way.”

“Are you in such a hurry to complete your task?”

It was as though all the sunlight were sucked away by a dark and ominous cloud as she turned back to him. Her eyes had gone from amber light to dark coffee brown in an instant. “I’ve been allowed a moment’s unexpected joy. It shall color the rest of my life. Please, don’t spoil it.” Her eyes begged him with desperation to understand and not to question.

“I’m sorry. I know what lies ahead of us and I shouldn’t have said that.”

She shook her head. “No apology is necessary. Healing your people is why I’m here. We must see that it is done as quickly as possible for their sake. And for yours. My destiny will not change.”

He wanted to see the sunshine again. Why had he said what he did? “A bright spot in this early morning.”

“What is that?”

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“I was speaking with the innkeeper and he informs me the two knaves who attacked you last night are suffering severely from the venom of your saviors. Would that I could have arrived sooner to exact my own brand of retribution before they arrived.”

“The bees accomplished what I sought. There were two of them and I wouldn’t have wanted to see your life put in danger because of their mistake.”

“Mistake? For them to assume any female is for the taking deserves harsher punishment than they received.”

“I believe they will think twice next time,” she responded. “I still find it hard to understand how you knew I needed you.”

“It was your song. It was drenched with your fear and I knew you were in danger.”

She studied him assessingly. “You are the only person I know of who can interpret the music as the bees do. I’ve never heard of it happening before.”

“Singing has never touched me the way your voice does. It’s as though it reaches inside my soul. It’s like you’re talking to me alone. I know that sounds insane, but that’s what it feels like.”

Could it be that something more existed between them than either of them could ever understand? She turned away from him, unwilling at the moment to look to the meaning behind it. “The day is quickly passing, I believe we should be on our way.” She opened the door and stepped into the hallway.

He followed her and they walked down the stairway. No one was about at this hour of the morning. He led her out into the cool, brisk air. “Wait here and I will get my horse. There’s no need for you to come into the stable. He should be saddled and ready to go. Give me the satchel with the elixir and I will see they are safely packed.”

She knew why he didn’t want her to go with him, and it made her love him all the more. He tried to protect her from the painful

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memories of what had taken place inside. She reached up and cupped the side of his face.

“I’m all right, Gerrick. You took away all the pain and replaced it with something beautiful and precious.”

He turned his head and kissed the center of her palm. It sent a tingle traveling through the length of her arm and she sighed with pleasure.

Dropping her hand, she offered him the sack and he turned away to head to the stable to retrieve his horse. She watched him stride across the ground in a long, confident gait. She knew his pride had been pricked that it had been the bees to come to her rescue. He didn’t understand her ways.

For years it had been her sole responsibility to care for the bees and in return they protected her. She’d been alone all that time with no one else to depend on. It did not come easily to alter that. Her time here was passing quickly and although she had already come to care for Gerrick deeply, she could not allow herself to depend on him to any great depth. The loss was already going to be too painful when it came time to return to the island.

There would never be another man for her like Gerrick. Why this had happened she didn’t know. But for the time she was here she would love him in the only way she could, giving him all, until there was no more of herself to give. And it would be a part of her always. Her memories would have to sustain her.

CHAPTER 9

At midday Gerrick pulled his horse up and helped Ambrosia down. They would rest for a short time and then move on. They'd made good time and would reach Blakely well within the time he'd allotted. But they'd ridden hard and if he didn't rest his horse, it would collapse before they arrived, defeating his desire for urgency.

He helped Ambrosia down. She wobbled a bit and he steadied her.

"Are you all right? I've pushed you hard thus far, but it won't be much longer before we reach the boundaries of Blakely land. We'll take a short rest to eat. It may help." He hated pushing her like this, but he had no choice.

"I'm fine. Something to eat will be lovely." She pointed to a shady grove a short distance from the road they traveled. "Over there? I think that would be nice."

Gerrick pulled down the sack containing the food and drink from the inn and followed as she made her way stiffly toward the copse of

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trees.

He spread his cloak for her to sit. Looking around, he noted a small stream running nearby.

"I need to water the horse. He's been carrying a double load and he needs rest or we'll be walking the rest of the way. I'll be right back." He set the sack next to her and returned to his horse.

After first loosening the girth, he watered the animal, and set it to grazing. Pulling his sword from the scabbard, he then returned to Ambrosia. Although everything looked peaceful, it didn't pay to let one's guard down.

Ambrosia eyed the sword when he returned to her and sat down with his back to the tree. He reached over and picked up a wedge of cheese and a slice of bread.

"Do you think we will be attacked?" There was a hint of fear in her voice. "I forget the dangers, being so far removed on the island."

"No, but it wouldn't do not to be ready in case there is trouble." He took a bite of the cheese, then a swig from the bottle of water.

Ambrosia looked around. "This is a beautiful place, so peaceful. Is your land like this?"

"Blakely is very green and fertile. Crops have grown well and plentiful for the families who live there. I think you will like it."

"Your sister won't be alone when she arrives, will she? I expect it will be very difficult for her with her change of circumstance from a nunnery to the outside world. I know what a shock it is every time I leave the island to visit my family. I believe going from the seclusion of the convent would be much the same."

"Samara, a wise woman, will watch over her until we arrive. Valonia has been away too long, it was time for her to come home. I can protect her better that way. There was no way of knowing if the curse of the warlock could touch her as well, and the nunnery is too far away if something should befall her."

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“I understand your concern.” She stood up and brushed at the skirt of her dress. “I need to stretch my legs before we continue.”

Gerrick rose as well.

“I’m just going to walk to the stream. I won’t go far.”

He clasped her arm. “Would you deny me the pleasure of your company?”

She looked away and he saw a hint of pink tinge her cheeks. “No. But I thought you might want to rest a bit before we leave. I would enjoy your company.”

“Then let us proceed.”

They strolled down to the water’s edge. He watched her and saw a look of yearning cross her expression.

“What are you thinking?” he asked.

She smiled. “That I would like to remove my shoes and stockings and feel the water between my toes.” Laughing, she looked at the ground. “You must think me foolish. It looks so inviting.”

He couldn’t deny her. He bent down and proceeded to remove her shoes.

“What are you doing?” she gasped, reaching for his shoulders to steady herself.

“I’m granting your wish.” He set her shoes aside. Looking up at her, he slowly lifted her skirt and placed the hem in her hand so she could hold it in place as he worked.

Her eyes darkened and he surmised what she was thinking. Because it was on his mind as well. He slid a hand up her stockinged thigh and encountered smooth, silky skin. Inching farther up, he encountered the top of her thigh. Warm, damp skin greeted his exploration and he glanced up, meeting her gaze.

“Are you sure it’s only your stockings to be removed?” he murmured.

She didn’t answer him for a long moment, simply returning his

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molten gaze. When she licked her lips, he was almost lost. His hand stilled against her thigh and it was as if all movement in the forest ceased.

"I think it best we continue our journey." Her voice was husky and tight with desire.

"Are you sure?" He teased the sensitive crease at the top of her thigh. The heady perfume of her arousal scented the air.

As she inhaled deeply, her eyelids fluttered closed. "Please," she whispered, "don't tempt me. Not now. You can't know how much I want you. It doesn't seem right."

"It is more than right," he whispered. His hand retreated back down her leg. He put her shoes back on her feet, re-fastened them, and leaned back. "I will respect your wishes. For now."

He rose and offered his hand. "Come, we'll be on our way then. I think the best thing I can do right now is get us to Blakely."

She nodded and clasped his hand. He led her back to where the food lay forgotten, and Ambrosia knelt, gathered up the remains of their meal, and placed everything in the sack. While she did that, Gerrick headed back to the horse and prepared for the continuation of their journey. The sooner they made it home and saw to his people, the quicker he could turn his thoughts to freeing Ambrosia and making a future for them together.

* * *

They stopped at the top of a knoll overlooking the castle and village.

"This is your land? It's beautiful here," Ambrosia remarked.

"It was. Until Tovak came. The people were happy and content." He urged the horse forward and he trotted down the incline towards the castle.

"I will do what I can to aid your people, you know that."

"I know you will do your best and that's all I can ask. Samara

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seems to think you will be able to help.” He reined the horse down the path toward the gates of the high gray stone wall surrounding the castle.

“Samara is the wise woman you spoke of?”

“Yes. She was banished when my mother died, but I had nowhere else to turn, so I summoned her. You are our last hope.”

“It all seems so odd, that she would think an elixir would help lift a curse.”

He shrugged. “Samara knows and sees things others do not. I believe my father blamed Samara for my mother’s death and that’s why she was banished. When he is well, he will not take kindly to my interference in his explicit orders.”

“He must have loved your mother very much. To have banished both the woman who attended her and his own child as well.”

“I believe he did, but he never speaks of that time and has forbidden anyone else to talk of it. I have tried to broach him about it, but he refuses to even consider any discussion of the past. And he’s forbidden my mother’s name to be mentioned within his hearing.”

Reaching the drawbridge, they crossed and entered the courtyard. On the steps leading to the castle stood a stooped elderly woman and a young girl with long dark hair who was dressed in a gray robe.

“Is that Samara and your sister?” Ambrosia asked.

Gerrick narrowed his gaze to take in the figures awaiting their arrival. “Yes, it’s Samara and I can only assume the girl is Valonia.”

He halted the horse, dismounted, and helped Ambrosia to the ground. They both turned to the two women who walked towards them.

“Samara,” he greeted the older woman.

Samara eyed Ambrosia as she stood next to Gerrick. “I see you have brought the Beesinger. She has the elixir?”

“Yes, I have it,” Ambrosia answered, meeting her intense scrutiny. “I am prepared to dispense it immediately.”

Samara nodded and turned back to Gerrick. “You have made good

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time. Valonia only arrived yesterday.”

Gerrick turned to study the quiet young woman standing next to Samara. “Valonia, it is good to finally meet you, but I wish it were better circumstances. You had a safe journey?”

Valonia looked at him with large, dark eyes. Gerrick understood a little as to why his father had banished her as well as Samara. She bore a strong resemblance to their mother and it sent a wave of sad remembrance through Gerrick as he looked at her. He attempted to banish his bittersweet memories.

“Samara has explained why you require my presence. When the danger is past, I would like to return to the convent.”

He was surprised at her request. Maybe he shouldn’t have been because she’d lived her whole life there.

“I hope you’ll take some time to get to know us before making a decision to return.”

“Your father will not want my presence here once he is well.”

What an odd way for her to word it. “He is your father as well. Once he meets you I think he will realize it is past time for you to return home.”

“This has never been my home, brother,” she answered him in a quiet tone. “I was a mere babe when I was taken to the nuns. The convent is my home. It is for the best.”

She turned to Ambrosia. “Beesinger—”

“Please call me Ambrosia. That is my name.”

Valonia offered a small smile. “Thank you. Ambrosia, Samara has told me of the elixir. May I assist you as you treat the villagers? I would like to hear more of the bees and how the medicine is made.”

Gerrick handed Ambrosia the satchel containing the bottles. “I would welcome your assistance.” She turned to Gerrick. “Where would you like me to begin, my lord?”

He scowled at her when she used his title. When had they reverted

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back to formality? “I think you know my name. It is Gerrick, in case you’ve forgotten.”

She jutted her chin out. “As you wish—Gerrick. The full moon will be upon us in two days hence. I must start if we are to treat everyone who is ill with fever before it occurs.”

He nodded. “Follow me. You should begin with my father.”

“At your leisure.”

Valonia dragged behind and Ambrosia stopped and turned back toward her.

“I will not go with you to attend Lord Blakely,” she blurted out. “I believe it is best he not be confronted with my presence yet.”

“She is probably right,” Gerrick answered. “We’ll wait until he’s recovered sufficiently. It will be enough of a shock for him to be confronted with Samara’s presence.”

“Very well,” Ambrosia said and turned to accompany him inside. “I’ll administer the elixir to those who are suffering the worst from the fever, then we will wait a short time to be sure it has the desired effect.”

“Valonia, why don’t you check with cook and have food prepared?” Samara suggested. “If all goes as I foresaw, the Beesinger will require food to strengthen her through the long hours ahead.”

“I’ll take care of it and will meet you in the dining hall when you are done with Lord Blakely.”

“That would be best,” Samara responded and then proceeded to follow Gerrick and Ambrosia to Lord Blakely’s room.

His father’s room was shadowed, the curtains closed to the outside world. It was a bleak, depressing atmosphere when they entered.

Ambrosia moved briskly to the windows. “This will not do. We must have sunshine and air in here. It is stifling.” She threw back the drapes and light escaped into the room, offering a more cheerful and vibrant atmosphere. “That’s better.”

She set the satchel with the elixir on the floor and walked to the

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bed. Reaching out, she touched Lord Blakely's forehead, and found him burning up with fever as he restlessly tossed on the bed.

Turning away, she moved back to the satchels, removed one of the bottles and poured out only a small measure. She moved back to the bed, raised the lord's head slightly and fed him the elixir. Then she gently lay him back down on the pillows. He appeared totally unaware they were even in the room.

"Now we wait." She turned and looked at Gerrick who had remained silent. "If it is going to work, it will do so quickly."

"It will do so," Samara confirmed with confidence.

Ambrosia looked at her quizzically. "How can you be so certain? It is powerful, I grant you that, but as to its effectiveness against a curse. I don't know. It's never been tried before."

"It will work. But when he awakens in his senses, will he know what he must do?"

"What do you mean, old woman?" Gerrick demanded. "What aren't you telling us? You have a habit of leaving out important parts of information."

Her smile held mysterious knowledge. "There are certain things that will not be revealed before their time. We must wait."

Ambrosia understood her meaning. She served an immortal after all; much was not revealed to her, and often Oriana spoke in just such a cryptic fashion.

She turned back to the bed and noticed the flushed countenance of Lord Blakely was lessening, he'd stopped tossing, and seemed to rest easier. He opened his eyes and looked at her.

"Who are you?" he demanded in a weak voice, rusty with disuse. "Get me something to drink. I'm thirsty."

She turned and smiled with relief at Gerrick. "I believe the elixir is working. Your father already seems to be improving."

CHAPTER 10

After eating a light meal in the dining room, Ambrosia accompanied Gerrick to the village. With Valonia's assistance, all of the people currently suffering from the fever had been treated and were already beginning to recover from the effects of the curse.

Ambrosia had worked long and tirelessly through the night and into the next day administering and monitoring the effects of the elixir. Especially the children. Children were so fragile and although the honey in the elixir was purified, she watched them closely for any signs of deterioration rather than improvement. Thankfully, there had been none and all were recuperating as they should.

She wandered from the huge barn into the late afternoon sunlight. Fatigue had finally caught up with her. Locating a path leading to the forest lying beyond the fringes of the village, she followed it. All she could think of was a moment's respite before a new wave of fever struck.

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Meandering along the path, she stumbled upon a small clearing and hearing the familiar hum of bees, assumed a hive was located nearby. It brought her a certain comfort to be near the bees. It was difficult being around so many people with so many questions after her years of solitude on the island.

Valonia possessed a sharp and inquisitive mind. The nuns had taught her well, but she harbored a thirst for more knowledge. She liked the young girl; was envious right now of her inexhaustible energy.

Ambrosia sank down beneath a tall oak and closed her eyes, listening to the rhythm of nature all around her. Those were the voices she was used to hearing. A silence that was not a silence—it was a comforting melody.

Gerrick had left her side to tend his father and to the needs of the estate. Upon seeing Samara in his room, as expected, Gerrick's father had been furious. Although he was still weak from the effects of the fever, he demanded a full reporting and Gerrick had no choice but to attend him.

It was now up to him to inform his father of Valonia's presence at the castle as well. It would be a bit more difficult to convince him of the necessity for her attendance than it was Samara's.

Ambrosia drifted away as sleep claimed her after the long grueling hours of tending to the sick. She dreamed of Gerrick, that he kissed her and held her. She breathed a sigh of pleasure as she sank deeper into his embrace.

"Gerrick," she sighed and burrowed closer, feeling like she was floating above the ground.

"I'm here, my sweet," his deep voice answered.

Her eyelids fluttered. They felt so heavy, but his voice sounded so real. She forced her eyes open and found herself looking into Gerrick's silvery blue gaze. She was indeed in his arms and he was carrying her toward the castle.

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She struggled, but he held her tight. “Put me down. I can walk,” she protested.

“I’m sure you can, but you’re exhausted and I’m taking you inside where you can rest without being disturbed.”

“I was resting,” she murmured.

“Yes, I saw that. Valonia is preparing you a relaxing bath and then you can sleep. There’ve been no more reports of fever outbreak. You need to rest.”

“I will, but I can walk to get there.” She really should push harder to make him put her down. But it felt so good to be in his arms.

They finally reached the upstairs and he carried her through a doorway. “Here she is Valonia, I finally found her.” He set her carefully on her feet.

She smoothed her skirt. “I wasn’t hiding. I’d simply taken a walk to get away for a little while.”

Valonia straightened up from pouring something into the bath water. Ambrosia smiled as she recognized the aroma. She walked over and trailed her fingers through the water. The temperature was perfect. What a temptation.

“I’ll return shortly,” Gerrick said as he turned toward the door. “Enjoy your bath.”

Ambrosia watched him leave and turned back to Valonia. “You remembered what I told you.”

Valonia nodded. “Yes. Honey and lavender, right? You deserve some pampering after what you’ve done for everyone. I’ve left some of the honey warming near the fire.”

“You catch on very quickly,” Ambrosia complimented her.

“I want to know more. Will you teach me? I want to learn everything.”

“I wish I had time to do that. But I’ll share whatever I can before I must leave.” The thought of her departure caused a wave of sadness to

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spread through her.

Valonia looked at her in surprise. “When are you leaving? You’ve hardly arrived.”

“I came to cure the fever and it appears I’ve been successful. But I have to return to the island once the danger is past.”

“What about you and my brother?” She bit her lip. “I know you feel something for him—I can see it when you look at each other. You can’t mean to leave him.”

Ambrosia felt heat flood her cheeks and she turned away. “I have to return to the island. There’s no other choice. Gerrick understands my obligation,” she said in a low tone. She didn’t want to think about the fact she had to leave Gerrick.

“But—” Valonia worried her lower lip and looked away. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t be asking you such personal things. I’ll leave you to your bath now. I hope you enjoy it.”

Valonia started to move past her and Ambrosia stretched out a hand to waylay her. “Thank you. For preparing the bath. It’s just what I need.”

Valonia nodded. “I don’t want you to leave. I know I’ve only known you for a short time, but it feels longer somehow.”

“I know. I feel the same about you. But I have to go back. People would die if I didn’t.”

Valonia looked up at her and Ambrosia could see her worry. “Is there anything I can do to help?”

“No. It is a debt to be paid and I must see to my duty. But thank you.” She dropped her hand and Valonia left, softly closing the door behind her.

Quickly, Ambrosia removed her clothing and stepped into the bath water. Oh, it was indeed heavenly. She sank down, leaned back, and closed her eyes. The scents spiraled around her senses to soothe her. No one had ever done this for her before and it felt nice to be pampered.

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The door opened and she looked up, startled, as Gerrick walked in. Even though they'd made love and he'd seen her naked, she sank deeper into the bath water.

"I've come to play lady's maid," he informed her as he turned to lock the door.

"I-I've never had a lady's maid. I wouldn't know what to do with one."

He walked over and knelt next to the tub. Pulling his shirt over his head, he threw it aside. "Rest assured, you've never been tended to by a maid as I plan to tend to you."

He leaned toward her, traced the length of her collarbone and down to the hollow between her breasts, imprisoning her with his molten gaze. She caught her breath as he cupped one of her breasts. "So very beautiful," he murmured, as he dropped forward to kiss her, continuing to tease her nipple to a hard, sensitive bud. Lifting his head, he grinned at her. "You taste of all things sweet, my pretty Beesinger."

"And you taste of all things forbidden, my lord," she whispered, arching toward him.

"Ah, sweet and forbidden. What an arousing combination."

He stood up and shed the remainder of his clothing. Then he slipped into the tub behind her, nestling her between his strong, hard-muscled thighs.

"This is how a maid tends to her lady?" she teased him.

His hands slid along the tops of her thighs to her knees and circled back along the sensitive insides. "Ah, well, I may be taking a few liberties." He slid a finger of his left hand into her pussy and she gasped at the quick motion. With his thumb he teased at her clit, then sank a second finger to join the first.

With his right hand he ran a cloth along her legs and up over her breasts. With his left hand he began to leisurely fuck her with his fingers. Leaning down, he nibbled at her neck.

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She undulated her hips and arched, dropping her head back to rest on his shoulder.

“Yes, my lady Beesinger, this is how a lady should be bathed. Do you like it?”

“Oh, Gerrick,” she sighed, feeling the mounting desire burn a path through her. “Help me,” she begged.

He added a third finger to the first two, dropped the bathing cloth, and cupped her breast. “Climb the summit, my sweet lady. Don’t look down. I’ll be there to catch you if you fall.”

Her body throbbed in answer to him and she felt the stars rain down all around her as she sobbed her release, her vagina clamping down on his fingers. Again wanting, needing this to never end.

He retreated from her and turned her to face him, pulling her down and piercing her with his hard, driving shaft. *Oh, yes, fill me so completely, I shall never feel empty again. And I shall always remember.* She felt herself make way for him, her body molding and shifting to accommodate his thick, turgid length.

He filled her beyond anything she thought possible and she welcomed all of him. He held her close, waiting for her to adjust.

Moving in long, slow circular strokes, he guided her movements, grinding against her clit, spiraling beyond the real world yet again.

As she came back down, she felt him harden still more, his breathing quickened, and she knew he was close to climaxing. He thrust faster, in long, quick strokes, then he pulled from her and wrapped her close to him as he spent himself. Capturing her lips, he drove his tongue between her lips, claiming her, branding her for all time.

He pulled her head to his shoulder and stroked her hair. It felt wonderful to be held by him this way, even if the water was quickly losing its heat.

Lifting her head, she looked up at him. “Why?”

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“Why what?”

“I know I’m not experienced—” she stammered.

“You want to know why I withdraw from you before releasing my seed?”

“Well, yes. I mean, I don’t want a child—at least not knowing I must return to the island—and I know if you climax inside me that could happen. But I didn’t think it would be something you would worry about.”

He cupped her face and turned her head up to him. “You thought I would be so insensitive as to not care if you left here carrying my babe?”

She tried to look away, but he wouldn’t let her. “Is that what you thought? Did you honestly think I listened to what Oriana said or heeded any of her words?”

“I don’t know.” Tears flooded her eyes. She felt so naïve. Had she really thought he didn’t care what would happen after she left him? Although she had finally come to terms with the possibility, her original fear had been part of what kept her from him. So why had she given herself to him if she hadn’t trusted him? And deep down she knew the answer was because she had trusted him. In all ways.

He looked deep into her eyes and she saw an honesty that filled her, overwhelmed her. “I would never hurt you,” he said. “Never. There is no way I will help to create a babe without knowing for certain you will be here so we can raise it together. Until we resolve this thing with Oriana, I will not endanger you or any child we might create.”

She flung herself forward and wrapped her arms around him. “I’m sorry,” she whispered brokenly, fluttering kisses along the length of his jaw. “I wish things were different. I wish I could stay.”

He stroked her back. “We’ll find a way. For now, I think it’s time we got out of this tepid water before you catch cold.”

He rose, stepped out of the tub with her in his arms, and proceeded

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to dry her with a toweling cloth. She did the same for him. Lifting her, he carried her to the bed and lay her down.

“This is my room and it is where you belong.” He came down to lay beside her, stroking her, as he teased her lips with his teeth and tongue until she again burned inside and liquid heat flowed from her pussy.

She pushed him onto his back, rising above him. “Wait,” she said. “It is my turn to play maid to my lord.” She rose from the bed and walked over to the pot of honey Valonia left behind. She dipped a finger inside, stirred and withdrew it, bringing it to her lips. Not too hot, just right. Carrying the pot, she walked over to the bed, and knelt beside him.

“Honey is a restorative my lord.” She dipped her fingers into the contents, and painted his lips with the thick golden liquid. She leaned down, supping at the honey mingled with desire on his lips, her tongue slowly lapping up every bit. “Bees are attracted to certain flowers because of their scent,” she whispered. “The workers that collect the pollen are female.”

Dipping her hand into the honey pot, she brought it down to coat his cock with the sweet syrup. “They can determine the flower is shaped differently and are drawn to its color and design,” her fingers tightened, “its texture.” She turned and lowered her head to his glistening shaft. “They return again and again in the knowledge of the sweet, sweet reward that awaits them.”

Her lips enclosed his now glistening, throbbing shaft within her mouth. He tasted of passion and nectar. Of male and need. Her tongue circled the engorged purple head and she traced a slow line along his length, relishing the groan of his need, the arch of his hips as he buried himself deeper and wound his fingers through her hair.

“Rosia, oh gods, your mouth is a never-ending torturous sting of pleasure.”

She released him for but a swift breath. “Then give me your sweet

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pollen, my lord, all of its essence shall belong to me.” She surrounded him once again, sucked and teased, and she felt him swell, hard and tight, until he offered her his explosion of release and desire. She drank from him gladly. Willingly. Wantonly.

He pulled her up along his body, wrapped her in his arms, and tugged the blanket over them. Kissing her forehead, he held her close. “I love you, sweet Beesinger.”

Her heart was full, yet she could not voice her own devotion. To do so would only make it harder when she had to leave.

CHAPTER 11

Gerrick was awakened by frantic pounding on his door.

“What is it?” he called, untangling from Ambrosia and arising from the bed.

“More fever, my lord,” came the muffled response. “We need the Beesinger.”

He turned to looking at Ambrosia, who was also awake and sat at the center of his bed. Sunlight streamed through the windows and caught her in its steady kiss.

Unable to help himself, he leaned forward and captured her lips. “Good morning, sweet beauty,” he said to her. He turned back to the door. “We’ll be with you shortly.”

“Yes, my lord.”

He reached for his clothing and dressed hurriedly. “It appears it isn’t over.”

Ambrosia rose from the bed and dressed as well. “Tonight is the full

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moon. His curse will be at an end and my work will be done. At the very least, it may dilute its effects on your people.” She pulled her dress over her head.

He heard her unspoken words and reached for her. “You will not leave me.”

She lifted her sad eyes to lock with his stern determination. “We knew our time would be short. Too many people will suffer if I attempt to stay. One curse could very well be supplanted by another—one I am unable to cure.”

“I will return with you. We will find a way.”

She turned away from him. “I must go. Your people need me.”

Samara was waiting for them in the entryway. Ambrosia felt her studied gaze as she approached her.

“I’ll take you to the ill,” she said. It appeared she was about to say something else, but then turned and walked to the door.

As Ambrosia entered the barn, she handed her satchel to Valonia and moved to one of the beds. There were only a few who now suffered from the fever.

“Hand me one of the bottles, Valonia,” she said without turning to her. “You will be well soon,” she soothed the young woman.

The morning flew by quickly as she tended the ill. Samara and Valonia accompanied her to several of the homes to visit with the villagers to confirm none had relapsed.

They now stood in the center square near a fountain. “This is a lovely village,” she said wistfully, knowing that tomorrow she must leave.

“You have done well, Beesinger, and will be rewarded for your efforts,” Samara responded.

She sighed. “I seek no reward, Samara. I’m glad I was able to be of assistance.”

“There’s nothing you would wish for?”

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What did the old woman want from her? Of course, there was something she wanted. But it wasn't hers to have so there was no point in wishing for the unattainable. "What I have is enough."

She saw an odd look pass between Samara and Valonia. Samara cackled. "You are determined on your path, but sometimes a new way will open and you will discover the first was not meant for you at all."

Ambrosia turned away from her. "You speak in riddles. It gives me a headache to try to decipher your meaning."

"When the time comes, you will be rewarded."

Samara left her standing in the square. Valonia turned and offered an encouraging smile before continuing after Samara.

"Beesinger!"

Ambrosia turned to the frantic voice behind her.

"What is it?"

The man was panting hard as he reached her side. "It's Lord Gerrick. He's come down with fever."

"Valonia," she called. "Quickly, the elixir. We must hurry to the castle."

Valonia raced back to her. "What's happened?"

"It's your brother. He has the fever."

They flew toward the castle.

As they reached the bedroom where Gerrick tossed restlessly on the bed, Ambrosia sat next to him. She smoothed a hand along his flushed brow. He opened his eyes and his fevered gaze met hers.

"Ambrosia," he rasped. His hot hand reached for hers. His encouraging smile was a shadow of what it should be. "I thought to evade the damned curse. It appears it was not meant to be."

"You will be well, my lord. I am here. You will be up and around soon." She turned to Valonia. "The elixir."

Valonia handed her a bottle. She unstopped it and tipped it to the cup. There wasn't enough. She looked up. "Another bottle."

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“There is no more, Ambrosia. That is the last of it.”

Ambrosia stood and hurried to her, fear squeezing her heart. She wrenched the satchel from her hand, yanking out bottle after bottle—all of them empty. “This can’t be. He must have a full measure or it won’t work.”

“What will we do? Can you make more? Can it be done quickly enough?”

Ambrosia looked back toward the bed. He could not die. She wouldn’t allow that to happen. Yes, she could make more. But to do it here, where there would be no healing waters to combat the venom once it raced through her could mean her death.

She turned back to Valonia with resolution. “I need to speak with Samara. Immediately. We have little time before the sun will set and the full moon rises. He must be healed before that happens.”

She walked back to the bed and leaned down to him. His dark lashes lay against his flushed face as he tossed beneath the ravages of the fever. “You will be well, my love. I swear to you, I will heal you.” She placed a kiss against his brow and turned and left, knowing what she must do.

Samara met her in the entry. “There are things I require, and I will need them quickly.”

Samara nodded, her ancient eyes filled with wisdom. “Your path has been revealed.”

“Apparently. I need an unblemished dagger, and I will need a large jar of purified honey, some thyme, eucalyptus, chamomile, and oil of callowart. And a pestle and bowl for crushing. You will obtain these things for me?”

“Yes, I will have them waiting.”

“The honey must be heated until it scalds.” Her only hope was that the flavor of pollen collected by the bees at Blakely would offer the same binding agent as that obtained on the island. But there was no

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choice, it was the only honey she had available to her.

She turned to Valonia. "I need a clean robe. As well as a sterile bottle. Can you locate these items for me?"

"Yes." She turned and hurried away.

"I will need the dagger immediately. When Valonia returns, ask her to meet me with the items I require by the stream that borders the village. I will be at the edge of the small clearing of trees. It is a secluded spot and where the bees will gather. The herbs must be ready when I return."

"You are certain you wish to do this?"

She stared at Samara steadily. "There is no other choice. It must be done."

Samara nodded. "As you wish. All will be ready for your needs."

Ambrosia hastened out the door and down the steps of the castle. There was no time to waste. No time for a ritual cleansing as was usually required for the ceremony. She would have to settle for bathing in the stream.

Valonia arrived with the items she had requested as she entered the water. "Here are the robe and dagger. And I have the clean bottle also."

The cold water chilled and numbed her, which was not necessarily a bad thing considering what was to come next. "Thank you, Valonia, I will be done shortly."

"What are you going to do, Ambrosia?"

She couldn't tell her as she might try to stop her from accomplishing her task. "I must commune with the bees."

"How will you do that?"

Ambrosia settled herself into the cold water, allowing it to rush over her, to cleanse her of impurities. "I will need your assistance, but you must not interfere. Do you understand? Under no circumstances are you to disturb the ritual once I have begun. No matter what. Give me your word."

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“Ambrosia, what are you going to do? Is it dangerous? Gerrick wouldn’t want you to endanger your life.”

“I will do what I must. Your word, or you must return to the castle now.” She pinned the young girl beneath a hard, firm look, demanding her obedience.

“Very well. You give me little choice. I will not leave you alone. I give you my word.”

Ambrosia released a relieved sigh. She knew she would probably require the girl’s help to reach the castle when the ritual was completed. But she would in no way allow her to interfere with what needed to be done.

“Take the robe and stand over near the edge of the clearing and wait for me to call you. Under no circumstances should you come to me before I summon you.”

“You’re frightening me. What are you going to do?”

Ambrosia stood up. “Do as I say. Now. I am the Beesinger and I will do what is required.”

Valonia picked up the robe and hurried to the edge of the clearing. Ambrosia stepped from the water. She picked up the dagger and glass jar and set them on a large flat boulder that would have to serve as her altar. Then she rose and walked to the center of the clearing. There was no lotion to enhance her attraction to the bees.

She studied her surroundings and an idea struck. The lotion she used was made from the essence of the flowers. She would make do with the base of the lotion by rubbing the petals on her skin, thereby possibly retaining some of their heady fragrance.

Once she’d done that, she moved back to the center of the clearing, fervently hoping it had been enough.

Closing her eyes, she tilted her head back, and spread her arms wide. Inhaling a deep breath, she then released it in song. It was a melody of need, of seduction that the bees would recognize. She heard

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their humming, felt the breeze stir against her skin, felt them alight and cover her.

And now the cadence of her song changed. It became one of discord, anger, and betrayal. They responded, and she felt them pierce her skin. Over and over the sacrifice of their lives to provide the venom she needed to restore human life. Her body throbbed with the sensations as venom raced through her blood, mixing and beating against her.

It would offer life. The power of the bees surged through her. A blaze of creamy light arced inside, an energy created by nature and beyond, to provide only what the bees and the Beesinger could produce together.

Pain pulsed through her with the release of the venom as it mingled with the Beesinger's blood. Intermingled with the throbbing pain was pleasure of knowledge, of creation filling her with power as the bees hummed around her. Her spirit moved into the light, to a merging with the essence of the bees, a moment of oneness like no other, filled with the rich, golden haze of fusion of souls.

Severed from the unity of the pure amber light, she was dropped back into the surging white-hot agony of hell as the venom burned a path through her body. Her song ended abruptly on a groan as she fell to her knees, gasping at the enormity of the roaring blaze consuming her, her skin seared crimson with reaction to the poison.

Her mind entrenched in a red haze, she staggered back to her feet and fumbled to grasp the dagger. With an unsteady hand she made a clean cut in her forearm, allowing her venom-enriched blood to drain into the waiting receptacle.

After a time, as a wave of lightheadedness rose to engulf her, her arm was gripped and yanked away as Valonia sought to bind the wound. "No more, Ambrosia, it's enough," she said as she bound her arm tightly with a ragged strip of cloth torn from her dress.

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Already her lungs tightened. She knew what to expect, and there was no healing pool to counteract the results, no soothing water to repair the wound. “Stopper the bottle. You will need to carry it. Assist me back to the castle.

Valonia quickly helped her to don the robe. Shafts of agony threaded through her at the touch of the material against her swollen skin. Valonia put an arm around her waist to steady and guide her.

“Is that what you go through every time you create the elixir?”

“It is the ritual, yes. Usually done in the confines of the labyrinth.”

“Are you in danger here?”

She offered her a weak smile. “Don’t worry about me. I need to prepare the elixir and get it to your brother quickly.”

Valonia stopped walking. “But what happens to you? I can see the swelling beginning, and the redness. Will the elixir help you?”

She urged Valonia to continue walking. There was no time to waste—not for the elixir and not for her. Already she felt the ravaging effects of the venom as it trampled through her. Soon it would overtake her and she must administer the elixir to Gerrick before that happened.

“I am immune to the elixir. It is made of my blood therefore has no effect on me. Please, we must hurry. I can’t waste time talking about what may or may not happen.”

Finally, as they staggered through the front door, Samara was there to offer support. “Everything is ready as you requested.”

Preparation of the elixir became a laborious nightmarish task as she fought the shroud of pain that sought to bind her. Finally, it was ready. She wiped a hand across her sweating brow and turned from the table. Looking out the window, she saw that the sun had begun to set.

“It is ready,” she fought through the swelling of her throat to speak. “Help me.”

She swayed and Samara and Valonia rushed forward and caught her before she fell. “What can we do? How can we help you?”

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“I need to get to him before—” She stopped, thinking better of revealing what she knew. “Gerrick must have the elixir. Samara send word to the village. Be sure no one else has succumbed.”

“Gerrick will be the last,” Samara informed her. “If he is healed, the curse will be lifted.”

Ambrosia nodded. “Very well, then. Get me to him.”

It was a painstaking process as they mounted the stairs. Ambrosia looked up and never had a journey seemed so unending. At last they arrived at his door and Valonia opened it.

They helped her to sit on the bed at Gerrick’s side. He was unconscious, tossing in his fever-drenched dreams. She lay a hand against the side of his face, smoothed back a lock of his dark hair, memorized his strong, handsome features.

“Samara, pour a measure of the elixir and hand it to me.” Her words were interlaced with fits of wheezing. “Valonia, I will need you to steady my hand.”

Tears sprang to her eyes at the knowledge her own life was ebbing away and her strength diminished. Samara handed her the measure and Valonia steadied her. “Samara, raise his head. It wouldn’t do for him to choke after all we have done.”

Samara’s look was dark and strained. “This is no time for joking, Beesinger.”

“What better time than at the doorway of life and death,” she responded in a tight whisper.

“For you, my love. Heal and guide your people well.” Slowly, she watched as he drained the small cup.

Valonia took the empty cup and moved from the bed. Samara allowed his head to sink to the pillow and moved away also.

Ambrosia would not allow herself to succumb to the pain—not yet. She watched him as the elixir worked its magic. Gradually the warm flush receded from his face and she sighed in relief.

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His eyelids fluttered open and he gazed around the room. Then his eyes met hers. She smiled.

“You will recover, my lord.”

He studied her and she saw the worry pass over his face.

“Are you ill? What is it?” He reached up a hand to touch her face.

“All is as it should be. Remember, I have loved you, my lord. You have given me the only moments I have ever known of true bliss.” Her eyelids grew heavy as the world began to fade and the agony in her chest—a cruel band coiled tightly. The numbing grace of unconsciousness received her.

CHAPTER 12

He refused to leave her side as she lay struggling for life upon his bed. When she folded to the floor like a wilted wildflower beneath the killing force of a strong wind, a panic such as he'd never known before surged through him.

Kneeling beside her, he pulled her into his arms and looked up at Samara and Valonia. "What's happened? How is it the fever has touched her as well? She must take the elixir."

Tears poured down Valonia's cheeks. "The elixir cannot heal her. She is immune to it," she sobbed.

"What are you saying?"

"The elixir was gone, so she created more. In saving you, she's killed herself."

He looked down at her unable to believe what Valonia was telling him. She could not die. But the red swelling and labored breath informed him otherwise.

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“Why?” he rasped out.

“Apparently, there are special ways for her to heal on the island. But we don’t have them here. She knew, Gerrick.”

The agony of losing her was too much to bear. Carefully, he lifted her and lay her on the bed. “Find the healers, find someone to help her. It can’t end this way. I will not allow her to sacrifice herself for me.”

Samara placed a hand on his shoulder. “She made her choice, Gerrick. There is too much poison, no one can help her now.”

Gerrick shrugged her hand from his shoulder. “I will not allow her to die,” he ground out. “Oriana!” he roared out with the pain of a wounded savage lion. “Oriana, I demand that you show yourself. Now!” She had to come and she must have an answer.

Amazingly, in a swirl of red smoke, she materialized—and not happily. “What is it, young lord? You have my Beesinger, what more do you want?”

Unable to believe she’d actually appeared, he rose from the bed. “She’s dying,” he bit out, unwilling to waste even one moment on idle banter. “You have to save her.”

Oriana, with her haughty chin raised, looked first at him, then at the prone figure on the bed. Thunder clapped loudly in the air about Blakely. “What have you done?”

Valonia stepped forward. “The elixir was gone and she was required to create more.”

“Stupid mortal. She should have known better than to try that away from the island. Whatever possessed her?”

“She did it for me—to save my life.”

She turned her intent gaze on Gerrick. “So, you have bedded her. And was she what you expected?”

Vain, shallow woman. He tried to contain his temper. “She is close to death. What will it take to get you to heal her?”

An assessing, predatory look flitted across her face. Her lust-filled

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gaze raked him from feet to head. “Ah, you seek to purchase her. Then you enjoyed her.”

Gerrick ground his teeth together. “I want her freedom. I want you to heal her.”

“What is it worth to you? Would you offer your soul in exchange for her? I could use a drone with some spark.” She lifted a long finger to tap against her chin. “It might just be worth it.”

She walked toward him and placed a palm against his chest. “Would you offer your soul to me, my young lord? She may be my Beesinger, but she’s still mortal. Wouldn’t you like to bed me and find out what’s it’s like to sink that lusty cock of yours into immortal realms?” Her hand eased its way down his chest to halt at his groin. “Well, what say you?”

What he wanted was to destroy her and all of her kind for playing havoc with their lives. To them, they were like playing pieces on a chess board to be moved about or tossed away on their whim. They cared little for the destruction that followed in their wake.

“I will give you what you want,” he bit out. “But you will heal her and release her family from their obligation.”

A self-satisfied smile rose to her red lips. “You drive a hard bargain. You value your services highly. But I think—”

“Wait!” Valonia stepped forward and Oriana turned to pin her beneath a fierce look. “I offer you a better bargain.”

Interest sparked in Oriana’s eyes. “I’m listening.”

“Valonia.” Samara’s tone seemed to offer some warning.

“No, Samara. It must be done.” Valonia turned back to face Oriana. “I am told you had a son.”

Wariness crept into Oriana’s eyes. “I suffered a weak moment and took a fertile mortal male to my bed a long time ago. What of it?”

“You bore him a child—a male child. The man you bedded was a warlock.”

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“Which he neglected to inform me at the time. I tossed him and the child out for his subterfuge and cursed him and all his progeny.”

“And do you know what became of your creation, Oriana?” Valonia asked her softly.

Oriana tossed her thick black hair over her shoulder. “No, nor did I care. I never made that particular mistake again.”

“Well, let me tell you. Your lovechild, half mortal, half immortal, became a warlock like his father. And when he reached manhood, he came to Blakely and was besotted with Lady Blakely. He cast a spell over her when she refused him. He left her with his seed and she bore a child—a child who caused her death. I am that child—your granddaughter. I offer myself, a child of your blood, in exchange for both Gerrick and Ambrosia.”

“How do I know this is true?” Oriana turned from Gerrick to assess Valonia more carefully.

“Your son, Tovak, told Lady Blakely after he had taken what he wanted from her,” Samara informed her. She turned to Gerrick. “I was the only other besides Lord Blakely who knew the secret and it’s why your father banished me.”

“That’s why Tovak came back. He wanted Valonia,” Gerrick surmised.

Samara nodded. “And it’s why he cursed Blakely when he died, for not giving him what he wanted. I don’t believe he realized I knew the truth. After his death, the Beesinger was the only one who could have a chance of lifting the curse.”

Oriana laughed. “Of course. It would only have been through me that it could have been achieved. How very resourceful of you.” She turned back to Valonia. “And where have you been? Here at the castle?”

“No. Lord Blakely sent me to a convent to be raised. I’ve only returned recently.”

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“And you would exchange yourself for these two who mean nothing to you?”

Valonia turned and looked at Gerrick and then at Ambrosia. “I may not have known them long, but they are like family. Ambrosia has told me of her life as a Beesinger and I want to learn more. I could take her place.”

“No, Valonia, you don’t know what you’re saying,” Gerrick rushed to halt her. He could not give up his sister to a self-centered creature such as Oriana.

“It’s my decision, Gerrick. I would do this.”

“It has merit,” Oriana inserted. “And ultimately, it is my decision, isn’t it? And as we discuss it, my Beesinger hovers closer to death.”

“Then decide,” Gerrick demanded. “Whichever the choice, heal Ambrosia and do it now. It will be either my sister or me in exchange for her, so what harm can it be to heal her as we broker our agreement?”

Oriana walked over to the bed and cupped Ambrosia’s head. She closed her eyes and leaned forward. All in the room remained silent as Oriana concentrated.

Miraculously, the ravages of the bee stings faded and the redness disappeared. Her breathing became less labored and eventually the wheezing disappeared totally.

She stepped away from Ambrosia. “The scar on her forearm shall remain—as a reminder of her foolishness. Now, let’s continue our negotiation.”

Gerrick moved past her to sit next to Ambrosia. Her eyelids fluttered and then opened and Gerrick exhaled in relief. She sat up and looked around, her eyes widening when she caught sight of Oriana. Her gaze shifted back to Gerrick.

“Has she come for me?”

He stroked her bright hair and pulled her close to him. “I called for

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her when you were close to dying. You will be free, Ambrosia, one way or the other.” He turned back to Oriana. “Well?”

“I have decided. Mortal male companionship is such a fleeting thing. Though I do believe you would have offered me some amusing diversion for a time. I believe I will refuse your very tempting offer, Lord Gerrick.”

Ambrosia turned to study him. “What offer? What have you done?”

He soothed her. “It doesn’t matter. She has refused.”

Oriana continued. “A child of my blood and female at that. Now that is a tempting offer. One to mold as I see fit, to learn the true ways of the immortals. Raised in a nunnery no less, so unlikely to already be ruined by human frailties. Even better. But there will be more to the bargain.”

Gerrick steeled himself for further battle. “First I have a stipulation regarding Valonia.”

Oriana’s haughty eyebrow arched. “Really? And that would be?”

“Once a year, at the very least, you will allow her to come to us. She belongs with her family.”

“I will be her family. But if she feels a burdensome need to attend you, I will allow it.”

“What are you talking about?” Ambrosia asked in a worried tone.

“It is a long story that I will tell you later. Suffice it to say we have discovered Valonia is Oriana’s granddaughter.”

Ambrosia’s eyes widened in disbelief. She turned to Valonia. “Is that why you were so interested in my life as a Beesinger?”

Valonia nodded. “That was part of it. But there was more. After Samara told me the truth I wanted to know more about who I am. Oriana is the only one who can tell me what I need to know. This bargain offers no hardship.”

“Yes,” Oriana interjected. “I have better things to occupy my time, let’s get this done. My other conditions.”

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“What are they?” Gerrick asked.

“Ambrosia’s family obligations to me will continue to be met.” She held up a hand as Gerrick was about to object. “She will not need to return to the island. I may be leaving there soon myself. Mortals are so tedious, I may follow the others and retreat to above. But I have yet to come to a decision about that. Anyway. I will send a majority of my bees to Blakely for Ambrosia’s caretaking. Once a year you will provide me with a portion of the honey derived from them. Each of your eldest female children shall continue as beekeeper.” She paused for a moment and looked around the room. “And hence, the eldest female beekeeper shall always remain tone-deaf and never utter another musical note from her lips. That is my offer. Take it or leave it.”

Gerrick looked at Ambrosia and saw a look of wonder pass across her face. “Are you saying,” she whispered, “that I am free? You will not seek further retribution from my family? None will be called to serve you in solitude on the island?” She turned and looked at Gerrick. “That I am free to stay here?”

He could not tear his gaze away from her. She was his and always would be so. Their love knew no limits, no boundaries. How they’d managed to discover each other would always be a gift they would not question too closely.

“Yes, yes, you’re free. I’m sure he won’t toss you out simply because you can no longer carry a tune. So are we agreed?”

Gerrick waited for Ambrosia to answer. It would be her choice and hers alone, but he held his breath as he waited. Would she think their love worth giving up her beautiful singing voice and making that decision for those who came after?

She reached up a hand to cup his face. “I agree. Oh, yes. Losing the ability to sing is well worth the happiness I have found here.” But her voice wasn’t the only payment—how could she accept her freedom at the expense of Valonia’s?

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Gerrick pulled her into his arms. "Your song will always be heard in my heart. Every word you utter is a peal of ecstasy."

She blushed and turned her head to the side.

"So be it. I'm done here. Valonia, take my hand."

Valonia ignored her and instead walked over to Gerrick and Ambrosia and taking each of their hands, clasped them together. "Do not feel sadness, I am content with the bargain. Be happy and always remember me with kindness."

"How can we ever repay our debt to you? You will come back to us?"

Her smile was beautiful and serene. "Of course. You are my family. Although you may need to speak with Lord Blakely. Maybe he will forgive me one day."

Gerrick reached out to touch the side of her face. "I'll make sure he understands everything. He will come round. How can he help it with Ambrosia here to sweeten and bring sunshine into our lives every day?"

Valonia laughed and turned away. "All right, Grandmother. I'm ready."

Oriana winced. "There will be none of that. You may call me Oriana. I'm not grandmother material. I have much to teach you, young lady."

Valonia turned and winked at Gerrick and Ambrosia. "And I believe I may have a thing or two to teach you as well."

In a red puff of smoke they were gone.

"I shall miss her," Ambrosia said sadly.

"She is on her path," Samara said. "As you are. It's time for me to return to my home. You no longer have need of me here. I wish you well."

"Good health to you, Samara. Thank you for all you have done."

She nodded and shuffled from the room.

Gerrick and Ambrosia gazed at each other.

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“You will bring much beauty and light into this dismal castle. I’ve waited a long time for you.” He drew her to him. “That first taste of your sweet nectar and I knew you were meant to be mine.”

He captured her lips and drank long and deep, knowing their future would be just as rich, sweet, and timeless as the amber nectar created as a delicacy only the gods could appreciate.

ADRIANNA DANE

Theresa Gallup uses the pen names of Tess Maynard and Adrianna Dane. Theresa has been writing since the age of 10. A legal secretary for 30 years, she is currently working on another erotic romance, as well as a full-length romantic mystery/suspense. She has been married for 30 years and has three grown children (a daughter and twin sons), and is a new grandmother.

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For more information about current projects, visit Theresa's websites at www.tessmaynard.com or www.adriannadane.com.

* * *

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