



Sometimes love is the only prize worth stealing...

Thieves of Aurion, Book 1

Mara Sheppard has no love for the Fae, but to free her brother from prison, she'll do whatever the treacherous Queen Nalia asks. Even kidnap Dashael Rhyder, a womanizing thief.

She should have known the deal would go sour.

It's almost too easy to bait and trap Dashael. Resisting his potent Fae allure isn't. Especially since Nalia's unexpected demand for a missing magical rune means Mara will have to hold strong far longer than she'd planned.

Dashael's best shot at escaping? Seduce her. If he can survive a few dozen of his closest enemies out for blood *and* the queen's scheme to make him her personal stud...he might just make it.

Then his game of seduction trips over a snag named Mara, and he falls. Hard. For a commitment-phobic thief, love might as well be a prison sentence. Yet the idea of losing her makes him miserable.

Mara can't deny that her enemy has stolen her heart. But their love is about to be tested by a lifetime of secrets. The risk may not be worth it. Especially if a life together means death for one of them.

Warning, contains one or more of the following: Hot, sexy thieves, pain-in-the-butt sprites, handcuffs, intriguing new uses for a silk bed curtain, and scorching, shake-the-ceiling-tiles sex.

**eBooks are *not* transferable.
They cannot be sold, shared or given away as it is an infringement on the copyright of this work.**

This book is a work of fiction. The names, characters, places, and incidents are products of the writer's imagination or have been used fictitiously and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to persons, living or dead, actual events, locale or organizations is entirely coincidental.

Samhain Publishing, Ltd.
577 Mulberry Street, Suite 1520
Macon GA 31201

Lover Enslaved
Copyright © 2009 by Jodi Redford
ISBN: 978-1-60504-635-8
Edited by Sasha Knight
Cover by Natalie Winters

All Rights Are Reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews.

First Samhain Publishing, Ltd. electronic publication: July 2009
www.samhainpublishing.com

Lover Enslaved

Jodi Redford

Dedication

To my wonderful family and the support they've always given me. You guys rock.

Also a big shout out to Sasha Knight for taking a chance on me.

Chapter One

Helias Proper, Aurion

2099—year of the sun goddess

Dashael Rhyder sauntered through Gallery Sabine's front entrance, kicking Mara Sheppard's heart rate into overdrive. Enough sexual magnetism oozed from the bad-boy fae thief to flood a small village.

A heavy sigh tumbled from Mara. *What the hell have I gotten myself into?*

"There he is!" Iridescent wings fluttered against Mara's cheek when Piper, her overeager sprite companion, leapt from her shoulder.

So much for our low profile. Corking her exasperation, Mara pinched a wing between her fingers, stalling Piper in mid-flight. Amethyst eyes shot fury down at her.

"Easy on those things. They're attached, you know."

Mara ignored the sprite and resumed her covert inspection of Dashael. He prowled through the crowd, his loose, easy gait attracting every female gaze in the room. No wonder—the cut of his dark suit emphasized a body built for a woman's enjoyment. Broad chest and shoulders tapered to a lean waist and long, powerful thighs. Subdued track lighting brushed his close-cropped ebony hair with a neon blue glow.

Clear to see why most faes fancied themselves superior to the human race. Aside from being magical descendants of the old gods and goddesses first inhabiting Aurion, the faes were the walking embodiment of physical perfection. Dashael Rhyder was no exception to the rule. If he weren't a fae—the enemy—she would chuck her self-imposed celibacy right then and there.

"Hello?" An irritated buzz vibrated from Piper, jolting Mara from her trance. "Remember me?"

"Unfortunately," Mara said, deadpan. She leveled a hard glare on the sprite swinging between her fingers. "And you best remember what's at stake here. If you screw this up, I'm kicking your butt."

Piper gave her pink hair a sassy flick. "Good luck. My butt is barely an inch wide."

Bragger. Mara checked on Dashael's progress towards the glass-topped bar set up in the farthest corner of the gallery. "Okay, I'm going in." She gave her sprite companion a warning glare. "You keep out of sight."

A frown pinched Piper's tiny face. "But Queen Nalia said I should—"

"Don't care," Mara butted in, her tone adamant. "If he sees you, he'll know something's up."

Adopting a sullen pout, Piper shoved her arms over her chest. "What about our partnership?"

“That was your delusional idea, not mine. Now be a good girl and hide in a plant or something.” Releasing Piper, Mara fluffed her hair and stared at her quarry’s broad back.

To bait a thief, you provide an exclusive gallery opening with priceless art and wealthy patrons on display. To hook a fae, you tempt him with the allure of hedonistic sex.

Mara popped the top hook closure on her tight leather bustier with a deft flick of her finger. Smiling grimly, she crossed the room.

Dash leaned his hip against the bar and reached for the Fairy Sex Fizz the bartender slid in front of him. He knocked the liquor back and hid a grimace. Yep, far too sweet and lacking any kick. Only reason he occasionally stomached the red fruity concoction was because its name amused the hell out of him.

At least real fairy sex provided more fizz for the bang, thank the gods. Plunking the glass down, he rested an arm along the bar and scoped the people milling about the cavernous brick-walled room. The residents of Helias defined his ideal mark—they never left home without first donning their entire jewelry box.

Gems in every color imaginable dripped from ears and wreathed necks. The blue diamond ring attached to the woman farther down the bar would easily pay off his house. Not a bad place to start.

Dash slid a tip towards the bartender.

“This seat taken?”

Engrossed with his prize waiting at the end of the bar, Dash ignored the question.

“Yoo-hoo...anyone home?”

A sharp poke in his biceps punctuated the obnoxious singsong voice. Dash turned. The air sucked from his lungs. Riotous blonde curls rippled in a luxuriant fountain towards the most incredible pair of breasts in all creation. *Holy sweet goddess.*

With effort, Dash dragged his focus upward. The woman’s sultry blue eyes twinkled devilishly, and his overactive libido fired into hyper drive. *This is what happens when I go three weeks without sex.* Miracle he could function.

Lady enchantress arched an eyebrow. A grin tugged at Dash’s mouth. Forget stealing jewels, his evening held much riper promise. He pulled out the empty stool. “Please, take a seat.”

“Gee, thanks.”

He didn’t miss the sarcasm in her voice. Time to make amends. “Forgive my rudeness earlier. I was...distracted.”

She glanced towards the woman at the end of the bar. “I noticed.”

Their arms brushed as she wiggled onto the stool. Her scent wafted around him. Luna flowers—nectar of the fairies. Its sultry spice always sent his head into a spin. “She’s a business acquaintance, nothing more. You, on the other hand, hold my complete attention.”

“Lucky me.” She hooked one high heel over the glowing white Lucite tube circling the foot of the bar. Her miniskirt rasped as it hitched higher up her well-toned thigh. The sound nearly destroyed Dash’s composure.

“Jeez, you weren’t kidding about giving me your complete attention.” A tiny smile tipped her lush mouth. “The way you’re checking me out, I might as well be wearing nothing but my pink silk panties.”

Lust uncurled in the pit of his belly at *that* mental image. “I love pink.”

“Bet you look adorable in it.”

“I mean on a woman.” He managed a chuckle despite being so turned on he could pound nails with his erection. Sassy females were his biggest weakness. Thank the gods he usually didn’t encounter any problem sweet talking them into bed.

Utilizing the fae magic at his disposal, Dash stirred a slight breeze across the bar’s glass surface. A cocktail napkin fluttered free of its stack and floated into the dip between her generous cleavage. Cheap parlor trick—but he’d die if he didn’t touch her soon.

“Allow me.” He reached for the napkin and his fingers brushed over petal-soft skin.

Her full, kissable lips parted on a tell-tale hitch and awareness bulleted between them.

Hot anticipation rolled through Dash. Before the night ended, this delectable woman would be sprawled naked in his bed, screaming his name in pleasure.

“See anything worth taking home?”

Several seconds passed before Dash realized she referred to the art on display—unfortunately. The pad of his thumb grazed her silky skin one last time. “Perhaps.” He crumpled the napkin and tossed it aside. “You?”

“Not sure.” She nodded towards the wall behind him. “Any thoughts on that sculpture?”

He turned his head and grimaced at the hulk of scrap metal suspended over the bar area. Amazing what passed for art these days. “Yes—it’s ugly.”

Her tinkling laugh floated over him. “Good. For a minute there, I worried my art appreciation classes were a total waste of money.”

“Ah, you’re a student of the arts.” He angled his thigh so it brushed hers, a light, teasing touch. “Perhaps you’d enjoy seeing the pieces in my private collection.”

“Let me guess.” She rested her chin in her upturned hand and contemplated him, her mouth curving in mischief. “There’s a velvet painting of frolicking nymphs and naked pixies hanging over your bed.”

Dash couldn’t bridle his grin. “Actually, it’s a velvet painting of satyrs and frolicking nymphs.” Everything inside him reveled in their flirtatious banter. Good gods, when was the last time a woman engaged his head *and* his body? “If you don’t believe me, come see for yourself.”

One pink-polished fingernail traced the ring of condensation left by his drink. She worried her bottom lip, casting her eyes down. “I’d love to, but…”

He reached for her hand. So delicate and fair compared to his. Caressing his thumb over the center of her palm, he laced their fingers together. “You’re more than safe with me. I promise.”

“It’s not you I’m worried about.” She wiggled closer, her soft breath fanning his cheek. Her fingers untangled from his and tiptoed across his knuckles. “My inner good girl always takes a hike when she’s alone with a sexy fae.”

Hypnotized, he stared at her lips. *Kiss her. Now.* “Good girls are highly overrated.”

“Famous last words.” Eyes glinting with challenge, she hopped off the stool. “You’ll eat them later, when you’re begging my naughty side for mercy.” With a smoldering look, she turned and strutted away.

Mara worried her trembling knees might give out before she reached the display of rose quartz sculptures.

“What are you doing?” The squeaky voice floating from the vase of lilies situated on the table drew a scowl from Mara.

“You really don’t get this low-profile thing, do you?”

“I’m staked out in a calla lily. How much lower can I get?” Piper plopped her elbows on the snowy white lily’s curved petal and shook her head, dispelling a yellow cloud of pollen from her hair. She pointed in the direction of the bar. “He’s on the hook. Why did you walk away?”

“To keep him *on* the hook.” And keep her cool.

Okay, mostly to keep her cool. After the ridiculous line of bull she’d baited Dashael with, he was primed for reeling in. She just hadn’t counted on getting so...into the role-playing.

No question about it, her self-imposed celibacy was chomping her in the ass.

“If Queen Nalia were here—”

“She isn’t.” The words gritted between Mara’s teeth like iron filings. Nalia preferred coercing others into doing her dirty work. Gave her more time to concentrate on lives she could ruin back in Zalan. “And if you bring up her damn name one more time, I’m stuffing a sock in your mouth.”

Piper snorted. “Like you’ll find one small enough.”

Mara narrowed her eyes. “I wear a size eight. Worried much?”

Piper squeaked before ducking inside the lily. At first Mara assumed she’d finally succeeded in getting her point across. Until she felt the bold heat of someone’s hand splayed dangerously close to her buttocks.

She looked over her shoulder and was treated to an extreme close-up of Dashael’s supreme hotness. The display’s spotlights highlighted his rugged features, delineating his strong jaw with its shadow of stubble. He was the definition of raw, masculine power.

And gods above—incredibly alluring.

Mara stifled a sigh. Why couldn't he be a Kifiter, the race of faes occupying Zalan Proper? With them, discerning the males from the females proved problematic. No such luck with Dashaël Rhyder. "You're a Maddoc fae, aren't you?" She already knew the answer, but better he verified the information so she didn't accidentally blow her cover.

"Your frown tempts me to lie, but it wouldn't be very honorable of me." He leaned closer, his musky scent playing havoc with her sanity. Fingers caressed her bare midriff. "Is my being a Maddoc undesirable for some reason?"

Hell yeah. She just couldn't let him know it. Not if she wanted to pull this off.

"No way." Mara swiveled until she bumped hips with him. Her hand stole inside his jacket and stroked the fine linen covering his firm chest. Wow, male pecs. She'd forgotten what they felt like. "I hear Maddocs can make love hours on end without coming up for air. Is it true?"

He lowered his head until his lips tickled her earlobe. "*Sher 'tian*, no one's complained about my stamina yet."

Mara shivered. "*Sher 'tian*?" She pulled back and arched an eyebrow.

"It's an ice glacier found in the seas of Mer'daca. Forgive the improvisation—you've yet to grace me with your true name."

She didn't take the bait. "Ice glacier?" *Jeez, he needs some better pick-up lines.* "How...um...romantic."

Dashaël curled a lock of her hair around his finger and stroked it across her lips. "When the moonlight hits *Sher 'tian*, the entire glacier sparkles like a mesmerizing diamond." His eyes darkened from deep, caramel brown to almost black. "Men have grown mad staring too long at her beauty. Is that what you've done to me?"

"Mara," she blurted in answer to his questioning look. *Damn it, why did I give him my real name?* His bedroom eyes and musky scent were turning her brain to mush, obviously.

"Ah, lovely Mara. One taste of your beauty is worth a lifetime of madness." He leaned down and brushed his lips softly over hers.

His kiss ended almost before it started, but it packed one hell of a *wowza* factor. Mara clutched his shoulders, her knees wobbling like they had been injected with jelly. Crimson and white sparkles riddled the air surrounding them. She'd been around enough faes to recognize the residual effects of their magic.

Son of a bitch. She jerked away from him and balled her hand into a fist. How typical—give a Maddoc fae an inch, and next thing you know your panties are hugging your ankles.

Loud sneezes shook the calla lily, snuffing Mara's ire.

"What's that noise?" A frown tugged Dashaël's eyebrows towards the bridge of his nose. He peered over her shoulder.

"I don't hear anything." Mara shifted, blocking his view of the trembling flower arrangement.

Dashael cocked his head, his handsome face set in fierce concentration. “Right there,” he exclaimed when Piper sneezed again. He tried brushing past Mara.

Panicked, she flung her arms around his neck and kissed him hard enough their teeth clinked together. That stopped him, and the furious sneezes from the calla lily. Groaning, he tangled his hands in her hair and slid his tongue deep inside her mouth. He tasted of cherry brandy and dark pleasure. The drugging allure of sex pounded over her in intoxicating waves.

If he kissed this good, imagine making love with him. No, she didn’t want to imagine that. Definitely not.

His tongue slowly retreated. “Mara, *Sher ’tian...*” He nipped her bottom lip between his teeth in a gentle tug. Unable to stop it, she moaned.

“Come home with me,” he murmured in a husky whisper, “and show me no mercy.”

Another sneeze issued from Piper.

If the sneezing doesn’t do her in, I will. Hoping to distract Dashael from the sound, Mara dug her nails into his broad shoulders.

“Does that mean yes?” Humor and lust gleamed in his eyes.

Trailing her hands down the delicious contours of his chest, she nodded. “But don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

His mouth curled in wicked invitation. “My life is in your hands, *Sher ’tian.*”

If he only knew.

Fingers trembling, Mara handed the coat attendant her electronic ticket. After a brief glance at the locker number, the woman stepped to the wall of glass cubicles and inserted the ticket.

“Ready?”

Mara jolted at the sound of Dashael’s deep baritone close to her ear. Damn it, not good. An oversexed nympho was supposed to jump out of her clothes—not her skin—whenever a man invaded her space. “Almost. She’s getting my bag now.”

The attendant returned with her heavy black leather satchel in tow.

“I see why you insisted on checking it,” Dashael said dryly when the bag settled on the counter with a thud. “What the devil’s in there? An anchor?”

Mara slung the satchel’s long handles over her shoulder and tucked it securely against her. “I prefer being prepared.”

Dashael’s dark eyebrows lifted. “For what?”

She wet her lips before giving him a smoldering look. “Anything, lover boy.”

His Adam’s apple bobbed with a hard swallow. Mara mentally high-fived herself. Finally, the oversexed nympho made a comeback. “Ready whenever you are.”

With Dashaël leading the way, they exited into the humid night. Moisture immediately beaded the back of her neck and crept towards her shoulder blades. She swept her hair into a loose pile atop her head and pinned it there with her hand. At the moment, she'd give just about anything for the crisp bite of Zalan's northern winds.

Dashaël's fingers stroked along her damp skin. "Hot?" His voice slid like warm honey, making goose bumps dot her arms.

"It's a furnace out here." She flicked the lapel of his well-tailored jacket with her fingernail. "You must be sweltering."

"I'll shed the suit soon enough."

The reminder put a stumble in her step. His palm cupped her elbow, steadying her.

"Damn crack." She mumbled several more complaints, making a show of frowning at the pavement. He gave her arm a light squeeze and she risked a peek at him from the corner of her eye, catching the tail-end of his knowing grin.

A valet jogged up, distracting Dashaël. He dug for his ticket and Mara dragged in a deep breath. Sooner this fiasco ended the better.

It seemed an eternity passed before the valet pulled up in a sleek black Riato tricked out with gleaming chrome side fins. Dashaël lifted the passenger door and helped her inside. She sank into the butter-soft leather seat with a soft moan of pleasure. Thievery obviously paid well.

Dashaël sauntered to the driver's side and climbed behind the wheel. His dark gaze traveled to her as the hatch doors clicked in place with a faint hydraulic hiss.

The magnitude of the situation slammed into her with alarming clarity.

Great, trapped in a cramped enclosure with a dangerously seductive Maddoc fae—one whose very existence would change her life forever. No pressure there.

"You seem tense." He stretched an arm across the center console and caressed her knee. Miraculously she didn't jump. A hint of concern shadowed his face. "Change of heart?"

"No way." Adopting a temptress smile, she glided her fingers over his. With a squeeze, she dragged their linked hands higher on her thigh.

His yummy lips parted on a ragged breath. "Thank the gods." He reluctantly slid his hand free and grabbed the wheel.

The Riato pulled from the curb with a low purr. On the dashboard, the blinking fiber optic lights monitoring transit conditions flashed green, and Dashaël zipped into the nearest lane. He handled the bullet-shaped vehicle with supreme confidence, hugging the tight curves of the aerial freeway like a professional racer.

"My house is just outside Helias limits."

Mara tore her attention from the blurred cityscape outside the window. “You know, I never did catch your name.” She prayed he didn’t find her blunder odd. Jeez, what moron didn’t demand the name of the individual she was supposedly about to have wild, uninhibited sex with?

“Dashael Rhyder.” He grinned, his teeth flashing white against his bronzed skin. “But please, call me Dash.”

Surprise flickered over her. Wow, he’d used his real name. She batted away the guilt threatening to settle in her chest. *Get a grip. It’s not as if he’s entrusting you with some big, classified secret.*

Time to put her head back into the game. “Tell me, Dash...” She stroked her fingers over the fine grain of the leather console. “What do you do for a living that you can afford a one hundred and fifty merca vehicle?”

He chuckled. “You’re a student of the arts and Riato fair-market value. A woman after my own heart.” His hand dropped to the shifter and punched the gear higher, rocketing them through a heart-stopping spiral that made Mara grit her teeth and white-knuckle her safety harness. “But back to your question. I acquire things people pay a hefty fee to possess.”

“You mean you’re a property broker?”

An enigmatic smile crooked his mouth. “More or less.”

How could he remain cool? He just freely admitted he stole for a living. Okay, maybe the jump from property broker to thief was sketchy at best, but close enough.

“And you? Any career beyond bewitching men’s hearts?”

“Nope.” Winding a curl around her finger, she tossed him a saucy smile. “Bewitchery is in high demand these days.”

His husky laugh rang out as he exited the freeway. Mara’s heart thudded when he took a quick right and they left the bustle of the city behind.

Holy crap, where exactly is his house? She peered out the Riato’s glass roof, her anxiety escalating. Out in this backwoods, the stars received no competition from Helias’s garish urban lights and glowed like fairy dust scattered in the twilight. “You weren’t lying about residing beyond the city limits.” She tugged the satchel against her side. Her racing pulse calmed with the reminder of the contents tucked inside it. “Still, I wasn’t expecting the sticks.”

“We’re less than two minutes away, promise.”

He kept his word and pulled into a deeply forested driveway a minute and a half later. Up ahead, a sprawling log and stone house nestled in a copse of spruce and firs.

Apparently thievery paid *very* well.

“It’s beautiful.”

Dash’s gorgeous face lit with pleasure. “I’m glad you think so.” His attention drifted to the swaying pines. “The landscape here reminds me of Mer’daca, my homeland—rugged and untamed.”

“What made you leave Mer’daca in the first place?” It was the only information missing from his thick file.

A nerve ticced in his jaw. “Circumstances beyond my control.” Before she could question him further, he unlocked the hatch and the doors swung upward. After unclipping his safety harness, he strode to her side and helped her from the vehicle. She snatched her satchel from the seat before the doors snicked shut.

“Watch your step,” he said, pressing a palm against her waist when her heel caught between cracks in the slag stone.

Hidden path lights blinked on when they approached the wide front porch. Dash pushed aside the antler-like foliage of a stag fern sprouting from the porch’s center support beam, revealing a keypad. He punched in a code and the house’s massive oak door swung inward. A cozy glow spilled across the threshold.

Mara swore the incessant thudding of her heart drowned out the trills and chirps of the resident firewing crickets. For the sake of Gideon, her brother, she wouldn’t chicken out. Her jittery nerves were inconsequential compared to the daily cruelty he must suffer inside Zalan’s fairy prison.

Taking a deep breath, she stepped inside and more lamps clicked on. She stopped and surveyed her surroundings. Centered in the room, weathered leather couches grouped around a circular stone fireplace. Dash snapped his fingers and fire instantly crackled in the pit’s grate.

“You must be handy on a camping trip.”

Dash laughed before stripping from his jacket. She stared at the interesting ripple of muscles beneath his white linen shirt. He tossed the jacket over a nearby armchair. “Hungry? I’ve some excellent filet in the cooler.”

Her stomach flipped at the thought of food. She shook her head. “Not unless you want some.”

The firelight reflected in his dark eyes. “It’s not steak I’m hungry for.”

Okay then. Swallowing past a lump of apprehension, she fumbled with the satchel, needing its reassuring weight. Dash noticed her awkward motion and stepped towards her.

“Here,” he said, holding out his hand. “Let me put that somewhere for you.”

She shifted the bag behind her. “No.”

“Don’t worry. I won’t steal it.” His lips curled in a half smile.

Very funny. “Um...there are a few things in here I’ll need later.”

“Really?”

Mara realized there’d be no deflecting his curiosity this time. With a sigh, she hauled the satchel forward and unzipped it. She hooked a finger around the object settled on top and pulled it out.

Dash’s jaw went slack. “That what I think it is?”

She lifted the handcuffs and eyed them. Giving her finger a little twirl, she nodded. “Yep, believe so.”

Chapter Two

The breath expelled from Dash's lungs in a whoosh. "*Sweet goddess.*"

Wariness stole across Mara's face. He groaned, battling the urge to bite his cursed quick tongue. Did she worry he'd ridicule her desires? Mentally head-slapping himself for his lack of gentlemanly tact, he strode to Mara and cupped her chin. His thumb brushed beneath the little dip in her bottom lip, tempting him, but first he needed to ease her mind.

"Don't fear shocking me. It's impossible. Besides, whatever you have in mind, I'm more than game." He punctuated the fact by sliding his mouth over hers. With some work, he coaxed her tongue into play.

"Delicious," he whispered, nibbling along the sweet curve of her lips. His mouth lowered, discovered her neck's graceful slope. Her breathing sped up. Ah, he'd found a sensitive spot. Murmuring in appreciation, he suckled her there, laving her skin. His hands glided along her shoulders. He brushed the sides of her breasts and she slumped into him. The handcuffs clattered to the hardwood floor, their metallic ring jostling them from their sensual reverie.

"Damn it." Mara ducked and scrabbled for the handcuffs.

He hunkered next to her. Looking to halt the frantic motion of her hands, he cupped her chin again, tilting it until she revealed the vexation in her eyes. "Don't worry, it's just a floor. Far worse punishment has been thrown its way." He gave her a teasing grin. "Though your handcuffs win top prize as the most interesting."

The flush in her cheeks deepened. "You must think I'm a clumsy oaf."

"No, I think you're beautiful..." his fingers traveled down her neck and grazed the delicate ridge of her collarbone, "...sexy..." he stroked the vee between her breasts, watching them rise and fall with the sharp intake of her breath, "...and far too overdressed."

He reached for the leather bustier's center hook. She jumped and her elbow went flying into his chin. Grunting, he thudded onto his ass.

"Oh gods," Mara groaned, leaning over him. "I'm worse than clumsy—I'm a menace."

He shook his head, trying to clear the spinning stars. "Not at all."

Well, maybe a little. To be on the safe side, they should probably stick to the missionary position. Much as he loved the sight of a woman riding him, he didn't need her falling off and breaking her neck.

Pushing to his feet, he smiled and extended a hand. "Come, I'll show you the rest of the house."

After the briefest hesitation, she tucked her hand in his. The kitchen received a cursory walkthrough. She oohed and ahed over the original Lia Mavrick watercolors and Stellic bronzes scattered between the various guestrooms. Outside the den, she stopped and ran her fingers over the nubby texture of the vessel holding a freeform arrangement of wild grasses.

“Is this a Rucca pod?”

He smiled at the wonderment in her voice. Here he possessed a houseful of priceless art and antiques, and a nut husk thrilled her most. Females were such strange, delightful creatures. “I picked it up during my last trip to Frittona.” Along with a square cut, ten-carat ruby that fetched a handsome finder’s fee.

“I’ve never seen one so big.” She stooped and surveyed the pod. Her skirt lifted, granting him a mouth-watering peep show.

Dash’s jaw dropped. *Sweet goddess, she is wearing pink panties.*

Mara glanced over her shoulder. He forced his attention from her curvaceous rear, but apparently not fast enough. Giving the hem of her skirt a firm tug, she scrambled to her feet. “Where next?”

Delirious with the need to peel those pink panties off, he led her into the master bedroom. He followed her stare to the massive canopy bed centered in the room.

“Perfect,” she blurted.

Couldn’t have said it better. Fumbling with the buttons on his shirt, he stepped towards her. She swiveled on her heel and strode to the bed, plunking her bag near her feet. Her handcuffs reappeared and circled the nearest pine post with a decisive click.

Dash’s lust exploded. Impatient with his shirt, he yanked. Hard. The buttons popped free and bounced along the wood floor with a *plink-plink-plink*. Mara turned, her wide-eyed stare tracking the rolling path of the buttons.

Dropping his ripped shirt, he advanced, kicking off his dress shoes before unbuttoning his trousers with shaking fingers. He was too far gone, too primed, to take things slow. Three weeks without sex—what the hell had he been thinking?

“Dash?”

The uncertainty wobbling her voice knifed through his single-minded focus...slightly. He forced a strained grin. “Perhaps you’d best remove your own clothing.”

She blinked before releasing a slow breath. “Okay.”

Her hand snaked towards the miniskirt’s waistband. The sex-starved beast in him snapped its leash. Plowing his hands through Mara’s hair, he claimed her mouth in a fierce, hungry kiss.

The taste of her inflamed his senses. He untangled one hand from her hair and cupped her breast, growling in frustration when his fingers met leather rather than soft skin. She gasped and tumbled sideways, taking him with her. They knocked into the post, rattling the handcuffs. Before he regained his

balance, she grabbed his wrist and secured it inside the dangling cuff. Not the way he'd expected things to roll, but it might prove interesting.

Leaving him slumped on the bed, she ducked to the floor. He watched her wiggling rear end and groaned. "*Sher'tian*, you're killing me."

She fumbled through her bag before returning to him. The hem of her miniskirt rasped against his thighs and he reached for her with his free hand. Ignoring him, she climbed onto the bed and straddled his lap. Lust hazed his vision. He lowered his head towards her breasts, fully intent on ripping her bustier open with his teeth if need be.

Cold metal locked around his neck with an ominous clank. The sound—along with the chill biting into his flesh—managed to edge past the fog clouding his brain. Disoriented, he glanced down. Purple lights flashed across the base of the bizarre collar encircling his neck.

Mara pushed off his lap and he frowned up at her.

"What is this?"

A strange expression crossed her face—one bordering on pity. He didn't like it at all. "Mara?"

"I'm sorry...truly. Please, just don't make any sudden—"

Agitated, he lurched at her. An electrical shock zinged his neck. "*Son of a bitch*," he roared, jerking back.

Mara winced before finishing her sentence. "—movements."

Mara listened to the sharp breaths whistling from Dash's nose. Guilt tore at her chest sharper than an emaris hawk's talon. Damn it, she'd warned Nalia the collar needed tweaking. But without someone wearing the device, she couldn't prove it. And go figure, no one volunteered to test it out.

She dug in the bag for the remote controller device. Locating the mode button, she depressed it several times. "Okay, this should do it. Try moving towards me."

Dash's glare threatened to rip right through her. "Got a better idea. Take this damn thing off me."

"I can't."

"Babe, whatever kink you've got in mind...it's not my bag." Moving with exaggerated caution, Dash settled on the bed's edge. The mattress creaked beneath his weight. "Go find yourself a Vorhian. I hear they're into pain."

He thought the collar was some kind of weird sex toy. *Who thinks like that?* She looked up at the individual mirrored tiles imbedded in the canopy's overhead frame. Okay, that was a dumb question.

"Now's probably a good time to clear something up." She took a deep breath and expelled it in a slow fizzle. "I'm not here for sex."

Dash's watchful golden eyes narrowed to slits. A wary stillness washed over him. "No?"

She shook her head.

“Mind telling me why the hell you *are* here then?”

No point beating around the bush. “To fetch you.”

“What am I—a damn stick?” The muscles in his massive shoulders flexed when he stretched his free arm behind him.

She swallowed hard. Gods, who could concentrate with all that sleek, bronzed skin within arm’s reach? “The person who sent me didn’t feel confident you’d come of your own free will.”

“Who sent you?” A thread of danger twined through his steely demand.

“Queen Nalia of Zalan.”

He blinked, evidently caught off guard. “Why the hell is royalty after me? I haven’t done anything to them...lately.”

Mara cleared her throat before staring at the floor. Circling the pointed toe of her high heel, she traced the path of the wood grain beneath her feet. Okay, enough stalling. “I don’t know. You’ll have to ask her.”

“Believe me, I will.”

She returned her attention to Dash and a prickle of alarm pinched the back of her neck. He was livid—no question about it. The throbbing vein in his brow appeared downright painful.

Keeping him fixed in her sight, she leaned down and dropped the remote controller into the satchel. His fingers drummed a frantic tattoo against the mattress. When she realized what he was up to, she shook her head. “Don’t waste your time. The collar’s blocking your magic.”

Murder and all manner of painful vengeance flashed across his face. A sliver of fear trilled up her spine. Good thing the handcuffs and collar secured him.

He twisted his manacled wrist and cursed when it remained uncooperative. “Might be difficult delivering me to your boss with this bed attached to my arm.”

Like she’d fall for that obvious ploy. “The queen’s driver is on his way. Your collar’s tracking chip sent him our coordinates when I switched it on.”

His body stilled again—a mass of tightly bundled fury. Their stares waged a silent battle. Her nerves dancing a wild jig, she wet her lips, hoping like hell he’d take her next threat to heart. “By the way, her driver is built like a Foini bull and mean as one too.”

He cocked one dark eyebrow in arrogant disregard. “Thanks for the heads up.”

“I’m just saying it wouldn’t be wise messing with him...or me.”

“Sweetheart, I’ve no desire to mess around with a Foini bull. You, on the other hand...” he scoped her body with a deliberate, snail-like pace, “...would be fun wrestling to the floor.”

“Not happening,” she said, her tone flat as the marsh plains outside of Zalan.

“Never say never.” Eyes glittering with carnal intent, his lips spread into a hard, feral smile. “I’ve tricks up my sleeve that’d make you spread your legs as easy as a Weliker bitch hound in heat.”

She decided to ignore his vile crudeness rather than stray deeper into his crafty head games. Picking up the satchel, she strode towards the door.

“Where the hell are you going?”

Planting a hand on the doorframe, she coolly returned his outraged stare. “Outside to wait for Ronan.”

“What the bloody hell am I supposed to do shackled here?”

She gave him a saccharine smile. “You’ve a free hand. Be creative.”

~ * ~

Don’t invite a Maddoc fae’s touch. They’ll steal your sanity. Her brother’s voice a phantom whisper inside her head, Mara leaned against one of the porch’s peeled log support beams and stared at the stars overhead. She didn’t know about sanity, but they stole hearts. And left them to wither and die in the blackest hour of the soul.

Nalia’s silver aerocoach floated down the drive, its luminescent headlights slashing the darkness and Mara’s painful memories.

“About damn time,” Mara muttered, pushing from the porch. She trotted down the steps and waited until Ronan maneuvered the bulky vehicle onto the ground. Compared to Dash’s sleek Riato, the aerocoach resembled an oversized meat locker.

The tinted rear window rolled down and Piper flew out. “Where is he?”

Mara found it impossible to corral her impatience. “In the kitchen, making us sandwiches for the road. Jeez, where do you think he’s at?” The long night was taking its toll. Usually Piper didn’t get on her nerves more than the standard twenty times a day.

Paying Mara’s sarcasm no heed, Piper flitted to the door. She settled on the heavy brass knob and stamped her foot. “Could I get a little help here?”

Mara gritted her teeth and stalked up the porch steps. Shooing Piper aside, she opened the door. Piper shot past her, leaving a trail of shimmering violet dust in her wake.

“Oh brother.” Mara dashed through the entry and skittered after the sprite. She might be angry at Dash for his head games, but she wouldn’t subject him to Piper alone. Talk about cruel and unusual punishment.

She bounded into the master bedroom and skidded to a stop. Piper hovered at eye level with Dash, her wings an iridescent blur as she treaded air. Sprite and fae were locked in a stare-down.

“You’ve been a very bad boy, Dashaël Rhyder,” Piper squeaked, wagging a tiny finger.

Dash grunted. “Anyone have a fly swatter handy?”

Piper’s indignant gasp broke off when Ronan stormed into the room, his barrel chest heaving from his sprint down the hall. Sweat stains formed perfect semicircles beneath the armpit area of his beige tunic. Mara couldn’t remember seeing him put out such exertion before.

“What’s going on?” Clutching his side, Ronan scowled at the room in general.

“Well, I’m shackled to my bed and awaiting transport to your employer. Other than that, not much.” Dash’s gaze roved to Mara. “Not too many bulbs in his lamp, I take.”

Mara stifled a grin. She wouldn’t give him the satisfaction of knowing she found him funny. No way. She glanced at Ronan. “Is the aerocoach ready?”

At his nod, she tossed him the handcuff keys. “Let’s get him outside.”

Ronan unclamped the cuff from the post and yanked Dash upright. Mara’s breath expelled on a relieved rush. Good—the collar’s sensitive circuitry seemed safely under control.

“Easy, big boy,” Dash growled. “I don’t allow rough handling until the second date.” A harsh curse hissed between his teeth when Ronan yanked his free hand behind his back and manacled it inside the other cuff.

Fury sizzling in his eyes, Dash lowered his head, butting it hard into Ronan’s protruding belly. Unfazed, Ronan slapped a meaty hand around the base of Dash’s neck and propelled him out the bedroom door.

Outside, Ronan shoved Dash headfirst into the aerocoach’s plush backseat. Cracking his knuckles, he walked to the front of the idling vehicle. Mara slid in beside Dash. Once he’d twisted into a sitting position, she snagged the safety harness and slipped it over his wide shoulders before buckling it in place. She tried ignoring the heated musky tang of male skin inches from her nose.

His stare scorched her. “Interesting company you keep.”

It wasn’t her choice—not by a long shot. “Don’t complain. I half expected Ronan to crack your head open back there.”

“What, and ruin the beautiful thing going between us?” Dash rolled his shoulders and winced when the strap pulled tight against him.

“You’re making things worse for yourself.”

“I’m sitting on my damn hands. What do you expect?”

She wedged a knee between his thighs and reached for his trapped arms. His mouth settled at the crook of her neck. A weak breath escaped her when his tongue flicked her rapidly beating pulse.

“Don’t,” she whispered.

“Why?” He bit her and laved the sting away with his lips. “This is the best time I’ve had in the past thirty minutes.”

She jerked away from him when Piper darted into the aerocoach’s roomy back cabin.

Dash fixed his heavy-lidded gaze on the smirking sprite. “Your timing is impeccable.”

“I know.” Piper giggled. Ignoring Dash’s scowl, she turned to Mara. “You owe me.”

Big time. Weak-kneed, Mara sank onto her seat.

Dash's body jostled when the vehicle hit a rough air pocket. Despite the delicate female ears within close proximity, he let loose a string of colorful swear words that would blister even a dockworker's ears. Hell with it, he'd never been more uncomfortable in his life. Why pretend otherwise? He shifted, trying to ease the strain in his arms, and managed to twist his elbow into a position a contortionist would be hard pressed to replicate. *Fan-frickin-tastic.*

He stared at Mara across the way, his temper spiking. What a contrary picture she made with her angelic face lit beneath the moon's opalescent glow and her sex kitten body curled against the seat cushion. Her eyes remained closed. Merely a ruse—sleep eluded his delectable enchantress. He could tell by the restless stirring of her head.

His mind whirled with a million questions, starting with what the hell she, a human, was doing working for fae royalty. Most royals barely considered humans worthy of scrubbing their waste receptacles, and here she'd been enlisted to kidnap him. "What's your story?"

A snore broke from Mara.

"I know you're faking."

She cracked one eye open. "Do you mind? I'm trying to sleep."

"No you're not." He shrugged off her glare. "It's impossible. Riding bareback on the hump of a Mer'daca dragon is more comfortable than this." To verify his point, the aerocoach jolted when it flew through a patch of choppy turbulence.

She stared out the window, her lips thinned in a stubborn line. He wouldn't be put off that easily. "What's in this for you?"

Mara remained silent long enough he figured she wouldn't appease his curiosity.

Finally she looked at him, her aggravation clear. "The satisfaction of bringing in a thief who doesn't give a rat's ass about the law." Fire kindled in her eyes. "Really, it's quite despicable using your goddess-given magical ability for such a low purpose."

"Why do you assume I use my magic to steal?"

Her expression remained confrontational. "Don't you?"

"There'd be no challenge. Besides, sticking with the old art of lock picking honed the dexterity of my fingers." He deliberately focused his scrutiny on her breasts. "Something you could have appreciated firsthand if you'd waited a couple minutes before clamping this collar on me."

The fierce blush riding Mara's cheeks belied her scornful snort. "Yeah, keep kidding yourself."

He chuckled. "Fine, we'll agree to disagree for the time being. But you still haven't told me what *you* get out of kidnapping me."

Adorable frown lines crinkled the corners of her eyes. If he weren't so damn cynical, he might have believed her guileless.

“But I did. You broke the law—several times over,” she added combatively. “Isn’t that explanation enough?”

“You really expect me to believe you’re doing this out of a sense of civic duty?”

Her gaze flickered down—the only verification he needed. She definitely possessed a much bigger motive.

He wiggled his fingers in an attempt to bring circulation back to the trapped digits. The effort proved fruitless. “We’re more alike than you think.”

She jerked her chin. “I sincerely doubt it.”

“Let me paint the picture for you.” He slanted his head in a contemplative pose. “I steal diamonds, rubies...original Hon’dach oils. Whatever brings top merca.”

Her expression remained impassive. “Sorry, I don’t get the connection.”

“No? Sweetheart, you’ve stolen the most priceless commodity on the market.”

She folded her arms over her chest. “Dare I ask what that might be?”

“Me.”

“Jeez, it’s amazing your back isn’t out of whack carrying your massive ego around.”

“Like it or not, it’s the truth.” Stretching his legs, he observed her beneath hooded eyelids. “People have tried nabbing me before. How did you manage where they failed?”

She stared at the hands fidgeting in her lap.

“What, suddenly shy? Quite a departure from earlier.”

A nerve twitched spastically above her left eye. “You’re beyond obnoxious.”

He gave her a wolfish grin. “You haven’t even seen me at my worst.”

His claim earned an exaggerated shudder from her. “Fine, if you must know—I studied you. There’s a certain style to your heists.”

Clever girl. “And?”

“A string of recent robberies around Helias matched your profile. It didn’t take much to determine you were responsible.”

“You knew I was in the area,” he said, nodding. “So you staged the perfect scenario and drew me in. Utilized all your sexual wiles until I panted after you like a Weliker hound.”

Her cheeks blushed a furious shade of crimson. She opened her mouth, but he stopped her with a shake of his head. “No, I applaud you. Well done.”

Mara’s brows slashed low. She flipped onto her side, presenting him with her profile.

He changed tactics. “How much is Nalia paying you to bring me in?”

“Do you never shut up?”

Her surliness tugged a smile from him. “Not much else to do right now.” His attention drifted to the sprite snoozing on the seat’s padded neck roll. The wings tucked against her quivered every once in a while with her loud snores. “How old are you?”

“Is that question for me?”

Turning, he caught Mara’s frown. “Well, it’s not for the snoring sprite.”

“Why are you asking?”

He gritted his teeth, frustrated with her mulishness. “Stealing the Frez’nak Diamond was a breeze compared to getting a simple answer from you.”

Her lips pinched together. “Fine, I’m twenty-five. Not that it’s any of your business.”

“You’re quite clever for a young girl.” His words weren’t empty flattery spoken with the intention of winning her over. Not that he suspected such a thing would work on the stubborn twit. “So here’s my offer—whatever Nalia is paying, I’ll double it. Invest it wisely, and you’ll be sitting pretty by the time you’re thirty.”

Mara’s mouth fell open. “I can’t believe you’re bribing me.”

“Worth a shot.” He repositioned his head and the safety strap tightened over his larynx. Grimacing, he sent a pleading look Mara’s way. “Help,” he choked on a strangled gasp.

Her eyebrows cocked in an evil fashion. “Why? I’ve been waiting all night for the perfect means to shut you up. Besides, I’m not falling for that again.”

He jerked against the constricting harness and it eased a fraction. “Surely I’m worth more alive than dead.”

Another put-upon sigh filtered from Mara. She leaned forward and yanked the strap behind his head. Air rushed into his lungs and he slumped back with a blissful groan. She scuttled onto her seat, reminding him of a hare fleeing to the safety of its underground burrow.

The rawness of his throat dampened any enjoyment mocking her skittishness might have brought. Instead, he returned to the business at hand. “Tell you what. I’ll triple her price.”

“I’m not interested in your money.”

He studied the set lines of her face and determined she spoke the truth. But it didn’t mean he wouldn’t find a bargaining chip more suitable than money.

Everyone came with a selling price.

Chapter Three

They passed through Rulach's palatial gated entry shortly after dawn broke. Pressing her hand against the aerocoach's cold window, Mara watched the heavy iron gates with their filigreed scrollwork clank shut behind them. The sound was an ominous reminder that more than one type of prison existed.

Despite the early hour, the vineyard teemed with sprites busy inspecting the dew-kissed grapes. Summer's harvest would be ready by week's end, which meant the vats would need a hard scrubbing. Good thing she'd stocked up on ointment for the blisters sure to make an appearance on her fingers.

The aerocoach coasted to a stop in the horseshoe-shaped drive and the palace's ten-foot doors swung open. Nalia's trio of personal bodyguards stepped out, their thickly muscled torsos covered with two crisscrossed straps of hammered metal. The knives and throwing stars tucked inside the straps' various notches glinted with menace when the trio marched down the steps.

"Interesting fashion statement. Not everyone can pull off wearing kitchen cutlery on their chests."

Mara shifted her gaze to Dash. He was surveying the bodyguards stationed outside the door with an air of detached amusement. "Wouldn't mock, if I were you." She released her seat harness and it snaked into its housing. "Compared to them, Ronan is a pussycat."

Dash didn't appear overly impressed. Shaking her head, Mara pushed open the door and stepped out. The bodyguards waited until she hiked towards the palace entrance before entering the aerocoach. Seconds later, Piper flew from the vehicle, her pink hair sticking up in a messy halo.

"Ever heard of waking a girl *gently*?" she screeched at the brutes tussling inside the vehicle.

Grunts and thumps preceded the sprawling arrival of Dash at the foot of the marble steps. Nalia's bodyguards exited the vehicle and reached for Dash, jerking him upright. A thin gash above his right eye trickled blood and his jaw wore the red imprint of someone's fist.

"The hospitality here is rather lacking." Dash leaned over and spat onto the graveled drive.

"You wound me." The sharp statement drew everyone's attention to the regal fairy queen poised in the front archway. Nalia tugged aside the scalloped hem of her morning dress and glided from the door's shadow. Her waist-length tresses swirled around her like ribbons of black silk.

Everyone but Mara and Dash bowed in a deep curtsy. Nalia's narrowed eyes suggested the slight didn't go unnoticed.

Pasha, biggest and dumbest of the queen's bodyguards, rushed forward with an eager gallop. "Your Royal Highness, where do you want the prisoner?"

Nalia took her time inspecting Dash. Lust lurked beneath the imperiousness in her icy green irises. “Bring him into the East Solarium. I wish to show my newest prize to my husband.” She turned and strolled inside the palace.

Dash’s gaze met Mara’s as Pasha grasped his neck roughly and escorted him up the stairs. Something cold and awful slipped around Mara’s heart. She had a bad feeling it was guilt.

I didn’t slide the noose around his neck. Dash’s flagrant disregard for the law sealed his fate long before she stepped into the picture. Fortifying herself with that thought, Mara waited until the others filed inside the palace before slipping through the door. The entourage crossed the vast, marbled receiving hall. Servants busy waxing the mahogany paneling dropped their polishing rags and stared at the procession.

Nalia strode into the tropical oasis of the East Solarium. “Finian, come meet my new pet.”

A tall figure robed in plum-colored silk appeared amongst the palm trees occupying the solarium’s glass-domed sundeck. Shooing a brightly plumed parrot from the railing, Finian descended the spiral staircase. With his silvered ebony hair, piercing blue eyes and natural Maddoc charm, the queen’s husband prompted drooling adulation. Mara stood in direct contrast to the female populace of Zalan—she despised Finian Artronté. And with good reason.

Finian stared at Dash, his hostility a visible shower of white-hot sparks. “What the hell is he doing in my home?”

“*Your* home? Last time I checked, I’m the one holding the deed. But why quibble?” Motioning everyone aside, Nalia circled Dash. She halted and trailed her hands over her prisoner’s tightly bound arms. Her talon-like nails raked over Dash’s dusky nipples, making him flinch. “Isn’t he quite a specimen? Don’t believe I’ve seen any finer.”

Mara glanced away, unable to stomach any more of the disgusting display. The twisted games played between Nalia and Finian sickened her.

“Pity I won’t have much time for enjoying my pet before he leaves on his mission,” Nalia said, the pout in her voice evident.

Mission? Frowning, Mara returned her attention to the tense interplay between husband and wife. She thought Dash was strictly here to pay off his debt to society, and service Nalia’s...recreational needs.

“But I suppose absence will make my heart grow fonder.” Nalia’s tone dripped with venom. She slid her hands from Dash’s chest and smacked his butt—hard.

Dash jumped. “Much as I love being talked about like I’m not here, an explanation would be nice.” He swiveled and glared at Nalia. “Let’s start with what the hell you mean by mission.”

“Yes,” Finian bit out. “I’d like the answer to that as well.”

“Just a little job for my beautiful boy.” Flicking back the sleeve of her dress, Nalia stroked Dash’s rigid jaw. “If you complete it successfully, I’ll shorten your sentence.”

Dash jerked away from Nalia’s touch. “What kind of job?”

"The kind you do best." A wicked laugh erupted from Nalia when Dash's expression turned contemplative. "I refer to stealing, of course. Though I'm sure your other notorious talent will receive my accolades in due time."

"Let me get this straight." Dash's mouth curled in a sardonic grin. "You imprison me for stealing, yet you want me to steal for you?"

A scowl marred Nalia's smooth, porcelain perfection. "I'm doing you a favor. Rather than being beneficent and keeping you in the luxury of the palace, I could let you rot in the fairy prison."

"Excuse my ungratefulness. If not for the bruised state of my body, I'd grovel at your feet." Dash's scornful gaze traveled between Nalia and Finian. "Okay, I'll bite. What exactly do you want me to steal?"

"The Rhyann rune."

Mara frowned, unfamiliar with the name, but judging from the wary set of Dash's face, he was plenty acquainted.

"You dare enlist this worthless slime to steal the Rhyann? The very individual responsible for its theft from my family's vault in the first place?" Finian stalked forward, his body bristling with anger.

Nalia chortled with glee. "It's quite brilliant. Who better to track down the rune?"

Finian's glare transferred to Dash. For several tense seconds, Mara worried the stare-down between the two Maddoc faes would end in bloody battle. And with Dash's fists trapped behind his back, he stood at a distinct disadvantage.

"Enough with the male testosterone," Nalia said, waving a hand. She turned to Pasha. "Take Dashael downstairs and have Sarina fetch fresh clothing for him. While you're at it, remove his handcuffs. He's not going anywhere."

Nalia strolled to the silver tea service situated on the buffet and everyone but Mara and Finian exited the East Solarium. Giving Finian a wide berth, Mara strode to the buffet and stared at Nalia's back. "Guess now is as good a time as any to sign the papers releasing Gideon."

"What?" Nalia poured a stream of earthy-smelling Jufferi tea into a delicate teacup and finished it with a dollop of cream before turning. "But your work isn't completed."

A cold black rage swept over Mara, making her entire body shake. Hating someone this much did nothing but eat at her soul, and she despised Nalia all the more for it. "You promised. I know your word isn't usually worth much, but I took it anyway."

"Dear, don't adopt such a fierce expression. It'll wrinkle your lovely skin." Nalia stirred her tea before tapping the spoon against the cup. "I fully intend on keeping my word. You merely misunderstand the finer details of our arrangement."

"How can I misunderstand details you never provided?" Mara said between clenched teeth.

Nalia tossed the spoon down. Her over-plucked eyebrows winged towards the ruby-encrusted combs anchoring her hair. “Come, let’s not argue. The only thing left for you to do is accompany Dashael on his mission. Trivial, really.”

“*What?*” A weight crushed at Mara’s chest. Travel with Dash—again? She’d either kill him or cave to his sexual magnetism. Either way she’d be screwed, no pun intended. “Wouldn’t it make more sense sending one of your bodyguards?” she asked, clutching at straws.

“We both know brainpower isn’t Pasha, Merke or Zith’s strong point. I need someone my sly thief won’t easily outfox.” Cold calculation gleamed in Nalia’s eyes. “Someone with strong motivation to finish this mission quickly. But perhaps I misjudged your desire to free your brother...” Nalia’s expression turned almost reptilian—a deadly asp getting ready to strike. “There are worst punishments than imprisonment, you know. Particularly for a human standing guilty of the crime your brother committed.”

Ice-cold fear trickled through Mara’s veins. Was Nalia threatening to reinstate Gideon’s death penalty? “No, I’ll do it.”

Nalia’s mouth curled into a frigid smile. “You always were a smart girl.” She reached for the tea cup and took a dainty sip before blotting her lips with the edge of her lace-trimmed handkerchief. “Which is why I trust I needn’t remind you Dashael Rhyder belongs to me.” One blood red nail circled the cup’s rim. “And what I possess, no one else touches.”

~ * ~

Amazing what a clean pair of pants will do for a fellow. Of course, his face needed some help. Grimacing, Dash finished tying off the line of stitches above his right eye. “Thanks, sweetheart.” He winked at the young maid holding the looking glass for him.

She giggled and dropped the glass to her side before darting past the stone-faced bodyguard stationed next to the door.

“See you’re busy making friends.”

Dash jerked around and stared at Mara as she sauntered into the kitchen from the rear entrance. Despite the replacement of her siren outfit with a drab green skirt and blouse topped by a white apron, she remained the most desirable woman he’d ever seen.

He rubbed his wrists, trying to ease the chafing left by the handcuffs. “Wouldn’t want her to accuse me of being rude.”

Mara rolled her eyes before stooping to grab his wrinkled trousers from the kitchen floor.

“Surely your job description doesn’t include picking up after me.”

She gave him a hard glare before tossing his trousers over her arm. Frowning, he stood. “Good gods, are you a *maid*?”

“Didn’t the outfit give it away?” She flung her arms wide.

"I merely figured it yet another of your clever guises to seduce me." At her incredulous stare, he grinned. "What male doesn't enjoy the naughty-maid fantasy?"

She snorted and brushed past him. Her hand wrapped around the thin, black wool tunic hanging over the back of the chair. "Here," she said, tossing the garment at him.

He let it fall to the floor. "Thing is too bloody scratchy."

"Stop being a crybaby and just wear it."

"Why? Worried you'll get all hot and bothered with this much eye candy on display?" He flexed his chest muscles to further goad her.

"Oh brother." She turned her back on him and the discarded shirt.

He watched her finish collecting the various implements he'd patched his face with. The enigma of her continued to baffle him. Shifting his attention to the other kitchen entrance, he noted the absence of the bodyguard. Good, gave him the perfect opportunity to fish for information. "I can't believe Nalia sent her maid after me. Is she too cheap to buck up for a bounty hunter?"

"I caught you, didn't I?"

Touché. Actually, it was ingenious in the scheme of things. If he were to type into a computing analyzer the specifications of his ideal fantasy woman, it'd spit out a picture of Mara. He gave her backend a considering glance. "If I'd known your situation, I would have more than tripled Nalia's finder's fee."

"Already told you I'm not interested in your money." She poked the needle into the spool of thread and tossed them into the rickety wooden crate leaning against the far stone wall. Her apron flapped around her waist while she scurried about, flicking a dust cloth over anything blocking her path.

He folded his arms over his chest, irritated by her constant flurry of activity. Really, she was more dizzying to watch than a sprite hocked up on caffeine. "Fine, you don't want money. What do you want?"

Mara swiveled on her heel and ran her cloth over a set of pottery canisters resting on the counter. She flicked a glance to the area just south of his waist. The gesture was brief and likely unconscious on Mara's part, but it still managed to get a rise from him. Literally.

"Nothing," she said, tucking the cloth into her apron pocket.

Liar.

"So what's the story with this Rhyann rune?"

Dash grimaced. As if coyly changing the subject didn't grate on his nerves, mention of that damn rune threatened to raise his blood pressure beyond the boiling point. "It's a stone, and it's priceless. End of story."

"A priceless stone?" She frowned. "Why does Nalia want it?"

"How the hell am I supposed to know?"

Mara turned away, but not before he noticed the disappointment she failed to hide.

Suspicion crept over him. “Why are you asking?” When she remained stubbornly mute he stalked forward and grabbed her shoulders, making her gasp.

She tried jerking free. “Release me.”

“Not until you start answering my questions.” He slid his grip down the slope of her arms and manacled her wrists inside his fists. “How does it feel being the one cuffed, *Sher ’tian*?”

Her eyes glittered with unleashed fury. “Get. Your hands. Off me.”

“Don’t you enjoy them on you? Sure seemed like it yesterday, when you were moaning and slithering your tight little body against mine.”

“That was an act, you ass.” She tugged her wrists hard.

“Then you should win an award for your acting skills.” He lowered his head, his sight fixed on the temptation of her scowling lips. Before he reached his target, her knee found his groin. Sucking in a sharp breath, he dropped her hands and staggered to his knees.

Mara stepped away with an innocent smile. “Sorry, guess my knee slipped.”

He pinned her with his hard glare. “If I’m ever able to stand again, you’re going to regret that.”

She shoved her hair back and pierced him with an annoyed look. He found that rather ironic, considering he was the one with throbbing balls. “Look, I don’t want to fight.”

“You have an interesting way of showing it.” Wincing, he reached between his legs and adjusted himself.

“If this is going to work, we must get along.” She extended a hand. After granting her a wary stare, he grabbed her hand and struggled to his feet.

“If what’s going to work?” he demanded, brushing the floor dust from his knees.

“Us.”

He stared at her, waiting for the punch line.

She held up her hand. “I’m referring to our temporary partnership, of course.”

“Babe, I don’t do partnerships.” The mere use of the word made his gut go sour. Personal or professional—partnerships were disastrous. He knew from personal experience.

Mara gave him a withering glare. “Neither do I. But we’re stuck with each other until you steal the Rhyann rune and bring it here.”

She was accompanying him? His mouth curled in a grin. *Then again, maybe disastrous is a bit harsh.*

“Any ideas swirling in your twisted, perverted head can just go to hell.”

“Trust me, they’ve already been there.”

She shoved a finger in his face, her expression bristling with fierce warning. “I mean it. Don’t try messing with me. I won’t have it.”

A groan skated past his lips. “We’re back to rehashing that old song and dance?”

“Whatever it takes to get it through that thick skull of yours.” Her eyes flashed fire. “Under no circumstances will I ever sleep with you. Got it?”

He cocked his eyebrows at her vehemence. “Who are you trying to convince—me or you?”

Gritting her teeth, Mara bent over and swiped the tunic from the floor. She rolled it into a ball and tossed it at him. “I hope you get a rash.” With those encouraging words, she stalked off.

He shrugged into the tunic, his gaze drifting to her shapely calves. She could lie to herself all she wanted. Sooner or later, she’d be writhing beneath him in the throes of rapture.

And knowing her inevitable downfall provided the key to his escape made it all the sweeter.

Chapter Four

“Her royal highness requests your appearance in her chambers.”

Dash settled the book he’d been perusing onto his chest and stacked his arms behind his head. The cot swayed beneath him, creaking.

“Is that right?” He eyed the guard stationed in the doorway of his cell. He’d given up trying to keep track of Nalia’s various bodyguards. Not that it mattered. They clearly all shared the same brain.

“We can’t keep her waiting. She’ll be most displeased.”

Tempting as it was to put a twist in the bitch’s panties, he wanted to get out of the cell he’d been confined to for the past thirty-two hours even more. He tossed the book on the floor and hefted to his feet.

The bodyguard barely allowed him time to exit the room before grasping the back of his tunic and thrusting him down the corridor.

Dash grunted. “I know you can’t keep your hands off me, you bloody pervert, but watch the threads.” The tunic he wore was only a sight better than the black one, but at least it didn’t make him scratch at himself like a flea-bitten hound.

They took the stairs up several flights before arriving outside a set of enormous marble doors. The bodyguard pushed a button recessed in the wall and Nalia’s voice filtered through the speaker, bidding them entrance. Dash stepped inside, his well-trained eye cataloging his sumptuous surroundings. The Hon’dach oil hanging near the silk-draped bed would fetch enough merca to feed half the populace of Zalan. Additionally, they all could take a vacation off the proceeds brought in from the jade lamp sitting on the late seventeenth-century Artur’ak dresser.

“Deciding which of my treasures you’d love to divest me of?” Nalia’s cold chuckle echoed off the walls as she stepped from behind an ivory inlaid screen.

“Can you blame me?” Dash’s arm swung in an arc, the gesture encompassing the goodies surrounding him. “It’s like luring a Frittona lion into a chicken pen and expecting him not to eat the residents.”

Nalia cinched the belt of her dressing gown and waved a hand in dismissal to the bodyguard. The weapons strapped to his chest clinked together when he rushed to obey her silent command.

“I trust you’re well enough to leave for Mer’daca in a few hours?”

The mention of his homeland and the fool’s mission ahead of him churned Dash’s stomach. It’d be a damn miracle if he wasn’t shot dead the second he set foot on Mer’daca soil. And that was all but guaranteed if he ran into Jerrick.

Jerrick. Just the mention of the name further agitated the tumultuous brew inside Dash's gut. Of course he'd run into the backstabbing bastard. Little chance he wouldn't, given the circumstances.

"I took the liberty of securing your clothes for the journey."

Dash pulled his thoughts from the anguished memories that were impossible to block and stared at Nalia. He'd missed a good portion of her babble. "What?"

She strolled to a large cabinet taking up most of the farthest wall and he trailed after her. A small stack of fine wool trousers and linen button-down shirts in various shades waited on one of the cabinet's shelves. There was also a pair of hiking boots and kidskin loafers.

"Do they meet with your impeccable standards?" Nalia inquired, her tone heavily laced with patronizing amusement.

"Not really, but I'll lower my standards this once."

A pile of books rested near the shoes. Their spines were shelved outward, clearly displaying their titles. *The Alchemy of the Fairies*. *One Thousand and One Ways to Hex a Lover*. *The Legend of Rhyann*.

"Interesting research material." Dash reached for the small, burgundy leather book on the end but Nalia slammed the cabinet door shut before he could acquire it. Turning his head, he took in her tight expression.

The wheels inside his brain began grinding. She was after the rune, a stone purported to enhance magic—something an all-powerful fairy queen shouldn't have any need for. He grinned. "What's the matter, old girl, losing your edge? Or should I say your powers?"

Nalia's right eyebrow twitched, a sure sign that he'd struck a tender nerve. "Your tongue is sharper than your brain."

Her barb fell short of piercing his ego and he chuckled, knowing full well it'd infuriate her. "Who are you trying to fool? The books give it away. Why else would you need the rune?"

Something cold and twisted swirled in the depths of her slanted eyes. "There are scores that need settling, and the Rhyann will ensure my fondest wish sees fruition."

Before he could bait Nalia further, the tread of footsteps announced someone's approach. Dash took one look at the pleased smirk creeping across Nalia's face and easily deduced who the arrival was. He turned and nearly ended up incinerated by Finian's blast of fury.

"What is he doing in here? I told you to keep that slime far from my sight."

"These are my private chambers. I'm the one who makes the decision who is allowed inside." Nalia's tone held a frosty bite. "You're fortunate I've yet to ban *you* from entering."

Dash inwardly groaned. He'd rather be in that chicken pen with the Frittona lion than stuck between a bickering husband and wife. "If you'll excuse me, I've some packing to do."

Nalia tore her attention from Finian as Dash shuffled strategically towards the doorway. "Sarina will bring your traveling clothes by your room later. Don't get too attached to them. When you return, you'll be

wearing the uniform I commissioned special for you.” She reached inside the pocket of her dressing gown and pulled out a scrap of red silk. It didn’t appear big enough to cover his privates.

Oh bloody hell. Suddenly, the scratchy tunic didn’t look so bad.

~ * ~

Mara blinked away a bead of sweat, visualizing the numerous ways she longed to pay Nalia back for her blackmail. Lugging twenty loads of laundry up and down six flights of stairs gave her ample time to come up with some real winners.

An extra cup of starch in the sheet wash? Nah, itch powder mixed in with the delicates.

Her lips twitching in a secret grin, she hugged the clothes basket next to her hip. She would never do it, of course, but it was fun to imagine. After dispersing the laundry to the appropriate rooms, she trudged downstairs and deposited the basket onto the shelf.

She staggered to her closet-sized room. Ignoring the rumble in her empty stomach, she kicked off her shoes and dropped onto her narrow cot with a groan. Muscles she didn’t even know she possessed screamed for mercy.

Nalia’s perfectionist standards were killing her, but twelve years in the queen’s employ had taught her that it did no good to complain. Even the time she threatened to turn Nalia in for violating the terms of the human slave ban resulted in nothing beyond a dismissive wave from the queen. That was the problem with working for fae royalty—the law tended to look the other way where they were concerned.

Stretching her legs, Mara leaned forward and massaged the arches of her feet. She moaned, dropping her chin in the crook between her knees.

“Do you suppose the nights are chilly in Mer’daca?”

Frowning, Mara lifted her head. Her fingers tightened around her toes when she spied the bulging satchel swinging from Piper’s arm. *Please don’t let that be what I think it is.*

“Maybe I should bring my striped scarf.”

“Hell no.” Mara bolted upright on the cot.

“You’re right.” Piper nodded decisively. “The snowflake one is warmer.”

“Forget it. You’re not coming.”

“Am too. Queen Nalia gave the go-ahead herself.”

Mara gritted her teeth. “Of course she did. Damn fairy isn’t about to give up the chance of getting you out of her hair for a week or two.”

“Huh, guess it sucks to be *you* then, doesn’t it?”

Box springs creaked in protest when Mara launched from the cot. She made a swipe for the tiny satchel but Piper streaked upward. The sprite showed off with a double back flip and grabbed one of the chain links supporting the overhead lamp before sticking out her tongue.

A growl escaped Mara. “You’ll only get in the way.”

“Will not. I fully intend to help. Besides, why should you be the only one enjoying some fun and excitement?”

“This isn’t a pleasure trip. In fact, I’m fairly certain it’ll be gods-awful.” If Piper insisted on tagging along, that’d be a given. Mara groaned and rubbed her temples in preparation of the massive headaches in her future.

“Where’s your sense of adventure?”

“On vacation.” The long-handled duster propped in the corner caught Mara’s eye. If Piper didn’t come down of her own free will, maybe a little feathered persuasion would help. She stepped around the cot.

“I see our rooms have the same décor—post-modern dungeon.”

Mara swiveled at the sound of Dash’s familiar baritone. Her kneecap banged the cot’s metal frame and pain arced down her leg. “Son of a—” Blinking back tears, she dropped to the mattress and hugged her knee.

Dash pushed from the doorway and rushed to the bed. He knelt over her, his muscular frame taking up too much space in the cramped room. Glaring, she socked him in the arm.

“Nice to see you’re keeping your word about getting along.” He graced her with a wry grin and rubbed his biceps.

“That’s for not knocking.”

Chirpy laughter rained down on them. Dash stood and stared at the ceiling. A frown furrowed between his dark eyebrows when he spotted Piper. “What the devil are you doing up there?”

Piper pointed an accusing finger at Mara. “*She* tried to steal my satchel.”

“I wasn’t trying to steal it.” Mara rolled her eyes.

“Hah, if I didn’t—” Piper gave an indignant sputter when the duster handle popped the satchel from her grip. It plummeted straight into Dash’s outstretched palm.

He tossed the satchel to Mara. Bemused, she caught it midair and stared at him. “Wow, I didn’t see you grab the duster.”

His smile dazzled. “Because I’m a professional, babe.” He settled on the cot’s metal footboard and nodded at the tiny canvas bag clutched in Mara’s hand. “So why do you want it?”

“I don’t really.” She shrugged. “What am I going to do with a sprite’s wardrobe? Dress my pinkies?” Sighing, she handed the satchel to Piper before studying Dash’s face more closely. “Your bruise looks better today—far less purple.”

He scrubbed a hand across his jaw.

“You shaved.” Heat crept into Mara’s cheeks. Great, nothing like appearing way too interested in his personal hygiene. “Good. I bet the cook’s daughter that Nalia prefers her lovers clean shaven. Seems she

owes me five merca.” She cleared her throat. Not too shabby for a quick improvisation. Hopefully he’d fall for it.

Amusement danced in Dash’s eyes. “Don’t get your coin purse out just yet. My decision to shave was based solely on my aversion to resembling a feral hound.”

Curiosity gnawed at her. Was he saying he hadn’t provided Nalia with stud services yet? Hard to believe. With Dash’s scorching sexual magnetism and mouthwatering physique, any female with a functioning libido would be hard-pressed keeping her hands off him. *Not that I’d know anything about resisting a fae thief who’s too sexy for his own good.*

“How about you, *Sher ’tian*? Prefer a clean-shaven lover?”

Mara met Dash’s prodding gaze. She didn’t know of any faes gifted with the ability to read minds, but for a mortifying second she swore he’d somehow managed a peek inside hers. Wouldn’t that be the final blow to her ego—Dash having an insider scoop to every lustful thought tumbling in her brain, most starring him buck naked in various and intriguing positions.

“She’s celibate. Hasn’t gotten any action since the baker stopped delivering his buns eighteen months ago.”

On second thought, there’s the final blow to my ego. Mara shot a murderous glare at Piper. If the duster were handy, she’d bop the little blabbermouth upside the head. “Leave. *Now.*”

Piper wisely took the suggestion to heart and shot from the room in a blaze of glittering sprite dust.

“Eighteen months?”

Mara turned her head. Dash’s expression matched the horror in his tone.

“How’ve you survived?”

“People don’t *die* from lack of sex,” Mara said, huffing in exasperation. “And if you don’t mind, I’d really like to get off this subject.” The valise protruding from beneath the narrow cot snagged her attention. Inspiration struck. “Come to think of it, I still need to pack.”

She nudged the valise out with her foot. “This’ll probably take a while.” Lifting her head, she gave Dash a pointed stare. “Feel free to go about your business.”

His butt remained planted on the footboard. Gnashing her teeth at the aggravating nature of the male species, Mara stalked to the tall, skinny cabinet leaning against the wall. She yanked open the top drawer and scooped out a handful of undergarments—her entire supply—and tossed them inside the valise. Dash’s eyes lit up. He reached for the silky pink panties resting on top and she slapped his hand away before returning to the cabinet and emptying the remaining two drawers.

The entire process lasted roughly thirty seconds.

“You’re right, that took forever,” Dash said dryly.

Ignoring him, she flipped the valise’s lid shut and snapped the latches down before jumping to her feet. The lingering ache returned, lancing through her left heel, and she gasped. Knee buckling, she lurched

sideways, her hand groping for the support of the bed. She connected with Dash's solid chest. Before her lips formed a protest, he settled her on the mattress and cupped her foot.

"Is it your ankle? You came down damn hard on it."

She shook her head. "Just a spasm. These marble floors are murder on my feet."

His big hands smoothed over her instep, his thumbs kneading circles along the arch. A blissful moan brushed past her lips. The amazing thing he was doing to her foot felt too good for her to even consider stopping him.

He rubbed along the sides of her foot, his smooth-shaven jaw tensing. "Maybe we should postpone the journey."

Nalia would have a fit. "I'll be fine." More than fine if his hands continued their magic.

Dash reached for her other foot. Settling back on his haunches, he rolled her toes between his fingers. Delicious tingles shivered up her spine.

It felt strange having someone fuss over her. Usually it was the other way around. If Nalia and Finian didn't run her ragged with their constant demands, their guests stepped in to fill the void. Time to herself, much less an opportunity for pampering? Totally unheard of.

Warmth spread through her limbs. The friction of Dash's hands wasn't the sole cause. It felt so damn good just being touched, sharing the intimacy of skin-to-skin contact with him.

The fact she craved it to the depths of her soul scared the crap out of her. She didn't need or want to have these urges. Not when they were directed towards a Maddoc fae.

"Thanks." She tugged her feet from his grip and curled them beneath the protection of the cot before smiling brightly. "I feel like a new woman now."

If Dash saw through her false perkiness, he didn't let on. He pushed to his feet and his shirt rucked up just beneath his navel. She tried not to blatantly stare at his exposed wedge of bronze skin, but it was real hard.

"What's the farthest you've traveled beyond Zalan's border?"

Licking her lips, she glanced away from his stomach. She kept waiting for him to pull his shirt down. *Jeez, can't he feel a draft or something?* "Helias. Why?"

"I need to know what I'm getting myself into. Since you're a virgin, I'm guessing a whole heap of trouble."

Mara frowned. "I'm not a virgin. I've had sex before."

Dash's slow, wicked grin slid into place. "*Sher 'tian*, I think we established that fact. I was referring to your lack of worldly experience."

She shoved her arms over her chest. "Just because I haven't jetted all over the planet stealing anything not nailed down doesn't mean I'm a naïve bumpkin."

He towered over her, his stance equally combative. "Have you ever stared down a hungry orgeel?"

“Not sure.” She gave him a wary look. “What is it?”

“A red-scaled lizard. It grows to twenty feet and is found mostly in the cave region of Mer’daca.” A devilish gleam sparked in his dark eyes. “They have a particular fondness for the sweet taste of blondes.”

She snorted. “You’re making that up.” Worry crept along her spine when he didn’t verify her statement.

“Mara, there are numerous deadly and strange beings you’ll encounter in Mer’daca.” His lips tugged upward. “Some of them are even the non-fae or non-human variety. Like me, you need to know what you’re getting yourself into.”

Even if she were shaking inside over the prospect of running into a whole herd of salivating orgeels—which she was—she didn’t have any choice but to accompany him to Mer’daca. Nalia’s poisoned ink sealed her fate, so to speak. “Well, wherever we’re going, hopefully it’ll be orgeel free.”

A pensive stillness laid claim to Dash’s face and she swallowed down a lump of fear. “Please tell me we’re not spending the night in any caves.”

“I’m not certain.”

“What do you mean you’re not certain,” she demanded, gaping at him. “Are we or not?” *Please say we’re not.*

He scrubbed his jaw before gracing her with a sheepish grin. “Here’s the thing—after we reach Mer’daca, I’ve no clue where we go next.”

Chapter Five

They arrived in Volto before nightfall. In the distance, dark clouds, fat with rain, gathered on the horizon.

Mara waited until the aerocoach coasted to a stop in the shipyard's unloading dock before tugging her valise from the overhead compartment. *This is insane*. If a raging storm didn't sweep her overboard during their journey, a hungry orgeel would likely take care of the oversight by making her his late-night snack.

Dash stretched his arm past her head and grabbed his own bag. He caught her stare and returned it with one of his cocky smiles.

If I'm the orgeel's snack, he damn well better be the main course. Growling beneath her breath, Mara hefted her valise with both hands and stumbled from the vehicle. The pungent stink of rotting kelp hit her full force. Gagging, she dropped the valise and clamped a hand over her nose and mouth.

Piper flitted from the aerocoach and scrunched her face. "What died?"

Mara cautiously removed her hand and took a shallow breath through her nose. Blessedly, the initial shock of the horrid smell appeared somewhat diminished. "My guess, about fifty tons of fish."

"What's the matter—never smelled the sea?" Dash sidled between them and sucked in a lungful of air before releasing it with gusto. "Ahh, now that's refreshing."

"There's something very wrong with you." Mara wrinkled her nose. Ignoring his chuckle, she searched the bustling docks for sign of their ship and her captain. According to Nalia, Sig Borgander was large of belly, boisterous, and sported way too much body hair.

From what Mara could see, that described nearly every male in the shipyard. A man with an obscenely endowed mermaid tattooed on his upper arm shuffled past carrying a crate. "Excuse me," she called, rushing after him. She sidestepped a rotting fish carcass being attacked by a swarm of flies.

The dockworker lowered his crate and eyed her over the top of it with lascivious interest. Quite disturbing, considering he was old enough to be her grandfather. He stopped and she crossed her arms over her chest in an effort to block his lecherous stare. "I'm looking for Captain Borgander. Would you happen to know where I might find him?"

He aimed a stream of tobacco at the ground before swiping a hand across his scraggly gray beard. "Girlie, you don't need him. I'll be your captain." The crate's contents rattled when he thrust his pelvis in and out suggestively.

She fought back a dry heave.

“Careful, mate.” Dash’s hand suddenly rode the small of Mara’s back. “Old fella such as you could end up in traction busting out those kinds of moves.”

A scowl pulled the man’s bushy eyebrows into a menacing vee. “Who the fuck are you?”

The warm hand pressing into her back slid around and settled possessively across her stomach.

Dash silenced her sputtering protest by tugging her tight against his hip. “I’m her husband. Anything else you want to know?” Underlying steel lurked in his velvet tone.

Flat olive eyes regarded Dash cautiously before the man shook his head. “Borgander ain’t left Port Scohope yet. Too much whoring and Ginnish Sours, I reckon.” His robust chortle startled the nearby gulls and they took flight with a chorus of displeased squawks. “Don’t expect him in before midmornin’.”

“Morning? As in *tomorrow*?” Mara’s mouth fell open. She remembered the nearby swarm of flies and quickly snapped it shut.

“Ain’t that what I said?” Mumbling beneath his breath, the man shifted the crate in his arms and hobbled off.

Piper fluttered up with Ronan hot on her wings.

“Where’s the ship?” Ronan’s narrowed eyes tracked the departing dockworker. “Sooner we leave this shit hole, the better.”

“Seems we’re not leaving until tomorrow.” Dash released Mara’s waist and held up his hands when Ronan gave him a sizzling glare. “Don’t kill the messenger.”

Ronan’s glare pivoted onto Piper. “This is all your fault. We could have hired a jetcraft and been halfway to Mer’daca by now.”

Piper turned up her nose. “Can I help it that I have a fear of flying?”

“You’re a *sprite*.” A vein bulged in the side of Ronan’s jaw. “You fly all the time.”

“Yeah, but not thousands of feet up in the air.” Piper tossed her hair. “*Geesh*.”

“Look, if anyone’s to blame, it’s the luscious maiden responsible for Borgander’s debauched excess,” Dash said reasonably.

Mara shoved her hands on her hips and issued him a challenging stare. “Your theory’s a bit warped. The captain’s a big boy. He should know when enough is enough.”

“Situations like that, men don’t think with this head.” Dash tapped the side of his skull. “The one downstairs always gets the winning vote.”

She hated to admit he had a point. “Well, no sense arguing over who’s at fault. The important thing is finding someplace to room tonight.” Lifting an arm, she shaded her eyes from the late-day sun and surveyed the shipyard. The idea of bunking with the seabirds and foulmouthed dockworkers was cringe-inducing. “I wonder if there are any hotels in town.”

“Only one way to find out,” Dash said, sauntering towards the aerocoach.

Sighing, Mara trailed after him.

~ * ~

They'd not traveled far from Volto's harbor when Mara spied the large crowd of people waving signs by the side of the road. "What's going on out there?"

Dash leaned forward and glanced out the window. His breath fogged against the glass, evidence of the near arctic state of the aerocoach's coolant level. "Some kind of protest."

The aerocoach slowed. Mara peered at the signs and the irate faces of the people being corralled behind a barricade heavily patrolled by a group of fae law enforcers. Other than the enforcers, everyone else appeared to be human.

"Ah, they're protesting the free-trade embargo."

Mara's fingers slipped from the cold window. She turned towards Dash, her forehead scrunching. "Isn't this kind of an out-of-the-way place to hold a protest?"

"I think it has more to do with the proximity to the harbor. Less and less human-produced goods are being allowed shipment by sea—the least costly means of cargo transport."

"That's terrible. How are people supposed to make a living if they can't get their products where they need to go?"

Dash's mouth tipped in a sardonic smile. "I suppose that's the whole idea."

Ire welled inside Mara's chest, threatening to explode. Would the injustices facing her species never end? For over a thousand years, Aurion humans had fought for equality—yet they seemed no closer to achieving the goal than the first humans who toiled in the vineyards beneath the harsh whips of the fae royals.

Out of nowhere, a large rock slammed into the side of the aerocoach. A screech ripped from Piper and she scrambled for safety under the seat. Another rock hit the vehicle, making it shake.

Mara instinctively hunched her shoulders and ducked beneath the window's edge. "Why are they throwing stuff at us?"

"The bloody crest on the hood." Dash growled and rapped his fist on the divider between the cockpit and the rear compartment. "Get a move on. This crowd is out for royal blood."

Ronan heeded the warning and the aerocoach rocketed past the screaming crowd. Several blocks down they slowed and everyone released a relieved breath.

Dash leaned back in his seat. "Exciting enough for you?"

Mara patted her chest as her heart slowly descended from her throat. "If that's excitement, I'll blissfully resign myself to a life of boredom."

They drove a little farther along the coastline until a small inn popped into view. Ronan parked the aerocoach and stormed outside to check the damage to the vehicle. Once he finished his litany of curses, he joined them in their investigation of the potential lodging.

Weather-beaten shingles drooped from the inn's exterior, many of them flapping in the breeze with a creaky whine. If a stiff wind kicked up, the entire place stood in danger of sliding into the ocean.

Mara dug for words of reassurance. "It looks...promising." Okay, so she was stretching.

"It's a dump." Ronan—ever the optimist—thrust out his chin.

"Sure, it has its issues." Mara nodded reluctantly. "But you have to admit the flower boxes on the porch are sort of homey and charming."

Ronan's chin regained its stubborn tilt. "There's nothing in them."

A sigh rolled from Mara. *There's just no pleasing some people.*

Piper flew to the porch and settled on the rail. "I bet a crazy woman runs this joint." She pointed to a pine floorboard jutting at an odd angle. "All three of her dead husbands are probably shoved under there."

The gravel crunched beneath Ronan's black leather boots as he slowly backed towards the aerocoach. Shooting Piper a quick *I'll-strangle-you-later* look, Mara snagged his arm. "You know better than to listen to her insane musings. Besides, do you really want to cross paths with those protestors again?" She patted his elbow soothingly. Glancing over, she caught the amusement splashed across Dash's face.

Ronan must have noticed it too because he jerked from her grasp and bared his teeth at Dash before swaggering up the porch steps.

Inside, the inn appeared better maintained. The floors gleamed with a recent waxing and a delicious odor of apples and sweet spice filled the air. An older woman with plump, rosy cheeks and a full head of bristly gray curls stood behind a worm-holed desk. She smiled when their group tromped across the entrance.

"You nice folks looking for a room?"

At Mara's nod, the woman reached for a key hanging from a row of pegs behind her. "It's the first door on the right, top of the stairs. Room comes with free breakfast. My daughter, Gretel, she handles the kitchen. Just show her your key in the mornin'."

Mara stared at the heavy brass key swinging from the woman's gnarled fingers. "We require at least two rooms."

Regret deepened the pronounced crow's feet at the corners of the innkeeper's eyes. "Only have the one. Whole slew of merchantmen came in tonight."

Shit. Mara slid a glance at the others. Ronan and Piper didn't look too thrilled. Dash, on the other hand, wore a grin and a sparkle in his eyes. She turned back to the innkeeper. "Any other lodging in the area?"

The woman shook her head.

"We'll take it," Dash said. He reached around Mara and snagged the key.

"Dinner's gonna be served in twenty minutes. If you're hungry, there's still a table available."

Before Mara could open her mouth, Dash accepted for the lot of them.

“Harker, set one more table,” the old woman hollered as she scuffed around the corner of the check-in desk.

Mara blasted Dash with a hard glare. “Gee, didn’t realize you’re running the show.”

He shrugged. “Got to eat, don’t we?”

That pretty much deflated the wind from her sails. Unwilling to give him too great an inch, she grabbed the key from his palm. “I’m only agreeing because I can hear Ronan’s stomach throwing fits.” Rather like the one she battled against enacting at the moment.

She stalked up the stairs, not giving a damn if anyone followed. They hadn’t even crossed the sea and already she wanted to kill Dash. Not a good sign.

The threadbare runner traversing the upper hall looked like it’d seen the bottom of one too many muddy boots. She didn’t put too much faith in finding their room a den of luxury.

It wasn’t—but at least it came with two large beds and a private bath. They made short work stowing their belongings and headed down to the dining hall. A dozen round wooden tables lined the room, all but one near the front crowded with rough-looking merchantmen.

Conversation lulled while the four of them took a seat around the vacant table. Several men at the neighboring table stared at Mara like they expected her to be part of the upcoming feast. She rubbed her arms briskly, warding off the nervous goose bumps cropping up.

Dash leaned close to her ear. “It’s okay. I’m here.”

“And that’s supposed to make me feel safer?” She scooted her chair in, smothering a snort.

He flashed a wicked grin. The paneled door across the way swung open and a bosomy girl carrying an armful of breadbaskets sashayed into the dining hall. Six youngsters, each loaded with an equal number of baskets, scurried to keep up with her. The procession of food snared the men’s attention.

Mara’s breath shuddered free. “I’ve never been so happy to see rolls in my life.”

“Your poor baker boy.” Dash made a tscking sound. “I imagine he would be crushed by your admission.”

The female server approached their table, giving Mara the perfect excuse to ignore Dash’s teasing jab. Ronan’s eyes riveted to the woman’s ample bosom when she leaned over him and settled a breadbasket in the center of the table. The server’s smile was saucier than the gravy sloshing in the tin jug she carried. Plopping the jug next to the basket, she strutted off, her butt performing an enticing jiggle.

Ronan craned his head to follow the girl’s departure. Mara half expected to hear the snap of his neck tendons. *Males.*

“She could balance a tray of glasses on those boobs,” Piper said, plucking a chunk of crust free. A moist cloud of yeasty goodness rose from the hole left behind. “Bet she gets great tips though.”

“I’d like to give her the tip of my co—”

“*Ronan.*” Mara’s glare turned fiercer when Dash tipped his head back and laughed. Really, the male species was so damn juvenile.

The remainder of the meal proved a study in patience for Mara. In between her mental grumblings she swallowed down the thick, hearty stew and rearranged the pickled beets in her salad. When the server girl returned with a carafe of red wine, compliments of the house, Mara gave up eating and contemplated the allure of getting rip-roaring drunk. Maybe inebriation would block out Piper’s constant jabbering and Ronan’s sexist, tongue-dragging adulation of the server’s breasts. But mostly she wanted to dull the delicious appeal of Dash.

No matter how hard she tried, her body wouldn’t let her forget the silky texture of his skin or the dark, wet pleasure of his mouth. The traitorous responses of her body were just one more reason why reaching Mer’daca and fetching the blasted rune were top priority.

She frowned at the reminder of the mysterious prize responsible for their mission. “I wish I knew more about the Rhyann rune.” *Or more precisely, why Nalia wants it.*

“What do you want to know?” Dash grabbed another slice of bread and slathered it with the rich honey butter mounded inside the provided crock.

Settling her elbow on the table, Mara rested her chin in her hand. She stared broodingly into the claret depths of her wineglass. “Well, for starters, it’d be nice to know what makes it so damn special.”

“It’s a charging stone.” Dash sank his teeth into the slice of bread. “Only one in existence.”

She jerked her head up and stared at him. Irritation sizzled in her veins. “You son of a bitch. I thought you didn’t have any information on the rune other than it being a priceless stone.”

“What gave you that idea?”

“You did. When we standing in Rulach’s kitchen.” Mara’s temper escalated to full boil. At the moment, it took every ounce of willpower she possessed not to grab the wine carafe and club him over the head.

“Oh yes.” He nodded, appearing not the least bit contrite. “I suppose being kidnapped momentarily blocked my memory.”

How convenient. Mara pinched her lips tight and drummed her fingers against the tabletop. “What did you mean when you called the Rhyann rune a charging stone?”

“For magic. Any practitioner in possession of the rune can use it to power up their spells.” Dash meticulously wiped each finger clean with his napkin. Once he completed his task, he leaned back in his seat. “Mind you, this is all secondhand information. I’ve never seen the rune in action.”

“Are you saying Nalia intends to use the rune for a spell?” Mara frowned. “But that doesn’t make any sense. Why would a fairy with magic coming out her ears need to work a common spell?”

Dash shot a look towards Ronan. Apparently satisfied the driver was still preoccupied with the server girl’s breasts, he turned back to her. “She would if she no longer possesses her magic.”

The statement made Mara blink. “What would make you think such a thing?”

“Let’s just say I have my suspicions.”

Mara’s head spun with questions she had no answers for. She reached for her wine and drained most of it in a long swallow. A strange buzzing reverberated in her head, making her woozy. Too much wine and lack of sleep were taking their toll. She plunked her goblet down, upsetting the remaining dregs sloshing in the base. “I’m going up to bed.”

“I’ll join you.” An ugly scraping sound squealed from Dash’s chair when he shoved from the table.

She pinned him with an incredulous stare. “The hell you will.”

His eyes twinkled. “I don’t mean literally join you in bed. But the idea holds great appeal, now that you mention it.”

Her breath fluttered in her chest. Damn him, he would fill her head with images of them twined beneath the sheets. “Stay. I don’t need an escort.”

Dash gave a pointed stare to the adjacent table and its grizzled occupants. “Yes, you do.” His tone brooked no further argument.

Grumbling, she rose from her seat and followed him from the room, her steps sluggish. After nodding good night to the innkeeper, they trudged up the stairs. Evening’s shadows shrouded the room. She wobbled to the glazed earthenware lamp sitting on the small table between the beds and toggled the switch. Light spilled in a soft circle, banishing the shadows.

“Want to take a bath?”

Turning, she gaped at Dash. His chuckle broke her free of the tempting visual of the two of them naked beneath a cascade of steaming hot water. *What the hell is wrong with me?* These kinds of thoughts didn’t need to be inside her head, damn it.

“If not, I’m going to jump in.”

“Go right ahead,” she said, trying to sound casual. Hard feat to accomplish when she’d just pictured him dripping wet.

He headed towards the bathroom. “Don’t answer the door to anyone but our roommates.”

She shot a glare at his retreating back. If her eyes were flame throwers, he’d be toast. “I’m not an idiot.”

“Never said you were.” The calm reason in his voice earned the grinding of her teeth.

The sudden lethargy swamping her renewed its efforts, pulling on her leg muscles like weighted chains. She slumped on the end of the nearest bed and flattened a hand against the dusky blue coverlet, digging her fingers into the coarse wool. The jettisoning plink of water hitting tile swelled in her ears. Lifting her head, she stared across the room.

Steam swirled, curling sinuously through the open bathroom door. Dash stood in the middle of the small room, his back to her. He shrugged from his shirt and dropped it carelessly on the floor. The

vaporous mist clung to his shoulders like a possessive lover. His hands moved to his trousers and shucked them down.

Transfixed, Mara stared. Other than the trousers pooled around his ankles, he was completely nude.

Dash's body rivaled a statue of the gods. A broad back with exquisitely defined muscles tapered to sculpted buttocks. The perfectly formed globes flexed when he kicked free of his pants. Long legs with a dusting of dark hair pivoted.

Mara sucked in a breath that lodged halfway down her windpipe. *Oh. My. Goddess.*

His penis jutted from a dark thatch of hair, its impressive length erect and extending towards his navel. He met her gaze and held it, his expression unreadable. One thing was certain—he didn't give a damn if she openly ogled him. The corded muscles in his shoulders flexed when he gripped the opaque water shield enclosing the bathing cubical. Metal grommets *zinged* and he ducked behind the shield.

The air blockaded in her throat tumbled free. Hot stickiness slithered across her skin and she reached for the suffocating collar of her top, trying to flap it. Her fingers lost grip, proving useless as her legs.

Faint tapping rapped at the door. Her movements sluggish, she rose from the bed and staggered forward. The short distance to the door took forever. Her fingers groped along the slick wood grain, missed the knob twice before finally curling around their target. At the last minute, she remembered Dash's admonition.

"Who is it?"

Piper's squeaky voice filtered through the crack in the doorjamb and Mara released the deadbolt. She snicked the door open just enough for the sprite to squeeze through.

"Where's Ronan?"

"With Mistress Boob-aplenty." Piper sniggered behind her fingers. "They hustled off to her room a couple minutes ago."

Mara's mouth dropped open. "But he doesn't even know her."

"Don't think it's much of an issue—they were slobbering all over each other." Piper scrunched her face and made a gagging noise. "Kind of resembled two drooling hounds trying to mate."

"First Borgander, now Ronan. Is sex the only thing males think about?" *Like I should talk.* Sex seemed to be the primary focus in her head. Groaning, she shoved her fingers through her damp hair.

"Why are you so sweaty?"

Meeting Piper's puzzled frown, Mara dropped her hands. She stared at the glistening sheen coating her forearm. "It's hot in here."

"Well, make sure you bathe." Piper pinched her tiny nose. "I have to sleep in that bed too, you know." Wings fluttering, she darted to the small table and snatched her bag. Humming, she streaked past Mara.

"Where are you going?"

"One of the gents downstairs invited me to join their game of Shimba." Piper tucked her satchel in the crook of her elbow and rubbed her palms together. "I feel lucky tonight."

"Don't leave me—" Mara's desperate protest sputtered in space when Piper flew into the hallway. She peered beyond the glittering cloud of sprite dust, her attention riveting on the bathroom. "—with him."

The heavy *shush* of water painted an erotic picture in her mind. Slick moisture rippling over Dash's chiseled abdominals. His soapy hand stroking a trail of bubbles along his thick penis.

Silence intruded on her X-rated musings. He'd shut the water off.

Must get out of here. Now. Her shoulder bumped the wall and she flailed around for the door's edge. Numb fingers refused to latch onto anything. "*Damn it.*"

"Mara?" Dash's deep baritone snared her.

Limbs frozen, she stared at him.

Knotting a white towel low around his waist, he stepped from the bathroom and glanced towards the door. "Didn't I tell you not to open that to anyone?"

"Go to hell." Her tongue felt thick and useless.

His dark brows snapped low. "What's wrong with you?"

"Nothing." Her hands fished for the knob. Wet palms slipped over metal, lost contact.

Dash stalked forward and she stumbled back against the wall. He planted a hand on either side of her shoulders, boxing her in. His broad chest filled her frame of vision. Licking her suddenly dry lips, she stared at the tiny moisture beads clinging to his sculpted pectorals. The heady scent of musk and forest emanated from his damp skin.

Would he taste like pine needles? She shook with the overwhelming urge to satisfy her curiosity by tracing her tongue over his collarbone.

His knuckles settled beneath her chin and forced her head up. "You're sweating worse than a one-legged man at an ass-kicking contest."

"It's hot in here." *Jeez, am I the only one who gets that?*

Dash's hand moved to her throat, slicked over her thudding pulse. A dull throb scudded beneath her skin. Panicked, she jerked against his touch.

"Easy," he said, palming her shoulder with his other hand.

He was too damn close, but she didn't have the strength or willpower to push him away. Her feet might as well be rooted to the floor.

My body isn't mine. The terrifying thought struck home her worst nightmare and gave her weird trance meaning. She struggled against the paralysis holding her hostage. Fighting off frustrated tears, she glared at him. "Let. Me. Go."

Blinking at her raw vehemence, he dropped his hands.

"I mean my head, you son of a bitch." She pulled her lips back and bared her teeth. "Get *out* of it."

He looked at her like she was out of her mind, which she damn well was. And he knew it.

“Is this the only way you can get a woman? By raping her mind?” She hissed the accusation. If her legs weren’t useless rubber, she’d knee his balls again—only harder.

His gaze bore into hers, demanding yet gentle. “Mara, I’m not doing anything.”

She tried ducking beneath his arms and tumbled into his chest instead. His arms wrapped around her and she wiggled against him. Refusing to cave, she sank her teeth into the meat of his shoulder. A harsh curse ripped from his mouth. “Stop, damn it.”

“No, *you* stop.” To emphasize her point, she bit down again. She tasted salt on her tongue. A spike of fear and pleasure swirled low in her belly.

He yanked her head away and she used the force of his thrust to propel herself against the door. The weight of her body slammed it open—straight into Ronan’s face. A howl of pain roared from him, right before he crashed backwards onto the floor. Blood spurted from his poor flattened nose.

Mara stumbled forward. The deadened sensation in her legs took over and she buckled. Crying out, she scrabbled for balance. Like a felled tree, she plummeted on top of Ronan. His eyes rolled upward, revealing the whites of his corneas as he groaned.

“If you fancied him more, you could have just said so.”

She ignored Dash’s droll quip and rolled from Ronan. The side of her face bumped the knobby ridge of his elbow before thudding onto the worn runner covering the hard planked floor.

“Damn bitch,” Ronan moaned.

Geesh, it wasn’t as if she’d *meant* to bash his nose in. “I’m sorry.” She scrunched her shoulders and thumped her way upward until she and Ronan were eye to eye. “I swear I had no idea you were on the other side of the door.”

“Not you. Server girl.” The red splotches of fury riding high on Ronan’s cheeks matched the blood gushing from his nostrils. “Stole my merca and ran off.”

She blinked at him. “How did she manage robbing you?”

“Drugged the goddamn wine. Took me at least five minutes to pry the bedroom door open.”

The lingering remnants of Mara’s outrage melted into a hot ball of chagrin. Shifting her head, she met Dash’s blazing stare.

Oh shit.

A gasp broke from Mara when the medic inserted the toxin remover’s needle-tipped prod into her vein. At the moment, Dash didn’t feel the vaguest sympathy for her.

The medic turned to him with an inquiring expression. “Anyone else?”

Dash shook his head. “The two of them were the only ones who drank the wine.”

Nodding, the medic tucked his lethal-looking device into the medicine bag and pulled out a roll of gauze and tape before walking to the bed. The elderly innkeeper backed up, her waterlogged eyes threatening to overflow. She wrung her hands and stared at Ronan. “He gonna be okay?”

The medic remained focused on the task of examining Ronan’s face. “Nose will likely be off kilter, and his headache must be a bugger. But he’ll live.”

Ronan yelped when the medic reset his nose.

“I swear if I’d known Ceris was a lowdown thief, I never woulda hired her.” The innkeeper sounded as penitent as a sinner seeking absolution.

Dash felt the sting of Mara’s scrutiny. Bad enough she thought him scummier than the bottom of Gael’dore swamp, now she obviously was running the comparisons between he and the server thief through her head. He wondered which of them she considered more despicable. “I need some air.” Furious at the gravelly catch in his voice, he stalked through the door.

Purple storm clouds gathered outside the small window at the top of the stairs, mimicking his mood. Folding his arms, he stared at the whitecaps breaking against the rocky shore.

Long ago, he’d stopped caring what others thought. So why did Mara dredge up old insecurities, make him long to be something better than what he was—a self-serving thief?

The sweetness of luna flowers teased his nose—an invisible calling card announcing Mara’s sudden presence in the hall.

“I’m sorry I overreacted, but how the hell was I to know she drugged the wine?”

Her statement rattled loose a memory he’d long ago locked away. Before it could sink in its claws, he mentally wrestled it back inside its padlocked box and turned the key.

Mara remained a silent force behind him. He practically felt her willing the words from him that would ease her conscience. They wouldn’t come. Not when the phantom of her harsh accusations continued beating against his brain. He might be guilty of many crimes, but raping a woman’s mind wasn’t one of them. The mere idea turned his stomach.

His lips curled in a mockery of a smile. “True. Makes more sense I’d magically taken over your body, doesn’t it? Particularly with my magic disabled the way it is.” Turning, he spied a flash of regret in her eyes.

A persistent moth dive-bombed Mara and she banished it with an impatient swat. The detoxification worked amazingly fast—no hint of paralysis remained in her limbs. “The drug obviously affected my reasoning.”

Perhaps to a certain extent, but there was more to it than she was telling him. Unfortunately, his bone-tired weariness outweighed his desire to shake the truth from her. He pressed his shoulder against the wall and noticed Piper darting up the stairway.

The sprite landed on the railing. “What’s going on? A crazy rumor is circulating downstairs. They’re saying someone was drugged.”

“The server girl slipped creotizine into the wine. I’m okay, but poor Ronan’s a little worse for wear.” Mara rubbed the spot where the needle stuck her arm.

Piper cocked her head. “What do we do now?”

Mara gestured to the room behind them. “We all try for a decent night’s sleep and hope Borgander’s ready for sailing in the morning.”

“Afraid that’s impossible,” the medic said, stepping into the hall. He tucked his bag beneath his arm before jutting a thumb over his shoulder. “Your friend’s in no shape for travel. In addition to the broken nose, his lower back is inflamed and his head trauma needs close monitoring.”

Worry took up residence on Mara’s face. She plucked the hem of her top repeatedly between her fingers. “When *can* Ronan leave?”

“End of the week, at the earliest.”

Mara dropped her hands. “We can’t wait until then.”

The medic tugged the end of his dark beard. “Don’t know what to tell you.” After promising to stop by in the morning to check Ronan’s vitals, he ambled down the stairs.

Dash watched the indecision warring within Mara. Her shoulders lifted before slumping in tandem with her long sigh. She wore defeat like a horsehair cloak.

“Guess we’ll leave him here.” Her weary blue gaze searched his. “We’ll manage fine without him, right?”

He didn’t know what the hell waited for them in Mer’daca. Other than a shitload of his closest personal enemies. “You bet, babe.”

Chapter Six

Mara tried not to be creeped out by the crazy-eyed woman staring at her from across the Sea Surfer's lounge, but the string of bird claws hanging from her wrinkled neck made it damn difficult.

She and the woman were the only ones occupying the room. Dash was brooding out on the observation deck and Piper was on another level of the ship, probably terrorizing small children.

Darn it, should have taken my chances with Dash. He might be cranky enough to bite her head off, but he was still way less scary than bird-claw lady.

The woman pushed up from her seat and approached Mara, her voluminous white cape flapping and the claws clicking.

Oh crap. Mara jumped from her seat and hustled towards the door leading to the deck. The woman intercepted her with a bony-fingered grip around her arm.

"I know what you seek."

Mara gaped at the woman, her heart thumping alarmingly fast. "What?"

"The choices you've made haven't been easy." One crooked finger shook in Mara's face. "Far more difficult ones are on the horizon, child. But choose wisely, and the deepest wish you carry will come true."

Right now, she wished the woman and her bird legs would venture back to the other side of the cabin. "I'll...uh...keep that in mind."

The woman's cloudy eyes returned Mara's stare for several seconds. Abruptly, the claw-like grip slackened. Grabbing the opportunity, Mara plowed through the door and stumbled onto the deck. She rubbed briskly at the goose bumps covering her arms and ambled towards Dash. Her body swayed, fighting to keep balance on the mist-dampened deck.

Dash eyed her approach but remained silent. Obviously he was still sulking. She settled beside him at the rail and watched the silvered fins of the porpoises plowing through the waves. They didn't stand a chance of keeping up with the jet-propelled Sea Surfer, but their efforts were admirable nonetheless and great fun to observe.

"They're something, aren't they?" The wind snagged Dash's words and tossed them into the sea.

She felt ridiculously happy that he'd decided to drop the silent treatment. Clutching the ship's rail, she turned to him. Her hair whipped around her face in a wild dance and he reached for the nearest strand, tucking it behind her ear. She shivered at the intimacy of the gesture.

Uncomfortable with the emotions swirling inside her, she waved towards the playful sea mammals frolicking in the waves. “Have you ever seen anything so beautiful?”

His dark gaze swept her face in a lingering caress. “Yes, I have.”

They stared at each other until the electricity snapping between them became overwhelming and she looked away. Her verbal attack yesterday wounded him. Despite what he must think, she didn’t enjoy inflicting emotional pain on anyone. But her need for vigilant caution hadn’t lessened. Dash wasn’t merely a fae thief—he was a Maddoc. Letting her shields down with him would be foolhardy.

“I’ve been mulling over what you said prior to us leaving Zalan.” At Dash’s frown, she leaned closer, using his larger frame as a wind buffer. “About not knowing where we’re going. I don’t understand how you lost track of the Rhyann rune.”

A nerve jumped in his tensed jaw. “Trust me, it’s easier than you think.”

Not the answer she wanted to hear. She expelled a frustrated breath. “Then how do you propose we find it?”

He stared over her shoulder, his eyes an emotionless brown. “I know a man who might be privy to the rune’s most recent owner.”

Her mood lifted. “You think he’ll help us?”

“Not likely.”

She sagged against the rail. Why couldn’t anything be simple?

A shout sounded from one of the crew members manning the deck, and Mara turned as he sprinted towards the helm. Shading her eyes, she tried determining the source of the man’s excitement. Finally she gave up and looked at Dash. “What’s going on?”

“We’re nearing shore.”

She frowned. “We are?”

No sooner did the words leave her mouth, the rocky coastline of Mer’daca appeared in the distance. Within seconds, the cliffs morphed from inconsequential boulders jutting from the sea into massive outcroppings towering hundreds of feet above the ocean. Mara gawked at them while the jet ship suspended its propulsion rockets and glided into the bay. She remembered Dash’s dissertation on the orgeel’s love of caves and took a nervous gulp.

Additional crewmen scurried to their stations when the ship neared the pier pilings. Beyond the docks, the port city of Hagee sat nestled in the basin of the twin peaks of Mount Vire like an offering to the deity of volcanic harmony. From her research, she knew Vire hadn’t erupted in more than a century. She prayed the gods didn’t intend on changing that status quo anytime soon—at least not until her butt was safely parked on the Sea Surfer while it jetted back to Zalan.

The ship putted into a waiting slip and one last *ker-chug* from the engine signaled they’d reached the end of the road—for the moment. Buffeting winds no longer a threat, Piper flitted onto the deck and

watched the lowering of the gangplank with them. Relief shivered over Mara when no stray orgeels thundered up the carpeted gangway and snatched them between its scaly claws. Instead, Captain Borgander stepped through the door leading from the ship's bridge. No scales on him, but he did have rather reptilian eyes.

"Again, my apologies for the late arrival." Borgander smiled, revealing a mouthful of tobacco-stained teeth and a solitary gold tooth. "Can't keep the ladies off me, it seems."

Really? Mara shuddered at the idea of him rutting away on some poor female like a shaggy, potbellied wartobeast.

"Have the dockmaster contact me when you're ready for pickup." After tipping his cap, the captain waddled back into his quarters.

With nothing left to do, they abandoned ship. Their bags waited with the rest of the Sea Surfer's cargo on the pier and after collecting them, Mara and Dash walked the short distance into town with Piper fluttering overhead.

Steel-sided buildings clustered tightly together on the other side of the dusty road. They possessed a disreputable quality, as if the simple act of looking at them might infect the casual observer with the black scourge.

"This place doesn't look very friendly."

Mara mentally agreed with Piper's assessment.

"That's the point," Dash said, his gaze diligently scouting the area. "They don't want folks lingering."

Mara shot him a curious glance. "Why?"

"*Sher 'tian*, stuff goes down in hellhole places like this you're better off not witnessing."

She gulped past a lump of anxiety. "We're uh...not staying long, are we?"

"Not if we wish to live."

Sucking in a breath, she hastened her step to keep up with his long strides. They approached one of the shady-looking structures. The wind whistled an eerie tune between the sheet metal riveted to the exterior, and apprehension slithered down Mara's spine. "Is it really necessary we go in there?"

Dash didn't answer, merely tightened his fist around the handle of his bag before elbowing the door open and striding inside. After sharing a mutual shiver of the heebie-jeebies, Mara and Piper darted through the swinging steel door. A thick blanket of acrid smoke swirled in the air. Mara choked on a cough. Thunking her valise to the ground, she covered her mouth. Here she thought the rotting fish were stinky.

Bare light bulbs swung over the scarred wooden bar situated near the far wall, casting lambent yellow shadows over an assortment of tattooed males smoking from Huluki pipes.

"I thought those pipes were outlawed," Mara blurted in surprise.

Dash slid her a quick look, his jaw tight enough to crack the toughest fruta nut. “From here on out, don’t open your mouth.” His expression turned fiercer when she threatened to disobey his command. “Damn it, Mara, these men don’t abide any laws, and your fool tongue is two steps from getting us killed.”

Scowling, she shoved her hands into the pockets of her corded vest. When put like that, how could she argue?

One of the males glanced at them, shock freezing him in place when he spotted Dash. He elbowed his nearest smoking partner, who granted them the same incredulous stare before poking the next fellow. Soon they owned the entire room’s attention.

“As I live and breathe.” The male occupying the last stool hefted his considerable bulk from his seat and crossed the room with an arrogant swagger. His bloodshot eyes traveled over Dash. “Rumor is you’re dead, Rhyder.”

Dash lowered his bag but didn’t relax his rigid stance. “Then I must be the healthiest dead bastard around.”

A chuckle shook the other male’s shoulders and he clasped Dash in a hearty embrace. Mara blinked. She would never have placed the pony-tailed ruffian for a hugger. He stepped away from Dash and took his time giving every inch of her a thorough inspection. “Understandable, when you’ve got your own personal nursemaid.” He winked and nudged Dash in the ribs.

Mara opened her mouth and Dash sent her a warning stare. She closed it with a jarring click of her teeth. *This’ll be hard.* Real hard. Resisting a swear word when the mop pail runs over your foot hard. And she hadn’t managed very well when that unfortunate occurrence happened, so who the hell knew how she’d fare with this.

“Plan on stayin’ in the area?”

Dash shook his head. “Just long enough for a snatch and run.”

The other male’s bushy brows lifted. “What’s the stake? Anything I know?”

“No.”

Mara glared at Dash’s profile. Why didn’t he mention the Rhyann rune? Maybe his friend knew something of its whereabouts.

Before she could bring up the possibility to Dash, he cleared his throat. “Know where I might find Jerrick?”

The other male’s expression teetered the fine line between shock and bafflement. “*Jerrick?*” He scratched the back of his head, his thick mustache twitching. “Sure you want to poke in dark corners lookin’ for him?”

A strange tension surged from Dash. It attached itself to Mara, feeding her own worries. He didn’t seem thrilled at the prospect of seeing this Jerrick fellow. Maybe they should consider an alternate plan.

Much as she wanted to get her hands on the Rhyann, she didn't want them to needlessly endanger themselves in the process.

"Don't have much choice." Dash punctuated his pronouncement with a stiff shrug.

"Last spotted him skulking around one of Tul'dea's party clubs. Plenty of rich marks for the taking in those parts."

So Jerrick was a thief. Why didn't that surprise her?

Dash reached for his bag. "Thanks, Hondal. One of these days we'll tip a couple Ginnishes and catch up on old times." He grabbed Mara's arm and spun her towards the doorway. Piper shot past them, an indistinct blur as she hot-winged it to the exit.

Outside, Mara blinked against the sun and jerked from Dash's grip. "Am I allowed to talk now?"

"No."

"Too bad. I'm going to anyway." She poked Dash in the chest, forcing him to take a shuffling step back. "I deserve a few answers, damn it."

Dash's harsh laugh grated against her nerves. "Priceless—the woman who's a walking enigma demanding answers."

"I'm not keeping anything from you." At least not anything that could potentially put his life at risk. Could he say the same? "Why didn't you tell your friend we're looking for the Rhyann rune? Didn't it occur to you he might know where it is, therefore eliminating the need for tracking down this Jerrick?" *Whoever he is.*

His face reminded her of a granite mask—hard and unyielding. "Hondal and I are business acquaintances, not friends. Which is why I sure as hell don't want him to know we're after the rune. Thieving faes are a backstabbing, untrustworthy lot." She cocked an eyebrow and he scraped his boot in the dirt. "Yes, I include myself in that description."

She appreciated him acknowledging the fact but found his logic a tad skewed. "If all thieves are backstabbers, what makes you think we can trust this Jerrick fellow?"

"It doesn't matter what I think. We need him."

"Why?" She nearly cried the word.

A vein visibly throbbed above the scar marring Dash's forehead. He clenched his jaw, glaring at her. She wanted to throttle him for being so stubbornly tight-lipped. Slamming her valise against her shin, she began walking away, stirring up dust with her angry march.

"Because I didn't steal the rune. He did."

Chapter Seven

Sometimes admitting the truth freed a person. Other times it settled in the gut like soured milk. Right now, Dash figured he was suffering the mother of all indigestion.

Mara stopped dead in her tracks and executed a slow pivot. "Mind repeating that?"

"Must I?" Once was hard enough. Saying it again would be akin to ripping his toenails out.

She nodded and he hung his head in resignation. "I didn't steal the damn rune."

"Then why did Finian accuse you of taking it from his family's vault?"

He rubbed his forehead, wishing for a handy wall to bang his skull against. "Long, boring story."

Her expression suggested she wouldn't let it end there. Of course not, she possessed the stubborn mindset of a Mer'daca mountain mule. Glancing over his shoulder, he checked the entrance of the bar. No one lurked in the doorway or anywhere on the street, but fae thieves were skilled eavesdroppers.

"We need to rustle some transportation before we start attracting further attention," he said in hopes of distracting her. It did the trick, and she scurried after him down a narrow alley running parallel with the main street.

A mangy hound stopped rooting through a garbage bin and issued a threatening snarl. Dash ignored the beast and the saliva dribbling from its wickedly sharp incisors. He hurried their pace until they reached a warehouse with large steel doors running along its back end.

"What is this place?" Mara gave the building a dubious stare.

"Some vehicles end up here prior to finding new homes."

Mara wrinkled her nose. "You mean it's a dissemble shop?"

"I won't ask how such a sheltered flower knows that term." Chuckling, he handed his bag to Mara. "If I'm not back in ten minutes, run."

She shoved the bag back at him. "Forget it, I'm coming with you. And what the hell kind of advice is *run*?"

"You're staying put." He ignored her growl and tucked her fingers over the handle of his bag. "These shops are typically run by sketchy characters. I don't need to worry about your safety while brokering our transportation."

"So don't. I'm a big girl." She sidled around him and pushed the side door open with her valise.

She's going to be the death of me. Gritting his teeth, he followed her into the garage's dim interior. Paint fumes and the gritty stench of engine oil fouled the air. A bald man hunched over a pod cycle's

stripped-down carcass, his sagging pants displaying way too much ass crack. He turned his head, his posture going rigid.

Dash nodded and offered the traditional Mer'daca greeting. "*L'argo te.*"

The man lowered his laser torch but didn't loosen his grip around it. Dash took it as a good sign. He'd half expected to feel the torch's white-hot bite ripping through his flesh by now.

"You lost?"

"We're in need of a vehicle." Dash didn't take his gaze off the torch's glowing tip. "A mutual friend suggested your services."

"Ain't got no friends." The man pointed the torch towards the exit. "Get your asses outta here."

"We have money—lots of it," Piper said, landing on a cart stocked with pipes and oil canisters.

Dash groaned. *No, she's going to be the death of me.*

Greed sparkled in the mechanic's eyes as he stared at the two bags in Mara's hands. Licking his fleshy lips, he stepped forward, unconcerned when the torch's beam flicked dangerously close to Piper's wings. Saved from a singeing, the sprite squealed and scrambled behind a canister.

The mechanic lunged for Mara.

Here we go. Dash leapt between them and grabbed the beefy arm holding the torch. He gave a vicious tug, but the mechanic possessed lightning reflexes and plowed a ham-hock-sized fist into his jaw.

Stars spinning in his vision, Dash staggered sideways, taking the mechanic with him. He jerked away when the torch's tip arced upward. Not quick enough. The crispy scent of fried hair competed with oil and paint fumes. *Shit.*

A rusty laugh rattled from the mechanic. Victory swam in the oily blackness of his eyes as he drew his arm back. Dash was prepared this time. His fist crunched into the man's bulbous nose. *Thunk.* The mechanic's eyes rolled back and he crumpled to the stained concrete.

What the hell? Dash stared at his fist. "Didn't even put much swing behind it."

"I did."

He lifted his head. Mara clutched one of the cart's steel pipes in her hand.

"Still wish I'd waited outside?" She twirled the pipe in a flashy show.

"I had the situation handled." Ignoring her derisive snort, he snagged the torch and clicked it off. He assessed the assorted vehicles scattered around the garage and decided on a dark blue Cloud Chaser. Solar powered, roomy and practical. Definitely not his style, which would throw off his enemies.

He strode to the cart and planted a knee on the floor. The third drawer contained a steel box. He made quick work springing the lock with a wire filched from another drawer and pulled out a ring of keys.

"How'd you know they were in there?"

Dash glanced at Piper as she leaned over the cart's edge. "Because even shady mechanics are predictable." Palming the key ring, he sauntered to the Cloud Chaser. "Let's hope this baby holds some juice." He swiped a thin layer of dust from the solar eye dome before yanking open the driver's side door.

He rifled through the keys. The sixth one in looked like a possible fit and he notched it into the ignition. A chuggish purr coughed from the engine before the Cloud Chaser settled on idle. "One of you hit the button by the doors. We need to get this outside before the sun sets."

Piper flew forward and kicked a boot against the appropriate button. When the noisy hoist rolled the metal doors upward, Dash settled behind the wheel and coasted the vehicle from the garage. He craned his head out the window. "Get your butts in here."

Mara fished inside her bag and pulled out several merca bills. She fanned them carefully on the mechanic's chest before she raced outside and jumped into the passenger side. Shaking his head, Dash maneuvered the Cloud Chaser out the snug alley and exited onto the main street.

He checked the gauges and decided to risk the mountains. Sun wouldn't set for a couple more hours and the solar eye hopefully held its previous charge. Both factors should get them beyond the highest pass.

~ * ~

The Cloud Chaser's warning light flashed thirty minutes after the sun sank below the horizon and several hundred feet shy of reaching Piaras's summit. Uttering a few words that would earn blushes from even the dockworkers back in Volto, Dash swerved onto the twisty road's shoulder. The vehicle collided with a low canopy of scrub pines before conking out.

"We're stranded on the side of this mountain." Mara's voice came out a thin whisper. "Things just keep getting better and better."

He followed her horrified stare to the murky darkness pressing against the windshield. "Look at it as an adventure."

"She doesn't do adventure." Piper crawled onto the center console. "Or fun and excitement." She snatched a napkin from the cup holder. After a thorough inspection, she spread it out with a snap of her wrists and crawled beneath it.

Taking the sprite's cue, Dash reached for his seatback and fumbled it into a reclining position. He rotated his shoulders, seeking the softest part of the cushion, and stacked his arms behind his head.

"How can you two sleep?" Mara demanded.

"Simple." The seat's rough upholstery scraped his knuckles when he adjusted the neck roll. "Lay back, close your eyes and pretend you're not sitting on a lumpy foam block." Shifting his head, he winked at her. "Give it a try."

"No way." Hugging her chest tight, she shivered. "Who knows what's lurking out there."

"And staying up all night conjuring imaginary monsters helps how?"

She gave him a fierce look, her eyes glittering. “Damn you, this is your fault.”

“Racing the sun was obviously a mistake. Will my apology suffice? Or would you care for a pound of my flesh?”

“Don’t tempt me.” One corner of her mouth quirked. “But I wasn’t referring to the solar dying on us. All your talk of orgeels has me seriously spooked. If anything taps against the windows, I’ll probably scream loud enough to scare a banshee.”

“Good thing I didn’t tell you about the vertaglion, a fanged dragon-like beast living—”

“Stop!” Mara’s hands clamped over her ears. He laughed and she slid her hands free, glaring at him.

“Not funny.”

“You stopped dreading on the orgeels.” He tipped his head in challenge. “Mission accomplished.”

“Your asinine logic is more deplorable than your driving.” She yanked her harness off and after a quick peek over her shoulder, slouched facing him. Her fingers clutched the seat’s edge like she was prepared to rip it from its hinges and hurl it at any ambushing orgeels or vertaglions.

Guilt bloomed in his chest. His hand curled around her knuckles and pried them loose. “The most dangerous creature found in these mountains is a Gromache toad.”

“Really?” With her cheek scrunched against the seat, she blinked at him. “I can handle a toad.”

He rubbed her stiff fingers before brushing each knuckle with a soft kiss. A feathery sigh drifted from Mara.

“You two done yapping?” Piper muttered beneath the napkin. “Some of us are trying to sleep.”

Mara’s gaze met his as they shared a chuckle. The corners of her eyes crinkled in an adorable way. Like it possessed a mind of its own, his other hand lifted and stroked the side of her face. The softness of her skin fascinated...beckoned.

She closed her eyes and rubbed her cheek against his palm. Her unexpected response staggered him and he almost dropped his hand from her face. The intimate brush lasted less than two seconds, but it was enough to fire an ache deep in his gut. Deep in his soul.

He battled the primal urges surging to the fore, those pathetic cravings for hearth, home and family. This woman was a means to an end, nothing more, and he damn well better remember it.

~ * ~

An overhead thump wakened Dash. He lifted his head as Mara bolted upright.

“What was that?”

“Solar power kicked on.” He checked the gauges on the display panel. “Appears we’ll be back in business shortly.”

Mara’s shoulders relaxed. She shot a quick look out the window before glancing at him. “How much farther to the next town?”

“Without breaking any speed laws—an hour.”

Crossing her legs tight, Mara groaned. He easily deduced the cause. “Full bladder?” At her reluctant nod, he shoved open his door and climbed from the vehicle. A brisk mountain breeze buffeted him, stinging his cheeks and flapping the rumpled tail ends of his shirt. When Mara made no move to join him, he clutched the doorframe and ducked his head inside the Cloud Chaser’s cab. She remained stubbornly planted in her seat.

“An hour is a hell of a wait.”

Her fingers dug into the tan cotton stretched over her upper thighs. “I’m fine.”

She gave a pained smile and he rolled his eyes at the ridiculous sensibilities of females. “Rabbits use this forest as their personal commode on a daily basis. You can lower your standards this once.”

“It’s not exactly private out there, you know.”

He frowned. “Who’s going to see you?”

Her cheeks took on a becoming shade of pink and realization crept into his brain. “You think I’m going to spy on you? Babe, I’m not that hard up to catch a peek of your bare ass.” Actually he was, but keeping that piece of info under wraps was probably prudent at the moment.

Mara’s lips pulled thin and she wrenched her door open. The rusty whine of the door hinge must have wakened Piper because she crawled out from beneath her napkin tent and yawned. “Wait up. I’ll come too.”

“It’s windy. You’ll be swept off the mountain.” Mara stretched her leg out the door.

“No worries.” Piper flew from the console and grabbed the scooped neckline of Mara’s top before snuggling inside. Her squeaky voice filtered through the thin material covering Mara’s chest. “I should have slept in here last night. These things are like a pair of toasty warm pillows.”

Dash licked his lips. “Never thought I’d be insanely jealous of a sprite.”

Mara glared and slammed her door. Her stride was frenetic and slightly comical as she sprinted towards the forested slope. Waiting until she disappeared behind a screen of pines, he ambled farther down the road and took care of his own pressing needs. His trousers were halfway zipped when a shriek ripped through the woods.

He jerked his head in the direction of the noise. “Mara?” When she didn’t answer, he leapt over the rock he’d used for target practice and bolted inside the thick of the woods. His heart and feet tripped with every slap of his shoes against the moss-slick forest floor. Streams of sunlight barely penetrated the leafy canopy. “Damn it, Mara,” he bellowed. “Where are you?”

Something rustled up ahead.

“Let her go, you ugly son of a bitch.”

The yell belonged to Mara. Dash sprinted between a pair of tightly spaced tree trunks, ignoring the sharp sting of bark scraping his bare forearms. Finally he spotted her, hot on the heels of a squat, wart-

covered creature bounding through the underbrush. When he recognized what she was chasing, he barreled after her until his lungs felt ready to explode. “Mara, stop,” he managed to croak.

She ignored him, of course. With a raspy growl, he ratcheted his pace. Who knew a human was capable of such speed? Bundling his last reserve of energy into a tight ball, he hurtled through the air and slammed into Mara. The oxygen escaped her lungs in a loud *ooff* and she pitched forward, her feet losing purchase with the ground. Snagging her waist with both hands, he tried slowing their fall but the slippery carpet of moss and needles wouldn’t cooperate. Looking to take the brunt of it, he wrapped her tight against him and twisted into the downward slide.

His shoulder plowed through muck, a sorry excuse for padding, and he grimaced at the jarring contact with solid ground. They continued sliding, gaining velocity as the needle-strewn earth sloped beneath them. *Damn it, I would have to tackle her downhill.*

Mara craned her neck around and stared over his shoulder. She sucked in a breath, her breasts swelling against his biceps. Under normal circumstances, he would have enjoyed the sensation.

“We’re going to hit that tree!”

He dug his heels into the moss, trying to put the brakes on their downhill ride. “Over my dead body.”

“Not the best choice of words at the moment,” she shrieked.

Suddenly they stopped. Just like that—stopped. Dash would have frowned if he weren’t otherwise occupied chasing down his breath.

“Thank you, gods.” Mara’s head flopped back against his shoulder.

Strange, it’s almost as if we’re suspended. Apprehension tap dancing along his nerve endings, Dash moved the arm braced over Mara’s rib cage and gingerly tested the ground near her hip.

“This is no time to try feeling me up,” she grumbled.

“That’s not what I’m doing. Besides, my hand is nowhere near your interesting parts.”

Before he could stop her, she wrenched from his grip. Four distinct snaps sounded.

Oh fuc—Dash’s stomach dropped the same second he and Mara flew towards the leaf-canopied sky.

Chapter Eight

“What the *hell*?” Mara flailed around, feeling like a giant tuna trapped in an invisible net. Forty-some feet in the air. In the middle of a forest.

Yeah, perfectly normal.

She tried unfolding from her u-shaped position and howled in frustration when her body refused to cooperate.

“Save your energy,” Dash muttered near her ear. “We’re not going anywhere. Gromaches are master snare builders.”

“Gromaches?” Why did the name sound familiar?

“The creature you were chasing—it’s a Gromache toad.” Dash reached past her knees and shoved against the invisible structure binding them. They teetered slightly and she sucked in a breath. “I’m guessing this snare is his handiwork.”

“That *thing* was a toad?” The cobwebs slowly cleared from her memory. “Wait a minute. Are we talking the same creature you told me about last night?”

She felt the slide of his grin against the nape of her neck.

“Glad to know you listened to my every word with bated breath.”

“Hardly.” She wiggled, trying to get comfortable. Hah, like that was remotely possible. “You said it was the most dangerous creature in these mountains.”

He spread his arms. “And your point is?”

“Toads aren’t dangerous. Or big as an overfed cat. And they definitely don’t have four eyes.”

His breath fanned her ear. “Hmm, guess I should have been more specific.”

Forget promises. If they ever escaped this snare, she was going to knee his balls again. “Ya think?” Scowling, she reached out until her palm pressed against the invisible barrier. The filaments were tightly woven and no matter how hard she pushed, the strands refused to budge. “What is this thing made of?”

“Gromache spit.”

She jerked her hand away and scrubbed it furiously against her pant leg. “We have to get out of here and chase down that four-eyed bastard. He has Piper.” The sprite may drive her nuts, but she couldn’t sit by and let the Gromache season his fly stew with Piper, if that’s what he had planned.

“Already told you there’s not much chance of escaping the snare.”

Tears of frustration welled and she blinked to keep them from leaking down her cheeks. Gideon's face swam in her mind's eye. He'd be twenty-eight now. Would she even recognize him if they passed on the street? Twelve years was a long time, and prison would have carved more than its share from his soul.

Oh gods. She didn't want to die in the middle of nowhere without telling him how much she loved him. And how sorry she was. For everything.

"Mara?" Dash's fingers squeezed her waist. "You still with me?"

She snuck her hand up and swiped at a tear. "Where else would I be?"

"There's little chance of escaping our predicament—"

"I'm not deaf." She tried to silently sniff back another tear. "Heard you the other two times you insisted on shredding my hopes."

"Good. Then maybe you'll let me finish my sentence for once."

She bit the inside of her cheek to keep from growling. "You were saying?"

"There is a way out of here." His lips brushed just beneath her ear. "But I'll need your help."

His words were a new lease on life. Literally. Giddy with the news she wouldn't be meeting an untimely death on the side of a mountain, she laughed. "You might have skipped the beginning of your sentence and mentioned that part sooner. Would have saved me a mini breakdown."

"Don't get excited. My plan might not work."

"It will." She nodded vigorously. "You're a master thief. A stupid Gromache toad can't outwit you."

The fingers wrapped around her waist tightened. "No one's showed such faith in me before."

She found his admission telling, and somewhat sad. Before she could think of anything to say, Dash cleared his throat.

"See that branch over there?"

Twisting her head, she followed the point of his finger to the large branch forking from a tree a few feet to the right of them.

"It's halfway between us and the ground."

When she realized what he was implying, she frowned. "Um...we have one small problem. How will we get out of the snare and reach it?"

"Magic, and natural gravity."

She stilled against him. "Your magic is blocked."

"You could disable the collar."

A shaky breath snaked from her lips. "Nalia would kill me."

"You'll die anyway trapped in this snare. I imagine it'll be a slow, torturous death."

Mentally conjuring that unpleasant image, she swallowed. "Nalia's punishment will be no quicker, or less torturous."

Dash cupped her chin and tilted it. The angle allowed her to see his face. Challenge swirled in the depths of his caramel irises. “I won’t tell her if you don’t.”

“I’m not sure I remember the code.”

He smiled grimly. “Think real hard.”

“We have another problem.” She squirmed onto her elbow, partially balancing her weight against him. “The blocking mechanism is located on the collar’s back panel. How the hell am I going to reach it?”

“Simple. You need to flip over.”

She stared at him. “Yeah, right. While I’m at it, why don’t I bend into a pretzel and hop around on one leg?”

His smile inched into the territory of a wicked grin. “We’ll save that position for a better time and place.”

Heat suffused her cheeks. Averting her eyes, she jutted her elbow sideways. Dash grunted and rubbed his side. “Good thing my kidneys came as a matching set.”

“There’s not enough room for me to flip over.”

Dash’s hand slipped along the small of her back. “Move your hip. Like this.” His fingers guided her up on one side. “Now lean back and tuck your arm here.”

“I can’t see. How am I supposed to know where you’re talking about? *Holy crap.*” She panicked when the snare dipped precariously.

“Relax and follow my lead.”

Every muscle in her body shook from strain and tightly strung nerves. She lifted her arm and his hand settled at the crook of her elbow, dragging it up and over his head. He twisted her body until her leg shifted to the other side of his knee. Now she almost straddled his lap. Not the most comfortable or dignified position, but it provided better access to the collar.

She settled her hand on his thickly muscled shoulder. “Duck your head.”

He did—right into her breasts. “I imagine you’re enjoying this,” she said dryly.

“Immensely.”

Rolling her eyes at his muffled response, she pushed the neck of his shirt down and studied the interlocking metal teeth securing the collar. Just above those, four tiny buttons controlled the settings.

I need someone my sly thief won’t easily outfox. Mara’s fingers hovered over the buttons while Nalia’s voice taunted inside her head. Was she ten kinds of fool for even contemplating this? Probably.

Her fingers descended the same instant Dash jerked his head back. He slanted her a wary look. “There’s no chance I’ll self-destruct if you accidentally enter the wrong code is there?”

She shook her head and he exhaled in relief. “But you’re the first to wear this model. Might want to keep your fingers crossed.” Her hand replanted his face in her chest before he balked further. Taking a deep breath, she punched in what she prayed was the correct sequence of codes. Three depressions on the first

button, two on the third, and three on the fourth. Who the hell knew what the second button did. *Blow up the planet?* She wouldn't put it past Nalia.

Fingers trembling, she pushed Dash away and checked the front of the collar. No lights flashed.

"Did it work?"

She nodded. "Now what?"

"I do my thing. But first we get something out of the way." His hand slipped behind her head and pulled her down. The lips haunting her dreams these last several nights slanted over hers, warm and coaxing. Gasping, she yielded.

Wet swirling tongues. An endless spiral of need and craving. Desire exploding.

Panting, she pulled back, her breath still mingling with Dash's. How could a kiss leave a person so wrung out? She licked her lips and tasted the spicy essence of him. "What was that for?"

"If this plan backfires, I'm dying with a smile on my face."

No disputing that logic.

He released her head and she scooted over best she could while he struggled into an awkward squat. Clenching her fists, she eyed him nervously. She distrusted magic to the depths of her soul. And that was on a good day. Trusting it under these conditions? She'd rather sign over the deed to her life to the lovely sisters of fate.

A wind gust rocked the snare and she made the mistake of looking down. *Then again, fate is highly overrated.* Snapping her head around, she stared at Dash. His eyes were closed but his lips moved in silent conversation. Either he was talking to himself or it was part of his magic ritual.

Intense heat radiated from him. It breached her clothing and soaked through her pores. She gulped and scooted back a fraction. "What's happening?"

He didn't answer, merely grasped her wrists and continued mumbling his private discourse.

They're tricksters. Magic is the work of devils. Never forget. Gideon's voice pounded in rhythm with her racing heartbeat. Swallowing hard again, she tried breaking free of Dash's grip.

His eyes opened. Blackness nearly overtook his irises. "Stay with me."

"Damn it, I don't like this—" A scream ripped from her when a brilliant, crackling light snapped around their invisible cage. Suddenly no boundary separated them from thin air and they plummeted in a deadly freefall.

She looked down. Gods, what moron did that when the ground raced to meet your body at exorbitant speed? A flash of brown appeared below. The tree branch. Too quick, it disappeared from view.

"Dash." Her terrified scream scratched her throat raw. One of her wrists slipped from his grip and she clawed the air. A jarring impact hit her. For a dizzying moment she swore she'd hit terra firma and what she felt was the splintering of every bone in her body. Then she realized it was only her shoulder joint burning with pain.

Straining her neck, she stared up at Dash. His lips peeling back in a grimace, he tightened his single-handed grip on her wrist and struggled to maintain a choke hold on the tree branch with his other arm. He let out an agonized roar.

“If you drop me, I’m going to be so pissed.”

Her threat succeeded in earning a heroic display of his brawn power. With a growl befitting a Frittona lion, he anchored the branch between his biceps and forearm before tugging her upward. A thick clump of leaves came within grasp and she plowed her free hand through them until rough bark scraped her fingernails. Breathless with relief, she hooked an arm around the tree branch and hefted her body on top of it. Her wrenched shoulder protested, but at least she was alive.

Dash swung his legs and straddled the branch between his muscled thighs. He inched his way towards her, his biceps bulging and animalistic grunts rasping from his chest. She didn’t know which turned her on more—her near brush with death or the sheer machismo of him. Either way, she was obviously warped beyond belief.

He reached her and gave an upside-down grin. Or maybe it just looked upside down because of his position. “What you say we blow this tree and catch ourselves an ugly-ass toad?”

The crunch of their footsteps broke the forest’s eerie silence. Dash’s fingers closed around hers. “Stick close. We don’t want to end up in any more Gromache snares.”

He’d get no argument from her. No way did she want to repeat the last half-hour’s funfest. She picked a leaf from her hair and eyed the now-useless collar around his neck. “Are you going to use your magic to track the Gromache down?”

“No need. Just follow your nose.”

Frowning, she sniffed the air. “I don’t smell anything.”

“Yet.” Dash glanced at the top of her head. He untangled their fingers and plucked something from her hair. It turned out to be another leaf. He stroked his thumb over its green, bumpy surface. “Things got pretty intense up in the snare.”

Her mind tracked back to the feel of his tongue inside her mouth and she tripped over her foot. Embarrassed, she hugged her chest and kept her attention riveted on the ground. “Umm, about that...”

“You’re leery of magic.”

She blinked and snapped her head up. “Pardon?”

“Don’t bother denying it.” Dash crumbled the leaf in his fist. “At one point, your fear almost counteracted my magic. I had to work doubly hard to break through its block.”

Part of her was thankful she didn’t have to scrape together an excuse for returning his kiss like a desperate, sex-starved maniac.

“Want to fill in the blanks and tell me what provoked your fear?”

Then again, sounding like a sex-starved maniac had its advantages—such as getting him off the subject. “Anyone tell you you’re a hell of a kisser?”

“Yes.” His mouth curled in arrogance. “Now answer my question.”

“Look, none of that is pertinent to this mission.”

He clamped a hand over her shoulder and dragged her to a stop. Thunderclouds brewed in his dark irises. “Don’t try making this about the *mission*.” He shoveled a heavy layer of sarcasm on that last word before flinging his other arm out. “Other than the Gromache and your sprite friend, we’re the only ones out here. No bloody royals you have to kowtow to and hide your secrets from.”

She knocked his hand free of her shoulder. “Piper isn’t my friend. She’s a freakin’ pain in my ass. That aside, could we please go find her before the Gromache decides he’s in the mood for some sprite delight?”

Dash’s face tightened. “Fine, but we’ll damn well finish this conversation later.” He stepped around her and stalked through the underbrush.

Releasing a relieved breath, she hurried after him. She’d worry about dodging his questions later. Right now, her primary focus was finding Piper and getting the hell off this mountain. She stumbled over a gnarled root protruding from the needle-strewn dirt and flailed her arms wildly, trying to regain balance. With an *ooff*, she tumbled sideways and knocked into a tree trunk. Brushing her hair from her eyes, she met Dash’s scowl.

“What did I say about staying close?”

The temptation to knock him flat on his ass sizzled through her veins. Planting a hand on the trunk for leverage, she pushed up from her knees. Something cold and slimy squished between her fingers. Grimacing, she jerked her hand from the tree and frowned at the red ooze dripping down her arm.

“We’re close to the Gromache’s lair.”

She stared at Dash. “How can you be sure?”

“The red gunk on your hand—that’s how they mark their territory. And don’t ask what it is. Believe me, you don’t want to know.”

“Why am I always the one who touches gross stuff?” After a quick scrub of her hand over a spongy moss clump, she raced to catch up with Dash before he bitched about her lagging behind again.

They stepped into a small clearing. On one side, a low berm spanned at least ten feet across the forest floor. A thick padding of leaves and twigs covered its surface.

“Is that where it lives?”

Dash pressed a finger to her lips. Her silence guaranteed, he cocked his head, motioning her to follow him. They scuffed quietly towards the lair. A coo sounded from a black-winged dove perched on a low-hanging branch. Feathers rustled and the bird flew off. Breath held tight in her chest, Mara stared at the berm. Other than the dove, no sign of life moved anywhere near the mound of earth. Was that good or bad?

She suddenly became aware of a foul odor underlying the forest's earthy pungency. It reminded her of the stench of the palace's outdoor rubbish compactors when they'd been putrefying beneath the sun and were long overdue for a decent scrubbing.

Dash must have sensed her revulsion because he glanced at her and held his index finger to his lips. Yeah, yeah, she'd gotten the message the first time. While she made faces at his back, he cleared the twigs from the berm, being careful not to alert the Gromache of their presence by making too much noise.

Soon enough, a wide gap appeared in the mounded earth. Broken roots protruded from the opening like stunted fingers. Dash ducked his head inside the hole and Mara crowded close, trying to catch a peek inside. She jumped away when he scooted back without warning.

"It's the rear entrance to his lair," he whispered. "This is perfect. The Gromache won't expect an attack from this direction."

"What do we do?"

"We don't do anything. You wait here while I take care of the Gromache."

Mara poked a finger in the center of his forehead. "Forget it. Piper might be a pain in the butt, but she's *my* responsibility," she said, her tone hushed yet fierce.

Dash looked ready to argue. Not giving him the opportunity, she sidled past him and planted a hand on the lip of the opening. She jerked her head around when Dash tapped her shoulder.

"You're the most stubborn female alive." He gave a low growl of frustration. "At least let me go in first."

Relieved by his reluctant acquiescence, she moved aside and allowed him the honor of leading the way. He settled on his back and wedged his legs through the tight opening, wiggling his way inside. Once his shoulders and head cleared the gap, she copied his motions. Midway inside the hole, she felt his hands grasp her hips. Confident his grip secured her, she let go of the hairy roots providing a handle at the lair's exit and plunged into murky darkness.

With Dash's hands still wrapped around her, she blinked, trying to accustom her eyes to the lack of sunlight. She'd never been stuck hunched over in a dank, dark hole six feet underground before. If she had her way, this would be the one and only time.

"Watch your head," Dash whispered, taking her hand.

He stooped and shouldered his way towards a tunnel leading from the small dugout they stood in. If you could call it standing. She stared at the dim outline of the back of his head. Boy, he was going to have a whopper of a crick in his neck by the time they got out of there.

The tunnel meandered several feet before taking a steep, downward slant. Mara risked a quick glance at the earthen ceiling. A fine spray of dirt granules dusted her nose and she whisked them away with an impatient swipe from her fingers. How far were they underground?

Dash halted abruptly. His hand released hers and she clutched the back of his shirt as she tried to see around his broad shoulder. A faint glow flickered beyond the bend in the tunnel. The noxious smell seemed intensified a thousandfold and she choked back the urge to gag. *Jeez, how can the stinky bastard stand being in the same room with itself?*

She broke off her internal musings when Dash started forward again, his body tensed and measured steps wary. He reminded her of a large, stealthy Certurion panther creeping up on its prey.

They rounded the bend and the tunnel widened, allowing her to see more clearly. Glow flutterbees skittered inside two large mesh cages flanking the entrance to the chamber spread before her, their pale luminescent wings flicking in a desperate plea for escape. Several of the jar's unlucky occupants lay in a lifeless mound at the bottom of the mesh prison. Turning away from the sad sight, she followed Dash inside the chamber.

Her mind boggled at the amount of time the Gromache must have spent carving out its primitive underground bunker. It wasn't exactly spacious—her head still didn't clear the ceiling—but an entire army of the ugly little buggers could easily camp out in the room. That's if they could find space amongst all the odd paraphernalia stacked everywhere.

Mara stared at the veritable mountain of mold-infested fabric occupying a corner of the chamber. A patchwork sleeve draped limply on the ground, as if the jacket attached to the sleeve tried pulling free only to give up and accept its inevitable demise. The jacket hinted at the ill-gotten source of the rotting fabric pile. Either the Gromache had been raiding clotheslines, or she and Dash weren't the first ones trapped in one of its snares.

Shivers of relief raced up her spine.

Talk about a close call. If not for Dash, her clothing might have found a home atop the pile. A flash of movement nearby preceded Piper's familiar squeak. A mesh cage smaller in size but similar to the ones housing the glow flutterbees hung from a rusted spike anchored in the dirt wall. The sprite stood inside the cage, its sole occupant. Her wide eyes were trained on them.

The sprite pointed anxiously at twin towers of clutter stacked near the back of the chamber, both constructed from footwear.

A kidskin hiking boot launched towards one tower's top perch, missed its mark, and rolled to a precarious stop at the foot of the pile. Dash stalked forward and grabbed the hiking boot. With incomprehensible speed and dexterity, he pitched it at the footwear towers. It slammed into the first one with an explosive force, sending an avalanche of shoes toppling into the second tower.

Boots, sandals and oddly enough a few high heels rained down, blocking out the grunts and angry squeals from the Gromache trapped beneath the tide of shoes.

“We don’t have much time.” Dash jogged to the cage holding Piper. “Sneaky little bastard will shovel his way out soon enough. When he does he’ll be pissed enough to trumpet a call to every Gromache within a fifty-mile radius.”

Mara hurried to Dash’s side. Her gaze bobbed in tandem with Piper’s excited flutter. She tried unsuccessfully to hide her apprehension. “How many Gromaches would that be?”

Dash stopped fumbling with the latch securing the cage and gave her a look that made her stomach clench. “Three hundred—at least.”

Holy shit. “What the hell are we waiting for? Let’s get out of here.”

“I’m trying.” Dash continued grappling with the latch. “He jammed the locking mechanism.”

“Why don’t you just whammy the cage with your magic? It got us out of the snare, right?”

“I had more room to work with back there. This cage is so small I might accidentally electrocute the sprite.”

Piper shook her head furiously. “Oh hell no. You are not frying me.”

Mara rocked on her heels and shot a quick look towards the shoe pile trapping the Gromache. “Why not just take the cage with us?”

Dash stopped his frantic jiggling. A reddened flush crept over the ridge of his cheekbones and he cleared his throat. “Yeah, I was about to suggest the same thing myself.”

Sure. She stepped back as he grasped the spike and tugged it free with a fierce growl. Clods of loosened earth tumbled to the floor.

The cage and spike swinging from his hand, Dash headed to a tunnel leading the opposite way they’d come. “This route should prove more direct and easier to climb from.”

She started after him but stopped after taking a couple strides. The thud of shoes falling from the tower gave her pause. *I must be out of my mind.* Tuning out the Gromache’s angry squeals, she raced to the chamber’s entrance.

“What the hell are you doing? Get your ass back here.”

Ignoring Dash’s bellow, she grabbed the two glow flutterbee cages, hugging their bulky weight with both arms. She stumbled back to Dash. He cocked his eyebrows and she juggled her heavy load. “We can’t just leave them here to die.”

He relieved her of one of the cages and shuffled down the tunnel. She traipsed after him. He knew his stuff. The new exit proved much faster to traverse and within minutes she shoved the mesh cage through the hole he’d cleared of debris and scrambled out after it.

Fresh air engulfed her nostrils. She sucked in a huge, wheezing lungful of the purifying stuff, not caring that she sounded like a hound with a bad case of hay fever. “Nothing smells better than this. It’s like pine needles and freedom all mingled together.”

“I agree.”

She looked up and met Dash's smile. He held out his hand and she grasped it before lifting from her knees. Dirt splotches and leaf particles flecked his previously pristine white shirt. She imagined her appearance ranked no less scary.

"Speaking of freedom, how about we release our friends?" Dash leaned over the nearest cage and pried the hinge back. The top sprang open and the glow flutterbees burst out, winging towards the tree canopy with joyful abandon.

Heart overflowing with giddy happiness, Mara reached for the other cage and released its occupants. While the flutterbees reunited in the sky, Dash grabbed Piper's cage and took off down the path he'd earlier blazed. Mara raced after him. Five minutes later, they reached the Cloud Chaser. She jumped in on her side and rested her head against the padded neck rest, gasping as she tried to catch her breath.

Dash slid in behind the wheel and tossed her another grin. "Next time, you're holding it."

It took a second to remember the reason she and Piper had been in the forest to begin with. She gave a self-conscious chuckle. "Yep, definitely keeping my legs crossed."

He leaned forward, reaching for the key still notched in the ignition. The neck of his shirt slipped, revealing the back of his slave collar. She'd forgotten to reengage it after they'd rescued Piper.

A good part of her conscience balked at the responsibility foisted upon her. *Damn Nalia to hell.* Blinking back tears of frustration, she settled her fingers over the collar's buttons. The metal's coldness lanced straight to her heart.

Dash tensed. His gaze slid to her, dark and wary. "Remember how good it felt freeing the flutterbees? You could have that again, right here and now." His soft words hammered against her resolve. "I promise I'll even stick around and steal that damn rune for you."

Her gut twisting, she tightened the vise around her heart. "I wish I could believe you." Before she caved and ended up doing something monumentally stupid, she activated the collar.

Chapter Nine

This was what he got for rescuing that damn sprite. Should have saved the heroics for the chumps stupid enough to fall for that lunacy. Gnashing his teeth, Dash peeled around a puttering Hove Cruiser out for a leisure drive.

“What a beautiful city.” Wonderment filled Mara’s voice. “Far cry from Hagee and the mountainside we left behind.”

“Looks can be deceiving.” He spotted the looming glass edifice of Tul’dea’s premier hotel, the Crystal Lodge, and swerved into their service drive. Outside the hotel’s front entrance, he slammed on the brakes and threw the Cloud Chaser into park. “Stay here while I get us checked in,” he bit out before storming from the vehicle.

Of course Mara didn’t follow his orders. She jogged up next to him and he sent her a hard glare. “Worried I might run off?” A harsh laugh bulleted from his mouth. “Wait, that’s right, I’ve got this choke chain around my neck tracking my every move.”

“Please understand this isn’t personal. It’s not *my* decision to keep that thing on you.”

He cocked an eyebrow and a heavy sigh skated past her lips.

“I know it seems like it, considering what happened back there on the mountain.” She threw her hands out in frustration. “But I really didn’t have a choice.”

“We all have a choice.”

Rather than argue, she stared at the black and gold veined marble beneath their feet. “You’re right.”

Her ready acknowledgement only marginally soothed the sting left by her decision to reengage the slave collar. One thing was certain—he wouldn’t make the mistake of mucking up his chance at freedom twice. Particularly when the last person he wanted to see might saunter around the corner at any moment. Unfortunately, that same someone happened to be exactly the person he needed to track down the rune.

Despite what Mara obviously thought, he hadn’t lied to her. He would have found the Rhyann rune eventually. And without Jerrick’s help. Now it seemed he didn’t have any choice in that regard. He glanced at Mara and noticed the regret swimming in those beautiful eyes of hers. Under different circumstances, he would have taken her upstairs, tumbled her onto one of the hotel’s big soft beds, and eased her worries away with some hot lovemaking.

Who was he kidding? He still wanted to do that. Craved it to the deepest depths of his soul.

He frowned as his fingers wrapped around the glass handle of the Crystal Lodge's front door. Come to think of it, wasn't that his original plan—seducing her? He never should have detoured off that particular path.

Screw the heroic bullshit. Plan A it is. He yanked the door open and gave an exaggerated flourish of his arm. "After you, *Sher 'tian*."

Mara granted him a suspicious look, making him wonder if he'd perhaps laid the gallantry on too thick. She ducked inside and he strode after her, letting the door close behind them with a near-silent swish. Her head bobbed around, taking in the hotel's grand décor. Hard to believe anything could impress her after Rulach's rich splendor, but perhaps being the hotel's guest rather than servant made all the difference.

They approached a massive glass fountain spraying alternating jets of purple, green and blue water from its delicate flutes. Mara's steps slowed.

She extended a hand towards the spray, her palm facing upward. Water droplets beaded on her fingertips and she rubbed them together almost reverently. "The water inside the fountain is clear." She glanced at him with delighted confusion. "Where in the world do the colors come from?"

He had no idea. Up until now, he wouldn't have given a flying frick. "Why don't you ask the desk clerk while I check us in?"

She bolted towards the marbled reception counter, apparently game with his suggestion. Shaking his head, he ambled after her. With half an ear, he listened to the excited chatter Mara carried on with the clerk. He had to give the chestnut-haired woman behind the counter credit—she didn't so much as bat an eyelash at his and Mara's grubby appearance. Made him wonder what sort of clientele the Crystal Lodge hosted these days.

He disrupted the feminine chatter long enough to secure them a couple rooms and sign the computer registry. With false identification, of course. Not that the majority of his enemies made a habit of hanging around hotel lobbies, checking their registries. Still, a little caution never hurt.

Leaving Mara in the care of the clerk, Dash exited the hotel and went in search of a parking spot in the spacious underground garage. He appropriated a spot near the stairway and began stacking their meager luggage on the ground.

Anxious buzzing came from the mesh cage sitting on the backseat. Ducking his head inside the door, he scowled at Piper. "What?"

She batted her eyelashes and gave him a sugary smile. "Think you could speed things up and spring me out of here?"

"Sure. Not as if I'm busy or anything." He hunkered next to the pile of bags and unzipped both his and Mara's, looking for anything sharp enough to cut through the wire mesh. Thorough rifling coughed up nothing useful.

“Where the hell is a laser torch when you need it? Or a hacksaw? At this rate, I’d settle for a damn butter knife.” He growled and slammed Mara’s valise down.

“Are you done ranting?”

He plowed his fingers through his hair and looked at Piper. She tapped one booted foot against the floor of the cage and crossed her arms over her chest.

“Probably not,” he admitted.

“Grab the keys. They should do the trick.”

These smart females with their practical suggestions were making his ego shrink by the minute. He dug in his trouser pocket and extracted the key. While he sawed at the cage’s interlocking wires, Piper sat down and tucked her chin against her knees. Her eyes moved in tandem with the key’s serrated teeth.

“Guess I should thank you for saving my life. You know, other than being a thief, you’re not half bad.”

He paused long enough to give the sprite a wry lift of his eyebrow. “Thanks—I think. But it’s mostly Mara who deserves the credit. She was quite adamant about rescuing you.”

Piper’s head jerked up. “Really?” A beaming smile overtook her face. “I knew this nonsense about me driving her nuts was a bunch of bahooy. Seriously, how can anyone think such a thing? I’m freakin’ *loveable*.”

Her adamancy provoked his grin. “How long has this love-hate relationship existed between you two?”

“Twelve years. Ever since she first came to work at the palace.”

The key’s teeth slipped, losing their grip on the wire. *Twelve years?* He figured the math quickly inside his head. Mara professed to be twenty-five. That meant she’d come under Nalia’s employ at the tender age of thirteen. Under the terms of the human-slave ban, Mara couldn’t have legally acquired a work permit until she reached seventeen.

Which meant Nalia was guilty of her own shady dealings regarding the law.

Dash mentally filed the useful info before he pried the key into the wire mesh and continued chiseling away. “Mara never mentioned the fact she’s worked at the palace that long.”

“Doesn’t surprise me. In case you didn’t notice, the girl isn’t exactly the sharing type. Hoards details about her private life like they’re precious jewels.” Piper flashed her teeth in a cocksure smile. “See how I did that? Precious jewels...you’re a thief. Get it?”

Because the sprite was a source of possible information on Mara, he played along. “By the gods, you’re clever.”

“I know.” Piper giggled.

The wire started to give and Dash sawed harder until the threads snapped and a gap emerged. He worked the key inside and bent the threads away from each other. “So Mara wasn’t much more than a kid when she started working at the palace.”

“Yep. That’s why I had to take her under my wing.” Piper snorted. “Not that she ever appreciated it. Swore she didn’t need any help fitting in around there.” The sprite hopped to her feet. She planted her hands on her hips and paced the cage. “*As if*. That girl had a major chip on her shoulder from day one. Sure, it was understandable considering everything, but the other servants didn’t give a hoot about the unfortunate circumstances of a human teenager.”

Unfortunate circumstances? He opened his mouth, fully intent on asking her to elaborate. The tap of approaching footsteps cut him short. His muscles tightened reflexively, a condition honed by too many years eluding the enemy. *Son of a bitch*. Back in Mer’daca a mere twenty-four hours and already his nerves were getting the better of him.

“They’re tiny hidden filaments!”

His shoulders relaxed at the sound of Mara’s voice. He turned and took in the rosy flush in her high cheekbones, noting how excitement lent her face a youthful glow. “What the devil are you blabbering about?”

“The coloring in the water is supplied by tiny filaments fused in the head of the flutes. They release this special dye that disappears once it’s recycled inside the fountain. Isn’t that amazing?”

In that moment he could easily imagine her as a thirteen-year-old—inquisitive and full of life. What didn’t fit the image in his head was that same girl illegally employed to a conniving fairy queen.

~ * ~

Mara cinched the belt of the cloud-soft robe swaddled around her freshly scrubbed body and padded from the bathroom. A monogrammed garment bag was draped over the bed’s sky blue silk coverlet. Curiosity aroused, she ventured to the bag and examined the ornate scrolled letters stamped across the opaque silver plastic. *Crystal Dreams*.

“It’s from the shop downstairs,” she said to no one in particular. Dash was sequestered in his room, doing gods knows what, and Piper was still out exploring the city. Amazing she had the energy, considering the excitement with the Gromache and all.

She pushed back the sleeves of her robe and reached for the zippered closure on the bag. Inside was the slinkiest little black dress she’d ever seen. A note dangled from the hanger. *Wear this tonight—D*.

“Who the heck is *D*?” Her irritation percolated when it finally dawned on her. “Talk about presumption.” The last time someone handpicked her clothes for her she’d been crawling around in diapers.

Fisting the bag tight, she stalked to the door adjoining the next room and rapped hard. It was tempting to just bust into his room. His scruples certainly hadn't stopped him from sneaking into hers. "What am I thinking? He has no scruples."

Seconds later, the door slid open and disappeared inside the wall. Dash stepped into the empty space where the door used to be, looking far too yummy with his torso bared and gleaming with a light sheen of sweat.

It took a few minutes to find her tongue. "Why are you so sweaty?" The second the words escaped, Mara wished she could reel them back in. *Oh jeez, could I be less subtle?*

"You caught me in the middle of doing sit-ups." He ran a hand over his chiseled abdominals in a lazy fashion. "Can't have myself going to flab."

Like there's the remotest chance that'll happen. He was built like a god. An extremely well-endowed god, no less. She swallowed, moistening her suddenly dry mouth. Would she ever be able to look at him half naked without remembering the night he'd stood in the inn's bathroom *fully* naked and sporting the mother of all erections?

Anxious to lure her mind away from that particular memory, she held up the garment bag. "Mind telling me what this is about?"

His hand dropped from his abdominals. "You needed an outfit."

"Not to sound ungrateful or anything, but I have plenty of clothes in my valise."

"Not the kind you'll need for tonight."

She scrunched her forehead. "What's tonight?"

"Our first meeting with Jerrick."

Hope and trepidation fluttered in her chest. "You found him?"

Dash shook his head. "Hence the reason you need to wear the dress."

Her attention dropped to the garment bag and the sinful creation tucked inside. "I don't understand. What does this have to do with anything?"

A slow smile tipped Dash's mouth. "Trust me, you in that dress will draw Jerrick out of the woodwork."

Indignation, sizzling hot, whipped through her. "Are you saying you're going to use me as *bait*?"

"What's the big deal? You did it with me and look how that turned out."

Yeah, look how that turned out. "But you were planned—quite thoroughly, I might add. It took me months to gather intel on you, and even then I still had to rent the gallery, put together the invitations to the opening, hire the couriers for delivering said invitations, coordinate the transportation with Ronan—"

Dash held up his hand, saving her brain from short-circuiting courtesy of the enormous amount of wordage spewing between her lips. "There's a big difference this time. You've got me on your side."

"Seriously, how *do* you carry that ego around without rupturing something?"

“Practice, babe, practice.” He pried the hanger from her grip and pushed it through the bag’s opening, popping it free. His hand smoothed over the front of the dress, fingers tracing a swirl over the silky knit.

Her nipples puckered against the softness of her robe, as if secretly wishing he’d drop the dress and start up with them instead. Traitorous little buggers.

“I know Jerrick...his tastes.” Dash hooked the dress’s straps over her head, leaving the hanger to dangle down her back. “If there’s one thing he can’t resist, it’s a gorgeous woman. Especially one poured into a hot number of a dress.”

He spread the fabric out so it hugged the front of her robe. For a breathless second, she waited for his fingers to move over her breasts. They didn’t. But his gaze did. It lingered on them for several heated moments before roving up to her flushed face.

“You’ll resemble the type of sex kitten Jerrick goes for.”

What about the type you go for? Refusing to give voice to the embarrassing question, she wet her lips. Dash’s eyes darkened and her heart skipped a beat. “Okay, color me convinced. So after I pour myself into this flimsy excuse for a dress, what next?”

Dash’s mouth slid into a dangerously wicked grin. “We troll for thieves, baby.”

Chapter Ten

The interior of The Fairies' Grotto proved similar to the three previous party dens—dark, smoky and overcrowded with the occasional patron in need of a good antiperspirant.

Dash grimaced and tugged the hat he'd picked up from the Crystal Lodge's clothing shop lower on his forehead. He leaned against the wall, keeping as far as possible from the offensively odoriferous person next to him without sacrificing his prime view of the bar and Mara.

Like a homing device, the curve of her thigh drew him in. Sweat broke on his forehead, crawling from beneath his hat's brim towards the side of his jaw. Shit, he'd really set himself up for endless torture picking out that dress. If he didn't get his hands on her soon, he was going to self combust.

Patience. He didn't want to trigger any of her alarms by moving too fast. And that meant continuing the charade he'd been playing the past three hours.

He hadn't been completely forthcoming with her. Jerrick most definitely wouldn't be hanging out in these types of dens. Not unless he was suddenly hooking up with transgendered individuals.

Dash snuck a glance at Mr./Ms. Stinky. He or she noticed him looking and winked. *Uh-oh.* He shoved from the wall and hotfooted it towards the spiral stairway. The crowd surged around the base of the stairs, some heading for the Fairy Loft and others for the Troll Dungeon, forcing him to elbow his way through the undulating sea of people. Mara's shiny blonde curls glowed beneath the bar's spotlights in the distance. He quickened his pace. Pulling up behind her, he cupped her shoulder.

She jumped, jerking her head in surprise.

"Relax, it's only me," he said, brushing his lips close to her ear.

The shoulder beneath his palm lost its tension and she peered up at him expectantly. "Any sign of Jerrick?"

A twinge of guilt stabbed him in the gut. "Not yet. But it's still early. Want your drink refreshed?"

"Um, I've had two already and my head feels kinda...floaty." An adorable frown tweaked between her eyebrows. "Maybe I should go back to drinking boring old water."

"Don't worry. I'm here to ensure you don't do anything you'll regret in the morning." *Good gods, I'm a bastard.*

She smiled sweetly, her blue eyes trusting and innocent. "Okay. Guess I'll have another of these. They're really yummy. *Obviously.*" Giggling, she lifted her glass, rattling the ice cubes and fluttering the

paper bumblebee swirling on the end of its stick. The bee's face wore a pissy expression. No small wonder, having that stick shoved up its rump.

Dash looked over his shoulder and spied a miraculously empty booth. "*Sher 'tian*, why don't you grab us that booth in the corner while I round you up another drink."

"Kay." She hopped off her stool and strutted to the booth.

He tracked every sway of her heart-shaped ass. Her dress and the body inside it were steadily killing off his brain cells. *Plan A. Just keep your head focused on the prize.*

Minutes later, drinks in hand, he joined Mara at the booth. The velvet-upholstered bench seat creaked when he slid in next to her and settled her Killer Bee Sting on the slab of black agate sidelining as a coaster. He casually draped an arm across the ledge topping the tufted booth, ignoring his own drink. Mara snuggled her breasts against the rounded edge of the table and lust shot straight to his groin. Good gods, how could he concentrate on anything other than the tempting swells of those perfect globes?

Her lips wrapped around the straw protruding from the glass with a soft pucker. He silently groaned, his overactive imagination conjuring an image of those full, pillowy lips wrapped around his suddenly iron-hard cock.

She ran the tip of her tongue over her lips, savoring the residue of her drink with a faint *mmm* of appreciation. He swallowed hard. *Kill me, now.*

"Are you sure I should be sitting here?" Worrying her bottom lip, Mara glanced towards the bar. "What if Jerrick shows up and we miss him?"

"We won't."

Mara looked unconvinced. "It's pretty crowded in here. He could slip in and out with us none the wiser. For all we know, we missed crossing paths with him all night."

She was way too astute for a woman with two and a quarter Killer Bee Stings sloshing around in her stomach. "Here, have another sip." He nudged the glass closer to her. "Believe me, if Jerrick crossed our path anytime tonight he'd have stopped by and said howdy." *If you could call planting a fist in my face the same as saying howdy.* Definitely not a discrepancy Mara needed to be aware of.

The music pouring from the club's high-tech sound system throbbed with an erotic beat. A couple—apparently too boozed up to feel remotely shy—writhed together in a close facsimile of sexual rapture. Mara stared at the pair, her eyes nearly popping from their sockets. It took every ounce of willpower he possessed not to chuckle.

"I've never seen two women dance so...close," Mara said, her voice full of awe.

He wasn't about to tell her the *women* in question were really men. Just another discrepancy she was better off not knowing. He reached for her drink, fully intent on reminding her of its presence, when a familiar face drifted past the writhing couple.

Every muscle in Dash's body tensed. *Son of a bitch.*

Mara must have caught on that something was wrong because she leaned towards him with an anxious frown. “Is it Jerrick? Do you see him?”

Dash shook his head without losing contact with the face in the crowd. “A business acquaintance I’d rather not see at the moment.” That was putting it mildly. Franz Ciscero was one mean asshole. And that gentler side of his nature was reserved for his close friends and comrades. To everyone else, he was affectionately known as the King of Pain.

“In thief code, what exactly constitutes a business acquaintance?”

He didn’t miss the wariness in Mara’s voice. “I divested him of his prized thoroughbred Morrt’mar stallion.”

She gasped. “Those stallions are worth a million merca and upward.”

“I know. That’s partly why I stole it.” He kept his focus trained on Franz Ciscero as the man stopped to converse with a woman standing near the edge of the dance floor. A snake tattoo curled up the woman’s thigh, its diamond-shaped head disappearing beneath her leather miniskirt. She looked like one tough chick, capable of grinding Franz’s balls under the heel of her stiletto boots. Which explained why Franz was trying to make time with her. Ciscero always was one kinky bastard.

“What was the other reason?”

“Hm?” Dash kept his attention trained on the dance floor. The multi-paned glass ball suspended over the dancing couples threw prisms of blue light on Ciscero and the woman, creating an eerie effect across their faces.

“You said you stole the stallion partly for the merca. What was the other reason?”

“I saw him whip the snot out of a boy. I think the kid belonged to one of the workers in Ciscero’s textile plants. Stupid bastard found creative ways to punish workers who weren’t meeting their production quota.” He shrugged. “I could have given him a good ass kicking, but the horse theft hit him where it really hurt—his coin purse.”

Mara’s silence surprised him. Here he’d handed her a perfect opportunity for chastising his line of work and she chose to stay mute. He risked giving her a quick glance. An indefinable emotion softened her features and cast a dreamy glow in her big eyes.

Oh shit. The last thing he wanted was her looking at him with delusions of heroism floating in her head. Not when he had plans for her later involving his bed, the chaise lounge in the corner of his room, and very likely the dresser and both end tables. If either of their bodies possessed an ounce of energy after all that, there was always the balcony. The idea of taking her from behind while she gripped the glass rail held great appeal. Hell with it, maybe they should start out there first.

Franz stepped away from the tattooed woman. Apparently he’d struck out. Dash’s grin slipped when Ciscero strode towards the bar.

Son of a— Dash jerked his head around, looking for any exits that wouldn't cross Ciscero's path, but spotted none. Damn it, he should have ducked out five minutes ago. He usually wasn't this stupid. Mara and her dress had short-circuited his brain.

Thinking fast, he scooted close to her. "Okay, this'll have to do."

She frowned. "What will— *Hey!*"

Before the protest finished squeaking from Mara, he gripped her waist and dragged her onto his lap. He pulled her head down and pressed his lips a hairsbreadth away from hers. "Here's the thing. Ciscero is approaching the bar. If he sees me, all hell is going to break loose. We don't want that."

A shaky breath escaped her and puffed against his chin. "No, definitely not. But I still don't understand why I'm straddling your lap."

"If Ciscero glances over here, he'll take us for a couple lovebirds having a good time."

"Um, I'm not exactly having a good time. The table is biting into my spine and one of the buttons on this seat is indenting my knee. Both hurt like a mother-you-know-whatter."

He nudged the table back with the toe of his kidskin loafer before reaching for her leg and reshifting it. "Better?"

She nodded. Instead of removing his hand, he left it to linger on her silky thigh. His fingers brushed her skin lightly and he heard her breath catch.

"Ah...is he at the bar yet?"

Dash watched Ciscero amble past the bar and leave through the rear door. The sign posted over the door proclaimed it exit only. Unless Franz planned on walking all the way around the building, he'd just bid The Fairies' Grotto good night. "Yeah, coast isn't clear." *I'm going to burn in hell for this.*

"What do you think we should do?"

His hand crept beneath the hem of her dress. "Put on a convincing act." He followed the curve of her thigh upward until he encountered the stretch of elastic across her hip. She stiffened and he soothed her with a gentle knead from his fingers. "You're wearing the same pink panties from our first encounter." His voice sounded like gravel that'd seen too much tread.

She leaned back and stared at him. "Can you see through clothing?"

Thank gods he couldn't. He was hard enough just dealing with the temptation straddling his lap. "I remember the little rosettes on the elastic."

Her stare bypassed curiosity and went straight to incredulous. "Okay, you pay way too much attention to detail."

He chuckled. "It's all about the details, *Sher 'tian*. Any thief worth his salt knows that."

"Oh really." She made a snorting sound that turned into a hiccup. "See, told you I had too much to drink."

Looking to get her mind off that subject, he curved his hands over the swell of her ass, his fingers barely teasing the edge of her panties.

Her eyes widened. “What are you doing?”

“Don’t tell me you’ve forgotten about Ciscero already.” Shaking his head, he cupped her butt cheeks, massaging them firmly.

“Ahh...no.” Her hands moved to clutch at his shoulders. “But—”

He cut her short by nipping her throat. She gasped and rocked forward, hips undulating. It was all the invitation he needed. With a growl, he pressed her against his erection, bearing up at the same time with blinding precision. Her hands dug into his shoulders and he gyrated his hips in a move guaranteed to make her eyes cross.

Her breathing rushed in a staccato stream past his ear, making lust bullet through his bloodstream. His control teetered a dangerous line. If he didn’t step back from the edge, he’d take her right there with an audience in full view. And he wouldn’t give a damn. He sank his fingers into her flesh, intending to ease her off him.

“*Oh gods...*I think I’m going to...” Mara stiffened, right before her body shuddered in climax. She muffled her keening cry against the side of his face.

He groaned, aroused beyond reason by the soft, feminine gasps breaking beneath his ear and the realization that she just came—at record speed, no less—in a crowded room. He wanted to give her an even more explosive orgasm in the privacy of their hotel room. Several of them. Tilting his head, he nuzzled her neck and released a ragged breath. “Let’s get out of here.”

“I don’t think I can move,” she said weakly, slumping against him.

“Try.” Hell, he’d carry her if he had to. Whatever it took to get her naked and in his bed within the next ten minutes. Or better yet, five.

He lifted his head. At first she refused to meet his gaze, apparently embarrassed by what just transpired.

She finally looked at him, her cheeks wearing a pretty shade of pink. “What about your friend at the bar? And Jerrick? Shouldn’t we keep searching for him?”

“Ciscero left a few minutes ago. As for Jerrick, I doubt he’s still prowling this late.”

Sensing her uncertainty, he dipped his head and kissed the side of her neck. Sometimes a fellow was forced to play dirty. He felt the hitch in her breathing, right before she sighed.

“I guess there’s no point...staying.”

Resisting the urge to shout his triumph, he lifted her from his lap and took her hand. He paced his stride, trying not to rush her towards the exit. Outside the night curled around them, crisp and heady with promise. All his dreams were about to come true. In return, he’d make Mara one deliriously satisfied woman before the night ended.

He squeezed her hand and sent her a look of smoldering promise before rounding the corner of the building.

A fist came out of nowhere, plowing into the side of his skull.

For a second, the only things Dash could focus on were the spinning of his hat on the walkway and Mara's shriek competing with the ringing inside his head. He staggered sideways, shielding Mara with his body. Whatever retribution Ciscero had planned was meant for him, not her. If the bastard so much as looked cross-eyed at her, he'd splinter every bone in his body.

"That's been a hell of a long time coming."

The deep baritone brought Dash's body around in a jerking pivot. *Oh bloody hell.* He stared at Jerrick Hunter's livid face.

Chapter Eleven

Mara stared at the two males facing off in front of her, her heart attempting to beat a hasty exit. *What now?* After the Gromache and the mechanic, she couldn't handle much more excitement. But judging from the hostility brewing around her, the excitement was just revving into high gear.

She edged around Dash and the tall, muscular individual with the murderous glower.

The stranger's gaze shifted to her, took its sweet time scoping every inch of her body, before flicking back to Dash. "Lost? This is my turf, asshole."

"*Your* turf?" Dash gritted the words past clenched teeth. "Did you forget? If not for me, you wouldn't know how to pick a basic lock."

Mara groaned while the two continued to visually size each other for body bags. Hoping she wasn't about to make a monstrosity stupid mistake, she sidled between them and shot Mr. Tall, Buff and Angry a beseeching look. "Please don't kill each other. I kind of need him."

"Is that right?" The steel in the blue eyes trained on her melted into molten heat. "Why settle? The good time he gave you in The Fairies Grotto—I can do better. Way better."

Scorching heat crawled under Mara's skin. He saw what happened back there? She gulped and scouted for a handy rock she could die under.

"You were spying on us?" A dangerous undercurrent knifed through Dash's tone. He stepped forward.

Wary of the aggressive energy both males radiated, Mara edged between them. Her heel slipped out from beneath her and she tottered. A hand snagged her elbow.

"Let her go." A menacing growl rumbled from Dash when his harsh command went unheeded. "*Now*, Jerrick."

Mara's mouth fell open. *Jerrick?* She whirled around, nearly toppling over again in the process. Unable to help it, she laughed. "Jeez, and here we almost gave up on looking for you. The sisters of fate *are* looking over me today."

Dash muttered something beneath his breath that she couldn't quite make out.

"Why the hell were you looking for me?" A scowl whipped across Jerrick's face. "Sonofabitch. I'm the one you've been trying to bait the last three hours?"

"You were spying on us for *three hours*?" The incredulity in Dash's voice matched his expression. "Good gods, do you not have a life?"

Jerrick crossed his muscular arms and the sleeves of his black tee shirt inched upward, revealing the lower half of an intricate tattoo on his right deltoid. “When I first spotted you tonight I figured I was seeing things, because no way would you be shit-brained enough to come back here.” Jerrick’s eyes glittered with malice. “Guess I was wrong.”

Okay, standing between two males who looked ready to beat each other to a bloody pulp obviously wasn’t the smartest idea. She tried wiggling free, but Dash bracketed an arm around her waist. Heat radiated from his palm and seeped through the silky fabric of her dress, making her uncomfortably aware of the intimate responses he provoked from her body. She tried to unobtrusively dislodge his arm from her waist. Her attempt only made his grip tighten.

“Does it really matter who was following who?” She disguised her clenched teeth with a forced smile. “Bottom line, we need your help.”

“Do you now?” Jerrick’s harsh laugh quashed Mara’s hopes.

It didn’t take a genius to realize the animosity between he and Dash wasn’t going away any time soon. Question was how deep did this rift between them go? And how much would it impact his willingness to divulge the whereabouts of the Rhyann rune?

Only one way to find out. She took a deep breath and expelled it forcefully. “We’re looking—”

“The rune,” Dash broke in, his tone flat and deadly. “Where is it?”

Huh. She hadn’t expected him to get right to the point. Still, it would have saved her some blabbering if he’d gotten around to it a wee bit sooner.

A slab of granite looked less rigid than Jerrick’s face. “You came back for the rune? Should have saved yourself the trip.” Giving a derisive snort, he stepped back from the circle of light spilling from the streetlamp.

“Wait!” Mara strained against Dash’s vise-like hold. She couldn’t let Jerrick disappear into the shadows. Not when he held Gideon’s future in his hands. “I’ll pay you for your time. Surely this thing between you and Dash can be put aside in exchange for—”

“This *thing* between us?” Jerrick stepped back under the lamplight, revealing an expression alive with fury. “I caught the sonofabitch in bed with my wife-to-be.” His cold stare didn’t waver from hers, not even when she winced at his harsh accusation. “Keep your damn merca. I’d rot in debtor’s purgatory before helping him.”

His shoulders stiff, Jerrick turned and stalked off. His abrupt departure ripped a hole in Mara’s heart—in more ways than one. She’d known Dash’s reputation when she’d walked into this mission. He was a womanizer of epic proportions. But hearing the ugly truth of it firsthand stung her like a horde of angry bees.

She shoved Dash’s arm away and whirled to face him. “How could you sleep with another’s wife-to-be? Is nothing sacred to you?”

A nerve twitched in his jaw. “I know it’s shocking to consider, but I’m not completely devoid of morals.”

“Are you saying you didn’t sleep with her?” A tiny seed of hope unfurled in her chest, sprouting the first tender shoots of faith. She wanted to believe Dash possessed integrity—that he was somehow better than the majority of his ilk.

“I don’t expect you to believe me if I say I didn’t. You wouldn’t be the first.” His casual tone belied the ember of dark emotion skating briefly across his face.

“Why doesn’t Jerrick believe you?”

Dash didn’t seem the least surprised she’d pinpointed the person responsible for his gloom and doom expression. He stooped and snagged his hat from the walkway. His eyebrows knitting in concentration, he focused on bending the hat back in shape. Just when she became convinced he wouldn’t answer, his lips twisted with a hint of annoyance. “He walked in on a situation that looked pretty damning. Hell, if I didn’t know better, I would have believed I slept with Leena.”

The name rolled off his tongue with easy familiarity. With a touch of affection. Jealousy spiked through Mara. She gritted her teeth at the unwelcome sensation. “Were you in love with her?”

His stare suggested she’d lost function of her brain. “Why would you ask such an insane thing?”

“It almost seemed like it, the way you said her name.” She caught the beginnings of his grin and hurried to cover her tracks. “Not that I care or anything.”

“Leena and I were friends once upon a time, nothing more. Does that ease your worrisome heart?”

She tucked her lips tight, giving herself precious seconds to organize the necessary words. “Look, all I care about is figuring out how we’re going to smooth this complication with Jerrick.” Not a complete lie. Getting Jerrick on their side remained her top priority. The complicated mess of her emotions where Dash was concerned was better shoved in some dark corner. Out of sight, out of mind.

Dash continued fiddling with the hat’s brim. “We’ll find another way to track down the rune. I figured Jerrick for a long shot anyway.”

His overly calculated, breezy attitude triggered her suspicion.

“You never intended to meet up with him, much less ask for his help, did you?” The last two words bulleted from her mouth. “This whole night was just a big smokescreen to throw me off.” Gods, she really was a moron for falling for his line of bullshit. Not to mention the things she’d let him do to her. No, the things she’d *craved* for him to do to her...

The hot wave of embarrassment and shame cresting inside Mara threatened to crush her under its riptide. If his duplicity wasn’t a flashing sign that she needed to keep her feelings for him shoved in that dark corner, she was blind *and* stupid.

Dash’s mouth tipped in a patronizing smile. “*Sher ’tian*, don’t get excited.”

She dropped her arms and balled her fists. “Trust me...” Her voice dipped into a dangerous purr. “You haven’t seen me excited yet.”

Wariness flickered across his face. “Normally, I’d provide a perfectly ribald comeback to that, but I’ve received my quota of punches for the night.”

“You’re damn lucky I’m too tired to give you another.” She spun on her heel and strode in the direction of the hotel. An angry march would have suited her mood, but unfortunately her high heels allowed nothing more dramatic than a lurching wobble. Dash sprinted up next to her, his longer legs easily overtaking her stride.

“When you say tired, you don’t actually mean *tired*, do you?”

She slanted him a peeved look. “What else would I mean?”

He plopped his hat back over his head and his gaze drifted to her breasts. “I thought we were going to indulge in some hot Aurion monkey sex.”

Her jaw dropped at the utter obtuseness of him. Or was it an affliction ailing the entire male species in general? She gave him a withering glare. “Sorry, but you and the monkey are on your own.” With that parting shot, she strutted away.

~ * ~

Sometime around three in the morning, Mara admitted she’d wasted two frustrated hours staring at the ceiling. Pushing the covers aside, she climbed out of bed, trying not to wake Piper. The sprite continued snoring on the far pillow.

Mara paced the carpeted floor, rubbing her bare arms while self-defeating thoughts played a hellish game with her head.

“I should have gone after Jerrick.” She kicked at her discarded shoe, sending it tumbling toe over heel towards the white lacquered dresser. “Damn it, I *should* have.”

If Dash was going to continue scheming his way out of the hot seat, she’d just have to rely on her own inventiveness. The last twelve years spent honing basic survival skills had certainly given her plenty of practice in that department. And she hadn’t endured being drugged, trapped in a snare, and copious amounts of Gromache spit just to tuck her tail between her legs and admit defeat. *Hell no.*

She stalked towards the balcony. Forsaking her robe, she yanked the filmy curtains aside and unlatched the glass door. Her bare toes curled, seeking shelter from the cool breeze. The knee-length cotton chemise she wore didn’t offer much protection from the elements, but the brisk air cleared the remaining doubts clinging for dear life and scattered them to the wind.

The rail beckoned. Heeding its call, she leaned forward, curling her hands over the slick glass surface. Sixty stories below, the city of Tul’dea resembled a miniature fairy village with its white-lighted trees. She almost felt like a goddess peering down from her palace in the clouds. The idea made her mouth curl in

derision. *Yeah, right. Imagine me anything but a lowly serf.* All the fresh air must have sucked the reality from her brain.

A soft click sounded to her right. She jerked her head around in time to spot Dash slipping silently through the door farther down the balcony. Other than a pair of navy blue briefs that molded to him like a second skin, he was deliciously bare to the night.

She stared at him, desperately willing her contempt to make an appearance. Her traitorous emotions refused to obey.

He padded towards her, the blinking purple lights on his collar casting strange neon shadows across his face and chest. Their constant flashing must be annoying as hell.

A yawn stretching his mouth, he settled beside her. "Couldn't sleep?"

"Not really." Reaching out, she pushed her thumb against one of the collar's blinking lights, temporarily dimming it. "This must drive you nuts."

"The first night it made sleeping difficult. Now I'm used to it."

Her surveillance moved from the collar. His bare chest, particularly the sculpted curve of his breastbone, garnered her rapt fascination. When she realized how close her hand hovered near temptation, she snatched it away. At a loss for what to do with it, she returned the recalcitrant appendage to the rail, curling it beside its partner.

He stared at her hands for several minutes. She cleared her throat. Breaking from his odd trance, he granted her a sleepy half smile that was too sexy for words. "Sorry. My mind was conjuring a memory from earlier."

She lifted a hand, trying to smother a yawn. What was it with yawns anyway that made them so damn contagious? "Hmm, was it a good memory?"

Dash's amber gaze smoldered like a banked fire. "*Real* good."

His velvet-riding-over-gravel tone pricked goose bumps along her arms. "On second thought, this fresh air isn't doing much for my insomnia." She started to push away from the rail. Dash moved behind her, his chest an unyielding wall of heat. He stood so close the hair on his legs tickled the backs of her calves.

She fought to still the trembling in her limbs.

"You know, there's one surefire cure for insomnia." His fingertips followed the trail of goose bumps down her arms. "Some hot...sweaty..." the unmistakable bulge of his erection nudged the small of her back, just above her buttocks, "...mind-blowing sex."

Her fragile thread of control threatened to snap.

The coaxing press of Dash's flesh and the dark promise of his words were fierce warriors. She swallowed hard, her senses on overload. There was no drugged wine muddying her logic this time. No fae

magic. Nothing she could pass the blame to. Just her own pathetically weak willpower. “Didn’t we have a conversation about this earlier? I distinctly recall shooting you down.”

“Yeah, you and the monkey both.” His teasing chuckle brushed against her ear, making her shiver. “But I thought perhaps...you’d let me change your mind.” Combing his fingers through her hair, he gently whisked the strands over one shoulder. Feather-light kisses skipped down her nape.

Knowing he was most likely working her for his own devious motives didn’t stop her body from melting like butter beneath his touch. “If I caved, would you agree to tracking down Jerrick again and begging for his help?”

His answer came two seconds too late. “Yes.”

“You’re lying.” She pivoted inside the cage of Dash’s arms and glared up into his shadowed face. “Is there anything you *won’t* say in hopes of getting your way or saving your own ass?”

“I admit my motives haven’t always been sterling. But I’m not lying when I say I want you. With an intensity bordering on torture.” The slave collar’s flashing lights threw the rugged planes of his face in harsh relief, as if verifying his agony. “I’ve lusted after diamonds and rubies worth millions of merca, and still none of those things brought me to my knees like you manage to do.”

Her heart pounded wildly, drowning out all else. *Don’t fall for his bullshit again, you moron.* “You expect me to believe that?” Furious, she shoved against his chest. “I don’t have that kind of power.”

“You do...over me.” He cradled her face within the warmth of his palms. “Stop fighting it. You know we’re meant to happen.”

She stared into his eyes, struggling for control. What he offered was...impossible. “No, we’re not happening. Got it? I *won’t* give in to you.” The words came out in a fierce hiss. She had to prove it, more to herself than him, that she alone controlled her fate. Not him. Certainly not her body’s hunger for him. Too much responsibility rode on her shoulders to bow to that weakness.

Knocking his hands away, she grabbed the back of the slave collar and pulled his head down. Her mouth met his in a hungry, bruising kiss. He groaned and began snaking an arm around her shoulder. She grasped his wrist but was unable to fully manacle it inside her fist. His sheer size and strength overpowered hers, but she parried it with emotional fury and the rake of her fingernails into his scalp.

“I could walk away from you right now without a backward glance.” Her cold whisper brushed against his lips, punctuating her determination.

He tugged his head back, his narrowed eyes glittering. “You’ve an interesting way of throwing down the gauntlet.” His chest rose and fell rapidly with his ragged breaths. “Fine, game on.”

She barely had time to remoisten her lips before he crushed them beneath his. His tongue invaded her mouth, asserting its dominance. She sparred back, sinking her teeth into his bottom lip. Their battle over supremacy drove them from the balcony rail and they thudded against the door leading into her room. He trumped her by wedging her against the glass. She counter-maneuvered by kicking his nearest foot away,

widening his stance until he was forced to plant his hand on the door for support. Again he upped the ante with a provocative bump and grind against her pelvis.

His tongue retreated from her mouth and traveled down the slope of her neck. Panting, she fought her body's instinctual desire to arch into him. Fingers plainly skilled in the art of pleasure cupped her breast. She bit back a moan. Sneaky bastard didn't play fair.

"I could make you come. Right here and now, if I wanted to." Dash dipped his tongue into the hollow at the base of her throat and flirted with the erratic drum of her pulse. "But where's the fun in that? Instead, I'm going to take you in my bed and explore every delicious nook of your body. Only when you're out of your head with pleasure and begging for the climax you're desperate for, will I slide deep in here." His hand left her breast and slid between her legs.

She swallowed with some difficulty. "Pretty detailed plan you've got there."

"Something needed to occupy my mind the last few days."

"What if I say no?"

"You won't." The pad of his thumb rubbed her through the chemise and his grin turned infuriatingly arrogant when she gasped and arched into his hand. "Your body won't let you."

Those were precisely the words she needed to hear. She slipped under his arm and reached for the door handle. Ducking inside her room, she slammed the door and twisted the lock. The last thing she saw before sliding the curtains in place was the stunned expression on Dash's face.

Chapter Twelve

“How damn difficult can it be tracking down a thief on my own?” Hell, she’d managed just fine once before.

Mara dragged her brush one last time through her hair. Giving up on the uncooperative curls, she tossed the brush onto the marble ledge above the bathroom sink and stalked into the main room. Her corded vest hung from the back of the chair angled in front of the dresser. She tossed it on over her blouse and jammed her feet into her sandals. Shooting a glare at Dash’s door, she exited the room.

Her mood lightened considerably on the ride down to the lobby. Hard to be a sourpuss when the glass-enclosed lift announced each floor with such cheery enthusiasm. Really, who knew machinery could be so perky?

“Have a lovely day,” the lift chirped when she reached the lobby.

“Um, you too.” Wagging her fingers in a departing wave, she stepped out and crossed to the spacious front entrance.

Outside, the streets bustled with morning activity. It was quite a different vibe from the party scene the night before. A vendor stood outside a kiosk displaying vials filled with mysterious substances. He spotted her and rushed forward, brandishing several of the vials in one of his hairy-knuckled hands.

“M’lady, this is your lucky day. Normally I charge big merca for my amazing cure-alls, but since your beauty has addled my brain, I’m going to cut you a deal.”

Not wishing to be rude in the face of his effusive and rather over-the-top flattery, she sent him a patient smile. “Thanks, but I don’t need—”

“This here is my most popular potion.” The man waved a vial brimming with a sparkly pink liquid in front of her. “It’ll make your feller randy as a Weliker hound.”

Mara stared at the vial in horror. *Oh jeez, I definitely don’t need that.*

The vendor slapped his forehead. “What was I thinking? Pretty thing such as you doesn’t need help hoisting her man’s rigging.”

A choked laugh sputtered from Mara. *Rigging?*

“No worries. I’ll find you the perfect potion.” The vials clinked musically when, with a sleight of hand, the vendor shuffled them. A small child dressed in a raggedy tunic that drooped on his bony shoulders approached the kiosk, gaining the man’s eagle-eyed attention. “Off with you,” he bellowed, shaking a fist at the boy.

The child scurried down the walkway.

Mara leveled an accusing glare on the vendor. "You scared him."

"Good. He's a filthy runt." The vendor gave a final shake of his fist before turning back to her. He took one look at her face and gave an anxious stutter. "He's a thief, m'lady. Don't feel sorry for him."

"Maybe, but he's also just a child."

"Those are the ones you have to watch out for. They're fast and too crafty for their own good. I can't tell you how much merchandise I've lost to the likes of them." The vendor appraised the front display of his kiosk. His face suddenly darkened with rage. He stormed to the baskets and thumped a fist hard on the table, making the vials roll and click together. "Two vials are missing! That's it—I'm siccing the law enforcers on the little mongrel. He can't keep robbing me blind if he's locked behind the fairy prison's bars."

Mara blinked at the vendor's harsh pronouncement. She felt for his plight, but at the same time her heart went out to the dirty-faced child. In tough times, people would do whatever it took to survive. And the fairy prison was no place for a small, defenseless boy. "Here," she said, rooting in her pocket. "I'll recompense you for whatever he took."

"M'lady, you are as kind as you are beautiful. For that, I'll sell you my most requested potion for a fraction of its value."

Mara shook her head and popped her coin purse open. "No, really. I don't—"

"It's guaranteed to bring you the most restful slumber you've ever experienced."

His boast made her head snap up. "Hey, that I can use. How much?"

The vendor's smile stretched wide, revealing a mouthful of stained, crooked teeth. Apparently none of his potions contained a cure-all for bad oral hygiene. "For you, ten merca."

She nodded and pulled out the necessary currency.

"Never settle for the first offer," said a deep baritone behind her. "Especially from a thief."

Her hand reflexively tightened around the merca resting in her palm. Pivoting, she stared blankly at Jerrick. She was so shocked to see him it took a moment to find her tongue. "You've got it wrong...he's sort of the victim here."

"That's what he wants you to think." Jerrick focused on the vendor, a hardened glint in his eyes. "The boy works for him. They run quite a lucrative business, from what I hear."

Mara glared at the vendor. "That's despicable. He's a *child*."

The old man had the audacity to shrug his thin shoulders. "I pay him a quarter of the profit." He slid a nervous glance Jerrick's way before giving her a pleading look. "Look, no harm done. Please accept this vial as my apology."

She pinched her lips together. "No thanks. I doubt it even works." Judging from his shady business dealings, it'd be a miracle if it did anything beyond rob innocent people of their hard-earned merca.

“But it does, m’lady.” The man’s head bobbed with vigorous enthusiasm. “I give it to my wife whenever I tire of her endless nagging. Believe me, her snores are far easier for my ears to take.”

What sounded suspiciously close to a chuckle snuck from Jerrick. Mara turned and nearly keeled over in shock at the sight of him grinning. The expression made him look approachable and...downright gorgeous.

“Take it.” Jerrick gestured towards the vendor. “If his persistence is anything like his wife’s alleged nagging, it’s the only way you’ll get rid of him.”

Mara reluctantly plucked the vial from the vendor’s outstretched hand. The man gave Jerrick a wide berth as he scurried to the safety of his kiosk. Tucking the vial into her pocket, she peered up at Jerrick. A soft laugh scooted between her lips. “The sisters of fate really are sprinkling their good-luck dust on me.”

The corner of Jerrick’s mouth quirked. “Sure, give them all the credit. Not like I was the one who kept you from getting scammed.”

“Mm, true—for which I owe you my everlasting thanks. But the bit of fate I meant is us running into each other.”

“Fate had nothing to do with it. I was waiting for you.”

“Really?” She blinked, trying to wrap her mind around the idea of him casing the front of the hotel, on the lookout for her. *Wait a minute. How did he even know where to find me?* Before she could vocalize the question, he took her elbow and steered her around the sailcloth-shaded kiosk, angling them away from the light flow of pedestrian traffic. His eyes never left hers, but his big body seemed on high alert. For what, she didn’t know. Maybe thieves were naturally edgy that way. Probably came with the territory.

A beam of sunlight snuck across the kiosk’s roof and bounced off the side of Jerrick’s head, making the sun-kissed streaks in his sable hair more pronounced. “What are you doing with him?”

She cocked her head. To say his question was vague and cryptic was an understatement. Still, she had a good inkling he wasn’t talking about the devious vendor. “By him, I assume you’re referring to Dash?”

Jerrick’s jaw clenched, providing her with the answer. She wrapped her arms around her chest to ward off the sudden arctic front blowing off him. “It’s kind of a long story.”

A tight smile barely cracked his expression. “Lucky for you, I’ve got time to waste.” He swept an assessing glance down the walkway. “But we’re not airing our business here.”

“Okay, so where do you—?” Mara broke off when Jerrick stepped around her and slung an arm across her shoulders. In the amount of time it took her brain to formulate a protest at his presumptuous behavior, he’d hustled her away from the kiosk.

Down the street, he ushered her inside a small dining hall. The clatter of eating utensils provided a musical backdrop to the buzz of conversations floating inside the cramped room. Jerrick led her to a table situated close to the kitchen, and she plopped onto one of the clear Lucite chairs. She frowned at the cacophony coming from the kitchen. “It’s noisy back here.”

“Good.” Jerrick removed his black leather jacket and sank into the seat neighboring hers. He grabbed the cup resting in the saucer in front of him and flipped it right side up before glancing at her. “Easier to keep our conversation private.”

The close proximity of his large and rather intimidating frame made her nerves tingle. So much so, her fingers trembled when she righted her own cup. The wariness prickling her skin didn’t resemble the flush of heat she felt whenever Dash invaded her space. Not that Jerrick wasn’t bone-melting sexy, because he was. But he was also a stranger who exuded a dark, dangerous energy that any woman with half a brain would wisely steer clear of.

A male server approached and filled their cups with the Jufferi tea sloshing in his carafe before rushing off to collect eating utensils for them. Her hand still shaking, Mara lifted her cup, thankful when she didn’t spill its contents all over her pants. She took a cautious sip and blinked away tears when she scalded her tongue on the aromatic brew.

Jerrick leaned back in his seat, but the tiny hairs standing at full attention along her nape didn’t let her forget his presence.

“I’m going to give you a piece of advice.”

“Hmm?” Frowning, she glanced over her shoulder and met his penetrating stare.

“Don’t make friends with someone who’ll only fuck you over.”

She settled the cup back in its saucer before peering up at him. “Trust me, I’m in full agreement with you there.”

He made a sound halfway between a snort and a grunt. “Then why the hell are you hanging around with a thief?”

“Hey, you’re the one who dragged me here.”

His eyes narrowed and she puffed out a sigh. So much for cracking through his ice with a little breezy humor. “Dash and I have a...complicated relationship.”

Relationship? The word spun in Mara’s head, mocking her. It was too pretty a name for what they shared. She refocused on Jerrick and realized he was watching her intently. Patiently. “Maybe I should start from the beginning.”

“Good idea.” Jerrick’s rich baritone came with a heaping side dish of sarcasm.

The server returned with utensils and scribbled their orders on his touchpad. Once he scurried off, Mara made short work laying out the story of her and Dash’s predicament, filling in the most pertinent blanks before their morning repasts arrived.

“So that’s why he returned for the rune.” Jerrick didn’t seem much interested in the fluffy eggs piled on his plate and instead stared at her.

She, on the other hand, was starving. All this talk of Dash was stimulating her appetite. Looking to appease her complaining stomach and get her mind on more productive thoughts, she nibbled on a corner

of the yummy, toasted nut bread. “Um, yeah.” She covered her lips, self-conscious about talking around a mouthful of food.

A little spark of vengeance twinkled in Jerrick’s eyes. “And that thing around his neck really zapped him?” He’d seemed particularly intrigued in that part of the story—to the point of cracking a wide grin.

“Yep, but the collar’s under control now. No more of that nonsense.”

“Pity.”

She rolled her eyes before taking another bite of the toast. “You’re kind of bloodthirsty, aren’t you?”

“Only when it comes to that son of a bitch.”

The nut bread’s flavor suddenly resembled sawdust when she took in Jerrick’s stony expression. If he and Dash managed to iron out their troubles long enough to track down the Rhyann rune, it’d be a freaking miracle.

“Dash insists he never slept with Leena.” The other female’s name sat on her tongue like a rotten fish head, but she tried not to show her distaste. For one thing, it made her look worse than a jealous shrew. Plus, the woman *was* Jerrick’s ex. She didn’t want to say or do anything to offend him.

“He’s a liar.”

“True, but perhaps not about this.” She gestured with the hand holding the piece of toast and a sprinkle of bread crumbs landed in her lap. With a quick brush of her fingers, she swept them free. “Do you think there’s any chance you might have misread the situation?”

“They were buck naked in bed together. What do you think?”

She picked off a corner of the crust, not seeing any hope on the horizon. “Okay, if you can’t do this for Dash, will you do it for me?”

“I’m a thief. We’re not known for being very altruistic.”

“I’ll pay you...or something.”

One side of Jerrick’s mouth tugged upward. “The *something* part has me intrigued.”

She pinched her lips together. “I was going to offer my cleaning services. Gods, you males are all the same.”

Jerrick laughed. The sound was both delightful and unexpected. “I can see why he couldn’t keep his hands off you last night. You’re the perfect blend of sex and sass.”

Mara felt her cheeks start to burn. Rather than crawling beneath the table like she longed to do, she bit off a big chunk of the bread.

“Not to mention my brother’s always had a hard spot for pretty humans.”

It took a full thirty seconds for his words to register. When they did, she choked on a mouthful of toast.

“*Brother?*” she sputtered, gaping at him.

Chapter Thirteen

Dash paced in front of the door connecting his and Mara's room. If he kept at it, the rug wouldn't have any nap left. "This is stupid. *I* don't have anything to apologize for. She wasn't the one suffering all night with a killer case of blue balls."

He halted, reaching for the door's lock pad. *Pansy ass*. Growling, he yanked his hand away and shoved it deep in his trouser pocket before stalking towards the bed. Midway across the room, he executed an about-face and stormed back to the door. Before he could temper the urge, he punched the green button.

The door instantly slid open and he grunted in surprise. She must not have armed her side of the door. "And here I suffered all night for no reason." He stepped into Mara's room. A sound similar to yowling Gorinna cats filled the air. Frowning, he glanced around.

No one occupied the bed—not that he'd expected it with the horrendous caterwauling damn near making his eardrums bleed. A person couldn't sleep in the face of that torture.

Movement across the room caught his eye. Stepping past the bed, he spied Piper shaking her hips in front of the tall looking glass bolted to the dresser. She lifted her arms over her head and waggled her fingers as her screechy soprano accompanied the atrocity pounding through the room's recessed speakers. Her yowl turned into a shriek when she spotted him in the looking glass.

She spun around and stamped her feet, coming damn near close to falling off the side of the dresser. "Are you trying to kill me of fright?"

"Don't blame me. This music is gods-awful enough to kill anyone."

Piper snapped her fingers. The yowling blessedly stopped. "You wouldn't know fabulous music if it bit you in the behind."

"Yeah, well, from the sound of that crap, something was getting bit in the behind. And not in a good way. What the bloody hell was that racket?"

The sprite slapped her hands on her hips and tipped her nose in the air. "It's called frodelling. Perfect for grooving to."

She couldn't be serious. Shaking his head, he ambled to the bathroom and looked inside. The water shield hung limply to the side of the bathing cubicle, revealing an empty stall. Moisture still beaded its glass block tiles. He pushed from the doorframe. His gaze detoured again to the bed. It in no way resembled the sheet-tangled mess back in his room. The visible proof of Mara's toss-free slumber really chapped his ass. He had half a mind to throw the pillows to the floor and stomp on the coverlet.

“What are you looking for?”

He swung around and met Piper’s puzzled frown. “Mara. Where the hell is she?”

“Dunno. She was long gone before I got up.”

His gut clenched at the idea of Mara alone and clueless in an environment teeming with characters who’d gladly give her a taste of Tul’dea’s seedy side. Swearing beneath his breath, he rushed from the room.

Once outside, he skulked the busy streets, his thoughts centering on one thing only—getting his hands on Mara’s rear end and spanking it until she promised not to run off unescorted again. That line of thinking got his blood pumping for more than one reason. Pushing aside the tempting visual of his hand splayed around the sweet curve of her butt cheek, he peeked inside an opened shop door. The sweet, clinging perfume of roses tickled his nose. Just inside the doorway, a shelf filled with feminine toiletries marked the source of the flowery aroma.

No female in existence could walk by a girly shop without stopping inside. It was some sort of law amongst their species. Maybe he’d be lucky, and the shopkeeper had seen Mara recently. If he were really lucky, Mara might actually be inside, looking over the trove of goodies. Mentally crossing his fingers, he walked into the shop.

Several females huddled in pairs, sniffing appreciatively at the pretty packages adorning the lace-strewn shelves. None of them resembled his infuriating *Sher ’tian*. Swiveling on his heel, he ambled to the rear of the shop, where a human female hunkered over a large book spread open across the payment desk.

“*L’argo te.*”

The female’s head lifted at his greeting and her oversized eyeglasses slid down the bridge of her nose. She pushed them back in place, blinking at him behind their magnifying lenses. She returned the traditional greeting before setting her micro-computing pen aside. “Can I help you?”

“Yes, I’m looking for a female human who might have been browsing your shop earlier this morning. Her hair is blonde, close to the same shade as yours, only a bit longer. About here,” he said, marking the area just above his biceps.

The shopkeeper took a step back, her eyes widening behind the glasses. “Dash?”

He blinked. *Oh shit*. This was what he got for running out of the hotel half-cocked and without so much as his measly hat to provide obscurity. Of course, the last place he’d expected to run into someone from his past was a girly toiletry shop.

While he returned the stare of the petite female in front of him, Dash realized he faced another problem. He had no clue of the woman’s identity. Which didn’t speak well if he’d entertained her in bed. *Good gods, I know I haven’t slept with so many females I can’t remember their faces.*

“Fancy meeting you here.” He mentally blotted the sweat beading on his forehead. “How’ve you been?”

Her glasses slipped down again and she peered at him over their cobalt blue frame. “It’s *me*, you pea brain. Avily...Avily Donahoe.”

It was his turn to give her a disbelieving look. “I don’t think so. Avily is a kid.”

“Sure—fifteen years ago. When you last saw me, you bonehead.” She stepped out from behind the payment desk and sidled up to him until she stood close enough he could easily count the freckles scattered on her fair skin.

Yes, the pert little nose and sparkling green eyes were the same. Could this really be Leena’s baby sister? The same pipsqueak kid who’d trailed after him and Jerrick like a lost pup? “Hell, kid, you’ve gone and grown up on me.”

“Well duh, you moron.”

Laughing, he grabbed her waist and swung her into a fierce hug.

“Dash, I have *customers*.”

Her indignant hiss only made him laugh harder and squeeze tighter. Avily gasped for breath and he gave her a quick kiss atop the crown of her shiny hair before planting her on her feet. “Sorry, couldn’t help myself. It’s just incredible seeing you after all these years.”

Avily peered up at him, worry shrouding her expression. “What are you doing back here? You know there’s a price on your head, right?”

He nodded and the scowl slipped back in place.

“Then I *really* don’t get what you’re doing here.” She tapped one silk-slipped foot. “I don’t remember you being such a dumb ass. What happened?”

“A woman.” He gestured towards her feet. “Running late for work this morning?”

She stopped her toe tapping. “For your information, these are part of my summer stock. They’re damn comfy too. Now tell me about this woman who’s turned you into a total dumb ass.”

Leave it to Avily to fixate on his personal humiliation. “Her name is Mara. We met under rather...unusual circumstances.” He cracked a wry grin. “And she’s an even bigger pain in my backside than you were all those years ago.”

Avily’s face lit with unabashed curiosity. “Ooo... I can’t wait to meet her.”

His head physically ached at the idea of Avily and Mara, possibly the two most exasperating females born to humankind, occupying the same room. “Not sure if you’ll have the opportunity. Soon as we pick up the rune, we’re out of here.”

“Rune?” Avily’s eyes doubled in size behind her glasses. “As in the Rhyann rune?”

Damn, did I say that part out loud? Dash scrubbed a hand across his jaw. “Uh...I need you to keep this conversation under wraps.”

“Sure, no problem.”

He dropped his hand and gave her a measuring look.

A pinkish hue crept along Avily's cheekbones. Her feistiness, something he remembered all too well, appeared on the brink of eruption. "Are you staring at me because you think I'm incapable of keeping a secret?"

He waited a beat before answering. "Of course not. I was just thinking how pretty you've become."

She crossed her arms over her chest and gave him a scathing look. "You are so full of shit."

Good gods, there's no winning with females. He issued a weary sigh. "Fine, I admit it. I was a little worried you might let my interest in the rune slip."

"To who?" Avily darted a look towards the rear of the shop before throwing her arms out. "I'm not exactly hanging out with the old gang these days."

"No?" He frowned, more than a little taken aback by the news. "Not even with Jerrick?"

An odd tension stiffened her shoulders. "I haven't spoken to him in a while."

He cocked an eyebrow. "How long is a while?"

Underneath Avily's carefully erected façade of disinterest, he detected wariness. "Five years, give or take." Her shrug was too casual to be taken seriously. She reached for a ruffled box behind her holding a stash of tissues. After plucking several free, she snatched her glasses from her nose and made a show of rubbing nonexistent smears from the lenses. "Kind of hard keeping in touch with him anyway. That brother of yours doesn't stay in one place for long."

The news staggered Dash. She and Jerrick had always been close. Sure, they'd had their moments of bickering and pointless squabbles. But *five years* without seeing each other? "Maybe you should try getting in touch with him while he's in Tul'dea."

The tissues fell from Avily's fingers and floated to the top of her slippered feet. "He's here?"

Nodding, Dash tilted his mouth in a grin. "And I'll bet your reunion will go much smoother than the one he and I shared."

She mumbled something beneath her breath. It sounded suspiciously like *fat chance*.

A customer approached the desk and Avily hurried behind it to compute the elderly woman's purchases. Dash glanced at the large, oval luminal timepiece suspended over the women's heads. Much as he'd enjoyed catching up with Avily, Mara was still out there—getting into who knows what kind of trouble. After promising Avily he'd return later, he darted out the door.

He spent close to an hour combing the streets for Mara. By the time he circled back around to the Crystal Lodge, his head was abuzz with every possible horrific situation she could get herself into. Not surprisingly, there were plenty. He rushed inside the hotel, fully intent on interviewing every single employee to see if they'd spoken to Mara and might know where she'd headed earlier.

The row of shops snagged his attention as he trekked towards the registration desk. He spied a flash of blonde curls through the nearest glass partition. Skidding to a stop, he gaped. Quick enough, his surprise morphed into outrage. While he'd been losing his mind, convinced her helpless, bound body was stuffed in

the backseat of some menacing thug's vehicle, she'd been *shopping*. True, he'd hoped earlier that might be what she was up to, but having it verified really chapped his ass.

Grinding his teeth, he stalked across the lobby. Inside the shop, he wove his way in the direction he'd last spotted Mara. He found her the next aisle over, salivating over a fancy computerized bread baker. Even while his fingers itched with the urge to wring her neck, he couldn't help smiling at her delight over the machine. Her domestic side was showing. Why else would she ignore the crown jewel of the shop—the heavily guarded display of diamond-studded serving trays.

Setting his mouth into a stern line, he stepped forward. "Where the hell have you been?"

Mara's hands jerked away from the bread baker. She swiveled and stared at him. Before he could lambaste her with the full force of his ire, she countered him with her own.

"Why didn't you tell me Jerick's your brother?"

He didn't know which caught him more unawares—her acting like the injured party, or the fact she knew Jerick was his brother. "How do—?" He stopped and mentally answered his own forthcoming question. There was only one way she'd know about Jerick. She'd tracked him down on her own.

Growling beneath his breath, he grabbed her hand. "We're finishing this upstairs."

She tried twisting free. "You know, I'm getting really sick of overbearing males."

"Tough." Tightening his grip, he tugged her towards the shop's exit.

Chapter Fourteen

Mara eyed Dash's rigid jaw while they rode the lift to the sixtieth level. What the heck did he have to be so angry about? He wasn't the one who'd been hit over the head with a big whoppin' surprise.

The doors slid open. "Have a super day," the lift chirped.

Dash snorted. "Damn machine has a twisted sense of humor." He stepped out and stalked down the hall.

Shoving her hands into her vest pockets, Mara trudged after him. He stopped outside his room and she stepped around him to key the security code into her door's lockpad.

"What are you doing?"

Her shoulders jerked at his imperious bark. Scowling, she turned to face him. "You said we were finishing this upstairs."

"In my room."

And give him the upper hand? "I don't think so."

He stared her down for a long, intense minute before reaching around her with a growl and jabbing his finger into the green button. The door slid open with a muted *whoosh* and he gave a mocking bow. Ignoring him, she stepped inside and frowned. "Where's Piper?" Damn it, she'd counted on the pesky sprite being here in case things got too heated.

"Don't ask me." His expression mulish, Dash tossed up his hands. "No one bothers telling me anything."

"This from the individual who kept his brother a secret." She walked to the balcony door and swept the curtains aside, letting in a flood of sunlight.

"I never kept Jerrick a secret. You met him, right? What more do you want?"

"Here's an idea—introducing him as your *brother*." She cocked an eyebrow in challenge.

Dash tucked his arms over his chest and gave a resigned nod. "You're right. I should have clarified our relationship."

The rest of the argument that Mara had prepared shriveled on her tongue. He sounded sincere. Maybe he hadn't deliberately set out to mislead her.

She decided to take the advice she'd given Jerrick, and give Dash the benefit of the doubt. "Well...okay. No harm done—other than spraying bread crumbs all over Jerrick when he referred to you as

his brother.” She tucked a curl behind her ear and chuckled. “Bet he’ll never sit that close to someone eating toast again.”

“The two of you shared breakfast? How cozy.” A nerve twitched above Dash’s left eye. “Did he make a move on you?”

She gaped at him, wondering if she’d missed something—like the turnoff where the conversation took its weird left turn. “No.”

“Good. Because I’d have to bust his kneecaps if he did.”

“What is it with you males always wanting to break each other’s body parts?” Rolling her eyes, she strolled to the bed and plunked her fanny on the edge of the mattress. “The file Nalia kept on you made no mention of a brother. How is that?”

“He’s my half brother, and a bastard.” Dash’s mouth crooked into a sardonic grin. “Though according to Jerrick, I’m the true bastard in the family. Regardless, other than a tight circle of friends, no one knows we’re related.”

“Were the two of you close? I mean before...” She bit her lip, unable to say it.

“You mean before he decided I betrayed him?” Bitter regret momentarily swirled in Dash’s eyes. “At one time, I would have laid down my life for Jerrick. Does that answer your question?”

His words were uttered in a surly undertone, but the hurt remained etched in his features. She hated seeing such a huge wedge between the two brothers. “Maybe if you—”

“No.” Dash’s face was a mask of stubborn resolve.

“Could you at least hear me out before you shoot me down?”

“Nothing you say will change anything. Besides, we didn’t come up here to talk about the love loss between me and my brother.” He pinned her with a censorious look. “What were you thinking gallivanting around by yourself? This isn’t Zalan, where you can come and go without worrying some lowlife will hassle you—or worse.”

“I’m perfectly capable of taking care of myself. I’ve been doing it for a while.”

He ignored her calm pronouncement and continued ranting. “If you need to go anywhere, I’ll take you. Otherwise, stay put.”

Her temper started spiking again. She grabbed one of the throw pillows and hugged it against her chest. What she really wanted to do was lob it at his head. “I don’t need an escort. And you’re not telling me when I can and can’t go out.”

“Yes, I am. Furthermore, if you pull another stunt like this morning, I’ll toss you over my knee and spank your ass red.”

“Hah,” she said, snorting. “You’re delusional if you think I’ll allow that.”

A fierce gleam blazed in Dash’s eyes. He popped the button on first one cuff then the other before rolling up his sleeves.

“What are—?” A gasp popped from her mouth and she scuttled back on the mattress when Dash began advancing on her. “You wouldn’t *dare*.”

His expression became feral. “Wanna bet?”

She hurtled the pillow at him and lunged towards the opposite side of the bed. His large palm clamped around her ankle and she shrieked. Clawing at the coverlet, she pulled it along for the ride when he dragged her kicking and squealing across the mattress. His fingers curled into her belt loops and hiked her over his waiting knee.

“So help me, if you—” She let loose an outraged wail when Dash’s palm landed with a sharp sting. *Thwaack*. His hand delivered another spank that propelled her hips into the firm muscles of his thigh.

“Are you done fighting me?” His voice held a silky menace. Instinctively, she knew he was referring to more than just her leaving the hotel unescorted this morning.

This was also about last night.

Dash’s hand smacked down again, only this time it lingered. His fingers curved on a downward glide around her butt cheek. Before she could rein it in, a moan snuck past her lips.

“I take that as a yes.” Satisfaction rumbled in his husky voice. Punishment became pleasure when he massaged his way towards the apex of her thighs.

Uh-oh, she knew what would happen if his fingers ventured too far inland. She wiggled forward, but his hand followed. He cupped—rubbed—with wicked finesse.

“*Gaahh...*” Her strangled gasp spurred him into a frenzy of motion. He flipped her onto her back and while she still bounced on the mattress, stretched over her with a predatory grace. Their eyes locked. Panting, she willed herself to move. To flee while she still had the chance. He tipped her head back, arching her neck. Her roaring heartbeat competed with the staccato breaths struggling to escape her mouth.

This must be how the helpless woodfawn felt before the lion’s fangs sank in for the kill.

His tongue flicked the base of her throat before tracing its way up to her chin. He bit her, scraping lightly with his teeth. She squirmed, her pulse drumming erratically against the pressure of his thumbs. Instead of journeying to her lips, like she’d expected, he tracked his way back down her neck. He stopped and slanted her a smoky look before his lips blazed a trail past the row of shell buttons at the top of her blouse.

One of his hands slipped from her head and pushed away the sides of her vest. He settled back on his haunches and stared at the lacey shadow of the corselette peeking beneath her blouse. Her nipples stood at eager attention beneath the thin fabric and his rapt gaze honed in on them. Groaning, he leaned down and sucked one into his mouth with a sharp tug.

Desire—hot and fierce—pulsated through her. Crying out, she bucked against Dash. A growl tore from his throat, the sound eerily reminiscent of the lion she’d envisioned. Seeking fingers slipped to the waistband of her pants and tugged at the belt, freeing its clasp.

Reality intruded like a slap upside the head. *What the hell am I doing?* She twisted beneath Dash, grabbing for his wrists. He misinterpreted the source of her panic and wrenched the belt's strap through the metal hook. Rethinking her strategy, she smacked his shoulder hard.

He reared back, his face flushed and pupils dilated. "Wha?" Apparently he was incapable of coherent speech. That made two of them.

Her breath sawed from her lungs. "Stop, I can't do this."

Tremors shook Dash as he leaned down and brushed his lips against her neck. "*Sher 'tian*, let's stop this stupid jockeying for control and give each other what we need."

Oh gods, she wanted to. Desperately. But the minute she caved to the temptation, she'd be doomed. Worse, Gideon would be doomed. She couldn't forget her responsibility to him—it was the whole reason for her being here. Well, not *here*, under Dash's magnificent body. A place she definitely didn't need to be at the moment.

She gathered every ounce of determination and, fisting her hands, shoved at him until he rolled off her with a groan. Struggling to his knees, he stared at her, his expression agonized. "Why?"

"I just...can't."

He clenched his jaw. "You accuse me of keeping secrets. How about sharing a few of your own? Such as the real reason you keep pushing me away."

She sat up and gave a quick shrug, trying her best to appear remotely innocent. "I don't have any secrets."

Eyes blazing hot, he pounced towards her, jostling the bed. A startled squeak popped from her mouth. His hands curled around her upper arms before she could escape. "Your eyes have a habit of shifting when you lie. Now spill it."

"Did it occur to you that maybe I'm just not interested in having sex with you?"

An exceedingly arrogant grin tipping his mouth, he gave her straining nipples a pointed stare. "Your eyes aren't the only things betraying you."

Damn those buggers. She pulled back from him and gauged the feasibility of making a run for it. Unfortunately, he possessed longer legs and the determination of a hound going after a steak bone. And lying wouldn't do any good. He'd already proven his ability to see right through them.

She saw no other choice—the time had come to tell him about Gideon. Her hellish past wasn't a place she wanted to revisit, and her throat constricted in rebellion at having to recount any part of it.

Shifting, she let her arms hang limp in Dash's grip. She didn't have the energy to fight him, not when it'd take every drop she possessed just to spit the story out. "I have a brother."

Dash stared at her for what seemed like forever. He blinked and the spell of silence holding his tongue hostage finally broke. "That's...nice."

His grip eased on her arms but his expression gave silent voice to a thousand unspoken questions.

“You’re wondering what he has to do with any of this.” She searched Dash’s face. Would he look down on her once he heard the whole story? She certainly wouldn’t blame him if he did. “Gideon’s the reason I’m indentured to Nalia and helping you search for the rune.”

“*Indentured?*” He dropped her arms and she sprawled backward on the mattress. “What the bloody hell does that mean?”

“I’m shackled to her for life, for piss-poor wages.”

He pinched the bridge of his nose and gave a weary exhale. “I’m familiar with the term. What I want to know is why you’re indentured to her to begin with.”

She pushed up on her elbows and blew at the curl clinging to her nose. “To save Gideon—my brother—from hanging.”

Dash braced his knees against the mattress, his vigilant gaze never leaving her face. “What did he do to earn a visit to the hangman’s tree?”

“He attacked Finian Artronté.” She shivered, recalling in vivid detail her brother’s cold rage when he’d cornered the king outside the palace gates. “Gideon would have killed Finian if Nalia’s bodyguards hadn’t stepped in.”

A low whistle escaped Dash. “Your brother is either ballsy or clinically insane. Either way, he’s damn lucky you were able to barter for his life.”

Would Gideon consider himself lucky? Probably not. “I couldn’t save him from the fairy prison.” She dug her fingers into the coverlet, taking her frustration out on the swathe of fabric. “They say a year in that place is worse than a lifetime sentence in hell. Gideon has been there twelve years.” Her voice broke on the last syllable and she ducked her head, unable to bear the compassion softening Dash’s expression. She didn’t deserve his empathy.

His hand settled over hers and coaxed her fingers into releasing their death grip on the coverlet. “You’ve also been serving a sentence under Nalia. Is it any less of a hell?”

“There was no other choice. I couldn’t let Gideon die. Not when I was the one responsible for everything.” Her mind flashed back to that awful day, the second most awful day of her life. Gideon shackled as the noose settled around his neck. Finian’s smirking look of triumph.

“How are you responsible for anything?” Dash leaned forward and cupped her face. “For gods’ sake, you saved your brother’s life.” His tone was both reproachful and compelling.

She swallowed against the mass of bitter emotion swelling out of control. “Yes, but I’m the reason our mother’s ended.”

Chapter Fifteen

Mara's pronouncement slammed Dash in the solar plexus, leaving him stunned. He almost convinced himself he'd misheard her. Until she looked up at him with those clear blue eyes brimming with tears and pain.

"My stupid impulse to honor a dare destroyed my mother's life and nearly killed my brother." Her tears finally broke free and streamed down her face towards her trembling lips.

He battled his instinctual urge to hug her tight. What she needed most right now was a voice of reason. Someone to whisk aside her curtain of blame. "You were what, thirteen? What teen doesn't commit great acts of stupidity at that age?"

She reached up and scrubbed a hand furiously across her cheek. "There's no excuse for what I did. I hurt the people I love, and nothing will ever make it right."

Mara's self-inflicted guilt seemed unreasonable. No one who agonized the way she did over a youthful dare could have deliberately perpetrated a heinous crime. Much less one that ultimately ruined their family. He scooted forward and patted the mattress, urging her to sit beside his hip. "Tell me about this dare."

Her hand came up again and flicked at a strand of hair clinging to her wet cheek. Shuddering, she inched closer. "I...snuck onto the grounds of Rulach Palace." She dropped her stare to the silk coverlet.

"And?" he prodded gently.

"Shoved a wild Aurion monkey through an open window. It managed to ransack the whole downstairs before they found it gobbling up a bunch of untended pies in the kitchen."

He buried the laugh threatening to sneak from his chest. Clearing his throat, he struggled to maintain a straight face. "How the devil did you get a hold of a wild monkey?"

"It wasn't easy, let me tell you." She brushed her cheek with her sleeve and finally dislodged the stubborn strand of hair. "They caught me on the visio security system. Needless to say, my mother received a summons the same day. She begged Nalia to spare my punishment, but it was ultimately Finian who made a counter offer."

The contempt in Mara's voice spoke volumes. He could easily imagine what the counter offer ended up being.

"My mother wasn't a whore, but she would have done anything to protect me." Mara watched him closely, apparently gauging his reaction.

“Of course she wasn’t a whore.” He stroked her cheek reassuringly. “Your mother did what she felt necessary.”

“Yeah, well, it wasn’t good enough for Finian. He didn’t just want my mother’s body—he wanted her completely enslaved to him. So he bonded her with his sex magic.”

A sour taste bloomed in the back of his throat. He dropped his hand from her face and stared at the moisture dampening his fingers. Finian’s despicable behavior shone a glaring spotlight on his own grand scheme to seduce Mara and ultimately free himself. His only comfort was knowing he’d never use his magic to enslave another. The idea sickened him—evidenced by the nausea roiling in his stomach.

“My mother became something worse than an addict. She wept inconsolably each time Finian left her bed. In the end, she couldn’t live without him. She took an entire bottle of pain pills and locked herself in her room. Gideon found her the next morning.”

The grief in Mara’s eyes fisted around Dash’s heart, squeezing until it hurt to breathe. Pushing back his own feelings of guilt, he reached for her. When she slumped against him in weary acceptance, he gently lifted her into his lap. A fierce protectiveness washed over him. The fear she’d displayed when he’d used his magic to free them of the Gromache snare finally made sense.

“You’re afraid of me because of my magic. Because you think I would do to you what Finian did to your mother.” His voice sounded gruff, but he couldn’t stop the raw emotion in his throat. “*Sher ’tian*, I would never do such a thing to you.”

“I used to think all Maddocs were selfish bastards.” She peeked up at him, her cheeks pale and tracked with silvery tear marks. “But I know better now.”

The tight fist around his heart eased and he leaned down to kiss her softly on the lips. A sigh escaped her before she jerked away from him. The rejection knifed through his chest, leaving an icy void.

Lifting his head, he stared at her. “Then why are you pulling away from me like you think I’m about to attack you like some rutting beast?” Stricken that she considered him no better than Finian, he released her and shoved to his feet.

“I’m not.” She scrambled to her knees and gave him a beseeching look. “Dash, this attraction between us is doomed. Nalia made it perfectly clear to me that you’re hands off. As it is, she’d kill me if she knew what’s transpired between us.”

A haze of fury settled over him. At the moment, he’d give anything to wring that bitch fairy queen’s neck. “To do that, she’d have to go through me first. And believe me, it’d be the stupidest thing she’s ever done.”

Worry flashed in Mara’s eyes. “Promise me you’ll stay out of this business between Nalia and me. She’ll only become suspicious.”

He took a deep breath and released it slowly. The thing he was about to say might ultimately bite him in the ass, but he needed to speak it anyway. “Mara, I’ve no intention of returning to Nalia. And I don’t think you should either. In fact, I won’t let you.”

The blood drained from her face, leaving it a white sheet. “But...” Swaying, she dropped back on her rump.

He returned to the bed and cupped her face. “Relax and take a deep breath. This will all work out.”

She knocked his hands away. “No, it won’t. If we don’t return to Rulach, Gideon is good as dead.” Her shoulders jerked and with a sob, she twisted away from him. “I knew this would happen. That you’d cloud my reasoning.”

He frowned. “How the devil am I clouding your reason?”

“You’re a complication I can’t afford,” she said, as if that explained a damn thing. “When this mission is done, *we’re* done. Completely. It’s the way things have to be.”

The callous statement knifed him in the gut. Twisted cruelly to finish him off. “So that’s it? I fetch Nalia her precious rune and you throw me to the wolves.” Not that he was surprised she didn’t want him in a forever kind of way. She’d made it perfectly clear how she viewed his profession.

All hope of being deemed worthy in her eyes bled from his heart. Numb, he stalked to the balcony door, slid it open and stepped outside. The brisk air slapped him, an ironic reflection of the verbal slap Mara just provided.

He leaned over the railing and stared at the cityscape below. *Good gods, I’m an idiot. Aching for a woman who kidnapped me to be another’s pleasure stud.* It’d teach him to deny his body sex for too long. Only made his head loony and his heart weak.

Mara’s sandals made a soft scuff behind him. She stopped next to the rail, but he refused to look at her. Why torment himself further?

“My words came out wrong. Hurtful.” She reached out and smoothed her fingers over his jaw. A shiver ran through him and he closed his eyes, overwhelmed by the fierce longing that roiled inside him.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered.

Unable to help himself, he finally looked at her. The naked emotion canvassed on her face threatened to steal his breath.

“If I didn’t have the responsibility of my brother’s life on my shoulders, I would free you without hesitation.” Her fingers crept from his jaw and stroked the back of his neck. “The idea of Nalia touching you makes me physically ill.”

The admission eased like salve over his wounded ego. With some effort, he tipped his mouth into a wry grin. “Trust me, I feel the same way.”

~ * ~

Lunchtime traffic congested the walkways when Dash exited the Crystal Lodge. Tugging his hat low over his brow, he merged with the other pedestrians. Knowing Mara's secret definitely complicated matters. He could no longer concentrate on his own selfish motives. Which meant he had to find the rune—and soon.

The hotel's computing network hadn't coughed up any leads. Not that he'd expected it. Still it would have saved him the necessity of paying a visit to Mordak Lucio—someone he'd just as soon not see. His old fenceman was more trustworthy than most, but his rambling, monotone diatribes on Aurion antiquities was enough to lull anyone into a coma.

Several blocks down, he spied Lucio's gilt lettered sign waving in the breeze. After a quick look over his shoulder, Dash ducked inside the shop. The musty smell of old books and leather hung heavy in the air. No one occupied the front portion of the shop so he wove past the aisles packed with antique oddities and strolled into the backroom.

Mordak's bald scalp shone beneath a hovering spotlight. Dash craned his neck, trying to get a better view of the exquisite Cordigan oil receiving Mordak's tender loving care. The luscious colors drew Dash, making him salivate. Nothing compared to a Cordigan. A vision of Mara's perky nipples sprang into his head. *Well, almost nothing.*

"Dragon's End, if I'm not mistaken," Dash said, naming the piece's title.

"How—?" Mordak lifted his head and blinked behind his illuminated magnifying scope lens. The old man's eyes tripled in size. Quite comical considering the magnification involved. "Slap my ass and call me Harry."

Grinning, Dash sent a pointed look towards the man's naked scalp. "When's the last time you checked yourself in a looking glass?"

Mordak patted the top of his head with evident pride before shaking the vacu-pen gripped between his fingers at Dash. "Boy, where the hell have you been?"

"Here and there. Mostly there."

Mordak grunted before motoring his hover chair from behind the workbench. "Looks like you've packed on a few pounds. Told you the sweets would do you in."

Dash surveyed Mordak's puny frame. "Compared to you, everyone looks enormous."

"Did you come here to insult me, or is there a reason for your visit?"

The old man hadn't changed one bit—enjoyed dishing it out, but grew surly as a wartobeast if you tried parrying his sarcastic quips.

"Actually, yes. I wondered if you might have any information on the Rhyann rune."

Rheumy eyes regarded him from behind the luminous scope. "Why are you asking me? You're the one who stole it."

Dash dragged in a peevish breath. *Bloody hell. Mara better appreciate this.* “I need some information not readily available. You’re the first person I thought of.” Well, second anyway. But he’d known Jerrick would be a wasted effort.

The hover chair lowered to the floor and Mordak removed his magnifying scope. Fetching a rag from the canvas bag attached to the chair’s arm, he buffed the lens. “Let’s see. It was first discovered in the early nineteen hundreds, during an excavation outside of Prevanahoe. The Prevanak tribe of faes held ownership of it for many years before the royal family of Artronté took it over in—”

Before he officially fell into the dreaded coma, Dash held up his hand. “Fast forwarding to today, might you have any idea who currently owns it?”

Mordak spent several minutes working his jaw in and out while he pondered the question. “No, can’t say I do.”

Disappointment sat like a bitter pill in the back of Dash’s throat. After bidding the old man goodbye and sending the Cordigan oil a final covetous glance, Dash exited the shop. Across the street, he spied a familiar tattoo. *Jerrick.*

He stared at the back of his brother’s head. Regret and lost hope set anchor in his chest. Just as quick, they were replaced with sizzling fury. If Jerrick hadn’t stolen the damn rune, none of this would be an issue. Nalia wouldn’t have sent Mara after him, and her brother’s life wouldn’t hinge on the return of the Rhyann.

With that thought in mind, Dash darted between the lanes of traffic and stalked after his brother. It wasn’t difficult keeping track of him. Jerrick’s height made him easy to pick out above the sea of bobbing heads.

Two blocks down, Jerrick disappeared through a set of double doors. Slowing his pace, Dash came even with the shop and read the name etched in the tinted glass. *Hulani Fashionables*. Since Jerrick’s idea of fashion was limited to tee shirts and scruffy denim, he figured it a safe bet his brother was on the job. Pushing one of the doors open, he stepped inside.

Music very similar to the gods-awful racket Piper had been listening to pounded around him. Wispy smocks, crystal-beaded frock coats and other fripperies circumnavigated the walls of the main showroom on a fiber optic pulley system. A female with spiky purple hair met Jerrick halfway across the room. The pulley system’s fiber optics reflected beams off her mirrored tube top. She glanced towards the doorway and Dash ducked behind a display of colorful bangles.

Through a crack in the screen he watched Jerrick swing his jacket from his shoulder and extract a vial filled with a murky white substance. The female handed over a wad of merca. After returning most of the bills despite the woman’s protests, Jerrick strode to the doorway. Dash stepped out from behind the silk-covered screen. His brother’s face hardened.

Dash nodded at the bills crumpled in Jerrick’s fist. “You in the drug trade now?”

Blistering anger shimmered around Jerrick. “Didn’t I make it clear last night I don’t want to see your face again?”

“I don’t care what you want. We have business to settle.”

White-hot sparks flickered from Jerrick. Noticing the visible output of his hostile fury, he shoved the merca into his pants pocket and whipped his jacket on. “The only reason I’m not slamming you into the nearest wall is because I respect Fromona too much to trash her place.”

Dash curled his mouth in a mocking smile. “Yeah, I can see how much you respect her. Enough to give her a discount on the drugs.”

A rigid vein throbbed in Jerrick’s neck. “She has Grandix disease. The Scorshee dust is the only thing that relieves her pain, but it’s on the banned-substance list. Make of it what you will.” Without further word, he stormed through the exit.

The air vacuum sucked the door back into place. Dash turned and stared at the woman straightening the hem of a velvet shawl on the pulley system. A large tumor protruded from her right wrist.

His shoulders slumped. “Oh bloody hell.”

Chapter Sixteen

“We’ve been in Tul’dea a whopping three days and the only things I’ve accomplished are baring my soul and sticking my foot in my mouth. Repeatedly.” Mara shook her head as she picked out a skirt and top to wear to dinner.

Her fingers brushed over the soft knit of the pink scoop-necked sweater. How could she possibly feel both terrible and elated after baring her soul to Dash? The part of her psyche carrying around the burden of her responsibility over her mother’s death and Gideon’s imprisonment might be lighter, but it also felt naked and vulnerable.

“Okay, I’m officially out of my ever-loving head.”

“I could have told you that ages ago.”

Swiveling on her heel, Mara stared at Piper. She hadn’t heard her come in. That was the problem with these darn doors—they were maddeningly silent. Then again, they also provided Piper with easy access. It was rather nice, not having to let the sprite in and out a gazillion times a day. “You know, for someone who insisted on tagging along to *help out*, you’ve made yourself pretty damn scarce most of the time.” Which was weird. Back at the palace, Piper rarely took a break from her busy pestering schedule.

Piper landed on the dresser. Leaning close to the looking glass, she picked her lunch from her teeth. “How else was I supposed to give you alone time with Rhyder?”

Mara gaped at Piper’s reflection. “Why would you want to leave me alone with Dash?”

“Because you need to get laid. *Bad.*”

“Are you crazy?” Mara sputtered. She opened her mouth, trying to formulate a more articulate observation. Unfortunately, none were forthcoming.

“You both have an itch that needs scratching.” Finished with her teeth cleaning, Piper fluffed her hair. “So I say unlock your chastity belt and ride that bad boy ’til you’re both tuckered out.”

Gritting her teeth, Mara returned her attention to the sweater in her hands. “Just when I figure you couldn’t possibly be more annoying, you go and open your mouth.”

“Fake it all you want, I know you have a soft spot where I’m concerned.”

“These delusions of yours are getting out of control.”

Piper made a *pfft* noise with her tongue. Apparently done grooming the upper part of her body, she flopped down on the dresser and pulled off her pink and orange striped leg warmers. She picked up a tiny

nail buffer and began giving herself a pedicure. “Rhyder told me all about the hysterical breakdown you had when the Gromache swiped me.”

A laugh clogged Mara’s windpipe. Choking, she thumped her chest until her breath popped free. “Trust me, I was far from hysterical. Mostly I didn’t want to explain to Nalia how you became a tasty snack for a four-eyed toad.” She wrinkled her nose. “And please don’t leave your toenail clippings lying around this time. It’s gross.”

A knock sounded on the adjoining door.

“Come in,” Mara said.

The door slid open and Dash stepped into the room. In addition to the low-brimmed hat he’d gotten in the habit of wearing, he also wore the same buff-colored slacks from earlier in the day. Topping it off was a shirt in a gorgeous shade of midnight blue that clung to his torso in all the right places. Mara couldn’t take her eyes off him. “Where did you get that?”

When he gave her a blank look, she motioned towards his shirt.

He glanced down before smiling at her. “Like it? I stole it from downstairs.” She gave him a shocked look and he laughed. “Good gods, you’re gullible.”

“I could have told you that ages ago,” Piper said from the dresser.

Mara tossed her sweater atop the sprite and glanced back at Dash. Her focus automatically returned to the shirt stretched over his exquisitely muscled chest. “Actually, I do like it. It really defines your...eyes.”

His mouth curled into a grin, as if he knew damn well it wasn’t his eyes she’d been admiring. She decided to change the subject before she dug a pit without any exits. “Did you happen to check the computing network again while you were downstairs?”

“Yeah. Same story as yesterday. Nothing.”

She took a deep breath and blurted the one thing she knew he didn’t want to hear. “There’s always Jerrick.”

Irritation glinted in his eyes. “I wouldn’t count on it.”

Bridling her frustration, she knelt and grabbed her high heels. After inspecting them for scuff marks, she tossed them next to the skirt resting atop the coverlet. “Maybe if you talked to him.”

A grunt sounded from Dash. “You saw the type of *talking* Jerrick’s interested in.”

Mara turned her head and caught him gingerly probing his jaw. The shadow of a bruise mingled with the dark stubble he’d yet to divest himself of. How crazy was it that her heart tripped over a fae thief who accumulated bruises faster than a bathing cubicle collected mold. Yep, Gideon would definitely label her clinically insane.

Shaking her head at her own idiocy, she plucked her sweater from the dresser. Piper barely took the time to stick out her tongue before resuming her nail buffing.

Mara scooped up the rest of her evening's ensemble and marched towards the bathroom. "Well, you and Jerrick better not start throwing punches during dinner. You'll end up getting us kicked out of the eatery."

Dash's harsh curse sounded behind her. "You invited him to dinner? What the bloody hell were you thinking?"

She stopped outside the bathroom door and dragged in a deep, fortifying breath before turning to face him. "That the two of you need to work this out."

His face turned a dangerous shade of red as he stalked towards her. Gulping, she stepped back, cramming her spine against the doorframe.

He halted a hairsbreadth away from her. The heat radiating off him in massive waves actually caused a slight sheen of sweat to break on her forehead. *Oh man, is he ever pissed.*

"Do you have any idea of the fire you're playing with?"

Putting on a brave front, she nodded.

A low growl ripped from him. "Then you're either the most courageous woman birthed to humankind, or the stupidest."

Hugging her clothes tighter to her chest, she offered a hesitant smile. "I probably fall somewhere in the middle."

"What the devil did you say to Jerrick to get him to agree to this?"

Mara cleared her throat with an awkward cough. "Um...that you wouldn't be there." Before Dash's irate stare burned straight through her skull, she ducked inside the bathroom and locked the door. She did a quick clothes change, all the while ignoring the colorful swear words uttered on the other side of the thick metal door. By the time she stepped out into her room, Dash had fallen quiet but he still looked plenty cross with her.

"Ready to go?" Without waiting for her answer, he stormed into the hall.

"See," Piper said, wagging a finger. "You should have given Mr. Cranky Pants some hot lovin'. Would have calmed him right down."

Mara gritted her teeth before jamming her coin purse beneath her arm. Downstairs, she noted the name etched on the frosted glass door leading into the Crystal Lodge's main eatery. Glasstisserie. Hopefully it was a play on words and didn't mean the entrees actually consisted of glass. She wasn't that adventurous of a diner. Then again, the direction this night was headed, eating glass might be a welcome respite.

Dash led the way inside, heading determinedly to a blue velvet tufted booth in the far corner. Fine by her. Less chance of him and Jerrick creating a public ruckus that'd get them all tossed out on their butts.

A woman sitting alone at one of the tables glanced up when they approached. Her expectant smile instantly fizzled to disappointment, but then her gaze shifted to Dash and her whole face lit up. “Are you stalking me?”

Dash made a sound that suspiciously resembled a groan. “Avily, how...great...to see you.”

The woman’s attention drifted from Dash and settled on Mara. Her grin widened, overtaking her face. “You must be Mara, the woman responsible for turning Dash into a dumb ass.”

A more pronounced groan slipped from Dash as the woman jumped to her feet and extended a hand. “I’m Avily.”

Slightly bemused, Mara returned Avily’s handshake. “Sorry, but how exactly did I turn him into a dumb ass?”

“Don’t ask her that,” Dash said with a horrified look. “It’ll only encourage her.”

Avily slugged him in the arm.

The action earned Mara’s instantaneous respect. You had to like a woman with a good left hook. She noticed Avily’s hot pink slippers and bent to get a closer look. “What cute shoes.”

“Thanks. At least some people know good taste when they see it.” Avily slid a sidelong glance Dash’s way. He made a grumbling noise but she ignored him and motioned towards her table. “Hey, why don’t you all join me? I could use the company, since my date seems to have stiffed me tonight.”

“We’d love to, but we’re meeting—”

“*Jerrick.*” Avily’s thin whisper cut Dash off.

For a second, Mara thought Avily was finishing Dash’s sentence—which would have been weird, since she couldn’t possibly have known Jerrick was joining them for dinner.

The color leached from Avily’s cheeks and she gaped at something beyond the next table. Mara looked over her shoulder and spied Jerrick blazing a trail across the marbled floor, his eyes shooting a red-hot laser of fury into the back of Dash’s head.

Oh man, what was I thinking putting them in the same room together? Mara gave herself a mental head smack.

Jerrick’s gaze slipped for a second and roved to Avily. An expression of undiluted shock softened the hard planes of his face and his sure stride faltered. He quickly recovered and continued stalking forward until he halted approximately a foot behind Dash. “What the fuck is he doing here?”

Dash instantly stiffened. Mara opened her mouth, hoping to quell the upcoming firesparks, but surprisingly Avily beat her to the punch.

“Do you kiss your mother with that mouth?”

Folding his arms over his chest, Jerrick stared Avily down. “I recall kissing someone else with this mouth. Want to make a problem of it?”

A rosy hue crested Avily’s cheeks. “Um. No.”

The tension continued to hang thick in the air. Mara noticed the curious looks coming from the diners crowded around several of the nearby tables. She focused on Avily, hoping she'd receive her help-me-out-of-this-mess transmittal. "Is the offer to join you still open?"

"Not a good idea," Dash and Jerrick said in unison.

While the two mule-headed brothers glared at each other, Avily grabbed Mara's arm and tugged her to the other side of the table. "You're sitting next to me."

The silver eating utensils neatly aligned on the linen-draped table drew Mara's eye. A premonition of doom flared to life. "Those knives look pretty sharp. Maybe it's not such a good idea to let them sit beside each other."

A dismissive snort broke from Avily. "Oh pooh. I don't know what's up Jerrick's butt, but he'll get over it."

Mara blinked at Avily's casual disregard. *Does she not know about the bad blood between Jerrick and Dash?* Weird, since she seemed to know the two brothers very well.

Avily pulled out the closest of the velvet-upholstered chairs and gestured impatiently. Mara gave the cutlery one last nervous glance and plopped onto the proffered seat. Hopefully emergency medical services weren't too far off, in case Jerrick and Dash attacked each other with a steak knife.

The two brothers reached for the back of the same chair. After a ridiculously long stare-down, Dash jerked his hand away with a growl and grabbed the other chair. While Jerrick and Avily settled into their own seats, Mara gave an inward groan. *This is going to be the dinner from hell.* Her suspicions became confirmed when Piper fluttered onto the edge of the table and leveled a belligerent stare on Avily.

"Don't even think of poaching on my territory." Piper pointed an accusatory finger. "She's *my* best friend and I'm not giving her up."

"Possessive much?" Rolling her eyes, Avily spread out her napkin and tucked it on her lap.

While Piper continued giving Avily the evil eye, Mara chanced a quick look across the table. Dash and Jerrick were staring at her with hot retribution.

"Okay, you're mad. I get it." Mara chewed on her bottom lip and followed Avily's example by unfolding her own napkin. "But your stubborn refusal to be civil to each other forced me to be sneaky." She sent a pleading look in Dash's direction. "We've been here three days and we're no closer to tracking down the rune. You said yourself the hotel's computing network hasn't coughed up any leads. *Please*, beg him to help us."

Dash clenched his teeth. "I'm done begging him for anything. Fifteen years ago, I begged him to see reason—to find it in his heart to trust that I didn't bed Leena. And all I got for the trouble was a price on my head for a damn rune I didn't steal."

A strangled gasp broke from Avily, gaining everyone's attention. She was staring at Dash with a look of frozen disbelief.

“Sonofabitch,” Jerrick snarled, glaring at Dash. “Do you have any idea how hard I worked to keep her from learning any of this crap?”

“She doesn’t know?” Dash’s gaze veered to Avily and he groaned. “*Oh shit*. How was I supposed to know? I haven’t exactly been in the loop lately.”

Avily lifted a trembling hand and straightened her glasses. “Somebody better start talking. And fast.”

Dash leaned back in his chair. “Honey, maybe this isn’t—”

“*Fast*,” Avily demanded.

“You want the short or the long story?” Jerrick countered.

“Whichever.” Avily’s hand shot up. “On second thought, make it short. I don’t think my patience could take the other option right now.”

“Fine,” Jerrick said, his tone curt. “Remember the four months I spent in D’argen, working the Paulette sapphire job?” At Avily’s nod, he continued. “Apparently at the same time, my brother was working your sister.”

“She’s Leena’s sister?” Mara gasped. *Oh man, I didn’t see that one coming*. All eyes swung on her. She waved her hand in apology. “Go on.”

“Where’d you come up with that pile of horseshit?” The fiery inquiry came from Dash.

“I did the math.” The tense set of Jerrick’s jaw matched the steely undercurrent in his tone. “The two of you looked pretty damn cozy in your bed. That sort of intimacy takes time to acquire.”

“Of course I looked cozy,” Dash snapped. “The lousy drugs she slipped into my Ginnish Sour knocked me flat on my ass.”

Mara blinked, taken aback. “She drugged you?”

“So he claims,” Jerrick bit out.

Dash ignored his brother and looked at her. “Unfortunately, you’re not the only one who’s fallen for the old drug-in-your-drink trick.”

“You’re unbelievable.” Jerrick stretched his lips so thin, they almost appeared white. “Even after all these years, you still won’t own up to what you did.”

“Like you owned up to the fact you stole the rune and framed it on me?”

A hint of regret darkened Jerrick’s eyes. “I never intended it to go down that way. Things were said that I didn’t immediately dismiss. Eventually everyone became convinced you stole it, and I couldn’t change their minds.”

Dash’s shoulders relaxed a fraction.

“Wait a minute,” Avily said, leaning forward, her stare focused on Dash. “I think Leena did end up drugging you. Around the time you’re talking about, I saw a bunch of vials from the weird guy who used to sell potions to our mother sitting in the middle of Leena’s bed.”

Mara frowned. “You mean the vendor who owns the kiosk down the street?”

Avily nodded excitedly. “Yep. I remember when I asked Leena what they were for, she acted pretty fishy.”

Jerrick still looked unconvinced. “Why the hell would she drug him?”

Silence descended over the table while Avily pondered his question. She fiddled with the tines of her fork, rocking the utensil up and down. Trepidation softened her features. “I have a theory, but I don’t think you’ll like it.”

“Probably not,” Jerrick said flatly. “Tell me anyway.”

“Your comment about math got me thinking. I just now realized I’ve never added up the amount of time you spent away from Leena during your stint in D’argen.” Avily smoothed her hand over the edge of the table, plucking nervously at the linen cloth. “Did you know she was pregnant?”

Every square inch of Jerrick’s face went rigid.

A weary sigh fizzled from Avily. “She told me you knew. That it was the reason you called off the wedding. She said you weren’t keen on starting a family.”

Jerrick remained mute.

“She ended up miscarrying at about eight weeks into the pregnancy, which means you couldn’t possibly have been the father,” Avily said, her voice quiet and strained. “Guess she wasn’t very good at math, either. The way I see it, before she lost the baby, she needed a good scapegoat to pass off as the father.”

Without saying a word, Jerrick scraped back his chair and stood. Avoiding their pitying looks, he pivoted and stalked towards the exit.

Mara stared at his ramrod-stiff back, her heart silently breaking for him.

A mumbled curse issued from Dash. “Wait here.” He pushed from his seat and loped after Jerrick.

“Hopefully I did the right thing telling him all that.” Moaning, Avily propped her elbow on the tabletop and cupped her cheek. “I’m really not cut out for this confessional crap.”

Dash slowed his pace when Jerrick stopped next to the waist-high tin sign marking the location of the Crystal Lodge’s underground parking and slammed his fist into the metal. The sign crumpled, making a *wwoonngg* noise in the process. Jerrick shook out his fist and ducked his head in a display of absolute dejection.

Blowing out a breath, Dash resumed his stride, quickly closing the gap between his brother and himself. “Thank the gods my head didn’t cave that easily when you clocked me the other night.”

Jerrick’s shoulders stiffened but he remained facing the parking garage. “What the hell are you doing out here?”

“Thought you might need someone to talk to.”

A humorless laugh trickled from Jerrick before he finally deigned to turn around. The overhead streetlamp revealed a face set in abject misery. In the span of mere minutes, he looked like he'd aged far beyond his thirty-three years. "Why don't you admit why you're really out here?"

Dash frowned. "I told you why."

"No, you're here to tell me what an idiot I am."

"No, I'm not," Dash said, his tone soft.

"Do it." Jerrick's eyes held deep sockets of pain. "Tell me."

"No."

"You've called me worse names." Jerrick's chin jutted upward in challenge. "Sleeping in silk sheets all these years turn you into a pansy ass?"

"Nice try. And my sheets are Hammatak linen. Cost a bloody fortune too."

Rage flooded Jerrick's face. He stalked forward, his stance combative. "Goddamn it, *tell me*."

"You're doing a fine job beating yourself up. You don't need any help from me."

Jerrick's shoulders slumped and he unballled his fists, dropping them listlessly to his sides. "I wasted all these years hating you."

"Yeah, you did." Dash inclined his head. "But I forgive you."

The hollows beneath Jerrick's eyes deepened. "Why?"

"Because you're my brother. And Leena dealt you one hell of a vicious blow. I can't stay mad at you, knowing what she did." A worrisome thought occurred to Dash and he gave Jerrick a pensive look. "You do believe me now about not touching her, right? I might have been half drugged out of my head, but I know we didn't have sex."

"The things Avily said were...tough to hear." Jerrick massaged his temple, as if trying to rub the worst of her words from his memory. "But they're too damning for me not to believe them." He dropped his hand and stared at the walkway beneath his boots. "It's crazy, but even though I stopped loving Leena long ago, tonight brought all that misery racing back."

Guilt chiseled a cubbyhole inside Dash's chest. "You never should have faced the misery on your own." He'd wasted so much time weaving his cocoon of bitterness, never thinking beyond his selfish pride.

Jerrick didn't say anything. Just continued to stare at him.

"I'm here for you now." The words, long overdue after all these years, sat like a lump in Dash's throat. If he didn't spew them out, he'd choke on a lifetime of regret. "I want things to be like the way they were before our fallout."

A faint smile tipped Jerrick's mouth. "You hinting at us becoming partners again?"

Dash grunted. "Not exactly what I meant. Besides, I have two buttinski females who think they've filled that position."

“Ah yes—the hot chicky and the little chicky.” Jerrick’s expression grew speculative. “A sprite and a human. Always knew you were one kinky bastard.”

A groan tumbled from Dash. “Good gods, don’t repeat that to Mara. She thinks I’m a big enough pervert as it is.”

“Ah, so she knows the true you. Amazing she still put in a good word for you the other morning.”

“She did?” Dash’s heart momentarily lifted at the idea—until reality slapped him in the face. “She probably did it because she needed us to reconcile. For the rune.”

Jerrick didn’t look entirely convinced. “If so, she’s going to be mighty disappointed. I lost track of the rune’s whereabouts a few years back.”

Dash wasn’t surprised. Still, it did put a crimp in things. “Maybe the trail isn’t completely cold. We’ll start with the individual you sold it to and work our way from there.” He stopped, realizing how presumptuous he sounded. Particularly when minutes ago he’d insisted he didn’t need any more partners. “That’s if you want to lend a hand.”

“I’m the reason you’ve got a price on your head. The least I can do is help get that damn rune.”

Stepping around Jerrick, Dash clamped a hand around his brother’s shoulder. It was the first physical contact they’d exchanged in fifteen years that didn’t result in blood loss. Kind of made him misty eyed. “Then let’s get to work.”

Chapter Seventeen

Dash shook his head while Mara, Jerrick and Piper battled for supremacy over the touchscreen controlling the Crystal Lodge's central computing network. Perhaps convincing everyone to pile into the cramped ten foot by ten foot terminal hadn't been the wisest idea.

"Damn it, would you quit batting your wings against my chin?" Jerrick growled before taking an ineffectual swipe at Piper.

"Can I help it your head's in the way?"

Mara leaned over the chair Jerrick occupied. "I've got a brilliant idea. How about the two of you take your bickering out in the hall while I finish looking?"

Jerrick snorted. "Nice try, Blondie."

Stifling a laugh when Mara tweaked Jerrick's ear, Dash turned and caught Avily staring at the back of Jerrick's head. It wasn't the first time he'd busted her doing it, either. She shifted restlessly. When she noticed him noticing her, a fierce blush rode her cheeks and she mumbled something about needing to use the bathroom facilities. Hugging her chest tight, she spun around and trotted from the terminal.

Dash swung his gaze back to his brother. His suspicions started buzzing louder than the irritable sounds coming from Piper. He strode to the group clustered around the screen and tapped Jerrick on the shoulder. His brother glanced up with a distracted scowl.

"We need to talk. In private. *Now*."

Jerrick's scowl didn't budge. "I'm in the middle of something."

"That can wait," Dash said, waving at the screen. "This can't."

"Fine." Jerrick shoved his chair back and stood. The second he vacated his spot, Mara plopped onto the seat.

"This better be damn important." Muscles rigid, Jerrick stalked from the room.

Dash trailed after him. Once he felt reasonably assured of their privacy, he glared at his brother. "You stupid ass. She's just a kid."

Jerrick blinked. "Who you talking about?"

"Avily." Dash grabbed the edge of the doorframe to keep from plowing his fist into Jerrick's nose. "What were you thinking bedding her?"

"*What?*"

“Can the innocent act. It’s all too clear now why you’ve avoided Avily’s doorstep the past five years.” Dash blew out a disgusted breath. “We all know Leena hurt you, but I thought you had more class than to screw her baby sister.”

Jerrick’s forehead furrowed. “I haven’t touched Avily.”

Dash’s righteous indignation dissipated slightly. Either his brother was one amazing actor or he was telling the truth. “What about the crack you made back in the Glasstisserie?” He grunted in response to Jerrick’s blank stare before elaborating. “When Avily needled you for swearing, you made a crack about kissing her. And don’t deny she was the one you were referring to. Her expression gave it away.”

Guilt flashed in Jerrick’s eyes. He swiped a hand through his hair. “Okay, I admit I kissed her. But that’s still a big jump from screwing her.”

Dash mentally replayed the look on Avily’s face before she realized she’d been busted. “Must have been one hell of a kiss, because she’s been giving you the stink eye all night.”

Jerrick remained quiet for several telling seconds. “Yeah, it was.”

When his brother didn’t furnish any further details, Dash decided to let the conversation rest for the time being. Besides, there were certainly more pressing matters to contend with at the moment. “So what’s the verdict on the rune? You have any better luck than me?”

Jerrick appeared relieved by the change of topic. “No. But I think you might be onto something with questioning the original buyer. Tomorrow I’ll drive out to Magnus Lefere’s place and have a chat with him.”

“You sold the rune to Lefere?” Dash gripped the doorframe until his knuckles went numb. “Were you out of your damn mind? He’s nothing but a backstabbing cheat.”

“At the time, I thought I was being ironic,” Jerrick said dryly.

Dash released the doorframe and paced in front of the terminal. “Lefere’s going to demand steep payment for any information.”

“Probably.” Jerrick leaned against the wall and crossed his ankles. “What do you care? Isn’t that bitch Nalia Artronté footing the bill?”

“Doesn’t mean our resources are unlimited. The cost of staying here is eating up the merca as it is.”

“There are cheaper places to bunk for the night.” Jerrick’s mouth tugged into a crafty grin. “Though I suppose they’re not in the same league when it comes to setting a seductive scene.”

Dash scratched his jaw. “I’ve no idea what you’re referring to.”

Jerrick’s chuckle broke off when the soft patter of Avily’s impractical slippers announced her reappearance. She stopped outside the terminal entrance, her expression wary. “Were you just talking about me?”

“Not at all,” Dash and Jerrick piped in unison.

“Oh *gods*.” After a quick moan, she glared at Jerrick and stomped through the doorway.

His brother slapped the side of the wall. "Great, now she thinks I told you."

"Since you stand accused, might as well spill the beans."

Grunting, Jerrick entered the terminal.

"It was worth a shot." Realizing he was talking to no one other than himself, Dash ambled inside the narrow little room.

A good half hour later, everyone decided to call it a night. While Jerrick and Avily left for their respective abodes, Dash escorted Mara and Piper to their room before retiring to his own quarters. After kicking off his shoes, he clicked on the hotel's visio system with the prompter imbedded in the nightstand and began stripping from his shirt.

A transparent twenty-inch screen blinked on a foot above him, hovering in midair. Lusty moans filtered from the speakers when the picture flashed to a busty blonde being serviced by a lad wearing nothing but a tool belt.

Pants halfway shucked down, Dash blinked. "That's definitely not a drain he's snaking."

Odd, he hadn't ordered up any raunchy entertainment.

"Well, no sense wasting the merca they're probably charging me." He settled on the edge of the bed just as a hesitant knock rapped against the connecting door. Distracted, he kept his focus glued to the intriguing visuals floating overhead. "Yes?"

The door slid open and Mara walked inside. With a whoosh, the door shut behind her and her gaze jumped to the hovering screen and the action carrying on between the blonde and tool boy. Her eyes doubled in size.

"What are you—?" Mara's attention cut back to him and dropped to the trousers sagging around his knees.

He gave her a lopsided grin. "This isn't what it looks like."

She slanted him a suspicious glance before letting her stare drift down his body. The snug fit of his cotton briefs made hiding his erection impossible. Her intent fixation made the idea of it dissipating anytime soon an even bigger impossibility.

"You did say come in, right? Because, I uh..." Mara stopped and cleared her throat. "This obviously isn't a good time to talk." She began inching backwards towards the door.

"No, stay." He jumped up. Hooking his thumbs through his belt loops, he hitched his pants in place before ambling to the nightstand and switching the visio screen off. "What can I do for you?" Good gods, there was a loaded question. He could envision several things he could do for her at the moment. Most of them involved nudity, a can of whipping cream and a few creative contortionist positions.

Mara's focus thankfully didn't linger too long on the opened fly of his trousers. "I wanted to apologize again for tricking you earlier this evening." She shuffled her feet in the thick pile of the carpet. "It seems I'm guilty of doing quite a bit of that. Tricking you, I mean."

"If you hadn't, Jerrick and I most likely wouldn't have reconciled, nor would he have discovered the truth about Leena."

She inclined her head in acknowledgment. "You know, Avily feels pretty rotten about what she had to tell Jerrick. I wish there was some way to make them both feel better." She plopped on the edge of the mattress and gave the floor a glum look.

Dash's heart filled with a soft glow that felt both disturbing and wonderful. He'd never known anyone like Mara—feisty and temperamental, yet possessing an innate empathy for everyone she met. It would be beyond easy to fall for her.

Who am I kidding? I've already fallen. So hard and fast, it scared the living hell out of him. Like she'd said, they didn't have a future together. Why couldn't his pathetic heart understand that?

"They'll be fine." Despite his best efforts to conceal the raw emotion in his voice, he realized he'd failed miserably when Mara whipped her head around, her blonde curls sweeping over her shoulder.

"Jeez, I'm a moron." A disgusted groan rushed from her mouth. "I didn't even consider what an emotional ride these past few days have been for you. In a matter of minutes, you were transformed from the villain in your brother's eyes, and into another victim of Leena's scheming. Must be pretty tough to digest."

He smiled at her. "There you go again—worrying about everyone else and pushing your own troubles to the wayside." Buttoning his trousers to safeguard against any temptation, he dropped onto the mattress and scooted behind her before wrapping his arms around her middle. He was ridiculously pleased when she stayed put. "How about you let someone worry about you for once?"

"I don't know if I can." Despite her claim, Mara relaxed against him with a shudder, resting her head on his shoulder. She tried so hard to retain the self-reliant image she clung to, but deep inside he sensed her longing to give up a corner of her burden. Everything inside him gravitated towards that longing, ached to fill its void.

Mara's fingers slipped over his, absently swirling little circles. Hot shivers raced under his skin. Crazy how such a simple touch made him break out in a cold sweat.

"It kills me, you know—Nalia having this much power over all our lives."

He freed one hand and stroked her soft curls back from her forehead. Her comforted murmur fanned against his collarbone. For several minutes she lay curled against him while he petted her.

"I have to tell you something." He could sense her wariness as she shifted restlessly. "I'm pretty sure it's going to make you despise me," she added in a guarded tone.

Damn, he'd known this peaceful moment was too good to last. "Nothing could make me despise you."

She peered up at him and her hair slithered against his chest, a tormenting, delicious shiver of silken sensation. "I don't know. It's pretty...bad."

He tweaked her nose. "Bad as throwing a wild monkey through a window?"

“Worse.” She released a shaky breath. “A lot worse.”

“Then don’t tell me.” His hand returned to the crown of her head and pressed her back against him. “It doesn’t matter anyway. Like I said, nothing could make you look despicable in my eyes.”

“I kidnapped you to free my brother.”

His hand stalled against her scalp, her admission piercing his consciousness like a poisoned dart. Tense silence stretched between them.

Mara sat up and anxiously searched his face. “Please understand that I only agreed to Nalia’s insane proposal because I was desperate. The fairy prison is a horrible place and I...” She stopped and swallowed hard, visibly trembling. Her wide, expressive eyes pleaded for understanding. “I was so scared for Gideon.”

The tightness slowly eased in Dash’s chest. Deep down, he couldn’t fault Mara for the choice she made. He would have done the same thing if in her shoes. Hell, he’d never fingered Jerrick for the rune’s theft out of fear of condemning his brother to the fairy prison. “*Sher ’tian*, it’s okay. I’m not angry.”

She blinked. “You’re not?”

He shook his head and scruffed her hair. “No point taking it personally. You hadn’t met me yet and discovered my charming allure.”

That managed to sneak a smile from her. Leaning down, he planted a quick kiss on her forehead. “No more guilty conscience, okay? I think you’ve punished yourself enough these past twelve years.”

Her eyes misted over with emotion. “Thank you. For understanding.” She lifted a hand and stroked his jaw. “You’re a good fae.”

“I’m a good fae?” He chuckled. “That sounded bloody weird.”

“Well, you’re not technically a man, so what else am I going to call you?”

She had a point. “Regardless, I don’t think you’d consider me a good anything if you’d been privy to my thoughts when you first came into the room.”

“Trust me, I had a pretty good idea where they were leaning.” Mara’s gaze dipped to his lap.

Okay, time to get her out of the room before Mr. Happy decided to make things difficult. He started to get up but froze when Mara settled her palm low on his abdomen. Right above the fly of his trousers. The glance she gave him from beneath her lush eyelashes was as arousing as the heat of her skin mingling with his.

“If you’re looking to tease me, it’s not a wise idea.”

“What if I’m not?”

He settled a finger beneath Mara’s chin and tipped her head back. “You were the one who said no intimate contact, remember? For fear it’d cloud your reason.”

“Right—but only if you’re the one doing the touching.”

The oxygen left his head. “What are you bloody proposing?”

“You...know.” Her hand slid lower, brushed over his fly, and he sucked in his gut.

Good gods, she's killing me.

Bright blue eyes stared up at him. Giving himself no time to rescind the temptation, he leaned down and kissed her.

Mara's lips parted in sweet invitation and he delved inside the velvety intoxication of her mouth, exploring her taste and texture. She curled her hand along his neck. Fingernails scored his nape, pressing him closer. Not giving a damn about the painful crick at the base of his skull, he obeyed her urgent demand by deepening the kiss.

In all his thirty-five years, he'd never kissed a woman with such pure abandon, using his mouth and tongue to convey the emotions ripping his insides apart. Mara seemed to intuit this, because she tugged him onto the mattress and twisted in his arms until she straddled his lap. She stroked his face, driving him insane with her feverish kisses.

Racking tremors shook his body. He was on fire, strung out on his desire for her. The need to take her consumed him. Teetering well past the edge, he pulled back with a groan. "This isn't going to work. We have to stop. *Now.*"

Her hands slipped from his neck. One of them trailed down his chest, caressing over his taut abdomen. Growling, he grabbed her hand, stopping its descent. "Damn it, Mara, I told you it won't work." His chest heaved in and out with his ragged panting.

"Stop being so stubborn and let me take care of your...little problem." She yanked hard on her hand and he banded it tighter in his grip.

Sweet goddess, how he wanted to take her up on her offer, but no way would he survive such torture. "Not a good idea. And for your information, it's hardly a *little* problem," he said, slightly peeved.

In the sneakiest move he'd ever witnessed, she skated her free hand across his rib cage and under their twined fingers. He held no chance of capturing the marauding invader in time. If he weren't so damned annoyed, he would have been highly impressed. With that kind of tricky handwork, she'd make one hell of a pickpocket.

She popped the button free on his fly and slid beneath the waistband of his trousers and briefs. The first brush of her fingers over the swollen head of his cock elicited his helpless groan.

"Mm, you're right. Definitely not a *little* problem." Mara's hand ventured lower and enveloped him fully. He jerked, nearly unseating her from his lap.

Her breath puffed fast against his cheek, keeping rhythm with her questing strokes. "You feel amazing. Hot and hard."

His skin became damp with perspiration. "I get it now. This is really payback for The Fairies Grotto, isn't it?"

"Not at all." Smiling like a cat with cream, she pumped her fist with a tantalizing squeeze that had him seeing stars.

Hips bucking, he dropped her hand and grabbed the mattress in a stranglehold. “For the love of everything holy, don’t *do that*,” he pleaded between gritted teeth.

“Why?” Her innocent tone stood in direct conflict to the wicked motion of her hand.

“Because you’re going to make me embarrass myself worse than a wet-behind-the-ears virgin.”

“Oh, you mean like if I do this?” She pumped her fist, slow and teasing, before swirling her thumb across the head of his cock.

It was too much. Nothing would save him now—not even reciting the goddess alphabet backwards while he envisioned a whole roomful of naked, hairy Vorhians. Fisting the silk coverlet with both hands, he surrendered to the white-hot release pounding down on him. A ragged, agonized moan ripped from his throat and his eyes rolled back.

Several minutes later, still gasping for breath, he collapsed in a boneless heap. Mara leaned down and gave him a demure peck on the lips. “Hm, thirty seconds. Has to be a record.”

He glared at her through slitted eyes. “It’s bloody amazing I lasted that long.”

Chuckling, she patted his chest before springing from the mattress. The brain-frying orgasm she just provided dulled his reflexes and he missed grabbing the tail of her skirt. With a suitably evil laugh, she escaped through the automatic door.

Chapter Eighteen

Dash exhaled in relief when he pulled up in front of Jerrick's rented room and spied his brother tossing a black satchel onto the backseat of a vintage cherry red Air Racer. He thought for sure Jerrick would have taken off the second the sun rose above the horizon. Crazy kid had always been an early riser, an annoying habit that regularly chapped Dash's ass back when they were partners. Really, was there ever a good reason to get up before nine?

Throwing his vehicle into park, Dash climbed out and ambled towards the Air Racer, silently admiring its pristine paint job. "I can't believe you still have this ancient hunk of scrap metal."

Jerrick swung around, his head narrowly missing the vehicle's doorframe. His shoulders relaxed when he spotted Dash but his scowl remained firmly etched in place. "Scrap metal? That's blasphemy, my friend." His gaze flicked over Dash's shoulder to the Cloud Chaser. "Especially when you're driving around in that thing."

Yep, he had a point.

"What are you doing out here anyway?" Jerrick slammed the Air Racer's door shut. "I didn't give you my address just so you can start stalking me."

"I don't like the idea of you going out to Lefere's alone."

Jerrick leaned against the hood of his vehicle, the casual pose in direct opposition to the rigid plane of his jaw. "I'm not an eighteen-year-old punk anymore. I can handle Magnus on my own."

Damn stubborn kid. "I know. Could you humor me anyway?"

For several tense seconds, it seemed Jerrick might balk. Finally, he nodded. "But we're taking the Air Racer. No way I'm sitting in that ride of yours."

"Deal." Dash ambled to the passenger door of his brother's vehicle and climbed inside.

Jerrick slid behind the wheel and turned on the engine. Grungy metal music pounded through the speakers. Approximately a minute and a half passed before he reached for the volume control and lowered it several decibels. He stared at Dash in stunned disbelief. "Holy shit, you got laid, didn't you?"

"What? No."

Jerrick glared at him. "You're a piece of work, you know that? Giving me shit about Avily, which I wasn't guilty of, and here you won't even come clean about Mara."

"I didn't get laid...exactly. But let's just say she had me in the palm of her hand." A flush of heat raced over him at the memory. "How the devil did you know anything happened?"

“Are you kidding?” Jerrick grunted. “You hate my taste in music and not one single complaint popped out of your mouth. Which means you’re still basking in post-coital joy.”

“Shut up and pull out of the damn driveway.”

“That lasted long.” Growling, Jerrick sped into the street.

The drive to Magnus Lefere’s countryside shack took roughly forty minutes. Dash surveyed the overgrown pine bushes obscuring most of the house’s exterior. Amazing the level of squalor some people insisted on living in. And in Lefere’s case, it was definitely by choice. The man made plenty of merca—enough to buy a palace if he wanted. “I take it Lefere’s still hoarding his merca under his mattress.”

“Yep.”

Dash made a wry face. “Some things never change.”

Jerrick reached for his door handle. Stopping, he eyed Dash, his mouth tightening. “Look, I let you tag along, but don’t get any bonehead ideas about following me inside. You’ve a price over your head, and as you pointed out last night, Magnus is one greedy, backstabbing sonofabitch. Besides...” Jerrick pressed a button on the center console and the hidden compartment beneath the steering wheel popped open. Reaching in, he pulled out a wicked-looking laser gun and tucked it inside his shoulder holster. He flipped his leather jacket back in place with a grim smile. “I’ve got my own brand of protection.”

“Good gods, don’t shoot your nipple off with that thing.”

Jerrick grimaced. “Your confidence in me is humbling.” He shoved his door open and climbed out, giving the area a quick scan.

Other than the mongrel hound gnawing on an enormous stick in the front walkway, there didn’t seem to be any living creatures stirring about. Jerrick remained on high alert when he approached the hound. The beast’s scraggly brown tail thumped, barely disturbing the weeds poking up through the crumbling bricks marking the path to the house. Apparently satisfied his leg wasn’t going to replace the stick tottering between the hound’s massive paws, Jerrick proceeded up the rickety-looking stairway and disappeared behind the screen of pines.

Dash pressed the station surfer, banishing the gods-awful grunge metal. The rich, smoky strains of a female singer floated through the speakers. “This is more like it.” The sensual music swelled, filling the vehicle. He imagined Mara beneath him, moaning as his thrusts kept tempo with the music. Slow and rhythmic—that’s how he’d give it to her. By the time her tenth orgasm left her more wrung out than a rag, she’d know the true meaning of payback.

The crunch of footsteps drew his attention back to the driver’s side window. He frowned when he spied Jerrick hurrying towards the Air Racer. “That was quick.”

Jerrick leaned his head inside the window and Dash realized his brother’s normally tan face wore a tinge of green. “We’ve got a problem.”

Dash reached for his harness release. “What’s wrong?”

“Lefere’s dead.” Jerrick shot a glance over his shoulder. “And that stick the mutt’s chewing on? Pretty damn sure it’s Magnus’s leg.”

The stench permeating Magnus Lefere’s humble shack nearly knocked Dash on his ass. Breathing shallowly through his nose, he leaned over the enormous man laying facedown in the middle of the filthy, garbage-strewn floor.

“Yep, he’s minus his wooden leg.” Dash visually tracked the muddy paw prints leading to and from the knee-high flap door cut in the nearby side of the shack. “Wonder if the hound absconded with it before or after Lefere met his maker.” He shook his head, figuring that’d be one mystery forever unsolved. “Want to give me a hand turning him over?”

Jerrick looked none too excited about the prospect of touching Lefere. That made two of them.

Growling, Jerrick hunkered next to Magnus’s good leg. “You owe me big time for this.”

Side by side, they rolled the dead man over until he landed on his back with a thud. Dash lifted his gaze north of Lefere’s impressive potbelly, giving a low whistle when he took in the pebble-sized laser hole cauterized in the man’s chest. His whistle petered off when he noticed the edge of a photograph jutting from Magnus’s shirt pocket.

“What the hell is that?” Jerrick demanded, apparently noticing it too.

Dash reached for the corner of the glossy photo, easing it out. The object in the picture made his heart race.

The rune.

But it was the words scrawled in ominous red ink at the bottom of the photograph that turned his blood to ice.

Come get it.

Chapter Nineteen

Mara waited until she heard Piper's off-key buzzing in the bathroom before she tiptoed across the room. Her hand snuck towards the door's keypad, fingers inches from the green button.

"Where are you going?"

Damn, so close. Mara gave the exit a wistful glance and turned. Piper fluttered in the bathroom entry, her amethyst eyes glittering with bright accusation.

"Uh...downstairs," Mara said, thinking fast. "I left my coin purse in the networking terminal."

"Hah!" Piper's arm shot out, one finger pointing towards the dresser. "Then what's that?"

Her coin purse. *Crap.*

Piper plopped her hands on her hips. "You're sneaking out to meet *her*, aren't you?"

"Maybe. Okay, yes," Mara admitted with a reluctant sigh. "Why don't you come with me?" It was better than the alternative—listening to Piper's complaints all morning.

"Really?" Piper instantly perked up. "I can come with you?"

"Sure. But do me a favor and don't bring up the poaching stuff again." Mara wrinkled her nose. "I'm pretty sure you freaked poor Avily out."

"You got it." With an excited buzz, Piper flew to the keypad and kicked the green button. Once out in the hall, she slid Mara a sly look. "You're being pretty nice this morning. Does that mean you and Rhyder did it last night?"

"Jeez, you're poetic with your words."

"Well did you?"

"That's none of your damn business."

Piper shoved her arms over her miniscule chest. "You're no fun."

Snorting, Mara led the way to the lift. Despite her refusal to appease Piper's naughty curiosity, she couldn't stop thinking about last night. Or forget the silky-steel texture of Dash's...

Liquid heat rushed through Mara and she shivered. A part of her still couldn't believe she'd had the nerve to do that to him. An even bigger part couldn't wait to do it to him again.

"Cold?" Piper wagged a finger. "You should have worn a sweater."

Yeah, that'll really take care of my problem. Blocking further mental images of Dash's scrumptious body parts, Mara trudged the final block to Avily's shop, The Fairest Rose. She stepped inside and breathed in the heady fragrance of the shop's namesake.

“Mara,” Avily blurted in delighted surprise. She rushed forward, her wide grin slipping a little when she spied Piper.

The milling customers drew Mara’s eye. “Did we come at a bad time?”

“Nah, the big crush of customers isn’t due for another half an hour—when everyone lets out for lunch. Besides, I could use some honest opinions on this new honey tea I’m promoting.”

Happy to oblige, Mara followed Avily to the far corner of the shop, where a rose-colored hutch held a white pottery tea set. The set certainly didn’t compare in elegance to any of the dozens gracing Rulach Palace, but she found its simplicity charming.

Avily poured a cup of tea for Mara and glanced at Piper. She bit her lips in contemplation. “I don’t get a lot of sprite customers. Oh wait, I’ve an idea.” Grinning, she rushed over to a wicker basket holding silver thimbles. “These are left over from the woman who owned this place before I took over, back when it used to be a seamstress shop. Don’t they make cute little cups?”

Piper scrunched her button nose while Avily filled one of the thimbles. “*Eewwe*, that better be clean.”

Glaring, Mara lifted her hand, but Piper wisely sensed where it was heading and flew to the other side of Avily.

Mara sent Piper a final warning stare before sipping from her cup. The essence of honey and lavender mingled on her tongue. She hummed in appreciation, her irritation at the pain-in-the-ass sprite instantly dissipating.

“What do you think? Remotely palatable?”

“It’s delicious.” Licking her lips, Mara glanced around the shop, taking in the nearby shelf of lotions and creams packaged in beautifully etched decanters. “Your shop is so pretty and frilly. And it smells divine.” She inhaled the sweet fragrance lacing the air. “I keep expecting to walk around a corner and stumble across an actual rose garden.”

“Hmm, now you’ve got me thinking.” Avily settled the teapot down and tapped a finger against her chin. “A few live rose plants tucked inside some urns would add a nice touch.”

Mara smiled at Avily’s intent expression. “You really know your stuff.”

“In this biz, you’ve got to stay competitive. Particularly when half the fae population stick their noses up at the idea of frequenting a business run by a human. Still, I’ll take it over my old way of life—far less chance of getting thrown in the fairy prison.”

Avily’s pronouncement slowly registered with Mara. Lowering the cup, she stared at her over the rim. “Were you a...” Mara lowered her voice to a whisper, in case any customers might be within earshot, “...thief?”

A blush pinked Avily’s cheeks. “Yeah, many moons ago. After Leena took off, my mother had a tough time coming up with merca to support us. It took some doing, but I convinced Jerrick to teach me the trade.”

Mara didn't bother hiding her fascination. "How old were you?"

"Ten. I just turned twenty-five, which means I've been out of the thief biz for almost six years now."

Avily shook her head. "Wow, hard to believe."

The parallels between them were downright freaky. Their ages, the fact they basically bargained themselves into dubious employment in their earlier years.

"I hope you don't think too poorly of me." Worry pinched Avily's face.

"You did what you needed to survive and take care of your family. Trust me, I know all about that necessity." Saluting Avily with her cup, Mara took another sip of tea.

The lines of anxiety furrowing Avily's forehead eased. "Okay, now that you know my deepest, darkest secret, I'm dying to ask you something *really* personal." Avily leaned forward, her grin wicked and mischievous. "Does Dash live up to his legendary-lover status?"

Mara choked on her mouthful of tea. She lowered her cup, bumping the sturdy porcelain against the edge of the hutch. Her gaze flickered between Avily and Piper's unblinking expressions. Jeez, talk about having an enthralled audience. "I...uh...have no idea."

"You're kidding." Avily's eyebrows risked getting lost in her hairline. "The way Dash kept looking at you in the terminal last night, I thought for sure the two of you were hitting it hot and heavy between the sheets."

The cup tottered in Mara's hand and she quickly set it next to the teapot. "Nope. Our relationship is strictly business." She waited for the goddess of honesty to strike her dead. Her heart gave a little skip of relief when no truth-tipped lightning spears splintered through the ceiling tiles.

"Damn, and here I thought I was about to get the scoop of the century." Avily gathered the crumpled napkins scattered on the hutch and tossed them into a small waste receptacle sporting a pattern of vining roses on its exterior.

Feeling like she'd missed a close call, Mara grabbed her teacup and drained its contents in a quick gulp. She absently scanned the assortment of antique books lining the hutch's uppermost shelf. One title in particular stood out like a gold-lettered beacon. *The Legend of Rhyann*.

Mara blinked, her mouth falling open in shock. "I don't freaking believe it."

Avily glanced up from her tidying and frowned. "Pardon?"

"That book," Mara said, pointing. "Look at its name."

Straightening her glasses, Avily peered at the title in question. "Huh, what do you know."

"Surely it isn't a coincidence." Mara shook her head, refusing to accept the possibility. "No, it must be connected to the rune in some way."

"There's only one way of finding out." Avily ducked around the corner of the aisle. Seconds later, she reappeared, carrying a cylindrical stepstool with tiny wheels bolted to its bottom. She deposited it in front

of the hutch and made short work climbing up and fetching the small, leather-bound book. A thin layer of dust coated the upper edge of the binding.

“Ugh, obviously the cleaning fairy hasn’t paid a visit up there lately.” Grimacing, Avily tapped the book against the lip of the waste receptacle before handing it to Mara.

Fingers trembling with excitement, Mara stroked the book’s burgundy leather cover. She cracked it open to the first page. Piper flew onto her shoulder and leaned close to the yellowed parchment, her wings fluttering impatiently. “Come on, hurry up. What does it say?”

For once, Mara didn’t mind the sprite’s bossiness. “It’s a story about a goddess named Rhyann.”

“Never heard of her,” Avily and Piper said in unison.

Mara continued flipping through the book. An illustration of a beautiful redhead astride a winged horse filled the next two pages. She paused, tracing a finger over the flowing lines of Rhyann’s fur-lined cloak.

“Is that her?” Avily’s voice floated over Mara’s shoulder. “Just once, I’d love to see a bucktoothed goddess with bad acne and a disfiguring hump.” The stepstool’s wheels squeaked in protest when Avily nudged it away from the hutch. “So what does the book have to say about our sickeningly gorgeous Rhyann?”

The fine-grained parchment crackled when Mara turned the page. “Apparently she’s the bestower of magical wishes.” A weird sense of déjà vu settled over her.

“Wishes, huh?” Avily grunted. “Sure could have used her last night, when I was wishing for the ground to swallow me whole.”

Avily’s surly comment distracted Mara from the strange sensation poking at the edges of her consciousness. She tore her attention from the book. “What?”

“Nothing,” Avily said, waving her hand. “Does the book make any mention of the rune?”

Mara thumbed through the remaining pages. There weren’t many—less than a couple dozen. And the majority of those only displayed illustrations. Her shoulders slumped. “No.”

“Well, so much for that.” Avily stooped and picked up the stepstool. “You can keep the book if you want. It’s just more junk left from the shop’s previous owner.”

The gold lettering drew Mara’s eyes again. Maybe she’d show the book to Dash, let him see if he could determine if it held any relevance to the rune. “At least let me pay you for it.”

“Don’t be silly. If you hadn’t spotted it on the shelf, it’d still be stuck up there, gathering dust.”

The shop’s front door opened and a horde of chattering females trooped inside. Mara tucked the book against her waist. “It looks like your expected crush has arrived.”

Avily peered towards the timepiece hanging over the payment desk. “What did I tell you? Right on time.”

“We should let you get back to work. But how about you meet up with us for dinner tonight?”

After gaining Avily's promise to stop at the Crystal Lodge once she closed up shop, Mara and Piper ventured out onto the bustling street. Neither felt the desire to fight the rush of lunchtime traffic, so they headed back to the hotel. Once in their room, Mara belly-flopped onto the bed and reopened the book.

"Aren't you done looking at that thing?"

"No. I barely peeked at it earlier."

An irritated buzz sounded from Piper. "I'm bored."

"Then go find something to entertain yourself."

"Oh sure. Just like I have to do everything else around here!" After vocalizing several more of her typically outlandish complaints, Piper flew from the room.

Rolling her eyes, Mara flipped past the lavish illustration of Rhyann astride her horse. The next page showed the goddess cavorting with her favored lover, a devastatingly handsome...*human*?

Mara blinked at the unexpected word printed in bold-as-you-please script. "Jeez, no wonder she's never been heard of. The fae bluebloods probably don't want it leaked that one of their goddesses did the deed with a lowly human." She flicked the page over.

The sound of arguing drifted through the door, breaking her concentration. Lowering the book, she cocked her head, trying to decipher the muffled conversation next door.

Frowning, she hopped to the floor and tiptoed to the connecting door. She pressed her ear to the smooth wood, sliding a hand towards the supporting frame. The surface proved slicker than anticipated and she lost her grip. Scrabbling for a hold, she grabbed the first thing her hand made contact with—the green button.

The door swooshed open. With nothing but air to break her fall, she landed face first at Dash and Jerrick's feet. Anchoring her elbows in the plush carpeting, she slowly lifted her head and met equally amused grins.

"You do have an interesting way of making a grand entrance, *Sher'tian*."

Ignoring Dash's droll quip, Mara shoved to her feet. "About time you got back. I knocked on your door early this morning, but you were already gone." She eyed Dash, trying to focus on anything but the quickening of her pulse when he looked at her with that dark, smoky, I'm-imagining-you-naked stare.

"Stopped by, did you?" Dash's expression edged further into wicked territory. "Were you intending to start up where you left off last night? Damn, knew I should have stayed in bed a while longer."

"I didn't come by to..." She shifted her attention to Jerrick and caught the tail end of his knowing grin. Renewed heat scorched her face.

"We paid a visit to an old friend," Jerrick said, apparently taking pity on her. At least *one* of the brothers possessed some decency. "He wasn't much up for company, but we did gather some intel on the rune."

The unexpected news caught her off guard. "That's terrific," she blurted.

A look passed between Dash and Jerrick, provoking a nervous flutter in her belly. “What is it?” she asked, her excitement rapidly fading.

Dash reached into his trouser pocket and pulled out what appeared to be a photograph. He handed it to her, his expression grim. She stared at the image of a small, white rock with a strange red symbol carved in its center.

It took her brain several seconds to assimilate what she was looking at. “Is this the rune?” She barely registered Dash’s response while she skipped to the words written at the bottom of the glossy paper. “I don’t understand. What is this?”

“Look at the back.”

Nerves prickling with apprehension, she flipped the photo over and read the name scrawled there in the same blood red ink. “Ortis Baggins?”

Dash’s lip curled in distaste. “He’s a bounty hunter. Quite adept at it too, judging from his illustrious reputation.”

Cold fear spread through Mara’s chest. She stared at the photo clutched in her trembling hand. “Are you saying this is some kind of calling card of his?”

“Basically,” Jerrick said, peeling off his jacket.

Mara’s eyes widened when she spied the weapon holstered to Jerrick’s shoulder. Bounty hunters, laser guns...she didn’t like where things were leading. “He has the rune?”

“Looks like,” Dash said, his tone flat.

The fear surged upward, threatening to choke her. Surely they hadn’t come this far, endured countless setbacks, only to be stopped dead in their tracks. Or was fate really that cruel of a bitch? “Why?”

“To draw me out.”

She blinked. “But that’d mean he knew...”

Dash nodded before finishing the sentence for her. “He knew I came here to fetch the rune.”

“How is that even possible?” The photo paper crackled when she tightened her grip in an effort to still the trembling of her fingers.

Gently, Dash pried the photo from her hand before stroking her clenched knuckles. “Jerrick and I talked it over. The most likely culprit is Finian.”

Mara stared at him, confused. “*Finian*? Why would he hire a bounty hunter to catch you? Technically, he already *has* you.”

Resignation settled over Dash’s face. “*Sher ’tian*, he didn’t hire Baggins to catch me. He hired him to kill me.”

Chapter Twenty

The fear threatening to overtake Mara finally exploded in her chest. She shook her head, desperate to refute the possibility of anyone wanting to murder Dash. He might be annoying as hell sometimes, and he possessed the irksome habit of stealing things that didn't belong to him, but he didn't deserve to die because of those things. "I thought bounty hunters were supposed to bring their quarry in alive."

"Not always," Dash said with a calmness that made her question his sanity. "Which perfectly suits Baggins' other trade—hired gun."

"No. Finian has no reason to want you dead." Her emotions got the better of her, making her voice break on the last word.

Dash's gaze slid to Jerrick. Some unspoken communication must have passed between the brothers because Jerrick reached for his jacket. "Meet me outside when you're ready to pick up your vehicle. And don't forget the computing printout. We'll need it to track down Baggins' property holdings."

Once Jerrick vacated the room, Dash tucked her into his arms. His warmth enveloped her, a bittersweet distraction, and she curled her fingers into the soft cotton of his shirt. "Finian couldn't want you dead," she whispered, as if repeating it would banish the ludicrous idea. "He needs you to get the Rhyann rune."

"Not anymore," Dash pointed out gently. "It wasn't his idea to send me after the rune to begin with. You saw the level of hatred he feels towards me. It'd be the ultimate slap in his face if I returned with the rune and began warming his wife's bed."

Mara lifted her head and stared at him. She didn't want to acknowledge the logic of his astute assessment.

His fingers smoothed behind her neck, comforting her. "If you keep looking at me with those teary eyes, I'll be forced to make love to you, making all this hard work transforming into the first decent Maddoc in history a total waste. Do you really want to shoulder that kind of guilt?"

He succeeded in pulling an anemic smile from her, but too soon, reality sank in its stubborn claws. The uphill battle facing them had suddenly become an insurmountable mountain. "What are we going to do?" She hated the weak note in her voice. Hated even more feeling shackled by helplessness.

"There's only one answer. I have to steal the rune from Baggins."

She jerked out of Dash's hold and gaped at him. "Are you out of your freaking mind? If you're right about everything, he plans on killing you. That's not the answer I'm looking for."

The corner of his mouth tilted upward. “Hmm, we’re in complete accord for once. Good thing I plan on doing everything in my power to stay alive.”

She knew Dash’s attempt at humor was his way of trying to bring levity to the situation and allay her fears, but it didn’t make her like it. Not one damn bit. “You do realize that if you try to steal the rune, you’ll be walking straight into his trap.”

He looked slightly annoyed with her pointing out the fact. “I’m not a complete greenhorn. I do have a little experience with these things.”

“Oh really? This isn’t the first time you’ve stolen things from professional bounty hunters who’ve accepted big merca to kill you? Should be a normal day’s work for you then.” She paced in front of the bed, her frustration coiling tighter and tighter until the tension threatened to snap.

Dash stepped forward, blocking her path. When she tried maneuvering around him, he cupped her shoulders, holding her firmly in place. “Would you stay still? You’re giving me whiplash.”

His breezy attitude made her want to tear her hair out. “You’re not taking any of this seriously.”

“Yes, I am.” His fingers pressed down, forcing her towards the mattress. Grumbling, she plopped onto the foot of the bed and glared up at him. “But I’m not going to dread over all the nefarious things Baggins will do to me if I royally screw this heist up.”

Mara tucked her hands inside her lap, hiding their nervous fidgeting. “I’m not dreading.”

Dash dropped to a crouch in front of her and tipped her chin up with one finger. “Sweetheart, you’re a worrier of epic proportions. The master poets should write a sonnet about you.”

She blew out a frustrated breath. “I can’t help it. When I think of him possibly hurting you...” The fear welled up again, burning the back of her throat.

“There’s your problem—thinking too much. Fortunately, I’ve a cure for that pesky ailment.” Dash’s fingers curled around her wrists and tugged her upright before nudging her towards the connecting door. “Grab yourself something warm to throw on and meet me outside your door in two minutes.”

“But—”

He leaned down and stopped her words with a quick kiss that made her tingle in inappropriate places. “Two minutes,” he repeated firmly.

Grumbling, she trudged into her room and poked around in the dresser drawers until she located her green wool sweater. After tossing it over her short-sleeved top, she ventured out into the hallway. She didn’t have a long wait. Precisely a minute later, Dash stepped from his room.

“Where are we going?”

“First Jerrick’s taking us to pick up the Cloud Chaser.” He slid an arm around her waist and steered her towards the lift. “Then there’s someplace I want to show you.”

His cryptic response managed to stir her curiosity and temporarily shut her up. Which was probably what he'd planned all along. Sneaky bastard. She followed him outside, where Jerrick waited behind the wheel of a gorgeous red vehicle.

"She's a beauty." Unable to resist, Mara stroked her fingers over the shiny lightning bolt racing down the middle of the hood.

Jerrick leaned his head out the window and gave her a thumbs up. "Nice to see some people can appreciate vintage quality."

"Ignore him," Dash said, urging her into the backseat.

When they reached Jerrick's place, Mara fully expected to follow him inside the squat, metal building he mockingly referred to as his hellhole away from home. Instead, he grabbed the computing printout Dash produced from his rear trouser pocket and disappeared down the street.

Dash cupped her elbow. "Jerrick knows someone who specializes in surveillance. We're hoping he can narrow down which of Baggins' houses stores the rune."

"Houses?" Mara scrunched her forehead. "Jeez, how many does he have?"

"Five. Apparently bounty hunting is quite lucrative." Dash straightened the collar of her sweater before buttoning it up for her. "Perhaps I should rethink my livelihood."

"Right now, I'd be ecstatic if I never had to worry about someone wanting to kill you."

"You're thinking too much again." Before she could protest, he scooped her up and strode towards the Cloud Chaser.

She wrapped her arms around his neck, a bit embarrassed by the stares they received from the group of teens loitering across the street. "In case you didn't notice, I have two perfectly functioning legs."

"Oh, I definitely noticed." His warm palm shifted, curving beneath her thigh. He deposited her next to the passenger door and his grin turned unrepentant when she rolled her eyes at him. "Hop inside. There's someplace special I want to take you."

The mystery location he kept hinting at was killing her, but no way would she admit it. Besides, he really seemed to enjoy building the suspense. She didn't want to deprive him this one tiny joy. Dutifully, she jumped into the Cloud Chaser and kept her questions to the barest minimum while they headed in the direction of the mountains. At least *she* thought she managed to restrain her innate curiosity, but apparently Dash thought otherwise.

"Enough already." A hearty laugh rumbling from his chest, he eased the vehicle down a narrow dirt road. "It's a miracle your mouth isn't smoking."

"I wasn't talking that much."

A fresh spurt of laughter tore from him, earning her glare. Stubbornly refusing to give him any further ammunition against her, she flattened her lips shut. Still wearing his insufferable grin, he shifted into park in front of a tall, bolted fence stretched across the road. Curiosity spiking, she watched him climb from the

Cloud Chaser and stride to the fence's gate. Seconds later, its steel doors swung inward and Dash returned to the vehicle, humming. He shot her a look, clearly waiting for her to ask about the gate.

Hah, I have more willpower than that. Sort of. They continued down the road a bit until Dash stopped in front of a stand of stately fir trees bending in the wind. He threw the vehicle in park and she stepped out into the pine-scented breeze.

Dash met her at the side of the rutted lane and laced his fingers with hers. "What do you think?"

She remained mute and he chuckled. "Fine, I won't tease you anymore. Go ahead and speak."

Good thing he said that, because not talking was the hardest thing she'd ever done. Probably wouldn't have made it another two seconds. "What exactly am I looking at?"

"Only the best secret hiding spot in all creation."

"Yeah?" She didn't bother hiding her skepticism. "It looks like a bunch of trees."

"What do you think makes it such a top-secret hiding spot?" With a squeeze of his fingers, he urged her to follow him into the deep woods.

"What about the Cloud Chaser?" She glanced over her shoulder. "If someone decides to drive past that gate you left open and spots it, your super-duper hiding spot won't be so super anymore."

"Not many people venture out here. And those who do don't stick around long enough to do much exploring."

She still wasn't convinced gallivanting around a dense patch of woods was something she wanted to do. The last time she communed with nature, she ended up swinging in a Gromache snare. She peered at the fluffy clouds scudding across the sky. "You know, I think rain might be coming in. Not to mention I invited Avily to dinner. It'd be really rude if I stood her up."

"There's not a drop of moisture in those clouds. And I promise we'll be back long before dinner. Now quit your stalling." His eyes sparkled with challenge. "Unless you're too chicken to go into the scary woods with me."

Though she knew she was walking straight into his evil trap, she tugged free of his grip and stalked into the thicket of trees. An owl hooted overhead and she tried her damndest not to jump. Dash's low chuckle clearly pointed out that she wasn't fooling him in the least.

"You might want to stick close to me. The path is a bit tricky to find."

Supremely grateful he'd given her an excuse to latch onto him, she slowed until the warmth of his hand settled around hers again. They journeyed a few yards beyond the tree line when they came upon a large block of stone with strange symbols chiseled on its surface. When she asked Dash about it, he mumbled some vague answer about it being an offering altar before he dragged her away from the object.

A few paces later, the pitch of the terrain sloped downward and the path dropped off into space. Leaning over the plateau she stood on, Mara stared down at the gulch twenty or so feet below her. Dash jumped over one of the boulders protruding from the hill's face and stretched his arm towards her.

“Uh, fun as this is, maybe we should be getting back.”

“But you haven’t seen the best part yet.” He waggled his fingers in entreaty.

Sighing, she let him lead her down the steep incline. At the base, she realized the small hill they’d just climbed over was actually a cave. With some trepidation, she stared at the slab of marble resting outside the cave’s rocky entrance. It was an exact duplicate of the one they’d stumbled upon back at the start of the woods.

“Okay, what the hell is that thing?” Plunking her hands on her hips, she frowned at Dash. “And don’t think you’ll appease me by saying it’s an offering altar again.”

“But that’s exactly what it is. People leave offerings on them.” His gaze shifted away, making her suspicious.

“An offering for what?” She stalked towards the mouth of the cave. A fierce growl rumbled from its depths and she jumped nearly ten feet in the air.

Shrieking, she spun towards the path they just descended and scrambled to gain purchase on the jutting boulders. Dash’s fingers latched into the belt loops of her pants, dragging her off the hillside.

His chuckle floated past her ear, breaking through her adrenaline frenzy. “I think you reached warp speed.”

Eyes widening in panic, she stared over his shoulder. “Come on, we’ve got to get out of here.”

“No, we don’t. The sound you heard was only a recording. You triggered a motion sensor placed near the altar.”

He smiled and she pinched him in the center of his chest hard enough to earn his yelp. “You might have told me that sooner. Like before I walked up to the cave.”

Dash rubbed the area where her fingers tweaked him. “I was going to, but you moved too quickly. I didn’t have time to warn you.”

He sounded genuinely apologetic, but she wasn’t quite ready to let him off the hook. Maybe in a year or two—if he was lucky. “Why the hell are scary recordings coming from that cave?”

“It’s all part of the cover Jerrick and I devised. They go along with the orgeel offering altars.”

“*Orgeel*?” She took a step back.

“Relax, there aren’t any in the area.”

“How do you know for sure? Have you checked every single cave in these woods?”

He ducked his head in weary resignation. “This is why I didn’t want to tell you about the offering altars. As for the cave, I want to show you something. I think it’ll make you feel better.”

When she balked at the idea of going anywhere near the mouth of the cave, he ambled to its entrance. Even though she knew the scary growl was only a recording, she still jumped when it went off.

A couple seconds later, Dash reappeared. “Okay, I switched off the recording.”

Her butt remained firmly planted on her little rock perch. He strode to the hillside and stared up at her with those caramel brown eyes that always managed to turn her insides to mush. "Please trust me. I would sooner die than put you in harm's way."

Okay, how could she say no to *that*? She held out her arms, letting him lift her from the boulders. With their fingers entwined, he drew her inside the cave. An earthy scent clung to the interior. Up ahead, a rock wall marked the end of the cave.

"It's not very big." A fact she really appreciated. Not that she hadn't trusted him about the orgeels, but it settled her nerves knowing a twenty foot, red-scaled lizard couldn't stuff itself into the tight space.

"Looks can be deceiving."

Without expounding on his cryptic comment, Dash strolled to the wall and pried back one of the rocks, revealing a recessed keypad. She stared, amazed, as the massive wall split in two, swinging open like a pair of doors. Upon closer inspection, she realized they actually were a set of doors.

"Oh wow," she breathed, mystified.

Dash's fingers squeezed hers. "You might want to pace your wows. We're only getting started."

Taking his word for it, she followed him beyond the rock doors. The vision greeting her made her gasp. They were standing inside a house.

An actual, freakin' house.

Dash clicked on several of the jade and quartz lamps strewn about the room and Mara slowly pivoted, taking in the wood-paneled walls covered with enormous tapestries and oil paintings. A gorgeous chandelier hung above a mahogany dining table, its crystals fashioned to look like fat clusters of grapes.

Enchanted, she continued her exploration and journeyed into the spacious, well-equipped kitchen. Unable to resist, she opened the large cooler unit. A blast of arctic air hit her. Rubbing her arms briskly, she surveyed the labeled containers stacked on the metal shelves.

"Not sure I'd eat anything in there," Dash said, walking into the kitchen. "Might have been a while since Jerrick last cleaned it out."

She closed the cooler unit and traipsed after Dash when he strode down another short hallway. The bedroom they stepped into resembled an opulent dream. Panels of champagne silk fell from an overhead canopy, flowing in a voluminous puddle around a massive sleigh bed piled high with sumptuous silk and velvet pillows.

The rich decadence surrounding her blew Mara's mind. "How is this place even possible?"

"This is my grandfather's land. He built the house, and later erected the cave around it when he decided to start up the family business."

She could find no tactful way to word the question burning on her tongue. "You mean he was a thief too?"

Dash nodded. “He had ambitious plans of siring an entire line of his entrepreneur offspring, but alas, my mother wanted nothing to do with the business. That left only me.” He inclined his head. “And of course Jerrick, by default. Apparently blood isn’t thicker than water when you’re trying to string together a family of thieves.”

She strolled to the oil portrait suspended on the wall nearest the bed and cocked her head. “This is your grandfather, isn’t it?”

“How did you know?” Dash came up behind her and settled his hands around her waist.

“The resemblance is extraordinary.” Even the devilish twinkle in his dark eyes matched Dash’s.

“Ah, so what you’re telling me is he’s a blindingly handsome fellow.”

She couldn’t resist giving a sarcastic snort. “I wonder if he had difficulty fitting his ego through the front door too.”

“Why do you think he had those double doors put in?”

Laughter bubbled inside her. Swiveling in Dash’s arms, she gave him a tremulous smile. “Thank you for bringing me here. It’s incredible.”

“I wanted you to see it, so you’d understand the great lengths my family has gone to in the past to maintain our survival. It’s a tradition I plan on keeping.” He fingered one of her curls away from her eye. “I don’t want you to fear Baggins getting the drop on me.”

He might as well ask her to stop breathing. It’d be far easier. “I’ll try.”

“That’s my girl.” He leaned down and kissed her lightly on the lips. “Now what do you say we get out of here before the orgeel gets hungry?”

Chapter Twenty-One

Jerrick strode inside the Glasstisserie's front dining hall, his dark scowl officially killing Dash's appetite.

"So much for a quiet breakfast." Dash rested his fork on the corner of his plate and waited for the inevitable bad news.

"The rune is being held at Baggins' estate in Skalage." Jerrick slapped down the computing printout, damn near toppling the cup of Jufferi sitting in front of Dash.

"Of course it is," Dash said, his tone dry as he edged his cup towards safety. "It's the farthest away. He wouldn't want to make things too simple for me."

"The distance is the least of your worries." Jerrick slumped into the adjacent seat. Propping his elbow on the table, he rubbed wearily at the lines burrowed in his forehead. "According to my man Leo, Baggins has outfitted the place with all kinds of high-tech traps."

"Only the best royalty can buy, I'm sure."

Jerrick dropped his hand and stared at Dash, his expression glum. "Leo says he's never come across anything like it. Baggins even had a gizmo recently installed on all the doors that's impervious to magical tampering."

"A type of magical blocker? Wonder what gave him that idea?" Dash fingered the collar around his neck and grimaced.

"You have any brilliant suggestions for how we'll bypass the traps?"

"We? Let's get something clear—you're not stepping within a hundred feet of Baggins' estate."

"You stupid sonofabitch, in the past, I always had your back. So drop the overprotective-big-brother bullshit." His shoulders hunching, Jerrick leaned forward and pounded the table, making the eating utensils rattle.

Dash steadied his cup of Jufferi. "Maybe one of these days you'll tell me how you *really* feel." Dash hooked his arm across the back of his chair and tried to conjure the words that'd placate his mule-headed brother. "Look, you know damn well Baggins won't think twice about killing you if you get in his way. And I sure as hell won't give him a shot at two of us for the price of one."

"This is a two-person job, minimum. Unless you've got some contact I'm unaware of, who won't hand you over to Baggins at the first sniff of a reward, you're stuck with me."

Dash stared at the stubborn line of his brother's mouth and knew there'd be no appeasing the mule this time. "Fine, I'll think about it."

Snagging an orphaned slice of toast, Jerrick gave a cocky grin, as if he knew he'd eventually get his way. "You'll need a better disguise once you hit Baggins' home turf."

Dash fingered the brim of his hat. "I suppose you're right," he said grudgingly. "Think one of your contacts can rustle one up?"

"Consider it done."

While Jerrick helped him finish the rest of his breakfast, Dash glanced at the computing printout. "Baggins' estate in Skalage isn't far from one of my old contacts—Gordon Haslin."

Jerrick stopped shoveling potato cake in his mouth long enough to shoot him a sizzling glare. "You planning to drop me for Gordon?"

Dash shook his head. "From what I can remember, he doesn't have the steadiest hand, which pretty much rules him out for this job. I was thinking more in terms of his daughter."

"Astor? When did she get in the business? I thought she still dabbled in—" Jerrick frowned, the fork slipping from his fingers to clatter onto the plate. "Okay, what the hell do you have up your sleeve?"

A noisy vacu-bot motored past their table, sucking food crumbs from the marble floor. Once it rumbled off, Dash continued. "Nothing yet. But I want an appointment with Astor—tomorrow at the latest. Think your man Leo can arrange it?"

"I'll call him right now." Jerrick pushed up from the table. After absconding with the last piece of toast, he strode towards the exit.

The annoying vacu-bot returned, nosing around the table.

"For gods' sake, you already ate everything." Dash's grumble went ignored while the bot continued greedily sucking for nonexistent debris. When the contraption started attacking his foot, Dash threw down a tip for the server and bolted from the table. He half expected the damn thing to race after him. And wouldn't that be ironic? Instead of a hired gun doing him in, he'd meet his demise courtesy of an overzealous vacu-bot.

Once he reached safety outside the Glasstisserie's front entrance, he stopped and checked his right loafer. The lousy bot had run over the toe area, leaving a black singe mark.

"This is the problem with robots—they just don't appreciate excellent Faltronian craftsmanship." Jerking his hat low over his eyes, he stalked towards the glass lift. He glanced in the direction of the networking terminal as he passed by its opened doors, halting when he spied Mara inside, perched on a chair.

He walked up behind her, but her attention remained firmly focused on the data scrolling down the massive computing screen. Fingers drumming impatiently on the glass counter, she shook her head. "Come on, give me *something*, you bastard."

“Good gods, don’t provoke that thing. The bloody machines around here are downright homicidal.”

Mara tipped the chair sideways, clanking its metal feet. Her stare looked like it should be reserved for the crazy fools who wrestled orgeels for sport. “*Okaay.*”

Clearly she didn’t believe him. Rather than make himself look any crazier in her eyes, he nodded towards the screen. “What are you looking for?”

“Something—*anything*—on Rhyann.”

He settled his hand on the back of her neck and absently stroked her nape. “*Sher ’tian*, why waste your time? We’ve tracked down the rune.”

“I don’t mean that Rhyann.” She reached for the leather-bound book sitting next to her elbow and opened it to a richly detailed illustration of a female surrounded by a group of smiling peasants. Mara tapped the page. “Notice anything?”

Two things, to be precise. But he doubted she was referring to the female’s bountiful bosom. “There’s a white light shooting from her forehead. Not exactly normal, but I suppose it keeps her from stubbing a toe when she’s in a dark room.”

Several beats of silence passed and Mara rolled her lips, visibly holding back a laugh. Finally, she chuckled. “Only you could come up with something that weird.”

Thank the gods I didn’t mention the humongous breasts. “I give up. What is it I’m not noticing?”

“Her name.”

He scanned the page again. “Ah, now I get it. So she and the rune share something in common.”

“Avily and Piper swear it’s only a coincidence.” Hope glistened in her irises. “Do you think they’re right?”

“More than likely. I’ve never heard of a goddess Rhyann. There’s a good chance she’s just a fabrication.”

“Or maybe your ancestors don’t want any of us knowing about her.”

Dash frowned. “What gives you that idea?”

“Apparently Rhyann was making time with a human.”

“Hmm, can’t say I blame her.” He traced a finger over her lush bottom lip. “Some humans are too tempting to resist.”

She twitched her nose. “And some faes are too distracting for their own good.”

Grinning, he folded his arms over his chest. “I stand properly chastised. Now what’s with this crazy assumption about my ancestors hiding goddesses?”

“Don’t you get it? Goddesses aren’t supposed to consort with humans. We’re the lowest on the creation list—somewhere between fungi and rocks.” She held up a hand when he started to refute her statement. “Before you tell me I’m being overly dramatic, let me point out the fact that *I* didn’t come up with that ranking.”

“The faes who think along those lines are snobbish fools.”

“It doesn’t change the fact we’re not equals.”

Her solemn admission stunned him. “Mara, I’m a thief. In the eyes of most, my profession puts me lower than rocks and fungi.”

A wrinkle furrowed the center of her brow. “Surely you’re not implying I think of you in such terms?”

“You said yourself I use my skills for a low purpose.”

He watched the emotions play across her face—recognition, remorse, shame.

Her fingers scraped the edge of the counter, worrying it much like the stress-relieving stones for sale in Avily’s girly shop. “It doesn’t excuse anything, or take the words back, but I want you to know I didn’t mean them. They were a convenient way to convince myself I did the right thing in trapping you.”

The hope budding inside his heart was almost painful. “I...” He stopped and cleared his throat, struggling to find composure. His emotions felt raw. Too close to the surface. “You’ve no idea the blessing you’ve just given me.”

Mara smiled. “Good. I’m glad you feel better.”

For a minute, he considered telling her he felt something far beyond better, but his emotions felt overexposed as it was. Sex he knew. Hopeless yearnings of the heart? Not so much.

A brisk knock rapped against the terminal’s doorframe. Dash jumped. Swiveling, he met his brother’s amused grin. More than likely the little shit had been eavesdropping. “You get a hold of Leo?”

“Yep. Might take him a while to line up the meeting with Astor.” Jerrick flicked his jacket open and tucked his micro-communicator inside the interior pocket. “Apparently some moneybags commissioned her to do some work at his house all week. But the disguise is pretty much a done deal.”

“Disguise?” Mara peered at Dash, her expression perplexed.

He didn’t want to talk about the rune heist in front of her. She’d only have further cause to worry.

“Hopefully it’ll keep him from being recognized when we’re in Skalage.”

Dash sent Jerrick a glare that should have incinerated him on the spot. “We don’t need to discuss this now.”

“Why? Because I’m here?” Mara’s indignant tone whipped out and lashed him. “You know, that’s so typically male. Always thinking a woman can’t handle the tiniest amount of stress.”

“She’s got a point,” Jerrick quipped.

Gnashing his teeth, Dash stared his brother down. “Last time I checked, *you’re* a male. Might want to remember that.”

“True.” Jerrick flashed a smile. “But I’m far from typical.”

“Good, then you won’t mind giving me the lowdown,” Mara said, tapping her foot.

The cocky grin skipped from Jerrick’s face. “Shit.” He stared helplessly at Dash.

“Don’t look at me. You opened your damn fool mouth.”

Jerrick scratched his jaw. “Uh—”

Dash leveled a warning glare on him. “Want to live long enough to see your thirty-fourth birthday?”

“Stop it.” Mara stalked forward. A mix of irritation and hurt swirled in her eyes. “Yes, I’ve freaked out on more than one occasion. It’s my forte. But please don’t treat me like I’m made of porcelain.”

She’d backed him into a corner and blocked all the exits. *Sonofafairy, she’s good.* Dash pushed out a sigh of defeat and dropped his head. Staring at the floor would only work so long. Might as well spit out the basics. “Baggins stashed the rune at the estate he owns in Skalage. The place is riddled with traps, and it’s going to be a real bitch getting past them. That’s about all we know for now.”

Mara remained quiet for a long period. Dash scratched the back of his neck. “This is why I didn’t—”

Her hand shot up, silencing him. “I’m thinking.”

From the corner of his eye, he caught Jerrick’s smirk. *Yeah, just wait ’til you’re saddled with a bossy woman.*

“What if I got entrance to Baggins’ house ahead of time and let you in?”

Dash’s full attention swung back on Mara. “Hell no.”

“Why not?”

Good gods, do I really need to point it out? “Because he’s a cold-blooded killer. And what gives you the idea you can jaunt right into his estate in the first place?”

“Because I have a secret weapon. *These.*” Mara reached up and bounced her breasts.

For a brief second, all potential argument deserted Dash. All he could do was fixate on her hands. Or more precisely, what she grasped within them.

“Again, she has a point,” Jerrick muttered, his tone ironic.

Dash scrubbed his jaw. “Would you please let go of those? I can’t bloody think while you’re doing that.” Mara accommodated his request and the oxygen returned to his brain. He lifted his gaze to safer quarters. “My answer is still no.”

She scowled but thankfully she didn’t grab any more body parts. “You’re being ridiculous. There’s no reason why my plan won’t work. In fact, I think it’s pretty damn brilliant.”

“Care to fill me in on the details?” Dash shoved his arms over his chest and squared his chin. “Or does it pretty much consist of you strolling up to Baggins’ front door and flashing him some boobage?”

“I’m thinking that’d do the trick.”

“You be quiet.” Dash shot a look in his brother’s direction. “And stop ogling her breasts.”

“Of course I won’t be able to walk right up to his door. But surely the man goes out once in a while. It comes down to me being at the right place at the right time.” She gave a small gasp. “The sleeping potion the vendor gave me! I could use it to knock Baggins out.”

Dash flattened his lips. “No.”

“Why are you being such a bullhead?” Thunderclouds brewed in Mara’s eyes. “I don’t need your permission.”

Glaring, he stepped forward, but Jerrick elbowed his way between them.

“Her idea has merit. And it might very well be the only way we’ll get our asses inside the estate.”

Damn Jerrick for even entertaining the idea. “I’m not putting her in that kind of danger.” Dash spit the words out like they were rancid. Refusing to humor them a second longer, he turned and stalked from the terminal.

He blocked out Mara’s outraged reply and strode for the lobby. His face must have displayed the fury on the brink of eruption because everyone he passed gave him a wide berth. Outside, he let the sun soak into him, fueling the heat sizzling in his veins.

How could she expect him to allow such a thing? Didn’t she remember his pledge back at the hideout? He’d meant it—he’d sooner die than put her in the path of danger.

Heavy footsteps sounded behind him. “What the hell was that about?”

He stubbornly continued giving Jerrick his back. “Don’t talk to me. I’m two seconds away from kicking your ass.”

“Whoa, I’m only trying to help.”

Dash pivoted, baring his teeth. It took every ounce of his control not to take a bite out of his brother’s hide. “Help? You just convinced Mara it’s a good idea to walk into a killer’s trap.”

“Holy shit.” Blinking, Jerrick staggered back a step. “You love her.”

He saw no point denying the obvious. “Yeah, I do.”

Jerrick looked like he’d stumbled upon a Parda opal—rarest of all gemstones. “*Holy shit.*”

“You already said that.”

“I know. I’m still in shock.”

“Me too.” Dash slicked a hand through his hair and pretended he didn’t notice his trembling fingers.

Jerrick continued staring at him for a long moment. “She wants to do this. And I still think it’s a good plan. We’ll keep a close eye on her, bro. Between us and the sleeping drug, Baggins doesn’t have a chance in hell of hurting Mara.”

The thought of that bastard within breathing space of Mara left Dash on the verge of puking. He squatted, hanging his head between his knees.

“You okay?”

Through his misery, Dash felt his brother’s hand land on his hunched shoulder. He groaned, a bad brew of fear-pumped adrenaline and love sickness churning in his gut. “Fuck no.”

~ * ~

Mara paced in front of Avily's payment desk, waiting for her customer to leave so she could finish ranting. The minute the woman's green cape disappeared through the door, she threw her hands into the air. "Are all males complete domineering assholes?"

"Pretty much." Avily gave a decisive nod and returned her attention to the micro-computing pen gripped between her fingers.

"It's some sort of mutant gene they're born with," Piper chirped, swinging her legs over the side of the payment desk.

"How can he not see the logic in my plan?"

"Hello. Mutant gene." Piper tapped the side of her skull. "It also destroys their brain cells."

Mara grunted. *Yep, makes sense.*

Avily bustled out from behind the purchasing desk. She tripped over the end of the rug and made a nose dive towards the floor. Mara rushed forward, but Avily halted her fall in the nick of time, landing on her hands instead. Blowing a blonde strand out of her eyes, she grinned in embarrassment. "Speaking of mutant genes, apparently I was gifted with the one that supplies a lifetime of clumsiness."

Mara chuckled. "Don't feel bad. I got a whole boatload of those babies." She leaned down, intending to give Avily a hand up. A tattoo peeked just above the rise of Avily's pants. She cocked her head, frowning.

"Are you staring at her butt?"

"What?" Mara blinked at Piper. "No. I was looking at her tattoo. It resembles the one on Jerrick's arm."

"Hmm, weird coincidence." Avily hopped to her feet and hitched her pants up, hiding the tattoo. "So tell me again about this plan you've devised for getting inside Baggins' house."

The request effectively tore Mara's attention from the mysterious symbol on Avily's rear end. "It's simple in execution, but brilliant in design."

"*Freaking* brilliant," Piper clarified, holding up her palm.

Mara high-fived her with a pinky. "Damn straight."

Avily gestured impatiently. "Well don't keep me in suspense."

"I'd use a similar tactic to how I trapped Dash."

"You mean showcasing your boobs." Avily snorted. "Males, magical or not, are equally predictable."

In unison, all three of them rolled their eyes.

"What are you going to wear?"

"I'm not sure." Mara rubbed her chin, pondering Avily's question. "It has to be super sexy. Something that'll catch a highfalutin' bounty hunter's attention."

“Ooo...I’ve the perfect addition to your outfit. Hold on and I’ll get it.” Avily ducked around the corner. Rustling sounded the next aisle over and a few seconds later she reappeared with a pair of the most sinfully sexy high heels ever created.

“Come on, you know you want to touch,” Avily teased, waggling the shoes.

Giving in to the temptation, Mara caressed a finger over the tiny, sparkly gold stones beading the crisscrossed straps. “They’re gorgeous.”

“And they look like a good fit.” Avily thrust them towards Mara. “Better try them on anyway.”

“Really?” Not giving Avily the opportunity to rethink her generosity, Mara kicked off her sandals. She bent over and reached a hand up for the high heels. When her fingers groped nothing but air, she frowned and lifted her head.

Avily’s focus was riveted on the front of the store. “Um...”

Mara peeked over her shoulder. Dash stood in the doorway—stare centered on her arched butt. His expression reminded her of the one Ronan wore the time he slammed his thumb in the aerocoach’s door. She swung upright and torqued her back. Biting off her pain-filled grunt, she turned to face him. “What do you want?”

For some odd reason, her question made him grimace. Rather than answer, he inched towards the exit. “I’m done fighting with you. If you want to tempt Baggins, go right ahead.” He bolted from the door.

She turned and stared at Avily and Piper. “Is it my imagination or did he look green?”

“As a toad,” Avily amended.

Shoving her feet back into her sandals, Mara rushed from the shop. She found Dash a few shops down, slumped against the speckled trunk of a flowering Borasha tree. “Are you okay?”

“I really wish everyone would stop asking me that.” Without looking at her once, he strode to the street-side water dispenser situated in front of the bookshop next to The Fairest Rose and gulped down several long swigs.

She waited until he straightened before touching his arm. His thick biceps stiffened beneath her fingers. “What do you want?”

A chuckle escaped her. “Funny, isn’t that what I asked—” She broke off when he turned and granted her a dark stare. “You don’t look okay.”

“I’m fine,” he snapped. “Absolutely terrific. Want to check my goddamn vitals?”

His uncharacteristic hostility lanced her heart. Tears pricked at her eyes and she stubbornly blinked them back. “You know what? Piper’s right. You do have a mutant asshole gene.” She whirled from him and stumbled towards the hotel.

“Mara.”

She ignored his pleading croak and powered up her pace. The warmth of his hand encircled her wrist and she tried shaking him off. “Go to hell.”

He jerked her to a halt and eyes brimming with misery speared her in place. She became lost in the depths of his caramel irises. Feeling like a moth hypnotized by a burning flame, she stood stock-still while he threaded the fingers of his free hand through her hair.

“I’m already there,” he whispered, right before his mouth crushed down on hers.

I’m doomed. Like a starved person seeking sustenance, Dash feasted at Mara’s mouth. He couldn’t live without her taste, didn’t want to even try.

Feverish, he thrust his tongue inside her mouth. Licked at her like a delicious treat. She gasped, clutching the front of his shirt.

Someone gave a racking cough close by. “Okay, time to take this off the street. You’re starting to attract attention.”

Jerrick. Dash growled and pulled Mara tight before kissing her deeper. His brother grabbed the back of the slave collar and physically hauled him off Mara, dragging him towards the Crystal Lodge.

Her eyes huge, Mara stared at the small crowds clustered in the nearby shop doorways before chasing after the two of them.

They all three remained silent during the ride up to the appropriate floor. When they reached Dash’s room, Jerrick finally allowed his wrath full reign. “What the hell were you thinking? From now on, no more public displays of affection. Got it?”

Dash continued staring at Mara unblinkingly. He wanted nothing more than to vault across the bed separating them and unbutton her prim little top with his teeth. Then he’d kiss and lick every inch of her creamy skin.

Muttering beneath his breath, Jerrick disappeared into the bathroom. The sound of running water preceded his return. Grasping Dash by the collar again, he yanked him inside the bathroom and shoved him behind the water shield.

Icy pellets drenched Dash, making him yelp. A strange mist rose off his skin. “Why the devil am I steaming?”

“Because you’re overheated, you bonehead.” Jerrick shot a quick look over his shoulder before lowering his voice. “When’s the last time you had sex?”

“Three weeks, six days, twenty hours, and three and a half minutes.” Dash glared at his brother. “This has nothing to do with sex.” His nosy brother didn’t need to know about the thoughts tormenting his brain.

Jerrick cocked an eyebrow.

Am I that transparent? He mentally backtracked to the soul-deep kiss he’d planted on Mara minutes earlier. *Shit.* “Fine, it’s a little to do with sex.”

“Think maybe you should do something to cure your pesky ailment?” Jerrick challenged.

“I’m not having sex with Mara. I promised her I’d be a gentleman.”

“You’re doing a great job. That mauling scene down on the street? Total gentleman material.”

Groaning, Dash slid onto the tiled floor of the bathing cubicle. Jerrick dialed the water jets off. “Sorry if that sounded harsh.”

“No, it’s true.” Dash slicked his hair back. Fat rivulets of water streamed down his face and neck, adding moisture to his already sodden clothes. He lifted his foot and stared morosely at his waterlogged loafer. “These are bloody ruined.”

“There’s the fashionable brother I know and love.”

“You’re just jealous because you wouldn’t know quality Faltronian workmanship if it flashed its boobs and gave you a lap dance.”

“No way will you make it to four weeks.”

“I have to.”

A light tapping announced Mara’s presence. “Is everything okay in here?”

Dash met her worried gaze. “Well, my brother tried drowning me.”

“Only for your own good.”

Mara stepped farther into the bathroom. A lovely blush pinked her cheeks when she looked at Jerrick. “Would you mind giving us a minute?”

“Take all the time you need. In fact, the longer the better.” Ignoring Dash’s glare, Jerrick abandoned them with a cheerful whistle.

“What did he mean by that?”

“Nothing. His mother dropped him on his head as a babe. Now he constantly babbles nonsense.” Dash stood up and more water gushed from his trousers. He frowned at the small lake ebbing around his feet. “Think I’ll stay in here for the time being.”

She remained mute and he lifted his head to find her staring at him. “Why did you kiss me like that? It was almost...frantic.”

“I’m sorry if I frightened you.” His thoughts instantly shifted to Finian and Mara’s mother and he nearly growled at his monumental stupidity. He was doing a bang-up job convincing her he was nothing like Finian. “It’ll never happen again.”

She blinked. “You mean you’ll never kiss me again?”

The suggestion triggered a wrenching cramp in his abdominals. He waited, heart pounding, for the painful queasiness to pass. “I can’t promise that.”

“Oh. Well good.” She chewed the corner of her lip. “Because I rather like it when you kiss me.”

Mist began gathering on his skin again. “Perhaps you’d best go now,” he said hoarsely. “I seem to be having issues.”

She blinked. “Why are you steaming?”

“It’s a long, dull story.”

“Maybe I can—”

He groaned. “*Sher ’tian*, I’m begging you. If you feel the tiniest compassion for my suffering...*leave*.”

Thankfully she didn’t argue further and instead scurried from the bathroom. Seconds later, he heard the connecting door whoosh.

The mist evaporated, along with the desire pounding through his blood. *Good gods, maybe Jerrick’s right and I’m experiencing some kind of sex withdrawal*. No, it was more than that. So much more. He didn’t just want sex from Mara. He wanted her. All of her. Body, heart and soul. Where the hell was the cure for *that* ailment?

Chapter Twenty-Two

She couldn't believe the time had come to leave Tul'dea. A part of her felt relief that the mission was finally moving forward. An even bigger part wondered if her brain had been off enjoying a sunny vacation in Frittona when she decided to seduce Baggins.

"You ready to go?"

Gripping the balcony rail, Mara turned her attention from the sun's slow ascent over the distant mountains. She nodded, but Dash didn't look too thrilled by the gesture.

"It's not too late. We can always put together an alternate strategy."

"No, I want to do this." She almost believed her own words. Regardless, fear wouldn't keep her from sticking to the plan.

Dash's jaw remained tight. "The Cloud Chaser is all packed. Some last-minute business came up for Jerrick, so he won't be meeting us in Skalage until early evening." He stepped to the door leading into her room and shoved the curtains aside. "I'll be down in the parking garage."

She watched his broad back through the glass while he strode across the room and exited into the hall. Ever since the strange scene in the bathroom yesterday, he'd been acting weird. Well, weirder than usual, anyway. He pretty much refused to look directly at her, and he kept a distance of several feet between them at all times. His usual grins and droll quips were also kept to the barest minimum.

If she didn't know better, she'd swear an alien creature had somehow taken over his body. She abandoned the balcony and checked her room one last time for anything she or Piper might have left behind before heading downstairs. When she spotted Avily waiting by the entrance doors, chatting with Piper, she chuckled. Who would have thought those two would ever be buddies? Shaking her head, she approached the odd couple.

"You forgot something yesterday." Avily held up the high heels from her shop and her eyes sparkled as brightly as the shoe's gold gemstones. "It's understandable. Anyone's memory would be fried after that doozy of a kiss." She fanned her face with one hand while passing the shoes over.

Jeez, did the entire population of Tul'dea witness it? Maybe it was a good thing they were leaving this morning. Better than having to dodge everyone's smirks. "Thanks for these." Mara jiggled the shoes.

"I hope they do the trick." Concern shadowed Avily's face. "But be careful. This Baggins character sounds like a huge creep."

Mara's pulse sped up at the reminder of the mission ahead of her. "Dash and Jerrick will be nearby. They won't let anything happen to me." *Hopefully*. Pushing aside the worrisome doubts plaguing her, she squeezed Avily in a hug. "I'm going to miss you."

"Come back and visit me if you're ever in the area."

That obviously would never happen, but Mara nodded anyway. It was easier than explaining the arrangement tying her to Nalia for the rest of her life. Feeling a bit emotional over their goodbyes, she glanced towards Piper. "Come on, we better go before Dash starts wondering what happened to us."

They walked outside. Dash had pulled the Cloud Chaser from its space in the parking garage and it waited idling at the curb. "Guess this is it," Mara said to Piper. *No turning back now*. With a final wave to Avily, they both hopped in the vehicle.

The drive to Skalage took most of the morning, but it felt like forever. Between Dash's moody silence and Piper's excited chatter, Mara's nerves were strung tighter than a Saurton lute. She rubbed the back of her neck as they circled the city center. Skalage lacked the size and industry of Tul'dea, so she didn't understand Dash's compulsion to make three laps around its business section.

She frowned at him while he surveyed the signs hanging above the various shop doors. "Are you looking for something in particular?"

"Just scouting the area." He accelerated and the four-lane street became an indistinct blur of brick-faced buildings. Without warning, he swerved onto one of the side streets.

Mara rolled in her seat, clutching the center console for dear life. The Cloud Chaser straightened and her heart returned to her chest. They halted abruptly in front of a small, single-story house with dense ivy climbing up its brown shingled exterior.

"This is where we'll be staying." Dash cracked his door open.

Forehead scrunching, Mara eyed the neatly tended roses blooming in front of the porch. "Who lives here?"

"My friend Gordon and his daughter Astor. They're both away from the city at the moment, so the house is all ours."

Dash climbed from the vehicle and Mara scurried after him. They made short work unloading their bags and she helped lug everything to the porch. He punched in the code for the front door and escorted her inside.

"I'll be back within the hour."

Mara tore her gaze from the colorful landscape mural taking up all four walls of the room she stood in and stared at Dash as he turned on his heel. "But we just got here." When he didn't slow his progress, she rushed to intercept him at the door. "Wait, I'll go with you."

He shook his head and ducked through the doorway. "Stay. Make yourself comfortable. If you get hungry, there's a fully stocked pantry in the kitchen—avail yourself."

“But—”

Dash’s loafers made a slapping sound as he practically tripped down the porch steps in his haste to reach the Cloud Chaser. He jumped in, revved the engine and peeled down the street.

Piper fluttered next to the porch post. “Geesh, did someone light a fire under his feet?”

No. But I’m sorely tempted. Gnashing her teeth, Mara shoved her hands in her pants pockets before traipsing back inside the house.

“Ooh look, Shimba dice. Wanna play a game?”

Mara slid her gaze from Piper’s excited expression to the jelly-filled cubes resting in the center of the Lucite dining table. Normally she wouldn’t even think of playing with Piper. The sprite was a giant cheat—the only thing giant about her. But the situation with Dash still rankled. Maybe it’d help get her mind off it. *And him.* “Sure, why not.”

Twenty minutes into the game, she gave up her last shred of hope that she wouldn’t eventually strangle Piper. “That one doesn’t count.”

Piper stomped her foot. “I’m little. I have to throw the cube with both hands.”

“Understandable,” Mara said between gritted teeth. “But you didn’t throw the cube. You freakin’ set it down and nudged it over with your elbow. *Eight times.* Until it landed on the winning square.”

“You’re imagining things.”

“Know what I’m imagining right now? Your scrawny neck between my fingers.” Glaring, Mara scooped the cubes into her palm and tossed them back into their plastic dish.

“Hey, we didn’t finish the game.”

Mara slapped the dish’s lid in place. “Yes, we did.”

“In that case, I won. You owe me two merca. But I’m feeling generous—you can pay me in the morning.”

“Thank you, O Munificent One.” Mara gave a mock bow and wandered into the kitchen. She couldn’t bring herself to rummage through the pantry, despite Dash’s assertion that it would be okay if she did. It just didn’t feel right helping herself to someone else’s food when she hadn’t even met them. Straying to the large window that overlooked the expansive back lot, she sighed and pressed her palm against the glass. Unfortunately the Shimba game hadn’t done anything to improve her mood.

“Why is he suddenly acting like I’ve got some contagious disease?” Furthermore, why did his behavior make her chest feel tight and heavy, like an invisible vise gripped it? Swallowing hard, she traced a pattern across the glass. When she realized they were a series of small connected hearts, she jerked her hand away.

Determined not to think about Dash a second longer, she returned to the main room. A stack of books was propped near the couch. She went to investigate their subjects. Several art books, a couple volumes of

classic and more recently penned literature. She grabbed one of the modern writings and flopped onto the couch.

Time crawled by. The words she read streamed in and out of her consciousness, making little or no sense due to the fuzzy state of her concentration. The third time she passed over the same paragraph, she admitted defeat and tossed the book on the couch cushion.

She knew she was really in a bad state when she abandoned the couch to search out Piper. Following the loud snores to one of the bedrooms, she found the sprite curled up on a pillow. How such a tiny thing could produce such thunderous noise remained a mystery.

Tiptoeing into the attached bathroom, she fetched a washing cloth from the linen closet. Returning to the bed, she tucked the cotton square around Piper before backtracking to the main room. The creak of footsteps sounded on the porch just as her butt resettled on the couch. Scrabbling for the book, she opened to a random page and relaxed into the cushions' downy embrace.

The door swung open and Dash stepped inside. Though she didn't look up, she felt the heat of his stare.

"How's your book?"

She thumbed to the next page. "It's not bad."

"Ever thought of reading it right side up? Might improve the experience."

Crap. No wonder the sentences all read like Saurtonian gibberish. Trying to keep the movement inconspicuous, she flipped the book the other way. Dash's silence proved vexing. Her willpower pushed well past its breaking point, she peeked to see what he was up to. The space where he'd stood seconds ago was empty.

He'd ducked out on her. *Again.*

Choking back an irritated huff, she sprang from the couch and stormed down the hall to the lone closed door. Too incensed to knock and wait for admittance, she twisted the knob and burst inside. "This avoidance tactic of yours is really immature." Practically hyperventilating from her bottled fury, she glared at Dash when he turned from the small desk leaning against the wall.

He continued eyeing her mutely and she shoved her arms over her chest. "Why aren't you talking?"

"I wasn't certain your tirade had ended."

She clenched her jaw. "I meant in general. You've barely spoken to me since yesterday afternoon, and when you do, it's mostly regarding dull stuff."

"Pardon me for boring you." He kicked out the seat in front of the desk and settled in it before dragging a micro-thin computing tablet towards him.

Gods, he was so damn infuriating! "In case you forgot, you're the one who started that kiss on the walkway. So get the bee out of your butt and stop giving me the cold shoulder."

Dark annoyance kindled in his eyes. "You've no idea what you're talking about."

"Then explain it to me so that I *will* understand." The pleading quality of her voice only vexed her further. Another awful ache squeezed her chest and she winced. "On second thought, forget it." She spun towards the doorway, refusing to let him see the extent of her hurt.

"I love you."

The bleak words that Dash ground from his mouth made her stop dead in her tracks. She slowly turned, certain she'd misheard. "What?"

"I'm out of my head in love with you. And I mean that quite literally."

Her heart took a traitorous small leap of joy. *He loves me*. The news was wonderful...and scary as hell. Neither one of them could afford to let their emotions get in the way. Not with everything that was at stake. "This isn't good."

"You're telling me." Dash's tone held a wealth of misery. "My life is going to hell in a rocket-powered handcart and all I can think about is you. The sweetness of your lips. How the patch of skin right beneath your earlobe smells exactly like luna flowers." His voice dipped into a husky whisper. "The way your soft breasts fit perfectly in my hand."

A flash of heat grazed her skin.

"When you smile, my chest fills with sunshine. And when you cry I want to take you in my arms and kiss away every one of your tears. But mostly I want to kill Nalia and Finian Artronté for dooming us and making it impossible for you to fully trust me."

He cut off her tiny bleat of distress. "Don't. Any denial you make is only shading the truth. Deep down, you're still frightened of my powers and the passion that boils inside me every time I touch you." His expression became one of self-disgust. "Like you said, I was too intense yesterday—I couldn't control it."

Mara belted out a laugh. "Oh man. Could you be any denser?" The question earned his fulmineous glare. Ignoring it, she shook her head. "Dash, that kiss was *hot*. It made me want to rip your clothes off and lick you from head to toe." An embarrassing admission, but hell, for the sake of honesty she needed to come clean.

Thick silence wrapped around them.

Dash scraped his fingers through his hair. "You shouldn't have told me that."

"I told you so you'd know I wasn't frightened." She stepped towards him.

The chair rocked as he leapt from it and edged around the desk. "Stay. *Put*."

"Why? Worried your uncontrollable passion might get the better of you?" she teased.

Dash's jaw flexed. "I don't advise baiting me right now. Not unless you're prepared to be tossed on that bed and fucked senseless."

His gruff, crude threat should have tripped the fuse to her temper. It didn't.

Her head floating with forbidden temptation, she slid her gaze to the bed. A rough growl broke from Dash.

“Mara, get out of here. *Now*. Before I break every promise I made you.”

Returning her stare to Dash, she noted the funnel clouds of steam rising from the sweat on his forehead. Gulping, she sprinted from the room.

~ * ~

Jerrick arrived at the house before the sun snuggled down for the night. After settling a satchel that Mara presumed held a change of clothes on the floor, he glanced at her. “Where’s my brother?”

“Sequestered in his room.”

A grin spread across Jerrick’s face. Chuckling, he ambled down the hall. Minutes later he returned, Dash trailing him with a dark glower. Jerrick murmured something low beneath his breath, making Dash’s scowl deepen.

“Bite me,” Dash muttered.

Another chuckle fell from Jerrick. “I’m not the one who should be providing that favor.” He nodded towards Mara. “Feel up for a drive, Blondie?”

She jumped from the couch. “Where are we going?” Not that she cared. Any opportunity to get her mind off things for a while was a welcome distraction.

“The area around Baggins’ estate. We want to get a better lay of the land.”

Goose bumps pricked her skin, but she resisted the strong desire to rub her arms. Any hint of her fear might convince Dash to call the mission off. “Good idea.” She reached for the sweater she’d draped over the back of the couch. Steadying her nerves with a deep breath, she pushed her arms through the sleeves and turned back to them. “Guess I’m ready.”

The three of them piled into Jerrick’s Air Racer—a wiser choice of vehicle because of its tinted windows. They drove approximately twenty martroneters outside the city limits of Skalage. A herd of grazing Foini bulls lifted their bulky heads and cautiously eyed them as the Air Racer slowed to a crawl near the laser-patrolled fence penning the beasts.

“This is where Baggins’ property line starts.” Jerrick nodded towards the menacing bulls. “It stretches two hundred kindrics deep, past that stand of trees, and about three hundred kindrics wide.”

Dash leaned closer to the window. “Is the road in blocked by the same system of lasers guarding the pasture?”

Jerrick nodded. “But it’s triple the power. There’s enough juice to disintegrate your innards from a foot away. Baggins’ vehicle is the only thing that’ll trip it.”

“Looks like we’ll have to go in by means of the pasture.” Dash grimaced. “The lasers I’m not too worried about, but the Foinis are another story. Any ideas?”

“An enormous bag of bull chow?” Jerrick’s mouth tipped into a grin.

“No, I’ve got it.” Dash snickered. “We’ll rent a Nartock cow costume.”

“Who gets to be the ass end?”

“Is there really any debate?”

She couldn’t believe they were joking about something of such deadly magnitude. “Those bulls can kill you.”

A snort shot from Dash. “Everyone wants to kill me. They’ll have to stand in line.”

“You’re taking none of this seriously.”

Dash gave her a narrow-eyed stare. “I bloody well am. If I weren’t, we wouldn’t be out here.”

His chastisement hit home, both relieving and infuriating her. “Fine, point taken,” she snapped. “Are we done with this section of Baggins’ property or would you like to get out and proposition one of the bulls? The one with the broken horn over there looks in need of a good time.”

Jerrick choked on a strangled laugh before maneuvering the vehicle down the road. Visibly struggling to keep his face straight, he pointed to a stone archway in the distance. “There’s the entrance to the estate. We won’t linger past this point because a visio security system monitors the gate.” He accelerated, cruising them past the remainder of the property. Once the laser fence gave way to dense forest, he braked to a complete stop.

Crooking his arm around the back of his seat, Jerrick pinned Mara with his stare, his mirth noticeably absent. “Don’t worry about Dash and I. You’re the one with the difficult job.”

Mara slipped her gaze from Jerrick’s pensive expression and looked at Dash. His face resembled carved granite as he stared mutely out the front windshield. Her own ire vanished. How could she criticize his lack of levity when he clearly struggled with the part she played in the whole scheme?

“If you have the slightest doubt about going through with this, now’s the time to say it.”

She returned her attention to Jerrick and shook her head. “I don’t.” Saying it was one thing, admitting the truth to herself—whole other story.

Chapter Twenty-Three

“It’s a go.” Jerrick stepped out of the kitchen and clicked off the micro-communicator resting in his palm. “According to Leo’s source, Baggins is meeting a client at Zupello’s tonight for dinner.”

Heart thudding, Mara swallowed her mouthful of porridge. The cereal congealed in a thick lump inside her throat. “But I’m not ready.” She felt Dash’s alert stare across the dining table and quickly amended her statement. “I haven’t put together an outfit yet.”

“What about the dress you wore the night you and Dash tried to lure me out?”

She wrinkled her nose. “It doesn’t go with the shoes Avily gave me.”

“What difference does it make? A dress is a dress.”

“*Hello.*” Slapping her hands on her hips, Piper sashayed between the breakfast dishes. “You can’t mix gold and black. It’s so last year.”

Jerrick grunted. “Fine, I’ll drive you in to the city center. The variety of shops is limited, but one of them is bound to cough up a dress.” He looked slightly queasy. “This is my worst nightmare come true. Shopping with two females.”

“I’ll take them.” Dash scraped his chair back, his face tight. “Where’s the disguise Leo put together?”

“Hold on, I’ll go grab it.”

While Jerrick strode outside, Mara fidgeted with her spoon.

“Stop trying to put on a brave front.”

Mara jerked her head up and met Dash’s stare. She let go of the spoon and tucked her hands between her thighs. “I’m not.”

“Bullshit. I can practically hear the blood pounding through your veins.”

Unable to stop it, she released a shuddering breath. “Okay, I admit it. I’m definitely scared.”

“Good.”

She glared at him. “No need to be an asshole about it.”

“I’m not.” His expression remained fiery. “But it’s good you’re scared—it’ll keep you on your toes. You’re less likely to make a costly mistake if your guard is up.”

What he said made a lot of sense. “Where’d you learn this stuff? Thief school?”

His fierceness cracked, allowing in a faint smile. “Didn’t realize they had schools for thieves. Might have saved my grandfather years of frustration training me.”

Jerrick stomped back into the house and tossed a plastic bag on the table. Without peeking inside at its contents, Dash grabbed the bag and strode to his room. A few seconds later, his booming curse echoed all the way into the dining room.

“Here come the firesparks.” Muttering, Jerrick hiked down the hall.

Curiosity mounting, Mara waited to see what had managed to get Dash so riled. The door the two brothers had disappeared behind opened. Jerrick stepped out first, his face a mask of barely contained jocular restraint. Behind him stalked Dash—wearing the most ridiculous getup known to faekind. Or humankind, for that matter.

The one-piece ocean blue jumpsuit was fashioned from some kind of stretchy material that made a weird *frippp* whenever he moved. Synthetic, fluffy white fur lined the cuffs and high neck. If that weren’t bad enough, the long blonde wig and platform boots put him well over the edge.

Piper rolled on the tabletop, her wings flapping as she dissolved in a fit of laughter. She pointed at Dash. “You look like Mara’s ugly sister.”

Dash started to pivot back down the hall but Jerrick clamped a hand around his shoulder, stalling him.

“No way am I going out in this.”

“You have to.” Jerrick shoved Dash towards the exit. “Look at it this way—no one will ever recognize you.”

“They bloody better not. I’d never live it down.”

Jerrick glanced at Mara. “Ready? I want to get him in the vehicle before he starts really throwing a hissy fit.”

After rushing for her coin purse, Mara galloped outside. While she and Piper ducked into the Cloud Chaser, Dash gripped the steering wheel in a chokehold and glared at his brother.

“Payback’s a bitch. Might want to remember that.” Dash left Jerrick’s chuckle in the dust as he sped off.

They spent a good hour combing the shops of Skalage. Mara didn’t have any luck finding a suitable dress, but Dash received three offers for a date.

“Do I look easy or something?” Scowling, he led the way back to the vehicle.

Mara’s lips twitched. “Um, I think it must be the stubble. It’s quite sexy.”

He smiled, apparently mollified by her assessment.

“Too bad you were subjected to a bunch of lecherous old men for no reason. Who would have thought finding a dress would be so difficult?” Mara sank back in the passenger seat with a grumble. “Guess I’ll have to settle for what I’ve already got.” She shot him an apologetic look. “Not that there’s anything wrong with the dress you bought me. It’s absolutely gorgeous. It’s just...”

Dash held up his hand. “I know. The shoes.”

Piper jumped onto the center console and peered up at Mara excitedly. “Why didn’t I think of this before? I could make you a dress!”

Sprites were master fashion designers, but Mara didn’t see how Piper would be able to pull it off. “We don’t have any fabric or thread.” She glanced at the compu clock on the windshield. “Or time.”

“We don’t need any of those things when I’ve got plenty of sprite dust at my disposal.”

Mara blinked at Piper. “You can make clothing out of that stuff?”

The sprite gave a cheeky smile. “It’s the ultimate in versatility.”

Who knew? Mara tapped her fingers against her knee. “Okay, go for it.”

Piper plopped her butt on the console. “We have to wait till we get back to the house. You’ll need to take all your clothes off.”

Lifting her head, Mara met Dash’s smoky gaze.

“Or you could just strip down right now,” he said, his voice husky.

Forbidden temptation once again tingled under her skin. She released a shaky breath. “I think I’ll wait.”

His mouth curved in a sardonic grin. “Wise choice.”

When they reached the house, Mara followed Piper into the room they’d shared the previous night. She unbuttoned her pants and wiggled free of them before tugging her pink top over her head. Piper studied her with a critical eye.

Nervous, Mara raked a hand through her curls. Getting the full ogle from a sprite was a little disconcerting.

“It’s coming to me.” Piper stroked her dimpled chin. “*Eureka*,” she shrieked, giving her head a decisive bob. “Take everything else off.”

“The only things left are my undergarments.”

“Yeah, you won’t need ’em.”

“The hell I won’t.” The idea of walking around in public without them brought a flush of heat to Mara’s face.

“You’re such a prude. Fine, I’ll let you keep the panties, but the boob catcher’s gotta go. Won’t work otherwise.”

“It’s called a corselette.” Shaking her head at Piper’s crude yet inventive vocabulary, Mara reached for the hook between her breasts and popped it free. Sliding the straps from her shoulders, she tossed the garment to the floor.

Piper rubbed her hands together. “Here we go.” She flung her arms out and sparkling violet dust showered from her fingertips. Fluttering her wings, she flitted around Mara, plucking and weaving the dust as she went. “Hold out your arms.”

Mara obeyed, trying not to giggle when Piper’s wings tickled beneath her armpit.

Roughly thirty minutes later, Piper clapped her hands. “All done.”

“Really?” Running her fingers over the tissue-thin substance covering her, Mara walked to the tall looking glass angled in the far corner of the room. She gasped, gawking at the sight greeting her.

The dress was magnificent but at the same time absolutely...indecent.

Piper settled on her shoulder. “What do you think?”

“You can see my breasts!”

“What are you talking about? I patterned a curlicue design over them. They’re mostly covered.”

“Mostly being the operative word.” Mara resisted the urge to clamp her hands over the exposed buggers.

“You don’t like it.” Hurt laced Piper’s voice.

A blanket of guilt settled over Mara. It covered her more thoroughly than the violet dust dress. “No, I do. It’s the most amazing, beautiful creation I’ve ever seen.” Her words weren’t guilt-induced flattery. The dress was all those things and more. She just wished there was more of it.

Piper’s smile took up her entire face. Relieved her little ego had been restored, Mara reached for the knee-length hem of the dangerously snug dress and gave it a tug. It didn’t budge. Frowning, she gave another tug. Still nothing. “Okay, am I doing something wrong?”

“Nope. It can’t come off.”

Mara gaped at Piper’s reflection in the looking glass. “*Ever?*” Oh gods, she was doomed to spend eternity walking around in a dress that allowed everyone and their brother to see her curlicue-patterned breasts.

Piper snorted. “Don’t be silly.”

The breath trapped in Mara’s lungs escaped in a relieved gust.

“Just for tonight.”

“*What?*”

“I had to make it extra strong so it’d cling to you, which used up most of my dust.” Piper shrugged. “You’re stuck with it.”

Mara’s mouth went dry as wild palpitations kicked up her heart rate. She wore a dress that left her close to naked—one she couldn’t take off or cover up with her everyday clothes.

There was just one adequate response she could think of for the situation facing her. “Oh shit.”

Chapter Twenty-Four

“You know, I’m strangely attracted to you right now.”

Dash glared at Jerrick before whipping the blonde wig from his head. “Doesn’t surprise me. You always were a little on the queer side.”

Jerrick settled back and tapped his fingers on the couch cushion’s braided top seam. “Admit it. Leo’s disguise is damn brilliant. Hell, I couldn’t have come up with anything better. And it beats that stupid hat you’ve been wearing.”

“Cut me some slack.” Dash ran his hands over his scalp, combing his hair in place. “I didn’t exactly have much time or the proper resources to do my usual bang-up job in the disguise department.”

They fell into a companionable silence for several minutes, until Jerrick finally cleared his throat. “I’ve been thinking.”

“Always a dangerous activity where you’re concerned.” Grunting, Dash stacked one platform boot on the shin-high, triangular table sitting in front of his overstuffed chair.

“Maybe it’s not such a good idea if you’re there when Mara lures Baggins.” Jerrick’s expression turned cautious. “Before you go ballistic, hear me out. You hate the idea of Mara’s involvement in the heist, and her being anywhere near Baggins.”

“Because I don’t want her in any danger,” Dash snarled. Why couldn’t his brother understand that?

“I know. None of us are disputing your right to feel that way. But you’re also a danger to Mara.”

Anger surged inside Dash’s chest. Dropping his boots from the table, he prepared to physically knock some sense into his brother. “I would never hurt her.”

“Not directly. But you losing it at the first sight of Baggins standing a tad too close to Mara would bring down a shit storm of trouble. And she’d be stuck right in the middle—a sitting target.”

Dash opened his mouth, fully intending to refute the assessment, when a harsh breath hissed from Jerrick. He turned to see what the devil had elicited his brother’s rapt attention and nearly lost all the oxygen in his lungs.

Mara stood at the juncture of the hallway—wearing just about nothing. Her wary gaze locked with his.

“I considered riding the time out in the bedroom, but decided it would be cowardly. Besides, a crowded restaurant is on tonight’s agenda, right? Might as well get in all the practice I can.”

Good gods, she was out of her ever-loving head. “You aren’t leaving this house in that dress.” Growling, he leapt to his feet.

“I don’t have any choice. It won’t come off.”

He stalked towards her. “Don’t worry. I’ll bloody get it off you.” The clomp of Jerrick’s boots sounded behind him but he ignored it and continued advancing on Mara.

Her eyes grew huge and she stumbled back against the wall. Jerrick’s hand clamped around Dash’s shoulder and tried jerking him to a halt. He shrugged from his brother’s grip.

Jerrick muttered a curse. “You would make me do this.” His fist connected with Dash’s jaw, knocking him off balance.

Staggering, Dash shook off his disoriented haze and glared at his brother. “You want a piece of me? Fine, game on.”

“You stupid sonofabitch.” Jerrick’s expression matched his confrontational tone. “This is exactly what I was talking about. You’ll never be able to handle seeing her with Baggins.”

Dash bared his teeth. “Don’t tell me what I can and can’t handle.”

“Fine. Guess you need a demonstration.” His jaw tight, Jerrick brushed past Dash and sauntered to Mara. “Blondie, I’m doing this to save your life and his, so please humor me.”

Without further word, Jerrick’s hands slid into Mara’s hair, holding her steady. His mouth covered hers, muffling her surprised squeak.

Fury exploded in Dash’s head. His ears ringing, he closed the distance between Jerrick and himself with two long strides. He yanked Jerrick away from Mara and plowed a fist into his brother’s gut. Jerrick reciprocated with an uppercut to his jaw. At this rate, it’d be a miracle if the damn body part didn’t end up shattered. Growling, Dash grabbed Jerrick and slammed him against the wall. He wedged an arm across his brother’s jugular, pinning him in place.

“Stop it!”

Mara’s irate demand ripped through Dash’s rage. Her heels clicked on the wood floor and he slashed a look in her direction without releasing his hold on Jerrick.

Her blue irises glittered. “I thought the two of you settled this beating-each-other-to-a-pulp business back in Tul’dea.”

Lungs bellowing, Dash granted her a steely eyed stare. “He’s lucky if I don’t kill him.”

A wheeze came from Jerrick. “Could you let up?”

Dash didn’t immediately honor the request.

“Do it.” Mara’s voice whipped around him, her tone clearly stating she’d take no more funny business. Reluctantly, he slid his arm free.

Jerrick rubbed his throat. “That does it. He’s not going anywhere near Zupello’s. In fact, he’s leaving.” Pointing a finger at Dash, he shoved away from the wall. “I don’t trust you to stay put here, so I’m packing you off to the hideout. I’ll nab the rune without you.”

His eyes slitted, Dash glanced around the main living area. “The army you intend to help carry out that demand must be hiding.”

“If I have to tie you to the damn passenger seat and take you there myself, I will.”

Dash ignored Jerrick’s threat and backtracked his gaze to Mara. Blood pounding in his eardrums, he stared at the violet swirls covering her breasts. Across the room, she’d appeared a glittering fantasy come to life. Up close, she was the death of his sanity.

“Look at her.” Jerrick’s harsh demand bulleted past Dash’s ear.

He responded to his brother’s request with an unintelligible grunt. Right now, an orgeel could lumber across the room and he wouldn’t notice.

“Now tell me what you’ll do if Baggins touches her.”

“I’ll rip the bastard’s heart out through his nose,” Dash said without hesitation. He smothered a growl. Great, he’d walked straight into his brother’s trap and didn’t have any hope of springing the lock. Pivoting, he stalked outside, slamming the door behind him with a thunderous bang. He stopped at the top of the porch steps. Leaning his hands against the support posts, he hung his head.

It was official—his sanity had migrated south for the winter.

The door made a whisking noise behind him seconds before he heard the *rap tap* of Mara’s high heels. Her hand fell hesitantly on his biceps. He couldn’t control his involuntary flinch. Hell, his utter lack of control lately seemed to be a recurring theme. If nothing else, he was consistent.

“If you’ve come out here to tell me to take Jerrick’s advice, save your breath.” He stared morosely at the roses flanking the porch. Their scarlet blooms shivered in the breeze, releasing a spicy-sweet essence. “Clearly I’m a menace to this operation. I’d only put you in danger.”

Her fingers stroked his arm through the gods-awful jumpsuit. “Not purposefully. But it’s a risk we can’t afford.”

The heaviness in his chest threatened to collapse his lungs. “I’m supposed to protect you.” It was the foremost thought in his head. Well, other than the delicious curves revealed beneath her glittery dress—a visual that seemed permanently branded in his visual cortex. “How can I do that if I’m thirty martrioneters away at the hideout?”

“Jerrick will keep a close eye on me. And it’s not like I’ll be out of your sight for long. Before you know it, Baggins will be snoozing thanks to the sleeping potion, and I’ll be joining you at the hideout with the Rhyann rune in my hand.”

“That’s assuming everything goes well.” He looked down, taking in the bright glow of hope lighting Mara’s face.

“It will.”

He’d experienced enough botched heists to appreciate the necessity of a good backup plan. “If this mission looks even remotely like it’s heading in a bad direction, promise me you’ll call it off.”

She frowned. “But—”

“Promise me.”

Her mouth started to form another protest and he backed her against the post. She nodded with a squeak. “Sure, whatever you want.”

“Mm, I like the sound of that.” Though it’d only fuel his torture, he reached out and cupped her breasts. A soft gasp sprang from her lips.

The dress moved like liquid beneath his fingers, an almost nonexistent barrier from her skin. Lust curled low in his groin. “Later, after this is all finished, I’m keeping my word.”

A moan skipped from her while his hands continued their exploration over the slithering fabric. Her tongue darted out to moisten her lips, making his cock throb in painful agony. “Your word?”

He curled his lips in feral promise. “I’m getting this dress off you.”

Chapter Twenty-Five

For the hundredth time, Mara rechecked her coin purse for the vial of sleeping potion. Yep, still there. “Okay, enough stalling.” Dragging in a deep breath, she climbed out of Jerrick’s Air Racer. After crossing the courtyard, she sashayed through the front entrance of Zupello’s.

The older gentleman standing near the door turned his head at her approach. “Good evening, how many...?” His eyes bugged from their sockets while his voice trailed off.

“Just little ole me.” Mara wagged her fingers. “Think you can squeeze me in?”

The man seemed to experience some difficulty swallowing because he reached for the knot of his tie and loosened it. “Most definitely, m’lady. Right this way.”

She followed him inside the hubbub of the tropical-themed restaurant. Gradually, the noise level abated as conversation ceased at each table they passed.

Oh gods, they’re probably all staring at my boobs. Pasting on a confident smile, Mara settled into the bamboo-caned seat her escort pulled out for her.

“Would m’lady care for a cocktail?”

Several males at the surrounding tables bounded from their chairs, reaching frantically for their merca.

“No, just some water please.”

Dejected sighs filtered from the males before they sank back into their seats. The server hurried off for her beverage and Mara swept a discreet glance around the restaurant. She spotted Jerrick at the bar. He’d entered Zupello’s ten minutes ago, but it appeared he’d barely put a dent in the amber ale in front of him. Catching her eye, he deserted his stool and ambled past a series of tables. He stumbled into one of the diners and appeared to mumble an apology at the scowling man before striding towards the bathroom facilities.

Mara stared at the male Jerrick deliberately bumped into. *Baggins*. Her heart knocked increasingly faster.

The bounty hunter wasn’t hideous by any means, but he wouldn’t win any male-model awards either. A bulbous nose staked claim to the majority of his face. It looked sort of off kilter, like it’d seen one too many fists in its day. Thinning brown hair swept low over his wide brow, not quite obscuring the coldest, flattest gray eyes she’d ever seen.

Overall, he looked like the sort of individual who enjoyed committing murder. And lucky her, she got to seduce him.

Shivering, Mara stood and tucked her coin purse beneath her arm. She ignored the hot, interested stares of the males occupying the neighboring tables and strolled in the direction of Baggins' table. Rather than approaching from behind, like Jerrick, she took the other aisle so the bounty hunter wouldn't miss the show she intended to provide.

Almost there. Mara slowed her pace. When she was almost on top of Baggins' table, she shifted her arm. The coin purse plummeted, landing between her sparkly high heels. "Jeez, could I be any clumsier?" She bent low, thrusting her butt in the air, and reached for the coin purse. Several male groans floated from the nearby tables.

Mara's fingers curled around the metal clasp of her coin purse. Satisfied she'd given everyone plenty of time to gawk at her butt, she straightened with a toss of her hair. Her gaze shifted, locked with Baggins' lust-filled one.

She bit back a smile. *We have contact.*

~ * ~

Dash growled as the countryside raced outside the Cloud Chaser's windows. "Something will go wrong. I know it."

"Geesh, nothing like being Mr. Positivity."

He shot a glare in Piper's direction. "Why didn't you talk me out of leaving?"

The sprite shrugged as she bounced on the center console. "Didn't know I was supposed to."

"Of course you're supposed to. You're the lousy sidekick—it's your job."

"I'm the sidekick? Cool." Piper's wings fluttered excitedly.

Dash's grip tightened around the steering wheel. "It's bloody torture, knowing I'll just be waiting for them to show up. *Maybe.*" He knew he was being pessimistic again, but he couldn't shake the queasy feeling in his gut. And this time it had nothing to do with lust and love sickness.

"Then don't."

He jerked his head around and stared at Piper. "What?"

"Just because they want you to go to the hideout doesn't mean you have to do it."

She had a point. But he'd also made Mara and Jerrick a promise. "I'm not supposed to go anywhere near Zupello's."

"Doesn't mean you can't stake the place out from a distance."

A grin stretched across Dash's mouth. "You're one damn good sidekick."

Piper fluffed her pink hair. "I try."

He slammed on the brake and the sprite knuckled the console to keep from colliding with the dashboard. “Sorry.” Glancing to make sure she hadn’t been catapulted through the air vent, he pulled onto the side of the road.

“No problem.” Piper resettled onto her perch before frowning at him. “I just realized something—you’re not wearing your disguise.”

Dash’s hand eased off the throttle. “Sonofafairy.” Much as he’d rather give himself a lobotomy than put the damn thing back on, he didn’t have much choice. He couldn’t risk blowing everything by having Baggins or some other goon recognize him.

He jumped out of the vehicle and grabbed the disguise from the bags nestled in the backseat. The road was deserted so he stripped down right there and zipped himself into the jumpsuit before donning the boots and wig.

Impatient with the time lost, he hopped back into the Cloud Chaser and broke every land record driving to Skalage’s entertainment district. He spied the cherry red Air Racer parked in the lot next to Zupellos.

“There’s an available spot,” Piper said, pointing towards the lot.

“I can’t see the restaurant from there.” Spinning the wheel, Dash shot across the opposing lanes and nosed into a tight alley that seemed more suitable for pedestrian traffic than the wide-bodied Cloud Chaser. Following the lane until it branched off behind the cluster of buildings, he hung a left, heading back to the street. He slowed once he reached the mouth of the walkway. Convinced he’d find no better stakeout position, he shut off the ignition.

Four minutes into the mission, he discovered first-hand that Piper was a fantastic sidekick, but a lousy stakeout partner.

“I have to pee,” she said, her voice whiny.

“The alley’s right behind you. Have at it.”

“You’re going to make me go out there all by myself?” Her lips pouted. “What if a Gorinna cat tries to eat me?”

“Good gods.” Grumbling, he hitched his door open. There was barely enough room for him to squeeze from the vehicle. “Come on.”

Piper flitted out. She sent him a censorious look. “No peeking.”

“Don’t worry. You’re not my type.” Shuffling sideways, he reached the rear of the Cloud Chaser and parked his ass on the tail end. An oily puddle filled a pothole near his foot, reflecting the overhead security light.

“Now I can’t go.”

“Then get back in the vehicle.”

“I said I *can’t* go. Doesn’t mean I don’t still *have* to go. Maybe if you hummed real loud.”

He ground his fingers into his temples. “Why?”

“So you won’t hear me tinkle.”

“Good gods, would you just bloody do it?”

The Cloud Chaser rocked beneath Dash, jostling him and making the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end. Jumping from the tail, he whipped around. Four burly thugs fronted the hood of the vehicle. A lecherous grin stretched the mouth of the tallest. “We’ve got ourselves a pretty one.”

Dash suddenly remembered the blonde wig. He snatched it off. “Hate to disappoint you, but none of you are my type either.”

“He’s a fucking transgender.”

Perhaps taking the wig off hadn’t been the smoothest move. Wings brushed by Dash’s cheek and he caught a brief glimpse of Piper streaking past. “Hold on,” she shrieked. “I’ll bring backup.”

“*Backup?* We have no bloody backup!”

She sailed over the heads of the thugs and darted from the alley. When Dash realized she was heading in the direction of Zupellos—to Jerrick—his heart lurched. He’d handle the thugs. Jerrick needed to stay put and keep watch on Mara. Protect her.

“Get your tiny ass back here,” he bellowed.

Piper either didn’t hear his shout or chose to ignore it. The thugs paid the sprite no heed as their leader reached into his pocket and pulled out a small bat.

Dash grimaced. He’d envisioned all sorts of scenarios where this mission could go horribly wrong. None of them had included getting clubbed to death for wearing a fur-trimmed jumpsuit.

The leader’s mouth twisted in a menacing smile. “Get him, boys.”

~ * ~

“You’re not from around here.”

Mara resisted the temptation to shiver in revulsion when Ortis Baggins stroked his fat thumb down her arm. Instead, she picked up the Fairy Fire Ball he’d insisted on purchasing for her and took the barest of sips. She couldn’t afford to let any alcohol go to her head. Like Dash stated, people were less likely to do stupid things when their guard remained in the upright position. “I recently moved to the area.”

“Aren’t I the lucky bastard?” Baggins’ leer dipped to her breasts.

Ugh. Where’s a wire scrub brush when you need one? Feeling dirty, and not in a good Dash sort of way, Mara gulped and forced herself to take advantage of the perfect opening he’d provided. “Not yet. But the night’s still young.”

Baggins lifted his head and revealed a lewd grin. “My business is finished here. No reason we have to stay.”

Mara's pulse drummed. *Get a grip.* She couldn't let her nerves get the better of her this close to the finish line. Besides, Jerrick would be right behind her. Looking to reassure herself, she peeked towards the bar. He wasn't there.

Panic squeezed Mara's chest. She darted a desperate glance around the restaurant and spied a flash of black leather near the front entrance. A second later, Jerrick's broad back disappeared from sight.

Where the hell is he going?

"Well, what do you say?"

Frowning, she returned her attention to Baggins. "Pardon?"

His fleshy lips parted as he leaned closer, and it took all her willpower not to jump away from him and his stale breath. "Care to join me for a cocktail back at my place?"

Oh crap. She couldn't go anywhere until Jerrick returned. Damn it, what possessed him to go outside in the first place? Didn't he know they were in the middle of a mission?

"Would you excuse me a sec?" Grabbing her coin purse, she gave Baggins an apologetic grin. Because she knew the bounty hunter's eyes were trained on her, she sashayed towards the bathroom facilities with a seductive shimmy. It made her ill having to perform for the disgusting cretin, but she had to keep up the pretense. Once she reached the privacy of the bathroom, she locked the door and slumped against it.

"Oh gods." She didn't know what she'd do if Jerrick didn't return within the next few minutes. Baggins wouldn't wait forever.

Stalling for time, she walked to the sink and splattered water on her hands and arms. It didn't completely remove the taint of Baggins' touch, but it was better than nothing.

One minute stretched into two. She couldn't put it off any longer or her quarry would lose interest. Wrestling her anxiety into submission, Mara opened the door. Baggins stood on the other side. She gaped at him, trying to find her tongue.

He pulled something from his pocket. The strange metallic object glinted as he palmed it. "Should have said yes. Less complicated and messy."

She stared at him. "What?"

Rather than answer, he jammed the strange object against her shoulder. Excruciating pain ripped through Mara, right before her world went black.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Dash watched two of the thugs climb on top of the Cloud Chaser's hood. The other pair took the more logical approach and simply squeezed between the vehicle and the brick walls of the buildings on either side of it. He prided himself on being damn good with his fists, but he wasn't a fool. The odds definitely didn't favor him being the victor in this fight.

Backing up, he splashed through the oil-slicked puddle, scouting for a potential weapon. Nothing. "Oh bloody hell."

Left with no alternative, Dash turned and loped towards the back intersection of the alley. The stupid platform boots were weights dragging beneath his feet. He hurtled over another puddle and almost lost his balance when he made jarring contact with the ground. The thugs sounded close—too close—behind him. Up ahead, the cross street taunted him with possible escape.

Something struck Dash between his shoulder blades and he went down hard. He didn't know which hurt worse—the searing pain in his back, or his blasted kneecap. A foot landed on his side and kicked him over. Growling, he swung his leg up and slammed the platform boot into the gang leader's groin. The man dropped to his knees, screaming.

One down, three to go.

Unfortunately, all three of them swooped on him at once. Jabbs came from everywhere. He'd have to be a Mer'dacian octopus to fend them all off.

"Sonofabitch. I can't leave you alone forty minutes without you getting pounded on."

Dash caught a glimpse of Jerick's livid face when his brother yanked the nearest bruiser off him and crunched the heel of his hand into the man's nose.

The addition of a new combatant caught the remaining two thugs off guard, giving Dash an edge. He swung his leg, introducing one of them to his boot in the same manner he'd given their leader. His eyes rolling back to reveal their corneas, the man grabbed his crotch and fell with a mute scream.

The final thug hurtled towards Dash. Jerick scooped up the bat that lay discarded near the wall and practiced his swing on the man's head. He crumpled, landing face first in the puddle of water.

Jerick tossed the bat aside. "Mind explaining what you're doing here?"

Winching, Dash heaved himself up. "I could ask you the same thing." Holding his side, he glared at his brother. "You're supposed to be in there watching Mara."

"She's fine. Baggins is wrapped around her pinky."

Dash's aching jaw tightened. Hearing the news made him want to kill the bastard more. "Get your ass back in there. *Now*."

"For someone who just got his balls out of the wringer, you're sure damn ungrateful."

"I'll send you a bouquet of thank-you flowers later."

Jerrick ignored his sarcasm and stalked down the alley. Probing his jaw, Dash determined it was still functional. He returned to the Cloud Chaser and found Piper waiting in the backseat.

"That was so *cool*."

He gave her a narrow-eyed look. "Next time I tell you something, you damn well better listen."

Piper's expression turned sheepish. "Does this mean I'm not the bestest sidekick anymore?"

"No." Starting up the ignition, Dash sped out of the alley. He pulled into the lot across the street and stopped next to the Air Racer.

"If you'd parked here to begin with, none of this would have—" Piper broke off with a squeak when Dash reached back and caged her in his fist.

Wings bristling against his palm, he tossed her outside and rolled up the window. She tapped on the glass, her voice muffled. Good, the last thing he wanted to hear was any more of her complaints.

Jerrick rounded the corner of Zupellos, his stride brisk as he headed towards the lot. A red haze of fury settled over Dash. Throwing his door open, he jumped out and met his brother halfway across the lot. "What the hell are you doing? Get back in there!"

The streetlamps suspended over the lot revealed the ashen pallor of Jerrick's face. "Mara's gone. And so is Baggins."

Dash staggered like the ground had tilted beneath his feet. "*What?*"

"I looked everywhere for them. Even the kitchen and the back supply closet."

A sour ball of fear congealed in Dash's throat. "She wouldn't leave with him without first ensuring you were right behind her."

Jerrick remained quiet.

"*Fuck*." Heart thudding, Dash raced back to the Cloud Chaser and jumped behind the wheel. Without waiting for his brother, he careened out of the lot.

~ * ~

Pain, dull and shadowy, dragged Mara from the dark void of unconsciousness. Moaning, she pried her eyes open and tried to make sense of her environment. Something hard pressed against her back, digging into her spine. She wiggled in an effort to ease the discomfort and discovered the bound state of her upper body.

Panic set in and she blinked, trying to chase away the fog clouding her vision. Images began shifting into focus. The rough, grainy texture of a seat back. A dome-shaped light. Baggins' sneering face.

Baggins.

Mara's mind raced back to Zupellos' rear hallway and the agonizing burst of pain that had spread through her shoulder. "What did you do to me?"

He held up the metallic object he'd used on her earlier. Terror seized Mara and she jerked against her bindings. She realized her upper body wasn't the only part of her trapped. Something secured her ankles to the bar beneath her feet. Escape seemed impossible, but she instinctually whipped her head around anyway, looking for any means that would get her far from Baggins. The fear escalated when she realized they were in the back end of a large vehicle.

"Relax, I'm not going to use the taser on you this time. I'm keeping you wide awake for what comes next." Baggins' voice was ripe with evil intent.

Mara stared into the cold depths of his eyes and knew with all certainty that he planned to rape her. Or worse. She needed to come up with a plan—*fast*. "Whatever happened to that cocktail you promised?" She licked her lips, stalling for time. "I sure could go for a stiff one right now." The minute the words escaped her mouth, she bit back a groan. *Ugh, I would have to say stiff one.*

Anger hardened the harsh planes of Baggins' face. "Stop the playacting, you stupid bitch."

Taken aback by both his words and his fury, Mara blinked.

"Do you think fools make it far in my line of business?" Apparently the question was merely rhetorical, because he didn't wait for her answer. "Finian Artronté tipped me off about Rhyder having a female with him. The second you accepted my offer of a drink, I put two and two together." His gaze kindled with animosity. "Hot chicks like you usually don't give me the time of day."

Dread compressed Mara's lungs in a painful squeeze. This wasn't about rape—it was about Dash. And she had a bad feeling she'd suddenly gone from being the enticer to the worm dangling on the hook.

As if to verify her suspicion, Baggins reached out and tightened the bindings around her chest with a vicious yank. "Still, I'll have to thank Rhyder for dropping such a luscious piece of tail into my lap." Spittle fell from Baggins' mouth and landed on Mara's arm. "Maybe I'll even give him a front-row seat when I fuck you. It'll give him a nice memory once he's rotting in hell."

The image Baggins painted induced a wave of queasiness inside Mara. While she fought off the nausea, the bounty hunter hunkered to his knees and reached for a large steel container wedged against the vehicle's wall. Flipping the lid up, he pulled out a small, oval-shaped wooden box and a micro-imaging processor.

What is it with this guy and taking pictures? Mara got her answer seconds later, when he trained the imager on her face and snapped off a couple shots.

"For my personal collection." His chuckle made her skin crawl. He popped open the wooden box, revealing its contents.

Mara gaped at the white stone nestled against its tiny bed of velvet. Her pulse stuttered.

The Rhyann rune. She stared at Baggins when he stooped over her and nestled the rune box between her breasts.

He focused the imager on her again. “Rhyder thinks he can best me? This photo ought to convince him who’s the real master of the game.”

The imager emitted another pop of luminescence and Mara blinked.

“Damn, but you’ve got the sexiest mouth.” Baggins returned the device to the steel container before running his pudgy hands up her thigh. She jerked, but the bindings didn’t allow her to move far.

“Gets me to thinking of all the uses I can put it to.” Hot breath beat against Mara’s cheek when Baggins straddled her lap and reached for the fly of his trousers. “Don’t worry, this will be quick and painless. I’ll save the good stuff for when Rhyder has a prime view.”

This can’t be happening. Please gods, don’t let this be happening. Panting with fear, Mara squirmed against the bindings. She noticed the bulge in the bounty hunter’s jacket pocket, where the heavy weight of the taser rested. *Damn it, I just wish I could get my hands on it.*

Streams of light erupted around them, nearly blinding Mara. For a second, she thought the imager had accidentally gone off. Baggins jerked back, his head whipping around.

The absence of his weight canted Mara away from the seat and one of her hands dropped to her lap. Blinking, she stared at the freed hand. And the taser gripped inside it. “What the hell?”

Baggins turned back to her. When he spied the taser, his eyes went huge. He quickly recovered and lunged at her. Screeching, she jabbed the taser forward and it hit Baggins right in the groin. The look on his face was priceless. She might have laughed if she weren’t so damn scared and shocked. He fell backwards with a thunk, dead to the world.

Mara stared at his crotch. “Man, that’s going to hurt like a mother when he wakes up.” Not exactly certain how much time it would be before that happened, she freed her ankles and kicked off the bindings. The rune box tumbled to her lap and she stared at it. For the first time, she really paid attention to the red symbol carved into the stone’s surface. Wings—exactly like the ones that graced the horse the goddess Rhyann rode in the illustration.

Rhyann—the bestower of wishes.

The déjà vu she experienced in Avily’s shop came racing back with furious speed. One by one, the pieces started taking shape. “The crazy woman on the Sea Surfer, what did she say?” The words came to her through the murky depths of her conscious. *Choose wisely, and the deepest wish you carry will come true.* “Holy crap!”

Mara’s hands fumbled for the rune, nearly knocking it off her lap. She clutched it tight, her heart pounding. “I wish all this were done with and Gideon, Dash and I were forever free.”

Nothing. She tried again, uttering the words a little louder, just in case Rhyann hadn’t heard her so good the first time. Still nothing. Feeling slightly dejected, she tucked the rune back into its box. “Guess it

only grants the single wish.” Not that she would complain. It’d certainly gotten her out of a close scrape with death.

She eyed Baggins’ inert body and shivered. “Thank you, Rhyann.” She lifted from the seat and hunkered over Baggins, dragging him towards the vehicle’s doors. After pressing the button to open the hatch, she hopped outside.

The vehicle was parked behind a screen of pines. Her heel sank into the spongy ground and she reached for the bounty hunter’s dangling arms. Anchoring her butt against a tree trunk, she heaved Baggins through the doorframe, twisting her body to give him room to land on the ground. His head banged into the rough bark of the tree. The sound gave her a certain satisfaction. Brushing off her hands, she surveyed his sprawled form. An idea came to her, making her smile, and she leaned over him.

“Don’t worry—this part will be quick and painless.”

~ * ~

Fear was a caged beast inside Dash’s chest. If anything happened to Mara, he’d never forgive himself.

He careened around the corner of the freeway, heading towards the country road leading to Baggins’ estate. Bright headlights shimmered in the rear viewing panel. *Jerrick*. His brother could flash him all he wanted. Nothing would deter him from getting to Mara.

The exit loomed and Dash rocketed down the off ramp, pushing the Cloud Chaser to its limits. Turbulence and excessive speed shook the vehicle’s chassis. “Don’t you konk out on me, you piece of shit.” Apparently heeding the threat, the Cloud Chaser found a smooth air pocket and accelerated a few martrionetics faster. Behind him, the Air Racer’s headlights dimmed.

Pine trees formed dense clusters of shadows that hugged the roadway. Dash barely registered them as he remained focused on the dark landscape stretching beyond the windshield. Up ahead, someone darted across the street. He stomped on the brake and the Cloud Chaser bucked, screaming in protest. At the last minute, he remembered Jerrick and veered to the right to avoid getting creamed from behind.

Dash eased off the throttle, steering the vehicle into a downward slide that took him dangerously close to the line of trees. Finally the Cloud Chaser groaned and stuttered to a stop. He shoved open his door just as Jerrick coasted up next to him.

“Are you out of your mind?” Jerrick roared, jumping out of the Air Racer. “You nearly got us all killed.”

“There’s someone out here.” Dash slammed his door shut and jogged down the road. “I saw a flash of gold. Might have been shoes.”

“Mara?”

“Not certain. But I’m damn well checking it out.” Dash didn’t slow down, just kept loping towards the trees. He heard Jerrick huffing behind him. As they neared the pines where he’d seen the darting figure,

he caught another sparkle of gold. There was no doubt in his mind now that the person rustling around in the trees was Mara. He'd recognize those shoes from anywhere. "Mara, honey, are you okay?" He listened, heart in his throat. When no answer came, he scrambled down the crumbling slope.

"Stay back, you sons of bitches. I'm armed."

Dash skittered to a halt, almost wiping out at the base of a tree. The gruff baritone shooting from the foliage most definitely didn't belong to Mara.

Jerrick's hand gripped Dash's elbow. "It's Baggins."

The red haze returned to Dash's head and he jerked from his brother's grasp. Ignoring Jerrick's shouted warning, he hurtled towards the lone flash of gold within the green plumage. If Baggins did have a weapon, he wouldn't have time to use it. The bounty hunter would be dead before his finger wrapped around the trigger. He tackled the man from the side, the propulsion of his body sending them both tumbling to the ground.

An *ooff* popped from Baggins' mouth, right before Dash plowed his fist into it. He straddled the man's chest and pulled his arm back, prepared to deliver another vicious blow.

"Uh, bro..."

Dash grabbed a fistful of Baggins' greasy hair, yanking his head back. "I'm busy right now," he growled.

"Too busy to notice you're sitting on a naked guy?"

Jerrick's droll inquiry breached the wall of fury surrounding Dash. Blinking, he shifted his knee and glanced down. Sure enough, Baggins didn't have a stitch on. He noticed the appendage hanging limply between the bounty hunter's legs and grimaced. There was something he never wanted to have inches away from his ass again. He jerked his gaze back to Baggins' face. Leaning down, he bared his teeth. "Where the hell is Mara?"

"The bitch took off in my Range Hover after tasing me."

Dash slammed his fist into the bounty hunter's nose, slanting it further off kilter. A howl erupted from Baggins.

"I'm not lying." Flecks of blood flew from Baggins' mouth while he sputtered. "That's what happened."

"I believe you."

"Then why'd you break my nose?"

"You called her a bitch. That really ticked me off."

Jerrick's boot came into view and settled hard against Baggins' chest. Dash looked up and noticed his brother's amusement.

"Why don't you go after Mara? I'll take care of cleaning up the trash."

Part of Dash wanted to stick around and take care of Baggins himself, but he wanted to find Mara and ensure she was okay a whole lot more. Giving the bounty hunter a final disgusted glare, he shoved up from his knees. His attention fell on the sparkly high heels. For a chubby guy, Baggins sure had some tiny feet. “Why the hell are you wearing Mara’s shoes?”

“How am I supposed to know? I woke up with them on.”

Grunting, Dash leaned down and unstrapped the shoes from Baggins before heading back up the slope. With a shake of his head, he tossed the shoes into the Cloud Chaser’s backseat. Mara had apparently escaped, but he wouldn’t allow the relief to fully bloom inside his chest. Not yet. Not until she was safe and secure within his arms.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

“What gave me the idea I could drive this thing? Jeez, I’ve never even *driven* before.” Mara clutched the wheel, giving it a frantic twist when the bulky vehicle drifted into the opposing lane. Thankfully she was the only one occupying the road.

She kept one hand on the steering wheel and reached blindly for her coin purse. Good thing Dash had insisted on drawing a detailed map for her, in the event something went awry. And she definitely considered being tasered, kidnapped and surviving a close brush with death as things going way left of normal.

“There you are.” Tugging the map out, she unrolled the paper and chanced a quick glance at its detailed instructions. According to Dash’s coordinates, it should be less than five martroneters to the hideout.

And it couldn’t be a martroneter closer, to her way of thinking. Her hand shook slightly, making the paper clutched between her fingers flutter. “Okay, get a grip. All that’s over with. The hideout’s just around the corner, and so is Dash.” She couldn’t wait to see him. Touch him. Bask in the knowledge that Baggins hadn’t ensnared him in his slimy trap.

Tucking the map into her lap, she returned her attention to the business of driving. The last thing she needed to do was run off the side of the road and wreck the vehicle.

A gazillion bug splats gunked the windshield. Grimacing, she fiddled with the controls on the steering wheel, trying to locate the one that operated the shield cleaner. The interior and exterior lights clicked off, plunging her in darkness.

“Oh shit. What did I do?” She scrambled to reset the controls. The lights popped back on and she sagged against the seat, exhaling in relief. “Screw it. I can live with a messy windshield.”

She white-knuckled the steering wheel for another three and a half martroneters when suddenly the terrain outside grew lush with forest. Up ahead, she spied the dirt road leading to the hideout. “*Thankyouthankyouthankyou*,” she chanted as she motored around its sharp bend.

Moonlight revealed the secured gate. Stomping on the brake, she swung the door open. The vehicle kept rolling. “Oh for crying out loud.” Returning her hands to the controls, she shifted into park. This driving stuff was hard work.

The footboard hovered a couple feet above the ground. Sure, she could waste precious seconds trying to figure out how to lower the vehicle with its engine still running. Or she could jump it. Not a hard choice.

Anchoring her hands against the doorframe, she sprang from the cabin. She landed with a thud but miraculously kept her feet beneath her. Her decision to switch shoes with Baggins was really paying off. The gorgeous high heels might have been stunning to look at, but the bounty hunter's sturdy boots were far more practical for driving and jumping purposes.

Lurching to the gate, she grasped the lock and entered the code Dash had given her. Metal whined as the gate yawned open. She darted back to the vehicle and gave the hovering doorframe a determined look before grasping its sides. With a heave and several unladylike curse words, she wiggled onto the footboard and tumbled into the seat. Shoving a stray curl from her eyes, she maneuvered past the opened gate. Rather than hassle with getting in and out of the vehicle again, she decided to park it for the night before locking things up.

She pulled in front of the line of trees and frowned. "Where's the Cloud Chaser?" A twinge of panic started to set in but she beat it back with some common sense. "Duh, Dash probably hid it somewhere."

Shifting into park, she pulled the key from the ignition. The vehicle plummeted to the ground with a jolting *thunk*. "Um, hopefully it's supposed to do that." Grasping her coin purse and the rune box, she swung the door open and stumbled outside.

Other than the wind's occasional tuneless whistle, a deep silence shrouded the woods. She plunged beyond the tree line, using the moon's luminescence to guide the way. The fake orgeel altar glowed like a marker in the distance and she tripped her way towards it. From there she found the path leading to the rocky precipice overhanging the hideout cave.

She shuffled down the slope. Loose earth and stones tumbled beneath her feet. When she approached the cave's entrance the recorded orgeel roar blasted, making her jump.

"Son of a—" Slamming her hand over her racing heart, Mara glared at the cave's rock face. "He could have at least turned the damn thing off." Steeling herself, she tripped inside the opening. The menacing growl reverberated inside her head and she resisted the urge to clamp both hands over her ears. Grinding her teeth, she waited until the recording stopped before pounding on the rock doors. Not that it was necessary. If the orgeel roar hadn't already alerted Dash, he must be deaf.

Seconds slid into minutes as she waited for the doors to crack open. "What is he doing, taking a nap?" Infuriated by the possibility, she pried the cover back from the lockpad. Thankfully the buttons were illuminated. Now if she could just remember the code he'd given her.

"I'm going to kill him, that's all there is to it." Tucking the rune box and her coin purse beneath one arm, she entered the first sequence that popped into her head. The lockpad flashed red. "*Damn it.*" She tried another. And another. On the next try, as she imagined every single way she'd make Dash suffer, the lockpad glowed green and the doors swished open. She rushed inside and was met by another pitch-black room.

Unease resettled inside her chest. “Hello?” When no response came, she stumbled around in the dark, trying to find a light source. Her knee banged into something hard. *Table edge*. Wincing, she patted her way upward until she brushed against the base of a lamp. She found the pull chain and tugged. A soft circle of light spilled from the bulb and she turned around, surveying the room. It looked no different from the way they’d left it a few days ago. If Dash had been here, he’d left no trace of it.

Heart beating a little faster, Mara raced down the short hallway and into the bedroom. After turning on the lamps scattered about the room, she set down the rune and coin purse and stared at the empty bed. So much for the idea of him taking a nap. A quick glance around revealed the same untouched quality of things. No bags littering the floor. No dents in the chaise’s plump silk cushions.

“Dash left almost two hours ago. Why isn’t he here yet?” Panic fluttering in her stomach, she returned to the main room. She rubbed her arms briskly and parked her butt on the edge of a chair. “Okay, calm down. No reason to start having heart palpitations.”

Her jittery nerves relaxed slightly when she spied the metallic glint of the cooler unit just beyond the kitchen’s archway. “He probably just stopped off to pick up some food.” She fooled herself with that scenario for approximately thirty-five minutes.

Then reality set in.

“Something’s happened. I know it.” The vine-patterned rug became intimately acquainted with the soles of Baggins’ boots as she paced its length. “Maybe the Cloud Chaser broke down and he’s stranded on the side of the road somewhere.” The possibility was a huge stretch. What were the odds she wouldn’t have spotted him on the way here? Still it was better than the alternative—him being wounded or dead.

She shook her head, refusing to let the disturbing idea take root. “Baggins couldn’t have gotten Dash. There would have been no reason for tasing me if he had.” Except Baggins was one sadistic son of a bitch and probably enjoyed tasing people for the hell of it. And the bounty hunter hadn’t exactly said he was using her to lure Dash out into the open. She’d just assumed.

Stomach heaving, Mara whirled towards the rock doorway. Slamming a fist against the opener, she plunged into the dark cavern and hurtled through the cave’s mouth. She didn’t even flinch when the orgeel growl roared behind her, so focused was she on clambering up the hillside. She’d nearly reached the top when she slipped on a boulder and came down hard on one knee. Oblivious to the pain, she clawed over the precipice and regained her footing on the other side. Nearly sobbing from exertion and fear, she limped along the pathway.

The moon lit the way, spilling a milky glow through the dense foliage and haloing over the offering altar and...

Dash?

Certain he was a hallucination, Mara rubbed her eyes.

“*Sher ’tian*.” Dash’s choked cry brought him into sharp focus, shattering any notion of him being a wistful illusion.

She stumbled forward, straight into his arms. He felt real. Alive. Her throat thick with tears, she pressed her face into his chest and breathed in his musky scent. “I thought you were dead. That Baggins...” A shudder overtook her.

Dash’s arms wrapped her tight, almost squeezing the air from her lungs. The suffocation didn’t bother her a bit. Not if it meant staying in his arms, soaking him in.

“Did that bastard hurt you? So help me, if he touched a hair on your head, I’m going back there and finishing him off.” Raw emotion shook Dash’s voice.

When his words sank in, she jerked her head up and stared at him. “*Finish*? Are you saying you saw him? That you—”

“Beat the snot out of him.” Dash’s warm hands cupped her face, tilting it. “I wanted to kill him. Jerrick wasn’t too fond of that idea.”

“Are you crazy? Baggins could have hurt you. Or killed you.” She clutched Dash around the ribs and a grimace of pain twisted his face. “What is it?”

“Nothing. Just a leftover reminder of my earlier ass beating.”

She reached for the neck of the jumpsuit and fumbled the zipper down. Gripping the slick material, she tugged the jumpsuit free of his torso and ran a gentle hand over his rib cage. “He did hurt you.”

“No, someone else. Or I should say a bunch of someone elses.”

“*What*?”

A faint grin shadowed his mouth. “It’s quite an interesting story. Remind me to tell it sometime.”

“Why not tell me now?” The golden curvature of Dash’s abdomen regained her attention and she leaned down to press a light kiss above his ribs. His stomach rippled beneath her touch and she stroked her fingers over its velvety tautness.

“I have a better idea.” His palms curled beneath her arms and lifted her. The moonlight reflected in his irises, a brief flash before his head lowered and he stole her breath in a deep kiss that clearly staked his claim on her.

Her knees buckled and she gripped Dash’s shoulders. The silky shift of muscle beneath his skin fascinated her and she stroked along the delicious contours, moving ever southward. She scraped over a hardened male nipple and his groan rasped into her mouth before his tongue curled around hers in a slick, coaxing glide. Lightheaded, she barely registered the progression of his hands along the center of her back. It wasn’t until he grasped the neckline of the dress that she suspected his intentions.

She pulled back. “I don’t think it’ll—”

Dash gave a wrenching tug and the dress unraveled in an explosion of sprite dust. Before she blinked the violet sparkles from her eyelashes, he lowered his head and suckled her nipple into the warm, wet

cavern of his mouth. She gasped, wobbling. Dash's hands gripped her hips, steadying her, before they roved to her buttocks in a massaging caress. His mouth left one breast and traveled to the other, treating that nipple to an equally luscious draw from his mouth.

Teeth tugged, lips plucked and tongue soothed. And all the while, her head spun. He released her nipple and dropped to his knees. His fingers tucked around the band of her panties, dragging it over her hips. When the satin caught on her thigh, he reached between her legs, his knuckles brushing over her slick wetness. She moaned and his smoky gaze lifted to her face. He peeled her panties the rest of the way down her leg. Stepping out of the garment, she listened to the blood rushing in her ears as Dash slid his mouth down her quivering stomach.

There would be no stopping him beyond this point, no stopping herself. But that was no surprise. Like he'd challenged not so long ago, this was meant to happen. Despite fighting it, she'd known it all along. Perhaps from the moment he'd stepped through Gallery Sabine's doorway.

His tongue dipped inside her bellybutton before he skimmed his lips to the sensitive crook where her thigh and hip met.

He coaxed her legs farther apart and ducked his head. His tongue licked over her and the oxygen left her brain, almost making her pass out.

"*Oh gods.*" She grabbed the back of Dash's scalp, inadvertently pressing him closer. A growl rumbled against her flesh and he gripped her waist, supporting her weight as he edged her backwards. Something solid nudged the backs of her thighs. The offering altar. He lifted her onto its smooth surface, giving her just enough time to accustom to the marble's chill before he spread her legs wide and closed his lips over her.

The heat of Dash's mouth was a shocking contrast to the icy slab beneath her. And things just kept getting hotter and hotter as he ate her like a person on the brink of starvation. Scrabbling for purchase on the altar, she leaned back, giving herself up for the offering.

Dash's hands slid to the backs of her knees, held her open and suspended for his devouring. Everything coalesced into a tight, pulsing throb beneath his tongue. He drew on her clitoris with devastating suction and her back arched off the slab. The orgasm crashed over her, ripping a scream from her throat.

And Dash's mouth kept right on working. Unable to believe it, she felt it start all over again as the sensations gathered into a tight, hot ball. She broke on a wail and still his tongue played her.

"Please...*please*," she whimpered, breathless. Begging didn't bother her so much. The fact he wasn't listening—whole other story. She slid trembling fingers into his hair and tugged just hard enough to gain his attention. Dark eyes wild with passion lifted to stare at her. "I need you inside me. *Now.*"

Dash stood, chest heaving, and shoved the jumpsuit the rest of the way off. He wore nothing beneath, leaving his beautiful, glorious body exposed to the night air and her hungry gaze. Propping his platform boot on the edge of the altar, he reached for the zipper. She covered his hand with hers, stalling him.

“Leave it.” At his frown, she smiled. “It’s kind of hot. You look like a pirate.”

The sexy grin curving his mouth almost made her jump him on the spot. Lucky for him, he was the one standing.

He tucked one of her legs against his broad shoulder and leaned over her, his eyes appearing fiery above the collar’s flashing purple lights. “A pirate who wears metallic platforms? What sort of pillagers have you been hanging around?”

She opened her mouth, a response forming on her lips, but he thrust inside her with a single, silken glide. “*Oohhhgodd*.” Canting her hips, she wrapped her free leg high around his waist while he sank deep. The dizzying penetration was short lived. He pulled almost completely out of her before taking her mouth in a drugging kiss.

Then he started moving.

Shallow, deep, sideways, circling. His pelvis possessed a range of motion that should be outlawed.

He teased her and she clawed at his back, mewling and gasping, doing everything in her power to get him to take her hard and deep—the way she needed to be taken. She slid her leg behind his butt and squeezed tight. His face flushed and the back muscles shifting beneath her fingers became damp with sweat. He grabbed her leg from his shoulder and moved it to join its mate around his pistoning hips before he gave her the deep penetration she desperately craved.

“Yesyesyesye—” Her chant broke off on a keening cry as her body erupted in a shimmering shower of white-hot sparks. Dimly, she heard Dash’s own strangled shout of completion as he shuddered violently and came inside her.

A few minutes later he moved, quietly slipping out of her, and she murmured in protest. He brushed the hair back from her face before pressing a soft kiss on her lips. “We need to get you inside before Jerrick and Piper show up. I’ll come back and get our bags from the Cloud Chaser.”

“Can’t move. You’ve disintegrated my bones.”

He chuckled and hooked his arm beneath her knees, cradling her body as he straightened. With a contented purr, she curled into his yummy heat. “Did I hurt your poor, battered body?”

“I’ll live. But should I ask why the devil you’re wearing Baggins’ boots?”

“Easier to drive in.” She swirled her fingertips over Dash’s firm pectoral muscle while he strode down the pathway. “I gave him my shoes. More than an even trade, don’t you think?”

“*Sher ’tian*, you’d never make it as a thief. You’re too soft hearted.”

The rocky slope leading to the cave proved too perilous for Dash to navigate with the added burden of her weight. Leaving his arms for even a few minutes was disappointing, but it beat the alternative—getting

dropped face first on a boulder. She took his proffered hand and scaled down the side with him. Once inside the hideout, Dash walked into the opulent bedroom and snatched a fawn-colored shirt and charcoal trousers from the closet. While he dressed she snuggled into the velvet throw from the chaise and settled on the edge of the cushions, enjoying the sights.

Mmm...he was too yummy for words. In or out of clothes.

Dash caught her watching him. "They're my grandfather's clothes. Never could bring myself to get rid of his things. Now I'm rather glad I didn't."

The trousers fit fine, but the shirt seemed pretty snug. He couldn't button it past his navel. Admiring the bronzed expanse of his exposed chest and upper abdominals, she licked her lips. "Mm, now you really do resemble a pirate."

Wicked temptation flickered in Dash's eyes. Dropping his hands from the shirt, he prowled to the chaise and leaned down to nip her earlobe. "Don't leave this room. When I get back, I'm going to properly plunder you."

A shiver of expectation tingled her skin and she swallowed. He stood. Giving her a smoldering look, he ambled from the bedroom. She pulled the velvet throw tight and the wooden box resting near the lamp snagged her eye.

The rune. She'd completely forgotten about it.

"This is what happens when I'm distracted by hot, bone-disintegrating sex." Well, no more. At least not until she filled him in on the rune. Hopping from the chaise, she waddled to the closet and rifled through the shirts before picking out a dark green one. It hung well past her knees, but at least she could roll up the sleeves. Since none of the trousers looked like a possible fit, she decided to wait until Dash brought her valise inside.

She grabbed the rune box and ventured into the main room. Given the way Dash looked at her earlier, it was probably wise to stay clear of the bedroom for the time being. Placing the box on the mahogany dining table, she journeyed into the kitchen and looked inside the cooler unit before remembering Dash's warning about the dubious state of its contents. "Guess I should have eaten while I was at Zupellos." Like that would have been remotely possible with her jittery nerves and stomach.

A plastic bag of crackers sat on the counter near the cutlery block. They might be stale, but her growling stomach didn't care. Unzipping the bag, she grabbed a cracker and nibbled a corner. *Yep, definitely stale.* Shuffling noises came from the main room and she turned in time to catch Dash tossing a handful of bags on the floor.

She stepped into the kitchen archway and cocked a hip against the wall. "Do you have any idea how tempted I am to clean out that cooler unit? There's some seriously scary stuff growing in those containers."

Dash frowned when he spotted her. "You're out of the bedroom. And you're dressed." He managed to make both statements sound like an accusation.

Munching the rest of the stale cracker, she nodded. "I figured it would be the only way we could talk. You know, without getting sidetracked."

"Babe, I'm already sidetracked."

"I know, that's the problem."

"You didn't think it was such a problem ten minutes ago." His mouth curled in a devastating grin designed to melt her insides. "By the way, that shirt looks wicked sexy on you. Now how about you take it off?"

"Nope." Ignoring Dash's impatient groan, she walked to the dining room table. She scooped up the rune box and tossed it to him.

"What's this?"

She gave a negligent shrug. "Oh, just the prize we've been after this whole time."

"The Rhyann?" Without waiting for her reply, he popped the lid open. "I don't understand. How the devil did you get it?"

"It was inside a steel box stashed in Baggins' vehicle."

Dash returned his attention to the rune. A faint smile quirked his mouth. "I've got to hand it to the sneaky bastard, hiding the rune out in the open was brilliant."

She caught Dash's meaning and frowned. "You think Baggins kept it in there all this time? But why did he go to all the expense of securing traps around his house?"

"To fool and ultimately trap me. But I still don't understand how you found it inside the steel box."

"I didn't. Baggins pulled the rune out so he could take a picture of me with it." A chill crawled over her skin when the memory came racing back.

"Why did he do that?"

"He was...going to lure you with it."

A harsh growl tore from Dash's throat. "That sick son of a bitch. Knew I should have killed him while I had the chance."

Thank goodness he didn't know the true extent of Baggins' intentions. If he did, no power in Aurion would stop him from making good on his threat. "It doesn't matter. I'm fine. But I owe my escape to the rune." The strange, mystical circumstances surrounding the event filled her with wonderment all over again. "Dash, the rune *is* connected to the goddess Rhyann. She saved my life."

He stared at her like she'd lost her mind. "Uh...how do you figure?"

The trick would be giving him enough information to understand the story, without painting in the disturbing details. It wouldn't take much to convince him to track Baggins down and beat him within an inch of his life. "When I was trapped inside Baggins' vehicle, and he was taking the picture of me with the rune, I made a wish. Sort of."

Dash cocked an eyebrow and she twisted her lips. “I’m doing a really bad job of explaining this, aren’t I?”

“No, I get it. You’re saying if you’re in possession of the rune and make a wish, it’ll come true.” His gaze dipped, a second before brilliant white lights shot from the stone nestled inside the box. A breeze tickled over her skin and Dash double blinked. “*Holy sweet goddess.*”

She looked down, noticed her shirt was gone, and hurried to finish the story. “You’ve got it partly ri—” *Wait a second.* Her attention jerked back to her bare breasts and her mouth fell open. “You wished me *naked?*”

Chapter Twenty-Eight

The enormity of the situation hit Mara and she groaned. “That was your one and only wish.”

Voices sounded outside the opened rock doors. Dash must have heard them at the same time because he whipped his shirt off, popping the buttons free in his haste. He spun her around before wrapping the shirt over her.

Jerrick’s amused chuckle came from behind them. “Did we come at a bad time?”

“Yes,” Mara bit out. “You should have waited until *after* I strangled your idiotic, one-track-minded brother.”

“Now, *Sher ’tian*, no need to get—*yeeow!*” Dash yelped when she pinched his nipple. “That bloody hurt.”

“Good. You deserve it.” Yanking the shirt closed, she stalked into the kitchen. She waited until Dash followed after her before whirling around. “I can’t believe you just wasted your wish getting me naked.”

He held up a finger. “One—I didn’t know it was a one-shot deal.” Another finger popped up. “Two—getting you naked is never a waste.”

“You’re really not helping your case right now.” She fumbled to secure the shirt with the few remaining buttons. Thankfully its baggy shape adequately covered her curves.

Jerrick stepped into the kitchen. He held Dash’s blue jumpsuit in one hand and her panties in the other. “Uh, found these outside. Thought you might want them back.”

Fingers stiff, she reached out and plucked the panties from Jerrick’s outstretched hand before ducking out of the kitchen. While Dash bitched his brother out for his incredibly bad timing, she went into the bedroom and sank onto the bed. Cheery buzzing announced Piper’s arrival a few seconds later.

“You should have seen the cool fight the three of us got into. There were at least ten bad guys, and they had knives and guns and rocket launchers. But I busted out some of my moves.” Piper executed a spinning kick in the air. “The bad guys didn’t know what hit ’em.”

Mara gave the sprite a dubious glance. “Rocket launchers?” Before she could say anything further, Dash ambled into the room, bearing her valise. She wanted to remain angry at him for wasting the wish and dissolving a perfectly good shirt, but her heart just wouldn’t let her.

He settled the valise near her foot, his expression wary. “Why don’t you get dressed and join us in the main room? I know Jerrick’s more than interested to hear how you escaped Baggins.”

“Okay.”

Her easy cooperation pulled a dazzling smile from him. “Does this mean you’re no longer mad at me?”

“Don’t push your luck.”

His grin deflating, he motioned to Piper and they left her alone to change. After wrestling off Baggins’ boots, she wiggled into a fresh pair of pants and reached for the shirt draping her. She caught a brief whiff of Dash’s woodsy scent. Unable to resist, she buried her nose in the soft fabric. Desire, bliss and love bound her in a tight embrace. The emotions swirling in her head and chest were exhilarating and frightening all at the same time.

She’d known being intimate with him would only complicate things. “Damn it, sometimes it really stinks being right.” Dropping the shirt from her face, she stripped out of it and pulled on the green wool sweater from her valise instead. Suitably clothed, she walked into the main room and perched on the arm of the massive leather couch. Before she could stop him, Dash reached for her bare feet and swung them into his lap.

“So Baggins wasn’t blowing smoke up my ass. You really did take off with the rune.” Jerrick held up the little wooden box. The white stone tucked inside its bed of velvet seemed to glow beneath the prisms of light cast from the nearby chandelier. “Mind explaining how you managed that spectacular feat?”

Mara tried to concentrate on Jerrick’s baritone instead of the smooth glide of Dash’s fingers over her sensitive arches. “The rune granted my wish.”

Skepticism colored Jerrick’s expression.

“Hell, if I didn’t witness what the stone’s capable of with my own eyes, I wouldn’t believe it either,” Dash said.

“It doesn’t make sense.” Shaking his head, Jerrick eyed the rune. “I had it in my possession for nearly a week before selling it to Lefere, and it didn’t grant me any wishes.”

“Did you specifically make any?” Mara waved her hand in response to Jerrick’s frown. “Keep in mind this is only a theory, but maybe the granting process only works if you actually word or think a specific wish.”

Jerrick’s expression turned thoughtful while he pondered her theory. “In that case, I guess not—” He lowered the rune and stared at it. Stillness descended over him.

“What?” Mara leaned forward on the arm of the couch, excited. “Did you think of something?”

“Yes, but it’s...insane.”

“Your brother wished me naked. Trust me, whatever your wish was, it couldn’t be that ridiculous.”

Dash’s hands squeezed her feet and she glanced down in time to catch his unrepentant grin.

“There’s only one thing I recall specifically wishing for. And it’s something I’ve held deep inside me for the past fifteen years.”

Out of nowhere, the crazy old woman's words floated inside Mara's head again. *The deepest wish you carry will come true.* The eerie déjà vu returned, but she shook it off in order to pay close attention to Jerrick's story. She had a feeling it would be quite enlightening. "What was it?"

The tanned column of Jerrick's throat moved with his rough swallow. His knuckles whitened as he fisted the rune box. "To find a way to forgive my brother. And restore everything lost between us."

His admission added to the emotional overload already burdening Mara and she blinked back tears. "Jerrick...that's so sweet."

A groan rumbled from Jerrick. "Please don't use sweet in the same sentence with my name. It'll severely impact my reputation as a hard ass."

Dash's hand encircled Mara's ankle and he propped her foot against his thigh. "So we have another piece added to the puzzle. Rhyann might not always grant the wish immediately."

"Or maybe some wishes take longer than others to fulfill." Mara gave Jerrick a tentative smile. "Perhaps you needed those fifteen years for your brain to catch up with the wish carried inside your heart."

"Hell, Blondie. How'd you get to be so smart?" Jerrick's mouth crooked upward.

Piper hopped onto the chair with Jerrick. Her wings twitching together, she scrunched her face. "Wait a minute, you're saying that rock gives away wishes?"

Mara snorted. "Glad to see you've been paying attention the past ten minutes."

"Well, I want my turn." Without warning, Piper plopped butt first onto the rune. White lights streamed from the stone, seconds before wads of merca bills rained from the ceiling. With a whoop, Piper scooped them up and shimmied her tiny hips.

"She wished for merca." Mara rolled her eyes. "There's a shocker." Leaning an elbow on her knee, she cupped her chin. "We've all used up our wishes. Now we're stuck with fate to get us through the rest of this mess."

Dash lifted her foot and tucked it on the couch cushion before rising. "Wait here, I'll be back."

Her thoughts were too glum to question where he was going.

Jerrick set the rune box on the arm of his chair. "For someone who outsmarted a sadistic bounty hunter, you don't look very happy."

"We might have defeated him, but does it really change anything? Finian still wants your brother dead."

He remained quiet for a long moment. "There's no proof Baggins didn't kill Dash."

Her palm fell away from her chin and she stared at him. Hope fluttered in her chest. Until reality once again set in. "Baggins—he'll report to Finian and tell him what happened."

"Not necessarily. I think he'll cooperate, especially once he sees the logic in lying. He won't want to return all that nice merca Finian paid him."

The hypothesis Jerrick rolled out in front of her made a lot of sense, but Baggins' cooperation was only part of the problem facing them. "Nalia won't just take my word for it that Dash is dead. She'll want to retaliate." Fear trembled down her spine when she thought of the danger Gideon would be placed in. It seemed no matter what, fate insisted on stepping in and demanding a choice from her. Gideon or Dash. Her brother or her love.

"Then give her proof."

She met the steel in Jerrick's eyes. The answer was there—temptingly within reach. "The slave collar." Her mouth suddenly felt dry as desert sand. "It might not be enough to convince Nalia."

Jerrick opened his mouth but immediately snapped it shut when Dash strolled into the room and stopped in front of the couch. Humming beneath his breath, he scooped her into his arms.

"Hey, what do you think you're—?" She broke off when Dash's tongue pushed past her lips. Moaning, she curled her arms around his neck.

Breaking off the kiss, Dash slid his hot gaze in his brother's direction. "Come anywhere near the bedroom and you're dead."

"Fine, guess I'll occupy myself with the merca-loving sprite." Jerrick grimaced. "I didn't mean that in any sexual way, of course. I like my females bigger than six inches."

Piper was too busy counting her merca to stick out her tongue in the usual fashion.

Lightheaded from Dash's intoxicating taste and smell, Mara held on tight as he carried her down the hall to the bedroom. She gasped when he stepped inside. Flickering flames danced shadows on the walls, provided by the dozens of candles scattered about the room.

"Where...? How...?"

Dash chuckled and shut the door behind them. "I wish I could say my grandfather was a hopeless romantic, but I'm afraid the candles were originally intended for more practical uses. Like if the energy generator broke down. As for the how..." He set her on her feet and reached for the flame laser sitting on the nightstand. "This little contraption helped me out there."

"It's beautiful." Emotion thick in her throat, she looked at Dash. "This is the sweetest thing anyone's done for me."

He smoothed her hair back and cupped her face. "You deserve nothing but sweetness. And I'm going to give it to you. In every..." Leaning down, he pressed his lips near the corners of hers. "...single..." He inched over a fraction, wetting the bow of her lip with the tip of his tongue. "...way."

She opened her mouth, inviting him in. He accepted with a hot sweep of his tongue that liquefied her insides. Desire, thick and heady, throbbed between her legs. She slicked her hands over his bare chest and he nudged his impressive erection against her belly. Kneading his shoulders, she sucked on his bottom lip and earned his husky groan in return. Her hands continued caressing upward until she felt the coolness of metal. The collar.

Her conversation with Jerrick broke through the sensual haze shrouding her brain. Jerking back, she stared at Dash.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.” Holding firm to the collar, she stepped around him. Fingers shaking, she reached up with the other hand and punched in the code that would disable the system. The lights flashed one last time before blinking off. She clicked the tiny button above the hasp and the collar’s interlocking teeth sprang open. With a small tug, she freed it from Dash’s neck and placed it on the nightstand.

She stepped back around him and his dark eyes locked on her. Her palm still carried the chill from the collar and she pressed it against his breastbone. His heat seeped into her skin. Beneath it stirred his other energy—the potent source of his magic.

“I might lose control of my powers, if I get too...excited,” he said, as if reading her thoughts.

“Is that your way of warning me I might become your sex slave?”

“Good gods, no.” Dash shook his head furiously. “If anyone’s in danger far as that goes, it’s me. In fact, I’m already your willing slave.” He threaded his fingers through her hair, holding her steady, his stare compelling. “But my magic is interwoven with my emotions. The more I feel, the more my magic will demand to express itself.”

“Your magic is a part of you.” She moved her hand to cup his jaw. “And I know *you* would never hurt me.”

The joy sparkling in his eyes nearly made her breathless. Until that moment, she hadn’t realized how much he’d longed for the simple handing over of her trust. And until that moment, she didn’t know she was even capable of the act.

His hands circled her waist and lifted her for his kiss. She drank him in, reveling in the dark pleasure of his mouth. The sounds rumbling from his chest inflamed her, spurred her questing hands to fumble at the waistband of his trousers. He stepped away, but rather than aid her with the removal of his clothes, he reached for hers. Warm fingers brushed her midriff before tugging the sweater over her head. Ignoring the hair streaming in her face, she tried freeing the button of his fly. He squatted in front of her and she gave the top of his head a frustrated look.

“Hey, I’m trying to remove your pants here.”

“Patience, babe.”

She lifted a hand to swat him but stopped when he sucked her nipple inside his mouth. Releasing a shaky breath, she cupped her hovering hand around the back of his head.

He flicked her with his tongue. “You’re like candy. One taste is never enough.” Working strictly by touch, he rucked her pants down and helped her out of them. He groaned in appreciation when his fingers encountered the slick wetness between her legs. “I like you without panties. Easier access.”

Her breath sawing in sharp pants, she leaned against the bed. He widened her stance and knelt before her. His mouth settled between her legs and began a slow, thorough worshipping that made her head spin and her fingers claw into the velvet bedspread.

Dash's mouth disappeared, leaving behind a frustrated ache. He stood and she swallowed hard when he shucked his trousers and tossed them towards the foot of the bed. No matter how many times she saw his body in its full, unclothed glory, it still managed to leach her brain of coherent thought.

He brushed a whisper-soft line from the crook of her elbows to her wrists. "Wrap your arms around my neck."

Her body trembled with anticipation at the gentle command. Standing on tiptoe, she pressed into him. The air surrounding them crackled with invisible energy and she waited, breathless.

His fingertips smoothed down her back, tickling over each vertebrae of her spine. Warm breath puffed against her ear. "Hold me tight."

She linked her fingers behind his nape and he dragged her legs up, anchoring them around his hips. He reached for one of the silk bed panels and wrapped it several times around their waists, binding them together. The symbolism wasn't lost on her and it brought a flood of tears. They spilled over, running down her cheeks.

Dash's lips soothed over the tears. He lifted his head and stared at her. She was exposed—vulnerable—but she didn't look away.

His heart pounded against her breast. "*Sher 'tian*, do you feel my love?"

"Yes."

"Do you love me?" He cupped her face. The naked emotions blazing in his caramel irises were an exact twin to the ones thudding in her heart. She wanted to give herself completely to him and not worry about the consequences.

This one night, she would love Dash with her heart unlocked.

"Do you?" he prodded, relentless.

"Yes." She gave a low moan when he thrust deep in a powerful stroke.

"Say it."

The tears leaked endlessly down her face. "I love you."

His eyes shuttered and he pressed his face into her neck, gusting a harsh breath against her collarbone. Hugging her tight, he began moving in short, smooth strokes that stole her breath. Crimson sparkles glittered around them, audibly popping and throwing off waves of heat. Instead of scaring her, this tangible proof of Dash's fiery love amazed her.

She clasped his shoulders, hugging him back with equal fervor. The tendon at the side of his neck beckoned and she gave it a gentle nip. He groaned and tumbled them onto the mattress before sinking impossibly deep inside her.

“Don’t you...dare stop.” Panting, she surged upward to meet his thrusts. Pleasure spiraled fast and furious. The world was shaking, crumbling down on them. Literally.

A small chunk of plaster bounced off the back of Dash’s head and plunked onto the bedspread, followed by another chunk.

“I won’t stop,” Dash gasped. “I promise.”

It took a second to realize he’d mistaken the raining plaster pieces for her hand. Before she could correct him, he gave a mighty thrust that scooted them halfway across the bed and whirled stars inside her head. It also loosened the canopy frame bolted to the ceiling. Shrieking, she rolled to the side, taking Dash with her, as the frame plummeted to the mattress.

“What the—?” Whipping his head around, Dash stared at the frame and the giant chunk of ceiling wobbling on top of it. Both rested within the indent where her backside had been moments ago. The silk panels, including the one still wound tight around them, puddled across the bed and surrounding floor.

She bit her lip, trying to stop a fit of giggles. Dash turned his head and gazed up at her. Unable to hold it in, she laughed. She buried her face in his chest and he chuckled, tugging the panel loose. When she started to roll off him, he grabbed her hips, holding her firmly in place as he pumped inside her. A low moan tore from her throat and she dug the heels of her palms into his shoulders in an effort to keep her balance.

“I imagined us like this the night you kidnapped me. But this is far better than the fantasy.” His hips undulated beneath her, stealing a gasp from her. Desire and love flamed bright in his eyes. “You’re better than a fantasy.”

She pitched forward, sprawling across his chest. He made a sharp inhalation. Too late, she remembered his battered ribs. “Are you okay?”

His arms gathering her tight, he rumbled a laugh against her neck. “You’re the sweetest torture, *Sher’tian*, but I fear you’ll be the death of me yet.”

The irony of his words elicited a fresh sheen of tears. She would do whatever it took to ensure his blood wouldn’t be on her hands.

Even if it meant leaving him.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Mara listened to the heavy, even breaths sawing from Dash. The candles had long ago been snuffed out, leaving the room shrouded in dense shadows and the lingering earthy scent of beeswax and paraffin. Sitting up, she studied him, branding each square inch of his beautiful face into her memory.

I'll love you. Always. A painful ache spiraled in her chest and she pushed out of the bed. Hot tears blurred her vision. Stepping over the canopy frame, she padded to the footboard and pulled on her discarded clothes, trying to be quiet as possible. She hefted up her valise before drifting towards the nightstand and looping the collar around her elbow. Pain intensified in her heart when she sent a final glance towards the bed. Beating it back, she slipped into the hall and closed the door on a soft click.

The main room held more shadows. An indistinct lump swaddled by thick blankets occupied the chair—Jerrick. Piper's muffled snores came from elsewhere in the cavernous space. The rune box sat unguarded on one of the mahogany end tables. Stuffing it inside her sweater pocket, she wasted precious seconds hunting for the Cloud Chaser's key. It turned up inside a small bowl chiseled from rose quartz, and she palmed it before rushing towards the rock doors. Piper would have to stay behind. She couldn't risk waking the sprite and alerting Dash to their hurried departure.

Night air misty with fog embraced her when she darted from the cave's entrance. The moon still rode high, providing enough illumination to save her from taking a nasty spill on the pathway. She reached the Cloud Chaser with nary a scrape. After throwing her valise inside, she dropped behind the wheel. Tension and heartache blanketed her all at once and she dropped her head against the steering wheel. Her shoulders shook with the force of her silent tears.

A hand settled on her back and she jerked. "*Dash.*" The word came out a panicked gurgle.

"No." Jerrick hunkered in the doorframe, his gaze dark with sympathy.

"But...the chair...how..."

"That wasn't me. Just a pile of blankets designed to throw you off."

She swallowed down the lump of misery congealed in her throat. "You knew I would leave?"

"I suspected after the conversation we shared earlier."

Her hand fell from the wheel and slumped to her lap. "This is the only way. He won't let me leave. I know that now. But I don't have a choice. I have to go back."

"Blondie, I don't envy your choice. That's why you don't have to worry about me judging what you're doing." His hand moved from her back and squeezed her elbow. "I know you love my brother."

Though it embarrassed her to break down in front of Jerrick, she couldn't stop the tears spilling down her cheeks. Thankfully he averted his eyes, giving her some much-needed privacy.

"I, uh, found something that should prove useful when you approach Nalia." He dug inside his jacket and pulled out a slip of paper. "It's the contract Baggins signed with Finian."

Wiping her cheeks, Mara snatched the paper and skimmed over it. "Where in the world did you find this?"

"The steel box in the Range Hover. Lucky for us, Baggins is apparently paranoid about keeping everything with him at all times."

Hope whittled away a little corner of her misery. "This is exactly the proof we needed. Finian can't lie his way out of the hot seat now."

"No, but he'll probably try." Jerrick's mouth quirked into a half smile. "Almost wish I could be a fly on the wall during that confrontation."

"Funny, I'd give anything *not* to be."

Compassion flickered across Jerrick's face again. He glanced to the indigo sky. "You better leave. Dash is a late sleeper, but I still wouldn't take my chances."

She grabbed the tail of his jacket before he could fully stand. "Don't let him come after me. You have to promise me that much. Make Dash see how it'd only mean the death of him."

"You've seen how stubborn my brother is. It won't be that easy."

Her grip fisted on the supple leather of his jacket. "Whatever it takes, do it. He can't step foot within Zalan's borders, *ever*."

Jerrick stood, forcing her hands to drop. "I'll do my best."

She could ask for no more than that. "Thank you."

His features softened. "I hope your brother appreciates the sacrifice you're making for him."

Before she could respond, he swiveled and disappeared into the growing fog.

~ * ~

Dash stretched out an arm, seeking the warmth of Mara's soft curves, and instead encountered a lumpy pillow. Raising his head, he frowned at the vacant side of the bed. The dark of the room returned his thoughts to the absence of the slave collar and its flashing lights. A prickle of alarm tickled the back of his neck and he jerked around, seeking out the nightstand.

When he saw the collar was missing, foreboding knifed him in the chest. Throwing the covers off, he jumped out of bed and raced to the door. He grasped the knob and shoved. The lock clicked in the housing, but the door wouldn't budge. He knew better than to credit Mara with that inconvenient piece of luck. His suspicions became confirmed when he shot a volt of magic at the lock and the counterspell shielding the door knocked him on his ass. He sprang to his feet with a growl.

“Jerrick!” He followed up his bellow with a vicious pounding on the door.

His brother’s response came quicker than anticipated. “What?”

The fact solid oak separated them didn’t keep Dash from drawing his lips back in a menacing snarl. “Let me out of here, you little shit.”

“Sorry, but no can do. I promised Mara I’d try talking sense into that dense brain of yours.”

“By trapping me inside this room? Brilliant plan—except the pesky problem of me keeling over dead after a few days without food or water.”

A sigh sounded on the other side of the door. “I’m not going to let you starve. And this is only temporary. I’ll let you out of there once you see the idiocy in running after Mara half-cocked and with no logical plan in sight.”

He leaned his weight into the wood, testing the magic shield for weaknesses. There were none. He’d have to rely on his wits instead.

“Are you still there?”

Dash glared at the door. “Where the bloody hell else would I be?”

“Thought maybe you’d found some corner to pout in.”

I’m really going to enjoy kicking his ass when I escape this room. Stalking to the trousers strewn on the floor, he yanked them on and settled on the bed’s edge. “How long ago did Mara leave?”

Jerrick’s silence stoked the fury brewing inside Dash’s chest. With some effort, he corralled his ire. “Answer the question. It’s not like I can chase her down at this point.”

“Almost four hours.”

He smothered his curse. “Tell me you at least accomplished the thing I asked of you last night.”

“You mean with Astor’s project?”

Dash waited lightheaded for his brother to continue. If Jerrick hadn’t managed that integral step of the plan, they’d all be—

“Yes, I did it.”

The breath escaped Dash’s lungs in a relieved rush. “So what story is she planning to give Nalia for my disappearance?”

“The most obvious—that Baggins succeeded in killing you. I found his contract with Finian and gave it to Mara. Don’t think she’ll have too tough a time putting on a convincing act with that damning piece of evidence in her possession.”

The news eased the tight ball of worry in his chest a fraction. If the gods looked over them, maybe Nalia wouldn’t immediately see through the elaborate ruse.

“I know you’re not happy about any of this. But you won’t do Mara any favors running after her while your head and heart are tied up in knots. Once you calm down, we’ll put our heads together and figure a way to spring her from those sonsofbitches.”

Dash made a face and prepared to utter the two most appalling words in any known language. “You’re right.” The depths he’d stoop to in order to go after the woman he loved amazed even him. He leaned across the mattress and clicked the lamp on. Blinking, he took a moment to adjust to the light. “If you’re serious about not starving me, how about fixing some breakfast? I haven’t eaten since yesterday afternoon.”

“Okay. Give me a few minutes to scrounge something up.”

“Don’t have much choice, do I?” Dash decided the surly approach was a nice improvisation when a responding grunt leaked through the door. Good, meant his brother might be less prone to suspicion when he returned with the food. Pushing from the bed, he prowled the room, looking for something he could knock Jerrick out with. It had to be something easily concealed. He might have eased Jerrick’s suspicions, but it didn’t mean his brother wouldn’t be on the lookout for the old lamp-upside-the-noggin trick.

He spied the coin purse wedged halfway beneath the bed. A smile curved his mouth. “The gods *are* looking down on me.” Hunkering to his knees, he grabbed the purse and unzipped it. He palmed the vial of sleeping potion and stood.

Humming beneath his breath, he ambled to the closet and freed a white shirt from one of the hangers. After tossing it on, he waited impatiently for Jerrick’s return. What seemed like a lifetime passed before he caught the distinct aroma of hot gorak porridge. The air shimmered as Jerrick’s counterspell dissolved. Seconds later, the door cracked open an inch, revealing the left side of Jerrick’s face.

“Move to the wall by the closet and keep your hands where I can see them.”

Keeping his grumbles loud and convincing, Dash stalked to the appointed wall. Jerrick entered the room, watchful and alert. He placed the tray on the foot of the bed and stepped back.

“I also found this in Baggins’ vehicle.” Jerrick held up a generation ten Nevis taser.

“You threatening to use it on me?”

Jerrick cocked an eyebrow in challenge. “Take a single step past the foot of that bed and you’ll find out firsthand.”

Heeding the warning, Dash walked to the tray of food. He reached for the bowl of porridge and with a strategic twist, deftly uncapped the vial tucked inside his other palm. Wedging the bowl against his chest, he dug the spoon into the steaming porridge and took a bite before spitting it onto the floor with a grimace. “Good gods, are you trying to make me sick? It’s rancid.”

“What the hell are you talking about? I just bought that stuff.”

“Well, you were gypped, my friend.” Satisfied he held Jerrick’s incensed stare, Dash tipped the bowl slightly and tapped most of the vial’s contents on top of the porridge. He had just enough time to slip the vial from sight before his brother’s attention dropped to the bowl.

“Put it back on the tray and go stand by the wall again.”

“You have some serious trust issues.” Growling, Dash returned to his post. He watched Jerrick stride to the bed and heft up the bowl. When his brother sniffed at its contents he threw his arms out in disgust. “You can’t tell anything by smelling it.”

His jaw rigid, Jerrick scooped a healthy serving of the porridge into his mouth and swallowed. “You’re out of your mind. There’s nothing wrong with this.”

“Take another bite.”

“Why? It’s not going to change my opinion.”

Dash made an impatient gesture with his hand. “Just humor me.”

Eyes flashing his annoyance, Jerrick shoveled in another bite—the one bite that should ultimately do him in. “Yep. Still tastes fine.” He settled the bowl onto the tray before retreating a few steps. “Eat up.”

Glaring, Dash shoved away from the wall. He was relieved to note the relaxed sag of his brother’s shoulders. The potion seemed to be working, and fast. Picking up the bowl, he pretended to taste some of the porridge before flinging the crockery against the wall near the bed. Tainted cereal slid in a goopy trail towards the floorboard.

“You’re...starting...ta pissh...” Jerrick’s words slurred deeper into unrecognizable territory with each shuffling step he took forward. He opened his mouth, formed the next word. His eyes rolled in the opposite direction of his body as he pitched against the bed. A snore broke from him even before his cheek hit the mattress.

Dash angled around the bed and clapped a hand against his brother’s shoulder. “One day, you’re probably going to kick my ass for that.” Counting on it, he strode from the room.

Chapter Thirty

By some miracle, Mara arrived in Hagee before sunset and without wrecking the Cloud Chaser. If she weren't dead on her feet from exhaustion, she would have patted herself on the back for both accomplishments. Instead, she stumbled out of the vehicle and made her way to the dockmaster's station.

She stepped inside the corroded, metal-sided building and a noxious cloud of pipe smoke burned her throat. Choking back a cough, she surveyed the cramped interior. Behind a desk piled high with charts, maps and various logbooks sat the dirtiest inhabitant in all Aurion. Seriously, the man looked like he hadn't seen soap or water in the past decade.

He shoved his spectacles down his hooked nose and squinted at her. "What do you want? Can't you see I'm busy?"

Clearly he wouldn't win any congeniality contests in the near future. "Are you the dockmaster?" At the man's terse nod, she approached the paper-strewn desk. "I need you to contact Captain Borgander and let him know I'm ready for pickup. He's supposed to return me to Volto harbor."

After much grouching, the dockmaster picked up a small communicator with the word *Locati-link* stamped on the front of it. "Sea Surfer, do you copy?"

Garbled static preceded Sig Borgander's response. "Aye, I'm here."

"There's a human wench taking up space in my office. Says you're to ferry her to Volto."

"Must be Nalia Artronté's girl. Tell her I'll be there by dawn's break."

"No, I need him now—" Mara glared when the dockmaster yanked open a desk drawer and tossed the *Locati-link* inside. "You could have at least asked him if he could get here sooner than morning."

The dockmaster made a loud hacking noise that should have cleared every trace of phlegm from his sinuses. "Told you I was busy, didn't I?"

She opened her mouth. *Oh what's the use?* Arguing with Crabby Pants would be futile. She bit her tongue and walked out of the building. During the brief time she'd been haggling over her return passage, the sun had disappeared behind Mount Vire. She quickened her pace and returned to the Cloud Chaser. It didn't take much to convince her to choose the backseat over any vermin-infested bed she might or might not be able to rent in the area.

The minute her body touched the seat, a massive wave of fatigue rolled through her limbs. Curling her knees towards her stomach, she dug inside the valise sandwiched between the console and backseat,

looking for something to use as a makeshift blanket. Her fingers brushed soft linen. She pulled out the shirt Dash had wrapped her in after wishing her naked. “I must have accidentally packed it with my things.”

Her hand fisted the fabric. She started to shove the shirt back inside the valise but hesitated when she caught the subtle woodsy note drifting from the linen. Though it was a poor substitute for Dash, she wrapped the shirt around her shoulders. Tomorrow she’d dispose of it in case Nalia decided to rifle through her belongings.

She closed her eyes. Almost immediately, she drifted into a heavy sleep plagued with dreams of pine-scented fae thieves and choices left untaken.

When morning came, her head pounded from lack of decent sleep and her neck suffered the mother of all cricks, but she was relieved to see the Sea Surfer docked in its slip. She shuffled up the gangplank and politely declined when one of the deckhands offered to stow her valise.

“Where’s the rest of your party?”

Mara spun around. Holding a hand against her racing heart, she stared at Captain Borgander. She felt like an idiot for being so jumpy, but better to get it out of her system before facing Nalia and Finian. “It’s only me this time.”

Borgander gave a disinterested grunt before returning to his post in the ship’s wheelhouse. Hugging her valise against her side, Mara ventured to the lounge situated mid-deck. She spotted the computerized communicator hanging between two portholes and took a deep breath.

“Might as well get this over and done with.” She trudged to the communicator and punched in the link to Nalia’s aerocoach. When Ronan didn’t answer the sync alert she left him a message to pick her up in Volto’s shipyard before day’s end. With that important task finished, she crossed to the bank of chairs and slumped into the nearest one.

The four visio screens suspended on the opposite wall popped on, momentarily distracting her. The middle screen displayed coverage of the free-trade protest they’d encountered on the way to the inn outside Volto. It appeared that while her life had turned upside down, the outside world continued its own struggles. The realization sat heavy in her heart.

Several horn blasts rent the air, announcing their departure. She slouched in the seat and pillowed her head against her arm. The journey ahead would be long and tiring—might as well try to get some rest while she could.

She must have dozed for a few minutes when suddenly a prickling awareness shivered over her skin, snapping her fully awake. Someone else was in the lounge. She cracked an eye open and yelped when a pale, wrinkled face swam into focus.

“Did you have a nice sleep?”

Mara gaped at the withered crone stooped in front of her. The woman wore the same voluminous white cape from the previous sea crossing, but the bird claws were absent today. “Um...yes.”

“Good. You’ll need your strength and wit for what faces you.”

Grabbing the arms of the chair, Mara struggled to an upright position. “What are you talking about?” She jumped from her seat when the woman swiveled and faced the wall of visio screens. “How do you know all these things about me?”

Rather than answer, the woman clucked her tongue at the screaming protestors on the center screen. “It seems no matter how many centuries pass, some things never change.” She gave an impatient wave of her arm. “Makes me wonder why we didn’t just populate the world with braying asses and be done with it.”

Mara stared at the smooth alabaster skin disappearing beneath the folds of the crone’s cloak. What happened to the wrinkles and liver spots?

The woman reached up and removed the cloak’s hood. Limp hair in a dull shade of copper spilled over her bony shoulders. Turning, she revealed a heavily pockmarked face. She returned Mara’s frozen stare with a crooked smile. “What, never seen a bucktoothed goddess with bad acne before?” Her features shifted, taking on a strange shimmer. A nanosecond later, her complexion smoothed and glowed with radiance. The lifeless locks lengthened into vibrant red curls. “Better?”

“Wha...?” A breeze blew inside Mara’s gaping mouth and she snapped it shut.

“Oh shoot. I forgot something.” The woman tapped her front teeth and they instantly straightened.

Mara shook her head. “This isn’t happening. I must still be asleep. There’s no way I’m talking to a freaking goddess right now.”

Rhyann tipped her head back and laughed. “You humans are so amusing. Pretty damn good in the sack too, I gotta say.” She reached into the pocket of her cloak and pulled out a digital timepiece. “Hades’ balls, it’s past morning already? Better get a move on before I’m late to Eldred’s. Trust me, you don’t want to keep a bad-tempered six-thousand-year-old god who keeps a dragon for a pet waiting.”

Brilliant lights erupted around Rhyann and she disappeared in a flash. Mara blinked and pinched her arm. “Nope, definitely awake.” She rushed out onto the deck in time to hear the clopping of hooves, followed by a horse’s soft nicker. Maybe if she caught Rhyann in time, she’d bend the rules and grant her one last wish.

A fierce blast of wind slammed Mara against the lounge door. “Rhyann...wait.” She staggered forward. A final gust whipped her curls wildly around her face before dissipating with an eerie whistle. Something poked into her scalp. Reaching up, she plucked the object from her hair and stared in bemusement at the red feather pinched between her fingers.

Chapter Thirty-One

Dash ripped his safety harness off the second the jetcraft suspended its quantic thrusters and glided into its docking bay.

“Ares we...*hicc*...theres yet?”

He grimaced at the sprite wobbling beside the bottle of Larry the Fairy’s Hardcore Nectar resting in the chair’s cup holder. “How much of that stuff did you drink?”

“Lotsh—it’s awshome.” Piper hugged the bottle and planted a smacking kiss on the superimposed image of Larry the Fairy. “You’re awshome.”

“If you’re going to be any use at all, we need to get you sobered up.” He plucked Piper by the wings and shook her until she released the bottle and it tumbled to the seat. While she buzzed in drunken contentment, he made his way to the jetcraft’s debarking ramp. Midosh, smuggler and pilot of the craft, ambled out of the cockpit and met him at the exit doors.

“I owe you, my friend.” Dash clasped his colleague’s hand.

The pilot’s craggy face broke into a grin. “You still have that signed first edition of *Winged Glory*?”

Dash took the hint and agreed to send Midosh the literary classic first chance he got. He stepped on the floating ramp. Too impatient to wait for it to deposit him on the ground, he jumped the final two feet and took off on a fast jog.

“*Wheee*.” Piper swung her legs. “Go fasher.”

A shiny black Cressica waited outside the warehouse terminal—precisely where he’d arranged for Midosh to leave it. Yep, the smuggler more than deserved the first edition of *Winged Glory* for granting him access to his prized baby.

He tapped the digitized lock at the base of the vehicle’s tinted side window. The hatch doors hissed open and he slid into the leather bucket seat before dropping Piper on the console. She landed on her rump and hiccupped a nebula of sprite dust.

“First thing we’re doing is injecting you with a mega dose of caffeine.” Shaking his head, he roared out of the warehouse’s receiving lot and headed to Thaépar’s city center. He found a drive-thru beverage hut and ordered Piper a tall Jufferi with three shots of liquefied hammis bark thrown in for good measure. Popping the lid open, he checked the temperature. Lukewarm.

“You conscious?” When Piper didn’t respond, he nudged her over. A snore rumbled from her.

“Sonofafairy.” Gritting his teeth, Dash pinched one of the sprite’s boots between his thumb and forefinger and dunked her in the container of supercharged Jufferi.

She came up sputtering. “Hey, what do you think you’re doing?”

Good, she sounded halfway lucid. He dunked her again.

“That was so not cool.”

Satisfied her buzz was officially killed, he lowered her back to the console. She scrambled to her feet and shook her dripping head, splattering the leather interior.

“Next time, could you use something other than booze to combat your fear of flying?”

Piper plopped her hands on her hips. “Next time? Forget it.” She slashed a hand through the air. “You’re not getting me on one of those flying deathtraps again.”

“Fine, you’ve got a deal.”

The sprite wrung out her hair and Dash engaged the Cressica’s turbo boosters. He shot towards the aerial freeway. Glancing at the luminar hologram, he tightened his grip on the steering wheel. Time was ticking and he had a stubborn woman to rescue.

He just hoped he could get to Mara before all hell broke loose.

Chapter Thirty-Two

The Sea Surfer reached Volto around midday. Relief and trepidation warred within Mara when she stepped off the gangplank and spied Ronan waiting outside the aerocoach. She caught his eye by giving a short wave and crossed the shipyard. When she came to a stop in front of him he glanced over her shoulder, frowning.

“Where are Rhyder and the sprite?”

She forced herself to meet Ronan’s prodding gaze when it swung back on her. This would be great practice for the upcoming showdown. “Neither could make it, I’m afraid.”

A ferocious glower darkened Ronan’s face. “Did that thievin’ bastard give you the slip?”

“I’m afraid it’s not that simple.” She held up a hand, hoping to stall any further questions. “It’s been a hell of a week. Could we just hit the road?” Without waiting for his response, she angled by him and climbed inside the aerocoach’s passenger seat.

Ronan’s grunt floated through the opened window before he ambled to his side of the vehicle. He hunkered behind the wheel and she eyed his profile.

“How’s your nose?”

“Healing.” He rubbed the side of his bandages. “Doc did a fine job setting it. Might even look better than before you broke it.”

“Sorry again about that.”

“No worries.” His grin stretched the tape around his nose. “The pretty nurse who took care of me more than made up for the discomfort.”

Leave it to a male to take enforced bed rest to a whole new level. “Would you mind if I napped for a while? I really am exhausted.”

He shrugged and she leaned against the neck rest. The aerocoach started up with a series of low whirs and soon she felt the faint buffet of resistance as the vehicle sought a smooth-riding air flow.

Hours ticked by, but sleep refused to give Mara’s mind much-needed relief. Despite the fact, she kept her eyes shut and pretended to doze the entire time. It saved her making small talk. The downside was it also gave her too much time to play over bittersweet memories. She pressed her fingertips against her lips, imagining the warm pressure came from Dash’s mouth.

The awful heaviness that insisted on pinching her heart whenever she thought of him intensified until she thought she might be physically ill.

She loved him. And he was gone to her—forever.

“We’re almost there,” Ronan said, breaking through Mara’s morose thoughts.

Dropping her hand, she straightened in the seat. The aerocoach slowed, giving her ample time to stare at the looming gates of Rulach Palace in the distance.

“You ready for this?”

Mara shifted her attention to Ronan and his wary expression. “Yes.” Digging into her sweater pocket, she tightened her fingers around the small wooden box containing the Rhyann rune. Hopefully Nalia’s temper would be equally soothed by its presence. *It has to be.*

The gates slowly swung open, granting them access. There was no turning back.

Ronan, bless his strange, misguided heart, tried lightening the mood by singing an off-key ditty about a one-legged sailor while he coasted the aerocoach around the driveway’s bend. When they reached the marble steps, the massive front doors swept open.

A sense of déjà vu hit Mara. She half expected Nalia’s bodyguards to come marching down the steps and drag her kicking and screaming from the vehicle. Shaking her head at the mental image, she reached for the door handle.

“Good luck,” Ronan said, his tone grave.

She pasted on a confident smile that mocked her jittering nerves. “Thanks.” Releasing a shaky breath, she grabbed her valise from the floor and jumped onto the graveled drive. She made her way up the steps and through the palace doors.

Loud voices carried across the foyer. Steeling herself, she crossed the expansive hall and stopped outside the rose parlor. Its ornately carved oak doors were propped open, revealing the occupants locked in a heated discussion inside the room.

Mara’s gaze skipped over Nalia and Finian, settling instead on the tall man standing with his back to her. Frowning, she took in the matted dark blond hair hanging well past his broad shoulders. The rest of him appeared no less filthy and unkempt. It even appeared his feet wore no protective covering.

She settled her valise down. Its metal hinges clicked against the marble, drawing the attention of the arguing trio.

“Ah, there you are,” Nalia said, brushing past the stranger in the raggedy clothing. “Perfect timing.”

Mara ignored Nalia’s approach. Instead, her focus remained riveted on the tall man who’d turned and was staring at her with flat, emotionless eyes. Her attention fell on the thick manacles binding his wrists. A heavy chain connected those restraints to the ones locked around his ankles. The sense of déjà vu returned, making her skin prickle. Heart pounding, she edged farther inside the doorway. “*Gideon?*”

Recognition flickered in the man’s blue eyes, momentarily banishing the bleak soullessness lingering in their depths. The air ripped from Mara’s lungs. “It is you.” She rushed forward but Nalia snatched her back.

Gideon released a roar and Finian stepped behind him, striking the back of his head. Mara cried out but her brother didn't even flinch at the attack. It tore at her heart, witnessing how numb Gideon had become to the harsh blow of another's hand. If Nalia weren't restraining her arms in her talon grip, she swore she'd kill Finian on the spot for the part he'd played in her brother's misery.

Despite the thickness of Mara's sweater, Nalia's fingernails got their point across as they dug into her skin. "This reunion is quite touching, but I believe we have some business to conduct first. I trust you're in possession of the rune?"

"Yes." After shooting a quick look in Gideon's direction, Mara gave Nalia her full attention. She didn't bother disguising the level of enmity she felt for the self-serving fairy queen. "And I trust you've signed the papers releasing my brother."

Her skirt flapping around her long legs in a swirl of emerald silk, Nalia strode purposefully towards the cherry-wood writing desk angled against the west wall. She rustled through a small sheaf of papers before returning to Mara. "I have them here. Now where's the Rhyann rune?"

"Let me see them." Mara extended her hand. She wasn't about to trust the backstabbing bitch.

Nalia reluctantly held out the papers and Mara snatched them up, on the lookout for any loopholes that might be hidden in the contract. Surprisingly, there didn't appear to be any. Her heart rate jogged back to normal when she flipped to the second page and discovered Nalia's spidery signature scrawled at the bottom.

Gideon is actually free. Mara struggled to fight the tears welling up but eventually accepted defeat. Hell with it, she deserved a good cry after the emotional turmoil of the last few days. Crooking her elbow, she wiped her eyes on her sleeve.

"Satisfied?" Nalia plucked the papers from her grasp. "You'll get these back once I get my rune. But first I want to check the condition of my other property. Bring Dashaël to me."

The painful thudding started in Mara's heart again. Here came the moment she'd dreaded—the moment that would really test her acting skills. "I'm afraid there's been a complication." She returned to her valise. Yanking it open, she pulled out the slave collar and whipped it towards Nalia. It clattered near the fairy queen's feet. "He won't be joining us."

Nalia tossed the papers she'd signed towards the desk.

Well, at least she didn't rip them up. Yet. Mara mentally crossed her fingers.

"You let him go?" Nalia's voice snapped with imperious fury.

"No, he's dead. Courtesy of a bounty hunter named Ortis Baggins." Mara slid a sidelong glance to Finian. "I believe your husband is acquainted with Baggins. Enough to hire him to commit murder, anyway."

A laugh pealed from Nalia. "I'm expected to believe this nonsense?"

Mara dug inside her pocket. She bypassed the rune box and pulled out Baggins' contract instead. "You might want to take a look at this." Quite amazed by the steadiness of her fingers, she passed the paper to Nalia.

Finian took a quick step forward but Nalia stalled him with a raised hand. She unfolded the contract and her features went rigid inch by inch as she read the document. After a minute she jerked her head up and glared at Finian through slitted eyes. "What is the meaning of this?"

He visibly struggled to get his tongue to work and Nalia stormed across the room. Halting a scant few inches from her husband, she slapped him hard across the face. The sound ricocheted across the room. "He was *mine*, you son of a bitch."

"Your devotion leaves me all warm and fuzzy inside."

The oxygen rushed from Mara's lungs at the sound of Dash's deep baritone behind her. Faint-headed, she whirled and stared at him. Pasha and Merke had both his arms pinned behind his back. Other than a smudge of dirt across the knee of his impeccably creased trousers, he looked fresh and well rested.

Too bad I can't say the same. Mara blinked, trying to make sense of his ill-timed arrival. He'd followed her—that much was clear. How he'd managed it so fast remained a mystery. Not that it mattered. Bottom line, he'd destroyed her efforts to save him. If she didn't love him so damn much, she'd throttle him for being the biggest idiot alive.

"Your Royal Highness," Pasha said, shoving Dash past the threshold of the doorway. "We found this intruder inside the palace perimeter. He gave us his name, but I couldn't find it on the guest roll."

Dash grimaced at Pasha. "Good gods, your memory is deplorable. Allow me to refresh it—I'm the owner of the jaw you nearly broke last week."

"Isn't this an interesting turn of events?" Nalia's skirt made a slithering noise as she crossed the room and stopped in front of Dash. "It's believed you're dead."

"Crazy the rumors you'll hear." Despite the hired muscle restraining him, Dash managed a shrug. "This one isn't quite as entertaining as the one about me joining a traveling circus, but I guess it suffices."

Nalia looked far from amused. Mouth tight, she turned and speared Mara with an icy stare before stalking back to the slave collar lying on the ground.

"No!" Mara fumbled inside her jacket for the Rhyann. "I'll give you the rune in trade for him."

A high-pitched laugh trilled from Nalia. "You dare negotiate with property already belonging to me? I don't think so." She snapped her fingers and Zith pushed his way past his comrades.

Mara grunted. Should have known he wouldn't be out of earshot.

"The girl has something of mine." Nalia flicked her fingers. "Get it."

Zith advanced the same instant Dash's voice rang out. "She doesn't have the rune. I do."

Chapter Thirty-Three

Silence descended on the room and Dash's mouth curled in challenge. "Now I've everyone's attention, perhaps you'd better pull out the rune box, *Sher 'tian*."

Mara scrambled to do his bidding. Nestling the box in the palm of her hand, she flipped the lid open. She gaped at the rune, her heart plummeting. Crazy as it was, she'd almost believed Dash had managed to pull a fast one on her.

Lifting her head, she frowned at him. "It's right here."

"No, it's not. Rub your finger over the stone."

Not seeing the point of whatever game he was playing at, she pressed down on the rune, dragging her thumb towards her chest. The wing symbol etched on its surface disappeared. Gasping, she jerked her hand away. A small blotch of red appeared on the side of her finger. Mystified, she flipped her palm over. The red symbol had transferred to her thumb. "How...?"

"The heat of your skin absorbed the ink. Astor warned me that might happen. Believe me, I sweated the equivalent of my own body weight worrying you might fiddle with the stone and discover its little secret."

Perplexed, Mara gaped at him. "Astor—your friend's daughter?"

"She's an artist."

Mara's memory tracked back to the mural painted on the walls of the little cottage in Skalage. Her fingers tightened around the stone in her grip. "You mean she made this?" Realization dawned and the missing pieces of the puzzle finally fell in place. "That night. You switched the rune on me."

"Sweetheart, I hated deceiving you." Tenderness and love softened his expression. "But even before we reached Skalage, I suspected you'd attempt to leave without me—that you'd think you were saving my life. Problem is, life without you isn't in my game plan."

Nalia stormed to Mara and snatched the rune from her grasp. She hurled it, box and all. Ignoring the shattering collision it made with the crystal vase resting on the writing desk, she glared at Dash.

Tearing his gaze from the bits of crystal littering the floor, Dash cocked one dark eyebrow. "Is that any way to treat a perfect example of Rittonnio craftsmanship?"

"Where is it?" Fury crackled in Nalia's voice.

"First I believe we have some terms to renegotiate." Dash engaged Nalia in a stare-down. Tension electrified the air between them.

“Do not entertain this scum’s demands,” Finian bit out, breaking into the pair’s mute battle of the wills. “Send him to the fairy prison. While you’re at it, return this convict to the cell he belongs in.”

Mara’s knees threatened to give out. “*No*. The papers are signed. You have to release Gideon.”

“I don’t have to do anything. My bitch of a wife plotted all this behind my back.”

Finian’s unflattering assessment didn’t seem to faze Nalia. Instead, she continued to size Dash up. “What is it you want?”

“I think you know. Additionally, I want the assurance Mara, her brother and I walk out of here without having to worry about any of you meddling in our lives again.”

The queen’s scarlet lips pulled back in a sneer. “It’s hardly an even trade. The rune is worth a million worthless thieves such as you.” She flicked a dismissive wave towards Mara. “And much as I’ve enjoyed Finian’s constant fear of you sticking a knife between his shoulder blades, my business with you is finished anyway.”

Nalia’s admission clobbered Mara dead center in her chest. *That’s why she made the deal with me—to torture Finian all these years?*

“Then it appears you’re getting a hell of a deal,” Dash said, breaking through Mara’s whirling thoughts.

“Very well.” Nalia tossed the slave collar onto the ground and smashed its controls beneath the spiked heel of her boot.

An angry protest sputtered from Finian. Everyone ignored the king while Dash bellowed, “Get your winged butts in here.”

Mara blinked when Piper and three other sprites streaked past Dash and the bodyguard’s heads. They shot upward, hovering a safe distance above the gathering. Each tiny sprite held a corner of the Rhyann rune.

“How did they get inside the palace?” Nalia demanded.

“It’s what we worthless thieves call a dummy distraction.” Dash’s grin turned cocky. “As in find a couple ass clowns to provoke into a tussle while your winged friends slip through the nearby unsecured window.”

Steam practically swirling from the crown of her head, Nalia shot her arm towards Pasha and Merke. “You’re both fired. Leave my sight. *Now*.”

The two ass clowns—as Dash colorfully dubbed them—banged into each other when they scurried to beat each other out the door. While everyone was preoccupied taking in the bodyguards’ comical exit, Mara hurried to Gideon’s release papers and stuffed them inside her sweater pocket.

“I’ve given my word and destroyed the collar. Now hold up your end of the bargain.” Nalia’s voice snapped with authority.

Oh boy, what'll happen when she finds out the rune won't restore her magic? Mara peered across at Dash. He must have intuited her concern because he sent her a silent warning.

Duh, like I'm gonna say anything. She planned on being long gone from Rulach Palace before *that* set of firesparks erupted.

Dash nodded and the sprites let go of the rune. It plopped into Nalia's outstretched hand.

"You goddamned conniving bitch," Finian roared, barreling forward. "Give the Rhyann to me."

Nalia snapped her fingers and Zith blocked Finian's path. "I don't think so. Not after everything you've done to me." She stroked the rune lovingly. "This is my reward for allowing you to taint my body after bedding that human."

"You know she meant nothing to me." Irritation flared from Finian. "How much longer must I suffer your tedious jealousy?"

Their callous bickering over her mother made Mara's stomach twist in a painful cramp.

"You dare speak to me of suffering?" Nalia's outraged screech bounced off the marble walls. She stepped forward, her eyes glittering a never-ending blackness. "Because of you, I've done nothing but suffer. For that, my wish is for my torment to eat your soul." She held the rune above her head and shook it. "Rhyann, grant my bidding!"

A low rumble shook the room as streams of light beamed from the Rhyann rune. Nalia staggered, her eyes growing huge. She screamed and a great, billowing black smoke erupted from her mouth. The rune thunked between her feet. The swirling smoke cloud shot across the room and funneled inside Finian's ears, nose and gaping mouth. His whole body twisted with fierce convulsions.

Pulsations of light glowed from the rune. In a blinding flash, a white-hot glare suspended the room and everything inside it. Biting back a scream, Mara covered her eyes. The entire palace could be crumbling down around them and they couldn't do a damn thing to stop it. Through the gaps in her fingers, she noticed the receding light. The glow reabsorbed into the rune, leaving an eerie stillness in its wake.

Dropping her hands, Mara stared at the two inert bodies sprawled on the floor. The smoke cloud was nowhere to be seen. "What the hell happened?"

"I think Nalia just got her wish."

Mara turned and met Dash's bemused expression. Her brain tracked back to the words Nalia uttered seconds before the rune did its light show. "He...ate her torment?"

"I'm guessing."

Not quite believing it, Mara crept forward and leaned over Nalia and Finian. Their eyes stared lifelessly towards the ceiling. "I think they're dead."

"Figures," Zith said with a grunt. "Damn bitch owed me two weeks pay." He hocked up a glob of phlegm and lobbed it towards Nalia. Done paying his regards, he swiped several of the jewel-encrusted writing instruments from the desk and stalked from the room.

Dash's footsteps sounded on the marble. A second later, his hand settled on Mara's shoulder. "Seems he couldn't live with her torment and she couldn't live without it."

She shook her head. "Nalia's last words...it's almost as if she knew what the rune is capable of."

"I think she did."

Mara tore her gaze from the bodies on the floor and moved it over his beautiful, beloved face. Unable to resist, she reached up and trailed her fingers over the stubble darkening his jaw. She'd come so close to losing him. "Remind me to kick your ass later for giving me the scare of my life."

She smothered his grin with her lips, kissing him with all the emotion trapped inside her heart. Twining his hands in her hair, he returned it with equal fervor.

The distinct clearing of a throat broke them apart. Glancing over her shoulder, Mara met Gideon's pointed stare. The passion swirling in her head ballooned into relief when she remembered they were free. Truly free. Releasing Dash, she rushed at her brother. He stepped back, his motions clumsy and wary.

For a horrible minute, she thought he was angry with her. And why wouldn't he be? She was partly the reason he'd spent the past twelve years in prison.

"You might want to reconsider coming near me. I don't exactly smell like spring flowers." Gideon tried unsuccessfully to hide the shame lurking in his eyes.

The heaviness lifted from Mara's shoulders. He didn't despise her. "Do you honestly think I care about that?" Ignoring the worried look he sent her when she approached, she gently encircled him in her arms. A shudder passed through him, followed by a weary exhalation.

"I'm so sorry." Her voice cracked. "For everything."

"Why? What did you do?"

She drew her head back at Gideon's gruff demand. "It's my fault this all happened," she said, frowning up at him. A thought occurred to her, renewing her fears. Maybe he had no memory of the past. "They didn't torture you in some way that's affected your brain, did they?"

"If that's your way of suggesting I'm dull witted, I'm going to redden your backside. Once I get out of these manacles, that is."

"No, no. I'm not suggesting that at—" Mara ceased her blathering when she spied the faint twinkle in her brother's eye. "You always were a brat."

"Hmm, I believe that's what I always used to call you." Gideon's expression suddenly turned serious. "You've grown up on me, Mar."

"You too." She sniffed. Embarrassed by the possibility of sobbing in front of her big brother, she waved a hand towards Dash. "I want you to meet someone. He's—"

"Her husband-to-be."

Jaw dropping, she turned and stared at Dash as he stepped forward and shook Gideon's hand. The gesture proved awkward, considering the presence of her brother's manacles. "You are? When did that happen?"

"The minute I got roped into jetting across the planet with a sprite who's terrified of flying."

A snort sounded above their heads. Peering skyward, Mara noticed the four sprites swinging their legs over the bottom ledge of the chandelier.

"It's my fault my best friend in the whole world ditched me in Mer'daca?"

Mara rolled her eyes at Piper. "When exactly did we become best friends?"

Piper's smile turned sugary sweet. "The minute you decided to invite me to come live with you."

A groan skipped from Mara. Did she really want to live with an obnoxious sprite, a bratty older brother, and a bad-boy, sexy fae thief?

Her mouth tugged into a smile. *Hell yeah.*

About the Author

At the ripe age of seven, Jodi Redford penned her first epic, complete with stick figure illustrations. Sadly, her drawing skills haven't improved much, but her love of fantasy worlds never went away. These days she writes about fairies, ghosts and other supernatural creatures, only with considerably more heat.

She has won numerous contests, including The Golden Pen and Launching a Star.

When not writing or working the day job, she enjoys gardening and way too many reality television shows.

Currently residing in Michigan with her husband and overgrown lapdog, she is a member of RWA national and Greater Detroit Romance Writers of America.

She loves to hear from readers. You can email her at jodiredford@jodiredford.com and visit her online at www.jodiredford.com.

Two wrongs don't make a right, but they might just make the perfect match.

The Matchmakers

© 2009 Jennifer Colgan

Nick Garret is flypaper for females, and he likes it that way. Women stick for a while, and when it's over they fly away. So does he. Then one rain-slick night a young woman steps in front of his pickup truck, and his jaded, cynical life takes a sharp swerve toward trouble.

Calliope did the only thing she could think to get Nick to steer his truck—and his life—in a new direction. Banished from the Fae realm for granting a wish gone bad, her punishment is an impossible task; redeem the unredeemable Nick Garret. If she fails to help him pair three couples in everlasting bliss, he's doomed to never experience real love. And she will share his fate—as a mortal.

Nick can't decide if this charming, exasperating woman is a dream come true, or a saucy, sexy nightmare sent to drive him insane. Yet something about her makes him want to rise to her challenge. He'll do anything to make her stick around a while.

Besides, how much trouble can one half-naked, seemingly wingless faerie be?

Enjoy the following excerpt for The Matchmakers:

Nick stole glances at his passenger while he followed the winding mountain roads toward the state forest. The views from the Appalachian foothills were spectacular this time of year, and he'd been itching to get out in the cool autumn air and fill his lungs with freedom.

Unfortunately, the view in the car was equally distracting. Callie had traded her pink satin pajamas for faded jeans and hiking boots. Under a matching denim jacket, she wore a fluffy sweater the color of caramel. It looked soft as a kitten, and Nick's fingers ached to touch it.

He'd asked himself over and over why he wanted to do this—why he wanted to be with her today. The easy answer was, why not? She was beautiful, vivacious and when she wasn't driving him crazy, she left him breathless. Loony or not, she was nice to look at and maybe, if he could figure out how to draw her out, he'd learn a little more about her. He needed a better explanation as to why she seemed more and more like a magical creature and less and less like an escaped mental patient.

"Oh look! Pumpkins!"

Nick smiled at her delighted cry. Mounds of brilliant orange pumpkins, some plain and others painted with goofy neon faces, spilled over wooden tables and out of huge crates at a roadside stand. A rocky gravel lot served as a parking area, and Nick pulled in between another pickup and an SUV.

"They've got cider. I haven't had cider in years," he said as he rounded the back of the truck and helped Callie out.

She breezed past him and immediately wrapped her arms around a twenty-pound pumpkin, hugging it like a long lost friend. “Look at this one! He’s beautiful.”

“It looks like all the other ones, only bigger.”

“It’s perfect for a centerpiece for the bar.”

“Oh. Can’t Farley get his own pumpkins? He hasn’t even agreed to have the party yet.”

Her face fell, and once again, Nick felt like a monster. Why did her smile suddenly mean so much to him? He thumped the pumpkin’s unblemished hide and reached for his wallet. Callie rewarded him with a triumphant grin as she hauled the huge gourd off its table.

Nick pulled out his wallet and paid for the pumpkin and two cups of fresh cider. He leaned against the truck, grinning into his cup while Callie hoisted her prize into the back of the flat bed.

She glared at him when he handed her the cider. “You could have helped.”

He shook his head. “You could’ve popped that thing back to the apartment or right to the bar.”

“Not in front of everybody,” she whispered between sips of cider.

Nick shrugged. “You could’ve made it weigh less.”

She opened her mouth to protest, but no words came out. Her expression told him he’d pay for his cheeky comments later, and he relished the challenge.

They finished their cider in silence and climbed back in the truck. Callie immediately twisted around in her seat to check on their new passenger. “Will he be all right back there?”

“He?”

“It’s a male pumpkin.”

“Of course. Pumpkins have gender?”

“Everything has an essence that defines its sex.”

Nick struggled not to laugh. Her serious expression forbade it. “I see. It’ll—*he’ll* be fine. Are you sure you don’t want to buy him a lady friend before we go?”

“I’m sure.”

Nick just shook his head. Faerie logic would be the death of him yet.

The morning’s destination was a scenic overlook abutted by a crumbling, moss-covered stone wall. The view rivaled anything visible in the Fae realm and made Callie homesick. She shivered in the autumn breeze. Nick put his own jacket around her shoulders, and her heart thumped wildly.

“It’s colder than I expected up here.” He stood close, and Callie leaned into his warmth, wishing for the endless summer of her world. “There’s the road back to Bayerville. If you look past that farm and along the tree line, you can see the hiking trail that leads to the skating pond.”

Callie followed Nick’s tour of the fiery landscape lit with brilliant gold and orange foliage. Country traffic meandered along thin ribbons of road that wound through the hills. Here and there, the familiar

shapes of grazing horses and cows dotted the hillsides, and not a single cloud interrupted the endless blue of the October sky.

“It’s beautiful,” she whispered, fighting to keep her voice light. “It reminds me of home.”

“What’s your world like? Do the seasons change?”

“Not like they do here. We have a time when the leaves change color and a time when the flowers bloom, but it never becomes unbearably hot or cold. We don’t get rain...unless we want to create some. It never gets dark.”

Nick surveyed the land spread out before them. “Rain isn’t so bad. Sometimes it can be...sort of comforting.”

“You love it here, don’t you?”

Nick seemed reluctant to answer, but Callie felt his thoughts. He wanted this to be his home, but he didn’t want to need it so badly.

“It’s nice here. It’s nice in a lot of places I’ve been.”

“You love open space. You hated the time you spent in the cities, didn’t you?”

He nodded, snaking his arm around Callie’s waist, making her stomach flutter. “I hate smog. Traffic. Subways.”

“I bet you love snow, don’t you?”

He grinned. “You say that like it’s a bad thing.”

“Snow is nice. It’s a little too cold for me. What else do you love?”

“I love sleeping in hammocks and cold lemonade and...”

“What else?”

His eyes narrowed on her, and she sensed his discontent. “I can see right through you, Tinkerbell. This is some kind of lesson, isn’t it?”

Callie feigned innocence. “I just want to know more about you.”

“I hate mind games and psychobabble.”

Callie pulled away from him, though she was reluctant to leave the safe circle of his arms. “It’s not a game, Nick. When love is gone—it’s all gone. You’ll lose it all.”

“I said I’d help you with this mission of yours—”

“It’s for both of us, Nick. Not just me. I want you to understand that.”

“I’m trying.” He stepped forward and tilted her chin up with his fingers. “Tell me what you love.”

His lips hovered close to hers, and Callie’s breath caught. She could kiss him now and make him feel something he wouldn’t want to lose. But that wasn’t her mission. She moved back just enough to break the hypnotic pull between them.

“I love helping people fall in love. And I don’t want to lose that.”

The rest of the day passed in a blur of crimson leaves and blue sky. They drove through the forest and back and had dinner in a small café that sold hand-churned ice cream and dusty antiques.

Nick stayed close to Callie, aware of the glances of other men and feeling proprietary. By the time they returned home, the buzz of arousal had replaced the light mood of their afternoon.

He followed her up the stairs and hesitated before unlocking the door. "Did you have a good time today?"

"I did. Maybe we can do this again sometime before..."

"Before what?"

"Before I go."

"We don't have to think about you going right now, do we?"

"No."

He centered his gaze on her lips, pink and moist, still sweet from the peach ice cream he'd bought for her. He wanted a taste, and the sleepy-sultry look in her green eyes told him she did, too.

He leaned in, his fingers creeping up under her jacket. A second later his lips nearly collided with the doorframe, and his hands closed on empty air. He caught himself before he stumbled, face first, through the door as she opened it from the inside.

"Hi, Nick."

"What was that about?" He leaned one arm above her head on the doorframe. "I almost kissed a brick."

"I'm sorry about that, but we're not here to fool around."

"I wasn't fooling."

"Nick." She put a soft finger across his lips and leaned close. The faint smell of roses teased him. "No distractions." She turned and walked into the apartment, disappearing into the kitchen.

Nick watched her go. He'd been shot down before, not often, of course, but there were certain women on which the Garrett charm just didn't work. Somehow, his borrowed intuition told him Calliope was not one of them. He'd seen desire in her eyes, felt it each time their fingers touched. Something held her back, though, and he vowed to figure out what it was. He needed to uncover all her secrets, and he wasn't going to let her disappear without knowing exactly what she was all about.

Loving him was impossible. Losing him is inconceivable.

At Earth's Edge

© 2009 Christine McKay

Man is an upstart species that was once welcomed by Aderyn's kind—the Others. Like a weed, humans left much in ruin. And the Others retreated behind an enchanted wall guarded by Keepers. Aderyn is one such Keeper. And Man's battles have reached her tower.

Owen, the nearly dead ex-soldier she once found at her gates, is a different sort of man. He didn't want anything—except to give her flowers and make her laugh. As he drank in her healing magic like life-giving water, she drowned in his eyes. She was taught to defend against Man's violence; she was helpless in the face of his kindness.

Now that she has had a taste of it, she would kill to keep it.

Her visions tell her it's only a matter of time before more soldiers attack her boundary. With no intention of failing her people—or losing the man she loves—she uses her magic to unleash an apparition with the power to decimate armies.

But there's a price to be paid—in blood. As the tide of it rises higher, everything she has fought for threatens to slip through her fingers. Including Owen...

Warning: Contains hot interspecies sex, a creepy boogey monster lurking in the shadows, a male gardener with not only a green thumb but shape-shifting body parts, and a horde of man-sized bloodthirsty bugs bent on world domination.

Enjoy the following excerpt for At Earth's Edge:

Standing on her tiptoes, Aderyn adjusted her panels to better absorb the sun's weak rays. Owen used plastic and mirrors to trick the sun into warming his plants. She used a mix of quick-boiling potions and recycled human technology. From this height, she could overlook her entire domain—Owen's plot with its plants arranged in no particular order, her herbal beds lined up in military precision, but adorned with Owen's whimsical garden folly, the outer gates and beyond that, shifting sand, broken bits of bedrock and abandoned junk.

A gleam of silver caught her eye. An insalubrious scent joined it. She glanced at Owen, puttering contentedly in his garden. Even when she'd found him at her gate, covered in blood and human bits, his scent had remained unadulterated. As sweet as his treasured flowers, as pure as the rose water he made for her, as ill-suited for his uniform as she was for her Tower.

Yet, this scent lingered, twisting around her like a noxious vine. She paused, leaning against the Tower's wall for support. The stones hummed, warning her as well. A man approached her gates. Ill-intentioned and filled with poison, accoutered in that curious ripple of silver and black armor the soldiers of

Man seemed to like. Six winters ago, Aderyn had burned and buried the remains of a similar uniform in a corner of her courtyard. The stranger walked with a swagger, a long, silver rod sheathed between his shoulder blades. She started down her catwalk, intent on reaching her gate before Owen did.

Owen picked up a basket of produce, greens the color of newborn leaves, reds brighter than a fresh drop of blood on a pin-pricked finger, waxy yellows reflecting the sullen sun's rays, and pungent white garlic and leeks, reeking of veiled things that slunk beneath the soil. She'd made the basket for him, conjuring the limbs from her homeland last winter, twisting them into a pleasing shape and fastening handles for her lover's fingers to slide through.

The soldier raised his hand, rapping on the gate.

Hurry, the foundation stones whispered.

Hurry, the nodding roses called, vines shrinking from the man's scent.

Her heart thudded in her throat. *Hurry*.

Owen's stride altered, his head swiveling toward the sound.

Her motions slowed, as if time and a loop of mage-warped air conspired against her. Her hands slid, unhurried, up an unseen boundary. "No!" The word lingered around her, sound's progress halted as well.

What manner of magic was this?

She watched him approach the gate.

The portal, she pleaded. *Do not draw the bolt. Look. Look first, dear heart. Smell his corruption. Do not let him pass within.*

Tucking the basket under one arm, he slid open the bolt. She whispered words, fragments of long-forgotten spells, prayers to deities she'd neglected. She begged the hinges to rust, the walls to throw their rocks and seal the opening.

Only Owen stirred.

Poisoned lips moved. Hands unsheathed a murderous weapon.

No! The skin split on her hands. Her blood smeared the walls of her invisible prison. She screamed, bereft of words.

Owen crumpled to the cobblestones, his basket bouncing beside him. The wood shrilled as blood sprayed its limbs.

The man looked up at her and grinned.

A word flickered in the corner of her mind, one that disregarded all boundaries, all manner of magic. She'd never spoken it. She did not know of any Collcrin who had. It teased her, swaying just out of her reach. She reached out, arms no longer human but blood-soaked, twisted limbs. Leaves rustled, urging her forward. Her lips formed the word.

A breath of cold air darted up her backside, making her shiver and blink.

She woke from her vision, sweating and panting. Owen lay beside her, lips parted, breathing heavy. His body was tangled in the bedding, leaving her sky clad and exposed. She touched the back of her hand to his cheek, then his brow. Tugging the quilt from his grip, she laid her hands over his bare chest. His heart beat, slow and steady. She had the urge to seize his shoulders and shake him awake, just to hear him speak, be it sleep-slurred or angry.

He lived. Whatever she'd dreamt had not yet come to pass.

Would not come to pass, she swore.

She slid down to lie beside him, wrapping her arms around him, drawing strength from his mortal heat and the steady pulse of his heart.



Samhain Publishing, Ltd.

It's all about the story...

Action/Adventure

Fantasy

Historical

Horror

Mainstream

Mystery/Suspense

Non-Fiction

Paranormal

Red Hots!

Romance

Science Fiction

Western

Young Adult

www.samhainpublishing.com