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Waters of Fate

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Warning: This book contains sexually explicit content which is only suitable for mature readers. This story has been rated *Total-e-burning*.

The Fey

WATERS OF FATE

Jessica Jarman

Dedication

This one is for my family. Oh, what they have to put up with when I'm focused on a book!

Thanks for your support and your love. I don't know what I'd do without you.

And, of course, my editor Chris. I don't know what else to say other than thanks for helping me make my books better each and every time.

Prologue

Neiva, Princess of Fey, wandered through the gardens surrounding the royal residence. She didn't know where her friends had gone. Off flirting with boys, no doubt. She rolled her eyes. Goddess, they were so stupid sometimes. She didn't understand why anyone would act so silly just to impress boys. And really, did it impress them? If it did, boys were even stupider than girls.

She hummed as she walked. It felt great to be away from lessons and tutors for a while. Sometimes she simply wanted to be alone. That was a rare occurrence. Though Dad said it would only get worse and she should enjoy this 'carefree time'. Neiva snorted. What did he know? He hadn't been fourteen in centuries.

A rustling to her left caught her attention and she stopped. The hedges parted to reveal a path. She tilted her head, trying to see where it led. She'd never noticed it before. Curious, she started down the narrow trail. It wound farther and farther away from the formal gardens. A part of Neiva's mind told her to turn back — her father would be furious if he knew she was in unfamiliar areas without protection — but she continued on. Something was drawing her. She didn't know what, but she couldn't sense anything bad or harmful.

The overgrown path opened up to a small glade. In the centre, a pool of water stood surrounded by a rough stone wall. Neiva approached and peered into the water. It was crystal clear. She could see the flat stone lining the bottom. Tentatively, she dipped a finger. The cool liquid began to swirl at her touch.

"Good afternoon, Princess."

Neiva jolted and spun towards the voice.

"I'm sorry I startled you."

A young woman stood barely a foot away. How had she approached without Neiva's notice? Even if she had flashed into the small clearing, Neiva would have felt the disturbance on the air.

"Good afternoon," she answered. "I don't know you. How is it you know who I am?"

"Everyone knows the Princess of Fey."

Neiva felt her cheeks heat, embarrassed at the obvious answer.

"I'm Mara. You look lost, Princess. Is there something I can assist with?"

She squinted slightly as she studied the woman. Why did she have to wander away? Now she was alone, in an unfamiliar place with an unfamiliar person. This was the type of situation her father lectured about constantly. Though the woman appeared harmless.

"I'm not lost," she insisted. "The pool called to..." She stopped herself from finishing the sentence. People thinking she was crazed was not a good thing.

Mara smiled. "It called to you. Of course. That is the way it often is. Have you looked within?"

Neiva frowned. "At what? It's just water."

"Look again, dear one," Mara encouraged.

Uneasiness caused Neiva's stomach to clench. "Why? What am I looking for? What is this place?"

Mara laughed and Neiva closed her eyes at the beautiful sound. It travelled on the wind and wound around her, like a living thing. It soothed her, calmed the tightness inside her.

"So distrustful. Wonderful! Your parents have done a fine job. Have you heard of the Waters of Fate?"

"Of course." Neiva rolled her eyes. Everyone knew about the Waters. "They tell you whether you have a true mate. Sometimes they'll only show enough for you to know you have a one, and sometimes they'll actually reveal who it is." She glanced at the pool. "These are the Waters?"

"They are indeed. Have you looked within?" she repeated.

"All I saw was water." Neiva was mortified as tears welled up. "I guess I don't have a true mate in this life."

"Perhaps you should look again," Mara suggested. "You only had a moment before."

Neiva turned and stepped to the pool. Bracing her palms on the rough stones, she leaned forward and peered into the Waters. After a moment, the water darkened and swirled. Soon, it was churning—a small, contained storm—splashing up on the wall, bathing her hands in coolness.

"Keep watching," Mara murmured.

In the middle of the chaotic water, images began to form. Neiva could make out the forms of a man and woman. They were embracing. But, Goddess, it was so blurred. She

leaned farther. The image sharpened. Her heart stuttered as she recognised herself – or rather an older version of herself. She shifted her gaze and her heart stopped altogether.

“It can’t be. *He’s* my mate?” She straightened and turned to look at Mara. “How? How can it be *him*? My father will never allow it.”

“Never question Fate, Princess. She has paired the two of you together. You are halves of the same soul. Even the King cannot deny nor change that.”

Neiva looked into the Waters again, where the man and woman still shimmered on the surface. They looked so happy. A warmth blossomed in her stomach and spread through her body.

“How will I tell him? Blessed Lady above, how will I tell Dad?”

Again, Mara’s laugh slid around her, comforting her. “You’ll have no need to tell your mate. He’ll know when the time is right. As for the King, you and your mate will find the right moment to inform him. How fortunate you are, Princess. Not everyone finds their other half in this life. He is a good, strong man.”

Neiva knew that to be true, but her head spun over the revelation. “Maybe it’s a mistake...” Her mouth dropped open.

The woman was gone. The glade was empty, save Neiva. She glanced back down. The Waters were clear once again.

She sighed. One thing was certain. She was telling no one about this. They’d think she was insane. Her head spun as she started down the path to the gardens.

Goddess, she had a true mate...

* * * *

Rhys entered the Great Hall and surveyed the splendour. It was the Princess’s twentieth birthday and a grand ball was planned for the occasion. As second-in-command to the King, he was handling last minute details while Kaelen spent the day with his wife and daughter in private. All was well and ready for the festivities. Rhys hoped the Princess enjoyed herself. She’d always been a bit shy at social gatherings, seeming to prefer one-on-one conversations. He’d been honoured with many of those conversations and had grown to appreciate his future Queen’s deft mind and sharp wit. In fact, quite often he sought her out for a bit of verbal sparring.

“Hello, Rhys.”

Speaking of Her Highness... He turned around and all reason was lost. The Princess was absolutely stunning. The silver gown clung to curves he was certain weren't there earlier that day. The skirt flared out and whispered across the floor as she moved closer to him. Her chestnut hair was swept away from her face but left to fall down her back to her waist. Rhys made a fist to squelch the temptation to run his fingers through the curls.

“How do I look?” She twirled slowly. “Dad couldn't talk. He just stared, and Mom got all teary. I didn't know if that was good or bad.”

He found his voice, barely. “Good, I'm certain. You look lovely, Princess.”

“Thank you. You will save a dance for me, won't you?” She batted — actually *batted* — her eyes at him.

“Of course I will. Though you may not have time. After the young men see you, I'll not be able to come near.” His stomach clenched. The thought of her being courted unsettled him. And why shouldn't it? Not only was she a youth, she was Kaelen's daughter.

“Truly? You really think so? Most of them avoid me.” She let out an unsteady giggle and moved another step closer to him. Her eyes were wide as she gazed up at him.

Rhys nearly laughed. He understood now. She was uncomfortable around boys and nervous about the attention she was certain to receive at the ball. Perhaps she even had a young suitor in mind. She was practicing her flirtations on him.

“Princess, they avoid you because they're afraid. You're a beautiful, intelligent, and powerful woman. Every one of them likely fantasises about courting you, but hasn't worked up the nerve to ask.” He patted her shoulder in what he hoped was a reassuring manner.

She stared at him and, after a quick glance around the room, threw her arms around his neck. Rhys struggled to grasp a thought — any thought — as her mouth covered his. He remained motionless. Until her warm, slick tongue slid over his lips. Then, Goddess help him, he simply reacted. He deepened the kiss, his tongue exploring the hot confines of her mouth. She sighed deep in her throat and pressed her body closer.

Music floated on the air around them. Joy filled Rhys as he wrapped his arms around Neiva. He couldn't control it. He had to get closer to her, feel every inch of her. Every cell in his body sang as she rubbed against him. The music grew louder, the notes more intense.

He needed to get her to his dwelling, into his bed, needed to be inside her... By the Blessed Lady!

“No!”

It took every ounce of strength he had to push her away.

“What are you playing with, Princess?” His voice shook. Anger mingled with the powerful arousal.

Neiva’s lips trembled and her eyes filled with tears. “W-w-what do you mean?”

“That song is not to be trifled with. Whatever little spell you conjured up to make the Song of Souls sound is dangerous. You do not mess with Fate!” A sick feeling churned in his gut and a cold sweat covered his body from head to toe.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. I wove no spell, I swear. The Song sounded because we’re meant, Rhys.” The pleading note in her voice only added to his panic.

“We are not. This is a sick joke. If not of your doing, then of someone else’s.” He jerked around, searching for the culprit.

“Listen to me!” Neiva shouted. “We are meant. I saw it. I saw it in the Waters. On my honour, Rhys, I saw it.”

He went absolutely cold. No, Fate would not be so cruel as to bind him to the King’s daughter. His *best friend’s* daughter.

Stepping forward, he grasped her shoulders and gave her a hard shake. “Understand this, we are not meant. I have no true mate. *That* is what I saw in the Waters.”

“But that was before...before my dad saved my mom. He changed everything—”

“No. You are never to touch me again. Do you hear me? Never!”

He cut off any protests by flashing to his residence. With an oath, he slammed his fist into the wall over and over. Blood covered his knuckles, but the pain helped clear his head. Breathing laboured, he turned, pressed his back against the wall and slid down until he was on the floor. Dropping his head forward, he scrubbed his palms over his face.

What in Goddess’ name was he going to do?

Chapter One

Five years later

Either he'd accept her tonight or she gave up.

Neiva strode through the lush, fragrant garden towards the entrance of the Great Hall. Men and women strolled along the curved paths in search of the fresh night air or a bit of privacy.

She paused in the tall, arching entryway and surveyed the large gathering. Rhys was nowhere in sight.

She bit back a sigh of regret and entered. Winding her way through the crowd, she made her way to the platform where the King and Queen sat.

When she was before them, she lowered herself to her knees and bowed her head.

"Stand, Neiva," the King commanded.

Both stood as she did and came forward to embrace her.

"I wondered what kept you, daughter," King Kaelen murmured in her hair.

"I lost track of time while in the gardens. I'm sorry if I worried you."

Chuckling, he released her. "I had no worries, otherwise I would have reached out to you."

Her mother took her hand. "You look lovely tonight."

"As do you." It was true. Her parents radiated happiness. Her father was clothed in his habitual black. Wings of silver opened behind him, framing his form. His long, raven hair flowed over his shoulders, a beautiful contrast to the thin band of gold encircling his head. Her mother wore a long flowing gown of green, accenting her beaming verdant eyes. Her chestnut curls fell to her waist.

"Mom, you are fairly glowing."

"We have news, Neiva, and I hope it pleases you. We plan to announce it tonight, but want you to know first." Nervousness wove through her mother's words.

"If it pleases you, I'm sure it'll be pleasing to me as well."

Her father wrapped an arm around his wife's shoulders. A grin nearly split his face in two. "You will have a brother or sister soon."

Shock coursed through Neiva. "A child? Truly?"

Her mother's face flushed and she nodded. "Are you all right with this news?"

"Of course I am! I'm a bit surprised, but thrilled. Are you feeling well? Having any sickness?" She knew her mother had had a difficult pregnancy with her.

"I'm wonderful. No sickness," she assured. "Only worry that this would bother you. There is such an age difference..."

Neiva chuckled. A twenty-five year age difference between siblings was hardly abnormal for the fey. She reminded herself that her mother was human—human with fey gifts but human nonetheless. This was not normal in the human world.

"I am so pleased with this news. I can see that both of you are." She wrapped her arms around her parents, creating a warm circle around the life her mother carried. Now aware and concentrating, she could feel the energy flowing from the tiny being in her mother's womb. Her brow furrowed as she concentrated. Slowly, a smile formed. It was a boy.

"*Welcome, my brother,*" she whispered in her mind. A burst of energy answered her. Her mother gasped and covered her abdomen with one hand.

Neiva placed her hand over her mother's and closed her eyes as her father's larger hand surrounded theirs.

"Such a strong baby," her mother whispered.

"He is strong in body and mind," Neiva replied. "He will be very powerful."

"He?" her father questioned.

"Whoops." She pulled away and grinned. "I probably wasn't supposed to let that out, was I?"

"I thought it was a boy," her mother interjected. "Are you sure?"

"I'm certain. I can feel him. His energy. He'll be a handful."

"You connected with him?" her father asked.

Neiva nodded. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw several people lined up to pay their respects to her parents.

"I'll leave you to your duties. Should I come to your dwelling tomorrow?"

Her mother embraced her. "That'd be great, sweetheart. There's much to prepare for, seeing as fey children don't take the normal nine months to make their appearance."

Neiva chuckled. Even after twenty-six years in the faery realm, her mother still considered human standards as normal.

"I will see you tomorrow then." She hesitated a moment before asking, "Is Rhys here this eve?"

"Yes, he just arrived." Her father nodded across the room at his friend and second-in-command. "He was taking care of some things for me. Is something wrong?"

"No, I simply wanted to say hello. It's been a while since I've seen him," she rushed to assure.

She embraced her parents once more and walked towards where she'd seen Rhys. She was reluctant to make known her plans. She had deliberately closed her mind around her parents with regard to him. She didn't know how her father would react to the fact that she was mated to his oldest and dearest friend. Especially considering Rhys' reaction to the whole situation.

Her stomach fluttered as she approached the man in question. Her body responded almost violently when around him. Every cell in her called out to him. And the blasted man refused to admit they were meant.

"Good eve, Rhys," she greeted and drank in the sight of him.

His long blond hair was pulled back away from his sculpted face, revealing slightly pointed ears. His green wings framed him from behind, contrasting with the dark blue of his garb. Neiva's gaze travelled the length of his body, from his broad shoulders to the muscled legs encased in his tight trousers. Heat raced through her body. Sweet Lady, she needed him. Stubborn man.

"Princess," he acknowledged with a nod. The coldness of his greeting warred with the heat of his gaze as it swept over her body. Under its scrutiny, her nipples pebbled beneath her thin dress, and desire softened and moistened the folds between her thighs.

"Rhys, we need to talk." She cursed the breathlessness of her voice.

His clear green eyes narrowed. "I believe we have already discussed everything we need to."

"Not to my satisfaction." She stepped close to him and lowered her voice. "Rhys, you cannot keep denying the bond between us. We are true mates. You heard the Song of Souls, the same as I have. How can you deny me?"

He leaned down and Neiva inhaled the clean, earthy scent clinging to him.

"We have been over this. We are not true mates. You are a youth, I am an elder. My loyalty belongs to your father and I am not about to betray that."

"So you betray me instead?" she hissed. Anger swept hotly through her.

"I betray no one. I looked in the Waters and I have no true mate in this lifetime."

"I saw you in the Waters, Rhys. You are my true mate. And you cannot deny that you heard the Song when you were with me."

"I heard nothing."

"Liar."

"Neiva," he warned in a low growl.

"Liar," she repeated.

He grasped her arm and pulled her to the side. "You were a child when you looked into the Waters. You mistook who you saw."

She pushed the consuming anger down and stared into his eyes. "You keep telling yourself that. I'll not bother you with this again. Live with the fact that you denied your true mate."

She pulled free and hurried away from him.

Rhys watched her walk away, cursing himself as his body hardened at the sight of her lush ass swaying beneath her clinging gown.

Loyalty to Kaelen and lust for his daughter warred within him. And it was just lust. The Waters had foretold that he had no true mate.

"Rhys."

His King's voice echoed in his head.

"Yes, my King."

"Please come to stand with Abigail and me as we make an announcement."

"Of course."

He made his way to the platform that held Kaelen and Abigail. Regret coursed through him as he saw his King and Queen. Always he'd believed not having a true mate was a blessing. Until recently. He wanted a woman to share his life with. Nothing held him back from taking a mate. Not everyone had a true mate to bond with. Often one chose a partner based on attraction and common interests. Yet no woman interested Rhys, save one.

His gaze found Neiva. She, too, was making her way to her parents. Kaelen had called to her as well, he assumed.

He approached the couple and knelt before them. Touching his fingers to his lips, he then clasped his hand over his heart. A show of loyalty.

"Stand, my friend. Be at my side as my mate and I share wonderful news."

Rhys moved to the right of his King and glanced sideways at Neiva who stood at the left of her mother. Her silver-blue eyes met his for a moment, flashing with anger before looking away.

"Welcome, my people," Kaelen addressed the gathering. "The Queen and I have joyous news to share."

All attention turned to those on the platform.

"My Queen is to give me another child," he announced. "My daughter has seen that it is a son. Soon you will have a Prince."

Happiness swelled within Rhys as murmurs swept through the Great Hall. He turned and quickly embraced his friend.

"This is truly joyous news, Kaelen. Many blessings upon you and your family."

Kaelen clapped him several times on the back before stepping back. Rhys' heart contracted at the happiness radiating from his King. Lucky bastard.

Turning, he smiled at his Queen. "Abigail, you are well?"

She gave him a small smile and hugged him quickly. "Quite well, thank you."

"Blessings to you, my Queen."

A stream of people lined up to congratulate the royal family. He released Abigail and moved on, finding himself standing before Neiva.

"Blessings to you and your family, Princess."

She stiffened when he wrapped his arms around her. "Release me," she whispered.

"I'm showing my respect and joy at your family's news," he protested as she pushed at his chest.

"Don't bother."

He leaned down until his nose nearly touched hers. "You are acting like the child you are."

"Fuck you."

He jerked back. "Princess."

“Move on, Rhys. You’re holding up the procession.”

She refused to look him in the eye, turning to smile at the man behind him.

Gritting his teeth, he strode away. Damn her. Why couldn’t she see that a relationship wasn’t meant? It was merely lust on both parts. It had to be.

Chapter Two

Neiva's face ached from the smile she kept pasted on. Hurt and anger raged through her. Damn him. Damn *her* for letting him affect her so. Well, no more. She'd move on. Find a male more suited to her. If Rhys refused to acknowledge what was between them, she'd look elsewhere. Hell if she'd beg him. She was the King's daughter — she begged no one.

Her duties done, she wandered the crowd, careful to avoid Rhys.

"Princess Neiva, you look lovely this eve."

She turned towards the handsome man addressing her. She recognised him as one of her father's council members.

"Gareth, how are you?"

"I'm well. And you?"

"Quite well. Especially after my parents' announcement."

"I am overjoyed for your family, for our people." He reached and grasped her hand. "I wondered if you would dance with me, Princess?"

"I'd be delighted."

She allowed him to lead her to the large open floor and take her into his arms. Moving on, she reminded herself and focused on the man holding her.

Physically, he was quite pleasing. A large man, he towered several inches above her. Long brown hair flowed over his shoulders, the soft curls tickling her hands. Quite handsome and quite suitable, she decided. She knew him to be a good and honourable man from his involvement with her father.

His hands caressed low on her back below her wings, just above the curve of her ass. He pulled her close to him. Her stomach tightened as she felt his erection pulse against her stomach.

"I've been watching you," he whispered. "Often I wondered if you were involved with any man."

She closed her eyes and leaned into him.

"I'm involved with no one."

His hands moved to rest on her ass and he pulled her tighter against him.

Regret filled Neiva. While she felt a pleasant warmth within her, it wasn't a fraction of what she felt when around Rhys.

Gareth's hand moved up to slid along the bottom of her thin wing. She shuddered at the touch. Her wings were so sensitive, it was as though he had glided his fingers along the soft folds of her sex.

"What in hell are you doing?"

Her body flamed as Rhys' voice filled her head. He'd never used this intimate form of communication with her before. Had refused to.

"It is none of your concern," she fired back.

"You would give yourself to a man you feel nothing for?"

"Again, it's none of your concern."

"Damn it all."

"Get out of my head."

She centred her attention on Gareth and his caressing hands on her ass, every once in a while slipping along her wings. She closed her eyes. Moisture pooled between her legs, softening the folds. Though part of her suspected it had more to do with Rhys' voice in her head than Gareth's attention. The man had a voice that could push even the coldest woman to orgasm—deep, warm...and arousing without any effort.

Though he didn't speak to her anymore, she could feel his disapproval. He watched her. She could sense his gaze as surely as she could feel Gareth's cock pressing against her. Anger at his rejection and sheer perverseness pushed her to tighten her arms around Gareth's neck. Tentatively, she tasted the tan skin at the base of his neck. With a groan, he slid his cheek on the top of her head.

"Perhaps you'd join me for a stroll in the gardens, Princess?"

Nervousness jumpstarted her heart. She leaned back and reached up to cup his cheek. *"I'd love to."*

Anticipation curled in her abdomen as he led her towards the arched doorway. She knew Gareth was an experienced lover—he would be kind and considerate. She liked him. She could be with him this way. The internal pep talk continued until Gareth halted. Neiva bumped into his suddenly still form.

"Good eve, Gareth. Princess."

Annoyance tightened her jaw. Rhys stood in the doorway and blocked their path.

"Rhys, good eve to you," Gareth greeted cheerfully.

Neiva refused to speak to him and lifted her chin defiantly at his expectant look.

"I'm sorry to disturb you, but the Princess is needed elsewhere at the moment." His low voice slid along her spine and she had to suppress a shudder.

"Really? And just where is that?" she demanded.

"Your father wishes a word with you."

She shook her head. "If that were true, he'd have contacted me himself."

"You've blocked everyone out of your mind. He couldn't make his wishes known."

She shook her head. "I don't think so. Move aside, Rhys. Let us pass."

"Neiva, perhaps you should go talk to your father. We can take our walk later."

Gareth trailed his fingers down her arm. "I'll wait."

"It could take some time," Rhys warned.

Gareth nodded. "Contact me tomorrow, then?"

Seeing as neither man was going to give in to her wants, she nodded. "Tomorrow then. I look forward to it."

A need to anger Rhys pushed her forward. Wrapping her arms around Gareth's neck, she captured his mouth. She poured everything she had into the assault. Sliding her tongue between his lips, she tasted him. She sighed into his mouth when his hands rested on her hips. A quick nip on his bottom lip followed by a sweep of her tongue, and she pulled away.

"Tomorrow," he repeated hoarsely before turning and leaving the Great Hall.

"Very nice, Princess. Did you practice that on the back of your hand?"

She glared at him. "My father doesn't want to speak to me, does he?"

"No." He shrugged. "But if he knew what you planned to do, he would."

She choked on the bitter laugh. "Hardly. Our people are highly sexual. The fact that I don't have a stream of lovers is more concerning to the population than anything I was to do with Gareth."

A muscle in his cheek twitched as he regarded her. "You are far removed from the general population, Princess. You need to take more care than most."

She moved closer to him, his scent tormenting her. "You just stopped me because you can't stand to see me with anyone else."

He shook his head.

She rushed to continue. "You're a liar. Not only to me, but to yourself. I'll not sit quietly by and wait for you to come to your senses. I've wasted too much time with that already. Stay away from me."

With a fling of her wrist, she flashed from the Great Hall to her residence. Tears burned her eyes as she strode into her bedroom. With a thought, her wings retracted neatly. Damn him. What a stubborn male. Air swirled through the room, lifting her hair from her shoulders. Green and blue lights danced through the air as Rhys flashed before her.

"Stubborn female," he growled, advancing towards her.

Although she trembled, she stood her ground. Fear didn't quake her—it was pure desire. And she cursed herself for that.

Unable to look at him, she closed her eyes. "Rhys, leave. Please."

"You refuse to act as you should. As heir to this kingdom, you need to behave in an appropriate manner. Yet you waltz into that room in that gown." His voice deepened. "Every man in that hall could nearly see through the damned thing."

A light caress across her breast had her eyes flying open. "W-w-what are you doing?"

He circled one nipple with his fingertip. It pebbled beneath the thin material, begging for more. Heat streamed through her body.

"Every man saw your nipples beckoning to be touched and wondered what they tasted like."

"Not every man," she denied breathlessly.

"If you believe that, you are a fool."

His hands trailed from her breasts down to settle on her hips, his fingers digging deliciously into her flesh. "They wondered. And they watched how your hips moved under this dress. How your long legs moved as you crossed the room. And every single one of them wondered what it would be like to be between them," he ground out.

The folds of her sex swelled and became moist as his hands massaged. Her thighs quivered uncontrollably. It was a wonder she was still standing.

"I didn't want any of them between my legs," she insisted.

One hand snuck across her belly and descended to cup her intimately. She bit back a cry as his palm circled and put pressure on her sensitive clit.

"Yet you were going to allow that man the privilege?"

"Yes." Slivers of heat darted from her throbbing heat to burrow deep in her belly.

"Why? When you deserve so much more?"

She shook her head and reached up to run her hands through his thick hair. Twisting the long strands around her fingers, she pulled until their noses nearly touched. Their breaths mingled as she stared into his green eyes and tried to find the right words. Why did he keep denying her? Why couldn't he understand?

"I deserve my true mate," she whispered.

She stood on tiptoe and brushed her mouth over his lips. Darting her tongue out, she traced the curve of his lower lip before teasing his mouth open. With a low groan, he accepted the kiss and slid his palm slowly over her folds. Neiva's head spun as the silken fabric of her gown glided over her hot moistness.

She moved one hand from his hair, down his chest and beyond to cup his hardness.

Breaking away from his mouth, she gasped, "You want me. Don't deny it."

"By the Goddess, it isn't a question of wanting. A man would be a fool not to want you." He ran his hot tongue along the crease of her lips, punctuating his words.

"It's more than physical, and you know it." Disappointment coursed through her when he didn't respond. He simply captured her mouth again. No gentle kiss this. It was a dual of tongues and a desperate plea for more.

He grasped the skirt of her gown and dragged it up to her waist.

Neiva's head fell back and Rhys rained kisses down her neck as he cradled her sex, no barriers between them now.

Blessed Goddess, she felt exquisite. Though he'd guessed she wore no undergarments beneath the blue frock, the feel of her softness, heat and dampness radiating, caused his hand to tremble. Damn, he was acting like a damned youth enjoying a woman for the first time. It hardly helped that was exactly how he felt.

He ran his tongue along the hollow of her throat, savouring the moan he elicited deep in her throat.

"Lift your arms," he demanded.

Her eyes slid shut as she complied. Though he could have flashed the clothes from her, he pulled the gown up and over her head, slowly revealing the lush body he had often fantasised about. Guilt rushed over him, but was shoved aside when she reached down and

unlaced his pants. His cock sprang out, eager to fill her hands. The first touch of her cool hands on the hot smoothness had him jerking his hips forward.

Music swelled in the air around them. Faint at first then growing louder and louder. Part of his mind screamed to walk away, to flash back to his dwelling and leave the princess alone as he'd intended.

Damn it all, why did she have to be so stubborn? Why'd she have to pursue another man so blatantly in front of him? *Because you'd insisted you felt nothing for her*, a voice in his head taunted. *You lied*.

"Wait," he protested, yet didn't pull away.

She shook her head as she unbuttoned his shirt. "I understand it will just be tonight, Rhys. You don't want forever, then give me tonight." She kissed the rough skin of his chest, her tongue darting out to taste him.

Rhys groaned. "You aren't making this easy, Princess."

"Goddess, I hope not." She pulled the shirt off his shoulders and slid it down his arms to drop on the floor. Running her palms up his arms, she demanded, "Look at me, Rhys."

There's the Princess, he thought. He stared down into her eyes.

"Give me tonight."

"You want more than that."

"What I want and what I can have are two different things. I'm intelligent enough to realise that. I'll take what I can get, Rhys. Give me something to remember if you insist on denying me the rest of my life."

He tried to hold onto his anger, his resolve to leave her, but failed miserably. Her mouth was on his chest again, raining kisses down to his stomach. She knelt before him – his Princess – and he watched as she took his cock in hand, then in her mouth. Her hot, sweet mouth. His head fell back and he stared at the ceiling as she began to suck and stroke him.

The music – that fucking music – slid through the room and around them. He clenched his jaw, fought against everything in him not to say the words that went round and round his head. He would not bind himself to her. Not bind her to him. He didn't care what she thought she saw in the Waters. Or that the Song of Souls sounded when she was near. He had no true mate. It was impossible. The Goddess would not pair him with his best friend's daughter. Surely Fate would not be so cruel. And Kaelen would never allow it. Rhys would not mar that friendship or betray his King. Simple as that.

He slid his hands into her hair, intending to pull her from him. She hummed low in her throat, the vibrations caressing his cock, and his hands fisted in the curls. His hips moved back and forth, fucking her hot mouth. His balls tightened and heat built up within him, wanting to burst out. He pulled her away — not to end it. No, it was too late for that. She asked for tonight, she'd get it. Yanking her to her feet, he kissed her hard on the mouth, bruising her lips. He spun her around and bent her over the bureau.

"Are you ready, Princess?" he asked, nipping at the smooth expanse of her back. He reached around her waist and slid his fingers through the swollen folds of her pussy. A grin curved his lips. "Oh yes, you're dripping. Do you want me inside you?"

She pushed back against him, her soft ass pressing against his hardness. "You know I do, damn it!"

Rhys chuckled and circled her clit with one finger before putting pressure on it. Neiva cried out.

He shifted away to grasp his cock and slid it along her slick slit, down over her clit and back to the opening of her warmth. Once positioned, he grasped her hips and pulled. With one swift thrust, her wet, tight heat surrounded him. The muscles of her pussy contracted around him. Great Goddess, he'd never felt such tightness. He gritted his teeth to keep from coming then and there.

Neiva whimpered and circled her hips. Reaching around again, he found the swollen nub and tapped it once, twice, and then rubbed it hard as he began to drive into her. He knew this wasn't going to be a long, drawn out loving. No, it was going to be fast and hard. And he would make her scream before he was finished with her.

He ran his other hand up the length of her spine and buried it in her thick mane of hair. He rammed into her and paused for a moment, his cock pulsing almost unbearably. Pulling until her head fell back, he leaned over her, his chest against her back, and licked the length of her neck to her ear.

"Come for me, Princess." He bit the small lobe. "Come apart."

Rhys straightened and moved within her again. Over and over. The closer he came, the more the pleasure built within, the louder the sweet music swelled around them.

"I. Belong. To You." Each word punctuated by thrust and a hard caress of her clit. "You belong to me... No!" He bit down on his lip hard, tasting blood, as her pussy began to

spasm around his cock. He plunged over and over until his seed spilled within her. Her clit throbbed against his fingers as she screamed out his name.

Breathing ragged, he leaned over her for a moment and rubbed his cheek against her sweat-slickened skin. He listened to the sound of her heavy breathing, satisfied he'd brought her pleasure.

"Get off."

He jerked into an upright position, but didn't pull out of her. "What?"

"Get off of me." Her voice was low, dull.

With a frown, he pulled away from her and watched as she straightened and crossed to the bed. She sat and pulled her legs up to rest her chin on her knees.

"You can leave now."

"Princess..."

Neiva lifted her head and glared at him. "Don't call me that! You gave me what I wanted. Now leave."

Anger swept through him. Damn her. "I didn't give you what you wanted though, did I? Was this a little ploy to get what you really wanted? 'Just give me tonight, Rhys'." He threw her words back at her. "You didn't want just tonight, did you, Princess? You wanted me to say the words. You wanted me to bind us together."

"I never made it a secret that that was what I wanted, you bastard," she hissed. "You're unwilling to give it to me. End of story. We fucked. I got my night with you. Go away."

"I told you from the beginning it wasn't to be," he pointed out. He reached down and tucked himself back in his trousers. Glancing down, he stopped cold. Blood. There was blood on his cock. His gaze returned to her pale face. "You were untried. A virgin?"

Neiva closed her eyes for a moment before meeting his stare again. "Yes, Rhys. I was. Now I'm not."

"Why didn't you tell me? How could you possibly still be..."

"I've known since I was a child you were my mate. No other man tempted me. Why didn't I tell you?" She let out a bitter laugh. "Why should I have? So you'd have yet another reason to deny me?"

"Neiva."

The sound of her name on his lips — not ‘Princess’ — caused such a pain she nearly cried out.

“Leave, Rhys. I won’t bother you again.”

“Let’s talk about this.”

“Talk? Okay, are you willing to say the words and be my mate?”

He shook his head slowly. “You know the answer to that.”

It surprised her that, after all the years of refusals from him, it could still hurt so badly. Tears stung her eyes and blurred her vision.

“Then we have nothing to talk about.”

“You honestly thought this would change things. That once I was inside of you I wouldn’t be able to stop myself from saying the words.”

She flinched at his raised voice. No, that hadn’t been her plan. She really had planned on being satisfied with one night if that was all he’d give her. But when he had started saying the binding words, joy had leapt inside her. Her soul had sung. She had literally felt their souls joining. And then he had stopped. Now she felt nothing. She was hollow inside. And she almost hated him for that.

“Rhys, I didn’t plan anything. I’m not asking anything of you.” Tears made her voice thicken. “Please leave.”

Their gazes met, held for a moment, then he flashed himself out of the room without another word.

A sob caught in her throat and she lay on the bed, drawing into herself. Damn him.

Chapter Three

Neiva walked slowly through the gardens again the next morning towards her parents' dwelling. She could have flashed there but needed the quiet and solitude to think. Her request needed to be well thought out to convince her parents – or rather her father – to let her leave.

She ached all over, a result of the previous evening with Rhys. Being fey, she healed quickly, of course, and could have made the discomfort of losing her virginity vanish with a thought, but the reminder of her...encounter with Rhys helped strengthen her resolve to go through with her plan.

She had to phrase her request just right otherwise her father would refuse. It hardly mattered that she was an adult. If the King vetoed it, she would have to obey or risk banishment – daughter or no.

Her mother would back her up. Neiva wouldn't confide her true reasons, of course. She'd hidden it from them for so long and they would simply force her and Rhys to be together. And he would hate her for that. No. This was the only way.

"Neiva."

She looked up to see her mother outside their dwelling, kneeling in the garden next to a basket of blooms. The older woman stood and rushed forward to embrace her. Neiva closed her eyes and inhaled the soft scent surrounding Abigail.

"Is Dad here? I need to talk to both of you."

Pulling back, Abigail frowned. "Is everything okay? Nothing is wrong?"

"No, no. Everything is fine. I just need to talk to you about something, that's all." She smiled widely to reassure.

"Okay. He's just inside."

She followed her mother into a large room where her father sat, feet crossed resting on a table and his head back, eyes closed.

She grinned and plopped down next to him. "Hey, Dad."

He popped one eye open and, draping an arm around her shoulders, pulled her close.

"Morning, pipsqueak."

Neiva blinked as her eyes burned. She loved moments like this. When he was Dad, not King. Gone was the formality of the previous evening and warm contentment took its place.

They sat like that, quiet and close, for a few minutes until Abigail came in with tea.

"So..." she drawled out as she poured. "You said you had something you wanted to talk to us about."

Neiva took her cup and fiddled with the handle, trying to compose her thoughts.

"Well, I have a request."

Her dad quirked an eyebrow, then nodded for her to continue.

Just spit it out.

"I'd like permission to go to the human world."

Stunned silence hung in the room. Both parents stared at her. Kaelen cleared his throat and took a sip of tea before speaking.

"I assume you have reasons for this request."

"Yes, of course. I am half human. I'd like to explore that part of my heritage. I wonder if perhaps my true mate," she nearly choked on the words, "is in that realm. Like yours was."

"Neiva sweetheart, you are young still. Most don't find their true mate so early in life," her father pointed out.

"Most full-blooded fey." She hesitated before giving them a sliver of truth. "I feel empty. Like something is missing. I believe going to the human world is the answer. I can stay at the cabin and just figure things out."

"You've been unhappy?" Her mother's soft voice soothed the edges of her hurt.

"Not unhappy exactly. Just...not complete. If you need time to discuss this, I understand. I can come back later."

"No, of course not. It is a fine idea. Isn't it, Kaelen?"

Her father turned to stare at his wife. "It is?"

"Yes, she needs to find herself and to do that, she needs to see both sides of herself — the faery and the human." Her mother nodded and beamed at her. "I'm sorry I didn't think of it myself."

Neiva smiled at her then looked at her father. "Dad?"

"If you think this is what you need, I'll not stand in your way. But Neiva, although some laws have changed, others remain. You cannot interfere with human lives by using your gifts. It is —"

"Strictly forbidden. I know, Dad. I promise to be careful and contact you daily."

"Very well."

She leaned forward and kissed his cheek. "Thank you. I'm going to go prepare some things. Shall I come back for dinner before I go?"

"That would be wonderful." Her mom nodded.

"I'll see you then." She flashed herself out of the dwelling and into the main gardens outside the Great Hall. She sat heavily on a bench and sighed. Much less painful than she'd thought. Hope filled her. Maybe in the human world, away from Rhys, she wouldn't ache so much.

"Princess Neiva, you look lovely today."

Gareth sat next to her and took her hand.

"Hello, Gareth."

"I had hoped you would contact me last eve." He lifted her hand to his lips.

"I'm very sorry. There was no time. As it is, I need to go to my dwelling. I am going to the human world for a time to...ah...be with my mother's family." She didn't want to hurt this man because her heart was otherwise engaged — and smashed — by Rhys.

"I see." He frowned. "When will you return?"

"I don't know. It could be a while. Don't wait for me, Gareth." She smiled teasingly, cupping his cheek. "The other girls would have my head if you did."

"You love someone else."

Neiva jerked back at his sure statement. "I... Gareth, I never said that."

"You didn't have to. He is a lucky man. But if you should ever change your mind, contact me." He smiled.

Am I so transparent?

"You'll be the first. Goodbye, Gareth." She leaned into him and pressed her lips to his. He cupped both hands around her face and deepened the kiss slightly, opening his mouth and sweeping his tongue around hers before pulling away.

"Goodbye, Princess. I wish you much happiness." He stood, touched his fingers to his lips and clasped the hand over his heart. Warmth spread through her at the sign of loyalty. He flashed out of the garden and she was left to ponder her future. Again.

Rhys fought to control the blinding fury that swept through him. The man had his hands, his *mouth* on his mate. Again. Everything in Rhys longed to pull the two apart, to grab Neiva and make her his. To say the binding words.

No. He couldn't...wouldn't do that. He had a commitment to his King. For the love of the Goddess, he'd been there when Neiva was born, had watched her grow up. The very idea she was his true mate was laughable.

He watched as Gareth flashed out of sight, leaving Neiva alone. Yes, it should be laughable, but it wasn't. She looked so miserable. He ached to go to her, to hold her. Yet he couldn't without her getting the wrong idea. That was clear after the night before. He would not be trapped. He didn't like to think of just how close he'd come to joining them for eternity. The memory of her coldness after they'd been together hurt. But not as much as the idea that she'd manoeuvred him into the situation.

He knew she didn't understand his refusal. Hell, he was having a hard time understanding it by the day. But he had been a friend and loyal subject to Kaelen for centuries. He was his second-in-command and would not betray the trust his King had placed on him. Even if he did concede and admit Neiva was his true mate, the fact remained she was a youth. A quarter of a century of living compared to his several. If they bonded — *if* — it must wait. It was unheard of for one of their kind to mate so young.

He stared at her and felt her unrest, her confusion rolling off her in waves. And anger. Oh yes, anger was there. At him, he had no doubt. Perhaps he should talk to her, try to get her to see they must wait. Surely she'd be willing to compromise on that point. Though he didn't see how they could be together physically. He closed his eyes and inhaled deeply, focusing on the rich smells around him. It had been painful to be with her, to find release and hold back the words that battered the inside of his skull. He had focused on the anger then, had been harsh — too harsh, perhaps — with her.

"Rhys."

His eyes opened at the King's voice.

"Yes, Kaelen?"

"Can you come to me? I need to speak to you about an important matter."

"Of course, I'll be there immediately."

He gazed at Neiva, shock coursing through him when he saw her silver-blue gaze on him. He inclined his head in her direction. She lifted her chin—every inch the regal Princess—and looked away.

With a thought, he was in Kaelen and Abigail's residence. Kaelen rose from his seat on the long sofa. Rhys lowered to his knees and bowed his head.

"Stand. You know there is no need for that here." Impatience threaded through Kaelen's words.

"You are my King and have my loyalty." He touched his fingers to his lips before clasping the hand to his chest. He needed the reminder. Particularly after the last evening with Neiva. Guilt swamped him even as his body hardened at the thought.

"Here we are friends, not King and subject."

Rhys stood and grinned at Kaelen. "Of course, my King."

"Smart ass."

"Rhys." Abigail strode in the room and immediately embraced him. "Good morn."

"How are you feeling?" He pulled away to search her face. "Does this pregnancy have the sickness as the last one?"

"Not at all. I feel wonderful. Please sit. My husband has a request to make of you." She rolled her eyes at Kaelen.

"Abigail, I'm set on this. As much as you may disagree, it's for her own safety."

"I understand your worry. Which is why I'm not fighting you on this." She sat beside Kaelen on the sofa and took his hand.

His friend grinned at Rhys as he lowered himself into one of the chairs. "She doesn't fight me, yet I must endure the rolling of eyes and exasperated looks."

"Perhaps you should tell me the request so I can decide whose side I'm on."

"Ever the diplomat. It concerns our daughter," Abigail informed.

Rhys' gut tightened. What could this be about? Kaelen mentioned her safety. Was she at risk?

"Neiva has it in her head to go into the human world," Kaelen said.

"She's been there to visit Abigail's family. How is this different?"

"This would be for an extended amount of time. She wants to explore that side of her heritage apparently."

"I see. You worry she'll be unsafe?"

"There are still supporters of Darrick who have been unaccounted for," Kaelen stated tersely.

Anger surged through Rhys at the mention of Kaelen's cousin. The man who had nearly killed his King to take the throne. Darrick himself had been banished to the Dark Realm – a truly hellish place – but some remained loyal to the bastard.

Abigail ran her fingertips down Kaelen's cheek, caressing gently. "There have been no attempts to hurt Neiva."

"Because she has always been protected. That will not change." Kaelen's voice was steel, boding no argument. "I don't understand her resolve to go now."

"I believe she explained it well enough, sweetheart. You cannot deny she is half human. Besides, she may be right. Her true mate may be human, as yours was." She leaned and kissed his cheek.

Blood roared in Rhys' ears. Her mate? She searched for her mate? Impossible. She knew he was... He shook his head.

"She said that? That she believed her mate to be in the human world?" he whispered harshly.

"She brought up the possibility." Kaelen dismissed this with a wave of his hand. "But her safety is what concerns me."

Rhys had denied her for how long and the thought of her searching for another to be with tore at him. Damn her.

"What do you wish of me? I can certainly put together some men to keep watch over her while she is there. Though she is too young to be mated," he couldn't stop himself from adding.

Abigail raised a brow. "I was her age when I found Kaelen."

"Totally different situation." Rhys thought about who could be gathered to protect the Princess. Certainly not Gareth. The man had too much of an interest in her already.

"Regardless, she needs protection. I want you to go and keep an eye on her," Kaelen said firmly.

Coldness swept through Rhys. "I can think of other people better suited for the task, my King. I am needed here."

"Nothing here is more important than my daughter. I'm asking you to do this for me, Rhys. I need someone I trust to do this."

"Perhaps Leilen would be a better choice?" Desperation gripped him. He could not spend day after day watching her, being in her presence.

"Leilen is going to the Dark Realm. I need him to make sure Darrick is where he should be. I feel unrest and need that assurance. And I need the assurance that all is well with my family."

"Dermet then?"

"Is there a reason you don't wish to be around my daughter?" Abigail frowned at him.

"Of course not." His mind raced to find a plausible reason for his hesitation. Certainly not the truth. "If you feel unrest, it is important that I stay close to you, Kaelen. Particularly with Abigail expecting."

Kaelen leaned forward, his silver gaze boring into Rhys. "I trust no one more than you. My second-in-command. My best friend. I cannot think of anyone I'd rather have watching over my daughter than you." He frowned. "Do you refuse me, Rhys? Question my decisions?"

"Of course not. I will do whatever you command."

"Thank you, my friend. She will be staying in Abigail's cabin. It's important that she not know you're there."

Abigail snorted, causing the men to look at her. "Nobody likes a babysitter."

Kaelen sighed heavily. "We've been over this, darling. She isn't a regular woman. She is Princess of Fey. We cannot afford to leave her unprotected." He gripped her hand. "If anything happened to her..."

"I know. I just dread her reaction if she realises you're having her followed."

That makes two of us. Particularly if she finds out who her "babysitter" is, Rhys agreed inwardly.

Chapter Four

Neiva flopped on the couch. Here she was. In the human world. In her mother's cabin. She'd expected to feel some sort of relief once she arrived. To have the gaping hole within her filled somehow when she left the faery realm. Left Rhys behind. No such luck. If anything, the hollowness was more pronounced, more painful.

Tears burned her eyes as she thought of her mate. He'd refused her again and again as though she weren't good enough. She swiped her cheeks as the tears escaped. Enough. She was not a whiney female who needed a man—certainly not a bastard who didn't want to be with her. She was Princess of Fey and, by the Goddess, would prevail over a stupid refusal.

Of course that's what her mind told her. Her heart and soul, however, yearned for him. Yearned to see him. Touch him. Feel him within her again. And more than anything, yearned to be joined with him.

A knock sounded and she nearly jumped out of her skin. Who could that be? The cabin was isolated with no neighbours within walking distance. She closed her eyes a moment and felt her surroundings. No evil, no magick lingered in the air.

She crossed to the door, pulled open the door, and found herself pulled into a tight embrace.

"Neiva! I could hardly believe it when Dad told me you'd be here. It's been so long."

She instantly relaxed when she realised it was her cousin. Pulling back, she bit back a laugh.

"Nice hair, cuz."

Elizabeth Guthrie ran a hand through her short, messy blue hair. "You like? Mom adores it." Her eyes danced with amusement.

Neiva pictured her prim and proper Aunt Darla. "Oh I'm sure she does. She probably picks out your clothes too, huh?"

"Obviously. You know Mom's all about leather and showing skin. Are you going to let me in?"

"Of course." She stepped back and watched her cousin pick up the black duffel bag at their feet. "Staying for a while?"

"If you don't mind. A while back, I asked your mom if I could stay here for a bit. But if you prefer to be alone, I can stay somewhere else."

"No, no, you're most welcome. I missed you. I'm in the loft, but you can have the downstairs room. Why don't you go dump your stuff and I'll get some food and wine. Luckily Mom made sure we were all stocked up."

An hour later, the two women sat laughing and visiting.

"Seriously, I thought she was going to swallow her tongue, Nee. Just can't understand why on earth I'm not wearing silk and pearls and chairing events like her. As if. When she saw my hair and this," she tapped the ring in her nose, "she called her shrink to make me an appointment."

"And what does your dad think?"

"He laughed and shook his head. Dad knows when to back off. A trait that never rubbed off on dear ol' Mom. So what have you been up to?"

"Oh, not much. Trying to figure out what to do with myself."

"You're sad though. Someone hurt you."

Neiva's mouth dropped open and she stared. "Beth..."

"You don't have to talk about it if it hurts too much."

"Am I that obvious?" First Gareth guessing she was in love, now this. Was she really an open book to all around her?

Beth shrugged. "Probably not to most. I can see it in your eyes. If you want to talk, cool. If not, no worries."

She sighed. "Not much to tell, really. I love him. He doesn't want me. End of story."

"Somehow I think there's more to it, but okay. So you came here to forget and move on?"

"Something like that."

"Cool. We'll have to go out, hit some clubs. Nothing like dancing and good company to get your mind off things."

Neiva laughed. "I thought I'd just hang out here for a while."

"Oh no, my dear sweet cousin. Trust me on this. We'll drive that man right out of your head."

Yeah, but what about my soul?

* * * *

Rhys stood amidst the trees, staring at the small cabin. She was in there. He could feel her. Could she feel his presence? He did his best to cloak it. Any human looking out couldn't see him. Hell, they could walk right up to him and not notice him.

Damn it all. He did not want to be here. Near her. He knew his thoughts made no sense. After refusing her over and over, he should feel relief when she showed interest in another man, when she showed signs of moving on. But no. Rage and hurt filled him. Even now, he didn't think he could see Gareth without tearing the man's throat out. And the fact that she'd left the faery realm, telling her parents she was looking for her mate, tore him in two. With a curse, he turned away from the cabin and strode a few yards away before stopping.

This had to end. He had to detach and do what Kaelen asked him to do. Watch over her and make sure she was safe.

The sound of a door opening and shutting pulled him from his thoughts. He turned back to see Neiva walking towards the small car parked in the drive. A small woman with...blue hair? ...was beside her. Their laughter floated to him on the wind.

"Kaelen?"

"Yes?"

"Neiva is with a woman. She seems friendly with her. She has blue hair."

The King's laughter echoed inside his head. *"That would be Abigail's niece, Elizabeth."*

"Elizabeth?" He remembered her as a little girl with golden hair and a mischievous smile. *"Darla's daughter?"*

"Yes. Abigail says she plans on staying with Neiva for a while."

"All right. I'll be in touch."

"Thank you, my friend."

He watched Elizabeth get behind the wheel. Neiva opened the passenger door but stopped before getting in. She turned, her gaze sweeping over the trees, always coming back to the spot where he stood. Even from a distance, he could see the frown furrowing her brow. She never looked directly at him. But she felt him, he knew it.

She shook her head and climbed in the vehicle. Rhys watched as they drove away. Where were they going? As the car disappeared around the corner, he closed his eyes and inhaled deeply.

Every time. Sweet Lady, he underestimated the effect Neiva had on him every damned time. Just the sight of her rocked him off centre.

He needed to focus. He was here to ensure the Princess's safety. Opening his eyes, he surveyed his surroundings. Nothing. He saw nothing out of the ordinary and felt no magicks. He moved towards the cabin and circled the building. After making certain there was no danger, he'd find the women and keep watch over them.

Although he didn't feel Neiva was at risk, he understood Kaelen's fears. If anyone wanted to harm the King, Abigail and Neiva were the most likely targets. Add the fact that Neiva was next in line for the throne, and the risk doubled. His gut clenched at the thought. Darrick's followers wouldn't be so stupid or bold to attack Kaelen's family, would they? There were few of them – Rhys himself had a hand in diminishing their numbers – and they didn't have much in the way of resources. And Darrick was in the Dark Realm, unable to command them.

The Goddess help anyone who harmed Neiva. He'd tear them apart for looking the wrong way at his mate...rather, his Princess. His Princess or Queen or King. He protected the entire royal family.

Rhys paused at each entry to the cabin and wove evil-warding spells. After finishing the intricate magick, he opened his senses and searched for Neiva. Once he'd located her, he flashed outside the building she was in, careful to cloak his presence from human eyes. A bar. She was in a bar. With a sigh, he concentrated and flashed human clothes on himself. Dread filled him as he walked around to the entrance and entered. Music vibrated on the air, riding along his skin. His eyes adjusted quickly to the darkness and he located her immediately. Every molecule in him was attuned to her, felt her.

She sat with her cousin at a table near the bar. The establishment was crowded – typical of a Friday night, he supposed. At least he thought it was Friday evening.

The cousins looked deep in conversation, oblivious to the bodies and noise around them. Relief replaced the dread. It wasn't as bad as he figured. In his mind, he'd imagined her surrounded by men...human men. He didn't know how he would have reacted to that.

Well, that was a lie. He knew exactly how he'd react and it went against the "no interfering with humans" rule. Pummelling humans with his fist would definitely constitute interfering.

Rhys glanced around and spotted a table in the corner. That would do. After taking a seat, he lowered his shields. Not so much that Neiva would feel his presence, but enough to be seen by human eyes. He might as well enjoy a drink while he was there.

"Hey, sugar. When'd you sneak in? Hope I didn't keep you waiting." The waitress, a thin, lean woman with very little in the way of clothing, sidled up to the table. "What can I get ya?"

"Beer. Whatever you have on tap."

"You bet. Be right back."

He didn't watch her go, his gaze on Neiva. She threw her head back and laughed at something Beth said. The sight of her throat reminded him of when they'd been together. His hand in her soft hair, pulling her head back. He could almost taste the salty sweetness on his tongue. He shifted in his chair, the damned jeans confining his growing erection. What he wouldn't give to go to her now and —

"Here ya go. Need anything else?" The waitress slid the frosty mug in front of him.

"No, thank you." He looked into her eyes and gave a mental push to leave him alone for a while.

He quickly took a drink, hoping to drown out the memory of Neiva's taste. No luck. Fuck. He turned his attention back to Neiva and frowned. Beth was pulling her to her feet. The two were moving towards the small but crowded dance floor. He lifted the mug to his lips and gulped and as Neiva began to move to the music, hips swaying, arms above her head. Great Goddess. His cock swelled even more. Damn humans and their fashions. Blasted jeans. The fabric was horrible. Well, not so much on Neiva. No, the material looked quite lovely on her, hugging her curves, moulding to her shape. As she moved, her shirt crept up exposing a line of flesh below the clingy black fabric. Soft, creamy skin that begged for his fingers, his mouth, his...

Damn it all. He needed to focus on the objective. Protect the Princess, not lust after her. Lust fogged judgement and he couldn't allow that. It was lust, a small part of his mind still clung to that belief.

She continued to dance, slowly spinning around. When she faced him, her gaze met his. With a jolt, he realised she could see him. Her mouth formed an 'O' of surprise. After a

moment she simply smiled, closed her eyes and kept dancing – and damned if she didn't add a bit more hip movement.

Fuck. He took another drink. It was going to be a long night.

Chapter Five

Neiva walked through the woods. Although she recognised the area surrounding the cabin, she knew it was a dream. Her first hint was the gown she wore – she'd never wear this in the human world. The thin, clinging skirt fell to the ground, swishing as she walked barefoot. The top hugged her breasts and tied behind her neck. Her back was left exposed to the cool night air. Her hair hung loose, curls lifting with the breeze and her movements.

She walked and walked, not quite sure she was going. She didn't care, really. Humming softly under her breath, she continued on. She was so glad Beth had shown up. Her cousin offered a welcome distraction, keeping Neiva's mind of Rhys. At least until she'd spotted him at the bar. She should have known her father would send someone to keep an eye on her. There would be no hope in changing the King's mind on the matter, she knew this. But perhaps she could find a way to have someone else be her protector. She rolled her eyes. Honestly, her father still saw her as a child who needed to be sheltered from all bad things.

A clearing opened before her. Sleeping flowers, waiting for the sun to wake them with its warmth, spread out as far as she could see in the pale moonlight. She inhaled deeply, drinking in the damp, fragrant night air. Here, alone, she ached for Rhys. She felt utterly empty.

Tears pricked her eyes and she lowered herself to the ground, folding her legs beneath her. She closed her eyes and pictured him. The ache grew as she imagined running her hands through his hair, stroking his shoulders, caressing his wings. The memory of his body against hers, inside her, tortured her. She'd have been better off not knowing his touch. She swiped her fingers across damp cheeks and tried to on something else, anything else.

"Princess."

His voice. Everything in her rejoiced. She could feel him standing in front of her and fought the impulse to jump up and throw herself into his arms. She opened her eyes and lifted her head. There he was. Moonlight framing his body. Oh, Goddess, his body...

"Are you unwell?" He knelt before her and raised a hand.

She pulled away before he could touch her tear damp cheek. "I am well."

"I can't bear to see you unhappy." He reached out again, cupped her face, brushing the tears away with his thumbs. "Can't bear to see you cry."

He leaned forward and pressed his mouth to hers. Neiva let her eyes slid shut and relished the feel of his firm lips. He slid his tongue along the crease of her lips and pushed inside. A moan rumbled low in his throat as their tongues danced around each other. He lowered his hands from her face and slipped his arms around her waist, pulling her against him. His erection nudged her belly and warmth pooled within. Her thighs trembled and she looped her arms around his neck. She couldn't get close enough.

With a sigh, he ended the kiss. "Sweet Lady Above, your taste haunts me." Releasing her, he looked around. "This is a dream."

"More evidence of our connection. True mates often share dreams. I'm sure you can explain that away, can't you?" She let her arms drop to her sides.

Rhys simply stared at her, silent.

"What? No denials?" she snapped. "No scolding me for believing we're meant?"

"I never intended to hurt you." His voice, though quiet, hung heavy in the air.

"I know," she admitted, "but the end result is the same."

"Come back home, Princess. There is no need for you to be here. You belong with your people."

"Are you willing to accept me? To announce to everyone, announce to my father, that we are meant?" She chuckled humourlessly at the look of horror on his face. "No, I'll stay right where I am, thank you."

"You still think to find a mate here? A human?" He grimaced.

"Watch yourself, Rhys. My mother is human and your Queen. I am half-human. Why is it so incredible that I'd search for happiness in this world. I'm certain I can find some measure of contentment here."

"Your true mate is not human." His voice rose to a near shout.

"Are you admitting you are my true mate?" She waited a moment and was met with more silence. "I thought not."

"Surely you understand. I'm an elder, you are a youth. Your father would frown upon that alone. You are too young for a union."

"Are you saying you will accept our bond, that you'll mate with me once I'm older?"

"If I say yes, will you return with me?" He took her hand.

Neiva closed her eyes briefly, savouring the warmth of his skin. After considering, she looked at him. "No. I'm sorry, but I can't."

"I'm conceding." He frowned. "I'm admitting we're meant. Why can't that be enough until you're older?"

Her breath caught at his admission. Oh, how long she had waited for him to admit they were true mates. And yet, the joy she expected didn't come.

"It's not enough. I can't see you day after day, Rhys. It hurts." Her voice broke.

She pulled away and stood, turning from him. By the Goddess, she was suffocating. She had to get out of here. Had to wake up. She started walking back the way she came.

Rhys came up behind her and grabbed her arm. He spun her around and leaned in until they were nose to nose. She bit back a whimper as his breath bathed her face.

"I'll stay away. I'll think of something, something that will keep me from you. You won't have to see me every day."

"Now who's being naïve? You are the King's second-in-command, I am the King's daughter. We may not see each other daily, but it'll still be too much." She cupped his face, fingers caressing.

"Don't you see? My soul sings when you are near. Everything in me celebrates. Until the inevitable rejection. Shhh." She covered his mouth to still his protests. "I understand your reasons, Rhys. Really I do. I just don't agree with them, nor can I live with them." Her fingers trembled against his lips.

"It's too hard."

She pulled away from him and concentrated on waking up.

"Wait! Don't – "

Neiva jerked awake. Tears streamed down her face and her breath hitched in her throat. Goddess, it'd been tempting – go home, wait it out – but she just couldn't do it. She couldn't bear to be near him and unable to be with him in every way a true mate is meant to. And despite his promise, they'd be in each other's company often. She knew this from experience. Not only was he her father's second-in-command, the two men were best of friends. Rhys was often at family gatherings and always at the official ones.

This is for the best, she repeated over and over in her head. Maybe if she thought it enough, she'd convince herself.

Turning her mind to building mental walls, Neiva prepared herself for sleep again. And this time, she'd dream alone.

* * * *

Early the next morning, Neiva dressed before peeking into Beth's room. Her cousin was still sleeping soundly. Good, she had a bit of time. She flashed to parents' dwelling and strolled into the dining room where she found her parents breaking their fast.

"So...when were you going to mention the babysitter?"

Kaelen paused, teacup halfway to his mouth, at his daughter's raised voice.

"Good morning, sweetie," Abby greeted and gestured towards the chair next to her.

"Breakfast?"

"Morning, Mom. I'm not especially hungry at the moment, but thank you. Well?" she snapped at her still silent father.

"Now, Neiva –"

"Don't 'Now, Neiva' me. I don't need a babysitter, Dad. What sort of trouble do you imagine I'm going to get into at the cabin, for Goddess' sake? Bring Rhys home. Surely he has more important duties." She knew her father would never give in, but if she could just manage to get someone else in the bodyguard role...

"You are my daughter and next in line for the throne. Who do you think someone would go after if they wished to hurt me?" He shook his head. "No, you will have protection or you will come home."

"Fine," she bit out. "Have someone else do it. There's no need for Rhys to be on Princess-sitting duty."

"Have you and Rhys argued?" Abby asked.

"No, of course not."

The older woman tilted her head. "He seemed to think someone else would be better suited for the job as well."

Neiva's chest tightened. Of course he had tried to get out of it. Why should that surprise her? Why should that hurt? She cleared her throat.

"I'm not surprised." She forced a laugh. "He has more important duties to see to."

"More important than protecting my daughter?" Kaelen bellowed. "No, he does not."

"Dad, be reasonable. Have...Gareth do it." She blurted out the first name that came to mind.

"Gareth? He's a solid fellow to be sure," he mused. "Didn't you dance with him at the ball? Is he courting you?"

"No!" Neiva saw her mother smile. "Mom, no. Gareth is not a suitor. Why do you have to make everything more complicated?"

"I need someone I can trust to protect you. Gareth is a fine man, but if he's more intent on stealing kisses than looking after your safety, you'll end up hurt."

"Please listen to me," she begged. "There is nothing between Gareth and me."

"Listen to *me*, daughter. Rhys is the best man for this. I'll not take chances with your safety." Her father punctuated the statement by pounding the table with his fist.

"Urgh!" She threw her hands up in the air. "You are impossible!" Without another word, she flashed back to her room in the cabin.

Unbelievable. Now her parents thought she and Gareth were involved. She sighed. Oh well. At least they didn't suspect anything between her and Rhys. Feeling restless, Neiva figured going for a walk would calm her down. Being outdoors, in nature, always did. She walked quietly through the house and slipped outside.

The cool morning breeze lifted her hair and she inhaled deeply. The fresh scent of dew clung to the air. Lovely. She wove through the trees, farther and farther from the cabin. She listened to the life around her—the plants, the animals, all of it. Suddenly, she felt pain, heard sorrow. Stopping in her tracks, she closed her eyes and concentrated. It was coming from her left. Neiva opened her eyes and headed in that direction. It wasn't long before she found what had been calling her.

A small tree and its surroundings were badly burned. Neiva's heart ached at the sorrow on the air. Clearly, someone had started a fire and let it get out of control. About three feet of the tree's trunk was scorched.

She kicked her shoes off and stood barefoot on the singed grass. The earth was crying out for help.

"I'm here," Neiva murmured. "All is well."

She lifted her arms, closed her eyes, and focused. She allowed her physical self to fade away, becoming healing light and energy. Gliding over the earth, she soothed, repaired, and restored. She knew not how long it took, but didn't stop until fresh grass sprouted, flowers bloomed, and no sign of injury was evident on the tree.

Her task done, Neiva returned to her physical body and staggered. Unable to stay upright, she knelt in the fresh grass. Her fatigue meant nothing as she felt the earth rejoice beneath her. She ran her fingers through the blades of grass and smiled.

"You're welcome," she whispered. "Goddess bless you."

She sat quietly for some time, humming to herself and listening to all around her. After a time, she rose and went back the way she came.

Beth was in the living room when she entered the cabin.

"Hey. Are you okay? You look a bit pale," her cousin said, a frown furrowing her brow.

Neiva sat beside her on the sofa. She didn't doubt she looked horrible. Between the interrupted sleep and the healing, she was quite tired.

"Just sleepy. No worries." She leaned her head back and smiled.

Beth leaned over and touched Neiva's arm. "I think it's more than that. You were crying. Last night. In your sleep."

"Oh." Neiva wracked her mind, not really knowing what to say. "I'll be fine. It's...it's complicated."

"You know you can talk to me. Whatever you say will go no further, I promise." Beth crossed her finger over her heart like they did when they were girls.

"I know. I trust you. Really. There are just some things I can't talk about. No matter how much I want to. "

Beth stared at her for a moment before leaning forward. "If this has anything to do with a certain secret your parents have, I already know."

Neiva's eyes widened and her stomach did a little flip. Beth couldn't possibly... "What exactly do you know?"

"I know what you and your dad are," her cousin said in a hushed voice.

"What are we? Beth, I need you to say it."

"You're faeries. Your dad is King and you're next in line. The Princess."

"Oh...great...Goddess..." She struggled to pull air into her lung. "How...how do...how..."

"How do I know? I've known for years. I overheard your parents telling my dad. I was about thirteen or so."

"Your dad knows?"

"Yeah. I don't know why they told them. I only heard part of the conversation, but he swore never to tell. Mom certainly doesn't know. And, Nee, I'd never say anything. I mean, who'd believe it anyway?"

"But you do? Believe it?"

Beth shrugged. "Yeah. Dad believed it. I had no reason not to. And hey, it's pretty cool. My uncle and aunt are King and Queen and my favourite cousin is Princess."

"This is incredible." Neiva shook her head.

"So, now that's out of the way, what's wrong? Faery troubles?"

She couldn't stop the laugh that bubbled out. "In a way. Faery man troubles."

Beth clucked her tongue. "Always boils down to a man. You said before that you love a man and he doesn't want you. I'm guessing there's more to it than that."

"A bit more. All right... Rhys and I are true mates. True mates are halves of a whole, you see. Fate makes one for the other. We belong together. Our souls long for each other."

"Well, that's intense. If you're meant to be together, what's the problem?"

Neiva took a deep breath. "Let me start at the beginning. When I was fourteen, I looked into the Waters..."

Chapter Six

"And that's about it, I suppose." Neiva pulled her legs up and rested her chin on her knees.

Beth pursed her lips. "Okay. Let me see if I have this right. You and Rhys are true mates. But he insists you aren't and won't...bond...with you. This hurts and is why you came here. Only now your dad has Rhys being Mr. Bodyguard and he'll be following you around while you're here. Being near Rhys hurts, being away from him hurts, and now you're sharing dreams with him."

"That about covers it."

"Well, you're in a fine pickle, cuz. And I thought my man troubles sucked."

Neiva chuckled. "I think man troubles suck no matter what realm you're in."

"No doubt. You poor thing." Beth patted Neiva's shoulder. "Poor Rhys."

"Poor Rhys? Why poor Rhys? All he has to do is admit we're meant and say the binding words! You're supposed to be on my side, Beth!"

"Oh I am. I just can't help but feel for the guy. He spends his whole life believing he has no true mate, but your dad changed all that by saving your mom. He feels a pull for you. I mean, this true mate thing works both ways, right? If you're feeling all this – the longing, the emptiness and sadness – isn't he?"

"Well, yes, I suppose so," Neiva conceded slowly. She'd never thought of that. She'd always accused Rhys of being selfish and she hadn't given a second thought to what he was feeling as a result of their being true mates.

"Add to that, you're the King's daughter. The King, who just happens to be his best friend and has been for what? A couple hundred years? That's gotta bite the big one. Even in the human world, it's not cool to go after your best friend's kid."

"But we're meant!" she protested. "Dad would understand that and wouldn't see it as a betrayal, like Rhys does. He wouldn't stand in our way, I know it. It wouldn't make sense to fight Fate."

"Feelings don't always make sense, Nee. Sounds like Rhys needs to work through this stuff in his head."

"Damn it, I understand his feelings, his reasons. I even told him that. I just can't be around him, pretending everything is normal while he does that. And I have no guarantee that he'll ever be with me." Neiva winced as her voice broke. She would not cry again.

"I totally get that. I think coming here was just what you needed. You need time to concentrate on you. Not Rhys, not your parents, not your kingdom. You're going to have the rest of your life to worry about others after you're Queen. Now is *you* time. So, let's go shopping, then get some lunch. And we definitely need to go out again tonight. You had fun dancing last night, right?" Beth scooted over and put her arm around Neiva's shoulders.

"Yes, I had a wonderful time."

"Excellent. Get your ass into the shower, girl. Time's a-wastin'."

Neiva laughed. Time just for her. She hadn't thought about it that way. Beth was right. It was exactly what she needed. There was plenty of time for others later. Today was about her.

* * * *

Rhys walked into Kaelen and Abigail's sitting room and found the King reading in a chair and the Queen reclining on the sofa with her eyes closed. He cleared his throat and waited to be acknowledged.

"Welcome, friend."

Rhys bowed. "My King."

"Yes, yes." Kaelen waved a hand before gesturing to the armchair next to him. "Sit."

"Is Abby well?" he asked in a hushed voice.

"I'm fine. Simply tired." Abby laughed, not bothering to open her eyes. "Carry on, gentlemen. Pay no attention to the knocked up Queen."

"For the love of the Goddess, Abby." Kaelen shook his head. "Ignore her, Rhys. Hormones," he said in a stage whisper.

Abby snorted, but otherwise remained silent.

Kaelen turned back to Rhys. "My daughter visited me this morn."

"She... Has she returned?" Rhys' heart leapt.

"No, she came to discuss your presence in the human world. I didn't think she'd spot you so quickly. Are you getting too old for assignments which require stealth?"

Rhys ignored the jest and asked, "Was she angry?"

"Of course." Kaelen shrugged. "She knew my mind was set. She believes you're too important for the job, though."

"Oh really."

"Indeed. She even tried to suggest a replacement. Gareth, I believe was her choice." He chuckled. "As if I'd be crazed enough to assign a man half-besotted with her in charge of her wellbeing."

"Gareth? Besotted..." Rhys stuttered.

"He's been interested in her for some time." Abigail popped one eye open to look at the men. "He's watched her for a while now. I even saw them dancing at the ball. They looked lovely together, very well suited, don't you think, love?"

Kaelen frowned. "Looked lovely... Abby, she is far too young to mate. It was an innocent flirtation, I'm certain."

A dull roar filled Rhys' head. She had asked for Gareth? Had she decided to follow through with her previous plan and lay with the man? And Abby thought them well suited?

To hell with that.

"Garth is entirely unsuited for the task at hand. Furthermore, innocent flirtations can develop into dangerous situations. It's better they are kept apart."

Kaelen nodded in agreement. Abby sat up and stared at Rhys, questions swirling in her eyes.

Rhys shifted uncomfortably. "She is Princess of Fey. She is unlike other young women. More care needs to be taken with her!"

"You see? This is exactly why you are the best man for this!" Kaelen exclaimed. "Now...all is well?"

"Yes, of course. There are no disturbances around the cabin. I've protected the entrances of the dwelling and I've been watching over her. She and her cousin were shopping when I last observed them," Rhys reported.

"Excellent. You'll keep me apprised of any changes?"

"As you wish, my King." He bowed, then nodded at Abigail. "My Queen."

He flashed back to the cabin. The building was empty and the car still gone. Rhys sighed. He'd give them a little while longer. Meanwhile he'd double-check the surrounding area.

He made his way through the woods, senses attuned to any magickal disturbance. His mind was a jumble. Had been since he'd awakened. Since the shared dream. He clenched his fists. Normally he constructed barriers to prevent it from happening. Obviously he'd failed the night before. He wouldn't make that mistake again.

And to hear about her and that *boy* Gareth...

His emotions were out of control, and he knew why. Being around Neiva, but unable to be truly with her, was maddening. All the things she mentioned – the sadness, the emptiness – oh, he felt it too.

Rhys would give anything to go to her now and say the words. To be with her body and soul. But he couldn't. Not yet. He stopped and closed his eyes. *She is too young to mate...* From the King's own lips. They needed to wait. Neiva would see that eventually and they figure out a way to live with it.

Damn it! He was allowing himself to become distracted again. Pushing all else from his mind, he concentrated on the earth and air around him. Listened to what they had to say. A disturbance. Without thought, Rhys sprinted towards it. It was faint, and no evil clung to the area. But a powerful spell could mask that easily.

He stopped where it felt strongest and searched for any clue as to what magicks had occurred here. His gaze landed on fresh growth around a small tree. He walked to it and knelt.

Grass and flowers bloomed, their smells heavy in the air. The tree itself fairly sang with happiness. With every swaying limb, joy could be heard.

Rhys' skin prickled and his stomach tightened. Neiva. This was her work. Now that the panic had passed, he could feel her touch everywhere. Relief filled him. There was no danger. Although he'd talk to her about wandering the forest alone.

That should be a delightful conversation, he thought with a cringe as he headed in the direction of the cabin. Time to see if the Princess had returned.

* * * *

Neiva sipped her drink and watched the dancers on the floor. She and Beth had returned to the bar they'd visited the previous evening. It wasn't as crowded but Neiva didn't mind. She just wanted some time to not think about serious topics. Another night of

drinks and dancing with her cousin seemed like just the thing. In fact, the entire day had been perfect. They'd visited the salon—Beth's hair was now a rather vibrant shade of red—and gone shopping. That had been an adventure. Neiva chuckled. Beth had made some interesting purchases. The more an item would shock her mom, the more she wanted it.

"So how are you holding up?" Beth asked.

"Good. I'm having fun." She scanned the bar. Disappointment soured her belly.

"You're looking for him, aren't you?"

"Don't be silly. I'm just...looking for him," she admitted. "He may be here, cloaking his presence. He's powerful enough to hide from me. But I don't know why he would. I mean, I know he's protecting me, so—"

"Push him out of your mind, Nee. *You* time, remember?"

"I know. It's just that—"

"Hello, ladies." A handsome man—Neiva judged him to be in his mid-20's—stood next to the table. "I'm Scott and this is my buddy, Nick. We wondered if we could join you."

"I don't—"

"Sure!" Beth exclaimed and pinned Neiva with a stern glance before grinning at the guys. "I'm Beth and this is Neiva. Nice to meet you." She shook both men's hands.

Neiva followed her example without speaking.

"Neiva," Nick repeated. "That's an interesting name. Very pretty."

"Thank you," she murmured.

"Be nice," Beth whispered in her ear. "They're cute and seem semi-normal."

She had to agree with her cousin. They were cute. Nick had sandy brown hair and clear blue eyes. He had a slightly crooked smile, and his eyes crinkled. Scott was blond, his hair cut close to his scalp. His dark brown eyes reminded Neiva of rich chocolate. So, yes, they were cute, but she couldn't summon up the smallest interest in either of them. However, she'd play nice for Beth.

"Are you from around here?" Scott asked.

"Nope. We're just visiting. Neiva's parents have a cabin out by—"

Neiva kicked Beth's leg. "Sorry," she said when her cousin glared at her. Turning back to the men, she added, "We're just visiting for a few weeks."

Great Goddess, even she knew not to tell strange men you were staying in a secluded cabin alone. Conversation continued, touching on career – Neiva had to, of course, lie blatantly – music, dancing, tattoos...

Beth and Scott were head to head, talking body art and piercing now. Neiva shifted uneasily in her seat.

"So, Neiva, we're probably going to have to jet in a few. Could I get your number? I think you're hot...and nice too. Maybe we could hook up sometime? I could show you a real good time." He wiggled his eyebrows and grinned.

She kept her hand under the table several moments before answering. "As nice as that sounds, I can't."

"Why? I thought we were hitting it off here."

"We were just talking," she snapped. "I'm sorry. I really can't. I don't think my husband would approve."

Lifting her left hand, she wiggled her ring finger and made sure the diamond sparkled brightly.

"Husband? Oh shit!" He glanced around. "He's not here, is he?"

"Not yet." Neiva fought the urge to laugh. She really shouldn't be enjoying this.

"Scott, dude, we gotta go."

She took a long drink as the two said their goodbyes. Once they were gone, Beth reached over, grasped Neiva's wrist, and stared pointedly at her now bare finger.

"Glamour," she quipped. "Comes in handy sometimes. Did you get his number?"

"Yeah, but, Nee, what's the problem? You weren't having a good time?"

"He just didn't interest me, Beth." She shrugged. "And he was so young – he annoyed me."

"Hey, just because you're into an old guy..." Beth's eyes widened. "Oh my God. Nee, is that him? It must be him. Damn, he's intense, just staring at you. Oh, he probably didn't like the guys sitting with us, paying attention to you..." Beth trailed off and just gaped towards the far wall.

"Beth, calm down." She followed her cousin's gaze. There he stood against the wall, legs braced apart, arms crossed over his chest. Very bodyguard-like.

"Ignore him. He's just doing his job. So are you going to see Scott again?"

"I'm not sure. He seems nice, a little immature but nice. Maybe I'll..." Beth's eyes darted in Rhys' direction.

"Ignore him," Neiva repeated, though the task seemed impossible.

"Uh, he's making it kinda hard to since he's coming this way."

Neiva's stomach flipped just as Rhys appeared beside her.

"Rhys." His voice escaped her in a rush. "This is my cousin Beth. Beth, this is my... This is Rhys."

"Hi," Beth said brightly.

He nodded curtly at her and turned back to Neiva. He held his hand out, palm up. "Dance with me."

Her hand trembled as she placed it in his. She stood and allowed him to lead her to the dance floor. She glanced back. If she weren't so jumbled inside, she'd laugh at Beth's wide eyes and slack jaw.

Rhys pulled her into his arms and they began to sway.

"How are you?" he asked.

She flinched at his cold tone. "I'm well. You?"

He didn't answer, but drew her closer until her head rested against his chest. His hands stroked up and down her back and he settled his chin on the top of her head.

What in the Goddess' name was this about?

"Rhys?"

"Shhhh. Just let me hold you. If only for a few moments."

She slid her eyes closed and just focused on him. On his body so near hers. That alone aroused her. His closeness, his scent. All of it wrapped around her, consumed her. She pressed closer and rubbed her body against his. She felt his hard length against her belly and nearly groaned when it jerked. Heat burst through her and her pussy contracted, aching to be filled.

He lowered his hands to cup her ass and lifted slightly until his cock was nestled in the junction of her thighs. She didn't know how she was still breathing. Each breath was a concentrated effort.

"I can feel your heat. You drive me insane." His voice, a hoarse whisper, pushed her arousal higher.

She tilted her head back. "I drive you insane? I thought it was the other way around."

He chuckled and grasped her hips. He rocked against her over and over, the movement causing such friction on her clit she had to bite her lip to keep from crying out.

“Wrap your legs around my waist,” he ordered.

Neiva glanced around at the people around them.

“They only see what I want them to see. As far as they’re concerned, we’re just dancing. Now, wrap your legs around my waist,” he demanded.

She obeyed, crying out slightly as the seam of her jeans skimmed over her clit. Rhys slid one hand up and buried it in her hair. He tightened his fingers and pulled her head back, exposing her throat to his mouth. Neiva nearly wept at the feel of his firm lips and wet tongue against her skin. She smoothed her palms over his arms, over his chest. She just had to touch him, be as close as possible to him. Her belly tightened, the delicious pressure building. She was so close, so damned close.

Rhys trailed his lips along the edge of her shirt. Releasing her hair, he moved his hand to unbutton the garment.

“Damn humans and all their clothes,” he muttered, his fingers trembling as he sought the front clasp of her bra.

Neiva moaned as he succeeded, releasing her breasts to his seeking mouth. Pleasure exploded when he pulled a taut nipple into his mouth—sucking first, then pulling between his teeth. The sweet nip of pain shot through her, straight between her legs. Her pussy flooded as he turned his attention to her other breast. She buried her hands in his hair, twisting the strands and holding him tightly. Rocking against him harder, faster, she pressed her clit against his erection.

Rhys reached between them and flicked the button of her jeans open. He lowered the zipper and slid his hand into the tightness. Neiva cried out as his fingers grazed her clit and found her opening. Her breath caught in her throat when he pushed two fingers inside her. She closed her eyes, her muscles squeezing around him, and just felt the sensations he pulled from her body.

He brought his lips back to hers, murmuring against them. “Come for me, Princess. Let me know I brought you pleasure. Imagine my cock buried inside you, stretching you.”

Neiva’s head fell back as he stroked her heat. Rhys pressed his thumb against her throbbing clit, and she bit her lip to keep from screaming. He kissed along her jaw and ran his tongue around her earlobe.

"Come for me," he repeated. "Honour me with this."

His low voice in her ear, his breath sliding along her skin, pushed her over the edge. Her pussy contracted again and again. Neiva clenched Rhys' arms, nails digging into his flesh as she fell through pleasure. Heat enveloped her and everything around them dimmed. All she knew was him. His touch, his scent, his body. She bit her lip as the Song sounded, softly at first, then growing louder. She fought against the elation that filled her, knowing this wouldn't end with the words she wanted to hear.

Neiva dropped her head forward and rested it against Rhys' chest. His breathing was laboured and every muscle in his body was tensed as if he were in battle.

"Don't you understand why this hurts, Rhys?" she whispered.

"Hmm?" He pulled his hand from her pants, and her clit twitched when he pressed the glistening fingers to his lips and inhaled deeply.

She unwrapped her legs from his waist and slid down until she stood, but didn't step out of his embrace. "I feel so wonderful right now, but I can't really enjoy it, can I?" She tilted her head back and stared in his eyes. "I know you're going to walk away now, and the ache, the emptiness will be back. I miss you, Rhys. I miss our conversations and just being with you."

Fighting tears, Neiva tried to regain control. She turned attention to straightening and fastening her clothes. He smoothed his hand over her curls before cupping her face. She met his gaze, and he frowned. Neiva's heart stuttered at the pain and regret in his eyes. She thought back to what Beth had said about his suffering as well.

"Don't say anything. Please," she asked. "I'll just go back to Beth, you go back to your duty. Thank you for this." She rose on tiptoe and pressed a brief kiss on his lips.

"Princess..." he said as she turned away.

"Yes?" She glanced back at him.

"I'll be nearby should you have need of me." His stilted tone made her smile.

"I know. Good eve, Rhys."

It took every ounce of strength to walk away from him, and it was on shaky legs. Beth still sat at their table, but she wasn't alone. Neiva hesitated a moment, unsure whether to interrupt her cousin's conversation with the young man, but her unsteadiness made the decision for her. It was either sit or fall over.

Beth turned. "Hey, how are..." She trailed off with a frown. "Uh, Todd, I'll catch you later."

The man looked startled but stood and walked away.

"Nee, are you okay? Is something wrong?"

Neiva shook her head. "I'm fine."

"What happened? Last I saw, you and your man were wrapped around each other. Did you argue?"

"No, no arguing." She cleared her throat. "Everything's fine. Promise."

"Oookay." Beth scanned the bar. "Did he leave?"

"No, he's here."

"Huh, I don't see him."

"He's cloaked, but I can feel him." And oh, did she feel him. His presence was a maddening assault on her senses.

"Are you sure you're okay? You're pale and, damn, girl, you're shaking. Did he hurt you?"

Neiva laughed at Beth's fierce expression. "I'm sure. I'm just tired. Is it okay if we head home?"

"Of course. Let's go." She stood and glanced around. "So he's just hangin' out here all invisible and shit? That's just creepy." She shuddered. "Okay, cuz, let's get you home and in bed."

Neiva rose to her feet and, taking a chance, opened her mind to Rhys. "*Good eve, Rhys. Sleep well this night.*"

"*Good eve to you, my Princess.*"

Chapter Seven

Rhys paced outside the cabin. The women had returned some time ago and were probably sleeping soundly. Yet he couldn't. He kept replaying everything that happened earlier in the evening...every word, every action.

Since he'd admitted they were meant – to himself and to Neiva in their dream – things had been more difficult. He couldn't stop thinking of her. The hollow ache from wanting to be with her grew, consuming him. Blessed Goddess, he hadn't spoken the binding words and he felt like he was falling apart when they were separated. He swore under his breath. He honestly didn't know what to do. Mating with Kaelen's daughter felt like a betrayal to his King, but he yearned for it.

With a thought, he flashed into Neiva's room. Just to see her. To be near her. He told himself it would ease the ache, but he knew that was a lie.

He stood next to her bed and simply looked at her – her lush lips slightly parted, her hair spread across the pillow, her arms thrown over her head. Clenching his hands into fists, he fought the urge to touch her, to pull back the blankets and stroke every inch of her softness.

Neiva shifted, moaning softly. Rhys lifted his gaze to her face. Even in the dark, he could see her eyes were open and on him. He held his breath, waiting for her to speak.

She didn't. After a moment, she folded the covers back and held her hand out. Rhys' cock swelled at the silent invitation. Without a word, he grasped her hand and lay on his side next to her. Her arms went around his neck and she snuggled close.

"I –"

"Shh." She tilted her head and covered his mouth with hers.

Rhys thought he'd explode as her lips and tongue seduced him. He ran his tongue around hers, a desperate attempt to taste her. He cupped her ass and rolled onto his back, pulling her on top of him. She wasted no time and straddled his hips without breaking the kiss. He groaned into her mouth as she rubbed against him.

Neiva drew back slightly. "I was dreaming of you," she whispered.

"Really?" he murmured, stroking her back.

"I always dream of you. Drives me insane, but most of the time, I don't wake up and find you."

She sat up and Rhys bit the inside of his cheek as her heat pressed down on his cock. His breath caught in chest when she flashed her clothes off her body. Her beauty never failed to astound him. She was simply perfection, and she was his.

"You're overdressed." Neiva smiled and tugged on his shirt.

As soon as the garments were gone, he yanked her down to cover him. The feel of her warm skin against his caused his erection to twitch between them. He held her close and rolled atop her. Determined to savour every second, he tasted her, making his way down her body until he was settled between her thighs. Her swollen pussy lips peeked out from beneath the tuft of dark curls. He inhaled and the scent of her arousal invaded his senses.

Lowering his head, he swiped his tongue up along her folds to her clit. He sucked the tiny nub and was rewarded with a strangled cry and Neiva's hands burrowing in his hair. He would make her scream his name before he was through.

The tanginess of her excitement danced on his tongue. He couldn't get enough. Over and over, he lapped at her pussy, drinking her in. Her hands tightened in his hair, but the sharp pain only encouraged him. He drove his tongue inside her channel and fucked her with his mouth until she squirmed beneath him. Her inner muscles began to spasm and he moved back to her clit, drawing it into his mouth. He slid a hand up and over her flat stomach to cup one of her breasts.

"*Scream for me, love.*" Rhys squeezed her taut nipple, hard, just as he caught the tiny bundle of nerves between his teeth.

"Oh Goddess." Her voice rose and her hips lifted. "Rhys!"

Neiva shook from the force of her orgasm. Rhys' voice in her head pushed her beyond pleasure. She slid through the release, through heated bliss. All thought fled and she simply felt. Felt his mouth and hands on her body. Felt her soul sing at his closeness. This was where she was meant to be. With him, her true mate.

She untangled her fingers from his hair as he lifted his head and moved up her body. He covered her with his warmth and his cock nudged her entrance, causing her to shudder.

"Neiva," he murmured before catching her mouth in a deep kiss.

Happiness rocketed through her at the sound of her name on his lips. She wrapped her arms and legs around him and raised her hips.

"I need you. Inside me. Please."

He surged forward and filled her. She felt a slight twinge, then immense satisfaction, as his cock stretched her deliciously. It felt so good, so right. He began moving within her and music softly surrounded them. He released her mouth and buried his face in her neck.

The tension built again as he pounded into her relentlessly. There was something urgent in his movements, as if he couldn't get enough. That aroused Neiva to no end – the thought that he wanted her so desperately. Her breath hitched as he quickened his strokes.

The Song grew louder and wove around them. It hammered at her, making her yearn. Suddenly Rhys stilled. Neiva cupped his head and moved him until she could see his face. He was pale and sweat clung to his skin. His jaw was clenched tightly. His whole body trembled. He was fighting it, still. Even though disappointment surfaced, Neiva couldn't stand to see him hurting. And it was obvious he was.

"Rhys. It's okay." She stroked his face. "Be with me. Don't think of anything but me." She lifted her hips, pulling him farther inside her. "Just me."

"I belong to you." The words were forced through gritted teeth.

"Shhh." How could her heart leap and break at the same time? "You don't have to say it. Just be with me. It's enough, Rhys, just to be with you this night. Really, it's enough," she lied.

He closed his eyes and dropped his head to rest against hers. His breath was harsh and ragged. Then he moved again. With slow, long strokes, he drove her back up. Neiva cradled his head as her muscles tensed, as her release built. His cock swelled within her and she knew he was close.

She raised her hips, meeting his thrusts. She gasped as an orgasm gripped her body. Wave after wave, it pummelled her. Her pussy spasmed around his erection, and, with a shout, Rhys came. The force of his cum jetting inside her, coating her womb, sent her flying higher. She tightened her legs around his waist, wanting to keep him deep within her.

For a long while, they just clung to each other. She closed her eyes and relished his embrace. Again, she wondered at her feelings. Physically, satisfaction filled every cell of her body, but desire for more, for the bonding, tugged at her heart.

Rhys shifted his weight off of her until he lay at her side. He placed a hand on her cheek and stared at her, his thumb caressing. Neiva nearly cried at the pain in his expression. Beth's words about how difficult it must be for him rushed to mind. She brushed the hair back away from his face and forced a smile.

"Are you going to leave now?" she asked softly.

He sighed. "Do you want me to?"

"No."

"Then I won't." He pulled her until she was nestled close to him. Her eyes drifted closed as he stroked her back.

"You didn't mean it, did you?" His voice was low, quiet.

"Mean what?" She stifled a yawn.

"That being with me tonight is enough."

Neiva squeezed her eyes tightly as tears prickled under her lids. "I don't want to fight, Rhys. I just want to enjoy being in your arms and sleeping beside you. Please. The rest can wait for tomorrow, yes?"

"Yes," he agreed. "Tomorrow."

"Thank you." She pressed a kiss to his chest and let herself slide into slumber determined to be content, even if it was only for the night.

* * * *

Neiva stretched her arms above her head and slowly surfaced from slumber. Her body felt relaxed, fluid. Last night, in Rhys' embrace, she'd slept better than she had in ages. Even before she opened her eyes, she knew he was gone. He wasn't far, though. She could feel him, as surely as if he was touching her skin-to-skin. He was in the woods. Doing his bodyguard duties, no doubt.

She rose and, after cleaning up in the adjoining bath, dressed quickly. The sound of Beth singing loudly travelled up the stairway as Neiva descended. She followed her cousin's voice into the kitchen. Beth was making coffee, dancing from foot to foot.

"You're in a good mood," Neiva murmured, leaning against the counter.

"Yup. Why aren't you?"

"Who says I'm not?" She laughed.

"Well, smile, cuz. It's a beautiful day. Particularly after a night with a certain gentleman caller." Beth wiggled her eyebrows.

Neiva felt a flush creep up her neck. "I...well...what?"

"So eloquent," Beth teased. "You weren't exactly quiet. And thank goodness you screamed his *name*; otherwise I would have barged in swinging the fireplace poker or something. Now that would have been a bit awkward to say the very least. I mean, your guy hasn't said boo to me and I'd have seen him *au natural*."

Snickering, she boogied over to grab mugs from the cupboard. Neiva just stared, mouth hanging open. She hadn't even thought of Beth's being downstairs when Rhys had come.

"Oh blessed Goddess." She covered her face and groaned. Embarrassment and horror welled up.

Beth burst out laughing and pulled Neiva's hands down. "Stop being so silly. There's nothing to be embarrassed about. You had a night—a helluva good night, by the sounds of it—with the man in your life. Nothing wrong with that."

"I'm so sorry. I didn't even think of your hearing," Neiva explained.

Her cousin grinned. "Good. That means he was doing something right. So tell me, what *did* he do right? I mean, he looks so damned intense. Is sex with him just mind-numbingly intense?"

Neiva gaped. "Beth, I'm not—"

Both women jumped when a knock sounded on the back door. Neiva took a few steps to the side and peer through the mudroom off the kitchen to the rear door. Through the window she could see her mother. *Oh Lady, help me!*

Neiva kept her voice quiet. "Beth, it's my mom. Do not say anything more about Rhys. They don't—"

"I know, I know. My lips are sealed...for now. Later, though, you are going to give me all the raunchy details." She wagged a finger at Neiva before she could speak. "Go let your mom in."

Neiva, head spinning, walked to the door, unlocked and opened it. "Mom! What are you doing here?"

Abigail wrapped her arms around her daughter. "I'm here to see you, of course. And Beth." She pulled away and cupped Neiva's face. "You look tired. Are you feeling all right, sweetie?"

"I'm fine. Just a late night." She cursed inwardly as soon as the words were out of her mouth.

Luckily her mom didn't ask any questions. She only nodded. "Well, I thought I'd visit with you for a bit. Your father was kind enough to pop me over here before holing up in the study for something or other."

"Well, I'm glad you're here." Her gaze fell to her mother's slightly protruding belly. "Oh, he's grown." She placed a hand over her brother and was rewarded with a quick blast of energy and a series of bumps against her hand.

"Hello, brother. Goddess bless you."

Abigail jolted. "Wow, he's excited to be near you. Kicking up a storm. So, is your cousin here? I thought I heard her voice."

"Goddess, I'm rude, keeping you standing in the doorway. Come in. Beth's right in the kitchen." She let her mother walk in front of her.

"Aunt Abby!" Beth darted across the room and threw her arms around Abigail.

"Let me look at you." The older woman leaned back and burst out laughing. She reached out and tugged a bright red lock of hair. "Darla's got to love this."

"I do all I can to please her," Beth replied saucily. She placed a hand on Abigail's stomach. "Congratulations. I was so happy when Nee told me. Though I must warn you, Mom will have strong words when she learns you're expecting at your age. It's unseemly."

Abigail rolled her eyes. "Darla always has strong words when it comes to me. I'll get over it. So, what are you girls up to?"

"We were just about to sit and have coffee and bagels. Join us?" Beth invited.

"Of course. Though I'll have juice if you have it."

"I'll get it. Sit down, Mom." Neiva crossed to the fridge and pulled out a pitcher of orange juice. She occupied herself with getting a glass while the other two chatted.

After she sat at the table, she just listened to the conversation, her mind elsewhere. She felt around her—Rhys was still in the woods. She tilted her head and tried to get an idea of the direction he was going. Maybe that would give her a clue as to what he was up to. Would

he come back this way? Would they finally discuss this or was he back to his deny-and-avoid stance on their relationship?

"Stop battering at me." Rhys' voice filled her head, cold and stilted. *"Your reaching for me is distracting me from my duty. All is well. I'll be near."*

Neiva's throat constricted. *Well, I guess that answers any questions. Nothing's changed.*

"Neiva, sweetie." Her mother reached over and covered her hand. "Where were you? You looked a million miles away."

"Oh! It's nothing. Just daydreaming." She forced a smile.

Abigail held her gaze several moments before nodding. "I thought, after I check the voicemail, we could go for a walk. Just the two of us."

"That'd be wonderful," she agreed before Abigail strolled into the living room.

As long as we avoid Rhys. The last thing she need was for her mom to see them together. Especially after last night. Neiva didn't think she could mask her feelings around him.

* * * *

Rhys frowned. Something was off. He was a ways from the cabin—outside the area Kaelen had determined Rhys should inspect regularly. Rhys had set out walking early in the morning, leaving Neiva sleeping peacefully. After the previous evening, then waking in her arms, Rhys needed space to think—and make some serious decisions about their relationship.

He couldn't put his finger on exactly what, but magicks had happened here. The air and earth had been disturbed. He just couldn't pick up anything else. The energy was either very old and faded or it had been masked. The second option frightened him.

He closed his eyes, lifted his arms and centred his focus on his surroundings. Wind swirled around him, lifting his hair from his shoulders and snapping at his clothing. He poured everything into delving into the magickal energy that lingered in the area, peeling layer after layer away.

Suddenly Neiva's touch pushed through his concentration, jerking him back into his body. Damn it! He drew in a staggered breath. She was still in the cabin, but was stretching out to him mentally. He couldn't do this with her in his head.

"Stop battering at me," he stated as calmly as he could. "Your reaching for me is distracting me from my duty. All is well. I'll be near."

She pulled away immediately and slammed a barrier between them. Even though he felt her jolt of pain, he sighed in relief. He'd explain later when he knew she wasn't in danger.

Gathering his energy, Rhys returned to his task. Time had no meaning to him as he probed the magicks. Exhaustion bore down on him and he withdrew. His breathing was laboured and sweat clung to his body.

He looked up at the sky. Based on the sun's position he'd been at it for nearly an hour. Frustration soured his gut. He had no more answers than when he first began. More power was required. He needed Kaelen, Leilen and Dermet.

Blessed Lady, let this be nothing. Let me be overreacting.

Chapter Eight

Neiva and Abigail walked through the forest, arm and arm. They chatted about life back home, discussed baby names, and plans for after the Prince arrived. All safe topics. Neiva began to relax.

"Are you happy, daughter?" Abigail asked. "Did coming here help as you hoped it would?"

"I'm glad I came here," she admitted as truthfully as she could. "It's been lovely, especially with Beth here." She saw the opportunity to change the subject. "Oh! Mom, she *knows*."

"Knows what?"

"About us. What we are. The fey, the faery realm....all of it."

Abigail stopped walking and stared at her daughter. "How?"

"She heard you telling Uncle Robert. Years ago," Neiva told her. "Why would you tell him?"

"She's known this long and has said nothing?" Her mother shook her head and laughed. "Well, to answer your questions, we told your uncle because he was questioning things. You know your father saved my brothers and my mother when she was expecting me?"

Neiva had heard the story countless times. She nodded.

"Robert recognised Kaelen from the first time they met. It just took him a while to figure out from where. We kept it from him as long as we could. Though telling him turned out to be a blessing." Abigail linked her arm with Neiva's and they started walking again.

"How so?"

"Well, I didn't want to stay away from my family permanently so I kept up the cabin, for us to visit, and kept the phone connected. Once a week, your father would come or bring me to check messages. That worked, but sometimes it got awkward trying to explain to everyone why I was so difficult to get a hold of." She patted Neiva's hand. "Now your Uncle Robert runs interference for me so to speak."

"Well, that's nice," Neiva drawled. "It was quite shocking to have Beth tell me she knew."

"I can imagine. I'll have to talk to her about it before I go home," she said.

"She wouldn't tell anyone," Neiva protested.

Her mother chuckled. "I realise that, sweetie. She's kept our secret for some time already. Now, you never answered my question."

Neiva swore under her breath. She should have known. No one was as tenacious as the Queen when she wanted answers.

"What question?"

"Are you happy?"

"I'm fine, Mom. Don't worry about me. You have other things to concentrate on."

Neiva patted the bump where her brother rested.

"Come, sit with me." Abigail led her to a grassy spot in the shade of a large tree.

They settled on the ground and just listened to the wind rustling the leaves for a few minutes. Abigail seemed to be gathering her thoughts, and Neiva knew there was no escaping the questioning. She wracked her mind, trying to figure out how to assure her mother there was nothing to worry about.

"You can't tell a mother not to worry. It doesn't matter if you are twenty-six or a hundred and six, I will always worry about you. One day, when you carry your own child, you'll understand." Abigail brushed the hair out of Neiva's face, peering into her eyes.

Tears stung and threatened to fall. Goddess, a babe. She cursed silently when immediately Rhys came to mind. She thought of his child growing in her womb, and warmth spread through her entire being. Oh yes, she yearned for it. How foolish.

"I know something is wrong. I only have to look at you and I see that. Tell me. Tell me what hurts you."

Abigail's voice, quiet and calm, was like a balm on Neiva's soul, but as much as she wanted to, she couldn't confess everything. Mama couldn't fix the hurt this time, no matter how much Neiva wanted her to.

Abigail continued, "I'll tell you what I see. I see my daughter hurting. I see my husband's closest friend hurting. When they are pushed together by a well-meaning father, I see both trying to avoid the situation. They attempt to get another to take over the duty. And

I see their hurt growing each day. So tell me, daughter of mine, what causes this hurt? Are you and Rhys involved? Are you considering mating with him?"

Neiva closed her eyes and drew in a few deep breaths before meeting her mother's gaze. She wouldn't admit anything. As much as she disagreed with Rhys, she wouldn't betray him this way. She had no choice but to weave a tale her mother would believe.

"We're not involved, Mom. I told you the truth. I feel empty. I don't know why and I honestly thought coming here would help." She continued, injecting a sliver of truth. "But there was something that happened some time ago that makes things a little awkward with Rhys. I had a crush on him, and I couldn't imagine why he wouldn't want to be with me. So, on my twentieth birthday, I kissed him."

"Oh honey." Abigail scooted closer and wrapped an arm around Neiva's shoulders. "What happened?"

Neiva forced a laugh and hoped it sounded carefree. "What do you think happened? He was horrified and pushed me away. Then he told me to stay away from him."

Her mother nodded sympathetically. "That sounds like Rhys. You've avoided him ever since?"

"As much as I could. I was so embarrassed, Mom. I still feel like a self-conscious little girl trying to get her first kiss whenever I'm around him." Neiva rested her head on Abigail's shoulder and sighed.

"Sweetie, I wish I could say it gets easier with men, but I'd be lying."

Despite the knot in her stomach from keeping the truth from her mother, Neiva laughed.

"It's true. I love your father more than anything, but the man can still drive me to distraction. In his mind, he is always right and knows what's best for everyone around him." Abigail squeezed Neiva closer. "One day, you'll be in love, but know that love doesn't make the annoyance go away. It just stops you from beating them with a baseball bat."

Neiva laughed again, just as her mother had intended.

"Well, I think we should head back. Your cousin whispered something about shopping as we left."

They rose and brushed off their pants.

"Beth thinks of nothing but shopping. She probably wants to change her colour too." Neiva rolled her eyes.

"Oooh, I'll have to help pick out something Darla will hate." Abigail rubbed her hands together.

"I swear you and Aunt Darla have the most unhealthy relationship I've ever seen."

"Don't be silly. We..." Abigail trailed off as she staggered.

"Mom!" Neiva grabbed her arm, concerned. "Are you okay? Is it the baby?"

"I don't...I don't..." Suddenly, she crumpled to the ground.

Neiva dropped to her knees. Panic choking her as it raced through her body. "Oh Sweet Lady! Mom!"

She patted Abigail's pale cheeks before putting both hands over her stomach. The baby kicked forcefully. Relief flooded her but was quickly pushed aside when an ominous heaviness surrounded her. Magick. Something was happening, someone was coming.

"Dad! Dad! Come now! It's Mom. Please!"

"Neiva." Her father's strong voice flowed over her. *"What's the matter?"*

"It's Mom. She just coll –"

White-hot pain lanced her skull, and Neiva tumbled into blackness.

* * * *

Rhys flashed outside of Kaelen's study and, without hesitation, pushed open the doors. He strode in the room, causing the men sitting across from Kaelen to jump to their feet. The King, though his eyebrows rose, remained seated behind his desk.

Rhys didn't spare the other men a glance. "Leave."

He waited until just Kaelen and he were in the room. "There's a disturbance in the woods. Very faint. It's either very old or has been covered."

"And you didn't sense this before?" Kaelen leaned forward, resting his elbows on the desk.

"It's outside the perimeter we agreed on," Rhys explained, omitting the reason he'd been so far from the cabin.

"I'll contact Dermot. We'll leave immediately." The King stood.

"I'd like to bring Leilen as well." Rhys knew his friend was in the Dark Realm investigating Darrick.

"You think it necessary?" Kaelen frowned.

"Yes. We need our combined powers." He was willing to take the heat if he was overreacting. He hoped to the Goddess he was, but was unwilling to take a chance.

"Very well. Let's —"

Rhys stepped forward when Kaelen's face paled and his King gripped the edge of the desk.

"Kaelen? What is it?" His head spun as air whipped around him. Suddenly they were in the forest. Moments later, Dermot and Leilen flashed beside them.

The three friends turned to their King, waiting. Rhys felt it immediately. Evil magick weighed the very air surrounding them, dark and oppressive.

Kaelen walked away from them and knelt on the ground. He ran his hand across a patch of grass before clenching his fist.

"Abigail fell here. Before they were taken."

"Taken?" Leilen questioned. "What do you know, my King?"

"Rhys felt unrest in the area and came to me. Then my daughter contacted me. Something had happened to Abigail, but Neiva was stopped before she could explain. Damn!" He slammed his fist on the ground.

"Can you not feel Abigail?" Dermot questioned.

Kaelen twisted around, rage and pain twisting his face. "Do you not think I'm trying? I reach for her and feel nothing but emptiness!"

Leilen and Dermot exchanged worried looks. Rhys knew exactly what they were thinking. If their Queen was lost, their entire world was at risk. Even a powerful King couldn't survive losing his true mate.

"We'll find them," Rhys stated with more confidence than he felt. Dear Lady above, they had to find the women. "We need to focus. Kaelen?"

The King inhaled deeply and rose. The four formed a circle and power surged. All their energy narrowed on the remnants of magicks. Rhys stumbled back when images flooded his mind. Abigail falling. Neiva kneeling beside her. Pain and then blackness.

"That was useless!" Kaelen exclaimed. "We know nothing more than —"

Rhys stepped forward and grasped his friend's shoulders. Not being able to reach out and touch his mate would make any man — even a King — frantic. "Stop! We need level heads to find them. I understand your panic, Kaelen. Trust me I do, but you need to push it aside. For Abigail and Neiva."

Kaelen nodded shakily. "For Abigail and Neiva." He narrowed his eyes and Rhys was relieved to see the strength in his gaze. "They will pay, Rhys, for daring to touch my wife and daughter."

"We need to go to the cabin," Rhys advised. "Perhaps Beth has information that would be helpful."

"What could —" Leilen stopped abruptly as power disturbed the air. Lights shimmered and colours burst around them.

Two men appeared. Rhys narrowed his eyes and struggled not to launch himself at them. Fey popping in wasn't just a coincidence. They had something to do with the women's disappearance. He stepped in front of Kaelen, blocking the King from possible harm. Leilen and Dermot followed suit, flanking their friend.

"Rhys, stand aside." Apparently Kaelen didn't appreciate the protection. His harsh tone cut, but Rhys stood firm.

"State your business," he demanded of the men.

Kaelen pushed him to the side and stepped forward. Rhys swore under his breath and moved beside him.

"Where are my wife and daughter?" Kaelen asked, his voice booming through the trees.

The taller of the two grinned. "Safe. And they'll remain safe if you do what we say."

"And your demands?" Rhys' stomach roiled and his heart hammered.

"Lift Darrick's banishment and allow him to leave the Dark Realm," the short faery snapped.

"You will step down and Darrick will take the throne," the other stated firmly.

Rhys clenched his hands, wanting nothing more than to take these men out. The only thing that kept him motionless was the thought of Neiva out there under the control of these men. If anything happened to them, would he be able to find her?

"Are you insane?" Leilen shouted. "Darrick is not the rightful King!"

The men didn't react to the outburst and kept their gazes on Kaelen.

"We'll give you time to consider." The tall faery tilted his head as if considering. "You have twenty-four hours. If you don't meet our conditions, your daughter will be the first to die."

Rage clouded Rhys' vision and fired through his veins. He let out a roar and leapt at the men, but fell to the ground as they flashed away. He pushed up onto his knees and lifted his face to the sky and for the first time in his life truly questioned the Goddess. Even when Kaelen had been banished those years ago, he'd believed there was a reason. He'd been right then. Kaelen's banishment had brought the King his true mate and resulted in Neiva.

Why? Why would you take her from our people? he asked, then added selfishly, *from me?*

"Rhys?" Kaelen clapped his hand over his shoulder. "Let's go. We need to move. Now."

Rising to his feet, Rhys turned towards his King. He searched Kaelen's face. Though fear was there, layers of determination and pure anger kept it in the background. The grieving husband and father had stepped back – the King was in control.

"You are not to blame." Kaelen shook Rhys' shoulders. "I can see the guilt on your face. Get rid of it. You are no more to blame than I am for letting Neiva come here. We will find them – make no mistake of that – then I will deal with those who dared take what is mine."

Rhys shoved everything down. Finding his Queen and Neiva was the priority. He'd deal with the rest later, when they were safe.

* * * *

Neiva rolled over and winced when something poked sharply into her back. She opened her eyes and her vision swam a moment. The air was cool, humid, and the sound of...waves?... echoed around her.

What was going on? She struggled to sit up. Her head ached and nausea threatened. Neiva took a few deep breaths, then surveyed her surroundings. Goddess, she was in a cave. It was dark, except a small circle of light given off by a tiny fire several feet away. Her mother lay on her side a couple of feet away.

"Mom?"

She pushed through the pain and rose onto her hands and knees. Pebbles cut into her palms as she crawled to the older woman. Weakly, she rested her head against her mother's chest and nearly wept in relief as she felt it rise and fall. Thank the Lady Above. Her breath hitched as she laid her hand over where her brother rested and concentrated. A burst of

energy answered her probing mind. Despite Neiva's fear, a smile curved her lips. Already the little Prince was insistent. He was confused but strong and safe. And she would see he stayed that way.

"Mom?" she repeated, lifting her head.

When she received no response, Neiva closed her eyes and held tight to her mother's hands. Focusing on home, she tried to flash them from this place. Searing heat swept through her body and a roaring filled her ears. Her head pounded and blackness dotted her vision. She fought to stay awake, the pain was so overwhelming.

Why were they here? Why couldn't she flash them away? She could guess at the first—someone was trying to get to her father. It didn't take a genius to figure that. The second? Obviously a spell was blocking her powers, and Neiva struggled to think of who was strong enough to weave a spell so strong. She knew next to nothing of Darrick's followers. Most were caught before she was born or when she was very young. Her father hadn't shared information with her about those who had eluded capture.

Neiva looked at her mother for a moment before forcing herself to her feet. She swayed unsteadily but managed to stay upright. Following the sound of waves, she walked blindly, hands running along the rough stone walls. After an eternity, she saw the opening of the cave several feet ahead of her. It was night, but moonlight offered a bit of illumination.

If she could just figure out where they were, perhaps she could wake her mother and get them to safety. It appeared as if their captor had abandoned them—for the moment, at least. Hope blossomed in Neiva's mind. Perhaps their abductor hadn't expected them to awaken so soon and they had an opportunity to escape.

She continued towards the cave's mouth, noticing the cool mist on the wind as she approached. The volume of the crashing waves increased with each step, as did the heavy feeling of dread in the pit of her stomach. The little hope she'd had dissolved and she cried out.

The cave opened to the sea. Neiva sank to her knees as she realised escape was impossible. She scooted to the edge and peered over. Waves rolled far below her—a sheer drop of at least fifty feet. There was no path, no ledge, no escape. She couldn't even discern if she were in the human world or the faery realm. Or another realm for that matter.

Tears filled her eyes, blurring everything around her. Her chest tightened and she lowered herself to lie on her stomach. The rough cave floor bit into her cheek, but she ignored the pinch of pain and allowed the cold despair to wash over her.

“Lady help us,” she whispered.

Chapter Nine

"What do you mean they're gone?" Beth shook her head. "They just went for a walk. They'll be back soon."

The King and his men stood in the living room of the cabin, questioning Neiva's cousin.

"Beth, sweetie, they were taken," Kaelen explained. "Have you noticed anything odd lately? Any strange men hanging around, watching Neiva?"

"No, everything's been fine. Normal." She crossed her arms over her chest. "How do you know they were taken, Uncle Kaelen?"

Rhys bit back his impatience. He'd known questioning Beth would be difficult. They couldn't tell her everything, and she could have overlooked anything. She wasn't able to sense magicks nor did she know to stay alert and observant. Of course, that had been *his* job. Guilt and anger turned his stomach.

Kaelen cleared his throat, clearly thinking of an explanation.

"Is there a ransom note or something?" Beth questioned.

"Something," Kaelen repeated slowly.

"Well, can't you, you know, talk to Aunt Abby in your head or something?" Beth gestured with annoyance. "Or, I don't know, poof over to her?"

The four men stared at the young woman. Astonishment rocked Rhys. She couldn't possibly know... Could Neiva have told her who, what, they were?

"Beth..." Kaelen, too, seemed at a loss for words.

She rolled her eyes. "Yes, I know, and no," she turned her gaze towards Rhys, "Neiva didn't say anything. I've known for a while what you are. I overheard you telling Dad."

"And you never said anything?" Kaelen's voice rose a few degrees.

"Of course not. I wasn't supposed to know." Beth smiled at her uncle, even though worry was evident on her face. "So? Can't you just talk to her...telepathically or whatever?"

Since his King seemed to be struggling to find his voice, Rhys spoke up. "Whoever took the Queen and the Princess used powerful magicks. Kaelen can't reach them and we can't locate them."

Beth tilted her head and studied him. "What about you and Nee? The true mate thing? Doesn't that make you even closer? Have you tried to contact Neiva? Maybe they didn't use as much magick on her since no one knows you're true mates."

Oh Great Lady Above. Everything dimmed around Rhys as Beth spoke. He turned towards where his friends stood beside him. Leilen and Dermot stared at him, mouths hanging open. In any other situation, Rhys would laugh at the disbelief on their faces. Shifting his gaze to his best friend, his King, he felt a cold sweat break out over his body.

Kaelen stared at him as well, but he wasn't mirroring the stunned expressions of the others. No, disbelief didn't tighten the King's jaw, stiffen his stance, or darken his eyes. Rhys recognised rage when he saw it.

"My King—" he began.

"You and my daughter are mated? And you failed to inform me?" Kaelen's voice was deathly quiet and calm.

"No, it isn't like that," Rhys protested. He hated that he sounded like a youth caught doing something forbidden. "The Princess saw in the Waters we were meant. I couldn't believe that. I thought she was mistaken. I wouldn't mate with her, wouldn't bind her to me. She is so young, and she is your daughter. I tried many times to explain that it couldn't be."

"The Waters showed you to be true mates," Kaelen stated. "When?"

"Does it matter?" Rhys snapped, worry and fear weakening his control.

"When?" Kaelen shouted, startling everyone in the room.

Rhys pulled shoulders back, bracing for the full brunt of his King's anger. "I don't know exactly when she saw it. The first time she approached me...in that manner...was before her twentieth birthday party."

"Five years," Kaelen murmured. "You have denied my daughter for *five years*?"

"Kaelen." Leilen stepped forward and placed a hand on his King's arms. "We need to focus on Abagail and Neiva." He glanced at Rhys, sympathy clear in his gaze. "We can resolve this afterwards."

The King nodded, but turned his cold silver gaze back on Rhys. "I wonder how much you let your emotions rule you, Rhys? How much did you miss because of your connection to my daughter? Would this have happened if you had been honest?" he spat.

"Kaelen, surely you cannot—" Dermot protested.

Rhys lifted a hand to stop his friend's defence of him. "He's right. I'm at fault." He lowered himself to his knees before his sovereign. "I allowed my emotions to govern my actions, and this is the result. I will, of course, accept any punishment you deem fit, my King. You must allow me to find her, though. I will not rest until your Queen and daughter are returned to you. You must allow me this." He kept his gaze lowered and waited.

"I don't have to *allow* anything. Remember that." Kaelen's voice floated on the air. "Go. Find my women and bring them home. You *owe* me that."

"Thank you, my King," Rhys managed before flashing out of the cabin to begin his search.

* * * *

Neiva pulled her knees to her chest and wrapped her arms around her legs. She'd crawled back to her mother and, feeling hopeless, sat and waited. Waited for what? She didn't know. For their captors to return, she supposed. With more information, maybe she could figure a way out of this. She let out a hoarse, humourless laugh.

"Neiva?" Abigail mumbled.

"Mom?" She unfolded herself and leaned over her mother, searching her face in the dim light.

"Are you all right, honey?" Abigail lifted a hand and cupped Neiva's cheek.

Neiva sniffed. How like her mother to worry after her first. "I'm fine. I...I..." She trailed off, tears clogging her throat.

Abigail sat up with a groan and pulled her daughter into arms. Neiva clung to her and squeezed her eyes shut. A silent sob gripped her. She wished she was still a child and her mama could make everything better. But that wasn't the case.

"Where are we?" Abigail pulled back and brushed the hair from Neiva's face with both hands. "Who did this?"

"We're in a cave. That's all I know. There's no way out." Her voice shook. "I haven't a clue who did this, though I think it's safe to assume it's someone who follows Darrick. Unless Dad has other enemies out there who would try to use us as leverage."

The older woman bit her lip, silent for several moments. "I don't know either. I can't think of anyone who would do this. You're certain there's no way out?"

"The cave opens above the sea, and I can't flash out of here. There must be a spell... I try to use my powers and nothing happens. Well, nothing but a headache." She grimaced.

"Okay...okay. We need to think. If nothing else, we just need to manage until your father finds us." Abigail gripped Neiva's hands tightly. "And he will find us, baby. Trust me on that."

Neiva smiled at her mother's trust and optimism. She didn't doubt her father would do everything in his power to locate them. Whether he would succeed or not, she didn't know. She wrapped her arms around the Abigail and pleaded with the Goddess.

Sweet Lady, please help me find a way to save my mother and my brother. My father couldn't survive without them. And if he were lost, our people would suffer. Please, please, please show me what I need to do. Great Mother, I don't ask for myself, but for my people. Allow me to return their Queen and Prince to them. I will gladly give myself for them.

The air around them swirled, lifting the hair off Neiva's neck. She pulled back and glanced around her. Several feet from them, lights in every imaginable colour burst from floor to ceiling.

"What on earth?" Abigail whispered.

Warmth and calmness embraced Neiva, and she immediately understood. "Not 'on earth', Mom."

A woman appeared before them, the glow around her illuminating the cave. Neiva's jaw drop and her breath left her in a whoosh.

"Hello, my daughters," the Goddess spoke.

"It was you," Neiva gasped. "By the Waters that day. Mara."

The beautiful woman nodded. "Yes, it was me. I'm always there when my children need me. Although you may not recognise me."

"What is going on?" Abigail questioned.

Neiva bowed her head. "Mom, this is the Great Lady, the Goddess."

"Oh my," her mother breathed and also dropped her head forward. "You can get us out of here, my Lady?"

"I'm here, Abigail, because *our* daughter has selflessly asked my guidance." The Lady knelt before the two women and, reaching out her hands, lifted both of their faces to look at her. "Neiva, are you truly willing to sacrifice yourself to save your mother and the child she carries?"

"No!" Abigail whipped around to face her daughter. "I forbid it, Neiva. Don't do anything rash. Your father will find us." Her voice broke and tears streamed down her face.

Neiva glanced back towards the Goddess and reached out with her mind. *"Yes. I do so willingly and gladly, my Lady."*

"You please me greatly, daughter."

Neiva fought tears of her own as the deity's voice filled her head. *"Tell me what I need to do. I wish to cause my mother as little pain as possible."*

"Our daughter is a brave soul who would surrender herself for the good of all." The Lady spoke to Abigail.

"You cannot ask me to consent to sacrifice my daughter. As a mother, you cannot do that," Abigail sobbed. "Please."

"There is a spell which causes pain when you use your power." The Goddess met Neiva's gaze. "I can give you the strength to bear the pain to flash one of you from this cave. One, not both."

"You are a Goddess!" Abigail shouted. "You have unlimited power, yet you will not help us! How can you do this to us? How? You are supposed to be the Great *Mother*, and you will not help your children."

"Mom!" Neiva was taken aback by the vehemence in her mother's tone and the fact she would address the Goddess in such a manner. "You can't—"

"Neiva, it is all right," the Lady interrupted. "I understand. No mother wants to see her child suffer. Despite what you believe, there are limits to what I can do, and everything happens for a reason, my daughters." She took Neiva's hand. "You have a choice. You are able to transport one of you from here. The other must stay."

Neiva moved her gaze between her mother and the Great Mother, her heart heavy. She knew what she needed to do, and by the sad smile in her eyes, the Goddess knew her thoughts.

"Thank you, my Lady." Neiva bowed her head. "I am forever grateful."

"Blessings to you, my daughters." The Lady leaned forward and kissed Neiva's forehead, then turned and repeated the gesture to Abigail. "Remember, I'm always here."

In a blink, she was gone.

"Listen to me." Abigail grasped Neiva's chin firmly. "You will flash out of here and go to your father. You will help him find me. Do you understand me?"

Neiva trembled, trying not to burst into tears. When she didn't answer immediately, her mother lowered her hands to Neiva's shoulders and shook.

"Do you understand me?" Abigail demanded.

"Of course I do. I just..." she hiccupped, "...I just don't like it."

"Sometimes you have to do things you don't like. Tell your father, I love him. That I'm waiting for him, and I'm getting impatient."

Neiva let out a laugh and pulled Abigail into a tight embrace. "Oh, Mom."

"Honey, I love you. Everything is going to be okay. I promise."

Yes, it will be. I'll make sure of that. Neiva closed her eyes and inhaled the scent that was her mother — warmth and sweetness.

"Mom, I need to tell you something...you know, just in case." She drew back and looked into her mother's eyes. "I can't leave here without telling you the truth."

"What is it, baby?" Abigail continued to soothe with her hands, rubbing up and down Neiva's arms.

She took a deep breath. "I lied before. Rhys and I are true mates. I saw that in the Waters."

"Really?" Abigail asked. "That's wonderful. He's a brilliant man. Why didn't you tell me? Tell your father?"

Neiva laughed at her mother's easy acceptance. "Rhys refused to believe it. He didn't *want* to believe it. He thought being with me was a betrayal to Dad. His best friend. His King."

"Oh, that sounds like Rhys." She sighed. "And explains so much. You aren't bound?"

"No. He refused to say the words." Neiva cursed inwardly when her voice cracked and her vision blurred.

"Oh, honey." Her mother pulled her close. "I'm so sorry you hurt."

Abigail's simple understanding broke the dam inside Neiva. She cried loudly, welcoming the comfort her mother offered. Before, she'd always focused on the anger she felt, not the hurt from his rejection. Now the pain welled up inside her, practically squeezing the breath from her body. Abigail held her, stroking her hair and humming a tune Neiva recognised from her childhood.

Finally, she pulled back and gave her mother a watery smile. "I hope he can forgive me for pushing him so hard. Maybe if I'd given him time..." She cleared her throat around

the tightness. "I need him to know I love him, Mom. That I understand and forgive his denial. I *need* him to know that."

"And he will. You'll be with him soon and you'll sort all of this out."

"You understand that he needs to know, right? That I love him more than anything, that I forgive him," Neiva insisted.

"Yes, honey. I understand." Abigail nodded. "Once you work through this, you will be so happy. And your father will accept the bond. He would never fight Fate. He may grumble, but he, better than anyone, knows Fate doesn't always work the way we expect."

Neiva sniffed and blinked to clear away the tears. Inhaling deeply, she prepared for what she had to do.

"All right, Mom. Let's do this." She shifted and kissed Abigail's cheek. "I love you, Mom. Take care of my brother."

"Of course. I'll see you soon, baby." Her mother's voice wobbled, but she smiled broadly.

Neiva concentrated and gathered her power, ignoring the throbbing at her temples. Her breathing quickened and she lifted her hands. She met her mother's gaze and saw realisation in the other woman's eyes as she flicked her wrists.

"No, no! Don't—"

Abigail's cry was cut off as she vanished from the cave. Pain splintered inside Neiva's skull and she welcomed the numbing blackness that surrounded her.

Chapter Ten

Rhys flashed into Kaelen's study and stumbled, exhaustion sweeping over him. Kaelen, Leilen and Dermot stood around a table, a loud discussion between them.

"Darrick is in the Dark Realm," Leilen insisted. "I hadn't found his exact location, but I could sense him when I was there. His followers are acting on their own, or he is getting word to them somehow."

"I've spoken to both of your aunts," Dermot offered. "The former Queen had no new information on those who took the Queen and Princess. Darrick's mother..." He shrugged. "She knows nothing. She hasn't come out of seclusion since Darrick's banishment."

"And Arella?" Kaelen asked, referring to Darrick's only sibling.

Dermot chuckled humourlessly. "As soon as I mentioned Darrick's name, she started sobbing and ran from the room."

Kaelen slammed his fist on the table. "By the Blessed Lady, we are getting nowhere!"

Leilen glanced over and noticed Rhys. He shifted his gaze to Kaelen before stepping towards Rhys. "Did you find anything?"

The others turned to him, silent.

"No, any magicks have been carefully covered." He pressed his fingers to his closed eyes. His stomach churned. Nothing. Hours spent searching, and he had nothing. Panic overwhelmed him. His hands shook and he struggled to stay on his feet.

"You need rest," Leilen stated. "Others have gathered and are searching. Dermot and I will be joining them now. Rest, Rhys."

He shook his head.

"You're practically dead on your feet. You aren't doing Abigail or Neiva any good this way. Rest for a short while," Dermot insisted.

Kaelen, who'd remained silent since seeing Rhys, spoke up. "They're right, Rhys. Everyone is doing all they can. Go to your dwelling and sleep."

"I will not," Rhys ground out, uncaring he was defying his King. Rest was the last thing on his mind. Neiva was out there, possibly hurt. He would not rest until she was found.

"Damn it—" Kaelen stopped abruptly as magick swelled around them, disturbing the air.

With a burst of light, Abigail appeared before them. After a moment of obvious disorientation, she let out a cry and ran towards her mate. As Kaelen pulled her into his arms, Rhys frantically looked around, his heart pounding with hope.

"Are you well? Did they harm you? The baby?" Kaelen ran his hands over her body.

"I'm...we're fine," she stammered. "But Neiva..."

"Is she..." Rhys couldn't even ask if she was all right, too afraid of the answer.

"She couldn't flash us both out of there. I told her to come to you, that you would find me. I *told* her, Kaelen. But she stayed." Tears streamed down her cheeks and her lips trembled.

"Where did they take you? Did you recognise where you were? Is it in this realm or the human world?" Kaelen gripped her hands as he fired questions at her.

"I don't know." Abigail's voice broke. "It was a cave, near the sea. That's all I know. I'm so sorry. I told her to come, to leave me. Why didn't she leave me?"

"Shhh, we'll find her, darling. I promise you we will," Kaelen vowed.

Rhys closed his eyes and inhaled deeply. He needed to continue searching. He felt a measure of relief that Abigail was safe, but it was overshadowed by worry and fear for Neiva. The longer she was missing, the more he ached. Not from the exhaustion weighing down on him physically. No, it was more than that. His soul hurt, wept at her absence.

He gathered his power and prepared to flash from the room. A hand on his arm had him opening his eyes. Abigail stood before him, large eyes glistening and full of sorrow and understanding.

"Neiva told me about your being meant. Rhys, she loves you. She wanted you to know that."

"Abby..." He couldn't form words, horrified that his throat tightened painfully.

"She forgives you," she said quietly, "for denying her. She understands. So do I. I know you were trying to do the right thing."

Rhys shifted his gaze to Kaelen, who studied him with a slight frown.

"And I know you haven't stopped since you found out we were taken. I can see it in your face. You need to rest...just for a little bit," she rushed to add when he opened his mouth to protest.

"I can't," he said hoarsely. "I need to find her."

Abigail turned towards Kaelen. The King stepped forward, gesturing for the other men to join him. As it dawned on Rhys what they were about to do, it was too late. Dermet grasped one of his arms, Leilen the other.

"Sleep," Kaelen ordered with a wave of his hand.

Magick enveloped him, darkness welcomed Rhys, and he was helpless to resist.

He stood on a cliff and stared out at the sea. Waves crashed and roared below him. A fine mist danced on the air and cooled his skin. The knowledge that this was a dream didn't comfort him. Anger at Kaelen for forcing him into slumber churned in his stomach. He needed to be out there, looking for Neiva. Instead he was asleep and dreaming – no good to Neiva, or anyone for that matter.

"Rhys?"

He spun around at her voice, and his breath whooshed out of his lungs when he saw her. Beautiful Neiva.

She looked around the desolate, rocky cliff, and a small smile kissed her lips. "Nice dream."

Unable to speak, he strode to her and yanked her into his arms. She pressed herself against him and clung to him. Rhys ran his hands up and down her back and kissed the top of her head. Joy filled him, though deep down he knew none of it was real. Just the feel of her in his embrace was a balm for his soul.

"Neiva," he murmured.

She pulled back, tears in her eyes. "My mom? She made it home?"

"Yes, she is with your father. She's safe."

"Thank the Lady!" She closed her eyes for a moment, then met his gaze. "Take care of them. My parents and my brother. They're going to need you after –"

"Don't. Don't talk like you're already gone. I'll find you." He leaned down and captured her lips.

With a sigh, she opened to him. He slid his tongue forward and tasted her. Goddess, a man could become addicted to her flavour. His erection pressed against the softness of her belly and jerked in response as Neiva bit on his lower lip.

"I know the chances of being found are small." Her breath whispered over his lips. "I made my choice, and I don't regret it. My father wouldn't have survived if something happened to my mom and the baby."

"I will find you. I swear this to you." He grasped her hand and brought it to his lips.

"I know you'll try, and I love you for that." She laughed quietly. "I love you, period."

His heart leapt. "Your mother told me you forgive me. For denying you. Did you mean that?"

She ran her fingers down his cheek, along his jaw. "Of course I did...I do. I always understood why you did what you did. I just didn't agree with you. But now, I'm going to say something I never thought I'd ever say. I'm glad you didn't say the words, that you didn't bind us together."

Disbelief rocked him. "What?"

"If you'd said the words, my...being gone would be too painful for you. Now, you'll be able to move on, be happy."

"Move on? Be happy?" His voice rose with each word. The very thought of life without her devastated. "How can you say that?"

"I don't want to fight with you, Rhys. Not now." Her voice broke, and she cupped his face.

"Listen to me, Neiva, Princess of Fey. I will find you. Losing you, words or no words, would destroy me. I love you." He kissed her mouth, hard and bruising. He would not lose her. "I vow before the Goddess I will find you."

"You are so hard-headed." She ran her fingertips over his face. "It's one of the reasons I love you. Goddess, everything that kept you from me – your hard-headedness, your loyalty, your sense of duty – are the things I love most about you."

"Tell me about where you are. Describe it to me," he ordered. If he could just get an idea of where they had her... "Every detail you can think of."

She hugged him tightly, then pulled away from him. Turning, she looked out over the waters and remained silent. She stood stiffly, head tilted to the side. Frustration filled Rhys. She'd given up. Before he even had a chance to find her, she'd given up.

"Neiva, describe it to me!"

"I'm close."

Her voice was so soft he could barely make out the statement over the roar of the sea.

"Close to what?" Rhys stepped closer and rested his hands on her shoulders.

"I'm close," she repeated. "Very close."

Rhys abruptly awoke and sat up. He was in one of the guest chambers in Kaelen and Abigail's dwelling. He scrubbed his hands over his face and replayed the conversation from the shared dream in his mind. Frustration filled him. He knew nothing more than before.

Swearing under his breath, he rose to his feet and left the room. He navigated the hallways until he came into the sitting room. Abigail stood at one of the tall windows, looking out over the gardens. At the sound of his footfalls, she turned around.

"Rhys, how are you feeling?" She crossed the room and embraced him.

"I'm fine," he bit out. "I need to continue searching."

She pulled back slightly. "Don't be angry with Kaelen, or the others. They saw what you wouldn't—you needed rest."

"I needed to be looking for her, not sleeping and sharing dreams with her! I've lost Goddess knows how much time in the search." His temperature rose as anger spilled over.

"You shared a dream? Was she able to tell you anything?"

Rhys stepped away and laughed humourlessly. "Yes, she told me she was close. Whatever that means."

"That's what she said," Abigail asked, "that she was close?"

"Yes," he snapped. "But it doesn't help anything. Close to what? To the cabin? To us, here in the Fey Realm?"

She tapped a finger against her lips as she thought a moment. "Where were you in the dream? Did you recognise the area?"

"It was a cliff, high above the sea. Very rocky...large boulders." Rhys shrugged. "I'd never been there before."

"I think I have," Abigail whispered and closed her eyes.

"What? Where is it?"

Rhys had barely gotten the question out when Kaelen flashed into the room.

"What is it, Abby? Some news?" the King asked.

"Rhys and Neiva shared a dream. She told him she was close. The dream was on a cliff, high above the sea. It was rocky, with large boulders." She stared at her mate, her frown intense.

"The cliff... Could it be..." Kaelen trailed off and gave a dry chuckle. "It's something Darrick would do. He'd find it fitting."

"Would you care to share your conclusions with me?" Rhys could barely keep from shouting as the sliver of hope he'd held on to expanded.

"The cliff where I...where Darrick's manipulations began. It's riddled with caves. It's possible Neiva could be there." Kaelen nodded towards Rhys. "I'll call to Dermot and Leilen. We'll go immediately."

Rhys bowed his head to his King and gathered his power, ready to find his mate. And make those who dared take her pay.

* * * *

Neiva groaned as she opened her eyes. Pain radiated from her head, and with every movement, no matter how minute, it intensified. Her lids slid closed again. Her mother was safe. A cry caught in her throat as she pictured Rhys in her mind, how he'd looked in their dream. Great Lady Above, she loved him. She ached for him, for his embrace. At least she'd had that briefly – even if it wasn't real. And he'd told her he loved her. Oh, how her soul had sung when he'd said those words. She'd hold that close to her heart until the end, because, despite his determination to find her, she knew the chances of her leaving this cave were slim.

Drawing in a shaky breath, she opened her eyes and sat up. She pushed the pain aside. Despite the dire circumstances, she wasn't going to lay there and wait to die. She would fight until the end. She struggled to rise to her feet, but fell to her knees. Sharp rocks cut through denim and flesh. Neiva gritted her teeth. She'd crawl then. If there was a way out of this dark hell, she'd find it.

On hands and knees, she made her way along the cold, rough ground, away from the mouth of the cave. Unable to see well, she felt her way along, paying attention to every sound she heard and sensation she felt. The sound of the waves grew fainter and the air grew danker as she continued. The cave narrowed to a skinny passage, yet she continued. Tears fell freely. She couldn't hold them back, but she didn't stop.

Everything inside her focused on pulling herself forward until something caught her ear. Instantly she stilled and tilted her head to listen carefully. Voices. Her captors – they'd returned. She scrambled forward, blindly feeling her way. A cry wrenched from her lips and she stilled again. The narrow passage had widened, she could tell by the echo.

The voices came closer and closer. Neiva frantically wondered if there anywhere to hide, then caught herself. She would not hide and, by the Goddess, she would not face these...criminals on her knees. She was the King's daughter. She cowered before no one!

Carefully she reached to her side and scooted along the stone floor until she felt the rough wall. Leaning heavily on it, she managed to get to her feet. Her entire body ached, and her hands and knees burned from the cuts the rocks had inflicted. She turned towards the approaching voices. She could see a faint glow down the passageway.

Closing her eyes she sent up a prayer the Goddess. *Please, Lady, give me strength to face and endure what is to come. Even though they won't witness this, let my actions be worthy of my King and Queen.* She bit her lip. *And my mate.*

Suddenly light illuminated the cavern, stinging her eyes. She fought the urge to cover her eyes, and got her first look at her captors. There were two – one was tall and lanky, the other a bit shorter. Both were filthy and their clothes were tattered and hung on their frames.

The taller one pushed his hair from his eyes and scanned the cavern. When his gaze landed on her, he sneered.

"There's the little Princess." He took a step towards her.

Neiva braced her legs apart and lifted her chin. "You will not get away with this. My father will see to that."

Both men laughed, an ugly sound that bounced around the cavern.

"Your father hasn't met our demands. Makes me believe he doesn't care so much for his human mate and half breed daughter," the man closer to her spat.

"Your demands?" she questioned.

"He hasn't released the true King," the short one stated.

Neiva burst out laughing, despite the coldness spreading through her. "I assume you mean Darrick. He is not the true King, and will never sit on the throne. Never!"

"We'll see." The taller man glanced around again. "Where is she? Your mother? Where is she hiding?"

The other man moved around, peering behind large rocks.

"You won't find her. She's not here." Relief filled Neiva. *Thank you, Sweet Lady, for allowing my mother escape.*

"Don't lie to me, you little bitch!" The larger man flashed next to her and grabbed her by the arms, shaking her painfully. "Where is she?"

“Dead! She tried to escape and fell into the sea,” Neiva lied and was satisfied to see a glimmer of fear in the man’s eyes. “There is no place in this realm or any other you can hide. My father will destroy you. Not only have you killed his mate, but you have taken his son from him as well. He will show you no mercy, and you will beg for death before he is finished with you. No one can save you now.”

Chapter Eleven

Standing on the cliffs, Rhys turned to his King and his friends. "This is it, where we were in the dream. We stood right here..." He trailed off as the emptiness he felt swelled. Unable to feel Neiva, everything in him protested.

Kaelen nodded. "There are dozens of caves among the cliffs. We'll separate and search. Keep your presence cloaked," he ordered. "If you find Neiva or those who took her, call to the others." He waited until his friends nodded, then flashed away.

Leilen stepped towards Rhys and clapped a hand on his shoulder. "No one will rest until she is returned to you."

Dermet laid a hand on his other shoulder and nodded. "We will find her, Rhys."

Rhys gave a slight nod. Their support and acceptance of his and Neiva's being meant gave a small measure of comfort.

"Remember to stay cloaked," he reminded before flashing away.

Time meant nothing to him as he travelled from one cave to another. He imagined Neiva – his Princess – trapped in one of the dank, cold holes and fury fuelled him as he continued. He would kill them, and he would need magicks to do it. No, he'd use his bare hands to squeeze the life out of the bastards.

Flashing into the next cave, he instantly stilled. A small fire hovered above the stone floor – obviously fuelled by magicks. He could feel the power in the small space. He closed his eyes and tried to reach out to Neiva. He cursed inwardly. Nothing. But something was going on here. Perhaps this was where her captors were hiding out, waiting.

Careful to mask himself, Rhys moved farther into the cave, even as it narrowed. After several paces, he froze. Great Goddess, Neiva. Her voice floated on the air. He allowed himself one moment to savour the sweet sound before stepping forward. A light shone and he moved steadily towards it. Other voices joined his mate's – he instantly recognised one. He would never forget that voice, the one which so easily spoke of Neiva's death.

The passageway narrowed and the light brightened. Rhys stepped soundlessly into the large cavern. His heart stopped when he saw his mate. Sweet Lady Above! Her hair hung tangled around her shoulders, dirt clung to her face. He could see trails through the grime

where tears had fallen. Blood dripped from her fingers and stained the knees of her ripped jeans. Rhys' heart thundered in his ears. His Princess had crawled...*crawled* until her flesh tore. His vision blurred and fire filled his veins.

"My King, I've found her. Remain hidden. Her captors are with her."

He narrowed his eyes when Neiva burst out laughing. He'd been so focused on her appearance he hadn't heard what the men had said.

"I assume you mean Darrick. He is not the true King, and will never sit on the throne. Never!" Neiva bit out.

Now pride mingled with the fury inside him. Damn, she was magnificent. Even battered and outnumbered, she was every inch the Princess.

"We'll see." The taller of the two men glanced around. "Where is she? Your mother? Where is she hiding?"

The other man moved around, peering behind large rocks.

"You won't find her. She's not here." A smile kissed Neiva's lips, though Rhys could see her hands trembling at her sides.

"Don't lie to me, you little bitch!" The larger man flashed next to her and grabbed her by the arms, shaking her painfully. "Where is she?"

"Dead! She tried to escape and fell into the sea." Neiva tilted her head proudly, staring unwaveringly into the man's face. "There is no place in this realm or any other you can hide. My father will destroy you. Not only have you killed his mate, but you have taken his son from him as well. He will show you no mercy, and you will beg for death before he is finished with you. No one can save you now."

"Conric?" The man farthest from Neiva looked at his companion, panic clear in his eyes. "If the Queen is dead..."

"Quiet!" the other man – Conric – bellowed. "She is not the Queen! This changes nothing. We still have this...this bitch, and as far as Kaelen is concerned we still have his mate. Nothing. Has. Changed."

"Wrong." The King's voice echoed though the space.

Rhys turned his head. Kaelen and the others stood blocking the passageway.

"Dad," Neiva cried.

Kaelen didn't look at her as he answered – he kept his gaze pinned on the man who dared lay his hands on the Princess. "It's all right, sweetheart. It's over."

Conric yanked Neiva towards him, spun her until her back was against his front. He held her wrists in one hand, and in the other, he gripped a wickedly long blade...against Neiva's throat.

"Don't move," he screamed.

"Conric! Goddess, Conric, I can't flash out of here," the other man whined, grasping his head. "Damn, my head is going to explode!"

Rhys took advantage of the commotion and made his way around the perimeter of the cave until he stood just behind his mate and the one who imprisoned her.

"Doesn't feel so good to have your powers limited, does it?" Leilen smirked, and Rhys realised his friend had cast the same magicks over the men as they had over Neiva.

"Lift the spell, or I'll slit her throat," Conric threatened, the hand holding the knife shaking.

At first Rhys didn't place the sound coming from Neiva. Surprise filled him as he recognised her laugh.

"You've just killed yourself," she said, her voice low and calm. "My mate will never let you out of here now."

"Don't try to deceive me, *Princess*," he sneered. "None of them is your mate." He nodded towards the King and his men.

Rhys moved closer and allowed his shields to drop. "No, but I am."

As soon as Rhys' voice reached her ears, Neiva used all her weight to drop to the floor. In surprise, Conric didn't even try to hold on to her. She rolled away, and nearly wept when her father pulled her to her feet and into his arms. Warmth and love surrounded her. She closed her eyes against the tears that formed and breathed in his familiar scent. A strangled cry made her pull away and turn towards the sound. The short man was on the ground, motionless, with Leilen and Dermot standing over him. Their eyes, however, were on their friend.

Rhys and Conric faced each other, crouched down, ready to spring.

"Oh Goddess, Rhys!" She stepped forward, only to be held back. In confusion, she looked back at her father. "Dad, please, don't let him —"

"It is his right." Kaelen watched the pair circle each other, his face an expressionless mask.

"You think to kill me?" Conric taunted. "I'm not afraid to die for King Darrick. I will gladly die to see him on the throne."

Rhys didn't speak. Neiva held her breath, afraid of what would happen next.

"You've taken my powers. You would be so cowardly as to face a powerless man?" Conric goaded.

"You faced a powerless woman, you bastard."

Neiva couldn't suppress the shiver that raced up her spine at the low, gravelly tone of Rhys' voice.

"And," Rhys reared back and punched the man in the nose, "I don't need my powers make you pay."

Conric grabbed his face, blood seeping through his fingers. After a moment, he leapt forward, tackling Rhys around the waist. Neiva cried out as they fell to the ground. She tried to move forward to see better, but her father's hand held her firmly in place.

Each man pounded at the other. Neiva couldn't tell who was bleeding from where anymore. Then Rhys flipped the man on his back and, straddling his chest, closed his hands around Conric's throat.

As her mate leaned forward, until his nose nearly touched her captor's, Neiva strained to hear what Rhys was saying.

"You dared touch the Princess of Fey, the King's daughter. For that alone, you die." Rhys' voice was a whisper on the air. "For daring to touch *my mate*, I make this promise to you, you son of a bitch. You will not be a martyr for Darrick's cause. Darrick of Fey will never sit on the throne. I will kill him myself before that happens."

Conric convulsed, hands clawing at Rhys' as he fought to draw in air. Time slowed, everything around them seemed muddled. Rhys stared at Conric, jaw set, until the man stopped moving.

Finally Rhys released him and stood. Neiva tore her gaze from the motionless man as Rhys turned towards her. Her heart thudded painfully at the tortured expression on his face. Pulling her arm free from her father's grip, she rushed towards Rhys. He stepped forward and pulled her against him. Running his hands up and down her back, he buried his face in her neck and murmured in the tongue of their people.

"Rhys..." She kissed his head and clung to him.

He pulled back slightly and cupped her face. His gaze swept over her, zeroing in on her neck. She could feel the anger come off him in waves. Neiva lifted a hand shakily to the small cut.

"It's fine, Rhys. It doesn't hurt. I'm fine," she assured. "You probably hurt more than I do." She gently touched above his eye where a nasty bruise formed.

He closed his eyes for a moment, then leaned forward and kissed the wound. He trailed his lips up over her jaw, kissing her cheeks, her forehead, her nose. Neiva's body burned as music built around them, softly, then louder and louder.

"When I saw you..." His voice broke as he smoothed his hand over her hair.

"You saved me. I didn't think... But you came. You found me." She slid her fingertips over his lips. "You found me. Just like you said you would."

The Song wound itself around them, almost a living thing, caressing them. Rhys caught her wrist and brought her palm to his lips. He kissed the already healing flesh, and looked over her shoulder. Neiva frowned as his eyes hardened ever so slightly. He kissed her palm again, then released her. He stepped back, away from her.

"What's wrong?" She reached for him.

He shuddered and moved farther back. "Princess, I'm..." he cleared his throat, "I'm overjoyed that you are now safe. I'll leave you in the care of your father. I have duties to see to."

"Rhys?" Uncertain, she glanced at the other men in the room. Leilen and Dermot kept their gazes on the ground, but her father had his locked firmly on Rhys. Neiva's stomach dropped at his hard expression. She turned back to Rhys. "Don't—"

"Goddess bless you, Princess." With that, green and blue lights surrounded him and he flashed from the cavern.

Neiva spun around to face her father. "What did you do?" Tears spilled over and slid down her cheeks. "What did you do, Dad?"

Kaelen shook his head. "I did nothing. I'll deal with him later. For now, we need to get you home. Your mother is sick with worry."

"Deal with him? Why? He *saved* me!" she shouted.

"He denied you," he said softly.

"And that's not for *you* to deal with. *I* deal with that!" she bit out.

"Neiva, you've been through so much, and you're upset. You don't understand—" he started.

"No. You don't understand. He denied me because of *you*, because of his friendship and loyalty to you." She swiped angrily at the moisture on her cheeks. Weariness beat down on her, and she trembled. From anger or exhaustion, she didn't know. "Please just...just take me home."

Kaelen stared at her a moment, seeming to search her face for something, then nodded. He stepped forward and gathered her close. "Let's go home, my daughter."

An hour later, Neiva leaned back in the large tub and closed her eyes, only to open them again when there was a soft knock on the door.

"Yes?" she called.

The door cracked open. "Honey? I brought you some tea."

Neiva smiled at the sound of her mother's voice. "Come in, Mom."

Abigail entered and shut the door behind her before crossing to sit on the edge of the tub. "Are you all right?"

Accepting the offered cup, Neiva took a small sip of the warm liquid before answering. "Yes." She held her hand in front of her, palm up. "See, already healed."

"That's not what I was referring to," Abigail answered quietly.

Neiva sighed. "What are you referring to? Am I all right after being kidnapped? Am I all right with Rhys walking away from me? Am I all right with Dad being so angry with him and wanting to 'deal with him'? Which one?"

Her mother chuckled. "Any of the above."

"I'm tired, but I think that's just an after-effect of the spell." Kaelen, Leilen and Dermot had worked together to lift the spell from her, and she had full use of her powers again, though she wasn't in any shape to do any magicks at this point. "As for Rhys... I don't know. I meant it when I told you I forgive him. I'll accept it if he denies me."

"Will you?" Abigail raised a brow.

"What choice do I have? I can't force him to say the words and be with me." Frustration had her slamming the cup on the rim of the tub. Abigail caught it deftly before it tumbled to the floor.

"Neiva," she admonished.

"What?" she asked, tears clogging her throat. "I can't keep fighting him on this. And it looks like I'd have to fight Dad too." She closed her eyes for a moment. "Goddess, you should have seen the way he looked at Rhys, Mom. It must be tearing him apart, knowing he's upset Dad so badly."

"I don't think that's what's tearing him apart." Abigail smiled.

"You didn't see it," Neiva insisted.

"Oh I'm sure your father's...moodiness," she rolled her eyes, "isn't making him happy, but if I had to guess, I'd say you're on his mind right now more than Kaelen is."

Neiva chuckled weakly. "A lot of good that does me." She swirled her finger through the bubbles floating in the tub. "When he found me and held me, Mom, everything felt right. His arms around me, his lips—" She stopped abruptly, causing Abigail to laugh.

"I understand," the older woman assured. "Honey, it'll be okay. Your father is going to grumble. You know how he is, but it will all be okay in the end."

She forced a smile for her mother's sake.

"Now, let's get you out of that tub. You look like you're about to fall asleep among the bubbles!" Abigail stood and took a large towel from the cupboard near the tub. "You'll stay here tonight. No arguments. I need you to. Indulge your mom in this."

Neiva didn't argue as she rose and stepped from the tub. She didn't argue when her mother hustled her off to bed and tucked her in. And she didn't argue when Abigail curled up next to her on the large bed and held her as she cried herself to sleep.

Chapter Twelve

Rhys stood in the gardens outside the Great Hall. A ball was underway – a celebration of the safe return of their Queen and Princess. He hadn't summoned the courage to go in yet. So here he stood, in the shadows, like a scared youth. Pitiful.

He closed his eyes and pictured Neiva in his mind. The memory of her filthy and hurt in the dark cave, facing Darrick's followers, immediately surfaced. His throat tightened painfully. Thank the Goddess they'd found her, that she was safe. He pushed the picture aside and tried to imagine what she'd be wearing that evening. His cock hardened as he conjured an image of her in a traditional Fey gown. Soft material clinging to her full breasts, but leaving her back bare. Her wings would be released and framing her in silver and blue. The skirt would flow around her long legs, brushing against silky soft skin. What he wouldn't give to slide his hand along the smoothness, up to...

Fuck! He shifted his legs in hopes of alleviating the pressure on his growing erection. It was hopeless, of course.

He hadn't seen her in two days – not since he'd left her in the cave. The hurt and confusion in her eyes at that moment had pierced his soul, but after seeing the expression on his King's face, he'd had no choice. If that hadn't been enough, Kaelen's voice in his head certainly had been.

"My daughter is safe. Leave us." Goddess, even the memory of it stung something fierce. Though he'd expected it, the reality of Kaelen's coldness had hurt almost as much as Neiva's reaction to his leaving. Almost.

"Good eve, Rhys."

Rhys opened his eyes and turned towards the voice. He lowered himself to his knees, touched his fingers to his lips and clasped his hand over his heart. "Good eve, my King."

"Rise."

Kaelen waited until Rhys was on his feet, then moved to stand next to him. The silence hung awkwardly between them as they both looked out over the expansive gardens. Uncertainty suffocated Rhys. This was the first time he'd been in his King's presence since that day. All of his orders since then had come from their mental communication.

After several minutes, Rhys couldn't stand it any longer. "Forgive me, my King, but if you wish to punish me or send me away, by the Goddess, just do it!"

Kaelen turned slightly towards him. "Is that what you want? To be sent away?"

Shifting his gaze to meet Kaelen's, Rhys responded. "If that's what my King wishes."

"Stop answering as my subject, damn it!" Kaelen's voice rose, causing Rhys to jolt back. "Answer as a man. Do you love her?"

"My King...Kaelen," he amended when Kaelen snarled, "you understand how it is with true mates. Yes, I love her, with everything I am."

"Then explain to me why you would deny her."

Rhys sighed, unsure he could explain it well enough. Goddess knew he'd had a hard time understanding as each day passed. "You know when I looked into the Waters, it showed I had no true mate, just as it had shown you when you looked. I had come to terms with that. Your saving Abigail's family changed that. For both of us." He ran a hand roughly over his face. "When Neiva came to me, I didn't want to believe it. I convinced myself she had mistaken what she saw in the Waters, that I had imagined the Song when she kissed me. There was no way Fate would pair me with my King's daughter. My *best friend's* daughter."

Rhys waited for Kaelen's nod, then continued.

"I avoided her as often as I could, and was cold to her when I couldn't. Then she got it in her head to go to the human realm. Goddess, I can't describe how that made me feel, when you told me she was looking for a mate there. Having to watch her while she was there was torture, but I came to realise that I couldn't deny that we were meant any longer. Even still, I was certain we had to wait. I'm an elder, she's a youth. It would need to wait until she was older. I just had to keep my distance until she was older.

"That proved to be impossible. I couldn't stay away from her. I tried, Kaelen. Goddess knows I tried. The day she was...was taken, I had decided to go to you and tell you, but was distracted by what I'd found in the woods. You know the rest."

"Hmm." Kaelen stared straight ahead, apparently deep in thought. Rhys' heart raced as the seconds ticked by.

"I'll accept whatever you decide. I only ask that you help ease her pain if I'm sent away. Even if you have to erase her memories of what she saw in the Waters..."

Kaelen burst out laughing, shocking Rhys into silence. "Believe me, meddling with her memories is the last thing I'd do. If you'll remember, I had the same idea with Abigail

when I returned to this realm without her. Trust me when I tell you it doesn't go over so well with the women to do that."

He turned towards Rhys and placed his hands on his shoulders. "Rhys, I would not deny my daughter her happiness. Sending you away or forbidding you to be with her would be doing that."

Rhys nodded dumbly. "Then another punishment. I understand."

Shaking his head, Kaelen laughed again. "No, you don't. I'm sorry you didn't come to me before about this, though I think I understand why you didn't. I'll admit it was a shock finding out the way I did. I can only ask that you forgive the way I responded. I was sick with worry over possibly losing my family. That is the only excuse I can offer."

"Forgive you? Are you jesting? Your reaction was justified," Rhys protested.

Kaelen let out a long sigh. "I'll not argue with you on this. You've been my friend, my ally for centuries. You are the best man I know. Your loyalty, your friendship, is something I've always been able to count on—even in the darkest of times. I am honoured that Fate would pair my daughter with such a man."

Rhys opened his mouth, then unable to form words, snapped it shut again.

"I just needed some time, my friend, to work it out in my head. As I'm sure you did as well." Kaelen clapped him on his shoulders once before dropping his hands and stepping away. "Now, my daugh—*your mate* is in the Great Hall. I think it's well past time for you to go to her."

Taking a deep breath, Rhys tried to process everything and calm his racing heart.

Kaelen turned and walked away, but stopped after a few steps. "Oh, and if you hurt her," he threw over his shoulder, "friend or not, I'll kill you." He grinned. "Though I'd be grieved enough to bring flowers to your wake."

Rhys laughed as the tension finally fell away. "Of course, my King."

He watched as his friend strode into the Great Hall, disappearing into the crowd. Sweet Lady Above, the weight he'd been carrying for years was gone. He could go to Neiva, could be with her and say the words. He didn't need to fight it any longer. The idea was so foreign he couldn't wrap his mind around it. Of course, he had to convince her to accept him. Knowing his Princess, she was bound to be angry with him for leaving her. Rhys grinned. He'd convince her, and enjoy every minute of it.

With a thought, he flashed into the Great Hall and immediately scanned the crowd for her. Unable to see her, he opened his mind.

"Princess?"

"Rhys?" Her uncertain voice filled his head and pleasure slithered down his spine.

"I need a word with you. Where are you?"

He felt her hesitate and smiled.

"I'm near the refreshment table," she said simply.

Instead of flashing to her, he made his way through the crowd. When he caught sight of her, he was glad he'd taken the few moments to prepare himself. She was exquisite. His imagination had paled in comparison to reality. Her back was to him. She wore a dark blue gown. The top dipped low in the back, exposing her creamy skin and allowing her wings to be fully extended. The skirt clung to her, the fabric sheer, and he could see the outline of her legs beneath it.

As if sensing him, she turned, and stole his breath. The bodice of her gown hugged her, and the swells of her breasts peeked over the edge. Sweet Goddess, what she did to him. His cock pressed against his tight trousers, aching to be released.

"Good eve, Princess." He took her hand and kissed it lightly.

"Good eve," she whispered before turning to the person she'd been speaking to.

"Excuse me, please."

Rhys shifted his gaze and clenched his jaw. Gareth. She'd been talking with the man who obviously wanted more than just conversation with her. Rhys took a step towards the man, but stopped when Gareth gave him a knowing nod and walked away. Stunned, Rhys just stared after him a moment. Could Gareth possibly know that Rhys and Neiva were meant?

"I-I hope you are well," Neiva said.

Rhys turned back to her and tightened his grip on her hand. *"Dance with me?"*

She closed her eyes and shivered. Looking at him again, she nodded and allowed him to lead her to the middle of the large room. Rhys slid his arms around her waist and pulled her against him, his cock pressing against her soft belly. Neiva wrapped her arms around his neck and laid her head on his shoulder.

In silence, they swayed to the music. Rhys ran a finger along the lower edge of her wing and was rewarded as a shudder raced through her. He pressed his lips to her temple and breathed in her sweet, soft scent.

She lifted her head and met his gaze. "Rhys—"

"I should have asked before," he interrupted. "All you all right? You've fully recovered?"

"Yes." She nodded. "And you? You were hurt more than I, I believe."

"I'm fine." He inhaled deeply before continuing. "Your father came to me today."

Her mouth formed a perfect 'O' and she pulled away. "Rhys, I've already talked to him. Once he was over his shock about...well, about everything, he wanted to force you to be with me. I told him I wouldn't allow that. Of course, he then started the whole 'I'm King, and no one *allows* me to do anything'."

"It wasn't—" He tried to speak, but she kept going.

"So regardless of what he said, I won't force you to do anything. I want you to be happy, Rhys. I'll stay away from you as much as I can. I know there'll be times when that's impossible, but we'll work through those." She rose up on her tiptoes and pressed her lips to his briefly. "Be happy."

With that, she flashed out of the room. Rhys stood dumbfounded. Where was the anger he'd been expecting? What in the name of the Goddess was she about? She'd avoid him? He set his jaw. Oh, he'd show her 'Be happy'.

Neiva sat heavily on her bed. All right, that'd gone better than she'd expected. She got through it without bursting into tears. Her vision blurred and her breath hitched. Barely. Oh Goddess, she hurt. It was as though everything inside her was being squeezed mercilessly.

The last two days had been torture. She'd fought with her father and cried with her mother...and yearned for Rhys. When she dreamed, she felt the barrier he'd put up. Knowing that he didn't want to be with her, even in that small way, had gutted her. Preparing for the ball that evening had been much more than putting on a pretty gown. She'd known he would be there. Her father had assured her that he hadn't sent Rhys away. Knowing she would see him, Neiva had been determined to let him go gracefully.

Well, she'd done that as well as she could. There was no need for grace in her own bedroom, she thought as the first sob wracked her body. She buried her face in her hands and let it out – the pain, the sadness, the anger.

"Why?"

Neiva jumped as Rhys' voice echoed through the room. She quickly dashed the tears from her face and struggled to control her hitching breath. He stood in the doorway, legs braced apart, wings framing him from behind. His green eyes flashed as he stared at her.

"Why?" he repeated.

"Why what?" She didn't understand what he was asking.

"You're hurting," he bit out, "but you let me go. Why?"

"I believe I explained that. I won't force you to be with me," she insisted. What was he doing here? She quashed down the sliver of hope that wormed its way into her heart. "I'll stay away –"

He shook his head and strode across the room. Without a word, he yanked her to him and crushed his mouth to hers. A small cry of protest rose in Neiva's throat, but when Rhys thrust his tongue past her lips, she wrapped her arms around his neck. Only for a moment, she told herself. She would just enjoy the feel of him for a moment. Surely she deserved that.

His tongue danced around hers, slick and hot. Neiva's head swam as his intoxicating flavour burst inside her mouth. Dear Goddess, how would she live without this? Without his touch, his warmth?

Cursing inwardly, she pulled away and trailed her fingertips down his cheeks. "Rhys, please."

"Let me love you this night, my Princess." He kissed her lips briefly. "Sweet Lady, when you were taken..." his voice broke, "you can't imagine how I felt." He trailed his mouth to her neck, nipping and nuzzling her sensitive skin.

Even as the reasons to stop him hammered at her mind, she didn't stop him. She could hear the pain in his voice and she ached for him.

"You found me, though, and I'm fine," she soothed.

He ran his tongue over her collarbone and slivers of heat pierced her core. Moisture flooded her pussy and her clit twitched. Rhys lifted his hand from where it rested on her hip and slid his fingers down the length of her wing. Neiva's stomach clenched and she gripped his shoulders as her legs trembled beneath her.

"When I saw you in that cave..." he murmured, his hot breath caressing her. "You were hurt, and bleeding, but you stood before those bastards so regally." He straightened and met her gaze. "I was so proud. So proud of the strong woman the Goddess had gifted to me...to all of us."

At his whispered words, tears burned Neiva's eyes. Several escaped, sliding down her cheeks. Rhys leaned forward and kissed them away.

"Let me love you this night," he repeated.

Neiva closed her eyes and inhaled deeply. How could she deny him? Deny herself? Even now, her body hummed in anticipation. If she'd not have him forever, she would allow herself this night. Though she knew it'd be difficult to let him go, at least she'd have the memory of their times together, and Goddess willing, it would give her comfort in the loneliness ahead.

Her mind made up, she reached up and pulled his head down. Her fingers tangled in his hair as their mouths met. She poured every ounce of her love and need into the fevered kiss. Rhys backed her up until she tumbled onto the bed.

Her breath caught in her throat as she looked up at her mate. He stared down at her, eyes intense and dark. The need in his expression increased her excitement, and she shifted her hips. He placed a knee on the mattress and ran a palm up one of her legs, pushing her skirt up as he went. Desire slithered down her spine as his hand moved to caress her inner thigh. Without hesitation, she spread her legs wider. Up and up, his fingers went until he was mere millimetres from her sex...and he straightened.

A smile curved his lips when she groaned in protest and lifted her hips. Holding her gaze, he removed his boots and clothing until he stood before her nude. Sweet Lady Above, she'd never tire of seeing him. The golden skin stretched over rippling muscles, the light hair sprinkling his chest and trailing downwards. Neiva clenched her fingers, itching to touch him.

She opened her mouth to speak, but words failed her when he dropped to his knees on the floor. He grasped her hips and pulled until her ass was on the edge of the bed. She gasped when he flashed her clothes off her body and the cool air swept over her. A jolt of pleasure rocketed through her as he glided a finger between her folds.

"I love how your body responds to me. Does anyone else do this for you, Princess? Anyone else make your pussy weep so sweetly?" He teased her clit once, twice.

Neiva shook her head. "No one," she choked out.

He lifted her legs and draped them over his shoulders. His breath feathered over her folds and Neiva clutched the linens beneath her. Every muscle tensed as she waited for his touch. When he flicked her clit with the tip of his tongue, she nearly came then and there. He tortured the tiny nub before sliding lower to thrust his tongue inside her channel.

Goddess, she couldn't breathe. Couldn't do anything but squirm as he fucked her with his mouth. Fire raced through her veins as her womb clenched. Even through the pleasure, her pussy ached for more. She yearned to be filled, to have his cock buried inside her.

He shifted and as he sucked her clit into his mouth, he rammed his fingers inside her. Her back arched as the orgasm overwhelmed her. She trembled from head to toe as she contracted around his hand. He continued to pull on the sensitive bundle of nerves with his mouth, driving her up again and again until she thought she couldn't take anymore.

Neiva lifted her head as Rhys straightened. Her stomach flipped as he licked her juices from his lips, humming low in his throat. He pulled her legs from his shoulders and stood. Neiva, gaze fixed on his hard cock, scooted back on the mattress, and he knelt between her legs.

She let out a sigh of pleasure as he covered her body with his. The feel of his hot skin gliding along hers was sinfully delicious. He ran his hand along her side, his fingers teasing the wing spread beneath her, and chills snaked through her.

"Sweet Goddess," she gasped before she could stop herself.

Rhys grinned and teased the sensitive wing again. Neiva shook uncontrollably, another climax building quickly. She closed her eyes, overwhelmed.

"No, look at me when you take me inside," he murmured and positioned himself at her entrance.

She forced her eyes open and met his clear green eyes as he eased inside. Her pussy stretched, accommodating his length. He braced an arm on either side of her head and began to move within her. Each stroke pushed her up, impossibly high, bringing her closer to another release. She rested her palms on his cheeks, memorising the moment, locking it away in her heart.

Notes surrounded them, rained down on them as their bodies moved together. Neiva squeezed her eyes shut as the Song rang out, echoing through the room. Rhys' body trembled above her. His breathing became ragged as his thrusts quickened. Neiva tilted her

hips and wrapped her legs around his waist, taking him even deeper within her. Her toes brushed his wings and she delighted in the forceful tremor that ran through his body.

Louder and louder the Song rang out. Suddenly Rhys stilled, his cock pulsing inside her. He rested his forehead against hers and slid his fingers through her hair.

"I belong to you," he ground out, his fingers tightening.

Neiva cried out, hurt weaving with the intense pleasure she felt. Sweet Goddess, could she handle this — his rejection — again?

Rhys' entire body shook, his very soul cried out. The words hammered inside his skull. He took a deep breath, preparing himself. Sweet Lady, after denying himself, denying her, to finally be able to say the words... It overwhelmed.

He lifted his head and immediately frowned. Neiva's eyes were screwed shut, and pain was clear on her face.

"Neiva," he said softly.

She opened her eyes, tears glistening. "Goddess, say it again...my name. Say it again."

"Neiva," he complied, though confused.

Her breath hitched and the most beautiful spread over her face. "Thank you. You so rarely say it. I can't tell you how sick I was of hearing 'Princess' on your lips."

Rhys' heart skipped a beat. "I'm so sorry, love." He kissed each of her cheeks. "I never meant to hurt you. It simply... Calling you 'Princess' reminded me of my duty. That's all."

He murmured her name over and over as he began to move inside her again. The Song, which had dimmed somewhat, rose again. As his climax built, it wove around him, pushed at him relentlessly to say the words — to bind Neiva to him now and forever.

Cupping her face, he forced Neiva to meet his gaze. "I belong to you." He thrust into her, his cock aching to release. "You belong to me."

"Rhys?" Neiva's eyes widened and her pussy squeezed him almost painfully.

"Our souls, our hearts are bound together." Heat licked the base of his cock, and his vision dimmed. He couldn't describe the pleasure, the pure joy that swept through his body and soul. "If one doesn't exist, neither does the other. No longer two, but one for eternity."

As he finished the binding, he exploded inside her. His cock pulsed as it shot stream after stream, coating her womb with his seed. Neiva contracted around him, crying out as she found her release. She clung to him and a sob wracked her body.

"Sweet, sweet Neiva," he murmured.

"Rhys. You...you said the words. You said..." Neiva trailed off.

He lifted his head and drank in the sight of her tear-stained, flushed face. "I love you, Neiva. I don't want to live without you." He kissed her lips lightly. "Now you're stuck with me."

Neiva's lips trembled, then tilted up in a sweet smile. "And you're stuck with me."

Rhys pulled out of her and shifted until he lay next to her. An unfamiliar sense of contentment settled over him when she curled up beside him and rested her head on his chest.

"I think I can live with that," he murmured.

* * * *

Neiva stood, leaning against the ledge of her balcony, and looked out over her private gardens. She sighed happily. Everything she'd dreamt of, everything she'd yearned for, she now had. A slight shiver danced over her skin as she thought of Rhys, her mate. She wrapped the robe more tightly around her.

Goddess, when he'd said the words, she'd been afraid it was some kind of dream, some trick of her mind. She could scarcely believe it. Her soul had sung, had reached for his. And this time...this time they'd met and joined together in such a way, it still brought tears of sheer joy to her eyes.

"Good morn, Princess."

She smiled as she turned around. Rhys leaned against the doorway, studying her. His calling her 'Princess' didn't sting as it had before. Of course, his tone now was anything but cool and detached. No, the word was more of an endearment, a caress.

"Good morn," she greeted, her gaze travelling the length of his nude body.

He stepped forward and kissed her soundly. "Do you have plans today?"

"My mother is expecting me for tea." She leaned her back, resting her hips on the stone ledge. "You?"

"I've a meeting with your father and the Council. It'll be all right," he assured her when she frowned. "I told you I'd spoken to him. He's given his blessing."

Happiness erased her worry. "Truly?"

"Yes." He parted her robe and ran his hands down her sides. He rested one against her flat stomach. "Goddess, Neiva, I can't wait to see you swollen with my child." He knelt in front of her and pressed a kiss just above her navel.

Neiva drew in a shuddered breath and ran her fingers through his hair. The thought of Rhys' baby growing inside her made her heart race.

"I'm going to make you so happy," he vowed as he nuzzled her belly.

She smiled down at him. "Are you now?"

"Oh yes. In fact," he kissed his way up her torso as he returned to his feet, "I'm under strict orders from the King to make you happy." He slid his fingers through her folds and drove them up into her already wet pussy. "And you know I take my duties very, very seriously."

Neiva gasped as her muscles tightened around him. "I-I've heard that about you."

He stroked in and out, pressing his thumb against her throbbing clit. "Let me show you how seriously."

Her head fell back as waves of pleasure flowed through her. "Oh, I insist you do," she said.

"There's my Princess," he murmured against her throat.

Neiva held him tightly as he showed her...again and again.

About the Author

Jessica Jarman has been weaving stories for many years, starting in her childhood when she'd entertain her younger sister every night. The stories, though simple, involved love and a happily-ever-after ending. It is no surprise she has come full circle and is now penning romances.

Jessica currently lives in Minnesota with her wonderfully supportive husband and their four children. Although family keeps her busy and on her toes, she manages to squeeze out time to put the characters and plots that live in her head onto paper.

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