



Sydney Somers

PRIMAL ATTRACTION

Pendragon Gargoyles

He'll stop at nothing to claim her... If she doesn't kill him first.

Pendragon Gargoyles, Book 2

A lethal huntress, Sorchia lives to track and eliminate rogue immortals—until her latest assignment turns out to be a sexy, gargoyle shape-shifter. From the start she's shaken by the lust his touch awakens inside her. Not only that, but the cat is convinced she's his mate, and for the first time, she's unable to kill her target.

Still mourning the loss of his mate, Cale is stunned to find Sorchia alive. Yet the woman he aches to possess doesn't recognize him and is after the only thing that will save his brother—a mystical weapon that will lead to Excalibur.

Determined to protect his family and reclaim his mate, Cale ruthlessly takes advantage of Sorchia's one weakness—her desire for him. Desire that could unlock their past...or cause him to lose her all over again.

Warning: Featuring a sarcastic, ass-kicking heroine going toe-to-toe with the stubborn shifter who's dead set on reclaiming his mate. Also contains graphic violence, death-threat foreplay and scorching sex that will make you roll over and purr.

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Chapter One

Here, kitty, kitty.

Sorcha resisted checking the time display on her cell phone. The one and only time she'd taken her finger off her crossbow while tracking a target she had ended up eating dragon scales. Not her best moment. Forget the laughs she'd given every other huntress when her so-called best friend blabbed about the whole disaster.

She scanned the area again, paying close attention to the shadows that stretched across the parking lot below. Cats were damn quiet, the hardest of the gargoyle clans to track when in their animal form. With a two-hour window left to catch her regular girls' night, she wasn't about to waste a second by missing the first flicker of movement.

If Callaghan was on time—and the information she'd been given said he was fairly predictable for a cat—she'd be able to return whatever artifact he had in his possession to Rhiannon before catching up with the girls. The goddess had a serious problem with immortals selling any piece of Avalon, let alone selling it on the human black market.

Since Rhiannon's stance on that had been made painfully clear to all immortals, Callaghan had signed his own death warrant as far as Sorcha was concerned. She didn't know who he was meeting, didn't particularly care. Humans were off limits even to her, unless they were a threat to Avalon.

A fleeting melody hummed on the air, sounding suspiciously like Madonna's "Like a Virgin".

Damn it, Nessa.

Promising herself she'd hit her best friend later, Sorcha turned her phone off. Her friend's addiction to texting—and worse, her insistence that Sorcha needed a new phone so she could text more efficiently—was going to get one of them killed. She should have guessed Nessa had screwed with the settings on her phone when the huntress had used it earlier.

Not that she'd hold it against Nessa for too long since her friend hadn't known she would be tasked with taking out a rogue after they'd met up. Usually immortals were closely scrutinized before the kill order went out. That Rhiannon had skipped that step this time meant Callaghan had gotten in way over his head.

A bank of clouds drifted across the moon, deepening the shadows below. The one lamppost in the small university parking lot had been vandalized at some point, leaving chunks of glass littering the

concrete below. Not that she needed help seeing. The cat was the only one in the area whose night vision could rival hers.

Movement beneath the trees lining the far edge of the parking lot caught her attention. The outline of a man edged toward the only car left in the lot. Even without a backpack or briefcase in tow, she wouldn't have mistaken him for a student or professor. His movement was a little too...predatory.

Callaghan. A smile caught the corner of her mouth.

The gargoyle stopped, scanned the area.

Smart kitty, though she'd prefer him a little closer before she took her shot. The arrow would slow him down, give her time to finish the job, but she wanted the shot to count.

He took another few cautious steps, then returned to his smooth strides.

A soft breeze whispered across her face, and she tensed. So did Callaghan. She'd chosen the spot to stay downwind, lowering the odds he'd catch her scent before it was too late. At best he should only sense another immortal was close by. Unless he had reason to suspect a huntress had been dispatched.

She could almost feel the wariness creep over him, had seen more than a few rogue immortals recognize the moment they'd made their last error in judgment. Instead of retreating however, Callaghan cocked his head. He remained motionless for so long she wondered if he was lost in thought.

Take the shot.

Sorcha pulled in a soft breath and held, letting the quiet steady both her heart and hand. Not yet. She needed to—

Callaghan's head snapped in her direction, his gaze seeking and landing on her as though he knew exactly where she was.

A flash of familiarity grabbed hold of her stomach and wrenched hard. Hard enough to catch her off guard. Her finger squeezed the trigger on her crossbow.

Callaghan jerked, his eyes those of a feral cat, rage imprinted on his human face as he ripped the arrow out of his arm and turned, fleeing toward the cover of trees.

Sorcha didn't move. Her gaze locked on the arrow lying on the pavement like a snapped twig.

She'd missed? She never missed. The poison-tipped dart should have embedded itself in the traitor's heart, slowing him until she could reach him to deliver the killing blow. If she wasn't looking at the arrow he'd torn from his arm—and that sure as hell wouldn't have tickled—she wouldn't have believed it.

How in hell had she missed?

The question buzzed around in her head, slowing her reaction time, and the second she realized it, she flattened her palm on the roof ledge and dropped over the side of the building. Her ankle turned over when she landed off balance on the grass. She'd underestimated the length of the drop.

Another mistake.

Annoyance bubbled beneath the steel-edged determination to finish her task, and she sprinted after him. Once she got close enough to see him, she'd be able to flash closer and use her sword. Even if he'd shifted into his cat form, he couldn't run faster than she could travel.

Sorcha burst through a clearing of trees and skidded to a stop as the clouds hiding the moon drifted past, brightening the small field.

Callaghan stood opposite her, still a man, still unarmed.

Not real bright, was he? Although surprised, she didn't stop to wonder why he hadn't at least armed himself, or stranger still, why he hadn't shifted into his cat form. She lifted her crossbow to fire another arrow.

"Sorcha?" Her name left his lips on a cracked whisper.

Her finger paused on the trigger this time. He knew her? How? Huntresses weren't exactly welcomed by other immortals, and making the effort wasn't worth it considering all huntresses were cleansed every hundred years, wiping out their memories.

Although she retained memories from her human life before becoming a huntress, she understood that each cleanse was the only way Rhiannon could guarantee those she'd gifted with godlike powers would never rise up against her.

Sorcha had never once regretted the price of being saved from her life as a slave. If she hadn't accepted the goddess's deal, she would have died at the mercy of Morgana's soldiers.

Avalon's most powerful sorceress didn't care how savage her armies were if it increased her empire, and having been a victim long enough, Sorcha would have agreed to anything to have been spared the kind of death those men had planned for her.

Countless immortals paid obscene fortunes to be cleansed and start over. For Sorcha, it was all part of the huntress package. Even if Callaghan did know her, she still had a job to do.

So squeeze the trigger already.

She searched his face, knowing she didn't recognize the brilliant blue eyes that bored into hers. Nothing about his dark hair or the shadowed jaw clenched tight struck her as familiar, and yet...

Her gaze landed on the scar on his chin. He would have gotten that before he reached maturity or it would have healed. From fighting as a cub maybe.

He took a step in her direction, and her finger tightened on the trigger.

"I saw..." He cocked his head, confusion and shock drawing his brows together, making him appear almost vulnerable. "I saw you die."

Die? Sorcha shook her head. "I think you've got me confused with someone else." A mortal obviously. Gargoyles had a higher tolerance for humans than most other immortals.

"Let me see it." She'd planned on searching his body for the item he intended to sell, but if he didn't have it on him, it would be more work to track down after he was dead.

“How did you...where have you...you’re okay? You’re alive?” His voice grew rougher with every word.

An enchantress. If Callaghan was high from banging one of the Lady of Lake’s daughters that would certainly explain why he wasn’t right in the head. A definite advantage for her.

He took three steps in her direction. She fired another arrow at him. This one caught him in the thigh. He snarled, his claws bursting from his fingertips.

Knowing just how fast gargoyles could shift, she sidestepped to keep her distance. “Easy, tiger.”

He blinked, his hand stopping short of ripping out the second arrow, and then grinned at her. Actually *grinned* at her.

Well, that was a first. The poison usually made them a little drunk and whole lot slower. But amuse them? Not so much.

“You called me tiger.”

“Don’t take it personally. It’s just—”

“A figure of speech,” he finished. “I know.” His smile deepened, a sexy, breath-stealing smile that tugged at her stomach.

Hell, she felt it all the way to her toes and every place in between that hadn’t warmed in way too long to think about now. Not when she was supposed to do her job and take him out.

Callaghan shook his head, the fading smile replaced by an expression of such sheer longing she almost backed up. “You’re not dead.”

“And you’re looking to change that, I suppose?”

His frowned. “You know who I am, right?”

She nodded, cutting him off. This was always the part where they tried to bargain their way out of death, even name drop as though she had anyone to fear except Rhiannon if she failed. “Cale Callaghan. Owner of a bar called Pendragon’s and traitor to Avalon.”

“Traitor?” He sounded just stunned enough she almost believed he didn’t have a clue what she was talking about.

“Do you have it on you?”

His face went carefully blank, and the breath she hadn’t realized she’d been holding unraveled in her lungs. Gods, had she really expected him to be innocent?

“You do,” she guessed, watching a fine layer of sweat glisten on his forehead. The poison had started working. Not lethal but it came with one bitch of a headache.

“You’re here for the dagger?” The last syllable slurred a little, but he still hadn’t shifted. He had to know his cat form would be more resistant to the poison, and yet he remained a man.

Why?

Callaghan swayed on his feet, his eyes drifting shut, only to snap open a second later. “I don’t understand.”

“You broke the rules.”

“You’re not dead,” he repeated, his gaze losing focus.

“Nope.” What the hell had that enchantress done to him? Again she waited for him to shift, to attack, to defend himself. Something.

“I thought...all this time...” He frowned. “You sure you’re not dead?” He stumbled, caught himself.

His visible struggle to concentrate might have been cute at any other time or place. And if she didn’t have to kill him.

So get on with it already.

Sorcha lowered her crossbow, reaching for the sword secured inside her jacket. Beheading and fire were the only ways to kill another immortal, and fire was much too unpredictable to rely on.

“Gods, Sorcha. You’re here, really here.” He moved toward her, his stride suddenly not the least bit hampered by the poison.

Son of a bitch.

She gripped the hilt of her sword, but it somehow snagged on the inside of her jacket—a first—giving Callaghan just enough time to get a hold of her.

With only a heartbeat to brace herself for a crushing blow, she should have flashed herself out of reach. How many times did a girl have to miss her mark in one night before she got her head on straight?

His arms wrapped around her, and she anticipated the sound of her own bones crunching. A sound that never came. The arms sliding around her and tugging her hard against his chest didn’t hurt her at all. Strong and solid, they cradled her as though he was afraid she would break into a thousand pieces.

Huntresses didn’t break, and they certainly didn’t let their targets—

His lips drifted across her forehead, and she went perfectly still. He rubbed his face against her hair, whispering her name over and over.

He really thought he knew her. When his arms tightened around her and his voice turned hoarse with emotion, she almost wanted him to know her. An idiotic thought, but knowing that didn’t stop her heart from quickening as he sank his fingers into her hair, tipping her face up to look at him.

She gripped his arms, ready to drive her knee between the gargoyle’s legs. And she would have if his didn’t buckle at that precise moment. His possessive grip kept her close as he slid awkwardly to the ground.

That smile was back on his lips, slow and hot and doing crazy things to her stomach. Not until she squeezed her fingers did she realize she was the one keeping him on his knees so he wouldn’t topple over. Something was seriously wrong with her. Was she really that hard up for sex that she could feel herself getting wound up for a man she’d come here to kill?

“Why are you looking at me like that?” He dragged his thumb across her jaw in a slow, sweeping arc.

"You're confused." And she was going to be a laughingstock for letting a target put his paws all over her, and worse, for liking it.

"No." The absolute certainty in his voice burrowed through her chest. "You're Sorcha, daughter of Alaios and Maurya. Slave-born and granted immortality by the goddess Rhiannon."

So what if he had known her—intimately judging by the way he cupped her cheek. He was still a rogue, a traitor. "You forgot the most important part. Huntress."

His blue eyes narrowed. "No."

"See, you don't really know me." He couldn't have. Maybe they'd hooked up a time or two for some really great sex, but if he had known her well enough to be more than one of her rare one-night stands, then he would have known what she did, who she was.

"I know you," he insisted, tightening the fingers he'd buried in her hair, but not to the point of pain. "And you know me."

"Sure I do, tiger." Better to keep him calm until she could work her sword free.

"But I can't give even you Constantine's dagger."

Her heart stopped. "You have one of the daggers? One of *the* daggers?" And he'd been about to sell it to a human? So he was reckless *and* out of his mind.

The six mystical daggers handcrafted by King Arthur's heir, Constantine, were the most sought after weapons in Avalon. It was believed, when reunited, they would lead to Excalibur. The sword was prophesized to awaken Arthur so that he could finish the war begun centuries ago. The war that suffered a significant setback when he'd died fighting his nephew and half-sister Morgana at the battle of Camlann.

Every immortal in Avalon—hell, even the remaining humans enslaved by Morgana—wanted that sword. Bad enough to kill to possess it.

"I do know you, Sorcha," Callaghan insisted, ignoring her question as his hand fell away from her face. He leaned in, nuzzled her cheek.

Her eyes slid closed. The traitor smelled much too good, too—

His lips teased her ear, his breath hot against her skin, and just when her next breath wedged in her throat, he murmured, "You're my mate."

"Hell no."

No? Cale frowned, his thoughts slipping away from him before pain exploded up his leg.

Fuck!

He hit the ground hard enough to knock his teeth together. Hard enough to jam the arrow deeper into his leg.

Cursing, he forced his eyes open, grateful for the fire burning through the layers of muscle where she'd shot him. The pain was the only thing that made him doubt he was dreaming. He should know. He'd dreamt of Sorcha being alive every night for the first decade after he'd lost her.

But he hadn't, had he? No sorcery or Fae glamour could fabricate the bone-deep certainty he was looking at his mate. The cat sure as hell knew, recognized her as his even when she stared at him like he was a stranger.

She sat opposite him, the sides of her long brown hair tied back to keep it from falling across her face, her eyes—one brown, one green—wary, her lips moving, though he couldn't understand what she said.

He squinted, watching her mouth work soundlessly. Hell no? He tried concentrating again, but the effort only made the vicious throbbing in his head worse. Something about hell and maybe...tiger?

The animal inside him growled at the familiar insult even as Cale's urge to smile cut through the agony in his leg.

"Stop that." Sorcha scowled at him. "Should have dropped you on your damn head," she muttered, crouching over him and patting him down.

"Stop what?" He caught her hand, laced his fingers through hers. The warmth of her touch instantly soothed the cat's need to get closer.

"Stop *that*." She tried jerking free.

He brought her hand to his face, leaned into her palm and closed his eyes. For a moment the last eighty years fell away and the hollow space in his chest was no longer eating everything up. "Gods, I've missed you." The words nearly lodged in his throat. "So much."

Her hand trembled against his cheek, then she wrenched it away from him. "I don't... I'm not whoever you think I am."

The cat snarled at the denial. Why didn't she recognize him? And how had she survived? He'd watched the fight, too far away to help, too far away to reach her before she'd been caught in the middle. One minute she'd been right there and then next she'd been gone, and his world had been ripped out from beneath him.

She shouldn't be here, so alive and warm and...reaching for her sword?

"Where's the dagger, Callaghan?"

He raised himself up on one elbow and even that much exertion left him shaking. What the hell had she done to him? During their short time together she'd joked about killing him for being a pain in the ass, but he'd never believed she was serious.

"Did you already sell it?"

He forced his gaze from her lips to her eyes. "Sell what?"

She sighed. "The dagger." She said it slowly, dragging the syllables out as though he was too thickheaded to follow her. "You have one of Constantine's daggers."

Had he told her that? He tried to remember, but from the moment he'd caught her scent in the parking lot— "You shot me."

Sorcha shrugged. "You're not dead yet."

"What happened to you?" Why didn't she know him and why the hell had she shot him—twice? More importantly, why was she dragging the tip of her sword down the front of his shirt?

"Sorcha?"

A flicker in her eyes, something akin to regret.

Shit. He rolled to the right a heartbeat before she drove her sword into the ground where he'd been. The cat ripped at the edges of his mind, wanting out. It took everything in him to fight the shift. He knew he'd lose her the second he did.

Locking his arm around her legs, he jerked her off her feet, rolling to trap her beneath him. He hadn't counted on her closing her hand around the arrow. Howling, he felt the bones in his hands realigning as his claws burst free again, digging into her soft flesh.

"Don't," he growled. Damn it, he couldn't fight her and the need to shift at the same time.

Surprisingly, she stilled beneath him. He sucked in a deep breath and then another and another. His claws retracted, but he didn't ease up on his grip, guessing the second he did she'd use the sword still clasped in her hand.

Her chest rose and fell sharply, her bored expression at complete odds with the flush of color on her cheeks and the legs she'd wrapped around him. If she was planning to use some kind of wrestling move to dislodge him, she was taking her time.

Cale shifted his weight to ease the pain in his leg, and her thighs tightened around him. Need, sharp and unbelievably sweet, slammed into him. All the heat in his body arrowed straight for his groin.

It didn't take her long to feel the full impact of him being without his mate for nearly a century.

Her eyes widened. "Oh, you did not."

"Get hard? Yeah."

She twisted beneath him.

He groaned, unsure if the pain or his arousal would do him in first. "That's really not helping."

"Get. Off. Me," she hissed.

He cocked his head, hoping he'd heard her wrong. "Get you off?" Because even with an arrow stuck in his leg and his head pounding and increasingly fuzzy, he was certainly up for trying.

Her face lost some of that pretty pink color. "That is *not* what I said."

"But you were thinking it," he countered. Her face might not betray her arousal, but her scent certainly did.

"I should have taken your head when I had the chance." She didn't sound as convinced as her murderous expression would lead him to believe.

“You really want me dead?”

She didn’t need to think it over. “It’s nothing personal.”

“You sure about that?” His gaze dropped to her mouth. Where she was thinking of sticking her sword didn’t seem nearly as important as kissing her. Kissing her and finding out how well his memories held up to the real thing.

“What are you doing?”

He couldn’t decide if she sounded a little breathless or if that was just his imagination. “Getting personal.” He traced the edge of her jaw with his thumb, then moved on to her bottom lip.

Gods, she was beautiful.

Eyes growing heavy, he rubbed his cheek against hers, sliding down to meet her lips but not quite making it. His mouth drifted over hers, a teasing brush of warm, soft lips that lingered long after he tucked his face against her throat.

Cale’s last thought before giving in to sleep was that he’d make it up to her, make up the years they’d lost and then some.

Assuming she didn’t bury her sword in his back first.

Sorcha didn’t move for a long moment. She could barely breathe with over two hundred pounds of unconscious gargoyles pinning her down.

“Hey.” She trailed her finger along his jaw then realized she should jam the hilt of her sword into his side instead if she wanted him awake.

And she would have if he didn’t look so damn cute snuggled up against her. Traitor or not, the cat was certainly easy on the eyes, easier still when he wasn’t looking at her like she meant something to him.

When her neck threatened to cramp from angling her head to study the way the strands of his dark hair fell across his forehead, Sorcha cursed under her breath. She unwrapped her legs from him, trying not to imagine Nessa’s freakish cackling if the other huntress were to find her like this.

She purposely nudged the arrow in his leg, not feeling the least bit guilty when he grunted but didn’t open his eyes. Although caught off-guard by the situation, she hadn’t forgotten why she was here.

And the tightness in her stomach when she pushed against the arrow again was clearly because the beast was squishing her. This time he didn’t make a sound.

“Heavy sleeper, huh?”

Her voice didn’t rouse him any more than the pain, for which she should probably be grateful. Did she really want him to wake and pick up where he’d left off—with his mouth on hers?

Don’t answer that.

She flashed from beneath him to beside him, refusing to think about why she'd waited until now to do it. With a last brief glance to be sure he was still out cold—she wasn't in the mood to be taken by surprise again—she finished checking him for the dagger.

It wasn't on him.

Pushing to her feet, she paced away from him. Maybe she hadn't heard him right. Maybe the dagger he'd mentioned was just another piece from Avalon and not one of Constantine's. Arthur's heir had disappeared after the daggers' creation, triggering the millennia-old search for the mystical weapons.

Arthur's mother, Rhiannon, still mourned her son's fall and was known to strike deals with any immortal who claimed to know the location of the daggers. The goddess already had one in her possession.

But while Rhiannon expected Sorcha to do her job, she would also expect her to do whatever was necessary to get her hands on any of the remaining daggers. As far as the goddess was concerned, the only thing worse than waiting for Arthur to wake was the thought of Morgana getting her hands on Excalibur first.

It was bad enough the sorceress had taken over Camelot since Arthur's defeat. Sorcha shuddered to think of what she'd be capable of once she got her grubby hands on Excalibur. These days most immortals tended to give the sorceress and Camelot a wide berth, Sorcha included.

Under Arthur's rule, Camelot had been considered one of the few neutral territories in Avalon. He and his knights had kept any warring clans under control within Camelot's borders. The same couldn't be said for Morgana since she'd claimed Arthur's throne. There would be no avoiding her if she claimed Excalibur. Morgana hadn't exactly made her ambitions to rule all of Avalon a secret.

Not even Arthur or the gods themselves had exercised that kind of control. Rhiannon's huntresses were the extent of the gods' involvement in immortal affairs, and even they were limited to policing immortals that broke the rules—namely exposing the existence of Avalon to humans.

Unfortunately, Sorcha had witnessed Morgana's brutality enough to know the sorceress would eagerly welcome anyone who would challenge her, if only to enjoy striking them down with Excalibur.

Killing Callaghan without learning whether or not he actually had one of Constantine's daggers would be a bad move. Seeing as how she'd made enough of them tonight, starting with missing his heart with the first arrow and ending with the way she'd wrapped her legs around him, enjoying the feel of him pressing her into the ground...

She craned her neck to check out her back. Why did her grass-stained ass suddenly feel worse than a puritan forced to wear a scarlet A?

"Sorcha," Callaghan breathed, and her heart skidded in her chest.

She closed her eyes and took a step backward before she did something stupid—like sit down beside him until he woke up. And what would happen when he did? Would he go back to insisting she was his mate?

Gods, she didn't even want to think the word, let alone hear him say it.

Keeping her gaze trained on him, she circled him slowly. How long would it take for him to sleep off the poison? Minutes? Hours? She'd never used it on anyone she didn't take out.

Maybe days if she didn't get the damn arrow out of his leg to help the healing along. She'd be better off taking her chances with the cat fully healed and coherent than waste time trying to wake him up like this. She might even get lucky and find him too furious with her for causing him more pain to make puppy-dog eyes at her.

Grinning at the offense he'd probably take to being compared to a canine, she gripped the end of the arrow. Better to push it all the way through than rip it out. Knowing that, she still found herself holding her breath as she forced it deeper and out the other side.

At least the poison had been good for keeping him unconscious, though she doubted he'd thank her for that. Cats could be so damn fussy sometimes. Few people appreciated how valuable a good poison was to a huntress. Sure, they were usually the last immortals added to the guest list, but few others stepped up to take care of the rogues that threatened to expose them all.

Sorcha tossed the arrow aside and checked the wound. It didn't take long for the bleeding to stop. Good. She would've really hated to waste a perfectly good T-shirt on patching the traitor up.

With nothing but time on her hands, she rocked back on her heels, studying him. In another time and place she might have made a play for the gargoyle, happily spending a few hours letting him put those wide shoulders to good use—holding her thighs apart. If he was half as good with his tongue as he had been with his lips earlier, he might have been worth seeing more than once.

"You didn't text me back."

Sorcha straightened and spun around at the sound of Nessa's voice, somehow managing not to draw her sword at being snuck up on. "I've been a little busy."

Nessa glanced past her. "Aren't you supposed to get them naked before you have your way with them?"

"He's a target." Sorcha gave her friend the CliffsNotes version of the last hour, keeping her own unprofessional response to the gargoyle to herself.

"So let me get this straight." Nessa sat next to Callaghan—a little too close—and leaned back on her hands. "You didn't kill him."

"No."

"He tried to kiss you."

Did kiss her, but Sorcha didn't clarify that point. Nessa was already looking at her like she'd lost her mind. Plus, if tongue wasn't involved, it wasn't really a kiss, right?

"And then he passed out?"

“Yeah.” And he could wake up any time now so they could get on with it. At this rate the sun would be up and she’d be stuck babysitting a statue all damn day.

Rhiannon had been furious with the gargoyle clans when Arthur had fallen in battle and cursed the shape-shifters to be trapped in stone during the day.

“So you still don’t know if he really has the dagger?”

“Nope.”

“Is he cute?”

Sorcha stepped between her friend and Callaghan. “Is now really the time to be worried about what he rates?”

“Aw come on, Sorcha. He must be damn close to a ten if you let him kiss you—”

“I did not *let* him.”

“But you didn’t stop him either, huh?” Nessa gave her a smug look.

She released a frustrated breath. “Could we just focus on the important part for a second?”

“Finding the dagger?” When Sorcha nodded, Nessa stood and reached for her sword.

Whoa. “Whatcha doing?”

“Chopping off his hand.” The other huntress motioned toward Callaghan as though the next move was obvious. “They always talk when you cut off a limb or two.”

“Nessa,” she warned.

“It’s not like it won’t grow back.”

“Forget it.” To think if she’d returned that damn text message, she wouldn’t have to deal with her friend right now.

“Are you feeling okay?” Nessa scrutinized her as only a best friend could get away with. “You weren’t drinking Sybil’s homemade wine were you? ’Cause I told her that stuff was potent enough to wipe out a small village.”

“No.” Her gaze slid to Callaghan and she massaged the back of her neck. “It’s just... complicated.”

Nessa’s eyes narrowed suspiciously. “Complicated how?”

“He thinks—” she blew out a breath, “—he thinks I’m his mate.”

She waited for Nessa to laugh. Instead her friend crouched down to get a closer look at Callaghan. A weird look crossed the other huntress’s face.

“What?”

When Nessa lifted her head, her lips curved in a pout. “You sure I can’t cut off his hand?”

Chapter Two

Cale was dead. Dead or dying. Hard to tell when his head felt like it was hanging on to his shoulders by a thread. He nearly raised his hand to confirm his head was still attached, but stopped at the sound of voices close to him.

It took a minute to hear them over the rushing in his ears.

“You sure I can’t cut off his hand?”

The hand still very much attached to his wrist? He wiggled his baby finger to be sure it was.

“How else do you suggest coercing him into handing over the dagger?” the same voice asked.

Of course this was about the dagger. He’d known other immortals would come looking for it. He’d just assumed his family would have had it in their possession longer than a few hours first.

They could damn well take his hand. He wasn’t giving up the only thing that could free his brother. Cursed by a fledgling sorceress over a century ago, his brother had been trapped in his gargoyle form and the dagger was the key to breaking the spell.

Footsteps moved away from him as a breeze stirred the grass near his face, bringing with it a familiar scent.

Sorcha.

The cat growled possessively. Out of habit he started to remind himself she was gone, only to have his most recent memories push to the forefront of his mind. That he managed to remain motionless when his mate was only a few feet away was a testament to his restraint—that and the crushing migraine.

He mentally replayed everything he could remember, unable to stop coming back to the part where she’d shot him. Twice. Somehow he figured it wasn’t necessarily a good sign that she hadn’t gotten around finishing him off.

Not when there was still talk about cutting off his hand. He didn’t know whether to be relieved or not when the conversation turned back to the dagger. Sorcha he could handle, even if she still had a weapon within reach. But the other one? Not a chance. Holding his own against one huntress would be hard enough. He wasn’t about to fuck everything up by playing the macho card. That was his brother Tristan’s style, not his.

Though he loathed leaving his mate when he’d just learned she wasn’t really dead, he hadn’t imagined her not recognizing him or her complete ignorance about their past. She didn’t remember him, didn’t know

they were mated. And somehow he doubted her friend was going to send them on a second honeymoon if he tried to explain anything to her. She was still hung up on severing parts of his body.

What the hell kind of people had Sorchia taken up with and what had they done to her?

Just two of a million questions he needed answers to. Answers he wouldn't get playing opossum. Still, he had something Sorchia wanted. Something she would come looking for. But even that certainty didn't come close to easing the cat's clawing instinct to stay with its mate.

"I think your kitty is awake, Sorchia."

Even hearing a sword being unsheathed, he waited. His mate's scent tangled him up inside, proving she was real, that she was as aware of him as he was of her. Painfully, achingly aware.

He needed to go. He knew it and yet he didn't move. How could he leave her again? He needed to stay, hold her until she remembered him, until he knew what happened and how to fix it.

He raised his head and that same unexpected, cut-off-at-the-knees shock slammed into him all over again. His mate was truly alive.

The very same mate who was staring at him like a lethal hunter who'd just bagged the biggest trophy of the season.

Damn it!

Cale shoved himself to his feet, not prepared for the agony that ripped through his head. His stomach twisted hard, threatening to empty its contents of half-stale nachos and peanuts from Pendragon's at his feet, and then he was shifting as the animal inside him broke loose.

His vision transitioned first, sharpening as his bones realigned beneath layers of muscles and fur. The pain in his head retreated to a more tolerable level, but the wound in his leg would slow him down.

He didn't let that stop him from tearing into the trees and leaving Sorchia behind—along with his now-shredded clothes.

"Nice ass," Nessa quipped, cocking her head as though she could still catch a glimpse of Callaghan's human backside instead of the cat's as he vanished into the woods. "Well," her friend began, "you two have fun."

"That's it?" Sorchia didn't know whether to be worried or relieved her friend was taking Callaghan's exit as her cue to leave.

"If you're looking for wisdom, I'm fresh out of fortune cookies, sorry. Sybil fed them all to her dragon." Nessa snorted. "I swear that girl has no taste in men."

"I doubt a fortune cookie is going to lead me to the dagger."

Nessa winked. "Never underestimate the power of Asian prophesy, young grasshopper."

"I'd sooner put my faith in a psychic hotline."

“So.” Nessa nodded in the direction the large black cat had disappeared in. “Do you have a plan at all?”

“Not really.” If she was smart, she’d just go with Nessa’s suggestion. Too bad she wasn’t up for getting any more blood on her hands for what was left of the night.

Nessa turned to leave, paused. “Just be careful with this one, okay?”

Sorcha had to dig a little deeper than usual for a smile. “I’ll be fine. I know better than to turn my back on a half-crazy cat.” Or anything else for that matter.

“It’s not your back I’m worried about.”

The other huntress vanished before Sorcha could bring herself to ask what prompted the warning.

Just as well. She really didn’t need to hear anything that might suggest Callaghan didn’t have nearly as many loose screws as she wanted to believe.

Sorcha was waiting for him when he stepped out of the shower less than an hour later. Cale had caught her scent a moment before shutting off the overhead spray. Although he knew the frosted glass distorted her view of him, he felt the hot weight of her gaze as though she stood next to him.

Not until he turned around did the panic take hold. The same paralyzing fear that compressed his heart the day he’d looked across the cavern in Avalon’s catacombs and watched her fall under a wraith’s sword. A moment later the bastard had kicked her body over the edge, into the fire pits.

She’d been gone long before Cale had sprinted across the cavern floor, long before she’d disappeared into the flames. He’d prowled the edges of the fire pits for weeks after that, part of him waiting for her to come back, the other part—the darkest—thinking about following her over the edge.

But he hadn’t. He’d dragged himself out of there and every step had felt like he was abandoning his mate.

Leaving her in the woods earlier hadn’t felt so different from those days or the ones that followed. For months afterward he’d think he glimpsed her face in a crowd, or he’d roll over in bed only to find she wasn’t curled around him and hogging the blankets.

Watching her through the frosted glass now was like seeing her in his dreams, knowing it was her but unable to see her clearly anymore. And for the few seconds it took his hand to relax enough to push open the door, he dreaded that she would vanish before his eyes.

No matter how certain he’d been that she would track him here, his knees damn near shook with relief that she’d come. For that reason alone he counted to ten before pushing the door open and stepping out.

Sorcha sat on the edge of the vanity, legs crossed, palms down on the granite countertop. She’d changed into a short black skirt and a red T-shirt that read “Want Some?”

Cale wanted a hell of a lot more than some and it only took a few moments for them both to realize it.

Her gaze slid down his body, lingering on his heavy arousal before taking its time coming back to his eyes. Everywhere her attention lingered made him ache to feel her hands trailing down his chest and wrapping around his cock.

He could think of nothing better than stepping between her thighs and making it happen. That and kissing her. His tongue sliding into her mouth and dragging out one of those deep-throated moans that drove him crazy.

Sorcha arched a brow, her pointed gaze slipping past him to the stack of towels folded neatly on the shelf.

He shook his head, too content with thinking about stripping her down and getting her wet—with or without using the shower—to move.

She simply shrugged when he didn't reach for a towel to cover up. He wanted her to look, wanted her to know exactly what being this close to her did to him. Most of all, he wanted to see the rise of color in her cheeks as her own arousal increased.

She crossed her arms, and he'd bet Pendragon's that it was to hide how hard her nipples were. "It's sunrise."

"And?"

"Shouldn't you be a few tons heavier by now?"

"No."

Her brow furrowed. "You're a gargoyle. All you cats, wolves and dragons turn to stone during the day. Part of Rhiannon's punishment for letting the big guy down."

"Rhiannon punished every immortal involved in the fight for Camelot. Not just the gargoyles." The wraith Cale always believed had killed Sorcha had once been a Knight of the Round Table. Not even those most loyal to Arthur had escaped Rhiannon's fury after her son's defeat.

"That still doesn't explain why you're not hanging off the edge of a roof somewhere looking all gothic and toothy."

"Unless severely wounded, mated gargoyles can control the shift to stone."

It took a few seconds for her to catch on. "I am *not* your..." she broke off, scowling.

"Mate?" he provided. "Is that what you're trying *not* to say?" He closed the distance between them, careful not to move too quickly.

She looked more bored than threatened by his proximity but for the faint hitch of her breath when his thigh bumped her knees. Innocent enough, the brush of skin against skin twisted his insides up.

Holding her gaze, he leaned in and breathed deep, letting her scent wrap around him.

"Contrary to what you might have heard, I'm not big into sniffing."

Cale grinned. Whatever had happened since he'd lost her, it hadn't changed her sarcastic nature. Since she didn't push him back or ease away from him, he decided to push a little harder. Whatever it took to help her remember.

He wrapped the ends of her hair around his finger. It wasn't enough to satisfy the cat's need to touch her, and it certainly wasn't enough to satisfy the man's need to piece together how she'd come back to him, but it was something.

She glanced at the strands coiled around his thumb. "Are you trying to groom me?"

"Trying to kiss you actually, just working up the nerve." He waited for her to tell him to back off, and when she remained silent, he nuzzled her hair. "You're not armed, are you?"

"Worried my sword is bigger than yours, tiger?"

He laughed, the sound of it taking him by surprise. How long had it been since he'd had a reason to really laugh? Too long. "Isn't there a saying that size doesn't matter?"

"That's just what human women say to men with fragile egos."

"Do you have a comeback for everything, mate?"

Sorcha tensed, leaned away from him. Her eyes searched his. "Don't look at me like that. I'm not the one you lost. I'm not *her*."

"You're not you?"

"I don't know why you think..." Her voice trailed off as she stared at his chest. Her fingers curled around the pendant he wore. "Where did you get this?"

He glimpsed uncertainty in her eyes for the first time, and some of the pressure on his chest started to ease. "You gave it to me."

She shook her head.

"It was—"

"My brother's," she finished. She turned it over in her hand, tracing the fine lines carved into the back of the stone.

The more she tugged the chain to get a better look, the closer he came to her mouth. It took much too long for her to notice.

She raised her head in small degrees, as though she knew exactly how close his mouth was. Her bottom lip whispered across his, and his eyes slammed shut. He tightened his finger around her hair, grappling for control, and failing. She'd never been intimidated by him before, but he couldn't tamp down the fear he'd chase her off if he pressed her back against the mirror and took her mouth the way he needed to.

Screw it.

Sinking one hand into her hair, he slanted his mouth across hers, skipping slow and soft and jumping right into hard and hungry.

One of them groaned and then something smashed to the floor. He was too busy pushing deeper between her lips to care. Sweet and damp, her tongue slipped across his, and then she was sucking his bottom lip.

Sweet Avalon.

She leaned back, her hold on the pendant dragging him closer. And when she wrapped her legs around him, fitting him snug between her legs, his cock pressed against her sex.

All coherent thought evaporated with a single rock of her hips.

“Again,” he growled, flattening his hand on the mirror behind her for leverage.

Sorcha smiled against his mouth. “Been awhile, huh?” She didn’t give him time to answer, or even *think* of one. Her hand slid down his chest. One lone finger traced a snaking path to his groin.

“What happened to trying to kill me, huntress?” He intentionally emphasized the last word. As much as he wanted to think she’d come here because of him, because she felt their bond even if she didn’t remember him, he knew better. She’d come for the dagger.

He had no problem using that to keep her close. After spending the last eighty years without her, he’d do anything to hold on to her. Anything but give her the dagger. Not until he figured out how to use it to free his brother first, and not until she remembered their past.

“There’s more than one way to take a man out at the knees.” Sorcha’s smile turned wicked as she curled her fingers around his shaft.

His eyes slid closed, his breath hissing out. “Is that your way of telling me I might not survive this?” He swore the soft tug of her palm, which pumped him slowly from base to tip, sucked all the blood in his body right to his cock.

Her fingers teased across the head, playing with him. She’d always known the exact way to work him over, and apparently nothing had changed that.

“Too early to tell.”

He cupped her cheek, clenching his jaw at the way she continued to stroke him. Part of her plan, the cool reasoning in his head insisted. Not that he cared when his mate’s hand felt so fucking good.

He jerked at her shirt, working it high enough to expose her breasts. So beautiful. He hooked a finger in the front of one lacy black cup and tugged it down. Sorcha released her seductive hold on him the second he flicked his tongue across her nipple.

“Oh,” she murmured. Her nails raked his scalp, pulling him closer.

Sealing his lips over her, he sucked greedily. She cried out, the sound as spirited and unrestrained as she was. He tugged her harder between his lips, spanning his fingers across her back to keep her close. After eight decades alone, he didn’t know if it was possible to get close enough.

Somehow she got her hand between them again and wrapped her fingers around him. A slow pump of her hand made him groan against her breast, then he nipped at her, making his way back up to her throat.

Something ripped when he yanked her skirt up, but she didn't protest and he didn't stop. Stopping was a bad, bad idea. Stopping would give her time to think, and they'd have time for that later. There would be time for everything later. Now he wanted to please his mate, make her moan his name over and over.

Sweet Avalon. She wasn't wearing anything under the skirt.

Sorcha covered his hand with hers, bringing them between her thighs. Already wet and slippery, she rocked impatiently against him.

Instead of plunging a finger into her sex—and he knew she was more than ready for it—he traced her damp seam. The scent of her filled his head, cranking his own arousal to the breaking point, and she'd barely touched him.

Finding the slick knot between her folds wasn't hard. Neither was watching her lips part and her eyes slide shut as he swirled his thumb over her clit.

She slapped one hand on the countertop, roped her other arm around his neck. "More," she breathed against his cheek.

He kissed her then, taking her mouth as soft and slow as his fingers stroked her sex. Teasing, feather-light strokes.

"That's...not...what I meant," she managed, pushing her tongue into his mouth in between her words.

"No?" Every time he circled her clit her breath caught, and every time he spread her wetness across the plump flesh she clamped her lips together and rocked her hips.

Damn she was hot. And sexy and strong. *His.* And he was hers, even if she couldn't remember that.

"Faster," she pleaded, biting his lip hard enough to draw blood when he didn't immediately obey.

He laughed, trailing down her jaw to her neck, laving the soft flesh before making his way back to her breasts. With the flat of his tongue, he teased her some more. He had spent too long with fuzzy memories to rush this.

Whimpering, Sorcha pressed her legs together, her inner thighs trembling around his hand. He lifted his head, watched her eyes squeeze tighter, her lips part on each hitched breath. He pushed a finger inside her, thrusting slowly.

"Yes," she whispered, and he covered her mouth with his, sweeping hard and deep, willing to her recognize the feel of his hands on her, the taste of his kiss.

The wet walls of her sex clenched around him, and he thumbed her clit. The faster he rubbed, the quicker her tongue dipped into his mouth.

"Wider." He nudged the inside of her thigh until she did as he asked. With more room to play, he added another finger, thrusting harder.

Her nails raked his scalp, and he pulled away. The protest that formed on her lips never made it any further. Not when she watched him drop to his knees. Sliding his hands under her ass, he tugged her right to the edge, bunching her skirt around her waist.

Sorcha's eyes never left his as he opened his mouth over her damp center. A flick of his tongue and she moaned. The hands she'd buried in his hair vanished, and she flattened them on the counter, using it as leverage to lift her hips.

"Still want to kill me, huntress?" he taunted, closing his lips over the plump knot and sucking softly.

Her head dropped back. "Only if you stop."

Not a chance, though he pushed to his feet a few moments later, right before she would have come.

"Hey—"

He cut her off with a kiss, sinking his fingers inside her again. She groaned, wrapped one arm around him. Again he waited until her breath came faster and she started pitching her hips harder to meet each thrust of his fingers.

Just when he felt her caught on the edge, he withdrew, going down to run his tongue up her damp cleft. The sound that left her lips—part whimper, part hiss—was like a scorching brand on his cock.

Cale nipped at the inside of her thigh. "Gods, you make me want inside you."

She trapped her lip between her teeth, and he knew he had her back on the edge. Still he circled her clit, tonguing the sensitive flesh.

"Almost," she breathed. "I need—"

"To remember me," he answered, though he knew that wasn't what she'd been about to say. "To remember us."

Back on his feet, he palmed her breast, plucking at her nipple with one hand, using the other to mold against her sex. "You must feel it." He caught her earlobe between his teeth. "Feel what it is I do to you."

"Cocky, aren't you, tiger?"

He grinned. "Nope. I just know exactly how to make you come."

"So do it already," she dared.

Deliberately slowing his pace, he eased back. "Or maybe I'll just stop."

Challenge glittered in her eyes, but he didn't give her time to voice any threats. Kissing her, stroking into her mouth the way he wanted to drive himself between her thighs, seemed like a smarter move.

Sorcha moaned against his lips, arching her sex against his hand in search of release. Certain she hovered right on the edge, he kissed his way down her body, sucking her nipple into his mouth on the way.

So softly he barely heard her, she murmured, "Please."

Pushing two fingers inside her, he pumped quick and fast, withdrawing just long enough to drag his tongue up her folds and pull her clit between his lips.

She tensed in his arms, her fingers sinking into his hair as she came. As she sagged in his arms, Cale returned to her mouth, lingering over each brush of her lips as though it would be enough to bring her back to him.

Much too soon, she broke away, and he growled. His protest was short-lived when she tucked her face against his throat—and whispered his name.

Like being tossed from a Jacuzzi into a cold spring, every muscle in Sorchas body went rigid before she tried to brazen her way through the slip.

And it was a slip. Nothing more. So she'd gotten caught up in the moment. The cat was good with his mouth. *Damn* good. That didn't make calling him Cale a big deal. A big deal would be buying into the whole mate thing when any traitor with his ass on the line would lie through his teeth to snag a get-out-of-jail-free card.

She planted her hand against his chest, then made the mistake of looking at him before she tried shoving him away. A fierce mix of desire and longing burned in his eyes.

Her heart thumped faster. Men didn't look at her like that. Not like they'd kill for just one more kiss. Not like she mattered.

She shouldn't have come here. Not alone, anyway. Callaghan might have one less limb by now if she'd brought Nessa along, but at least there wouldn't be a part of her wondering if there wasn't something to what he was saying. Of course, if she'd brought Nessa along, she might have stopped him when he curled his fingers around the back of her neck and angled her face up.

Like before, there was time to put the brakes on. Time to flash her ass out of there as he coaxed her forward to meet his mouth. She couldn't even use the excuse that she let him get so close because she could easily snap the cat's neck if he tried anything. He wouldn't hurt her.

How do you know?

There wasn't time to answer the voice of reason that sounded further and further away. Sorchas was too busy watching his mouth, dragging in a breath before his lips slid deliciously across hers.

The kiss wasn't at all what she expected. The dangerous predator had curbed his need to dominate, taking her mouth so softly she could barely feel it. Why then did the backs of her knees tremble, and instead of locking her arms around his neck, why did she clench her hands into fists?

It couldn't have anything to do with being afraid that reaching for him would make it that much harder to let him go when the kiss ended.

Shit.

Shoving hard, she pushed him away. He hit the wall with enough force to dislodge the towel rack, sending a patterned hand-towel set to the floor.

"You have flowers on your towels," she pointed out, slipping off the counter and adjusting her skirt when he glanced at the floor.

"So?"

The only men she knew who used flowers anywhere in a bathroom were either gay or living with women who did the decorating. An unfamiliar tug of emotion pulled at her midsection. “Didn’t figure you for the type to get in touch with your feminine side.”

He gave her a lazy smile, then took a step toward her. “I’m not really interested in talking about my sister’s taste in décor right now.”

His sister? She remembered from her information on him that he shared the mansion with his siblings. Something on her face must have given her thoughts away because his smile widened.

“Good to know you’re still the possessive type.”

She arched a brow. “Possessive? Hardly. Though I do find it amusing that a cat, whose race is known for keeping their women barefoot and pregnant, could call anyone else possessive.”

“Tell that to the enchantress you tackled for sitting in my lap during a birthing ceremony.”

Sorcha couldn’t help it. She burst out laughing. A huntress represented death in most immortal’s eyes, making a celebration of life the last place she’d be welcome. Let alone to brawl with one of the Lady of the Lake’s skanky daughters.

“Don’t believe me?”

“Sure I do.” She snorted.

He nodded to the S-shaped scar on the inside of her arm. “That’s what she did to you when you sliced off a chunk of her hair.”

As pissed as an enchantress might get if someone was stupid enough to screw with their cherished locks, Sorcha couldn’t decide what sounded crazier. That she’d ever come to blows with another female over any man, or that an enchantress would stop giving come-hither glances to any nearby male long enough to do some actual damage.

“Nice try, tiger. But I got this before I was granted immortality in exchange for eliminating Avalon’s traitors.”

The traitor remark didn’t even earn her a scowl this time. Callaghan crossed his arms. “The mark you got with your immortality is on your lower back, right above your ass.”

Okay, so the scar wasn’t from Rhiannon, but that didn’t mean she hadn’t gotten it right before she died and just couldn’t remember. Immortals didn’t scar unless mystical weapons were involved, and the odds of a make-love-not-war enchantress carrying around something like that were about as high as Sorcha wasting even another moment thinking about her human past.

He took another step closer. “I believe you called her a shameless hussy at the time.”

Well that did sound like something she’d say. Not that she was convinced. “If an enchantress did this, it wouldn’t have been because I was jealous.”

“It was rather arousing actually.”

Sorcha eased back a step, keeping a healthy distance between them. “I don’t think I’ll ever understand why men find two women fighting so appealing. Must have something to do with all that testosterone and a lack of imagination.”

“You fighting her wasn’t what turned me on.”

She strolled past him, doing her best to ignore how *turned on* he was in the present. “Doesn’t seem to take much with you in my brief experience.”

He ignored the barb and snagged her wrist. The warmth of his grip seared her to the bone.

“What made me so damn hot for you had nothing to do with the enchantress.” His gaze dropped to her mouth. “It was the first time you’d shown that you considered me your mate.”

“You know, you should probably stop confusing me with your dream girl. Now that your hands aren’t between my legs, it’s bound to get on my nerves sooner or later.” Hopefully sooner.

Callaghan growled, his eyes more cat than man. His fingers tightened possessively. The nutcase—insanely gorgeous nutcase, she corrected—was actually going to kiss her again.

She couldn’t make up her mind if that made him desperate or just determined. Either way she needed to stay focused.

In a heartbeat she gripped the knife she kept tucked in her boot, and pressed the tip of the blade to his throat. “Don’t.”

“Sorcha,” he warned.

Forget desperate and determined. He was undoubtedly suicidal. Why else would he ignore the stab of the blade to cover her mouth with his?

She started to lower the knife, the sweep of his tongue across hers much too intoxicating. He slid an arm under her knees, lifting her up.

Something slick trickled across her fingertips. She sighed. “You’re bleeding on me.”

“You cut me.”

“Your fault.” Most of what had happened tonight was. “Where are we going?” Her voice came out on a whisper. She couldn’t manage more than that when he nipped and sucked at her neck.

“Bed.” He rocked up on the balls of his feet, pushing his rock-hard cock against her bottom. “It’s not really fair to leave me like this, is it?”

“You’ll get over it.” Knowing it was give it up or get out, she did what no huntress had ever done when faced with a formidable adversary.

She flashed her ass out of there.

Chapter Three

“Come again?”

Cale smiled, relaxing onto the worn stool at the counter. Only a few immortals frequented this particular tavern in Avalon, and the man—or wolf, depending on his mood—opposite Cale liked it that way.

The minute Cale had used the mirror that served as a portal and crossed through the veil separating Avalon from the human world, he’d felt some of the tension drain from his body.

He hadn’t been crazy about leaving a note for Tristan, who still blamed himself for taunting the sorceress who cursed their brother, and felt even worse for taking the dagger without offering an explanation. However, leaving it behind hadn’t been an option. In all likelihood, Sorchia would be back to search for it.

The cat growled again, anxious to track her. Cale could barely concentrate with his animal half riding him hard to find her, as it had been doing since she vanished out of his arms hours ago.

Nate waited, albeit impatiently from the way the tavern owner idly spun his glass around, not caring the remaining ale spilled over the sides.

“I want to know how I’d go about tracking down a huntress,” Cale repeated.

He knew he didn’t have to look for or even find Sorchia. She’d come looking for him when she remembered he still had the dagger, but waiting was impossible for both man and cat.

“A huntress?” Nate lowered his voice, probably so he wouldn’t spook the rest of the patrons. “What in sweet Avalon could you possibly want with one of those crazy bitches?”

“Need to settle some unfinished business.”

Nate’s smile slowly faded. “You’re serious.” He shook his head. “Are you already on her bad side or just looking to make the list?”

Cale shrugged, but didn’t comment further. Chances were his old friend would look at him like he’d lost his mind if he mentioned Sorchia wasn’t really dead. He wasn’t any closer to having an explanation for it yet himself and doubted Nate would believe it without seeing her with his own eyes.

He barely believed it.

“You know they’re pretty notorious for biting a man’s head off during sex, right?”

He laughed. “I think you’re confusing them with a praying mantis.”

“It’s all the same when you don’t come out whole from the experience.” Nate shuddered. “But if you’re dead set on finding one, then I think I might know someone who can help.”

“I figured you would.”

Unless Cale was close enough to catch her scent, trying to track Sorcha to her lair on Avalon would be useless. Only an oracle could help, but few immortals born with the clairvoyant skills he required were easy to find.

Probably something to do with Morgana hunting them down. The sorceress would exhaust any means of being the first to find Excalibur. Arthur’s defeat wasn’t enough of a victory for her it seemed, even if she’d lost her own son and ally, Mordred, during the last battle.

But unlike the goddess Rhiannon, who sought Excalibur for Arthur, Morgana never made it a secret she sought the weapon as a means of attaining more power. More than just Camelot would be as her mercy if she got her hands on an oracle.

Nate cocked his head, then whistled. “The huntress wants to kill you, huh?”

Cale’s eyes narrowed suspiciously. Nate hadn’t arrived at that conclusion without a little telepathic help. He stood and leaned over the bar, scanning the floor at Nate’s feet. “Where’s the pup hiding?”

“Hmmm?” Nate followed the not-so-innocent sound with a long chug that finished off his ale.

Turning, Cale spotted the toes of two scuffed shoes poking out from the end of the counter. He thought about trying to sneak up on her, but the pup had probably glimpsed that he might try it.

A pile of wayward black curls popped up first, followed by a set of eyes that mirrored Nate’s. A ragged teddy bear hit the counter next.

“She’s pretty for a girl.” Arden pulled herself up on the stool a couple down from Cale.

Knowing the precocious seven-year-old meant Sorcha, he grinned. “I know.”

Nate gave his niece a meaningful look without indicating the surrounding immortals.

Arden shrugged. “No one here will tell.”

“That you can foresee,” Nate quietly reminded her.

As far as Cale knew, Arden couldn’t see her own future very clearly, both a blessing and a curse, according to Nate. Still, her gifts had forced her to mature much faster than other wolves her age.

Eyes far too wise, Arden pursed her lips thoughtfully. “You should wear some armor.”

“Don’t ask,” Nate suggested, guessing Cale wanted more details. “It’s probably just a feeling.”

Sometimes Cale wondered which of the pair was the actual oracle. He nudged the pup with his arm. “So you think you can help me find her?”

“Well...”

Cale recognized the calculating expression on Arden’s face. She had definitely inherited her uncle’s trait for negotiating. “What’s it gonna cost me?”

Too late, Nate made a cut gesture across his neck.

“A trip to the zoo. A human one.”

Nate sighed.

She grinned at her uncle, then dialed up that pup charm. “And I want to go to the next Ava-fest.”

“No,” they both said in unison. The annual week-long party at Pendragon’s was frequented by too many immortals to expose her, even if she could see trouble coming.

Arden rolled her eyes. “Okay, just the zoo. But can I get some of those mouse hats with the ears? Uncle Nate too?”

“That’s Disney World,” Cale corrected.

Her eyes brightened. “We can go there too?”

Nate glared at him. “She would have done it for free, you know.”

“Yeah, but then I’d miss seeing you play Mouseketeer.”

Get the dagger. Get out.

Sorcha repeated the words to herself for the hundredth time since she’d left Callaghan. It was also the last thought on her mind when she finally flashed herself—sword in hand—from her villa in Italy to the traitor’s mansion.

And found the place empty.

She turned around in the middle of the room, half anticipating an oversized black cat to prowl through the door. When the seconds eased into long minutes and she remained alone, she tried to loosen some of the tension embedded deep in her muscles. She’d been wound tighter than Nessa’s Slinky since their encounter hours ago.

Usually thinking of her friend’s endless amusement with a toy that’s only claim to fame was that it could travel down stairs on its own, made Sorcha smile. Not this time. Her mind was too hung up on what had transpired between her and Callaghan in the bathroom earlier.

Leaving hadn’t been the best choice, but it had been the smartest. She’d enjoyed the cat’s touch far too much. Every second spent that close to him meant one less getting the dagger for Rhiannon.

And she’d needed to remind herself of that—without the man’s hands on her—almost as much as she’d needed a drink earlier. But unlike most immortals, wine was the only alcohol she could stomach without throwing up. She’d rather chew glass dipped in battery acid than spend even a moment on her knees heaving her guts out.

Although sipping a glass of wine after she’d left Callaghan had given her some much needed space and time to ponder her target’s weaknesses, it had also apparently given the traitor time to split. She shouldn’t have stayed away so long, and yet she’d known just how close she’d come to giving in to every last naughty urge the cat had awakened inside her.

But no matter how confident she'd been during her little happy hour that Callaghan truly believed she was his mate, she shouldn't have assumed he would stick around. Though he had to know she'd be able to track him with little effort.

Maybe getting hands-on with the cat hadn't been such a bad idea. The better she knew her targets, the easier it was to track them. Given their brief but insanely intense time together, it should be good enough to get her within eyeshot.

After taking some more time to make sure he hadn't stupidly stashed the dagger close by—she wouldn't be that lucky anyway—Sorcha easily called Callaghan's image to mind. His brilliant blue eyes blazed in her memory, and her stomach bunched into warm, tingling knots.

When she didn't immediately get a feel for him, she realized he must have fled to Avalon. Didn't he realize that only made her job easier? Many traitors and rogue immortals wisely chose to hide in the human world, taking advantage of the thousands of cities with dense populations to disappear in.

Avalon didn't offer the same kind of anonymity, although certain magical protections made some places much harder to track through. Thankfully only the most desperate rogues chose to hide in Korrigan territory. The lethal fairies were known to charm and ensnare any immortal that crossed their path.

Sorcha flashed back to her villa, standing directly opposite a floor-to-ceiling mirror. A handful of softly spoken words rolled off her tongue and her reflection shimmered, awash in a silvery rainbow that slowly retreated.

The colors in the meadow on the opposite side of the veil always looked brighter, and she knew the sun would feel warmer, the breeze fresher. Like walking through cobwebs, the veil slipped over and away from her as she emerged on the other side.

The cat's image remained on the forefront of her mind—proof she thankfully had her priorities aligned—and she flashed to...her lair?

Frowning, Sorcha immediately recognized the small dwelling she'd made at the base of a sheer rock wall. So much for her priorities guiding her to Callaghan. She closed her eyes to concentrate and try again.

Footsteps sounded behind her.

Knowing instinctively it wasn't another huntress—and no one else visited her here—Sorcha whirled around. Her sword moved in a fluid extension of her arm, catching the intruder across the stomach.

He fell back against the wall, gripping the doorway behind him for support.

Her gaze darted from the blood on the hand he pressed to his abdomen to his face. Her lungs shut down, trapping her last breath in her chest.

"Cale?"

No.

The dull clang of Sorcha's sword hitting the ground echoed in her head long after she reached out to catch Cale. And then she was on her knees next to him—again. She couldn't remember the last time she'd so much as blinked when a traitor hit the ground, let alone dove to catch him.

"You idiot," she snapped, her gaze darting from his face to his stomach and back. His eyes were closed. Her gut twisted. "You can't just sneak up on a huntress like that." She couldn't decide which one of them was stupider. So fucking stupid.

She gripped the end of his shirt and the soft material bunched and rippled in her hand. She cursed the wobbling fabric then realized it wasn't the material shaking, but her hands.

Too much wine. Right?

Sorcha didn't give herself a chance to answer. She focused on gently peeling back his shirt. Why hadn't he moved faster? Weren't cats supposed to have excellent reflexes? Why—

His hand slid over hers, his fingers warm and reassuring.

"Cale?"

His eyes fluttered.

"Cale." Sharper this time.

Slowly, his eyes opened, though his gaze took forever to reach her face. She could have run the perimeter of her lair twice in the time it took, and when his eyes finally found hers, her heart skidded to a stop.

There it was again, that soul-deep look, like she was the center of the cat's universe. No wonder women tripped over themselves to find a mate. If this was what it felt like...

He tried to move, grimaced. The pained expression on his face cranked the tension back up her spine.

His hand tightened on hers. "Your sword is definitely bigger." A much too sexy grin curved his lips.

"Are you out of your mind? Stealing and betraying isn't enough, now you have to go *looking* for trouble? Unbelievable." Even more unbelievable was how she kept finding herself at the center of his screw ups.

"Could you—" He tried lifting his head off the floor, winced. "My head is killing me. Could you help..." He trailed off, cursing under his breath.

"I didn't stab you in the head." Though if she had, like maybe a few hours ago, she wouldn't be sitting here feeling *guilty*. Still, she glanced around for a pillow, and seeing none within immediate reach, she moved and carefully rested his head in her lap.

Callaghan stared up at her, his brows drawn into a pained line. "Why *did* you stab me?"

If he was hunting for an apology, he was wasting his breath. "You were trespassing."

"Guess I missed the sign warning me to stay off the property."

"What are you doing here? Shouldn't you be trying to navigate Shanghai's sewer system by now?"

"Is that where immortals hide out these days?"

“Only the ones smart enough to run.” She watched the slide of his thumb across the back of her hand. Each feather-light pass seeped a little deeper into her skin.

Already edgy enough, Sorcha flicked his hand off, returning her attention to checking the wound.

“That’s four times, by the way.”

She didn’t meet his gaze. She’d gladly examine a thousand festering wounds rather than lift her head and find those incredible blue eyes of his trying to see into her head. Since he’d come closer than most, she had even more reason to keep her head down.

“Four times that you’ve called me Cale,” he clarified.

He just couldn’t leave it alone, could he? “Well if that isn’t your name, I guess I came after the wrong guy. Oops.”

That she didn’t rip the shirt up to see the damage at this point—which he so deserved for just waltzing into her place like he had a right to be here—was a testament to her determination to forget what being this close to him did to her.

She leaned forward, and her breast grazed his cheek. Her eyes snapped shut, but she kept moving, dragging out the decadent friction, inch by slow inch. Her next breath trickled out, as though her lungs knew that working too fast and hard would betray how turned on she was.

The cat grunted softly.

Okay, so maybe he knew exactly how turned on she was. Didn’t mean a thing. Certainly not when she got his shirt out of the way and found—chainmail? More specifically a small slice in the thin armor that had protected him far more than she’d realized.

“You’re faking?”

He craned his neck to see. “Feels worse than it looks.”

She jerked at the armor, exposing the minor flesh wound. “It’s just a scratch.”

“Well that should make you feel better.”

Sneaky son of a bitch. “You tricked me.” Stealthy *and* cunning. She might have approved of the cat’s methods if she didn’t hate how knowing he wasn’t seriously injured actually made her feel better.

“You were the one who stabbed me.”

Sorcha shoved him off her, satisfied when his head thunked on the floor. “Maybe a second time will actually get the job done.” She reached for her sword.

One solid arm caught her around the waist, flipping her on to her back. Fully recovered from his *scratch*, Callaghan hovered above her, one hand flattened on either side of her body.

She couldn’t even lie to herself about not liking the way his eyes had gone all cat on her. Knowing she could push him to the edge of losing his cool helped make up for how much she wanted him to kiss her. The worst of it was how little she cared that kissing him complicated her life.

Complicated everything.

Not that she'd made up her mind to actually let him, but the memory of earlier had her gaze sliding down to his mouth. That fluttery feeling was back in her stomach, making her skin hot and her insides ever hotter.

"You never told me what you're doing here."

"It isn't obvious?"

She shook her head, watching as his head lowered. Or was that her arching up? Either way, she snared his shirt, closing the distance.

Except right before his mouth opened over hers, he had to go and fuck it up.

"I'm here to make a deal."

I'm here to make a deal? Fucking brilliant. Why not just remind her with a slide-show presentation that she'd started out wanting to kill him?

Smooth. Real smooth.

Cale watched the faint pink on her cheeks deepen to a red. Not good. If he wasn't familiar with that flash of telling color, followed immediately by a lack thereof, he might not have anticipated the arm she clocked around to deck him.

As it was, she nicked his jaw hard enough he bit his tongue. Better that than the full force behind the punch he barely avoided. He could do without his migraine sliding from tolerable to down right incapacitating.

"What I meant to say," he corrected, "was that I have a compromise."

"I don't negotiate with traitors."

There she went with the traitor crap again. "You keep calling me that. Why?"

"Do all gargoyles have such short memories or just you cats?" She snapped her leg up and around, hooking his upper body.

The move should have shoved him off, but for some reason she didn't carry through. So he used his weight against her leg, pushing down as though he were helping her stretch—and not thinking about how he fit so damn good against her. "I think I'm pretty good at remembering the stuff that counts."

"Like our supposed past? If I had a sword for all the traitors who've tried convincing me not to skewer them for betraying Avalon to the human race, I'd have an armory large enough to take down Morgana by now. Though you have been more creative than most."

"Betray Avalon how?" Denying it out right would only make her more convinced of his guilt.

"Did you really think you could sell one of Constantine's daggers to a human and no one would know?"

Sell the dagger? Is that what she thought he'd been doing when she came after him? Not bloody likely. Though now didn't seem like a good time to mention the lead he'd been following that night in hopes of unlocking the dagger's magic to free his brother.

Instead, he felt compelled to point out the obvious. "If you're so convinced I'm a traitor, why haven't you skewered me yet?"

She gazed pointedly at his already healing wound.

"Scratches don't count." Certainly not when she'd shifted her leg to hug his waist instead. If she wanted her distance, he knew she could have kicked him off. Mate or not, he wasn't stupid enough to believe a huntress couldn't kill him in a heartbeat if she wanted to.

"You're wearing chainmail. Why?"

He went with the first response that didn't involve giving away his connection to an oracle. "What, traitors don't take precautions?"

She smirked. "Only the guilty ones."

"You still haven't answered my question." When she remained silent, he grinned. "You want to know what I think?"

"That you've screwed one enchantress too many and don't know up from down?"

He shook his head, dipping down to nuzzle her cheek. "I think you can't bring yourself to kill me because you know there's something between us. Even if you can't remember what it is, you feel it."

Her lips parted, and he turned his face so their lips almost touched. Almost.

Then Sorcha's eyes narrowed and she vanished. He would have hit the floor if she hadn't reappeared instantly behind him, her sword across his throat and her hand gripping his hair, pulling him to his knees.

"Don't fool yourself into thinking I won't kill you."

"Then do it," he challenged, his voice deepening as the cat didn't take kindly to the threat. He caught her wrist and dragged the tip of her sword to his heart. "Just don't miss this time."

"It's not a good idea to push me, tiger."

She was the one with the sword, and he was pushing her? Not even close. "For a huntress, you're awfully sensitive, aren't you?"

"I've seen scarier immortals than you cry like little girls when they've been in your shoes."

"If you led them on the way you have me, I can see why."

The sword fell back to her side, and she stalked around to face him. "Led. You. On?"

Cale wasn't sure how she managed to sound both stunned and supremely pissed off at the same time. And he suspected from the way the last syllable rose another octave she'd come close to screeching those three little words.

He cocked his head. "Isn't that your M.O.? Get close, maybe let them into your pants and then stab them in the back?" Okay, *now* he was pushing her.

"I've never let a traitor so much as lick his paws in my presence, let alone put them anywhere on my body."

"Until me."

She scowled at the reminder. "Where is the dagger, Callaghan?"

"Cale," he corrected, trying not to grin. The more she talked, the less she waved the sword in his direction. Both man and cat took that as a promising sign.

"You would die before sacrificing an opportunity to make a few bucks?"

Sobering, he shook his head. "I'd die to keep my family safe."

"You're not making any sense."

"The dagger was used to curse my brother. He's been trapped in his stone state for over a century and the only way to free him is to use the dagger." And possibly the sorceress who'd cursed him, according to a vague tip from Arden before he'd left Nate's.

Wary, Cale climbed to his feet. He might be willing to push Sorch's buttons, but he also knew she was as much a predator as he was. Even before he'd known she was a huntress, he'd been incredibly drawn to her strength and independence. Still, any quick movements now could be interpreted as a threat.

"So," he continued, "you can make me cry like a little girl all you want. I can't and won't tell you where to find it."

"Not a smart move—"

"But," he interrupted, "I will give it to you."

She arched a brow. "You won't tell me where it is, but you'll give it to me?" Skepticism dripped from her words.

"Assuming you don't kill me first."

Sorch let out a frustrated breath. "I think I liked it better when your tongue was down my throat. At least I had no problem understanding that." She used one hand to massage the back of her neck.

She turned her back on him to sink onto a pile of thick cushions. More proof that she trusted him on an unconscious level whether she wanted to admit it or not. He doubted she would have ever left herself blind to an attack from behind by a rogue, even if she was half expecting one.

He gave her a minute then settled beside her, pleased when she didn't tense up. The eyes she'd closed moments ago slid open, and a fist squeezed his heart. He'd fallen for the warrior in her from the start, but he'd fallen hardest for the rare glimpses of a vulnerable woman who could tame both man and beast with a single, soulful glance.

Gods, he loved her. Even if the words would have made it past the sudden tightness in his throat, he wouldn't have dared utter them and risk extinguishing that look in her eyes now. She'd meant everything to him once and losing her had devastated him in ways he could barely fathom with her sitting right next to him.

Alive. Breathing.

He caught a long strand of her hair, twining it carefully around his fingers. It wasn't the lingering touch the cat craved. Wasn't the caress of skin against skin the man hungered for, but anything more might chase her off again.

She lifted her hand, tracing the shape of the pendant he wore. "I never took it off."

"Not until the day you gave it to me." The same day he'd lost her.

"My brother gave it to me."

Cale nodded. "He died trying to keep one of Morgana's slave masters from punishing you for stealing."

She didn't argue how he knew that. At least they were making progress. Though having to tread carefully was killing him. When he found out who had done this to her, who had taken her memories away, there was going to be hell to pay. On that he and the cat were in perfect, merciless agreement.

"I was only ten." Sorcha let go of the pendant as though doing so would let go of the pain that came with the memory. "He knew I might not have survived the beating. I'd been so stupid to take the bread."

"You were starving and your mother was sick."

She glanced away but not before he saw the old pain flare to life in her eyes. "She never forgave me."

He slipped his palm beneath her chin, angling her face toward him. "She lost her husband and son within weeks of each other. She didn't know how to handle her grief."

Confusion shone in her eyes. "I've never spoken of my family to anyone and yet you know of them."

"You trusted me once. You can again, Sorcha. With your life." *With your heart.*

Indecision blinked across her face before she slowly shook her head. "I don't want to talk about us."

"Then you admit there—"

She straightened and swung one leg over his, sliding into his lap. "All I'm willing to admit is that one minute I want to kill you and the next, kiss you."

He got the impression she was frustrated with the latter more than anything. "I'm partial to the kissing myself." Especially when it involved her in his lap.

She leaned in, touched her forehead to his. Her soft exhale whispered across his cheek, and he ached to bury his fingers in her hair and coax her down to his mouth. He forced himself to be content keeping his hands on her hips and letting her call the shots.

"Partial to the kissing, huh? Surprise, surprise." Her nose bumped his as she lowered her head.

"But first we need..." His words went south, along with all the blood in his body when she caught his ear between her lips. "To come—"

She laughed, nipped him with her teeth. "I'll bet."

“—to some sort of arrangement.” He groaned when she shifted to get more comfortable in his lap, grinding softly against his cock. “So I don’t end up dead,” he finished, tightening his hold and rubbing her up the length of his shaft one more time.

“It’s inevitable.”

Not in his mind. “After I use the dagger to free my brother, it’s yours.”

Her mouth hovered above his skin, her breath hot. “Yeah? What’s the catch?”

“You stop insisting I’m not your mate for starters—”

“You’re n—”

He pressed his finger to her lips. “You do know that stop means *stop*, right?”

She rolled her eyes, but didn’t move to push him away or get up. Thank the gods.

“And?” she prompted.

“You let me help you remember me. Us.”

Sorcha hesitated. “And how do you plan to accomplish that?”

Good question. Not that she needed to know he was pretty much winging it. He’d come here assuming he’d get a better handle on his plan when he saw her. Of course she’d thrown him off balance by stabbing him. “I’m sure it’ll come to me.”

Cocking her head, she searched his face. To determine if he was lying? “Why haven’t you used the dagger to free him already?”

“We’re still working out how to do that. We just need a little more time.” As much as he wanted to free Cian, he couldn’t move too quickly and risk losing their only chance, not with Sorcha involved.

“There’s just one hole in your plan.” Her gaze trailed down to his mouth. “What’s to stop me from killing you after I get the dagger?”

He caught the waves of hair falling across her cheek and tucked them back. “By then you won’t be able to live without me.”

She laughed. “And defy Rhiannon’s order to kill you? I’m not a huntress with a death wish.”

“By then I’ll have proved I’m not a traitor to Avalon.”

“She’d be more lenient if you hand the dagger over now.”

“But then I wouldn’t be able to do this.” He leaned in just enough to open his mouth at her neck. “Or this.” Sucking gently, he pulled her soft skin between her lips. “Or this,” he murmured, sliding down to the deep V where her breasts pushed at the neckline of her shirt.

She leaned back, letting him move lower and rocking against him when he bit at the nipple jutting against her bra and shirt. A needy whimper hummed in the back of her throat. He gripped her hips harder, pulling her forward to rock against her sex. Planting his heels, he pushed up, fitting as snug as he could.

This time they both moaned, and he cupped her nape, dragging her back to his mouth. Just as his lips brushed hers and he ached to sink deeper, he paused.

“Do we have a deal?”

“You’d be a fool to trust a huntress.”

“I’ll take my chances.” Slipping his hands under her shirt, he unclasped her bra. “I’ve spent much too long without you. Besides—” he tugged her shirt up, and nudging her bra aside, he dragged his tongue across her nipple— “I think my odds are pretty good.” He slowly sucked the dark, hard tip into his mouth.

Eyes dark with desire, she held his gaze.

He gave her a lazy grin. “What, cat got your tongue?”

“Something like that.” She tipped his chin up, swept her tongue across his bottom lip before sliding inside.

A crackle of awareness snaked across his neck and he angled her to the side the moment he noticed they weren’t alone.

A few feet away a woman with long blonde hair stood with her head cocked thoughtfully. “So this must be that French torture method you were talking about, Sorcha.”

Chapter Four

Wonderful.

Nothing like getting caught with her pants down. Or her top up in this case.

Sorcha tried to climb off his lap only to find his grip on her hips unbreakable. A warning growl rumbled in his throat, his gaze locked on Nessa.

Instead of being annoyed, she felt strangely touched at the protective hold he had on her. She didn't need his protection but couldn't remember the last time anyone since her brother had offered it.

"She's a friend."

He didn't look convinced. "Your friend wanted to cut off my hand."

Nessa flopped back on the lounge opposite them. "Don't ruin the whole cute and protective thing by being a wuss about it now."

Sorcha tried again to get free, resorted to poking his earlier injury when he attempted to keep himself between her and Nessa. He loosened his grip enough that she could work free, but she didn't get any farther than beside him. Stubborn cat.

"Since you haven't been answering your phone, I figured I'd come looking for you. Should have guessed you had tamed the kitty-cat."

Callaghan growled again.

"Easy, tiger." Nessa grinned. "I'm not here to neuter you. I just need to borrow your girl for a minute."

Sorcha blinked. "His girl?" This coming from the woman who routinely said any man who tried staking a claim on a huntress deserved to have his balls handed to him on a platter?

"Mate," he corrected with a bump of his knee.

Nessa arched a brow, a curious smile on her lips when she looked to Sorcha to correct him.

Oh hell. Choosing not to say anything, she grabbed Nessa's hand and lured her toward the door.

Callaghan pushed to his feet. Had she really expected otherwise? Of course any normal male wouldn't have felt compelled to stick by her side when she'd already shot him with a couple arrows and sliced him with a sword.

Clearly he wasn't normal.

She stabbed her finger in his direction. "You stay there."

He crossed his arms, looking unimpressed.

Nessa laughed, glancing over her shoulder at him. “Maybe I’m not the one you should worry about neutering you.”

Sorcha glared at her, then gave Cale another warning look. “If you’ve spent all this time alone, a few more minutes won’t kill you.”

He started to argue, but she glanced at Nessa, ignoring him. “Hilltop.”

“Wait,” he said, but she’d already flashed away.

A heartbeat later she joined Nessa at one of their regular meeting places. Her friend stood at the edge of the grass-covered cliff that overlooked the endless miles of dark water surrounding Avalon.

“He’s definitely a ten.”

She stepped up next to Nessa, studying her closely. “You called him tiger.” She wanted to believe it was coincidence, but the flicker of something on her friend’s face made the anxious feeling in her gut draw tight.

The same feeling she’d been doing her best to ignore since discovering Cale knew more about her past than she’d expected.

Nessa kept her gaze fixed on the horizon. “What?”

If she doubted her friend knew more than she was letting on, she didn’t any longer. “You called him tiger. Why?”

Nessa shrugged. “Why not?” She glanced at Sorcha. “You getting a soft spot for the gargoyle?”

“Rhiannon wants him dead.”

“What about you? You’re not planning on going against—”

Sorcha didn’t let her even finish that thought. “No. He offered to give me the dagger.” Not that she planned on waiting him out. The sooner she got this over with, the better, and if that meant going along with him for now, she’d deal.

“In exchange for what, sex?” Nessa grinned.

“To let him help me remember our past.”

The smile instantly fell from her friend’s face. “I assume you didn’t tell him that it would be impossible to get those memories back.”

“You believe him?” It was one thing for her to wonder after the brief conversation about her family. But for Nessa to act like there was some truth to it... Sorcha closed her eyes, half anticipating her friend’s response.

“I think the real question is what do you believe?”

“I have a job to do.” It was the only truth she was willing to admit to. The only one she could face right now.

“So earn his trust and get the dagger.” Nessa rocked back on her heels. “Though I still think it would have been easier to just cut something off.”

“He wouldn’t have given up its location.”

“That’s what they all say.”

“He’s different.” And that was the biggest problem, and getting bigger by the moment. The only thing going for her right now was the fact that she didn’t remember him.

Gods, she was really starting to believe it, wasn’t she? At least that she and Cale had known each other well enough to have confided the darkest parts of her past. And then there was her pendant—which she really needed to take back.

Either he’d taken it from her somehow or she’d truly given it to him. The idea of him stealing it just didn’t feel right, and she really wished it did. Better that than wondering how close they must have been for her to have entrusted it to him.

She couldn’t imagine she would have let anyone claim her as a mate when her loyalty lay with Rhiannon. She owed the goddess everything, and for that reason alone, at the end of the day, she would do what she had to. Turning her back on Rhiannon would mean giving up her immortality, her strength, her skills and no one, mate or otherwise, was worth returning to a weak mortal for.

That concerned look was back on Nessa’s face. “You don’t think he’s guilty, do you?”

“He’s either a very compelling compulsive liar, or someone wanted him out of the way.”

“And I suppose you’d like me to find out who that might be while you play house?” When Sorcha nodded, she smiled. “Just so happens I already asked a few questions when I noticed you dragging your heels earlier.”

Another first for Nessa. For the both of them really since Sorcha never dragged her heels when it came to eliminating a target.

“You didn’t ask Rhiannon?”

Her friend snorted. “And tip her off that you’re getting cozy with the cat instead of taking him out? Of course not. But I did hear that a representative of the McKibben clan pled a case with her recently.”

What was it with her luck and gargoyles lately? “Why would a dragon clan be concerned with Cale?”

“On a first name basis are we?”

“Part of our deal,” she lied to cover the slip.

Nessa gave her a knowing look. “Uh-huh.”

Uncomfortable with leaving Cale alone in her place and giving him the opportunity to put his paws on her stuff, she tried to keep them both on topic. “The dragon clans haven’t been interested in any other immortal faction in centuries.”

Nessa shrugged. “Maybe they’ve realized they’ll be as endangered as the remaining humans in Avalon if they don’t take steps to prevent Morgana from moving into their lands.”

“Do you know who it was from the McKibben clan that spoke to her?”

“No, but just so happens one was spotted flying above a human city after coming to blows with a cat. And it gets better. The cat who nearly shredded the dragon’s wing? He’s your mate’s brother.”

Doing her best to ignore the way Nessa said *mate*, Sorcha frowned. Cale probably didn’t know. Seeing as time passed differently in Avalon compared to the human world, she’d guess he had probably crossed over before it happened.

“When was this?”

“Are we talking Avalon time or human time?”

Sorcha rolled her eyes.

Nessa nodded. “It’s okay to admit you get confused. I do.” Laughter shone in her friend’s eyes. “I’d say a couple days in the human world since you’re kitty went AWOL.”

“How did you find all this out anyway?”

“Wraiths can be pretty chatty when they’re wasted.”

Sorcha wasn’t even going to ask. A wasted wraith was about as common as a sober huntress during one of Sybil’s luaus. Unlike being a huntress, a wraith didn’t choose to be loyal to Rhiannon. She’d bound the former Knights of the Round Table to her for failing Arthur, hiring the blood-drinking mercenaries out to the highest bidder. Ignoring or prolonging the completion of a contract literally drove a wraith insane.

How Nessa even had managed to stumble across a drunken wraith would take more imagination than she possessed at the moment.

“So why was Cale’s brother fighting with a McKibben?”

“Lucan didn’t say exactly, but I got the impression it had something to do with him marking the cat’s mate.”

That would certainly do it. Any one who hired a wraith to target another immortal instead of dealing with it themselves was asking for trouble.

“Who’s tracking the dragon?” Unlike the wolves and cats, the dragon clans couldn’t get away with shifting anywhere near human populations. People tended to notice when gigantic mythical creatures took to the sky. UFOs could be explained away. Monstrous, scaly beasts with wings, not so much.

Nessa grinned. “As of now? You are.”

By the time Sorcha returned to her lair, Cale had vanished.

He had, however, left behind a pile of clothes. For one long, hot-and-bothered moment she imagined him in her bed. Imagined all six-foot plus of him stretched out and tangled up in her sheets.

Waiting for her.

Entertaining that fantasy, however briefly, succeeded in jacking up her body’s temperature until she felt the telling flush creep across her skin. The longer she stood there, the more acutely aware she became

of how much she wanted him in her bed. The hours she could spend tracing the taut lines of muscle that defined his body.

But he wasn't there. He wasn't anywhere in her lair at all.

Bracing herself for the unexpected, she concentrated and flashed to his location.

She turned at the sound of rushing water, surprised to discover Cale had covered so much ground in such a short amount of time. The cat could run. The waterfall and lagoon were miles from her place.

Perched on a rock, she crouched to make herself as small a target as possible, and scanned the area. The heavy pounding of the waterfall might have made it difficult to hear him, but she could feel him watching her.

She waited for the hair on the back of her neck to prickle or that knife-edge awareness to dart up her spine. Instead, the tension in her abdomen gave way to a stampede of butterflies that might have knocked her on her ass if Cale hadn't prowled out of the trees at that exact moment.

The fluttering sensation was forgotten as Sorchia took in the cat's sleek, black fur, almost glossy in the sun. Two amazingly vivid blue eyes pinned her in place. The gleam of viciously sharp claws peeked out from his massive paws. She'd heard they were strong enough to take off an immortal's head with one powerful smash.

Despite that, she didn't fear him. Most immortals didn't incite any fear in her, but that didn't mean she was reckless. Which was why she instinctively inched her hand toward her closest weapon—the knife tucked in her boot. If everything Cale had said to this point had only been to make her lower her guard, this would be the moment to strike.

Whenever she'd been tasked to handle a gargoyle, she'd done her best to avoid a confrontation when they were in their animal form. It didn't matter that her abilities gave her the edge. Gargoyles were more unpredictable this way.

Nothing on Cale's furry face betrayed what he was thinking. He could be imagining the taste of her bones crunching between those massive jaws for all she knew.

"I don't taste anything like chicken. Just so you know."

He cocked his head, and she pictured Cale smirking at her.

Motionless, she watched the cat stroll closer. The occasional snap of his tail suggested the cat didn't appreciate her lack of trust. Simply by narrowing his eyes he gave the impression he was downright annoyed.

Tough.

He leapt gracefully to the rock next to hers, taking his time closing in on her. She lowered her hand, but made no move to touch him when he jumped onto the same rock. Her gaze again fell to the size of his paws. She was a little envious of the power in them, the inherent strength he'd been born with, unlike her.

"What are we doing here?"

He could have run in any direction, and yet he'd ended up here. Something told her it wasn't coincidence. The lagoon had been one of the reasons she'd chosen to make her home close by after her last cleanse. The remote location was a world away—literally—from the villa in Italy she used as a home base when tracking immortals in the human world.

In answer, Cale leaned in until his face was inches from hers. His eyes were a lot bigger this close. So were his teeth. She'd bet Nessa's Slinky that the deliberate display of teeth was just to screw with her.

"If you even think about licking me, I'll shove you into the lagoon."

A puff of air from the cat's nostrils sounded suspiciously like a snort. She opened her mouth to tell him she meant it, that she'd happily send his furry ass over the edge, only to be knocked on her ass when he nudged her hard with his head. The second she was down, he sprawled across her legs, trapping her.

Gone was the urge to reach for a weapon, replaced by curiosity and a little bit of awe. Not that she'd admit that to the cat. He was arrogant enough without knowing he was just as stunning to her like this.

"You're heavy."

He flicked his tail, then settled his head on his paws, watching her.

"That's probably *your* M.O. right? Stretch out on a girl's legs then pounce when they're too numb to run?"

He responded by butting her hand until she got the message.

She moved to stroke his fur, paused. "You don't have fleas do you?"

The heavy stare he leveled her with managed to effectively communicate his disgust a few times over.

"Just checking." And stalling.

Suddenly the idea of stroking his fur felt far more intimate than if he'd been a man and asking her to run a finger down his chest. Sex and all the trimmings could still be impersonal, even when both people were naked and exposed. This, the unwavering trust she glimpsed in his eyes, was anything but impersonal.

Sensing her hesitancy, he stood and rubbed against her, taking the decision out of her hands.

Warm. Gods, he was warm.

She turned her face as he curled around her, his fur caressing her cheek. Her eyes closed and she leaned into him, forgetting everything. Her assignment. The deal he'd offered. The dagger he still had in his possession.

Even the sound of the waterfall and the neighboring chatter of woodland creatures seemed further away. Keeping her face tucked against him, she ran her hand down his back, returning to his neck each time and stroking toward his tail.

Sorcha lost track of how long she remained that way, lulled by the throaty rumble that reminded her of a purr. Slowly, he sank down next to her as though he knew moving too quickly would disrupt the rhythm of her hand.

Stretched out on his side, he watched her through heavy lids, his tail thumping occasionally on the rock. Sitting there, her skin warming in the sun, lazily trailing her palm across his side, she felt herself relaxing, getting sleepy.

When her eyes slid closed for at least the tenth time in five minutes, she gave serious thought to lying back for a minute, maybe resting her head on—

Oh, he did not. She stared at her hand, the telling moisture on her skin a dead giveaway.

The damn cat had licked her.

She shook her head, and with a sigh planted her foot on the cat's side and pushed.

Claws scraped across rock, but it was too late. Gravity was on Sorcha's side and she couldn't help but flinch as he hit the water with a belly-flopping splash.

Grinning, she peered over the side and into the water. And kept looking. Where the hell did he go? She scanned the surface of the water, watching for the telltale ripple. Nothing.

Not being completely stupid, she took a step back—about two seconds before a hand shot out of the water to slap the rock. If she hadn't moved, he would have caught her around the ankle.

"Nice try." She took another step back, just in case.

Smoothing his hands over his face, Cale pushed his wet hair back. "That was a cheap shot."

She shrugged. "I warned you."

"Come here and say that."

"Not a chance." She'd sooner be hogtied, dipped in honey and left to face a starving grizzly bear than dip so much as a toe in the lagoon with Cale within reach. And naked no less.

Liar, liar, pants on fire.

Okay. So maybe her reluctance to get any closer stemmed more from her own paranoia than it did avoidance of Cale's perfectly sculpted body.

"You forgot how to swim too?"

"I know how to swim." Somewhat. Either way, she wasn't about to admit a weakness to anyone, least of all a target.

"You used to race me from one side of this lagoon to the other."

So he had chosen this place for a reason. "I doubt that." And not only because she could barely manage the doggy paddle.

He pushed off from the rock, heading towards shallower water. He turned, cutting through the water is smooth, sure stokes. Sticking to the rocks, she moved in the same direction, ignoring the slab of rock she occasionally stripped down and sunned herself on. She was too busy watching the water sluice down his solid frame as he planted his feet and turned to face her.

Hip deep, he held out a hand.

Much too preoccupied with thinking about those wet hands sliding under her clothes and peeling them off, it was a wonder she could form a single syllable. “No thanks.”

Before her eyes, his gaze turned cold. “It’s a good thing he’s dead.”

Sorcha froze in the process of taking a seat on the grassy shore. “Who?” But she knew. One look at Cale’s face and his barely contained rage and she knew exactly who he meant.

“Your father.”

Every time she started to think he couldn’t say anything else to take her by surprise, he did.

“Yeah,” he continued. “I know exactly how he tried to teach you to swim.”

Teach her to drown was more like it. What else had her father expected when he pushed his eight-year-old daughter off the docks? Had it not been for her brother diving in when she hadn’t surfaced...

Her throat grew tight as it always did when she stirred up memories from her human life. Perhaps if the memory of all the centuries since then weren’t wiped out every hundred years, she might have made her peace with the past by now.

Crossing her arms, she studied Cale. “How is that you know so much about me, but you didn’t know I was a huntress? Why didn’t you know I was alive? What made you think I was dead in the first place?”

“I saw you die.”

The emotion behind the words hit her hard and she had to look away. Whatever else Cale had done, he’d loved the woman he lost. You couldn’t fake that kind of hurt, not the kind that lay buried in his eyes, pulling at her every damn time she held his gaze for more than a heartbeat.

When she had the courage to glance at him, she found she wasn’t the only one who’d looked away. He studied the water that swirled around his waist, slowly raising his head.

One glimpse of the raw need imprinted on his face, and Sorcha felt more than her knees nearly give way. And it wasn’t the savage, I-want-to-get-you-naked kind of need. She could have handled that. It was the kind of need that sucked you in and stripped you down, consuming you until you were left irrevocably changed.

The kind of need that made people fall recklessly, hopelessly in love.

How she knew that wasn’t nearly as staggering as the certainty she’d felt it before.

Sweet Avalon.

She didn’t move as he emerged from the water. Didn’t break eye contact—couldn’t have if she’d tried—when he crossed the shore to reach her. Her heart pounded as though she was powerless and surrounded by a legion of Morgana’s bloodthirsty trolls instead of facing one man. Just one.

Had she felt this way before? Had he made her feel the same anxious mix of scared to death and delicious anticipation?

Yes.

She couldn't deny something about it tugged at her even though she had no memory to prove it. Thank the gods for that. Because when Cale slipped his hand around her nape and drew her up to meet his mouth, she didn't want the past to compete with this moment in time.

Everything about this felt different than earlier. The way his fingers curled around her neck, anchoring there as though it would keep him from losing her again. The way her legs, strong and solid, nearly trembled under the strain of keeping herself upright when she ached to fall into him.

Ached to take away the pain she saw in his eyes, to be the woman he remembered—if only just this once.

"Sorcha," he murmured, his lips teasing across hers.

"I'm here," she breathed. For now she was here, with him. She wanted to see what came next, to feel it, too much to even think about leaving.

"Don't—"

She opened her mouth over his, drowning out the words she couldn't hear right now—*don't leave me*.

If he said it aloud, she'd be tempted to agree to something that would hurt them both later. So she kissed him. Caged his face between her palms and rocked up, stealing his next breath before he stole another piece of her. He already had her past. Any more than that and she might not walk away whole. Might not walk away at all.

He slid his tongue across her bottom lip and swept into her mouth, snatching away all coherent thought. His arm snapped around her back, bringing her flush against him.

She whimpered, sucking at his bottom lip and luring him deeper. So deep she didn't register much of anything for a few minutes. Not why he tugged off her boots or where they were going when he lifted her up.

There was too much sensory information to process, from the electrifying kiss and the possessive grip he had on her, to his seductive, throaty growl when they broke away to draw a breath.

Not until her feet felt wet and her eyes snapped open did she realize he'd carried her into the water.

Something that sounded suspiciously like a squeal escaped her lips as she grappled for a better hold on him.

"You're okay."

Hardly. Okay would be sitting on the grass in the sun, not surrounded by enough flowing water to eradicate drought in the barren region. And certainly not with him looking at her like she was the very last bite of dessert when he hadn't eaten in weeks.

"I've got you."

She narrowed her eyes. "I'd feel better if you said that with a straight face." But even though her heart kicked against her ribs and she couldn't bring herself to look at the water for more than a second at a time,

she knew he wouldn't let her go. If not for that unwavering certainty, she would have been across the lagoon and safe on shore already.

His grin widened, and she felt a little of her panic ease.

"I thought you said you could swim?"

It took a minute to register the playful taunt with his fingers lazily rubbing the side of her breast. Her nipples—already hard from the cool water—started to ache, eager for his hand to slide higher.

"That doesn't mean I want to." Or that her limbs wouldn't freeze up the moment she tried. She might not be able to die from drowning now, but that didn't mean it wouldn't seriously suck to find herself struggling at the bottom of the lagoon.

"This is where you conquered your fear."

Oddly enough that was one memory she wouldn't mind recalling right about now. "How did you do it?"

He shook his head. "Not me. You."

The deeper he waded, the more aware she became of the water inching higher. It already covered her ankles.

"I still have my clothes on."

"We can fix that," he said. But what she heard in his voice was, "*I'll* fix that." Somehow she guessed his plan didn't involve turning his naked ass around and heading back to shore.

"If you're trying to scare me—" Her voice cracked a little as the water rode up over her calves. This was insane.

He stopped and the mist from the waterfall cloaked them in a fog shot through with slivers of color as the sun cut through the water vapor.

"Scare you? I doubt that's even possible."

Clearly, he hadn't been paying attention a minute ago when the thought of kissing him—or worse, not kissing him—had seemed pretty damn terrifying.

"You can hang on a little tighter if you want. I won't mind."

She snorted. "I'll bet."

They plunged deeper, another foot at least and she locked her arms around his neck. She also squeezed her eyes tight, which might have shamed her a little if she hadn't forced them open again to find his mouth so enticingly close.

She felt his attention drop to her lips, and her stomach back-flipped. It didn't take much to close the remaining centimeters and get another taste of him.

Incredible. Slow, sweet and all kinds of trouble, it was just...incredible. Was it any wonder she struggled to concentrate on what needed to be done when he caressed her mouth like he couldn't get enough? And when he caught the tip of her tongue and sucked it like that...

Was it possible to orgasm from just a kiss? The needy clenching deep in her core was damn near banking on it.

Something brushed her back and she realized they were behind the waterfall. The air was cooler, the shallow cavern behind them buffering some of the sound from the tons of water pouring into the lagoon.

“A cave?” She’d been to the lagoon countless times and hadn’t imagined anything more than rocks lay beyond the falls.

“Grotto,” he corrected.

The water grew shallower again, his footing surprisingly steady as he moved from the lagoon and into the mouth of the cavern. The thought of him losing his balance and them both falling back into the lagoon made her hold on even tighter.

“Breathing would be good,” Cale choked out.

“Okay then.” She let her arms fall back, far enough from the water now she could relax.

Cale growled until she clung to him again, and she laughed. Gods, it felt good. She laughed with Nessa and the other huntresses all the time, but this felt different. Deeper, like it touched places inside her nothing or no else ever had.

The intensity in his eyes slowed her laughter until their gazes locked. Heart thumping, she tentatively ran the back of her fingers across his shadowed jaw, seduced by the roughness. Seduced by everything about him.

She moved on to his mouth, and he kissed the tips of her fingers. Lighter than a breeze, the touch might have been more innocent than carnal if not for the hungry expression on his face.

For the first time she knew what it was like to be targeted by a true predator—one that wanted to devour every inch of her.

Cale’s attention dropped to her mouth, and he leaned forward. At the last second, just when she felt her lips part in needy anticipation of his, his mouth brushed her ear. “This was our place.”

Sensing it was important to him to pay attention to their surroundings when all she wanted to do was drag him down for a kiss, she glanced around the cavern.

A sound of surprise left her lips. “Wow.”

Black sand blanketed the cavern floor, glittering like a diamond-filled night sky, shimmering brighter near the edge of the cave where a solitary burst of sunlight struck the sand. A handful of pools, fed by a run off from the waterfall above, rippled with a light current. At the edge of the cavern small streams ran over the sand in twisting paths that emptied back into the lagoon behind them.

“Just...wow,” she managed again, wishing she’d taken the time to explore the area more thoroughly.

He passed the first pool and slowly waded into the largest one. “They’re not too deep.”

“Shouldn’t you be telling me they are so I won’t let go?” The water brushed her ankles, cool enough to notice, but not enough to make her shiver. That might have been impossible anyway with the heat from Cale’s bare chest keeping her warm.

“Is the water really the reason you’re holding on?”

Chapter Five

“Why else would I be?” Teasing him, she slid to her feet, surprised he didn’t try to stop her. It only took a moment of standing in the thigh-deep water to figure out why he hadn’t.

A slow, sexy smile curved his lips, and then he ran a claw down the middle of her shirt, tearing the fabric neatly in two. She barely had time to suck in a breath, the cooler air caressing her skin, before he pushed the shredded material over her shoulders.

“I liked that shirt.”

Unapologetic, he made quick work of her bra. “I think you’ll like this even more.” Holding her gaze, he bent and swirled his tongue across her nipple.

She dropped her head back. It was too easy to sink her fingers into his hair as the hot walls of his mouth closed around her. Damn, he was good with his mouth. Every feverish tug pulled at the nerve endings coiling in her sex.

Wanting him closer, wanting every inch of him pressing against her, she wasn’t above using her grip on his hair to get him there. Too bad he seemed intent on flicking the tip of each breast, making her squirm helplessly in her effort to seek some relief. And when he cupped her breasts, running his thumb across the nipple he hadn’t pulled into the slick heat of his mouth, her need for him multiplied.

He took his time letting her slide free only to nip and suck her greedily back in over and over. By the time he finally released her, her body burned a thousand degrees hotter. She whimpered both in protest and then in relief when he dragged her flush against him and his cock nudged her.

Cale palmed her ass, moving higher to skim his fingers along the back edge of her pants, dipping inside to sweep across her skin. Practically a tease. She grabbed his hand and brought it to the button on her pants.

The sound of his deep-throated laugh licked up her spine.

“Let’s not shred these too, huh?”

Taking her hands, he pinned them behind her back, holding them there with only one of his. “Are you trying to rush me, huntress?” He plucked at her nipple, brushing the pad of his thumb back and forth.

The longer he teased her nipple, bending every few seconds to lave the hard tip with his tongue, the sweeter the ache deep between her thighs.

“Just pointing out—” her breath caught as he sealed his lips around her and sucked “—you should have saved us time and taken these off earlier.”

“Before you got wet you mean?” He got her pants open and slid his hand inside. “Or have you been wet since coming hard on the counter in my bathroom?” His fierce eyes dared her to deny the effect he had on her.

Sorcha tugged at his hold, testing him. He didn’t give an inch, his grin widening at her half-hearted attempt. Of course he would be cocky about having her at his mercy, but that didn’t mean she needed to like it. Didn’t mean she needed to crave his touch so damn much or eagerly part her legs, making it easier for him to palm her sex.

She bit her lip, rolling her hips into him, willing him to stop torturing her by only sliding up and down her cleft. He softly circled her clit, sweeping across it in so soft a caress she clenched her jaw.

All at once, he eased back and herded her toward the shallow end of the pool. His foot tripped hers and she fell backward, bringing him down with her. She didn’t care the fall sent cool water splashing over both of them, she was too busy sliding her hands up his back, getting him closer.

Raised up on his elbows, he stared down at her. Thinking to wipe the satisfied look off his face, she slid her hand between them and curled her fingers around his cock. She’d barely adjusted her grip, pumping softly, when he growled in pleasure.

She grinned. “I guess the cold water isn’t having any effect on you.”

“I could be lost in Morgana’s shadow realm and I’d still be hard for you.”

“That so?” She pulled him from base to tip, felt him dig his feet into the sand to push against her hand.

“Never doubt what you do to me.” He closed his fist around her hand, encouraging her to go faster.

His breath grew short, choppy, his hand falling away as she pumped him faster. “Don’t stop,” he pleaded, his voice rough and just a little bit savage.

His hips rocked with each slow shuttle of her hand, as though he couldn’t help but grind a little harder against her.

“Fuck,” he groaned, shaking his head. His fingers brushed hers under the water.

“You’re not worried I’m going to leave you hanging again?”

Eyes dark with lust, he palmed her breast, his thumb alternately rasping across her nipple and tugging it to a harder, hungrier point. “I think you said I’d be foolish to trust a huntress.”

“Others have made that mistake.”

He clenched his jaw. “What others?”

“Down, boy.” Ignoring the jealousy in his tone, she pumped his shaft until she knew he hovered right on the edge, then slowed down again. “I wasn’t talking about sex.” Her own voice turned breathless, her body twining tighter and tighter just by watching him get closer to climax.

His forehead touched hers. “We’ve been here before. Right here,” he murmured, his jaw tight, his muscles straining.

“Did I have my hand wrapped around you then?” She deliberately slowed the rhythm. “Did I make you come?”

He answered her by tipping her face back and slanting his mouth across hers.

Power. Pure, raw sensual power buzzed through her system more potent than any victory against an adversary. Every ragged catch of his breath, every trembling slide of his fingers across her skin, heightened her own pleasure until she thought she might orgasm just watching him.

He broke from her mouth, sliding down her throat and almost sliding free of her grip in the process.

“Oh no,” she chastised, tightening her hold enough to make him moan. She worked her fist faster.

He dug his fingers into the sand. “I didn’t plan—” The rest of his words were lost to a hoarse shout muffled against her neck, the tension slowly draining from his body.

Sorcha took her time letting go and he took his time lifting his head. Maybe she’d underestimated her skill because instead of seeing satisfaction in his eyes when he met her gaze, all she saw was blatant hunger.

Confused, she shook her head. “I thought you...”

“Came? Oh, I did, but it won’t be nearly enough until I get inside, until you’re right there with me.”

Here? She didn’t need to voice the question to know that’s exactly what he meant.

Part of her didn’t want to move except to lift her hips and let him get her pants all the way off. The other part was frozen at the thought of him comparing her to the woman he loved. Whatever had happened in the past, Sorcha wasn’t her. Not the way he remembered her.

He dipped his head, his tongue tracing a hot path down her throat.

“Wait.”

Never having flashed anyone besides herself and another huntress to a different location, she struggled to concentrate. It didn’t help that she felt his arousal fitting tight against her already.

Focus.

A cool hard surface replaced the wet sand and she knew Cale had her pinned to the floor now. A smooth, polished floor so white it gleamed like a fresh snowfall in the afternoon sun.

She didn’t have a floor like that in her lair.

Cale cursed, and her gaze slid to the half a dozen huntresses staring curiously at them, smirking.

Oh fuck. She’d flashed them directly into Rhiannon’s throne room.

He wouldn’t get out alive. If one huntress didn’t have a problem with suggesting a little dismemberment to get the dagger, he couldn’t imagine there would be anything left of him if a whole gang of them got in on the action.

“Sorcha,” he prompted.

His mate's eyes widened, shock making her pretty mouth fall open. He took that as a sign she hadn't purposely hand-delivered him.

"I don't think I'm really dressed to meet a goddess, do you?" And there wasn't a doubt they were smack dab in the middle of a huntress meeting hall in Avalon, or worse—Rhiannon's throne room.

"Shit," she muttered, and then he felt the same charge of static race across his skin.

The hall disappeared behind them, replaced between one moment and the next with Sorcha's lair.

He exhaled slowly, his muscles relaxing even as he felt Sorcha's lock up.

Damage control. It didn't take a rocket scientist to see how wrong this could go in less time than it took for her to reach for a weapon. And she was certainly tense enough for it. That's all it would take to wipe out the progress they'd made.

He could have anticipated a dozen factors that held the potential to drive a wall back up between them. A group of cannibalistic females hadn't made the list.

Cale touched his forehead to hers. "Hey."

She turned her head, avoiding him.

He did the only thing he could do to get her attention. He bit her shoulder. Hard enough to pull her thoughts away from their impromptu detour, but not enough to break the skin.

Her gaze snapped to his. There. He wanted her eyes on him as he cupped her jaw and slanted his mouth across hers. Slow wouldn't get the job done, so he didn't hold back. Didn't give her the time to think about stopping him. He'd rather go back to huntress headquarters than put a halt to what they'd started in their grotto.

The second he pushed his tongue into her lush mouth and took the kiss deeper, he felt her indecision. Her spine went rigid, but her mouth softened beneath his. He palmed her breast, teasing her nipple.

"Later," he breathed against her lips. "Worry about it later. Right now I need you. And you need me."

He'd needed her long before this, but he couldn't guarantee he wouldn't go out of his mind if he couldn't lose himself inside her. He hadn't wanted it to be here, among the memories of her life as a huntress.

The only hope he had of reclaiming his mate lay in triggering her memories. The lagoon had meant something to them, but he wasn't about to suggest she take them back. Not after their last side trip.

Lacing their fingers, he pushed her hands against the floor, exposing her breasts like a decadent meal he planned on devouring. Slowly. He caught her nipple between his lips and sucked.

Sorcha moaned and satisfaction curled through him, stroking the cat's need to dominate. He fought the need to turn her over on her belly and thrust into her from behind. Not yet. She wasn't ready. She might be wet for him, the scent of her arousal filling his head, but he needed her as desperate for him as he was for her.

Gods, she tasted good. So sweet and familiar and real. He let her slide free of his mouth, searching out the other dark nub. She moaned louder this time. Longer.

He released one wrist to get his hand inside her pants. Her panties—if that’s what you could call such a thin strip of fabric—were all that stood between him and her hot flesh. He rubbed softly, and she responded by grinding against his hand.

Circling slowly, he slid a finger under the edge. Her nails bit into his skin where he still held one hand trapped against the floor. And then she was letting him slide up through her slick folds.

“Cale,” she hissed when he drew the pad of his finger around her clit. The sensitive nub plumped up as he grazed it with every pass. “Please,” she begged. “Please.”

He pushed past her snug opening and slid deep. Sorcha shuddered, arched her back. Slower, he withdrew, spreading her wetness across her clit until she writhed beneath him.

Much too soon he was ready to explode, and she didn’t even have her hand wrapped around his cock. He closed his mouth over hers, filling her mouth the way his fingers filled her sex. A lazy pump. A harder one. A deeper one.

She bucked her hips, her breath coming faster.

Keeping his mouth on hers and his hand between her legs—sweet Avalon, she was hot—he somehow coaxed her to her feet. They only made it a few feet, the two of them slamming up against the wall. He loved the way her nipples rubbed against his chest, and that sound she made when he bent to trap one between his lips.

Getting her pants down should have been easy if he wasn’t constantly distracted by the soft bounce of her breasts and the slick heat between her legs. They staggered another few feet and he managed to strip her pants off.

By the time they reached her bed, he was hot all over. The need ravaging him, making his cock ache, had him pushing her back on the mattress and nudging her legs further apart.

Satisfied she wasn’t thinking about anything but him, he took a minute to look at her. Thighs parted, chest rising and falling, her hair fanned out across the pillow like a gift from the gods. When his attention fell to the center of her, all soft, dark curls and glistening folds, he palmed his shaft, desperate to ease the ache for a second.

Sorcha watched him, the flush on her cheeks and breasts deepening. The sound of his name on her lips was like a siren’s call, and he stepped closer. But instead of covering her body with his and sinking into her, he bent and pressed his face between her legs.

She cried out in pleasure, rocking her hips beneath him, letting his tongue slide deeper along her cleft. When he reached her clit and took a long, sucking taste of her, she yelled and fisted her hands in his hair, riding out her climax.

“Oh my.” Barely breathing, Sorchia melted against the bed. Not even in her most vivid fantasies had she imagined a mouth capable of making her climax that fast. And he wasn’t done yet.

Cale hovered over her, his cock bumping against the inside of her leg and setting off a scorching chain reaction. She spread her legs wider, lifting her ass to coax the full length of him to slide up her sex. They both moaned at the exquisite friction, and he lowered his head, stealing a kiss that rocked her inside and out.

Without breaking away from her mouth, he caught her hip, pulling it high enough so that he could fit his cock snugly against her. A heartbeat, then another, and another as he watched her, then seeming to know the second she couldn’t take the wait a moment longer, he thrust inside her.

Clutching at her sheets, she arched up only to be pushed back each time by the sheer addictive weight of him pressing her into the bed. Every hard thrust kept her pinned, his hips pumping hard and fast, driving him into her over and over.

Forget breathing—there wasn’t time anyway, not with the savage pace Cale set. Eyes dark and hungry, he rammed deep, one hand gripping her nape while the other dug at the sheets for leverage.

Drugged by the taste of his mouth, his possessive grip, the way their bodies fit perfectly together, she clutched him tighter, keeping him close. It all felt too damn incredible and much too right to sacrifice even an inch. Cale only succeeded in getting any space between them when he hooked her legs over his arms, sinking impossibly deep.

Crying out, she raked at his shoulders before letting her arms fall back, shielding her face. “More,” she begged, not caring that she didn’t beg anyone for anything. Ever. She needed him to give her more, to give her everything, and she would scream if she had to.

Wicked blue eyes bored into hers with a ruthless intensity that matched each thrust. Totally without mercy. Not for her body that welcomed the savage release building inside her, and not for her heart.

She closed her eyes, consumed by the staggering orgasm that made her forget she didn’t know him. Because right then, with him locked deep inside her, he was a part of her.

Always.

As though he sensed her acceptance of their bond—however temporarily—he lost control, pushing them both up and over and into the sweetest oblivion she’d ever known. Even after he collapsed, his face tucked against her throat, his breath harsh and uneven, she didn’t let go.

Didn’t ever want to let him go.

It took hours. Hours of being curled up against him before Sorchia couldn’t pretend that she hadn’t made a mistake. And it wasn’t sleeping with a target, though that wouldn’t win her any points with Rhiannon.

No, she screwed up the second she'd started believing she and Cale had a history together, and risking everything important to her to spend a few hours indulging in a past she couldn't even remember.

She couldn't get back the time and memories she had willingly sacrificed to get as far away from her mortal existence as possible, and she didn't want them. Neither did she want to get any closer to Cale.

Already, she'd let their brief time together compromise her, and if he couldn't prove his innocence and hand over the dagger, he would be taken out. If she couldn't do it, another huntress would. His best bet was to give it up, the sooner the better. If he could be persuaded to do it today, Rhiannon might not believe Sorcha's judgment had been compromised.

Easing out from beneath the arm and leg he used to keep her close, she made it out of bed without disturbing him. His face was planted in the pillow, the sheet tangled around his waist, except for one corner that fell down his hip.

Without a doubt, tugging the sheet down would wake him. Tempted to do just that, if only so he would drag her back to bed and make her forget everything but him, she grabbed some clothes and slipped away.

By the time she pulled on pants and a shirt and retrieved the boots he'd left at the lagoon, she was much too keyed up for having slept as deeply as she had in his arms. Sex would certainly burn off some of her excess energy.

She discarded the possibility the moment it crossed her mind. Considering how much she'd enjoyed the last few hours, it was a bad idea. If she'd doubted their past before, the time he'd spent working her body over, driving her to such intense pleasure...

She took a breath and headed outside before she crawled back into bed and up his body. The longer she thought about straddling him and sinking down, taking him inside her, the harder it was to walk away.

Bottom line—there was no way he could have known how to give her that much pleasure right out of the gate. He should have fumbled around a bit, taking a little time to learn what made her rake at the blankets or scream his name to the point her voice grew hoarse.

But he hadn't. He'd known from the start what slow strokes would push her right to the edge, and how to drag out the pleasure until she was drowning in it, begging for him. Her mind might not know him, but her body did. And as easily as he could make her pant and writhe, she'd instinctively known what made him lose control.

She'd loved that best, watching him get closer and closer to giving in to the wildest, most primitive parts of him. He didn't hold back, wasn't afraid of getting rough with her. Men, even immortals, were intimidated by her more often than not. But not Cale.

Did that explain why she had never told him she'd been a huntress? Had she been afraid that if he knew the truth, he would have been more wary of her?

Not that it mattered. It obviously hadn't ended well between them for reasons she couldn't afford to think about. They had a past, but they didn't have a future. Regardless of their connection or their undeniable physical chemistry, she couldn't be anyone's mate.

"The gargoyle still lives."

Sorcha turned, the sword she'd grabbed on her way outside disappearing from her hand, along with the knife in her boot. Rhiannon never allowed anyone to be armed in her presence, routinely vanishing any weapons. Seeing as the goddess's closest ally, her own husband, had once nearly killed her, Sorcha couldn't blame Rhiannon for not trusting anyone.

Rhiannon's long red hair was pulled back in its usual braid and the gold arm band she wore that carried Camelot's crest gleamed in the early morning sunlight. When she moved, the scabbard of her own sword clinked softly against the delicate rope of braided chains draped around her waist.

"You wouldn't be the first you know." Rhiannon inclined her head in the direction of Sorcha's lair. "Other huntresses have fallen into bed with their targets." She strolled a few paces away, then turned, her expression sliding from understanding to resigned. "But they didn't forget what they had to do. Have you?"

"No." She had to force the word out.

"I hear you're tracking a dragon now. Should I take that to assume you do not plan on completing your first assignment?"

"I have reason to believe Cale was set up because he has an object of interest in his possession that the McKibben clan is after."

Telling the goddess what that object was right at this moment would be nothing short of a death sentence for Cale. Nessa might have been content with one of his hands. Rhiannon would tear him apart if she thought it would get her that much closer to Excalibur and awakening her son.

"And why would they involve us in their dispute with the cat if he didn't pose a risk to all of us?"

"I haven't figured that out yet."

"Your job is not to investigate. It's to carry out my orders."

"I understand—"

"Do you? Perhaps you'd prefer I returned you to that bloody battlefield where I found you wounded and unable to protect yourself from Morgana's men."

"No."

Rhiannon's face softened. "When you retrieve the artifact, bring it to the hall."

Sorcha nodded, her chest tight.

The goddess turned away, paused. "I never assign these tasks without being certain each of you is equipped to handle it."

It was more of an explanation than Rhiannon usually offered, which was none.

The goddess vanished, leaving Sorcha alone once more. Her sword reappeared on the ground a few feet away, but she made no immediate move to retrieve it. Her muscles were locked too tight and she hadn't made up her mind if the painful churning in her stomach was going to make her throw up.

She didn't want to kill him, and yet disobeying Rhiannon wasn't an option. Fury rose in her, hot and fast. Fury directed at Cale for knowing her. For making a situation impossibly complicated and refusing to give her the dagger.

But most of all she was furious with herself for getting sucked in so deep, so quickly. If she hadn't hesitated to force the truth from him, she wouldn't have disappointed Rhiannon. She wouldn't have taken so long to do her job.

She wouldn't have spent last night with him.

Sorcha sighed, her anger fading at the thought of what she might have missed out on if she'd remained the cool, detached huntress Rhiannon had dispatched.

A breath of movement whispered across the back of Sorcha's neck, and she spun, tossing her knife.

It stuck in the ground a few inches from Cale's bare foot. The man had pulled on pants but hadn't gotten around to doing up the top button. Given his lazy smile, the oversight had been intentional.

He picked up her knife, studied the blade before glancing in her direction.

She shrugged. "Guess my aim is off."

"Is it?"

She collected the knife from him, unable to avoid the fingers that brushed the inside of her wrist as he handed it over.

Like before, his touch pushed her heart into the next gear. She drew back before the yearning that took hold made her step into his arms. That spot between his shoulder and neck had to be the most perfect place to rest her head.

Turning away, she threw the knife. This time it struck the middle of a tree a few meters away.

"You never even hinted at being a huntress."

"Didn't you wonder how I could be immortal?"

He nodded. "You said you were rewarded for coming to the goddess's aid during a confrontation with Morgana."

An unlikely scenario, but not improbable. Though a long-ago pact with another god prevented Rhiannon from directly moving against the sorceress, the goddess had manipulated circumstances in the past to strike out at Morgana.

"How long were we together?" She asked to appease her curiosity.

"Six years."

A blink of time when you could live an eternity. "And not once did you wonder where I disappeared to?" She wouldn't still be a huntress if she hadn't continued to do her job after they'd met.

“You were rarely gone for long periods of time.” He followed her to the tree, cringed when she jerked the knife free.

“It must have bothered you.” Already possessive, she couldn’t imagine he’d been okay when she’d vanished with little explanation, without knowing where she was.

“You were my mate, not my slave. I didn’t demand extensive explanations for the absences or brood over it. I knew it if was important, you’d tell me.”

She snorted.

Looking annoyed, he crossed his arms.

“Oh, come on. You expect me to believe that?” Throughout her short mortal life, she’d witnessed how controlling men were, had seen dozens of women succumb to their husbands’ demands with few objections. Had witnessed their cold brutality when they were denied what they believed was there due.

Immortal males were even more territorial. She’d confronted enough of them to know that much. Enough to make her doubt Cale would have been so laid back about it.

“We argued over it sometimes,” he admitted. “But it wasn’t a big deal.”

Didn’t sound that way to her. Her expression must have mirrored her thoughts because he crossed his arms.

“Not at the time anyway. Knowing now what you were doing changes my perspective a bit.”

“That’s what I thought.”

His gaze darkened. “So I’m not supposed to be concerned about my mate tracking down traitors and rogues?”

She opened her mouth.

Cale growled. “I swear to the gods if you’re about to deny being my mate—”

“Whatever we were to each other has nothing to do with the present.”

His eyes went completely cat on her. “The hell it doesn’t.”

“So what happened then? How is it you saw me die and yet I’m standing right here?”

Some of the anger left his face. “You were run through by a wraith’s sword and when you hit the ground, he kicked your body into the fire pits.”

A wraith? She wasn’t chummy with any of the former knights. Like huntresses, they didn’t play well with others. Then there was that whole drinking blood thing. Still, she couldn’t imagine any risking Rhiannon’s anger to attack her.

And the catacomb fire pits?

She held up her arms. “No scars.” Which he must have noticed by now. Since the fire pits were mystically charged, she wouldn’t have fully healed from those kinds of burns.

Cale caught her hand and she realized she’d all but invited him to touch her.

He rubbed his thumb back and forth across the inside of her arm. “I know.”

She kept her gaze down. “When was this?”

“Eighty years ago.”

She would have only been months, maybe even weeks away from her last cleanse.

“I keep running it over and over in my head,” he said softly. “Trying to figure out how I didn’t know you’d survived. I should have felt it somehow. Should have found you.”

Unless she hadn’t wanted to be found. But she didn’t say that. Couldn’t speak past the tightness in her throat. He was giving her that look again. The one that made her feel needed, cherished.

“Whatever happened, it wasn’t your fault.”

“I didn’t protect you.” He cupped her face. “I should have been there.”

“I can take care of myself.”

Leaning in, he nuzzled her cheek. “That doesn’t mean I don’t want to keep you safe. That I won’t still try.” His lips grazed hers. “I love you too much.”

Sorcha’s world ground to a staggering halt. A hoard of Morgana’s soldiers could have appeared out of thin air, swords waving and she wouldn’t have been nearly as dumbstruck as she was right at that moment.

“I have to go.” The words ran together as she stumbled back a step. A lot of steps. She closed her eyes. For the first time in so very long she knew she was in way, way over her head.

Chapter Six

Stupid. Unfuckingbelievably stupid.

“Wait.” Cale searched his mind for something to say, something that would erase the panic that flashed in her eyes. “Just a minute. Please.”

He couldn’t think. Words, explanations, questions spun through his mind but he couldn’t find the right thing that would make her stay.

She shook her head, her face visibly pale. “I can’t... I need to go. I’ll be back.”

“When?”

“Soon. I’ll need the dagger, Cale.”

“I can’t do that, Sorcha. You know I can’t. Not yet.”

“Rhiannon wants the artifact. She also wants you dead. If you’re dead, you won’t be able to help your brother.” The reminder sounded rushed. “I’ll be back.”

The cat snarled, wanting to force her to stay. “Sorcha.”

She shook her head. “I know you want me to remember you and the life we had together. I just... I have to go. Stay out of trouble and don’t go anywhere.”

And then she was gone.

He lashed out, his claws breaking through to slash the tree. He stared long and hard at the gouges in the trunk. He’d fucked up. Royally.

Even if there was a slim chance that hearing how he felt could help her remember, it didn’t do a damn bit of good when it chased her off.

Cale pushed away from the tree, took a few steps without knowing where to go. How long would she be gone? More importantly, how did he keep that from happening again?

A familiar howl pierced the early morning air. He scanned the distant tree line. Unable to spot Nate right away, he headed west, toward the forest.

After getting enough details from Arden to track Sorcha, he’d been stunned to recognize some of the landmarks on the way to her lair. It couldn’t be a coincidence Sorcha had chosen to make a home so close to the lagoon, a place they’d come countless times. A place he hadn’t been able to return to for the last eighty years. Maybe if he had, their paths would have crossed decades ago.

Still furious at himself for not sensing she'd been alive, he shucked off his pants and shifted. The short run only fed the cat's determination to hunt down its mate. So much so that it took Nate saying his name a few times for him to focus on anything but tracking Sorchia.

"Well you're still alive," Nate said when Cale reluctantly shifted.

He gave their surroundings a more thorough inspection. He doubted anyone would be hanging around so close to Sorchia's lair, but he preferred not to be taken by surprise either.

"If you thought I was insane for encroaching on a huntress's territory, what are you doing here?"

Nate's eyes glinted, his wolf half surfacing at the reminder of where they were. "The sorceress who cursed your brother, I think I may know where to find her."

"Arden?" Cale had mentioned the situation to Arden before he'd left, hoping something might come of it.

Nate nodded. "But it was hard for her to pin down the exact time, so we need to leave now."

The cat snarled in protest, nearly drowning out the part of him that knew he couldn't let his family down. Tristan had been shouldering much of the blame for Cian's state from the beginning, but what kind of a brother would that make Cale if he let this kind of opportunity pass?

Sensing Cale's hesitation, Nate said. "We might not get a chance like this again if we don't go now."

He nodded grimly. "Where's the pup?"

"With my sister." Nate waited. "We need to leave as soon as possible," he added, transitioning seamlessly back to his wolf form.

Alert, the gray wolf watched him, waiting.

Cale glanced back over his shoulder. Sorchia could be gone for hours or return at any moment. There was no way to know. No way to know if she'd come back alone or with back up. She had to know he was serious about holding on to the dagger, leaving them at an impasse.

A sharp bark cut off his train of thought. Twice now he'd been forced to leave her side when he'd only just found her. That knowledge only intensified his guilt, made the cat want to dig in, stay.

Nate started in the opposite direction, circling back around when Cale didn't move to follow.

What if she needed him and he wasn't there? He'd lost her once. The wolf pawed impatiently at the ground, reminding him that according to Arden, their time was limited.

The pain in his chest made it increasingly harder to choose.

I can take care of myself. Sorchia's words echoed in his head. She hadn't died. Somehow, someday, she'd survived, and as much as it killed him to think of her returning to find him gone, he knew he needed to trust her instincts.

That didn't stop the indecision from flaring all over again the moment he shifted back to his cat form. Only snarling at Nate, who responded with an equally wary growl, managed to keep him from tearing

through the trees to return to Sorcha's lair. The men's trust was the only thing that allowed their animal halves to tolerate the other.

Forcing himself to think about his family, the one thing he could do something about right now, he promised himself to return as soon as he could, and trailed after Nate.

"Where the hell have you been?"

Where hadn't he been was the real question as far as Cale was concerned—and he'd been asking himself that since leaving Sorcha's lair—but voicing it seemed impossible when he couldn't lift his head off the damn couch. Maybe if it didn't feel like a wrecking ball had nailed him right between the eyes.

Through slitted eyes, Cale watched his brother slam his office door, thankfully drowning out the music from the bar downstairs. Of all the places for Nate to dump him. His friend hadn't listened when he'd insisted on returning to Sorcha's, in between stopping to empty his guts every few minutes.

Damn Korrigans. One minute he'd been within striking distance of the sorceress, and the next he'd been flat on his ass.

So no sorceress. No freed brother. No Sorcha.

Oh yeah, he was batting a thousand tonight.

"You look like shit."

He didn't even open his eyes to look at Tristan. "You too."

"Briana and I've have been worried about you."

"How long have I been gone?" It was hell trying to keep track when time passed so much faster in the human realm than in Avalon, plus he'd lost days tracking the sorceress through Korrigan territory.

"Almost a month."

The cat prowled restlessly in his mind, demanding he get his sorry ass up and find his mate. That Sorcha hadn't tracked him down wasn't sitting well with either man or beast. The certainty that she'd be on his ass in a heartbeat had been a deciding factor when it had come to leaving her in the first place.

He tried to sit up, only managing to lift his head a few inches before nausea clamped down on his stomach.

Tristan frowned. "How long has it been?"

"Since I've gone to stone? Too long." And it couldn't be put off much longer. His injuries were too extensive and his mind too exhausted. Once the sun was up even his need for Sorcha, which was the only thing keeping him conscious at this point, wouldn't stop the inevitable.

"At least you didn't burn the place down while I was gone." He would have knocked on the table next to him if he could have reached it. He needed to save his energy anyway. He'd be leaving just as soon as he figured out how to move without the world tipping.

What the hell had that Korrigan done to him? One minute he'd had the sorceress cornered, and the next flashing red eyes had come out of the dark and he'd been treated to a vicious lashing. One he was vaguely aware of actually begging for thanks to the Korrigan entrancing him. If not for Nate, he'd probably still be the bitch's whipping boy.

He'd known the risks when they'd crossed into their territory, knew their magic stemmed from the darkest places in Avalon. Korrigans even intimidated Morgana. At least that was the bedtime story cubs were told when they were too young to understand the risks Korrigans posed.

It was that fear that probably prompted the sorceress to hide out in their territory.

"The bar is fine. Can't say the same about you. At least tell me you managed to figure out how to use the dagger."

"Sort of."

"Where is it?"

He shook his head, forced his eyes open. Thankfully there were only two Tristans instead of five. Squeezing and opening his eyes again helped a little. "Where's Nate?"

"He just left. Said he figured you might try to off yourself if he'd taken you home instead of here."

"What?"

Tristan shrugged. "Something about going to see a huntress."

"Sorcha," he began.

"Shit man, you are messed up." Concern flashed across his brother's face.

"No." He made it to a sitting position, only having to swallow the bile that rose in his throat twice in the process. "The huntress is Sorcha."

"Ookay." Tristan poured him a drink and watched as Cale miraculously brought it to his lips without spilling any. "You need to be patched up and get some sleep."

Cale followed his brother's gaze to his bloodstained shirt. That explained the bitch of an ache in his side.

"What were you and Nate doing anyway? You've missed a hell of a lot in the last month."

Something in his brother's voice sounded different. He searched Tristan's face. "We were tracking the sorceress who cursed Cian. Arden thinks she's the key to freeing him."

The door to Cale's office opened and Kennedy poked her head in. The blonde bartender's smile quickly turned into a frown when she noticed the sorry state he was in.

"I thought the wolf was jerking my chain." She crossed the room. "This wasn't the work of a wraith I hope?"

Wolf? Wraiths? He shot his brother a troubled look. Last time he'd checked, Kennedy had been oblivious to the immortal crowd she regularly catered to downstairs. When had she—

Tristan's arm slid possessively around her waist.

Hell, he had missed a lot apparently. His gaze darted to Kennedy, his eyes widening. “Mated? You’re human.” He cocked his head thoughtfully. Or was she?

“Long story,” Tristan began.

Something below drew Kennedy to the bank of windows overlooking the club.

Tristan scowled. “If Dolan is causing trouble—”

Kennedy snorted. “You’ll what? Challenge him to another arm-wresting match?”

His brother shrugged. “You won’t let me stalk him.

“Or pounce. Or chew.”

“Or anything fun,” Tristan countered.

Cale gripped the side of his head. “Maybe you two could do this later if you don’t mind.”

“And it’s not Dolan that’s making people nervous down there. A pack of wolves is harassing some brunette by the bar.” Kennedy opened the door.

With so many immortals below, the air was ripe with exotic scents, but only one made the cat claw at the edges of his mind.

“Where are you going?”

Tristan moved forward to help when Cale staggered to his feet, determined to block out the pain. Block out everything but his mate.

Beyond his office lights pulsed from the stage, drenching those below in blinking shades of red, blue and white. Even with bodies crammed together and the music pounding out of speakers, he had no trouble spotting her.

One guy was already out cold at her feet. That probably explained why everyone within ten feet was giving her a wide berth. Everyone except the remaining wolves.

Judging by the empty pitchers on the table they’d collectively vacated, they were young and looking for trouble. By the time Cale made it to the stairs, the cat pulsed dangerously close to the surface. Breaking his own club rules and shifting wasn’t a good idea at all, but if one of those wolves put a finger on his mate...

They looked ready to put a whole lot more than just a finger on her when he started shoving through the crowd. He growled in warning, and a few immortals backed up before he plowed them over. The last handful of spectators were too caught up in watching the wolves close in on Sorcha to pay any attention to him.

“Hey!” Tristan snagged Cale’s arm. “Not a good idea, bro. You need...” Tristan’s hand fell away, and he knew his brother had spotted Sorcha. “Fuck me.”

One of the wolves said something to Sorcha. She smiled at the comment, and then nailed him in the jaw with a punch that shattered a few bones. Seeing their friend go down, the others moved in, snarling.

A bouncer would have stepped in to avoid the bloodshed by now, but even the closest one seemed reluctant to go near Sorcha.

Cale knocked the last person between him and the wolves aside. He was only a handful of feet from his mate when two more gargoyles hit the floor. The first ones down were already back on their feet, but Sorcha didn't even slow down.

She seamlessly rotated, kicking the wolf in front of her before jamming her elbow into the gut of the one who'd come at her from behind. When he doubled over, she pivoted and caught his head, smashing it down to meet her knee.

With four wolves struggling to get back up, the last one left standing might have made the smart call and gotten the hell out of there. Except some jackass enjoying the show shoved him right at Sorcha.

The wolf grabbed a pool cue from the culprit's hand. Not that he had it long. Sorcha snatched it from him on the first swing, then rammed the end into his stomach and snapped it around to knock him upside the head.

In ten seconds flat it was over and Sorcha stood in the middle of five guys who looked more like college frat kids unable to hold their liquor than deadly immortals.

Around them, nobody moved. Nobody breathed.

And then the same asshole who'd pushed the last wolf opened his fucking mouth. "Bar fight!"

All hell broke loose.

Three more immortals came at Sorcha, one managing to slam her up against the counter before she brought her knee up between the bastard's legs. She'd no sooner turned from him before a meaty paw landed on her shoulder.

Gripping it, she turned, bringing the dragon over her shoulder.

All around her bodies collided, the sound of grunting and flesh striking flesh, riding on the air. Hell, even an enchantress dove from the bar to land on some Fae's back.

The crowded bar had taken her by surprise when she'd flashed here in search of Cale. She had almost given up on tracking him, fearing at one point that something must have happened to him when she'd left him at her lair. The time differences between worlds shouldn't have prevented her from catching up with him for so long, and yet he'd vanished.

She'd even suspected Rhiannon had learned of the dagger and returned in her absence to personally oversee its retrieval by another huntress. Constantine hadn't wanted any of the gods—though few bothered—to interfere with the daggers, and had deliberately made the weapons poisonous to them.

Only Nessa had prevented Sorcha from going to the goddess to make sure, and given the irrational panic that had her fearing the worst, it wouldn't have been a pleasant little chat.

“He’ll turn up,” Nessa had said. “He can’t hide forever.”

But he wasn’t hiding. And he wasn’t dead. He stood an arm’s length away. His fierce expression locked on her.

Relief came first. Then anger. Anger she directed at herself for trusting him not to run. For worrying about him. For caring.

His gaze darted to the right, but she was already whipping around, the pool cue snapping in half across a Fae’s head. It took another punch to knock him backward and he disappeared into the crowd that surged around them.

Two hands settled on her hips, but her body immediately recognized the touch.

“Outside,” Cale growled against her ear. His chest crowded her back, his warmth instantly draining some of the tension in her spine.

A vicious snarl erupted from him and he twisted her around, away from the trio of humans too stupid to realize they could get themselves killed in here on a regular night, let alone during a full-on brawl.

“Quite the place you’ve got here,” she yelled over the noise.

“It was before you walked in.”

“They started it.”

“And you finished it.” The pride in his voice made her try to turn around to look at him.

A high pitched screech sounded and water erupted from the overhead sprinklers. The crowd that had been tearing into each other started breaking apart, many heading for the exits.

Behind her, Cale cursed, his hand never leaving the small of her back. More than once he shouldered past people looking to drag them back into the fray. He ushered her down a narrow hall. Water from the sprinklers made the floor slick. More than once she lost traction before they rounded a corner and he opened a door.

Voices sounded behind them, and they stepped out into an alley. Further down, more people spilled out from another exit, heading toward the street. Cale didn’t let go of her until the last of the stragglers trickled outside and away from them.

“You disappeared on me.”

He edged her backward, toward the wall. “Isn’t that what traitors do?”

“So now you’re guilty?”

“If you’re still thinking about taking me out, I might as well be.”

“You don’t seem real concerned about that.” If he was, he’d be trying to get some space between them, not moving in until she had only enough room to breathe.

Cale leaned in, his cheek dragging across hers. “Maybe you’re just not as convincing when you’re not armed.”

“That can be arranged, you know.”

“Or,” he countered, “maybe it’s because you’re actually glad to see me, mate.”

“In your dreams, tiger.”

He laughed, the sound rich and deep and close enough she felt his lips graze her ear.

“Did you come here to retrieve the dagger from your hiding place?” Reminding him of what this was really all about was the only shot she had to make him back off.

“And here I thought *I* had a one track mind.” He swept his thumb across the base of her throat, the wicked undercurrent in his voice making it obvious what track his mind was on.

He might as well have put his hand down her pants because the effect was the same. Her whole body got hot.

“Maybe you should talk to someone about that,” she suggested, barely keeping her eyes open under the seductive caress of his fingers.

He laughed, the sound sexy as hell. “Like it would do any good. We both know where my head goes the second I catch your scent.” He brushed her hair back from her face. “I’ve missed you.”

One look in those baby blues and she knew he wasn’t talking about their recent separation. And just that fast the last of her earlier anger and frustration was wiped out.

“How do you do that?”

He nuzzled her neck. “Hmmm?”

Her eyes slid shut. “How do you make me forget everything but you?”

“Do you want the simple answer, or the complicated one?”

“Simple.” Everything else was complicated enough.

“We’re meant to be.”

She might have been able to brush his answer off if his voice hadn’t deepened with emotion.

He touched his forehead to hers, his hand gently cradling her face. “*We’re* meant to be.” Then he swooped down to cover her mouth with his.

Not for all the daggers in Avalon would she admit how much she wanted to believe that. But that was the best thing about kissing him, when his arms slid around her until she fit perfectly against him, she didn’t have to think or believe anything.

She just needed to feel.

With the brick wall at her back, his body slowly grinding against hers, feeling was so damn easy. And it only got easier when Cale wedged his thigh between hers, rubbing just enough to make her squeeze her legs around him in response to the soft ache deep in her sex.

The hand at her back peeled up her soaked shirt and slipped beneath. She shuddered at the warmth from his palm, moaning against his lips when he inched up and cupped her breast.

She turned her head, dragging in a deep breath in an attempt to calm her insides. Every cell in her body cried out from the closeness, the release.

The buttons on her pants gave way beneath his fingers.

Sorcha rocked up, willing him to—

He slipped beneath the edge of her panties, ran his fingers up her cleft.

Sweet goddess. She rolled her hips, making it easier for him to find the right spot. She whimpered. “There,” she hissed.

“Spread your legs wider,” he demanded.

Not wanting him to stop, she didn’t even argue about this not being the time or place. There would be time for that later, after he made her come. After he buried himself inside her and fucked her against the damn wall.

Gods, she wanted that. Wanted it so much, she trembled from head to foot.

“Cale,” she breathed. She nipped his bottom lip, and he groaned. Groaned and kissed her so hard and deep he might have bruised her mouth if she wasn’t so busy sweeping her tongue across his.

A shout of pleasure rocketed up her throat as he pumped a finger inside her. Needing to be closer, she tugged his shirt up, wanting to feel skin against skin.

Cale hissed, and she drew back. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” he growled, angling her head back to take her mouth in another drugging kiss.

Her fingers raked at his side. He tensed at the same moment she grazed a wound on his side.

“You’re bleeding.”

“That hasn’t stopped us before.”

She eased back as much as she could manage. “It doesn’t count when I’m the one who made you bleed.”

“You do know how twisted that sounds, right?”

She rolled her eyes. “You know what I mean.”

“Sure. You’ve got the monopoly on torturing me.”

Since one of them needed to be serious, she tried again. “What happened?”

“It happened when I was tracking the sorceress who turned my brother into a permanent rock. I only had a small window of opportunity.”

Sorcha frowned. “So you didn’t run?”

Cale looked amused. “Sorry, you’ll have to come up with another reason to punish me.”

“I don’t need a reason—”

He bit her lip, his eyes gone cat.

She glared at him. “Don’t play the dominate male with me.”

“Right, I forgot—” he brushed his lips across hers, “—you eat kitty cats for breakfast.”

“Ass,” she murmured, struggling to remember what they were arguing over with his mouth drifting so lazily across hers.

A door banged open in the alley.

“There you are.”

Cale caught her hand before it reached her knife. “My brother Tristan.” He stepped back, giving her a second to adjust her clothes, and taking with him the only warmth she could feel when she was this drenched.

His brother wasn’t alone. An equally drenched blonde hovered behind his shoulder.

“How?” The other gargoyle’s gaze darted from Cale to her and back again. “You...I was there. You...” He shook his head then reached out and pulled Sorcha forward, wrapping his arms around her in a bear hug. “You’re not dead.”

Stunned, Sorcha slanted a helpless glance in Cale’s direction. He hadn’t let go of her entirely, and his grip on her hand tightened.

“At least some things are making sense now.” Tristan stepped back.

“I’m glad they are for someone,” the blonde said. She held out her hand to Sorcha. “Kennedy.”

Cale’s brother continued to stare as Sorcha shook hands with her. “How is this possible?”

“We’re still working that out.” For the first time in the last few minutes, Sorcha heard the strain in Cale’s voice. He shifted his weight, signs of pain showing in his face.

“Now I get why you vanished. But—” he broke off looking at her, puzzled. “You do know me, right?”

Sorcha shook her head.

Inside, the fire alarm finally stopped screeching. “And to think we just got the bar back up and running.” Tristan directed his comment at Kennedy.

She shrugged, not looking the least bit apologetic. “It was pull the fire alarm or let them tear the place apart.”

Tristan sighed. “We need to go deal with the police and fire crews pulling up.”

The pair gave a little wave and then she and Cale were alone once more.

“Couldn’t bring yourself to tell my brother I’m on your hit list, huh?”

Sorcha frowned. “You might not treat this seriously—”

“Oh, it’s serious.” He turned, propped a hand on the wall next to her head.

“Where’s the dagger, Cale?”

“Some place safe.”

She planted a hand against his chest. “That’s your only bargaining chip, you know that.”

“I thought you didn’t negotiate with traitors?”

“Stop it,” she snapped. “It’s the dagger or your head on a platter.”

“So we’re back to that. What happened to giving me some time?”

“Like the time you had to track the sorceress? It’s out of my hands now.” Using the dagger to bargain with Rhiannon was their only chance and a slim one at best.

His eyes narrowed. “So you’re just doing your job?”

Sorcha ducked under his arm. “Yes.” Because as much as she believed they’d shared something once, it was in the past. Even if she could convince Rhiannon to rescind her order to kill Cale, the two of them wouldn’t be riding off into the sunset together.

He pushed away from the wall, his predatory strides tripping every internal alarm she had. “That’s a shame.”

She sidestepped to maintain some space between them. “Stop.”

He shook his head.

“I’m not doing this. We’re not doing this.”

A grin curved his lips—cunning, seductive.

Footsteps echoed down the alley, but she wasn’t dumb enough to take her eyes off Cale. Not when he looked ready to pounce. Every step was meant to get him strategically closer to his prey.

Her.

The fact that he appeared to enjoy her piecing that together only annoyed her. Mostly because there was no way she could be remotely turned on by him trying to corner her.

Of course, the flush of heat that started at her toes and swept upwards vehemently disagreed. Then there was the come-and-get-me smile that tugged at the corner of her mouth. And worse, the sinking sensation that she wanted to be caught.

Caught. Trapped. Pinned.

The more she thought about his body pressed up against her, the more aroused she became. Stomach-tight, pulse-jumping, panty-dampening kind of aroused.

“Come here.” He might as well have skipped talking and tackled her. His words alone were enough to throw her off balance. Made her think of hot, naked bodies locked together.

His. Hers.

Noticing more than one shadow stretching across the alley wall, she risked a quick glance. At first she thought the four men approaching were the same gargoyles who’d pushed their luck with her inside.

Not wolves, though, she realized, dragons. The skin on the front guy’s face flashed iridescent shades of crimson along his jaw.

A pissed-off dragon apparently, one struggling not to shift. At her current rate, she should probably expect a couple of Fae to try tag-teaming her tonight too.

Only one of the four guys spared her more than a dismissive glance, their collective attention focused on Cale. If they’d been inside earlier, they’d obviously missed her at the center of the brawl. Otherwise they wouldn’t be ignoring her entirely.

The smart dragon in the bunch watched her as she edged toward Cale.

“Get lost, bitch.” This from the lead guy.

Cale snarled, but she saved him from the protective crap by moving close enough he at least wouldn’t injure himself further trying to position himself in front of her. She knew he’d try even if she was more than capable of handling anything these four could dish out.

The longer she looked at Cale, the clearer it became he was worse than she’d believed when she found the wound on his side. It was just a matter of time before the dragons realized that and tried to take advantage of any weakness.

She turned her attention on the one in front. “At least have the balls to look a girl in the eye when you call her a bitch.”

Another warning growl from Cale, his cat hovering close to the edge. That growl seriously hadn’t been meant for her?

In front of them, the dragon who’d been eyeing her warily took a cautious step back. She would have considered the move a wise one and nothing more if not for the hatred she glimpsed in his eyes. Hatred barely masking his fear.

McKibben.

Chapter Seven

The damn dragon she'd gone looking for when she'd left Cale after that whole *I love you* fiasco—and now so wasn't the time to think about that—stood opposite them.

She strolled closer, ignoring the other three but speaking to them as she zeroed in on McKibben. "My fight is not with you."

One must have made a move toward her because Cale had him by the throat and pinned to the wall.

"If you shift, it's your funeral." Something in her tone must have given them pause, so she made herself perfectly clear. "I'm bound to track and eliminate any immortal who knowingly risks exposing us to humans."

"Huntress," one of them whispered.

"I suggest you three leave before you risk your scaly hides. Like your pal here."

One of the dragons cursed at McKibben.

"I think you can let that one go now." She nodded to indicate the dragon Cale had against the wall.

"In a minute." He gave the gargoyle, the same one who had been ready to shift earlier, a meaningful look. "Don't you have something to say to my mate?"

The dragon's eyes widened as though Cale had just said he was married to Medusa. Another squeeze of Cale's fingers and he choked out, "Sorry."

She rolled her eyes. Cale released the dragon and the three of them took off. McKibben was smart enough not to move as she spoke to Cale.

"Would you have been so quick to pin him if we'd been in Avalon?" Where the dragon could have shifted and used his sheer size as an advantage.

"If he had touched you, his throat would have been crushed before he had the chance to shift."

She didn't need to ask to know it would have been the cat and not the man doing the crushing. The violence she understood. That it stemmed from his need to protect her still took her by surprise, but didn't bother her half as much as she figured it would.

Cale looked at McKibben. "I've seen you before."

"Probably staking out the place before he made a move against your brother," Sorchia said. "He's after the dagger."

"My brother?"

“Our scaly friend here engaged a wraith to mark your brother’s mate. He planned to trade her life for the dagger.”

“Tristan never had it.”

Hearing the guilt in his voice, she shook her head. “They handled it. And Kennedy looked more than fine to me.” Men really needed to stop underestimating their female counterparts, mate or not.

“How do you know all this?”

McKibben’s feet inched toward the right. Sorcha slammed her palm against the dragon’s chest. “Don’t move.” She turned back to Cale. “I haven’t exactly been sitting around keeping the home fires burning while you were gone. And you left to find a sorceress?”

Cale crossed his arms. “We need her to undo the curse.”

She arched a brow. “And where exactly did you track her to?”

“First in Avalon, in the catacombs, then Korrigan territory. Then she crossed the veil and we lost her trail.”

At least that explained why she hadn’t been able to find him.

McKibben cursed. “Are you two done now? Or do you want to check his collar for lipstick too?”

Cale’s lips twitched as though he too realized how mate-like she’d just sounded.

Scowling, she tightened her grip on McKibben. “Tell me why I shouldn’t let the cat tear you into tiny bite-sized dragon bits for targeting his family.”

“The dagger is the only way to guarantee Morgana will stay off our lands.”

“If the sorceress made that deal with you, you’re a fool for believing her.”

“We’re out of options.”

Call shook his head. “Why not ask the other gargoyle clans for help?”

McKibben laughed coldly. “I don’t think so.”

“So you’d sell us all out,” he countered.

“Do you really think living under Morgana’s reign will be any different than if Arthur rose again?”

“Yes,” she and Cale answered in perfect unison.

“You’re a goddess’s flunky. I don’t expect any different from you.” McKibben glanced at Cale. “Our race was punished for Arthur’s fall. What’s to say Arthur won’t seek vengeance against our clans if he awakes and reclaims Excalibur? We’re better off taking our chances with Morgana.”

“So it’s true then,” Sorcha mused. “Dragons do have brains the size of walnuts.”

McKibben snarled at her but made no move to attack.

“So you figured you’d set Cale up as a traitor, then sweep in and collect the dagger when he was dead?”

The dragon frowned. “Traitor?”

“A representative from your clan had a meeting with Rhiannon—”

"You huntresses really are mad. Why would my clan involve Rhiannon when she might discover what the cat had in his possession?"

She and Cale exchanged glances.

"The dagger should have been mine anyway. I'd been tracking that sorceress for months before your brother swooped in and snatched it mere hours before me."

"That's not breaking our laws. You flew across the city," Sorcha reminded him.

Cale whistled.

McKibben paled. "The cat would have ripped me apart."

The cat being Tristan, she guessed. "Guess you shouldn't have targeted his mate."

A fresh wave of alarm crossed the dragon's face.

"Don't," she warned, anticipating a desperate move to get away from her.

Surprisingly, he obeyed.

Far from reassured by his compliance, she dug her phone from the pocket of her cargo pants and punched in Nessa's number. The other huntress answered on the first ring.

"I'm in the alley outside Pendragon's. I need a favor."

There wasn't time to mention the details before Nessa appeared in the alley.

Sorcha stuffed her phone back in her pocket as Nessa strolled up to them, her gaze sliding from Cale to McKibben.

"Is this Puff?"

McKibben gave her a blank look.

"As in Puff the Magic Dragon," she clarified, smirking.

"I need you to keep an eye on him for a bit."

"I suppose his limbs are off limits too?" Nessa sighed. "You're getting soft, Sorcha."

McKibben shot her a pleading look. "I flew one time. It won't happen again."

"That's what they all say, honey." Nessa patted his face, and then the pair vanished.

Cale relaxed a little. "Think he'll fight or flee?"

"Neither unless he wants to make his situation a lot worse."

"Sometimes we don't always have a choice in the matter."

Sensing he wasn't talking about McKibben's problems, she linked their fingers and flashed them to her villa. The moment she let go, Cale stumbled, forcing her to sweep both her arms around him.

"When the last time you became one with the stone, tiger?"

"You know I'm virtually indestructible that way, right?" At her arched brow, he added, "You've got that huntress look on your face. Figured I'd save you from ruining your sword trying to cut my head off when I'm stone."

Sorcha led the way down the hall, taking some of his weight as he leaned against her. "I'm not going to cut anything off."

"But you're thinking about it." He sat on the edge of the chair in the corner of her bedroom.

"Your tongue maybe." She lifted his shirt out of the way to check the wound.

Cale hissed. "Easy."

"Seeing as you faked your last injury, I'm not about to be taken for a ride a second time."

He gripped her hips. "That's not the kind of ride I'm thinking about right now."

The suggestive comment succeeded in warming her blood, for a few seconds anyway. Nausea churned in her stomach at the sight of his wound, the makeshift bandage someone had applied hanging by the corner. "Shift."

His hand dropped to his buttons.

"I said shift, not strip."

Cale sighed. "Tease."

One look at the laughter in his eyes and she knew he'd heard correctly and was just screwing with her. "Cute," she drawled.

Despite the pain etched in the tight lines around his mouth, he grinned. "I was thinking more along the lines of irresistible, but cute works."

"Stop thinking and do your gargoyle thing before you get any more blood on my floor."

"Careful, you almost sound worried about me, mate."

"I'm worried about the bloodstains," she lied.

He stood, kissed her forehead, lingering there a moment. "I'm fine."

"Good to know," was the best she could come up with to mask the worry gnawing at her stomach. The sensation didn't last much past seeing him pitch his shirt and pants over his shoulder. "Cale."

He laughed, looking paler by the second. "Don't want them to rip."

A shimmer of color brightened the room. It wasn't the first time she'd witnessed a gargoyle shifting to their animal form, but it was the first time she'd reached out to catch the sparks that hovered on the air before fizzling out.

A large black cat stared up at her. "You're not going to lick me again, are you?"

He bumped her hand with his head.

"Smart call." She ran her palm down his back. "Though I guess I should have taken you to the roof or something."

He cocked his head, then turned and jumped on her bed.

"If you shed all over my silk comforter, I'll turn you into a throw rug."

He flopped down, but didn't close his eyes. The seconds ticked off as he watched her, waiting for something.

She sighed. "I'm not going anywhere."

Seemingly satisfied, he closed his eyes. Within seconds his fur lightened to a slate gray and he turned to stone before her eyes. She was still standing in the same position when Nessa appeared a short time later.

"Cool." Nessa rapped her knuckles on the cat's head. "Knock, knock." She grinned. "Guess nobody is home."

Sorcha snorted.

Nessa sat on the bed, one arm thrown companionably around the gargoyle's neck.

"Where's the dragon?"

Her friend cocked her head. "Do I detect a hint of annoyance in there somewhere? 'Cause if you don't want me snuggling with your stone kitty, just say so."

"He's not my—"

Nessa nodded to where Sorcha's hand had drifted closer to her knife. "Whatever you say."

Sorcha closed her eyes, cursed. "What is he doing to me?"

She spun on her heel, striding down the hall and into her favorite room in the house. Sunlight streamed through the wall of windows, caught by random prisms hung across the long panes. In the distance she could see the soft rolling hills of a neighboring vineyard.

Had she finally lost her mind? Nessa was her best friend, not some poaching enchantress, and yet she'd gotten possessive, nearly going for her knife when her friend had playfully touched him.

And it wasn't even really him, just the outer shell.

Turning back to her friend, who'd followed her, she held up her arm. "Did I ever tell you where I got this scar?" She pointed to the S-shaped mark.

"Is this really about a scar?"

"Yes!" Sorcha dropped onto the lounge in her favorite corner. "No." She closed her eyes, drew a deep breath, released it. "He's a target."

"Well it started out that way." Nessa sat next to her, bumping her arm, the gesture not one she expected when she'd nearly drawn a weapon on her friend.

"I shouldn't feel this way about him. It makes no sense."

Nessa held up two fingers.

"Peace?"

"No, two."

"Okay." Maybe Sorcha wasn't the only one suffering from temporary insanity.

"Two is the number of men you've let into your bed since your last cleanse."

"That you know of," Sorcha challenged, struggling to look like even either of those times had done much for her.

Nessa saw right through her. "Cale is the first guy to not take no for an answer. He's pursued you."

“He thinks—”

“Mate-schmate. It’s not the same for us.”

So why did it sound like Nessa was asking for confirmation then?

Her friend thankfully didn’t wait for a response. “Our loyalty is to Rhiannon first and foremost. Right?” she added when Sorcha remained silent.

“Yeah.”

“And how many times have I told you that you need to scratch the itch before the itch takes over?”

“Are you telling me sex will solve my problems?”

“Only if you’re going to be open-minded.”

“You do realize Cale—”

Again, Nessa cut her off. “Is just a target. It doesn’t really matter what he thinks, right?”

A pit formed in the bottom of Sorcha’s stomach.

“Think of it as a test,” Nessa continued. “If some hot Italian stud can light your fire, then you’ll know.”

“Know what?”

“Whether or not you’re totally screwed.”

The icy stone broke away from Cale, the chunks disintegrating before they hit the ground. The scent of his mate filled his head, and he rolled to his side, stretching out across the blankets.

She wasn’t next to him.

He lifted his head. She wasn’t in the room either.

A pair of pants landed on the bed. He growled, baring his teeth at Sorcha’s friend. He liked her even less than when she wanted to sever body parts.

She stood in the middle of the room, arms crossed. “You might want those.” She picked up his shirt, gave him a disgusted look when she noticed the dried blood on it.

“Hang on a second.” She vanished, returning moments later with a clean one.

He narrowed his eyes at her.

“Hey, if you want to be naked, your choice.” She turned a bit, and he knew she either trusted him not to lunge at her back, or was confident he couldn’t do any real damage if he tried. Probably the latter he decided, shifting back to human and pulling on the clothes.

Not once did he take his eyes off the other huntress. Certainly not when her fingers idly tapped the sword at her hip.

“Where’s Sorcha?”

“Out.”

Why didn't that surprise him? "How long has it been?"

"Since you got your stone on?" She smiled at her own humor. "About eighteen hours. Hungry?"

"About to offer me my last meal?"

She grinned over her shoulder. "Just trying to be nice."

He followed her at a cautious distance. "Like the kind of nice cannibals are when they fatten up the people they plan on eating?"

"As yummy as you might look naked and on a platter with an apple jammed in your mouth, Sorchia would—" she glanced at him quickly "—be annoyed if I denied her the kill. As good as your paws are between the sheets, Sorchia hasn't forgotten she has a job to do."

Cale perked up. "My paws are good between the sheets? Did she tell you that?"

Nessa rolled her eyes and led him down the hall and into the kitchen. "You seem like a decent cat—for a traitor. I'm just trying to be honest with you."

"And the point of you being so brutally honest is what exactly?"

She let out a breath. "This can only go down one of two ways. You die or Sorchia comes up with a way to convince Rhiannon not to kill you. Either way, she stays one of us and you're still alone." She plucked an apple from the bowl on the table and took a bite. "Not exactly a win-win situation."

"Where exactly is Sorchia?"

"Whether you think you're her mate or not—"

"Where. Is. She?"

Nessa's eyes widened. "Does your voice always sound that sexy when you get all possessive? No wonder you've got Sorchia riled up."

Cale shook his head. He'd always found females in general to be confusing, but this one broke the mold. One minute she was talking about cutting off his hand and Sorchia killing him, and the next she was looking at him like he'd just landed the Sexiest Man Alive title.

If he hadn't just spent hours rebuilding his strength, he'd probably have a migraine by now.

"Tell me where to find her. Please."

"If you're really planning on being all cave-man like and dragging her home, you should know there is a dress code involved."

He felt like an idiot.

Cale set the empty champagne glass on a passing tray.

An idiot for believing Nessa when she'd insisted he'd find Sorchia at an exclusive benefit of some kind. Hundreds of people were crammed among three floors. He could more easily imagine Sorchia

sharpening her sword in Camelot's courtyard, waiting to call out Morgana, than chatting up any of the men and women circulating below.

He'd chosen a third-floor vantage point, leaning against the railing and scanning the crowd, and doing his best to ignore the surrounding people who'd tried more than once to coax him into conversation.

If Sorchia was here, he'd have caught her scent by now. Unless she was roaming the elaborate grounds, though he'd already checked the acres surrounding the mansion twice now.

Clearly he needed to face the fact Nessa was screwing with him. As far as he could tell, there wasn't even another immortal around that might have been of interest to Sorchia. With everything else, he doubted she'd come to support any causes.

Coming here had been a waste of time. He started to turn away, stopped first by Sorchia's tantalizing scent, then after a flash of rich dark hair. Hair piled up haphazardly, thick strands trailing across her bare shoulders and framing her face.

The cat growled softly at the edges of his mind, while the man leaned into the railing as the crowd parted and he got a glimpse of the strapless black dress clinging to every curve.

Sweet Avalon.

He'd barely begun to think of the dozens of ways he could get her out of that dress, depending on whether he wanted to start at the top or the bottom, when he noticed a human get close to her.

Close enough to drape an arm around her waist.

He dug his fingers into the railing. There was nothing friendly or accommodating about the hold the guy had on her. It radiated intimacy and possessiveness with the kind of cultured restraint Cale couldn't have exhibited on his best day.

Today wasn't even a mediocre day.

The bastard whispered something to Sorchia, and his mate smiled in response.

She was enjoying herself, it seemed, at least right up until awareness washed over her face, and she searched the crowd.

It took only a few moments for her to look up and lock onto him.

Nessa was an idiot, Sorchia thought. On the other hand, she was clearly a bigger idiot for letting her friend talk her into such a stupid idea.

And if the gargoyle striding along the third-floor balcony, moving quicker than he should and not caring who he nearly knocked over in the process, wasn't an indication of how freakin' stupid Nessa's idea was, Sorchia would give up her sword.

"Antonio," she murmured, keeping an eye on Cale's progress.

Antonio spared her a million-watt smile, but didn't break from the conversation with the guy next to him. Something about investments. Humans were way too obsessed with making money.

Cale vanished from view, and she craned her neck to spot him. "Antonio." Sharper this time, she managed to snag the attention of all the people in the immediate area.

She ignored the speculative glances, wondering as Antonio finally faced her what she'd been thinking when she had zeroed in on him earlier. So maybe he'd been one of the few men not to glance away when she made it clear she was sizing them up.

Antonio was smart, attractive, charming... Was that the problem? That she *noticed* his charm, like he had to work to keep her attention?

"Si?"

"I have..." The rest of the words dried up on her tongue as she caught sight of Cale moving through the crowd in front of her.

She had only a second to take in the sex-in-a-suit impression he made before he came toe-to-toe with her.

Cale's blatant invasion of her personal space didn't go unnoticed by what's-his-name. She might have made an attempt at an introduction if she could have remembered buddy's name, and if her vocal chords cooperated.

Motionless, the seconds ticked off in her head. Cale's eyes bordered on feral. If she were smart, she'd move away from what's-his-name, or shove him out of the way before Cale took a swing at him. Or worse, a bite.

His lethal glare slid to the hand on her hip. He waited, jaw clenched for—Andy? Alex? Antonio!—to take a hint.

Her date made a sound in his throat, signaling Sorchia to say something. She didn't, couldn't, far too preoccupied noticing how Antonio's suit smoothed out the man's edges, while Cale's made his edges rawer, more primitive.

More exciting.

Antonio released her, offering his hand in greeting. Cale didn't look down, let alone take his eyes off Sorchia, his lips parting in a savage grin.

It was time to do something to stop Cale from making a scene, or worse, knocking Antonio out. So why wasn't she moving instead of getting caught up in the moment, wanting to see what came next as much as wanting to avoid it.

Or did she?

Her heart pounded, her breaths shallow and fast, a rush of adrenaline that had nothing to do with being in danger pushing through her bloodstream.

"Cale," was all she managed before he made his move.

Instead of knocking Antonio clear off his feet, Cale caught her around the waist, and pulled her against him. Their knees bumped, and she braced one palm on his chest for balance. Not that it mattered when he swept his mouth across hers and knocked her whole world off its axis.

She heard the sudden ceasing of conversation around them. Felt the moment Cale's need to stake a claim was overtaken by the hunger he never held back. The arm keeping her close tightened, his other hand sliding up, brushing her shoulder and finally cradling her jaw.

Someone close laughed, or maybe they were far away. The whole room could burst into mad giggles and she wouldn't have cared. She was too busy melting into Cale, sinking her fingers into the crisp shirt as she angled her head, letting him deepen the kiss.

His tongue caressed hers in soft, teasing strokes, his mouth slowing things down until their lips were barely moving. For a moment everything around them came to a stop and they were alone in the vast room.

All at once the sensation evaporated and the real world poured back in. Voices, music and someone saying her name.

Nessa? No, Antonio.

Cale started to back away, but she caught his face between her hands, lingering for one more second.

Satisfaction and arousal glittered in Cale's eyes when she finally drew back, but it was anger she heard when his lips brushed her ears.

"We need to talk."

A shiver slid down her spine. From anticipation or dread? She didn't even attempt to apologize or offer an explanation when he turned her around and maneuvered her through the crowd.

He growled something that sounded suspiciously like, "Unbelievable," under his breath, and some of the heat building inside her fizzled out.

Sorcha planted her feet to the point one of her heels threatened to snap before Cale stopped. She opened her mouth.

"Did you find him here or come with him?"

"Does it matter? If you have your way I won't be leaving with him." Until right then she hadn't realized how dark his eyes could get.

"Is that what you came here for, to find someone to go home with?"

"It crossed my mind." Briefly. Though once she'd spotted Cale, she'd known she never would have stepped one foot out the door with Antonio or anyone else.

He nudged her down the hall and through the closest door, shutting it behind them. "We're mated. Does that mean nothing to you?"

"Do you really want to go there? Fine, then let's talk about your sex life or lack thereof. Because you've been completely celibate for the last eighty years, right?" she drawled.

Exasperated, he shook his head. "I thought you were dead."

“And I didn’t even know you, how is that any different?”

“You know me now,” he challenged.

“For days. Not years or months or even weeks. You might be able to slip back into the past, but it’s not the same for me.”

“You may not have the memories, but you feel what’s between us.”

“What I feel is—”

“All that matters,” he finished for her. “You want to know what I think?”

“Not particularly.” Not when it involved him propping one arm up as though keeping the door shut would give him some kind of advantage.

“I think you’re feeling a whole lot more than you’ve been letting on.”

She crossed her arms, did her best to look bored.

“I think I’ve got you more worked up a minute ago with one kiss than Fabio could have done with a whole night.”

“Full of yourself much?”

“Not really.” He leaned in. “I was just right there with you. For every breath you drew, I took two. Every time you made that needy little whimper in your throat—” he nuzzled her there, “—mine got tighter and tighter.

“And let’s not forget the most telling detail of all. That kiss made you wet, didn’t it? I’ll bet if I slipped my fingers under your dress, your panties would be damp.”

Sorcha closed her eyes. “There’s just one little hole in your theory. I’m not wearing any panties.”

Chapter Eight

She heard rather than saw his jaw clench, and it took a good long minute before he finally drew back.

“Are you trying to provoke me, mate?”

“If by provoke you, you mean pointing out the obvious, then I guess so.”

“It’s been obvious you’re not wearing anything under your dress?”

“I’m sure you would have figured it out by now if you stopped talking long enough to put your hands to better use than holding the door shut.”

His eyes darkened, but he didn’t move.

“If I wanted to leave, I wouldn’t need to use the door. I’m not going anywhere, tiger, and I wouldn’t have left with anyone tonight. Except you,” she admitted, surprised by how true that was. She’d felt more alive in his arms in the middle of a party, surrounded by humans, than she did when hunting down her toughest adversaries.

And if she felt this way now, she could have—would have—before.

Cale snared her wrists and pinned them above her head.

“So now you don’t trust me?”

“It’s not you I’m struggling to trust.” His gaze slid down to the deep V of her dress, then lower. He slowly released her hands. “Leave them there.”

“Or?”

The promise of retribution flashed in his eyes. He gripped her hips, his thumbs idly massaging her.

She bit her lip, the warmth from his touch sinking through the material to heat her skin.

Gathering the hem of her dress between his fingers, Cale tugged it up. He shook his head before she moved her hands an inch. “Don’t.”

“Are you about to play the dominate-male card again?”

A cocky smile curved his mouth. “Are you going to pretend you don’t like it?” Cale didn’t wait for her to answer before he slipped two fingers between her thighs and pushed up and inside her.

The gods help him, she was wet. And hot and tight and he wanted inside her, needed inside her.

Now.

In record time Cale had her dress to her waist and his pants undone. Catching her thigh, he opened her a little more, fitting the head of his cock against her slick center.

They both moaned, and then Sorcha rocked up on the balls of her feet, using the leverage to slide down his shaft.

His eyes nearly rolled back in his head. The sensation damn near short-circuited every last brain cell. Cupping her ass, Cale lifted her up, urging her legs around his waist a moment before he sank deep inside her.

Lust, thick and hot, licked up his spine. This wasn't exactly how he'd imagined the night playing out when he'd arrived, but he doubted it could get any better. Already she was gripping him so sweetly, rocking impatiently, demanding he move with those sultry little whimpers she made.

Buried to the hilt, he pumped his hips, sliding free and driving back into her. The hot walls of her sex closed around him, coaxing him to get as deep and snug as he could.

Sorcha cried out, gripping his shoulders so hard he wondered if her nails had ripped the suit. Not that he cared. He buried his face in her hair, fucking her against the door so hard it rattled.

She arched in his arms, clenched all those slick muscles.

Voices echoed in the hall, but he didn't back off, not even when whoever it was lingered outside the door.

"Don't stop," she murmured against his ear.

As if he could. Certainly not when she put her mouth on his neck and sucked so slow like that.

He slowed the rhythm, sliding soft and easy, so he didn't give them away. Sorcha flexed her hips, changing the angle just a bit. He growled low and deep, widening his stance.

Over and over he plunged his cock inside her, working deeper, faster.

"Cale," Sorcha whimpered, clinging to him even tighter.

Needing her in ways that scared even the cat in him, he nipped her jaw, snaring her attention. He'd been careful not to push her too hard, but tonight she'd pushed him and there was no softening the words he needed to say, no taming the savage instinct to make sure she understood him completely.

"You're my mate, Sorcha. I will not share you. *Ever*."

Eyes dark with need, she silently held his gaze.

"Say it."

She averted her face, her eyes sliding shut.

"Sorcha." He bit her lip, thrust hard inside her. "Say it."

"I can't," she panted.

Already screwing her so slowly, it took the last threads of his concentration to take things down another notch. "Tell me. Tell me you're mine, Sorcha."

The denial came slower this time, softer. "I..."

He sealed his mouth over hers, sliding his tongue inside. If she needed proof he could do this all night, drag out the pleasure, until she admitted to the both of them—

“Cale,” she begged. She squeezed her eyes shut tight. “I...we’re mated. Sweet goddess, I’m yours. Always yours.”

As much as he’d always believed they were incredible together, right then it was even better. Grateful and still a little bit desperate, he ground her harder against the door, getting all the way inside her and rocking fiercely.

Sorcha cried out, her sex clutching every inch of him as she came.

He caught her mouth in a wild kiss that almost matched the frantic finish as his own release roared through him moments later.

It took longer than he expected to catch his breath and lift his head off her shoulder. When he finally managed that much, Sorcha made a small sound of protest, so he didn’t let go of her. He wasn’t ready to anyway, and knowing she felt the same filled him with the kind of contentment he hadn’t felt in decades.

She ran her fingers up his neck and into his hair, and both man and cat reveled in the light caress.

“Like that?”

He let the appreciative rumble that echoed in his chest speak for itself.

She laughed, and his goofy, insanely content smile widened. Gods, he loved the sound of her laughter. Loved her.

Cale leaned in for a quick kiss and ended up dragging it out until he felt himself get aching hard all over again.

Which turned out wasn’t nearly as much of a problem when their surroundings disappeared, both figuratively and literally. Not only were they back in Sorcha’s villa, they were in her bed.

He wasn’t sure if it was the method of travel or just how damn hot his mate was that left him a little dazed.

“It’ll pass in a second,” she whispered against his lips, sensing his disorientation.

He trapped her lip between his, indulging the cat’s need to play. “Do you happen to have a very large, very hot tub by chance?”

She grinned. “Maybe.”

He rolled to his feet, buttoning his pants so he didn’t trip over them, then pulled her after him. His gaze fell to her throat and then lower still to the swell of cleavage.

He twirled his index finger. “Turn around.”

“We should—”

“We shouldn’t do anything, but you should indulge your mate.”

Cale waited for that flash of denial to surface in her eyes, unsure of whether to be wary or relieved when she gave in without argument.

Brushing aside the hair that had fallen loose since he'd dragged her through the crowd, he pressed a soft kiss to the back of her shoulder. That was all it took to almost make him forget why he'd wanted her to turn around in the first place.

He indulged in another taste of her, another moment of drawing in her addictive scent until he forgot about hot tubs and running his hands down her slick skin, then finally reached back and unclasped the pendant Sorchia had given him long ago.

Sorchia shivered from the feather-light kiss, anticipating the next one before Cale's mouth left her skin. She glanced over her shoulder, but his arms were already coming around her.

Something cool brushed her cleavage and she recognized her brother's pendant.

Cale adjusted the thin strap, dropping another delicate kiss at the back of her neck. "It suits you."

She clasped the pendant in her hand and closed her eyes. "I didn't ask for it back." She hadn't asked for anything and yet he seemed to know just what she needed. A smile. A challenge. A kiss.

A piece of their history.

She hadn't wanted to ask for it back in the beginning, assumed she'd take it back when her job was complete. Thinking about it all had become hard, let alone wondering what would have possessed her to have parted with it in the beginning.

"Hey." Cale turned her around.

She ducked her head, but not before she was sure he'd seen the unshed tears in her eyes.

"Shit. I didn't think it would upset you." He wrapped his arms around her. "You'll remember me. When you least expect it, our past will come crashing back."

Of course the cat was just arrogant enough to think this was all about him.

But wasn't it? Wasn't it the whirlwind of emotion he invoked that made her actually *want* to remember him? That made everything so hard? She was drawn to him in ways that defied explanation. He should have been dead by now and yet from the start her instinct had been to get close to him.

Gods, she wanted to be with him, to relearn the ways to decipher his tone of voice, to gauge his moods. Wanted to find out how good he was with a sword and how fast he could run as a cat. Wanted him to teach her to swim and spend mornings tangled up in bed and mussing his hair so she could laugh at his bedhead later.

She wanted...forever.

Something in her heart broke a little. Because as crazy as it was to believe she could fall for someone so fast and hard, she knew it would never work. Not when it meant giving up who she was.

"No."

He frowned. "No what?"

"No, I won't remember." She moved out of reach, digging deep in search of the cool, practical woman she'd never had a problem being before.

"Won't remember, or don't want to?"

"I didn't die, Cale."

He shook his head, confused. "I'm aware of that."

"Then hasn't it crossed your mind that maybe I gave you my pendant for a reason. That maybe I knew I wasn't coming back."

Not until the words left her mouth did the truth of that sink in. She'd felt this way before and doubtlessly came to the same harsh conclusion. If he hadn't been a target when they'd crossed paths before she would have been able to lie to herself for a while. Tried to have the best of both worlds, loyal to both her mate and Rhiannon.

Until the time of her next cleanse had drawn closer.

"Slow down a second," he growled. "What do you mean, maybe you knew you weren't coming back?"

She shook her head. "It doesn't matter."

He caught her arm when she tried turning away. "The hell it doesn't."

The confusion on his face reminded her of the night she'd gone after him in the park. He'd been just as confused that night. Stunned.

Happy.

She'd remember that the most. The way he'd looked at her like she was the only thing that mattered.

Tears burned behind her eyes for the second time in a matter of minutes.

"Talk to me."

"There's no point." She touched his face, sweeping her thumb across his cheek.

"Sorcha?"

For the first time she saw fear in his eyes. Not once, not even with an arrow buried in his leg and her coming at him with her sword, had he looked nervous.

Rocking up, she brushed her lips across his, wishing they were still back at the party, before things had fallen apart so completely.

Cale groaned softly, pulling her against him, kissing her back with no restraint. Unchecked, untamed. As though the cat knew what was coming and struggled to hold on to her.

She ran her lips across his one more time, a slow soft slide that ripped her up inside, and then she backed up. "Good-bye Cale."

"Just wait a damn minute."

Running out of time, she shook her head. "We can't be together."

"We were together. We *are* together."

“No, we’re not.” She swallowed past the ache in her throat. “Don’t you get it? I’ll do it again.”

“Do what? You’re not making any sense.”

“I didn’t choose you.” No matter how alive he made her feel, how cared for, protected, needed. She had turned her back on all of it.

“You think how we feel about each other is a completely conscious choice? That it’s not also about recognizing something in each other and knowing we just fit. That we belong.”

“It’s not enough.”

“Bullshit. Just—” he ran his hands through his hair, “—just try making sense. You know I’m right.”

The desperate need to stop from losing any more of herself to him churned in her stomach. “I knew you’d be like this. Even then, I knew you’d pull this fated crap, didn’t I?”

His eyes narrowed, more lethal feline than flesh and blood man. “So we’ve moved from you denying our bond to calling it crap? We’re mated, Sorcha. You let me claim you, asked me to.”

“No.”

He stepped up behind her, ran his thumb along the back of her shoulder, close to her neck. “Right here. You might not see the mark, but it’s there.” He turned her around. “The same way I carry your mark here.” He placed her hand over his heart.

She shook her head, determined not to let the cracks guarding her heart splinter into a thousand pieces.

“What is it that makes you so damn sure I’m wrong?”

For once she didn’t have to lie to him or herself. “Because if we were really meant to be, I wouldn’t have to choose.”

“Choose what?”

“Between being me and being with you. You didn’t see me die, Cale. I doubt I was even in any real danger.” It was the only thing that made sense. “I wanted you to think I was dead.”

Confusion gave way to disbelief until her words finally penetrated. “You what?” His hand fell away from her.

She should have been relieved but instead she had to force herself not to reach out and... And what, apologize? Ask him to forgive her? What would be the point? It wouldn’t do either of them any good. It wouldn’t take away the hurt clamping down on her chest, threatening to cut her in two. Wouldn’t ease the pain she saw in his eyes.

They couldn’t go back and they couldn’t go forward. Not together.

She took another step back. He didn’t reach for her this time.

It hurt to look at him and see the betrayal on his face knowing she’d caused it. She inflicted pain and death on countless immortals who’d crossed the line, but not once had she felt even a shred of the guilt twisting her stomach inside out now.

Damn him for making her feel this way. For making her want to be with him.

Damn her for knowing better.

“Watch your back.” She meant it only as a warning if Rhiannon sent someone for him.

“Is that a threat, huntress?” The anger in his voice was sharper than any weapon.

“No.” She couldn’t explain beyond that, not when his gaze had turned accusing.

“Sorcha.” The low growl carried just enough warning to make the next part a little easier.

Without another word, she flashed far away from her home.

Away from Cale.

“Who died?” Nessa asked, half joking, when Sorcha appeared in her friend’s Manhattan apartment.

She’d taken the chance Nessa would be home, needing to know the truth. “Tell me.”

Nessa sobered, her earlier humor quickly fading.

“I want to know.”

The other huntress straightened. “Why now?”

It took her three tries to get it out. “I let him think I was dead, didn’t I? I set the whole thing up.

Nessa, please,” she added when there was no response.

Her friend sighed. “You should have just let me cut off his hand and been done with it.” She crossed her arms. “You made me promise not to tell you.”

“Extenuating circumstances.”

“Now or then?”

Sorcha shrugged. “Both.”

Resigned, Nessa searched her face carefully. “You were crazy about him, though you kept your relationship with him even a secret from me for a while.”

“Did I love him?”

“You don’t need me to answer that,” her friend said softly.

No, but it kept her from asking herself when facing the answer only made what she’d done so much harder to understand. “He wanted me.”

“Cats are possessive that way.”

“It’s more than that.” Feeling unusually contained by the surrounding walls, she started pacing, stopped. “He really thinks we belong together. At least that’s what he thought before hating me.”

Nessa frowned. “Wait. Hate you? Since when?”

“I chose to remain a huntress over sacrificing my abilities for a future with him.” She glanced at Nessa, half expecting to find a *well, duh* look on her face.

Instead she found only concern mirrored in her friend’s eyes. “And you told him that?”

“Am I wrong?”

“No. Your last cleanse was only a couple of months away. You knew he wouldn’t willingly give you up, would have pursued you no matter what. You didn’t think it was fair to either of you.”

“I was afraid Rhiannon would kill him for interfering,” she guessed.

Nessa shook her head. “No. You were afraid he would eventually make you change your mind.”

“But letting him think I was dead?” The idea that she could do that to him pushed her back to pacing from one end of the room to the other. “If you would have seen the look on his face tonight.” She closed her eyes, afraid to think about what she must have been feeling to make such an incredibly desperate and selfish decision.

Gods, how could she have done that to him?

“I should have talked you out of it. I had a Fae who owed me a favor and created the glamour.”

“Guess that explains why he thought a wraith severed my head and kicked me into the fire pits.” For a moment Sorcha put herself in his shoes, imagined him dying right in front of her.

“Where is Cale now?”

Once more Sorcha sank into the closest chair. “My place. I told him it wouldn’t work between us.”

“Before or after you told him about faking your death?”

“Before I think.” She rubbed at the vicious ache at the back of her neck. “Maybe during, I don’t know. He must hate me.”

“Isn’t that a good thing? If he hates you, he won’t try to pursue you. That is what you want, right?” There wasn’t time to answer before Nessa cursed. “Shit, you fell for him all over again, didn’t you?”

Though she knew the truth, she had to voice the doubts. “How could I? We haven’t been together long, and I’ve spent almost half that time trying to kill him or talk him into handing the dagger over.”

“Just because you don’t have any memories of him, doesn’t mean your heart has forgotten him.”

She arched a brow at her friend’s uncharacteristic romantic sentiment.

Nessa shrugged. “Blame Sybil. She’s got me hooked on these books...” She waved off the rest of whatever she’d been about to say. “That’s not important. What are you going to do now?”

“The only thing I can.” The only thing she knew how to do. “My job.”

Hours. Hours without a fucking word from her. Cale didn’t know whether to be relieved or furious.

Furious, he decided. At least whenever the cold ache in his chest let him feel anything at all. She’d lied to him, deceived him intentionally. The only thing worse than Sorcha dropping that bomb on him was her vanishing without filling in the rest of the blanks. And there were a lot of them.

Like why? Had she hated the idea of being with him so much she’d gone so far as to fake her death?

The vise stretched across his lungs clamped down a little harder.

Hell. He rubbed the heels of his hands against his eyes. It wasn't nearly enough to counteract the drilling pressure at his temples.

Angry and exhausted after prowling from one end of her house to the other, he dropped back on the edge of the bed.

There hadn't been a single thing on his mind earlier than getting his mate spectacularly naked, and in such a short space of time they'd done a complete one-eighty. He tried again to fully exhale, expecting some of the weight on his chest to ease, but in the seven hours and twelve fucking minutes she'd been gone, the sensation had only gotten worse.

She wasn't coming back.

The cat raked at the edge of his mind, more upset by that than the truth the man continued to grapple with. For eighty years she'd lied to him, let him think he'd lost her.

Damn, his head hurt.

She wasn't coming back. He'd seen it in her eyes in those last few seconds. Still he hadn't left, hoping, despite the fury keeping his blood pumping fast and hot that she'd realize...what?

He lay back on the bed, surrounded instantly by her unique scent. He fought the urge to roll and press his face into the blanket to breathe it in. How could she have done it to him, let him mourn her, ache for her?

And how could she have lied about getting her memory back? Or maybe it hadn't been gone at all. Maybe she'd played him from the start to get the dagger.

The cat snarled at the possibility.

"At least the place is still intact."

Cale cracked open one eye when he heard Nessa's voice. Part of him hoped she'd see him lying there as a disadvantage and make a move to attack him. He was looking for a fight just bad enough that the fact she was a huntress seemed more like a perk than a drawback.

Unfortunately she didn't move further than a few inches past the door.

Sitting up, he let the cat push as close to the surface as he dared, hoping it might provoke her.

Nessa rolled her eyes. "That's it? At least show me some of those sharp teeth if you expect me to even pretend to be worried."

She ran her gaze top to bottom, not even attempting to mask her horror. "Next time I hook you up with a suit like that, at least change before lying around like it's jeans and a wifebeater."

"If you're not here to tell me where she is, then you and I have nothing to say to each other."

Her eyes darkened. "Just because I'm not here to kill you, doesn't mean I'll listen to your crap."

He cocked his head. "What's stopping you?"

"Not you or any one of your little bitty claws, gargoyle. I would have killed you long ago if I thought it would spare Sorcha—"

“Spare Sorcha?” He laughed, the sound icy, bitter. “From what? The inconvenience of dealing with me?”

She gave him a bored look.

“Where is she?”

“She doesn’t have anything to say to you.”

“That’s too damn bad.”

“For you, yes.” Nessa held her ground when he pushed to his feet and stalked toward her.

“Is acting part of your huntress training or do you all come by it naturally?” He circled her. “Maybe it’s even a quality Rhiannon looks for when recruiting.”

“That’s right, I’m acting. Your big bad pussy cat impression is actually making me tremble in my boots.”

“Was Sorcha?”

“Trembling?” She shrugged. “You were the one who got frisky with her at the party.”

“Acting,” he corrected. “Or has it only been since she got her memory back?”

“Whoa. Back the litter box up, cat. Sorcha doesn’t have her memory back. She never will.” Her expression was almost sympathetic. “That’s part of the deal we make. Our memories are wiped every hundred years.”

“How convenient for all of you.”

“Convenient would be killing you now. You have one week to use the dagger to free your brother and then she’ll be coming for it.”

“And if I don’t hand it over?”

“She’ll kill you.”

Chapter Nine

“Let me get this straight,” Tristan began, leaning against the bar. Pendragon’s was empty, still closed for cleaning after the sprinkler incident. “We have a week to find the sorceress, who may or may not be in this realm, get the dagger from your super-secret hiding spot and free Cian before your amnesiac mate comes to kill you?”

Cale glanced at the empty shot glass in his hand, wishing that last one had burned as much as the others. “That about sums it up.”

He reached for the bottle he’d been drinking from since Nessa had delivered him to the bar an hour ago. He hadn’t quite figured out why she’d bothered. It would have slowed him down considerably if he’d needed to find his own way home from Sorcha’s.

Cale met resistance and noticed Tristan’s hand on the bottle.

“Is now really the time to drink yourself into oblivion?”

He glared at his brother. Tristan’s eyes narrowed in turn.

A predatory grin caught Cale’s mouth as he waited, daring his brother to give him an excuse.

“I think we could all use a drink.” Their sister, Briana, took the bottle and filled four shot glasses.

Kennedy stood quietly behind her. He’d hired the bartender because she knew how to hold her own, never afraid to speak her mind. Yet tonight she said nothing. Considering the sympathy he read in her eyes, maybe that wasn’t such a bad thing.

Cale moved a few feet from the bar, taking his shot with him. He lifted the glass to his lips, then pivoted and fired it across the room.

Fuck. He gripped the edge of the chair in front of him, breathing through his nose. The need to shift rippled under his skin, a fiery current with no way to discharge.

“What aren’t you telling us?” Briana had moved closer but made no attempt to touch him, as though she knew he was struggling to contain the animal that only wanted Sorcha.

The man wasn’t faring much better at curbing that urge. Except he wasn’t sure how he’d handle a face-to-face meeting when her betrayal had cut open old wounds. By the gods, he’d mourned for her, for decades, and it was all a lie.

Briana touched his shoulder, but instead of lashing out, he dropped his head and closed his eyes.

“It’ll work out.”

Would it really? He wanted to ask but knew his sister didn’t have any more answers than he did.

He loosened his grip on the chair, and sensing he wasn't in danger of throwing it and trashing the place, Briana rubbed his back a moment longer.

"We'll find the sorceress. You get the dagger."

"Nate and I—"

"Shouldn't have been tracking her alone in the first place," Tristan interrupted. His brother made it clear he wasn't happy he'd been left out of the loop on that one, even if he'd been preoccupied with his own mate at the time.

"Does she know who's looking for her?" Kennedy asked.

"I don't know. Nate and I were careful but by now..." Cale shrugged.

Kennedy finally spoke. "I could ask—"

Tristan growled. "Don't say it."

"Dolan for help," she finished.

Tristan sighed, and Cale recalled the numerous times his brother and the Fae regular had nearly come to blows.

"If he can help, then yes." Briana glared at Tristan when he started to protest. "Fae or not, we need the help. No offense," she added for Kennedy's benefit.

"None taken."

Cale just shook his head. Later he'd have to ask exactly what he'd missed when he'd gone looking for Sorcha in Avalon.

Trying and failing to be subtle, Briana returned the bottle to the shelf behind the bar. "Will it take long to get the dagger?"

That was definitely the question of the hour. Until a few moments ago, he'd been so focused on what had happened with Sorcha, he hadn't stopped to consider the dagger.

"What?" Briana asked. "There's a problem, isn't there?"

"I hid the dagger at Sorcha's lair in Avalon."

Tristan exploded. "Are you crazy? She's been after the dagger from the start."

"Which made it the perfect place to hide it at the time." Now, not so much.

"And what if she'd killed you? We wouldn't have known where it was."

"She wouldn't have." The defense of his mate was instinctive even as he knew he deserved the fury in Tristan's voice. If he'd been wrong, he could have cost their brother his freedom.

"What about now?" Tristan challenged. "Because it sounds to me like you're next on her hit list."

According to Nessa anyway. But as much as Sorcha faking her death had stunned him, he struggled to understand how the woman who had come undone so completely in his arms was now planning to run him through with a sword. Then again, he would never have imagined the mate he'd argued with as

passionately as he took her in bed, the mate he'd cherished—*loved*—would have been capable of betraying him.

Tristan crossed his arms. "How do you know she won't be there waiting for you?"

"Because she'd have to know that if I went looking for her, that's one of the first places I'd check."

"Unless she's counting on that." Tristan shook his head. "You can't go alone."

"If I don't go alone and she's there, she'll take it as a threat." He released the breath that lodged in his lungs at the thought of coming across her at all. "Besides, you need to find the sorceress."

Whatever Tristan had wanted to add, he changed his mind and headed for the office. Kennedy offered Cale an encouraging smile then trailed after her mate, leaving him alone with Briana.

"Do you think I'm as suicidal as he does?"

His sister shook her head, her dark hair pulled back in her usual French braid. Of his three siblings, he'd always been most protective of her, and at the same time he knew she could be more deadly than either Tristan or Cian.

Her tracking skills were certainly superior. He'd been crazy not to seek out her help before, but there hadn't been time once he and Nate had caught the sorceress's trail.

"Where's your pendant?"

Not until Briana nodded at his chest did he realize he'd begun to adjust the strap out of habit.

"Sorcha has it."

"Did that happen before or after she went all Grim Reaper on you?"

"Before." He let out a breath. "She set it up, Briana. Her death. It wasn't real."

She was silent for a moment, then, "Why?"

"She didn't offer much of an explanation." Frustration swept through him in another choking wave, and he found himself telling Briana more than he'd planned, starting with Sorcha's revelation and everything Nessa had said about their memories being wiped.

"What are you going to do?"

"I don't know." He hadn't come close to figuring that part out. "Nothing if she had her way." That was the only thing he felt remotely confident about.

"You sure about that?"

At least he *had* been confident about that. "She decided for the two of us that things needed to end. No discussion, no warning." Not even a fucking hint.

"Then why give you her pendant? Why not sever all ties?"

"Maybe she wanted me to suffer even after she was gone?" She faked her death at least suspecting it would crush him. Doubtful she would have lost any sleep over leaving the pendant behind.

"Or," Briana suggested, "it wasn't meant for you, but for her. So if your paths ever crossed again, she'd know you meant something to her."

Cale.

Sorcha turned, feeling his presence as though he stood directly behind her. She scanned the interior of her lair. How was it she'd gone so long oblivious to him and was now so finely attuned to him, she felt him even when he wasn't there?

Already here and gone, she decided. Recently.

Why? Had he come to fight her, or to fight for her? The thick tangling in her stomach made it impossible to tell which she feared most.

Drawn by a few cushions tossed aside in the room, her gaze turned critical. Next to the cushions, the second shelf of sturdy, bound volumes had been disturbed. A stack sat on the floor instead of tucked in with the others.

She crouched for closer inspection, wondering what her cat had been looking for. The books themselves were little more than exaggerated retellings of Rhiannon's huntresses. Nothing of much interest to a gargoyle, and yet he'd moved them.

A piece of paper jutted from the pages of one of the volumes, and she tugged it free.

Instead of reading the old language, she stared down at the English handwriting.

"Thanks for keeping it safe," she read aloud.

Unbelievable.

The dagger had been here the whole time? Her gaze fell to the post script at the bottom. "You'll have to kill me for it."

Did he provoke her intentionally to see if she was bluffing, or did he want to confront her? He could have retrieved the dagger and left without the note. Instead he wanted her to know how close she'd been to it.

She pushed to her feet. If the cat wanted to push buttons, she had no problem pushing back.

"Is the gargoyle dead?"

It took everything inside Sorcha not to react to Sybil's unexpected appearance. She was so focused on Cale, she wasn't paying attention to anything else.

"You forgot to knock." Sorcha glanced over her shoulder at the lanky redhead as though she hadn't been taken by surprise.

"Rhiannon is done waiting, Sorcha."

Which probably explained why Sybil was armed.

"If you're too busy—" she nodded to the book, "—reading, I'll handle it."

"I've got it under control." The lie rolled easily off her tongue. Surprisingly easy when she'd had never before felt so far off her game.

Sybil looked about as convinced of that as Sorchia felt. “I’m to back you up if you’re ready to finish this.”

That rattled her more than Cale’s break and enter. “Rhiannon doesn’t trust me?”

“It’s the gargoyle she doesn’t trust. And his hold on you.”

“I don’t need help.” Not the kind Sybil was offering.

Though exactly what she did need escaped her. Giving Cale the ultimatum certainly hadn’t accomplished anything. Instead of cementing her resolve to do what Rhiannon demanded, she’d spent nearly every moment of their separation wondering where he was, what he was doing, if he hated her.

That ate at her almost as much as knowing she’d hurt him. But no matter how much she ached to be with him, to make it up to him for as long as it took, telling him the truth had been the right call.

Too bad the invisible fist squeezing her heart wasn’t buying it. *She* barely was, and it was only thinking about the brief life they’d have if she turned her back on Rhiannon that kept her focused. Stripped of her powers, her mortal life would pass in a blink with her growing old and sick while he stayed young and strong. Immortal.

As much as she craved being with him, it would only hurt more to put off the inevitable. And if she couldn’t find a way to compartmentalize the feelings he’d awakened, she only had to hold on until her next cleanse and the memories of him would be wiped out.

“I won’t interfere,” Sybil insisted. “The cat’s head is yours.”

Gee thanks, perched on Sorchia’s tongue, trapped there by the lack of oxygen.

No one was touching Cale’s head, unless it was her and involved running her fingers through his hair.

Yeah, that ultimatum had accomplished a lot.

Sorchia shrugged. “Fine. I’ve got to get some things together. Meet me outside his place in an hour and you can see for yourself I’m taking care of it.”

Sybil hesitated. They might tease the other huntress about not being the sharpest sword in the armory, but tonight Sybil wasn’t nearly as slow to catch on as Sorchia preferred.

Still, Sybil nodded and vanished.

Just what she needed, another headache. Arming herself, Sorchia flashed to the closest portal, and instead of waiting crossed the veil immediately.

Focusing, she concentrated on Cale’s location and found herself in Pendragon’s. She stood on the cat walk above the dance floor. Close by, a murmured voice went quiet and she heard what sounded like a cell phone snapping shut.

She turned, moving toward the open doorway.

Inside, Cale stood with his back to her in the middle of the room. One glance at his stiff shoulders, planted feet and one clenched fist and it was clear he knew she was there.

“I suppose you’re armed,” he drawled.

She grasped the hilt of her sword a little tighter.

"I'll presume that's a yes." Keeping his back to her as though she wasn't a threat, he moved to the small bar in the corner and poured himself a drink.

"I'm only going to ask once, Cale."

He took a leisurely sip. "I thought I was clear in my note." He said note like it was an inner-office memo letting her know the coffee maker was busted.

Cale set the glass down, his fingers lingering before a gentle push slid it away from him.

Just that fast she realized he wasn't dismissing her as threat at all. It was anger that kept his movements slow, controlled.

Was the cat so very close to the surface, ready to go for her jugular for betraying him? *Apparently*, she decided when he finally turned and his eyes were practically rabid.

"What happened to giving me a week?"

"You have no intention of handing it over at all so there's really no point in waiting."

"Fair enough."

She nearly gaped. Fair? What the hell was wrong with him? There was nothing fair about any of this. Not since he'd stood opposite her in the park, looking at her like she was a ghost.

Although that had to be preferable to the angry resignation on his face right now. It wasn't supposed to have turned out this way. He was supposed to use the damn dagger and hand it over, and if he was lucky, escape his death sentence, though how she hadn't worked out yet.

But no. He had to force her hand by refusing to give it to her at all. And now she had Sybil breathing down her neck. She'd been avoiding Rhiannon for so long, it shouldn't have surprised her that another huntress had been dispatched to assist.

"That's it then."

"Is it?" He took one purposeful step toward her. "Is it so easy to be the cold-hearted huntress again?"

Cold-hearted? Not judging by the heated rush that pushed into her bloodstream with every move that brought him closer. There was no mistaking the predatory gleam in his eyes or the way he looked ready to strike at any moment.

"Or," he continued, "was I a fool to believe you felt anything at all?"

She shook her head, willing herself to move, to react, something to stop him from getting closer. Her limbs refused to cooperate, her sword remaining lowered instead of blocking his access to her.

"So which is it?" he pressed, only inches separating them now. "Am I a fool or is it just that easy to pretend you feel nothing?"

Sensing his intention, she jerked her arm up, but not fast enough. He caught her wrist, his fingers closing around her skin, and everything inside her went still.

His hold lasted only a second, but that was all it took for their gazes to lock. Even if she'd had more time, she wouldn't have been able to mask how much his touch undid her on every level.

Surprise flashed across his face, followed by an arrogant satisfaction only the cat was capable of.

He knew.

The gods help her, he knew.

Just as she knew a moment later that they were no longer alone.

If she hadn't anticipated Sybil catching up with her, she might not have sensed the other huntress. It took Cale another few seconds to notice her outside the door.

"Job shadowing day?" he inquired, his voice cold and empty.

That should have made it easier to do what needed to be done. So why then did it feel like she was fighting everything inside her when she drew back and punched him.

Cale growled, catching his balance quickly.

"I didn't come here to play, tiger."

He drew his thumb across the blood from his split lip. "The dagger, right?" Wary now, he moved to counter the direction she circled. "Do you always whore yourself out to get what you want, or am I just special?"

Even if she deserved his anger, the words stung, and she lashed out, slashing down with her sword to catch him across his thigh.

Little more than a scratch, yet his gaze turned lethal. "You really want to do this."

She needed to do this, at least for Sybil's benefit, but she kept that to herself.

Snarling, he lunged and she flashed directly behind him, knocking his feet out from beneath him.

Like before, he recovered quickly, reaching back to catch her ankle.

Stumbling, Sorcha slammed into the desk. She had barely straightened when he tackled her, taking them both to the floor. Too easily she jammed her foot against his ribs, and pushed, flipping him over her head.

Somehow she managed not to wince when he crashed into the bar. Bottles shattered on impact, raining glass and alcohol across the floor.

He was bleeding in a couple more places when he got back on his feet.

"Stop fighting it." It was clear the cat wanted out. Cale's eyes were entirely feline, his teeth sharper looking, his claws out.

"So I should make it easy for you to kill me?" He shook his head. "If you want me dead, huntress, you'll have to look me in the eye when you do it."

"Don't make this harder than it needs to be."

"On who?" Glass crunched under his feet. "Unless you grew a conscience between your *death* and today?" Judging by his tone there was a bigger chance of an asteroid striking Earth.

“Hardly.” She lunged for his right side and when he snarled and moved to block, she flashed to his left, catching him again with her sword.

He hissed, his claws raking her shoulder in retaliation. She kicked out, dodging the next swing of his fist. He staggered under the force of her return attack, but stayed on his feet.

Even angry and bleeding, his clothing ripped, he was the best thing she’d ever laid eyes on. The best thing that had ever happened to her, and she was only hurting him more.

She didn’t know whether to be grateful or frustrated that Sybil’s presence kept her from tossing her sword aside and wrapping her arms around him.

“You never gave me a choice,” he snapped, a thread of hurt buried beneath the anger. “You could have said something. We could have figured it out.”

“What’s done is done.”

“Fuck that! You decided without giving me a say. What gave you the right to make that call? If you knew what losing you nearly did to me...” He broke off, his laugh chilling her to the bone. “You can’t even remember if you felt the least bit guilty, can you?”

Worried Sybil would realize there was more to her and Cale’s relationship than just their recent confrontation, she struck out, catching him in the chest.

She deliberately herded him away from the door and lowered her voice. “You know, tiger, even cubs know when to shut up.”

Oblivious to how much he risked exposing everything, he pressed on. “But you know the one thing that doesn’t add up?” He cringed when the next swing of her sword caught his shoulder. “Why not keep your pendant? Why leave it behind? Or did you just want history to repeat itself?”

She faltered, the significance of that hitting her nearly as hard as he did when he followed the comment with a blow that knocked her off her feet. She would have known that in leaving it behind, she risked recognizing it if they ever met again.

Had she hoped it would be different the next time around, that she’d find a way to have a future with him?

Sorcha wasn’t sure who to be the most disappointed with. Her past self for hoping for the impossible or her present self for failing to find a way to make it happen.

But that wasn’t what she said when she planted her hands on the floor and pushed off, using the momentum to spring back to her feet.

“I actually try to learn from my mistakes.” She said it loud, needing Sybil paying attention to her and not Cale.

Another trickle of awareness rolled down her spine. Nessa.

The other huntress leaned in the doorway. “Damn, if I’d known I was going to find a show, I’d have brought nachos and beer or something.”

Cale snarled at Sorch, ignoring the other two. "So killing is a spectator sport for you people?"

This time when they met, Sorch twisted around to throw him, making sure he hit the wall hard enough to keep him down a little longer this time.

"It's under control."

Nessa's expression revealed only disinterest when she nodded to Sybil. "She's just gonna play with him now." She yawned. "Since I've got a serious craving for nachos all of a sudden, how about we hit that pub you're always raving about? Sorch's got this."

Sybil slowly nodded, though Sorch wasn't sure if it was because she was buying it, or simply wasn't about to push her to finish it then with Nessa there. Dissension in the ranks wasn't any more acceptable to Rhiannon than failing to complete an assignment.

By the time Cale started moving, the other two had vanished. Sorch swore to herself she would never again complain about Nessa's habit of popping in at the most unexpected moments.

Relief spread through Sorch, dulling her response time when Cale caught her ankle and yanked.

She landed hard on her back, pain flaring across her skull when her head hit. Cale was on her in a heartbeat, his grip on her arms crushing.

"Cale," she tried, but didn't get any further before his head slammed into hers, dazing her further. "Wait," she managed, getting one arm up and punching him in the side.

He flinched and his weight shifted, giving her just enough wiggle room to knock him off.

She scrambled to her feet, wincing at the pain that took a few moments to shake off. "I knew you were hard-headed." She rubbed her head. "But shit that hurt."

Cale didn't say anything and came at her again. The broken glass sabotaged both their footing, and they went down hard. He landed on top of her, his hand on her throat.

Neither of them moved, their breaths coming fast and hard.

"I'm not cold-hearted," she whispered. "And you're not an idiot, except for the last minute, maybe."

His expression betrayed nothing.

She searched his eyes for the man beneath the animal. "I'm sorry." She brought her hand up over his, but made no attempt to rip it away. "For everything."

"Don't," he growled.

"Sorry for my choice, for what it did to you, for how I left things the other day. I'm sorry for all of it."

He rested his forehead against hers. "Don't."

"Sorry." She tipped her face up, grazed his lips. "So, so sorry."

A rumble echoed in his chest, and she slowly opened her mouth over his, wishing an apology could even put a dent in the pain she'd caused him. Even if she could convince herself that she'd made the best decision at the time, it had hurt him more than she could stand to think about.

One soft kiss wasn't nearly enough to prove just how sorry she was, but it became harder and harder to focus when he kissed her back, his lips sliding across hers.

His hand moved up from her throat to her nape as the kiss turned brutally possessive. She didn't object when he sought to dominate her mouth, to punish her, to drive her out of her ever-loving mind.

Without warning, he broke away, putting a few feet between them before she'd even peeled her eyes open.

"I am an idiot. I just don't know if it's for believing nothing else mattered but our bond, or wanting to believe you now."

Sorcha pushed herself up, the cuts on her hand from the glass already starting to heal. "It was just for show."

He continued to watch her warily.

"They...Sybil..." She sighed. "I needed to show them..." Drained, she broke off. There really was no winning was there?

Regaining her feet, she crossed the room and picked up the sword she'd let go of at some point. Probably the moment he'd pinned her and she'd felt that explosive hunger tear through her.

"Drop it," Cale growled.

She arched a brow.

"Drop the sword, Sorcha." On his feet, he stood opposite her waiting, his arms crossed. There wasn't any warmth on his face, anything playful in his tone.

If he was trying to test her, expecting her to fight him on everything, all the time, he was in for some disappointment. She didn't hesitate, letting her sword hit the floor with a dull clank.

She'd come to depend on her weapons to keep her safe, strong. But with Cale she felt stronger, more powerful when it was just the two of them.

Nothing on his face betrayed his satisfaction that she'd obeyed him. "Your knife too."

Holding his gaze, she propped her foot on the edge of the couch they'd toppled over at some point, and drew out the blade tucked in her boot. "Feel better now?"

"Take off your boots."

"Worried I'm going to stab you with the heels?"

He only stared at her until she complied, keeping away from the broken glass once her bare feet rested on the floor.

"Pants too."

"It won't change anything, Cale." Fighting their attraction might be an exercise in futility, giving in might prove she didn't need to hide behind objects and agendas where he was concerned, but it wouldn't erase the obstacles between them and building a life together.

"Take. Them. Off."

She unsnapped her pants, worked them down over her hips.

Cale's heated gaze slid appreciatively down her body, pausing on the simple lace underwear. Letting his arms fall back to his sides, he approached her. Unlike before, it wasn't a threatening prowling, but the stealthy stalking of a hungry and skilled hunter.

He circled behind her. His lips brushed her ear. "Your shirt."

The seductive order made her nipples hard, and she bit her lip when he brushed past her front, sending fiery currents racing across her skin. The hot ache building between her thighs jacked her internal temperature all the way up. Or maybe that was him. A steady warmth radiated between them, and she shifted closer.

"Are you purposely taking your time or do you need help?" He slipped his hand under her shirt and cupped her breast. His thumb teased her nipple, rubbing gently through her bra.

"No," she managed, catching the hem of her shirt and pulling it over her head. The least amount of fabric between his hand and her skin the better.

For a moment, she thought he was disappointed, then his gaze trailed down her throat, pausing on the swell of cleavage pushing against her bra.

He nipped her shoulder, then moved lower, covering the space between her neck and her breasts with slow sweeps of his tongue and teeth. His fingers traced the edge of her bra, dipping inside to torture her.

Finally, he bent and closed his lips over her, sucking hard. A whimper slid up her throat, trapped there as he tugged until she came free of his mouth, then laved the hard tip.

Overwhelmed by the intensity, she backed up. He didn't give her much space, sticking with her, thigh to thigh, chest to chest.

She sank her fingers into his hair, tugging when he pressed her against the end of the couch. The lopsided furniture didn't stop him from sliding his hands down to cup her ass beneath the elastic on her panties.

He pulled her up on her toes, grinding his shaft into her until they both moaned.

Sliding a hand between them, she worked his zipper down, slipped her hand inside. His sharp intake of breath only fueled the arousal simmering under her skin. She met and held his gaze, watching his eyes snap shut when she molded her palm to his cock, pumping softly.

More than anything, she hungered to push him to the edge, to watch his eyes go wild when his control slipped beyond his reach.

He didn't look away from her when she dropped to her knees in front of him and ran her tongue across the plump head, but the fierce sound he made in his throat was pure, satisfied male.

Wrapping her fingers around him, she traced him from base to tip, then greedily pulled him into her mouth.

Chapter Ten

Sweet Avalon.

The woman was going to take him out at the knees. The ones locked in place and keeping him agonizingly still as she licked her way up his cock.

“Sorcha,” he breathed, burying his hands in her hair, twisting his fingers deeper as she pulled him harder between her lips.

Then he was moving with her, sinking into her mouth in short, smooth digs. Cale grit his teeth, thrusting just hard enough to satisfy the need rising inside him like a tidal wave, a need that only intensified as Sorcha traced the edges of his shaft with light, teasing strokes of her tongue.

All at once, her lips closed around him, and she sucked deeply. By the third—maybe fifth, tenth?—repetition, he was rocking his hips along with her, sliding into her mouth and cursing under his breath every time she stopped and started over.

Soft lips, hot tongue, slow suck.

He didn’t have a clue how much she expected him to take. He only knew he was torn between making her stop so he could think for a minute, and begging her to drag out the pleasure as long as she could.

Suddenly desperate to be inside her, he pulled away, hooking an arm around her waist and turning her around as he sank down behind her.

On her hands and knees, Sorcha pushed back, brushing her ass against him. Slipping his hand between her legs and finding her already damp, he pushed two fingers inside her.

His mate’s soft moan, combined with knowing she enjoyed his touch, welcomed it, soothed both man and cat in ways he didn’t think possible since she’d left him. He was no closer to understanding the choices she’d made or the ones she continued to try to make without him, but somewhere between his talk with Briana and his mate’s appearance tonight, he knew that whatever happened, they’d deal with it together.

Gripping her hips, Cale fit his cock against her, inching inside just a little, then thrusting hard. Sorcha sucked in a deep breath, and arched her spine, sinking back on him before he could push inside her again.

Giving in to his animal nature, he pumped his hips, filling her up, and losing himself inside her. The rhythm was frantic, his need consuming him in slow degrees, creeping over his skin, the way she’d crept back into his heart as though he’d never lost her.

Sorcha looked back over her shoulder, watching him. Desire burned in her eyes. Locked inside her, he leaned down, catching her chin in his hand and taking sweet possession of her mouth.

Damn, but he needed to see more of her.

Growling, he flipped her over on her back, snaring one plump nipple between his lips. He tongued the tight nub, circling it before pulling her into his mouth.

“Cale!” She planted her heels and flexed her hips, brushing her slick center along the side of his cock.

All at once he surged forward, sliding deep.

Unbelievably perfect.

Cale didn’t move for a long moment, gazing down at her. He didn’t care that she couldn’t remember their past. It didn’t seem nearly as important as right now, as finding a way to be together.

Sorcha cried out again, her breathy little whimpers coming faster, closer together, melting with his own ragged moans until he couldn’t tell where her sounds of pleasure began and his ended. Her nails raked his back, her body moving to meet his, her sex so slick and tight.

Every thrust he made inched them farther across the floor. His office was half destroyed. Hell, the world could be falling down around their heads, and he wouldn’t have given up one moment that he spent watching the pleasure race across her face.

“Cale,” she breathed. The velvet-edged plea struck both man and animal in the heart, and he bent to capture her lips.

The kiss was slow, their bodies instinctively easing down to match the drugging pace. Although barely plunging inside her, he knew the moment he hit all the right places.

She locked her legs around his waist, tipping up.

“I...” She thrashed around, trying to get away from him one second and clinging to him the next.

“I know.” Eyes squeezed shut, he felt their connection—their bond—in the deepest places, where she was and would always be a part of him. No matter their past, no matter their future.

“I love you,” she whispered against his lips, her tongue sliding inside to stroke his. She lifted her ass, and he knew the second he was losing any ability to speak, think or even breathe.

His need for her trumped everything else.

Spurred by the need to give his mate everything, he rocked them both, fucking her harder. Faster, and faster.

She moaned loud and long against his lips, her sex clenching him tight as she came. Her release triggered his own, the deep waves of it ripping down his spine as he continued to thrust inside her until he had nothing left.

Spent, he collapsed next her and pulled her close. He wasn’t sure how long they laid there, limbs roped around each other, their hearts slowly calming.

“How did we meet?”

He waited until she finally looked at him, sensing she was as afraid as he was of knowing it wouldn’t live up to her expectations. “You were fishing actually.”

Her frown melted away, a smile playing at her lips. “What?”

“Well, that’s what you always insisted anyway.” Even with his office ripped apart and the two of them lying on the hard floor, Cale was more content than he’d been in decades.

Sorcha rolled to her stomach, rested her chin on his chest. “At the lagoon?”

Cale nodded.

“I don’t swim, but I fish?” Her skeptical expression was laced with amusement. “But you don’t think I was fishing that day, do you?”

“Nope.”

She cocked her head, poked him in the side when he remained silent. “So what was I doing?”

Still a little sore from their fight—and he planned on getting the full story on that very soon—he stretched and folded one arm under his head. “Checking me out.”

“Uh huh. And what were you doing at the lagoon?”

He rolled to his side, nudging her on her back. “I happened to be minding my own business and taking a swim.”

“And I happened to be what, spying on you?”

He wrapped a strand of her hair around his finger, tugging playfully. “I didn’t say it.”

She laughed. “So you’ve always been so full of yourself.” She rubbed her cheek against his shoulder, and he waited for her to ask whatever else was on her mind. “When did you know?”

Guessing what she meant, he caught her hand. “That we were mated?”

She nodded, slowly raising her gaze to meet his. Gods, she was stunning.

Finding it impossible not to, he ran his thumb along her jaw. “Not until the third time we met, which took me about two weeks to arrange. You were stubborn then too.”

“Two weeks of skinny dipping? It must have been all that pruned and wrinkled skin that finally wore me down.”

Growling, he rolled until he had her trapped fully beneath him. “You love to provoke me, don’t you?”

Sorcha laughed. “No more than you love trying to dominate me.”

He bent his head until their noses touched, then slid down to take her mouth slow and soft. “If I thought you would be happy with someone who would never test or push you, then I would be that man.”

“So it’s my fault—”

Cale nipped her bottom lip, silencing her. “Whatever you need to be happy, I’ll give you. If you need me to have your back, I will. If you need me to give you space, I will. If you need someone to crawl across Avalon on their hands and knees—”

“And then have to listen to you whine and lick your wounds all the time?” She shuddered. “Let’s skip the last one.”

“Cats do *not* whine.”

“Whatever. Meow.” Her smile faded, her face vulnerable as she cupped his cheek. “You’re already more than I ever imagined I would have in my life. I don’t want you to change for me or anyone else.”

Chest tight, he touched his forehead to hers. “Then stay with me. We’ll figure out a way to make it work, Sorch. Together. It doesn’t have to be right now, or tomorrow, or even before your memories are wiped out again. If it takes keeping after you and reminding you every hundred years what we are to each other, then that’s what I’ll do.”

She opened her mouth to reply, and seeing the doubt in her gaze, he quickly added, “Just promise me no more decisions without talking to me, no more leaving without a word, okay?”

“Okay.”

A rumble echoed between them, and he glanced down. “Was that your stomach?”

She punched him in the shoulder. “I’m a little hungry. What do you have to eat around here anyway?”

“Peanuts. Maybe a bottle of maraschino cherries in the fridge behind the bar.”

“Wow, nuts and garnishes. You really know how to appeal to a woman’s appetite.”

He ducked his head, nuzzling her throat. “If it’s any consolation, I’m very, very good at satisfying some appetites more than others. Carnal ones happen to be my specialty, actually.”

“Food first, then we’ll talk about your specialty.”

Sitting up, Cale grabbed his pants and jerked them on. He dropped a quick kiss on her head, then strode for the door. “I’ll be right back.”

Smiling to himself, he jogged down the steps and crossed to the main bar. The hair on the back of his neck rose, and he pivoted around.

Something struck the back of his head before he could shift, knocking him into the wall.

“Cale?”

It was a wonder he could hear Sorch through the ringing in his head. He scrambled up, the cat in him snarling to get loose, but unable to. Panic swept over him as he faced his attacker.

Few creatures could completely contain his animal half, and the one opposite him, cloaked head to foot in black, was apparently one of them.

An invisible hand closed around his throat, cutting off his air, pinning him. He saw Sorch step out of the office, saw the sword in her hand.

“No.”

She ignored him at the same moment his attacker’s sword slashed down in a deadly arc. Between one second at the next, Sorch was in front of him, but he knew it was too late. There wasn’t enough time to get them both out of there unharmed, and the regret and acceptance in her eyes told him she knew it too.

His hand closed over her nape in vain to shield the neck she’d exposed to protect him.

Pendragon’s disappeared as she fell against him, her body going limp.

Cale fell back, landed on an unfamiliar floor. “Sorch!” He rolled, cradling his mate against him.

Her eyes drifted open, and the moment awareness sank in, she jerked her hand back to touch her neck.

“He missed.” Relief crashed through him.

She shook her head.

“He missed.” Cale pulled his own hand from her neck. “No blood. You’re fine.”

Sorcha sat up. “She wouldn’t have missed.”

“Who?” He watched the indecision flash across her face, and gripped her shoulders. “Was this supposed to be another trick? Were you going to fake your death again?” His chest turned to ice at the thought.

“No.” She moved to her knees, coming up to eye level. “I wouldn’t do that.”

He never would have believed she was capable of it at all if not for their past. As much as he wanted to have faith that they’d work things out, he knew she was holding back something. “Who was it? You know, don’t you?”

“Cale.” She touched his face, the caress. “I’m not leaving you. I swear it.”

Closing his hand over hers—maybe a little too hard—he struggled to set aside the doubt that wanted to take hold. “You put yourself in the path of the sword.” Anger finally cut through his shock. He’d come so close to losing her again.

“And you would have done the same for me.”

“Damn it, Sorcha—”

“I get that you will always want to protect me, but you told me we’re in this together, equals. Or has that changed?”

Sensing his answer was important, he didn’t hesitate. “No.”

She nodded, looking relieved. “I might not always be as strong or as quick as you, but that won’t stop me from fighting for you. If you can’t handle that, then it will never work between us.”

He shook his head, increasingly confused, but not enough to keep him from answering. “I’ve never tried to change you. I’m not about to now.” And he meant that. As much as she pushed him, driving both man and animal crazy with the risks she took, he couldn’t imagine her any other way.

“I’ll never get those memories back, you know.”

He pushed her hair back from her face. “We’ll make new ones.” Another unwavering truth. Wanting her to remember their past wasn’t nearly as important as proving to her that they deserved a future.

A slow smile spread across her face, and he knew they’d be okay. Better than okay.

“There’s something I have to do.”

He shook his head. “It works both ways, you know. You want me to deal with your independence, you need to deal with the fact I’ll always want to protect you. You fight for me, I fight for you.” He waited, expecting her to vanish on him, knowing there would be no way to stop her.

Sorcha was right. If he couldn't show he trusted her to handle herself, then it would end up hurting them both down the road. Though it went against his most primitive instincts, he let go of her. Let his hand fall back to his side, his fingers curling into a fist so he wouldn't reach out to sweep her back into his arms.

Her lips parted in surprise, then she snagged his shirt and drew him forward. Every inch of her fit against him as she rocked up to catch his mouth with hers.

The kiss was almost over before it began, but in the possessive tangle of lips and tongue—so damn hot a few of his brain cells were liquefied—he felt his mate staking a claim.

"Okay," she murmured against his lips. She laced her fingers through his. "Just try not to get your furry ass killed by a goddess."

Sorcha knew the second Cale understood, watched the shimmer of colors as he shifted to his cat form. She laid her hand on his back and returned them to Pendragon's.

"Rhiannon?"

The cloaked figure with her back to them turned, lowering her hood.

Seeing the goddess's face confirmed Sorcha's suspicions. The familiar sound she'd heard before she'd anticipated the slash of the sword had been the braided gold chain Rhiannon wore at her waist.

Stunned by the anger that pushed through her, Sorcha didn't trust herself to speak right away. She'd been loyal for centuries, learning from Rhiannon, trusting her judgment, and she'd been set up from the start.

"You never suspected Cale of being a traitor. You knew he was in possession of the dagger from the start."

Rhiannon nodded.

"What if I had killed him the very first day?" What if she hadn't hesitated and had done her job as she had every other time? "I would have lost my chance."

"Chance at what? You're a huntress."

"I love him." Without reservation, without weakness. Men had been underestimating her potential most of her existence. Her father, even the brother who'd adored her had always fought her battles for her. Few of the rogues she hunted down had considered her a threat until she'd more than proven how lethal she could be.

But not Cale. The cat wanted to keep her safe, yes, and though he'd been reluctant to let her face Rhiannon on her own, he'd been prepared to let her go. He had faith in her, had trusted her from the moment in the park, certain she would recognize the bond that existed between them.

They were mated.

Rhiannon cocked her head. “You would sacrifice all I have given you to have one mortal lifetime with him?”

“No.”

Something akin to disappointment blinked across the goddess’s face.

Sorcha continued, “No more than I suspect you’re willing to sacrifice finding Excalibur to punish me for wanting a future with my mate.”

Not surprising, the cat had to communicate his satisfaction hearing her call him that, and gently snapped his tail across her ass.

Amused, Rhiannon flicked her gaze to Cale before returning to Sorcha. “You seek to bargain? With me?”

She shook her head. “I’m merely asking you to consider that I deserve to keep my immortality as a reward for my centuries of loyalty and service.”

“And I suppose if I went along with that, you’d immediately hand over the dagger?”

“Not exactly,” Sorcha hedged.

Rhiannon’s expression revealed nothing, then she laughed. “You’ve never ceased to surprise me, Sorcha.” Almost relieved, she slipped into the closest chair. “I had to be sure.”

“That he had the dagger?”

“That you would die for him,” the goddess said softly. “How else would I know that releasing you from my service would be the right decision?”

“Release me?”

Rhiannon nodded. “Of course I hadn’t anticipated you threatening me.” She waved her hand before Sorcha could voice any objection to that. “You’re not the first huntress to bond with another immortal, and certainly not the first to try keeping her relationship from me.”

“You’ve released other huntresses before?”

The goddess nodded. “I had every intention of releasing you before, but you surprised me then too. You gave him up.” She glanced at Cale. “He might look at it like a betrayal, but to me it was noble. Few huntresses have ever been able to make such a sacrifice. I couldn’t make that sacrifice.”

For the first time the ancient goddess looked vulnerable. “If I had, Arthur’s mortal father might still be alive.”

Sorcha shook her head, needing to be honest with both herself and Rhiannon. “My choice wasn’t noble, it was selfish.”

“And it wouldn’t have been selfish to choose him over protecting our world, our way of life? How many immortals would have exposed us, sabotaged our ability to move unnoticed in the human world if not for you and the others?”

“And choosing him now—”

“Comes with a price,” Rhiannon interrupted.

The cat growled.

Rhiannon glared at him, more annoyed than threatened. “You will retain your abilities with the exception of traveling by mere thought alone. That I cannot allow when it could be used against me.”

“And in exchange for that?” Sorcha prompted, sinking her fingers into Cale’s thick fur to keep him from reacting to whatever the goddess might demand of her.

“You will both vow to hunt down the four remaining daggers and bring them to me as soon as they’re found.”

Most of the tension in Sorcha’s spine uncoiled. “Done.”

“Good. Now, how about you explain what you meant by ‘not exactly’ handing the dagger over.”

One week later

Cale brushed her hair aside, his mouth hot on her neck. “You still take too many risks.”

Sorcha had to force herself to reply, guessing he’d deliberately waited to say that until his lips slid down to the curve of her shoulder, distracting her. “And it wasn’t a risk when you pounced on that Korrigan?”

He snorted. “Cubs pounce.”

Laughing, she looped her arms around her mate’s neck, threading her fingers through his hair. “I hope you don’t think that you’ll be able to pounce on me when I’ll no longer be able to flash out of the way.”

“Aside from the fact that you love it when I pounce—” he nipped her shoulder, “—I wouldn’t dream of taking advantage of you that way.” His tone gave him away a heartbeat before he hooked an arm around her.

Dropping to the ground, she planted her foot in his stomach and flipped him over her head. Landing on his back, he hadn’t even caught his breath before she straddled him.

“How about I take advantage of you then?” She leaned down, grazed her lips across his.

Cale gripped her hips and rocked up, rubbing against her. “I have absolutely no problem with that.”

“Things could get rough. I might scratch—” she trailed her nail across his jaw, “—bite—” she caught his bottom lip between her teeth, “—suck.”

He moaned when she did exactly that, pulling him into her mouth. “Yes. Please. And I sure as hell hope so.”

Grinning, Sorcha reached between them.

An impatient sound came from the sack next to them, reminding Sorcha that they weren’t alone. Neither were they really in any shape to be going at it on the floor, but that hadn’t stopped them before.

Beneath her, she watched Cale finger the singed hole in her shirt, his gaze turning feral when he studied the twitching sack. “She’s lucky you’re fast.”

The sorceress’s hit-and-miss ability to manipulate fire hadn’t been Sorcha’s biggest concern when they’d finally caught up with her. She found the way the sorceress had given up the moment she realized why they were there was more of a red flag.

Sorcha nodded in the direction of their prisoner. “Think she’ll be enough to get the job done?”

“For my brother’s sake, I hope so. You sure those chains will hold her long enough to undo the curse?”

“She’s not going anywhere.” Strangely enough, the sorceress didn’t seem to *want* to go anywhere.

Cale shifted under her, pulling her attention back to him. “Now,” she murmured, leaning over once more and linking their fingers together. “Where were we?”

Laughing, he scooped her up, regaining his footing effortlessly. “I believe you were about to take advantage of me.”

She wrapped her legs around him. “Right.” She waited until they’d cleared the basement door in Cale’s mansion, watching as he keyed in the lock. The chains would prevent the sorceress from escaping by magical means and the security system would take care of the rest.

As he negotiated the stairs, she reacquainted herself with that tempting hollow at the base of his throat.

He groaned, one hand sliding under her bottom even if he already had a solid grip on her. “We could get there faster, you know.”

“You mean your room?” She licked at his skin, breathing in his scent.

“Any room will do right now.”

Laughing, she kissed her way up to his jaw. “I think I need to get used to traveling the good old fashioned way, don’t you?” She could easily imagine herself getting used to him carrying her around like this.

At the top of the stairs he pressed her against the wall. Lethally seductive, he slanted his mouth across hers, pushing deep with his tongue until she moaned.

Slowly, he drew back, his grin cocky. “What’s the matter, huntress? Cat got your tongue?”

She shook her head, willing him to see right into her soul and know he was the center of *her* world. “It’s worse than that actually. He’s got my whole heart.”

About the Author

A born and raised Maritimer, Sydney Somers fell in love with writing at the age of eight. Since finishing her first book in 2002, Sydney has written over twenty-five romances—one of which will forever remain hidden under her bed.

When she's not tracking down remote controls, chasing after three very energetic children or exterminating rogue dust bunnies, Sydney can be found curled up with a good book or working on her next sexy, paranormal romance. She loves to hear from readers and invites them to e-mail her (sydney@sydneysomers.com) or drop by her website (www.sydneysomers.com) any time.

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Talons: Caged Desire

Coming Soon:

Dark Obsession

When the sun goes down, passion is unleashed

Primal Hunger

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Pendragon Gargoyles, Book 1

Kennedy Beaumont loves her bartending job, even if her spirited nature sometimes gets her in trouble. Like threatening to hose down one of Pendragon's co-owners. When it comes to Tristan, she could use a good hosing down herself—maybe it'll help her stop casting him as the star of her wickedest dreams. Since he goes out of his way to avoid her, it ought to be easy to put him out of her head—until he reluctantly offers her a ride home.

Gargoyle shape-shifter Tristan Callaghan hasn't had time for anything other than recovering the mystical dagger that was used to permanently lock his brother in a prison of stone. The cat inside him should have stopped craving Kennedy's touch long ago, but now that she's sitting next to him in his car, his very human need for her is sharper than ever.

The distraction is costly. In a split second, Kennedy finds herself thrust into a dangerous, millennia-old hunt for Excalibur. A hunt that marks her for death—and leaves Tristan with a painful choice—sacrifice his family, his quest...or the one woman meant to be his.

Warning: There's nothing tame about this alpha male hell-bent on claiming his mate. Featuring bone-melting explicit sex, graphic language, violence and a little harmless bite...or two.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Primal Hunger:

"I still don't see why we're not going to the police first." Kennedy studied him, confusion lingering in her pretty brown eyes.

He jerked the wheel to the right, swerving at the last second to avoid a pothole he would have noticed if he hadn't been staring at her again. "We're closer to Cale's."

A few minutes later he stopped in front of the gate that kept unwanted visitors—mainly humans—off the property. He frowned at the security console. The number sequence that would open the gate jumbled together in his mind, and the harder he tried to recall the code, the harder his head pounded.

"Problem?"

Not compared to the spider web on her hand, but he didn't tell her that. Instead, he shook his head and hit the intercom button. Whatever the wraith had used in the darts was still screwing with his head. The mercenary couldn't have been expecting Tristan would show up to give Kennedy a ride or the darts would have been loaded with something a lot more potent.

Cursing his sister, who should have answered, he stabbed the intercom again. Another minute ticked off, and he gave up, digging out his cell phone this time. When Briana still didn't answer, he shoved the

phone back in his pocket. Reversing back onto the street, he parked the car and climbed out. Kennedy followed suit, glancing around.

“It’s safe.”

She cast him a dubious glance, trailing after him as he walked the front perimeter of the stone wall bordering the property. “This *is* Cale’s place, right?”

“Last time I checked.” He spotted the tree towering above the wall on the corner of the lot. “Stay right here.”

Her spine snapped straight. “Where are you going?”

“I’ll just be a few seconds. You’re safe. Promise.” Until the wraith tracked her here, but that was one more certainty he didn’t plan on sharing. “I’ll be right back.”

Ducking around the corner, he sprang up—high enough Kennedy would have asked questions—and grabbed the top of the stone wall, pulling himself over. From there he jumped easily into the tree and then back to the front of the wall overlooking the street.

“Give me your hand.”

Kennedy peered up at him. “How did you get up there?”

“Footholds on the other side.”

She stared at his outstretched hand. “I’m sure I can climb it too.”

“This is faster. Unless you’re scared of heights,” he taunted, grinning when she planted one foot on the wall and pushed off, catching his hand.

A burst of warmth exploded up his arm, the sensation tunneling straight to his groin. He tightened his grip and hauled her up the wall.

She grabbed ahold of him when she reached the top to steady herself. “Work out much?”

His grin widened as he savored the feel of her body tucked close to his. Her hand drifted down his arm, but the narrow wall didn’t leave her much room to back away.

“Do you do everything the hard way?”

“This coming from the woman who relies on water hoses to settle disputes at a crowded bar.”

A reluctant smile drew his attention straight to her mouth. He spanned his fingers across her lower back, preventing her from edging away from him. He’d let her go in just a minute, first indulging the cat’s need to touch her. The man, however, wanted a whole lot more. Hours more. Days.

Kennedy shivered. “You’re not still mad about that, are you?”

He shook his head. “But I can’t promise I won’t retaliate the next time.” Because the need to lower his head and run his mouth along the slender curve of her neck threatened to overwhelm him, he nodded to the thick branch extending from the tree. “Ladies first.”

Easing out of reach, she stepped gingerly onto the branch, clinging to the overhead limbs for balance. When she reached the trunk, she moved to another branch and waited for him to climb down first.

The cat wanted to climb higher in the tree and wait for the wraith to make another appearance, but he needed to get her inside first. His feet hit the ground and he reached up to help her down.

“Crap,” she hissed, skidding down the tree.

He should have caught her easily and kept them both upright. Maybe it was the drugs slowing his reflexes, or maybe he wanted to feel her sprawled across his chest when the impact knocked them both to the ground.

“Are you okay?” Her eyes widened and she tried sliding off him.

He anchored one arm across her back, keeping her still. “Not really.” He probably wouldn’t be okay for a long time. The closer she got, the more he wanted her there, proving his attraction to Kennedy ran much deeper than he’d imagined.

“You’re bleeding.” She caught her bottom lip between her teeth, wincing in sympathy.

“Just a scratch.” He barely registered the scrape on his cheek from connecting with the tree bark during the fall. Barely registered anything but all the places she was nestled against him. The only thing better than having her draped across him, would be her draped across him *naked*.

She stared in the direction of the main house, exposing the tempting curve of her throat.

Tristan didn’t think about it, he lifted his head and closed his mouth over her skin.

Kennedy moaned, and he ran his lips higher, sliding one hand into her hair and coaxing her down. Her thigh slipped between his legs, rubbing his arousal. The friction unleashed a groan in his chest, and he grazed her with his teeth before sucking her harder between his lips.

Why did she feel so good, taste so good? Attempting to wrap his mind around it didn’t matter to the animal basking in the feel of her fingers threading the ends of his hair, dragging him closer.

In the distance a lone howl, then a series of barks echoed through the night, and he tried to remember why that was important.

Fuck. The dogs.

“Oh, shit.” Kennedy scrambled off him, and he rolled to his feet as a pack of Dobermans tore across the grass toward them.

Loving him was impossible. Losing him is inconceivable.

At Earth's Edge

© 2009 Christine McKay

Man is an upstart species that was once welcomed by Aderyn's kind—the Others. Like a weed, humans left much in ruin. And the Others retreated behind an enchanted wall guarded by Keepers. Aderyn is one such Keeper. And Man's battles have reached her tower.

Owen, the nearly dead ex-soldier she once found at her gates, is a different sort of man. He didn't want anything—except to give her flowers and make her laugh. As he drank in her healing magic like life-giving water, she drowned in his eyes. She was taught to defend against Man's violence; she was helpless in the face of his kindness.

Now that she has had a taste of it, she would kill to keep it.

Her visions tell her it's only a matter of time before more soldiers attack her boundary. With no intention of failing her people—or losing the man she loves—she uses her magic to unleash an apparition with the power to decimate armies.

But there's a price to be paid—in blood. As the tide of it rises higher, everything she has fought for threatens to slip through her fingers. Including Owen...

Warning: Contains hot interspecies sex, a creepy boogey monster lurking in the shadows, a male gardener with not only a green thumb but shape-shifting body parts, and a horde of man-sized bloodthirsty bugs bent on world domination.

Enjoy the following excerpt for At Earth's Edge:

Standing on her tiptoes, Aderyn adjusted her panels to better absorb the sun's weak rays. Owen used plastic and mirrors to trick the sun into warming his plants. She used a mix of quick-boiling potions and recycled human technology. From this height, she could overlook her entire domain—Owen's plot with its plants arranged in no particular order, her herbal beds lined up in military precision, but adorned with Owen's whimsical garden folly, the outer gates and beyond that, shifting sand, broken bits of bedrock and abandoned junk.

A gleam of silver caught her eye. An insalubrious scent joined it. She glanced at Owen, puttering contentedly in his garden. Even when she'd found him at her gate, covered in blood and human bits, his scent had remained unadulterated. As sweet as his treasured flowers, as pure as the rose water he made for her, as ill-suited for his uniform as she was for her Tower.

Yet, this scent lingered, twisting around her like a noxious vine. She paused, leaning against the Tower's wall for support. The stones hummed, warning her as well. A man approached her gates. Ill-intentioned and filled with poison, accoutered in that curious ripple of silver and black armor the soldiers of

Man seemed to like. Six winters ago, Aderyn had burned and buried the remains of a similar uniform in a corner of her courtyard. The stranger walked with a swagger, a long, silver rod sheathed between his shoulder blades. She started down her catwalk, intent on reaching her gate before Owen did.

Owen picked up a basket of produce, greens the color of newborn leaves, reds brighter than a fresh drop of blood on a pin-pricked finger, waxy yellows reflecting the sullen sun's rays, and pungent white garlic and leeks, reeking of veiled things that slunk beneath the soil. She'd made the basket for him, conjuring the limbs from her homeland last winter, twisting them into a pleasing shape and fastening handles for her lover's fingers to slide through.

The soldier raised his hand, rapping on the gate.

Hurry, the foundation stones whispered.

Hurry, the nodding roses called, vines shrinking from the man's scent.

Her heart thudded in her throat. *Hurry*.

Owen's stride altered, his head swiveling toward the sound.

Her motions slowed, as if time and a loop of mage-warped air conspired against her. Her hands slid, unhurried, up an unseen boundary. "No!" The word lingered around her, sound's progress halted as well.

What manner of magic was this?

She watched him approach the gate.

The portal, she pleaded. *Do not draw the bolt. Look. Look first, dear heart. Smell his corruption. Do not let him pass within.*

Tucking the basket under one arm, he slid open the bolt. She whispered words, fragments of long-forgotten spells, prayers to deities she'd neglected. She begged the hinges to rust, the walls to throw their rocks and seal the opening.

Only Owen stirred.

Poisoned lips moved. Hands unsheathed a murderous weapon.

No! The skin split on her hands. Her blood smeared the walls of her invisible prison. She screamed, bereft of words.

Owen crumpled to the cobblestones, his basket bouncing beside him. The wood shrilled as blood sprayed its limbs.

The man looked up at her and grinned.

A word flickered in the corner of her mind, one that disregarded all boundaries, all manner of magic. She'd never spoken it. She did not know of any Collcrin who had. It teased her, swaying just out of her reach. She reached out, arms no longer human but blood-soaked, twisted limbs. Leaves rustled, urging her forward. Her lips formed the word.

A breath of cold air darted up her backside, making her shiver and blink.

She woke from her vision, sweating and panting. Owen lay beside her, lips parted, breathing heavy. His body was tangled in the bedding, leaving her sky clad and exposed. She touched the back of her hand to his cheek, then his brow. Tugging the quilt from his grip, she laid her hands over his bare chest. His heart beat, slow and steady. She had the urge to seize his shoulders and shake him awake, just to hear him speak, be it sleep-slurred or angry.

He lived. Whatever she'd dreamt had not yet come to pass.

Would not come to pass, she swore.

She slid down to lie beside him, wrapping her arms around him, drawing strength from his mortal heat and the steady pulse of his heart.

A legend...a myth...a high stakes game that could shatter them both.

Heart of a Huntress

© 2010 Crista McHugh

The Kavanaugh Foundation, Book 1

As one of the oldest surviving vampire hunters in the Foundation, Lana's learned the toughest lesson: success comes at a price. So while the yummy stranger she bumps into at Caesar's trips all her temptation switches, duty comes first. Better to be alone than to gamble with someone else's heart—or her own. Although maybe a one-night stand won't hurt...

Byron has set a one-way course for revenge against the Vegas vampire who murdered his uncle. When he collides with Lana, though, her scent calls to him like a potent aphrodisiac. The only explanation: she's his true-mate. And the timing couldn't be worse. He can't afford any distractions—not to mention it'll be hell convincing her to love someone who sprouts fur and fangs every full moon.

One drink together turns into a daring night of passion. Their erotic interlude ends abruptly with the news that Lana's partner has been abducted by the very vampire Byron seeks. Now Byron has no choice. He must reveal what he is and risk a rejection that could spell his own destruction...

Warning: Contains *wild sex you want to sink your teeth into and a shower at the Venetian that may need to be closed for repairs until further notice.*

Enjoy the following excerpt for Heart of a Huntress:

His fingers itched to touch her, but he shoved them into his pockets. "No ambushes tonight?"

Lana shook her head and her shoulders relaxed. "No sign of trouble anywhere, and that has me nervous."

"For what it's worth, I haven't seen any of them at Caesars or Bellagio. Care to check out the Venetian with me?"

"How does someone completely untrained know what to look for?"

"Some things are instinctual." Byron closed the space between them and bathed in her scent. Right now, his instincts told him to get her up to his suite at the Venetian and remove every article of clothing that clung in all the right places to her lean body.

Her pupils enlarged, and her grip tightened over the straps of her purse until her knuckles turned white. Her breath quickened. "Instinctual?"

A grin raised the corners of his mouth. She seemed just as aroused as he was, and they hadn't even touched each other yet. So far, so good. "Yeah, sort of like that gut feeling you have when you cross someone who isn't quite right. Or maybe when you bump into someone who seems a little too right."

There. He'd laid his cards on the table for her, letting her know he wanted her without sounding like some horny pervert. He realized he was holding his breath while he waited for her response.

"I think I know what you're talking about." She lowered her eyes and took a step toward the main entrance. "I suppose checking out the Venetian before heading home wouldn't hurt, so long as you stay out of my way if we find anything there."

"Trying to steal my thunder?"

"Trying to keep you from getting killed."

He chuckled at her overprotectiveness. If she only knew that he was really a wolf in human clothing, not some helpless little lamb. "If I remember correctly, I saved your life last night."

She bristled at his comment. "No need to get cocky."

"I meant what I said about joining forces. I think we'd make a great team." He trailed after her as she meandered through the crowd, his strides easily matching hers.

"I'm not authorized to work with outsiders."

"Who says Big Brother needs to find out? I want to catch my uncle's killer. You want to kill any bloodsucker that moves. It's a win-win situation from where I'm standing."

She stopped and rubbed her forehead once they reached the sidewalk. "Is that the only reason you're following me around, Byron? To get your revenge?"

"No," he blurted out.

"Then why?"

A lump expanded in his throat, cutting off the air and causing spit to pool under his tongue. He swallowed hard to push it down into his stomach, where it sat like a lead brick. How much should he tell her now? "The truth?"

"It would be a good place to start."

He glanced around at the scant traffic on the sidewalk, but still felt uncomfortable telling her with an audience. He wouldn't be surprised if Alan had spies positioned within earshot, and with a werewolf, that could mean a block away at this time of night. "Can we please go someplace where we can't be overheard?"

"Where do you suggest?"

"I have a room at the Venetian."

Her head snapped up, and her lips parted. A new facet enhanced her scent. He'd smelled it last night in the hallway, but now he knew what it was. Her arousal. His cock strained against his zipper as he inhaled it. "No funny business?" she asked softly.

"You call the shots, remember?"

"Good." She pulled herself together, appearing to be all professional for the moment. "Maybe I can talk some sense into you."

“I doubt it, but you can try.”

Despite the raging hard-on, he brushed past her and led the way to the Venetian with a smile on his face. If he could get her into his bed, then maybe tonight wouldn't be a total failure. The wolf inside wagged its tail in delight.

Lana fiddled with her purse as she followed Byron, unsure how much trouble she was about to invite into her life. She didn't miss the distinct bulge in his jeans when he passed her, nor the heavy innuendo in his words. He had made it clear that he wanted her, but also that he was leaving it up to her to determine how far they took things. The way her body reacted whenever she came near him told her she should jump his bones now before one of them ended up dead. Her mind, on the other hand, cautioned her not to give in to him blindly. He was hiding something from her, but what?

Espe's whispered advice played again in her mind. Have a howling good time. What the hell did that mean? But as she caught a glimpse of the way his jeans clung to his tight ass, images of doing all kinds of naughty things came to mind. Her fingers itched to grab it, to pinch it, to feel the muscles slide under her palms as he pumped his cock deep inside her over and over again.

The cool desert night air suddenly felt like the noon sun. Damn, why had her mind gone there? Why had another man's touch made her skin crawl earlier tonight, whereas Byron's made her want to remove every stitch of clothing? She admitted she needed a good ol' fashioned fuck fest—a “Lana-palooza” where she came so many times, she'd have trouble walking the next day. But it wouldn't be open to the general public. Just the one man she'd hungered for since the first second she'd laid eyes on him.

There, that settles it. Just sleep with him and get it out of your system.

Her gut tightened. She hated it when her common sense agreed with her emotional side.

But what if once isn't enough?

She shook her head. No, once would have to be enough. Anything more and she'd risk forming a relationship with him, however sick and twisted it might be.

With her walls up and a game plan in place, she entered the Venetian with a fixed smile on her face.

Too bad the moment he took her hand, everything fell apart. The innocent gesture cracked her façade and set free a torrent of emotions inside her. They cascaded through her body from the point of contact with him, filling her with warm, panty-drenching lust. The lone song of a gondolier reverberated off the walls from the canal that wound its way through the casino. The pleading notes tugged at her heart, intensified her desire, and made her want to push him against the wall and finish what they'd started last night.

Her breath came out in ragged pants. Screw looking for vampires—they had less than half an hour to get back to their black holes before the sun came up anyway. Where were the elevators up to his room?

“Are you feeling okay, Lana?”

His question pulled her from her downward spiral of self-destruction. Her whole body burned. She blinked a few times to bring her surroundings back into focus. How should she answer him? Take your clothes off and fuck me now? “Um, why don’t we just head upstairs?”

“And finish our discussion in private?” The raw edge in his voice nearly sent her over the edge. Jesus Christ, he seemed just as turned on as she was. If they made it to his room fully clothed, she couldn’t decide if she’d be surprised or disappointed.

She got her answer as soon as the elevator doors closed. He took a step toward her and hesitated, as if he was worrying about being too aggressive. She’d barely inclined her head forward before he wrapped her up in his arms.

Their lips crushed together so fiercely, she could almost taste his desperation. Her mouth parted and his tongue swept in to ravage it. Each sensual flick heightened the throbbing tension between her legs. She pressed against the solid bulge in his jeans and frantically ground her hips, hoping to stimulate her already-sensitive clit.

The elevator dinged and they jumped apart like two teenagers caught making out in a car on the side of the road by the local sheriff.

His chest heaved up and down as if he’d just sprinted the hundred-meter dash at a world-record pace. “My room is just down the hall.”

“Good,” she managed to say between her own pants. The sooner they got to bed, the better.

He fumbled with the key card, his hand trembling as he inserted it into the slot. She inhaled through her teeth and tried not to tell him to hurry up. Dear God, what was wrong with her? She was acting crazier than that cougar from the other night.

The green light flashed, and they practically fell into the room. He kicked the door closed while his hands slid under the slinky material of her top. The warm calluses on his palms felt rough against her skin, complementing the almost savage way he kissed her.

Byron was a man’s man, not some sissy metrosexual. He knew what he wanted, worked hard to get it, and had no qualms about being forceful when he needed to be. And she loved every second of it.

But what if once isn’t enough?



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