



Lares Lords Book One

THE LOVER'S POOL

By

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For Shal who kept pushing, thanks. To Mandy who said just do it already and shoved, and Michelle for coercing. ☺ Thanks for offering all sorts of help in more ways than I can ever explain.

Prologue

The room was tinged blue with wisps of smoke from the belloa leaves that cleansed the mind as the steaming stones cleansed the body.

Lars, King of the *Lares*, appointed member of the High Fae Council, gazed at the other three men lounging on rock ledges in the small, stone, windowless room. They were all strong and well built, he supposed. As his elite warriors and ruling generals, they were men he trusted without thought. Men he also considered friends.

And none of them were going to like what he'd have to say. He shifted position on the hard and uncomfortable ledge. He should have some cushions brought in to cover them. He shook his head and thought of the matter at hand.

"Lars, I'd really like to know what we're doing here," said Conto who was sitting in the corner.

Lars said nothing. Instead he looked at the three men he'd die to protect and knew without the flicker of a doubt they'd do the same for him.

All were honed for battle, covered in scars, their only clothes the white loincloths draped around their waists. It was hot enough in here to roast the dead. Sweat dripped off his hair and ran down his face.

Lars knew what he was about to say would not be well received. Yet he had to smile at knowing he'd take them by surprise. It was rare he could shock or surprise his closest friends.

"I hate it when he smiles like that," Titon, General and ruler over the *Lares Marini*, commented from Lars' left.

Lars glanced at Titon and only smiled wider.

"Damn," Conto muttered, sitting up. "He's going to ask us to do something he knows we're not going to like, and he's going to enjoy every damn minute of it." Conto sighed. "So who are we supposed to battle? Kill?"

Lars laughed and shook his head. "Conto, always so cynical. Actually," he considered how to phrase his next words. "Actually, this is more in your area of expertise."

"A woman," the last man said softly.

Lars looked over to where Romulas, commander of the *Lares Rurales* lay sprawled. His ankles crossed, one arm thrown over his eyes, he didn't so much as twitch or turn in their direction.

Romulas continued, "The only area of expertise in Conto's arena is wooing and bedding women."

Conto's laugh rumbled through the stone chamber. "Jealous, Rom?"

Romulas only scoffed.

"There are worse things to be an expert at, my friends, than the art of wooing and bedding a woman," Conto answered.

Romulas muttered something and sat up, looking across the triangular pile of stones in the center of the floor to Conto. "Yes, there are. But some of us are more selective in our pleasures than others."

"Too much caution leaves the bed cold," Conto said happily.

Titon added his opinion. "Cold, aye, but at least quiet. Women can all too often be a pain in the ass."

They all readily agreed.

Lars' smile widened. This would be more fun than he had expected.

"Well, since we're on the topic of women," he said, leaning back and propping his arm on his bent leg, "I should give you all your next order."

Romulas gave Lars his attention, as did Titon. Conto was staring at the stones. "I've never been ordered to woo and bed a woman."

Lars laughed. "No, Con, you haven't. You are ordered to woo and bed a *wife*."

For a moment no one said a word. Then Conto laughed, the sound bouncing around the small chamber in rumbling waves. "Wife?" He leaned forward and clasped his hands between his knees. "Wife? No, Lars. No wife. They're too much trouble."

Titon nodded.

Lars looked to Romulas, who was only staring at him. Finally, Rom spoke. "Ordered to woo and bed a wife? You're ordering us to marry, Lars?"

He nodded and added more spiced water to the stones, the steam hissing a snake into the air. "Yes."

Conto's smile slid into a frown. "A wife?"

Titon mumbled something about women and death.

"A wife?" Conto asked again.

This time Romulas chuckled. "He's having a hard time with this one, isn't he?"

"A wife?" Conto stood and paced the small area. "What the bloody hell am I going to do with a wife?"

The other three laughed outright. Lars was still laughing when Romulas said, "The same thing you do with all your other women. I thought you were the expert."

Conto glared at his friend. "You think this is funny?" Con turned his anger on Lars, but the king knew his trusted friend well enough to know that Conto was the more emotional of the lot. "I don't want a wife."

Lars calmly sipped the water from his goblet. "I don't recall asking you, Con."

Conto cursed and paced, shoving his hand through the blond hair women seemed to find appealing.

"When are these blessed events supposed to take place?" Titon asked with a sigh.

"You have three months to find your brides, or I find them for you."

Conto whirled and opened his mouth, but Lars held up his hands. "The High Council is concerned that the kingdom, though solid, might be in jeopardy with no heirs."

"We're not the damn king," Conto said, anger still radiating out of him.

Lars had expected no less. "True, but I want to know that my principalities are as solid as my own thrown. Without you three to keep the rural areas, cities, and sea ports in control, I would not have a throne to sit upon. I want to know that you each have children to inherit your control and powers. Children who will, in time, stand side by

side with my own.”

Titon sighed. Romulas scratched his cheek and shook his head. Conto just stood there, still too stunned to get past his anger.

Lars continued, “It was either my order or have the High Council choose your fae brides, women with strong ties that would also benefit other kingdoms. I will have no one dictate to me the best course for my kingdom, but I also know there is a time to give and a time to stand. I don’t want to be allied with other fae kingdoms, to be beholden to others more than we already are beyond the Council’s laws of war. I will help and stand with them when I must. Beyond that, I--we--take care of our own.”

He knew his reasoning contradicted what he’d just ordered and expected of them. “I know this isn’t what you want. But it’s either do as I ask and find your own brides, or accept the High Council’s choosing. I chose for us to keep the control.”

Romulas nodded. “I agree. I’d rather know I was choosing my own bride than to have one handed to me.”

Conto jerked his chin in Lars direction. “What of you? Are you to marry as well?”

Lars nodded. “I am.”

“Married,” Titon said. “Mayhap I’ll just hire a wife.”

Romulas laughed, Conto rolled his eyes.

Lars shook his head. “Woo and bed, Titon. Woo and bed. The marriages will be real in every way. Solid. You find your mates. Make offerings to Venus if you must. But you have three months. Three full moons.” Lars stood. “I’ve had enough of this steam room. Lunch should be ready.”

“A wife?” Conto muttered again.

Titon slapped Conto on the shoulder and Romulas just laughed. “I’ll skip lunch. If I’ve only got three months to find the woman, I’d rather get to looking if it’s all the same to you.”

Lars nodded and watched his friend walk down the long columned hallway, the marble a dull red against the bright sunlight. “Be safe, Rom.”

Romulas turned and smiled. “How dangerous can wooing and bedding a mate be?”

Chapter One

He waited and he watched, as he always did. The night air was cool around him, the breeze off the mountains neither cold nor warm.

Romulas was general over the *Lares Rurales*. The *Lares*, once a great and dominant race of fae, were now consigned to certain areas of Italy. There were still enough of them that they had a seat on the High Fae Council, a strong ruler, and smaller principalities. Politics, work, love. The damn wife order.

The moon shone brightly down on the rippling water of The Lover's Pool, fading out most of the stars. From here he could see the villa where only today his commander and friend, King Lars, had departed.

He sighed, wishing that for once he could have what others around him possessed. A home. A family. The order from his king neither surprised nor worried him. It did, however, give him pause. It had been four weeks since the king's order. How did one find a wife? He didn't want just any woman he could fuck, impregnate, and then ignore.

He wanted a woman he could love.

But mayhap the fates had deemed it otherwise for him. What did he know of love? Lust, yes, but love? He was a soldier, his work never done. The only solace he'd found was here at this pool. With his luck, the three months would end and either Lars or the High Council would choose his bride. He shook off the thoughts and looked again at the water, rippling at the pool's edge.

Legend said lovers were separated here, long ago. For some reason the story had always fascinated him. Different versions had passed down through the ages. Whether any were true, he knew not. The story told of a young woman and the warrior who tried to save her. Both had perished.

The pool was special, sacred. Legend had it, blessed by Venus herself. Many left offerings for the goddess in hopes she would send their lover to them. And sometimes when true lovers met, it was said the water seemed to glow an eerie blue-green color. He dreamed of water that color.

Whether that was why the tale sent a chill down his spine he didn't know, but it always did.

Perhaps it was the dream.

He'd often dreamed of swimming in the moonlit waters glowing faintly at the edges, of laughing with a woman, her hair long and as dark as wine, her skin as pale as the moon. Romulas knew the scent of her skin, knew the way her eyes looked heavy with pleasure, knew the weight of her breasts, full and womanly. Knew how hot her wet mouth felt around his cock, the way her teeth scraped over his nipples, her nails raking down his chest.

And what the hell did that say about him that he was sitting here fantasizing about a woman he only saw in his dreams, even if she seemed so damn real he could close his

eyes and all but taste her. He should be out wooing a future wife, but since dreaming of his moonlit nymph, he didn't find other women appealing--well, perhaps he did. But not *as* appealing as he once did.

Find a wife. Damn the order. Instead he sighed, closed his eyes, and thought of her, of her long hair tickling his balls as she rode him, arching back. His cock hardened and he stroked it through his tunic.

He wanted *her*. Wanted her to wrap her legs around his waist as he plunged deep into her, her hot slick passage squeezing him.

He stroked himself harder as he imagined her.

* * * *

Penelope walked to the edge of the pool, just as she did every night. It was the only place she felt at peace. The only place she could find solace from the world she had no way of escaping.

With a glance over her shoulder, she saw the garden was empty--though empty wasn't an accurate term. Someone was watching. Someone was always watching her. He made certain of that. She was never allowed alone, never allowed to go out.

Penelope sighed. She'd learned it was easier to have someone watching her. Someone who could agree with her stories.

Edward often accused her of lying, twisting her words until she didn't even know or remember what she had meant. He could twist anything, anything to be the way he wanted it in his world.

And the gods help anyone who he suspected had betrayed him.

She traced the scar on her side from one of his tirades. He'd been furious, ranting and raving as he often did for no apparent reason. She'd been shopping that day, had only purchased outfits he would deem appropriate, but she'd made the mistake of buying a piece of lingerie. A simple white gown, silk, with a bit of lace along the tops of her breasts. She'd thought he'd like it. She'd been wrong. He hadn't approved of it, hadn't picked it out himself. Thus she must have bought it for someone else. Someone she was seeing?

She shook off the thoughts.

Penelope knew what others thought of her. The mistress, the trophy lover, yet so lucky, so fortunate. Some never saw past Edward Trellila's wealth and power, never saw what lurked just beneath that ambitious surface.

But she knew. She'd seen firsthand.

Underneath was an insecure little boy. The problem was, he thought like a military general intent on taking the land one battle at a time.

She'd realized that the land was her spirit and each battle--well, she didn't care to dwell on that.

The moon shone brightly down, casting the path in silver, the bushes in grays, the shadows in deep blues and blacks. She loved the nights. Everything was hidden, yet simple. Black and white, differing shades of gray.

There were no bright reds and pinks, no flowers dotting the perfect landscape of the perfect house, with the perfect couple on this strip of land.

Perfection exacted too high a price, she'd learned.

Once upon a time, she'd been a girl who worked. A bank teller. Nothing spectacular in that. She'd dreamed of traveling and seeing the world. Meeting Mr. Right and settling down to have kids and a family. Little League and a dog.

But fate had twisted things.

She sighed and listened to the lapping waters of the beckoning pool. What drew her here night after night?

The pool was beautiful and one of the only places Edward seemed to leave her to herself. For some reason, he had an aversion to the beautiful little pond. It was surrounded by flat stones edging one side. The grass gently sloped down into the water, or surrounded the stones. A weeping willow moaned over one side, its leaves often tear-dropped upon the water's surface. The pool was at least thirty yards across at the widest point and deepest towards the center. She loved coming to the pool. Why? Perhaps it was her dreams. Here by the pool she often slept and in her sleep dreamed of a man she could love.

If she believed in love.

Love that cherished, loved that gave, not took. Love that was equal.

She'd thought she'd had love once. Now she realized she had no idea what love really was, but she knew what it wasn't.

It wasn't anger and fear--at least not constantly.

A woman should never have to fear the man she slept with. Fear *for* him? That's one thing. Fear *of* him? No.

Sometimes, in nightmares, she didn't see Edward as he was, a handsome businessman, but as some sort of monster with pale blue skin and sharp teeth. Whether he was handsome or blue, she thought, it didn't matter. Looks were deceiving and his heart was as cold and cruel as any monster's, no matter the looks he was blessed with.

She was tired.

Penelope sat on one of the flat stones edging the pool. The grasses were tall enough that she was all but hidden here. She swirled her hand in the pool and wished things were different. She knew they weren't, just as she knew she'd have to risk her life to get away. He'd never let her go. And perhaps tomorrow would be the day she'd find her courage. Of course he'd probably find her, but he might not.

She lay down on her stomach, the grass cool beneath her silk gown, the stones at the water's edge cold on her breasts. Penelope closed her eyes, listening to the night sounds--the crickets chirping, the hush of the breeze whispering through the reeds across the pond, the water lapping the edge of the pool.

What was this place? The white moon rippled across the surface and she sighed. In her dreams the edges of the pool glowed a strange green-blue. Now they were dark. Yet awake, or in her dreams, the pool hummed across her skin, like a soft electrical charge.

Was it wrong to want more? To wish for more? To want someone to love her? Just her as she was? Not someone constantly telling her all she'd done wrong?

Again she closed her eyes and wished, wished the man she often imagined, fantasized over, and dreamed of were real. Sometimes he seemed so real she could remember what he smelled of--outdoors and man, with just a hint of lemon--could

remember the way his eyes narrowed and darkened just as he sank into her. His dark hair was longer than most, just brushing the tops of his shoulders. His wide forehead was broken by the widow's peak and the dark slash of brows over his almost black eyes. His strong jaw only enhanced the carved facial features, the strong Romanesque nose. When she'd first seen him, he'd seemed hard, cold, almost sinister. But then he smiled. She did now, remembering the way the edges of his eyes crinkled, the lines bracketing his mouth relaxed as he'd laughed with her. And they'd laughed during love making. She sighed, growing hotter. She loved the way his gruff voice caressed her body as surely as his hand caressed her throat, her breasts, the folds of her sex. The way he moved in her, yet his presence engulfed her even as he drove her to madness.

She sighed and remembered their last encounter she'd imagined out here by the pool. The way his hands spanned her waist, the way his strong hands were gentle with her, the way his fingers had brought her to orgasm. She often worried Edward had ruined her for all men, but in her fantasies there was no fear of the man with the wide, broad chest, the muscular arms that lifted her as easily as if she were nothing but a feather.

He didn't seem to mind the fact her breasts weren't as tight and high as a twenty-year-old's, or that she had a slightly rounded lower abdomen that no amount of crunches would alleviate. Her fantasy man had never said anything negative about her chubby thighs. His hands, rough from work of some sort, had always caressed her body as if he were worshipping her. *Fingers trailing lightly.... Circling her breasts, her nipples, bringing them to hard points....* Her blood heated and slowly pulsed through her body at the memories. His long fingered hands had whispered over the slight rise of her lower abdomen, squeezing gently before he'd moved lower to discover her wetness. The way those fingers had whispered then grazed harder over her clit...again, and again, and again even as he'd slowly sank one finger deep within her, stroking, pulling, taunting. She moaned and shivered.

Her skin warmed at the memories, at her fantasy, and she huffed out a breath and stood, her body seeming to pulse to life out here. She dropped her gown, its silk whispering over her heated skin, catching first on her nipples, then grazing down to catch on her hips, until finally it landed in a silken pool at her feet. She knew the temperature of the murky waters. The waters were blue--almost green during the day, a dark emerald, almost black, at night. The man of her fantasy had told her that her eyes were the very color of the pool.

She stepped down into the water, the liquid caressing her higher and higher up her calves, her knees, to caress her thighs. She used the stone steps that lead deeper and sighed when the cooler water flowed around her heated core.

"I'm an idiot." She shivered as she dropped to the bottom, her toes only hitting stone as her head submerged under the cool waves. Yet the water was never actually cold. She popped up, slicked the water away, and stared at the stars. She closed her eyes and floated on her back, letting the water cool her naked skin. No one would come along. Even if they did, she found for the first time, she didn't really care. Edward would find reasons to be angry with her anyway. Might as well do something she wanted to for once.

She closed her eyes and swam to where she could touch the bottom. Her nipples

were so hard that her arm brushing them tightened the invisible cord from her breasts to her pussy. Her hands played down her stomach. She thought of him, of her fantasy man as she stroked her fingers over her skin, up to cup her breasts, tweaking the nipples between her fingers, rolling them softly at first, then harder. Finally, she lowered one hand to her *mons* and slipped her fingers between the wet folds of her sex. Penelope wasn't surprised at the slick cream. She thought of him, of how his deep voice whispered in her ear the things he would do even as his fingers played her faster and faster until she'd have begged him for anything. Yet, the thrill was not there. She wasn't in the mood for self pleasure. She wanted him, wanted the man that looked at her as if learning her soul, that took her with an intensity that left no room for anything other than pleasure. Her fingers seemed a sad second to the fulfilling pleasure he gave her. Sighing, she floated again on her back and stared at the stars.

Please come to me.

Chapter Two

Romulas opened his eyes and felt the air shimmer, grow heavier, the rippling pattern of the water against the stone shore changed. He stared across the pond. Just there, he saw her shimmer at first, as she always did. But then, it was as if he blinked and there she was, her eyes closed. The full moon bathed her wonderfully naked body in pale silver light. His cock already aroused, hardened to the point of pain. He winced. She was here, he wanted her.

He stood, the grass tickling his bare feet since he'd already taken off his sandals. Romulas released his sword, stripped off his tunic, and eased into the water.

She'd come. Just as he'd wished she would. He wondered who she was. He'd never asked. They'd loved twice. The first time, he'd been so surprised by her appearance, so aroused by her naked body, they spoke not a word as they'd screwed against the stone shore. She'd held her hand over his mouth the last time he'd started to ask her questions. Perhaps it was the mystery around her that aroused him so. Whatever it was, she was the only woman he'd thought of since he'd taken her.

Or perhaps she'd taken him. He wasn't certain, he was trying to figure that out, had been trying to figure that out for days.

The first time he'd seen her, the moon had been full, then nothing until two days ago. And now again. What did it mean? Had she sought him out as he did her? He knew the legend of the pool. But none had spoken of it in so long, he often believed it to be just that--a legend, not fact.

Yet here he was again--wanting her, waiting for her. The water was cool, yet warm where it rippled up to his calf, then his knee, then his thigh.

Her attention was still on the moon above her

He stopped, eased silently deeper into the water, and waited for her to turn to him. To see him.

Her nose was turned up gently at the end. Her brows arched, her dark red hair long and streaming in the pool around her. Her hair in moonlight always reminded him of dark wine. Her eyes were the color of the pool's edge--which he saw was glowing blue, yet green and almost murky so that shadows danced just below the surface.

He knew today the king wondered at his lack of interest in the females provided for entertainment. And he'd released Calsalla from his bed. That had been only days before he'd met this mysterious nymph the first time. He wondered if Fate was playing with him? Venus herself?

He ran his hand through the water and continued to watch her.

Moving silently, he decided to surprise her. He ducked under the water, held his breath, and swam beneath the surface. The moonlight danced in muted smoke beneath the pool. He could see her just there, above him, a dark water nymph against the shimmer of waved moonlight. He reached up, jerked her down, and covered her scream

that bubbled from her mouth with his own lips. She stiffened, her arms pushing against him. He held her tightly, ran his hand from her nape to her spine, and felt her relax. Laughing, he pushed them both to the surface.

Her eyes were narrowed. Water dripped off her nose, ran in rivulets over her face, down her neck, to her chest.

He waited, but she didn't say a word, just relaxed against him, her body buoyant in the water.

Here he was a hardened warrior in the King's guard, friend, and confidant to his sire, and he couldn't get the damn woman to speak.

"I've been waiting for you."

She sighed and leaned forward to kiss him.

He pulled back. "Why did you come?"

Her lashes swept down, covering her eyes from him. He held her to him, pulled her closer, and she wrapped her legs around his waist as he held them in the water.

"I had to," she whispered. Her voice was soft, wary, reminding him of dark secrets.

"To whom do you belong?" he whispered, just as quietly afraid she might again retreat into silence.

Still she wouldn't look at him. He wondered for a moment if Titon or Conto. He hoped to hell she didn't belong to either of his friends.

She sighed and looked up at him. "For now, I only belong to you."

He frowned, annoyed at her words. "You'll tell me all I want to know, sooner or later, *cara*."

She tilted her head. "But what if I can't?"

"Can't or won't. In my experience, people always can. They simply choose not to."

She swayed against him from one side to the other. The movement drew his gaze to her breasts. They were neither small or large, not high and tight like a virgin's either. No, hers were a woman's breasts, full, heavy tipped with large, dusky nipples--made for a man's hands. He loved the feel and weight of them, the taste of the pebbled nipples.

He cupped her jaw in his palm and then ran his finger over her plump lower lip. "You're beautiful," he said, not looking at her, instead following the way his finger grazed one way then the other. She stiffened.

"Why do you do that?" he asked, pulling his gaze back to her eyes. "You do not believe me?"

Her eyes searched his face, and he could feel and see the confusion in her long-lashed eyes.

"I don't know what to believe," she whispered.

"You are beautiful. I should know. I don't bed ugly women."

Her eyes widened, and then she leaned back and laughed, the sound deep and throaty. She shook her head. "I don't know what to make of you."

He walked to the steps, holding her still wrapped around his waist. He sank down on one of the steps. She tried to unhook her ankles, but he shook his head. "No, stay as you are. I like the feel of you on me."

One corner of her mouth tilted up slightly. "I'm not on anything."

Her voice was made for the night. Just like her laugh, it went straight to his groin. "You will be."

Again her throaty laugh danced between them. He felt the vibration of her laughter move through her body and into his cock.

He ran his hands up her torso, her skin a stark white contrast to the darkened night landscape. He trailed his fingers over the silken sides of her breasts. He loved the feel of her under his hands. He cupped her breasts and she flinched. "What's this?" he asked, looking up into her eyes. "I thought you liked me touching you."

"I-I do. It's just...."

"What?" he cupped them, caressed and squeezed the milky globes. In the full light of moon, her skin seemed to glow, to take the moonlight into her very being. He leaned closer and kissed a trail of water from her throat, that little indentation at the base of her neck, down to her left breast. "Tell me," he whispered against her, licking her skin, tasting again that essence that was solely and completely this woman. She tasted of some unknown spice he was beginning to crave.

"I ...um" Her fingers trailed along the back of his neck, the nails lightly grazing, causing goosebumps to jump along his skin and down his spine.

He licked his way around one breast, closer and closer and closer. He pulled her nipple into his mouth, flicking it with his tongue.

She gasped, her nails digging into the back of his neck. He grinned and pulled away, whispering, "You were saying?" He blew warm air across the now chilled and distended peak before pulling it back into his mouth and sucking hard.

She arched against him. "I wish you were real," she whispered.

He laved her breast, moved to the other one, and continued to toy with her, all the while caressing and tasting. Her pussy was hot and beckoning on his lower abdomen. Her fingers spasmed, then she pulled back, looking at him.

Her words registered. He frowned and studied her for a minute more. Finally, he took her hand from around his neck and kissed her palm, trailing the lines with his tongue. He pressed her hand on his chest, over his heart. "Don't I feel real?"

Her eyes looked at her hand against his chest. He looked down, saw the pale fingers against his darker chest. "You feel so real I could stay here forever."

He pulled her down for a kiss, then stopped just short of her lips. "Careful what you wish for, nymph. I might just keep you."

She gave him a sad smile before he covered her mouth with his, teasing before she opened and again he tasted her as she kissed him back.

Chapter Three

I might just keep you.

Penelope shivered at his gruff words. He held her tightly to him, his hand at the back of her head, his other arm banded around her waist as if he'd never let her go.

She wished he wouldn't, but knew that wasn't to be. Instead, she fell into the moment. Water sloshed between them. He sat on the step that rippled the water just at their waists. It moved between them, caressed not only her hips but also the heated core of her. Cool water, heat of him, her own burning need.

"Jupiter's blood, but you're hot," he said against her mouth even as he continued to kiss her, his tongue moving against hers, between her lips, tracing the roof of her mouth until she squirmed. She cupped his jaw, felt the dark stubble that shadowed his jaw prickling against her palm.

He laughed and pulled away, leaning back against the step behind him. She looked into his dark eyes, noted again how long his lashes were, black as his hair. He held her waist and his gaze traced from her eyes to her mouth, her jaw, her chest, down her stomach. She looked down her pale body and placed her hands over her the small pouch on her lower abdomen. "I need to lose some weight."

He frowned, the skin of his forehead creasing between his dark slash of brows as grabbed her hand. "Why? You're perfect. If you weighed any less, the water would carry you away."

He traced a line from one breast to the other. "The last time you apologized to me for your breasts. Why?"

She didn't meet his gaze, just shrugged. "I don't know."

His fingers kept on, trailing over her torso, then lower to her stomach, twirled around her navel and she giggled. "That tickles."

He smiled, the lines bracketing his mouth relaxing. "I remember. Now answer me. You do know."

How did she tell him? And what did it matter? She just wanted a damn release tonight. Anything to make her feel better. His cock was hard and hot, long and thick between them. She reached down and grasped it. "I suppose you don't have a problem with any of me," she whispered, caressing the tip of his cock with her thumb. It jumped in her palm.

Perhaps she'd distract him. In the back of her mind, she knew there was not much time and she wanted to enjoy what they did have together, not waste it on idle talk and questions she couldn't or wouldn't answer. His cock was long, thick and hot.

"I need no apologies for that which you apologize for. I do, however, like to know whom my lovers are."

She paused, didn't look at him, then tightened her fist, and began to stroke him, hoping to distract him from his probing. "Has anyone ever told you, you talk too much?"

She peeked a look at him from beneath her lashes.

"And you don't talk nearly enough." His hands tightened on her hip bones. "I'd advise you to stop or I'll take you here and now."

She laughed, loving the power she could have over a male. A big, strong, man that could break her in half if he wanted.

The thought gave her pause.

He must have felt the shift in her. "What?" he asked, his fingers meandering closer to her center, then lightly dancing away. She squirmed on him.

He chuckled and said, "Two can play this game. Now tell me, what troubles you."

Did she dare ask him? No. He squeezed her hip bone again. Apprehension twisted down her spine to pool at the base of her back. "What would you do if I displeased you?"

His fingers paused and he searched her face, another slight frown creasing his brow. "Why do you ask me that?"

She took a deep breath, opened her mouth. To tell him what? Instead, she forced a smile and shook her head. Tomorrow she'd leave. This was their last night. Why was she ruining it?

"Never mind." She cupped his face between her palms and lightly kissed the corners of his mouth. "I'm being silly."

She reached between them with one hand, grasped his cock again and raked her nails softly down his hardened length. Penelope lightly danced her fingers over the tip, before she began to stroke. He gasped and arched. She added her other hand and eased down him, kissing his chest, licking her way across one flat dark nipple then the other, which she scraped with her teeth. She started down this abdomen, the muscles tight beneath her lips.

He grabbed her arms. "No. Not now, I'll be gone in but a few seconds."

He hauled her against him and kissed her, his mouth demanding, controlling, offering her leverage. "You will be mine."

She shuddered at his words. "Would that were true."

As if angry, he kissed her harder, his hands brushing hers away from him, then tracing the skin between her thigh and groin. She held her breath.

His finger trailed a fire up the crease of her leg, then down, then back over, closer and closer until his cool finger grazed between her hot folds.

Penelope arched and moaned, the fire he created licking through her.

"I want to make love to you all night, until sunrise," he said pulling back and watching her. His finger danced a wicked dance over her bundle of nerves and startled her.

"Be still and don't move, or I won't give you what you want." His face seemed even more chiseled and hard in the silvery moonlight, shadows playing around them. The moonlight glinted off his dark eyes like sunlight on obsidian.

"What do I want?" she whispered, wanting ... wanting

"This," he said and traced her wet center with his cool finger. Up, down, back and forth. She closed her eyes on a sigh. Tried to follow his fingers with her mind. Up,

around her clit, down across, under her slit, back across and up. A figure eight. Even with the water, she could feel her own wetness aiding him.

She wanted, she wanted.... "More," she whispered.

She rocked against him. Now all his fingers joined the one single digit. So many were moving all at once she couldn't keep up, couldn't follow, couldn't

She moaned.

He pierced her with two of his fingers even as the others continued their wicked dance. In. Out. Around. And around.

"Ohhh." She moaned again, her body taking over.

"I love seeing you like this," his deep voice moved through her. "I've carried the memory of you falling apart in my arms for days and before that, weeks." His fingers stroked in and out, shallow and deep. He kept up the pace, flicked his thumb over her clit again and again. Just as her climax was within reach, he paused, laughed against her throat.

"Did you know your eyes get narrow and almost seem to glow when you become angry?"

She shook her head. "I'm good at hiding my feelings." Wasn't she?

He chuckled. "Really? To whom?"

She opened her mouth, then shut it quickly, shaking her head as he slid his fingers into her again, slowly. So damn slowly.

"You won't hide a single thing from me," he muttered, still just toying with her.

She rocked against his hand, leaning closer to brush her breasts and nipples against the hard plain of his scarred chest.

"You...", she muttered, her thoughts scattered.

"I'm what?" he whispered.

She opened her eyes to see him smiling at her, an arrogant male smile of satisfaction and determination.

For a moment, she only stared at him. Penelope wished so much that he was real, she paused in her movements, cupped his face in her hands and leaned forwards kissing him. She kissed him as if he were actually hers, and she his, as if she never wanted to let him go and prayed he could understand that all from her mouth on his.

Chapter Four

Romulas stiffened for a moment, his fingers stalling against her hot, slick flesh. Her mouth fastened on his. Her kisses to this point had either been timid and wary or simply meeting him. But this

His mind flew. All he could feel was her devouring him, her heated and wanting in his arms, her honeyed pussy against his hand all but begging him to take her.

Yet he stilled. There was a pain, an urgency in her eyes he wanted to take away. Pain and something else.

With his other hand, he ran it up her spine, pleased when she arched against him. He held her tighter, wanting to help her. Before he'd simply wanted her, simply wanted to sink bollocks deep into her.

His cock still wanted to, still demanded it to the point of pain.

But he didn't. Instead pulled away from her kiss, fisted his hand in her hair, and played her with his fingers. She was so wet he could feel her even with the water.

"Venus! But you're a passionate little thing." Her slick skin trembled against his fingers. "Just feel, *cara*," he whispered, increasing the depth and tempo of his fingers piercing her channel. She was wet, tight and begging around him.

She shook her head, but he plunged deeper, twisting his wrist. She cried out. He pulled his fingers back towards his palm as if beckoning her climax to him. She shuddered in his arms.

"That's it, come for me." Romulas leaned up, licked a nipple before pulling it deep into his mouth. She moaned and he felt the vibration inside her. Wanted to be buried inside her.

Again he fucked her with his fingers, playing over her clit with strokes that were light then heavy. She shuddered again.

"Yes," he told her.

Her hand reached down and wrapped tightly around him, pumped him once, then again, twisting just slightly. He groaned against her breast.

He felt the tremors ripple through her. Romulas jerked back, his hand still at her nape, and forced her to look at him. Her eyes locked with his just before her inner muscles clamped hard on his fingers and hot honey flooded his hand. Her yell sang through the air. Water splashed around them. All he could see was the emotion in her eyes, tears held on her lashes. All he could smell was the fragrance of her--floral yet fruity, and that essence of spice he couldn't put his finger on. He panted, leaned closer, and kissed lightly from her collarbone up her neck, the scent even heavier just there beneath her jaw close to her ear.

Her breath shuddered out and he smiled against her neck as he licked the lobe of her ear, chuckling as she shivered. Still he pumped his fingers into her, slow and steady, calming her instead of arousing her.

Her muscles no longer tight and tense, now they were relaxed and pliant. Just the way he liked her.

When he felt wetness against his cheek, he pulled away and studied her in the moonlight. The tears had fallen, leaving silvery trails on her cheeks.

"What, *cara*?" He kissed first one eye, then the other.

"You're my dream," she whispered.

He frowned, tried to make sense of what she said. "Come with--"

"Penelope!"

She jerked, her head whirling to the other side of the pool and the steps that led to the pool side.

Penelope? Romulus tightened his arms. "Who is that?"

Her face, always fair, was even paler in the moonlight, her eyes wide with fear. "I--I--"

"Penelope! Get out, now!" The man's anger carried through the night.

Romulus felt her tremble in his arms. "Who is he?"

"I have to go," she whispered, trying to get off his lap. "I have to. He'll be ... I have to go." She looked back at him and quickly kissed his cheek, her hand lingering for a moment on his chin. "I'm sorry. "

"Penelope!"

She was trembling, but no longer from passion. "I'm coming!"

Romulus banded his arms around her. "You're not going to him. Who is he?"

She frowned, and jerked in his hold. Afraid, he'd hurt her, he released her, but stood as well. For a moment, she merely stared at him, then she wavered before him, and vanished.

Romulus stared in disbelief, his hand reaching out to her. What the gods? He leapt forward, water sloshing down him. Penelope. "Penelope!" he shouted. But only the wind and the ripple of water answered him.

His unsatisfied lust quickly turned to anger. Who the hell was she? And why had she just left? And who was the man?

No answers were forthcoming.

Knowing it was pointless, he quickly dressed and ran back to his villa, halfway there, he met some of his guard. "Rouse the others. We need to search."

"For?"

"A woman."

And a man.

Chapter Five

Penelope trembled as she climbed from the pool. One minute she'd been so happy, so calm, so safe. But not now.

She stood on the steps, the water still at her ankles. Edward stood on the bank, his hand fisted in her lavender gown that had been pooled at the water's edge. What was he doing here? He never came to the pool. In fact, he hated it. She never understood why but didn't question it. Penelope was happy to have a place of her own away from this man.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" he hissed. She saw two of his men standing a discreet distance away. Vincent and Giulio. She knew no help would be coming from them.

A shiver of what would probably come danced down her spine.

"Search the premises," he barked over his shoulder, never taking his eyes off her. Dark though it might be, the light from the full moon was enough to shimmer off the coldness in his dark eyes.

"Sir? For?" Giulio asked.

"A man."

She frowned. A man? What man?

He stepped forward and handed her the gown. "Put it on."

With a trembling hand, she slowly took the gown and slipped it over her head. The silk clung to her wet body.

She wanted to cover herself, but didn't dare.

Edward stepped closer, his face right next to hers. His blond hair was pale in the moonlight, his dark eyes narrowed. A muscle ticked in his jaw. "Tell, me, Penelope, who was he?"

Her mind raced. What did he mean? The man was only of her fantasies.

"Who was who, Edward? I was out here swimming alone."

One blond brow arched. He started to turn away, and she sighed. He struck out anyway, his fist striking her across the cheek. She fell to the ground, crying out. Blood, hot and thick coated the inside of her mouth. She spit it out and closed her eyes.

He knelt beside her. She could see him, the trousers, his feet, his clasped hands between his knees. "You're saying there was no man out here with you?"

All the anger and rage at him, seemed to well up and volcano out of her. "No. I wish to God there had been, but no. You're so pathetic I have to come out here to have any satisfaction." If ever there was a moment she'd wished to take back words, that was it. But there was no way to take them back.

She watched his fingers fist, then flex. He stood, then held his hand out to her. She shook her head, and stood up herself, not taking his hand.

"Pathetic am I?" he whispered, walking behind her. "Pleasing yourself are you?"

Why had she said that? Why?

He stalked around her. She closed her eyes and never saw him move. He lashed out at her, his fist connecting in the soft part of her back. She arched, even as he hit the other side. Pain stole her breath. His next aim was her ribs. She doubled over moaning.

So stupid.

The blows kept coming. Not fast and random, but slowly, controlled, toying. Just as she thought he might be done, hoped to hell he was done, he'd lash out again, his aim true. Her whole body trembled in pain.

"Please," she finally begged.

"Please what, Penelope?" He fisted his hand in the front of her gown, and pulled her towards him. "Maybe next time you'll think before you shove your fingers where only I'm allowed. I'd rather you fucked another man. But then, I do suppose no one would want to climb between those fat thighs of yours." With one last blow to her face, he dropped her. "You want to stay out here, fine. Stay out here. You better be in my room when I return tomorrow eve." With that, she watched his shoes clip across the path.

The world tilted, grayed. She moaned, whimpered before the blessed blackness pulled her under.

* * * *

"You've got it bad, *il mio amico*," Titon muttered, biting into some Scantu bread, olive oil glistening on top.

Romulas paced. He'd hardly slept after searching last night. When he did, he dreamed he heard her crying, moaning in pain, and he couldn't reach her. Couldn't help her. He was still furious this morning.

Who the hell was she?

"So tell us of this woman," Conto said.

Both men were friends. They'd all joined the ranks of the *Lares* army together, fought and won battles though the ages. Conto was the general of *Lares Compitales*, or of the subdivision and crossroads of cities. He charmed the ladies even as he ruled and kept order. Titon on the other hand was more restrained, quieter, yet not as somber as Romulas himself was. Titon ruled the *Lares Marini*. All three of them answered to their commander and friend, King Lars. He knew they were busy, but they were also powerful enough that it took but a thought, a need of the others and they could travel there in but seconds--*gettare un ponte*. Bridging. They often traveled to each other in such times--times of need. But the effect was draining on the bridger, so they used the talent rarely. Each had other talents. Romulas, though he hated to admit it, was a healer. His blood could not only heal himself, but others. Conto had the power to feel. He felt others' joys and pains as few did. Titon, in Romulas's opinion, was cursed. For Titon could often see what was to come. Each had their talents, none ever spoke of them.

"Come, my friend. Tell us of her. How else are we supposed to help you?" Conto pressed.

Romulas wiped a hand over his eyes. "She's beautiful. Not like many of the women mortals today. She's curved in all the right places."

"Oh, gods, tell me she's not fat," Conto muttered.

Romulas whirled and glared. "No, but nor is she a damn twig I could break in half with but one hard thrust." He liked his women soft and curved. "I get no pleasure from hammering into bare hipbones."

"So she's comely," Titon said, ever the peacemaker.

Romulas reigned in on his emotions. "She's perfect. I can't get her out of my mind." Which meant he walked around with a hard cock all damn day.

"Mayhap Venus is but toying with you."

He thought of the way the woman seemed to hold secrets so tightly, the way she'd all but disappeared. "Mayhap."

But then he saw her face, the fear flashing in her eyes. Fear of whom? Of the man?

His gut told him yes. "No. She's not Venus, for sweet goddess' sake. She's mortal," he admitted. "Or at least I think she is."

Conto let out a bark of laughter. "And you don't know? What has come over you, my friend? A mortal woman?"

He sighed, then sat and drank from his goblet, the wine full and rich on his tongue. He toyed with a piece of cheese. "I met her at the pool."

"So?" Conto shrugged and popped a grape in his mouth, then another. Around the fruit he asked, "I've fucked women in, on, around pools, none have controlled me by my cock, Rom."

He took a deep breath.

"Which pool?" Titon asked.

For a moment he said nothing, then met his friend's aqua gaze. "The Lover's Pool."

"Well, then, that explains it." Conto chuckled and then stood. "You sit and contemplate your mysterious damsel, Romulas. I, on the other hand, plan to find a comely wench to pleasure."

Romulas raised a brow. "Is she to marry?"

Conto waved the question away. "Of course not."

"Memory serves, we were all given the same order, Con."

Conto nodded. "So we were. However, there is still time." He wagged his brown brows and left through the portico.

Romulas sighed. The sun was setting. They'd searched all damn day and nothing. Perhaps this eve would find her at the pool again. This time, if she came, he was simply going to bring her back here to his house and love her until she could remember no one but him. And he'd find out all he wanted to know of her. One way or another.

Chapter Six

Penelope stirred. Pain pulsed through her body. Where was she? She opened her eyes and tried to think. Instead, her skull felt as if it would explode at any moment. Things were fuzzy. The Cyprus trees seemed to sway and dip above her. But was there wind? She could smell the water from the pool.

The pool....

She tried to turn over but tears stung her eyes as the pain lashed its way through her. Oh, God.

The sky was darkening. Someone stood behind her, she could feel them, but she didn't turn to see who it was.

The pain wasn't new, but it hadn't been this bad in a long time. She wondered vaguely if this was dawn, or if it were the next evening. Dizziness washed over her. *She'd close her eyes for just a minute....* Just a minute, then she'd get up and clean up a bit. The grass was cool beneath her throbbing cheek.

Edward. She turned, saw the shadow of someone walking back to the villa. The thought that she'd always dreamed of visiting the Tuscan country side flitted through her disjointed mind. But not like this. There was no beauty in this, no fun, no joy.

There was only pain. Great rolling waves of it.

The moon, an almost-orange globe in the cobalt sky was rising over the treetops. She closed her eyes.

She remembered now. The way she'd been in the pool, joyed and safe at the thought her fantasy man was there with her. Then Edward had come. But he'd thought she'd been with someone. Was it because he'd heard a man's voice? Or he'd just assumed? She tried to wrap her mind around memories, but it didn't happen. How could Edward have heard? No, he just suspected. He had to.

Damn. Nausea greased her stomach. Her ribs bit through the blackness calling to her, tempting her.

But what if she passed out, out here. Would anyone care? Would Edward beat her again?

Probably. She tried to push herself up, but her arm, trembling, collapsed under her. The metallic taste of blood coated her mouth.

A drink, she just wanted a drink. Carefully, she pulled herself along the cool ground, moaning as shifted and her ribs pierced pain, sharp and hot through her.

The grass and dirt cooled her, her teeth were chattering by the time she reached the pool's edge.

Darkness had fallen, or almost. Stars were twinkling in the deepening sky, the moon rising higher, whiter than before. At the pool, she cupped some water, most of it sloshing out of her trembling hand. After three tries, she got enough to wash her mouth out. She leaned over and looked at her reflection, barely recognizing the woman who

stared back through the ripples.

Something shifted on the path behind her, and she wanted to turn and look, but didn't. Footsteps crunched on the gravel and she tensed.

"Madam?" the voice asked.

Vincent.

She tried to push herself up. He bent down to lift her, but she lashed out, "Leave me alone."

Though she'd only whispered the command, he must have understood, for he stepped back. "You should come in before the boss arrives home. He won't be pleased and I don't think you can take another round with him."

A harsh laugh escaped her. "Vincent, there comes a t-time," she hissed as her ribs stole her breath. Her face throbbed and her head spiked pain through her body. The water's edge seems to waver before her. "A time, when a person just doesn't care."

For a moment, he said nothing, then, "Please, madam. I don't want to see you hurt."

She laid her face on her arm and waved him away. "Go, Vincent. Just go. I want to be here by the pool. It calms me."

Several heart beats later, she heard him walk away, muttering something under his breath.

Penelope sighed. "I wish you were real," she whispered, her tears plopping into the pool. And what damn good did tears do? What good? Or fantasies? Or anything? There was no great hero to save her. If she wanted to leave, she'd have to save herself, and if he caught her--then at least she died knowing she at the very least tried.

But God, she was tired.

Her arms shaking, she pushed herself up to her knees, swaying and closing her eyes. The pool dipped and beckoned. She tried three times to stand. On the forth, her knees trembling, she shoved herself to her feet. But the pain in her ribs blackened her vision and she stumbled, her knees giving out, and fell to the ground.

Instead of fighting it longer, she gave in to the oblivion that beckoned. If only it wouldn't hurt. The pool seemed to shift, to lighten at the edges. If only her fantasy man was real, but he wasn't. If he was, she'd beg him to take her away.

Please, help me.

* * * *

Romulas strode near the pool's edge just where he'd sat last eve. He'd watched the sun set. Irritated when his two friends found him. Conto just couldn't leave it alone. "Well, it's dark, Rom, where the hell is this legend of beauty?"

He ignored the jab and continued on. He heard Titon say something, heard them moving through the orchard not yards from the pool.

He stopped and stared at the moon rising high over the Cyprus trees, spearing up almost black against the sky.

Penelope. The name had fit her, as did the fire within. But the fear he'd felt tremble through her bothered him the most. He knew without a doubt that the man was whom she feared.

Anger burned through him.

"Rom?" Titon's voice floated through the darkness. "You know, she could be a sprite, or a water demon, to lure you here."

He shook his head. "She could be, but she's not."

He looked back over the rippling water and closed his eyes. He hoped to the gods and goddesses that the woman would come to him tonight. If she did, he'd never, ever let her go. Doubts did not enter his mind. She was *his*.

A moan caught his attention and he glanced to the far side of the pool where the other man's voice had floated from the night before. The air changed, grew heavier. Romulas's blood raced. The edge of the pool began to glow. He stilled and listened. The air shimmered and glided over his skin.

He narrowed his gaze. Something lay near the edge. His heart kicked in hope. He hurried around the pool, heard his friends behind him.

"Be careful, Rom, you don't know--" Conto started, then broke off. "Gods," he muttered.

The moan floated again. Not one of pleasure, but of pain.

He ran the last few yards, heard the hiss and scrape of his friends' swords leave their sheath's.

Her dark hair stood out in contrast to the pale limbs, the pale gown. Twisted at the waist, her back to him, her head was cradled in her bent arm.

He crouched beside her. "Penelope?" he asked, reaching out to her.

Romulas touched her bare shoulder. She was hot. Not feverish, but as if she'd been in the sun too long. He frowned.

"Romulas," Titon's deep voice warned.

"She's hurt," Conto whispered. "Badly."

He ignored them both and turned her over onto her back.

His relief, burned away in the heat of fury. Even as he felt like yelling, he whispered, "Penelope, can you hear me?"

She made no response. Her entire face, that beautiful face, was swollen and marred with blood and bruises, swollen so he might not have recognized her if he hadn't have known her from behind.

"The gods!" Conto hissed, sheathing his weapon. He crouched on the other side of her. "Who did this to this woman?"

Romulas, the leader of armies, guardian of royalty, confidant of the King, noticed his hands trembled as he held them over her face wanting to make certain she was still alive. But he couldn't bring himself to touch her, didn't want to hurt her.

"Is she even alive?" Titon asked, kneeling at her head.

"Yes," Conto said. Romulas ignored him.

The question seemed to echo through Romulas' haze of rage. He placed his hand over her chest, felt the rapid, shallow pants and the flutter of her heart.

"Yes," he bit out. Carefully, he scooped water into his hand and bathed her face, washing away the blood. What was beneath wasn't much better. Still swollen, still bruised and hurt.

Someone had hurt her.

The man?

Romulas breathed deep. He took more water and dribbled it into her mouth. How long had she been out here?

She moaned. He trickled more water between her busted lips. Then just a bit more. He leaned over, carefully, kissed each one and whispered, "You are mine, none will ever harm you again."

With that, he carefully picked her up, sliding an arm beneath her knees and her back. As he lifted her and her body shifted, she whimpered, her breath catching.

Her eyes fluttered open. "Can you breathe?" He kept walking back towards his villa on the hilltop. "Are your ribs hurt?"

Her eyes, wide and opaque, just stared at him. She whispered. Romulas frowned and paused, leaning closer to her lips. "What?"

"You came," she whispered before her eyes closed again.

Had she thought he wouldn't?

Confusion, questions, and anger leaked between and around his shields of control. He flew to the villa.

Someone would pay for harming her. Someone would pay.

Chapter Seven

Romulas laid her carefully on the bed in his chambers. He'd run the maids away and only allowed in his guards. His first commander was in charge of scouring the countryside for any sign of what might have happened to her.

Conto and Titon themselves lit candles, and with a flick of his wrist, Conto blazed a fire in the hearth.

Romulas ran them out of the room and demanded heated water. The sounds of the villa scrambling to meet his orders were muffled beyond the closed door.

She was pale, or at least her chest was, her face bruised, her back and shoulder red from sun exposure.

If she'd been out there all day, how had they missed her? He had no answers and he wanted them.

Romulas carefully stripped the dirty, blood-stained gown from her and hissed in a breath.

Her torso and lower back were bruised, big fist-size areas. He carefully ran his fingers over the marks and willed them away, but they remained. He himself was a healer. He could heal himself, all the *Lares* could to a point, but he was different.

She moaned when he rolled her back over. He grazed a finger over her swollen face.

Anger, hot and fierce, licked through him.

His chest tightened. She was *his*. His to protect. *His* to cherish. *His* to love. No one else had the right to any of those things or the consequences those brought.

Romulas couldn't heal her, but his blood could.

He drew a dagger strapped near his calf. Holding her hand in his, he wished there were another way. Palm to palm, he placed the dagger, razor sharp between the palms and jerked it down.

"Blood of mine becomes blood of yours." He pressed his palm, now wet and slick with blood to hers, until their blood ran down both their wrists. "To heal and to protect."

"Well, now he's done it," Conto drawled from the doorway.

Romulas didn't bother to look up. He waited, felt the almost forgotten tingle as his palm healed itself.

"The gods only know who or what she is and--"

"Conto, shut up," Titon said.

Romulas waited a moment more, then unlaced his fingers from hers and looked at her palm. A small scar mirroring his slashed across her palm, bright pink. But it was closed, no blood ran from it now.

He turned her palm, leaned over and kissed the center. "You're mine, Penelope."

She drew a deep breath and opened her eyes, the murky blue-green depths

shadowed.

Titon handed him a cup of wine. "Make her drink this. T'll help with the pain," his friend said.

Romulas held her up with his arm beneath her shoulders and poured some of the liquid between her teeth.

He handed the cup back to Titon. "Get out."

"Fine, you want to die alone, who are we to deny you," Conto muttered. "Lars will not be happy."

Romulas glared at his friend. "Lars ordered me to wed. Consider it done."

Conto looked from him to Penelope, his gaze studying her a long moment. "Well, I hope to hell you know what you're doing. Hurt or not, you know next to nothing about her."

"I do."

"At least you'll have beautiful children," Titon hedged in and grabbed Conto. "Come, Conto, I think if we don't leave, he'll throw us out and I'd just as soon enjoy the rest of my evening, as he will undoubtedly as soon as her healing is complete."

Romulas didn't catch Conto's reply and he didn't care. He sat on the edge of the bed, brushing long strands of her hair away from her face. A knock at the door preceded the maid who carried the water he'd requested.

When they were again alone, he wet a cloth and gently bathed her face. He knew she was awake from her short, shallow breathing.

"Do your ribs pain you?" he asked, wishing he could bath her to get all the blood off.

When she didn't answer, he stopped studying the cut near her temple and focused on her eyes.

"Who are you?" she asked, licking her cracked lips.

He almost smiled. "Romulas."

"As in Rome, the twins and the evil greedy brother?"

He did smile, but didn't answer.

"Who names their kid Romulas these days?" she muttered.

"My mother."

This time, she smiled. He could already see the swelling going down.

He took a deep breath. "Who harmed you?"

She tried to take a deep breath, then shrugged, looked up at him and asked, "Why?"

"Is he your guardian? Your husband?" Romulas didn't know what he'd do if the latter were the case. His chest tightened.

She shook her head. "He's just a mistake. No guardian, no husband."

"You're not going back to him."

Her round aqua eyes blinked, then she raised her hand and circled her fingers around his wrist. "No, not unless he drags me back unconscious." Her fingers tightened. "But make no mistake, he will come for me."

Romulas leaned closer to her so that their noses almost touched. "You're not going back to him." Thinking he'd just tell her, he said, "We're bound."

Her dark brows formed a vee with her frown. "Bound?"

"Connected. You're mine."

The bruise along her cheekbone was starting to recede. "Yours?"

Romulas leaned over and kissed her gently on one side of her mouth, then the other. "Yes. Mine. Now go to sleep so you'll finish healing." He rubbed the back of her hand. "I'll explain it all in the morning."

He watched as she slid quietly into sleep. The rage in him was no less than it had been, but at least he could think through it. And he suddenly knew he needed to know more about the pool.

Carefully, he rose and walked to the door. He opened it. Outside stood a guard. "Mario, tell the other generals I wish to meet with the *rurales* elders." Mario nodded and turned, walking down the long dark hallway lit by the torches in the wall sconces. For a minute he looked after the man. He wondered how long it would take the elders to assemble. He wanted his questions answered now. The feeling he needed to know everything he could filled him with an urgency. He knew the legend, of the legend and the different versions, but he felt there must be more. Something.

For one thing was for certain. It wasn't just him and Penelope the pool affected. Romulas had heard the bastard call her last eve. Perhaps the pool was a portal and if so, he had someone to hunt.

* * * *

Romulas listed to the elders around him, as did Conto and Titon.

"How do you know she is what she claims?"

He waved the question away. He had no real use for the *rurales elders*. They were a pain in the ass, always going on about traditions and the old ways.

But now, he needed them. He needed to know the exact legend of the pool.

One elder, Selon, nodded and cleared his throat. "The pool, at best, is a portal, my lord. It has always claimed to be so, at least in legend. So, perhaps you are right and she was sent to you.

However," the old man continued. He tried to sit up at the table, but still he was stooped and withered. "It concerns me you heard this man's voice. Legend has never claimed that mere mortals could pass in the water, at least not in this pool."

Romulas nodded. At the center was the man. He wanted to know who the bastard was.

"Do you think the pool is a weakness, at least for the people?" Titon asked, his arms crossed as he leaned back into the chair.

The elders all looked at each other and Romulas knew then, they knew no more than he did. The legend, of lovers united until the woman sent to the warrior died, did not give him any damn answers.

"Thank you for your time."

Selon held up his hand. "I would advise caution, my lord. And I think the king should know of this turn of events."

So he probably should. That was one meeting Romulas would much rather put off.

* * * *

Warmth awoke her, in a haze of gold. Kisses nipped her lips even before she opened her eyes. For just a moment, she stiffened, felt him pause, and she breathed deep.

No expensive cologne assaulted her nose. Instead, she smelled... Romulas.

Her eyes flew open. He was balanced over her on his forearms, the heat from his body heating her side.

"Good morning, *cara*." His voice was deep, gruff and caused her breasts to tighten.

She licked her lips, memory slowly returning. She moved her arm, but there was no pain, Penelope frowned and breathed deep--no sharp stabs from her ribs, no aches, no pain. Nothing. Romulas' long, work-worn fingers touched her face.

"I think you're healed."

She shook her head. "But how?"

He picked up her palm, showed her the new pink scar that slashed across it. Then he showed her his with the same mark. "I gave you my blood. Connected with you."

Penelope stared at him. Okay, maybe Edward had scrambled her brains. Or maybe she was still dreaming? Yeah. "I'm dreaming."

That sexy smile lifted the corners of his lips, dark stubble shadowing his jaw. His dark eyes bore down on her. "You're not dreaming, *cara*. We were *never* dreaming. Each kiss we shared." He leaned over, one hand cupping her face, as he softly then more demandingly kissed her lips, traced the inside of her mouth. "Each touch." His hand moved from her chin, his fingers lightly stroking, to her neck, spread so that he grazed both breasts, down over her belly, only to stop at her *mons*. "Each and every stroke." Those long, wicked fingers stole her breath as they parted her wet folds, flicked over her clit, and played around her slick opening. Around, and around, and around, until she couldn't think. "Each was very, *very* real."

She moaned and arched, opened her eyes, and realized sunlight flooded the room. She sat up, surprising him. "It's light outside."

How could this be? She spent the night with him? But Edward... the villa? Her body? She looked down her body, but no bruises showed, no pain radiated out. Only her smooth, clear skin.

He chuckled behind her. "Yes, it's morning."

But how? How was this...? She shook her head. "I don't understand all this. I don't understand it at all."

Penelope stood and walked to the window and stared out at a familiar yet different view. The trees were different, and on that hill just beyond the rise would sit Edward's villa. But nothing was there but more trees. The pool down the hill sat glimmering in the early morning light.

Was this real? Please let this be real. Did she want it to be? She carefully touched her face, but there was no pain, no bruising, no anything.

"How did you find me?" she asked, turning back to him. He was lying amidst rumpled sheets, his dark muscular chest drawing her gaze, as he studied her.

"I was looking for you." He held his hand out to her. "Come back to bed. I've missed you."

For a moment, she stood, then looked back over her shoulder at the pool.

"Do you know the legend of the Lover's Pool?" he asked, his voice a dark caress over her.

"I'm dreaming."

"I told you this is no dream. Come to bed." He patted the place beside him. "Now, the Lover's Pool. Do you know the legend?"

She turned back to him and walked to the bed, sitting down beside him. "No."

He took a deep breath and drew patterns on her arm. "It's said that the goddess Venus will find a mate for those who visit the pool. Many have gone, many have left disappointed. For it is only those who believe in true love that she sends a mate." His finger meandered from her arm to circle her breast, then her nipple. "She sent me you."

Everything was moving so fast so.... A legend. Venus? "Venus? Who...?" Then her brain clicked. "You mean the ancient goddess of Rome? Or Greece or whatever?"

His look was partly amused, partly aghast. "Venus, goddess of love, *cara*." He leaned up and kissed her cheek. "She sent me you. From the pool. I've no doubts on that and neither do you."

Neither do you....

Maybe she did.

Yet, here she sat, in this bed, with the world outside the same, yet different and beside her sat.... She looked into his eyes.

Romulas.

"I won't have to go back, will I?" She was surprised that the question just blurted out.

The lone finger stilled, then continued in its circle. She couldn't think when he touched her. "Do you honestly think I'd let you go back?" he asked. Though his voice was calm, she caught the fine edge of steel in it.

Staring into his eyes, she said, "So I can stay here? I'll be safe?"

For a long moment, his dark eyes held hers, then he tugged her to him. "You're mine. None will dare harm you."

His mouth sealed hers in a kiss. And for some reason, she didn't care how she came to be here, how all this was happening. She didn't care that a house had disappeared.

All she cared about was that she was exactly where she wanted to be. With Romulas.

His fingers and mouth were demanding on her skin. She knew it would only be a matter of minutes before she was forgetting her own name.

Jerking away, she put her hands on his chest and said, "No."

One dark brow rose. "No, *cara*?"

She smiled. "I want to do this my way."

A slow smile played on his mouth. "You don't always get what you want, and if memory serves, we've always done it your way."

She sighed and brushed her hand back and forth over his chest, down his stomach to wrap her fingers around his cock. She closed her eyes at the long solid feel of him in her hand. "I know, but let me play."

When he didn't reply, just put his hands behind his head, she grew bolder. She'd

wondered at the taste of him. Not that she hadn't played this way before, but she wanted him all. She knew the scent, how he tasted salty from sweat and a faint trace of lemon.

Leaning down to kiss his mouth, she whispered, "I want to play a bit."

His eyes narrowed. "For now."

Chapter Eight

Penelope kissed her way down his chest, slowly pulling the sheet away. When it caught and then gave way with a whispered hush over his cock, he drew in a sharp breath.

She licked across his flat dark nipples, scraped her teeth until he shifted. Slowly, she licked down his stomach, tracing his muscles. His hands caressed her hair. She looked up at him from her lashes, then shut her eyes and continued on, twirling her tongue in his navel. She'd hated doing this before, and once she'd been able to put just the tip of Romulas in her mouth. But now, with Romulas, she *wanted* to do this, wanted to take his big cock in her mouth, and she was growing wetter just thinking of what he'd taste and feel like.

His cock stiffened even more as her hair grazed first over him, then over his balls. She smiled, looked at him, as she licked up one side of his cock, then skirted the head, to lick down the other side. His fingers were tightening on her head, then one hand cupped her chin.

"I want your mouth on me, Penelope."

She smiled, slowly. "Do you?"

His thumb rubbed back and forth over her bottom lip, then at the corner. She reached out and licked his finger, then moved her tongue to the opposite corner and licked the head of his cock.

His thumb stilled. "Open."

Still watching him, she opened and took him in her mouth, swirling her tongue even as her hands continued to play, pulling him taut for her. His hands dropped to his sides and fisted. She kept her eyes on his as she licked and laved. Penelope closed her eyes and drew him deeper until she couldn't take him any more. With one hand, she kept pumping at the base of his cock, while the other she let wander down and cupped his balls. She raked her nails over the sacks and he arched, moaning, his hands fisting in her hair.

"Penelope...", he groaned.

She sucked harder, even as she let one finger curve behind his balls to press his anus.

He arched, jerked, his eyes flying open. "I don't think so."

Without warning, he grabbed her under her arms and yanked her up, turning so that he lay atop her.

"I wasn't done," she said, smiling.

"You are for now. You can suck me off another time." A muscle ticked in his jaw and she just stared at it.

"Are you mad?" she asked, worry starting to--

"No." He offered no other words, just kissed her, hard, hot, demanding. No

gentle nips. His teeth scraped her mouth, her lips, then his tongue dove inside. He devoured her. His mouth was demanding, taking, claiming, even as his hands roved and heated the rest of her. His hands weighed her breasts, cupping softly, gently circling. The light caress contrasted with the savagery of the kiss. His finger circled her breast, closer and closer, then he tweaked and pressed her nipples until she wanted more.

"Like that, do you?" He moved further down her body, his knee nudging her thighs apart. The crinkling hair on his legs tickled the insides of her thighs.

She closed her eyes, felt his warm, hot mouth on her again. She loved his kisses, whether slow and coaxing or hard and demanding.

"I want to hear you scream," he said against her mouth. "Scream my name as you started to the other night before you bit it back."

She shook her head. "I never scream."

His chuckle, warm against her neck, danced out and lit the fire deep within her body. "You will."

His hands molded her body as if a sculptor learned and appreciated his art. He kissed the soft undersides of her breasts, making her squirm, then circled her nipples with his tongue until she panted. When his wet mouth closed over the stiffened peak, she moaned. He flicked her nipple with his tongue, laved, and suckled hard until she was writhing. Then he bit, not hard enough to hurt, but to get her attention.

"Not yet," he whispered, then moved to the other side. While his wicked tongue danced on her breast, his fingers slid down her stomach to squeeze her hipbone. She squirmed, but his fingers stilled.

She huffed out a breath.

Again he laughed.

His fingers grazed over her closely trimmed *mons*. Then they dipped lower.

* * * *

Romulas had been shocked when she'd taken his dick in her mouth. Well, perhaps hoping was a better term. He'd thought he'd come in her mouth, but decided he didn't want the moment to end so soon. They had endless days together for that. He wanted to shoot his cum into her hot pussy, not down her throat. At least not yet. Instead, he'd work her up until she would scream.

Her body was already straining beneath his. Her legs parted for him. He dipped his fingers around her clit, not touching, not yet, and trailed a figure eight down beneath her slit, already so wet he could kneel her cream trailed even lower. Back and forth, up and down, only to lightly graze over her bundle of nerves. He flicked his nail over her clit again and was rewarded with another shuddering moan. When he slipped his fingers into her hot, wet channel, she arched.

Romulas stroked her, feeling her reaching, then pulled his fingers away to pet and play over her *mons*, around the most sensitive areas, but not where she wanted him.

He kissed his way down her belly, dipped his tongue into her navel, then moved lower, holding her hips with his hands.

Her eyes opened and she watched him as he licked his lips. "I've missed you." He pressed her legs wider and studied her, admired the pink skin of her pussy, glistening in the morning light. She was splayed wide for him. He used two fingers to part her slit,

smiled when she hissed. She was so wet, her cream trickled down between the cheeks of her ass so that her tight rosette even glistened. That he would do as well, one day.

He blew a soft breath against her. "I've missed the scent of you." He breathed deep. "Pure woman." He leaned closer and licked her from the bottom of her slit to the top, darting around her clit. "I've missed the taste of you."

She moaned and arched again, but he kept her still with his hands pressing on her.

He licked and laved until her moans rolled one onto another, her breath coming faster.

Slowly he inserted one finger into her pussy, closing his eyes as her vaginal muscles grasped it. God, he couldn't sink balls deep into her soon enough.

"Please," she begged.

He stroked her, sinking his finger in, then pulling it back, hitting that one spot deep within her that he knew would shatter her.

Her honey coated his finger, creamed into his palm. Smiling against her, Romulas decided.

"Turn about is fair play, isn't it?" he said into her.

"Uuuuhhhh."

With his finger slick from her juices, he pulled it out, flicked his tongue back and forth, then around her clit until her head was thrashing.

"Romulas."

He smiled. "Not quite screaming yet, *cara*."

He wet his middle finger again, then slowly pressed it against the tight rosette between her ass cheeks, already wet from her cream.

"Have you ever had a man here, *cara*?" he asked her.

She didn't answer and he stilled all movements, eliciting a groan from her.

"Have you?"

Her eyes, cloudy with lust, locked with his. "No."

He smiled, even as he watched her and licked her again. "You will. One day."

Slowly, he rimmed her virgin ass, around and around and around. She shuddering, the muscles of her thighs quivering. Still he toyed with her, around and around, until he felt her relaxing. Using his other hand, he thrust another finger back into her sheath, felt the ripple of her muscles.

Romulas licked her clit again.

Slowly, ever so slowly, he pressed his finger into her ass. She stiffened and he paused, licked her clit, stroked her pussy. Then he sucked harder on her clit.

Cream drenched his finger.

"Ohhhhh."

He pressed his finger deeper into her ass and she cried out.

"Easy. Breathe," he whispered against her.

She moaned and squirmed, pushing his finger deeper.

He smiled. "Yes, just like that." He played her pussy and her clit again, alternating between slow licks and fast darts of his tongue. Shallow thrusts in her pussy with his fingers and separating them, to spread her wide as he withdrew.

She shuddered and on her moan, he pressed the finger in her ass up past the tight

ring of muscles to his first knuckle.

"Oh. Oh. Oh. Romulas!" She shivered.

"Like that? The gods, you're tight."

He carefully began to move his fingers in tandem.

Her muscles grasped him. He could feel his fingers between the thin barrier separating them.

She moaned, louder.

"Romulas," her voice wavered.

"Still not loud enough."

He pulled her clit between his teeth, suckled hard, deep, and pumped his fingers into her pussy and her ass.

"Ohohohohohoh! I'm ... I can't." Her head thrashed back and forth. She screamed long and loud, "Romulas!" Her muscles clamped down so hard, he almost came.

He licked and laved, stroked and caressed, until the tremors quieted, then he withdrew his hands and climbed up her body.

Her chest glistened; her eyes were closed. Damp ringlets at her temples made him smile.

"I'm not done yet."

He held his cock, nudging her opening until the head was wet. He wanted in now.

Romulas grabbed her hips and surged inside. Her wet heat surrounded him, drawing him deeper, urging him on.

But he wanted to feel her come around him.

Her lips rose to meet his. She kissed him, uninhibited, open mouth. "More," she whispered.

The sun's rays slashed across his back. He looked down at her. Flexed his hips and reached between them, playing with her clit until she gasped and wrapped her legs around his hips.

"Harder, Romulas, fuck me harder."

"Your wish is my command." He hammered into her, until all he saw was her eyes watching him.

She arched, her arms flying out and clamped down on his cock.

He shot a jet of cum into her, on and on, groaning as his release shook him.

* * * *

Penelope lay beneath him, sweaty, panting and ... at peace.

Her legs, still wrapped around his waist, shook slightly. She smiled even as she dropped her arms from his neck.

Darting her tongue out, she licked his neck, just beneath his ear.

"You killed me, *cara*."

She smiled. "No, but maybe next time."

His chuckle vibrated against her as he rose up to look down at her. He cupped her face.

She was so in love with this man.

"You are?" he asked.

“Oh, did I say that out loud?”

His look softened, his eyes narrowed. “Say what aloud? You said next time.”

“Oh.” Thank goodness. “Yeah.”

His eyes narrowed even more. “What?”

She was insane. But she didn't care either. This was right, whatever this was. Taking a deep breath, she said, “I can really stay with you?”

He sighed and rolled to the side, pulling her atop him. “I'm not about to let you go anywhere.”

Maybe I really am his....

Just as she leaned up to kiss him, he smiled, a twinkle in his eye. “You really are.”

Chapter Nine

Penelope stared at the gossamer curtains lightly blowing in the breeze. The morning light had stretched into mid-morning so that the bright rays of the sun no longer slashed across the bed that sat against the wall. The sheets were all twisted, half in the floor, the other half draped over her.

What was she doing here? Did she care? She didn't have to go back and that was all that mattered. For the first time in a long time, nausea and worry didn't twist her stomach. Instead she sighed and stretched, contentment and peace flowing through her. On her stomach, her arm draping over the edge of the bed, she closed her eyes and remembered the magical night and day she'd spent with Romulas.

She knew he was in charge of the area because he'd told her that. Something about *Lares*. What was that? She'd have to ask him again.

This all seemed like a dream. He'd said something about the high council, and he'd asked her if she was a descendant of the fae. Fae? Granted, she'd believed that they had existed, and perhaps not in the way that most modern people limited them. She had never thought of the fae as little people, but more along the lines of a lost race knowledgeable in herbs, plants, and perhaps ... magic. She'd never thought of magic before. To her it was a form of science, something sooner or later explained through physics or chemistry. After all, had many not believed that twins were magical? And that was a matter of biology, mysterious, yes, but biology. And gunpowder, once thought the dark art of the Moors, was nothing more than chemicals mixed together creating a boom.

So what exactly was this?

The pool was magical. He'd told her that, had told her too of the legend surrounding it.

Penelope stood and walked to the window, the sheet draping behind her like a shroud. The wind blew the curtains against her.

Cherished, loved, worshipped. That was how she felt. She ran her hands over her arms and stared out at the day. Flowers bloomed from pots set along the balcony, others hung suspended from the air overflowing and cascading down in a rainbow of color. She wondered how all this was possible and decided not to worry about it.

Did children worry about how their imaginary friends came to be? No, the adults did.

Yet, she worried that perhaps she should be more cautious. What did she know of this man?

What she didn't know paled in comparison to what she did know. And that was that he'd never hurt her. He saved her, helped her, took her pain away.

She ran her hand over her face. Romulas believed she was somehow special. Special how? This was bizarre, yes, and as far as she knew, she was as unmagical as a

fencepost. But if he thought her special, she wasn't going to disillusion him.

He'd given her so much, what did she give him? Something special? Something to show how much she cared? How much?

Tears stung her eyes. How did she tell him? Show him? She knew she'd been in love with him since she'd found him at the pool the very first time. She knew some might argue that she was going into this all wrong, that she needed time to heal from her months with Edward.

Edward.

She grimaced.

Hadn't she wasted enough on that bastard? Hadn't he stolen enough of her? More importantly, she'd all but given him everything--like the people who left their homes unlocked and then wondered how a burglar got in. Or at least that was how she felt. Penelope rubbed her arms. Edward stole time, her security, herself.

It didn't matter to her what this...all this, was. She wanted it. It was safe here. She was cherished here.

She didn't want to go back, not ever.

No, she wanted this, wanted Romulas.

She stood staring out across the lawns down the slope to the pool. From here it shimmered in the sunlight, glinting softly.

What was it about the pool? He'd told her it was magical. That Venus herself had blessed the pool so that whomever she deemed worthy was bathed in its magic.

She wasn't of this world, but she was coming to understand magic. For her, it wasn't so hard to believe. She'd never really believed in evil, and she had slept beside it every night for almost a year.

Magic wasn't so far out of her realm. If a man could be as cold and heartless as Edward, then magic, goodness could happen.

And for her, it had happened.

For her, it was Romulas.

Whether the pool factored in was pointless to her. It was but the vessel that delivered her to Romulas, into the magic.

For the first time in longer than she could remember, she realized she was smiling from the simple pleasure of peace, of happiness.

On the air flutes danced.

Were there musicians downstairs? Could she play as well? She'd always wanted to play a musical instrument, but Edward had not liked to listen to music.

She closed her eyes and swayed to the sound, then realized something hung from her neck.

Reaching up she fingered the pendent that Romulas had hung around her neck. She picked it up, as it hung long between her breasts. The iron was hammered and patterned in swirls with small carvings on it. Stones set in four points on the circular medallion. He said it was for protection. She'd laughed and said she didn't need it as long as she had him.

He'd mumbled some words even as he left it on her.

Iron. He'd said it was iron.

No gold for her, but that was fine. Edward had given her golden and diamond gifts for months--always for particular events he wanted her to attend. But to be honest, she'd hated the flashy jewelry.

This, this pendent was ... pagan. Old. Otherworldly.

She let it drop and looked back out over the lawns. Clouds were rolling in. Sighing she turned and saw a dress draped over a chair that should be in a museum. Did they have museums here? The arms were a dull metal, iron or brass? Bronze? She knew not. Riches to her were not things to be studied, merely appreciated. Edward had put too much stock in them. She walked over and fingered the material. Soft as butterfly wings. The smell of lemons hung heavy and sharp in the air. She breathed deep and picked up the dark green gown. It shimmered, a dark promise, of what she knew not. For a moment, she merely turned it one way then the other and watched the play of light on the dark green gown. One way it appeared dark, the other it almost glowed a deep turquoise. How did material do that? She sighed and pulled it over her head. The material slid over her naked skin, whispering over her nipples, down her torso, and over her hips to fall like liquid at her feet. Every time she moved the material felt like a hand caressing her skin. She shivered and realized she was flushed. What was wrong with her?

Her gaze wondered again out to the Pool. What had he called it? Lover's Pool? She knew then what she wanted to give him. Stupid. The man had everything or it seemed he did. But she'd give him something else. Something more.

Something special. Of course anyone could go gather some. But she wanted to be the one to pick the white flowers that swayed beside the pool.

How did she get out of here? At the door, she found it open. The flagstone floor was cool beneath her bare soles.

The hallway wasn't dark and lit with sconces, as she would have imagined. Instead light, bright and beautiful, shined through archways that marched down both sides of the hallway. Outside the birds were still singing, their songs dancing with the flutes, or whatever instrument she heard. The air was warm yet pleasant.

If this be a dream, let me not awaken, she thought.

The dress still caressed her.

At the end to the arched hallway, the area opened up at the top of a wide stone staircase. To each side was a corridor. Doors were spaced on either side of arched windows.

She waited and listened, but nothing moved, nothing breathed. She started down the stairs.

Maybe it was all a dream and her man only came to her at night.

No, she shook her head, knowing that wasn't it. He'd made love to her that very morning with the sunlight bathing their bodies.

Her body warmed at the thought, her nipples tightening.

Sighing, she descending the stairs and waited.

A man dressed in a short white tunic stepped out from a side alcove. "My lady." He bowed.

She frowned. "How do I get out of here?" she looked past him and saw another arched hallway behind the stairs that led to a room at the far end. The double doors were

closed.

"You can't leave," the young man said. She noticed then the sword strapped to his side by the wide leather belt around his waist.

"I don't mean, leave." She twisted her hands. "It's just so beautiful outside. I wanted to go out."

He relaxed. "I'll escort you."

She raised a brow.

"Where's Romulas?" she looked back over her shoulder.

The young man jerked his head back towards the closed doors at the far end of the hallway. "He's in a meeting."

"Oh."

The young man--warrior?--opened the doors and led her out into the sunshine.

She closed her eyes and threw her head back, basking in the freedom.

"Why must you escort me?" She felt free. Free to do anything she wanted to do.

"My orders, my lady."

She stopped and opened her eyes, looking at him. He was not as tall as Romulas, but still she could easily see his muscles from the short tunic, and the banded sinews on his arms were testament he knew how to wield the sword strapped to his side.

"Aren't we safe here?" she asked, looking around at the peaceful beauty.

"The general makes certain we're safe."

"General?"

He smiled and a dimple winked in his cheek, giving the blond man a younger look on his long, weathered face. He was rather handsome she supposed, but not nearly as handsome as her dark Romulas.

"Romulas. He's general of the country."

"The country?" She shook her head. "The entire country?"

He sighed. "Yes. He's one of the greatest warriors. Conto is general to the greatest cities and Titon is general to the seas."

"But of course he is," she muttered.

Magic. It was all magic. She'd just remember that.

The grass tickled her bare feet. "I want to go to the pool," she told the warrior. "What do I call you?"

"Polonius."

She smiled. "Like Shakespeare?"

"I know no man named Shake. Is he good with a spear?"

She laughed out right. "Never mind." Looking around, she started walking to the side of the house. The villa was large, a burnished yellow in the afternoon light. Windows opened each wall, porticos lined the house. "Will you walk me down to the side of the pool? I wish to get something for Romulas."

He paused. "I'm not to let you go into the pool."

She shivered. "I don't wish to go in it. I just wish to gather some flowers for him."

He looked around. "But there's a garden around the side of the villa, my lady. Mayhap you'd rather look there first?"

She shook her head and waited. "I don't want those flowers. I want the ones near the pool."

"Why?" he crossed his arms.

She sighed and started across the lawns. Men. "For the simple reason that I want to give him a special gift." She glanced back over her shoulder to see the confused look on his face. Poor man. Sighing she swallowed some of her pride. "You can have no idea what your general has given me. I just want to repay his kindness."

"But...but..." He shook his head. "You're his wife."

She blinked. Wife? Wife? "I'm what?"

Wife. She stood, unmoving. They were bound. She knew that, and she knew he said he planned to keep her, but she had no idea he meant this way. Wife. She opened her hand and stared at the bright pink line that slashed across her palm. Bonded, blood shared, mated....

That sounded final

For a moment, an old apprehension tingled through her. But then she realized that he was hers, or was he? "Can he have another wife?"

The soldier shook his head, frowning. "A wife is a wife."

"Yes, but can he have more than one?"

He pulled back as if she'd slapped him. "Who put such strange notions into your head?" He shook his own. "*Lares* mate for life."

Mate. Wife. She should probably be terrified. But....

She wasn't. She was calm and at peace.

Penelope sighed. He couldn't take another wife. She loved Romulas, but bigamy wasn't something she could easily do. She'd have gladly handed Edward on to a woman with a list of warnings, but Romulas she would share with no woman.

She remembered the feel of his hands on her body, the way he worshiped her breasts, the way he pulled the centers deep into his mouth to suckle. The feel of his warm tongue as it traveled lower over her abdomen, tracing her ribs, the sensitive skin between her thigh and hipbone. The way he'd made her scream out his name as his mouth had licked and laved her clit, bringing her to such pleasure she knew she was wet now.

She would share none of that with another woman.

Nodding she turned and started across the lawn. "Good. I need to get him something that I know he doesn't have."

The man sighed. Polonius.

She smiled. "I suppose I can't call you Polly?" She glanced at him.

At his raised brow, she laughed.

"I'd rather you not, but I cannot stop you."

"I'm only teasing, Polonius."

At the side of the villa she walked down the slope at an angle. A hand on her arm had her stopping. "I don't believe we should be here." He frowned and pulled his sword free.

"But why? I just want some of those flowers over there. They are special to me. Special to Romulas. I want to give him some."

"We have some in the garden."

“But the garden is not the pool and it’s not the same.”

He all but growled at her and looked back up his shoulder towards the house. She could see the open windows from here. But there was no movement within.

“It’ll only take a moment, I promise.”

She pulled her arm away and walked towards the pool. As she neared, she saw the flowers sway in the breeze. The birds sang loud and long. The wind stilled. She stopped near the weeping willow whose branches rippled the water. At its base the white flowers, tall on their stems like none she had ever seen, looked like orchids yet smelled of roses and vanilla and only grew one to a stem.

She picked one and breathed the deep, sensual fragrance. Her hand on the tree, she smiled. A growl made her look at the water a few feet away. The water rippled.

What lay beneath?

The wind turned from still to gusty. Black clouds quickly boiled up, covering the sun. She looked to Polonius.

“My lady, come.” He moved towards her.

She looked up, shocked how the day went from bright to night. “Just one more.” She grabbed the flower and snapped it off. As she straightened, the water gurgled and growled.

“My lady!”

A beast rose from the water, hissing and chanting. Its skin was blue, the teeth dark yellow. An image from her very nightmares. She gasped and whirled. The vines of the flowers wrapped around her bare feet. She jerked and tried to get away.

“Pennn-eeelll-ooooopeee,” the beast whispered.

Chills danced over her skin. She wanted Romulas.

She looked to where Polonius was, but the branches of the willow, touching the water, had caged her in.

“Polonius!”

“My lady!”

She could hear him fighting something.

Romulas!

Chapter Ten

Romulas sat with his back to the wall. Bright daylight streamed in from the windows. Conto and Titon had merely sat torn between amusement and silent support.

"Why this one?" Lars asked again, sighing and rubbing his forehead.

Romulas took a deep breath. "Because she's the one I want, and if memory serves I was ordered to find a bride."

The King looked at him from beneath his brows, no smile on his face. "Be that as it may, I was hoping it would be someone a bit more suitable."

Romulas didn't move. For a moment he merely stared at the man he'd give his life to protect, a man he considered more than overlord, a man he thought of as a friend. "You don't like that the council wanted your kingdom solidified in their fashion. I don't want them, or you, dictating who my mate will or will not be. Penelope is my wife. I'll have you show her the respect she deserves."

They'd been over this and over this. The King stared at him. "You were the easiest of the three in terms of accepting my dictate. I did not, however, mean you were supposed to go out and marry the first skirt you came across."

Romulas stood and crossed his arms. "I hardly did that. How do you know she is not my intended mate, by one higher than you?"

The rueful tilt of Lars' mouth and the skeptical brow said his thoughts on the matter. "The pool?"

Romulas leaned onto the table. "I don't care if you approve or not, Lars. Penelope is my wife. We're bonded." He raised his palm and showed the king.

"You think I don't know that?"

"Then what the hell is this all about?"

The king sighed. "You're not just my generals. You're my friends. I don't want to see you taken advantage of."

"Fine, same goes. But hold on your judgments until you've at least met her," Conto contributed.

The king turned to him. "This should have been you. Rom is always the levelheaded one. You on the other hand have always gone off with your sword in your hand ready to rush in battle."

Conto chuckled. "It's the lady that holds my sword in her hand, Lars. I rarely need to use my own. And I never, ever rush."

Titon laughed. The King only smiled.

Romulas straightened, apprehension marching down his spine. He waited and listened. The flutes no longer sang; the birds were quiet.

He looked to the window and saw the darkness gathering in midday. The King turned in his chair and looked as well. "What the hell?"

Conto and Titon stood.

Romulas!

He heard her scream in his mind.

He didn't bother with the door, he vaulted through the window, landed on the lawn and rolled, came up pulling his sword free. He heard the others land. One of them sounded the battle call. Soldiers swarmed around the side of the villa to surround the four of them.

In the silence, he heard the growl and hiss.

Penelope screamed and he ran through his men down the hill. He couldn't see her. His heart in his chest, he hollered, "Penelope."

* * * *

Penelope looked at the monster who jerkily started to change. Her stomach trembled. The features were the same. The same as those horrible nightmares she had while with Edward. A monster with white, almost blue skin, the veins dark beneath the mottled covering, scabs over the bald crown. Slitted eyes that glowed as the monster stared at her. It was the mouth that clicked it all, brought it all straight from her nightmares into reality. The mouth was black, the teeth sharpened and yellow, dripping with slime. She'd dreamed the monster had bitten her, had fought and struggled even as those teeth had bit her over and over, the slime stinging until her entire body felt as if it were burning from acid.

Nightmares.

Reality.

They collided and imprisoned her where she stood.

The features became smaller, the grotesque bluish-white skin became pink, the bald, scabbed head changed into one with a full head of hair.

She blinked. No. No, yet it made sense.

No. She shook her head. "No."

He smiled. "Yes."

She gasped. "Edward?"

He chuckled, as he stepped from the water. "I really hate doing that, Penelope." He tsked. "Always running off, always going your own way." He shook his head as he came closer. "It's time for us to leave."

What the hell. Evil was one thing. She knew he was violent. Magic was one thing, but to be honest, this was beyond her.

Trembling, she tried to step back, but it did no good.

"I was supposed to claim you. Yet I wasn't ready to drag you under yet, you see." He laughed. "Let me introduce myself." He bowed and straightened. "I'm not really Edward. I'm a Nacken, a water demon. You were never supposed to actually come here. We wanted to get him to the other side." He tilted his head and looked at her. "But, as usual, you couldn't manage the most simple of things. I controlled you. You were to lure him to our side, through the water." His contemptuous gaze raked over her. "Yet you couldn't even do that, could you, Penelope. You were too eager, too easy."

For a moment, she couldn't think. "H-him?"

He rolled his eyes. "Romulas. The great leader of the *Lares Rurales*."

She stared, could only blink.

"Please. Did you think I didn't know? I thought we had him that last night. I heard the bastard. But there was no sign of him. Somehow you're protecting him. It took a long time for the oracle to find you, but finally the old crone did and I was sent. To woo you." His gaze raked over her. "How in the world you're one of the chosen is beyond me." He shrugged. "But the oracle knew you would only help solidify the Lar Kingdom." He spit. "The Nacken will arise again. Anyone other than the Lar ruling would be a blessing. They think they are so perfect, so powerful." He chuckled. "But without the correct mates, then what will become of them? Well, here you are." He frowned. "Now if you'll come with me, I can report back to my general and maybe just maybe we'll stop the others from finding their mates."

Her mind was whirling as if this was a dream. "What? What are you talking about? *Lares*? Demons? Kingdoms?" She was beyond freaked now.

Was she still here? Still with Romulas? Or had she already been taken back to Edward's realm. Then his words started to click. "What?"

"You were always so damn stupid," he hissed, the monster beneath rippling through the handsome features. "We needed you to draw him back to us. Away from his army. On our side of the realm he'd be weaker, easier to defeat. That was why I found you, why you were so closely watched. Yet I found, as time went on, I was conflicted. I wanted you simply because you were so important and the more you fought that, the more angry I became. There was a rush in knowing the great Romulas' mate lay beneath me, to know that she bowed before me. To know that I could inflict any punishment I chose and she wouldn't do a thing." He sniffed and straightened his shoulders. "We don't want the *Lares* ruling any longer."

"We?"

He shook his head and grabbed her arm. "Why am I bothering explaining this to you? You're too dumb to understand. Suffice it to say that you and I are going for a little swim."

She tried to pull her hand away. "No."

"No?" He threw his head back and laughed, then whirled on her, his handsome face stripped and replaced by the monster. His eyes glowed red. Teeth sharp and slimy snapped at her. "And just who is going to stop me?" He snapped his jaws close to her face and she screamed.

"Penelope!"

Romulas!

The demon laughed. "Awww.... How sweet. The warrior lover came to claim you?"

His words jogged her from her stupor. "Claim?" Then she held her palm between them. "He's already done that."

His eyes dropped to her palm, and he hissed, recoiling. He grabbed her again and jerked her towards the water. "It won't matter. You're coming with me." The water soaked the hem of her gown. "This might work even better, now he'll have to follow you back and he'll be weakened."

He picked her up as if she weighed no more than one of the willow leaves. The water lapped at her feet, then she was flying through the air to land in the middle of the

pool. Her yell was cut off as the water closed over her head.

The monster was in the water with her, something brushed her leg. She came up gasping and coughing.

"Penelope!" Hisses filled the air, and the water moved as if something nested just beneath the surface. Then the nest rippled, and giant vipers slithered to the shore, shifted, and before her eyes became monsters that gained the shore. There were more. More rose from the water.

"Romulas?"

Where was Edward or whatever, whoever the hell he was? "Stay back," she told him. "It's all about you. They want you!" She tried to find her footing.

A laugh danced over the water and something moved closer to her. The water was dark, no longer calm, but roiling and dangerous. Other monsters were rising from the water.

"A wife does not," Romulas yelled, as steel rang against steel and hisses died in the air. Something or someone else was chanting. "Does not tell her husband what to do."

She started swimming towards the shore. "Says who?"

"This." Again steel on steel. "Husband."

She treaded water and realized no one was beside her. Then she thought of the guard that had been with her. "Polonius, you okay?"

"I told you we shouldn't come out here," Polonius said. She could see men battling dripping creatures. Creatures who were still rising from the water.

She brought this all on them.

"Look at them," a voice hissed in her ear. She looked, but only water was there, in the shape of Edward's face. The water face smiled at her. "They will slaughter the ruling *Lares*." A watery laugh danced out. "Mayhap you have more uses than we thought. All in one fell swoop."

She looked back at the shore. "No. No. No!" From somewhere inside her, she felt a shimmer, a warmth that spread from her center to her head. Power. "No!" She screamed. She loved Romulas. She would not, *not* allow him or his friends to be harmed because of her.

The water around her began to change, began to calm and glow a faint blue green.

"I don't think so, little witch," Edward's voice hissed.

"Romu--" She was jerked under the water. Held. Something hit her against the side of the head, but she raked out with her nails. The skin beneath her hands felt slick, scaly like a fish. Still she fought. The hands were pulling her deeper and deeper, something wrapped around her ankles. Something pierced her skin, burning up her calf and she opened her mouth to scream. Bubbles streamed to the surface and water rushed in.

She felt a hand close over the pendant Romulas gave her. Suddenly, the hands and hold on her ankles released her. In her mind she thought of their lovemaking, of the moment he strung the chain around her neck, then of the words he mumbled with his hand over the pendant before he let it drop to her chest.

The water calmed around her. She looked up, her lungs burned, the surface....

She tried to cough out the water she swallowed, but more rushed in. Wasn't going to....

Romulas....

The water around her darkened yet glowed.

Chapter Eleven

Romulas sliced his way through the Nackens rising from the water. He knew the others fared well, and he heard Conto make a blithe remark. Penelope.

He could no longer see her in the water. A storm of bubbles rumbled the surface where he'd last seen her.

He hacked another ugly water demon down and waded into the water. A large monster rose in front of him. "Looking for Penny?" Sharp teeth dripped venom. "She's no longer your concern." He held up his palm and Romulas saw the mark of his pendant glowing red on the skin in the palm of the demon.

He stood his ground. The water beneath the surface was calming, staring to glow. He looked at the demon.

"She's great in bed, isn't she?" the demon hissed, then morphed. A man, wet and dripping but handsome, stood in front of him. "There is nothing more wondrous than breaking a strong woman." The man laughed.

And in that moment, Romulas knew this was the man that had so hurt Penelope. Very softly, he said, "You're going to die."

The man laughed. "You think so? Even if you kill me, it'll be too late for her." He motioned back towards the deeper part of the pool.

Rage flooded through Romulas. He couldn't loose her.

"Appropriate, is it not?" the demon laughed. "Broken by the legendary lover's pool. Lovers parted. One died, doesn't the legend say? It was supposed to be you."

A red haze filled his vision. He brought his sword up, but the demon deflected it.

Another sword came down stabbing the demon in the side. The demon whirled, his eyes going red. Romulas brought his sword up and sliced across. The demon's hiss died as his head left his body.

The man's body immediately became that of a bloated water demon. The water stopped roiling, calmed. The air cleared, and the dark clouds blew away as if never there.

Romulas stood panting. "Penelope!"

Nothing answered him. He swam to the center, heard the men in the pool with him. Then he saw her. Just there beneath the surface near the center of the pool.

"Nooooo!"

His strokes ate up the water. He reached down, grabbed her and hauled her to the surface. The water around them glowed.

"No. No. Come on, *cara*. Don't leave me. Not now. *Cara!*" He swam and dragged her back to the shallows. One of the men helped him lift her from the deeper water onto the shore.

He dropped to his knees beside her, wiping the hair from her face. Her eyes stared sightlessly up into the sky.

"No! No! No!" He grabbed her arms and yelled, "Penelope! Come back to me."

He tried to feel her, to heal her, but he felt ... nothing. Just a warm emptiness. His throat closed up. "Please," he whispered, "please."

* * * *

Penelope stared around her. The air was pale blue, hazy and glowing, almost like fog.

She looked around but saw nothing. Then the mists began to shift, to pulse and part.

A woman, the most beautiful woman Penelope had ever seen, walked slowly towards her. Her hair was long and glimmering like spun gold. Her eyes were the color of the fog around them and her skin seemed to glow. She was tall and curvaceous, her breasts heavy and swaying beneath the gossamer pink gown. She wore an armband and wide, plump lips broke into a smile.

"You, Penelope, did exactly as I'd hoped you would," the woman said softly, yet the words seemed to echo around the area.

"I-I did?" Penelope wondered just what she had done. "But I did nothing." She thought back over the past, of her imprisonment with Edward--or whoever he was--of her dreams of Romulas. Of her future.

"Is he real?" she asked.

The woman smiled. "Romulas? He's most definitely real, my dear. There are more things between heaven and earth than mere mortals want to admit. The *Lares* exist in the world of others. A world created when immortal men became too powerful."

Penelope frowned.

The woman sighed. "Our world shifted, so that it runs parallel with the mortal world, yet exists on its own. It's rather like two roads that run side by side and can only be visited by certain locations."

She thought that over. "And the pool is one of these locations?"

The woman again smiled and her face seemed to glitter with starlight. "Yes. In a manner of speaking. Water is always a strong passage between worlds, no matter which worlds. But this pool is special." She smiled another secret smile. "Sacred. I blessed it and protected it so that Romulas's true mate could only come to him and he never to her. For it was long foreseen that the *Lares* might be destroyed if they traveled to the mortal world." Her face grew sad. "Not that the warnings stop them, but there are some we cannot afford to allow passage into that world. Romulas is one of them. He is a great man. A good man."

Penelope blinked and looked around. "Where am I?"

"For the moment, safe. You must return soon though. He will think the legend destroyed you both rather than save you."

Penelope nodded. "The legend of the lovers at the pool?"

The woman smiled.

"Who are you?" Penelope asked.

The blond head glinted in the strange, luminous light as she tilted her head. "I am Venus."

"As in the goddess of love?"

Again the woman smiled.

A goddess.

Penelope took a deep breath. She must have really hit her head hard.

A soft laugh tinkled out and bounced within the air, reminding Penelope of harps.

"What of me? Why me?" she asked. "Romulus is a great man, yes. I know that. How great, what he's done matters not to me." It did, but not in the way of power or position. She looked down. "He treats me as if I'm special," she admitted quietly.

"And so he should." A warmth filled the air around her and Penelope looked up to see that Venus was standing very close to her, so close that Penelope could smell the light scent of the white flowers surrounded the goddess. "You, Penelope are very special. You're his mate for more reasons than just the pool." The blue of the goddess's eyes seemed to darken, no longer pale and clear as a summer's day but the deep blue of sapphires. "The *Lares* need special mates. Mates who cannot be corrupted by others here. Women who love the men, not the power, not the status, but the men." She shrugged and her diaphanous gown shifted so that the folds shimmered a dull gold-green. "However, all in our world know of the powerful *Lares*. They are the branch of Italian fae sitting on the High Council. The Council rules that world--or so they think." She waved a hand. "It matters not. Suffice it to say, we've searched long and hard for their mates. And we found them, or rather heard of them. Women, mortals with special gifts."

"But I have no gift," she protested.

Venus smiled. "You my dear have the power of a woman. As do I. You are a true woman that tempts men to love, not just with their dicks, but with their hearts." She laughed and shook her head. "For the *Lares*, this is essential. But you also have the power of belief, a power that when you believe in something long enough, hard enough, you will always see the truth."

Penelope shook her head. "So it was all ... planned? Then how do we--"

Venus held up a hand. "No. No one was coerced. That was a rule. You see, many are tired of the *Lares*, of the strong fae rulers sitting upon the councils' seats. Vampires, fae, weres, elves. There are other beings out there that want the power as well, but are not as..." She frowned. "Many are evil and are not allowed those freedoms. That does not, however, keep them from striving for it. We knew that the *Lares* mates would be of the mortal world and would bridge to ours from the water. That was all we knew. I decided to use the pool for Romulus."

Her eyes glowed. "You must, Penelope, warn the others. I'm afraid that having been set back, the Nacken and those that fight with them will try even harder to stop the others from finding their true mates. And without their true mates, the *Lares* kingdom and way of life is in jeopardy."

Her mind was whirling. "I feel like stupid idiot. Is this a dream?"

Venus smiled. "No, my dear. You'll remember this and you must pass it on to the generals. To the King." The smile changed and Venus sighed. "I envy you women."

With that she began to fade. "Remember, you have the power of belief and of truth. No one can take that from you, Penelope." Her form faded before her voice, so that the words still echoed, and the bright blue fog began to recede. Penelope's head felt heavy, her heart slowed. She closed her eyes.

Chapter Twelve

"Penelope! No. No. No," a voice tunneled to her.

Romulas. She blinked and realized she was staring at the bright blue sky.

"Rom. Romulas," someone said. "Come, it's too late."

Penelope gasped, or tried to. She rolled over and coughed, water spewing from her lungs, her throat, even her stomach. Shudders shook her. She felt arms go around her, lift her. She smelled him as she laid her head on his shoulder.

Romulas. He smelled of the outdoors, of the lemon groves, of man. His heart hammered against the side of her breast as he stood and strode across the lawns. She felt the rumble of his voice, but the words and meanings were lost to her. Why couldn't she think?

Before she knew what was happening, someone was stripping off her clothing as she leaned against Romulas. He was still barking orders, but now, she couldn't focus on the words. Someone held something to her lips and she sipped. Warmth trickled down her throat, swirled in her stomach.

Then she felt the warmth surround her, felt water lapping at her, up to her chest, even as arms again held her. For a moment she panicked, but his voice rumbled against her, calming her. The words finally penetrated.

"Shh. You're safe, *cara*. You're safe now." His arms felt like manacles around her, yet didn't bother her. Fear didn't rear its head, instead here, in his arms, was the safe harbor she'd always searched for.

After several moments, she realized the water was within a room. Steam rose around them. It was quiet around them, the water lapping against tiles. The pool was inside, light from the afternoon pouring into the window. Again the wind carried the sound of birds and flutes.

She sighed and tried to relax.

"Better?" he asked.

She nodded and pushed back, realizing that she no longer shook.

His eyes were the same dark intensity as they always were, but the hint of pleasure that always twinkled in their depths was gone. A seriousness shrouded him.

His hands tightened on her, one on her lower back, the other on her hip bone. She was draped across his lap.

"I almost lost you today," he whispered, his gaze never wavering.

She remembered the monster--Edward--and she remembered more. The water, the blue light, the goddess.

She licked her lips. "Is he dead?"

One black brow rose.

She supposed it probably was a stupid question.

"Why did you put yourself in that danger?" he asked. "Polonius said you wanted

flowers?" His voice was growing louder.

She brushed her hand over his face. "I wanted to give you a special gift. Flowers from the willow. I could smell them when awake and I still thought this all a dream."

His eyes narrowed and his mouth thinned.

She knew she should tell him of Venus. "I have something to tell you, something I think you and your friends, whomever they are, should know," she leaned up and kissed the side of his mouth. "But I don't want to talk to them right now." She shook her head. "I don't know what's real anymore. What's not. What's a lie and what's truth." She looked into his eyes. "The only time I feel alive, whole is when I'm in your arms. I need you. Please, Romulus." She leaned up and kissed him. "Please make love to me."

For a moment he was stiff as she ran her hands up his chest, the water slick and warm. His muscular chest smooth and bare except for the scars that marred it.

Then she felt him shift, realized he was wasn't wearing his tunic.

She leaned back, looked into his eyes. "Please. You're the only thing I have to hold onto. You're all I need. Nothing more."

He breathed deep, his nostrils flaring. "You're mine."

She nodded. "I'm yours."

He brushed the water from her face, smoothed the wet hair back behind her ears. He slowly kissed her brows, the bridge of her nose, the corner of her mouth. Then his firm lips settled over hers and her thoughts floated with the waves.

His mouth slanted over hers, his lips hard and demanding. She opened her mouth and his tongue swept in, devouring, tasting, calling.

She tried to pull free, but he followed her, grasped the back of her head and held her in place. Finally, he raised his lips. "You will never scare me like you did today."

She leaned up and kissed him. Beyond him, she saw a wide bench set against the wall. "Come," she slowly stood, noted her legs still shook.

For a second, he frowned at her, but then he rose. She led him to the bench and motioned him down. He tried to pull her down with him, but she shook her head. "I want you. I want to learn and taste every inch of you."

"Not today." His fingers ran through her hair.

"Yes today." She knelt between his thighs, noted that he was already semi-aroused.

"You almost died."

She grinned and licked the corner of her mouth, noting how his eyes smoldered. "I feel very much alive." Penelope ran her hands up his corded calves, to trail her nails over the insides of his knees. He flinched. She smiled. Her hands smoothed up his thighs, back to his knees. "I want you to feel as alive as I do."

One brow arched, but her hands trailed back up his thighs to glide over his hipbones. She lightly grasped him, noted how he instantly hardened even more in her hand. She gently raked her nails down the length of his cock, over the bulbous head, back up to his balls.

His breath hissed out.

Smiling, still raking her nails over him, she leaned forward and licked the tip, watching him from beneath her lashes. "I want to taste you again."

His eyes were narrowed and blood stained high on his cheekbones. She pulled him taut and closed her lips over the tip, dancing her tongue over him.

"The goddess!" he gritted out, his hips jerking.

* * * *

Romulas watched the nymph nestled between his legs. Her wide, luscious lips stretched over his cock. Her mouth was warm, wet, and so damned inviting.

He stilled, though he wanted to thrust deep. Dimples winked at him as she twirled her tongue over and around the tip again, even as her nails raked up the underside of his cock.

"There's a saying about playing with fire, *cara*."

Her grin was wicked. She pulled him deep, and deeper still, all the while her tongue dancing, her hands moving, her nails raking over his balls.

He closed his eyes, burst of lights flickering behind his lids as he pumped into her. But she shifted back. He reached out, clasped her head, and lifted his hips. Her eyes watched him. He watched her sucking his dick.

His balls tightened and he could feel the ending straining against his control. He didn't want to go in her damn mouth. Maybe later, but not now. Now he had an overwhelming desire to mark her, claim her as his own, remind her who she belonged to. Yet her siren's mouth beckoned him deeper.

He thrust once, twice, then with a roar, jerked himself from her mouth.

The breath panted from his lungs, his heart slammed against his ribs and his cock was so full it fucking hurt.

Penelope sat at his feet, on her knees, her hands now clasped in her lap. The look of submissive wickedness danced in her eyes.

He pulled back on his control. "Get on the bench."

Her eyes widened for a moment, but she complied, turning to sit on it.

He shook his head. "Not like that," he growled and motioned with his fingers. "On your knees, holding onto the end."

A faint frown marred her brow, but she shuffled into position, her knees sinking into the cushion, leaning down to grasp the iron ending of the bench.

Romulas breathed deep. She was open to him, glistening. For a moment, he could only stare, the need to pound his claim on her overwhelming. But he didn't want to frighten her. Not after all she'd been through.

"Romulas?" she quietly asked, turning to look at him over her shoulder.

He pulled the bench away from the wall a bit, then threw his leg over it so that he straddled the bench. She was perfect. He trailed a finger down her back, to the concave of the small of her back, over the luscious cheeks of her ass.

"There is something about your ass that fascinates me," he muttered.

She squirmed as he squeezed the globes in his hands, caressing, squeezing, then caressing again.

He scooted forward and leaned down. Breathing deep, he smelled her, and the pain in his dick intensified.

Romulas danced his fingers up the backs of her thighs and she blew out a breath. The pink of her pussy glistened with moisture. He swiped his finger over her slit,

grinning when she moaned. He stood, leaned over her, even as he took her clit between his fingers and pulled. She shuddered. "I want you screaming again in pleasure. I want your screams to echo in this chamber," he whispered, letting her clit go to swipe his fingers around her wet entrance. He licked her ear, licked a line from her ear to her neck where her pulse galloped.

He nestled against her, his hands reaching to cup her breasts that dangled. He lifted them, squeezed and caressed before he pulled the nipples between his fingers. She moaned again.

He reached down and positioned himself, just inside her opening. He held her with a hand on her hip, the other pulling and twisting her nipple just as he surged deep. She cried out.

Romulas smiled and pumped into her, long, slow measured thrusts.

She shuddered beneath him. With each deep thrust, he pulled harder on her nipple, with each lighter, shallow dig, he merely caressed.

She sighed and moaned again.

"You are mine."

She only nodded.

Romulas jerked out, and sat on the bench. He hauled her up and turned her so that she straddled his thighs. He sat her down, so that her ankles dangled on the other side of the bench.

Watching her eyes, he tilted his hips, hers grasped in his hands even as he brought her down on him.

She was tight as a fist and slick with honey. He closed his eyes, feeling at peace for the first time since he'd looked out the window and knew something was wrong.

Fear and rage still thrummed through him.

Her mouth was open, even as she moaned, her eyes half closed in passion. He leaned up and kissed her throat, tasting that scent that was only Penelope, lightly vanilla and purely sensual. "I will never let another have you." He leaned back and stared into her aqua eyes. "No matter if they're mortal or of my world. The only one." He thrust deep, and again, reveling in her moaning cries. "To have you." Embedded to his balls, he rocked against her, eliciting a shudder from her. "Will be me. No one else."

He trailed his hands up and down her back. Back and forth.

"Look at me."

Like she could look anywhere else. His dark eyes demanded, just as did his deep gravelly voice. Her pussy pulsed and wept at his alternate short digs and deeper thrusting, her body growing tighter and tighter. The tension coiled with each stroke of his full thick cock. She wanted him. Only him. "Only you."

"Caress your breasts." He watched her, didn't look away from her gaze until she hesitantly brought her hands up and weighed each breasts in each hand.

"Play with your nipples." His voice was dark, full of lust, retribution and something she couldn't put her finger on.

"Do it." He kept rocking inside her. "For me."

Her eyes slid closed even as she pulled her nipples between her thumbs and middle fingers. It was as if someone jerked an invisible string between her breasts and

pussy to a taut line, waiting to be plucked.

"Again," he whispered, once again his hands on her hips, withdrawing and thrusting.

Penelope pulled and played, learning that she liked the intense feeling of pulling harder the deeper he thrust.

"Gods and goddess," he muttered. "You tighten like a fist every time you do that." She grinned into his eyes as she again pulled hard on her nipples, making herself moan.

His eyes on hers, he trailed his hands down her backbone to cup her buttocks. She cried out when he grasped each cheek and pulled them apart. His wicked fingers danced around his cock sliding in and out of her.

In. Out. In. Out.

Then his fingers twirled around her anus and she stiffened. His eyes seemed to burn with a dark fire. "Relax," he urged, thrusting deep. "Your nipples."

A wicked grin pulled at his mouth, the skin over his face tight.

She felt his fingers, moving closer and closer, around and around her nether hole, even as he thrust slow and long into her. Then he changed the tempo, digging her with short sharp jabs.

Penelope closed her eyes and twirled her nipples between her fingers. She felt his fingers, two, one from each side, stretching her anus. She could no more hold in the shudder that rippled through her than the moan that cried out and bounced around the room.

"Still not a scream, I don't think."

His mouth nibbled on the side of her neck and she shivered, even as she felt one long finger slide deep into her ass. "Oooohhhh."

"You're so fucking tight," he mumbled against her. "I can feel my dick sliding in and out of you."

His words trembled through her as he pumped harder and faster, his cock stroking a hidden spot deep within her. One hand splayed across the small of her back, but his other hand was still on her ass, she felt his finger lodge deeper into that forbidden passage, could only gasp as he withdrew it and then stroked his finger back inside her.

The tension built and coiled.

"You like that."

She only nodded. "More." She leaned up and kissed him, open mouthed and frantic. "Fuck me harder, Romulas."

His hand fisted in her hair, jerking her so that her eyes opened and she looked at him. "You're mine."

He stroked her deeper with his cock, deeper with his finger, the alternating slide of each tightening her. His cock stroked deep, and as he withdrew, his finger slid deeper. In. Out. In. Out. Tighter and tighter until the double penetration, double motion shattered her control, ripping an orgasm from her. She screamed, the echo mixing with his yell, bouncing around the room.

Epilogue

King Lars looked at the assembly at the dinner table. The smell of roasted linger birds and sage hung in the air, laced with garlic and scent of fresh scunta bread. Carafes of olive oil and jars of lemon wedges were placed down the table amidst the food and bottles of wine.

He breathed deep and studied the woman that won Romulas's heart and soul. She was without a doubt beautiful. Her curves enticed and the dark hair and strange aqua eyes would call to any man.

But she only answered to one. He smiled at his friend, who still hadn't taken so much as two steps away from Penelope. Not that he could blame the man. He hadn't seen Romulas like that since the long ago fateful day when their villages were sacked by marauding harpies, killing Romulas's entire family. That rage had been banked upon the death of the harpy tribe that led the attack. But today, today that rage had blazed anew and with that rage, Lars saw how deeply his friend truly felt for this woman. It only took one look at her to see she felt the same way.

Her story however was another matter.

Conto shook his head yet again. "Venus? *The Venus?*"

Penelope's laugh danced out. "As in the goddess of love among other things--as she added."

Conto frowned. "I wish this got me out of the damn marriage deal you strung together," he said, looking now at Lars.

She sighed. "You're not listening. Venus knew of the marriages, of your mates. Of me, even--which I still find difficult to believe."

"Are you certain you didn't dream this?" Titon asked, rolling his goblet stem between his fingers.

"She didn't dream it," Romulas said from the other end of the table, his hands crossed over his abdomen as he lounged in his chair. The wide band of green, gold, and purple that trimmed the collar, sleeves and hem glinted dully in the flickering candlelight.

Lars tilted his head in acquiesce. "What did she want you to tell us again?"

The woman looked at him, then dropped her gaze. He'd been trying to put her at ease all evening, but felt it would be a long while before she was as open with him as he'd wish her to be. After what she'd been through, he couldn't find fault in her hesitancy.

She again related the story of what she saw while they'd apparently thought her dead. He would never forget the look of raw despair on Rom's face when they couldn't get Penelope to respond.

"So we now have to worry about Nackens sucking our brides-to-be down the water so we're not mated?"

She shrugged. "It's only my opinion, but the way I understood it was that the

other side, the Nackens or monsters or whatever and whoever is all working together knows the passage for the mates is water. They're using the portals and the women in hopes of luring you to them so you'll be easier to destroy. At least that was what Edward said about Romulas. With what Venus told me, I can only assume that she's protected you all as well."

Her gaze raked over him, including him in her *you all*. He knew he too needed to find a wife, but though he'd been looking, none had called to him.

"Wonderful!" Conto slapped his hand on the table and emptied his wine glass in one swallow. "Not only do I have to marry when I really don't want to. I now have to contend with some pissed off water demons as well. Life is grand."

"Con," Titon cautioned.

"This was not," Conto said motioning to the table, "my idea. I've been against the whole marriage thing from the beginning."

Lars, King of all the *Lares* rubbed his head.

"But you have to marry," Penelope said. "The continuation of the kingdom itself, whatever that may be, rests in you all claiming your mates."

Conto sighed and closed his eyes, then his eyes snapped to hers. "Yes, we've heard this before. Hell, the only funny thing in all this is that it even includes our dear king."

She looked at him, then at Rom, and nodded. "Yes, I believe Venus also included the king." Her shoulders were pale and the jeweled clasp of her tunic twinkled as she shrugged. "I can't swear on it. This is all very new to me." She waved a hand. "Magic and evil and whatever."

Romulas leaned over and grasped her chin. "But you're accepting it."

Her smile dimpled and the love in her eyes shown. "Anything for you."

Romulas leaned further and kissed the woman softly on the lips.

Now if the rest of them could find that.

Great, the entire fate of the kingdom not only rested with mortal women with special powers, but on his men being smart enough to claim them.

Lars rubbed his forehead again and wondered who would be next....

From *The Lover's Fountain*

By
Eryn Blackwell

Coming soon!

Chapter One

Conto cursed. He hated, absolutely hated the fact he was being forced to wed. It made him want to keep to himself even more. But that, unfortunately, wasn't an option.

He sighed and stepped out of his palazzo and into the Venetian night. The moon was hidden behind the wisps of clouds but he could still see. Still had to see.

Cursing again, he tried to override the constant anger that seemed to beat at him as the tides beat against this great city.

Nothing worked.

General Conto, ruler of the *Lares Compitales*, keeping order in the subdivisions and crossroads of cities...he was reduced to finding a wife because his friend and king had *ordered* it of him. If he'd wanted a damn wife, he'd have found one himself.

He was happy for his friend Romulas, who had recently found his soul mate, he really was. But a soul mate for him? He shook his head. No. It wasn't to be, no matter what oracles, goddesses or legends said of or to him.

Conto walked through the night, the fog swirling around him. He saw his own kind, *lares*, or Italian fae going about their business. Women laughing together, men talking in whispers, men escorting ladies from shops to gondolas, couples kissing. Here, torches lit the way, stones gleamed from the damp in their flickering light.

Yet through the veil, that separated their worlds, sometimes, he could glimpse the other side. Humans shuffling hither and yon, thinking if they stopped just for a moment, the world must certainly halt as well. Talking on gadgets connected to their ears, or tapping on contraptions in their laps with strange blue screens. Torches didn't light the way there, but fake lighting. He had issues with fake lighting. Sunshine, the moon, starlight, fire...these things were real, elements of the world itself. But this other.

He scoffed and shoved his hands in his pockets. Though he, as had most of those living in the larger cities, had taken to wearing human clothing. It was hypocritical he knew, but by outlawing it, as it had once been, a huge market and crime had emerged. Humans had been kidnapped for their clothing, for shoes. It had seemed easier to let the *Lares Compitales*, wear what they wished. And if they wished for the fine clothes from human shops, then he would not stop them. He found a way to keep the order and the balance between his domain and theirs and he kept it.

He wove his way through the streets, safe here. He'd left out of the side entrance of his palazzo that few knew existed. He was tired of the guards. The guards his king had put on him, as if he could not walk his streets alone.

When the anger threatened yet again, he stopped shoved it back and wove his way around the corner to a small alcove of buildings. Here was a temple to their goddess Venus. In the human world the building was a small deserted chapel. What a shame. Here it was still beautiful, the stones intricately laid, withstanding time and battles. Gargoyles and beings, spites and stone spirits guarded the domain. In the center of the courtyard, at the bottom of the temple steps stood a fountain. It was wide enough across that a dozen people could swim in it if they chose. Perhaps not swim as it was rather shallow. Water shot up from it's center and showered back down in an arching umbrella. He'd always found it peaceful here, found he came here time and again.

He closed his eyes and breathed deeply, listening to the sound of the canal at his back, to the sound of the water trickling from the fountain.

And crying.

His eyes shot open.

He scanned the darkened area and waited, rather irritated someone else might be here in his sanctuary.

Yes, there it was again.

Someone sniffed.

Conto put his hand on his dagger. There in the shadowed doorway something or someone shifted.

Memories of fighting water demons set on destroying the *lares* flashed unbidden into his mind.

But he waited.

He heard laughter float across the night, the sound of a woman moaning quickly followed by a man's yell, the lap of the canal, the trickle of the fountain. His attention stayed focused on the doorway.

The clouds drifted and the moon's light shone down, turning the world around him into a pale foggy light.

A figure stepped away from the temple, a shimmering figure. One from the other side. He blinked and wondered if the woman was here or if he was merely seeing her through the veil that separated their worlds.

Conto didn't move. He waited.

She drew a deep breath and the wind shifted, on it rode a faint floral scent mixed with citrus--her scent.

He drew a deep breath, but it wafted away.

She stepped fully into the moonlight and walked to the fountain. Her long, lithe frame reminded him of graceful willows. Her pale hair was bleached almost white in the moonlight, long almost to her waist. The dress she wore was a long sheath, and clung to her curves so that even from here he could see her nipples pebble against the silky material.

Yet still he waited.

He'd always appreciated women, had made a sport of the chase, of the hunt, of

the seduction. At least he had until several weeks ago when he'd been ordered to find a wife.

On that thought, he shook his head and relaxed, wondering what she was doing here. The air around her continued to shimmer, with a faint pulse.

His friends had always laughed that women would be the death of him. If he had to marry one, that would no doubt prove true.

She wiped at her eyes and he sighed, closing his...

He felt her, the loneliness, the heartache caress over him like the fog whispering around the courtyard. He kept her pain at bay. He'd learned long ago to keep other's feelings and emotions from slamming into him.

Yet something in her longing called to him.

He opened his eyes and watched as she arched her neck back and stared at the moon, the light shining down and caressing her like a lover's hand.

Conto's dick hardened just looking at her, or maybe it had been her scent.

Gods she was beautiful.

He sighed. Well, hell.

Check out Eryn's website at www.erynblackwell.com