



## Cinderella Unmasked

*Bonnie Dee and Marie Treanor*

## Chapter One

“Sebastian, take notes. I’m planning to host a ball.” Queen Ella breezed into the study where her chief steward sat at his desk. Before he could rise in greeting, she’d collapsed into the plush, red velvet chair across from him. “This will be an event for everyone, not just the elite, but the bourgeoisie and even the working class. No one shall be turned away.”

“Yes, Madam.” Sebastian put aside his ledger and took out a new piece of parchment. He dipped his quill in the inkpot. The pen scratched across the surface, turning the queen’s idea into a royal proclamation.

She rolled her neck against the back of the chair, hoping to ease the tension that corded her muscles. It had been too long since she’d had any amusement, too long that the weight of governing the country had burdened her. When he’d abandoned the throne and left the kingdom, Charming’s duties had settled on her like a mantle fashioned of chain mail. The young girl who’d once pinned all her hopes and dreams on romance was gone, replaced by strong-willed Queen Ella, ruler of a nation.

“You think I’m being capricious, don’t you?” She studied Sebastian’s long face as he wrote. As always, he was an enigma. He obeyed her commands and gave her advice on matters of state, but never volunteered an unsolicited opinion. She wondered how he entertained himself on his own time. It was difficult to imagine her serious, reliable chief steward laughing or having fun.

When he offered no reply to her question, she sighed. “Well, maybe I am. A ball is a foolish expense given the precarious state of the economy. There are no political reasons to have a ball, no foreign dignitaries or royalty to impress. Quite honestly, the idea only just occurred to me out of the blue.”

Sebastian lowered his quill and looked up. His dark, heavy-lidded gaze seemed to see into her as if he could read her secret thoughts. Too bad she could never read his.

“You’re the queen. You have a right to host an event for no particular reason, and your subjects will love you for making this inclusive gesture. However, you’ll have to find some way to limit the guest list. You can’t invite every single person in the entire kingdom.”

“No, of course not.” She smiled. “But can you imagine watching swineherds and dukes rubbing shoulders? The idea is intriguing.”

She pictured herself at sixteen in the gossamer gown her godmother had created for her out of thin air. She’d danced until the glass slippers cut into her feet and hadn’t even minded the pain because she was in Prince Charming’s arms—she, a mere servant in her stepmother’s house. Oh how naïve and young she’d been. But would she have chosen differently if she’d known then what she knew now? Would she have been content to marry Johnny, the blacksmith’s son, and live a simple life?

At least with Johnny sex might’ve made up for the lack of money and power. She fondly remembered fumbings in the haymow and stolen kisses when she’d secretly met him at the market in the village square.

“Do you ever think about other paths your life could have taken?” she asked Sebastian.

“Everyone does, I think.” He paused, and Ella waited because when he said something it was usually worth listening to and because she always hoped to learn more about his mysterious past.

“I believe in making your own future, but there are things that happen to people that are beyond their control sometimes. Illness, death, poverty. Those can be difficult to overcome. Sometimes your chosen path is blocked by a boulder and you have to navigate around it.”

“That’s true. I know my life isn’t exactly what I’d envisioned, but there wasn’t a lot I could do to force Charming to stay. He had his own path to follow.”

“An unusual one for a king.” One of his rare smiles flickered across Sebastian’s wide mouth, the curve of his generous lips softening his severe expression.

“Yes it was.” Ella could smile about it now, although the pain of abandonment still stung. In their eighth year of marriage, long after he’d stopped coming to her bed, Charming had disappeared from the castle, leaving behind a signed note of abdication, entrusting the throne to Ella’s keeping.

“You have been a loyal wife, and the failing in our marriage has been mine,” the note read. “Already you are more popular with the people than I have ever been. They accept you as their own. You’re smart, innovative, even-minded, and you should have no difficulty in ruling the

kingdom.

“I must leave as I have fallen in love with another, a simple goose girl named Myra. She understands me like no one else ever has. I’m sorry for any pain I’ve caused you and wish you the best in your future.”

That betrayal had been horrible, but Ella had made it through the time of transition. She’d grown into a leader and a stronger woman than she’d ever thought herself capable of being. The second, more humorous blow came a couple of years later, when she’d learned Charming had left the goose girl and was living onboard a pirate ship as the captain’s special friend. He’d embarked on another sort of adventure.

At last she’d let go of her guilt in not being able to please her husband. There was nothing she could’ve done to keep Charming from fulfilling his own unusual destiny.

“So you’ll have a gala to please yourself and invite anyone you wish,” Sebastian continued. “You deserve some pleasure.”

*Little do you know*, she thought, for there was a hidden agenda to her desire for a masquerade ball. She’d spent too long sleeping in an empty bed and wished to indulge all her wildest sexual fantasies. Sebastian was right: a queen was entitled to some play time. She hadn’t taken a moment for herself since assuming the crown. What better way to meet potential sexual partners than at a masquerade? Of course people weren’t truly anonymous at these affairs, but wearing a mask enabled one to act more freely than usual.

“All right, then,” Ella said briskly. “Take notes. It will be held in two weeks and this is what I want...” She proceeded to describe the theme, the food, the orchestra, the limits to the guest list while Sebastian dutifully took notes.

When she ran out of ideas, her mood was lighter than it had been for months, what with the downturn in the economy and the threat of war with neighboring Malevolin. For a short while she would allow herself to, not put aside her duties because the governing of a country never ceased, but to indulge in a little make-believe, a little magic and mystery. The ball would be beautiful, and hopefully by the end of the evening she’d find a sexual partner to put some spark back into her life—at least for one night.

Ella rose from her chair. “I guess that’s everything, Sebastian. Thank you for your help in organizing this affair.”

“Whatever you wish, Madam. I’m here to serve you.”

Why did his customary reply always send a little shiver through her? Something about the way he said “to serve” made her stomach tighten in an unusual way.

“Yes. Very well,” she stammered, and swept from the room.

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Sebastian inhaled to catch a faint trace of the perfume that lingered behind her. He listened for the rustle of her gown and the soft tread of her slippers fading down the hallway. When he could no longer hear her, he sank back into his seat and cast his pen on the desk, leaving a black blot on the list of things to accomplish before the ball.

He should resign his post, leave the castle and find employment elsewhere. The woman had other advisors to help her navigate through the mire of politics. But even as he imagined another life, perhaps with a wife and child, Sebastian knew he would never leave. Duty bound him to Ella with stronger chains than those that moored the ships in the harbor.

She'd relied on him ever since that joke of a king had abdicated, leaving her to shoulder all his responsibilities. Sebastian couldn't abandon her even if it meant he never had a home and family of his own, even if it meant he suffered at the scent of her perfume. He would remain here and do his job to the best of his ability for as long as she needed him.

## Chapter Two

Ella could feel her headache returning. She felt so wound up that she'd unravel if she heard one more, "It is *my* right..."

"Gentlemen." It had taken her a while to perfect, but by now she had the tone just right. Her single word, quietly spoken, cut through the quarrelling of her Privy Council like a knife. As one, they shut up and gazed at her expectantly.

Beside her, Sebastian moved, leaning forward to dip his pen in the ink once more. His elbow brushed against her arm in a familiar, secret gesture of support. It spoke volumes for her tension that the brief physical contact sparked through her whole body in a manner that was far from unpleasant.

"Gentlemen," she repeated. "This is not a matter for negotiation. As you know, I prefer to work with your agreement and support, but this law *will* happen. Food prices have fallen so drastically in this crisis that the peasantry simply cannot afford to pay you—or me—the same dues. Therefore, taxes will be reduced as I've outlined. It will be little enough loss to you, the nobility, but make a great deal of difference to them. The difference between life and

starvation.”

“It’s a bad precedent, Madam,” said Count Loyola heavily. “Give the peasants an inch and they push for a mile. In addition, word spreads, and our neighbors in Malevolin won’t like it.”

Ella sat back, regarding him till his gaze fell before hers. “Are you really suggesting I rule this country according to the wishes and needs of Malevolin?”

“Of course not,” Loyola said hastily. “I merely mention it as one more thing the ambassador will inevitably complain about!”

“You may leave the ambassador to me,” Ella said grimly. She’d enjoy kicking the little weasel around her audience chamber—metaphorically, of course. “Shall we move on?”

Her real question was, “Do I have your support? Or do I do this by force?” And they knew it. There were several surreptitious glances exchanged. Mostly, they didn’t want to oppose her, but giving up any of their rights and dues was anathema to their privileged souls.

Sebastian rustled his papers. “I’m sure we all understand that the kingdom’s prosperity depends on the peasantry’s. It is in no one’s interests to have destitute peasants on our estates, land that is unfarmed, producing no food—or taxes.”

As so often before, he’d pushed just the right lever. There was a bit of sighing, a few blank looks while the gears of thought creaked ’round almost audibly. Then heads began to nod sagely. “Of course, of course,” they mumbled. “Let us move on.”

Ella risked a glance at Sebastian. Though he gazed at his papers, one eyelid flickered down in an infinitesimal wink. Laughter bubbled inside her, along with a surge of affection, easing her headache.

“Good. Now, the other matter on which I need your advice is the further buildup of Malevolin troops along our border. Are they really spoiling for a fight or just saber-rattling to intimidate us?”

Count Loyola said, “I suggest we prepare for war while making all efforts to keep the peace. Further talks with the ambassador or with the prince himself, perhaps.”

Ella nodded. Part of her knew she should invite the prince of Malevolin and his wife—her own step-sister—to the ball. It would be the perfect opportunity to show generosity and to discuss differences amicably in an unthreatening setting. But this was *her* ball. She really didn’t need Euphemia spoiling it for her. Surely she was entitled to *one* bit of fun after all these years of work?

Entitled or not, she was damned well going to take it.

“Sound advice, Count,” she acknowledged, smoothing his feathers after their run-in over the peasant dues. “You and I shall compose a letter to the prince tomorrow.

“And finally,” Ella added with relish, “a word about the masquerade ball. You should receive your invitations within the next few days. I want this to be a fun event to lift our spirits—*all* our spirits. To this end, I have invited not only the nobility, but representatives from every estate. I expect you to rub shoulders as graciously with the clerk, peasant and artisan as with the duke or wealthy merchant. Since we’ll be masked, we’ll be equals, so let’s all benefit from the occasion.”

*But mostly, let me.*

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Alone at last in the darkness of the night, Ella let out a long breath and stretched luxuriously in her large, lonely bed. Finally, she could let go of all the vital strands of rule and concentrate on the event looming larger and larger in her mind: the ball.

Surely there would be many attractive men to choose from, many who wouldn’t be able to believe their luck if she invited them to a quiet corner for a kiss. Or a grope. A gloved, masculine hand on her naked breast, a mask surrounding eyes that glittered with lust as she let him press his bone-hard erection against her...

Ella let out a moan of frustration, sweeping her hand down the length of her nightgown-clad body from breast to thigh. Involuntarily, her hips pushed upward, thrusting her aching pussy into her own hand.

Could she do that? A secluded tree beside the terrace, her arms wrapped around it while a large, worshipping builder pounded into her body...

Ella thrust her hand under the inconvenient nightgown and pushed her fingers between her hot, damp folds, beginning to gyrate her hips with the delicious vision of herself and the imaginary builder. When she lifted her skirts for him, he would be unable to believe his luck. He would be strong and rough, his big, calloused hands covering her breasts, kneading them, squeezing her hard, elongated nipples between his fingers...

*Oh yes.* Ella grasped her own breast with her free hand, pinching her nipple. With her other hand she rubbed her clitoris harder. Her builder’s cock would be huge and blunt, and he’d be afraid to hurt her until she pushed back onto him. Then he’d power into her, slamming her against the tree, the rough bark scraping her flesh...

Ella arched upward with a gasp, thrusting two fingers inside herself. The builder would hammer her mercilessly until he gave her the release she craved. And then....

Well, she couldn’t really imagine what then. Massive orgasm there would certainly be on both

sides. And no risk of pregnancy or disease since she would have taken the magic potion her godmother Lucinda provided her. Besides, she was probably barren—she'd certainly never conceived with Charming

But enough of such mood-dampening thoughts! Perhaps a tree in the open with a builder would not be best. Perhaps a lover with more finesse...a man she'd take to this very bed, who'd undress her slowly, kissing her breasts for a delightfully long time, teasing her and pleasuring her at once. He'd lick his way down her naked body, his own lean and hard and ready. But he wouldn't just take her. He'd kiss all of her first, latching his clever mouth to her lower lips, sucking and licking at her clitoris.

Ella's fingers moved frantically. She'd be on the verge of orgasm when—hell, bring the builder back. She'd have *his* cock in her mouth and he'd be groaning with ecstasy while she writhed with joy under the more skilled lover's mouth. Then, as she began to come, the refined one would plunge his cock inside her pussy and she'd be pleasuring them both at once. They'd tie her to the bed, take turns fucking her all night, take her both at once, in her mouth, her pussy, her...

"Oh God," Ella whispered, and fell into ecstasy at last. Her imaginary lovers vanished, leaving nothing but the joy tearing her apart.

The usual coldness crept through her as soon as the pleasure began to fade. But the excitement remained. She had no idea how it would turn out; she ached simply for a man, a lover, and right now she didn't care who or what he was, or in what circumstances she took him. She wanted sex, dirty, fun, amazing sex. She wanted *everything*.

And for the first time in years she had a reasonable hope of getting it.

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Sebastian's quill broke, snapping him out of his reverie and alerting him to the unnecessary force with which he'd been pressing pen to paper. Completely unnecessary since he hadn't actually written anything for ten minutes.

Throwing down the broken quill, he swept his fingers through his hair till it came loose from its black, confining ribbon. He pushed back his chair.

He'd done everything he needed to for this damned ball, anyhow. Decoration was almost complete, food and wine was ordered, guest list vetted, approved and invitations delivered. He'd sent dressmakers to the queen to prepare her costume, and chosen his own simple mask in case he troubled to wear it. By tomorrow night everything would be ready. And by the



following morning...

Sebastian stood abruptly. He didn't want to think about that. He wasn't stupid. He understood what this ball was really about. He couldn't blame her. The poor woman hadn't been laid in years—and if rumor was true, she hadn't been laid much before that, either. Given Charming's recently revealed preferences, that was hardly surprising, but a woman as passionate as Ella needed far more than pretty words and flowers. She needed a man.

He didn't begrudge her a little snatched happiness, but everything in him revolted against helping her find it like this. Apart from anything else, he wasn't convinced it wouldn't be aiding her political suicide. The people accepted her because they'd put her on a pedestal, which she seemed determined to dive off head first and legs akimbo.

Without their acclaim, her position was untenable. And his. What price then the ambition that had driven him from poverty to the second highest power in the land? If she fell, so did he.

Intriguing idea. At least then he might get some sleep.

Finding himself at the window, he threw the casement fully up and stuck his head out into the fresh, cooling air. His "apartment"—a tiny room that served as both bed chamber and private office—was on the ground floor, and looked out onto one of the kitchen courtyards. As if he needed anything to remind him about his true position in the queen's life. Useful, as a pen or a piece of furniture was useful, and taken for granted to the same degree. Did she even see him when she turned those huge, blue eyes up to his in yet another request or demand? She'd look right through him tomorrow night to get at some handsome, unscrupulous rogue who could cause the kingdom untold damage, even let Malevolin in...

A loud crash interrupted his bleak speculation. Blinking, Sebastian saw a figure fighting its way out of the dustbins in the corner of the courtyard.

"Goodness me!" it whispered as more bins fell. "Oh goodness me, what a... Oh, dear." Stumbling clear at last, the figure shook itself out and by the light of the moon and his own lamp, Sebastian saw that it was a woman. A very small and very old woman in a black, hooded cloak from which strands of white hair straggled free.

"What in the world are you doing?" he asked, amused.

The old woman jumped. "Oh, goodness! Oh, dear!" she said again. "I think I arrived in just the wrong..." As she spoke, she drew closer to him, peering hard into his face. "But then again... What's your name, young man?"

"Sebastian," he said dryly. "What's yours?"

"Oh, that's not important."

"It might be to the guards when they arrest you for trespassing."

“Arrest me?” The old woman looked stunned. “They can’t arrest me! Cinderella would never allow it!”

Sebastian frowned at her. He was sure he’d never seen her before. “Why? Who the devil are you?”

The old lady smiled—a singularly sweet if vague smile. “I’m your fairy godmother, of course.”

“Of course,” Sebastian sighed. He’d have one of the guards take the poor old thing home.

“Well, strictly speaking, not *your* fairy godmother, but I do like to help the unhappy—and you are unhappy, aren’t you, dear?”

“Not in the slightest,” said Sebastian, giving her the look that withered haughty noblemen.

“Nonsense, you drew me here like a bullet. No wonder I landed so abruptly. Dustbins indeed! Anyhow, now that I *am* here, what’s your problem?”

“I do not have a problem.” *Apart from you.*

He was already drawing his head back in, preparatory to summoning the guard, when she enquired, “Going to the ball?”

In spite of himself, Sebastian smiled sourly over his shoulder. “Organizing the damned ball.”

“So you’ll be there? Then perhaps I can grant you a wish.”

*I wish you could.*

“I did for Cinderella once, you know. At another ball. She met the prince, as he was then...”

Her voice trailed off, unhappily. But Sebastian, against his better judgment, had turned to stare at her. The mad old trout actually brightened under his disbelief.

“Come on then,” she encouraged. “What would you like?”

Sebastian laughed. *What I wish for, nobody can grant.*

## Chapter Three

Ella watched the colorful array of costumed dancers filling the ballroom floor, listened to the exquisite music of the orchestra, smelled the combined odors of too many perfumes and overheated bodies, and felt numb. The night of her grand soirée had arrived at last and the excitement she’d allowed to build like a child anticipating the holidays had dissolved into the morning-after-Christmas feeling. Tonight *was* supposed to be her celebration of life, her chance for flirtation and sexual dalliance, so why was she sitting on her throne gazing at the throng instead of joining the party?

“Is everything all right, Madam?” Sebastian spoke near her ear as he stooped beside her. “You don’t look pleased. Are the decorations not to your liking, the orchestra or the food not satisfactory?”

She touched his arm and found herself reassured by his solid presence at her side. “No, it’s lovely, really. I approved the design and I think it’s simply brilliant. Your idea of having a pastoral theme was well thought out. It ensures that those who could ill afford a costume have one ready-made.”

She indicated the numerous shepherds and shepherdesses, millers and dairy maids who flocked together in democratic unison. Although, of course, it was quite clear the woman with the diamond-encrusted shepherdess crook was not in the same class as her partner, a big blacksmith wearing a worn and truly used leather apron. Her mask was spangled with gold thread; his was an ill-cut strip of black leather. The disparity made for an intriguing and sensual contrast, and from the way the woman was flirting, the blacksmith would pound his hammer on something other than an anvil tonight.

This was the event Ella had planned, the egalitarian night she’d been eager to enjoy, yet she felt suddenly very tired and wished she could retire to her bedchamber. It felt like too much trouble to mingle with her guests and make small talk, to seek out a possible lover in a likely young goatherd or a broad-shouldered farm hand. She’d been alone too long to suddenly dive into sexual abandon.

“Perhaps you’d like a drink.” Sebastian didn’t ask but offered a glass of wine that he’d already poured for her.

“Yes. Thank you.” Their fingers brushed as she took the goblet, and Ella looked into his somber, brown eyes. He hadn’t bothered with a mask, so she could study the permanent frown lines etched between his dark brows and the few laugh lines at the corners of his eyes. She wondered what had happened in his life to make him so serious. In all the years he’d served her, he’d never revealed much about his past. Maybe because she hadn’t asked the right questions.

“Thank you,” she repeated before sipping the wine, an impeccable choice she realized Sebastian had selected for her alone. It wasn’t a vintage one could afford to offer to an entire party of guests.

She continued to drink as she turned her gaze back to the excited crowd. Some were talking and drinking on the fringe of the dance floor, while whirling couples waltzed in the center of the room. She noted that many people stayed with their own kind, naturally seeking out the peers they recognized despite the masks—both commoner and gentry alike drawn to the

familiar—while others seemed thrilled at the idea of trying something new. The socialite dressed as a shepherdess was swept off her feet in the blacksmith's brawny arms, her head thrown back in joyous laughter.

"Do you ever feel it's impossible to change?" Ella glanced up at Sebastian standing by the side of her ornate chair. "One would think becoming a queen would transform the cinder girl inside, but almost every day I feel as lost and confused as I was at seventeen."

He started to reach out, and for a moment she thought he was going to rest his hand on her shoulder, perhaps give her a comforting pat. Instead, he took her empty wine goblet.

"Is there anything else I can get for you, Madam? Any way I may serve you?"

She sighed. "No, thank you. I suppose I must go and meet my guests now. It would be viewed as quite odd if I simply sat here all evening."

"Then, if you'll excuse me, I believe I'll retire for the night as I'm not feeling well. Mangold will take over my duties. If anything should go amiss, the wine runs low or there's a fistfight on the dance floor, he will take care of the situation."

A man wearing a peasant cap and rough breeches, whom Ella recognized as Lord Belling, tapped on the blacksmith's shoulder in an attempt to take his partner. The big man glared at Belling and shrugged off his hand, spinning the woman away to another part of the dance floor. Perhaps a fistfight at some point in the evening wasn't so preposterous.

"I'm sorry you're not well, Sebastian. Is it a headache? You've worked so hard preparing this event, it's a shame you can't stay and enjoy it." She'd been about to ask him if he'd care to dance with her, but the request died on her lips at his announcement he was leaving.

"Yes, a bit of a headache, Madam." He stood for a moment, staring at the expansive ballroom—the mural of fields, farms and woods that covered one wall, the rustic well in the corner which actually contained vast quantities of ale. A servant manned the well full time, drawing up bucket after bucket to fill empty glasses—a clever idea in theory, given the theme, but hardly practical in reality.

Ella gazed up at Sebastian, wondering what he was thinking. She opened her mouth to ask and maybe to suggest one dance, after all, but at that moment he gave a formal bow and a curt goodbye.

"Good evening, Your Highness. I hope you have an enjoyable night."

"Thank you. I hope your headache goes away. Be sure to take a powder before you lie down."

She watched her steward's erect posture as he strode away, the tails of his blue coat covering the top of his buff-colored pants. He always moved rigidly with an almost military bearing. While Ella appreciated his orderliness and precision when it came to matters of state, she

wondered if he ever unbent enough to enjoy himself. Perhaps he wouldn't have a headache if he took the time to have some fun.

She should take her own advice. It was time to get off her throne and greet her assembled guests. Ella rose and smoothed the wrinkles from the backside of her milkmaid costume. She wore a plain, white blouse with a scooped neckline, the sleeves rolled up to her elbows. Her light blue skirt ended at mid-calf with white stockings and sturdy, flat-heeled lace-up shoes beneath. No jewel-studded milk pails for Ella. She knew her garb was authentic because she'd worn such an outfit when she labored for her stepmother, Almeda, at her father's country home.

Funny how the prestige of marrying the ruler of the nation tended to erase Ella's past as far as the nobility was concerned. Her father, Rupert Revelle, had been a wealthy merchant, but not one of the elite by any stretch. That was why it had been so important to Almeda to push her daughters Euphemia and Hortense into the rarefied circle of quality. Meanwhile she'd kept Ella as a menial in her own home after Father had died. But it had been Ella who'd caught Prince Charming's attention—for what *that* was worth.

If Ella's smile was slightly bitter, her guests didn't seem to notice as she greeted one after another. She shook hands, smiled, chatted about the weather, smiled, listened to an old woman complain about her lumbago and smiled sympathetically. Her cheeks hurt and her mouth was numb by the time she'd circled the dance floor perimeter.

Her guards lurked warily at a distance as she'd told them they must. The head of security wasn't happy about having the queen mingle with her subjects on such a personal level. She'd told the man if he feared assassination, a member of nobility was probably a more likely candidate than a commoner, but neither was likely to try anything in front of a ballroom full of people. She'd also let him know if she chose to invite a partner to a private audience with her, the guards were to remain within calling distance, but well out of sight.

As she continued to smile and shake more hands, it began to seem as if flirtation, let alone achieving a compromising position, was going to be impossible tonight. But at last the Duke of Glaston, or perhaps it was Lord Marbury—she could scarcely tell them apart when they weren't wearing masks—asked her to dance.

He might be forgettable and rather dull, but the man could waltz impeccably. He guided her around the floor in a fast dip and sway that left her breathless. When the song was over, her heart pounded from the unaccustomed exertion, making her realize she'd been spending far too much time behind a desk rather than outdoors lately.

The duke bent over her hand and pressed a fervent kiss to the back of it. His eyes shone as he

gazed into hers with unspoken sexual attraction. But a new partner came along to brush him aside and sweep her into another dance. This man was short and stocky and whirled her with more vigor than finesse. She guessed his occupation was a miner, a tree-cutter or perhaps a ditch-digger because of the powerful strength in his biceps. But she didn't ask. The point of the masks was to allow people to be whomever they chose to be for one night.

When the music ended again, Ella stood fanning her sweating face. She was glad to be wearing a light skirt and blouse rather than the heavy layers of silk she'd normally don for such an event. Her partner offered to get her a drink and bulled his way through the crowd on his way to the refreshment table.

"Your Highness." Count Loyola's voice was as smooth as oil, but grated like sandpaper against her nerves. She would've loved to exclude him from the guest list, but couldn't slight a member of her Privy Council.

She turned to him and noted that he hadn't made much of an attempt at disguise. He wore his usual elegantly-cut suit and expensive shoes. His silver-shot black hair was slicked flat and his moustache was waxed into points. A small flesh-colored mask was his one concession to the masquerade and, because the fabric almost exactly matched his skin-tone, it gave him an eerie presence—rather like a mannequin come to life.

"Madam, I'd like to discuss with you some rumors I've heard about Malevolin. It's been suggested your sister, Princess Euphemia, controls the throne. As you know, the king's senility is advanced, so Prince Theodore acts as regent, but he's a weak man. The neck that turns the head-of-state is Euphemia and behind her, your stepmother, Madam Almeda. A dangerous combination. I think we should—"

"Loyola." Ella stopped his words with a raised hand. "This is a party, a rare occasion for fun and frolic. Could you save your worries for the boardroom tomorrow? I'll be happy to discuss anything with you then, but tonight I want to enjoy myself, and I suggest you try to do the same. So unless you want to dance with me, please excuse me."

"Oh..." The count looked taken aback. She knew he wasn't a dancer, but he must have felt it impolitic not to ask her since she'd made the suggestion.

Ella laughed and patted his arm. "Don't worry. You don't really have to dance. As you can see, I have partners lining up to take me for a whirl."

It was true. Now that the ice had been broken by the brave miner, there were several men clearly of working class stock or merchants who were queuing up to dance with their queen. The cachet of having danced with the queen of Jondalar would be something they could wear like a badge of honor.

Ella found her spirits had risen. The dancing really was fun, and even if nothing else came of the evening, she'd had the unique opportunity of meeting some of her subjects first hand. Her desire for sexual adventures with a stranger seemed quite silly now. How had she imagined something like that would happen just because she held a masked ball?

She accepted a cup of punch from the miner who'd returned and begun to tell her all about himself. It seemed her second guess, lumberjack, was correct, and his name was Baxter. She prompted Baxter to tell her about his typical work day and soon learned much about what it took to safely fell a tree.

As she listened, Ella noticed an unaccountable restless stirring in the crowd around them. The rustling and murmuring was particularly noticeable among the ladies, who bent toward one another, whispering, with their faces turned toward the grand stairway.

She looked to see what had attracted so much attention and froze. Her pulse raced. The woodcutter's voice faded into the background like the drone of a fly.

The man standing on the stairs wasn't dressed much differently than the other real or would-be farmers, shepherds or cattlemen. Although he was undeniably broad-shouldered and long-legged, there were plenty of men here with equally impressive physiques. His hair was dark brown, but no more so than many other men's hair. The lower portion of his face boasted a strong jaw and chin and a pair of lush, sensual lips. Other men at the ball had those attributes, too. Maybe it was the mask itself that gave the stranger such an enigmatic and sexually potent presence. Many men wore black satin masks tonight, but not with the same panache that made a woman itch to rip it off to see the hidden face beneath.

Whatever the elusive quality, all eyes were drawn to the man surveying the room from his stance halfway down the staircase. At least every woman was looking, and because of that every man, too, as the males assessed this unexpected competition for the ladies' attentions.

*Him. He's the one.* Ella's heart pounded as if she'd danced a mazurka. Her body flashed hot and cold. It was crazy. She hadn't felt this strongly since she'd fallen under the spell of Prince Charming as a girl, and at thirty-one she was well past such foolish romantic fantasies as love at first sight. So this was simply pure lust, swelling like a tidal wave that threatened to engulf the bastion of her reason.

Carried away on that tide, she glided across the floor toward the newcomer, completely forgetting about Baxter, who was explaining the proper way to sharpen a saw blade.

As she neared the bottom of the stairs, the man locked gazes with her and began to descend the stairs. He strode like a soldier, shoulders back, chest thrust ever so slightly forward. Perhaps he was a soldier, either a mercenary back from foreign lands or one of Jondalar's own army.

He could be anyone. Ella's excitement mounted at the knowledge and at every stride that brought him closer to her.

He stopped on the bottom step, forcing her to look up to meet his eyes, not that she wouldn't have had to look up even if he stood beside her. He was taller than average, just like the oversized hero in her sex fantasy. But he was better than the imaginary builder because he projected intelligence along with his confidence, an erotically potent combination.

"Your Highness." He barely dipped his head in greeting, making her feel as if she was the one being greeted by royalty.

She gave a small curtsy, something she hadn't practiced in years. People curtsied to her now. But she was playing the part of the milkmaid, and so she bent her knees and bobbed her head. "Sir."

"I'm honored to meet you, Highness," he said.

"The honor is mine, sir. I'm but a simple dairymaid, not anyone of great importance."

He descended the last step and took her hand in his, pressing a quick kiss to the back of it that made her skin burn. His eyes glittered like diamonds. "A dairymaid or a queen, both perform necessary work, do they not? And either way I'm certain you're someone of great importance." She laughed, delighted at his recognizing the quality in all women and managing to compliment her at the same time. "You're right. Everyone has duties to perform from chimney sweep to a lawyer, and I think we could do without the latter more than the former. What is your trade, sir?"

"Stonemason. Repair work on chimneys and such mostly, but I've recently returned to the area after working on the Briarwood Cathedral."

"Really? I've heard the building is beautiful, but I haven't been to Briarwood in several years. I can't seem to find the time."

"I should imagine not with all of those cows to milk and butter to churn." A little smile twisted his lips, and behind his black mask, his eyes sparkled.

"That's right. A milkmaid's time is not her own."

Another waltz began and the big man offered her his arm. "Shall we?"

She took it and he led her onto the dance floor. He was light on his feet for his size. He clasped her hand and slid his other hand around her waist. His body remained a respectful distance from hers, but she burned at the two points of contact. He swung her into the waltz and they glided around the floor in unison as if they were made to fit together.

"What's your name?" Ella asked as they whirled past the gawking faces of the onlookers.

"Tonight? Joseph. And you?"



“Marie Christine.” Ella smiled at her choice. When she was a child, long before Euphemia and Hortense had entered her life, she used to play with an imaginary friend by that name. Later she’d always chosen it for her name when playing princess with school friends. Tonight Marie Christine might have adventures Ella had never envisioned as a little girl.

Her dance partner bent his head close and murmured low, “A lovely name.” The quality of his voice, so deep and rich, sent tickling shivers through her. Her skin felt flushed as if she had a fever, and between her legs, her pussy clenched.

“Thank you, Joseph.” She looked at him from under lowered lashes, deliberately flirting in a way she’d not practiced for many years. Flirting was hardly in her nature, but it seemed to come naturally to her tonight.

She noticed his quick glance at her chest, the scoop of her neckline revealing a little of the top swell of each breast. “Are you enjoying the ball, Marie? Is it everything you’d hoped it would be?”

He twirled her around and brought her back into his embrace before she could answer.

“It’s lovely, but I’ll admit I had hoped for something more.”

“What do you wish for, little Marie Christine? What would make you happy?”

“Tonight?” She echoed his word. “Take me out to the garden and I’ll tell you.”

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The garden was as cool and quiet as heaven after the heat and noise of the ballroom, but it was hardly the private haven Ella had fantasized. There were many strolling, hand-holding and kissing couples along the winding paths. From behind bushes and thick tree trunks came sounds that suggested much more than kissing and fondling. The grunts and gasps that drifted through the night air made her nipples tighten and her breathing grow ragged.

From behind a high hedge a woman whined like a bitch in heat. Ella glanced at the handsome man walking beside her not even trying to take her hand. Would he do things to her to make her whimper like that? Would he drag her off the path and rip her bodice in his hurry to suckle her breasts? Would he bend her over the nearest stone bench and flip up her skirts to take her from behind? Or would he, like the man in her imagination, push her up against a tree trunk, tell her to wrap her arms around it, then fuck her hard and fast. Her body ached and itched all over just from imagining it and her pussy felt as slippery as warmed butter.

“So what is it that would please a dairymaid queen?” Joseph asked as they strolled along the walkway. The gravel crunched underfoot and the breeze lifted the curls around Ella’s face,

cooling her heated cheeks.

“I’m ashamed to ask it, sir. You’ll think me forward and unseemly.” She adopted a false demure tone as she cast another sideways glance at the tall stranger. And then suddenly she wasn’t playing a role as she realized what kind of fire she was prepared to singe her fingers with. To take a strange man as a lover was one thing in a fantasy, quite another in reality. She might be a queen, but that didn’t mean she could do as she liked. On the contrary, her movements were far more scrutinized than a milkmaid’s might be.

“Honestly, I’m not sure what I’d like,” she admitted. “I thought I wanted to make love under the stars like a wild bohemian, but now that we’re out here I’ll confess I’m a little nervous.”

He looked at her and the whites of his eyes gleamed in the moonlight. His teeth did, too, as he spoke. “Perhaps you’d like someone to take control, rescue you from having to make yet another decision in a life that’s too full of decision-making.”

Ella smiled, her pulse leaping yet again at the suggestion. “Perhaps I would.”

He stopped walking then and turned to face her, taking her by the shoulders and looking down into her eyes. “Then that is what I’ll give you, Madam, a night free of choice. Your only responsibility will be to obey my commands. Does that sound possible to you?”

“It sounds absolutely refreshing,” she sighed.

## Chapter Four

“Do you trust me?”

The words hung heavily in the air between them. Perhaps it was the darkness of night that gave them a sinister quality. Ella glimpsed one of her bodyguards at a distance, trying unsuccessfully to blend into the shadows of a tree. Someone was only a cry away if the situation got out of hand. She looked into Joseph’s eyes, shadowed by the mask that surrounded them and nodded.

“Yes, I trust you.”

He glanced at the guard then back at her and smiled. “Maybe not completely, but that’s all right.”

For a moment they stayed locked together with his hands on her shoulders, their gazes meshed. He stared at her mouth, and Ella’s lips trembled with the need to be kissed. Slowly he inclined his head. She rose up on her toes and leaned into him. His warm breath touched her face. It

smelled like mint and chocolate. Would his tongue taste the same?

His face filled her vision, and she closed her eyes as his mouth descended toward hers. Then he kissed her cheek, a light brush of his warm lips near the corner of her mouth before he pulled away.

Ella's eyes flew open. She stared at him with her eyebrows raised.

"I won't kiss your mouth, Marie. Kissing is for those in love. We're only temporary lovers."

"Oh." Her disappointment was keen, but she'd agreed to play the game his way, to let him direct the course of their evening. She could hardly complain because he didn't intend to kiss her.

Joseph let go of her shoulders and took her by the hand. "Come."

Ella walked quickly to keep up with his longer strides. He led her from the gardens near the ballroom, away from the light spilling through the windows and the sweet sorrow of violin music that floated behind them.

"Where are we—"

"No questions," he commanded. "Blind obedience tonight. I promise I won't do anything you don't enjoy."

They'd crossed the lawn and were approaching the tall hedge of the walking maze, so Ella's question about destination was answered. But what Joseph would do to her in the dark avenues and blind alleys of the labyrinth remained to be answered.

He stopped before the entrance of the maze and drew a handkerchief from his trouser pocket. He dangled it before her, and Ella understood he was about to blindfold her.

"You don't know me, but this game won't be enjoyable unless you trust me. So I ask again—do you trust me?"

He was right, she didn't know him, and how foolish was she to trust a complete stranger with her body? And yet, despite the fact that his face, physique and voice were foreign to her, there was a quality of familiarity about Joseph. On some deeply elemental level she *did* trust him. Completely.

Ella took off her violet-colored mask, glad to feel her face uncovered for the first time all evening. She turned her back to him, indicating her readiness to be blindfolded.

A moment later, her eyes were enveloped in darkness as Joseph tied the handkerchief around them. He stood behind her, gripping her shoulders again, and spoke softly near her ear. "I want you to be aware of all your senses. Listen to the night sounds. Breathe in the scents all around you. Feel the air on your skin or the scratch of the hedge against your arm as you pass. I want you to experience everything more deeply than you ever have before, and when we reach the

center of the maze...”

He stopped, and Ella held her breath, waiting for him to tell her what would happen there. Instead, his heavy hands left her shoulders as he stepped away from her. She was floating in darkness, alone, without an anchor.

What did he want her to do, fumble along blindly through the maze? Or was she supposed to wait for his direction? She held very still, listening for his breathing. She couldn’t hear it, but did hear the steady chirp of a cricket, the trill of a chorus of frogs and the soft soughing of the breeze through the dense branches of the hedge shrubbery.

But even though she couldn’t hear Joseph, she sensed him nearby and knew he was watching her. The knowledge was incredibly erotic. She wanted to be naked as he gazed on her—naked, blindfolded and vulnerable. Her nipples poked hard against the bodice of her blouse and her skin felt too sensitive against her clothing.

“Walk straight forward.” A low, commanding voice moved her feet. She took a few careful steps, testing the ground, feeling for something that might trip her.

“Take small steps, but take them with confidence,” he ordered.

Ella resisted the urge to put up her hands and feel for obstacles in front of her as she walked several paces forward. Even though her arms didn’t brush against it, she felt the hedge rise on either side of her as she entered the maze. She became aware of how much farther her body’s perceptions extended without sight to identify the world around her.

“Turn left.”

Walking blind, she turned sharply and continued forward again. She thought she was walking straight, but soon felt twigs and leaves scratching her left arm. Remembering that the maze was circular, she adjusted her course from a straight line to a slightly curved one.

The voice came from immediately behind her. “Good. Stop. Turn right then immediately left.”

She felt his warm presence heating her backside even though he didn’t touch her, and she obeyed his directions, moving farther into the maze. The narrow pathways were shadowed and mysterious during the day so it must be pitch black tonight even for Joseph, who was not wearing a blindfold. Yet he gave one command after the other as if he knew the maze intimately. She didn’t feel like they were becoming hopelessly lost.

Although it was a cool evening, in the shelter of the yew hedges Ella’s flesh began to heat from exertion and in anticipation of what would happen next. The sounds of their footsteps on the grass, the snap of an occasional twig, the distant, mournful hooting of an owl, were all magnified by the darkness. The pungent smell of the yews filled her nose, and her body felt more aware, more alive, than it had in a long time.

She continued to walk as Joseph directed her to. His tone wasn't overbearing, but calmly assertive, and she found the deep rumble of his voice unbearably attractive.

"Stop!" he ordered at last.

Ella felt a wider space around her. She could no longer sense the shrub walls closing in, and to check she extended her arms, feeling for the thicket. Joseph's footsteps approached. His hot body was right behind hers again. Her heart pounded and she swallowed past the dryness in her throat.

When his hand touched her head, she started, but relaxed as he stroked the length of her hair, which she'd left down and undressed for her role as a milkmaid. She tensed again when he slipped his hands around her neck, but he only caressed her throat before slipping one hand down to the scooped neckline of her blouse. The heat of his palm felt imprinted on her chest.

Joseph reached for the hem of her blouse and lifted it. Ella raised her arms, and he pulled it off her. She was left wearing only a camisole, having rejected a corset for this evening. His mouth touched her bare shoulder and she shivered. The tiny hairs on her forearms rose as he pressed soft, damp kisses down the length of her arm. As he'd promised, every touch felt more intense with the blindfold on. Ella held as still as a doll and let him do what he would with her.

He moved in front of her and stripped off her camisole, leaving her bare-breasted, nipples peaked like pebbles. The caress of the air on her skin was like a thousand tickling fingers. When Joseph cupped one breast and drew the other nipple into his mouth, her pussy clenched in rhythmic spasms. Ella felt she might come simply from the pleasure of his mouth and hand on her breasts. It had been so long—over five years without a man's hands on her body. Charming had stopped coming to her bed long before he'd left the palace.

The man before her groaned softly, and Ella moaned an equally quiet response. Far away, the owl hooted—little, intimate, natural sounds that filled her senses and seemed profound.

Joseph switched his mouth to her other breast and suckled it while he plucked and twisted her nipple. She gasped in pleasure and thrust her chest toward him.

Suddenly his mouth and hand were gone. She moaned at the loss, her breasts still jutting forward, begging for his touch. He left her alone for several moments, allowing her curiosity and anticipation to build before he made his next move. Then his hands were at her waist, unfastening her skirt and sliding it and her petticoat down her legs to pool around her feet. He took her hand and helped her step out of the circle of fabric. Now she wore only her shoes and the thick, peasant stockings that attached to her pantalets with garters.

Joseph knelt before her. He leaned close and kissed her stomach, a sprinkling of little kisses all around her navel and down her abdomen that made her skin twitch. Her pussy tightened as his

mouth went lower, kissing her mound through the fabric of her undergarment. Meanwhile, his hands busily unfastened garters. He slid her stockings down and pressed his face between her legs to kiss her inner thighs.

Ella groaned and opened her legs wider in encouragement. But he only gave her a few kisses and licks before pulling away. He untied her shoes and removed them and her stockings as she lifted first one foot then the other.

At last she was totally nude, standing naked under the open sky, on display for a strange man to examine. Her heart pounded and the blood rushed in her ears as if she might faint. Her skin tingled all over and there was a heaviness in her pussy and her tender breasts. She'd never felt more vulnerable, more free or more desirable. Here in the dark in the midst of nature she felt like a strange goddess, the primal element of woman.

She swore she could feel the heat of Joseph's gaze upon her as he remained quiet, not touching, merely studying her. Sweat prickled her upper lip and the throbbing between her legs grew almost unbearable.

"Please," she begged at last. "Touch me, please...sir."

As if that was the signal he'd been waiting for, he grasped her ankles lightly then skimmed his hands up the length of her legs. He separated the folds of her sex, and Ella caught her breath as he leaned in to press his mouth there.

It was exquisite. The sensation of his sinuous, wet tongue stroking her was a million times better than her circling finger on her clitoris. Charming had only deigned to pleasure her that way a few times during the course of their marriage. He'd found it distasteful and thought she should be happy with an occasional, graceless ramming of his cock.

When she'd felt him losing interest in her, after those first heady months of their marriage, Ella had tried everything she could think of to please and attract him. In the palace library she'd found a section of scandalous books—with illustrations—that demonstrated many positions for copulation and described techniques to enhance pleasure. Armed with her new knowledge, Ella had redoubled her efforts to satisfy both herself and Charming. But soon it became apparent he simply had no interest in her in the bedroom and their relationship had devolved into miserable cohabitation.

Now, maybe for the first time ever, her body felt completely aroused and saturated with feeling. Joseph gripped her hips and dug his fingers into her buttocks as he lapped over her clit until her legs trembled. Just as she felt her body climbing the final peak toward climax, he backed off and turned his attention lower. He tongued her opening, tasting her juices and providing a milder delight than the exquisite torture of her sensitive bud.

Once more he abandoned her, leaving her thrusting her hips against the air. She whimpered in distress when his clever tongue didn't return after several seconds.

Joseph chuckled, a deep, warm vibration that seemed strangely familiar. Something flickered on the edge of her mind, a thought or memory she couldn't quite place, but then his fingers replaced his tongue in gently exploring her channel and the almost-memory evaporated.

His plunging fingers were coupled with a renewed lapping of her clit, and the combination was amazing. Tendrils of delight unfurled like new shoots of grass which suddenly exploded into a verdant green meadow. Lights flashed behind her closed eyelids and pleasure rocked her body. She moaned and writhed against Joseph's hand and mouth, gripping his strong shoulders while wave after wave coursed through her.

She heard herself making soft little gasps as the ecstasy slowly subsided. When her climax was finished, the man before her rose and took her into his arms, holding her close to his big body. Funny, he didn't feel quite as tall as he looked. Her face rested against his chest without her having to rise up on her toes. She pressed her face into the coarse homespun of his shirt and wished he weren't wearing anything. She wanted to feel his bare skin against hers from cheek to feet.

"Thank you." She'd wrapped her arms around his back and now gave him a hard squeeze.

"That was wonderful."

"And not over yet." His voice purred against her ear. The bulge of his erection, covered by his trousers, pressed into her crotch. He thrust against her, and her sensitized bud contracted in near pain at the contact.

Joseph reached behind her head and loosened the blindfold. "I want you to see the night now. It's too beautiful to miss."

Ella blinked as the handkerchief fell away from her eyes and eerie white moonlight flooded her vision. The hedges looked like they were covered with frost and the black shadows cast by the tall shrubs made a startling contrast.

She and Joseph stood at the center of the maze where several comfortable chaises lounges had been placed for the intrepid few who made it all the way to the goal. Ella wondered why no other couples seemed to be using the maze tonight. She hadn't heard any voices during the entire time she'd walked the paths. Perhaps the guards were keeping them away to give her and her guest some privacy.

Joseph cupped her cheek in one hand and bent to kiss her—on the opposite cheek. Her lips had automatically parted to receive his kiss, and she closed them as she remembered his words earlier. *Kissing is for those in love.*

Ella tipped her chin up as he nuzzled the side of her neck and nibbled and licked the ridge of her collarbone.

He was still fully clothed, which made her feel even more exposed in her nudity. She reached for the buttons on the front of his shirt and began to unfasten them one by one. Leaning in, she pressed kisses over his broad chest while she stroked the light smattering of hair—funny, he didn't feel as hairy as he looked. Her mouth explored his right nipple. She lapped her tongue over the sharp point then worried it with her teeth.

Joseph groaned softly. He took her by the shoulders and moved her away from him so he could quickly strip. Boots, pants, shirt and stockings were soon scattered across the moon-drenched carpet of grass. His chiseled body was beautiful in the magical silver light giving him the appearance of some ancient god frolicking with a mortal for one night.

Perhaps he was a god. He certainly didn't seem like a common stonemason.

The man pulled her roughly to him again almost before she had time to glimpse the object of her desire: his jutting erection. Ella had only an impression of length and girth before she felt it pressing against her again, only this time it was flesh to flesh. His hardness slid against her still-throbbing clitoris and sent a new flare of arousal through her.

“Over here now.” His voice was as hard and rough as granite. He led her to one of the lounges and bent her over it, her hands braced against the furniture and her bottom presented to him with a saucy tilt.

Ella shivered with excitement, her pussy pulsing in anticipation of his entry. And it came, much swifter and harder than she'd expected. She let out a whoosh of air as he plunged into her like a man who'd been starved for sex as long as she had been. His big hands gripped her hips and his groin slapped against her buttocks as he filled her again and again.

It had been so long since she'd been fucked that her channel was tight. Her body clenched around his cock, resisting the abrupt intrusion at first before welcoming him deeper. Ella gripped the edge of the chaise and braced her legs against his ramming thrusts. She moaned and closed her eyes in pleasure at being filled at last—hard and rough just the way she'd fantasized.

Her body shook and her breasts jiggled from the force of his pounding. His desperate groans and little grunts excited her, as did her submissive position with her ass in the air. His fingers dug so hard into her hips she knew there'd be bruises on her skin tomorrow, and she welcomed that. She wanted to wear them like badges, proof of what had happened tonight.

Deep inside, his cock kept hitting a spot that gathered the sparkling remnants of her orgasm into a new, more powerful feeling. The sensation grew with every push of his cockhead and



Ella realized she was about to come a second time.

Behind her, Joseph groaned again and froze balls-deep inside her. Their bodies meshed together, flesh melting against flesh, sweat and juices mingling. Ella pushed back against him as hard as she could. She tensed her inner muscles around his pulsing cock, and her climax, which had danced just out of reach, suddenly exploded. Her mind soared and she cried out as an intense bolt of lightning ripped through her.

She collapsed face down on the chaise, breathing raggedly, her legs buckling at Joseph's weight. His body curved over her back, hot and heavy. His chest heaved against her spine; his breath blew hot against her neck. After a few seconds, he rose and his cock slipped from inside her, leaving her empty.

Ella continued to lie for several moments while her heart slowed and her breathing evened then she pushed off the lounge and straightened. Her legs felt wobbly, barely able to support her body. Her thighs burned from the unaccustomed exercise and her pussy felt pummeled and well-used.

At the edge of the moonlit clearing in the shadow of one of the hedges was a bucket of water containing a jug. Joseph went to the pail and dipped a folded rag on the rim into the water. His naked skin took on a golden hue in the moonlight. Muscles rippled up his back as he walked, and when he bent, she couldn't take her eyes off his taut, wonderful buttocks. She felt like purring. He snagged one of the bottles before coming back to Ella, his still semi-hard cock swinging in front of him. It all added to the delicious decadence of the occasion. She lifted her gaze with some reluctance when he handed both bottles to her so she could refresh herself.

"Your staff is thorough. Someone planned ahead," he said.

"Sebastian, my chief steward. He thinks of every detail and every contingency. The man is a marvel of organization. I couldn't function without him. I gave a few suggestions, but he basically planned this entire ball."

"Sounds like a useful man."

She sponged between her legs before sipping the fairly tepid water from the bottle. Nothing had ever quenched her thirst more.

"He's more than useful. He's...a friend, I suppose, although I don't know much about him despite all the years we've worked together. He keeps his personal life to himself and avoids talking about his past."

She sat down on the grass, enjoying the soft velvet feel of it against her bare skin, and the coolness of the earth beneath.

"Maybe he doesn't have time for a personal life." Joseph sat facing her, his eyes shadowed by

the mask. "And some people prefer to put their past behind them."

"Are you like that? You sound as if you're speaking from personal experience."

"There are some things I'd choose to forget, but that's never really possible."

"No, it isn't," she agreed, thinking of the betrayals in her own life. She touched his leg. "Tell me a little about yourself, Joseph."

He smiled. "I thought the point of a masquerade was so that everyone could reinvent himself for the night."

"True enough, but tell me something anyway."

He grasped her foot and began to rub it, his strong thumbs pressing into the arch. Ella nearly groaned at the pleasure of his massaging hands on her foot. Despite having a host of servants, she'd never felt so pampered.

"As a young man, my father was a stonecutter in a quarry. He wanted a better life, so he became an apprentice to a carver and later had his own business carving headstones. But his business failed and he died of a lung disease from all the dust he'd inhaled in his youth. My mother died soon after from complications after the birth of yet another child."

"How many brothers and sister do you have?"

"Ten. I'm the eldest. It fell on me to keep everyone fed and clothed. For a long time it was all I could do to accomplish that. But I realized I was treading water. I'd need to make some sacrifices if I was to bring my family out of poverty."

She noted the sharp lines at the corners of his mouth and the hard set of his jaw. He was telling her the true story of his family, even if the rest of his identity was fabricated.

"What did you have to do?" she prompted softly.

"For all of us to prosper, I needed to further my education. I had to let the children be taken into different homes. My oldest sister took one of the little girls, but she already had several children of her own. A couple of my brothers found work or apprenticeships. Relatives took the rest of the little ones, some of them grudgingly."

"I'm sorry. That must have been very hard for you, but it sounds like you did what you had to under the circumstances."

He shrugged. "I sent money to all of them when I could, but by the time I became truly solvent and ready to try to make a home for them again, it was too late. They were all grown up and scattered across the country. Their lives had taken many different courses, some of them unhappy ones, and it was far too late to try to reclaim my family."

"I'm so sorry," she repeated. "I lost my parents too, and gained a rather horrible stepfamily, but my situation seems mild compared to yours."

Joseph set her foot on the ground and leaned forward to look into her face, his somber eyes a mere glitter behind the holes of the mask. “I know your story and I know you’ve suffered deeply. Pain isn’t only the provenance of the poor.”

He was definitely not a simple mason. His speech was too educated for that to be his trade. Ella leaned toward him, her gaze dwelling on his lips. “You’ve given me a lovely experience tonight and brightened my mood considerably. Thank you.”

He reached out to finger a lock of her hair. “I’m here to serve you, Madam.”

Her stomach lurched at the familiar words. Guilt shot through her as she thought of poor Sebastian lying sick in bed while she enjoyed the best evening she’d had in a long time. It was absurd. Why should she feel guilty?

In the distance the owl called again. Even farther away, the midnight chime of the cathedral bells began to peel.

Joseph started, his eyes opening wide. He suddenly leaped to his feet, gathered his clothes and began to dress. He jerked his trousers onto his legs and thrust his arms into the sleeves of his shirt.

Ella sat up straight. “What—?”

“I’m sorry, Your Highness. I have to leave. Immediately. Can you find your way out of the maze?” Leaving his shirt unbuttoned, he jammed his feet into his boots.

“You have to leave now? Right now?” The tolling of the distant bell wasn’t lost on Ella. She still remembered the feeling of panic as she’d rushed down the palace steps and lost that ridiculous glass slipper.

“Yes, now. I’m sorry.” He grabbed her hand and drew her to her feet and into a hard embrace that made her ribs creak. She smelled his masculine scent as she buried her face in the crook of his neck.

He pulled away and once again took hold of her arms and looked deep into her eyes. “I’m sorry,” he repeated before pressing his lips against hers in a swift kiss.

He turned and strode quickly away from her.

Ella’s mouth tingled and she put her fingertips to her lips as she watched him disappear through the entrance to the maze’s center. His boot heels thudded against the ground as he raced away.

She stood for several more moments, naked and abandoned in the middle of the night, trying to figure out what had just happened. Who was this mysterious man, really? What had he hoped to gain here this evening—merely the satisfaction of fucking royalty? It had seemed like more than that to her, but then she’d always been a bit naïve about men and sex and romance.

She was feeling more than she should feel from what was always meant to be a night of physical amusement with no strings attached. Ella stooped and slowly began to gather her clothes and dress. Alone again.

Men always left.

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The following afternoon Sebastian entered the queen's sitting room with a pile of correspondences and papers for her to sign. She sat by her window staring out at the view, but her eyes seemed to be seeing something other than the gardens below.

He paused, waiting for her to notice him, and when she continued to stare into the distance, he cleared his throat quietly. Queen Ella's gaze swept from the window to him and the distant, dreamy look disappeared from her eyes.

"Sebastian. Are you feeling better today?"

"Yes, Madam. Thank you." He crossed the room and set the papers on her small writing desk.

"You'll need to attend to these sometime today, Highness."

"Mm. Thank you," she murmured absently and fingered the embroidered fabric of her skirt, picking at a loose thread.

She didn't dismiss him, so Sebastian lingered. "Was your evening satisfactory, Madam?"

Ella laughed, a sudden loud burst of sound. She clapped her hand over her mouth. "Pardon me. Yes. It was eminently 'satisfactory', everything I'd wished for." Another hiccup of hilarity escaped her and a few silent giggles made her shoulders shake before she got herself under control.

"Very satisfactory," she repeated with a wide grin.

"I'm glad." His own lips threatened to curve into a smile at the sheer joy in her voice and manner, but he restrained himself.

"In fact, it was so satisfactory I'd like to hold another ball."

His stomach dropped. "Pardon?"

"Yes. Week after next if you can organize it and get the invitations sent out so quickly."

Sebastian swallowed and reined in his temper. "Madam, the organization of the event took much time from my regular duties. I'm hard pressed to catch up with the things I need to do. And I hate to remind you, but in these economic times the extravagance of a second ball is perhaps more than the palace coffers can bear."

She sighed and relaxed into her seat, arms stretched along the armrests, head lolling against the

back of the chair as she gazed at the ceiling. "Of course, you're right. I'm being selfish and stupid. Forget it."

Her sad, resigned expression made his chest tighten. He could deny this woman nothing.

"No," he said quickly. "I've spoken out of turn. You've gone five years without spending one coin on any personal extravagances. If you wish to have another ball, it's certainly your prerogative."

"We could make it inexpensive, perhaps recycle the decorations from the first ball and shorten the guest list. I believe there may have been some people here last night who managed to enter without invitation, or else borrowed or bought one."

"Really, Madam? I'll make sure the security is more stringent this time."

She gestured to the chair across from her. "Please, sit. You make me nervous hovering over me like that. Let's talk for a few minutes."

He lowered himself onto the little chair that seemed too fragile to hold his body. His knees stuck out awkwardly before him and he folded his hands on his lap, feeling like a mastiff that had wandered into a parlor meant for poodles.

"You have something you want to say. I can tell." Her blue eyes studied him and he felt his skin begin to burn.

"If you wish to hold a second ball, of course I'll arrange it," he began. "But I wondered what you hoped to, er, accomplish by hosting another event. Did something happen last night that...? Were you hoping for a different outcome from last night's affair?"

She shook her head and the wispy curls on either side of her face trembled. "No. As I said, the evening was very satisfactory. I was...pleased."

She paused, fingering her skirt with diligent attention to the loose thread. "To tell the truth, Sebastian, I met someone at the ball last night and I'd hoped to see him again. He left before I could learn more than his first name and his occupation, neither of which I believe were true. So I thought...I mean, I hoped if I had another ball he might come again."

"I see." Sebastian dipped his head and stared at his hands. He felt unaccountably angry and jealous when he had no right to be. If the queen had found someone who made her happy, who was he to begrudge her that pleasure?

"I'll arrange it, then. Let me know what you want the theme to be. Whatever you wish, Madam. I'm here to serve you."

## Chapter Five

Roy Slieman, Malevolin's ambassador to the court of Jondalar, threw down his pen on his office desk and regarded his visitor with new interest.

"She went into the maze, *blindfolded*? With this man?"

The soldier turned his cap in his hand and growled, "I just said that."

"But why?"

"Because you paid me to tell you what she did."

Slieman pushed back his chair with an angry jerk. "Not why did you *say* it, imbecile! Why did she do it?"

"Not for me to say, is it?"

Slieman, who suspected his informant of deliberate obtuseness, narrowed his eyes. "How long were they in the maze?"

The soldier shrugged. "Good hour."

"And did they come out together?"

"No, he came first, rushing as if all the fiends in hell were after him, only half-dressed."

"Half..." This he had not expected. Some plotting, some attempt to use the ball to cover her underhanded efforts to keep the throne by further enslaving her inexplicably adoring subjects, that he had expected. But not that she'd actually screw them.

"Carrying his coat, his shirt open to the waist, still doing up his breeches..."

"I get the picture," Slieman interrupted. "And the queen?"

"A little flushed perhaps, but otherwise much as she always looks."

"And where did she go then?"

"Back to the ballroom. Alone."

Slieman picked up his pen and began tapping it on his teeth. "And who was this man? Did you recognize him?"

"Never seen him before in my life."

"Then he wasn't a palace courtier?"

The soldier shrugged. "Had his mask on, didn't he? They all did."

"But you recognized the queen with hers."

"Oh, yes. I'd always know her." The soldier frowned ferociously for no obvious reason. "So where's my money?"

Slieman leaned forward and opened a drawer in his desk. Taking out a purse, he weighed it in his hand. Truly, he'd been about to throw the soldier out unpaid for having no useful information when he'd come up with this juicy tidbit. Slieman wasn't quite sure how yet, but he knew he could use this *somehow* to discredit the queen and open the way for Malevolin's take-over.

"How did he speak?" he asked curiously. "Like a native of Jondalar or a foreigner?"

The soldier considered. "Jondalar."

"With the accents of a commoner or a nobleman?"

The soldier shrugged laconically.

"Did he speak as you do or as I do?" the ambassador snapped. "Was he an educated man?"

"Didn't sound like me," the soldier admitted.

"Would you recognize him again?"

The soldier seemed to give the beginnings of an emphatic nod, before he snarled, "Don't know!"

"Well," said Slieman, tossing the purse across the table. "There's another one of these in it for you if you do. Tell me his name if you can find it out, if not just where he is and any other information you can pick up."

The soldier reached, grabbed and pocketed the purse so fast that it seemed to vanish into thin air. Slieman smiled. Greed was such a wonderful tool in his work. He was about to issue instructions on how to contact him next time when he realized the soldier was already striding toward the door without permission.

"My good man," Slieman began angrily, but the soldier ignored him. He simply opened the door and went out without closing the door behind him. Unused to such blatant disrespect, Slieman closed his mouth and decided to let it lie. The soldier would be back. Thank God for an economic crisis.

He sniggered. Ella should pay her soldiers better.

Slieman leaned back in his chair and put both feet up on the table to think. He had a pretty good post at Jondalar—opulent office at the embassy, very pleasant house. But once Malevolin took over he would be rewarded with considerable wealth, plus a premier posting ...

Dragging himself out of the delightful dream with some reluctance, Slieman forced his mind back to the astonishing news he'd just learned. That Queen Ella, the darling of her people, the perfect princess who'd never put a foot wrong since her lightweight husband scarpered with a goose girl, was, in fact, as much of a slut as the infamous Duchess of Glaston. How long had it been going on, and who the devil was her lover? Was he a long-standing affair? And if so how

had she kept it secret?

Crowley, of course. Thrice-damned Sebastian Crowley would be covering for her as always. The man had retired from the ball with a headache, so Ella had been on her own with no idea of how to maintain discretion without him.

Slieman began to think that they would have to get rid of Crowley. Permanently.

Either that, or buy him. As he'd bought the surly soldier. Every man had his price.

Smiling, Slieman rang for his secretary. "I want an investigation on Sebastian Crowley's background. Report on my desk by tomorrow evening. And summon a courier to go to Malevolin. I'll have a letter for Princess Euphemia ready in one hour."

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The palace was in darkness when Ella, lamp in hand, slipped into the library. Setting the lamp on the nearest table, she went directly to the left-hand corner and pulled up the ladder. It wasn't easy climbing since she'd foolishly come in her bare feet and the nightgown clung to her legs, but she knew exactly what she was looking for. Those same books she'd consulted when she'd been trying to entice Charming back to her bed.

Seizing the two she recognized immediately from their plain, unmarked spines, she brought them over to the rug beside the still glowing embers of the dying fire and sat down with them, tucking her legs under her for comfort.

She knew she should be asleep. She'd had a busy day of endless meetings and papers, a review of the troops and a conference about the border troops build up with the anxious General commanding the Jondalar army. And tomorrow would be more of the same, only replacing the military meetings with ambassadors and the Privy Council.

But she couldn't sleep. Hot and restless, her body insisted on recalling every tiny part of her sexual experience with Joseph, until she was all but screaming to relive it in reality. And not only that. Her mind was awash with ideas of things she wanted Joseph to do to her next time, things she wanted to do with him...

Partly, she'd wanted the books to feed her own ideas. Partly, she was torturing herself by looking at the pictures, feeding her lust and frustration while, like some mindless debutante, she counted the days—and nights—until the next ball.

She'd forgive him for leaving so abruptly. In her current state of need, his leaving was not half so important as his ability to pleasure her.

*And if he doesn't come?*



*Then I'll find someone else. Someone like him...*

She gazed voraciously at the fine physique of the man portrayed in the picture. Muscles rippled up his back and thighs as he knelt on a rumpled, opulent bed. A young lady in a pose of total abandon lay on the pillows, her hips on his lap. His whole cock had disappeared inside his partner and there was an expression of complete ecstasy on his handsome face.

Further aroused, Ella licked her lips and read eagerly about the advantages of such a position, reaching greater depth and providing greater satisfaction, apparently, for both parties.

Ella turned the page and was rewarded with a close-up painting of female genitalia. Not only that but the swollen bud of the aroused clitoris seemed to reach toward the face of the man who lay between her legs, his tongue extended, his lips half-forming a kiss.

"Oh, God," Ella whispered. She wondered if she dared masturbate in here.

Hastily she turned the page once more and had to turn the book sideways to understand the complicated positions of the lovers. It made her giggle, though in a breathless sort of a way. She was aware of her pussy pulsing, gushing moisture that would surely mark her nightgown. On the next page, she found several even more disturbing pictures, involving the young lady's anus, with a man's finger stroking it, then pushing into it while his cock hovered.

Ella felt her eyes widen. "Goodness. It can go in *there*?" she murmured aloud. What would that feel like? There were so many things she didn't know, so much to discover. Next time, she needed a lover who could stay all night and show her...everything!

On the next page was a lady with two men. A powerful surge of lust shot through Ella as she established where all those mouths and cocks were placed. So easy to imagine herself there. Between her legs was fire, a desire so deep it pained her. Unbidden, she touched herself through the nightgown, an instinctive gesture to relieve tension. It didn't help.

With one unsteady finger, she touched the picture instead, as if by doing so she could absorb the woman's pleasure.

Something clattered in the chimney, making her jump. An instant later there was a puff of soot and a little old lady sat in the hearth.

"What the...?" Stunned, Ella waved her hand through the billowing soot, peering at the old woman who leapt up with a little squeal of pain.

"Drat, that's hot!" she exclaimed. "What is the matter with me? First dustbins, now fireplaces! There has to be a safer way..."

"Lucinda?" Ella uttered.

Lucinda paused in the act of brushing soot off her dress and beamed at her. "Ella, what a lovely surprise!" She reached for her, and Ella threw herself into her arms, hugging her with

enthusiasm while she laughed.

“What in the world are you doing here like this?” Ella demanded.

“Can’t I visit my favorite goddaughter anymore?”

“Of course you can. I’ve missed you so much.”

There was no accusation in her voice. She’d always thought Lucinda’s work would be done when she married Prince Charming. But she’d grown to love the gentle-hearted old lady and enjoyed her erratic visits during her marriage. Now she thought of it, she hadn’t laid eyes on her since Charming left.

Lucinda was blushing. There was a smudge of soot on her nose. “Well, I’ve missed you, too,” she confessed, giving Ella another quick hug. “The thing is, I’ve been feeling guilty. I know how much you cared for Charming.”

“It wasn’t real, was it?” Ella said ruefully. “A spell can’t make love. It has to come from the heart.”

Lucinda looked surprised. “Of course it does. The spell just facilitates it, creates the circumstances under which it can prosper.”

“But my love for him was silly, romantic drivel. And I don’t think he ever loved me at all!”

“Oh, he did, in his own way,” Lucinda said vaguely. “There are many kinds of love, and if we’re lucky, we get to experience them all.”

“Damn right,” Ella muttered, so emphatically that Lucinda regarded her in surprise.

“You don’t regret marrying Charming, do you?”

“What’s to regret?” Ella said wryly. Apart from the lonely, neglected years, the unconscious slights, the humiliation of his abandonment and the loss of herself in caring for his wretched kingdom.

“Exactly dear,” beamed Lucinda. “Remember the happy days.”

There had been some, Ella remembered reluctantly. The days of heady courtship and tingling kisses, of dancing and laughing, riding together in the sunshine—or in the rain, just enjoying each other’s company. “Where did it all go wrong?” she whispered, swallowing the sudden lump in her throat.

“You grew up,” Lucinda said gently. “Both of you.”

Ella stared at her. “Then we were never meant to be together?”

“For a while, dear, for a while. Don’t regret that. It’s given you this.” She waved her stick—a slightly sad looking wand bent at the top and smeared in coal dust—around the room.

Ella sighed. “A palace to live in, a kingdom to rule.”

“And people who love you,” Lucinda reminded her, but the words came out even more vaguely

than usual, for her attention was focused on the book beside Ella. She twisted her neck. “Goodness.”

Ella flushed and snapped the book shut. Hastily she piled it on top of the other one and rose to her feet. “Let me just put these away and you can come up with me to my chamber. Someone must be around to bring us coffee, or wine, if you prefer.”

“Oh, no need to wake the staff,” Lucinda said, waving her bent, dirty wand in a doubtful sort of a way.

“You’re a very useful guest,” Ella laughed, balancing precariously on the ladder while she shoved the books back on to the shelf. “How are you at creating food and drink for two hundred people?”

“More balls?” said Lucinda, just as the library door opened and a man walked in.

The newcomer paused, clearly surprised to find a light already burning. He lowered his own lamp and Ella saw that it was Sebastian. Not her staid, formal steward, impeccably dressed and groomed, but Sebastian in his shirt sleeves, dark hair giving his forearms a masculine beauty. A few locks of equally dark hair fell across his forehead. Sebastian, delightfully rumpled and human.

Mesmerized, Ella stared. His gaze swept round the room, taking in the presence of the rather dirty looking old lady and passing on without comment to Ella. In her nightgown and bare feet. Halfway up a ladder.

“Sebastian,” she said faintly.

“Madam.” He inclined his head. “Forgive the intrusion.”

“No intrusion,” she said quickly. “I always said you were welcome to use the library.”

Sebastian set down his lamp beside her own and advanced toward her. Something twisted low in Ella’s stomach. Embarrassment, surely, at being seen in such an undignified state. Perhaps he even knew what kind of books were in this section. Unbidden, the pictures she’d been looking at so recently flashed through her mind—which outrageously replaced the painted male face with Sebastian’s. Ella gulped. Did her staid steward ever get up to such tricks? What sort of lusts and desires possessed him in his private moments? What sort of lover was he?

Shocked at her inappropriate speculation—after all, Sebastian was the nearest she had to a friend these days—she watched in something of a daze as he held out his hand to her. It was an odd gesture, managing to combine the respect he always accorded her with an unexpected air of command. Before she meant to—and in fact it would have been easier on her own—she’d laid her hand in his and watched his long, strong fingers curl around it. He felt steady as a rock as she took the final two steps to the ground and glanced up at him with a smile.

Her steward, she realized, was a handsome man. Not pretty, like some of her younger courtiers, but he had a strong, sensitive face and even features, and his dark, steady eyes were really rather beautiful. She was conscious of a vague twinge, a memory, perhaps, which wouldn't quite come.

It was she who broke their locked gaze, dropping her eyes as she brushed past his warm body. His shirt was open at the throat, revealing a hint of chest hair and an unexpectedly muscular neck which was normally hidden by his pristine cravat.

Something stirred in Ella. The books she'd been devouring had churned her up so that she was aware of Sebastian as never before. That he was tall and powerfully built and unexpectedly virile.

*Oh God, get a grip before you alienate your only friend!*

"Good night, Sebastian," she said—very quietly, it was true, but at least her voice didn't shake.

"Are you well, Madam?"

She glanced up to see him frowning. "Quite well, thank you. Just tired I think."

"May I get you anything?"

Ella grasped onto Lucinda's arm as if to a lifeline. "No, but thank you for your care."

Sebastian inclined his head. "I'm here to serve you."

Ella's breath caught on a hiccup of laughter. Because her wayward mind had already answered him. *I wish you would.*

\*\*\*

Sebastian was just about to give up and leave the library when the fairy godmother—whom the queen had addressed as Lucinda—fluttered back inside.

"She's asleep," the old lady confided. "So we can talk."

"Thank you for coming," Sebastian said with difficulty.

Lucinda was still covered in soot. As the queen had been. He'd never imagined her with a smudge on her cheek and a dirty nightgown. It was an image he treasured now, that and her confusion at being so discovered. Looking at her smutty books, no doubt in search of inspiration for her next assignation with her mysterious lover.

Whom Sebastian already hated.

"Good," said Lucinda, just as if she'd heard him.

"What?"

"So there's to be another ball, dear? How did the last one go?"

Sebastian curled his lip. "Perfectly, I understand."

"Are you not happy? No, of course you're not. Happy people don't need me. What do you wish for this time, Sebastian?"

Sebastian leaned his hip on the table and took a deep breath. "For the ball, the same as before. If you please."

"Oh, I can't do that again, dear."

Sebastian shut his lips. "Can't...why not?"

"It's a one-time only spell," she apologized.

"Oh." Curiously deflated, he straightened. "Then I'm sorry to have bothered you."

"I can do you something similar, though. I think you'll be entertained."

Sebastian, reluctant once more, yet unable to stop himself, spread his hands wide. "Entertain me."

## Chapter Six

"Why, the little whore!" Hortense exclaimed, reading the letter over her sister's shoulder.

"Such language is most unbecoming," reproved Almeda, her mother, from the chair on the other side of the room where she was engaged on some embroidery work.

"Most unbecoming," Euphemia agreed, not troubling to keep the amusement out of her voice.

"But in this case, you have to forgive my sister—she's right!"

"Cinderella's cracked at last," Hortense crowed. "She has feet of clay after all!"

"What has she done?" Almeda enquired, bored. "Shown her ankle as she got out of her carriage? Chosen the wrong colored hat for visiting the sick? Worn a low cut gown and inadvertently flashed a breast at the races?"

"Oh, much better than that, Mama," Euphemia drawled. "She took a lover at that ridiculous egalitarian ball."

Almeda paused. At last, she lowered her needle. "Give me it," she said, and without a word, Euphemia rose and put the letter into her mother's hands. Almeda's smile was slow.

"Well, well, well," she murmured. "Who'd have thought it? Prudish little Cinderella!"

"She wasn't all that prudish," Hortense recalled. "I remember her and that blacksmith's son snogging behind the fish baskets on market day."

"Snogging the blacksmith's son while a commoner is hardly comparable to enjoying sexual

intercourse with one of her subjects in the palace maze while queen. This is exactly the sort of thing that could knock our angel off her pedestal...”

“It’s amusing, I grant you,” said Euphemia. “But I don’t see that it gets Theodore and me any nearer the throne of Jondalar. Even Slieman says that despite the rumors the people remain unequivocally loyal to her.”

“Because they have been taught to fear Malevolin as the only viable alternative.”

“Well, it is. Theodore is related—somewhere, way back—to Charming. He is the rightful heir. And if it hadn’t been for the people spontaneously acclaiming Cinderella, Charming’s ridiculous abdication note would never have stood. *I* would have been queen!”

“We are aware of it,” Almeda said sharply. She pondered, tapping one finger against her cheek.

“Charming. Charming... Interesting fellow.”

“Queer fellow,” giggled Hortense. “Ella drove him into the arms of a pirate!”

“Via a goose girl,” Euphemia reminded her.

Their mother ignored them. “No backbone,” she mused. “But not a *bad* fellow. Did his duty by the old king, had enough feeling for his country not to just abandon it, even if his note was a somewhat careless abdication of responsibility.”

“So?” Her daughters stared at her, at a loss.

“I wonder...”

“Wonder what?” Euphemia demanded.

“Whether he still cares for his country enough to save it from the clutches of a whore and her greedy, self-serving lover?”

“Such language is most unbecoming,” Hortense began with blatant mockery, but her mother didn’t even notice. She’d begun to laugh.

“I wonder if we could find Charming and explain all this to him? If he would only come home and depose Cinderella in our favor, then we’d be saved the expense of a war... Euphemia, go and tell Theodore to halt the troop movements to the border for now. Let’s lull them... And see if we can’t wrangle an invitation to the ball.”

\*\*\*

“Ah, Sebastian. What treats do you have for me today?” Cinderella spoke lightly as the steward entered her sitting room. Fresh from a fund-raising reception for the local hospital, she’d drooped onto her sofa for ten minutes to try and recover enough to face the Privy Council.

The familiar sight of him lifted her spirits, as she realized it nearly always did. Funny how,

having met that warmer, more casual side of him so briefly in the library, she'd started to notice those things. It wasn't that Sebastian was different, or even that she looked on him differently. It was just that she was more *aware* of looking.

The day after their encounter, he'd immediately removed any awkwardness by observing straight-faced that it was good to see her in a clean gown. For which she'd thanked him and in similar spirit complimented him on his neat appearance.

Now he dropped a pile of papers on her desk. "Report from the general. Malevolin troop movements appear to have stopped for now."

"Well, thank God for that. Do you suppose our diplomacy is working?"

"Let's hope so. It seems likely, combined with our own show of force. They'd be happy enough to frighten us into submission, but I don't believe they want actual war any more than we do." On top of the report, he laid some more papers, one after the other. "Agenda for the Privy Council meeting. Assorted papers requiring your signature. And the Malevolin ambassador's request for an invitation to the ball for his prince and princess."

"Oh, dear," said Ella in dismay. "Damn it, it's bad enough having to invite the weasel Slieman. Do I have to have them, too?"

"Not if you don't want to."

"I can't ignore this request..."

"What request? I've been so busy lately that there are many papers still on my desk unread."

Ella caught his gaze, admired how they could laugh even while his face looked so serious. She began to smile. "I apologize for overworking you, Sebastian. The ball is taking up too much of your time."

"Alas, so it is. But I think we've found a most entertaining theme in ancient myths."

Cinderella regarded him with some amusement. "I believe you're actually enjoying yourself."

"Actually, I am," he confessed. "It reminds me of my childhood, organizing parties for my family."

"Was it a large family?"

"Ten of us," said Sebastian. "Plus parents, aunts, grandparents, a positively ancient great-grandmother and more cousins than you can shake a stick at."

Ella laughed. "What sort of parties did you have?"

"Oh the usual—Christmas and birthdays. We had a lot of birthdays. And dressing-up parties for Halloween."

"Just like our parties," said Ella, remembering with a pang the days before her mother had died. She smiled. "Are any of your family coming to the ball?"

Sebastian shook his head.

“Why not? I’d like to meet your family.”

“They’re very scattered, Madam. Are you ready to face the Council?”

Something niggled at her as she dutifully preceded him into the council chamber. Not just her wonder that this was the first time he had ever mentioned his family to her. There was something else.

It was only halfway through the meeting that it came to her. He was one of ten siblings. Like Joseph.

*Joseph*, she thought, all but purring. *Only a few more nights to wait...*

Although, of course, since they didn’t know who he was, there was no guarantee that he would even be invited. Apart from the nobility, it was different members of each estate who’d been asked. But Ella had the feeling he hadn’t had an invitation last time either. Security had been tightened, but somehow she was sure if Joseph wanted to come, he would be there nonetheless.

On the other hand, he could be married, and if Ella discovered that, she knew she couldn’t see him again. But it would be so good to make love with him once more. Lots more! In all the different ways in that book.

\*\*\*

“Anything from the palace?” Slieman barked at his secretary on the way through the imposing entrance hall of the Malevolin Embassy building.

“Just an apology, sir.”

“An apology?”

“A polite note from the chief steward explaining that your request didn’t come to his attention until today. He regrets there is now no time for an invitation to be sent and the royal party to travel here.”

Slieman scowled, strode into his office and closed the door. If he was honest, he didn’t actually mind—he’d far rather work without the interference of Theodore’s wretched wife and her appalling family. And he’d certainly rather reap the credit and the subsequent rewards of success. But he felt the slight to Malevolin.

It was Crowley, of course. Protecting the queen, keeping her step-family out. He doubted Ella had even seen the invitation. Crowley was there at every turn, opposing every policy that would suit Malevolin’s interests. The man was becoming a first class pest.



Slieman unlocked his desk drawer and took out the report on Sebastian Crowley which had been compiled a couple of weeks ago. The trouble was, there was bugger all in it. The man was about as interesting as a lettuce.

A few unimportant love affairs before he reached the position of chief steward, nothing since, unless he kept it very quiet. No breath of scandal, gambling, corruption or deviancy. The man worked, slept and ate. And that was it.

Only two points had come up that bore further investigation. One was where all his money went. Crowley earned a very respectable salary, yet his bank account was more or less empty. His salary went in, and then it was all paid out, though his sources wouldn't reveal where he sent it. Slieman would have hoped for blackmail, except for the fact that the money left the account in such small amounts that all went to different places. Still, Slieman hadn't given up on finding out more.

The other mystery was Crowley's single day off each year. Always on the same day—fourth of August—he left the palace and didn't return until the morning of the fifth. No one knew where he went or why or with whom. This had possibilities, too. An unsuitable love child to be visited, or perhaps a scandalous lover—although once a year was not much of a love affair.

This fourth of August, if Slieman could wait so long, Crowley would certainly be followed. And by the fifth Slieman would know as much as the steward himself. If it turned out to be nothing they could use against him, they'd just have to hire the assassin.

But one way or another, Crowley and Ella would fall before the end of the summer, and Malevolin would absorb Jondalar.

## Chapter Seven

Ella learned from her mistakes. No way was she going to waste all her evening by sitting on a throne again, watching other people enjoy themselves. Having dragooned a few amiable ladies into being her attendants for the evening—normally she rejected ladies-in-waiting as an unnecessary and annoying expense—she elected to stand at the foot of the ballroom stairs and welcome the guests as they arrived.

Those had been Sebastian's ideas, and she'd welcomed them. Apart from anything else, it meant the elusive Joseph would not get by her. If he came, she'd know it. Although Sebastian's other bit of advice had been less auspicious.

“I suggest discretion,” he’d said in his usual, formal tones.

Ella had been so surprised that it had taken her a few moments to realize what he meant. Then her face flushed with embarrassment as much as outrage. “Discretion? Are you accusing me of *indiscretion* at the last ball?”

“There is no accusation, Madam. You *were* indiscreet. If the queen disappears into the maze alone with a stranger for over an hour, trust me, people will talk. All the masks in the world will not protect you from that.”

His words, coolly spoken, had hurt her. And that made her angrier.

“Let them talk,” she said contemptuously. “I harmed no one and did nothing wrong.”

“You’re on a pedestal, Madam...”

“I hate the damned pedestal! Am I allowed *no* fun at all?”

Sebastian had turned away, so she couldn’t see his face. His shoulders, however, were rigid.

“Have as much fun as you can get, Madam. I only advise that you do it discreetly.”

It still rankled as she greeted her guests. The ballroom was hung with garlands and vines and lilies, a beautiful setting to receive its gods and goddesses, sprites, fairies, goblins and even giants—one man had come on stilts. He beamed down at Ella with such pride that she threw off her ill-nature and determined to spite Sebastian by enjoying the evening.

On the other hand, she had a sneaking suspicion that he was right. She and Joseph had been just a little too blatant and, despite what she’d claimed to Sebastian, she really didn’t want her intrigues to be the subject of gossip.

*Come on, Joseph!*

She continued to smile, causing her cheeks to push against the velvet mask she wore around her eyes for convention, although no one would have any doubt as to her identity. Every guest called her “Majesty” or “Highness” when she shook their hands on arrival.

It was hard work standing all the time with her mermaid’s tail squashing her legs together. She’d got a little carried away this time and let appearance conquer common sense. Though she did look pretty good in the figure-hugging costume, cut so low over her breasts that if it hadn’t been for her long fair locks tumbling loose over her shoulders to her waist, she would have been in danger of revealing all each time she leaned forward or lifted her arms. Even Sebastian had found it difficult to raise his eyes from her cleavage, she thought smugly. Who did he think he was, lecturing her on discretion?

Well, at least he was pretty discreet himself this evening. She’d barely glimpsed him all night. *Good*. Her determination to dance with him at this ball had vanished with his carping criticism.

*Where are you, Joseph?*

Her mind was always several people behind the one she greeted. Each time she turned to someone new, she allowed her gaze to flicker up the ballroom stairs to scan those waiting, and Joseph was never among them. For this reason, her attention was too distracted to realize for several moments that her current arrival—a tall Apollo complete with laurel wreath and a Grecian mask on a stick—was grinning at her too broadly for common civility. He peeked around the mask, nodding encouragement.

Ella blinked, focused properly on the handsome face in front of her and made a discovery.

“Johnny?”

He beamed. “Johnny the blacksmith’s son—at your service,” he said and made her a very creditable bow.

Johnny of the laughing blue eyes and incredible kisses, who had once turned her girlish knees to water. He was still a charming devil, and clearly doing well for himself. Ella smiled back with genuine pleasure.

“But this is wonderful to see you again! Only you’re not meant to give your name away, you know!”

“Oops,” said Johnny with no pretense of genuine contrition. “Am I supposed to ask the queen to dance?”

“That is certainly permissible, and I’m happy to accept if you wait another few minutes for me to welcome the rest of my guests.”

Johnny wagged his eyebrows in the comic-suggestive way that had won him plenty of girlfriends back in the old days, and Ella couldn’t help laughing. Or looking forward to their dance.

How strange it would be to dance with Johnny again after all these years! He’d filled out, grown up into a mature and highly attractive man. She wanted to know everything about him, how his family was... If he was married and had children. Selfishly, she hoped not, because she really rather liked the idea of tasting Johnny’s kisses again, especially now he was clearly more sophisticated.

Ella gave a delicious little shudder, smiling at the stout fairy before her and praying that this was not Johnny’s wife. Surely he would have introduced her if she was?

Her duty done, Ella dismissed her attendants with instructions to have fun. They went with alacrity, but didn’t forget to courtesy or to smile at her with a friendliness that seemed genuine. Ella knew a pang of regret for female companionship. It had been a long time since she’s had a female friend to confide in. Pride had prevented her making friends as her marriage had disintegrated. She didn’t want people knowing her hurt and humiliation. And since Charming

left, there had simply been no time.

But these women were *nice*, and actually seemed pleased to be asked to attend her. Perhaps she could invite them to a less formal tea sometime. After all, there were more pleasures in the world than sexual ones.

The thought had no sooner passed through her head than Johnny moved into her line of vision. *Well, that's one for later contemplation*, she thought, all but purring. *For now—that man is sex on legs!*

Completely resigned to the absence of her previous lover, she moved through the ballroom—with tiny steps taken from the knees, since only her lower legs could move inside the mermaid's tail—toward her first love.

As there was no formal opening dance, there were couples already twirling across the floor to the orchestra's entrancing music. Sebastian had found surely the best orchestra in this or any other kingdom.

Johnny came to meet her, two glasses of wine in his hands, the mask on its stick stuck under his arm to the imminent danger of the other guests. He presented one of the glasses with a flourish.

"Your Highness. You didn't forget."

"That I promised to dance with you? Of course not." She took the glass with a murmur of thanks.

"Not that. You didn't forget *me*."

"They say you never forget your first love."

His eyes gleamed. "Was I?"

"Oh, yes. I was utterly besotted with you until you ran off with Vilma Kurt."

"I didn't run off with Vilma Kurt," he protested. "It was just I was young, a lad with needs, and you were always too nice."

"Too nice?" she repeated, uncomprehending.

"To...you know." For the first time, Johnny looked uncomfortable, shifting his feet and grinning sheepishly.

Laughter bubbled up. "To make love?" she said blatantly. He actually blushed at that, although the sudden darkening of his eyes gave away the fact that he was still a very lusty man.

Leaning forward, she lifted her face and whispered in his ear, "Perhaps you should have asked."

His breath caught then came out in a rush. His gaze had dropped to her cleavage. Demurely Ella rearranged the discreet lock of hair and stepped back.

“So you didn’t marry Vilma?”

“I didn’t marry anyone. You’d stopped talking to me and by the time I took over my father’s smithy, you’d married the prince.” He smiled with no bitterness. “I could never have competed with him anyway.”

“Not at the time,” Ella admitted. It was hard to remember now, how in love with Charming she’d been in the beginning. So sad that all love faded, whether lost to the likes of Vilma Kurt or to Charming’s neglect. In each of her love affairs she’d been infatuated with surface charm without really knowing either of her lovers. Which would have been fine if it had been only about sex. Like Joseph.

She sipped her wine, regarding Johnny over the rim of her glass. “You must be a fine catch these days. How did you manage to avoid all the matchmakers?”

“Oh, I can be quite determined when I choose to be.”

Ella’s stomach gave a little flutter. “You must tell me about that.”

“I’ll show you, if you like.”

The flutter grew, spread lower. “By dancing with me?”

“It’s a start.” He took the glass from her fingers and laid it with his on the tray of a passing servant.

When he took her in his arms, she had no sense of familiarity. This wasn’t the boy who’d stolen kisses at the market. This was a strong, mature man. He held her just a shade too close for a formal waltz, and his arms and body felt thrillingly hard.

The fluttering had become a storm. Moisture trickled down the crack between her squashed together thighs. Intoxicated, she felt his erection brush against her through the fine fabric of their costumes as they began to sway. In truth she could do little more than sway and shuffle inside the tail but her partner didn’t seem to mind.

Tonight, she thought with a sense of wonder, I could finally *know* Johnny.

“Are you still as beautiful without the mask?” he asked, a little huskily.

“Haven’t you seen me in the city?”

“Not close enough. You look like a fairy tale driving by, as splendid and as distant as the sea.”

“And now?” she prompted, shamelessly eager for compliments.

“Like the most beautiful woman in the world. Mysterious, alluring... I can’t believe I’m holding you in my arms at last, after all these years.”

Like her, he was in love with a myth. He loved what he’d thought she was, and stayed flatteringly true to that false memory. With sudden insight, Ella knew that if she took him to her bed tonight, she’d break that spell. Which would be sad, since Johnny was the only faithful

man—at least in spirit—she’d ever known. On the other hand...

Wouldn’t it be a kindness? To free him at last to fall in love and marry another lucky girl?

She gazed up into his blue eyes, not laughing now but serious, glinting with lust. She realized he still didn’t believe he could make love with her. She opened her mouth to put him right on that score.

*I suggest discretion.*

She closed her mouth. Bloody Sebastian.

The music came to an elegant end. Johnny took a moment to release her, as if treasuring his final moment with her.

She smiled. “You’ll dance with me again tonight, Johnny?”

His eyes widened. “You’d do that?”

“I do as I like. It’s good to be the queen.”

And, smiling behind her mask, she slipped out of his arms and went to mingle with her other guests.

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The mermaid’s costume was a mixed blessing. Of light, filmy fabric, it kept her cool in the heat of the ballroom crush. On the other hand, the constricting tail grew to be so annoying that before she danced again, she had one of her ladies-in-waiting slit it up the front to her shins. Now she could at least move from the knees, and the end of the fish tail followed her like a train.

It was during her second dance with Johnny—she’d danced with many partners in between, including Ambassador Slieman, half her Privy Council and several stunned commoners—that she first became aware of the satyr.

She felt a prickling at the back of her neck, as if someone was watching her. She looked ’round at once, convinced, for some reason that Sebastian was trying to attract her attention.

But it wasn’t the steward. It was a satyr. And one who’d have difficulty at unmasking, since his features seemed to be painted onto his face rather than onto a mask. Devil’s eyebrows rose sharply upward from the bridge of his nose, over dark, sparkling eyes that stared directly at her. He had pointed ears. Something—a tail?—was looped over his arm from behind. His powerful chest, scattered with thick, black hair, was naked, save for a kind of sash that ran from his shoulder across his chest to the waist of the skirt that covered his lower body and upper thighs. It was the most daring costume of the evening and, from the look of him, he

knew he'd won the prize.

The satyr smiled and sipped from his glass. And because he amused her, and because his costume was so gloriously decadent, Ella smiled back before returning her attention to Johnny.

"Do you see the satyr?" she said. "I wonder who he is."

"Probably the archbishop," said Johnny, and Ella laughed aloud.

"You are wicked!"

"I'm wicked, too," said a deep but almost whispering voice that went straight to her core. Her first, instant thought was that she knew the voice, and yet when she glanced from Johnny to the man clearly intending to cut in, she saw a stranger—the satyr.

He smiled. "But I'll be good if you'll dance with me."

Johnny opened his mouth to object in no uncertain terms, but, for whatever reason—whether he remembered that she was the queen or whether the satyr's steady gaze intimidated him—he closed it again and glanced to Ella for guidance.

She hesitated, but only for a moment. She had no desire to hurt Johnny's feelings, but this was her evening of sheer hedonism and there was no denying the satyr attracted her. Besides, Johnny would still be here when the dance ended.

Her hand slid off his shoulder. "Thank you," she said, smiling to show it wasn't rejection. Johnny gave in gracefully, releasing her hand and stepping back. Before she could say or do anything else, the satyr had whirled her into his arms, spinning her around the dance floor far faster than she'd known she could travel in her ridiculous tail.

She was sure her feet left the ground altogether in some places and that the satyr actually carried her. Certainly, he held her close enough. Instead of the almost respectful accidental brushes of Johnny's perky manhood, the satyr's full erection stood straight up against her abdomen. It felt hot and bone hard and Ella's body, already in a state of permanent tingle from dancing with Johnny, threatened to melt into a hot pool of desire at the satyr's hooves.

Shocked—at herself as well as him—she glanced into the satyr's face. He grinned, a predatory, almost smug grin, as if he knew what he did to her and liked it. His hand on her back spread lower, so that the tips of his fingers brushed the curve of her bottom. At the same time, he deliberately moved his cock against her.

Ella burned. Trying for lightness, she said, "You are too bold, sir."

"Too bold? You're dancing with me, aren't you?"

"I don't remember agreeing to be fondled."

"True, but your eyes asked for it."

"You are sadly mistaken, Lord Satyr."

“Then tell me to stop.”

She stared into his mesmerizing eyes. “Would you?”

“Of course.”

She tipped her head back a little to see him better and his gaze dropped to her breasts.

She said, “I’m under orders from my steward to behave with discretion.”

“I’m in total agreement. You go up to your bedchamber first and I’ll follow.”

“You are incorrigible! I don’t know whether to be amused or appalled by you!”

“Only one way to find out. But I assure you, I can be rather more than amusing.”

“Why, what else do you do besides dancing?” She knew she shouldn’t ask, shouldn’t give him the opportunity, but there was something curiously liberating about the satyr. And she wanted to know.

“I am a creature given over entirely to pleasure. I could make your toes curl just by talking to you.”

“I’ll bet you could,” Ella said hastily, glancing around her in case any other dancers might have overheard him. Her toes were already curled. “But I beg you won’t just yet.”

He picked up on her mistake before she did. *Just yet*. His eyes gleamed pure lust and in response moisture pooled between her thighs and began to trickle. The satyr whirled her around and her stomach followed some three or four steps behind. It was the most exciting dance she’d ever had in her life—all that energetic whirling and spinning in the arms of the bold stranger while all the time his erection rubbed against her and he punctuated his movements with suggestive conversation that made her alternately laugh and wriggle with desire.

One thing was certain: by the end of the dance she was more than ready for a little sexual dalliance. The satyr released her, but he didn’t step away, and she found herself oddly reluctant to part their bodies. And yet she had to before people began to notice.

“Shall we?” murmured the satyr.

“I don’t know,” Ella said honestly.

“Give in to your desires. Just for tonight. I can guarantee you won’t regret it.”

With an effort of sheer will, Ella stepped back. “I don’t even know your name.”

“Silenius. Ah, my rival,” murmured the satyr, and Ella realized Johnny had come up to stand beside them.

*Oh the devil, now there’ll be a scene of total indiscretion! My night will be spoiled and Sebastian will hate me.*

“Come, let’s take a stroll,” said the satyr, linking arms with them both and urging them off the



dance floor. "It's a beautiful night and it's so hot in here."

Behind the satyr's back, Johnny made a comical face and Ella shrugged. Somehow, there was no gainsaying the man who began to resemble a host more than the queen's guest.

So who in the world was he? He had to be a nobleman, his whole bearing and attitude proclaimed it. But Ella was sure she'd never met him before. Unless he changed his personality with his costume. Which was not so very far-fetched. It was the whole point of masquerades.

The cool of the evening lifted her hair, caressed her cheeks. It was certainly less noisy outside than on the occasion of the last ball. Sebastian had succeeded, then, in tightening up on security and invitation forgeries. The terrace was decorated in similar style to the ballroom, with stone benches and trailing vines, and an ornamental fountain surrounded by mosaics on mythical themes.

Unerringly, Silenius the satyr found them a quiet spot. Rather to her surprise, he let Johnny take the place beside her on the bench while he sat on the ground opposite them, knees drawn up under his chin like a mischievous elf. His short skirt gaped under his thighs. Ella knew that if she just ducked her head a little, she'd be treated to quite an eyeful. Determinedly, she kept her gaze on his face.

"And so," he said to Johnny, "you, too, want to pleasure the lady."

Johnny's mouth fell open.

Silenius laughed. "Why so shocked? We three have to be honest with each other. I'll admit proudly that it's been my ambition since I first set eyes on the lady."

"When was that?" Ella pounced.

The satyr's lips wide lips quirked. "Tonight, of course. You have the face of an angel, the body of a wanton and a beauty that speaks straight to the loins."

Johnny made a strangled sound in his throat.

"I also have a little wit and intelligence," Ella murmured, unreasonably annoyed by this partial catalogue of her charms.

The satyr's teeth gleamed in the dim light. "You wear the mask to hide your mind," he observed. "So I will not be so rude as to mention it."

Stunned by this insight, Ella closed her mouth.

Silenius returned to Johnny. "Your turn, my friend. What is *your* ambition for the night?"

Johnny watched as Silenius summoned a servant and glasses of sparkling wine were delivered to each of them. Only as the man retreated again did he answer. "I was so happy to be invited. I arrived with only the ambition of making her remember me." He smiled sadly. "Maybe I even wished, selfishly, to light a spark of regret, however tiny."

“And now?” the satyr urged.

“It never entered my head I’d have a chance of anything more than a dance.” He turned to Ella.

“But you flirt. Your eyes promise, and my body yearns.”

Ella began to melt all over again.

“Oh, yes,” the satyr agreed with enthusiasm. “Yearning. I like that. We both yearn. And her eyes definitely promise.”

Johnny looked at him. “You don’t seem to be the kind of man who would give in. So we must agree to let the qu...the lady choose between us.”

*Damn.*

But, of course, there was no other way. She glanced from one decidedly attractive man to the other. Perhaps she could have yet another ball and make sure the other was invited next time. Or she could choose Silenius since she knew Johnny’s real name and could get him to the palace again under some pretext or other.

Only she had the feeling it was now or never with Johnny. She had a powerful urge to finish what they’d begun as children, but whatever happened tonight, whether she chose him or sent him away, he would no longer be in love with her. Because she’d have fallen off her pedestal. And for some reason, making love with a stranger was far more attractive than having sex with someone who’d fallen out of love with her.

Only the satyr was so damned—fuckable!

Hell, so was Johnny. And she owed him for his fidelity. It was a debt she was sure she’d thoroughly enjoy paying.

“We *could* do that,” Silenius agreed, watching her from veiled, steady eyes that suddenly seemed familiar.

*I know you!*

“But that would be a damned tame outcome for the evening.” Silenius smiled, and the significance of his words broke into her memory’s struggles.

“What do you mean?” she asked faintly.

*He knows! He knows my secret, shameful desires!*

“I mean, I want you and he wants you. You want me and you want him. The final link to be established is, my friend,” he said, turning to Johnny, “how much you like me.”

Johnny’s eyes widened. “How much I...I certainly admire your cheek!”

The satyr winked. “I’ll show you both of them.”

Johnny laughed, clearly without meaning to because he tried to cover it with a cough. But Silenius wasn’t fooled.

“That’s settled then. Why don’t you go back to the ballroom, Madam, plead a headache to your ladies-in-waiting and retire for an hour’s nap?”

She found herself blindly rising to her feet as he did, before common sense reasserted itself.

“But...”

“Three hours?” Silenius offered. Johnny laughed again.

“Stop it! You don’t know where my bedchamber is!”

“Trust me, we’ll find it. Discreetly,” he added with an innocent grin.

Unwilling to be seen dithering—either by her would-be lovers or by the other guests scattered around the terraces and gardens—Ella walked away from them and back into the ballroom.

Her heart beat like a drum. Delicious anticipation warred with an agony of anxiety. How could she do this? The two men were hardly inconspicuous, and even if by some chance they did discover the way to her bedchamber, they were bound to be seen. And when they were discovered, discretion demanded that she be nowhere near them! She should just stay here, safe in the ballroom under the protection of her guests.

Only then she’d never know Johnny, never experience the surely astounding pleasures of Silenius, never know the thrill of two men making love to her at once.

Lacking a fan, Ella waved one hand in front of her face. She needed Sebastian. Only what the hell would she say to him? “Please conduct these two outrageous gentlemen to my bedchamber—discreetly?”

She burned at the very thought of admitting such a thing to Sebastian. She wondered if he’d ever indulged in wild sexual adventures. Somehow she didn’t quite like the idea of that. She’d grown used to the idea that *she* was the most important thing in Sebastian’s life, but it had been an unacknowledged, almost subconscious belief and, looked at face-on for the first time, she had no idea if were true...

“Highness, you don’t look well,” said the motherly Countess Theresa who had attended her earlier. “Come and sit down for a little.”

Ella let the woman take her arm. “I do have a bit of a headache,” she admitted with perfect truth—although the tension causing it was largely sexual. She took a deep breath. “Perhaps I should just go to my chamber for a little while, away from all the excitement...”

“That would be an excellent idea,” Theresa agreed. “Shall I come with you and summon your maid?”

“No, no, I’d hate you to miss out on the fun when you’ve been so helpful already.” And in any case, she’d sent her maid away for the night—in preparation for the very event surely about to follow.

She left the ballroom in full view of many of her guests, but at least she left alone. Climbing the stairs was not easy in her fish tail. She felt like an old woman in armor trying to maneuver herself from one step to the next. It took a long time.

As she made her way to her private apartments, she wondered how long it would be before she heard the sounds of violent arrest. One of the new men-at-arms was on duty outside her apartments. But he merely straightened to a rigid position at sight of her. She smiled at him and murmured goodnight, a civility that seemed to startle the surly soldier, for his shoulders and his jaw sagged together.

Ella wanted to laugh. How in the world did Silenius plan to get past *him*? Should she dismiss him? No, that would be unforgivably indiscreet.

*Oh the devil, this whole escapade is doomed! What was I thinking of? The satyr was only having a laugh at my expense, and Johnny's...*

She turned the handle of her bedchamber door and pushed it open with relief. The lamp was already lit. At least she could get straight out of this damned mermaid's costume and pry her legs apart.

"The Queen of the Sea," murmured a voice behind her that made her jump.

"Sebastian?" She froze. What in the world was the steward doing here? But no, Sebastian never laughed like that. He barely laughed at all. Her heart lurched, seemed to drop straight down to her pussy. It was...

"Silenius," said the satyr, stepping round in front of her. His erection pushed at his skirt like a tent pole. His dark eyes gleamed with mischief and a naked lust that sent her own into overdrive.

"And Johnny," said the blacksmith's son. He stood beside the bed, looking large and a little awkward, but more handsome than she could ever remember.

Ella swallowed. Her throat felt dry as dust. Silenius presented her with a glass of sparkling wine. She took a dazed, grateful sip, then managed, "How did you get in here? Were you seen?"

"Silenius..." Johnny began.

"Does it matter?" the satyr interrupted.

"Of course it matters!" Ella laid down her glass with unnecessary force. "I have a kingdom to care for and my reputation must be..."

"Risk it," said the satyr. "You know you want to."

And before she could move, he'd swept her up into his arms and carried her toward the bed. Ella gasped and clung to him from instinct, but he laid her down on the pillows with great care,

as if she were some precious, breakable object. In silent wonder, she watched him sprawl down beside her, propping his chin on one elbow to drink her in.

A choked sound came from the other side of the bed. She turned to look at Johnny and he smiled. There was something of the old, cheeky Johnny in that smile, but behind it she read nervousness akin to her own as well as a dazed, "I can't believe this is going to happen" kind of lust. She understood that, too.

"I think we all need to relax a little," said the satyr, casually freeing the sash part of his costume and tugging his skirt off in one movement. Ella glimpsed his long, erect penis and had to swallow a moan. His tail, trailing across his muscular thigh, was long, thin and flesh-colored. Covered with a fine coat of dark hair, it came to a neat point at the end.

Ella giggled. "You've left your tail on."

For the first time, she thought he actually flushed. "It doesn't come off," he said.

"You're weird," Johnny observed.

"And I'm naked," Silenius returned. Unexpectedly, he leaned right across Ella, grasped Johnny's costume and pulled. It fell, fluttering, to his ankles. Silenius smiled and resumed his former position.

Ella's breath caught. Johnny was everything she'd hoped for. In the lamplight, he was tall and strong and his skin looked golden, glistening faintly with the sweat of tension. And his cock, perhaps not as long as the satyr's, was mouthwateringly thick and erect.

Under her admiring gaze, his annoyance with Silenius vanished visibly. He sank down on the bed beside her and touched her hair. On her other side, Silenius did the same, only he stroked her breast over and over. Her nipple, already erect, began to ache.

As if emboldened by her acceptance of this caress, Johnny's hand crept lower, too, cupping her free breast. The strangeness of having them both touch her at once was oddly thrilling. If there had been any doubts before, there were none now. *This* was what she wanted.

Silenius pushed her hair back, revealing the upper part of her breast.

"A daring costume," he observed. "But it's time to lose it." His fingers deftly unfastened the hooks on her flesh-colored bodice. Johnny helped with the lower ones, and as their knuckles brushed against her breasts, she began to squirm.

Between them, they completely drew off the bodice with its shell-shaped cups, and Silenius cast it on the floor without looking. All his attention was on her breasts.

"God, you're so beautiful," Johnny whispered. Part of her wanted to cover herself. Never in her life had she displayed herself to two men at once. But there was something liberating and exciting about enduring their lustful scrutiny. Her nipples, flushed and rosy, stood out hard and

long as if pushing toward them, begging for their attention.

Very slowly, Johnny reached out, took the nipple nearest him between his thumb and forefinger and rolled it. Ella moaned.

Silenius brought up his palm until it just touched her other nipple and no more. It seemed to tremble against him, and he moved his palm softly, caressingly. It felt divine, exquisite. Of their own volition, Ella's hips lifted up off the bed. Johnny laughed softly.

Ella said shakily. "Take off my tail."

"Oh, no," said Silenius. "The tail stays. It's almost like tying you down."

He smiled at the sudden lust which must have shown unbidden in her eyes. Another fantasy given away. His hand moved, cupping her breast, kneading.

"Ella," Johnny whispered in wonder. "Ella." He bent his head toward her mouth, and she parted her lips eagerly, desperate to taste his kiss.

"Not her mouth," Silenius reproved. "Her breast. Kiss her breast. Make love to it. Fuck it."

Unexpectedly, the coarse word added flame to the slow burn of all the rest. Johnny took her nipple in his mouth and kissed it tenderly. She gave a little mewl of delight.

Then, as if satisfied that Johnny was doing it right, the satyr bent his head to her other breast. His tongue snaked out, caressing the nipple before his mouth took it. He rolled it between his lips, sending stabs of ecstasy through her whole body to her core, then pulled it more strongly and began to suck.

It was astounding. Both men were clearly experienced lovers for they seemed to know exactly how to please her, every lick and caress of just the right the strength to suit the instant. It was joy and torture and went on and on. They lashed her nipples with their tongues, sucked them hard and tenderly, kneaded her breasts with their mouths, and sucked some more. Ella thought she would die of pleasure. She thought she would come.

Without meaning to, she moved her hips in a sensual arc, wriggling so that her closed thighs exerted some pressure on her desperate clitoris, and still they continued to kiss her breasts.

A moan of bliss and frustration broke from her. "Please," she whispered. "Take off the tail, touch me there, take me, I need..."

"Control your impatience," Silenius said around her nipple. He flicked it hard with his tongue, drew back a little to examine the result, then bent his head once more and took her nipple between his teeth.

Ella cried out. "Oh, God!"

Silenius laughed softly, and she felt the vibrations through his stroking teeth. Johnny blew against her other nipple, giving her fresh, contrasting pleasure. Ella bucked her hips, and this

time when they landed back on the bed, Silenius moved his hand and placed it on the constricting tail, just over the juncture of her legs. Ella cried out in gratitude and need, and realized Johnny had placed his hand over the satyr's. The combined weight felt delicious, joyous. They pressed down harder. As if in some secret communication, they lifted their heads, then dipped them again in perfect time, taking her breasts into their mouths and sucking strongly.

Orgasm battered her. Helpless under their mouths and their hands pressing her down into the bed, she writhed, consumed by pleasure, drowning in it. Somewhere she was aware of her own animal cries and gasps, of the men's heavy breathing as her climax aroused them further.

When she could focus again, she was gazing up into the satyr's vivid dark eyes.

*He has eyes like Sebastian.* The thought came unbidden and almost made her laugh because the steward's eyes had never looked so mischievous or so self-satisfied and they'd certainly never blazed with naked lust. Not when they gazed at her anyway. No, the satyr's eyes were more like Joseph's.

Joseph, whom she'd already all but forgotten in this fresh adventure. What sort of harlot was she?

A very happy one.

She smiled and purred under their stroking hands.

"That was beautiful," she sighed. "Amazing..."

"Good," said Johnny hoarsely. "Now roll over and take off that damned tail so we can fuck you."

When Ella rolled over with alacrity, Silenius laughed. They found the fastenings easily and dragged the fish tail off her at last. Ella spread her legs with something close to ecstasy, while the men caressed the curves of her bottom, reaching between her thighs, running their fingers up the crack from her clitoris to her anus, exploring with arousing, sensitive fingers that had her desperate for more sex before the after-pangs of the last orgasm had properly passed.

Ella pushed herself onto her knees, eager to see her lovers in all their glory. For a little, they all knelt together and she could run her hands over their shoulders and chests and thighs, gaze her fill at their swollen, rigid cocks. Though part of her longed to, she wasn't ready yet to touch them—a ridiculous shyness when she considered the state of abandon they'd already reduced her to.

Smiling, she leaned in to Johnny and brushed her lips along his clavicle. She trailed her finger over his biceps, loving the strength and power latent in his body. Her free hand rested on the satyr's hip bone, then began to move around the curve of his firm, tight buttock. She wanted to

purr some more. Slowly, she slid her hand upward and found the satyr's tail, where it joined to his body.

She said curiously, "I can't feel the join."

"Perfect costume."

"Will it come off in the bath?"

"If it doesn't, I'll be suing."

She smiled, kissing his shoulder, dabbing little pinpricks with her tongue. She became aware that one of the satyr's hands was not on her but on Johnny, and that Johnny was returning the caress. She watched them exploring each other's bodies, manly hands gliding over muscular bodies. She realized that part of the pleasure for her had been the roughness of Johnny's hands, contrasting with the smoother touch of the noble satyr. But both were physically imposing men, and she still couldn't believe what she was doing with them.

The unthreatening, stroking exploration washed away the last vestiges of Ella's shyness. She placed her hands on their chests and swept them downward over their ribs and abdomens until she encountered their cocks, which she grasped, one in each hand.

They seemed to hold their breaths, and when she squeezed, they hissed in unison.

Ella smiled.

"Kiss it," Silenius whispered.

Still holding Johnny's cock in her left hand, she sat back, drawing him with her, and lowered her mouth to the satyr's cock. A drop of moisture beaded from its slit as she approached. His scent filled her nostrils, distinctive, familiar, yet elusive. She'd met him before somewhere, she'd swear it. She swiped her tongue across the head of his cock, her first taste, and gave an inarticulate little growl before she closed her lips around him.

He sighed, taking her head between his hands. Johnny's cock slid out of her fist and, though she missed it, it meant she could use both hands to hold the satyr's hips while she slid her mouth up and down the long length of his cock. Silenius drew back the foreskin for her, guiding her to the way he clearly liked best.

Something nudged against her bottom. The blunt head of Johnny's cock, pressing into her crack. With a gasp of pleasure, she pushed back and, as if encouraged, Johnny slipped his hand between her legs, finding her hot, slick folds. Probing, he found her entrance and slipped his finger inside her.

Her pussy contracted as if closing him in, and he groaned, dragging his finger free. Gazing upward from the satyr's cock, Ella saw him offer Silenius his finger, glistening with her juices. Silenius took it into his mouth, just as Johnny pushed his cock inside her body.



Ella cried out from shock and pleasure, loosening her mouth's grip on the satyr's cock. At once Silenius moved her head for her, commanding her to continue while he sucked Johnny's finger and the blacksmith began to fuck her as if his life depended on it.

Overwhelmed, Ella used her teeth and her tongue to caress Silenius with new savagery. At last the satyr seemed to be losing control. His breath sounded like a horse's after a hard morning's riding. Excited beyond belief that she was making him come, Ella wondered if she would come at the same time, or if Johnny would. Surely he couldn't keep up the pace of this pounding for much longer. And as for her, the very idea of what she was doing, of what was being done to her, was enough to send her over the edge.

With sudden decision, she swallowed Silenius. He let out a shout that must surely have been heard in Malevolin. At the same time Johnny slammed into her before dragging his cock free, shooting his seed up her back in warm spurts while she swallowed the satyr's.

Silenius withdrew from her throat and mouth surprisingly gently and held her while she came. Johnny's arms were wrapped around both of them as they all heaved and trembled together. Ella held the satyr's still-pulsing cock in her hand as if it was her only lifeline.

After a few minutes, Johnny said, "Bloody hell."

Silenius began to laugh.

Detaching himself at last, he stepped naked off the bed and Ella watched his tight buttocks sway as he walked across the room.

"Time to go back to the ball," she agreed, not without a hint of regret. But my God, what an experience she'd had!

"Oh, no," said Silenius in surprise. "Not till I've drunk wine from your pussy and then fucked it. We've many pleasures still to achieve."

Incredibly, his words set her tingling again. Would this evening never end?

She lay back on the pillows, cradling Johnny's contented head to her breast where he lazily licked and nuzzled. Silenius, his still erect cock swinging between his legs, came back with the wine bottle.

Casually, he dribbled some over her breast, where it trickled over Johnny's smiling lips. He licked it clean. Then Silenius took her by the ankles and lifted her legs, placing them one at a time on his shoulders. In a perfect image of decadence, he took a swig from the bottle and held it in his mouth while he bent and lowered his head and fastened his mouth to Ella's clitoris.

She came at once, hard and uncontrollably, but he wouldn't let up, continuing to lick and suck her through it all, before soothing her with his tongue. Then, lifting the bottle from the floor once more, he poured some wine directly onto her pussy. It felt deliciously cool on her over-

sensitive, over-excited bits, and when his mouth returned to her, the contrast was beautiful.

Aroused once more by Ella's obvious pleasure, Johnny lifted himself and knelt over her face, offering her his semi-erect cock. She took it eagerly into her mouth, feeling it grow and harden. Ella lost herself in pure, physical pleasure once more. Silenius found the same rhythm as Johnny, pushing his tongue into her entrance in perfect timing with Johnny's cock in her mouth. It was slow, intense and delightfully inevitable. She knew she would come. It was just a matter of when. And Silenius seemed inclined to tease her, drawing back each time she seemed to be on the verge before beginning the torture all over again.

But each time, she was reaching higher and knew the climax would be as profound as anything they'd yet given her. Then, just as she felt herself begin to fall, he loosened his mouth and sat up.

With her mouth full of Johnny's cock, her protest was entirely inarticulate. But Silenius only laughed softly and lifted her hips over his knees.

At last she felt his cock nudge her folds. He entered her slowly but completely in one relentless push. There was no resistance. She was already so wet and pleased and eager for more that her body all but sucked him in. And then he simply stayed still inside her, throbbing, while she tried to move her hips and make him fuck her.

Only when Johnny began to come did he move in long, strong strokes that grew increasingly fast until he took her by the hips and hammered her over the edge. She tried to tell him he didn't need to withdraw, that she'd taken precautions against pregnancy, but he'd already dragged his cock free of her with a groan of loss and ecstasy.

Helpless in the throes of her own orgasm, Ella knew how he felt.

"A bath," Silenius said shakily at last. "And then back to the ball."

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Of course, it didn't quite work out that way. There was some play in the bath that got a little out of hand, involving the satyr's tail strung between Ella's legs and held up by Johnny. But in the end they left her to finish her bath in private.

And amazingly, as she slipped back into the constricting mermaid's costume, Ella realized there would still be time to bid farewell to her guests. And, with a secret, wicked frisson, her lovers. But when she returned to the blaze of light and noise in the ballroom, almost surprised to hear the orchestra still playing and see couples still waltzing enthusiastically, neither of her lovers was anywhere to be seen. They had vanished like Joseph. Like every man in her life except

Sebastian.

*Sebastian.* A slow smile curved Ella's lips as little fragments from this evening and the last ball clicked into place like shards of broken tile forming a mosaic. The picture they created was outrageous, yet it felt absolutely right. She didn't need to chase after her mysterious lovers, Joseph and Silenius, with a glass slipper in hand. Their identity suddenly became crystal clear, and deep inside she felt she'd known it all along.

Now to prove it and unmask the hidden face of her pleasure-giving culprit.

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Sebastian stared unseeingly at the mountain of paperwork on his desk. He knew he should go and find the queen. What he wanted to do was retreat to his own private room.

"Why so sad?"

He didn't even turn. He knew the voice. The last thing it had said to him was "Oops! Sorry!" while trying not to laugh.

To which he'd responded impatiently, "You were meant to change me into someone who might be easily *disguised* as a satyr!"

"I know, dear—sorry, but truly, what's the difference?"

Sebastian had shown her his unnecessary appendage. "I've got a bloody tail!"

Lucinda had smiled winningly. "Yes, I see that, but it might come in useful."

In fact it had, in the bath, rubbing between Ella's legs and giving her yet another orgasm, but he was not about to confide that knowledge to the little old lady leaning over his shoulder at the desk now.

"I'm not sad," he growled. "I'm busy."

"You don't look it. Shall I get rid of all these for you?" she suggested, pointing her mended wand at the colossal paper mountain in what he could only describe as a menacing manner.

"God, no!" He fended her off with a wave of his hand. "Just tell me why you've come. Or did you mean to be somewhere else?"

Ignoring his sarcasm—if indeed she noticed it—she said, "Oh, no I came to see you—just to make sure it turned out all right."

"You mean to see if my pointed ears and tail vanished at midnight, or just my clothes?"

"No, to see if you enjoyed yourself."

Sebastian felt his whole body flush. The entire evening had been a meshing of extreme pleasure and pain, joy and emptiness, triumph and jealousy.

With difficulty, he said, “Let’s just say, I won’t be doing it again. I’m grateful for your help, but I’ve discovered it’s not what I want. It never was.”

“I thought you wanted to be what she wanted.”

*Give me a new face*, he’d said once. She’d given him two, now, and wearing each of them he’d fucked the queen.

“I’m not, though, am I? When I stand in front of her this morning, she’ll look right through me all over again, thinking of my other bloody faces.”

“Tsk, tsk,” said the fairy godmother, though whether at his swearing or at his predicament was unclear. “You think she’s incapable of seeing what’s beneath a handsome face?”

Sebastian shook his head. “No. Once, when she was a young girl, perhaps. Not now. She’s just incapable of seeing what’s beneath mine.”

“Then show her,” said the fairy godmother. Sebastian blinked at her, and she smiled. “Or have you done that already?”

## Chapter Eight

“Highness, the fact that Malevolin has stopped amassing troops at our border is a good sign. Perhaps it’s time to hold a summit with Prince Theodore and discuss ways in which our two countries can not only coexist peacefully, but even benefit each other.” Count Loyola leaned forward over the conference table, tapping the tips of his fingertips together. “Ambassador Slieman has expressed to me a willingness on the part of the prince regent to arrange such a meeting.”

Ella paused, considering his words. On the surface, the temporary halt of saber-rattling at the border did appear to be a gesture of peace, but deep in her heart she felt something was off. She knew her stepsisters and mother too well to believe they would ever extend an olive branch. Likely they’d simply changed tactics and had a new plan in mind to manipulate rather than overpower Jondalar. But she couldn’t fathom it without seeing Euphemia and her puppet-prince Theodore face to face.

“You have a point, Loyola, but I believe a social setting rather than a formal meeting would be a better method of receiving the royal family in Jondalar. A celebration in honor of my stepmother and sisters’ visit seems appropriate, more welcoming than a cold meeting of dignitaries flanked on either side of a board room table.”

“An excellent idea, Your Highness. A feast with perhaps a concert afterward would be just the thing,” Lord Marbury agreed and there was a general murmur of consent around the table.

“Actually, I was thinking of hosting another ball.” Ella willed herself not to blush as her other agenda danced in her mind. She schooled her face to composure so none of her Privy Council would guess the libidinous drift of her thoughts. “My stepsisters and mother always did love to dance and wear elaborate costumes. It’s just the thing to put Euphemia and Almeda in a receptive frame of mind.”

She knew those two were her real nemeses. Theodore was a dupe and Hortense had never been more than her sister and mother’s obedient shadow. Ella would listen and learn and find out their real motive for the sudden cessation of hostilities. And if there was another more personal reason she wished to have one last ball, her council need never know it.

“Another ball?” Loyola’s eyebrows shot up nearly to his hairline. His pointed moustache twitched. “Do you really think that is necessary?”

“The expense,” another council member murmured.

“This event will be different.” Ella described the plan she’d already begun to hatch before coming to this meeting. “Our royal guests couldn’t be expected to attend a ball with nobility and commoners alike and, as you say, another ball would be an extravagance. This one will be a fundraiser instead. Only the wealthiest will be invited and the money raised will go to orphanages and hospitals in *both* Jondalar and Malevolin. A gesture of goodwill, do you see?” She smiled at the beauty of her plan. “Inclusion on the guest list will be such an honor people will gladly pay for the privilege of being invited. A winning situation all around—entertainment for our Malevolin guests and much-needed income for charities.”

She turned to Sebastian, sitting silently on her right as always. “Of course, the burden of organizing yet another ball will fall on you. Are you up for the task one last time?”

“I’m here to serve you.” He didn’t raise his gaze from the parchment on which he took notes, but Ella thought she saw his eyes glitter. Was he annoyed? Amused? Lustful? All three? This time she would work closely with him on the plans for the event, and in the process she’d poke and prod him until he revealed more than the calm mask he always showed her.

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When the meeting was finally over, Ella summoned Sebastian to her office, where she sat behind the desk studying her guest list in progress.

“Please, sit down.” She gestured him into the chair across from her. “I’ve had several ideas as

far as a theme for the ball. I'd considered playing with the elements—earth, fire, air, water, but the concept seems a little nebulous. But it just now occurred to me that I want to go back to the basics. What is a costumed ball about? Hiding identity behind a mask or a false persona.”

She checked Sebastian's face, but his expression was irritatingly neutral. It hardly seemed possible that he contained the unbridled passion or commanding intensity of either of her two mystery lovers, but she was determined to continue pressing until she found out.

“Therefore, this ball will be about showing your true face by your choice of mask.”

For the first time, Sebastian glanced up and met her eyes. “Pardon?”

She rose from her chair and walked toward the window to look out at the dreary, rainy day.

“Oh, I don't expect most of these nobles to understand the assignment. They'll put on their finest clothing and wear a satin or sequined mask to hide their eyes. But those who really dare to take the challenge will show their inner self through what they wear and how they cover their face.”

Ella watched the raindrops stream down the windowpane for a moment and listened for the sound of Sebastian in the room behind her. But he didn't so much as clear his throat or shift in his chair.

“For example,” she continued, gesturing to her dress as she spoke. “This isn't who I really am. This crown. These jewels. Underneath I'm... Well, I'm not sure who I am. No longer my father's daughter or my stepmother's servant, but not a queen either. I'm simply a woman who yearns for a person to love her, a man she can trust completely and place all her confidence in.”

She turned toward Sebastian at last, hoping to catch a glimmer of response to her statement.

He'd turned in the chair and was gazing at her with those profound, dark eyes. “And how would you illustrate that by a costume?” His husky voice floated through the quiet room and touched her with an almost physical connection.

She smiled then, a little coy and teasing, an invitation in her manner as well as her words.

“You'll have to come to the ball and find out.”

His brows drew together in a slight frown as if he was trying to decide whether she was flirting or making fun of him.

Ella wanted him to have no doubt as to her intentions. “Come to the ball, Sebastian,” she commanded, “and stay until the unmasking this time.”

She couldn't have been much clearer if she directly accused him of using Lucinda's magic to play the parts of both Joseph and Silenius, but it put the burden of confirming or denying it on him. Would he unmask for her or continue to act the role of her loyal steward as if he'd never held her in his arms and given her the greatest pleasure she'd ever known?

Sebastian set aside his ever present notebook at last, placing it on her desk before rising to his feet and coming to join her by the window. As he approached, Ella's skin prickled and the hair on her arms rose as if magnetized. Her body recognized him on an elemental level even if his face didn't match what she'd been shown the nights of the balls. How could she ever go back to their old relationship now? If her guess was right and this man was her secret lover, then everything must change, and in Ella's experience, change usually didn't end well.

He stood beside her, drawing the curtain away to reveal more of the window and the dripping leaves of the tree beyond. She studied the line of his jaw, the hard planes of his face, searching for similarities between him and her fantasy men. She thought she found it in his eyes that gazed at the garden as though looking beyond it.

"Besides entertaining the Malevolin delegation, what are your hopes for this ball?" he asked with studied casualness.

Ella understood that he asked what other sexual fantasies she held in her heart. She waited to answer, considering the possibilities and how she could phrase her request. "I learned much about myself at the last two balls, what I enjoy, what I need and what I really want. This time I hope I could learn more about others' needs—what they wish for and dream about."

She glanced at Sebastian, the furrowed brow, the set mouth, lips full despite its severe line. If this man wasn't her dependable, trustworthy friend, Sebastian, who was he? Maybe she'd never really known him at all. Underneath he was different than she'd ever imagined and, as much as he'd pleased her, that unknown factor frightened Ella. It was time for him to reveal himself and share his innermost self as she had done.

In case he didn't get her veiled innuendo, she made it clearer. "I would like to be whatever my...dance partner...wishes me to be." She looked Sebastian in the eye. "You know, there to serve him."

His face remained still, but his throat moved as he swallowed.

Ella suppressed a smile.

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She knew. Sebastian felt the change in the way she regarded him over the last few days, no longer as if he was a coat rack for her to hang her cape on, but as if he was a real person whom she could see standing in front of her. How could she have found out? Had that blasted Lucinda accidentally told her or had his acting been so poor Ella recognized him even under the guise of magic that distorted his features and masked his voice?

More importantly—how did she feel about his deception? She didn't seem angry. She hadn't accused him outright or terminated his employment. In fact, she seemed nearly playful, hinting at things and daring him to reveal himself. Should he simply admit the truth to her?

But what if he was wrong? What if the attraction he thought he felt between them was in his own mind and she had no idea her lovers were him? What if she was furious when he told her? Or worse, what if she wanted to fuck him one last time then send him on his way like John the blacksmith—fine for a bit of frolic, but never to be recognized in public? What if he only meant sex to her, nothing more?

Well, it was better than being a coat rack, wasn't it? Except that when he'd begun these masquerades, he'd never imagined being in this ridiculous position of being jealous of himself. If he took her again, whether it would prove to be the last time or not, he'd make damned sure she knew who was really fucking her.

Sebastian snorted in disgust at his lack of focus and turned his attention back to the list lying on his desk. He had fifty things to accomplish within a fortnight and all he'd been able to do lately was think about Ella, worry, wonder and weigh options like a schoolboy with a crush.

He never should've accepted Lucinda's offer to transform him. Her magic had apparently changed him inside as well as out since he could no longer concentrate or control his emotions as he'd done for so many years. His inattention would be his ruin and possibly harmful to the kingdom, especially with so much at stake during this upcoming Malevolin visit. Sex should be the last thing on his mind. This was his opportunity to sound out the royal family and discover their agenda, because he didn't believe it was to hammer out the peace with Jondalar.

As though summoned by his thoughts, a servant knocked at the door of his office and announced the arrival of the Malevolin ambassador, Roy Slieman.

The sharp-eyed diplomat strode in with an arrogant air and sat without waiting to be invited. "I need to discuss with you the protocol for the royal stay. I assume you've reserved a wing for the entire Malevolin entourage? Princess Euphemia has certain dietary restrictions your cook will need to be aware of. Lady Almeda will want one of the bedrooms with south facing windows and Lady Hortense prefers a room decorated in blue with a fire burning in it at all times no matter how warm the weather."

He leaned forward and set a piece of paper on Sebastian's desk. "Her Highness's diet."

Sebastian nodded and accepted it. "I'll pass on their requests to the staff. Let me know if there's anything else I can do to make their visit more comfortable." He offered a sheaf of papers to Slieman. "Here's the itinerary for the days of their visit. It includes touring nearby historical sites, meeting with the Privy Council and local politicians in an informal luncheon



and, of course, the masquerade ball for the needy.”

“Queen Ella has become quite fond of masquerades recently, hasn’t she?” Slieman emphasized the word ‘masquerade’, making it sound as slimy as a slug’s trail.

Sebastian knew rumors of the queen’s sexual exploits had spread like wildfire through the city. Although no one had actually witnessed her performing any lewd acts, the fact that Ella had disappeared into the maze with a stranger one night and retired to her room after being seen in the company of two men at the second ball had not gone unnoticed. Sebastian couldn’t help but feel guilty he’d contributed to the gossip by his behavior, even though Ella had been determined to pursue a dalliance with or without him.

He answered the sneering ambassador now with all the aplomb he could muster. “Yes, Her Majesty has been enjoying some much-deserved entertainment after many years of devoting herself to running this country.”

Slieman nodded. “Entertainment. Of course, queens as well as serving wenches must play sometime. Women are weak-willed creatures, hardly suited to the heavy burden of politics.”

Not wishing to antagonize the man from whom he hoped to glean more information, Sebastian let the slur on Ella’s character slide and changed the subject. “There’s been enmity between our two countries for too long. It’s time to find a way to coexist peaceably. What does the prince regent hope to achieve during his talks with Queen Ella and the Council? I’ll do everything in my power to promote his ideas.”

Ambassador Slieman tilted his head and narrowed his eyes. “You? Aren’t you simply the queen’s steward? How much power do you wield at court?”

Sebastian realized his mistake and quickly shifted his stance. “None. I only meant I could plant a seed prior to their meeting if you want to share what the king will be discussing with her.”

Slieman smiled and Sebastian felt as if someone had trailed an ice cold finger up his spine. “All will be revealed in due time. It is up to their Highnesses to explain their proposed...policy changes to Queen Ella. There’s nothing I have to tell you at this time.”

Sebastian nodded. “Very well. Again, please let me know of anything I can do to make the royal family’s visit a pleasant one.”

The ambassador rose, but paused before leaving the office. “A man such as you is in a position to be of great use to those in power. I’ll keep your offer in mind.”

He walked out of the room leaving the choking scent of amber musk behind.

Fanning a hand in front of his face, Sebastian stood and went to the window to draw a breath of fresh air. He thought about what Slieman had said and left unsaid and became more determined than ever to listen for any suggestion of ulterior motives during the Malevolin visit.

List in hand, Sebastian left his office to go to the kitchen and confer with the cook about the upcoming banquet and Euphemia's special diet. He descended one of the back staircases and as he turned the corner, his attention was on the paper he carried, so he ran into the woman coming from the opposite direction.

His eyes widened to meet Ella here in the servants' area, although he shouldn't have been surprised. Her Highness was likely to be found in any part of the castle, her sensibilities not too refined for her to be involved in the mechanics of how her household was run.

His heart pounded from the mere sight of her. She was dressed in a simple yellow frock that matched her hair, which was wrapped in a white head scarf. Curling tendrils escaped the scarf and framed her face, flushed from the heat of the kitchens. She was absolutely adorable. It was all he could do not to grab her and kiss her right there at the foot of the stairs.

"Highness." Sebastian bowed and stepped aside so she could pass.

"Sebastian, just who I need to see." She smiled, and his breath stopped. His chest ached as if he had pneumonia. His symptoms were getting worse. Fighting his attraction to the queen had long been a trial. Since the events of the balls it had become absolute torture.

"What may I do for you, Madam?" He forced his eyes to meet hers rather than stray to her plump cleavage displayed by the scoop neck of her dress.

Her expression as she gazed at him was caught between a smile and a frown. "There's no need to speak so formally, Sebastian. I'd hoped we could talk for a bit."

Flip. His stomach jumped like a fish on the surface of a lake. This was it. She was finally going to confront him about everything that had happened between them. She knew. He knew she knew.

She laid a hand on his arm. "Let's step outside. I'm sweltering hot from the kitchen."

He felt the light touch of her hand even through the sleeve of his jacket. She burned him.

Sebastian glanced at the woman beside him, enchanted again by her disheveled appearance. Was this how she'd dressed before she became a queen? He could scarcely picture her drudging away in her stepmother's kitchen. Ever since he'd known her, she'd been a royal, far out of his league. But today, this minute, as they walked together with her arm linked through his in the weak sunlight of a cloudy day, he felt like her equal, even her partner. Long before she'd been a queen, Ella had been a merchant's daughter and then a servant in her own home. She wasn't a star to his earth, but a mortal woman with the sexual needs and the desire for love of any woman.

If he stopped walking, turned toward her and bent his head only a little, he could kiss her. Would she pull away or curve her hand around the back of his neck and draw him closer?

“Have you prepared a costume for the ball?” She glanced up at him, a smile slanting her lips. He shrugged. “I’ve something in mind, although I think most of my time will be devoted to attending the needs of the delegation from Malevolin.”

“I’d thought of that.” She nodded. “I plan to ask Count Loyola to see to the guests should I decide to take a short rest from the proceedings. He’ll be honored to be chosen and probably be more diplomatic than I.”

Sebastian questioned the wisdom of indulging in extracurricular activities right under the noses of her enemies, but held his tongue. Not only was it not his place to reprimand Ella, but he’d be denying himself pleasure he could no longer do without. If she wanted to play with Joseph, Silenius or any other character Sebastian might invent, he was going to satisfy her whim.

“I must admit, I’m nervous to see my step-family again.” Ella kicked a stone with the toe of her silk slipper, sending it rattling down the path before them. “I haven’t since I married Charming. How long has it been now? Thirteen years.”

She shook her head. “I don’t know why it bothers me so much. My stepmother’s opinion doesn’t matter to me. I have no relationship with either her or my sisters. They’re only women I happen to be related to by marriage. And yet, I’m anxious as if they still had some power over me.”

He wanted to slip his hand around her waist, hug her, do anything to alleviate her apprehension, but Sebastian merely covered her hand on his arm with his. “You were a girl when you saw them last and your stepmother did have power over you. It’s only natural that you should still feel some fear of her. The woman kept you enslaved and nearly ruined your life.”

Ella laughed suddenly, a light tinkling sound like water bubbling in the garden fountain. “And yet I’m inviting her brood to celebrate and socialize as if we were one big happy family, as if Almeda had never made me sleep on a pallet on the kitchen floor among the cinders and as if Malevolin wasn’t eager to swallow our kingdom. How ironic!”

“Life is strange and families are stranger,” Sebastian agreed.

She kicked the pebble again, sending it flying off into a patch of chrysanthemums. “Is your family strange? You never talk about them. Please, tell me a little about your family so I don’t feel so badly about mine.”

He’d already told her most of his story while in his guise of Joseph so he chose to relate an anecdote about his sister.

“I’m the oldest in my family, but my sister, Marina is only ten months younger than me. One time she put snakes in my bed.” He smiled when Ella laughed. “She was angry at me for not

letting her go out with a boy who was trouble. I made her stay home so she paid me back in the most evil way she could think of, knowing how I hate snakes.

“Unfortunately, I wasn’t the one who discovered the snakes.” He grinned. “My poor little brother Liam felt sick that night, so he climbed into my bed. I was outside getting more firewood when I heard him screaming.”

Ella clapped her hand over her mouth. “Oh, the poor little thing, he must have been beside himself.”

“Oh, he was. It took a long time to calm him down, and the thing he was most upset about was that he’d squashed and killed one of the snakes. The lad always was tender hearted. We had to have a funeral for it the next day.”

“What about Marina? Did you punish her?”

Sebastian shook his head. “She felt bad enough without a scolding. She used all our sugar and flour allotment for the month to make a cake for Liam.” He smiled at the memory. “And by the way, I was right about the boy she wanted to see. He got one of her friends pregnant, then deserted her before the year was out. Marina ended up marrying the baker in our town, an older man, but very decent and kind.”

Ella leaned into him, squeezing his arm a little. “You see, was that so hard, sharing a story? I’ve learned more about you in the past few minutes than in all the years I’ve known you.”

“What have you learned?” He lifted an eyebrow, pretending to tease, but honestly eager to hear her assessment of him.

“That you were a responsible older brother, protective but fair, kind to your younger siblings, soft-hearted enough to have a funeral for a snake to make a little boy feel better. I’ve learned that the loyal, solid man I know today sprang from an equally devoted and steady youth.”

Sebastian felt his cheeks burn and it wasn’t from the sunlight filtering through the clouds. He couldn’t remember when he’d ever been praised, and her admiration made him uncomfortable.

“What about your childhood? You must have some memories of your half-siblings that weren’t horrible.”

Ella cocked her head, her expression quizzical. “You’d think so, wouldn’t you?” Then she smiled. “Well, yes, I suppose there were. Hortense isn’t nearly as bad as Euphemia, who is an exact copy of her mother. Hortense is simply weak-willed and happy to follow someone else’s lead. When my father first married Almeda, she and I would play together. It was only after his death that Almeda forbade her to interact with me.”

“How old were you then?” Sebastian asked gently.

“Twelve when Papa married again; fourteen when he died.” Ella’s eyes were distant and sad. It

was all he could do not to gather her against him and hold her. He wanted to rock her until her pain eased.

She broke from her reverie with an impish grin. "As I said, Hortense was more than willing to obey a stronger person's desires. I got us both into many scrapes, risking our lives at times. There was an instance of playing toreador with a neighbor's bull in a pasture from which we barely escaped. Another time I insisted we take turns balancing on the ridge of our shed like tightrope walkers. Luckily the fall only left Hortense with a bruised tailbone. And there was a summer day when we were playing mermaids, holding our breath underwater, and poor Hortense nearly drowned."

Sebastian chuckled, picturing Ella as a knobby-kneed, hard-headed girl. "You and my sister Lili would have gotten along. She was always the imaginative one."

"I like hearing about your family. I'd like to meet them sometime."

His smile evaporated as he thought of how few of his ten siblings there were left to meet.

"It seems you've worked very hard and sacrificed much for your family," Ella continued. "I wish I'd known about them sooner. I was so caught up in my failing marriage and then the demands of the kingdom that I failed to learn about the one person who has been my right hand all of these years."

Sebastian had never imagined that the day the queen acknowledged him as more than a coat rack, he'd actually feel awkward and tongue-tied as if thrust unprepared onto a stage. He tugged a couple of dark green leaves off the nearest bush, and threw them into the breeze. "I suppose we should get back to making preparations for the ball. I have a long list of things to accomplish by the end of the day."

"Let me help you." Ella stepped in front of him. "Give me some tasks to accomplish and I'll do them. You've put enough effort into my frivolous social events already. How may I serve you, Sebastian?"

She smiled, and his gaze became riveted on her petal-soft lips. How he longed to lean just a little farther and cover them with his mouth. He remembered the one brief kiss stolen from her before he fled the maze and thought it was sweeter than the entire debauched evening of sex at the following ball. Of course, he couldn't deny he'd enjoyed infinite pleasures with both her and, if he was to be honest, the blacksmith, but he'd treasured the kiss more.

He was almost completely certain of her knowledge of his identities and of her desire to kiss him now. He could see it in her eyes. But Sebastian held back, still afraid he might have misread things and their bond of friendship would crumble like bad masonry if he tapped his chisel the wrong way.

Abruptly, Sebastian handed Ella the paper Ambassador Slieman had given him. “If you wouldn’t mind, this needs to go to the cook—Queen Euphemia’s dietary needs. And there are special room requests from Lady Almeda and Lady Hortense as well.”

Ella blinked and focused on the list in her hand. How ironic. “Naturally. I believe it is my lot in life to serve these ladies. Even as a queen, I can’t escape it.”

She led the way from the garden and Sebastian followed behind, more exhausted than if he’d run a mile. The turmoil of emotions and sharing was draining. How did people manage it?

## Chapter Nine

Ella sat on her throne with Euphemia on her right and Almeda on her left. Prince Theodore lounged in a chair on the other side of his wife while Hortense had been banished to stand with the ladies of the court. Ella searched the room for Sebastian, but didn’t see him. He hadn’t been around since earlier that afternoon when he’d told her he must take care of a few final details for the ball. She longed for his steady presence close by, for seeing her stepfamily again had been much harder than she’d thought it would be.

“An...interesting theme this evening.” Almeda leaned close and spoke from behind the flesh-toned mask that perfectly simulated her face except for making it about twenty years younger.

“Come as you are, so to speak. Clever.”

As always, her words dripped sarcasm. Ella doubted her stepmother could speak any other way after so many years of inflecting her tone with scorn. But even understanding what a shallow, horrible person the woman was, she couldn’t help cringing inside at the tiny cut—one in a series of cuts Euphemia and Almeda had been administering since they’d arrived several days ago.

The child inside Ella had reacted with an ingrained response, losing more confidence at every slight. Worst of all, she’d found herself explaining her actions to her stepmother, who deserved no excuses or explanations.

“Yes, I’m aware the slates on the castle roof need replacing, but road repair comes first.” “No, I don’t intend to have the carriage gilded gold. I don’t believe the people need to see trappings of royalty to know who I am.”

And now. “Dressing as our inner selves was meant to give each of us an opportunity to look within and see who we really are, to strip away the daily masks we wear.”

“So *that’s* what you see when you examine yourself?” Almeda gazed at her with aging eyes behind the youthful mask.

Ella knew her mask must look strange not only to Almeda, but to everyone. It was the most elaborate part of her costume, her dress being a plain, white shift tonight. The construction of her mask had been a much more painstaking business for the artisan who’d made it. After painting a mask of her features, he’d fragmented the image so her face was shown in scattered bits as chaotic and confused as she often felt.

Her reflection had showed her quite an eerie image that suggested a woman in turmoil and Ella had wondered whether this was really the face she should reveal to her subjects and the Malevolin contingent. Did they all need to know she felt so uncertain inside? It would hardly breed confidence in her as a monarch.

Nevertheless, she’d worn the mask for herself and for Sebastian so he’d see her as she truly was. Unfortunately, he seemed to have decided to forego the ball tonight—or maybe he simply hadn’t arrived yet and she could expect him any minute in some new disguise.

Euphemia leaned toward her now, smelling of the peppermints she sucked constantly which didn’t quite mask the odor of her breath. “Sister, your affair is not nearly as decadent as I’d expected. From what I heard I half expected naked serving wenches and a Bacchanalian orgy for the evening’s entertainment.”

Ella was extremely aware of the way Euphemia stressed “your affair”, letting her know she’d heard the rumors about the last two balls. Were they rumors if they were the truth? Ella wondered. She suddenly felt sleazy and ashamed of her antics, the fun drained from her experiences exactly as Euphemia had intended.

“You did nothing wrong,” a masculine voice murmured in her other ear, his breath brushing against her skin. Ella nearly bolted from her seat and let out a small cry, but a heavy hand rested on her shoulder and the voice whispered, “Shh. Don’t be afraid.”

Ignoring her stepsister’s surprised exclamation Ella whirled to face—nothing. There was no one standing beside her yet she could still feel the weight of a hand on her shoulder. She reached for it and touched solid, warm flesh.

“I didn’t mean to frighten you,” the growly murmur continued. “It’s only my costume. Perhaps you shouldn’t act as if you’d seen a ghost. Your relatives might think you mad.”

Ella turned back to Euphemia. “I’m so sorry. I thought I felt something, perhaps an insect flitting against my shoulder. Will you excuse me? Lord Loyola will introduce you to some of the guests and get you anything you need.” She summoned Loyola with a wave of her hand and rose from her throne.

Acknowledging Prince Theodore with a bow of her head, Ella descended the steps of the dais before Euphemia or Almeda could say anything. The glittering throng filling the ballroom parted to make way for her. She noted the lack of imagination in most of the costumes—regular fancy dress with many flesh-colored masks replacing the usual black ones.

A few women had crystal or diamond teardrops sewn to their masks to show some hidden sorrow, but most, as she'd predicted, didn't seem to have understood how to display their inner self on the outside. That was fine. The assignment had really been only for herself and Sebastian, and Ella was shocked at the way he'd interpreted it. Was this really how he saw himself—as invisible?

She felt him behind her, smelled his scent, before he spoke again. "I shouldn't have approached you while you were with them, but I couldn't stand to hear them speak to you that way and see how it affected you."

Ella wanted to reply, but couldn't without appearing mad. She smiled and nodded at several people, but kept listening to the man who crowded close behind her.

"You mustn't listen to anything they say or start to believe their opinion of you. You're a powerful queen and an amazing woman."

How did he do that? He barely murmured yet his voice reverberated in her ear until it seemed almost like it was echoing inside her mind. But the heat of his body and the tickling of his breath on her ear let her know she wasn't imagining the invisible man, whose hand was now pressed against the small of her back, guiding her from the room. It never entered her head to disobey his silent command.

Only when they'd exited the ballroom did she dare to speak. "You sound as if you believe you know me, sir, but do I know you?"

"Perhaps a little, but not as well as you think you do." His chuckle was warm but sent a shiver up her back. Her breasts were tender and her pussy throbbing from listening to the husky tone of his voice and from the sheer, erotic thrill of having an unseen lover.

She turned to look at the empty space behind her, reached out her hand and touched fabric, perhaps the front of his shirt because she felt his heart beating behind it. "Your costume is absolutely magical. How did you come by it?"

"A friend, whose miraculous skills are amazing if sometimes unpredictable."

Ella smiled. "Oh, yes, I had a friend like that once. She helped me attain something I thought was unachievable, although the results didn't turn out to be what I'd expected."

Her invisible suitor took hold of her arm and guided her down the hallway. "We haven't much time to spare. You'll be missed, tonight especially."



After they passed a guard near the entrance to her suite of rooms, she lowered her voice. "What happens now?"

"Now I'll show you the limits of what your body can bear. I'll bring you to orgasm over and over until you beg me to stop. And I'll show you the woman you really are, not the broken one your mask displays, but the confident, strong-willed beauty who isn't afraid to trust the man who will treat her the way she deserves to be treated."

"Trust," Ella repeated weakly. Her legs were wobbly and her lips barely able to form the word. He'd melted her with his powerful speech.

"Yes, trust, Madam. The one thing you lack. I want to give it back to you."

"How do you propose to do that?" She opened the door to her bedroom and stepped inside.

"Have you read of the practice of bondage in any of your special books?"

Her stomach flipped and she squeezed her legs tight together against the aching in her pussy. The very idea of silken cords or rough jute binding her limbs to the bedposts sent a frisson of desire shivering through her body.

"You know about my reading habits, sir?" She continued the pretense although there was no doubt her visitor was Sebastian, or that he knew she knew it.

He gave a hum of agreement, but didn't answer. "Are you interested in allowing me to practice some knot tying? Would you give up that much control?"

She wanted to, especially knowing her partner was Sebastian who would never hurt her or abandon her leaving her trussed in a compromising position. Ella exhaled her answer on a sigh.

"Yes, I would."

"Then let's begin."

With fascination she listened to his footsteps crossing the room, then watched as one of her drawers opened and he withdrew a long silk scarf. The fluttering bit of material floated through the air until it was beside her. Again she felt the warmth of his body just behind her as he tied the scarf over her eyes.

"I can't see you so what's the point of being blindfolded?"

"So you can't see what's coming next. 'Anticipation is one of the greatest aphrodisiacs'."

"Hm." She smiled. "A quote from one of those educational books. It looks as though I'm not the only one to spend time reading."

Ella relaxed into the blackness and opened her other senses, listening for every sound her lover made as he slowly removed her clothing, feeling the brush of air on her naked skin as it was revealed. Her flesh burned at the sensation, and he hadn't even begun to touch her yet.

When he'd stripped her bare, she stood awaiting further guidance, but her unseen lover moved

away, leaving her trembling from nervous excitement. She could feel his gaze on her just as it'd been when he was Joseph in the maze or Silenius watching her with Johnny. But if she thought about it, Sebastian had been studying her since long before these erotic adventures. How often had she glanced up at a Privy Council meeting and met his gaze, or turned from speaking to someone and caught him quickly looking away from her?

He'd always been there for her and now, stupidly belated it seemed, she realized he'd always been attracted to her. How could she have denied the evidence right in front of her for all this time? How could she have been so self-focused that she looked right through him?

She jerked when warm, hard hands suddenly touched her, stroking the length of her body from shoulders to hips. He propelled her across the room, walking her toward the bed. She felt every fiber of the rug beneath her feet, then listened to the whisper of the covers as Sebastian drew them off the bed. His hands pushed her gently down onto the edge of the mattress before he knelt at her feet and pushing her knees apart.

Ella swallowed. Her pussy was wide open, displayed for his pleasure. The petals of flesh burned hot at his examination, and liquid trickled from her clenching entrance to wet the sheet. For several long moments, he left her sitting that way, eager, open, desperate for his touch, and then he leaned in and licked her, once only, all the way up her slit. He swirled his tongue around her rigid clitoris before pulling away. It was just enough stimulation to make her long for more. Ella whimpered when he stopped.

"Lie back on the bed." His voice sounded like a stranger's, lower than normal, and as commanding as the voice of a god.

She obeyed, scooting back onto the mattress and lying down. Once more there was a pause during which she listened to Sebastian moving around the room. She didn't have to wait long to find out what he planned for her. His hand wrapped around her wrist and drew her arm over her head to tie it the bedpost with what felt like a cotton cord. Working quickly, he circled the bed and did the same to her other wrist, then both ankles. There was just enough play in the ropes that she wasn't too uncomfortable, enough stretch on her muscles to ensure she could feel she was tied up.

Ella lay splayed in a wide X. Breathing hard, she felt her breasts rising and falling, her nipples tightening even harder. Her pussy clenched and released in rhythmic pulses as she waited for what would come next.

Surprisingly it wasn't a touch or a kiss or even the slap of a flogger. Sebastian's voice cut across her ragged breathing after several seconds.

"Your Highness, what do you think is the most important thing you've done in your life so

far?”

Ella blinked behind the silken scarf, taken aback by the odd question. “I—I suppose the treaty with Fairland, or perhaps the bill allowing unionization of factory laborers.”

“Both admirable accomplishments, but not the answer I’m looking for.” His weight settled on the bed beside her and his fingertips brushed over the tip of her right breast, making her thrust it toward him. “You’ve given the people hope for a better life, but that’s still only a part of the most important thing you’ve done. Beyond being a queen, you are a woman with a generous heart and deep compassion for people.”

He leaned close and whispered near her ear. “The most important thing you’ve done in your life is to love—even when your love was given to a man who didn’t value it.”

He stopped speaking then and pressed his lips to the thudding pulse in her throat. Her arms ached for the comfort of holding him, but they only jerked once against their bonds. His lips burned her skin, harsh buttons pressed into her naked breasts.

He said, “It’s your capacity for love that makes you who you are. That makes people love you.”

“Nobody loves *me*,” she whispered, and was appalled by her own words. *Damn it, stop talking and make love to me before I weep...* How could she be this aroused physically while emotion swamped her? Emotions totally unconnected with the man who half lay across her naked body.

Or were they? Without warning, his finger slid inside her body, making her gasp with sudden pleasure. Her pussy contracted, holding him, and she had the sudden illusion of everything coming back to him, everything that had ever happened to her, everything she had ever known or felt joining to him by threads as invisible but as real as he was tonight.

His finger moved in long, slow strokes, pushing in and out of her. “Everyone loves some part of you, with some part of them. Is it so impossible that someone could love the whole?”

*Apparently. Everyone leaves me.* Ella bit her lips to prevent the words escaping. And abruptly, his finger withdrew. She let out a whimper.

“You haven’t answered me. Is it so impossible?”

Her hips thrust upward, searching for his touch.

“Answer,” he said again, his voice still quiet but implacable. It was simple, she realized in torment. No whip or other tool was necessary to discipline her. No answer, no caress.

“Yes,” she raged. “Everyone leaves me!”

She moaned as his finger returned to her. Like a reward, he slid a second finger in with it and his thumb brushed over her clitoris, sending pangs of new delight snaking through her.

“And you believe I will, too?”

“Won’t you?”

“That’s up to you, isn’t it? You’ve already trusted me tie you up. You’re helpless in my power. I can do what I like with your body. And yet you won’t trust me not to leave.”

The heel of his hand pressed tenderly on her pussy while his fingers caressed the inside. His breath stirred her lips, and she parted them instinctively, yearning for his kiss.

“You won’t believe that I love you.”

Emotion exploded inside her, joy and pain, disbelief and fear. “Show me,” she whispered, arching her neck, reaching for his mouth. It was so close she felt it smile, but it never touched hers. Instead, deliberately, his hand played her pussy, his fingers pumping in and out of her. His thumb and his palm caressed her clitoris until orgasm shook her.

The bed rattled as she tugged her bonds, but they held, curiously intensifying the pleasure by pinning her down. Through it all, she felt his gaze hot on her face, lapping up every sign of her ecstasy. She heard his all-but-panting breath, rejoiced in his excitement, which added hugely to her delight, but still he didn’t kiss her.

*Kissing is for lovers.*

*You won’t believe that I love you.*

“A little appetizer for you,” he said huskily.

“Appetizer?” she gasped. “Oh, God, bring on the main course...”

He moved and a button rasped her nipple. Despite the bliss he’d just given her, a stab of excitement shook her, catching at her breath. As if he saw it, he did it again repeatedly while he spoke.

“But you forget, you are not in command of tonight’s meal. I am. You take your pleasure when I choose to give it. You climax when I tell you.”

Her tender nipple began to hurt, and yet her enjoyment of the unorthodox caress intensified in spite of the pain. Or perhaps because of it. She felt him move across her body. His cock—hard and rigid within his clothing—nestled between her spread legs, touching her over-sensitized clitoris, which pulsed and ached. She arched into him, and her bonds tightened, holding her back. His button pressed hard into her nipple now, arousing her further, and without warning something grazed the other one. It felt like his teeth...

She held her breath. It was his teeth, gently, softly brushing back and forth across her nipple. He licked it, tracing all around her puckered areola with his tongue. Then he took the nipple between his teeth once more and together with the wetness and the kiss of his breath, the sensation was incredible. She wriggled with rapture, and his teeth bore down a little harder.

She gasped, arching into him.

He released the nipple. "You see?" He punctuated his words with sharp, exciting little bites all over her breast. "There are so many ways I could hurt you right now."

"You *are* hurting me," she confessed, pushing up into him with ecstasy. "And it's delicious..."

"It's part of the love."

He drew the nipple into his mouth, lashing it hard with his tongue while his teeth nibbled and bit. Ella moaned, and abruptly, his mouth at her breast, his weight on her body disappeared.

She shivered. "Are you still there?"

There was no answer. He could have left the room, the sound of his footsteps lost in her panting breath, in her preoccupation with the joys of her heavily aroused body. She didn't feel that he had... She imagined she could hear his breath, faint movement, sense the excitement and the comfort that always came with his presence. And yet that could be wishful thinking. He could be punishing her...

Without warning, something slapped her pussy, not hard, but enough to sting in that tender, too sensitive area. She cried out in surprise.

"Silly question. Why would I go?" Something else—his warm, moist tongue—touched her clitoris, and she sighed in bliss. His soft hair brushed against her thigh.

"I don't know," she murmured, trying with considerable difficulty to focus on the question through the suddenly intense pleasure. "To punish me..."

His tongue vanished. Once again, she felt his slap against her pussy, soft, stinging and weirdly delightful. "Like that? For what?"

His lips caressed her labia, his tongue circled her clitoris.

"I don't know," she gasped. "For not understanding, for not seeing, for wanting—this!"

She cried out as the smack of his hand replaced the kissing of his mouth, shooting fresh pleasure straight through her whole body. Then, almost before she'd registered it, his lips were back, sucking her clitoris.

"Oh, my God, that is...Oh...! I'm going to come..."

Instantly, his mouth withdrew and his hand slapped. "Not yet."

"Why not?" she demanded, straining toward him. Her swollen clitoris throbbed; her entrance pulsed, yearning for him. She didn't know whether she wanted his mouth or his cock more...

She got his hand, smacking her aching, desperate pussy.

"It's not your place to question, but to obey." And his mouth was there again, his lips closing over her clitoris, his tongue stabbing inside her. She felt his hand under her buttocks, holding her steady, kneading and exploring while he ravished her.

Gasping on the verge of bliss, she cried out when he withdrew his mouth and again slapped her pussy.

“Not yet,” he ordered, then returned to sucking and licking.

Reduced to a mere mass of delight and frustration, Ella had no idea how long it went on. Each time she approached climax, Sebastian would release her, and deal his soft, agonizing slap. Those, too, gave her pleasure, and yet the stinging contrast was enough to put the orgasm just out of reach. Sometimes he dealt her several at once so that again orgasm nearly swallowed her. One more smack and she knew she would be there...

He withheld it for the space of several heartbeats, then returned to kissing her tortured pussy.

“I could walk away now,” he whispered, his breath deliciously cool stirring among her petals, on the hot, trembling bud between. “I could leave you tied and pleading for it and leave. Take my pleasure with some other willing woman looking for thrills. Like this, there’s no way you could stop me.”

“Then do it,” she gasped, challenging him from instinct. *Don’t dare do it! One lick, one touch and I’m...*

She cried out as he slapped her once more.

“You think I won’t? Because you’re more beautiful than any other woman? More desirable, more eager, more—fuckable?” He punctuated his words with smacks, tender, agonizing, delicious, so that she had to fight to hold onto his words as well as the pleasure. Especially when the tide of orgasm began to gather. She couldn’t speak, merely shook her head from side to side in unendurable anticipation. She began to moan deep in her throat. He couldn’t stop it this time, he couldn’t...

Each slap brought the wave closer and closer.

“You’ve discovered what makes good sex,” he whispered. She felt him move, reach up and tear off her blindfold before he slapped her again. “Hot sex, stunning sex. But can you make it the best for both of us?”

Two more slaps in quick succession and the wave broke, crashing over her and she sobbed aloud in relief—and in grief because it would soon be over. She tried to speak, desperate to bring him with her, to share the moment with him, but could only stare, pleadingly, at where his voice had last come from and pray her eyes spoke for her.

Through her joy, she heard his voice utter some short, inarticulate sound. The bed heaved; she felt his weight on her, his naked cock nudging between her drenched thighs, and then he slid straight into her and the orgasm intensified impossibly. His cock stroked a cascade of bliss into being, pumping it into her, through her.

“Oh! Oh!” she cried, in the most complete joy she’d ever known, not just the unbearable physical ecstasy, but the pure happiness of knowing it was him, and that he was coming with her at last. “Oh, God, oh *Sebastian!* Sebastian!”

A groan, deep and powerful, broke from him. With blind trust, she reached up for his mouth, and received it.

His lips sank into hers, drinking her in like a drowning man discovering air at last, while he thrust repeatedly into her body and his groan became a shout of animal joy.

And as the intensity of the spasms began to die back at last, she realized with wonder that the wetness on her face came not from her eyes, but from his.

## Chapter Ten

Sebastian lay on top of Ella’s heaving body, feeling her softness beneath him, and thought he could die happy right in this moment. It was the culmination of years of longing. This night she had made love to *him*, not some idealized alter-ego. She’d known it was him from the beginning and had called out his name as she came.

He exhaled and opened his eyes to see his hand clasped lightly around her arm. His eyes opened wider as he realized what that meant—it was past midnight; his invisible cloak was gone.

Pushing himself up, he moved off of Ella’s softness. He reached to untie her hands from the bedposts, then crawled to the foot of the bed to untie her feet.

He glanced at her with a quirk of his lips. “Were you surprised it was me?”

She laughed and rubbed her chafed wrists. “I’ve known it since the end of the last ball.”

Pulling her foot onto his lap, he massaged her ankle and calf. “What gave me away?”

“Several things, but mostly it was when you said ‘I’m here to serve you’. Everything clicked into place and I realized why your voice sometimes sounded familiar even though your face and body weren’t. Lucinda helped disguise me before, too, you know. When I remembered your tail and body paint didn’t come off in the bath, I realized it was more than a costume. It was magic. Suddenly I understood why Lucinda had been in the library that night. She was coming for you.”

She chuckled again, and Sebastian felt he could wrap her laughter around him like a warm quilt. Ella offered him her other foot.

“I wish you hadn’t thought you had to disguise yourself before you could show me how you felt.”

He concentrated on rubbing her foot, unable to meet her eyes. “Because I knew what I felt was inappropriate.”

“Why would you think that?” She sat up, drawing her legs off his lap and tucking them beneath her. She leaned forward and took his hands.

“You’re the queen of Jondalar. I’m your…employee.”

“I haven’t always been royalty. I wasn’t when I married a prince.”

He shrugged. How could he have possibly told her of his feelings or tried to flirt with her when she hadn’t shown the least bit of attraction to him?

“You don’t understand. I’m the son of a stonemason, just as I told you. My responsibilities to my family have consumed my entire life. My desire to get ahead in the world was all for them, and I haven’t had time to think of building a relationship with anyone, especially not the woman with the power to banish me from my position at court.”

She gasped. “Do you honestly think I would do that? Did you think I would’ve dismissed you if you showed an interest in me? Sebastian, you know me better than that.”

He gave another small shrug. “How could we have continued to work together if I’d shown my feelings? How can we work together now? Everything has changed, at least for me.” He finally dared to look up from their joined hands to her eyes.

A frown furrowed her brow. “For me, too. Do you think you’re the only one who’s been touched by this? After all you said and did tonight? You claim to know me, but I think maybe you don’t know me at all.”

Sebastian pulled his hands away. “You wanted to experience sexual pleasure with strangers. I gave you that opportunity within safe parameters so no one would go gossiping afterward. We could leave it at that and try to carry on as before.”

Ella threw up her hands. “Why would I want to do that? Why would you?”

In truth, he didn’t. Nor did he know why these words were spilling out of his mouth now. For so long he’d secretly dreamed of this moment, of holding her in his arms, telling her of his love, hearing her cry out his name at the height of ecstasy, and now he’d achieved it, he no longer knew how to prevent it from slipping through his fingers once more.

He’d proved to himself, and to her, that she loved him. He didn’t need words to know that now. And yet it changed nothing, She was still the queen, and he was still the steward. And



perhaps, even for the happiness of this night, he should always have left it at that.

“Isn’t it what you intended after tonight? Before I made you...” *Before I made you admit to more. Before I made you see me.* Instead of easing her life, he’d complicated it ten thousand fold. Worse, he was spoiling her moment of happiness. He could read it in her eyes and hated himself, and because of that, he couldn’t stop and make it right.

In a small, hard voice, she said, “Before you made me do whatever you wanted? Is that what tonight was all about, Sebastian? Finally dominating the woman who’s told you what to do for years?”

*Yes, damn it!* One lie would make it easy to hate him, free him from the torture of seeing her every day and never having her. He stared at her, his lips already drawn back, almost in a snarl, to give the answer she so obviously expected. Behind the boiling anger in her beautiful eyes lurked a hurt so deep it broke his heart.

He couldn’t do it.

With a groan, he dragged her back into his arms. She resisted at first, holding herself stiffly, but when he covered her mouth with his, she melted, kissing him back with a passion and abandon that nearly undid him all over again.

“Tonight was about love,” he whispered against her lips. “Only love. And now we have to live with reality.”

He let her go. “We can’t talk now. It’s after midnight. The unmasking will be about to begin, and I’ve no idea what your adorable step family are up to.”

As he reached for his discarded clothes, he thought she was about to object, to insist on having everything out now. But reality had intruded for her, too, and she acknowledged the right of his words by a reluctant nod.

He dressed hastily, in silence, while she watched him with veiled, inscrutable eyes. “I’ll see you in the ballroom,” he said awkwardly. Was it really all slipping away already? Were they back to queen and steward?

She nodded again. Only when he turned and strode toward the bedroom door did she say, “Sebastian?”

There was a rustle as he turned, and she threw herself naked into his arms and fastened her mouth to his in a long, overtly sensual kiss. He couldn’t prevent his arms coming up to hold her soft, pliant body to him, his mouth from kissing back, fighting for dominance.

“Everything *is* changed, Sebastian,” she said huskily and slipped from his arms. She walked away into her bathroom, her hips swaying in the way that drove all the blood from his brain to his cock, and closed the door.

What did she mean by that? he wondered as he strode down the passage. That there really was some future for them beyond a squalid, sneaking affair they kept from her kingdom and his family? And their enemies in Malevolin. That she wanted him to find a way to be together? That she would? Was there a way that didn't involve her giving up the kingdom?

Part of him longed to go back, to give in and sit with her and talk about their personal crisis—one he'd deliberately provoked because he couldn't bear the way things were before. But the old habit of duty was never completely dormant and he knew they'd both been foolish beyond belief in snatching time together in the midst of such a volatile situation.

He swung through the doors leading from the queen's private apartments to the public ones. And almost walked into Ambassador Slieman.

Instantly wary, a thousand thoughts flitted through Sebastian's mind at once—not least of them, what the hell was the ambassador doing here, with Ella's guilty-looking sentry, and what possible capital could Slieman make out of seeing him here?

Ella's chief steward had a perfect right to be visiting the queen in her private apartments. Providing no one knew how long the visit had lasted!

Why in hell hadn't he taken the other way, through his own private quarters?

Because he was so churned up with love and emotion and fear of losing her before she was properly won that he couldn't think straight. Bad for Ella, bad for the country.

"Ambassador," he said, electing to brazen it out. "How may I help you?"

"I was merely enquiring as to the health of Her Majesty." The man almost oozed slime. Sebastian longed for a bucket of soapy water. "She has been gone some time from her own ball. We are all praying she is well enough to return before it finishes."

"I believe she will return shortly. Her ladies are caring for her. Shall we?"

"Her ladies" was a nice touch, he thought. If only he could get to said females and send them to her before she reappeared alone!

Slieman had no excuse to linger and had to tag along with Sebastian, who spared the surly sentry only a cursory glance in passing. Still, it was enough to remember the man. He would interview him first thing tomorrow morning and, if he wasn't much mistaken, dismiss him before noon. For tonight, he'd have him instantly replaced at Ella's door.

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*You've discovered what makes good sex. Hot sex, stunning sex. But can you make it the best for both of us?*

Ella believed she had just done so. The discovery was blinding, overwhelming, and she found herself fumbling over her washing and re-dressing, her nimble fingers unaccustomedly clumsy and slow. But the pure, absolute happiness of that final orgasm and the moment which followed it, had quickly faded.

An echo remained, behind the twisting fear of the future, the inevitable terror that Sebastian didn't really feel the same way, that now he'd revealed himself it would be over...

Ella replaced her mask and for a moment gazed at her broken face in the mirror. Sebastian had made her whole again tonight. Briefly. But had anything *really* changed?

Drawing in her breath, straightening her shoulders, she left the bedchamber and walked quickly down the passage, past the sentry—a different one than she'd seen on the way in—and on to the ballroom, still lost in thought.

Ella had stopped believing in “happy ever after”, so she'd stopped thinking about it. She'd planned the balls for the excitement of sexual intrigue, to say nothing of some desperately needed sexual gratification. Even the warm, fuzzy glow that had formed around her heart when she'd realized her lovers were both Sebastian hadn't been enough to force her to think ahead. All she'd wanted of this ball was to force Sebastian into the open. After that, if she'd thought about it at all, she'd just sort of assumed that everything would fall into place somehow. They would have a “relationship”, and one she looked forward to eagerly for the growing friendship between them as well as the gloriously exciting sex.

But tonight had made it more than that. There was more than attraction, more than sexual gratification, more even than friendship here. He'd brought love into it and forced her to acknowledge it.

*So what are you going to do about it, Ella? Let it all go?*

*No!*

The force of her own abrupt thought startled her. More than her ladies in waiting from the last ball, who arrived suddenly, breathlessly, at her side. Ella barely noticed them. As she made her way down the ballroom steps between them, fixing a smile to her face, resolve swamped her, wiping doubt and fear clear of her mind.

*I will not let it go. I'll do whatever it takes to keep the man I love, the man who loves me. I will make him happy, because loving is what I do best...*

The irritating buzzing in her ears—in reality the chatter and laughter and polite applause from the ballroom—grew briefly louder, then died away. All eyes were turned to her.

Ella pulled herself together.

The unmasking had begun already. Nearly all of her noble guests were unmasked, as were her

step-family who stood like hosts in the middle of the throng, as if their unmasking was the star attraction of the evening. There was Almeda, smug, almost triumphant—that alone was enough to send warning butterflies through Ella’s stomach. Euphemia and her puppet husband stood on either side of her, actually laughing. And behind them, Hortense, eyes huge and excited.

What in the world was going on? Was a masquerade unmasking really all that much fun to them? Or was it the company they were keeping? Had Count Loyola excelled himself, revealing hidden charms behind—or through—his mask?

But no, that was not Loyola who stood with them. Two tall men, dressed as pirates, still masked.

“Ah, our hostess returns! Are you quite well, darling?”

Every syllable, the very sound of her stepmother’s voice, was a criticism. But Ella had the certainty of Sebastian’s love behind her, and Almeda’s barbs bounced off her.

She took the final step, inclining her head without smiling, and walked purposefully toward the central group. “Quite well, thank you. I can see you’ve had a lovely evening. Who’s left to unmask? Apart from myself?”

She glanced at the pirates. Goodness, that looked like a real sword hanging at the larger man’s hip. He had a positively villainous beard, too, gleaming black eyes, one dangling earring, and his clothes were positively gaudy, hung with jewels and lace. Only his mask was plain and black.

Unease twisted through her once more, especially as her gaze flickered over the other. He was more slender, his clothing less vulgar, but his sword, too, looked too business-like and his eyes... Surely there was something familiar about those eyes? About his stance?

While the flickering thoughts and observations flashed through her mind, she reached up to the string of her mask, but to her surprise, Euphemia caught playfully at her hand.

“Oh no, sister, I think you’ll have to keep the broken mask! Let your late-arriving guests unmask first.”

Seeing no reason to quarrel over it, Ella merely inclined her head to the two men.

“I’m sorry I wasn’t on hand to greet you when you arrived—please go ahead.”

The large pirate moved first, removing his mask with nonchalance to reveal an extremely piratical face, scarred down one brown, weathered cheek. He grinned, and bowed.

“Well, sir, I am none the wiser,” Ella said, amused. “But you have clearly picked a most appropriate costume. You are very welcome.” Though Sebastian had best count the silver before they left...

Sebastian. Her eyes flickered and found him on the other side of the room, by the door. He

looked tense, as if he, too, thought there was something wrong about the pirates. And yes, there were soldiers lurking like shadows in the doorways and passages, in the garden beyond.

“And you, sir?” She turned to the other, unafraid because, although the men looked like pirates, they were clearly no immediate threat.

The second pirate smiled and slowly reached up and pulled the string of his mask. He didn’t trouble to catch it as it fell to the floor.

Blood rushed in Ella’s ears. For an instant she thought she would faint. Only willpower kept her steady on her feet as the second pirate smiled at her with affection.

“Hello, dear,” said King Charming. “Great party.”

Ella tugged off her mask as if it prevented her breathing. She had no need of it. Anyone who looked could see that she was broken.

## Chapter Eleven

Charming took her in his arms and kissed her on the lips. He smelled of salt and perfume.

“Isn’t that a lovely surprise, darling?” Euphemia gushed. “Charming’s home!”

Ella swallowed. Something wasn’t right here. Why were they pleased he was back? Had they set this up? Why?

Over Charming’s shoulder, Ella’s gaze flew across the room in search of Sebastian. For an instant, their eyes met. His looked—stricken. So much so that she didn’t know if he’d even recognized the question in her own: *What the hell is going on here?*

The need to have him by her side in this new crisis was almost a physical pain. But he acknowledged her only with the barest nod of his head, then his heavy-lidded eyes dropped and he backed quietly out of the room.

Leaving Ella to face hell alone. Well, she’d become good at that. And she knew in her heart he wasn’t deserting her but going to find out all he could in order to help her.

She eased herself out of Charming’s embrace. He seemed willing enough to let her.

“So you’ve come home,” she said as lightly as she could manage. “Why is that, Charming?”

“To see you, of course.” Charming smiled winningly. He still had perfect, white teeth behind his beautifully sculpted lips. Life at sea had tanned his fair skin to a fetching gold and bleached his luxurious blond hair almost white. His hair was longer than before, stretching to his shoulders in a wild, unkempt look that once he would have made his barber labor over for

hours. Now, Ella rather thought it was natural. Otherwise, he didn't seem to have changed a jot. He was still the handsomest man she'd ever seen. And he left her heart cold.

When she didn't respond to his smile, he added, "And to find out how our kingdom does."

*Our kingdom? You walked out on it! It's my bloody kingdom now!*

*Oh, God, am I getting like my step-sisters?*

"This is Captain Smith," said Charming, waving one negligent arm toward his companion.

"Captain, my wife, the queen of Jondalar."

Under her bemused gaze, the captain took her numb hand and kissed it soundly. "Would the queen of Jondalar condescend to dance with an old sea dog?"

Dancing was the farthest thing from her mind, but she was given no chance to refuse. Before she could speak, the pirate whisked her into his arms and onto the dance floor, which cleared rapidly. The orchestra struck up a hasty waltz, and Ella found herself in the intriguing position of dancing with her husband's lover.

"So what are your plans, Captain? Have you and Charming come ashore for good?"

"No good ever came to me from being ashore," Smith said with feeling. From the corner of her eye, Ella saw Charming, with Almeda, being introduced to Ambassador Slieman. Count Loyola was there, too, bowing very low.

Was Charming really back? To take over the rule of the kingdom? Was he going to undo all the good she knew she'd done? Would he stay this time?

Was this her way out? Was this the way for her and Sebastian to be together? Because whether or not Charming wanted her back, she could not stay with him now. Their marriage was over and she loved a better man. If she was no longer queen, nothing could keep Sebastian and her apart.

And yet she did not trust Charming to care for the kingdom. He'd already deserted it once, and she had this terrible fear that without her it would not be safe...

"So you will go back to sea?" Ella asked, taking in the huddles of gossiping guests, all watching Charming with a mixture of curiosity, affection and unease.

"Assuredly."

"And Charming?"

"Well, that is up to him."

"Have you quarreled?" Ella enquired.

"Obviously not."

"Why obviously? Because you're here?"

"Because *he's* here," said Smith. He smiled, a wicked gleam of white teeth. "Alive."

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Sebastian, all his hopes and dreams in tatters, strode down the corridor in search of the captain of the guard. After that, he'd visit the stables, find out how and from where Charming and his guest had traveled here, where their ship—and their men—were. And what their connection with Malevolin was...

But it was damned difficult to concentrate, even to see, with the vision of Ella in her husband's arms constantly flashing in front of his eyes. By the law of the land, two years apart meant an automatic divorce, but the king, surely, was above that. His wife was whoever he claimed as his wife.

And yet if he'd come for Ella, why bring the pirate? Who, if rumor spoke the truth, and Sebastian had every reason to believe it did—he'd checked—was rather more than Charming's superior officer.

Happy to be directed outside in his search for the security chief—the fresh air, would surely clear his head—Sebastian strode out by the kitchen door and made his way toward the barracks.

Although the night was dark, friendly to secretive lovers, there didn't seem to be anyone outside tonight. All the excitement was inside.

But no, someone was abroad. There were footsteps, light, almost stealthy. The hairs on the back of Sebastian's neck began to prickle.

Clenching his fist, he spun 'round. Shadows sprang at him from all sides. His first punch landed squarely, causing a muffled yelp, but immediately after that, something crashed into his head. Immense pain roared through him, and the world went black.

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"Send Sebastian to me, please," Ella said to a servant as she strode into her sitting room the following morning.

She'd barely slept, hoping against hope that if not Sebastian himself, then some message from him would be forthcoming. But there'd been no word and she'd tossed and turned, anxiously debating with herself all possible reasons for Charming's return.

Her stepfamily was in on it, she was sure. They'd brought him for the ball because...they expected her to disgrace herself there? Indiscretion beyond what Charming would tolerate in his appointed queen?

Had she? She'd left the ballroom alone and returned alone. Apart from her ladies, who'd clearly been sent after her to save her face—Sebastian's doing, she was sure. It was another small warmth to hug to herself: his care of her. And damn it, she really wouldn't have foregone their stolen hours together, even to discover or to thwart whatever Charming and her stepfamily were up to.

A knock on the door interrupted her pacing and she turned in relief to greet Sebastian. She'd even taken two half-running steps across the carpet when she realized it wasn't Sebastian but the same servant she'd sent to find him.

"Beg your Highness's pardon, but I can't find Mr. Crowley. He's not in his office and George says he's never slept in his bed neither."

"Not in his...never slept..."

Ella closed her mouth on the rest of the unfinished sentences that threatened to erupt, and stared at the servant numbly until he effaced himself.

Ella sank down onto the sofa.

Gone, she thought in sheer disbelief. He's gone, vanished...

But why would he do that? Because with Charming's return he feared for his job? No, his life! Someone knew! The secret was out that she and Sebastian were lovers and Charming and his supporters would have him killed!

*Thank God he's gone! At least he's safe...*

*But how could he, how could he leave me?*

*Everyone leaves me.*

She covered her face with her hands, trying to force herself to think through the terrible, numbing grief. There really was no other reason, was there? He was always at his desk before nine o'clock every morning, even after working into the small hours. It wasn't his day off. He'd left no message...

Or had he?

Frowning, Ella dropped her hands and stood. There could be some clue in his office.

Purposefully, she wrenched open the door and marched to his office.

She couldn't prevent the stab of disappointment that he wasn't there after all, that he hadn't ordered the servants to deny him, even to her, because he was so busy, or because he was still coming to terms with what had passed between them last night.

He really wasn't here. Only the inevitable piles of papers on his desk—which, now she came to look more closely, didn't seem to be as neat as usual.

Ella let go of the door handle and went in.



“Hello,” said Charming cheerfully from behind the door.

Ella jumped. “What the...?” She blinked as Loyola looked sheepishly over the king’s shoulder.

“We were just looking at your steward’s books,” Charming said, jerking his head to the shelves of volumes behind him. “Quite a well read man.”

“Indeed,” Ella said frostily. “He has been invaluable to me in the years since you left.”

“So I hear,” Charming murmured, moving toward the desk. “And—er—where is he this fine morning? Did you give him the day off? After all his hard work.”

Ella felt her eyes narrow. Charming’s gaze was bland, but she knew there was more significance to his words than their bare meaning.

Charming knew.

“No. I’m looking for him myself.” As she brushed past him, glancing quickly through the papers piled on the desk, she knew without doubt that Charming and Loyola had been here before her. Had they removed anything? Any message to her?

She was clutching at straws.

“There’s no indication there as to his whereabouts,” Loyola said. “I’ve looked.”

Ella lifted her brow haughtily. “I don’t believe it’s your place to rifle the steward’s papers, or his belongings.”

Loyola flushed unbecomingly and tugged at his moustache. “Of course not, in normal circumstances. The prince—the king—bade me take him to the steward, and when we got here, he wasn’t. That’s all.”

Charming frowned. “Not sure it is,” he murmured, not very clearly. “All, I mean.”

There was a ring of genuineness about this to Ella. They knew no more than she did.

“He’s taken flight,” Loyola said, not without a certain satisfaction. “You must know, Highness, that certain of the nobles were not happy about the power he’d accrued.”

“Because he was the only one prepared to take on the hard work that the rest of you avoid!”

Ella raged. How dare he criticize Sebastian, who had given every waking moment to this damned country, to *her*, for the last eight years!

And with her fury came the sudden knowledge that Sebastian, *her* Sebastian, could not have run away. It was not in his nature. At the very least, he would have stayed to face the music. And most of all, he would never, ever desert her.

Emotion soared, like a release, flooding her with happiness, Until, hard behind it, came the knowledge that something was wrong, very wrong. Something, or someone, kept Sebastian from her, and that could only mean that he was in danger. Or worse...

## Chapter Twelve

Almeda picked her way down the dark, dingy staircase with distaste.

"I'll bet there are rats in here," Euphemia said nervously behind her.

"All the better." Roy Slieman spoke over his shoulder, temporarily blinding Almeda with the lantern he carried to light the way. "For our guest. For ourselves, don't be alarmed, ladies, the light will frighten them off."

"Has he said anything?" Almeda demanded.

"Nothing worth hearing. I thought you ladies would prefer to be present when he spoke."

Reaching the bottom step, he held the lantern high, and Almeda moved past him to see the prisoner.

They were in a dank, cold cellar. Somewhere, water dripped erratically. The stone floor was rough and gravelly, and the whole place stank. An iron pole had been embedded into the floor. Sitting with his back against it was Cinderella's lover.

His eyes gleamed in the dimness as they approached. After a moment, he moved, hauling himself to his feet, and Almeda heard the slithering of his ropes sliding up the pole with him. Both his hands and his feet were tied.

Slieman moved the lantern, let the light fall properly on his prisoner, and Almeda saw that he could have been a personable, even a handsome, man. He had black, collar-length hair, dark, heavy-lidded eyes like a hawk's and strong, even features. But his hair was rumpled and matted, his face streaked with dirt and blood and his lips, possibly always sensually full, looked swollen, as though somebody had hit him. Which they undoubtedly had.

"So you're Cinderella's lover," Almeda mocked. He stared at her in silence. "I must say, I don't admire her taste. Couldn't she do any better?"

Euphemia had brushed past her, examining the man in some detail from his bruised face to his torn shirt and blood-spattered trousers. Now she even reached up and touched his bare arm.

"Oh I don't know," she drawled, trailing her finger. "Nice muscles...for a clerk."

The steward cast her a quick glance of contempt for which Almeda couldn't entirely blame him. Then his gaze lowered, as if looking her up and down in much the same manner from her smart, elegant little boots to the vulgar, jewel-encrusted brooch which fastened her cloak.

"Euphemia, stand back from him," she snapped. "Sir, to be frank, none of your attractions interest us. We have a proposition for you. Tell the truth and you'll be the richest man in two

kingdoms.”

That got his attention. Well, it would. Slieman had discovered that the man needed money. He was sending virtually all his salary to various members of his family. Of course he’d want more, lots more. Now they could all be rich, and, with a little persuasion, Malevolin would have an efficient new servant.

However, he said nothing, merely continued to look at Almeda.

She smiled. “It’s all over, otherwise, Mr. Crowley. Charming is home to do his duty. Now, that could be one of two things. He could take the reins of government back, along with his wife... No, I see you don’t like that idea. Well, the alternative—and preferable—solution is that he abdicates formally in favor of his cousin, my son-in-law, making Theodore not only the regent of Malevolin but the sole ruler of Jondalar. Now, King Charming would prefer that, because he loves—er—the sea, and he could thus go away with a clear conscience. But he wouldn’t do it unless he knew Cinderella was a whore, running the kingdom into the ground for the benefit of her greedy paramours.”

The man made an instinctive jerk, tugging at his ropes. Euphemia laughed.

Ignoring both events, Almeda continued. “All you have to do to bring about that more preferable situation—along with your own vast wealth and influence—is to confess to being her lover. Confess that she’s had others and come up with some figures to prove the extortionate costs of all three balls. We can manipulate other expenses to look bad while we’re at it.”

The steward’s lips twisted.

“She doesn’t love you, you know,” Euphemia said, amusement in her high, strident voice. “She’s just a whore who can’t keep her knickers on. But if she loves anyone, it’s Charming. It was his bed she slept in last night.”

*Technically*, thought Almeda, amused. Everything in the palace, including all the beds, still belonged to Charming.

“Show the little trollop who’s the more powerful,” Almeda suggested. “Do we have a deal?”

The steward’s lips parted. He smiled. “No.”

His voice was deep, quiet, firm.

“You don’t believe my promises?” Almeda guessed. “Slieman, give him the check.”

Slieman pushed the piece of paper under the prisoner’s nose. It was a high enough amount to stagger many a nobleman let alone a man in his position, but Crowley barely glanced at it.

“Plus,” said Almeda. “An annual salary of twice your present income, in order to run Jondalar for us. We understand you are most efficient in that role already. We’ll recognize it with a title,

lands and the wealth I've already described. Just for the truth. What do you say, Mr. Crowley?"

"I say no thank you." He stared at the ground with a resigned look in his eyes that revealed he knew what would come next.

Almeda sighed. Slieman walked toward the stairs and called his servant.

He was a burly man and powerful. And mean. When he punched, even Euphemia cringed.

If Crowley did, Almeda didn't see it. She turned away with a sniff of distaste and began to discuss social matters with Slieman.

When they turned back, Crowley was almost doubled over, panting. Only the ropes binding his wrists and ankles to the pole kept him from falling.

Almeda gave a wintry smile. "Well?"

With an effort, Crowley straightened. He shook his head to clear the blood from his eyes, splattering Euphemia's gown as he did so and making her shriek. He gazed directly at Almeda, but still didn't speak. Perhaps he couldn't.

Euphemia, always drawn to the dramatic, went forward to him, touched his arm. "There, there, sir, there is no need for this. There's no dishonor in telling the truth, is there? We don't want you hurt any more—do we, Mama?—and the offer of wealth still stands. What do you say, sir? Please? For me?"

Almeda nearly laughed. She could never rid her daughters of their belief in their own physical attractions. She wasn't entirely surprised that the steward's eyes glazed over. They lost focus, then seemed caught by the brooch on Euphemia's cloak.

He swayed once, then without warning fell forward onto her like a snapping dog.

Euphemia screamed, pulling violently back from him. At the same time, Almeda and Slieman grabbed her to haul her away. He really was biting her. For an instant the cloak stretched between Euphemia and Crowley's teeth, then something ripped and she was free.

The brutal servant hit him twice before Slieman barked, "Leave him for now. He'll come 'round in the end. They all do."

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Breathing hard, Sebastian watched them go. His whole body ached, but he barely felt it right now. Rage and excitement numbed the pain.

When the key had turned in the lock above, and all sounds of their departure faded, he opened his mouth, took aim and spat out Euphemia's brooch. It landed on the stone floor at his feet.

Sebastian smiled, and winced as his torn lips stretched against his teeth. He slid down the pole and settled gratefully onto his ass. He reached for the brooch with the toe of one bare foot—they'd taken his boots—and dragged the ornament by painstaking inches toward the pole where his hands could reach it. He thanked God for Euphemia's penchant for ostentatious jewelry to show off her royal wealth. The glittering diamond and ruby brooch would serve to cut through the hemp rope strand by strand, even though it might take a while. When he got free, nothing would stop him. His captors had foolishly not incarcerated him in a cell with a barred door. He'd find a way out of this basement chamber, wherever it was, and escape back to the palace.

His hands were going numb from the rope cutting into his wrists, but he managed to pick up the brooch between his fingertips. He gritted his teeth as he let it slide between his palms, closer to the rope. Sweat beaded his brow at the effort of holding the small pin steady while moving the sharp, diamond-studded face back and forth over the rope.

One stroke, two, three. He sawed carefully with no idea of whether the brooch was actually cutting the hemp or not. His hands grew slippery and the jeweled pin fell from between his palms. He heard it hit the floor with a small click.

His head was spinning from the blows it had received and nausea churned his gut, but Sebastian felt for the pin. Its sharp point poked his finger, and he painstakingly picked it up and positioned it between the heels of his hands again. He shifted position, finding a way to grasp the brooch with the fingers of one hand and pushing against the rope with it while moving his other hand.

The process was mind-numbingly slow. His mind was split between concentrating on not losing the brooch a second time and listening for approaching footsteps. Once they'd decided what to do with him, someone would be back to finish him off. He swallowed and tasted the coppery blood from his damaged lip.

His thoughts strayed to Ella. He wished there was some way he could let her know he hadn't abandoned her because of the king's return, but he couldn't allow himself to dwell on that now. Absolute focus and complete control over his emotions were what would get him through this alive, then he could find her and tell her himself that he'd help her in whatever way she needed. He was, after all, there to serve her.

The rope seemed to be growing weaker. As the diamond points cut through the hemp, the brooch slipped in his slick hands again. This time he caught it before it fell and began to saw with renewed vigor, his heart pounding with excitement as he felt the strands of rope separating. Suddenly the binding around his wrists was so loose he no longer needed to cut.

Sebastian twisted his hands free and rubbed his chafed wrists. Blood rushed back into his numb hands and they tingled.

He quickly went to work on the unknotting the rope tying his ankles, trying to work too fast and fumbling at the knots. Slowing his breath, he took more time and care in picking at the tight knots. At last those ropes were loosened, too and he pulled them free from his ankles. He held onto the pole and hauled himself upright.

A wave of dizziness crashed over him and he nearly toppled to the ground. His ribs hurt so badly when he drew a deep breath that he guessed one or two might be cracked rather than merely bruised. Clutching the pole tighter, he maintained his balance and breathed his way through the pain.

So far, so good. But it wasn't going to be easy to fight his way free in this condition. Although his body was still strong from his years of working with stone and he'd kept in shape by rowing and fencing in his spare time, he'd spent too many hours behind a desk in recent years. And tonight, beaten and sore, was no time to have a fistfight if he could avoid it.

They'd taken his boots, so Sebastian walked barefoot up the stone staircase from the cellar. The door at the top of the stairs was closed, probably locked and with a guard or even two on the other side. He had no weapons, only the brooch and his bare hands. He tried the latch and found it unsurprisingly locked. Now what?

Sebastian leaned against the wall by the door and considered his options. He could wait for someone to come, take them by surprise and throw them down the stairs, or he could make enough noise a guard couldn't resist coming to find out what was happening.

Time was critical. Even now Charming might be handing over his kingdom to Malevolin. Sebastian had to get back to the castle and stop him. Better the rule of a mediocre king of Jondalarian blood than a takeover by foreign tyrants.

Although, if Almeda's scenario played out and Charming abdicated the throne to Theodore, it would free Ella. No longer would she have the heavy responsibilities of government for which she'd never asked. Perhaps she would even go with Sebastian somewhere far from the capitol to live out their days in peace.

The idea was extremely tempting.

But it was impossible. He couldn't sacrifice the good of the entire country for his selfish desires. Charming must remain on the throne with Ella by his side to guide his rule. Sebastian would be the one to leave, unless she needed him to continue his work. If so, he'd stifle any feeling he had for her and carry on as he always had.

And now wasn't the time for dithering. Action was required. Sebastian pushed off from the

wall, straightened his shoulders and began to yell, screaming and calling for help. Almost instantly the door flew open, inward, as he'd predicted. A uniformed guard started through the doorway, sword drawn.

Sebastian seized the doorknob and pulled hard. The guard, taken by surprise at the latch being pulled from his grip, stumbled onto the landing at the head of the stairs. Sebastian stuck out a leg. The man tripped over it to fall down the stone steps.

Still holding the door handle, Sebastian slammed it, catching the second guard full in the face with the solid slab of wood. The man howled in pain, but he was a quicker thinker than his partner. He pushed the door back against Sebastian and stabbed the blade of his sword through the opening. He sliced the air, trying to force Sebastian away from the door.

Gripping the knob and using the upper arm strength from years of hauling blocks of granite and marble in his father's shop, Sebastian wrenched the door free of the guard's hand before slamming it against him once more.

Meanwhile, the man who'd tumbled down the stairs had regained his feet and was charging toward Sebastian, sword raised. In a few seconds he'd be skewered by one or the other of the two guards. Physical strength was no match for pointed weapons.

In a last ditch effort to save himself, Sebastian tore the door open again, reached around it and grabbed the front of the man's uniform. He dragged him onto the landing then pushed him down the stairs. The guard couldn't stop the momentum and was propelled into his cohort ascending the steps. In a tangle of swords and limbs, the two men crashed down the stairs.

Sebastian didn't spare them a glance as he darted through the doorway, slammed the door behind him and slid the lock into place. He scanned the hallway for other guards drawn by the commotion, but the corridor was empty. He trotted toward another set of stairs leading up. There didn't appear to be any alternative way out so he quickly climbed them, listening hard for sounds from the floor above, trying to decipher where he might be.

When he reached the next landing, his question was answered. The sounds of a busy kitchen came from one direction. Turning the corner led him to another world, a series of closed office doors each bearing the insignia of Malevolin. He was inside the embassy building!

Sebastian retreated around the corner toward the servants' area. It was more likely he'd be able to escape through a back way, perhaps a service door or emergency exit. Surely that's how they'd carried him in here, not right through the front door of the embassy.

Flattening his body against the wall, Sebastian closed his eyes for a moment, but that made the ringing in his ears and the whirling of the universe grow stronger, so he opened them again. His body was drenched in sweat and trembling from the rush of adrenalin through his system.

It felt like all he could do to take one step after another, let alone fight his way free of the building and the fenced compound beyond the doors.

Sebastian drew a deep breath and continued on down the hallway, slipping silently past empty rooms with his heart pounding. Suddenly a small figure burst through a door on his left, tumbling out into the corridor in front of him in a flurry of purple cloak and star-spangled skirts.

Sebastian pulled his punch and grabbed hold of Lucinda before she could fall on her face. The birdlike woman chirped a litany of “oh, dear” and “my goodness” as he set her back on her feet. He clapped a hand over her mouth and put a finger to his lips, shushing her.

“Sorry I’m late. I had a little trouble,” she whispered as loudly as a stage actor delivering a death speech. “Sometimes this thing doesn’t...” She shook her wand and stared at the tip. “It simply doesn’t work the way it used to.”

Sebastian pulled her back into the empty chamber from which she’d come. “What are you doing here?”

“Why, saving you, of course. But I’m afraid I’m better at romances than rescues.” Her giggle sounded like a chipmunk chattering.

“You’re rescuing me? How did you know where to go?”

“Well, I didn’t at first, but when your thoughts turned to Ella and the sacrifice you’re willing to make for her, love drew me like a magnet, albeit a slow one.”

“Yes, I could’ve used your help in getting past the guards,” he teased with maybe a hint of reproach.

Lucinda scanned him from head to toe, taking in his damaged face and bloodied clothes. “So I see.” She gestured with her wand, sending a swirl of sparkles drifting through the air. “It’s this old thing, like I said. Now let’s see if it has the juice to get us both back to the castle, shall we?” The old woman grabbed his hand in her papery palm, twirled the wand around and muttered a few words. Instantly, all sound vanished as if he’d gone deaf and Sebastian felt his body lifted up.

*Where will we land?* was his last thought as he was sucked into a dark void.

## Chapter Thirteen

Ella gripped the arms of her chair and glanced over at Charming seated in her throne—*his*



throne again—beside her. They were on the dais overlooking the Great Hall where all the court was gathered. The Malevolin royalty was arrayed on their left in equally resplendent chairs: Prince Theodore, Princess Euphemia and Almeda sitting haughty and proud, while Hortense looked nervous at being on display in front of a room full of Jondalarian nobility.

Charming's pirate friend was nowhere to be seen today, conveniently hidden away so perhaps people could forget Charming had been gone for five years and accept him as their sovereign again, Ella thought bitterly. She scanned her stepfamily's faces, strangely triumphant, and wondered again what their plan was. How did Charming resuming power possibly aid their agenda?

*And where is Sebastian?* The thought was never out of her mind for more than seconds at a time. She'd sent numerous soldiers—those she trusted—to search the city for him. Surely kidnappers could not have taken him farther than that in so short a time. She wished she could look for him herself, but duty tied her to her throne today of all days. Charming had said he was going to make some kind of proclamation.

She dreaded hearing it. Her knuckles were white as she gripped the chair arms. Her rings dug into her fingers and her corset stays bound her so she could scarcely breathe. Ella stole another glance at Charming and he was smiling at her. Smiling! She wanted to spit into his smug face. She looked to the spot at her right where Sebastian should be standing, the place he always stood, and a pain such as she'd never felt stabbed through her. What if she never found him? Or what if he'd been killed? If so, she couldn't bear it.

Ambassador Slieman bent to speak to Princess Euphemia then came forward to stand before Ella and Charming. He bowed low. "Your Majesties."

Acting on habit, Ella inclined her head slightly. As she studied Slieman, she became convinced he had something to do with Sebastian's disappearance. It was connected with the Malevolin visit and she guessed their motives would all come clear in about a minute.

The ambassador straightened and smoothed the front of his waistcoat before he continued. "I wish to present a petition on behalf of your brother-in-law, the Regent of Malevolin, Prince Theodore."

Charming's handsome brow furrowed. For the first time Ella noted fine lines around his eyes and realized he'd aged and weathered in his years at sea. "A petition? Pray go on."

Slieman lowered his voice. "The matter is delicate, Highness. Perhaps it would be better to discuss it in private chambers rather than before the entire court."

The king glanced around the room at the noblemen and ladies clustered in pairs and groups, whispering and speculating. "I don't think that will be necessary. Whatever you have to say,

the entire court will know soon enough anyway. That seems to be the way court life works as I recall. No secrets.”

Slieman bowed his head. “Very well. Although it seems there have been some secrets certain people at court have been able to keep. Until now. I feel it my duty to inform you of things that have gone on in your absence, some unfortunate... behaviors on the queen’s part that disgrace her as your wife and queen and cast a shadow over the Jondalar throne.”

Ella’s heart thudded so hard her breastbone hurt. It was as she’d guessed. Her affair with Sebastian had been discovered and was about to be revealed to the entire court. But what proof did Slieman and her stepfamily have?

“What kind of behaviors would those be?” Charming sounded almost amused.

Ella darted a sharp glance at her husband and saw the corners of his mouth slightly quivering. He already knew about her involvement with Sebastian and was preparing to enjoy her humiliation. He was in collusion with the Malevolin contingent, but why? She pressed her lips tight together and waited for what would happen next.

“Affairs, Highness, with several different partners. And I have an eyewitness to at least one of the events. I’m working on securing even more damning evidence as we speak.”

“An affair. Really?” Charming drawled above the gasps and increased murmurs of the ladies and gentlemen of the court. “I’ll be most interested to see what evidence you present, but I’m even more interested in how this information impacts on Prince Theodore. Surely, as Ella is my wife, I should be the one who is upset.”

Ella felt she should speak up for herself, but there was no way she could without appearing as if she was making excuses. Besides, she couldn’t bear to lie about having slept with Sebastian. And she was rather interested in Charming’s tone of voice, which seemed less gleeful at having her dalliance revealed and more baiting, as if he was leading Slieman into some sort of trap.

The ambassador seemed to catch the same nuance. His expression went from confident to uncertain in the blink of an eye. He licked his lips before continuing.

“I’m sure all of Jondalar wishes only the most dependable and righteous sovereign to occupy its supreme seat of power. Highness, it saddens me to point out the flaws in your wife, but she’s clearly not morally fit for the position with which you’ve entrusted her these past years. Prince Theodore understands you may not wish to rule Jondalar since you’ve already abdicated the throne in order to live a life of your choosing.”

“Ah, I think I see where this is going,” Charming said at the same moment that Ella understood the Malevolin plan. “My brother-in-law offers to rule in my stead, uniting the two kingdoms.” Her husband wasn’t buying it, Ella could tell, and hope dawned in her heart.

Charming leaned forward. "But who would remain behind to rule Malevolin, given the king's precarious mental state?"

"Your Majesty, both Queen Euphemia and her mother are Jondalarians. We propose that while Prince Theodore would be the official head of both countries, these excellent ladies would act as his right hand in Jondalar."

"Under your guidance, no doubt."

Ambassador Slieman was no fool. He read the king's mocking tone and, after a glance at Almeda, adjusted his presentation accordingly. "I can imagine you suspect Malevolin's motives in wanting to rule in your stead, but I assure you both kingdoms will be governed fairly with no more threat of war between them and with an equal sharing of goods and natural resources. The economy of both countries will benefit, something this woman," he pointed a finger at Ella, "could not achieve in all her years in power despite her best efforts."

He beckoned a guard, whom Ella recognized as a new man on staff. The frowning man shuffled forward, clearly not happy at being called to testify.

"A queen who's more interested in hosting balls, during which she gratifies her sexual obsession, than in being prudent with the country's coffers is not the woman you want to leave in charge," Slieman said. "This eyewitness will attest to Queen Ella's actions the night of the first ball."

The ambassador nodded at the man, who stared down at the floor. "Go ahead. Share with your king what you saw."

The man looked up suddenly and met Ella's gaze. His frown deepened, his eyes nearly disappearing under the shadow of his jutting brow, then he faced Charming. "Nothing. I saw the queen go into the maze, that's all."

It was Slieman's turn to frown. "And what of the man you saw with her? The same man who emerged from the maze in a state of undress, still fastening his breeches? That's what you said you saw."

The man shrugged. "Don't know what I saw. It was dark, wasn't it? Lots of gentlemen and ladies were about in the garden. Could be I was remembering one o' them."

The courtiers' murmuring grew louder than ever. Discussions and arguments elevated the sound in the room to fever pitch. Excitement crackled like lightning through the air. There were some, Ella knew, who would be happy to see her cast down and put back in her place. Others were loyal supporters. But she was fairly certain none of them wanted to see Theodore Malevolin on their country's throne. Foolish Almeda and Euphemia, always striving for something beyond reach. Ella waited with her breath held for Charming to shoot down

Slieman's proposal.

The king lifted his hand with a negligent gesture bred into him through generations of royalty. The small movement instantly silenced the court. Ella was rather in awe. She'd never mastered that control, had never even wanted to.

"Prince Theodore." Charming addressed the man himself, ignoring Slieman. "I find it interesting your ambassador is also apparently your mouthpiece. Perhaps this is a discussion that would've best taken place in private between the two of us, but now the subject is out there let me state one thing unequivocally."

He paused, allowing the entire room to draw a collective breath. Ella snorted inside. Trust Charming to build dramatic tension.

"Malevolin will not occupy the throne of Jondalar now or ever."

A rippling murmur of approval went through the assembled crowd.

"But Your Highness," Slieman protested, "you surely don't intend to leave the kingdom to the attentions of this woman. I swear to you, I myself saw her chief steward leaving her chambers the night of the most recent ball at an unseemly hour with his hair in disarray and his face flushed."

"Sebastian Crowley?" Charming turned to Ella and lowered his voice. "Is *he* your lover?"

She glared straight into his eyes, challenging him. "Yes, my lord," she answered distinctly. "He is."

Charming's beautiful smile, the one that had stolen her heart as a girl, flashed across his face like sunlight. "Well, good for you, Ella."

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Sebastian crashed down from space and landed on a different hard, stone floor in a room flooded with sunlight. Lucinda landed with him, and for a moment they were entangled in a heap of arms and legs. The little lady didn't weigh much but, with his injuries, having her land on top of him hurt like hell.

"Pardon me. So sorry," she nattered as she poked him in his sore ribs with her sharp elbow. She scrambled off him and got to her feet, twitching the skirts twisted around her legs back into place.

Sebastian had his first chance to look around the room and his stomach lurched. Yes, he'd wanted the magic woman to take him back to Ella's castle, but he hadn't pictured winding up in the middle of the Great Hall in the midst of a crowd of onlookers.

Every pair of eyes was on them. A few shrieks and curses rose above the general babble of excited voices. Lord Marbury, who stood nearby, was as pale as the underbelly of a carp and his eyes nearly bugged out of his head. Lady Belling had a hand clapped over her mouth.

Sebastian looked toward the front of the room and the raised platform where the royal thrones were. Both were occupied, one by King Charming and the other by Ella. Sebastian met her shocked gaze across the room as he slowly pushed himself up onto his hands and knees.

She rose from her chair and flew down the steps, brushing past Ambassador Slieman and running toward Sebastian. She dropped to a crouch beside him, resting a hand on his shoulder and peering into his face with concerned eyes. *Such beautiful blue eyes. I was afraid I'd never see them again.* He breathed deeply, inhaling her precious scent.

"Sebastian, you're here! Are you all right? What happened?" She put an arm around him and tried to help him to his feet. When his weight was too much for her, she called out for a servant. "Come. Help me!"

Surprisingly, it was Count Loyola, not exactly their greatest ally, who came to their aide. The fussy man who couldn't stand to be disheveled or have a hair out of place drew Sebastian's arm around his shoulders and helped him stand.

Sebastian let go of him as soon as he got his balance. He took in the Malevolin contingent on the dais and hoped he wasn't too late. He'd deny his involvement with Ella with his last breath if it would keep her reputation safe and protect the country.

"What happened?" Ella said again, glancing back and forth between him and Lucinda.

It didn't seem politic to announce his kidnapping by the Malevolin royal family in front of the entire court, so Sebastian lowered his voice. "I think we should discuss this confidentially. I hardly meant to drop into the middle of the Great Hall. Can you get Charming to dismiss everyone or else withdraw to private chambers?"

She nodded. "Of course."

But Charming himself had descended the steps of the dais and was approaching. "Where did you pop in from? I've never seen anything like it and I've seen some very strange things in my travels."

Sebastian faced the king, bowing his head in respect. The slight movement made him dizzy again and he swayed.

"Come and sit, Sebastian. You look like a butcher decided to tenderize you." Suddenly, Charming, his sovereign—his rival for Ella—took Loyola's place by Sebastian's side and put an arm around him.

"Sire, there are things I have to tell you which are best not discussed in front of the Malevolin

royal family,” Sebastian said in an undertone as he caught sight of Ambassador Slieman’s enraged expression.

“Nonsense. If I’ve learned one thing, it’s that secrets never helped anyone. If I’d been honest much earlier in my life, I could’ve saved myself and others grief and started enjoying life sooner. Whatever you have to say, you should proclaim to everyone assembled here.” Charming spoke as he guided him the length of the room to his own throne where he helped him to sit. “There. That’s better.”

Sebastian glared at the man who acted as impulsively as a child and who held everything Sebastian desired in his hands. “This is a delicate matter, Highness. It would be impolitic to make public accusations against our Malevolin guests.”

The king sighed and shrugged. “Understandable. It’s exactly situations like this that remind me why I abandoned my crown.”

*And your wife whom you don’t deserve.* Sebastian looked at Ella, who’d dropped onto her throne. Her eyes were wide and shocked. “I’ll send for the court physician. You look terrible.” “I’m all right, but listen. The Malevolins plan to declare you unfit to rule, turn Charming against you and try to win the throne.”

She rested her hand on his arm, her light touch burning him as always. “It’s all right. They already tried and failed. Charming knows about us and doesn’t care. He was about to make an announcement when you...landed here.”

The king had moved to center stage, facing the assemblage. As he slowly raised both arms, calling the people to order, Sebastian had to admit the man had a naturally regal bearing and knew how to charm a crowd. His mother had named him appropriately.

“Loyal subjects of Jondalar, I’m sure you’ve all been confused and maybe even alarmed by the turmoil you’ve witnessed here today. From accusations of immoral conduct to suggestions of a foreign sovereign on the throne to the most unusual entrance of our beloved chief steward and his friend, it has been an unusual and exciting day.”

Sebastian couldn’t see his smile, but heard it in his voice. A ripple of soft laughter and renewed murmurs swept around the room before Charming continued.

“But when I asked you all here, it wasn’t to judge your queen or to decide who should take control of the Jondalarian government. I’ve already made that decision and I chose to announce the news to members of the court before proclaiming it throughout the land.”

Here they came, the words Sebastian had been dreading. Charming wanted to resume command of the kingdom with Ella by his side.

“When I abdicated as your king five years ago, I did it in a hasty and unseemly manner, leaving

a note, signing a few papers and running away from my responsibilities. I didn't worry about leaving Queen Ella in charge because I knew she would rule justly and well, but I never gave a thought to how difficult the task might be for her. I was selfish. I hope I've grown since then and I stand before you now, penitent and asking you to forgive me."

He turned and looked at Ella. The light coming through the tall windows shone on his handsome, noble face. Sebastian could almost feel the people falling in love with him all over again and forgiving his abandonment of them. He wanted to leap from his seat and remind them who had done all the work these past years.

Charming faced the room at large once more. "But I do not ask you to accept me as your king once more. That is a responsibility that was always beyond my skills, one I am most unsuited for. Today I wish to formally and officially bequeath my crown to one who has earned the right to wear it—your gracious Queen Ella, but only if this remarkable woman chooses to accept such a heavy mantle."

Ella looked to Sebastian, her blue eyes dark and soulful and unreadable. He wasn't sure what she was thinking. She should be as overjoyed as the crowd which had begun spontaneously cheering. Her position was safe. She could continue on as before, and he could remain with her as an advisor, confidante and even lover, if she so chose.

Sebastian smiled at her. It was the best situation they could hope for.

Charming reached for her hand and Ella rose from her throne to go take it. She smiled and nodded at the people before holding up her hand for silence.

"I'm honored by my husband's faith in me and would be happy to continue as your ruler. Despite some setbacks in the economy recently, I hope I've done a creditable job in keeping our nation safe and operating efficiently. But before I accept there is something I must tell you which may influence whether you wish to have me as your queen."

She glanced over her shoulder at Sebastian and he his pulse raced as he guessed what was coming. Why would she do it? Why? When everything was about to come out right?

"Ambassador Slieman was not wrong in saying that I have taken a lover. I freely admit it to you now. Some of you may think such an affair immoral, but I assure you I am in love with the man. He has proven his loyalty to me and to our country over and over. His advice has shaped policy and his dependability has been my strength. I intend to marry him so if I become your queen, he will continue to fill the throne where he sits today."

She let go of her husband's hand and turned toward Sebastian as Charming stepped back so the people could see their queen's consort. Sebastian sat erect, frozen, staring at the many pairs of eyes that had suddenly discovered the invisible man in their midst.

Charming had one more piece to add. "Of course, our divorce will be finalized in order that the queen might remarry, but I heartily endorse her choice. And to prove it, I'd like to endow Sebastian Crowley with lands and a title. From now on he will be Sebastian Crowley, Duke of Pell."

Sebastian's vision began to blur and his head to feel swollen like a balloon. Perhaps he was dreaming all this and would awaken still lashed to a pole in the basement of the Malevolin embassy.

He glanced at the Malevolin royal family and their ambassador to find them wearing expressions of such incredulous horror he nearly laughed. But this turn of events did not bode well for tensions between the two countries and that was a sobering thought.

He blinked and when he opened his eyes, Ella was crouching beside him, one hand on his knee, the other holding his shoulder.

"Are you all right? Your face is so pale and your eyes were closed. I thought you'd passed out."

Maybe he had. He seemed to have lost a few seconds. He gazed into her worried eyes and fell in love all over again.

"Am I really here? Did you just tell the entire court you love me and did Charming make me a duke?"

She smiled. "Yes. Now it's time to put you to bed and get the doctor to tend your wounds."

It sounded like a good idea. He let his eyes drift shut.

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When he opened them once more, he was in bed. Glancing around, he realized it was the queen's bedchamber in the middle of the day. Sunlight poured through the stained glass windows, making a bright patchwork of colors spill across the floor and over the opposite wall. Was it still the same day or the following one? He had no idea how long had passed since he'd been taken.

A soft rustling noise drew his attention and he looked to the right. Ella sat in a chair beside the bed. She was smiling at him, a beautiful stained glass creature herself. Bits of green, red and blue light cast on her pale flesh turned it to a rainbow.

She leaned to cover his hand on his chest with hers. "You're finally awake. I was beginning to fear you wouldn't, that you'd remain locked in sleep for a hundred years."

"Your kiss would break that spell."



The words were more poetic than he usually dared and would've been the perfect thing to say, except they came out in a frog's croak.

She rose to pour him a glass of water from a pitcher on the washstand. When she returned, she slipped her hand under the back of his neck and lifted it while she brought the cup to his lips. Cool water soothed his parched throat and her cool hand cradled his head.

Laying him gently back against the pillow, she transferred her hand to his forehead, feeling for a fever.

"You've slept over twenty-four hours. Lucinda explained where she'd found you and I wanted to have Ambassador Slieman arrested. Charming made me calm down and let him leave along with the rest of the Malevolin entourage. I never thought my fickle husband would be the calm voice of reason, but he was right. Relations between our two countries are strained enough without adding an international incident on top of it."

"What about the Malevolin embassy? Still open?"

"Yes. I talked at length with Almeda, Euphemia and, of course, Theodore, although he never says much. While they couldn't completely deny that Slieman had represented their interests, they did try to separate from him as much as possible. They denied any knowledge of your abduction, but I assume that was a lie."

He nodded.

Her scowl was fierce, and adorable. "I knew it. But I had to continue to try to build peace before I let them go. I told them we'd be happy to welcome a new ambassador as soon as they send one."

Sebastian had trouble caring about any of it. His gaze never left Ella's face as he watched every nuance of expression, every blink of her lovely lashes and the shifting colors that dappled her skin. The dimples in her cheeks alone were enough to keep him captivated for hours. Suddenly he realized his haziness wasn't all due to her perfection and his adoration.

"Have I been given some medication?"

She laughed and the colors shimmered across her countenance. "Lucinda brewed a potion she promised would help you heal quickly. I admit I had my doubts, but it has taken down the swelling and healed the lacerations." She touched his face lightly with her fingertips. "Although the bruises still make you look like a prizefighter."

He reached up to touch his chin then took hold of her hand, bringing it to his lips. How soft and warm her skin felt against his mouth.

"I love you," he murmured, the words spilling from him easily like water flowing.

"And I love you."

At long last she bent and kissed him and her lips were even softer and warmer than her hand had been. When she was done with his mouth, she kissed the cuts and bruises on his face with gentle care, her hands lightly cupping his jaw. Then she pulled away and looked into his eyes.

“I was terrified when you disappeared. I thought I’d never see you again. I’m so glad you’re here in my bed safe and sound.”

“Me, too.” He thought of those desperate, helpless moments tied to the pole when he’d doubted he’d escape with his life.

She smoothed her hands over his chest and torso which were naked and her palms felt like velvet. “Now, I have a question for you.”

“Yes?”

“Will you marry me?”

## Chapter Fourteen

“You’re sure you want to come with me? It’s a long way.”

It was the third or maybe fourth time Sebastian had asked her, so Ella knew he was nervous about having her meet his family.

“Not that far and yes, I’m sure. I’ll meet them now so they feel they know me when they come to our wedding.”

“Oh. I don’t know if that will be possible. My sister Marina perhaps, but most of the others live far away and some of them... Well, I don’t know how comfortable they’d feel at court.”

“Nonsense. Do you think I felt comfortable when I first arrived here? I came with nothing but the clothes on my back. The servants here were better dressed than I. Trust me, I’ll make certain your family enjoys their visit here and feels no awkwardness.”

He nodded, but didn’t look convinced and she understood why. Sebastian had sprung from simple people and worked very hard to educate himself and achieve a prominent position at court. Now Charming had bestowed on him a ducal title and lands, but Sebastian’s family members were still working class. Even as a merchant’s daughter, Ella had felt the disparities between herself and Charming, so she could certainly understand Sebastian’s discomfort at bringing her and his family together for the first time.

She grasped his upper arms, rose on her toes and kissed him soundly. “I’m going to go change

now, my darling. We'll leave within the hour."

As she walked from Sebastian's room to her bedroom—soon to be *their* bedroom—she passed several servants carrying hatboxes and trunks. She'd chosen unadorned gowns and bonnets to wear during the visit and hoped they were plain enough so help set Sebastian's relatives at ease with her.

Thinking of his family brought her mind to her own and the last conversation she'd had with her stepmother and sisters before they left for Malevolin. They'd sat in the empty conference room where the Privy Council usually met. Charming had taken Theodore on a walk to "discuss state business", but actually to give Ella a chance to speak privately and plainly with her family. Before leaving, he'd rested a hand lightly on her arm and whispered in her ear, "Remember who you are—Queen of Jondalar."

Ella was hard-pressed to hold onto that as her soon-to-be-ex-husband left and her claws came unsheathed. She wanted to verbally and physically tear into Almeda and Euphemia, and to a lesser extent, Hortense. But she was a ruler with a peace pact to maintain which took precedence over her emotions, so she spoke with frigid politeness.

"As you can imagine, I'm not pleased with your attempts to usurp my throne, but for the sake of peace between our two countries, I hope we can move forward from this."

As she had in their youth, Euphemia tried to foist the blame on someone else. "It was Theodore's idea, him and that horrid Slieman. I told them trying to undermine you would get them nowhere, but they wouldn't listen to me, a mere woman."

"Silence, Euphemia. The deed is done. Assigning blame is a waste of breath." Almeda stared across the table at Ella with the cold, lizard gaze which used to make her quake in her boots and search all her actions trying to figure out what her mistake that day had been. "You're quite right, Ella. We should move forward in a spirit of conciliation. Our kingdoms are linked by trade and, regardless of how we might feel, we must work together."

Beneath the table, Ella clenched her hands in her laps. Even now the woman refused to apologize or acknowledge her part in the coup attempt and Sebastian's kidnapping and torture.

"I will allow you to take Slieman with you, despite his actions against my steward. You may send a new ambassador to take his place," Ella conceded.

"Very good." Almeda's slow nod and drawling tone displayed her arrogance.

"In return, I want your signature on several documents my council has prepared, stating your intent to cease troop buildup on our border. An outline for a new trade agreement is also part of the package."

Almeda's brows shot up. "That is a large request in exchange for Roy Slieman. Perhaps you

should keep him here, try him and dispose of him.”

“A trial might implicate the royal family. Do you really want to stir up hostilities between our nations?” Ella gazed back at her with equally hard, cold eyes and finally Almeda’s gaze dipped. Childishly, Ella felt a thrill of victory at winning the little combat of wills.

Hortense, who’d been watching the exchange with worried eyes, suddenly broke from her cowed silence. “Mother, Euphemia, let’s just have Theodore sign the damn document. I want to go home!”

Her gaze met Ella’s for a fraction of a second. No matter how many times Ella had gotten Hortense in trouble when they were girls, she’d always been willing to try Ella’s next big plan. Perhaps Hortense remembered those girlish scrapes fondly now, because Ella could’ve sworn her step-sister gave a slight nod.

After that there was nothing else to discuss. Ella sent a servant to fetch Charming and Theodore, then waited in awkward silence with her stepfamily for the men to return. At last she could bear the strained quiet no longer and she dared voice the question she’d longed to ask Almeda for years.

“Why do you hate me so?”

Her stepmother didn’t even try to deny it. She answered simply, “Because you’ve always had more than you deserved since long before you became a queen.”

It was no more than Ella had expected to hear and there was no response she could give to unreasonable, elemental hatred.

Those were the last words she’d exchanged with her family.

Later, as their caravan of coaches and outriders had disappeared through the palace gates, Ella had heaved a huge sigh of relief.

Charming spoke from beside her. “I always said, my dear, that your family is the most unpleasant trio of ladies it’s ever been my displeasure to meet. I find it nearly impossible to be charming to them.”

His soft chuckle made her laugh, and Ella remembered for a moment the attraction that had once blossomed between them on a muggy summer night long ago.

“By the way, where is your friend Captain Smith?” she asked. “I haven’t seen him since the night of the ball.”

“Oh, he is a wandering rogue. Can hardly keep his feet in one place for minutes at a time. He’s an adventurer always looking for booty. You know, he used to be a highwayman before he went to sea, and I wouldn’t be at all surprised if he’d decided to try his hand at it again before we set sail.” Charming grinned with casual mischief and his eyes sparkled. “In fact, I wouldn’t

be surprised if he robbed a traveling caravan of royal dignitaries just for a lark. Yes, that sounds like my Robbie.”

Ella’s mouth had dropped open. “After you warned me not to stir up trouble with them you unleashed your...your...pirate on them?”

He’d raised his palms in surrender. “There should be no connection back to Jondalar. He’ll be sure to set upon them on a Malevolin roadway.”

With another devilish grin, Charming had slung his arm around her shoulders. “A pirate lover can be a marvelous thing—in many ways.”

After that exchange Ella had gone to check on Sebastian still sleeping in her bed and had made him her offer of marriage.

Now it was several weeks later and she and Sebastian were about to travel to his sister, Marina’s home in West Dorcas. Despite her assurances to him that she was eager to meet his family and all would be well, she was actually a little nervous. Just because she was royalty didn’t mean they’d accept her. In fact, it made it more likely they’d keep her at arm’s length and judge her severely, assuming she was snobbish rather than getting to know her.

“Are you ready?” Sebastian’s voice from the doorway made her break from her idle gazing out the window.

“Yes.” Ella smoothed the sunny yellow frock she’d changed into while pondering families.

“Are you?”

He nodded and strode toward her. How many times over the past years had she watched him approach and never realized the little shiver of anticipation she felt inside was *not* because of some new policy proposal he was about to show her? Her body had recognized its attraction to him and her soul had known him as her best friend long before her foolish brain had caught up. Sebastian pulled her into his arms and kissed her lips lightly. “Did I ever tell you that you look like a buttercup in that dress?”

“No, I don’t believe you mentioned it.” She smiled and passed her hands over the front of his shirt and his sober gray waistcoat. “And did I ever tell you how attractive you look with rolled up shirtsleeves and an open vest? A little formal, but like you’re ready to get down to business.”

He glanced past her at the bed. “There’s some business I’d like to attend to now before we leave.”

“Tcht, tcht,” she clicked her tongue. “Not now. We’ll be late to your sister’s party. But perhaps you can show me around the countryside where you grew up and we’ll steal a private moment in a haystack or something.”

\*\*\*

Marina gazed at her heavily laden table with a doubt that amounted to despair. She'd decorated the table far more elaborately than usual, bought beautiful new china and glass that they couldn't afford. Jack had excelled himself baking savory pies and sweet pastries, gorgeous cakes and biscuits in the elegant shapes of swans and ships and crowns.

"Goodness, it's lovely," breathed Lili, her youngest sister who had been here since yesterday helping her clean and tidy the house to within an inch of its life.

"Yes," Marina agreed, tugging at her hair in distress. "It is."

Lili turned to her in surprise. "Then what's the matter? Why are you looking like that?"

"Because it doesn't matter how lovely it looks, does it?" Marina raged. "It'll never be good enough for *her*!"

Lili sighed. "I can't really understand why she's coming."

"To look us over, see if Sebastian's family is good enough for her."

"Well, we're not," Lili said frankly. "So what's she going to do about it? Throw him out after announcing she's going to marry him?"

"Do you suppose he had any say in that?" Liam wondered, wandering into the room and reaching over Lili's shoulder for a miniature pie.

Marina slapped his hand away.

"In agreeing to marry her?" Lili said. "He's not going to say no, is he? He's been doing her every bidding for years, running himself into the ground so that every time we see him he looks more tired and thin. If she says to him one day, 'Crowley, marry me next month', he's just going to say, 'Yes, Highness' and meekly go off and buy the ring."

Liam laughed, with just a hint of bitterness. They all shared it, the knowledge that this would be their last reunion with Sebastian present, the inevitable resentment and the sense of loss.

It was worse for the younger ones. They'd always hero-worshipped their oldest brother, the big, hazy figure from their childhood who breezed over the horizon one day a year, larger than life and so dedicated to fun that it was hard to believe it was his success and wealth that formed the safe background to their lives. Well, most of their lives.

But Marina, no stranger to bitter thoughts about her brother's approaching nuptials, had grown up with him, spent far more of her life in the same house as him. And something about Lili's scenario didn't ring true.

"I can't imagine him being quite that meek," she said doubtfully. "He must *want* to marry her."

Liam shrugged. “Ambitious, isn’t he? Can’t go much higher than marrying the queen. They’ve made him a duke, for God’s sake! Will we have to call him ‘Your Grace’?”

“Not in my house,” said Marina firmly. “Liam, get your greedy eyes off those pies! I will not—what’s that? Is it them?”

In response to the loud knocking on the front door and Marina’s panicked and not very lucid questions, Liam and Lili went and glanced out the window.

“Can’t be them, no carriage,” Liam reported. “Jack’s let ’em in, whoever they are.”

As one, they all trooped out of the dining room to the top of the narrow staircase. Marina could hear Jack’s voice interspersed with another man’s. Peering over Liam’s shoulder, she let out a squeak of joyful recognition, shoved her siblings to either side and flew downstairs to hurl herself into the arms of the family black sheep.

“Alastair!” Liam and Lili yelled in unison.

Alastair gave Marina a brief, rough hug. “I was just saying to Jack, I wasn’t sure he’d let me in his house.”

“Idiot boy,” Jack reproved. “If you spent more time in this house, you’d get into less trouble.”

Releasing Alastair, Marina spared her husband a warm glance. Every day, something happened to remind her exactly why she loved her amazing husband, and this latest treasure—welcoming Alastair straight from prison—was one of the most precious.

“What happened?” Lili demanded. “Did they let you out early? Oh, Alastair...” Her face paled.

“You haven’t *escaped*, have you?”

“Well, Jack’s pastries are one hell of a draw to a man on prison rations. I’m joking,” he added hastily to Marina’s glare. “No, some smart-talking lawyer turned up. Apparently, though I’m not innocent, some technicality means they can’t find me guilty, so here I am.”

“Well that was lucky!” Liam exclaimed.

“It was,” Marina said severely. “And you must use it, Alastair. *Never* go back there.”

“Actually, I thought I might join the army...” He broke off as a sharp rap on the front door sounded.

Marina’s heart lurched. It could be the twins, who’d arrived from the farm last night and had taken her children to the market this morning. Or it could be *her*.

With his usual quiet efficiency, Jack stepped round the suddenly frozen siblings who seemed incapable of doing more than exchanging wild glances. Except for Alastair who, watching them with amusement, said, “What? Are we expecting the bailiffs?”

He didn’t know, Marina realized hysterically. While the whole kingdom could talk of little else, Alastair didn’t even know their brother was about to marry the queen! And what in God’s

name would she make of Sebastian's jailbird brother?

Jack opened the door, and Marina's worst fears were realized.

It was her, all right, her hand possessively on Sebastian's immaculate coat sleeve. Even in that first glance, Marina felt blasted by her beauty. No wonder this ordinary girl had captured the heart of a prince and kept the strong-willed Sebastian wrapped around her little finger for all those years. She wore a bright yellow gown of such soft fabric and such elegant cut that Marina was sure it had cost as much as their house. Worse, her head was held high with pride and her beautiful face looked cold and closed.

Sebastian thrust out his hand, "Jack."

Marina was sure no one else could see Sebastian's discomfort. His smile was easy, his manner as friendly as always. But something about his stance, the way he shook Jack's hand and ushered his betrothed into the house, told his sister there was more to his excitement than normal delight in being together again. Sebastian was nervous.

Because of *her*, of course. Marina hated her for that. She was ruining their final reunion by her unasked for and unwanted presence.

Jack managed to close the door on the gathering, gawping neighbors while bowing in a civil though not servile manner to the queen. "You are most welcome in our house."

*No, she bloody isn't!*

Sebastian said, "My brother-in-law, Jack Mann, who's the best baker in the kingdom."

Advancing to do her duty, Marina watched the queen offer her hand to Jack, who took it and bowed over it just a shade awkwardly.

"I'm delighted to meet you," the queen said, and Marina looked at her more closely. If she didn't know better, she'd have imagined that was nervousness raising the royal voice just a little too high, imbuing it with the faintest quaver.

"And his wife, my sister Marina."

Marina gazed coldly at the intruder, making a mockery of her curtsy. The queen's smile stayed fixed on her luscious lips. She transferred her hand from Jack's to hold it out to her. That was when Marina noticed her other hand, not just resting possessively on Sebastian's sleeve, but clutching him as if to a lifeline.

The queen *was* nervous!

Of what? Of lowering herself to their level?

"I've heard so much about you. Thank you for inviting me."

She seemed genuine. Stunned by that as much as by her other discoveries, Marina found herself unable to speak or move, even though she knew she was being unforgivably rude.



The queen's breath caught. Her eyes flickered to Sebastian, as if imploring him for advice. And Sebastian smiled at her.

Understanding hit Marina like a blow. Sebastian was not only the queen's rock; she *loved* him. More than that, adoration spilled out of her brother's eyes, even in that smallest of comforting glances.

Reeling with relief, Marina seized the queen's wavering hand in an over-enthusiastic manner that must have seemed more outrageous than her previous rudeness. But the queen didn't seem to mind. Surely that was relief in the lovely royal eyes? And her smile was warm, instantly forgiving Marina's initial coldness.

Alastair thrust himself in between Marina and Jack. Offering his hand he said appreciatively, "Hello! I'm Alastair Crowley. Has anyone ever told you you're the spitting image of the queen?"

Her Majesty began to laugh. "I try. God knows, I try!"

And suddenly everyone was laughing too, all but Alastair who kept saying, "What? What did I say?"

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Sebastian leaned negligently by the front room window, half his attention on the game of blind man's buff, in which Ella was participating with all the joyful amusement of a child, and the other half, from habit, on the security in the street below. Soldiers in civilian dress still lurked inconspicuously at the corners, but as night fell, the street emptied even of the inevitable gawkers who'd seen the elegant coach arrive and disgorge the queen. By now, the whole town would know that a beautiful and wealthy woman resembling the queen was in the house of Jack Mann the baker.

Sebastian smiled faintly. He felt relaxed and, after the rocky start to the visit, contented.

"It was you, wasn't it?"

Sebastian turned his head to see Alastair, leaning his hip on the sofa back, regarding him with steady, but curiously fierce eyes.

"What was me?" he countered lazily.

"You sent the lawyer. How did you know where I was? I forbade Marina to tell you."

"She didn't." Sebastian hesitated, then decided to tell the truth. "I found out myself. I like to know where you all are, what you're up to."

"Then you'll know I was guilty. I deserved to go to prison."

“Guilty, yes,” Sebastian allowed.

“Then why get me off? You always said we should be prepared to take the consequences of our own actions.”

“Yes.” He looked away from his brother, trying to be honest and yet struggling with the only half formed concepts. “Only...sometimes, I think you all take the consequences of *my* actions.” Alastair frowned. Sebastian didn’t need to look to be aware of it. “Sebastian, I’m grown up. I got myself into the mess. You should have let me get myself out of it. Why should you feel guilty?”

“I...I’ve concentrated on the wrong things, sometimes. I thought money would solve everything and set out to make as much as I could. But we needed more than money. We needed a home. I should never have split us up. I’ve still no idea where to find Tony or Ralph.” Alastair struck his forehead. “God, how could I forget? When I was in prison, I met someone who knew Tony! He’s been at sea, got injured and came ashore but I don’t know where...”

“Will you help me find him?” Sebastian interrupted, and Alastair grinned, the fierce light fading completely from his eyes at last.

“Of course I will. And Ralph. Also, I want to join the army.”

Sebastian nodded. “I can have a word with...”

“No! No words with anyone! I want to do this on my own.”

Sebastian straightened. “Very well,” he said distantly.

Alastair swore under his breath and seized Sebastian’s arm. “Stop it! I know—we all know—and are grateful for everything you’ve done for us! Whatever your stupid guilt is telling you, you couldn’t have done more. But it’s time for us to stand on our own two feet now. You’ve got a wife—a kingdom, for God’s sake! Let go of at least some responsibility or you’ll collapse!”

Sebastian stared at him. His most troublesome brother stared back. Slowly, Sebastian smiled.

“I never thought I’d say it, but I believe you’ve turned sensible on me.”

Alastair’s smile was twisted. “Prison does focus the mind.” He didn’t need to elaborate. Sebastian knew he wouldn’t go back there. “I never thought I’d say this either, but I love your queen.”

Sebastian couldn’t resist glancing across the room at her where she played with his siblings and their children. She was removing the blindfold and laughing with Marina, whom she’d caught. Her hair glinted golden in the candlelight. Her blue eyes sparkled with sheer fun.

Sebastian smiled. “So do I,” he said softly. “My God, so do I.”

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“You see?” Ella said smugly. “That wasn’t so bad, was it?”

But she should have known better than to try to get one over him. Sebastian said, “For all your talk, you were more nervous than they were, and you hid it so well you looked positively glacial.”

“I was afraid they wouldn’t like me,” Ella confessed. “I was relieved when I met Jack, and then when Marina looked at me, I wanted to die. She hated me!”

“No. She hated who and what she imagined you were. They were all afraid you would come between us. We don’t see each other often, but we are still a close family. Bringing royalty into it isn’t easy for anyone.”

“I know,” she sighed.

“If it’s any consolation, they all love you now.”

“Well, I love them. You have an amazing family, Sebastian, from the baker’s wife to the veterinarian, from the farmers to the...”

“Convicts?”

“Alastair told me,” she said. “He seemed to think I would mind.”

“Didn’t you?”

“How can you *mind* about something that’s already done with? I like Alastair, and I think he’ll make a great officer.” She smiled and reached out for his hand in the darkness. At the first touch, his fingers curled around hers. “We should see more of them, all of them.”

Sebastian said, “I’d like that.”

She squeezed his hand, then began to play with it, loving the feel of his strong fingers and warm palm, remembering vividly their touch on her naked body. “I loved your little nieces and nephews too. They made me wonder...”

“Wonder what?”

“Well, I never had much time to think about children of my own before. But seeing Marina’s, I began to feel this tiny ache and I caught myself wondering what it would be like to have a child of yours.”

Abruptly, Sebastian rapped on the coach roof and called out the window for the driver to halt the coach.

“I’m sorry,” Ella said in quick alarm. “I’m just babbling. I know it’s too soon to start talking about...”

“Come, walk with me a moment.”

Ella blinked, but he was already opening the coach door. “Now?”

“Now.”

“But it’s dark.”

“So it is.” He stood outside the open door, silhouetted in the coach’s lantern lights, holding out his hand to her.

It was too dark to see his expression. Still afraid she’d angered or appalled him by her last remarks, she obeyed. Away from the listening ears of the servants—she was never sure how much they could hear inside the coach—she could clear the air and make things right.

Sebastian handed her down. “The queen and I will take a short walk. Wait here,” he commanded.

She waited until they’d walked several yards off the road before she said urgently, “Sebastian, I was only thinking aloud. We have lots of time…”

“Yes, we do,” he interrupted. “I love your thinking aloud. In fact, I think we should write that into the marriage contract. After all we’ve hidden over the years, Ella, there must be total honesty between us now.”

“Absolutely,” she agreed with enthusiasm.

“No masks, no magical disguises, no secrets.”

“None.”

A large, shadowed oak tree marked the boundary of a field. He led Ella behind it so they were hidden from the carriage and their escort. By the moonlight, now that her eyes had grown accustomed, Ella could make out his warm, serious eyes, and he didn’t look angry or appalled. In fact, his expression made the butterflies dance in her stomach, spreading lower and hotter.

“No sharing with other lovers. There will only ever be two of us in my bed. I can’t share you.”

“I don’t want to share you, or me,” Ella whispered, because he’d leaned into her, his mouth hovering near hers. “It was a fantasy, born of frustration because I didn’t know what I really wanted. I wanted all love because I had none. Because I thought I had none.”

“And now?”

“And now I love only you.”

“And several million subjects.”

“But they’re banned from my bed.”

His lips curved, brushed against hers. “Since we’re being so honest, I want you to know that I’d love you to bear my child. I want to have lots of children with you, but if it doesn’t happen, that’s fine, too, because it’s you I want, now and forever.”

She touched his face with her finger tips, wonderingly, then reached up for his mouth and

kissed him.

Several moments later, she said huskily, "So why did you bring me here? Just to say that?"

"No, I brought you here to this tree to fulfill a boyhood fantasy of my own."

Since his lips were pressed to the rapid pulse at the base of her throat, she had difficulty in responding to that. "What...is that?"

"To make love under its branches."

She let out a moan of desire. "They'll know..."

"So what? I don't intend to hide our love any more. They can't see us and I don't really care if they hear us. In fact, it might add to the thrill." He gave her a wicked grin before kissing her mouth again, thoroughly, tenderly. At the same time, he found and cupped her breast. When he pressed his lower body into hers, she gasped at the feel of his rigid cock through their clothing and stumbled, falling back against the trunk of the oak.

Sebastian came with her, still kissing and caressing, rubbing her stiffened nipple through her bodice repeatedly with his thumb. He began to gyrate his hips against her, stroking her with his covered cock.

"Say yes," he whispered into her mouth.

"Yes." As he unhooked the front of her dress and freed her breast for his mouth's ravishment, she gasped out, "I had the same fantasy, not about this tree, but any old tree. Way back at the beginning, before the first ball, I wanted someone to love me, standing up against a big tree. It was so vivid a daydream I could almost feel the rough bark pressing into my skin."

"Like this?" He'd dragged her gown down from her shoulders, and she felt the coarse wood rasping the naked skin of her back. At the same time, he reached under her skirts, bundling them up out of his way.

"Almost," she whispered. "I think I was facing the other way...oh God, Sebastian!"

His fingers were between her thighs, soaking up the moisture from her desperate pussy as they played among her folds and glided over her clitoris.

"We'll do that next time," he promised, sliding one finger inside her and stirring, slowly. "This time, I want to see your face while I fuck you, gaze into your eyes while you orgasm."

Ella moaned and forced her hands between their bodies, fumbling for the fastening to his breeches. He brushed her fingers aside, deftly opening his own breeches and freeing his upright cock. Ella had one delicious glimpse of it in the moonlight before his body slammed into hers once more.

"Oh, God, I want you so much," she whispered.

"Good." His cock nudged between her thighs. He dragged her up on her tiptoes and thrust. His

cock slid straight in, making her gasp with shock as well as pleasure. “Because later, I’m coming to your bed to make love to you all night. For now, I’m afraid this will be hard and fast and without finesse.”

“Good!” She broke off, unable to say more, for he was moving inside her, just as hard and fast as he’d promised. It was rough and furious and although he took enough care to protect her with his arms from the tree, she loved the feel of the bark grazing her back and buttocks while he thrust into her. He stroked her thighs, held on to her hips, hammering pleasure into her. She reached for it eagerly, passionately.

Orgasm claimed them both quickly. Sebastian collapsed against her, holding onto the tree above her head as they trembled and shuddered together.

Ella held on to him, and when she could speak, she whispered in his ear, “I like it with no masks.”

He smiled, stroking her hair, and kissed her mouth. “So do I.” He withdrew from her slowly, and gently drew her bodice back up over her breasts. “Was I rough? Did I hurt you?”

“Yes. And no.” She watched him smooth out her skirts and smiled, fumbling with her fastenings. Unexpectedly, when he began to button his breeches she found herself aroused all over again.

He heard the little growl from deep in her throat and paused to kiss her once more lingeringly.

“Tonight,” he said, as a promise.

Arm in arm, they walked back to the coach. The driver, the servants and the soldiers of the escort all faced ahead, expressionless and inscrutable.

“Thank you. You may drive on to the castle,” said Ella demurely.

Inside the coach, she snuggled against Sebastian’s shoulder, his arm around her. “I love being with you. Do you know what I think?”

“What?” he asked lazily. She felt his soft kiss on her hair and smiled.

“I think this is the happy ever after Lucinda always intended for me. She’s not really my fairy godmother, you know. Although she’s a romantic old soul, she’s really Jondalar’s fairy godmother. She watches over the country. For some reason, she thought I could rule it well and so she brought me to Charming. After he left, when I was finally ready, she brought us together.”

“I don’t think it’s anything to do with Lucinda. I’ve always loved you.”

Ella only smiled and slid onto her knees on the rocking coach floor. “I wish I’d recognized before that I’ve always loved you. That’s what Lucinda did for us—she made us see.”

Sebastian smiled. “I’d like to say a little magic never hurt anyone, but Lucinda and that wand...

What are you doing?”

“Unfastening your breeches. Again.”

He swallowed audibly. “Why?” he asked huskily.

Ella, kneeling between his legs, took his fast-growing cock in her hand and lowered her head.

“Because I’m here to serve you...”

## About the Author

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*Slavery was her refuge...but now it's time to fly free.*

**Butterfly Unpinned**  
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Navajo woodworker Bryan Lapahie can't believe his luck. He's been hired to create sculptures for a wealthy photographer's wildly opulent mansion. Once inside, he finds his new boss is a man of many possessions—and an appetite for BDSM so extreme it makes Bryan's own Dominant tendencies look tame.

Of the four submissives enslaved at the mansion, it is quiet Butterfly who captures his interest. Her vulnerable beauty stirs his fantasies...and awakens his protective instincts.

Butterfly wanted only two things: to feel protected, and to satisfy her craving for hardcore kink. She found both...with the wrong guy. She'd almost forgotten how to be a normal person until a man with flowing dark hair enters the mansion. Suddenly, her safe haven is looking more and more like a prison, and all she can think about is breaking free—with Bryan.

To rescue her, Bryan is more than willing to lay everything on the line. But simply walking away isn't as easy as it seems...

*Enjoy the following excerpt from Butterfly Unpinned:*

The key in his slick hand hit the floor. He closed the door. Locked it. Christ, the way the morning sunlight streamed into the study... She was so beautiful and lay so still, her limbs



splayed on the massive desk and held in place with large red ribbons.

He just stood there watching the rise and fall of her chest. She didn't seem afraid. The bottoms of those tiny feet were nearest to him. He crossed the room slowly, looking for a reaction. Every step closer increased the tempo of her breathing, and when he reached her and touched the lightly-soiled sole of each foot, she panted as if on the edge of orgasm.

His fingers wrapped around each slim ankle. The bows weren't anchored to anything that he could see, but she stayed in position when he gave her calves a gentle squeeze. Pale blue blood vessels spidered just beneath her creamy skin—it was that translucent. He walked to her side and let his hands trace a path to where the invitation Gary spoke of rested between her thighs. The envelope had been tied with red ribbon to the ring peeking from the fleshy hood of her clitoris.

He bent down for a better look. And to breathe in her scent. When he exhaled, a spray of goose bumps dotted the tops of her thighs, to which he held tight in order to maintain control. Another deep breath and he was ready. He released her skin. Ten almond-shaped marks in a mottled pink were left behind on her white thighs.

“Sorry,” he said, rubbing them as if that would make them disappear. The texture of her body, like warm satin, made his cock throb. He wanted her off this hard table and somewhere soft.

He looked at her face. She didn't meet his gaze, but her eyes were open, fixed on the ceiling.

*No, hon. None of this coy shit.* If he fucked her, he wanted to see her reaction. He wanted her to want this, too.

“Sit up.”

“I can't, sir. The bows...”

So they were tied down. He walked over to where her head met the edge of the desk and felt under the curved lip of the desk's top—a small ring held the bindings in place. He pulled one end of a ribbon holding her wrist, then untied the other. In the stillness of the room, the satin rushing through the knots sounded like a roar. Her nipples thickened, and their centers grew from dusky pink to a bright red. He heard her swallow. He pressed his lips to her ear.

“How wet will you be when I pluck that pretty invitation from between your legs?” he whispered. When she shuddered, he suppressed one of his own. He liked this—the set-up, her submissiveness, his struggle to stay in control and do everything slow and right. He liked it a lot.

He willed himself to stand upright and go back to her feet. She must have expected him to undo those ties, too; her toes gave the slightest wave. He ran a finger over the ones on the right. A rush of air left her chest. Better yet, she sat up.

Bryan put a knee on the desk between her feet and climbed up. His hands found purchase on either side of her hips and, although he stared at her eyes, she kept hers lowered. He dipped down to try to catch them, to lock with them and study the unusual green irises. Her eyes dodged his, and they made a game of it, him moving closer and crouching lower to make the connection.

She actually grinned.

He pressed his elbows to the desk, letting the weight of his body force her back down. He moved lower to place a fleeting kiss to the space above her belly; she still wore scarves there, just a twisted bundle of them hiding her abdomen. He skipped over the mass of silk, then kissed lower still, wetting his lips each time to make her wait until his feet were firmly planted back on the floor. When he reached her clean-shaven mound, he added a lick. She shivered. His nose trailed over the bare slope of her cunt and nestled against her clit. The muscles of her pussy clenched so hard, the sensitive ridge bumped him back. He inhaled. *Heaven...*

“So this is for me?” He looked up.

She nodded.

“I’m not talking about the invitation.”

She nodded again. Slower this time.

He gripped the edges of the desk to hold back. To keep from unzipping. He focused on the envelope. It hid her slit well, and he kissed the thick paper, forcing it close against her concealed lips. Then, with a flick of a finger, he unveiled her secrets—the full, ruffled lips, a deeper pink than her nipples. He parted them. A trickle of juice escaped, and he gathered it on his fingertip.

He looked up again. She had propped herself on her elbows, and her eyes didn’t shift away this time, not until he tasted her. Then all he got was the soft open *o* of her mouth and fluttering eyelids. He climbed back on the desk to capture her lips with his. She jumped, leaving him with only her bottom lip. He sucked it into his mouth—held it there—then pushed her back to the desktop to take the upper lip, too. She resisted and he let go.

“I want to taste all of you,” he said softly.

He tilted his head to place a kiss right by her lips. She turned to him, her eyes searching his.

“What?” he asked.

“You’re supposed to fuck me, sir, not...”

“Not what?”

“Not...not love me like this.”

His erection, coated in pre-come and dying for any kind of release, burned into his skin. Seared

him like a fucking brand. His fingers itched to yank open his fly and find those goddamn condoms. He wouldn't last three strokes.

But he kept his head. "What do *you* want, Butterfly?"

"I'll do whatever you wish—"

"That's not what I asked."

"I take pleasure in pleasing you."

He crawled back down her body until his feet hit the floor and his lips hovered over her sex. It was wetter now, but he didn't touch it. He took a thin sliver of ribbon between his teeth and made sure she watched. Her pupils were huge, her cheeks flushed. He pulled. The bow holding the invitation came loose and dropped between her thighs. He picked up the small envelope, careful not to touch her, then tucked it into his back pocket.

After untying the bows at her ankles, he offered his hand. She took it and let him slide her to the edge. But he didn't let her get down. Instead he walked into her still-open thighs and forced them further apart. She leaned back on her hands. The bend of her legs cleared the far edges of the desk, and her eyes met his—this time in challenge.

He fingered the hoop at her clit and gave it a playful tug. "You going to be at this little party?" he asked.

She nodded.

He could barely wait.

He stepped back to let her go. She closed her eyes. In disappointment, he hoped. After what he'd just put himself through, she'd better be feeling something. When she slid off the desk, the smear of moisture she left behind was a small victory. But when she turned around on shaky legs at the door while he got his tools...that moment, the look on her face and the obvious lust there—hell, the fact that she even turned around—this was a triumph.

*Rab's dead but he won't lie down.*

## Requiem for Rab

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Lili's luck is on the upswing. Her acting career is taking off, she's home in Edinburgh to perform in a high profile Festival play and romance is blossoming with her famous leading man. The last thing she wants or expects on her first night of passion in two years is her ex-husband looming over her new lover's shoulder, dripping blood on her pristine sheets.

Rab, self-confessed hedonist and computer geek, has always been a joker, but surely even he wouldn't go to this length to stop her getting laid—inventing a wild tale of being shot dead and having to track down his own body.

Then again, there's no logical explanation for why she's the only one who can see him. Why the police are knocking on her door. And why Rab is still the only man who drives her crazy, in bed and out.

All she knows is, it's all still there. The fun and the pain. The feelings that never really went away. She owes it to him to never stop looking—even though finding him could take him away for good...

*Enjoy the following excerpt from Requiem for Rab:*

It seemed I'd only just fallen asleep, when I sprang back into wakefulness.

*"Oh mama mia, mama mia,*

*Mama mia let me go!*

*Beelzebub has a devil put aside for me,*

*For me, for ME...!"*

Queen.

In my living room. *What the...?*

Blindly, I stumbled out of bed, pushed open the bedroom door and blinked in the lamplight.

*"So you think you can love me and spit in my eye?*

*So you think you can love me and leave to die?"*

It was like a time warp.

Rab sat at the old desk, hunched over a computer, singing along to loud rock music, his gaze glued to the screen while his hand flew across keys and manipulated the mouse at the speed of light. How many times over the years had I discovered him like this, at all hours of the day and night?

The only difference was the absence of his big tower computer. He was using my laptop.

At least I knew what to do. Crossing the room, I turned down the stereo to don't-force-the-neighbours-to-call-the-police volume, and went to stand beside him.

Quite naturally, his arm came out and drew me to his side. He didn't look up from the screen, but he did stop singing. Which was a relief to all.

"What are you doing?" I asked, still suffering from a weird sense of déjà vu.

"Looking up mediums," was the unexpected answer. His hand moved on my waist, absently caressing. Little sparks of pleasure ran up to my breasts and down to my stomach.

“Mediums?”

He shrugged. “Makes sense. If I can get through to one of them, maybe she’d be able to track down my body.”

“Why can’t *you* track it down?”

“No idea. One article here was wittering about the dead body repelling the spirit. Suppose it would.”

He glanced up at me, still half-absorbed in his research, but almost at once, his eyes cleared and softened. He drew me onto his lap and held me loosely in both arms.

“There’s one in Morningside. She *looks* the genuine article.”

I glanced at the screen. A plump middle-aged lady gazed back at me. She had short, grey hair, dangling earrings and a no-nonsense smile. Above her, a plain banner proclaimed, “Rose Colvin, Medium”. So far as I could tell, there were none of the obvious clichéd images on her site. She might have been advertising a cleaning service.

Against the curve of my bottom, I could feel Rab’s erection growing. Excitement warred with disbelief. How did ghosts get erections? I twisted round to face him. “Will you go and check her out?”

“Yes...” His eyes darkened. His arms tightened, and I felt his hand slide up from my waist along the side of my breast. “Tomorrow,” he breathed.

I swallowed, unmoving as his hand roamed back and around, touching the sensitive underside of my breast, brushing the nipple that reached out to him without permission.

“Tonight, I wish...”

“You wish what?” I managed.

“I wish...” His gaze roved over my unbuttoned nightshirt, came back up to my face, unsmiling.

“I wish we could make it right.” He touched my cheeks, my lips, with the sensitive tips of his fingers. “I wish we could wash away all the crap and just leave the one thing that matters.”

“Death,” I whispered.

His lips quirked. “Love.” He brought my face nearer and fastened his mouth on mine.

It wasn’t like the last time, in the street outside the theatre. This was a ravenous kiss, consuming me from the outset. He attacked my mouth with lips and tongue and teeth, taking fierce possession, and the fire surged from him straight through me.

I gasped into his mouth. “And when you’re gone?”

“Then you’ll have it to remember as you get on with your life. And we’ll both know that for this night at least, we loved each other. And, Lil...”

“What?” I gasped as he dragged my nightshirt over my head and threw it over his shoulder.

“I loved you every night. And day. The ones in the pub as well as the ones at home. The ones on computer games and the ones pissed in our bed or on somebody else’s floor. The ones I fucked you and all the ones since you left me. I never stopped and I never will.”

“Oh, Rab, don’t make me cry,” I choked.

He seized my mouth in his, cupping my breast and kneading, groaning deep in his throat, “Can I make you come?”

“Can ghosts have sex?”

“This one bloody can.”

Laughter caught in my throat, feeding the frantic lust. “Then do you fancy a shag?”

He left my mouth, smiling, to kiss my breast instead. “I thought you’d never ask.”

His lips brushed my nipple, pulled at it while his tongue flicked over it wickedly. Moaning, I arched up into his mouth. I felt his teeth grazing my nipple, teasing. His hands were busy on his zip.

He lifted me by the waist and I watched with blatant desire as his cock sprang up between our bodies. God, I’d missed that... Big, blue-veined, purple headed and thick. Watching my face, he began to lower me onto it.

I gasped at the shooting pangs of delight as its blunt head probed among my folds. It brushed against my clitoris, found my soaking entrance which already throbbed uncontrollably as if trying to draw him in. Then he pushed up into my body and I cried out in shock and delight.

“Oh, fuck, I love being dead,” he whispered.

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