

Quest for Fire

By

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Dedication

For Amy Zuccaro, without you this book would not exist and Nicole would have no voice.

You rock!

To Judith, Jess, and Janice - your input and support has been invaluable.

Love you guys!

Chapter One

“Who the hell thought this was a good idea?” Nicole muttered.

Sweat-soaked hair, straggling from a half-hearted ponytail, lay matted against Abby’s head and face. Sunglasses slid lower and lower down her nose with each plodding step. She blinked the burning perspiration from her weary brown eyes as she turned to gaze at her best friend. The smile she attempted probably resembled a snarl, but it was the best she could do at the moment.

Sauna-like heat suffocated and clung like an unwanted boyfriend. Every movement they made was mechanical, fixed, and unwavering. If their feet stopped, Abby was sure they would not start again.

“What the fuck was wrong with us?” Nic demanded under her breath. “We woke up this morning and thought, mmm-hmm, we’ll just go hiking in the jungle today? I don’t think so. Our asses should be lying by the hotel pool being served drinks by hunky cabana boys.”

“We’re in a foreign country,” Abby mumbled, wiping at her face with the bottom of her dirty t-shirt. “We should try to see some of it. Do you remember who said that?”

The wild sounds and intense fragrances of the Mexican jungle swirled about. Monkeys called in the trees above. Birds cried to companions as they lit the sky in a bright patchwork of color. Large flying insects buzzed and swooped in every direction.

“Oh fine, blame me,” Nicole grumbled as she marched along. “If it wasn’t for me you wouldn’t be here in the first place.”

Abby turned to stare at her friend. “You said it.”

“I didn’t mean here here, I meant the country. I had to drag you from Kentucky to Mexico practically kicking and screaming the whole way. No matter what, we needed this two-week vacation. Just not this part. We were so tricked.”

The promising day, which had started out on such high spirits, was rapidly escalating out of control. The travel company representative at the hotel, who touted the tour, guaranteed a marvelous archeological excursion to the Mayan ruins. A brief jaunt to see some of the oldest sites in Mexico, he said, and an opportunity to take pictures. They were to be back at the hotel, he promised, no later than two in the afternoon. Just enough time, Nic said, to have some drinks and a swim before dinner.

Instead, they found themselves on a mile-long trek through thick, heavy jungle with a guide who barely spoke English. Not one of the greatest ways to spend the first day of the much-anticipated vacation.

Nic pulled her heavy, dark caramel-colored braid forward and fanned herself with it. A moisture line where the braid had lain decorated her green shirt almost to the waist. For once Abby did not envy that mane. She was quite content with her shoulder-length flyaway dark-brown hair. The small part, remaining in the sad ponytail, bobbed merrily with each step. At least one part of her was vaguely cheery. The rest felt like it had been rolled over by the tour bus...several times.

The twenty-five member group they were with came upon yet another ruin. A collective moan of agony joined the singing birds. Not one person wished this to go on any longer. The oddly-shaped vestige of the Mayan site resembled a pyramid with the backside cut off. Tall steps led up to each level, finally ending in a large platform. Beyond that rose the rest of the pyramid. The guide talked and pointed excitedly but Abby had long since given up trying to understand. She just wanted to leave. Hell, at this point, she was willing to go anywhere just as long as it was far away. Preferably somewhere very cool. With drinks and comfortable chairs.

She contemplated the other members of the unhappy ragtag group. At least she and Nic listened when the bastard, who set them up on this death march, said wear comfortable hiking shoes. Most of the other participants wore sandals, or in one woman's case, low-heeled designer dress shoes. Abby glanced at the woman, taking in her matching coral short and top set, upswept spa hairdo, and scads of gold jewelry. Shaking her head, she wondered why people never listened to good advice.

Abby pulled her sunglasses off to again wipe her face with the white t-shirt she wore, as much good as it did. The tee was soaked through from the intense humidity of the hundred-degree temperature blanketing the jungle area. God, she couldn't wait to get back to the hotel. Not only was she sweaty, but filthy from the sudden dust storm that swirled half of Coba around their group. A thin layer of gritty dirt instantly coated any wet surface. From the picture Nic presented, Abby knew she must appear equally as lovely. She didn't even need a mirror; she just had to smell herself. If asked for a one-word description, rank instantly came to mind. The bus ride back would be an adventure of the unpleasant kind. Abby doubted if any of them would survive the stench of bodies packed tightly together after a day in the scorching jungle. She shuddered at the thought of the bus ride, wondering if the hotel would even let them in. She wouldn't.

"Remind me to kill the bastard who booked us," Nic spoke under her breath. "I remember him saying half day. He promised. I'll give him half day right up his stupid head."

Abby just nodded. She couldn't answer, her brains felt cooked. *If I faint, would we go back to the bus? The bastards would probably leave me. I wouldn't want to carry anyone either in this heat. In situations like this, it's every woman for herself.*

"Come on," Nicole nudged her. "He said we could actually investigate the building."

"And this means what?" Abby slowly trudged along behind her.

"Inside—" Nicole stopped to stare at her "—out of the sun."

"We're going up there?" Abby pointed to a spot that looked very high to her. "I'll just wait down here. Take some pictures for me." She was not going up those steep steps.

"You are not waiting in the sun." Nic put her hands on her hips. "Let's go."

"Nicole, you know I'm scared of heights."

"I'll hold your hand. It's not that far. So get used to it, missy. You're climbing."

Nicole was right, the reasonable side of Abby's brain argued. She needed to get out of the sun before her brain became a bowl of poached goop. Inhaling, she made herself march up the high set of stone steps, clutching Nicole's sweaty hand in a death grip. Members of their group already clustered around a slab of rock under an open-air hut. Abby spared a brief glance but continued on. The rock obviously had significance, but right now she couldn't care less. She just wanted to make it off the steps before her knees gave out. The sun beat down mercilessly on the grayish-white stone. Abby could feel her feet burning through the thick soles of her *Nike's*. She couldn't imagine actually living in this miserably-hot place. She'd shrivel up and die from the heat within minutes.

Glancing around, a wave of dizziness struck her. She clutched Nicole's hand tighter, attempting to breathe deeply until they reached some place safe. Fainting and rolling down a ruin would certainly end a low day on an even lower note.

"In here." Nicole tugged her toward an opening in the structure.

Abby leaned in the doorway gulping great drafts of air. The cool dim confines of the tiny room felt heavenly. Both women removed their sunglasses as they stepped farther along to allow others access. Abby opened the water bottle she carried to take a long pull. The water, though warm and slightly plastic tasting, was refreshing. Not as good as the fun drinks at the resort, but it would do. For now.

"Do you think they would leave us here and catch us on the return trip?" Nicole asked, drinking from her own bottle.

"We can ask," Abby smiled, wiping her face once again on her dirty shirt. "When I get back to the hotel I'm burning this outfit."

“May as well, we’ll never get them clean.”

“So, remind me again why we came here?”

“To soak up the culture of another country,” Nicole quickly replied. “And to meet studly men who will fall on the ground to worship at our feet, loving us forever as they carry us off to their jungle plantation homes. Rich homes.”

“Of course,” Abby smiled. “Like we’d want poor men. However, I didn’t mean this gloriously wonderful tour. I meant to Mexico.”

“Oh, so we’d meet rich men who would fall madly in love with us to carry us off to their rich European homes.”

Abby laughed tiredly. “I’m sensing a theme here. Truthfully, I’ll skip the men and win my big money. Love is a marketing tool used to sell tickets to the movies, and for high school kids going through their first big crush. It’s not real. Men are absolutely worthless.”

“You know what, girl?” Nicole grimaced. “Every man I’ve dated is shittier than the last. But I’m sure there are good ones out there. At least one or two.”

“No, there isn’t.” Abby’s joking mood evaporated. “Not that I’ve found anyway.” James had taught her that. Very painfully and very quickly.

Nicole gave her a brief hug. “Not all men are like him.”

“Don’t want to talk about it.” Abby shook her head.

“Right. Let’s make a pact. No men at all, ever. We’ll win the lottery and run away to live in Hawaii.”

“Cheers.” They raised water bottles to each other.

“Oh, and let’s give a toast to my new house.” Abby tapped her bottle to Nic’s. “Three bedrooms, two baths, and a large backyard for Jinx and Minnie to roam to their hearts content. It’s all mine. At least until we win our big millions and run off to Hawaii.”

They toasted again and drank. “Oh yes, the miniature horses that masquerade as dogs,” Nicole laughed. “So when do the three of you get to move in?”

“Hey, don’t make fun of my dogs. They love their Auntie Nicole very much.”

“Mmm-hmm, Auntie Nicole would love them so much more if they realized they were miniature Clydesdales and not tiny poodles. One of them can’t get in my lap, not to mention two of them. I’m squashed flat like a bug by the time they get done with me.” She shook her head smiling. “So when are you moving again?”

“The realtor said sometime within the next two months. The people I’m buying from are moving out of state and my lease isn’t up for another month anyway. So it works out fine.”

“And so when do you start your new job?”

“Two days after we get back home. I’m ready. I’m just really glad you let me stay with you until I can move.”

“Girl, what are best friend’s for?” Nicole waved away Abby’s thanks. “You know you’re welcome as long as you want. I’d prefer you to stay forever, but I have no room for the terrible two.”

“That’s why I have to move. I hate to leave them at the kennel any longer than I have to. You could always move in with us,” Abby said. “I have room.”

“Let’s put that off until you move and see how you like it. You know I’d love it, but you might like having your own space more. In the meantime, I’d better see if our group is ready to move on. He said he would yell for us, but I don’t trust him. What’s our group name again?”

“Jaguars,” Abby replied as Nicole hurried out. The quiet of the shadow-enshrouded room fell around her, promising rest. Dust motes floated gently in the musty air. Abby slowly perused the small room, spying where the wall dented in to create a natural shelf. Maybe some long ago person had used the space to display colorful handmade pottery. Or medicinal herbs. The age of the space transfixed and called to her. Stepping closer she placed a hand against the cool stone wall. She could feel slight ridges from the tool used to cut and smooth the rock. Whoever built this place was a true artist since they used no mortar to set the stones.

Perhaps this had been someone’s home. Abby liked the idea since finally purchasing her first place. The search went on forever before finding just the right house. She researched the market, mortgage companies, and neighborhoods thoroughly before making a decision. And, finally, had taken the huge step and signed the contract the day before their flight.

A new job also awaited her arrival home. She knew long hours of training and overtime were ahead of her, but she really didn’t have a choice. She had to make the changes, though she hated them. She felt as though her very survival depended on it. She could not allow him to find her, ever.

Forcing her thoughts away from the stress that waited at home, she studied the wall and shelf above. The area really wasn’t that high up. Glancing around, Abby found a discarded stone tossed in a corner. She checked to make sure no one was around and then quickly settled it in front of the wall. She suddenly had to know if anything remained on the ledge. Gingerly, she stepped up to peek into the indentation.

Nothing.

The little area was empty. It would have been perfect to hold jars or knick-knacks. Frowning, she began to step down when a small glint caught her eyes. Rising on tiptoe, she gripped the edge of the rock to peek again. Toward the back of the sill a piece of jewelry lay amidst the dust. She reached out her hand to drag it forward.

“Jaguars!” a male voice yelled outside, startling her and causing an echo throughout the room.

Abby snatched her find and hurried from the room. The sun and humidity struck her like a heavy weight. Breathing took on the intensity of an Olympic event. She shaded her eyes wondering if she could sue them if any of this caused permanent damage. Fumbling for the sunglasses in her pocket, she slipped them on.

“Abby, girl, let’s go.”

Nicole waved to her as their group gathered on the dirt path. Holding her breath, Abby cautiously descended the steeply pitched steps, still clutching her discovery. As they once again slogged down a dirt trail, she spared a moment to study the necklace. Damn, it was ugly. A tarnished disk, the size of a coaster, swung from a thick chain created of delicate silver strands intricately braided together. On one side, engraved in a circular pattern, were markings that may have been some kind of foreign language. The other featured a woman holding something in her hands. Abby rubbed the disk against her shirt but only succeeded in adding more dirt to the ugly thing. The image was certainly not any clearer.

“Well, crud,” she muttered, sticking the necklace in her front button pocket. Someone had probably lost it. Though how it had found its way onto the shelf was a mystery. She hoped it wasn’t a valuable antiquity. A Mexican prison was the last place she wanted to end up on her vacation.

“What’s going on?” Nicole slowed down to walk beside her.

“Nothing, daydreaming and wishing the day would be over. Soon.”

“Girl, you and me both. The first thing I’m going to do is take a long cold shower. Then I’ll jump in the pool or maybe the other way around. Whatever, I know I’m going to have a big ice and alcohol-filled drink. I can almost taste it.”

The guide again stopped to admire yet another ruin. This one was small and in poor condition, so there would be no going inside. Abby could feel the sun bake her as he droned on and on about the possible uses of the dwelling. If it weren’t for the thirty-plus sun block, she would have been sunburned too. She thanked God for very small favors. Tall stringy trees dotted the area but offered no protection. Abby pushed a stray wet hair off her face, wishing for a tiny breeze. Or, even better, if they could hike on until they reached the end. The faster they moved, the faster they would get back to the bus.

The bus, her mind wandered, where it was cool. They would have cold drinks there and lovely moist towelettes. The dream machine would roar to life and whisk them off to the luxury hotel where a cool shimmering pool awaited.

“What’s that?” Nic nudged her, pointing into the dense trees.

“What’s what?” Abby glanced to where her friend pointed.

“That,” Nic said impatiently. “That movement.”

She studied where Nic pointed. Maybe she has jungle fever, Abby thought. “Trees, honey, those are trees. Then after that are more trees. Oh, and ruins. We can’t forget the ever important ruins.”

“Okay, but I’ve never seen trees or ruins move before.” She waved her hand, pretending to understand what the guide was saying. “Maybe the heat is getting to me.” She went back to fanning herself with the braid.

Abby slipped her sunglasses down and studied where Nic had pointed. The trees and underbrush were particularly thick. Wiping at her eyes, she scrutinized the area again. She became conscious of something large moving within the dense forest. A large animal? She again blinked to clear her vision, but the thing was still there. Suddenly, she realized the only audible noise was the murmur of the guide’s voice. Every living thing within the forest had gone perfectly quiet.

Her heartbeat accelerated.

The hair on the back of her neck stood on end.

She touched Nicole’s arm.

“Look girl, it’s too hot to be likin’ me. Maybe later after we cool off,” Nicole teased.

“Nic...there *is* something out there. Do you hear it?”

She must have caught the underlying fear in Abby’s tone since all sign of joking disappeared.

“Hear what?”

“Nothing,” Abby whispered. “No birds, no animals, no insects. It’s silent. Totally silent.”

She and Nicole stared at one another. The fear Abby felt transmitted to her best friend like an electric shock. She opened her mouth but didn’t have a chance to speak.

A guttural scream tore its way through the clearing.

The guide and group of twenty-five froze.

From the thick forest the thing emerged, large and dark and deadly. It walked upright, standing approximately seven feet tall. Short, coarse black fur covered a powerful body and head. Large pointed ears swiveled to catch sounds as a cat’s did. Round, bulging red eyes with black pupils like slits stared at them. A long snout rose to sniff the air as a gaping mouth containing sharp fangs yawned open.

Thick heavy arms swung forward, displaying massive hands with razor-like talons. They clicked together ominously. The thing's gaze carefully examined the group, searching for something...or someone. A thick lip curled back exhibiting heavy sharp canines. A menacing growl emerged, then an ear-splitting howl.

The reverberation sent a shock wave through everyone.

In unison they fled, scattering like leaves on the wind. Scattering and running like the prey they were.

Abby dragged Nic away from everyone else. "Run! Whatever that thing is should chase the largest group and not us."

"How do you know that?" Nicole puffed, keeping up.

"I think I saw it on *Animal Planet*."

They dived off the path into the forest, running for their lives. Whip-like branches slashed at them. Roots snatched at their feet causing them to stumble. The walking nightmare's eerie howl came again. This time it was answered.

"Shit." Nicole looked back. "There are more of them."

Soon human wails of terror and pain joined with the animal cries. She and Nicole dodged trees and bushes, desperate to get away.

They *had* to get away.

Nicole ground to a halt. Abby found herself dragged off into even deeper brush as Nic took the lead. Where were they going? Did Nic have a plan? She hoped to hell so. Right now, she was all out. Fear had taken root. Abby shoved aside every thought but running as fast as she could—hoping that whatever was in the forest had missed them.

Nic stopped.

Abby ran into her.

Nic pointed to a thick mound of brush. They didn't take the chance to speak for fear of being heard. They ducked down and crawled inside the enormous pile. Abby backed in, overwhelmed by a pungent aroma that crossed between fish and dead stuff. Tentatively, she sniffed at a leaf then jerked her head away. The odor was coming from the hiding place they had chosen. Breathing through her mouth she crawled backwards until she was side by side with her best friend in the world.

They knelt in the gloom of the mound, both trying to catch a breath but still not wanting to breathe too deeply, afraid of what the stinky pile would do to them. And even more afraid the creatures would find them.

Abby shook uncontrollably, unable to make herself stop. She clenched her jaw to stop her teeth from chattering.

No noise. She had to keep totally quiet.

She felt Nic grasp her hand. It shook too.

Abby closed her eyes praying for a miracle; a miracle that would come along and save them. They couldn't die, dammit. They had so much more to do. They weren't even thirty yet. Hell, they still had all week left at the resort. And she was moving into her wonderful house and starting a new job.

Something large crashed through the underbrush outside their hidey-hole. Her eyes snapped open.

She and Nic gripped hands tighter. Harsh panting assaulted their ears. An aroma that overpowered the plants wafted in. It smelled like dead skunk and wet decaying leaves. Abby felt bile rise in her throat. One of the monsters paused right outside. Please, please, please, she thought, go away. She eased out a breath as it began to slowly shamble down the path.

It was leaving, she thought. It was leaving. They were safe.

Jubilation was short lived as footsteps returned. She froze.

Shadows crisscrossed crazily in the gloom as the beast again slowly circled the huge brush pile. Deep enormous breaths huffed in and out of its snout. The thing was searching, smelling them out. She met Nicole's frightened eyes with her own.

Maybe it wouldn't find them.

Maybe the bushes would mask their scent.

Maybe it would just go away.

Barking shrieks forced the women to clutch their ears. The sound was deafening inside the confined space.

Soon more crashing steps raced toward them. The thing had called for reinforcements.

Abby seized Nicole to burrow deeper into the mound. She hoped, prayed, they would find another way out. If they didn't, they would most certainly die.

As they clawed their way through, the animals above were also clawing for a way in. The girls scrabbled faster, unmindful of the scratching branches.

They had to get away.

Sensing their prey's flight, the animals began howling, calling to more of their kind.

Abby felt wetness falling on her cheeks, whether from tears, sweat or blood, she was unsure. Her hands and arms stung, her breathing labored, but still she dug harder and faster. She could hear Nic grunting in exertion as she plied her way through. It wouldn't be for lack of trying if they didn't escape.

Together they made one last push. The flat ground gave way as both women tumbled down, down a large hill. They crashed through brush and high grass, landing beside a small stream.

Abby raised herself shakily to her bloody hands and knees, gulping air into her burning lungs. She looked around to find Nic spread-eagled on her back. Abby reached for her but the call of the monsters stilled her movement. Nic rolled on to her stomach as the sounds of pursuit reached them.

"We have to get the hell out of here." Abby stood, grabbing her best friend.

Nic pushed off from the ground, blood also streaking her arms and hands. "Cross the water. I saw some stupid show on *Discovery*, or maybe it was *CSI*, that swore animals couldn't track through water."

They stumbled through the cool water. It felt heavenly as blood and grime ran in streams from their bodies. Every inch of her body throbbed and stung, especially the fresh cuts, but Abby kept going. They couldn't stop, couldn't rest. She just hoped they could stay on the run long enough until some kind of help arrived. That was their only chance. Crashing brush and sharp cries signaled that the monsters still tracked them. Abby picked up her pace, which Nicole mimicked. Neither one felt like being a meal as the members of their group most probably had.

They clawed their way up the steep embankment. Nicole struggled and Abby pulled her along. Inexplicably, each step was an extreme effort, like running through sand or fighting against some kind of unseen force field. Then, like shot from a sling, they whooshed forward. Both women staggered. Neither dared glance back. A torrent of kicked-up water warned of the creatures' approach. They ran faster, dodging bushes and ducking branches. If they could just find a place to hide long enough, they might be able to wait these things out.

Nic gasped, pulling Abby to a standstill. She raised her gaze. A creature stood in front of them, no more than fifteen feet away. Its wide muzzle gaped, revealing saber-like fangs. Huge talons clicked together. Growling deep, it fixated upon them with burning red eyes. Abby's mind went completely blank.

"Fuck you," Nic said, picking up a rock and hurtled it at their foe. The rock struck its chest, causing a hesitation. In that moment, Abby felt Nic pull her from the path. She knew it was no use, the thing would catch them. But it would have to work for it.

They plowed into each other as another creature came out of the brush.

An intense whistling sound broke the tension. Abby gasped. It jerked back, an arrow protruding from its chest. The thing gurgled, teetered and then fell to the ground with a loud crash.

“Let’s go,” Nic said, taking off. Abby followed, wondering what the hell was going on. She didn’t think the Mexican government used bows and arrows. But what the fuck did she know? She also thought this was going to be a relaxing vacation too.

The cries of the creatures closed in around them, but still they ran. Abby put her head down to pour on the speed. Her breathing became jagged as a stitch burrowed in her side. The hike through the heat had sapped too much of her strength and energy. She could feel herself slowing.

She unexpectedly realized she only heard one pair of feet, her own. She almost tripped to a halt. Nic wasn’t with her. How had they separated? She heard another barking cry.

“Not Nicole,” Abby prayed as she gripped her side. “Keep her safe.”

Nicole ran full out, her legs and arms pumping, just as she had once run on the soccer field. But that was before the knee and shoulder injuries. She breathed through the ache building in her left knee, she had to keep going. She was alone. Somewhere, she and Abby had become separated. The thought chilled her. How could she let this happen? Too focused on you, the voice in her brain teased, just as before. She hadn’t paid attention and Abby had got hurt. Well this time she might get dead. Nicole swiped the tears from her eyes. Don’t think about it. Abby will be safe. She’s smart. She’s tough.

The whirlwind of fears in her head caused a misstep. One minute she was running free, the next a root caught her foot, spilling her to the ground. She grunted at the impact as her breath gasped out and she tasted dirt. Her knee throbbed and burned. She hoped it would hold her since there was no handy team doctor to run out to tape it. Only huge creatures that would love to find her injured. Injured prey did make the best kind.

She rolled to her back in an attempt to stand and pull in a breath. A creature stalked out of the trees toward her, fangs gleaming, talons clicking. The thing was biding its time, waiting for her to tire, waiting to make the kill. She pulled her shaking legs under her and stood. Adrenaline rushed through her system. Aches and pains disappeared. The sharp scent of pine both shocked and awakened her. Pine? There was no pine in Mexico. The thought rushed away as her breathing picked up, deep and full. The monster growled low as it pinned her with a red-eyed gaze. She’d be damned if the thing would take her without a fight.

The beast furled back black lips to display huge fangs as it stalked toward her. She took deep breaths with each step backwards. *Get ready to run.* A whooshing sound, a passage of air immobilized her. A large arrow embedded itself in the creature's head, knocking it to the ground. Dead.

She spun around in surprise to find a man dressed in greens and browns standing behind her. A hood drooped low over his head, covering the upper part of his face. The only section she could discern was a strong jaw and full kissable lips.

Kissable what? What the hell was her problem? A thing almost killed her and she was noticing some man's lips. Hell, maybe she needed her head examined. Maybe she was knocked out. Maybe she was dead and didn't know it.

"Are you well?" he spoke, his voice low and lush like rich chocolate. Nicole almost gagged at her thoughts. She definitely had to be dead.

"I don't know." Her speech came out croaky. The run had dried her mouth. There wasn't enough spit to even swallow. "What's going on? What are those things?"

"We must go." He held out a hand. "We cannot stay here. There are more of them."

"Right," Nic nodded, walking shakily toward him. "I have a friend out here, Abby. We got separated."

"We will search for her."

Nic took his hand. A shock jolted through her and she gasped. He did too. His hand was large, callused and warm, but it was more than that. Much more. Sensual heat ran through her body, heat like she had never felt before. From his ragged intake of breath and the hold he had on her hand, he felt it too. It arrested his movements as it did hers. They stood together, holding hands. She gazed into his face. Intense blue eyes met her brown. The depth caused a sense of falling, falling fast and hard.

A barking cry sounded. It freed them from whatever spell held them. He took a small step back. "We have to leave," he spoke softly. It sounded shaky, just like her knees.

"Okay." She hated that she sounded breathy, but couldn't help it. It was from all that running, that's what it was. Nothing more.

He pulled a cup out of the cloak and filled it with water from a bag that hung from his broad shoulders. "Drink first." She was hesitant, wondering what the hell it was.

"It will refresh you." He drank from the cup first and then held it out to her. It was cold and crisp, tasting slightly fruity and oh so good. After a second cup he slipped the container away, taking her hand again. The jolt was still profound, but Nic ignored it. Together, they jogged hand in hand down the path. Nicole hoped wherever Abby was, she was safe and they saw each other soon.

Abby crouched behind a bush. The stitch in her side had become a pain so intense it doubled her over. She just couldn't run anymore. She was actually surprised she lasted as long as she had since she couldn't really remember when she last went to the gym. If she weren't so tired she would mentally kick herself, but that took too much effort. Shit, at this point, breathing took effort.

The filthy t-shirt was once again used as a rag to wipe her face, as much good as it did. Sweat rained down her body. Only a cold shower and a change of clothes would begin to cool her. Abby grimaced. She doubted those would be happening any time soon. Right now her main worries were getting away and finding Nicole. She prayed the howling in the forest didn't have anything to do with her friend. She shrank farther into foliage as she attempted to control the rising panic. She had to gain control of herself. If she allowed fear to win, she knew she would die.

Abby peeked out from her hiding place, searching the forest for any movement. The surrounding area was too quiet. The hair on the back of her neck rose. Something was behind her. She didn't know how she knew, she just did. She held her breath and closed her eyes, then inched her hand around on the ground for something to use to defend herself. She refused to go down, not after staying alive this long. Closing her hand around a rock, she waited for movement, waited for the attack. She doubted she could protect herself against one of those things, but refused to die without trying.

A faint sound of twigs crunching underfoot came directly over her shoulder. Abby grasped the rock, swirling around to strike her foe. A hand seized her arm. She and her captor tumbled noisily to the ground. The rock in her hand dropped as the hand on her wrist tightened. A struggle began. She refused to die today.

She threw her elbow back, smiling in satisfaction at the grunt of pain. She gained her feet as arms encircled her in an attempt to pin her, but she threw herself wildly around, making the move impossible. Thrashing, her foot connected with her attacker's leg and the arms loosened. Innately, she kicked out again causing a cry. Abby smiled in grim satisfaction. Damn, now she knew why men went into wrestling and karate. Kicking ass was a major upper.

Her victory was short lived as her assailant grabbed her ankle and twisted. She fell heavily to the ground. Blackness swirled before her eyes. She could not pass out, this was not like before. She was stronger now. She kicked her legs wildly, feeling her foot connect once then again.

Running footsteps sounded behind them. An arm snaked around her waist, lifting her off the ground, but it was not covered in fur. She gasped as her hands closed over soft fabric. The attacker she fought was not one of those creatures. Abby instead found a man dressed in the colors of the forest.

“What are you doing, Garen?” a male voice over her shoulder spoke angrily. “The noise can be heard for many paces.”

“I tried to help.” Garen slowly stood. The hood he wore obscured most of his face but Abby could tell by the purse of his lips she had got in some good shots. “But this one fought me. I was taken by surprise.”

“This one can speak for herself,” Abby cut in. She hated being the topic of conversation, ignored like an unpleasant picture hanging on a wall.

She turned to find the man behind her dressed identically. Odd uniforms for Mexican...police? Or whatever they were. Maybe they were forest rangers, she thought, forest rangers that obviously saw way too many movies.

“What do you do out here?” he asked.

“We were with a tour group. These animal things came at us and we ran. My friend Nicole is out there and I have to find her. Can you help me?”

“We must rejoin our band. The Prince will know what to do. Come.” He motioned her to follow as the guy she had knocked on his ass fell in behind. She hoped he didn’t hold a grudge since he was guarding her back.

Prince? What the hell? Where did Prince come into this? No one told her a popular singer was running some kind of secret police force in the Mexican jungle. Shit, she could sell this story for a mint. Maybe she and Nicole could retire to some place wonderful, say like a huge stone castle where things like this could never happen again.

“Where are we going?” Nicole whispered to the beautiful blue-eyed man who held her hand. One part of her hoped he would tell her he was taking her off for a thorough ravishing. Damn, it had been ages since she had been ravished. Okay, it had been never, but a girl had dreams. Big dreams. And he seemed like just the man to fulfill them. She sighed. God, he is sexy. He made her feel hot and weak. She licked her lips, wishing it were his tongue doing the licking.

Shit, what was her problem? Heat. It had to be the heat. The sun had finally cooked her brain to oatmeal. Maybe none of this was real? Maybe she was lying in a hospital suffering from some type of jungle fever. If so, she wished he would get on with the ravishing part because the hiking and running was getting really old.

“We are rejoining my band.” He turned to speak to her. “It is safer if we stay together.”

His grip tightened on her hand. Nicole's knees went weak. This is not a swoon, she told herself. *I do not swoon.* She was tired, that's all. Tired and fevered.

"Are you well?" He put his arms around her to pull her close. He smelled heavenly, or enough to what she imagined heaven would smell like. It was earthy with hints of herbs and spices she could not identify, she just knew she could breathe him in forever.

"You are exhausted," he said, easily lifting her into his arms. The folds of his cloak encased her. Oddly, the inside of his cloak was cool like the inside of an air conditioned room. She shivered, though from the cool air or being surrounded by his warmth and scent, she did not know.

"Oh no. I can walk." She even thought the words sounded feeble and insincere. Moreover, she never thought once of struggling to get out of his arms.

"I know," he breathed by her ear, "but then I would not get the pleasure of holding you close."

"Oh, okay." She snuggled in his arms, hoping the dream she had fallen in would never end.

Everything sucked. The day was a total nightmare, Abby thought. Okay, she was happy someone had found her, but if she woke up in her own home she would jump for joy. She trudged through the forest surrounded by fifteen identically cloaked men. So weird. She had no idea what their deal was, but if they helped her find Nicole and get the hell out of this place, she would be grateful.

Garen, the man she kicked the shit out of, kept throwing glances her way. *Wonder if he expects me to leap in the air and toss him to the ground again?* She made a face at him. He quickly averted weary brown eyes. Smiling to herself Abby's step got lighter. She would definitely write to the guy who produced the kick boxing tape she attempted. The thing not only kept her in shape when she did it, but also allowed her to kick a Mexican forestry worker's ass. If that didn't make a woman feel powerful, she didn't know what would.

"Loriem," the man in front of her called. "Are you well? We were worried when we did not find you."

"I am fine Tarn, but I discovered someone in the forest."

Abby stepped around Tarn to see the man speaking. He was dressed as his companions, but carried someone in his arms. A smiling face popped out of his cloak to look around.

"Nicole!" Abby hurried forward. "Are you okay?"

Loriem carefully set Nicole on her feet but did not release her. Abby frowned, wondering if she'd have to kick his ass too. Hell, she figured she was pissed enough to take the lot of them on and win.

Nicole hugged Abby tightly. “Girl, I was scared shitless. Where the hell were you? I looked around and you were gone.”

“Don’t worry about it.” Abby returned the hug. She faced Tarn, the man who led her group. She didn’t know who this Loriem character was, but she didn’t like how he eyed Nic. Lustful was the big word that came to mind. “How do we get out of here? We need to get back to our hotel.”

Tarn and Loriem glanced at one another. Loriem spoke. “I do not know what you mean by hotel. But we will escort you to our home to speak to my cousin, the Prince.”

Discordant howls raked through the clearing.

The cloaked men pulled arrows to ready their bows.

Abby shook her head. The government must be in worse shape than she had heard. Hell, they couldn’t even afford guns and proper uniforms.

“Let us go,” Loriem said, easing protectively toward Nicole. “We must make it back before nightfall.”

Abby hesitated and then figured it was safer to stay together. Hell, it wasn’t like she and Nicole could find the hotel alone anyway. Whoever this prince guy was, she would tell him to drive them back immediately.

Eyeing the individual named Loriem, she wondered what the hell he wanted with Nicole. Stupid question, she knew what he wanted. No matter where a girl went, all men were the same—total pigs.

They moved forward as the cloaked figures constantly surveyed the forest for suspicious movement. They fanned out with Abby and Nicole in the center. Abby promised herself that as soon as they returned to the hotel she was catching the first flight home. Sleeping in her own bed surrounded by Minnie and Jinx sounded close to perfection. She would also have more time to prepare for her new job and the move. Yep, that’s exactly what she was going to do.

Once again, Abby found herself trudging through the forest. God, would this day never end? Frowning, she checked her watch. The face was a thin spider web of cracks that radiated from the center out. Needless to say she wouldn’t be reading it ever again.

She nudged her friend. “What time is it?”

Nic checked her watch. “I don’t have a clue. It’s broken.” Saying this, she turned her wrist so Abby could see. The exact same pattern that ran across her wristwatch also covered Nicole’s watch face. An unexpected shiver ran up her spine. What the hell was happening?

Darkness started closing in around them. A breeze played through the trees washing over Abby's sweaty body. Instead of feeling good, her teeth chattered. The evening had become suddenly very chilly. She wrapped her arms around herself to try and horde heat.

"I'm freezing my ass off," Nic whispered to her. "No one said the stupid jungle would get like this at night. I thought it stayed hot all the time."

Loriem appeared at Nicole's side. "You look chilled." Saying this he opened his mantle and enveloped her. "Are you warmer now?"

"Definitely," Nicole said.

Abby rolled her eyes. Damn, this guy knew all the moves.

As the forest thickened, the pace of the group increased. Abby could feel the path begin to slope downhill. She stumbled more since the canopy of trees cut them off from the waning sun. Soon it would be dark. She hoped they didn't have much farther to go.

The weariness of the day settled on her like a heavy weight. The darkness, acting as a signal to her body, called for sleep. Her footsteps dragged. She yawned widely. Catching her toe on a root, she hit the ground, hard. Air huffed out of her lungs. She lay stunned. Her scraped hands stung where she had thrown them out to catch herself. She was definitely going to be sore in the morning.

"Fuck," she muttered, trying to stand.

"Are you all right?" Nic's voice was filled with worry as hands helped her rise. The cloaked men released her as soon as she was on her feet. Obviously they thought she had cooties or something.

"I'm fine," she said sharply, but hell, she was tired, confused, and frustrated. She just really did not want to put up with this any longer. "How much farther is it?" she demanded

"Over the rise." Loriem pointed into the distance, his tone suggesting their location was visible to all.

"Yeah, great," Abby said sarcastically. *Like I have x-ray vision.* "Tell me when we get there."

Nicole took her arm as Loriem walked behind them, guiding and directing their footsteps. Abby knew for certain if she fell again she would not get up.

"We are here," Loriem spoke, breaking her stupor. She looked left and right, examining the area, finding only trees and more trees. There wasn't a single hotel in sight, nor a house, not even a trailer or anything else that resembled lodging.

"Here, where?" she asked.

"Our home." He turned to Nicole. "I hope you will feel welcome and safe with us."

Abby interrupted. “I don’t see anything. So, unless this place of yours is invisible, there isn’t anything here.”

He motioned with his hand. “Where we live is above.”

Abby’s jaw dropped open. Faint lights in the trees displayed what resembled a village high above them in the sheltering arms of the trees. Well shit, she thought, how the fuck are we supposed to get there? Fear flooded her body. They could not expect her to climb or swing or whatever when standing on a small stool made her dizzy. She looked around to find everyone watching her.

Chapter Two

Nicole's gaze moved to where Loriem pointed. Loriem. She liked the name; it was odd and strangely sexy. She liked *him*, which was even odder since she never took to anyone this fast, especially a man. In her experience, short as it was, she found men much more trouble than they were really worth. Okay, sometimes the sex was good, but that did not make up for all the childish antics most pulled. But there was something about Loriem. Something that made her itch and tingle, something that made her want to screw him till he cried.

He took her hand and she once again felt the jolt of his flesh touching hers. Together they walked toward one of the large trees on the outer ring of the grove. She hoped to hell there was some kind of ingenious way to climb to the top since she knew her knee could not handle anything fancy.

Abby trailed behind; Nicole knew she cursed under her breath the entire way. Her friend was definitely not having an ideal day. Hell, she wasn't either, but Loriem made everything improve mightily. She crossed her fingers hoping he wasn't married. Knowing the kind of luck she experienced though, he was not only married, but had ten kids and one more on the way. Bastard.

Loriem let go of her hand to gently caress the enormous tree before them. Nicole shivered. She wondered how it would feel for him to touch her, stroke her. Shit, she hadn't even seen his face and was ready to drop her panties. She rolled her eyes. Damn, she was truly pathetic.

Loriem's hood slipped back as he stared up into the darkness; Nicole's breath caught in her throat. He was beautiful. High-sculpted cheekbones, full rich lips and white-blond hair pulled back in intricate braids. She could feel moisture pool in her mouth. God, she wanted to taste him. He turned to look fixedly at her, like he read her mind. Nicole could feel her breathing increase as heat swamped her body. She could even feel her face getting warm.

"Are you ready?" He stepped toward her.

"Oh, yes," Nicole nodded, for whatever he wanted.

He took her hand to usher her toward a large platform of wood and leaves, which had not been there before. They both stepped onto it and instantly they were rising into the air. Nicole gasped. Loriem pulled her tightly against him.

"Do not worry. We are safe," he whispered in her ear.

Nicole watched him; she didn't think she'd be safe again. Dark brows arched over incredible blue eyes, which glittered in the moonlight. She licked her lips, her mouth suddenly dry. He leaned toward her, holding her gaze the entire time. As he touched her lips with his, fire shot through Nicole's body. Moisture pooled instantly between her legs; she could feel it, and she wanted him inside, deep inside.

She slid her arms around him, licking his lips with the tip of her tongue. She could feel his indrawn breath, but he did not pull away. Instead, he tugged her closer into his arms, opening his mouth to her invasion. She could feel his body shake as she delicately touched his tongue with her own. Damn, he tasted so good. Sweet and rich, like an exotic fruit.

The platform gave a slight tremble; he pulled away, breathing heavily. They had arrived. The village was hundreds of feet in the air, yet lay out before them as stable as anything she had seen before. Right, like seeing big tree house villages were an everyday occurrence for her. But it looked fairly hardy. Buildings and walkways wove in and around the cluster of trees. The whole place was a dream come true. Except for the monsters wanting to eat people, she amended.

She turned back to Loriem. Her breath caught in her throat. The full light of the village not only revealed him to be even more beautiful, but she finally could see him clearly, including his ears. His very pointy ears.

Abby stood dumbfounded. Nicole had just stepped into some kind of contraption to float to the sky. Silly hoochie hadn't even checked to see if she was okay. She just jumped right in, riding to the stars with the pig-dog that wanted to screw her and dump her. Men. They were the pits.

Abby inched closer to the tree, trying to figure out how the device worked. Damn, if Mexico had stuff like this wouldn't she have heard? Maybe it was some kind of prototype deal where they were still working out the bugs. But somewhere deep inside Abby didn't think so. Everything was too weird. Not wanting to think about things too much she wrapped her arms around her waist. She shivered, but not from the cool breeze. She felt scared, more scared than any other time that day.

"Come."

Abby noticed the lift thing once again before them. A group of cloaked men stood by waiting for Abby to come forward. For a brief moment she wanted to run, run far away from this place. Instead, she stepped onto the platform where the man named Tarn waited.

Slowly, they rose into the air. Abby viewed the surroundings, trying to see something familiar, but it was no use. The darkness was impenetrable. She glanced at her companion. There wasn't much to see since the hood effectively covered most of his face.

"So why didn't anyone else ride with us?" Abby spoke to muffle the chaos in her head. "This thing's big enough to hold everyone."

He replied, startled, "They are uncomfortable in your company."

"And you're not?" she asked. "Or did you draw the short straw?"

He shifted nervously but did not answer. He didn't need to. Abby already knew the answer, or at least suspected. Either this was a whole colony of gay men—which she doubted since that Loriem character was hot and heavy for Nicole—or, the most likely answer was she kicked the shit out of one of them. Whichever it was, she couldn't care less. As long as they helped them get back home, that was all that mattered.

"As soon as we reach the village, I will take you to the Prince," he said solemnly.

"Whatever," Abby shrugged, wondering if he'd run screaming from her, half hoping he would. That would make for an interesting story. Shit, the whole vacation could be a lousy movie of the week. All it needed was some dreadful disease to strike one of them.

The lift eased to a halt and Abby gazed around. The place was magnificent; for some reason she felt tears gather in her eyes. For the first time she felt safe, felt welcomed. A huge central tree was the stabilizer, the place where the village sprang; the mother to the village. She stepped forward. Tarn called to her but she ignored him, she needed to touch the tree. She didn't know why, but the intensity of the need forced her forward.

She laid both hands against the enormous trunk. The bark was surprisingly smooth but warm, very warm. The tree felt like a living sentient being. Abby experienced a connection she could not explain. Leaning against the tree, she closed her eyes. Tears seeped from under her lashes to trickle down her cheeks and onto the tree.

A small shudder pulsed through her body, answered by a heat, which spread from somewhere deep within and into the tree. She didn't know what was going on, but it didn't feel wrong. Everything felt right. She felt safe. Safe as she had not felt in a very long time.

"Who are you?"

The quiet voice entered her, breaking the connection. It washed over her body like smooth dark silk, fine and luxurious. She turned to discover a man watching intently. He was dressed similar to the others but without the cloak. His long night-black hair fell away from this face in intricate braids, which

cascaded down his back. His exotic green eyes tilted up, as did his sharp cheekbones. His lips were rich and full, expressly made to love a woman. A thick silver chain around his neck held some type of crystal, which glittered in the light.

“Who are you?” he asked again, taking a step forward.

“Abby.” Her voice sounded rough, as it did when she had a cold. But that was certainly not it. He was just so beautiful, like the mountains or the ocean. An awe-inspiring beauty that only nature could provide.

“Caledon.” He took one more step. “I am prince of this Elven band.”

Abby instinctively held out her hand. He took it in his own. They both gasped as an electric charge pulsed through them. Abby clenched her legs together, wanting to hold onto the bizarre sensation. She couldn’t explain it, but if the pig-dog made Nicole feel this way, she could totally understand her running off with him.

After a minute she came back to herself, replaying what he had just said. Elven? What the hell?

“What did you say?” she asked.

“I am prince here. This is our village.” His green eyes never left her brown.

“Did you say Elven?”

“Yes,” he nodded as someone called his name. He turned without releasing her. She could see intricate earrings made of silver dangling from pointed ears. Pointed? Where the hell was she?

Tarn approached slowly. His hood was off; his ears also had points. “Sire, this is one of the people we found in the forest. The gruntags were chasing them.”

“How many creatures were there?”

“I do not know but our arrows dropped many.” Abby could tell he wanted to say more, but her presence stopped him. Too damn bad, she thought. If he wanted to do boy talk, he would just have to do it in her presence.

The prince turned back to face her. “We have much to talk about, you and I. However, you are weary. I will show you a place where you may rest. The morning will be soon enough.”

Abby nodded. She needed space, time to process all that had gone on. Certain they were no longer in Mexico, Abby had to come to grips and figure out a way to get home. She also needed to talk to Nicole; soon.

The house she was taken to sat toward the center of the village. Caledon opened the front door, ushering her inside. Rich carpets covered the floor; Abby sunk into them as she walked. She wanted to fall down instantly and sleep but chose not to, figuring it would be very rude.

A grouping of chairs sat on one side of the room while a large bed, encased with sheer hangings, dominated the other. Open windows allowed a cool breeze to flow through, bringing in the rich scents of the forest. The house truly felt like heaven.

“I hope you will make yourself at home.”

Abby once again felt a zing when he spoke to her. She wondered if it would happen every time. She turned to him. “I hope we’re not putting someone out.”

“We are few here,” he shook his head. “Many homes are empty.”

Abby nodded, unsure of what to say. She was so damn tired all she could manage to do was gaze at him. After the horrors of the day, he was the first pleasant experience to come along.

“I will leave you now.” He stepped forward to take her hand. “If you need anything, please do not hesitate to call for me. I will hear you.”

The door opened, stopping Abby from having to reply. Loriem entered with Nicole. The two men greeted one another and Abby remembered someone mentioning they were cousins. She didn’t see much resemblance, but she didn’t look much like her sister back home either.

Nicole hugged her. “Are you okay?”

“Tired and stinky. How about you?”

“The same.”

“We will leave you now,” Caledon addressed them. “I will come fetch you to break your fast on the morrow.” The door closed leaving the two women alone.

The unreality of the whole day washed over them. They had started out that morning believing they would be taking a short sightseeing jaunt. Now they were in a strange village with no obvious way home.

“I need a shower or something.” Abby held her arms away from her body. “I reek. More than that, I *really* reek. I am so offensive I’m gagging myself.”

Nic smiled. “There’s bound to be some kind of bathroom in this place. I can’t imagine they could do without one.”

She moved toward an archway tucked discretely behind a curtain. Beyond that, a short hallway led to a mid-sized intricately-tiled room containing a long covered shelf filled with ornate blown glass bottles and stacks of soft towels. The ceiling was an odd collection of tiny rounded openings while one

whole wall was solid glass, looking out into the dark forest beyond. The remaining wall held a small round decorative piece; besides that, the room was very empty.

“What the hell?” Abby nodded over Nic’s head. “What do you suppose the purpose of the room is?”

“The handle probably opens the floor up to toss out evil visitors.” Nic gingerly moved through the door to grasp the handle and turn. Warm water flooded from the entire ceiling like an afternoon rain shower; both women sighed.

“You go first,” Nicole stepped back. “I think your day has been infinitely worst than mine.”

“You are a goddess.” Abby smiled as Nic left the room.

Stripping off her clothes, Abby stepped into the room to experience the incredible sensation of water pouring down over her dirty body. She really needed soap or something to wash with though; water was not going to get it. She glanced around, her eyes finding the bottles sitting on the shelf. Picking one up, Abby pulled the stopper to sniff tentatively. The scents of exotic flowers and herbs wafted to her. Pouring some in her hand, she rubbed her fingers together. When lather appeared she smiled, dumping out more. This was perfect, she thought.

She thoroughly lathered every part of her body and began to scrub. The dirt and sweat of the day ran off under the powerful flow of water. But it did not calm her mind. She had no idea where they were or even how they’d come to be here. She poured more liquid in her hand to wash again, hoping the familiarity of the act would bring some comfort. But it didn’t. In fact, the unfamiliar scent of the liquid, though wonderful, enhanced her worries. She grabbed her panties and bra from the dirty clothes and began to wash them. Different clothes were definitely in order since she did not want to put the Coba clothes on again. Ever.

Abby toweled off while heading back to the main room. The shower may not have solved any problems, but she sure as hell felt ten times better. Pulling the sheets aside, she collapsed on the bed. It felt good to lie down. She closed her eyes, snuggling into the softly-scented sheets. There was nothing they could do about the situation tonight, so going with the flow felt like the best option.

“Your turn,” Abby mumbled as she heard Nicole leave the room and the rush of water following seconds later. She was almost asleep when Nicole’s voice brought her back to consciousness.

“What the fuck is going on?” Nicole paced about the room draped in a huge towel. “How did we get here? Where is here?”

Abby forced her eyes open and rolled to her side so they could see one another. “I don’t have a clue. The man that was here is the Prince of this place. His name is Caledon and he says they are an

Elven band, which I take that to be Elves. Since I have never heard of Elves in Mexico, I don't think we're in Kansas anymore, Toto." She yawned widely.

Nicole shook her wet hair. "This shit is just too weird for me. We're chased through the forest by hairy creeps and now this. Do you think we're dreaming? Or maybe in a coma?"

Abby laughed. "If we are, I wish we'd dream we're fabulously wealthy, lying on a beach somewhere. That would be much more satisfying."

"Damn straight," Nicole muttered.

Abby yawned again, feeling herself slipping. She was so glad for the shower, but still had no idea what to do for clothes. Maybe Caledon would know she needed him and come. Boy, she hoped so, and take her right along with him. She smiled as her eyes closed and her breathing deepened; the last thought was a wish she would wake up in her own bed at home.

Nicole stood in the center of the room. She did not want to wake Abby. She knew she too should sleep, but felt keyed up. Once this feeling was on her, sleep was not an option. She adjusted her towel into the semblance of a toga and sat at the table. Everything that happened was so intense her mind whirled. The day was a jumble of images. Nic thought if she could sort the details out it would make more sense. Walking always assisted her in doing this.

Stepping outside, she closed the door quietly behind her. A cool breeze whispered past, moving the leaves in slow motion patterns. The air was fresh and sweet, smelling nothing like the jungle they had started out in that morning. Nic shoved all concerns aside, she'd let Abby worry. Silly, but Abby was the big sister in the relationship, it was her job to worry. Nic smiled, knowing Abby would cuss mightily to hear that, but still take care of things. She always did.

"Are you well?"

Nicole turned to find Lorie standing within an arm's length of her. She hadn't heard him approach but wasn't startled. Perhaps some part of her knew he was close, wanted him close. Maybe she ought to have her head examined too. He was just trying to be nice, she told herself. Quit making it out to be something more. Remember he has a wife and probably twelve kids.

"I can't sleep," she answered in soft tones, not wanting their conversation to carry. "I thought I would just walk for a bit. I'm really keyed up from the day. What are you doing here?"

He stepped forward, the moonlight turned his hair to burnished platinum under its caress. "I came to find out if you would like to take a bath, but I see you have already bathed."

Nic hesitated for a moment, but only a moment. She didn't know why she wanted to be near this man so much, even if he did have a wife and fourteen children. He was pretty enough any woman would want to have as many kids as possible with him. But he touched something inside her, made her feel things no man had made her feel before. That was probably why he appealed to her as much as he did.

"I'd still like to go with you. After what happened I feel like I could take twenty baths and still not be clean."

Smiling, he took her hand to lead her into the darkness. Walkways criss-crossed this way and that. Nicole followed willingly as Lorie, surefooted, led them on. They climbed steadily higher, passing many homes, dark and unoccupied. Finally, he stopped in front of a thick curtain of branches. The sounds of water reached her ears, but she could not see where it came from.

"We are here." He pushed the branches aside to lead her through.

She found herself in a grotto under the stars. A deep pool of water glistened and rolled under a gentle waterfall. She knew they had not gone to the ground, but didn't understand how all of this could be here. Elves and magic, she thought.

"Do you like it?" he asked.

"I love it. It's beautiful." She walked slowly past him to approach the water. Leaning down she dipped her hand in to find the water warm and welcoming. "How is this possible?"

"The trees have joined together to create areas for us. This is just one of many. The warmth of the water comes from the trees themselves as they use the water as well. We protect them as they shelter us."

Nicole watched the beautiful man before her. He had to be married, or at least be with someone. But the kiss they shared earlier was so intense, and he never mentioned being with anyone. But as Abby always said, men are pigs.

She straightened up. "Thank you for bringing me here. I don't want to keep you any longer from your family."

He gave her a puzzled gaze. "The only family I have is Caledon and he is quite capable."

"I was talking about your wife," Nic said.

"Wife?" He shook his head. "The word is unfamiliar to me."

Nic put her hands on her hips, huffing out a breath. She hated when men acted stupid, if they acted at all. Most of them, from her experience, were dumb as rocks. "A woman you're committed to—have children with—a wife."

Loriem gave a sad smile. “There are no women in this village. There is said to be Elven women somewhere, but I have never seen one other than my mother. She died when I was quite young.”

Nic gaped. “No women? What the fuck is wrong with them? How could there be no women here?” These men were totally gorgeous. Were the women in the land blind? Or possibly stupid?

“In the beginning, our life was hard. No woman wanted to build a city out of the forest. Now there are few of us. We are long lived so we do not die quickly, but we do not reproduce because we have no life mates. The Elves are dying slowly and there is nothing we can do about it.” He shrugged.

Nic stepped toward him. “I’m really sorry about your mother, but this place is beautiful. I know tons of women who would want to live here. Okay, other than those forest monster thingies, but if you get rid of those women would be lining up.”

“Possibly in your world, but not in this one. Elves mate for life, so if there are women here, we do not know where they are. As I said, the Elves are scattered to the wind like leaves; to find another band is to travel over rough and hostile terrain. Right now we cannot afford that.” He eased his hands onto her shoulders. “Besides, right now I know not of another woman I would rather spend time with than you, Nicole.”

“Oh.” The sound of him saying her name for the first time took her breath away. Her heart began to pound as his touch made her shiver. She didn’t understand the feelings he stirred in her, but she knew she did not want them to end. She wanted to explore them, and him, much more thoroughly.

He gently enfolded her hands with his. Slowly he brought her hands up to kiss them. “But I will leave you in peace to take your bath. Once you are finished I will take my own.”

“No,” Nic blurted out. “You don’t have to go. I’d like you to stay. It’s a really big pool. I think we could share it.” Like him to stay? She needed him to stay. Every time they touched one another, the needing and wanting became more fierce. Maybe it wasn’t like that for him. Maybe it was just the way he affected her. But no, the kiss was definitely hot. Damn, he had never seen a woman before. What if she dropped her towel and he screamed, running right off the tree? What if she killed him?

Without a word he began to disrobe. Nicole felt her mouth go dry. If he was beautiful with clothes, he was absolutely stunning without. His shoulders were broad and muscled, she supposed from pulling the long bow he used. In fact, all of him rippled with lean muscle as she viewed his naked body by the light of the moon. His hair flowed down his back as he raised his arms to begin unbraiding it.

Nic touched his hands and she felt him still. “Let me help you with that.” She reached up to begin the slow process of pulling the braids apart. His hair was soft like silk, flowing through her hands.

She wanted to feel his hair drag across her heated flesh. She finger-combed it and as she did, her hands brushed against his well-defined back. His muscles jumped and rippled under her touch.

When she finished, she walked slowly around to stand in front of him. He stood with legs apart, balancing himself, his indecision to stay or go evident on his beautiful features. She let the towel she wore slither to the ground as she felt her own unbound hair glide across her naked back. It felt good, but it wouldn't be the same as his hair, as his body.

"I want to touch you," he said, reaching out a finger to gently brush the hair away from her face. "I want you to touch me."

She reached out to take his large penis in her hand. God, he was magnificent, and he was all hers. She almost did a dance but decided that might spoil the mood. Especially if she pulled them out of the tree or into the water.

He sucked in a breath at her touch. Nicole stilled. "Don't you like that?"

"Yes, very much. I have never had another person touch me so intimately before."

"Before the night is over I think you'll be really used to it. In fact, I think you'll like it."

"I already do." He wrapped his arms around her, pulling her in for a kiss. The kiss was not hesitant like the first time; in fact, he was the one to take command. He traced her lips with his tongue as she had done for him and then slowly slid into her mouth. She danced her tongue with his to taste him, so he could taste her. Her heart pounded in her ears. Nicole had never been with a man who had never known anyone else. She was his first. The thought made her dizzy. The feeling of responsibility overwhelmed her until his hands slid onto her bottom, pulling her close. All thought ceased.

Loriam's large cock pressed against her stomach, but Nicole knew it could so be put to better uses. She pulled herself farther up into his arms until she could feel it slide between her legs. She could feel her own moisture coat him as she eased him back and forth between the lips of her very eager vagina. Damn, he felt so good. But she knew she couldn't continue this for long. She didn't want him to come before she was finished with him. She longed to explore every inch of his incredible body until he begged her for release. She craved this experience to be so imprinted on his mind that it became his only wet dream ever. And she became his goddess. A bit extreme, but this was her fantasy, and in this land maybe it was possible

Nicole smiled as she heard his breathing increase, felt his muscles shake. They would definitely have to get horizontal soon before he dropped her. That would not make for a great end to sex, especially if she fell and splattered to the ground. She wouldn't be the wet dream and goddess; she would be the horror that would turn him from sex forever. Can't have that, she thought.

“Nicole,” he whispered as she pulled away. “Where do you go?”

“Nowhere,” she smiled at him. “But I think we could get more done if we were both lying down. Is there someplace we can get comfy?”

He nodded, taking her hand to lead her to the other side of the pool. Loriem pushed thick heavy branches aside to lead her forward. Nicole found herself standing within a bower protected on all sides, but open to the sky. A large piece of thick soft fabric covered the ground invitingly. The place was quiet and, most importantly, very private.

“This is beautiful,” she whispered, feeling as though she should.

“You are beautiful.” He pulled her into his arms. “This is the place I come to think. I have never brought anyone here, until now. This is our place.”

“Good.” Nicole pulled him down until they were both lying comfortably. “Now where were we?” She licked her lips. My goodness, he was tasty. She had never seen a more handsome man. She knew she kept thinking that, but couldn’t get away from the thought. He wasn’t just handsome though, Loriem was also brave, gentle, and very caring. Her thoughts shattered when he reached up to gently touch one of her nipples. The sweeping touch sent an instant shock to her already over-sensitive flesh. She was wet and hungered for him.

Nicole pushed him back until he lay flat. He was spread before her like a delectable Elven banquet. Slowly, she leaned over to take one of his small nipples in her mouth. She laved it with her tongue then teased it with her teeth. Nicole felt the muscles in his stomach spasm as he gasped. Yep, he liked it and she hadn’t even started yet. Damn, she was good. Slowly, she kissed and nipped down his chest and onto his stomach. She slowly swirled her tongue around his belly button but was stopped from going lower when he clutched her hair.

She moved up again to kiss his lips and Loriem answered her with a desperation she had never felt before. He ran his hands down her back to grab and drag her over his heated flesh. Once again, he settled himself between her legs. Nicole knew that he may never have done this before, but he knew what went where. That thought comforted her since she certainly didn’t want to scare him to death. She was feeling more confident now since he did not run and scream from either her naked body or anything they had done so far. On second thought, she thought the screaming would definitely be okay, but the running would have to wait until later. Maybe she could get him to chase her. The thought brought a smile to her face.

Loriem’s brilliant blue eyes were dark and hooded, his full lips swollen from her kisses; if she could draw, she would whip out pencil and paper now. Okay, she really wouldn’t, but it was a nice

thought. She smiled at him and he answered her with a smile that lit his whole face. The thought that this was so much more than sex flitted in, but she shoved it away.

Leaning up, she grasped his cock and teased her overly sensitive flesh with it. She heard him draw in a shaky breath as he thrust his hips toward her. Quickly, she positioned herself over him to sink slowly down; not wanting the whole thing to end before it got really good. His penis was large, larger than she had ever had before, and he filled her, stretched her. Nicole gasped, tossing her head back. God the feeling was incredible, indescribable.

She placed her hands on his chest as he grasped her hips. Leisurely she began to move, pulling away and dropping down to take more of him inside. She had to have him, all of him. The thought stuck in her brain and would not go away. He was hers and she was going to claim him, fully and unconditionally.

Loriem moved restlessly under her but allowed her to set the rhythm. His eyes were closed, his brow wrinkled. He looked like he was trying to memorize every single moment. Silly man, she thought, we'll be doing this again. Soon. Nicole began to move her hips faster, riding his thick heavy cock, pushing herself to take him deeper. Loriem tightened his hold on her hips as he thrust up to meet her downward drop. She gasped, stopping as she felt the head of his penis meet her cervix, the feeling made her almost blind. She could feel the orgasm beginning to build from her feet, if that was possible.

"Nicole." He said her name through gritted teeth.

She leaned over to force her tongue into his mouth as she crushed her dripping mound against him. He thrust once, then again. Nicole felt the tension build within her then explode. She moaned, bucking against him as she felt him explode inside of her, filling her already oversensitive flesh. Impossibly she felt another orgasm ride in on the heels of her last one. This one was much more intense. She felt herself go blind. Then all thought ceased.

Chapter Three

“Nicole.”

Someone called her name. A male someone, with a soft, deep and very soothing tone.

“Nicole.”

The tone became more insistent. She could even sense a thread of anxiety. Slowly, she opened her eyes to find a beautiful man leaning over her. Her mind was fuzzy; uncertainly filled her. Where was she?

“Nicole, are you well?”

Long, moonlit hair brushed her face as memory returned. Loriem. Incredible mind-blowing sex with Loriem. My God, had she passed out? It wasn’t possible, was it? She was the one that was going to fuck him till he cried; instead, she was the one who passed out. She swore to herself to never repeat the story to anyone.

“Loriem.” She gently touched his face. Even after being with him all day, his beauty was still almost too real to believe.

His brow wrinkled as concern covered his face. “I was worried. I thought I had harmed you. You would not answer me.”

Yep, she had passed out all right. One part of her was horribly embarrassed, the other totally excited down to her toes. Loriem was absolutely incredible and it was only his first time. She wondered what sex would be like the next time, and the time after that. Her hormones jumped for joy; she couldn’t wait to find out.

Nicole began to sit up, but froze as the aches and pains rolled through her body. Running and falling in the jungle, then mind-blowing sex did not make a girl ready for the Olympics. Okay, the mind and hormones were willing, but the body needed a break. Or a massage and a long nap and ice cream; lots and lots of creamy, smooth, melt-in-your-mouth chocolate *Graeter’s* ice cream. Even Oprah said it was the best, so who was Nicole to argue.

Loriem sat back to cradle her in his arms. She closed her eyes, it felt just like heaven. He was so large and protective; no man had ever treated her like something precious and fragile. Fragile? Who the

hell was fragile? Not her. Nicole struggled to sit up, but Lorie held her fast. He was not going to let her go.

She turned to smile up at him. The concern was still there. "I'm okay, Lorie."

"Are you sure?" He caressed her hair. "I have never touched a woman before and am inexperienced. You are so soft and delicate; I did not want to hurt you. However, I lost myself. I wanted to touch you so badly..." His words ran out.

"Lorie. Being with you is great. You didn't hurt me. In fact, just the opposite. I love how you touch me; no one has ever made me feel this way before."

Did she really say that to him? Aloud? She was not going to admit her feelings for him. Feelings? Did she think that word? No feelings, no feelings. She wasn't going to use the L-word either, but for some reason she had. Was she nuts? Had he done something to her brain? Was she out of her fucking mind? She looked at him to find him looking back. Those incredible blue eyes stared steadily into her brown. Normally, men would be running for the hills by now. But not Lorie. He wasn't like other men, nothing like them at all.

She had to get a hold of herself. She had to stop these crazy thoughts. There were no L-word feelings; shit, there were no feelings. It was sex—really, really good sex. Okay, great sex. Fine, it was stupendous knock-a-girl's-socks-off-till-she-fainted sex. But still that's all it was. Hell, she had only known him one day. Okay, that made her sound like a slut. One day and she had already dropped her pants for him. She could hear Abby now. All this was moot anyway; she wasn't staying long enough for any of this to be a worry. Not like she would want a huge relationship even if they ended up stuck in this place. She did not want a man. She did not need a man. Sex was good. Anything else was definitely bad. Bastard!

He stroked her lips gently with his own. "Would you like to bathe now?"

Immersion in a pool of water sounded perfect. Anything to get away from her runaway thoughts. "I'd love to have a bath."

He rose, easily picking her up in his arms. She tried not to think about how safe and cared for she felt, but the thoughts kept jumping in. Maybe she was drugged? Or—terror slipped in—maybe she had a brain tumor? What if none of this was real? What if she was lying in a hospital somewhere, hooked up to machines and this was all some tumor-induced hallucination? That would definitely explain all the thoughts that were totally not Nicole-like.

Lorie stepped lightly into the pool. A gentle breeze ruffled his thick hair, which fell gently around his face. The scents of the night were rich, like a fine wine; Nicole felt herself intoxicated by

everything this place had to offer. Especially Loriem. If this whole thing was a tumor, she prayed she would never wake up. Only in dreams were men this damn good.

The pool was warm and comforting. Nicole sighed then ducked under to swim across their little sanctuary. The feel of the water flowing down her body reminded her once again of Loriem. Of course it would, she thought in disgust. Everything made her think of him. She resurfaced to find him near, holding some kind of leaf pods.

“Come to the edge and I will wash your hair, if you wish.” He dipped the little green husks in the water and began to rub them between his hands. A gel-like substance burst forth.

Nicole swam to the side to hold onto the smooth tree bark as he began to run his elegant fingers through her long hair. The sensation sent shivers through her body. The scent was wild and woodsy, just like Loriem; it overwhelmed her senses exactly as he had. In one short day this man had somehow worked his way through her defenses. Tears pooled under her closed lashes and slid slowly down her cheeks.

Nicole rested her head on her hands. She must be totally exhausted to be acting like this. It was the stress of the day. She had been through a lot. Her whole equilibrium was knocked off. She was in this strange place with people she didn’t know. She and Abby had been separated—it was just all too much. That’s why she kept thinking the L-word and was crying. Nothing else. Stress and exhaustion.

“Rinse,” he said softly. Nicole sank down under the water to run her fingers through her hair. It felt incredibly soft and so clean. She came up to find Loriem rubbing more pods between his hands. She moved over to take them from him. They felt like hard marbles, but as she rubbed they softened and released a gel-like liquid. She glanced to find him watching her. Any thoughts she may have had raced from her mind. Right now in this place, it was just the two of them. She and Abby certainly couldn’t do anything about the situation, not right now anyway. So why not enjoy it while she could?

“Your turn.” She moved behind him to begin running her fingers through his white-blond hair. It was heavy and thick like her hair, but seemed to have a life of its own. It twined around her fingers, falling over her arms as she gently massaged his scalp. Loriem took a deep ragged breath as she moved her fingers slowly through his hair. She massaged down his neck and then began to work her way back up to his ears. As she massaged behind them he moaned and moved under her touch, just as he had when she had touched him more intimately before. She made him dunk to rinse, but continued to run her fingers through his hair and around his ears. As she continued to rub around those lovely pointed ears, he moved under her fingers as his breathing became more ragged. Maybe to him rubbing his ears

was like grabbing him. Nicole thought about doing a dance again, but knew she would drown so didn't. He was so incredibly sexy, she didn't want to waste one minute with him.

He twisted, pulling her toward him for a mind-numbing kiss. His tongue plunged roughly into her mouth as he sucked the air from her lungs. He was frantic in his movements. He pulled her close, backing her against the edge of the pool. His hard penis swayed between her legs, searching for entrance of its own accord. Nicole wrapped her legs around Lorie's waist, kissing him back just as fiercely as he kissed her. He was so damn hot and all hers.

"Nicole." He gasped out her name as he ran biting kisses down her throat. "I do not want to hurt you again, but your touch enflames me."

Nicole had never had a man talk to her in this way. If any other guy said enflame she probably would have laughed in his face, but with Lorie it sounded right. And dammit, he enflamed her too.

She ran her hands down his sleek back. The muscles bunched and rippled under her hands. "You won't hurt me." She lightly bit his neck. "You didn't hurt me the last time."

He took her words as an invitation and plunged his cock deep inside of her. Nicole gasped. If it was possible, he felt even bigger than before. Or she was just more sensitive? Whatever it was, she could already feel the orgasm building deep inside. She did not want it to end this quickly, but really had no say. Lorie plunged himself into her and pulled out only to plunge himself into her again. There was no real rhythm or finesse to his lovemaking, but it didn't matter. Nothing, not even her friendly vibrator, created an orgasm this intense.

They both cried out as one as they came together at the same time.

Abby sauntered slowly about a sun swept glade. A breeze played through the trees, bringing with it the heady scent of summer. Rich flowers, fragrant grass, and above all, clean refreshing water. She stretched, loving the feel of the sun and wind on her naked body. The grass felt like finest silk as it caressed her toes and ankles. She moved along easily until she came to a large flat rock. Climbing to sit upon the smooth surface she looked out over the crystalline clear pool. A small waterfall emptied into the pond creating magical patterns in the water. There was no place like this on Earth.

Looking over, she was startled to find the Prince from the village sitting beside her. He looked as stunned as she felt. He opened his mouth, but no sound issued forth. The clearing began to flip and fuzz, like an antenna-less old television. Then everything went dark.

Abby blearily rolled over, wondering where the hell she was. Remnants of the dream still clung to her. She rubbed at her eyes, trying to clear her mind. Sunshine flooded in the window over the bed,

illuminating the small neat room. This is not my hotel room, she thought. Lying there, she stared up at the ceiling. Tree branches interconnected closely to form a solid shield from the elements. She wrinkled her brow. The events of the day before spun through her mind like a bad Hollywood movie. Abby sat straight up in bed. Monsters chasing them through the forest. Elves finding them. She had prayed the whole thing was some kind of drunken delusion. Unfortunately, it wasn't. She grimaced, flopping back. What a mess.

She surveyed the room again. As far as places went, it was nice. She had noticed that much the night before. That and not much else. All she wanted was a bath and a bed in that order. Her stomach rumbled. Yesterday's breakfast had been their last meal, but food had certainly not been a priority the night before. Nothing had been, but a bath and sleep. That response was probably her mind's way of coping with the insanity of everything they had been through. Either that or they really were dead, or in the hospital as Nicole suggested.

Nicole? Abby sat up again. Where the hell was she? The last thing she remembered was the two of them talking and then...nothing. She climbed slowly out of bed, wrapping a sheet around her naked body. Maybe she was in the shower? Abby stuck her head in the bathing room to find it empty but for the pile of Nicole's dirty clothes, and quite dry. She wandered around the room looking under various pieces of furniture. She didn't think her friend would be under the bed, but knowing Nicole anything was possible.

Once she thoroughly searched the small house, she sat back on the bed. Abby wondered where the hell she could be. The place was very unfamiliar so roaming should not have even been a thought, especially since she was naked. Nicole liked to explore new hotels but Abby crossed her fingers, hoping she had decided not to walk about here. She could have fallen out of a tree or been eaten.

"Maybe I'll go look for her," Abby spoke aloud and winced. Her voice sounded unusually loud in the absolute quiet of the room. Other than the rustling of leaves, there was nothing. She shivered, wondering where everyone was. Even at the resort, voices could be heard at all hours.

Abby crossed to the door. Stopping, she looked down at her artfully arranged sheet. She could not go out dressed, or undressed, like this. Moving to the bathing room, she found her clothes tossed in a crumbled heap on the floor. Gingerly, she picked up the shirt and sniffed. Damn, the smell was overpowering. She couldn't believe she had worn this thing just one day. It looked and, unfortunately, smelt like it had been worn for months with no washings in between.

She picked up the shorts to find them in the same shape. Almost able to stand on their own. Abby started to toss them away, but stopped when she remembered the necklace she had picked up in

Coba. Digging in the pocket, she pulled the disk out to study it closely. Nothing had changed, though she thought it had been more tarnished than it was now. But then again, the whole day had pretty much fried her brain, so what did she expect? Dragging it over her head, she settled the almost familiar weight between her breasts. Might as well wear it, she thought. Easier to keep it safe that way until the owner could be found.

Glancing around the room, she decided she had to have just one more shower. May as well, especially since Nicole wasn't here to enjoy it. Abby turned the water on and tossed off the sheet. She slid underneath the small indoor rain shower and sighed. The water felt good on her body; she closed her eyes and just enjoyed the sensation. She hoped the water would do just as much good for her troubled thoughts as it had done for her grimy body the night before. There had to be an explanation for everything that had happened. And where there was an explanation, there had to be a solution.

A small noise became the counter point to the soothing sound of water. Abby opened her eyes to find Caledon—the man introduced as the Prince, the man from her dream—watching her from the doorway. Abby froze in place, neither moving nor speaking. All she could do was stand, clutching the necklace, watching him as he watched her.

His eyes roamed slowly down her body, taking in every inch. He stood transfixed, neither speaking nor moving; she could feel his gaze like a hot touch on her skin. He looked up and their eyes locked. Anything that would have come to mind melted away under his heated gaze. Abby now knew how a mouse felt confronting a cobra. A very sexy cobra.

“Hello,” she whispered.

Her voice acted as a mood breaker. A flush ran up his face. Wordlessly, he held a bundle of fabric out to her.

Abby shut the water off and quickly grabbed the sheet she had used as a garment. Pulling it around herself, she brushed her wet hair from her face. “What do you want? Why didn't you knock? What's that?” She pointed to the fabric he held.

He cleared his throat. “I brought you clothing.” His voice was deep with a husky quality to it. A brief thought asked what that voice would sound like whispering in her ear during sex. She shoved the thought aside. What the hell was wrong with her? That situation would never happen. Never. Men were off limits—permanently. James had seen to that.

“Thanks. I didn't want to put on what I wore yesterday. Truthfully, I don't think it's salvageable.” She couldn't believe she was having such a calm conversation while standing naked.

There was something wholly unreal about the situation. Hell, everything about this place was unreal. That probably accounted for her odd behavior. Right?

“I’ll just place them on the bed,” he replied, but never moved.

Abby held the wet sheet loosely around her. She never had a man look at her as this one did. Hungry. It wasn’t uncomfortable; in fact, she thought in another lifetime she could probably have grown to like it. Grown to like him. No! She needed to push those thoughts aside. Thinking along those lines only brought hurt and pain, lots and lots of pain. Events had obviously scrambled her brain. He was in all likelihood studying her because he had never seen a human before. Maybe Elven women had three breasts or something. Hell, whatever they had it was probably much more than she did.

He took a step toward her, but whatever was about to happen ended when the front door opened. Nicole’s voice rang through the small house. “Abby? Girl, where the hell are you?”

Abby and Caledon both jumped as Nicole stuck her face around the corner. “Well, hello. What’s going on?”

“Caledon brought me clothes,” Abby supplied, trying to act normal, like standing nearly naked in front of a strange man was an everyday thing.

“Mmm-hmm, I bet.” Nicole eyed the dark Elven man before her. “I can take those if you’d like.”

“Of course.” He gave a small bow, handing the garments to Nicole. “You are both welcome to join us break our fast. I will send Loriem to escort both of you.” He quickly left the room.

Both girls stood quiet until they heard the front door close. Nicole, with hands on her hips, turned back to look at Abby. “What the shit was that all about? Why was he in here watching you shower? Are you okay? Did he hurt you?”

Abby opened her mouth to blurt out some response. Instead, she moved toward the main room with Nicole following close behind. “Where have you been? I woke up and you weren’t here.” She looked at Nicole closely. “Where did you get those clothes?”

Nicole wore an odd assortment of garments. An oversized shirt, obviously male, covered her from neck to knee. The rolled back sleeves stayed in place with some type of silver decoration. A large sleeveless tunic went over the shirt and was belted at her slim waist. Her tanned legs were bare from knee to ankle and on her feet were shoes that looked like slippers. Overall, she looked like a child dressed up in her mother’s clothes. Or a woman dressed up in an Elven man’s garments. Abby eyed her friend who flushed up to her roots.

“Nicole!” Abby burst out. “What the hell have you been doing? Have you been with that Loriem character?”

“He’s not a character,” Nicole retorted.

“But you’re not denying you were with him?” Abby wrapped the damp sheet around herself more securely.

“I couldn’t sleep,” Nicole answered.

Abby stared hard at her friend, the friend she had known for years. The light bulb went off in her head. “You slept with him?”

“Well, we didn’t exactly sleep,” Nicole shrugged, smiling.

Abby opened her mouth and then closed it. A hundred comments flew through her head. She didn’t know where to start. “You...he...jeez Louise, Nic, you just met him. Did you use protection? He’s probably married, the bastard.” She stopped to stare at her friend. “Shit, he’s not human. He’s like some other kind of species or something. Oh, damn girl. What were you thinking? Have you lost your fucking mind?”

“Abby”—Nicole shouted over her—“did you see his body? He is totally hot.”

“And that’s supposed to make it right?” Abby stood with hands on hips.

Nicole rolled her eyes. “I’ve never met anyone like him before.”

“Of course you haven’t. He’s an Elf. Fuck, they don’t even exist. They’re some kind of species made up to sell books. Besides, he could be a psycho killer or something. You don’t know him. He could hurt you, badly.”

Nicole crossed her arms. “You won’t even listen to me. Shut up a minute and let me talk.”

Abby clamped her lips shut. Nicole smiled. “Thank you. As I was saying, Loriem and I connected on a deep level. He treats me like I’m some kind of delicate lady. He’s not married. And he’s not James.”

Abby slumped on the bed. The name of her ex still caused a retching fear. She hated feeling that way, but still couldn’t help it.

“Oh Abby, I’m sorry.” Nicole hugged her tight.

“It’s okay.”

“No, no it’s not. I shouldn’t have mentioned his name. It was unfair.”

Abby took a deep steadying breath. “Nicole, I just don’t want to see you hurt. You have just known this person one day. Who knows how long we’ll be in this crazy place. People change, quickly. One minute they are wonderful and the next...” She trailed off.

“I worry about you too.” Nicole sat on the bed beside her to take her hand. “But I just know that Loriem is different. He would never hurt me. Don’t ask me how I know this, but I just do.”

“I said that too. But it didn’t happen that way.”

“I promise no one will ever hurt you again.” Nicole squeezed her hand. “I will rip him a new asshole and then get really mean.”

The two women sat side by side on the bed holding hands. The breeze through the open window brought the scents of the forest; rich soil, fragrant flowers. For the first time in the last two days, Abby felt peaceful inside. She didn’t know why. Perhaps it was the fact that her best friend was sitting beside her and they were both safe and sound. At least for the moment, anyway.

“So, you say he’s not married.” Abby broke the silence and changed the subject to something much safer.

“No.” Nicole shook her head. “In fact, there are no women in this village. We’re it.”

“You’re kidding?”

“No, that’s what Loriem said. I didn’t get the full story, but I don’t think there’s been a woman here in a really long time. In fact, other than his mother when he was really little, we’re the first women he’s seen.”

“Wow,” Abby said.

“Yeah,” Nicole replied.

They sat in silence a few more minutes until Abby couldn’t help herself. She had to know. Moreover, the mood desperately needed lightening. “So...the sex. What was it like?”

Nicole perked up. “Oh, Lord, girl. You are not going to believe it.” She then launched into her escapades of the night before. Abby was left mouth hanging open. Could this be right? Could this man be that incredible? Were all of them like this?

“And we’re the only women?” Abby asked.

“Yep.”

“My goodness.”

“I know, girl. That’s what I thought. Do you think they’ll put us on pedestals and worship us like goddesses?”

Abby joked, “If they do, I am never leaving this place.”

Before they could continue, a knock came at the door. Nicole hurried over to open it. Loriem stood on the threshold. Looking at the two of them together, Abby could see Nicole was a goner. She had that look on her face. Abby couldn’t explain it in words; it was just something she recognized. All

she knew was he'd better treat her right or she would tear his lungs out and wrap them around his neck for a scarf.

"I'm here to escort you to Caledon," he said, glancing around. His gaze landed on Abby. "Are you planning to go dressed just like that? I am quite sure you will cause a stir."

"This is my best friend, Abby," Nicole smiled at him. "Things were so crappy last night I don't think you got to meet her."

He made a small bow. "I would have known you anywhere." He gave her a smile. "Any best friend of Nicole's is also my best friend. Be welcome in our village."

"Thanks." Abby smiled, unsure of how to respond to him. She wasn't quite sure if he were teasing or serious. This whole place was unquestionably frying her brain.

"We'll wait for you outside," Nicole said, giving Lorie a small shove and closing the door behind them.

Abby picked through the pile of clothing, wondering what the hell Caledon had brought. As she sorted her thoughts turned to Lorie. She could totally understand how Nicole had fallen for him. Not only was he handsome, but he seemed to have a sense of humor too. At least that's what she hoped was going on and he wasn't somehow slow. She just prayed he wouldn't hurt her. In any way.

Pulling a soft shirt around her, she buttoned it up and began to roll up the sleeves. The shirt had no collar and slim fitted sleeves, or at least she assumed they would be fitted. On her, they flopped around a bit, but she rolled them up best she could to keep them off her hands. She looked down smiling. The shirt hit her mid-thigh level, but that would have to do. She was not going to put on any of her filthy clothes, except the panties. She had washed them out the night before and found them quite dry.

She pulled an over tunic on, deftly tying each set of ribbons that held it together. The tunic was similar to the one Nicole wore, but made of softer and richer fabric. The last item of clothing was a pair of pants. Abby eyed them, knowing they would never fit. They were much too large, but decided to try anyway. If she could figure a way to keep them up, she would feel much better about roaming around. Nicole looked nice in the pantless ensemble with her tanned shapely legs. Abby's legs, though slender, were ghostly pale and apt to send out a beacon to the ugly creatures of the day before. She thought of them as a bit of a lighthouse and decided not to take the chance.

She pulled the pants on, but no matter what she did, they would not stay up. The waist was too large, and they kept dropping to the floor. She thought about trying to belt them, but realized there was

nothing to use as a belt. When Nicole opened the door a few minutes later, Abby was still holding the pants up trying to get them to stay.

“Girl, what’s taking so long?” Nicole asked.

“I can’t get these to stay up,” Abby motioned to the recalcitrant clothing. “No matter what I do they fall down.”

“Go without.” Nicole walked over to her. “We don’t want to be late. The Prince is expecting us.”

“And I care about what he expects,” Abby snapped. “I expect to suddenly be whisked home, win a huge lottery, and retire in splendor, but I doubt that will happen.”

“Please forgive our lack of clothing for you.”

Abby looked up to find Loriem watching her, distress obvious on his handsome face. She suddenly felt shitty like she had just kicked a puppy or better, been a totally unappreciative guest. These people didn’t need to take them in. But they did anyway. They also didn’t need to protect them the day before, but they done that also.

Abby shook her head. “Loriem, I apologize. It’s been a very long couple of days, which doesn’t excuse my rudeness. The clothing’s fine. I’m just grouchy.”

Nicole stared at her bug-eyed, apparently stunned. Abby knew she rarely apologized, but had it been so long? *I guess it was difficult when one was always right.* She smiled at the thought and Loriem returned the smile. She felt her knees go mushy. Wow! The more she saw the more she understood why Nicole had latched onto this prize. He was certifiable dream material.

Once the pants were off and shoes on, Abby was ready to go. Loriem escorted them through the village, progressively moving higher into the trees. They heard no voices, just the sound of wind rustling leaves. It was both soothing and eerie at once. Abby shivered as they passed empty dwellings.

“Where is everyone?” she whispered.

“Once this village thrived—” he turned to speak to her “—but our numbers grow small. There are barely one hundred who live here among the trees. Though our life spans are long, we are not immortal. We have no women who live here with us, so we are a dying people.”

Nicole hugged him. “Isn’t there anything that can be done? I mean this place is awesome. I don’t understand not wanting to live here. What about a resort? Hell, I know at least fifty women who would love to come here.”

“This land is cursed. Once the Elves were the guardians and we flourished. Now as the land dies, we die.”

He spoke so matter-of-factly about it all. Abby sighed, wishing for something to help them. She and Nicole were safe because of the Elves. Wait, she told herself. Must not get involved! None of this was either of their concerns. She just needed to know how to get back home. That was it. These people had been living like this for a hell of a long time. If a solution existed to the problem, they would have come up with it by now.

The journey ended far above the village, next to a building, which sprang from the main tree. The tree Abby had touched the night before. The tree she felt the connection to. She looked at it again but this time did not touch. She was afraid to.

“Caledon lives here.” Loriem stepped forward to open the door.

“Can we just walk in?” Nicole looked in without entering.

Loriem smiled at her. “Of course. I am his cousin, and as such, share this dwelling with him.” He took her hand. “I want you to consider this your home also for as long as you are here.”

Abby rolled her eyes. She could just about hear the sound of Nicole crashing to the ground. She’d have to hand it to Loriem, he was slick. All she knew was he had better treat her friend like a queen or it would not go good for him. After the whole ripping the lungs out and wrapping them around his neck deal, she would then kick his ass to the moon. Soon Loriem wouldn’t look so pretty. Abby stifled a smile.

The room they entered was large, bright, and airy. The ceiling consisted of the interconnecting branches of the large mother tree, which weaved together to create an incredible artistry. The walls and floor melded perfectly into the surround, fashioning such a natural environment that Abby questioned whether she was inside or out.

Loriem led them farther in, and both women found themselves facing a large flowing waterfall which trickled and danced into an open basin surrounded by rocks. Scattered furniture groupings lent an air of comfort to this haven in the sky. Abby wanted nothing more than to sink onto a chaise and listen to the gently falling water for the rest of the day.

“Lovely, isn’t it?” Loriem came forward, holding Nicole’s hand. “This is the informal gathering area for Caledon to meet with our people. Come; let me escort you into our private quarters.”

Abby climbed a short flight of stairs hidden behind the waterfall to a plain wooden door. Loriem opened it to admit them into a wondrously open room. The entire outside wall was gone which afforded an unhindered view of the forest and mountains beyond. The mountains were even more startling since their vacation destination had none. Abby shook her head, once again reminded they were nowhere close to home.

“Welcome to my dwelling.”

Abby turned to find Caledon watching her. At least this time she had clothes on. Loriem approached him and the two men fell into a soft conversation. Nicole glanced over at her, shrugging. Soon Loriem backed away, bowing slightly, then turned to Nicole. “Come. Let me show you my rooms. We can break our fast there.”

“What about Abby?”

“She will be well.” Loriem smiled at both women as he took Nicole’s hand to lead her away. Abby found herself alone with Caledon. She wondered what he wanted with her; why they were having this private meeting. She glanced over to find him studying her once again. No matter what, she was not getting naked again. If he wanted a human to study, he’d have to go back into the forest and find one.

She paced the large room, trying not to notice his sea-green eyes following her. The silence of the room, broken only by the rustling of the leaves, was becoming unnerving. What did he want? Did he want to see if she would break? Abby set her jaw. She would not show him the satisfaction. She had faced far worse than him and was still alive. If he wasn’t going to speak then she would. All she wanted was to go home.

“So, what’s the deal?” She turned around to face him, hands on her hips. “You lurk around watching me shower, now you stand here staring at me. Are you shy? Are you weird? I truthfully don’t care what your problems are. I just want to go home. So let’s focus on that and nothing else, and we’ll be fine.”

Abby cocked a hip. Yep, right now she definitely had the upper hand. She was in the driver seat of the Elfland Express. Once he picked his jaw up off the floor, they could get down to the serious talk of doing exactly what she wanted. Nothing more and nothing less. She loved it when people did exactly what she said.

Chapter Four

Nicole allowed Lorie to lead her away. She hated leaving Abby alone with Caledon, but Lorie acted as though it were necessary. Hell, this was his land and his house, so who was she to argue? Besides, she could think of nothing better than watching his ass as he walked. Damn, it was fine, and he was all hers. If it wasn't bizarre she would rub her hands together and cackle with glee, but imagined he would think her odd. But then again, she had breasts so he probably thought she was odd anyway. Whatever, he seemed to like them. Quite a bit if last night was any indication.

Lost in thought, Nicole ran into Lorie, almost falling to the floor. He may not look it, but he was solid as the tree they stood in and the earth it was buried. At that thought, she smiled like a twelve-year-old. Yep, he was solid. She laughed to herself as he turned quickly, gathering her in his arms.

"Why do you laugh?" He leaned in close to nuzzle her hair.

The feel of him surrounding her warmed her heart and other places. She wrapped her arms around his neck. "I'm just glad we're here. Alone."

He brushed his lips against hers once, twice. Nicole shivered as heat rushed through her body. This man was lethal. Just twenty-four hours before she didn't even know he existed, now her every thought centered on him. The idea made her head whirl. What the fuck was wrong with her? Why did thoughts like that keep jumping into her mind? Calm down, she ordered herself. Of course your thoughts would center on him, she reasoned. This was a totally strange place and he saved your life. On top of that, she was getting the best sex she'd ever had. Feeling satisfied with her reflections, she turned her attention back to Lorie.

He took her hand and quickly led her through a set of interconnecting hallways. They went upstairs and then down, hurried through light and then pitch black. By the time he stopped in front of an ornate wooden door, Nicole had no idea where the hell they were. Or even if they were in the same building they started out in. All she knew was she was tired and now very hungry.

Lorie opened the door with a small bow. "Be welcome in my abode and accept it as your own."

Nicole stepped in and gasped. The room was more magnificent than anything she could imagine. Once again, the wall was open, but no trees blocked the view of a large clear lake with a

surround of mountains. Thick carpets cradled her feet as she hurried over to stand on an ornate balcony carved from the very tree itself. The wind gently caressed her face as she held it up to breathe deeply. Not even Mexico's Mayan Riviera could rival this for beauty or grandeur.

Loriam's arms came around to cradle her in his strength. "What do you think of my home so far?"

"Absolutely stunning." She turned in his arms to lay her head against his chest. His heart beat strong against her ear and unknowingly her heart began to pick up the rhythm.

"You continually befuddle my mind," he whispered to her. "I brought you here so we may break our fast in peace. But all I can think of is to have you in my arms again."

"Is that so bad?" She looked up into his sapphire-blue eyes.

"No," he smiled. "But I must feed you to keep up your strength. I have many plans for you."

"I can't wait."

"Please be seated." Caledon drew out a chair. "I will bring food so we may both eat and talk in comfort."

Abby watched him go, a grimace on her face. She didn't understand. She had told him what she wanted and he left to get food. Okay, she wanted food, badly, but she really wanted to talk about the logistics of the trip home. The longer they waited, the more trapped Abby began to feel. She just wanted to go home. Now.

Caledon reentered the open-air room carrying a tray laden with food. Abby hoped it wasn't fried. Fried food so gave her an upset stomach, though if he had bacon she would try to choke it down. She didn't want to seem an unappreciative guest.

Caledon sat across from her and began placing bowls upon the table. Abby recognized none of the food except for bread, or at least she assumed it was bread. Either way, her stomach rumbled loudly.

"I am quite sorry," he apologized. "I never thought of supplying you with food last evening. The day was one of surprises—"

"Nicole and I being the largest of those." She cut him off.

"Most definitely. Though not unwelcome ones."

His voice was pitched low and had a growling quality that sent shivers through her body. Get a grip, she told herself. So the man has a great voice. Okay, and beautiful eyes, and, from what she could tell, a bod to die for. Whatever. He was the prince of this bunch and was probably married to a

beautiful princess somewhere, no matter what Loriem had told Nicole. Incredible men like this did not run around unattached for long.

“I know yesterday was a difficult one—” he placed a plate in front of her “—but please, if you can, tell me exactly what happened.”

Abby began to eat and talk. She didn’t care if it was rude. She was starving and the food looked way too inviting to pass up. Recounting the entire day from start to finish made Abby realize just how much she and Nicole had been through. Though she skipped some of the parts, like the situations that made either one or both of them look like idiots, or what she was not present to witness, they both came off sounding pretty good. In fact, from where she was sitting, they were extremely lucky.

Caledon sat back in his chair, idly picking at his bread. A frown marred his serene face, but he did not speak. Abby ate while watching him under her eyelashes. He did not look happy; in fact, if she had to guess, he looked worried. God, she hoped it had nothing to do with their ability to go home. As nice as this place was, she was more than ready to return to the incredible resort with the huge buffets and endless drinks. Then home to her brand new house and huge dogs.

He looked up to meet her eyes. Abby felt an odd shiver run through her; she felt open and stripped bare. It was the same awareness she felt around the huge tree she now sat in.

“Once Elaria thrived.” He spoke slowly, measuring each word. “The Ancient Ones were the keepers of the land and as such flourished as Elaria did. Century upon century this was so until my people left what we had tended so carefully and built a magnificent city to live in. There were no trees, no plants, nothing living in this creation of ours. We began to rule the land as masters instead of the caretakers we were appointed to be.

“As time passed we forgot the old ways, to our and the land’s detriment. In our haste to abandon our ancient way of life, we left the most precious creation the Elves had, though at the time we did not see it as such. It was something formed by the first Elves, the four Elves who became the Caretakers. A thing of incredible beauty but deemed unimportant by the Breakers of the land.”

“What was this thing the Caretakers created?” Abby asked, very fascinated by the tale he wove.

“I do not know, and there is no one alive who does. Stories exist about it but nothing definite. I do know that it represented the land, it represented the four elements, and it represented the four Caretakers. Whatever it was changed as the cycles of the land changed. Alternatively, some stories claim as this creation changed, so did the land. Whichever, the Elves, in their arrogance, did not understand that it held the land and maintained the land. As long as the Elves oversaw both the object and the land, everything would prosper. Let it fail and we would fail.

“But the Breakers of the land did not heed this or the old ways. They did not want any of the old ways in their magnificent city. Therefore they left it, alone and unguarded, or so the one who craved to rule thought. He knew whoever possessed the item ruled the land, so he decided to steal it. However, in his haste he somehow destroyed what he wished most to possess. He attempted to enter the Sacred Chamber, but since he was not one of the four Caretakers, the room vanished. From that moment the land began to fail, and as a consequence, the Elves also.

“Elaria, the land we so prized, is now wild and running over with the creatures you saw yesterday. They are the agents of Trellum, the false king. Once the land began to fail, a great uprising, driven by Trellum and his followers, swept through the city. The king and most of his family were slain, and Trellum claimed the throne he desired above all else. Since the old ways were gone he chose to rule with might and has done so ever since.”

“So the creation thingy disappeared, the land failed, and then the old king was killed?” Abby asked slowly, trying to grasp the whole history of this land she found herself thrown into. “I understand that part of the story. But who are the Caretakers?”

Caledon grabbed what Abby supposed was a fruit and began to peel the skin delicately from it. “According to the Ancients, four Elves are appointed Caretakers of this land to follow the first four. Four Caretakers to represent the four elements: earth, air, fire, and water. The binding of these four elements, of these four people, creates a spiritual link between the Caretakers, the object, and the land. At least that is what the stories tell us. It is all confusing, and there is nothing written from that time to guide us.”

Caledon tossed the last bit of skin on a plate and pulled the fruit apart. A sweet ripe fragrance filled the space and Abby could feel her mouth water. She could almost taste the fruit; the scent of it was so strong and inviting. Caledon leaned forward, a piece of the fruit in hand. He gently touched her lips with it. Abby unconsciously licked her lips, tasting the sweetness. He rubbed her lips lightly with the fruit. Abby opened her mouth, mesmerized by the man before her. She could taste the sweetness that burst on her tongue. She licked the juice from her lips, brushing his fingers with her tongue in the process. He drew in a quick breath at the contact with her tongue. His green eyes darkened.

Abby quickly sat back. What the hell? Shit, she had licked the man. Most probably a married man, and a prince to boot. Was she out of her mind? Okay she hadn't meant to, but that wasn't the point. Or had she? Whatever, there were probably laws against stuff like this. My God, what if he had drugged her? She did not act this way. Ever. It had to be this place. She had to get home as soon as possible, before something truly terrible happened. Like she wanted to lick him all over.

Abby could feel the color creep up her face as she took a huge swallow from the cup before her. The liquid was cool and crisp like water, but not water. She didn't care. She just needed something to clear her head and break the strange mood that was over them.

"So"—she cleared her throat—"why were those scary animal things, gruntags you called them, chasing Nic and me around the ruins of Coba?" Be business-like, she told herself. Keep to the subject and keep your tongue to yourself.

Caledon hastily wiped his hands on a napkin. "That is what we need to find out."

Abby was thankful he didn't mention the tiny mishap or try to push it. They needed to work together to fix whatever was wrong. She had enough trouble with Nicole and Lorie; she needed to be the one with the clear head right now. She certainly didn't need some angry Elf princess rushing in here trying to start a fight. A fight that Abby was most certain she would finish.

"This whole failure of the land deal," Abby said, trying to get back on track. "Is this why those monster things could appear in Mexico? I mean I know we aren't in Mexico now, so something must have happened."

"I believe so, but I am not quite sure. There is so much about this situation I do not understand."

"Since we're no longer home and are here instead, how can we understand each other? Do you understand English?"

Caledon shrugged. "Once again I do not know. To my ears you are speaking Elvish. To yours I am speaking your native tongue. Another mystery to solve."

Abby looked at Caledon, really looked at him. She looked past the beautiful green eyes, the gorgeous face, everything, to see a man weighed down with responsibility. Weighted down with no one around to relieve him for even a moment. She did not envy him one bit.

Abby thrust aside the language question; she would worry about it later. "So, can I ask how this village fits into the story you told me?"

"When the city fell, the Elves scattered. Many died, including my father and all my siblings. A small group escaped. We knew the land failed, but could do nothing to stop it. Our plan was to wait until things settled then attempt to fix all that was broken. Trellum, the false king, heard and attacked us. Many of our number died. We moved deeper and deeper into the forest until this village was founded. We are still hunted. Trellum thinks that if he kills us, all will be right with this land. He is wrong."

"How long ago did this take place?" Abby asked, amazed that a village such as this most probably appeared almost overnight. Elf and magic, just like the commercial promised.

“I had barely seen thirty summers when the reign of the king ended. I have seen over eighteen-hundred summers now and am tired.”

Eighteen...did he say eighteen-hundred? Years? Abby stared at him stunned. There was no way this man was eighteen-hundred-years-old. He didn't even look twenty-five. The look on her face must have been apparent because he nodded. “Yes, I am eighteen-hundred-years-old. I am one of the oldest in our village and the last remaining child of the King.”

“The King?”

“Yes, my family has ruled this land for thousands of years. My grandsire is responsible for the construction of the city. My father followed in his footsteps, which surely sealed our fate. Their shame is my shame and will always be so. So you see, I am not worthy to be called Prince, but the few Elven that are left insist. Therefore I allow it, to never forget what my family has wrought upon this land.

“It does not really matter. We are a dying people. There are no women in our number, so we do not grow. We just exist until the land fails completely.”

“So what happens when the land fails?” Abby asked, almost afraid to find out.

“The tales say that when the land finally fails and breaks apart, we will perish. I have been studying the signs and there is little time left. Our end is coming soon.”

Nicole lay flat on her back, enjoying the comfort of soft sheets and a warm man. Opening one eye she looked over at him. Not warm; hot, definitely hot. Breakfast had been good, but what he had served up afterward had satisfied her far more. Loriem was eager and a quick study, she smiled. Oh, and he had stamina, lots and lots of stamina.

He leaned up on an elbow, his unbound hair falling like moonlight around them. He studied her with an intensity that almost made her squirm. “Nicole, I did not realize how empty I was until you came. Whatever time we have together I thank you, for this will be the happiest time I have spent in my long life.”

She could feel tears pool in her eyes. Why did he do this to her? Every time she convinced herself it was just sex, he said or did something, saying it was so much more. She fisted the tears from her eyes, covering her unsteadiness with humor. “Long life huh? I probably have lipstick older than you.”

“I do not know what lipstick is, but I doubt if it is older.”

“So how old are you?”

“I am twelve-hundred and twenty-six.”

“What?” Nicole sat up almost knocking heads with him. “There is no way. You can’t be, can you?”

“My people live very long lives,” he smiled. “Is there a problem with my age?”

“I don’t know.” She lay back down again, unsure of how she felt. “I’m only twenty-six so you are quite a bit older than me.”

He pressed his lips against hers, slowly easing his tongue into her mouth. “Then you must be careful with this old man. Should you not?” The taste of him, the smell of him invaded her senses. Did she care how old he was? Not hardly. All that mattered was he was here and she was here and they were naked. And with Loriem, that was an excellent way to be.

Nicole tried to push him back to take the lead, but he resisted. He slid his open mouth down her throat and began to gently bite. She tilted her head to give him better access. Lying with him was incredible. The feelings he inspired were almost too much to take. Why did he have to be here? Why couldn’t he live downstairs from her in the apartment complex? Instead, she had to find him in a strange land that she had to leave. Life was so not fucking fair.

Loriem lifted his head to look down at her. Concern filled his blue eyes. “Nicole, why do you cry? Am I hurting you?”

“No.” She wiped the tears away. “Yes. Shit, I don’t know.” She rolled away from him to climb out of the bed. “Why did I have to find you here? Why couldn’t you be some guy I worked with or lived close to or whatever?” The tears came faster and for once, she couldn’t stop them. The feelings developing were too fast and too overwhelming for her to comprehend.

He gathered her in his arms. “Why do you wish this for us? We are together because we are each who we are. To wish a difference on either one of us would mean we would never meet.”

“But I have to go home.” She sobbed, hating herself for it. She hated to be weak. Weakness was so girly, and tears truly pissed her off.

“Why? Why do you think you have to leave?” Loriem wiped the tears away to kiss her trembling lips. “Why do you not think this is the way fate intended for our lives to be?”

Nicole opened her mouth to respond, but could find nothing to say. Could he be right? Maybe she and Abby were here for a reason instead of some bizarre accident. On the other hand, maybe she was scrabbling for straws. There was no way that she was meant for a man like Loriem. Was there?

“It’s too soon.” She wrapped her arms around him. “I just met you yesterday and I feel all...I don’t know. I feel confused and needing you and I don’t want to be apart from you. That can’t be normal.”

“I do not know.” He kissed her deeply. “But I feel the same way. I feel deep love for you—”

“No.” Nicole covered his mouth. “No, don’t say that. See, it’s too soon. You can’t love me.”

He kissed her fingers, pulling them away from his mouth. “I do love you. This I swear to you. I promise to love you always, with every fiber of my being. I promise to protect you with every skill I possess. All of this I pledge for eternity and beyond.”

Nicole wept as Loriem kissed her. The promises he made were immense, but she knew he would keep to them. She may have only known him one day but she knew Loriem. He was as familiar to her as Abby.

They fell on the bed, each kissing and touching the other, wordlessly promising love. Nicole ran her hands down his back, feeling the muscles ripple and bunch. Loriem gathered her lush breasts in his hands, kissing and laving each nipple with his hot tongue. Nicole had never felt so cherished. She tried to tell him with her body and whispered words just how much he meant to her.

“Nicole,” Loriem whispered against her lips as he slid deep inside her. “I love you, forever and always.”

Nicole gasped as an orgasm more intense than the first one she had with him hit. Her body vibrated with his and the last sound she heard was the chiming of bells.

Abby sat quietly, unsure of what to say to Caledon. What does one say about the total annihilation of a race? Before she could reply the beautiful sound of wind chimes reached her ears. Chimes so perfect and in tune they brought tears to her eyes. Caledon stood suddenly, his chair falling over, a stunned look blanketing his face.

“What is it?” Abby asked, rising also.

“Something I have not heard since I was a boy. The chimes.”

“You mean the wind chimes?”

“Yes, they only happen when two Elven mate for life. It was always a sound greeted with great joy. How is this happening?”

Abby closed her eyes. Nicole and Loriem. She was going to kill both of them. Fuck, maybe Caledon would do that for her. Her eyes popped open. Would he try to put Nicole to death for screwing around with Loriem? Was that forbidden? She wasn’t an Elf that was for sure. Especially now since the race was supposedly dying. Oh shit, one more problem to have to solve. Would things never get better? If she and Nicole survived this, she would personally kick her best friend’s ass all the way home.

“Maybe it’s not what you think it is,” Abby suggested quickly. “I mean, like you said, it’s been a while since you heard it. Maybe it’s some kind of auditory hallucination? Or some kind of trick of the wind?”

Caledon, never saying a word, turned toward the doors leading from the room. Abby knew she had to stop him; she would not let him kill her best friend. She raced to get in front of him to stand barring the door. The look on his face would have been priceless if the situation wasn’t so intense. His eyes widened and his mouth dropped open, but no sound emerged.

“I can’t let you pass,” Abby told him quickly, not wanting to give him a chance to think of something to say. “I think we need to sit and talk about this calmly...rationally. You know. Figure things out. Violence is not the answer.” What the fuck? She sounded like some namby-pamby commercial. Whatever. As long as it stopped him. What if he hit her? Her eyes widened at the thought, but she still stood her ground. This was her best friend she was protecting.

Caledon looked at her with one eyebrow raised. He appeared rather commanding and she really wanted to step aside, but held her ground. Nicole was all she had here. And if anyone was going to kill her, it was going to be Abby and no one else.

“Abby, step aside.” His voice was low and husky. It made her shiver. He stepped forward and she put out a hand to touch his arm. The electricity of his touch made her gasp. The awareness that had come the night before was there again, but more intense this time. What the hell? Whatever it was, he felt it too. She could see it in his face.

He grasped her shoulders trying to move her gently from the door, but she held onto him. He was not passing without a fight. Instead, he slid his arms around her. Abby wondered if this was some ploy to get her to move, but no matter she was not budging. He pulled her close to his body; she could feel his muscles harden under her touch. Maybe this wasn’t a ploy.

“What are you doing to me?” he whispered as he slid his lips over hers. “I am feeling things I never thought I would feel. Ever.”

Abby didn’t know how to respond. She wasn’t doing anything, was she? Maybe he liked bossy women? Hell if he did, she was certainly the girl for him. But what about his wife? Didn’t he have one of those? Nicole said there were no women in the village, which was something he confirmed in the conversation they just had.

The kiss that came was unexpected, though she didn’t know why. When men pull you close and rub their lips over yours, a kiss should be expected, she reasoned. But when Caledon slid his tongue into

her mouth Abby almost jerked away. She would have if he hadn't held her so close and backed her against the door she had guarded so carefully.

He tasted of heat and sweetness and some elusive element Abby could not name. She ran her hands up and into his thick black hair. It swirled and clung lovingly to her fingers, appearing to live just for her touch. Caledon pulled her closer as Abby sucked on his tongue. She could hear him moan and feel his body's reaction to her closeness. She felt powerful. She felt like a goddess.

He pulled away from her, gasping as if he had run from a herd of gruntings. Abby closed her eyes, shaking from the quick-fire emotions racing through her body, thoughts racing through her mind. Caledon ran his hand down her back as he rested his forehead against her own. Both of them were breathless.

"I must go speak to Loriem," he whispered. "The chimes of mating can only have come from his rooms."

"You won't hurt them, will you?" Abby croaked out.

"Never, as I would never hurt you. I need to speak to him. To find out how and why this happened." He kissed her forehead gently. "You will accompany me."

"Try and stop me," Abby said. "Let's go."

Abby closed the door to Loriem's rooms. Both men had exited to speak privately, leaving her in the luxurious apartment. She hoped blows wouldn't be exchanged, or blood spilt. If someone was going to be kicking ass it was definitely going to be her. Glancing around she wondered where Nicole was. Better to focus on her than on what had happened with Caledon. That was certainly a no-fly zone for thoughts. She didn't want to think about it. In fact, she wanted to forget it ever happened.

Abby moved to the balcony. There certainly weren't many places to hide. The room was open and airy with a sitting area to one side and sleeping on the other. A huge balcony framed a view of a lake and surrounding mountains. The tableau was something right out of a magnificent painting.

Abby turned back to the one door in the room that remained closed. If she was correct, it had to be a bathroom, or something similar. Opening the door, she heard the sounds of water and singing. Nicole singing; this entailed making up songs. This one was no exception.

"Elfmens. Elfmens. When you gonna take off your clothes?" Nicole belted out. "Well I was walking through the forest and what did I see. Loriem was coming toward me. He was a strong and a handsome and woow what an ass. Wow! Elfmens. Elfmens. Come and make me your Goddess."

Abby laughed, glad for the break in tension. Some female gospel singers would definitely be jealous if they heard her. "I thought he already took off his clothes," she shouted over the water.

"Hey!" Nicole shut off the water. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. The big question should be how are you?"

Nicole appeared with a huge piece of cloth wrapped around her. Abby assumed it must be the Elf version of a towel. Her thick heavy hair was wrapped in a smaller piece of material. She looked positively glowing. She should be, Abby thought. It wasn't everyday a girl was mated for life.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" Nicole stopped.

"Like what?"

"Girl, like you want to kick my ass or something. And like something's wrong." She breezed past her to finish drying off in the main room. "Where's Lorie?"

"Caledon needed to talk to him in private." Abby waited to see if Nicole would mention the whole mating for life deal. Did her friend think no one had heard? Did she think this was something that could be hidden? From the sound of it, the whole village must have heard the ringing.

Nicole finished drying off and redressed. Abby watched her as she pattered about, straightening up the bed and the room. God, Nicole and domesticity did not mix. Abby felt faint watching her. Maybe during the whole running from monsters thing Nicole had received a blow to the head. That had to be the only rational explanation for her unlikely behavior.

"Why are you staring at me like I've grown another head?" Nicole sat on the bed to begin combing out her damp hair.

"I'm just seeing how far you've actually lost your fucking mind." Abby collapsed beside her. "Nicole, do you even realize how serious this is? I mean it's for life, sister. Life. And life to these people is a really, really long time. You've just met this guy. I mean sure, he may be great sex, but you don't know him."

"We've already had this conversation. So what are you talking about?" Nicole covered her mouth. "Stop. What serious? What life?"

Maybe she didn't know? Was that possible, Abby thought? Oh jeez. Maybe she would let someone else tell her. But the look on Nicole's face said it all. She wanted to know and she wanted to know now.

Abby just figured to do it like a band-aid. Rip it off quickly, painful for a moment, but then okay. She hoped. "So you know the chimey bells you heard?"

Nicole's eyes widened. "Fuck. Did you hear them? I thought it was an orgasm driven thing. Who else heard them?"

"Most probably the whole village." Before she could interrupt, Abby held up a hand. "Caledon tells me that when Elves mate for life, the bells ring. That's what it was. By the way he acted it is way serious and hasn't been heard in ages. So from every indication, you and the elfman are...um, married, sort of. For life."

Nicole opened her mouth, but no sound issued forth. For the first time she was speechless.

Caledon faced his kinsman. The insanity of the last few days had reached the ultimate point. The two women who had stumbled into their midst had brought incredible change. He had always known his people were dying. The Elven race died as the land died. Now a mating had occurred, the first of many possible changes. He wondered what repercussions any of this would bring. And if his race could manage and survive.

"The chimes sounded," Caledon repeated. "Everyone heard them. Already the village is clamoring to find out what has happened. They wish to celebrate."

Loriem gave a brief smile. "The mating was not something I planned. I had heard of the ceremony before, but did not know the particulars. I did not think I needed to since there were no females."

"The ritual is ingrained into us." Caledon sat wearily. "As we are of the land and the land is of us, so is the ritual. It represents the renewal of our land and of our people."

"What does this mean then?" Loriem sat beside him. "I have grown up knowing we are a dying people. Now Nicole has come into my life and we are life mates. Does this mean that we can save our people? Save our land?"

"I do not know," Caledon said, tired of hearing those words come out of his own mouth. "I will need to think on this. The situation is enormous. These women are not of our kind, and yet you did the ceremony with the one called Nicole. I did not know it was possible. I do not know what this means. They are fragile and not long-lived as the Elven."

"I will not give her up." Loriem rose to face his cousin. "I do not care what anyone says. She is of my heart, and I am of hers."

"Easy, Loriem." Caledon stood to face him. "No one has said anything about taking your mate. The ceremony has happened and there is no one who can break it. So tonight we will celebrate."

Loriem smiled, bowed quickly, and left the room. Caledon ran a hand wearily over his face. As leader, he was expected to know what these signs meant, but he knew nothing. They were definitely in untried territory. He just hoped that something revealed itself soon before it was too late.

Chapter Five

“I’m what?” Nicole shrieked.

Abby winced. Man, the woman definitely had a set of lungs on her. But she could certainly understand the tone. It wasn’t everyday a girl had sex and found herself stuck with the guy forever. Then again, Abby thought, this was just like Nicole, jump in...uh, feet first, as it were, and worry about the consequences later.

“You are mated,” Abby replied in what she hoped was a calm tone. “For life.”

“Okay, I so didn’t agree to this.” Nicole stood suddenly. “I mean, I don’t remember him asking me. If he would have asked I would have told him fuck no. I don’t want to be married or mated or whatever. I’m too young. Besides, I don’t love him. I like him; I like him a lot in fact, but that is not the basis for a marriage or mating or whatever. I have so many things to do and men to see and all that shit.” The faster she spoke the faster she paced. “Who the hell does he think he is? He tricked me. That’s right, tricked me. He turned those beautiful blue eyes on me and I was toast. Well you know what, he’s toast now. I am so going to kick his ass. Mmm-hmm, he won’t know what hit him when I get finished with his sexy little Elf body.”

“You know,” Abby shouted, to catch her attention. “You should have thought of all of this before you had sex with him. I mean you are in a culture you know nothing about; of course, something like this could have happened. So, do *not* put all the blame on Loriem.”

Nicole stared at her. “Abby, you’re my friend. My best friend. You’re supposed to back me up. You know if I say a guy is a total asshole then you say, ‘oh yeah, he is’.”

“Not this time.” Abby shook her head. “And let me tell you what. Apparently this is a big deal. So if someone comes up and offers congratulations to you, just say ‘thank you’. We’ll worry about how to get you out of it later. Right now, suck it up and pretend you’re happy.”

Before either woman could say more Loriem entered the room. He looked more frazzled than Abby had yet to see him. She wondered how his talk with Caledon went and then decided she really didn’t want to know. She did not want to get any more involved than she already was, did she? Shit, she was involved. She was involved because her stupid friend was. All she wanted was a vacation.

That was it. A chance to lie on the beach and drink silly drinks. Apparently she was not going to get it. Not today anyway.

The looks Nicole and Lorie were giving one another indicated to Abby it was time to leave. She slid off the bed. "Well, I'll let you two alone. I'm sure you have tons to talk about. Remember what we discussed." She looked hard at Nicole and then quietly left the room, closing the door behind her.

Nicole hugged herself tightly. This could not be happening. She looked at Lorie realizing she barely knew him. How could she be mated to someone she didn't know? They had just met the day before. Okay, the sex was great, but as she said to Abby that wasn't enough to build a relationship on. She thought about what Abby told her and could not pretend happiness. She had to tell him she wanted out. Whatever magical ceremony he had to do, they could not be married.

"I just spoke with Caledon." He approached slowly. "He does not know what any of this means. I do not know what it means for our people. He is concerned."

"I can totally understand that." Nicole nodded, hoping the conversation was going in the right direction. Maybe he didn't want to be mated to her either. She chewed on her lip; but why wouldn't he want to be mated with her? What was wrong with her? Nicole narrowed her eyes. She was good enough to screw but not marry? Bastard.

He slid wearily into a chair. "He asked me about the mating. I told him the truth; I did not know how it happened."

"What do you mean you don't know?"

"I assumed, in my ignorance, the ceremony was taught as men came of age. I was not taught since there was no reason to have the knowledge. The only information I have about the ritual is life mates are born to one another, they cannot be matched. So if an Elf never discovers his life mate then no mating will ever occur."

"You mean you would just be by yourself? Forever?" Nicole asked, stunned by the idea. Whoever heard of spending thousands of years alone because chance did not send you your partner? The thought was chilling.

"Yes. And because I knew there were no women in our village, I resigned myself to the fact of being alone all my life." He sank to one knee in front of her. "Thank you." He took her hand. "Thank you for coming into my life so I would not have to be alone."

Nicole felt tears gather in her eyes as she looked at his face. “You’re not upset? I mean, we barely know one another.”

“No.” He rose to gently cup her face in his hands. “You have made me so happy. I am honored to be your life mate. I love you with all that I am and all that I will be. I understand that you do not return these feelings, but I promise that you will never regret our mating.” He leaned in to kiss her and Nicole knew she couldn’t crush him. She could not tell him she didn’t want to be mated with him. She would wait just as Abby suggested. That was the best plan.

Abby wandered the twisting and turning hallways of Caledon’s home; they clearly mirrored her confused thoughts. Leaving Nicole and Lorie to talk had been a great idea, but leaving and having no idea where she was going was not. This was bad—very, very bad. What if no one ever found her? She almost laughed aloud at the thought of someone finding her crumbling bones in a corner. ‘Yep, that was the human woman that came here. We wondered where she had gotten to.’ She stilled; maybe it wasn’t so funny.

“Well shit,” she looked around. “Everything seems familiar, but I know I’ve never seen it before.” She rubbed her head; damn the day was turning out to be a long one. She heard that if one became lost to sit and wait to be found, but Abby knew that was meant for the woods. Would it work in here?

“Fuck,” she muttered. Where the hell was Caledon when a girl needed him? She fiddled absently with the new necklace she wore; the warmth from it surprised her. However, she guessed it shouldn’t. She had walked for what seemed like miles, of course the jewelry she wore would be warm. Hell, it should be dripping with sweat too.

Maybe if she called for him. Yeah right, like he was going to hear her. He didn’t even know she was missing. No one knew she was missing.

“Abby.”

His voice came around a corner startling her. Well, damn, maybe he did know. She started off at a trot toward his voice.

“Caledon, I’m here. Where are you?”

He appeared almost by magic sweeping her into an embrace. She hated to admit it, but he felt good. Moreover, she felt much better in his arms. She had to squash those feelings. Look where stuff like that landed Nicole. She backed away from him. “Wow, am I glad to find you. Or glad you found me,” she smiled. “I wanted to leave Lorie and Nicole alone, but then didn’t know how to get back.”

“I am just glad you are safe. I could not find you, but when you called my name I came instantly.”

“I didn’t call your name.” Abby looked at him oddly.

“You must have. I heard you call. I felt you call.” He stared at her with those fathomless green eyes.

Abby smiled. Maybe if she ignored the situation it would go away. Yes, ignoring it was best. “So did you figure out what happened with Lorie and Nicole?”

He took her arm as they walked down the long hall. “They are life mates. The ceremony has been completed. They are bound.”

“You make it sound so final,” Abby said, her mind racing. “They hardly know one another; he’s an Elf and she’s not.”

“It matters not how long life mates have known one another. They are born to be together and together they must be else they die. As for species, I did not think it was possible, but then nothing is how it has been. We are charting unknown territory.”

“So this life mate deal is for...” She trailed off.

“Life. They will be mated forever. That is what the ceremony does. It binds them body and soul. The ritual is ancient. It is ingrained in each Elven male and female. This is a rite neither my grandsire nor sire, in all their power, could force the people to leave behind. It is as much a part of the people as breathing.”

Abby nodded. Shit, they were in trouble. If this thing couldn’t be undone then Nicole was stuck. *Okay, get a hold of yourself.* Since she wasn’t an Elf, maybe it didn’t really count.

“You are concerned?” he asked, opening a door for both of them to enter.

“Yeah, you’re damn right I’m concerned. Nicole and I need to get home.” Abby entered a small area that contained low couches, tables and another incredible view. Man, if the Elves knew how to advertise, they could have this place filled to capacity within the month. Stressed-out business people would stand in line.

“Look, I feel like you and I can talk straight with each other. We seem like the only two people left who have some sense.” Abby sat on a couch smoothing the shirt over her knees. “Nicole and I have lives and homes waiting for us. I just bought a new house. I’m getting ready to start a brand new job. We can’t stay here. I don’t understand how this whole mating thing happened, but that’s immaterial right now. What I need to know is how to break it up and how to get home.”

Caledon sat beside her. “You do not understand; the mating cannot be reversed. I was told that in the entire universe for each man, one woman is created to be his mate. In the old days, the odds of discovering your life mate was good, and once you did you were bound body and soul. Now, to discover a life mate is unheard of. Loriem and Nicole are mated, and they cannot live without one another.”

“Right,” Abby nodded. “People say that all the time, but then the trouble and the fights start. He punches her and she runs away. Next thing you know the couple are in divorce court and he’s hopefully in jail. So how do we send them to the divorce court for Elves?”

“I do not know what divorce court is. Men in your world strike women?” He looked and sounded appalled by the very thought.

“Yes, men batter and kill their wives, girlfriends, whatever. You see it on the news everyday. No big deal,” she shrugged, trying to pretend everything was fine.

“We do not raise hands to our women. Ever. We live, breathe, and die to protect our mates. Without them we are nothing.”

“Sure,” Abby sighed. “Back to Nicole and Loriem. How do we break them up? How do we sever this whole deal?”

“We do not,” he spoke firmly. “Abby, you must believe me, there is no way to break up life mates. When my father was murdered, my mother pined until she joined him. Life mates cannot live without one another. When they finally find one another, they must mate. They are instinctively drawn to one another.”

“My culture has something like that too, we call it good old-fashioned lust,” Abby said. “Once it’s satisfied, the parties involved usually just drift apart never to see one another again. We call that a one-night stand.”

“Your culture is a very odd and emotional one,” Caledon observed. “We are a very serene people. We do not display our emotions easily. That is why most Elven men are excellent in battle since we never lead with our feelings.”

“What does this have to do with mating?”

“As I have said, once life mates find one another, a mating must take place. An Elven female, supposedly, feels an overwhelming urge to be one with her life mate. Because of this, her emotions are heightened until she begins to lose control. An Elven male also loses control of his emotions, but in a much more deadly way. He becomes aggressive as he begins to lose who he truly is and falls into madness. He needs his life mate to keep his aggression in check, to center himself in her love.”

“So what does he do, go around punching people out?” Abby rolled her eyes. “I thought you said men didn’t do that here.”

“When I was very young, a girl of noble birth found her life mate. Unfortunately, he was a guard in my father’s army. Her family was furious and refused to allow them to mate.”

“Why?” Abby interrupted. “I mean, if this is an ingrained thing then there is nothing anyone can do about it.”

“If it were that simple.” He shook his head. “When my grandsire built the city he ordered the old ways left behind. All the stories, all the history, all the traditions. They were to be left in the dust to rot. The people were to create better and grander traditions. I learned a small bit of our past because I was the son of the king, but not what I should. Talking of the ancient ways brought death. Anyone teaching or even discussing our heritage was accused of treason and executed, so even the mating ritual was not discussed at length. Most just assumed you picked your mate as you would a pebble from a stream.”

“That totally sucks.” Abby sat back in awe of such enormous stupidity. “Didn’t these men realize that not learning about the mistakes of the past could force them to be repeated over and over?”

“Neither of the kings thought this way. We were too perfect to make mistakes,” he said scathingly. “Which was the first huge error, and ultimately the last.”

“So what happened with the girl and the guy who were to be mated?”

“My father stepped in and, as king of our people, ordered this family to allow the mating to take place. Instead, the father slew his daughter. He would prefer her dead than to be mated to a commoner.”

“What a total bastard,” Abby interrupted. “I hope your father did something about this.”

“There was no need. Because of the amount of time that had passed without completing the ceremony, the male lost control. Insanity swamped him. He killed his mate’s entire family, then went out into the street and began to kill everyone he could find. It took ten arrows to finally bring him down. So you see, life mates must complete the ceremony. If not, Loriem would have met the same fate as this poor man. Now that he and Nicole are one, there is nothing that can break what has been bound. Because once the bond is forged nothing, not even death, can sever it.”

“Fuck.”

The evening brought the entire village out for a banquet to celebrate Loriem and Nicole. The headache that had been threatening for two days finally broke. Abby’s head felt like an overdone

soufflé. She had not spoken to Nicole about her conversation with Caledon. Hell, what could she say anyway? Sorry girl, you're stuck here forever? She didn't think it would go over too well. Right now she would let things ride until a plan came to mind. There had to be a way, no matter what he said.

The walkways overflowed with men laughing and talking as they headed to the banquet hall, a little-used facility since there were so few in the village. Abby strolled silently along with Caledon as he greeted everyone by name. The excitement in the air was so dense Abby could feel it dance across her skin. Obviously the place hadn't had a reason for a party in a long time. Go figure men would celebrate someone getting laid.

"You are quiet," Caledon murmured close to her ear.

"I'm overwhelmed," Abby spoke truthfully. "Yesterday we were on vacation at a resort and today my best friend is 'mated' with a man she doesn't know. On top of that, I have no idea how or if I will ever get home. I don't understand anything about this land and I have no clue how I will survive."

"Please do not fear. I will care for you."

She looked into his earnest face and gave a half smile. "I appreciate that but I like to take care of myself. It's much safer that way."

"Well, then we will care for one another," he stated simply as he lead her into the large hall.

Any reply Abby had drifted away as she gazed in awe at the architecture before her. The inside of the building was spacious and ornate. Her feet sunk into rich luxurious carpets covering the entire floor. The walls were painted with detailed murals and hung with colorful tapestries. Once this village thrived; it was loved as the people loved one another. Tears sprang to Abby's eyes; hurriedly she wiped them away. Damn hormones, she thought. Everything was making her weepy. She crossed her fingers, praying her period would not make an appearance. Wouldn't that just make this experience even more special?

The chattering of voices echoed in the huge room. Though they were few in number, the atmosphere was jovial, the scent of hope on the air. Lorie and Nicole sat at a table on a raised platform. They looked happy and relaxed as they whispered to one another. Nicole certainly did not look worried. Didn't she care that she would never go home again? Once again, Abby felt the urge to kick her to the moon. Here she was stressing while Nicole sat worry free, having the time of her life.

Caledon led her to the raised table. She smiled stiffly at Nicole and Lorie. She was not going to wish them a happy life because what she really wanted to do was hit them in the head and yell. But she did neither. Instead, she showed admirable restraint by taking the seat Caledon pulled out for her. The chair he sat in next to her was large backed and intricately carved; a chair fit for a prince. A throne.

She peeked over her shoulder at her own chair. It too was high backed and intricate, but not like his and not like anyone else's at the table.

"Are you uncomfortable?" He lowered his voice so only she could hear.

"What makes you ask that?" Abby sat stiffly, not looking at him. She hated being on display and sitting up high in the chair made her feel overly conspicuous.

"I see you looking at the chairs. At one time, they were seats of power reserved for only the King and his mate, the Queen. When we escaped the city, somehow my people brought them on the arduous journey thinking that one day I would need them. Now they mean nothing since our land is dying. You are my guest and I wish you seated beside me. Conversation is easier if I do not have to shout to be heard."

Abby looked at him. His thick night-black hair fell in elaborate braids; she wondered who created them for him. The over tunic he wore was stitched with gold and silver threads and adorned with small gems. His white shirt was soft to the touch, made from some type of fine fabric. Caledon could say whatever he wished, but Abby knew who ruled this village.

He rose and the room instantly fell silent. Caledon raised his cup. "Today we celebrate a miracle. For too long we have lived in isolation and despair, a dying people with no hope. Now, one of our own has found his life mate when no possibility of that existed. This is a sign of good things yet to come. Let our history show that Lorie and Nicole are the bringers of faith. The rebirth of our people and Elaria."

"Lorie and Nicole," the men shouted. Abby shot a look at her friend but could not contain a smile. Nicole looked shell-shocked. Abby guessed it was the whole idea of being the rebirth of anything. Maybe the dumb hoochie finally realized what she was doing could cause babies, she thought testily. Well, she should worry. If she got pregnant, they would never get home.

Caledon took his seat as food was passed around. The fated couple was served first. Abby noted that Nicole had recovered quite nicely since she was accepting the food Lorie fed her. Abby decided to push every worry and thought aside for the evening. Nicole was an adult. What she chose to do with her life was her business. Abby knew she had to start worrying about herself. She wanted to get home. There was nothing here that held her.

Caledon leaned over to pour liquid into her glass. "You look quite serious, Abby. We are celebrating. Do you wish to tell me what troubles you?"

"You know what troubles me," Abby said.

He nodded. “But what is done is done. There is nothing you or I can do about it. The Gods have ordained these two be life mates. Now we must walk the path to see where it leads us.”

Abby thought on what he said, knowing he was absolutely right. She hated to admit it, but he was. Once again she decided to just go with the flow and take life as it came. She figured if she made this promise enough it might actually happen. She doubted it, but it could. Catching the Nicole Virus was her only hope. Was it possible? She and her friend were so different. She glanced over to where she sat. Nicole took everything in stride, or seemed to. Nothing ruffled her. Nothing bothered her, but she wasn’t big on planning either. Abby, on the other hand, worried about everything. Hell, she preplanned her bathroom breaks. She’d had to plan even more since meeting James. She could not afford to allow him into her life again. The next time would be deadly.

To stop the whirling thoughts, she rose from her chair to explore the hall. The wall murals totally intrigued her so she definitely wanted a closer look. Loriem and Nicole were immersed in one another, and Caledon was deep in conversation with an Elf she had never seen before. Slowly, Abby began to investigate the paintings. The artist, whoever it was, had talent. The images depicted looked real enough to walk into.

She longed to touch but held back. Not even while visiting the Met in New York did she feel the urge to truly experience artwork. However, here in this place, she felt a pang deep in her soul to be a part of all that lay before her. She finally stopped in front of a mural she found in a small alcove lit with candles. Though the painting was just as detailed as the others, the Elves pictured had their faces hidden. They stood in front of an ornate doorway holding offerings of some kind in their hands. Stepping closer, Abby studied the objects. Not offerings, but necklaces. They each wore necklaces of braided metalwork with elaborate end pieces.

She had seen something like that before. The longer she stared the more certain she was. She studied each necklace in turn until she came to a figure with long flowing red hair. The piece she held before her was carved with an image of a person holding fire in the palms of the hands. Abby gasped, stepping back. It wasn’t possible, was it? Slowly she withdrew the necklace she had found at Coba from under her shirt. Delicate strands of silver woven together comprised the sturdy chain. At the end was the piece she worked so hard to clean. On it stood the same figure holding fire in the palms of the hands. On the back, the image of fire was joined with three other images—the images were pictured on the other disks in the mural. Writing she could not read encircled the four images. She clutched the necklace tightly in her hand, unsure of what to do.

“Abby?”

She jumped, whirling to face Caledon. He approached so quietly she had not heard him.

“I see you found the mural of the four Caretakers.” He nodded to the painting behind her.

“Caretakers?” She turned around to stare dumbly at it.

“Yes, the four Elves chosen to guard our most sacred artifact. The necklaces they wear represent the elements of earth, air, fire, and water. Together the four combine to create the spirit of the Elven people and of this land. The door they stand in front of is the entrance to the sacred chamber. Only they are allowed to enter.

“Terrill, the holder of ancient knowledge, painted these when the village was first built. He wanted us to understand where we had come from so that when the land was renewed, as he believed it would be, we would know our history. Sadly, he stepped over to the Green Lands upon completion of this mural and never really shared everything he knew. That is why most of what we know is filled with gaps.”

Abby nodded, remembering the story he had related to her. How the hell had one of these necklaces come into her possession? It couldn't be. If Caledon were over eighteen-hundred-years-old, the necklaces would have to be far, far older. There was no way the jewelry she wore was that old. Even crazier was the fact that it had somehow found its way to Coba to lay unnoticed in an ancient ruin. Double no way. Besides, the real necklaces had to be buried with some long-dead Elves. The thing she wore had to be a reproduction or even more, just a queer coincidence. Nothing more.

She laughed shaking her head. “I think I'm losing my mind.”

“Why do you say that?” He moved to stand beside her.

“It's stupid really. I found this necklace at Coba, right before the monster things started chasing us. For a minute I thought it looked like one of these in the mural.” Saying this she opened her palm to reveal the disk.

Caledon stared at it unblinking. He slowly reached a hand out to touch it, but quickly withdrew. “By the gods, Abby. Where did you find it?”

His voice, normally low and growling, was almost inaudible. Abby stepped closer to him still holding the disk. “I found it at Coba. It was just lying up on a shelf in one of the ruins. Caledon, there is no way this bauble is the necklace pictured. It's a coincidence, that's all. It's probably carved by some guy in Playa del Carmen and sold for a buck on the street. Hell, the silver will probably wear off within a day and turn my neck green.” She held it out to him, but he backed away.

“I cannot touch it.” He stared in awe of her. “To touch a talisman of the Caretakers is to die. The old stories say the power contained upon them is the power contained in them. The Caretaker who wore this piece wielded the power of fire.”

Abby smiled. “Honey, that’s all well and good. But this isn’t that necklace, okay? This is a cheap trinket sold on the street by a vendor. If what you’re saying were the truth, I’d be burned to a cinder by now. I picked it up, I wiped it off, and I’ve been wearing it. I’m not dead, though at some points I felt like it.”

“What the hell is going on?”

Abby and Caledon turned to find Nicole and Loriem staring at them. “This is a party.” Nicole gritted her teeth in a fake smile. “You two are over here hiding in the corner and people are noticing. Come on out and join the rest of us.”

“Loriem, Abby has a talisman of a Caretaker,” Caledon said.

“No I don’t,” Abby protested.

“You have a what? Have you stolen something?” Nicole stepped over to her. “Whatever it is, give it back to them.”

“I didn’t steal anything.” Abby slapped her on the arm. “I found it in Coba. Now Caledon thinks it’s some kind of necklace the Caretakers used to wear. See.” She pointed to the mural holding the necklace up for Nicole to inspect.

“By the Gods,” Loriem stepped forward. “Abby, how did you come to have this? How are you wearing it?”

“Everyone calm down,” Nicole directed, pacing forward to study the mural closely. “Let me have a minute to look at this.”

All three were quiet as Nicole stood with her nose practically pressed to the wall. She then turned to Abby. “Let me see it.”

“Do not touch it,” Loriem ordered. “It will kill you.”

“Sweetie, don’t get your panties in a knot. I doubt very much the thing Abby is wearing is going to kill anyone. I think I saw someone peddling junk like this in Cozumel.” She reached out a hand to take the necklace. But just as her fingers were about to touch the disk, it flared a brilliant red. She jerked her hand back and danced away. “What the fuck! What happened? Shit, Abby that thing feels hot like an oven.”

Abby stared down at the necklace in her hand. “No it doesn’t. I mean it’s a bit warm, but nothing like what you’re talking about.” She made a face at Nicole. “Quit goofing around. This is serious and not a time for jokes. Now tell them you were teasing and let’s get on with it.”

“I’m not joking.” Nicole shook her head. “That thing was hot. I could feel it.”

Caledon, Loriem and Nicole stared at her. Abby quickly dropped the necklace back inside her shirt but it was too late. The people in the hall, curious about the goings on in the alcove, had begun to gather. They had seen the necklace.

Mutterings began which then spread to loud talk. They all said the same thing. A Caretaker talisman had been discovered. Abby didn’t know what any of this meant, but prayed it was nothing close to a life mate thing. She had the sick feeling, though, that to the Elves it was much better than a life mate, and she was right in the middle of it.

Loriem sat with his eyes closed. A sense of peace surrounded him. Nicole, his life mate, sat behind him slowly running her fingers through his hair, removing the braids. Soon he would teach her to put them in as women of old had done for their men. The whole concept of having a mate filled him to bursting. Mostly he could not believe it, but then he would look at her and realize it was real; she was real.

Her thick heavy hair swirled around her as she worked. He could picture her in his mind; he had brushed her hair carefully before she had begun. An intense need for her grew, but he knew it would be like this always. They were life mates and could not be apart for long. Their bodies and souls called out to one another. He knew she did not understand this yet, but she would. Or prayed she would. The culture she was from did not have life mates. He did not understand. How did people stay together if their souls were not one? The thought of some other man touching Nicole made his anger rise. If anyone would dare look at her, he would kill him.

“Sweetie.”

He opened his eyes to find her watching him. “Yes, my heart.”

“What does all this necklace stuff mean?” She began to brush his hair with careful strokes. “It’s pretty much fried out the entire village.”

Loriem smiled. Her turn of phrase was foreign to him, but he understood the meaning perfectly. After the discovery of the necklace, the village was in an uproar. Caledon had ordered them to their homes and a council was called for the next day. Maybe someone would have ideas.

“I do not know what it means. The tales says that when the false king came to power, the Caretakers fled. No one knows where they went; they disappeared. When that happened, the room which held the sacred artifact was closed forever. Elves broke and ran to escape the killings. Our people fell to ruin.”

“So are there more Elves out there?”

“That, I cannot tell you. We were a numerous people, but I grew up in this village and have no experience living any other way.”

“So is Abby in trouble?”

He could see the worry in her heart. “No, not by any means. As we are a sign, I believe she is a sign. The two of you have brought hope back to our people. You have given me hope.”

“Loriem.” Nicole climbed off the bed to stand in front of him. “Do you understand how crazy this is for me? I don’t live like this. Where I’m from, you date for months to get to know each other. Maybe you get married, maybe not. When you do, it’s not necessarily for life. Shit happens and people break up. Then you move on to find someone else.”

“There is no one else for either of us.” He moved to stand before her, unashamedly naked. “We are one.” Saying this, he pulled her into his arms and kissed her slowly. Her lips were soft and yielding. She tasted hot and sweet, an essence uniquely Nicole, a taste he could not get enough of. Her tongue stroked his, the sensations threatened to overwhelm him. He had never imagined mating would be this way; he never imagined mating at all. He knew it would not happen so why dwell on the impossible? But it was not impossible. His mate was here with him for all time.

She began to slowly kiss down his neck, biting and licking, causing pleasure and pain to be bound into one. He would never tire of her. Never tire of the feelings she evoked. He pulled away from her to look into her eyes. Her lips were swollen from his kisses and her hair tangled around his fingers. She was his. He would kill to protect her. Kill to keep her.

He reached out to begin unbuttoning the shirt she wore—his shirt—pulling it from her body. Her nipples stood out in an invitation he accepted willingly. Loriem teased each with his tongue, laving and sucking. Her breathing was ragged, but he wished this to last. All their other unions had been hurried and frantic, but on the night of the celebration, he wanted this to be special. Something neither would forget.

With his tongue he traced intricate patterns over her full breasts as he held her firmly. She ran her fingers restlessly through his hair, massaging his scalp and ears. Loriem leaned his face into her belly breathing deeply, trying to remain in control. He had never realized just how sensitive his ears

were until Nicole's touch. He could feel his penis grow and elongate; he wanted nothing more than to bury himself deep within her heat. However, he held back. This night belonged to them.

Blowing gently on the soft tuft of hair between her legs caused Nicole to grasp onto his shoulders, gasping softly. As long as she kept away from his ears, he could hold onto his hard fought control.

"Loriem," she breathed his name.

"What, love?" He eased her back to lean against their bed while hooking one of her legs over his shoulder. He took in the fragrance of her, hot and musky. Swirling his tongue into her petal-soft folds, he drank her in.

"Loriem, don't stop. That feels so good."

"Never." He swirled his tongue around and around her small bud as she clutched frantically at his long mane. He was not sure if she wished him closer or wanted him gone. Plunging his tongue deep within her, he began to suckle and lick. He wanted to taste her, to feed on her. Nothing had ever tasted as good as Nicole. She began to shudder against him as he drank her hot nectar, her voice crying out for him.

Loriem could not stand it any longer. He craved for this night to last, this time to last, but he desired to be a part of her. He had to be a part of her. Placing her on the bed, Loriem gazed at her sprawled before him. She was magnificent, like a work of art, but she was hot and real and his.

He positioned himself over her, beginning to kiss her again, starting at her swollen lips. Her tongue danced with his as her fingers threaded through his hair, beginning to caress his ears. Loriem tried shaking her off, but Nicole knew what she wanted and she knew how to get it. Swiftly he parted her legs and slid within. Nicole's heat clung to him, gripped him. He lay unmoving, just feeling her surround him. The connection between them flared; they were one. She was his life mate and he hers. There was nothing else that mattered. The land could crumble around them, but as long as they were together, everything was perfect.

"Loriem," she whispered. "You are so beautiful and you feel so good inside of me." Her hands traced patterns over the bunched muscles of his back down to his ass. She embraced him, pulling him tighter against her. "All of you, I want all of you inside of me."

He withdrew his length, feeling her tight sheath spasm, fighting to hold him within her body, forever. He then pushed himself deeper within her as Nicole rose up to meet him. He gripped her hips wanting more, needing more. He began to move in and out of her hot depths. Any rhythm or finesse he thought of having was lost. He yearned to be inside of her, crawl inside of her if he could. The feelings

she brought forth in him were exquisite, bordering on pain. He felt tears gather in the corners of his eyes as he thrust himself deeper within her.

Nicole clasped him tightly with her legs, locking them around his waist. Lorie m slid his hands under her, trying to bring her even closer if that were possible. He could feel the orgasm beginning to build, not sure whether he wanted it or not. If he could he would hold them in this moment, but that was not possible. Nicole hugged him frantically as he felt her beginning to climax. She gasped his name. Lorie m held her as his own orgasm poured through him and into her.

“I love you,” he murmured against her lips as he began to run his hands over her sweat-slicked body. Tomorrow would bring a new set of problems as the council met, but tonight was his and his life mate’s. He intended to make every second they had together count.

Chapter Six

Caledon sat staring moodily out the window. The view was utterly spectacular from his rooms, but he would not have noticed if it disappeared. His whole focus was on the discovery of the talisman and the woman who wore it. In two days, the world and life he knew had been turned upside down. More changes were coming; he just had to understand how to cope with them. Eighteen-hundred years should have prepared him, but no amount of training or planning could.

Standing, he began to pace. Though the talisman should be at the forefront of his thoughts, it was not. He should be pondering the meaning of the piece and why it had turned up now. The council would meet within a very short period of time and his people expected answers. Instead all he could think of was Abby, the bearer of the talisman, his sometimes nemesis, his partner—his life mate. The realization was overwhelming. The tug and pull he had felt on his heart, his soul, that first night she had entered his land. Laying eyes on her had only confirmed what he knew in every fiber of his being, his life mate had arrived.

Why? Why now? Why her? The questions tore and nipped at him. She was nothing like the Elven women he had grown up with. They had been gently bred, born to be protected by their families and life mates. This was the type of life mate he had been raised to have. Yet Abby was none of these things. She was tough, opinionated, and totally focused on going back to her home.

He leaned against the railing of the balcony. The sun was just beginning to come up behind the mountains. Pink and purple streaks rippled across the sky like streamers at a party. This was his land, for better or worse, and he loved it. He would die to defend it, die to save it. He was descended from kings; it was his duty. Could he force Abby into a life that could give so little?

He turned, leaving the scenery behind. Abby could not stay here. There was no life for her; nothing he could give her, for his was a dying people. But the existence of the talisman changed that. If one turned up, might not all of them? The thought troubled him. If the false king found them, he could have entry into the room of the sacred artifact. The thought was chilling.

Caledon laughed aloud at his arrogance. Here he stood making plans, trying to find a reason to send her home, his life mate. He could not do that, just as he could not let her go. To do that was to sentence both of them to death. Once life mates found one another they had to complete the ceremony

that would unite them body and soul. He had to walk the path put before him. The path, which contained Abby and the talisman, was his destiny. It would be a rocky one, but never boring. Abby would see to that.

Abby dozed fitfully in one of the seemingly endless chambers in Caledon's home. The recognition of the necklace she wore had prompted him to insist she stay. The village was inquisitive and would not leave her alone in the little house she stayed the first night. Protection was not what she sought in this quiet place; she wanted answers. Instead, what she had found were more mysteries and more questions. Not a pleasant thought for a woman who planned everything—needed to plan everything.

A soft breeze, fragrant and warm, blew across her bare skin. She breathed deeply, opening her eyes to find herself walking down a quiet forest path. Abby knew, deep in her heart, she was dreaming because the faint softness of the sheet covering her was barely discernable. But she could not wake, no matter how much she forced herself. Instead, she continued to walk. The lushness of the forest enchanted and beguiled her. Birds called in the trees and the trilling of insects sang from the bushes. There was no more beautiful place on earth, she thought.

Coming around a bend in the path, she spied the glint of sun on water. Gently rushing water came to her ears as she hurried along to see what lay ahead. Now she knew this was a dream because she never hurried forward. Thinking and planning was her forte since hurt often found people who didn't deliberate before they took a step. This was the way Abby had led her life, had to lead her life. James showed her what happened if she didn't. She liked the new life she was planning for herself and wanted to get back to it as quickly as possible.

The trees thinned. Abby could see the rippling waters of the hidden pool. She knew this place, she dreamed about it last night also. Water rushed from above to form a small waterfall that dropped into the pool, creating ripples and patterns in the clear blue water. In the dream Abby found she was suddenly naked, or had she been all along? The thought passed quickly as she slid into her new private sanctuary. The pond was cool but not cold, and felt refreshing against her bare skin.

She swam through the water, lithe and sure like a dolphin or mermaid. The thought made her laugh because in reality she couldn't swim very well. Okay, unless it was water she could stand up in, but this wasn't. This water was deep and clear. The bottom was soft white sand that felt like silk to the touch and danced with ripples of sunlight from above.

She felt herself push up from the bottom, exploding out of the water, breathing the sweet air. The feeling was exhilarating, but missing something. The something that had been missing her entire life, though she didn't know what it was. She couldn't even verbalize it but the feeling was always there, like a hole that could never be filled. In the beginning she thought James would fill that empty spot, but no matter how hard she tried, nothing worked. Then her world had shattered around her. The empty feeling was much preferred to what he had given her.

The sensation of not being alone any longer came over her. Abby turned to find Caledon in the water, a mere hairsbreadth from her bare skin. His night black hair fanned around him as his green eyes stood out like vivid gems in his perfect face. She could feel the heat of him through the water and shivered. Leaning forward, he pressed his lips to hers as his body molded down her length. An impression of completeness spilled over her as his tongue eased into her mouth. He tasted of things sensuous and dark. Wrapping her arms and legs around him, she held him close as she felt not only his body touch her, but his soul as well.

“Abby.”

The voice invaded, disturbing her. How could he speak when his lips clung to hers? She fought to stay within the dream, whole and complete as she wasn't in reality, but still the voice called her.

“Abby. Wake up, girl.”

The dream released her like a rock shot from a sling. She opened her eyes with a jerk to find Nicole staring down at her. Her body felt heavy and unfulfilled as her brain whirled with the realness of the dream. She had not wanted it to end. She wanted to stay in that pool and in his arms forever. But those things could not happen. Ever.

“Are you all right?” Nicole asked, her brow wrinkled with concern.

Abby nodded, unsure of her voice as Nicole went on. “We need to hurry. The council starts in just a bit and we need to be there. I'm surprised you aren't up already. You usually get up so damn early.”

Shakily, Abby made her way to the shower as Nicole talked on. The dream still gripped her, clinging like a stinging nettle. Or, rather, she could not get rid of the feelings the dream brought. She stepped into the stream of water as she imagined the thoughts and feelings about Caledon rushing away with the water. He was a prince and an Elf. She had a home and a job. The two of them collaborated to fix the situation they found themselves in. She needed him to get home, nothing more. This place was not her place, nor would it ever be.

She stepped from the shower more clearheaded as she began to briskly dry off. Clearheaded, but not released from what the dream had brought her. If Abby had learned one thing over her life, it was to put silly notions aside. Notions brought pain she could do without. She had a job to do, which was getting home. Nothing else could be allowed to stand in her way.

The council met where the celebration banquet had taken place. However, today only fourteen chairs graced the inside of the space. Fourteen chairs set in a circle with Caledon's overshadowing all of them. There was no gaiety and laughter of the night before, instead faces were stern and brows wrinkled. Abby and Nicole sat together between Lorie and Caledon, listening to the conversation bounce from person to person. From what Abby could observe not one of them had a clue what was going on. Like men, the subject was discussed as if they were driving around and around refusing to ask for directions.

For the fifth time, Kael, one of the ten Elves present, asked, "But what does the coming of the talisman truly mean? And why is it in the hands of an outlander?"

"Haven't we already covered this topic?" Nicole whispered to Abby none too quietly. Leave it to Nicole to drive the point home like a hammer. Abby smiled into her hand as Lorie sent them a look that clearly said to behave. But, for the women, they had been sitting for far too long listening to the men get nowhere.

Nicole held up her hand to get some attention. "Hello. Can we all agree we don't know what this means and why Abby has it? So what else is there to discuss?"

Her interruption brought the conversation in the room to a screeching halt. Lorie closed his eyes, sinking a bit in his chair. Abby smiled. He wanted her, so now he finally got to see Nicole in all her glory. Abby sat back in her chair, quite content for Nicole to take the floor.

"I've been thinking," Nicole went on. "Remember, Abby, when you first found the necklace thing? Wasn't it shortly after that the hairy scary things started showing up?"

Abby nodded. "You're right. I found the necklace on a shelf in a Coba ruin. I thought someone had lost it and put it in my pocket to turn it in to our guide. Right after that you said you saw something moving in the trees."

"Either that was a coincidence in timing or they were there for a reason." Nicole began to drum her fingers on the arm of her chair. "I think they were there for that necklace, but you got it first. So they figured they would get it back."

“Even if they would have found the talisman first, they could have never touched it,” Loriem interrupted them. “Abby is the only person able to. That is what being a Caretaker means.”

“So what were they doing?” Nicole asked.

“Looking for the one who possessed the talisman. They were probably going to attempt abduction and take Abby to the false king,” Loriem answered. “That would have been the only option.”

“But they didn’t know who had it since the group we were with was packed together.” Abby nodded to him. “They didn’t figure it out until Nicole and I ran off. They figured one of us had it so they chased us. But we crawled into the big brush pile.”

“But remember after we fell down the hill and ran in the water?” Nicole asked. “It was like running through mud or something.”

“I remember. It felt like something holding us back, but we just held on and kept running. That’s how we ended up here.” Abby glanced over at her pensive face. “So do you think it was the talisman that got us here?”

“Maybe,” she nodded, looking to Loriem who agreed with her. “But if they can track this thing then aren’t they going to find it here? And if so, why is it taking so long?”

Caledon interrupted them. “We have many wards on this village. It would be very difficult for the gruntags to track the talisman here.”

“Difficult, but not impossible,” Loriem said. “Even now they pace the forest hunting, always hunting. We did not know for what, but if we are correct, they are looking for the talisman and the one who bears it.”

“Well hell,” Abby muttered. “What else can go wrong?”

In answer to her question the door burst open and a disheveled Elf came rushing in, clutching a large dusty book to his chest. “I am so sorry, Highness,” he bowed to Caledon. “But I have been searching what ancient records we have since the talisman was discovered. I do not mean to interrupt this venerable gathering of the wise of our village. You who have so much more knowledge and skill than I, you who have lived far longer and seen so much more of the world. I know you do not need the words of a simple scribe and I would beg your leave and your pardon—”

“Just say what you found,” Nicole interrupted his rambling. “Damn, I don’t even know you and you already irritate me.”

“And you asked what else could go wrong?” Loriem leaned over to whisper to Abby. “Now you know.”

Abby smiled as the newcomer stood in open-mouthed astonishment. She bet no one had ever interrupted him before in his life. When he didn't say anything, Nicole snapped her fingers. "Hello. Get on with it little man before I come down and rip all your hair out."

Abby started to laugh aloud. She loved Nicole and if she had to be trapped in a situation like this, there was no better person to be with.

"You heard the lady, Elan," Caledon said. "Tell us what you have found."

"Of course, my Prince." He bowed again, nearly falling over with the weight of the book he carried. He then placed the huge tome on a table and began to flip pages. "This book holds the history of our race, written by the Elves who witnessed it. Much of it is written in the old tongue, but I have been tutored in it by the Prince"—he bowed again—"who was tutored by Terrill."

He glanced up, caught Nicole's eye, and hurried on. "The history and a number of other parchments have much to say on the talismans and the legend which surrounds them. In our past, Elven of much power—two male and two female—wielded the four talismans. Each of these Elven were life mates, Earth and Air were mated as was Fire and Water. No words written say why this is so, but it was always the way of it."

"Life mate?" Abby interrupted. "Excuse me?"

"Y-yes," he stammered, not meeting her eyes. "Your life mate will be the one who will wield the talisman of Water."

"No, see you *don't* understand. I *don't* have a life mate nor do I *want* one," Abby explained slowly and carefully, to make sure the little Elf man understood. "And truly I don't want this talisman either. So, you need to come up with a way someone else can have it. Because I'm going home."

The messy little Elf almost danced in place as he tried to escape not only Nicole's eyes, but now Abby's as well. "Beg your pardon, Lady of Fire, but you are the one, the owner of the talisman. No one may take it from you else he or she burn and die. The only one who may touch it is your life mate and he cannot wield the power. He may touch it because he is Lord of Water, but that is it."

"Lady of what?" Abby laughed.

"Lady of Fire, that is the name placed upon the one who controls the element and the talisman," he mumbled under his breath.

"I don't want it." Abby started to rise but was held back by not only Nicole, but Caledon also.

"Sit back, Fire Woman," Nicole laughed. "Let's hear what Little Man has to say."

"Tell us of the legend," Loriem interjected, changing the subject. "I know I have heard it told as a child, but not since then."

Elan brushed his unkempt hair away from his face with ink stained fingers. “The legend says that there will be one from a far away place who will begin the restoration of this land. She will come bearing the talisman of fire. Once the talisman has been found, the others will make themselves known to their rightful owners.” He began to struggle with the book, flipping pages until he pulled a small dirty parchment out. “Here it is. This is the legend written in a hand long dead. It talks about the legends and the possible resting places of the other talismans, though never Fire. It is said to be lost in space and time, or something to that affect. It is very hard to decipher.”

“That sheet of paper gives directions?” Nicole asked skeptically. “Then why didn’t somebody go looking for them? That’s what I would have done.”

“Um, no.” He bowed again. “Like I have said, the language is ancient and veiled in riddles. No one has been able to decipher the parchment all the way and even if someone did, none could claim the talisman. I do know the other talismans are where their elements can be found. Least that is what I can read from the parchment.”

“So what do we do?” Nicole asked. The question was met with silence. Each person in the room looked at the other, expecting some type of answer. Caledon stared down at his linked fingers deep in thought. Nicole nudged Abby, rolling her eyes. “So none of you have a plan?” She stood up with hands on her hips. “You have had a billion years to prepare for all of this and not one person came up with a plan? I don’t believe this. Wait, yes I do. You’re men. You never pre-plan for anything.”

“Nicole,” Loriem spoke, “this is not something we could prepare for.”

“Oh, I beg to differ. You’ve had this legend forever and not one of you thought what if it’s really true. Instead, you’re going to sit around and stare at the floor and each other while some asshole that doesn’t belong on your throne tears this land apart. Mmm-hmm, if it were me I’d go kick the shit out of him. But hey, this isn’t my place, so whatever.”

The men in the room began to argue about the validity of what Nicole had just said and the truth of what the little grubby Elf had delivered. Abby figured they’d still be arguing when all the nasty hairy things came in with the bad guy to wipe them all out. Serves them right, she thought. She wasn’t going to be here for it. Hell no, she was going home. If the necklace could get her here, it could certainly get her home; it was the least the troublemaking thing could do.

“Nicole is correct.”

Caledon’s growling voice shut down all conversation. Everyone in the room turned to look at him, waiting. He shook his head. “We should have been preparing for such an occasion. However, when you live your whole life believing the land is dying, there is no hope. So, now there is hope. The

talisman of fire and the wielder are amongst us. The other talismans and their Caretakers will begin to make themselves known. We must go after them before the false king finds them and claims them for his own.”

As the conversation started, he held up his hand for silence. “I will go as is my right.”

“You cannot,” another Elf spoke up. “You are our prince, and as such must be kept safe. Besides, only a true Caretaker can claim the talismans. If you touch one of them you will die.”

“I am the Prince, agreed. Nevertheless, this duty falls upon me and no one else. On the morrow I will leave. The rest of the village must go deeper into the forest for protection. We cannot be found and wiped from the land.”

“I will go with you,” Loriem said. “Ever have I followed at your side, I will not abandon that place now.”

“What?” Nicole punched him in the arm. “I’m your life mate and you’re going to leave me here? Well, that’s real nice.”

Loriem clasped her hands in his own. “You will be safe here with my people. I must go with the Prince. This journey is too important. It must be undertaken or we will all perish.”

Abby shook her head. She had a sick feeling she knew where she was going. As a holder of the stupid necklace she couldn’t stay in the village; it put all of them in danger. And until she figured out a way to get home, she was stuck here. “I would imagine I’m going to have to go on this stupid quest.”

Caledon turned to face her. “If I could change things I would, but I cannot. You hold a talisman, which is an object of great power. It cannot stay in the village. Still, I will do everything within my power to protect you. You will be safe until we see this thing through to the end.”

“Abby’s going?” Nicole demanded. “Oh no, buddy, she’s not going without me. If she goes, I go.” Loriem began to speak but she covered his lips with her fingers. “I’m going. Remember, I’m your life mate. We have to be together and never be parted and all that jazz. I’m going. No arguments.”

Abby smiled without humor. Nicole wanted to go, and she wanted to stay. Well, she really wanted to go home, but right now that didn’t seem to be an option. In either case, the journey would be an interesting one. And short, she crossed her fingers. Let it be a short one with lots of places to stay and bathrooms along the way. But she knew in the pit of her stomach this was going to be far worse than Cobra ever dreamt of being.

Nicole pondered Loriem’s clothes and wondered what a girl packed for a quest. The events of the past days whirled in her head, but if she concentrated on the problem of clothing, she could keep the

panic at bay. Five days ago she had come to Mexico for sun, drinks, and the beautiful white sand beaches. In a short time she found herself in a strange land she knew nothing about, mated for life, and making plans to travel on a quest that scared the life out of her. So all in all, the fabulous vacation basically sucked.

Of everything there was to worry about—death, destruction and general mayhem—Nicole worried most about being left alone. She tried not to dwell on it. She tried to forget it while she and Lorie were together, but the thought kept coming back. One day Abby would leave and she would be all alone. The notion chilled her to the bone. She and Abby were best friends. No one understood her more and no one knew more about her. What would she do when Abby left?

“Nicole?”

She spun to find Lorie standing behind her, a quizzical expression on his face. God, he was beautiful, more beautiful than any man had a right to be. He made her feel things, want to give things no other man before had, but he still wasn’t her best friend.

“Hi.” She smiled brightly, or hoped it came out that way.

“What are you doing?” He took a shirt gently from her hands. “I can assure you I am quite capable of packing for this journey.”

She rolled her eyes. No matter what species they were, men were all the same. “I am not packing for you. I am trying to find things for me to wear. If you haven’t noticed, I have no clothing.”

He smiled. “And that is the way I like you best.” He leaned to kiss her. “But you are correct; you cannot undertake a serious journey such as this naked. So I have a most welcome surprise for you.” From a bag she had not noticed, he began to pull pants, shirts and other bits of cloth. “Milen is quite handy with a needle and he made all of these things for you.”

Nicole clapped her hands giddily, eyeing the earthen tones scattered about the bed. She loved new clothes. “Who is Milen?”

“He has sewn Caledon’s and my clothing for years. Caledon informed him your first night here that you and Abby had no clothes. He has been sewing night and day ever since. It has been many years since he has sewn for someone new; women especially.”

Nicole dived into the pile of clothing. The cloth was heavy and rich, feeling soft yet durable under her hands. Folding and sorting she discovered she now had three pair of pants, six shirts, two heavy over vests, a long cloak like Lorie’s, and a pair of boots. Everything a girl needed to go on a quest she knew nothing about.

“What do you think?”

She turned to smile at the concern in his voice. “I will look like an Elven fashion plate, I’m sure. Other than I’m not Elven, but hey that’s okay. That just means I have no competition.”

He crossed the room to take her in his arms. “Even if there were a thousand women, you would still be the jewel amongst them.” Lorie slid his lips over hers and once again Nicole figured she would just worry about things tomorrow. Worrying did no one any good, as her granny always told her. For once, Nicole decided to take her advice.

Abby sat before the fireplace in her borrowed room contemplating the necklace around her neck. It felt slightly warm to the touch and soft as silk. The warmth could have come from the fact that it laid against her body day and night, but no one wanted to think that. Instead, they imagined it was some ancient talisman back to restore life to a dying land. She was to restore life to a dying land. How the hell was she to do that? Especially since she killed any houseplant that came within ten feet. It made no sense.

Studying the engravings on the piece, Abby had to admit it was superior craftsmanship. Every detail was so well defined, down to the serene expression on the woman’s face as she held fire cupped in her outstretched hand. If it had been her, she would have run, screamed and eventually fainted. Abby was not the best in an emergency.

In spite of everything, she was heading out to the wilds with people she barely knew to go on some kind of quest. She must be a fucking nut; that was the only explanation for it. Maybe Nicole was right. Maybe they were both lying in some hospital room, hooked up to machines, and this was all an elaborate vision. If that were true then how could they be in the same vision together?

Abby dropped the necklace back inside her borrowed shirt. Enough. She couldn’t think about it anymore. This was real. She and Nicole were both here and it was something they would both have to cope with, though Nicole was obviously coping way better than she was. Or not, depending on how one wanted to view the situation.

A knock at the door interrupted her thoughts and Abby jumped to answer it. She hoped it was Nicole, but knew in her gut it wasn’t. Caledon stood on the other side of the door. Abby didn’t know how she knew that, but she just did. And it wasn’t something she wanted to examine too closely. Her life was in too much chaos to take on one more thing.

“I knew I would find you still up,” he said as the door opened.

Abby wasn't quite sure how to respond to that statement, so answered with a smile. Hell, it felt like that's what she did most often now. Of course, if she didn't give a teeth-gritted grin then she would begin to curse and probably not stop. So for all involved, the fake smile was best.

He stepped in to deposit a bundle of clothing on her bed. "Milen, our tailor, has been working constantly to create clothing for you. And Nicole. He wished to create dresses such as Elven women of old wore, but I requested the clothing be more practical and durable as the clothes we wear are."

Abby began to fold each piece, thankful she had something that would fit and allow her to wear pants. "Thank him for me. I appreciate it."

"Get some sleep. We will leave very early on the morrow."

Abby blinked. Leave? Already?

She didn't realize she had spoken aloud until he turned back to face her. "We cannot put this off any longer. My people are not safe as long as the talisman is here in the village without its companion pieces. We must go before the false king can track us."

"I know that," Abby nodded quickly. "I know we have to leave. Did I mention that I really don't like to camp and stuff? I mean I'm really not good at it. Nicole is a natural. Heck, she can hike and ride with the best of them. Probably catch some kind of wildlife, skin it, and make a fancy dish from it. Me...well, I'm not woodsy. At all."

Caledon smiled. The first one she had seen since this whole mess had begun. The sight of it caused her breath to catch in her chest. He wasn't just handsome or even beautiful; it went beyond that, beyond description.

"Abby, put your fears aside." He gently took her hands in his.

The ever-present jolt went through her system. She knew that if he held her hands like this forever, she could even pee behind a bush with no problem.

"I will care for you. That is my right and my privilege and my honor. You have nothing to worry about."

He kissed her hand gently, a feather light touch on the back of her knuckles. "Get some sleep, my lady. We leave before first light."

The door closed behind him leaving the room quiet and her heart beating wildly. She didn't know how he did what he did to her, but she had to force it aside. She did not want a man. She did not need a man. Her main goal was to get home and that was just what she planned on doing.

Caledon eased through the shadows of the quiet village. He could still feel the touch of Abby's small hand against his lips as well as her scent lingering on his clothing. The need to smell his sleeve, to absorb her fragrance came over him, but he ignored it. He needed a clear mind for the journey ahead.

"You are troubled, my Prince," a soft voice came out of the darkness.

Caledon stopped. "You should have been at the council meeting today, Tarn. We are in need of your wisdom."

The Elf Abby would have recognized as the one man brave enough to escort her unaccompanied to the village stepped from the darkness. He was dressed in shabby clothes covered by the same warm cloak.

"What wisdom can I give you, the oldest of us?"

"Your father, Terrill, was the oldest of us." Caledon paced his steps so that he walked abreast of the man he called brother. "He raised me, but you are his true son. His knowledge of the old ways was vast, but he kept most close to his heart."

"Caledon, I have followed you since I was a small child. You welcomed me into your home after my father stepped over to the Green Lands. If you have need of something please tell me and I will do my best to help you."

"You know the talisman of fire has been found. I leave on the morrow with Lorie and the two outlanders to find the other three. We must find them before the false king."

Tarn reached a bench hidden among the leaves and sat heavily. "I have heard the talisman was found. Elan wasted no time in spreading the news. Nevertheless, you are our prince and should stay safe within the village. There is no sense in beginning something so foolish that will come to naught. My sire told me that if one were not meant to bear a talisman it would not accept you. It would sooner kill you. We cannot take that chance."

Caledon sat beside his oldest friend. "I am meant to bear the talisman of water. The one who bears fire is my life mate, though she knows it not."

"This is good news." Tarn hugged him. "By the gods we have life yet. Or possibly this is not good news by the look on your face."

"It is good, but she is stubborn. She does not want to stay here. I need to take this one step at a time with her."

Tarn laughed, slapping him on the shoulder. "Good. Someone who will not fold before the King is good. I always warned you your mate would be just like you. Do not hesitate too long. You know the penalty for waiting to claim your mate."

Caledon decided not to reply. He and Abby were not alike. She was stubborn and headstrong beyond reason. Instead, he replied, "I am not the King."

"You are." Tarn's voice became like steel. "There is no one else left in your family. You are King no matter how you pretend it were not so."

"I need to know about the prophecy. I need to know how to find the other talismans. Abby wears the talisman of fire, but she cannot wield it though others cannot touch it." Caledon turned to face him. "Tarn, help me to understand, if you can."

Tarn nodded slowly. "I will tell you what my sire related to me. He prophesied one day you would come to me with these questions, but I did not believe. I should have known he was always right."

"The talismans were forged from the land. Elven artisans at the very beginning of our race created them with skills and magic that passed into memory. The talisman cannot be worn by just anyone. If the false king thinks he can find them and wield them, he is in for a horrible shock. They are meant for one, and only one, and no other. But they must be charged."

"Charged? I don't understand."

"Terrill was only a lad when new Caretakers were chosen. There was a great celebration, but then the four left the city. My grandsire, who served the Caretakers, related that the talismans and their bearers had to return to where each talisman was forged. At each location, a ceremony of some sort took place to bond the wearer and the talisman into one. This was called The Charging. When the new Caretakers returned they were able to wield the powers they represented."

"Why have you not told me this before?"

"Terrill swore me to secrecy," Tarn said. "You are the rightful King and as such should have this knowledge. He warned me though never to reveal what he said until requested. He did not want to bring false hope to ones who grasped desperately for anything. In addition, he told me to say to you, if you asked the question, 'You never inquired. Never wanted to know.'"

"I did not see what good it would do." Caledon began to pace. "We have been a dying people for all of my life. We are hunted and hidden. We do not grow in numbers, but just count the passage of days as leaves fall from a tree. Now there is a chance for this to change. I have to know what to do when the time comes."

Tarn pulled a worn leather pouch from around his waist. Slowly, he began to untie it. "My father knew life as we were living it was collapsing. He could see it. He could feel it. He had served the Caretakers all of his life, as his father before him, so when the end came they entrusted him with one

of their great secrets.” From the pouch he withdrew an unremarkable gray rock, buffed smooth by time and handling. “This will lead you to the talismans, but only the one you are meant to wield.”

“I do not understand.” Caledon took the rock Tarn handed him.

“From what I was told, it is a map of a sort. This is what the Caretakers gave my father and this is what he handed down to me. I was to hold it until a new Caretaker stepped forth to start the quest. It has begun and now this is yours.”

“What do I do with it?”

“Since the talisman of fire is found, give it to Abby. She will hold it in her hand and it will reveal to her all she needs to know. That is all I can tell you since this is all he related. I am sorry, Caledon.”

Caledon stared down at the rock in his hand. He could already imagine what Abby would say when he gave it to her. A smile began to creep across his face. Tarn was right. The quest had begun and it would be anything but boring.

Chapter Seven

Abby huddled in a blanket watching the sunrise through the trees. After spending the night puzzling over events of the past few days, she still didn't understand. She didn't understand how any of this could have happened to her. She was never purposely cruel or unkind. She was always nice to animals, children and old people. She never spoke behind someone's back. In fact, if she had something to say she was often painfully honest. Probably too honest at times, but hey, if someone didn't want to know if the skirt made their ass look fat, then don't ask. She had never killed someone, stolen anything, so what was it? How could her luck become so rotten over the past year?

She plucked the source of all her troubles out of the blanket until it dangled in front of her face. The talisman winked dully through the tarnish in the early morning rays. The figure was still stamped upon it holding fire in her hands. Nothing had changed about the piece since she had found it in Coba, but her entire life was different. All she had wanted was a vacation. That's it, nothing life-altering, just a nice simple vacation. Okay, she had hoped for some kind of little adventure, but wished it were more along the lines of drinking and dancing till dawn. Not trapped in some strange land about ready to set off on a journey to do things she knew nothing about with people she didn't know.

A brief knock at the door stilled her thoughts. Maybe if she didn't answer, whoever it was would think she wasn't at home. Maybe they would leave. She imagined dropping the necklace on the bed and sneaking away. But to where? Could she get home? The knock sounded again a bit louder, but Abby still didn't answer. She wasn't ready for any of this yet. She wasn't ready to set out on a quest to save the world. She wasn't a saving-the-world kind of girl. She was a run-to-*Starbuck's*-and-get-a-mocha girl.

Abby closed her eyes as the door opened. If she sat still, maybe she would become invisible, but knew no ploy she came up with would work. Caledon had entered the room. She didn't even have to open her eyes to see him; she could sense him with her very breath, her very being.

"Abby, are you well?"

The question came softly from just a hairsbreadth away. Her eyes opened to stare into the deep emerald that was his. She could drown in those eyes if she weren't careful. One minute part of her

wished for that. However, the rest of her wanted to run like hell. Run until she never saw this place, especially him, ever again.

“No,” she said bluntly. “I’m not well. This whole situation sucks.”

“If I could change it for you, I would.” He spoke gently as he reached out to pull the blanket off her head. “But I cannot. You and I are set on a path that we have no control over.”

“That’s what I despise most of all. I hate not being in control. Not being in control can get someone hurt. I don’t believe in betting my safety on some kind of divine fate. Do you understand?”

“Yes, but I do not think there is much we can do about it. I will promise you that no matter what happens you will be safe. I will die protecting you if necessary.”

Abby shivered. The mere mention of that possibility choked her. She couldn’t imagine any of them dying on this journey. “Don’t say that.” She spoke more loudly than she intended. “You’re not going to die. I don’t think this little trip of ours is going to be like heading to the mall, but none of us are going to die.”

“We must leave soon. But before we do I need for you do to something.”

She narrowed her eyes. “What? Because if I have to eat some kind of weird thing or do a funny dance then you can count me out.”

His eyes smiled though nothing else moved. “I just need you to hold this in your hand.”

Abby looked at the ordinary rock he held out to her. It sat squat and unassuming in his hand, but Abby sensed it wasn’t ordinary. The little rock could pretend to look that way, but it truly wasn’t. Once again, she didn’t know how or why, but she just knew. Maybe it was because nothing in this place was as it appeared to be. Or she had just grown more cautious. Whichever it was, she really didn’t want to hold this thing in her hands.

“Why? Why do I have to hold it?”

“I am told it will show us the destination to where we must travel. Without that we will be wandering lost.”

She looked at him and once again at the rock. “And you weren’t going to tell me, were you? You were going to make something up to trick me into taking it. Why didn’t you?”

Caledon had the good grace to look ashamed. “I thought about it. That is no way to build a trusting relationship between us. As you have said, we are the cool heads of our small group. This journey will be difficult at best. I do not want to sew bitterness since we will depend on one another.”

Abby eyed him suspiciously; he didn’t look like he was up to anything. But what did she know? Her life was so scattered she might even believe Nicole was the Goddess of Elfmen as she claimed. Her

gaze moved to the gray stone he held in his hand. If she refused to take it then the journey could not begin. But if she refused, she would never get home. Decisions. She hated making them, especially this quickly. Normally, she mulled things over, made a pro and con list, and asked others for an opinion.

Without hesitating, Abby grabbed the stone and held it tightly in her clenched hand. Nothing happened. Abby breathed a sigh of relief. She had done as he asked, but the stone did not do what he claimed. Beginning to relax, she opened her hand to give the stone back.

The stone began to glow softly in her open palm. What was once an unassuming gray rock now became a flickering gem of brilliance. The colors swirled around her, bathing her in dreamy kaleidoscope rich hues. Abby looked at Caledon expecting him to be just as entranced as she was by the show. Instead, he watched her with those startling green eyes. Slowly, he brought his hand up to cup hers, to ease the burden of the miracle in her hand.

The stone flared a brilliant gold. Abby closed her eyes to shield them from the light, the knowledge the stone offered. Yet, she couldn't hide. As the stone went dark, wisdom flared in her mind, she knew instinctively where they were to go. The information was in her head. However the stone did it, she had it now, and there was no going back.

"Are you well?" Caledon gripped her hand in his. "Abby?"

She opened her eyes to find him mere inches from her face, from her lips. She drew in a breath, drawing his scent, his very essence into her. Why couldn't he stay out of her head? He was just a man, okay he was an Elf and a prince to boot, but still he had the same equipment. Or did he? She never thought to ask Nicole about that. If they had something different she was sure Nicole would have come running...oh and screaming. Nicole definitely would have screamed.

"Abby?" He touched her face.

"Sorry," she blinked. "I, uh...I know where we have to go."

"How?"

"I don't know. I just know."

Caledon nodded, seemingly satisfied with her non-answer. Taking the stone back, he touched her face gently. "I will tell Loriem. How soon will you be ready?"

Abby tossed her blanket off to reveal the new clothing he had brought her the day before. "I just need to toss a few things in my pack and I'll be ready. Hell, may as well get this fiasco on the road."

Nicole lay with her eyes closed. She couldn't believe it was time to get up already. The sun wasn't even visible. Oh sure, she could see light, but that didn't really count. She tried to make it a rule to never rise before the sun did.

"Come, love, we must break our fast."

She felt his lips caress her own. Nicole wrapped her arms around his neck, plunging her fingers in his hair. "Oh yeah. Let's." She pulled him down. She never tired of his scent, his touch, the way his tongue felt against her own. He was way better than *Graeter's* chocolate ice cream and he didn't have the calories.

Loriem returned her kiss as he shoved aside the blankets that covered her. "I do not know how much time we have," he murmured against her lips. Kissing and licking, he moved down her neck as his hands found her breasts.

Nicole tilted her head back to give him better access as her hand found his already hard penis. "We'd better hurry then, sweetie. Because if Caledon's like Abby, we'll be leaving shortly."

Nicole gasped as Loriem's fingers deftly stroked her petal-soft folds, caressing gently inside and out and then moving to swirl against her clit. She could feel her wetness begin to flow as she tightened her grip on him. "I want you now, Loriem."

He regained her lips as he pushed himself deep inside her. Even if they made love a million times, she knew she would never tire of him. In fact, the more they were together the more intense everything felt. Nicole wrapped her legs around his hips as a knock sounded at the door. They both froze. It could only be one person outside the door. Caledon.

"Loriem," he called. "Are you there?"

Loriem took a deep breath, trying to give the impression he was not buried inside his mate's body. "Yes. What is it?"

"We are leaving shortly. Can you both be ready?"

Nicole rolled her hips anxiously, feeling the first hint of an orgasm. The look on Loriem's face was priceless, so she did it again. Here they were, a hairsbreadth away from being caught, and she wanted him. Now

"Yes," Loriem husked out. "We will be ready."

"We already are," Nicole whispered.

"I will see you both in the common room."

They both held still for a full minute insuring Caledon had walked away. When he heard no other sounds, Loriem plunged his tongue into her mouth and began to move frantically. Nicole

tightened her arms and legs around him, feeling the orgasm rise. She didn't know when they would next find a bed so she meant to make the most of every minute they had.

Abby entered the common room to find Caledon speaking with Tarn, her lone brave escort. She refused to exit, figuring if they didn't want her to hear they would have found a more private place to talk. She set her pack down flexing her toes in the new boots she wore. All the clothing was new, but felt comfortable and broken in. All the fabrics were soft against her skin and the boots were a perfect fit. If she could take the Elf back who created all of this, they would both be rich. Most women would kill for comfortable shoes.

"Abby, you remember Tarn."

She turned to find them standing next to her. She hated when he did that. Now there were two of them that walked quietly. "Hello." She put out her hand. "It's nice to see you again."

Tarn bowed low over her hand. "It is an honor to meet you again, Lady Abby."

"What?" Abby brushed her bangs out of her face. "I'm not a lady. Wait, that didn't come out right. I'm not like a capital 'L' lady. I'm just Abby, but I am a lady. At least I consider myself so." She clamped her lips shut. She had to quit talking right now before both men backed away in fear.

Tarn smiled. "But you are a lady with a capital 'L' as you put it. You are a talisman bearer and as such, automatically carry a title. It can either be Lady or I will just call you Caretaker."

Abby smiled back. "Wow, what a choice. For right now just call me Abby, because I really don't plan on having this talisman for long. I mean I'm not an Elf so I can't be a Caretaker."

Tarn cocked his head. "Once a talisman has chosen a bearer it is not an easy thing to undo. In fact, according to my sire, Terrill, it is impossible. Just as when life mates are chosen. What our minds may not know or recognize our hearts and souls do."

"Who is Terrill?" Abby asked, choosing to ignore what Tarn has said about the talisman. If she didn't think too much about it then it wouldn't be true, couldn't be.

"Terrill was the oldest of us to escape from the city," Caledon replied. "He was also Tarn's sire."

"He created the murals in the hall. I remember you telling me about him." Abby also remembered something else Caledon had told her, Terrill was dead. She turned to Tarn. "I am so sorry to find out your father died."

“He lived a full life though often not a happy one. He is much missed.” He studied her a moment. “I will tell you what my father once told me. ‘Do not think too much on this journey. Use your heart and soul to see the way; they will be the guides for you.’”

Abby nodded as he bowed to her then Caledon and quietly left. There wasn’t much time to digest his comments since Lorie and Nicole came noisily into the room. Well, Nicole was noisy. Abby didn’t think she had ever heard Lorie be that way. Her best friend was talking a mile a minute and fussing with her hair, which was pulled back in a ponytail.

“Hey, girl”—Nicole hurried over—“what do you think?” She spun around modeling her new clothes. “These pants don’t make my ass look big do they?”

Abby laughed. No matter what, her friend was still the same. “Nope, they look great. How do they feel?”

“Not as good as Lorie,” she muttered. “But they’ll do.”

“Are we ready?” Caledon donned his long leaf-green cape.

“Do we know where we are going?” Lorie did the same as both men buckled on swords and picked up elegant long bows.

“That is up to Abby. She knows our destination.” Caledon grabbed his pack.

Nicole glanced over at her as Abby slung her pack over her shoulders and cape. “I guess we should be going then.” She hated saying it, but just kept reminding herself the sooner they started on this quest, the faster she would make it home.

“Are we there yet?” Nicole asked as soon as she hit the ground. This was something she said every time they began a trip. Though, usually said in jest, was now meant wholeheartedly this time.

“Almost,” Abby gave her pat reply, which brought a smile. At least one thing felt normal.

The little bit of sunlight the village saw up in the trees was absent on the ground. Night was still king in the forest. Nicole shivered, pulling her cape tighter. Being up in the village made everything seem like a dream. Now, once again under the trees, everything came back into focus. The frantic flight, the horrible screams of the Coba group, and the certainty that any minute she and Abby would die; it was all there.

Lorie put his arms around her. “You are safe. There is nothing that will hurt you.”

Grunting cries in the distance made all four of them jump. Caledon scowled. “Grunts are hunting early this day. We must move quickly to lead them from the village. Abby, where do we go?”

Nicole looked over at her. How could Abby know where they were going? She didn't know this land at all, unless the talisman gave her some kind of knowledge no one knew about. Nicole dearly hoped so. She wanted this adventure to be over quickly and all of them safe. That wasn't much to ask for. Was it?

Abby searched the surrounding forest. Her friend had a good sense of direction, but this was unknown territory. The last time they had been this way Abby had been dead on her feet. The men stood still, waiting; it felt like the forest too was holding its breath, waiting for Abby's decision. Nicole was sure if she closed her eyes, she wouldn't have known they were there. The thought brought another shiver. Maybe she *was* in a coma with a brain tumor. The unnatural silence chilled her to the bone, like a bad nightmare. She watched Abby stand silently, staring into space with unfocused eyes. She got the feeling that only Abby's body was still present; the rest of her—Abby's thoughts, soul, essence—was fully occupied elsewhere.

Abby finally snapped out of whatever trance she had been in. Nicole gave a start, almost laughing at her fanciful thoughts. Maybe she was really locked up in a mental institute. If so, she hoped this part got over soon so she could get back to the hot Elf sex.

"This way," Abby broke the silence, starting into the woods. The path she chose was unmarked so the four of them struggled through brush and trees. Not all of them, Nicole thought as she stumbled. She and Abby were definitely struggling. The men moved easily, never disturbing a leaf in their passage. Nicole figured if something were tracking them, they wouldn't stand a chance. Woods-people they were not.

Gruntag cries sounded again, but much closer. Nicole knew the sound. Something was being tracked, and she'd bet her best bra it was them. Without a visible signal, they broke into a light jog. If her knee held out, Nicole was sure she could keep the pace, but worried about Abby. Occasional aerobic kick boxing sessions did not prepare someone for this type of activity. On top of that, Abby hated to sweat. Nicole stifled a smile as she imagined the vile curses flying in her friend's head. Oh yeah, in the woods and running. The two types of activities she loved best.

Fuck! Abby jogged along the path behind Caledon. They hadn't even been running that long and she already felt worn out. Oh, and sweating. She was definitely sweating all over her new clothes. What a bitch! At least the boots were comfortable, but it would help if they did the jogging for her. She tried to concentrate on putting one foot in front of the other, but the thoughts kept flying. How the hell did she get into this mess? She was not made to run; especially long distances. She prayed the monsters

all dropped dead so they could stop and rest a bit. A cold drink of water sounded so good right now. In fact, a piña colada would be even better. Served by a lovely man as she lounged by the ocean and was massaged...by Viggo Mortensen. Oh yeah, that would be the total life. If Viggo was present, they could definitely skip the drink. She tried to concentrate on the idea of him running his hands over her naked body, but her gasping breath killed the mood. Fuck!

The running stopped suddenly as she smacked into Caledon's immovable back. Raspy breaths caused her chest to heave; she should have spent more time at the gym. A few times did not prepare her for this. She hoped that if she passed out someone would carry her and not leave her to be eaten. Even dragging her by the hair was fine just as long as the monsters didn't get her.

Caledon turned swiftly to pull the hood over her head. He then wrapped his cloak around the two of them, pulling her to the ground. As her heartbeat slowed, she could hear grunting and snuffling sounds coming from the forest around them. The sweat trickling down her body turned to ice; she had heard this before. Gruntags were trying to smell them out.

Gritting her teeth to keep them from chattering she unconsciously gripped the talisman. *Stay away, stay away, stay away.* The refrain played repeatedly in her head. She knew if the things found them she and Nicole would be much more of a hindrance than help. In addition, the thought of Caledon and Loriem fighting these things sent fear shooting through her body. There was no way the adventure was going to end this quickly. After all she had been through, Abby refused to be eaten after only an hour on the road.

"Abby."

She started at the sound of Caledon whispering her name. She opened her eyes to find him studying her intently. The forest around them was silent. Not the best thing, but the growling which had been there just a short time ago was gone.

"What happened?" Loriem spoke barely above a whisper. "Why did the Gruntags leave when they were so close to their quarry?"

"Why are we squatting here talking?" Nicole nudged him. "Let's not wonder about it. We need to get the hell out of here while we can."

"You are right," Caledon nodded. "Let us go."

Abby once again found herself in the lead as they moved through the forest. She didn't care how it happened. They were safe for the moment. No matter what, she meant them to stay that way. Whatever it took, she was going home in one piece.

Stars shone like brilliant pinpoints of light against a sky made of black velvet. Scents of pine flowed on a breeze that rustled the trees softly like water brushing gently against the shore. Night birds called from the bushes as insects buzzed loudly, creating a symphony to accompany the dark. Abby stomped along, wishing the whole planet would go to hell.

The day had been a continuous string of walking, running, then hiding. She had never felt so grubby or tired in her life. Even Coba wasn't this bad, or at least she didn't remember it being that way. Of course, her brain had been paralyzed by fear too. This day had started out the same way, but by the fourth or fifth time, she had been too numb to care. All she worried about was being able to put one foot in front of the other. But she had made it or at least she thought she had. Abby pinched her arm to make sure she hadn't actually died. Nope, still alive.

"We will stop here for the night." Caledon's voice broke her reverie. "This is one of our watch stations."

Stopping, she looked around at nothing and then looked around again. Closing her eyes, she could feel a cold sweat break out across her face. *Please let it not be where I think it is.* The thought ran continuously through her head.

"Where is the watch station?" Nicole asked the question she could not.

"Up this tree," Lorie replied. "We have found that grunts cannot climb so it is much safer."

"Cool."

Abby opened her eyes to look up. She could see nothing in the darkness above. She would bet a box of *Godiva* chocolate truffles there was no wonderful tree-levator or magical city. Though she so hoped, she was wrong.

Lorie squatted before Nicole. "Put your arms and legs about me. The only way up to the station is to climb. I do not want to risk you."

Nicole did as he asked and was soon whisked up the tree by her worshipful life mate. As they disappeared into the darkness, Abby shook her head. She could not climb. There was no way. She froze climbing up steps that were deemed too high. This was impossible.

"Come." Caledon turned his back to her.

"No thanks." Abby shook her head backing away. "I can't climb. I won't climb. I'll just sleep down here. Keep watch. Stuff like that." Faster and faster she spoke as he turned to face her. "You have a safe journey. I'll see you all in the morning."

"You will climb to the watch station," Caledon said firmly. "I will carry you as Lorie did Nicole."

“No”—Abby shook her head—“you won’t.”

“Abby, you are integral to this journey. You must be kept safe. Now, please.” He gritted out the last word as he swirled gracefully to drop to one knee.

Abby bet he had never said please in his entire princely life. If the situation hadn’t been so pants-wetting, it would have been awesome. However, it wasn’t. She could not go up there on his back. She also couldn’t stay down here either. The rational part of her knew that. She had to get the talisman to wherever it was going so she could go home. Home. She could do anything, would do anything, to go home.

Taking a deep breath, she wrapped her arms around his neck. He rose swiftly and pulled her legs around his waist. Abby was thankful no one could see her blushing face in the darkness. It wasn’t anything more than a piggyback ride but it felt like so much more.

“Are you ready?” he asked her in a rich low voice.

“Yes,” Abby said, hoping her voice didn’t tremble.

Caledon grabbed a branch over his head to lift them easily into the air. He moved from limb to branch with a grace and power that would cause women to swoon. The sensation was like flying or swinging in the park. Totally free. The climb really wasn’t too bad, especially since his rich scent flowed around her as they moved higher and higher into the night.

Abby laid her head against his back and breathed deeply. He was a combination of fresh wind, pine, and rich spices. The scent calmed her and yet made her ache all at once. Why him? What was it about this man that so intrigued her? Beyond the fact that he was a prince and an Elf, she was aware of him as a woman. Even when she imagined she was in love, James hadn’t affected her this way. No one had.

He lowered her to a solid platform that served as an observation deck of the small building high in the sky. Abby pressed her back to an outside wall. The place they hid compared not at all to the village they had left that morning. Though the walkway felt sturdy, Abby clearly knew they were way up high. She closed her eyes as dizziness overwhelmed her. Jeez Louise, she thought, please don’t let me fall off.

“Abby,” Caledon touched her arm. “What is wrong?”

She opened her eyes and gritted her teeth at him. “I’m really afraid of heights.”

He nodded once then led her inside where light flickered cheerfully and Nicole and Loriem waited. The Elf had already spread comfortable sleeping blankets for them. Now he was moving gracefully about setting food out for a late dinner.

Abby gingerly sat down to rub her face wearily. The whole day had been a nightmare and she wasn't even sure she could sleep knowing she was so high up off the ground.

Nicole plopped down beside her. "Are you okay?"

"I thought I had died." Abby glanced over at her. "Then realized I couldn't be that lucky."

Nicole smiled. "It wasn't that bad. Alright, the parts with the scary monster things, that was bad, but for the most part it was like hiking."

"Oh, and I so love to hike," Abby nodded. "Yep, tripping over branches, swatting bugs away from my sweaty face, jeez what a rush!"

"The trip up here was the best part," she smiled at her mate.

Abby grimaced. "Speak for yourself."

"I'm sorry, Abby." Nicole hugged her. "I know you and heights don't mix. But we're up here now and perfectly safe. I for one am ready for something to eat then to bed. I'm pooped."

Loriem sat next Nicole and smiled as he handed her bread and cheese. Abby was willing to bet she had way more on her mind than just sleeping. She hoped to hell they wouldn't try to get all lovey in such a contained space. She would definitely take her chances on the ground.

The four of them ate and spoke quietly. Nicole talked about their lives back home as Loriem shared stories growing up in the Elven village. There was nothing to even begin to compare the two, but still Loriem and Nicole looked like they belonged together. It wasn't something overt Abby could place her finger on, but like most things now she just knew it. Instinctively.

Soon the conversation dwindled to nothing until Nicole yawned loudly and announced she was ready for bed. Abby rolled her eyes. She couldn't have been any more transparent if she'd hung a sign up that said get out. Unfortunately, there was nowhere for them to go. The watch station was one room with a platform. That was it. There would be no privacy in this place.

Abby did pick up a blanket and moved slowly to the outside platform. She wrapped herself in it and sat with her back to a wall. Nicole and Loriem hadn't been together that long so she did want to give them some type of alone time, but prayed they would not get loudly amorous. She wasn't particularly sleepy yet. She was bone-tired, but her mind whirled too fast to calm down for sleep. Everything moved so fast, and for a planner like Abby it was nearly too much to take.

She glanced around to find Caledon sitting beside her. She had neither heard nor saw him approach, but he was there all the same. She pinched herself surreptitiously to make sure she had not fallen asleep and this was one of those weird dreams she had been having. Pain spiked from her arm. Nope, wide-awake, she thought.

“Your home sounds like a...interesting one,” he said.

“It might not be the greatest place, but it’s home and what I’m used to.”

“I suppose your people live at such a frantic pace because you are so short lived. You wish to experience everything before crossing to the Green Lands.”

“Sometimes, but most of us just want to live a normal happy life. Often that doesn’t happen, but that’s what we all want. Of course, who’s to say what normal is?” Abby said, almost speaking to herself. “One person’s normal is another person’s strange and vice versa. As long as you don’t hurt anyone or break laws then you should be able to do what you want.”

Caledon nodded. “That is quite well put. Is your life happy? Is this why you wish to return? Do you have someone waiting for you?”

Abby detected tightness in his voice but put it down to never having personal conversations. Previously, every time they had spoken, it had been about Lorie, Nicole, and the talisman.

“No,” Abby said emphatically. “I have a new house and a new job and my dogs. There is no man in my life.”

“You sound as though there never will be.”

“There won’t.” She looked over to meet his gaze. “Truthfully, I don’t trust a man as far as I can kick him. It might be great for other people, but I do not want it. Ever.”

The silence lengthened between them. Night sounds played around them as Abby tilted her head back to look at the stars. The sky was filled with them and it was a sight she would never see back home. Of course it wasn’t, she told herself, since none of the familiar constellations glittered across the black expanse.

“Who hurt you?” Caledon inquired softly.

Abby opened her mouth to spill out the million lies that came eagerly to her lips, but stopped. Why lie to this man? She was not staying here. Their lives would touch only briefly. He was like a stranger one talked to on a bus and never saw again.

“His name is James. I met him through a mutual friend who promised me he was wonderful. The perfect gentleman and everything I needed.” Abby shook her head. “He was, at first, but then slowly things began to change. He didn’t want me meeting with my friends. He hated my dogs and wanted me to get rid of them. I ended up having to board them. He wanted me to move into his house and away from my apartment. And because I had never been treated so well before, I just went along with it.

“The whole time he kept telling me that he loved me. Everything he did was to make me happy.” She laughed dryly. “Happy. No one can make someone else happy. I was blinded by it all. Then one day we were having a disagreement over something trivial and he hit me.”

Caledon growled something in a language she didn’t understand. Obviously it wasn’t kind from the expression on his face, but Abby kept going. James was like a huge festering wound deep inside and if she said everything aloud, she would finally heal. Finally find peace.

“I was in shock. He apologized, said he hadn’t meant it, but that I had made him so angry. Right then I received some kind of clarity of vision. I saw my unhealthy relationship. I grabbed my things and left. I told him I didn’t want to see him again. Ever. He just wouldn’t take no for an answer. He kept saying how perfect we were and how I couldn’t leave him.

“I got my dogs and went back home, but he kept calling me, begging for a second chance. I had to change my phone number, change the locks on my doors, but still he kept coming. Nicole told me he wouldn’t give up, but I assumed that if I didn’t show interest he would just leave me alone. He finally tried to poison my dogs so I had to put them back in a kennel. Nicole insisted I come to live with her since they had never met.

“The night before I moved he broke into my apartment and beat the hell out of me. Thank God Nicole got worried and came over with the guy she was seeing at the time. Tony, Nic’s guy, caught him as he was leaving and Nicole called the police. If he hadn’t been there, she would have killed him.”

“So that’s why I do not want a relationship.” Abby turned to look at Caledon’s face. He looked like a marble statue with anger radiating off him in heavy thick waves.

“I would kill him for harming you,” the words grated out. “No man can act against a woman and live. So says the ancient laws of this land.”

“It doesn’t work like that back home. He went to jail, but was ready to get out on parole just as Nicole and I left for Mexico.”

“Madness. Believe me; no one will harm you here. I will kill the first person to lay a hand on you.”

All she could do was nod under the intensity of his gaze. Abby closed her eyes in exhaustion, but she felt lighter. Somehow sharing the story here in this place with Caledon had eased the terrible sadness that constantly weighed on her. If this land did nothing other than that, she would be eternally grateful.

The sun was barely touching the horizon when they climbed down from the safety of their nighttime perch. The journey that day was much as it had been the day before. Running when they could and hiding when gruntags made their awful cries. Abby led the little party along and was still amazed that they followed so confidently behind her. They all must be crazy, she thought as they zigzagged across the ragged ground.

Each day melted into the next with a sameness that became hypnotic. The first two nights they stayed in watch stations hidden in the trees. After that, the little party had to find safe places on their own to hole up. Caledon and Loriem began taking turns at watch while Abby and Nicole slept. Abby wondered how they managed on so little sleep, but they never slowed. In fact, they were relentless in the pace and in the protection they afforded both women.

Abby sat before a small fire on what could have been the tenth or hundredth day of the journey. Each day melted so much into the other she wasn't sure how long they had been running. The only circumstance that did not improve was her woods-person abilities. She still sucked.

Nicole dropped to sit beside her. She looked weary, but nowhere near dropping from exhaustion. Abby could hate her if she could work herself up to it. However, the effort was entirely too much. She decided to just feel disgruntled instead.

"How's it going?" Nicole looped an arm around her shoulders.

"Swell." Abby didn't try to hide the disgust from her voice. "You look like you're doing well."

"Not too bad. My stamina's building back up so the running isn't so bad. My knee is even doing okay."

Before Abby could respond in a scathing fashion, Loriem stepped forward and knelt beside Nicole. He carefully unwrapped a package he carried to show the last of the bread, cheese and fruit. "I thought you might be hungry."

"Starved."

Abby rolled her eyes. She certainly looked it, but it wasn't for food. If Loriem was a sundae from *Graeter's* Nicole would have already grabbed a spoon and dived in.

"How are you fairing, Abby?" he inquired.

"I'm peachy," she smiled. "Did Nicole tell you I just love doing outdoorsy stuff?"

"Yes, she might have mentioned it." He smiled at her. "And if she had not I certainly would have noticed your engaging woodland instincts."

Abby eyed the innocent blue eyes he turned on her. He was teasing her. She smiled; maybe she wouldn't wrap his lungs around his neck. "Oh, is that what we're calling what I do now? My goodness, it sounds way better than saying I stagger around and curse a lot."

He moved until he sat between the two women. "Yes, but you are very regal when staggering and cursing." He offered her food from his stash.

Abby laughed softly. "And you are so full of it." She took the offered food and began to eat hungrily.

"You should be kind to me," he said. "I am your elder and am deserving of your respect."

"Whatever." Abby rolled her eyes.

Before anyone could reply, Caledon stepped into the light of the campfire. "And what tale is my cousin weaving this evening?"

"He's saying how much older he is, and how he deserves our respect and kindness," Abby told him.

Caledon raised his eyebrows. "Really? I distinctly remember saying the exact same thing to him and he scoffed at me. Do not be fooled by him and do not be kind. It just encourages him."

Nicole laughed. "Man, buddy, he knows you."

"Do not listen to him." Lorie tried not to smile. "He is becoming senile in his old age and knows not what he is speaking about."

Caledon leaned down to upend Lorie who landed on his back behind them. Then he settled himself between the two women. "I may be senile, but am definitely the stronger and more agile of the two of us."

"I allowed you to toss me aside." Lorie sat down on the other side of Nicole, brushing off his clothes. "I would not want to embarrass you before the ladies."

Nicole rolled her eyes. "We believe you, sweetie."

"I have food for us." Caledon turned to Abby. He unwrapped a package similar to Lorie's, bringing out different types of fruit.

"Thanks." Abby chose some things that resembled grapes and began to eat.

He then turned to Nicole, ignoring Lorie. "Would you like some fruit, Nicole? I can see the bread your mate provided for you is quite dry."

Lorie laughed. "I will have to tell Malic you insulted his cooking when we return to the village. Then you will receive burnt fare for a week."

“I appreciate your care and confidentiality,” Caledon said dryly. “Your loyalty is quite touching.”

They talked quietly together by the light of the small fire. Abby felt a connection, a bond forging tighter and tighter among the four of them. She felt glad that she was here at this moment rather than anywhere else, even home. The thought scared her, but just a little. She had never had a close circle of friends before, just Nicole. So to sit amid a group laughing and talking made Abby realize just what she had missed.

Soon though, Lorie and Nicole moved away so they could talk quietly. Abby watched them touch one another gently as they spoke in whispers. She didn’t know how Nicole managed it, but even in the middle of nowhere, she turned up with a stunner. It just wasn’t fair, Abby thought. None of the relationships ever lasted but Nicole seemed happy in the short term. Of course, this one was for life so maybe she wasn’t so lucky.

“How are you feeling?” Caledon spoke softly beside her.

She looked over at him. “Tired, but I’m sure you can tell that. How are you doing?”

He smiled but said nothing as he took a bite of some bread. They ate companionably side by side, the silence only broken by the hushed whispers of their friends. Abby stared off into the darkness. Worn-out and confused as she was, their ultimate destination still called. She knew instinctively where they were going and felt that if they could fly, they would still not get there soon enough.

“What is it?” Caledon asked.

“The farther we travel the more I feel...we have to keep moving. I can’t explain it, but there’s a sense of urgency about all of this.” She looked to him. “I’m not explaining things very well.”

“I feel it too.” He followed her gaze off into the darkness. “It is as if Elaria herself is holding a breath, waiting.”

He quickly finished his meal. “We must sleep. Morning will come early for us.”

Lorie and Caledon opened their packs and began to unroll the fabric blankets, which they then tossed on the ground. Abby hated sleeping outside even though she had done so these many nights. The fabric they slept upon, though lightweight, kept them warm and surprisingly comfortable, even on the hardest ground. It wasn’t a bed, but Abby really couldn’t complain since she slept well each night.

“I will take the first watch,” Lorie said, settling himself against a tree.

Nicole pouted a bit. “Well rats, I guess I have to try to fall asleep alone.” Then she ruined the pout by smiling.

“Soon.” He leaned to kiss her gently. “May your dreams be nothing but good ones.”

Abby dug in her own pack pulling out the fabric. It was soft to her touch, like finely-woven cotton. She hated to put it on the ground it was so beautiful, but soon discovered how strong it was. She could even see the stitch-work that had gone into it and wondered who had made it. Putting her nose to it she inhaled. The scent of the village still clung to it, bringing her an odd sort of comfort.

“It will get chilly this evening,” Caledon said to her in a low voice.

She turned to find him standing beside her and nodded. Each night they had slept on ground level Abby found herself sleeping beside Caledon. The idea was still startling. She understood it was for protection and warmth, but he still unnerved her. Not as much as he had when they first met, but it was still there. Abby tried not to think about what *it* was, but knew it skirted more into the awareness category than anything else. The more she was with him, the closer she became to him, the awareness of him as male, as a sexual being, increased.

She tried squashing the traitorous feeling down. It worked during the daytime; she was too busy running and hiding to notice much. In contrast, during the nighttime hours as she slept so close beside him, the dreams returned. The ones where she found Caledon and herself naked in a sunlit glade.

“I hope it doesn’t get too cold,” she mumbled, moving to the bed he had made for them. Pulling her cloak around her, she lay upon it and spread her blanket out over them. Caledon did the same but laid his bow and sword beside him. He was a man ready for action. Abby snuggled under the blanket feeling the warmth from Caledon seep over her. The bed was so soft. Not exactly like in the village, but nothing like sleeping on the ground either. She closed her eyes, breathing deeply. She didn’t think sleep would come easily that night with all the things they had been through, but once again she was wrong. She felt herself slip away.

Caledon lay stiffly beside his life mate. He tried to concentrate on the road ahead and the many perils they had before them. All he could think about was the scent of Abby and the warmth of her beside him. Her nearness was beginning to test his patience. Each night he lay beside her, each night the wanting grew more intense. He knew he had to claim her, but not as quickly as he had inferred to Abby. His sire had told him that the stories of Elven men losing their minds were but stories to scare the young. It was a way to manipulate those without life mates to ensure their race would go on. He wanted Abby but he had to give her time. Time to become accustomed to him; accustomed to the idea of staying.

He closed his eyes and began to take deep even breaths. Visualizing a woodland clearing, he began to slowly add elements to it. Thick trees to surround and protect, a waterfall that fell to a small

pond, and the sun to warm. He placed himself in this place as he always did. This was the place he had built in his mind. The place he went when in deep meditation; it calmed him, centered him as nothing else did now. It also brought him his life mate.

He could feel the sun-warmed rock he sat upon. The birds sang sweetly in the trees as the water created a symphony. He breathed in the scent of water and wood, feeling his body relax. Slowly he opened his eyes to see the rippling water before him. The place was so real to him that he knew every nuance of it. He could walk about the clearing or swim in the water. It was as familiar to him as his own body.

A prickling raced up his spine. He knew he was not alone. He turned slowly to find Abby sitting beside him once again. Ever since coming to the village she had been with him in his meditation. He did not understand how this happened. He did not consciously put her within the scene, but somehow she was still there.

“This is still the most beautiful place I’ve ever seen.” She smiled at him.

“I agree. One day I hope to find a place such as this and walk in it,” he spoke slowly. Did he conjure her somehow? Was she a figment that he could banish as quickly as she had come?

“I like it. Though what I’ve seen of your world, there isn’t anything I haven’t liked, other than the big scary monster things. Those so majorly suck. Oh, and the jogging. I really don’t like that. I’m more of a kickboxing girl myself. Kicking and punching really makes me feel good, though I only do that about three times a month. Sometimes.”

Caledon stared at her, his breath shallow in his chest. This was no figment of his imagination; the woman sitting beside him was Abby, though he knew not how it happened. There was no other explanation since her speech was so foreign to him. He could not have dreamed this up. However, that could not be true. In all his long life, he never heard of life mates entering one another’s meditation states. This had to be a dream. This figment was not Abby, she could not be.

“Abby. How are you here with me?” He stared at her, drinking in every expression on her face.

“This is a dream, silly, just like every night.” She smiled at him. “My dream, so I can do what I want.”

“And what do you wish to do this night?” he asked slowly, feeling his gut clench.

She smiled, leaning forward to press her hot lips to his. She tasted sweet like the honeyed wine his mother used to make. He placed a hand behind her head to hold her as he pushed his tongue into her mouth. Her tongue tangled with his as her hands crept up to brush through his hair. She was so real, so

his, if only in his mind. He knew he should banish this enticing figment of his imagination, but could not. In this place Abby wanted him. What harm could it do?

He pushed her back onto the rock they lay on and deepened the kiss. His left hand cradled her head while his right slowly roved down to cup her breast. She was full and fit perfectly into his cupped hand. Abby wrapped her arms around his neck to begin running her fingers through his hair. The sensation drove him almost over the edge. He began kissing down her neck, biting and licking, trying to claim her, imprint her on his mind as he imprinted himself on her.

“Caledon,” she whispered, moving restlessly under him. “Don’t stop.”

“Never—” he kissed her “—you are mine. Mine to hold and cherish. I will defend you to the death.”

As he moved back to her lips, he felt a touch that was not from Abby. He did not understand it, but suddenly the glade was dissolving. He opened his eyes to find Loriem bending over him. Rage moved through him. A killing rage. Something must have shown on his face since Loriem moved back a step.

“Caledon, we are being stalked. Gruntags are in the forest.”

Caledon worked to regain his calm. He did not know what had come over him. Obviously the stress was beginning to wear him thin. He began to sit up but found himself tangled with Abby. Somehow they had truly found each other, even if it was in sleep. He could feel his body throbbing for release. Even with danger surrounding them he wanted her. But not the creation of his dream. He wanted the living, breathing woman lying beside him. No matter how maddening he found her.

“We must leave this place,” he finally spoke. He leaned over to Abby. “Come, love, wake. We must go.”

She opened sleepy eyes to look up at him. Incredibly she smiled and touched his face gently. Then her eyes widened as she withdrew her hand. Reality returned and he felt anger. Only in his dreams would she allow herself to want him. But this would not be for long. It could not be.

Loriem moved to Nicole. “Wake up.” He placed a hand over her mouth so she would not cry out. “We must go.”

Both women rose, swiftly beginning to repack as the men made all signs of the camp disappear. Before long the small clearing was back to the way they had originally found it.

“They will hunt us by scent,” Caledon said. “We must hurry.”

“The women are tired,” Loriem replied. “They cannot go for long. I will lead them off while you make your escape. I will meet up with you when I can.”

“No.” Nicole stepped forward.

“I cannot let you do this,” Caledon said. “Your mate needs you.”

“Our people need you.” Loriem shouldered his bow and kissed Nicole. “I will see you soon.”
Then he vanished into the woods.

Chapter Eight

Nicole blinked. He was gone. As if he never existed. She opened her mouth but no sound issued forth. She didn't know what to say even if she could. What if he didn't come back? The thought leaped out to grab at her. She shoved and kicked it aside. That was not a possibility, he would be back. He promised.

"Hon, let's go."

Nicole felt Abby put an arm around her shoulders. She was right. She had to pull herself together so they could get moving. Loriem did what he felt was necessary. The faster they left, the faster she would see him again.

This thought tossed her into action. She grabbed up her cloak and pulled it on. Her pack went over her shoulders as she looked for Loriem's.

"I have it, Nicole." Caledon touched her arm lightly. "Do not worry, Loriem will be safe. Abby, which way?"

Her best friend stood silently for a moment and then pointed once again to a nonexistent trail. "This way."

Caledon shouldered both bags taking the lead. He pushed through the brush and began walking at a ground-eating pace. Nicole could hear the crying of the monsters around them. She shivered, praying hard that nothing would happen to her mate. What she once thought a lark was now deadly serious. This trip had gone from lots of great sex to tons of danger. She was quite certain she didn't like it at all. If she was in the hospital knocked out, her dreams were definitely sucking aloud.

Caledon stopped them. Several of the Gruntags were up ahead. She could see them sniffing the air, searching. Nicole sheltered against Abby's back. This was the first time she had got a good look at the creatures without the whole running and screaming factor. They were big, hairy and really evil looking. She closed her eyes.

"Down," Caledon murmured, pulling them both to the ground. He pulled their hoods up to shelter their faces. Nicole figured it was to block the vision of the things coming to eat them. She surely hoped not. Being killed was not the way her dreams ended. She was usually carried off by hunky men and worshipped as a goddess. She doubted the gruntags would do that with her.

She peered cautiously from under the hood. All she could see was Abby crouching beside her, talisman gripped tight in her clenched hands. Nicole didn't understand what was happening, but Abby held the piece like it was a lifeline. In return the piece glowed, softly at first, then brighter. Nicole stared at it, then at her friend. What the fuck was happening? She looked up to find Caledon also watching Abby. The expression on his face danced between lust and awe. Oh hell, he had it bad, which was fine but not now. They didn't have time for nookie looks, especially when her best friend was doing weird-assed shit.

Abby opened her eyes. Nicole nudged her, motioning to the talisman. "What are you doing?"

"What do you mean?"

Before Nicole could say more, Caledon stood. "Come, we must go. The gruntags have left the area."

Once again they ran. In the distance Nicole could hear the monsters screaming and crying to one another. They had made the same sounds when they were on the hunt. She almost staggered. Could they be after Loriem? Was he in trouble? Were they leaving him to die? If something happened to him, would she know it? Questions and fears whirled through her head as they moved further and further away.

The sun rose high in the sky. The forest was strangely silent as everything familiar dwindled away. The wind barely rustled the trees; if there were creatures, they were well hidden. It felt like the three of them were the last alive in this strange land.

Caledon called a halt and Abby collapsed gracelessly to the ground. Her fly-away brown hair clung to her head and face in sweaty strings. Her face was flushed an unnatural red as she gasped for breath. Nicole sat beside her, worried. Abby was not the most athletic soul around.

"Are you okay?" Nicole asked her.

"Oh yeah, perfect." Abby pulled her hair away from her face and began to fan to stir a breeze. "The next time I miss a workout, kick me in the ass."

Caledon moved to squat beside her. "Drink this." He helped Abby's shaking hands hold a cup of water. "We will rest here momentarily." He pulled out food and separated it among them. He ate as he paced about, always on guard. Nicole leaned against Abby, needing the comfort of a familiar body. As always, Abby looped an arm around her neck.

Nicole gave a small smile. Abby wasn't the most affectionate person, but with her it came easy. Nicole laid her head on Abby's shoulder. "The necklace was glowing."

"What?" Abby looked at her.

“The talisman, it was glowing.”

“When?”

“While we were hiding from the monsters. You were holding it and it was glowing.”

Abby pulled the necklace out from under her clothes and studied it. The talisman was the same slightly-tarnished silver as it had been since the beginning. “I was praying the monsters would leave us alone. Are you sure it was glowing?”

“Positive. That thing is some weird kind of shit.”

Abby nodded. “And, for right now, it’s all mine. Am I not the luckiest girl in the world?”

Abby tucked it away as Caledon approached them. “We must go.” He took Abby’s hand to help her up. Nicole noticed he did not release it but still held tight as he lent her a hand. She felt tears prick at her eyes. Lorie’s absence was like a palpable hole inside of her. The more she shoved it aside, the more it hurt.

Caledon led them deeper into the woods. Abby reached out to take her hand so the three of them were linked as they moved together. Nothing could replace Lorie’s presence, but Nicole thanked the stars once again for her best friend’s presence.

They made a hasty camp and still Lorie did not show. Caledon paced the darkness, watching and waiting. He knew deep in his soul his cousin lived. If the grunts captured him—. He cut short the thought. He would not allow his mind to move in that direction. Too many sorrows clung to his soul; he refused to add one more.

He looked toward the two women who were now in his care, the salvation of his people. However, at the moment he could care less about their importance in that way. Nicole was Lorie’s life mate and as such, she was his family. He had not had family other than Lorie for a very long time. Abby was another matter entirely. She was beginning to consume his every waking minute. Her nearness distracted him, enthralled him. Even in a meditative state she was there. He could offer no explanation for what was happening.

He turned from the two women, not wishing to look at them any longer. Abby was too much in his soul as it was, he could not afford to be careless. Already he had allowed Lorie to leave on his own. If his mind had not been so scattered, he would have been the one hunting grunts. Lorie had a life mate and as such should be with her. Caledon, as the eldest and the most experienced, should have put his foot down. Except it was too late. The deed was done; they would all have to live with the decisions made.

Caledon made the two women a bed. "Sleep as long as you can. I will stand watch."

"What about Loriem?" Nicole asked, climbing beneath the covers beside Abby.

"Worry not. He will find us. He is quick and clever. The gruntags are no match for him." He tucked the cover around her. "Sleep well, little cousin."

Both women seemed soothed by these words, though he himself was not. He crouched beneath the shadow of a tree. All night he kept vigil. Still Loriem did not come. As the sun began its climb but darkness still held sway, Caledon woke them. There was no conversation. Nicole and Abby hurriedly packed the sleeping blankets, broke fast, and got ready for another long day's march.

Without asking, Abby set off. She never spoke a word nor did Caledon attempt to take the lead. She looked like a woman determined this morning. It was all he and Nicole could do to keep up with her. Caledon maneuvered Nicole in front of him to bring up the rear. He watched the forest around them intently, searching for signs they were being followed. But the mighty trees seemed unwilling, or unable, to give up their secrets.

He shouldered his bow and packs more securely. No matter what happened, he had to get Abby to her destination. The fate of the land was on her shoulders; her driving pace was evidence of this realization.

Abby marched, intent on putting one foot in front of the other. The faster they got to where they were going, the faster they could rest. That's all she cared about. She hated exercise. She admitted that to herself now. She hated the sweating and the smell, but most of all she hated the way it made her feel. Her body was worn out. All it wanted to do was lay down and take a nap. She truly couldn't agree more.

The longer they traveled the more the idea of the talisman worried her. She thought back to what Nicole had said about the talisman glowing. What the hell? Why is it she never saw the crazy thing do stuff? Maybe Nicole was mistaken, but Abby knew that wasn't possible. Nicole was not a woman prone to flights of fancy. Down deep she was a solid person, no matter how capricious she might appear. Abby had figured out years before that Nicole gave people what they expected to see and hid the rest. The more outrageous and in your face she acted, the more she could guard her true self.

Her thoughts raced back to the talisman. What did it all mean? Why was it acting the way Nicole described? Did it actually have powers? The thought made her stumble on the uneven ground. What did that mean for her if it did? Was it changing her in some way? She didn't want to be changed. She just wanted to go home.

“What is it?” Nicole interrupted her thoughts.

Abby realized she had stopped. She turned to look at them watching her expectantly. She hated being depended on; she never wanted to be a leader. She always valued her independence, which was why she never wanted to marry or have children. Both of those brought too many expectations and too many chains. Now here she was, leading an expedition to a place she knew only in her head, for a purpose she didn't understand. What a rip!

Abby shook her head and started walking again. The forest moved by in a blur as she picked up the pace. At least the clothing she had on was comfortable, but what she wouldn't give for a cool shower. She hadn't bathed since leaving the village. The thought was disgusting at best since she sweat constantly now. Just keep moving, she told herself. You're not out here to win a beauty pageant. You're here to find out where the talisman went and to get rid of it. Permanently.

Her mind flicked to Lorie. She hoped he was okay. Nicole had cried in her sleep and Abby knew it was for him. Damn him! Why did men have to try to be some kind of heroes? Bastards! No matter what Nicole said, she was totally hooked. She had never seen her act like this with a man before. By any means, he was coming back. Abby would be damned to see her best friend upset like this again.

She again quickened her pace without realizing she had. All the while she concentrated on Lorie and his need to come back to Nicole. Deep inside Abby realized that most probably Nicole would not be going home with her. Caledon had stated that once life mates are bonded there was no going back. The knowledge sent a searing pain through her body. She couldn't imagine going home without her best friend; her life would be decidedly empty without Nicole. Still, she couldn't stay here either. There was nothing here for her. Grimly she set her jaw, shoving all thoughts aside. Worry about one issue at a time, one day at a time.

That night passed the same as the one before. Caledon watched while the women slept. They were up and on the road before it was even light. Abby once again took the lead. She neither spoke to her companions nor noticed the forest thinning around them. She focused totally on staying on her feet and on the path her body set. She didn't wonder anymore about the talisman or Lorie or what would happen once this adventure was over. Her mind had shut down to everything but the quest. Abby barely even acknowledge the rest stop. Her entire focus was on the journey and getting to the destination the talisman demanded.

Her world snapped back into focus when Caledon touched her. She had been marching along as she had for the last week, month, year; she didn't know what. The next thing she knew she was laying

on the ground underneath his body. What the fuck? Had he lost his mind? She began to fight until he gripped her tightly.

“Stop,” he whispered. “Gruntags.”

Abby nodded, catching her breath. She had been so caught up she hadn’t noticed. Being that unaware could get her killed. She looked around to find Nicole lying on the ground beside them. They smiled at one another, as if to say what now?

Abby became conscious of the grunting and growling of the monsters, but they were not crying like before. Actually, they looked as though they were having a conversation. She shivered. God, could these things be intelligent? She prayed they weren’t. It was bad enough they had huge claws and fangs, but if they had brains too... She didn’t even want to think about it.

Nicole, Caledon, and she were hiding behind a huge outcropping of rocks. Abby noticed for the first time how sparse the forest was. Apparently they had walked out of it without her even noticing. Some guide she had turned out to be. The sky above them was a clear perfect blue; not one cloud marred its ocean-like surface. The sun bathed her face like a warm caress. The day was perfect, except for the things waiting to eat them.

Abby rolled cautiously onto her stomach, nudging Caledon to give her room. She peeked through a crevice to find five gruntags not more than twelve feet from their hiding place. The only reason the monsters did not scent them was because the wind blew toward the rocks. As soon as it shifted they would be found. Abby studied the area. There was no place else to hide. They couldn’t go back without being seen, nor could they stay where they were.

She looked over at Caledon, reading the same thoughts on his face. She watched him slowly begin to ease his bow forward and remembered his promise. He would die to protect them. She could not let that happen. What could she do? Nicole nudged her from her thoughts. She turned to find her best friend mimicking the action of pulling something out of her shirt. Abby’s eyes widened as she pulled the talisman forth. What now? What had she always done before? She gripped the talisman tightly in her hand, closing her eyes. Now what? What would be best?

Gripping the talisman Abby began to think. *Go away, go away.* For good measure she developed a picture in her head of the Gruntags leaving. She made them run far away to the place she and Nicole had first entered this land. Under her hand she realized the talisman was warm. Cautiously, she opened her eyes to find the piece glowing just as Nicole said it did. But was it doing any good?

She looked to where the monsters had been but they were gone. In fact, they were moving in the direction she had pictured in her mind. Could she have done that? No, it had to be a coincidence. There was no way. She glimpsed Caledon watching her and turned to face him.

“What?” she asked.

“You are truly a Caretaker. There is no doubt. Even in its weakened state and without the charging, you are able to wield the talisman.”

Abby could feel her face getting warm. She shrugged. “It’s no big deal. Most probably a coincidence. Let’s get out of here.”

She stood cautiously, brushing the dust from her cloak. Wherever their friends had gone, it was nowhere close. The day was quiet but for the shushing of the wind and the sounds of birds. Caledon and Nicole also rose. Her friend looked around; Abby knew she searched for Loriem. Still he was not with them.

The land beyond the rocks was grassland, flat and seemingly endless. In the distance, mountains rose soaring toward the sky. Those were the final destination. She no longer questioned the knowledge. She just accepted it, hoping that with acceptance came a speedier journey.

What if you can’t get rid of the talisman, a voice in her head whispered? What if it is your place to carry it? She shook the thoughts off. She could not stay here. She needed to go home; back to the place she belonged.

They moved farther away from the woods, farther away from Loriem. Nicole glanced back, hoping to see his swiftly moving figure coming up behind them. But he wasn’t there. He *was not* dead. She refused to accept that. He swore he loved her and would never leave her. She had heard that before, but this time she believed. Loriem would not lie to her. Ever.

She kept her eyes forward and her feet moving. Better to concentrate on where they were going. Nicole knew it would drive her crazy if she kept thinking about him. She just had to trust, which was nearly impossible. The only person she trusted now was Abby. Abby never lied to her. Abby never let her down. Now she had chosen to trust Loriem, a man. If she weren’t so scared, that would chill her the most. She never trusted what a man said or did. She may have at one point, but after getting her heart stomped to bits, she had never done it again. Until now.

Caledon called a halt to their progress. Without the cover the trees afforded them, the sun was once again the enemy. Nicole could feel sweat trickling down between her breasts. Abby was faring no

better—in fact, probably worse. Her face was bright pink and streaked with sweat. Nicole was fully aware they would be winning no pageants any time soon.

“This area is too open.” Caledon motioned the women to crouch in the tall grass with him. “We are exposed to prying eyes. I should have thought of this before we left the forest.”

“Can we go back?” Nicole asked.

Abby interrupted. “No, because we need to reach those mountains. Staying in the forest will not get us there.”

“Pull your cloaks around you. Cover your faces,” he directed. “We will try staying here until dark comes. That will be the safest time to travel.”

The three of them sat crouched in the grass, covered from head to toe in the cloaks. Nicole tried not to think about how uncomfortable she felt. As journeys went, this one wasn’t exceedingly horrible. Loriem had left, but she knew he would return. They had to run a bit and hide, but all in all, the whole Coba incident was higher on the shit scale than this.

The first hint of trouble advanced with shouts in the distance. Nicole recognized instantly she should never have counted her blessings. Trouble was coming and she didn’t need a magic talisman to tell her it was going to be bad.

Caledon searched the surrounding area to ascertain where the voices were coming from, and voices they were. These were no gruntags hunting them. Trellum must have sent out his men. He knew that a talisman was back in the land. The thought was arresting. If they found the talisman then they found Abby. He would not let that happen.

“We must move swiftly, but cautiously. These are no simple beasts hunting us, but agents of the false king.”

They crept slowly through the high grass. Caledon relied on them being able to move far enough away so they would not be spotted when they rose. Their escape depended on this bit of good luck.

Abby angled toward the left, taking them closer to the mountains. As they moved from the shelter of the trees, the land became hard and windswept. Vast empty spaces with no place to hide awaited them. It had been many years since he had traveled Elaria, but Caledon was positive a water-crossing was in their immediate future. If only they could shake pursuit, he would have time to plan what to do about the river that lay ahead of them. From what he could recall it was not a huge body of water, but substantial enough to not take lightly.

He pushed them on more quickly now. They could not afford stealth, but needed speed. Shouts in the distance told Caledon they had been seen. "Run!" he shouted. Both women bolted forward like their lives depended on it, which it did. They could not afford to be taken captive, especially Abby. If that happened, the quest was over and the land would fail.

Caledon heard the sound of hoof beats approaching. He spun to face a man riding toward them. Other horsemen were in the distance, but this one had decided to be a hero. Not for long. Caledon swiftly strung his bow and fired. The arrow soared true. The man cried out falling from the horse.

Caledon whistled shrilly. The horse spun instantly, coming toward him. There was no time for pleasantries, the others were gaining. He ran the horse up to where the women waited. Anger coursed through him. They should have been much farther ahead but stopped to wait for him. Not again.

"Get on the horse and ride. I will hold them off."

"No." Abby shook her head. "I won't leave you."

"Yes, you will." He pulled her to him for one brief kiss then tossed her lightly in the saddle.

"I can't drive this thing," she said, clutching at the saddle, fear plain on her face.

"I can." Nicole clambered up to sit in front of Abby. She took the reins, expertly controlling the prancing horse.

"Ride swiftly, little cousin," he ordered Nicole. "Loriem and I will join you when we can. Just stay on the path. Abby knows the way."

Nicole nodded, spurring the horse forward. Caledon turned to face the oncoming riders, remembering his promise. He would defend them, no matter what the price.

Nicole bent low, trying to get the feel of the mount beneath her. She hadn't lied to Caledon about being able to ride, she rode very well, but it had been a while. Abby clung to her like the staticky plastic off a CD case. Nicole knew she could ride this horse to the moon and Abby would be with her the whole way.

She loosened her grip on the reins letting the horse have its way. A burst of speed was her reward; she smiled as the wind whipped through her hair. She only hoped the thing wouldn't turn around and try heading back the way they had come. The scenery flashed by as Nicole kept her eyes firmly on the path ahead. She could not get distracted. All thoughts of Loriem were firmly closed off. There would be time enough when this was all over. Right now, she struggled to keep them one step ahead of the bad guys.

Abby's brain was frozen. She wasn't even able to curse—the fear was so real to her. A huge living animal carried them probably to hell, and no one questioned it. He had just tossed them onto its back like so much baggage, sending them off into oblivion. Praying, she wished she were gripping the stupid piece of jewelry that had started all of this. Maybe then they would survive this demented pony ride.

She tried closing her eyes then popped them open after a moment. Not being able to see death was much more horrible than to face it head on. The steed and Nicole's rash words would bring them to ruin, she was sure of it. Abby remembered it had been a while since Nicole had been on a horse. Why the fuck did she act all confident?

High grass lashed at the horse's legs as they plowed forward. She was afraid to turn around to see what was happening. She hoped they were getting away. Leaning forward, she gripped Nicole tightly with her numb fingers. All she needed would be to fall as they were practically traveling at warp speed. She doubted very highly she would survive; nor would she want to.

Nicole reined in quickly, almost throwing Abby from the horse. Water rushed before them. Much larger than the stream they had passed through to get into this world. Abby risked a look behind them. No one was in sight, but that didn't mean anything. At any minute hordes of crazies could come streaming into view.

"What do we do?" Abby asked.

"Get off," Nicole directed.

Abby gladly slid down as her friend dismounted. Nicole wrapped the reins around her hands, heading toward the rushing water.

"What are you doing?" Abby asked.

"We have to cross. I think if we go into the water they won't be able to track us."

"*Discovery Channel* again?" Abby demanded.

"No, old John Wayne movie. Let's go."

Abby flapped about helplessly then plunged after her friend into the water. She gripped the saddle, hoping a lot of swimming wouldn't be involved. She didn't swim very well either. If she survived any of this she was going to the gym, learn to ride, start running, and take swim lessons. If she survived.

The water was cool but not frigid as they tentatively began to cross. Nicole looked over her shoulder at Abby. "Just stay with the horse. I think we should make it."

"You think?" Abby's teeth chattered more from fear than cold. "That's so comforting."

Before long they were slogging up onto the opposite shore. Water ran off them in miniature waterfalls but they didn't have the time dry out. They had to come up with a plan quickly. They both looked around at the unfamiliar terrain. Abby knew where they had to go, but certainly didn't know where they were right now. It didn't matter anyway. As long as they kept moving to the mountains, that was the only important thing.

"Let the horse go," Abby told her soggy friend.

"Why? He's our transportation."

"Because hopefully they'll follow his prints and not ours. Besides, there is no way this animal is going to be able to carry both of us for long. It would be better just to let him go. Maybe he'll find a nice horsy family and settle down to a quiet life."

Nicole sighed. "You're right. Damn, I hate to though." She popped the horse on the rump. The two of them watched as the animal galloped off. Soon, the only sound was the rushing of water. Abby nudged Nicole and started off at a run. She didn't know how long she could keep up the pace, but they had to continue moving. It was their only hope.

Both women ran until they could run no more. Abby leaned on her knees as Nicole squatted on the ground at her feet. Their clothes, which had been soaked, were at least not streaming any longer. Abby tried to care but was too tired. She so wanted a hot bath, a drink and a warm bed. She promised herself when this was all over she would do exactly that. No one was going to stop her. If they tried, she would just kill them.

"It's getting dark." Nicole looked up at her. "What do we do?"

Abby pushed the hair off her face. "We'll keep moving until we can find a place to camp for the night."

"What about Caledon and Lorie?"

"I don't know," she shrugged. "But we have to keep going. They did what they had to so we could escape. We can't toss that away."

"Do you think they're dead?"

Abby watched her best friend, trying to figure out what to say. After the arduous day, Nicole looked close to tears. Abby did not want to be the one to tip her over the edge because once Nicole started, Abby knew she was so close behind. "I don't know. What do you think? Lorie is your life mate. Shouldn't you know?"

Nicole slowly rose to her feet. "I don't think so but fuck, who knows? Right now I'm so damn tired I can't see straight."

Abby nodded. “Let’s keep moving. As soon as we find someplace safe to stop, we will.”

Nicole nodded as both women struck off toward the mountains. They were on their own now. Abby didn’t know how long this would last, but for now they had to depend on each other and keep pushing on. The talisman had to get to the mountains, that much she was sure of. Anything else was unimportant.

She pulled the piece from beneath her shirt to grip it tightly. The first thought was to keep her and Nicole safe. Instead, her thoughts flew to Caledon and Lorie. They had to be all right. She didn’t know what they would do if they weren’t.

Chapter Nine

Darkness began to descend upon the land in slow creeping measures. Stars appeared in the velvet darkness of the sky as night creatures exited burrows and nests to find food. Nicole and Abby, though, marched solidly on, stopping occasionally to rest. They were afraid to do much else. A dismal day to begin with had turned heinous in the extreme.

Abby rubbed a grubby hand across her sweat-streaked face. The quest wasn't shaping up the way any of them had expected. All she had worried about was contending with sleeping outdoors and peeing behind bushes. Now she and Nicole were totally alone, trying to forge ahead on a journey they never wanted to begin with. She didn't even try to pray for things to get better. Every time she did, things just got progressively shittier.

"Should we stop for the night?" Nicole whispered behind her. To Abby it sounded like a shout. The darkness was too quiet, even with all the night sounds around. She was used to the constant roar of the city. The absolute silence was deafening.

Abby stopped. "I think we can rest for a bit, but not long." They both hunkered down in the tall grass, spreading their cloaks under them. Abby hated the thought of actually sitting on the ground. Who knew what else shared space with them?

Nicole dug in her pack. "I wish I had some kind of light to see the food. I can't see a thing."

Abby sat patiently as Nicole finally located a bit of bread. They ate and drank sparingly. When the food and water finally ran out, they would have to find their own. Neither woman ever had to actually hunt for food before. They were both whizzes at finding restaurants in strange towns, but this was totally out of their element. How the hell were they supposed to know what to eat and what not to? Then came the next step of cooking it. The concept was absolutely frightening. She tried to look on the bright side; she needed to shed a few pounds. She would have definitely chosen another way to do it though.

"Why don't you sleep for a bit?" Abby suggested. "I'll keep watch while you do."

"I don't know if I can."

"Just try," Abby urged. "You can even rest your head on my lap so you don't have to put it on the ground."

“Thanks.” Nicole pulled the hood close over her head as she rested on Abby’s legs. Soon her even breathing joined the soft whirring of insects. Sitting in the darkness, Abby began to feel the overwhelming crush of responsibility. She always said she didn’t want to be in charge, but here she was, and a lot more rested on her than just getting a job out. The fate of a whole world rested on her shoulders, and now she and Nicole were alone.

Her teeth began to chatter. She clamped her jaws to stop the sound. Fear coursed through her. She could feel her breath catch in her throat as tears threatened. God, she couldn’t do this. The whole situation was just too huge. How could anyone expect them to carry on? They had no skills, no abilities. Oh sure, Nicole could ride and they could both hike, but big deal. None of that prepared them to survive out in the wilderness. The only experience either of them had was Abby’s one year as a Camp Fire Girl, but that was when she was eight. The only thing she learned was to make a clay ashtray. She doubted very highly anyone would be asking her to do that. So where did that leave them?

Stop! Stop letting the voice rule you. You aren’t as helpless as you think you are. No matter what, she wasn’t alone. She had Nicole, and in Abby’s book that was worth a hell of a lot. Both of them were intelligent women. They would survive. She knew where they were to go and hoped things became clear when they got there. For now she could not let doubt rule. She had to take one minute at a time because nothing else would work.

“Are you done thinking?” Nicole’s whisper startled her.

“What? I thought you were sleeping.”

“I dozed, but could feel you get all tense. Are you okay?”

“Sorry.” Abby patted her shoulder. “Go back to sleep. We’ll have to leave before too long.”

Nicole sat up, pushing the hood away from her face. “You’re worrying,” she stated.

“More like panicking.”

“We can do this,” Nicole voiced what Abby had been telling herself. Actually, hearing it spoken aloud by someone else made her feel better. “We may not be Caledon or Loriem, but we can do this.”

Abby hugged her. “We’re gonna be okay and so are they. I know it.”

Nicole and Abby ran through the early morning dew-soaked grass. Rest the night before had been nonexistent so they decided to get an early start, a very early start. Neither woman was aware of being followed, but how could they tell? As Nicole said, a whole pack of Rugby players could be running after them and they may miss it.

“Except if they were really cute.” Nicole smiled. “We never miss cute men.”

Abby could see a forest looming before them in the distance. She just kept thinking once they made it there they would be fine. At least they would be out of the open. She hated being on display. Anyone could see them, but they didn't have a choice. They had to keep moving.

The stitch in her side she had nursed for days flared up. Abby clutched at it but kept moving. She could not hold them up. She tried to visualize other things to keep her attention off the pain. White sand beaches came to mind. The ocean crashing against the shore as the sun shone brightly through the leaves of a palm tree. She tried to place herself within the scene, but it was no use. Between the pain and the gasping of her breath, she just couldn't get into the mood to lie on the beach. Maybe collapse in a soiled heap, but not lounge. Hell, the garbage collectors wouldn't even touch her she was so dirty. She'd give anything for a bath.

"Abby, down," Nicole gasped, pulling her to the ground.

Abby fell face-first, eating grass. She lay trying not to cough as she picked unpleasant things from her mouth. Why couldn't she keep her mind on what was happening? This was what got them into this mess in the first place.

"What is it?" she whispered.

"I think someone may be following us, or at least riding in the distance. I have no idea if they've seen us."

"Better to be safe than sorry. We'll lie here a bit to give them a chance to move on. Then we'll crawl through the grass till we think it's safe to stand and run like hell."

Both women slowly raised their heads to see if they could spot what Nicole had seen. Abby couldn't make out anything as hard as she looked. What if the person was hiding in the grass as they were? The thought brought a shiver. What if it was crawling toward them right this minute?

"Let's get moving," Abby mumbled. "The more distance we gain the better off we'll be."

Nicole nodded as they set off at a crawl. Abby hoped whatever was out there had left. She did not relish traveling like this for long. She gripped the necklace for luck, wishing once again for their safety.

Nicole leaned against a small tree as dusk began to overtake the sun. Travel that day had been long and arduous, but they had finally made it to the forest which appeared as a mirage in the distance. She was utterly exhausted, as was Abby. They had barely slept or eaten in two days, or was it three? She couldn't even remember anymore. Time seemed to blur. The only feature she was certain of was the missing part of herself. Lorie's absence was like a constant ache. She blinked back tears. She had

spent so much time not thinking about him that when she finally did, his image invaded her mind and would not leave. She could remember every taste of him, every touch; God she missed him. Missed him as she did no one else.

Searching her memory, the faces of her family were fuzzy and insubstantial. Lorie's face, however, was clear, like he was standing right in front of her. She missed him so terribly. She didn't think she could go on, but knew she had to. Angrily, brushing the tears from her cheeks, she tried to think of something else, but nothing would come to mind. Just him. She hated this. No one could mean this much in such a short time, but impossibly he did. She didn't understand how it happened, but it had. Bastard.

"Are you okay?" Abby sat beside her.

"Fine." She tried to wipe tears away without Abby noticing, but it didn't work. Her friend noticed everything.

"We're going to be okay, Nic." Abby touched her hand. "We will, I know it."

"It's not that." Nicole shook her head as more tears seeped from beneath her lashes. "I can't stop thinking about him. Abby, I miss him, and I hate it. It's like this hole that's eating me alive. During the day I can concentrate on other things, but at night I can't. The longer I'm away from him the harder it is. What the fuck is wrong with me?"

Abby hugged her tightly. "Nicole, I am so sorry. Caledon mentioned something about couples that were mates; your feelings are probably coming because of that. But who knows? I wish there was something I could do."

Nicole wished the same thing. If Abby could carry even part of the feelings it would make it more bearable. However, that wasn't possible. She would just have to deal with it.

"Thanks." Nicole hugged her back. "I appreciate it. I just need to quit being a big crybaby. It's not as if we don't have bigger and better things to worry about. Oh...like food, shelter, and making sure nothing kills us."

Abby smiled, shaking her head. "I don't think we've done too bad so far." She quickly knocked on the tree next to them to ward off bad luck. "Are you hungry?"

Without waiting for an answer she pulled the pack toward them to start the search. "Let's see, we have bread and a little cheese left. Oh, and a few pieces of fruit." She pulled it all out to set between them. "Not much, but we'll get by." She tried to make her voice positive but Nicole could tell that Abby was worried. Nicole looked over the growing mental list of things they had to fixate on now that finding food was becoming a concern. Water would be added next.

Both women ate, savoring the last bit of food they had. Once finished, Abby curled up in her cloak and left Nicole to watch the night.

Abby opened her eyes to find herself back in the clearing again. She dreamed of the place nearly every night, it was familiar, as familiar as her own nakedness. She felt freer here than she ever did in real life. Now she was not only free, but also safe. Here there was no one to stalk her or kill her. Here she could be whatever or whoever she wished. Her unclothed state was now far more comfortable than clothes could ever be. She stopped to wonder briefly why she was so aware since this was obviously a dream. She did have lucid dreams occasionally, but nothing to this extent. Shaking her head she moved toward the small lake and waterfall. Settling herself on the large sun-warmed rock, she enjoyed the rushing of water and the rustle of the wind through the trees. After the hell of the last few days, this was pure peace.

“Abby?”

She turned to find Caledon, also nude, sitting beside her, as she knew he would eventually. She couldn't be in this place without him appearing. Tears swam in her eyes as she took him in like a cool balm to her soul. God, he was so beautiful. His thick black hair was braided in intricate designs she wished to slowly unravel and run her fingers through. His eyes were a deep forest-green and when he turned his gaze on her, she trembled because she knew he wanted her as much as she wanted him. She hadn't realized until this moment just how much she missed him.

“Caledon,” she whispered his name. She leaned forward to kiss him with an intensity she only possessed here, in the dream.

“Abby.” He murmured her name against her lips as he pulled her into his arms. His lips brushed softly over hers, once, twice. The kiss was light, like the sun brushing against her on a spring day. “To look upon you again brightens my soul.”

For the first time in days she felt truly safe, even if it was just in a dream. Abby wrapped her arms around him as he helped her slide even closer. She found herself in his lap with her legs wrapped around his waist. The warmth of him, the feel of him, his scent filled her.

“Why do you cry, love?” he whispered against her lips.

“I'm scared,” she said, finally able to voice her fears aloud. Even if it happened within the dreamscape of her mind. “When you and Lorie left us, I didn't grasp how hard everything would be. Nic and I aren't well prepared to go through a survival course. We're okay for now, but I don't know

what tomorrow will bring. We think someone is following us, and we're running out of food and water. So all in all, we really aren't doing that well."

"Abby." He pulled back to look intently into her face. "Abby, it is truly you."

"Who else would it be?" She smiled at him through her tears, unsure of the direction the fantasy was taking. Every time she had this dream, though, she was interrupted. Then she woke frustrated and unsatisfied. Only in the dream could she speak freely to him, touch him, kiss him. Feel whole with him. In the daylight hours she refused to even dwell on the dreams. They were aberrations, glitches in her mind. She did not feel this way toward Caledon. He certainly did not feel any way toward her. They were partners in the quest and nothing more.

But at night Abby was released from the worry and the strain she carried. In her dreams James was but a shadow, and her old life was the delusion. She was free to speak and feel what was buried deep, deep within. She wanted him, intensely, profoundly. This time she would not allow him to melt away without expressing this. Leaning forward, she claimed his lips, sliding her tongue inside his mouth. He tasted sexy and mysterious, like a rich dark chocolate truffle. Even if none of this was real, she needed to pretend for a brief moment that he truly hungered for her as much as she did him.

"I want you," Abby said to the dream Caledon. "I crave you. I can't get you out of my mind."

"Abby, I hunger for you. I require you. You are essential to my very life and breath." He stared at her intently. "Are you sure you feel the same?"

Abby stared deeply into his eyes. Even in her dreams Caledon was intense and almost scary. Hell yes, she was sure. She nodded in answer to his question because she didn't trust her voice.

Standing, he swept her into his arms to carry her to a grassy spot under a tree. On the ground was spread a sleeping blanket and he laid her upon it. His body was lean and hard, perfect in every way. And he so obviously wanted her. Abby smiled at the size of the penis that bobbed before her face. She knew it was a dream now. No one was this well endowed. If she were awake, she would definitely scream faced with something of this size. But it was her dream and she could have or do whatever she wanted.

He lay beside her on the blanket and ran a hand down her body. "You are so beautiful. And you are mine." He turned his eyes upon her with such passion she couldn't speak. "I would kill any man who dared to look upon you."

Before she could even try to form a reply, he leaned down to capture her mouth in a soul-burning kiss. Abby felt her breath catch as he began to slowly stroke a hand down her body. Wanting to touch him, she slid her hands over his back, his muscles contracting under her touch as he gasped against her

lips. If he reacted to a simple touch, she wondered what he would do if she moved her hands lower. Deciding to take the plunge, she grabbed him and gently squeezed.

“Abby. Stop, it has been too long.” He grabbed her hand. “I will not be able to make this last if you do not stop.”

“Am I hurting you?” she asked, embarrassed. Then thought how dumb was that since this was a dream.

“Never. I long for you, but it has been many, many years since I have been with someone. I want to make our first time together perfect.”

“It is.” Abby moved beneath him. “But hurry. I don’t know how long we actually have. I don’t want this to end before it gets started.”

“You are right.” He eased his fingers between her legs to gently stroke her. She spread her legs wide to allow him access and could feel herself get wet at his touch. Her experience in real life was horrible at best. Since James, she had shut herself totally off. Sex for her was now an act best left for others. If dreams like this continued though, she figured she could be quite content.

“Oh,” Abby cried out as Caledon replaced his fingers with his tongue. She clutched at his hair while he thoroughly licked every inch of her. The feeling was mind-numbing. “Don’t stop. Don’t stop.” She could feel an orgasm beginning to build, but this was far more intense than she had ever achieved with a vibrator.

Caledon moved up from between her legs as he claimed her lips. She could feel his fullness at her entrance and spread her legs as far apart as possible. God she wanted him. Wanted him so bad she felt she would die if she didn’t have him. Gripping her hips, he eased himself inside of her tight channel. The feel of him within her body brought tears spilling down her cheeks, he felt like heaven. She clutched at him, pulling him tighter. She wanted him deeper, so deep he became a part of her. If she couldn’t have it in real life, she had to have it here. This was her dream and she would be damned if it ended before she was ready.

“Caledon, hurry.” She rained kisses on his face and neck.

“Abby, I can’t hold on any longer. You are perfection.” He gritted his teeth as he forced himself all the way into her body.

Colors swam before her eyes as his bulk invaded her. The tightness was so overwhelming she felt unable to breath. It got worse as he began to move. The feeling then went from uncomfortable to mindless pleasure in three strokes. Abby could feel the orgasm build again. All she could do was hold on as he slid himself in and out of her moistness. Caledon whispered into her ear the whole time, but he

spoke in a language she didn't understand. No matter since she knew he was feeling it as intensely as she was.

"Abby, come with me." He gritted his teeth as he began to move faster. "Come with me."

Staring up into his beautiful face, she could feel his love as a palpable presence. Then she thought nothing as the orgasm swamped over her. She then did something she had never done before. She screamed at the intensity of it all.

"Abby. Abby," a voice called. "Abby." A hand grabbed her shoulder and shook her violently.

She sat up panting and sweating in the darkness with Nicole's face less than a foot from her own. "What?"

"Are you okay? That was some dream. You were moaning and thrashing like a herd of lions were after you."

Abby fell back onto the blanket. A dream, it had only been a dream. It could only ever be a dream. Soundly, she slammed the door on the emotions it had brought. "Yeah I'm fine. I had a nightmare." She hoped she sounded convincing. By the look on Nicole's face she truly doubted it.

"Mmm-hmm, I bet. The kind of nightmare that a whole horde of horny Elfmens is chasing you and you can't get away. Oh I know that one girl; I have it all the time."

Shakily, she ran a hand through her rat's nest of hair. "Why don't you try and get some sleep now. I'll sit up and watch."

Nicole flopped on the ground next to her. "I hope to hell my dreams are...uh, scary like yours." Snickering under her breath, Nicole pulled the hood over her head.

Abby made a face at her. She wished she could say something flip, but didn't trust her voice so said nothing at all. Damn, the dreams were always so intense. So real. Closing her eyes, Abby could almost feel Caledon still deep within her body. The thought made her tremble. If a dream could feel like this, a voice whispered, what would reality feel like? Angrily, she punched the voice to silence. A great big fat disappointment. No man was that wonderful. Only a dream was that loving, that tender. He would do whatever she wanted and be however she wished. In reality, men and life sucked.

Settling her mind, Abby turned her eyes to the darkness. She needed to focus and keep watch. They didn't need someone sneaking up on them. They had been lucky so far. After Nicole had thought she spotted someone the day before, neither one had seen anything else. Abby still didn't trust that someone wasn't out there. If the evil king guy was as bad as Caledon said, they had to stay on guard. Apparently the talisman was what he wanted and he would do anything to gain it.

Abby and Nicole traveled carefully the next day. They had risen even earlier than the day before, breaking camp before even the sun woke up. Both women felt a heightened sense of danger. Neither could explain it, but decided to follow their instincts, which had served them well up until this point. We're still alive, Nicole thought. Therefore we must be doing something right. She hoped it wasn't just dumb luck, though they would take any and all help they could get.

Abby led them with a single-mindedness that Nicole found unsettling. Where her friend was normally struggling and cursing under her breath, this day found her pushing them hard. The farther they went, the more persistent Abby became. Nicole really hoped it meant something because sure as hell, they were both going to be totally ass-whipped by nightfall.

An odd noise in the forest forced both women to an instant stop. The birds, which minutes before had been singing their beaks off, went silent. This is so not good, Nicole thought. In unison both women pulled the cloaks around and crouched so they could ease into bushes along the path.

They both sat still, waiting. Nicole all too well remembered the movies where the heroines moved too soon and were bludgeoned to death with some cruel implement. This was not going to happen to them. Not if she had anything to say about it.

A voice rang out through the stillness, causing both women to jump in alarm. It had been so long since they had heard anyone speak in a normal tone of voice. They shrank back farther into the hiding place, pulling hoods farther forward to cover their faces.

"Where are they?" a male voice asked. "They cannot have gone far."

Abby and Nicole exchanged a glance. This was not a voice either had heard before. How could they have missed being followed? They had been so careful. Or as careful as either one of them knew to be.

"They are here," another male answered. "I am quite sure they are cowering somewhere, thinking we will not find them."

Four men stalked into view. Nicole knew they were Elves, but whereas Lorie and his village blended with the forest living in harmony with the elements, these men did not. They were dressed in clothing bright like a bird's plumage ready for courting. Like the other Elves they had seen, they were handsome, or would have been, Nicole amended in her mind. Their faces held a casual cruelty which shone out through their dead black eyes. Nicole pursed her lips, knowing she and Abby were in trouble. They could not allow themselves to be taken by these men.

“We must find them,” the man with the brightest clothing spoke in a harsh tone. “The King wants them found immediately and alive. He will not accept failure.” Nicole figured he must be in charge or he thought he was.

“There will be no failure,” another scoffed. “These are women and outlanders. They do not know our ways or our land. They will be very easy to find.” He looked around him. “I suggest the two of you give up now. It will go much easier on you.”

The leader nodded. “Yes, give up. Our king knows traitors have filled your mind with lies about many things. The piece you carry is his and was stolen. He just wants his property back. You will be richly rewarded.”

Sure, Nicole thought, and then we’ll be given a parade and the key to the city. All the while being worshipped as goddesses by the puny masses. She sneered. These men obviously imagined she and Abby were both idiots and fools to fall for lines such as that. They may as well rub their hands together and chuckle evilly while they were at it so false was the leader’s tone.

The four men studied their surroundings. When the women did not appear, the leader placed his hands arrogantly on his hips. “We gave you a chance and you chose to ignore it.” He turned to his men. “Fan out and find them. Whoever has the talisman, bring her to me. Kill the other. She will not be needed.”

Nicole’s heart stuttered briefly in her chest. She felt Abby’s hand take her own and she gripped it tightly. She was nothing but useless garbage to these men. Her life was worth less than the shoes on their feet. Fear coursed through her. What to do? They could not run, but they couldn’t stay where they were either. Eventually they would be found; she had no doubt of that. Closing her eyes, Nicole wished with all her might Lorie would come. She knew they would be fine if he and Caledon would come dashing triumphantly out of the forest. She opened her eyes. Nothing had happened. Okay, so she and Abby would have to fend for themselves. God help them both.

Abby gripped Nicole’s hand as she held the talisman in the other. She knew that somehow the talisman had helped in the past. The grunts never found them, always turning just before they could be found. She didn’t know if it would work on the Elves, but was willing to take a chance.

Unsure, she took a deep cleansing breath, clearing all fear and worry from her mind. She concentrated on the talisman. Feeling the weight of it in her hand, the texture, she pictured the images on the piece, imprinting them on her mind. Slowly, she released the death grip she held on the piece to hold it gently in her palm. The image of she and Nicole fading filled her mind. They were invisible,

untouchable. They did not exist to these Elves. The Elves could not see them, could not hear them and could not smell them. She could see the image of the two of them rising and walking away in her mind. The men forever searching, but never perceiving them. They were like the wind. Invisible, invincible. Nothing could touch them.

Slowly Abby stood, pulling Nicole up to stand with her. In the distance she could feel her friend hesitate, but never break contact with her. Abby held Nicole's hand as they walked slowly from the bushes. The men walked around them, looked at them, but just as she saw in her mind, they did not see them. They were truly invisible.

The two women trod down the path, never once wavering. The calm she had built up began to crack. Abby could feel it, but could do nothing to stop it. Her mind felt like two separate entities. One was calm and at peace, totally trusting what she did. The other half was the real Abby. She could feel the disbelief beginning to take hold. The world, which had been so serene, was starting to break up. What was once hazy now became clear to her eyes. It was failing. Whatever magic she had wrought was falling apart.

She turned to Nicole. "Run!" She gave a yank on her hand. Without question, Nicole shot forward as the two of them began to pound down the path. The shouting of male voices behind them signaled they had been seen. Abby hoped they had enough of a head start. She didn't know what they would do if they didn't.

Nicole's mind raced as fast as her feet. What the fuck did Abby do? Those men didn't even see them, or at least acted like they didn't. She had almost wet herself when they stood up and walked out as big as you please. Then the spell, or whatever it had been, snapped and all hell broke loose. Run, she yelled to herself. Run and quit thinking, thinking makes you careless. She forced her mind back to concentrate on keeping one foot moving in front of the other. Her knee screamed. The last few days had been way too much for it, especially the crawling. *Don't give out. Don't give out.* The chant ran through her head. She couldn't wonder how long her body would work at the present pace. It had to; if it stopped she would be dead. And that wasn't a good thing to be.

"Here!" Abby shouted to her.

Nicole instinctively swerved to follow. The path Abby chose was a small crevice carved into the hillside. Nicole had to force herself into it, the way was so tight. Rocks brushed against her face, leaving marks as she pushed forward. She could hear the men behind them, cursing, or at least that's

what she thought since the language was strange. Daring a glance back, Nicole saw that though she and Abby could squeeze through, the men could not. They were too big to follow where their quarry led.

Pulling her attention away, she concentrated on moving after Abby. The narrow path became even narrower as her knees and elbows caught on every pebble along the way. Tears flooded her eyes, but she kept moving. The pain could be dealt with later; staying alive was the first priority.

Abby dropped to her knees and began to crawl. Nicole followed suit though her knee was now screaming in pain. The slim passage had become a small cavern too small to stand upright. Nicole prayed with all her might Abby knew where they were going. If this did not lead to a way out, they could not go back.

Rocks littered the ground and though she was careful, she was not careful enough. A sharp stone drove into her already throbbing knee, causing her to pitch forward in agony. Excruciating pain shot through the entire leg. Rocks and grit scored her hands and face, but Nicole was insensible. Her leg felt as though it were on fire. She could not go on. She had pushed and pushed almost beyond endurance. Her leg, once vaguely healthy, would carry her no more.

“What is it?” Abby swiftly came to kneel beside her. “Come on.”

“I can’t.” Nicole shook her head. “My knee...I can’t. You have to go on. That thing around your neck is important. You have to leave me here and keep going.”

Both women stared at one another. Nicole blinked back tears. This was the only choice; the only thing left to do. Abby had to go on. The fate of the land depended on her.

Chapter Ten

“I am not leaving you,” Abby said emphatically. “So forget it. We do not leave our wounded behind. Or at least the Navy Seals don’t. I saw it on *Discovery Channel* and uh...read it in a book, so I’m not leaving you.”

“You are not a Seal. And both of us watch way too much television and read too many romance novels for our own good,” Nicole said through gritted teeth. “This is real, and it’s serious. You have to go on.” Nicole couldn’t believe they were having this discussion with their pursuers so close. The longer they argued the more time Abby lost. She had to go on; figuring out how to convince her was the problem.

“I’m not leaving you,” Abby said savagely. “Why the hell do you think I’m doing all this bullshit? For my fucking health? For this fucking land? Everything I do is to get us home, end of story. And leaving you behind does not get *us* home. If I could I’d dump this stupid piece of jewelry right now, but I can’t. I’m using it so it can get us back the same way it brought us here.”

Nicole opened her mouth to respond, but what could she say? Her life was upside down and totally screwed, but going back to where they came from wasn’t something she had considered. Leaving Loriem...could she leave her life mate? Did she want to?

“Say something,” Abby demanded.

“I can’t go home,” Nicole spoke softly. “Loriem is my life mate. He and I...are linked. I’m not whole without him.” She hurriedly wiped the tears from her face. Never having spoken the words aloud, she didn’t realize how they would sound. Now she had, it all sounded right.

Abby’s dark eyes stood out huge against her ashen skin. She nodded jerkily. “I knew that, deep down. But I’m going home, Nicole. I can’t stay here. There’s nothing for me here. And I certainly can’t be what these people imagine me to be. I’m not a Caretaker, I cannot save this world. I’m just Abby. It’s too much.”

“I understand.” Nicole felt her heart break. She didn’t understand though. How could she stay in this strange world without her best friend? She would have to figure it out because if there was a way out, Abby would find it.

“Right now, none of this is important.” Abby took her hand. “I am not leaving you here alone. I won’t.”

Nicole recognized the look and it spelled trouble. No one was more stubborn than Abby when she dug in her heels. From the looks of things, the heels were spiked into the ground and not likely to move until she got her way.

“Okay, what’s the plan?” Nicole asked.

“Well, you can kind of crawl on one knee till we get out of here. I’ll be in front and toss the rocks out of the way. As soon as we can stand, I’ll help you along. And don’t argue with me.”

Nicole nodded. Once Abby had to lug her ass along for a bit she would relent and leave her behind. She didn’t want to be left. With all her heart, she wished her knee would magically heal, but it wasn’t going to happen. The longer Abby fooled around, the closer they came to being caught. Nicole would not allow that to happen.

Both women began to slowly crawl along the narrow passage. Abby studiously removed all the rocks littering the path. Nicole pulled herself along on one knee, holding her bad one up to protect it. She concentrated on moving ahead one inch at a time. She cleared her mind of the men chasing them and the worries about Loriem. She had to keep going for Abby’s sake. All Abby wanted was to get home; Nicole would not become an obstacle in her personal quest.

“Okay,” Abby said.

Nicole looked to see her friend standing over her. The height of the passage had once again opened up so they could stand. Little good it did either of them. Abby helped her to her feet as Nicole gingerly put weight on her battered left knee. She winced, damn the thing hurt. There would be no swift recovery this time.

“Maybe we should wrap it?” Abby suggested.

“With what?” Nicole glanced around. “I don’t see a *Target* handy so we can run in to get a knee brace, do you?” She knew she was being shitty but couldn’t help it. After days of running and abuse, she was totally worn out.

Abby dug in her pack to pull out a shirt. She began to rip it into strips. “We’ll use this shirt. I know it won’t have the support a real bandage gives, but it should help.” She knelt and began to wrap the cloth around Nicole’s knee.

“That was one of you new shirts,” Nicole said, feeling tears begin to pool.

“So, it’s just a shirt,” Abby shrugged. “I’m sure I can get another eventually.”

Nicole sniffed, wiping away the tears. “I feel like a big stupid jerk for being so shitty to you. I’m sorry.”

Abby stood to hug her. “Look, we’ve been under a lot of stress these last few days. Let’s quit talking about leaving each other, okay? We’re in this together. I love you, girl. So let’s put our heads together and get the hell out of here.”

Nicole huffed out a breath and nodded. “You’re right. If the positions were switched I wouldn’t leave you either. Let’s go.” She took a small step. The pain was still there, but not sharp and stabbing as before. The bandage definitely helped to support it. “I can walk, but I’ll need help.”

Abby put her arm around Nicole’s waist as the two of them moved along the passage. Soon they had a rhythm going. Looking like they were running a crazy three-legged race, the two worked in tandem. Nicole would have laughed if the situation weren’t so dire. Now they were on the move again she took time to glance up. The rock channel they were in soared above their heads. She could see blue sky, but nothing else. Where the hell were they? If she didn’t know better she would swear they were in the center of a mountain, but that couldn’t be. Could it? She decided not to interrupt Abby’s noticeable concentration with questions. When she wanted her to know something she would say.

The passage took a sharp curve to the left and began to widen. Nicole dearly hoped no ugly surprises would be waiting for them when they reached the end. Like a whole army of gruntags and bad guys to take them in. That would definitely spell the end of a truly fucked-up day. Instead of bad guys, they came upon a split trail. Abby never hesitated as she guided them down the right hand passage.

Nicole finally spoke. “Uh, Ab, are you sure we’re on the right path?”

Abby stopped in mid-stride. Her unfocused eyes turned and met Nicole’s. “We are exactly where we need to be.” Saying this, she started them off again.

Nicole tried not to shiver. Her friend’s eyes, once a deep dark brown, were now almost gold. At least that’s what she thought she saw. Rolling her own eyes, Nicole concentrated on keeping in step. There was no way Abby’s eyes were changing. That was plain idiotic. It was the light, lack of sleep and her incredible imagination. Nothing more. Stay focused, she told herself, and hope her friend didn’t go wonko and try to suck her brain out.

Together the women kept going. The path switched many times, but Abby never broke her stride. The sun peaked over them then moved off, signaling the waning of the day. Nicole hoped to hell they weren’t caught in this place overnight. She didn’t like the tunnel even though it had saved their lives. There was nowhere to run or hide if trouble came at them. She doubted very much if Abby could walk them out without being seen.

Abby took the lead as the trail began to narrow. Nicole hobbled along, careful to put most of her weight on the other knee. It wasn't fast and it wasn't pretty, but she was still moving. That's what counted right now. As the walls closed in on them, she used them as a crutch for support. The rock was rough against her hands and cold, very cold. She could feel the grit cling to her sweating palms. Concentrating on the idea of taking a hot bath, Nicole kept pace with her friend.

The hot bath occupied her until she ran into Abby. Nicole peered over her shoulder to see they were now out of the passage. Her heart leapt. The ground sloped down and away from where they stood to disappear into a dense forest. Dusk was beginning to fall as the sun gradually disappeared into the tree line. Nicole didn't even care about the darkness. She was just glad to be out of the mountain.

"There doesn't seem to be anyone out there." Abby turned to her. "We'd better hurry. I want us to get deep into the trees before it gets completely dark."

Looping her arm around Abby's shoulder, the two of them started off at a brisk pace. They moved carefully down the slope and then gradually began to climb as they reached the tree line. Birds called a welcome as insects began to take up their nighttime chorus. Nicole trusted this was a good sign for a change.

Abby finally let them stop when it became too dark to go on. Nicole eased herself under a cluster of large bushes. She didn't care about what occupied the space with her. She just wanted to lie down and go to sleep. Abby followed her until both of them were hidden from view. Things had clearly changed within a very short period.

"Go to sleep," Abby whispered. "I'll keep watch."

"Wake me when it's my turn," Nicole mumbled as she felt sleep swiftly claim her.

Abby crawled wearily from the safety of their nighttime hiding place. The sun's light was just beginning to creep into the darkness of the forest. Stretching, she tried to work the kinks out of her back and legs, but it was useless. She was as stiff and sore this morning as she had been last night, even more so. Wearily, she rubbed a grubby hand across her face. God, she was so fucking tired. For fifty cents she would lay down right here and just sleep. Except that wasn't possible. They had to keep moving.

Abby crouched down. Nicole would not go back with her. The bombshell she had dropped the day before sat between them like an unwelcome guest. Deep inside she had known, anticipated, but actually hearing the words spoken aloud made it real. Tears clouded her vision until she blinked them away. How could she leave Nicole behind? How could she go back to the real world and not have the one person with her who truly understood? Understood her as no one else did. She would have to.

Nicole was an adult; she had a life mate. She belonged to this wild land now while Abby was but a brief visitor.

Turning, she clambered inside the nest they had made. She hated waking Nicole but there was no choice. Abby crossed her fingers, hoping a full night's rest had done wonders for her friend's knee. Nicole was going to yell about sleeping through guard duty, but she needed the rest far more. No matter what the stubborn head said.

Once awake, Nicole dragged herself into the sunlight, complaining all the way. "Why the hell didn't you wake me up? You needed to sleep too. Dammit Abby, I could kick your ass. Quit treating me like I'm a baby."

"I'm not." Abby helped her stand. "You needed the rest." Before she could be interrupted Abby went on. "How's your knee? Can you walk on it any better?"

With help, Nicole put pressure on it. "It feels better."

"Sure it does. That's why you grit your teeth and winced, right?" Abby dropped to the ground. "I'll rewrap it so we can get moving."

Neither woman mentioned food. There wasn't any. Maybe they would find something edible along the way. They still had a bit of water so that wasn't a concern. Yet. Their final destination was close, very close. The urge in Abby to run was strong, but Nicole couldn't take the pace. She reminded herself that getting there was the point, not how soon. Still a small part of her pushed for speed, more speed.

Grabbing the packs they moved down the path. Abby kept a firm arm around Nicole's waist as they negotiated the forest together. When possible, they stayed to what had once been well-used trails, but were now being slowly taken back over by the immense woodland around them. Soon Abby pushed through brush, never wavering from whatever drew her on. The talisman, usually a subtle warmth between her breasts, was now hotter. It didn't burn, but heat radiated noticeably from the disk. She chose not to mention it. Nicole did not need something else to worry about. And neither did she.

Mid-morning they came upon a small stream; Abby stopped long enough refill the water skins. She hoped it was good to drink figuring that of any place, this land should have clean water since there was no sign of industrialization. But then again it could be naturally poisonous. Abby shrugged it off, she was too exhausted to worry since this seemed to be the least of their problems.

She cautiously took a handful of water from the stream and sipped. It was cool and crisp against her parched tongue. Smiling, she handed the filled skin to Nicole and began to gulp large handfuls.

Nothing had ever tasted so good. All right, a margarita would have been better, but beggars could definitely not be choosers.

After they had drank their fill she replenished the water skins and placed them carefully in the packs. Standing, Nicole placed an arm around her shoulders. Cautiously, they crossed the stream then began to climb the bank on the other side. The land sloped upwards as, for the first time, the mountains, which had looked so far away, came into view. They were getting close.

Confidence flooded through her body. She and Nicole had been alone in a strange land for days and survived. They had done it. They had eluded capture, never once losing sight of the goal and all without Caledon and Lorieam to guide them. No matter what happened, they should both be proud of their accomplishments.

“There they are!”

Abby’s congratulatory thoughts fled as a voice called out. She and Nicole turned to find two men running through the forest toward them. Abby concluded quickly they weren’t there to help. She recognized them both. Keeping a tight hold on Nicole she took off running, not even wanting to give her a chance to argue. Nicole had no choice but to struggle to keep up. Not after all they had gone through Abby was leaving her behind. Nicole was her best friend; she needed her, had to keep her safe.

As the path rose their pace slowed, but both women kept moving. Abby refused to be taken without a fight. Her eyes constantly searched their surroundings; they needed a place to hide or take a stand. At the very least she needed some type of weapon. Unsure of what the men carried, she refused to take the chance they were unarmed. More than likely they at least had knives. Their backpacks wouldn’t be much use against that, but if need be they could use them as weapons. She had once seen Nicole beat a man quite effectively with her purse. Of course that had been in a bar and he had been drunk, but whatever worked.

Abby could hear the pursuers closing in on them. They would have to stop, they had to be prepared. Pulling them to a halt, Abby frantically searched the ground for something to use as a weapon.

“What are you doing?” Nicole demanded.

“Here, take this.” Abby handed her a thick heavy stick as she began to search for another. “We need weapons.”

The two men approached at a walk. Abby found a large stick and went to stand beside Nicole. She wanted to wipe the smug condescending smiles right off their faces. They obviously thought these women would be easily taken. They were so mistaken.

“Give up and we will not hurt you.”

Abby rolled her eyes. Did they think she and Nicole were idiots? “No. Go away and *we* won’t hurt *you*.” She looked over to see Nicole wave her stick around. She prayed she didn’t end up knocking both of them out. That wouldn’t scare anyone.

Each man drew a large knife. They held them easily; the weapons were obviously something they used everyday. Abby took a deep breath. Okay, they weren’t going to surrender. Neither were they. At least she hoped they weren’t going to. Catching Nicole’s eye her confidence returned. Nope, there was no surrender to be seen in those eyes.

“Do not kill them,” one man spoke to the other. “We need to find out which one carries the talisman. As soon as we do, take her back to camp. I will dispose of the other.”

Abby hated to be spoken about when she was so clearly present. She especially hated to be treated as if she was of no consequence. Tightening her grasp on the weapon, she held it before her like a sword. Even if they managed to catch them, she planned to give them a hell of a fight.

As the men eased into a crouch, the women charged as one, both swinging for all they were worth. Abby, who had played softball as a child, connected solidly to her foe’s arm. She felt the shock of the contact radiate through her body as he fell screaming to the ground. Okay, maybe this wasn’t going to be so hard. A moment later, she found herself on the ground as he swept his foot across her legs. Clinging to her stick, she swung to bash him in the leg.

She rolled to her feet, frantically searching for the knife. But he already had it as he approached. She tried frantically to duck his advance but he slid past, cutting her left arm. Abby knew he had got her because she felt the wet stickiness of blood begin to flow down her arm, but no pain. The adrenaline pumping through her system took care of that. Shoving thoughts of her injury away, she whirled quickly to keep him in her sights. She could not afford to let him get behind her.

Emboldened, he moved at her again. This time he wasn’t lucky. Her stick caught him in the shoulder as her foot kicked out at his knee. He staggered forward but managed to stay on his feet. Abby knew she had hurt him. She had to have. The hit and kick had been solid. Why wouldn’t he go down? She didn’t know how much longer she and Nicole could do this. They had been on the run for days with minimal sleep and food. Any energy the adrenaline that pumped through her system gave would begin to flag soon. They both had to end this quick. Before their enemies ended them.

Nicole danced around the other man, trying to keep the weight off her left knee. She jabbed at his head while he tried to dodge and come at her with the knife. Off balance, she fell to the ground. He

lunged at her as she kicked at him with her good leg. The solid muscles she had built on the soccer field gave her power as she caught her opponent's knee in a glancing blow. He lurched away, giving her time to regain her feet. She had to stay upright. If he got her on the ground, she was done.

He moved around her, studying her. Nicole tried to give the impression nothing was wrong. She could not show weakness, but it was useless. The fall made her knee throb and she could not put her full weight on it. He saw her difficulty and smiled. He thought she would be easy. Nicole planned to disabuse him of this notion, she hoped.

"You can't win," he spoke to her. "You are injured. You are weak."

Nicole clamped her jaws together. She refused to give him the satisfaction of an answer. As he spoke he continually moved, forcing her to move also. She knew he was trying to wear her out, but she had no choice. She had to keep him in her sights. Her thoughts strayed to Lorie. God, she wished he were here. She missed him. She needed him.

"I will kill you."

"You'll try, fucknut," Nicole muttered. Lorie's name became a mantra in her head. As long as she repeated it over and over she was safe.

She could feel the knee burning. It wouldn't hold her much longer. Tightening her hold on the stick, she made a quick decision and rushed forward. The suddenness of her action caught him off guard. Swinging, she caught his knife hand forcing him to release the weapon. It flipped off into the bushes. When she struck again though, he was ready for her. He caught her stick, beginning to fight her for it.

Pulling it from her hands, he threw it aside and began to stalk her. Nicole backed up at his approach. All the while Lorie's name ran through her head. She wished she could have seen him again. She refocused her attention on the smiling man in front of her. Bastard. He thinks he's won. Well he may have, but I'll make sure he remembers me, she thought.

"You can't escape," he said. "No matter what you do, I'll catch you."

"You can bet on that, fucker," Nicole yelled, rushing at him.

Leaping into the air she collided with him as they both spilled to the ground. Her momentum carried her farther as she rolled away. With a grunt, he pushed himself up to come after her. Fury filled his face. He would kill her, she had no doubt. Rage emptied away as an arrow caught him solidly in the chest, knocking him to the ground. Nicole turned to find two cloaked and hooded men coming toward them.

One of the men raised a bow to loose an arrow, easily catching Abby's attacker as he tried to pin her to the ground. The force of the arrow carried him back and down a slope. Abby pulled herself to her feet to face the new threat. Nicole saw she was bleeding from various wounds and unsteady on her feet, but she moved forward, ready and willing to defend them both.

The men swept their hoods off in unison to reveal Caledon and Loriem. A sight that Nicole thought she would never see again. Maybe she was imagining them. She had thought of him so often that maybe her fevered brain had conjured him. Maybe she was dying. Maybe she was already dead.

"Nicole." Loriem rushed forward to sweep her into his arms. "Nicole. Are you well? I was fearful we would not find you both in time." Then he was kissing her. His hot full lips pressing on hers, molding her body into him. This was no dream.

Nicole felt tears begin. She blinked to clear her sight. "Loriem. Is that really you? Damn, I missed you." She buried her face into his neck and wept.

Abby slid to the ground, trying to grasp how the events had unfolded. Her head whirled with a million thoughts, her body thrummed with a million aches. Notions of standing quickly came and went. She much preferred to sit on the ground for a bit, though in truth she didn't think she could make it to her feet and stay upright anyway.

"Abby." Caledon dropped to the ground beside her. "You are hurt. You are bleeding."

Though the words were calm, something about his tone caused the hair on her neck to rise. If she wouldn't have known better she would say he was furious. His touch was light and sure as he began to check her injuries. As the adrenaline washed away, Abby began to feel every single injury. She hurt like she had had the shit kicked right out of her. It reminded her why she never got into fights as a child. Pain was not something she was into.

"How did you find us?" she asked him.

"We have been tracking you for a number of days. But you have always stayed a few paces ahead of us." He took her hands in his. She wondered if he was somehow healing her. If so, she hoped he hurried. After a moment, he let her hands go then proceeded to swing her into his arms.

"What are you doing?" She struggled briefly, which made the pain worse.

"I am carrying you. You are in no condition to walk and we must be going. These men were only part of a larger group. They will be missed."

Abby thought it sounded reasonable, but then again it felt so good to be off her feet. If he had suggested rolling down a hill, she probably would have agreed to that too. A miniscule part of her, the

secret part, admitted it felt good in his arms. In his arms she felt peace and safety, just as she had in the dreams.

“Abby, it is good to see you well.” Lorie greeted her with Nicole in his arms. “Where do we go from here?”

Abby tried to smile at him, but her lips just wouldn’t move. She was so tired. Closing her eyes, she pointed in the direction they had to go. She could feel the slight sway of Caledon’s gait. The warmth of his arms and the beating of his heart were the last things she experienced as she dropped into sleep.

Abby opened her eyes. Her view consisted of rock. Confusion swam in her brain as she tried to make sense of events. She remembered the fight. She also remembered Lorie and Caledon appearing, unless that was a dream. She closed her eyes. If she was captured, she didn’t want to know about it. That may be a huge turtle reaction, but she didn’t think she could take much more. Not yet.

“Abby.”

A soft male voice called her name. She opened her eyes again to find Caledon kneeling next to her. “I thought I dreamed you again.”

“No. I am no dream.” He carefully picked her up.

“Where are we?”

“It is a cave system that runs throughout the mountain range. We will be safe here for a time—long enough to rest and heal—then we must go.”

“Where are you taking me?” Abby leaned against him, enjoying the flying sensation being carried gave her. She wondered if he would do this all the time, but truly doubted it. She couldn’t be the lightest load, that was for sure.

“These caverns have a spring system. I want to help you clean up so I can assess your injuries.”

His words were calm, but to Abby there was an underlying thread of anger to everything he said, every move he made. He wasn’t rough with her; to the contrary, he was gentle as if he was handling fine crystal, or better yet, dynamite. Yet the anger was still there. She didn’t know what she had done to inspire it, but she was certainly not going to take it. This journey had been fucked up from day one and no one was going to make her the fall-girl for what had happened. She had done her best.

“You can put me down.” Abby struggled in his arms. “I can walk.”

“I do not know the extent of your injuries—”

“Put me down,” she cut him off.

Caledon stopped to place her on her feet. Abby felt the world whirl for a moment; closing her eyes she took a breath then opened them again. Placing a hand against the wall of the cavern, she steadied herself. She'd be damned if she ended up on her face in front of him. Putting one foot in front of the other, she started down the corridor with Caledon close behind. Abby had to admit she felt like shit.

"Let me help you."

"Why?" She looked over at him. "So you can get angrier? Don't deny it. I know you're pissed. Well, you know what, dude, I did the best I could. So you can bite my ass."

Caledon took her arm in a tight grasp. It didn't hurt but she knew she wasn't going anywhere. "Do you imagine that I am angry at you?" His words came out close to a growl.

"I don't see anyone else. You've acted like a bug was up your butt ever since you found us. I'm sorry if this little trip didn't turn out to your liking, your Highness, but I am not to blame. Nicole and I—"

"I am not angry at you." He was the one to cut her off this time. "I am furious at the fact that you had to be left alone in a place you know nothing about with no protection. It is my duty to protect you and I failed. Because of this failure, you are injured and very well could have died. More than this, I am enraged at the fact that your attacker died swiftly. He deserved to suffer for what he did to you."

Abby stared at this new Caledon, sure her mouth hung wide open. Someone she didn't know had replaced the genial man she had known so far. She wasn't sure what to say to this pronouncement. Some part of her wanted to declare that she could take care of herself and didn't need him or anyone to protect her. However, at the hard look in his eyes, she chose wisely to say nothing. She merely nodded and began to plod down the corridor.

"You have nothing to say?" he asked, swinging her into his arms again, his tone an open dare.

"What is there to say? I could ask you to put me down again, but doubt if you will. I might as well enjoy the ride while I can. No one is going to carry me through the mountains."

Nodding, he swiftly made his way through a series of tunnels that eventually opened into a room containing a small body of steaming water. Condensation dripped off the rainbow-hued ceiling to fall onto great groupings of fern-like plants which glowed eerily in the darkness. The air was thick but smelled pleasantly of growing things and earth. Abby looked around in wonder, being hit again with just how far from home she was.

Caledon eased her to her feet. "Do you like it?"

"It's beautiful," she spoke in a whisper

“This is a sacred place. In the old times, Elven would come from around the land to bathe in the pool. It was thought to have healing properties as well as deeply cleansing.” He knelt at her feet to begin removing her boots.

“You want me to get in there?” Abby asked, backing up a step.

“Yes, Abby.” He smiled at her. “The water is quite comfortable. I will then see to your injuries.”

“Caledon, you said this place is sacred. I don’t want to mess it up or make someone angry.” She looked back at the steaming water. “Isn’t there some other place I can clean up?”

“No one has come here since the beginning of Elaria’s fall. I doubt there are but a handful that even remember the old ways anymore. It would please me greatly if you would accept this hospitality of my land and people.”

She knew he was maneuvering her, but couldn’t figure a way to back out. Truthfully, she was too damn tired and achy to care. “Sure, what the hell.” She sat slowly on the ground and began to remove her boots. “I’ll just shout when I’m done.”

“I will be right outside. If you have need of me you only have to call.”

As he walked away Abby could think of a million needs for him, but pushed those aside. She was going to have the first hot bath in many days. She planned on thoroughly enjoying it.

Loriem cradled Nicole in his arms as they floated in a blanket of hot water. She felt totally safe, totally content. The urge to burst into tears was subsiding, which she thanked God. Crying was never something she did well, considering it weak. Now Loriem was back with her, tears came all too easily. It was starting to totally get on her last nerve.

He slid his lips over hers, caressing and tasting so carefully and lovingly. Nicole sighed into his mouth, wondering if this was some kind of fever dream. If it was, she hoped to never wake up. Floating closer, she twined her legs with his as she pressed her breasts against this muscled chest. Damn, he felt so good.

“I have missed you, love.” He rubbed her nose gently with his own. “When I heard you calling me I felt I would die. I knew you were in danger and I had to reach you.”

“I wasn’t calling you,” Nicole murmured against his lips.

“I heard you.” He slid his tongue into her mouth to tangle with her own.

“I was saying your name in my head.” She pulled back to look at him. “But not so anyone could hear.”

“I am your life mate and I could hear you plainly.”

“Just don’t leave me again.” Nicole said, looking deep into his eyes. “Promise me. I couldn’t stand it if you did. I don’t know what the hell is wrong with me.” She felt tears begin to gather again. “I’m becoming a big crybaby.”

“We are life mates. We are meant to be together. The hardship of the separation was something I did not anticipate. I will not leave you again; I cannot. I must be with you.” He kissed her gently, reverently. The love he felt was palpable. And where in the past Nicole would have run for the hills, this time she strained to be closer to him—had to be closer to him. Tomorrow, she told herself. She would think about these feelings tomorrow. Right now she wanted to be with Lorie in her heart, mind and body, with no other distractions. She knew from experience tomorrow would come too soon and bring troubles, whether she wished for them or not. This seemed like the nature of the beast nowadays.

Now, though, now was about them. She ran her hand down his body to grasp his throbbing hardness in her hand. His gasp echoed around them like fine music. Nicole wasn’t going to let anything or anyone distract her from welcoming her mate home.

Chapter Eleven

Abby peacefully floated on the satiny water. For the first time in days—weeks—she was clean and that made all the difference. If she could have foretold the end of the day, she could have kicked a whole army's worth of ass. Ducking under she swam leisurely through the crystal clear water. The pool felt like a warm cocoon, a barrier against everything bad in this world.

Looking up she could see prisms of light dancing across the surface from the rock formations on the ceiling. And Caledon, standing on the edge of the pool, looking down at her. Pushing upwards, she broke the surface, splashing him in the process. They stared at one another and the memory of her dreams forced its way into her mind. Abby could feel a blush steal up her cheeks. What was it about this man? Why did he tie her in knots? He was a potential king, incredibly handsome, and an Elf. He was also from a world she would be leaving shortly, as soon as she came up with a plan to get back. Which was exactly why he affected her the way he did, the voice whispered to her. He's unattainable so he's safe.

"I was worried about you," he spoke softly.

"I'm fine." Abby looked at his knees. "Just glad to be clean."

"If you are almost finished, I would like to check your injuries. Then we can break our fast."

"Right," Abby nodded. He was back to his genial self which calmed Abby. Everything could be falling to hell, but as long as Caledon remained as he always was then she felt safe. She kicked all the crazy thoughts to the curb. The day had definitely fried one too many brain cells.

They both watched one another. Green eyes stared into brown until Abby looked away, disconcerted by the attention. "You need to turn around so I can climb out."

"Of course." He presented his back to her. Abby moved to where the rocks created gentle steps and slowly clambered out. On land, the crushing weight of gravity returned. The water supported and energized her whereas the land reminded her of all she had been through in the past days. Wary and uncaring of her nakedness, she sank shakily to the warm stone floor.

A heavy cloth fell around her shoulders as Caledon began to vigorously wipe the water from her body. Once again he picked her up and bore her away down the passage. Hell, if this kept up much longer she wouldn't want to ever walk again.

Caledon cradled the weight of his mate in his arms. The choking anxieties of the past days were gone. She was here with him where she belonged, though through no assistance from him. He couldn't believe he had tossed her on a horse, sending her into the land unprotected and unprepared. If something had happened to her... He allowed the thought to trail away; it was unproductive. She was here with him in his care. He promised the spirit of the land he would take better care of the gift given to him.

Setting her down, he busied about gathering supplies to take care of her wounds. He ruthlessly shut himself down because if not, he would jump upon her like a starving gruntag. She was so warm and soft, her body and soul calling out to him. Glancing over his shoulder, he became enraptured by Abby drying her hair. Her movements were slow and to him, very sensuous. If he reached out with his senses he was sure he could feel her fingers running through his hair as she slowly began to unbraid it.

Ripping his eyes from her movements, he began to dig through his bag once again. He had promised himself not to rush her into mating as Nicole had been, though Lorie had not known what was happening at the time. He understood the implications and because of that could not bind her. Not until she cared for him and wanted him of her own volition. Especially since she had been through so many traumas in her old life. Anger roared in. If he could find the man who had harmed her, he would kill him, slowly and painfully. Ruthlessly he pushed his anger away. If he allowed emotions in, the instinct to claim her now would overtake him. He had to wait; he was not some mindless animal. He had plenty of time to woo her properly

Lorie sat behind Nicole, running a brush slowly through her copper-streaked hair. It reminded him of the sun illuminating the fall leaf colors. Of the earth at her most vibrant and rich, bursting with life. Leisurely he gathered a small section of hair and began to weave it into an intricate pattern. He was not sure where the design came from, so he tried not to think about it too much. Terrill had once told him stories of the Elven life mates of old braiding each other's hair in intricate patterns. These designs would say they were mated, that they belonged to one another, heart and soul.

Soon delicate braids pulled the hair from her face, creating the impression it was blown by a gentle breeze. These separate strands met at the back of her head to create a pattern finer than lace, complex and filled with love. Lorie gathered his mate in his arms to pull her back against his body. He had almost lost her. If they had been just seconds longer in arriving the results could have been

much different. He would never leave her again. He had promised to care and protect her, and on his first time out failed at that duty. Never again.

Nicole turned in his arms touching her hair. "I love it. It feels so pretty."

"It is because you are." He kissed her gently.

"So where did you learn to do this?"

"Terrill told me that Elven mates of old would weave one another's hair in patterns all their own. When I asked Caledon how someone gained this skill, he told me he did not know since the knowledge of our past was outlawed. Now I can tell him that it is just something I know since our mating. There is no other explanation than that."

"So I can do your hair?" she asked, picking up the comb. "It probably won't look like this, but I'll figure it out."

Loriem turned eagerly to allow her access. Though they had shared each other's bodies, the braiding of hair was considered sacred to life mates. The importance of braiding was never explained to him. He did not know why it was so important. He had never asked questions since he would never have a life mate. Now he and Nicole were together, he often wondered where these ideas came from.

His wondering ceased though when she began to run her fingers through his hair. In the process she also brushed against his ears, which brought about a different feeling all together. He could feel his member harden as she began to slowly work the tangles from his damp hair. The feeling was exquisite, hovering between intense pleasure and pain. He knew in his heart that no one would ever or could ever affect him in this way. He hoped in his heart she returned those feelings if not now, then some day.

The realization that Nicole did not feel for him in the way he felt for her had come in the days they had been apart. He knew her heart was still trapped by the place she had called home, by the events in her past. The ideas from her world were strange and contradictory. He knew she did not quite believe it when he told her of his love. But she would. As long as their lives lasted, he would work each day to prove he was worthy of her love. There was nothing else that mattered to him as much.

Nicole dreamily braided Loriem's ice-white hair, enjoying the sensation of touching him, of being close to him. She couldn't get enough of his scent, his voice. It felt like she was slowly awakening from some kind of spell and finally seeing him for the first time. On the other hand, it could be the voicing of her desire to stay with him had uncovered her eyes and heart. She knew Abby didn't want to accept it. Her whole goal was to go back. But Nicole understood that option was closed to her. Had been closed the moment she and Loriem completed the mating ritual.

She tried pretending this was nothing but a brief encounter. But the separation finally kicked home the realization of the bonds that now held her. She and Lorie were one. She could not leave him, ever. Therefore her place was in this strange complex world with her mate. She didn't even dwell on the idea of Abby leaving. It hurt too much. But as time went on she wondered if it was even possible. If Abby could not return, how would she react? Nicole had a horrible feeling Abby would have to prepare for that eventuality.

This place was changing them both, they were becoming more than they ever could have been at home. Especially Abby, the small voice in her head whispered. The talisman around her neck was somehow recreating the woman she called her best friend. Other than brief flashes of oddness, Nicole couldn't quite put her finger on the change but it was there all the same. She knew it; she could sense it. The more Abby changed the more likely it was she would never return home, the land and the talisman would not allow her.

A frisson of fear raced up her spine. *Stop it. You're going to spook yourself. Just concentrate on being with Lorie.* Nicole forced her thoughts back to her mate. Never had a man wanted to be with her as much as he did. Never had one treated her the way he did, with a mixture of reverence, awe and love. She and Abby had often joked of being worshipped but didn't think it would actually happen. In this place it was happening. However, it was definitely not the pedestal type of worship. He treated her like she was a special gift given to him. She quite liked the feeling.

Nicole pulled herself from her thoughts to view her handiwork. In the past she would have said her skills were passable at braiding hair. The pattern that shone from Lorie's hair was something she would not have dreamed she could do. Dozens of tiny braids on each side of his head melded together in a delicate pattern that accentuated the points of his ears to fall down his back. Not only were they beautiful, but also functional as they kept the hair pulled from his face.

"You did an exceptional job." He smiled at her. "Thank you."

She eased herself onto his lap to wrap her one good leg around him. "I think you can do a better job of thanking me than that. Don't you?"

"I will do my best. It may take me awhile to show you how grateful I am."

"A girl can hope." She leaned forward to capture his lips with her own.

Abby lay upon the sleeping blanket lost in thought. Around her Nicole, Caledon and Lorie slept deeply. She didn't understand why sleep was elusive for her this night. Aches crawled across her

body but not enough to keep sleep from coming. It was as though the events of the last days had flipped a switch in her, something that wouldn't let her relax.

Closing her eyes she began to breathe deeply, forcing blankness to fill her mind. She tried various relaxation activities. She even tried to count sheep. Once they turned into crazed monsters chasing her she gave up the idea of sleep. Instead, she allowed her mind to wander, focusing on everything and nothing.

A bare trace of a sound found her ears, forcing her eyes open. She searched the small room Caledon had found for them deep within the cave system. Nothing seemed amiss but still Abby had the feeling something was out of place. She sat up, instinctively clutching the warm talisman. Out of place, the thought ran through her mind. She was out of place. Out of sync with the land, her self and what the talisman strived for her to be.

She almost laughed aloud at the silly thoughts. The journey she and Nicole had taken must have knocked something loose. She used to be so reasonable, so normal, so... The thought trailed away. Had she really? Or had she fooled herself into thinking she had been this way? The harder she tried to grasp who she had been, the more it slipped away like a sheet of paper in a strong wind. Could her ideal of who she was mask her true self?

Shaking, she tiptoed quietly from her sleeping friends. She needed to walk, needed to think. A myriad of notions and questions rushed around in her brain. Who was she? What did she want? Where was she going? Was home, a place she so desperately wanted to return to, really her place? Did it make her happy? Did anything make her happy? Could something make someone happy?

No, Abby reasoned. Happiness comes from within. Only I can make me happy. So, am I happy? She had never asked herself the question before and now she had, there was really no answer for it. She didn't know. She had obviously known being with James made her miserable, even before he assaulted her. Had she been happy before? After? Did the new house bring her happiness? Or was it just another means of escape? Another way to run, chasing something she didn't have? Chasing after something she could never find? The questions presented themselves one by one, but there was no clarity of vision to see her life as it was or how it had become.

Stopping in the middle of a corridor, she looked around, finally seeing where her footsteps had led her. She recognized nothing. The stone walls and floor were smooth, worn by hands and feet long past. The air was also heavier, warmer. The odd phosphorescent plants that grew abundantly in the room Caledon had labeled sacred flourished throughout the passage. The light they gave off allowed

Abby to see the strange writing that ran along the walls. It looked like the Elvish writing on the walls of the banquet hall in the village, though different somehow. Older maybe. Abby wasn't sure.

She stood uncertain in the middle of the path. A small part of her argued to turn and go back. She should not be here. A large part, the loudest part, said this was the only place she could be. Abby clutched the talisman and began to move forward. The deeper she went the more certain she became. Soon she was almost jogging and began to laugh. Nicole would fall over in a faint to see her best friend actually running for no reason. That would have convinced her before anything else that Abby was changing. Changing? Was she changing? Another idea to think about. To worry over.

The corridor widened as three distinct tunnels presented themselves to her. Abby stopped to study each one. Where to go? The answer came as she took the tunnel directly in front of her. Keep on the path; the other two were blinds that led nowhere. She didn't know how she had gained the knowledge; it was like a memory that had been blocked and was now forcing its way to the surface. Understanding hovered right out of reach; it was touchable if she just hurried.

Abby rushed down the corridor, one hand flat against the wall. Leaving her mark, smoothing the path as those before her had. The air was not only warm but also filled with an indescribable fragrance. It was exotic and heady, like a bouquet of tropical flowers, and yet clean and crisp like a chilly winter's day. The aroma invigorated her, driving her forward toward the unknown. Toward her destiny.

The corridor narrowed farther, the walls and ceiling closing in uncomfortably, but still Abby pushed on. It was as though she were on automatic pilot, unable to stop her headlong flight. Part of her was afraid, very afraid. She didn't like enclosed spaces. She didn't particularly like caves since she associated them with heights. As a child, a trip to Mammoth Cave had become a major ordeal when she was finally forced to climb a set of metal stairs that seemed suspended in mid-air. She remembered the higher she had climbed the more fear had gripped her until she was frozen, mired in the blackness of terror. A family member had finally carried her the rest of the way to safety. She had never returned to that place, no matter how wonderful everyone proclaimed it to be. Now here she was rushing through a cave alone and unguided. The concept would have been funny if not for the ludicrousness of the situation.

The narrow trail ended as abruptly as it had started. The wall before her was not smooth, it was filled with deep crevices, but it was solid. Very solid. Abby tapped on it expecting a door to open. Nothing happened. The rich scent was stronger standing in this place, but there looked to be no exit. She turned slowly in a circle then finally, unbelievably, looked up. A dark hole in the ceiling above the craggy wall signaled the way. She now had to climb. Abby laughed mirthlessly. More than caves she

was afraid of heights. Deathly afraid. She often thought she had died from a fall in a past life and vowed not to let it happen in this one. But, as her grandmother always said, never make a promise until you're sure you can keep it. In this case she knew she couldn't. She had to keep going.

Tentatively she reached out for something to grab onto as she stuck her foot in a deep opening in the wall. She prayed nothing would grab her or crawl across her foot. The thought almost sent her sprinting back down the corridor, but she gritted her teeth, moving slowly upwards. She couldn't stop. She was so close. To what she didn't know, but the end of the journey was near. Or was it the beginning?

She savagely shut down all thought as she moved up the wall. Spiderwoman she was never going to be, but all she cared about was making it to the top in one piece. She felt for handholds and toeholds as her arms began to shake with the strain. Focusing on her goal she pushed harder. Falling from this height would not feel good and since she was alone, it could not happen. She would not allow it. Gritting her teeth she crept forward the last three feet to stick her head up into the hole. She wished she could have looked around but didn't have the luxury. Her body was starting to fail.

She climbed the last foot to fall gracelessly onto the floor. Nope, she wouldn't be winning any Olympic medals, but she had made it. Hah, she thought, take that you bastard. Since exercise was not one of her favorite activities, it always made her feel better to curse whatever workout video she did. After the adventure was over Abby swore to never work out again, instead she would lounge and eat tons of *Godiva* chocolate. Eat *Godiva* while Viggo Mortensen massaged her. The thought brought a smile to her face as she forced herself to her feet.

The chamber she found herself in again had tunnels leading away from it. Instead of three there were six choices. Abby closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and then opened them again. Don't mull it over, just feel it. She moved forward one step, another step, and finally picked a tunnel. She hurried forward more certain than ever she was on the right track. Never before had she really trusted her instincts. Decisions had to be weighed and measured, opinions asked, lists created until an option was chosen. Even after all that, Abby questioned herself constantly, never ever one hundred percent sure of the choice made. This time she was sure even if the outcome was a mystery.

Doggedly moving forward, she followed the twists and turns of her decided upon route. Once again she came to a room with options. Nine tunnels faced her and again Abby made a choice without thinking about it. She just kept moving as though being chased by a herd of grunts. The end was coming, she knew it; she could feel it in every cell of her body. What would happen then was unclear, but she couldn't worry. It was far too late for that option.

The corridor finally ended in a small room thick with glowing ferns. She breathed deep of the rich perfume they exuded. Water trickled softly down the wall into a pool that sat in the center of the room. Beyond that was an opening, strangely dark and yet vibrating with energy; this was where all her paths had led. Maybe her whole entire life was created just for the express purpose of stepping through that portal.

Moving farther into the room she saw the walls decorated with rich paintings. The image of a woman holding fire in her hands overshadowed all else. Abby picked up the talisman around her neck to look at the image engraved upon it; they were the same. She was definitely in the right place.

Leave it, the voice whispered in her head. You've carried it far too long. This is your chance. Dump the thing and run home. It's not your responsibility, not your land, not your problem.

Abby gazed at the talisman again. She had to know, had to know the answers to her questions. She had to find out once and for all who Abby was. And if she was really worth all the fuss that was being made over her.

Looking at the pool, Abby removed her clothes and slid into the warm water. The ritual had begun. The air charged around her; she could feel the hair on her arms stand upright. She was not alone in this chamber and yet she was. She wondered if she were going insane just as Nicole always said they were. Maybe they were locked up in some ward somewhere drugged to the gills. Or in a coma hooked up to machines that kept their bodies' alive while their minds flew.

She tentatively pinched herself. Nope, she was here and this was all real. Though no one would ever believe what had happened, what was happening. It was just too strange and wonderful for words. Ducking once more under the water, she swam across the pool to the edge closest to her destination. Coming up, she peered over the threshold at the dark entryway. It wasn't a natural opening but carved. Elven writing encircled the entry on all sides, even the floor. Abby hoped it wasn't important since she couldn't read it.

Finally, she pulled herself from the water to stand naked before the dark gateway. Warm air flowed toward her, encircling her, inviting her. It was the rich perfumed aroma she had been following. The scent was stronger and even more intoxicating. She hesitated but a moment then stepped forward to embrace the darkness.

Nicole snuggled against Loriem, aware of her aching knee, but more aware of being back where she truly belonged. This was real to her, he was real to her. Everything else that had come before had a dreamlike quality. Her old life felt like a television program she had once watched, but no longer

interested her. Yawning, she brushed hair from her face, hers or his she was unsure. Then the urge to pee hit her. She hated when that happened. Here she was, all warm and cozy, but then her body insisted on taking a walk. Maybe she could convince Abby to go with her. It had been a while since they'd had quality girl time together. Oh sure, they had spent days running for their lives, but that had left no time for important stuff. Like talking about how hot Lorie was.

She sat up, stretched, and looked to where Abby slept. She wasn't there. Nicole looked around, wondering where she had got to. Knowing Abby's thimble-sized bladder, she had probably already gotten up. Gingerly Nicole rose, not wanting to put too much weight on her knee. Lorie had rubbed some kind of gunk on it and wrapped it, but she didn't want to take a chance with it. They had so much more of the journey ahead of them.

She limped to the designated potty area, a small room down a short corridor from where they slept. Again, there was no Abby. Nicole quickly did her business, feeling a moment's worth of panic flare. Where was she? It wasn't like her to just wander off. Abby hated caves. Nicole gimped down the passage to the sacred pool Lorie had shown her. Maybe Abby wanted to take another dip. If so, she had a great idea. The pool felt so good, and after being on the run for so long a bath in heated water was like heaven.

The gently glowing plants illuminated the area. A warm mist rose off the water perfuming the air with a foresty scent, which struck her as odd again. A cave was supposed to smell dank and musty, or at least that was her experience from the past. Instead, the air was quite invigorating. And silent, very silent. Abby wasn't here either. Nicole took a step forward to make sure she wasn't in the pool. It was totally clear and empty.

The panic, which had been a gentle tickling, now came roaring in full force. Abby was gone. Someone had taken her under their very noses while they slept. Turning, Nicole hurried as quickly as her body would let her. She had to alert Caledon and Lorie.

"She's gone," Nicole shouted, awakening both men. "Abby is gone."

Caledon rose to face her. "What?"

"Abby is gone." Nicole repeated each word slowly and precisely. "I have looked for her and she is not here. I think somebody took her."

Caledon stood to grab his bow and sword. "I will hunt whoever has her and destroy them."

"Stop," Lorie's voice interrupted them. Nicole and Caledon turned to where he sat on the sleeping mat. "We must be calm. We cannot go running off until we have all the answers. How do you know someone took her?"

“She’s not here,” Nicole told him. “Abby wouldn’t just walk off. She hates caves.”

“Let us be wise about this.” He stood. “No one could have found us here. If they did, they would not have swooped in to take her away so quietly. They would have killed us.”

“They would have tried,” Caledon growled. “Enough talk. I must go in search of Abby. I must find her and bring her back.”

“We will search for her.” Loriem grabbed his bow and sword. “Caledon, you know these caverns better than I, you should search in here. Nicole and I will look outside to see if there are any signs. We will find her. No matter what.”

Nicole looked at the capable men in front of her and felt a moment’s comfort. But deep inside she instinctively knew Abby was in trouble. She didn’t know how or why this feeling arose, but it was there nonetheless. She just prayed they found her before it was too late.

Abby stood in darkness. She could see neither what lay in front nor the entrance behind. She had crossed the threshold of the doorway so confidently. The feeling of absolute certainty had lasted until the shadows had overtaken her. Now she stood lost and alone, unable to go back, but unable to move forward either. The realization hit her that this was a perfect example of her life in a nutshell. The events of her past held her in one spot so she couldn’t move forward. Or felt she couldn’t. She had spent her whole life repeating and reliving her childhood. She may have thought she walked a different path, but it had actually all been the same. Until she and Nicole had crossed over into this land.

Tears filled her eyes as she took a hesitant step forward. She couldn’t stay here. She would die. She did not want to do that. Fear swamped her, choked her. She lived a safe life, regimented and planned. Every event scheduled so no surprises happened. As soon as she entered a situation that was unknown, she backed away, ran away. Unsafe, her mind always screamed. James had seemed so safe, that was why Abby liked him. Then he too became dangerous. After that she ruthlessly questioned everything she did. Everything she wanted to do. So much so that she had never taken another chance, never gone anywhere or done anything. Until now.

Abby took small breaths, trying to hold back the sobs. Her whole life played out before her eyes in one huge Technicolor reel. She saw all that she was, all that she had done, all that had been done to her, and the chances she had missed. The pain was unimaginable. Maybe she was already dead? No, if she was it wouldn’t hurt this much, her mind reasoned.

“Help me,” she whispered into the darkness.

And a voice in the darkness answered. “Keep moving.”

She took one step, then another. She was mired in regrets, pain and memories. Her mind was on fire, but still she moved forward. Slowly, one step at a time, Abby began the journey that had taken her a lifetime or more to get to. The voice from the darkness encouraged her, or maybe it was inside her head. She wasn't sure, didn't care. The feeling of absolute abandonment had lessened with the presence of the mysterious cheerleader.

Still the images from her life played in front of her eyes. Events that were only half remembered or totally forgotten were revealed for inspection. Abby felt the pain and the loss, and the intense loneliness. She shivered with emotions, her nerve endings raw and bleeding. Cold, so cold and confused. Still she staggered forward.

"This will be over, but you must stay on the path," the voice whispered.

Path? This was no path but a death march. Abby shrank from the pettiness she had exhibited, the unkind words, the careless way in which she had treated her family, friends, and most importantly herself. The whole affair with James played in slow motion for her inspection. She relived every moment of it, every horrible minute. She saw the warning signs and how she had refused to listen to them. Convinced that what he said and what he did she brought on herself. Nothing was left in secret. Her life, in all its terrible failed glory, was laid out before her. She was naked before it.

Staggering, Abby could see a faint ray of light ahead. She began to move faster. The way out. The way out was before her. She sobbed with relief. No more torture. No more visions from the past. She was free. But free for what? The question made her hesitate. Doubts crashed in on her. What could she do? People expected her to save this land, but that wasn't going to happen. She had seen her true self and she was an absolute failure. She wasn't strong and capable, but a scared child hiding in a corner praying no one noticed her.

"Stop!" she screamed, running from her own thoughts. She had to escape. She couldn't take this anymore.

The light she had seen materialized in front of her. It wasn't the way out. A curtain of molten fire blazed throughout the passage. Blocking the way. She took a step back, the heat was so intense. What the hell had she got herself into? She looked off to the left. Another tunnel presented itself to her. She began to laugh. Thank God, there was a way out.

"That is not your path." The voice pulled her up short.

"Yes it is," Abby nodded, wiping tears away. "It's the way out. The other way is blocked. It's fire. I can't go that way."

“You must.” The voice soothed as a mother would soothe a child. “Fire tempers. It is the only way you will be whole.”

“I’ll die.” Abby shivered. “I can’t do this.”

“You have said that your whole life. Do you want this to be one more missed chance? You are the bearer of the talisman. If you choose the path that seems easiest you will lose all you have gained.”

“Gained? What have I gained?” Abby cried.

“So much that has yet to be revealed.” The voice spoke calmly. “If you walk away you will never discover the beauty of the life before you. If you walk away, you will remain who you are right at this moment. Do you want that? Does that make you happy? Are you truly whole? You must decide.”

Abby looked at the fire, then back to the dark corridor. Decide? She could never decide on anything. She had to make a list and ask opinions and... Her thoughts trailed away. There was no one here to depend on but Abby. So what would Abby decide? Unconsciously she touched the talisman around her neck. Fresh tears moved slowly down her face, she had already been through so much. Could she go through more? Could she really walk away from this without changing? Did her old life make her happy? Once again she replayed her life in her mind. She had not been happy, had never been happy. Had never been truly whole. Her life had been misery.

Weeping she stepped forward, one step, and then two into the flames. Hot wind whirled around her. She was disoriented. Was she on her feet? Was she flying? Flames ripped through her. She saw her life again, but this time she saw the good in it. The happiness, the laughter, and the worthy deeds she had done.

The fire burned through her. Purifying her. Recreating her. Empowering her. Charging her. Abby screamed at the pain and the beauty. Then she knew nothing.

Caledon paused as a wail echoed eerily throughout the cavern. Abby! Drawing his sword he began to swiftly move forward. He had to find her. Cool air whipped around him as he ran down corridors which led to fantastic rooms with soaring roofs. Gems winked and danced in the light given off by the plants as water musically played, but he was blind to all. Find Abby was the thought that drove him onward.

Warm air flowing out of a dark passage caused him to pause. Warm? There should be no warm air in the caverns. A sound from the darkness beyond chilled his blood. It sounded like a moan, a whimper. His keen Elf eyes allowed his steps to be true as he started down the corridor. No plants lit his way so he pulled a small stone from the pack around his waist. Holding it up he whispered in Elvish;

instantly the rock began to glow, illuminating his path. There, lying no more than a hundred yards away was his life mate.

He rushed to kneel by her side. Her skin was oddly hot to the touch. There were other things changed about her too. Her short hair, once a pleasant brown, was now long and flaming with red. Her body looked taut, strong, and healed from the ordeal she and Nicole had gone through. Even the scars she had carried to Elaria were gone. She was Abby and yet she was different.

He picked her up in his arms. A shiver of power rushed through him. She gasped at the contact of his skin on hers and opened her eyes. What had once been dark chocolate-brown were now golden like fine topaz. The talisman had been charged. Abby had been accepted. She was now the Caretaker of Fire.

Chapter Twelve

The new Caretaker of Fire stared moodily at her reflection in the sacred pool. Caledon had dumped her off in the cavern for safekeeping as he began the search for Lorie and Nicole. Now she sat and catalogued the changes the charging had brought. Her hair, once rather a short, thin, flyaway brown was now suddenly a thick lustrous mane of rich deep red that fell below her shoulders. The dark brown eyes that normally stared back at her were a deep golden topaz. Even her features were slightly different, more distinct and refined, if she had to put words to the change. The scars she once had were gone leaving her skin a fine, almost shimmering, porcelain. However, the most startling change had come to a very small area. An area most people wouldn't notice. Her ears had developed a very delicate upsweep which hinted at points without actually going all the way. She was definitely more Elven than human, a thought which would have terrified her before. Now, though, she took it in stride. Hell, after everything she had been through, this was just one more issue to add to the pile.

"Abby." Nicole's voice echoed from down the corridor.

Still naked, she rose to face her best friend and wondered what she would say to all the changes. A coil of unease began to unravel in her stomach. "I'm here," she called out. Even her voice was slightly different. The pitch was just slightly deeper and huskier. After the Caretaker gig was over, she figured she could get a job giving phone sex to the Elves who had no mates. Of course, someone would have to invent phones. Her thoughts trailed away as Nicole stepped through the doorway. The two women looked at one another.

Nicole blinked. "Abby, girl, where the hell are your clothes?"

"I have no idea." She shrugged, realizing that she actually felt quite comfortable naked. One more change to add to the mounting pile. "I don't guess I'll get them back either since I don't really think I'd find the room I was in."

Nicole dropped the pack she was carrying on the floor and burst into tears. Abby rushed forward to embrace her. "Nic, it's no big deal. I mean, I have another change or two of clothes. I'm sure I can find others."

"No, you big dork." Nicole punched her arm. "Do you realize how worried I was? I woke up and you weren't there. I thought someone grabbed you, that I had lost you. Don't ever do that again."

Abby cradled her close, feeling tears begin to rise. She was so damn lucky to have Nicole as a friend, but had she ever told her? Did her friend realize just how much she was loved? The old Abby would never have shared her feelings, hugging everything close to ensure no hurt would come her way. But she wasn't the old Abby anymore. She was new and fresh and changed. "Nicole." Abby pulled her away so they could look at one another. "Thank you. I probably never told you before, but you mean so much to me. Without you, my life would have been gray and boring. You are my best friend. Fuck, forget that, you're my sister in the only ways that count. The sister of my heart and soul."

Nicole cried even harder as Abby gathered her close. If she had to choose anyone to go through this life-altering adventure with, she couldn't have found a better person.

Nicole snuffled, wiping at her eyes. "I hate crying. My face gets all blotchy and yucky. And here you stand looking like a damn goddess. Girl, what the fuck happened to you? Where were you? Oh, and before you answer any of those questions, I brought your pack. Caledon said you needed it. I guess, since you've seemed to have lost your clothes, I can see why."

Abby was just finishing dressing when Caledon and Lorie entered the cavern. Both men looked at her quizzically and Abby felt uncomfortable at their scrutiny. She wondered what they saw when they looked at her. Could they tell she had changed so deeply?

Lorie bowed deeply to her. "Caretaker, it is an honor to be in your presence."

Abby burst out laughing, unable to help herself. Then stopped, hoping she had not hurt his feelings. Lorie glanced up at her from his bow, his blue eyes twinkling. "Knock it off, okay. You're mated to my best friend and I can make sure your life is miserable if you don't watch out."

"Of course, Lady of Fire," he smiled, standing again.

"That's goddess to you buddy," Abby quipped back, feeling infinitely better. She did not want any of these people she had been through so much with to treat her differently. They had a long road to travel ahead of them.

"Abby, tell us what happened," Nicole nudged her.

Caledon finally spoke. "Let us move to our sleeping chamber. I am sure Abby is quite hungry after her ordeal."

They moved back down the corridor as Abby wondered at Caledon's stilted tone. What was up with him? Once again he was acting weird. Not like the genial companion from the road. Not like the angry man from earlier. Jeez Louise, men were confusing. He was confusing. In her dreams he was so much easier to deal with. She smiled; he of course did what she told him. And, as Nicole said, that made life much easier.

Caledon tried to keep his eyes away from his life mate. Abby, he reminded himself. If he quit thinking about her as his life mate, he could begin to rein his thoughts in. Still his eyes strayed to her. The power seemed to flow from her and wrap its way around him. She called to him, enticed him, ensnared him. As her power called so his tried to answer. He was deceiving himself if he thought he could stay away from her.

He busied about getting food for them as the other three settled down. If he just kept busy then...what? He would forget all about the fact that his life mate was a foot from him and all he wanted to do was grab her and thrust his— *No! Stop!* That will get you nowhere. He settled quietly as the other three talked, trying to focus in on their conversation. He wanted to be close to her, needed to, but did not dare get too close. He felt he was walking upon a very narrow branch in a windstorm, one wrong step and he would be lost.

“So you were in this tunnel walking in the dark and then all of a sudden there were flames?” Nicole’s voice brought his thoughts back to the conversation.

“Yes,” Abby nodded. “And I knew I had to go through the flames and did. The next thing I remember is Caledon carrying me.”

“Girl, I think you are skipping a huge bunch of the story,” Nicole accused. “Something more had to have happened.”

“Nicole, perhaps Abby does not wish to speak of it.” Loriem gentled his words with a soft tone.

“It is said,” Caledon finally spoke, “the road to becoming a Caretaker is fraught with danger. A person must face demons and overcome them. Go places that inspire terror. All of these tests are to prove worthiness to bear a talisman.”

Nicole made a face. “Well okay, so you tell me when they’re not here. We’ll do private girl talk.”

Abby smiled. “You got it.”

“So now what do we do?” Nicole changed subjects as she began to eat. “I mean, the fire talisman is charged. So where do we go from here? Do we go out and search for the guy who is supposed to bear the water talisman? He’s supposed to be Abby’s life mate, right? He shouldn’t be that hard to find. I mean, can’t you do some kind of thing, Abby, to find him?”

“What...like a dance?” Abby laughed as Loriem began to smile.

Nicole rolled her eyes. “You have the talisman; can’t you rub it or something and ask for your life mate to appear?”

“Nic, I don’t think it works that way.” Abby picked up the shining tarnish-free talisman to look at it. “It’s not like a Magic-Eight Ball. I can’t shake it and ask a question.”

“What do you think Caledon?” Loriem asked.

“I will need time to think on it,” he replied, trying to buy some time. “We must go carefully. The land is aware that a Caretaker has returned. This news will be sung from the forests to the mountains. The false king will now intensify his search.”

“That sucks,” Nicole said.

“No offense,” Abby snuggled down on her sleeping mat, “but I’m really tired.”

“We will leave you in peace.” Loriem stood, pulling Nicole up with him. “If you need anything you have but to call.”

“I love you, lady,” Nicole said to her as she left the room.

“I love you too,” Abby answered back.

Caledon wished she were saying the words to him, but he could not dwell on the need. Their journey was just beginning. One talisman was charged, his ordeal was before him, and two Caretakers were still left to find. The responsibility he carried was mounting, but still his heart ached. Ached as it never had before.

Abby opened her eyes to again find herself in the forest glade. The dream that came to her with such consistency was beginning to take on a reality, which should have scared her. Would have scared the old Abby, but the new Abby was not afraid. She was exhilarated to be here once again.

Hurrying forward, she crawled upon her favorite rock. The pool was clear and perfect as the spray from the waterfall fell on her face like light kisses. The air smelled sweet as the sun warmed her nakedness beneath its rays. This was the perfect spot to spend quiet time after the test. The only thing missing was Caledon. Fantasy Caledon. Caledon of the deep green eyes, perfect body and growling voice, the voice which instantly sent a shiver through her no matter whether he was speaking to her or not.

She closed her eyes, dangling her toes in the pool, which dominated the small area. The water felt cool and fresh against her heated flesh. For the first time in what felt like forever her body began to relax. Her mind wandered, flitting from thought to thought like bees to flowers. The talisman hanging around her neck began to warm, to pulse with the beat of her heart. Abby’s breathing steadied, catching the rhythm of the pulsing and her heart. She felt whole, complete and totally in balance with the universe around her.

Abby could feel something begin to bloom within her. The only word she could put to it was power or energy. Whatever, it slowly built and spread throughout her entire body. She felt a connection being established with the very land beneath her. But not the rock she sat upon in the quiet glade. The connection was to the land she could feel beneath her real body in the cavern. It was as though she stepped forward to fling a door wide open in the core of her very self. A door she never even knew existed.

As this new awareness built and grew, she realized this place, this dream she consistently found herself in wasn't a dream exactly. It had a reality to it, a consciousness to it. Opening her eyes, she beheld the glade, the water, and the rock she sat on top of. Thoughts, feelings, niggled in her mind, but she couldn't quite put the pieces together. It was like working a puzzle with no knowledge of the final picture to be formed.

"Hello, Caledon," she said, looking over at where he sat beside her. Before he had always just appeared, but this day she felt him enter. How did he fit into this place? What was his role within this dream universe?

"Abby." A free smile spread across his face. She felt her breath catch. He was so incredibly beautiful, so free here. Free in a way she had never seen in reality. "Are you well after your ordeal?"

As her mind began to work on this issue, she smiled back. "Tired, but okay. How are you?"

She could feel unease within him. A tension she had never noticed before. "I am holding up." He reached out to take her hand, to hold it within his own.

Abby remembered never really speaking much within these dreams. Hell, the last time they barely spoke at all. The sex had been explosive, intense. Upon waking she could still feel him within her body. The memory of that encounter sent a flush through her skin, this coupled with his touch made her shiver.

"Are you cold?" he asked, moving closer to her. He leaned into her body to bury his face in her hair. She could feel him taking deep breaths, trying to pull her essence inside of him.

Abby allowed him to take the weight of her body. She loved the sensation of his bare skin against her own. And even though she lived within this moment, a separate part of her still worked the puzzle. She thought of that entity within as the Caretaker, that part of her that connected to the talisman and ultimately to the land itself. The more she used the part the stronger it would become. Soon it would not have to be a conscious decision for her; Abby knew this to be true. As the minutes ticked by the changes within her were integrating into one being, one powerful being.

“Caledon, why are we not like this in reality?” she asked as his lips gently played across her naked shoulder.

“This is reality. The only reality that is important at this moment.” The husky quality of his voice deepened, rubbing across her sensitive nerves like velvet.

Abby turned to face him as she put out a hand and ran it down Caledon’s chest. She could feel the muscle flex under her touch. “Do you like that?”

“Yes.” He put his head back, acting as though her touch was both torture and pleasure. “Touch me, Abby. Please.”

Leaning forward, she swirled her tongue around one of his hard nipples as she ran her hands over his shoulders and down his arms. She pushed him back against the rock until he was lying flat, spread out before her. He was so incredibly gorgeous and he was all hers. Sliding forward, she lay her body over his, rubbing her legs against his; her breasts against his hard chest; her lips against his full supple mouth.

“Does this feel good?” she asked against his lips.

“If a man could die of pleasure, I would. That is how good you feel against me.”

She slid her body slowly down his, enjoying the friction and the tease. Trailing her tongue over his throat, she left biting kisses. Caledon put his arms around her to run his hands up and down her back. A noise out of place within this forest caused her to pause. She raised her head to listen intently. It was echoing voices.

“What is it?” Caledon asked.

Abby shook her head, still listening. The voices were familiar to her. Then it came, it was Lorie and Nicole. The echoing was caused by their voices bouncing off the cave walls. More than ever Abby was certain this was no dream. But what it was, she still didn’t know.

Leaning down, she kissed him again. “It was nothing. What is this place, Caledon? It is so beautiful.”

“It is where I come to meditate. To be with you. To center myself,” he murmured. “It is the only place I am happy and complete.”

“It is real? Does it exist in reality?” Abby slowly made her way down his body. Kissing, teasing, nipping, and through it all he gasped and shuddered. For a change she was in control and loved it.

“No, it is a construct of my own.” He bunched his hands into her hair and then froze. She looked up to find him staring at her.

“What?” she asked.

“Your ears.” She felt him gently trace her newly pointed ears. Abby shivered at the sensation. “You are now Elven.”

She nodded; absolutely certain that this was no dream, but it still mystified her. She would bet the farm though that he knew. Her whole interaction with Caledon, down to the conversation, was so natural. His answers were ones she could never have come up with, even out of her subconscious.

“Yes, I am now Elven. Or at least close to it.” She rose up to straddle his prone body. “Does this make a difference?”

“You will not leave this land. You cannot leave.” He cupped her breasts in his hands. “You are not only a Caretaker, but now one of us.”

She allowed him to touch her. She needed to know what was going on. Increasingly, she felt he was manipulating everything, everything including her. “And what does this mean? To you? To us?” She stroked her hands down his body. She hated doing this, using him, using herself, but had to know.

He gasped as she closed a hand around his cock. He was a large man and growing larger as she stroked him. “We can be together,” he murmured, seemingly lost in the sensations she caused him.

“But we can’t.” She moved down until she could blow gently against his swollen tip. “The council says I have a life mate somewhere. So no matter how you make me feel or how I make you feel, it is not possible.” She skimmed her tongue down his length. He tasted so good. So right. Abby wanted to toss aside all thoughts and doubts. She wanted to be with him; feel him deep within her body. She couldn’t stop. She had to know.

“Abby, Abby.” He grasped her hair. “We are meant to be together. From the moment we were born the heavens ordained this truth. We are halves of the same whole. We are one.”

Something in Abby snapped and she knew the answers. She knew what was happening. She knew. Fury raged through her. Shivering, she rose and closed her eyes. Concentrating. Opening them again she stared at the ceiling of the cave. Quickly she got up and began to rummage through Caledon’s bag. She knew what she was after; she just had to find it.

Anger coursed through her system as her hand closed over the object she sought. Hurrying from the room, she ran down the passage. Abby didn’t know how or why, but she zeroed in on him. Caledon was in the room containing the pool. She closed in like a predator searching for prey.

Entering, she found him sitting quietly, his eyes closed, his breathing deep. In a heartbeat, those green eyes opened to look deep into her topaz.

“You fucking bastard,” Abby gritted her teeth. “You have been using me since the first day I was here. You made me think those were dreams.”

“No,” he stood. “It was not like that.”

“Then how was it? Why don’t you explain it to me?” Abby crossed her arms. “And don’t lie. I’ll know.”

She could feel Lorie and Nicole enter the room behind her. She hated having an audience, but this confrontation could not be stopped. Wisely, neither one said anything.

“I do not think this is the place for a discussion.”

Abby laughed mirthlessly. “What? You don’t want our friends to know what a punk-assed prick you are? Too bad, buddy. You created this fucking mess. So why don’t you explain how mind-fucking me was not using me. You knew I thought those were dreams.”

“The first time was a surprise for me also. I had read about instances where connections existed with such intensity that life mates were able to enter one another’s thoughts, dreams. However, they were just tales. And we had not gone through the mating ceremony.”

“What, then you figured you’d use the connection to get laid? I wasn’t good enough to fuck in reality, but you could do it in a dream. What, then all of a sudden I’m a Caretaker and an almost Elf to boot and now I’m good enough?”

“No,” he shook his head. “You were set on going home. I wanted to give you time. I wanted you to become adjusted to our ways before I bonded with you.”

“Oh, I’m adjusted alright.” She threw the object in her hand at him. “But you can forget about bonding or anything else.”

He caught what she threw, holding it up for all to see. The Seeing Stone sat in his hand, glowing softly. It flared to life, filling the cavern with brilliant light. His eyes widened as the visions she knew all about came to him. The quest for the next talisman, Water, was on. She just hoped she didn’t kill him before it was over.