



**WILD
HUNT**
Willa Okati

Loose Id

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Chapter One

If they were starting without him –

Delaney cradled his guitar close to his body and hurried uphill. He followed the flickering light and growing heat of the bonfire, the sturdy tang of wood smoke, and the chatter of voices mixed with the chaotic wailing of instruments tuning up. Someone thumped a hand drum, another rattled the bones and the shakers, and someone else played a few bars on a pennywhistle, testing the clearness of the sound.

The music drew him on like a piper. Delaney moved faster. The urge coiled in his calves, an almost unbearable ache, to pick up his feet and run, but he wouldn't risk his guitar. He'd sold almost everything he had that he didn't need to live just to buy her. Music was everything to Delaney. It was why he and his bandmates had signed on for a summer gig doing groundskeeping work at a festival venue – to be near performers and to hope for a chance to be noticed. To live in a world of music.

Just behind Delaney and to his left, he could hear someone running to keep up with him on the incline. He stopped to look over his shoulder and caught a glimpse of a slim man dressed in black, his blond hair tangled and tousled over his face as if it'd flown forward when he stopped in his tracks. Whoever it was didn't move a muscle or speak to Delaney.

Puzzled, Delaney studied him. He could have been a musician or a dancer or a tourist who'd sneaked back in after the festival closed. "Are you lost?"

The man shifted his weight from foot to foot. Though Delaney couldn't truly see his face beneath the heaviness of the hair he used as a mask, he imagined he caught a glint of moonlight off one of the man's eyes.

Worried now, Delaney turned fully around to face the man. "Are you hurt?"

The man shook his head once.

"Delaney! Everyone's waiting for you. Shake a leg!" his bandmate Hugh called from a short distance.

Instinct made Delaney turn at the sound of his name. "Hang on, almost there. I—" When he turned back, the blond had moved out of his line of sight. He spun in a confused half circle to search for him despite the darkness that made it impossible to see farther than the next cluster of shadows.

"Delaney!" Hugh shouted.

Delaney shrugged off a small twinge of uneasiness. Whoever that had been surely hadn't wanted to talk, anyway. He'd be fine. Too bad, though. A man like that, with a body as lean as a rapier and that amazing hair... Delaney did wish he could have gotten a look at the fellow's face.

Below him, amid the gathered crowd of players and musicians that thronged in a stone-walled pit where a house must have stood once upon a time, Hugh waved at Delaney to urge him on. The rising bonfire he stood in front of made a black shadow of him, but Delaney knew the shape and he could pick that voice out of any crowd. He threw back a salute and let himself jog the last few paces down the hill.

Hugh craned his neck and shaded his eyes to get a better look up at Delaney. He'd hooked the crossbars of his bodhran over his bare wrist. He'd stripped down to a singlet and paint-splashed, dirt-daubed jeans with frayed cuffs, his sun-browned feet bare on the dirt floor. "I almost thought you weren't going to make it." He had to shout to be heard. "Where were you?"

"Fell asleep in the back of the van, listening to—"

"For God's sake, Delaney." Hugh propped his arm on the edge of the pit, bodhran balanced on his hip. "The tune's not going to be right without a fiddler. You know that. After watching you work yourself half to death trying to get the sound right without the fiddle, I know that better than I know my own name."

"Doesn't mean I won't stop trying." Delaney knew the stubborn jut of his chin when he ground his teeth did his face no favors and risked his jaw, but no song had ever beaten him yet and he wasn't about to let it happen now.

"Let it go for one night. We busted our asses getting this place ready. Give me the guitar and get down here and unwind, you freak."

Delaney nudged Hugh's arm with the toe of his shoe, playfully knocking him off balance. "When you ask that nicely, how could I say no?"

"That's what I like to hear." Hugh's grin was saturnine by night, his face sharper, more hawklike, strong and angled. If Hugh had had a taste for men, Delaney would have wasted a hundred daydreams on him, but as it stood they made excellent friends and great bandmates.

"All you hear is the calling of wine, women, and song," Delaney teased.

“True. Let’s add some men and whiskey to that for you, and we’ll both be happy.” Hugh offered him a hand down. He stopped and frowned at Delaney. “You look tweaked. Something wrong?”

“I don’t think so.” Delaney could have sworn he’d seen a flash of something as bright as his mystery man’s hair or a glimpse of pale skin as he moved past them, but he wasn’t anywhere to be seen at a second look. “Just déjà vu.”

“You’ve been spending too much time out in the sun again, haven’t you?”

“Probably so.” Delaney handed over his guitar case, braced himself on the edge of the pit, and vaulted down, light as a dragonfly on the wing. He dusted the dirt off and breathed deep. He and the band had spent weeks stealing an hour here and there off their day jobs at the festival venue to clear out the old cellar. The venue owner, Frank, had been so impressed by their hard work that he’d given them his version of *carte blanche* by promising to look the other way when they inaugurated the place.

It’d been worth every second and every pulled muscle. Delaney would have turned to admire their handiwork if in the close press of bodies he wouldn’t have knocked a belly dancer off her jingling feet or elbowed a bass player in the ribs. “Not bad, Hugh. Not bad at all.”

Hugh pulled Delaney into a brother’s easy choke hold and dropped a wet, messy *smack* of a kiss on the top of his head. “It’s fucking perfect, and you know it. Get a move on. We need a strong voice to get us started right.”

Delaney pushed his hair out of his face with both hands and held it back. The night sky dizzied him, and the richness of the air down here made him slow-witted even as it inflamed his head and made his temples pound. He could almost feel the tickling brush of blond hair, long and sleek, across bare skin, and it made him gasp.

Hugh shook him. “You sure you’re okay? You don’t really have sunstroke, do you?”

“No, I’m fine, I promise. Just...give me a minute.” He caught Hugh by the shoulder and jostled him firmly, meaning business. “You start. Something fast, that’ll get them dancing. Loud, clear. Fast. Quicker than you’ve drummed in your life.”

“No foreplay?”

“Not tonight.” Delaney stretched his arms over his head and arched his back. There was a strangeness to the air that he couldn’t get enough of, the green smell of humid forest and the musk of aged humus coiling around and around inside him. “The music needs to run wild. Can’t you feel it?”

“No, but I’m not you, and I’m not drunk enough to understand what you’re talking about. Yet.” Hugh jostled Delaney and loped away. He played as he ran, a rhythm matched to his pace, and landed poised in front of the fire. “Heather Ale’s Reel!” he shouted, bouncing his favorite carved bone *cipín* off the tight-stretched skin of the *bodhran*.

“Heather Ale’s!” the gathered crowd roared back. Bouzoukis and whistles, *bodhrans* and guitars, mandolins and *rebecs*, all of them found their place and let the

music out of its cage. No one was an accountant or a teacher or a doctor here, and no one a musician trying for his lucky break and sweating it out in the trenches until he got there. Here, all they were, were servants of the song. Delaney whooped and raised his voice to back up Hugh's strong tenor.

It would have been—was—as close to heaven as Delaney ever hoped to get. If they only had a fiddler...

Bah. Maybe I have had too much sun, and if I haven't, there's always another night and a weekend's worth of festival to try and find him again. Mind shuffled back in order, Delaney ran to his bandmate's side to speed the tempo and help lead the chorus after all.

* * * * *

Three reels in, Delaney began to feel the effects of too many people pressed too close together, the heaviness of whiskey fumes and wood smoke in the air, and the weariness of a long day's work in the sun. He excused himself from leading the songs and made his way to the far left corner of the cellar where he'd left a few fallen rocks and branches suitable for resting on. Either no one had discovered them yet—unlikely—or no one else needed a break yet, but they were almost all his. The only seat taken was occupied by Tam, the third member of his band, hard at work picking out a new tune on her acoustic bass.

Even Delaney had to admit Tam was a strange one. No one ever knew what she might be thinking at any given time, with her habit of drifting off into a thousand-yard stare while her lips quirked at some joke no one else heard or understood. Then again, she made for peaceful company when a man wasn't interested in talking but only in making music. She acknowledged Delaney's arrival with a quick flick of a sideways glance and nothing more.

"Tam," he said, nodding to her. Then, though he couldn't have said why, he asked, "You haven't seen a blond around here anywhere, have you?"

Tam raised one of her dark eyebrows, already arched by a quirk of nature.

"Not specific enough. I see." Delaney thought. "A blond man dressed in black. He moves fast."

She raised one shoulder in silent question.

"No reason," Delaney answered. He peered through the crowd and thought—for a second—he caught a flash of fair skin and tangled blond locks, of a man moving in and out of the crowd as silently and swiftly as a shadow, but then, nothing. "Tell me, Tam, would you still be in the band if I went insane?"

"Most musicians *are* crazy," Tam said. She pointed the neck of her bass at him in invitation to play along and help her work the kinks out of her composition in progress.

"Gladly." Anything to get his mind off the needling compulsion to find the strange man who'd worked his way under Delaney's skin without a word exchanged between them. "Take it from the top."

* * * * *

Impatient for the dancers, the drummers took over for the next song. Hands slapped stretched kidskin bound tight in circles while their players raised high, shrill cries to the sky. Women circled round and round the fire with bells chiming at wrist and ankle, bodies undulating and bare skin gleaming. The fire grew as warm as the hot blood of those who'd soon pair off two by two or sometimes in threes. They'd finish this night with their limbs tangled together, bodies straining against one another. Already, the smell of sex was as strong as that of the crackling logs.

Delaney pushed his awareness of them away and focused on his guitar. Though he couldn't hear the chords as he tested them, he could tell from the way they trembled and thrummed if they were right or wrong. So far, they were mostly wrong. He swore and shook his hand to cool his fingertips.

Tam glanced sideways at him as if to ask, *Problems?*

Delaney shook his head. He'd get this right on his own or die trying. The drummers had stopped to catch their breath. Maybe now that he could hear, he'd —

A ground-jarring crash of a man's full body weight falling to earth beside him almost startled Delaney into dropping his guitar. "I'd should have known I'd find you in the wallflowers' corner."

Delaney played a mocking chord. "You expected something else?"

"Nope." Hugh pulled the woman he'd brought with him into his lap. A pixieish slip of a thing clad in more bare brown skin than faded sundress, she had sloe eyes, honey brown hair full of static, and a chain of wilting daisies looped around her neck that hung all the way to the middle of her back. She had whiskey on her breath and eyes only for Hugh.

No matter where he went, Hugh always found someone warm and willing. He'd charm them with a few pretty words, give them a night to remember, and forget her name before the sun went down again. The woman, whoever she was, pressed her cheek to Hugh's and giggled. "I heard you playing earlier," she told Delaney. "Never heard anyone like you before."

"He's one of a kind, all right." Hugh drew her attention back to him with a hand skimmed up beneath her skirt. *Hugh*, on the other hand, could do two things at once and nodded at Delaney's guitar. "Not again? Still?"

"Always," Delaney said simply. "Until I get it right."

The woman on Hugh's lap swayed about to look at him. "I could play with you if you want help." Her tipsy grin left nothing to the imagination about what she'd like to play with. "You're pretty." She reached out to touch him and missed, not that it seemed to bother her.

Hugh came to his rescue. Thank God. "I'd rather you played with me," Hugh said as he moved under her skirt. "Delaney takes care of himself. He doesn't need us lesser mortals. Do you, Delaney?"

A strange tingling sensation centered itself on the back of Delaney's neck, uncannily like the pressure of someone watching. Delaney refused to glance over his shoulder to see who it was or to hope that it was the blond man. "I need you more when you're sober," he said absently.

"Too bad. That's not going to be for hours, if I have anything to say about it." Hugh lifted his fly-by-night higher and held her to him. Her almost bare legs wrapped around his waist signaled the end of any kind of conversation.

Delaney shared a rueful grin with Tam and shook his head. He ran through the tune again on his guitar and then again. Almost there, close enough to taste it, but every time he thought he had it, the music slipped away from him, too wild to be bound. He needed a *fiddler*, damn it, one good enough to make angels weep. A guitar wasn't right for this, and though he could fend for himself on any other instrument Celtic fusion might call for, the fiddle was the one that defeated him every time.

The worst of it was that he could *hear* the fiddle in his head, slip-sliding through the notes with a life of its own and matching the score that ran endlessly behind his eyes. Could *hear* it but couldn't play it for himself. Could –

Wait.

Delaney held as still as a mouse except for his fingers on the strings. He kept his ears open and his eyes shut. He *could* hear. The fiddler he'd hunted for so long had found him instead. The pure, mellow tune flowed around him, found his tune, and matched it. It fell into place as if it'd always been there, everything Delaney had dreamed this reel could be.

If Delaney spoke, he knew it'd break the spell. He opened his eyes and saw, across the way with the fire between them, a man with yellow-gold hair shrouding his face, fiddling like a fallen angel.

The man startled but didn't stop. He sped up, rather, his bow drawing the music around and around, circling ever tighter in on itself. Soon, there'd be nothing left but the one clear note, and then the end, and a man like this didn't stay.

Delaney couldn't let him get away. Wouldn't. Not when it could be like this. He improvised a bridge that brought him back around to the beginning of the reel – and the fiddler followed him, note for note.

Around them, the fusion-rock musicians stilled, their voices dying away one by one. The drummers ceased their thumps on skin stretched over wood. The dancers' feet stilled, the jingle of their bells and finger cymbals faded away in echoes that were not strong enough to overcome the reel.

Delaney couldn't stop and didn't want to. As fast as the fiddler played – and it was impossibly fast, his bow a blur and the strings throwing sparks – Delaney matched his pace and dared him to go faster still.

“Jesus,” he heard someone mutter. He thought it might be Hugh and shrugged away sharp and impatient before the nearing, distracting touch of Hugh’s hand risked breaking the song.

The fiddler’s clothes, black and thin, clung to his body, soaked through with the sweat of his body. Tendons stood out as strong and hard as cords in his neck, his face set in a grimace like that of a man on the verge of orgasm. Bliss, pain, pleasure, inability to stop. Delaney knew he looked the same, or more so. He shook his glasses off to keep the all-suffusing heat of his skin from fogging the lenses.

His hands ached. His fingers burned, blisters risen anew beneath long-hardened calluses.

“Stop,” Hugh said, stronger than before. The woman he’d had on his lap tumbled aside without protest, her breathing as fast as a rabbit’s. “Delaney –”

Delaney chanced only a slit-eyed glare at him. *No*. Something more had seeped in beneath the strain and the all-consuming music. A wildness, a feral beast within that snapped and snarled and gave him orders he didn’t yet understand. He wanted to run and didn’t know why, only that he had to. Wanted to chase, to fight, to fuck, to claim. He knew it wasn’t him, that this was something out of a song that’d seized control of his body.

Knew it wasn’t him, and didn’t care. The fiddler, opposite him and too far away to touch even if Delaney had been able to stop playing, drove him higher with darkly glittering lust in his eye and a knowing temptation in the not-a-smile that stretched his mouth wide.

“Delaney,” he heard someone calling him from somewhere far away, the sound as thick and muffled as if he were underwater. It was the last thing he heard besides the music. Not even the fire crackled; if anyone gathered there breathed, it didn’t reach Delaney’s ears.

The reel made its last turn, the final round before it had to stop or go on beyond the perfection they made of it together. Closer and closer came the end, the fiddler’s bow lit with flame that didn’t burn him on either end.

Delaney hadn’t the air to speak but did anyway. Whoever this was, whatever he was, he would disappear when the song ended. Nothing gold could stay, right? Was that how the poem went? He couldn’t let that happen. “Stay with me.”

One last, flawless note, one sharp scream of melody, and the fiddler dropped both instrument and bow. Firelight cast strange shadows across him that nothing could penetrate. Delaney counted the time in his head: one, two, one, two, three –

The fiddler rose in a leap no man should have been capable of. Soared across the fire in one great bound and landed crouched lightly as a dragonfly before Delaney, who dropped his guitar and drew a lusty breath.

He caught Delaney’s chin between his fingers. Not a kiss, but a collision, a punishing blow, over so quickly that Delaney surged after him for more. The man rumbled low in his throat, a rasping susurrations, and used Delaney’s body to thrust

himself away. He spun away through the fire, unburned, unblemished, and with a flash of white skin and his hair flying in an arc, he ran.

Hugh's hand closed around Delaney's wrist and pulled him halfway back from the undying reverberation of the song. Neither of them expected it, but the jar of bone beneath the hard strike Delaney dealt him ended the reel at last.

He was on his feet and into the forest beyond the cellar before Hugh's startled yell had finished.

Ten feet or fifteen or five steps beyond the tree line – time ceased to matter when the song ended – Delaney stumbled to a halt. His knuckles flared their protest, jarred when he'd hit Hugh.

He'd hit Hugh. Oh God. He stared at his hand, smeared with blood that wasn't his own. He could still feel the hardness of bone under his fist.

What am I doing? What was I thinking? Delaney turned to hobble and stumble as fast as he could back to the fire, apologies already crowding together on his tongue.

Ten steps or fifteen or five, and he stopped again, turning sharply. He'd heard... What had he heard? He couldn't help but listen, and once he'd stopped he couldn't move. His heart drummed hard against his ribs, so hard he thought it would burst, and roared in his ears.

There. Again. The shout of a horn so deep and pure it made his bones thrum. *There.* The belling, barking, and baying of hounds, or were they wolves? Hoofbeats on either side of him, the lather of too-hot horseflesh making him gag. Iron, heated red and glowing, burning brightly in the night. Male laughter, dark and cruel, calling to horse and to hound.

A scrap of song rang through Delaney with the surety of old knowledge. Nothing else made sense, but he knew where he was now. Why. What he'd been set on this course to do.

"Chase him," a baritone said, speaking too close to Delaney's ear. "He's yours if you can capture him." Short, bristly hair tickled his ear, as if the speaker Delaney couldn't see boasted a mustache and beard that had never seen a blade. "He wants to be caught, you know. He's as enthralled by you as you are by him. He craves the touch of your hand and the taste of your kiss. Why else seek you out to begin with?" the man asked, as sibilant as a snake and sly as a fox.

Delaney didn't trust this stranger, but he believed him. Hadn't he seen it for himself? And he couldn't let the fiddler get away. Wouldn't. He jerked his head in a rough nod of agreement.

"Good!" The stranger pounded Delaney's shoulder. "This is a fine game and a worthy night's entertainment. Run, musician. The Hunt begins *now*."

Chapter Two

Brambles caught on Delaney's legs only to be torn free by the bracken that snatched at him from the right and the left. He ducked beneath the threat of the low-hanging boughs above and jumped over fallen trees that would have downed him.

Far and away, the horsemen shouted, words he couldn't make out, dim as the memory of echoes. They didn't matter; the trail had gone cold for them long ago, and this hunt was his alone.

No cicadas or bullfrogs dared raise their voices, but the rest of the forest was on *his* side and fought to keep Delaney at arm's reach. Trees knotted their branches together and creeks overflowed their banks to slow him, to force him to find ways around and hinder his progress. Humidity wrapped around his limbs, the green smell of the woods threatening to overwhelm him.

Delaney stopped poised atop the tangled roots of a tilting oak and held his breath to listen. The light shirt he'd started the night wearing had gotten in his way, and he'd pulled it over his head to leave it—somewhere—as well as his sneakers, which he kicked off. Sweat soaked his dark hair and plastered it to his face, slicked his chest and his arms. Half-naked, he'd have shed the rest of his clothes if he could.

Not yet. Wait. Listen.

His limbs shuddered with the need to keep running, to never stop. Eager breaths of wind curled about his legs, coaxing him on, catching his hands and pulling. Faces in the trees, shaped from twisted vines, peered blindly at him and whispered silent words in a language he didn't understand.

Yet Delaney held his ground, head tipped to one side, and though his lungs burned, he would deny them until —

There? A sound, to his left, to the sinister side. *Yes. There.* The *thud-thud-thud* of bare feet over the forest floor, the whisper of leaves parting before the prey, the harsh, labored breathing of his prey. Delaney lifted his head and scented the air.

Found you.

Delaney glanced at the moon, sickle-thin and silver. His grin stretched his mouth tight and sharp. *Mine.* The scent was strong again. He wouldn't lose it now.

He took the hill at a dead run. Though taller and steeper than he could have climbed in the other world, in his other life, it didn't slow him now. He found toeholds among rocks and roots to grasp and haul himself higher with. Salty sweat that dripped from his hair stung his eyes and half blinded him, but *half* was not *whole*, and neither was he whole without the one he chased.

When he reached the top he almost lost his balance on the sharpness of the peak, barely two steps' worth of shelf between him and the sheer drop on the other side. He gripped with his toes, held his arms out to steady himself, and if he hadn't looked down would have missed it.

There. Below him, falling to his knees. Tripped or trying to stop running no matter what the Hunt demanded, Delaney couldn't tell. Silken blond hair, the mixed colors of wheat and corn and sunlight, flew in an arc around the pointed lines of a man's pale face. Naked and smooth save for the leather straps crisscrossed tight down the line of brass hoops piercing his back, he was enough to make Delaney stop, struck dumb.

Not so his prey. He bared his teeth at Delaney and hissed.

Delaney could have taken him then, but he hesitated, and it cost him. The prey rose to his feet and grinned savagely at Delaney. Afraid? Yes, but eager. Hungry to be caught. He curled his hands and pulled the night air toward him in great, silent handfuls. Though he didn't speak a word out loud, Delaney knew what the man was saying with the cocky gesture: *Come and get me. Come and take me down, if you dare.*

"I dare," Delaney said, his voice a wrecked ruin and his throat raw. He stepped off the ledge, tumbling down, down, down –

Muscle memory that wasn't Delaney's, that was ancient, older than time, seized control of him as he fell. Even as bracken scored his bare skin in a dozen places and broken bits of wood and bits of rock marked him, he covered his face with his arms and drew his knees tight to his chest. Not halfway down and he knew how to land, how to roll up to his feet, poised to run again.

He'd run forever if he had to, but it wouldn't be long now.

A smooth tuck, a roll, and Delaney rose. He shook off the buzz in his ears and the ache in his limbs. Not important. His prey, the blond man dressed in pale, pale flesh and brass rings, froze not five feet away from Delaney. Hair caught in the two rows of rings down his back, leading the eye to slim hips and firm buttocks. All Delaney could see of his face was the glint of one eye glaring at him through the tossed tangles of wheat and gold, a half mask that covered him only far enough to whet a man's appetite for the rest.

“Stay.” Delaney gathered his strength, knowing his prey wouldn’t make it that easy. “Who are you? Why did you run from me?”

The fiddler turned in profile to Delaney. “You know why.” They were the first words the man had spoken. He had the sound of someone who hadn’t used his voice in centuries—hoarse, with a timeless edge that made Delaney ache down to his bones. He hadn’t let himself get hard, not yet, the will that kept him fixed on his chase strong enough to control that part of his body too.

The man lacked that strength, or perhaps it was that he didn’t care, or even that he wanted Delaney to see, to weaken his control. The tips of his hair brushed over the solid red jut of his cock, tickling and tangling over his milk white thighs.

“You left your fiddle,” Delaney said. He wanted to hurl himself at the man. To drive his body into that soft, sweet suppleness. To roll and wrestle, to bite and mark and fuck. Words were useless, and he should move, but the wait made the anticipation all the sweeter.

“Was never mine. It’ll find its way back home.”

“Not yours? There was love in the way you held her. Played her.” Where was the man’s own fiddle, if not here? Why had he stolen—

“No time to explain.” The man’s limbs trembled, shook. He nearly lost his balance and righted himself at the last second before he tumbled down.

Was it weariness, or a fight to stay put? Delaney couldn’t tell. The tension tightened in his burning muscles. It demanded that he move. “Yield or run,” he rasped. “Either way, do it now.”

“And if I run?” the man challenged him.

Delaney’s body raged at him. He forced the tide back, but only just. “Then I follow.”

The man raised his chin, defiant. His hair fell fully over the double row of rings and the black cords that laced down his back. He turned his face but not his body, the dark stiffness of his cock still on display. “And if I yield?”

Delaney’s grin didn’t feel like his own, but far older than his years, as old as the Hunt itself. “If you yield, then you’re mine to claim. You want to be taken. I can smell it on you. I can see. That’s what this is all about.”

“Always has been,” the man said. “Turn back now or pay the price. It’s too much to ask of a man. That I tell you for free.”

“I won’t leave.”

“Then you can only blame yourself. Remember that, later.”

“I understand. Yield to me.”

“No.” The man crouched as would a sprinter before the starting gun, arms out for balance. “Earn me first.”

“I thought I’d done that with the song.”

“Almost.”

“Then what more do I need?”

“Catch me.” The man bent swift as a willow in the wind and dashed a spray of dirt and old leaves at Delaney. “You take up the chase, you finish it. Catch me now, or nevermore.”

The man moved fast, but Delaney, done with this and too eager to taste the salt-sweet kiss of his prey, moved faster. Delaney shouted and dashed the debris off his face. He’d shut his eyes in time, and though dirt clung to his eyelashes and smeared over his cheeks, he could see. He could shoot forward like an arrow from the bow, he could leap like a bobcat, he could *fly*, and he could sting. He had the man, solid and real, caught in his arms even as his tackling lunge brought them to earth.

He pinned the man, knees bracketed by his hips, and drew his prey’s hands far above his head with wrists clamped together. The weight of his body cast his prey into shadows and darkness.

“Yield,” he commanded.

His prey rose in a leaping surge. Sharp teeth scored over his shoulder and drew fiery drops of blood that smeared his lips when he dropped, panting. But the fight was already draining from him.

Delaney dropped his full weight atop his prey and held him still. “*Yield.*”

Feral and almost too beautiful to bear looking at, his prey undulated beneath him. He spread his legs to drop Delaney between them and rolled up. Hard. Eager. The music ran in the *bump-thud-thump* of his pulse, so sharp and loud it made Delaney’s head burn. “It’s for you to make me yield,” he said, low, raw, needy. He cradled Delaney and pinned him at once. A turn of his head and a spill of his hair bared his slim white throat for the killing blow. “End this.”

“I will.” Delaney wound that hair three times around his hand and forced the man to look up at him. Some small, faraway drop of himself looked for the *yes, I want this* in his prey’s eyes and went loose with relief when he saw, deep down, the affirmation that shone back at him.

The kiss was his to take this time, and he did, bruising his prey’s lips dark with the claim he laid on them.

Delaney’s prey was his to claim, warm and writhing and willing, oh yes, but not to damage. His to mark, but not to break, and that was what made the difference between man and beast—a fine line Delaney knew he stood on the edge of. The only bruises he wanted his prey to wear tomorrow would be five fingerprints on each hip, purple-red welts on his neck and chest, and the scratches he’d earned on the chase.

Dimly, under the roaring in his ears and the breath he couldn’t catch long enough to keep him upright, Delaney thought he heard his prey beg, then demand, then beg again. “*Finish it. Finish it fast –*”

No one could have stopped him. Delaney fastened his mouth everywhere he could reach, licked and nipped and soothed away the white dents his teeth left. Though the prey laid himself out open and bare in a feast of flesh, there wasn't enough, not before Delaney lapped a thick pearl of cum from his prey's cockhead and rolled it over his tongue. Not before he stretched his lips wide and drew his prey's cock as deep inside as he could take him, then farther still.

His prey cried out and arched up. Delaney pulled off to blow cold, warning streams of air over the man's wet cock and held him hard to the ground. Almost before he'd shuddered back to shaking quiescence, Delaney returned to him, hungry for the flavor rich and thick across his tongue. Then, with a roar that shook the earth, his mouth was flooded.

Delaney swallowed it down, every drop, but it wasn't enough. He lashed his prey's cock with his tongue just to the point before his cries would no longer be of pleasure, but pain instead, and let go with his lips swollen fat and thick. His cock pushed urgently at the rack and ruin of his jeans.

Orgasm hadn't wearied his prey, who would forever be ready for more. He licked the corner of his mouth and gestured to Delaney. Crooked his finger and asked, all in silence, to give to Delaney what Delaney had taken from him. If he could have waited, he—

No time to think about it, no time to do more than *act*. If there were time, he'd turn his prey over and unlace the leather thong threaded through the double row of rings that pierced him. He'd open each ring with his teeth and tongue and spit it out to lay the marks of his kisses over them, a better decoration. He'd...he'd...

"My God, what's your name? Tell me your name." Delaney panted, blood like burning honey, too thick, too slow to keep up with his heart.

"No." The fiddler snapped at Delaney so sharply, he almost cost Delaney a finger.

"Don't do that again. I need those."

The fiddler laughed at him.

"If that's how you want to play this, so be it." Delaney fumbled with buttons that slipped through his fingers and wrapped his fist around his cock without so much as sliding his jeans off his hips. He knelt over his prey and jacked himself as fast and urgent as he'd played their reel. He almost thought he could hear the same music, only played on horns, and with hounds baying instead of drums.

Hurry, he read on the lips of his prey, through the fog that clouded his eyes. His prey stroked his thighs, urged him on. He opened his mouth like a bird and put out his tongue to beg for it.

"Another time," Delaney heard himself say. "There'll be another time... My... You—"

Delaney saw the white flash of his prey's eyes opening too wide, and he was undone. His cock slipped from his fingers with the fierceness of the orgasm and the

power of its punch; he could do no more than fall over his prey and grind against him in the mess he made, smears thick and blood-warm between them.

The horns and the hounds were close now, their shouts loud and fierce and exultant. His prey went white, as white as salt, a dead white, and pushed uselessly at Delaney's weight. "Move!"

"Never."

"Hunt's over. Let me go. Let me go *now*, before it's too late."

"No, not ever. You're mine, again and again." Delaney licked drops of his own cum from his prey's lips and slid his tongue against the man's. "Don't go." He asked again, the compulsion too strong to resist, "Tell me your name."

"They're close. You don't know them. You can't." His prey fought harder. "It's over and done, it has to be. Let me go!"

"But you yielded." Delaney didn't understand. "You belong to me. Give me your name."

The thump to his head came from nowhere, together with the shriek of a horse and the tearing of grass beneath iron hooves. Came from the shadows and cast him into darkness with the taste of his prey still tangy-thick on his tongue.

Chapter Three

Delaney woke to the sun in his eyes, crisp and merciless. He stirred in the grass – *grass?* – and threw his arm over his face to block out the light. No luck. The ache of his bladder combated the sharp burn of his muscles that firmly demanded he stay put.

When he chanced peeking out through slit lids and the shade of eyelashes, all he saw was the white-hot sun rising above the horizon. He'd spent half a summer here and knew all the signs. It'd be hellishly hot, the kind of day that'd crisp a man's skin and leave him gingerly red no matter how tanned he might be. His arm already felt tender. How long had he been out here?

More to the point, why? Delaney sorted through his memories. The cellar party, that he remembered. Damp stone and smoky fire and whiskey that had its origin in a still or a basement, not in a factory. Music that rang through the night.

Music. Yes. That, Delaney remembered. A fiddler. *Yes.* Someone who could play the way he'd dreamed, who'd finished the song with him and then...then...

Darkness. Shadows riddled with snatches of starlight, living black, and gold. Shining metal that should have been skin-warm but was cold to the touch. Fallen twigs snapping underfoot. Under bare feet. Trees and thorns that'd left marks of their passing on his arms and legs.

But nothing more. No context, no sense.

Delaney shook his head and sat up, far too fast for his throbbing head to be happy with the movement. The movement jarred his bones. More than that, it dislodged his glasses, which someone had considerately folded and placed neatly on his chest. He grabbed for them, groaned, and clutched the back of his neck. *Who...?*

Sliding his glasses haphazardly onto his nose, Delaney squinted at the early-morning hullabaloo of the festival gearing up for a weekend of Highland Games and haggis, whiskey and caber tossing. Burly men with bony knees tromping around in

kilts, bellowing to one another with the earsplitting enthusiasm of hearty warriors who either hadn't been drinking or were still drunk.

Delaney's bladder reminded him once more, insistently, that though he couldn't remember taking more than a drop of two, he'd likely had more than his share of some strong whiskey recently.

He forced one leg and then the other to cooperate with him and pushed himself shakily to his feet. Though they didn't want to hold him upright at first, he had the reserves of stubbornness to force himself forward. More of a lurch than a walk, true, but he wasn't the only one he saw staggering around like a zombie.

One quick, embarrassed stop behind a tree—some things couldn't wait—and Delaney pointed himself in the direction of the groundskeeper's cabin. He wanted nothing more right now than a cool cloth, a pot of strong black tea, and toast.

Explanations of what in God's name he'd gotten up to the night before wouldn't come amiss, either.

* * * * *

"Wondered when you'd show your face." Hugh leaned on the open doorway to the cabin. A darkening bruise and a reddened scrape were smeared across his chin. Someone had split his lip, leaving it puffy. The circles under his eyes were darker than the bruise.

"What happened to you?" Despite how taking the two poured-concrete steps to the door made Delaney's brain bounce painfully in his skull, he took them almost without thinking to reach out to Hugh and check the damage. "Looks painful."

Hugh grunted. "You should know."

"I should?" Delaney's forming hypothesis had been that one of Hugh's companions-for-a-night had taken a shot at his roguish friend. "How?"

Hugh turned his back to Delaney. "If you don't remember, doesn't matter."

"Hugh?" A growing sensation of something not right made Delaney uneasy. "What aren't you telling me?"

"Nothing." Hugh wiped his hands on his legs. "Breakfast in ten if you clean up in time. You reek."

Hugh walked away, leaving Delaney on the threshold confused, sore, and now that he caught the rich fragrance of steeping tea and toasting bread, starving. He hesitated, torn between going after Hugh and doing as he'd been told. One whiff of his own body decided for him. "Reek" had been putting it politely. No one ever made peace or solved a riddle when they smelled like the bottom of a pig wallow, or if they had, no one wrote songs about them.

* * * * *

Someone had been in the shower minutes before Delaney, the fog from the last of the hot water they'd used still steaming up the mirror and clinging to the cracking tiles in fat beads of condensation. It suited Delaney fine to find the water nearly cold, especially once he'd peeled off his jeans, which were stuck to him with sweat and worse. He winced at the redness of his arms and chest. Sunburned after an hour, Christ. *Better take care of that.* He gritted his teeth against a shout and shoved his head under the spigot. He jerked away fast, recoiling against the sharp, lancing sting of his scalp when the water struck him. *What the...?*

Delaney prodded carefully at the top of his head and came away with his fingers smeared with water-diluted pink. Beneath that he thought he felt furrows raked into his scalp. Five of them. Fingernails?

A flash of memory struck him. A slim, fair hand knotted in his hair, pulling him down. Naked flesh, white as milk, a long cock swollen painfully dark. The taste of spunk on his lips, tongued away drop by drop.

He came to with the ice-cold water raining down on his body. Stinging burns on arms, legs, ass, and shoulders told him that his scalp wasn't the only thing that'd taken a beating. His legs protested, almost rubbery, as if he'd finished a marathon; only by slapping both sides of the shower stall did he keep from falling.

A pretty young man with a cloud of hair tangled over his face. Brass rings lining a back that arched in something between agony and ecstasy.

Delaney shut off the water with a sharp twist of the wrist. Enough.

He stepped out of the shower, fumbling for the glasses he'd left on the edge of the small sink. *Ugh.* Delaney grimaced at the thought of putting them back on, crusted with salt and spattered with mud, and wished he'd worn them into his shower. Not thinking about anything else but locating the glasses and not paying attention to the bathroom door opening, he startled and yelped when he encountered firm, warm bare skin instead of tile, along with the softness of a small but full breast.

The woman laughed, light and musical. "Good morning to you too, sailor."

Delaney could feel the embarrassed heat rushing to the tips of his ears. "You're with Hugh?"

"I was last night, anyway. Here." The woman slipped Delaney his glasses.

He recognized her when she came into focus. She was small in stature, with a headful of whiskey-colored hair and a wilted daisy tangled in the locks, and she stood brazenly naked between Delaney and the door. Hugh's type in every way. "Sorry. I don't remember your name."

"Susan." She offered him her hand. The absurdity made them both crack rueful grins at one another. "My friends call me Black-Eyed Susan. We didn't get around to introductions before you took off."

"And Hugh was —"

"Too busy getting me off to be polite?" She laughed at Delaney's expression, though not cruelly. "It's okay. I'm not shy."

"Obviously not." Delaney looked away, realizing far too late that he didn't have a towel and wishing to God he'd planned ahead.

"Here." Black-Eyed Susan pushed a thin green-striped rectangle of terry at him. She paused before he could take it and tilted her head to study his chest. "What happened to you?" She poked lightly at a bruise and traced one of the deeper scratches along Delaney's side.

"Nothing!" Delaney's reply was too sharp; he knew it as soon as he heard it. "I don't remember," he admitted to soften the bark and bite. "Don't make a big deal out of it, okay? I'll be fine."

"If you want something from me, fine, but I'm not into freebies." Black-Eyed Susan studied him, the naughty smile of a born minx quirking her lips. "I'll trade you my silence for a kiss."

"I'd thought Hugh claimed all your kisses."

"Hugh doesn't own me."

"No, but he's my friend. Closer than a brother, and I won't—"

"Neither would I. When I give my heart, I'm true," she said, momentarily serious. Her solemnity took Delaney aback, and then the moment passed and she dimpled at him. "Hugh was right. You're too much fun to wind up." She patted his cheek and moved past, into the shower. "Whatever your secret is, it's safe with me. I just hope the sex was good enough to make the morning after worth it."

Enough had just become too much. Delaney knotted the towel tightly around his waist and retreated at the highest speed his sore muscles could muster.

* * * * *

Delaney padded barefoot into the kitchen, toweling off his hair with a T-shirt. What was sauce for the gander might be sauce for the goose, and turnabout was fair play. "You know what?" he asked, deliberately too casual. "I think your one-night stand just hit on me when we were both naked."

Hugh chuckled quietly to himself. "That sounds like her. She's a firecracker." Standing at the cabin's small range, he was in the middle of breakfast prep, shaking a pan here and stirring a pot there. "Hope you let her down easy."

"Ah, you know me. Truth be told I was a little too unnerved by the naked part of the exchange to do more than run like a rabbit."

"That's my boy."

Delaney almost didn't catch Hugh's response. *Run*. The word lingered in his mind. He frowned and rubbed the back of his neck; it tingled as if someone was watching him.

When he looked behind himself, he saw no one except Tam, busy ignoring a bagel with one bite out of it while she scribbled notes in pages of preprinted staves. Even odds were she didn't even know he was there.

"Is there any tea left?"

"None that isn't totally stewed, but I've got some fresh water boiling." Hugh poked a spatula in the depths of the old skillet he manipulated over the gas, the pan's contents crackling and emitting the savory smells of bacon and eggs.

"She seemed like the personable kind last night. I wonder how she got her nickname?"

"Always looking for a story, aren't you?" Hugh stirred a pot that smelled faintly of cinnamon and sugar. Oatmeal, maybe. "She didn't say. I didn't ask."

Delaney lingered between the picnic table they'd adapted for kitchen use and the doorway, uncertain, thinking he was missing something but with no idea what. The bruise on Hugh's jaw and the split in his lip looked uglier as the sunlight through the bare windows grew brighter. "Have you tried icing that?"

"Mmm." Hugh moved a kettle, the old-fashioned kind, short and stout with a spout, to the back burner of the range.

Memory, an older one, sparked brief amusement. "Wait, did she slap you? She must be as fiery as you say if she's still around. Come to think of it, she must be as tenacious as a mule to still be here when the sun's up." Delaney took off his glasses and rubbed the heel of his hand over his forehead, less to soothe a growing ache than to find something to do with a building, restless sort of mood. "What happened? Was that whiskey or Jack they were passing around, or was it moonshine?"

"Either way, you had too much. Hangover headache?"

"What? No. I don't think so, anyway." Delaney couldn't have said why talking to Hugh rubbed him the wrong way this morning, like the scrape of sandpaper over stone. "Just hungry, I guess."

Hugh exhaled through his nose. He drummed his fingers on the side of the stove and reached across to the no-doors cabinet that held mismatched plates older than either of them. "Next time, I'm cutting you off at one shot. Lightweight."

The tension eased somehow, though the thrum of it reverberated faintly in the back of Delaney's mind. "I won't argue with that."

"Mmm." Hugh rummaged for silverware. "Delaney? What *do* you remember from last night?"

Delaney shifted his weight, seeking a comfortable position on the hard bench. "I remember music," he offered, not sure what Hugh was digging for here, but fairly certain he wouldn't like it. "Drumming, dancing. Fiddling. Wait."

Black shirt without seams stretched over a taut chest. The play of firelight over limber arms and the supple muscle of a dark man's calves as he crouched. An old fiddle, rosy at its heart.

"Hey!" Delaney came to with Hugh snapping his fingers in front of his face. "Wake up. We need you today."

"You do?" Delaney fought to balance the snatch of memory and Hugh's present concern.

Hugh grumbled under his breath, tromped to the range, and came back with a cup of tea. "Caffeine," he said. "Seriously, what happened to you last night?"

"Nothing." Though he wanted the tea, Delaney drew back, away from Hugh, and didn't know why. "I'm fine."

"Uh-huh." Hugh lingered, watching Delaney with his eyes narrowed. "I'm glad one of us is."

"What is that supposed to mean, anyway?" Delaney reached for the cup. When he touched the stoneware, he brushed Hugh's fingers by accidental chance.

The jarring shock of fist and bone. Blood on his knuckles.

Delaney's cup slid from his abruptly nerveless hand and cracked on the table, spraying them both with tea not hot enough to burn but hot enough to hurt.

"Christ, Delaney!" Hugh jumped back and pulled his now-sodden shirt away from his skin.

Delaney couldn't be bothered to care about the stinging of the spilled tea. "I hit you," he said. His knuckles were bruised almost as badly as Hugh's jaw, and his wrist ached. "Didn't I? Hugh, why didn't you say anything?"

Hugh pulled the shirt off over his head and sat. He righted Delaney's teacup and pushed the dregs and half inch of liquid at him. "I thought you were yanking my chain."

"Why would I—"

"Mostly because you're acting like a freak? After you did this" — Hugh gestured to his bruises — "you ran into the woods. Deep in. I followed you, Black-Eyed Susan too, even Tam, but wherever you went it wasn't somewhere we could find you. Tam only came back this morning and she said she hadn't had any luck either. That's why Black-Eyed Susan's still here. I didn't fuck her. She stayed here keeping watch with me until we fell asleep. Too worried about your sorry ass to get it up." Hugh's temper rose with each short, clipped statement. "And you're saying you don't remember anything more than—"

Cool, dew-wet grass slippery beneath his feet. Skin, pale as milk and soft as feathers. The tangled ends of long, dark hair pattering like raindrops. Putting his weight behind a lunge and bringing a man to earth.

Delaney's ears rang. "Nothing that makes sense," he said, though he hadn't understood anything Hugh had said while the flashes of memory played themselves out before his mind's eye. "I'm sorry. That I hit you. You have to know that."

Hugh hesitated.

“Have to know what?” Black-Eyed Susan, wrapped in a towel knotted above her breasts—barely—strolled into the kitchen. She *hmm’d* at the frying pan cooling on the back burner, plucked a strip of bacon out, blew on it, and ate it hot. She tipped her head to the side like a curious cat. “Something wrong?”

“Nothing.” Hugh turned away first, catching her by the hand and reeling her into his arms. She traced his lips with her shiny forefinger and leaned up to lick them clean, as compact and sweet as a kitten.

Delaney paused with the cup at his lips. He’d seen a dozen-plus women come and go this summer alone, but there was a difference to this encounter that he almost couldn’t describe. Black-Eyed Susan fit in Hugh’s arms as if she belonged there. Had always been there, and evermore would be.

Hugh kissed the tip of her nose. “Hungry?”

Soft lips parted beneath his, giving way. The hissing rustle of virgin grass crumpled beneath him. Them.

Something jogged Delaney’s elbow. Glad of the distraction from the nonsense in his head, whether memory or dream, and from the “too much” of Hugh and Black-Eyed Susan, he glanced down. A saucer sat at his elbow. Tam had pushed her uneaten breakfast over for him. She’d balanced a note on top, written in her strong, blocky print: EAT ME.

Delaney frowned at Tam, who winked once, slowly, and turned back to her writing. Was she joking? He couldn’t tell at the best of times. Jest or not, though, she had it right.

Down the rabbit hole, indeed.

Chapter Four

Delaney's guitar beat a *thump-thump-thump* tattoo on his back as he toiled uphill, toward the summit where he could look down and see the cellar. One of the oldest venue stickers, crumbled away in places, tickled his nape. He shrugged irritably and hitched his case higher on his shoulder.

"I have some aloe," Black-Eyed Susan said, her sudden presence making Delaney jump. She had quite the way of sneaking up on a guy, didn't she? "Well. I know where an aloe plant is. They won't notice if I break off a stem. Probably."

"What?" Puzzled, Delaney waited for Hugh to join them and reclaim his lady. Not that he thought Black-Eyed Susan would go along with anything she hadn't chosen for herself. She reminded him of a maple sapling, small and thin, but with roots that stretched as deep as a thousand-year-old oak.

The flash of an eye through dark gold hair obscuring a man's face. A double row of brass rings laced through with black suede, a false corset on a man's firm back. Bared teeth, white and sharp.

"Are you all right?" Black-Eyed Susan stood on tiptoe to peer at him.

"Yes." Delaney tightened a fist around his guitar case's strap. He tried a fake smile. "I had too much to drink and went a little crazy. It won't happen again. I'm fine."

"You don't look it. Maybe going back to the cellar to practice isn't such a good idea. I mean, memories and all?"

Delaney thought, for an uncharitable second, that he liked Black-Eyed Susan better when she was drunk, and knew he preferred her when she had eyes only for Hugh. "There's nowhere else to practice," he pointed out. True enough; all the good grottos and groves and niches had already been claimed by the time he and his had stumbled ragtag out into the morning. "Don't worry about me."

"What he said." Hugh finally reached them. He playfully batted Black-Eyed Susan's shoulders with the smooth flat of his bodhran. "C'mon, lass. You promised to dance as long as my wrist action holds out."

Tam, forever Delaney's darker shadow walking silently by his side, covered her mouth but wasn't able to hide her smirk at the innuendo.

"That's good," Delaney said, the joke a welcome relief. It felt good to laugh. "You don't even have to think about them anymore, do you?"

"Funny." Not in the least bit insulted, Hugh ruffled Delaney's hair and then Tam's, bound so tightly to her head as to be immovable as a skullcap of dark glass. "We're going to check around later. See if there was anything besides whiskey in the jar last night."

"Hugh..."

"I know, I know. But you're too out of it for me to be comfortable, so humor me, okay?"

Delaney couldn't argue with that, not without ingratitude fit to shame a thief. "I keep remembering things. Not what happened. I don't think." He chafed his forearms, a little chilly despite the heat of the summer sun rising toward noon height. "More like dreams. Maybe. Crazy stuff. They're throwing me off my game."

He walked ahead of the trio before they could press him on that and stopped at the top of the hill. Below him, the cellar pit opened like a mouth in the earth, the rough-hewn stones its teeth and the heavy-hanging pall of last night's smoke its breath. No one had been back to clean up. The ashes and embers of the fire made an ugly black smear in the middle, with cigarette butts and detritus littered about like random snow.

"Real nice." Hugh caught up and pulled a face at the mess.

Delaney tried to lighten the faltering mood. "At least I'm not the only one who got too buzzed to behave." He knew it was a mistake the moment he'd said the words. Words had power; any musician knew that. "Hugh."

Hugh rubbed his jaw. "It's in the past. Leave it there. We've got the place all to ourselves, anyway. That's something."

Tam hovered into place at Delaney's other side. "Wind picking up?"

The question didn't make sense until she pointed at the cellar, at the remains of the fire, the awkward black streak of soot and ash. It seemed to move, a length of char stretching out and away from the middle. Delaney licked his finger and held it over his head. No trace of any wind at all. The day was as humid as a swamp and as still as a stump.

"There it goes again." Hugh leaned on Delaney to better squint down at the cellar.

"Moving," Tam observed.

"I'd noticed," Delaney said. His heart rate quickened, though he couldn't have said why. He kept that to himself. "Is it a black cat, maybe?"

"Poor kitty." Black-Eyed Susan pressed tighter to Hugh, half hiding under his arm.

Tam wrinkled her nose and nodded sideways at the cellar. "Still alive," she said with a shrug. "Whatever it is." She chuckled. "Maybe a skunk. Huh. Or a cuckoo."

"Or a partridge in a pear tree," Hugh said. "I'll take care of it. You stay here and keep an eye on Black-Eyed Susan."

Delaney doubted Black-Eyed Susan needed any help. And besides, there was something about the stretch and shape of the blackness as it moved. Something not feline, not bird, not...

"Fuck me." Hugh stilled. "That's not a man down there, is it?" His laugh was forced and fake. "I don't smell burning flesh. Can't be."

"I don't think they're burned." Delaney slid his guitar case off his shoulder and pressed it on Tam. "Hold this. Stay here, all of you."

"Delaney, if that's a man, you can't go down alone. Delaney!" Hugh shouted after him. Too late; Delaney was already halfway down the hill and picking up speed as he went, so that when he hit the short, smooth green before the cellar, he was running.

He knew before he'd dropped down into the cellar what he'd find there, just as he'd know the next line of a ballad before he'd sung it. Yet he didn't name it even in his thoughts, not before he'd seen it with his own eyes and touched it to be sure. No. Not it. Him.

Delaney dropped to his knees beside the ragamuffin tangle of ash-dusted black rags more draped over the man's limbs than worn. His joints protested, as did the flesh that covered them, reminding him of scrapes and bruises that'd slipped his mind.

Hands and knees, straddling a man dressed in nothing but the night but once clothed in black. Pinning him down. The man laughing like a wild creature and rearing up to bite at him and catch his mouth, demanding to be kissed. Subdued.

Though he'd been reaching out to shake the man's arm, Delaney pulled away with a hiss.

"Is he hurt?" Hugh called from atop the hill.

"Don't know." The air down here was acrid and reeked. Delaney licked his lips for the moisture and regretted it. "Hey. Are you awake?"

Silence, at first, and then a small groan. The man lay on his stomach, his face hidden in the crook of his arms. "Are you hurt?"

No answer. Delaney touched him. Once. He'd intended to tap the man on his shoulder, but he'd changed midpath and stroked the thick, soot-darkened tangle of hair away from the man's face instead. Pale skin beneath, smudged with ash but unburned.

Delaney knew when the man woke from his sleep or stupor by the small gasp and the abrupt tension in the way he held himself. He remembered that way of moving. Prey spotted by the hunter, caught between fright and flight, a deer in the headlights.

"I won't hurt you," he promised, hoping he could keep his word. "Look at me." He caught the man when he would have looked away, and turned the man's face toward him, careful but firm.

Soft lips, sharp teeth, eyes as dark as night. A laugh, a shout, a cry of pleasure. A challenge, a dare, a risk.

Yes. It was him. "Prey," Delaney murmured.

The man nodded, sharp and jerky, and kept his stare fixed on Delaney. Less afraid. More wary. Ready to run, but hesitating. Waiting to see what would happen.

"I remember. All of it, from the fiddling to—God almighty. Who are you?" Delaney's touch softened, but he didn't let go. He wanted to. Wanted to goad this almost-stranger into a run so he could be chased and caught again. Implausible, yet undeniable, and even as his body warmed with remembered arousal, he wanted no part of it. What lived in the dark should stay in the dark. "Why did you come back?"

The prey—the *fiddler*—lay still, but not as a meek and biddable thing. He would have run if he could have. Would have bitten and clawed if he couldn't have run. Instead he watched Delaney from the corner of his eye, crouched so that if he chose, he could be up and away in seconds with Delaney left to chase after him.

Though Delaney knew he shouldn't, he drew closer regardless. The nearer he came to his prey—no, his fiddler—no, not his at all; the fiddler belonged to himself, whoever—whatever he was—

Delaney couldn't think clearly with only inches between them.

When he came so near that his breath stirred the fiddler's hair, the rich earthiness of the *green* filled his senses. Loam and humus and old, old stones. The essence of the wild forest twined its way inexorably through his mind and colored his vision. He thought he felt the reverberations of the land groaning in its shift beneath his feet.

He knew the fiddler felt it too. That all it would take was a touch, a command, a kiss, and the fiddler would make it happen. For a moment, Delaney wanted nothing more than to give that word and watch the fiddler disappear into the forest. A head start for the sake of the game, and then...the chase. He parted his lips, tasting the fiddler's breath. Ready to give the need a voice.

"Stop!"

It was Hugh who'd shouted, and Delaney who obeyed. Delaney reeled back into his own head, shaky with how close that'd been. The fiddler lay still. He shuddered once, but in no other way did he react. He yearned to be brought down. It was his nature, and a man couldn't change the way he'd been born or what he'd been shaped to be.

Delaney burned with the need to touch him, and so he didn't. He crossed his arms and gripped his elbows. If he'd had long sleeves, he would have pushed his hands in those to hide them. "Who are you?" he asked again, quiet as the stirring of a leaf. "Why did you come back?"

The fiddler's lip curled, betraying a small hint of sharp teeth. The look in his eye was as wild as a dog that had never been near men, yet as hesitant as a hound pup uncertain of his new master.

"I won't hurt you." Delaney resisted the urge to touch him at all. "You can hear, and you can speak. Answer me."

"What use? Won't believe the truth," the fiddler said, almost without moving his lips. Delaney wasn't sure at first if he'd heard the words or only imagined them. "I chose you, and here I am, and here we are, and what is, is, because of my willing it so."

Delaney riddled through the sense of that. "You want to be here," he said and hazarded the rest. "You came looking for me."

The fiddler nodded once, a sharp and unaccustomed jerk of his head like a dandelion with a broken stem or a clockwork man. The energy of the chase shot through Delaney and made him gasp. "Are you doing that?"

The fiddler shrugged and didn't answer the question, but said instead, "You want it. Again and again and then some more."

"That doesn't mean I'll take it without understanding." Delaney had steadily ignored the questions Hugh and Black-Eyed Susan shouted at him, speaking beneath the clamor of their voices. He didn't think Tam had said a word, but she'd probably busily thought just as much as the others had spoken. "You should go."

The fiddler shot out his hand and grasped Delaney's ankle. A shock ran through Delaney, a jolting current that made him think this was what being struck by lightning must feel like. He pitched forward, and only by bracing himself on his arms did he avoid falling on the fiddler.

"Don't wish to, can't, and won't," the fiddler said. "Force me if you want; or try. Won't do you any good. Here I am; here I stay."

"I get that." Delaney held position. "If that's how it is, then you have to do what I tell you. It's for your own good. Do you understand me?"

The fiddler looked dubious.

Delaney wanted to pet him. He didn't. "The man and the women on top of the hill. See them?" He waited for the fiddler to indicate *yes, I do*. "They're my" — What was the right word? — "my kin. They're worried about me. They think you're hurt, and that you're dangerous. People are afraid of what they don't understand."

The fiddler's silent laughter made the ashes beneath them stir.

"I guess you already knew that." Delaney chanced a look back. He half expected he'd turn into a pillar of salt, but instead he saw only his friends, quiet now, white with uneasy fear. Part of him wanted to label them: *prey*. He shivered. "Stand up and come with me. I'm taking you to meet them."

His fiddler's response was immediate and negative, if silent.

"If you want to stay with me, then you don't have a choice about them."

His fiddler shifted a scant handful of inches away, but it was enough to make his intention clear.

There was one way to handle him, Delaney saw this now, and though it meant sacrificing more of himself than he wanted to give without understanding what was going on, he touched the fiddler. Caught him by the upper arm and didn't let go. "It's not a request. Not unless you want to go. Alone. I won't follow you back there even if I *do* want it. That place, it's not my world."

"Is too your world," the fiddler said. He closed his eyes, looking suddenly weary, and older than Delaney would have thought. "It is now." He rose to a kneel. "What's to come is already done. I follow."

* * * * *

True to his word, the fiddler kept behind Delaney as they crawled out of the cellar. Delaney couldn't help but notice the way he moved, as if he had a backbone like a cat's and could bend in ways humans couldn't. When he realized he didn't think of the fiddler as human, he drew to an abrupt stop.

Beside him, head down and shoulders rounded as if silently asking for Delaney to put his arms around them, the fiddler stopped too and looked at him in wordless question.

"What's your name?" Delaney asked instead of the other question. He didn't think he could handle the answer to that one. "I need to call you something."

"Names have power," the fiddler said, as if to himself. He chafed his arms, the rags of his clothing sliding up and down, slits in the old fabric bunching and escaping without his seeming to notice. "I don't remember mine."

Somehow Delaney didn't doubt that. "Then give me *a* name."

"Ha!" The fiddler's bark of a laugh sounded as canine as his movements were feline. He thought a moment, rubbing his wrists. "Robbie. It's good enough."

"Robbie. It suits you."

Robbie shrugged. Delaney didn't think he cared one way or another. But since the fiddler had given him that gift, he was bound to return the favor, wasn't he? And he wanted to. Wasn't sure he could go on without giving in. He put his arm around Robbie and nudged him forward, up the hill.

* * * * *

Climbing the hill was the easy part, though the higher they climbed, the quieter Robbie grew. Delaney wouldn't have thought a man could be more silent than when he was saying nothing, but he saw now how that was stupid. Robbie was as unreadable and inhuman as one of the fair folk by the time they reached Hugh, Black-Eyed Susan, and Tam.

Hugh stood slightly in front of Black-Eyed Susan, though she peered uneasily past him and at Robbie. Robbie scared her. Delaney couldn't blame her for that.

Tam—well, who knew what Tam was thinking? She contemplated Robbie, taking her time about it, then pursed her lips to whistle, soft and low, a tune that Delaney knew by heart. The song he'd spent months banging his head against the wall over, the one Robbie had finished before the chase.

Robbie had frozen when she began to whistle, and though she only ran through three bars, he reminded Delaney more of a deer on alert than a man by the time she'd finished. Wolf, panther, deer; Robbie was more of all those than human, no matter what he looked like. A sense of age saturated him, almost as overwhelming as his wariness.

Tam regarded him implacably. "You'll teach me that one."

Robbie looked to Delaney, asking permission. Delaney didn't think he cared for that. He didn't own Robbie, after all. Did he?

Hugh shifted a little farther forward in front of Black-Eyed Susan, until all Delaney could see of her was one wide eye peeping around Hugh's elbow. "Explain this," he said. "What's going on here?"

Delaney hesitated. Though he loved Hugh like a brother, there were some things no brother told another, and Hugh wouldn't understand the truth. No one could have, if they hadn't been there. He didn't have much of a clue to spare, himself.

Robbie would know, but Delaney doubted he'd share with the class. The sooner he finished these introductions and got Robbie somewhere secure and private, the better.

"Where'd he come from?" Hugh pressed. "Who is he?"

"Robbie," Delaney replied, relieved to be able to say something.

"Is he hurt?" Hugh relaxed when he heard the name, a nice, normal, reassuringly ordinary name. He shook himself like a dog and seemed to shed most of his gathered tension. "What was he doing in there?"

"Fell asleep after the party, I guess," Delaney lied. It'd do for an answer until he could get the truth out of Robbie. "I'll take care of him. Check around and see what group he belongs with." Robbie knotted his fist in the tail of Delaney's shirt and tensed so subtly that Delaney thought he was the only one who noticed. "Can we put practice off until this afternoon? I should really take care of him first."

Tam raised one thin shoulder and turned away. "All the same to me."

Black-Eyed Susan followed Tam, quick in her step. Delaney didn't blame her. He'd have wanted to get away as quick as he could too, if that shoe was on the other foot.

Hugh held back, seeming torn between agreeing and protesting. "Let me help," he said at last. "Two people can—" He reached for Robbie.

Robbie flinched away, darting behind Delaney as Black-Eyed Susan had stood behind Hugh in her turn, and bared his teeth at Hugh. Snapped at him, teeth clacking bone against bone, and growled.

“Jesus Christ.” Hugh backed down. He ran his hand through his hair. “Okay. You know what? Fine. He’s all yours, but you’re *going* to fill me in later. On everything. Got that?”

“Later,” Delaney promised.

Hugh huffed, turned, and walked away. Delaney would have been frustrated and angry enough to run after Hugh—and was—but then there was Robbie, who looked to him for protection. His responsibility. The loyalty due to a brother wasn’t enough to combat the territorial stamp he’d lain on Robbie’s body and couldn’t do anything about. It’d gone deeper than any tattoo.

Like it or not, Robbie belonged to him now and had come after Delaney to make sure he knew that. And that meant he had to take care of the man.

Robbie pushed his head against Delaney, insistent. A spark of desire revived Delaney’s senses. “We need to get you cleaned up. And see if you’re hurt.” He didn’t give Robbie a choice on that one. “Follow my lead.”

Robbie followed.

* * * * *

Robbie wouldn’t go into the cabin. No great surprise there. Not even to the steps or to the door. He stopped where his bare toes almost touched the step up, and no farther, balking like a stubborn mule refusing to walk on the edge of a cliff. Delaney didn’t push him. He didn’t have the energy, was feeling the lack of a good night’s sleep and the exercise he guessed he had to believe had been real, not a dream. Besides, he could hear Hugh banging and clanging in the kitchen with Black-Eyed Susan’s voice a constant, trying-to-be-soothing hum beneath the racket.

Hugh would get over his temper. He always did. Robbie, on the other hand, couldn’t be predicted. Not yet.

“Wait here,” Delaney told him as he himself went up and in. “I need some things. Don’t go anywhere.”

Robbie sneezed. Delaney thought that might have been an agreement. At any rate, when Delaney came out with an armload of towels, purloined soap, and a first-aid kit, Robbie was still waiting for him. Delaney breathed easier at that sight.

As for the rest, he’d have to depend on Robbie to lead *him*. “If you won’t come inside where there’s a shower, we’ll have to go find a garden hose. You need to wash. Do you understand?”

Robbie cocked his head to a side.

“You’re filthy,” Delaney said, not bothering to be polite about it. “So am I, after helping you out of the cellar and walking with you.”

Robbie looked first hurt, then insulted, then irritated. "Had other things to think about," he said. His voice was stronger now, but still strange, unmusical and rough as an old saddle. Almost like he couldn't hear himself. Maybe his senses were lessened outside the forest and...whatever that had been, the night before. Who knew? "There's better water this way." He nodded to the left. "Near the trees, but not properly inside. Down in a valley. Hidden very well."

Delaney hadn't had much cause to go farther than the grounds proper, but he thought he knew the place Robbie referred to. "Fine. This time, you lead me."

That got a new reaction, one of startled suspicion.

Delaney gave up trying to be kind. Apparently it didn't work. He'd try again later. Soon. When he could see more of Robbie than hair and soot and be sure his body was undamaged. That took precedence over a gentle hand. "I won't ask again. Do as you're told."

The whites of Robbie's eyes showed, reminding Delaney of a spooked horse, but he darted forward and took the lead. *Finally.*

Chapter Five

Delaney dropped his armful of supplies by the creek bank and studied his reflection in the water. Robbie joined him, hovering over his shoulder. The ripples of the water distorted their reflection, seeming to blend their faces together.

He dashed the ripples with the flat of his hand. "How did you know the end of the song last night?" he asked Robbie. "Did you read my mind?"

Robbie shouldered past him, daring Delaney to push back. Looked like the prey was tired of meekness at last. "No," he said as he waded ankle-deep in the flowing water, still fully dressed, over the slick, wet-leafed creek bed studded with pebbles. He cut a slanted look at Delaney. "Not a new song, you know."

"I wrote it myself!" Delaney protested, stung.

"And? Nothing new under the sun. That tune, it was old when I was a boy."

"And how long ago was that?"

Robbie's lips turned down at the corners. He kicked a floating twig out of his way. "Too long ago to remember."

Impossible, but somehow Delaney didn't doubt that either. "Wash." He picked up the soap and tossed it to Robbie, who caught it neatly if with surprise.

Robbie pointed at him, one eyebrow up in a question.

"Soon," Delaney replied. "Maybe. You first."

Robbie's splash forward shifted, metamorphosed, became fluid instead of choppy. "And you'll watch," he said, a thin layer of silk weaving itself in with the roughness of his voice. "And then you'll join me."

"Do you want me to?" Delaney cocked his head to the side.

Robbie crouched in the water with his face only just clear of the current. "Very much," he said and sank down until only his eyes were visible through the tangle of his wet hair.

"We'll see," Delaney said, but that was a lie. The water that washed smoothly over Robbie, soaking his clothing and making it cling to his limbs so that he might as well already be naked, was too strong a temptation to be resisted. Cravings coiled within Delaney's belly and snaked through him. His cock began to fill as the heat increased.

Green, green grass, and fair, fair skin. Red lips parted in a shout, a cry, a roar. The taste of clean sweat and hot-blooded lust.

Robbie laughed at Delaney and ducked underwater. He rolled to his back and floated idly, trailing his fingers down his chest in wanton invitation even as the current carried him a short distance downstream.

Yes. A foregone conclusion, but one Delaney couldn't help anticipating.

And from the looks of things—hard to miss when the water he poured on himself left only enough to the imagination to whet his appetite—Robbie felt the same way.

Robbie sat up and drew his shirt over his head with a seemingly casual grace. Already tattered so that it was hard to imagine how the pieces had stayed joined together, it now fell apart in a burst of black threads that scattered around Robbie in a sort of dark rain.

Delaney had half expected the threads to become birds or moths or feathers when they scattered, something that'd fly away. When anything was possible, nothing could be doubted. A man like Robbie could only exist in that kind of world, human in body and animal in mind. Intelligent; he knew what he wanted and how to get it. How to make his hunter want to chase him.

But not yet. Anticipation was what made the chase worthwhile. Imagining, remembering, dreaming, planning. More, watching his prey. Seeing how he moved and spoke. Learning how to predict how he'd move.

Though Robbie would never do the same thing twice, Delaney couldn't see that as a bad thing. Unpredictability was far more exciting.

He rested on the bank and watched Robbie move farther into the cold creek water. Though it barely came up to mid thigh at its deepest point, the current was strong and resisted Robbie's strides.

"Where did you come from?" Delaney asked, mostly to himself. "Where the wild things are? I should have named you Max."

Robbie wrinkled his nose. "Robbie will do. For Robert Burns."

"Ha! Robert Burns. No wonder you showed up at a Scottish music festival, if you like odes to haggis."

Robbie crouched, quick and smooth, scooped up a handful of water and dashed it at Delaney. Delaney dodged and covered his eyes, laughing. "I'll take it as read that you're not a fan."

"You talk too much," Robbie said.

"You'd be the first to say that. I'm supposed to be the quiet one. I guess anyone would be a chatterbox next to you."

Robbie shrugged. "Words are words."

"Words are my life."

"No. Music is." Robbie watched him sideways. "Don't need words when the music talks for you."

Delaney rested his cheek on his hand. "Never heard it put that way."

Robbie raised one shoulder and was silent. He pulled his hair out of his face, his eyes shut in wordless pleasure at the warm sun on his skin. A pretty sight, but Delaney couldn't help but notice how careful Robbie was to face him. To hide his back from sight.

"Turn around," Delaney said, not even sure himself if it was an order or a request.

Robbie pretended not to hear. He didn't fool Delaney.

"Robbie," he said, his arousal kindling, burning hotter. "Turn around."

Robbie shook his head, hiding his face behind his hair. He walked farther upstream and away from Delaney. This was it. The chase. Delaney rose and stood on the edge. This wasn't the real him, not in the real world, but it was here. He could be two men at once, and the discovery made that part of him not held in thrall by the Hunt almost giddy, drunk with excitement.

"Look at me, Robbie."

Robbie stayed put. Not afraid, just stubborn. Daring Delaney to push harder and further. His chest, sleek and bare, rose and fell faster, betraying his interest.

"I told you to look at me." Delaney's vision blurred. He took off his glasses and cast them to the side; rubbed the bridge of his nose and blinked. Better. He didn't need them here where the world was seen through a different sort of eyes.

A thought came to him. In the ballads, threes were the numbers that mattered. He wondered...

"Robbie," Delaney said softly, warning him. He shifted to ease the building ache in his groin. Pressed the heel of his hand to his cock and rubbed to enjoy the frisson of pleasure. "For the third time. Look at me."

Robbie hissed and lifted his head sharply, his eyes glittering dark behind the veil of tangled hair. He held his arms open and ready at his sides, tense in preparation for a leap or a sprint. "Wondered how long that'd take." For all the building fight in him, he still slid the tip of his tongue over his lips. Hungry. "Glad it worked?"

Delaney kicked his shoes off and, uncaring of the cold, strode through the water. It seemed to part more easily for him where it had fought against Robbie. "You're a devil in disguise. Tell the truth."

"Guilty," Robbie said and meant it.

The admission gave Delaney pause, but only a moment's worth. Nothing could have stopped him now that his prey was in sight, ripe for the catching, his cock as hard and full as Delaney's and outlined by the soaking-wet rags and tags of the trousers he wore. "Take those off."

Robbie toyed with the band that secured them around his waist. A drawstring of sorts, already almost falling apart. "What will you give me in return?"

"What I think you want. Am I wrong?" Delaney came within arm's reach of Robbie. "I'll ask twice more if I have to, but I want to see you. Let me see you."

"That *was* three," Robbie said, alight with wicked humor. "I am bound." He pulled the string loose. The trousers fell away, just threads as his shirt had been reduced to. They swarmed around Delaney's legs before the current carried them away.

"Unbound," Delaney said. He wished he'd taken off his jeans before he entered the water. They chafed. The best he could manage was scraping them down, not pleasant, and peeling off one leg at a time. Though the cold made his bones ache, he drew his shirt off and cast it on the bank. Through all of it, Robbie watched with an intensity that made Delaney feel both uncomfortably naked and hotly appreciated. "Do you like what you see?"

Robbie reached for Delaney, drew away, and reached out again. "Yes."

"Then let me see your back, or I won't touch you."

Third time asking was the charm, but not with pleasure. Robbie bared his teeth at Delaney and turned at the waist. The double line of brass hoops that ran down his back, interlaced with black suede like a corset woven into his skin, flexed with the shifting of his muscles. "There," he growled.

Delaney had seen enough. "Hide them if you want. I only wanted to be sure they were real."

"Why?"

"I knew a woman once who had the same kind of piercing done. They were too sensitive to be touched, and she couldn't wear them very long at all. Temporary and painful. Yours look like they're a part of you. Like you've worn them for most of your life."

Robbie shrugged. "They are what they are. Happy?"

"Not if you're unhappy."

Robbie stilled.

"Yes. That matters to me. Does that make me so unusual?"

Robbie said nothing, but he trembled once. Shuddered. The tightness of the muscles in his arms and legs eased, and Delaney knew he'd won. The prey was his once more, again. "Come to me."

Or...

"Or maybe I'll come to you," Delaney said, closing the small space between them. "That's the way it should be, isn't it? The lamb doesn't lie down for the lion."

"You think you're a lion?" Robbie jeered, though his body strained forward and his cock darkened, hardened further still, and gleamed wetly at the tip. "Think I'm a lamb?"

"Hardly. More of an owl."

Robbie scoffed.

"You don't think so? I do." Delaney was touching Robbie without knowing when he'd started, only that Robbie was smooth and sinewy and soft and warm, that he smelled of the woods and of the green, and that he quivered in a way that only the hands could know, and not even a hunter's eyes would ever see. "A night owl, one that only flies in secret."

Robbie's shaking stopped. He held his breath.

"I won't tell." Most of the words that he spoke weren't Delaney's. He didn't mind; they were better than anything he could have composed. "But I'll ask for something in return. A kiss."

"You think I'll pay?"

"Shh." Delaney pressed his palm to Robbie's and lifted their hands between them, fingers laced together. He pressed them to Robbie's chest to feel his heart thundering. He'd startled a rabbit, once, when clearing the grounds. It'd run no more than ten paces before it had stopped and fallen, blood on its lips, its heart burst from too much adrenaline. "I won't hurt you. Not ever, not willingly. That's my promise to you. Not even if you turn me away, though I know and you know that's not going to happen."

Robbie's throat worked, his swallow dry and audible, so odd in the middle of a rushing creek, and so vulnerable in its way that Delaney cupped his cheek to show tenderness. "Never say never," Robbie protested.

"I can, and I will, because it's true." Delaney traced his thumb over Robbie's lower lip. "Do you believe me?"

Robbie turned his head into the caress, eyes drifting closed, lips drifting apart. Almost there, willing to surrender. Almost. "I believe you believe yourself," he said.

"Then you believe me."

Robbie didn't deny it and slid closer, water eddying and rising around their hips. Their cocks almost touched and indeed strained toward each other despite the chill of the water and the growing cool of night and the rush of the wind that made them both shiver.

Delaney drew a stroke from Robbie's shoulder to his wrist. He avoided Robbie's back, no matter how he ached to touch the corset piercings on Robbie's back. Wanted to slide beneath the lacings to feel the fair, smooth flesh beneath, to steer Robbie with the lightest of touches.

He wanted more to ease the hunger and slake his thirst in Robbie's body, as desperate to take him as he was to give. The rest could wait. "Do you yield?"

Robbie nodded, short and choppy.

"You have to say it." Delaney tipped his chin up and restrained himself, both of them, when Robbie would have pressed their bodies together. "Do you yield?"

"I yield," Robbie said. He shrugged free of Delaney's hold and glided forward with a strong stroke to align their bodies from chest to groin to legs, twining so tightly together it seemed he'd never be able to part. The pressure of slick, hot skin and the rigid fullness of Robbie's eager cock pushed to his hip were double and triple acknowledgment that he'd won. Delaney needed no more. He caught a double handful of Robbie's hair and pulled to hold him still so that he could take his reward.

Robbie surrendered eagerly and with as much vigor as he'd run, giving way where Delaney pushed and surrendering where Delaney wanted to go. There was nothing of him he didn't offer up of his own free will, and nothing he said no to when Delaney asked with lips, with questing touches, with teeth, and with white-knuckled grasping. He wrapped one leg around Delaney's waist of his own accord to bring them impossibly closer together and to grind against Delaney.

"How?" he asked in Delaney's ear. He undulated more slowly, dragging his cockhead up and down Delaney's stomach. His lips drew into a circle by Delaney's ear, where he whistled the song they'd played together. "Tell me how you want me. Anything."

If he'd meant to drive Delaney mad, he'd accomplished the feat. "Not in the water. We'll fall."

"Not if you don't tip us off balance." Robbie caught Delaney by the nape and drew him in for a bruising kiss, their teeth clacking together, jarring, but the slight pain didn't matter.

"Don't think I can keep my head that well."

"Clumsy, then," Robbie said in between hot presses of his mouth to Delaney's throat. He writhed like a wildcat but as sleekly as an otter, with his ragged nails as sharp as an owl's talons raking down Delaney's sides and the tops of his shoulders. "Stand, fall, sink, swim; don't care. Only care about *soon*."

"Here, in the water?"

Robbie's hair, wet now, clung to his face. "Yes. Why not?"

"No reason at all, I guess." Delaney allowed himself one stroke over Robbie's lacings and then cupped his ass, kneaded the taut muscle, and drew Robbie higher up with his body as all the support necessary. "Another time, I'll take you on your back. I'll push inside you. But now all I want is this."

"This, what—*oh*." Robbie bucked into Delaney's grasp, circled tight around his cock. He scrabbled between them to return the favor.

"No, like this." Delaney knotted their hands together around both, pressed their cocks hard together. Dragged out the first stroke, his breath catching in time with Robbie's. Faster on the glide down, slick with the gloss from their cockheads, harder still in their joined grasp.

Quicker. Stronger. Robbie moaned and Delaney silenced him with his mouth, only muffled cries and chest-deep grunts emerging now. The sweat that stuck their bodies together was washed away by the water that sluiced around them, the cold fully replaced by the heat of their skin.

Robbie's breath hitched faster and faster still, his stomach drawing concave with the harshness of his gasps. *Almost there, then, almost.*

Delaney could taste it, touch it, sense it, still out of reach but nearly at hand. He buried his face against Robbie and dragged him closer, tighter with an arm around his waist. "Come on," he said, the warmth of his breath too hot on Robbie's skin and on his lips. "Yield to me."

Robbie's cock pulsed against his palm, growing impossibly harder. Delaney was too big for his body, coming apart at the seams, as if he could and would shed his summer's skin and be something else altogether.

"Yield."

"Three times," Robbie told him, though he almost hadn't the breath to speak. He shuddered in Delaney's arms and thrust up. "Has to be."

Delaney's wrist stuttered. The end of it all rose and towered above him, falling, falling—"Yield." Robbie sank his teeth in Delaney's collarbone and his nails deep in Delaney's sides and shuddered, even more so when Delaney refused to let his cock jerk as it would have alone and guided it to direct the heavy cum where he wanted it, on his chest and his belly and down his wrist. A fleck landed on his lips. He put out his tongue to taste it, and the flavor drove him mad.

He thrust his hand beneath Robbie's laced piercings and *pulled* and came, Robbie shuddering out a second orgasm beneath them, rising and breaking with the swell of the water that splashed high and deep and washed them clean.

Somewhere, not too far away, a dog barked. A hound, its belling cry deep and mournful, the scent of its prey caught. Delaney wound the laces tighter still around his hand.

No, he thought without knowing why. Go away. He's mine.

Chapter Six

Hugh had coaxed a fire to life in the cabin's small, smoke-blackened hearth by the time Delaney made his way inside, still toweling his hair dry. Robbie had refused to come in, but they both needed to eat.

"I'm sorry I didn't make it back earlier," he said, though he knew the apology wouldn't be nearly enough to satisfy Hugh's ire. He deserved it. Truly, he'd meant to be back sooner, but when with Robbie time ceased to have any real meaning, and the day had gone by while he wasn't paying attention.

"Umph," Hugh grunted.

Delaney lingered by the hearth to warm his hands. "What time is it?"

"Around eight, I think." Hugh didn't look at him, focusing on the bodhran he held with its crossbars around his wrist. He tapped the cipín, carved to look like a bone, against his knee. "You're damn lucky we weren't on duty today. We need this job. Roof over our head, food on the table, and gas for the van, not to mention the chance at any venues that open up. Any of this ringing a bell? Fuck, Delaney, where'd you go? You missed practice. We waited for you."

"We?" It didn't make sense for a moment.

"Me. Tam," Hugh enunciated slowly. "Black-Eyed Susan."

"Black-Eyed Susan," Delaney repeated. "Isn't she part of another group?"

"And? I can't invite her to join us if I want?"

"I didn't say that." Delaney looped the towel around his neck and, though he wanted to retreat, rooted himself before the fire with his bare toes curled on the floor and his hands outstretched to the heat. "I'm sorry."

Hugh twitched his shoulders irritably, as if shrugging off a dragonfly that'd lighted on his arm.

Delaney couldn't stand the cold and distant awkwardness between them. He tried another approach. "Tell me about Black-Eyed Susan."

Tap-tap-tap. Hugh started a staccato rhythm on his bodhran, the ease of long practice and mastery made rough-and-tumble by his mood. "What do you want to know?"

"Anything, I guess." Delaney sank to his knees to better let the fire's warmth soak into his bones. "She must be special. No one else has ever stuck around for more than a night. Don't glare at me. It's true."

"She's different. Sweet. The kind of girl who'd keep me company last night when you vanished, and she did the same today. Where were you, Delaney? I looked, you know? Everywhere. All over the grounds. Hell, I went back to the cellar and poked the old ash with a stick, no matter how crazy."

Delaney looked at the floor.

"You were with him," Hugh said. "I figure I don't have to guess what you were up to. You've got bites all over. Scratches too. You look like you spent a week's pay at a whorehouse."

Delaney reared, indignant. "That's rich, coming from you."

"You left us. Again," Hugh said, almost too quietly to be heard. "You scared me. We don't know this guy. You were gone all day. Anything could have happened."

Shame touched Delaney's heart. "I didn't mean—I don't think this'll make a difference to you, but for what it's worth I'm sorry."

Hugh grunted. "That's just a word," he said, but the tempo of his drummed tune eased into something less warlike and more melodic. "Fuck it. As long as you're okay. But..." He rubbed his chin on his arm to scratch it. "Fair's fair, right?"

"Yes?" Delaney grew wary. "And?"

Hugh's drumming changed speed once more, somewhere between angry and curious, the emotion palpable. The nimbleness of the turn of his wrist looked too multijointed to be human, for a moment only, before the uncanny illusion snapped away. "Tell me about him." No need to specify who. "What's so special about this guy?"

Delaney didn't want to answer that and didn't have time for the fight. How could he explain what he mostly didn't understand anyway? Unless Hugh made him, he wouldn't.

"He's new," Delaney started by evading. *And maybe very, very old; I'm not sure yet.* And where that thought had come from, he didn't know.

"I figured. He doesn't act like he's from around here." Hugh let his carved cipín fall and looked at Delaney for the first time. The firelight cast odd shadows on him, half his face concealed by darkness, and half ruddy with reflected flames. "I don't like him."

"No, really? Wait, I'm sorry. That didn't come out right." Delaney pinched his lips in thought and grimaced at Hugh. "I'm tired. It's been a long day. Can we talk about

this later? I came in for some food and water and a spare change of clothes. Something of Tam's should fit him, and I doubt she'd mind. I'll pay her back somehow."

"Came in," Hugh said, a deliberate, challenging echo. "So you're leaving again?"

Delaney glanced behind him, at the small window that faced the yard. "Yes."

"Because Robbie won't come inside," Hugh said.

"No. And I won't leave him alone."

"Didn't figure you would." Hugh stood abruptly, bodhran looped around his wrist, and stalked away.

Delaney followed him, anger replacing the need to make peace with his longtime friend. "What's your problem, Hugh? I'd have thought you'd be happy for me. I've finished the song, or I will as soon as it's written down, and for God's sake after all the nagging you've done telling me to get a life, I think I have."

"Did it have to be with him?"

"Why *not* him?"

"Because he's turned you into someone I barely recognize, damn near overnight!" Hugh glared. "He gives me the fucking creeps, Delaney. I don't think he's safe. Neither does Black-Eyed Susan."

Delaney had to pick up his pace to keep in stride with Hugh and stopped only when Hugh did, at the pantry door where they kept their nonperishable food. "What's that supposed to mean? What's Black-Eyed Susan got to do with it?"

Hugh glared blackly at him. "He scares her."

"And I suppose he puts the fear of God in Tam too."

"Tam doesn't pay enough attention to anything besides music to even notice, and even if she did, she wouldn't have the sense to care."

"So you're playing den mother again."

"Someone has to."

Frustration made Delaney rash. "I'm not afraid of him. You shouldn't be either. There's no reason. It's crazy."

"Yeah, well, guess I'm crazy, then." Hugh plucked a loaf of grain bread, a pack of cheese slices, and a vacuum-sealed summer sausage off the shelf. "Suppose I'll have to be afraid on your behalf too."

"Hugh, Robbie's half a foot shorter and fifty pounds lighter than you are. You could squash him like a bug."

"That's so far from the point it'd have to call long-distance." Hugh pushed the supplies at Delaney, filling his arms with them. "Go on. Feed him, water him, whatever. I'm going back to the cellar with Black-Eyed Susan. Tam might be around tonight, or she might not be. We have to work tomorrow. If you miss that, it's all our asses on the line. Our livelihood. We don't work, we don't get the chance to play. We don't play, then—"

"I'll be there. I promise."

Hugh curled his lip. "Will you? Or are we going to be here doing the same thing tomorrow night after you've disappeared again and come back when you felt like it?"

"Hugh—" Too late, not that Hugh had listened to him in the first place. Delaney could only watch his friend as he stalked away. "I can take care of myself. Things will calm down, I promise. I won't lose track of time again. I can take care of him and still be what you need."

"You could," Hugh said, jerking the door open. "But I don't think you will."

And what that was supposed to mean, along with the rest of Hugh's sullen anger, Delaney was left to figure out for himself.

* * * * *

Robbie wasn't at the creek where Delaney had left him, asking that he stay put. Delaney hadn't figured he would be, naked or not. Nudity wouldn't stop a man like Robbie from slipping away when he wanted to go elsewhere. He could move unseen and unheard; it was his nature.

But he couldn't hide from the hunter he'd yielded to. Delaney knew that as surely as he knew his own name, even if it made less and less sense as the hours ticked past, and less still now that his hunger for Robbie had been temporarily eased.

He found Robbie in the first and last place he'd expected, at the edge of the cellar, standing above but not too near the hole in the ground, staring at it with an expression Delaney couldn't read in the growing dark of night. Still naked, though his hair had dried and snarled in the piercings that lined his back.

Delaney tweaked a strand free to gain his attention. "Are you hungry?" He'd lost his appetite after the encounter with Hugh, his ears still buzzing and his stomach sour. He pushed the bread and cheese at Robbie. "It's not much, but you should eat."

Robbie glanced at the food, not seeming to see it, and turned his face away, silent once more.

No. He'd meant what he'd said. He'd take care of Robbie, even if Robbie didn't want him to. He pressed the food on Robbie again. "I told you to eat."

"Pallid stuff. Like weak tea. Smells of things that don't grow."

"Sorry." Delaney bumped shoulders with Robbie. "I'm fresh out of game." He twirled open the bag of bread, took out the top slice, and dropped it in Robbie's hand. "This is the world I live in."

Robbie cut him a sideways glance. "Do you?"

"Where else would I be?"

"Here." Robbie opened his arms to the forest, to the cellar that stood out like an ugly dark stain. He didn't seem happy about it and dropped the bread to wrap his arms tighter around his chest. "Same as I am."

"Is that such a bad thing?" Delaney picked up the bread, blew dirt off it, and took a bite. "Share it with me."

Robbie grumbled under his breath and did as he'd been told. "Ugh."

"I didn't promise you it'd be *good*. It's filling, and that's enough. Aren't you starving by now? God knows I am."

Robbie crammed the bread in his mouth. He watched the tree line as he chewed, crumbs on his lips and the slender column of his throat working when he swallowed. The moon was hidden behind a heavy cover of clouds tonight, the air thick and humid with an approaching storm. Dangerous sort of weather, with static electricity snapping the air about them and the thick, bitter-sour taste of ozone heavy on Delaney's tongue.

He tried to take Robbie's hand. "Come inside with me. Hugh's got a quick temper, but it usually fades fast. There's enough room in my bed for two, if we're careful. Or we could sleep in front of the hearth."

"Can't. Shouldn't have come in the first place."

"Don't say that."

"It's the truth. I can't." He waved Delaney's protest away. "'Want to' doesn't change 'can't.'"

"And I want to keep you safe." The wariness with which Robbie held himself unnerved Delaney. Whatever he kept watch out for here, whatever had drawn him back to the cellar, it wasn't safe. He thought he understood Hugh's fears now, at least in part.

The ghost of a smile quirked Robbie's lips. "*You* can't. Go now. Before it's too late."

"Too late for what?"

"The Hunt." Robbie pushed him. "They come for me. You shouldn't be here."

"Where you are, that's where I want to be."

"More fool you." Robbie evaded Delaney's attempt to touch him. "Unless it's already too late."

A sudden barking and baying, the belling cry of hounds following a trail, made Delaney jump. For his part, Robbie paled as white as salt and stumbled away from the cellar.

"What is it?"

"Something you shouldn't see. *Go*." Robbie kicked forward, the calculated strike of a horse shod with iron, the blow sudden and with all his strength behind it, propelling Delaney back and himself forward. He tucked and rolled down into the cellar, landing as lightly on his feet as a cat, naked and all the fiercer for it. The traces of humanity he'd gathered around himself instead of clothing melted away to make of him what he'd been the first time Delaney had seen his face. "*Go*."

"The hell you say." The clash of iron joined the racketing clamor of the hounds, and then the rasp of leather and steel and the shout of an ill-tempered horse. Delaney

thought he saw the brightness of metal gleaming through the trees. Riders in the night where no riders could be.

He made a choice and jumped down into the pit with Robbie.

Robbie balanced almost on his toes, quaking with the need to run, too much white showing in his eyes. "Shouldn't have done that."

Delaney straightened his glasses. "I made a promise. I'm going to keep it."

"Shouldn't do that either." Robbie glanced up, sharp, hearing something Delaney couldn't, something bad. "Down. Get down on your knees, on your face. No questions. *Now.*"

"What?"

"Get *down*," Robbie insisted, pulling at Delaney. Startled, Delaney fell. He was more surprised still to feel Robbie climbing atop him, stretching limb over limb and covering Delaney with his body. Though he shook like an aspen, he clung tight as a limpet and wouldn't be shaken off when Delaney tried to buck the heavy weight of him away. "*Don't* ask. *Don't* move. *Don't* breathe. *Don't* speak. *Don't think.*"

The stink of leaf mold made Delaney recoil and gag when he opened his mouth to speak, and crumbs smeared over his tongue. He spat and tried to wrestle Robbie. "I claimed you. You're mine to protect."

"You don't know what you're saying, really saying. It's a thousand years too late anyway." Robbie forced Delaney's head down, so that he breathed only through the crumbled leaves. "Want to be yours, only yours, but they—" He hid his face in the crook of Delaney's shoulder. "Please. Hide. For me. *Lie still.*" He pressed his cheek to Robbie's, his lips to Robbie's temple, and ceased to breathe or move at all. He became as stone.

Chapter Seven

Nearer and nearer the horses rode. How many? A dozen, a legion? No way to tell; as loudly as their hooves struck the earth, the louder their horse screams assaulted Delaney's ears. He struggled beneath the deadweight—please God, not truly dead—of Robbie atop him, trying to heave him off, then roll him over and escape from the side. Nothing worked. He didn't think Robbie had thought this through. Maybe he hadn't known to. But Delaney couldn't breathe, his face pressed deeper into the leaf mold more firmly with each effort to get free.

"Hsst." The hiss curled its way into Delaney's ear. He slitted one eye open to look, thinking it'd be a snake or a lizard or even a dragon. He'd have believed anything.

Maybe not this. A face made of vines and leaves. No body. Just the face, woven together from the greenery that grew between the stones of the cellar wall. It'd gathered heavy oak leaves for its eyebrows and made a mustache and beard out of pine.

"I know you," Delaney said. He managed to lift himself to his elbows.

"Do you?" The face seemed surprised. Or was he? His kind stayed two steps ahead of the game. Always. "Who am I, then?"

Vague memory solidified. "I saw you and others like you last night, on the Hunt. Here and there. I know what you are." And if he behaved the way he did in the ballads, he didn't have only one name, but hundreds. You never called his kind by what they really were, anyway, lest you draw unwanted attention from other, worse things. "You're a Green Man," Delaney said. "A Jack o' the Green."

"Well spotted!" The Green Man didn't have eyes so much as he had shadows that suggested them, but Delaney knew when he looked past him to Robbie. "The hound pup has teeth and a collar now."

"He's mine."

"So you say." Delaney had the oddest sensation that if it had had the ability and the appendages, the Green Man would have stroked his beard. Delaney could smell the trees the Green Man's leaves had come from above the stink of horse and fire. "If he is yours, then what will you do with him?"

Red and orange light blazed above the top of the cellar, curiously dappled. Delaney fought to twist up and see. A loose lattice of kudzu and pine bark crisscrossed over the top, weaving shut even as he watched. No doubt the Green Man's doing. "Are you trapping us in, or keeping them out? Who are they, the riders?"

"You should know. You are one of them now, or near enough. Near as makes no difference, and that's a fine distinction, now isn't it?" The Green Man's leaves quaked with mirth. "You've no idea what you've gotten yourself into. A good game, this; a fine fete, little hunter."

"Don't call me that. I'm a musician."

"We know. Yet you *are* one of ours, if you caught a fish in our pond. This prey of yours, pretty, pretty Robbie. Come share a feast with us. Celebrate. Tear meat from the bone and drink the beer barrels dry."

"You're not just a Green Man, are you?" Jacks o' the Green wouldn't care about this. Delaney almost had his torso free. "Something's speaking through you, isn't it?"

"Only with my permission," he said, and then lower, deeper, the echo driving an ache through Delaney's bones, "I am the Master of the Hunt."

"What does that mean?" Delaney shouted over the sudden roaring rush of wind that blew dirt around him in thick clouds.

The Green Man laughed at him and disappeared, leaves fluttering to the cellar floor. Delaney lunged to catch one. The torrent stopped when he caught the oak leaf. The green-veined fragment was too warm as it curled in the palm of his hand. When he closed his fingers around it, it burst into flame that didn't burn him. He dropped the ashes with a stifled yell.

Somewhere in there, Robbie had woken. Delaney could sense it in the speeding of his respiration, almost gasps. "You have it the wrong way around," he said, knowing Robbie could hear him. "Whatever's out there, it has to go through *me*."

Robbie would expect a fight. A tumble, a thump, a fist, or a kick. Delaney gave him none of those. He twisted beneath Robbie to lie on his back. Caught Robbie with double handfuls of his fair hair, then, with his hand cradling the back of Robbie's head, pressed his mouth to Robbie's.

Delaney held Robbie from below when Robbie would have flinched away. He tasted of the smell of burning leaves, and when Delaney pressed his thumbs to either side of Robbie's eyes to coax them open, his pupils had dilated impossibly wide, leaving only the smallest ring of color. Afraid. Scared to death. Yet wanting. There could be no doubt of that, not with Robbie straddling him and their cocks rubbing together.

He shook one hand free of Robbie's hair and thrust it between them to mold around and massage Robbie's dick. Robbie groaned and thrust forward, moisture slicking down Delaney's wrist. His own cock jumped, demanding Robbie's attention. Delaney ignored it. Taking care of Robbie meant denying himself. So be it.

"I told you I'd take care of you," Delaney said. He drew Robbie down to lie atop him once more, then rolled them over to put Robbie on the bottom and him above, sheltering them both. The way it should be.

Beneath him, Robbie strained up, his cock throbbing in Delaney's hand. "I warned you," he said, snapping his teeth close to Delaney's chin. A warning shot.

"Don't." Delaney caught Robbie's wrists in one hand and pinned them as far over Robbie's head as he could reach. "If you don't believe me and what I've promised, then I guess I have to show you." He licked Robbie's lips open, slid his tongue inside, and stroked.

Robbie made a mewling sound and surged back; when Delaney moved his hand in time with his tongue, he went wild. He bit Delaney and sucked the stinging marks. Thrust his legs between Delaney's, then around him, locking his heels behind Delaney's back and bruising him with the force of his grip.

The horses and rough men riding them were close now. Circling the cellar. A steady, choppy rain of dirt and humus rained down on Delaney's head. He kept his eyes open though they wanted to close to protect his sight. So did Robbie. In the dark depths, Delaney thought he saw...he saw...music. What music was, not notes on a page or the sound of a voice lifted in song, but the spark that music was drawn from.

Orgasm struck unexpected, knocking the breath out of him as if he'd dived from three stories above the ground into the shallow creek where they'd bathed. Robbie caught Delaney's tongue and sucked it into his mouth, whimpering desperately around him and rutting up against him. He arched up like a strung bow when he came, striping Delaney with cum.

Delaney hadn't yet caught his breath, or even begun to gentle Robbie down and pet him quiet through the aftershocks that rippled through him, when the *thud-thud-thud* of the heaviest horse yet trod the edge of the cellar. "This," the Master of the Hunt said, "is better than I'd hoped. Welcome, huntsman."

Robbie hid his face against Delaney's chest and curled up tight and small beneath Delaney. Not fear, or at least Delaney didn't think so. More of a fuse burning down to the last possible centimeters before an explosion.

"Lie still," he ordered even as he sheltered Robbie with his body, one arm protecting his head and his knees bracketing Robbie's hips. He was sticky with cooling, drying cum, and lathered in sweat. He stank and didn't care. *My prey. Mine.* "Who are you?"

"The Master of the Hunt, as I told you, or the Huntmaster for short, if it pleases you." A blade that might have been silver sliced smooth as butter through the tangle of

vines the Green Man had woven over the cellar. For a crazy moment, Delaney wondered how he'd explain the mess to Hugh in the morning.

"I don't know what you mean," Delaney said.

The Huntmaster clicked his tongue. "There's a shame," he mocked. "Try again. I'm not so easily fooled."

"I *don't* know," Delaney insisted. Sharp-edged twigs made their presence known, splinters aching in his knees and his elbows. "Stay with me." He manipulated Robbie up and back, into the corner of the cellar, and turned his back only to shield him better, and to get a look at this Huntmaster. To understand whatever it was he dealt with.

Severed vines and leaves dropped to the bottom of the cellar, nearly half the mat cut away, their weight pulling the rest down. Delaney shaded his eyes and squinted against the abrupt harshness of torchlight and the head-rattling cacophony no longer muted by the Green Man's canopy.

Above him, the Huntmaster crouched on the edge of the cellar and returned his stare, eye to eye. Once seen, he couldn't be looked away from. He was... Delaney didn't have the words, not any that would fit. Alive in a way that a human couldn't be. More than he should be. To look at him was to be dragged under and drowned by the forces of nature he wore like a mantle and manipulated at his whim. A strong chin, a crooked nose, black slashes of eyebrows. Teeth too white against the moonless midnight black of his beard and barely on the wrong side of too sharp. Handsome? No, but he'd break a man's heart to look at him. No one else could compare. Ever.

Delaney started to get up. He wanted to follow the Master of the Hunt. He'd go anywhere this being led him. Do whatever he asked. He —

Sharp, stinging pain pierced the back of Delaney's neck. Four lines as sharp as knives dragging furrows down his spine. Robbie's nails, rough and ragged. Not a noise from him, but there didn't need to be. He could think clearly again, and he knew better than to meet the Huntmaster's eyes this time.

The Huntmaster laughed, sounding truly pleased. A hearty sound, deep and effusive and commanding others to join in. Delaney clenched his jaw and refused to do as he'd been told, which only seemed to make the Huntmaster happier still. "You're a fine one," he said. "An unexpected surprise. It's rare that happens. The prey you shield could tell you as much; he's had far more of my temper to compare it to."

"Never again. I've claimed him."

The Huntmaster scoffed. "You've hunted him, fucked him, but unless you join our company and master him properly, he isn't yours. Not when I can call him back with a snap of the fingers." He clicked them together, muffled by a set of thick leather gloves Delaney could now see he wore. He could only look at the Huntmaster in bits and pieces. Any more was too much.

"Then how do I keep him? Do I ask you?"

"Perhaps, but who am I to ask?" The Huntmaster leaned forward, hovering over the cellar. A human would have fallen. He only rested against the emptiness, as

comfortable as if it had been a hammock. "Come now. I know you can identify me if you only try. I'll bank my fires to make it fair." He did seem to dim. To draw down somehow. "How about a guessing game? I'll trade you fair value for putting a name to what we are."

"I'm not that dumb," Delaney retorted.

The Huntmaster pounded his gloved hands together. Around him, behind him, the bellows of horses and bays of hounds never stopped. Delaney's head ached.

"It will not stop until I'm satisfied," the Huntmaster warned Delaney. "They're mine, all of them. As he is."

"His name is Robbie."

"Not so, and you know that. Robbie is as random a string of letters as a sneeze. Names have too much power to be bandied about." The Huntmaster feigned crude surprise. "Perhaps you knew that."

"I won't be played with like this."

"You'll be anything I wish when I'm speaking to you. Tell me what I am, and tell me what this is. I won't ask again."

"And if I don't?"

"Nothing." The Huntmaster darkened. "Ever again."

Delaney felt movement at the side of his throat. Lips, Robbie's lips, shaping words he couldn't hear but could still understand. Comprehension settled thick and cold, but not to be disbelieved. Anything was possible, right? Especially the worst.

Shielding his face with one arm, Delaney squinted obliquely at the Huntmaster. "This is a Wild Hunt," he said. "Ghost riders in the sky."

"Well done!" The Huntmaster extended his arm for Delaney to take. "Come up and join us."

"I'm a musician. I play the old songs and tell the old stories. I'm not going anywhere near you."

"Wise and wary as well as quick and comely. You are quite the prize indeed." The Huntmaster withdrew as if being rebuked meant less than nothing to him. "Ever and ever more surprising. There's nothing new under the moon, but then there was you. Don't lie. I know you remember me."

The Huntmaster's regard made Delaney nervous, uneasy. His nerves prickled. "How could you be forgotten?"

"You managed that well enough before."

"I was with Robbie. He filled my mind. There wasn't room for anything else." A simple-enough answer. Delaney didn't like the small ripple of displeasure the Huntmaster betrayed. "Wait. I ran him down in a fair chase. He *is* mine. That's how the Hunt works. Isn't it?"

"In its way." The Huntmaster shrugged. "You were one of us, for a night. He was yours for a day. That day has ended, and the night begun again as if what came before had never been. Time turns on itself, and all is new. If you wish to have him again, then you know what you must do." His teeth grew sharper and whiter. "Hunt with us."

Delaney hesitated, and that seemed to amuse the Huntmaster most of all.

"Or if you would rather take your ease by the fire, you may." The Huntmaster stood. He beckoned to Delaney, who found himself standing, drawn to his feet against his will. "Join us. There's meat on the spit and whiskey in the jar that goes round and round about. There're horses that would suit you for riding, and more loyal hounds than that puppy you've adopted. What would you say to a pretty mare with jingling brass bells and a sturdy hunting dog? In exchange, all I ask is that you sing for us. And play. It's a fair bargain."

"Don't," Robbie whispered harshly. He bit Delaney's ear, the sting waking him up better than a splash of cold water. "You know the stories. No going back. Only being eaten up. Munch, crunch, gone."

Like you? Delaney wondered but didn't say out loud.

Either Robbie heard the thought or could guess. "Yes," he said, rolling his head on Delaney's back. His hair, stiff with dried sweat, abraded Delaney's skin even through the shirt that separated them. "We need to go. Run."

"He runs from. You run to. There's the difference between you, and a vast one it is. I see now what's happening here." The Huntmaster dropped lightly and dangled his feet, shod in supple leather boots, over the side. "Robbie, if you must call him that, is as clever a liar as he is fair of face. He's won you over with his sad, sad story, hasn't he? What has he told you?"

"Nothing."

Funny, but as often seemed to be the case with anyone you cared to name, the truth was the one thing the Huntmaster didn't seem to believe. "Nothing at all? He's given you no more than a name that isn't a name and a pretty tune on a stolen fiddle?"

"Believe me or don't. I won't lie, even if that's what you want. Maybe you could trap me here if I tried to trick you. No." Delaney could feel Robbie shaking behind him. He drew strength from that, and from the clutch of Robbie's hands on his sides, and shook his head. "No. I'm taking him and going home."

"Do you think I'm evil?" The Huntmaster kicked his feet idly. Sparks flew where his heels struck the stones. One singed a lock of Delaney's hair, the reek making his eyes water. "If this one's told you anything, he'll have story after story telling you how me and mine come crashing out of the night. How we ride down the weak for our meat. Did he tell you that was how we took him? A thousand years or more ago, that was, and he a boy who thought himself smarter than us. Bah. I am older than time."

"I don't doubt that. But he said nothing."

The Huntmaster scowled. "He said nothing about it having been a better life for him, you mean. I am hard, but I am kind. My hunters and hounds—I call this one

'puppy' for good reason—none of them were meant to live past what mortal men meant for them. They were after him, you know. Called him a witch because he played like an angel. I beat them. Claimed him and kept him, whole and alive."

Delaney had knotted his fists tightly enough for the half-moons of his nails to pierce his palms. "The difference between us is that *I believe you.*" No matter how he didn't want to. Robbie's small growls and his odd ways made sense now. Worse still, now that Delaney knew he could hear the voices concealed inside the barking of the hounds. "It changes nothing."

"Knowledge changes everything. I see, or I begin to think I see." The Huntmaster drummed his fingers on his knee. "Perhaps I was wrong. You surprise me once more. I would see you better, musician. I want to get a look at the man with such defiance at his core." He beckoned to Delaney. "Come out of the pit and talk with me in the light."

"No." Delaney spread his arms wide to brace himself on the sides of the cellar. "You're not getting me away from him."

"Aren't I?" The Huntmaster blew air like a horse and shook his head in the same manner. "You underestimate me. Nothing happens here without my say-so. *Nothing.* Whatever I wish to do to you, I can. And I will." He studied Delaney more narrowly. "I think now I overestimated you. You *don't* know anything about this one but his sweet mouth, his temper, his pretty cock. The puppy muzzled himself? Adorable. It must be love."

I doubt you'd know. Delaney kept his mouth shut on the angry retort. Cutting words could and would be turned back on him, and they might draw real blood.

"Come out and let me look at you in good light," the Huntmaster coaxed. Toying with Delaney still, though it was a deadly serious game he played. "Let me see you. Smell you. Taste you."

Suspicion flared. "You're trying to seduce me."

The Huntmaster didn't deny it. "You've never known a man like me," he said simply. "After you did, you would never want to know another again. You're worthy, musician, and this is not an offer I'm accustomed to making."

"I'm flattered." Delaney shook from head to toe with the effort of defying the Huntmaster. This wasn't him. He played songs and told stories and drove himself crazy trying to finish a composition and stayed awake glowering over faithless lovers. He paid his way with honest hard work and he broke bread with his friends. God, he missed Hugh right about now. And Tam. Even Black-Eyed Susan.

The Huntmaster waited. "Well? Yes or no, musician."

"No. A hundred times, no."

"I think you'll alter your mind."

"Think again. Robbie came to me. I took him in, and I'm a one-man kind of guy. I care for him."

"Ah, but does he care for you?" The Huntmaster pounced on the opening. "Can he love? I can hear you wondering, even if you don't know this is what you're thinking beneath the jumble that clutters a mortal mind." The Huntmaster dismissed that with a casual wave. "As an animal could care and no more."

"He's a man."

"He *was*, hundreds of years long since gone by. Then he was mine, and now it seems you're determined to divide him between us. Do you know the story of Solomon? How he judged the women who fought over a child, and commanded that child cut in half so each could have an equal share?"

Delaney crowded Robbie behind him. If it weren't for the choppy expansion and compression of his ribs and the shaking of anger that made his presence vibrate like bones on a bodhran's tight-stretched skin, he'd have worried about hurting him.

"You are not so different from me," the Huntmaster observed, quiet, so quiet. "You would swallow him up to keep him safe. How is that different from what I did?"

There wasn't an answer for that, and the Huntmaster damn well knew it. The Huntmaster's laughter, mocking and rich as aged whiskey, was one note off-key. Jarring to a musician's ear. Cruel. "I think you need a lesson, boy."

The weight and presence of Robbie behind Delaney disappeared with the rush of a storm gale. The sound of running came and went too quickly.

"What did you do to him?" Delaney had no reason not to shout. "Bring him back!"

"Not by half. I sent him on his rightful way. If you want him, go and get him. Catch him a second time, if you can. But we are not done here, you and I. We will meet again. Soon."

The Huntmaster stood and lazily, proving he could have done this all along if he'd wanted, drew Delaney out of the cellar as easily as blowing a falling feather off its course. The firelight that glinted off polished tack and rolling equine eyes blinded Delaney even as the Huntmaster spun him about and set him reeling. "Entertain us with this chase, and we might be kind as you think of kindness, or merciful as you define mercy."

"I don't believe you." Delaney fell to his knees, but rose again and staggered until he found his feet.

"There is but one way to find out, musician. Lesser hunter who could be more." The Huntmaster chuckled. "A fine game! Seek the hiding and find more than him, if you can. The Hunt begins again."

Chapter Eight

Delaney dodged beneath the lashing hooves of a coal-dark horse that reared when the Huntmaster gave his command. It missed caving his head in by the barest of whispers, the force of the air it stirred up slashing at his cheek. On purpose? Probably. Who knew?

He hadn't spent half his adult life at one kind of fair or festival or another without learning a trick or two, and that was what saved him. He took the fall as he'd once watched an acrobat teach Hugh, and rolled, clumsily but without breaking any bones, and thrust himself to his feet already running.

The forest opened for Delaney and closed behind him, swallowing him whole. Behind, he could hear the shouts of huntsmen not yet seen and the bellowing laughter of the Huntmaster, jeering and better on him in turn. He chanced one look over his shoulder and saw the torchlight grow brighter.

They'd be after him. Soon. Delaney put his head down and picked up speed.

A tree root snaked across Delaney's path too quickly to be avoided and caught his foot, sending him sprawling, the breath knocked out of him. His glasses flew away somewhere he'd never find them again. He twisted to his back and gaped airlessly at the writhing branches overhead, fighting to draw in air.

Faces made of twisting greenery formed to peer down at him, dismantled themselves, reformed again to point and laugh.

The first breath hit Delaney's chest with the force of a battering ram and drew him up sharp as if he were being pulled by a hook through his chest. Lumpy and painful beneath his back, the far end of the root twisted about to look at him with a crocodile's head and displayed sharp teeth.

Delaney scrambled to his feet. He hadn't yet adjusted between nearsighted humanity and the eagle sight of a hunter. Maybe that meant something. He steadied himself with one hand on a tree but jumped away with a curse when it tried to bite him.

He clenched his fists and shook the sweat out of his hair. "I'll show you *run*." Branches slapped uselessly together above his head, and he blazed away in search of Robbie's scent.

That, he couldn't find, even though he put his nose to the ground once to try and catch a trace. Didn't like what that meant. Either Robbie hadn't been serious about escaping him before, or he—the Huntmaster—had stacked the deck against him this time. Likely both.

The hell with that. Delaney caught the lowest branch of a sapling pine and twisted. Greenstick fractures broke away the bark and a hoarse male scream scraped his ears. Delaney almost dropped it. Almost. "Green Man, I don't want to hurt you," he said. "But fair's only fair. Why do you want to hurt me?"

The tree battered him with useless needles that fell away. Nothing else came to its aid.

"It's just you and me," Delaney said. "Either promise to help me, or pay the price. Agreed?" When had things gone so sideways that he not only spoke to a tree but knew it heard him and expected it to answer?

"Pain isn't the way. He'll never help you now. Would rather be lamed and bear the scar." A tangled thicket of Queen Anne's lace and blackberries, ripe with thorns, leaned toward Delaney. It spoke in a low, husky woman's voice. Delaney had a sense that this was something new, separate from the Green Man. Maybe his wife? The thorns scratched his hand, lightly, giving him the strangest sensation of being petted as a rich woman would indulge her cat with a dainty stroke behind the ears.

Whoever this was either had courage or intent. Delaney's skin crawled with wanting to push it off, but he kept still. "What do you propose I do instead?"

"Break him, don't break him, it's all one to me." The Queen Anne's lace dipped and swayed in an invisible breeze. "But you, now, you speak of 'fair' and that means 'trade.' Trade with me, and I'll tell you where he's gone, your prey. And he's gone far, far away; you'll never find him without help."

"I know better than to promise anyone anything here," Delaney said. He thought fast. "But I won't tear you up by the roots if you promise I can pass unharmed through the woods."

"Oh now, oh now, oh now!" The hundred-blossom flowers waved together as if they were applauding. "Clever hunter. A smart man, a pretty man, one like you, he's earned what he asks for."

"You'll show me where to go?"

"Better. We'll take you."

"That's a likely story." Delaney eyed the tangle of flowers and thorns. "You're part of the Green Man, aren't you? One of the Huntmaster's toys."

"We all are."

"I figured as much. The aspect I spoke with before wasn't on my side. What do you want?"

"Nothing but entertainment, and you are fine, good fun. It'd be less fun for the game to end so early. Come, now. I'll give you what you want for free. Why hold back?"

"I'm just waiting for the catch," Delaney said.

"Suspicious too. You're a match for the puppy. Robbie. A good name. Not his, but no one remembers that, not even us. But time flies past, and you stand still while Robbie runs out of your reach. Answer yes or no: do you want my help?"

He had no other choice, not in a forest that would bind and consume him. Even the ground felt unfriendly, shifting beneath his feet. "Yes."

The tangle of weeds let go. Parted to reveal a path between and beneath them, one bare of bracken and roots and old leaves. Too smooth and clear and good to be true. Delaney hesitated.

Briars lashed his back. "Go! Do you not hear the horse and the hound?"

Was this a trap? "I can't hear anything but you. I thought I'd lost them."

"Do you think they can't find anything they want? They're toying with the game. Cat and mouse, don't you see? Or do you think I lie?"

Delaney looked behind himself. "No. I believe you. How long do I have?"

"Not long enough if you tarry. They can't ride fast through the forest, but once they know we've granted you passage, they'll be here, oh, they'll be here. Forward. The one you seek hides behind the standing stones."

"Standing stones." Not that Delaney disbelieved her, God no, but it begged the question: where *was* he? Couldn't still be on the festival grounds. How had he gotten so far?

"You run faster and farther than you think in here," the Queen Anne's lace murmured. The slim vines rose and bent, inexorably like a woman sniffing the air. "So does he. You smell divine, both of you, better than flowers." Slim green fronds twined sinuously up Delaney's legs and tickled his crotch. He wasn't hard, not yet, but the urge was suddenly there. The need.

The faint tickling only reminded Delaney of Robbie's rougher touch. He staggered with the arousal the memory brought, and ground the butt of his hand against his cock to make it behave.

The Queen Anne's lace purred. "Delicious, the way you smell of lust and passion and blood." She pushed him more firmly with her briars. "I'll knot together so firmly that anyone who might come behind can't get through me without cutting. Take him down, if you can. Take him home, if you like. Mark him well and bind him up tight."

Delaney halted. "Then I *could* keep him?"

"I won't say yes and I won't say no. You have to *catch* him first." The briars lashed his back. "He heard us. Knows you're coming. Fast, fast, fast!"

"He's running from me?" Delaney hadn't thought—he'd known Robbie was running, but Robbie was *his*. Why run from the man who wanted to save you? Unless...he didn't...

That'd be something to ask Robbie. Delaney put his head down, an arm over his face to shield his eyes, and *ran* till his lungs cried out for fear of bursting. And then he ran farther still.

* * * * *

Just before Delaney thought his legs would give out, that his heart would fail him and he'd fall like the rabbit he'd frightened, he broke through a copse of a quietly chuckling pines and saw him. Robbie. Naked at the edge of a clearing small enough to cross in five strides. Hiding behind the hair fallen forward to cover his face, but seeing Delaney. Frozen in place with his hands up and held out to warn Delaney off.

"Go home," Robbie rasped. "No arguing."

Delaney's lips were dry to the point of cracking, and his mouth was too cotton parched to moisten them. "I won't leave without you, and we're not having this fight again."

"You didn't hear a word he said. He takes me, you take me. I'm anyone's but my own." Robbie pulled his hair, tearing some of it loose to fall in thin gold threads at his feet, and growled. "Don't get it, still."

"No." Delaney readied himself to run after Robbie. Again. All night, if that was what it took, and into the next day. He wouldn't be *able* to stop, not with the thrall of the Hunt pushing him on, but he could do this. "Make me understand."

Robbie's head jerked, hair falling over his shoulder and down his back, covering the brass rings that pierced his skin. Disbelief? Scorn? Maybe both. "I'm trying to *help* you," he said, rough as bark. "What's there to understand?"

"Everything, I think." Delaney crept forward a careful step, more quietly, he knew, than a human should be able to.

"Guess you don't know yourself either. Already, you're changed. One of them soon." Robbie shook his head, faster and harder as he went, frantic, but still he wouldn't look at Delaney. "No life for a man like you. You'd be missed."

"That doesn't mean I could ever stop hunting for you if I lost you now. This wasn't my choice. They put this on me. But I'm the one who won't turn away."

"Are you?" Robbie dropped to his knees. He rounded his shoulders to protect himself and lowered his head. He didn't fool Delaney, who knew Robbie could be up and flying in moments. "He wants you. The Huntmaster. Wants to keep you. His pet, his plaything. Like me. He can't sing, you know. Never could. Can only shout. A

world's worth of hunting horns at his command, but all he cares about is how he can't sing a note or play one either." Robbie's laughter was crazed. "This is all about you. Don't you see? I'm bait for him to catch *you*."

"I don't believe that."

"More fool you, then."

"Maybe so." Delaney took three steps forward, one silent glide at a time, not paying attention to how it wasn't possible. *Not*. "I don't care."

Finally, finally Robbie lifted his chin and glared at Delaney through the curtain of his hair, murder in his eye. "Care about this: I was sent to you. For the music. Didn't come on my own. Wouldn't have. Gave you what he told me to. Now we're done."

"I don't believe that, either." Delaney had almost reached Robbie. "Not all of it. Maybe he sent you at first, but then you came back on your own. Don't try to protect me."

Robbie covered his head with his arms and groaned.

"I'll find a way," Delaney said. "I promise you I will."

"Stupid, stubborn idiot." Robbie glared sideways at him. "I could *bite* you."

"Only if I can return the favor."

Robbie snapped his mouth shut and sulked.

Delaney moved closer and closer still, one limb at a time, never stopping. He wondered if he looked like a dragon nosing after treasure. He felt like one. So close. Almost there. "They don't know what you're worth, but I do, and I'll cherish it as long as you stay with me." He could touch Robbie's hair by now and did, winding the gold around his fingers. So soft and so rough at the same time, like petting a bobcat's ruff. "A thousand years old, he told me. He might not know what kind of man that made you, but I do. A strong one. You endured."

"I went crazy."

"I beg to differ." Delaney took a chance on kissing the corner of Robbie's eye.

Robbie bit his lip to keep his mouth shut, said nothing, and hunkered down, curling tighter into himself.

Delaney made a choice. "I'll let you go, if that's what you want. I will. If you'd rather I stay, I'm staying too."

Robbie made a small, choked noise.

Delaney let go of Robbie's hair and caught him by the chin, raising Robbie's face to his. Allowed himself one slow, sweet taste of Robbie's lips and stopped long before he'd begun to have enough. "Or you could leave. With me. You could work in the venue and fiddle with us. Shh, shh. Don't say 'can't' or 'they'll catch us.' It doesn't matter."

Robbie's lips were darkened from the kiss, shining and full. "It matters plenty if they kill you."

"I'll take my chances." Delaney didn't let go. Yet though he held on, he couldn't stop his hands from moving one at a time. Skimming over smooth, pale skin that heated beneath his touch. Robbie moaned so quietly, straining first to draw nearer and with ever-decreasing effort to push Delaney away.

"Beautiful," Delaney said, over and over again, until the word had no meaning but the meaning itself still rang in his ears. He touched Robbie everywhere, watching the paleness go faint pink with life and energy. From the hollow at the base of his throat to the dent of his navel, and from the soles of his feet to the slenderness of his fingers. Delaney sucked those in one at a time and lashed them with his tongue. Robbie mewled and cried out, but didn't fight. His cock hardened and lengthened, full between his legs.

That, Delaney didn't touch. Not yet. Not when Robbie cursed him in what might have been English a thousand years ago, or might have been what a hound sounded like trying to talk. Not even when Robbie fought to catch Delaney by the wrists and move him.

He waited, counting the stars, until Robbie broke.

"Mercy. Take mercy, damn you."

"I am. I always will be. But this?" Delaney swept a gesture at the forest and the stars. "It's not my world. I can't live in both. I want you in mine. Come with me. I'll protect you, I swear. If I have to, with my life. I swear to you."

Robbie understood what he was doing when he said the words a second time. He scuttled away, still crouching. "No! *Don't* make this harder than it has to be, please."

"Hard isn't always bad, is it?" Delaney closed the space between them with an easy glide and touched Robbie's cock. A slide of clear liquid glossed the head when he stroked it with his thumb. He stuck his thumb in his mouth and licked it clean, tasting bitter-salt earth and cold. He moistened his fingers again and traced Robbie's lips, feeding him his own flavor. "I won't force you. But I don't have to." He knew his prey's heart. "Take the chance with me. Please."

Slowly, then hungrily, Robbie drew Delaney's finger into his mouth and sucked. His cheeks hollowed as he cradled Delaney with his tongue, then let Delaney feel the sharpness of his teeth.

Delaney drew free and drew a line down Robbie's nose, a dot on his chin. He couldn't refuse his body much longer, but he'd be damned if he'd take Robbie without hearing the word. "Yes?" he asked.

There was an eternity in the waiting, but the rush of Robbie's cool breath over his wet finger was worth lingering for. "Yes," he hissed. "But there's things. You don't know. Can't tell you everything."

"Are they things that'll hurt me? Or you?"

"What do *you* think?" Robbie reached for Delaney despite the bitterness, hands opening to him.

"I think I'll take my chance. It's too late to do anything else." Delaney took Robbie by the wrist. Robbie flinched, but then turned in Delaney's hold so that he could take Delaney's hands rather than try to break free. "I think I couldn't do anything else. I choose this." He leaned to press his forehead to Robbie's. His wild, strange prey, dangerous as death, beautiful as life. Who had music in his heart.

They could be so much more than this.

"I choose," Robbie said. He tumbled backward to lie with his legs spread apart and his arms open. "I am yours."

Delaney fell on him with a groan that echoed against the bowl of the sky. "Mine."

Robbie yielded for Delaney in his own way. Made him fight for every inch of ground and flesh he gained. Raked furrows down Delaney's back and bit his collarbone, breaking the skin. Spread his legs to draw Delaney in and savaged his mouth, wet and sloppy and eager. Helped him claw away his clothing until there was nothing between them, warm flesh pressed to warm flesh.

The only thing Robbie wouldn't allow was Delaney toying with the brass rings on his back. He flinched so hard and seemed so frightened, as spooked as the hunting horses, when Delaney tried that though he was crazy to touch the pierced skin and to unlace the bindings, Delaney couldn't be cruel enough to force him. "Calm down," he gentled Robbie down. "I'll leave them be."

"No, you won't." Robbie caught Delaney's lip between his teeth and sucked it into his mouth. "Wish I could say —"

"Not now." Delaney took control of the kiss and bent Robbie's head back to plunder deeper.

"Yours?" Robbie asked when they had to breathe.

Delaney gulped down air enough to say, "Mine" once, then again, and once he'd started he couldn't stop. The repetitions slurred together like a breeze through leaves, rustling in an almost-rhythm that broke when he pushed inside Robbie. Not a gentle claiming, nor a patient one, eased by nothing but spit and stubborn willpower, the cries they loosed torn half and half between passion and pain, but the craving didn't ease. The deeper Delaney thrust, the higher Robbie rose to meet him, and the hungrier his kisses grew.

Yet it wasn't enough. Delaney needed more. He gathered Robbie in his arms, harder and easier than it would have seemed. Pulled out only long enough to drop into a kneel, and to bring Robbie onto his lap, and to drive deep once more. Different this way, deeper. He thought if he put his hand on Robbie's stomach, he could imagine the feel of penetration from the outside as Robbie rocked forward to take him as far as he could go.

Delaney found the words to whisper hot and damp in Robbie's ear. "Touch yourself for me. Get yourself off while I fuck you."

"Pretty talker," Robbie said. He canted forward to ride Delaney harder, forced Delaney to grasp his hips so Robbie wouldn't knock them both down again. His eyes rolled back in his head, and his lips parted on a strangled groan.

Though it half killed him, Delaney stopped. He held his breath and stilled his limbs. Waited for Robbie to whine and jostle him for more.

"I want to see you," Delaney said. "I do. I won't say it a third time, because it's your choice, but I'm asking once. Let me see you come like this." He stroked Robbie's stomach—he couldn't resist that any longer—and wondered if it was just his imagination or if he *did* feel his own hardness through Robbie's skin and muscle. He flexed once and almost, almost came when he felt it both outside and in.

If he didn't let go now, he never would, but oh, he'd try that again soon. With a dildo, perhaps, so he could see the greedy pink clutch of Robbie's hole around the bulk of the toy and press his mouth to where it moved beneath his stomach. He could do anything he wanted now that he had time.

And he would be gentle. He'd be good for Robbie. To Robbie. He'd vow that to any god in the heavens who cared to listen.

"Delaney," Robbie begged. "Please."

"Like this." Delaney guided Robbie and molded Robbie's fingers around his angry-dark cock. Moved up, then down, then held. He held Robbie upright with his arms around Robbie's back and watched him.

Robbie swore eloquently in that odd language and moved. Delaney had to catch him, fast, before he fell, and held the entire weight of him. Had he been forbidden to do this? Maybe, from the way he went at it, as if he'd almost forgotten how and couldn't go fast enough to catch up with the flood of memories returning. His toes curled deep into the dirt, and drops of salt streaked down his cheeks, and his hand was a blur.

Delaney talked to him all the while, quiet nonsense, encouraging his lover and keeping himself still with an effort of will that made his joints creak from the pressure he put on them. "Good, so good. Like that, Robbie. Just like that." He nosed at the curve of Robbie's neck and under his jaw when he threw his head back, tasting him. "Let me see you come, now. I want to hear you let go."

Robbie squeezed his cock. Delaney knew what this was, wanting that final rush to last forever. He might make that happen, sometime, when they had a bed and a fire and four walls around them. Not now.

He took pity on Robbie, and on himself, and closed his hand around Robbie's to finish it. Robbie keened high and thin, then growled deep and low. Stilled, face locked in a rictus of beautiful ugliness, and came in great, shuddering spurts that striped Delaney's chest and dripped thick between them. Delaney chased him in this, as he had before. Yielding. Caught by the prey, as he wanted, as he needed, and reached it before he knew to look for it, drowning before he knew he was underwater.

The smell of blackberries rolled cloyingly over Delaney. He thought he heard a faint female cry of dismay, and then...nothing. Neither horse nor hound nor crackling of fire.

"Well played, hunter. Musician. Bold as brass, you are, and I find myself impressed," a rich male voice whispered to Delaney. *"A fine game, this."*

Delaney pulled Robbie to him and held him there; Robbie, loose-limbed and deaf with orgasm, didn't hear the Huntmaster. The creature wasn't to be seen. He spoke into Delaney's mind. Knowing he could do that chased away his own lazy, loose-limbed pleasure and drew him up as tense as a bodhran's stretched-skin frame. "Stay away from him. From me."

"As you say, as you think you mean, but I know better." Invisible fingers ruffled Delaney's hair and ghosted over the back of his neck. *"Until tomorrow. When the sun goes down, you'll come to us."*

"I won't," Delaney said. He sheltered Robbie with his arms. Wanted to draw him so close that Robbie would melt inside him.

The Huntmaster laughed at him and was silent. Deafening silence that colored the rose-red sunrise cold.

Chapter Nine

“Where are we?” Robbie whispered. He latched onto Delaney.

Delaney blinked, blinded from suddenly staring at the sanguine rising sun. Spots flashed in his eyes, but he didn’t need to see to know that Robbie had curled up tight behind him, nose pressed to his shoulder. As small as Robbie could make himself, there’d be nothing visible but hair and a pair of wide eyes. Delaney would look like he’d grown a second head.

He fumbled behind himself, trying to find some part of Robbie to touch to soothe him. “You’d know better than I do where the Hunt goes.” Surprising that he hadn’t thought to question that before. There wasn’t room for much else when the Hunt had you, and certainly no brain cells available to fire at a quantum quandary.

Even thinking like that reminded Delaney of how long it’d been since he’d eaten a full meal and slept properly. Forever, yet no time at all. He rubbed his forehead and blinked ferociously to clear his vision.

When the sun blindness cleared, he could see why Robbie had asked, and why he shook with small tremors even as he clung on tight as a limpet. Close-clipped grass of a verdant green, tents and pavilions rising in the distance, and not too far away, early risers stumbling about in an approximation of Elizabethan period clothing. Sort of. One man had mixed a Van Halen T-shirt with a jester’s cap and a pair of parti-color jeans. Delaney winced. Was that Frank?

Then again, considering he and Robbie were both naked where they weren’t smeared with mud and cum, they would come in a not-so-distant second in the “ow, my eyes” games. Was there a way to sneak back to the cabin? Ye gods, Delaney hoped so. They were on the far side, but if they kept to the tree line—or maybe that wouldn’t be such a good idea.

Before he'd even had time to consider them, his options were taken from him by a dumbfounded whistle. "Fuck me, man." Frank dropped his jaw as well as his Styrofoam cup of anachronistic coffee and gaped at them. "What kind of party did I miss last night?"

"Wait, what?" As far as Delaney could remember, last night had still been the Scottish festival – wait, that was supposed to go on for a couple more days, and then the lull during the week...

"You okay, dude?" Frank mixed dubiousness with ogling and then trying *not* to ogle. So damn ordinary that Delaney wasn't sure whether he wanted to laugh or gnash his teeth.

In the end, protecting Robbie was all that mattered. Delaney shifted fully in front of his wild lover. It meant his giving up any attempt at modesty, but they were past that, weren't they?

"I think we're fine. No. Hold on. What day is it?"

Frank chuckled. "Road ran you hard, didn't it? Hugh told me you'd be gone a while on that out-of-town gig, but damn."

"We weren't –" Delaney stopped. If the Society for Creative Anachronism event this looked like was in full swing, then that meant... "It's not Saturday morning, is it?"

"Yep," Frank agreed, cheerful. "Bring me back any souvenirs from that club?"

"A club. Is that where Hugh told you we went?"

Frank pursed his lips. "You tellin' me it wasn't?"

"No," Delaney amended hastily. He and Robbie had been gone for a week, then, and Hugh had lied for them. *A riddle wrapped in a mystery wrapped in an enigma, and I don't like it.*

"Anyway, you, uh..." Frank coughed. "You're really naked, guys. Want me to go see if Hugh can bring you something to wear?"

Behind Delaney, Robbie had finally had enough, and annoyance overcame the prey's urge to hide and run. He snapped his teeth at Frank, along with a growl that sounded far less puppyish than full-grown wolf.

"Okay, okay, all yours." Frank backed off. "Look, you want me to go get some clothes arranged for you or what?"

"Rather be naked than look like a fool," Robbie grumbled, his cheek pressed to Delaney's back. His hair tickled Delaney's cheek and itched his neck as Robbie sat up straighter behind him. "Showmen draw crowds."

Unfortunately true. Frank wasn't the only one who'd noticed them. Hard to miss two naked men addressed by a "dude" who jangled every time he moved. Among them, unnoticed as yet by Frank, was a stocky man in jeans and light flannel shirt with a tiny wisp of a woman tucked beneath his arm.

"Hugh," Delaney said, raising his hand. "Black-Eyed Susan?"

They were silent. Not good. Delaney knew this mood of Hugh's, dark like a thundercloud with the threat of a storm behind it. Hugh's bark was far worse than his bite, but when he was roused to wrath he was like a bulldog; he bit down to the bone and never let go. No telling about Black-Eyed Susan. He didn't know her well enough. Given the way she clung to Hugh, as curled up as a leaf and as small and fragile as Robbie, Delaney didn't think her reaction boded well.

Tam's vulpine shape stood solidly outlined just behind them and off to one side. She studied them as remotely as the Queen Anne's lace had, without a face while the sun was behind her. When she spoke, the raw rasp of her voice put Delaney in mind of hounds when they'd bayed themselves hoarse.

"There you are," she said as if he'd been gone for an hour and not a week. "Hungry?"

Enough was too much and pushed Delaney past his limits to laughter that fast bordered on lunatic. He couldn't stop, falling on his side with his chest heaving, unable to draw enough air. Everything caught up to him at once—the Hunt, the Huntmaster's threats, the music, hunger that twisted his stomach into knots, and weariness that throbbed in every bone.

"He needs to rest," Robbie said. He threw his arm over Delaney's chest and held him still. "Questions later. Help now."

Delaney thought maybe—maybe—Hugh wouldn't relent. Black-Eyed Susan wasn't moving. Tam might help of her own accord, but she was too small to help lift and carry.

Hugh growled under his breath. "Only if you tell me *what the hell* as soon as you can. No more putting me off, Delaney, or so help me God—"

"I promise." Delaney put his hand to his aching chest. "On my honor."

"Right. Where have I heard that before?" Hugh hunkered down and took Delaney by the arm. With Robbie on the other side, they got him to his feet.

"Here." Tam took off an overshirt that protected her arms from the sun and threw it at them. "Kilt," she explained. "Better than nothing."

Robbie blinked at the shirt, surprised. After a moment he inclined his head in grudging thanks. "I owe a debt to you for his sake." He knotted the sleeves around Delaney's waist. Tam nodded in silent accord.

Not so, Hugh. "You're okay with being naked?" Hugh scoffed.

Robbie glared at Hugh. Ah. Fear replaced by territorialism. "Anyone who wants to can look as much as they like. I'm used to it." He spoke more clearly now. Practice, or memories returning, or did it come with his agreement to stay with Delaney if he could? Hard to say. "Tell me where to take him."

* * * * *

Delaney strained to look at everything as he passed by. The air seemed thinner and the smells weaker, confusing him. He could barely see even with the sun out of his eyes. Not that he needed to see more than shapes to know that whether they helped him, , neither Hugh nor Black-Eyed Susan wanted any part of this. Black-Eyed Susan clung to Hugh's far side, as far away from Delaney and Robbie as she could be, her lips pinched shut bloodlessly tight. Hugh rubbed her back and shot dark glares at Delaney and Robbie for upsetting his lady.

Hurtful, and confusing, unless Black-Eyed Susan had taken his disappearance deeper to heart than Hugh had. Could be. Anything was possible, after all, wasn't it? In any case Delaney still couldn't blame them.

"Is she all right?" he asked, gesturing at Black-Eyed Susan.

"Not really, no," Hugh replied. He cuddled Black-Eyed Susan closer, fully under his arm now. "While you were gone, we nearly lost our jobs. If Frank wasn't such a stand-up guy, we'd have been out on our asses. We missed out on three chances to perform. She wore herself to a thread trying to help find you, and so did I. We thought you were dead, but it looks more like you've been partying naked for a few days. So if you'll forgive us, we're not in the mood to play nice."

Robbie growled in his throat.

"Shut up," Hugh snapped. "Black-Eyed Susan, come on."

"Mmm." Tam turned to walk backward in front of them. "Lose your glasses somewhere?"

"Oh." Delaney touched the bridge of his nose, vaguely surprised. "I must have."

Hugh snorted. Nothing in the wide world could keep him quiet for long. "Probably not all he lost after vanishing for a week. You idiot. If you ever do that again, I'll wring your neck."

"And I'll deserve it. I—" Delaney stumbled. Robbie caught him, but only by virtue of ducking in front to prop him up.

Hugh blushed nearly scarlet and stripped off his shirt for Robbie to tie around his waist. "Don't want to see that flapping in the breeze," he explained gruffly. "Go on. Sooner we get him—both of you—inside, the sooner..." He gave up, shaking his head. "Put the damn thing on already."

Robbie eyed the garment as if it were about to transform into a handful of snakes, but after Delaney murmured encouragement he obeyed. Delaney hadn't realized how much larger Hugh was, but the shirt wrapped fully around Robbie's slim hips to cover him completely, with the arms tied double.

He stopped to stare. Had Robbie always been this small?

"Don't see too many of those." Tam prodded at Robbie's back. "Corset piercings. Nice. Hard to maintain. Hurt much to get them?"

Robbie eyed her long and thoughtfully, with Delaney as unable to tell what he was thinking as he was unable to interpret what went on in Tam's head.

The tension broke when Robbie sighed and bent his head. "It was a long time ago." He carefully shook his hair down his back to hide the corset piercings with their brass rings and regained his place as far behind Delaney as he could while still clinging like a monkey. Delaney got the feeling it was less to hide and more to watch his back. With so many insistent helpers, he could hardly let them down, could he? Though his knees were as weak as rubber left out in the sun, he took one step and then another.

"I'll find his spare pair of glasses," he *thought* he heard Tam say as she wandered off.

"Good," Robbie said, gently pushing Delaney. "Easy. I'll protect you."

And here was Robbie protecting him. "Wrong way around," Delaney mumbled. "I thought we'd been through this."

Robbie tweaked his ear.

Nothing else was clear until Delaney found himself in the cabin's tiny, poky bathroom with Robbie lingering determinedly in one corner while Hugh turned on the water. Hugh wiped his hands and turned away without saying anything. When Delaney tried to thank him and produced only a hoarse grunt, Hugh threw up his hand to stop that before it started.

"Don't," he said. "Just don't. Black-Eyed Susan's freaked to all fuck. I have to take care of her." He hesitated. "There'll be breakfast when you're done."

"Nothing heavy," Robbie insisted.

That made Hugh look around, darkly scowling. "I think I know what I'm doing."

"Do you?" Robbie retorted. "Then why does Black-Eyed Susan fear things she won't speak about?" He jabbed Delaney in the ribs.

Though Delaney tried, he couldn't make sense of that and gave up after a head-aching moment. None too soon, either. Hugh bristled like a hedgehog at Robbie's words. "You leave her out of this. Understand? You even come near her and I'll —"

"Do worse than this?" Robbie flipped his hair over his shoulder and pivoted from the waist to show Hugh his piercings. Delaney stumbled back without meaning to. He had to fight and claw to get Robbie to let him look at those, and Hugh got a free show?

Hugh drew in a sharp, short breath. He seemed ready to say something. Almost.

"I don't know what you're talking about, but screw you," he snapped at last. "Stay away from her."

The door slammed behind him, its echoes loud enough that Delaney knew he was the only one to hear Robbie whisper, "Gladly."

Bone-rattlingly sore or not, Delaney couldn't let that one go. "What's up with that?"

"Can't say," Robbie replied curtly. He made quick work of the makeshift kilt and pushed Delaney toward the water pattering down in the shower stall. Cool, not cold, a balm on his skin rather than a teeth-chattering curse. Delaney rested his head on the cracked tiles and moaned. Felt good, so good.

Robbie said something under his breath, maybe in his otherworldly language. He shivered and went to his knees.

"What are you...?" Delaney asked, confused, even as he automatically moved to give Robbie room between them.

"Shut up," Robbie said. He licked the head of Delaney's cock. "Need this."

"I do, or you do?"

Robbie bit the inside of Delaney's thigh. "Both," he answered, brusque, his forehead lined with concentration. "Going slow. Go with me. Grounding."

"Ahh." The sigh was half giving up the effort to understand, and half shocked with lust when Robbie's lips sealed tight around his cock and slid down. He wasn't hard, but not for long. The shower rained heavy around them and stifled his moans, Robbie's skillful lips and tongue driving him fast beyond the point of any return and beyond. The wild man swallowed what he'd nursed from Delaney and stood, head to Delaney's heart.

"Better?" he asked.

Delaney started to say "no", then realized that would be false. "I think so," he said, shaking water out of his eyes. "Starting to." He'd adjusted to the sights and sounds, the smells and the tastes now, feeling less like living in this world was the equivalent of drinking a cup of weak tea. So strange. All he'd been able to think about was drawing Robbie back here with him to be safe.

Now, barring memories of the Huntmaster, he almost wondered why...

"Hey!" Robbie took Delaney by the chin and kissed him, sharp with biting teeth and slick with tongue. He sucked on Delaney's lip and shared the flavor of his own cum with him. His lips were swollen red from kissing when he let go. As soaked as he was, he should have looked like a drowned rat, but oh, he didn't.

"Better?" Robbie asked again.

Delaney didn't mean to lie. It just happened, or so he chose to think. "I'm good now." *Thank you* didn't seem appropriate. Lucky for him, lovers had other means than words to get their points across. "Do you need...?" Delaney fumbled below Robbie's waist and sighed, satisfied, when he found Robbie's eagerly rigid cock bobbing high and full. "Let me?"

Robbie eyed him, dubious, but Delaney didn't give him much of a chance to say no. He took Robbie's sturdy cock firmly in hand and, as a kind hunter would, took mercy on his prey.

Outside, the rich, layered smells of coffee and tea, bacon and eggs, toast and cheese, all warred for dominance in Delaney's nose. His stomach roared its intent to find the food as fast as possible and consume it down to the last crumb.

Yet he knew where the rest of him wanted to be. He gathered Robbie, sleepy-eyed and loose-limbed, into his arms and pillowed Robbie's head on his chest. He stroked

down Robbie's sides, careful to avoid his piercings, and hummed the song that had brought them together in this world, a hundred years ago, or so it felt like.

Chapter Ten

"There you are. I almost thought you'd fallen in." Seemed Black-Eyed Susan had changed her tune. She still moved too quickly and smiled too brightly, almost dropping a chipped plate of pancakes when she turned without looking and bumped into Hugh.

Delaney kept a careful eye on her and on Robbie, which left him nothing to make sure he was sitting down on the bench and not thin air, but he trusted Robbie not to let him fall.

"I told you, you don't have to be here if you don't want to," Hugh said to Black-Eyed Susan and Black-Eyed Susan alone.

"I thought she had a band of her own," Delaney said. *Damn*. He hadn't meant to say that, nor for it to come out as a challenge.

"Not anymore. She's with us now." Hugh thrust out his chin, daring Delaney to go on and give him an excuse to argue.

Delaney didn't.

"I'm okay." Black-Eyed Susan squeezed Hugh's hands, hers so small they could rest fully atop his. Such a tiny woman, so slight that it seemed a stiff breeze would blow her away. Not unlike Robbie, Delaney thought. He could see why Hugh had grown so attached so quickly. There was something about Susan that begged, sweetly, for protection.

Not unlike Robbie, either, was the sense Delaney got that those sweet smiles of hers hid sharp teeth. In an odd way, it gave Delaney hope. Human or man of the Wild Hunt, there wasn't such a gap between them, and if a woman as fey as Black-Eyed Susan could make her way in the world, then so could Robbie.

Even if Robbie hunkered down beside him on the bench and radiated enough displeasure at Black-Eyed Susan's presence that it was almost tangible.

That made two of them. Delaney could almost hear Hugh's blood pressure climbing whenever Robbie reminded Hugh *he* was there.

"You're sure you're all right?" Hugh thumbed Black-Eyed Susan's lip and kissed her, a light press that spoke of familiarity and affection, not Hugh's usual morning-after salaciousness.

"It was only a week that I was gone, wasn't it?" Delaney blurted.

That earned him a scowl from Hugh. "You have to ask?"

"Stop it, silly." Black-Eyed Susan stood on tiptoes to kiss Hugh properly and tucked a strand of hair behind his ear. The straps of her pretty, flowered yellow sundress slipped off her shoulders. Delaney looked away, suddenly feeling like a voyeur, only to feel Robbie's hand pressed to the small of his back.

Divided, yet we stand.

"Robbie's not going to hurt me," Black-Eyed Susan promised Hugh. She patted his cheek. "It'll all be okay."

Beside them, silent and almost unnoticed, Tam slurped up a mouthful of granola cereal and crunched. A small noise, but it broke them all apart.

"Jesus, Tam. Do you want a feed bag instead of a bowl?" Hugh flicked a hand towel at her.

She put out her tongue.

"And now she's five." Hugh kissed the top of Black-Eyed Susan's head. "Delaney, do you...? Hell. There's syrup. If you want."

"I want," Delaney said, grateful. He needed the sugar. "Please, and thank you."

"He's polite, I'll give him that. Sweet and pretty." Black-Eyed Susan came close enough for Delaney to breathe in the fragrance she wore, something light yet dizzyingly sweet, vanilla and baby powder and brown sugar and roses all rolled into one. Underneath that, a sharp-sour sort of nervousness.

Robbie sneezed.

"Oh. Sorry." Black-Eyed Susan withdrew. She rubbed her hands together and sat. No, perched. Like a wren ready to fly away. "Hugh?"

Tam reached past Robbie to fork up two pancakes and snaffle the syrup away from Delaney. "What?" she asked, mouth full. "I'm hungry."

"And you're the only one here who had a full night's sleep. You're like a dog, Tam; must have been chasing rabbits in your dreams," Hugh joked halfheartedly. He missed Robbie's flinch, or at least Delaney thought he did, and sobered, poking at the remains on his own plate. "Eat up before it gets cold."

Robbie frowned at the pancakes, tore off the edge of one to sniff, and deigned to lay the rest on Delaney's plate. When he tried to taste test the syrup as well, Delaney didn't think any trick Tam pulled out of her bag would be enough to distract them, though he blessed her for trying in her strange way.

Sure enough, Hugh ignored her. He drummed the tabletop in a simple bodhran-styled rhythm, using a fork instead of his carved cipín. The noise caught and held Delaney and drew him away from his food to meet Hugh's eyes. No looking away. Nothing enchanted about the way he held Delaney in thrall, only anger and friendship and betrayal and hurt that went down to the core that couldn't be quashed no matter how he might try. "How could you do this to us?"

Black-Eyed Susan moved to touch Hugh even as Robbie mirrored her, his hand over Delaney's heart.

Delaney drew strength from Robbie, though the wrongness of the prey protecting the hunter chafed at him—and wasn't it strange, how he couldn't shed that even here and now in a world where there were pancakes and coffee and bosses who wore jester caps?

He laid down his fork and swallowed the one bite of pancake he'd managed, the bread traveling in a painful lump down to his empty belly. "It wasn't on purpose. If I'd known I'd be gone so long, I'd have made sure you knew not to worry."

Hugh scoffed. His drumming picked up speed, an almost hypnotic rhythm that kept Delaney's mind one bubble off plumb. "So tell me where you were. Wherever it was, they don't have phones? E-mail? Morse code?"

"Hugh, calm down." Black-Eyed Susan patted his hand. Might as well have asked a butterfly to shift a tree.

Delaney caught Hugh's hand to silence his drumming. "I apologize. For everything. Especially for what I can't explain or excuse. I had to take care of him." He let Robbie press flush against his side. "He needed me. Same as Black-Eyed Susan needs you."

That took Hugh off guard. "Wait. You love him?"

Delaney raised his eyebrows at the instant association. "You love *her*?"

"Any reason I shouldn't?" Hugh bristled.

"None at all." Delaney spread his arms in surrender. He settled with a sigh. "Love looks good on you."

"Wish I could say the same for you."

"And what's that supposed to mean?"

Hugh pointed at Delaney with his fork. "It means if you didn't get an eyeful of yourself in the mirror before or after you showered, you should have. You look like you have a broken nose or fuck, I don't know, tuberculosis. Two black eyes, you've lost at least five pounds you didn't have to spare, and you're marked up worse than ever. Like you had a fight with a tree and lost."

Delaney bit the insides of his lips. If Hugh only knew how right he was.

"Gone for a week and then you come back stinking of old sex and blood and God knows what, with this? Him? Naked, and no explanation besides 'I had to'? Fuck you,

Delaney." Hugh knocked the bench back when he stood. "I'm trying, but if you don't meet me halfway, then I swear we're done."

"Hugh—"

He shook off Black-Eyed Susan's attempt to catch him. "I'm late for work. Overtime cleaning up the main stage."

"But you didn't eat—"

"I'm not hungry. Let him have it."

Black-Eyed Susan rose to follow him, wavering like a bumblebee in flight. She shot first Delaney, then, oddly enough, Robbie, a pleading look. "He'll be okay. He was just scared. Really scared. If he lost you, he'd... I don't know."

"Feel like you would if you lost Hugh?" Robbie said. He dug his nails into Delaney's side. Hanging on for all he was worth.

Black-Eyed Susan licked her lips. She shook her head, hung in an agony of indecision, then fled after Hugh.

"Is it possible you don't like her?" Delaney asked, mostly to himself.

Robbie glared dourly and pinched Delaney's side. *Ask a stupid question, eh?*

Tam shrugged and moved the serving platter in front of her.

"Seriously?" Delaney had to turn back to ask. "The world's gone tits up and you're eating seven pancakes at one meal? What happened to the woman who'd go all day on one bite of bagel and not give a damn?"

"Built up my own appetite," she said. "Give us all some time." She winked at him and tapped her nose, almost vivacious for Tam, surprising Delaney into silence while she added, "It'll all turn out right in the end."

* * * * *

"You know, they say time heals all wounds."

Robbie curled his lip.

"I never really bought that one either." Delaney stopped beneath the spreading branches of what he thought might be a dogwood long since grown out of meek submission and into a knobbly, bulky-limbed beast. Roots sprawling from the ground, rising and dipping, formed cradles of a sort the right size for a man to sit in and laze against the trunk. "How's this? Will it do to relax in?" God knew he needed to work out some of the tension that made his shoulders ache.

Robbie tested the springiness of the turf and sighed. He sat in the cradle of Delaney's legs and rested his head on Delaney's chest. "Yes. Thank you." He dragged the back of his hand across his lips. Delaney recalled that those sweet lips had started to seem dry. He'd need to wheedle some balm from Tam or even Black-Eyed Susan later.

Not that Robbie would go near anything that belonged to Black-Eyed Susan. One week's residence in their absence, and she'd left her stamp on the groundskeeper's

cabin. A fringed summer shawl draped over the back of the couch, a dropped hair barrette, a dainty pink disposable razor by the sink. Surrounded by marks of her passing, Robbie had drawn tighter in on himself with every moment spent inside.

Delaney was curious about the antipathy, oh yes, but all things in their time, and he had quite enough to deal with now.

"Been a long time since I was inside," Robbie said noncommittally.

Delaney stroked Robbie's golden hair. "I'd figured as much."

"Strange to look up and not see sky. Trees. Stars."

"There aren't any tents or way stations or anything like that?" Delaney asked.

"Can't hunt inside," Robbie pointed out. He'd reverted, partially, to his old speech habits. Perhaps they were more comfortable for him.

"I don't know. Cats do, going after mice."

"Ha!" Robbie bit his lip, not quite able to hide the mirth that betrayed him in his eyes, gone shiny.

Seeing Robbie at ease pleased Delaney, warmed his heart. He'd been careful of touching Robbie when he'd been so tense, but now it was natural and good to nudge Robbie's foot with his own, and leave it there, ankle resting against ankle. "I won't make you go in again."

Robbie frowned at a patch of clover, both three-leafed green and pink-white weed flowers, plucked a handful and toyed with the stems. "Have to eventually, if I stay."

"If isn't in question."

"You know better than that. Never underestimate him." Robbie wiped his fingers on his knees. He looked both right and wrong in Tam's castoffs, jeans and plain loose shirt. Lucky for both of them she preferred to dress mannishly. Delaney thought he'd been as relieved as Robbie when her shoes hadn't fit him. The clothes seemed to bother him plenty without binding his feet.

Heat pulsed unexpectedly in Delaney's groin. Bindings. The corset. He itched to touch them again, to trace the double line and to stroke the laces and the soft, fair skin beneath.

"Know what you're thinking," Robbie grumbled. He scooted back. "Leave well enough alone."

"How could you know?"

Robbie hesitated, then smirked, a bitter twist of the lips. "Practice. You're not to touch them. Please. For me."

"I'll try." Honesty made Delaney add, "I can't promise I won't think about them."

Robbie made a noncommittal noise. He rubbed his palms on his knees, harder this time, scowling at the denim. There was something odd about the way he placed his fingers. Something that sparked a chord of memory — *wait. Yes. Chords.*

"Wait here." Delaney hurried to his feet, excitement making him clumsy. He almost sent Robbie ass over teakettle. "Sorry. I'll be right back. I want to bring you something."

Robbie's surprise was almost comical. "Me?"

"Yes." Delaney wanted to bend and tip Robbie's chin up, to kiss him, and why not? "Be right back. Don't go anywhere."

"Where would I go?"

Nowhere that isn't where I can see you. I hope.

"Robbie," Delaney said, abrupt, perhaps too sharply. "I'm sorry. Don't be afraid." *Great start.* "I only wanted to know... I have to ask—do you *want* to be here?" He'd thought he'd known, but if he'd been wrong...

Solid torsion clamped around his ankle. Robbie's eyes glittered behind a fallen tangle of his hair over his face. "*Here,*" he said, and there was no mistaking his meaning. "Hurry, get whatever it is you want to give me, and come back. Sooner started, sooner returned."

I love you, Delaney wanted to say but didn't think Robbie was ready to hear. Something made him bite that back and kiss Robbie again instead. The press of his mouth made Robbie's smooth and supple again. "Three minutes tops. Cross my heart."

"I'll count them," Robbie murmured, drawing his knees up to his chest. For a moment he looked heartbreakingly like the wild man Delaney had first seen behind the firelight of the cellar party, and it took his breath away.

Hurry? God, yes, he'd go as fast as if his feet had wings. And luck willing, he'd come back with the perfect offering to please his lover. He just hoped the thing was where he'd left it...

Chapter Eleven

Robbie's smile was positively predatory by the time Delaney returned. Dappled green and gold by the sunlight streaking through the leaves, he looked so like the Robbie he'd seen running with the Hunt that it made Delaney stumble.

"Took you long enough," Robbie said. He craned his neck. "What'd you bring me?"

He sounded so like a greedy child that Delaney had to chuckle. He pressed the bundle of wrapped cloth on Robbie. "Take it and see."

Robbie poked and prodded at the lumpy package as Delaney sat on a tree root, careful not to knock about the guitar case he'd slung over his shoulder. He'd discarded the traditional packaging for what he'd brought as a gift, hoping for exactly this: Robbie's curiosity and the wide-eyed wonder of Christmas morning.

"Clothes?" Robbie asked doubtfully. "Clothes with rocks?"

Delaney almost didn't realize that Robbie was teasing him. When he did, he slipped off his shoe and toed Robbie's calf. "Wise guy."

"I'm not as dumb as I am pretty."

"Turning into a smart-ass, huh? We're going to have to watch you." A job Delaney didn't mind in the least. He propped his chin on his hand and his elbow on his knee to enjoy the view as Robbie puzzled his way through the wrapping, then one by one peeled them away.

He pressed the back of his hand to his mouth and bit when the last bit of concealing cloth fell away.

"Robbie?" Delaney asked, on alert. That wasn't a *happy* expression. "I can take it back. Don't be afraid."

"No!" Robbie clutched the fiddle protectively to his chest, where he cradled it like a baby. "Mine!"

He stroked the strings. They made a faint discordant sound, but reminiscent enough of the music he and Delaney had once played together to heat Delaney's blood, ever on the verge of simmering in Robbie's presence.

"It's from when we used to have a fiddler. We've suffered the lack of one for too long now. No more." Delaney hoped Robbie understood what he was trying to say without saying too much. "I thought you might like —"

Robbie surged up to kiss Delaney hard and quick and fierce. "Not like. *Love*. It's been too long." He returned to his seat and was already tuning the fiddle before Delaney's head had stopped spinning. "By the fire, in the cellar... It was the first time in so long." He drew his fingernail across a string. "Wasn't like what I knew how to play. Before."

No need to question what "before" meant. But... "Then how did you know to how play it?"

"It was what became this, and the song was old, as old as me." Robbie petted the violin as fondly as a kitten. If he'd had a tail like the puppy the Huntmaster called him, it would have wagged and thumped the earth in a *rat-a-tat*. "Beauty, you beauty," he crooned. "Always had a knack." His jaw worked. "You already know that's why he took me. Don't want to say his name."

"Fair enough."

"Bow?" Robbie poked through the bundle in vain search.

Delaney produced it from up his sleeve with a flourish any magician would be proud of. Robbie grinned when he took it and applied it immediately to the tuned fiddle.

Oh. Delaney closed his eyes at the sound of the first pure, sweet notes. No one had properly played this instrument in too long. Hugh had thought they should sell it, reasoning that if they ever found a fiddler, he'd have his own instrument. Delaney hadn't been able to make himself do it. He'd kept this in reserve for "one day" when he found the right man to wield the bow. She was a good instrument, but Delaney thought it was the fiddler who made the magic here. Fiddling had never sounded this sweet to his ears. He thought if he put out his hand, he could touch the notes like soap bubbles, iridescent and fragile, things of transient but shattering beauty.

Robbie paused. "You all right?"

"Yes." Delaney reached blindly for him, not wanting to open his eyes and break the spell, and rested his hands at the sides of Robbie's waist.

"Only if you play too."

"Can't do that with my eyes closed."

"Yes you can." Robbie nudged him genially. "Come, open up and play with me."

"I hear you better this way."

He could visualize Robbie's shrug. "Then play blind. Music good as yours... Don't need eyes." Robbie dropped to a whisper, almost too soft for Delaney to hear less than

three feet away. "Your music would have called me from the Hunt all on my own. Drew me nearer than I should, made me lose my heart. Had to hear this, had to join in. Like a fever in my bones."

Delaney felt for his guitar case and drew it into his lap, surprised at how easily his body remembered where the clasps were and how naturally the guitar nestled in his hands, his lap, like a lover happy to be home. The comfort of it spread through Delaney; it was like immersing himself in warm water. "Then play with me again, and let's see if it's as good now as it was before."

Robbie played a quicksilver run in answer. "Chase me, if you will."

Prickles and tingles replaced the honey-slow relief. Still good. Better, maybe. Delaney licked his lips. If this was what Robbie was, then this was who he had to be too, and it pleased him more than well enough if the truth was to be told. The Hunt went on in its gentler way.

He transposed the notes in his head and followed them with guitar chords. "As long as it's not 'Dueling Banjos,'" he teased.

"Eh?"

"Never mind. Run ahead," Delaney said, repeating what he'd played before. "I'll follow behind." *Always.*

"Yes," Robbie murmured. "You will. And so will they."

"Shh." Delaney found his melody and let it take him over. Playing with Robbie, the simplest of melodies could sink tendrils as deep and writhing as living roots into him and hold him fast, drawing him to drown in the counterpoint of fiddle and guitar.

What they created together under the tree wasn't a song, not as such, more of a series of silvery clear notes. It was better than a song.

Delaney didn't know when the drumming started, nor when the faint brass jingle of bells joined in, only that when noticed they seemed to have always been there. The acoustic bass, weaving a contrapuntal path between fiddle and guitar and bodhran and bells—that was what penetrated deep enough to startle him out of his waking sleep.

"Don't stop," Robbie ordered. He pressed his calf to Delaney's, their legs crossed scissors-style together. He drew the bow across his fiddle and sped the tempo. Circled back around into the song that'd tormented Delaney for months, until Robbie joined him.

Behind Robbie, Hugh faltered on his bodhran and Black-Eyed Susan stopped middance step, midjingle. Tam played on, following them with simple ease. She was the one who brought them all back around on course and even carried the melody forward before she improvised a run and blended in the song she'd been working on before Robbie arrived.

Robbie grunted, approving, and pointed at her with a flourish of his bow. Tam cracked a smile. Hugh laughed, startled, and began to wield his cipín with a hearty will.

Black-Eyed Susan was the last to succumb, but succumb she did. Picked up her feet, as bare as Robbie's, and danced with the bells she wore at wrist and ankle and throat, jingling in a brass chorus.

Jingling bright and merry, but if you listened beyond that. If you heard what the music said instead of the sound of the bells...

Delaney fumbled an easy chord.

"Don't," Robbie said, not breaking his stride. But a look at him, and Delaney knew that he knew. Had known all along but hadn't said. Couldn't have said? "Finish the song."

Delaney didn't like it, but Robbie was right. Black-Eyed Susan trembled and avoided his eyes. She knew he knew, the threefold awareness swirling about them in a carousel cycle, yet she'd joined the song and there was no stopping before it ended, not for one of her kind. As it had been with Robbie.

Once the last note had been played, *then* there would be a reckoning.

Delaney knew who she was, now, this Black-Eyed Susan. *What* she was. And if she meant harm to any of them, especially Hugh, he'd hang her by her hair from the highest tree.

As far as Delaney could tell, Hugh knew nothing. Good. Tam? No telling. Delaney wasn't sure he wanted to be sure of what went on in her head at the best of times.

He might have drawn out the song long past the time it should have finished, and would if Robbie hadn't flourished his way through the final chords and laid his bow to rest.

Hugh blinked rapidly when the music stopped. He dropped his cipín and shook his head.

One quick glance exchanged between Robbie and Delaney carried with it an entire conversation. Robbie inclined his head toward Hugh and jerked his thumb at Black-Eyed Susan. *The Huntsman chases. The prey bides his time.*

Black-Eyed Susan had begun to back up, unnoticed for once by Hugh, who had glazed over with a fine sweat. Robbie plucked the fallen cipín out of the grass and pressed it on Hugh. "Good wrists," he said to lure Hugh's attention. "You've played long?" He tapped a simple rhythm.

"What? Oh. Yeah. Since I was..." Hugh frowned. "Five? Six?"

"Long time indeed," Robbie said dryly. Behind his back, he waved Delaney on, urging him to hurry. Black-Eyed Susan had already retreated five steps, then ten. Yet Delaney lingered.

"I don't like leaving him this way," he hissed to Robbie.

Robbie made a gesture Delaney wouldn't have thought he knew, and jerked his head impatiently in Black-Eyed Susan's direction.

Ignorant of everything else, Tam plucked the beginning of a new song, one with a choppy melody that sounded like footfalls on rocky ground. Maybe it was that, or

maybe it was seeing the strain that whatever this was put on Robbie. Delaney rose, unnoticed by Hugh, and gave chase.

Chapter Twelve

He caught Black-Eyed Susan by the tree line. Snagged the hem of her pretty flowered sundress and held it fast.

“Don’t.” Her belladonna eyes were huge in her small, angular face. White showed around the edges. When she tried to pull free, her bells jingled in a mocking cacophony. “Please. Let me go.”

“Not before you’ve told me what I want to know.” Delaney had lived the entirety of his life without being cruel to a woman, and he hated himself for it now, but needs must as the devil drove. But how to hold her without hurting her?

Wait. A strange thought snaked through his mind. *Bound. I wonder if...* He caught her wrist and slid one of the jangling bell bracelets off. Tucked it in his pocket and held her at arm’s length.

“No!” Black-Eyed Susan flung herself at Delaney and scrabbled at his pocket. “I can’t—you don’t know what he’ll do to me.”

Delaney held her at bay. So. He’d guessed right. The bells were her binding link to the Hunt, and whoever held them was her master. “You’ll get that back. When you’ve explained. You know, it’s funny” —he flicked one of the bells on her remaining bracelet— “I’d have sworn the Huntmaster preferred stallions over fillies.”

Black-Eyed Susan moaned and crumpled. She would have fallen if Delaney hadn’t caught her.

“Tell me,” he insisted. “I won’t hurt you unless you’re hurting Hugh. Then all bets are off. Why did you come here? What do you want with him?”

“What do you think?” She recovered her dignity in bits and pieces, still coming together but proud enough to hold up her head. “But it’s not all exactly like that.” She looked past Delaney, pointed, and he knew she had her stare fixed on Robbie. “Yet we are the same sort of beast, that’s true.”

"Are you here to hurt Hugh? I'm sorry, but I have to ask. I need to know."

"No." Black-Eyed Susan chafed her bare wrist. "What more do you want to hear? There are things I *can't* say." She glanced nervously over her shoulder. "Things I'm not allowed to." The faintest hint of slyness passed over her face, but oddly enough it wasn't threatening, tempered by pleading. "There are things Robbie can't say either."

"He's not as good as fitting in as you are."

"He's wilder than I am," she agreed. "Less contact with those who speak. The Huntmaster—he only rides his stallion when he wants to show off. Or when the filly is away." Her laughter was still quiet, but nearly hysterical. "But I'm not human, not anymore. Does that make you happy to hear?"

"Not especially, no." Delaney took her hand. "All I want is your promise that you won't break Hugh's heart."

"Do you bind me?"

"Only out of care for my friend. But yes."

"You don't know what you're promising, Delaney. If you bind me, then the punishment lands on your shoulders." She darted her hand under his arm and tickled his back, making him flinch.

"Punishment for what?"

"I don't know. There's always some price to pay when you defy the Huntmaster. Answer me. Yes or no?" she insisted.

Though it was probably a fool's choice, Delaney didn't have to think about it. "For Hugh? Yes. I bind you."

Black-Eyed Susan shuddered, and the feeling behind that almost startled Delaney into letting her go. "You love him, don't you?"

"As Robbie loves you. I mean him *no* harm. You have to see that. Just as Robbie would cut off his fingers before he'd willingly hurt you."

"Would it have been different if you hadn't been sent to scout us?"

"No. At least not for me." She calmed as she spoke, though she ran trembling fingers through her hair all the way. Daisy petals scattered. "I was the one sent first. The Huntmaster, he..." She shrugged. "He's drawn to reveling. There's good times to be had when mortals are drunk and stupid. Easy prey. But then I saw Hugh, in front of the fire, black and red and white, so handsome, he..." She rested her hand on her throat. "Robbie was sent to get me. I think. I can't be sure. But then there was you."

"And here you both are," Delaney said slowly. "What happens next? Whatever it takes to keep Robbie here, and safe—and you too, now—I'll do it." He drew the bells out of his pocket and offered them to Black-Eyed Susan. "Answer me this: the Huntmaster's insane, isn't he? There's no predicting him."

Black-Eyed Susan drew the bells over her wrist and shook them once. "If you have to ask that, you don't know half of what he's like yet."

"I know enough."

"You think you do. I've seen this before." She slipped past him and blew a cool breath on his back. She danced away. "I'm going back. Please, don't tell Hugh? He'd – it'd break his heart. And mine."

"I won't hurt him either. I won't say anything. Yet." Delaney made a decision. "Black-Eyed Susan? Promise me one thing in return."

Black-Eyed Susan hesitated. "What?"

"Keep Hugh distracted for the next hour." Delaney looked past her at Robbie, slight and dark and feral, and thought he saw a glint of brass at his nape. "Maybe longer."

She touched her bracelets. "It's all things brass, you know," she said.

"I do."

"Be kind to him?"

"In everything. Always." Even if Robbie wouldn't see it that way at first.

* * * * *

Robbie rose to his feet as Delaney approached. Delaney could sense more than he could see the coiling of Robbie's muscles and the flaring of his nostrils. Robbie shook his hair forward to cover his eyes and waited. He waited to speak until Delaney was close enough to smell the wildness of him. "You know, then."

Not a question, but Delaney answered anyway. "Not all of it, and that's why I'm here." He pushed Robbie's hair out of his face to force eye contact, then caught him by the shoulders and turned him so that he faced away. Took the hem of Robbie's borrowed shirt and dragged it up to expose his back.

His bindings. Laced tight, as firm as his lips were sealed. *Bound.*

Delaney traced the zigzag lacing halfway up. "I'll know the rest soon."

Delaney didn't see it coming, the violence with which Robbie leaped away from him; only when his body startled back did he know Robbie had taken to his heels and fled.

"Oh no, you don't." Delaney trusted that Black-Eyed Susan would take care of Hugh. No other choice, and no time to even look back. He let the thrall of the Hunt flood him with the strength he needed, a shock like standing atop a fallen power line that made his teeth rattle—God, he hadn't done this before, and he was glad—but it was enough.

The Huntmaster would be laughing at him. Let him choke on it. If Delaney caught Robbie this time, the Huntmaster would be laughing on the other side of his face.

Delaney ran after Robbie as fast as his legs could carry him, far faster than a man should have been able to sprint. Into the tree line, past the thinner branches and beyond. Uphill and down the valley. Skidding, falling, picking himself up and driving on—quick, quick, quick—and then down again, brought up hard against something

that hadn't been there a moment ago. His ears rang as he fell to a crumpled pile at the Huntmaster's feet.

The Huntmaster crouched beside Delaney, choking him with the smell of horse and iron and sweat, and chuckled. "A fine game indeed. Have you had enough yet, musician?"

"I don't have time for this. Get out of my way."

"Such a high-handed command, musician. I stand and you cringe at my feet. Consider how wise it might not be to make demands."

"I'm only here because you knocked me down." Delaney climbed to his knees, though there he had to stop until the dizziness and clanging in his ears subsided. "Tell me something."

"Again, you demand, but so be it." The Huntmaster smirked at Delaney as a man would at a trick-performing dog. Amused enough to be indulgent, tolerant as long as it pleased him. Toying with him.

It put Delaney's teeth on edge and fired his growing frenzy to get past the Huntmaster as fast as he could. But there were ways to play this game, weren't there? "Are you wearing armor, or are you made of stone?" He rubbed his head, over-the-top and aiming for comical in his reaction.

Aha. The Huntmaster's smile broadened, teeth white and sharp against the smuts and torchlight that made his face a patchwork of light and dark. "No armor, save for that of leather and bone. No stone, save for those two every man has." He bent and placed two fingers beneath Delaney's chin, lifting his face. "If you disbelieve me, you can see for yourself."

Almost impossible not to fall into the susurrations and the thrall, the purring note of command in the Huntmaster's way of speaking. His touch tickled and made Delaney want to stretch his neck so the Huntmaster could scratch the underside of his jaw. Kneeling before the Huntmaster was where he belonged.

Wait. No. Delaney rocked back on his heels, gasping. He ground his hands against his eyes and saw explosions of light. "Don't do that again."

"Don't do this, don't do that—bah. But what do I care?" The Huntmaster gestured at a fallen tree trunk, termite-ridden and no more than wood-colored sawdust in spots. Though it should have fallen apart with a stiff breeze, the demolished tree rolled obediently to the Huntmaster and presented itself. No harm, no foul so far, but when the Huntmaster swept back imaginary coattails and took a seat, the wood shivered and the pale rot faded. Queen Anne's lace unfurled from behind the fallen tree and bent forward to brush the wood in a curiously testing sort of way. The weed flower shuddered, lost some of its petals, and withdrew. It tipped left as it did so and caught Delaney's eye before it disappeared.

"How did you do that?" Delaney reached out to touch, then thought better of it and withdrew.

The Huntmaster raised an eyebrow. "It's only wood. Once living. I command, but only succeed because it is of the hunting grounds, and those end at the tree line. Once you have passed them, all yields itself to me."

Delaney's palms itched. Three desires warred within him, tearing him apart — *How did he do that, and why? What does he want from me? Have to find Robbie. Have to.* "I do not yield. Let me go."

"Mmm," the Huntmaster vocalized noncommittally. He stroked the side of Delaney's face. "You are a pretty one. Black as ebony, red as cherries."

Delaney growled. "I'm not Snow White. I'm nothing special, either."

"Fierce, fierce. But beautiful, in your way, nonetheless, and make no mistake — I will have you, musician."

Delaney brought one knee up, all he could manage when faced by the Huntmaster in a playful mood. One leg at a time, muscles commanded in turn. Was this what Robbie felt like when Delaney was on the chase after him? The thought made Delaney's stomach turn.

No...no, couldn't be. Robbie had proved over and over again with his body that he relished Delaney's catching him. All Delaney wanted was to kick the Huntmaster's throat and chase the bigger hound off his chosen scent. *His.*

"Attention." The Huntmaster snapped his fingers in front of Delaney's eyes. "I will not be ignored."

"No. Really?"

"I tire of your disrespect. You are on my lands, and you will show me due accord."

"And if I don't?"

The Huntmaster rubbed his chin, his smile sly and unpleasant. "Try it and find out."

Delaney rubbed his upper arms and rose to a crouch. "And you wonder why I'm not inclined to accept your offer of a hook-up."

To Delaney's surprise, the Huntmaster tipped his head back and laughed. "You are *refreshing*, musician. None of these cattle have the will to cheek me."

"Not that you'd allow it." Delaney tried to see past the Huntmaster. He thought he heard scuffling in the leaves just beyond.

The Huntmaster pushed Delaney over, his supple leather boot crusted with mud planted in the center of Delaney's chest, the smallest flex of muscle all it took to send him tumbling with the breath knocked out of him.

Delaney had bitten his lip when he fell. He licked away the taste of copper and spat. "Let me past. We're done here."

"Not so. You captivate me."

"Thanks. I already knew that."

"Yes, but you fail to appreciate it." The Huntmaster peered thoughtfully at him. How odd that Delaney couldn't get a proper look at him, the shadows and soot always obscuring his face like a mask. He laughed, a sharp bark. "If you would stay with me, you could wash my face."

"Pass." Delaney struggled to his hands and knees, and then to his feet. The Huntmaster let him rise. "Stop playing games. Tell me what you want from me."

The Huntmaster stretched out his legs and crossed them at the ankle. "So you can tell me no?"

"Something like that."

"You are a rare one," the Huntmaster murmured.

"I'm nothing special. Stop saying that."

"And you understand so little." The Huntmaster clicked his tongue. "Bide with me and let me teach you better. Handsome one, sweet-voiced blackbird, bide with me." He stroked Delaney's cheekbone, and...and...

A thousand thousands of nights of riding beneath a moon never less full than gibbous, as bright as day now to his eyes. The sturdiness of a good horse, the sharp smell of the prey's fear, the sight of tracks and the bugling call of the horn he carried at his side. He tasted salt and ash when he licked his lips. His neck and chest stung, sweat burning the bites and scratches the Huntmaster had laid upon him when they last rested together.

"The kill is yours," the Huntmaster said. He rode alongside Delaney on a horse with daisies stripped of their petals woven into its mane and dangling over its eyes. He caught Delaney's hand and kissed the back. "And then later, you will play for us while we feast, and if you are good, very good, perhaps you will have a taste..."

"Then I dedicate this Hunt to you," Delaney said.

"As it should be," the Huntmaster said. "As you know it could be."

Cold sweat ran down Delaney's back, clammy and uncomfortable. "You have only to say yes," the Huntmaster coaxed. He petted Delaney. "There is no choice when it comes to offering me your music; at the finish you'll see that, and you will know that right now I am being kind. It can be better, musician. It can be more. Offer me your body, and *live* with the chase. Every night, you could bring your Robbie down and do with him what you will. Only stay with me, bow your head to me, and I will give you anything."

Delaney struggled to think past the encroaching wave of contented drowsiness that fogged his head. He *wanted* to give in; God, yes.

Brass bells jingled. Somewhere. Faintly.

They were enough.

Delaney knocked the Huntmaster's hand away from him with a sharp slap. "Let me past," he commanded for the third time.

The Huntmaster chuckled. "As you please, this time." He stood, moved out of the way, and dropped a mocking bow. "Only know this: three-times binding applies to you as well as to me. I'll ask you a third time, and you may find the cost too steep to say no then."

"I guess we'll find out, won't we?" Delaney retorted. He made a false start down the trail, then stopped, not trusting the Huntmaster. "You're letting me go?"

"For now. You may even run away from the hunting grounds, if you like, though you may *not* like it once you have gone. Nothing that I touch lives forever once I've let it go, Delaney." The Huntmaster nudged the fallen tree trunk. It burst open, spilling sawdust and scraps of bark. In an eyeblink, nothing was left but ash. "Nothing. Think on that."

Delaney couldn't. Not now. He dodged past the Huntmaster and ran for all he was worth, ran until his legs roared their protest and his lungs burned.

The scent of prey lay heavy on his tongue.

Chapter Thirteen

Delaney might have run all night, or seven nights. He couldn't tell, only that he followed the ever-fainter scent of his prey until it grew stronger. Branches scored his limbs, stinging raw with sweat.

He hadn't betrayed himself to the Huntmaster. The conceited bastard had been far too fixated on binding Delaney that he hadn't dug deeper and known what Delaney planned.

Good.

Wait. There? Yes. His prey had drawn a false trail and doubled back, then diverged halfway. A clever trick, but not enough to fool Delaney. He tried to stop, to draw breath into his burning lungs, but could not. So be it, then. Delaney trusted to luck that his body wouldn't give out—it couldn't in this place, could it?—and dived through the forest.

He tore at branches laced together that would bar his way, thrust past them, and *there*. Moonlight and gold. His prey, Robbie, not five feet away, frozen in midstep. Only the light of his eyes showed through the hair hiding his face.

Delaney stopped then and shook the sweat from his eyes. "Found you."

Robbie snapped his teeth at Delaney. He said nothing, too caught up in the spell to speak. Was this why he'd forgotten how to talk like a man? How many had chased him over the centuries? And it had been centuries. Here and now, the age Robbie carried inside him shone clear as glass.

Yet he was still beautiful. He took Delaney's breath away and kindled his lust as easily as touching a match to a candle.

Robbie had shed his clothing somewhere along the way, or perhaps it'd been torn off. The forest had left its marks on him too, more cruelly, red and pink welts and lines

of dried blood striping his flesh. He heaved when he breathed, not able to draw enough air to keep standing, yet unable to fall.

"We've danced this tune before," Delaney said. He extended his hand as he would to a skittish animal. "You know me. I won't hurt you."

"Liar." Robbie stumbled back three steps. "Don't."

Delaney gave up the attempt to hide. "Fine. Yes. This will hurt. But only so you can be healed."

Robbie sneered at him. "Know-nothing."

"That's the problem, isn't it?" Delaney feinted to the right. Robbie dodged to the left, and Delaney was ready for him, already launching himself to the left. He caught Robbie midfall and took the brunt of their weight though the impact jarred his aching body from teeth to toenails. He twisted Robbie beneath him, on his stomach beneath the trees.

There Delaney stopped. Who could *not* pause at the sight of Robbie, so trim and fine, his sweetly shaped ass raised and his legs parted to try and draw them up under him?

Not even a stronger man could have resisted pressing a kiss to the back of Robbie's neck. Pushing his hair out of the way to fall in angel wings on either side of his head. Drawing his tongue down the salty line of Robbie's back until black suede lacings tickled his tongue.

"Don't," Robbie begged. He fought harder. "If you love me at all, for both our sakes, *don't*."

"Shh." Delaney stroked Robbie's quivering sides. "Shh." He slid farther down to put his mouth on the small of Robbie's back, beneath the last of the brass hoops and laces, close enough to the dimple above the cleft of Robbie's ass for his breath to stream down and tease.

Robbie swore and shivered. He bowed his head and parted his knees. Slid forward on his elbows in silent plea.

"Do you like this?" Delaney licked the dimple, swirling the tip of his tongue in the indentation. "Just this? Or more?"

Robbie arched his back and raised his hips. "*More*."

Delaney bit one cheek and admired the white imprint of teeth. He feathered light strokes over Robbie's hips, the cut of his hip bones, the tops of his thighs. He whispered soothing words to Robbie when he quaked and whined.

When Robbie was ready—when Delaney couldn't wait any longer—he opened Robbie and bent to taste him. Not something he'd done before; not what he'd thought this would be like. Better. Rawer, softer, hotter. Eager for him, thrusting against empty air in search of relief. His cock hung heavy and sore-looking between his legs, and Delaney knew how desperate Robbie would be for his hand.

"Can I make you come like this?" Delaney asked, blowing streams of hot breath over Robbie's rim. He teased with kitten licks and small kisses. "Would it be cruel or kind?"

"Don't care." Robbie groaned and pushed back. "No. Yes. In me? Want you. Will you?"

Delaney throbbed with the need to do as he'd been told. To sink in and be enveloped by Robbie's eager, welcoming body. His cock chafed raw inside his too-binding jeans. The buttons would burst soon.

Yet he waited. *Almost there. Too close to give up now.*

"I'll fuck you," he said and glided his fingers higher up. "If you still want me to after this."

Robbie stiffened, understanding too late. "No!"

Too late. Delaney had studied the binding knot with its dangling suede laces enough by now to slip the knot free. Robbie screamed the harsh, angry scream of a wounded panther and writhed away in a swift, crabwise crawl.

Delaney was ready for that; he caught Robbie and pinned him. One ring at a time, whispering hushed nonsense, he drew the laces from their moorings and gentled Robbie through each muffled cry and choked-off shout as the lacing slid free of each binding hoop.

Delaney might have let go and been merciful. This was *cruel*, and he knew it. Robbie writhed in what looked like pain, and might have been, biting his forearm hard enough to draw blood with each length of lacing that came free.

He would have stopped if it hadn't been for Robbie's once looking over his shoulder. Silky tangles of hair hid most of his face, but Delaney could see his pretty rosebud mouth, as lovely as a woman's, but his face saved from feminine prettiness by the stubborn jut of his jaw. He nodded at Delaney, the small movement as slow and unsteady as if he were sinking through quicksand. His sweet mouth shaped the silent plea: *don't stop.*

I'm only hurting him to help him, Delaney promised himself. I am not like the Huntmaster.

Or are you? Delaney's own mind mocked him. Aren't you doing what the Huntmaster did, taking Robbie against his will?

"You have to tell me," Delaney said. He made himself stop, the last of the laces almost free. "Nod. Blink. Anything. It's almost done. If you don't, I won't."

Robbie's lips stretched in a rictus that might have been a smile. He bowed his spine and thrust forward, fucking empty air. Breath hissed between his teeth. "Want," he said.

Delaney heard the double meaning in that. He kissed the bare skin he'd freed of its lacing and kept his mouth there. Fumbled blind to the last of the lacings and slowly, slowly drew it free of its mooring. The black suede slithered off Robbie with the sound

of a snake moving swiftly through sand. Robbie threw back his head, tendons standing out painfully, and thrust faster against nothing.

"I've got you." Delaney rubbed Robbie's back and reached beneath him. Robbie's cock filled his hand perfectly, solid and urgent. He licked patterns between Robbie's shoulders and took mercy on him. Used his hand to bring Robbie's heavy, throbbing cock the release it needed, and didn't stop until Robbie broke the night with his sharp cries and spilled over Delaney's fingers.

Delaney gentled him through it. "Good, so good. So sweet for me. So pretty when you come." He smoothed Robbie's hair away from his flushed cheeks and turned him again so that he lay on his back, but kept a hand beneath him to toy with the rings that still pierced his skin. Would this be enough? He could slide the hoops free of Robbie's flesh if he had to, but oh, that would hurt him more than Delaney could bear to watch, even in search of the truth.

He held his breath and waited. Robbie came to himself slowly, blinking. His lips parted in an O, and he stared at Delaney as would a betrayed dog that had been kicked when it had expected a treat.

Though he wanted nothing more than to comfort Robbie, Delaney held himself in abeyance. What happened now was Robbie's choice, now that he'd been freed.

Slowly, Robbie licked his lips, bitten redder than cherries. He couldn't keep them shut, breathing too hard for that. "You," he said, hoarse and faraway. "How you dared. How did you know?"

"Black-Eyed Susan said 'all things brass.' I knew these rings bound you somehow, maybe to secrecy. Maybe they kept your mouth shut on things you wanted to say and I needed to know. I—"

Robbie surged up to wrap his arms around Delaney's neck and drag him down, not hungry but ravenous, and kissing Delaney as if he wanted to climb inside him and become one flesh forever.

More than a kiss and less than an attack. Robbie clung to Delaney and breathed the same breath, traded back and forth between them until Delaney had to push him away or black out. One clean gulp of air and Robbie bucked up, begging for more. And his hands, everywhere, mapping Delaney by touch alone with his eyes closed so tight that lines of strain marred his face and stood out in cords along his neck, in sinuous ripples of lean runner's muscle.

"It's okay," Delaney tried to calm him by saying. Tried to gentle Robbie's frantic madness with slower touches. Not easy. The same fire that consumed Robbie threatened to overtake him too. He wanted to urge Robbie up to his feet and push him down the trail. Wanted to run, to fight, to crush Robbie into submission, and then to do it all over again—

But to be what the Huntmaster wants me to be – I will not.

He squeezed his eyes shut and pushed the madness back, just far enough to wrest control over nails that wanted to scratch and teeth that wanted to sink deep. *I am not an animal.*

Neither is he. Not really.

"It's over," he said into Robbie's desperate mouth. "Just you. Just me. Calm down, or you'll hurt yourself."

Robbie loosed a broken sob, the kind that was almost impossible to distinguish from laughter. His fingers danced along Delaney's back in a rhythm that was maddeningly familiar. Delaney swore and drove forward to thrust against Robbie's belly when he recognized it: the fingering to the music that had drawn Robbie to him.

"Not over," Robbie said. He licked his way into Delaney's mouth, chased his tongue, sucked, fell back, and rose again. "You still don't understand. It's *never* over, but you—what you did—" He spoke more clearly now, inasmuch as he could while writhing like sex clothed in thin flesh, and Delaney understood him just beneath the maddening urge to thrust hard and deep.

"How isn't it over? I've unbound you." Delaney threaded his pinkie through one of the rings, a tight fit, and pulled as gently as he could. "You're free."

"Can't be, he won't let me go that easily —"

"I'll replace them with my own." Delaney's vision was full of lights and colors that didn't exist on earth, nothing any prism could cast. "Silver rings, pure and bright. A golden chain. Silk ties. Whatever you want, I'll give you, but you are *mine* as I am yours. I claim you."

"You promise that, even here and now? Don't. For the sake of your life, don't."

"My life means nothing without you."

Robbie raised his knees to bracket Delaney's sides and swept slow, shaking caresses over Delaney's chest. "Fools for love are still fools."

"Yes, and I evermore will be." Delaney kissed Robbie, lingering and slow, though gentling him—either of them—was impossible. He burned too hot, too bright, and knew it was the same for Robbie. Enchantment, the Hunt, the headiness of freedom? Relief or adrenaline? Who knew? "You're bound to me and me alone now," he said, insistent, promising himself that it *was* true. "Always."

Robbie keened high and thin and raised his hips. "Then claim me. Now." He scrabbled over the button fly of Delaney's jeans, which barely clung to their moorings and separated their bodies with too much cloth. "Get these off."

Parting, even only long enough to strip away the jeans and push them down to his knees, was too much. Delaney kicked them free and fell atop Robbie to rain kisses on him, sliding their tongues together fast and slick, their teeth clicking together, bone against bone.

Naked now, Delaney's cock slipped easily through the cleft of Robbie's ass and bumped the saliva-wet rim. Caught, juddered away, then back again. Robbie whined, a

noise somewhere between animal and man. His cock had never gone soft and left new sticky smears on Delaney's stomach.

Delaney wanted Robbie more than bread or salt. "I'll die if I don't have you," he said, lip to lip. "Let me."

Robbie stared at him, their eyelashes almost tangling together. He undulated more slowly, but with even more intent, drawing Delaney's cock over and around the pucker Delaney had licked open. He drew Delaney in. "While we can."

"He won't come back."

"Want to or no, not even you believe *that*. Take the 'now' and be satisfied," Robbie begged. "Take me. I'll bow, if I have to—"

"No." Delaney smothered Robbie with the weight of his body, slanted their mouths together, and sucked on Robbie's tongue. No need to line up or to warn Robbie. Only in, and in some more, smooth, slick glide with nothing between them but the frenzy for more.

"Wait." Robbie flat-palmed Delaney's chest. "No, not—you aren't hurting me—" He gulped, breathless. "The cord. Tie me."

"Never again for him."

"For you." Robbie writhed beneath Delaney, spitted on his cock, and somehow managed to stretch his arms over his head, crossed at the wrists. "Deeds are more than words. *Oh*." He bucked, trying to take Delaney deeper. "Don't ask. Just do."

Delaney didn't understand. Didn't matter. Robbie would explain later. Or maybe he did comprehend after all. Covering a brand with his own mark. He put out his hand in search of the length of black suede. He shuddered, repulsed, when the suede slithered over his wrist and coiled in his hand, and he almost jerked out of Robbie. Only Robbie's frantic clamp on his hips stopped that.

He shook the laces angrily. "You are mine too," he said through clenched teeth. "Obey me."

They fell slack, the life gone out of them. Good enough. Delaney stretched up, sinking deepest yet, and as Robbie writhed, he wound the laces loosely and once around Robbie's wrists.

Robbie went mad. There was no other word for it. He savaged Delaney with his kisses and his clenching muscles. It was like trying to ride a hurricane, holding on for the sake of his life, the thrill of that life, nothing like it before and nothing would ever be the same after. It would overcome him if he didn't master it.

And master it he did. He forced back the rising tide touch by touch, returning kiss for bite, stroke for claw, and whispered care for wordless snarls. He enveloped Robbie and made Robbie *all* his own.

At the last second, almost too late, Robbie surged forward. He carried them both smooth and rough, and knocked Delaney flat on his back. Delaney slipped free, but not for long. Robbie fell on him again and sank to a cowboy's seat on Delaney's cock. His

bound wrists scrubbed Delaney's chest, scraping him raw even through his shirt. He rose and fell and rose again and came with an echoing scream as wild and raw-musicked as raven song, Delaney following fast after, falling with Robbie, down, down, down.

Chapter Fourteen

In the aftermath, before Delaney had stopped shaking with the aftershocks, Robbie returned to himself with a suddenness that startled Delaney. A soft gasp and his eyes snapped open, the pupils spiraled from wide and soft to narrow pinpoint, changed too fast for Delaney to track.

He didn't jerk away from Robbie, though it was a near miss and Delaney couldn't help his flinch. Robbie didn't seem to notice. Whatever Robbie stared at, above and beyond Delaney's head, it was nothing that Delaney could spy for himself. Given the expression of mixed dreaminess and terror etched across Robbie's face, Delaney thought he was glad to be blind to that vision.

"Robbie." Delaney brushed hair away from his wild fiddler's face, one fingertip's worth at a time, slow and easy. No reaction. Robbie breathed alternately fast and slow, too erratic to keep up with. "Robbie, come back." He tried to shake him. Nothing. "Robbie, can you hear me?"

Robbie blinked slowly. He drew his tongue across his lips. "I hear," he said, and it sounded as if it came from far, far away. "You call, and I answer."

His words sounded too much like a hypnotized creature's response to Delaney, who jostled him again, harder. "Snap out of it."

Robbie smiled, a quirk so like the twist of a smirk the Huntmaster wore that it chilled Delaney. If that vile thing had invaded Robbie—no. Couldn't happen; Delaney wouldn't *let* it happen. He caught the suede lacings binding Robbie's wrists together and pulled them free.

A sigh, as if Robbie were falling asleep as sweetly as a child, and then a healthy color returned to his cheeks. "No fear. It's only me in here, though that was... I would not want to do it again. Sex, yes. The rest—" He shuddered. "Will you let me up?"

"Depends," Delaney said, though he had already started to move when Robbie asked it of him. "Are you going to run?"

"You would like that, wouldn't you?" Robbie winced when Delaney pulled out, but waved off Delaney's concern and sat upright. He tweaked Delaney's glasses straighter on his nose. "It's all right. You are what he's shaping you to be. Fair's fair."

"Fair isn't acceptable here."

"A gentleman," Robbie said. He crossed his legs Indian-style and rested his still loosely bound hands on his knees, casual and unashamed in his nakedness. Arching his back, he sighed. "Thank you, but you might not thank me."

"Why?" Delaney unwound the cord. "You're speaking better."

Robbie laughed quietly. "Better than you."

"More than likely," Delaney agreed. "Or am I just imagining it?"

"No. None of it." Robbie looped the long, slim length of cord, still skin-warm, over Delaney's hands and threaded it through his fingers. "Spread your hands."

Puzzled, Delaney did and exclaimed in quiet, wordless surprise to see Robbie had woven a cat's cradle.

"Keep going. I can speak freely now that I'm unbound."

"I hoped you might." Delaney hadn't ever learned the trick of elaborate cat's cradles. He tangled the cord and frowned at it. Wasn't what he wanted to concentrate on, now was it? "I want to know. All of it. What the Huntmaster wants. How I can get you away from him for good, out of his head games and tricks and traps and lies."

"You know very well what he desires; he's been plain enough."

"I know some. Not all. Not enough."

Robbie rescued the near ruin of the cat's cradle and guided Delaney's fingers. "Careful. I speak free only as long as you're busy here, and then less, and when you lace me again, not at all."

Delaney believed him, but... "Like hell I'll tie you up again."

"If I asked nicely, you would," Robbie said. He stroked Delaney's thigh from knee to an inch below his groin. Though red and sore from more fucking in days than he'd enjoyed in months, his cock made an effort to rise. Robbie gentled him down and kept the arousal at a low, warming ebb. "There are things I can't tell you, even now."

"But—" Delaney wanted to touch Robbie's unbound back to make sure nothing had changed again.

"Things I *won't* tell you, then." He warded off Delaney's questions. "We don't have much time. He'll know, soon, if he doesn't already, what you did. Clever, clever Delaney."

"Not in the least." Delaney's glasses slipped when he bent his head to study the cords and tried to keep his gaze fixed on Robbie at the same time.

Robbie shrugged, and that gesture at least hadn't changed. There was ever and always something of the animal in his body language. "You have questions, and I have answers, but for the love of God, save them for another time. Please God, let there be another."

"I wouldn't have pegged you for a devout man," Delaney said, mildly surprised.

Robbie chuffed. "Not by half. It was how we spoke, when I... Never mind."

"The Huntmaster said you were old. So did Black-Eyed Susan"

"*Her*. She has no idea. She's new, picked up around 1920. A sweet young thing. Wanted nothing more than to be a flapper, all ready to run away from home, bob her hair, and dance the night away. Only when she ran, the Hunt caught her. She danced for them to save her life, and in thanks they clapped bells on her to capture and keep her forever." Robbie shook himself. "*Don't* distract me. You must listen, and this is important."

Delaney wished he could rub his eyes, tired and irritated. "How many questions do I get?"

Robbie inclined his head to show approval. "Three, and it should be two now since you've asked that one, but three it will be."

"Three is always the number," Delaney mused. "That wasn't a question. Three...it's like a braid," he went on, careful not to rise in a note of query. "One strand is weak, two wound together is stronger, three braided is strongest."

Robbie's posture eased, more relaxed, though he looked over his shoulder before he spoke. "Quickly."

Where *did* a man start? Maybe with what bothered him most. "Why do I have to lace you back up?"

"Because you don't want the Huntmaster to see you've done this. Trust me. An eye for an eye is more than he needs, and he wants—"

"He's offered, more than once now to make me his lover," Delaney interrupted. "I wasn't inclined to say yes. I'm a toy to him, something new and shiny, and I'd be discarded as soon as he got bored."

"Not a question, but I'll answer you. Yes. He would. Maybe in a year, maybe in a thousand." Robbie shrugged. "As he has with me."

Delaney bit his lip. "If I have to lace you back up, does that mean I'm surrendering you to him again? If that's the case, then I'd as soon offer myself in the bargain, as long as I'm not his lover. As long as I can be with you, I don't care where it is."

Robbie's openhanded slap startled Delaney, who almost dropped the cord. "*Never* say that again, do you understand?" He twisted, up on one hip, to flash the glint of brass at the top of his back. "If you dare, I will do worse than use the flat of my hand on you. You don't know. You *can't*."

"I won't, then," Delaney lied, only wanting to soothe him.

“Liar.” Robbie shook his hair over his face to hide behind it. “I belong to him until he says otherwise. I would be willing to go, to rest – eager for it – if not for you.”

“I don’t understand.”

Robbie ignored that. “My tongue is freed. I can speak as I want now. But if he looks on us, and he will, he needs to see me tied. I wouldn’t think you’d mind.” A ghost of a smile crossed his face. “You have a fetish.”

Delaney laughed, knowing he was grinning like a lunatic. “I can’t be blamed for it.”

“Perhaps not. One more question, Robbie, and be careful what you ask. Don’t query what you don’t really want an answer for.”

Delaney gave it some quick thought. Though it chafed, the charm of threes wasn’t something he knew how to overturn. Had to make this last one count.

He wanted to ask why the thought of leaving the Hunt bothered Robbie so much. It made no sense to him. Wanted to ask if it would be *that* bad to live forever with Robbie at his side, each night a chase, a conquering, wild sex in the forests and filling his belly with beer and bread and meat roasted over the fire? He could still play music. The Huntmaster would enjoy that.

He’d have to sacrifice his freedom, but for Robbie it seemed almost an unimportant loss. Especially if he could find a way to get the Huntmaster to release Susan, maybe in trade, so she could be happy with Hugh. There were far worse fates.

Or were there? Delaney remembered the whites that showed around Black-Eyed Susan’s eyes, too wide with fear when she spoke of the Hunt. The Queen Anne’s lace, which spoke with the voice of a weary woman. Robbie’s bared teeth and animal nature, when he *had* been a man. Once upon a time. And he thought better of what he’d offered.

Delaney pressed his thumbs together, hating the snakeskin sleekness of the cords wound about his fingers. Questions crowded one against the other and choked the rest out.

“You were afraid when I suggested going with the Huntmaster,” Delaney said at last. “Not just angry. Scared. Both, in equal measure. Why? What do you know about what the Huntmaster wants that I don’t?”

Robbie shut his eyes and sighed. He seemed to grow smaller and paler, his light dimming. “If you give yourself to him, there’s no bargaining. He takes what he wants.”

“And he wants...”

“You, instead of me, not the both of us together. He wants to cast me out and take you in my place.” Robbie leaned in and blew on Delaney’s neck. He smelled suddenly of sawdust, old and musty, like the tree trunk the Huntmaster had crumbled to powder. “How much plainer can I be? What do you think will happen to me then?”

Delaney’s stomach soured. “Oh God.”

“And now you understand all of it. Almost. Hush.” Robbie turned his back to Delaney and presented him with the hoops all ready for their lacings. “Quick. No more questions. Lace me, and let’s go. See how far we get. Not far enough forever, but maybe, if we are lucky, we can have one more night...”

* * * * *

They made it back to the cabin unscathed, clothed in rags and tatters. At this rate, people would start to think Delaney and Robbie were starting a grassroots nudist colony, but truly, Delaney couldn’t be bothered to care. Though maybe he would start keeping a backpack handy with a couple of extra changes of clothing to carry with him.

Not that he minded the sight of Robbie naked. Robbie wore his nudity with the comfort of long years of no other choice and was beautiful enough to stop any man or woman in their tracks. *That* was what bothered Delaney. Robbie was his to admire and enjoy, and no one else’s. He’d at least try to be ready, the next time he was called to the Hunt.

I’m thinking as if there will be a next time, Delaney realized. I’m accepting it as a fact. The way Robbie would and does. Does that mean there’s no question about it?

“Yes,” Robbie replied, and Delaney didn’t think Robbie had read his mind, but knew him well enough already to be able to guess. “By being with me, you stay in his line of sight. Does that bother you enough to leave me?” he asked with a trace of his old surliness.

That, Delaney didn’t need to think twice about. He pulled Robbie closer to him in a one-armed embrace and kissed his temple. “I’ll never leave you.”

Robbie grumbled under his breath and shook his hair over his face. “You should.”

“Too late for that.”

“I know.”

The rest of the trip, short though it might be, they spent in silence. Delaney kept one eye on the tree line, expecting the Huntmaster to break through at any moment. He knew Robbie did the same. Hard to say who was more surprised when nothing happened, he or his wild fiddler, but Delaney knew they both breathed easier when they reached the cabin and saw light in the windows.

“I’ll handle Hugh,” Delaney said quietly, touching the inside of Robbie’s elbow.

“You think I can’t?”

“I think you shouldn’t have to.” Delaney helped Robbie up the rickety stairs, not because he thought Robbie needed the assistance, but to show anyone watching that he’d taken charge.

The cabin door opened before Delaney could reach for the knob. Hugh stood in the door frame, filling it, wiping his hands on a dishcloth. The savory smells of meat and spices—Hamburger Helper, if Delaney had to guess—wafted out to greet them. Delaney’s stomach rumbled. Robbie’s didn’t. None of them smiled.

Behind Hugh, Delaney caught a glimpse of Black-Eyed Susan moving about, as quiet and light on her feet as a dragonfly. She peeked at him, tried for half a smile, and flitted away.

"He's staying with us," Delaney said, no playing games. "I'll share my bed with him, or we can sleep outside. But he's with me, same as Black-Eyed Susan's with you. I don't want to fight you, Hugh, but if I have to, I will."

Hugh studied Robbie in silence. He tucked the dishcloth in the waist of his jeans and rubbed his forehead. "Dinner's almost ready. There're crackers if you can't wait." He sighed. "Come inside. I don't like you, Robbie, and I doubt I ever will, but this argument's not worth chucking all these years of friendship between Delaney and I."

Robbie frowned at Hugh as if he didn't quite believe what he'd heard.

Delaney squeezed Robbie's arm. "It's all right. Go and eat."

Robbie wrinkled his nose at Delaney but nodded and ducked past Hugh, who moved aside to let him pass.

Delaney lingered on the steps. "Thank you."

"Don't thank me." Hugh crossed his arms over his chest. "I meant what I said. I *don't* like him."

"I got that memo already." Delaney hesitated, then shrugged off the second-guessing. "Why? Because he's different?"

"No. Because he's bad for you, and you can't see it. Longtime friendship notwithstanding, since you've been with Robbie you haven't been the Delaney I thought I knew for years on end. I'm not sure I like this version of you."

"That's blunt."

"I miss the old you."

"People change, Hugh."

"I don't have to like that either."

"You did, for Black-Eyed Susan."

Some of the fight seemed to go out of Hugh. He drummed his forearms in a simple bodhran rhythm, giving away his reluctance that warred with his need to be on good terms with his friends, especially those who were closer than brothers. "I'm worried about you. Can you blame me for that?"

Delaney thought back to all that had happened since Robbie had come into his life, and though he wouldn't change having Robbie, it wasn't hard to see Hugh's point of view. "No. I can't."

"But you're still going to be with him."

"Excuse me." Black-Eyed Susan slipped between them. She stood on her tiptoes and pressed a kiss to Hugh's cheek. "I think I saw some wild leeks growing near the tree line." There was no missing the pointed look she aimed at Delaney. She wanted a word in private, and for that he'd have to follow her. "I'll be right back."

Hugh caught Black-Eyed Susan by the waist and kissed her more deeply. "Don't stay too long."

Delaney watched her go. "I have to be with Robbie."

"No one *has* to do anything."

"Could you be without Black-Eyed Susan?"

Hugh started to say one thing, stopped, then shook his head. "No. I mean... She's... Black-Eyed Susan's the one, you know? My wandering days are over. She's part of me."

"And you'd do anything to keep her safe?"

Hugh bristled. "Are you saying she's in danger?"

That, Delaney couldn't and wouldn't answer, especially not with a comforting lie. "I'd do the same for Robbie," he said instead. "Anything. Whatever it took. He's my 'one' too. If you can't like him, I'll deal with that, and I won't even ask you to be happy for my sake. But accept him. That's all I ask. I—"

"Move." Delaney hadn't seen Tam coming, hadn't heard her step, but abruptly she was there, pushing her way past Hugh and out into the night without a flashlight, her acoustic bass strung across her back and her head held high. Angry? Maybe so. Her lips were set in a thin line and her pale eyes cold.

"Tam? What's up?" Hugh shouted after her. If she heard, she didn't react, not even so much as turning around.

Delaney went abruptly cold. *No*. Not Tam. But... "Stay here. Keep an eye on Robbie. *Please*. I'll go after her."

"I could—"

"You stay with Black-Eyed Susan." Delaney's heart sank when he saw where Tam was headed: straight for the tree line. "Dear God. Wait for me here, Hugh. Keep them safe. I'll be back as soon as I can."

"Safe? Safe from what?" Hugh yelled, but there wasn't any time to stop and answer him. Not when Tam was on the move and walking fast, slipping too quickly into the darkness...

Chapter Fifteen

"She's already gone," someone said from behind a tree near the edge of the forest, a thick oak tree with the light, sweet voice of a woman. "I don't know where or why."

Delaney startled, thinking for a moment the tree itself had spoken to him like the strange, helpful Queen Anne's lace or the Green Man.

As if thinking about that strange creature had summoned it, the oak leaves above Delaney's head rustled to capture his attention. They shaped themselves into a heavy, masculine sort of face and laughed silently before rustling apart and becoming just leaves again.

"He won't hurt you," Black-Eyed Susan said. Dear God, he'd forgotten all about her.

"You know what he is?" Dumb question. Of course she did.

Black-Eyed Susan didn't call him out for being a fool. "The Huntmaster's pet. A flock of dumb and malicious leaves." She stretched out her legs with the accompaniment of jingling brass bells and a flutter of gauzy flowered skirt.

Delaney circled the tree to find her sitting between two heavy roots, drawing her knees up under her chin again. She'd wrapped her slim arms around them and held herself tight, her fear plain. "If he's harmless, why are you scared? What are you telling me?"

She looked sideways at him, too much white in her eyes again. "Because what he sees, the Huntmaster sees. What he laughs at, he'll pass along."

"He's a spy?"

"Of a sort." Black-Eyed Susan laid her cheek on her arm and shivered. "He's just leaves, and I never said *harmless*. You did. He's poison, like the ivy leaves."

"Full of bites and stings, like the mites that live in Queen Anne's lace..." Delaney hesitated. "Why is the Queen Anne's lace different?"

Black-Eyed Susan scrunched her face up in an expression of confusion. "What? There's no lace in the hunting grounds.

"It's the Green Man you have to worry about. He's always playing games. Don't trust him, not ever. He never helps, but he hurts too. If he offers a hand, it's only so he can slap you with it, now or later."

"I see." Delaney found himself sinking to a crouch before her, wanting to comfort her. Was this what she brought out in Hugh too? Or more so, because he loved her and didn't know enough to be afraid? "The Green Man isn't like that in the ballads."

"Is anything?"

"Good point." Delaney was at a loss for words. "Is he a prisoner too?"

"No. He chose to serve the Huntmaster, and they're as much alike as they can be." Black-Eyed Susan wrapped her arms around her chest, under her small breasts. "He helps keep *us* imprisoned for the fun of it. He was watching me to remind me I'm not here for good. We're all his captives. *Damn* him."

Delaney didn't want to ask this next. "Is Hugh in danger too?"

Black-Eyed Susan pressed her lips together tight and thin.

Delaney couldn't let that rest. He laid his hand atop hers and shook it gently. "Answer me. I'm his friend. I want to keep him safe."

"And you think I don't?" She opened her eyes to glare at him. Anger melted fast to despair. "I love him. I shouldn't, I know that, but I *do*. I want to save him."

"Can you?"

"I don't know." She rubbed the corners of her eyes, not wet with tears, but not far removed from them either. "I won't stop trying."

Delaney almost didn't ask, but the same firmness he'd made himself use earlier couldn't be lain aside now. "You said there were things you couldn't tell me. About yourself. Robbie told me what you couldn't. Who you were, how you fell in with the Hunt. He also said what you said, that there were things he couldn't tell about himself. So I figure you can tell me instead."

"He shouldn't have." Black-Eyed Susan curled in tighter on himself. "Don't tell Hugh? He shouldn't have to carry that, not unless he has to. I *want* to be human for him, and I'm trying so hard –"

"Shh. I know, I know." No one could be cruel to Black-Eyed Susan for long, not unless they were the Huntmaster, and though it got harder to fight the urge, Delaney was still able to push aside the urge to take command as he did. Sometimes, though, he wondered how fine the line he treaded was. "Robbie let me ask three questions. Can I do that with you?"

"Yes, and that's one. But I'll tell you for free that I don't know where Tam went. Or why. Just that it was into the forest."

"Are you lying?"

"That's two. And no." Black-Eyed Susan's lips shaped the word, but her hands shook; that, and the look in her eyes, shivering afraid, told him *yes* instead.

He could have slipped the bracelets off her wrists and the anklets off her feet and made her answer, but he didn't need to, did he?

Above them, the Green Man rustled, shaped himself, and fell apart.

Delaney hesitated. One question left, and so many things he needed to know. Was Tam part of the Wild Hunt now? Had they caught her, or had she betrayed them? "*Worked up my own appetite,*" he remembered her saying. What would better make a woman hungry enough for seven pancakes at a sitting except running through the woods from sundown to sunrise, chasing prey and reveling with the huntsmen? What had she offered them, or what had they taken? Or was he wrong about her and reading too much into Black-Eyed Susan's body language?

A thousand questions, and too many answers. He'd save that for later. Maybe he could ask Robbie. Maybe he'd ask Tam herself and get three answers from her.

For now, there was only one thing that he could speak simply. "Will you tell me about Robbie, the way he told me about you?"

Black-Eyed Susan exhaled. Tears that'd stood out spiky on her lashes fell. She dashed them away with an impatient brush and nodded. "What can I tell you? I don't know his name. As long as I've been with the Hunt, he's been there. He's *old*. Not the oldest, but among them."

"You knew I already know that. Tell me the rest. Whatever you can." Delaney waited, preparing himself for the worst. Whatever that "worst" might be.

"I was told that he's always been lesser. Always a puppy with teeth and never a hound. Timeless, ageless, beautiful. I'm told he played every night for hundreds of years, and then—I don't know why, no one would ever tell me—he broke his fiddle over his knee and refused to ever use a bow again."

"Bet the Huntmaster didn't take *that* well."

"No. He's stubborn, but they're—*he*—he's a genius when it comes to being cruel. Now, Robbie only fiddles when the Huntmaster forces him to. When he threatens something pitiful or helpless for the fun of watching Robbie sacrifice his pride and break his word in trade for it being spared worse things than being thrown to the horses and hounds." She half laughed and wiped her cheeks. "He did that for me, did you know?"

Delaney kept silent, but he believed her. That'd be just like Robbie.

"Now, when they make us, Robbie plays, and I dance, and we keep the huntsmen amused when they're around to see. Mostly they're not. There are so many places to hunt, and so much prey to catch..."

"The Huntmaster's tired of him, Robbie told me," Delaney said. He watched her carefully. "Maybe because he's bored, coming up with new ways to work Robbie's

puppet strings. If that's true, then the Huntmaster wants to be rid of Robbie and take me instead."

"He wants your *music*."

Something about her emphasis bothered Delaney, but he pushed it aside. For now. "He showed me what'd happen to Robbie, only I was too distracted to understand. As soon as Robbie's out of the Hunt, permanently, all the time he's spent in there will catch up to him. He'll age a thousand years in seconds, and there won't be anything left but dust."

Black-Eyed Susan nodded, once. It was enough.

Delaney dropped his head and folded his hands. "I don't know what to do."

"Neither do I. Only I won't stop. If you do, you're less of a man than Robbie thinks you are."

That brought Delaney sharply upright. "Like hell I'll quit. I'll cut out my own heart before I give up trying to rescue him and keep him safe."

"He's not helpless."

"Next to the Huntmaster, yes, he is."

"So are you."

"I don't care," Delaney said flatly, lying, but needing to speak the untruth anyway. Brazening it out. On impulse, he offered Black-Eyed Susan his hand. He might have drawn it back when he considered briefly, then changed his mind. Even if they came from opposite directions, they still met in the middle. "Truce? Alliance?"

The ghost of a smile glimmered on her lips. "You're crazy to even think about going up against the Huntmaster, but I suppose I am too. It must be part of being fools in love."

"I think so, yes." He took her hand in both of his to seal their bargain. "Still, we'll try, for the ones we love."

Black-Eyed Susan wriggled her toes in the dirt, accompanied by a quiet jingle of bells. "Then you believe me? About Hugh?"

"Yes. He's your Robbie."

"Such a way of saying it. But it's right." Black-Eyed Susan ducked her head down and peeked up at him, watery sunshine. She slid her hand down Delaney's arm and splayed her fingertips over his pulse. "I give you my word."

Chapter Sixteen

Delaney scabbled for footholds and handholds on the dead and dying ivy vines that cascaded down the sheer rock face of the cliff he climbed. Tried to climb. Had to. The hunter on his trail haunted the bottom of the rock wall, waiting for him to tumble down and break his crown.

If he reached the top, he could run farther, faster, though his legs all but refused to move; they ached and burned so, worn-out and cramped from the chase. His arms were no better off, his knuckles scraped raw and his wrists bruised. If he couldn't run, he would crawl, but he had no choice about either. The hunter had his scent, and no one left a chase halfway done.

Especially not this huntsman.

Faster, faster. Delaney reached for a vine to loop around his wrist. He tugged, and it seemed steady, but... Chance it? Should he?

He dared to look down, and when he did he tasted the iron of blood in the back of his mouth from the frantic pace of his heart beating too fast for him to survive. The hunter on his trail had begun to climb, and he found the crevices and crannies to balance on. Gaining ground, ever higher, going to be there soon.

Move now!

Delaney trusted his weight to the ivy wrapped around his wrist and strained up for the next one that looked solid, hoping, hoping...

His toeholds slipped, and the ivy gave way. Only a loop around his wrist kept Delaney from falling, and from the blaze of pain in his shoulder, he knew it'd tear and he'd wish for the hunter's mercy before he hit bottom, and he would, he was falling.

Queen Anne's lace tried to wrap itself around Delaney's wrists to catch him, but though it was surprisingly strong, it snapped when he shouted and jerked away in reflex.

The desiccated ivy that appeared to swallow the lace shaped itself into a face, old and wizened and cruel. "Let that be a lesson to you," it said in the Huntmaster's voice –

"Delaney!" Robbie's hard shove knocked Delaney halfway off the bed. He slapped his palm to the floor and cursed at the sting and the jarring of his bones. Upside down, unable to see, his stomach churned sourly and he coughed, almost retching.

Cool hands pulled at Delaney and brought him back to the mattress on the floor they shared tonight, too hot from sleeping body warmth, the sheets rucked up, tangled, and half torn off the mattress. Robbie kept his back to the wall, barely visible in the dark, only enough for Delaney to see his eyes were as wide as Black-Eyed Susan's, but his lips pressed thin and angry. "A dream," he said and pinched Delaney's arm. "Just a dream."

Delaney collapsed flat on his back and tried to breathe. He rubbed his eyes, dry and itchy. Even the sheet over him was too hot and stuck to his skin. "You and I both know that's not true."

Robbie sighed. He rubbed haphazard swirls and whorls over Delaney's bare chest. "Yes," he said, though Delaney didn't know if that was agreement or otherwise. Maybe both. "Come."

"What?"

Robbie climbed over Delaney. Almost kned him in the groin and elbowed his jaw, but determined. He pulled at Delaney to get him to follow. "Outside," he urged. "Fresh air. Creek water."

Delaney smiled despite himself. He reached out to stroke Robbie's hair. "You keep trying to take care of *me*."

"Would you deny me that?"

"No. God, no."

Robbie took Delaney's hand and helped him rise. "Good."

Delaney shed the boxers that were all he'd wanted to wear to sleep in this heat and felt better immediately. Why not? Wasn't anything the others hadn't seen before, even Black-Eyed Susan, as embarrassing as that memory might be, who slept curled up in the crook of Hugh's arm.

Robbie's teeth flashed white in an approving grin. He took Delaney's hand and pulled to lead him out.

"Delaney?" Hugh struggled up, careful not to disturb Black-Eyed Susan even only one-quarter awake. When Delaney was in contact with Robbie he saw better in the dark and could clearly make out the confusion and concern on Hugh's face. Could note the way Hugh looked from him to Robbie and back again, suspicion warring with concern.

Robbie answered before Delaney could. "Nightmare. Taking him outside to cool off." He moved slightly in front of Delaney and to the side. "I'll watch over him. You sleep now."

Hugh drew his lower lip between his teeth. He studied them. The quiet begged to be filled, and Delaney had opened his mouth to reassure Hugh in his turn when Hugh

settled back down with Black-Eyed Susan. He wrapped his arm around her and tucked her head under his chin.

Delaney blinked at them, at a loss, but not for too long. Robbie interlaced their fingers together and pulled again, insistent. "Outside is better," he urged. "Safe enough. No Huntmaster rides tonight, except in dreams."

"You knew?"

"Hard not to." Anger glittered dark in Robbie's eyes once more. "You begged out loud that he not take you."

"Robbie—"

Robbie shook his head. "No. Outside."

Delaney didn't think that meant Robbie would explain, but he followed anyway, eager to be out of the stifling heat of the cabin.

* * * * *

The first breath of clean, cooler air went down like cider, heady and strong. Delaney drew it deep into his lungs and let his head clear. Were all nights like this, and he hadn't noticed before? He didn't think so.

Robbie didn't let him stand still long enough to fall into the night's spell. "With me," he insisted, pulling Delaney on. "Down to the water." Delaney could hear the sound of the creek trickling down its course, cold water over rocks and sandy soil. He was suddenly thirsty, parched as a desert.

He wiped his dry lips. "How far?"

"Don't waste time talking." Robbie pulled harder, reminding Delaney abruptly and unpleasantly of his dream. He looked over his shoulder, through his tangles, urgent. That, and hungry.

"Oh," Delaney said, feeling thickheaded again.

Robbie crooked a grin at him. "Yes." He thumbed over Delaney's pulse. "Best cure for hot-blooded dreams."

Delaney couldn't argue with that. He picked up his feet and hurried, ahead of Robbie by two steps when he splashed into the creek. Cold water lapped around his ankles, so delicious a sensation that when he shivered it was with pleasure. He bent to pick up handfuls and splash them over his skin. Though icy they might be, and he almost imagined they created puffs of steam when they coursed down his body, the one thing they didn't cool was the ardor Robbie stirred with no more than a flash of a promise.

He found his place in the middle of the creek bed and beckoned to Robbie without words; none were needed, for Robbie came, snaking into his arms and lifting his face to slant their mouths together. He stroked his tongue over Robbie's, sleek and slick, creek-

chilled and night-strong, as hard as Delaney and wanton as a cat as he undulated in his rutting against Delaney's stomach.

"Good?" Robbie stopped to ask, lapping at Delaney's chin.

"Better than good," Delaney replied. He fitted their mouths together, a finer use for them, and took control. Stroked deep and fast and didn't stop. He breathed through his nose as a piper would, his breathing circular, and showed Robbie how to do the same.

Robbie chuckled when he got it and twined his arms around Delaney's neck. "Never too old to learn a new trick?" he queried, their lips barely touching but still kissing.

Delaney wrapped Robbie's hair around his wrists – so much better, overlaying the dark memory – and controlled him.

Robbie murmured wordlessly and happily and succumbed. He melted into Delaney, smooth and boneless except for where he was hard, and opened for Delaney to slide his knee between Robbie's. He rode Delaney's leg with his head thrown back.

Delaney hissed with pleasure and reveled in the contact. This stance made everything brighter and hotter between them, and it was all the better to watch Robbie's eyelids flutter shut with simple carnal pleasure, his lips as swollen and shiny red as Delaney thought his must be.

All too soon it became too ragged a rhythm to be controlled. Delaney laid his lips over Robbie's neck and mouthed, teased him with a hint of teeth and reached between them to stroke Robbie's fine cock. He swiped a heavy drop of precum and brought it up to taste, then shared the flavor with Robbie and thrust against him, as wild a creature as Robbie himself. Oh, but Robbie seemed feral when he writhed and bit.

It's not a Hunt, but not too different, Delaney thought hazily. It was more of an honoring of the wildness that unfurled like healthy ivy and bound them together.

Robbie shuddered and arched away from Delaney when he came. Delaney reeled him back in and crushed Robbie to his chest when he followed, their mingled cum mixed between them and sliding down their thighs. Robbie still quivered with jolting aftershocks when Delaney drew him in for a kiss, slow and sweet and playful, their tongues rolled together in lazy mock battle.

"Better," Robbie said when he tilted his head back to study Delaney dreamily. "Like music."

"In its way, or better than," Delaney said, his voice thickened hoarse. "How'd you know?"

Robbie laid a finger over Delaney's mouth and shook his head. He pressed his cheek to Delaney's, kissed beside his ear, and sighed, satisfied. "Now you can sleep," he said. "So can I. No more waking me up."

"Is that what this was about?" Delaney pretended to be offended.

Robbie pinched the softness of Delaney's unguarded side and laughed into the next kiss, and the next, and the one after that, until Delaney lost count and didn't mind that in the least.

The night was young, and it was theirs. Sleep could wait.

Chapter Seventeen

Delaney's next waking was much more pleasant. He came to slowly in the growing red and yellow light of rising dawn, the coolness of the dew on the grass diminishing the nighttime's sultry blanket of heat. A breeze drifted in through the window screens, carrying with it the sound of cicadas and the faraway hum of the festival waking up.

Still half-asleep and savoring the last traces of dreamless comfort, Delaney rolled to his side and felt for Robbie. He frowned when he found nothing but emptiness, the sheets cooled of any body heat. Patted them three times to be sure before he cracked his eyelids open and squinted through morning fugue and nearsightedness.

"Like this," Hugh murmured in his trying-to-be-quiet way, as loud as a stage whisper and thinking he was far stealthier than he actually managed. Delaney smiled sleepily, then broader, delight mixed with disbelief when he focused on Hugh sitting amid the tangled sheets on his own mattress.

For Robbie crouched before him, intent on the bodhran—Hugh's own—looped over his wrist. He frowned at the carved cipín that Hugh pressed on him, and though he bristled when Hugh took him by the hand to guide him through an easy rhythm, he eased at the sound of the most ancient music of all.

"That's it. You're getting it," Hugh encouraged. He let go of Robbie and sat back to watch him figure it out. But did Robbie know more than he let on? Robbie turned as if to shake hair out of his face and winked at Delaney.

Delaney rubbed his mouth to wipe away his grin. Maybe this was only a happy dream, but if so he didn't want to wake up. Too good to be allowed to drift away into hazy memory.

Behind Hugh, Black-Eyed Susan rested with her cheek pillowed on her hand. She watched them with the prettiest, fondest of sleepy amusements, her brass bells silent

and her adoration shining clearer than the growing sunlight. She caught Delaney's eye and dimpled at him. In that moment, she was so beautiful in her way, as Robbie was in his, that Delaney understood why Hugh was called so strongly to her.

They were rare and precious gifts, these, their refugees from the Wild Hunt. Better still, they looked right here, at home amid the casual clutter of a bachelor's one-room cabin. Best of all, the steady, soothing thrum of the bodhran.

Hugh watched Robbie, tolerant, pleased. When had — after the nightmare? What had he seen in that moment that changed his mind? Delaney wasn't sure he wanted to know, not if it got in the way of his enjoying this.

"Not bad for a fiddler," Delaney said, sliding his legs out of bed. He'd washed and put his boxers back on before he and Robbie had returned to the cabin. They were molded warm to his body, comfortably so. "Who needs strings to make music?"

Robbie wrinkled his nose at Delaney.

Hugh put his head to a side. "The fiddle you played, that first night. Was it yours?"

Robbie ducked his head, pinkness suffusing his cheeks. "No," he mumbled.

Hugh tweaked the bone from Robbie's hand and aimed a playful swat at him. "You little thief. I guess Delaney gave you the one we had collecting dust, didn't he?"

Robbie nodded. "Mine now."

Hugh held up his hands. "No arguments from me."

"No?" Delaney asked, surprised.

Hugh shrugged, rueful. "A good instrument might as well get some use."

"Thank you."

Hugh's grin crooked. The corners of his eyes crinkled. "Don't mention it."

"We've kept it tucked away. Robbie, I'll get it for you now."

Black-Eyed Susan rolled to her back and watched Delaney slip out of bed. When he passed her, treading lightly on his bare feet, she mouthed silently for him and him alone, *thank you*.

She had to know it was his pleasure, and from the broadening of her grin, he thought she did.

The trip to the van and back didn't take too long, and no one was awake or moving around enough yet to comment on a man running around in his boxers and nothing else. Delaney returned fast enough to please him and carried the fiddle, still in its case, straight to Robbie and laid it in his arms. "It needs an owner," he said. "Now it's yours."

Robbie stroked the case in silent wonder; then, with the blazing excitement of a child on Christmas morning, he hurried it out of its case. He tucked the point beneath his chin and drew the bow over the strings.

One clear, soft, sweet note emerged, as fine as the last traces of purple in the sky outside. He sighed, stroked the rosy wood, and nestled his cheek against it. Delaney saw love there, as pure as a father for his child, and it made his heart seem too big for his chest.

He didn't want to get up again, to leave this small cocoon of companions and song, so he began to sing instead, soft and low. A simple ballad but an old one, about true lovers, fair and handsome rogues. Robbie laughed but swung into the tune, followed Delaney and kept pace with him. Hugh caught the rhythm and joined them with the perfectness of a second hand ticking past the hour.

Delaney thought Black-Eyed Susan might dance for them, but she did not. She joined her voice to Delaney's, surprising him with the clear sweetness of her light soprano, behind him but making the song all the better.

The only thing missing was Tam and her acoustic bass. Delaney didn't have to look for her to know she was still gone. Maybe she wasn't coming back, but that wasn't something he wanted to talk about, not with Hugh, or Black-Eyed Susan, and especially not Robbie—it'd only frighten them, and maybe unnecessarily. He still hoped he was wrong about Tam's possible dallying with the Hunt, but for now he pushed her and the uncertainty of what that might mean from his mind. Thoughts of betrayal didn't belong here, when everything shined rosy golden warm like this.

He played on instead, in harmony with Robbie and Hugh and Black-Eyed Susan, and thought that if there was a heaven, then this was what it must look like.

* * * * *

No sooner had the good smells of bacon frying and toast browning and coffee perking begun than Tam swung through the cabin door with her acoustic bass case slung across her back. She looked as fresh as if she'd slept soundly in her bed all night long, until Delaney got a glimpse of her eyes and saw white lines of stress at the corners and an extra layer of implacable calm to contradict that in her usual intense internal focus.

Delaney wasn't the only one to notice. Black-Eyed Susan faltered midstroke with the blue plastic bowl of eggs she'd started scrambling with a fork, and Robbie, still occupied with fine-tuning the fiddle, stopped to regard her narrowly.

Delaney thought they could smell it, the scent of the forest and the Hunt that clung to her. He knew he could. So much for keeping this secret until he was sure.

Hugh alone seemed oblivious, and Delaney wanted to keep it that way. He glanced from Black-Eyed Susan to Robbie, and interestingly enough, both managed to turn their heads half seconds before he did so, their hair still swinging over their shoulders from the abruptness of their moving.

Was it that Robbie and Black-Eyed Susan couldn't help him with this, bound not to, or wouldn't, afraid? Delaney wasn't sure, but he took it as read that he'd not been

wrong and *something* wasn't right. It cast a dark shadow over the golden morning that kindled a dark red rumble of anger in his mood.

For her part, Tam didn't seem to notice any of the undercurrent. Maybe she truly didn't. "I'm starving." She reached into the pan and filched a slice of sausage.

"Greedy," Hugh scolded without heat. "There's toast if you're starving."

"Close enough." Tam stole another slice of fatty meat and wrapped the toast around it, then tore at the impromptu roll as if truly ravenous. She licked the shine of grease off her lips and leaned against the wall to avidly watch Hugh cook. So strange; she ate like birds were supposed to, a nibble here and there, but if anything she'd dropped weight in the past day or so, the ever-prominent bones in her face standing out more than usual.

"Where have you been?" Hugh asked as he took the bowl of half-beaten eggs from Black-Eyed Susan. He looked puzzled but shrugged and tipped them into a skillet regardless. "You look trashed."

"Sweet talker," Tam said. She licked her fingers. "Hurry up with those."

"They'll be done when they're done, unless you want them raw." Hugh feinted the pan at Tam. Delaney didn't think he was the only one to see the avid light in Tam's eyes or the subtle effort expended not to take him up on the offer.

Black-Eyed Susan still wouldn't look at Delaney and kept her face hidden. Robbie wouldn't turn around either, but he'd pushed his hair out of his face to watch Tam. He didn't seem angry, more like puzzled.

Delaney still didn't trust this. He cleared his throat. "Big party last night we didn't know about? In the forest, maybe?"

Black-Eyed Susan startled as if she'd been shot. Robbie pointed silently at Delaney, who got the warning and subsided.

"Not so much a party." Tam seemed almost her old, unruffled self. "Found a quiet place, not far from the cellar. Spent all night working on a tune and then..." She shrugged. "Sunrise."

That sounded like the old Tam, enough so for Delaney to hesitate in his suspicions. If it weren't for Black-Eyed Susan's trembling and Robbie's intent assessment, he'd have believed her.

"*I won't hurt you. Trust me.*" Delaney flinched. Had he heard that, or just thought it, or had it stroked some other sense altogether? He looked across the way to see Tam regarding him as blankly as still water.

He sensed Robbie's stare, as any man or woman or child would know when someone was looking at them, and turned to him with an eyebrow raised in question. Robbie drew his hand across his throat and shrugged. The message was clear: *Leave it. For now.*

Robbie trusted Delaney with more than enough. He'd have to do the same and hope Robbie knew what he was doing. Who knew? She could be telling the truth, and they were all just on edge.

Delaney's head hurt. "Coffee ready?"

Hugh jerked his chin toward the decanter. "Help yourself. We're out of cream and any kind of sweetener."

"I thought we had honey," Tam said. "Maple syrup, even?"

"Somebody ate it all." Hugh shoulder-bumped her, careful not to upset the range of pans full of good food. "Sweet tooth much, Tam-o-shanter?"

"Don't call me that." She subsided and moved far enough away from the stove to protect her acoustic bass, which she removed deftly from its case. Her fingertips looked as red and sore as if she'd played all night without stopping; Delaney thought there might be blisters forming under her calluses from the gingerly way she handled the instrument. Still, despite all that she played an idiosyncratic sprightly run on the strings that ended on a questioning note. "On my way back, I met a man."

"Mmm. I don't know that song, but if you hum a few bars, I can fake it." Hugh started to tip equal but man-sized portions onto the plates Black-Eyed Susan held out for him one by one. "I'm kidding, Tam. Who'd you run into, and why's it important enough for you to tell us? *Ow*." He almost dropped the bacon pan and sucked at a spatter of bacon drippings that reddened his thumb. "Well?"

Tam plucked a teasing melody on her bass. "Event coordinator for this festival," she said, deliberately drawing it out. Blast her hide, but her trickiness worked and won Delaney's undivided attention. Robbie's and Black-Eyed Susan's too. "The bagpipe rock band set to perform tonight canceled. No one in this crowd knows how to do more than tootle on a tin whistle, and not that well." She played deeper, heavier notes, almost like a burly man's mocking laughter. Delaney had forgotten how good Tam was at that.

The memory kept him from reaching the conclusion before Hugh, who hastily pushed the skillets off their burners and wiped his hands on his hips. "It's ours? The main venue?"

"They have no music, but they want to dance and drink." Tam plucked three sharp notes, *ha-ha-ha*. "It's a good chance."

Maybe too good. Delaney overrode his intention to keep it zipped as Robbie had asked and lifted his chin to her. "We haven't practiced together in a long time," he said.

Hugh turned on him, sharp again. "That's not exactly our fault." Irritation shifted to eagerness as quick as a dragonfly's flight. "Years of knowing each other, that can't be wiped out in a week and some-odd days. We can run through a set this afternoon, and we won't need too much equipment, just basic speakers and a mike. Keep it simple, keep it lively – Delaney, don't wuss out on this. We need it."

Delaney wanted to edge back from the too-bright light of Hugh's enthusiasm, knowing how odd that was, and how a week ago he'd have blazed just as bright and

excited. "There were three of us then," he pointed out. "Now there are five." *And two of them, I don't want to be exposed for anyone to see and take advantage of.*

That was what truly held him back. Up on stage, they'd be vulnerable, all of them. The Wild Hunt could gallop through the crowd and sweep them away, and no one would think it was anything more than some over-the-top theatrics. It'd be what he'd do, if he were the Huntmaster.

Knowing that he could think like the Huntmaster, that it had come naturally to him, made Delaney's throat close up. He hesitated, wanting to say yes for Hugh's sake, certain he should say no to keep Robbie safe, and Black-Eyed Susan, but the seconds were ticking down and he'd have to say something, though what —

A long, pure note, as clear as springwater and as rich as ancient wine, divided the tension between Hugh and Delaney down the middle. Hugh turned in sync with Delaney to see Robbie rising to his feet, eyes closed, bow moving over his fiddle.

Tam barked a quiet laugh and plucked her acoustic bass. "That's three who say yes."

Black-Eyed Susan crossed her arms and hugged herself, but as she did so — as she did so — her brass bells jingled. She squeezed her eyes shut, but she had no choice, that much was clear. She raised her arms over her head and began to dance, though she kept her eyes on Hugh and managed to smile for him.

"That's four," Tam said, soft as spring rain. "Delaney?"

What choice did he have, if he wanted to keep them safe, but to stay by their sides? But he didn't have to be happy about it. Delaney tucked his hands under his arms to hide their tightening into fists and nodded curtly. "You win."

Tam winked at him and licked her teeth. "Good."

Good had never sounded quite so awful before.

Chapter Eighteen

They weren't given the main stage after all. Without the need for speakers and a roadie, for cables and sound checks and colored lights—Celtic fusion had its divas, same as any other genre—they'd cordoned off the great cement slab with its folding chairs and its raised platform of plywood.

To Delaney's mind, they'd been lucky. Or not so lucky, depending on how you looked at it, for they'd been given the amphitheater instead. Small and old, with squared-off timbers sunk in stair-stepping rows for seats, and nothing at the bottom except a sheet raised like a sail for a backdrop. No cords, no plugs, no lights except for a handful of torches the festivalgoers had cheerfully donated.

Delaney couldn't see the cellar from where he stood tuning his guitar, but he could feel it, not far away. And then there were the trees, growing dense and wild, close enough to touch. Beyond them, a shadowy darkness that seemed almost too solid to be the absence of light. More like a presence that waited.

He quashed a shiver.

"Hey. You all right?" Hugh touched Delaney's wrist. "Careful with those. Don't break them."

"What? Oh, damn." Delaney let go of the tuning peg half a turn before he would have snapped a string. "Sorry. My mind's somewhere else."

"You and everybody else." Hugh fell easily into place at Delaney's side. Lucky bastard, all he had to do was make sure he had both bodhran and cipín and he was ready to go. Still, he rolled his shoulders and glanced over them. "Does something about all this seem, I don't know, off to you?"

"Why would it?" Delaney replied, mildly surprised that the question came out deadpan despite the flare of panic it invoked. Hugh couldn't know about any of this,

and not just for Black-Eyed Susan's sake. He was a good man and he didn't need to find out that there was more fact than fiction to the old songs after all.

"Not sure. Whatever's wrong, I can't put my finger on it," Hugh replied. He tousled Black-Eyed Susan's hair as she passed by, spare set of shakers in hand. Celtic maracas, he'd once heard the shakers called, and it wasn't *too* far off the mark. "Hi, beautiful."

Delaney bit his lip. Black-Eyed Susan's smile was forced and pale. "Ready to start?"

Hugh assessed the gathering crowd. "Almost. Delaney, is Robbie good to go?"

Ah. That'd be the question. As if calling his name had summoned him – and who was to say it hadn't? – Robbie surfaced at Delaney's left side. He'd dressed in black again, all borrowed from Tam, for he was too slender in the shoulders for Delaney's shirts and too short for Hugh's trousers. Tam's gear fit him better than a glove, leaving him looking uncannily like the man who had jumped the fire to play with Delaney not so long ago. A pale face, two pale hands, and an untamed fall of dark gold hair. Three-quarters' worth of darkness, and not enough light to balance him.

He held the borrowed fiddle with the tender care of a mother and child, though, and that meant enough to soothe Delaney's uneasiness. "Good to go," he parroted Hugh. He laid his head on Delaney's shoulder, leaving blond strands clinging to Delaney's plain blue shirt when he lifted up to kiss him lightly on the lips. "Promise," he said for Delaney alone to hear.

Somehow, Delaney didn't quite believe him.

Before he could ask, Hugh had taken Robbie at his word. He thumped Delaney on the back and drew all his stage presence, a considerable force that'd drive back any darkness, and plucked up a torch to brandish at the crowd. "Who's ready to dance?"

More had turned out than Delaney had expected, and almost all clapped and cheered. Any excuse for a party, not that he saw a problem with that. Celtic fusion put fire in your heart and made your body eager to move with the music.

He watched Robbie tuck the fiddle beneath his chin and ready his bow over its strings. "You're sure you're all right?" he asked under his breath. Robbie looked paler than usual – or was that his imagination?

Robbie bared his teeth at Delaney. "Yes. Quit asking."

Tam had laid aside her acoustic bass for the big double bass at her own insistence. Her fingers looked too small and pale on the brutally tough strings. Black-Eyed Susan raised her hands over her head, bells swinging in a chime like the mocking of the fey, and Hugh twirled his cipín between his fingers like a baton.

Delaney closed his eyes, whispered a small prayer for luck, and gave Hugh the nod. "Let's do this."

Hugh counted the time for them – "One, two, one, two, three" – and away they went.

Delaney knew, from the first notes, that this was going to go as badly as he'd dreaded.

Nothing was wrong, and that was the problem. They were too perfect, too pure. He hadn't practiced in longer than he'd have liked, yet he found the chords he wanted almost without trying. Chiming behind him, the jingle of Black-Eyed Susan's brass bells and finger cymbals were loud and clear. The low, ominous thrum of Tam's bow drawn over the bass sounded ominous. Threatening.

By comparison, Robbie's fiddling was light and sweet, but it carried with it the wildness that suffused him and a threat of manic energy. His and Tam's bowing clashed, mingled, and clashed again, first jarring and then in terrible harmony, then warring.

Hugh's drumming sounded like hoofbeats. Fast, yes, but they'd started a reel and those were swift by nature. Not this fast, though. Not getting faster all the while.

Delaney faltered, or tried to. His brain stumbled, but his fingering carried on without a hitch. Autopilot or something more? He didn't want to think about it. He couldn't *not* think about it.

Some of the crowd heard nothing wrong and danced, kicking up their heels and laughing bright and sharp. Some hesitated, uncertain. One, two, or maybe three sat down and put their hands to their mouths or over their hearts.

"We need to stop this," Delaney said, though he knew no one else heard him or wanted to listen. The song whirled about to the chorus faster still. His fingertips burned. He couldn't take them off the strings. "Robbie, make it stop."

All he saw of Robbie through the hair that flew around his face with the effort of his bowing were the whites of his eyes and the edges of his teeth. The rest of him he held so taut and tense that he looked to be seized in a cramp.

The chorus circled around into the next first, boiling-hot quicksilver. Delaney jostled Hugh. Sweat ran down Hugh's face, and his eyes had glazed over. He drummed with a speed that should have broken his wrist or sent him dropping his cipín and cursing in pain.

No help to be found there. He couldn't see any more of Black-Eyed Susan than the dip and sway of her hips while she danced with all her body. She almost seemed to blur, caught in the thrall of the music.

The beat of the bodhran, the hoofbeats, came closer. They deafened Delaney to anything but the faraway wailing of Robbie's fiddle and the bone-deepness of the notes Tam drew out.

Wait.

One more time, the chorus circled about on itself like a snake eating its own tail, and the tempo picked up speed. Delaney tasted blood and realized he'd been grinding his jaws hard enough to crack a tooth. He spat and blinked sweat out of his eyes to squint at Tam. Tam, who looked as cool and untroubled as she'd started. She drew the steady undertow from her bass that caught and carried them along.

Robbie's bow was a blur. Delaney saw tendons standing out white and taut in his neck. Blood on his fingertips and a silent keen spasming in his throat. He jerked strangely, almost like a seizure. Trying to throw the fiddle down. Only he couldn't.

"Tam!" Delaney shouted, rendered mute by the music.

Faster, faster, faster still –

Hugh's mouth shaped an O of pain. Black-Eyed Susan left red-tinged footprints in her wake as she spun and twirled, her bells brightening as if they were too near a forge.

Faster again, and they wouldn't survive this. No one danced, though some clung to one another, and some buried their faces in others' breasts to hide.

It was coming again, the step up. *No*. "Tam! Tam, stop it!" Delaney tried to yell. Nothing came out. He threw all his might into projecting his voice, every drop of himself he could claw away from the music, and bellowed her name, chest burning with the rush of silent air.

No sound. Yet she heard him or knew his intent. She lifted her head sharply and –
Fumbled.

One of the bass's strings broke under the strain. She dropped the bass with a mighty *thump*, a raucous cacophony that spread with the quickness of ripples in an underground lake, dark stillness untouched by mortal man in more time than man could comprehend.

Robbie dropped with her and Black-Eyed Susan and Hugh, who fell to his knees and then to his hands and knees.

Delaney alone stood, guitar heavy in his numb hands. He was the only one who could look up and see the night sky through the trees, and he was the only one who heard the low rumble of the Huntmaster's chuckle.

But then again, he'd been the only one meant to hear, hadn't he?

Chapter Nineteen

"Robbie." Delaney would have thought throwing his guitar down, careless of where it landed, was an abomination; now, he didn't care. To hell with all of it. He went to his knees in front of Robbie. He bracketed Robbie's face with his hands and tried to see him beneath the dampened tangle of hair that hid him, or that he hid behind. "Robbie?"

He smoothed the hair out of the way. Robbie looked – *dear God*. Red-rimmed eyes that rolled in their sockets, pale lips, skin blanched the almost blue of milk with all the cream skimmed out. He inhaled sharply when Delaney touched him. A little color returned. Not much. Not enough.

Robbie tried to smile, and Delaney couldn't bear to look. "Don't," he warned, shaking Robbie harder than he'd meant to. He glanced over his shoulder and saw – not surprised at all, though sickened – that Tam had vanished, leaving bass and bow behind.

He shook it off, the deep-wounding sense of betrayal, and focused on Robbie instead. "What was that?"

Robbie raised one shoulder. "What do you think?"

"I heard the Huntmaster. Just now. Laughing at us."

"What did you expect?" Robbie sagged forward.

Delaney caught his lover and held him upright. Though Robbie's head lolled on his neck, he still tried to smile that awful, dying-rabbit smile. "Did you know this was going to happen?"

A hint of fire kindled in Robbie's eye. "No."

"Are you surprised that it did?"

The fire died. Robbie looked down and drew his bloodless lower lip between his teeth. He spoke a word in a language Delaney didn't understand, then finished by saying, "No."

"We're getting out of here." Though Hugh had stopped drumming and cradled his wrist—it might be broken; Delaney would be surprised if it wasn't—he could still hear the hoofbeats circling round and round about them.

"Can't run anywhere he can't follow," Robbie said. He rose shakily to his feet. "Still. I'm with you."

Delaney caught Robbie's hand and pressed a kiss to the back of it. "I have to make sure they're okay. Hugh and Black-Eyed Susan and—" He stopped. *Tam.*

Robbie turned to face the woods. "Not far off."

"I know," Delaney said, grim. "They're toying with us."

Robbie looked at him, expectant. Waiting for a command. Prey still, but still too proud to bend his head. "Then we stay?"

Delaney didn't want to leave as much as he did, but he had no choice. The call of the Hunt threaded its way through his veins and made him too hot to stand still. If he didn't run, he'd die of standing still. "The Huntmaster wants me, not them. I won't risk them."

"But you'd linger and risk yourself for them." It wasn't a question, and Delaney didn't think Robbie disapproved.

He answered anyway. "They're my..." There wasn't a word for it. Delaney grimaced. "I'm sorry. I have to do this."

"Not a thing to be sorry for," Robbie said, steady as a rock, though Delaney could see in him the primal need to run fast and far away.

Delaney kissed his knuckles one by one. "Okay. If they're hurt, I'll call nine-one-one. And then we'll run. You and I. Agreed?"

Robbie squeezed Delaney's hand, his knuckles seeming sharp enough to pierce the flesh, but his grip strong and growing stronger. He breathed easier, the rise and fall of his chest not so erratic. "Yes."

But when he sought for Hugh, Black-Eyed Susan had fallen half on top of him, half in his lap. She pressed her forehead to his and babbled things Delaney couldn't understand, spoken too quickly. Tears streaked down her cheeks, and her face was twisted in grief. Hugh fumbled to touch her, to soothe her, but his face bore white lines of pain. His wrists had swollen, both sprained.

No time to hunt for a phone. Delaney caught the eye of a woman who'd been horrified from the start, dressed in jeans beneath her short, embroidered tunic, modern haircut fallen out of its anachronistic snood. She clutched a cell phone to her breast.

"Call for help," he barked at her. "Call someone *now.*"

Though she startled, the woman nodded jerkily and started to hit buttons.

Delaney knelt by Hugh's side and put his hand on the back of Black-Eyed Susan's head. "Listen to me," he whispered in her ear. "We'll distract the Huntmaster. Stay with him."

Black-Eyed Susan pressed her cheek to Hugh's, wetting it with her tears. "He wants you to come to him. He'll gather us all back tonight."

"He'll try to."

"What can you do to stop him?" Black-Eyed Susan hid her face and Hugh's from Delaney. "Go away. Let me have this last bit of time."

Robbie laid his hand atop Delaney's head. Delaney wanted to protest, but he could feel the quivering in Robbie's arm. They'd delayed long enough.

"I *will* stop him," he swore to Black-Eyed Susan as he stood and held on to Robbie. "Protect Hugh. Keep him safe."

"With my life," Black-Eyed Susan said, or Delaney thought she said. The intent was still there.

He drank in the sight of them, committing it to memory in case it was the last, and turned away. "To the woods, Robbie."

"No. Hold." Robbie drew upright as sharply as a strung bow. He scented the air. "Closer than we think."

"All the more reason to run." Delaney pushed him.

Robbie stumbled a step, then held his ground and glared. "You don't know these grounds. I do."

"Then I'll follow you." Now that Delaney listened for them, he could hear the hue and cry of the hounds on the trail, the horses disdaining them with screams of defiance, and the clank of iron and brass. "Go. I'm behind you."

"Yes." Robbie moved backward, never turning away from Delaney. "You know how it has to be."

Awareness sank needle-sharp. "God, no. Not like this. I won't play by his rules. Why would you even ask?"

Robbie drew his lips over his teeth. "Hunter. Prey. It's how it works."

"It shouldn't." What kind of defiance or challenge was it to do exactly what the Huntmaster wanted? It made no sense. "Robbie—"

Robbie beckoned to Delaney, bring-it-on curls of his hands. "Why do you think? *Bait.*"

"Robbie, no—" Delaney snatched at his lover. Tried to catch him.

Too late; Robbie had already leaped about and sprinted for the trees. One glimpse of bright hair and milky-pale skin and he was gone.

Though Delaney loved Robbie, he damned him too as he raced after his prey and fell crossways over the thrall of the Hunt, swimming against the tide.

* * * * *

Perhaps it was that the thrall of the Wild Hunt was strongest this time, on the final drive, or perhaps it was that Delaney was in no way going to let Robbie get away with what he suspected of him, or perhaps just that Delaney knew Robbie's tricks by now.

If he closed his eyes and breathed deeply, he could catch Robbie's scent. Listen, and he could tell not only where Robbie ran, but where he was going. Look, and know where he himself should be before Robbie got there.

It was as a hunter, with a huntsman's power, that he raised his voice to the trees and demanded, "*Out of my way.*"

The pines swept their boughs apart, the oaks formed a mocking arch over him. Fallen branches and rocks rolled off the path, and the Queen Anne's lace that lined the sides giggled shrill and cruel.

Above Delaney, the Green Man appeared in the leaves and leered.

Delaney reached for a knife he didn't have, not knowing a second later why he'd done so, but too able to guess. A huntsman would be armed. The Wild Hunt was already claiming him for its own and drawing him into the hive mind. It laughed at him, a deep jolly Santa Claus rumble that made Delaney shudder with revulsion. "We'll sing about this later, and so will you, when the Huntmaster commands."

"We'll see about that."

The Green Man's laughter followed Delaney down the path. Delaney ignored it, put his head down, and pushed his muscles to their limits, then past them. If they'd kept him too long and he'd lost Robbie's trail, then he'd find that knife and slash them smaller than blades of grass, all of them, even to the trees themselves.

Thorns lashed across his shins. He recognized them for what they were, ignored them, tore through them, ran on. He couldn't breathe, his lungs shrieking and his throat closed. He tasted metal on the back of his tongue and knew his heart would burst soon.

He didn't stop, because *there*: a pale flash, a whisper of gold. Delaney caught the branch of the nearest tree and swung himself up, through a branch that put out a carved crocodile's face and snapped at him, and *down*.

He crashed to earth with Robbie in his arms and pinned Robbie with the weight of his body.

"Don't you fight me... Don't..." Delaney caught every slash and gouge that Robbie aimed at him. Braceleted his wrists and slammed them to the ground at his sides. "Look at me!"

Robbie arched up, mouth in an O and eyes too wide. He sagged then as if his strings had been cut, and sobbed. "Why? You should have stayed."

"You knew damn well I couldn't have." Delaney didn't let Robbie go. "Bait? Did you think I'm dumb enough to fall for that?"

Robbie glared at him. "Smart enough to listen. I'd hoped."

"Brains and heart duel to the death. Who wins? No contest." Delaney kissed him, quick and hard. "I won't let it happen. You're not sacrificing yourself for me. That is what you planned to do, isn't it? Lay down your life for that bastard to ride across. No. Not while I'm still alive."

A ghost of a smile flickered across Robbie's lips. "Careful what you wish for."

"I've heard that before. I still wish for you."

"More fool you."

"That's as the case may be." Delaney made a judgment call, one he might regret, or might not, and lifted his weight off Robbie. Still, he carried Robbie with him until Robbie straddled his lap, and Robbie came with almost no protest but with enough tension in his limbs to be immobile as a carved doll.

When he let go of Robbie's wrists to press Robbie to him, Robbie didn't punch or strike, but flung his arms around Delaney and clung breathlessly tight. He smelled of loam and sweat and blood. Like the Wild Hunt. Smears of dirt and crimson striped his face, his hair would be easier to cut than comb, and he was so beautiful he stopped Delaney's heart.

Delaney pressed his mouth to Robbie's and begged for entrance. Robbie moaned, a small and helpless yet hungry sound, and opened for him. He snarled his fingers in Delaney's hair and pulled hard, hurting his scalp. Delaney welcomed the prickling pain and forgot about it in the next second.

"I need you," he said between kisses that ran one into the other, barely stopping to let the words out, but unable to keep them in. "Need you so much. Won't lose you."

Robbie drew Delaney's lip into his mouth and bit. "Can't not."

"The hell I won't. You're mine." Delaney smothered Robbie's face with kisses and touched him wherever he liked, and that was everywhere. Down the sweep of back to the swell of taut buttocks and the length of arms to the hardness of his chest and lower still; yes, that was where he wanted most to be. When he thrust inside and took Robbie in hand, never ceasing to kiss him, Robbie bucked and whined.

"No time," Robbie panted. "Run, *run*."

"Not without you." Delaney stroked him without mercy. "He can try to take you."

"He will. *Ahh*." Robbie strained against Delaney. "Please—" He gasped for breath that wouldn't come. "Take you too."

"No." Delaney rose to meet Robbie's body, struggling to rise and fall. Body demanded what the clock wouldn't allow, and who knew that time didn't slow down for them? Anything could happen here, *anything*. And perhaps Delaney could shape that to his will.

"Come on," he urged Robbie, riding their cocks together through too much cloth. He freed both hands to sweep over Robbie's bare skin, every inch he could reach, and kissed Robbie until his vision clouded over.

He found the corset piercings, that damned double row of brass, and jerked the lacings. Robbie cried out when the skin pulled taut around the rings. "No more of the show. *Mine.*"

Robbie ground against Delaney and cursed into his mouth and bit through Delaney's lip as he came in a great, shuddering rush.

Delaney licked off the blood and sank his teeth into Robbie's shoulder, following after. "Now you're inside me," he said. He ran his tongue over his lips. "Your life is mine. He has no power over you."

"I think we all know differently." Bracken crumbled underfoot beneath leather boots free of mud or blood or worse. Age blasted the woods and threatened to crumble all the trees to powder. The smell of horses and iron and blood made Delaney gag.

The Huntmaster had arrived.

"I think it's time you learned to show me some respect, musician." The Huntmaster covered Delaney's vision with darkness too fast to fight and stole the breath from his lungs in a knifelike twist of agony. "I think you need to know I am your master, and I'll show you what that means. *Now.*"

The world disappeared.

Chapter Twenty

“Don’t waste your strength looking for him, the one you call ‘Robbie.’ He isn’t here.”

Delaney came to on his knees, only just balanced enough not to topple forward into the morass of too-thick, too-spongy humus he’d somehow fallen on. *Peat?* The air smelled of snow and of the cold rocks that jutted up and around the ground cover. There was no pattern or sense to them until Delaney’s mind set the broken stones upright and arranged them in a circle.

He wiped his mouth, tasting the sourness of bile. At least he hadn’t vomited, and he’d spared himself that much indignity, though to be frank dignity was not his concern at the moment.

No need to ask who was with him—he’d have known that sinfully dark voice anywhere as that of the Huntmaster—and Delaney thought he knew where he was, but he asked anyway. “Where did you take me?” An awful thought struck him. “When am I?”

The Huntmaster made the trees shake with his explosion of mirth. “I am ageless, and so is this place.”

Delaney nodded at the fallen standing stones. “Tell that to them.”

“They’re only broken at my whim. And broken or not, still they remain. As do I, as do my hunters and our pets who crave the thrill of being chased down time and time again.”

Delaney started to argue. Stopped. He wanted to deny it but couldn’t: both he and Robbie were at their most alive when on the move. But was that the thrall of the Hunt, or was it who they were and had become?

So many questions. Delaney wished for a mouthful of the snow he could smell on the air to wet his dry lips with. “That wasn’t an answer.”

“Not at all, no. Clever musician.” The Huntmaster lifted himself lightly onto one of the uppermost stones. He propped one leather-booted foot on the rock and let the other swing down, as careless as a sunbather on a warm day. “You have more wit about you than Robbie, and your beauty is as far different as night from day. Blond, green-eyed as a cat, run daft from his own stubbornness; it’s little wonder that I prefer your darkness and your sharp mind, now is it?”

“Be that as it may. I’m not yours.”

The Huntmaster kicked his foot idly as a child, but Delaney was not so easily fooled. The clean smell of snow was replaced by a flood of the raw tang of hot iron and overheated horses, of sweat and beer, of meat roasted to a char on the outside yet still raw inside. He could hear the steady clatter of hoofbeats not close, but not far. Biding their time.

“Are you not mine?” the Huntmaster asked. He swung himself lightly off his rock. As he approached Delaney, for all his size and solid muscular bulk and utter masculinity, he moved with the sort of sinuous grace of a stalking wildcat on the trail of a mouse it intended to play with before devouring.

And I am its prey. Delaney wondered if this was what his hunting had been like for Robbie, then rejected that horrifying notion. “No wonder he wants to get away from you,” he said without thinking.

The Huntmaster rolled one shoulder carelessly. He crouched before Delaney, still taller than him by far, even when kneeling, and almost twice as broad. “Yes, and Black-Eyed Susan too, the childish fools. I call that ungratefulness. I am not an unkind thing, Delaney; don’t shake your head. I know what you think of me.” He brushed the angle of Delaney’s jaw, lingering just on the wrong side of too long. Petting him like an animal and coaxing him like a would-be lover. “I am what I was made to be. No more, no less. Know that.” He chuckled. “Unlovely Tam knew this right away, the first night she came to me, and she did that of her own free will. Or had you already guessed?”

Delaney said nothing.

“She knew, too, that I can be kind,” the Huntmaster said. “I can give her the home she never found in this world. You know, if you’ll only admit it to yourself, that a strange one like her does not belong in this day and age. That she could be happy with me.”

Still, Delaney said nothing. The truth was unmistakable, but it left a foul taste in his mind. Was standing apart from the crowd so awful for Tam that *this* would be better?

Or would it be bad for her? If she belonged... But then, he’d heard her swear she wasn’t trying to hurt them. It didn’t make sense to Delaney. He shuddered.

“As for you, I can be all you need of a man. All you have to do is bow your head and follow me.”

Delaney spat to the side.

He'd hoped to anger the Huntmaster. No such luck. He didn't even seem to notice, though the trees did in their strange and uncanny way. They choked each other in rings around this small clearing. Old, they were; they looked older than time, and they hadn't grown kind with age. The sound of the wind whistling through them sounded far more like hissing.

"So, so stubborn," the Huntmaster murmured. "I like you all the better for fighting, you know. If you and Robbie had foolishly lost your hearts to one another, then I would have laid better odds on you losing patience to the point of murder."

Robbie. Delaney straightened. "Tell me where he is."

"And why should I? What do I stand to gain? I offer you a great gift that I extend only rarely these centuries. Love. Excitement. The pop of joints of meat, night rides through lands of dreams, and the heather ale you've only heard of in songs." He stroked Delaney's cheek. "I offer you passion, and I offer you immortality. And you say no?"

"Did you offer Robbie immortality too?" Delaney seized on the Huntmaster's second's worth of surprise. "He's told me if you cut the strings that bind him to the Hunt, then he'll die. All that age catches up to him, and he's ashes before the sun sets. It's true. I can see it in your face. Why should I believe any promise you make to me?"

He'd expected the Huntmaster to grow angry at this. Instead, the Huntmaster only looked all the more amused. "I forget that bartering has fallen out of fashion. Another thing I could teach you."

Wait. "Bargaining," Delaney said. "You want to make a deal? What do I have that you could want, that you couldn't just take? That you haven't already taken?"

The Huntmaster clicked his tongue against his teeth. The strange juxtaposition of oversharper and overstronger features intensified. Deliberately, to scare him? Delaney didn't know. "You have yet something worth trading. But I ask you a third time."

Delaney didn't see the Huntmaster reaching for him. All he registered was the rush of air and the sense of falling, and of being caught and lowered on his back to the peaty earth. The Huntmaster knelt over him, reminding Delaney of all that could be if he chose. All he had to do was act. He blocked out all sight and sound except himself just by being that close.

"Wit is one thing," he said, his breath hot on Delaney's face. "Insolence is another. I have told you before and I will tell you again: show me my due respect."

"Let me go."

The Huntmaster ignored Delaney's words to stroke his hair and draw his thumb over Delaney's lips. "If your resistance did not add to your desirability... Bargain with me, Delaney. Tell me what you want, in plain terms, and I will make you an offer."

"But the only thing you'll take in trade is me."

"Not so, musician, not so, though I would make you a king among men. Second only to me. Love me, obey me, and you will live forever."

"I've given Robbie all my love. He owns my passions." Delaney wanted to claw and kick at the Huntmaster, suffocating him from being so close. He held himself as still as he could, though his muscles ached and quavered. "I will not love you, and I will not give myself to you. Tell me where Robbie is."

"No. Come now; you can do better than this."

Bartering. "Tell me what I can offer you instead of my life and my body. What'll it take besides those to free Robbie with your blessing so he can live a human's life with me?"

The Huntmaster laughed, rich and deep. "Sharp enough to cut yourself, aren't you? There is something..." He caressed Delaney's cheek. "Though nothing you are willing to give. Yet." In an abrupt rush, he was gone, lifted off Delaney and back on his rock to laze indolently and cruelly as a cat. "Or perhaps all I need is the right leverage..."

The Huntmaster clapped his hands together, the supple leather gloves he wore almost not muffling the noise at all. Darkness flooded Delaney's vision, and he had the sickening sensation of running while kneeling huddled still. Things flickered past too quickly to be seen.

He wasn't moving, then, was he? The Huntmaster moved the world around them.

If he was trying to scare Delaney, he'd managed that long ago, but now Delaney tasted the sharpness of terror. The Huntmaster's low laughter that carried through as if they were both underwater told him the Huntmaster knew exactly where he'd driven Delaney.

A jerk forward, a shuddering sense of falling, and the moonlight returned. Delaney blinked open his eyes and knew where he was. The cellar. Back to the beginning. A fire still smoked and glowed red at the center, spilled beer muddied the earth, and they were no longer alone.

Hugh. Black-Eyed Susan. Tam.

Robbie.

"Leverage," the Huntmaster repeated. "Barter. Do you begin to understand now?"

Delaney clenched his jaw and said nothing. He saw and comprehended, more than he wanted to. Except for Tam they were bound, Robbie and Hugh and Black-Eyed Susan, all in their own ways, all as cruel as cruel could be. Tiny roots the color of brass and iron—or perhaps they were actual metal—snaked around Hugh's and Black-Eyed Susan's bare toes and ankles, and bound one wrist each behind their back. Leaves covered their mouths. They were just far apart enough that though they reached for one another, straining against their bonds, they were barely an inch away from being able to touch. They too blurred and jarred, as if moving through space and time. Not there with him, not just yet, but arriving as he watched.

Robbie stood apart, cold and proud and bright as a falling star. In that moment, Delaney saw Robbie as he was, had been, and could be. It was both horrible and

beautiful and made him understand why the first thing angels said to men was “be not afraid.”

Black-Eyed Susan’s bells chimed at wrist and ankle with a fine, faint tremoring like the beating of a brass dragonfly’s wings, never stopping. Almost silent, but once heard could not be unheard. Delaney couldn’t describe the look in Hugh’s eyes when Hugh saw who’d come to join them. He didn’t want to.

“Don’t,” he said to the Huntmaster. “Let them go.”

“Shall I? Or would you rather I loosed the ties on your lover?” The Huntmaster laced the last word with sarcasm as sharp as thorns. “So devoted to him and his pretty cock, but you’ve not even looked to him yet. Fascinating. Do you love him less than your friend and his would-be bride—yes, bride; he’s thought often of marrying her, as has she. Or are you afraid?”

No. Yes. I don’t know. “Differently and the same, and I’m not afraid.”

“You are, and a liar to boot, but no matter.” The Huntmaster gestured and turned Delaney to the side as Robbie came fully to rest in the here and now.

“God. Robbie, God,” Delaney whispered. Robbie knelt in profile to him, heavier brass rings and thicker, almost ropelike lacings in the corset piercings on his back.

“Shall I unbind him?” the Huntmaster asked again, soft and sly.

Delaney bit his tongue to keep from blurting a *yes*. He’d “unbind” Robbie, all right. Turn him loose without the blessing and watch him turn to dust.

“Such a smart boy. But now tell me: would you set *her* free?” The Huntmaster waved at Delaney again. He turned another quarter’s worth of the way, and there was Tam. Tam unbound. Unhindered. Dressed in black, the same cloth of shadows Robbie had worn, equally as old and fragile in its weave. Timeless. She looked more like a sharp-boned animal than ever.

Tam met Delaney’s stare without flinching, and without a word. There was even less telling what she was thinking than ever, though Delaney thought he could guess.

Tam said nothing and did not move. It infuriated Delaney. “Did you betray us? Promise us to the Huntmaster in exchange for...for this? Immortality isn’t worth a copper cent if you spend it as a slave.”

Tam remained as she had been, stiller even than a statue. Delaney couldn’t tell if she even breathed. But at her feet, something began to stir beneath the humus...

The Huntmaster slapped his hands together, the sharp *crack* commanding Delaney’s attention. “If I’m so terrible, then you should bargain to keep her with you, away from me. Make me a counteroffer,” the Huntmaster coaxed, suddenly behind Delaney and stroking his hair. “Come now, and do your best, or your worst, as you like.”

Delaney’s mouth was almost too dry to speak. Though it wrenched his neck, he craned his neck to look at Robbie instead of Tam. “Let them go, then we’ll deal.”

"A poor start. Perhaps I should ask them what they'd consider fair. Black-Eyed Susan would know, and Robbie, oh yes."

Sick dread gripped Delaney's stomach. "Don't."

"And Hugh," the Huntmaster said. He blew a stream of air at Hugh. The leafed gag fell away from his mouth, leaving his gasping for ragged breath. "Speak, drummer. What do you think Delaney should trade me, and for who? Or would you rather trade something of your own for knowledge?"

Delaney could see, from the side, one half of the Huntmaster's mouth curling in a foxlike smile that made him cold in his bones.

"Speak up, Hugh," the Huntmaster taunted. "The first one's free. There must be so much you want to know." He held up a hand to stop Hugh before he could begin. "But know that this, whatever you learn and whatever you choose to happen, this is Delaney's fault. All yours, musician, for it could have been so much easier if you'd only let me have my way."

"Go to hell," Delaney bit out.

The stink of searing iron choked him. "That would be redundant, but here's a merry thought: why shouldn't I take you all, and do as I like with Robbie? Answer quick, musician. More than your life depends on it. Like this." The Huntmaster caught Hugh by the wrist and twisted.

"Stop!" Delaney tried to surge forward and found his movements slow, as if he swam through syrup. "Don't. Spare his wrists, and I'll...I'll..."

"And you'll what?"

There was no other choice. "I'll tell him the truth. Everything I wanted to spare him from. It's better than what you'd do to him now."

The Huntmaster whistled long and low. "Quite the sacrifice."

"I know," Delaney said. He did Hugh the hard but only honorable choice by not looking away. "Give him some water to clear his head."

"None for the lady or your lover?"

"Do as I ask. I'm not arguing this."

"As you like, but only because it amuses me to do so." It was wrong of Delaney to be pleased that the Huntmaster sulked over that request, but still satisfying.

Leaves rustled together to form a funnel of sorts, dripping either dew or maybe old rain where Hugh could put out his tongue and lap at the liquid. Hugh groaned, opened his mouth wide, and gulped with messy, sloppy noises. He wiped his mouth on his shoulder and spoke. "What have you done to us?"

Tam closed her eyes and sighed.

Delaney told Hugh everything. All that he knew, or guessed at. From the first bonfire and the song Robbie had finished with him, to the hunting, to the threats and promises, but nothing hurt so much as betraying Black-Eyed Susan.

Hugh had begun by hanging off Delaney's every word, disbelieving and scornful and impatient in turn. When Delaney spoke of Black-Eyed Susan, that changed. Horror. Denial. Doubt. For her part, Black-Eyed Susan squeezed her eyes shut and sank ever lower.

"If she had not loved you, she would have ended you," the Huntmaster remarked. "It was what she came to do. To spirit you away when you'd plowed her, to be one of a dozen hounds sniffing at her hooves. Poetic, wouldn't it have been? Ah well. Love makes fools of us all. Count yourself lucky, Hugh. She does love you, true. But do you see where that's gotten you? Exactly where I'd wanted. So much for love."

Hugh looked between Delaney and the Huntmaster, and then to Black-Eyed Susan. He'd made his choice, and Delaney couldn't blame him for it. Hugh strained harder, struggling to get to her. "I don't care," he said, to her and her alone, no matter who else heard. "Black-Eyed Susan?"

"Horse and hound," the Huntmaster murmured. "Perhaps cat and mouse too." He flickered his fingertips at Black-Eyed Susan. The roots that tied her to the earth unfurled with a whiplike snap.

"Black-Eyed Susan?" Hugh asked, plaintive as a child.

Black-Eyed Susan covered her face with her hands as she stood. "I can't," she said and turned to run. She jumped clumsily and nimbly at once out of the cellar and took to her heels.

This time, when Hugh surged against *his* bonds, they broke. He threw off the straggling remains and struggled up and out to follow. He staggered as he ran but didn't stop.

Delaney could feel the intensity of Tam's stare on the back of his neck. Something about it. Something not quite right. It prickled and burned. He noticed, again, the ground swelling at her feet. It was as if something was trying to grow there. What...?

Oh. He understood now. Understood more than he could process in the rush of adrenaline and panic and fear for Hugh and Black-Eyed Susan, but —

"So much for them," the Huntmaster said with a dismissive wave.

"You let them go."

"I did."

"Why?"

The Huntmaster placed his finger to his lips and winked.

Delaney tried to see into the forest. "You didn't just let them go. Where did you send them?"

"Nowhere you can find them."

Delaney's fists tightened. "Damn you. Why?"

"To spare them, of course."

"Like hell; you won't free them."

"I didn't say what I was sparing them from, now did I? Perhaps from you."

Delaney held his tongue.

"I can be kind."

"Only when it suits you."

"Yes. I grow tired of the foreplay, musician. Have you had enough yet, or will it take more still before you give me your hand?" His whisper brushed Delaney's lips like cold silk. "Or are you willing to deal?"

Behind the Huntmaster, Robbie began to shake his head, ticktock frantic. *No no no!*

Delaney wasn't certain he had a choice, and if there was a chance of freeing his wild Robbie, then he'd trade anything.

Bound on his knees, Robbie closed his eyes and sagged. Only the ties kept him upright. His arms tensed and Delaney knew he'd tear the Huntmaster limb from limb if only he could. That was his Robbie, all right, a fighter to the very end.

"Eyes on me, musician." The Huntmaster stepped between them to block Delaney's view. "Do you understand?"

"Yes, but I don't like it. You never said I had to."

The Huntmaster's fickle sense of humor rose to the fore. He slapped his thigh in approval. "Fiery. Such a hunter as you could have been. Such a leman."

Delaney bristled. "If you want to deal, let's deal. What are you offering? What do you want more than me?"

"Not yet. Answer me this first. Is there anything you would refuse me, even your body if I made that the only condition, in exchange for the drummer or the dancer, or – what of this one, this prickly, deep-voiced lady?"

He kept pushing that offer at Delaney. Why?

Tam appeared by the Huntmaster's elbow, as small and cool and pale as always, untouched by the world. Lost somewhere inside her head, listening to music no one else could hear. She held her arms crossed beneath her small breasts, drumming a rhythm on her forearms.

Delaney gathered what he'd realized earlier and held it tight to his chest. He waited, though it almost killed him, to see what Tam would do.

The Huntmaster petted her idly and spoke as if she weren't there, as if he and Delaney were old friends passing the time of day checking out a pretty lady. "You don't see her like these days. I'd thought the last of her kind had passed before Good Queen Bess danced to the throne. Better times, those." The Huntmaster cuffed him; a love tap from that giant hand half knocked the breath out of Delaney. Reminded him once more of how much damage the Huntmaster could do if he chose. "Everywhere there's nature red in tooth and claw, we have hunted among them. In one night we can gallop from Russia to California, and spill beer in Greenland along the way."

"Where is Robbie from?"

"It hasn't been on a map since before Ethelbert was a gleam in a Viking's eye." The Huntmaster slapped Delaney almost casually. "Don't think you can distract me. You're nowhere near as sharp as Tam. A pale second best. Answer my question. *Is there anything you would be unwilling to sacrifice for your lover or your merry band?*"

Delaney wished to God he could see Robbie. There was an awful, shivering silence from his corner. "Let me look at Robbie, and I'll tell you."

"Agreed." The Huntmaster stood back and gestured grandly at him. The fierceness of Robbie's glare did Delaney's heart good. At least some things never changed.

"As long as it doesn't hurt him and them, then no, there's nothing I wouldn't give," Delaney said to Robbie's face. "Except for my body to you, when I love another."

Robbie shook his head and growled. Delaney knew what he meant. It was morbidly stupid to try to bargain with the Wild Hunt, but what choice did he have?

"Stick to those rules, and I'll bargain." What was done was done, and it was true. "I've answered. Now you answer one for me: what do you want more than me, in the Hunt?"

The Huntmaster laid a finger alongside his nose. "Guess. But I'll sweeten the pot first, to show my intentions are good."

If he thought Delaney would believe that, then Delaney had some beachfront property in Arkansas to sell him. He doubted the Huntmaster would get the humor or be amused, and kept the thought to himself. "What are you offering?"

"Freedom for Robbie, for one. For Hugh and for Black-Eyed Susan, even, though she is a fine ride and I'll miss her."

If an offer sounds too good to be true... "What'd be the cost?"

"What, you don't ask that I throw in cold Tam for makeweight?"

"No." Delaney saw, out of the corner of his eye, tension drifting away from Tam. He didn't understand it, no – or maybe he did. He hated that the Huntmaster had to be right about anything, but it *was* a world Tam could belong in.

"If this is what makes Tam happy, then I can't – won't – take that away from her."

"Even though she betrayed you?"

Delaney watched the Queen Anne's lace unfurl at Tam's feet, white blossoms and green stems twining up her legs. She petted the flowers.

"Thank God." The rush of relieved adrenaline made Delaney dizzy. "I'd hoped."

"You took a chance," Tam said. He should have recognized her voice from the start. "Thank you."

The Huntmaster snarled.

"Enough of this. *Think*, musician. If I cannot have your body, and I am gentleman enough not to take it without your say-so" – the Huntmaster gave a mocking bow – "then what would be second best?"

“What you’ve wanted all along,” Delaney said, glad he was already on his knees. Otherwise he might have fallen with the nauseating comprehension. What was the last thing he had that he hadn’t promised himself he wouldn’t give?

His music.

Chapter Twenty-one

"Yes," the Huntmaster said. "At last, you see. I wondered if I would have to spell it out for you. Hush, you." He snapped his fingers at Robbie, whose bubbling and hissing growls behind his gag fell abruptly silent. "Make no mistake, I do crave you, and you've insulted me gravely by saying no, and I won't let that slide. But give me what it costs you most to surrender, and we'll call it even."

Tam frowned, a slight crease appearing in the middle of her forehead. So she hadn't seen this coming, either.

"Give me your word, musician Delaney, that you will give me every note you have in your head," the Huntmaster insisted. "A fine trophy, one to hide away and take out like the finest beer when I crave a draught."

"I'm nothing special," Delaney said slowly. "There are hundreds of players better than I am—"

"But none better than you could have been."

The air rushed out of Delaney's lungs. *Oh God.*

The Huntmaster's smile sharpened, his teeth large and too white. "Is this something you won't trade? Say yes, and you go free, you and Hugh and Black-Eyed Susan, and yes, even your sweet Robbie. I'll unbind him and give him back his life. Say no, and you're mine to keep, except for Tam, and her I'll cast aside forever."

No choice could have been crueler, but it was no choice at all. Over the sound of Robbie furiously fighting to get free on his own, Delaney offered his hand to the Huntmaster and said, "You have my word. Yes."

"I would tell you to kneel before me." The Huntmaster loomed above Robbie. He swelled larger still, taller and stronger. Delaney wondered, for an awful second, what the Huntmaster would look like when he'd absorbed this. So many lives he'd consumed over the endless ages; he must be big enough to stride across the world with one step.

Taking Delaney's music was a higher cost than taking his life. They both knew it.

But for Robbie, and for Hugh and Black-Eyed Susan, Delaney would pay this price. He bowed his head to the Huntmaster. "I want to see Robbie set free, first. I want to know that Hugh and Black-Eyed Susan are safe."

"Easily done for the one." The Huntmaster shrugged, and the bindings that held Robbie prisoner slithered free. "You will have to take my word for it that the drummer and his whore are well. They're far from here, true, but I release them, and here's the proof."

Delaney frowned, confused, as the Huntmaster raised his hand. He understood when the Huntmaster plucked a dozen brass bells from nowhere and let them fall with a jingling that sounded like Black-Eyed Susan dancing.

"Is that proof enough, or shall I bring you some other part of her, and of Hugh, to convince you?"

He didn't trust the Huntmaster. He didn't have the option to say no. "All right," he said and bowed his head. "Do it."

The Huntmaster's touch was surprisingly light for a creature of his bulk and height, and it tickled Delaney's face like a dragonfly perched on his cheek. "It will not hurt," he promised.

He lied. The awfulness of being emptied was like nothing Delaney could have put in words. Though it happened in an instant, he knew, it seemed to take a lifetime as well, this being drained dry from heart to soul to head.

Delaney held still and let the Huntmaster do it. He couldn't have moved, all his body's strength drawn out of him. He had a vision of the blood and plasma being commanded from him, of being frozen in place as dried out as a mummy when the Huntmaster was done.

Vaguely, he thought he sensed Robbie, enraged, jumping the Huntmaster from behind, and knew he heard the Huntmaster's irritated grunt, then the crashing *thud* when he shook Robbie off as easily as swatting a moth.

Delaney saw whiteness, then darkness, then nothing at all. His orbital sockets flared with pain, and he knew his eyes had rolled back in his head farther than eyes should go. He could *see* the spark leaving him, awful to watch.

"Hold," Tam said.

The Huntmaster's grasp on Delaney faltered. He fell forward, on hands and knees, almost on his face, and coughed up things thicker than blood. His throat was as raw and ruined as Hugh's had been, and his hands—he could barely see through clouded vision, but he vomited sour bile when he saw that his fingertips were ruined, withered and bent at the wrong angles.

"Idiot!" Robbie shouted, there without Delaney having seen him approach, trying to lift Delaney and hold him at the same time. "You stupid, stupid fool. Why did you do this? Love's not a good-enough reason."

It's the only reason, Delaney mouthed. He wondered if he would be mute from now on.

"No one's ever been this daft," Robbie said. Rack and ruin or not, he pressed his lips to Delaney's and clung to him. "I'm not worth this, you great —"

Delaney wouldn't touch Robbie with his ruined hands, but he could and did roll his forehead against Robbie's. *Yes, you are.*

Robbie buried his face in Delaney's neck and cried angry tears that burned his skin.

Delaney found that he had the strength to touch Robbie, after all. In a way. He brushed at the heavy ropes that crisscrossed through the piercings on Robbie's back, and they crumbled like spiderwebs, blown away on the breeze. Robbie was warmer now. Humanity surged into him with every breath, the Hunt stripped away and the man left.

Yes. It'd been worth it.

"This is between he and I," the Huntmaster argued with Tam, angry and letting it show. "You traded yourself to me; you are mine, and you will stand back."

"Will I?"

"You cannot save him. I think less of you for trying. If you would be a hunter —"

"So be it," Tam said, unruffled. Unbothered by Robbie's presence, she knelt beside Delaney and laid her hand on his forehead. All he felt was the coolness of her skin and the whisper of her breath. He wondered why he'd never been able to feel this before, this *otherness* about her. "I claim him as the first of my prey."

Robbie snarled and snapped at Tam, but he was slow now, human slow, and missed by a mile.

Tam, Delaney mouthed, unable to speak, afraid enough to want to scuttle backward and incapable of moving an inch. *Don't.*

"Shh." Tam caressed Delaney's bruised cheek. "This is my right, isn't it?"

The Huntmaster seemed stymied, and no less furious. "To poach on another's hunt —"

"Is done by all." Tam stroked Delaney's hair. "You don't understand now," she whispered for him alone. "But I never meant to hurt you. And this is how I'll prove it." She kissed his temple. "Gone, but not forgotten," she murmured and rose to stand by the Huntmaster's side. "You have what you wanted. Spare his life, and we'll be done here."

"That was not a condition he set," the Huntmaster growled.

"But it was one you implied," Tam replied.

"A fine distinction."

"Yet you are honor-bound to keep your word, aren't you? Otherwise what's passed here means nothing, and it could turn back on you."

"Is that a threat?" The Huntmaster towered over Tam, casting her almost wholly into shadow.

Tam shrugged. She'd said her piece, and now she was finished. The Huntmaster could take it or leave it. Delaney would have laughed if he could have.

Though he didn't know what good this would do him. He'd given all he could, and the Huntmaster had a new bone to pick. No one's patience lasted forever.

The Huntmaster had run through all of his. He tore at his beard and gnashed his teeth; Delaney would have laughed if he hadn't been afraid for his life. "Bound by my own rules; I may regret taking you on after all."

Tam's own grin was feral and sharp. Delaney would have laughed if it hadn't been awful. The Huntmaster had bitten off too large a bite with her. He hoped the Huntmaster choked on her. It'd serve him right, and Tam could lead the Hunt far better than he.

The Huntmaster spat. "So be it, but since no one trusts my kindness, let me be as cruel as I like."

Robbie's presence abruptly ceased to register by Delaney's side. He fell but rolled to his back with the last of his strength only to see a flash of gold and of milky white skin, Robbie caught up and tumbling like the spores of a dandelion. Tumbling, disappearing...gone.

"He's not dead," the Huntmaster said. He trod on Delaney's hand and ground it into the dirt. "But he is gone. Far, far away, he's gone, miles and states and rivers and countries away."

Bastard.

The Huntmaster tipped Delaney a mocking salute. "If you can hunt him without my help, then have at it. *We are* done. Tam, come."

She stayed put. "A moment still."

"I gave you an order, wench."

"I am nobody's wench, but I do understand that for what is taken, something must be given." She chuckled. "And it seems Robbie knew that too." At the very edge of the tree line, a tumbling heap of rags and hair fell down the slight slope. A pretty sundress and a solid man with dark slashes of eyebrows and a too-strong chin, wound tight around one another.

As the Huntmaster had flung Robbie away, he must have caught Hugh and Black-Eyed Susan and propelled them back to the here and now. Delaney laughed soundlessly, a raucous guffaw that would have echoed to the skies.

Delaney rolled his head to the side to mouth at Tam, *Show him the way back too, if you can. If you will. Please.*

She nodded, almost imperceptibly, maybe a trick of the light, and she too disappeared.

"I would kill you if I could," the Huntmaster told Delaney. "Count yourself luckier than you know."

He vanished. A horse reared and screamed just beyond the tree line, the Huntmaster's roar raised above it, shouting to the beast. The thrum of a bass line echoed beneath the iron-shod hooves thundering away, under the shouts and cries of the lesser huntsmen, fainter and fainter by the moment until there was nothing but the night.

The night, and memory. "*Gone, but not forgotten,*" Tam's words echoed in Delaney's ears. Then, more: "*I am your friend still.*"

Delaney finally let go and allowed himself to slip into the darkness alone. The Wild Hunt was finally finished.

Chapter Twenty-two

"How's it coming?"

Only Hugh would ask the question, and Delaney appreciated him all the more for it. Though it did make parting ways with him even harder.

"Better than yesterday." Delaney labored to tighten the tuning peg on his oldest guitar. He'd almost managed to turn it three-quarters of the way.

"You know I'd have been glad to do that for you," Hugh said. He leaned on the door frame. "But I guess that isn't the point, is it?"

Delaney chuckled. He tipped his head back to let gravity slide his glasses higher up on his nose. "I've been working on something else too."

"Yeah?" Hugh entered the room fully. He craned his neck to see better. Hugh had had one moment of not being able to bear looking at Delaney's hands, and after that he'd done what he did best: help. Delaney had come to in the cabin with Hugh hovering over him, bandaging one finger after another with the careful attention of a surgeon. He hadn't spoken, and Delaney couldn't have blamed him, but he'd done the job right down to the last splint. He'd healed more quickly than they'd expected, and at the least the fingers were straight now. Mostly.

He had months of work ahead before he could so much as write his name, but in thanks and as a good-bye gift, he could give Hugh this.

Careful as he'd never been even when he was a child first learning to play, Delaney touched the guitar strings and played a chord. Just one, and it was ragged around the edges, but it was true.

Black-Eyed Susan appeared in the doorway behind Hugh, her lips parted and her eyes huge. She'd changed her airy summer dresses for heavier wool, everything Tam had left behind supplemented by what she could borrow from Hugh. She'd need those

larger sweaters before long. Their child was due, at best guess, sometime in late spring. "Delaney...?"

"Knew you could do it," Hugh said. He caught Delaney's nape and shook him, then clapped him on the back. "Fucking *knew* you could!"

Delaney relaxed his grip on the guitar and beamed, feeling as if the sun had come out from behind the clouds. "Where there's life, there's hope." He'd never play the way he once had, and he could still only make the slightest of sense out of sheet music. Yet there were snatches of song coming to him in dreams and on whispers in the wind.

There was no shining future for him with recording contracts and playing to dancing crowds. He almost thought he liked it better this way. Simpler.

"Delaney, you..." Black-Eyed Susan gave up and came to put her arm around him, pressing her cheek to his. She rocked him, saying with that what she couldn't find words for.

Hugh knit his fingers together and pressed his thumbs one against the other. He stood and looked to Black-Eyed Susan with a little-boy's hopefulness, though he spoke to Delaney. "We don't have to go. We could stay here, maybe find some work in town. I don't want to leave you."

They'd been down this road before. "Black-Eyed Susan, talk to your husband."

Black-Eyed Susan rose on tiptoe to throw her arms around Hugh's neck and kiss him. "He understands this language better," she said, and Delaney laughed. Hugh grumbled but didn't deny it.

Delaney put the guitar aside with the greatest of care and a small nod of pleasure when it settled aright in its stand. He managed far better with large objects than small; he could drive a lawn mower and, with sufficient limbering, handle a rake. If it was a truly good day, he could put to use the effort he'd expended in learning how to wield a hammer. After all, if he hit his thumb instead of a nail, it wasn't as if he'd properly feel the blow, but only an echo of it.

He had work here, at the venue as their winter groundskeeper, light tasks that'd keep him busy and give him enough money to eat with. No one would see his hands in the heavy canvas gloves he'd wear.

"I won't hold you back," Delaney said, simple and honest. "Find another band. Drum for them while Black-Eyed Susan dances and take care of your family. It's time you had a real one to watch over instead of just a rag-tag band."

"I won't stop worrying about you," Hugh replied bluntly, though he had his arm protectively around Black-Eyed Susan at the same time. "You can't wait here for him forever."

"Can and will." Delaney chafed his hands, deliberately displaying the faults in them. "People tell me what I can't do, but somehow I seem to prove them wrong."

"What if it's him who can't or won't?"

"I'm not talking about this with you."

"I'm not going to keep quiet. It's been almost six months, Delaney. Robbie hasn't found you yet. He might not want to."

"You're wrong." Black-Eyed Susan might understand the bond better than Hugh, that which tied hunter to prey. It'd last beyond the Wild Hunt.

It had to.

"Hugh, let it go. It's my life to spend however I want, and this is what I choose. What I don't want is to part angry."

Hugh grumbled. "You'd better prove me wrong, or I'll hunt him down myself and kick his ass from here to Milwaukee."

"If you're right, then go ahead with my blessing, but you won't be." Delaney stretched out the kinks in his back and arms as he stood to give Hugh a proper man's hug, complete with hearty back slapping. "See? I'm strong. And I'm not wasting my time. I know he'll be back."

"You can't be sure."

"I can," Delaney said. "Tam gave her word."

Hugh's face darkened. Tam and what she'd done was an argument neither of them ever won, but they'd raged through the night more than once over her. Hugh thought she'd been against them from the start. Delaney thought she'd only ever wanted to help them all, and if that included herself and finding a dominant place in a world where she could be happy, then what harm?

"Enough," Delaney broke the rough silence, brushing it off. "I want to stay. It's a good place, Hugh, and I'll still get to enjoy all the festivals. I can learn a thing or two from the bands who pass in and out. It'll be better than a ballad."

"Don't be surprised if you *hear* a ballad or two about this coming back your way," Hugh warned, anger already melted away. "I've been thinking about calling it 'The Night of a Thousand What-the-Fucks.'"

Delaney cracked up; he couldn't help it. "Get out of here," he said when he could breathe again, scuffing up Hugh's hair and pushing past him to kiss Black-Eyed Susan's cheek. "I'll be fine, I promise," he whispered by her ear. "Take care of Hugh for me."

"I believe you, you know. As long as Robbie's alive, he'll work to find his way back." Black-Eyed Susan took Delaney's hands in hers and squeezed them lightly as a breeze. Yet she willingly touched them, and for that he owed her more than he could ever repay. "And I'll take care of Hugh forever, but because I love him. I'd do the same for you."

"I don't ask it of you." Delaney kissed the back of her hand out of courtesy, and for the fun of watching Hugh bristle, and let her go. Let them both go. "Travel safe. Write me. Good old-fashioned letters. And send me pictures."

"We'll be back next year," Hugh promised. "Black-Eyed Susan and me and whoever this turns out to be. And if Robbie hasn't come back by then, swear to me that you'll at least *think* about joining us."

"I won't promise anything." Delaney rode over Hugh's instant protest. "But if I could, I would, and if Robbie's with me, then maybe we'll both go along for the ride. Good enough?"

"Not by half," Hugh grumbled. He clasped Delaney by the forearm in the old-world way and jostled him. "Take care of yourself."

"Until Robbie comes."

"You have a hell of a lot of faith in him." Hugh still didn't like Robbie.

He'd come around to it. "I do," Delaney answered. He'd claimed Robbie long ago, and he knew – could feel – that Robbie was out there, searching for a way home. "You'll see."

"How long *will* you wait?"

"As long as it takes," Delaney said. "And I won't regret a second of it."

He watched from the window as Black-Eyed Susan and Hugh got into the van and drove away. Crowded enough with the three they'd been, he and Hugh and Tam, there was just enough room now for Hugh and Black-Eyed Susan to be comfortable.

Delaney wished them well. Better than the best. The road called to them, and he prayed it'd treat them kindly.

As for himself, he had nowhere else he wanted to be.

Outside, the first snowflakes of the winter storms began to fall.

* * * * *

Delaney brushed back the curtain over the cabin window. Black-Eyed Susan had insisted, and Hugh had supported her. He hadn't lived in a house with curtains since he'd gone on the road... Then again, he hadn't lived in a house since then, full stop. Outside, the snow fell steady and thick, all but blinding him.

"I'm fine by myself. The snow won't hurt me," he told the venue owner, shifting the phone between cheek and shoulder to keep it from slipping. Frank was a good man, better still since Delaney had been injured; he hadn't asked awkward questions except, "Can you still handle a lawnmower, dude?" and he'd been more generous than most with this job and roof over his head.

He listened to Frank rumble on about being careful not to burn the place down with the hearth and making sure he had enough food to last.

"Not planning on going anywhere," Delaney said. He could have dropped the curtain and held the phone more securely, but though the plastic was sticky and uncomfortable pressed to his face, he'd rather put up with the discomfort to keep looking out into the snow. "What? No, I have plenty. Cans, hot dogs, powdered milk, coffee. Would a leaf blower work as well on snow? I'll give it a try."

He paused when Frank asked him if he was sure he'd rather stay there than snowshoe out and get put up in a motel till the worst passed.

"I'll stay," he said, watching the world turn white and soft. Far cry from summer. Maybe that wasn't a bad thing. "And Frank? Happy New Year."

* * * * *

Life was simpler for Delaney with only himself to take care of. Didn't mean it was better, just easier. When the power went out, he built a fire, lit a few emergency candles, and settled in with blankets in front of the hearth.

Alone, but not forever. He'd believe that until the day he died, if he had to.

I know he's out there. He'll be here soon. If faith made him a crazy man, as many seemed to think, so be it.

Delaney dipped his slice of toast browned over the fireplace into the tomato soup he'd warmed. Not much, but he'd added some dried basil Black-Eyed Susan had left for him and a splash of red wine Hugh had "forgotten," and it tasted rich, smooth, creamy.

Would Robbie have liked this?

Pushing his plate and bowl aside, licked clean, Delaney rolled up in one blanket and used the other, balled up, for a pillow. He'd watch the fire until he fell asleep, he decided.

He'd lied to Hugh. There was one song he'd never let himself forget. He'd clung to that no matter what in the first few days – after – and he'd hummed it over and over to himself in the quietness of his mind to keep it secret and safe.

Here and now, he could let it free and count time with the swing of his wrist. The song that'd driven him insane with its refusal to be completed, before Robbie finished it as naturally as spring thawed snow. The one that'd brought Robbie to him.

Maybe there was something to it, maybe not, but every night Delaney hummed that song to himself at least once. Hoping.

As for the rest of the time, he waited.

* * * * *

Scuff. Scuff. Scuff. Delaney blinked, surprised that he'd drowsed off. It took him ages to fall asleep these days, without someone to curl around.

He sat up, rasping his palm over the stubble on his cheeks, bleary-eyed and fogged with sleep.

Scuff. Scuff. Scuff. He couldn't place the noise, not at first.

When he could, he didn't leap up and run to the door the way he'd dreamed of. He couldn't have moved if the house had been on fire. His heart thundered, the rush of blood making him dizzy, and his breathing was too sharp and shallow to keep him upright.

If he was wrong, he couldn't handle it. He'd have to, but God, it'd be like a knife to the heart.

So he waited, whispering a prayer to himself, white-knuckled in his grip on the tumbled blankets, and listened to the sound of footsteps, a man scuffing doggedly through the shin-deep snow.

Waited until he heard the rough rasp of a hoarse tenor and a knock on the door.

Robbie.

Delaney didn't remember throwing off the blankets and bolting for the door, only that he must have because that was his hand on the knob, turning it, letting in a gale's worth of frigid, snow-filled air and under that, like a contrapuntal voice that crept in to balance and complete a song—

Chapter Twenty-three

“Robbie.” Delaney couldn’t stop staring, and he couldn’t make himself reach out. “I knew you’d be back. They said you wouldn’t, but—”

Robbie had changed. So much. Tanned nut brown with freckles dusted heavily beneath, his hair coarser and shorter and bound back away from his face in a ponytail. Lines of exhaustion around his eyes and a hesitant smile. From the way he stared at Delaney, Delaney wondered if he’d become just as different since the last time they had seen one another.

He didn’t think once about his hands, not until Robbie made him. “Hold out your hands, together, in a cup,” Robbie said. His own were stuffed in the pockets of the peacoat he wore over a ratty navy blue sweater and faded khaki jeans, all of them ill-fitting and hard worn.

When Robbie saw what the Huntmaster had done, he stopped for the briefest of breaths, then said, as plainly and salty as a sailor, “Shit.”

Delaney’s laughter surprised both of them. Robbie didn’t quite seem to get the joke, but he grinned more openly. “It doesn’t matter. It was worth it.” Delaney cupped his palms. “Don’t keep me waiting.”

Robbie bit his lip, seemed to come to a decision, and sighed. He drew a handful of something from each pocket and poured the contents slowly into Delaney’s hands. They clinked brightly and dully at the same time as they mounded high: brass rings, thirteen apiece.

Delaney knew those all too well. “From your back,” he said as he stirred the rings with his thumbs. They were cold from being in Robbie’s pockets, but he remembered their skin-warmth, and how much he’d hated them by the end. Not anymore, because they meant something that made his chest expand for a good clear breath at last in relief. “Then you really are free.”

Robbie nodded without a word.

"And you came back to me."

"Where else would I want to go?"

"God, I missed you." Delaney wanted to touch him so badly, but not with a double handful of metal. He looked at the rings and made a choice. Lifting his hands, he flung the former chains out into the snow, to be lost in the ice and then the drifting melt that'd carry them far away.

An indefinable tension melted out of Robbie. "Thank you." He took Delaney's hand in his and, without a seeming care for its misshapen state, squeezed.

A second window-rattling gale made Delaney flinch, and Robbie too. "Come in?" they asked at the same time. Some thin veneer of ice broke. Delaney caught Robbie by the forearms to draw him inside. Robbie elbowed the door shut behind him, closed out the hostility of the storm, and then they were alone in the hushed cabin filled with flickering firelight and the smells of soup and bread.

Robbie sniffed the air. His stomach rumbled loudly enough for Delaney to hear.

"I can make more," Delaney hurried to say. His brain caught up with his mouth. "You like human food now?"

"Be in a sorry state if I didn't," Robbie said with a crook of one eyebrow. "Later. Just want...just want to look at you. Waited a long time for this." He moved so that he could clasp Delaney's forearms and link them wholly together in an old warriors' greeting.

"You and me both." Delaney took a step closer, needing more than salt and bread to feel the winter cold and summer warmth of Robbie's body. Words stuck in his throat. He swallowed to try and moisten the dry tissue and only managed to swallow the smell of Robbie, winter wind and smoke and something salty, like sea air. "They said I was an idiot to wait. I'm glad they were wrong."

"Didn't know you'd still be here. Hoped. Glad I was right." Robbie took a step closer to Delaney, bringing them almost aligned body to body. Delaney could taste the peppermint Robbie must have been sucking on. "So much to tell you. Don't know where to start."

"Begin with 'I'm glad to see you'?" Delaney chanced a sweep of his hand down the strange coarseness of Robbie's hair, seeing it was bleached far lighter than before as well as rougher. "I've waited just as long for that."

"Gladder than you can know," Robbie said. He stretched up on tiptoe and rested his mouth once, too lightly, on Delaney's. "And you, me?"

"More than I can say."

Robbie hesitated. "Music, your music, it's gone for good?"

"So the Huntmaster planned. He was wrong. Didn't count on how stubborn I can be. I'm learning again. Slow but steady."

Robbie hooted in amusement. "Good!" He studied Delaney. "Tam did as she promised, you know?"

That, of all things, made Delaney's knees wobble. *Tam*. "How do you—"

"She waited for me when I reached the mainland. There's trees not far off base."

"Base? What?" Delaney was confused.

Robbie shook his head. "One thing at a time. Tam is well. Thriving. She holds the loyalty of most of the Wild Hunt. Gives the old bastard a run for his money and won't be cast out. *He* will. Soon." He sobered and stroked Delaney's cheek soothingly. "She never betrayed you, you know. None of you. She *was* there all along because it called to her, yes, but she kept her head and watched out for us. Still does. She waited for me, to show me the way to you on foot, on land. Says to tell you she's happy."

"Then you were at sea?" Delaney wound a loose strand of Robbie's hair around his forefinger. The tan and the coarseness and the cursing made sense now. "You're a sailor man, aren't you?"

"Not hardly. He sent me... I don't know where. Couldn't say the name, didn't know the language. Cold, snowy, everyone afraid. When I got to the edge, there was nothing but sea. Something they called the Winter Palace. What choice did I have but to sail away?" Robbie shook his head in mild disgust. "I tried to stow away, actually. Doesn't work as well as in stories."

"I wouldn't think so."

"They put me to work. I worked until we came here; then I ran away; then I met Tam."

"And I know the rest." Delaney slipped his arm around Robbie's waist, unable to wait a moment longer to hold him, and pressed his forehead to Robbie's to breathe in his breath, peppermint-sweet. "From Russia to the Appalachians; no wonder it took months."

"I could have called," Robbie said, faltering. "I know I should have. It just... There are things that can't be said at a distance, and in case something happened to me, I couldn't be cruel enough to make you lose this a second time."

"Shh. It's all right." Delaney didn't want to waste time on any regrets. What was done, was done. His questing fingers bumped something hard slung across Robbie's back. He searched the length of it and laughed. "A fiddle. Where did you get this?"

"With every cent and coin I earned playing games on board. That and the clothes. Then the money was all gone, and I walked. Headed straight to you. Hoping you'd waited for me."

"There's nowhere I would have gone."

"Nor I." Robbie stretched to kiss Delaney again, soft and slow and tempting, and it was far harder to stop this time.

Delaney had waited and dreamed too long to yank and tug. "Here, take this off?"

"I'll play for you later. And you for me. Not what I was, though."

“Better than. Human.” Delaney cupped Robbie’s cheek and sighed with pleasure when Robbie leaned into his touch, eyes slipping closed and lips parting. Delaney traced Robbie’s lip with his thumb. “Still so beautiful.”

Robbie scoffed.

“You are if I say you are. Shh.” Delaney helped Robbie slide the fiddle’s tough though battered and scuffed case off his back. He let himself stroke Robbie’s back and found nothing but the roughness of sweater. Not good enough. Delaney slid his hand beneath to caress bare skin and found only smoothness with the sole marring of small knots that marked where the rings had been for so long.

Delaney would have said there was a moment where it could have gone either way, but what would be wasn’t in question at all. He bent to kiss Robbie for the third time and clung. Threes didn’t have as much power in the human world, or not as much, but he and Robbie both knew what it meant to them.

Robbie laughed beneath Delaney’s lips. “So much more to tell,” he murmured. “Later. Much, much later.” He licked his way into Delaney’s mouth. “I’ve waited longer still for this.”

* * * * *

Their clothes lay tossed to the side, a tumbled jumble of sweaters and socks and jeans, forgotten as soon as they were discarded. Nothing mattered more than flesh against flesh.

Robbie looked far more different lain out before the fire dressed in nothing but his skin. Thinner but stronger, eager but a little shy, a blush staining his cheeks beneath his tan. Bronzed brown to the waist, paler to the knee, and dark again to his feet.

He reached up to caress Delaney’s arms, as bare as the rest of him, as bare as Robbie himself. “What makes you smile so?”

“Tan lines,” Delaney said before he knelt above Robbie to put his mouth on them. He sucked on the sun-darkened skin, tasted the clinging smells of salt as different from wood and leaf as could be, and liked the flavor better.

Slowly, as slow as he could manage the hunger, he kissed his way down to Robbie’s navel, just above the still-darker length of his cock, lying hard and flush against his stomach. Robbie hissed and raised his hips.

Time to play another night, and there will be other nights. As many of them as we both have in a normal, human life. Only not normal at all. Every bit of it better than a dream.

Delaney slid his mouth over the head of Robbie’s cock and slid down. The weight, the heft, the taste—he could spend hours there, and almost would have, if Robbie hadn’t growled and pushed at his shoulders.

“Been too long,” Robbie said, out of breath. His hair had grown damp while Delaney feasted on him, and his skin rose-hued beneath the tan. “You know what I want.”

Delaney's glasses slid almost fully off his nose on the sheen of his sweat and the rough jerk of his nod.

Robbie laughed and plucked them off, pushing them out of the way, and stroked his cock, shiny with saliva and precum. "Want to see your face," he said, then pressed his fingers to Delaney's lips to silence him. He moaned when Delaney sucked those fingers into his mouth and laved them wet, licking off the taste of Robbie's cock. "Next time," Robbie finished. "This time, on my hands. On my knees."

"I'd rather see your face this time."

Robbie's chin jutted. "Why?"

Delaney lowered himself to rest on his elbows and kissed Robbie lingering and slow. "There can't be any of this the other way."

Robbie sparkled with unexpected wickedness. "No, but better." He pushed at Delaney. "You'll see."

"Wait." Delaney kissed Robbie as deep and wet as he wanted, drinking down the taste of him as long as he could before he had to breathe.

When he let Robbie go, Robbie looked almost as wild as he had in older times. "Let me move now, or not at all, and I've waited for this too." He writhed beneath Delaney. "Please."

Delaney groaned, wistful and frustrated, but did as Robbie asked. When Robbie had turned on his stomach, propped with his hips high and begging for attention, Delaney saw what he'd wanted more than kisses. Robbie had tattooed over the smoothness of his back. Crisscrossed lines in corset shape from one healed piercing to the next.

A name, two names, woven in with musical notes. Delaney couldn't read the music, but he still *knew*. "The song," Delaney breathed, tracing them with his mouth. "And you, and me."

"This is what binds me now," Robbie said, muffled but clear and true. "What I choose for myself." He turned, his hair breaking free of the dried leather cord and falling over his face, hiding him except for the glitter and gleam of one eye. So very the same; so different too. "Sailors know good tattoo parlors."

The confession made Delaney laugh all over again. He laid his lips on a join where his name and Robbie's met a stave, three becoming one. "Thank you," he whispered. "More than you know."

Robbie undulated and lifted his hips. "Finish it," he rasped. "Add your mark while you fuck me."

"God," Delaney said, breathless. "How?"

"Any way."

Delaney kept his hand splayed wide over Robbie's back through the rest, licking him open until he begged for mercy, slicking him deep, then holding poised at the rim with Robbie a mewling tangle of honest passion that begged for mercy. "Like this," he

said and bit the crux where the names and the music joined. He slid home and held to let the moment spin out for what he wanted to be a life's worth of time.

He held Robbie down, then held him close. Never took his mouth away, breathing hot and wet and speaking things that made no sense and more sense than anything he could have said in the light of day. Pressed tighter and tighter still, supported Robbie's weight, and drew him back so that he sat in Delaney's lap. Delaney's arm around Robbie's waist, his face buried in Robbie's shoulder, Robbie's hair covering them both in a heavy veil that smelled of the north wind.

"Play this for me later," Delaney urged, driving deeper, harder, faster, losing the ragged rhythm he'd strived for and not minding. Nothing mattered but the feel of Robbie silky-hot around him and pliant in his arms. That and the music and the taste of his kisses and the solid surety of Robbie by his side. He broke off a hitched sob by pressing his mouth to the soft spot beneath Robbie's ear and biting him soft and slow. "Don't leave me again."

"Never," Robbie said as he rose and fell. He brought with him the harmony Delaney had missed for so long. "Never, not ever again. I swear, I swear—"

Delaney rocked and soothed Robbie through the pinnacle, then held him tight when he too finished. Sweat made their bodies stick together, slippery cum slicked their thighs, and Robbie was almost too loose to be brought around to straddle Delaney for a kiss that went on for minutes, hours, or days.

"Like this for always," Robbie said in echo of Delaney's thoughts, nuzzling the corner of his mouth. "Never leaving again. Yours, only yours, forever and always."

"And I'm yours," Delaney said, catching his lover to kiss him one more time. Then one more and another and again... "Yours."

And so he would be. Not prey, but his prize, Robbie pliant and sweet in his arms. He'd sleep wrapped around Robbie, the thrall of the Hunt behind them. He'd hold Robbie close with music in his head and the song he'd dreamed of soft on his lips, for now and for forever. Robbie would never leave again. Delaney's for keeps; his to care for, for always.

And that was exactly what he did.

 THE END 

Willa Okati

I can most often be found muttering to myself over a keyboard, plugged into my iPod, and breaking between paragraphs to play air drums. I'm teaching myself to play the pennywhistle and mixing up the summer's batches of henna. I have forty-plus separate tattoos and yearn for a full body suit of ink. I tend to walk around in a haze of story ideas, dreaming of tales yet to be told, and I drink an alarming amount of coffee for someone generally perceived to be mellow.