

Heartsong

S. W. Vaughn



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eISBN 978-1-60737-591-3

Editor: Morgan Fayne

Cover Artist: Anne Cain

Printed in the United States of America

Loose Id.

Published by

Loose Id LLC

PO Box 425960

San Francisco CA 94142-5960

www.loose-id.com

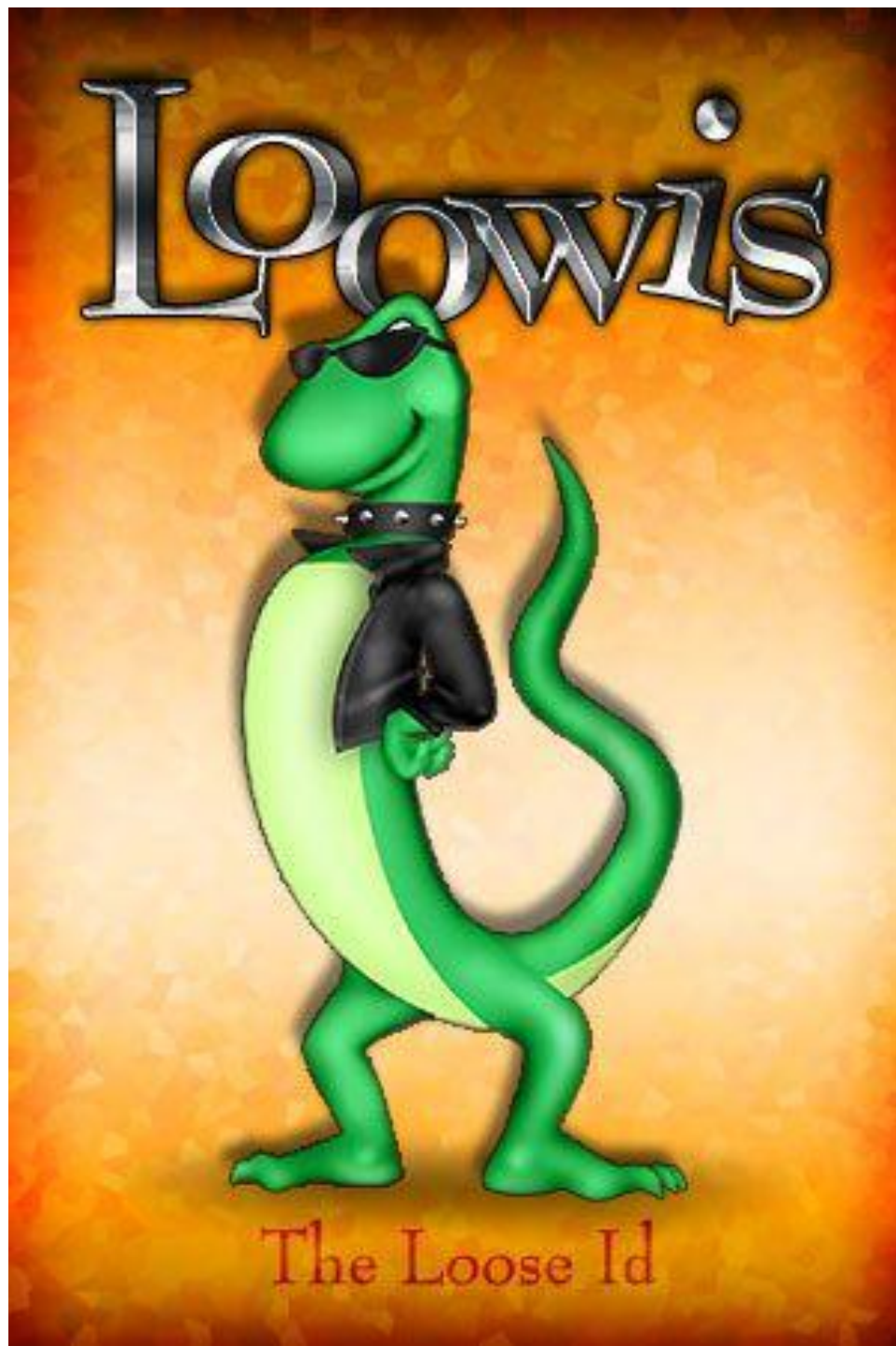
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Chapter One

When the guy in the suit pulled his pants down, Trystan hardly had to fake his usual reaction. “Damn, hon,” he said. “That’s a lot of cock you got there.” It was. Nine inches easy and thick as a flashlight barrel. A nice change from the skinny-dicked, desperate loners he’d been pulling tonight—not that he minded them either. “You want a suck or a fuck?”

The john flashed a crooked, embarrassed smile. “I don’t, ah...”

“This your first time?” As if he couldn’t tell from the wedding band. The more experienced usually took them off long before this point, before they even went out looking for his brand of love. Probably didn’t even bring lube or a condom, but that was all right. Trystan came prepared.

“Yeah.” Another endearing little smile. “What’s better for you?”

Trystan’s lips quirked up. The poor sweet thing. “This is about you, hon. You’re paying. But if you want a suggestion, I’d say you should take the total-immersion package.” This guy was gonna need some TLC. And with two hundred cash already tucked in his pocket—payment up-front for new-to-him johns, especially for these quick and dirty bathroom jobs—he could afford to give it.

Besides, he wanted to be fucked with that nice, thick appendage. He loved cock. Was practically addicted to it. Real useful in his line of work.

“All right.” But he didn’t do anything. Just stood there with his big dick jutting from his groin and his hands hanging in limp contrast at his sides.

Trystan moved closer. He only needed a step to do it in the dingy stall—the handicapped one—but there still wasn’t room to spit. “Let’s get this off,” he said and slid the guy’s jacket from his shoulders. A little moan crept from the john’s throat.

He turned, draped the jacket on the rusty hook on the back of the door, and snagged an extra-large condom from his pocket. He held it up. "Want me to put it on?"

"I... Yes."

He tore the package open, pinched out the coiled ring, and rolled everything into place. A nice smooth fit, the rubber slick under his fingers and the cock beneath twitching at the contact. That done, he handed him a lube tube. "Here. You know what to do, right?"

The john swallowed and nodded.

"Relax." Trystan gave him an encouraging smile and turned away. He slid the latex pants he wore down to his ankles, shuddering a little when the damp air slithered across his hard cock. The john sucked in a breath. Must have liked what he saw. Trystan bent over the toilet and stuck his ass out, shimmying his hips.

There was a pause behind him, a shifting of fabric and flesh. A hand that trembled a little smeared cold lube on his hole. Some of it slid down his balls in slow, thick rivers. The john grabbed his hips, and the tip of his sheathed cock settled against him. But no farther.

"Go on, hon." Trystan bumped back and spread his legs a few inches. "Take it all."

A longer pause. "My name's Mike," the john whispered.

"Okay. Mike," he said, because he knew the guy wanted to hear it. "I'm all yours. Take me, Mike."

Hearing his name must've broken his paralysis, because he drove himself all the way inside with a single thrust and a grunt through his teeth. Trystan hissed in pleasure and wiggled on the shaft. "That's it, Mike. That's good. Just like that."

Mike drew back and thrust again. He picked up speed fast, puffing out grunts and sighs with every pump of his cock. Trystan settled for a low moan and pushed back in opposing rhythm, until he had to brace his head against the wall to keep from being crumpled over the toilet stem with the force of the fucking.

But it was good. So good. He might even come with this one.

An explosive groan washed over him as Mike buried himself deep, jerking with his climax. Damn. He'd been close to spurting, but not close enough to finish himself with a few discreet strokes. Have to take care of that later.

Mike shuddered and pulled his softening cock out. He made an inarticulate sound. Outside the stall, the bathroom door banged open. Mike whimpered and grabbed too fast for his pants. He would've fallen over if Trystan hadn't caught him.

"Easy," Trystan whispered. "Everyone expects this stuff in here."

Footsteps crossed the floor. A stall door creaked open and slammed shut. Urine streamed.

Mike, flushed and sweating, gave him that crooked little smile again. He dressed with a bit less urgency, and Trystan did the same. When they finished, Mike produced a billfold and pulled out a fifty. "Thanks," he said softly.

"You already paid."

"Yes, but...you were good to me." He pressed the bill into his palm, insistent, smiled again. "Good-bye." He unlocked the door and left. Didn't even stop to wash his hands.

Trystan stared at the money for a few seconds. His attempt to turn it down had been reflexive, but he did need it right now. He'd been dog sick for almost three weeks, huddled in Talia's rundown apartment up by Harlem, puking out everything that passed through his lips—which wasn't much, since Talia didn't keep food in the place. Hell, she'd only let him stay with extreme reluctance and the promise that he'd clean up his own mess. Three weeks without turning tricks left him flat broke, and tonight was his first night out again.

That was why he'd come to Frankie's, where the bathroom quickies usually flowed like water. But even here the pickings had been slim. It was like all the horniness in New York had scuttled back inside its dark corners and tucked its head firmly between its legs while he was laid out. And before that, the few reliable

regulars he'd maintained had hooked up with legitimate lovers. He didn't begrudge them their happiness, but it wasn't exactly good for his cash flow.

Shrugging, he tucked the bill in a pocket and left the stall for the sink. A glimpse in the mirror had him frowning. He still looked sick—pale, drawn, waiflike. Maybe it added to his charm. But he had to eat something solid, and soon. His legs were shaking like twin earthquakes in the aftermath of Mike's affections. Probably couldn't take another john tonight. He'd eat, grab a cheap room somewhere, and try to sleep off the dregs of the sick. No partying for a few more days.

The stall door at the far end opened as Trystan turned the faucets on. He threw a quick glance over, figuring he could do a blowjob even with a case of the shakes if the guy seemed the looking type. He didn't—he made a beeline for the sinks and never so much as twitched an eye in Trystan's direction.

But he was holy-shit hot. Tall, fair, and sculpted as hell. Trystan's already hard cock strained against his pants. One more reason to get a room—he had to whack off soon.

He shut the water off, shook his hands over the sink. And the guy spoke.

“You like men?”

“Yeah.” Maybe there was another quick buck here after all. Trystan turned a seductive smile on him...wasted, since the guy still wasn't looking his way. He fed the line anyway. “Do you?”

The guy straightened slowly and faced him. His eyes were bright blue, piercing. “No. But I've a friend who does.” One corner of his mouth lifted. “I've seen you. You've known Cobalt, have you not?”

A flash of heat skewered his gut. Cobalt. One of his former regulars—a favorite. Smoking hot tattoo artist, recently hooked up permanently with some radio deejay. This guy's almost lilting speech pattern matched Cobalt's perfectly. “Do I know you?” he said. “I mean, have I seen you around the Grotto or something?”

The blond frowned. “Grotto?”

“Um, yeah. Cobalt's place?”

“I've not met him personally.”

“You sure? What's your name?”

The guy looked irritated. “Morven. And you've not answered me. Have you known Cobalt?”

“I did,” he said carefully.

“Good.” The other corner drew up to match the first. “Good.” A smooth pink tongue moistened his lips. “Trystan.”

His jaw dropped, and he worked to put it back in place. Lots of people knew his name in certain circles. No reason to believe this guy wasn't one of them. “That's me.”

“Yes.” A step forward. “How would you—Trystan—like to earn one million...dollars?”

He barely noticed the way his name coiled from the pink tongue like a snake, or the way he said *dollars* like he wasn't sure what they were. The amount knocked away logical thought. “I'm listening.”

“My friend needs an escort. You'll stay with him, pleasure him, do as he commands for one month.” Those eyes almost burned. “For this you'll receive one million dollars.”

His brow furrowed. “So your friend wants a sub for a month? That the deal?”

“A submissive. Yes.”

Trystan nodded faintly. He had plenty of experience subbing. He'd enjoyed most of it, except the one john who'd decided to burn him with a cigar when he was tied up, despite the rules they'd agreed on beforehand. He had a huge thing against fire. Afterward, he'd paid a couple of Talia's boys to lump the bastard up and record the session so he could listen to the screams. It helped him beat back the nightmares.

The mark was waiting for an answer. Fuck, how could he turn down a million bucks? It was a goddamned fortune, more money than he'd ever hoped to see in his lifetime. With that he could afford to take some time off and recuperate when the month was done. Somewhere nice, where they changed the sheets every day and room service wasn't a bag of stale chips and a can of generic soda.

"No cutting, absolutely no burning, and I want a down payment," he finally said.

"Agreed." The guy reached in a pocket and extracted a thick wad of bills. Hundred-dollar bills. He held them out. "This is, I believe, ten thousand."

Jesus. Ten thousand just for saying yes? Trystan took the cash and thumbed through it. All hundreds, not stiff and sharp counterfeit. His breath caught in his throat. He shoved the money in a pocket before the tall blond could change his mind.

The guy held a long-fingered hand out. "A handshake to seal the deal. I believe that's how it's done."

"You're right." Trystan took it.

A jolt traveled up his arm—not the heat and sizzle of lust, but something else. The dank, cool air in the bathroom changed, became warmer, laden with heavy scents of musk and wet wood and cut grass. Dizziness crept over him. What the hell...?

The guy let go, and everything was normal again in a blink. Except his palm. It itched like crazy. He glanced at it but saw nothing unusual. "Um. All right. So when do we meet your friend?"

This time, the smile edged into creepy territory. "Now." He walked over to the far wall, raised a hand, and brought it down slow in a straight line. And unzipped the bathroom.

* * *

Two months. Uriskel had spent two months in this dank and stinking hole, stripped of clothing and magic. He'd accounted for time with the daily flask of water and handful of meat or bread scraps they threw down for him and the long, aching stretches that meant they'd skipped a day or two. Once he'd gone at least a full fortnight without. And for what? He'd done exactly as the Seelie king commanded him. He'd brought the traitor Eoghann back alive from the human realm to face his sentence.

Of course, his bastard father had expected him to die on the mission. He nearly had. And what it had cost him hurt far more than dying, though he'd never let the king know that.

He stretched his cramped legs as far as they'd go, which wasn't far. They hadn't let him dig his gaol wide enough to lie down in. This time, he didn't even have his cards to occupy and calm himself with. He'd left them with Ciaràn—Cobalt, as his half brother called himself among mortals—with a foolish promise to return for them.

As if he could control what the Seelie court allowed him to do. He was forever bound to Arcadia's will. He might never get back to the human realm, especially if they left him down here as long as they did last time.

A chill ran through his already cold body at the thought. *Please, gods, no.* Not another five years. He tried to convince himself otherwise with the idea that he'd earned it last time. Not five years—never that long—but he had done something even he was ashamed of, and he wasn't one to harbor shame. No matter what atrocities Arcadia bade him perform. But this two months had to be just a cruel whim. He'd not made any mistakes.

Except one. Surely the king didn't know about that. He'd have been put to the thousand-year curse by now, or the burning rack, or some other far more painful method of slow death, if that particular mistake had been discovered—that he'd told Cobalt they were brothers. No, Arcadia's pet halfling would live to be set on yet another string of bloody, humiliating tasks, and to be punished simply for existing.

Often Uriskel wondered why he did not offer reward or favor to another in exchange for ending his life, since no Fae could end his own. With an Unseelie mother and a Seelie father—the bastard king—the Laws decreed that he should have been killed at birth. Only his usefulness as the court's assassin and spy among the Unseelie had spared his life. So far, miserable as it was, he wanted to keep it.

But he'd asked, practically begged the traitor to kill him when it seemed he'd not succeed at his task, and he'd been more than willing to die. Perhaps he was no longer as attached to his pathetic life as he used to be.

Gods, what weak thoughts. He sounded like Cobalt. He pushed them aside and sought something else to concentrate on. Nothing came to mind. He frowned, pulled his protesting legs close to his body, and whispered the start of a song in the halting rasp that was his voice, unused for weeks on end. It hurt his parched throat, but he pressed on until the grind of stone above his head indicated someone opening the gaol.

He squeezed his eyes shut. His vision had long since adjusted to the blackness, so that even the pale light of the eternal moon and the diamond strings of stars stung them. The grinding stopped. He heard a distant splash seconds before a glut of freezing water poured over him. He forced back a gasp and sat shivering, waiting for an explanation or lack thereof.

“Have you died, then, Unseelie?”

The voice set his teeth on edge. Braelan, true son of the king. His brother, technically, though he'd not stoop to calling him such. Less than a handful in Arcadia knew of his mixed parentage, and Braelan certainly wasn't one of them. Faekin simply assumed he was Unseelie—and a particularly ugly one at that. What did the royal bratling want?

“Uriskel.” Disgust and impatience lined the word. “Answer, or find a clutch of sprites in your lap at the next.”

He shifted, squelched through the dirt that was now mud. “I've not died, Highness,” he scratched out. “Sorry to disappoint you.”

“Well, then. You'll be glad to know that you're to be released.” This time a certain nasty pleasure tinted Braelan's voice—the promise that freedom would only bring further unpleasantness.

At least the toad-bellied prince spoke truth. Uriskel could feel the first tingle of warmth in his spine that was his magic returning. It would take hours for the process to complete.

“You've something to say to me, don't you? Speak, dog.”

Uriskel set his jaw. “I thank you, Highness. Your mercy knows no bounds.” He nearly vomited the words. Stupid, mewling spawn of corruption.

“You may emerge when you've been fully restored,” Braelan said. “And you'll report to the stone circle.”

The stone circle. Where Arcadia carried out public punishments—and executions. “Perhaps Highness in his great mercy will tell me what I've done to merit this sentence”—he tried to swallow past the roughness lining his throat—“since I am apparently not finished serving it, and still I've no idea where my fault lies. After all, you'll not want me to repeat whatever grievance I've caused.”

“You'll be informed.” A mocking laugh tumbled down the hole, and the stone slid back into place.

Uriskel shuddered in the dark. After a moment he picked up the threads of his song and attempted to weave them back together. But no matter how he tried, they would not mesh.

Chapter Two

As shaky as Trystan had felt before, it was nothing compared to the quivering-jelly sensation when Morven yanked him through a shimmering rip in the bathroom wall and into a moonlit forest.

That was the first thing, besides the gaping hole in reality. There were no fucking forests in New York—especially not outside the back wall of Frankie's.

The second thing was the...well, *things* in the forest. There were things with glowing orange eyes, up in the trees, things that made chittering sounds like laughter that made his spine crawl. Things that walked among the trees, things that could have *been* trees, bundles of sticks clicking and clattering through shadows. Things that flew and were definitely not bugs or birds—things with tiny human torsos and bulging ass ends and mouths full of teeth.

And the third thing was that he couldn't stop following this asshole. His feet no longer listened to his brain, and they carried him along behind the blond without missing a step.

Trystan finally made himself speak. "What the hell's going on?"

"I'm bringing you to my friend." The guy didn't turn around or stop.

"Why can't I stop walking?"

"We've a deal."

He could practically hear the icy grin around those words. "Hold on," he said. "If you're saying I'm gonna spend the next month like this, forget it. I don't know what you did to me, but I don't like it. Did you drug me or what?"

“No, Trystan. There have been no drugs.” This time he did turn and cast a glance over his shoulder. “You’ll have your will back once you’ve adjusted.”

“To what?” One of those orange-eyed things let out another eerie laugh, and he shivered. He made himself ask the question he didn’t want answered. “Where are we?”

Morven took his time. “The Fae realm,” he finally said.

“Fae.” A wild laugh clawed from his throat. “You mean like fairies. Real milk-drinking, baby-snatching fairies. Grimm Brothers shit.” This was a dream. He was still sick, huddled on dirty blankets on Talia’s floor, dry-heaving bile and blood. So much for the million.

“The Unseelie have been known to steal human babes, yes,” the blond said. “We, however, are Seelie.”

Trystan pressed his lips together to keep from asking anything else, in case the guy kept answering him. He concentrated on waking himself up instead. Had to be still passed-out-fever sick. Maybe he hadn’t even gone out tonight. Maybe he’d only imagined the blurred handful of quick fucks and shy sweet Mike in the bathroom. When his insistence failed to convince his eyes, he pinched himself. Hard.

He was still walking through a forest.

“Okay,” he said aloud. “Okay, it’s not a dream. It’s a trip. I got a bad hit, and I’m seeing shit—”

Something stepped out in front of the blond, stopping them both. Something short, shirtless, and male—he thought—with fur from the waist down and cloven feet. And little horns sticking from its curled hair.

“What the fuck is that?”

“A satyr.” The blond bent down, and the little creature whispered something in his ear. Morven nodded and rose. The satyr thing bowed, a deep waist bend that would’ve been funny if it wasn’t so damned creepy, and ran back into the woods.

“All right. Cut this shit out.” The tiny sliver of him that knew this wasn't a hallucination, no matter how fucked-up impossible it was, expanded suddenly and engulfed him in cold panic. “Stop with the midgets in makeup and the crazy sound effects. I'll take the real world for a thousand, Alex.”

Trystan giggled. The involuntary splintered sound lodged in his brain, and at once he felt like laughing forever. And ever and ever. Amen.

The blond whirled on him, furious. Trystan didn't even see his arm move, but he felt the teeth-rattling backhand that knocked him to the ground, and tasted blood from a freshly split lip.

“Perhaps I've judged you wrongly.” The blond sneered down at him. “This is no trick. If you refuse to accept what your senses tell you is truth, then return the money and go back to your needles and your drunken stupors and your filthy animal sex.”

Trystan propped himself on his elbows. He almost said, *Yes, take the damned money. Bring me back to normal, dirty, scrambling street life where at least the freaks are all people.* But he'd already begun to accept this was happening. The pain helped. And really, considering some of the terrible things he'd done for money, was this much worse?

Still, there were some things he had to know before he went through with this.

“I'm sorry.” The apology came out sincere enough. He'd had practice. “Look, you have a nice, uh, realm here. But I'm not sure I can stay for a month.”

The blond arched an eyebrow. “You'll not remain in the Fae realm. The prince wishes to see your world, your...New York City.”

“Whoa. Did you say prince?”

“I did.” The cold smile resurfaced. “Braelan, prince of Arcadia, will be your master for the next month. Serve him well and be rewarded.”

A fleeting thought crossed his mind and then his lips before he could stop it. “I think I'm gonna want more than a million for this.”

For a second he expected another backhand, but the blond laughed. “We’ll consider your fee open for negotiation. Please Braelan, and perhaps we’ll arrange a greater payment.”

“Right.” Trystan scrambled to his feet, already adding an *s* to the million. He could get his own place. Fix Talia up with decent digs. Hell, he could buy Manhattan—or at least a couple of blocks. “I’ll walk on my own now. Promise.”

Morven nodded. “Come, Trystan. Your new master’s arranged a bit of entertainment before you return to your realm.”

“Great.” He forced enthusiasm into the word, unable to ignore the nasty way Morven said *entertainment*—as if the festivities included him. He tried to shrug it off. He’d done humiliation and voyeur displays before, and for a hell of a lot less than millions of dollars.

No big deal. It’d be worth it. He hoped.

* * *

The restoration of his power did little to comfort Uriskel. He possessed no healing abilities and could do nothing for the various bruises and scrapes or his general emaciated condition. But he could, at last, leave the damned gaol.

Where apparently further punishment awaited at the stone circle.

Death seemed more attractive by the moment. He’d long ago given up the idea of eventual freedom and settled for the hope that someday Arcadia would tire of using him and allow him to fade from their constant summons. Two unchanging centuries had dulled that hope. And his recent encounter with Cobalt, who’d always known him as an enemy, a betrayer, served to sharpen the despair that had taken hope’s place. He’d been forced to confess their relation—both of them fathered in secret by the bastard king—a transgression forbidden to him on pain of the slow death the traitor Eoghann was now receiving instead.

Cobalt had accepted him. Helped him bring Eoghann down. Called him brother for the first time with a depth of affection Uriskel had never received...and

never would again, with Arcadia puppeting him across the realms on missions of blood.

He could not think of Cobalt. It would make this punishment harder to bear.

The mud Braelan had mired him in caked his legs and covered him near to the waist. He inched his back up the dirt, gained his feet, and brushed away what he could. Much of it stayed stubbornly in place. He closed his eyes and let himself rise, one hand lifted, grateful for the ability of flight. In most cases he cursed his flying—it meant he had no healing. And he was injured far more often than he'd found the need to take to the air.

Eventually his outstretched fingers touched stone. The heavy gaol cover, settled on a ring of mortared rocks, proved difficult to move in his weakened state. He managed to slide it a few inches before his arms shook too hard to continue. He'd have to use his magic to remove it, and drain himself further in the process. The blasted court had likely counted on this. With his palm pressed to the stone, he summoned his spark and willed the slab to move until it tipped over the edge of the ring.

Sweet, clean air flooded his senses. He would have wept if the idea of shedding tears did not repulse him. Instead, he lifted clear of the stinking hole and lowered himself to the ground. After a few indulgent moments of lying on his back in cool grass, he opened his eyes.

Where he expected to see the moon, the stars, the violet-black sky, he found a face.

“Keroth.” His voice refused to rise above a cracked whisper. “Been here long?”

The Seelie vassal blinked. “I have.”

“You might have helped me with the gaol cover.”

“You know that's not permitted.” Keroth backed away.

Uriskel sighed. He sat up slowly, and Keroth pushed a flask into his hand. With murmured thanks, he opened it and drank until the water tightened his

stomach. Some of the burning in his throat eased. "So they sent you to fetch me," he said. "I'll assume it wasn't with charitable intentions."

Keroth heaved a breath. "You'd be right."

"Predictable bastards." He lifted his gaze to the sky, to familiar patterns stitched in starlight, unwilling to meet Keroth's eyes. The young vassal harbored too much sympathy for him, despite knowing that any High Fae who attempted to shelter him risked banishment or worse. "What is it you're to do, then?"

"Bathe you. Feed you." As though speaking the words had reminded him, he tossed a half loaf of cold honey bread in Uriskel's lap. "And...heal you."

Uriskel gave a stiff nod. Under different circumstances, these orders would seem a kindness. But he knew precisely what they meant. "So it's to be physical punishment." He picked up the bread with hands that shook slightly. "Care to tell me what?"

"They mean to flog you."

He heard the unspoken *and* at the end of the statement. "What else?"

Silence answered him.

"Keroth."

He turned to face him at last. The guarded anguish in the boy's eyes threatened to undo him.

"What else? Tell me."

"I can't, Uri. No one knows." Keroth stared at the ground. "Braelan announced that he's arranged for entertainment. He'll say nothing further."

Uriskel managed to maintain outward calm, though his stomach threatened to empty itself the wrong way. The bratling never lost an opportunity to torment and humiliate him. Whatever Braelan had planned would be worse than anything the king doled out to him.

He swallowed a few bites of bread and found that his appetite had deserted him. "So be it," he said softly. "Do as you've been told, Keroth. I'll not be punished further for delaying their entertainment."

The boy complied. Uriskel let the healing magic flow through him, aware he would not enjoy the sensation of being whole for long.

Chapter Three

The forest ended eventually, and things got even weirder.

Morven led Trystan to a massive clearing obviously designed for exhibitions. A huge circle of bleached stone, etched with marks that kind of looked like Egyptian hieroglyphs, had been set in the ground. Stone risers edged the closest third of the circle. In the center stood two vine-covered columns on a round, raised platform. Six big chairs were arranged on the border of the far side—occupied by more of the Fae.

The male and female in the center chairs had to be the king and queen. They wore crowns. Trystan couldn't make out much more beyond that because it hurt to look at them. He'd never actually seen blinding beauty before. The others weren't quite so overwhelming, but like Morven, they were hot enough to seduce monks. Or nuns, if your tastes ran that way.

One of them, a dark-haired male seated next to the king, stood and started across the circle. Morven signaled a stop with a touch. "Your master," he murmured. "I'd suggest you curb your foul language when you address him."

"Whatever you want. It's your dime." Trystan watched the prince approach. He couldn't help admiring the lithe build, the confidence and grace of movement in his stride. Command was written all over this guy. He wore pale suede—tight pants and a sleeveless belted shirt laced loose up the front. Tribal line tattoos covered both arms from shoulders to wrists.

And his face. Damn. Not a single flaw or crooked line in his perfect features. His eyes were dark like his hair, with rings of almost electric purple around the pupils. Thick, dark lashes, firm lips curved in a tiny smile. The man—Fae,

whatever—dripped sensuality. He probably pissed champagne and shit Godiva chocolate.

The prince stopped in front of Morven. “You’ve brought my *gallae*. And a pretty one too.”

“Highness.” Morven bent his head and came up grinning. “His name is Trystan.”

Braelan’s smile grew. “Trystan,” he said, like he was tasting the word. “That will do.”

Trystan opened his mouth, closed it. Maybe he wasn’t supposed to talk to the guy unless he was spoken to first. Even if that wasn’t the case, though, he couldn’t think of anything to say at the moment. Besides *damn, you’re hot*, which probably wouldn’t go over well.

“My *gallae* is patient. I like that.” The prince turned to him and cupped a hand to his face, let his fingers glide down his jaw. “Blue eyes. Fire in them. Yes, this will be very good.”

The voice sent shivers through him. It was smoky, mesmerizing. He couldn’t look away. Couldn’t speak or move. Could barely breathe.

Braelan lowered his hand and put it behind his back. “I’ve a gift for you.” He brought it back holding two thick gold bracelets, inscribed with the same kind of symbols that marked the stone circle. “Will you wear them for me?”

For a second he thought he wouldn’t be able to answer. Braelan whispered something, an encouraging sound, and he found his tongue. “They’re beautiful. But I think they’re too big.”

The prince laughed. “They are not for your wrists.” He brushed the hem of Trystan’s shirt. “Remove this. I will show you.”

“Um. Okay.” He peeled his shirt off and held it in his hands. For the first time he noticed that even though it was night, there wasn’t a trace of a chill. The air caressed his skin like silk. And somehow it wasn’t dark. The only light came from

the stars and the brilliant silver moon, but he could see everything—right down to the detailed work of Braelan's tattoos.

Scars, he realized. Not ink, but raised lines of flesh with multiple colors.

“Exquisite,” Braelan whispered. “Come here.”

Trystan swallowed, moved closer. He was losing himself again, drowning in Braelan's eyes, his voice. The feeling was strange, but even stranger was the fact that he felt nothing sexual in the dizzy rush his presence brought. He didn't even have a hard-on anymore.

Braelan opened one of the bands, reached out, and fastened it around his upper right arm, around three inches from his shoulder. He did the same to his left with the other bracelet. “There, now. You are mine, Trystan. My own gallae.”

Distant alarms penetrated the spell over him. “For a month,” he said.

A faint line appeared between the prince's brows. “What was that?”

“I'm yours for a month.” More clouds cleared from his head. “That's the deal. Right?”

Braelan smiled. “Of course it is. One month.” He took the shirt from Trystan's hands and held it back to Morven without looking away. “You'll not need this. And I enjoy the sight of you.”

He grinned. “For as much as you're paying me, you can look at anything you want.”

“Impudent mortal!” Morven flushed dark and bared his teeth. “You'll not speak to the prince that way.”

“Easy, my friend. He meant no harm.”

Morven sneered. “He's a nasty tongue in him. I should like to cut it from his mouth.”

“None of that, now.”

Trystan's stomach fluttered. Morven actually sounded serious. Before he could decide whether he should be worried, an arm curled around his shoulder and turned him to face the chairs across the circle.

"They are arriving," Braelan murmured in his ear. "Come, Trystan. It is nearly time."

He almost asked who *they* were, but then he saw for himself. Fae drifted from the edge of the woods behind the chairs—most carrying jugs or bottles, or trays of what he guessed was food. A few went straight to the royal couple and began serving them. Most stood or seated themselves on the grass. Within minutes, a crowd of twenty or thirty had gathered.

A noise like a hundred sticks rubbing together erupted behind him. Trystan glanced back. Dozens of luminous pairs of orange eyes peered from the tops of the trees. "What are those?" he whispered.

"The *Orendl*." Braelan steered him gently away, across the stone toward the gathered Fae. "Come to watch. They sense that blood will be shed."

Trystan stiffened. "I said no cutting, or the deal's off."

"It will not be your blood, gallae."

Jesus. What kind of entertainment did they have planned? If these guys were royalty...shit. "You're not going to kill somebody, are you?"

"Not today."

The fluttering in his stomach increased. He probably would've puked if there had been anything in it.

Braelan stopped beside the raised platform, half-turned. "Is it ready, Morven?"

"Of course, Highness." Morven stepped up and took something from one of the columns. It looked like a hoop of braided sticks, a wreath without leaves or needles.

"Good. He comes now." The prince let his arm fall and looked at Trystan. He wasn't smiling anymore. "During our time together, there is one rule you must not

break. You will tell no one of our arrangement. Let them assume what they will about us. Do you understand this?"

"Sure. No problem." He tried to ignore the cold lump of doubt settling in his gut. Ready or not, the game was on. Time to play the submissive, make Braelan happy, and earn his ticket to an easier life.

Just for a month. Then he'd be free from everything.

Braelan nodded, looked past him. A wicked grin touched his lips. "The dog crawls from his hole," he said. "Is he ready to face his punishment?"

"I've not heard my crime yet. Highness."

The new voice reached down Trystan's throat and squeezed his heart. If winter could talk, it wouldn't sound half as cold and bitter as that. He turned slowly, caught sight of the speaker—and froze, unable to look away.

This one wasn't as tall as the others, not flawless or model perfect, and somehow that made him exponentially sexier. Shoulder-length dark red hair the color of polished mahogany. Impossibly green eyes. A curved scar along one side of his set jaw. Tawny skin rippled over defined muscle everywhere, visible because he wore only a leather string around his waist with two strategically placed flaps at the front and back. More scars on his chest formed a crude knotted star, not raised and deliberate like Braelan's, but pale pink and puckered. Healing.

His green eyes settled on Trystan. Raw hatred spilled from them with the intensity of a hundred suns.

The prince broke the electric silence. "Your crime is one of negligence, Uriskel. You were to bring your quarry back alive and unharmed."

"Unharmed." The rawness migrated to his voice. "How long did it take you to concoct that lie? I'd wager two months."

"Disobedient cur," Braelan snarled. "If you possess the smallest shred of wisdom, you will hold your tongue and do as you're told. Report to Morven. Now."

One corner of his mouth twitched down a little. “As you wish, Highness.” But he hesitated, and his heated gaze pinned Trystan again.

Trystan shuddered and forced himself to look away before those eyes burned right through him. When the Fae—Uriskel—finally moved past him toward the platform, he turned and looked up.

Morven shook the wreath thing, and it uncoiled to trail on the floor. It was a whip.

At least now Trystan knew where the bloodshed came in.

* * *

Though he still wasn't certain exactly what the bratling had planned, Uriskel knew it would have something to do with the human. The one who wore possession bands etched with Braelan's name—which meant the mortal had offered himself freely to the prince and would do his bidding. The idea disgusted him.

But he'd no room to dwell on that situation. It would take all his concentration to withstand the flogging if Morven was to administer it. He should have known. The sadistic vizier had probably requested the pleasure of wielding the whip.

The sight of the implement in Morven's hand chilled his blood. Bastard must've crafted it just for this occasion. Three separate lashes of braided willow hung from the handle, each tipped with sharpened metal barbs. A single stroke would slice his flesh to ribbons, and he knew he'd receive far more than one.

And they'd assembled nearly the entire court to watch. How delightful.

“Uriskel.” Morven held up the whip with a grin. “An inspired piece, is it not?”

He sneered. “You'll forgive me if I decline to appreciate it.”

“Oh, but you'll not have a choice in the matter. You'll realize that when you feel its sting.” Morven grabbed his wrist and pulled him forward. Or tried to.

He wrenched away. “Just tell me where you want me. I'll not piss myself cringing from the likes of you.”

“You may yet when we're through, Unseelie vermin.” Still grinning, Morven pointed to the columns. “Stand between them and reach as far as you can. Keep your back to the court.”

He walked to the position and speared a furious glance at the king before he turned away. The bastard didn't so much as twitch. What should he care if his secret spawn was tortured and humiliated at the hands of his shining prodigal child? No one would know of his transgressions. The king had ensured that.

The thorn-studded vines wrapping the columns made it difficult to place his hands. With a few nicks and scratches for his efforts, he managed to press his palms against the stone. The distance between them was a touch too wide to maintain purchase. He'd fall before it was through.

Morven subjected him to an appraising scan. “Spread your legs,” he said. “Feet against the columns.”

He complied with a scowl. No way he'd be able to hold this position. Already his arms twinged from keeping them up.

“Good dog.” Morven's smile was ice. He held a hand out, palm forward, and slowly closed his fingers in a fist.

A rustling groan sounded on either side of him. The vines were moving, circling the pillars like snakes. Tendrils separated themselves and coiled around his wrists, his ankles—squeezing, piercing his flesh with their thorns. He pressed his lips together and looked away from Morven's expectant gaze.

The human was staring at him with rapt attention.

How anyone could give himself to Braelan was beyond him, but this one obviously had. The mortal stood on the grass a few feet from the platform with the prince just behind him, watching intently. Waiting to be entertained as the rest of them. As humans went, he was a pretty specimen—of course, Braelan would have nothing less. Blond hair arranged in tousled spikes, engaging blue eyes, smooth pale skin, and angelic features. He'd a seductive aura about him; no denying that.

He wondered whether the human knew the part he was to play in this spectacle.

The vines finished binding him to the columns. Morven nodded and paced around to come behind him. "Very good. Nearly perfect, save one thing. I want nothing to impede my lash."

Uriskel closed his eyes, quite aware of what was meant. He was unsurprised to feel the string at his waist snap and his scant covering fall away. It would not be the only humiliation he'd suffer today.

Murmurs and outright laughter rolled from the gathered court. No doubt they'd begin fucking one another any moment. His flogging would serve as a backdrop for yet another frantic royal orgy. It was a small and likely unintentional kindness that he'd been bound facing away from them, so he'd not have to witness their depraved eroticizing of his pain. He blinked his eyes open and tried to relax his body, to perhaps cushion the first stroke of the whip—at least enough to keep from screaming outright.

Gods. Now Braelan's human stared at his flaccid cock with rounded eyes and gaped mouth, as though he'd never seen one before. Perhaps he was a eunuch. Braelan bent and whispered something, and the human shivered. No doubt the prince had already poisoned his mortal plaything's mind with tales of Uriskel's vicious, deadly exploits. Let him believe what he would. He'd not care if the human thought him revolting. The sentiment, after all, was returned.

Morven's hand settled between his shoulder blades and pushed, forcing him to stand erect. "Stay," he whispered. "If you can."

The pressure left abruptly. Uriskel curled and uncurled his fingers once, feeling the thorns shift and prod with the tension of his muscles. The blasted vines would cause nearly as much damage as the whip. He inhaled slowly. Anticipation sent electric currents through his back, and he willed himself to remain still.

An angry whistle and snap behind him, but no contact. Morven was testing his range. He'd not flinched, though he would soon. There was a slight step on stone, then another.

This time the whistle detonated in pain as the triple lash scored him shoulder to waist.

The sheer force of it stole his breath. He'd not be able to take more than a handful of lashes like that before the screams came. Another stroke landed before the fire faded from the first, drawing a grunt from him—and something further. A stirring in his groin, unwelcome and unbidden. His cock throbbed, hardened. A third shot left him drizzling blood at his back and completely erect in front.

Mandrake. The bastard had soaked the whip in mandrake oil to force an arousal.

At least they'd not made him drink the stuff. Ingesting mandrake, in addition to spiking an erection, heightened all sensations. Including pain.

"The nasty dog enjoys it," Braelan called, to the audible delight of the court. "Strike harder, Morven. See if he'll spill his seed."

Uriskel fixed the bratling with a black stare. Just as their gazes locked, Morven lashed him at full strength, hard enough to dig the metal tips into his flesh. He gasped at the impact, uttered a brief cry when Morven yanked the barbs free.

Braelan raised a hand, pointed one finger skyward, and made a twirling motion. The entire platform shuddered and began to rotate.

"Arcadia! Gaze upon the filthy phallus of an Unseelie." The prince's mocking banter rang through the clearing. "Note the delight this one draws from his punishment. He knows it is warranted."

Uriskel caught a glimpse of the court, jeering faces and bodies tumbled together, before the whip struck again and forced his eyes closed. Still the platform turned. Another lash snapped him taut against the restraints, produced a choked and breathless shout. Blood trickled down his back and his arms. When the whip failed to fall again, he dared to look up.

He saw the woods, the eyes of the Orendl watching him. Slowly, the rotation brought him again to face Braelan and his human. The prince laughed and made an obscene gesture with his tongue.

The mortal did not reflect his amusement. Silent tears slipped from the little blond's eyes and tracked his cheeks. Blasted weak creature. Uriskel sneered at him, but a fresh stroke shattered his contempt with anguish. He heaved a breath and let his head hang forward.

Morven settled into a solemn, steady rhythm. The explosive sting of the lash dimmed his sight and hearing until there was nothing but the stroke and the pain, again and again. His blood pulsed in hot streams, soaking his ass and thighs, pooling around his feet. He lost count, but he thought he'd received around twenty lashes when he began to scream.

At perhaps thirty, the punishing blows stopped. Braelan was speaking again, but he could not make sense of the words. He drew gasping breaths and attempted to focus, hoping this meant an end to the flogging, knowing it did not.

Something hard and flat impacted the side of his face. The shock of it forced his eyes open, and his blurred gaze found the prince standing before him on the platform. "You've something to say to me, cur?" Braelan said.

Uriskel's chest hitched. Speaking was a struggle. "Suppose I'm to thank you. And apologize. Did not hear your words of wisdom."

Braelan looked beyond him and nodded. The lash fell hard. Uriskel screamed.

Fingers gripped his throat. A hand forced his chin up. "Hear me now, Unseelie?"

"Yes. Highness."

"I've decided to grant you some measure of mercy." Braelan moved aside to reveal the now blank-faced mortal behind him. "Since you cannot seem to calm yourself down, my gallae is prepared to do this for you." He sent a meaningful look between Uriskel's legs.

Understanding triggered a dawning horror. “No...”

“Refuse this kindness again, and I will remove your problem with my blade instead. I’ll hear nothing but thanks from your wicked lips.”

His head pounded sickly. “I thank you, Highness,” he whispered.

“Better. But first, you must meet my condition.” The prince leaned in until his mouth nearly touched his ear. “Drop your glamour, Uriskel,” he said softly. “I would have Trystan know your true form, your disgusting appearance, so there can be no question over which of us is the monster.”

A bone-deep chill settled into him. He’d no choice but to comply.

Chapter Four

Trystan had to stop watching after fifteen lashes, when Uriskel's back was already flayed raw. But no matter how tightly he squeezed his eyes shut, he couldn't stop hearing the screams. The pain in them, the absolute fury and humiliation, hurt more than the sight of his bloody flesh.

Soon after he closed off the sight, the prince whispered a word he didn't understand, and twin shocks slammed through his arms. They were coming from the bands. He opened his eyes and the pain stopped.

"Pay attention, gallae." Braelan spoke calmly, but the warning was there. So the bracelets weren't just for decoration. "You understand what I've instructed you to do?"

"Yes," he whispered. At least now Uriskel was in front of him and he couldn't see the damage. And he had a job to do. He'd already started compartmentalizing, drawing on what he knew and pushing the rest from his immediate awareness. He knew blowjobs. A cock was a cock, even if it was attached to a tortured fairy.

After Braelan finished whispering whatever insults he'd intended to Uriskel, he stepped aside and pulled Trystan gently forward. "As I have said, this creature is not what he seems. You will see him now as he truly is. Do not be afraid. He cannot harm you." With that, he walked to the other side of the platform and stood next to Morven.

Of course he can't, Trystan wanted to shout. *You damn near killed him*. But he held his tongue and stared at Uriskel, vaguely curious about this so-called true form.

With apparent effort, the Unseelie lifted his head. His eyes glittered with anguish. “Human,” he whispered, so faint that Trystan wasn't sure he'd actually spoken. “I'll derive no pleasure from this.”

Trystan swallowed hard. *Same here, pal.* But he couldn't make himself say it aloud.

The green of Uriskel's eyes darkened to glossy black. For a second Trystan thought it was a trick of the light—or his mind—and then the rest of the Fae started changing. His skin turned a pale corpse blue. His features sharpened; his jaw elongated. Lips that had become blue-black peeled back and revealed curved bone needles where his teeth should have been. His ears grew points that poked through the red-vine tangles of his hair like blue devil horns.

Trystan clapped a hand to his mouth and blinked back fresh tears. He was monstrous, yes, but beautiful too. A caged and mistreated tiger, beaten but still proud. Those eyes retained a ferocious intensity that blazed right to his soul.

A chorus of hissing swelled from the cluster of Fae. Apparently they didn't like this guy's natural appearance.

“Do it, mortal.” Uriskel's lips moved with difficulty around his needle teeth.

Shivering, he went to his knees and got an eyeful of Uriskel's true cock. Long, thick, blue. Ridged with darker blue veins. Stiff and solid as marble. It gave new meaning to the term blue balls. He clenched his teeth so he wouldn't laugh.

Christ, was he really going to do this? It wasn't like he had a choice. He tried to convince himself he was doing Uriskel a favor, giving him some release. That woody had to hurt like hell—if he could even feel anything outside his shredded back. He worked up as much spit as his clenching throat would let him, opened his mouth, and took him halfway in.

The gasp Uriskel let out could've been pleasure or disgust. Trystan slid farther down the shaft, surprised at his taste—clean and almost sweet, like pure water. If he closed his eyes, he might get through this fast.

Something whistled. Uriskel jerked forward, and a scream filled Trystan's skull.

He fell back gagging. It took him a few seconds to realize the scream had been Uriskel's, the violent lunge unintentional. Morven had lashed him again.

"Keep going, gallae." Mild threat edged the prince's voice. "Use him to brace yourself if you must, but do not stop moving that luscious mouth. We will have our entertainment."

"Okay. Okay. Jesus, all right." Trystan righted himself and hooked his arms around Uriskel's thighs. The wet warmth coating the backs of them sent a twist through his stomach. *Come on. You're a whore, for fuck's sake. You can do this.* The silent pep talk restored his determination to get this over with, and once again he worked Uriskel's cock into his mouth.

Another whistle, a deafening crack. This time Uriskel only flinched a little, and no sound escaped him. Trystan drew back a few inches and rolled his eyes up, suddenly afraid he was sucking off a corpse.

Uriskel had somehow closed his mouth around all those teeth, and bright blood leaked from the corners. He'd bitten his tongue to keep quiet.

Shit, this guy was hardcore.

He pulled back the rest of the way, almost to the tip, letting his tongue trail along the underside. Uriskel moaned and shivered. Good. If he could manage to get turned on while the crazy fuck with the whip tore his ass to shreds, they could finish this faster. And maybe the whipping would stop then. Trystan suckled the head, played the loose skin underneath with tongue and teeth. A groan that was almost a sob met his efforts.

Despite the horror of it, his own cock twinged. He loved those sounds.

He shifted, seeking a better grip on blood-slick muscled thighs, and went down again. All the way, until the tip hit the back of his throat. God, the taste of him. Incredible. He'd never experienced anything like it—and he'd sucked a lot of cock.

He could almost forget the circumstances of this particular whacked-out sexual episode.

Until the whip sliced the air and impacted flesh with a sharp crack.

Uriskel gave a muffled, abbreviated grunt that vibrated through his cock. The sensation stirred Trystan's groin. An involuntary little hum escaped his throat, and Uriskel trembled against him. Shit. Did he like that, or was it just an aftershock from the lash? He hummed again. Uriskel's breath caught, then left in a shaking sigh.

Oh yeah. He could work with that.

He slid out and down, out and down, humming gently. Uriskel tensed and shook, his breath coming faster. The whip cracked and drove him forward. But Trystan was ready this time. He met the desperate thrust with one of his own, burying the cock deep in his throat. Uriskel's strained cry shifted to breathless pleasure.

Trystan picked up the pace and sucked harder, hummed more. *Come on, baby. Spray for me.* Fuck, he'd hum the *1812 Overture* if it'd get this guy to come, give them their entertainment. End this freak show.

The lash whicked out again. Uriskel jerked rigid. A thin moan unspooled from him and ended in a single choked sob. The sound contained the fringes of a scream. Trystan knew he wouldn't be able to hold out much longer.

He pumped faster. One hand left a thigh and slid lower to caress and squeeze his balls. The sounds he made were intoxicating. *That's it, baby. Let it out.* The whip whistled, sounding distant compared to Uriskel's soft groans.

Tears fell from his eyes when Uriskel flinched inside him. Something warm and wet dripped on his forehead—fresh blood. Uriskel biting his tongue again.

Uriskel bucked and cried out without any help from the lash. Moaning, Trystan rammed the cock home and sucked. Relief filled him as much as the hot cum spurting down his throat. Morven struck a vicious blow with the whip at the height of his cry and forced it into a scream.

Trystan held fast, keeping Uriskel in his mouth until the cry stopped and his breath shuddered out. Finally, he let the relaxing cock slip from his wet mouth and looked up.

Shocked black eyes stared back at him. Bloodied lips parted. Uriskel said nothing.

“Well done, gallae.” Braelan was suddenly behind him, lifting him to his feet. “You are a joy to observe. I should like to see more soon.” The prince draped an arm across his heaving chest and looked past Uriskel. “One more, I believe,” he said.

Uriskel closed his eyes just before the lash struck. A massive grunt exploded from him...but he didn't scream.

“Your punishment is over, dog.” Braelan maneuvered Trystan to the edge of the platform. “Are you not grateful?”

Uriskel drew a breath and coughed it out. Crimson droplets sprayed from his mouth. “I...thank you.” He didn't look at the prince. Kept his gaze to the ground.

“As you should. Now, Trystan, I must tend to a few matters before we depart. I would like you to stay here and attend this scum. He will not harm you.” Braelan laughed. “He knows better. Particularly since he is to accompany us to your realm as my bodyguard.”

That got Uriskel's attention. His head snapped up, and he sent a silent glare at the prince.

“This troubles you? Perhaps you need further punishment after all.”

“No.” Uriskel shivered, looked down. “Highness.”

“Let him down, Morven. And come with me.”

Morven nodded and gestured. The vines wrapping Uriskel's wrists and ankles blackened, and he collapsed almost instantly. The sight of his butchered back threw the reverse switch on Trystan's stomach, and he desperately swallowed bile. He really didn't want to puke all over Uriskel. It was bad form.

The platform stopped turning. "I will not be long," Braelan said. He leaned over and kissed Trystan's forehead. "I look forward to everything your world has to offer."

Trystan nodded, unable to reply with words. The things he'd pushed aside to get through the torturous blowjob flooded back, and he started to understand just how much shit he'd gotten himself into. Maybe millions of dollars wasn't worth this.

And maybe he no longer had a choice.

* * *

Try as he might, Uriskel could not shake the feeling of the human's mouth on his cock. In true form, no less. And Trystan had not retched or turned away. Braelan's hold over him must have been powerful.

But the human had wept. So some part of him was still aware enough to be repulsed.

He allowed himself nearly five minutes before he attempted to move. The slightest motion seared every inch of his body, but he'd not lie here and let the human gape at his back. Being made to scream was humiliation enough. He pushed up slowly, his thorn-sliced arms trembling with effort, and managed to rise half a foot before they gave out. He smashed down on unforgiving stone, and a pained snarl escaped him.

"Hey." The human, seated on the edge of the platform, scuttled closer. "You...uh, want some help?"

"Do not touch me, human." Gods, was that his voice? A pathetic wheeze was the best he could manage. He'd received far more lashes on his last flogging and been less damaged. Morven's implement had done its job well, though he'd not tell the bastard that.

"Whatever," the human said. "By the way, I've got a name. Most humans do. Mine's Trystan."

Uriskel ignored him and tried again to rise. This time he settled his weight on his elbows. He made it to his knees and paused, gasping at the fiery spasms that wracked him. Almost there. He steeled himself and gave a tremendous push. The pain nearly pushed him into blackness, but he held on and sat beside one of the columns. In a slick of his own still-warm blood. Though modesty seemed unnecessary at this point, he covered his spent cock with an arm.

Humans. Blast Braelan and his ridiculous whims. He'd rather assassinate the entire Unseelie court than trail about after the prince while he sated himself with humans and risked exposing the existence of the Fae through his ignorance. Braelan had never ventured into the mortal realm for longer than a few moments, and his last appearance there had been nearly a century ago. An extended stay could be disastrous. And Arcadia would place the blame on him for any havoc the prince caused.

The little blond shot him a quick frown. He stood, walked to the opposite column, and returned holding the sundered covering. "Morven left this here," he said. "You want it?"

"Stop."

"Stop what?"

"Helping me."

"Fine." He dropped the covering at Uriskel's feet, sat back down, and hugged his knees to his chest. "This is gonna be a blast," he muttered.

Uriskel sighed. "Do as you will, huma—Trystan," he said. "But I'll not thank you."

Trystan turned narrowed eyes on him. "I didn't ask for your thanks, did I? If I wanted that, I would've said so already. Christ, I just sucked your cock, man. Er. I mean Fae."

"You did." He battered away the remembered sensation. "At Braelan's command."

“Yeah, well, Braelan is—ah, shit. Never mind.” Trystan folded his arms and pressed his forehead against them. “This is nucking futs. Un-goddamn-real.”

Though he was loath to admit it, the bluntness Trystan spoke with intrigued him. He relented a bit. “I’d not meant to harm you...before,” he said. “When you fell.”

“What, you mean when that psycho was whipping you?” Trystan stared at him. “Jesus, it wasn’t like you could help it. And you—damn. You saying you were biting your tongue so you wouldn’t hurt *me*?”

He frowned. “I suppose I was, in part. And I do have some small measure of pride remaining to me.”

“Yeah. I’ll say you do.” Trystan flushed and turned away. “So I guess you’re coming with us, huh?”

“Apparently.”

“You sound real happy about it.”

“Happy.” Renewed disgust stirred coldness in his belly. “Perhaps you enjoy serving the bratling prince, but I do not.”

Trystan opened his mouth, closed it. “Maybe we shouldn’t talk.”

“An excellent idea.”

When Trystan didn’t say anything more, Uriskel closed his eyes and rested his head on the column. He’d no wish to know Braelan’s latest conquest. And he certainly didn’t desire those hot, wet lips on his cock again, or to feel those sounds he’d made vibrating through him like a heartsong.

The brief pleasure had been a greater torment than the flogging. No mortal or Fae desired a beast such as he.

“Hey, uh, Uriskel. What’s the deal with those chairs there?”

He looked at him. “Do you never cease talking?”

“Not really.” Trystan smirked. “I’m a people person. Well. You know what I mean. And I was just wondering—are those things made out of bones?”

"The thrones of the court? They are."

"Oh." He shivered a little. "Whose bones are they?"

"The enemies of Arcadia. Most are Unseelie." At least his bones would never serve to support the idle asses of the court. The king would not allow such filth to taint his furnishings.

"Damn. That's your kind, isn't it?"

"Yes," he whispered. "My kind."

Trystan flashed a stricken look. "I'm sorry," he said. "That was rude. I just...well, I'm kinda new to this whole Fae thing."

"New? Yes, most humans know nothing." For the first time he realized how odd it was that Braelan should have brought this human here. If he'd intended to spend time in the mortal realm, why had he not simply joined Trystan there?

The only reasoning he could come up with was that Braelan had brought the human across the veil for the sole purpose of humiliating him on top of his punishment. If that were true, no doubt he'd planned further degradation for the coming time.

"Somebody's coming." Trystan pointed.

He followed the gesture. "Keroth," he said. "Likely the bratling wants me on my feet for the journey."

"Why do you call him that? Bratling, I mean."

"You ask far too many questions."

Trystan shrugged. "You don't ask enough."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing."

Uriskel glowered at him. Before he could say anything further, Keroth mounted the platform and stumbled across to him, carrying a full flask and a bundle of cloth. The vassal dropped the items and knelt in front of him. "Uri, you should not be sitting," he said. "You are a mess."

“You've noticed.” He hitched a smile. “And you've come bearing gifts.”

“Hush. Gods, what they've done to you...” Keroth glanced over his shoulder. “You. Come and help me with him.”

“No, Keroth. I don't need—”

“I do. And you'll not move another inch until I say you can.”

He almost laughed. He'd never seen the boy so furious. But Keroth was too sensitive to understand the black amusement he derived from Braelan's constant torment, so he remained sober. “I suppose you're to heal me again,” he said.

Keroth snarled. “Not completely. The prince has—”

“What do you want me to do?” Trystan stood behind Keroth, arms folded across his chest as though he were cold.

“We must lay him down.” Keroth didn't look back. He had no love for humans, and Uriskel didn't blame him. “You stay here. I'll take the other side.”

“Keroth, I am perfectly capable of—”

“You're not, and you won't.” The vassal stood and motioned for Trystan to take his place. His shoulders stiffened, and he moved behind Uriskel. There was a pause, then he made a wretched choked sound. “Ah, gods, Uri...”

Trystan crouched in front of him and bowed his head. “I'm sorry,” he whispered.

“Why should you be?” Uriskel narrowed his eyes. “Surely Braelan's informed you that it's no less than I deserve.”

“Yeah, but—”

“Human.” Keroth's strained voice hammered down on him. “Take hold of his arm. Mind his wrist.”

Trystan followed the direction, and he tried to ignore the blossom of warmth at the human's touch. It proved difficult...until they manipulated him onto his side, then his stomach, and rekindled the anguish in his back. Then he could discount everything else.

For a moment the world vanished under a gray haze. He heard dim sounds, pained sobs, and realized they'd come from him. Eventually the flood of agony ebbed a bit and allowed him to feel Keroth's healing magic working through him. And the heat of Trystan's hands on his thighs, a gentle pressure holding him down. A sensation he refused to enjoy.

When the magic stopped, he remained far from healed. But at least he could move without losing consciousness. He lifted his gaze to an exhausted Keroth. "Do I have your permission to get up now?"

"It's not funny, Uri." Keroth scowled, nodded once. "Get up, then. I still have to... Blast that callous toad, anyway. I'll not do it."

Frowning, he rose to his knees. "Whatever it is, you know you must," he said softly. "I'll not let him banish you because of me."

"What the fuck just happened?"

Trystan's voice shook. Uriskel turned to find him pale and cringing away, as though he'd just touched something indescribably nasty. Of course, he had. "Nothing's happened." He restored his glamour reflexively. Better that than to have the human continue recoiling in disgust.

"But you...and he just...your back. It's better."

"Yes." His brow furrowed. "Keroth possesses healing abilities."

"Abilities. Jesus fucking Christ." He shot to his feet, shook his head. "Magic? Okay, fine. It's magic. A goddamn fairy tale. Where's the gingerbread house?"

Uriskel sent Keroth a worried glance and saw his concerns reflected in the boy's face. Humans had a tendency to slip into insanity when confronted with the realities of the Fae. Aware that Keroth could no more offer comfort to a human than end his own life, he rose and held a hand out, a calming gesture. "You must breathe, Trystan," he said. "No harm will come to you. Did Braelan not prepare you for any of this before he brought you to the realm?"

"I came with Morven. And no, he didn't tell me shit." Trystan's eyes flared, and he pressed his lips together as though he'd revealed some secret. "Damn it!"

"Relax, *àillidh*." The endearment slipped from him almost without awareness, and he dismissed it as borne of his concern for the human's sanity. "You've nothing to fear."

"Oh yeah?" Trystan moved closer. "Convince me."

"How?"

Another step. "Touch me. Prove that I'm real, and you're real, and this isn't some fucked-up trip on a spiked batch."

He'd no idea what a spiked batch was, and touching Trystan seemed a dangerous prospect. But he had to calm the human down, if only so he was not blamed for reducing Braelan's new possession to a quivering bundle of madness. He reached out, hesitated, and laid a hand on Trystan's arm. "You see?" he said hoarsely. "I am flesh, and you are flesh."

Trystan's features crumpled. With a hitching breath, he closed the distance between him and laid his head on Uriskel's chest. "I'm sorry," he whispered. "So sorry. I didn't... I couldn't..."

The shock of his action gave way to reluctant pity. "Hush, *àillidh*. You've no need to apologize." Unthinking, he rubbed Trystan's shuddering back.

"By the gods. You've quite the set of balls on you, Unseelie."

The voice was a blade through him. Uriskel looked up to find Braelan approaching the platform, his wry and wicked expression promising fresh torment.

Chapter Five

Even while he was doing it, Trystan knew it was a bad idea to cozy up to Uriskel—but he'd needed the touch, the reassurance, and he felt like shit for what the guy had been through. Hearing Braelan catch them and call him out made everything worse.

He stiffened and turned around. "It wasn't his fault," he said. "It was all me."

"Now, gallae. There is no need to defend this dog." Braelan stepped up and fixed Uriskel with an icy stare. "He should know his place by now."

"But he didn't—"

"Enough, human." The cold command came from Uriskel. "What do you want of me, Highness? You cannot give a dog a treat such as this and then expect him not to try taking it again, given the opportunity."

Trystan's jaw dropped. What the fuck was he doing? Was he *trying* to get his ass beat again? Shit, maybe Braelan hadn't been exaggerating about this guy.

The prince grinned. "Naughty dog," he said. "We will have to train you to go against your nature, won't we?"

"It looks that way."

"I will enjoy that. You'll have your punishment later, when we've settled in the human realm." Braelan glared at the healing guy, Keroth. "Have you finished, then?"

Keroth's mouth quivered. "I won't—"

“The vassal doesn't wish to touch me.” Uriskel edged between the prince and Keroth. “Can you blame him? Your lackey's clumsy execution has failed to improve my appearance.”

Braelan's brow lifted. “So bold today. I mocked you before, saying you enjoyed punishment, but perhaps I was not far off the mark.”

“You know nothing of me. Highness.”

Trystan bit his lip. This guy was just begging for pain. But from what he'd said before, his jumping in had to be to protect Keroth from being banished or whatever for refusing. So was Uriskel trying to protect him too, or was he just an asshole?

“You are dismissed, Keroth. Leave what you have brought.” Braelan turned and smiled. “I will have you prepare him. It will amuse me.”

“Prepare him for what?” Trystan whispered.

“Highness, please...” Keroth hadn't moved. “He's paid for his transgressions.”

“And yet he continues to defy me.” The prince's voice was frigid. “Leave, vassal. You would not survive banishment.”

“But—”

Uriskel whirled on him. “Leave, boy! I'll not have you coddling me. I'll take what I've earned.”

Keroth's features shifted to careful blankness. Without a word, he walked away.

Braelan's gaze stayed cold. “Do not think I am unaware of what you are doing,” he said. “I know you attempt to protect him. And I am tempted to banish him anyway.”

“Do it, then. I've no sympathy for any member of your precious court.”

The prince stared at him. Uriskel didn't even blink. Finally, Braelan shrugged and picked up the bottle next to the pile of clothes Keroth had brought. “You'll need this, gallae,” he said. “Do not be too concerned. I'll not require you to perform your services on this dog at the moment. I only wish you to ready him for our journey.”

Trystan took the bottle with a wary glance at Uriskel. “What is it?”

“Mandrake oil.”

The look on Uriskel's face said he knew what the stuff did and he didn't want it. Trystan stared at his feet. “What am I supposed to do?”

“Rub it on his back.” The prince smiled, but there was nothing warm in it. “Surely, unlike my simpering vassal, you do not fear a bit of blood.”

He shook his head. He'd seen worse—not too many worse things, but once he'd seen gunshot wounds up close. And he'd watched *A Nightmare on Elm Street*. Hell, at this point it was perfectly rational to compare horror movies with what was passing for reality. But something else bothered him, and he really wished it didn't. “Will it...hurt him?”

Braelan laughed. “Of course it will. Only not in ways you might think.” He circled Uriskel so the Unseelie was between them, and said, “On your knees, mongrel.”

Uriskel complied in slow silence.

A gesture served as the prince's command. *Proceed*. Willing his hands not to shake, Trystan pulled the cork from the bottle. He wouldn't just dump the shit on. Even with what the other guy had done, supposedly healed him, Uriskel's back still looked like he'd been attacked by a three-toed tiger. At least the triple gashes scoring his flesh had stopped drizzling blood, though they glistened darkly with it.

He poured some of the oil into a cupped palm. The stuff was dark red, nearly black, and weirdly warm. It almost felt alive. An unpleasant shudder worked through him, and he moved closer to the stiff, kneeling Fae.

Close enough to see the old scars under the fresh cuts. The ghosts of whippings past.

Jesus. His stomach flipped in a lazy rotation. He brought his oil-slick hand to within a whisper of the savaged flesh and could go no farther. It would hurt him, but not in ways he might think... What the hell was that supposed to mean?

“Your human hasn't the strength for this, Highness.” Though Uriskel spoke through clenched teeth, a mocking thread ran through his words. The bastard was goading him into it. Maybe he really did like pain.

If that was the case, Trystan would oblige him.

He tilted his hand up and pressed his palm against a shoulder. Hard muscle turned to rock under his hand. He slid down, rubbing the too-warm stuff into one of the welts. Uriskel groaned and shuddered. He poured out more and repeated the action, trying to ignore the horrific sensation of raw flesh under his hand.

Uriskel drew a gasping breath, and his cock sprang to stiff attention.

Holy shit. This guy was a masochist of the highest order. Or maybe the purest, since he didn't seem to actually welcome the delivery methods. But pain sure as hell excited him in a physical way.

After he smeared another handful of oil on Uriskel's back, the prince signaled to him and said, “Enough. Clothe yourself, dog. I wish to be in the great city now.”

Without looking at either of them, Uriskel pushed to one knee, stood, and dressed in the clothes Keroth had brought.

“Now, then.” Braelan turned a smile on Trystan and touched fingers to his jaw, a sweet caress. “We will need a...den, a haven. A comfortable place for the three of us, where we will be provided food, bath, and beds, and will not be disturbed. For one month. Do you know of such a place?”

Talia's cramped apartment flashed through his mind. No way. Even if it was acceptable by the prince's standards, she'd never let him crash there for a month by himself, let alone with a couple of strangers—even if they were gorgeous strangers. “Well,” he said slowly. “I guess what we need is a hotel suite. Like in a posh place somewhere uptown. But it'll cost a fortune.”

“It will cost you nothing, gallae. I will provide for your merchants.” The fingertips on his jaw whispered up, settled at his temple. “Where shall we stay?”

He frowned. Most of his hotel experience had been cheap, dirty, and usually roach infested. His high-end clients usually had townhouses they'd brought him to. But there had been one, a Japanese "businessman" in the area for some deal out near Staten Island. Something to do with a street-fighting ring, and if the guy had been legitimately employed, then Trystan was the goddamned king of Spain. He'd been inked solid from neck to wrists to ankles. One of his semiregulars had hooked them up, and they'd stayed a night in an insanely expensive place that obviously catered to loaded criminals. Cash basis, no questions. There was a color in the name. Gray...no, black. The Black Dragon.

"The Black Dragon," Braelan said. "I like it."

Trystan shivered. He'd never said a word out loud. If the prince could read his mind, he was in some serious shit. It had to be whatever he was doing with his fingers, touching him.

He hoped.

Braelan trailed his hand away, then reached up into the air. He drew his arm down slowly, and a shimmering part in reality appeared, just like the one Morven had made back in the bathroom. "Dogs first," the prince said with a sneer. "After all, you must protect me, should there be danger awaiting us on the other side."

Uriskel moved to the rip, his expression blank. His erection strained against the fabric of the pants he'd put on. Just before he stepped through, his eyes settled on Trystan, sizzling with fury...and something more. Then he vanished into the swirling vortex.

Braelan grabbed Trystan's hand. "Come," he said. "Your city awaits us." And before Trystan could murmur something appropriate, he pulled them both through.

* * *

At least Braelan had either sense or good fortune enough to bring them across the veil into an alley behind the hotel. There were no humans present. Uriskel moved back and waited until the prince crossed over, dragging his pet behind him.

The bratling hadn't forgotten the mandrake oil. Of course. Already his cock throbbed almost as painfully as his back, and Braelan would not allow him relief any time soon.

"So." Braelan gazed at the surrounding buildings with vague mistrust, as though he expected them to collapse atop him. "How much of your money will this require?"

Trystan shrugged. "Probably three, four hundred a night for a suite. Ten grand, easy."

Braelan raised an eyebrow. "Grand?"

"Thousand, Highness. Ten thousand dollars." Uriskel swallowed rising anger. The prince knew nothing of this realm. He may as well have worn a shirt that said *I am not human*. "Not an easy sum to come by for most."

Braelan reached into the pocket inside his shirt and produced a thick stack of hundred-dollar bills. "Morven has made the necessary preparations for me."

"Put that away!" Uriskel moved to block the prince from the side alley leading to the street and glowered at him. "Humans kill each other for less. Should you be shot, I'll not be able to heal you."

"Infidel! You dare to command me?"

"He's right," Trystan said quickly. "It's bad news to wave that much cash around, especially in the city. Just...wait till we get inside, okay?"

Braelan replaced the bills. "Very well. But I'll not tolerate such outbursts from you, Unseelie."

"Highness..." Uriskel closed his eyes, drew a deep breath, and exhaled. "If you wish me to protect you, you must allow me to do my job. And you mustn't mention the Fae in front of humans." He shot a glare at Trystan. "Present company excepted, of course. Call me dog or mongrel all you like. Not Unseelie."

For a moment he expected Braelan to lash out again, to promise further punishment. But the anger eased from the prince's features. He nodded at the building before them and said, "Come. I wish to see our quarters."

Trystan led the way up the side alley, with Braelan nearly beside him and Uriskel trailing behind. At least the bratling hadn't rejected his request outright. Still, he harbored little hope of a single moment's peace for the next thirty days. Braelan had not been to the human realm in a century. Much had changed, and he would not understand it. Worse, he would continue to act like the spoiled prince he was, and become enraged when the humans did not show him deference.

When they reached the sidewalk, Braelan stopped so suddenly, Uriskel nearly walked into him. He turned in a slow circle, eyes wide, mouth agape. "By the gods," he whispered. "It is so...big. And loud! And...what is that smell?" He started away from the hotel, pushing through the crowds and drawing more than a few glares and curses.

With a silent curse of his own, Uriskel went after him. Trystan followed at his heels. "What's the matter with him?" the human asked. "Is he crazy?"

"No. He is royal-born," Uriskel replied curtly. For an instant he lost sight of the prince and cursed all over again, but then he spotted him standing before a street vendor with an array of roasted nuts and soft pretzels on display. A heavy burned odor rolled from the cart in waves and cloyed at the air. "There," he said. "We must get him before he causes trouble."

Trystan stopped. He clamped a hand over his mouth, backed up a step. "I can't," he said, his words muffled and choking. "I..." He stumbled back farther and abruptly turned away.

"Useless," Uriskel snarled. "Fine. Stay here, then. I'll fetch the bratling." He started for the cart and behind him heard Trystan retch, a miserable dry sound. He glanced back, saw the human weave to the edge of the sidewalk and huddle against a bank of phones, one arm flung against it to steady himself.

He almost went to him.

But whatever Trystan struggled against, he'd have to manage alone. He'd not allow Braelan to cause a scene and bring down human law enforcement, or worse. He made his way to the prince and cleared his throat. "Should we not be checking in now?"

Braelan ignored him and pointed to one of the glass partitions, filled with cashews and labeled *Honey Roasted*. "What will you take for that?" he said.

The vendor, who was turning a crank on a machine in his cart, didn't even look up. "Three bucks a bag," he said. "Five for a box."

"I wish for a box," Braelan said.

At that, the vendor's head came up slowly, squinting through smoke that churned from the machine. "Then I wish for five bucks," he said.

"What—"

"Five dollars," Uriskel whispered harshly. "Let me handle this."

"No." The prince reached in his pocket and came out with a single hundred. At least he hadn't produced the entire stack this time. "A box," he repeated.

The vendor shook his head. "I can't break that."

"Break?"

Groaning, Uriskel switched to the Fae tongue. "He does not have enough change for that large a bill," he said. "These street merchants are not rich, Highness."

Braelan's lip curled. He seemed about to lay into him, but then he turned to the vendor and thrust the bill at him. "I do not require change," he said. "And I will take two boxes. This and this." He pointed in turn to honey-roasted cashews and toffee peanuts.

Without a word, the vendor snatched the bill and turned away with it. After a few seconds, he grabbed two boxes and filled them with the requested nuts, then pushed them across the top of the glass cases. "Enjoy," he said.

Braelan nodded toward them. "Carry them for me."

"As you wish," Uriskel muttered under his breath. After he retrieved the warm boxes, he spoke louder. "Your... Trystan is sick," he said. "Back there."

The prince's eyes narrowed. "Take me to him."

Uriskel led him back to the bank of phones, where Trystan had gotten to his feet and stood leaning against the far side, eyes closed, one arm folded across his stomach. He was pale and breathing slowly.

"What is the matter?" Braelan touched his arm.

Trystan opened his eyes. "Nothing," he said. "I'm all right." His gaze strayed to Uriskel, and the clouds in his eyes cleared. "Are we getting a room now?"

"Indeed we are." Braelan held a hand toward Uriskel without looking at him, and he dropped one of the boxes into it. The prince pulled the flaps open and offered it to Trystan.

The human paled further. "No, thanks," he said. "Not real hungry."

Shrugging, Braelan extracted one and popped it in his mouth. He chewed, and his features crinkled in distaste. He swallowed hard. "These are terrible!" With a frown, he grabbed another and consumed it just as quickly as the first. "I've not tasted worse," he said. "Come. We've still things to accomplish tonight, and I have decided on what they shall be."

Cold seeped through Uriskel. He'd nearly forgotten he was to be punished further.

He followed the pair of them—Trystan subdued and silent, Braelan eating cashews and making an awful face with each one—and tried to distract himself by wondering what had shaken the human so thoroughly. It hadn't been merely a physical illness. He'd seemed almost...frightened.

But too soon, his thoughts returned to his torn back and his painfully engorged cock. The bratling would ensure he felt much worse before the night was through.

He'd nothing to spare for Trystan. He would ignore the urge to comfort him, because it would only earn him more pain. And because he did not care about the feelings of Braelan's pet.

Even if his heart whispered that he did.

Chapter Six

The Black Dragon seemed the same as it had been when Trystan was there before—at least, from what he could remember. He'd been fairly drunk and half-wasted most of the time. But the place was nice. Lots of black and silver, the occasional flower or dragon pattern. Clean, quiet. And best of all, not smelling like fire.

Christ. Being that close to the burning stench out there had just about given him a waking nightmare. They were bad enough when he was asleep.

Somehow they managed to check in without Braelan going too weird. He did demand “the best,” and they'd been given the top-floor penthouse suite. One month for eighty-five hundred, cash. Apparently there was a slight long-term discount.

Uriskel spent the entire ride up in the elevator stiff and silent, pale, his eyes closed. And he still had an enormous hard-on. But once they stepped off on the top floor, he resumed his usual furious glare. At least most of it was directed at the prince. For now.

Trystan walked to the suite door and swiped the passkey. The electronic lock gave a muted buzz, then clicked open. He turned the handle and pushed the door in. Braelan brushed past him and entered first. He waited for the other Fae to go in, figuring he was probably the lowest on whatever chain of command their bizarre little group was supposed to have. Just a paid escort, an expensive fuck buddy.

But Uriskel had other ideas. “Go on,” he practically growled.

Trystan shrugged. “Whatever,” he said. “I just thought you should go first. Being the bodyguard and all.”

“You think—” He stared for an instant and gave a short, bitter laugh. “No, Trystan. I’ll not come before you. You’d do well to remember that. To him, no one is lower than me. Now go.”

Some emotion flickered in his eyes, and Trystan couldn’t figure out whether it was anger or hurt. Maybe both. He shook his head and walked inside. With Braelan’s strange ways and Uriskel’s needling temper, he was resigned to a long damned month.

Millions of dollars, he reminded himself. A guaranteed lottery win, tax-free. All he had to do was stick it out.

The living room of the suite was amazing. He’d never even set foot in a place like this; the last time they’d gotten just a single room—nice, but not lap-of-luxury stuff like this. In the center, a huge U-shaped black suede couch faced a giant plasma screen mounted on the left-hand wall. Beyond that, three shallow steps led to a big bay window with cushioned seats. The right side of the room held a kitchenette with a wet and a dry bar, table and chairs, small fridge and big microwave, and a few cabinets. There were two closed doors to the right. One looked like a closet; the other was either a bedroom or bathroom. And on the far side of the television was an open doorway leading to what looked like a hall.

There was no sign of Braelan.

The door closed, and Uriskel came up beside him. He scanned the room with narrowed eyes. “Lovely,” he muttered. “The bratling will be sure to adore this. It’s so...human.”

Better than bone chairs, Trystan almost said. “Did you see where he went?”

“No doubt he’s exploring the bedrooms and deciding where to punish me.”

The flat words lodged in his gut. “Wait. He was serious about that? I mean, he already had you...” Whipped. Humiliated. Tormented. God, those screams still echoed in his head. It had only been a few hours. The prince couldn’t really mean to hurt him again so soon.

Uriskel stared at him. Finally, he frowned and said, "You'll learn. Braelan does not threaten idly. He's never been required to restrain his whims, and he'll not do so now."

A shadow grew on the wall of the corridor. Braelan strode into the room, grinning. "These quarters please me, gallae," he said. "You've done well. Tomorrow, you may show me what all of these things are. But we've much to do tonight. Come."

Trystan crossed the room slowly, and felt Uriskel fall in behind him. He still couldn't believe the prince would actually go through with it. Maybe Uriskel was wrong. Maybe he just wanted to start in with the sex tonight. That had to be it.

There were two doors in the hall. Braelan entered the one on the left, and Trystan followed him into an immense carpeted bedroom. A four-poster queen bed, black sheets, and a black comforter trimmed with silver. Dragons embroidered on the pillowcases. A polished wood dresser with a vanity mirror. Closet and small bathroom. Nightstand with phone. A corner reading nook with two armchairs.

Braelan had taken a few things from the closet and laid them on the bed. Two belted terrycloth robes, an extension cord, and a length of wood that looked like the handle of a toilet plunger. He waited until they both entered, and said, "Close the door, Uriskel."

The command was carried out. Braelan's eyes sparked with nasty intent. "I was nearly tempted to forgive your earlier transgressions," he said. "But you seemed so eager for correction, I thought I should oblige. Remove your clothes."

As Uriskel moved to comply, Trystan crossed his arms and stared at the floor. Unbelievable. This was really going to happen. And he had no idea what he should be doing right now. Should he watch? Offer to help? Maybe keep standing here like an idiot, trying not to gape at Uriskel's back or his enormous erection. Or his beautiful body. Or those dazzling green eyes, so direct and expressive. He could drown in them.

"So patient, gallae."

Braelan approached him, pulling his thoughts away from Uriskel, and he reminded himself what a bad idea it was to lust after the bodyguard, who'd already demonstrated how much he didn't want him anyway. He was supposed to serve the prince.

"Relax for a moment." Braelan put an arm around his waist, led him to the reading nook, and lowered him into a chair. "This will not take long. And very soon, we will know each other better. I look forward to that." He leaned down and kissed his forehead.

A shiver shot through Trystan's spine, and he watched Braelan walk away. Not a damned thing wrong with that body, either. Perfect in every way. He was cruel, but only to Uriskel. And though Uriskel definitely resented him, he'd never refused him or told him to stop...and he sure as hell seemed to welcome the pain.

He didn't know what to make of their relationship. Maybe he should stop thinking about it. Just concentrate on making it through this month, earning his money, and getting away from both of them. There was only so much weird he could take.

Braelan walked to the bed and gestured for Uriskel, who approached with reluctance. He pointed and said, "One I'll beat you with. The other you'll hold in your mouth to still your wicked tongue. Choose."

With only the slightest hesitation, Uriskel grabbed the extension cord and thrust it at him.

"Very well." He moved back and gestured at the foot of the bed. "Stand here."

Uriskel walked into place and stood facing the bed. His muscles tensed visibly, rippling under his flesh.

Braelan shook the cord loose and doubled it once, then again, creating a length of a little more than two feet to swing with. He gripped Uriskel's neck and pushed him forward. "Down," he said. "All the way."

"Highness..."

“Down!”

Slowly, Uriskel bent over the footboard until his torso rested flat on the bed. He snatched the wooden rod without being told and clamped it in his mouth.

“You’ve been a naughty dog,” Braelan said. “You will not defy me, and you’ll not touch my gallae unless you’re instructed to.”

A protest surged to Trystan’s lips, and he bit down to keep it back. This was his fault. He shouldn’t have gone to Uriskel for comfort. But if he said anything now, Braelan would shock him with the bands again and probably punish the bodyguard even harder.

He could take the first. Not the second.

Braelan drew back and brought the makeshift flogger down hard across Uriskel’s ass. A bright red welt formed immediately. He struck again and again, giving no pause between the blows. Blood blisters raised along some of the marks. After a few dozen strokes, he started beating his thighs.

Uriskel stayed still, moving only with the force of the blows. His breathing grew labored. He grunted against the rod at the harder strokes when blisters burst and produced trickles of blood. But he didn’t get up. Didn’t scream.

As promised, the beating didn’t last long. Two minutes at the most. Still, the prince had gotten plenty of blows in. When he finally stopped, Uriskel’s backside was covered with crisscrossed welts and dribbling blood.

Braelan threw the cord at the open closet. “Stand and face me,” he said.

Uriskel let the wooden rod fall from his mouth. It rolled across the bed, just enough for Trystan to catch a glimpse of darkened wet spots and deep imprints of teeth. He pushed up from the mattress and turned. His eyes glittered with pain and humiliation.

“Well, mongrel. Have you learned your lesson?”

“Yes, Highness.” The words grated from his throat.

“And what is it?”

"I'll not defy you. I'll not touch your...human."

Braelan stared at him expectantly. When he offered nothing further, he said, "Your punishment could have been much worse."

"I..." Uriskel bowed his head. "I thank you, Highness," he whispered. "Your mercy knows no bounds."

Jesus. Trystan shuddered at the exchange. The prince hadn't told him what to say, but it was obviously a scripted response delivered many times before. How often did he beat this guy?

"As you should." Braelan smiled, and his gaze drifted to Trystan. "And now you will repay my gallae for his earlier kindness. Come here, Trystan."

Wide-eyed and wary, Trystan rose and crossed the room. He wasn't sure he should say anything, but he had to know. "Repay me how?" he said.

"In exactly the same manner. On his knees, with your cock in his mouth."

"Oh." Trystan swallowed hard. "That."

* * *

Uriskel could barely stay on his feet. If the prince kept up this level of punishment, he'd not survive the month. The pain, the humiliation would drive him to beg for death, and if anyone would oblige that request, it would be the bratling.

He'd never known such pure terror as when Braelan had ordered him over the bed. For a moment he'd been convinced the prince intended to rape him. He could not allow that to happen. Bastard or not, he was his brother.

Now he was to be used to pleasure the human. He'd almost been relieved at Braelan's proclamation that he never touch him, and hoped it would serve to keep Trystan away from him. The farther he was from temptation, the better. But it seemed that forcing them together entertained the prince. And anything that entertained him would be repeated until he tired of it.

“Undress,” Braelan said. While Trystan moved to obey him, he retrieved one of the pillows from the head of the bed and placed it at the foot. “Stand aside,” he said to Uriskel.

He did as he was told. Far be it from him to defy his Highness.

Braelan worked the belts free from the robes he'd laid on the bed, carried them to the foot, and began tying one to the nearest post. Uriskel understood at once what he intended, and looked to the human to see if he did.

Trystan was still undressing. He'd removed his shirt, his shoes, and socks, and worked at unfastening his pants. He got them down, revealing underwear that was little more than a pouch attached to strings. An erection bulged beneath the fabric. He hissed a little when he peeled them off, and kept his gaze averted.

He had to wonder what had aroused Trystan. Perhaps witnessing the punishment had excited him. Or Braelan's touch, or even the mere presence of the one he served. He'd seen humans so besotted by the Fae who toyed with them, they could climax with just a look from their masters.

Braelan finished his knots just as Trystan kicked his pants away. “Ah, gallae,” he breathed. “You are beautiful. How difficult it will be to wait for you, even for a few more moments. But you'll be worth the wait, won't you?” He settled his hands on Trystan's waist and smiled. “I see you've already prepared for this,” he said with a glance down.

“Mmm. Yeah.”

“Good.” He led him to the side of the bed, reached over, and patted the pillow. “I'd like you to kneel on this, facing out.”

“Sure.” Trystan climbed onto the bed.

Braelan moved in front of him. He grabbed an arm and lifted it straight out to the side, then picked up the loose end of the belt he'd tied to that post. “You'll be here for quite a while.” He wrapped the white cloth strip around Trystan's wrist. “Do not hesitate to tell me if the bonds are too tight.”

Trystan nodded slowly and watched while the prince stretched and tied him between the posts. Uriskel stared for an instant and had to look away. If he hadn't already been swollen to the point of agony, he'd have gone stiff at the sight of the human—bound and unafraid, tousled hair framing a face from which blue eyes blazed.

Touching him, tasting him, would be torture.

Braelan directed him to kneel in front of Trystan, and then regarded him with a leer. "I've a condition for you, dog," he said. "You may not touch him with your hands. Only your mouth. If you lay so much as a fingertip on him, you'll be beaten again when you're through. Understand?"

"Of course, Highness." Blast him to hell. He was expected to bring the human to climax, as had been done to him. It would have been difficult enough if he'd been permitted to fully engage him. Trystan was attracted to Braelan, not him. Now it would be nearly impossible to spill his seed—and what would the bratling do to him should he fail at his task?

He gripped the footboard in an attempt to keep his hands from straying, and glanced up expecting to see Trystan's eyes closed to spare himself the sight of the creature he would receive favor from. But the human stared down at him and smiled a bit when their eyes met. "I will enjoy this, Unseelie," he said.

If he'd doubted Trystan's disgust for him, the mocking echo of his earlier words confirmed it.

He straightened and placed himself in the right position, drew a few slow, deep breaths. Trystan's cock twitched when he exhaled against it. Perhaps the human was sensitive. That would make things a bit easier. He opened his mouth and took him in.

Gods, how he tasted. At once bitter and sweet, silk and steel. He'd not expected his battered senses to respond with such a surge of lust, and for a moment he froze with his tongue pressed against the shaft, holding it firmly in place. A groan of sheer delight vibrated his throat.

Trystan gasped, and his cock grew harder in Uriskel's mouth.

Uriskel eased farther down, taking in more of him, groaning again. Intoxicating, the sounds this human made. He suckled the shaft, drew back slowly, feeling every inch of heated skin glide under his lips and slip out. Trystan shivered, and he went down again—slow, savoring with lips and tongue.

A long, low moan drifted down to him. “Faster,” Trystan whispered. “Please...”

Uriskel nearly answered him. *Yes. Faster.* But with his mouth full of cock, all he managed was a slight hum of acknowledgment, to which the human responded with a sharp breath. He picked up the pace, letting less and less of him escape his mouth with each thrust.

He soon forgot this was a punishment.

He gave himself over completely to sensation, retaining just enough awareness to keep his grip on the footboard and follow Braelan's ridiculous condition. The hard, sweet flesh filled his mouth, pulsed with the beat of Trystan's heart as it pounded a rhythm to match the music of his sighs. His own heart sang a counterpoint.

Too quickly, Trystan voiced a guttural cry and began to climax. Hot, thick seed splashed the roof of Uriskel's mouth, and he slammed forward on the spurting cock until the head nuzzled his throat, swallowing every drop.

Finished, Trystan shuddered and stilled. Uriskel held his cock captive a moment longer, imprinting the taste and the heat on his memories. At last he drew back with a gasp. He bowed his head, unable to look at the human. Or Braelan, who was sure to be in some way displeased with his performance.

But he'd not touched Trystan. At the least, he was certain of that.

For a moment the only sound was Trystan's heaving breath. Then a muffled crack reached Uriskel's ears, like flesh striking flesh. The prince hadn't struck him, though. The sound repeated three more times, slow and steady.

He looked over. Braelan was clapping.

“Well done, mongrel.” His eyes flashed, and his voice was tight with disdain. “Honestly, I’d not thought you capable of arousing anything with a pulse.”

The remark stung nearly as hard as Morven’s whip. Uriskel struggled to his feet, still averting his gaze from Trystan, and walked a few steps away. “I’m certain it was simply a fluke,” he said. “The human does not yet realize how truly revolting I am.”

“He will come to understand.” Smiling, Braelan approached the bed. “Now, gallae, you will experience true pleasure. And Uriskel, you will watch. Perhaps you’ll learn something. But I have my doubts about that.”

Shuddering inwardly, Uriskel forced himself to turn. Braelan was headed for the side of the bed, but Trystan paid no attention to the prince. His blue gaze fastened on Uriskel—cold, furious. Disgusted.

Nothing he’d not received from every other being whose life had touched his. But before now, it had never hurt so much.

Chapter Seven

In Trystan's humble opinion, Uriskel was sincerely fucked up.

He'd tried to encourage the bodyguard. He didn't want to see him get beaten again, and it was obvious the prince expected him to screw up. So he'd talked to him, teased him a little. Attempted to get them both in the mood so no one got hurt any more. At least tonight. But the moment Uriskel took him in his mouth, he'd drowned in his own lust and gotten the best blowjob of his life.

Now the son of a bitch was saying it was a fluke. Cloud nine to complete shit in ten seconds. The guy wasn't just an emotional roller coaster; he was a whole damned amusement park.

Worse, Braelan seemed to be using him to play a few rounds of who's-the-better-lover. That really pissed him off. Especially since his own body had already informed him it was a hell of a lot more attracted to Uriskel—but he was supposed to be pleasing the prince. And if he understood anything about this crazy situation, Braelan would be less than pleased about that. If they were told to put on any more exhibitions, he'd have to fake disinterest in Uriskel.

He was used to the other way around. Faking attraction to johns who couldn't get a blind porn star off came naturally to him now. But he'd never had to tone down his own reactions. Not even Cobalt had gotten him this hot, and the tattoo artist had been incredible.

Braelan came back into view—completely naked now, flawless even without clothes. The scarified tattoos on his arms set off the perfection of his torso, every muscle sculpted and defined. Like Uriskel's, his cock was immense. Was every Fae hung like that?

"This, I like." The prince touched his right nipple piercing, flicked the hoop. He leaned in and kissed it, sending a shiver through Trystan. "I may want one for myself. There are humans who do this, yes?"

Trystan nodded. "Lots of studios around here. You can get piercings done anywhere."

"And which...studio have you gone to?"

"Cobalt's place. The Grotto."

At that, Uriskel made a strangled sound, almost a growl. He glared at Trystan like he'd kill him with a look if he could.

Braelan smirked and glanced back at him. "You know this place, Unseelie?"

Uriskel said nothing.

"You do. How fascinating." The smirk became a cold smile. "You will take me to this Grotto, Trystan. Along with my bodyguard, of course. Not tonight. But soon."

"All right," Trystan croaked, unable to look away from Uriskel's furious gaze. *He knows Cobalt.* Somehow, he understood it wasn't just the mention of the studio that had enraged the bodyguard. Cobalt was tall, sculpted, beautiful. He had the same type of scarification work on his chest as Braelan did on his arms. And a huge cock.

Braelan walked away. A moment later, the bed dipped as he mounted it. "Beautiful from behind, too," he said. "Spread your legs for me, Trystan."

Trystan shuffled his knees farther apart. His shoulders ached with the suspension, but it wasn't too bad yet. And his wrists would only suffer a minor chafing. He tried to tune out everything but the prince so he could concentrate on pleasing him.

It would help if Uriskel stopped staring at him.

Arms encircled his waist, and he closed his eyes and leaned back on the firm body. Braelan's hard length pressed against his ass. Regardless of who turned him

on more, that cock was going to feel good rammed inside him. He moaned and rubbed against it.

“So eager, little one,” Braelan whispered in his ear. “Look at me.”

Trystan turned his head. The prince kissed him, just a brush of his lips at first—then firmer, more urgent. Braelan's tongue slipped through and explored while a hand slid down and rubbed the inside of his thigh.

The heat of the kiss surged through Trystan, delicious and comforting. He sighed against Braelan's lips. It was...nice. Pleasant.

And a thousand watts below the electric need that Uriskel ignited in him.

He shoved thoughts of the bodyguard aside and made more appropriate noises, grinding his ass against Braelan's cock, pushing his leg in to deepen the prince's caress. When Braelan drew his mouth away, he groaned. “Fuck me,” he breathed. “I want you so bad.”

“Of course you do.” Smiling, Braelan grasped his chin and turned his head to face forward. “Look at the dog,” he said. “Let him see your enjoyment and know what he will never have.”

Trystan looked. Uriskel's gaze was still directed at him, but it was unfocused, almost bleary with pain. He'd gone pale and wavering. A few spots of blood decorated the carpet around his feet. When he noticed the attention on him, he pulled himself together long enough to sneer. “I've no desire to follow your mastery with my fumbling. Highness.”

“And I've no care for your desires, Unseelie,” Braelan said. “Now hold your tongue.”

Uriskel's lips pressed in a firm line. His eyes flashed, for an instant becoming the black and gold of his true form, before they glazed over again.

“Are we ready, gallae?” the prince said softly.

“I...um. There's some lube. In my pants pocket.”

“Lube?”

Trystan bit his lip. "Yeah. You know...grease." A flicker of unease went through his gut. Did Braelan plan to take him dry?

"Highness," Uriskel shook himself and added something in that weird, lilting language they'd used earlier.

Braelan's arm around him tightened and relaxed. "Ah. That," he whispered. "No need. I've brought my own." He pulled back, and after a few seconds rubbed something warm, thick, and wet on Trystan's ass. "There. We're ready now."

"Yes." Trystan forced himself to relax.

The prince gripped his waist. The tip of his cock settled against his opening. He pushed in slowly, hot breath feathering the back of Trystan's neck, and stopped when he was completely buried. "Wonderful," he said. "Such a tight fit."

"Mmm." Shivering, Trystan clenched his ass. "God, you're big."

"You like it, then?"

"Oh, yeah." He hadn't been filled like this in a long time. He wriggled and bumped back, trying to impale himself deeper. "Give it to me, babe."

Braelan let out a low laugh. "My gallae is enthusiastic. He'll have what he wants...this time." He drew out and plunged back in, long and steady strokes that set Trystan's muscles fluttering, the cock striking his sweet spot with every thrust.

Trystan practically melted. Bursts of pleasure sizzled behind his eyes and faded too fast every time he pulled out. "Christ Jesus, please *fuck me*," he gasped.

"Yes," Braelan growled. He drove faster, yanking him back hard against his cock. In and out like a piston.

The cloth belts bit harder at Trystan's wrists as the force increased. He grabbed on and held himself up, lifting a few inches from the bed. Braelan kept him in place with firm hands on his hips, moving him expertly against his shaft.

A scream tore from him just as Braelan plunged deeper and came with a primal cry. The prince's hands slid up and arms crossed his chest to hold him there.

He felt Braelan's heart hammering against his back. His breath heaved, settled slowly, and he nestled into the prince's embrace, practically purring his content.

Eventually Braelan withdrew, leaving a sweet aching throb in his ass. Damn. He hadn't been fucked like that in...well, ever. He definitely would've come if he hadn't just spilled a few minutes ago. If he was going to get a month of this, he'd have no problem getting used to it.

Braelan released him reluctantly and dismounted the bed. Instead of untying him, as Trystan expected, he walked over to Uriskel—who watched him with raised hackles, like a dog anticipating a kick. “Poor mongrel,” the prince crooned. “He needs to relieve himself.”

“No, he does not,” Uriskel said through clenched teeth.

Braelan drew an arm up and backhanded him to the floor. “You'll do as you're told,” he spat. “Consider yourself fortunate that Trystan has put me in such a good mood. Now get up and take him.”

Shit, shit, *shit*. Panic tightened Trystan's throat. He didn't think he could control himself if Uriskel fucked him. He'd almost lost it with just a blowjob.

Uriskel struggled to his hands and knees and collapsed back down. With a frustrated grunt, he pushed up again. This time he gained his feet. “As you wish, Highness.” The sounds barely left his lips. He made his way to the bed without looking at either of them.

Trystan closed his eyes and tried to concentrate on something else, anything that would help him keep cool. The mattress bowed under Uriskel's weight, and a surge of anticipation rippled his skin. Christ, he hadn't even touched him yet.

There was a pause. “Am I to keep my hands from him, then?” Uriskel said.

“You may touch him,” Braelan replied. “For all the good it will do. Likely you'll only repulse him further.”

Uriskel's breath caught, a tiny sound that was almost a sob. Hands settled on Trystan's hips. They vibrated like electric razors. "Ah gods," he whispered. "You've my apologies, Trystan. You do not deserve this."

Don't. He almost said it out loud, but shock kept him silent. Uriskel wasn't playing the smartass to Braelan's cutting tongue. Not right now, anyway. He actually believed he was this hideous, horrible thing.

Uriskel's cock brushed his ass, pressed lightly against his opening, and hesitated. At least he didn't need lube this time. Braelan's cum had left him slick, warm, and ready. Heat bloomed in him everywhere Uriskel touched. A powerful scent washed over him, as if the bodyguard exuded it. Water and fire, dark spices and clean air. Strong enough to taste.

And Trystan was lost.

* * *

Uriskel would have preferred another thirty lashes to this.

As if it weren't humiliating enough to be bent over and beaten like a fledgling. Now he'd be forced into what amounted to raping this human—because Trystan surely didn't want this. And he'd no desire to fuck someone who was sickened at the sight of him.

But he would. Because if he refused, Braelan would physically or magically force him through it anyway. That experience would be hell for both of them.

He steadied himself as much as possible, cursing his own body for reacting this way. Why in the gods' names did he have such strong desire for this brash little scrap of a human? Even without the mandrake, he knew he'd have been hard as iron at this point. And if the bratling ever sensed his lust...

"Get on with it, mongrel," Braelan snapped.

Uriskel closed his eyes, sucked in a breath, and worked himself slowly into Trystan.

The pain was immense, shocking a strangled cry from him. He'd been erect for hours with no relief, no pause, and it may well have hurt less to strip the skin from his shaft. But the pleasure swelled with the pain. The heat of him, the pressure of his tight hole, seeped through his blood like sweet poison.

A hiss escaped Trystan and morphed into a groan. "Shit," he whispered.

Gritting his teeth, he tightened his fingers on Trystan's hips and pulled back. Jagged slivers of pain lodged in his cock, but he barely felt the skin move. He'd soon go completely numb—and while that would relieve some of the pain, it would be next to impossible for him to finish.

He'd have to make this fast.

With a murmur that was both encouragement and apology, he increased the pace of his thrusts. His hand crept around Trystan's waist almost without him realizing it, and he held the slender body against him as though he could protect it from his own brutality. He slid his arm up, let the other join it to cross over his chest. Hot skin against him. Quick sighs fluttering from Trystan's lips. His cock throbbing with agony and ecstasy at once.

A liquid shiver filled his groin and spread, pushing him to the knife's edge of release. He held Trystan tighter, pumped an urgent rhythm while sweat trickled down his back and stung the open welts. At last, he gasped into a climax that burned like the sun.

"Nnn-uhh!" Trystan clenched his ass, clamping Uriskel's cock impossibly tight. Shallow breath shuddered from him, and his head fell back against Uriskel's shoulder.

A tear slid from one unfocused blue eye, then the other.

The evidence of his disgust was more than Uriskel could bear. He released his hold and nearly flung himself off the bed. "Are you satisfied, *Highness*?" he spat. "He is supposed to be *your* pet. Not mine. Beat me to death if you wish. I'll not do that again."

Braelan's eyes widened. And then he laughed.

“You did not enjoy that? Well, then. I suppose your behavior's been sufficiently modified. Move to the door.” The prince walked to the bed and stood before Trystan. “And how was it for you, little one?”

Trystan shot a glare at Uriskel. “I've had better. Pretty recently, in fact.”

“Such a sweet tongue.” Braelan touched the knots at his left wrist, and they unraveled. He did the same for the right. Trystan's arms dropped to his sides, and Braelan lifted him down from the bed. “We'll sleep now. I will take this chamber, and my gallae shall have the other.” He smirked, and added, “Dogs sleep on the floor. You'll take the front room, Unseelie, and do not bleed on the couch.”

“I'd not dream of it,” Uriskel said flatly. “Am I dismissed?”

“Out.”

Avoiding Trystan's fiery gaze, he turned and opened the door. He half expected the bratling to call him back, to demand another application of mandrake oil or a fresh round of blows, but it seemed the prince had tired of abusing him for the day.

Even if Braelan did nothing to him for the remainder of the month, he would still be punished every time Trystan looked at him like that.

Chapter Eight

After indulging in a quick shower, Trystan lay naked on one of the two full beds in the room Braelan had assigned him, glowering in the dark at the general direction of the ceiling. *Pet?* Goddamn it, he was nobody's pet.

And he couldn't even explain that to anyone, because he'd been forbidden to talk about the whole hired-escort thing.

He didn't want to explain a fucking thing to Uriskel, anyway. What an incredible prick. He'd just about killed himself to keep from exploding in pure ecstasy while the bastard was screwing him—Christ, he'd been moved to tears by the end, had a total mind-fuck of an orgasm even though he couldn't physically come—and Uriskel had basically said he'd rather die than fuck him again.

He never thought it was possible for a whore to feel violated.

The bed, at least, was comfortable. Unlike this job. If this shit kept going, he'd have to spend his millions on therapy, unless he wanted to end up one of those crazies who wandered the streets screaming at random people and eating out of Dumpsters. These two were going to drive him out of his mind.

His fury was still tempered by utterly confused sympathy. He'd seen some intense Dom-sub play, or at least thought he had, but what had been done to Uriskel made it all look like tickling sessions. The bodyguard had to be in agony, though he worked hard not to show it. His reactive cock and his constant kiss-my-ass attitude toward Braelan, who was unquestionably his master, said he wanted the pain. Anyone who didn't, and wasn't insane, would've walked away.

Anyone human, at least. But they were Fae, and Trystan still knew nothing about them. Maybe he should just come right out and ask Braelan exactly what

they were to each other. The prince might give him a shock treatment for that, but if that was the worst he could expect, he had to try. Had to know. At once crushed and conflicted, he headed into a fractured sleep.

And the nightmares came.

He was twelve, and small for his age. Hot, disoriented, frantic. Thick, nasty smoke billowed everywhere, stinging his eyes and stealing his breath. *Talia*. His sister had been right there when he fell asleep. They'd come down to the den, were playing video games. She'd fallen asleep first. Now she was gone. Blinded, choking, he crawled his way to the stairs leading out of the basement.

A piercing shriek drifted down, containing his name.

"Talia!" He could only croak. Somehow he scrambled up the stairs. Flames licked the top of the open doorway. Nothing but solid black smoke beyond. He stumbled through, and a hammer of heat pounded him.

Another scream—weaker, gurgling.

He crawled, trying to call for her. An ocean of flames rippled along the ceiling. Fiery chunks fell like bombs, exploding in showers of sparks. He understood the fire must've started on the second floor and that their parents—Couldn't think about that. Had to get Talia first.

Tears poured from his scorched eyes. Felt like he'd been dragging through this inferno for hours. Living room—no Talia. Front hall—no. Kitchen. Something huddled in front of the sink. Moaning, gibbering...burning. Talia, with fire for hair.

He lurched and coughed and retched his way to her. Grabbed her shuddering body, dragged her out the back door, away from the burning house. Cool night air scoured his lungs and brought out gobs of black mucus amid endless chest-stabbing hacks.

He rubbed dirt on the last of the flames decorating her skull. Talia, scorched black and red, motionless, drew a breath. Then another. Thin whistling sounds. Still alive. Please, God, let her live.

A crack like thunder split the air. With a rumbling groan, part of the top floor collapsed, spilled debris in a wave away from the worst of the flames. Something terrible and familiar flopped from the front of the wreckage, dangled over a slab of wall, pinned beneath a charred roof beam.

An arm. His mother's arm.

With sobs that were almost screams, he ran for her. He pushed the beam, tugged at it, beat on it with palms, with fists, until his knuckles ran with blood.

But he was twelve and small for his age. It didn't budge.

He grabbed his mother's hand. Hot, stiffening. Dead, some disengaged part of his brain said, but he wouldn't buy it. No. He'd get her out. Talia would live. Mom would live. She wasn't even burned. He pulled, gasped, pulled...

And went hurtling back, smacked hard on the ground, his mother's hand still in both of his. Her arm hanging crooked, impossible, resting on his leg. The rest of her still buried in the wreckage.

Trystan hitched in breath until his lungs nearly burst. And screamed.

* * *

Uriskel had resigned himself to not sleeping tonight. He could only lie on his stomach, and a few agonizing moments on the floor dismissed the possibility of holding that position. He certainly couldn't sit down. So he knelt on the recessed seats before the bay window, arms folded on the ledge and chin resting on them, staring out at the glittering city.

At least Braelan had thrown his clothes from the bedroom before he retired. He'd struggled into the pants but not bothered with the shirt. The welts on his back were by far the worst, and he could not bear having anything touch them. Though the bratling had healing abilities, Uriskel suspected he would not be granted a healing any time soon.

Not that it mattered. Taking Trystan against his will had hurt more than the beatings, and no amount of magic would ease that pain. It was the second time in

his life he'd been forced to rape in the name of Arcadia. The first had shattered him, and he'd paid not only with his soul, but with the harshest punishment he'd ever endured.

This time, there was no one to punish him but himself. And he'd do plenty of that.

Unable to kneel any longer, he stood and walked toward the main part of the room. He paused at the passage leading to the bedrooms when a faint sound drifted from one of them. After a moment, it came again—a low, distressed moan.

He took a step down the passage, then another. There was a muffled sob. From Trystan's room. Of course it would be the human. He'd just been raped. And besides, what would the brat prince have to cry about?

His shame deepening to black, Uriskel started to turn away. And then Trystan screamed.

He sprinted for the room and pushed the door open, ready to pummel Braelan and damn the consequences. But Trystan was alone, sitting bolt upright in one of the beds, gasping for breath, wild-eyed and glistening with sweat.

“What's happened?” Uriskel strode toward him but stopped at the foot of the bed. He'd not startle him further. “Trystan?” he said when the human didn't respond.

Trystan shuddered and closed his eyes. When he opened them again, he flinched as his gaze settled on Uriskel. “Oh, Jesus,” he whispered. “Oh, *fuck* me. Jesus Christ.”

The fear in his voice knotted Uriskel's stomach. He held up both hands and backed away. “My apologies,” he said hoarsely. “You screamed, and I thought... I'll go.” He turned and headed for the door.

“Wait.”

He froze with a hand on the knob.

"It was...a nightmare. I have them sometimes." Trystan sounded a bit more settled, though his words still grated like stones. "Please don't leave yet."

Uriskel gripped the doorknob hard enough to hurt. If Braelan were to wake and find him in here with his pet, he'd skin him alive. He should leave now that the danger had passed. But the human's need for soothing was plain, and if his screams hadn't woken the prince, perhaps he could risk a few moments.

He relaxed his grip and faced Trystan. "Must have been quite the nightmare," he said.

"Yeah." Trystan let out a shaking laugh. "Hasn't been that bad in a long time."

"You are drenched." And naked, his mind insisted on recognizing. The sight of that lithe, gleaming body stirred him in ways he could barely control, and he averted his gaze. "I'll get you a cloth," he murmured and went into the room's adjoining bath. He saturated a hand towel with warm water, wrung it out, grabbed a larger dry towel, and returned.

Trystan stared at him. "I could've gotten that."

"Fine, then. I'll return them, and you can fetch them yourself."

"No. I just meant—" He sighed. "You don't have to wait on me."

"I wanted to." The words were out before Uriskel could stop them, and he looked down quickly. "I've not become completely heartless yet, human. Here." He held out the damp towel.

"Thanks." Trystan took it slowly and wiped his face and neck. He let out a long breath. "Here." He patted the bed beside him. "Take a load off."

Uriskel smirked. "I believe I'll stand, thank you."

"Why? I promise I won't..." His eyes widened, and his features crumpled. "Oh, God, I'm sorry," he moaned. "I'm such a shit."

"No. It's all right." He stepped closer to the bed. "These nightmares. You have them often?"

Nodding, Trystan wiped the cloth across his chest. "There was a fire," he said. "Bad one. A long time ago."

"The vendor's cart." No wonder he'd reacted so strongly to the burning stench.

"Yeah, I think that set me off. Usually I just get flashes and fragments. But this... It was total recall." He went still and paled several shades. "I've never asked Talia if she has them, too."

"Talia?"

"My sister." His curt tone suggested he'd not welcome further questions. He reached over his shoulder, frowned, then lowered his hand and curled it around his side. "Damn. I can't reach."

"Here." Uriskel took the cloth from him and flinched when he stiffened. He closed his eyes. "I'll not harm you," he whispered. Blast it, he should have refused Braelan's ridiculous whim the first time and taken the consequences. The prince's pet or not, he did not deserve to be violated.

"I didn't think you would."

The husky note in his voice made Uriskel look at him. That blue gaze fastened on his and held. Trystan smiled. "I'll ask this time. Could you get my back?"

"Yes."

"Thank you." He shifted on the bed and sat near the edge, facing away.

Uriskel shook the cloth loose and went down on a knee. He worked quickly, trying to ignore the sensations that coursed through him at the contact. It was not easy.

Trystan looked over his shoulder, his brow furrowed slightly. "Are you wearing cologne or something?"

"Cologne?" He frowned. "No."

"That's weird. You smell so damned good. It has to be you, because I caught it...you know. Before."

The cloth slid from his fingers, but he barely noticed. His mating scent. All the Fae had one, a unique blend of aromas they emitted when aroused, but it was the rare human who could detect it. He'd only met one other—Cobalt's lover, Will.

And this one knew Cobalt too. He had to wonder how well.

The corners of Trystan's mouth turned down. "Hey, are you okay?"

"Fine." He retrieved the cloth and stood, then handed him the dry towel and backed away. He nearly asked about Cobalt but decided he'd rather hear it from his brother. After all, he would see him soon—Braelan had demanded to be taken to the Grotto. Which would be disastrous. But he'd no choice there, either.

"Okay. Guess we're not talking about that." Trystan repositioned himself in the bed, draping the towel around his shoulders like a blanket. "Can I ask you something else, then?"

"You may ask. I cannot guarantee an answer."

"Figures." He closed his eyes, opened them. "Your back looks awful," he said slowly. "Is that mandrake stuff going to help you heal, or are you just gonna walk around cut up for the next few weeks?"

A bitter laugh escaped Uriskel. He almost refused a response, but he'd not been forbidden to discuss his punishments. Only the reasons he served Arcadia, the essence of his personal hell, were to remain secret. "Mandrake does not heal," he said. "To the Fae, it is a drug—though its use is not typically for wounds."

"What does it do?"

He shook his head. "Is it not obvious? It forces an arousal."

"Forces..." His eyes widened, practically bulged from his head. "But you were hard before. With the whipping."

"Yes. Morven soaked the lash in mandrake oil. To humiliate me further."

Trystan's throat worked, a single rapid spasm. "You're not a sub."

"Though I'm not certain what you mean, it's likely not what I am." He paused, attempting to decide how much he should reveal. He'd not be able to stomach pity.

"I am a servant of Arcadia," he said at last. "A...ward, I believe is your term, of the Fae court."

His eyes glossed over. "You're a slave," he whispered.

There it was. Weak, damnable pity. "Do not weep for me, human," he snarled. "I've my own reasons, and as Braelan has told you, I am not innocent. I'll not welcome your sympathy."

Trystan blinked, shook himself. "Okay. Do me a favor, then."

"What?"

"Stop calling me 'human.' I've got a name."

Uriskel let out a breath. He'd not meant to be so harsh, but he could not allow anyone to discover the truth. And fury was the fastest way to turn them from that path. "I'll do that," he said. "Trystan."

A tiny smile graced his lips. "Thanks."

"You should sleep," Uriskel said. Already he'd spent too long here, risking the bratling's wrath. "I suspect tomorrow will be exhausting."

Trystan sighed and fell back against the pillows. "I doubt I will. I never really manage to get back to sleep, after that dream."

"Close your eyes, àillidh."

After a brief, questioning glance, he did.

Uriskel retrieved the tangled sheet from the foot of the bed and smoothed it over him. And then he began to sing.

Trystan relaxed almost immediately. "That's...beautiful," he murmured.

As are you. Uriskel let his own eyes flutter closed, at once unable to bear the sight of the angelic human. The song came far easier than it had in the gaol, clear and fluid, filling his heart as only the music could. He spun only a single soft thread so that Braelan would not hear.

When Trystan's breathing grew deep and even, he slipped from the room to face the long night alone. But the song stayed with him for a time.

Chapter Nine

It was well after noon when Trystan awoke, refreshed and disoriented, with a snarling stomach. He rarely slept more than a few hours at a time, and he never woke up in a decent bed alone.

Then he remembered. Uriskel had tucked him in and sung him to sleep.

If he was confused about the bodyguard before, he was completely lost now. Finding out the guy wasn't a sub or even a masochist had been a swift kick in the balls. But just as quickly, Uriskel had scrambled to retain his king-of-the-bastards crown. And then he'd gone all sweet again.

It was like watching the goddamned weather channel.

He got out of bed, took a piss, and dressed in yesterday's clothes—the only ones he had. The rest he'd stashed at Talia's place. He'd have to either go get them or buy more soon. And speaking of money, he had ten gees in cash that he didn't want to carry around. He sure as hell didn't have a bank account, so that meant leaving most of it here somewhere. He poked around the room and finally settled on stashing it behind the drawer of the nightstand.

Five hundred of it went in his pocket. He felt practically rich.

He left the room and found silence in the suite. Braelan's door was closed. He entered the main room, blinking against the bright sunlight streaming through the bay window. No sign of the prince. But he spotted Uriskel, and a tangled wave of emotion tightened various parts of his anatomy—his throat, his heart, his cock.

The bodyguard knelt on the seat below the window, facing the glass, head resting on folded arms on the ledge. Still shirtless, his torn back on full display. Somehow he'd managed to fall asleep like that. Rays of light played over his hair,

transforming it into fire shot with copper highlights. Thick, dark lashes brushed his cheeks. Full lips parted slightly to reveal a hint of teeth. Even with his features relaxed in sleep, he looked fierce, deliciously dangerous.

Christ, he was gorgeous. And disturbing, because more than anything, Trystan wanted to kiss him. Not just fuck him or be fucked by him, but taste those lips, and the tongue that had caressed his cock so expertly. He wanted to take his time and savor every inch of him.

He'd never wanted that from anyone before. That kind of thing led to love, and love hurt too much when you lost it.

"Good morning, gallae."

Braelan's husky voice behind him made him jump, and woke Uriskel instantly. Green eyes snapped open and narrowed in his direction, but the glare was meant for the prince. He hoped.

"Morning." He put on a smile and turned to face him. "Sleep well?"

"I did." Braelan glanced beyond him and smirked, then looked back. "We must eat and bathe. There are humans to bring us food, correct?"

"Sure. Room service."

"Have them provide breakfast. Meanwhile, you and I will make use of that." He pointed to the door across the room, the one Trystan hadn't opened last night. Had to be a bathroom, and since this was a suite, it probably had a hot tub. "And you, Unseelie," the prince said. "You'll use Trystan's room and clean yourself in the shower."

No answer. Trystan turned his head to look. Uriskel had gotten to his feet and stood with the shirt he'd worn yesterday in his hands, like he'd been putting it on. "I'm clean enough, Highness," he finally said, his voice low and tight. "I've no need to shower."

Trystan bit his lip. With all the cuts and gashes on him, a shower would be agonizing. And of course, Braelan had to know that.

“Oh, I insist,” the prince said. “You must keep yourself clean. You’ll develop infection.”

Muscles tightened along Uriskel’s jaw. “Touching as your concern is, Braelan, I’ll pass.”

“This is not a request.”

“Have I done something wrong? *Highness?*” Uriskel stepped toward them with rage glittering in his eyes. “Perhaps my memory’s a bit hazy, but as I recall, I’ve done all you commanded of me. You’ve no call to demand this.”

“You’ll do as you’re told, dog!”

“Or what? You’ll beat me again?” He pulled his shirt on with a wince. “I’m no use to you crippled with pain, bratling, and you know it. I’ll take my punishments when they’re merited. This is not.”

Stop provoking him! Trystan wanted to scream. If he didn’t shut up, Braelan was going to kick his ass into next week.

But the prince flashed a chilling smile. “Very well,” he said. “Perhaps I should have known the dog would prefer to roll in his own filth. And I’ve no doubt you’ll do something soon to earn worse than a cleansing.”

“Quite likely. I am nothing if not a creature of habit.”

Trystan broke away and headed for the phone on the coffee table. “I’m calling room service,” he said loudly. “If anybody cares.”

He grabbed the handset and dialed the listed extension, and forced himself to breathe. The tension between these two was enough to start fires—and if they kept it up, he’d burn right along with them.

The phone was answered on the second ring. “Good afternoon, sir.”

The title felt bizarre. Nobody had ever called him *sir* in his life. And he’d never ordered room service, either. “Uh, yeah,” he said. “We’re in the presidential suite...”

“Yes. We know.”

“Oh, good. Well, we’d like some breakfast.”

There was a pause. “What would you like for breakfast, sir?”

“I don't know. What do you have?”

“Would you like me to read the menu to you?”

He frowned. Was there supposed to be a menu around here somewhere? “Nah,” he said. “Just send up a bunch of food. You know, breakfasty stuff.”

“Very well, sir. Will there be anything else?”

“No, we're good. Thanks.” He hung up and realized the other two had stopped arguing. He looked over to find them both staring at him. “What?”

Uriskel arched an eyebrow. “Breakfasty stuff?”

“Yeah. Eggs and toast and bacon. Shit like that.”

“Sounds delightful.”

“Watch yourself, mongrel.” Braelan smiled faintly, but his tone was steel. “You've a job to do, so remember your place. Come, Trystan.” He held out a hand.

Trystan moved closer, took it, and allowed himself to be led to the door, which did turn out to be a bathroom with the biggest hot tub he'd ever seen. He glanced back at Uriskel. The bodyguard stood motionless—head bowed, eyes closed, arms folded across his stomach like he'd just been punched.

No one had ever looked more alone.

He closed the door, his heart breaking as he turned to Braelan, who was inspecting the stone-finished walls of the hot tub. “What's the deal with you two?” he blurted before he could think about what he was saying. “Do you have to treat him like shit *all* the time?”

Braelan looked at him. Anger infused his features, and Trystan braced himself for a shock. But the prince's rage softened into something like sympathy. “He is Unseelie,” he said. “I know you do not understand, but theirs is an evil, twisted race. You should not pity him.”

“I don't. I mean—” He blew out a frustrated breath. “It's wrong to torture somebody just because of what they are,” he said. “Don't you know that?”

"You do not know the Unseelie." Some of the anger edged back into his voice. "As a human, you in particular should despise him and all his kind. They've destroyed your world."

"What?"

Braelan shook his head and settled on the edge of the tub. "This realm was once beautiful, like ours. Natural, peaceful. But the Unseelie brought superstition and fear to humans. They stole babes and terrorized populations. Cast droughts upon your crops and plagues upon your beasts just to watch you starve. Played your kings against each other to incite carnage and war. They are every black legend ever echoed through your history books, every bedtime story told to your children to frighten them into good behavior. To them, you humans are playthings. Toys to be broken." He pointed at the closed door. "That one is no different."

Shivers wracked Trystan and raised goose bumps. "If he's one of them, why does he work for you?" he whispered.

"Because he can no longer live among the Unseelie. He's betrayed his own kind, and should he return to them, he'll be executed. He lives only through the grace of Arcadia." Braelan's eyes narrowed. "But he cannot be trusted. He has murdered countless times, human and Fae. His crimes are brutal. He once killed a Seelie noble. She was raped, beaten, left naked and broken on the stones of the circle for all to see."

Trystan's throat clenched so tight, he couldn't have gotten a word out even if he could think of one to say.

"Uriskel must be controlled completely." Braelan stood, walked to him, and embraced him gently. "Promise me you'll not turn your back on him, gallae," he said. "I've no wish to see you hurt."

"I promise," Trystan managed.

"Good." The prince kissed him and drew back. "Now, show me how this works. I wish to bathe with you...and perhaps something more."

A hand caressed his cock through his pants, and Trystan groaned. "I like that idea," he said. "A lot."

* * *

Uriskel stood at the window, half listening to the muted conversation that drifted through thin walls. He'd not heard everything, but he had caught enough to understand the general idea. Trystan, fool that he was, had attempted to defend him, and Braelan had spouted the string of lies and half-truths that inevitably turned everyone against him.

It mattered little that the prince did not know they were lies. They were true enough to him, and Uriskel could not refute them without being sentenced to death.

Eventually, the sound of running water replaced conversation. He moved to the bench before the window and sat down carefully. The pain would be manageable. He'd just have to avoid sitting for long periods of time, and leaning his back against anything. Perhaps he'd be able to sleep tonight.

Convincing Braelan to back down had surprised him. He'd expected the bratling to force him into the shower or, at the least, promise further beating. Now, though, he'd been punished without Braelan having to lay a hand on him. Now Trystan would fear him, cringe from him.

As for the accusation, he'd not killed the Seelie—though it may as well have been his hand that delivered the killing blow. And he'd no choice but to take full responsibility.

Soon after the water ceased to run, the sounds of sex began. Braelan's rough growl, Trystan's lyrical moans and sighs. He could scarcely bear to listen. He stood and moved to the curved couch, but before he could decide whether his throbbing ass could tolerate sitting longer, there was a knock at the door of the suite and a muffled announcement of, "Room service."

He opened the door to a grinning youth in black uniform, and moved back to let the boy shepherd in a wheeled cart filled with covered dishes. "There's a little bit of everything here," the boy said. "Where do you want it?"

"The table, I suppose." Uriskel gestured vaguely toward the kitchen area.

"No problem." The boy pushed the cart over and began unloading its contents. Just as he placed the last dish, there was an audible splash from the bathroom, followed by a loud, unmistakably sexual cry.

Uriskel rolled his eyes. "Brilliant," he murmured. "They may as well have left the door open."

The boy stared for an instant and then laughed. "At least somebody's having fun," he said. "Don't worry. That's nothing. You wouldn't believe some of the things I've heard in this place."

"Oh, I certainly would," Uriskel said with a smirk. "Thank you..."

"Ricky. At your service."

He nodded, and gave the more human name Cobalt had assigned him on his last visit. "Skelly."

"Cool name." The boy reached in a pocket and produced a small card. "Hey, call me if you or your friends need anything...special. Know what I mean?"

Uriskel's brow furrowed, but he took the card. It simply said *Ricky* and listed a phone number. "All right," he said.

Ricky smiled. "You're all set. My tip's on your bill."

When the boy left, Uriskel tucked the card absently in his pocket. They would emerge soon, and he worked to steel himself against the fear and loathing he'd receive from both of them. Fortunately, he had ample experience with that.

Chapter Ten

The cab ride to Leather Heaven might've been the longest in Trystan's life.

All three of them sat in the back seat, with him between the prince and the killer. The only sounds were the muted rush and honk of the traffic outside, and the low babble of the info channel playing on the small screen in front of Trystan's knees. Uriskel and Braelan had argued again before they left. The bodyguard insisted on being careful about what they called each other in public, and said he already had a human name. Skelly. Kind of weird, but passable.

The prince refused to be called something different. Braelan wasn't really much worse than some of the bizarre names among fetishists and street people. For Christ's sake, he knew a guy named Pink and a girl named Mister. But the prince got pissed when Uriskel informed him that he wouldn't call him Highness outside the suite.

The fight ended when Braelan said he'd pick something up while they were out to punish him with later, and Uriskel went back to teeth-grinding, sarcasm-laced obedience.

Trystan still had doubts about whether Uriskel was as much of a bloodthirsty monster as the prince said he was, but he did believe he must've done something. Even Uriskel himself said he wasn't innocent. He'd have to stay away from him—no matter how much his body urged him to get closer. Or how much his heart insisted no one who sang like an angel and had been so sweet and tender in calming him down after the nightmare could possibly be a vicious killer.

They probably said that about Jeffrey Dahmer too.

A million hours into the silent, strained ride, the cab finally pulled off in front of the store. They got out, and Trystan paid the driver, then joined them on the sidewalk. “Okay,” he said. “This is the place.”

Braelan frowned at the narrow brick storefront sandwiched between a café and a trashy tourist shop. “And this is the largest...selection of the items I desire?”

“Yeah. It's bigger than it looks.” He held the door open. When Braelan had said he wanted to get some sex toys, Trystan picked Leather Heaven because they had decent clothes in addition to just about any BDSM gear he could come up with—and some he couldn't. “This part's all vanilla,” he said. “The good stuff is upstairs.”

“I see.” Braelan walked inside.

Uriskel didn't.

“Oh, right,” he said with a sigh. “I forgot. You're last.”

“How perceptive of you.”

“That's me. Sherlock fucking Holmes.” He wanted to say a hundred things, ask a thousand questions. Make sense of all these stories and decide which one of these head cases was the good guy. Or whether they were both bad news. Instead, he went in after the prince without another word. This wasn't the time or the place.

The narrow first floor of the store, more a hallway than a room, contained racks of skin mags and porn movies, assorted condoms and lubes, and a handful of novelty props—furred plastic handcuffs, cloth paddles with feathers, edible panties. The only thing leather down here was the clerk's vest. The guy behind the counter sat on a stool, reading a hardcover novel and ignoring them.

Trystan approached Braelan, who was slowly turning a wire display of DVDs with titles like *Cum Down Route 69* and *Big Burly Farm Boys* and *Italian Stallions 2: Double Exposure*. He touched his shoulder and pointed to the stairs at the back. “That way,” he said. “All this crap's for wannabes.”

The clerk looked up and grinned. “Got a blowout sale on restraints up there,” he said.

“Thanks.”

Trystan led the way, with Braelan just behind him and Uriskel trailing. When they reached the top, the place opened up to practically warehouse size. Racks of leather and fetish clothes, aisles of cuffs, harnesses, leashes and binders, dildos from average to ridiculously huge arranged on tiers like perverted church candles, paddles and straps, plugs and cock rings, an entire wall of floggers and whips.

Braelan beamed like a kid at Disney World. He looked at Uriskel and gestured to a pegboard display of collars. “I’ll want you to have one of those,” he said. “Choose one. I’ve other things to select.”

Uriskel shot him a look and walked toward the display.

“Fascinating.” Braelan picked up a studded leather circle with an attached metal hoop. “What is this?”

“It’s a cock harness. Mostly decoration, but there’s some for...” He stopped himself before he could say *torture*. Confused as he was, he didn’t want to see Uriskel strapped into every CBT or pinch device the prince could lay hands to. “Stimulation,” he said. “You can get those with vibrators or suction too.”

“Such toys you have!” Braelan turned in a slow circle. “I believe I’ll begin here.” He pointed to the restraints.

“Go for it. I’ll be right back. Just want to get some clothes.”

The prince nodded absently and headed for the spreader bars.

Trystan walked to the clothing racks. He wasn’t picky. Anything black that fit would work. He grabbed two pairs of soft leather pants, a skin-hugging body suit, and three shirts. Not having to look at the price tags felt pretty good. Satisfied with his selections, he made a quick detour to pick up something he’d always wanted from here but never been able to afford—boots. The shin-high pair with buckles up the sides.

When he looked back toward the restraints, Braelan was gone.

His heart skittered. He scanned the area, didn't see Uriskel by the collars anymore. There weren't many customers in here, but none of them nearby were the Fae. He had a sudden image of Braelan insisting on being allowed to test some of the implements on Uriskel, and started looking for closed doors. Finally, he caught sight of them at the back wall. In front of the whips.

He moved toward them. Uriskel held a basket filled with what he assumed were the prince's selections—mostly restraints, but he'd also gotten a dildo, a cock ring, and a few bottles he couldn't read the labels on. A black collar with metal spikes lay on top of the pile.

Uriskel glanced back as he approached. His expression was completely blank. After a few seconds, he turned toward Braelan and said softly, "I could not possibly care less."

"Come now, *Skelly*." Braelan smirked at him. "Surely you would prefer one of these"—he gestured at the rubber floggers—"to one of those." His hand moved to indicate the long braided whips. "Or perhaps something simpler." He took a step to the side and hefted a wide, wicked-looking studded strap. "This?"

Uriskel blanched. "I'll not choose."

"Fine." His smile staying in place, Braelan turned and said, "Which shall we purchase, Trystan? There are so many. I'm not able to decide."

"I..."

Scowling, Uriskel snatched the strap from the prince's hands and dropped it in the basket. "Are we through?"

"I believe we are."

Trystan cleared his throat. "I'm all set too," he said. "We can check out over there."

Without waiting for a response, he headed for the upstairs register. The guy behind it practically had more facial piercings than flesh, and wore a collar with the

word BITCH stamped on a silver plate at the front. He grinned as Trystan deposited the clothes on the counter. "Find everything you wanted?"

"Sure." He sensed the others behind him and worked at not glancing back. "Keep the box for the boots, okay? Just bag 'em."

"Right."

Braelan came up beside him and put the basket next to his pile. "I'll purchase everything, Trystan," he said. "I want to...spoil you."

"Whoa." The clerk looked from the prince to him. "Trystan? You're the—"

"Probably. Just shut it." His throat convulsed. No matter what the clerk had been about to say, it wouldn't be something Braelan would want to hear.

"Whatever, hon." With a bemused smirk, the clerk finished bagging Trystan's stuff and started on Braelan's.

The prince stopped him after he rang up the collar. "I'll take that," he said.

Shrugging, the clerk handed it over. And Braelan passed it to Uriskel. "Put it on."

Uriskel complied in silence.

"Nice," the clerk said to Braelan. He didn't stop bagging and totaling. "You must be the Dom, huh?"

A frown formed on the prince's lips. With a quick curse, Uriskel said something in their tongue, and Braelan replied curtly.

"Ooh, foreign Dom. Been in town long?"

"No." He gave a slow smile. "I do look forward to the...experience."

"Well, hon, I'd say you can dominate me any time, but you've already got two subs."

If this cruiser didn't zip it soon, Trystan was going to snap his scrawny-ass neck. "Look, just check us out, okay?"

"That's what I'm doing."

Trystan opened his mouth to say something else, and Braelan looked at him, raised an eyebrow, and whispered a word. The armbands jolted him, harder than the first time. He grunted, managed not to fall over, but he was left panting when the shocks stopped.

He got the message.

"You're a hard one, aren't you?" The clerk waved a hand in front of his face, broadcasting an idiot smile, and looked at Uriskel. "Damn, the redhead looks tough. I bet this is for him, isn't it?" He hefted the strap and punched the price into the register.

"It is," Braelan said.

Trystan tried to ignore the cold feeling in the pit of his stomach. Another beating to watch tonight. If nothing else, he knew without a doubt he definitely wasn't a voyeur. Not when he practically felt the blows himself every time he'd seen Uriskel take them.

There wouldn't be enough money in the world to erase these memories.

* * *

By the time night descended on the city, Uriskel had settled into full despondency. The black mood isolated him from all but the most peripheral awareness as Braelan dragged them about from place to place, and he barely managed to respond to orders of *carry this, fetch that, stand here, go there*. Knowing he'd another beating promised did not improve his outlook.

Once again, he wanted nothing more than oblivion.

It was nearing midnight when the prince at last decided they'd return to the hotel. The proclamation brought a small measure of relief. At least he'd soon have the punishment over with. But while Trystan attempted to stop one of the endless taxis flying down the street before them, a familiar and unwelcome figure strode from an alley and approached.

“Morven!” Grinning, Braelan embraced the vizier. “My friend, you were correct. I adore this New York.”

“It's quite the place.” Morven's gaze panned over Uriskel, settling for a few seconds on the collar, and he offered a smug smile. “How's this one behaving?”

“Well as can be expected, though he's earned himself a punishment tonight.” The prince crossed his arms. “Perhaps you'd like to assist me with that.”

Morven's eyes glittered, and a shiver penetrated Uriskel's numbed senses. “I would,” he said. “And how is your pet?”

“Perfection. Obedient and succulent.”

“Good.” The vizier clasped Braelan's shoulder. “I've arranged a bit of fun for you tonight. Have you found lodgings?”

“We have.”

“Send them there to wait. And when we return, we'll see that the dog receives what's owed to him.”

Uriskel glared at Morven. Blasted sadistic bastard. What business did he have in the mortal realm? His duties to the court could not be served from here. The worm was up to something.

“Well? Go on,” Braelan said. “Watch over my gallae. And be sure my new toys arrive safely in my room.” He gave a cold smile. “I'd not wish to be you, should anything happen to my possessions.”

“Your concern is duly noted.” With a final glower for the vizier, Uriskel turned and approached Trystan just as he managed to summon a taxi.

Trystan glanced at him, then looked to the prince, who was walking away. “Isn't he coming?”

“No. He'll be along later.”

“Is that...Morven?”

“It is.” He failed to keep the disgust from his voice.

“Terrific,” Trystan muttered. He opened the door, climbed inside and slid all the way over, and gave the address to the driver.

Uriskel placed the bags on the seat first, and then entered carefully. He settled back long enough to close the door, teeth clenched against a hiss, and leaned forward to balance most of his weight on his thighs. “I’ve no idea when they’ll return,” he said when the initial pain subsided.

“They?”

He nodded. “Braelan has enlisted Morven to—” No. He’d not complain to the prince’s prized possession. This was his problem, his burden.

But Trystan guessed for himself. “Help him beat you,” he said. “Right?”

“Yes.” Uriskel turned toward the window. He’d no wish to discuss this, or anything, with anyone. Particularly Trystan.

Neither of them spoke further during the ride to the hotel. They ascended to the top floor in silence, entered the suite in the same manner. Uriskel headed for the prince’s room to deposit the bags. “If you retire now, you’ll be spared what’s to come,” he said without looking back at the human. He dropped Braelan’s load of torture instruments on the bed and returned to the main room.

Trystan stood before the couch, arms folded, leveling a thunderous glare. “I want answers.”

“Well, you’re not likely to get them.” Fool. Why would he not leave?

“I want to know if you’re crazy or just stupid.”

“Excuse me?”

“You heard me.” He took a step closer. “You do what he says one minute and rip his head off the next, even though you know damned well he’ll beat your ass for it. You’re a servant; you’re a dangerous killer. You hate my guts; you sing me to sleep. What the *fuck*?”

Uriskel recoiled inwardly. “Braelan has told you—”

"I don't give a shit what he says about you!" Trystan flushed and lowered his arms. "I'm a big boy, and I make up my own mind about people. And Fae. And my bullshit meter says you're only half-full. So which part's the truth? Are you a monster or a moron?"

For a moment he failed to process the words in the face of lust so strong it pained him. By the gods, what a brazen, beautiful creature. So strong willed. And so very off limits. It was exactly as Braelan had said—Trystan was something he could never have.

"A monster," he finally said.

Trystan's eyes narrowed. "Bullshit."

"You've asked. I've answered."

"I don't believe you." He strode across the room and stopped in front of him. "You can't possibly be as bad as he says. Nobody deserves the kind of abuse you take."

"Yes, I do."

"Goddamn it! You know, you can be just as bratty as him sometimes."

"Then perhaps you should punish me as well."

"*Perhaps* I should." With fire in his eyes, Trystan reached up, grabbed Uriskel's head, and pulled it down.

And kissed him.

Chapter Eleven

Trystan decided he must be the crazy one. But *damn*, did this feel good.

Uriskel stiffened in shock when he planted his lips, but it didn't take long for him to relax. Trystan took advantage, tilted his head slightly, and slipped his tongue through. Oh, God, that mouth was hot. And sweet as hell—like rain and wildflowers. Everything he'd imagined it would be and more. When Uriskel kissed him back, thrust his own tongue in with a moan, it was all he could do not to melt on the floor.

Then the bodyguard pulled back, abrupt as a slap. “No,” he grated. “I’ll not do this to you again.”

“I’m pretty sure I was doing it to you.” The loss of contact was a physical ache. “And what do you mean *again*?”

Uriskel bowed his head. “I’ve already taken you against your will.”

“Against my...” *Jesus*. He replayed last night's disastrous game and saw what Uriskel must have seen—the silence, the resistance, the tears. Sick weight lodged in his gut. “You don't understand,” he whispered. “I was holding back. Big-time. I couldn't let Braelan think... Well, he'd have been pretty pissed if he knew I was enjoying you more than him.”

He looked up slowly. “You cannot mean that.”

“Don't be a jackass.” Trystan grabbed his hand and pressed it against his crotch, where his cock lay hard and ready. “Does it feel like I don't mean it? And that's just from kissing you.”

“Trystan, *please*...”

“Please what? Please kiss you, fuck you, smack you around, call you names—”

“He'll tear me apart.”

The raw words were a bullet straight to his heart. He shoved knuckles in his mouth, and a sob escaped around them. His eyes burned. Christ, how could he *forget* about Braelan? He wouldn't be able to stand it if the bodyguard had to take another beating because of something he'd done. He already had one coming.

Uriskel lifted a hand and disengaged the fist from his mouth with trembling fingers. “Do not cry, àillidh,” he said.

Trystan's breath caught. “I forgot. You can't stand pity.”

“No.” He cupped the side of his face and rubbed a thumb gently beneath one eye, catching moisture before it fell. “I simply cannot bear to see such misery in one so beautiful.” A smirk lifted his firm lips. “Only I am permitted to be miserable.”

“Well, you are pretty good at it.”

“I've practiced.” Uriskel leaned down until their mouths were nearly touching. “Damn Braelan, and damn the consequences. Let him flog me to ribbons. I'll pay that price for you.”

The shudder that worked through Trystan blazed down to his core. “You won't have to,” he said. “We'll go in my room, and if he comes back, you can jump in the shower. He did tell you to take one.”

“Yes. He did.”

Uriskel pressed his lips against him. This time, there was no hesitation, no stiffness. His tongue plunged inside with wet urgency, and Trystan caught it with a groan as the scent of him filled his nostrils with heaven.

“You sure that's not cologne?” he murmured when Uriskel gasped for breath.

The bodyguard's low laugh sent delicious vibrations through him. “I am,” he breathed. “It is my mating scent.”

“I think it's working.”

“Àillidh...” Uriskel captured his mouth again.

He gripped Trystan's waist and lifted. Without breaking the kiss, Trystan wrapped his arms around the bodyguard's neck and allowed himself to be scooped up in a cradle hold. He felt muscles ripple under cloth as Uriskel carried him to the bedroom and opened the door, still supporting him completely with one arm like he weighed no more than a puppy.

Once they were inside, and the door closed, he broke away reluctantly. "Strip in the bathroom," he said. "That way your clothes'll already be there. Just in case."

Nodding, Uriskel set him down and headed away.

"Hurry," Trystan called.

He waited a few seconds, then peeled his own clothes off and scowled at the armbands. They'd have to stay. He had no idea how they clasped, and he'd never be able to get them back on in time if Braelan interrupted.

There was still one major concern—Uriskel's wounds. No matter how carried away things got, he had to make sure he didn't hurt him further. That meant no grabbing, no wrapping, no wrestling around. He could manage that. The easiest and least painful thing was probably to bend over the bed and have Uriskel take him standing up.

When he came back in, Trystan forgot everything except how to stare.

There was a difference between seeing him naked for a beating and seeing him naked for sex. He could pick out every muscle in his chest and stomach, their definition setting off the strange star-shaped scarring that interrupted perfection and changed what could have been creepy into something explosively sensual. His golden, hairless skin practically glowed.

Trystan swallowed before he could start drooling. "Turn around."

Uriskel's brow furrowed. "Why?"

"I need to see how bad it is," he said. "So I don't...touch you where it hurts."

"You'll not hurt me." Uriskel crossed the room to him. "Only the wanting hurts."

“Just humor me. Please.”

Reluctantly, Uriskel turned away.

He tried not to sob, but he couldn't help a sharp indrawn breath. Livid marks still scored his back, raked his ass and thighs over darker bruising. Dried blood edged the cuts and dotted the welts. And he'd still sat down today—in the cab, at dinner, through the peep show Braelan had insisted on seeing.

“All right. You've had your look.” Uriskel faced him, but he wasn't scowling this time. “Now forget what you've seen, because I'll not let a few marks stop this.”

“A few marks. Yeah.” Trystan closed his eyes, attempted to banish the vision. It didn't work. But it didn't stop him from wanting the bodyguard, all of him, *now*, with no one watching or forcing or threatening. He walked to the side of the bed and bent over.

Uriskel made a strangled sound. “No,” he said.

Heaving a sigh, Trystan looked back at him. “What now?”

“Not like this.” Uriskel moved behind him and cupped his ass with both hands, then leaned down and kissed him between the shoulders, sending sparks down his spine. “As appealing as the view is back here, I'd prefer to see your face. Lie on the bed. Please.”

“But your back...”

With a low growl, Uriskel lifted and flipped him onto the mattress, and climbed up after him. “You'll not hurt me,” he said again. “Unless you force me to beg.”

“Don't beg me. Just fuck me.”

He smiled. “As you wish.”

Uriskel slid him back farther along the bed, parted his legs, and settled gently between them. His cock brushed Trystan's erection, making him hiss and arch up to grind them together. “Now,” he gasped. “God, I want your cock.”

“God, is it?” Uriskel leaned down. The silk of his hair whispered over Trystan's face. “Allow me to answer your prayers, then.”

Uriskel massaged warm wetness in between his cheeks, and Trystan let out a moan. Some distant part of him tried to remember asking about that, the same thing Braelan had done, but right now he didn't care. Uriskel shifted slightly, pressed hot flesh against his opening, and kissed him—then thrust his tongue and his cock inside at the same instant.

His mouth swallowed Trystan's cry. He stayed still, his shaft buried so deep that Trystan felt his balls brushing his ass.

But when he tried to move against that delicious, thick cock, Uriskel grabbed his hips and held him in place. “Easy,” he whispered. “You've no need to do a thing. Let me pleasure you.”

The shudder that ripped through Trystan wasn't just sexual. How long had it been since anyone wanted to make him feel good, since someone cared whether he felt anything at all? He was a whore. Any pleasure he got was a side effect. He'd received his share, but it was never intentional.

And it was so much sweeter coming from Uriskel, who didn't know what he was. Who wanted him...because.

On his knees now, effortlessly holding Trystan at the perfect angle, Uriskel drew his cock out a few inches and pushed back in—steady, not teasingly slow, again and again. The rocking motion built waves of dizzy pleasure that escalated fast, until Trystan let out a ragged gasp at the height of every thrust.

He boosted on his elbows so he could watch. Fingers pressed his flesh, gold on pale. His own throbbing cock slapped the taut muscle of Uriskel's belly, adding sparks to the liquid swell in his groin. A green gaze raked him, smoldered, devoured him alive.

Sizzling pressure ballooned in him until he was convinced he'd explode. His eyes rolled back, and he bucked urgently. “Uri,” he breathed, unable to spit out the rest of the name. “F-f-fast. Hard. *P-please*. I need you...”

With a wordless moan, Uriskel complied.

The long, hard cock slammed into him, driven deeper by the weight of his body. “Yes,” he cried, clutching the sheets as the bed bounced beneath them. Wishing he could clutch Uriskel the same way. His balls tightened, and his cock convulsed painfully. “Oh, Jesus. Oh, *shit!*”

Glistening white cum shot from him in thick, arching ropes, hitting Uriskel's face, spattering on his own stomach. He screamed through the orgasm. Uriskel matched his cry as his pounding cock pumped Trystan's ass full.

Trystan let out a shaking breath. “Think I might've died just then.”

“You make a lively corpse.” Uriskel's voice emerged husky and trembling. He bracketed Trystan, palms on the mattress, let his head fall, and pulled free with a grunt. “Ah, gods,” he murmured. “I may be dead as well.”

“Then this must be heaven.” Smiling, Trystan reached up and wiped a splash of cum from his chin. “Maybe we should both take a shower.”

“You should. I'll wash from the sink.”

“Good idea.” Trystan shifted reluctantly and sat up. “How about one more kiss?”

“Yes.” He leaned forward and brushed his lips once, twice, then gave the lower one a gentle nip and offered his tongue. Trystan took it, reveled in his taste and silky heat.

Definitely heaven.

* * *

Uriskel had insisted that Trystan sleep. When he claimed he could not, he'd sung him there and layered a bit of enchantment into the song that would keep sound—and dreams—from waking him. The human's exhaustion was obvious, and he'd rather spare him witness to his punishment if he could. There was at least a slight chance Braelan wouldn't force him to watch. After all, he'd have Morven along.

He'd made a mistake taking Trystan. That they hadn't been caught was miraculous, but that kind of fortune wouldn't last. His declaration that he didn't care what Braelan did to him had been true enough. Now, though, his concern was what the bratling might do to Trystan. He'd heard the prince cast the pain spell in that horrific shop, seen the human cringe in response.

He should not have taken even this nearly safe opportunity to sate his lust. He'd meant to ignore the prince's pet completely, for the rest of the damned bodyguard sentence if possible. But when Trystan claimed to want him more than Braelan, he'd come undone, all his resolve shattered.

The sex had been the most intense of his life and only served to further cement his attraction. It would be so much harder now to stay away. But he'd no choice. Braelan would certainly punish Trystan for carrying on with him. Human lives meant little to the Fae. Even those claiming to be benevolent Seelie—as if the Seelie had never meddled in the affairs of humans.

He'd have to ensure that Trystan despised him. He no longer trusted his own will to keep himself from ravaging the beautiful human again.

Night stretched to early morning, and it was nearing three when Braelan and Morven entered the suite. Uriskel didn't bother turning from the window to greet them. Neither of them spoke for long moments after the door closed.

At last, Braelan said, "Where are my bags, mongrel?"

"In your room." He still didn't turn. He'd not look at them until he was commanded.

"And Trystan?"

"Asleep."

"Come here."

Reluctantly, he faced his tormentors. Morven bared his teeth in a shark's grin and headed for the bedrooms, while Braelan waited with folded arms.

He crossed the room, stood before the prince, and caught the unmistakable scent of sex. A sneer formed unbidden on his face. "Been out sampling humans, Highness?"

"Their females are delectable. And Morven had gathered so many, all of them desperate to please me. How could I refuse?" He flashed a slanted smile. "There's a problem you'll never have, Unseelie. There's no wanting involved with you."

A tiny protest rose and died in him. He'd been wanted just a few hours ago. But no more. His fate did not allow for love. In a month, he'd return to Arcadia with Braelan and lose what little will he could summon here.

"Undress."

He obeyed with wooden indifference. It was better this way, to close himself from everything Trystan made him feel, to take no more of the pleasure he'd only be denied for another century or more. And love? The human could never care for him anyway.

He would feel nothing. Not love or pain. He'd not give Morven the satisfaction.

The vizier returned with the thick metal-studded strip of leather and two thin bars with cuffs attached to the ends. Apparently they'd discussed this punishment before returning here, or the prince had given Morven leave to do what he would. Uriskel stood where they told him, held himself as instructed while they restrained his hands and feet. Let them drape him facedown and half kneeling over the couch, with Morven at his feet and Braelan pulling the bar between his wrists to hold him taut.

He'd not be able to sing himself away. Braelan would silence him with a command or a broken jaw. But they could not stop him from thinking.

As the first lash fell across his back, he summoned the idea behind the song that comforted him most—the dark beauty of the Unseelie wood, the one place he'd been free and nearly happy, before his mother was killed and Arcadia claimed him.

At once he was there, a simple breedling with no care greater than remembering to help his mother gather toadstools from beneath the great stones.

His open eyes saw not Braelan's mocking delight, but moonbeams fragmented through the canopy and dappling the ground. The sting of the strap was nothing more than the sweeping branches of ancient moss-covered trees whispering over his skin as he climbed them. Its whistle and smack were pixie calls and satyrs harvesting the fruits of the vines. He dined on bittersweet elderberries, sluiced through the silvery cool of a river-fed pond, flattered a willow dryad into letting him brush and plait the pale green silk of her hair. He flew in the space between treetops and pale silver stars, the wind caressing and cradling his body, absorbing the weightless joy of being.

Eventually the pain savaged him back to reality. He knew agony too great for screams, knew Morven had left not an inch of him unscathed from shoulders to ankles.

He drew a single gasping breath and lost himself to blackness.

Chapter Twelve

Halfway through *Pulp Fiction*, Trystan was ready to gouge his own eyes out.

The morning after Morven's little visit, Braelan had discovered movies. He'd been instantly fascinated, damn near spellbound, and for three days straight he'd ordered flick after flick through the pay-per-view service. He took occasional breaks to eat and fuck, especially after he'd watched porn and wanted to try out something he'd seen. But for the most part he stayed on the couch, gaze riveted to the huge plasma screen. He hadn't even gone to sleep.

Uriskel had spent most of the time staring out the window. He'd been in obvious constant pain for the first twenty-four hours or so, and while he'd eventually managed to sit down for longer stretches, he was still hurting. He'd barely spoken a word to either of them. Trystan had no idea what they'd done to him or how the hell he'd slept through it. But without a single minute alone with the bodyguard, he'd never had a chance to ask.

It was Friday night. Plenty of shit going on out there. But it looked like they were going to spend another evening sitting here, staring at the screen until he passed out and Braelan nudged him off to bed, possibly staying for a quick lay before he went back to his TV trance.

Oh, joy.

He stood, stretched some of the kinks from his spine, and unsuccessfully stifled a yawn. He'd taken to going shirtless in the suite, since Braelan preferred to keep it warm. Maybe he could entice the prince into sex—if only to break the monotony. He wasn't sure he could take an entire month of endless questionable cinema and

strained silence. But at least there was a bright side. No one was getting beaten or shocked.

Braelan gave him a sidelong glance and then actually looked at him for the first time in days. He smiled and said, "The Grotto."

"Huh?"

The prince snagged the remote and aimed it at the screen. John Travolta vanished mid-diatribes. "Take me to this studio you mentioned. The Grotto. I want one of these." He reached over and touched Trystan's nipple piercing. "And I'll see what bothers the Unseelie so about the place."

Trystan stole a look toward the window. The Unseelie in question stood with his back to them, not saying a word—but every line in his body stiffened, and one hand clenched the window ledge white-knuckle hard.

He cleared his throat. "Well, we can go there," he said. "But I'm not sure if we can get you pierced tonight. See, Cobalt has a waiting list. It's appointment only."

"I do not wish to wait." Braelan frowned. "Are you not this human's friend?"

"Yeah, kinda. But—"

"Then you can have him do this."

"It's not that simple, Highness." Uriskel relaxed his grip and faced them slowly, his features emotionless. "Humans place little stock in boons. There are a hundred more of these studios, where you'll not have to wait."

Braelan smirked. "A hundred. Yet only one that you are desperate to avoid, and so that's where we'll go. You should not have reacted so strongly to the mention of it."

"Hold on." Trystan's stomach surged. He'd already guessed Uriskel knew Cobalt, and had a strong suspicion why. If he was right, bringing the prince there might get Cobalt in trouble too. "The thing is, I don't really know Cobalt that well," he said, hoping he didn't sound completely full of shit. "I doubt I could get you in right away. Maybe we should just go somewhere else."

Braelan shot to his feet. “You as well, gallae? I've a feeling someone is keeping something from me. Unless you're trying to protect the dog. But you'd not do such a thing. Would you, little one?”

“No.” He shook his head, as if it'd be more convincing that way. “It's just... I haven't been there in months. He might not even remember me.”

“You lie,” Braelan said softly. “I'll not have you lying to me.”

Shivering, Trystan tried to brace himself for a shock.

“Enough, Highness.” Uriskel sounded just as commanding as the prince. “The Fae realm may revolve around your splendid person, but the human realm does not. You brought me along to guard you. As your guard, I tell you the Grotto is no place for a royal Seelie.”

Braelan lost interest in Trystan and stalked across the room. “Tell me why,” he said. “Now. I demand to know.”

“It is a haven for the banished.” Uriskel met his furious gaze with an even stare. “None are likely to be welcoming of any court drone. Particularly you.”

Damn it, there he went again, begging for a beating. Why couldn't he just leave off the insults? Trystan just about bit his tongue in a bid to stay out of it.

“Well, then. You'll do your duty and guard me, won't you?”

“Blast you, Braelan, you'll not even be able to enter! The Laws still hold in this realm.”

“Really.” The prince arched an eyebrow. “Tell me, mongrel. Who is this Cobalt?”

“He is Fae.”

“His name!”

Uriskel closed his eyes. “Ciaràn of the glen,” he whispered.

Braelan's mouth opened. After a few seconds, he started laughing.

Jesus. If the confirmation that Cobalt was Fae knocked him in the teeth, the cold edge to Braelan's laughter kicked him in the gut. Obviously, he'd heard of him.

“Ciaràn.” The prince's lips twitched. “As I recall, Uriskel, you championed the poor lowborn bastard at the hearing. Perhaps Eoghann was not his only lover. It seems he's developed a taste for Unseelie.”

A deep flush stained Uriskel's neck. “He'll not invite you in.”

“He will not refuse the command of a royal.”

“He's been banished,” Uriskel grated. “The word of the realm no longer holds sway over him. You cannot bully and bluster your way through this one.”

Braelan narrowed his eyes. “Then you will persuade him to invite me. Or you'll pay the price for his refusal.”

He paused and said, “As you wish. Highness.”

The pure hatred in his voice could've withered cement.

Apparently satisfied with the damage he'd done, Braelan approached Trystan with a smile. “Go and dress yourself, gallae,” he said, extending a quick embrace and a perfunctory kiss. “We'll depart when you're ready. I look forward to meeting your friend.”

“Yeah,” Trystan muttered. “Me too.”

He headed for the bedroom, wondering how in the hell he'd be able to say anything to Cobalt—and how bad things would get when they brought the prince who'd banished him into his studio. Somehow, he didn't think Cobalt would take it very well.

* * *

A bright moon in the mortal realm could prove deadly to a Fae.

Uriskel avoided looking skyward when they exited the taxi in front of the Grotto. The law that prevented them from entering another Fae's dwelling without an invitation was not the only one at play tonight. There was another law—no Fae could kill another in this realm, except when the moon showed its face and mirrored the eternal moon of the Fae realm.

Moonlight was power. And Braelan had made many powerful enemies who'd been banished here.

Of course, the prince knew the Laws as well as any Fae. Likely Braelan believed they did not apply to him, or he'd not have insisted on wandering about under the moon.

Standing before his brother's house brought a flood of emotions and memories. For a lifetime he'd both loved and hated Ciaràn. Loved him for his indifference and occasional kindness, despite knowing he was Unseelie, before he'd been forced to betray him to the court. Hated him for being the brother who had escaped the hell of service to the king, for being the one permitted a quiet, peaceful life—until he was banished. But even here in the mortal realm, Cobalt had landed on his feet. He'd found true love, mortal acceptance, and freedom.

Uriskel envied him that, but it was no longer tinged with hatred. He could not despise the one being who cared whether he lived or died.

“We'll be waiting here for you,” Braelan said. “But we'll not wait long. If you do not return with my invitation in fifteen minutes, I'll send Trystan for you, and you'll spend the evening in retribution.”

Uriskel clenched a fist. One day, when he was certain he'd be put to death—and he knew that day would come—he'd take great pleasure in breaking the bratling's teeth before they killed him. “If Cobalt refuses, I'll return myself to you,” he said. “I told you I'll take what I've earned.”

Trystan made a small sound of distress. He glanced at him. The human looked ready to be sick, as pale and shaking as he'd been at the smell of the vendor's cart. But there was nothing burning now. Uriskel guessed Trystan had not known Cobalt was Fae, and did not look forward to encountering him again, armed with the truth.

“Very well.” Braelan gestured at the door. “Go on, then.”

With a final disgusted glare, Uriskel entered the Grotto.

Thankfully, Cobalt had removed the seals that crippled any Unseelie who passed through the door, invited or not, after they'd captured the traitor Eoghann.

The outside entrance led to a small, plain room that contained a table and chair near the door to the main studio. And behind the table sat a familiar human—Malik, Cobalt's shop assistant. Obviously recovered from the insanity the traitor had inflicted on him, and still afraid of Uriskel.

“Um,” the boy stammered when he entered. “Skelly. You're back.”

Uriskel smirked. “Relax, boy. I'll not eat you.” Muffled music sounded behind the closed door. That his brother played music was a touch he'd appreciated on his last visit. “I'm assuming Cobalt is in,” he said.

“Yes. I'll tell him you're here.”

“No need.” He waved the boy down and reached for the door. “I'd prefer to surprise him.” He wanted as few witnesses as possible when he brought the bad news.

Despite the threat of punishment, he half hoped Cobalt would refuse. It would nearly be worth the pain to see Braelan denied what he wanted for once.

He walked into the main room, into dim lighting and crowds, a swell of human music and chatter, human scents and sights. The bulk of the place contained seating similar to restaurants, but instead of food, each table held a velvet-bound book with samples of the artists' work. Three glass booths stood at the far end of the room, allowing the crowds to watch the artists. The left and right booths were occupied. The center was empty.

Cobalt was not working at the moment. Thank the gods for small favors.

Uriskel marked the time from a wall clock and calculated fourteen minutes, figuring it'd taken him a minute to get past Malik and inside. He scanned the crowds and spotted a tall, dark-haired figure standing at a table near the front with his back turned. From this distance, he couldn't quite discern those seated there, but it looked like Will, along with Nix and Shade—the Pooka and Sluagh couple, Cobalt's fast friends. He'd rather hoped the Sluagh, at least, would not be here. She was psychic, and he'd rather not have her mining his thoughts tonight. But at least the two of them tolerated him at Cobalt's insistence.

He approached in silence. When he'd come near enough, the Sluagh's eyes found him and widened. He laid a finger on his lips, and Shade nearly smiled, a frightening expression coming from her. He stopped just behind Cobalt, waited a beat. And said in low tones, "I've come for my property. I do hope you've not lost them."

Cobalt jolted stiff. He turned slowly, and his mouth parted in shock. "Uriskel?"

"It's Skelly. Remember?" He clasped his brother's shoulder, a customary greeting. "Well met, Cobalt."

"Screw that." Grinning, Cobalt pulled him in a fierce embrace.

By the gods, that hurt. He struggled not to shout, but he couldn't help a wincing hiss.

Cobalt relaxed his grip immediately. His eyes glossed over. "What's happened?" he said hoarsely.

"Nothing. Great softhearted fool." He managed a smile and stepped back. Nix and Will were on their feet, coming around the table toward them. Shade remained seated, her expression troubled, but she said nothing. He supposed he was grateful for that.

Shade nodded an acknowledgment with a knowing smirk. Uriskel rolled his eyes.

"Skelly! Where've you been, mate?" Nix stopped shy of touching him. Whether he'd seen the reaction to Cobalt's embrace or not, the Pooka knew contact with him was anathema to his kind. "We've missed your visits. They certainly livened the place up."

"Indeed." In fact, they'd nearly destroyed the upper floor, Cobalt's living quarters, while fighting to subdue Eoghann. "Greetings, Nix. And Will. I assume you've been taking care of this sentimental oaf."

The human smiled. "Very good care. And I made sure he didn't lose your cards."

"I thank you, then." He leveled a look at Cobalt. "I'd like to speak with you, if you've a moment to spare."

"I'll make one." The concern etched on his face threatened to break Uriskel's resolve, and he nearly walked out without mentioning the whole mess. But that might be more damaging at this point. "Come on," Cobalt said. "There's an empty table there."

Uriskel followed him across the room. Cobalt sat down and gestured for him to do the same. He shook his head.

A furious snarl stretched Cobalt's lips. "Who's hurt you?"

"You'll know in a moment."

"Let me heal you, then."

"Not this time." Uriskel sighed, and his gaze flicked to the clock. Ten minutes left. "I'm afraid I've brought you an unwelcome visitor."

"Who?"

He hesitated. "Braelan."

"The *prince*?" Cobalt's fury turned to sympathy, then disgust. "What business does he have in this realm? And why does he want to see me?"

"He's not exactly here for you." Uriskel dropped his gaze. "He's come to indulge in human pleasure, and he's claimed one of them to escort him for a month. Someone you know, I believe. His name is Trystan."

"Gods. Trystan," Cobalt whispered. "I can see why Braelan would want him, but I don't understand—" He shook himself. "Trystan brought him here?"

Uriskel frowned. "No. Trystan mentioned the Grotto when the bratling asked about his piercing, and I...reacted badly to his wanting the same. So he's come to you in order to shame me. He demands that you invite him inside." He swallowed, clenched his hands. "Believe me, I'll understand if you refuse him."

Cobalt fell silent for a long moment. At last he said, "And he'll punish you because of my refusal. Is that the deal?"

He couldn't answer. But Cobalt knew anyway.

"I'll not have that happen, brother. Even if it means granting haven to the royal brat." He stood and summoned a smile. "You protected me from harm for over a century. I'll take my turn now."

"I thank you." Uriskel could scarcely speak. "Brother."

"That must've been hard for you, thanking me."

A brief laugh escaped him. "You've no idea."

"Actually, I may have a bit of understanding now." Cobalt's smile faded. "He doesn't know, does he? About either of us."

"No. He must not find out."

"He won't from me or anyone here." Cobalt nodded toward the exit. "All right. We'll go and invite the prince inside. I've always wanted to entertain royalty."

"I'll be sure to inform his Highness of your desires to serve him, fledgling. He'll not turn you down. You're far too pretty to refuse."

Cobalt chuckled. "Come on."

They made their way through the throngs, into the vestibule. While Cobalt dismissed Malik for the moment, Uriskel reached for the door. He squared his shoulders and stepped out. Turned to where he'd left the others. And his heart rose to his throat and lodged there, threatening to choke him.

Morven had joined them.

Chapter Thirteen

Trystan wished an earthquake would split the sidewalk open and swallow him. Unfortunately, this was New York, not California. But he wouldn't mind being in San Fran right now. Nice big gay community, plenty of johns to pick from—and no matter how crazy they might be out there, they couldn't come close to the insanity of the Fae.

When Uriskel walked out and saw Morven, he blanched whiter than snow. He ducked back inside, closed the door. An instant later, a male voice that sounded a lot like Cobalt's shouted muffled curses.

Braelan grinned. "It seems the lowborn doesn't wish to welcome you into his house, my friend. What have you done to him?"

"Not a thing," Morven said. "Perhaps my reputation precedes me."

"You think so?"

The door opened, and Uriskel leaned out. "Come on, then," he said.

They approached the door and stopped. Cobalt stood just behind Uriskel, just as gorgeous as Trystan remembered and at least twice as pissed as he'd ever seen him.

When Braelan got a look at him, his jaw hinged open. "So it's true," he said.

Cobalt frowned. "What's true?"

"You..." The prince closed his eyes and shook his head. "For a lowborn, your beauty is extraordinary. I hadn't thought it possible."

"Come in, Braelan," he said through clenched teeth.

The prince slung an arm around Trystan's shoulders and steered him inside.

“And you, Morven.” Cobalt's blue eyes practically sparked. “This place is a haven for any I choose to invite. I'll not have you causing trouble. Keep your hands—and your tongue—to yourself, and don't think I've not the power to enforce that. Understood?”

“Easy, lowborn.” Morven smirked at him. “I've no interest in whatever bottom-feeding scraps you've harbored in there. If you're so concerned, I'll swear to it.”

“Do that.”

“Fine. I'll not touch a single soul within the walls of your dwelling. Cross my heart.” He drew an X on his chest with a finger, forming faint streaks of light that faded quickly.

Cobalt grunted and stepped back. “Come in, Morven.”

Uriskel shut the door after the blond walked through. Cobalt moved to the studio entrance and stopped with a hand on the knob. “Before we go inside,” he said. “Is there something you want, Braelan, or have you just come to mingle with the commoners?”

“Trystan has a...piercing, is it? Yes, a small hoop. I believe you know its placement, since you put it there.” He cupped the nipple through his shirt. “I may want one. First, though, I'd like my gallae to have a matched set. I want to see it done.”

Trystan flinched. Nobody said anything about him getting another piercing. It wasn't burning or cutting, at least, but he didn't like the idea of having someone else dictate what was done to his body. Outside of sex. *Millions of dollars*, he tried to remind himself.

For some reason the money didn't motivate him as much as it did four days ago.

Cobalt's gaze settled on him and delivered a jolt of remembered lust. “I'll not pierce or tattoo anyone who isn't willing to receive.”

“It's fine,” he said. “Really. I was gonna get the other one done anyway.”

“Are you sure about that?”

“Yeah.” He didn’t sound very convincing, even to himself.

Cobalt let out a sigh. “All right.” He opened the door.

The music rolled out first, slow indie-rock stuff, and under that the low mutter of the crowd. The Grotto was pretty much always full. It was the only performance tattoo studio he knew of, and more to the point, the only studio with Cobalt.

Braelan entered slowly, wide-eyed and silent. Trystan stayed at his side, and the others filed in after. They made their way toward the other end of the room and the glass booths. Gradually, Trystan realized the atmosphere was changing. The steady babble and hum of conversation beneath the music lowered and then stopped altogether.

Everyone was staring at them.

The rapt silence crept him out. Somehow, he understood why the crowd reacted like this—it was the Fae, the four of them together. One at a time, they just seemed like beautiful people. But put a bunch of them in the same place, and they radiated sensuality, commanded attention. They were practically broadcasting orgasms.

It took a minute or so for people to adjust to the increase in sexual energy, and then their staring tapered off and the chatter resumed. Morven came around to the prince’s other side and nodded toward a table near the booths. “Look at this, Braelan,” he said. “Insects.”

Trystan followed his gaze. There were three at the table. One of them was Will. He recognized the radio host from the last time he’d come here when Cobalt called, the time Cobalt had freaked out and sent him away before they did anything. The other two, a man and a woman, seemed familiar. He must’ve seen them here before. The guy had glossy brown hair, cat green eyes and wore a preppy ski sweater that’d look ridiculous on most men but made Trystan want to cuddle up with him. The woman looked like what Goth girls wished they were—pale, smooth skin, jet-black hair, penetrating gray eyes, dressed in black and smoking hot.

They were gorgeous. And Fae.

“Morven.” Cobalt's voice simmered with warning. “Look at them the wrong way, and I'll toss you out bleeding.”

“Please. As if I'd waste my time on their kind.”

“I'll meet them,” Braelan said. “They interest me.”

“Around here, they call that 'slumming,'” Morven muttered.

The conversation left Trystan more confused than ever. Insects? Their kind? And what they called Cobalt—lowborn. At least he could guess that meant not royalty. But these guys were apparently something different.

Braelan herded him to the table. Will bit his lip, the sweater guy grinned at them, and the Goth chick glared. Before anyone could make a remark, Cobalt cleared his throat loudly. “I trust you'll all remember the rules,” he said. “And my friends, if this company isn't wanted, they'll damn well find another seat.”

“No worries, mate,” the guy in the sweater said. “We'd never pass up such interesting company—would we, love?” He turned to the girl at that.

She stared at him. “Speak for yourself, you daft bit.”

“Ouch. That's a night in the doghouse for me.” The grin spread. “How about an intro, then?”

“You know that one.” The girl's steady gaze fell on the prince.

“Aye, I do. Braelan. I'm Nix, and this is Shade, my rather cranky wife. Our friend here's Will.” He stood and extended a hand across the table.

Braelan gave the hand a look of distrust, then reached out slowly and took it. “You are a—”

“Hush, mate. Our host likes to keep that sort of thing out of earshot. Bad for business, you know.” Nix gave Morven a sidelong glance. “And who's this?”

The prince smirked. “He is Morven.”

“Bloody...” Nix's expression wavered for an instant and returned brittle. “Well, I suppose any friend of the prince. But watch yourself, mate. I'll only like you until I'm given reason not to. And you look like you'll give me one.”

“Morven's sworn to behave.” Braelan looked downright amused. He nodded aside. “This is Trystan. And I believe you may know the other.”

“We've made Skelly's acquaintance.” Nix sent a smile in Trystan's direction, the warmth in it restored. “Seen you too, but never had the pleasure. Looks like you're another strong one, like our Will.”

“Huh?” he blurted.

“Don't worry,” Will said. “You'll get used to Nix. Are you joining us? I could use another...uh, normal guy. You know.”

“Trystan will join you soon.” Cobalt reached out and gave Will's shoulder a gentle squeeze. “He's an unexpected appointment.”

Will shot him a concerned look. Cobalt shook his head, leaned down, and kissed him. “We won't be long, love. You can go upstairs, if you'd like.”

“No,” Will said. “I'll stay.”

“All right.” He looked at Trystan. “Are we ready, then?”

Not exactly. Trystan held back a sigh. “Let's do it.”

Braelan still had an arm around him. He hugged him closer, bent to his ear, and whispered, “I know you do this just for me, gallae. Thank you.” He pulled back and smiled.

Trystan returned the expression and impulsively kissed him. It was the first time the prince had thanked him for anything. “I'll be back,” he said.

Braelan laughed. “Terminator! Is that not what the android said—'I'll be back'?”

For a second, confusion ruled—then he understood. *Terminator* was one of the zillion movies Braelan had watched, and he'd remembered Schwarzenegger's famous line. Holy shit. The ice prince seemed to be melting a little.

“You've seen that flick?” Nix resumed his seat and leaned forward. “Did you catch the sequel? It's better than the first one.”

“What is a sequel?”

Nix gaped at him. “Oh, mate. You've got a lot to learn, don't you? Take a seat. We'll chat.”

Trystan slipped away and followed Cobalt toward the booth. He glanced back once and froze when he caught sight of Uriskel giving him a furious black stare. What the hell...?

“Trystan?” Cobalt looked from him to Uriskel and cast a deep frown. “Damn,” he said under his breath. “Worse than I thought, isn't it?”

“Couldn't say. I don't know what you're thinking.” He made himself look away. Whatever he'd done to piss off the bodyguard was beyond him, and he wouldn't exactly be able to ask. Not with Braelan around. And damn, he wanted to spend some time alone with Uriskel. He couldn't stop thinking about the last time. He wanted him again, more every minute.

The intensity of his lust scared the shit out of him.

Cobalt practically pushed him into the booth and closed them inside. “I've a feeling we won't be able to talk much at the moment. It's good to see you again, Trys. And I'm...sorry. For what happened before.”

“Don't worry about it,” he said. “And it's good to see you again too.”

“Is it?” Cobalt kept his back to the studio lobby. “I'll assume you know what we are.”

“Yes, I know. And I'm okay. Really.”

“Mm-hm.” He opened a small cabinet near the floor of the booth. “We'd better get on with the show. If you'll...get your shirt off. Please.” He flushed and glanced away.

Trystan couldn't help grinning. “Come on, Cobalt. You've seen a lot more of me than my chest. I don't regret it. Do you?”

“No,” he whispered and returned the smile. “No regrets.”

“Good.” He peeled off the shirt and perched in the vinyl chair in the center of the booth.

Cobalt grabbed a few things from the cabinet. When he straightened, his gaze settled on the bracelets, and his face fell. “Possession bands?” he said. “Ah, Trystan. What've you gotten yourself into here?”

“I wish I knew.” Trystan closed his eyes. Possession bands. He definitely didn't like the sound of that. “Maybe you'd better just do this quick.”

“I'll take it that means you're not permitted to discuss certain things.”

“Yeah,” Trystan said. “Something like that.”

With a grim nod, Cobalt set to work.

* * *

Uriskel watched his brother lead Trystan away, and commanded himself to calm down. Why should he be furious because the human had kissed Braelan? He'd watched them engage in far more intimate activities, time and again, with no further interest than hoping the prince wouldn't demand his participation.

But some small, sheltered part of him had wanted to believe Trystan took little pleasure in Braelan's uninspired coupling. And that kiss had been deliberate. Given freely, with a smile like a secret.

Blast it. He'd not care whether Trystan fell to the prince's charms. It only made it easier for him to keep his distance.

For a moment he watched the booth and saw their brief, apparently uncomfortable conversation. When Cobalt flushed and turned away while Trystan removed his shirt, he realized something further—he'd been intimate with Cobalt too. If their stilted interaction didn't prove that, the tight expression on Will's face when he looked at the little blond did.

It was almost amusing. Three brothers, and Trystan had screwed them all.

He tore his gaze from the impending piercing and back to the table. Odd that Braelan had taken so to Nix. But the Pooka did have a certain irresistible charm about him, and a gift for smoothing potentially explosive situations. It was likely how he'd managed to stay with the Sluagh.

Will looked over at him, pushed his chair back, and stood. "Here, Skelly," he said. "There's plenty of room. I'll get another chair."

Before he could mutter some polite refusal, Morven gave an icy laugh. "That one won't be sitting down tonight. In fact, I'd wager it'll be several nights yet."

"You..." Will blanched, and then brick red suffused his face. He took a deep breath. "I think you're going to be leaving soon," he said through gritted teeth. "Because if Cobalt doesn't throw you out, I will."

"Save your wrath, young one." Uriskel managed to keep his tone light. If an altercation started here, he'd be blamed, and Morven would transfer the irritation onto his hide. "I'd accept your offer, but I've a job to do. One that's better performed on my feet."

"Yeah, right." Will lowered himself slowly back down. His color returned to normal, but his fury didn't leave. And he'd not been the only one affected by Morven's crass comment. The irrepressible Nix glared thunder, and Shade's lips trembled in barely controlled distress. She met Uriskel's eyes across the table, and the sorrow in hers said she'd sensed his fear of further punishment, seen right through his attempt at blithe dismissal.

Lovely. He'd drawn the pity of a Sluagh. For his next trick, he'd make a stone weep.

Braelan, who actually had the grace to look a bit uncomfortable himself, pointed at the booth and made an obvious attempt to change the subject. "That does not look so difficult," he said. "Perhaps I'll have my own pierced as well."

"Really, Braelan." Morven turned a disgusted look on him. "You'd let that lowborn filth lay hands to you?"

"Oh, that's it." Will stood so quickly, his chair clattered to the floor. "You're—"

Uriskel grabbed his wrist and squeezed, just hard enough to gain his attention. "Don't," he said quietly. "He wants this. Play into him, and you're no better than he is."

"Think I don't hear you, dog?"

"Morven, that's enough."

Shock stung Uriskel, and his grip on Will slackened and fell away. Braelan was...defending him? That could not be.

"You know the laws, and you're no more above them than I, my *friend*," Braelan said. "You are fortunate he was able to even bring you in this place, and you'd be well served to recall that. There'll be time enough for the lash of your tongue elsewhere."

Before Uriskel could process the bizarre and surely temporary miracle of the prince's favor, Shade got to her feet almost as abruptly as Will had. "Trouble." She looked directly at him. "Be on your guard."

He started to ask for clarification and then sensed what she must have—a new presence, dark and furtive. Still far but closing in. He scanned the room and saw a tall, light-haired figure in a long black coat striding unsteadily toward them. A male Unseelie. Vaguely familiar. A few more feet, and recognition set in with a dull twist. "Finn," he murmured. "Cobalt granted haven to *him*? He's lost his mind."

"Aye, we warned him," Nix said. "But you know Cobalt. Always wanting to see the best in anyone."

"Thick dolt, he is." Uriskel shook his head and watched Finn warily. Once a member of the Unseelie court, he'd been cast out and then banished by Arcadia for an affair with a Seelie priestess, which he insisted hadn't occurred. Innocent or not, Finn was a lunatic—and he held Braelan accountable for his banishment.

Uriskel moved to stand between the prince and the approaching Unseelie. "Stay, Braelan," he said. "Perhaps he's not seen you." He stepped forward a few feet in the hopes of keeping Finn as distant as possible.

Finn stopped a few tables away, where two human females were leafing through a studio art book. He leaned over them and pointed to the open page. "I've that one on my ass," he said. "Care to see it?"

One of them smirked at him. "Maybe later," she said.

"It's a date!" Roaring with laughter, he lurched away and headed once again for their table. His black eyes narrowed on Uriskel, and he stopped in front of him. "Hello, puppet." Disdain dripped from his voice. "Have they finally banished you too?"

Uriskel's lip curled. The sour stench of alcohol consumed to excess blanketed the Unseelie. "You're drunk, Finn," he said quietly. "And you're not welcome at this table. Find another seat."

"No room for a fellow outcast?" His gaze slid to Will. "Get rid of that one, then. He's—ah, wait. What's this?" He leaned aside and flashed a grin that showed sharpened teeth. "High company you're keeping these days, puppet. I'll have words with that one."

"No. You'll not."

Finn raised a black-gloved hand as though he meant to strike. The sight of it raised a faint alarm—it was spring and warm even for that season. He'd no idea what it meant, but he suspected the gloves were not a fashion statement.

He grabbed Finn's arm and shoved him back. The Unseelie stumbled. "I said, you'll not have words or anything else. Take yourself elsewhere."

Much of the crowd watched them now. For an instant, Finn looked like he'd lunge again, but he straightened and offered a strained smile. "I wonder, puppet, if you serve the right side," he said. "That one's time may be shorter than you think."

In a blink, Finn pulled a dull gray object from his jacket, a flattened disc mounted on a short handle, and thrust it against Uriskel's neck. His skin hissed and bubbled beneath the thing. Pain screamed through him, and his legs gave out and dropped him to his knees.

Cold iron. Poisonous, potentially deadly to the Fae. Finn wore gloves so he could handle the stuff without burning himself.

The Unseelie withdrew the brand and headed for Braelan.

No! With a vague awareness of chaos erupting around him, Uriskel summoned his spark and channeled it back into himself. He could not heal, but he could increase his physical strength for a few moments. He sprang up, whirled, and lunged, tackling Finn to the floor mere inches from the prince's seat.

Finn cursed at him, squirmed until he was faceup, and flailed with the brand, striking Uriskel's head and shoulders. Every blow sent waves of nausea through him. His vision dimmed, but he held fast and wrenched the thing away from him. It seared his palm, cutting like a blade. He fought the impulse to drop the iron and rammed it beneath Finn's shirt, then held it down with both hands.

Finn let out a long bubbling snarl. He twitched for several seconds, foaming at the mouth, and finally stilled.

Uriskel rolled off the motionless Unseelie. A strangled cry escaped him when his bruised back hit the floor. "Iron," he managed to gasp, unable to see whether anyone was close enough to hear. The sickness flowed through him, turning his gut to water, clogging his throat, and burning his eyes.

Through the pounding in his ears, he heard shouts, something being dragged. He assumed it was Finn. Hoped they'd had sense enough to get one of the humans to remove the brand.

He was going to vomit, and soon. If he did it lying on his back, he'd choke. Teeth clenched, he rolled on his side, struggled to hands and knees, and crawled in a direction he thought led away from the rest of them.

A voice laced with concern spoke something near him. Someone grabbed his shoulder. The contact wracked him with agony.

"Don't touch me!" His own voice stabbed at his ears. A ragged cough twisted his gut, and what felt like gallons of burning liquid surged through his throat and left his mouth in a powerful spray. His stomach seized, and he vomited again and

again. The fourth time he brought up nothing. Still, the torturous retching continued.

When at last he managed to stop, he straightened and braced himself with hands on his thighs, shivering violently. He closed his eyes and drew several deep breaths. Slowly, his senses returned to a dull, aching semblance of normalcy. "Braelan," he croaked. "Are you harmed?"

"He's fine."

The wavering voice sounded to his right. He turned, attempted to focus, and Trystan's face resolved from the blurred gloom. He must've been the one to touch him. "Good," he whispered.

"You're not," Trystan said. "Let me help you up."

"No." Even the weight of the air felt like sandpaper against him. He could not bear to be touched again, especially by Trystan. He blinked until the rest of the room swam into view. Table and chairs to his left. He grabbed the nearest chair, wrenched to his feet, and swayed. Caught himself just before he toppled over.

The rest of the group, save Cobalt, stood in a loose semicircle near the table they'd occupied. Most of the crowd had left, and Malik moved among the rest, apparently telling them to head out as well. There was no sign of Finn.

He'd been fortunate. The Unseelie's drunken state, combined with the relative weakness that likely stemmed from being fool enough to carry around cold iron, had allowed him the upper hand. This time. He'd have to hope there would not be a next.

"Well, I guess you don't need me."

The catch in Trystan's voice pierced his heart. He nearly explained that it was not him, that the effects of iron poisoning made contact intolerable. But it would only encourage sympathy from the human, when he'd sworn to make Trystan despise him. So he said nothing. Let him assume what he would.

Cobalt emerged from the shadows beyond the booths, where stairs led to his living quarters above the studio. He held a bottle in one hand and a glass in the other. Going straight to Uriskel, he poured deep red liquid into the glass and offered it. "Can you hold this?" he said in choked, guttural tones.

Nodding, he accepted and drank. Elderberry wine. It would neutralize some of the poison—and he'd not had the stuff since his last visit here, and decades before that. Glorious. He might've wept at the taste if there were not witnesses. He drained the glass quickly and set it on the table before his fingers could fail him. "Thank you," he whispered.

"Thanks belong to you, bodyguard."

He blinked. He hadn't even seen Braelan come up beside Cobalt. Whatever the prince might be thinking, it did not show on his face.

He was not certain how to respond. At last, he settled on neutrality. "I merely performed my duties, Highness." With the humans gone, at least he could use the title and perhaps put off a beating.

"Yes. And you've done them well, mon—Uriskel."

Morven approached them with a sneer. "How touching," he said. "The dog saves his master."

"No thanks to you!" Braelan whirled on the vizier, eyes lit with rage. "You knew this Finn. There was a time you kept counsel with him. You might have attempted to turn him away."

Morven flinched. Brief anger dissolved into something that resembled meekness, and he bowed his head. "My apologies, Highness," he said. "What can I do to atone for my failure?"

"We continue as planned for the moment." Braelan turned to Cobalt and gave a slight nod. "I thank you for your hospitality and protection, and offer you a boon for the damage I've caused to your house."

If any part of Uriskel's body still responded, his jaw might've fallen to the floor. No Fae offered a boon lightly, least of all Braelan, and never a royal to a lowborn. Should Cobalt accept, the prince would be bound to grant a favor of his choosing at any time he desired it.

Cobalt shook his head. "I cannot accept," he said slowly. "You were not at fault. It was Finn who attacked you, and myself who gave him leave to enter."

"I insist." Braelan grabbed his hand and clasped it in both of his.

Uriskel felt the whisper of power passing between them. He looked from the prince's determined face to Cobalt's nearly horrified features—and saw for the first time the strong physical resemblance between them. Both dark-haired, blue-eyed, and bronze-skinned, the same shape to the nose and jaw. Had either of them noticed?

Braelan released him. "Morven and I will take our leave now," he said. "We've a party to attend and certain females I've promised to entertain."

"Do send your entourage back to await you," Morven said.

"No." The prince faced Uriskel, and something in his features softened. "I'm tempted to bring you along, since Morven has proven worthless at protecting me. However, you've earned a respite. If you wish, you may...visit with Cobalt, and I'll charge you only with escorting my gallae safely back before I return. Untouched, of course."

It took him a moment to reply. "As you wish, Highness."

He watched Braelan stride across the studio with a thoroughly disgusted Morven in tow, and his thoughts raged like a summer storm. He'd performed countless tasks for the prince over the long years, even confronted and turned away other Fae with intent to harm him, as he'd just done, and never had the bratling shown an ounce of gratitude or compassion. His suspicions greatly outweighed his relief, and he'd not be able to view this as a change.

He could only wait. Eventually, Braelan would exact retribution. It was certain as the sun would rise at dawn.

Chapter Fourteen

Trystan hung back while the Fae argued and talked crazy with each other. He didn't exactly understand what had just happened, but it seemed like Braelan had done something nice for Cobalt. And for Uriskel.

All he knew for sure was that when the guy in the coat attacked, he'd basically stopped thinking and burst out of the booth trying to get to the bodyguard. Nix and Will had held him back, and in his frenzy to break free, he'd bitten Will on the arm. Hard enough to draw blood. They finally let him go when the coat guy passed out, and he'd scrambled after Uriskel—all to get screamed at for touching him.

That shouldn't have hurt as much as it did. For a minute, he'd wanted to die.

Braelan and Morven left. When the door shut behind them, Uriskel staggered back and collapsed in the chair he'd used to get up, wincing as he landed.

"Thought you couldn't sit," Cobalt said, half smirking.

"Hurts less than standing." Uriskel waved weakly at the table. "How about another glass of that?"

"Of course." He poured and handed it over. "Improving?"

"Some."

Trystan shook himself and moved closer. "Can somebody please tell me what just happened?" he said in a voice he hardly recognized as his own.

Cobalt spared him a distracted glance. "Ah. Well, that was...damn. Nix? Can you—"

"On it, mate." Nix walked over, slung an arm around Trystan, and steered him gently away. "You holding it together? Not lost your marbles, have you?"

Trystan sighed. “Not yet.”

“Good. I'll wager if you haven't after that, you're safe. Here, now.” He lowered him into a chair and took the one next to him. Will settled across the table, with Shade between the two.

He met Will's eyes and grimaced. “Sorry about your arm.”

“Don't worry about it.” Will nodded toward the table. “Looks like we're even, anyway. I almost couldn't hold you.”

Frowning, Trystan glanced down and saw finger-shaped bruises forming on his forearm. He hadn't even realized they were gripping him so tight.

“So, that was Finn.” Nix's brow furrowed. “He's a bit of a nutter, and he doesn't much like the prince. Or anyone else, for that.”

“Is he...dead?”

“No. He'll be dog sick for a while, but he'll live.”

“Great. That's probably not good news.” He glanced over at Uriskel. The bodyguard looked terrible—he was practically green, and there was a huge circular burn on his throat. “What was that thing he burned Uri with?”

Will stared at him. “Uri?”

“It was cold iron.” Nix flashed Will a look. “Stuff's poison to the Fae. Enough of it can kill us.”

“So he's been poisoned?”

“Aye. But what Cobalt's giving him will help.”

Jesus. Up until now, the whole bodyguard thing had seemed like just another way for Braelan to humiliate Uriskel. They'd been in the goddamn hotel for days. Nothing there to protect the prince from, except maybe cold room service food. Even outside the place, the idea that anyone would actually try to kill Braelan felt ridiculous. It belonged in an over-the-top spy movie. Not out here in the real world.

What if Uriskel got killed?

“Skelly can take care of himself.” The Goth girl, Shade, sent him a small smile. “At least as far as staying alive. His heart's another matter.”

Trystan gaped at her. How the hell...

“Oh, gods, your *face*!” Nix howled with laughter. “Priceless. Good show, love. Should we tell him or let him squirm some more?”

“You've had enough entertainment tonight,” she said. “Besides, I think he's got it pegged.”

“Um. You're psychic?”

“That she is.” Nix leaned over and stage-whispered, “I'll tell you, mate, it's not as fun as it sounds. Last week, I wanted to—”

“Nix.”

“Sorry, love.” He smiled and settled back into the chair. “I'm an insensitive bastard, a bloody tool, et cetera and so forth.”

“That you are.”

Cobalt came to the table, his features strained and pale. “I think we've passed the worst of it,” he said. “He'll be all right in a few moments. But he'll not let me heal him. Stubborn bastard.”

Shade closed her eyes. “He can't let you,” she whispered.

“I know. It's just not... Damn Braelan to hell. There has to be *something* I can do.”

“Cobalt.” Trystan stood, trying to sort through the whirl of thoughts and half-understood conversations in his head. The more he heard, the less sense things made. “Can I talk to you for a minute? Um...alone?”

“Of course.” He offered a weary smile and looked at Will. “That is, if you don't mind, love.”

Will nodded. “You know I trust you. Besides, I think your friend here's a lot more fucked than we ever were.”

“I'm afraid you may be right,” Cobalt said softly.

“Wait a minute.” Cold settled over Trystan like a shroud. “What do you mean, I’m fucked?”

“Come with me, Trystan.” Cobalt put an arm around him and led him across the room, toward the outside entrance.

He looked at Uriskel when they walked by. The bodyguard still sat, leaned over almost double in the chair with arms crossed over his legs, his head resting on them. At least he wasn’t puking anymore. “Are you sure he’s gonna be all right?” he said.

“Yes.” Cobalt’s mouth pulled in a grim line. “Unfortunately, he’s been worse than this.”

Trystan shivered and fell silent until they took seats at a table far from the others. Nobody had turned the overhead music off, so at least they wouldn’t be overheard. “Cobalt, I don’t know what to do.” He was going to stop there, but the rest of it came pouring out of him like a shaken beer can. “I’m kind of stuck with Braelan for a while. He’s good to me, but he’s awful to Uriskel. Most of the time Uri’s awful right back. They’re both driving me nuts. And sometimes Uriskel is so sweet to me, but then he...shit. I can’t keep any of this straight. There’s a ton of stuff I don’t know or can’t know or whatever. And I’m losing it.” He buried his face in his hands, pressing fingers against his eyes to keep from bawling.

Cobalt took a while to respond. At last, he said, “Do you love him?”

“Who? Braelan or Uriskel?”

“You tell me.”

He sighed. “Well, I don’t love Braelan,” he said. “And I’m not sure about Uriskel. It’d be pretty stupid to love him, wouldn’t it? I mean, he hates my guts half the time. He—” *Saved me from the nightmare. Sang me to sleep. Wanted me for me.* Jesus Christ. The reaction when he thought the crazy Fae was going to kill Uriskel came rushing back—frantic terror, the same he felt when he tried to save his family from the fire. Desperation, because he didn’t want to lose him. Couldn’t imagine going the rest of his life without having him.

"You do love him," Cobalt said.

He couldn't answer. It was true. And he was fucked.

"Trys, you have to understand something." Cobalt's voice shook. "Uriskel does have secrets. I know you're aware of this. But his life depends on keeping them." He reached across the table and took one of his hands. "I'm almost as helpless in this as him, but I can tell you one thing. He doesn't always mean what he says. And if you can learn to tell when he's forced to lie, maybe you can help him."

"Help him what?"

"Trust," Cobalt said. "He trusts no one, and with good reason. But if he can trust you, perhaps things can be changed."

"By things, you mean these secrets I can't know, right?"

"Yes."

He would've been pissed if Cobalt didn't look so completely miserable. "All right," he said. "In that case, I just have one more question. Well, two."

Cobalt raised an eyebrow.

"What's gallae mean?"

"Braelan's name for you." He shook his head. "It's an endearment of sorts. Not terrible, but not exactly loving. The closest I can come in your language is 'sweet bitch.'"

"Yeah, that's kinda what I thought. And I am his bitch, for now." He drew a quick breath and met Cobalt's eyes. "What about àillidh?"

"That one's easy and definitely you." He smiled. "It means 'beautiful.' He calls you that as well?"

Trystan swallowed. "No," he whispered. "Uriskel does."

"Ah, Trys. If only you could know." Cobalt squeezed his hand. "You're working a miracle. Please don't give up."

He bit his lip. It'd be a miracle if he got through the rest of the night without his head exploding. How the hell was he supposed to tell when Uriskel was lying—hook him up to a fucking polygraph? But if all the rest was true...

"It means 'beautiful.'"

"I'll try," he finally said.

"Thank you."

He didn't even want to think about what might happen if he failed.

* * *

The wine calmed Uriskel down and finally eased enough of the sickness to let him see and hear and move without retching. He straightened slowly. Nix, Shade, and Will sat at the front table, but there was no sign of Cobalt or Trystan. He looked around and spied the two of them all the way across the room, apparently having an intimate little conversation.

He'd not let that bother him either. The human could fuck all of New York if he wished.

No longer able to tolerate sitting, he pushed to his feet and took a moment to collect himself. The sickness had left him hollow and raw, as though his insides had been scraped clean with a dull blade. Without a healing, he'd not fully recover for days. But if he was to be healed, it would have to come from Braelan. He would not risk allowing Cobalt to incur the prince's wrath.

He made his way to the table and stopped near one of the empty chairs. "By chance did anyone relieve Finn of his weapon?"

"Malik took it," Will said. "He went to get rid of it."

He nodded. "Good, though I don't doubt he has more."

"Always wondered why being around him made me a bit queasy," Nix said. "Are all your parts still working, mate?"

"The ones that matter." Uriskel touched the mark at his throat. Another eventual scar for his collection—magic-inflicted wounds never healed completely.

His gaze strayed across the room again. Trystan and Cobalt were standing, about to head this way. He wanted to stay, to talk with his brother and forget his damned duties to the court for a time. But he could not trust Braelan's newfound generosity. "I suppose I must escort the prince's pet back to our quarters," he said, half to himself.

Stone silence met his statement.

"What?" he said. "You all heard his Highness. I'm to return him untouched."

"He also said you could stay for a while." Will looked particularly furious for some reason. Likely he'd picked up on Trystan's intimate knowledge of Cobalt as well.

"If you knew the bratling, you'd understand why his favors cannot be trusted." Uriskel frowned, glanced down, and noticed the wound on Will's arm. "Did Finn get to you?"

"No." Will gave him a steady stare. "The prince's pet bit me."

"*Trystan* did that?"

Will nodded. "He was trying to save you from Finn. Nix and I had to hold him back so he wouldn't get hurt. He didn't make it easy."

"Oh gods, no..." He nearly choked on the words he'd not meant to say aloud. If Trystan had reacted like that, Braelan had surely noticed—and damn, what the bastard would do to him, to both of them, if he suspected what they'd done. He closed his eyes, unable to face the condemning gazes around him.

They thought him coldhearted for spurning the human's affection. So be it. He'd been hated by countless others for less noble reasons. At least he could bear this knowing he'd done everything in his power to spare Trystan.

A small comfort, but when had he ever had more than that?

He'd no choice but to forgo a visit now. Avoiding those at the table, he turned and found Cobalt and Trystan had already reached them. "Cobalt, I thank you for

the wine,” he said. “And if you'd be so kind as to return my cards, we'll be on our way.”

He expected a protest. But Cobalt merely reached in a pocket and produced a battered leather case. “This was my guarantee that you'd return,” he said. “What do I have for it now?”

“My word. For what it's worth.” He almost laughed. Braelan might insist on returning here—once or a dozen times or never. He also might forbid him from ever setting foot in the Grotto again, or keep him busy in the Fae realm for another century or two.

One more excellent reason to stay clear of Trystan. He was forever subject to the bratling's whims.

“Walk with me a moment,” Cobalt said.

Uriskel narrowed his eyes. “Why? Do you have some sappy farewell speech to deliver?”

“Ah, there's the bastard who came seeking haven from the enemy.” He grabbed his arm. “Walk.”

“Unhand me, fledgling.”

Cobalt flinched and released his grip. “Please,” he said. “A moment.”

“Fine.” Ignoring the stunned silence from the others, he stalked away and waited for Cobalt to join him. “I've neither the time nor the patience for this,” he said. “I thought you, at least, understood my reasons. Perhaps I was wrong.”

Cobalt gestured in surrender. “Easy, brother.”

“Easy! What, exactly, about any of this is easy?” Fury fueled by helpless frustration bubbled through him, threatening to burst the thin cap of his control. “Tell me what you want, and make it quick.”

“I want to set you free.”

“You...what?”

"You heard me, you mule." Cobalt offered a faint smile. "I've a favor from the prince himself. I'm going to have you released from service to the court."

"You cannot do that."

"Watch me."

"Blast it, Cobalt!" A hundred reasons it wouldn't work pounded through his head and snuffed a fragile flare of hope. *Freedom*. Impossible. "The bastard king would never allow it. Even if he did, Braelan is still my brother. *Your* brother. Scum-sucking noble that he is, he'll get his fool self killed without me. You've seen Morven's brand of protection. And if he dies in this realm, his death will be blamed on me."

"So who's going to keep you from getting killed, then? I saw what happened with Finn. You barely managed to take him down. Next time—"

"I'll have my cards next time."

"Your cards? Damn it, Uriskel, how are those going to help? Do you plan to rummy him to death?"

"Not exactly." A corner of his mouth twitched, and he fought a grin. "They are not merely playing cards. I've enchanted them."

"Really. While they were here with me. What a talent you have."

"If you recall, I'd brought them with me."

"Come on. Those aren't going to save your life. Enchantments don't last that long on objects."

"They do if you've worked them for five years."

Cobalt's brow furrowed. "Why would you do that?"

"Because I'd nothing better to do." As they always did, the memories threatened to crush him—the black solitude, the constant shivering sickness, the slow burn of insanity. Five years in a stinking gaol, with nothing but the deck of cards and a fraction of his spark. "Do not worry about me. I'll not be destroyed by the likes of Finn."

“Fine.” Cobalt made a visible effort to pull himself together. “But if you're really concerned about Braelan—and I can't believe that's true—you can still protect him if he releases you.”

“No. He'll be furious if you ask that of him, and he'll send me away.”

“Then let the precious prince die. Either way, you'll be finished with it.”

“I'll not leave—” Something in Cobalt's eyes gave him pause, and he finally realized what he'd been driving at all along. “You manipulative bastard.” His throat tightened around the words. “You want me to admit it? Very well. I'll not leave Trystan alone with the bratling. But he's not to know that. Understand?”

Cobalt immediately averted his gaze.

“You've told him,” he whispered. “How could you?”

“Uriskel...he loves you.”

It was the final blade, and it sliced him apart. “Love,” he snarled through clenched teeth. “Idiotic, starry-eyed breeding prattle! Just because you won your Will does not mean love conquers all. Have you any idea what you've done?” He barely stopped himself from striking at Cobalt. “The bratling's already beaten me bloody, simply for touching Trystan without permission. I do not love him, and he cannot love me.”

“Wait. I didn't tell him anything, damn it!” Cobalt's jaw firmed. “I'm not completely stupid. And he does love you.”

“Then he's lying. To you or to himself.”

“Will you just listen to me? It wasn't like that. If you'd talk to him—”

“I won't, and you've done quite enough talking. I'm leaving, Cobalt. Send the human outside. I must return him to his keeper.”

Uriskel whirled and strode for the exit. He forced himself not to look back, aware that if he caught sight of his brother's devastated features, he would lose far more than his temper.

Chapter Fifteen

Once again, Trystan endured a silent cab ride back to the Black Dragon. But this time it seemed to take a year to get there. Uriskel was so furious, he practically cooked the air around him. He'd probably spit flames if he opened his mouth.

And Cobalt thought he could get through this? Yeah, right.

More crackling silence accompanied them into the building, up the elevator, through the door of the suite, which Uriskel slammed shut behind them. He didn't even look at Trystan. Didn't move. Just stood there, blazing with rage, breath seething in and out between bared teeth.

Go to bed. Solid advice from the last remaining bit of him that could still think straight. Nobody that pissed off could be talked to or reasoned with. But Cobalt wanted him to try. *He* wanted to try. And who knew how long it would be until Braelan left them alone again? He opened his mouth, not entirely sure what would come out.

"Don't speak to me, human," Uriskel snapped before he managed a single word.

Trystan recoiled. He doesn't mean it, he tried to tell himself, but it wasn't very convincing. He sure as hell sounded like he meant it. "I thought I asked you not to call me that," he said.

"I do not care what you want. *Human.*" Lip curled, he took a step forward and stopped. "I'll have nothing to do with you outside of what the prince commands. I despise you."

"No, you don't." Trystan barely kept his voice from shaking.

“Really. So you've developed psychic abilities? Perhaps the Sluagh's rubbed off on you.”

He swallowed. “Cobalt said you're lying.”

“Cobalt?” Uriskel's fury flipped into icy disgust. “Well, now. Let's discuss Cobalt. You're quite familiar with him, aren't you? Just as cozy as you are with the prince.”

“Hey. Hold on a minute.” A spark of anger flared in his gut. “I'm not cozy with Braelan. I already told you that.”

“I see. So when you kissed him at the Grotto, you meant to lay your lips on his ass.”

“What? I didn't—” Oh, damn. He'd forgotten about the impulsive thank-you kiss. “Okay, I did. But it really wasn't anything. Just a spur-of-the-moment peck.”

“Like your spur-of-the-moment fucking.”

The spark surged into flames. “What happened with you wasn't impulse. I wanted you, specifically. Not just a screw.”

“And I'm to believe that, knowing how willingly you've fucked Braelan...and Cobalt?”

“Cobalt and I are ancient history.”

Uriskel arched an eyebrow. “You admit to fucking him, then.”

“Yeah, I do. Jesus Christ, wouldn't you?” He could've strangled the stubborn son-of-a-bitch. “Hell, you already knew him, and you don't even have any piercings or tattoos. So maybe you fucked him, too.”

Uriskel's fiery glare raised the temperature in the room a billion degrees.

“You did, didn't you?” Unbelievable. Was this really all about jealousy? “Oh, man. If you hate me this much, I guess you really hate Will.”

The bodyguard moved so fast, Trystan didn't even see him cross the room. One moment he was by the door. The next he was in front of him, one hand fisted in his

shirt, yanking him almost off the floor. "Gods take you to hell, human." He growled the words, and his green eyes flashed dark. "Cobalt is my *brother*."

All the anger and disgust flushed out of Trystan at once. He sagged against the grip. Uriskel shoved him away, and he stumbled back and landed hard on his ass. The impact knocked the breath from him.

"Don't speak to me," Uriskel said. "Ever."

With that, he strode past him into the main bathroom and slammed the door.

* * *

Uriskel made it as far as the sink. He grabbed it with both hands, leaned over and gasped, willing himself not to vomit.

He'd actually said it aloud. Blurted the secret he guarded more carefully than his own life—because it *was* his life—with no more care than discussing the damned weather. To the prince's lover. And sooner or later, out of sympathy or spite, Trystan would let it slip.

He would be fortunate to live another night.

For several moments he stayed in place, attempting to regain control of his trembling limbs. Perhaps this was a blessing. He would finally know oblivion. Of course, he'd know suffering first—far more than he had ever experienced, since the bastard king would not grant him an easy death. This time, though, the pain would end forever.

Not exactly the freedom Cobalt had in mind, but freedom nonetheless.

At last he steadied himself enough to move. He would take advantage of Braelan's absence and soak in the hot tub. The potential relief for his aching muscles would be worth the sting of the water, and he'd not truly bathed since Keroth had cleaned him after his stretch in the gaol. He walked to the tub, adjusted the water to hot as he could stand it, and engaged the drain plug.

A thud sounded outside the door. He stiffened. Had the prince returned, or did the noise come from Trystan? After a moment and silence, he decided he didn't care

one way or the other. Let Braelan punish him for bathing. He'd be put to death soon anyway.

Once the tub filled halfway, he stripped methodically. He'd no sooner removed the last of his clothing than the click of a latch came from behind him, and Trystan said, "We need to talk."

"Blast you, stop following me!" Uriskel didn't bother turning. "When I said don't ever speak to me, I meant it. If I must, I'll force you to stop."

"Oh, my God..."

The strangled, halting whisper only served to spike his irritation. He pivoted to face the human, and was met with a view of quivering lips and tears trickling from reddened eyes. "Pathetic," he said with a sneer. "You weep more than Cobalt. I'd not thought that possible."

"Y-your *back*." Trystan's breath hitched. "I didn't know what Morven did. I slept through it. How the fuck did I sleep through that?"

"Oh, for the love of—" He moved aside, positioned himself across from the full-length mirror on the far wall, and glanced over his shoulder. Damn. He'd not realized how bad it looked. The strap did not cut like the whip. It bruised, and it had left a spectacular, solid array of gruesome coloration blanketing every inch of skin on the back half of him. The days-old bruising appeared far worse than it felt. "I am fine," he said. "Now leave me alone, human."

"No."

The word slapped him, but he recovered quickly. "Then I'll force you."

"I'm not leaving." Trystan's chin firmed and lifted. "You'll have to pick me up and drag me out if you want me gone."

"I'll have no trouble with that."

Uriskel advanced on him, radiating all the menace he could muster, fully intending to toss the infuriating little human out of the room, out of his life as far as he could get him.

Trystan reached back, swung the door shut, and stood with his back against it.

“Leave, damn you!” He slammed his palms against the surface on either side of Trystan, making him jump. “I’m going to open this door, and you’re going to get out.”

Trystan’s eyes widened, and his body trembled—but he shook his head. “No, I’m not.”

“I’ll kill you.” Gods, how it tore at his soul to say that. “Braelan can find another human escort. You’ll not be that great a loss, pet.”

“You won’t.” A shudder worked through Trystan, but he held his ground and his steady gaze. “Your scent says you’re lying. I figured it out,” he whispered. “Your mouth can lie, but your body can’t.”

Uriskel hadn’t even realized he’d been edging closer, leaning down to the upturned face that wouldn’t flinch or look away. Now their lips were inches apart, and the heat pouring from that perfect body crashed against him in waves. He groaned, hitched a breath. “Damn you to hell,” he murmured. “I hate you, Trystan.”

“I love you.”

“Liar.”

He closed the distance and claimed his mouth, attempting to push every ounce of frustration into a punishing kiss that would convince Trystan—and himself—of his hatred. But even at the height of fury, he could not hurt this beautiful, fearless human. He eased back and thrust his tongue between slick, firm lips. Tasted salt and heat, sorrow and desire.

Trystan grabbed his head and pushed back, slipping his own tongue across the barrier. He groaned, and the sound ricocheted through Uriskel’s blood with pure musical vibrations.

It stole his breath, and he broke the kiss with a gasp. “Trystan,” he rasped. “Will you promise something to me?”

“Anything.”

Stop this, you fool. He knew exactly what would happen if he did not walk away now. But the taste of him lingered on his lips, in his mouth, delicious and maddening. He would take what Trystan offered, like the dog Braelan accused him of being. He'd beg for scraps and devour them. Under one condition. "Tell no one of my relation to Cobalt," he said. "Do not even allow him to learn that you know. In fact, forget what I said altogether. Can you do that?"

"I've already forgotten."

"Good." Uriskel allowed himself a smile, and gestured to the bath. "Join me?"

"Oh, hell yes."

He nodded and moved to turn off the water. One last indulgence before the storm.

Chapter Sixteen

It worked.

Trystan felt like singing. Not that he was any good at it, but holy shit. Right now he'd belt out an opera if Uriskel asked him to. Cobalt was right. If he just held his ground, didn't give up, he could get to the truth. And the truth was in that knee-weakening, died-and-went-to-heaven mating scent of his. Better than any lie detector.

He stripped fast, before Uri could change his mind.

Part of him knew this was a bad idea, with a capital *B*. Braelan could come back any time, and the bodyguard was already in terrible shape. Of course, the prince would probably punish him too. Maybe worse than a few shocks this time. But if Uriskel could take a beating to be with him, then he'd do the same.

He moved up next to Uriskel, who stood staring at the tub like it was full of snakes. "What's wrong?" he said.

"Are there not supposed to be bubbles?"

Trystan laughed. "You have to turn the jets on." He flipped the lid on the control panel and moved the dial up to nine. Motors hummed, and the surface of the water rippled, rose, transformed into churning foam. "There. Bubbles."

"Ah." Frowning, Uriskel stepped over the edge and eased gingerly into the water. He paused, thrust an arm under, then shifted aside to sit on one of the submerged benches. "This is...nice," he said.

"It doesn't hurt too much?"

"No. Not the water, at least."

The simmering edge in his voice sent shivers of anticipation through Trystan. “What hurts, then?”

Uriskel grabbed his hand, plunged it into the water, and pressed it against his stiff cock. “This,” he whispered.

He couldn't climb in the tub fast enough. Unfortunately, his mind was a step ahead of his body. As he clambered over the edge, his foot slid and pitched him forward.

The bodyguard caught him one-armed just before his head went under. “Easy, now,” he said with a soft laugh. “I'll not have you drown on me.” Uriskel's arms went around him and steered him onto his lap.

He groaned and wiggled until their bodies molded together. The delicious warmth of the water, the soothing pulse of the jets, Uriskel's heat and his firm length against his ass—he'd gladly drown like this. He laid his head on the rock-hard chest with a contented sigh. “Don't move,” he murmured. “I could stay here forever.”

“Or until the water grows cold.” Uriskel hugged him tighter, ran a hand down his arm. The other one disappeared under the water. “And I'm afraid you may have to move in a moment.”

Before he could ask why, fingers brushed his cock and wrapped around it. His hips jerked in response, and Uriskel drew a sharp breath. “Have mercy, àillidh.” The words rumbled through his chest, a sensual vibration in Trystan's head. “That is no part of the furniture beneath your lovely ass.”

He smiled. “Call me that again.”

“As you wish...àillidh.”

“Damn. That is the sexiest thing anyone's ever said to me.”

“How is that possible?”

Trystan looked up at him. "People don't come on to me," he said. "It's always the other way around. I just... I've never been seduced. Christ, that sounds pathetic, doesn't it?"

"Then all humans are fools." Uriskel touched fingertips to the side of his face. "You are an angel, Trystan. You deserve legions worshipping at your feet."

"Okay, I changed my mind," he whispered. "*That's* the sexiest thing anyone's ever said to me. And I don't want legions. Only you."

"That, you'll have."

The hand around his cock moved, a single lazy stroke up and down, then settled to grip firmly at the base while Uriskel gave him a languid kiss. The still pressure drove him crazy. His thigh muscles fluttered, and he rocked his groin in silent demand for more rubbing.

Uriskel growled against his mouth. "How you torment me, àillidh," he said. "Keep that up, and I'll not be able to wait."

Grinning, Trystan ground his ass along the rigid cock under him. "Don't wait, then."

"So impatient." The traces of a smile curved his lips. "But not this time. There'll be no haste, no desperate fucking. You will be seduced."

"Isn't that what you're doing now?"

"It's only just begun, love."

Love. The word curled into him like smoke and settled warm in his belly. He hadn't loved anyone in so long, he'd almost forgotten how sweet it was. How beautiful. And how much it hurt when you lost it. After the fire, he'd never dared to love again. Now he didn't have a choice. Here was love, whether he wanted it or not.

Fortunately, he did.

"I'm going to move you," Uriskel said. "Try and hold still."

"Mmm..." It was the closest he could come to speech.

Keeping a snug hold on his cock, Uriskel curled the other arm around his waist and turned him facing away, lifting slightly to settle Trystan's ass on his stomach. He guided him down and positioned him with the hot length between his cheeks, the head nuzzling his balls. Parted his legs so he was straddling hard thighs. "Lean back, àillidh," he murmured.

Trystan complied. Water bubbled up his back and streamed down his sides, pushed out from between them. He exhaled slowly, resisting the urge to move. Having that thick, amazing cock inside him was just a few tiny adjustments away. But he'd wait.

Uriskel started stroking him, a slow, firm motion that sent pleasure rippling through him. He bent his head, kissed the hollow of his throat, licked away beads of water. His tongue was a smooth flame, leaving burning trails on skin. His other hand glided down his stomach, skimmed the crease of his thigh, and massaged his balls.

Trystan's eyes rolled back, and he gave himself over to the sensations—strong arms around him, the whispering weightless caress of water, expert hands milking his cock. The strokes came faster, and he forgot to hold still. He arched into them, his soft cries growing in volume as the coiled heat spread through his groin.

A warning twinge tightened his balls. His hands thrashed in the water, looking for something to grab. He found Uriskel's arms and clamped on hard.

With a snarled gasp, Uriskel nipped his shoulder, then licked the marks he'd left.

It was enough to send Trystan over the edge. A shout hammered his clenched teeth, forced them apart in release. He came for what felt like an hour. All through it, Uriskel held fast until Trystan finally slackened and melted back against him.

"Holy..." he whispered, unable to come up with the next word.

"Hush, love," Uriskel murmured in his ear. "You've no need to speak." His arms crossed over Trystan, locking him in place.

Something that resembled a rough purr left Trystan's throat. Aftershocks shivered through him, and he became sharply aware of the hard shape still lodged against his ass. He smiled. "Your turn now," he said.

Uriskel gave him a quick squeeze. "I'd hoped you would say that."

* * *

Sometime between the angry, desperate kiss and Trystan's weight snuggled into his lap beneath silky warm water, Uriskel had lost his heart completely. He'd known this would be the consequence for not turning away this time, and he feared it more than the beating he'd no doubt receive from Braelan.

This could not last. Eventually he'd be separated from Trystan forever. But he had him for the moment, and he'd take what he could from this interlude.

Trystan shifted to look up at him, and his swollen cock throbbed in response. "Much more of that, and we'll be through now," he groaned.

"Sorry." Trystan didn't appear in the least apologetic. He seemed...hungry. "I'm so ready for this, Uri. Please don't make me wait anymore."

"Ah, gods. You are insatiable."

"For you? Hell yes."

He nearly spilled his seed at that. "Face me," he said. "Please."

Trystan stood. The water partly covered his ass, foaming against smooth, glistening skin as though it, too, desired entrance to that heavenly portal. He turned and flashed a beguiling smile.

Undone, Uriskel grabbed his waist, lifted, and pulled. He settled him in position against his cock and said, "Forgive me, love. I've no patience left in me now."

"I'll forgive you if you fuck me."

"Yes." He pushed Trystan's hips down and thrust into him. The water eased the entry, let him glide through and feel every inch of tight flesh hugging his cock.

Already the sweet bite of release pulsed just beneath the surface. He closed his eyes, attempting to will it back a bit—but he'd not be able to draw this out long.

Trystan rested palms lightly on his chest. “Is that too much?”

“Never.” That the human would still be concerned with hurting him touched a deeper note, struck a resounding chord in a place long dead. He shifted to gain a firmer hold, and Trystan responded with a liquid, musical moan.

His cock surged impossibly hard. Biting his lip, he lifted and impaled Trystan, swung his hips up to meet every bounce. The hands on his chest moved to his arms, fingers locked in a fevered grip. He sped the rhythm, thrilled to the slap and splash of water displaced by the frenzied coupling.

Release came without warning. He bucked deep inside, held Trystan to him as though he'd slip beneath the bubbling surface without the connection. His cry was startled, desperate. A prayer for the impossible—that this not be the last time he'd taste such pleasure. That he'd not be torn from the sight of this human, this angel, forever.

When he drew back spent, Trystan settled into him and reached up to stroke his hair. “You're amazing,” he whispered. “And the water's not cold yet. Does that mean we get to stay in here?”

“Yes, love.” Even as he spoke, his heart sank like a stone. Braelan was returning. He sensed him near, probably in the building, possibly already in the suite. They were caught no matter how quickly they might move. So he would savor this last moment, pretend he could have this glow of happiness for himself. “Do not worry,” he murmured. “I'll not let him hurt you.”

Trystan jerked. “He's back? Jesus, we need to get out—”

“It's too late, àillidh.” For once, contentment outweighed regret. Braelan could not beat this from him. “Stay. Let him find us. His wrath will fall on me.”

“Damn it, I don't want anything falling on you!”

"Hush, now." He held the quivering body against him. "Know that the gift you've given me will bring me through whatever he chooses to do. Never fear for me."

Trystan choked on a sob and buried his face in his chest.

"All right," he said gently. "It is all right."

He waited, not long. He watched without surprise the knob turn, the bathroom door swing open. Braelan stepped through and stared at them. He said nothing.

"Highness," Uriskel said. "I would apologize, but I am not sorry."

"I suspected you were not." The prince's voice emerged flat, listless. "So this is how my kindness is repaid. Out of the bath, both of you."

Trystan lifted his head. "Please don't hurt him," he said. "We both wanted this."

"Out."

The prince's lack of emotion proved more frightening than his rages. Trystan stood like a shot, waded to the edge of the tub, and climbed out. Uriskel took his time. "Braelan," he said carefully. "If you must—"

"Not a word from you. Or you, gallae." He reached to the side of the door, grabbed a towel from the rack there, and flung it at Trystan. "Dry yourselves off. I'll return in a moment." With that, he strode from the room.

"Oh, God," Trystan moaned when he'd gone. "I'm so sorry..."

"Don't be. Please." Uriskel retrieved another towel from the shelf by the hot tub and dried quickly. "And don't defend me. I've enough groveling ahead without that."

"Promise you'll be okay."

"I swear it."

Trystan nodded slowly. "All right. I'll shut up."

"Thank you."

Braelan soon returned with the bottle of mandrake oil in one hand and a pair of handcuffs in the other. He thrust the bottle at Uriskel. "Drink."

The command was a harsh blow. Ingesting mandrake was far worse than its application. It would heighten every sensation, drive his pain to agonizing heights. He accepted the damned stuff, faltered, then took a long swallow.

"More."

Forcing away a grimace, he drank again. His cock throbbed to life. The settled ache of his injuries sharpened and screamed through his blood.

"Put it down."

After he did, Braelan grabbed his arm and twisted him to face away. He snapped a cuff on one wrist, pulled the other back, and fastened it in place. "That is so you'll not attempt to pleasure yourself," he said. "You are fortunate I left Morven behind to return for more money. He would not have been as forgiving. Out into the living room."

He glanced at Trystan and managed a small smile before he moved to obey. Trystan swallowed, but his mouth twitched up a bit in return.

"You," Braelan said as he passed through the door. "I must go back out. You'll stay in your room until I return, or you'll taste the mandrake yourself."

If Trystan responded, Uriskel did not hear him. He went and stood near the couch, legs trembling with renewed pain. He'd not be on his feet much longer.

Braelan emerged, with Trystan a silent shadow behind him. The human headed for the bedrooms, head bent, gaze glued to the floor. When the click of a door latch announced his compliance, the prince approached Uriskel and stood before him. "You've hurt me, dog," he said. "Are you happy?"

"Not particularly."

With a cold sneer, Braelan backhanded him. A guttural shout accompanied the mandrake-enhanced impact. "Don't lie."

"Very well," Uriskel rasped. "I am ecstatic."

“Filthy Unseelie whore.” He'd returned to that deadly flat tone. “I can no longer stand the sight of you. Until my tolerance returns, you'll be locked in the closet.” He pointed at the door to the left of the television screen. “And all that time I'll be fucking Trystan. Right here, so you can hear...everything.”

The way he drawled that last word chilled Uriskel to his bones. “I swear, Braelan. If you hurt him, I'll destroy you.”

“Please. You've balls enough, but not the balls for that. You'll not risk Arcadia's wrath.”

“Watch me.”

Braelan offered a humorless laugh. “I don't intend to hurt the little human. Move.”

Jaw set, Uriskel walked to the closet door. Braelan reached around him, slid it open, and shoved him inside. He banged against the back wall and crumpled to the floor.

“I'm sealing this,” the prince said. “Trystan will not be able to release you, nor will you be able to escape yourself. So do not bother trying.” He clapped the door shut, and an echo of power rolled through the cramped space as he enchanted the lock.

Uriskel waited until he heard the door to the suite open and close. He gasped out the agonized breath he'd been holding, and attempted to arrange himself in the least painful way.

The bliss he'd held for a moment was a bitter candle in the long darkness ahead.

Chapter Seventeen

Not ten minutes into his confinement, Uriskel knew he would soon lose control.

Five years sealed in the ground had ensured his hatred and fear of being enclosed. During that stretch, the cards had been his only tenuous link to sanity. Each time he'd exhausted his spark enchanting them, he had spent hours shuffling them, staring at them, teaching himself tricks. At one point he'd named them all. He could no longer remember the names, but the deck still comforted him.

Braelan had not allowed him to dress. The cards were still in his pants pocket, likely crumpled on the bathroom floor.

A wave of panic swept through him. *Trapped*. He managed, barely, to push back the tide, but he'd not be able to stem it much longer. He usually employed tricks to control the fear—slow pacing, staring out windows, and when those were not possible, sheer force of will. But with mandrake tainting his blood and amplifying his senses, he could not will himself calm.

The gap along the bottom of the closet door admitted a lighter shade of dark, just enough for his eyes to adjust to shapes in the gloom. A rod above him, with a handful of hangers pushed to one side. Over that, the underside of a shelf. Nothing more.

Trapped! His heart thrummed like a bird's, and cold sweat broke along his skin. He wedged himself into a corner, attempting to create the illusion of space—still, the walls appeared to lean together, to shrink and converge in on him.

He squeezed his eyes shut. It helped for a moment, let him ride out a fresh stab of terror. Soon, though, the air seemed to thicken, and his breath came in

shallow gasps. A low moan left his lips. He pressed them together, tried to keep the screams inside.

Get out, get out, get OUT!

Panic ripped away coherent thought. He bucked and kicked at the walls, ignoring flares of pain. With a wretched cry, he lurched to his feet and barreled at the door, slamming a shoulder into it. The thick wood held. This time he could not dismiss the agony and curled in a heap on the floor, panting and heaving, the fear a black beast with fangs sunk in his neck.

“Uri! Oh my God, are you in there?” Trystan's voice outside the closet. He rattled the door in its tracks, banged on it. “I can't get it open! What the hell happened?”

“Trystan.” A rusted wheeze. He closed his eyes, exerted the last bit of control he could summon. “My c-cards. Please.”

“Why the fuck—okay, all right. Your cards. Shit. Where are they?”

“Pants.”

“Right. Um...hang on. Be right back.” Footfalls running away.

He held himself still and breathed, waited endless seconds. At last, the footsteps returned. “This thing Cobalt gave you, right?”

He nodded and then realized Trystan couldn't see it. “Yes.”

“Okay. I'll try to push them under the door.” Something rattled. Scraped softly. “They're in there.”

On his side, facing away from the door, Uriskel dragged himself awkwardly across the floor until his fingers brushed the leather case. Another push allowed him to grab it. Though he could not use them with his hands cuffed behind his back, holding them was enough to drive away the demons, to manage the fear. “Thank you,” he grated. “Now...go. Before he returns.”

“Not until you tell me what the fuck's going on.”

He nearly smiled. “Stubborn.”

“Yeah. Kinda like somebody else I know.”

Uriskel let out a long breath and managed to expel some of the lingering haze. He'd still be able to sense Braelan's approach, and Trystan's presence calmed him more than the cards. “Very well,” he whispered. “But you must go when I say.”

“I will. Now spill it.”

He struggled into a seated position, half-propped against the back wall. “Braelan has decided I'm to stay in here until he can bear to look upon me again,” he said.

There was a long pause. “Do I even want to know how long that'll be?”

“Not likely.”

“Oh.” Trystan coughed. “So what was all that banging? Jesus, it sounded like somebody was killing you in there. And why do you need cards?”

Uriskel stared at the wall. He'd never told anyone about his imprisonment, what he'd done, what it resulted in. It was his weakness and his shame. “You understand this goes no further than you,” he finally said.

“You can trust me.”

Trust. Yes, if he were to confess to Trystan, he would have to place trust in him. And he'd not trusted anyone fully, ever. Not even Cobalt. He drew a breath to steady himself. “I've a fear of enclosed space,” he said. “I cannot bear being...trapped. What you heard was my panic, my rather fruitless attempt to escape.”

“Holy shit. That's some serious claustrophobia,” Trystan said. “Does Braelan know?”

“No. At least, I do not believe he does.” He smirked. “If he did, he'd lock me away more often.”

Another pause. “So those cards calm you down?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Must you ask so many questions?” He shook his head, imagined the indignant look on Trystan's face. “I've a reason for my fear,” he said slowly. “I spent five years in gaol.”

“The Fae have jails?”

“Gaol is a type of prison for one,” he said. “A hole in the ground.”

“What do you mean, a hole?”

“I mean precisely that.” He swallowed back the memories that clogged his throat. “Gaol prisoners are given a shovel and twenty-four hours to dig a hole at least ten feet deep and as wide as they can make it during that time. Then they're lowered in and covered, fed once a day, and forgotten until their release.” His eyes closed. “I was granted thirty-six hours due to the length of my sentence.”

They placed him naked on rocky ground. After twenty hours, his hands blistered, cracked and bloodied, stiffened into claws, he gained an eight-foot depth and could no longer hold the shovel. He dug for sixteen more with hands, elbows, and feet.

Trystan made a choked sound. “Five years?”

“Save your pity. I deserved it.” He eased back and gentled his tone. “This deck of cards was all I had down there. In fact, it was Braelan who gave them to me, six months into the sentence. He'd stolen them from the human realm and grown bored with them.”

The gaol cover opened. Some small object fell tumbling down and struck him square in the chest. “Entertain yourself, mongrel,” the prince called. “Perhaps you'll get hungry enough and eat them.”

Uriskel turned the case in his hands, ran his fingers along the worn edges. “I spent nearly every waking moment using them, enchanting them. I may have talked or sung to them at some points.” A bitter laugh escaped him. “Though he certainly didn't intend it, Braelan saved me. And these cards still serve to keep the fear at bay.”

A soft thump on the closet door. “Five years,” Trystan said shakily. “You didn’t deserve that. You couldn’t have.”

“I told you, àillidh. I am not innocent.” Here, the final blow that would sever the human from him. Perhaps he should have confessed sooner. “Braelan has regaled you with the tale of the Seelie noble, the one I was accused of killing.”

“So you didn’t?”

“No, but I may as well have.” He frowned, attempted to calculate how little he could get away with explaining. The situation had not been a simple one. “I serve Arcadia, the Seelie court, and must do anything I am bid—”

“You’re a slave, then.”

He sighed. “Fine. Think of it that way. This will be easier in the telling.” After a moment, he said, “Often I’m tasked with political matters, with uncovering secrets regarding traitors to the court—those who associate with the Unseelie. For obvious reasons. And I use seductive magic to accomplish this.”

He expected a reaction there, but received none.

“This Seelie reacted favorably to me,” he said. “I had just learned the extent of her betrayal to the court when a band of wild Unseelie came upon us looking for sport. They, of course, assumed I would join them.” He shivered as the ghost of their mocking laughter wormed through his mind. “I’d been forbidden to reveal my ties to the court. So when they insisted on seeing me take her, I complied.”

“My God. You...”

“I raped her.” The admission soured in his mouth, gagged him. “In front of those jeering jackals. Because I did not want to be put to death, and because I knew once I’d marked her as mine, they would not harm her in my presence. I’d planned to escort her back through the Unseelie Wood to the safety of Arcadia.”

Trystan fell silent for a time. At last he said, “I take it things didn’t go according to plan.”

“No.” The sourness surged down to his gut, and he just managed to keep from retching. “They left. I led her away. Before long she struggled against me and tried to escape. I was a monster, after all, and she could not tolerate the sight of me.” Fresh shudders wracked him. “I tried to explain to her. The Unseelie Wood is dangerous, deadly to the Seelie, especially nobles. Without me, the one who'd claimed her, the wild ones would tear her apart.”

“They did,” Trystan said. “Right? They killed her.”

His jaw clenched. “I could not hold her long enough. She broke away, found a jagged tree limb, and gutted me with it. She left me bleeding on the forest floor and ran in the wrong direction. Deeper into the wood.” He could still feel the agonizing burn of the wound. She'd used magic to force it through. “By the time a sympathetic Unseelie found me and healed me, they'd raped her, tortured her. Killed her. And I did leave her on the circle,” he whispered. “She had family. They deserved to know her fate.”

“So that's why they blamed you?”

“Yes. My life was spared only because she was, in fact, a traitor.”

“Uri.” The quivering edge to his voice suggested more tears. “It wasn't your—”

“Blast! Go, Trystan,” he said as a distant tremor of magic penetrated his bones. “He comes now.”

“But I—”

“Move, you fool,” he grated. “You promised.”

The movement outside the closet was entirely too slow, but he heard Trystan stand and walk away with heavy steps. An eternity later, the bedroom door closed.

A rare sensation burned Uriskel's eyes. He blinked rapidly and tipped his head back. He'd not weep for his own horrendous actions or his failures.

He had already paid for them a thousand times.

* * *

Trystan sprawled on the bed, face buried in a pillow, shoulders heaving. He had to get himself under control before Braelan came in; he knew that—but his heart was breaking.

Five years. Five fucking years in a fucking *hole*, for doing what he had to, trying to save his own life and someone else's. And he blamed himself. Thought he deserved it.

No wonder Uriskel was so fucked-up.

He forced himself to breathe evenly, pushed up, and flipped the damp pillow over. No need to let the prince see that. He'd promised Uri he could trust him, and that meant he wasn't even going to take a chance on letting Braelan know how miserable he was. He headed for the bathroom and splashed some water on his heated face.

When he came back out, the prince stood in the doorway. “And here I thought you'd disobeyed me,” he said.

“Surprise, I didn't.” Trystan walked to the bed and sat down, not sure what to expect. Maybe he'd get a shock treatment, or get yelled at or slapped around or fucked. Maybe he should apologize. He still had a little over three weeks to spend with this guy.

Braelan walked into the room and closed the door. He stared without expression for so long Trystan wanted to scream. Finally, his mouth twitched down. “Have I not given you everything you wanted, gallae?”

It was the last thing he expected. And he couldn't think of a thing to say.

“You've wounded me.” Blue eyes, the exact same shade as Cobalt's, caught his gaze and held. “I wanted you, and it seemed you wanted me. But you have chosen that...that monstrous creature.”

“I'm sorry.” Trystan found his tongue and practically bit it off to keep from saying something he shouldn't. Like *you're the monster, asshole*. But Braelan actually believed Uriskel was evil, apparently with good reason, and he couldn't

convince him otherwise without betraying Uri. "Look, I like you," he said. "I really do. It's just... I'm sorry. I won't touch him for the rest of the month, okay?"

"That you won't."

Something in his tone put Trystan on edge. "What are you going to do to him?"

"Nothing he's not earned. And as for you..." Braelan sighed like a disappointed parent. "I considered many things. I thought perhaps I'd have you taste the mandrake after all. Or I would take you where the dog could hear, and hurt you both. But these are petty actions, and I've not the heart for them." He shook his head. "So I have decided to simply dismiss you and find a more willing human escort."

No! Somehow he managed not to shout. "You don't have to do that," he said. "I'm willing."

"Perhaps you are. But I cannot have you distracting my bodyguard." He gestured, and the possession bands fell from Trystan's arms. With another motion from his hands, the bracelets rose in the air and floated over to him. He collected them and grimaced. "Good-bye."

Oh, shit. This definitely wasn't in the plan. He'd been ready to take anything Braelan wanted to dish out—except getting sent away. He hadn't even considered that. "I won't distract him. Swear to God," he said. "Can't you just beat me or something?"

Braelan gave him a disgusted look. "Are you that desperate for money?"

"I don't care about the damned money."

"Really." The prince arched an eyebrow. "What do you care about, then?"

Christ, that was stupid. Now what was he supposed to say? Before he could come up with a plausible lie, Braelan strode across the room and touched his temple, the same way he did when he'd plucked the name of the hotel from his thoughts.

Trystan jerked away. Too late. The look on Braelan's face said he'd figured out something he definitely shouldn't know.

The prince took a step back. "Love," he whispered. "You *love* him?"

"Yeah." Might as well admit it. "I do."

"And you truly believe he returns this...love?"

He stared at the floor. "Yes."

The sound that came from Braelan was so cold, it took him a minute to realize it was laughter. "You should consider this a kindness, then." He went back to the door and yanked it open. "Leave."

"Please. I can't—"

"Get out, human." His voice cracked like a whip. "Your stupidity is dangerous. That creature loves nothing and seduces only to kill."

Trystan shook his head. "You're wrong."

"You know nothing of the Fae." Braelan sneered at him. "And even if by some miracle he does care about you, did you think he'd actually stay with you? That he has some kind of choice in the matter?"

"No." He wasn't sure what he meant to negate. He couldn't think straight anymore. Uriskel was a slave or whatever equivalent the Fae had. He'd never even factored that into the equation. He loved him, period. In a normal situation that would be enough. They could work things out from there.

But this was nowhere near normal.

"Leave," the prince said again.

"No." The reply was more impulse than decision, but it strengthened his resolve. "I can't. I won't leave."

Braelan's eyes narrowed. But after a long moment, he deflated like a popped balloon. "Go or stay, as you will," he murmured. "I no longer care enough to bother. But if you so much as speak a word in greeting to Uriskel, I will dismiss you immediately. Is that understood?"

“Yeah. I got it.”

Braelan spun and left the room. At least he didn't slam the door.

The relief that he'd managed not to get his ass kicked out might let him sleep a while. And maybe in his dreams, he could forget that no matter how many battles he won, he'd already lost the war. There wouldn't be a forever.

Chapter Eighteen

A full day passed at a torturous crawl. The pain and fear diminished gradually as most of the mandrake worked itself from Uriskel's system, but neither left completely. He was not certain whether to be grateful that his restrained arms and shoulders hurt more than the unrelieved erection.

From what he could determine through sound and scent, the prince did not follow through on his promise to fuck Trystan and force him to listen. The television babbled constantly. He thought Trystan might have spoken a few times, but whatever he'd said went unanswered. Braelan had either returned to his movie-induced coma or was deliberately ignoring the human.

Neither scenario allowed him the prospect of release.

Outside his prison, the drone of the television ceased. Silence reigned for a moment, and then footsteps approached the closet. The door opened. Braelan stared down at him with bloodshot eyes. "Can you stand?"

He nodded and struggled to his feet, aware he'd be forced onto them if he didn't.

"Turn around."

He did. Braelan grabbed the handcuffs and unlocked them. "Go and use the bathroom," he said. "I'll not have you making a mess in here."

Uriskel hadn't even realized he needed to until the prince brought it up. Without looking at Braelan, he shuffled past and made his way across the silent living room, his groin spasming with urgency. He barely made it to the toilet. The stream shot from him in a burning torrent, and he stifled a gasp as his thighs cramped.

He stood for a moment longer, willing his body to stop shaking. At last he turned and started for the sink.

"If you're thirsty, I've something for you to drink."

Braelan's withering tone froze him in place. He was certain the prince didn't mean water. Still, he couldn't bring himself to simply accept another dose of mandrake. "I am not," he said. "Thank you all the same, though."

"You must be." Braelan advanced into the room, the blasted bottle clutched in one hand. "You've gone so long without sustenance."

"Highness—"

"Do you love him?"

Uriskel stared at him. "What?"

"Trystan seems to believe he loves you and that you love him in return. I told him that was impossible. You cannot love." Braelan's right eye twitched, a sign more disconcerting than his rigid stance. "Now I wonder if you've deluded yourself into believing you do."

No. He'd not answer this. Regardless of whatever response he offered, the bratling would fault him for loving or lying. "I've no delusions," he said.

"Yes or no, Unseelie. Do you love him?"

He replied with silence.

"Back you go, then, until you answer me." He thrust the bottle out. "Drink."

Uriskel shuddered. Another day imprisoned and freshly drugged at once seemed unbearable. If he snapped in Braelan's presence, the prince would know exactly how to hurt him most. He'd rather be beaten to a bloody pulp than spend another moment locked away.

But if he balked now, Braelan would understand why, and promote imprisoning him to the top of his list of torments. He drank. At least he'd have the cards.

"Stubborn beast. Come on." The prince strode from the bathroom.

He followed, the new infusion of mandrake already beginning to take hold. He could see each fiber in the carpet below his feet, feel their texture against his bare soles. Hear the rough purr of his steps as though his ear were pressed to the floor. The first stirrings of panic echoed in him, sent his heart stuttering in his throat.

Braelan reached the closet first and opened the door. He stared inside. "What is this?" Before Uriskel could react, he bent to the floor and straightened, holding the leather case.

No! He pressed his lips tight against the shout. "It is nothing," he managed. Gods, if Braelan took them, he would surely break.

"Nothing." The prince turned the case over in his hands. He traced a finger along the faded pattern on the back, opened the flap, and ran his thumb across the edges of the cards inside. "I remember these," he said, almost to himself. "Six months you'd been in gaol. A long time, even for a dog. You'd still six more to go, and I..." He looked up, brow furrowed. "You kept them?"

"Obviously." The response detached itself from his thoughts, which were a mass of screaming confusion. Six months was a long time? And why did Braelan believe that he'd only spent a year in gaol? The bastard couldn't have felt sorry for him. *Even for a dog...*

Braelan shook his head and slid the case absently in a pocket. "Get in there."

He swallowed hard. Asking for them would only infuriate the prince, but he could not help it. "Braelan, my cards," he whispered. "Give them back."

"Why? They are, as you've just said, nothing."

His jaw clenched. "I lied. Give them to me."

Braelan grabbed his arm and threw him in the closet. He slammed face-first against the back wall, and the amplified pain blossomed black behind his eyes. The door rattled shut.

Uriskel collapsed. He crawled into a corner and wedged himself there, drawing his knees to his chest. Panic simmered beneath the thin shell of control he still held,

approaching full boil much faster than it had last night. Then, his anchor had simply not been present. Now it had been taken from him.

He forced a deep breath, felt the exhale hot against his skin. Sounds reached him—the creak of the couch as Braelan sat, a renewed flood of music and chatter when he turned on the television again. He tried to listen, to imagine himself out there. Breathing was the key. In and out, slow and calm.

Oh, gods. Let me out!

He could not afford to react like this. If his fear were discovered, it would be exploited mercilessly. He closed his eyes against the deepening shadows. Perhaps a song would help. A lullaby. If he could sleep, he'd no longer see his prison. He gulped in air and chose the words, the tune, to plait through his tongue.

What emerged was a startled cry that ripped the fabric of his resolve.

Barely thinking, he scrambled to the door and banged on it. A hoarse sob splintered in his chest. He slid both hands under the gap and shook the door, rattling hinges, choking on panic. His feet pounded a disjointed rhythm on the wall.

Nothing gave. The surge exhausted itself, and Uriskel curled on the floor in a shivering ball. Another wave would come soon. He'd let it take him. His outburst had already consigned him to hell.

Something clicked behind him, and the door trundled open. He didn't even try to face the prince.

“Are you finished thrashing about in here?” Braelan said.

Uriskel clenched tighter. “Not likely.”

“You are not prone to tantrums, Unseelie. What do you mean by this?”

“Cards.” He shuddered. “Need them.”

“You will tell me why, and you'll do it now.”

Clear thought proved impossible. Was he forbidden from discussing his imprisonment? He recalled no direct command against it. But for some reason

Braelan did not know all that he should. Usually that meant the king did not want him informed.

“Damn you, answer me!”

“Five years,” he gasped. “Five years in gaol with your blasted cards.”

A heavy silence followed. He waited, expecting to be mocked, shouted at, called a liar. Anticipating the slam of the door, a pronouncement that he'd spend a week in here, a month, forever. Possibly with a beating to keep him company.

“Come here,” Braelan said in strangled tones.

It'd be a beating, then. Perhaps the bratling would do him the favor of battering him unconscious. He unfolded slowly, stood on trembling legs, and walked to the closet door. “Shall I fetch the strap for you?” he said.

Braelan blinked and took a faltering step back. He stared for a long moment, then reached in his pocket and produced the leather case. “Take them,” he said. “I am going to bed. You will sleep on the couch.”

Uriskel looked from the case to the prince, unable to process his actions. Was he not going to beat him? “I've not told you what you wanted,” he said. “Not finished paying for my sins.”

“Stop that.” A breaking whisper. Braelan reached for his arm, lifted it, and pressed the cards into his hand. “Take these. Sleep on the couch.” He let go, turned abruptly, and walked across the room. When he reached the bedroom hallway, he stopped, looked back, and said, “I am not a monster.”

“No, Highness.” His fingers tightened on faded leather. “You are not.”

Braelan hesitated as though he'd say something else. Instead, he shook his head and moved into the hall, out of sight. A door opened and closed.

Shock left Uriskel breathless and cold. He staggered to the couch, stretched carefully on his stomach, and laid his head on folded arms. He would try to reason this out. Braelan had some motivation, some hidden agenda behind his apparent reversal.

He closed his eyes, and sleep scattered his thoughts to the winds.

* * *

Trystan stared at the ceiling, paralyzed with indecision. He'd heard the thumps and rattles from the main room and knew Uriskel was freaking out again. But he wasn't allowed to talk to him. He almost went out anyway. Then he'd caught a muffled conversation between Uri and Braelan that ended without any explosions. Now it was silent, and it sounded like Braelan had gone into his bedroom.

The prince hadn't moved from the couch since he'd caught them last night. And he hadn't said a word, not even when Trystan tried to ask him a question or suggest they do something, like eat. He'd ended up ordering room service earlier today, enough for all three of them. He was starving. But Braelan didn't even look at the food, and it was clear giving some to Uri was out.

At least he'd been able to talk to someone for a few minutes with the room service delivery. He'd almost forgotten that Ricky worked here. The kid was a scrounge, a hustler, and always had something to sell outside of his staples—dime bags and blotters. This time, Ricky had tried to interest him in a Florida time-share. He laughed so hard, he scared the kid off. Scared himself too. He hadn't been sure he could stop laughing.

Now he waited, still half expecting a fight out there. Ten minutes, fifteen, twenty. No sound. Finally, he got up, opened the door, and stepped into the hall. Braelan's door was closed. He could see the kitchenette and the small bulb over the wet bar that looked to be the only light burning in the main room. If he went out there, he'd probably do something stupid. Like try and talk to Uriskel.

The hell with it. He was going.

In the main room, he found the closet door open and the space inside empty. He scanned the room. For a few seconds he didn't recognize the form sprawled on the couch as Uri—still naked, still covered with bruises more colorful than a gay-pride parade. The bodyguard slept facedown with his cards clutched in both hands like a talisman.

The prince must've actually let him out after he flipped his shit. How un-Braelan-like of him.

Trystan crossed to the wet bar and fixed himself a Long Island, hold the tea. He slammed back a third of it at once. The pure hard liquor burned a sweet trail down his throat. He exhaled, held the drink absently, and stared at the back of the couch. What a fucking mess. He wouldn't wake Uriskel, couldn't even talk to him if he did—and asking Braelan what happened would be like walking into a biker bar and yelling, “Harleys suck!”

Three more weeks of this. Fucking hell. And from what the prince had suggested while he was reaming him out last night, he wouldn't even be able to see Uri anymore when it was over. They'd go back to their realm, with their goat-midgets and freaky orange-eyed tree things, and that would be it. These guys were magical fucking creatures, and he was just human. He couldn't exactly follow them.

Why did he ever think he had a shot at love?

Standing around staring at Uriskel wasn't going to help. He grabbed a full bottle of Jack with his free hand and headed for his bedroom, planning to get good and plastered. And maybe jump out the damned window after that. Nobody could drive him crazy if he was dead.

He walked in and almost dropped the drink. Braelan was sitting on his bed.

“Trystan.” The prince looked terrible. His eyes were red, his features haggard. “Do you find me repulsive?”

He sounded as bad as he looked. Regret sank into Trystan and chilled him. Had he really made Braelan feel this awful? “Of course not.” He moved closer, set the bottle and glass on the nightstand, and perched on the bed. “You're beautiful.”

The prince sighed. “I wonder if you would say that, were I not paying you.”

Trystan bristled but made himself calm down. “You have a point,” he said. “But trust me, this has nothing to do with money. You are hot shit.”

“That does not sound like a compliment.” Braelan smirked. “If it is, then you are hot shit as well.”

“Thanks.”

Braelan reached for him, hesitated, and his arm fell short of touching. “I am sorry, gallae,” he said. “I thought to seek comfort with you, but it seems even your charms cannot rouse me from this. I am...troubled.”

“Tell me about it.”

“Obvious, am I?”

“No, I mean tell me about it. Really.” Trystan slid up and sat next to him. “This doesn't have to be all about screwing our brains out. I'd like to be your friend too, if you want one.”

For a few seconds Braelan looked like he'd tell him to fuck off and die. Finally, his features relaxed. “Yes,” he said. “I believe I could use a friend.”

“Great.” Trystan grinned. “So what's on your mind, friend?”

“It is difficult to explain.” The prince stared down and let out a quick breath. “I have been deceived...lied to, sheltered from certain truths. By those I trusted. This Finn, for example. I did not know—” He closed his eyes. “No one has ever shown such hatred toward me. In my realm, I am protected from my enemies. Perhaps too well, as I have never confronted them. It was unnerving to have him attempt to kill me.”

“Yeah, I'll bet. I've been jumped a few times, but nobody ever wanted me dead. Just hurt.”

Braelan looked at him. “Jumped?”

“Beat up. Kicked around.” He shrugged. “Some people don't like guys like me.”

“What do you mean?”

“Gays. Whores. Take your pick.”

The prince grimaced. “That is unfair,” he said softly. “And I'm afraid some Fae are guilty of the same. Including me.”

“So you don't like gays or whores?”

“I do not like the Unseelie.” He shook his head. “I loathe them, in fact. All my life, I have been told what monsters they are, and I've not had cause to doubt that. Until Uriskel saved me.”

Trystan blinked at him. “Isn't he your bodyguard?” he said. “I thought that was his job.”

“Yes, but I did not expect him to do it.” A bitter laugh escaped him. “I'd not even thought to actually need a guard. No one would dare to attack the prince of Arcadia. Yet someone did. And despite the way I have treated him, he did not hesitate to defend me. I had not thought such traits existed in the Unseelie.”

“Traits?”

“Loyalty. Honor. Strength.” Another grimace. “I suppose his strength should not have surprised me. He has always been strong, though I've not bothered to notice.”

Trystan almost agreed out loud. Probably not the best idea.

“He kept those blasted cards.” Braelan spoke in a toneless rasp. “He'd been in gaol too long, and I'd thought... I am no longer certain what I thought. That a year in gaol was cruel. One year.” He shivered hard enough to vibrate the bed. “My father told me he'd been sent on a mission, but they left him down there. Five years buried alive, clinging to a thoughtless gift.”

“Oh *shit*.” Trystan didn't have to manufacture shock. Uri must've told him while he was freaking out. He wished he knew whether that was good or bad—but at least it seemed to change the prince's opinion of him a little. “So your father's the one who's been lying to you?”

“He is the worst of them, yes.” Braelan cleared his throat. “And that is not the most grievous of his...omissions. Apparently, I have a brother.”

“Does that mean you didn't know you had one?”

"I'd heard rumors. Whispers among certain Seelie with dubious claims to nobility. I'd not wanted to believe them." One hand lifted, wavered, and fell to the sheet. "But now that I've seen him, I can no longer deny the truth. He is my brother."

"Seen..." Jesus Christ. He put it together before the question could form in his brain. The same black hair and blue eyes, the same shaped nose and jaw. Still, he had to ask. "Who?"

"Ciaràn of the glen," Braelan whispered. "The one you know as Cobalt."

A dizzying rush swept over him, and he came close to passing out on the spot. This was why he'd been so accommodating at the Grotto. And if he was Cobalt's brother, he was Uriskel's too—but there was no way he'd be able to look at the redhead and tell.

Did Uri know this? He had to. No wonder he'd wanted to keep Braelan away from Cobalt. And all this time, he'd been taking abuse and beatings from his own brother, letting the prince believe he was some evil mongrel. Holding his tongue and saving his brother's life. It wasn't fair. It wasn't *right*.

"Trystan?" Braelan sounded a hundred miles away. "You look terrible."

He shook his head and forced himself to pull it together. "I'm okay." If the prince touched him now, did that psychic thing, he could find out everything. "Just a little shocked."

"Likewise," Braelan drawled.

"Yeah, I bet." He breathed in slowly. "Can't you talk to him or something? I mean, it sounds like you want to get to know him."

"I am royal-born. He is lowborn. It is not done among the Fae." The prince's lip curled. "And now I'm forced to wonder how many other bastards my father has spawned and tossed to the fates."

At least one more. Trystan's throat clenched, and he had to squeeze his eyes shut for a few seconds. "I'm sorry, Braelan," he said when he regained control. "That seriously sucks."

The prince hitched a tentative smile. "You've no need to apologize, gallae," he said. "But I thank you for your concern."

"Hey, I'm your friend now. Friends worry." Trystan glanced at the alarm clock he'd never bothered to set since they checked in. It was almost two in the morning—Cobalt would be closing up soon. "Let's go to the Grotto," he said. "I'm sure Cobalt won't mind, and you'd get a chance to talk to him without your creepy friend around."

"I assume you mean Morven," Braelan said. "Perhaps..."

"Come on. We can hang out, have a few drinks. I hear he's got some really good wine."

Braelan closed his eyes, opened them. "All right. I believe I would like to...hang out."

"Good. I'll call him and let him know we're coming." He stood, headed for the door, and stopped. "Um. Is it gonna be two of us, or three?"

"Three," the prince said. "After all, I am no longer safe without my bodyguard. And I'll be healing him before we go. He should not be in such a state."

"Thank you," Trystan whispered before he realized he was speaking aloud.

"Look at me, gallae."

He turned and bit his lip. Shouldn't have said that. "What?"

"You may speak to Uriskel. I've no wish to strain things further during my time here." At once, he looked like he'd sat on a dead mouse. "But you must remember that his duties lie with Arcadia. He cannot stay in this realm, and there is nothing to be done about it."

"Yeah," Trystan made himself say. "I got it."

“Please understand that I am concerned for you. I've no wish to see your heart broken.”

“Sure. I'll just go make that call now.” He turned away and slipped from the room, unable to say the two words that screamed through his head.

Too late.

Chapter Nineteen

Braelan's behavior bordered on frightening. First he returned the cards and failed to mete out further punishment, and then he healed him completely—going so far as to flush the mandrake from his system. Now they were visiting Cobalt in his loft apartment above the Grotto, for no apparent reason other than what the prince gave. To relax.

But Uriskel could not relax. If the suspicious, unwarranted kindness weren't enough, the presence of a blazing moon reinforced his need to be on guard. After all, he'd only wounded Finn, not killed him. And there were others who despised the Seelie prince.

Trystan and Braelan sat together on the short couch, Will on the longer one, while Cobalt set out glasses and wine on the low table between them. Uriskel stood across the room by the window and half listened to their tentative conversation.

“So where are you guys staying?” Will said.

There was a pause, and Trystan replied, “The Black Dragon.”

“Never heard of it.”

“You wouldn't have. You're not a thug.” A teasing note edged Trystan's voice. “It's a nice place. Discreet.”

“It better be. Seems like you need some discretion right now.” Another pause, a slight scrape of glass on wood. “Braelan, right?” Will said. “I'm glad you didn't bring that jerk back with you. No offense, but he's an asshole.”

“Yes, Morven can be a bit much to take.” The prince almost sounded amused. “However, he does have his uses.”

“Sure. Just don't use him here.”

A touch on Uriskel's arm startled him. He whirled to find Cobalt offering a glass of wine and a curious expression. “Is the city on fire?” Cobalt asked.

“Doesn't seem to be.” Uriskel accepted the glass with a tip of thanks.

“There's a rain of toads, then.”

“What do you want, fledgling?”

“The pleasure of your company.” Cobalt grinned. “Unless you believe Finn intends to fly through the window. If that's the case, by all means, continue staring out it.”

“Perhaps he will.” Uriskel glanced at the gathering beyond them and muttered, “I am not feeling particularly sociable.”

“Are you ever?”

“No.”

“Well, then. Since your disposition won't improve regardless, you may as well join us.”

He grunted. “Fine. But I'll not participate in your ridiculous banter.”

“There's a shock.” Cobalt slung an arm around him, leaned in, and whispered, “Are you hurting? Tell me honestly.”

He shook his head slowly. “Apparently I've been pardoned for the moment.”

Without another word, Cobalt led him to the sitting area. “If I haven't said it, it's good to have you here,” he said. “All of you. I hope this won't be your last visit.”

Braelan favored him with an unreadable look. “I plan to stay in this realm for a time. Perhaps we will return again, if you're certain. I had been considering a piercing.”

“I'd be honored to provide you with one.” Cobalt made his way to the long couch and sat next to Will, leaving plenty of room. “Sit down, Uriskel. You're making me nervous.”

“Cobalt. I'm perfectly fine here.”

“Come on.” Will smiled at him. “Hey, did you bring your cards? Maybe you can show us some of those tricks you know.”

Uriskel's jaw clenched against a curse. Blasted human. Why did he have to mention that?

Braelan leaned forward with interest. “Tricks?”

“Yeah, he can do some amazing stuff with them,” Will said. “Fancy shuffles, guessing games, readings...”

“Can he, now?” The prince looked over at Uriskel, his features giving nothing away. “You've hidden a well of talents, bodyguard. I may be impressed. Tell me, what do these readings entail?”

“Nothing, Highness.” He struggled to push down his irritation. Will could not have known anything about the cards or what they represented, because he'd not even told Cobalt the full story. “They are simple parlor tricks.”

“Let's see one, then.” Braelan gave him something that resembled a genuine smile. “I wish to hear my fortune.”

Uriskel drained the rest of his wine in one swallow and reluctantly approached the table. “All right,” he said, not wanting to snap the prince from his generous mood if he could help it. “But remember, there'll be nothing accurate or predictive in it. They are just cards.”

It was not quite truth. The enchanted deck tended to read correctly more often than not. But no matter what came up, he meant to give Braelan a pleasant, fortunate reading. He expected it would turn out well regardless. The bratling was a favored son of Arcadia. No dark shadows lurked in his future.

Braelan nodded. “I'll bear that in mind.”

Drawing the case from his pocket, Uriskel knelt at the table across from the prince. He extracted the deck and shuffled rapidly, three times, then placed the cards facedown on the surface. “We'll keep this simple,” he said. “A three-card spread. Past, present, future. Make a cut, if you would.”

“Does this help, cutting them?”

“It places your touch on the cards. Lets them reveal your essence.” May as well make a show of it, if he had to go through with this pointless exercise.

Braelan reached out. His hand hovered over the deck for an instant, as though he were afraid to touch them. Finally, he separated a third of them from the top and placed them beside the rest. “Was that right?”

“I’ll assume you’ve not played many card games. Yes, that’s fine.” Smirking, Uriskel deposited the remaining cards on the cut. “Now then,” he said. “Your fortune.”

He turned over the top three cards, one by one, and placed them in a row. The eight of diamonds, reversed. The jack of spades, reversed. The five of hearts, upright.

Not exactly the fortunate spread he’d expected.

He locked away the dread that filled him at the sight of the cards, and pointed to the first. He would give the opposite descriptions. No one here save him knew their true meaning. “This is your past,” he said. “The eight of pentacles. Skill and creativity and an increasing abundance of wealth have been yours.”

Skills unused. A disdain for hard work. Lack of ambition. The card’s true reversed meaning was the essential Braelan.

“Your present.” He gestured to the second and forced a smile. “The page of swords. You are receiving wise, insightful counsel. You stand ready to act.”

A false friend, devious and vindictive. One who seeks to exploit weakness.

Braelan’s brow lifted. “And my future?”

“The five of cups.” He pointed to the final card, the one that puzzled him most—neither meaning suited the prince in the least. “New relationships, the return of a loved one. Courage that comes from within.”

Disillusionment, sorrow, regret. And the loss of a loved one.

“Fascinating.” This time, the prince's smile was unmistakably delighted—an expression far more disconcerting than the cold sneer he reserved for his favorite mongrel. “I am quite pleased with this, even if it's not meant to be accurate. Uriskel, will you read Trystan now?”

His heart lodged in his throat. Discovering what the future held for Trystan would only confirm what he knew—that he was not in those cards and never would be. “Perhaps you'd permit me to attempt a different trick with him,” he said. “One of mind reading.”

“Yes! How thrilling. Please do.”

“As you wish, Highness.” He reassembled the deck and shuffled, barely watching the blur between his hands. One card. He could handle Trystan choosing a single card, since it could apply to anything—past, present, or future. He'd not have to bear the certainty just yet. Still on his knees, he shifted himself across from the human and fanned the deck facedown in his hands. “Choose a card, Trystan,” he said. “Do not let me see it.”

Trystan's gaze met his for the first time since Braelan had commanded them apart—only a day ago, but the passage had seemed an eternity. The fire in them had not diminished. “Any card?” Trystan half whispered.

“Yes.” Gods, how he wanted him. He could hardly stand to look at him and control the need to touch him, strip him, taste him. Take him and let himself be taken. He dropped his gaze to the cards, certain the others could feel the lust radiating from him like a bonfire.

He felt the slight shift in the deck as Trystan took one, and closed his eyes. “Take a good look, and remember your card. Show it to everyone.” He paused. “Finished?”

“All set.”

“Good.” He swirled the cards together, split the deck between both hands. “Place it back here. Make sure it's facing down.”

Trystan's slight touch as he replaced the card electrified him. It was all he could do not to groan aloud.

He sealed the deck, then opened his eyes and shuffled the cards without looking at them. The trick had been set already—no magic involved, merely sleight of hand. He had become quite dexterous with them over five years. He stopped, placed the deck down on the table, and fanned them in a straight line. Grasping the last facedown card, he ran the corner along the edges of the rest and flipped them up. Another pass, and the deck faced down again, save one card. He teased it free, flashed it around. A chorus of quick breaths and appreciative sounds confirmed it was the correct one.

The eight of clubs, translating to the tarot's eight of wands. A journey by air. Love will find its mark. Probably meaningless.

"Simply amazing," Braelan said. "How many of these marvelous tricks do you know?"

Please, no more. If he was forced to spend the rest of the night entertaining, he'd no doubt end up doing something to resurrect the prince's wrath. "I can crush you in a game of Nine Card Don," he said, hoping one of them would pick up on his desire to stop performing.

"No, he can't," Cobalt said with a quick smile. "He's terrible, Braelan. A spoon-fed whelp could clean him out in two hands."

Uriskel flashed him a grateful look and received a nod in return.

"Well, then." The prince grinned. "Nine Card Don it is."

Trystan cleared his throat. "Um. What's that?"

"It's easy. You'll pick it up." Will leaned closer to the table. "And after this, we're playing poker. Strip poker," he amended with a wink at Cobalt.

"Oh, I am so in on that," Trystan said.

Cobalt groaned. "Really, love. You know I'm terrible at poker."

"Exactly."

Laughter circulated around the table, and Uriskel allowed himself a fraction of relief. Perhaps this night would pass without disaster.

But the ominous reading he'd done for Braelan cast a pall on his thoughts that he could not shake. Somewhere was a spy, preparing to betray the prince. He suspected he knew who—and if it were true, he'd likely not be able to stop him.

After all, Morven was the king's trusted advisor. And more powerful than him and Braelan combined.

* * *

It was almost five in the morning when they left the Grotto. Still dark, with a smudged whisper of dawn flickering in the spaces between buildings. Trystan was tired but not exhausted. In fact, he felt better than he had all week.

They were getting along. Finally.

The three of them wandered in the general direction of the Black Dragon—not hurrying, not tense or angry. Trystan had a decent buzz. Uri hadn't drunk much, and Braelan was somewhere to the left of goofy and staggering. The prince seemed happy for the first time since Trystan had met him. His mood transformed him, made him adorable.

Cute as he was, though, Uriskel outshone him, the sun to Braelan's firefly. Even the slight touch from Uri at the Grotto had Trystan wanting to drag him off to a bedroom and do things to him that'd make a lesser whore blush. But the prince hadn't given him permission to be with Uriskel. Only to talk to him. He'd been told in no uncertain terms by both of them that forever was out. They only had now, and not much of that left.

He wished there were some other realm they could escape to. Maybe a vampire realm or a werewolf realm. If there were real fairies, why couldn't there be other things that shouldn't exist?

Braelan stumbled over and slung an arm around him, cutting off his fantasies. "We should have breakfast," the prince announced. "I want...eggs. Toast and jam. Bacon. Let us find a house of eating."

"They're called restaurants." Trystan smirked at him. "And I think we should just order room service at the suite. You're way too sloshed to be in public."

"Sloshed? I am not sloshed. I am *drunk*."

Trystan laughed so hard, Braelan's weight almost knocked him over. "Yes, you are," he said. "I think you should sit down over here and let me get a cab." He steered him toward the next corner, where a few benches were scattered among trees in a miniplaza between a K-Mart and a shoe store.

"Can you handle him?" Uriskel said, directly behind him.

Trystan nodded. "It's not too far."

"Eggs," Braelan muttered. "And bacon. Trystan...I love you. I love this realm. And humans. They are so fascinating."

"Okay. Ixnay on the human thing, all right?" He settled him on a bench and turned to Uriskel. "How did he get so plastered?" he whispered. "I mean, he didn't drink much more than me."

Uriskel frowned. "Elderberry wine. It affects us more than you."

"So that's the stuff Cobalt has. I always wondered." Trystan watched the street for a minute. There weren't many cabs out this way. It'd take a while to snag one. "You think he's going to make it?"

"He'll be fine. He just needs to rest." Uriskel looked past him, and his gaze hardened. "Damn," he said. "Find a taxi, Trystan. Quickly."

"Why? What's going—"

"Morven! I must thank you again for the advice. This is a marvelous place. Marvelous."

Trystan whirled when the prince started talking. The creepy blond stood next to the bench like he'd materialized there. He must've come out somewhere in the trees. Terrific. If anything could kill the fragile peace they had now, it was Morven.

"Good to see you enjoying yourself, Braelan." A hint of disgust colored Morven's tone. "Leave us a moment, dog, and take that with you. I've a need to speak with him."

"No, Morven," Uriskel said tightly. "We'll not leave."

Trystan stared at him. What the fuck was he doing? Now that Braelan wasn't beating him, he was going to provoke Morven into it? Maybe he couldn't help himself. Well, this shit had to stop. "We're going," he said and grabbed Uriskel's arm.

The bodyguard was rigid, practically vibrating. "We're not," he snarled.

Braelan blinked blearily at him. "What is the matter?" he said. "It's only Morven."

"I am protecting you."

"From my own vizier?" Braelan laughed, slumped over, and caught himself. "Go on, Uriskel. He knows what will happen to him should I need protection and he fails to give it."

"Yes." Morven narrowed his eyes. "Go on...*Uriskel*."

The vicious look on his face froze Trystan's blood. But the prince didn't seem to notice—probably because Morven usually looked vicious anyway.

Uriskel stood his ground a moment longer, then jerked from Trystan's grip and stalked down the sidewalk, away from the plaza.

"Er. I'll just go with him." Trystan glanced at the still-smiling prince and hurried after Uri. He caught up to him half a block away. "I think we're far enough," he said.

“Bastard.” Uriskel stopped and turned, his expression just as nasty as Morven's. “Why did I never suspect this? He knows Braelan will not take my word over his.”

Trystan leveled a grimace. “You wanna tell me what the hell's going on?”

“The reading.” Uriskel's voice dropped to a near whisper. “I offered Braelan the wrong meanings, because the cards revealed unpleasant things. Dangerous things.”

“But...they're just cards,” Trystan said. “Aren't they?”

Uriskel shook his head. “They are enchanted and nearly always accurate. They called for spying, betrayal, vindication. A false friend.”

“Shit.” Trystan looked back. Braelan was still on the bench, and Morven stood in front of him, talking with stiff gestures. “You think it meant him?”

“I believe it did.”

Jesus. He didn't know much, but Uri was right—Braelan would never believe his so-called friend was out to betray him. If it was really Morven. It didn't have to be. Tarot cards never gave out names.

The tree behind Braelan's bench rustled. At first it didn't seem remarkable...but there was no wind. Something about the upper branches looked wrong, but it was still too dark to make anything out clearly. Trystan grabbed for Uri and pointed. “Is there something up there?” he asked. “I can't—”

A figure in a black coat dropped from the tree, headed straight for the prince.

Chapter Twenty

It was over before Uriskel could reach them.

Finn landed hard on Braelan, cracking his head against the bench. He drove a fist into the prince's face—and then Morven wrapped both hands around the Unseelie's throat. He dragged Finn aside, threw him to the ground, and without hesitation delivered a killing blow.

The display chilled him. Finn was at least a century older than Uriskel. More powerful by half. And Morven had destroyed him with no more effort than it would take to squash an insect.

He ignored the vizier and went to the prince. Braelan was semiconscious and slouching. Blood smeared the boards where the back of his head hit them, and ran from his nostrils in thick streams. His nose looked broken. A closer inspection revealed burns along the bridge. So, Finn did have more iron.

Uriskel crouched in front of Braelan, propped him up, and used a sleeve to wipe some of the blood from his face, but it kept flowing. Throat clenched, he put as much pressure as he dared against the nostrils, worked the prince's mouth gently open to let him breathe. “Morven, get over here and heal him,” he called in the Fae tongue.

“In a moment,” Morven responded in kind. “I've trash to dispose of.”

“Move, blast you! He's been poisoned.”

“He'll live.”

Uriskel let out a frustrated growl. There was a faint glow from the shadows—Morven opening a portal to the realm. Likely he'd shove Finn's body through and be done with it. Cold bastard.

But he had saved Braelan. Perhaps he'd read the cards wrong or at least drawn the wrong conclusions.

A tap on his shoulder, and Trystan said in shaken tones, "I don't know what you guys are saying, but is there anything I can do to help?"

"You don't happen to possess hidden healing talents, do you?" Uriskel glanced back at him and smirked. "I am afraid not. But thank you."

"He's not gonna..."

"No. He will be fine in a few moments." Uriskel looked toward the street. There were few humans out, and most walked on the opposite side. "Perhaps you can do something. Try and prevent interference, particularly if any police turn out."

Trystan nodded, pale but determined. "Okay."

"Yes. You scurry along and take care of that." Morven stepped out at the other end of the bench. "And you, dog. Stand aside so I can tend to him."

Trystan wandered a few paces away. Uriskel shot the vizier a glare, straightened, and moved back. "Well, Morven," he said. "I find it odd that Finn has only turned up when you're around. Have anything to say about that?"

"Only that, obviously, it will no longer be a concern." Ice would not melt in his mouth. He bent and pressed a hand to Braelan's chest. After a moment, the prince stirred and drew a sharp breath.

"Finn," Braelan blurted. "Where is he?"

"He has been eliminated."

"Morven. You—"

"I did, Highness. He was a threat."

Braelan closed his eyes. "Thank you, my friend," he said. "I knew I could count on you."

"Of course you can." Morven turned to Uriskel and gave him an appraising look—as though he would skin and quarter him into cuts of meat. "And now I'd like a private word with your bodyguard. If you don't mind."

"I'm not certain I want a word with you," Uriskel said.

Morven gave him a cold smile. "And when has it mattered what you want, dog?"

"Wait." The prince struggled up from the bench. "If you both leave, I'll not be protected."

"We'll not go far. Besides, the danger has passed," Morven said. "It will only take a moment. I promise."

"Very well. Make it quick." Braelan walked past them to where Trystan stood near the street, and touched his arm. Trystan spun with a smile and gave him a fierce hug.

Though he knew the human simply displayed relief that Braelan was unharmed, witnessing the scene stung. Still, he had a more immediate concern. Whatever Morven wanted could not be good for him.

"Come on, then." Morven moved back into the trees.

Uriskel followed, and found the vizier leaning against the back of another bench. "All right," he said. "What do you want?"

Morven paused before he spoke. "You are more observant than I suspected, mongrel."

A cold lump settled in his gut. "Finn."

"Yes, Finn. The blasted lunatic." His eyes flashed dark. "He let me down, so I had to kill him. You'd do well to remember why he's dead."

"Would I, now?"

"That's right. Because now his job is yours."

Uriskel recoiled. "Excuse me?"

"Stop acting like a prissy female. You know exactly what I mean." Morven straightened and cast a faint smile. "It's quite poetic, actually. You murdering Braelan."

"You're mad as Finn, Morven. I'll not do it. And I will tell him what you've asked of me."

Morven sneered. "You'll do no such thing, Unseelie. Or should I say...halfpling?"

All the breath went out of him, and his tongue locked in place.

"Oh, yes. I've known about you. The bastard son, the dark half prince. The king's shame." Morven advanced on him, wearing a wicked grin. "You are more powerful than the brat, and you want him dead anyway. I've seen it in your eyes."

"No," Uriskel managed. "I'll not kill him. He is my brother."

The laugh that crawled from Morven's throat dripped with contempt. "Brother! Do you think Braelan would welcome you with open arms? Perhaps he'd surrender his seat on the court to you. After all, you are the eldest." His expression flattened. "He'll never call you brother, and the king will never call you son. Unseelie slime. You'll kill him this coming night. It is your only chance."

"And if I don't?"

"Then I'll be forced to destroy both of you." Morven glanced at the sky and sighed. "She does want you alive, but I'll convince her your death was required."

"She?" he croaked.

"That is not your concern. Do as you've been told, unless you want to die for your *brother*. Try to hide, and I will find you." Another step closer. "I am not concerned about you attempting to spill this to Braelan. He'll not take your word over mine. However, there is the human."

Uriskel struggled to suppress his reaction. "Why should he pose a concern?"

"I know you fancy him, mongrel. It's rather pathetic. But he may have the prince's ear more firmly than you, and so...if you speak a word of this to Trystan, I'll kill him for it."

The lump residing in his stomach turned to ice. "I'll not mention it," he whispered.

"Cross your heart?"

Before he could respond, Morven's arm flashed out. Pain blazed through his chest as the blade in the vizier's hand carved an X in his flesh. Morven spoke a word, and his shirt repaired itself. "Remember. This night, Braelan dies—or the next, you both do. I'll leave you to explain my absence and your new markings."

With a haunting laugh, Morven parted the veil and vanished into the Fae realm.

Uriskel shuddered and stared at the space he'd left. He barely felt the blood drizzling down his chest, the deep cuts burning skin and muscle. Even with his own life at stake, he could not murder Braelan.

But he had no idea how to prevent Morven from doing it himself, after he failed to carry out the command.

* * *

Somehow they managed to find a cab and stumble back into the suite. Trystan followed the prince to his room, the exhaustion of drained adrenaline making his muscles jerk and his legs weigh a hundred pounds. When Braelan asked him to lie beside him, he didn't even consider refusing. He climbed in under the sheets, snuggled into the prince's embrace, and sleep promptly smacked him between the eyes.

He woke with a start from a blurred nightmare. At least he didn't scream. This time it was Talia—the hospital, the endless operations, the handful of nurses who let him stay overnight in the chair in her room. The long weeks, months of doctors telling him every day that she wouldn't make it. She hadn't cried when the bandages finally came off and she'd gotten her first look at the red, ridged mass of her face. He remembered that.

In fact, he'd never seen her cry after the fire. Not even for Mom and Dad. Like the flames had cauterized her tear ducts forever.

No point trying to get back to sleep now. Besides, he had to take a piss. Braelan still slept, with one arm flung over his head and the other draped across

Trystan's waist. He slid from under him and padded out of the room. If the prince slept light, he didn't want to wake him.

Early afternoon sunlight bathed the window in the empty main room. Figuring Uriskel must've gone into the other bedroom to sleep, Trystan shuffled across to the bathroom. The door stood ajar. He pushed it open with one hand, rubbing his eyes with the other, looked in, and froze.

Uriskel stood in front of the sink, cleaning dried blood from a huge X carved into his chest.

"Jesus fucking Christ!" he blurted. "What happened?"

The bodyguard didn't even look at him. "Nothing."

"That goddamn well isn't nothing."

Uriskel rinsed the washcloth in his hand and dabbed at part of the wound. "It is not your concern," he said. "I made a promise to myself. Cross my heart." The last words came out flat and furious.

"You did that to yourself."

"Yes."

Trystan moved into the room. "Liar."

Without a word, Uriskel grabbed something from the back of the sink and held it up. A small switchblade. The end of it was coated in blood.

"I still don't believe you," Trystan said.

"What is not to be believed?"

Braelan's voice behind him made Uriskel stiffen. He dropped the knife in the sink with a resounding clatter. "It is nothing, Highness. Only a personal promise."

The prince came beside Trystan. "You know, Uriskel, there's no need for actual cutting with a *gealht*," he said. "You might have used magic and saved yourself the mess."

"I've a need to conserve my spark." He worked the cloth into a crusted patch, and a muscle twitched along his jaw. The cloth joined the knife in the sink, and he

grabbed the shirt draped over the towel bar, shrugged into it, and faced them.
“Braelan. Do you believe that I mean to protect you?”

He frowned. “You've proven that.”

“Yes, but do you believe it? Truly?”

“I... Yes. I do.”

“Then you must trust me when I say we cannot stay in this place another night.”

Something in his tone shook Trystan to the core. “Why not?” he said.

“There are many enemies of Arcadia. I've reason to believe we have been compromised, and we must leave today.”

Braelan shook his head. “I see no need to run. I am no coward.”

“Blast it, I cannot protect you here!”

“The Grotto,” Trystan said quickly. “I'm sure Cobalt won't mind if we stay. He probably has protection, right?”

“No.” Uriskel's features strained. “Pleasant as that would be, we must stay where there'll be little chance for any Fae to find us. Including Cobalt. An unattractive, unassuming place without glamour or wealth or excitement. And one without a register for our names to be traced.”

Braelan snorted. “Really, Uriskel. Is all this necessary?”

“Yes, it is.”

“Tell me why.”

He stared at the floor. “I can't...explain it. You'll have to trust me.”

“I think I know someplace.” Desperate to stop the tension from ebbing back in, Trystan spoke before he could think twice. “We can stay with my sister.”

“You've a sister?” the prince said.

“Yeah. She's out past the Upper East Side, has a spare room we can use. Her place is—er, unattractive. And I'm sure she doesn't know any Fae.” Damn, this was

stupid. Talia would be furious if he showed up there with two strangers. He'd have to hope a couple grand would sweeten her temper.

Uriskel didn't look convinced. "If she is your sister, it would be easy to find you there."

"Hardly anybody knows we're related," he said. "And the ones that do won't talk."

"It's settled, then. We stay with Trystan's sister." Braelan flashed a smile. "Tell me, gallae. Is she as attractive as you? I may wish to know her better."

Trystan bit back a groan. Talia was going to kick his ass for this.

Chapter Twenty-one

The building looked as though it might collapse at any moment.

Three stories of red brick, crumbling and stained with age, seemed to lean in a dubious foundation of weather-beaten concrete. Several windows had been broken and boarded over, and faded scrawls of paint adorned the lower surfaces. The surrounding structures appeared more stable, though not by much.

But the state of their new temporary lodgings did not concern Uriskel nearly so much as the number of entrances he would have to protect, and the chances that Morven would be able to find them here. The latter seemed unlikely. Trystan had been conservative in deeming this place unattractive—it held nothing to interest Faekin, and Morven would almost certainly search areas that were suited to the prince's tastes.

The former was another matter. He could not seal every door and window in the building. Not in a single day.

“Well, here we are. The Taj Mahal.” Offering a rueful grin, Trystan moved up the short walkway leading to the entrance. “She should be up and around by now. I hope.”

Braelan followed, and Uriskel stayed behind him. “Trystan,” he said. “Is there a back door to this building?”

“Kinda. It's nailed shut. Hasn't been used in years.”

“Are there any other ways inside?”

“Don't think so.”

Braelan smirked over his shoulder. "I believe I've seen this in a movie," he said. "Perhaps you would like a flame thrower to heat the doorknobs, or some rope and a few cans of paint. But it may be too warm to ice the steps."

"Yes. And some boiling oil to pour from the roof." Uriskel smiled faintly. "Laugh all you like, Braelan. As long as you're laughing from inside this place after I've sealed the entrances."

"You're serious."

"What was your first clue?"

The prince's expression sobered. "Very well, bodyguard," he said. "I'll trust that you have a reason for this."

"Thank you."

Trystan wrenched the handle down and pulled the steel door open. "Oh, for fuck's—" He hung his head and sighed. "Watch your step, guys. It's up two flights, and there's a roadblock."

They entered to stale air with a rolling host of scents—alcohol, urine, cigarette smoke, and sweat, and a sickly sweet false flower stench that covered nothing. A shirtless human male sprawled on worn wooden stairs, not apparently injured, but unconscious and snoring loudly.

"That's Pink. Don't mind him." Trystan held to the railing, stepped over the figure, and started up the stairs.

They followed him. "Does...Pink often sleep there?" Braelan said.

"Only when his girlfriend kicks him out."

"I see."

On the third floor, a narrow corridor branched ahead, and another to the left and right. Trystan moved straight down and stopped at the last door on the right. He inhaled sharply, hesitated, and pushed a button below a round metal grate mounted beside the door.

"Might take a minute," he muttered.

Someone shouted from inside. There was a slight clatter, a pause. A husky female voice emanated from the grate. "Fuck off, Pink."

Trystan bit his lip, leaned forward. "Tee, it's me."

A few seconds passed. "Didn't I just get rid of you?"

"Ha-ha. Look, I have company with me. And...I need a favor."

"Damn it, Trys." The door opened. Talia, a slender and enraged blonde, glared out with eyes an icier blue than Trystan's. Old burn scars swept one side of her face in oddly elegant ripples, like wind-patterned desert sand. They might have been Cobalt's work instead of the ravaged remains of fire.

She planted a fist on her hip. "So who're they?"

Trystan pointed. "This is Braelan and Skelly. Guys, this is Talia."

"*Who* are they? You know what I mean."

"Come on, Tee. I'd never bring you trouble."

"Except yourself, brat." She smiled, reached out, and ruffled his hair. "Come in and tell me what you want," she said and turned to walk back inside.

The apartment was faded but clean. Pale walls, worn green carpeting, a couch, and a few chairs arranged around a television, a few sets of shelves. Black curtains at the window. Three closed doors, and an open frame leading to a kitchen.

They sat around the kitchen table. Trystan drew out a battered, folded paper bag and tossed it on the surface in front of Talia. "For you," he said.

Brow pinched, she unrolled it and looked inside. Her mouth fell open. "How much?"

"Five."

"Hundred?"

He shook his head.

"Jesus, Trys. What do you want, a franchise?"

"A room."

She went still. Her eyes moved from Trystan to Braelan to Uriskel and back to her brother. “Who's after these guys?”

Uriskel could scarcely hide his shock. If she were not human, he might have suspected she had some relation to Cobalt's Sluagh friend. But her sharp observation eased some of his concerns over staying here. She'd not fall easily to tricks of glamour.

The look Braelan favored her with unsettled him, though. It was an awed expression, tinged with lust. The prince possessed a royal's appetite for sex. He'd want this one—and she did not seem the type to oblige him. Here was a recipe for friction they did not need.

“Okay, Tee. Truth.” Trystan fidgeted a bit, stared at the table. “Braelan's a prince, and Skelly's his bodyguard.”

Her eyes widened. One hand flew to her mouth. She made a choked sound, and it erupted into laughter.

“A prince!” she howled. “Oh, God. You're killing me. A fucking prince. What is he, Trys—the prince of Bob's Waffle House? Wait, I got it. He's Prince Albert. Somebody finally let him out of the c-can...” She sputtered and climbed back to full-blown laughing again.

Braelan cast a bemused smile. When she calmed a bit, he said, “I'm afraid Trystan is correct, lady. I am a prince.”

“Lady?” Talia snorted. “There's no lady here. Just me.”

“And what a lady you are. Talia. Beautiful and wise.”

Her eyes narrowed. “I don't pick up my brother's leftovers, even if they swing both ways. So you can just tuck that back in your pants, pretty boy.”

“Tee, *please*.” Trystan reached for her hand and squeezed it. “We just need to lay low for a couple of days. Right, Skelly?”

“Yes. A few days.” One way or another, this would not go on long.

Talia sighed and lowered her head. "Fine," she muttered at the table. "Take the back room. You make me crazy. You know that, don't you?"

"If I didn't, who would? Thanks, beautiful." Trystan leaned over and kissed her scarred cheek. "So, you got anything to drink?"

"Couple cases in the fridge. Which I wouldn't let you have, except now I can buy more." She looked up and smiled. At Braelan. "My place isn't exactly fit for royalty," she said. "Hope you don't mind slumming it, Prince."

"Oh, I believe I'll be quite comfortable here."

Uriskel forced back a groan and interrupted before Braelan could attempt to take her on the table. "I've a question for you," he said. "How many windows does your apartment have?"

"Windows?" she said. "Why does that matter?"

"I must ensure they are protected."

"Huh? Oh, right. You're the bodyguard." Talia smirked. "We're on the third floor here. Nobody's getting in the windows."

Trystan blanched. "Just tell him, Tee. It's important."

She hesitated, and her expression grew wary. "Four. No...five. There's a small one in the bathroom." She glanced at Trystan. "You guys really are in trouble."

"Something like that," Trystan said.

Uriskel stood from the table. He had to complete the seals before nightfall, and the spells would take some time. "Talia," he said. "May I have your permission to secure your windows?"

"Sure. Help yourself. There's three bedrooms, the living room, the bathroom." She massaged a temple with two fingers. "Trys, get me a beer, would you? And pass 'em out while you're at it. If we're going to panic, we should definitely be drunk."

Trystan grinned. "I'll drink to that. Anybody else?"

"Sounds delightful," Braelan said.

Uriskel shook his head. "I must see to this first. But thank you."

He turned and entered the living room. Five windows, three doors—apartment, main entrance, back entrance. Perhaps two hours of daylight remaining. He would have to work quickly. And pray to the gods he'd have enough power to finish the job.

* * *

Somehow, over the course of the day, Braelan had charmed his way to Talia's heart—or at least her G-spot—and got himself invited into her bedroom. When all this was over, Trystan would have to grill her about that. She never did flings when it came to sex. Boyfriends only, and she hadn't taken many of those. He'd hate to try and kick Braelan's ass if he broke his sister's heart. But he would. And he'd probably fail spectacularly.

At least the prince had given him a gift. Right before he went off to fuck Tee, he'd told him to do whatever he wanted with Uriskel. He intended to take advantage of that.

He drained the last of the beer in his hand and headed for the back room. Around sundown, Uriskel had dragged himself in from doing some unexplained things to the building entrance and mumbled something about sleeping for a while. So he hadn't heard Braelan's announcement.

Trystan looked forward to filling him in.

The door was closed. He opened it, slipped through, and shut it again. Talia had made some changes to the room—she'd brought in a card table and a few chairs, a decent mattress, fresh sheets and blankets. She'd even hung real curtains at the window instead of towels. When he left last time, she'd grumbled something about maybe fixing it up so he could stay more often. She didn't expect him to take her up on it, and he didn't expect her to follow through. Apparently, they'd both been wrong.

The blanket-covered lump on the mattress had to be Uri. A shiver of anticipation went through him and forced out the lingering sorrow. He'd lose him eventually. Of course he would. Nothing good ever stayed in Trystan's life for long.

But he had now. And damned if he wasn't going to take it.

Uriskel didn't stir when he knelt next to the lump. "Hey," he whispered. "You alive in there?" He found an edge and drew the blankets back.

Blue skin. Pointed ears. Needle teeth. This couldn't be a good sign.

"Uri!" Trystan shook his shoulder. "What happened? Are you okay?"

Gold-ringed black eyes fluttered open and focused on him. "Trystan," he murmured. "Yes. Tired." His gaze flickered around the room. "Braelan?"

Trystan smirked. "He's screwing my sister."

"Blasted royal pain." He sighed, pushed up on his elbows, and gave him a quizzical look. "Is something wrong?"

"Um. Your...glamour."

Uriskel glanced down. He snarled something in his language and in a blink became a green-eyed redhead again. "I am sorry." He averted his eyes. "I've exhausted my spark with protection spells and cannot hold the glamour in sleep. It should not take much longer to restore."

"Don't worry about it."

He frowned at nothing. "I thank you for holding back. Waking to screams would have been difficult."

"Okay, you lost me. Why would I scream?"

"Because I am monstrous."

The flat conviction in his voice was heartbreaking. Trystan flashed back to the Fae realm, to the crowd's reaction when he'd shown his true form—jeers, hisses, general shock and disgust. How long had they been treating him like that, like some slime-covered nightmare creature dredged from a swamp? Probably forever. "Not to me," Trystan whispered. "You're beautiful."

"My glamour form—"

"No. Look at me, Uri."

The bodyguard shifted reluctantly and met his eyes. "Please," he said. "I cannot take such platitudes. I know my true appearance is hideous. I frighten fledglings and make females faint with horror."

"Well, you don't scare me."

"Then you are a fool."

Trystan's mouth firmed. "Do you know what I thought of, the first time I saw you like that? A tiger. Proud, graceful, maybe a little dangerous—but not ugly. Not hideous." He reached out and traced his jaw, his lips. "Beautiful," he said. "Àillidh."

Uriskel shuddered. His scent rose like a fog, teasing and tempting, sinful as devil's food cake. "How could you know what that means?"

"Cobalt."

He laughed softly. "I might have guessed."

"I've got something for you." Trystan tugged the rest of the blankets away, and before Uri could react, he straddled him and leaned close. "Guess what Braelan said when he shagged off with Talia?"

Uriskel let out a moan. "Likely something along the lines of whether she has friends he can take after they're through."

"Nope. He said, 'Feel free to do whatever you'd like with Uriskel. I'll not be joining you tonight.'"

"Did he?" Uriskel swallowed, and his hands strayed to Trystan's waist. "And what would you like to do with me, àillidh?"

"I think I'd like to screw your brains out."

"I believe I'd like my brains to stay where they are."

"I'll put them back when we're done."

"In that case, I'll gladly lose them to you."

Trystan closed the distance between them and pressed his lips to Uriskel's. Maybe this would be their last time together. If it was, he'd damn well make it one to remember.

Chapter Twenty-two

Chains formed by a thousand taunts shattered and fell away from Uriskel, rendering him breathless. Trystan found him beautiful. Wanted him. And he had leave to take him. This time, there would be no consequences.

Save your broken heart, when you return to the realm without him.

He shoved the thought ruthlessly aside in favor of better things. Trystan's warm lips on his, the welcome weight pinning him to the mattress. He slid his tongue between those lips, into the moist heat beyond. His hand strayed up Trystan's side, across his shoulders, and settled at the back of his head.

Without breaking the kiss, Trystan lowered himself and lay flat along his body, then shifted a few inches aside. A hand trailed down him. Fingers whispered over the bulge of his straining cock.

Uriskel flinched and hissed. "Would you torture me then, àillidh?"

"Maybe." Lips curving up, Trystan rubbed his cock through his pants. "I'd like to get my mouth around this," he said.

"Yes. And there is something of yours I'd like to taste as well."

"Mmm. That is a fantastic idea." With a quick kiss, Trystan drew back and unfastened Uriskel's pants. He hooked thumbs into the waistband. "Lift."

Uriskel obliged, and he tugged the pants down and away. "This now," he said, fingering the hem of the shirt. Uriskel sat up, and Trystan peeled the shirt over his head, slid it down his arms. His gaze settled on Morven's damned mark. "A promise," he whispered. "Jesus, why did you *do* that? What promise?"

He offered the closest he could to the truth. "I've sworn to protect you. With my life, if it comes to that. I cannot explain further."

Trystan's eyes glittered with moisture. "That says you'll die...for me?"

"Yes, àillidh. I would. A hundred times."

"Don't you dare. Not even once." He gave a crooked smile. "If you die, I'll kill you."

"It seems I'll have to live, then." Returning the expression, Uriskel nodded down at his erection. "Now, if you'd not mind picking up where you left off."

"Wait."

"Must we?"

"Yes. Just for a minute." Trystan pulled his own shirt off, and his pants followed quickly. He cleared everything from the bed except their naked forms and knelt beside him. "All right. Lie down, and we'll see about getting us both what we want."

He raised an eyebrow in silent question and lay back on the mattress.

Trystan moved up next to his head. He reached across, put a hand down on the other side, and swung one leg over. Soon he'd positioned himself on hands and knees above him, with his cock in Uriskel's face and palms planted on either side of his hips. He curled his head down, looked back through the space between them, and cast an upside-down grin. "See? Mutual satisfaction. No waiting."

"Ah, gods, Trystan. I'd never have thought of this."

"Sixty-nine. Everybody's favorite number." He raised his face, leaned forward, and licked the swollen head of Uriskel's cock.

Moaning, Uriskel reciprocated, his tongue darting out to flick the sweet flesh hanging above him. Trystan gasped, bent to capture his head, and sucked hard.

Uriskel lifted a few inches and did the same.

Trystan hummed against his cock, sending quivers through him. He eased down, taking him farther in, drew back, and thrust the tip of his tongue against his head.

More. He wanted to taste more of him. He braced his hands on the muscled flesh of Trystan's ass. Pulled himself up and swallowed his cock whole. Ah, better. He suckled the hard length, swallowed spit mingled with the salty tang of early seed.

With a muffled cry, Trystan drove down on him.

The sensation of cock in mouth and mouth on cock at once was intense as a blaze—so powerful, it rode the edges of hell. He clung to Trystan and worked himself up and down, finding a rhythm, letting his teeth graze and his tongue savor silk skin wrapped around taut ridges.

Trystan soon copied his motion, settling into a counterpoint, up to his down. He made breathless little sounds at every stroke, rocked his hips eagerly into the suckling.

The pleasure was a living heart encasing him in a frantic beat, a blinding crescendo dazzling his eyes. But just as he shuddered toward the crest of a climax, Trystan released him abruptly and gasped, “Wait...”

He relinquished his hold with a frustrated sigh, and a dull throb settled in his groin. “You do mean to torture me,” he breathed. “That was not the best time to stop, love.”

“Trust me, I know.” Panting, Trystan crawled down and climbed shakily to one side. “I just...ah, *fuck*.” He closed his eyes, sucked in a breath through clenched teeth. Held it. Let go with a tearing sigh. “Damn. Almost lost it.” His eyes opened, and he smiled. “That was just a warm-up. We haven't gotten to the fucking-our-brains-out part yet.”

Uriskel sat up, reached for him, and pulled him sideways onto his lap. “Well, then,” he murmured against his neck. “Let us move on.”

* * *

Trystan figured he'd be lucky to last another whole minute. If Uri so much as breathed on his cock before he managed to get him inside, he'd come harder than a shaken bottle of champagne and baptize the ceiling.

There'd been a lot of sex in his life, but nobody had ever taken him this far. He'd never had to stop and pull back so he could keep going.

He loved it.

Uriskel's cock was a hot, hard length snugged against his ass. Waiting to feel that thick shaft filling him wasn't exactly what he had in mind, but he had to calm down first. Just a little. He twisted to look at him, and Uri kissed him hard. "This is not moving," he whispered. "This is torment. I must have you."

"And you said I was insatiable." Grinning, Trystan slung an arm around his shoulders and ran fingers through his hair. "Redheads are so impatient."

"That we are, love."

Before he could react, Uriskel scooped him up and stood on the floor, cradling him. "Hold to me," he commanded. The instant Trystan clasped his neck, he let his legs go, then hooked them under his arms and hitched up, pressing their cocks firmly together. "Now then," he said in husky tones. "What shall I do with you, teasing human?"

Trystan's eyes rolled back with a swell of delirious pleasure. "Fffuck me."

"Yes. I believe I will." He carried him to the card table, the motion of every step rubbing his swollen rod and sending jolts of liquid heat through his groin. "Here?"

"Anywhere. Now."

He smiled. "Blonds are so impatient."

Uriskel settled him on the table, and he jumped when the cold surface touched his ass. The motion drew a sharp breath from Uri. "Easy, àillidh," he breathed. "Lie

back. Yes, there.” Uri’s hand rubbed his ass and spread thick wet warmth on his hole. “Perhaps it’ll be your brains that spill tonight.”

“Never needed ‘em anyway.” He squirmed and pushed closer to the edge to give the best access. “Your cock’s a different story. I need that.”

“It is yours, love.” He guided Trystan’s legs around him, gripped his waist, and settled his cock at his opening. He pushed inside with a smooth, swift thrust, and Trystan cried out. “Such music you make,” Uriskel said. “Your sounds are nearly as sweet as your flesh.”

“Keep going,” Trystan rasped. “I’ll make more.”

“As you wish.”

There was no languid lead-in, no slow stroking or sweet torture. Uriskel held him in place and fucked him, hard and steady and beautifully desperate. He gripped the edge of the table and gave himself over to bliss. God, he’d never been filled so completely.

A ragged, sobbing sigh reached his ears, and he realized it came from him. His cock throbbed faster than his pounding heart, tightening with every beat. He was either going to come or explode—and he didn’t care which one happened. As long as it happened with Uriskel inside him.

His throat convulsed, and he expelled a guttural shout. The pressure burst, releasing a torrent of delicious shudders through every inch of his body, right down to his toes. He clenched his ass tight, and Uriskel let out a prolonged snarl as his cock burrowed deep and pumped itself empty.

Trystan’s breath rushed away, and his muscles trembled with aftershocks. “Dear sweet Jesus,” he murmured. “I’ve never come that hard in my life.”

“You may have broken records, love.” Uriskel nodded at the wall behind him.

Trystan twisted around and spotted the glistening wet splashes adorning the plaster. “Damn,” he said with a grin. “Tee’s gonna kill me.” He straightened, started to sit up and disentangle himself.

But Uriskel held fast. “Going somewhere, àillidh?” he whispered.

Trystan opened his mouth and felt Uriskel's cock stir and harden again inside him. “Oh, God,” he moaned. “You're amazing. How many times can you go?”

“As many as it takes.”

“For what?”

“To fuck your brains out.”

Trystan wriggled on the thick shaft. “I can still talk straight.”

“Well, then. We'll have to remedy that.”

“Good idea.”

They kept going long after Trystan lost the ability to articulate.

Chapter Twenty-three

The sun set on the day following the most exquisite hours of Uriskel's life, and the moon rose on Morven's promise to end it. Thus far the vizier had not found them—the proof lay in the fact that they still lived.

Talia had left that afternoon and informed them she'd not return until late. Her exact words had been, "*Don't wait up.*" Braelan had not been pleased, but he'd done little in the way of complaining until the limited selection of television ceased to amuse him. Now, at ten p.m. and with a waning quarter moon burning a silver beacon against the black sky, he made his displeasure clear.

"I am bored." Braelan leaned in the kitchen doorway, arms folded, a deep frown etched into his face. He'd emptied eight cans of beer in two hours, and the effects showed in his moist eyes and slightly slurred tongue.

Uriskel looked up from the table, where he'd been helping Trystan practice the game of Nine Card Don. "You're welcome to join us, Highness," he said.

"I do not wish to play cards." The prince made his way to the fridge and helped himself to a fresh beer. "I wish to go out. Experience the city. That is why I'm here."

"Out of the question."

"Why not?"

Uriskel glared at him. "You know why. You must stay in this apartment, where you are protected. Where no one can find you."

"I'll not hide for the next three weeks, Uriskel." Braelan leaned against the counter and popped the can open. He took a long swallow, set the beer aside with a sigh. "By the gods, I am bored," he said.

Trystan pushed his chair back. "Sex is fun," he said. "You wanna have some?"

"Sex," Braelan said slowly, rolling the word about on his tongue. "Yes, perhaps I will. However..." He straightened and settled a gaze on Uriskel. "You will entertain me, bodyguard."

Absolute horror seized Uriskel with sharpened teeth, and for a moment he couldn't bring himself to speak. "No, Braelan." He spoke as steady as he could manage. "You've Trystan for that. And Talia, and every other human you happen to feel like charming."

"True. But I've never had an Unseelie."

"And you'll not have this one. Excuse me."

He stood, nearly toppling the chair in his haste, stumbled to the bathroom, and locked himself inside. *Dear gods, no.* Why Braelan would decide he wanted him, when he could scarcely stomach his presence before now, was beyond his ability to understand. But he'd not let the prince have his way. Not for this.

And if he gave the real reason, it would be his death sentence. On the slim chance they escaped Morven, the king would have him killed. Slowly.

He leaned back against the door, shaking, and heard shouts through the thin wood. Braelan and Trystan, arguing. What if the prince hurt him over this? He'd not stand for that either. Somehow, he had to stop this madness.

Steeling himself, he pulled the door open...and was met with a furious Braelan.

"So you'll not have me, will you?" His eyes, so much like Cobalt's, glittered with emotion. "You'll have my gallae, and likely Cobalt, and every traitorous slime my father sends you to fetch, but you'll not soil yourself with me."

"Let me by, Braelan."

He expected resistance, but the prince stood aside. He walked past and stood in the center of the living room, his back to Braelan. Trystan hovered in the

doorway by the kitchen. The human's face was streaked with tears, and he looked as though his heart would shatter.

He knows. Somehow Trystan had connected Cobalt with Braelan and drawn the logical conclusion. Had he told the prince? No, he could not have. If he had, Braelan would not be spewing such insanity.

"I've never had Cobalt," he said without turning. "And I'd little choice with the traitors. As for Trystan... Here's your answer, Highness. Yes. I love him. I'm aware that I'll not be permitted to act on this, but I cannot deny what I feel."

Trystan choked on a ragged sob. "D-don't do this, Uri. Please don't get yourself in trouble for me."

"It's Uri now, is it?" Braelan's voice took on a cold edge. "He'll not be harmed. Provided, of course, that he agrees to entertain me. Come on, *Uri*. I'll even let your beloved Trystan join. You can take him, and I'll take you."

Uriskel whirled to face him. "Go ahead and beat me, bratling. Tear the flesh from my bones. Lock me away and laugh at my terror. Do what you will to me, but I'll not couple with you. No threat or promise could force me into this."

"Not even if I promised you Trystan?"

He may as well have gutted him with a dull knife. "You base, soulless royal snake. I suppose I should not have expected less from you." His fists clenched tight, and his nails drew blood from his palms. "You've an unerring talent for striking me where it hurts the most. No, you bastard. Not even if you promised me Trystan."

"Why?" Braelan moved a step closer, one corner of his mouth twitching. "Do you not find me attractive? Have I not been kind to you and given you what you wanted? Why will you not accept me?"

"I cannot accept you." He searched for a lie to justify the claim and found nothing plausible to say.

A terrible smile stretched Braelan's lips. "Then it is not a question of wanting, and I shall help you to accept me."

Everything inside him liquefied and churned in a seething mass of horror. He tried to head for the prince, not sure what he intended—to scream at him, throttle him, force him to understand—but his body would not obey his commands. Instead, he turned and walked stiffly toward the back room.

Braelan had taken control of him. And he'd not the right spells to break his hold.

“Oh, God,” Trystan said hoarsely. “Are you making him do that? Braelan, stop! Please, you can't do this. You just can't.”

“This is not your concern, human.”

“Trystan.” At least he could still speak. “Hush, àillidh. It will be all right.” He could not have him spilling the truth, no matter how well-intentioned his confession.

“No. It won't.” The flat resignation in his voice assured he'd say nothing further.

Uriskel watched his own hand reach for the door and open it. His feet carried him to the right, to the table he'd taken Trystan on. He stopped there, facing the wall, and when Braelan entered the room and closed them in, he bent and placed his palms on the table.

“Braelan. You must not do this.” His body trembled violently with the effort to throw off the spell. Nothing came of it. He could not even lift a finger of his own volition. “Please. I...I am begging you. I'd be on my knees if I could.”

“You? The proud dog, begging me?”

“Yes. I'll do anything you ask of me. Anything. Not this.”

“This is what I want.” He was right behind him. “This is what you'll give me.”

There had to be a way to stop this. He could not move, could not reason with Braelan. He had no hurting spells, or paralyzing spells. Most of his power was contained in his cards, secreted away from those who would take it. He had...

His songs. The lullaby. He could sing Braelan to sleep, and buy some time to think.

Uriskel closed his eyes. He called to his tongue the words he'd gleaned from the king himself, in the early times when Braelan was a babe, and he'd huddle outside the nursery to imagine the loving tune directed at him. The song spoke of moonlight and stars, of rain whispering through trees, of soft touches and warm embraces and strong hearts.

Sudden pressure choked his voice. Braelan had wrapped both hands around his throat. He jerked him aside and slammed him against the wall. "Wretched Unseelie thief!" he roared. "Who did you steal that enchantment from?"

Uriskel coughed miserably, unable to draw more than a sip of air. "I've stolen...nothing," he wheezed. "Not...a thief."

"And now you lie," Braelan snarled. "Only those with royal blood possess song magic."

Shock leached the resistance from him, and he sagged in Braelan's grip. He had not known that. He'd always had his songs—the music was part of him, as vital as the blood in his veins. He searched his rapidly clouding mind for a royal name. "Hestia," he gasped as black starbursts obscured his vision. "Stole it...from Hestia."

Braelan released him abruptly, and he thumped to the floor, doubled over and gasping. "Hestia," the prince spat. "She has no song magic. And if she did, she'd not know my father's lullaby. So you've stolen it from him, or—" Braelan crouched in front of him, gathered a handful of shirt, and bashed him into the wall again. "Cobalt. You took it from him, or he gave it to you."

True confusion flooded him. "Cobalt? How could he know the king's song?"

"Because he is my brother."

"You...know?"

"Bastard!" Braelan drew his free hand back as if to strike, but he did not release it. "I've only just discovered it. *You* knew this? You, a bottom-crawling

fatherless—” He drew a sharp breath, and his eyes stretched impossibly wide. Both arms fell to his sides. He lost his balance and dropped back on the floor with a grunt. “No,” he whispered. “It cannot be.”

If Uriskel had been capable of taking his own life, he would have done so right then. The awful realization in Braelan's eyes hurt far more than any beating, any cruel taunt or thoughtless punishment he'd ever received. He struggled to move limbs that were heavy with the weight of centuries in hell. Positioned himself on his knees and met Braelan's horrified gaze. “Kill me.”

“What?” The prince's lips barely moved.

“Kill me. Please.” He'd never issued a plea more sincere. He could no longer bear the strain of existing. At least he'd held love for a brief time before the end. Some left this world with less than that. “Please, Braelan. I would rather die at your hands than face him again. And once you've done this, you must return to the realm immediately.”

Braelan blinked rapidly, shook his head. “You. You are Unseelie,” he said haltingly. “You are...a halfling?”

Shudders wracked him, nearly dropping him on the spot. “Yes. And by the law, you *must* kill me. Please. I know you despise me. Here is your opportunity to end my miserable life.”

Braelan stared without seeing him. “You are my brother. Why...why did you not tell me?”

“The king forbade me, on pain of death.”

“No!” Braelan scrambled back along the floor. He lurched to his feet, spun, and pounded a fist against the table. “Ah, gods. All these years, and not once—no. It's not true.” He whirled and glared fire at Uriskel. “Tell me it's a lie! Tell me that my father did not keep such secrets from me. Tell me that he did not permit me, *encourage* me, to spend decades...heaping torments...on my *brother*...” His features crumpled, and he buried his face in his hands.

“Braelan.” His voice wobbled unsteady from his lips. “You’ve every right to hate me. What better way to strike back at the king than to kill me and deny him the opportunity?”

“Stop.” With a harsh sob, the prince fell to his knees. He lowered shaking hands and stared at Uriskel. “You’ve such strength. You have always been strong, and I’ve taken advantage of that. Not once have you faltered. And you have never turned on me. Even now, as I nearly forced you into doing something unspeakable...” He paused, shivered. “You could have confessed out of spite, merely to hurt me or shame me. But you did not.”

Uriskel shook his head fiercely. “Everything I’ve done, I’ve done to survive,” he said. “I am not noble. I am nothing, and I deserve to die. Please...destroy me. I’ve no wish to suffer the king’s death sentence.”

“I’ll not kill you, brother.” Braelan’s voice cracked on the word. “Nor will I allow our father to destroy you. After all, you did not disobey him. I figured it out on my own.”

A ray of hope blazed briefly in his soul and vanished just as fast. “It will not matter to him how you’ve discovered the truth. He’ll kill me for it regardless.”

Braelan reached out and gripped his shoulder. “I am a prince of Arcadia,” he said. “If I command it, then it will be done. Your life will not be taken.”

Uriskel’s throat clenched. Tears burned his eyes, threatened to fall, and he covered it with a grim smirk. “Braelan, you have never issued a royal command in your life.”

“Well, then. It is about time I began, isn’t it?”

“Perhaps it is.” Uriskel drew a breath and attempted to expel the electric vibrations from his nerves. He could not entirely trust that he’d be spared—but for the first time in his life, the possibility existed. He would face the king after they survived the more immediate threat. A threat he now realized would follow both of them, all of them, until they dealt with it directly. “Enough of this grousing,” he

said. “Call Trystan in here. There is something you both must know, and we've some decisions to make.”

Braelan's brow lifted. “Another confession?”

“Yes. I'm going to tell you why we're here instead of out there, experiencing the blasted city, and what we must do in order to escape back to the glorious disaster of New York.”

“Oh, I quiver with anticipation.” The prince smiled and rose to fetch Trystan.

Uriskel stayed in place for a moment longer. Exposing Morven's betrayal would lay all their lives on the line—but he'd finally come to the only solution that would free them from the vizier's grasp.

He had to kill Morven first.

Chapter Twenty-four

Sometimes Trystan hated being right.

“So, Morven did that to you. That thing on your chest,” he said. “I knew you were lying.”

Uriskel settled on the table, where he'd been pacing while he explained Morven's plans. “I'd no choice,” he said. “But what I said to you was truth. It is a promise to protect your life. And his,” he added with a nod at Braelan.

“Black-hearted snake.” Braelan shifted on the mattress. “But I do not understand. Why does he want me dead?”

“That, I do not know.” Uriskel frowned and folded his arms. “He employed Finn to destroy you, and when that did not work, he killed him for his failure. That was not done to protect you, Highness. And Morven mentioned a 'she.'”

Braelan flinched. “Do not call me Highness, brother.”

A jolt went through Trystan, and he stared at the prince. “Did you just say what I think you said?”

“Yes.” Braelan gave a weary smile. “I did tell you Cobalt was not the only bastard my father abandoned. Uriskel was kind enough to allow me to figure this out before I did something...more horrible than what I've already done.”

“You've done nothing you could have prevented, Braelan. The fault does not lie with you.” Uriskel grunted. “Now, if we've finished tossing out sentimental nonsense, perhaps we could discuss the business of staying alive another night or two.”

“Wow. You're such a softie, Uri.” Trystan grinned at him. “Can't you take a few minutes and be happy about the whole brother thing?”

Uriskel glowered. “No.”

“Fine. But after we take care of this, we're celebrating.”

“Trystan, you must understand,” Uriskel said. “Morven is older and more powerful than myself and Braelan. He'll not be easy to defeat. In fact, it may not be possible.”

“What? I thought you'd just—I don't know—arrest him or something.”

“I'm afraid it will not be that simple.” Uriskel closed his eyes. When he opened them, he looked at Braelan. “I must destroy him.”

“Impossible.” Braelan shot to his feet. “He's far too strong. We will return to the realm and send the guard after him.”

“I'd considered that. But we no longer know who is trustworthy among the court. Morven plans betrayal, and he is not alone. We cannot risk seeking help from those who may be cooperating with this plot, and we've not the time to uncover it further. And the king may side with Morven no matter what he's told, from whom. Even you.”

“Uriskel,” the prince said. “If you take on Morven, you'll be killed.”

Trystan went colder than ice. “No,” he said. “Don't do it. We'll figure something else out. I...I'll shoot him or something. I can get guns.” He was babbling. Couldn't stop if he tried. “I'll get Talia's boys to take him out. They'll do it. You can't go after him, Uri.” His chest tightened until he could barely breathe. “You can't...”

“There is nothing else to be done, àillidh,” he said gently. “He must be—”

“You promised you wouldn't die!”

“Trystan,” he whispered. “Come here.”

Every bit of him shaking, he crossed the room and stood in front of Uriskel. “I know you can't stay,” he said. “I don't like it. But if you leave, at least I'd know you

were still out there somewhere, and maybe I'd see you someday." He bit his lip to keep it from trembling. "I need that maybe. There's no maybe in dead."

Without a word, Uriskel slid from the table and enfolded him in his arms.

"Oh, God." Trystan hugged him back, laid his head on his chest. "You're not going to say you won't die. Are you?"

"I'll say nothing, save that you have my love. Always." Uriskel's voice rumbled against his ear, deep and comforting. "You've given me everything. And if I should not survive, I'll not die in misery and neglect, as I have always expected. I will die loved."

Trystan closed his eyes. There was nothing in the world but Uriskel—his firm heat, his heavenly scent wrapped around him as tightly as his arms. He pressed the moment into his mind, knowing with terrible certainty that in the end, he'd have nothing but this. He would take it out later, inspect and caress it, remember every second he'd spent with this beautiful soul. With this love.

"We will face him together." Braelan's strained voice broke the spell. "There'll be a greater chance of success if both of us take him."

Something close to a laugh vibrated through Uriskel's chest. "You are a prince, Braelan. You've killed nothing more dangerous than a docile stag in your life. I, on the other hand, am an assassin. Remember? And we can't allow Morven to destroy us both." He settled back and stroked Trystan's hair. "If I do not succeed, you must return to the realm. You must speak to no one save the king. Despite his faults, he does love you."

"All right, assassin." The prince didn't sound thrilled. "Tell me how you intend to kill Morven."

"With my cards."

"Have you lost your mind?"

"Not yet." He leaned down and whispered, "Excuse me a moment, àillidh. I must fetch something."

Trystan pulled away reluctantly, and Uriskel left the room.

“His cards,” Braelan muttered. “This is madness. My servant is my brother; my friend is my enemy. My father is either a cruel bastard or a doddering idiot. And Uriskel intends to slay the Seelie vizier with *cards*.” He swung his gaze to Trystan. “Are you my brother as well? Or perhaps you're not human after all. Perhaps you're an enchanted wooden puppet.”

“No, I'm pretty sure I'm human.” Trystan fought an inappropriate laugh. “And I'm definitely not your brother.”

“Good. I feared I'd been completely surrounded by lunatics.”

Uriskel strode back in, the leather case in his hand. “If you'll recall, Braelan, you asked if I'd further tricks at hand. I do. These cards are layered with five years of enchantments. Each is a different spell, and only I can activate them.” He took the deck out, fanned it, and pulled a card free. The queen of hearts. “This one...well, it's no use against Morven. So I'll show you.”

He held the card between his thumb and forefinger, brought it close, and whispered something to it. A spark of golden light flared at the top of the card and raced around the edges like a flame following a line of gasoline. The light spread, infused the rest of it, until he grasped a glowing, pulsing rectangle. He curled his wrist and flicked the card into the air.

It flew like a rock, stopped abruptly, and hovered near the ceiling for a few seconds. Then it exploded in a shower of gold.

But the streaks of light didn't fade. They expanded, swirled, took on a rainbow of opaque, brilliant colors. The bands separated and formed spreading tendrils, and the colors eased into shapes—a stroke of an arm, a graceful sweep of fabric, a whisper of a face. And then, a complete living image, like a movie projected on an invisible screen. An impossibly beautiful woman in a shimmering silver dress, seated on a moss-covered rock, working an ivory comb through cascading copper hair. The suggestion of flowing water rippled along the bottom of the image, and a hint of trees hovered in the background.

The woman looked up and smiled. Her lips moved, but there was no sound. She faded slowly, and her face lingered for a few seconds longer before it vanished.

“My mother,” Uriskel said in the stunned silence. “She was...that is how I remember her. An angel.”

Trystan stared at the empty space. “Where's the card?”

“Gone. Once the enchantment is used, the object is finished.”

“Well,” Braelan said hoarsely. “That was quite powerful, Uriskel. I'd not thought you possessed such magic.”

Uriskel gave a short laugh. “That was a weaker spell,” he said. “I've enough here to finish Morven. I need only the opportunity to use them.”

“And how will you find that?”

“We've only a few hours of moonlight remaining. At sunrise, I intend to go to Cobalt and ask for his help. More specifically, the help of his Sluagh friend.”

“The psychic,” Trystan said. “Do you think she can figure out where Morven is?”

“Perhaps. It is worth a try.” Uriskel smiled. “And for now, I believe we should sleep.”

“I'll second that.” Trystan looked at the bed and pushed away the image of sleeping alone on a bare mattress for the rest of his life. “You'll sleep with me, right? Both of you?”

Uriskel glanced at Braelan, and the prince nodded. “We will,” he said. “I can't think of a better way to spend this night.”

“Thank you.”

They arranged themselves on the bed—Braelan at the wall, Uri on the edge, Trystan snuggled between them. A hundred fears raced through his mind, and he was convinced he'd never actually fall asleep. But the warmth of the Fae and their comforting presence calmed his thoughts. His eyelids grew heavy, and he drifted away.

He didn't dream at all.

* * *

After ten minutes of pounding on the front door of the Grotto with no response, Uriskel realized he'd have to break in. Eight in the morning was a bit on the early side for Cobalt, who generally worked through two a.m., but he would forgive him for being roused from sleep. Eventually.

He considered flying to the roof, letting himself in the access door that led directly to Cobalt's apartment, but that would risk humans seeing him. Instead, he laid a hand on the deadbolt and manipulated it open. He remembered to lock it again once he'd gone inside, and headed for the side entrance that bypassed the studio.

Leaving Braelan and Trystan alone worried him. He had ensured they couldn't be found through magic, and there was little probability Morven would stumble across them by accident. That left human intervention. Trystan seemed convinced none of the few people who knew of his relation to Talia would confess it, but there was still a chance. With humans, there was always a chance.

Cobalt's bedroom door opened just as Uriskel reached the top of the stairs, and Cobalt staggered out wearing only boxers and a pinched frown. He started when he caught sight of Uriskel, then heaved a sigh. "Come on in, Uriskel. Door's open. Er...it's not actually open, is it?"

"No. I locked it back up."

He grunted. "Coffee. Need some. You?"

"I've not yet become addicted to the human brew. But if you're offering..."

"Yes." Cobalt closed the door gently and made his way across the loft to the kitchenette. "You've any idea what time it is? Early o'clock. I'll assume this visit's important."

"It is." Uriskel watched him make coffee preparations, waited until he wasn't holding anything breakable. "Morven's ordered me to kill Braelan."

Cobalt froze. "Have you?"

"No. And since I haven't, he means to do it himself. Along with me, and likely Trystan."

"By the gods." He turned slowly.

Uriskel drew a breath and explained, from Finn's brutally fast death and Morven's subsequent twisted demands to the previous night's revelations, a subject still raw with shock. He did not reveal what Braelan had nearly done before he realized the truth. The prince had undergone enough regret over that.

When he finished, Cobalt stared at him. "He knows, then. About both of us."

"Yes. Apparently, he's a few wits stashed somewhere in that royal head."

"Must be why you've not killed him." Cobalt scrubbed a hand over his face. "Well, brother. This is a fine mess. What can I do to help?"

"I'm not certain you can, and honestly, I'll not involve you any more than I have to." His gaze strayed to the window, the panoramic view of a sprawling city filled with places to hide. "I must find Morven first and destroy him. I'd hoped the Sluagh could help me locate him."

"Shade?" Lines formed on his brow. He turned to the counter, moved two mugs to the edge, and filled them with steaming coffee. "She may be able to give you a general area, but I doubt she could pinpoint him exactly. Her abilities don't work that way."

Uriskel gave a short laugh. "An area would be better than what I have now. Which is precisely nothing. For all I know, he could still be in the Fae realm."

"This plan of yours sounds worse every moment." Cobalt handed him a cup. "You could stay here, the lot of you. He's bound to turn up, and we'll handle him then."

"No, Cobalt. I thank you for the offer, but I'll not place you in danger. Besides, I don't want him to turn up." He sipped the coffee, surprised to find it pleasant and

smooth even without cream or sugar. “It’ll be difficult enough defeating him when he’s not expecting me. If he’s prepared, I’ve little chance at besting him.”

Cobalt looked ready to snap. Instead, he made a visible effort to relax his expression. “Where are Trystan and Braelan now?”

“Safe.”

“Really. And where’s safe?”

“The more you know, the more can be tortured from you.”

“Ah, gods.” Cobalt blanched and set his mug down. “I can see you’ll not be dissuaded.”

“This is the only way.”

Cobalt dropped his gaze to the floor. His shoulders lifted, settled. “All right,” he said. “I’ll get hold of Shade. Let me fetch my phone.”

“Thank you, brother.”

Cobalt met his eyes for an instant. He looked away quickly and headed for his bedroom.

I am going to die. Uriskel closed his eyes against the thought. Despite his assurances to everyone that he’d a fair chance at killing Morven, his own death was a likely outcome. He could not lie to himself. But perhaps it was for the best—for if he did survive, he’d still have to face eternity without Trystan.

There was something he could ask of Cobalt. To watch over Trystan and keep him safe when Morven chased Braelan back to the realm.

Footsteps behind him announced Cobalt’s return. “There’s no answer,” he said. “Nix might’ve turned his phone off. I’ll try again in a moment, and there is another way to possibly contact them. Unfortunately, it works only when Shade is awake.”

“Does no one rise early in this realm?” Uriskel turned with a smirk. “And what’s the other way? Smoke signals or perhaps a courier bird?”

“Think of your need to speak with her.” Cobalt shrugged, smiled. “She is psychic.”

"I see." At least they'd plenty of time before the moon rose. Still, he'd inform them of the delay. Trystan had written down Talia's phone number for him. He fished the scrap of paper from his pocket. "May I borrow your phone, then?"

"Sure." Cobalt handed him the device.

He stared at it. The screen, covering nearly the entire front surface, showed a picture of Will grinning and pointing to the armband tattoo Cobalt had done for him. He turned it over and found smooth black plastic. "How do you use this thing?" he said. "There's no buttons."

Cobalt blurted laughter. "Here. I'll dial for you." He took the phone, touched the screen. "What's the number?"

Uriskel read him the digits. When he'd finished, Cobalt gave him the phone. "It's ringing," he said.

Nodding, Uriskel held it to his ear. Trystan answered on the fourth ring with, "Hey, sexy."

He shook his head. "Is this your standard greeting?"

"Caller ID. Knew it was you." Trystan's grin echoed bright in his voice. "What's up?"

"I'll be a bit longer than I expected," he said. "It seems this is not a popular time of day to be conscious."

"Yeah. Hardly anybody I know gets up before noon."

"Nor does anyone I know, apparently." He folded his free arm across his waist. "How is...everything?"

"Mostly quiet. Braelan's still asleep."

"Good."

"Oh—hang on a sec?" He paused a beat, and when he spoke again his voice was distant, as if he'd moved the phone from his mouth. "You sure you're okay, Ricky? You look awful." A mutter of sound responded to his question.

Ricky. The name filled him with ice. Surely there were other humans named Ricky besides the one that worked at the Black Dragon, who'd given him a phone number for "good stuff," but instinct told him this was the same one. "Trystan," he said through numb lips. "Would that be Ricky from the hotel?"

"Yeah." Surprise colored his tone. "You know him?"

"Not exactly." He forced himself to breathe. Panic created mistakes, and Trystan would definitely panic. "Why is he there?"

"He lives in the building. Does a little side business with...er, certain substances."

"And what is wrong with him?"

"Don't know. He just seems really out of it."

"Explain." He came close to shouting but pulled his fear back. "How, exactly, does he appear?"

"Um. His eyes are glazed—not red, just kind of blank. He's reacting slow. Talking a little slurred. And confused, like he's not sure where he is. I thought maybe he was high or coming down with a bug."

The coldness in him spread. That sounded like a seduction spell. The same type he used to gather information from suspected traitors. "Do not let him leave," he said. "I am coming back. I'll be there as quickly as possible."

The silence lasted too long. "He's gone," Trystan whispered. "He was on his way to work..."

No! He almost told Trystan to leave, to take Braelan and find another hiding place. But the entrances were sealed, and they'd be safer there until he could get to them and protect them during a move. "All right. Listen to me, Trystan. Do not set foot outside that apartment, and tell Braelan the same thing. Do not let anyone inside. Don't even answer the phone. I'm coming for you right now."

"What's going on?" The edges of fear splintered his voice. "Did I do something wrong?"

“No, àillidh. You've done nothing wrong. But I've no time to explain. I'll tell you when I get there.” He turned and thrust the phone at Cobalt. “I'm going. I'll contact you later.” Not waiting for a reply, he rushed toward the stairs.

“Uriskel!” Cobalt called after him. “What's happened?”

He spoke without stopping. “Morven's enchanted a human to spy for him. He's about to learn where they are.”

If he hasn't already.

Chapter Twenty-five

Trystan stared at the silent phone, his mind churning furiously. Why in the hell would Uriskel freak out about Ricky? The kid wasn't dangerous, and he definitely didn't know Morven or any other Fae. He'd seen Trystan over here a few times, was a vague acquaintance who sometimes supplied him with pot or a few hits of acid when he was feeling adventurous.

But he worked at the Black Dragon. And Morven knew they'd been staying there. Hell, Morven had *been* there, in the suite.

Oh, shit.

He ran into the back room, knelt on the mattress, and shook the prince. "Braelan! I think we'd better get ready to move."

Braelan blinked and bolted upright, instantly awake. "What's happened?"

He told him about Ricky. "Uri's on his way back," he said. "He wanted me to tell you not to set foot outside the apartment. And we can't answer the door or the phone."

"Right." The prince grunted, ran a hand through his hair. "I'll be prepared, then. Excuse me." He climbed off the bed, stood, and moved unsteadily from the room. After a minute, Trystan heard the bathroom door close.

He made his way to the living room, found his shoes, and stuffed his feet into them. Didn't have anything else to bring. Tee never came back in last night—she'd probably either crashed with one of her boys or she hadn't been to bed yet. That was more likely. He went to the computer desk under the window, intending to scribble her a brief note. *Hey, Sis, we had to run. Thanks for the room.* No details, no future plans. He'd see her when he saw her. Just like always.

There was plenty of paper but nothing to write with. The shelves of the hutch didn't have much on them. He shoved a few stacks of DVDs and a couple of knickknacks aside. No pens or pencils. He stood on tiptoe and felt along the top—and something through the window caught his eye. Movement. The window looked out on a patch of crumbling blacktop that used to be a basketball court but now served as a walk-by tradeoff point for dealers. It was usually deserted until nightfall.

He took a closer look. There was Ricky, talking to a guy in a jacket with the hood pulled up. The sight chilled him. *Please, dear God, let that be a mark.* Ricky nodded at something, raised one arm slowly, and pointed up, right at the window.

The guy in the hood turned to follow his gesture. Morven.

Time slowed, and Trystan's mind took in impossible details. The blond pushed the hood back and sent an empty grin in his direction. His lips moved, he gestured at Ricky, and the kid crumpled to the ground. The bathroom door opened. Braelan called something, but he couldn't force himself to make sense of the words. Couldn't make his tongue form a warning.

Morven held his arms up and spoke. Glass burst inward, and half the wall exploded in flames.

Trystan flew back and landed on the floor so hard he bounced and whacked his skull on Talia's oak bookshelves. A white flash of pain filled his head and dropped to a sharp throb. Cuts and glass splinters decorated his face and the arm he'd thrown up at the last second to shield himself. A muffled ringing blocked his ears—but though he couldn't hear the crackling roar, he saw the spreading fire, smelled the smoke that invaded his airways and stung his eyes.

Long-buried panic jolted him to his feet. But the instant he stood, his head spun and his legs gave out. Jesus, he couldn't have taken in that much smoke yet. He touched the back of his head. His fingers came away soaked with blood.

“Braelan.” It came out a whisper. He inhaled to shout, and smoke poured into his lungs, forced him into a gasping cough that hammered his aching head. *No!*

Damn it, he wasn't going to die like this. He dragged away from the flames, an awkward army crawl, and squinted through the smoke-swirled shimmer of heat. "Braelan!"

More coughing. More dizziness. If the prince responded, he didn't hear it. There was only the fire—a pounding, snapping, hungry rush attempting to finish the job it started so many years ago. To claim him the way it hadn't been able to then. When he was twelve and small for his age.

He made it to the bathroom before the blackness took him.

* * *

Uriskel all but jumped into the taxi before it stopped completely, and gave Talia's address. "I'll pay triple your fee if you can get me there in ten minutes," he said.

"Hey, I'll give it a shot, pal," the driver said. "Can't guarantee nothin', though."

"Fine. Just hurry."

He tried to watch the traffic and the clock at the same time. Not that he had any idea how much time they might have. He soon settled for just the traffic, every red light sizzling his nerves and tensing his muscles further.

Dread took root in him and blossomed. The closer they drew, the more convinced he became that things had already gone wrong, that he'd been too late even when he called Trystan. The wail of sirens in the distance mingled with the deep, throaty blast of emergency horns served to cement his convictions, though the sounds were far from unusual in New York.

But the sirens grew louder. And when the taxi turned a corner, a great black plume of smoke billowed ahead of a snarl of vehicles, ordinary cars dominoed before a tangle of fire trucks and police cars with lights whirling and pulsing.

"Jeez, that looks like where you're headed," the driver said as the taxi slowed to a stop. "This why you're in such a hurry?"

Uriskel couldn't speak. He fumbled in a pocket for the money he'd taken from Braelan earlier, shoved it all through the slot, and bolted from the car.

No no no. He raced for the sidewalk, bouncing off vehicles, earning shouts and horn blasts from the humans inside them. Sprinted toward the fire and shoved gawkers aside, sending more than one sprawling. There, the source of the smoke. Four-story brick building. The top floor burning, flames spitting from every window.

Someone familiar sat in the open back of the nearest ambulance, wrapped in a blanket, staring dully at the fire. Ricky. Uriskel went to him and demanded, "Braelan. Trystan. Where are they?"

Ricky swiveled to face him with shocked eyes. "Dunno," he murmured. "Brayden? Dark-haired guy, wasn't he? Wandered off with that blond dude. The pretty one."

Morven. The bastard must've had this human bring him here, and then waited outside while Ricky ensured the prince was in. Now he'd have to find them both before moonrise. "Trystan," he managed through a clenched throat. "Where?"

"I think..." Ricky's head turned back toward the building in a series of rusted spurts. His mouth opened slowly. "Think he's still up there."

A fierce, feral scream rose above the howling sirens. There was something female in the cry. Uriskel pushed his way toward the sound and saw Talia struggling in the grip of three uniformed officers. She was almost winning.

"Let me fucking go, you bastards!" She lunged, knocked the officer at her left aside. "Didn't you hear me? I said, *My brother's in there!*"

He was running for the building before she finished the words.

The entrance hung open, a gaping rotted hole leaking smoke. Shouts from the gathered humans barely registered, nor did the police running toward him.

Nothing in any realm would stop him.

Inside. The cloying stench of burned things slapped at him, tried to drive him back. Not bothering with the stairs, he ascended straight through the spaces

between them. Everything on the fourth floor was bathed in flames. He pounded down the hall with tongues of fire lashing him, disintegrating clothes, charring flesh. Halfway there, the floor collapsed under his feet. He wrenched from the splinters and flew the remaining distance.

The apartment door stood open—and beyond, an inferno. He plunged into it, screaming Trystan's name. Smoke blinded him, choked him, drove him to his knees. He crawled.

Somewhere in the torrent of brimstone, his blistered hands found a shoe. With a foot in it. Attached to a leg. He gathered the motionless form, tensed, and shot back through the air.

The blazing wreck of the corridor was a warm summer's day compared to the apartment. He glanced at the body in his arms just long enough to confirm. Trystan. Badly burned. Not quite dead, but close. He'd not last an ambulance ride to the hospital.

Cobalt could heal him.

He adjusted Trystan against him as firmly as possible. The Grotto was too far by taxi, even without heavy traffic. It'd be perhaps a five-minute flight. In broad daylight. Over a city teeming with millions of humans. Hundreds would likely see him. He did not care.

He flew through more flames, crashed back-first through the window at the end of the corridor, and took to the skies.

Chapter Twenty-six

Trystan was floating.

His eyes didn't want to focus, but he caught impressions—blue space, white clouds. Rays of sun. He was up here in the sky. Dead. The fire won.

Why did heaven hurt so much?

He wasn't alone. Someone floated with him, held him in a firm embrace. An angel? *Uriskel*. Covered with black smears and swatches of burned flesh. What remained of his hair blew wild in a stiff breeze.

Not floating. Flying. Fast.

Uriskel must've died too. Trying to save him? It looked like that. At least they'd get to share heaven—but this was somebody's sick idea of paradise, with Uri charred to a crisp and himself in agony. Maybe it'd get better. Maybe they had to heal in real time.

He tried to say something. Anything. Uriskel's eyes met his, and he attempted a smile. The motion spiked the pain to new levels.

He plunged back into darkness.

* * *

Uriskel landed hard on the roof of the Grotto. The impact forced a cry from him, but he made a stumbling run for the access door. It would be locked, he knew. He dropped the tenuous hold on his glamour and used the last of his spark to force it open.

There were stairs. They looked leagues apart. Limbs trembling with the effort to remain conscious, he took them one at a time. To walk was to drive nails through his feet. He clenched his jaw and moved faster.

He reached the bottom landing and another door. Locked. He'd nothing left. He kicked at unforgiving wood, shouted for Cobalt until his voice gave out. An eternity of seconds passed. The door opened.

Uriskel swallowed splinters. "Save him."

Without a word, Cobalt took Trystan and carried him away.

The absence of that slight, feverish weight left Uriskel cold. How could he be cold, when his flesh had been cooked? Something hard slammed his knees, and he realized he'd fallen to them. The world blurred before his eyes. Two figures emerged from the haze. Nix and Shade. "Easy, Uriskel," the Sluagh said. "We'll heal you."

"No!" He scrambled away and fell, jerked back up, and stumbled blind until he rammed against a wall and collapsed. Biting back a scream, he huddled there with his knees drawn to his chest, arms clamping them in place. "I'll not die," he coughed out. "He might. Save Trystan first. *Please*."

No one touched him. Thank the gods. He rested his head on his legs and throttled a sob. If Trystan died...no. Unthinkable. Cobalt would save him.

Please let Cobalt save him.

With stillness came a whisper of relief, a mild drop in his anguish. He managed to relax a few muscles, from coiled steel to mere stone. His breath expanded from shallow sips. Awareness unraveled in a graying mist.

Eventually it resolved to a voice speaking his name in pained, hesitant syllables. The tone proclaimed itself the bearer of news he did not want to hear. A crushing weight descended on him, and the effort to raise his head seemed impossible. He did it anyway.

Cobalt's drawn, agonized features hovered before him. "Ah, gods," he said. "I'm sorry..."

“No.” Uriskel wasn't sure if he'd spoken aloud. Waves of fury and bleak despair crashed through him, numbing every sense except pain. “He did not die. You saved him.”

Cobalt blinked. His eyebrows curved in a question. “*You* saved him,” he said. “I merely healed him.”

“He...lives?”

“Yes.” The pale suggestion of a smirk curved his lips. “The apology was for you. I've not the strength left to heal you.”

Relief drained his strength and sharpened his tongue. “Keep your apologies, Cobalt,” he said. “No one gives a toad's warts for me.”

“I do.”

The choked voice came from behind Cobalt, who moved aside to reveal an angel.

“Trystan.” His name was a note, a song, a prayer of thanks. It was everything. The only thing. Further words refused to form.

Trystan took the few steps to him and dropped by his side. “Flying,” he whispered. “You carried me all the way here, and you were flying.”

The eight of wands. A journey by air. Love will find its mark. “Yes.”

“Look at you.” A tear gathered in one eye and streamed down an unmarked cheek. He leaned in and kissed Uriskel's forehead gently, as though he'd shatter with a touch. “How could you do this to yourself? Everything's burned. I can see your *bones*. How could you even move through that...that hell?”

“Àillidh,” he rasped. “How could I not?”

Trystan sobbed. More tears joined the first.

“Do not cry, love.”

“Why not? You are.”

Frowning, Uriskel unclasped his hands. His legs collapsed without the support. He raised trembling fingers to his face, touched beneath an eye, and felt the moisture there. "So I am," he said with stark wonder. "Tears of joy."

"Joy? You look worse than Freddy Krueger, and you're *happy*?"

"None of this matters." He made a weak gesture at his battered body. "You are alive."

"And you're stubborn."

"That I am."

"All right, little one. Stand aside. You'll have him back in a moment." Nix. The Pooka's tone lacked its usual irritating cheer.

"I'd better." Trystan kissed him again. "Thank you isn't enough," he said near his ear. "I don't know what is, but I'll figure it out."

Trystan left his limited field of vision, and Nix took his place. "Thought I was impressed with you before, mate," he said. "Now I'll have to worship you."

Glaring hurt too much. He settled on a stare. "Note how I'm not laughing, shifter."

"Nor am I." Not a single muscle twitched in his expression. "I've never met anyone nobler than you. I mean that."

Uriskel growled and let his head drop back. "If anyone else calls me 'noble,' I'll tear his tongue from his mouth and wear it for a necklace."

"See that, love?" Nix grinned. "I've made him feel better already."

"Be quiet and help me with him, you hopeless git," Shade said from his other side.

Uriskel stiffened. "Help you what?"

She made a sound that wasn't quite a laugh. "What, he says. Told you we'd heal you, didn't I? If you weren't so blasted stubborn, you'd be mended already. Just hold still a moment, and I'll—"

"Don't."

She snorted. “*Now* what?”

“I...need your help. Your abilities. Don't exhaust your spark healing me.”

“I know what you need.” She smiled, shook her head. “My mind's not tied to my spark. Now, if you don't close your mouth and let me heal you, I'll cock you one and do it anyway.”

Uriskel closed his mouth.

They joined hands over him. A bright, cool sensation spread through him, like moonlight made physical, fading and then erasing the pain. When they finished he remained stiff and sore but whole. And completely exhausted. Still, he'd no time to rest.

“You do, and you will,” Shade said with a stern frown. “It'll take me a while to search, and it's likely you can't even stand.”

He nearly laughed. “So you are still in possession of your abilities,” he said. “Your concern is...appreciated. A bit frightening, but appreciated. Though I cannot wait longer than the time it takes you to search.”

“You've hours of daylight left.”

“Yes, and I need every one of them.” Uriskel grimaced and straightened as much as possible. “Morven's taken the prince.”

Chapter Twenty-seven

Trystan sat on the loveseat with Uriskel's head resting in his lap. Uri was so exhausted, he hadn't even been able to put his glamour back until just a few minutes ago. Trystan had badgered him into closing his eyes while Shade did her thing, and he'd been asleep almost before he stopped moving.

Shade had insisted on absolute quiet. She'd locked herself in Cobalt's spare bedroom and admonished them all not to bother her, especially Nix. He'd sulked for all of five seconds before he bounced back.

But no one was smiling now. Will, Cobalt, and Nix formed a grim line on the couch, and Trystan had lost his happy thoughts faster than you could say Tinkerbelle.

"Do you think she'll be able to find anything?" Trystan asked, addressing anyone who could answer. "I mean, it's a big city. And maybe he isn't even here anymore. He could've went...you know. Back."

Cobalt frowned. "Unlikely. Even Morven wouldn't risk killing the prince in the Fae realm. I suspect that's why he brought him here in the first place."

"There's a better reason he'll not leave."

Uriskel's voice against his legs stirred a badly timed reaction. Uri started to sit up, and Trystan pushed him back down. "Oh, no," he said. "You stay right there."

"As you wish, love. Though it's a bit uncomfortable at the moment."

Cobalt cleared his throat. "What's the reason, then?"

“He wants me.” Uriskel sighed. “If he kills Braelan, he can't leave me alive. I may be despised, but I am still the court's pet assassin. The king will destroy me. But he'll listen first.”

A heavy silence fell on the room. Eventually, Will broke it. “Shouldn't we all go after this guy?”

“No. He's far too powerful, and everyone's exhausted their magic. I have—” He gasped, bolted up, and searched the tattered remains of his clothes. His shoulders sagged in relief. “This,” he said, and pulled out the leather case. Scorched, reeking of smoke, but still intact.

“Your cards,” Nix said with a grin. “Aye, that's brilliant. He's sure to fold in no time.”

Trystan managed not to groan. “Those aren't just cards,” he said. “They're magic.”

“So he says.” Cobalt stood and paced a few steps. “Uriskel, are you sure you can rely on these cards of yours?”

“I saw them work,” Trystan said. “It was really cool.”

“And when do we get to see these really cool cards, then?” Nix said. “Come on, mate. Give us a show.”

Uriskel let out a moan. “Why is it that every time I come to your place, Cobalt, I'm forced to perform? I'm going to begin charging you for appearances.”

“I'd feel better if you showed us.” Cobalt crossed his arms and half smiled. “It might even stop me from trailing you when you go after Morven.”

“You could not trail a pink horse through a snow-covered field.” With a quick, graceful movement, Uriskel drew the deck out. He glanced at Trystan. “Perhaps you should not defend my honor anymore, àillidh. It only gets me into trouble.”

“Don't worry. I will.”

"I knew I could count on you." He fanned the cards, frowned at them, and selected the eight of clubs—the card Trystan had picked for the mind-reading thing. "A journey by air," he murmured.

Trystan blinked at him. "That's what my card meant?"

"Yes. As I mentioned, they are nearly always right."

"Was that all it said?"

"No." With a slight smile, Uriskel brought the card to his lips and whispered. The first few things that happened were the same—light spread around the edges, seeped through, made the whole thing glow. He flicked it up, and it hovered above their heads. The rectangle erupted into golden sparks that separated, slowed, and hung suspended, like a paused fireworks display.

The sparks brightened and swelled. Each one shimmered into a brilliant jeweled butterfly, and the air was filled with a glittering flurry of wings. One of them, a bright blue with bronze markings, lit on Trystan's arm. He felt the slight weight and its legs tickling his skin. "Are they real?" he whispered.

"Illusions. Though they feel and act real enough for a few moments." Uriskel held a hand out, palm up, and the largest of the butterflies—crimson and emerald, shot with gold veins and edged in black—circled and fluttered into it. "Don't you, pretty?" he crooned.

They stayed longer than the first one. When the last butterfly faded from its perch on top of Will's head, Uriskel raised an eyebrow at Cobalt. "Well, breeding," he said. "Are you satisfied, or shall I transform your table into a gryphon?"

Cobalt had to work at closing his mouth. "Satisfied's a bit weak," he said. "Try shocked. Or amazed. Possibly frightened."

The bedroom door opened. Shade emerged and moved toward them, looking paler than usual. "Nix..."

Nix took one look and vaulted over the back of the couch. He got to her just in time to catch her as she wobbled and pitched. Over a weak protest, he scooped her

in his arms, carried her back, and sat with her on his lap. “Takes a lot out of her, looking for thoughts,” he explained in subdued tones. “Normally they come to her.”

“I heard that.” She tossed a weak smile up at him, but it faded fast. “And I’ve found them. More or less.”

Uriskel leaned forward. “Where?”

“Still in Manhattan. Somewhere south of here.” Shade closed her eyes. “A club. A place for sex and pain. He’s brought the prince there before. They have women in cages.”

“What club? What does it look like?”

“I read thoughts, not visions.” She shivered. “Morven’s mind is shuttered, for the most part. It’s a hive of menace and rage. Braelan...is weakened. He’s been clapped in irons and shut away in the dark. He believes you’re both dead, and knows Morven intends to destroy him at moonrise.”

“Blast!” Uriskel pounded a fist on his leg. “Then we’re no closer to finding them.”

“Maybe we are,” Trystan said quietly. “Shade. Did you get anything from the women?”

She nodded. “They don’t like Morven. He’s a cruel Dom, they think. The one he’s taking now—” She choked on the words and whispered, “She hopes the marks he’s leaving will fade before the club’s slave auction next week.”

Sex and pain. Women in cages. Slave auction. “Shit. I know the place,” Trystan said. “Been there a few times, actually. It’s Twisted Tails.”

Shade turned a shocked gaze on him. “You’ve been there?”

“Yeah.” His lips firmed in determination, and he grabbed Uriskel’s hand. “Looks like I’m going with you. I planned on it anyway, but now there’s no choice.”

“Out of the question.”

“I knew you’d say that.” Trystan shook his head. “You can’t get in, Uri. It’s invitation only. You have to be on their list.”

"Then I'll force my way in."

"Oh, really. Even if you could find the place—which you can't, unless you've already been around—you want to cause a scene and let Morven know the minute you get there? You try to bust in, they'll take you around back and break some of your bones for you." Trystan swallowed and met his furious glare. "You need me. I can bring you in quiet."

For a few seconds it looked like he'd refuse again. Finally, his anger drained, and he squeezed Trystan's hand. "Swear you'll not confront Morven yourself, and you'll leave the instant you've the opportunity."

"Cross my heart."

Uriskel pressed a palm against his chest. The outline of it felt traced in fire. "I'll hold you to that," he said.

Trystan smiled and stole a quick kiss. "One problem," he said.

"And that is?"

"We can't go out dressed like this."

He smirked. "I supposed burned rags are not in fashion this time of year."

"Will and I'll donate clothing to the effort," Cobalt said. "However, Uriskel, I'd recommend that you not wear my sailor suit."

Trystan stared at him. "I missed something, didn't I?"

"Aye, you did," Nix said and laughed. "Knew we should've taken pictures."

Uriskel gave him a cool glance. "Consider yourself fortunate that you did not, shifter. You'd be short a camera and a few fingers today."

"I'd be petrified if I didn't know you were—whoops. Can't say the N-word, can I?" Nix grinned at him. "Leave off it, mate. You're soft as me underneath."

"Try me."

"Okay. Down, cranky," Trystan said. "Save it for Morven."

"Fine. But that one's next, unless he stops being so blasted cheerful."

Laughter swept the room, and even Uri cracked a smile. Unfortunately, it didn't take long for unease to settle back in Trystan's gut. Knowing where Morven was, and knowing they'd actually be able to take him down, were two entirely different things.

He'd helped with the first—but wasn't sure he could do a damned thing about the second.

* * *

Uriskel made himself wait, and timed their arrival for an hour before moonrise. He could not risk giving Morven the opportunity to escape before he could destroy him—provided he managed to capture the bastard in the first place. At least the waiting had allowed him time to restore a portion of his spark. Shade had monitored the thoughts of Braelan and the females Morven selected and abused, to ensure they stayed at the club.

Toward the end, the Sluagh had become furious and asked Uriskel to let the vizier die in agony. She did not share what prompted this request, but he intended to honor it as best he could.

Trystan led the way through a parking garage to the entrance of Twisted Tails, a plain olive green steel door with nothing to indicate where it led. No sign, no code, not even a window. It was true—he'd never have found this place alone. Still, he'd make sure Trystan left at the first sign of danger. He'd not pulled him from the fire only to watch him die at Morven's hands.

“Ready?” Trystan said.

“As I'll ever be.”

“Remember what I told you.”

“Yes, love.” He'd been instructed to let Trystan speak, and not interrupt. He would, so long as it seemed to be going well.

“Okay.” Trystan drew a deep breath and pulled the door open.

Inside was a vestibule similar to the entrance of the Grotto—but the guard did not resemble Malik. A hulking slab of a human blocked the next door, clutching a clipboard in one hand. The other rested on the end of a polished stick snapped onto his belt. His scowl eased into a mere frown as his gaze settled on Trystan. “Name?” he said.

“Trystan Raines.” He flashed an enchanting smile. “They’ve still got you working the front, Hank?”

“Nah. I’m upstairs now, but it’s Jerry’s day off.” The mountain relaxed a fraction and flipped through pages on his clipboard. He stopped, frowned again. “Your membership’s expired. Two months.”

“Damn it. Knew I forgot something.”

“You’ll have to see the boss.” Hank lifted a massive arm and twisted it to look at the watch on his wrist. “He’s not in for three more hours.”

“Ah, shit.” Trystan stuffed a hand in a pocket. “Look, I’ve only got two hours with this guy, and he’s got to take off. Has a plane to catch. If I have to go across town to the Mask or something, we’ll get maybe an hour.” He produced a hundred-dollar bill, part of the money he’d told Cobalt they would need. “Can we call it an oversight?”

Hank took the money and made it vanish. “Be out before the boss comes in. And get your membership renewed.” Offering an expression that might have been a smile, if boulders possessed emotions, the guard took a few lumbering steps to the side and opened the door.

A blast of heavy synthesized music rolled out. Colored lights flashed over the darkness inside, illuminating a dense crowd of people. Most wore some type of costume, and about half the humans were masked, ranging from feathered and sequined eyes-only to full-head leather hoods. Chatter blended with a cocktail of scents—alcohol, sweat, sex.

Already the crush of humans overwhelmed Uriskel’s senses. He’d not be able to detect Morven in there if he were standing right behind him.

"Thanks, man." Trystan grabbed his hand and pulled him inside. The guard grunted something in response, and the door banged shut.

Uriskel bent close and whispered, "Impressive."

"You ain't seen nothin' yet, hon. Stay with me." They headed for the back of the room, past a crowded bar, and stopped before a desk that held a computer, a chair, and a nearly naked human female concentrating intently at pushing buttons on the cell phone in her hand. Trystan knocked on the surface and said, "Hey, gorgeous."

The girl glanced up and beamed. "Trystan! It's been ages."

"Months, actually." Trystan leaned on the desk. "I'm kind of on the clock, so I can't catch up. But I promise I'll swing around this weekend. For now...what do you have in a dungeon?"

"You don't want a room?"

He grinned. "I've been a very bad boy."

"I bet you have." She licked her lips and turned to her computer. "I'm pretty sure most of them are empty. Lemme just...yeah, only one's out right now. The Scream Shack. Guy's had it all day." Something dark flashed in her eyes. "Creepy bastard," she muttered under her breath.

Uriskel's heart paused too long and restarted at a rapid pace. She had to mean Morven. He half turned and scanned the crowds but saw no one resembling the vizier.

"Damn." Trystan squeezed his hand, letting him know he'd understood as well. "That's the only soundproof one, isn't it?"

"Yeah, but we've got the one right next to it, the Torture Tub, that's almost as good. Boss calls it sound *resistant*." She giggled. "You want it?"

"How much?"

"One-fifty an hour, six for the night."

“Done. Give me the night. I might stick around a while after he has to leave.” Trystan produced the money and counted out six hundreds.

The girl took them and deposited them in a drawer, then typed something into the computer. “So who's your man-candy?” she said. “I suppose he's gay too. Damn it.”

“That's Pierre. He's definitely gay, and he doesn't speak a lot of English.” Trystan moved closer to her and whispered loudly, “Besides *bend over, hold still, and suck my cock.*”

She laughed. “Yeah, everybody speaks 'fuck' around here.” Her gaze swept Uriskel with undisguised interest. She opened another drawer and handed Trystan a single key on a ring, sporting a leather tab with the words *Twisted Tails—D2* etched into it. “You know the rules, or do I have to read you the riot act?”

“I'm straight.”

“No, you're not. Tease.” She thrust a pink tongue out at him. “Go on down and get your spanking, bad boy.”

“Yes, ma'am.” Trystan straightened and offered a mock salute, then guided Uriskel away.

They entered a black door with a helpful sign reading DUNGEONS. Through it, stairs lit by electric blown-glass torches curved out of sight. Uriskel waited until they'd descended halfway and said, “Pierre?”

Trystan shrugged. “First foreign name I could think of,” he said. “We got damned lucky. Reni's a talker, and the only other dungeon in use is...”

“Yes.” Fresh fear wormed through him, but not for himself. “And now that we've located them, you must leave. I'll not have you risking your life.”

“I don't think he's down here,” Trystan said. “From what Shade said, I'll bet he has an upstairs room for the girls, and he's just stashed Braelan here until he can—you know. So you still need me.”

Uriskel suppressed a frustrated growl. “And why is that?”

“Because I can touch iron. And pick locks.”

Damn. Why did he have to make such sense? “And if Morven should be in this dungeon?”

“Then I’ll run. Really fast.”

He almost refused. But if Braelan were alone and could manage to fight the iron sickness after they removed his shackles, he and Trystan could escape and leave him to fight Morven one on one. That would be the best situation he could hope for. “All right,” he said. “You’ll stay. For just a few moments.”

“I’ll take every moment I can get.”

As will I, love. He’d not speak that aloud. All moments with Trystan, and perhaps every moment he would draw breath, were approaching a rapid end.

Chapter Twenty-eight

Another stroke of luck presented itself in the dungeons. The Screaming Shack and the Torture Tub were the only two rooms at this end of the place. They wouldn't be interrupted. Probably.

Trystan used the key to open the door on the Torture Tub and left it slightly ajar. "In case we need to slip in and hide. Or grab a weapon," he said. All the dungeons came stocked with implements. Some were nastier than others.

Uriskel nodded absently. He was busy looking through his cards. He palmed one of them and turned to the door across the way. "I'll open this one," he said. "You stay back. And be prepared to run."

"Yeah." Trystan wiped damp palms on the loose-fitting jeans he'd borrowed from Will. Damn it, he should've hooked a gun from somewhere. Bullets obviously didn't kill these guys, but he'd bet unloading a clip into Morven would slow the asshole down.

Uriskel pinched the card he'd separated in one hand, grabbed the doorknob with the other. After a few seconds there was a hollow click. He turned it slowly, paused, and flung the door wide open.

The room was dark. Light spilled through the doorway and made shadows from everything inside. Nothing seemed to be moving in there.

When Morven didn't run out and attack them, Uriskel reached around the corner and patted the wall. He must've found a switch, because the room lit up and revealed Braelan.

There were shackles built in, two pairs to a wall. Braelan hung from the back left set—shirtless, bedraggled, unconscious, a pool of drying vomit at his feet. Bruised welts crossed his chest, and bloody burns encircled his wrists at the cuffs.

Trystan almost puked too.

“Braelan. Ah, gods...” Uriskel's voice broke. He turned and motioned. “Stay by me,” he said. “Any sign of him, of *anyone* coming this way, you get out.”

“Right.” Trystan hung directly behind him and followed him across the room. It was a big space, thirty by thirty at least. An ancient-looking wooden cabinet stood against the center of the left wall. Probably where all the paddles and straps and restraints were stashed. On the right side of the room was furniture—a spanking bench, a bondage frame, a St. Andrew's Cross. At least he hadn't chained the prince to that.

Uriskel stopped in front of Braelan. He didn't seem to notice what he was standing in and probably didn't care. “Can you get him down?”

“I hope so.” He reached to the back of his head and detached one of the bobby pins he'd taken from Cobalt's bathroom. “Gotta know how to do this,” he muttered, breaking the pin at the bend and leaving the curve attached to one side. “You sub for a drunk, he passes out and leaves you cuffed, you don't wanna stick around till he wakes up.”

“I've no idea what you just said.” Smirking, Uriskel backed up a few steps. “I'll give you room. But work quickly.”

“Mm-hm.” He moved to a side and gripped one of the cuffs as gently as possible.

Not gently enough. Braelan uttered a pained gasp, dragged a breath. And started speaking his own language.

“No, Highness!” Uriskel said quickly. “We're not Morven.”

Braelan stiffened. He lifted his head as though it weighed a thousand pounds, and Trystan bit back a sob. Half his face was covered in bruises. His gaze found

Uriskel, and the unmarked corner of his mouth turned up. “Told you...not to...call me that.”

“My apologies. I am an old dog and cannot learn new tricks.” Uriskel's features worked to keep from breaking. “Try and be still now, Braelan. Trystan's going to free you.”

“Trystan. Not dead?”

“Nope. Still kicking.” Trystan managed a decent grip on the cuff and slipped the hook into the lock. He wiggled and pressed a few times. Nothing clicked. He tried again, and Braelan grunted in pain. “Sorry,” he said. “Won't take much longer.” *I hope.*

He slid the makeshift pick out and inserted it lower, hoping for a better connection. This time, he thought he felt the tumbler—but it wouldn't budge. He pressed harder. No movement. “Jesus,” he said under his breath. “This is really stuck.”

The door slammed shut, and a familiar voice said, “Well, I have enchanted the locks. If that helps you.”

Trystan didn't dare turn around. He heard Uriskel whisper something, saw the glow of his card from the corner of his eye. Morven spat something that sounded like a curse. There was a hollow thud and then silence.

“Oh, I do hope you've better than that,” Morven said.

A crack like thunder filled the room, and an invisible sledgehammer walloped Trystan between his shoulders. Blackness rushed in.

* * *

That Morven had concealed himself in the room and they'd already lost the fight the moment they entered was no comfort. Uriskel had not seen the gun until the vizier fired. When Trystan dropped in a heap, he roared with rage and attempted to lunge at the bastard, intent on tearing his eyes from his skull.

His body refused to move.

Laughing, Morven held up the weapon. "Rubber bullets," he said. "With humans, I prefer to slit throats. But I'll not bother killing that one. There's no need, when I have you and Braelan."

"You are an unconvincing liar, Morven."

"I could swear not to kill him," he said. "If you'll destroy Braelan for me. You see, much as I need him dead, I still have no wish to deal the death stroke myself. It is bad form for the king's vizier."

"Disgusting traitor," Braelan rasped. "My father will see you die for this."

Morven rolled his eyes. "Your father is a fool, and blind at that. Half his own court stands ready to betray him."

"Morven!" Uriskel's heart battered against his ribs, but he maintained an outward calm. He'd centuries of practice. "I'll take your deal."

Braelan made an awful sound. It was nearly his undoing. *Please trust me, brother.*

"Will you, now?"

"Yes. I swear to destroy the bastard who's tormented and abused me for all my life, in exchange for your promise. You'll not harm or kill Trystan."

A heartbreaking sob from Braelan had the vizier grinning. "Very well. I promise I'll not harm or kill the human. Cross my—"

"Say his name," Uriskel demanded.

Morven's lip curled. "I promise I'll not harm or kill *Trystan*," he said. "Cross my heart." He made the gesture, inscribing a glowing X on his chest. "Go on, then. Kill Braelan."

"No."

"*What?*"

"I swore to kill the bastard who's ruined my life. That would be you, you toad-bellied pile of worm droppings. Not Braelan." He could not help a triumphant smile. "Unlike you, I am a convincing liar."

Morven stared at him, eyes narrowed, face flushing a deep crimson. At once, the color drained, and he loosed a cold laugh. "True. I might have killed the human after all, when I'd finished using him to control you. But merely out of spite. His death is not necessary to my plans."

Uriskel's feet carried him forward. They stopped him, turned him about to face the large wooden X standing against the wall. He'd not paid heed to the structure before. There were wrist restraints attached near the top of the crossbeams.

His arms lifted as though he were surrendering, and his feet moved again, until he was pressed against the cross.

"We've still some time until moonrise." Morven approached and fastened his wrists tight within the leather buckle straps. "Since you've angered me, and because once I kill you I'll have no one to flog for some time, I believe I'll indulge."

"No." The wavering whisper came from Braelan. "Leave him alone. Flog me."

More cold laughter. "You are already helpless, Highness. This dog needs to be hobbled."

Uriskel shuddered and tried to tune out the sounds behind him—Morven's tread across the floor, the creak of a hinge as the cabinet opened. He'd already solved one problem. Trystan was safe. How, then, would he save Braelan...and himself?

The tread closed in on him, and something rustled. The deceptively gentle sound of a whip shaken loose from its coil. *Sing*, his mind whispered. Put Morven to sleep. These restraints were not iron. Without the vizier holding the control spell, he could escape them.

He opened his mouth, and the lash fell across his back.

A surge of pain enveloped him, stole his breath, and prevented sound. He managed a single intake of air before another stroke landed. The third lash followed immediately, then a fourth, and a fifth. Pain spiraled to burning agony. Morven gave no pause.

He would sing anyway.

He called the words to mind, let them drive away the biting sting of the whip. The song lifted from his tongue, hesitant at first, faltering in the wake of the lash. He pushed through. His voice steadied. After a moment, a harmony arose and twined through the tune, as though the air captured and echoed the music.

Braelan had picked up the threads of his song and wove them together with his own.

The vicious pace of the flogging slowed. "Hell's fire," Morven said. "Shut *up*, will you?" A fresh stroke landed with considerably less force. "Singing like a couple of women." The whip cracked but barely touched him. "What are you...going on...about..."

A heavy thud accompanied Morven dropping to the floor.

Uriskel stilled for a moment and gathered what strength he could. Even with his efforts, he stumbled when the straps loosed beneath his spark. Morven first. He dragged the unconscious vizier to the wall and shackled him ankles-up. Bastard would wake with a pounding head, if he woke at all before he died. From the cabinet, he took a pair of handcuffs and fastened Morven's arms behind him. His back screamed by the time he finished.

He'd one last step to take. Morven had knocked away the first spell he'd thrown, but he could do nothing about this one. He selected the cards he required. One he activated and sent at the vizier, who locked rigid when it hit him. The paralysis would last long enough. Moonrise was fifteen minutes away.

His remaining strength flagging, he staggered toward Braelan with another card, a counterspell, and cast it at the shackles. "Have you down soon," he muttered. "Apologies for the delay."

"I knew," Braelan said.

He blinked at him. "Knew what?"

"That you'd not destroy me." The prince curled away with a weak cough, collected himself. "Your intentions weren't...clear. But I knew."

"I thank you for that." Uriskel bowed his head as a wave of pain threatened to bring him down. "And for the song," he said.

"Least I could do."

"More than you should have." He managed a smile. "You've strength as well, Braelan."

A moan from the floor called his attention. Trystan stirred, lifted an arm, and let it fall. "The fuck happened?" he said thickly. "Somebody throw a brick at me?"

Uriskel crouched down and extended a hand, relief overruling the pain for a moment. "Can you stand, love? We've not much time."

"Shit!" Trystan took the offered hand. With Uriskel's help, he struggled to his feet, gasping for breath. He scanned the room and found Morven. "Tell me he's dead."

"Not quite. The moon's not yet risen."

"Let's get Braelan out of here, then." He took a step, wavered, and bashed into the wall. "Damn. That hurts."

Braelan gave an abrupt laugh. "Quite the set we are, the three of us," he said slowly. "We've matching bruises."

"Great." Trystan caught his lip in his teeth and produced another hairpin. "I'll try this again."

Uriskel nodded. "I've broken the spell, so it should work this time." He turned away to watch Morven. Trystan cried out, and he snapped back around. "What is it?"

"Nothing," he whispered. "I just...found out where the matching part comes in."

His back. "Yes. I'll be fine, àillidh. Free him."

A strained silence combed the room. Uriskel kept watch over the vizier, though his vision blurred and faltered. He'd only to hold out for a few moments. Then, at last, he could end this. Soon there was a metallic click, and he called back, "You've got one, then."

It took Trystan too long to reply. "No..."

Another click rang out. Morven's body slid down the wall. One of his legs twitched.

The bastard was breaking free.

"Stay with him!" Uriskel wasn't sure if he meant to address Braelan or Trystan, but it'd serve for either. Both. He could think of nothing but Morven now, of keeping him powerless for the final minutes. He bolted across the room, threw himself on the vizier, drew back, and drove a fist into his jaw.

Morven's eyes fluttered. A brief sound issued from his lips—and he twitched beneath him, stronger this time.

Snarling, Uriskel dragged him from the floor and slammed him back-first against the wall. "You've lost," he said through clenched teeth. "Moonrise comes. You die."

Blood drizzled from Morven's parted lips. There was a popping sound, like a jaw loosening, and his tongue darted out to catch the drip. He cast a slanted smile. *Too strong*. Uriskel swayed, nearly collapsed. *He is too strong*.

He blinked—and fingers wrapped around his throat.

"Never lay hands to me, mongrel." Morven squeezed tighter. Flashes of white burst before his eyes. "Royal bastard. You're worse than a lowborn." Uriskel caught the impression of a vicious grin just before Morven dashed him to the floor.

A cry of wordless fury lanced the air. Gasping for breath, Uriskel scrambled to right himself. The world blurred around him. He bit down hard on his tongue, and clarity rushed back with a dizzying swoop. He heard thumps, curses. A dull crack. He turned toward the sound.

Morven lay flat on his back, an enraged Trystan straddling his chest and pounding fists into his face. The vizier attempted to strike back, but every blow stopped short. His promise prevented him from harming the human.

Eventually, Morven stopped moving.

Trystan bared his teeth and struck a final blow that broke bones with an audible crunch. He climbed off him, panting. "There," he said. "Now kill the bastard."

Nearly laughing, Uriskel crawled closer and fumbled his cards out. Morven's face was a bloody mess. Agony for him, no doubt. This would please the Sluagh. His fingers grasped the card he'd spelled with a deathblow, the ace of spades, and the first stirring of a moon risen at last whispered through his blood.

Morven's battered lips moved. His eyes rolled to Uriskel, took in the cards. He croaked something—and the deck burst into flames.

"No!" Trystan lunged for him.

Uriskel dropped the burning cards, thrust an arm out, and blocked him. "It's all right, love." The calm that filled him restored him to full awareness. He'd more than magic at work. Still a trick up his sleeve. "I'm tempted to let you live, Morven," he said. "You'll suffer far worse at the king's hands than mine."

A rusted wheeze unraveled from him. "Your spark is all but gone," he said carefully. "As is mine, admittedly. We'll see who recovers first."

"I'm afraid you'll not recover at all." Uriskel spoke almost gently. "I have promised to destroy you. Cross my heart."

"You cannot destroy me." Morven coughed. Blood bubbled from his lips. "We are the same. You and I. Monstrous. Leave the false prince and return to your family. Your mother."

Uriskel's heart stuttered. "My mother is dead. I saw the Seelie guard kill her."

"Nursemaid." Raw splinters of laughter dribbled from his lips. "Your real mother could not keep you. The laws."

“Enough of your lies!”

“I am...an unconvincing liar.” Morven let out a shuddering breath. “Your mother is the Unseelie queen. You are full nobility. Prince...Uriskel. Nobility does not destroy its own.”

Whether the bastard spoke truth or grasped at straws to save his own life, it no longer mattered. One way or another, Uriskel was through with the court, the realm, all of it. His life was here in this room and at a tattoo parlor not far from here. His brothers. His beautiful Trystan. He loved and was loved in return.

“My mother is dead,” he said firmly. “And I am not noble.”

He eased the ace of spades from his sleeve. Whispered, “*Múscailh.*” And sent the deathblow straight to Morven's twisted heart.

The vizier died with shock in his eyes and a curse on his tongue.

Chapter Twenty-nine

Trystan couldn't remember how they managed to drag themselves out of Twisted Tails or get to the Grotto. He barely recalled the emotional reunion, the mass healing, being showered and dressed and shunted off to sleep somewhere safe.

He remembered waking up filled with happiness so pure it was painful—and then losing it all to black despair when he looked at Uriskel and realized he'd be leaving him soon. Braelan would have to go back and straighten out the royal mess Morven had made. And Uriskel didn't have a choice about going with him.

He'd never love anyone like this. Couldn't bring himself to fuck for money anymore. Without Uri, he'd die in a gutter somewhere.

Cobalt had rounded up a breakfast fit for kings. The table was piled with eggs and bacon, fresh fruit, toast and pastries, and gallons of juice and coffee. Everyone—Braelan and Uriskel, Cobalt and Will—ate like they'd just finished fasting with Gandhi. How could they have such big appetites when the world was ending?

Trystan pushed a half-eaten piece of toast around on his plate and tried to look interested. The few bites he'd managed to swallow settled like lead in his gut. Maybe a drink would help. Straight vodka, or a rum-and-antifreeze cocktail. Get it over with.

A hand on his thigh jolted him. “What is the matter, love?” Uriskel said. “Are you sick?”

“Yeah,” he muttered. Heartsick. Soul sick. Forever. “I'm not real hungry.”

“Perhaps you should lie down.”

He almost agreed. He could go to sleep and stop thinking. Stop feeling. He was on his feet before he realized it, pushing back from the table, ready to roll over and let everything go.

No.

The whisper, the tiny spark of rebellion, expanded inside him and burst. He'd fought for Talia. He would fight for Uri. He stared into concerned green eyes and demanded, "Do you love me?"

Uriskel's jaw dropped. No sound came out.

"One syllable. It's easy. Yes or no."

"More than all the worlds," he whispered.

"Then don't leave me."

Another shocked silence. "I..."

"Don't you dare leave me." His eyes burned, but he refused tears. "You have everything. My love, my life, my heart. You can't give it back, and you can't take it all with you, because I'll have nothing left, so *don't you leave me!*"

Uriskel stood slowly. His speechless sorrow was a knife in Trystan's chest. He opened his arms, and Trystan fell into them.

"Àillidh." Uriskel stroked his hair, kissed the top of his head. One hand rubbed circles on his back. "I'd not intended to leave you."

Trystan actually heard something shatter inside him. "What?"

"You've my heart as surely as I have yours. My love and my life." Uriskel drew a deep breath and let it out on a sigh. "I'd planned to tell you more delicately than this. I'll not return with you, Braelan."

"You're...staying?" Trystan stared up at him.

"Yes, love. Though we may have to move to some remote jungle or swamp. Or perhaps a desert." He lifted a halting smile. "The king's Guard will come for me eventually."

“No one will come for you, brother.” Conviction cemented Braelan's voice. “You'll no longer bow to the whim of the court.”

Uriskel's features wilted. “Braelan, you've no need to champion me,” he said. “The king will be displeased at best, and I'd not put it past him to punish you. Do not martyr yourself for me.”

“I no longer care what my father thinks of me.” Braelan smirked. “I've told you, I am a prince of Arcadia. My word's as good as his. However...” His gaze shifted to Cobalt. “The court could not touch me if I were to, oh, grant his freedom to honor a boon.”

Cobalt grinned. “Braelan, I call your favor,” he said. “I demand Uriskel's freedom.”

“Done, and my debt is repaid.” The prince turned back, and sadness colored his smile. “Though I'll never be able to repay you, Uriskel. Not for what I've put you through.”

For half a second, Trystan thought there was an earthquake. Then he realized it was Uriskel, shaking like a junkie before payday. Uri sat down hard, not letting go, pulling Trystan onto his lap. “You have repaid me,” he whispered. “Freedom. You've no idea. I thought... I *knew* I'd spend every moment of my life chained to the court. I knew that some day, I would die beneath that crushing weight, and not a soul would mourn my passing. I never expected...to live.”

“Welcome to life, then.” Braelan lifted a glass of juice, gestured, and drank. “I, on the other hand, must return. So I'm afraid you're stuck with him, Cobalt.”

“I'll manage.” Cobalt flashed a grin. “We can do brotherly things.”

Uriskel groaned. “What, exactly, are these brotherly things?”

“Drink beer, play football, pound each other into the ground. Those sort of things.”

“I do not play with balls.”

“Liar,” Trystan said.

Laughter buzzed around the table. When it died down, Will spoke for the first time that morning. “Do you guys have a place to stay?”

“I know where we're not staying.” Trystan stared at the floor. “Talía. Oh, man. She lost everything...again. I've got to help her out.”

Braelan cleared his throat. He reached in a pocket and tossed a huge wad of money on the table, then did it again with the other pocket. “Will this help her?” he said.

Trystan almost felt his eyes to make sure they were still in his head. “Uh, yeah. That'll help. How much *is* that?”

“Three hundred thousand dollars. More or less. I am afraid I'll have to owe you the rest.”

“Where did you...never mind. I don't wanna know.” Trystan smiled at him. “Thank you. I hope my escort service wasn't too disappointing.”

“Not in the least.”

“Only one problem now,” he said with a wry grin. “When Tee finds out I'm not dead, she's going to kill me.”

“Really, love. Must I protect you from your own sister?”

Trystan shifted in his lap. Uriskel moaned and drew him tight against his body, and the stiff bulge of his cock pressed his ass. He wiggled a bit, and Uriskel hissed.

“I think you're the one who's gonna need protecting,” he said.

“Yes. From you, as you torture me into an early grave.”

“I won't torture you.” Trystan curled into him and murmured in his ear. “But I will fuck your brains out.”

Uri's smile was the only thing in the world. “I can still speak,” he said on a husky breath.

“We'll have to fix that.”

Trystan moved just enough to reach his face, and brushed his lips across that beautiful smile. One taste didn't cut it. He kissed him, drank him in, touched every part of him that his hands could reach, to make sure he was real. Not leaving. Staying forever. The final links in the chain of doubt dissolved beneath the heat of their embrace.

Not the end. The beginning.

THE END

Loose Id Titles by S. W. Vaughn

Skin Deep
Heartsong

S. W. Vaughn

S. W. Vaughn lives and writes in upstate New York, a nice place to visit during the two months it isn't snowing. When not writing, Vaughn spray-paints graffiti art on the walls of the writing cave, collects movie posters, and double-checks the dark corners of the house with a flashlight for mice, snakes, and the occasional possum or visiting horse from next door. Vaughn works in multiple genres but prefers urban fantasy and erotic romance.