



Warning: This story contains sex, violence, and naughty words. It's based on a fairytale, but it isn't for kids. You must be over 18 to read.

Ember

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Dedication

To my mother.

No matter what anyone says, the gory old fairytales make great bedtime stories. Thanks for reading them to me.

Thanks

To Fairy GodSciencemother Bam, & crit partner Jodie. Thanks for your encouragement & help.

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1. The Witch

I know you think you've heard this story before, but you're wrong. Some would have it that this story begins with a virtuous virgin, a young woman of honesty and integrity sucker punched by cruel fortune and forced to sleep among the cinders while her moral inferiors lived the life which was meant to be hers. Bullshit.

This is no fairytale. The real story doesn't even start with me; it starts with the Prince. The tales have him faceless and nameless, a passionless plywood man meant to represent everything a good girl is supposed to want. Nothing could be further from the truth.

His given name was Adrian Juste, but after the witch Gaetane bestowed her double-edged blessing on his naming day, none called him aught but Charming.

"*Charme*," she whispered the word in the language of the Old Ones, the tongue of curses and enchantments. The blessing fell from her lips with a spatter of blood, for the tongue of the Old Ones is sharp as broken glass against the tender flesh of mortal mouths. "May he be charming. May every eye find perfection in his face and form. May every man respect him and every woman desire him. May all who meet him love him and long to please him."

The old king smiled. Who wouldn't wish such a gift for their child? Only the royal Wise Woman, Raisende, grasped import of Gaetane's blessing. She grew pale with shock and fright.

"Sister," whispered, Raisende, "what have you done?"

"A blessing," Gaetane replied, her voice untroubled as she wiped her bloody lips on her glove.

"A curse, more like! You've *blessed* the boy with respect he won't have to earn, desire he'll never learn to appreciate and love he'll never need to reciprocate. He'll become a tyrant!"

"You worry overmuch, Raisende." Gaetane removed her bloody gloves to place her hand across the infant Prince's brow. Her hands were delicate and lovely, save for the stump where the smallest finger of her left hand had been. "You wished him wisdom, did you not? Have some confidence he'll make use of it."

* * *

If Raisende's gift of wisdom tempered the Prince's pride, we never saw it. No man or woman who met him could deny him. No listener who heard his voice could help but love him. He grew to manhood but remained a boy, carousing, whoring and pleasing himself in any manner that took his fancy.

And we loved him for it. We loved him for the fortunes he spent on his horses and his hounds. We loved him for the virgins he seduced and the whores upon whom he bestowed the jewels of the royal treasury. We loved him for the treaties he struck, just by asking foreign monarchs to agree. We loved him for the wars he won simply by walking onto the battlefield knowing no man would raise a sword against him.

The Prince's charm was our charm. Despite his self-indulgence, our little kingdom grew to greatness through Charming's wicked gift. Peace lay over the land like a warm blanket in winter. Wealth flowed to us like a river flowing to the sea. Fishermen and draymen became merchants. Merchants became princes.

You may think me disingenuous to complain of the Prince's curse when my father was among the tradesmen who made their fortunes on the coattails of the Prince's charm. It was profit from the Prince's treaties that bought our grand townhouse on the Avenida Delpalacio, not a mile from the palace. It was profit from the Prince's curse that bought the ladylike dresses of silk and satin I never wore, and paid the small army of learned doctors who tried in vain to save my mother's life.

Money, like the Prince's charm, could change the appearance of a life, but not the substance of it. Money couldn't make a lady of a drayman's daughter. Money couldn't save a merchant's dying wife.

I had nineteen years the summer my mother died, and the Prince had twenty-four. Fearing the power of his curse, my mother forbid me to

look upon him when he rode past our house on his way into the city. But my mother was bedridden that summer, and all of my friends did nothing but sigh the Prince's name.

Even at nineteen, I had a formidable knowledge of magic. I thought I was strong enough to resist the tug of a simple nameday blessing. I was headstrong and I disobeyed my mother.

One day I joined the crowd on the Avenida Delpalacio to wave and cheer as the Prince rode past. Even before he came in sight, I felt the strength of his charm. It was thick and damp in the air around me, sneaking into my lungs with every breath I took, heating my blood with anticipation. It brushed against my skin like a slimy touch, a leech inching over my wrist, a snake slithering up my leg. I knew then that I faced strength greater than my ability to resist. But it was too late.

His party rounded the corner and I saw him. Sun-gilded and perfect, he sat atop a white stallion and lit a fire in my blood such as I'd never known. The feeling was not the innocent stuff of daydreams or girlish sighs. It was desire, full blown and inescapable. Desire made my skin prickle and ache for want of his hands. Desire drenched my virgin cunt with the slick heat of a woman's readiness.

His eyes met mine as he surveyed the crowd—or in my fevered state I thought they did. I cannot say what color his eyes were, but I remember thinking they were the most beautiful I'd ever seen. I loved

him completely, more thoroughly than any woman has ever loved a man. Every girl in the crowd felt the same.

Longing for him usurped my will and dissolved my dignity. I would have stripped myself naked and begged him to fuck me on the filthy cobbles if he'd looked at me again. I would have acceded to any act, no matter how depraved, for the blessing of his penetration.

I never felt my lack of beauty so keenly as I did when I gazed upon the perfection of the Prince. For the first time, I became ashamed of my frizzy red hair and the garish freckles marring my skin. I lamented my scrawny, girlish body and the way the inborn twist of my right foot marked my walk with a slight limp. A perfect man deserved a perfect woman, and perfection was far beyond the reach of such as me.

He smiled and threw coins to the crowd as he passed, oblivious to the tortures I suffered in my lust for him. The shiny silver coins were stamped with a likeness of his face so exact, girls had taken to wearing the coins strung on a bit of ribbon around their necks to keep Charming close to their hearts.

The coins hit the cobbles with the metallic clatter of dented bells but none of the crowd even glanced at the wealth of silver bouncing and rolling past their feet. None could bear to look away from our beloved Prince. The strength of his curse overpowered even natural greed.

Panting, feverish, and frightened, I, alone of all the crowd, forced my gaze from his face and fixed it on the cobbles at my feet until he

passed. When he was gone, his spell weakened enough to allow me to search the street for fallen coins. I found one wedged into the muddy crack in a broken stone. I pried it loose and cleaned it on my russet silk skirts.

His profile winked sunlight at me from the silver surface of the coin. I raised it to my lips and kissed his likeness's metal cheek. Licked it. I slid the coin into my mouth, tasting the tannic flavor of his glove above the metal and beneath the grime.

With the silver likeness of the Prince clamped between my lips, I turned and hurried back inside. I could not close the door fast enough to suit the drumbeat of desire in my blood. I hadn't the patience to climb to my chamber and dream of him in private. Indeed, I barely managed to squeeze into a broom closet and shut the door before my hands were pulling up my skirts and parting the hot, slick folds of my sex.

I ran my tongue across his likeness on the coin as I thought of him. I thought of his eyes on me, his hands on me. I imagined the sublime joys of his touch, the taste of his skin, the feel of his cock between my lips.

I imagined the exquisite pain of him taking my maidenhead. Oh, I'd been told the pain was a minor one, but in my fevered, foolish virgin's imagination I envisioned it as saber thrust and imagined myself a martyr on the altar of his pleasure. My virgin's blood became my life's blood and

I lay beneath him, dying from the loss of my innocence, happily fading into nothingness for his enjoyment.

I dreamt he leaned over me crying; his hot tears fell upon my cold cheeks. “Oh, she was so pure,” he wailed. “She was so delicate and special. She has died for the love of me. I can love no other!”

I must pause here to tell you, I see the way your lips are twitching. Please, don’t be afraid to laugh. My dignity is not so rigid I can’t see the humor in those youthful imaginings.

Now, where was I? Ah yes, having taken my virgin’s blood, and with it my very life, the Prince could love no other. He would spend the rest of his days remembering my face and longing for my touch. No lady, princess or queen would ever affect him so much as I had. He would spend his life mourning the loss of me, Ember, a drayman’s daughter.

As sad as it is to admit it, I must tell you this melodramatic imagining was the thought that gave me my first taste of womanly pleasure. My body seized, climaxing with a ferocity that made me stumble to the floor. I gasped for air, only to feel the cold bite of the silver coin lodging in my throat.

I panicked, coughing and gagging, trying to force a decent breath around the silver barrier imprinted with the Prince’s face. My death flashed before my eyes and in this scenario, I was not a noble virgin sacrifice, but a silly girl, crumpled on the floor of a broom closet with her

skirts rumpled and her hands stinking of sex. The lack of air was nothing—I almost died of embarrassment!

Dizzy and struggling, I shouldered my way out of the broom closet. My vision swam with black spots and above the pounding of my heart I heard the wheezing whistle of my futile attempts to breathe.

All the servants were upstairs, seeing to my mother on her sickbed. Robbed of breath and voice, I tried to stagger up the stairs in search of help, but I hadn't the strength. I stumbled and spun like a sloppy drunk and fell forward over the polished oak newel post at the bottom of the stairs.

The coin flew from my throat like a cannon shot and hit the tiled floor with a metallic *clink!* before rolling off into the shadows. Exhausted and gasping, I sank to the stairs and tried not to think about how close I'd come to death and posthumous humiliation.

Moments after I managed to take a calm breath, I heard the sound of footsteps on the landing above followed shortly by the breathy rasp of my mother's voice.

"Ember! What has happened to you?"

I looked up to see my mother, her pale skin stark against the faded red of her thinning hair, leaning against the steady shoulder of one of our footmen.

I began to weep. I've never learned the knack of crying prettily. Soon, my eyes were puffy and red rimmed, and I was wiping snot and

spit from my face with the cuffs of my sleeves. “Oh!” I wailed. “It’s terrible. I love him!”

My mother said nothing. She whispered to the footman to help her into the parlor, and then ordered me to follow. When the footman had got her situated in her chair beside the fireplace and left the room, she turned her tired, clouded eyes on me and said, “You went out to see the Prince.”

“Yes,” I brayed, scrubbing my wet cheeks on my already damp cuffs. “I never should have, for now I love him and he doesn’t even know me! He’ll never be mine. I wish I could die!”

“Don’t be an idiot, you’re just spell-caught.” She motioned me close and peered into my eyes. “The Prince’s curse has teeth like a lamprey. It latches onto everything he touches. Its power seeps from every utterance of his name and image of his face.”

My mother shivered as she turned her head to look at the cold hearth. It was summer and we kept no fuel beside it. “Light the fire and listen carefully.”

When I winked at the empty hearth, it leapt into flame, eager to please me. In neighboring countries, like Terre d’Or, women are burned at the stake for lesser acts, but Tierra del Maré has always been more tolerant of Wise Women. I’d no need to hide my abilities, as my mother had never needed to hide hers.

My mother was a very learned woman. Before illness crippled her, people from all across Ciú Dello's Reyes came to our home humbly petitioning advice, blessings and curses. Behind our backs, those same people whispered my mother was the only reason my father had risen from humble drayman to wealthy merchant.

While I would like to say Mother was above such supernatural tampering, I must admit, there was some evidence of magic at work. Father's horses never shied, his cartwheels never broke. Grain never rotted in his carts and fruit never withered while on the road. He kept a compass with him that always pointed to honest men.

"Very good." My mother smiled at the fire burning in the empty hearth. "Now, tell me: What reveals illusions and counteracts all curses?"

Her voice was measured and slow, insultingly so. Any idiot can tell you the light of the full moon reveals truth, unravels illusion, and protects all who stand beneath it from magical harm. That's why witches craft their most dangerous spells at the full moon and why all beasts hidden in human flesh must take their true forms for the nights it shines.

Firelight or candlelight will counter the effects of even the three quarter moon, but there is no spell spoken that can withstand the light of the full moon. The full moon counteracted even the Prince's potent curse, and he knew it. Rumor said the Prince locked himself in his

chambers alone on full moon nights so that none would ever look upon him with anything less than utter adoration.

“But the effects of the full moon only last until daybreak,” I whined. “What good is it to be free of him at night if I wake wanting him at dawn?”

“Shh.” My mother ran a frail hand through my hair, which was red as hers had been before her illness. She reached beneath the collar of her nightgown and drew out the pendant she always wore on a long chain around her neck. The pendant had a soft radiance to it, like moonlight on a misty night. “Light from the full moon, trapped in a vial. It will weaken the curse.”

Reluctantly, I took it from her, slipped it over my head and tucked the pendant beneath my bodice and shift. My craving for the Prince and all my foolish fantasies receded when the vial of moonlight touched my skin. Despite my humbled pride, I felt almost like myself again, only wiser and more wary.

“This will protect me?”

“The pendant, and one other thing.”

The footman reappeared at the parlor door. He carried a wad of bandages and a wooden chopping block beneath his left arm. And in his right hand he carried a butcher’s knife.”

“No,” I shook my head. “You can’t mean it. Blood magic is illegal. Charms and philters will protect me just as well.”

“The Prince’s curse is too strong for such temporary measures, and I fear it will grow stronger with time.” My mother motioned the footman to set the block and knife on the arabesque ebony tea table beside the settee. “I must know you’ll be safe from his curse. I must know before I die.”

“Don’t talk like that. You’re not going to die.”

“Do not deceive yourself, Ember. You’ve magic and sense enough to recognize the pall of death upon me.” My mother pointed to the knife. When she spoke again, her voice held no emotion. “Choices and change require sacrifice. Heat the knife.”

How could I disobey her twice in the same day? I called the fire to the knife, and heated it as hot as it would go without losing its edge. I made a fist of my left hand, except the smallest finger, which I laid upon the block. I took a breath but couldn’t act.

“Do it!” My mother shouted the words. There was magic behind them. My right hand lifted the knife and severed my little finger just above the knuckle. I screamed at the pain of it, and at the sight of my bloody finger on our cook’s cutting board.

You’re thinking my mother was cruel and meant to punish me. Don’t shake your head, I read it in your eyes. You’re thinking of all the tales you’ve heard of wicked magic, of how witches make their sacrifices in blood and bone—their own, and others’. But it wasn’t like that. Not really.

She meant to keep me safe. She meant for me to hide the finger somewhere far away. So long as a piece of my body was beyond the curse's reach, I would, with struggle, be able to resist the Prince. After she bandaged my wound, my mother tucked my severed finger into the palm of my right hand. "Hide it well."

There are many stories of this wizard or that sorcerer who hid his heart in a tree or a gorgon's nest atop a mountain thinking none would ever find it. You and I both know how they end. And you know I have never liked to take chances.

Some will say what I did next was blood magic, or something darker. Some will say I sacrificed my soul that day. But what I did, I did to save myself. It was no great evil, just a minor sin. And don't the Old Wives say that, sometimes, minor sins may serve a greater good?

I offered my severed finger to the fire and spoke the Witch's Bargain. "*Flesh for power. Blood for knowledge. Bone for strength. Take my offering and become my servant, even as I am yours.*"

My mother gasped, but did not say a word to stop me.

No power, no knowledge, no strength may be got without suffering. I felt every lick of fire as my severed flesh burned. I felt the flames every instant until my offering burnt to grit and ash. I screamed and cried at the pain, beating the floor and biting my lips until they bled. At last the pain died away, though the stench of burning meat never truly left the

air. Even today, the front parlor stinks faintly from my wicked bargain with the Fire.

My mother wept that I'd made a witch of myself, but when I met her eyes she nodded at my choice. "I cannot rebuke you as I should for choosing the way of the witch over the way of the Wise Woman. Mother's love has made me selfish. I'd rather you lived a long, possibly wicked life than a short and virtuous one."

My mother grew weaker that night. I begged her to take her pendant back, but she wouldn't have it. "I'm going to die, Ember. There is no stopping it. I had rather go easily into death knowing my only child is safe than to live a few extra days worrying the curse will take you again."

She died a few weeks later. Every fire in the city went out the morning my father and I found her cold in her sickbed. I did not want to believe the dead fires were my doing. I did not want to believe the fire had liked the taste of my flesh enough to grant my emotions such sway, but for the three days until we freed my mother's ashes, there was no firelight or warmth in the city but her pyre. For three nights, there was no light save moonlight. Rumor said the Prince locked himself in his chambers at sunset each night without fire and allowed no one to look upon him.

The fire returned when we threw my mother's ashes into the wind. By then I was ready for it. I was at peace with my grief, and resolved to

honor my mother's memory by keeping myself safe from the Prince's curse.

I entered and left our house through the alley behind it and never walked the Avenida Delpalacio again. I avoided every image of the Prince, from the statues in the market at Commerce Square to his profile on silver coins. I carried my money in coppers and never complained at the ungainly weight of my purse. It was better to travel alleyways with a purse full of copper as a free woman than to strut the avenidas spending silver as a slave to desires not my own.

I was so careful to avoid the Prince that I might have gone my whole life without ever seeing him again. I might have lived happily ever after, without him. But Fate, and the Prince, himself, had other plans for me.

2. The Courtesans

My father faltered after my mother died. His attention wandered and he slept poorly. His carts began to suffer from broken wheels. Grain went moldy before he could get it to market. He tried to turn his business to luxury goods and textiles from Terre d'Or, but despite his many past successes, he still had a drayman's taste for flashy fabrics. He purchased several shipments of dubious quality.

My parents were married for almost twenty years before my birth, and for almost twenty years after. They had become so much a part of each other that my father could not open his eyes in the mornings after my mother's death without feeling her absence like a new wound.

I was not surprised when, scarcely nine months after my mother's death, my father returned from one of his buying trips with a cartload of second-rate silks and a new wife. I wasn't angry, either. He was the sort of man who needed a wife. He needed stability, love and care. He needed someone to remind him to eat in the mornings and to take him to bed at night.

When I saw the carriage trailing his cart, I'd high hopes of his new wife. But then he told me she was a beautiful, impoverished d'Oran noblewoman. He called her a delicate flower who needed his care. He said his new wife had two daughters just my age, and he promised we would be the best of friends.

The carriage drew to a stop, and my father herded half a dozen footmen out to hold the horses, set up the stairs and open the door so he could help his new wife down from the carriage. Her hand preceded her from the dark interior. It was delicate and powdered white, gilded with a filigree of rings and bracelets. Her fingernails were varnished pink. The stones in her many rings twinkled prettily in the sunlight, but I knew they were glass.

My stepmother's foot followed next. She wore shoes of gaudy pink satin, frayed at the toes, studded with dull glass gems, and balanced on a spindly wooden heel that would barely support its wearer from one end of her bedchamber to the other. I do not mean to be cruel when I say this, only factual: I knew her for a whore before I ever saw her face.

She was pretty enough beneath her mask of powder and paint and the black beauty patch in the shape of a swallow affixed above the corner of her cherry-red mouth. But hers was the brittle sort of beauty that came of constant care and vigilance. Hiding from the sun kept her smooth skin unmarred by lines or freckles. She'd gained her high, elegant eyebrows through pulling each unwanted hair out from the root. Her slender form bespoke a lifetime of half-eaten meals.

And what little else she lacked in true beauty, she made up for in cunning and charisma. Her brown eyes gleamed with determination and an intelligence I could not help but respect. I understood why my father thought her beautiful.

She paused when she saw me, and I couldn't blame her. I knew what I looked like—my cold expression, my red hair and freckled skin, my angry black eyes smoldering like hot coals. Her eyes flicked to the torches flanking our door, noting, I am sure, the way the flames yearned toward me though the wind urged them in the opposite direction.

Her face tightened beneath its façade of paint. Her white-powdered hand wavered on the verge of greeting me. In that moment, she realized my father's tales of an innocent, biddable daughter were spun from the same wishful imagination that had let him believe her to be a noblewoman, and to believe the two hard-eyed whores (scarcely a decade her junior) who peered out of the carriage behind her were her daughters.

"Step-mamá!" I greeted her, taking her shoulders and kissing her powdered cheeks. My lips came away white with a mixture of lead and lard, but it was worth it for the expression of surprise that crossed her face. When my father wasn't looking, I wiped my mouth on the cuff of my velvet sleeve.

"Come inside, let me show you and my new sisters our home. I know we shall be ever so happy together!"

With my father's help, the three women wrestled their threadbare satin skirts and listing panniers up the stairs and into the house. I showed them to the parlor, which still stank faintly of burned flesh, and directed my new step mama to sit in my mother's blue leather chair.

"I just knew you four would get along," my father said, beaming from the doorway. I hadn't seen him so happy since before my mother's illness. "I'll leave you ladies to get acquainted while I see to the unloading of my latest shipment of fine textiles."

My new stepmother's lips parted on a word as the door swung shut. I think she was going to say, "Wait."

I smiled, pleased as a spider to have so many flies trapped in my parlor. I winked at the hearth and it roared to life, shooting flames up the chimney and sparks onto the rug. The candles followed, lighting all at once.

"Please don't hurt us!" One of my new stepsisters pleaded. Despite her shopworn satin and powdered hair, she suddenly looked young and frightened. She was delicate of frame, and though she had rounded, girlish cheeks, the rest of her was too thin for good health. Beneath her paint, her eyes were puffy and shadowed, as if from lack of sleep.

"We didn't know," said the other. "We didn't know Master Drayman's daughter was a Wise Woman."

"A witch," I corrected, smiling wide to show my teeth.

"Even had we known," my new stepmother said, her voice sure and clear, "we could not have let him leave Terre d'Or without us. Sylvia has the *loup*, you see."

"Minette, don't tell!" Sylvia hissed.

“Don’t fret, Sylvie, it isn’t a crime here.” Minette turned to me, “But they were gathering the wood for her pyre when we fled *Ville des Rois* in your father’s care. Do you understand?”

Damn her, but I did understand. For all their airs of worldly sophistication, our neighbors to the north are famously intolerant of magic. They hold witch-burnings the way other lands hold summer fairs. Sylvia was not a witch. Her condition was quite beyond her control, but her countrymen cared little for such distinctions.

“How did it happen?” I asked.

Sylvia looked away, but the skinny one, Dulcibella, answered. “A rich man from the east paid for a week with her. His eyebrows met in the middle. We should have guessed his nature, but his gold was good. He fell in love with Sylvie and imagined she wanted to be rescued from her life because he wanted to take her away. When she refused him, he bit her and infected her with his curse.”

“And when I refused him again, he told the constable I had the *loup*.” Sylvie finished, crying softly into a mangled handkerchief. She looked up at me; her lovely face was striped pink and white by wet tears and smudged paint. “You’re a witch. Can you help me?”

I crossed to her and tilted up her chin to look into her red-rimmed blue eyes. “I could burn it out, but that is as much a punishment as it is a cure. The fire takes more than the *loup* when it leaves. I know a potion

to control it, but the potion will prevent you from conceiving while you take it.”

Sylvie smiled at me and became almost beautiful again. “Sister, in my line of work, that potion of yours is a double-blessing. Will you help me?”

“Say yes,” Minette cajoled. “Say yes, and we will leave your father and your home as soon as Sylvie can travel.”

“Leave?” I said. “But my father needs a wife. The Old Wives say sheep dogs are descended from wolves, and the best thief takers were once thieves, themselves. You know how gullible my father can be, for you gulled him. Who better to look after him than one who knows his weaknesses?”

My new stepmother opened her mouth to protest, but the fire flared in anger at her interruption. She snapped her jaw closed and let me speak.

“Sylvia’s potion must be made and taken by the month. The price of my help, dear Stepmother, is that you stay.”

“But I saw your sour face at the sight of us. You don’t like courtesans.”

I laughed and every flame in the room danced with joy at the sound of it. “You mistake me, Sister. Whores are the better part of my business. A witch who shuns the custom of whores and courtesans will

be a pauper. No. I dislike liars and cheats. I dislike deceivers and dissemblers.

“Now that the air is clear between us, I like you just fine. My father needs a wife, and as long as you care for him and do not cuckold him with other men, we shall get along as well as he imagined.”

* * *

As I had predicted, we got along quite well. Minette was a loyal and helpful wife to my father, and my new stepsisters were far better at playing the dutiful daughter than I was. I gave them all the silks and satin gowns my father had purchased for me and went back to the comfortable linen and woolens I'd worn before he'd decided I ought to be clothed like a lady. Sylvie and Dulcie planned soirees and spent hours in the parlor embroidering handkerchiefs and other ladylike nonsense while I Worked at the kitchen hearth perfecting my potions and honing my craft.

I knew the neighbors whispered that my new mother and sisters had made a servant of me, but I've never cared what others thought. I liked linen and wool, so that is what I wore. I liked to listen to the chatter of the fire in the kitchen hearth as I fell asleep, so I slept beside the hearth.

In truth, the three years before my father's death were quite happy. Though my new stepsisters, stepmother and I were very different, we got along in complementary fashion. Minette was canny and shrewd, but also wise to the vagaries of human nature. She always knew just what to say to charm or to console. Dulcie was bright and cheerful, despite her fragile nature. She had an unerring eye for beauty in art, and she could draw a smile from a stone. Sylvie was quiet and regal. She had a sadness in her, a sort of stillness, that made her presence soothing though she was sometimes too blunt in her speech.

I do not know what help I gave our group, except my witchery. I am often confused by the irrational vagaries of human nature, and I have been told my sense of humor is as twisted as my right foot. I am rarely calm or still, I Work and fiddle and fix every hour I am awake. I created sleeping draughts for Dulcie to ease her fitful sleep, and stirred up cosmetics and perfume for Minette to aid her quest for beauty. Every month I made the potion that kept Sylvie's *loup* from troubling her.

My care must have endeared me to my new step-family, despite my prickly personality, for they were genuinely kind to me. Minette, Dulcie and Sylvie may have come to our home in deceit, but they were honest in their affection and their actions. I never had sisters and it is difficult for witches to find friends, but in those three I found both. I will ever be thankful for them.

One day my father's horse shied on a mountain pass and his cartwheel broke. When his drivers brought the news, my sister-friends were there for me. They arranged the funeral for the third day after his death, in accordance with Tierra del Maré's traditions. They made me meals of uncooked fruit and vegetables when the fires would not light.

It was Sylvie and Dulcie who helped me fill in my father's grave. And it was Minette who soothed me, as my mother would have, when I wept.

"Your father is with her again." Minette consoled. "Don't spend too much time mourning him, for you know he's happy to be back at her side."

Minette's words may not sound like much, but they were what I needed to hear. I stood from my chair and wiped my eyes. Outside, the rowdy shouts of our neighbors echoed through the streets as their candles and cookstoves sprang to life again.

My relief was short-lived. The next day, I started on my father's ledgers. His affairs were worse than I'd expected. The business was gone. We had to sell the carts and horses just to pay his debts. In the end, I managed to keep the house and its contents, though we had to let the servants go.

"What will we do for food?" I sighed, burying my face in the crumpled pages of my father's ledgers.

“You worry too much,” Minette said. She sat in my mother’s blue chair, buffing her nails. “We have a house on the main road to the palace, with three whores in residence. All I need to do is hang a garter ribbon in the window, and we’ll be feasting by week’s end.”

“I couldn’t ask that of you.” I shook my head.

“You’re not asking, I’m telling. Don’t think the girls and I haven’t enjoyed this sojourn in respectability, but we three are whores at heart. We chose the work, and we like the rewards. The downside of the job was always needing a procurer to manage the house and the books, but you can do that well enough, and offer protection, besides.”

“Protection?”

“I keep my eyes open. The illusion you use to hide your missing finger is flawless, but people in this city know you have power. They see the way fire burns brighter when you’re near. None will cross you. Or hadn’t you wondered why your father’s creditors were so reasonable?”

I shook my head, shocked. I hadn’t wondered. I’d thought I hid the extent of my blood-got power, but apparently I didn’t. That explained why the custom for my potions had dwindled. People were afraid of me.

“Don’t fret.” Minette patted my shoulder. “We’ll be feasting in four days. Leave everything to me.”

* * *

True to her promise, Minette had us feasting by week's end. She rechristened our house with a d'Oran name, *Maison d'Aube*, and put word out that Master Drayman's d'Oran widow and "virginal" stepdaughters were fallen on hard times and in need of help. There was no shortage of kind-hearted, wealthy men to "help" the lovely widow and her daughters. In deference to my distaste for the Prince's silver coins, Minette stipulated *Maison d'Aube* would only accept "help" in gold coins or gems.

Three months after my father's death, our debts were paid and our house was a favorite among wealthy merchants and the nobility. We had some problems at the beginning from men who thought they could treat my sisters roughly because there was no pimp in residence. But they soon learned witches are both creative and persistent in their vengeance.

At each week's end we held a feast, just for we four sisters. We drank and laughed and joked we would conquer the world with our combined talents. Or, at the very least, the city.

Minette raised her glass. "To us, Sisters. To Ciú Dello's Reyes' three most sought-after courtesans, and to its most powerful witch!"

"We'll be wealthy before the year is out." Dulcie sing-songed. "I'd an offer from the Grand Duke today."

"That's nothing." Sylvie tossed an envelope of bleached parchment onto the table among the dirty dishes and empty wine bottles. The

phantom of my little finger throbbed as though it was burning all over again.

There was a profile stamped into the blue-black wax of the seal. It drew my eyes, though I tried to look away. I closed my lids and struggled to keep my voice steady when I spoke.

“What is that thing?”

Sylvie was too pleased with her news to notice my discomfort. “*That* is a letter from the Prince.”

“The Prince?” I felt lightheaded, fearful and excited, all at the same time. The profile in the wax seal was his.

“Sylvie,” Minette chided, “where is your consideration? You know Ember does not care for the Prince. Now take the seal from the envelope before the poor girl faints.”

I’d told them of the time I’d seen the Prince, and we’d all had a good laugh about my overwrought reaction to the man. “Virgins do such stupid things,” Minette had mused. “I shall ever be thankful to the newel post, for at the time, it had a better head on its shoulders than you did.”

I could laugh because I wasn’t a virgin anymore. I’d taken three lovers in the time since I’d first seen the Prince. They were the kind of men I liked, big, with muscles hardened by work and faces softened by humor. They all had the aura of daredevils about them, addicted to risk and brave beyond reason. And so, I suppose, they would have to be, to dare lay down with a witch.

They were not unskilled, my lovers. They were thorough and attentive to detail, taking their satisfaction both from my body and from the sense of mastery that came of pleasing a woman whom other men feared. I adored them each in my own way but the sad secret of my heart was, I had never wanted another man the way I'd wanted the Prince. The way I wanted him, still.

I hated him for it. Hated him and his stupid curse for robbing me of a real first love, and spoiling me for a second. If I could have withstood a second sighting of him, I'd have ordered the Fire to burn him to ash, and damn the consequences. But, then, if I could have stood the sight of him, I'd not have hated him so very much.

“What does the Prince's letter say?”

Sylvie plucked the thick, cream-colored paper from the envelope and handed it across the table to me. “You must tell us what it says. We don't read in our native tongue, much less in Maréan.”

Don't dismiss my sisters as ignorant for they were merely untaught. Terre d'Or does not care for literacy in any but its clergy and nobility. A common woman who reveals she can read may as well admit to witchcraft. Her neighbors will burn her on her books and speak of how they've done her soul a favor.

I didn't want to touch the Prince's note but my hand grasped it before I could ask Sylvie to hold it open for me. A shiver of excitement ran up my arm. As I held the paper close to my face to read the elegant,

looping script, I inhaled the scent of leather and straw. I knew it was the Prince's scent. I imagined him coming in from a long ride and signing the note his secretary had drafted for him.

"What does it say?" Dulcie asked, her eyes bright and eager.

Embarrassed by how quickly I had lost myself, I made hasty work of the letter. "He—he wants to come *here*. He wants the whole place for himself and his cronies for three days, a week hence."

Sylvie smiled in her quiet way and Dulcie squealed in delight. Minette kept her calm. "We can't turn down the Prince," she mused. "It would be bad for business. If the nobles learn we turned Adrian Juste away, the nobles will spurn us and the merchants will follow."

A frisson of excitement skittered over my skin at the sound of his name. I wanted to say it myself, to feel it on my tongue, to shape it with my lips. "Don't say his name to me again!" I hissed. "That damned curse gets stronger every year."

Dulcie looked at me askance. The curse was no stronger for her, or for anyone else, than it had ever been. I was the only person who thrilled to the sound of the Prince's name; who became entranced at the image of his face; who woke in the night wanting him. Perhaps it was my magic that made the Prince's charm pull so strongly at my will. Perhaps it only tormented me as punishment for my resistance.

"We can't let him near Ember," Minette said.

“But who will protect us and manage the books if she goes away to hide?”

“I’ll sleep in the summer cookshed.” I said. “I’ll keep to the kitchens and the servant’s hallways.”

“What if the Prince’s followers don’t behave?” Dulcie asked.

“Keep the fires lit. If any of his courtiers behave boorishly, whisper the man’s name into a candle or a hearth, and the fire will deal with him.”

“You can do that?” Sylvie leaned across the table to look at me with new eyes. “I did not think you’d so much power.”

I shrugged. “Power builds with age.”

“Like the Prince’s curse,” Minette said.

I closed my eyes. I didn’t want to think I had anything in common with him. I didn’t want to think of him at all.

* * *

The neighbors’ gossip transformed to lurid speculation when the Prince and his courtiers began to visit our house. They whispered that my stepmother and stepsisters had stolen my magic to make love charms to enthrall the Prince, that Minette and her “daughters” had forbidden me from entering my own house, and that my stepfamily made me rub

ashes into my hair so no nobleman would notice the color of it and fall in love with me.

I don't know where the neighbors got such nonsense. I've never been beautiful, or particularly loveable, though I'd kept to myself for so long, perhaps the neighbors had forgotten. The truth of it is, I hid my hair with ash of my own volition, after the Prince's first visit.

He took Dulcie to bed that time. Though the moon wasn't full, he kept the shutters closed against the moonlight and kept the candles lit the whole night through. Few people suspect a thing so homey as a candle flame or a hearth fire will betray them, but every spark of flame that springs to life in Ciù Dello's Reyes will do my will. How do you think I always know what my neighbors think of me?

The cookshed fire woke me in the hours before dawn, dancing and flaring with the urgency of its message.

"What is it?"

I fed the fire a bundle of pitchy pine twigs so it could speak through the crackling sound of burning sap.

It formed an image of the Prince and Dulcie reclining on her bed. "I have a question for you." The Prince's voice was a low crackle of burning wood.

"Anything, your Highness," Dulcie breathed, her usually bright eyes dull with lust and wonder.

“There used to be a girl who lived in this house. She’d red hair and black eyes.”

I prayed Dulcie would find the strength to lie to him, but none could deny the Prince. She barely hesitated before answering, “My stepsister, Ember, has red hair and very dark brown eyes.”

“Ember,” he said. I closed my eyes and shuddered at the thought of my name upon his lips. “Does she work as you and your ‘sister’ do? Will you send her to me?”

If ever I’d doubted Dulcie was my sister, or doubted she loved me as well as if we’d been blood kin, I had the proof of it in her answer. She denied the Prince, as best she could. Her voice shook when she answered him. “I cannot send her to you, Highness. She is not for sale. If it is red hair you want, I know a whore with hair like a stormy sunrise and a muff to match.”

“No.” The Prince shook his head. “I want Ember. I saw her once, five years ago. She watched me ride by on the street. She wasn’t beautiful, that’s not what I noticed about her. When I go out in the streets, every face in the crowd turns as I pass like flowers following the sun. But she looked away from me.”

He turned, staring at the shuttered window, perhaps thinking of the day he’d seen me. “I’ve wanted her since then. I’ve looked for her in the streets, for the flash of red hair and the cold regard of those dark eyes. I get everything I want, but not her.”

“I—“ Dulcie tried to deny him a second time, but her voice died in her throat as the Prince traced his hand along her face.

“Promise you will send her to me. Promise you will not rest until she comes to my bedchamber.”

His words had power to them, more power than just the weight of his curse. I suspect he might have been a great sorcerer if Gaetane’s cruel blessing had not directed his innate ability into his Charm. With magic and wisdom to aid him, he could have been the greatest king in the history of our little kingdom. Instead, he was a selfish, dangerous man with a voice none could refuse.

“Yes, Highness,” Dulcie droned. “I promise I will send her to you. I will not rest until she goes to your bedchamber.”

I cursed. The fire flickered in fear of my anger. The image disappeared. That stupid man! How could he be so cruel to compel such a promise from my sister? The force of his power would ensure the literal truth of her words. Dulcie wouldn’t rest until I went to the Prince. And if I didn’t go, she would die from lack of sleep.

3. The Cinder Girl

My sisters came to supper in the kitchen at sunrise. Minette and Sylvia were cheerful and chatty as magpies. Dulcie did not sleep well under even the best of circumstances, and that morning she had shadows like bruises beneath her eyes.

I set our food on the table: meat, eggs, tea and toast.

“Mmm! Ember, this is perfect.” Sylvie sang. “It is not so tasty as a good d’Oran breakfast, but there is no better cook in Tierra Del Maré than you!”

Sylvie meant it as a compliment. Truly. Though her countrymen had been ready to burn her at the stake as punishment for her affliction, she still believed (as do all d’Orans) that nothing in the world is as good or as beautiful as the art, language, food and culture of Terre d’Or. I imagine I would feel the same way, were I forced to leave Tierra del Maré. How fortunate for me that *my* homeland would never be so backward as to persecute one of her citizens for the *loup* or any other unwitting manifestation of magic.

“How goes the royal visitation?” I asked.

“Do not ask me,” Minette answered, “for I shall only chatter on about the Prince. He’s so charming—“

“And so handsome!” Sylvie interrupted.

“...And so clever and so kind,” Minette continued.

I looked to Dulcie, but she said nothing. Her face was pale and tinged with green as though she might be ill.

“...But when I think about it,” Sylvie continued happily talking of the Prince, “I do wonder where he got his lovely face. I’ve seen old Justinian. The man has a nose like a hawk’s beak and eyes set so deep, his sockets might be empty for all I know.”

“And all that dark hair!” Minette complained. “The king always looks in need of a shave.”

“So does his wife!” Sylvie giggled. “But it isn’t surprising. She’s a distant cousin, right?”

They looked to me, the only native to Tierra del Maré, to settle the question. “The queen is the king’s second cousin.”

“You see!” Sylvie took a great gulp of her tea and swallowed it in a hurry. “His parents both have hawk noses and brooding eyes and too much hair on their cheeks, but the Prince...Oh, he’s golden and perfect.”

I had lived my whole life in Ciú Dellos Reyes. I was a fool not to have seen it before. “It’s the curse! The curse makes him appear handsome, the better to make people love him.”

Minette shook herself, seeming to wake from her daydreams of the Prince. “Ember, you look happy at the news.”

“Yes,” I smiled.

“When you showed us to the parlor the day we first arrived, you had the same wicked smile. Tell us what you are thinking.”

“I have just figured out how to break the geas the Prince put on Dulcie, and how to make sure he never sees me.”

“You knew about it?” Dulcie sobbed. “I’ve been trying so hard not to say anything to you, but I keep hearing it in my head: ‘You must tell her to come to me.’ I thought I would go mad!”

“Don’t fret, Dulcie,” I said, trying to sound as gentle as Minette and failing utterly. From my lips, the words emerged as an order. “The curse is strong, and the Prince is wise to its uses. He’s right, I must go to him.”

“No! You mustn’t. Once he has you, he won’t let you go. There’s something mad about him, about the way he wants you. I could almost feel it, like a lash against my skin, when he said your name.”

“To break a geas, one need only obey the letter of the promise. I’ll go to his bedchamber, and he’ll never know I’ve been there.”

“How?” Minette asked.

I opened my mouth to reveal my clever plan, to tell my sisters I could hide myself in an illusion and the Prince would never know me. But I remembered how persuasive the Prince could be. “You’ll have to forgive my secrecy. I’ve already said too much.”

My words made Dulcie cry in earnest, for no matter how loyal we four were to each other, the Prince could make traitors of us at any moment. I rose from the table, and went back to the cookshed.

That day, I became the Cinder Girl.

I made an ink of chicken's blood and charcoal, and painted sigils on my hands before writing the words of my spell ninety-nine times on ninety-nine scraps of paper. I fed the paper to the fire. When the ash cooled, I worked it into my hair, skin and clothes until it smothered the smell of my skin and my red hair was gray with it.

The secret to a good illusion is not to change too much, for illusion alters appearance, but nothing else. You can bespell a large man to appear as a small one, but his footprints won't change. He will still bump his head on doorways and take up the better part of a bench when he sits.

When I had donned the illusion, I looked in my old brass mirror and a Cinder Girl stared back at me. She was pretty in a dull sort of way with wide blue eyes and wheat-colored curls. She'd all of her fingers and she didn't walk with a limp. Her face wasn't afflicted with my orange freckles, or with my cold expressions and sly smiles. I would have to learn to hide my prickly demeanor on my own, though. Magic cannot alter personality.

To complete my disguise, I wove a little spell of forgetting into my illusion. It was simple and subtle—a whispered suggestion to forget Ember the Witch. A breath of old memory to make anyone who did not know me well believe the Drayman's daughter had always been golden and pretty, sweet and kind. It would not work on those who had formed

a strong impression of me, but it would be enough to blur the memory of my presence in the minds of passing acquaintances and nosy neighbors.

I gathered a bucket of kindling and coal and went upstairs to the Prince's bedchamber. I was almost to his door before I remembered to tuck the moonlight pendant beneath my bodice and shift. Sunlight overpowered it, but it might betray my illusion in darkness or weak candlelight.

The Prince was sprawled across the blankets, naked and perfect. He was asleep, so I let myself look at him. The vial of moonlight between my breasts kept the worst of his curse at bay, but it couldn't stop the natural lust that coursed through my body at the sight of so fine a masculine nude.

Sylvie had said he was fair, but his hair appeared quite dark to me. I wished he were fair, for I liked dark men better, and I didn't want to like the look of him at all. It must have been the magic of his Charm that made me perceive in him every feature I considered handsome.

I tried to detect the edges of his illusion. I looked at the outline of his body against the blanket. He was taller, perhaps, and bigger framed than he appeared. He appeared to have broad shoulders and smooth, golden skin, his chest lightly sprinkled with dark hair. His torso was muscled to perfection, neither too much nor too little. His cock lay long and thick against his muscled thigh, sated and peaceful as he slept. I

imagined the size and the girth of it when he grew hard, and shivered at the thought of taking it into my body.

He stirred. I hurried over to the hearth and made haste to light the fire. It had been years since I'd lit a fire by mundane means, and the task took twice as long as it should have.

When I turned from the hearth, I found the Prince awake and watching me. He evinced no shame in his nakedness, even though his cock now stood at attention. "I haven't seen you before."

I was surprised he spoke to me. Nobles rarely deign to notice servants, and he was the noblest man in the land, save his father.

I looked down, feigning embarrassment I didn't feel, and made a clumsy curtsy. "I'm sorry to have disturbed your Highness. Please forgive me. I'll be on my way and let you sleep."

He looked me over once and then again. His eyes lingered, as though he liked the look of the Cinder Girl. "You needn't leave." There was seduction in his words, in their shape, sound and source.

I took a step toward him with no conscious thought. I meant to run for the door, but my feet brought me to his bedside instead. He caught my hand and pulled me down to sit on the bed beside him. "You're a pretty thing, aren't you?"

"Your Highness flatters me."

He drew my face forward and kissed me. I did not know what to make of it, except that I liked the feel of his lips. I'd thought a man with

no need to woo women would be careless when he kissed, but the Prince was as careful as an uncertain suitor. His lips were gentle over mine. Caressing, exploring, seducing. I felt the brush of stubble from his cheek though I hadn't seen so much as a shadow of beard on his face.

His tongue brushed against my lips. I would have opened them for him, but he drew away. "You taste of ash." He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and I was, unaccountably, hurt by it.

If he'd insulted my face or form, I would have shrugged it off, for they were illusion and thus no part of me. But I spent my days and nights near fire, listening to its whispers, Working magic with its light. I always smelled of ash and smoke, and probably tasted of it, too.

"I'm sorry to displease your Highness." I began to back away, meaning to gather my tools and flee his presence as soon as I could.

Like something separate from his body, his hand reached after me. "Don't go."

My missing finger burned as though I were back in my mother's parlor watching it crumble in the flames.

"Come here, let me touch you."

His curse came upon me like the slide of snake's scales across my ankles. It tickled my skin like a herd of millipedes scampering up my arms. I wanted to brush it off, to burn it away, but I could do nothing to free myself without betraying my disguise.

He took my hesitation for fear and tried to soothe me. "I'm not trying to get under your skirts," he whispered.

I glanced down at his cock. It was thick and half-hard, making a liar of him in the plainest way possible. He had the grace to look ashamed as he drew the corner of the counterpane across his sex.

My missing finger burned, shooting shrill jolts of pain up my left arm. I made a fist of my hand and shook my head. "My mistress will beat me, Highness, if I abandon my tasks."

"Then you must go." He opened a box on the bedside table and withdrew a silver coin. "For luck." He tossed the hateful thing at me, forcing me to catch it before it hit me in the face.

The coin itched against my bare palm, and I thought I could feel it writhing in my grip like a burrowing worm. I wanted to throw it back in his face, but instead I made a low curtsy and thanked him before fleeing his chamber.

Dulcie was asleep with her head on the table when I returned to the kitchen. Sylvie sat beside her, petting her hair.

"You did it," Sylvie said when she heard my footsteps on the floor behind her. She turned to face me, and her expression crumpled in confusion at the sight of the Cinder Girl. "Who are you?"

If I told her the truth, the Prince might later compel the answer from her. Though I hated to do it, I smiled at my sister and lied. "I'm here at the behest of your sister, the witch, to protect you."

“Are you a witch, too?”

I tried to make my voice kind, but there’s no unthreatening way to admit to witchcraft. “Yes.”

Sylvie’s face grew fierce. “I went to find her in the cookshed, but found only blood on the floor. What did your help cost her?”

“Not life, limb, nor any of her blood. Rest easy, girl. She’ll be back when it’s safe.”

Sylvie backed down and let me pass, though a low growl rumbled from her throat as I walked by. When I got outside, I threw the Prince’s coin over the back wall into the alley.

* * *

I was still awake when the cookshed fire began to flicker that night, for it is difficult to fall asleep while wearing a face not your own. I fed the fire pitchy twigs, and it again showed me the Prince’s bedchamber in our house.

He had Dulcie and Sylvie with him. They were clothed, and the gathering looked more like an interrogation than a tryst. My sisters sat side-by-side on the Prince’s bed, blank-eyed and witless from the force of his charm. The Prince paced, restless as a caged animal.

“She didn’t come to me.” He turned to Dulcie. “You promised you wouldn’t rest until she came to me, yet you slept today.”

“She must have come to you.” Dulcie’s voice held no inflection.

“I waited and watched. How could she have escaped me?”

I hated that he’d asked so general a question. Dulcie tried to resist answering for as long as she could, but at last she spoke, halting and through clenched teeth. “Our sister is a witch.”

“You mean she is a Wise Woman,” the Prince corrected. “We honor Wise Women here in Tierra del Maré, not witches. You d’Orans are too ignorant to tell the difference.”

Sylvie shook her head, bristling at the insult to her homeland. “No, she’s a witch, if ever there was one. She cut off her own finger and made the Witch’s Bargain with the spirits of Fire. She writes her spells in blood. When Lord Campos blacked my eye, she sent a plague of rats and ravens to drive him from the city. And she keeps a little doll made in his image to poke with pins or singe with fire whenever she needs amusement.”

“Is she wicked?”

“What does wicked mean? She watched the ravens harry Campos out of town, and laughed to see the wounds they pecked into his skin. But she did it to protect me. When Minette married her father, we meant to rob him blind. She struck a bargain with us to treat him well. She helped us. We’re sisters now and I do not doubt she loves us.”

“She loves?” The Prince’s voice betrayed an interest I’d not expected from him. “How?”

“Yes, she loves. Not easily, but fiercely.”

The Prince turned away from my sisters and the fire. I couldn't see his expression. He was silent for some time, a man caught deep in thought. Finally, he kissed my sisters chastely, upon their brows. “You've both done well.” He pressed a silver coin into Sylvie's limp palm and curled her hand around it. “You may go.”

My sisters left the room and the Prince sat down in silence, but still I fed the fire fuel and watched him. I didn't know what he wanted from me, or why. I could think of no reason why he might care whether I loved, except a reason I did not want to contemplate.

Most witches walk a darker path than I. They sacrifice more of their flesh and blood for power; they barter their emotions for knowledge. Some even kill their children. Witchcraft's unsavory reputation is far from undeserved. You'd be safer to assume all witches are incapable of love, than to risk your life and heart by loving a woman who loves power above all else.

Every lover I've ever had has gone to my sisters first to ask after me. They asked if I was kind or cruel, if I was forgiving or vengeful, and if I was loving or hateful. They asked how much I cared for power. Only when they were sure of my nature did my suitors dare approach me.

The Prince, for all the power of his awful curse, had sounded like a suitor when he interrogated Sylvie and Dulcie. It softened me toward

him, to think he might want me as something other than a whore. And that frightened me.

4. The Stableman

The Prince became a patron of our house over the following weeks. He held parties there for his courtiers and cronies. He ate, drank and slept beneath our roof. He filled our coffers with his largesse. The nobles who followed him replaced my sisters' paste gems with real ones. They showered gifts on my sisters and tried in vain to bribe the Prince's new favorites to whisper recommendations in his ear.

Minette hired more servants and bought back our carriage. The Prince sent her a quartet of matched blooded mares to pull it, and a team of trainers, tigers and stablehands to mind the mares. Overnight, it seemed, our house was full of strangers.

I made a nest of blankets and old featherbeds in the cookshed, and slaughtered a witch's dozen chickens to paint the outside walls and door with an aversion spell. I felt like an exile, huddling in the cookshed night after night. Hiding behind the Cinder Girl's false face each day. Not even my sisters knew me, though they took pains to see me comfortable because they thought the Cinder Girl was a sister witch who had done Ember a service.

I was comfortable and well fed but lonely, though all who met me were kind. I began to loathe the Cinder Girl, her sweet eyes and golden hair. I hated how kindly the neighbors treated her and the way the new footmen flirted with her without reservation. The Cinder Girl showed me

the world I'd missed. It wasn't until I donned her face that I truly understood what my magic had cost me.

The first night of the full moon fell two weeks after the Prince first came to our door. He didn't come to our house that night, but stayed at the palace, locked behind three sets of doors. I'd always laughed that he was so frightened to show his true face, but after donning the guise of the Cinder Girl, I understood his precautions.

Not candlelight nor firelight nor any spell known to man or beast can preserve an illusion on the nights of the full moon. Any who saw me from dusk to dawn would see my true face—my red hair and freckles and cold black eyes. My twisted foot and missing finger. They would know me for a witch. And worse, they would know I was the girl for whom the Prince's servants searched.

When his geas on Dulcie failed to bring me to him, the Prince employed a far more powerful tack than mere magic. He had sent his guards around the neighborhood with velvet purses stuffed with silver coins. If I had not covered my tracks so carefully by twisting and blurring my neighbors' memories of me, their greed and their desire to please the Prince would have overwhelmed any fears they had of my retribution. I would have been lost.

But after two weeks of the neighbors' confusing stammers, vague recollections, and adamant assertions that the late Drayman's daughter was not a redheaded witch, but a sweet Cinder Girl with golden curls,

the Prince's search had slowed. His guards still asked after me, but they did not seem confident of my existence, much less the eventual success of their search. I overheard a guard confide to one of the housemaids that he feared the Prince had gone a little mad.

The Prince's guards' doubt and confusion worked in my favor, for they did not look too closely at me or any of the other servants. If they had, they might have noticed the dragging, twisted print my right foot left as I trod across the rain-soaked mud of the rear yard from the cookshed to the kitchen door. They might have noticed stray red hairs dusted in ash that sometimes clung to the hood of my cloak when I hung it up to dry on the wall beside the kitchen hearth. They might have noticed that I left the print of only four fingers upon anything I grasped with my left hand.

Perhaps I became careless in those weeks the Prince's men scoured our neighborhood and failed to find me. Perhaps I grew overconfident in the protection my illusion provided. Or perhaps I was merely foolish. Whatever the reason, the mistake I made on the very first night of the full moon could easily have cost me my freedom, had any of the Prince's guards been present to see it.

Around midnight, I heard a commotion in our small stables. I called a lick of flame into my hand and went out to investigate. When I opened the door, I saw a man in the Prince's livery struggling to quiet a

panicking horse. The mare broke free of him and charged toward the now-open stable door. Straight for me.

I closed my fist around my witch's flame. It disappeared with a swirl of smoke and the faint scent of singed skin.

"Close the door, you idiot!"

I jumped inside and pulled the door shut after me. The mare reared when she saw me, her great dark eyes showing white around the edges. She struck with her hooves and clipped the side of my head. I staggered and tried to keep my balance lest I fall beneath the horse's feet.

A firm hand pushed me out of harm's way. I fell against a stall door and onto my knees. My vision flickered with stars.

The stableman stepped in front of the frightened horse and grasped her bridle. He pulled her back onto all four feet and then put his face close to hers. He whispered and soothed the beast as he blew his breath into her flared nostrils. "Shhh, girl. All is well. All is well."

His low voice was so gentle I almost wished he were talking to me. After a while, the mare quieted and the stableman led her back to her stall.

He seemed calm until he turned to face me. "Don't you know anything about horses? You could have been killed!" His voice never rose above the level of conversation, but I could hear the anger in his words.

"I'm sorry." I rubbed the bruise on my brow. My sight faded in and out. "I heard a commotion and thought I could help."

“Help? You come into my stable stinking of ashes and dried blood and dash beneath the hooves of a panicked horse. Are you mad?”

Belatedly, I remembered the moon. I looked down at my hands. They were drawn all over with the ink I’d made of blood and charcoal. I wasn’t the Cinder Girl, I was a mad witch caught out on the night of the full moon.

I tried to stand, to flee the stable, but a wave of dizziness punished me for my sudden movement. My vision faded again, and when it returned, I was laying in a bed of straw with my head in the stableman’s lap while he wiped the ash from my face and hands. He paused a moment when he encountered my missing finger, but he didn’t seem upset by it. He continued his task with gentle determination.

“Little idiot,” he muttered as he worked, unaware I’d waked. “You should have known better than to come around a panicked horse. I would have taught you better if you were mine.” His voice was terse, and I detected the strain of worry in it. His hands were gentle on mine.

He smelled of straw, saddle leather and horses. It wasn’t an unpleasant scent. And the feel of his hands holding my hand was even less unpleasant. Indeed, it felt lovely.

I sighed. I sighed like a stupid virgin dreaming of her ideal man. Even now, I still cannot believe I did such a thing. I wanted to sink into the ground with shame.

He leaned over my face and met my gaze. He wasn't handsome or particularly well groomed, but I liked the look of him. He'd a narrow face with a crooked nose that had probably been even more garishly prominent before it'd been broken. His skin was swarthy, not golden or sun kissed, but olive by nature and darkened by hours in the sun. His eyes were large and black and kind, but set so deep as to make him look imposing unless you were standing very close to him.

His hair was black, wavy and too long, except where it was too short. The front section looked like he'd cut it with a hunting knife to keep it from falling in his eyes. He could have done with a shave, too. His cheeks were dark with two days growth of beard.

"Mistress, are you well?"

"Well enough," I said, struggling to rise. My body made a liar of me: I wobbled on my feet.

He urged me back down to the straw and sat beside me. "You aren't well. You may have a broken skull. I should fetch a surgeon."

"No." I tried to shake my head, but the motion made me dizzy. "Let me go lay down. I'll fix it tomorrow."

"Fix? A broken skull is more than a bandage and a folk remedy will fix."

I thought of the surgeon and his steel knives, and struggled harder. "No surgeon!"

“Easy,” his voice was soft and very like the voice he’d used to calm the panicked mare. “Very well. I’ll spare you the surgeon, but you can’t go to sleep tonight. Head injuries are tricky. You mightn’t wake.”

He took my left hand between his. If he thought anything of my missing finger, he kept it to himself. “Talk to me. Tell me something of yourself.”

“Must I?”

“Your voice will slur if your brain starts swelling. The quality of your words will warn me if you’re too badly injured.”

“Very well.” I tried to sound annoyed, but he’d taken my hand between his and I liked the feel of him. “What shall I talk about?”

“Start with your name.”

“Ember.” I cursed myself as soon as I heard my voice. I should have told him something else, but I’d no other name at the ready. I’d never given the Cinder Girl a name. When the people spoke to her, they called her “mistress” and when they spoke of her, they called her *ella*. I’ve heard the word is a name in other lands, but in our tongue it means simply “she” or “her.”

Fortunately, my name seemed to mean nothing to him. “Good evening, Ember. I’m Rian.”

Rian. It was a common nickname for Adrian. Most mothers in Ciù Dellos Reyes named at least one of their sons after the Prince, and every

third Adrian Juste called himself “Ian” or “Rian” in a futile effort to distinguish himself from all the others.

“Hullo, Rian. Do you have a second name?”

“Nothing distinctive.” Ah. He was Adrian Juste the Stableman. How common. Not that I’d room to brag. I’d been Ember the Drayman’s Daughter, and now I was Ember the Witch. When it comes to names, we commoners are an unimaginative lot.

“So you’re a stable hand for the Prince, are you?”

“I tame and train horses and hounds at the palace—” He cut himself short. His lips tilted up. “You’re asking me to speak when you should be speaking. If you don’t want to talk about yourself, then tell me a story.”

His thumb rubbed along my hand, and I gave in almost immediately. I told him a story I’d heard from an herb witch who lives out in the country. It concerned a novice witch who’d bespelled her hidden forest cottage with an illusion to make it look and feel like the dream home of any who beheld it.

The witch was quite pleased with her Work until two greedy children stumbled into her clearing. Having already made paupers of their parents through their unrivaled gluttony, the children wandered the forest in search of small animals and large insects with which to feed their endless appetites.

When the little gluttons beheld the witch's house, they perceived a structure made of candies and cakes, for they could think of nothing besides food. The witch returned from her herb gathering to find the two little monsters gnawing on her shutters like a pair of rabid squirrels. She pulled them off her house and showed them the truth behind the illusion.

She offered to cure them of their unnatural hungers, but they'd run into the woods to escape exactly that fate. They fled the witch, only to return on the night of the full moon when the moonlight would protect them from her magic. They cut her to pieces, cooked her in her own oven and ate her.

Rian laughed. "I think I've heard another version of the tale. One with a different villain and a happier ending."

"Oh, this one has a happy ending, too," I answered, smiling despite the ache in my head.

"It does?"

"Yes. The greedy children were later eaten by bears."

He wiped his brow. "What a relief."

"You're laughing at me."

"Not in the least. I like your perspective."

Perhaps I was lonelier than I'd realized, for I found myself watching Rian's smiling lips as he spoke, and wondering what they felt like. I knew I was a fool, to be going soft over the first man to treat me kindly in a

long time, but I couldn't help it. Perhaps my injury was worse than I'd thought?

A sharp pinch against my wrist recalled me to the present. "Ow! Why'd you do that?"

"You were falling asleep."

"I wasn't. I was just thinking."

"What about?"

I blushed. Plague take it—I *blushed*! I haven't blushed since I was a child, but I blushed at the thought of admitting my attraction to him. And well I should have blushed. I was filthy, contused and clad in bloody, ash-covered remnants of the spell I'd used to craft the Cinder Girl. He was the first attractive man to pay me any attention in many months, but I'd given him no cause to be attracted to me. He thought he was saving my life.

"N-nothing."

He met my eyes and smiled. I liked how his smiles came so easily. He raised my hand to his lips and slowly kissed my palm. He kept his lips against my skin so long, I could not doubt his meaning or explain the kiss away as simple kindness. I closed my eyes and savored the warmth of his lips.

"Ow!" I jerked my hand away and glared at the white mark his teeth had left in my palm. "You bit me!"

"You were falling asleep, Ember."

"I wasn't. You kissed my hand. I was enjoying the sensation."

"You were?"

I stuck out my chin. "I was."

"Even though I'm a rude, wicked man to take advantage of a girl who might have a broken skull?"

I laughed. "*Because* you're a rude, wicked man. Charm and goodness are overrated."

"In that case..." He kissed me. He did not kiss me softly as he should have, considering my injury. He kissed me hard and I adored it.

When he moved to lift his lips from mine I opened my mouth and lured him back to a deeper kiss. The bruise on my head pounded in an aching echo of my racing pulse. I didn't care.

My eyelids fluttered closed as he deepened the kiss.

"Ow!" He'd bitten my lip. I glared up at him and he tried to keep a straight face as he said, "You closed your eyes again."

"You're *supposed* to close your eyes when you kiss."

"I prefer to keep mine open."

I shook my head in disgust. "Did you enjoy your up-close view of my freckles?"

"I like them. They're all over your face and neck. I wonder how far down they go."

I unknotted the ties to my bodice. "I could show you."

He stilled my hand with his. "You'd be all over bite marks by morning. You look like the type of woman who closes her eyes when she comes."

"I—"

He covered my lips with his fingers. "Don't tell me if I'm right or wrong. I'll be awake all night thinking of your answer."

"I thought we were supposed to stay awake all night."

"Not like this." He pulled my hand against the front of his breeches. His cock was hard as a steel rod, and hot despite the fabric between my palm and his skin. I traced the thick shape of it down to his balls, and up again to its rounded tip.

I whistled. "The stallions must hang their heads in shame when you walk through the stable yard."

"You flatter me."

"Not by much. You're lucky I like a challenge."

He groaned. "Have you no mercy?"

"I'm not known for it."

"What about patience?"

"Sometimes."

"Then please be patient until you're healed. I wouldn't forgive myself if I hurt you. I'll come back another night and..."

"And you can examine all my freckles as closely as you like."

“You’re cruel. A week. Your head should be healed enough in a week.”

“I’m a witch, Rian. My head will be healed an hour after sunrise, even if I have to bleed out every chicken in the henhouse to do it.

My new suitor looked uneasy. Few people like to be reminded we witches deal in power borne of spilled blood and severed flesh, though it is nothing less than the truth.

I met his eyes. “If small mention of my witchery worries you, your worries shall only grow worse as you know me. I’ll speak plainly, and if you do not like my words, you shouldn’t return tomorrow.”

“No.” He shook his head violently, as though the mere thought of not returning angered him. “Nothing will keep me from you.”

“Wise Women may work their wonders with the power of a pure soul and noble intentions, but we witches are not so kind. I steal power, Rian. I steal life. Every insect I crush beneath my heel, every chicken I slaughter for the dinner table, every life I take becomes fuel for the fire that serves me. For the fire I serve.”

“Do you kill anything bigger than a chicken for your power?”

“The occasional goat or pig.” And once, a noisy dog, but I didn’t mention it. Rian loved dogs almost as much as he loved horses. I did not want him to get the wrong idea about me.

“As long as you don’t kill people, I don’t care where your power comes from, or what you do with it. I only care about seeing you tomorrow night.”

I let go the breath I’d been holding. “After moonrise,” I suggested, not wanting him to see me in the guise of the Cinder Girl.

“As you command.”

Rian bade me farewell before sunrise. He was hours late returning to the palace stables.

“Will they beat you?” I asked as I watched him saddle the mare that had kicked me. She was calm beneath his hand, for there was something soothing in his presence.

He laughed. “Me?” He made his face seem serious. “Even if they did beat me, I’d count the pain of the lash a worthy payment for the pleasure of your company.”

“And if the lash left marks, it would be nothing you didn’t deserve.” Smiling, I thrust out my arm to display the little bruises from where he’d pinched me to keep me awake. “Look what you did to me.”

Perhaps he tried to look ashamed of himself, but all he managed was a quivering smile. “You will have to think of me today. Every time you look at your hand or your arm, you’ll think of me. And when the other servants see you, they’ll see the marks I left on your neck and know you have a lover.”

Before I could answer, he jumped up on his horse and rode to the back gate. "Tonight," he called, turning over his shoulder to wink at me.

"Tonight," I whispered.

* * *

Even had the day passed in the blink of an eye, nightfall would not have come soon enough to suit me. It was a struggle to be patient through the day. When at last the sun set, I heated a tub of water for my bath. I washed every grain of ash from my hair and brushed it until it shined almost as bright as fire. I scrubbed every flake of blood-ink from my hands and arms and cut my ragged nails.

I felt like a love-struck girl when I found myself donning my favorite dress for Rian, but I didn't change my clothes. The dress wasn't fine or fancy as the ladylike dresses my father had wanted me to wear. It was a simple dress of fine-spun rose-colored wool that fell almost to the ground and hid my twisted foot from sight. The shift I wore beneath it was edged in silk ribbons of the same color. Sylvie had once told me the color softened me. It made freckles seem less garish and made my dark eyes seem less cold.

I considered powdering my cheeks to hide my freckles or dosing my eyes with belladonna, as my sisters did, to make them look loving and limpid. What a foolish picture I would have made: the awkward

redheaded cripple in her best wool dress, her face pasty with powder, her eyes as wide as a cretin's. I left my face bare.

I met Rian in the stable when I heard his horse ride into the yard. I didn't feel so bad about my preparations when I saw him in the moonlight. He'd shaved his stubble and combed his hair. He still looked scruffy at the edges, but I liked him that way.

He did not greet me with the studied politeness and nervous reserve which often mark the first few outings of a courting couple, but instead cupped my cheek and kissed my lips as though we were lovers, reunited. I sighed and leaned against him, my body and will as malleable as warm wax. He could have had me then, without a word spoken between us, but he broke the kiss and looked into my eyes instead.

"You're beautiful." He sounded so earnest, I almost believed him.

I shook my head to disagree with him, but he put his hands on my waist and lifted me onto his horse. He mounted a moment later and settled his body behind mine, bracketing me with his arms as he reached forward to grasp the reins. All the words in my head scattered like hens fleeing a hawk, and I hadn't the wit to gather them up again. I could think of nothing but the feel of his hard thighs behind mine and the heat of his muscled chest against my back.

He took me to a tavern in the city where there was music and dancing in a courtyard outside. There were players in the courtyard, and we laughed and jeered at the folktale they enacted. It was the tale of the

stuck-up princess who so despised common work, she died of spite after pricking her finger on a spinning wheel when her affianced Prince took her to his peasants' summer Fair. The tale ended happily, though, for the lazy princess had a bastard sister who'd been working as a maid for seven brothers in the woods. She had the beauty of her royal sister, but not the princess's haughty ways. The Prince married the bastard sister, and everyone lived happily until they died.

When we left the tavern, we lied and said the wine made us cling to each other as we staggered back to Avenida Delpalacio leading Rian's annoyed horse behind us. I said it was the wine gone to my head that made me pull Rian into the pile of straw outside his horse's stall instead of taking him back to my bed. But the truth was, I couldn't wait. The pleasant diversions of the evening had been frustrating delays. All I'd wanted since he'd kissed me was to feel his naked skin beneath my hands.

Soon enough, I got my wish. I lay naked on a blanket of our discarded clothing, and he stood naked above me. His body was long, tough and lean. Every inch of him spoke of his work. His thighs and calves were thick with muscle from riding; his arms were strong from hauling tack. His stomach was flat and lean from holding himself upright in the saddle. His hands were rough and strong from gripping rope and rein.

He smiled as he watched me look at him. His eyes twinkled, and his mouth held a hint of mischief.

“I have a confession,” he whispered as he moved his body to cover mine.

I tried to keep my face neutral, but the phrase “I have a confession” is not one you want to hear from a man you are about to fuck. “Tell me.”

He put his lips close to my ear and whispered, “It’s not the wine.”

“Pardon?”

“I didn’t have a drink of wine all night. I’m drunk on you.”

“You flatter me,” I chided.

“No, I speak the truth.”

He kissed me and I forgot about conversation. He kissed my cheeks and my lips, my neck and my eyes. He kissed the crooks of my elbows and the backs of my knees, and every other secret part of my anatomy.

I do not want to be indelicate as I relate this, for there is a limit to the details you should tell even your closest friends. If you tell too little, you may appear as a prude, but if you tell too much, your friends will forever regard you as a person of peculiar tastes. Truly. Dulcie once told me the intimate details of an evening she spent with the Grand Duke. I haven’t been able to eat carrots, since. And I used to adore carrots.

I must hasten to assert, Rian and I did nothing that would put you off your favorite fruits or vegetables. My hesitance stems from concern you might think me a braggart if I told all. So, with your pardon, I'll take the high road and describe my nights with Rian in as delicate a manner as I'm able.

How about this: I've heard the republics on the coasts of the Midlands Sea worship in their pantheon a goddess whose dominion is the act of physical love. Women and men lay with the priests and priestesses, and in so doing, they touch the divine. Lovemaking is their holy communion wherein they worship with both soul and flesh. In pleasing their partner, they please their goddess.

This is how it was with Rian. He worshipped me; he blessed me. He took my body both with reverence and with hunger. I prostrated myself before him; he gave himself to me, entirely. Together we touched the divine.

No? Too vague and airy? Very well, I shall be blunt. He licked and sucked me until I screamed his name. He fucked me until I couldn't see straight. He rode me hard and made me love him for it.

I did not think what I felt for him was love, not at first, for we spent only a few nights of each month together. Everyone knows servants have little free time for themselves. The palace staff was no exception.

The Prince was particular about his stables and his horses, and Rian's days at the palace were long and tiring. The only nights he could

get away were the nights of the full moon when the Prince locked himself in his rooms at the palace in order to hide his true face from the world.

“The Prince should not force his servants to work so hard.” I complained one night as we lay together in my bed.

“He doesn't force them.” Rian's reply sounded faintly defensive.

“No, his curse does it for him. He asks you to work from dawn to dusk, and you are happy to comply because his curse makes you love him above all others—including yourself!”

“You're wrong.” Rian rolled atop me and pinned my shoulders to the bed. The fire of anger in his eyes might have cowed a weaker woman, but I met his gaze and waited for him to explain himself. That, alone, seemed to calm him.

“I hate the Prince.” He whispered. “I hate the way all people love him, though none know him. I hate the fields of false smiles that blossom in his wake. I hate the courtiers and flunkies who trail after him, desperate to ingratiate themselves no matter how coldly he treats them.”

The anger in Rian's eyes faded and his gaze grew unfocussed as his thoughts wandered. “It isn't right that one man should command so much unearned adoration, but he never asked for it. His curse does not affect animals. The stables and the kennels are his escape.”

I felt my mouth drag into a frown. “Oh, the poor, *poor* Prince. How terrible it must be beloved by everyone and to always get what he wants.”

“You’re cruel. Don’t you think it must be a peculiar sort of hell to live surrounded by sycophants? Like living in a dollhouse. No matter how perfect your playmates, they are cold porcelain. Soon enough, you would long for the heat, the softness, and the imperfections of living flesh. You would long to hear words and wishes other than your own.”

He quieted and looked into my eyes as though waiting for a response. As though he expected me to agree with him. Had I answered him, I would have noted how he’d gone from hating the Prince to defending him between one breath and the next. I would have complained that he seemed to care far too much what I thought of the Prince.

I wondered what Rian would do if the Prince were to find and claim me. I wanted to think he would fight for me, but my cynical heart knew he would give me up as easily as he’d surrendered his time and his sympathies. No one could resist the Prince’s curse. No one but me.

And I was not certain how long my resistance would hold.

“Ember?” Rian’s voice broke through my brooding thoughts. His hand traced a gentle path along my cheek. “Your expression is dark. What worries you?”

I did not reveal my thoughts to Rian, but kissed him instead. I snaked my hand around his neck and pressed his head closer to mine. We spoke no more that night, and I never again complained that he spent too much time at the palace.

By the time the moon had waned and waxed again, I'd decided it was as well that we only met when the moon was full and the Prince was locked in his rooms at the palace. I did not know how I would explain my disguise, or the reasons for it, to Rian. And the more I came to care for him, the more I came to fear what he would make of the Cinder Girl.

I did not fear he would reject me for wearing a false face, or for deceiving all who saw me by day—no, my worries were far pettier than that. The Cinder Girl was beautiful where I was not. She had golden hair and pleasant features. She had all of her fingers and two straight feet. I do not often dwell upon my looks, but I cannot deny I was afraid my lover might like the Cinder Girl's face and form better than he liked mine.

And so I engaged in another deceit. I kept my longing for Rian to myself and pretended I was content to see him only a few nights a month. His work and my petty worries made both of us grudgingly happy with the scant time we had together.

Besides, who can say whether our time together was not sweeter for its brevity? We had almost six blissful months of stolen nights before I ruined it all.

5. The *Loup*

“Why Master Rian, I would not have thought you were an impatient man.” Rian’s hands didn’t slow in their quest to raise my skirts.

“Only with you.” He buried his face in the crook of my neck and scraped his teeth along my skin. “I’ve been waiting years for you.”

“You exaggerate. We’ve been apart for less than four weeks.”

“Mmm.” He lifted me against the cookshed wall and entered me in one smooth, divine stroke. “I don’t care what the calendar says. It has been too long.”

I agreed with him, but I didn’t want to admit it. I’d been fond of my previous lovers, but not like this. I missed Rian when we were apart. And I missed him for more than just the skill of his hands and the size of his cock.

I missed *him*.

I missed his sly humor and the deep rumble of his voice. I missed the smell of his skin and the comforting warmth of his body beside mine in the night. I missed the gentle whispers he used to quiet horses, and the confident way he put his arm around me when we walked down the street.

He paid no special attention my witchery. He didn’t act as though he had been brave to bed me, and he didn’t strut about like he’d some

special magic in his cock that let him please a witch. To him, my witchery was just another feminine skill, like tatting or midwifery, which had little to do with him. He never asked me for spells or charms, even when I offered. He was never afraid to anger me.

In fact, he liked to make me angry. He would say some outrageous thing and smile as my cheeks grew pink and I argued with him. He would pile absurdity upon absurdity until I was yelling and calling him names, and then he would kiss me, inhaling my heated breaths, running his hands over my struggling muscles.

I wanted to stay angry with him, but there is only one good way to put aroused passions to rest. When he would push me to the bed, or pull me into a shadowed doorway as we walked down a moonlit street, I took my vengeance on his body, licking him or riding him until he shuddered and shouted my name. He was not the only one of our pairing who liked to make their lover lose control.

“Do you think about me?” he asked me when we had taken our pleasures from each other. “Do you think of me when I’m not with you?”

I did not answer, but snuggled deeper into his arms.

“I think of you,” he whispered. “I wake in the night with my cock so hard I hurt. I wake with your name on my lips.”

“I wake wanting you, as well.” It was not a lie, only an edited version of the truth. Betimes I did writhe in my sleep, dreaming of a

lover's touch upon my skin. Such dreams had haunted me since the day I saw the Prince. They haunted me still.

At times, the Prince wore Rian's face, but his kisses were wooing and gentle. The hands I dreamed I felt upon my body had the work-roughened feel of Rian's. But the scaly caress of the Prince's curse always trailed in the wake of Rian's touch.

Sometimes I came to pleasure from those dreams. I shuddered in my sleep with the hot, damp taste of the Prince's magic in my mouth and the feel of Rian's cock stretching my cunt. I felt like a traitor when I woke, and I wept with hatred for the Prince. I wept with hatred for myself.

"I want to spend every night with you, Ember." Rian's words startled me from my dark ruminations.

"Does that mean you will quit work at the palace, and come live here with me?"

"No. I don't fancy life in a cookshed. You should come to the palace and live with me."

"Because the palace provides *such* spacious accommodations for its stablemen, and eagerly welcomes their families and wives?"

"They will make room for you. I shall make sure of it."

"It does not matter what concessions you think you can wring from your employer. I have duties here."

“What duties?” Rian asked. “I’ve never seen you enter the main house. I’ve never seen any other servant come to you with a task. It is almost as if they don’t see you at all.”

“Witchery is complicated.”

He shook his head, as though he could shake thoughts of my witchery from his mind. “You talk too much of witchery. It is ever on your mind. You explain your every action with the words, ‘I am a witch,’ as though it is the whole of you. Just once, I want to hear you say you are mine!”

I had not seen him so possessive before. Of a sudden, I recalled all the times he’d put his arm around my shoulders as we walked on the street. I had always thought he meant to show he was not afraid to love a witch. But his message was more basic. He meant to tell me I was his; he meant to tell the world, *She is mine*.

He took my hands and looked into my eyes. “I love you and I want to marry you. Don’t you love me?”

His talk of marriage panicked me. I imagined standing before the civil justice vowing to love and honor Rian until I died. I would make a liar of myself on the first day of our life together, for I knew I would only honor him so long as I kept away from the Prince.

The Prince’s curse pulled at me constantly. Even with my missing finger and my vial of moonlight, it was a struggle to resist him. It was a

struggle to keep my composure at the sound of his name. I could not touch a silver coin without wanting to run my tongue along his profile.

“Of course I love you,” I told Rian. “In my way.”

“In your way?” He almost shouted the words. “What do you mean, ‘in your way?’ You either love or you do not. And if you love, you love me only. There is no other way!”

“Rian, I—”

He grabbed my shoulders and locked his gaze to mine. “Love is a fire, Ember. Tend it, or it will burn you. Feed it, or it will die and leave you cold.”

I didn’t like the anger in his eyes. It was not a rage I could cure with soothing words or a fevered fuck against the wall. I feared he would leave me, and I couldn’t bear to let him go. “I’m overwhelmed—confused! I never planned on marriage. There are few enough men who would dare to wed a witch. Your proposal is something I could not have imagined.”

“Where did you think we were headed? Did you think I’d be content to see you three nights every month, six on the blue moon? I want you every night, Ember. In my bed and in my life. I will not settle for anything less.”

“I need time to accustom myself to it, Rian.” I pleaded, thinking frantically as I spoke. “Give me until next month. Come to me then, and you will be coming to your betrothed.”

It was a desperate ploy based on an impossible goal. How would I find the key to breaking the Prince's hold on me in a month, when I'd spent the better part of five years searching for just such a cure? I was only delaying the inevitable.

As I'd expected, I had no luck in my frantic, month-long search for a cure to the Prince's curse. I spent hours every day Working at the hearth. I scoured every book and scroll I could find. I ate little and slept less. But the days passed. The moon waned and waxed, and still I found nothing of use.

The problem is, witches are like snowflakes, cold and quite unlike each other. No two witches cast the same spell in the same manner. What works for one will not work for another. And what Work one does, no other can undo.

I could find no solution that would guarantee immunity to the curse Gaetane had laid on the Prince, and if I could not be certain I would be able to resist the Prince, I could not promise myself to Rian.

The Old Wives say the promise of a witch is as sharp as a sword, and as sure as an iron chain. They do not lie, but I did not strive to keep my oaths to Rian for fear of the fate awaiting a witch who breaks her promises. The simple truth is, I would rather have died than to betray him.

* * *

“No offense to you,” Sylvie told me as she gulped down her monthly potion. “But I miss Ember.”

“None taken,” I said, smiling behind the Cinder Girl’s face. “I’m sure she misses you as well.”

“Blech!” Sylvie gulped down the last of it. “And her recipe for this potion doesn’t taste so foul as your does.”

I almost laughed. The potion was the same one I’d always made for Sylvie; the same one she’d always complained about. The difference between the two was only in her mind. It is as the Old Wives say, “Memory makes everything sweeter.”

“Your sister never told me,” I said to Sylvie, “where you bear your scar.” In truth, Sylvie had never told me, and I’d always been curious. Everyone stricken with the *loup* carries a scar from the bite that infected him. Any injury those poor souls sustain after infection will heal as though it never was, but the *loup*’s victims will always wear the mark of the bite that doomed them.

“My scar?” Sylvie drew her brows together in a look of confusion I knew from experience to be utterly false. “I don’t think I know.”

“Come now,” I prodded, emboldened by the stranger’s face I wore. “Everyone with the *loup* has a mark. If you tell me where yours is, and

what it looks like, I may be able to dispense with some of the more unpalatable ingredients in your monthly potion.”

Sylvie hesitated as her hatred of the potion warred with her natural bent for secrecy. She rubbed her left hand on her thigh.

“It’s here.” She touched the inside of her upper thigh through her skirts.

“That is an odd place. Most marks are on the hands, arms or lower legs. Sometimes the neck. What does it look like?”

“Uh. Like teeth marks. Two sets of angry red curved indentations.”

“The *loup* was in human form when he bit you on your upper thigh.”

Sylvie shook her head. “I know what you are thinking, but I loved him! Then he told me he was a monster, and I hated him for deceiving me. He swore it wasn’t so bad, and bit me to prove it.

“But I did not want to turn into a beast. I went to the Priest for a blessing to heal me. The Priest told me the *loup* was my punishment for being a whore. He said the only cure for it was the pyre. He locked me in a cellar while he went to fetch the constable.”

“That is when you fled *Ville des Rois*?”

Sylvie looked down at her folded hands, and I hated my cold curiosity for making her miserable. “I allowed Minette and Dulcie to think it was Raoul, my lover, who betrayed me instead of my own

stupidity. I could have fled with him and let Minette and Dulcie keep their lives in *Ville des Rois*, but I could not forgive him for what he did.

“And when we arrived here, I was frightened to tell Ember. She has such a sharp tongue and she knows how to read. Though she has ever been kind to us, and she always holds her tongue where we are concerned, I did not want to look into her eyes and see she thought me a fool to have fallen in love with a man I barely knew. I think it might be worse than if she said it aloud.”

Awkwardly, I embraced Sylvie and patted her back. “There, there. Ember would not have thought you foolish. Every woman knows decisions are complicated when it comes to the heart.”

My words were a lie. Before meeting Rian, I might have thought Sylvie foolish. Now, I thought her brave.

“I miss Ember,” Sylvie muttered as she wiped her tears. “When do you think she will return?”

“I would imagine she’ll be back when the Prince tires of you and your sisters’ services.”

“Oh, if only that were true. He tired of our services early on. He hasn’t touched a woman under this roof since his first night with Dulcie.”

“But he’s here almost every night the moon isn’t full. What does he do?”

“He lives like monk! He doesn’t gamble or fuck. He just sits in our best set of rooms staring out the window at the rear yard. I swear he must have memorized the view by now. There’s nothing but the kitchen garden, the stables, and the cookshed.”

I shivered at the thought of all the times I’d met Rian out there in the moonlight. My only protection was that the Prince stayed locked in the palace on the nights of the full moon. I’d no need to fear he’d seen us, but the knowledge he was often in residence made me uneasy.

“He is becoming a hermit.” Sylvie mused. “His courtiers and cronies are worried for him. His cousin, the Grand Duke, plans to throw a ball in his honor, to cheer him.”

“I’ve heard the noblemen and merchants who frequent this house complain about the balls and soirees their wives drag them to. I did not think men went to them willingly.”

“This will be a Harlots’ Ball,” Sylvie confided. “His Grace means to invite every courtesan and lady of dubious virtue in the land so the Prince may choose a mistress.”

“Are you worried? If the Prince chooses a mistress, you might lose his custom.”

“*Pfft!* We never wanted his custom in the first place. Refusing him might have lost us other business. It’s strange, but I don’t think I like the Prince. When I’m near him, I can only think how handsome and perfect he is, and how I would do anything to please him. But once he leaves, I

remember he's sullen and moody. He orders but never asks. He seems to despise us for adoring him, though we cannot help ourselves."

I thought of the time I'd gone into the Prince's chamber to light the fire. I remembered the way his hand had yearned toward me when he'd asked me not to leave. I remembered the gentle, tentative touch of his lips upon mine. He'd not seemed sullen and despising. Beneath the despicable pull of his curse he'd seemed...lonely.

I quashed the thought immediately. I did not want to have sympathy for the Prince. I did not want to wonder why he'd made our house his hermitage. But the questions lingered in my mind as I crossed the rear yard to the cookshed.

I turned to look up at the windows of the Prince's suite. Light poured from every one. The curtains of the third window parted, and I detected the shadowed shape of a man watching from behind the wavering leaded-glass panes.

An idea occurred to me. Later I would come to regret it as I'd never regretted any idea in my life save the one that had bade me disobey my mother and watch the Prince ride down the Avenida Delpalacio. But at the time, the idea represented the hope of freedom from my susceptibility to the Prince's curse.

What if the key to breaking his curse's hold on me lay with the Prince, himself? What if he wore some magic gewgaw I might steal to break his power? What if I used a strand of his hair in an anti-curse

invocation? What if hope for my future freedom and happiness with Rian lay not in avoiding the Prince, but in braving his den and discovering his secrets?

I'd exhausted my other options. I decided to take the risk. Thus, with the best of intentions, I sealed my fate.

6. The Prince

The Old Wives say the road to hell is paved with good intentions. They also tell a tale of curiosity and cats. Though their words of wisdom were much on my mind through the night, I couldn't stop myself from rising well before the sun and sneaking into the Prince's room. I took a bucket of kindling and coal as an excuse for my intrusion, but my real purpose was to snoop.

It wasn't until I stepped through his door this time that I remembered to tuck my moonlight pendant away. With hasty hands, I shoved it down the neck of my bodice, where it lay trapped between my bodice and my shift.

The Prince was asleep on his bed. He was naked beneath the covers, if his bare shoulders were any indication. He didn't stir when I sneaked into his chamber. Nor did he stir when I tiptoed over to the chair beside his window. There were empty wine bottles on the floor beneath the chair, and a messy stack of books upon the table beside it—five or six books, at least.

The careless pile of books was worth a fortune! Each book was lettered and bound by hand, copied over by monks who went blind from their task before they had so much as a single gray hair in their tonsures.

There was a book of tales, and one of poems. There was a discussion of magic and witchcraft. I leafed through it, but it was a translation from Terre d'Or, and very biased against witches. There were two books on mathematics, and one on the building of bridges and other functional constructions. And beneath those, I found a slim volume with no title or illuminated frontispiece. It was half-filled with script written in an exacting hand. I flipped through the pages until a drawing caught my eye.

Of the two facing pages, one page held a drawing done in pencil and traced in ink while the other was thick with text. The drawing was very nicely done. The subject was a young woman of common costume and appearance, but I could see why he had chosen to sketch her. There was something compelling in her dark eyes and sharp features.

I wondered if I knew her. She seemed very like someone I'd met as a child. It took me several moments to recognize her face as my own. Not my face now, but my face as it had been five years ago, more hopeful in attitude and softer in appearance.

It is no wonder I didn't recognize the Prince's drawing of my face—I'd worn the Cinder Girl's face for months. I had not been so cold in my manners then as I was now and my eyes hadn't held the slightest hint of wickedness.

I turned my attention to the text on the page facing the drawing. It read:

I get everything I want, but not her. I will her to come to me, but she does not. It only makes me want her more.

When I find her, I shall woo her and make her love me, for I have never been loved by anyone who'd the ability to refuse me—who had ability to resist my curse. It is possible, I suppose, that she might refuse me. She might rebuke my intentions and rebuff my advances. She might even decide to hate me.

I have never been hated. I might like her hatred almost as well as her love. Perhaps I might like it better. What a pity love and hate are opposites. It would be so fine to have both from her, to feel the fire of her passion in its every possible form.

Night after night, I imagine her naked in my bed, eager for me, angry with me. Fighting me, seducing me. I imagine her as a battle to be won, a woman to be wooed. I want to be both harsh and gentle with her. I want to seduce her each day and conquer her each night.

Some would say it is madness to want a woman this way, but I think it must be love. Not the tepid, fickle love of which the poets sing—the love that forms or fades with kindness or cruelty. No, this love is something more divine—like the love of a god, both vengeful and benign. It is as constant as the sea. And as beautiful. As dangerous. As mysterious.

She is the only woman to ever refuse me. And yet, I want...

He was mad—obsessed, insane. *And yet, I want...* And yet, I wanted. My heart beat faster when I closed the book than it had when I'd picked it up. I could feel the flush of arousal on my cheeks and the liquid pulse of desire heating my blood.

My reaction was not the result of the Prince's curse, but of his haunting words. Words weave a spell, betimes. They create images in our minds that heat our loins and sway our souls. And though I didn't love the Prince, though I feared him, I couldn't extinguish the heated images his words had kindled in my imagination.

The Prince stirred in his sleep, but did not wake. His sleep-roughened voice said, "Ember."

I started at the sound of my name and kicked over the empty wine bottles at my feet with a clatter. His eyes opened in earnest, and his voice spoke more firmly. "Ember."

I waited for the burn of the moonlight pendant against my skin, but it was trapped between my shift and my bodice. I couldn't draw upon its strength. The nerves of my left hand screamed in pain from my burning finger, but the pain was not enough to halt my feet. I went to him.

He looked darker than I remembered. His brown hair seemed almost black. His sun-kissed skin seemed almost swarthy. Still half

asleep, he sat up in bed as I approached, and the blankets fell away from his muscled chest.

He pulled me down across his body and kissed me. This time he did not complain I tasted of ash. This time there was nothing tentative in his kiss. He ravaged my mouth, forcing my lips apart and plundering me with his tongue until I moaned and writhed against him.

“You are she,” he whispered, as he traced his lips along my neck. “You wear a different face, but you answer to her name.”

He was overwhelming, irresistible—my nightmares come to life. I tried to resist him by thinking of Rian, but as in my nightmares, my memories of Rian twisted into my perception of the Prince. He looked perfect, but his smooth-seeming hands felt callused, and rough as Rian’s hands against my skin. He smelled of straw, horse and leather, just as my Rian did. The Prince’s curse wove memories of my lover into a noose upon my will. I struggled like a prisoner on the gibbet, twisting my body in vain to catch a last breath of freedom before my doom overtook me.

I struggled with him, but soon enough my traitorous hands ceased pushing him away and began pushing at his blankets to bare more of his body for my hungry touch. He tugged my chemise and bodice down to bare my breasts—but, alas, not low enough to free the moonlight pendant—and covered them with his lips and hands, suckling until I moaned and clutched his head to urge him closer, still. His words had

been elegant upon the page, but his seduction was too hungry to be kind.

His hands made fast work of my skirt, bunching it around my waist. He ripped the center-seam in my loose-fitting drawers and plunged his fingers inside me. My cunt was drenched already, and eager for his touch. I moaned at his penetration, and rolled my hips to urge him deeper. His long, strong fingers moved within me and without, hurried but unerring in their pursuit of my completion. I screamed when it came upon me, bucking against his hand.

My tremors hadn't yet faded when he took his hand away from me to grasp my shoulders and roll me beneath him. He skewered me on his cock with no forewarning. The sensation wasn't pain, exactly, but it was no kindness. I hated that it made me come again.

His movement was rough, hungry and relentless. He'd been so eager to fuck me, I'd thought he would come quickly. But he went on and on. Desperate and unflagging, he rode me hard and set a brutal pace that drove all thought from my head.

I don't know how long I writhed beneath him, listening to the heavy oak headboard knock divots from the plaster wall. My body wasn't mine. It shuddered and moaned at his command. He wrung pleasure after pleasure from my protesting nerves.

If making love to Rian had been an act of worship, this act was a blasphemy. And the creature rutting on me was a demon that sucked away my soul with every sigh I ceded to his touch.

Rian! I cried as I thought of him. I had not wanted to betray him. I felt horrid and heartless to have so easily fallen into bed with another. Hot tears slid down my face, and singed black spots into the sheets.

At last the monster rutting on me found his completion. He shouted my name and came inside me. His hot come seared me like a brand. Or perhaps the sensation was just shame, eating at me like acid for my betrayal of the man I loved.

Loved? Did I love Rian? Of a sudden, I was amazed I hadn't known it earlier: I loved Rian not "in my way," but in every way. I wanted to weep at the thought. What good was it to give my heart, when my body was so willing to betray me?

I felt a gentle touch against my cheek and opened my eyes to find the Prince staring down at me. His dark eyes were beautiful as the night sky, and his perfect face bore lines of worry at my sadness. "Why are you crying?"

I shook my head. "I should have fed my heart to the Fire instead of my finger. Had I done so, I'd not regret betraying the trust of a good man."

"Ember," he laid a gentle hand against my cheek. "You haven't—"

"I haven't just lain beneath you and screamed with joy as you fucked me? I haven't just spread my legs for a man other than the one I love?" I shoved him off me and bounded out of bed.

"You fucked me as though you had a right to. But you had no right. I love Rian. You made a traitor of my body, but my heart and soul are his!" I turned and ran.

"Ember!" He reached out to grab me, but my skin burned his hand when he touched it. He let go with a muffled oath. "Wait!"

His curse tugged at me, but rage gave me strength where loyalty and love had failed me. I barreled through the door and careened down the stairs. I heard the rumble of his heavy footfalls as he chased me. He shouted at me, ordering me to wait and to listen, but I forced it from my mind. I lost him when I ran into the servants' hallways. I knew them blind and he'd no light. I emerged downstairs and hid myself in the root cellar. I stayed there for three days, until the moon was full and I knew the Prince would return to the castle.

It was midnight on the first night of the full moon when I emerged, bedraggled and still wearing the clothes I'd worn when I ran from the Prince. Rian sat with his back against the cookshed, a skin of wine in his lap and a worried look upon his face. I began to cry the instant I saw him.

He pulled me into his arms and whispered in the low, calm voice I'd heard him use with panicked horses. "Darling, where have you been?"

I've been so worried for you." He kissed my filthy cheeks and smoothed my matted hair.

"Don't." I hated that he gave me tenderness when I deserved scorn. "We mustn't see each other again. I didn't know it, but I'm heartless. I've betrayed you, Rian, and I cannot guarantee I won't do it again."

He cupped my cheeks in his hands and looked into my eyes. "I love you. You haven't betrayed me, you've proved you love me, too."

I shook my head, even as he tried to calm me. He didn't understand. "No, Rian. Go find a woman you can trust. Go find someone who has all her fingers and who won't frighten your horses. I've given away too much of myself. Too much, but not enough."

I pushed out of his arms and ran into the night. I did not run quickly, for my twisted foot makes me less than nimble, but I knew the back alleys from the years I'd spent avoiding the Prince. Though Rian tried to follow me, I soon lost him in the labyrinth of the city.

I spent two weeks roaming the Dark Woods to the east of the city. One night I found a ring of pagan stones and made a bonfire there. I spent long hours with my knife clasped in my hands trying to determine which part of me I could cut out that would allow me to resist the Prince and yet love Rian. But the traitorous and necessary parts were one in the same, my heart.

Near dawn the fire woke me with a message. I fed it dried leaves and small twigs until it built a scene in shades of flame. The front parlor

of our house on the Avenida Delpalacio. Minette sat in her blue leather chair. Sylvie and Dulcie sat side by side on the gold velvet settee. All three wore blank expressions, and I soon saw the reason. The Prince stood in the room with them, his face a burning mask of determination.

“I wish your sister would stop running from me. No matter where I search, I cannot find her.”

“You can’t find a witch if she doesn’t wish to be found,” Dulcie murmured.

“No, but I can make her come to me. Swear you will bring her to me. Swear you’ll bring her to me at the palace. The palace is protected by the magic of the Old Ones. Her witch’s spells will not work within its walls. I will know her when I see her. I will make her stay and listen to me.”

My sisters tried to protest, but the Prince silenced them with a wave of his hand. “Promise you will bring her or take your own lives as forfeit for your failure. And make sure to tell her of the promise you’ve made the instant you see her.”

Outside the city, in my circle of stones, I ground my teeth and hated him for using everything I loved against me. I’d never before understood what drove other witches to sacrifice or renounce their families and friends, but I understood it now. Love made me weak, and worse, it exposed those I loved to unnecessary danger.

If I had not loved Rian, I wouldn't have fled the city in shame and guilt at betraying him. If I had not loved my sisters, the Prince would not have been able to use them to force my return.

My sisters unwillingly repeated his words. I knew I had to go back.

7. The Return

Dirty and bedraggled, I stumbled through the kitchen door at dawn. Dulcie was there, trying in vain to light a fire for her tea. I winked at the stove, and fire sprang to life for me, as it always had.

Dulcie made an inelegant noise of surprise, and whirled to stare at me. “Is it really you, Ember? Are you returned?”

“Yes.”

“I must tell you—”

I silenced Dulcie with a shake of my head. “No need, I know. You must bring me to him.”

“How did you—?”

“Don’t I always know? You mustn’t worry on it, for he was clumsy when he extracted the promise from you. He did not specify a time limit, which means you may comply whenever you wish, even if that day is a decade from now.”

“Oh. I was worried.” Dulcie sat down as I poured hot water over the tealeaves. “I did not want to betray you again.”

“You never betrayed me.” I brought the teapot and our cups to the table. “The Prince’s curse is strong. There is little anyone can do to resist it.”

Dulcie nodded, but her expression remained sad and drawn. She'd shadows beneath her eyes, and a hint of gauntness to her usually round and rosy cheeks. I worried for her. "You look awful. Are you sick?"

Dulcie's eyes widened and her cheeks went red with anger. "I don't know why I missed you, Ember. You have no tact! I don't look so bad; I just haven't been sleeping well. Between the neighbor's stupid howling dog and worrying about the Prince, I've scarcely had a wink of sleep for the past week."

Though few would suspect such delicacy of a courtesan, Dulcie is a very light sleeper. I once heard a tale of a princess who slept on a hundred featherbeds but was kept awake by a single pebble caught beneath the bottom mattress. Her servants grew so annoyed by her constant complaints that one night they pushed her from her mountain of mattresses, and she broke her neck and died. Dulcie had a similar inability to sleep, but a much sweeter disposition. We would have done anything to help her.

Sylvie, Minette and I went to great lengths to prevent disturbances of Dulcie's fitful few hours of sleep each night. Sylvie used her wiles to convince the mayor of Ciú Dellos Reyes to ban noisy carts and hawkers from the Avenida Delpalacio. Minette made sure Dulcie had the quietest room in the house. A year past, when one of our neighbors refused to muzzle his noisy dog, I killed the thing to shut it up.

“I shouldn’t be mad at you,” Dulcie shook her head. “It’s true, I look a mess. Since you’re back, do you think you could talk with our neighbors, as you did last time, and convince them to send their dog away?”

“Of course,” I smiled and poured her tea. “You should go upstairs and try to rest. Everything will be just fine. I promise.”

After finishing my tea, I drew myself a bath and scrubbed the dirt of travel from my body. I did not bother to don the Cinder Girl’s face again, for the Prince knew the truth of it now, and he was the one from whom I’d meant to hide.

The chatelaine of the house next door was a jolly creature, round of cheek and belly, and friendly to everyone she met. Her ruddy face went white when she opened her kitchen door to find me on her stoop.

“Witch!” She exclaimed in a startled squeak. “Uh, I mean, Mistress Ember! It’s so good to see you again after such a long absence. How may I help you?”

“My sister says your dog is keeping her awake.”

The housekeeper shook her head frantically. “Oh, no. We haven’t a dog. Not after what happened to the last one. We’ve heard the howling in the night as well. We thought perhaps *your* household had acquired a dog.”

I shook my head and thanked her before going on to interview our other neighbors. I spent the better part of the morning asking after the

phantom dog and finding no clues. Everyone had heard howling the past few nights, but none knew who owned the dog or what it looked like.

Dispirited, I returned to our kitchens and found them crowded with servants. Our house was unusual among the great houses of the Avenida Delpalacio in that our servants worked from afternoon to midnight, and did not live within our walls. We were not, however, unusual among other well-heeled houses of ill repute. In the finer emporiums of commercial fornication, clients pay for secrecy as much as for sex. Few men and women of wealth like it when their bedsport becomes the stuff of gossip, and full-time servants are inveterate gossips.

The chefs and chef's assistants, the butler, the footmen, the maid and the scullery scamp, all stopped their work to gape at me when I stepped through the kitchen door. They had heard of the red-haired witch. The neighbors had gossiped of me, and the Prince's lackeys had offered them money for news of my whereabouts.

I glared at them. "Don't you all have tasks to do?"

They all turned away, even the chef. "You," I snapped my fingers at the chef. "Fix me a tray for lunch and have it sent to the front parlor."

You are thinking I was rude in my treatment of the servants. But you try to endure the shaky, frightened stares of half-a-dozen pairs of eyes and tell me how you well like it. Two weeks before, when I'd worn the guise of the Cinder Girl, these same people had treated me with courtesy and kindness. Now they trembled and scuttled out of my way as

though they were afraid my shadow would fall on them and sour their luck. I was insulted.

I found Sylvie and Minette playing chess across the tea table in the parlor. Sylvie usually kept apace in their matches, but she was losing badly today. She seemed distracted and worried.

“Ember!” Sylvie jumped up, kicking her silver velvet skirts out of the way before crossing the room to throw her arms about my neck. “We were so worried when you left, and so relieved when Dulcie told us you’d returned. She is asleep upstairs. It must soothe her spirit to have you back at home.”

“I drugged her tea.”

Minette laughed. “Oh, it *is* good you are returned. I know you’ll figure out a way to thwart the Prince.” She paused to look at the chessboard. “And I think he knows it, too.”

Minette did not often allow her face to betray emotion, for such shows of feeling would eventually lead to wrinkles. But now the painted black lines of her eyebrows drew together in thought. She picked up her skirt with one powdered hand and paced over to my mother’s blue leather chair. Sylvie and I kept quiet, knowing the thought must be important if Minette would risk a wrinkle for it.

Finally, she said, “I wonder if the reason the Prince will not let you alone is *because* you defy him.”

“You’re not saying this is my fault!”

“No, no. I simply mean he is a man to whom it is impossible to say no. After a lifetime of such treatment, any sane soul would come to crave an honest opinion.”

I remembered what the Prince had written of me. *I will her to come to me, but she does not. It only makes me want her more.*

“You are right, Minette. He wrote that he wanted me because I might refuse him.”

“It goes further. Does his curse affect animals?”

“No, only humans.”

“Yet he spends his days caring for animals in his stables or his kennels. Any woman who sees his face will gladly spread her legs for him, yet he spends his coin to pay for whores. The Prince craves honest interactions, my dear. Even when you deny him, you provide a response he desires.”

“What a mad idea! I thought men liked to be flattered by their bed partners.”

“Most do, but not all,” Sylvie said. “Men may become aroused by the strangest things. I once had a very proper-seeming gentleman from *L'Aingleterre* who begged me to paddle his arse and call him naughty. And, did Dulcie ever tell you of the evening she spent with the Grand Duke and a zucchini?”

“Oh, Sylvie,” I buried my face in my hands, “please do not recount the tale. I *like* zucchini.”

Sylvie's painted pink lips curved up into a mischievous smile. "So does the Grand Duke."

My sisters broke into gales of laughter at the hot flush of embarrassment on my cheeks. They have always enjoyed shocking me. How I'd missed them! After my blushes faded, I laughed, too.

Our moment of merriment was cut short by a wailing howl from the street outside. Minette's expression turned sour. "It is that dog again. I swear! If I have to endure one more night of howling I shall hire a hunter to track it down and kill it."

I sneaked a glance at Sylvie. Her face seemed pale beneath her paint, and her expression looked drawn. Her hands lay in her lap, but she'd twisted her handkerchief into a rope and she held it taught between clenched fists.

I could not bear to see her in such a state. Another howl broke through the night, and Sylvie shivered at the sound.

"You should invite him in," I told her, "before someone does him harm."

"Him, who?" Minette asked. "The dog?"

"The *loup*."

Immediately, Sylvie began to cry. She ran from the room, and I heard the low creak of the front door opening, and the clack of her wood-heeled shoes on the front stair.

Minette looked me over with an arch eye. "You have a gift, Sister, for reducing people to tears."

"And you have a gift for returning them to good humor. You know Sylvie loved him?"

"I suspected as much. I was with the constable when the Priest came to report her as a *loup*. I know Raoul did not betray her."

"You never told her you knew?"

"Sometimes, we need little lies to save our pride." She pinned me with a hard stare. "And sometimes we need big lies to save our souls."

Minette was not speaking of Sylvie, anymore.

"You think a lie will save me from the Prince?"

"All this time, you have resisted his curse and it has made him want you. But if you were to nod and smile for him, acquiesce to his every whim and desire, you would be no different than anyone else. He would soon tire of you."

"You mean I should spread my legs for him, even though I love another?" I hated to say the words, hated the way my heart leapt at an excuse to give in to his curse.

"You already have, Sister." Minette paused. We heard two sets of footsteps ascend the stairs. She smiled. "You can only be with your lover if you rid yourself of the Prince. Do not think of acceding to the Prince as faithlessness; think of it as a noble sacrifice."

She put a gentle hand on my shoulder. "The Harlots' Ball is set for next week, at the dark of the moon. Let us dress you as a courtesan and take you to the palace. It will fulfill the promise the Prince forced from us and I do not think his obsession with you will last a day if you act as vacuous in his presence as everyone else does."

* * *

"Where is Sylvie?" Dulcie asked as she stirred a spoonful of honey into her morning tea. "She is usually the first of us to break her fast."

"She is locked in her bedchamber with her lover," Minette replied.

"Sylvie has taken a lover?" Dulcie's eyes were wide. My sisters had among them a sort of code they used to describe the people they fucked. Men or women who paid were their "gentlemen" or their "ladies;" and those whom my sisters chose for pleasure alone were "lovers".

"But Sylvie has not taken a lover in years. Not since we left Terre d'Or."

"Not since Raoul," Minette agreed. "And he is her lover, now."

"Never say she has forgiven him! He would have seen her burnt at the stake."

Minette took a few moments to explain the truth of the situation to Dulcie. I was glad to know she'd been as unaware of the true story as I. I

did not want to think my sisters had deliberately left me out of their confidences.

“If he never meant her harm, then I am happy they are reunited.”

Dulcie concluded.

I frowned. “You both are too forgiving.”

“So says the witch,” Minette laughed. “You never forgive anyone.”

“I do, too.”

“Oh? Then I suppose you have given up sticking pins in the little doll you made of Lord Campos after he blacked Sylvie’s eye.”

Minette knew me too well. The hex doll was to me as a favorite toy is to a child. I always kept it near. I poked it with pins or singed it with fire whenever I felt bored or peeved.

Lord Campos had become a wreck of a man since he’d crossed me, but it was not revenge enough. I intended for him to suffer the rest of his life for hurting my sister. You may think me cruel, but I have never felt the least bit of remorse.

“Do you forget Raoul gave Sylvie the *loup* a purpose?” I asked.

“He is a *loup* born,” Minette countered. Though all civilized people view the *loup* as an affliction, there are tribes in the east who consider the *loup* as a blessing, a mark of favor from their gods. “He likely thought he was doing her an honor. And besides, he did it for the love of her.”

“His intentions do not change the results of his actions, nor the fact that he forced the fate upon her.”

“No,” Minette agreed, “but it is the argument Sylvie will use as an excuse to forgive him.”

I wanted to disagree, but I have found over the years no man or woman alive who knows human nature quite so well as Minette. “Do you think so?”

“She loves him,” Minette answered. “For five years she has been melancholy, with her sad smiles and longing sighs. I have no doubt Sylvie will decide it is easier to forgive him than it is to go another five years without him.”

I thought of Rian and wondered if he would forgive me for betraying him with the Prince, once I confessed the truth of it. He loved me. Would he find it easier to take me back than to repudiate me? For the first time since I’d fled the Prince’s bed, I dared to hope things might end happily.

8. The Ball

The dark of the moon approached quickly, and with it, the Harlots' Ball. Minette closed *Maison d'Aube* to all custom in preparation for the ball, and it was just as well. Sylvie had renounced the life of a courtesan and shocked us all by wedding her long-lost lover the day after their reunion.

Sylvie's Raoul was tall and rawboned with pale hair and wary, wild eyes. He was a taciturn man. When he spoke, he spat his words out in short bursts, as though he could not stand the shape or taste of them upon his tongue. He seemed ill-at ease with the clatter and chatter of human activity. He bristled at the sound of cartwheels on cobblestones and the way voices echoed from ceilings and walls.

I did not understand at all why Sylvie loved him, until I saw him look at her. Raoul watched Sylvie as though she was the sun and the moon and the stars drawn down from the heavens and bound into flesh. He smiled when she smiled, and when she did not smile, he did everything he could to cheer her.

I wanted to dislike him, but Sylvie loved him. What kind of sister would I be, to hate the man who made my sister happy? I couldn't even hate him when Sylvie told us she was going away with him.

"He cannot abide the city," she explained. "He wasn't born to it, and it grates against his nerves. We will find a place in the country."

“A place where humans don’t hunt wolves? I do not believe such a place exists.”

“We will find a place.” Sylvie’s voice was firm. Her expression softened, though, and she said, “I will stay to help you prepare for the ball. Once this business with the Prince is past, you must introduce your lover—what is his name?”

“Rian,” I said. I hated the note of melancholy yearning in my voice.

“He was named for the Prince?” Sylvie’s lovely features crinkled with a slight frown. “How terrible that your lover should bear such a hated name.”

“I do not think of it,” I said. “Rian is ‘my Rian’ and the Prince is a stranger.” I knew the words were a lie when I spoke them. The Prince was not a stranger, far from it. I knew him too well—not because we had exchanged confidences but because we were too much alike. Long shunned for my witchery, I could easily imagine how alone he must have felt, faced with false smiles and Charm-compelled adoration every day of his life.

As much as I hated his desire for me, I understood it. Rian had been right those many months ago when he’d speculated on what a cruel fate it would be to be surrounded by people who loved you though they did not know you. The Prince only wanted what other men took for granted. A friend. A lover.

He had chosen the wrong way to achieve his desire. He had chosen the wrong woman. His threats and highhanded behavior had done nothing to endear him to me. But he'd never needed to ask for anything in his whole life. Is it any wonder that, when he set his mind to wooing a woman who was less susceptible to his charm, he made a mess of it?

"Well," Sylvie continued, stretching a smile onto her face. "I would like to meet your Rian before I go, if only to be certain he is good enough for you."

"If I am good enough for him," I corrected. "And if he forgives me for betraying him." I felt tears welling in my eyes, and looked away from Sylvie to hide them.

"Ember, you are crying!" Sylvie hugged me and patted my back. "You mustn't lose hope. From everything you have told me of your Rian, I know he will understand. I am certain he will forgive you, if only you'll forgive yourself."

Forgive myself. I wondered if I ever could. In time, I might forgive myself the weakness that had let me succumb to the Prince's curse and spread my legs for him that morning in his bedchamber. I'd never meant to betray Rian. But my plan to rid myself of the Prince was a deliberate betrayal. Even if it freed me from the Prince's attentions, I would still have knowingly betrayed Rian. And that, I could not forgive.

* * *

I let my sisters dress me for the Harlots' Ball, for the night I would give in to the Prince. I emerged from my bath naked as a newborn, and they remade me from my toes to the crown of my head. There was no magic in it, only artifice. Sometimes artifice is the greater power.

Sylvie teased and styled my hair. Minette slathered my face, arms and décolletage with ceruse to cover my freckles, before dusting the whole of me with white powder. Dulcie wrapped necklaces of diamonds, pearls and glass gems around my neck. She tugged at the chain of my moonlight pendant. "Are you sure you want to wear this?"

"I've never taken it off."

Dulcie added another string of glass beads to hide it, and smiled, satisfied with her work.

Next, Sylvie gave me white silk stockings tied with red ribbon garters. And for my feet, Minette produced a pair of shoes in white satin, studded all over with glass gems in tin settings.

"They'll look like diamonds in the candlelight." Minette held the shoes up for my inspection. "And here is the best part." She tipped the right shoe up to show me that the inside was crooked, to support the twist in my foot. From the outside both shoes looked almost equal.

Clever Minette also had lace gloves for my hands. The left one came with a wooden finger to disguise my missing one. It was perfectly carved and painted to appear as powdered skin through the lace.

“How lovely!”

“I had the carpenter do it.” Minette explained. “I don’t believe this is the first he’s made. Come now, let us get your clothes.”

To clothe me, my sisters first draped me in a linen shift as thin as a liar’s promise. Over the shift, they strapped lightweight panniers, followed by linen petticoats and an underskirt of silk charmeuse in the palest, prettiest pink I’d ever seen.

“They call it Last Blush,” Minette explained. She spoke of the lovely color, which came from a berry that grows in the Alts. The berry is a subtle poison. Even with careful training, a lifetime stirring vats of dye drives the dyers mad. This is why you will often hear d’Orans declare someone to be “mad as a red-fingered dyer.” They will also say someone is “rich as a red-fingered dyer,” for fabric dyed with Last Blush is quite expensive.

Next came a corset of whalebone and thick coutille followed by an overskirt and bodice of white silk brocade figured in gold and pink with the *fleur d’or* pattern, which is popular in my sisters’ homeland. The corset made my waist seem as thin and fragile as the stem of a wineglass, and it pushed my breasts up to somewhere just beneath my chin, offering them temptingly, like fresh buns on display in a baker’s case.

Sylvie and Dulcie pinned the edges of the overskirt aside with glass broaches to match the glass gems on the shoes. Sylvie brought out a

frothy little collar of starched pink silk, this dyed also with Last Blush, and pinned it round my shoulders with two more broaches. The collar framed my face and neck, but did nothing to hide the vast expanse of powdered décolletage laid bare by the low-cut bodice.

“Loosen the ties so I can pull this bodice up,” I complained. “I can see my nipples over the top.”

“Rouge for those, my dear,” Minette offered me the little pot wrought of glass and gold. “Last Blush pink to match your skirt. Apply it to your lips and cheeks, as well. The color enflames men’s passions.”

“It’s poison!” I protested.

“Only a little,” Sylvie said. “For beauty. Like belladonna. You’ve heard the Whore’s Remedy, haven’t you?”

“Is it like the Witch’s Bargain?”

“You always think of witchery,” Dulcie laughed. “The Whore’s Remedy is this,” she took up the rouge pot and recited, “*One pinch for your beauty, two teaspoons for his sleep, a cup to solve your problems and make his widow weep.*”

I laughed. “And I thought witches were cruel.”

“We all do what we must to survive.” Minette tilted my chin up. “Hold your eyes open, dear, while I apply the belladonna.”

The candlelight seemed very bright after she put the drops in my eyes, but fortunately my sisters had finished their ministrations, and all

that remained was for me to see was my reflection. Dulcie drew the scarf away from the silver-backed looking glass.

I did not know the woman who faced me. Her hair was powdered until it seemed a very pale rose, and piled high in soft waves upon her head. Her face was pale, too, except for her limpid black eyes, the red slash of Last Blush upon her lips, and the round, false flush of girlish pink against her white cheeks. Her breasts, powdered pale and revealed to tops of her rouged nipples, proclaimed her no girl, while the white silk gown stretched over wide panniers beneath her narrow waist made her seem to float above the ground, like a specter.

I looked like a ghost, a dead woman wreathed in white mist.

“You’re beautiful!” Dulcie cried.

“No offense to you, Sister,” Sylvie said, “but I never suspected you hid such beauty beneath your shapeless woolens and your cloak of ash.”

I looked at my white face in the mirror. I did not think it beautiful at all.

* * *

We caused a stir when we entered the ballroom. The other women in attendance (whores, barefaced but for their paint, and ladies masked to preserve their reputations) wore passable imitations of the d’Oran style, but none had quite mastered the combination of delicacy and

grandiosity that distinguished the high style of Terre d'Or from garish imitation. We must have seemed like pale ghosts floating on clouds of ruffles and lace, crowned by misty swirls of powdered curls. We must have seemed beautiful, for the men came running and the women's whispers turned ugly.

"My lovely little cabbages! My darling pumpkins!" I recognized Dulcie's gentleman, the Grand Duke. Though we'd not had a real war since before the Prince's birth, the Prince's younger cousin wore a military uniform of dark blue, bedecked with red ribbons and gold medals. He held out his arms, as though he meant for us to approach him.

"The Grand Duke seems over-fond of vegetables." I whispered to Dulcie behind the cover of my lace fan.

"Ember! You've a filthy mind. 'My little cabbage' happens to be an endearment in Terre d'Or." Dulcie whispered back, her face the very picture of affronted innocence. A moment later, she broke into a fit of giggles.

"Who is this lovely?" The Grand Duke asked, inclining his head to me.

"Our sister, your Grace. The one whom the Prince asked us to bring."

I opened my mouth to greet him, but Dulcie prattled on. "She is a mute."

I snapped my jaw shut.

When the Grand Duke turned away to greet a passing acquaintance, I grabbed Dulcie's shoulder and hissed, "Why'd you say I was mute?"

"It was a favor, Sister. They only ever talk about themselves, and now you've no need to pretend you were listening by answering."

"Oh. Thank you."

The Grand Duke turned back to us and offered his arm to Dulcie. "Come dance with me." She took his arm and he began to lead her to the edge of the ballroom.

"The dancing is the other way."

"Come dance with me outside in the shadows," he cajoled.

"But I've barely seen the ball."

The Grand Duke smiled. "I'll make it worth your while."

Dulcie blew us a kiss and let herself be led away.

After some minutes, Minette and I found ourselves amid a growing circle of gallants. Many of them talked at me, telling me tales of their prowess. They puffed up, proud as kings, when I smiled. Their breathing quickened when I blinked my dark, drugged eyes at them.

They paid me fulsome compliments, noting the fineness of my skin and the delicacy of my form. They said beauty such as mine must be protected from the vicissitudes of the world. One offered me a carriage, promising that my feet would never tread on cobbles again. Another

offered me a house and servants so I would never need share my home with any but the man who loved my beauty more than a flower loves the sun. A third, who was not so rich as the others, offered me his heart on a silver platter and his affection for eternity.

The poor fool. I almost took him up on it. He could keep his affection, but oh, how the Fire would have loved his heart! I smiled and he sighed, thinking I favored him.

"I say, is something on fire?" One of them asked. The air smelled of smoke.

Hastily, I turned my thoughts to matters other than the power I might harvest from a freely given heart. I turned my eyes back to the men, wondering what other false promises they would spin for me. They had fallen silent and begun to back away, bowing as they went.

Rian stood among the fading crowd, watching me with dark and hungry eyes. I blinked and he wavered like a dream. Like a nightmare. The man before me was too perfect to be my Rian. His dark hair was neatly combed, his jaw clean-shaven. His hawkish nose had never been broken. He wore the Prince's finery.

It was the Prince, draped in the image of my lover. It wasn't until I saw the Prince that I realized how well and truly I loved Rian. The Prince's curse would make him seem perfect in the eyes of any who saw him. And to make the Prince perfect in my eyes, his curse had made him appear as a better-groomed version of my estranged lover.

“Ember.” He said my name. I heard it echo in my soul. He held his hand out to me, and my body went to him, though my heart and mind screamed against it. The phantom of my missing finger felt hot as smoldering coals. I looked down at my left hand. The wooden finger in my glove was black and burnt.

He took my right hand, and drew me into the figures of a dance. I didn’t know how to dance, but my body moved for him, perfect and without misstep. There came places in the dance where he should have given my hand to other partners, but he didn’t let me go. He kept me in his arms, eating me with his eyes as we moved together.

He drew his finger along my jaw, and it came away white with paint and powder. “I don’t like you this way,” he said. They were the first words he’s spoken since my name.

“They tell me I am beautiful. I thought men liked beauty.”

“This isn’t beauty, it’s lead paint and artifice.”

“What do you like, then? Only tell me, and I shall strive to please you.”

His expression soured at my words. “I dislike your powdered curls and your affectation of a malleable will. I like your hair red, and your eyes burning with the strength to look away from me. I like you as you truly are. I always have.”

His hands roamed my body as he herded me from the ballroom onto a lamplit terrace overlooking the gardens. He fell on me like a

starving man at a banquet, kissing me before we even got outside, rubbing away my paint and powder with his hard lips and rough cheeks.

He shoved me against the ivy-covered wall outside the ballroom. The leaves caught in my hair, and I wondered if the tickling scamper of legs across my skin came from the ivy's insect tenants, or the effects of his Charm. He ran his hands over me, my face my neck, my shoulders, my arms. His lips followed where his hands went, careless of the cloying taste of lead upon my skin.

"When you fled, I was so worried," he murmured. "I love you."

"Love!" I almost screamed. Where once I had felt shame in my attraction for him, I now felt rage at it. I didn't have it in me to play the docile fool. I could not let his curse dictate my emotions. "What do you know of love? I'm here because you threatened my sisters' lives. How is that an act of love?"

"I didn't mean it. It wasn't a binding promise."

"You only meant to make me think it was." I slapped him. "You used your curse to make me fuck you. And you don't care if I'm in misery to have betrayed the man I truly love. How is that love? It seems like cruelty to me."

"Ember, be calm. Listen." He tried to still me with soft words and gentle hands on my shoulders but I pushed him off. For all I hated him, my body still thrilled to his touch. I needed to get away.

I charged down the steps of the terrace and into the shadowed gardens. He caught up to me just before I reached the edge of the lamplight. He grabbed my shoulders. “Ember, wait. Listen. There’s something I need to tell you.”

I didn’t care to listen to him again. My anger flared as fire in the air around me, and he drew back clutching the side of his face as though he’d been burned. His face appeared unharmed. It still bore that hideous, perfect version of my beloved Rian’s features.

“Go to hell.” I turned and fled into the darkness.

As soon as I left the lamplight, my moonlight pendant began to glow. I heard the Prince’s footsteps behind me. I whirled to face him and screamed at what I saw illuminated by my little vial of moonlight.

It was Rian—my Rian, with his broken nose and messy hair—clad in the Prince’s velvet coat and breeches, with a fresh burn marring his cheek and sorrow welling in his dark eyes.

“No.” I shook my head and staggered away from him. “What game have you been playing with me?”

“No games. I love you. Please come back. I wanted you to love me as I am, and not as the curse makes me seem. I shouldn’t have touched you that day in my bedchamber, but I was dreaming of you. I spoke your name, and then you were there, cloaked in a bland illusion.

“It was too long to go a month without you. I was impatient. I wanted you, and took you though you didn’t know me. Twice, I tried to tell you, but you ran away each time.”

“You deceived me.” I felt sick to think of all my agony over the past month. I had betrayed my lover...with my lover. Oh what a little fool I was. What rare joke of fate was this? The man I loved and the man I hated were one in the same.

“I never lied to you. Not once. From the day we met, you knew my name was Adrian Juste. You knew I lived at the palace. You knew I spent my days with horses and hounds.”

“You lied by omission.”

“I spent years looking for you, the red-haired girl dressed in russet silk. The one with dark eyes and no name. It was as if you disappeared. I couldn’t bear the thought of losing you again.”

“You will have to bear it now.”

He reached for me. I held up my hand.

“Altus”

I spoke the word for “halt” in the language of the Old Ones, the tongue of curses and enchantments. It was like licking the edge of a razor blade to say it. Blood poured over my chin as I looked at the frozen figure of my lover. His eyes watched me, but the rest of his body did not move so much as a hairsbreadth. His hand remained outstretched to touch me.

“I will not be another conquest of your curse,” I whispered. “The spell will fade when my blood dries.”

I kissed his cheek. My lips left their print in blood on his jaw. The blood was drying, even as I turned away.

I ran into the gardens, but the tall heels of the shoes Minette had given me kept sinking into the damp earth. I kicked them off, and made much better time for having rid myself of them. I found a fountain on my way to the front gates of the palace, and rinsed the blood from my lips before continuing on.

The guard at the gate came running when he saw me. “Mistress, where is your coach?”

“Perhaps it turned into a pumpkin,” I laughed.

The guard looked at me as though he thought I was mad. I smiled at him and confirmed it. My tongue had not stopped bleeding, and my teeth were red with blood.

He backed away. I walked past him, out through the gates and into the night.

9. The Happily

You are thinking I was either callous or stupid to leave my sisters unprotected though the Prince had twice used threats against them to bring me to him. Believe me, I'd no doubt he would try a third time, and I was not ignorant of their vulnerability. If you insist on finding some sort of lesson in my tales, it must be this: few situations are what they appear to be. Yes, I left the city, but I did not flee the Prince. I left because I needed time and distance to craft my spells of retribution.

I went into the Dark Forest again, and headed east. I was better prepared this time, for I'd returned home to scrub the paint from my face, exchange my finery for sturdy woolens, and retrieve three strands of Rian's—the Prince's—dark hair from my pillow.

After three days travel, I made camp again within the ring of pagan standing stones, and built a bonfire there. By firelight, I sewed a little doll of burlap and stuffed it with ash. I put the Prince's hairs inside before I stitched it closed.

I'd tried to snare a hare or some other small forest creature to use as fuel for my spell, but growing up amidst the crowds and cacophony of city streets has left me loud and clumsy in the relative quiet of nature. I did not catch so much as a mouse. Lacking lesser lives to spend in my spells, I made a fist around my knife's blade and used my own blood to paint features on the little doll.

I was, perhaps, too careful in the likeness I drew of Rian's face, for once I'd finished it I could only hold the doll and weep. I'd sketched the bump in his nose, the crooked tilt of his smile, the way shadows fell across his deep-set eyes.

I remembered the burn I'd left on his cheek when we argued in the gardens. Even now, though I meant to curse him, I hated that I had hurt him. I stroked the doll's opposite cheek. It felt as warm and rough as Rian's unshaven jaw.

The miles between us dissolved. I felt his face beneath my fingertip, his breath against my still-bleeding palm. From his bed in the palace, the Prince said my name, his voice rough with sleep and desire. He sounded as close as when Rian and I had lain in my narrow bed, sharing the same pillow.

He spoke in the same yearning whisper he'd used so many nights in the cookshed after the first frantic coupling was behind us and we lazed sticky, naked and replete, entwined in damp, twisted sheets. He spoke in the whisper that had once roused me to his kisses and made me ready for him though I was yet half asleep.

Memories assaulted me, wrestled with me, and won. I relived the rough, exquisite urgency of his hands on me in the darkness. I trembled in remembrance of the hazy, sleep-muddled fever of my response. And I hated him anew when my mind recalled the acid burn of guilt I'd felt

upon waking from all those passionate nightmares in which my lover and the Prince were one man instead of two.

Anger chased away my memories of pleasure. I unclenched my hands and let the doll fall to the dirt at my feet. As if from a great distance, I heard Rian shout, “No! Please!” He sounded broken and desperate, like a gambler who has risked everything and lost.

The pain in his voice made me hurt for him. For all that I hated him—and hated how he’d hurt me—I could not douse my love, nor smother it, nor starve it. For me, love was not a Fire. It was a thing outside of magic. It was a power beyond my control.

Had I loved Rian less, or hated the Prince more, I might have had the strength to wreak a witch’s vengeance on my former lover. But as it was, I yearned and wept and worried for him—this man whom I would have tortured, if only I could have made myself enjoy it.

After a long, sad moment of self-pity over my soft heart, I retrieved the hex doll from the dirt. I did not let my eyes linger on it, but instead picked apart its seams while reciting backwards every word I’d said to make it.

I scarcely had an hour of sleep after I finished unmaking the doll. Just before dawn, the fire crackled and flared to wake me, as it had done two times before. I did not open my eyes right away for fear of what I would see—the Prince using some new threat against my sisters to force

me back to his side. I rubbed the sleep from my eyes and glared into the fire's yellow light. "What is it?"

The fire flickered and formed a picture of *Maison d'Aube* on the Avenida Delpalacio. The Prince faced my sisters in the front parlor. Despite the veneer of perfection his Curse stretched across his features, he looked rumpled and worn, as though he hadn't slept. Half a dozen soldiers had crowded into the room behind him.

"No," Minette said. "We are done with you. We won't help you find her again."

"She came back to save you once."

"She won't need to save us again."

Rian glared at Minette. Even in the inexact image formed by the fire, I could see the power of his curse burning in the air around him. Dulcie and Sylvie clasped Minette's hands, and all three shook their heads no to the Prince.

Perhaps the Prince was as shocked as I at my sisters' newfound ability to defy him. He paused and regarded them in silence for several moments before concluding, "She gave you some sort of spell to let you resist me."

"We did it ourselves," Dulcie said, a note of pride in her quavering voice.

After another moment of silence, Rian shrugged. "Very well. There is just one thing you must do." He nodded to the soldier standing at his right with a wooden box.

The soldier knelt and opened the box to reveal the shoes I'd worn to the ball. The white satin was stained with dirt and grass, and many of the glass gems had fallen from their tin settings.

The soldier lifted out the right shoe, the one made to fit my twisted foot. "If you would each try this on," he said, "to prove you aren't hiding beneath an illusion."

Oh, my Rian was clever. He knew that no matter how I changed my appearance, I would not be able to change the real shape of my body. No matter what face I wore, the shoe would fit my foot, and only my foot. Had I stayed in the city, he would surely have found me.

Minette removed her slipper. The soldier recoiled. Her right foot was short its smallest toe, and the bandage she'd put there was wet with seeping blood. Sylvie and Dulcie took off their shoes to reveal matching wounds.

"You did this because of me?" Rian asked.

"We did it for her," Sylvie said. "Not that I would expect you to understand."

Rian raked a hand through his messy hair. "I understand. I would do anything for her."

"Anything, save give her up," Dulcie smirked.

“Yes.” Rian’s mouth drew into a grim line. “Anything, save that.”

The fire’s image faded as my sisters each donned the shoe. I sat in silence for a long time after, listening to the crackle of the fire and the night sounds of the forest.

* * *

Some days later, I came upon a house deep in the woods. In my wanderings, I’d passed remote cabins and cottages, which housed hermits and madmen who could not stand to live near other people. But this house was no cottage, cabin or shack. It was a marble-faced three-storey townhouse, the exact twin to our house on the Avenida Delpalacio though it sat amid the ancient trees and brambles of the Dark Forrest.

This house was more than a duplicate; it was the very image of my home just as I would most have liked it. I saw Minette, Sylvie and Dulcie through the parlor window playing cards on the ebony arabesque tea table beside the settee. And if I circled around to the back of the house and looked up at the wavering leaded glass window of the master suite, I would see the shadow of a man staring wistfully out at the rear yard.

It was illusion.

Presently, a woman swept out of the door of the house. She was beautiful, graceful, tall and slender. Perfect in every way. The ghost of my lost finger burned. I closed my eyes.

“That’s very rude of you,” I told the witch.

“Oh,” her voice was melodic as the chiming of distant temple bells. Then, she spoke again. “I’m sorry.” This time her voice sounded weak and strained with age.

I opened my eyes to see a bent old woman standing before a tidy cottage. The old woman had dirt rubbed onto her cheeks, and twigs twisted into her long white hair. She was an Earth witch. Where I had given my finger to the fire for the flames to burn, she’d given hers to the ground for the worms to eat.

“It’s been a long time since anyone but superstitious peasants visited me. Come in and have a cup of tea.”

“This isn’t a visit,” I said as I ducked beneath the low lintel of her cottage door. “I happened on your home by accident.”

“Oh, no,” said the witch filling a teakettle from a tall water barrel. “I’m afraid that’s quite impossible. The only way to find my home is by looking for it. Are you on a quest to right some grievous wrong? Do you yearn for something you cannot have?”

I thought of Rian. Of how I wanted him, but not the Prince, though the two were one in the same. “You’re Gaetane.”

“Oh, my!” The old woman giggled like a little girl and covered her mouth with her left hand. “You must be here about the Prince.” She paused and looked at the kettle in her hands. “Would you mind?”

She set the kettle on the stove and I called the Fire to heat it. The water was hot in the blink of an eye.

“What a convenient skill,” Gaetane sighed as she poured the water over the tealeaves. “I never regret pledging myself to Earth, except when I want a quick cup of tea.”

“How did you know I was here about the Prince?”

“Your twisted foot. Last time I checked my scrying mirror, his soldiers were running all over the city forcing people to try on a cripple’s shoe.”

She poured our tea. It smelled of roses and tasted like dirt. I kept a polite smile on my face as I sipped at it.

“Will you remove his curse?”

“Heavens, no! I wouldn’t dream of it.”

“But he suffers!” I almost shouted the words.

“Not so much as the rest of the world would suffer if he were free of it.”

“What do you mean?”

Gaetane leaned across the table and almost whispered her answer. “Surely you’ve felt it, the power in him? He’d have been a great sorcerer if not for my blessing.”

“He could have been,” I did not bother to hide the acid in my voice, “if not for your curse.”

“What would have happened to Tierra del Maré with a sorcerer-king upon our throne? He would have raised armies. He would have built an empire.”

“And what is so wrong with an empire?”

“The hum of Fate filled the air around him when he was just a babe. It whispered he would be the greatest king in our land’s history. And he would be our doom. When he died, his empire would crumble and all the enemies he’d made would pick our kingdom to bits like vultures on a dying cow.

“Whatever unhappiness I have caused the Prince, it is but a small sin when compared to the greater good of saving the kingdom.”

“But why did you craft the curse to make people love him?”

“Conquerors and emperors crave adoration. They want every woman to desire them, and every man to respect them. They want crowds of citizens to chant their names. I gave him those things so he wouldn’t raise his sword to get them.

“Thanks to me, a man who would have spent his life in pursuit of love and respect won through conquest and fear has, instead, learned to hate the forced adoration of strangers. He doesn’t care to rule. He doesn’t want to conquer lands or wave to cheering crowds. He wants only to have someone who will see him as he is, someone who will love him as he is.”

She paused to smile at me. Her shriveled lips parted to reveal crooked, yellowed teeth. "You're more valuable than an empire, my dear. You should be proud."

"Proud because a mad Prince has made me his obsession and played cruel games with me?"

"Posh!" She dismissed my words with a wave of her gnarled hand. "He loves you. He did not deceive you to be cruel, but to be certain you returned his love."

I looked into the thick dregs of my tea. "You don't know what agonies of guilt I suffered when I thought I had betrayed my Rian."

"And now you suffer agonies of rage. Neither guilt nor rage diminishes your love for him." She reached across the rough wood table and put her gnarled hand on mine. "Come, now. Would it not be easier, and far more pleasant, to forgive the man you love and spend your lives together than to begrudge him and try to live without him?"

I thought of Sylvie and her long-lost lover. I thought of how she had forgiven him rather than live another day without him. I wanted to be truer to my anger than she had been. I did not want to think love could make me so weak

"I do not forgive easily."

"Of course not, you are a witch. You believe you must repay pain with agony."

“Tell me, will you make a little doll of him, as you did with Lord Campos? Will you torture him with phantom pains, with chills and fire?” I looked away, my face hot with shame. Merciless, Gaetane continued, “Or will you punish him, and thereby yourself, by renouncing his company and spurning his love?”

Her little gnarled hand clenched mine like a vise until I thought my bones might break. “How do you punish a man when your heart beats in his chest? How do you hurt your beloved without also hurting yourself?”

I pulled my hand away and looked into my tea. I did not want to think of Gaetane’s questions, for if I did, I knew must surely decide to forgive Rian’s deception. I’d fled him, but I did not want to give him up.

“You will return to him,” she whispered. “You look away from me, but I can see it in your eyes.”

“I might forgive Rian for his deceit, but I won’t spend the rest of my life fighting off his curse. I demand you free him from it.”

Gaetane folded her skinny arms across her sunken chest. “No.”

I lay the back of my hand on the table. A lick of flame burst into being above my palm.

“Are threats your answer to everything? I won’t remove the blessing, but that doesn’t mean you can’t alter it. Current behavior aside, you seem like a smart girl. Use your head instead of your magic, for once. Use light instead of fire.”

My vision blurred. My eyelids drooped as fatigue washed over me like a storm-driven wave. My control faltered, and the lick of flame in my hand burnt me before Gaetane snuffed it with a tea towel.

“You drugged my tea.”

The old woman smiled as the illusion of beauty settled back over her features. “My girl, you’ve said it before. We witches are an untrustworthy lot.” She laid one graceful hand upon my nodding head. “Good luck to you.”

* * *

I woke in my bed in the cookshed, back in Ciú Dellos Reyes. The shed was dark, but my moonlight pendant glowed softly on my chest. I heard a footstep outside, the door swung open, and I was blinded by the sudden brightness of lantern light.

I squinted against the light to stare at the man holding the lantern. The Prince stood my doorway. His perfection tugged at me, sapping my will, soothing my qualms.

Pulling my gaze from his face, I glared at the flame in his lantern, and it snuffed itself to please me. The Prince’s curse faded in the light from my pendant. He became my Rian again.

He set his lantern down and approached me. I noted the new pink scar across his cheek.

“Ember.” He knelt and took me in his arms. I didn’t have the heart or the strength to push him away.

I brushed his scarred cheek lightly with my fingertips. “I hurt you.”

“No more than I hurt you.” He kissed my lips, my cheek, my temple, and my brow. “You came back.” He whispered the words into my hair. I did not have the heart to tell him my return was not my doing. “You love me. You must forgive me.”

I pushed him away. “Yes, I love you, but I hate your curse. And there is nothing I can do to rid you of it.”

“We’ll figure something out,” he growled. “Don’t leave again. I went a little mad without you. I behaved abominably. Your sisters cut off their toes to defy me. The citizens grow tired of being asked to try on your damned shoe.”

“It’s not my fault you behaved so poorly.”

He smirked. “Of course it was. Ask any citizen on the street, and they will tell you their Prince is broken-hearted because he cannot find the woman who stole his heart at the ball.”

I felt my cheeks grow hot with rage. “Of course they will say that, they are all fools for your curse! They want to believe the best of you and will believe any lie you ask of them.”

“But you won’t believe it.” Rian’s dark eyes were steady as he watched me, and I remembered all the times he’d goaded me into anger as a form of foreplay. “You always tell me what you think of me. You

treat me like a man instead of a golden idol who must be appeased by constant smiles and adoration. It is no wonder I go mad without you.”

His breathing was as fast as mine, and hot upon my cheek when he leaned in to kiss me. I opened my lips for him, and he bore me down to the bed, his hard body and hot hands working wonders on my senses. I put up no fight against his intentions, but I struggled to take control. We wrestled as we stripped each other, caressing and restraining in equal measure. When we were both naked, I straddled his hips and took him into my body.

He put his hands on me, ruthless, skillful and unerring. I came too soon, and then too often, trembling in honest adoration of his every touch until I was sated and sedate, on the edge of sleep. He smiled as he watched me struggle to keep my eyes open. He was smug as any man who thinks he has the upper hand.

I met his smile with my own, and he seemed glad to see it. I leaned down and kissed him until we were both gasping for air. I rode him hard until he shouted my name and spent himself inside me.

Afterwards, we lay together in a pile of twisted blankets and rumpled clothes with no light but my little vial of moonlight. We lay silent, stretching our contentment until it was thin and taught, and barely worth its name. Neither of us wanted to admit that nothing had changed.

Finally, he whispered, "Please forgive me. Tell me what I must do to regain your trust and your affection, and I will do it—only, do not leave me again."

"Can you shed your curse?"

"We can meet by moonlight, or in the dark." He ran his hands along the silver chain around my neck. "I should have undressed you the day you came into my chamber. This moonlight would have shown you my true face and saved me weeks without you."

I looked down at the pendant, the only reminder I had of my mother, save my freckles and my red hair. I had not taken it off since she'd put it on me, since she'd spent the last crumbs of her waning strength to save me from the Prince. And now I was in bed with the man from whom she'd sought to protect me.

I wondered if I had betrayed her efforts, until I remembered what she'd said to me that day in the parlor. *I must know you'll be safe from his curse.* She had not said, "safe from the Prince." She'd said, "safe from his curse."

I weighed the little vial of moonlight in my hands. *Choices and change require sacrifice.* My mother's voice whispered from my memory. Then, her voice twisted and became stronger, older. Gaetane's voice. *Use your head instead of your magic, for once. Use light instead of fire.*

My hands hesitated to remove the silver chain from my neck. I'd worn the pendant so long; it was almost a part of me. I remembered the

feel of the knife against my finger. It was best to remove the pendant as quickly. I pulled it off over my head and laid it over Rian's shoulders in one swift motion.

A shiver of magic ran up my arms when the vial touched his skin. I thought I heard the sound of distant laughter, sweet as chiming bells.

"The curse feels different." Rian looked down at the pendant. "Have you cured me?"

"I hope so." I took a deep breath, and called fire to the lamp.

I almost screamed with rage when Rian's features blended into my mind's perfect image of them.

"I no longer feel the weight of the curse on my shoulders. It is gone." His voice was low and full of wonder. "You saved me."

"No, the curse is not gone. It still masks your features. It still—" I paused. I'd been about to say his curse still made the ghost of my lost finger burn, and it still tugged at my will, but it did not.

Just as the vial of moonlight alone had never fully protected me from the Prince's curse, so it did not fully negate the curse when it hung from Rian's neck. It was a half measure, only. But it was enough. Though the curse still hid his true face, it no longer pulled at my will or sought to fill my mind with desire.

"Is it...?" He put his hands on my shoulders.

“It is enough. The moonlight has weakened your curse enough for me to resist it, though I fear it will still have a strong hold on anyone who has all of his fingers and toes.”

Rian whooped with joy. “It is as well part of the curse remains. I will need some measure of unnatural Charm to convince my father and the council to allow me to marry a commoner.”

My heart seemed to fall into my stomach. “Rian, you shall need an act of the gods to convince them to allow you to marry a witch. I am a lawbreaker; I practice dark magics. I’d have hanged for my crimes, if ever I’d dared cross anyone with the power and wealth to buy protection from my spells.”

I stopped and sucked in a long breath. I had to force the words from my lips, but because I loved Rian, I could not let them go unsaid. “We cannot marry.”

His face grew fierce. “We will marry. I won’t give you up.”

“I did not say you had to give me up.” I kissed his hard, angry lips. “You credit me with stricter honor than I possess. I do not need a wedding to love you, to fuck you, or to sleep beside you at night. Find some vapid virgin girl of noble birth to marry and get heirs from. Let me be your mistress. We shall think of your marriage as an act of sacrifice. Your marriage will keep our love safe from those who would do it harm.”

He reached down and grabbed my left hand. He kissed the stump of my missing finger. “A sacrifice, like this one? You sacrificed when you

made the Witch's Bargain for protection, but you became a witch in truth. I will make no sacrifices with my freedom, for I want to be no woman's husband but yours."

I was silent for some moments. Everyone who knew of my witchery, save Rian and my sisters, had come to fear me. Rian would be king one day, and taking a witch to wife would earn him only enemies. He needed a wife who was sweet and kind, pretty and biddable. He needed a woman like the Cinder Girl.

"I know just the girl the Prince should wed."

"I told you," he almost shouted the words. "I will only have you."

I held up my hand. "Hear me out."

Without ink and ash to anchor my spell, it was an effort to don the image of the Cinder Girl. The illusion itched at my skin and wavered in his sight, but the idea was clear enough. Rian broke into a broad smile.

"Can you stand to see this pretty face every day of your life?"

"I will endure that dull façade, so long as I may see your freckles and your dark eyes every night." He kissed me. "I know you won't believe me when I tell you this, but you are beautiful."

He was right. I did not believe his words, but he believed them and I loved him for it.

10. The Ever After

The Prince married his Cinder Girl in a grand ceremony at the royal cathedral. Cheering crowds lined the streets, for all the people of *Tierra del Maré* loved their Prince. And if they loved him a little less than they once had, they hardly noticed it.

They scrambled to pick up the coins he threw as he and his bride rode through the streets. They shouted his name. They shouted compliments to his lovely, demure bride. They told each other that their charming Prince was truly a good man to have married a commoner for love rather than a princess or noblewoman for wealth.

I doubt they'd have been so kind if they'd known their Prince married a witch.

My sisters were not so easily appeased as the general populace. Their missing toes gave them both a grudge against Rian, and the ability to resist his Charm. He had to grovel to gain their forgiveness. They'd been quite attached to their little toes.

Though they've never come to like Rian, my sisters eventually saw how much he loved me and forgave him. I believe it helped his cause when he convinced his father to create my sisters duchesses. Everyone knows duchesses are far more forgiving than whores.

Lady Minette and Lady Dulcie stayed at *Maison d'Aube*. They turned the grand old house into a salon for exiled d'Orans. Minette spent

some of her new fortune on lessons in reading. And once she got the hang of it, she spent more of her fortune on books. She has turned the parlor into a library. Her collection of books rivals the royal library.

Dulcie became a patron of the arts. She takes all manner of artists under her wing. As a result, some of the finest art in all the land—statues, paintings, ballads and poems—depicts the beauty and generosity of the Lady Dulcibella.

The statue of the Lady of Sorrows outside the cemetery bears her face, as does Mirelli's famous fresco of the Lady of the Sea in the grand hall of the Merchants' Guild. Next time you go to Commerce Square, observe the statue of the Goddess of Spring. If you manage to drag your gaze from her lovely attributes and examine her bare feet, you will note the right one lacks its smallest toe.

The salon at *Maison d'Aube* is now a renowned gathering place for intellectuals, artists and luminaries. They hold forth on all manner of philosophy and create clever stories to amuse each other. One such story was Minette's satiric *Cendrillon*.

To be truthful, I do not know how it got beyond the doors of *Maison d'Aube* and began to circulate the land. Dulcie and I laughed and giggled at the tale Minette spun from threads of the neighbor's gossip and speculation. It was a silly tale of a dull-witted but pretty cinder girl and her terrible stepsisters and a Prince who loved the cinder girl for her shy virtue and her dainty feet. It was a jest, you see?

I've ordered the bards to stop telling the tale, but they think I am merely humble and tell it anyway. Next time the moon is full, I will craft a spell to strike any bard who sings the tale mute. You think me cruel, but I do not like to hear my sisters slandered so.

You seem surprised I still practice my craft. I do not understand why. I have told you time and again that I am a witch. Did you think I would give up witchery when I became a wife? Despite all I've told you, you do not know me.

Less than a year after the wedding, my first and favorite victim, Lord Campos, grew weary of his tribulations and hanged himself. I did not mourn him, but I do miss all the fun I had with the little hex doll I made in his image.

His lands, which abut the Dark Forest, reverted to the crown. When the old king died and Rian became King, he awarded Lord Campos's lands to Sylvie and Raoul. My sister and her husband now happily play lady and lord of the manor while they raise a veritable litter of sharp-toothed children.

I did not fare so well in childbirth as Sylvie. I lost two babes as stillbirths before delivering a sickly girl with a twisted foot. We named her Nieves and we love her completely. Shortly after her birth, some lords and councilors complained of her imperfections—her gender, her pale coloring, her twisted foot, her frail health—and urged me to risk my life and my heart again to give their King a son.

I cursed them all with impotence. Their complaints ceased, though now they look at me in fear.

Within five years of her birth, Nieves put all complaints to rest. Her foot remains twisted, but she outgrew her sickliness and grew into her pale skin and over-sized eyes. Her hair, like Rian's, is black as a raven's wing. Her skin—like mine, beneath my freckles—is pale as snow. She is beautiful, and the people love her for it.

The people do not know Nieves is also clever, adept at magic, and just the slightest bit wicked. She has her father's gentle nature, and my taste for vengeance. She will make a great queen when we are gone, I am sure of it.

As king, Rian cares little for the business of ruling. He would much rather spend his time with our daughter and me, or with his horses and hounds. I take care of the tasks that go with running the kingdom. As I did at *Maison d'Aube*, I make the rules, keep the books, and keep the peace. I encourage trade and punish our enemies.

Running a whorehouse was surprisingly good training for running a government. The land has prospered under my guidance. The merchants are wealthy, the peasants are fat, and the streets are filled with art and commerce.

I am a good queen but despite all I've done, some enemies whisper I am wicked. They whisper I've a magic mirror that allows me to spy on any who oppose me. Poor dears, they cover their mirrors when they talk

treason, but they never spare a glance askance for their hearth fires or their candle flames.

I do not deny I've a collection of hex dolls, and a collection of pins to go with it. But it does not make me wicked. I see no wickedness in protecting my husband, my family, and my people. After all, minor sins may serve a greater good.

And there you have the whole of it, the truth behind the tale of the Cinder Girl and the Charming Prince. All ended happily, but you do not seem happy to have heard it.

Why not?

Ah, I understand. You wanted to see heroes rewarded and villains punished. You wanted the Prince to be noble and his princess to be kind.

Poor dear. I warned you this story was no fairytale.

The End

Acknowledgments

Special thanks to [Dionne Galace](#). She runs a [damn fine blog](#) and writes [a damn fine yarn](#). And she was nice enough to run my "little" free story for ten weeks straight.

Dionne has the patience of saints. A trio of angels follows wherever she goes, singing of her good deeds and shining the brilliant light of her virtuous example into the dark and twisted hearts of all who are fortunate enough to cross her path. Sometimes, the angels beat box. Kickin' it old school. Rumors of her alleged threats against ducklings are the product of communist Anti-Bam propaganda. Don't believe it.

Note from the Author

Dear Reader,

I hope you enjoyed reading *Ember* as much as I enjoyed writing it. I wrote the story specifically to distribute as a free e-book. If you liked it, I hope you'll buy a copy of my erotic novella [Like a Thief in the Night](#) when it's available at Samhain Publishing as one of the *Strangers in the Night* stories, along with [Bonnie Dee's The Valentine Effect](#) and [Veronica Wilde's Erotics Anonymous](#). Release date is, January 15, 2008.

For information on future releases and sneak peeks at Works in Progress, check out my website, www.bettiesharpe.com, or email me at bettiesharpe@gmail.com.

Thanks for reading!