

Del Fantasma

Riley's Sparrow

Mary Winter



Aspen Mountain Press

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Chapter One

"You can't run forever, you know. Why don't you try this?" Cody pushed a drink across the bar.

Cheri stared at the amber-colored liquid wondering if she really wanted to take a sip. Alcohol affected fairies a lot more strongly than it did humans. Too bad it tasted so damn good, and numbed the pain so well. She closed her eyes and drew in the scents of bar, smoke, and the mishmash of paranormal patrons. "Thanks. What is it?" She lifted the glass to her lips.

"A Riley's Sparrow." Cody winked at her.

Cheri nearly choked. She sputtered, swallowing hard to get the burn down her throat. "You could have warned me." In spite of her discomfort, a grin spread across her face. The liquor seared heat all the way down her esophagus to sit in her stomach with a burst of warmth. She felt a flush creeping over her cheeks, partially from the drink, and partially from Cody ferreting out her secret. How he knew that she'd spent five years imprisoned in the body of a sparrow, she'd never know. "Thanks."

The door to Del Fantasma opened and closed as another patron entered.

The back of Cheri's neck tingled. She looked up from her drink to find Cody watching her intently as heavy footfalls grew closer to the bar. "Tell me that whoever just entered is tall, willowy, and female. Please." She struggled not to whimper.

"You can't run forever, Cheri. I've got to get some things out of the back. Don't go anywhere."

Don't go anywhere? How could he say that? Without turning around she had a picture of the man who had just walked in the door in her mind. Or more accurately, the fairy who had just entered. Riley stood nearly six feet tall, with broad shoulders that could make a gentle Fae girl weep with the need to bury her head against them. His body was composed of rock hard muscle, and when he shifted, his other form matched his name. Hawk. Riley Hawk. Her parole officer.

Cheri traced her finger along the unmarred rim of the glass. She didn't need lipstick to make her lips ruby colored; it was a trait of her people. As were the slanted cat-like green eyes, the ears that almost came to a point, and her long white-blond hair. Since it fell past her butt, it made her look shorter than her inch over five feet. She stretched her thin fingers over the rim of her glass, noting the translucence of her skin, and bony-bird like structure. A sparrow. She couldn't go back to a life of picking seeds and hoping some brave soul had ventured out in sub zero weather to fill their feeder. Sure, it didn't get that cold here in California, but with warmer weather came different dangers. And hawks, always the hawks.

She stiffened as the newcomer sat on the barstool beside her. *Cody, come back!* She had no idea if vampires could hear a fairy's mental summons, but if he could, she hoped he wouldn't ignore her. No one ignored Cheri Aerchere, fairy princess. No one.

A strong hand clamped over her bare arm, preventing her from sliding from the bench and going after Cody. "I believe he told you to stay here." Riley's warm voice flooded her senses like a shot of bourbon.

Cheri's heart fluttered. Her stomach dropped, and for a moment, the world spun on its axis. The drink. She shouldn't have had the drink. Riley's sparrow.

Her jaw dropped in an expression completely unbecoming of fairy royalty. "Cody's in on this, isn't he?" Under her breath, in a frequency too high for human ears, she let lose a string of curses one of her mother's guards had taught her.

"Such language, *princess*," Riley leaned in closer. "You know why I'm here. Don't cause a scene."

"What are you going to do, take me to some *cell* and have your wicked way with me?" She batted her eyelashes, and remembering the first time she'd seen Riley. He'd been brought in as part of her sister's harem, but Lise only had eyes for one Fae man, who sadly, only had eyes for another Fae man. Riley had been relegated to the back of the room where Cheri had found him. Their one night of unauthorized passion had been the crime that had gotten her five years of banishment, and stuck in the form of a sparrow. Well, that and the fact that she'd stolen her sister's man, however unwanted he may have been. Stupid fairy court rules.

"And would you like that, m'lady?" Riley asked in his best courtly voice. He smiled, making endearing lines form at the corner of his sky blue eyes. A dimple winked in his right cheek, and he looked entirely too innocent for her own good.

Cody still hadn't returned. No other patrons had entered, and Jonathon was due to come on duty in less than an hour. If Cody thought he could leave the bar untended... then again, he was the owner. He could do what he wanted. And besides, Chris, the manager, sat at a table towards the back. What few patrons were here this evening surely wouldn't get into trouble before someone came to man the bar. She, on the other hand, was so deep in trouble she figured it wouldn't matter if someone saw the almost-pointed tips of her ears.

"No, that's not necessary. I'm not going to let you handcuff me. I'm not going back! You don't understand." Just thinking about returning to the fairy court to face her punishment, banishment for fifty years as a sparrow, made a cold sweat bead on her upper lip.

"You don't understand. The rules were in place for a reason. You had your chance. Make a new life here without magic. You could have done anything. Gone to college, got a degree, been an accountant, a waitress, anything you wanted, but you... you had to go and use magic when things didn't go the way you wanted them to. Just. Like. A. Spoiled. Little. Princess."

Cheri forced her gaze away from Riley, half afraid she'd see the truth of his words mirrored in those eyes. "No," she whispered. "It wasn't like that."

Cody shoved two sparkling waters across the bar at them. When he'd returned, she didn't know. Her hearing was more acute than the average fairy, and she hadn't heard him.

"Then how was it? Just a game to you."

If Cheri wasn't mistaken, she heard sadness in his voice. Glancing at the bar, she noticed Cody had made a discreet exit. She found him sitting next to Chris, presumably discussing bar business. Looking at Riley tossed her past right back into her face, and she didn't like what she'd seen. Being the youngest daughter of a popular fairy queen wasn't everything it was cracked up to be. In Riley she thought she'd found...she didn't know, but the night they shared hadn't been a game. It'd been the best night of her admittedly long life.

"Your other form is a hawk. You soar on thermals far above the surface and don't have to worry about anything. Your meals are bountiful when you wish them. You don't know what it's like to be a sparrow." *Hawks eat sparrows*. She courted danger by sliding her fingers across the polished wood bar and curled her fingers over his hand. She squeezed gently, noting the paleness of her skin against his. Strength ran through him, a steel core that made her believe that he could do anything, survive anything. Even bringing her back to the court to face her punishment.

"Then tell me," he offered.

She clung to the lifeline he'd tossed her with his words. "Not here." She shouldn't have said that. At least here, in Del Fantasma, they had a public setting. There wasn't much he could do to her, *for her*, and she could keep the impulse to rake her fingers through his brown hair with its golden highlights to see if it was as thick and soft as she remembered. The high slashes of his cheekbones made him look more severe than she'd known him on that night. "So why did it have to be you?"

"The court made me bring you back to prove that I had no intention of bidding for your hand."

Cheri gasped. "What?"

"Don't play games with me, princess. Don't tell me you don't know."

She yanked her hand away, the vehement anger radiating from him hot enough to scald. She didn't know, but after his last statement she wasn't about to tell him.

"You made it clear what you thought of what had happened," he continued as if he hadn't paused. "Even if marrying me would have lessened your punishment, I won't subject myself to that kind of humiliation. If I join with someone it's because she *wants* to be with me, not because she's trying to get out of something. You knew what the rules were and yet, you did it anyway."

"You!" she countered. "I did *you* anyway, and you weren't exactly innocent. You were sex incarnate, a vision that looked as if he were made to please every woman's fantasy. I—"

"Not every woman. Come on, Cheri, let's just go back."

The cold fatalism in his voice stopped her. No one could be that cold, so unfeeling. Least of all the man she had made love to over and over again. "Not yet, Riley. Give me one night. Let me try to explain to you what my store means to me. The council asked me if I wanted to come back here and make something of my life. They made it *my* choice for once. I could do what *I* wanted, and I wanted to make life better for the real wild birds. You have no idea what it's like to be a sparrow." She squeezed her eyes closed, half afraid the tears stinging them would fall. She wouldn't cry. Not in front of Riley. For the man to make her feel like that, then come and bring her back...in that moment, she hated him.

"Tell me." He reached for her, caressing her cheek with long strokes of his fingers. He stroked the line of her cheekbone and threaded his fingers through strands of her hair. The motion pulled her closer to him, so close she caught a hint of his unique scent, one that smelled like soaring in a cloudless summer sky.

"Not here," she repeated.

"Where?" He didn't release her.

Cheri stared into the depth of his blue eyes. For a single moment she saw them soaring above the clouds, her smaller form nestled just above him. Riley caught a thermal, carrying her with him. She blinked and looked away. Right now was not a

good place to entertain such fantasies, and most definitely not with the Fae who was supposed to bring her back to the ruling council.

Cheri pulled her lower lip into her mouth and nibbled on it.

Riley watched the movement. His eyes darkened, the tips of his ears turning the same shade of sapphire as his eyes. He wanted her. She didn't need to drop her gaze any lower than his face to see that.

"Cody might let us use the rooms upstairs." She pulled her gaze away from him as she realized what she had just said. *Not for that*. Oh she wanted that, wanted it with every breath hitching in her throat, the heat pooling low in her stomach making it hard to think of little else. *That* had been what had gotten her into this predicament.

"I was thinking somewhere more private." Riley leaned in and flattened his palm on the small of her back. "Before I bring you back, I want to know why, Cheri."

"Neither one of us brought cars," she blurted out the obvious.

That damn dimple in his right cheek winked again. "Fly with me?" He slid from the stool and offered her his hand.

Cheri stared at Riley's upturned palm. Her stomach fluttered as if a thousand butterflies had taken flight there. "Where?"

"Your place. I'm just visiting."

Cheri slid from the stool. Riley laid out the bait, a chance to spend a little time with him before her freedom was taken away, again. "Yes." She led him from the bar, this handsome, dashing Fae who'd come to sweep her back home. Of course, home would consist of something the size of a coffee mug when he took her back, not her own private wing of the palace. Cheri didn't care. She sashayed from the bar, giving Cody a wink as she left. If she were leaving, then she'd go out in style.

She paused just outside the entrance to the bar. For a moment she drank in the night, the cooling night air, the sound of insects, everything that reminded her of home. She tuned out the roar of traffic and the smell of exhaust.

"Ready?" She wasn't, but she wouldn't let him know that either. He inclined his head. Ladies always took-off first. It was a fairy tradition.

She stepped away from him and stretched out her arms. A flick of her fingers, and she popped into that space between the human world and the Fae. Her form shifted. Weight became nothing. Bones and flesh melded in a seamless change that felt like falling into herself. She lifted her wings and brought them down, forcing her miniscule body into the air. Lightness flooded her being, one unlike any she'd ever known before. But even light needed dark, if only to showcase its light, and in this form, she longed for the earth-bound darkness of her human guise.

A dark shape moved over her, drawing a warning trill from her beak. Then Riley's familiar hawk form materialized and she relaxed. He hung behind, letting her lead the way. She pinpointed her location, just above Del Fantasma's parking lot, and headed home.

Cheri focused on home. She knew not how she made it, only that the lights, the surroundings, and a gut instinct guided her. She swooped higher, wanting to bask beneath the star-filled bowl that formed the night sky. Lights of all kinds, neon, fluorescent, incandescent, twinkled in the city, marking that wonderful, marvelous thing that was mortal life. She loved spending time amongst them, feeling their energies, sensing the furious passion in their short lives.

Swooping low over a residential neighborhood, Cheri reveled in the dwindling hours of her freedom. Riley still followed her. His work with the fairy court demanded that he bring her back. They, and he, would demand no less.

The closer she drew to her house the lower she skimmed over the tops of houses. She dove through a small oak grove, delighting in flitting among the leaves where Riley couldn't follow. A moment alone to collect her thoughts. She savored it, even as Riley tugged at her mind to bring her out of the trees. He flew up behind her, menacing in his hawk form. His wicked curved beak opened and closed in warning. His talons flexed. His wide wings caught the breeze, and he nudged her down toward the gazebo in her garden.

The white structure with the climbing vines had been her solace. Numerous bird feeders hung around the edges and a large marlin house sitting on the outskirts of her

yard reminded her of the life she'd had before. She glided down to the edge of the white lattice surrounding the bottom of the gazebo. As soon as her feet brushed against the cool, dewy grass she pulled into that other space, grabbing her human form and popping into the change. In a flash, Cheri stood there, watching as Riley landed and did the same.

He looked around. "Very nice."

"Thank you." Having him in her home, in her garden was very real. Almost too real, and she turned to curl her fingers around the white railing to try and find some grounding with him there. She looked through the gazebo to her house, a modest dwelling. The flowering vines, the meticulous garden, all of it was hers. And Riley wanted to take that away.

Grass rustled as he stepped behind her. He framed her with his body, resting his hands on either side of hers. His warm breath caressed her neck.

Cheri pressed against the railing in a futile attempt to put some space between them. "See what you're going to be taking away from me?"

"I'm not taking it away from you, Cheri. You did that when you went to the alchemist to get funding for your store. Do whatever you want, without magic. You could have gone to the bank, gotten a loan, sold the store, anything to keep from going to that alchemist. I don't want to take you back. But I have to, and so I will." His words, so full of regret rumbled from his chest.

"I did what I had to do. I couldn't go to a bank. With my cash flow no one would give me a loan. Selling the store is not an option. Not when I am making such a difference in the life of backyard birds. The alchemist promised to be discreet. It was the only way."

"Not the only way." Riley turned her so she faced him. He cupped her chin, tilting her head up so he looked into her eyes. "You could have asked the council."

Cheri laughed in his face. "I was exiled. They wouldn't help me." Worried laughter bubbled from her throat, and she pressed the back of her hand against her mouth to stop it. Could it really have been as easy as asking the council for help? She

shook her head, unwilling to believe that her salvation lay with the very people who had exiled her from her home.

"Did you ask them? How do you know they wouldn't help?" Riley's serious tone shook her.

"Is there something going on with the council that I don't know about?" The terms of her exile had been crystal clear. Under no circumstances was she supposed to return home or use magic to help her.

"There's been a coup. Your brother is now in power."

Cheri gasped. She swayed against Riley, and he wrapped his arms around her. "My parents?"

"They're dead, Cheri. I'm sorry."

Chapter Two

Cheri's head spun. "Let's go inside," she said, needing a hot cup of tea and a soft cushion on which to rest and absorb Riley's news. "When?"

"About six months ago. Your brother gained the support of several influential council members. The terms of your exile still hold. Not even your brother can pardon you, but by coming home with me, peacefully, then perhaps some clemency can be given."

Cheri opened the door to her modest home and led Riley inside. She'd purchased the small bungalow not for its size, but for its back yard. Riley filled the space, dominating it with his masculine presence. Her living room was done in an ivy theme, with a cluster of large plants in the front window. The open floor plan let her move to the kitchen and dining area, while directing him to the cream-colored couch. He sat down and rested his arm across the back of the couch, looking as if he visited every day.

Would that be so bad? A short hallway led to her bathroom and bedroom. She wondered what he'd make of her spring flower theme. Her south-facing window held a huge rack full of plants, including several African violets and orchids. Far too feminine for his tastes, she supposed, and she couldn't get the image of his strong, masculine body sprawled across her rose-colored sheets out of her mind.

She turned toward the fridge under the guise of fairy hospitality. Some sparkling fruit juice and cucumber sandwiches would provide refreshments, and hopefully battle the alcohol in that drink Cody had served her. The world held a fuzzy quality she knew

came from too many spirits and not enough solid food. When it came to talking to Riley, she lacked control as it was. She didn't need anything else impairing her judgment.

She returned with the tray, noticing that Riley had remained in the same position. He surveyed the room as if he were lord and master, his male Fae arrogance making her warm and soft in places. She sat down next to him, feeling his fingers brush the back of her neck. She shivered, wondering if they could skip the talking part. *Focus!* Her mental slap did little good, especially when he reached for the champagne flute full of sparkling juice and brought it to his lips. She wondered if he'd taste her as delicately.

"Can you tell me what happened?" Cheri was proud her voice didn't break. She'd known Fae politics were rough. Her parents had ruled the council for nearly twenty-five years, and even in a lifespan that could be measured in centuries, that was an amazing feat. Few leaders lasted a decade.

Riley balanced the flute on his knee. "For what it's worth, it went fairly quick and painless. Your brother simply amassed enough support, and then took over. He wants you back. The council won't let him pardon you, but he'll ensure you spend your sentence in as much luxury as a sparrow needs with visiting rights."

Cheri's heart skipped a beat. "Visiting rights?" She stared, not into Riley's eyes, but at the tips of his ears, watching them change colors. Conjugal rights more aptly described the thoughts running through the Fae man's mind, and she smiled thinking that it might be a deal that she could accept. If she didn't have to worry about her shop here. "I do too much good to go back."

She leaned back and crossed her arms over her chest. Her stomach rumbled and she ignored the food she'd set out for them.

"You have to go back." Riley leaned forward. "I want you to come back."

"Why, so you can be forgiven of your sins, too?" She threw the words back at him, grabbing onto her anger and holding it like a shield between them. If she were mad at him, if she focused on that instead of the attraction between them, then the

fantasies she'd been harboring ever since regaining her human form might not burn so powerfully in her mind. Maybe.

"So I can see you."

His admission punched her in the gut. Her hands dropped to her lap, her fingers twisting together. "Oh," she gasped. "I see."

"No, I don't think you do." Riley leaned closer, curling his fingers against the back of her neck, almost as if he were afraid she'd flee.

Cheri's glance darted around the room, to her plants, to the large floral painting over the television, anywhere but at Riley's face where she'd caught a glimpse of the most heart-felt sincerity that she'd ever seen from a Fae man. They were supposed to be larger than life, testosterone-fueled, otherworldly men who took what they wanted, who they wanted, and damn the consequences. Her tongue darted out to lick her dry lips. Her sparrow nature demanded she stand, flit from place to place, trying to keep far, far away from the predatory gleam in his eyes.

"If I go back without you, I won't be allowed into the mortal realm again. I'll never see you again, Cheri. What happened that night was as much my fault as yours. My punishment has been no less severe." Without elaborating on what that might have been, he dipped his mouth toward hers. "And I've missed you so much."

"Oh," she breathed at his admission.

"Yes," Riley said. And then, he kissed her.

Cheri sighed into his mouth as he settled his lips on hers. He tasted of the fruit juice and something wholly his own. He didn't press, didn't take what he wanted like a Fae man might. Instead, he simply was there, his kiss warm and gentle.

She swayed toward him, all thoughts of her banishment, of returning to her home, fading away under the onslaught of his mouth. There was Riley, the one man who had touched her cold fairy princess heart, and thawed it. That she'd been exiled for her actions had been the price she willingly had paid for a night in his arms. A night she wanted once more before facing her brother and the fairy council.

His tongue brushed against her lower lip.

Cheri sighed into his mouth. She flattened her palm against his chest, feeling the strong wall of his pectoral muscles beneath her palm. For one night she could pretend that she wasn't an exile, and he the parole officer meant to bring her back. For one night....

She deepened the kiss, sliding her tongue into his mouth. Goddess, she'd forgotten how heady he tasted, like the sweetest fairy ambrosia. Her nipples tingled with the memory of his touch, his lips, and her sex remembered the delicious thrust of his body into hers. She acquiesced to his seduction, tangling her fingers into his tawny hair that curled so enticingly around his nape.

Riley pushed her back onto the couch, and she pulled him down on top of her, tangling her legs with his. She was thankful for the silk trousers she wore, and the fitted, matching blouse. The Fae-made garments created a delicious friction between their bodies. She wanted this...needed this.

As Riley slid his tongue into her mouth, Cheri found her memories catapulted back to that fateful night. The hard ridge of his erection pressed intimately against her, making her all-too aware of what she craved.

"Riley," his name emerged on a sigh as he pulled his mouth away from hers to draw a shuddering breath.

He paused above her, his gaze so intent on her face that she wished she knew what he was thinking. She might be able to use a Fae summons on someone not of her kind, but for other members of her own species, their minds were closed to her. She tightened her fingers on the back of his neck, trying to draw him back down to her. He resisted, and she feared she'd pressed the advantage too well and her moment with him was lost.

* * * *

In all the times Riley Hawk had imagined walking up to Cheri and bringing her back to the land of Fae, this was not how he envisioned it. From the first moment he'd

seen her on the bar stool dressed in a Fae outfit of shimmering green that matched her eyes, her long, white-blond hair plaited in a single braid down her back, he'd wanted her. He'd flashed back to that night when their eyes had locked across the crowded ballroom.

A single look.

That's all it had taken, and he'd been completely, irrevocably lost.

They'd both paid the price for that night.

Bracing his weight on his hands, he looked down into those emerald eyes. Need, desire, all the carnal emotions a Fae could feel swarmed in their green depths. He knew her emotions mirrored his own, and knew the tips of his ears burned a blue as hot as the desire inside him. Goddess, he wanted her.

Not like this.

Swallowing hard, he gathered every ounce of control he had to ease away from her and sit back down at the end of the couch.

Cheri stared at him. "What are you doing?" She drew a deep breath that raised her breasts, and he found it hard to look away. Damn hard.

"Doing the smart thing."

"What if I don't want to do the smart thing?" With the grace of the fairy princess that she was, she stood and came to him. Bracing a knee on either side of his thighs, she lowered herself onto his lap.

Riley bit back a groan. Her luscious breasts hovered in front of him, the silken material parting to give him a tantalizing glimpse of pale, creamy flesh. He curled his hands into fists to keep from reaching for her. "Cheri," he warned.

She inched higher on his lap, setting her mound against his erection. The thin silk material did little to hide her heat. She gave a small chirp of appreciation as she ground against him, her smile looking far better suited to a cat than a sparrow.

He flattened his hand against the small of her back. "I have to take you back." If she thought to use her body to persuade him from completing his mission, she was wrong.

"Not tonight, you don't." She dipped her head, her breath caressing his lips. "Please, Riley. Just give me tonight."

The aching in her words tugged at him. He wanted to do this, to take her sweet body over and over again until they fell into an exhausted sleep in each other's arms. Except, in the morning he'd have to bring her back to the council. The visiting rights her brother had mentioned weren't for him.

But how could he refuse her? One night, that's all she was asking for out of their long lives. He drew a deep breath, pulling her floral scent into his lungs. When it came down to memories, he remembered the honeysuckle taste of her lips, and the fact that she smelled like a patch of spring flowers. Riley drew his hand up the length of her spine.

"One night," he said, wanting to know that she understood that was all they could ever have together.

"One night," she repeated with a stern nod of her head. "I understand, Riley. I want what I can get."

"Not here. I want to make this night special for you. Let's go to your bedroom."

Riley watched her eyes darken, knew that the tips of his ears must be burning like cold fire. She shimmied off of him, her hands going to the nearly invisible buttons on her blouse. Riley reached for her. Curling his hand over hers, he shook his head. "Let's wait."

Her hand fell away from her blouse. She held it out to him, palm up in offering. The motion was the exact same one she'd used that evening, and its significance wasn't lost on him. Just as before, when he slipped his palm into hers, a sense of homecoming washed over him. She was his safe harbor, his mate, his home. And she could never be his, because he hadn't told her the last term her brother had placed on her return.

* * * *

As soon as Riley's hand settled in hers, Cheri knew she had him. She led him down the hall, her heart beating a steady rhythm. Her skin tingled, her nipples pebbled, aching for his touch. After knowing him again tonight, how could she let him go? She shoved the thought from her mind, not wanting to dwell on the consequences. She'd take what she could get, and not ask for a moment more.

She stopped just inside the door to her bedroom. Soft moonlight fell through her gossamer curtains, silhouetting the bed in a shimmering silver glow. She released Riley's hand long enough to run her fingers along the seam in her blouse. Tiny pearl buttons slid from their holes as the material parted. It hung off her shoulders, catching on the tips of her nipples, and a shrug of her shoulders sent the silk tumbling to the ground. Her hand dipped to the wrap around her waist that secured her pants.

Riley stopped her. "Let me." He gently pulled her hand away, the reverence inherent in his actions reminding her of that fateful evening. A flick of his wrist released the sash. The silk fabric swished to the floor, and Cheri stepped out of the puddle of emerald fabric, beautifully, blissfully naked.

She heard Riley's swift inhalation, watched as his hard cock pressed against the fabric of his trousers. With the tips of his ears blazing blue, there was no doubt that he wanted her. And goddess, did she want him.

"Come to me." She beckoned him with the tips of her fingers. Stepping backwards, with her gaze never leaving his face led her to the bed. She stopped when her calves brushed against the mattress. Sitting down, she patted the comforter next to her.

Riley stared, unmoving.

"Come," she repeated. Cheri leaned back on the pillows, a heady sense of power flowing through her. She knew from his position at the foot of the bed that Riley could see the neatly trimmed white-blond strip of hair at her sex and her hard nipples, the same ruby-red color as her lips. Raising an arm, she curled her fingers once, twice, inviting him into her bed, and her body. "Please."

That small word must have been his undoing, for with a strangled groan, Riley strode forward, stripping. His clothing disappeared with each step until he rested his knee on the edge of the bed.

Goddess, he was a gorgeous hunk of Fae man. Broad shoulders with flat pectorals, and tiny buds for nipples. Just a few swirls of hair graced his chest, the same tawny color as that on his head, perfect for rubbing against her breasts. It arched down across the washboard abs, that she'd once traced with her tongue, and formed a nest of curls from which his cock rose. Powerful thighs, perfect for thrusting, and those sculpted, masculine feet. From head to toe he was a vision.

Cheri's thighs parted.

Though his gaze centered on her slick folds, he made no move toward them. Instead, he leaned forward and swept his hand down her arm. He took a deep breath, giving Cheri the feeling that he was struggling to commit everything to memory. She reached for him, suddenly beyond the gentle seduction Riley so obviously wanted to give her. Curling her fingers around his hard biceps, she tugged him down to her. "Love me, Riley." The words escaped past her lips, too quickly for her to take them back.

Love had nothing, and everything, to do with this moment. Rearing up, she met him half way, slanting her lips across his. Tangling the fingers of her left hand in his hair, she used her right to grab his biceps and tug him down to her. She craved the heavy weight of his muscled body pinning her to the mattress. She wrapped her left leg around him, resting her heel against his calf.

Riley groaned. Whatever inner battle he might have been fighting, whatever restraint he tried to show, was lost in the aftermath of her brazen actions. He kissed her, pouring out all his frustration, his loss, his growing desire into the movement of his lips across hers and Cheri matched it with her own. Tonight nothing mattered but the two of them, and as he slid his tongue into her mouth, she lifted her hips, pressing his erection into her stomach.

He shifted, allowing her to wrap her other leg around his lean hips. The muscles in his arm bunched as he tried to keep his weight off of her.

Take me. She wound her body around his and writhed. Tiny whimpers, which he swallowed, emerged from her throat, and when he tore his lips from hers to nibble along her throat, she gave a mewling cry.

He nipped her, the tiny marking of teeth making heat race through her veins and moisture pool in her sex.

His lips moved over the junction of neck and shoulder, licking, nibbling, and she realized his mouth traced a perfect circle on her flesh. A fairy marking, one that she knew wouldn't go away. Not when it was made with love.

Tears stung her eyes.

Their first time together, Riley thought he'd never be seeing her again. He'd tried to mark her that night, and she'd stopped him, knowing what they'd done, and what the consequences were. "I want everyone to know you're mine," he had whispered in her ear, his voice rough with passion. "I want everyone to know you're mine."

She'd told him she belonged to him, had done everything but the fairy marking and a commitment ceremony. "I'll be exiled for this. I'm not coming back. I'm yours," she'd told him.

Now, she was returning to the land of her birth with Riley's marking. He wanted not all the Fae, but just one, to see that she belonged to him. Her brother planned to marry her off.

She went still beneath him.

Then, he touched his tongue to the center. A tiny barb, one that came out only during a marking, pierced her skin. A drop of blood welled into his mouth and Riley licked it away. Through the barb a small amount of his blood slid into her skin, a binding far more permanent than any ceremony. When he pulled his mouth away, he knew there would be a tiny star inside the circle.

His essence filled her. She shuddered as heat suffused her veins. It pooled low in her stomach, her womb tightening just thinking about that tiny bit of him inside her. The base of her spine tingled.

Riley pressed his lips to the mark.

A bolt of pure pleasure stole the breath from her lungs. She cried out. Tightening her legs and arms around him, she held him to her as she came. Her body erupted into a being of light. His name became a mantra on her lips. Shudders raced through her body, tiny tremors and aftershocks igniting even deeper fires inside her.

Through it all, Riley was there. The weight of his body kept her grounded. Long strokes of his fingers along her sides, beneath her breasts, kept the energy moving through her body. And when at last she took a deep breath and came back to herself, it was into his eyes she found herself staring.

"Beautiful," he whispered as he bent his head to her breast.

It wasn't she who was beautiful, she thought as she watched his tawny hair stroke across her pale, luminescent skin. He pressed open-mouthed kisses along the swell of her breast, skirting her nipple, and in that moment, she realized she'd never seen a more beautiful sight. His eyes were closed, almost as if he wanted to savor the moment, and his lashes fanned across his cheeks. Sharp planes of his jaw, a body honed to perfection in every way. No, it wasn't she who was beautiful, but he.

Riley suckled her nipple. He closed the palm of his hand over her other breast. Gentle caresses of fingers and lips left her wanting more.

She watched, transfixed, the play of Riley's lips across her flesh. The contrasts between the red of his lips, the golden highlights in his hair, and her pale skin left her breathless. When his attentions moved lower, she whimpered. This was exactly how she imagined this night to be like, and she didn't want it to end.

He paused just above her hips and drew a deep breath. She presumed it was to steady himself. If the need to join with her pounded as fiercely in his veins as it did hers, it was a wonder they weren't driving each other to ecstasy. A heartbeat later his head dipped between her thighs.

Cheri cried out. His warm breath caressed her folds and she opened to him. One stroke of his tongue along her wetness and she nearly came again. Unable to reach him, she grabbed fistfuls of the comforter to try to keep some hold on reality. She was here, lying on her bed, Riley between her legs licking her, loving her, each flick of his tongue bringing her higher and higher.

Just the knowledge that she wouldn't see him after this night made everything so much more vivid. She tucked every nuance deep in her mind, wishing she had some permanent way to record this. She'd need it. If her guess was right she'd—no! She wouldn't think about that here, not with Riley sucking on her clit, his fingers stroking the insides of her thighs and along her hip bones. She loved him. She just hoped he knew it.

Then he speared her with his tongue and all thought fled from her mind. There was only emotion and sensation. His tongue dipped into her channel before darting up to swirl around and over her clit and labia. He played her like a delicate fairy mouth flute, an instrument that took fine oral skills to play well. And like the compositions played on the instrument, he made her body sing.

Another release built deep inside her. Her muscles tightened, her hips lifting towards his mouth. Her back arched. Mouth open in a wordless cry, she let the explosion roll through her. Lights flashed behind her closed eyelids. Her whimpers escalating to full out screams of delight. Something beyond pleasure, more completely sublime pulled through her. And she knew, no matter what, she'd never feel like this with another.

Riley pulled away from her.

She forced her eyes open to watch him crawl back over her body. He rested his cock against her, and she lifted her hips to slide him inside.

"Wait," he growled, and he trembled. *She* had made a Fae man tremble. "I want this to be good."

"It already is." Cheri pressed her heels into his buttocks driving his hips, and his shaft into her. "Oh goddess bless, it's better than good."

A feral smile crossed his lips as he finished joining them completely. For long moments they stayed that way, locked together in the most intimate fashion possible. When she thought she couldn't stand it anymore, he began to move.

He shafted her with long, slow strokes as secure and confident as Riley himself. A tilt of his hips had him brushing against sensitive places high inside, and she reached for his broad shoulders, using them as leverage to take his strokes even deeper. The mark on her neck tingled. Riley's mark.

Her inner muscles contracted around his shaft. Each thrust seemed to touch a new place inside, and then, fingers tightening, he made her explode again. She screamed his name and a moment later he followed her into release.

Chapter Three

This was not how this night was supposed to unfold. Resting his face in the crook of her neck, he simply savored the moment. He never expected this to happen. He thought that he could be stronger, that he could resist her. And he tried. Goddess bless, once he'd flown above her, his wings shielding her from above just like he'd shield his mate, he realized he couldn't let her go back. Not if it meant that she would marry another.

He rolled to the side, curling her against him. *So what do we do now?* He opened his mouth to ask the question then closed it again. He knew what he had to do. Bring her back. It was the only right thing to do. She'd been promised to someone far above his station, and he had to do what was right. She might have suffered for what had happened that night, but he'd erred too. He'd been brought in for her sister, for him to turn away from her, no matter how unwanted he might have been, and go to Cheri meant that he'd slighted her family.

Riley's gut churned.

"That was goodbye, wasn't it?" Cheri asked softly.

"Mmm?" He stalled for time by pressing a kiss to the top of her head.

"You heard me." She propped her head up on her hand and stared at him.

Riley looked into her emerald eyes with the knowledge that his silence answered for him. Swallowing hard, he realized he had to level with her. She deserved that much. He eased into a seated position, tucking the sheet around his waist. Having her naked

and warm in the bed next to him tended to derail the train of his thoughts, and really, he needed to think clearly now. "I have to take you back," he began.

Cheri nodded.

Telling her the truth was going to kill him. He reached for her hand. Just touching her was torture, especially knowing that in just a few hours they'd be back in Caroann, their homeworld. "I don't regret what we did, then or now. But I have to take you back. Not just to clear my name, though that's part of it, but you violated your parole. Your brother has promised you to someone else. If I bring you back to him, then the disgrace will be lifted off of my head. I'm so sorry, Cheri. But you used magic. You —"

"Did what I had to do to save something I loved!" She burst from the bed, snagging a short, black satin robe from its hook on the back of her door. With quick, angry movements she tied the sash around her waist, then whirled toward the bed and stared at him. "You bastard!" Her voice shook. "I can't believe —" Her voice broke and she turned away from him.

Oh hell. He stumbled from the bed, the layers of sheets and blankets tangling around his legs. Damn this mortal world anyway. In Caroann it was always a beautiful seventy degrees, day or night, and a simple use of magic made it warmer, or cooler, as the Fae wished. Here, the mortal realm was at the whim of Mother Nature, and she had a wicked sense of humor. Especially when a man was naked and trying to get out of bed.

Heedless of his nudity, he strode around the bed and laid his hand on her arm. "Cheri,"

"Don't, Cheri, me." She shrugged his hand away. Tears clogged her voice.

"Hey, are you crying?" Fae never cried, never knew sorrow until they interacted with the human world. Riley tried to tell himself that it was too much contact with the mortals, not him, who had brought the glistening tears to her emerald eyes. "Hey," he crooned. He looked up, and saw they'd stopped in front of the full length mirror that hung on the back of her bedroom door.

The sight of the two of them, the black robe highlighting her white-blond hair and pale skin, his naked, tanned figure standing behind her, took his breath away. Cheri was the perfect height to tuck beneath his chin, and he did that, loving the way her curves fit against his body. Against the small of her back, his cock hardened, and though he knew it wasn't the time, he rocked closer to her. His hand slid from her shoulder, down over the front of the robe.

He caressed her breasts and watched her nipples bead against the fabric. Lower, he flattened his palm against her abdomen. A tiny shudder wound its way through her and she relaxed against him.

"Don't cry," he crooned. With his free hand he captured one of her tears on his finger.

"But I have to go back, and you..." Her voice wavered in a way most unlike a fairy princess. She breathed deeply. "Have to do, what you have to do." Cheri turned. She flattened her cheek against his chest and wrapped her arms around him. Though he thought he heard soft sobs, he detected no trace of tears against his bare chest.

Riley held her. Though his hands longed to explore the curve of her buttocks and sweep the length of her back, he kept his fingers on her waist like a gentleman. Her fingers tightened against his back, her nails making tiny indents. He bore the pain. It was the least he could do.

"Who is it?" she asked after long moments.

"Prince Iversterlat Soccoroan."

Cheri groaned. "I should have known." She sighed and curled even tighter against him.

Riley shared her dislike for the spoiled prince with his mop of gold curls and cornflower blue eyes. He held court within the fairy court, and he always got his way. He also was several levels above Riley in the fairy hierarchy, and far more suited to bid for Cheri's hand than he.

"I have to go back, but not tonight." Cheri slid her open palm over his chest and along the side of his neck. Cupping his cheek, she tilted his face down to hers. "For tonight I need you. Can you give me enough memories to last, Riley?"

"Enough to last for the next three centuries," he answered. And then, he did the only thing he could do, he dipped his head and kissed her. Goddess damn him to exile for his actions, but he would make sure when Cheri returned to Fae, that the only touches she'd crave would be his.

* * * *

The mark on Cheri's neck pulsed in time with the heavy beat in her blood. By the time tonight was over, she planned to be fully bonded to Riley. She may return to Iver, but he'd never touch her. Not like this. Not even the spoiled prince would violate another Fae's bond. Or at least she hoped he wouldn't.

She couldn't mark Riley. Only the males held the barb in their tongue that created the bond. Besides, it wouldn't be fair. If she were to be wed, then how could she deny him the same thing. To be a solitary Fae was a lonely endeavor. Living alone for centuries only created madness. She wouldn't sentence him to that, even if every day she lived with Iver her heart would break a little more until it was shattered.

Riley reached between them and tugged at the sash of her robe. The material slid open, and then his hands were there, sliding beneath. He caressed her ribs, her sides, working his way ever closer to her breasts. Arching her back, she offered them to his touch, his mouth. She burned with a flame that only he could quench

"Turn around," he whispered.

She did, letting the robe cascade to the floor. Reaching behind her, she twined her fingers into the hair at the nape of his neck. She lifted her body, spreading her legs so he could look in the mirror and see all of her. Tilting her head, she nibbled along his jaw, his neck, licking and sucking as if she could mark him too.

Riley bent his head to her right shoulder. He reached around her and palmed her right breast. His left hand slid over her hip and paused at the top of the neatly trimmed strip of curls covering her pussy. With his tongue, he traced the mark on her neck.

Cheri shivered. Closing her eyes, she tilted her head inviting him to explore the mark further. Once a Fae male marked his mate, he couldn't resist her. She lifted her hips to slide his fingers closer to her damp folds. *Mark me again.* She flung the mental summons at him even though she knew it'd have no effect. Her world narrowed down to that tiny point on her neck.

Riley's cock pressed against her lower back. His big hands on her skin made her think of nothing but his touch, his kiss, his caresses. The tips of his fingers flicked back and forth across her breast, coaxing the tiny bud of her nipple into a hard point. It was said that everything in the Fae realm was better than in the mortal. But not this. Never this.

She whimpered as he tongued the center of his mark. Tiny spasms shot through her body, centering on her womb. Rocking her hips backward, she elicited a moan from him as she trapped his cock between them.

Riley swirled his tongue over the mark.

"Yes," she whispered. "Do it."

His fingers slipped down to her labia, slick with her juices. Mindless strokes of his digits across her swollen folds brought whimpers to her lips. She writhed against him. With her eyes closed she couldn't see her reflection in the mirror, but had no doubts what she looked like—a woman in the throes of passion.

"Do what?" Riley's husky voice tantalized already enflamed senses.

"Mark me," she moaned.

"Don't think you can order me around." Riley speared her with a single digit. A moment later, the barb on his tongue slid into her skin and a second finger joined the first. He flexed his wrist, finger fucking her.

Cheri screamed. Dropping her hands, she curled her fingers into his buttocks trying to keep her knees from buckling. The more his fingers moved in and out of her,

the higher he took her. That barb, that damnable, wonderful barb, pulsed into her skin, once more mingling their blood. Her nipples tightened. They were so hard they hurt. And yet, still Riley feathered his caresses across first one breast, then the other.

She gasped for air. Her channel rippled around his fingers. The heel of his hand pressed against her clit, intensifying the pleasure with every thrust. She couldn't be more at his mercy if she were bound. Her fingers tightened into his ass, her legs spreading. She lifted her hips, pumping them in time with his fingers. And she wished, goddess, she wished he'd slip his magnificent cock into her.

Riley teased her instead. He moved his lips down her shoulder, following the slope around to the nape of her neck. The gentle caresses of his lips and tongue sent shivers down her spine. He cherished her. At the council tables she'd eaten creamy deserts with as much devotion as Riley paid to her skin. He reached the left side of her neck.

Cheri relaxed into his touch. Her hand slid from his hip and she maneuvered it between their bodies. Heat met her open palm as she curled her fingers around him.

He groaned in her ear. "Cherianalasta."

Her full name. She tightened her fingers. She stroked him from base to tip, curling her palm over the head to spread his pre-cum over them. Just thinking about his cock deep inside her had her hovering on the edge of orgasm.

"Open your eyes."

She couldn't ignore his soft entreaty. She opened her eyes and met the green gaze of the Fae woman in the mirror. She hardly recognized that woman with her flushed cheeks and wide spread legs. Riley's fingers drove in and out of her channel, touching places high inside. Her breath came in harsh pants. Her hips moved with each pump of his hand, her muscles tightening, needing something more.

Riley slid his fingers to her clitoris. He circled the swollen bud until she writhed against his hand.

Cheri struggled to keep her eyes open to watch them in the mirror. Seeing Riley palm her breast only intensified the sensations as he rotated his palm against her hard

nipple. The scrape of his teeth sent shivers down her spine. It felt like she was burning up from the inside out, a flame that neither of them could quench until it consumed them.

"Please," she whimpered, though she knew not whether she begged for the thrust of his cock or the ministrations of his fingers. "Riley." Her words dissolved into whimpering cries as he slid his other hand down to her sex. With two fingers circling her clit, he penetrated her with his other hand. First one finger, then a second, until she felt as if she rode on his digits.

Riley turned them away from the mirror. He walked her forward, using pressure on first one thigh then the other to keep her moving. When they reached the bed, he slid a hand around her waist and brought it up to her lower back. Gentle pressure sent her forward, and she braced her weight on her hands. He widened her stance.

For a moment he took his fingers from her, the loss making her mewl with need. Yet, the anticipation of him filling her had her trembling. A need like none she'd ever felt before built within her. If she didn't feel Riley's cock sliding into her soon...she'd die. She ached that much, wanted that much. Then he was there. His broad cock head pressed against her opening, and with a quick thrust of his hips, he entered her.

"Yes," she hissed as his long, smooth stroke buried him balls-deep inside her.

Riley bent forward. He traced kisses along the length of her spine, nuzzling the nape of her neck. He lipped the mark, each caress of teeth and tongue punctuating his thrusts.

Cheri curled her fingers into the comforter. She could only hold on, bracing herself against Riley's pounding thrusts.

His mouth found her mark again. And for a third time that night, the barb slid from his tongue.

Cheri cried out as it penetrated her skin, the dual possession bringing her to orgasm once more. She cried out, every muscle in her body going rigid. Her channel milked his cock, pulling it deeper into her with long contractions. And his name

exploded from her lips. She nearly tumbled to the bed; only locking her elbows, and Riley's strong hands kept her from falling forward.

Riley plunged into her once more. He stiffened, a hoarse cry erupting from his chest. Deep inside her, his cock twitched, and he spilled himself into her. The warmth of his seed triggered tiny little aftershocks and Cheri fought against the blackness threatening to overtake her.

He filled her senses. Now fully bonded, she swore she heard his heart pounding. His breaths matched hers. Where their skin touched, she tingled, power flowing between them, through them, around them. She now was his in every way possible for the Fae.

He parted from her long enough to tumble them to the bed then pulled her into his arms. They lay there, arms and legs entwined. The mark on her neck pulsed, and a heavy lassitude swept over her. Without saying anything more, she tumbled into the deepest sleep she'd had in a long time.

* * * *

Riley propped his head up on his elbow and looked at Cheri's sleeping form. The red mark on her neck drew his attention and he couldn't help but trace it with his fingers. He shouldn't have done that. It went against every tradition the Fae had. He knew she would be wed to Iver once she returned. He had no part of her life.

Yet he couldn't *not* be a part of it. That one night of them together had burned in his memory, nearly cost him the place he'd worked so hard to build in Fae society. Bringing her back would redeem his reputation, but what about his soul? He brushed strands of her hair, letting the silken tendrils run through his fingers.

He loved her.

The truth sat in his gut like a heavy rock. Tomorrow morning they'd return to Caroann and he'd have to let her go.

A lump formed in his throat. Bending over, he brushed a kiss across her cheek. Her lashes fluttered, but she didn't wake.

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry," he whispered. Fae men were rarely sorry. They had nothing for which to apologize. The traditions they honored went back millennia, and who was he to say that they were wrong. Surely he wasn't the first Fae man to face this choice. He doubted he'd be the last. The one thing the Fae had learned from mortals was passion, and his Cheri had spent too much time among them not to love hard and deeply.

He just hoped once she returned to Caroann and Iver with his bond, she'd remember that she had begged him to mark her. He couldn't lay the blame for this at her feet. Not entirely. He'd wanted to brand her as his, to make sure no other Fae man touched her the way he had tonight. In giving into his selfish desires, he'd damned her. And for that he was well and truly sorry.

Chapter Four

Cody had told her she couldn't run forever, that sometime she'd have to go back and face the consequences for what she'd done. Then Riley had come and marked her, and her world had changed. Now, standing in front of the great white marble thrones upon which sat the Fae council, Cheri truly realized the ramifications. Her strapless gown showed off Riley's mark, and she'd deliberately pulled her hair back into an elegant twist, leaving the tail to trail down her back, so the entire council could see that she'd been bonded to another.

Her brother sat in the center throne, his malachite eyes narrowed, his face drawn into a stern countenance. Her sister sat beside him, a man Cheri vaguely recognized sitting next to her. The rest of the council, all old and dour souls, sat on either side of them. In the middle, on the polished marble floor, Cheri stood alone.

She hadn't seen Riley since returning to Caroann. Surely the council knew she bore his mark. She'd seen no other Fae, and she hadn't been marked when she'd been exiled. What had happened to him?

Thankfully, Iver wasn't in the room. If her brother had planned to wed her off, he at least planned on giving her a bit of time before it happened.

"Cherianalasta Aerchere, you stand before us accused of breaking the terms of your exile by using magick to keep your store running. You were exiled in your other form then sent to the mortal lands for transgressions against your family. What say you to these charges?" Her brother's voice sounded more authoritarian than she

remembered. If he planned to show her any mercy because of their family relationship, he gave no signs.

"Yes, I used magick to keep my store afloat. Unlike some of you, my other form is a sparrow. When you exiled me in my other form, you sent me to a place where I was no better than the wild birds. And when I came to the mortal lands, I knew I needed to help those who carried my form. So yes, I used magick to keep my store running. Without me..." She drew a deep breath, trying to stay calm and practical. "Without the work I do, a lot more wild creatures would go hungry or be lost to us. Every soul is precious. I just ensured that a few more would survive." There, she'd said what she'd done and tried not to get all emotional.

"You violated the terms of your exile. Because of that, we had to send Riley back to get you. And now you wear his mark!" Her brother bolted to his feet. "I am Lukosoloman Aerchere, leader of the Fae council. You defy me."

"How can I defy you when I didn't even know what you had planned? Yes, I defied the prohibition about using magick. But there wasn't anything said about my bonding, or not bonding to anyone. You're just mad that I did. Now whatever state marriage you have planned isn't going to work out well. Isn't that right?"

Lukos' face reddened. His ears darkened, turning a green-black that made his eyes look like rolling storm clouds ready to explode. Balling his hands into fists, he sat in his chair. The other members of the council looked at him. "How did you know?"

Cheri grinned at having gained the upper hand. "My exile was to the mortal lands. There's only one reason why you'd bring me back here, especially now that you've gained control of the council. So who is it, Lukos?"

"Prince Iversterlat Soccoroan." Hearing her brother repeat Riley's words didn't make them feel any better. She didn't see him in the chamber and frankly, she appreciated it. The last time she'd seen Iver he'd been acting like the spoiled Fae prince he was, and that was nearly ten years ago. The thought of being wed to him made her stomach churn.

"What has he promised you, brother? Support? Money?" Cheri tried to fathom why her brother would want to bind her to a toad of a Fae. She needed to know what she'd come back for, what she'd given up Riley for.

Riley. Even now, standing here in her formal ice-green gown, his mark pounded. Through it, she knew he was nearby, though not in the room with her. His mind was shuttered to her.

"I promised him to take his wayward little sister off his hands." Iver strode into the council chamber. He wore robes as dark as his dark eyes. His hair had gone silver with age. The last Cheri knew he was over two hundred years old. His black robes trimmed with silver gave him an imposing presence. He stopped beside her, making a show of inspecting her mark. "He didn't tell me you were soiled goods."

"I'd be far more soiled if I had been bonded to you," Cheri spat back. She turned to her brother. "And if I, being bonded to someone else, refuse to wed Iver?"

Lukos snapped his fingers. A surge of magick centered on the low table in front of them and when the sparks cleared, a gilded cage sat by his feet. "Then this will be your new home."

Cheri whimpered. The cage looked little more than a foot square with gilded bars and a single swing. Her gorge rose. To be trapped in a cage, watching the world go by...it was worse than being exiled to the mortal lands. "No, you can't do that."

Lukos grinned ferally. "But yes, I can. I run the council now little sister, and you have to do what I say."

"Send me back to the mortal lands. I'll lose my shop if I have to. Don't just imprison me." The mark on her neck throbbed. Reaching up, she traced it with her fingers, wondering if Riley sensed the goings on in the chamber through her. *Please stay away. I don't want you involved in this mess.* She gave the mark one, final caress then let her hand fall to her side.

"Your lover can't help you now," Lukos said. "So what will it be, Cheri. Will you wed Iver?"

Caught between a cage and her brother's marriage proposal, Cheri's stomach fell. What choice did she have? She kept her gaze straight ahead, knowing looking around the chamber for Riley would only cast her in a weaker light. Using the bond, she searched for him and encountered a solid wall.

Her brother leered at her from the throne. She'd been gone, her impulsive nature sending her to exile just when she suspected that her people needed her the most. Her parents should have been sitting there, not her power-hungry siblings. And right now there was nothing she could do about it.

"I accept," she said, her soft voice echoing in the chamber. "I shall marry Iver."

A triumphant grin flashed across Lukos' face. Next to him, her sister looked resigned to the inevitable, and Cheri wondered what kind of hold Lukos had on the entire family to have this happen. Had her parents still sat there, she had no doubt that Iver's suit would have been dismissed long ago.

Iver swept forward. He wrapped his arm around her waist, pulling her against his lean frame. "Don't think I'll let the matter of your bond come between us," he whispered in her ear.

The mark on her neck burned. "You wouldn't," she growled back. To take a Fae who was bonded to another would violate one of the most sacred rules of their people. For Iver to even contemplate it, meant that he feared no wrath. What had happened while she'd been gone?

When she raised her gaze to meet her brother's, she found her heart completely devoid of familial love. *I'm sorry, Riley. I'm sorry.*

* * * *

Good girl, Cheri. Don't give them any reason to imprison you. From his hiding place near the fringes of the chamber, he watched Iver claim his new bride. Seeing the Fae man's long, pale fingers on Cheri's skin, jealousy twisted in his gut. He balled his hands

into fists, hiding behind the cowl of his robe. Standing there and letting that *schletkik* touch his woman took all the self-restraint Riley had.

He had known when he brought Cheri back what would happen. Lukos had made his stance clear. Bring Cheri back, turn her over to Iver, and he could be forgiven of the transgressions against their family. Maybe even be returned to his caste. He'd renounce all of it if only could have Cheri back.

She wasn't lost. He had to remember that. This was all part of a greater plan, a plan to bring him his true love. With the proceedings in the chamber coming to a close, he melted into the crowd, and slipped out the door. Once in the hallway, he kept concealed until he made it out the lower caste door, and into the gardens surrounding the palace. He found the appointed place and waited.

Twenty minutes later, Cheri's sister, Lise strode down the walkway. Her brother was nowhere in sight, and after doing a discreet sweep of the area, she sat down on the bench beside him.

"Lady," he said, using the formal address for her. "I've brought her back as you requested."

"I see. And my sister has done the right thing by joining with the Prince. You have not by marking her. It complicates things," her cool, modulated tones were nothing compared to the bright notes of Cheri's voice.

"We discussed marking. I had to follow the dictates of my soul." He deliberately used the sacred words that spoke of things that had to be done in the hopes it would placate her. His marking Cheri went beyond their plan, could place her in jeopardy, and yet, when faced with her sweet body and bright presence, he had to claim her for his own.

"Your case is too weak to challenge the Prince to bondmate rights. Your crime is no greater than her own for that night. Though I have forgiven you, and allowed you to bring her back, I doubt the rest of the council will be so kind. She is a princess, and had my brother not been so power hungry, and she so determined to follow the dictates of

her soul, then perhaps she would be heading the Council and not he. And that would place us all in a very different position.”

Riley accepted the scolding in her words. “So what do you propose?”

“Let her get through this evening. If she does not violate the bond between you, then I shall call for a *Quartanine* tomorrow. If she passes, then you may challenge for her. My sister will go to the winner.” With a nod, she stood. Gathering her robes around her, she strode away from the rendezvous point, her words ringing in Riley’s ears.

A *Quartanine*. A challenge. Such things hadn’t happened in the realm of Faerie for decades. The sacred testing to determine someone’s proper mate. Once Cheri’s sister had gone, Riley stood. The large temple at the opposite end of the gardens called to him. It had been a while since he’d knelt in service to their gods, but perhaps, tonight, he’d ask for all the divine intervention he could get. By the goddess, if he did get to challenge Iver, he’d need it.

* * * *

Cheri stared at the silvery trefoil leaves struggling to remember her herb lore. Such classes had been years ago, back when she toddled around the palace by her mother’s side. She suppressed the stab of longing that shot through her. Since coming back, she hadn’t mustered the courage to find out what happened to her parents. Had Lukos killed them? Or had someone else? Political battles within Fae were never bloodless.

She stirred the grains and bits of vegetables softened in broth. Adding the spices that were customary to a Fae couple’s first night together, she added the silvery leaves designed to dampen the spices’ aphrodisiac affect. She spooned the filling into crisp, green lettuce leaves, rolling it and tying it with strings dyed red and purple for love and loyalty. Into the ones for Iver she laid more of the silvery green leaves, careful to layer them between the lettuce leaves. With luck, the sedative would only dull her impulses, but put him to sleep.

She hoped.

Drawing a deep breath, she arranged the food on a plate. Iver had gone to some political function, and was expected to be back before dark. She wiped her hands on a towel and went to the bedroom. Iver had set out her garments, a few gossamer whisks of silk that would reveal far more than they concealed. She wished she could wear them for Riley.

A sob, quickly dashed, caught in her throat. Where was he? What had happened to him since bringing her back? Since Iver had taken her away, she hadn't seen her siblings or Riley. She figured she probably wouldn't see him ever again.

Tears beaded at the corners of her eyes. She'd made her decision. She had to live by it. Reaching up, she touched the mark. It still throbbed, though the ache had grown less. It was said that when partners were separated, so long as one of them was alive, the mark would ache. The fact that it was fading worried her. Was Riley well?

Be strong for him. Though it would break her heart if something happened to Riley, she couldn't cheapen what they had by becoming weak. Pressing her hand over her heart, Cheri took several deep, calming breaths and prayed to the goddess that he was all right.

Iver strode onto the patio where she arranged the food. Placing his hands on her shoulders, he leaned forward and kissed her cheek. "My darling mate, I see you've prepared our bonding fast." He let his hands linger over her shoulders, sweeping down to caress the tops of her bared breasts.

Cheri stiffened. She leaned forward, wanting to keep space between their bodies. She didn't have to look over her shoulder to know that the tips of Iver's ears telegraphed his lust. She sensed it rolling off his body in palpable waves that disgusted her. *Never. I'll never have sex with him. I belong to Riley.*

Iver swept his fingers over her bond mark. "That'll be gone soon enough."

Cheri held her chin high. She said nothing, letting her defiant stance speak for her.

Iver chuckled low behind her. "You'll be a pleasure to break my dear." He leaned forward enough to press his erection against her. "I'm looking forward to it."

Get the hell away from me! She flung the mental words at him, putting as much distaste behind them as possible.

Iver flinched, but didn't release her. "Your mind games won't work on me."

No, because you're not a strong Fae man. Pasting a saccharine sweet smile on her face, she picked up the tray. "I believe our bonding dinner is served." She ducked away from his touch and headed to the carved wooden table at which they would eat. She set the tray down, careful to keep his rolls away from her then started to serve.

She presented the image of a dutiful Fae wife. It disgusted her, but for Riley she'd do it. If only she had a way to see him again.

Iver surveyed the repast with a feline smile. He sat down, arranging his dark robe around his legs. He waited with his hands folded in his lap for her to serve and feed him the first bite.

Her stomach twisted at coming anywhere close to him. Standing at the side of the table, she set the first wrap on a plate. Using a knife she cut off a tiny bit, making sure to get plenty of the sedative in it, then with her fingers, held it to his lips.

Iver leaned forward. He took the succulent morsel from her, swiping his tongue across the tips of her fingers. "Another," he said.

"As you wish," she replied. *Let him not taste the sedative.* Would it even occur to him that she'd drug him?

She fed him a second then a third morsel, until one of the wraps was completely gone. By this time, Iver had pulled her into his lap, and she straddled him, intimately aware of his dick pressing against her. His hands roamed her back and shoulders, pausing to caress the sides of her breasts. Still, she fed him.

Iver unfastened the clasp holding the scarf around her breasts. The metal clanged to the stones paving the patio and the bit of silk fluttered to the ground. He reached for her breasts, cupping them and bunching them together like grapes on the vine. "Look at

your nipples, hard and red like the finest fruit." He bent his head and swiped his tongue across first one, than the other.

Cheri gasped, not expecting the seduction from him. Surely the sedatives should be working by now. His cock pressed insistently against her, and there was no way she'd let that thing inside her. *Just pretend he's Riley.* Instead of Iver's dark hair, she imagined Riley's tawny head dipping to her breast. His hair, so much like the plumage of his other form, radiated the light in a cascade of browns and golds. The lips, instead of belonging to a spoiled prince, were Riley's lips surrounding her nipple, sucking, licking.

Iver cupped her ass and hauled her against him. "That's it, my wife. Forget all about that Fae who marked you. You're mine now." He alternated long pulls on her nipples, and looking at him, Cheri knew she'd never forget Riley. Never.

He swayed on the bench and her heart gave a lurch of hope. Maybe the herbs were taking affect. She hadn't eaten, and hoped he wouldn't notice. "Let's go to bed," she said in her sultry voice.

Iver pulled his lips away from her breasts. "Yes, let's." She wiggled off of him, adding a bounce to her step that made her breasts sway with her movements. He followed her, the sound of robes and garments falling to the courtyard a sickly reminder of what Iver thought would happen. Once in their bed chamber, a place she hadn't even looked at since arriving at Iver's, she pushed him to the bed.

"Let me, my husband," she said, stroking her fingers down his bare chest. She straddled his hips, and as soon as his head hit the pillow, his eyelids fluttered closed.

Iver gave a small snore, and Cheri sighed with relief. Her plan, had worked.

Chapter Five

Cheri returned to the gazebo where she'd drugged her husband and sat down with a sigh. Her nudity didn't bother her. Not only was this supposed to be her wedding night—and she sure hadn't imagined it like this—in the realm of the Fae clothes were optional more often than not. She needed to shed the human customs she'd picked up. She wouldn't be going back there again.

Resting her chin in her hand, she closed her eyes with a second heavy sigh. *Riley, where are you?* She reached for the mark on her neck, rubbing it absently. The perfumed flowers filled the night air with their scent. Somewhere beyond the thorny hedge marring the perimeter of the outdoor garden, birds warbled. Drawing a deep breath, Cheri could imagine herself perched high in a tree, watching the Fae and marveling at their too-mortal cares.

She chuckled. Oh Fae like her brother might think they were above the mortals, that things like greed and lust didn't drive them, but in the end, wasn't it the Fae who taught those emotions to the mortals? She barked mocking laughter. At herself for getting into this predicament. At Lukos for trying to force her into a marriage she didn't want, and at Iver for thinking that he could claim her like a ripe fruit off the vine.

"Something funny?" Riley's voice hung in the air like the musical notes of a songbird.

Cheri gasped. She straightened, half-ashamed at being caught in a maudlin moment. "Just thinking about my situation and the Fae. Lukos thinks he's won. Something tells me he hasn't."

With a whisper-soft breeze Riley sat down on the bench next to her. He reached for her hand, covering it with his own. "You okay? Iver didn't do anything, did he?"

Cheri looked into Riley's dark eyes. Even with the limited illumination provided by the moon, she saw worry swimming in their dark blue depths. His fingers squeezed her hand. "No, I put some sleeping herbs in his dinner. He won't wake until morning."

"Thank the goddess. I'm going to challenge him for you in the morning."

"No!" Cheri flung her arms around him, holding him tight. Iver had been around for decades longer than Riley and she doubted he wouldn't fight fair. To lose her lover in a battle...she couldn't bear to think about it. "Just let me go." Her voice broke. She squeezed her eyes closed in a futile attempt to stem the tears. Her brother would say that crying was mortal and beneath them.

She buried her face in his shoulder, the solid warmth of his body comforting her. She drank in his sun-warmed scent in the hopes that she could tuck it into her memory.

"I have to." Riley tightened his embrace.

"Goddess bless, Riley. What if I lose you? At least now, with me wed to Iver, I can—"

Riley pressed his index finger to her lips, silencing her. "Wed to Iver you have nothing, Cheri, and you know it. How long before he figures out that you're drugging him so he won't break our bond. Every moment I'm away from you I ache. I sense our bond, and I reach for you. But you're not there. Don't do this to us, Cheri. Be strong. Fight!" He brushed a kiss across her mouth. "Where is my little fighter that used magic to keep her store afloat for the sake of some tiny birds? Where is the woman who knew what she wanted that night, and defied everything to have him? You have to be that woman, Cheri. I will fight for you, but you have to fight for us."

Soft sobs shook her body. Every word Riley spoke was true. Deep in her soul she knew it, as did he. The tears fell, dampening the cotton vest he wore at the shoulder.

Beneath it, warm sinew and skin called to her. Where Iver's touch sickened her, pressed against Riley, she hungered to feel his fingers, his lips on her nipples and his cock in her body. She shuddered.

He held her until the sobs subsided, and then held her some more. Nestled against him, Cheri simply enjoyed being with him. The mark on her neck hummed with contentment. If this was what a mate bond felt like, she knew she couldn't go back to her bondless, loveless marriage.

"My brother may still change his mind you know," she said when she could speak without choking on her sobs. "Iver is a very powerful Fae Prince. If you win, and take me away from him, I could still be punished. Iver would see to it, if my brother does not."

"We could flee to the mortal lands."

At one time the words would have filled her with a forbidden joy. Now, being back in the Fae realm, seeing her family, no matter how estranged they might be, she realized how lonely she was in the mortal world. Even with Riley by her side, she'd still be lonely. "No. I will want to return, but not permanently. I'd much rather walk the veil between worlds, working sometimes in the mortal lands, other times in the Fae. I shouldn't have to stay away."

"Then you won't."

"How do you know?" Cheri buried her faced against Riley's chest, hating herself for not trusting him. She knew her siblings and how power hungry they were. If Iver promised them something for wedding her, and she had no doubt he did, then they'd do whatever it took to get what they wanted. She knew. She'd been that way once too.

She brushed her thumb across Riley's cheek.

"Let's just say not every member of your family wants to see you wed to Iver. There may be a *Quartanine* tomorrow. Shall we strengthen the bond?" He tangled his fingers with hers, pulling her hand up to press it against his chest. Beneath her palm, his heart pounded.

"Yes," she breathed, trying to wrap her head around his news. She couldn't, so she let it go. "Yes." She leaned forward and kissed him, twining her free arm around his neck. Crawling over to his lap, she straddled his legs. Cheri wriggled against him until the length of his erection pressed against her, and she wished they had on less clothes. Her bare breasts brushed against the cotton vest and bare skin, the friction making her nipples hard. "Love me, Riley." She kissed his jaw and gave herself over to the man that she loved.

* * * *

With Cheri on his lap, Riley wanted nothing more than to lay her back on the table and pound into her until they were both satisfied. His cock ached with the need to sink into her warm, wet heat. He loved her. Seeing her like this, half-naked, knowing another Fae had touched her breasts made him want to tear Iver apart. The damn foolish Fae Prince wasn't good enough to touch her.

He leaned back and cupped her breasts. With swirls of his thumb he caressed her nipples to a diamond-hard state. He bent forward and swiped his tongue across his mark.

Cheri moaned.

Her fingers dug into his shoulders, almost as if she were holding him to her, or holding herself still. He laved the mark, nibbling and sucking until she writhed in his lap. The heat of her sex, even through the thin silk shorts she wore, burned him with the memory of her slick channel. He grazed the top of one breast with his teeth.

She bent back, offering him her nipples. Her eyes closed, her white-blond hair tumbling down her back, she looked like a fairy goddess. He licked first one nipple, then the other, wanting to cherish her, to show her how much she meant to him. Because in the back of his mind he knew, tomorrow, he might not win.

He drew her nipple into his mouth, rolling it around on his tongue. He could see and feel that she burned for him, her tiny cries were making him harder. Just one night.

Though he anticipated more, he had to treat her as if this would be their only night together. He palmed her other breast. The silky smooth softness of her skin got to him, reminded him of the contrasts between them, as if he needed it. Here, beneath the moonlight, she positively glowed. His own fairy goddess.

He nuzzled the valley between her breasts, turning his head to kiss first one, then the other. Every inch of her body demanded to be worshipped and he prayed he'd have the self-control to last that long. He pushed the *Quartanine* out of his mind. Legends told of battles that went on for days, bloody contests to determine the victor. The spoils might have been Fae women, land or gold. Either way, the *Quartanine* was the deciding contest. If he lost tomorrow, he'd lose Cheri forever.

Goddess, he couldn't think that way. Her fingers slid into his hair, flexing into his scalp. She held him to her breast, murmuring soft wordless sounds of encouragement. Her free hand drifted over his shoulders, down his back, and he thought about moving them to a more comfortable place.

He found his hands on her waist, working on the buttons on her shorts. A quick flick of his wrist, and the material parted, revealing her bare skin beneath. The only moving he'd be doing would be into her hot body. He lifted her onto the table, pushing back the bench with his leg as he stood. Laying her out, he tugged off her shorts.

Cheri parted her legs.

His nostrils flared as he drew the scent of her cream into his lungs. Goddess, he'd never seen a more beautiful sight.

She stretched her arms over her head. Her back arched and she offered her perfect breasts to him.

Riley curled his fingers around her ankles. He spread her legs, bending her knees so he could place her feet flat on the table. He released her long enough to shed his pants and his vest. The cool night air caressed his overheated skin, as arousing as her touch. He turned his head, pressing a kiss to the inside of her left knee. Short, halting caresses of his fingers and tiny kisses led him up the insides of her thighs. Beneath his touch, she trembled.

How could one Fae woman get beneath his skin so deeply that he'd risk everything, even his life to have her. The bond between them pulled, drawing him closer to her sex. He nuzzled her folds, teasing her labia by drawing each one into his mouth and sucking. Her plump clit called to him with a siren song that promised both of them pleasure. He swirled his tongue around it and smiled as her voice broke into a wordless cry.

Iver must be sleeping soundly indeed.

He tugged her closer to him, loving the way she lifted her legs to his shoulders. She cupped her breasts, and he looked over her body to watch her play with her nipples. His big hands covered hers, and he bent his head to her pussy once more.

Though the night continued around them, it was as if they had all the time in the world. He lapped at her folds, sliding his tongue between them to make her shudder and cry out his name. She tasted like ambrosia, like the finest sweet he'd ever had the chance to nibble on.

He licked her, pausing to swirl his tongue around the plump bead of her clit. He slid his hands beneath her thighs, up to cup her buttocks and raise her off the table. Just a little bit longer. He stabbed his tongue into her, wringing tiny, whimpering cries from her throat. Each one tightened his cock, made him want her that much more.

Inside the villa, Iver slept. He hoped to the goddess that the Prince stayed asleep. He needed this night with Cheri, if only to have one, last lingering taste of her before the *Quartanine*.

"Riley." She lowered her legs, sitting up as she reached for him, curling her fingers into his shoulders. Her knees fell even wider open on the table. "Please," she whimpered.

"Please what?" He lifted his head just enough so his breath teased the slick folds of her sex. He ached with the ball-tightening need to possess her once and for all.

"I need..." Cheri's words slid into a long shuddering moan as he traced his finger along her labia.

"What do you need?" He tormented her with caresses of fingers, lips, and tongue. She had to say what she wanted, needed to tell him exactly what she desired. He wanted the memory of her words to take with him into battle tomorrow.

"You. Inside me," she panted. "Goddess, Riley I need you to make love to me!" She nearly shrieked the words.

"I never thought you'd ask." He slid his tongue across the inside of her thigh before straightening. Grabbing her ankles on his shoulders, he poised the head of his cock at her entrance. He slid home with a flex of his hips.

Riley paused with his shaft completely inside her. He relished the tiny contractions rippling along her channel, the way she moaned and reached for him. Looking down at her, with her breasts rising and falling with each panting breath, her lips parted, her eyes half-lidded in passion, he burned the image to his mind. Her toes flexed against his shoulders, and his hands beneath her buttocks lifted her for an even better angle.

"Cheri," he breathed. If this were to be their last night together—goddess, he nearly shattered with the thought—it had to be a memorable one. "My mate." Then, he began to move.

* * * *

Cheri struggled to find grounding in the solid table beneath her. The heat radiating from Riley's body as he thrust between her legs plunged her into a world of searing desire. Her world swirled. Tiny multi-colored lights danced in her vision. Her pussy tightened around his rod in a demand that he stay with her, inside her, always. Her body clung to that desire, her entire being reaching for his.

In all her years as a Fae princess, she'd never met another Faeman like him. Iver, the snoring, insipid Iver, never brought her to the heights of passion that Riley did. None of them had ever done so, and that's why when she saw him across the room that night, she knew she had to have him. Now, she did. His talk of battling for her

tomorrow enflamed her. She felt like a woman worthy of a man willing to fight for her. Yet, with battle came a victor and a loser. She feared Riley might be that loser. Not that she doubted his physical prowess. He easily had more muscle than Iver. No, she doubted the Prince's ability to fight fairly.

A sob caught in her throat. Cupping her rear, Riley changed angles, his shaft brushing against something high and deep inside with each thrust. She focused on him, his body, his cock, his breaths, the way his fingers flexed against her... everything about him. Her channel tightened. She held off, not wanting to come too soon. But, Riley reached across her body to cup her breast. He pinched her nipple, rolling it between his thumb and forefinger.

A bolt of pleasure shot through her. She screamed; head bowed back, breasts lifted to him like a spring festival sacrifice. Her release poured from her, coating his cock with her juices. Tiny spasms raced along her spine, down her legs, centering on her womb. Over and over again her release poured through her, until after one, long thrust, Riley grunted, and spent himself within her.

She lay on the table, trying to right her spinning world. Reaching beneath her lower spine, Riley helped her sit. Her feet fell from his shoulders and she wrapped her legs around his waist. Resting her forehead against his shoulder, she drew his musky scent into her lungs. She hugged him, squeezing so tight she never wanted to let go. The mark on her neck hummed.

Riley bent his lips to it. "I can't stay." Loss crackled in his words. "I have to go prepare for the battle tomorrow."

She nodded against his chest. "Goddess be with you."

"And with you. I know the rest of this night won't be easy. Is there somewhere you can go that isn't Iver's bed?"

She repeated her nod.

He stepped away, his shaft sliding from her. He reached for his clothing on the ground and gave her the scarf that had made up her top and the tiny pair of shorts. She didn't get dressed, instead clutched the silky fabric as if it held the keys to the universe.

Reaching up, she rubbed the mark. Though he stood in front of her, she needed that connection to him, needed to know that she was still bonded to him.

“The priestess will come tomorrow to confirm that you haven’t lain with Iver. Once she announces it to the council, then I shall call for the battle. By this time tomorrow night, we’ll be back in each other’s arms.” He pressed a quick, hard kiss to her lips then hurried to the low wall surrounding the garden. One moment he stood there, the next, a hawk flew overhead, and into the darkness.

Cheri wrapped her arms around herself hoping that Riley was right. Because she didn’t think she could take a second night with Iver.

Chapter Six

Dressed in a gossamer gown the same emerald as her eyes, Cheri sat in a hard, wooden chair in the middle of the council chamber. From behind their desks, her siblings, and the rest of the fairy council stared at her. The priestess, an older woman with kind eyes, who Cheri immediately liked, stood behind her. She rested her hands on Cheri's shoulders, chanting something low in the old language. Tendrils of magic raced down her arms. They pooled in the mark, making it blaze with a holy fire. Cheri kept her eyes open, not wanting to succumb to the magic or Riley's mark in front of the council.

At last the chanting ended. The priestess stepped back. "Cherianalasta Aerchere has been examined in front of the goddess and witnesses. She bears the mark of a Fae mate, but not from the man to which she was given last night. She has lain with the same Fae who gave her the mark, not Prince Iversterlat Soccoroan. She is free by Fae law."

"No!" Iver bolted to his feet. "That's a lie."

The priestess' gown swished as she whirled to face the Prince. "Do you dare question the word of a sworn priestess to the goddess? I know what I sensed. You did not mate with your wife last night, Prince Soccoroan. Would you like me to test you too?"

A gasp and a hush fell over those assembled.

"That isn't necessary," Lukos said. "I have no doubt my sister couldn't remain faithful to her *husband* for a single night."

A husband she hadn't been willingly given to. Cheri silenced the thoughts. She remained looking straight ahead, her hands clasped in her lap. The mark on her neck hummed with Riley's nearness.

"When you gave her to one, after she had been marked by another, what did you expect?" The priestess asked.

Cheri stifled a grin. Another gasp fell over the crowd.

"Very well then. Be gone, old woman. Cheri you are ordered to fulfill your marital obligations or face the consequences." Though the cage didn't sit on the dais, its presence hovered between them as a symbol of what Lukos would do should his will not be followed.

"I am a priestess of the goddess. You cannot order me away." The old woman strode forward until she stopped just in front of Lukos. "There is ceremony to be called. She is bonded to another. Perhaps he would like to call the *Quartanine*."

"He cannot!" Lukos started to rise then sat back down. "He's a cur, not fit to lick the mud off of my sister's shoes."

"And Prince Soccoroan is?" The old woman cackled. "A Fae man does not mark every Fae woman he sticks his barb into. It takes the woman to accept the mark, to allow it to stick. Three times given. Three times accepted. 'Tis the goddess' way. And now you deny that Fae man a chance to claim the woman he so obviously loves?"

"The priestess is right," her sister, Lise, said. "It is I to whom my sister gave slight when she took Riley Hawk as a lover. Though his name marks him as one of the lower castes, he had been selected to be mine. Riley Hawk fulfilled his obligation by bringing my sister back home after she broke the terms of her exile. If he wants her, then I say let him call *Quartanine* for her. I shall not stand in their way." She looked down at her sister and smiled. "It is the least I can do."

"Thank you," Cheri breathed. "Thank you!"

"Don't thank me, little sister. Not yet. Riley hasn't called the *Quartanine*, and even if he does, he hasn't won yet."

Cheri nodded, knowing truer words had never been spoken.

The door to the council chamber banged open. Heedless of propriety she whirled to watch the Fae man that she loved walk into the room. He wore gleaming armor of silver and brass, a long sword hanging by his side. Green jewels, the same color as her eyes, winked in the hilt. He didn't go to her, but the hot, hungry smile he gave dissipated the chill of her sister's words.

He swept to one knee, his armor clanking, in front of the council. "I understand that Princess Cherianalasta Aerchere has been tested and has passed. I call for the *Quartanine* so that I may fight for the woman I love." He rose just as gracefully as he had bowed.

Cheri's heart leapt.

"Do you accept this?" Lukos asked.

"Yes. I bear the mark of Riley Hawk, and I wish the *Quartanine*." She had no idea what the ritual words were. The battle for a mate hadn't occurred in Fae for many years, but she figured they had to go something like what she'd just said.

The priestess nodded her approval.

"And who challenges Riley Hawk for the Princess Cherianalasta Aerchere?" Lukos called, clearly not liking the situation.

"I do!" Iver rose to his feet. "You gave her to me, after all."

The priestess laughed. "Ah, but a Fae woman is not a possession to be given or taken away at a whim. It is this that the *Quartanine* reminds us of, that there are four sides to any relationship. That he loves her or he doesn't. That she loves him or she doesn't. And should any woman found to bear the mark of a man not her husband, she has shown her truth with the mark upon her body. It is up to him, to see if he is worthy of her." With a half-bow, she started to back away from the council. "I trust that you can complete the rest of the ritual without me. I must ensure that the priestesses go into meditation to assure the rightful outcome." With a wink at Cheri, the woman left.

The rightful outcome? Cheri watched the priestess leave wondering if there was more happening behind the scenes than she was first aware. Did the priestesses already want Riley to win?

"The *Quartanine* has been called. The combatants will meet on the battlefield in an hour. Cheri, you are to come with us." Lise stood and nodded once to those assembled. Without waiting for any response, she spun on her heel and went to the door behind the council seats leading into the heart of the castle.

Not knowing what else to do Cheri stood and followed her sister.

Lukos glared at them both until the door closed behind her.

Cheri slumped against the wall. Her sister stood at the end, a triumphant grin on her face. "Come on, we don't have much time. There are things you need to do as well for the *Quartanine* to work." She motioned for Cheri to follow her.

Cheri stared at her sister and realized she really didn't know the Fae woman who stood before her. The last time she'd seen her sister, she'd been on the receiving end of a glare strong enough to singe hairs from her head. Princess Liseannechelle Aerchere had grown up in the time since Cheri's exile. "Why are you helping me, Lise?"

"Because I realize that I may have been wrong in ordering you exiled. I had no intention of bedding Riley that night. He was just one of many sent for my pleasure. You two had a connection, and I interfered with that. I'm sorry for it, and that I cost you exile. If I can fix it..." Lise's words trailed off.

Cheri realized she indeed didn't know the Faewoman standing before her. The Lise of old certainly wouldn't have wanted to make things right, let alone apologize for past behaviors. "Thank you," she said, unsure of whether to say anything else.

"Come on." Back to her old self, Lise hurried down the corridor.

Cheri followed. She glanced behind her, but Lukos hadn't entered the hallway. She supposed she should be thankful for that and she hurried down the hallway after Lise. Her sister turned into a small door through which Cheri hadn't gone before. It opened into a small open-air courtyard. A fountain bubbled merrily in the corner. A large fruit tree held several small songbirds and they sang as the door opened. Lise

scooped a handful of seeds out of an urn next to the door and scattered them on the ground. The birds fluttered down to eat.

"Sit." Lise indicated a stone slab on which a green cushion sat. There were no other seats.

Cheri did, crossing her legs. Instantly a calm descended upon her. Though she'd said nothing to Riley, she sensed him preparing for the ritual. The mark on her neck hummed pleasantly, and then it stopped.

Cheri gasped. She reached for it, tracing her fingers over the now-dead mark. "What happened? I can't feel him anymore." She blinked back a sudden wash of tears at the thought of being forever separated from the man she loved. Whirling, she saw Lise aligning crystals on a grid in the corner opposite the waterfall. "What did you do?"

"It's all right. The bond needs to be damped for both of you to prepare. This ritual is to choose who is the one of your heart, after all. If the mark is blasting away at you, it's not going to be a fair contest." She smiled so sweetly that Cheri had to believe it was true. "You know, I never thought it would get this far. I never thought you and Riley would bond."

"Me neither," Cheri said. She waited for Lise to finish then gasped as tingles raced up and down her spine. She tried to turn her head to see what her sister was doing and found she couldn't. "Lise," her voice sounded hollow as if it came from miles away. "Lise, what are you doing?"

Panic swept over her. She struggled against the forces holding her down, trying to lift her arm, her leg, hell, even straighten, and she found she couldn't move. Tiny green sparkles the same color as the cushion danced around her, hovering just above her skin. She opened her mouth to scream. No sound emerged. *Riley. Can you feel me?* The mark remained as dead as if it never existed.

Cheri took deep breaths. Her sister still moved somewhere beyond her peripheral vision. Panicking now wouldn't do any good. Then, the swish of gowns against the stone floor came to her as Lise moved back into her view. "I'm sorry," she said, and in her eyes Cheri truly saw the regret. "But Lukos' hold on the council is

tenuous. I can't have you defying Prince Soccoroan. Giving you to him was the only thing that kept him from killing our brother when Lukos took over. I cannot stand aside and watch you ruin all our plans."

Now that sounded like the sister Cheri had known. She opened her mouth to speak, then knew she couldn't, not with the enchantment around her.

"You see, the *Quartanine* relies on the force of the bond to work. As long as you and Riley are connected through your bond, Prince Soccoroan didn't have a chance. Now, he'll likely win. He's older, stronger, and has far more experience than Riley."

Don't count him out. Just because Riley never learned to fight among the nobility didn't mean he didn't know how to fight. Growing up among the lesser castes made for a hard life, a life that meant Riley had learned at a young age how to fight. She didn't say this. She couldn't. And really, in her state of mind, Lise wouldn't listen.

"You just sit here and be a good little Fae. When the *Quartanine* is over, your husband will come and get you." She hurried away, but not before Cheri saw the flash of regret in her sister's eyes.

The duplicity made her head spin.

Crystal magic. Her sister had been good at it. Closing her eyes, Cheri reached out with senses she hadn't used in a long time. Yes, the magic was there. Subtle, but there. She recognized her sister's touch. Lise might be good with Crystal magic, but there was one thing Cheri could do better. Dispel. With a determined grin, she went to work.

* * * *

Riley jerked as the mark went dead. Cheri. What had happened to her? He curled his fingers around the hilt of the sword he'd had specially crafted right after her exile. The gems in the hilt matched her eyes, and her name was written in Fae script along the blade. Everything he'd done from the moment of her exile had been building up to this moment. Whatever happened, he wouldn't let it get between them.

A priestess dabbed oil on his forehead and his temples. The scent of jasmine surrounded him. "Be strong, my son. Let your heart be your guide," she said. He'd heard her say the same words to Prince Iver, who had only sneered.

"Thank you." He paused for a moment, not wanting to contemplate defeat. "If I don't..."

"Rely on the strength of your mark. It will see you through," she said, bowing once then hurrying away before he could tell her that it wasn't there.

He reached up and touched a gauntleted hand to his shoulder. Nothing. Not even a zing. Perhaps this was part of the ritual, though if it were, then why would the priestess tell him to rely on a mark that wasn't there. It had to be there. Dressed in his armor, he couldn't tear open the collar of his shirt and see if the mark blazed on his skin as it had on Cheri's. He'd worn high collars so no one could see the reciprocal mark, though surely everyone knew it existed.

The battlefield loomed in front of them. Prince Iver had already had taken position in the corner with his back to the sun. He held a sword in one hand and a shield in the other. Several attendants stood around him, ready with water or whatever he made need.

Riley had no one.

If this were truly meant to be a fair contest he would have an attendant with a pitcher of water at the very least. A box containing viewing seats sat along one side of the field and offered some shade from the sun. In it, Riley saw Cheri's siblings sitting there. There were no other witnesses.

Nothing like a fair fight in front of impartial witnesses.

Riley stepped into the opposite corner from Iver. He took a deep breath and waited for the chime to signal the start of the battle.

He didn't have to wait long. It sounded then he and Iver advanced upon each other warily. Swords drawn, the two Fae circled each other, looking for openings or weakness. Riley sized up Iver as a competent, if not good fighter. He looked at ease in his armor and with his polished sword containing his family crest on the hilt. His armor

was clean and shiny, yet had a few marks in it from battles past. He would not be an easy opponent.

Riley debated about acting stupid. As a lesser caste he shouldn't be as comfortable in armor as he was. Most of the lower factions couldn't afford armor, and never learned how to fight within its bulk. For Riley, being chosen to battle for some higher caste Fae, he'd learned early and well how to fight according to their style. At least Iver hadn't called a stand-in. He could have, and it would have been legal under Fae law. In fact, Riley had fought as such a stand-in many times, though he'd never fought Iver before.

He put thoughts of the missing mark out of his mind. Time to focus on the battle. He held his sword ready.

Iver advanced. The Fae prince thought to rush him with his greater size. He barreled into Riley.

Riley raised his shield, hitting the Fae prince in the shoulder. The clang of metal against metal rang in the clearing. Riley spun away. No time to think about dulling his actions to give Iver a false sense of security. He ducked and spun, lifting his sword for a downward strike.

Iver blocked it. He moved his shield just enough to hit Riley's sword, then came in for a wicked undercut.

The impact of sword against shield jarred the length of Riley's arm, nearly stunning him. He'd forgotten what it was like to battle like this. Humans preferred to fist fight, and frankly Riley did too. He managed to evade another flurry of blows before sending Iver back on the defensive.

Where was the damn mark? He drew upon memories of Cheri, of her skin soft and supple beneath his lips, the tiny breathy cries she gave when they made love, the feel of her hot channel wrapping around his cock. He pulled the memories into the forefront of his mind. He battled for her.

Sweat glistened on his brow. If Iver had expected a quick fight, he'd been sorely mistaken. The two of them were nearly evenly matched. He heard nothing from the box

where Cheri's siblings waited, no cheers, no cries for victory or defeat. It was the damn oddest battle in which he'd ever fought.

Draw strength from the mark. How could he draw strength from something that he no longer felt? Riley stumbled. The only way to remove a mark would be to kill one of the members of the bond. No! Cheri couldn't be dead. He swung wildly and missed.

Iver laughed. "So you figured it out, did you?"

"Figured what out?" Riley growled. He blocked a blow and aimed again, this time for Iver's neck.

The Prince narrowly missed the slash. "That we made things a little bit more even for the battle. But don't worry, I don't think Lise hurt her." He sneered and struck again.

Riley growled under his breath. The curses that fell from his lips were pithy and foul. Trust the Prince to make sure things went his way. That's what they all were, spoiled fairies playing at power and miring everyone else deeper in shit. He reciprocated with a flurry of blows that drove Iver back toward the edge of the field. Behind him, his men watched anxiously.

Sweat soaked the scarf he'd tied around his forehead, green for Cheri's eyes, and dripped across his face. The salt stung his eyes. He ignored it; ignored everything that he'd have to endure until he held Cheri in his arms once more.

The dead mark mocked him.

He wasted no more time on words, simply poured his frustration, his anger, his fear into his actions. He used his emotions like the sword he held in his hand, keeping him from tumbling into the abyss of worry that would drag him down and make Iver the victor. Cheri was a grown Fae. She could look after herself. And though it'd been years since she'd been in the land of Fae, he knew she wasn't without magic of her own. He hoped she remembered that.

Riley landed a lucky blow, the tip of his sword finding the space between armor plates and cleaving a line along the joint. Blood welled into the opening, blue, just like the royalty Iver thought he was.

Iver yanked his arm back. He snarled, raising his sword with his bloodied arm. His parries came slower. Lines of pain bracketed his eyes and mouth. Riley wished it would be that easy to defeat him, but he knew it wouldn't be.

A hint of magic made the hair on Riley's arms stand on end. That bastard! Magic wasn't allowed on the battlefield. It was the one weapon that Faes had at their disposal that they couldn't use. And he had no magic. One of the curses of being a lower caste Fae, no magic, no power save what he created, ran in his veins. Iver had just turned it into an unfair fight.

Riley knew better than to look toward the stands to see what Cheri's siblings thought of it. Undoubtedly they wouldn't call the magic, and the priestess wasn't here to officiate. The *Quartanine* was to be fought on the honor system, and Prince Soccoroan had no honor.

Riley pretended that he missed the subtle use of power. Though he had none of his own, he'd learned to recognize it. Such abilities came in handy when working in the halls of the noble Fae, for they liked to abuse their situation by using the magic they wielded. He ignored the fact that the wound healed, the only hint that it had happened was a few specks of dried blood on Iver's armor. He fainted toward Iver's formerly-wounded arm, allowing the Prince to land a couple lucky blows in the process.

The mark tingled. Faintly, but it was there, a surge of love and desire so powerful Riley staggered.

Iver grinned, his lips pulled back from his teeth.

Not this time, bastard. Riley ducked, drawing strength from the mark's slight presence. Not as powerful as it had been, but it was there. Cheri wasn't completely gone.

His foot slipped. The ground, once crisp dry grass, was quickly turning to mud with no rain in sight. *More power use, Prince. Don't you think you can beat me fairly?* His right leg splayed out to the side, and too quickly, Iver slashed at his knee.

The blade knicked armor to slide to the leather straps beneath. They split, as did the heavy trousers that he wore. Skin parted, and blood welled. His knee screamed.

Iver raised his sword again.

In the Fae court, dismemberment would be worse than death. A shout of pain erupted from his chest. He pulled his leg back, staggering to his feet and backing up a few precious steps to get him out of reach of Iver's sword. He balanced most of his weight on the left leg, the blood, his red, dripping down his calf in a wet, sticky mess.

The mark wavered.

"No!" Riley yelled, not caring who heard him. "Damn you, no!"

He charged Iver. This had to end, and it had to end now.

* * * *

Cheri repeated the mantras under her breath, making each one a bit more powerful than the last. The shield still held, though she could move her head and lift her arms, just not beyond the confines of the cushion. Using the mark, she sent wave after wave of love and support to Riley. She imagined him on the field in full armor, fighting Iver. Bloodied and bruised, he'd fight to the end.

She wanted to believe he'd win, but she knew the Prince to whom she'd been given. Iver would stop at nothing to get what he wanted, and he wanted her. Her energy wavered. *Focus, girl!*

Cheri reached out with her fingers and traced the sputtering green outline of the shield in which she'd been imprisoned. When the priestess had told her to prepare for the *Quartanine*, Cheri figured this was not what the old woman had meant. There, she found it. A seam in the magic, a way for Cheri to interject her will and break free. She focused on it, noting the wavy lines of poorly constructed power. Lise had been in a hurry.

She'd always been sloppy in conjuration class. Cheri smiled, for a moment drawn back to those halcyon days where she'd been the light in her parent's eyes, and Lise, the older, staid Fae woman, destined for governing. Lise hadn't liked her back then, either. Just as she had in class, Cheri eased her magic into the spaces left by her

sister's haste. Once there, she gently pried the two halves apart, slowly, surely, working to ensure that the caster wasn't alerted to the flaw in her spell.

Her breathing grew ragged. Cheri's muscles ached. She worked so slowly, she had no idea how much time had passed, or even if the battle still raged. A soft pop filled the air. A second tiny release followed then a long hiss as the magic dissipated into the air.

Cheri bolted to her feet, her muscles screaming in protest. The mark blazed to life, raw with pain and anguish. Riley. She had to go to him. Not caring if she alerted her sister, she opened the door and raced down the hall. Cheri hoped she wasn't too late.

Chapter Seven

Cheri skittered to a stop at the edge of the battlefield. The subtle, tell-tale hint of magic slid over her skin like a slimy caress. Looking at the men's boots, she saw Riley's were caked with mud, his tracks slippery, where Iver stood in solid, grassy ground. The bastard! She growled under her breath, automatically extending her senses toward the field. She firmed up the ground beneath his boots. The tendrils of magic emerged from her as easy as breathing.

She turned her face to the sun. A breeze toyed with the loose strands of her hair, sliding it across her skin in an intimate caress. The scent of loam and sun-warmed air filled her nostrils, reminding her of Riley. Her hawk.

The mark pulsed. She reached out and touched it, not knowing if it would help, but figuring it couldn't hurt. The clang of sword against sword filled the air, mingling with the men's grunts. Iver landed a blow against Riley's arm. His hand flexed and his shield dropped to the ground. Iver kicked it away.

Cheri started to rush forward, but a shake of Riley's head kept her on the sidelines. A small viewing box sat on the other side of the field, and in it, she saw Lukos and Lise sitting. For a moment she contemplated joining them then decided against it. They'd put her in this predicament. While she might want to gloat in their presence, it wouldn't be something appropriate to a fairy princess. And, knowing what Lise tried to do, if she did go over there, who knew what would happen. Either way, she figured they'd try to stop her and Riley from getting together ever again.

"You realize if Riley wins, you'll be the Queen of Faerie." The old woman stood next to her and spoke low in Cheri's ear.

"What?" Reluctant to take her full attention away from the battle, she turned toward the old woman. The priestess. "I don't understand."

"The ruler of the Fae council must be a Fae of royal blood mated to another. Your brother thought his coup would gain him power. He's just a place holder until your young man wins. He knows this, as does his sister."

Cheri swayed with the shock of the priestess' words. "But I don't want..."

"It doesn't matter what you want. Tradition will dictate that you rule. Your brother set things into motion that not even he can comprehend. When faced with a bonded Fae of royal blood, the Fae her parents wanted to rule, the council will no longer support Lukos."

"But Riley? He's not a prince or anything, is he?" Cheri stared at the Fae on the field and tried to figure out if he might be a Fae prince in hiding. The blood that she saw was as red as a mortal's, signifying that somewhere in his past he had shady ancestry. Even dressed in head to toe armor, his body wounded and weary, he still set her soul on fire. She ached to soothe his wounds, to apply what little healing arts she knew to making him whole and healthy again. She loved him.

The old woman cackled. "No, he's not a prince, though he'll find out he's become one soon enough." In a blink of an eye, she vanished.

"Where?" Cheri stared at the empty place where the old woman had stood. Not even the grass had been bent from the pressure of her feet. A rattling clang sounded from the field, and Cheri realized that Riley had gotten Iver onto the ground. His blade rested against the Fae Prince's throat.

"Do you yield?" Riley's voice boomed across the field.

Cheri waited with held breath to hear what Iver's answer would be. Though he'd panted after her for years, and he'd pawed her last night as if she were something to own, Cheri realized she didn't want to see him killed. "Say it," she whispered under her breath. "End this now."

Iver remained silent.

Across the way, Lukos and Lise leaned forward.

"I asked, do you yield?" Riley yelled again. "If you don't, then by Fae law you will die."

"Never!" Iver boomed. "Kill me. It's obvious she's yours, and she's been yours all along." No sorrow, only remorse like someone who watched a cherished possession slip through their fingers, filled his voice.

"I don't want to kill you." Cheri thought she was the only one close enough to hear his words. "Don't make me doing this."

"Why, are you a coward?" Iver sneered.

Not caring what Riley thought, Cheri rushed forward. "Don't do this, Iver. You're not a bad Fae. You are merely misguided. My brother has no valid claim to rule, and you know it. I'm a bonded Fae of royal blood. I'll pardon your actions. Just don't make a fool of yourself and die here." She searched Riley's gaze, wanting him to know that she loved him. The mark blazed stronger than ever.

"You'd pardon me?" Iver barked laughter and spat blood from his mouth. "I wouldn't if I were in your shoes. And if you lead, then he will be right by your side. How do I know that he'll agree to the pardon?"

Riley reached across the space separating them and grabbed Cheri's hand. He still kept the sword braced at Iver's throat. "Because I love her, and I agree. You don't deserve to die for this. No one does." He paused for a moment. "Did you really mean it when you said that you'd be ruling the council? And I'd be at your side?"

Cheri grinned. "As a bonded fairy princess of the royal line, I have first claim to the throne. Not even Lukos or Lise can stop me. They're not bonded."

Riley's eyes widened. He glanced from her, down to Iver, then back again. "So you're saying that we will rule the fairy council." A grin split his face. "If that's the case, Iver, then I'll pardon you so long as you agree to leave Cheri alone. She will be the Queen after all."

"I will." In spite of the sword pressed to his neck, Iver managed to nod. "I yield," he said loud enough for Lukos and Lise to hear.

"No!" Lukos roared from the box. He raced out of it, followed by Lise. She held her skirts up, her eyes widening when she saw Cheri standing next to Riley.

Riley tightened his fingers around Cheri's hand. He released the sword, allowing Iver some measure of dignity to stand. He turned to face Lukos and Lise, pulling Cheri to his side. Iver stood a short distance away.

"You weren't supposed to yield. You were supposed to win," Lukos bellowed. "How dare you do this to me?"

"It was a fair fight. He beat me fairly."

Cheri gasped at Iver's admission. She hadn't expected anything remotely close to civility from him. "It seems dear brother and sister, that I will rule the council now. I am of royal Fae blood, and I am bonded." She pulled aside the neckline of her dress, wanting to make sure that they saw the mark remained on her skin. "And my bonded won the *Quartanine*."

"Never," Lise hissed. "This isn't how this was supposed to happen."

Lukos snarled. He pulled his hand back, ready to strike.

Iver darted between them. "You will not—ugh!" His head snapped with the force of Lukos' blow. Blue blood dripped from the corner of his mouth. He shook his head and started to charge.

Riley clamped his hand on Iver's shoulder. "Thank you, but let me." He gently pushed Iver aside, and with his gauntleted hand, punched Lukos.

The Fae man's head snapped around. "Hey!" He yelled. A trickle of red blood dripped from his lip.

Red blood.

"Lukos!" Cheri gasped. She brushed past Riley, not caring that he'd hit her brother. Lukos had deserved it. The red blood dripping across his chin concerned her most. If his blood were red, then he wasn't a royal Fae. He wasn't her brother by blood.

She noticed both Iver and Riley staring at him as if they didn't believe it.

"Lukos!" Lise cried. She curled her hand around his arm, reaching for him the way a concerned lover might.

Lise and Lukos? Her head spinning, Cheri looked from her sister to her brother. The undercurrents between them made her stomach twist. But if Lukos weren't her brother by blood, then they weren't siblings. Still, she swallowed hard and reached for Lukos.

He flinched away into Lise's arms.

"Now you know," he snarled and pulled away, his red blood still on his lip and on his fingers.

Cheri turned to Lise. "Did you? How?" She sputtered the words, her world spinning apart. First she found herself in charge of the fairy council. Now, she learned her brother really wasn't, and her sister had feelings, or something, for him that went beyond the fraternal.

Lise shook her head. "Now look what you and your *lover* have done. Take the throne. You won't be seeing us anymore," she snarled. Spitting on the ground at Cheri's feet, she whirled and hurried after Lukos.

Cheri watched them leave. Distantly, she realized Riley had his hand on her shoulder, supporting her, and she willingly leaned into his strength. "I had no idea," she whispered after her siblings disappeared from view. "I had absolutely no idea, and I don't think it's because I was gone for five years."

"There were rumors, but nothing more." Iver removed his helm, and swept into a low bow. "Please allow me to be the first to pledge my loyalty to the new leaders of the Fae council. May your rule be long and prosperous."

Cheri looked at Iver's bent head and realized she had no idea what to say.

"Thank you. I'm sure with your support the transition will go much easier," Riley replied.

"That is my intent," Iver said. He stood and winced with his injuries. "I see the high priestess is coming to confirm the outcome. She'll let you know what to do. I'm

afraid I need a hot soak." He drew their attention to the old woman making her way down the grassy hill surrounding the battlefield.

Cheri stepped forward. She reached for Iver's hand, feeling affection for the man who had almost become her husband. His actions were honorable, and she had no doubt when it came time for her and Riley to sit at the table at the head of the council, that he would do his best to support her. "I know this probably hasn't been easy for you. I appreciate it." She released him, and returned to Riley's side.

Iver tipped his head to her, then turned and left. His retainers had left sometime during the confrontation with Lukos. Stoically, though every muscle in his body must ache, he carried his sword and shield up the hill, and back toward his home.

"We did it," Cheri said. She longed to sag against Riley's chest and let him wrap his arms around her. Grief sat in a knot in her stomach when she looked at where Lukos and Lise had disappeared. She couldn't give into her emotions. Not now when she had a council to meet and duties to assume.

Riley rested his chin on her head. He had to be bone-deep exhausted, but he gave no sign of it. His sword and shield lay on the ground next to him, dropped sometime during the conversation. Wrapping his arms around her, he held her against his chest. "You did it. All I did was bring you home."

Home. She hadn't thought about it, but she'd undoubtedly take over her family's rooms in the castle. It had been over five years since she'd walked in the walled garden at the center of the courtyard, or went to the roof to watch the fledglings get their lessons. All the joys she'd missed while she'd been in exile came flooding back to her. She swayed and Riley's arms tightened, holding her upright.

"You have work ahead of you," the priestess said.

Cheri turned in Riley's arms to face the old woman, not quite wanting to leave the haven of his arms just yet. "I don't suppose we could rest first?" Cheri asked. She breathed in the heady aroma of Riley's sun-warmed skin mixed with sweat. The stone baths in the castle would be the perfect place to cleanse his wounds and simply relax.

The priestess laughed. "I wish that you could. I'm sure both of you would like nothing more than the traditional seclusion that follows a successful *Quartanine*. But you must prepare yourselves to take over the council. Come with me, please."

"What about my brother and sister?" Cheri wasn't quite content to leave the battlefield yet. While she figured Lise and Lukos wouldn't return; she hoped they were all right.

"I don't think they'll be back," the priestess said. She fixed Cheri with a long, serious look. "It might be for the best if they go the human lands. Perhaps a self-imposed exile will be the best thing for them to work through their issues."

Cheri's heart sank, though she knew the priestess to have spoken truly.

Riley released her. "We'll do what we need to do," he said, his hand still possessively on her lower back.

"Good. Cheri can show you to her family's rooms. Please clean up and come to the council chamber as soon as possible. There, I will invest you as the new leaders of Fae." The old woman paused for a moment.

Cheri waited, expecting the priestess to say something else. She looked at Riley, wondering how he must be taking his change in fortune. Their caste difference didn't matter to her. She'd wanted him even before she learned about his upbringing. He'd been born of the worker class, finding purchase among the upper castes because of his fighting skills. There, he'd caught the eye of her sister, and been brought into the harem that night. Lise had said that she'd seen Riley in a duel, where he stood in for one of the lesser Fae lords.

"May the goddess bless both of you." With those parting words, the old woman turned and went back up the hill to the castle.

Cheri waited until the priestess had gone some distance before speaking. "Are you sure you're okay with this?" To think that Riley had come to bring her back, never expecting her to be anything but an exile. It boggled her mind when she thought about sitting on those raised thrones and ruling over the Fae council. She couldn't imagine what he thought of it. The mark on her neck tingled.

Riley cupped her chin to look into her eyes. She stared into his dark blue gaze. Love radiated from him and through the mark. "This is not what I imagined happening when I brought you back home, but I am very glad it worked out this way. I love you, my fairy princess. I think I have ever since that night we shared, and though I brought you back as a way to atone, I never, not once, did it because I didn't care for you very deeply. You're my bonded mate, my sparrow, and I am humbled and honored to sit in the chair next to you as you preside over the Fae council as is your birth right." He dipped his head and sealed his words with a kiss.

His mouth moved over hers, honoring, seeking, and when he touched his tongue to her lower lip, she opened for him. Cheri twined her arms around his neck, arching against the cool metal of his armor. Her Fae warrior. Her mate. She loved Riley like she'd loved nothing else in her life. Her body tingled, her sex humming to life at the prospect of being bonded to him for the rest of her life. She wanted no other.

When the kiss ended, she turned to find the priestess standing at the top of the hill watching them. Embarrassment swept through her until she remembered that she ruled the Fae council, and could do what she wished. With a grin, she led her mate up the hill toward the priestess and the council, where their new life waited.

"Do you think we can invite Cody to the ceremony?" Cheri asked.

"Ceremony?" Riley stopped.

Cheri laughed at him. "Yeah, our bonding ceremony." She started to punch him in the arm then remembered he still wore his armor. Instead, she stood on tiptoe and kissed his cheek. "There's going to have to be a big ceremony, plus our investiture. There will be balls and parties the like of which Caroann hasn't known for many years." She beamed.

"That's my fairy princess," Riley said, giving an overly dramatic sigh.

Cheri did punch him then, tapping him on the shoulder, though she figured he didn't feel it through his armor.

"Yes, we can invite Cody. Maybe we can have the reception at the bar. Although I'm not sure what he'd think about dozens of Fae descending on the mortal realm and his place of business at once."

"Something tells me Cody won't mind." She kissed his cheek again then laced her hands with his. "To our future."

"To my sparrow," Riley replied.

The priestess cleared her throat.

Chuckling, she laced her fingers with Riley's and led him toward their future.

Mary Winter

Riley's Sparrow

Ingredients:

1 1/2 oz Dark rum

1/2 oz Southern Comfort

2 dashes Bitters

Mixing instructions:

In a mixing glass half-filled with ice cubes, combine all of the ingredients. Stir well. Strain into a cocktail glass.

Del Fantasma: Riley's Sparrow

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