



The Druid's Glen 4:
HIGHLAND FIRES
By
Donna Grant

© copyright June 2007, Donna Grant
Cover art by Alex DeShanks, © copyright June 2007
New Concepts Publishing
Lake Park, GA 31636
www.newconceptspublishing.com

This is a work of fiction. All characters, events, and places are of the author's imagination and not to be confused with fact. Any resemblance to living persons or events is merely coincidence.

*For my readers who begged for Lugas to have his own Happily Ever After.
With much love and thanks. God Bless.
Enjoy!*

Chapter One

Isle off the coast of west Scotland
Summer 1629

Lugus stood atop the small cliff on his isle and watched the sun crest the horizon, its bright orange glow streaking across the gray sky. It was a daily ritual, one he had done from the moment his mortality had begun.

In the nearly five years since he did the unthinkable and nearly destroyed Earth and the Realm of the Fae, he had pushed his past life and the horrors he committed from his mind.

But there was one thing he couldn't push away.

The memory of Moira.

A Druid priestess who had powers granted to her by the Fae, a woman so incredibly beautiful that Lugus would have done anything to claim her as his own. Despite his great love for her, he was not her mate. Even when he discovered this, he refused to give her up. It wasn't until she sacrificed herself for her mate that Lugus saw what true love was.

That was the day his new life, a life of mortality, had begun.

He inhaled the sea air deeply and stretched his arms over his head before he turned and faced the village across the sea. His ventures to the small village were as rare as he could make them.

Somehow the people there knew he wasn't a mere mortal, that he used to be something more. The ones that did speak to him weren't what he would call friendly, but they were civil. He had learned who those people were and made sure to only trade with them.

His gaze moved to his small boat that sat waiting for him. He blew out a reluctant breath and started down the slope. The sooner he left, the sooner he could return to his haven, the only place he felt he could be himself.

Lugus chuckled to himself as he climbed in the boat and set the oars to rowing. If only the people that used to fear him could see him now. He once held the power of two realms in his hands, a power so great that he could have ruled all the realms. Yet now he was hesitant to face a small village of people and their whispers and glances behind his back.

Sweat beaded his brow and rolled between his shoulders when he finally reached the shore. For long moments he stared at his small island, his home and refuge. Some nagging feeling told him to return immediately and not venture into the village, that if he walked onto the Scottish shore his life would be forever changed.

As a Fae he would have known immediately what the threat to him was, but as a mortal he was still learning to discern the strange, and sometimes unwanted, intuitions that assaulted him. He debated with himself for several heartbeats, but the hunger in his belly ruled the day.

His hands immediately went to the sword at his back and the dagger at his waist. Just knowing he was prepared helped him face whatever lay ahead. He flexed his hands before he jumped from his boat to pull it onto shore and tie it off. Regardless of what his senses told him,

he had to get more supplies. Eating wasn't an option.

He kept his eyes forward as he walked to the village. A group of children stopped their play and whispered among themselves as he passed. Lugus should have been immune to his treatment but each time it occurred, it hurt worse than the last. Out of the corner of his eyes he noticed the people that gave him a wide berth, and others that would stare after him as if he was some monster.

And he was, in more ways than they realized.

He reached the millers and went inside to purchase more yeast and what few herbs he wasn't able to grow in his small garden. Learning to cook had been something he had enjoyed and he found he had a knack for it.

After he paid for his purchases, he tucked the package under his arm and headed for his next stop. Jonathon Frasier's cottage. Jonathon was one person that actually treated Lugus like a man.

He had come upon Jonathon during a particularly vengeful storm that had tossed many boats onto shore. Jonathon had been desperately trying to tie up his small skiff as his pregnant wife and small son looked on.

Lugus lent a hand and they got the skiff tied. Since that time, Jonathon had gone out of his way to befriend Lugus. Now, Jonathon, an expert hunter, supplied Lugus with leather. Lugus then turned them into scabbards for the swords and daggers Lugus crafted.

"Morn', Lugus," Jonathon called as he walked from his cottage on the outskirts of the small village. "I wasn't expecting you so soon."

Lugus shrugged. "I've had an order placed for a sword and thought I would get to work on the scabbard while I finish a few smaller pieces."

Jonathon smiled as his gaze moved to the scabbard on Lugus' hip. "'Tis no wonder word has spread far and wide of your craftsmanship. I've never seen anything of the like before."

Of their own accord, Lugus' eyes looked at the intricately designed scabbard. The many hours it took to do the scroll work on the leather was relaxing in the same way working the metal for the swords was exhilarating.

"I do what I must to earn a living."

Jonathon nodded his head. "I ken. Come," he said and motioned toward the back of the house. "I think I might have something for you."

It was just an hour later that Lugus had paid Jonathon and chosen the strips of leather. They would work perfectly, and he was anxious to return to his island and begin designing the scroll and knot work that would be tooled onto it.

He had to stop himself from running to his boat. The time he spent away from his island was like a noose around his neck. He never felt safe unless he was on his isle.

With gentle hands, he placed the leather and other supplies in the boat, untied it, and pushed it into the water. He jumped in and took the oars in his hands and immediately began rowing toward his island.

The sensation began instantly.

He was being watched. But by who?

* * * *

Ahryn drank up the site of the mysterious man. She had seen glimpses of him before, but today she had heard something that gave her hope. Something her captor would never want her

to know.

Something that could very well free her.

Lugus.

In all her years of living, there had only been one man with that name, a man who wasn't a man at all, but a Fae. As she watched the muscles in his arms bunch and strain as he rowed to his small island, she knew he was her last chance at returning home.

Her hand fisted in her skirts, and she felt the coolness of the chain on her right hand. She pulled her gaze away from Lugus and looked at the offending slave bracelet on her wrist and the chains that ran to her middle finger that attached to the ring.

The baron thought it rather humorous to fasten it on her, branding her a slave to all who saw. But soon it would all end.

"See something you fancy?" Marcus MacGregor asked as he walked up behind her.

Ahryn gritted her teeth and turned to face her captor. "I was just picturing you drowning."

He laughed and roughly took her arm in his hand as he pulled her after him to his awaiting horse. He mounted and hauled her up before him.

"Once you have a taste of me, you won't want me killed," he whispered in her ear.

Ahryn swallowed the bile that rose in her throat. "I will never marry you."

He laughed and picked up a strand of her flaxen hair. "You will if you want to live."

Just before he kicked the horse, Ahryn chanced one more glance at Lugus. He had reached his island and pulled his boat to shore. Even from that great distance, Ahryn could tell his gaze searched for something across the sea.

Could he feel her gaze? Did he sense her need?

Chapter Two

Lugus woke and stretched his neck as he swung his legs over the side of the bed. The many long hours he had spent on the design of the scabbard had put a crick in his neck. Yet, no matter how long he had worked he couldn't shake the feeling someone had been watching him yesterday.

Even in sleep, the feeling had haunted him. In between dreams of Druid green eyes he had seen mystical blue eyes--eyes of the Fae. And the only reason for a Fae to watch him was that the time had finally come. He shook his head to clear it and rose from his bed.

He needed some fresh air. Without bothering to reach for a tunic, he headed outside to watch the sunrise from his cliff.

The mist rolled over the sea onto his isle covering his small cottage in its thickness. Lugus stopped at his door and inhaled the crisp air as he closed his eyes. Scotland wasn't the Realm of the Fae, but it was a close second. The wild, untamed beauty of the rugged land pulled at Lugus' soul the same way the splendor, peacefulness, and grandeur of the Fae realm had.

He opened his eyes and peered into the thick undulating mist. The lap of the water could be heard but naught else. Some might think the mist eerie and almost evil, but Lugus loved it.

The first rays of light could be seen through the mist, and Lugus turned to make his assent to the cliff. The sea air filled his lungs as he began to climb. He had climbed nearly half way up when something stopped him. The same feeling that had assaulted him the day before surrounded him now.

Apprehension snaked down his spine. Could it be that someone had finally come to meet out justice? Lugus hoped so. For nearly five years he had waited for someone to come and end his life. Only then would he feel as though he had paid for his crimes.

His steps quickened as he raced to the top to see who had come to kill him. With his breathing labored and the mist clinging to him, he raised his eyes to see a woman standing atop his cliff.

The sea wind blew her long, flaxen hair off her shoulders, and her dark skirts billowed behind her. Slowly, she turned to face him, and he saw her eyes.

Mystical blue eyes.

Fae eyes.

Her face was flawless of any blemish. The ethereal glow of her milky skin seemed to burn in the dawning sun's light. She wasn't gowned in the clothes of the Fae, but rather in that of the townspeople across the sea. Yet, even in the dark red of her gown, he knew her body would be lithe and tall as all Fae women.

Lugus hadn't expected a female to come and kill him, but he wouldn't stop her. He had to pay for his crimes.

"I've come for your help," she said, braking into his thoughts.

Lugus blinked, not sure he heard her correctly. "Help? From who?"

"Them," she said and pointed.

Lugus followed her finger and saw the four men that stepped onto his shore. Anger rolled within him. No one came ashore to his island. No one.

He began his descent, rarely taking his eyes off the men. By the time he reached the bottom, the men still hadn't ventured far from their boat. The mist hampered their vision, but it would give Lugus the advantage he needed to dispatch the men and then figure out just what a Fae female was doing on his isle.

Briefly he thought about retrieving his sword but decided against it as one of the soldiers spotted him.

"Where is she?" the soldier demanded.

Lugus planted his feet as he reached the shore and stared at the four men. "No one is allowed on my island. Leave now. Or die."

"Not without the woman."

Lugus flexed his hands and prepared to be rushed by the four men. They came at him instantaneously. One punch landed in his kidney, another on his jaw, and another in his stomach. He might be mortal, but his Fae training would never leave him.

He captured a leg between his and squeezed. As he spotted another blow coming at his face, he ducked and smiled as the meaty fist landed on the face of another soldier. With his elbows, fist, and head, he managed to knock two of them unconscious. The other he had captured with his leg was now beating his back. With all the momentum he could muster, Lugus threw back his elbow and connected with the soldier's face. He watched in satisfaction as the man slumped to the ground.

Lugus then turned his attention to the last remaining soldier. "Get off my island."

"I can't," he said. "I must return with the woman or he will kill me."

Lugus waved away his words. "I don't care about the woman. This isle is mine, and no one is allowed on it. If you don't want to die, I would suggest you take your men and leave. Now."

The soldier looked from his men to Lugus.

"I won't repeat my offer," Lugus said.

It took only a moment before the soldier jerked into action and began hauling his fallen men into the boat. Lugus didn't move until the boat had rowed out to the sea. He sighed and winced as the pain from the beating began to push its way into his mind now that there wasn't a threat.

A ray of sun slanted across his arm. He silently cursed not seeing the sun rise over the horizon. And that's when he remembered the Fae. He turned and raised his gaze to the cliff that hovered over his cottage to see her staring down at him.

It had been so long since he had seen a Fae that she held him spellbound. He had forgotten just how stunning all Fae were. And how had he forgotten the mystical and sensual essence that flowed from them and around them? He had taken it for granted when he was a Fae.

He waited as she slowly made her way down from the cliff. She moved with the grace of a feline and the sensuality of a woman who could bring a man the most exquisite pleasure imaginable. With great effort he refused to allow his body to respond to the call of a Fae, though he knew it wasn't the woman, but the essence that called to him. It was difficult considering the last woman he had kissed had been Moira.

Pleasure wasn't something he permitted himself to feel. Not after what he had done.

“Get it over with,” he said when the Fae reached him.

Her head cocked to the side as she regarded him, her mystical blue eyes never wavering. “What exactly am I supposed to do?”

“Did you not come here to kill me?”

She shook her head. “I told you. I’m here so you can help me.”

Lugus looked at the sea. The boat was now on the shore of Scotland. “I don’t want anyone on my island.” He returned his gaze to her. “You need to leave now.”

“I cannot.”

He ran a hand down his face. “You are Fae. You can, and will, leave. Unless you’re here to kill me, I have no use for you.”

Now that his morning has been ruined, he pivoted and entered his cottage to try and gather his thoughts before he started work on the sword and sheath.

* * * *

Ahryn stared after Lugus. She hadn’t known what to expect from him, but once she had seen him fight the soldiers, she knew he was the only man who could truly help her. The memory of his flashing blue eyes when he saw her brought a smile to her face.

Mortal he may be, but the royalty that flowed in his veins was still there. But would it be enough to convince him of her cause?

She took a deep breath and entered the small cottage. It was larger inside than she would have guessed. It was clean and everything put away except for a table where he sat staring at a piece of leather before him. She had seen his work. The craftsmanship of the weapons and sheaths amazed even her.

His eyes were closed, and she took that time to really study him. He had features of the Fae--an angular face, strong jaw, tall, lean but muscular and the flaxen hair.

Lugus’s hair was a shade darker than most Fae’s, but that was a sign of the royal house. His thick hair hung down the middle of his back with tiny braids near his temple--another sign of the Fae.

He sat bare-chested before his table. Even now she could see the dark bruises where the soldiers had struck him. There was a cut over his right eye, and the knuckles on his right hand were bleeding. That’s when she noticed the markings on his hands and forearms, ancient tattoos with hidden meanings.

Ahryn longed to tend to him, but Lugus was a proud man and wouldn’t take kindly to her intrusion, although, with her situation she really didn’t have much choice.

“Shall I tend to your cuts?” she asked softly.

His entire body jerked before he swung his head around to her. “Do you always go where you aren’t welcome?”

Her ire prickled at his comment, but she bit her tongue and refused to take the bait. “I do not, but desperate times call for desperate measures.”

He threw back his head and laughed, the sound not at all friendly. “I find that humorous when a Fae can venture any where they want. You no more need my help than the sun does in climbing the sky.”

Ahryn knew it was time she showed him her secret. She withdrew her right hand from the folds of her skirts and held it in front of her.

His eyes lowered to her hand. “It’s an ancient Celtic slave bracelet.”

“Very good.” She tried, but failed, to keep the sarcasm from her voice. “However, it is not just any Celtic slave bracelet. It was made specifically to capture a Fae.”

Lugus’ blue eyes narrowed as he swung around on his stool to face her. “I’ve never heard of such.”

“I, myself, had never heard of it. It was only after it was on and I tried to leave that I discovered just how different this bracelet was.”

“How long have you been here?”

Ahryn glanced out the open window. “Two months.”

“Have all your abilities disappeared?”

She swallowed and licked her lips. “Do you mean to ask if I still hear other Fae? Nay, I do not. Everything ceased when the bracelet was clasped to my wrist,” she said and lowered her hand. Every time she saw her hand, anger at herself nearly drowned her, so she kept it out of sight.

“And how am I to help?”

She had known this question would come, but now that it was here, she found it hard to answer. “I know who you are. Although you may be mortal now, you’re the only one that can help me return to the Realm of the Fae.”

He crossed his arms over his muscular chest, and she noticed a tattoo of a horse surrounded by ancient knotwork on his right forearm. “If you know who I am and why I’m mortal, you would also know that I cannot venture into the Realm of the Fae.”

Ahryn didn’t try to hide her disappointment. In truth, she didn’t know why he was now mortal but had hoped to bluff him into thinking she did. “I didn’t know that. I assumed you were still able to travel to different realms.”

Her last hope was now gone, and her curiosity would keep her trapped on Earth for eternity. She took a deep breath and turned to the door. There was no use staying now. She would return to Marcus and face whatever wrath he had.

Lugus hated that he was affected by the devastation on the female’s face. She wasn’t his concern. He couldn’t help her.

Or did he just not want to?

“What is your name?” he asked as her hand reached for the door.

Startled Fae eyes jerked to his face. “Ahryn.”

It was a beautiful name, he thought to himself. “How did you get to my isle?”

“How does anyone get to this isle? I stole a boat and rowed all night.” She looked down at her feet. “I didn’t expect him to find me so soon.”

Lugus had to admit that his curiosity was now piqued. “Who?”

Slowly, her mystical blue eyes rose to his. “Who is the most powerful man around? Lord Marcus MacGregor is the one that searches for me. The soldiers have seen me, so he will return to claim me.”

He thought over her words for a moment. Regardless if he sent her away that instant, his island would be invaded by the baron and his soldiers. There were very few places he could hide either himself or Ahryn for any length of time. Yet, before he could make any kind of decision, he needed to know more of the facts.

Lugus moved his hand and clenched his jaw as his swollen, bloodied knuckles cried out in protest. He rose from the stool and went to the fire where he had water boiling to wash his

cuts. It was one of the many things he had had to learn to do once he became mortal.

He reached for a strip of cloth and quickly dunked it in the boiling water. It scalded his hand as he tried to wring out the water.

"Here," Ahryn said as she took the cloth and gently pushed him to his bed. "You sit and I will tend to your cuts as I tell you my story."

"How did you know I wanted to know your story?"

She raised her Fae eyes to him and smiled as she knelt before him. "It doesn't take Fae magic to read the emotions that cross your face."

Lugus looked at her, really looked at her. Aye, she was Fae and had all the characteristics of the Fae, but there was sadness in her eyes, a sadness that Lugus himself lived with every day.

Her eyes were large, expressive with gently arching flaxen brows. She had high cheekbones, a stubborn chin and a long, graceful neck. Her lips, wide and full, drew his attention like a bee to a flower.

He hadn't been this close to a woman since Moira. Nearly five years of his self-imposed prison on the isle. He blamed it on the fact that he had been without a woman for so many years that his body yearned for Ahryn. His body needed relief and would take any female that came near it.

When her long, tapered fingers touched his injured knuckles he nearly came off the bed. No one had touched him in what seemed like ages. He had forgotten what it was like to have comfort, even in such a small dose as someone tending to a wound, and he was startled to find he craved it.

Her touch was gentle as she removed the dried blood and dirt that had become imbedded in the skin, her finger stopped to examine each of his tattoos. Lugus fisted his other hand at his side as he tried to keep his breathing normal and his mind focused on Ahryn's story instead of the hunger that had been awakened in him.

"Your story," he bit out between clenched teeth.

"Aye, my story," she said softly. She glanced at him and gave him a small smile. "I'm sorry this pains you. I am being as gentle as I can."

He gave her a nod and allowed her to think his actions were due to his discomfort of her cleaning his wounds.

"I am curious by nature. Something that has oft times gotten me into a spot of trouble," Ahryn said as she wrung out the cloth and turned back to his hand. "My friends and I used to come to this realm during Beltaine and Samhain. It was a world like none other. So like ours, yet so different."

Lugus knew exactly how she felt. The realm of Earth had often called to him as a young boy. The people were so innocent of the magic and evil that hovered around them.

"Yet, the more times I came," Ahryn continued, "the longer I wanted to stay. The people I met were very friendly. It became so that I would sneak away and venture to this realm even if it wasn't one of the sacred days. My father discovered this and sought to put an end to it."

Lugus suspected that she had been kept out of this realm for a long period of time. "How long did he keep you away?"

She raised her gaze to him. "Centuries. It was only after someone tried to take over both realms that he loosened his hold over me. He assumed that after all those years I would not wish

to visit here again.” She raised her hand with the cloth and began to dab at the cut over his brow.

“He was wrong,” Lugus said.

She smiled slightly. “Aye. For awhile he thought I was coming to meet a man, so he tried to force a marriage on me. I refused. After a particularly painful fight with my father, I came here, to Scotland.”

Lugus waited for her to finish. She didn’t speak again until the wound over his eye was cleaned.

Her eyes met his as she sat back on her feet. “I only meant to stay for a few hours. I wandered the market place as I usually do. That is where Marcus first saw me. I knew as soon as I felt his gaze that he knew what I was. I wasn’t afraid though. As a Fae I knew I could get away at any time.”

Lugus sat forward with his elbows on his knees. “What happened?”

“I stopped by a small shop that sold jewelry among other things. I found a pair of earrings that I knew my sister would enjoy. I purchased those and went to leave when the owner asked if I liked older pieces. Since I try to find pieces of jewelry we made while still on this realm, I said aye.”

“And they brought out the slave bracelet.”

She nodded and looked down at her hand. She ran a finger over the chains that connected her middle finger to the bracelet. “I thought it an unusual and beautiful piece. I knew the Celts had made such bracelets, but they were usually plain in appearance unless the slave was someone of importance. So, when the shopkeeper bade me try it on, I thought nothing of it. As soon as I clasped it together I felt the magic.”

Lugus looked down at the bracelet. Along the ancient carvings of knots and scrollwork, so much like what he tooled into the leather, he saw what looked like an ancient language. “Have you tried to decipher the symbols?”

She nodded. “My first day. No sooner had I attached the bracelet than Marcus and his men brought me to his castle. I spent the remainder of that day locked in a chamber as I tried in vain to call for help.”

Lugus sighed and leaned back in his chair and studied her. Either she had no idea that he had been the one that nearly destroyed their realm or she didn’t wish to mention it. He decided to assume she didn’t know exactly what he had done.

“Even if I tried to call to the Fae, it would fall on deaf ears because I’m no longer Fae. I’m a mortal man.”

“Have you tried?”

He shook his head. “Nay. And I won’t.”

“If you don’t help me, Marcus will force me to marry him and I will never return home.”

He saw the misery and fear in her eyes and hated that he couldn’t help her. “What do you want me to do? I’m but one man against Marcus’ army. I know of whom you speak, though I have never encountered him myself. He is a very powerful lord with many men at his disposal. I cannot defend you against them.”

“I’m not asking for that.”

He stared at her for one heartbeat. Two. “You ask the impossible. You say you know who I am, but you do not know everything.”

“I know enough. You are my last hope, Lugus. You know I am not meant to live out my

life here. I must return to my realm.”

“Then you need to find a champion that will aide you.”

Chapter Three

Lugus walked from his cottage and saw the storm clouds rolling in. The dark clouds flashed lightening as the thunder boomed around him. The sea had already begun to churn and chop. Only a fool would venture out onto the sea in a storm as fierce as what was about to blow in.

He turned on his heel and entered the cottage to find Ahryn staring into the fire. She raised her gaze to his when he closed the door behind him.

"I'm sorry for coming here. Marcus and his men will come even if I go back."

"Aye."

She took a deep breath and turned to him. "I will depart now and hopefully talk Marcus into leaving you alone."

"I wish that were possible," Lugus said as he leaned against the door. "There is a storm coming. Only a fool would venture out onto the water now. You'll have to wait until it blows over."

"Which means, Marcus won't come for me?" she asked hopefully.

Lugus shrugged. "I couldn't say, depends on if he can find oarsmen who are willing to chance their lives."

"He won't," she said with a smile that lit up her face. "For one night I'm free."

She whispered the last part, but Lugus heard her nonetheless. He glanced at his tools and then at her bracelet. The least he could do was try and take it off for her. He reached for his tools and walked to her.

He held up the tools. "Shall I?"

"Please." She sat and held out her hand.

For the next two hours Lugus worked at trying to unclasp the bracelet to no avail while the storm raged outside. Whatever magic held her bound to the realm of Earth held the bracelet closed. He set aside his tools and shook his head.

"Without knowing what kind of magic made the bracelet, I cannot unlock it."

"I wish I could tell you. All I know is that Marcus had the bracelet, but he wouldn't tell me where he got it or from whom," she said, her voice barely above a whisper.

They sat in silence for a time, the thunder had become near constant and the lightening lit up the cottage as if it were day. Weather such as this always exhilarated him, made him feel as though he should be out in it soaking up the fierceness.

Lugus flexed his shoulders and rose. "I have work to do, but make yourself at home and relax while you can."

"What are the markings for?"

He turned and found her gazing at his hands. He looked down at the tattoos and shrugged. "I don't know. They've been on me for as long as I can remember."

"So you don't know what each means?"

His gaze raked across the tattoos, a horse, a small boar, an even smaller dragon, and

several ancient knotwork patterns were marked across his skin. "I have no idea."

He went to the back of the cottage behind a cloth he had draped across the doorframe and heated up his kiln. If nothing else he could finish the dirk that had been ordered.

Soon he had forgotten about Ahryn, Marcus and his soldiers, the slave bracelet and the Fae. He channeled all his energy into crafting the dirk.

Hours later, with a heavy sigh, he wiped the sweat from his brow and raised the finished dirk for inspection. It met with his approval, and, with the matching sheath, it would make a startling pair. He wiped the blade with a clean cloth, making sure everything was in order.

"It is very beautiful."

He looked over his shoulder and found Ahryn gazing at the dirk. He shrugged and slid it into its sheath. "It helps keep food in my belly."

"Maybe," she said as she came to look at the assortment of weapons hanging on his wall. "However, I get the feeling you enjoy your work. Have you always been gifted so?"

Lugus set aside the dirk and sunk his hands into a bowl of water to wash the sweat and grime from him. "I don't really know. I used to draw as a child, but it wasn't until I came here and needed to find something to do that I happened across this."

Her soft laugh filled the room. Lugus could only listen to the magical sound. He couldn't remember the last time someone had laughed around him.

"I hardly believe you just stumbled onto this," she continued, unaware of the turmoil she had caused. "This," she said and touched a sword, "is made with passion and love. You must have watched them craft swords in our realm."

Lugus could still recall his father's fury at discovering him wanting to learn to craft weapons. His father had said it wasn't for royalty to do such jobs, and it was the beginning of a huge rift between him and his father, a rift that never mended.

"You don't have to answer."

He raised his eyes to her. "It seems you know much more about me than I do you."

She grinned and lifted a shoulder coyly. "I'm not near as interesting."

"Ah, I disagree. A Fae that gets trapped in the Earth realm after being forbidden to venture here is quite interesting."

She waved away his words, the sadness once again in her gaze. "I only know of you because of hushed whispers. The stories never seemed to affix, as if there was something missing, something someone didn't want the rest of the Fae to know." She stopped suddenly and looked at him. "Did you know our realm was nearly destroyed by the Black dragons? No one knows who let them loose or who managed to lock them back up."

Lugus' gut clenched at her words. "Is that so?"

"Aye. I heard that *Caer Rhoemyr* was left in shambles. My city and surrounding village had some damage, but we managed to get it set aright very soon."

He waited for her to ask him if he knew who had released the Death Dragons, and he prayed the question would never come. She was the only Fae that was likely to speak to him, and, if she discovered everything, she would hate him as much as his own family did. Not that he didn't deserve it.

"Aren't you curious to know what the whispers were?"

"Nay," he said and turned to leave the small chamber.

"Really?" she asked and followed him. "I would find it near impossible not to ask."

Lugus didn't bother responding to her. He was used to being alone and liked his solitude, though he couldn't very well send her out in the foul weather that had descended upon them. If he didn't know better he would think someone had bidden such weather. He walked to a window and eased open the shutter a bit to peer into the darkened sky.

He needed to bathe and he needed his solitude, both of which were being denied him. The cagey feeling he had suffered through for millions of years while he had been in the Realm of Shadows consumed him.

"You don't like me here, do you?" Ahryn asked.

He glanced at her over his shoulder. "I'm used to being alone."

"I'm not," she replied. "I have a large family and many friends. Here, I have only Marcus. I apologize if I have disturbed your work. I promise not to do so again."

Lugus heard her feet as she moved around the cottage and then silence. He turned and found her sitting in front of the fire staring at her right hand. He could well imagine the worry her family felt. He envied her that. His family had all but forgotten him in the millennia he was forced into a realm no one had ever come back from.

He pushed aside the dark thoughts that tried to break through. It had been those dark thoughts that had turned him into the fiend that had nearly destroyed everything. His gaze returned to Ahryn.

"Come," he said as he walked past her. To his surprise, she rose and followed him. He took her to one of his work tables and showed her the drawing he had done of the sheath for the sword Marcus had ordered. "I have traced the outline of the sheath in the leather. Can you cut out the leather?"

She looked at the small dagger in his hand then up at his face. A slow smile pulled at her lips. "Aye," she said and reached for the dagger.

Just as her hand closed over his, he said, "Be careful. The dagger is sharp." He released his hold and watched as she ran a hand over the leather and traced his outline with a finger. Then, she situated herself and began to cut.

Lugus made himself walk away. He hadn't liked giving her the leather to cut, but she had needed something to occupy her mind as much as he did.

He splashed some water on his face before he started work on Marcus' sword. The sword was one of the largest Lugus had ever attempted, and he was eager to begin.

The kiln was fired and ready to start. He grabbed a piece of iron from the kiln and envisioned the sword before the first swing of his hammer.

* * * *

Ahryn was amazed at how quickly she had lost track of time and forgotten her worries. The chore Lugus had given her had helped clear her head. She smiled, thinking of how he proclaimed to want his privacy but was continuing to help her in ways she had never dreamed.

She looked over her shoulder at him as he pounded away on the iron and found herself unable to look away. The Fae by a general rule were all beautiful creatures, but there was something primitive, powerful about Lugus that pulled her to him.

Her mouth watered as she watched the muscles in his arms strain and bunch as he worked the metal with his hammer. His back and shoulders were dusted with a fine sheen of sweat from being near the heat of the kiln, and the firelight blazed across his skin, setting him afire in a red-orange glow.

She jerked her gaze away and turned back to the leather. She had just finished cutting out the strips, but she wasn't ready to leave the chamber. She knew he didn't wish to be disturbed, so she grabbed a few strips of discarded leather and lifted the dagger.

* * * *

Lugus rotated his head to help work out the kinks in his neck. He yawned and set aside the metal. He had come farther than he had anticipated with the sword this day, but it was time he rested or he would make a mistake.

Thunder continued to roar outside as the rain beat a steady rhythm on the roof and walls of the cottage. His stomach growled, and he realized he had missed not only his morning meal, but most likely that of the noon as well.

It wasn't until he turned to go into the kitchen and spotted Ahryn that he realized she was there. She had her head pillowed on her arm as she slept. He was loath to wake her, but he knew she was most likely as famished as he. He quickly washed away the grime and reached for his tunic.

He moved his hand to touch her shoulder, and that's when he saw them, small strips of leather that had been in a pile to throw out. She had used a dagger to carve out intricate designs, designs only found in the Realm of the Fae.

Lugus blinked, amazed at her ability. For a half a moment he considered keeping her there with him and having her design a few of the sheaths. Then he remembered who and what she was and who and what he was.

"Ahryn," he called softly.

She jerked upright so fast she nearly came off the stool. It was only Lugus' quick hands that caught her before she toppled off. He righted her as she yawned and wiped her hair from her face.

"Is it as late as it feels?" she asked sleepily.

For the first time in centuries, Lugus felt like smiling. "Hard to tell with the storm, though I suspect we worked clear through the noon meal."

"That would explain why I am so hungry."

Lugus left her to venture into the kitchen where he set about making their meal. Cooking had always been woman's work even in his realm, but it was another chore he hadn't minded learning. It had taken some time before he had learned enough to make an edible meal. For a time he had thought he might starve to death his meals had been so dreadful.

With the storm he hadn't been able to catch any fish, so he heated the soup he had fixed the day before. They ate in silence, yet Lugus could feel her anxiety of the storm ending. For with the end of the storm came Marcus.

Lugus had kept himself detached from everyone and nearly everything since he had become mortal. To be honest, he hadn't expected to live as long as he had. Many times he would pray for death, and a few times he even demanded it. But the heavens had been silent. Until today he had lived each day on its own, never expecting or hoping for anything.

And now, a Fae sat at his table asking for his help. At one time he would have jumped to aid her, thinking it might gain his entrance into the Realm of the Fae.

He wasn't that same foolish man.

Despite telling himself that he wouldn't and couldn't help her, she was in dire need of assistance. He knew firsthand how it was to live on a realm he had no desire to be on and unable

to return to his own. He had lost count of the millennia he had spent in the Realm of Shadows. It hadn't been a pleasant place. Even now nightmares would plague him.

He glanced up to see her gaze lowered to the table and her shoulders hunched. She knew her time was short, and she was living each heartbeat with all her hope. Lugus then understood what he had to do.

"It is good," she said.

He gave her a nod and watched as she finished her bowl. "I'm sorry I couldn't provide more."

"Don't apologize. It was a very nice meal. I thank you for sharing it with me," she said with a smile.

Lugus rose and took her bowl. "You may take my bed," he said as he pointed to the left. "I plan to spend more time working on the sword."

"Thank you," she said and turned toward the bed.

He waited until she had pulled the cloth closed over the doorway before he walked into his back chamber. For long moments he stared into the kiln. When he had gathered as much courage as he could, he inhaled deeply and closed his eyes.

Though he was mortal and considered a human, the Fae ways had not left him. He called to his brother, Theron, using the Fae language. When Theron didn't answer or appear, Lugus then called more urgently, letting Theron know that there was a Fae trapped on Earth.

Still Theron didn't answer.

Lugus sank onto his stool. He had been afraid Theron would ignore any correspondence from him, which was why Lugus hadn't told Ahryn what he had planned. He didn't want her hopes dashed if he had failed. It was better if she thought he didn't care enough to try.

He stared at the metal he had started to form into the shape of the sword. His work helped keep the ugly thoughts out of his mind. He rose and grasped the metal and hammer as he began to pound.

* * * *

"You aren't going to answer him?" Rufina asked.

Theron squeezed his eyes closed and shook his head as Lugus' voice reverberated around their bedchamber like a tolling bell. He leaned forward in the chair and with his elbows braced on his legs, dropped his head into his hands. "You know I cannot."

"He hasn't called to you or any other Fae in the five years he has been on the Earth realm. He wouldn't be calling to you if it wasn't important," his wife said earnestly.

"I cannot," he repeated.

She rose and backed away from him. "Regardless of where he is, he is still your brother and part of this family."

Theron sighed as he sat up and looked at his beautiful queen. She had been intended for Lugus, who, as eldest, had been in line for the throne. Theron thanked the heavens each day that he had Rufina by his side.

"You know what he did," Theron shouted over the din of Lugus' voice.

And just as suddenly as it had begun, it stopped.

Theron looked around his chamber. "Why did he stop?"

"Because he is a proud man who has suffered more than any man, Fae or human, should. He has endured the greatest of trials and conquered power that would have killed me or you."

“And nearly destroyed our realm and Earth,” Theron pointed out.

Rufina sighed and shook her head sadly, her long white blonde hair gently moving around her. “I think you have made a mistake, my love.”

“I don’t think I have,” he said and prayed he was correct. “If he hadn’t closed his mind off to us, we would be able to decipher if his call was genuine or not.”

Rufina cocked up a perfectly arched brow. “I’ve never known you to take the easy road, Theron. Why is it you always do that with Lugus?”

“I don’t trust him.”

“Then go have a look in the village he lives near. You will be able to find out all you need very quickly.”

Theron considered her suggestion but wasn’t comfortable spying on his brother. Lugus had made him swear that he would not interfere in his life on Earth even the smallest bit. He had wanted to make it on his own, and as far as Theron knew, he had.

But why the sudden call? Could he be in trouble? If Theron knew his brother at all, he knew Lugus would rather die than ask for help for himself. But if it involved someone else, he just might send the call.

“Stop your worrying,” Rufina said as she came to stand in front of him. “I’ve other things I would like to occupy your mind with.”

Theron smiled. “And what might that be?”

“This,” she said and dropped her silver robe to display her naked body.

He reached out and pulled her against him, her breasts even with his face. “Ah, a feast,” he mumbled just before he took a hard nipple into his mouth.

Chapter Four

No matter how Ahryn tried, she couldn't sleep. It wasn't the banging of Lugas in his forge. It was the knowledge that her last thread of hope had slipped through her fingers. Because of her curiosity, she would be enslaved on Earth. Forever.

She knew without trying that she would never convince Lugas to take her to a gateway between the worlds. She didn't even know if there was one close by. It was something all Fae were taught to discover before ever visiting a realm, yet she had let her own confidence hinder her.

With an arm slung across her forehead and the other creasing her skirt, Ahryn found her mind wandering to Lugas. She had bluffed her way into his cottage. All she remembered was the whispers that he had been expelled from the Realm of the Fae again. Again. That still baffled her. Once a Fae was expelled, he was never allowed to return. So, how had he managed to return? And just what had he done to be expelled from the realm a second time?

Could he have something to do with the entire imprisonment of the Fae realm?

She had seen his face as she spoke of the destruction of the Death Dragons. Was it the pain of knowing the city he had been born and raised in had nearly been destroyed? Or was it the pain of someone who had been responsible?

Her mind raced with possibilities. Lugas might be a man who liked his privacy, but he hadn't turned her out. Her instincts had never led her astray before, and she refused to believe they had done so now.

She closed her eyes and envisioned Lugas as he had been earlier--shirtless and sweaty as he pounded his hammer into the metal, working it into a shape only he himself saw as his muscles flexed and glistened in the fire's glow.

Had it been any other situation, she would have laughed at finally finding a man that interested her.

She sat up and ran her finger over the hated bracelet. Lugas had tried every tool he had to unlock the bracelet and nothing short of cutting her hand off would free her. If she wasn't such a coward, she would cut it off.

The rhythmic pounding of Lugas' hammer lulled her. She laid down and soon found her lids growing heavy.

* * * *

His body was on fire. His need was so fierce it consumed him. He needed to taste her, feel her silken flesh beneath his hands. Her pale hair cascaded around him as she moved to straddle his hips.

Lugas nearly spilled his seed right then. How many nights had he dreamed of having her as she was now? How many days had he plotted to have her as his own? Now she was finally his.

And he would claim her.

He fisted his hands in her long hair and brought her face closer to his. He wanted to

look into her eyes as he plunged his rod deep inside of her.

Her soft breasts pressed against his chest and she moaned softly as she moved her hips against his hardness. Lugas silently cursed. He had waited too long and planned too well for anything to go wrong now. He had to stay in control.

He raised his eyes and stared into her Druid green eyes as he moved his hips until the tip of him entered her. She was hot and slick and he easily slid into her tight sheath.

Elation poured through him to finally claim Moira as his own. He closed his eyes and reveled in the feel of her around him. He began to move inside of her, pumping faster, harder. He felt her clench around him as she screamed his name. Still he thrust within her until he felt his own climax building.

His hands roamed down her sleek back to her narrow waist. He opened his eyes for he wanted to stare into her beautiful green eyes as he reached his own orgasm. Just as he was about to spill his seed he found himself staring into mystical blue eyes.

Fae eyes.

Lugas came awake with a start. With his heart racing and his breathing ragged, he glanced around his forge. The dream had been so real he could still feel and taste Moira. And it had been Moira, at least to start with, but there was no denying the face at the end had been Ahryn.

It had to be because she was in his home and he had tried to contact Theron. At least that's what he told himself.

The fire still blazed in the forge, which meant he had slept for only moments instead of hours. He rose and walked to the small window in the forge and opened the shutters. The rain still came down in a vicious pour, but the lightening had moved on, though he could still hear the rumble of thunder over the rain.

It was only hours from dawn. Lugas knew he would get precious little work done on the sword, so he decided to make his way to the cliff and wait out the sunrise in the rain. As he turned away from the window, something on the water caught his attention. He leaned forward and peered through the rain to see four large boats coming toward his isle.

"Marcus," he whispered as he closed the shutters and hurried to his room to wake Ahryn. Only she wasn't there.

Lugas stared at the empty bed before he walked to it and felt the covers. It was still warm, so she hadn't gone far. He ran back to his forge and grabbed his favorite sword and several daggers as he raced from the back of the cottage. She had told him she had come to the island with a boat of her own. Since it wasn't docked with his, she must have landed at the back of the isle behind the cliff where the water was the most dangerous.

He lengthened his strides as he raced from the cottage to the small, nearly hidden, path that led around the cliff all the while placing the daggers and sword on his body. The rain had already plastered his clothes to his body and his hair to his face, but he never slowed.

His foot slipped on the small rocks that lined the isle as he worked his way around the cliff. The rocks bit and cut into his hands as he walked around the tight corner. And then he saw her.

The wind hampered her ability to move as it pulled and yanked at her thick, heavy skirts. But it was just the advantage he needed to catch up with her.

To his utter shock, he saw her trying in vain to push her small skiff out into the turbulent waters. She was trying to leave without Marcus finding her, which meant she must have seen the boats just as he had. Since she hadn't bothered to tell him, he knew she was leaving to protect him.

Which left him with one choice.

"What are you doing?" he asked as he stopped beside her.

She jerked around, and the wind whipped her hair into her eyes. She clawed at the long length and stared aghast at him. "How did you know where I was?"

"It's my isle. Now answer me," he demanded over the rain and wind.

She glanced away. "I saw them coming. There is nothing more you can do for me. I had already decided to leave this morning anyway. Marcus arriving earlier just spurred me to move more quickly."

"Where do you think you will go?"

She shrugged. "I have to find a gateway. I can't do that if Marcus has me chained to him."

Lugus looked over his shoulder. They had a little time before Marcus and his men found the trail around the cliff. He turned back to Ahryn. "We have to move quickly."

"We?" she asked, trying to hide the hope in her eyes.

"Aye, now come on."

He waded out into the water and then turned to find her still pushing the skiff. "Ahryn," he called.

She raised her gaze to him. "Aren't we using the skiff?"

"They'll catch us. We need to go undetected."

She looked at the turbulent sea and slowly made her way to him. "I won't make it with this heavy gown."

Lugus pulled a dagger from his waist and reached for the neck of her gown. He heard her gasp as he sliced open her gown and pulled it from her body. Without looking at her, he turned and hid the ruined gown between two rocks before sheathing the dagger. When he turned back around Ahryn was already neck deep in the water.

He dove into the water and quickly caught up with her. The current was swift and strong, and Lugus knew they would have to swim hard and fast to get to the shores of Scotland without Marcus finding them.

They were half way to the mainland when he turned to look over his shoulder to check on Ahryn. She had gotten farther and farther behind him, and he could see that she was fast losing what little strength she had. With a curse, Lugus turned around and swam to her. He had just reached her when she went under the water.

He dove under after her and brought her to the surface. He held her back against his chest as he swam backwards to the shore.

"Lugus," he heard her say over the rain.

And then he saw it. His home, all his belongings and everything he had called his, was ablaze. He quickly looked away and swam even harder to the shore. His time there had ended. He would have to find another place to make his home. If he survived the swim to the mainland.

Ahryn began to shake in his arms. The cold sea water had finally penetrated her Fae skin. He had to get her out of the water soon. He had no idea how long they had been

swimming, but it seemed the mainland had not gotten any closer. His worry then grew that he wouldn't be able to make it to shore. He had only swum the distance three times, and those times had not been in the middle of a storm.

When his feet finally struck the bottom he got a surge of renewed strength that managed to get them both to shore. He pulled Ahryn out of the water onto the rocky shore and collapsed on top of her to give her some of his heat.

"So cold," she said, her teeth chattering.

His chest burned and his arms ached, but Lugus climbed to his feet and lifted Ahryn in his arms. They had to get out of their wet clothing and find a place to hide before Marcus spotted them.

The first rays of sunlight filtered over the horizon as Lugus made his way to Jonathon's cottage. He was the only person who would help him, but Lugus hated to put him and his family in danger. Instead of waking them, he sat Ahryn down at the back of the cottage and slowly made his way to the front.

"Lugus?" Jonathon asked as he walked from the cottage. "What are you doing here?"

Lugus held up his hand. "Don't say any more. I wouldn't have come here, but I had no where else to go."

Jonathon's brow furrowed. "What happened?"

"The less you know, the better. I'm putting you and your family in grave danger as it is."

"What do you need?"

Lugus was amazed at Jonathon. He was a rare man who would give whatever he could and not ask questions. He was the only man Lugus considered a friend.

"Dry clothes and a blanket."

Jonathon nodded. "My clothes might be a bit tight on you..."

"Not for me," he interrupted Jonathon. "I need a gown from your wife."

For a long moment Jonathon stared at him before he nodded and went into the house. When he returned he had a gown, two blankets, and something wrapped in a cloth.

"There's food, too," he said as he handed it to Lugus.

Lugus reached into his boot and pulled out a dagger. "It is all I have for payment."

Jonathon shook his head. "I won't accept it. Get to safety, my friend."

"I won't forget this," Lugus vowed.

Jonathon smiled.

Lugus quickly tucked the food and gown between the two blankets and hurried to the back of the house. Ahryn was huddled in a ball against the rain, her thin shift her only defense.

He refused to think more about her sitting there nearly naked in front of him. Instead, he opened one of the blankets and wrapped it around her, but not before he saw the outline of her full breast and the dusky pink of her nipple against the transparent material of her shift.

"We need to find shelter," he said as he wrapped an arm around her. "Can you stand?"

He smiled inwardly as she nodded and shakily rose to her feet. He kept his arm around her to help her stay upright and to also steer her and give her warmth.

With the sun making its ascent, they had precious little time to find a place to hide. Lugus knew of an abandoned cottage outside of town, but if he were Marcus, it would be one of the first places he looked. Instead, he steered Ahryn toward Marcus' castle.

"Have you lost your mind?" she asked incredulous.

“He’ll never suspect us to be here. Once we get you warm and changed, we’ll head out, but until then there isn’t a place in this village he won’t find us.”

“And how do you propose we leave the castle without him discovering us?”

“Let’s deal with one thing at a time.”

Though the rain had slackened, people were still loath to get out in the weather, which provided Lugas and Ahryn the opportunity they needed to get into the castle gate. Lugas had never ventured to the castle and now he wished he had so he would know the layout.

“To the left,” Ahryn said.

Lugas let her lead them to a store room of sorts that hadn’t been used in years. It smelled as though it hadn’t gotten fresh air in decades, but it was a place to hide. Once they were inside and the door barred, Lugas jerked off his wet tunic and wrung it out.

“That blanket is wet. You need to get out of that and your shift,” he said not looking at her.

He heard movement behind him and guessed she had done as he suggested. When the blanket at his feet vanished, he knew she had taken it to wrap around herself.

“I wish I could give you a fire.”

“I’ll be fine,” she said and seated herself on an empty chest. “I just need to warm up.”

Ahryn tried not to stare at Lugas. It wasn’t as if she hadn’t seen him bare-chested just the night before, but he drew her gaze nonetheless. With the blanket wrapped securely around her, she reached up and wrung the water from her hair. She felt his gaze on her and raised her eyes to him.

“Thank you,” she said.

He shrugged as if it had meant nothing to him. She still had no idea what had changed his mind about helping her, but she was glad that he had. Maybe with his help she might succeed in returning to the Realm of the Fae, and once there she would make sure she sought out King Theron and advise him of what Lugas had done for her.

She became uncomfortable in the silence. “How long will we stay here?”

He raised his gaze to her and lifted a brow. “When you stop shivering and it’s safe for us to leave.”

She looked away. Out of the corner of her eye she saw Lugas slide down the wall and stretch his legs in front of him. With his head leaned back and his hands clasped at his waist, he closed his eyes.

Ahryn let her gaze linger on his well defined chest and abdomen. His neck and arms were just as large, and she suspected it was the years he had spent forging the weapons that had given him such a delicious body. Most Fae men, though muscular, weren’t as defined as Lugas.

Everything about him still spoke of the Fae, but there was something else, something dark about him as well that drew her. Maybe it was the sadness in his eyes, but regardless of what it was, she knew she wanted to spend more time with him.

Fate had put her in his hands. However things turned out now, she would accept it. At least she was attempting to make it back to her realm. She had been smart enough to realize that though she might be able to sneak out of the castle and reach Lugas’ isle, she wouldn’t get farther than that before Marcus caught her. And she had been right. She had barely stepped foot on the isle before Marcus’ soldiers arrived.

But with Lugas by her side, she just might make it to a gateway. She was eager to find

out if he knew of a gateway, but when she raised her gaze his eyes were still closed. She might be insatiably curious, but she wasn't mean spirited.

Alone with her thoughts, her mind wandered to her family and the Realm of the Fae. She missed the beauty and grandeur of her realm. She missed the magic that Earth lacked.

Slowly, the chill that had encased her began to ebb away. She still recalled the chilling waters that had nearly pulled her down to their dark depths. It had been Lugus that had saved her from certain death and then had to watch his home being burned. It had been beyond cruel of Marcus.

Her gaze sought Lugus again. He was exactly who she needed to take her to the gateway. She just hoped he didn't discover who she really was before then.

Chapter Five

Lugus struggled to bring Moira's face into focus. He had memorized her beauty so that he would never forget, yet even now, only a few years later, he couldn't remember the exact shade of her hair or the shape of her mouth.

The one thing he did remember was her Druid green eyes. He knew he would never forget her eyes.

He opened his own eyes and found Ahryn dozing on the chest. Her flaxen hair had dried to a tangle of strands that fell over her shoulder to cover her breasts. Just the thought of her breasts sent his blood straight to his rod. He cursed and shifted positions.

For too long he had been without a woman, something he would have to rectify soon, very soon.

To turn his mind off his need for sexual release, he began to plan their route to the nearest gateway. Their destination would be the Isle of Skye. It was one of the most powerful gateways to the Fae realm, and the closest. It would only be a two to three day journey, by his calculations, once they left Marcus' castle.

Suddenly, he caught the sound of approaching feet. He jumped up and reached for Ahryn as he fell behind a pile of old chests. He looked down to tell her not to speak when he found her gazing at his mouth.

With his body still in a vicious state of need, just the idea that she might want him sent a bolt of fierce hunger running through him. The blanket she had secured around her had come loose, allowing him a sight of her flesh from her shoulder to the swell of her breast. He swallowed and made himself raise his gaze to hers.

"Someone comes," he said just before someone tried the door.

He could hear mumbling outside the door, but he couldn't make out the words. If they busted down the door there was no where for him and Ahryn to hide. He realized then that they must leave the castle immediately. Under cover of darkness would be the best, but Lugus didn't know if they could stay that long before being discovered.

"I think they've gone," Ahryn said softly.

Lugus rolled from atop her and held out his hand to help her to her feet. "How do you feel?"

"The chill has left me," she said.

He nodded, pleased with her answer. "We'll leave tonight."

"Do you think we can last that long before Marcus finds us?"

"He's a man, Ahryn, and he's arrogant, which means he will never suspect us of being here. Whoever was at the door just now was not Marcus or his guards."

She nodded and adjusted the blanket. Lugus remembered the gown he had gotten from Jonathon and retrieved it for Ahryn. "I'm not sure of the fit, but it will be better than the blanket."

She smiled and accepted the gown. "Thank you. Again."

He turned his back as she reached for her now dry shift. He heard material rustle and could imagine the blanket falling to the ground as she slid the shift over her head and it slid slowly down her lithe body.

With an inward curse, he closed his eyes and tried to think of anything but Ahryn's naked body.

"How do I look?" she asked.

Lugus said a silent prayer of thanks that she had finished and turned toward her. The plain gown was a soft blue that brought out her eyes even more. It fit remarkably well except for the length.

"It's a little short," she said and looked down at her feet.

"No one will notice."

She laughed. "Then you obviously don't know women very well at all."

He smiled inwardly as he reached for the food Jonathon had packed for them.

* * * *

"I'm only going to ask this once more, Jonathon," Marcus said as he looked at the ruby ring on his right hand. "Tell me where Lugus is."

The men holding Jonathon jerked back on his arm. Jonathon growled in pain. "I've already told you, milord, I have no idea where he is."

"Is it not true that you supply him with leather?"

"You know it is. You commissioned a sword from him."

Lugus withdrew the small dirk from his waist and brought it to Jonathon's throat. "I can kill you right this instant. You and your family," he added. "Lugus has something of mine, and I want it back. Now, tell me. When was the last time you saw him?"

"Yesterday. He came and bought some leather for me to begin work on your sword and sheath," Jonathon said, his lips thinned in pain as the men tightened their hold on him.

Marcus glanced at Jonathon's wife huddled at the door to their cottage with their children. "The difficulty is, Jonathon, that I have no idea if you are lying or not."

For several moments Marcus debated on whether to kill Jonathon and his family. Finally he waved away his men, and Jonathon dropped to the ground. Marcus stepped on Jonathon's hand and grabbed his hair and pulled until Jonathon looked at him.

"I will have you watched. I am sure Lugus will return here, and, when he does, I will be waiting for him."

Marcus released him and walked to his horse. Fury pumped with every beat of his heart. He had worked long and hard to secure the enchanted slave bracelet and then worked just as hard to make sure it was a Fae that tried it on. He refused to believe he had lost Ahryn, because if he had lost her then he had lost everything.

* * * *

Lugus cracked open the door to make sure no one was about. The castle occupants had long since found their beds, but he had wanted to be cautious so he had waited another hour. He held out his hand as he pushed the door wider.

Ahryn placed her hand in his, and he led her from the storeroom. He paused and pulled her into the shadows before he closed the door and scanned the bailey again. She stayed behind him, always keeping to the shadows, as they slowly worked their way to the massive gate.

Lugus saw four guards at the gate, two on the gatehouse tower and two in the bailey. He

had hoped to get out of the castle walls without having to kill anyone. He had done enough of that for four Fae lifetimes. But, it looked as if there was no way around it.

"I have an idea," Ahryn whispered near his ear, her warm breath sending chills racing along his skin.

Lugus halted, his hand reaching for his throwing dagger, and looked at her. "And what would that be?"

She smiled seductively. "I'm Fae, Lugus. What do think I will do?"

He stared after her as she walked toward the two men at the gate. They each fell under her spell immediately as she smiled at them. There wasn't a need for her to even speak for a Fae's sensual essence drove humans mad with desire. And that was all that was needed to keep the guards' attention.

Lugus crept toward the door in the gate, his eyes never leaving Ahryn and the two guards. He reached over and unlatched the door then quickly stepped through it. Instead of dashing into the shadows, he waited for Ahryn. If a situation became too much, a Fae could just vanish back to their realm, but Ahryn didn't have that luxury, and now Lugus worried that the men would overtake her.

Just as he was about to step back through the door he heard Ahryn's magical laughter.

"I cannot express how grateful I am," she said as she stepped through the doorway. "I will never forget either of you." She gave them a little wave then shut the door.

When she turned to Lugus, her smile vanished. "Ready?" she asked.

"What did you say to them?" he asked as they crept to the shadows.

She chuckled. "I lied. I told them I needed to go for a walk and clear my head for my impending marriage."

Lugus shook his head, but he admired her imagination. Where as he always went in with brute strength, Ahryn used her head and thought things through.

"You know what will happen to them when Marcus discovers what they did," Lugus reminded her.

She shook her head. "He won't do a thing since neither man will remember ever seeing me."

"So you can use some of your Fae magic?"

"Some and only in small doses."

It was something Lugus tucked away for future reference. He had assumed the bracelet rendered her without any Fae magic or abilities.

With the cover of night and the clouds concealing the moon, they were able to put a lot of distance between them and Marcus. Yet Lugus didn't stop. He had the distinct feeling that he needed to keep moving and get Ahryn to safety. And that's when he realized there had to be more to Ahryn than she had told him.

As they followed the coast, Lugus thought back over the Fae court. Their kingdom was much like the Scottish and English kingdoms. There was a king and queen, princes and princesses, dukes, earls, and so on. The Fae had begun Britain's monarchy.

Despite Lugus' attempt to discern if he had somehow known Ahryn before now, he couldn't place her. If her family was a member of the nobility, he didn't remember it. This didn't surprise him considering he had spent several millennia locked in the Realm of Shadows to pay for a crime he hadn't committed.

Just thinking of that realm sent a shiver of dread through him. He had been the only person to leave that realm alive. It was meant to kill, and it had nearly done just that. Only his vengeance had kept him alive.

To this day he didn't like dark places, not when there had been a time he thought never to see light again. It was why he loved watching the sun rise every morning. It was his way of celebrating evading the darkness.

"Can we rest?"

Ahryn's voice jerked him to the present. He looked over his shoulder at her and found her leaning against a tree several paces behind him. Lugus thought over her request for a moment and then turned and walked to her.

"Just for a moment, we need to cover as much ground as we can tonight."

"Why are you in such a hurry? Marcus will never find us now," she said as she sank to the ground.

Lugus scanned the area. "I'm not so sure of that."

"How could you possibly know?"

Lugus jerked at her words. He didn't need another reminder that he wasn't a Fae any longer.

"I apologize," Ahryn said softly. "That was uncalled for. I only mean...."

"I know what you meant," Lugus interrupted her. "Call it a feeling, but just as easily as Marcus captured you with that slave bracelet, he will know where we are headed and why."

"I see," she murmured.

Lugus squatted beside her and tried to see her face in the darkness. "How did Marcus know you were a Fae? Didn't you cloak yourself?"

"Aye," she said with a nod. "I took the precautions so that no one would realize I wasn't mortal. I have no idea how Marcus knew. He wouldn't divulge that information to me, but I gathered that he was rather proud of the fact."

"Is he intelligent enough to have done it on his own?"

"He's smart, but discerning a Fae from a human when a Fae is using magic takes magic, not simple guessing. I think he had help."

"My thoughts exactly," Lugus said. "The question is who?"

"I wish I knew. Fae magic is some of the strongest around."

"Aye. Do you remember whose is as strong as ours?"

For a long moment there was silence. Then Ahryn said, "The Draconia."

Just hearing the name sent wariness through Lugus. "We fought over this realm once. It was a battle in which both sides lost vast numbers, yet we came out ahead. The Draconia left that day and never returned."

"Were you there?" she asked.

Lugus swallowed and looked to the ground. "I was. My brother and I had just come of age to fight, and, despite our father's wishes, we fought."

"I recall from the teachings that the Draconia were the only ones able to control dragons."

Lugus lowered himself to the ground and leaned against a tree facing Ahryn. "I suppose they also told you that the Draconia taught us everything there was to know about dragons?"

"Well...they say they didn't teach us *everything*, but they did bring the dragons."

He shook his head in disbelief. "I will admit that it was long ago, but I would have

thought that part wouldn't have been forgotten. Nay, dragons at one time were on just about every realm. They are more ancient than our race or the Draconia. The dragons on this realm and the Fae realm were very similar, and when the time came for the Fae to leave, the dragons left with us and intermingled with the Fae dragons."

"And the Draconians?"

"During the great battle, both sides used dragons, and just like with our people, both sides suffered heavily with the death of the dragons. As far as I know, the Draconia took their dragons with them, the ones alive...and dead."

"Would a Draconia have dared to return to this realm?"

Ahryn asked the question Lugus hadn't been able to. "Anything is possible, but I would doubt a Draconia would enter this realm without Theron knowing about it."

"What do they look like?"

His gaze went to her face even though he couldn't make out her features in the dark. There was something in her tone, and it was more than curiosity. "Not much different than you or I."

"Could you spot one in a crowd?"

"I doubt it. It is no secret they can blend in with humans."

He heard her sigh. "So, I could very well have walked by him at Marcus' castle and not known it."

"We don't even know for sure if a Draconian is here, and we won't know that until you return to your realm. Until then, we can only speculate."

She leaned up and moved closer to him. "But it makes sense, Lugus. No one should have known I was a Fae. No one."

"Unless another Fae betrayed you." As soon as the words were out of his mouth he regretted them. "It's my turn to apologize," he said.

She held up a hand. "Nay. You only spoke the truth."

"So it is a possibility?"

Ahryn got to her feet and dusted off her gown. She wished now she hadn't brought up the subject.

"Ahryn?"

"Aye," she replied softly. "It's a possibility."

She felt more than saw Lugus rise. The clouds completely concealed all light, leaving her with nothing but a silhouette to see.

"Tell me," he said as he moved past her and began to walk.

Ahryn was more than happy to be moving again. This way she wouldn't have to worry about Lugus trying to read her expression. Not to mention, she wouldn't have to see his when she finished her telling.

"Remember when I said my father tried to make me marry?"

Lugus grunted ahead of her.

"The man my father chose was a very high ranking member of the powerful royalty guard."

"Aimery?" Lugus asked.

Ahryn chuckled. "Nay, not Aimery. He is too involved commanding the entire Fae army to think about a wife or family."

"I take it this man wasn't happy about being rejected?"

Ahryn still recalled his rage and harsh words. "Nay, he wasn't happy. In fact, he was part of the reason that I ventured here."

"He wouldn't leave you alone?"

She shook her head as she tried to keep up with Lugus' long strides. "My parents assumed I would change my mind toward him if he continued to try and win my suite."

"Didn't you tell them how you felt?" Lugus asked.

"More than once."

"Would this suitor of yours resort to something like this to get revenge?"

Ahryn opened her mouth to answer him when Lugus suddenly swung around and yanked her behind a tree. He pressed her against the tree and put a hand over her mouth. She heard a stick break beneath someone's foot. Her gaze jerked to Lugus', and she wished she could see into his eyes.

He lowered his head until his mouth was near her ear and whispered, "No sound."

She couldn't have spoken had she wanted to. Every fiber of her being was on fire from his touch. It was the second time that day he had been pressed against her, and her body had responded instantly both times.

His breath rushed between his lips, grazing her skin as he shielded her body with his. His large hands held her arms still, as if she might run when what she really wanted to do was sink her fingers in his long locks. She closed her eyes and forgot about the threat that had made Lugus press her against the tree and instead let her body feel since her eyes couldn't see him.

She lifted her hands and placed them on his waist. He inhaled sharply which brought a smile to her face and a thread of hope to her heart. She had thought him immune to her, but maybe he wasn't as immune as he claimed to be.

The urge to feel more of him was nearly too much to bear. Ahryn didn't understand the sudden and intense feelings rushing through her body, but she did know she had never felt this for anyone before Lugus.

She turned her head toward his face and found his mouth mere breaths from hers. Her lips parted on their own accord and she waited, breathless, for his lips to meet hers. The moon broke through the clouds, and Ahryn was able to see Lugus' face. His eyes were troubled as they stared down at her, as if he was unsure if he wanted her.

Just as quick as the moon shed her light, she took it away.

And then Lugus took a step away from her. "Whatever it was is gone," he said softly.

Ahryn couldn't have agreed more. She took a deep breath and tried to swallow. She could still feel the heat of him, smell the delicious scent of him, but most of all, her body still yearned for his touch.

"Stay close," Lugus said as he turned and walked away.

Close was exactly what she wanted. The question was, would he allow her to get close?

Chapter Six

When Lugus knew Ahryn couldn't move another step, he stopped. The small clearing was perfect. It afforded them a nice view of the shore while keeping them hidden from anyone tromping through the forest.

He bit back a grin when he saw Ahryn literally crumple to the ground. They had forgotten the blankets in their rush to leave the castle, and there hadn't been time to grab other luxuries, but still Lugus felt as though he should have provided that for her. Regardless of whether he was immortal or not, in his heart he would always be Fae, and Fae men looked after their women.

Though he knew by watching Ahryn this day that she could take care of herself. She hadn't complained once, not even when she was nearly asleep on her feet. He sighed and dropped down beside her. Like it or not, he would have to stay close. Despite it being summer, the winds off the sea had a way of turning things chilly, and, without protection, it would lead to a miserable night.

Lugus looked at the small bag of food that would last one more meal. They would need their strength for tomorrow, and if they were lucky they would find someone to trade with for food. He reached for the bag, then looked at Ahryn. She was already asleep, and he was loath to wake her.

He decided against it and closed the bag. He was too exhausted to eat himself, so he leaned against a nearby tree and dozed, careful not to fall completely asleep and allow someone to come up on them. With one last glance at Ahryn, Lugus closed his eyes.

He wasn't sure what woke him, but, when he glanced over at Ahryn, it was to find her shivering and curled into a ball. Realizing it hadn't been that long since she had swam in the frigid waters of the sea, he hastily crawled over to her and molded his body to hers. Though the Fae didn't normally get sick, it had happened before while they were on Earth.

The warmth of their bodies soon pulled Lugus to sleep. He fought it as long as he could, but the allure was too strong.

* * * *

Ahryn stretched and drew in the warmth that surrounded her. She had dreamed that she was freezing to death, then all of a sudden, the sun burst through the clouds and heat suffused her.

She tried to roll to her side, and that's when she felt it.

A body.

A very *male* body.

Lugus.

She knew without looking it was him. She would have liked to think he slept beside her because he was attracted to her, but the truth was, she knew he had come to her because she had been cold. That was just the type of man he was.

Just as she was about to sit up, his hand moved to her hips. She stilled and stared at the

canopy of trees above her. Her heart began beating loudly in her chest as his hand moved to her stomach to stop just shy of touching her breast.

A deep throb of longing jolted through her as Ahryn silently begged Lugus to move his hand higher, to take the pleasure she would gladly give him.

Ahryn didn't understand the sudden and intense yearning she had for Lugus, but she knew it wasn't simply Fate that put her in his path. It was more like destiny. But just what did the future hold for them? She highly doubted they would be together. Lugus was only doing this because Marcus had dared to come onto Lugus' isle for her.

In spite of the fact they were running for their lives and she desperately wanted to return to her realm, Ahryn liked being with Lugus. In many ways, a part of her didn't want their time to end.

She turned her head to find his eyes open and staring at her. Her breath lodged in her throat as he slowly pulled her towards him. She waited for him to stop or tell her he was protecting her from something, but all that disappeared when his lips met hers.

Ahryn forgot everything but the exotic taste of Lugus and the pleasure that spiraled through her as his hands ran over her body. She didn't protest when he rolled onto his back and brought her to lie on top of him.

The feel of his rock hard body pressed against hers yet again made liquid heat pool between her legs. While his hands discovered her body, she plunged hers in his thick, golden locks. His tongue explored her mouth and sent shivers of desire through her already heated body.

She was appalled at the urgency in which her body wanted him, but her mind had stopped working the instant his lips had met hers. The only thought in her mind was making sure he didn't stop kissing her.

When he rolled over and pinned her to the ground, Ahryn sighed, loving the weight of him atop her. His lips traveled from her mouth to her jaw, ear, and down her neck, leaving a trail of tingling flesh in his wake.

"Moirá," he whispered.

Ahryn jerked, unable to believe he had spoken another woman's name. And suddenly, Lugus raised his head and looked at her. After he blinked several times, he moved off her to sit at her feet.

"That wasn't just a dream, was it?" he asked softly.

Ahryn swallowed, hurt and confused. She wanted to ask him who this Moira was as her body still cried out for release. Instead of begging him to finish, she simply shook her head.

He climbed to his feet and ran a hand down his face. "I'm sorry," he said and turned his back. "I've been alone for a long time."

"Don't," she said as she smoothed down her gown and came to her feet. "There is no need for explanations."

Especially when it's a lie to cover up the fact you were dreaming of another woman.

Ahryn couldn't believe she was so angry. She had no ties to Lugus, and certainly didn't know him well enough to question him about anything.

No words were spoken as Ahryn ran her fingers through her hair and plaited it. She watched and waited for Lugus to tell her he was ready to begin the day. He set out at a brisk pace that Ahryn was hard pressed to match, yet she didn't mind him staying ahead of her while

she sorted through all that had happened that morning and her body's response.

It wasn't until they were once again following the shore that he slowed his pace and waited for her to catch up to him.

"Did I...say anything?" he asked, glancing from the ground to her face.

Now would be the perfect time to see if he would talk of the past, but Ahryn wasn't in the mood. She couldn't shake the hurt off, nor could she stop the longing of her body to feel Lugus'. She shook her head and continued on.

"I must have done something," he persisted. "You look...hurt," he said softly.

She threw him what she hoped he saw as a sincere smile and said, "I'm just tired."

Lugus didn't believe her for a moment. The dream this morning had been so real, and when he had opened his eyes to find himself on top of Ahryn he had been mortified that he had taken advantage of her that way.

At least he hadn't kissed her. But he could have sworn he had said Moira's name. Had he and Ahryn lied? Had something more transpired this morning than he remembered? He had hurt Ahryn, of that he was positive, and to ask her if they had kissed or more would only make things worse for both of them.

Lugus had to admit he missed her bright eyes and easy smile. He even missed her not so secretive way of trying to discover things from his past.

"Tell me what happened?" she asked unexpectedly.

He didn't need to ask about what. She was referring to his status of mortality. "It's a long story."

"It's a long walk," she retorted, not put off by his answer.

"You don't want to know."

"I do or I wouldn't have asked."

Lugus sighed. "You think you do, but once you find out the truth, you'll understand why I've tried so hard to keep it from you."

"It couldn't be that dreadful," she said sarcastically.

"What do you think a Fae must do to not only be cast from the Fae realm but have his immortality stripped from him?" Lugus didn't bother telling her he had given his life essence, his immortality, to Moira to save her from death.

She shrugged but never slowed. "Does it matter? Obviously it was something really horrible, but I don't even have rumors to ask you about. There was nothing spoken of other than to say you were no longer in the realm."

"And that should speak volumes to you," he said, not hiding the growing irritation from his voice. "I'm not going to tell you, so just leave it."

The once companionable silence had flown away as quickly as a spooked bird, leaving nothing but tension behind. Lugus wished now he had stayed by the tree instead of warming Ahryn up because of where it had gotten him.

When he handed her the last bit of food, she eagerly took it, though she didn't spare him a glance. Whereas at one time he had been sure she had wanted him, he wasn't so positive now. The feeling of disappointment that thought brought disturbed him greatly. He didn't want her, so why should it matter that she wasn't interested in him? Lugus hadn't been this confused around a woman since he had been a lad.

Around midday, just when he thought they wouldn't find a place to trade for food, they

came upon a cottage with smoke pouring from the chimney.

"Where are you going?" Ahryn asked.

"We're out of food. I'm getting us more."

It didn't take long to trade with the widow for a small bag of stale bread and moldy cheese for one of his daggers. He used another dagger to scrape off the mold before he sliced Ahryn a piece of cheese and handed it to her as they resumed walking.

"By my calculations, we should reach the Isle of Skye later today or tomorrow," he said.

She swallowed her food before asking, "You've been there before?"

"Once," he admitted. "Though never on the isle itself. It's large and easily seen from the coast."

"How do you know the gateway is there?"

"I recall that isle. It stuck with me."

She raised her brows. "And if the gateway isn't there?"

"I suppose we'll have to keep looking."

* * * *

"Are you sure?" Marcus asked.

The growl was low and deep. "How many times must you ask me that? I know where she is headed."

Marcus stared at his companion, the one being that had helped him capture a Fae. And with his marriage to Ahryn, he would come into a wealth of power that no one in Scotland would dare to defy.

Hair as black as pitch fell half way down his companion's back, held away from his face by a clasp of pure gold that had the shape of a dragon on it. Marcus stared into his unholy copper eyes and tried to hide his fear.

"Ahryn has convinced Lugus to help her only because you insisted on storming his isle. Had you listened to me and left him alone, Ahryn could very well be sitting beside you even now."

Marcus looked away from the accusing copper gaze. "Mayhap. However, you know to what lengths I went to obtain Ahryn. I couldn't sit idly by and wait for her to return to me."

A low chuckle reached Marcus as his companion folded his arms across his chest and regarded him. "Ever the insecure lord. Admit that you didn't take Lugus as a threat because he is the only one that can lead her to a gateway safely. It is the very reason I warned you to stay away from him."

Marcus waved away his words. "We will reach her in time."

"You better pray to your god that we do or else the entire Fae army will descend upon you."

* * * *

Ahryn didn't think her body could get more exhausted than it was, yet somehow she had managed it. The lack of natural magic on Earth drained Fae easily, and, when exerted as she had been, it went even faster. She briefly closed her eyes and tried to gather some calm around her.

She had thought that her hurt would have melted away by now, yet here it was late afternoon and she couldn't shake it. Very few words had been spoken since they had left the widow's cottage. Lugus seemed lost in his own world, and she had no desire to intrude again.

His harsh tone when she had asked about his past told her just how fresh his wounds

were. She tried to imagine the worst thing he could have done, which was try and destroy the Fae realm. Yet, it still didn't stop her from trusting him. In the little time she had been with him, she had seen the real man.

If he had done the unthinkable, Ahryn knew there had to have been a reason. She didn't for a moment believe that a man capable of what was hinted about on her realm would save her instead of leaving her to die.

She wished her mind would stay occupied with such thoughts, but inevitably, they shifted to his kisses and the feel of him that morning. The love and desire shining in his eyes as he spoke Moira's name would be etched in her memory for eternity.

Ahryn barely saw Lugus stop in front of her. She hastily sidestepped and missed running into him and ignored the inquisitive look he shot her. When he turned his head she followed his gaze and found herself looking across the sea to a large isle.

"Is it the Isle of Skye?" she asked hesitantly.

"Aye."

She looked to the sky and the growing darkness. "Will we make it today?"

Lugus sighed and turned away. "It is too late. We'll go first thing in the morning," he said as he searched for a place for them to bed down for the night.

She had noticed how uncomfortable he became in the darkness and wondered if it was her imagination or if he truly didn't like the night. Slowly, she turned and followed him. As preoccupied with his own thoughts as he was, he never noticed her studying him.

Lugus looked very much like his brother, King Theron, yet there was something missing from him besides the Fae glow of his skin. It was then she realized what it was. Hope. He had no hope in him, and without hope, it would only be a matter of time before he died.

She leaned against a tree and asked, "Can we chance a fire tonight?"

Lugus paused in his perusal and looked at her. "I cannot shake the feeling that Marcus is not very far behind us. If I had pushed a little harder today, we could be on the isle," he said and pointed to the Isle of Skye. "And you could be nearly home by now."

"It isn't your fault," she assured him. "I slowed you down. I'm not so sure that Marcus will know where we are. I don't know how you stand it," she said and rubbed her head. "I hate not being able to read the future."

He shrugged and sat down against a tree. "You get used to it, just as you get used to not healing quickly."

"It must be dreadful." She sat across from him, hoping he would continue talking without her having to ask more probing questions. She had no idea why she felt the need to know him as she did.

"It wasn't as bad as I had thought. In all honesty, I hadn't expected to live."

That's when she remembered what he had said when he first saw her on his isle. "You thought I had come to kill you. Have you been waiting for that?"

He didn't meet her gaze as he nodded. "I've asked for it."

"So you think you deserve death?"

"Most certainly."

The conviction in his voice gave her pause. "You were given a second chance. Why not grab hold of it with both hands and live your life?"

"It isn't that easy," he said, his voice laced with sorrow. "I have much to pay for, Ahryn.

My deeds demand my death.”

“Yet King Theron didn’t allow it.”

She heard what sounded like a chuckle, but surely that couldn’t be since she hadn’t even seen him smile.

“Theron had nothing to do with it. The only thing he did was place me on this realm instead of somewhere else.”

Ahryn was more confused than ever. If Theron didn’t halt the hand that would end Lugus’ life, then who had?

She watched Lugus with his cool demeanor and somber blue eyes and knew what she had to do.

Chapter Seven

Lugus rubbed his tired eyes and looked out over the sea. He couldn't believe he had gotten Ahryn here safely, but then cursed himself for not having her on the Isle of Skye before nightfall.

He knew in the depths of his soul that Marcus was coming for her. Lugus would have another soul on his conscious if he didn't send Ahryn through the gateway before Marcus arrived. And all because his mind couldn't let go of the dream and waking up atop Ahryn.

The dream was still vivid in his memory, and with it the glowing blue eyes that had stared back at him. It's why he had called Moira's name. It was as if she had transformed in his arms to someone else, someone looking like Ahryn.

He told himself it was simply because he had been alone for so long and had not tasted a woman's flesh in all those years. It was because of those reasons alone that Ahryn had been taking over Moira's image in his dreams. It had to be, he told himself. He refused to think of the other possible reasons.

His gaze moved to Ahryn. She had been quiet and withdrawn the entire day, and he couldn't blame her after what he had done that morning. He wouldn't speak to him either after what he had done to her that morning.

What really angered him was that Ahryn was a good sort, someone that he didn't want to harm, yet he seemed to be doing just that. It was one of the reasons he had wanted to reach the Isle of Skye that day. The sooner she was away from him, the better off she would be.

He was surprised when she moved her head and met his gaze. Her mystical blue eyes sparkled in the fading light of the sun.

"What will you do once I am returned to my realm?"

He pondered her question a moment. "I don't know," he said after not being able to come up with a lie.

"You cannot return to your isle."

He shook his head. "Nay. Even if we manage to get to the Isle of Skye and you pass through the gateway without Marcus catching you, he will hunt me. Returning to my home isn't an option."

"You like Scotland," she said suddenly.

He was surprised that she had managed to see that about him. "I do."

"You won't leave it."

"It suits me," was all he said in answer.

She tilted her head to the side and regarded him. "Aye, it does. Marcus' hand reaches far and wide, and his power over other clans is great."

"I had assumed as much. There are many places in which a man can live undetected for a few years."

He had already decided he would head deeper into the Highlands and the rugged mountains. There he would find some place to call home.

“And you?” he asked. “What will you do?”

She looked down at her hands that played with the material of her skirts. “I will return to my parents and explain what happened, and then, after that, I want to visit *Caer Rhoemyr*.”

Lugus jerked at hearing of his city. “What is there?”

“An aunt. I think some time away from my family is in order so I can determine what it is that I want, not what my parents want for me.”

“A smart idea.”

Silence fell around them, but he was loath to break it. When he heard Ahryn’s stomach rumble, he rose and gave her the last bit of cheese and bread.

“What about you?” she asked.

“I’m not hungry,” he lied and walked down to the shoreline.

Water gently lapped at his feet as he watched the sun disappear into the horizon. He sighed and refused to let the fear take hold of him. He would see the light in the morning, he repeated over and over in his head.

Their water supply had run out earlier, and Lugus knew he had to find some fresh water for them soon. He looked to his right and the village. There was nothing else for him to do. He had to get some water.

“Where are you going?” Ahryn asked as he walked to her.

“Into the village for some water.”

“It’s safe. There is no way Marcus and his men got here before us. Why not let me come?”

It probably was safe, but the more people that saw them, the more that could lead Marcus to them. She looked so hopeful that Lugus couldn’t refuse her, not after all she had been through.

“All right, but try to keep your hand hidden. If anyone sees that....”

“I know,” she said quickly.

Lugus looked over her and resigned himself to the fact that he would have to trade another of his daggers for a room so she could bathe and rest peacefully. There was no way he was going to chance another night alone with her.

Her steps were lighter as she walked beside him to the village. “Do you know where the gateway is?”

“Nay.”

“So it could be anywhere on the isle.”

Lugus didn’t bother to answer her statement.

“How big is the Isle of Skye?”

He cursed and plodded forward.

“That big,” she said softly. “It could be another several days before we find it.”

Lugus hadn’t wanted to tell her until once they had reached Skye. She was exhausted, and to learn that they would have even more days of travel would only worry her. Yet, he hadn’t wanted to lie to her either.

Once they came to the village, Lugus found an inn with two empty rooms and traded another dagger for it, food, a bath, and clothes for Ahryn. He walked her to her room and pointed to his across the hall. “The owner is sending up hot water, a new gown, and some food. Don’t leave.”

“Where are you going?”

“To ask some questions,” he said and turned on his heel.

Lugus didn’t breathe until he had reached the stairs and stepped into the dining room. He seated himself in a corner and ordered a mug of ale. The owner had told him that the dagger would cover anything he and Ahryn ordered for the next two days, so Lugus was going to be certain to get his money’s worth.

When the owner’s wife came to bring his mug, he stopped her and asked, “Is there a ferry to the Isle of Skye?”

“Aye,” she replied, her graying brown hair coming loose and falling about her face.

“Do you know much about the isle?”

She chuckled and placed her hand on her plump chest. “Ye could say that. I’ve lived here me whole life. What do ye want to know?”

Lugus took a long draught of his ale before answering her. “Do you know of a place on the isle where there are two massive standing stones?”

She peered closely at him. “There are many such stones all over Scotland and the isle.”

“These are different. Both stones are set apart and face the sea, their height reaching high into the sky.”

“I know those,” she answered softly, her gaze glancing around the dining room.

Lugus said a silent prayer of thanks. “Can you tell me where on the isle they are?”

“For a price.”

Somehow, that didn’t surprise him. He reached into his boot and pulled out one of his throwing daggers. It was smaller than the others, but the weapon was one of his most prized possessions. It had been one of the first he had made.

“Will this do?” he asked and slid it toward her on the table.

She smiled, showing two missing teeth. “Twill do nicely,” she said as she placed it in the pocket of her apron. “The stones are on the northeast side of the isle. If you follow the coast, you won’t miss them.”

“How long will it take to reach them?”

“Depends on how fast you travel. If you walk it could take up to five days. There is a ship that will take you and get you there in three.”

Lugus had already bartered three of his weapons, leaving him with his sword and only two more daggers. He had no wish to trade more, but their food was gone and they had no coin in which to spend. It was either barter the weapons or barter themselves.

* * * *

Ahryn stared at the big wooden tub that was being filled with water. She couldn’t wait to lower herself in the steaming water. It wasn’t the giant stone bath of her parent’s, but it would do just as well.

The young girl gave her a smile. “I will return with your food and a gown later.”

Ahryn nodded and kicked off her shoes. She didn’t care about food at the moment. All she wanted was to wash the grime and dirt from her body and hair. Her long hair had become tangled and knotted so that she knew she would be combing it out the rest of the night just to work out all the tangles.

She dipped her toe into the water and hissed as the heat connected with her skin, but it didn’t stop her from stepping into the tub and sinking into the delicious hot water. With a long

sigh, she leaned back and let the water lap around her. She closed her eyes and felt her muscles began to relax little by little until she was nearly asleep.

Leisurely, her hand reached over and grabbed the bar of soap. She brought it to her nose, thinking it would smell as wonderful as the soap that was made on her realm when she got a whiff of the foul concoction. Holding it as far away from her as she could, she lathered up and began to scrub her body. Twice. Even then she wondered if she should scrub it again. Instead, she dunked her head to wet her hair.

She wiped the water from her eyes and looked around for the bottle of hair wash. Seeing nothing but the offending soap, she rolled her eyes and reached for the bar again. As loath as she was to use it, she had to admit it seemed to get her skin and hair clean.

By the time she was finished, the water had begun to turn cool. As she stepped out of the wooden tub and began to dry off, there was a soft knock on the door, and Ahryn heard the serving girl call out.

"Come in," Ahryn called and wrapped the material around her body.

The girl smiled shyly and set the tray of food on the table before laying a gown on the bed. "I hope the color suits you," she said softly.

Ahryn looked at the pale blue gown and smiled. "I love the color. Thank you." She waited until the door closed behind the girl before she ran over to it and bolted it. Only then did she let the towel drop as she reached for the new chemise. She debated on whether to put the gown on since she knew she wasn't going out. She decided against it and sat down to eat.

* * * *

Lugus walked woodenly back to the inn. The night had not gone as he had planned, and his mood had soured quickly. He didn't even glance at the innkeeper as he walked in and climbed the stairs.

As he passed Ahryn's door he saw light from beneath it. He knocked softly and heard her hurry to the door.

"Who is it?" she asked hesitantly.

He rubbed his eyes and said, "It's me."

A moment later, the door cracked open. "Is everything all right?"

"I need to come in and tell you the plans," he said as he pushed open the door and walked in. It never registered in his mind that she might not be dressed, so when he turned and found her in nothing but her shift, he could only stare.

She shrugged. "I tried to warn you."

He blinked as she walked to her table and sat down to continue eating. Unlike the women on Earth, the Fae didn't conceal every part of their bodies and run and hide if someone came upon them. The Fae body was one of beauty, and they didn't mind showing it off.

Lugus stared at the ceiling as he tried in vain to tell himself not to look at her, and he begged his body not to respond.

She giggled. "I find it odd that you have changed to this realm's ways."

"A person gets used to something, but that isn't it," he said and turned his back to her so that he looked at her bed and the pale blue gown.

"Then what is it? Does my body not please you?"

It pleases me too much.

"I didn't come up here to discuss your body or what pleases me." He knew he should

have continued on to his chamber and spoken with her in the morn. Yet, instead of walking out, he stayed, wondering what outrageous question she would ask him next.

“True, but that’s what we’re discussing now. So answer me. Do I not please you?”

He sighed and leaned against the bed post. “You know you do. Fae are some of the most beautiful, alluring creatures in creation.”

“Exactly. So it only makes sense that you would please me as well,” she said matter of factly, as if there wasn’t a debate.

Lugus turned around, prepared to tell her the news and leave. Instead, he found himself watching her as she slowly rose from the table, the light from the single candle behind her illuminating her silhouette through the thin shift. All the moisture in his mouth vanished as he simply stared.

His heart began to beat wildly and his blood pooled in his rod, bringing it to a painfully hard and yearning state. All he had to do was reach out and touch her. He could sense her own need which only spurned his desire.

But to touch her, taste her, would be to give in to his pleasure, something he had denied himself for too long. Giving in now would not be fair to neither himself nor Ahryn.

With more willpower than he ever thought he possessed, he said, “I came to tell you the plan for tomorrow.”

“The plan?” she asked, her voice low and seductive.

“Aye. I discovered the gateway is on the northeast side of the isle,” he said and stepped away from her toward the door. “It would take us longer by foot, so we’re going by boat.”

“All right.”

He swallowed and reached for the door. “We leave at first light.”

She smiled knowingly. “Why are you fighting this? We both know what we want.”

“I have my reasons.”

“Lugus,” she said.

“Don’t,” he said harsher than he intended. He glanced down before gazing into her mystic eyes. “I have my reasons, Ahryn. Please don’t ask more of me than I can give.”

Ahryn stared at the closed door, not believing Lugus had walked out. For a moment she had thought he would give in, but then something had happened and he had left before she could say another word.

Whatever prison Lugus kept himself in, it was near impenetrable.

* * * *

Lugus hurried from Ahryn’s chamber to his own and barred the door. He sank onto the bed, his head in his hands as his body ached with need. If it had been anyone else, he might have given in if only to relieve himself. But it was Ahryn. A Fae that had entrusted him with her life.

He could not fail her.

Chapter Eight

Lugus ran his hands down her bare back and smiled as she arched away from him. He leaned forward and ran his tongue down her spine, lingering at the base as he teased a sensitive spot. He heard her sharp intake of breath and turned her around to face him.

He gazed into her Druid green eyes. "Moira."

She smiled at him and leaned down to run her lips over his. He traced the outline of her mouth with his tongue and pulled her down atop him. The feel of her full breasts against his chest made his sacs heavy with need. It had been so long since he had held her, and he knew once wouldn't be enough that night.

His hands cupped her breasts and tweaked her nipples. She cried out and rotated her hips against his swollen rod. He moaned and brought his mouth to a hard nipple. He ran his tongue over her nipple and swirled it around his mouth until she writhed with need.

Only then did he allow her to sit up and take him slowly into her. Her hot, wet sheath nearly made him loose his seed right then. He closed his eyes and reveled in the feel of her tightness surrounding him. When she began to rock back and forth, he gripped her hips and felt his climax coming faster than he wanted.

He opened his eyes to tell her to stop and found himself staring into mystic blue eyes.

Lugus stood by the ship and watched the sun break the horizon. He let out a pent up breath and inhaled the sea air. Except it wasn't salt he smelled, but the distinctive fragrance of innocence, sexuality, and magic.

Ahryn.

He could feel her approach and wondered how she had slept. After another dream where Moira once again turned into Ahryn, he hadn't been able to sleep again. He was tired and in the worst of moods. Ever since he had left the inn he had experienced an urgency to board the ship and leave as soon as possible.

"Good morn," Ahryn said as she stopped beside him.

He glanced at her and noticed the dark circles under her eyes. Instead of commenting, he glanced at the gown and her clean hair plaited away from her face with many tiny braids that met in one thick braid down her back.

"Good morn. The color suits you," he said and turned back to the sea. He saw her turn to him out of the corner of his eye.

"Thank you. Is everything set?"

"Just about," he said as he spotted the captain.

She began to fidget beside him until he could ignore it no longer. "What is the matter?"

"Don't you feel it?" she asked under her breath.

He looked around. "What?"

"I don't know. There's an urgency in the air I cannot explain."

He nodded and looked at her. "That I have felt."

"Is it Marcus?" Her wide blue eyes searched his.

Lugus shrugged. "I don't know. Once we board the ship, the captain will show you to a chamber. Stay there. Don't venture on deck until I come to get you."

"Where will you be?"

"Around," he said as he put his hand on her back and guided her toward the dock as he saw the captain wave to him.

"How long will it take us to reach the gateway?"

"About three days until we reach Skye, but I'm not sure how long it will take to reach the gateway," he answered as he glanced over his shoulder. He could have sworn someone was watching him, and even though he searched, the sensation did not go away.

He turned back around to find Ahryn facing him. "Someone is out there," she said.

"Aye. Now follow the captain. Quickly," he said when she didn't move. He watched as the captain led her away before he turned back to the village.

People milled about, but no one looked suspicious, until he saw a man with long black hair disappear behind a building. It could be nothing, but it could be everything, especially since the sensation of being watched no longer affected him.

"Ready?" the captain asked as he joined him.

Lugus sighed and handed him his sword. "Ready."

* * * *

Lugus' arms burned as he pulled the rigging tight. The wind had given them speed but changed often. He had been at the sails since the ship had left the dock, and he could well imagine Ahryn getting antsy in the cabin.

He jumped down and ducked below deck to find her cabin. He barely tapped his fingers on the door before she jerked it open.

"Where have you...", she began then stopped as she looked him over. "What have you been doing?"

"Helping the captain."

Her blue eyes narrowed. "Doesn't he have crew for that?"

"Aye."

She sighed and leaned against the door. "So why are you helping him?"

Lugus knew he had to tell her. "It was part of the package."

"For our passage?"

He nodded once. "You can come on deck if you like. We are far enough away from shore," he said and retraced his steps.

Ahryn hurried after him. She couldn't believe he had bartered himself as payment for their passage. She had seen him give up two of his daggers already but had no idea just how many weapons he had.

The sun hit her as she came on deck, and for a moment she stopped and tilted her face to it. The few hours she had been in the small, cramped cabin being tossed about was almost worse than being trapped on Earth.

She moved toward the rail, a smile on her face when Lugus stepped in her path. The frown on his face let her know he wasn't happy.

"What is it?"

"Hide the bracelet," he hissed. Then in a softer tone, he warned, "You aren't using

magic, so the men will flock to you. I'll be watching, but just in case I'm not near, use this," he said and handed her his dagger.

She took it instinctively. "I won't stay on deck long," she promised and hurriedly hid the dagger and her right hand.

His face softened as he looked out over the water. "It's just for three days. We can survive three days."

"Aye, we can," she promised him and gave him a bright smile when he turned his blue eyes on her.

He started to walk off when he stopped and reluctantly turned towards her. "One more thing."

She leaned against the rail and waited.

"In order for you to come aboard, I had to lie."

Ahryn was finding Lugus more and more interesting. "And what did you have to lie about?"

He sighed dramatically. "I said you were my wife," he said quickly and hurried away.

Ahryn blinked in stunned disbelief. She was surprised he hadn't said she was his sister or niece. But wife? That she hadn't expected, and the thrill of hearing it on his lips worried her more than Marcus finding her.

By mid-afternoon the sun and bright skies had given way to dark, ominous clouds and distant thunder. Ahryn had spent the majority of the day in her small cabin alternately calling for her parents and even the Fae king, Theron, yet none answered her call.

The ship began to toss wildly, and Ahryn gave up trying to pace the cabin and sat instead. The first rain drops could be heard over the shouts of the sailors, and all Ahryn could think about was Lugus high up in the rigging. If he didn't have a good hold, the pitch of the ship or a blast of wind could knock him right off. Her worry increased with every heart beat until she was nearly mindless with it.

Then suddenly the door to her cabin flew open and Lugus staggered in. He looked as if were ready to pass out. She jumped up and caught him as he tripped and the ship pitched. He raised his head and looked at her with half closed eyes. She gave him a smile and wrapped her arms around him and his wet clothes.

"You need to rest," she said as they stumbled their way to the bed.

He fell on it in a heap before she could get him out of his clothes. She set about removing his boots and socks, then managed to turn him over on his back so she could work on his tunic.

She could only imagine how she looked sitting nearly astride him as she worked to get his arms out of the wet material, and then once that was done she had to sit him up and get it over his head, which proved to be harder than she imagined. Just as she removed the tunic and tossed it aside, she turned back and found him staring at her.

"What are you doing?"

She swallowed, her mouth now dry at seeing the desire darkening his blue eyes. "Your clothes were soaked. I didn't want you sleeping in them."

His gaze raked over her face as if he were searching for something. "You should have woken me."

Unable to resist, she raised her hand and traced his mouth with her finger. "Nay. Not

after the work you have done today to aid me.” She dropped her hand and met his gaze. “I will never be able to repay you.”

“Nay,” he mumbled as his face drew closer.

Ahryn held her breath, waiting and wondering if he would kiss her again. The memory of their first kiss still lingered in her mind.

The ship jerked to the side, and Ahryn grabbed hold of Lugus with one hand and the wall with the other. And that’s when she felt his rod nestled against her. Heat pooled between her legs, and a deep throb of hunger resounded within her.

She was surprised when his arm gently wrapped around her and brought her to his chest to keep her steady. Her eyes lowered to his wide, full mouth. It was a sensuous mouth, one that could bring about the most intense pleasure, just with a simple kiss. She licked her lips and heard his intake of breath.

Her lips parted as his mouth drew near. Their cheeks met and brushed ever so slightly. The stubble of his whiskers scraped her face as his mouth moved toward hers slowly, as if undecided.

She felt his arm tense around her just before his lips touched hers.

Lugus knew he would burn in a special realm for this, but he could no longer deny the pull of Ahryn. He was too tired of fighting it and the growing need his body had for release. When her smooth cheek met his, he closed his eyes and savored the feel of her silken skin against his. He opened his eyes to see her chest rising and falling rapidly, and her lips parted, waiting expectantly.

And his control vanished.

He moved his head, and his lips met hers, and pleasure burst within him. His arms crushed her to him as he deepened the kiss and explored her delicious mouth. He promised himself he would do no more than kiss her, but with each taste and moan and sigh that escaped her sweet mouth he found it difficult to think of anything but sinking into her heat.

Needing to know more of her, Lugus broke the kiss and moved to her neck. She rolled her head to the side and gave him access to her long, slender neck. His hands moved to her sides as she leaned back, her breast thrust outward as if begging him to taste their nectar.

Lugus could no more turn away than he could stop breathing. His hands moved to cup her breasts, and even through the heavy material of her gown he could feel her nipples harden. She moaned and gripped his arms as he leaned forward and kissed the skin above each breast while his hands continued to squeeze and roll her nipples.

His rod begged for more. It demanded more until he was mindless of anything but Ahryn’s pleasure and the desire that ran swift and true in him.

He was about to begin work on removing her clothes when someone banged on the door and hollered for him to come back on deck. Reality descended upon him like a bucket of cold water. And he knew the instant Ahryn realized that.

She said not a word as she moved off him. He reached for his wet tunic and pulled it on before tugging on his boots. He didn’t know what to say to her, so instead of saying something he either didn’t mean or didn’t want, he decided the best course of action was to leave it be.

He quickly walked from the cabin and softly shut the door behind him. Just before he walked out into the storm, he stopped and touched his lips. He knew her taste, which meant he had kissed her before. Why had she lied about their first kiss?

* * * *

Ahryn stood in the corner and watched Lugus walk from the cabin. When the door closed she slid down the wall and drew her knees up to her chest. She had thought he knew who he was kissing, but maybe she had been wrong again.

Her breasts tingled as if his hands were still on them. She sighed and buried her head in her arms as the ship continued to toss about.

She must have dozed for when she woke she was on the bed. She rubbed her eyes and rolled over as she yawned and tried to remember if she had climbed into the bed. With the ship pitching about, she was sure she wouldn't have chanced being tossed out while she slept. But how had she got into the bed?

Then she spotted Lugus asleep on the floor. He was on his back with a hand thrown over his eyes. His clothes were still wet, and he had dark circles under his eyes.

She looked out her small window and saw the sun just breaking the horizon. Briefly she thought about waking him since he had seemed to like to watch the sunrise, but the haggard lines on his face stopped her.

Unable to help herself, she watched him. Fae men did not have facial hair like the men of the Earth realm did, yet Lugus did have some growth. She accounted it to the fact that when he lost his immortality, he took on mortal attributes.

His long hair had been pulled away from his face, but it was still tangled and in need of a comb. She noticed a bruise on his neck near his shoulder and could only imagine it had occurred while he was aiding the men during the storm. She hoped he wasn't seriously injured because she knew he would never tell her if he was.

She chewed her bottom lip and brushed the hair from her face with her hand. The jingle of her slave bracelet drew her attention. She ran her finger over the intricate knotwork of the ancient Celts and wondered about the strange markings that looked somewhat like a language. If anyone could decipher what the language was, they would be found on the Fae realm. She just had to get there first.

Needing some air, Ahryn scooted to the end of the bed, then slipped on her shoes and quietly left the cabin. Just as it normally was after a vicious storm, the sky shown blue and the sun bright.

She leaned on the railing and studied the deep blue of the sea. Off to her left and up ahead was the Isle of Skye. If she walked to the other side of the ship she would be able to make out the isle, but she didn't like knowing it was so close yet so far away.

"Good morn, milady," the captain said as he approached.

Ahryn inclined her head and wished she had taken the time to replait her hair. She could only imagine how awful she looked having just woken up.

"I see you survived the storm," he said as he leaned an elbow on the rail and stared at her.

The captain was an older man with hair nearly completely white and a full beard to match. His hazel eyes seemed innocent, but Ahryn somehow doubted he was.

"I did," she finally answered. "Thank you for the excellent work in keeping us afloat."

He chuckled and looked out over the water. "That storm was nothing compared to some of the ones I've been in. I could tell you stories that would make you never want to step foot on a ship again."

Ahryn found herself smiling. "I imagine that you could." Her eyes lowered, and that's

when she saw it...Lugus' sword.

She knew he hadn't been wearing it yesterday, but she just assumed he had stowed it in their cabin.

"'Tis a mighty fine sword," the captain said. "I'm surprised yer husband parted with it."

She swallowed and made her gaze meet his. "As am I."

"Just shows you how much he loves you," the captain said before walking away.

Ahryn was stunned. That sword had been a masterpiece and worth the price of the ship and ten others just like it. And the captain knew it. She tucked a stray hair behind her ear and thought over the man asleep below deck.

* * * *

Lugus came awake with a start. He sat up and tried to get his bearings. His shoulder throbbed where a mast had broken loose of its knot and slammed into him. Other parts of him hurt just as badly as he recalled the many long hours as he and the other sailors had struggled to keep the ship together in the violent storm.

He braced one hand on the floor as he leaned back. To his surprise, he realized it was the first night he hadn't dreamed of Moira. He knew it was probably due to his fatigue, so didn't scrutinize it more.

His stomach grumbled, reminding him he hadn't eaten since yesterday morning. Using the bed as leverage, he pulled himself up, and stared at an empty bed.

Chapter Nine

Lugus blinked. Where was Ahryn? She had to be on the ship, but he had warned her just what her Fae magic could, and would, do to the sailors.

He threw open the cabin door and rushed down the narrow hall and up the stairs. As soon as he reached the deck he had to stop and shield his eyes from the bright sun. With his arm raised, he scanned the deck. When he didn't find her at the railing, he began to walk the ship.

It wasn't until he reached the other side that he found her. He stopped and braced his hands on his knees as he drew in a deep breath. The trepidation he had felt at not finding her scared the hell out of him. It had been a long time since he had felt such a strong emotion, and he didn't know if he was ready to feel again.

When his breathing was under control, he walked to her and leaned against the railing beside her. They didn't look at each other but stared at the water instead.

"Thank you for moving me to the bed," she said.

He still recalled walking into the dark cabin and finding her huddled in the corner. Despite his fatigue, his rod had stirred as he lifted her and placed her on the bed.

"I couldn't let you sleep as you were."

She shrugged. "You needed the rest more than me. The floor couldn't have been comfortable."

"In truth, I was so tired I didn't notice."

"You bartered your sword."

Lugus sighed and turned towards her. "Aye. I did."

She faced him, her eyes troubled and her brow furrowed. "Why? That sword was magnificent."

"And can be replaced. I will make another one." He didn't want her to know just how much the sword had meant to him or how easily he had given it to the captain to give her safe passage to the isle.

"You say the words, but you don't mean them. You forget I watched you while you worked. You put your heart and soul into each weapon."

"It is true I love crafting the weapons, but they are just weapons, Ahryn." She glanced away, but he had seen the doubt in her mystic blue eyes. She knew he lied.

"Does the bruise pain you?" she asked and pointed to his injured shoulder.

The pain was like having a dragon chew through his shoulder, but he wouldn't tell her that either. "Not too badly."

"It looks awful."

He found himself wanting to smile at her scrunched up nose and doubtful voice. "And to think I was told women liked men with scars."

The teasing light shown in her blue eyes as she flipped her long braid over her shoulder. "Scars aye. Bruises nay."

To his surprise, he chuckled. He couldn't remember the last time he had smiled, much

less laughed.

Ahryn leaned close and studied him. "Was that what I thought it was?"

"Depends. What did you think it was?"

"A laugh?" she asked hopefully.

He thought a moment then nodded. "Aye, I think it was."

She leaned back and gave him a thoughtful smile. "Interesting. The sound wasn't half bad. I'm sure if you work on it more it might even sound natural."

Lugus looked away before he did start laughing. Her teasing tone and quick thinking brought a smile to his face like nothing else could.

"And I have to admit, the smile looks very handsome on you."

He swung his head around to her. "Ah, so you do find me handsome."

She raised a finger and shook it side to side. "I said it *looked* handsome on you, not that you were handsome. Maybe there's something wrong with your hearing."

"I've never met anyone like you," he confessed before he thought better of it. "You're in the most dire of situations and yet you find something to laugh about."

She shrugged and faced the railing again. "Why not? What will happen will happen, and no amount of my fretting or pouting will change that. And if jesting lightens the mood for a moment and makes me forget, why not?"

Lugus had never thought of it this way, and it gave him pause. "You find me dour, don't you?"

She threw him a look and shook her head. "Not dour. You're a brooding sort, and it gives me an extra challenge to see if I can make you smile."

He wasn't the sort to be surprised or intrigued by anything, yet Ahryn continued to do both to him. And he didn't want to be intrigued, especially by her.

His eyes followed her as she pushed from the railing. He faced her, wondering what would come out of her mouth next. Would she have a quick response that made him want to smile? Or would she finally admit that he had kissed her before last night?

"Be careful today," she said as she trailed her finger along the railing before she turned and walked away.

Lugus shook his head. Once again she had surprised him. He could have sworn she had been about to say something else. He sighed and moved his shoulder to try and work out some of the soreness. The tightness and pain would only get worse as the day drew on.

"Better grab some food, lad," the captain said as he sauntered by. "'Tis going to be a long day repairing the damage the storm caused."

Lugus nodded and made his way to the galley. He took the offered bowl and tried not to look at the slop that was dished into it. Instead, he sat and began to eat, hoping that Ahryn got something better than the tasteless gruel he ate.

He barely got the last bite down before he was up and once again on deck. He wanted to survey the damage himself and see if it would cost them an extra day. His hands, sore and blistered from the previous days work, throbbed and protested when he reached onto the rigging and began to climb.

The damage wasn't as bad as he had feared, and he doubted it would slow them much at all. The relief he felt was short lived as he realized that once on the isle, they would still have to reach the gateway before Marcus. He and Ahryn had a head start, but just how much of one?

As he set about attaching part of the sail that had come loose he thought over the sensation he had when leaving the dock that someone had been watching him. He wished he had seen his eyes so Lugus would know if it was a Draconian--or something else. It could have been his imagination and apprehension, but he highly doubted it.

The tasks became more difficult, and Lugus had to concentrate or fall to the deck. It was some time later that he heard one of the sailors mumble something near him. Lugus turned to the sailor to his right who hung perilously by just one hand and foot as he pulled the sails tight. He followed the sailor's line of sight and found Ahryn strolling the deck.

She had done just as he asked and kept her right hand hidden so no one would see the slave bracelet. Her steps were slow, leisurely, as she ambled about not looking at anyone or anything.

His gaze was drawn to her like a dragon to treasure, and if he were honest with himself, it wasn't just his gaze that wanted her. His body ached for her.

The memory of their kiss still lingered in his mind as did the incredible feel of her body in his hands. The desire that had flared in her mystic blue eyes had only fueled his own. If they hadn't been interrupted, Lugus knew he would have claimed her that night. He couldn't help but wonder how long he could put off what he craved so dearly.

The hair on the back of his neck suddenly stood on end. Slowly, Lugus looked over his shoulder, and he could have sworn a set of copper eyes stared at him through the clouds. He blinked, and they disappeared, but he knew what he had seen. The Draconians were on Earth. How many, he didn't know, and by the time he found out, it would most likely be too late.

He cursed and glanced down at Ahryn. If he still had his powers, he could easily dispense with any Draconians that came near her. But he didn't have his powers anymore. No magic flowed within him, only the memory of it did.

Quickly he finished tying off his knot and began to descend to the deck. He landed in front of Ahryn and reached for her hand.

"What is it?" she asked.

He pulled her below deck and into their cabin before he turned to face her. "It's the Draconia."

She swallowed and sank onto the bed. "How do you know?"

"They are watching us even as I speak."

"Then there's no hope for me," she said with a sigh.

Lugus knelt in front of her. "We will get you to the gateway, and I vow that I will do everything I can to make sure that you pass into your realm."

"Our realm."

He ignored her correction and stood. "What bothers me is their sudden appearance and interest in you."

"I have no idea what their interest is," she said and looked away.

He knew then she lied. It hurt that she would trust him with her life but not her secrets. Yet, he wouldn't tell her he knew she lied. He would let her keep her secrets because the only thing that mattered to him was getting her through the gateway.

"They want something," he said. "If not you, then what?"

"Or who?" she said. "Your brother, maybe?"

Lugus' breath lodged in his chest. "Theron?" His mind raced with the possibility.

Theron was powerful as the king of the Fae, but what would the Draconians want with him?

“Aye, Theron? Why not? He’s the king and very powerful.”

He thought over her words and leaned against the door. “It could be. I cannot think of anyone else they would want for them to dare to venture into this realm.”

“It has to be,” she said and moved a strand of flaxen hair from her face. “The Draconia haven’t been seen by the Fae in...”

“Ages,” Lugus supplied for her.

She nodded. “Exactly. As you said, for them to dare to venture here, they would have to be after either something extremely powerful or extremely precious to them. Could they be trying to take back this realm?”

“Nay,” he said. “I don’t think they would dare try. It would be too difficult now to wage that kind of war with all the humans about.”

Ahryn smiled inwardly when she heard Lugus refer to the humans. Whether he wanted to admit it or not, deep down, he still regarded himself as Fae.

She pondered the Draconians appearance. “Wars have been fought before with humans here.”

“They have. However, it cost us dearly to keep it from the humans.”

“If the Draconia are just as powerful as us, they could very well try.” She watched as Lugus ran a hand down his tired face. Her gaze caught his reddened hand and hated that he was having to labor for her passage.

He was a prince, not some beggar in need of work. “How is your shoulder?” she asked. “It’s fine.”

She licked her lips. “We won’t make it will we?” He tried to hide the doubt in his blue eyes, but she saw it anyway.

“We will make it.”

She reached around and loosened her plait, then ran her fingers through the long strands as she gazed out her window. “If the Draconia are aiding Marcus, they are most likely already at the gateway and waiting for us.”

“Then we’ll find another gate.”

His statement had her swinging her head towards him. By the look in his eyes, he was serious. “Because of me your home was burned and you cannot return. Because of me you have had to barter your weapons. Because of me you are bruised and battered and exhausted. I cannot ask more of you than I already have.”

A hint of a smile pulled at his mouth. “I have much to atone for. Bringing you to a gateway, regardless of what happens between then and now doesn’t matter.”

She didn’t know why she had expected him to want to take her because of her, not because he felt he needed to pay some penance for past deeds. In her heart she knew she should be grateful he was willing to help at all, but when it came to Lugus, she found she was anything but reasonable.

“You don’t believe me,” he said, his voice full of shock.

Ahryn looked away. “It isn’t that at all, Lugus. I just want to return home.”

“And you will,” he said before he left the cabin.

She fell back on the bed and stared at the ceiling. As the granddaughter of the High Chancellor, Ahryn and her siblings had been sought after for marriages that would align certain

houses. All she had wanted was a man she could love, a man who was strong and caring.

No matter how hard she had looked, she hadn't found a man she wanted strongly enough to consider marriage. Until now.

She wasn't a fool. She knew that any union between her and Lugus, Fae prince or not, could never be. His immortality had been taken away, and he was exiled from the Fae realm. And he didn't want her.

Oh, his body might want her, but the fact he continued to pull away from her told her that his heart belonged to someone else. Moira.

Somehow Ahryn knew that Moira was connected to Lugus' banishment, but to what degree she had no idea. And why wasn't Moira with him now? If only the cursed slave bracelet wasn't on her arm, she would be able to see all she needed to know instead of wondering.

And wondering drove her crazy.

Chapter Ten

Every muscle in Lugus' body ached. Not even all the hours he had worked hammering the steal had prepared his body for the rigorous work the sailors did as they climbed to the tip of the masts and back.

At least he wasn't scrubbing the deck.

Slowly, he walked below deck. He was half asleep and in sore need of a comfortable bed, hot bath, and good food. None of which he would get while on the ship. His feet stopped when he reached the cabin door.

Ahryn would be inside most likely fast asleep since it was well into the night. He could very well picture her with her flaxen hair spread around her like a golden sheen of silken threads, her luminescent skin aglow in the moonlight while the blanket molded to her curves.

If he walked into the cabin, he knew he would claim her, and whatever she was, nobility or commoner, he would not take advantage of her despite the desire she claimed she had for him.

With a deep sigh of resignation, Lugus lowered himself to the floor and stretched out in front of her door. As exhausted and drained as he was, he didn't care if anyone saw him or not. All he wanted was some rest for his mind, body, and soul.

Just before sleep claimed him, he found himself wondering what Theron would think of Ahryn.

* * * *

Ahryn didn't know what woke her. All she knew was that she was alone. She rose on her knees and looked out her small, round window. The sea was calm. So where was Lugus?

She scooted from the bed and yanked on her gown before opening the door to go in search of him. After the previous night, he needed rest, and she was going to make sure he had it, even if she had to barter herself to do it.

But when she opened the door she found a huddled form on the floor. Only the long, pale length of Lugus' hair let her know it was him. She knew the floor wasn't where he needed to be, but as long as she was in the bed, he wouldn't be.

She turned on silent feet and pulled a blanket from the bed then walked to him and gently draped it over his body. Quietly, she closed the door, undressed, and climbed back into bed.

His actions tonight proved he would go out of his way not to be near her. She knew he would fight the need in his body until the last, and if she pushed him, he would give in but end up resenting her because it wasn't what he wanted, or *who* he wanted.

Ahryn had seen the other sailors looking at her. All she had to do was give one the slightest impression she wanted him and he would be hers. It was the Fae magic that pulled to the humans. But it didn't work on Lugus, and in a way she was grateful. She wanted him to want her for her, not because he couldn't resist her Fae charms.

She regretted the few times she had pushed him to make love to her. At the time, she hadn't any idea just how deep his feelings ran for Moira, but now that she did, she knew she didn't stand a chance. And because she admired him, she refused to put him in that position

again.

With the blanket pulled up to her chin, she rolled onto her side and tried to sleep, but all she could think about was the nearly uncontrollable need her body had to be held by Lugus.

* * * *

Lugus opened his eyes when he heard the door click shut. He had come awake the instant he had heard the door open, and for a moment he wasn't sure what Ahryn's intentions were. When he felt the blanket against his skin something had moved within him. No one had done something out of kindness for him in...an age.

It wasn't until she had closed the door behind her that he allowed himself to open his eyes and turn on his back. After he had repeatedly turned her away, she continued to show him compassion. He didn't understand why.

Of all the people she bestowed her kindness upon, he was the least deserving. And that's when he realized he never wanted her to know what he had done to be banished from the Fae realm. He had seen laughter, determination, fear, and kindness in her mystical blue eyes. He did not want to see the loathing and revulsion that was sure to shine through when she learned the truth.

For many years he had yearned for a Fae to come and end his life for what he had done. But now...now he prayed they didn't. He needed to make sure Ahryn reached the Fae realm unharmed and safe, then he would welcome death.

Then he would seek it.

Ahryn.

Her name meant passion, and she embodied her name like a well fit glove. Like most Fae, she was elegant, beautiful, and graceful, but she had other characteristics that molded her--kindness, determination, and faith.

In his mind's eye he pictured Ahryn's lithe body in his hands, her back arched, and her full breasts heavy and eager for his touch. His body hardened as desire flared in him.

Lugus closed his eyes and tried to erase Ahryn's image with one of Moira's, but no matter how hard he tried, he could not recall Moira. Not the shade of her hair, the feel of her body, but especially not the green of her eyes.

He ran a hand down his face and refused to give in to the anxiety that rolled in his stomach. He told himself it was because he concentrated on Ahryn and arriving safely at the Isle of Skye that he couldn't remember Moira's face. Once Ahryn was gone, then he would be able to remember details of Moira.

With his conscious at ease, Lugus closed his eyes and didn't fight the fact that all he could think about was Ahryn's mystical blue eyes filled with passion.

* * * *

Ahryn woke feeling as though she hadn't slept more than an hour. She was tired, cranky, and restless. Not a good combination on a ship.

She raised a hand and brushed the hair from her eyes. Her dreams had been plagued with fear. She had been running from something. At first, she had thought it was Marcus, but soon came to realize it wasn't him. It was something else, something more dangerous...more evil.

The jingle of the slave bracelet drew her attention. She dreaded having to tell her family that she had been impulsive and childish in leaving the realm and being caught by humans. She knew her father would be slow to forgive her, but if she needed anything, she could turn to her

grandfather. He had always been there for her.

A soft knock brought her out of her musings. "Who is it?" she asked as she sat up and clutched the blanket to her chest.

"Me," Lugus answered. "I've come with food. Are you decent?"

She briefly thought about standing naked on the bed to see if he would notice her but remembered the vow to herself to leave him be.

"Just a moment," she said as she climbed out of bed and hastily threw on her gown. She reached for the laces to tie it and said, "You can enter now."

She concentrated on her laces as she heard the door open, and Lugus stepped inside the small cabin. It was on the tip of her tongue to ask him if he slept well on the hard floor but bit her tongue before her crankiness could show through.

He set the tray on the small table that was nailed down to the floor planks and waited. Ahryn lowered her hands and raised her gaze. She didn't like the haggard look that had replaced his cool features.

"Thank you," he said.

She stilled at his words. "For what?"

"The blanket."

"You're welcome," she said as she reached for a piece of bread while she sank into the chair. "Thank you for bringing the food."

He shrugged away her words and sat as he began to eat. "We should reach Skye sometime today."

"So soon?" She had feared the storm had blown them farther out or off course somehow. She was relieved to hear they were still on schedule.

Lugus nodded. "I spoke with the captain this morning. Unless something strange happens, tonight we'll be sleeping on the isle."

"How far to the gateway?"

He took a deep breath and swallowed his food. "That depends on where we land. The gateway is on the coast, so it shouldn't be too difficult to find."

Ahryn should be feeling pleased at the news, but the nagging sensation that they wouldn't reach the gateway as easy as Lugus said wouldn't go away.

"And if Marcus is there?"

Lugus slowly set down his cup as his blue eyes locked with hers. "Every gateway has guardians the Fae placed there. If need be, we will seek their aid. However, I don't plan on allowing Marcus time to catch us. We will travel light and swift once we hit land."

His words, though they comforted her, didn't alleviate the fear that grew within her. And he only had one dagger in which to fight with.

"Ahryn." His voice was soft but commanding.

"Don't think I don't trust you," she explained. "It isn't that, but a growing...fear that I cannot dispel."

He sighed and leaned back in his chair. "You feel it as well?"

She searched his face and saw he wasn't jesting. Her eyes glanced around the small cabin to see if something or someone hid waiting for them.

"They aren't on the ship," Lugus said.

"I feel as though they are." Her gaze returned to his face. "When did you begin to feel

it?”

He shrugged. “It doesn’t matter.”

“It does. How long?”

With his arms crossed over his chest he said, “Since we departed Scotland.”

Ahryn found it difficult to breath. She rose and tried to pace the tiny space. “I didn’t feel it,” she said. “I need to feel my magic, to feel connected to our realm.”

Lugus knew she was fast becoming hysterical. He was surprised she hadn’t done it before now, and in truth, she had every reason to be frantic. Without her magic and any connection to the Fae, she could die.

He stood and took hold of her shoulders to force her to meet his gaze. “I never go back on a promise, Ahryn. We will make it there no matter what I have to do.”

Her brows furrowed as she searched his eyes. “I don’t like being frightened.”

“Not many people do. Now,” he said as he moved her toward the chair, “you need to eat as much as you can before we land.”

She nodded woodenly but picked up her food and began to eat. Satisfied, Lugus resumed his seat and stared at his food. He wouldn’t admit to Ahryn how worried he was about reaching the gateway before Marcus. If Marcus was in league with a Draconian, then they were most likely already there waiting for he and Ahryn to arrive.

And without his sword, he was useless.

He glanced up and found Ahryn watching him, so he hastily reached for his food. He ate without tasting it as his mind ran over each and every possibility they could, and probably would, encounter until they reached the gateway.

And none of them were good.

Most importantly, he would have to make sure that he reached the guardians of the gateway quickly. They could be Ahryn’s only chance of survival, though he wondered what the guardian’s price would be for such a request.

Whatever it was, he was prepared to pay it.

Chapter Eleven

The intense emotions running amuck through Ahryn had drained her of all energy. She needed her realm and the magic that would restore her.

Yet, she refused to allow herself to think about such things until she and Lugas reached the gateway. Until then, she needed to focus on what lay ahead of them.

She turned away from the railing and shielded her eyes with her arm as she raised her gaze to find Lugas high above her. She had no idea what he was doing, but she wished he wouldn't hang so perilously by one hand as he tied something off with the other. If he lost his grip...she stopped that thought and declined to think more about it.

No matter how many times she told herself to stop thinking of Lugas, he continued to pop into her thoughts. Constantly. He wasn't hers, and she needed to remind herself of that several times a day.

But when she saw his blue eyes sparkle with determination and authority, she found herself eager to be apart of it, of him. She looked away from him and glowered at the deck. She wasn't the type of Fae to become obsessed with anything, much less a man, so why was that what she felt?

Anger soon replaced her resentment as her gaze landed on the captain and Lugas' sword that was strapped to his hip. As he approached, she lifted her lips in a dazzling smile.

"'Tis a fine day," the captain said as he stopped beside her.

"That it is, Captain."

"I gather your husband informed you that we are on schedule and will dock on the shores of Skye today."

Ahryn licked her lips and watched as the captain's eyes followed her tongue. "Aye, he did. I'm eager to be on solid land again."

The captain tried to respond, but when nothing came out he cleared his throat and tried again. "Ah...most women aren't suited for sailing."

"Oh, it isn't that at all. I find being on the water suits me wonderfully," she lied and ran a hand down her neck.

Again the captain's eyes followed her, but as her hand stopped at her collarbone, his eyes continued down to her breasts.

The revulsion that rolled in her stomach was nothing compared to the anger at him for taking Lugas' sword. "See something you like?"

He nodded, unable to answer and all but drooling on the deck.

Ahryn rolled her eyes. "You have something I want."

"Anything. I'll give you anything," he said, his eyes still on her breasts.

"If you touch her, I will kill you."

Ahryn spun around at the voice behind her to find Lugas glaring at the captain. Before she could begin to wonder what all he had heard, he glanced at her and held up a hand to silence any words she might think of speaking.

"I'm only taking what she offered," the captain said smugly.

Lugus smiled, and it chilled Ahryn, for she saw what the captain didn't. Fury.

The captain laughed and slapped Lugus on the back. "She's a feisty one, aye. There's plenty of me to satisfy her since you cannot."

Ahryn took hold of Lugus' arm when she saw him ball up his fist. "Nay," she whispered and prayed he heard her.

"We'll finish this later, darlin'," the captain said as he turned on his heel and walked away.

Ahryn felt the cool burn of Lugus' cold blue eyes on her. She turned her back to him and waited. She didn't have long to wait.

"What were you doing?"

"That's my business," she said. She didn't want him to know she would trade her body for his sword because she knew he would object.

Lugus stared after Ahryn as she walked away. He had felt her eyes on him as he hung from the rigging. He wasn't sure what made him climb down, but when he approached her and heard her words, it had felt like he had been thrust into an ice realm.

Even now as he tried to force the image of her offering herself to the captain, he wondered at his fierce and sudden need to smash the captain's face in.

The more Lugus thought about Ahryn's actions, the angrier he became. It just proved to him how little he knew of her, and he began to question his motives for allowing her to keep her secrets. Maybe it was time she told him everything.

Then she'll want me to do the same.

And he couldn't.

He leaned back against the railing and clenched his jaw. Patience. It was the key to surviving. At least that's what he told himself.

Lugus wouldn't have made it out of the Realm of Shadows without his legendary control and patience, and he called upon his two strengths again for he had great need for them.

Just as he pushed away from the railing to climb back up the rigging, he caught the captain looking at him as he smiled and nodded.

It was the straw that broke the dragon's back.

Lugus turned on his heel and made his way below deck. He didn't bother to knock on the cabin door before he threw it open. The site of Ahryn huddled on the bed with her head upon her knees didn't halt him or tamp down his growing ire.

"You're right, it is your business. However, until you walk through the gateway I would appreciate if you do not do anything that might hinder us reaching the gateway."

She merely blinked and gave a slight nod before she looked away.

Lugus refused to feel guilty for raising his voice. "Get some rest. We'll be traveling by night," he said just before he shut the door behind him.

He leaned back against the door and wondered where his control had disappeared to. Not since the fight with his father that ended with his father's death had he lost his temper so. And it scared him. When he lost control, people got hurt.

With his heart still pumping wildly, he slowly made his way back up on deck to continue his work. While he hung from the rigging, he wasn't planning their arrival at the gateway or even thinking of the traps he wanted to plant for Marcus. Instead, his thoughts were on Ahryn

and how he wasn't himself when he was around her.

From everything he had learned from her in their few short days together, her offering herself to the captain didn't fit in to who he thought she was. And he was rarely wrong when it came to people.

Though he wasn't the type of person to need others to talk to, he wished now he had someone to confide his troubles with, someone to help him see what he was overlooking when it came to Ahryn.

But he knew no matter how much he might like such a person, there wasn't anyone, nor would there ever be someone. Even as a young Fae, he and Theron hadn't been close like most brothers were. In fact, they never had anything in common, which only served to push them farther apart.

The one time Lugus had needed Theron by his side, Theron had shown just how little he thought of Lugus by siding with the elders in sending him into the Realm of Shadows.

To this day, Lugus hadn't completely forgiven Theron.

Lugus, disgusted with himself for losing his temper then wallowing in self-despair, shut off his mind and focused on his duties.

He didn't free his mind until someone clapped him on the back and pointed. Lugus followed the man's finger and saw the land nearing through the rays of the setting sun. He sat back and watched the huge orange sun sink into the sea as the night slowly closed in around him.

Little by little, the calm that he was renowned for descended upon him. When he felt he was once again himself, he climbed down the rigging. As soon as his feet hit the deck, he knew Ahryn stood waiting for him. He turned around and found her standing near the railing, her right hand hidden in the folds of her skirt.

"We're here," she said softly.

He walked to her and stared at the approaching land. Within the hour the anchor would be dropped and they would step into the rowboat that would take them to the isle.

"Aye," he said and braced his hands on the railing. "Are you ready?"

"I don't know."

Her candid answer made him turn and look at her. "I vowed to get you there."

She licked her lips and shook her head. "It isn't that. I'm not the brave sort, Lugus, and what we must face frightens me to my very soul."

"Being brave doesn't mean that someone isn't frightened. It simply means they know what is before them and they do it anyway. You are brave. You escaped Marcus and came to me not knowing whether Marcus would find you or if I would refuse you."

One corner of her mouth pulled into a grin. "I'm more frightened now that I know the Draconians are out there."

"Come," Lugus said as he pulled her below deck to their cabin. Once inside, he shut the door and faced her. "Listen to me closely because I only have time to explain this once."

"You're scaring me."

"I know, and I apologize, but it must be said." He took a deep breath before beginning. "If something happens to me...."

"If?" Ahryn repeated.

Lugus squeezed his eyes closed and tried again. "If something does happen to me, you need to know where to go to return home. Only you can open the gateway, Ahryn."

When she sank onto the bed and looked up at him with her bright mystical blue eyes, he continued.

"The stones are on the coast. From the directions given to me before we left Scotland, the captain has landed south of the gateway. When we reach land, we need to follow the coast north."

"North," she repeated.

"Even with the storm we made good time, and, unless magic was involved, we should reach the gateway before Marcus."

"And if we don't?" she asked.

"Don't think along those lines," he said as he leaned against the door. "If you can find the gateway, you have two choices, you can walk through it alone, or if you need help, go to the guardians. They will live close to the gateway and will feel you coming. But no matter what, forget me and find the gateway."

She rose from the bed and gawked at him. "Forget you? You expect me to leave you if you're wounded?"

"I do." He crossed his arms over his chest and returned her stare.

"Nay. I cannot."

"You won't have a choice. If I fall it will be because Marcus and his army have found us. I will be able to give you some time to get away, but the forfeit of my life will be worthless if you are caught."

She looked down at her floor. "I don't like this."

"There are many things in life I don't like, but we all do what we must." He felt the ship slowing and knew they would anchor at any moment. "Now. Are you ready?"

She nodded.

"Good. Go up on deck and wait for me there."

"What are you going to do?" she asked.

He didn't answer her as he left the cabin. His steps were unhurried as they walked up the steps to the deck. It wasn't hard to find the captain. He stood by the helm and looked over his ship with greedy eyes.

Lugus made his way to the captain and prayed Ahryn wouldn't see what was about to happen.

"I see you're anxious to depart," the captain said as Lugus joined him.

"We are."

The captain laughed and slapped Lugus on the shoulder. "I envy you your high-spirited wife."

"I know."

The captain's gaze narrowed on him. "You're still angry about earlier."

Lugus turned and faced him. There was no need to answer him, he knew the captain saw the fury in his eyes.

"She offered herself to me," the captain explained.

"I know," Lugus interrupted him. "And that's what confuses me."

"I have power. Women are drawn to power."

Lugus almost laughed. Power. The captain didn't know the meaning of the word. "Think what you like. Now, give me back what is mine."

“I never touched her,” the captain said as he took a step away from the helm.

“You know of what I speak.”

The captain’s hazel eyes sparked with anger. “Nay. ‘Tis mine now.”

Lugus took a deep breath and glanced at the night sky. “You have two options, Captain. You can either hand over my sword and continue on with your boring life, or you can refuse and I will slit your throat and take my sword anyway.”

“You’re bluffing.”

In the blink of an eye Lugus withdrew his remaining dagger and held it up to the Captain’s face. The blade was long and thick and so sharp it could slice a rock.

The Captain swallowed loudly before unbuckling the scabbard and handing it to Lugus.

“Smart. For once,” Lugus said. He buckled on his sword and sheathed his dagger, then turned on his heel and went to find Ahryn.

She stood at the railing, the moonlight shining on her like a beacon as she looked forlornly at the isle. Their real journey was about to begin.

Chapter Twelve

Ahryn gripped the side of the boat so hard her knuckles hurt. Her mouth had gone dry the moment she left the ship and they began to row the boat toward shore. Even without her magic, she knew her journey with Lugus to the gateway would not end well.

She glanced over at him. He sat beside her, his face forward as if calculating just how many rows it would take the men before they reached the shore. Lugus was calculating in everything he did. She had been shocked to see him wearing his sword again but had decided against asking how he had managed to get it back from the captain.

With each row of the oars, her stomach would drop to her feet like a weighted stone. To her surprise, Lugus reached over and took her right hand in his. As his hand closed over hers, she could literally feel his strength fill her. She gave his hand a little squeeze to thank him.

And then they reached shore.

She waited in the boat as Lugus and the other men jumped out and pulled the boat to the shore. When Lugus took her hand she rose and walked to the front of the boat where he lifted her out and sat her on the shore.

After a brief exchange with the sailors, Lugus turned back to her. She knew he waited on her to signal that she was ready to begin, so she gave him a small nod and followed as turned right.

The pace he set was quick and grueling, but not so fast that she had to run to keep up with him. As they walked, she ran the words he had spoken in the cabin over and over in her head. She was thankful he hadn't made her promise to leave him if he fell because she wouldn't have been able to give it.

Nothing, not even her own death, would make her leave him to die, not after all he had done for her. Nay, she would not leave him.

She stumbled over something in her path, and, just when she was about to fall flat on her face, Lugus caught her. He pulled her up and pushed the hair from her face that had escaped her braid.

"Are you all right?"

She nodded. "I just didn't see whatever it was I tripped over."

"'Tis one of the hazards of traveling by night, especially in a place neither of us have been."

"I'll be more careful," she assured him.

When he didn't move, she turned him around and gave him a little push. He began walking again, but the pace wasn't quite as fast as before.

She fingered her slave bracelet and wondered if the markings on it were Draconian. As far as she knew, the Draconian language wasn't taught to the Fae. If anyone would know what the markings were, her grandfather would be the man to ask.

* * * *

"Where are they?" Marcus demanded.

Not even when the unusual copper eyes narrowed on him did Marcus flinch. He knew if he showed the Draconian any fear, it would be the end of him.

“They are on the Isle of Skye.”

Marcus adjusted his tunic as he sat before the fire. They had ridden long and hard to try and reach Ahryn before the ship came ashore, but they hadn’t succeeded.

In truth, Marcus had begun to wonder if something, or someone, was preventing him from reaching Ahryn in time to stop her. Even with the bracelet on, she would still be able to cross over.

He motioned the guards out of his tent so he could speak privately to the Draconian. Marcus gazed at the man before him. He had seen the way women looked at the Draconian, and he supposed the unusual eyes, hair as black as obsidian, and the power he radiated would pull women to him.

“Tell me, Tane, is there anyone using magic to prevent me from reaching Ahryn?”

Tane smiled, but it didn’t reach his copper eyes. “I sense no one using magic that would prevent you.”

“Really?” Marcus said as he rose and paced the tent. “Then why is it that we didn’t reach Ahryn this night?”

Tane shrugged nonchalantly. “Things happen, Marcus.”

“Make sure they don’t happen tomorrow,” he warned.

Tane rose slowly as his distaste of Marcus nearly overwhelmed him. He exited the tent before he choked the life out of Marcus. He detested the man so fiercely that he couldn’t believe his people had fought the Fae over this cursed realm.

He walked into the grove of trees and leaned against one. He missed Draconia, his people, and the dragons. But soon, his mission would be finished and he could return to his realm. Then, and only then, could he face what awaited him. Until that time he would have to suffer the humans.

Tane turned and laid on his pallet as he looked through the limbs to the sky above. Only one moon shown in the sky compared to the three Draconia had.

He sighed and settled down to rest. They were sure to catch up with Ahryn and Lugus on the morrow. So far Ahryn and Lugus had been incredibly fortunate, but that luck was about to end.

* * * *

Lugus knew Marcus was on the isle. He also knew the Draconian was with him. What he didn’t know was where, exactly, Marcus and the Draconian were.

He looked over his shoulder to find Ahryn desperately trying to keep up. He had pushed her hard as soon as they had landed, so he decided now would be a good time to rest. When he spotted a small grove of trees, he ventured toward them and handed Ahryn the water skin when she caught up.

“Thank you,” she said as she lifted the bag and drank deeply.

Lugus found his gaze drawn to her slender neck as she tilted her head back to drink. He had kissed her flesh and knew how soft and warm she was. He swallowed and made himself look away before he did something unwise like pull her to him and kiss her until both of them were senseless of anything around them.

He didn’t know what was wrong with him. Just the slightest of touches and he was

aching for her so badly he nearly shook with it. He gripped the pommel of his sword as he looked off into the distance and prayed for the strong will and patience that had always served him in the past.

“Have we come far?” Ahryn asked as she came to stand beside him.

Lugus refused to look at her. He knew just how appealing she was in the moonlight with tendrils of her hair framing her face. His control hung by the thinnest of threads and the slightest wind could snap it in half.

“Aye,” he managed past the tightness in his throat. It was as if his body was somehow connected to Ahryn’s and her every movement.

He needed some distance between them. He set out again, not looking back to see if she followed. It was only a moment later he heard her soft footfalls as she quickly followed.

“What I wouldn’t do for a horse,” Ahryn said.

Lugus knew the odds of them happening upon horses were remote and was just about to tell her so when he heard a soft nicker. He stopped in his tracks and slowly looked to his left where he spotted a horse atop a small hill.

Ahryn inhaled sharply. “Do you think we could borrow him? We would reach the gateway so much quicker.”

For several heartbeats Lugus debated on continuing on foot, but he knew he was being foolish. His goal was to get Ahryn to the gateway and doing that as quickly as possibly was of the utmost importance, not his sudden need to bed her.

“Lugus?” she called softly.

He sighed and turned to her. “Stay here while I catch him.”

The joyous smile that lit her face made his breath catch. He jumped the small fence in front of the horse and found a length of rope on the ground. He grabbed it and slowly made his way to the horse. About halfway to him, Lugus stopped and went down on his haunches as though he searched for something on the ground.

Knowing how curious horses were, it didn’t take long for him to hear the soft tread of the horse as it drew near. Lugus watched the animal out of the corner of his eye as he reached into a bag he had taken from the ship and pulled out an apple.

At the first bite, the horse trotted closer to him. If Lugus had wanted, he could reach out and touch the animal, but he needed the horse’s trust, so he waited. After a few more bites, he slowly lifted the apple toward the horse. Just as he suspected, the horse extended his neck and sniffed the apple.

With the slightest of movements, Lugus pulled the apple closer to him so that if the horse wanted it, he needed to take a step toward him. Lugus smiled as the horse not only took the needed step but also took another.

Lugus gave the horse the apple and rose to his feet as he ran his hands over the horse, appreciating the horse’s nice lines. He was dark, black by the looks of it, but it was hard for Lugus to see in the moonlight, with four white stockings.

By the time the horse had eaten the apple he was no longer afraid of Lugus.

“We need your help,” Lugus said to the horse. “I don’t like taking you from your home, but I need to get Ahryn safely to the gateway. I will return you.”

Lugus reached up and secured the length of rope to mimic reins, then grabbed hold of the horse’s black mane before he leapt upon his back. He waited to see if the horse would protest his

weight, but when the horse swung his big head around to look at him, Lugus chuckled and patted his neck.

“Let’s see what you can do.”

He trotted the horse around the pasture before he faced them toward the fence and Ahryn. Lugus whistled to the horse and brought him into a gallop before they jumped the fence.

The exhilaration from the quick ride helped Lugus push his desire for Ahryn to the side, until she stood before him waiting to be lifted onto the big animal.

“He’s a beauty,” she said as she ran her hand over the horse’s dark flank.

“That he is,” Lugus said and held out his hand. She grabbed hold, and he easily lifted her behind him. “Hold on tight. I have no bridle or reins.”

As soon as the words were out of his mouth, he regretted them, especially when her body molded to his back. He squeezed his eyes closed when he felt her breasts on his back and her arms wrapped around his waist. His rod swelled with desire, and it was all he could do not to pull her around in front of him and feast on her breasts.

Give me strength, he bade whatever god was listening as he nudged the horse into a canter.

The horse was eager for exercise just as they were eager to cover ground quickly. It wasn’t long before Lugus felt Ahryn’s arms loosen around him as she drifted off to sleep. To help hold her against him, he put his hand over her arms. Even that simple contact made him ache to feel more of her.

He prayed they reached the gateway soon before he gave in to temptation and tasted the heady nectar of Ahryn. Again.

Chapter Thirteen

Lugus had managed to keep a tight, if not unsteady, hold on his desire. That is, until Ahryn began to slide off the horse. Lugus quickly brought the horse to a halt and easily pulled Ahryn around until he held her across his lap with her head against his chest.

He knew the road ahead of them was going to be treacherous, even with the horse, so he let her sleep while she could. There would be times they would have to forfeit sleep in order to reach the gateway.

Though he had gotten the directions from the woman in the inn, Lugus wished he had visited Skye before. Not knowing the location well enough, or having the forethought to ask more townsfolk, he had no idea how long it would take them to reach the gateway. And, of course, the Captain had refused to tell him after Lugus had taken the sword.

There had been no way he was leaving the ship without his sword. It was one of his few possessions that meant something to him. Not to mention a man without a weapon was as sure as dead, and, with his current mission, he couldn't take that chance, at least not until Ahryn was safely in the Fae realm.

Ahryn sighed and snuggled against his chest, her hand lying limply against his abdomen. It didn't matter how much he told himself not to look, his eyes drifted down to see her sleeping contentedly against him. As a Fae, she was stunning, but asleep, she looked innocent and fragile, and Lugus had the overwhelming desire to protect her.

"The only thing you need to protect her from is yourself," he mumbled into the night air.

A steady breeze off the sea dimmed the sounds of the nights, sounds Lugus desperately needed to be aware of. Because the wind played havoc with him, he had to continually look around him, allowing his senses to guide him.

He determined it to be a couple of hours before dawn when he stopped the horse beneath a small grove of trees. Large boulders stood between the trees and the sea, which would keep them hidden from passers by on the road as well as the constant breeze.

Lugus gently picked Ahryn up in his arms and swung a leg over the horse's black head. As carefully as he could, he slid to the ground. He smiled to himself when Ahryn didn't stir.

He laid her down and quickly brushed and tied the horse before he too succumbed to sleep.

* * * *

Ahryn didn't know what had awoken her. She kept still as she cracked open her eyes to see Lugus asleep near her. Sunlight gently filtered through the dense foliage from the trees overhead as she turned onto her back and stretched.

She rose to her feet and walked to the horse Lugus had tied off to one of the trees.

"Hi, there," she whispered as she held out her hand.

The horse lifted his soft muzzle and gently blew on her hand before he rubbed his great head against her. She laughed and ran her hand from his head down his neck to his smooth back. He was beautiful, and she was thankful Lugus had been able to catch him.

“Even without Fae magic he is impressive, isn’t he?”

Ahryn jerked and whirled around to find a man leaning against one of the trees. But he wasn’t just any man. She knew by his copper eyes he was a Draconian.

“What do you want?”

He shrugged. “I want you to answer my question.”

For the life of her, Ahryn couldn’t remember what his question was. “What question?”

“That he is impressive even without his Fae magic.”

Ahryn glanced at Lugus still sleeping soundly, too soundly. “Aye, he is.”

“Don’t worry about him,” the Draconian said as he pushed off the tree and took a step toward her. “He won’t wake up until I wish it.”

Dread seeped into Ahryn’s bones. With the bracelet still attached and her magic near nonexistent, and Lugus now a mortal, neither of them had magic to combat the Draconian.

But she refused to cower. After all Lugus had done for her, she would not allow any harm to come to him. “So you found me. I will go quietly with you if you leave Lugus alive and unharmed.”

The Draconian chuckled and crossed his arms over his great chest as he stared at her, his black cloak hiding much of him. His long black hair hung past the middle of his stomach and glowed nearly blue in the sunlight. “You think you can bargain with me, Ahryn?”

She had never felt so alone or frightened in her life. “I do,” she lied. “Since you know my name, why not give me yours?”

He bowed his head slightly, and in his deep timber said, “I am Tane.”

“Tane, I beg you, leave Lugus unharmed and alive.”

He took a deep breath. “What makes you think I’ve come for you?”

Ahryn didn’t believe her ears. “You haven’t come for me?”

Tane shook his head.

“Then wh....” She stopped as realization dawned on her. She glanced at Lugus then turned back to Tane. “Why?”

“Why?” he repeated, his black brows raised. “He is the rightful heir to the Fae kingdom. He was unjustly imprisoned, and only by his strength of will did he survive and manage to exit a realm no one has been able to leave before. And you ask why?”

She tried to swallow but found her mouth dry. “What do you want with him? He is a good man.”

“We know. A wrong needs to be righted, Ahryn. Lugus needs to return to your realm.”

“He cannot. He’s been banished.”

Tane closed his eyes and sighed. When he opened them again, his gaze was harsh, demanding. “You must get him into the Fae realm, at any cost.”

Ahryn looked away from Tane’s penetrating copper gaze. “I’ve already discussed his return with him. He won’t go. Nothing will make him pass through the gateway.”

“He will go through it.”

It was Tane’s tone, so certain and powerful, that made Ahryn turn to him. “He could be killed.”

“Theron may be many things, but he would not kill his own brother.”

“How do you know so much about Theron and Lugus?” she asked.

His eyes moved away from her. “That doesn’t matter.”

She sensed that he knew much more than he was willing to share, but she also knew he wouldn't give her any more information. "What if I cannot get him to come with me through the gateway?"

"I will get him through the gate," Tane said.

Ahryn wanted Lugas in her realm so Theron could see how wonderful Lugas was, but she couldn't help but doubt Tane. He was a Draconian.

"You doubt I'm sincere," he said.

It wasn't a question, but a fact, and Ahryn nodded. "Draconian's and Fae do not mix."

"And why is that? Haven't you ever wondered?"

She had, but she wasn't about to admit that to Tane. "You are working with Marcus. For all I know you gave him the bracelet to trap me," she said and held up her right hand.

Tane walked to her and stared at the bracelet. "Marcus told me he had it, but I never saw it until now." He moved his gaze to her face. "You cannot remove it." It wasn't a question.

"Nay."

"I can."

Her breath left her body in a whoosh. "Then do it," she said breathlessly.

"Only if you make sure Lugas is with you at the gateway."

"Once I pass through the gate, the bracelet will no longer work."

"Who told you that?"

Ahryn could feel sands of Fate shifting beneath her feet. "I just assumed...."

"You assumed wrong," Tane said and moved to stand near Lugas. "Until that bracelet is removed, you will not have your magic."

"Surely someone on my realm will be able to remove it."

He shrugged. "Possibly, if they can decipher the marks."

Ahryn glanced down at the bracelet and the marks she and Lugas had looked over. "You know what they mean?"

"I do, and I will remove the bracelet as soon as Lugas is again on the Realm of the Fae."

Ahryn inhaled deeply and realized she didn't have much of a choice. "All right. Just answer me one question."

"If I can," he said softly.

"Do you intend to hurt or kill Lugas in any way?"

One side of his mouth lifted in a smile. "If I wanted to kill him, I would have done it while you slept. Nor will he be harmed or killed once he returns to your realm."

"How can you promise that?"

"I can," he said as he turned and walked away.

Ahryn blinked, and he was gone. No sooner had Tane vanished than Lugas began to stir. She watched as he slowly rose up on one elbow and rubbed his head with his other hand.

"Did you sleep well?" she asked.

He grunted as he sat up. "I don't think I've ever slept so hard before."

Ahryn turned to the sea. "Did we travel far last night?"

"We did," he answered as he came to stand beside her. "I'll go look for some food and water."

"We can both go," she said as she turned to face him.

He studied her face a moment before he said, "Are you rested enough?"

“Aye. I’m anxious to get to the gateway.”

“Then let us be off,” he said as he walked to the horse, he could see now in the light of day that it was black as he had suspected.

Ahryn watched as he untied the horse and gave the big black beast a pat on the neck as he spoke hushed words into the horse’s ear. She desperately wanted to know what words he shared with the black, but she knew she would never know.

“Come,” Lugus said and held out his hand.

Ahryn shook her head. “I would like to stretch my legs for a bit this morning. Besides, we need to save the horse for later.”

She knew Lugus wondered at her logic by the way he stared at her, but he didn’t question her. The truth was, Ahryn needed to think over Tane’s visit and she couldn’t do that with her arms wrapped around Lugus’s muscular abdomen.

“You are quiet this morning,” Lugus said after awhile.

Ahryn shrugged. “It’s just that I’m so close to home now.”

He nodded. “I understand. We could have slept longer. I had intended to rest most of the day and travel at night.”

“Why not travel when we can? We both were rested this morning, and it’s only a little after noon. We’ll travel slowly until dark.”

Lugus stopped walking and reached out to halt Ahryn. “What is going on?” he asked. She had been different as soon as he had opened his eyes. In truth, she looked...apprehensive...as though she had much to think about.

Her mystical blue eyes met his, and he nearly came undone by the fear and sadness in their depths. “Ahryn?”

She stepped away from him and lowered her eyes. “I just want to return home, Lugus.”

He let her lie. Again. When she began walking, he let her have a slight lead while he hung back and led the black. They had gone another ten minutes or so when Lugus spotted a small cottage.

When he started to hand the reins to Ahryn so he could bargain for some food and water, she shook her head.

“Let me,” she said.

He was hesitant but agreed. “All right.”

As he watched her walk to the cottage, he fingered his dagger, praying he wouldn’t need it.

She reached the door and knocked. An older woman answered and smiled at Ahryn. Though Lugus strained, he couldn’t make out the words they exchanged, but it wasn’t long before the woman handed Ahryn a basket and a water skin.

Ahryn had a wide smile as she made her way back to him. “Hungry?” she asked as she lifted the basket that was laden with food.

“Starved,” he admitted and reached into the basket.

He waited until she had gotten a piece of bread and cheese before he asked, “What did you tell her?”

Ahryn grinned and started walking. “I told the truth, that we were on a journey and asked if she had any food to spare.”

“Amazing,” he said as he caught up with her. “I think from now on I’ll let you get our

food.”

She laughed and threw him a knowing look. “I’m up to the challenge.”

Lugus quickly finished his meal and took a long drink of water. He knew he needed to find them some fresh water to refill the water skin, not to mention he would like a bath. The last bath, if he could call it that, which had taken place on board the ship, was just a bowl of water he washed with.

He cast a glance at Ahryn and saw her steps start to slow. Without asking, he reached over and lifted her atop the black. She gave him a small smile and took hold of the horse’s mane in one hand while she held onto the basket with the other.

They traveled in silence for hours, and it was during that time that Lugus realized he had slept without dreaming again. Twice now he had done that, and it worried him. Not only had he slept hard, but he hadn’t dreamed, of anything.

He glanced up at Ahryn and found her deep in thought. It wasn’t Ahryn. Her magic was basically nonexistent with the bracelet on, but then who could it be?

He had no answers. But he did know magic was used, *on him*.

But for what purpose?

Chapter Fourteen

Ahryn closed her eyes and tried to imagine the grace and beauty that was the Fae realm. The bright blue sky, clean air, powerful waterfalls, mountains that reached nearly to the heavens, and dragons.

She missed the commanding swish of the dragons' wings as they glided through the sky. She even missed the sound of their roar in the fading light of the day when they returned to their nests.

For years she had taken the dragons for granted, but on the Earth realm where there weren't any dragons, she discovered just how much she missed them. She found herself eager to look up into the sky and see a great red dragon or a small green dragon soar through the air.

"Everything all right?" Lugus asked her softly.

She opened her eyes and turned her gaze to him. "I miss the dragons."

He looked away quickly but not before she had seen the anguish in his eyes. He missed them, too.

"Which were your favorite?" she asked.

One side of his mouth lifted in a smile. "I loved to watch all of them, but I have to say my favorite was the dark blue dragons."

"Ah," she said as she recalled seeing them only once in her life. "They are magnificent and rare, so large and graceful."

"And powerful," he added.

"Do you know why there are so few of them?"

He shrugged his massive shoulders. "I suppose they are like most creatures in that some of them survive and prosper while others find it difficult to produce offspring."

"I suppose," she said. "I've only seen them once, but I plan to seek them out when I return."

He glanced at her and smiled. "You will have to travel far."

"I don't care."

"After this journey, you'll have no problem finding them, Ahryn."

"Care to join me in my search?" She wasn't sure what prompted her to ask, but she knew she desperately wanted him with her.

He looked away and sighed. "You know I cannot."

"No one will know you are in the realm."

"Theron will."

Ahryn looked down at him from atop the black and thought over Tane's words. She would do everything she could to ensure Lugus did indeed return to the Realm of the Fae with her. He belonged there, even if he didn't want to acknowledge it. And if she had to seek King Theron and Queen Rufina out herself to plead his case, she most certainly would do that. He didn't deserve to be banished.

But what if he really does deserve his punishment?

Ahryn refused to believe that. Lugus was a good man and whatever he did couldn't have been so terrible that he wasn't allowed to live with his own people. He was a Fae, with or without his immortality.

She would keep her word to Tane, but if there ever came a time when Lugus' life was in danger or he would be hurt in any way, she would make sure Tane was hunted down and punished.

Whatever Lugus might be, he was her savior, and that was enough for her.

Is it really? Would you still think that if you knew the whispered rumors the elders passed regarding him?

Ahryn wanted to think she would, but it was hard to say. She tried to imagine the worst and that involved innocents being killed, something she knew Lugus would never do. Lugus wasn't a killer.

But she had doubts about *Caer Rhoemyr's* destruction. The city of kings was a sacred place, and for someone to try and destroy it would very well have resulted in their banishment.

She made up her mind then that once they reached the Fae realm she would discover exactly what Lugus had done and decide for herself. He had made it plain he would never tell her, but she knew one person that would--her grandfather.

She was so deep in thought she hadn't noticed Lugus take them off the coast and head inland until he stopped the black, and she found herself staring at a small loch.

When she glanced at Lugus, he shrugged. "I need a bath," was his only explanation as he dismounted. He set the basket on the ground and then reached for her.

Her hands gripped his shoulders as she slid from the horse. His large hands nearly spanned her waist, and she found the heat of him exhilarating and addictive. Before she made a fool of herself, she stepped away from him with her head down and turned to look at the water.

"You may bathe first," she said as she hurried away to the grove of trees. There was something about Lugus that made her yearn for his kisses, his touch. Something that made her want to throw caution to the wind and see where it would lead her.

But she knew exactly where it would lead her--into Lugus' arms. It was exactly what she wanted, but she knew he didn't really want her. His body may want a woman to slake his needs, but his heart wanted...Moira.

Ahryn found herself hating Moira. Who was this woman that had such a tight hold of Lugus, and why wasn't she with him?

Ahryn found a tree and dropped down to lean against it and stared at the sea, she knew no one would answer her questions. If she ever encountered Moira, she would find out the truth.

She heard a splash and knew Lugus had dove into the water. She could easily envision his hard, lean body gliding through the dark water until his head crested the surface. Just that image alone had her heart racing and her breathing coming in great gulps.

Her body urged her to go to the water and see him for herself, yet her mind halted her, for a moment. The idea that she might indeed glimpse his glorious naked body had her nearly running to the loch.

When she arrived, she made sure to hide behind a nearby tree as her eyes feasted on the hard planes of his chest as he raised his arms to wash. Water glistened on his wide shoulders and then rolled down to his chest to merge with the loch.

He turned, and she watched as he lifted his long length of hair and began to wash it as the

muscles in his back, shoulders, and arms glistened in the fading light of day with each movement.

She tried to swallow but found her mouth dry as he dove under and she glimpsed his tight bottom before he disappeared under the waters.

Her body hummed with untold and untried desire. She wanted him like a body wanted breath. Her body pulsed, her breasts ached, and her nipples hardened. The desire was so strong she couldn't fight it. She slowly slipped out from behind the tree where she had been hiding and walked to the edge of the loch as he surfaced and faced her.

Their eyes connected and locked.

In an instant she recalled his kiss, a kiss that had branded her, a kiss that had awoken her ... a kiss that had yet to be answered.

The water swirled and moved as Lugus walked toward her. She let her eyes roam down his sculpted form from his wide shoulders to his tight abdomen and then to his narrow hips and....

She raised her gaze to his when he stopped. His eyes never left her face, and she knew he waited to see what she would do. Too many times she had offered what he didn't want, and though it was difficult she could no longer offer it to him knowing he didn't want *her*.

Ahryn felt tears sting her eyes as she turned her back to Lugus and went to the horse. She ran her hands down the black's smooth coat while envisioning her hands running down Lugus' body.

"Ahryn?"

She heard the worry in his voice but refused to let him know just how much he affected her. "I didn't mean to interrupt your bath. Please continue."

Her hands shook as she intertwined her fingers in the black's mane. She hated how her body betrayed her with just a glimpse from Lugus, and no matter how much she told herself he didn't want her, her body wouldn't listen.

"I'm finished," Lugus said, fastening his breeches as he stopped a hairsbreadth from her, his warm breath fanning her neck.

She wasn't able to control the shiver that ran through her as she turned to face him. Water still dripped from the ends of his flaxen hair to run down his chest into the waist of his breeches.

With a force of will she didn't know she had, Ahryn turned away from the horse, kept her hands to herself, and raised her gaze to his face. "Is the water nice?" She couldn't believe her voice sounded as calm as it did when she was aflutter inside.

His brow furrowed slightly before he took a small step back and nodded.

"Thank you," she said and moved past him. As she kicked off her shoes, she looked over her shoulder to find him watching her. "Could you please turn around?"

Lugus clenched his jaw at her icy tone and put his back to her. He wasn't sure what had happened, but suddenly Ahryn wanted no part of him. He should be relieved, but in truth, he was flummoxed. He had grown accustomed to her mystical blue eyes holding passion and desire when she looked at him, and her full dusky pink lips slightly parted as if she waited for his kiss.

For the life of him, he couldn't understand his bewilderment or her change in attitude. But he wouldn't question her. The sooner they reached the gateway, the sooner he could return to his old way of life.

He glanced over his shoulder to see Ahryn gliding gracefully across the water, and in a blink he envisioned her at the great waterfall near *Caer Rhoemyr* where he had swam as a child. The waterfall was a favorite of his, a place he had always wanted to bring his mate, a place he would never see again.

With a curse he turned away and tried to put Ahryn out of his mind. After the rest and some food, it would be time to get on their way again. They still had several hours of travel time before they slept.

Lugus rubbed the black down and whispered soothing words to it. When he was finished, he turned and looked over to the water and didn't see Ahryn. Thinking she had already finished and was dressing, he brought the black to the water to drink.

No sooner had the horse dipped his nose into the water to drink than Ahryn rose from the depths like a goddess with the water bubbling and churning around her. His eyes instantly noticed her bare breasts before she dipped back into the water so that only her head shown.

"I had thought you were done," he said when she noticed him.

She wiped the water from her face. "I was underwater."

"I noticed that."

Tense silence stretched as the horse continued to drink. Finally, the black raised his head, and Lugus led him away from the loch to give Ahryn some privacy.

He shifted and tried to relieve some of the pressure from his now throbbing rod. The need had nearly overtaken him again, just as it had when he had risen from the water to find Ahryn standing before him.

For just a moment he had been sure he had seen passion flare in her blue eyes as her gaze raked over him. He had stood motionless, unable to move for fear that she would leave. When he finally did move to her he had been surprised when she turned away.

If he was honest with himself, he would admit that he hadn't known what he would have done had Ahryn not turned away. He knew his body needed release and he was more than attracted to her, but would he have taken her?

His eyes nearly rolled back into his head as he imagined himself driving deeply into her tight, wet sheath with her nails raking his skin as he brought her closer and closer to her climax.

The image was so vivid and real that for a moment Lugus couldn't tell which was the fantasy and which was genuine. He blinked and found the black staring at him as if he knew what Lugus was going through.

"I know, lad," he whispered as he scratched the horse's head. "Something needs to be done, and quickly."

Lugus grabbed some food from the basket they had tied to the horse and left the horse to graze while he went in search of Ahryn to break their fast. He found her sitting near a tree as she worked her fingers through the long, wet strands of her hair. Her eyes were closed and a small smile pulled at her lips, and he found himself wanting to know what could bring such a smile to her face.

"Tell me," he whispered.

Her eyes jerked open in surprise, and her hands stilled. "Tell you what?"

"Tell me," he said as he set the food down and knelt in front of her, "what you were thinking to bring such a smile."

She grinned and lowered her eyes. Her fingers began to comb through her hair again. "I

was recalling how my mother used to gripe as she combed out my hair. It was forever tangled, and I complained endlessly. She used to tell me that there would come a day when I would wish she were combing it for me.”

“And today is that day?” he asked, liking how she allowed him to glimpse into her past.

She laughed. “Oh, yes. It’s very difficult with a comb much less without.”

“Let me,” he offered.

Chapter Fifteen

“But there’s no comb.”

Lugus held up his hands and wiggled his fingers. “I’ve got these and you could use a break.”

“All right,” she said and scooted around until her back was to him.

Lugus moved the food to the side and sat cross legged behind her.

“Start at the bottom and work your way up. It’s easier that way.”

He licked his lips and ran his fingers through the bottom of her hair, immediately encountering a knot.

She laughed and reached around for an oat cake. “See?” she said.

He tried to gently work the tangle free and was soon regretting that he offered.

“You need to be more aggressive with the tangle, or it will never loosen. Besides, you won’t hurt me.”

He was unsure of the last part considering how big some of the tangles were, but he pulled a little hard and was rewarded when the knot gave way.

After that he tackled tangle after tangle until he was nearly to her neck. He ran his fingers from the hair at her neck all the way to the bottom and heard her moan softly.

He never imagined that a woman liked to have hands ran through her hair and just to be sure he had actually heard the moan, he did it again. He was rewarded with another soft moan.

Lugus smiled and continued working out the tangles. It didn’t take him long to work his way to her temples. By the time he was moving his fingers from the crown of her head to the ends, her head was thrown back and the ends brushed his legs.

Time after time he would use both hands to gently pull through the strands, and each time he could visibly see Ahryn relax. He watched as she inhaled sharply when he massaged her scalp, her lips parting and her breasts rising with each breath.

With each run of his fingers, he slowly began to pull Ahryn back against him until she rested her head on one of his shoulders. He knew he shouldn’t tempt himself, but when it came to Ahryn he could never think straight.

Suddenly, her eyes opened, and she looked at him.

His mouth was near hers. All he had to do to taste her sweet lips again was move his head a fraction of an inch. His aching rod begged him to take her, but he didn’t want to break the spell that held her soft body against him. It felt so good to hold her that he was content to do just that.

Lugus was prepared to stay there the entire night, but the black had made its way over and nudged him.

“We’ve tarried here long enough,” Ahryn said as she rose to her feet.

He raised his gaze as he stood and looked at the darkening sky. “I suppose. I know you are anxious to reach the gateway.”

“Just as you are anxious to return to your life.”

Lugus nodded absently. "Have you considered what may happen if we don't reach the gateway?"

Her hand reached up and cupped his cheek. He looked down to see her searching his face.

"Don't say that. We will reach it. I know you will never give up until we do."

Her faith humbled him.

"Stop doubting yourself," she said as she pulled his head down towards her.

Lugus' body came alive. His blood pounded in his ears as he glanced at her inviting mouth. For several moments they stared at each other until she suddenly moved away. He sighed and watched as she gathered the remaining food.

"You haven't eaten," she said and held the food she had gathered out to him.

He waved away the offered food, his mind on other things. "I'll eat later."

She nodded and stuffed it into the small basket. When she was finished he lifted her atop the black, handed her the basket, and vaulted onto the horse behind her.

Her soft body pressed back against him was nearly his undoing. Just moments before they had nearly kissed, and with his body already inflamed it was all he could do not to nuzzle her neck or run his hands across her velvety skin.

Using his iron will that had gotten him through the endless millennia of the Realm of Shadows, he was determined to forget about his need and growing attraction to Ahryn. In a day or so they should reach the gateway and she would be gone out of his life forever.

And somehow that made him sad.

She had managed to fill his days with more adventure and excitement than he had seen in more than five years. He hadn't realized until he had been around her just how much he had hated being alone, though he had chosen his own state.

Whenever he tried to think of how his life would be once she was back in the Fae realm, he saw only bleakness.

He jerked his mind back to the present. The black was making steady headway following the coast. Ahryn shifted and unknowingly rubbed her firm bottom against his rod. Lugus couldn't stop the hiss of pleasure that escaped his lips. Before she could turn around and ask him what was wrong, he nudged the horse into a canter which had her holding onto the black's mane for dear life.

The rest of the night was spent in silence as Lugus contemplated his attraction to Ahryn and her sudden withdrawal from him. He had told himself at first that his attraction was because he hadn't bedded a woman in years and needed release, but now he wasn't so sure. And the more he thought about it, the more confused he became.

He alternated walking and galloping the black, which let them cover a lot of ground. By the time they stopped just a few hours before dawn, Lugus knew that they had traveled twice as far as he had hoped.

With a gentle pull on the reins, Lugus stopped the black and held onto Ahryn's arm as he lowered her to the ground. He slid off the horse and walked the animal to a small shelter of trees and gave him a thorough rubdown.

When he was finished he turned and, by the soft light of the moon, found Ahryn staring at the sea, her fair locks blowing in the breeze. She looked lonely and isolated, and he had the sudden urge to take her in his arms and comfort her.

The jingle of her slave bracelet caught his attention, and he followed her arm as she raised it to brush hair from her face. Lugus knew she would have to see Theron and tell him of the bracelet so other Fae could be warned in case there were other Celtic slave bracelets out there, which meant she would tell Theron he helped her.

Lugus wished she would omit his part in the tale, but he knew she wouldn't. For some reason she had gotten it in her mind that all she would have to do is talk to Theron and everything would be set right. Only Lugus knew better.

He really didn't want her to discover his foul deeds, but he was just glad he wouldn't be there when she did learn the truth. At least this way, she might remember him fondly for aiding her.

Lugus didn't try to dissuade her from speaking to Theron because he knew it wouldn't do any good. Theron would assume Lugus had done the act in order to be allowed back into the Fae realm, when in truth Lugus had helped because he had so much to atone for.

The fading moonlight shed its pale beam on Ahryn and her simple, elegant beauty stole Lugus' breath. His feet moved on their own accord to her side. He didn't try to speak to her as they watched the darkness loosen its hold on the sky, and as much as he wished to watch the sunrise, Lugus knew they needed sleep.

He took her hand and led her into the trees where they would sleep. After he removed his weapons and lowered himself to the ground, he gently pulled her down next to him.

"Lugus," she said, but he quickly covered her lips with his finger. Her brow furrowed as she watched him, and he could see the doubt and confusion in her mystic blue eyes.

Lugus himself had no idea what he was doing, only that he wanted Ahryn in his arms, needed to feel her softness and warmth in an otherwise dead, cold world. He needed to feel alive again, and she gave him that. It was time he stopped running from her and the need she awoke.

As his gaze searched her eyes he saw something in her blue depths that touched him as he had never been touched before. And before he knew it, his mouth lowered to hers.

Just before his lips touched hers, she pulled back a fraction and studied him. Whatever she looked for she must have found for she raised her face to him.

The instant their lips met, Lugus felt a sizzle of awareness skim down his spine. It was as if a beast he had kept locked inside of him was unleashed.

He pulled her tight against his chest as he covered her body with his. He deepened the kiss as he ran his tongue into her mouth to duel with hers. The kiss empowered him as much as it weakened him, but he couldn't get enough of her.

His hands skimmed her arms as they traveled down her body to her hips. The craving to rip her clothes from her body so he could see her in all her glory was so strong his hands shook.

He moved his hands to her head and buried them into the thick strands of her flaxen hair. And just as he reined in his raging desire, she moaned.

It was Lugus' undoing.

His need was so powerful that he forgot everything and everyone except Ahryn.

Ahryn's mind whirled with the incredible sensations that roared within her. Lugus' kiss sent her spiraling out of control, and, when he deepened the kiss, he stirred her already awoken desires that quickly flared to life and brought an ache between her legs.

Her hands clawed at his back as she tried desperately to feel his skin beneath her fingers, yet he continued to kiss her as though it was all he longed to do.

Then his hands glided over her body and brushed the outside of her breasts. And just as quickly his hands held her neck as he gave her a kiss that sent her senses soaring. A moan escaped her as his swollen rod pressed into her stomach. Her breasts grew heavy and her nipples taunt as she rubbed her hips against him.

She had seen the look in his eyes before they kissed. He knew exactly who was beneath him, and she would bet her life that he wasn't thinking of Moira now. It was the only reason she had allowed the kiss.

There was no denying she knew Lugus was going to make love to her. It was what she had prayed and hoped for. And as his mouth moved from her lips to her neck, Ahryn let her hands roam over his magnificent body.

His lips did incredible things to her. As his warm breath brushed across her skin, she heard herself sigh with delight. When she was about to scream with want of his hands on her body, he finally moved his arms.

She waited in breathless anticipation for him to cup her breasts or grind his hips against hers, but he did nothing. Ahryn gripped his shoulders and opened her eyes to see him staring down at her.

"What is it?" she asked hesitantly.

His jaw clenched. "Is that the only gown you have?"

"Aye."

"Then I cannot rip it off of you."

Ahryn smiled and pushed him off her as she sat up. "I'll gladly take it off. All you had to do was ask."

"Then consider this begging," he said as his desire filled eyes pleaded with her.

Ahryn rose to her feet and quickly shed her shoes, stockings, and gown. When she next looked up, it was to find Lugus removing his tunic. She moved to stand in front of him and ran her hands slowly over his sculpted torso.

"I've wanted to do this for so long," she said as she placed kisses over him.

With a fierce growl Lugus pulled her away from him. "If you continue I will not be able to give you pleasure."

"Touching you is pleasure enough," she said and reached out for him again.

She thought she had won as she moved her hands over his chest to his trim waist, but he had other plans in mind. He pulled her tight against him so she felt his rod.

"My turn to play," his husky voice said just before he claimed her mouth in a kiss that made her forget her name. His tongue touched every part of her mouth and demanded she give as much as he.

Ahryn eagerly returned the kiss, but with each stroke of his tongue the flames of desire leapt higher and higher until she thought she would burn to a cinder.

Then his hand reached up and cupped a breast. She sighed into his mouth, her sex now heated and moist. As his hand massaged her breast, she found her breath locked in her chest. Until his thumb grazed her nipple and her breath exploded from her as she cried out in pleasure.

She didn't remember him lowering her to the ground until she found him on top of her again. The delicious weight of his body on her brought an intense throb through her center.

Her fingers threaded through his long, silky strands of hair as his mouth moved lower and lower until he hovered over her breast. His warm breath fanned her nipple, causing the tiny bud

to hardened in expectation. Ahryn moved her hips as she tried to lower his head and felt the most delicious sensation as she met his hard rod. A sharp, powerful stab of pleasure shot through her as Lugus' tongue ran over her nipple before he began to suckle while his other hand tweaked and pulled at her other nipple.

Pleasure like Ahryn had only dreamed of engulfed her and shot straight to her center. Yet she wanted more.

He moved his mouth from one breast to the other until Ahryn's only coherent thought was to fulfill the raging desire that surged through her.

"Lugus," she moaned as his mouth left her breasts to travel down her stomach.

She opened her eyes to see his tongue flick his tongue on her navel. Never had she known such passion could exist, but she wanted Lugus. Pulsing and hard inside of her.

Chapter Sixteen

Ahryn didn't shy away from Lugus when he spread her legs and kneeled between them. She was spread open for him, her folds exposed to the air and his penetrating stare. She watched, fascinated, as he settled on his stomach and kissed first one thigh then the other.

With each kiss he drew closer and closer to her sex. As he hovered over her center she felt moisture run down her leg, and she knew he had done that to her.

He dipped his head and gave her sex a small, light lick that sent chills of anticipation across her body. Then he settled between her legs and gave her a kiss like no other. His tongue licked along her folds, dipped into her center then circled around her swollen nub.

The wonderful, succulent longing that washed over her made her arch her back as she pushed closer to him, wanting more and crying out from the sheer pleasure of it.

And just when she didn't think she could stand any more, he pushed a finger inside of her. She gasped and stilled as even more sensations rocketed through her, locking the breath in her lungs. Then he began to move his finger in and out of her as his tongue played skillfully over her sex.

Ahryn cried out as she felt herself building toward something, something so intense and amazing that she couldn't wait to reach it.

Lugus' name was wrenched from her lips as the first waves of her orgasm caught her, yet he never stopped his ministrations. He continued to stroke and lick her, bringing her higher and higher until the last bursts of her climax had claimed her.

Ahryn had never felt so...special...in all her life, and she didn't want it to end. She glanced up through the thick foliage to see the sun making its ascent. Her body still convulsed from her orgasm, but she wanted to touch Lugus' body as he had touched her.

When he rose over her she returned his smile then reached up and pushed him onto his back. She rolled over until she leaned over him.

"Let me touch you."

He shook his head slowly, his eyes sad. "In truth, I should never have laid a hand on you."

"I'm glad you did, but now I want to return the pleasure."

He started to shake his head again, but Ahryn reached between their bodies, cupped his hard rod, and gently squeezed. A moan tore from his throat as his eyes rolled back in his head.

She moved between his legs and ran her hand up and down the length of him. His rod strained against his pants and jumped each time she touched him. She quickly opened his pants and freed him. The sight of his hard rod jutting out made her sex clench and want him deep inside of her.

Her hand reached out and stroked the rigid, velvety length of him. When she heard him moan she became more aggressive and wrapped her hand around him as she slowly moved her hand up and down his length.

A drop of liquid formed at the tip of his rod. Her eyes caught his as she leaned down and

licked the moisture. A hiss passed through Lugus' lips just as she leaned down and took him in her mouth.

Lugus' hand dug into the ground as Ahryn's sweet mouth took him inside of her. It had been torture enough when her hands had explored him, but when she licked him, it had nearly sent him over the edge. He had never been so hard, wanted so deeply as now. It was too much to refuse her.

And now as she took him deeper and deeper into her mouth, he found himself wishing he were plunging into her tight sheath, burying so deep that he would touch her womb.

Lugus felt his need rising as she sucked and cupped his sacs. He groaned and jerked as his climax pulled him under. Before he succumbed, he pulled Ahryn up and onto his chest as his seed poured from him with an orgasm so strong that for a moment he thought he had died.

* * * *

"What do you have to be so pleased about?" Theron asked his wife as she walked seductively to their bed that he reclined on.

She shrugged and climbed onto the bed, allowing him a glimpse of her breast. "Nothing special, my love."

"Now I know you lie," he said with a laugh as his eyes feasted on a nipple that hardened before his eyes. "Tell me," he demanded as she crawled on her hands and knees until she was even with him.

She leaned over and kissed him, her tongue licking his lips before she sat back and stared.

"You are making me uneasy, Rufina," Theron said. It wasn't like his wife to be so pensive.

"Something has happened."

Theron sat up, all traces of play gone. "What is it?"

She reached over and took his hand and placed it on her stomach.

Theron stared at his hand then looked up at his wife. "Are you sick?"

She laughed and shook her head. "For the ruler of the entire Fae realm, you can be dense some times."

Theron looked again at his hand on her stomach and then jerked his gaze to her. "Are you...."

"Carrying your heir in my womb? I am," she answered with a bright smile.

Theron grabbed her to him and closed his eyes as he said a prayer of thanks. For centuries they had hoped for a child and had nearly given up.

"Are you sure?" he asked as he grabbed her shoulders and pulled her back so he could look into her eyes.

"I'm positive. Are you happy?"

"Ecstatic, my love," he said just before he kissed her.

* * * *

Lugus woke with a smile on his face and Ahryn in his arms. He didn't regret the pleasure they had shared, though he knew it could never go further. If any of the Fae knew she had shared herself with him, she would never be able to find a mate.

"Awake. And with a smile," Ahryn said as she grinned and sat up.

He shrugged and stretched. "Did you sleep well?"

"Like a newborn Fae."

"I think we're very close to the gateway," Lugus said as he rose to his feet and fastened his pants and donned his tunic.

She stopped pulling on her own garments and stared at him. "Truly?"

"I think so. Are you ready to ride?"

"Give me just a moment."

While she finished dressing, Lugus went to the black and made sure the horse was ready. In no time at all he had Ahryn on the back of the black and they were once again on the road. He wouldn't tell Ahryn, but he was almost positive they would find the gateway that day.

Ahryn watched the satisfied expression on Lugus' face. He seemed more relaxed and open since they had woke. Her body still tingled for his touch, and it was on the tip of her tongue to ask him to stop so she could taste him once again.

She felt wicked, but she didn't care. When she was with Lugus she felt free despite having the slave bracelet on. Recalling the bracelet made her think of the Fae realm and how she would have to make sure Lugus went through the gate with her.

It would be easier to convince him if she knew more of his past, so she decided to see if he would impart some of his past.

"When did you get banished?"

If he was surprised at her question he didn't show it. "Five years ago," he answered simply.

Ahryn took his easy answer to mean that he was willing to talk about the events that led to his banishment. "How did it come about?"

For a moment she didn't think he would answer, then he said, "Someone was dying because of something I had done. To try and make amends I gave up my life force."

"To try and save the person?" She had never known anyone to do something so heroic.

He nodded but looked straight ahead. "Rufina held my life force. In doing so, I gave up my immortality to save the dying person, but Rufina didn't allow me to die."

The way he spoke, the hurt and anger showing through in his voice, Ahryn knew then Moira had had something to do with it. "Who was it you tried to save? Was it Moira?"

He gave a curt nod.

Ahryn could have cheerfully kicked herself for bringing up Moira's name and now her memory. She found herself curious about the woman that held Lugus' heart in her hands.

"What does she look like?" she asked and looked down at him as he walked beside her.

He shrugged. "She has blue eyes. No wait. Her eyes are green, and she has blonde hair."

Ahryn watched as Lugus withdrew from her. It was obvious he was delving into his memories of Moira, memories that she could never compete with.

Lugus couldn't believe he had said Moira had blue eyes. Every night for five years he had dreamed of Moira's Druid green eyes, but even now he couldn't recall the exact shade. It was then he realized he hadn't dreamt of Moira in several nights and had gone just as many days without thinking of her.

It was such a new and different feeling that he didn't know whether to rejoice or mourn Moira's absence from his life. Part of him wasn't ready to let go, but the other part was eager to explore the unwanted attraction he had for Ahryn.

He sighed and wished he could go back through time and do things differently. If he

were still a Fae and heir to the throne, he could have courted a bride properly and already had sons and daughters filling the palace with laughter. He could see himself with a beautiful bride by his side, someone like Ahryn.

The thought brought him up short.

Though he was attracted to Ahryn, he refused to allow himself to become attached in anyway. He wanted her to forget him when she returned home, but the passion they shared last night would make that difficult. He cursed himself inwardly for being so weak that he couldn't control his own desires for a few days until Ahryn had passed through the gateway.

His father had been right all those years ago. He wasn't fit to be king.

* * * *

Rufina watched her husband pace before the thrones as he rubbed his hands together joyfully.

"We must have a grand celebration," he said.

Rufina shook her head. "I would ask that you hold off on such plans until the babe is born."

Theron stopped pacing and walked the steps to her throne. "There is always cause for celebration. We will have a ball like no other."

She laughed knowing she would be unable to dissuade him from his course. "And just when is this celebration?"

"Tomorrow," he replied gleefully. "The invitations went out this morning."

"Yet I just told you last night of the news."

"I informed the staff first thing this morning. They immediately set everything in motion."

His smile was so bright that she didn't have the heart to tell him she was unnerved to have visitors in the palace. She couldn't pinpoint exactly what she feared, but she had the unnerving feeling that something terrible might happen.

"I ask but one favor," she said.

"Anything."

"Keep Aimery and the guards close."

The smile disappeared from Theron's face. "Do you sense something?"

"Maybe. I don't know." And, in truth, she didn't. It was more like a nagging doubt than an unwavering assurance that something would indeed happen.

"It's probably just the babe affecting your powers. That does happen."

Rufina laughed as relief swept through her. "I had forgotten that."

"Everything will be fine, my love. You'll see," Theron promised.

Rufina watched him hurry from the throne room before she too rose and went to make a list of everything she would need for the nursery.

Chapter Seventeen

Ahryn didn't try to draw Lugus out of himself the rest of the night. He was so deep in his memories that it was as if he didn't see the ground before him. So when he suddenly stopped and whispered her name, it surprised her.

"Ahryn," he said more forcefully as he glanced at her over his shoulder. "Look."

She followed his finger and found the moon shining its light upon two great standing stones.

"The gateway," she whispered and barely felt Lugus' hands as he pulled her off the black.

"It's almost dawn. We should get you through the gateway now before Marcus and his army appears, not to mention the Draconian that is aiding Marcus."

Ahryn stared at the stones, unable to believe that she had finally reached them. And it was all because of Lugus. Without him she would still be at Marcus' castle being readied for a marriage she didn't want.

"We must hurry," Lugus said.

The urgency in his voice got her moving. She lifted her skirts and came to stand beside him on the hill overlooking the gateway.

"Is that a cottage?" she asked.

Lugus followed her gaze and cursed. "It is. The less people that see what is about to take place the better."

He grabbed her hand and was about to start down the hill when she stopped him.

"Wait," she said and looked into the blue eyes. "Let us watch the sunrise together, one last time."

His face softened, and he gave her a slight nod. She turned to face the glowing red ball that slowly broke the horizon. Great beams of light pushed away the last remaining remnants of night. She had known how much he loved to watch the sun rise, and though she didn't know the reason, she wanted to share another one with him, something that was theirs.

"Are you ready to return home?" he asked.

She nodded, and they started down the hill when the ground began to rumble. Ahryn glanced at Lugus to see his gaze focused somewhere in the distance.

"What is it?"

"Run," he said and withdrew his sword.

She glanced at the gateway then back at him. "Lugus?"

"Bloody run, Ahryn," he shouted. "Marcus has arrived. Get to the gateway now."

Fear snaked through her to settle in the pit of her stomach. "You cannot fight them alone."

He took her by the arm and turned her to him. "Ahryn, we talked about this. You must get to the gateway. Run as fast as you can and never look back."

"Nay," she said and pulled his head down to kiss him.

Lugus allowed himself to get lost in the kiss for a heartbeat before he pulled back. He saw the fear in her mystical blue eyes and wished he could erase it, but he couldn't. All he could do was sacrifice himself to make sure she made it into the Fae realm.

The odd thing was that all these years he wished for death when now he wished for life. He ran his finger down her soft cheek. "Run."

"I cannot leave you."

"If I mean anything to you at all, you will give me your vow that you will run to the gateway and never look back."

She hesitated, and he worried that she might try and dissuade him, but she finally gave him a little nod and turned to the gateway.

"I will hold them off as long as I can. Don't tarry," he warned as he tightened his grip on the pommel of his sword and spotted Marcus and his army riding hard and fast.

Lugus gave her a little push down the hill. She lifted her skirts in her hands to allow her legs to lengthen as he made sure to keep even with her. When they reached the bottom Lugus moved in front of her and guided her toward the stones.

They reached the stones the same time Marcus' army came within range to fire their arrows. Lugus used his sword to knock away the arrows aimed at him as he waited to hear the sound of the gateway opening and Ahryn stepping through.

But there was nothing.

"Lugus," she cried.

There was a hysterical note in her voice that alerted him something was terribly wrong. He turned to find her standing between the stones, yet nothing had happened. The gateway wouldn't open for her.

He stood incredulous as his eyes locked with hers. He couldn't understand why the gateway hadn't opened for her. Then he saw her bracelet.

Her gaze followed his, and she closed her eyes and sank to the ground. Lugus hurried to her to shield her body as more arrows littered the ground around them. If she couldn't get through the gateway then he had to get her to safety before one of the arrows found her as its mark.

"Ahryn," he called as he rushed to her.

Just as soon as he stepped between the stones, lightning flashed around him and the bright light of the gateway opening blinded him.

If Lugus had been confused before, it was nothing to what he felt now. He was no longer Fae, yet he had managed to open the gateway. There wasn't time to linger on the hows, not when Ahryn was in danger.

"Step through," he urged her as he pulled her to her feet.

"Thank you."

He wiped away a tear and pushed her through the gateway. He caught just a glimpse of his home realm before he turned back to Marcus and his army that now surrounded them.

Lugus lifted his sword and met a charging soldier. Using his dagger, Lugus cut the soldier's thigh as he raced by on his mount. The soldier reined his horse around and charged again, and this time Lugus managed to drag him off his horse.

He had seen and committed enough killings to last five Fae lifetimes, so it was not his intention to kill Marcus' soldier. But then the man jumped to his feet and aimed a dagger at

Lugus' heart, it was by instinct alone that Lugus lifted his sword and killed the soldier before his dagger found its way to Lugus' heart.

Lugus pushed the soldier off his sword and raised his gaze to Marcus.

"I won't allow you to live," Marcus shouted.

"Doesn't matter now that Ahryn is safe in the Fae realm."

Next to Marcus was the man Lugus had seen before, long blue black hair and copper eyes, a Draconian. Lugus would have to kill him. Somehow he had managed to keep himself hidden from the Fae, which allowed him to walk on Earth undetected.

"You have no idea what you've done." Marcus lifted his hand and arrows began to fly around Lugus.

Movement on the hill above him caught Lugus' eye, and he spotted a man and woman staring down at them. It must have been the long blonde hair blowing in the breeze that made Lugus realize that it was Moira and Dartayous watching them, a very pregnant Moira.

It was like a boulder had been shoved into his gut. An arrow buzzed by his head leaving a gash on his neck, but he ignored the pain. He ducked past another arrow and began to walk toward the Draconian when suddenly the Draconian looked over Lugus' shoulder and his face went pale.

Lugus turned to see Ahryn crumpled on the ground with an arrow in her shoulder. The gateway began to close, and he knew he couldn't leave her to die. He would have to take his chances with Theron.

He sheathed his sword and jumped through the gateway and knelt beside Ahryn. Just as the gateway closed he saw the Draconian again, this time with a smile on his face.

Lugus no longer cared about the Draconian. All that mattered was Ahryn and getting her safely to someone that could remove the arrow so she could heal herself.

* * * *

Rufina's nervousness didn't disappear as one day turned into the next. The magnificent ball Theron had ordered would take place that night, but all she wanted to do was stay in her chamber.

"You look stunning, my love," Theron said as he walked up behind her and leaned down to kiss her neck.

She gazed at her husband in the mirror and smiled. She had never seen him so excited since he learned of the news of their babe. He was going to make an excellent father to their children.

"They are waiting," he said and took her hand.

Rufina took one last look at herself in the mirror. An elegant gown of silver graced her body and her hair had been left down to flow freely about her except for a small section that was held back away from her face by her crown.

She allowed Theron to lead her out of their chamber and down the hall to the throne room where they would receive gifts from emissaries from other realms. It was the first time in nearly a millennia that Theron had opened the Fae realm to allow the emissaries entry.

The throne room was crushed with people as she and Theron made their way to their thrones. She glanced at her husband and found his face beaming with pride. He gave her hand a squeeze as he led her to her throne. It wasn't until she had taken her seat that he sat.

Rufina looked to her right and found Aimery, the Fae commander and trusted friend,

standing near Theron. She gave Aimery a little nod for she had told him of her fears, fears that could very well be attributed to her pregnancy, but she wanted to be sure just in case.

Each emissary was introduced as they made their way to the steps before Rufina and Theron, and after an elaborate bow they would present their gifts.

With each introduction, Rufina found herself relaxing and enjoying the wonderful and elaborate gifts brought from other realms. Hours had passed and she was beginning to tire but since only a few emissaries remained she didn't want to miss anything.

It wasn't until the Draconian was announced that she felt a ripple of fear move through her. She glanced at her husband, but he smiled at the emissary and waved him forward.

"It was a pleasure to receive your invitation, King Theron," the Draconian emissary said. "It is with sincere congratulations that I bring a present from my king, Constantine. I hope you and your family enjoy it."

Theron smiled. "It has been too long since a Draconian walked in our realm. We welcome you and hope you will stay with us a few days before returning to your realm."

The Draconian smiled, and Rufina calmed as his smile seemed genuine and there was no evil in his copper gaze.

The emissary lifted a small golden chest and waited for Aimery to present it to Theron. Theron took the chest and looked at Rufina.

She smiled as he opened the chest. They both gazed inside to find a round sphere that glowed milky white. Suddenly it flashed brightly and Rufina quickly covered her eyes. She laughed and lowered her arm knowing how Theron loved tricks of that sort.

Only she didn't find her husband, but an empty throne and the emissary gone.

Chapter Eighteen

Lugus knew with Ahryn back in the Realm of the Fae her magic could again be used. He didn't know if she had enough power to get them both to her home now that she was injured, but he had to try.

"Ahryn," he called softly as he moved her hair from her face. "Ahryn, you're hurt and I need to get you to safety."

But no matter what he said or how many times he called, she never woke. Her wound bled badly, and he grew nervous. He didn't want to try and take the arrow out of her shoulder himself for fear he would hurt her more than aid her, but he didn't have a choice.

He swiped at the blood running down his neck from his own wound and reached to tear a piece of her skirt off, then tied it around his neck to help stop the bleeding.

"Don't wake up," he murmured and took hold of the arrow protruding from her left shoulder.

He braced his other hand on her shoulder to keep her still, and, after a deep breath, yanked the arrow out. Blood gushed as the wound opened, and Lugus quickly ripped part of her skirts to use to help staunch the flow of blood. He had never seen so much blood in his life and began to worry that he wasn't aiding her.

How much time it took for the blood to stop flowing he had no idea, and it was only then that he ripped more material from her skirts to wrap a bandage about her and lifted her in his arms.

He turned his back to the gateway and for the first time in five years beheld his beloved realm. Yet he didn't see it. All he looked for was somewhere he could take Ahryn to get help.

It didn't take him long to remember where he was and as he left the protection of the trees he spotted the magnificent waterfall and bridge that led to *Dun Glamyr*, a small village. He began to walk toward the village praying with each step that Ahryn would be all right.

As he crossed the long stone bridge over the river to the village he spotted a Fae watching him. "Help me," he called out.

The man hurried to Lugus and took one look at Ahryn in his arms and said, "Follow me."

Lugus fell into step behind the man and entered the man's lodging. He waited, unsure of what to do.

"In here," the man called, and Lugus quickly followed him into a back room where he placed Ahryn on the bed.

"What happened?" the man asked as he unwrapped the bandage to look at the wound.

Lugus didn't want to relate the entire story, so just said, "She was hit with an arrow while crossing through the gateway."

The Fae nodded and didn't look up again as he cleaned the wound. Lugus sank into a chair by the bed and kept his gaze on Ahryn, his worry growing with each beat of his heart. It was the first time in five years that he wished he had his powers.

He knew it was a matter of moments before Theron realized he was here and came to get

him. But Lugus prayed for time. He would leave as soon as he knew she was all right, but not a moment sooner.

"I know who you are," the man said.

Lugus stilled and closed his eyes. When he opened them it was to find the Fae staring at him, blue eyes swirling with animosity.

"I'm not staying, but I couldn't leave her to die."

The Fae gave a curt nod of acceptance and left the room. Lugus dropped his head in his hands and sighed. It was because of his hesitation after spotting Moira that Ahryn was wounded. Had he kept his eyes on Marcus and the army everything would have been fine.

Instead, he watched Ahryn lying still as death from a wound that should have been his.

Lugus heard the Fae enter the room again, but he didn't want to see the scorn in his eyes just yet.

"What in all that is magical is this?"

Lugus' head jerked up and found the Fae staring at Ahryn's bracelet. "Is she going to be all right?"

"What is it?" he repeated.

Lugus rose to his feet. "Is Ahryn going to be all right?"

"Aye," the Fae said. "Now tell me."

Lugus let out a breath he had been holding and walked to the doorway of the room. "You need to call to the Fae commander, Aimery. He'll know what the bracelet is and how to remove it as well as who Ahryn's family is."

"I know who her family is," the Fae said. "Her grandfather is Michyl, the High Chancellor."

Lugus blinked. No wonder she hadn't wanted him to know who she was. Had he known he would have made sure to keep his distance, because though she might not be royalty, she was just a step down.

"Then call to her family, but make sure you call to Aimery first. Ahryn would want the bracelet off before her family sees her."

Lugus hurriedly left the dwelling then and didn't look back. He wished he could have looked into Ahryn's mystical blue eyes once more, but it was better this way. His steps slowed over the great bridge, and he found himself gazing into the light green waters of the river that ran beneath the bridge.

He shook himself and continued to the gateway. As it was, he was sure he would receive a visit from Aimery wanting to know every detail of what had happened to Ahryn, but Lugus didn't want that confrontation on the Fae realm.

Just as he reached the gateway and wondered if it would open for him again, he sensed someone near. He drew his sword and swung to his left to see the Draconian leaning against a tree enjoying an apple.

"What are you doing here? Did you come to make sure Ahryn died?" Lugus demanded.

The Draconian threw away the apple and straightened. "I wish no harm to Ahryn or any other Fae. I came to warn you."

"Warn me?" Lugus repeated. "Warn me of what?"

"That something dreadful has happened to your brother. As I told Ahryn..."

"Told Ahryn," Lugus said in bewilderment. When had Ahryn spoken with the

Draconian, and why hadn't she told him?

"Aye," the Draconian said. "I am Tane, and I came searching for you."

Lugus lowered his sword as he tried to take in everything. "That doesn't make sense. I no longer hold the power I once did."

"I know. And even with all that power you didn't see to take over other realms as you could easily have done, but I digress. I spoke with Ahryn about the bracelet. Both you and she assumed wrong. The bracelet will hinder her powers even on this realm. Only a Draconian can release the bracelet since it is our markings next to yours."

Lugus' mind whirled with the news. "Ahryn's still in danger."

"Aye. As long as she wears that bracelet she is all but mortal. Her body will not be able to heal like a Fae normally would."

"Why didn't she tell me?"

"I will be waiting. Call to me when you want my assistance."

Lugus glanced up, but Tane was gone. He had never trusted the Draconians, and he had difficulty doing so now. Yet Ahryn's life hung in the balance.

"Leaving so soon?"

Lugus sighed at hearing Aimery's sarcastic voice. He turned and found the Fae commander standing behind him with his legs braced apart and his arms crossed over his chest.

"I was."

Aimery dropped his arms. "I need you to answer some questions first."

"I thought you might."

"How is it that Ahryn came to wear that bracelet?"

"First," Lugus said, "I need to know if it has been destroyed."

"That would be difficult considering it is still attached to her."

Lugus cursed. Tane hadn't lied. "We must remove the bracelet with all haste lest she die."

Aimery stared hard at him a moment. "Why?"

"On the human realm it prevented her from using almost all of her Fae powers or calling to any Fae. I assumed wrongly that once she returned to this realm the bracelet's magic would cease to work. It hasn't. If we don't remove the bracelet, she could die."

Aimery cursed and then nodded. "You must return with me."

"I cannot," he said. "As much as I need to know Ahryn is all right, I cannot stay."

"I need you to stay. I'm asking you to stay."

It was then Lugus noticed the lines of worry around Aimery's eyes. "What has happened?"

"I will tell you after we see to Ahryn."

Lugus fell into step with Aimery as his mind raced with possibilities. For Aimery to be so concerned it must have something to do with Theron or Rufina.

It wasn't long before he once again stood looking down at Ahryn. She looked paler, more lifeless. He watched Aimery examine the slave bracelet.

At Aimery's questioning stare, Lugus knew it was time for an explanation. "She was tricked into putting it on. A human wanted to trap her on their realm and marry her. I tried to take it off her."

"What are these markings?" Aimery asked.

Lugus knew he had no other choice but to tell him. "Draconian."

Aimery's head snapped up. "How do you know this?"

"I was told."

"By who? A Draconian? Did you align yourself with them? Wasn't it enough that you nearly destroyed everything in your quest for power?"

Lugus' anger surged to the surface. "It wasn't a quest for power but revenge for being wrongly accused," he spat. "And I have not aligned myself with a Draconian. What has that got to do with anything?"

"It has everything to do with it," said a voice behind them.

Lugus turned to find Tane at the foot of the bed. The Draconian's face was thoughtful as he gazed at Ahryn. "Why is the bracelet still on her, Lugus?"

"You have aligned with them," Aimery shouted and unsheathed his sword.

"Put your sword away," Tane said. "I am not part of what happened."

Lugus looked from Tane to Aimery. "What has happened?"

Tane's copper eyes turned to him. "The queen is carrying the heir to the kingdom, and to celebrate King Theron hosted a lavish ball where emissaries from other realms presented gifts to them."

"And a Draconian betrayed us and sent Theron's soul into a realm no one can enter," Aimery finished.

Lugus ran a hand down his face. "Theron? Gone?"

"I had no part in it," Tane repeated to Aimery. "I saw what was to come to pass and knew that Lugus must return here, else you would lose your king forever."

"How is Rufina?" Lugus asked, knowing his sister-in-law was most likely devastated. Theron was her true mate. They would be linked forever throughout time.

"What does Lugus have to do with anything?" Aimery asked.

Tane took a deep breath. "Put away your sword, Fae commander. I will release the bracelet from Ahryn's arm then we can speak of this."

Aimery slowly lowered his sword then sheathed it. He watched Tane carefully as the Draconian moved to his side of the bed.

"Lugus," Tane said. "Read your words then I will read mine."

"Why Lugus?" Aimery asked.

But Lugus knew. He was somehow connected to Ahryn, and they needed all the magic and power they could gather to release the bracelet.

Lugus leaned over and put her hand in his. Her breathing was shallow and her skin cool to the touch. He licked his lips and ran his hand over the ring on her finger.

"By ancient magic you have been locked," he started to read, "By love you will be released."

Lugus felt a bolt shoot through him at the words he spoke. Love? He didn't love Ahryn. He still loved Moira. Or did he?

"Finish," Tane urged.

"Hear my voice for I command the ancients to release their hold and free the one they have trapped."

Tane nodded and leaned over Ahryn. "Listen to the voices that command you. Fae and Draconian united. We demand the ancients withdraw their magic."

Chapter Nineteen

Instantly the bracelet unlocked, and Lugus hastily removed it and the attached ring from Ahryn's hand. Color slowly came back to her face, and her skin began to warm in his hold.

"Thank you," he said as he glanced at Tane.

"It is time we spoke," Aimery said.

Lugus nodded and reluctantly released Ahryn's hand to follow Aimery and Tane outside of the dwelling. He suddenly found himself very tired and needing to sleep for at least a year. The fear that had held his heart in a death grip had been released.

"Who was the Draconian emissary?" Aimery asked Tane tersely.

"Daveth. The gift didn't come from King Constantine, however. It has come from someone who is trying to take the throne."

Aimery sighed heavily. "What exactly was the gift given by the emissary?"

When Tane glanced at him, Lugus knew whatever he was about to say wasn't going to be good.

"It has sucked your brother into an empty void. A place that none can get to," Tane said sadly.

Lugus didn't believe that for a moment. After all he had found his way out of the Realm of Shadows, a place that no one else had managed to leave. "There has to be a way."

Tane turned to him, his copper eyes serious. "There is."

"Wait," Aimery said, his agitation showing. "You just said none could get to this void."

Tane, with his gaze still holding Lugus', said, "If Queen Rufina tries to find her husband, not only will she lose the babe that grows in her womb, but both she and the king will die."

Lugus swallowed, for he feared Tane's next words. "Don't say it," he said before Tane could speak.

"You don't know what I'm about to say."

"I do, and I would prefer you didn't."

"What in the name of all that is magical are you two talking about?" Aimery asked. "I have a distraught queen, an army ready to attack Draconia and a banished prince to deal with. I don't have time for riddles."

"Your banished prince is leaving so there is one less worry you have," Lugus said and turned on his heel.

"Without seeing Ahryn?" Tane said softly.

That stopped Lugus in his tracks. He felt responsible for Ahryn, but in truth, his feelings went deeper than that. How could he tell Tane and Aimery the truth? It wasn't that he didn't want to save his brother, because despite what had transpired between them, he held no animosity for Theron.

The truth was he was petrified.

Lugus looked through the doorway of the dwelling and into Ahryn's chamber and saw movement on the bed. He pivoted and walked into Ahryn's chamber to see her struggling to sit

up.

“Hold on,” he said and rushed to her side. “Let me help you.”

He shifted pillows behind her and was relieved to see the luminous glow of the Fae once more returned to her skin.

She lifted her right arm and stared quietly for a moment. “Tane held up his end of the bargain?”

Lugus nodded. “Why didn’t you tell me you spoke to him?”

“I knew you wouldn’t listen to anything he had to say. Besides, I agreed with him. You needed to return here. This is where you belong.”

Lugus lowered his gaze and took a deep breath. “I know you would like to think that, but as soon as I leave, you will learn just what I did to become banished. Once you learn the truth, you won’t think so highly of me.”

“How do you know how I will think?” she asked with a smile. “You got me safely to the gateway just as you promised. Regardless of your past mistakes, you are a good man.”

Her words affected him more than he would have liked, and it was because of them that he knew he had to get as far away from her as possible. If she was associated with him in any way...well, she might as well be banished herself for how the rest of the Fae would treat her.

“Ahryn,” he began, but she put her fingers to his lips.

“I know what you would say, and I would rather you didn’t.”

He nodded and raised his gaze to her. “Aimery is here.”

She bit her lip. “You know who I am.”

It wasn’t a question. “I do. Aimery will reunite you with your family once you are fully healed.”

“You’re leaving.”

He hated the disappointment in her eyes, but he had to make her understand. “I don’t belong here. It was because of me that you were hit with the arrow.”

Ahryn’s stomach flip flopped as she recalled the beautiful woman with blonde hair overlooking the gateway. “That was Moira at the gateway, wasn’t it?”

He nodded, and it was all the answer she needed.

“You don’t need to apologize. I shouldn’t have stayed in the doorway watching. Thank you for bringing me here and for saving me.”

His blue eyes were sad as he gazed at her. “You’re welcome,” he said and then walked quietly from the chamber.

Ahryn buried her head in her hands as the tears came, ignoring the pulling pain in her shoulder from her wound. Lugus was walking out of her life, and there was nothing she could do about it.

* * * *

Aimery watched the exchange between Ahryn and Lugus and found himself intrigued. It was obvious to anyone who looked at Ahryn that she had deep feelings for Lugus, and though Lugus might try to hide or dismiss his feelings, he too felt something for Ahryn.

“They make a striking couple, do they not?” Tane asked as he came to stand beside him.

“They do.”

“Lugus risked everything to get her to the gateway. Marcus burned his home as they made their escape.”

"It doesn't change what he has done in the past," Aimery said tightly.

Tane shook his head. "Nay, it doesn't, but it should show you a man who is remorseful and wants only to make amends anyway he can."

"You approached Ahryn without Lugus' knowledge," Aimery said, changing the subject. "Why?"

"To make sure she got him into this realm any way she could."

"Why?"

Tane sighed and turned to look out at the waterfall. "I have a...gift...in that I can see the future."

"As can I. There is nothing special in that."

Tane smiled and turned back to Aimery. "There is a difference. You see the future one way and don't see any of the changes until someone deviates from what you've originally seen."

"And you do?"

"I see every thread that can happen."

Aimery leaned back against the dwelling and watched as Lugus again walked to the gateway. "You went to a lot of trouble to make sure Lugus returned."

"And you should be going to just as much trouble to keep him here."

"What has he to do with anything?"

Tane was quiet for a moment, as if he contemplated what his answer would be. "I cannot share that with you now. Lugus must come to terms with his own demons."

"I do not like not knowing," Aimery said, his voice low and menacing.

"Most people don't," Tane replied easily. "Are you going after Lugus?"

Aimery rolled his eyes and disappeared.

* * * *

Lugus couldn't walk fast enough. This was the second time he had tried to leave Ahryn...nay, the Fae realm. He was leaving the Fae realm, he repeated to himself.

Ahryn wasn't his to worry over any longer. Aimery would make sure she was returned to her parents, and with Tane's aid they would find Theron's soul.

Lugus' feet slowed. He hadn't allowed himself to look around the realm. Returning here made leaving that much more difficult. Besides, he had lost the right to be amongst the magic that flowed so freely.

Being unworthy was all Lugus had ever been, and it was all he ever would be.

He thought of Moira and instead of the usual longing and pain that filled him, there was only a sadness for what he had done to her and Dartayous. Seeing her heavy with child had made him understand that she had never been his and never would be his.

In some ways, he wished he had stayed in the Realm of Shadows. At least there he belonged. It didn't matter how much he did, he would never atone for the destruction and death he had caused.

A shift in the air alerted him that he was no longer alone, and when he turned and spotted Aimery behind him, he wasn't surprised.

"Following me to make sure I leave?" Lugus couldn't help but ask.

"Nay. I've actually come to ask that you stay."

Lugus closed his eyes and sighed. When he opened them it was to find Aimery regarding him thoughtfully. "You know what I have done, Aimery. You know better than most that

Theron was right in banishing me. In truth, Rufina should have allowed me to die.”

“But she didn’t,” Aimery said.

Lugus began walking again. “Save your words. I will not stay for you do not need me.”

“I may not, but Tane thinks he does, and Ahryn definitely wants you to stay. And despite what I may wish, you have royal blood in your veins.”

Just the mention of Ahryn’s name made Lugus began to doubt his leave taking. “Ahryn doesn’t realize who I am. As soon as she does, her thinking will change. I know I deserve a lot, but I would rather not be around when she discovers the truth.”

“You don’t give her enough credit,” Aimery said as he caught up with Lugus.

Lugus stopped and turned to the Fae commander. “Stop using Ahryn for this has nothing to do with her. Tane thinks he needs me, but he doesn’t. Theron does need saving, and if the Fae and Draconian unite powers you will be able to find him yourself. What good would I do with no powers.”

“You opened the doorway, something you shouldn’t have been able to do.”

Lugus signed louder this time. “I know, but you needn’t worry. I will not venture into the realm again.”

There was something in Aimery’s gaze that stopped Lugus from speaking. Maybe it was the worry or the underlying fear, but he knew Aimery was more concerned than he let on.

“I ask you to stay. If you will not do it for your brother, I ask you to do it for the friendship that used to be between us.”

Lugus turned away and looked at the gateway. “Understand that my wanting to leave has nothing to do with Theron. He is my brother and regardless of how he feels, he is my only family. I wish to leave because I...fear my presence will make things worse.”

As Lugus expected, Aimery walked until he stood in front of him. “I’m not totally convinced you are the man Tane proclaims you to be, but because my king is in need and my queen cannot help him, I am asking you.”

Lugus knew he had no choice. Tane had convinced Aimery that he needed Lugus, when in fact Lugus knew Tane could most likely find Theron himself.

“I will stay then.”

In a blink, Aimery was gone. Lugus didn’t want to walk back to the dwelling and see Ahryn’s mystical blue eyes filled with doubt so he began to walk towards *Caer Rhoemyr* to see his sister-in-law and face a fear he had thought he had buried deep within him.

Chapter Twenty

Ahryn hurriedly wiped her eyes as Tane walked into the chamber. "Thank you for releasing the bracelet."

He smiled and nodded. "How are you feeling?"

"Much better. I should be healed in a few hours and Aimery is to return me to my family."

Again Tane nodded thoughtfully. "What awaits you there?"

"Endless questions. I would rather venture to my grandfather's. At least I know he would tell me the truth."

"About Lugus?"

She blinked and nodded. "Do you read thoughts as well?"

Tane smiled. "Not exactly. As with any powerful being you have blocked anyone from reading your thoughts, I just see things others do not."

"I just want to know what Lugus is hiding."

"Why?" Tane asked. "Is it because you do not think it is as bad as he thinks it is, or because you fear it is worse than you think it is?"

Ahryn hated that he knew her feelings. "I've only heard whispers of rumors. Everyone feared for our lives when we were captured and held prisoners. It wasn't until we were suddenly released that we saw the destruction across the Fae realm and the first rumors began."

"What were the rumors?" Tane asked.

"That someone had tried to take over the realm and released the Death Dragons."

"Death Dragons are a dangerous thing to play with," Tane murmured.

"Someone else harnessed the Death Dragons and released us. Only then did we learn of Lugus' banishment."

Tane tapped his finger on his chin as he paced in front of her bed. "How do you think Lugus was involved?"

"I think he must have helped the person responsible for releasing the Death Dragons."

"Why do you think that?"

She licked her lips and glanced out the windows. "He spent countless years in the Realm of Shadows. None even knew he had managed to leave. Some say he was powerful enough to escape, I think Theron finally realized he had been punished long enough and released him. After the banishment we learned that he hadn't, in fact, killed his father and he had been wrongly accused, which would explain why he helped the person free the Death Dragons."

"A plausible theory," Tane said softly. "So, you don't think he had a bigger role in the near destruction of your realm?"

"Nay," she said vigorously. "He is a good man, a man that deserves to be respected as a prince of our realm."

Tane suddenly smiled at her words. "You must care about him a great deal."

"He saved me. His home was burned, and he can never return to his isle because of me."

He's lost another home, and I wish to make right what was wrong."

"You will do nicely," he said before he turned on his heel and walked away.

"Do nicely for what?" Ahryn called after him, but she knew he wouldn't answer.

The more time she spent with Tane the more she learned of their differences and likenesses. While both the Fae and Draconians were matched equally in power, there were some in her race just like Tane that had an exceptional gift.

Tane was planning something, and Ahryn wished she was privy to it. She would gladly give him her aid if it meant that Lugus' banishment would be overturned.

She made the decision then that she would go to her grandfather's first since she had a sneaking suspicion that Tane, Lugus, and Aimery would be going to *Caer Rhoemyr*.

* * * *

Aimery found Tane leaving Ahryn's chamber. "I've convinced Lugus to stay. We need to make haste to the palace. I want Queen Rufina to hear your words."

"Where is Lugus?"

"He started walking. I wanted to deliver Ahryn to her family first. Catch up with Lugus. He will lead you to *Caer Rhoemyr*."

Tane nodded and disappeared. Once he was gone, Aimery turned to enter Ahryn's chamber and found her standing beside the bed. "Are you ready to see your parents again?"

"Not just yet."

He was startled to hear her words. "Why not?"

"I have a need to see my grandfather first."

"He is in *Caer Rhoemyr*."

"Exactly," she said and cocked her head to the side.

Aimery silently cursed. "Did Tane tell you that is where we are going?"

"Tane told me nothing."

"You really need to see your parents," Aimery argued.

Ahryn shook her head. "My powers have returned. I will go to my grandfather's one way or another. I have already sent word to my parents that I am once again in the Fae realm."

"You get your stubbornness from your grandfather."

"It's why I love him so," Ahryn answered with a smile.

* * * *

Lugus spotted Tane leaning against a tree about twenty paces ahead of him. "I suppose Aimery sent you."

Tane nodded and fell into step with him. "Aimery is trying to bring Ahryn to her parents."

"What do you mean trying?" Lugus asked and stopped. "Is something wrong with her? Is her injury not healing correctly?"

"She is fine," Tane answered with a knowing smile. "You are wounded."

Lugus touched the material around his throat. "It's nothing."

"Let me see," Tane said before he reached over and untied the strip. "The arrow barely missed you."

Lugus shrugged. "It will heal in time." Before he could move away, Tane placed his hand on the wound and closed his eyes. Lugus felt the magic flow through him and found himself lightheaded.

When Tane stepped away, Lugus reached up and felt the healed skin. He threw aside the soiled material. "Thank you. Now, you were saying about Ahryn?"

"You worry greatly for someone you proclaim to think of as a responsibility."

Lugus turned back to the path and began walking. "Tell me why Aimery is having difficulty with Ahryn."

"She wishes to see her grandfather."

Lugus frowned and tried to ignore the feeling of despair that settled around him.

"You have no response?"

Lugus shook his head, unable to find his voice. He knew why Ahryn wanted to see her grandfather, she wanted the truth about him. Lugus now regretted not telling her when he had the chance.

Now she would hear all the ugly details and know him for the monster he really was. In a way, it was better that she finally heard the truth. Then, he would have to stay away from her. As it was, he was finding it difficult to keep his distance from her.

His rod still throbbed with a need to be buried inside of her. Their pleasuring each other had only wet his appetite for her, and he feared he would never get enough.

He stopped in his tracks. "I am meant to walk the realms alone, a monster that everyone turns away," he said softly.

"One never really knows what the future holds," Tane said.

Lugus looked at him and saw something in Tane's copper eyes. "But you can see my future?"

"I see many different paths that you can take. Which one you journey is your choice alone."

"Why go to so much trouble to bring me back here if you won't tell me what I need to do."

Tane smiled sadly. "It isn't that easy, Lugus. I saw what was to happen to your brother and who has done it. I also saw what would become of your realm if King Theron wasn't returned."

"And that in itself made you come to a realm where Draconians haven't been welcomed in millennia?"

"Nay. I came because I had to. Like you, I have no choice."

That's when Lugus understood. "Someone sent you?"

"Something like that," Tane said and glanced away.

"I will not delve into your secrets," Lugus said, "for we all have them."

No sooner had the words left Lugus' mouth than Aimery appeared before them. "The queen wishes to speak with both of you."

Lugus inhaled deeply and waited for Aimery to transport them to the palace. He was afraid he would see the palace and city still destroyed. When they arrived in the palace throne room, Lugus hastily made his way to the balcony and looked out over his precious city.

All traces of destruction were gone. It was as though the Death Dragons had never come to the city.

"You always did love to look at the city."

Lugus jerked at hearing Rufina's voice beside him. He moved his head and found her usually smiling face full of despair.

"I'm sorry, Rufina," he said.

To his utter surprise, a single tear slipped down her face. "I'm trying to be strong," she said, her voice soft as though she was afraid someone might hear. "But I'm failing miserably."

Lugus turned to her as she faced him. "I will be strong for you."

At his words her face crumbled, and he pulled her into his arms as she cried. He clenched his jaw and knew then that he would gladly give his life to find Theron.

He didn't know how long he and Rufina stood together as she cried, and he offered her his strength. When her tears began to dry, she pulled back and looked into his eyes.

"I'm glad you are here. I feel as though I am losing my mind."

Lugus took her hand and tucked it into the crook of his arm as he led her back to the throne room where Tane and Aimery waited. As he drew closer he spotted Michyl, Theron's High Chancellor, and Ahryn beside him.

He stopped and stared at her. When she gave him a hesitant smile, he returned it with a nod and continued to Rufina's throne.

Rufina leaned close, "I see how you two looked at each other. I'm anxious to hear the tale."

"There is nothing to tell because there cannot be anything between us."

Rufina's brow creased. "Lugus, haven't you lived in punishment long enough?"

He nearly laughed at her words. "The first time I was punished it was undeserved. This time, however, I deserve it and much more."

"Anyone would have wanted revenge."

"Not Theron," Lugus answered, and, with Rufina's silence, he knew she would argue no more.

She sighed softly. "I still wish to hear the tale if for nothing more than to take my mind off Theron for a little while. I feel so helpless."

Lugus seated her and moved down a few steps. "Maybe one day."

"Tonight," she said.

He knew better than to argue with her here. Tonight he would explain why he didn't wish to speak of Ahryn or their time together.

Lugus turned and walked to stand beside Tane. Regardless that Tane was a Draconian, he had risked everything and saved Ahryn, and Lugus would trust him with his life.

Rufina raised her hand, and Tane walked towards her. He knelt on the steps below her and placed his right hand over his heart. "Your majesty," he said softly, and he bowed his head.

"Rise and tell me what you know," Rufina demanded.

Tane rose then and squared his shoulders. "As I told your commander, it was not our king who sent the gift."

"Who did?" Rufina asked.

"Daveth. He is a powerful Draconian that is trying to usurp the crown."

Rufina folded her hands in her lap. "How do I know you are speaking the truth?"

"May I approach?" Tane asked.

Lugus watched Aimery step near Rufina.

Tane threw back his black cloak over his shoulders revealing the intricate gold material that lined the inside. He held his arms out and palms up as he moved toward Rufina. Once he stood in front of her he turned his palm down.

Lugus watched as Rufina leaned forward and stared at Tane's hand. She nodded, and he stepped away. Lugus knew the only reason for Tane to show Rufina his hands was if he had the Truth tattoos on him. The Truth tattoos had been implemented several millennia ago, and it had worked well for not only the ambassadors, but also the realms.

"So, you speak the truth, and it is Daveth that is trying to take the crown from your king. What has that to do with us?"

"Theron is a very powerful king. Despite the Draconians and the Fae not mingling, Daveth knew that if Theron ever discovered his treachery, Theron would make sure and stop him."

Rufina nodded sadly. "You are correct. My husband would have done just that, however, I don't think you are telling me everything."

"I am not," Tane answered honestly. "I am what my people call a Diviner, able to see not just into the future, but to see all the different paths a person can take."

"So, you saw some path my husband would take and you came to save him?"

Tane glanced at his feet before he shook his head. "Nay. I came because of Lugus."

Lugus met Rufina's gaze and knew she worried that he might try and take over the throne while Theron was gone. He needed to set her straight on that when they talked. There were too many people, namely Ahryn, in the room that didn't need to hear everything.

"I thought you came to save my husband," Rufina said, her voice low and tight as if she were about to lose the single thread that held her together.

"King Theron plays a large role in this, Queen Rufina. Once the details are sorted out, we can try to find him."

"Nay," Rufina said as she rose to her feet. "You will find him now. He is somewhere out there suffering. I won't sit here and wait for you to do something. I will go after him."

Lugus saw her wobble and began to make his way to her. He passed Ahryn and felt her eyes on him, but he was too worried about his brother's wife to spare Ahryn a glance.

Tane's voice rose and filled the throne room. "If you do, you seal yours, your babe's and Theron's fate to death. He was sent to the Realm of Shadows."

Lugus caught Rufina just as she crumpled. She pressed her head onto his shoulder as her body shook.

"I've lost him," she said softly.

Lugus lifted her in his arms and met her eyes. "Nay. I am going after him."

Tears filled her eyes, and she wrapped her arms around his neck as he walked to her chamber.

Chapter Twenty-One

Ahryn knew she shouldn't be jealous of her queen, but with Lugus carrying her, Ahryn felt a jab of emotion hot and true rush through her.

She had hoped Lugus would be happy to see her, but when he had looked at her, she thought she saw...resignation in his blue depths. She hadn't had time to ask her grandfather about Lugus, and now she feared there might never be time.

"Follow Lugus," her grandfather said. "Queen Rufina is going to need you."

Ahryn lifted her white skirts and hurried after Lugus. It had been a wonderful feeling to shed the awful garments of the humans and don the Fae dress.

Her soft soled shoes made no sound as she stretched her legs and caught up with Lugus. Rufina still had her arms locked around his neck and her face pressed into his shoulder. Ahryn could only imagine the pain and heartache her queen felt with her husband betrayed and trapped in a place that she couldn't reach him.

She ran ahead of Lugus and opened Rufina's door. His eyes met hers as he passed, but they didn't speak. When he laid Rufina on the massive bed, her eyes were closed. Lugus stepped back and pulled the silver cloth around the bed closed. Ahryn did the same on the opposite side and waited for Lugus.

He walked to her and gently touched her face. "How is your shoulder?"

"I feel nothing, like I never had an injury," she said and smiled.

He didn't return the smile. "I thought Aimery was taking you to your family?"

"He did."

"I wasn't speaking of your grandfather. Though I know how valuable Michyl is to Rufina and Theron, I'm sure your parents would wish to speak to you."

"I've sent my parents a message." She watched as his jaw clenched.

"You need to be far away from me," he whispered, his expression pained as though he wanted to be away from her.

"I know, but I can't."

"You came to find out the truth," he nearly shouted.

Ahryn covered his mouth with her fingers to silence him. He let out a low moan and closed his eyes. When he opened them they burned with desire.

"You can try and hide it, but I know what you feel."

"You don't know anything," he said right before he pulled her into his arms and kissed her.

Ahryn threaded her fingers in his long blonde hair as his tongue plundered her mouth. Moisture gathered between her legs, and she began to pulse with need, a need only he could quench.

"Nay," he said and wrenched his mouth from hers. "Ahryn, you do not belong here. What is going to take place is dangerous, and I want you as far away as you can get. Go home," he said just before he turned on his heel and walked out of the room.

Ahryn took a deep breath and touched her lips. Despite his words, he still desired her, which was evident by his devouring kiss and thick rod that pressed against her stomach.

She shook herself and quickly left to make sure there was food and drink for Rufina when she woke.

* * * *

Rufina looked at the ceiling and thought over all that she had witnessed. She had never seen Lugus so protective, but what puzzled her more was his obvious need to be rid of Ahryn. Did he think he wasn't worthy of love?

She couldn't wait to speak to him and learn exactly what had transpired between him and Ahryn, because the feelings Ahryn had for him ran deep--very deep.

To her surprise, she heard her door open. She raised her head and saw Lugus step inside. "I thought you had left?"

He shrugged. "I knew you wished to speak to me. It's better to do it now so you could rest easier."

She looked at her brother-in-law and saw the haggard look in his eyes. How she wished he wouldn't have lost his immortality, he deserved to be on the Fae realm. "Tell me," she said and sat up.

He walked to the bed and moved aside the curtains to sit on the edge. "First, I want you to know that I haven't returned to take over as ruler. The role of king belongs to Theron now."

"But it's rightfully yours."

"Maybe, but you know as well as I that regardless of who I am, the Fae would never accept me as king. Not now."

She placed her hand atop his. "I'm so sorry, Lugus."

"It doesn't matter."

But she knew it did. "If you haven't come to take over, then why have you? You barely survived the Realm of Shadows the first time."

"I have to. He's my brother," he said softly, his blue eyes intense as he stared at her.

"I cannot lose both of you."

He gripped her hand in his. "You won't lose Theron. This I vow to you."

She sighed and closed her eyes a moment. When she opened them, she gave him a smile. "You always were a good man. Now, tell me about Ahryn."

"There's nothing to tell," he said and rose from the bed to pace in front of her. "I helped her escape Earth and return here."

"Is that all?"

"That's all there can be," he admitted softly.

Rufina swung her legs over the bed and walked to him. She placed her hand on his arm to stop him. "Lugus, don't turn aside the love Ahryn willingly gives you."

"She only gives it because she has no idea of what kind of monster I am."

"Then tell her. Let her decide. Don't wait for some fool to blab it to her before she's had a chance to hear it from you."

He gazed at her a moment before he nodded. "I'll think on it. Now, I want you to rest. Theron will have my head if anything happens to you and the babe."

Rufina allowed him to sit her back on the bed, but she wasn't fooled. She knew he cared more for Ahryn than he let on. It was in every word, every movement, every look. And she was

going to do whatever it took for Lugus to find happiness.

* * * *

By the time Ahryn returned to Rufina's chamber, the queen sat at her small table and stared out the balcony doors.

"Are you hungry, my queen?" Ahryn asked.

Rufina jumped slightly and smiled sadly. "Hello, Ahryn. I'm not hungry, but I must look after the babe that grows in my womb."

Ahryn sat the tray on the table and took the opposite chair. "Is there anything I can do for you?"

The queen smiled and nodded. "I need something to take my mind off my helplessness."

"I will gladly do anything you would ask."

"Then tell me about Lugus."

Ahryn grew very still. "What do you wish to know?"

Rufina sighed and popped a piece of fruit in her mouth as she leaned back in her seat. "I have known Lugus since I was a small child. He was always quick with a smile and his sharp wit, but he would anger at the slightest thing, especially with his father. They fought daily. The Lugus I saw today isn't even the same man I saw five years ago."

"He doesn't smile much," Ahryn admitted. "Though I did manage to get a few from him when I tried."

The queen smiled. "That is good to know. He needs laughter in his life."

"He does, though he won't admit it. He actually thought I had come to kill him the first time he saw me."

Rufina's brow furrowed. "I had hoped that giving him a second chance at life that he would embrace it."

Something in Ahryn's face must have alerted the queen of her ignorance.

"You don't know, do you?" Rufina asked her.

Ahryn shook her head. "I asked him many times, but he refused to tell me."

"Is that why you came here instead of returning to your home?"

"I knew my grandfather would tell me the truth."

"Why do you want to know?" Rufina asked. "Would it change how you feel about him?"

Ahryn shrugged. "I know he occupies my thoughts constantly. He risked his own life to save mine when he could have easily turned his back on me. He also lost everything in aiding me. The second chance you gave him is gone." She licked her lips and asked, "Will you tell me what I seek?"

The queen met her gaze. "Nay. Lugus is my family. If he does not wish you to know of his deeds, I will respect that. If he wants you to know, he will tell."

Ahryn had hoped Rufina would impart something, and she couldn't help but be disappointed in discovering the queen was as closed mouth about it as Lugus.

"A piece of advice," Rufina said as Ahryn rose to her feet. "Don't go behind Lugus' back. Give him time and he will open up for you."

Hope bloomed in Ahryn. If anyone knew Lugus, it was Rufina, so she took the queen's words to heart.

* * * *

Lugus hurried to his chamber. He slammed his door and leaned against it as his heart

pounded and his rod begged for release. He wanted Ahryn with a desperation he had never felt, a need so intense that he nearly couldn't breathe.

And it was because of that emotion that he refused to allow her near him. He would only bring her pain and heartache.

With heavy steps he walked to his balcony and threw open the doors. The sweet air brushed against him, and he inhaled deeply as he closed his eyes.

He had never thought he would get to see his beloved land again, and to return and discover his brother was in grave danger took away any excitement he felt at returning. He was no fool though. He would enjoy every moment he had before he ventured into the darkness to find Theron.

Lugus braced his hands on the railing and dropped his head to his chest. How ironic it was that he had fought so desperately for millennia to be free of the Realm of Shadows only to return.

It just proved to him that he should never have left. It was where he belonged. And it was where he would stay.

He swallowed and lifted his head to the city below. His beautiful city, a city he had nearly destroyed, he would never see again.

Ahryn.

Lugus cursed and pushed away from the railing. No matter what he did he couldn't get her out of his head, and his body wanted only her after he had gotten a taste. Even now his desire for her outweighed everything.

A knock on the door thankfully brought him out of his thoughts. Lugus strode to the massive door and opened it to find Aimery before him.

"Has something happened to Rufina?" Lugus asked at Aimery's grim expression.

The Fae commander shook his head. "May I come in?"

Lugus stepped back and allowed his old friend to enter. "What is it? You usually hide your emotions well, yet it's plain to see something bothers you."

"I just fear for Theron and Rufina's life," he said as he slowly walked around the room.

Lugus shut the door and crossed his arms over his chest as he waited. He knew eventually Aimery would get to what he came for.

"Thank you for volunteering to go after Theron," Aimery said and turned to face Lugus.

Lugus shrugged. "He's my brother. Did you expect me to ignore that?"

"In truth, aye," he admitted. "Tane assured me that you would find Theron, but I had my doubts."

"You still have your doubts," Lugus said as he walked to the table near the balcony and poured two drinks. "I know what you and the rest of the Fae think of me, and I would never have returned if it wasn't for...."

"Ahryn," Aimery finished.

Lugus nodded and handed him a glass. "I want you to take her from here."

"I've already tried."

"Try harder," Lugus shouted. He closed his eyes and raked a hand down his face. When he opened his eyes again he was once more in control of his emotions. "Aimery, I'm asking you this as a friend. Do whatever you must, but get her away from here."

For several long moments he returned Aimery's stare as the commander locked gazes

with him.

“So, it’s true. You care for her.”

Lugus turned away and sighed. “Please. For the friendship we once shared, do this small thing for me. I beg you.”

“I will do my best,” he heard Aimery say from behind him.

Lugus let out a breath he hadn’t known he was holding and turned to Aimery. “Thank you.”

Aimery tilted his head back and drained the small glass before setting it down on the table. “Don’t make me regret this.”

Lugus watched as Aimery left his room. Once the doors shut behind him, Lugus sank into his chair and dropped his head into his hands.

He was relieved to know Aimery would take Ahryn away from the palace, but part of him fought against being separated from her. It was a war he knew he would fight for the rest of his life because as hard as it was to let her go, it would be worse still to watch her hurt because of him.

There was no other choice but to let her go.

He leaned back and dropped his head on the back of the chair. His thoughts turned to Theron and the Draconians who had dared to betray the Fae. A plan began to form as he thought of what he would do once he found Theron.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Aimery walked from Lugus' chamber and contemplated his words. His need to have Ahryn away from the palace was palpable. And it was obvious to anyone that cared to look as to why--Lugus cared for Ahryn. How deep his feelings went, Aimery didn't know.

He found Ahryn walking from Rufina's chambers a short time later. For a moment he almost didn't stop Ahryn she looked so pensive, as if she was contemplating something of great importance.

"Ahryn," he called softly.

Her fair head jerked his way, and she gave him a small smile. "Hello, Aimery. If you've come to ask about Rufina, I will tell you that she is resting as well as can be expected."

"Actually, I came to speak with you."

"Me?" she asked, her brow furrowed. "Why?"

Aimery sighed. "Walk with me," he bade as he clasped his hands behind his back and leisurely walked the halls of the palace. "How much do you know?"

"About what?"

"The king?"

She shrugged. "I know what I heard in the throne room when Tane spoke to Rufina."

"But do you know how dangerous everything is?"

She stopped walking and faced him. "What are you trying to say?"

"We've asked everyone to leave the palace, Ahryn."

Her blue eyes narrowed. "You want me to leave?"

"I do," Aimery said, happy that this was going as smoothly as he had hoped. "It would be for the best."

"And why is that? You need someone here to look after Rufina. It certainly won't be you since you and Tane will be aiding Lugus. Since, as you say, you've asked everyone to leave the palace, I'm all you have to look after the queen."

Aimery turned away and cursed. "Ahryn, please. You must leave."

Ahryn stared at Aimery's back for a long moment. Finally, she walked around to face him. "Lugus asked you to make me leave, didn't he?"

The small curt nod Aimery gave her was her only answer.

"Why?"

Aimery's eyes blazed as he looked to her. "He is trying to protect you. There is no guarantee that what we plan will happen."

"I'm not leaving him," she said and returned Aimery's stare. "Nothing he can say or do would make me leave him now. He's been alone for too long."

Aimery sighed and ran a hand down his face. "I promised him that I would have you leave."

"You did your best. Go see to your preparations. I must attend the queen."

She waited until Aimery walked away before she leaned against the wall and sighed. Her

heart had hammered wildly in her chest when Aimery had told her Lugus wanted to protect her. She knew there was something between them. She just needed to convince Lugus.

* * * *

Lugus woke a few hours later with a stiff neck and a need to visit the baths. He rose and opened a drawer in his large chest to find it still full of clothes. He couldn't believe Theron hadn't emptied the room, but he was glad for it. He quickly grabbed clothes and left his room.

As he walked down the long, quiet halls of the palace, memories of his childhood engulfed him. He could still see his mother's smiling face as she sat and watched him and Theron play. He recalled the pride on his father's face when he had mastered the sword. He even remembered the first girl he kissed.

The smile he wore soon vanished as he realized the life he'd had and thrown away because he couldn't control his temper. How many times had his mother cautioned him to think before he spoke, to give himself a few moments to calm down and not let his temper rule him? He had never listened to her, and he had paid dearly for it.

He found his feet following the hallway that ventured to the gallery, where all the kings and queens of their realm were painted. Lugus stopped in front of his parent's painting and leaned against the opposite wall.

"I'm sorry, Father," he whispered. "I miss you both terribly. Theron needs you. I need you," he said and lowered his head, unable to stare into his father's knowing blue eyes.

Lugus felt out of place in the hall. He was responsible for his father's death, and his mother's since she had died soon after because of what he had done. Then there were the other killings, the ones he had done to try and take over the Fae realm.

He took one more look at his parents and walked away, his heart heavy with grief. He never saw Aimery step from the shadows.

Lugus tried to keep his mind blank as he strode to the baths. He pushed open the tall double doors and gazed at the beauty before him.

The bath was long and wide, larger than any the Roman's tried to duplicate. The Roman's tried to take ownership of many things that weren't theirs, the baths being one of them. If a Fae hadn't shown them how to build the baths, they most likely would never have been.

Lugus stepped through the doors and closed them behind him. Movement to his left caught his attention, and he turned to find Tane pulling a tunic over his head, but not before Lugus saw the intricate tattoo of a dragon that covered Tane's entire back.

"My apologies," Lugus said. "I will return later."

"Nay," Tane said and turned to him as he reached for his boots. "I was just finishing. I will be but a moment."

Lugus nodded and walked to a bench on the other side of the bath. "This is your first time on our realm?"

"It is," he answered and pulled one boot on.

"Tell me, is it much different than yours?"

Tane paused in pulling on his other boot. "My realm is different in many ways, but there are also similarities. Take your bath for example. We have them as well, but instead of one large one, we have several smaller ones."

"Odd isn't it that two realms that never intermingle would have something in common?"

Tane smiled as he finished pulling on his boot and stood. "There isn't much that I find

odd nowadays, Lugus. Magic is a wonderful thing, but no one knows where it began or how.” He reached for his cloak and nodded to Lugus. “Enjoy your bath.”

* * * *

Tane paused outside the bath doors as he contemplated speaking to Lugus of his plans. The only problem was, that for the first time in decades, Tane didn’t know which outcome was for the best, and if he didn’t know that, then he shouldn’t speak to Lugus and try to change his mind.

There was time, but only a little of it left.

He sighed loudly and began the walk back to his room. He hadn’t gone far when he saw Ahryn coming towards him.

“It’s a lovely night, isn’t it?” she asked with a smile as she approached.

He nodded. “It is, although I miss my night sky.”

“Is it so different?”

Tane thought of Draconia’s three moons and smiled. “Very.”

“I would love to see it one day.”

Tane blinked. “I’m sure you will. Where are you headed?”

“To the baths.”

“I just came from there,” he said. He decided to omit the fact that Lugus now occupied them.

She smiled. “It’s wonderful, isn’t it?”

“Enjoy your bath, Ahryn,” he said and walked away. He smiled as he stepped into his room and thought of the surprise Lugus would get this night.

* * * *

Lugus waited until Tane left before he hurriedly stripped and stepped into the warm water. He had missed this solitude while on Earth. The tiny wooden tubs that he could barely fold himself into were disturbing, and he had quickly grown to hate them. He preferred the coldness of the sea where he could stretch his legs and feel as though he were once again in a Fae bath.

He glided through the heated water until he stood in the middle of the large bath, then he turned on his back and looked up through the glass ceiling to the stars overhead.

Suddenly, the quiet and solitude was broken by the sound of a door. Lugus jerked upright and looked to the double doors to find Ahryn standing there watching him. For several moments they simply stared at each other.

Lugus knew he should ask her to leave, but no matter how much he told himself that’s what he should do, it wasn’t what he wanted.

As he watched, Ahryn reached to her shoulder and loosened her gown. With a simple movement of her hips, her gown pooled at her feet. Lugus’ mouth went dry as he stared at Ahryn’s nude body, a body he had touched, tasted in what seemed a lifetime ago.

When she stepped into the water he found himself walking towards her, his heart beating wildly in his chest. He couldn’t have stayed away from her had his life depended upon it. He was drawn to her as the Fae were drawn to magic.

He stopped just short of reaching her, almost afraid to touch her.

“Lugus,” she whispered.

His name on her lips pulled at his soul, and when she reached out to touch him, his heart

leapt at the contact. He quit running from her then. It had been useless, and she had tried to tell him, but once again he hadn't listened.

He pulled her to him and wrapped his arms tight around her as he buried his face in her neck, inhaling the clean, fresh smell of her hair.

The feel of her soft body in his arms suddenly eased an ache in him he hadn't known was there. He pulled back and put his hands on either side of her face as he gazed into her mystical blue eyes.

"Don't ask me to leave," she begged.

Though her words were strong, there was doubt in her eyes. "Don't you dare leave," he said and lowered his head to her lips.

Each taste of her was new, exotic, and set his blood on fire. He wanted, nay needed, more of her, all of her. His hunger knew no bounds when it came to Ahryn and try as he might, he couldn't control it.

Ahryn's heart thundered in her chest as Lugus claimed her lips with his own. His kiss was terrifying in its intensity, but she also felt his loneliness and fear as well.

She wrapped her arms around his neck and buried her hands in his thick blonde hair as she opened herself to him. He had finally given in to her, and there was no way she was going to let him go.

The water swirled around them as Lugus pulled her legs around him. She felt his rod against her stomach and yearned to feel him inside of her. She tried to move her hips, but he held her steady as his kisses made her weak with desire.

She leaned her head back as his kisses trailed down her neck to her shoulders and chest. She felt the water move around her and opened her eyes to see Lugus moving toward the side of the bath.

Her body was a mass of quivering nerves, her veins filled with molten desire. His fingers skimmed across her shoulder blades and down her back to rest at her hips. She sighed as he pushed his rod against her sex.

A moan lodged in her throat as his hand moved to brush the underside of her breast, a breast already heavy with need and aching for his touch. She bit her lip as he continued to tease her breast with his touch while his lips nibbled and kissed her neck.

Her sex ached and pulsed each time his rod brushed against her, but that's all he would give her, that simple touch. She was near mindless from his teasing. When she decided to explore him, she found her wrists captured in one hand above her head. She opened her eyes to see him smiling down at her.

"Tonight I'm going to love you properly, Ahryn. Tonight is mine."

His words sent a thrill through her that landed with a thud at her sex.

She felt something at her back and recognized it as the side of the bath. Lugus had situated her between him and the bath as he continued to work his magic on her with his mouth.

With her head leaned back against the side, Ahryn moved her hips against his and was rewarded with a deep moan. She smiled and moved her hips again. He didn't stop her and she became bolder with her need.

When his hands moved to her hips, she assumed he would halt her, but he had other ideas. His fingers skimmed the inside of her thighs and near her center, but never touching her sex. Time and again he would move close to her sex, and just as she thought he would finally

touch her, his hand skittered away.

She moaned and attempted to rub her hips against his rod, but his hands stilled her. She thought she heard him chuckle just before his head bent and kiss the top of each breast. As she arched her back for him to accept her nipple, his head moved and only his chin grazed her sensitive nipple.

Her hands gripped his shoulders, silently begging him to relieve her of the teasing. His lips and tongue traced patterns on her breasts, always near her aching nipples, but never touching.

Her sex throbbed and her nipples hardened as desire spiked through her. She was mindless of anything but the raging need running through her.

A scream tore from her throat when Lugas' thumb rubbed across her sex. In the next heartbeat his other hand cupped her breast as he rolled her nipple between two fingers. While his fingers continued to tweak her nipples, his thumb worked its assault on her sex, rubbing across her nub with the lightest touch.

Ahryn was already half way to release before he touched her, and it only took a few strokes of his thumb over her sex to send her toward her climax.

Her body jerked as the orgasm claimed her, sending waves upon waves of pleasure over her with each stroke of Lugas' finger over her sex.

When she was finally able to open her eyes, she looked down to see him still rolling her nipple between his fingers. She raised her gaze to him and rubbed her hips against his.

"That wasn't exactly fair," she mumbled.

He smiled, a smile that transformed his face into magnificence. "Maybe not, but you enjoyed it."

Chapter Twenty-Three

Lugus' body burned to bury himself deep inside of Ahryn, but he held onto his thin thread of control with all his might. He would make this night last forever, for he would need it in the years to come.

As the last tremor went through her, Lugus gently picked Ahryn up out of the water and laid her on floor. He climbed out of the bath and picked her up to carry her to one of several settees tucked in the corners of the room.

Her finger traced down his neck to his shoulder. He glanced down into her eyes and saw them still glazed with passion, a passion he had ignited. She was the first thing he had done right, and he wanted to keep it that way.

When he reached the settee he laid her down and moved beside her. He didn't know how long they gazed into each other's eyes, he just knew he felt contentment, something he had never thought to experience again.

"What are you thinking?" she asked.

He didn't wish to break their mood, so kept his feelings to himself and said instead, "I'm thinking of all the different ways I want to make love to you."

She laughed and leaned up to kiss his shoulder. "You don't have to do it all tonight. We have years ahead of us, and I intend to see that you love me every night."

Lugus leaned down to kiss her instead of giving her the answer he knew she wanted.

As he explored her hot mouth, his body shook with need, a need that only Ahryn could satisfy. He didn't question why his body had connected with Ahryn. It was a part of life on their realm, but he knew there wasn't a future for them. Not now.

Not ever.

He trailed his mouth down her slender throat to nibble on the lobe of her ear. She moaned and ran her hands down his back, sending chills racing along his skin. Her touch drove him insane with desire and he didn't know how much longer he could hold off before he plunged inside her hot sheath.

Never had his need been so great, his desire ruling out everything. But with Ahryn, things had always been different.

"Lugus," she whispered in his ear as his mouth moved down to her breasts.

He lifted his gaze to her face as he cupped her breast and took her hard nipple in his mouth. As he swirled his tongue around her nipple and began to suck, her eyes rolled back and she dropped her head onto the pillow.

Lugus wanted this night to be special, something he could remember for the long nights ahead. He intended to memorize Ahryn's magnificent body, the feel of her breasts in his hands, the heat of her body as he filled her. Every fiber of his being would know Ahryn.

His hand continued to caress her full breasts while his mouth moved to her other nipple. Her hips rubbed against his chest as her pleasure rose, and his rod throbbed with desire.

Ahryn was surrounded by bliss. How many nights had she dreamed of Lugus claiming

her? How many times had she wondered if she would ever feel his body against hers again?

A moan escaped her lips as his mouth left her breasts and kissed down her stomach. His tongue lapped at her navel as her hands gripped his shoulders. Her sex throbbed and clenched, a bolt of desire sweeping through her.

His hands gripped her hips just before she was lifted off the settee and placed on his lap, her back to his chest. She longed for the feel of Lugus deep inside her, to have him fill her completely.

He began to kiss the back of her neck as his hands roamed over her breasts and stomach, barely grazing her sex. She tried to hold in a whimper when he pulled her back to lean against him and spread her legs so each one fell over one of his, exposing her to the cool air.

She shuddered, her mind wondering what new pleasure Lugus would give her next. She didn't have long to wait as his hands cupped her breasts and began to tweak her already sensitive nipples.

Just when she didn't think she could take any more, Lugus' hands moved down her stomach and over her hips to rest on her thighs. Her breath locked in her chest as she waited, yearning for him to touch her, to ease the ache within her.

Then, his fingers spread her folds, opening her fully. Ahryn moaned as his finger dipped into her center and spread her arousal over her sex. His thumb circled her pearl as his finger entered her, stroking her to new heights. He entered a second finger, stretching her.

"By the stars you're tight," he whispered as he nipped at her ear.

Ahryn shuddered and gripped his forearms as he pushed farther into her. She cried out, her climax building again. With just a touch Lugus could send her body soaring.

"Lugus," she moaned as she ground her hips against him.

Suddenly, his hand was gone. She started to turn around to face him when his hands gripped her hips and lifted her. That's when she felt the tip of his rod against her sex. Slowly, he guided her down his length only to stop.

"Nay," she cried and tried to move against him, but he held her still.

His face was pressed against her neck, his chest rising and falling rapidly. "Why didn't you tell me, Ahryn?"

Through her haze of desire she realized what he asked. "I never found anyone I wanted to share my body with, until you."

For several heartbeats Lugus didn't move then he kissed her neck softly. "This might hurt."

Ahryn knew it would hurt, but she also knew she had to have him fill her. All of him. She didn't wait on him but used her legs to lift herself up. He must have known what she was doing, because as she lowered herself, he shifted his hips and broke through her hymen.

The pain broke through her desire, but Ahryn's body was in such a state of need, that she hardly felt anything other than the fullness of Lugus as he filled her completely.

"I've waited for this, for you," she said as she turned her head and kissed him.

Lugus took her mouth and put as much passion and love into the kiss as he could, praying she felt the depth of his feelings for her. He had never been so humbled. It had never crossed his mind that Ahryn might be untouched. Most Fae experienced sex before they married. It was part of their culture, especially since Fae were very sensual creatures.

He gently rocked his hips and heard the breathy moan that left Ahryn's lips. His need for

her had only grown with each touch and taste of her until he shook with it. He broke the kiss and continued to move his hips until she rocked against him.

Then he allowed her to control the tempo. He closed his eyes and let himself explore the pleasure that poured through his body. It wasn't long until his jaw clenched as his orgasm threatened. He wasn't about to peak without taking Ahryn with him.

He moved his arms to encircle her. With one hand, he plucked at a nipple, and with the other, he found her pearl and rolled it between his fingers until she was panting and calling out his name.

She was so close, but Lugus didn't know if he could hold off much longer. Then, Ahryn's body jerked as her climax claimed her, and Lugus let himself go, pouring his seed deep inside her.

It seemed an eternity later that he opened his eyes to find himself lying back on the settee still deep inside Ahryn as she lay on his chest.

Lugus blinked as he realized what he had just shared with Ahryn. It had been glorious and unique, and he knew deep in the pit of his soul that he would never experience such wonders again with another woman. Ahryn was meant for him.

It was too bad he wasn't the right man to claim her.

* * * *

Lugus watched the sun rise over the horizon and embedded the memory in his mind. He glanced at the settee and Ahryn sleeping soundly. He had made love to her many times during the night and each time he found he wanted her more than the last.

His appetite for her was growing and he feared it could very well take over his life. If he tasted her sweet flesh or kissed her plump lips once more, he knew he could never leave her. And he cared about her too much for that.

Lugus jerked as if struck as he realized what he had just thought.

He cared of Ahryn, cared for her more than he had ever cared for another person. What he thought was love for Moira was nothing compared to his feelings for Ahryn.

And he knew she would do whatever it took to be by his side, which helped to make up his mind.

His eyes moved to the doors as they silently opened and he spotted Tane. He gave the Draconian a nod before he knelt beside Ahryn and traced her jaw with his finger.

Because he was too afraid of what would happen if he actually uttered the words, he mouthed, "I love you, Ahryn."

With one last look at her, he walked from the bath.

"Lugus?"

He ignored Tane's question and walked to the throne room. "Whatever questions you might have, keep them," he told the Draconian.

"You should have told her."

Lugus stopped and whirled around to face Tane. "Told who what?"

Tane crossed his arms over his chest and glared. "You know I speak of Ahryn. You should have told her you weren't planning on returning here."

Lugus quickly looked away lest the Draconian see how desperately he wished to cling to Ahryn and the feelings she stirred within him.

"You can return," Tane said.

Lugus looked to the throne room and Rufina sitting quietly on her throne. "I can't. There isn't forgiveness in the things I've done."

He hurried away from Tane before the Draconian said more or dug deeper. All Lugus had to hold onto was the night he and Ahryn had spent together and the knowledge that he was finally doing the right thing.

As his footsteps took him closer to his sister-in-law, he saw her fair head raise and hope shine in her blue depths.

"Today?" she asked, trying to hide the eagerness in her voice.

Lugus brought her hand to his lips and placed a light kiss on her knuckles. "Right now. I will return Theron to you," he promised and stepped away to see Aimery standing off to the left.

He didn't wait to see if Aimery had anything to say to him, he knew how the Fae commander felt. Lugus' gaze scanned the huge room until he spotted Tane leaning against a wall.

"I had a feeling you would want to do this today," Tane said as he pushed off the wall and walked to Lugus.

"Theron has been in the darkness long enough. I fear to wait too much longer."

Tane nodded. "What do you need?"

"Water," Lugus said. "As much water as I can carry."

Rufina licked her lips. "Aimery, please see to Lugus' request."

Lugus watched as Aimery left the throne room before he turned to Tane. "You have the look of someone who has something to say."

In the depths of his being, Lugus prayed Tane would not let it slip that he wasn't planning on returning with Theron. For long moments Tane returned his stare.

"I do," Tane said and walked toward him. "Have you not wondered how you were able to open the gateway to this realm?"

Lugus shrugged. "I haven't thought much about it."

"I'm amazed that no one has stepped forward with the reason," Tane continued. "I would have assumed that someone at the palace would have known the truth."

"What truth?" Rufina asked.

Tane visibly sighed. "Lugus, as soon as you were born, the markings were placed on your body."

Lugus looked down at his arms where the tattoos covered his skin. "Why?"

"You were heir to the kingdom," Tane replied. "Only upon your death would the markings transfer to Theron unless you had an heir."

Lugus ran a hand down his face. "No one ever explained to me what they were."

"I imagine your father had planned to impart all that knowledge to you at a certain time."

Lugus then recalled the many times his father had said as soon as he learned to control his temper he had many things to speak to him about. Lugus realized now that those "many things" were the tattoos and what each represented.

He swallowed and raised his gaze to Tane. "That's how I managed to escape the Realm of Shadows, isn't it?"

Tane nodded. "Each marking holds certain power, regardless of whether you are mortal or immortal. As long as you live, you will be able to open gateways."

"And what else?"

"I'm not sure," Tane said. "For you to once again leave the Realm of Shadows, you must touch this marking."

Lugus looked down to see Tane pointing to the horse tattoo on his right hand that ran from the middle of his forearm to his wrist with intricate knotwork intertwined with the horse.

He still stared at the marking when Aimery came to stand beside him with several water skins. Lugus took them from Aimery and draped them over his neck and through one arm.

He looked at Tane. "I'm ready."

Tane nodded and glanced at Rufina before returning his gaze to Lugus. "There's going to be some pain."

Lugus gritted his teeth. The pain he remembered vividly, but it was nothing compared to the endless darkness that would envelop him or the mind-numbing emptiness that stretched forever.

"I can handle the pain," he said as he stepped closer to Tane.

The Draconian's eyes held understanding, understanding Lugus didn't need--or want. The mere thought that someone might know what he had been through and would go through again shook his resolve.

* * * *

Ahryn woke slowly and smiled into the sunlight that streamed across her face. She stretched and felt her muscles moan in disapproval. Lugus had promised to love her last night, and he had, many times.

She turned to reach for him but found the settee empty. Her hand reached out and she felt the coolness of the fabric. She didn't think more of it, as she rolled onto her back and looked at the dawning sky through the windows.

Lugus had surprised her last night. Before he had always held a piece of himself back, but last eve, he had given her everything. He might not have said the words, but she knew in his actions and the way he made love to her that he loved her.

She had wondered at the sadness in his blue eyes as he had kissed her as if he might never see her again.

Ahryn gasped and jerked upright.

"Lugus, nay," she said and scrambled off the settee. She hastily grabbed a sheet and wrapped it around her as she ran toward the doors.

Her heart pounded in her chest as she urged her feet to move quicker. She couldn't believe Lugus would dare to leave for the Realm of Shadows without saying good-bye, but what hurt worse was that she knew he didn't plan to return.

She jerked open the door and lifted the bottom of the sheet as she lengthened her strides and ran to the throne room.

* * * *

Lugus nodded to Tane and watched as the Draconian clasped his hands together and closed his eyes. A heartbeat later, Tane extended his arms in front of him and opened his palms outward. Slowly, Tane moved his arms upward and then made a large circle with his arms.

The air around the throne room seemed to halt, and then with a whoosh the portal opened. Lugus stared at the abyss and wondered how he had come to be at the portal yet again. He had sworn never to return to the darkness.

"Lugus."

He turned his head to Rufina.

“Be careful.”

He swallowed and nodded. He inhaled deeply and started to move into the portal when Aimery’s hand on his arm stopped him.

Lugus met the Fae commander’s gaze and waited.

“I wish there was another way,” Aimery said.

“There isn’t. We all do what we must.” He looked at the abyss before he turned back to Aimery. “Take care of her for me.”

“Take care of....” Aimery trailed off as realization dawned.

Lugus clapped Tane on the shoulder. “Thank you.”

“Just find Theron.”

* * * *

Tears blinded Ahryn as she stumbled and nearly fell down the long hallway. It was as though something held her back from reaching Lugus in time. She had to see him, had to speak to him before he left to find Theron.

She swiped at the tears as she reached the throne room and pulled open the doors.

For a moment she couldn’t breathe as she stared at the great hole that took up nearly an entire wall. Then she saw Lugus and Tane standing in front of it.

“Nay,” she said but it only came out in a whisper. When Lugus took a step toward the portal she reached out her hand.

“Lugus! Nay,” she screamed.

* * * *

Lugus once more faced the yawning hole. He didn’t know how hard it would be to make himself enter it, and for a moment he feared he couldn’t.

Then he heard her. He closed his eyes and prayed for the courage he knew didn’t exist in his body. Despite what he knew he should do, he looked over his shoulder to see Ahryn staggering toward him, a sheet clutched around her body as tears coursed down her face.

The pain in her mystical blue eyes was nearly more than he could bear. Before he changed his mind, he stepped through the portal . . . with Ahryn screaming his name echoing around him.

* * * *

Ahryn collapsed onto the floor. She heard someone screaming Lugus’ name and only dimly realized it was her own voice.

Strong arms wrapped around her, but she wanted nothing to do with them. They didn’t belong to Lugus, but the more she tried to push them away, the harder they held on.

She didn’t have the strength to fight and buried her face in the shoulder as she let the tears fall.

“Don’t give up on him,” Tane whispered in her ear.

Ahryn raised her face to see it was Tane that held her. “You knew.”

It wasn’t a question.

He sighed, his copper eyes full of sadness and regret as he looked at her. “I did.”

“Will he come back?” Ahryn knew she shouldn’t ask, but she had to know.

“That’s up to him.”

The back of her eyes prickled with unshed tears at his words. “My love wasn’t strong

enough.”

She felt Tane’s arms tighten around her as he lifted her in his arms and stood.

“Your love had nothing to do with it,” Rufina said from beside her. “In all the time I have known Lugas, I’ve never seen him as protective of someone as he was of you.”

“Then why did he leave?” Ahryn asked, and didn’t miss the look that passed between Aimery, Rufina and Tane.

It was Aimery that finally answered. “Lugas hasn’t escaped his demons.”

Demons that Lugas hadn’t wanted to share with her. Demons that Rufina had asked her to leave alone until Lugas was ready to tell her. Demons she would never know about.

For she knew what they weren’t telling her.

Lugas wasn’t coming back.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Lugus gasped as the pain ripped through his body. He tried to wrap his arms around his abdomen but with the force of the portal wasn't able to do more than think about it.

Just when he thought he might be splintered in two, he landed with a bone jarring thud and the whooshing of the portal ceased.

If he had thought the pain was unbearable while still an immortal, it was near blinding as a mere man. He tried to roll over and groaned as agony radiated from every inch of his body. For several moments, he simply laid there and tried to forget the pain that consumed him.

When the pain had dimmed to a constant, dull ache, Lugus made himself open his eyes. Only blackness met his gaze, a never-ending sea of darkness with no hope of a shred of light or glimmer of happiness. He was stuck in the middle of his one true fear.

How many nights had he slept with a candle burning next to his bed? How many times had he shaken with terror when the night surrounded him?

He had sworn to never return, to never be without light again. And here he was, in the darkness.

Nothing survived on this realm for very long, and he knew his time was short. He couldn't wallow in self-pity, he had to find Theron.

Slowly and with great effort, Lugus gained his feet. The great emptiness he feared was already upon him, but he shoved it aside and took a staggering step.

"Theron," he bellowed. "Theron, I'm here. I've come for you. Rufina needs you. Theron? Theron!"

* * * *

Ahryn's body came alive as Lugus' hands moved over her skin. She stretched, arching her back so her breast was near his hand. A sigh escaped her when his hand cupped her breast and squeezed.

"Lugus," she whispered when his mouth closed over her aching nipple, sending desire spiraling through her to puddle at her sex.

She throbbed, needing to feel him inside her. Only he could quench the yearning, but she knew he would make her wait, bringing her past the point of want to a state of need that left her a massive of quivering nerves.

His fingers parted her nether lips, baring her to his gaze. Her sex clenched eagerly in anticipation. She moaned deep in her throat as his fingers dipped inside of her and then moved gently over her sex, skimming her button with the pad of one finger.

She cried out, begging for more. But he ignored her. His fingers continued their exploration of her sex, dipping deep into her and smearing her juices over her throbbing button. Her hands fisted in the covers as an intense wave of pleasure swept through her.

Somehow she raised her head and watched as he took his rod in his hand and brought it toward her. She spread her legs and bit her lip, impatient to feel his hardness, his heat.

Instead of filling her, he rubbed the head of his rod against her sex making her cry out.

She throbbed. She pulsed. She *needed*.

Excitement ripped through her as he pushed the tip of his rod inside her. She moved her hips to take more of him, but he held her still.

"Not yet," he whispered and gave her a smile that promised hours of pleasure.

Before she could beg him to fill her, his fingers closed over her button and squeezed while his other hand rolled a nipple between his thumb and forefinger.

With each caress, each squeeze, she was becoming mindless with desire. She had no idea how long Lugus teased her. Each time she came close to her climax, he would stop, and each time she cried out for him to relieve her.

He would ignore her cries, concentrating instead on bringing her body the most passionate pleasure she had ever felt.

While he thumbed her nipples and button, she felt him move within her. She arched her hips, silently begging for more of him. That simple move sent her over the top as she exploded in waves of pleasure.

Ahryn came awake, her body still tingling from her dream. She buried her head in the pillow as tears threatened again. It had only been a day without Lugus, but it felt more like a lifetime.

Even in sleep she sought him, but her dreams were more vivid, more heartbreaking. She rose from her bed and left her room to wander the palace.

Queen Rufina had refused to let her leave the palace, saying Ahryn needed them as much as they needed her as they waited for the arrival of Lugus and Theron.

Except she knew only Theron would return.

Her feet were silent as she walked the dark halls. To her surprise she found Tane standing in the moonlight in the throne room. She walked to him and saw his eyes closed. Deciding she wouldn't intrude, she moved to turn away.

"There is no need for you to leave," he said.

Ahryn turned around to find him looking at her. "Do you never sleep?"

He shrugged. "I sleep when my body needs it. What brings you here?"

"Nothing," she lied and turned to the balcony doors. "It's a beautiful night."

"It will take him awhile to find Theron. The darkness is like being blind."

She swallowed and licked her lips as she realized just how much Lugus hated the darkness. "He would wake every morn and watch the sun rise."

"He hates the darkness. The Realm of Shadows has not a shred of light. No sound can be heard other than the vast emptiness. Just a few moments on that realm will render a strong man insane."

"Oh, gods. I never understood until just now why he loved the sunrises so much."

"It takes great courage for a man to face his fears the way Lugus has," Tane said as he came to stand beside her.

"Lugus is a great man. He hasn't deserved the life he has endured."

Tane turned to face her. "He is a great man, but it is the trials he has endured that have made him the man he is today."

"Tell me what he did that he doesn't think he can be forgiven for?"

For long moments Tane was quiet.

"Nay. Lugus should be the one to tell you."

She sighed. "Everyone tells me that, yet Lugus won't speak of it."

"Do you give up on him so easily?"

She narrowed her gaze on Tane. "You know I haven't."

"How strong is your love for him?"

She turned her head away. "What kind of question is that?"

"One that Lugus asks himself. He fears what he will see in your eyes once you learn the truth of him."

Her gaze swung back to Tane. "How dare you. You know nothing of the depth of my feelings for Lugus."

"True," he conceded easily. "However, let us do a little test."

Ahryn all but rolled her eyes. She had come for solitude, to sit in the place she had last seen Lugus, but she knew that Tane wouldn't allow her to leave just yet. So, she would play along with his little game, for the moment.

"What test?"

He smiled, though it didn't reach his copper eyes. "Let's say Lugus stole. Would you still love him?"

"Aye."

"Would it matter why he stole?"

"What he did in his past doesn't matter," she said, already tired of the game.

"But it does," Tane replied softly.

Ahryn knew that somehow Tane was trying to tell her something. "All right. If it does matter, then I would want to hear from him why he stole."

"Let us say he stole to retrieve something that someone took from him, but while he was stealing, he knocked over a prized sculpture, one that no amount of coin can fix."

"Everything can be fixed," she said softly as she stared into copper eyes. "What did he do that cannot be fixed, Tane?"

Tane looked away and inhaled deeply. "You know he had to have done something terrible for Theron to strip him of his immortality. Have you not thought of what that could be?"

With one last parting look to her, Tane turned on his heel and left.

Long after Tane had abandoned her, Ahryn thought over his words. She thought of every awful thing Lugus could have done, and regardless of what it was, nothing dissuaded her from her love of him.

But would she ever be able to tell him that?

* * * *

Lugus had no idea how much time had passed. An hour? A day? A year?

Already the madness was creeping in on him, and he didn't have the strength to keep it at bay. His voice was hoarse from calling out to Theron repeatedly with no answer, and even the water he brought with him didn't soothe him.

For the most part, Lugus kept his eyes closed. He found that if he left them opened, he strained into the darkness and an ache would start at the base of his skull. Yet, every so often he would forget and open his eyes.

The frustration at not being able to see even an ounce of light, an outline of something was maddening. The silence stretched out like eternity, draining him of hope.

If he wasn't looking for Theron, he would lay down and allow the realm to take his soul,

ending the nightmare he called a life.

Then he thought of Ahryn. She was the only bright spot in life, the only thing that had given freely to him without demanding something in return.

He could never tell her that he loved her, could never subject her to the horrors he had done, or the vicious looks the Fae were sure to cast her way. Instead, he hoped his actions would tell her once she stopped hating him for leaving.

Despite his request to Aimery that he make Ahryn leave, he was grateful that he had at last one night with her. Her body had been more than he deserved, her cries and moans of pleasure would echo for an eternity in his mind.

She was the only beacon he had.

“Theron,” he tried to shout only to feel sharp needles of pain in his throat.

Lugus felt along his leg for the water container and lifted it to his lips. He only drank a few drops, leaving the rest for Theron when he found him.

The entire Fae kingdom was in his hands. It would be so easy for him to return and take over as rightful heir to the throne, but he couldn’t do that. Power no longer mattered to him.

Righting his wrongs did.

He stopped walking and slowly sank to the ground. He was so tired, his body felt weighted down, he could barely lift his hands.

“Theron,” he whispered as he laid back and closed his eyes. He told himself he would only rest a moment.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Lugus jerked awake and listened. He had sworn he had heard his name as if whispered on the wind.

“Lugus.”

There it was again, and it sounded like...Ahryn. He smiled as he slowly sat up. Her sweet voice was like music to his ears. He listened closer but heard only--silence.

His head dropped into his hands. He was going mad. Ahryn wasn't here, and she wasn't calling out to him. He was failing Theron, Rufina, and Ahryn.

He thought of the Draconian who had dared to betray Theron and the Fae. If Lugus didn't find Theron and return him, he knew it was just the beginning of what the Draconian's would do to the Fae.

Lugus gritted his teeth and pushed himself onto his knees. The pressure that held him down like a great weight pushed harder. But Lugus refused to give up. With Ahryn's shining mystical blue eyes in his mind's eye, he pushed himself up with a roar.

The weight didn't lesson, but it was enough that he was on his feet. He pushed aside the fear of the darkness and concentrated on Ahryn's beautiful face. If she was his beckon on Earth and the Fae realm, she would continue to guide him in the pit of darkness.

Lugus continued to put one foot in front of the other, periodically calling out to Theron. When the weight became too unbearable, Lugus braced his hands against his knees and tried to take in huge gulps of air. He feared if he sat or fell to the ground that he would never rise again.

“Ahryn,” he whispered. “I don't want to fail.”

“Lugus.”

His heart nearly stopped when he heard her voice. He raised up and opened his eyes, straining into the darkness.

“Ahryn?”

In the distance off to the right he heard his name again. Without hesitation, he followed her voice, praying it led him to Theron.

“Don't stop, Ahryn. Don't stop.”

* * * *

Ahryn sat in the middle of her bed with her legs crossed and tucked up beneath her. She had asked Tane to tell her what the Realm of Shadows was like and after hearing of the awful darkness and eerie silence, she knew she had to help Lugus somehow.

She didn't know if it would work and having never tried it herself, she wasn't sure she knew how to do it properly. But she was going to try.

Several years ago she had come upon an ancient text in her grandfather's library that spoke of Fae reaching out to others on different realms. It had stayed with her, and now she knew why.

She closed her eyes and cleared her mind of everything--save Lugus. Using all of her limited powers, she concentrated on Lugus. After several attempts she was about to give up with

a shiver down her spine alerted her that she might have found him.

Desolation, emptiness, and fear surrounded her, and she called out his name.

The emotions weakened, and she inhaled a deep breath. She had found him, now she had to find Theron and lead Lugus to him.

* * * *

Lugus followed the voice for what seemed like an eternity. He didn't know if he had finally gone mad or if Ahryn was somehow helping him.

Either way, he had no other options.

Suddenly the voice was gone, leaving him alone in the shadows once more. The anguish nearly drowned him.

"Ahryn, please," he begged, needing to hear her voice.

He took a step to the left, listening. Nothing. He took a step to the right and listened. Yet only emptiness reached his ears. He took a step forward and entangled his feet in something and fell flat on his face.

With a groan, Lugus turned onto his back. His face blazed with agony and his skull felt as though hundreds of tiny little men hammered away inside. He moved to sit up when his hand touched flesh.

His breath lodged in his throat as he reached forward and touched the fabric of a Fae.

"Theron," he whispered and searched for his brother's face.

He rolled Theron onto his back and found his breath shallow and his heartbeat slow.

"I'll return you home, brother," he said as he reached for the water.

Using one hand near Theron's lips and the other holding the water, Lugus slowly poured a little into his brother's mouth.

"Theron? Theron, wake up," he demanded as he patted his brother's face.

Using his hands as guides, he found Theron's shoulders and shook. But no amount of shaking woke his brother.

Lugus sat back on his heels as he realized his plan to stay in the Realm of Shadows as his own form of punishment was now out of his hands. If Theron couldn't wake up, he couldn't walk into the portal himself. He would have to be carried.

By Lugus.

Lugus' heart leapt at the idea of seeing and holding Ahryn again. He had no doubt that she would understand why he had gone without telling her. But what concerned him was that he knew it would be near impossible to leave her, and leave her he must. Regardless of what she said, he mustn't stay.

With a deep sigh, Lugus bent down and pulled Theron onto his shoulder. After he adjusted Theron, Lugus touched his tattoo of the horse to summon the portal.

It took several tries before he was actually able to find the tattoo on his forearm as he spoke the words. The whoosh as the portal opened and light poured in around him was a welcome relief. Even knowing he was about to experience blinding pain, he welcomed the light and sound.

His only thought as he stepped through the portal was Ahryn.

* * * *

Ahryn's head jerked off her grandfather's shoulder as the loud whoosh surrounded them as the portal opened. Out of the corner of her she saw Rufina, Aimery and Tane gather near her

as they waited for who would step through the doorway.

They didn't have long to wait.

Lugus came tumbling out of the doorway, holding Theron on his shoulders. She watched as Tane and Aimery tried to catch both Lugus and Theron. Aimery was able to catch hold of Theron as Lugus hit the floor with a bone-jarring thud.

She rushed to his side, tears of joy blinding her vision. Her hands touched his face and saw his eyes were closed and tight lines of pain around his mouth.

"Lugus?" she asked as she leaned close. She raised her gaze to see everyone surrounding Theron. Lugus had risked his life for their king, the least they could do was see if he was injured.

"Someone help," she yelled.

Tane quickly rose to his feet and moved to Lugus' other side. He ran his hands down his legs and arms as if looking for something. Ahryn didn't know what to make of it, but when Tane's expression grew grim, she knew it wasn't good.

"What is it?" she asked.

Copper eyes rose to hers. "He has a broken leg, and I think his ribs might be bruised or even fractured."

"Then someone needs to fix him," she said as anger began to boil within her. She turned her head and watched as Theron was carried out of the chamber, Rufina and Aimery rushing behind him.

Ahryn brushed aside tears that wouldn't cease as she turned back to Tane. "Fix him," she demanded.

Tane glanced away. "His injuries aren't severe, Ahryn. He can wait. I must see to your king."

"Nay," she said and grabbed hold of Tane's arm. "Theron has many who will see to him. I need you. Lugus needs you."

For a tense moment, she was afraid she would be left alone with Lugus, then Tane gave a quick nod.

"All right. I will help you," he said. "First, we need to get him to his chamber."

"I'll see to that," Aimery said as he strode up. He looked at Ahryn. "We didn't forget about him."

She wasn't going to argue the point, not when they were helping now. It took several of the guards to lift Lugus and when he moaned as they shifted him, Ahryn winced, wishing she could take away his pain.

"Ahryn," her grandfather said from beside her.

She tried to give him a smile. "He's returned. I must see to him."

"I'll see to your parents," her grandfather said as he turned and left the throne room.

Ahryn rushed after Lugus, anxious to be near him. When they reached his room, she held open the door and hurried to his bedside as the guards lowered him.

"I see a bruise on his face," Aimery said as he came to stand beside Ahryn.

Tane nodded. "A bruise, fractured ribs, and a broken leg that I've noted so far."

"Anything more serious?" Aimery questioned.

"I won't know until after I see to him."

Aimery looked down at Lugus before he said, "Tend to Lugus. If we need you, I will

send for you.”

Ahryn waited until Aimery left before she reached for Lugas’ hand. “He looks to be in pain.”

“That’s because he is. You, having only been immortal, don’t know the depths of pain that mortal men can reach.”

She swallowed and gently moved aside a lock of blonde hair that fell over his forehead. “Can you stop the pain?”

Tane nodded and turned to speak to the guards. Ahryn didn’t care what he asked for as long as it helped Lugas. She couldn’t believe Lugas had returned, but she wouldn’t question her fortune. The fact that he was alive and she was holding him was enough.

“Lugas,” she whispered just before she placed a soft kiss on his lips.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Lugus felt the gentle caress on his cheek and turned towards it. As he began to wake, pain crept its gnarled fingers along his body.

He tried to take a deep breath and paid dearly, a vicious slice of pain that wracked him.

"Be still," someone whispered in his ear.

He knew that voice. Ahryn. Slowly, he opened his eyes to find her smiling down at him.

"How do you feel?"

He opened his mouth but thought better of speaking and gave her a small grunt instead.

"Tane has been healing you all day. Does your leg hurt?"

Lugus moved his right leg and felt no pain, but when he moved his left leg he felt a dull ache, as though a bone had been healed. He raised his eyes to Ahryn.

"Your leg was broke. It must have happened when you fell out of the gateway."

Lugus swallowed and felt a twinge on his right cheek. Dimly he remembered tripping over Theron and landing on his face, but he hadn't thought he had hurt it that bad.

"I see you're awake," Tane said as he stepped next to the bed. "How do you feel?"

Lugus closed his eyes and wished he could go back to sleep. His throat felt like a ball of needles had lodged itself, he could barely take a breath without feeling pain, his face hurt and there was a dull but constant ache in his leg. The last thing he wanted to do was talk.

"I suppose that means you've felt better," Tane responded sarcastically.

If Lugus had felt up to it, he might have rolled his eyes. Instead, he opened his eyes and found Tane studying him.

"As I'm sure you already know, you have some injuries," Tane explained. "You had a broken leg that I managed to heal as best I could. You will still have some pain there for a few weeks as the bone fully heals, but you will be able to walk on it by the end of the day."

Lugus gave him a silent nod of thanks.

"Somehow your face became scraped. I applied an ointment to it a few hours ago which will deaden the pain and speed the healing. There will be no permanent scars. As for your last injury, your ribs are either bruised or fractured. I didn't feel any broken though."

Lugus reached over and touched Tane's arm in thanks. He hadn't expected anyone to see to him and the fact that Tane had helped showed Lugus what kind of man the Draconian was.

"You're welcome," Tane said. "Do you have any other injuries I don't know about?"

Lugus nodded and touched his throat.

"Ah," Tane replied and quickly turned his back to them as he busied himself at a table.

Lugus felt Ahryn's eyes on him, and for once since he'd awoken, he was glad he couldn't speak. He knew she wanted answers, he could see it in her mystical blue eyes. But she held her tongue.

"I'm glad you're back," she whispered as she kissed his uninjured cheek.

He looped his fingers through hers and gave a gentle squeeze. Already he could feel his resolve slipping to leave and he had only just returned. Being near her made him think there just

might be hope for him.

Tane lowered a goblet in front of him. "Drink this," he said.

With Ahryn and Tane both helping him lift his head, Lugus was able to get all of the sweet tasting water down. Almost immediately the pain left his throat.

"What did you do?" he asked.

Tane simply smiled and shrugged his shoulder. "The Fae aren't the only ones with special healing skills."

"Is Theron...?" Lugus couldn't even bring himself to ask.

Ahryn nodded. "Theron is being seen to."

"Has he woken?"

Lugus watched as Ahryn raised her head to Tane. Tane sighed and went back to the table.

"He will," Lugus said. He knew the healing skills of the Fae. He might have returned Theron, but the Fae would bring back the man.

"Let's see to you now," Tane said and lifted the sheet from Lugus' torso. "This might hurt a little."

Lugus squeezed his eyes closed as Tane's hands touched the injured ribs. Every breath that left his body was like a dagger in his lungs.

"Easy," Tane said softly.

"He's nearly done," Ahryn whispered in his ear and splayed her fingers in his hair.

Her fingers gently rubbed his scalp, helping to ease the anguish. Slowly, Lugus relaxed and as he did, he found it easier to breathe.

"In a few days you will feel no pain in your ribs. There was just bruising and I healed them."

Lugus peeled open his eyes as sleep called to him. "I don't know how to thank you."

"Aye, you do."

Lugus wanted to ask what Tane meant, but his eyes wouldn't open and sleep began to pull him under.

"What did you do?" Ahryn asked as she looked at Lugus.

Tane sighed. "He needs to rest. To fully heal he needs to sleep and with everything going on, I knew he would struggle against it. I just made sure he couldn't fight it."

Ahryn gazed at Lugus so peaceful in his sleep. She had wanted to be near him when he woke, and after long hours of him never stirring it brought tears to her eyes when he finally looked at her.

"You need to rest yourself," Tane said softly.

"I won't leave him." She would never leave him.

Tane came down on his haunches beside her chair and touched her shoulder. "Ahryn, you are as exhausted as Lugus. He is healing and once he wakes he will be nearly back to normal."

"Then what?" she asked and turned to look deep into his copper eyes. "What lies ahead for us, Tane? I know you see it."

Tane bowed his head and sighed deeply. "If it was that easy I would tell you, but it isn't. Your grandfather waits for you even now, Ahryn. Go to him."

Ahryn didn't wish to leave Lugus, but she knew with Tane in his chamber all would be

well. She wouldn't admit to anyone else but herself that she was afraid he would leave again. If she could only talk to him, let him know that no matter what he had done in the past, she would love him for eternity.

"All right," she said and released Lugas' hand. "You will watch over him?"

Tane nodded.

With one last look at Lugas, she walked from the room and into her grandfather's arms.

* * *

Tane released his breath as Ahryn closed the door behind her. He sank onto the chair she had just vacated and looked to Lugas.

"I don't envy you the road ahead, my friend," he said.

Despite what he had originally thought, he had come to think of Lugas and Ahryn as friends. Lugas was a good man, and he didn't know if their roles had been reversed if he could have controlled the power Lugas had once held.

Power in the strongest of men had a way of turning their hearts black, yet it hadn't touched Lugas. Instead, he had come out stronger than before.

It was the reason Tane knew Lugas was just the man he needed.

He rose and began to pack the herbs he had requested from the Fae. He was more than a bit surprised that Aimery hadn't come to check on Lugas, since Lugas was the rightful king of the Fae no matter if he was mortal or not.

Tane chuckled when he happened to get a glimpse of Aimery's future, which would not be as orderly as the Fae commander wanted.

"Oh, how the mighty do crumble at the feet of love," Tane mumbled.

Once the table was cleaned, he turned to the balcony and looked out over the gleaming city. It was a beautiful city, but not even its beauty could dim his longing to return to Draconian. And return he must. A traitor had to be found before he wrought more damage.

Tane glanced at Lugas. Already the cuts on his face were healing, leaving only pink skin that would soon fade as well. His gaze found the tattoos on Lugas' arms.

How had Lugas not known the significance of the special marks and how they would rule his life regardless of where he made his home?

The gentle flap of wings startled him out of his thoughts, and as he turned to the opened balcony he spotted the small brown dragon just before it perched on the railing.

Tane smiled and walked to the dragon. "What brings you here?" he asked.

The small dragon cocked his oblong head to the side as he regarded Tane with copper eyes. He tucked his wings against him and laid his spiked tail over the railing. The dragon had two horns on his forehead that twisted outward and several tiny rows of spikes on his back.

"Ah, you're a pretty one," Tane cooed.

The dragon blinked and then held out his front paw. Without hesitation Tane reached out as the dragon dropped a gold coin in his hand. Tane looked at the coin to see two intertwining black dragons. It was from his brethren.

When Tane raised his head to thank the dragon, he had already flown away.

"Thank you, my friend," he whispered into the wind before turning back to the coin.

He walked into Lugas' room and closed the balcony doors. Only then did he grip the coin between two fingers and hold it before him.

At once a bright light poured from the coin and a miniature figure became visible. Tane

was startled to see Viggo before him. A gnawing fear began in the pit of Tane's stomach. Only in the direst of circumstances would Viggo send out a message that might be intercepted.

"I hope this finds you quickly, Tane," Viggo said softly as if someone might hear him as his recorded message began. "Finish your mission and return. Draconia needs you. Our king needs you."

And just as suddenly as the message appeared, it vanished. Tane leaned back in the chair and rested his head against the back. There was no way around it, he had to return. Immediately.

He glanced at Lugus to see his face nearly healed and his breathing even. As much as he needed to be here to help Lugus down his path, Draconia and his king needed him more.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

No matter how hard Ahryn tried, she couldn't rest. She had pretended to sleep as her grandfather watched over her, but now she was growing tired of the charade. She wanted to be with Lugas.

"You can stop pretending now."

She should have known she wouldn't fool her grandfather. Ahryn rolled over and sat up to find her grandfather sitting with his arms crossed, his blonde hair long and held away from his face by braids.

"Even as a little girl you weren't able to fool me, Ahryn. Why try now?" he asked, sadness darkening his blue eyes.

Ahryn sighed. "I don't know."

"You will be with Lugas shortly but you need to rest. You will not do him, nor yourself, any good by becoming exhausted."

There was something in his voice, something that alerted Ahryn that something was going to happen.

"What are you keeping from me?" she asked hesitantly.

Michyl averted his gaze and uncrossed his arms. "I had no choice, Ahryn. You don't know what Lugas has done in the past."

"I know what type of man he is now, Grandfather." As she stared at the man before her, the man she had trusted with her heart, she realized what he had done. "You sent for my parents."

He nodded slowly.

"It doesn't matter," she said as she threw back the covers and slid from the bed. "I'm not leaving Lugas."

With one last look at her grandfather, she walked from her chamber.

* * * *

No matter how Rufina had prayed or the amount of magic used, Theron wouldn't wake. Many hours they had stood over Theron, pooling their powers together in the hopes he would revive.

She had asked for constant updates about Lugas' condition, and though she wanted to go to her brother-in-law and thank him for returning her husband, she couldn't leave Theron. Not until he awoke.

"My queen, you must eat," Aimery said as he held a platter of food for her.

She reached over and plucked a piece of fruit from the tray but didn't taste it as she chewed. Finally, when she could stand the crowded room no more, she stood.

"Everyone, thank you for your efforts, but I need you to leave now."

"But, Rufina," Aimery started.

She halted him with her hand. Once the others had left, she turned to her commander. "Check on Lugas again. Give Tane anything he needs to speed Lugas' recovery."

Aimery nodded and turned to leave.

"Also," she said, stopping him. "See about Ahryn. She and Lugus are going to need some privacy and I want to make sure they have it."

"Even if Michyl and her parents disapprove?"

She raised a brow. "Am I queen for nothing? This is my palace, Aimery, and they will remember that. As long as Ahryn stays here, she is under my protection."

"Does your protection also reach to Lugus?"

She stared at Aimery, trying to discern what he was referring to. "Others know he is here?"

Aimery nodded. "They are more concerned about his presence than Tane's."

"If anyone harms Lugus, I will banish them." She trembled with rage at how callous her people could act. Didn't they realize that people could change?

"I will spread the word," Aimery said then turned on his heel and walked from the chamber.

When the door clicked behind Aimery, Rufina sank onto her chair and lifted Theron's hand in hers.

"I'm at a loss, Theron, and you know that rarely happens. I don't know what else to do to bring you back. It seems all the magic in the Fae realm cannot wake you. Don't you want to come back to me? To our child?"

She sighed loudly and dropped her head onto her hands.

"Our people need you, my love. I need you. I cannot do this alone."

"You could do anything," came a hoarse reply.

Rufina's head jerked up to look at Theron, but his eyes remained closed. Had she simply imagined her husband had spoken?

"Rufina?"

She knew she heard it that time. She rose up and leaned close to Theron.

"My love? I'm here. Come to me."

Slowly, Theron's eyes opened, his once bright blue eyes now dulled and nearly lifeless.

But Rufina didn't care. She smiled through her tears and kissed his cheek. "I knew you would come back to me."

"Wh...what happened?"

"I'll tell you everything later. Right now you must get better. Sleep, my love, and regain your strength."

When his eyes closed and his breath evened into sleep, Rufina sat back in the chair and wiped the tears from her eyes. Now that Theron had woken, she felt the iron claw around her heart loosen.

She rose and went to the door to proclaim the good news. Soon the quiet palace was abuzz with Theron's wakening. Rufina hurried to Lugus' chamber to tell him.

Without knocking, she opened the door and found Tane staring off into the distance as if he were deep in thought. Her gaze moved to the bed to find Lugus sleeping.

"Tane?" she whispered as she stepped into the chamber.

He jerked and rose to his feet. "Rufina."

"How is he?" she asked though she could tell by Lugus' face that he was healed.

Tane nodded. "He is all but healed. He slumbers in a healing sleep, though I suspect he

will wake soon.”

“I know his mortality slowed the process.”

“It did a little, but I was able to work through that.”

Rufina smiled. “You’re skills are very good then. I understand you didn’t require any aid from us.”

“You praise me too highly. Lugus’ wounds were not that severe.”

She waved away his words. “Tell me, will he completely recover?”

“Because of his mortality, he will walk with some pain for a few weeks before the bone fully heals in his leg. Since his ribs were only bruised, he should be fine by the end of the day.”

“Excellent. I don’t know how to thank you for...everything.”

She watched as his gaze shifted away for a moment before returning to her. “I ask but for one small favor.”

“Name it.”

“Lugus has his destiny still before him. He needs to reach for it. Many things depend on Lugus fulfilling his destiny.”

Curiosity got the better of Rufina. “What is his destiny?”

Tane smiled and shook his head. “That I cannot tell you.”

“Why is it I get the feeling you are about to leave us?”

“Because I am. Draconia needs me.”

She nodded as she understood. “Know that you are welcome in our realm any time. I would like for you to visit soon so Theron may thank you personally.”

“The thanks goes to Lugus.”

“It goes to both of you.”

Tane bowed his head. “As you wish.”

She watched as Tane walked to the door. “If you ever need us, you need simply ask, Tane. We owe you a very large debt that I fear will never be repaid.”

Tane gave her a smile then slipped out the door.

“He is a good man.”

Rufina’s gaze swung to the bed to find Lugus watching her. “That he is. I fear we won’t ever see him again.”

“Oh, I think we will,” Lugus said as he sat up and swung his legs over the side of the bed, careful to keep the sheet from showing his nudity.

Rufina walked to the bed. “How do you feel?”

“Like I’ve been dragged behind a horde of dragons.”

She smiled, but she saw the pain in his eyes nonetheless. Not pain from wounds, but pain from his soul. “I cannot imagine what it was like to return to that place, Lugus. Mere words of thanks don’t seem enough.”

“But they will do nicely. I ask for nothing. I did it for my brother.”

She sat beside him and laid her head on his shoulder. “Theron has woken.”

Lugus sighed and closed his eyes. “Thank the stars,” he whispered.

“You hadn’t planned on returning.”

It wasn’t a question and he knew it, yet he felt like he had to answer her.

“I didn’t, but I had no other choice when I found Theron unconscious.”

“How did you find him?” she asked as she raised her head and looked at him. “Tane told

us the realm was as black as the Death Dragons and as silent as a tomb.”

“It is all that and more. I’m not sure how I found him. I wandered for hours until I heard a voice,” he said as he remembered the sweet sound of Ahryn calling out to him.

“A voice?” she repeated. “Who’s voice?”

“Ahryn’s,” he said with a soft laugh. “I know it was most likely my imagination. That realm will make you go daft in a matter of moments.”

“Yet, you found Theron?”

“Tripped over him actually,” he said and touched his cheek that was now fully healed.

“Interesting,” she said then rose to her feet. “I’ll expect you to come see Theron.”

Lugus looked away from her. That he couldn’t do. It was better if he left before then. “Aye,” he lied and watched her walk from the chamber.

He looked around for his clothes but they were no where to be found. Hesitantly, he stood and found his leg only ached a little and if he took slow, shallow breaths, his ribs didn’t hurt.

Upon reaching his wardrobe without incident, he opened the door and reached for some clothes. He didn’t like wearing the clothes that signified him royalty. Just when he thought he would have to wear them, he caught a glimpse of something dark among the white and silver.

He tossed aside the white tunic he had held and pushed aside the other clothes until he found the leather trousers and black tunic. With a smile he pulled on the clothes. He wasn’t surprised to find his boots next. He pulled on the comfortable leather boots and issued a sigh at feeling more...himself.

First, he would find something to eat then he would find Ahryn. He hadn’t yet decided what he would do regarding what was between them. There was so much he wanted to say, but it was unfair to do anything until she knew the truth of him.

Maybe it was time he told her. Everything. Even if she did hate him afterwards, at least he would know he had done the right thing and had given everything.

Peace suddenly filled him. He chuckled and strode to the door, suddenly anxious to find Ahryn.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Ahryn walked the halls of the palace, deep in thought. Her grandfather's words rang in her mind, and with the imminent arrival of her parents, she knew she had precious little time to speak to Lugus alone.

It still didn't matter to her what he had done. Even if he had been the one that nearly destroyed *Caer Rhoemyr*, he wasn't the same man and she would gladly place her life in his hands. She just needed to tell him that.

Then they could decide what was right for them. She knew if she didn't have a chance to speak to Lugus before her parents arrived, she never would. Her parents still treated her like a child.

"Maybe its time I stopped letting them," she whispered.

It was time she stopped complaining about how her parents treated her and did something about it. She smiled at her decision, knowing it had been Lugus' influence on her that had changed her into what she was.

Her feet hurried as she turned and walked to Lugus' chamber. By the time she reached it, she was nearly giddy with excitement.

Which made her disappointment all the worse when she found the room empty.

"I think he's feeling much better."

Ahryn spun around to find Rufina behind her. "My queen. I didn't hear you approach."

Rufina gave her a knowing smile. "That is obvious. I'd like to speak with you a moment if you please."

Ahryn glanced at Lugus' bed. She would have to wait to find him, but find him she would.

"Aye, my queen."

"Good," Rufina said. "Come with me."

Ahryn didn't know why Rufina took her to the small chamber off of the king and queen's private quarters. It felt more like an interrogation coming.

"Have a seat," Rufina said as they passed one of the many chairs.

Ahryn sank into one and waited.

She didn't have long to wait.

"Tell me, Ahryn, how much do you love Lugus?"

Ahryn blinked. "I love him so much that I would give up my immortality to be with him."

"That much, aye," Rufina said, her face devoid of expression.

"Aye."

"Without knowing what demons haunt him?"

Ahryn nodded. "It doesn't matter what he has done in the past. I know what kind of man he is now."

"One more question," Rufina said. "Did you somehow manage to link yourself to him

while he was in the Realm of Shadows?"

Ahryn swallowed. "I did. I knew he would need help and I sought to give him that."

Rufina suddenly smiled. "You'll be quite happy with Lugus. He is a good man, Ahryn, despite what some think of him."

"I know," Ahryn said, a smile on her face as well. "I went to his chamber to tell him of my love and that I don't care what he has done in the past. I will help him release his demons. We can do it together."

Rufina stood then and patted Ahryn's shoulder. "Wait in the throne room. I'll find Lugus and send him there. Oh, and Ahryn. Don't worry about your parents. I've kept them away and I will continue to do so until you and Lugus have had a chance to talk."

Ahryn hugged herself and gave a prayer of thanks before hurrying to the throne room.

She walked aimlessly around the massive room as her mind raced with everything she wished to say to Lugus. She went over every possible outcome and her reaction to each, just so she could be prepared for any eventuality.

When the door opened, she jumped and turned expecting to find Lugus but found Theron instead. He was leaning against the door as if it had taken every ounce of his strength just to open it.

She hurried to her king and slipped her arm around his waist to help support him.

"I don't think you were supposed to be out of bed yet. Queen Rufina will have your head if you hurt yourself."

He smiled, though his mouth was pinched with fatigue. "I'm fine, Ahryn, just incredibly weak. I've never felt this before, and I will be perfectly content to never feel it again."

She helped him into his throne and made sure he was comfortable before she stepped back. "Can I get you anything?"

"Nay," he said, his eyes closed as he leaned his head against the back of the throne. "I had felt fine when I awoke and thought I would go looking for my wife, but it was only a few steps away from the bed that I realized my mistake."

Ahryn chuckled. "I'll find someone to get you back to your chamber."

"Not yet," he said. "I'm comfortable for now."

"All right," she said and glanced at the doors.

"You act as though you are waiting on something, or someone," he said, one eye cracked open.

Ahryn threaded her hands together and faced her king. "I am."

"Who is the lucky suitor? Is Michyl pleased?"

She shrugged. "I'm not sure what my grandfather thinks."

"And the suitor?"

"Lugus."

Theron's eyes snapped open. "My brother Lugus?"

Ahryn nodded, barely able to contain the shudder that ran down her spine at the look on Theron's face.

"I forbid it. You are not to even speak to him. He isn't worthy of you."

"I think I'm the only one that can decide who is or isn't worthy of me," Ahryn retorted. "My king."

"If you won't listen to my advice, maybe the truth of what he is will change your mind."

Ahryn opened her mouth to stop him. She didn't want to hear Lugus' deeds from Theron. Now she understood when Rufina had told her to let Lugus speak first.

"He might have been wrongly accused of killing our father," he began."

"Might have been?" Ahryn asked outraged. "He was, and wrongly imprisoned as well. You were in that realm for a mere few days. He was there for millennia and survived."

Theron sliced his hand in front of him for her silence. "I'm not through," he ground out.

Ahryn stared at him, not understanding the hate Theron felt for the man that had saved his life.

"It was vengeance that kept Lugus alive those millennia, Ahryn, and when he was able to free himself, he had more power than anyone in any realm. He set out to take over this realm and Earth."

"This realm was rightly his," she said hastily.

"It doesn't clear him of what he did. Not only did he trap the entire Fae realm under his control, but he released the Death Dragons which nearly destroyed this city."

Lugus had just stepped into the throne room as he heard his brother's bellow. When Rufina had found him and told him that Ahryn waited for him, Lugus had nearly ran the distance. Now, as he waited for his brother to continue he felt a knot of dread in the pit of his stomach.

He stood rooted to the spot as Theron continued down his long list of crimes.

"He is a murderer, Ahryn."

Lugus closed his eyes and sighed. Ahryn was well and truly lost to him now, which was more than likely for the best. He stepped into the throne room then and waited until both Ahryn and Theron noticed him.

"There you have it, Ahryn. All of my crimes. Everything that I had tried desperately to keep from you, the very reason I left with no intention of ever returning."

Before Ahryn could respond, Theron's voice boomed around them.

"How dare you enter this palace! You were banished from this realm, and there is no reason for you to have returned. Leave now before I throw you back into the Realm of Shadows."

Lugus stared at his brother and wished with all his heart that he could apologize to Theron, but an apology wasn't enough. Nothing he did would ever make up for the destruction he had wrought.

Theron was right. It was time for him to leave. Lugus didn't bother looking at Ahryn as he turned to leave. He couldn't stand to find the hate shining in her beautiful mystical blue eyes, not after everything they had shared.

He hurried from the throne room, feeling suddenly as if his heart was dying. But leaving the palace wasn't enough. He had to get farther away.

Lugus waited until he was clear of everyone then touched one of his tattoos. He had no idea where he was going, but then again, it really didn't matter anymore.

* * * *

Ahryn stared aghast at her king. "What have you done?" she cried and tried to chase after Lugus.

"Stop her," Theron bellowed.

And before Ahryn could leave the throne room, two guards had a hold of her.

“You have no idea what you have just done. Do you even care what he risked to help you?”

Theron laughed. “Help me? Lugus has only helped himself.”

“Not true,” Rufina said as she strode into the throne room. “Theron, what is going on?” she asked when she saw Ahryn being held.

“She’s trying to leave to follow Lugus. I’ve stopped her. She doesn’t belong with him.”

“Aye, she does. Tell me you didn’t do what I think you’ve done.”

Theron leaned back and regarded his wife. “I’ve just returned from near death, Rufina. What is it that you think I’ve done?”

“Interfered where you had no right,” she said. “And the only reason you’re back from near death, dear husband, is because Lugus risked his own life to go into the Realm of Shadows to find you.” Her voice shook with anger.

Theron’s face fell. “You mean he came after me in hopes that we would restore his immortality?”

Ahryn watched as Rufina shook her head.

“Then why did he come after me?” Theron asked.

“Because we asked him to,” Ahryn replied when Rufina didn’t.

Theron closed his eyes and ran a hand down his face. “By the stars what have I done, Rufina?”

“Where did he go?” Ahryn asked, impatient to wait for Theron.

Rufina and Theron raised their gazes to her. “I don’t know,” Theron answered. “But I have to find him.”

“Nay,” Ahryn said and jerked her arms out of the guards’ grasp. “I will find him.”

She turned to leave the throne room when Theron bellowed for her to stop. Ahryn sighed and turned back to her king. He had risen, and with the help of Rufina, was slowly walking towards her.

“You’re going to need help,” Theron said. “He could be anywhere on this realm.”

“I don’t think he is on this realm,” Rufina said.

Theron’s gaze turned to her. “What?”

“There hasn’t been time to tell you everything, my love,” Rufina said softly. “But there is so much you don’t know. Lugus risked his life to bring Ahryn here who had been trapped on the Earth realm, then risked his life again to save you. He intended to stay in the Realm of Shadows, but you were unconscious and so he had to carry you home.”

“I don’t understand,” Theron mumbled. “How is it that Ahryn was trapped?”

Ahryn stepped closer. “A mortal bound me to him with an ancient Celtic Slave bracelet. It prevented me from using basically all of my Fae powers, and that included opening the doorway. It was Lugus who opened it.”

“How?” Theron repeated and looked between Ahryn and Rufina.

“His tattoos, my love. They are special, and from what I’ve found out, they were given to him because he was heir to this throne.”

“We’ve got to find him,” Theron said. “I’ve....” He turned beseeching eyes to Ahryn. “Forgive me, Ahryn. There is no excuse for what I’ve done.”

Ahryn shook her head. “Just let me leave to find him.”

“I will as soon as I find Aimery. I’ll send him with you.”

“Nay,” Ahryn said more harshly than she intended. “I reached Lugus before. I’ll do it again,” she said and left the throne room.

“What do you suppose she meant?” Theron asked Rufina.

Rufina smiled as she turned and walked Theron back to their quarters. “She linked to him while he was searching for you.”

“What?” he asked, disbelief widening his eyes.

“I know. I was just as surprised. I don’t think she knows how rare it is that she has that link to Lugus.”

“She loves him.”

“Very much,” Rufina said.

Theron stopped and turned to his wife. “I cannot believe I acted such the fool.”

Rufina touched his face and smiled. “He’ll forgive you, my love. He isn’t the man you once knew. Your parents would be proud of what he’s become.”

Theron sighed. “He belongs here. We must bring him back.”

“Well, Tane said he had a destiny to fulfill.”

“Tane?” Theron had nearly had enough surprises for the day, but he realized he was probably in for more. “Who is Tane?”

“I’ll tell you all about him as we take a bath and give you a tongue lashing for what you nearly did to Ahryn and Lugus.”

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Lugus stepped out of the doorway and found himself gazing at three moons. He blinked. Three moons stared back him.

“Astonishing,” he said as he looked around him.

The realm was in darkness, but amazingly, the darkness didn’t frighten him as it used to. With the moons shedding their light upon the land, he let his eyes rove over the tall mountains, thick forests and dark beauty.

A sound he thought never to hear again reached him. “Dragons,” he whispered as he raised his head to the sky and found the dark shape of a massive dragon circling above him.

“This I didn’t expect,” Tane said as he walked from the forest.

Lugus was amazed to find himself smiling. “I must be on Draconia.”

Tane nodded. “What do you think?”

“It is very beautiful.”

“That she is. Why have you come?”

Lugus stared at him a moment. “You knew I would come, just as you know why I left my realm.”

“Aye. I do.”

“So why do you ask?”

“In the hopes that you’ll realize what it is you need to know.”

Lugus sighed. “I just want to be alone for awhile. If I’m not welcome here, I will leave.”

“Of course you are welcome here,” he said as he turned back to the forest. “Just remember that...”

His voice trailed off as he disappeared into the trees. Lugus rolled his eyes and sank to the ground. He didn’t bother to call Tane back and ask him to repeat what he had said. If he had wanted Lugus to hear it, he would have said it louder.

With his arm pillowing the back of his head, Lugus stared at the sky and watched the many dragons as they danced upon the night air.

“Lugus?”

He jumped and sat up. That had been Ahryn’s voice in his head, just as it had been on the Realm of Shadows.

“Lugus.”

This time she was more insistent, as if she expected him to reply.

“Answer me please.”

He heard the desperation in her voice and longed to answer her. He had no idea how she was reaching him through another realm and part of him didn’t care, but another part knew it was best if they parted ways.

“I know you can hear me,” she went on. “If you won’t answer me then you’ll have to listen to me.”

He laid back, but he no longer watched the dragons. Instead, he closed his eyes reveled

in the sound of her voice.

"You shouldn't have left me. Again. There is much that we need to say to the other."

She was right, he knew.

"Lugus, I...I love you. It was what I was waiting in the throne room to tell you."

His heart leapt at her words and he longed to tell her what he felt.

"It doesn't matter to me what you've done in the past. I know the man you are today and that's all that matters to me."

He wanted to believe her, but he knew the Fae would never forget or forgive him. He hadn't even forgiven himself.

"Come back to me, Lugus. Let us explore what's between us. I'm not whole unless you're with me. I need you."

After several moments he realized she was gone and he regretted not speaking to her.

"Ahryn," he called out, testing to see if she was listening. But he didn't get an answer.

He sat up and rested his elbows on his knees as he thought over her words. Maybe he hadn't given her enough credit to make her own decisions. Maybe she really did care.

Maybe....

* * * *

Ahryn let the tears fall. She had failed. Lugus wouldn't even speak to her. She wasn't giving up though. She would continue to reach out to him, to tell him of her love. Maybe one day he would see how strong her love was.

She heard the door to her chamber open and she let out a soft sigh. Theron had been to see her several times, begging her forgiveness each time. She didn't think she could stand to hear him say it once more.

"I just want to be alone," she said and kept her back to the door. Maybe he would understand and just leave.

"I must have the wrong chamber because I was sure you called to me."

Ahryn's mouth dropped open upon hearing Lugus' voice. She spun around to see him filling her doorway, an uncertain smile on his face.

"Did you mean it?"

"What?" she asked.

"What you said to me. Did you mean it?"

She smiled and fought the urge to run into his arms. There were things that had to be said before she could rejoice. "Aye. Every word."

"You aren't ashamed of what I've done?"

"Any man would have done what you did if they were able. I would have done it."

He walked into the room and closed the door. "You're parents don't approve of me."

"I don't care. I do and that's all that should matter."

He took a step toward her. "I'm no longer immortal."

"We'll work around that. I'm not worried." He didn't need to know yet that she had already spoken with Rufina and Theron about giving up her immortality.

Another step toward her. "We won't be able to live here."

"I don't care where we live as long as I'm with you."

One last step that brought them face to face. "All I have to give you is my love."

She closed her eyes at finally hearing him say it. When she opened them it was to find

him regarding her solemnly. "That's all I ask for."

Relief washed over his face and he reached for her, bringing her hard against his body.

"I never thought..." he started but was unable to finish.

"I know," she said and leaned back to look into his eyes. "Me either. I'm glad you came back."

He smiled and kissed her tenderly. "How could I resist you?"

Ahryn gave in to his intoxicating kisses until her body was on fire and her sex throbbed for release. She plunged her hands into his thick hair as her breasts grew heavy and her nipples hardened in anticipation.

"We need to see Theron and Rufina," she said between kisses.

"They can wait," Lugus said as he picked her up and laid her on the bed. "I'm going to love you first."

Chapter Thirty

Lugus fisted his hand again and again over the hilt of his sword. He blew out a breath as he could well imagine what words Theron wished to impart upon him, and he just wished Theron would do it without Ahryn next to him.

Before he and Ahryn went to the throne room, Lugus had wanted a moment alone. During that time he visited his parent's portraits in the gallery hall.

For some reason he didn't feel as unworthy as he used to. Maybe loving Ahryn had set him free, or maybe it was her love that had done it. Either way, he was at peace and ready for whatever the future held for them.

Now, as he stood waiting for Theron and Rufina he found himself as anxious as he used to be when standing before his father when he had been in trouble.

The door opened and Aimery walked into the room. The Fae commander made his way to Lugus where he held out his arm. Hesitatingly, Lugus clasped forearms with Aimery.

"Thank you for everything you have done," Aimery said. "I'm proud to call you friend and would proudly call you king."

Lugus blinked and didn't know how to respond to Aimery. All he could do was nod.

He wasn't given long to think about it though as Theron and Rufina walked into the throne room. Rufina gave him a bright smile and one he gladly returned. He watched as Theron seated Rufina, touching her rounding belly softly before taking his seat.

"Lugus," Theron called out, his face stoic.

Lugus glanced at Ahryn and then walked toward his brother. He bowed his head and waited for Theron to begin.

"It seems as though I've acted a fool."

Lugus head snapped up and he stared into the eyes of his brother. "What?"

"I had no idea what you had gone through to save Ahryn, nor did I realize who it was that risked their life for mine."

Theron rose and walked down the steps until he stood in front of Lugus. "My brother, thank you. Thank you for saving me, for bringing me back to my wife and child. And please forgive me for what I did to you and Ahryn."

Lugus blinked. "There's nothing to forgive."

Theron smiled. "I would ask you to return here, but I don't think you would."

"Return to what?" Lugus asked. "I'm no longer immortal. I don't belong here."

Ahryn squeezed his arm. "Aye, you do, my love. Immortal or not, you have always been, and will always be, a Fae."

Lugus shook his head. "I don't know."

"I do," Ahryn said. "I've already spoken to Theron and Rufina. I'm giving up my immortality."

A jolt of fear plunged through Lugus. "Nay," he bellowed and gripped her shoulders. "I'll not have you put your life in danger."

"And neither would we," Rufina said. "Which is why we are offering you immortality, Lugus."

He stared at the fruit in Theron's outstretched hand. He had forgotten of the special fruit that grew on a tree in the back of the palace, a tree kept secret from all but a special few.

"Are you sure?" he asked Theron.

"It's time we right a wrong, my brother."

"I won't take over," Lugus said and took a step back.

Theron smiled. "I knew you wouldn't. Take it, Lugus."

It wasn't until Ahryn reached for the fruit and brought it to his lips that Lugus opened his mouth took a bite. One obstacle had been overcome.

"Thank you," he said to Theron and Rufina.

"Now," Theron said as he walked back to his throne. "If you won't take over as rightful heir to this realm, we have another alternative. You belong here, and we want you to stay."

"But the rest of the Fae..." he began.

"Will adjust," Theron interrupted. "We would like to offer you the position of Royal Ambassador. With the responsibility, you'll be expected to do more than a regular ambassador. The 'royal' attached with let everyone know that you come from the royal family. You may not have the throne, brother, but you will have the next best thing. Besides, with your special tattoos, you're able to move through realms where others wouldn't dare."

Lugus couldn't believe what Theron was offering him. He turned to Ahryn. "What do you think?"

She smiled and leaned up to kiss him. "I say do whatever makes you happy. I'll support whatever decision you make."

"Even if it means leaving your family?"

"Even that," she replied with a wink.

Obstacle two had been overcome.

Lugus turned back to his brother. "I accept." Before the words were completely out of his mouth, Theron had bounded down the steps and wrapped his arms around him.

"It's good to have you back, brother. I've sorely missed you."

Lugus returned the hug. "I've missed you as well."

They pulled apart and looked at each other. "I think our parents would be proud."

Lugus smiled and waited until Theron returned to Rufina before he turned to Ahryn. Out of the corner of his eye he spotted Aimery. He glanced and returned the smile the Fae commander sent him.

"Shall we tell my family?" Ahryn asked. "I've refused to speak to them since I've been back. My grandfather has kept them abreast of everything that has been going on."

Lugus frowned. "I've always admired Michyl. I would have liked to have him approve of us."

"Oh, but he does," she said. "I must have left that part out. I'm ready to face my family with this news."

"Not yet," Lugus said.

She cocked her head to the side and regarded him. "Why?"

"I have one other question I need for you to answer."

"What is that?"

“Will you marry me?”

Her face broke into a huge smile as she flung her arms around his neck. “Aye. Oh, aye, I will,” she said and buried her face in his neck.

Lugus smiled and held her tightly. Obstacle three had been overcome. He had all he ever wanted, but most importantly, he had Ahryn.

Epilogue

“What do you think he wants?” Ahryn asked.

Lugus shrugged and pulled her against him to wrap his arms around her slim body. “I don’t know. I told him if it was important he would have to meet us here. We’ve traveled too far and too long to turn back now.”

She smiled up at him. “I still can’t believe we’re about to see the blue dragons.”

Lugus had spent weeks locating where the rare blue dragons were. It had been a surprise for Ahryn after their wedding. He had just thought she had been emotional at the wedding, but once she discovered his surprise she had cried for hours.

He grinned inwardly and loosened his hold on her as he climbed atop the mountain. He reached down and helped her.

“Now I know why you wanted to climb it instead of using our magic,” Ahryn said from beside him.

Lugus nodded as he looked out over the vast mountains and endless stretch of blue sky and mist swirled around the tallest of the mountain tops.

“I’ve never seen anything so beautiful,” she said in awe. “I don’t think I ever want to leave.”

“We don’t have to,” he said and moved to stand behind her. He wrapped his arms around her and rested his chin on his chest. “Are you ready?”

“For what?”

“Listen,” he whispered.

Just on the tip of the wind it reached them, the beating of a dragon’s wings as it soared through the air. Lugus searched the skies until he found the small dark blue dragon.

“There,” he said and pointed to their right.

She sucked in a breath as she spotted the dragon. “You found them.”

“No, my love. We found them.”

She turned her head and Lugus bent down to claim her lips. He deepened the kiss and was about to lay her on the ground when he heard someone clear their throat behind them. Reluctantly, Lugus pulled away and turned to find Theron.

“Brother, I said you could meet us here, but I would have thought you would realize now wasn’t a good time.”

Theron chuckled. “With the way you two are always occupied, I’d never be able to speak.”

Lugus could tell by Theron’s pinched mouth that something was wrong. “What is it?”

“We’ve received a message from Draconia. Tane is in trouble.”

Lugus glanced at Ahryn, and at her nod turned to Theron. “Then we must go.”

“Be careful,” Theron said and then was gone.

Lugus turned to Ahryn. “I’m sorry, love.”

“Don’t be. We owe Tane, and if he is in trouble, then we need to help him. We’ll come

back here.”

“Aye,” Lugas said as he took another look at the magnificent blue dragon. “We’ll not only come back, but we’ll build our house here.”

“And raise our children.”

His eyes slowly moved to Ahryn’s. “Children?”

“Children,” she repeated, a huge smile on her face.

THE END