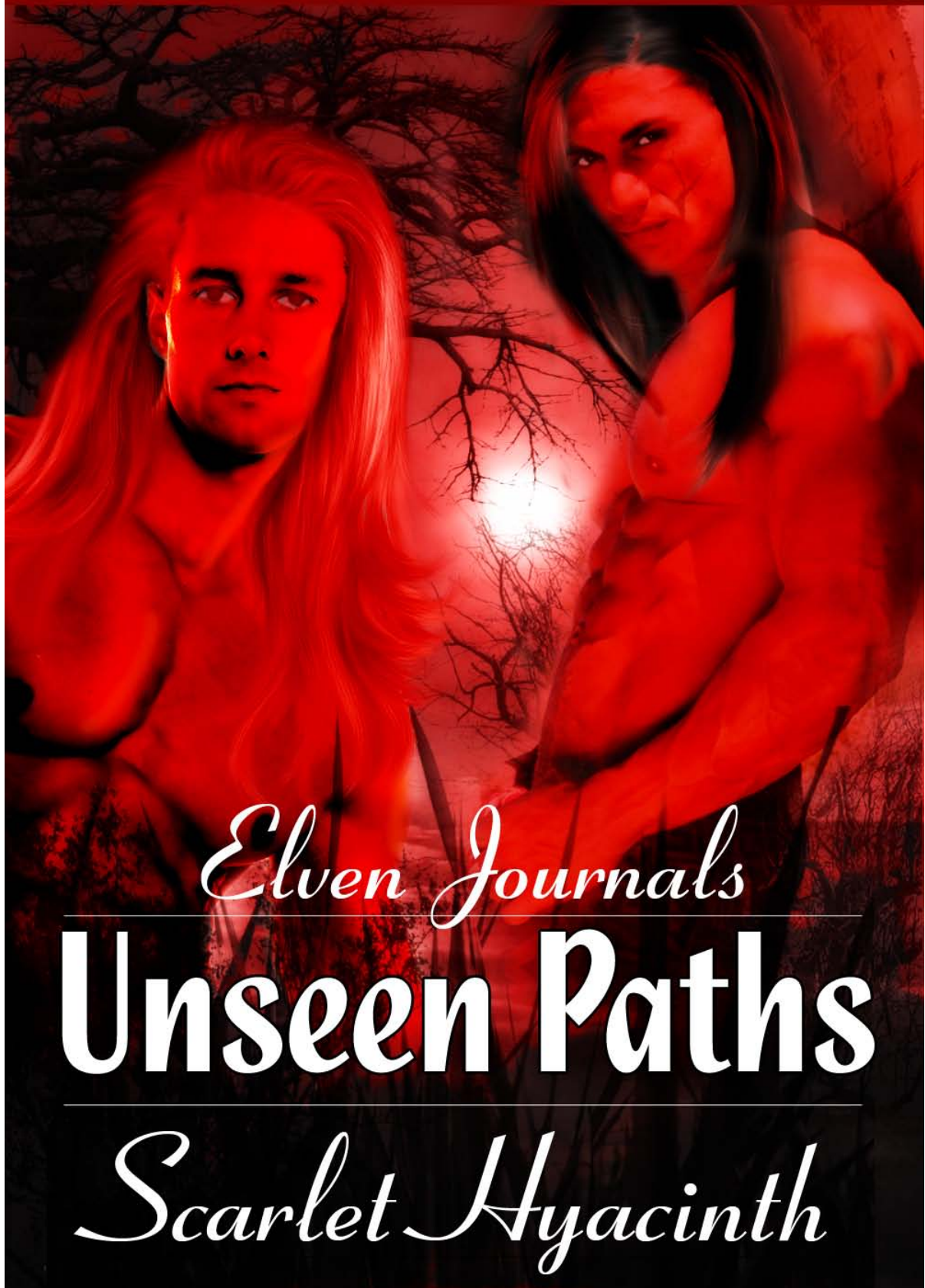


*Noble Romance Publishing*



*Elven Journals*

# Unseen Paths

*Scarlet Hyacinth*

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Elven Journals: Unseen Paths

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### **Book Blurb**

For an elf, the worst curse in the world is blindness. Alix Skyeyes learned that the hard way. Scorned from birth for his innate handicap, he lives as a pariah in the fae elf palace and survives only due to his acute senses and battle skills. Having lost faith in their entire race, Alix is surprised when a dark elf approaches him in a hesitant attempt of friendship.

A hardened warrior, Jan'ke carries heavy scars due to his time in the neighboring demon country. When he meets Alix Skyeyes, he sees in the blind elf a soul that echoes his own jaded grief. They find comfort in each other – and slowly, but surely, their friendship evolves into love.

When Jan hides his engagement with a noble woman from Alix, his lies push Alix into revealing secrets of his own past in the worst way possible. Compromises are made, unlikely alliances are forged and many more secrets revealed. Jan finds himself forced to make the toughest choice in his life. Will he remain loyal to his country or will he save his lover?

## Prologue

In the year of the Solstice 10.851 after the descent of our Goddess (A.D.G.), war broke out between the elven nations of Thralnia and the demon country of Xoz. Southern Thralnia united its forces with Northern Thralnia and after almost two centuries of fighting, the two independent kingdoms pushed back the demons into their own lands.

The forces of light rejoiced, but their glee did not last; for only a few years later, Thralnia fell into civil war – one so bloody and terrible it left both nations weakened and drained, their fields littered with dead, children fatherless and women husbandless. Ten times worse than the conflict with the demon country, the civil war shrouded everything in the darkness of treason. Enemies and friends were no longer easy to discern and trust became synonymous with death.

The annals of history record the stories of the many – of those brave souls who fought and died for the unification of their country and of those whose arrogance had led the country to destruction in the first place. They tell the story of two dynasties whose lust for power had pushed the twin nations into this terrible conflict. The story of the few – of the individual loves, lives, and sorrows – as always, got lost in the aftermath of all the chaos, forgotten in the tumult of the great conflict.

But there is one such story that has survived. A story of love found and lost, a story of pain and hidden curses, a story of feelings and more than anything, a story of fighting and never giving up – all recorded in the journals of the two brave soldiers who lived to tell of it.

With the permission of the owners of these journals, this chronicler will record this tale here, in the hope whoever may read this tale will be inspired to fight and always keep honest to themselves and to others. The sorrows of the past must never be forgotten, but we must also find hope, and, if necessary, fight to build a new and better future for ourselves and our children.

## **Part One**

### **Falling in Love**

*From the Journals of Jan'ke Nightbourne and Alix Skyeyes*

*Early Spring - Late Autumn 11.043 A.D.G.*

## **Chapter One**

### **Jan'ke Nightbourne: Beginnings**

To be alone. An overwhelming feeling I fight to defeat and yet it consumes me. It consumes me, because the one person with the ability to heal my heart and send my demons away is not by my side. I do not know where he is. Perhaps he is no longer alive. Perhaps the cruelty of fate finally ended his days. If this is the case, I would wish to know it; for in that moment, I would die as well. The only reason I live now is the hope someday, somehow we will reunite.

I first met him a few years ago in a garden of all places. I had randomly wandered from the extravagant party to which I'd been invited. After a tedious while with the partying, the laughter, the sweet wines, it all became superfluous. The lies and intrigue of the fae court made me sick.

And then, there he stood, only a few feet from me. He looked beautiful but not in the feminine way the fae sometimes boast. No. His was a more peculiar beauty, the classical perfection of elven features mixed in a purely masculine face speaking of a powerful warrior.

It was by no means love at first sight. An armor of ice surrounded my heart, my emotions cancelled out by my time in the war, my entire being jaded from the years I'd spent in the company of all the wrong people. Even so, for some inscrutable reason, I wanted to talk to him . . . and at once if at all possible, I recall. From the distance, he radiated an aura of power that fascinated me. And then he looked at me, and I saw in those bright blue eyes, something beautiful and clear of all the filth I associated with a life of fighting. But no, he did not look at me—that is the wrong way to put it. He looked in my direction, his beautiful unseeing eyes not registering my presence as he started to sing. And with his song, my wish to speak to him

changed, instantly morphing into compulsion.

*The blind elf.* That's what they called him. He had been born blind, the child of a noble woman and an unknown father. If not for his mother's insistence, he would have never lived in the first place. Perhaps death would have been kinder since, for an elf, to be blind represents the ultimate curse. His mother, however, had refused to let him go, and so he had remained amongst the living.

I had thought with his mother's status in elven nobility, she had protected him—shielded him from the cruelties of life—for he looked serene and without a care in the world. But his song sounded as sad as it was beautiful, and I soon learned elven society had only cruelty in store for the ones who did not abide by their rules—for those of us who were different.

\* \* \* \* \*

*One year before*

Glittering lights decorated the tall marble columns of the palace, intricate patterns of glowing symbols welcoming the guests to the celebration of victory. Beautiful banners praising the Goddess for her assistance in battle adorned the walls, reminding everyone of the party's purpose. I peeked at the guests in a furtive manner and inwardly snorted. Our religion had long ago lost its meaning to everyone but the priests, and the battle was as far from the guests' minds as the border with the demon country. These balls were held for three distinct purposes, none of which was praising the Goddess. All the intricate preparation, the celebration and glitter, like everything in elven society for that matter, focused on gain—sex, money, and power, or the many variations and combinations of each. I felt sick.

As a war hero, I had a compulsory appearance in the festivities tonight. I expected I would be congratulated, fawned over, and schmoozed, and I expected nobles presenting their young, unwed daughters to me, and the pretty elven girls smiling and blushing as if on command. There were so many things I knew would happen, the same things that happened every time, and yet, there would be no way

for me to escape. I couldn't wait to get the *show* over with so I could return to my chambers. I could no longer bear seeing the seductive forms of my sisters sashaying around the room, giggling flirtatiously with guests of different races, or watching my brother disappear into one of the hidden alcoves with whoever had caught his sight for the evening.

If I wanted to be completely honest, I envied them. I too yearned for the warmth of human contact, for the feel of a lover's embrace. I missed bathing nude in the clear rivers, basking in the hot rays of the sun. We'd been so carefree and happy growing up, but life had at some point parted our ways. With their coming of age, my sisters had turned over night from laughing sprites to seductive sirens. Together, with my brother and I, we'd thrown parties renowned for debauchery in the whole of Thralnia. But I'd long ago stopped being that man, the one who could laugh, drink, and lose myself in sex.

I still yearned for my youth, sometimes. I did not regret what I had done. Joining the army had been a necessary feat for the safety of Thralnia. The soldiers of the Northern armies had needed a leader and for all my youth, I had been the ideal choice. Some had said I'd been sent not in spite of my youth but because of it. No one had wanted to risk certain death in battle with the demons of the North. But I had returned, victorious, our country once again safe from its enemies.

And yet, I couldn't help but feel all those who had feared the front had been correct. A part of me was well and truly dead and I had no way of getting it back.

The light sound of approaching footsteps alerted me to a new presence. Elves were by nature stealthy creatures. My own kind, the dark elves, more so than their fae brethren. Even so, my years in the war had shaped my instincts to the extent no one could surprise me.

I schooled my features into neutrality as I heard my father, Ran'dar, step from the shadows.

"Jan," he began, "what are you doing, hiding here?"

I turned and pasted a dishonest smile on my face. "Just taking in some night air, Father."

My father nodded, his expression thoughtful. I hoped he would leave it at

that and allow me my solitude, but alas, I couldn't be so lucky. My father took post by my side and not looking toward me, he idly commented, "Wonderful party, is it not?"

I inwardly sighed at my father's inquiry. "Yes, Father. A wonderful party," I murmured, this time not even bothering to attempt to fake enthusiasm. The man knew me too well to fall for such lies and masks.

"Come now, Jan. You could at least give us a chance," he said with a sigh. "You used to love parties. At least try to enjoy yourself."

"I am enjoying myself," I snapped. "I am a dark elf. Night nourishes me. The Goddess speaks to me at night, feeding my heart and my magic. Isn't that what you always say?"

"That's not what I meant and you know it." He rubbed his eyes wearily and I hid a smirk of satisfaction at his exasperation. "The war is over. Would it kill you to be civil for one evening?"

I gave him a dark look, a scathing reply already forming on my lips. So many possible answers, so many ways to torture my father. He'd been comfortably sipping wine from his priceless silver goblets while I was fighting for my life and dying inside piece by treacherous piece with every second that passed. He'd been laughing and enjoying the luxuries he took for granted, while I'd been literally swimming in blood and guts. I could tell him things about killing that would burst that comfortable bubble he lived in. If he had an inkling of my memories, he would not be so easy to discard the war as being over.

In the end, no such answer left my lips. I alone had chosen to go to war. I did not regret it and I would not blame him for the things I had seen and lived. Self-pity didn't fit in my heart or in my life. I was here, still alive, still able to revel in the soft touch of the wind on my face and the whispers of the night. I had lost many things, but many of my companions hadn't even returned.

And so, I nodded my assent, muttering under my breath, "Fine. One night." After all, my father's never-ending quest to breed me would have little success. War strategy had taught me also when to choose my battles.

"Marvelous!" My father perked up immediately. "Come! There are so many

people I want you to meet!"

I followed him back into the ballroom, already having resigned myself to an evening of societal hell. I just needed to make an appearance, put on the normal smile-and-nod, combined with the pretend-not-to-see-the-grimaces, and the ignore-the-whispers. In spite of my so-called glory, no elven lady would willingly wed someone like me, a soldier disfigured and torn by the horrors of war. For all they knew, I was dead inside – a ghost, as rumors said, as everyone in the army now referred to me.

My father nodded to members of the ton as we passed, and I kept a fake smile on my face at all times. As we stopped to greet several counts and viscounts, I thought for sure that smile would be forever carved in my features. A throbbing headache started to form and the evening had just begun.

Slowly, we made our way through the crowd, stopping from time to time to chat with various groups. I added an appropriate word here and there, automatically falling back into the manners I'd been taught as a child. Strangely enough, my father seemed to have little patience for useless conversation. I realized then, with much dismay I might add, that slowly but steadily, my father had been leading me toward Count Windwisp's table.

Count Windwisp was one of the most influential figures of Southern Thralnia. Like my own family, the Windwisp clan represented one of the sturdiest pillars of the elven political system. The Windwisps remained among the few who insisted on the centralization of our state. Secretly, I agreed with him. The war had proven that divided we were weak but together nothing could stand in our way.

Still, I was a dark elf, and Windwisp – a fae elf. Therefore, in spite of having the same political ideas, we rarely saw eye to eye. Our breeds, though we belonged to the same race, remained as different as night and day. This discrepancy remained one of the main reasons Thralnia had been organized into two separate provinces. Dark elves and fae elves simply did not mix. My father had often expressed the same idea. Why would he suddenly want to chat with Windwisp?

The answer was, of course, an entirely predictable one. The count greeted my father politely, and then turned his attention to me. "General Jan'ke. Greetings. I did

not know you had arrived. This is my daughter, Alana."

He gestured toward a beautiful, blonde lady who stood demurely behind him. Inwardly groaning, I played along nevertheless, and following etiquette, I greeted the fae elf. "Count, what a pleasure to see you again."

I then bowed low and kissed the girl's wrist. She blushed as she obviously had been instructed, but I saw a flash of fear in her eyes before she concealed it behind a practiced smile. I answered with a practiced smile of my own.

"Jan'ke Nightbourne. I am honored to meet you, my lady." Though I felt disgusted with myself and with her, I decided, for the night, I could go with my father's delusions. Tomorrow, I would conveniently organize a hunt or a scouting trip or *whatever* in order to leave the fae palace. I could only take so much without losing my mind. "Care to dance?" I asked Alana.

The girl assented with a barely perceptible nod. "I would love to dance, my lord."

Ignoring her more than obvious nervousness, I took Alana and led her to the dance floor. Instinctively, my body remembered the rhythm of the steps and we fell in line with the couples surrounding us. Elves were naturally graceful and not even all the time I'd spent in the company of death could erase my aristocratic upbringing. And so, I twirled Alana around the dance floor, her beautifully embroidered dress brushing against the glistening floors with a swishing sound. Other couples watched us surreptitiously as we danced, but I paid them no heed. Alana seemed a good dancer. At some point, she must have realized I would not bite her because she relaxed considerably and allowed her body to move gracefully with mine.

After a few dances, I finally considered my societal duty complete for the night. I bowed to Alana and fought to find the best way to usher her away from me. "Thank you for the lovely dance, my lady," I said.

Alana curtsied in a proper yet seductive way, gifting me with a full view of her more than generous cleavage. "I hope it won't be the last one of the night, Lord Nightbourne."

As we walked back to the table, the count clapped, his eyes, still sharp despite

his age, analyzing us slyly. I could practically hear the gears turn in his head, and I realized I had made a mistake in accepting my father's "suggestion" to dance with Alana. Now, the count would expect me to court his daughter and probably, in the future, wed her.

The count's approval of me, of course, made my father supremely happy. He tapped me on the shoulder and grinned, his first sincere smile of the night. The part of me still aching for his approval rejoiced in the knowledge I had been the cause of his expression, but another part of me wanted to slap it away.

The following hours passed in a whirlwind of fake laughter, flowery perfume, and less than subtle hints. After what was likely my fifteenth dance with Alana—I'd lost count at some point—I planned my escape. With stealth, I made my way to the balcony, and, clearing the ledge, dropped to the lower level terrace.

Landing on my feet, I proceeded to analyze my new surroundings. Relief flooded my heart. I had escaped my father's clutches and effectively avoided being dragged off to yet another round of polite platitudes. I walked randomly through the deserted hallways, finding comfort in the solitude. I didn't know where I was going, an unusual fact for a soldier like myself. Even so, I couldn't care less. My lapse in caution I blamed on the dancing; my mind was on the verge of insanity, surely. I had chosen the lesser of two evils. Quite honestly, I'd had enough of Count Windwisp, Alana, and my father.

My footsteps fell noiselessly on the marble floor, and I almost chuckled at the peculiarity of my own person. I had acquired a strange skill and habit during my years in the war, a tendency to be as noiseless as possible, to the extent I had become almost ghost-like. My brothers-in-arms had even taken to calling me that, *a ghost*, and the nickname seemed somewhat fitting.

And so, like a phantom, I slipped through the shadows, unheard and unseen by anyone. I lost myself in exploring the labyrinthine corridors for the longest time. With the many twists and turns, a sort of childish excitement bubbled inside me at the knowledge I ventured into something unknown. Right and left, left, forward and right, right again, and so it went, on and on. The corridors seemed endless, so when they abruptly ended, I froze in my tracks. In front of me, a beautifully carved arch

marked the entrance to an interior garden. This didn't surprise me, since fae elves had a very close connection to nature. I'd already seen an abundance of gardens throughout the palace. I sighed in disappointment, displeased my exciting expedition had led to something this common. In the end, I decided I had nothing better to do and entered.

It was by no means as beautiful and elaborately decorated as the main garden of the palace, which boasted splendidly carved sculptures and marble fountains decorated with priceless gems. This small garden, however, held a serenity the main garden did not. I stepped forward only to realize a lone figure already occupied one of the benches in the garden's center.

Silently, I took in the appearance of the bench's occupant. Upon first glance, I thought he was just another fae elf. A more attentive assessment, however, revealed the falseness of my first thought. His sharp, almost rugged features spoke of the possibility of a mixed heritage. I would not have bet money on this questionable fact, since my impression may have been influenced by the way he wore his hair—long and loose on his shoulders, not braided like elves tended to arrange it. The wind passed through his blond locks, playfully tugging on the strands, but he made no movement to rearrange his ruffled hair. He seemed oblivious to everything around him, including my presence. This latter fact did not surprise me entirely, since I had been unintentionally silent in my approach.

I stood there for the longest time, watching him in silence and drinking in the mystery of his presence. As the wind passed through his hair, I could see his pointy ears peak out naughtily from the misplaced strands of gold, and as the seconds passed, I became more and more convinced I'd been mistaken about his ancestry. For all his ruggedness, he possessed the flawless beauty of the elves, skin unmarred by traces of age or disease.

My analytical account of him was abruptly cut off when all of a sudden, the stranger opened his mouth and started to sing. The melody escaping his lips in tones of ancient elven spoke of night and day, life and death, sorrow and love. Like the song of a nightingale, the tune sounded strikingly beautiful, sad, tragic, lonely . . . and yet, so very perfect, I let out an almost inaudible gasp.

Instantly, the man stopped singing and raised his head. His blue eyes scanned the expanse of the garden, but passed over my frozen figure without seeing me.

"Who's there?" the stranger asked.

It was then, when I first saw his blue eyes, I realized the mysterious elf could not see. I could've made my retreat, as he had no way of identifying me later. However, something about the singing blind elf, some unknown force called to me, drew me to him. Instead of making a hasty escape, I took a step forward. "Sorry," I said, a bit rougher than I would've spoken normally as my apology seemed to stick in my throat. "I did not mean to intrude. You have a beautiful voice."

The other elf frowned at me, or rather, in my direction. "Who are you? I do not know your voice."

"I imagine not. I'm from the Northern armies. My name is Jan'ke Nightbourne. I'm here for —"

"The party." The blind elf scoffed, his voice reeking with disdain. "How so very interesting. I do hope you're enjoying yourself."

His tone irritated me, instantly worsening my already sour mood. The expression on his face had to be the most pure portrayal of contempt I had seen in my life. "Actually, no," I snapped. "I'm not enjoying myself. I do not enjoy the company of frivolous and judgmental imbeciles." Out of habit, I said goodbye with a military salute.

My salute had to be quite ridiculous, since he could not see me. Perhaps I had done so on purpose, finding a stupid form of satisfaction in mocking his disability. It was low of me, but I had reached the limits of my caring and compassion. My temper flared, and I couldn't make myself consider the reasoning behind his actions or my own. Enough was enough. The count's remarks and my father's insistence had annoyed me beyond measure and I did not have the patience to deal with a bitter, blind elf.

"Have a good night."

His voice stopped me in my tracks. "Please stay," the mysterious elf said. "I apologize, Lord Nightbourne. Please stay."

I considered ignoring his apology and taking my leave regardless. In reality,

however, I had nothing better to do. This strange blind elf intrigued me. A sudden compulsion took hold of me – the desire to get to know him, to decipher his mystery, and maybe . . . to, once again, hear him sing.

Decision made, I walked toward the bench. I had no idea, at the time, this decision would change my life.

## **Chapter Two**

### **Alix Skyeyes: Meeting Destiny**

To be alone. A song I sing in the darkness, the song of yearning and of loneliness. There is no one here to listen so I need not be afraid of the laughter, the jeers. It is a weird thing I seek solitude and yet, there is nothing I loathe more. I feel like a trapped bird, trapped within the bars of a terrible cage. My song reaches for the stars, flies away when I cannot, the notes gliding and disappearing into the distance.

But I am not a poet, nor am I an artist. I reach out into the darkness for something I cannot reach, and yet, I know better than to sing my sorrows in anyone's presence. I may be blind, but I'm not stupid. No one will know of my pain; no one will hear my cry; no one will feel my sorrow. Not here, where everything is sorrow and everything is mind-numbing treachery. No. No one. Everything is as it should be.

And yet, I still remember my song brought us together, caused us to meet for the first time. The same dark song I abandon myself to whenever I'm alone; the same one I feel inside whenever I am surrounded by my kind. He heard my lonely call and came to me, two hearts forged by the same emotion. Unknowingly, in that same day, I surrendered my life and my freedom. The drama of two unlikely lovers came to pass and I am yet again, alone.

I could say he was handsome, but that would be a lie. I have yet to see my lover's face. When he comes to me in my dreams, he is but a shadow and a feeling, a ghost from the past as he has so often been called. The only knowledge I have of his features is the memory imprinted on my fingertips. I remember my hands tracing a

stubborn jaw, full lips, stubbled cheeks, rough scars marring otherwise perfect skin. I remember the little things, like his strong scent the first time he took me in his arms and his masculine taste when our lips first met.

I am well aware, at this point, there is a high probability I will never be in his presence again. I am not worthy of him, not after all that has happened, after all I have done. He is probably in the arms of another now, in the arms of a lover more suited for him; and yet, I cannot help what I feel. The memories come unbidden, shadows torturing me, taunting me with what I had and what I shall never have again.

\* \* \* \* \*

It was the night of my return to Thralnia. The battle had ended and our forces had prevailed over the demons of Xoz. I had pledged my own blade to defending our lands for reasons that eluded me. Elven society had been anything but kind to me. It might have been because of a need to prove myself, but in truth, I doubted that. I doubted everything those days . . . even my own existence.

Sometimes, I found comfort in my blindness. I could still hear the screams of my fellow soldiers as their bodies were consumed by demonic flame. I could still smell the stench of burnt flesh in my nostrils. I did not need the imagery to complete the package, although my thought processes reconstructed it as if I had sight.

Today, Thralnia celebrated victory. The elven aristocracy had donned their most fashionable clothes, adorned themselves with their priceless jewelry, and were drinking and toasting to the victory of our army. I couldn't see them, of course, but in spite of my inability to witness it, I knew I was correct. They had conveniently cast aside the fact their glee had been paid for in the blood of the many, forgotten soldiers and nameless heroes who had become but a memory in the minds of their loved ones.

I sang for them tonight. I sang not because I missed them, but because they were missed and yet, ignored. I sang my own pain and loneliness, for who will listen to the lonely cry of one blind elf?

And so, I lost myself in my melody, trying, but failing, to purge the sorrow infecting my blood like poison. My song shifted as always, sometimes tragic, sometimes hopeful, for in my mind I dreamt that one day, someone would appear who would take the pain away.

A barely audible gasp killed my voice in my throat. Someone was here. Someone had heard me. How could it be possible? How did I miss the other person's approach?

Courtesy of my blindness, I had acute hearing and a hyper sense of smell. Because of these well-developed senses, I had been allowed to fight in the Southern Thralnia Army. Much to the dismay of *my people*, I was renowned for my physical prowess and had defeated my share of demons during the war. The knowledge that some unknown individual could approach me so stealthily irked me terribly. My entire body tensed as I threw my voice into the now-threatening darkness. "Who's there?"

Much to my surprise, the darkness answered back. "I'm sorry. I did not mean to intrude. You have a beautiful voice."

The reminder of the stranger's invasion of my privacy did nothing to improve my mood. Furthermore, I had an educated memory of voices. They represented the only thing I could identify my fellow elves by, and this particular person was a stranger to me. "Who are you? I do not know your voice," I asked, feeling more than a little put off.

"I imagine not," the stranger answered. "I'm from the Northern armies. My name is Jan'ke Nightbourne. I'm here for —"

Those few phrases made up my mind instantly — yet another member of the elven aristocracy here to celebrate death and destruction. I let out a sound of disdain, not allowing him to finish. "The party. How so very interesting! I do hope you're enjoying yourself."

"Actually, no," the other elf replied in a similarly snappish voice. "I'm not enjoying myself. I do not enjoy the company of frivolous and judgmental imbeciles. Good night."

At the dark elf's words I felt ashamed of my behavior. After all, I did not

know this person. What gave me the right to assume – to brand him as a heartless aristocrat? For some reason, it became important to me that he understand I was not frivolous like the rest of the fae elves.

"Please stay," I said quickly. "I apologize, Lord Nightbourne. Please stay!"

The interior garden remained silent and I could feel my words echoing off the walls. I could not hear him walk away, but that didn't mean anything. I had not heard him approach either. Thankfully, he didn't delay in breaking the shadow of uncertainty clouding my mind.

"It's all right," he said. "I shouldn't have eavesdropped on you. You were right to be offended."

From his tone of voice, I concluded he did not apologize easily. The realization made me push back the awkwardness and discomfort. Even if I'd been overheard by this stranger, he seemed as miserable as I was, and misery loves company – I knew that better than anyone. I gestured in the general direction of the bench I'd been sitting on and said, "Please, take a seat. Pardon my terrible manners. I am Alix Skyeyes."

The air shifted as he took me up on my offer and seated himself at my side. "Skyeyes," he repeated almost absently. "It suits you. You have beautiful eyes."

The casual comment resurrected my earlier hostility. I didn't like when anyone mentioned anything connected with my eyesight and before I could stop myself I snapped at him again. "I wouldn't know. I've never seen them."

He remained silent for a long minute, so silent I feared he'd gotten up and left, until he finally spoke. "I have offended you again. My humblest apologies. It seems, I am truly a bumbling idiot."

I laughed uneasily, hoping to dispel the tension. Suddenly, I wanted to talk to someone, even this peculiar stranger who would praise a blind man's eyes. In this situation, he would probably get up and leave, but for some reason unknown to me, I just couldn't allow that.

"Don't." I extended my hand, reaching out into space in what I hoped was his general direction. His stealthy movements confused me and my otherwise flawless sense of orientation drew a blank. Luckily, I intercepted him before he moved away

and my hand grasped his silk-clad arm. "It's fine. Thank you for the compliment."

He retook his seat beside me and we waited in silence, unsure of what to say to each other. We were strangers brought together by a coincidence. There had been nothing dramatic about our meeting, just a casual acquaintance of two existences, an acquaintance that could end at any time with little to no effect.

Still, I did not feel comfortable with the idea of him leaving and decided a conversation was in order. "So . . . From the Northern armies? I suppose I should thank you for your aid."

"There is no need for such thanks. After all, we were together in this. We helped each other."

I sighed, already regretting having mentioned the war. I did not want to talk about the war. I didn't even want to think about it, and I hadn't a clue what part he had played in our victory. I suspected he had to be someone important and his name sounded vaguely familiar, but I had never been one to pay much attention to politics. "I'm sorry. This may seem a foolish question, but your name sounds familiar."

"I suppose it would. I am the general of the Northern Thralnia Armies."

"Oh . . . ." The general. I tried but failed to imagine the weight of the responsibility this person carried. If the war had been hard for me as a mere soldier, I couldn't fathom how difficult it must have been for him. But he did not need my pity, or my compassion. "I suppose that explains you listening to my song."

I didn't know what made me utter those words, but it must have been the right thing to say.

He let out a brief, humorless laugh. "I suppose it does."

In that moment, the song I always sang shifted to a melody of thanks inside me, for unconsciously, I think, I realized the person who would save me had finally arrived.

### **Chapter Three**

#### **Jan'ke Nightbourne: Our First Day**

That night marked the beginning of our fragile relationship. We spent hours talking about Thralnia, about each other's pasts and sorrows. He was unlike anyone I'd ever met and I found myself disclosing things I had never confessed to anyone — telling Alix about my time in the war, about my father's attempts to wed me to Alana, even about my former lovers, who now ignored me. His blind eyes seemed to see through me. He listened as I spoke, but he showed no sign of the pity I had expected to receive. Silently, I thanked the Goddess for having found him. I did not want pity. It was an emotion I despised. I had thought I despised emotion altogether, but I did want understanding — and Alix understood.

We'd ended up telling many stories, stories of the past, of our time in the war. He'd been reluctant to do so initially, but in the end, the words had started to flow, much like a downpour you try to stop but are powerless against. Talking to Alix had been like a cleansing, and I felt free.

He told me about his own time in the war, and I was astonished he had been one of the soldiers who'd fought in the Southern Thralnia Army's premier front division. It seemed incredible to me someone with such a handicap could not only defend himself in a fight, but also be one of the best soldiers who had ever fought against the demons. He did not show his offense at my surprise, a fact I noted with shame but some sort of relief. His attitude showed he was getting used to my total lack of civility. As my father had once noted, I recently seemed to be completely tactless, but I had never once regretted that until meeting Alix.

He took everything in stride, smiled at me, and said, "You don't have to believe me. I will prove it to you one day."

I don't know what emotions his first smile birthed inside of me. Maybe I fell in love that very moment, but sincerely, I doubt it. He represented a mystery for me, a mystery I needed to decipher. But the sincerity of his smile and the way we simply seemed to click, pushed me — and us — on a course of action that would eventually lead us to finding many things we did not want.

As much as I would want to boast today about the strength of our connection, the truth is, we were both much too stubborn and proud to accept finding comfort in each other's arms. The concept didn't occur to me in the beginning, for how could

love possibly appear between two males? Sexually, I could accept the compatibility of two males in bed. But love? I could not fathom such a thing happening between men.

Perhaps this is why I instinctively tried to push him away, why he tried to do the same with me. And yet, for all our hesitance and clumsiness, from that very first day, something sparked between us that couldn't be ignored or forgotten.

\* \* \* \* \*

*One day after the party*

I woke up feeling better than I'd felt in years. For a minute, I couldn't think of a reason for this sudden feeling of well being and then I remembered: the party, Alana, then my stroll through the labyrinthine corridors, and . . . him. Alix.

My lips twisted into a smile as I thought about my new friend. I would have expected him to be bitter or boring, but once we'd broken the proverbial ice, he'd proven to be very pleasant company. I'd managed to crack a few bad jokes, and he'd laughed, not at the actual jokes but at my poor talent as an entertainer. Not only that, but he was surprisingly easy to talk to, and I soon found we had a lot of things in common, among those things, our general dislike for the war.

I had to see him again. I donned one of my more casual outfits, leather breeches and a matching coat, deciding to forgo the cloak since I had no immediate plans to leave the castle. I strapped my ever-present blade at my waist and exited my chambers. But then, I realized that other than his name, I really did not know much about what he did here at the castle. We'd talked about many things, but somehow, his occupation had never come up.

With this realization, another more disturbing one came. I froze as I took in what I planned to do. I, Jan'ke Nightbourne, for no apparent reason, wanted to go in search of a stranger I'd met just the day before. And last night, I had poured my soul out to the same stranger, confided things to him I had never shared with another. Not even my own blood knew of the things I had been through during the war or what I actually thought about it. And yet this man, this Alix, had somehow managed

to convince me to share my most personal and private feelings with him.

Anger swelled inside of me and immediately I changed my direction; no longer had I any desire to see Alix. If I met the fae elf in that particular moment, I was likely to do something we would both regret, like punch him in the face or some similar action.

Still fuming, I headed toward the main hall, hoping to find my brother there. For all his superficiality, usually, Lar entertained me and possibly, he could make me forget about my indiscretion.

Unfortunately, as I entered the main hall, I observed my brother was not alone seated at the large table. Sitting on one of the beautifully carved chairs and delicately sipping from a clear crystal glass was Alana Windwisp. At her side, her father had been seated, naturally, watching her like a hawk. As I walked in, his attention turned to me immediately and I cursed both my stupidity and bad luck for coming here. I did not feel in the mood to withstand another matchmaking attempt from the count or from my father.

Much to my displeasure, however, I had no choice but to join my brother and father at the table. "Hello, Jan." My father greeted me with a formal bow. "What a pleasure to see you at breakfast."

I smiled stiffly and nodded in acknowledgement, then kissed Alana's wrist as per custom. "Greetings," I said simply.

To be quite honest, Alana's presence at our table surprised me. In spite of her position as the count's daughter, she remained a woman, and women did not eat at the same table with the men. Not even my sisters, also well known and highly respected for their position in elven society, were allowed to eat with the three of us in the great hall. I thought it highly unusual and I daresay, a bit impolite. While personally I could not see any reason for which women should be excluded from casual meals in this manner, it irked me to acknowledge the count had used his influence and power to go over unwritten norms we were expected to respect. If Alana Windwisp had been allowed at the table in the main hall, why not my sisters or my mother?

Of course, I couldn't explain my general displeasure with the issue and

instead, found myself forced to withstand the stilted conversation, false smiles, and embarrassing hints my father and the count proceeded to shower on me. By the time breakfast ended, I was fuming, ten times more furious than I had been before I'd decided to come into the great hall. If I exchanged one more word with any of those present, I was certain, I would seriously hurt the person in question.

Sparing a nod as a final greeting, I abandoned the great hall swiftly, making my escape before the count could corner me and try to strike up a conversation between his daughter and me once more. With everything that had happened, I needed to blow off some steam. I headed toward the sparring grounds.

The fae elf palace boasted a large barracks, which housed the fae imperial guards as well as the training grounds for the preparation and schooling of new guards. Adjoining this training area was a larger sparring field built for the more experienced fighters. Sometimes, novices would come and watch the battle-scarred – or, in most cases, flawless-skinned – warriors in their sparring matches, supposedly to learn from their movements and agility. This custom irritated me and I hoped no such younglings would be there today.

Much to my dismay, as I entered the training grounds, it was not the guards in training whom I saw. I realized some would probably be around, since the area seemed unusually busy. However, despite my efforts, my eyes were drawn to the blind elf busy swinging his iron blade at a fellow fae elf and amazingly overpowering his combatant.

I found myself in awe as I watched Alix move and fight, a deadly predator soundlessly cutting his blade through the air. I could tell his sparring partner had no chance in this battle, especially since Alix seemed particularly ruthless and fierce.

Perhaps it was my impression, but the way Alix fought exuded a sort of violence and hatred not entirely necessary in a sparring match. I squashed down my surprise and suppressed a sigh of disappointment. For all my conflicting emotions regarding my conversation with him, I had not expected Alix to be yet another bloodthirsty warrior reveling in his own power to destroy.

As Alix disarmed his opponent, I started to clap mockingly. "Beautiful match," I said, sarcasm thick in my voice. "I wonder, would you have the same

success against me?"

We both knew the answer to that question, since he had himself admitted he had not heard my approach the day before. He counted on his hearing to fight and without it, he couldn't possibly defeat me.

"Maybe another day, Lord Nightbourne," Alix said coolly. "I'm afraid I am not quite used to a warrior of your level."

I had expected an excuse, anything from tiredness to boredom or perhaps being busy with something else. What I had not expected was Alix being honest and accepting, for once, he had met his match. The sheer vulnerability of that simple fact made me feel the lowest person on the planet and I didn't have to see Alix's eyes to know he was disappointed in me. He had told me the night before that he prided himself on being able to fight in spite of his disability. Now, the first thing I had done upon seeing him again was mock him with that knowledge, breaking his trust.

I opened my mouth to say something, anything that could fix my mistake. Alix, however, proved faster than I had realized and in an instant, he'd abandoned the training area and distanced himself from the sparring grounds. I wanted to go after him, but unfortunately, I found myself intercepted by Alix's sparring partner, a tall, muscular fae elf with elegant but slightly rough features.

"I did not realize you knew our resident blind elf, Lord Nightbourne," the man said with a small smirk. "I have to say, I have not seen anyone deal with him in such a manner. Perhaps it will teach him to be less arrogant."

"And perhaps there are reasons for his arrogance," I shot back. "Don't forget, regardless of my exchange with him, he wiped the floor with you."

The man's eyes widened at my rude reply. He immediately reached for his blade, but I was faster and intercepted him before he could even unsheathe it. "That's not very smart—drawing a blade before introducing yourself. Arrogance seems to love you fae."

Without another word, I turned my back on the man, knowing he would not dare to go against me. In truth, I could easily pull rank and claim he had offended me first, since he had approached me without so much as by your leave, as if we were best friends or on the same level. Such a thing could not possibly be the case,

because I was familiar with the fae generals. While I didn't enjoy their company much, we did at least respect each other's ability in battle. Nevertheless, I couldn't help but wonder whether perhaps there was someone more deserving of that rank among the fae, someone I had stupidly offended and humiliated because of my own idiotic pride.

I had long ago come to terms with my one elven flaw — pride. Elven nature cursed us to be almost absurdly conceited and to find great pleasure in our own persons. Not even I, who had long ago grown weary of the falsehood of elven society, could escape this blasted arrogance.

It did, however, surprise me I wanted to try, to actually apologize to a stranger when nothing compelled me to do so. Part of me again pushed me away from Alix, unwilling to accept I had made a mistake. But another part, the part that had seen and become sick of elven stupidity, that part urged me forward, made me go in search of the stranger to whom I felt peculiarly drawn.

I could think of only one place in which to look for Alix — the garden where we had met the night before. I easily found my way through the labyrinthine corridors, hurrying toward my destination. An urgency I had never before experienced pushed me onward and I forced myself to calm my steps, knowing my haste would draw unwanted attention. I doubted someone would follow and even more that I would not detect such a reckless person, but I did not wish to risk anyone making the connection between me and the blind fae elf. We both had complicated enough lives; to make them more difficult through such a peculiar association would be a grave error.

And yet, it did not occur to me, not even once, that I could easily solve the problem by ignoring Alix altogether. He would not approach me himself, not after the episode in the sparring grounds. If I wanted to cut off any possible connection between us, then would have been the perfect time.

Still, my mind didn't register this alternative and I continued to make my way through the palace grounds and in the direction of the garden. When I reached my destination, I found myself peculiarly out of breath and almost panting. An emotion I couldn't name gripped my heart as I realized he had, indeed, come here.

"Hi," I began hesitantly and winced when Alix tensed.

"Hello, Lord Nightbourne," he answered formally, turning away.

Even if I realized he could not see me, his gesture, the knowledge he did not even wish to do so, that he did not wish for me to see him either, hurt me more than I would have thought possible. I was not in any way a man of emotion. The war had killed many things inside of me and one of those things had been the capacity to experience hurt. Or so I had thought, until that moment.

I shook myself mentally, not allowing myself to yet again lose my temper or to panic. Feelings were not, after all, completely new to me. I had loved and laughed and lost, like any elf, before the war. I had experienced sensations and passion and I had laughed and danced, enjoying the breeze through my hair.

I took a deep breath and focused on what I wanted to say. How hard could it be, after all? Alix and I had apparently, for lack of a better word, *clicked* the night before. There was no humiliation in admitting one's mistake in front of a friend. "I simply wanted to apologize for my attitude in the sparring field. I deeply regret it."

"It's all right," Alix said quietly. "I understand."

By the way he continued to keep his face from me, I doubted he truly understood. I suspected he thought I had humiliated him on purpose. Perhaps I had, simply because of my own fury, my anger at myself for revealing my innermost secrets to a virtual stranger. Even so, the fact remained—I truly regretted it now. Some things could not be taken back with a simple "I'm sorry", but still, I hoped I had not ruined Alix's opinion of me for good.

"No, please listen," I said eagerly, and on impulse, grabbed his hand. He backed away from me as if he'd been slapped and I inwardly cursed, realizing the rudeness of my action. Taking such liberties was simply not allowed in elven society, especially not between two males, not since the sodomy laws. I sighed deeply and tried again. "I'm doing this all wrong. I just wanted you to know that what happened back there is something for which I am deeply ashamed. I wish I could take my words back, say something to fix things, but I cannot. And now, I am once again being brasher than I'd intended. I hope perhaps you could be so kind so as to forgive my stupidity and start this day over again."

Alix turned and looked in my direction. He obviously could not see me, but I could read his expression well enough to realize he was shocked at my verbal self-flagellation. His lips twisted into a small smile, the same smile that had made me spill the secrets of my heart the night before. I understood that somehow, through some miracle, I had fixed things.

"Apology accepted," Alix said. "Sit now, and tell me what had you so angry today."

I took him up on the invitation and sat on the bench next to him. The words flowed from my mouth and everything that had happened since last night, my meeting with the count and Alana, my irritation at Windwisp and my father's attempt at matchmaking, even my frustration at my attitude toward Alix himself, slipped out. I did not realize I had said so much until I ran out of things to say.

He let out a little laugh but oddly didn't seem offended. "We're a strange duo, you and I," he said with a smile. "What a funny fact, for both of us to be so stupid, stubborn, and prideful to find shame in a simple conversation."

I grinned at the realization that he had, in his own way, reciprocated a similar confession. I now understood his anger in the sparring area, and for some reason, his words made me feel even closer to him. I didn't know it at the time, but in that moment, I felt yet a little more for the mystery of Alix Skyeyes.

## **Chapter Four**

### **Alix Skyeyes: An Unlikely Friendship**

That night marked a meeting that would change our destinies. While the entire elf nobility was busy partying their lives away, we spent our time simply talking, talking about everything and about nothing really, about insignificant details and personal secrets in our lives. I can't describe the feelings that passed through me then. Even if I loathed my own recklessness, I could not stop myself from telling him my innermost secrets, from disclosing my greatest weakness to someone I had just met.

I realize now that somehow our first meeting should have warned me of the

destructive nature of the connection between us. I partially saw it, the day after the party, and in my anger nearly killed that idiot Sorhel in the sparring grounds. It wouldn't have been too great a loss and I would have found some relief from the anger and the stress plaguing me. Or perhaps I would have lost myself even sooner. Who can even know, now?

At any rate, what I do know is, in front of the undeniable evidence of Jan dooming me, I do not regret anything I have done since. I do not regret accepting his one clumsy apology, nor do I regret falling for him. This love is my curse and my blessing and I accept it with a burning heart and a bleeding soul.

\* \* \* \* \*

The day after the party, I awoke to a splitting headache and a burning fever. This condition had become an increasingly common occurrence and I would have been concerned if not for my doubt that I would live long enough for any disease to consume me.

That day, however, the burn all too quickly turned into a feeling I knew too well. I recalled the events of the night before, the sound of Jan'ke Nightbourne's voice, and my own idiotic trust in him. I recalled him sneaking in on my singing. So many times, I had sworn to myself no one would ever hear me sing. And yet, the night before, I had forgiven the general for his indiscretion – and so easily too. My actions were unforgivable.

My palms started to itch and my skin erupted in a hot sweat. Concern became a distant thought. Since I knew how to deal with my anger, I knew what I needed to do to vanquish it, to appease the fire in my blood. The only way to purge this anger, to start anew, the only power strong enough would be the power of death, the power of extreme violence.

I had told Jan the night before I hated the war with a passion, much the same as I hated all those who reveled in its aftermath. There was much more to it, though, more than I ever dared to voice. Even in my darkest of moments, I refused to admit it. Secretly, the war had saved me. The scent of blood, the sound of dying souls, and

the fierceness of battles had somehow kept me sane when I should have probably long ago lost my mind. I had sung in sorrow not only for my dead companions but also for my dying heart.

I did not understand my need, my peculiar urge to destroy, to hurt things. I had been that way since I could remember. And yet, the strangest thing was not this desire in itself but the mindlessness of it. My soul and heart rebelled against everything I was and all that I did; yet my body yearned for the feel of fresh blood and my hands reveled in the comforting weight of a deadly blade. More than my blindness, the darkness in my heart separated me from the rest of the fae. While I despised those elves who found enjoyment in the senseless destruction of nature and spent their time pinning butterflies to their morbid "life" collections, at the same time, I needed a much similar destruction to survive.

Shaking myself, I randomly chose an outfit from my closet, identifying it through the special embroidery my mother had been careful to stitch into each item. I hated her idea with a passion, since it represented another reminder of my handicap. The clothes of normal fae elves did not have such decorations and the jewelry or accessories they used to complement their outfits were purely for esthetical purposes. I did not desire such useless adornments as I found no real beauty in them. Perhaps by seeing them through touch alone, I was being unfair. But life had been more unfair to me than I could ever be to anyone else.

Fuming over my own inner musings, I swiftly clothed myself, strapped my blade to my waist, and exited my room. Unlike most of the soldiers in the fae elf army, I didn't live in the barracks, instead, sharing a house with my mother. Another of the many differences between me and them, of the many things that sanctioned me as *not normal*. Sometimes, I wondered what they would say if they could truly read my mind. Even those morbid dark elves surely would be horrified.

At the moment, I did not find it in myself to care. I could no longer hear the melody I had sung the night before. My own song came to me like a distant memory, something I acknowledged and yet seemed to only hover as if it had happened to someone else. My anger overwhelmed everything and I smiled to myself, my blood already thrumming with the excitement of the battle to come. Anger gave me the

power to live, the same anger, hatred, and passion for destruction I loathed so. I welcomed it now; had I not been built in such a way, I would have collapsed under the weight of my own pride.

It didn't take but a few minutes to arrive at the sparring grounds. Navigating through the busy corridors of the palace outskirts was an exercise in humility. Not for myself but for those soldiers who found it impossible to dodge incoming servants or pass supply carriages without interruption and who saw me, the blind elf, easily doing so. I could hear their voices whispering as I passed, like malignant static at the edge of my consciousness. I knew I shouldn't let it bother me; I had become used to their disdain. They spoke of a curse, of my mother's indignity, and of my own unnatural existence. Innate blindness had never been seen before in elven society, and it did not help that, in spite of this handicap, I seemed to be a better warrior than many of them.

Some days, I would laugh at their idiocy, knowing they couldn't possibly understand either me or my mother. Indeed, she had her faults, as I did. Those faults, both mine and hers, had caused a wide chasm between us. She was my mother, nevertheless, and I knew her to be ten times better the person than any of those needlessly berating her. With that knowledge, I would often, in secret, laugh in their face, for why would their superficiality and hatred affect me? Not today, though. Today, every word alimented the flame of my anger to the extent I became invaded by the same need to destroy I had experienced during the war.

Back then and many times since, I had conveniently blamed my desires on circumstances, on my hatred toward the race that had caused my people so much pain and loss. I did the same this day, as always, blaming my anger and my peculiar, violent temper for my sudden lust for blood, willingly closing my eyes to the problem. I did not care I wanted to kill, for in such moments, I no longer saw my desire as something unnatural.

It was Sorhel who had the bad luck of getting in my way on the sparring grounds. Sorhel was one of the few fae elves who had the courage, or maybe the stupidity, to challenge me in battle. I knew it irked him terribly how I always seemed to be stronger, to be better than him. No matter what he did, he could not convince

the fae generals of the necessity of my elimination from the army. General Rothin was not a kind man, but he did recognize my ability to fight and for that reason, he had repeatedly refused to exile me from my position. I did not kid myself thinking that he liked me. Rothin had shown his disdain quite clearly for me in the past. Nevertheless, unlike Sorhel, he saw my utility and was willing to permit my existence as long as I remained useful for the nation – which in truth meant, useful for him.

This irritated Sorhel terribly and he often had the incredible idiocy to engage me in sparring. Now, normal sparring would be a friendly, if combative, event meant to train the muscles, agility, and skills of the combatants. If I became one of those combatants, however, one could count on the sparring match taking place with real, sharp blades. Whenever I joined the sparring, the violence had the potential to turn life-threatening. In the end, no one would bat an eyelash if the resident blind elf accidentally died in a practice match. I wondered what they would do if such a fate befell Sorhel.

As usual, I felt Sorhel before he even stepped in front of me to emit the challenge.

"Alix," he spat rudely at me. "Today we fight."

I looked in his direction, not for the first time wishing I could use my eyes if only to convey all my disdain for his person. "Certainly, Lord Flamecloud," I answered, knowing my voice dripped with sarcasm. "It would be an honor."

I felt him fume at my reply, at the knowledge he could not affect me through his hatred. It amused me, although not to the extent of calming my desire to kill. The elves surrounding the sparring grounds encouraged Sorhel already, praising him for his bravery, not realizing unwillingly, they praised my skills and gave Sorhel a bad image. Too bad I couldn't enjoy their ridiculous spectacle, but I needed something more. I needed blood.

The second the sound rang out signaling the beginning of the match, I jumped to the side, waiting for him to make his move. I heard him retrieve his blade from his sheathe; the specific feel of the air shifted when confronting a sharp object as familiar to me as the sound of my name. Inwardly, I smirked, prepared for this development.

Had I drawn my blade first, I would have been accused of an illegality during the match. With so many witnesses seeing Sorhel with his sword in his hand though, there was no risk to me and I could retrieve my own sword without concern.

In truth, if I killed the idiot elf, I would probably lose at least my position in the army, if not worse. But not everyone would lie for Flamecloud and not everyone would be willing to risk not only my anger, but also the anger of the fae general. Their cowardice didn't make me safe, but then again, I'd never once been safe in my entire existence.

Sorhel seemed to have forgotten about rules or superiors in his zeal to slay me. He lunged for me recklessly and his blade swished by me as I dodged his movement easily. He fought well, but as always, my hearing warned me as to his every move and therefore he could do nothing to surprise me.

I enjoyed myself for a while, not even drawing my blade, allowing him to hopelessly attempt to reach me, taking advantage of his disdain. He forced himself into exhaustion, like I knew he would, and when I felt him tire, I began my attack. It was ridiculously easy. I turned into the cat playing with the mouse and as I allowed my anger to flow over him, wicked satisfaction drove me forward, growing into violent energy.

Within minutes, he surrendered, beaten. I heard his blade drop to the ground with a dull thud. Silently, I cursed. By losing myself in my enjoyment, I had lost my chance to bathe my hands in his blood without risking too great a punishment. If I slew him now, I would be killed.

My anger grew exponentially as I saw my goal within my reach and yet so far away. Suddenly, my eyes seemed ablaze, as if the flame inside my veins concentrated in my vision. Just as I prepared myself to reach for my eyes and inspect what could be wrong, I heard a clapping sound behind me.

I tensed, having not sensed another presence approach. This meant the source of the sound could only be one person, the same person who had caused my anger in the first place. If it was someone else, then I would give up my position in the army, for without my senses, I would be as useless to my people as a recently born babe.

Much to my glee and yet simultaneous dismay, Jan's voice sounded a mere second later. "Beautiful match," he said, sarcasm thick in his tone. "I wonder, would you have the same success against me?"

His remark hit me with the same strength with which my own anger had gripped me earlier. A peculiar nausea came over me at the realization he was using the information I had given him recklessly the night before to humiliate me, to mock me with my one vulnerability. I could not hear him and he knew it. My anger disappeared almost instantly, replaced by a sorrow I did not understand. Why would I feel this sadness? I didn't know. What I did know was I needed to get out of there, rescue whatever dignity I had left and retreat someplace hidden to lick my wounds in silence.

"Maybe another day, Lord Nightbourne," I answered, feeling proud of my emotionless tone. "I'm afraid I am not quite used to a warrior of your level."

From the muted gasps of the crowd surrounding the sparring grounds, I could tell my admission of inferiority surprised the elves who'd come to watch the match. Half of me wanted desperately to see Jan's expression, to know what he thought of me. Did he despise me like everyone else did? Probably. Disdain had to be the one thing that could have prompted such a remark from him. The curse of my blindness aided me, yet again. I didn't know what he looked like, and yet the very thought of seeing him now seemed unbearable.

With a silent goodbye to the rest of the elves, I made my escape. There was only one place I could go. My garden, the garden in which I had met Jan only a few hours before. It wasn't truly mine, of course, but since it had been built so out of the way, others seldom partook of its peacefulness, preferring instead the more opulent luxury of the main gardens. Personally, I couldn't stand the main gardens, since the overwhelming cacophony of sounds and scents mixed together until they drove my every sense insane. The many aromas of flowers blended into an unidentifiable noxious fume. As if the nauseating result wasn't enough, always so many people filled the main garden; the serenity one would expect to find when communing with the Goddess became non-existent.

As I seated myself on the bench I also identified as mine, flashes of memory

of the day's events passed through my head. For me, memory had never been accompanied by a visual correspondent to what I heard or sensed, and for this reason the things I did remember, the tastes, emotions, scents, those things I recalled with a much greater intensity. I buried my face in my hands as I remembered the things I had felt and the things I had nearly done. If not for Jan's arrival, I would have very likely killed Sorhel in spite of his yielding to me. Would I never be free of this insane anger? Would I always have to live with this curse?

Sighing, I lifted my eyes and cursed myself for falling into self-pity. I could do better than this. So what if I seemed to be trapped in this vicious circle of violence? So what if everywhere I looked, I found only more betrayal, more hatred? I could move past it . . . I had to. I had no choice.

My thoughts again failed me as I caught a hesitant greeting from the entrance of the garden.

"Hi," Jan said and I immediately turned away, still unable to withstand the mere thought of him seeing me.

"Hello, Lord Nightbourne," I replied coolly. I did not know what else he wished of me, but at this point, the only thing I wanted was to be left alone. My entire body ached in an unnatural exhaustion and I wished to just close my eyes and sleep until this world was no more.

Naturally, I couldn't find such an easy way out. I had to continue existing and Jan had to continue speaking. "I simply wanted to apologize for my attitude in the sparring room. I deeply regret it."

I didn't know whether to laugh or to cry at his apology. Perhaps I should just tell him the truth, tell him I had not expected anything different. My anger originated from my mistake, from allowing myself to be vulnerable. In the end, Jan was not to blame for my own stupidity. After all, his attitude could be considered perfectly justifiable. As much as he hated the hypocrisy of elven nobility — if his words from the night before were to be believed, at least — he remained one of them while I was an outcast, a cursed freak allowed only to live because of my strange ability to kill.

Forcing myself out of my bout of self-pity, I focused on formulating a reply.

"It's all right," I answered neutrally. "I understand."

But Jan would not be denied. "No, please listen," he replied earnestly.

Obviously, he'd seen my coolness for what it was. I found my hand all of a sudden being captured in his, an action that surprised me immensely, especially since I had not realized he had moved so fast and had reached my position so stealthily. I withdrew my hand from his, fighting to maintain a straight face in spite of the fact Jan's simple gesture had caused my heart to start beating at an alarming speed.

"I'm doing this all wrong," Jan said, oblivious to the torment he had just caused inside of me. "I just wanted you to know what happened back there is something I am deeply ashamed of. I wish I could take my words back, say something to fix things, but I cannot. And now, I am once again being brasher than I'd intended. I hope perhaps you could be so kind so as to forgive my stupidity and start this day over again."

As I listened to his voice, my heart became calm and my tortured spirit seemed to be soothed magically. I could hear his honesty in his voice. He did indeed regret his words from the sparring grounds. I could also feel something else, the barely palpable trace of anger, like a shadow in his voice, ethereal and yet so real.

At the realization, I turned toward him and smiled, for if there was one emotion I understood, it was anger. "Apology accepted," I said, no longer shielding my eyes. "Sit now, and tell me what had you so angry today."

Jan sighed as he sat next to me, a deep, heartfelt sound that told me more than words could ever express. "Where should I begin?" he asked rhetorically. "I think I mentioned dancing with Alana Windwisp last night."

I nodded, remembering he had indeed mentioned the fae elf lady in passing. "If I remember correctly, his lordship, your father tried his matchmaking talents on you and her."

Jan chuckled and I guessed the way I had described his father amused him. In truth, the situation held nothing to laugh about as it represented yet another reminder of the difference in our ranks. He must have realized this, for after a second of hesitation, proceeded to explain. "Well, I found Alana sitting at the

breakfast table today, with the count, my brother, and my father."

I almost started to laugh at his obvious dodging of the issue, until his words penetrated my consciousness. "Wait—at the breakfast table? In the great hall?" I asked, unable to keep the disbelief from my voice. It was unheard of for a woman, even one of her standing, to join the men at the table.

A sudden unsettling feeling gripped my insides but I ignored it, focusing on Jan's words instead. "It's unbelievable, I know," Jan answered me with a sigh. "I couldn't believe my eyes when I saw her there. It made me so very angry. Not that I believe in this stupid separation of sexes, mind you. But the count is pushing his authority on us and going over the rules the rest of us must obey. That, I cannot accept."

I nodded seriously and had half a mind to tell him this was truly a serious issue. If Count Windwisp had such an authority, he could easily push his daughter onto Jan even if he had no desire to marry her. For some reason, I despised the mere thought.

But then Jan decided to make another striking revelation. "Actually, something else made me angry, even before I saw Alana," he said almost shyly.

"Oh?" I answered, intrigued. "What?" Truly, I couldn't imagine anything that could make him angrier than his father's attempts to marry him off.

"You and I, actually," Jan answered. "From this morning, I felt so stupid because of our talk last night. I thought you were untrustworthy and I couldn't believe I'd told you all those things."

I heard the familiar sound of flesh hitting flesh and guessed Jan had slapped himself at the realization of what he'd just said.

"Oh, Goddess. I can't believe I just said that," he added, confirming my suspicion.

The whole incident probably should have upset me if not for the fact I had experienced exactly the same thing just that morning. More so, I realized I simply couldn't make myself stay upset with Jan. There was something about him, about his honesty and the peculiar purity of his opinions. He was a strange person, so marked by battle but still conserving this innocent idealism that made him almost childlike.

Guilt shrouded my heart for all the things I hid from him, for the things I myself had thought. In comparison to him, I felt filthy.

I shook myself, not wanting him to realize the direction my thoughts had taken. If we were to conserve this weird friendship of ours, I would have to make a bit of an effort. "We're a strange duo, you and I," I said, forcing a smile I didn't quite feel. "What a funny fact, for both of us to be so stupid, stubborn, and prideful and to find shame in a simple conversation."

As I spoke these words, I realized my own heart suddenly seemed lighter. I had not told him too much, but in my own way, I had confessed my anger. Perhaps one day I would be ready to share all my secrets with him. Perhaps one day he would be the one to cure me from my curse.

Little did I know, Jan would, in the end, manage what neither Sorhel nor all the other elves had managed to do through their hatred. Little did I know, he, the one I had seen as so honest and pure, would push me over the edge and into the darkness.

## **Chapter Five**

### **Jan'ke Nightbourne: I Hear You**

After an initial reluctance, we started to fall into a peculiar routine. Our meetings gradually became regular occurrences. I did my best to make them discrete and Alix accepted this choice, knowing it was probably the best thing for the both of us. I did sometimes wonder whether demanding secrecy from him wasn't unfair, since, in truth, we had nothing to be ashamed of. After all, we were simply two soldiers sharing war stories and dark pasts.

I do know now, what we felt for each other went much further than a simple camaraderie, though. I suspect Alix knew this even earlier than I, and he'd been afraid to tell me. He had just cause not to trust me, for in the end, I let him down in the worst way. It had been my mistakes, my choices, that had led us both down the path to sorrow and loss.

There were times when we would just stand together in silence, enjoying each

other's presence. I did not think much of it, because the silence was never awkward. Instead, it provided a sort of comfort, and soon I found these moments held a deeper meaning. Through them, Alix became the one person in the world who could hear me — really hear me.

I do remember the day I realized my own feelings for Alix went beyond the realm of friendship. Perhaps, had I known then what would later happen, I would have never acted upon those feelings. Perhaps I would have kept them buried deep inside and rejected Alix's feelings for me. It would have been better . . . . Or would it have been? I cannot know. What I do know is I would forever blame myself for my love's pain.

For in truth, today, I realize how much my own mistakes and selfishness pushed me away from Alix. I realize I tried to have both the advantages of a noble of the elf court and the pleasure of Alix's affection. In the end, this selfishness of mine doomed us both.

\* \* \* \* \*

Yet again, my father, Lar and I had a meeting at breakfast with Count Windwisp — and Alana. I had, on several occasions, mentioned the peculiarity of the issue to my father, but he'd shrugged off my concerns as inconsequential. The entire group, however small, seemed too pleased with the arrangement and I suspected they secretly plotted against me. Sometimes, I would catch Alana throwing a secretive smile in my father's direction and I didn't enjoy the thought I was most likely the cause of that smile.

Somehow, through the entirety of breakfast, I had managed to not snap at any of the occupants of our table. The only thing keeping me from strangling at least one of the idiots was the knowledge that I would soon see Alix. My addiction to him had turned dangerous, but I couldn't withstand it. Every day, my steps inexorably took me to the interior garden where he would be waiting just for me. Every day, I yearned for him more and more. I told myself this had to stop, but I couldn't muster the strength. My reason seemed to have flown out the window and I could not make

myself forsake my clandestine meetings with Alix. Lately, they'd become the one bright moment keeping me sane in this otherwise insane world.

I hastened my steps, the need to see my mysterious friend burning in my veins. I thanked the Goddess for the casual stealth that kept me from being heard. No one remarked on my presence as I moved through the castle and toward the interior garden.

When I reached my destination, he waited on the very same bench he'd been sitting on that first day. He had once confessed to me he did, indeed, enjoy coming here, because of the silence and the solitude. I would have thought he was a creature of habit, but I suspected there had to be more to his visits than mere enjoyment. I suspected his being there that day had not been just a random coincidence and he came here at certain hours and on certain days to meet only me. I kept these thoughts to myself, however, for they led me in a direction that held many perils, for the both of us.

I opened my mouth to greet him, but the greeting froze on my lips when Alix lifted his blind eyes and smiled at me. "Jan. Greetings."

"You . . . How did you know I was here?" I stammered, disbelief coursing through my veins.

Alix grinned, signaling for me to approach. "I heard you, of course."

"That's impossible," I said as I took his invitation and sat next to him. "No one ever hears me when I walk around. I'm practically a ghost."

My blind companion scoffed. "Don't be ridiculous. You're not a ghost. You're just a very good soldier."

I blinked in surprise at the joking remark. It was the understatement of the century and Alix knew it, but he didn't seem inclined to have a conversation about my virtues as a soldier. "So . . . How did it go at breakfast?" he inquired, a fleeting smile crossing his lips.

I'd told Alix about Alana and my father's insistence on getting us more closely acquainted. Now, whenever we met, Alix asked me about how things progressed on that front, smiling at whatever else I'd done to cross my father and sabotage his plans.

"Nothing special today," I answered gloomily. "I felt uninspired."

Alix laughed at the dejection in my voice. "What can I do to cheer you up?"

My mouth went dry—I struggled for a response. As I looked at him then, I realized the answer to his question could bring about my doom. I yearned to feel those lips on my own; I desired them obsessively. I wanted Alix to whisper my name with that beautiful musical voice of his, over and again, as we made love.

I wasn't a stranger to sexual relations with men. Before the war, I'd had my fair share of male bodies writhing beneath me. Still, my desire for Alix meant so much more than sexual release or simply lust. My heart, the heart I had thought frozen and unable to feel, yearned for him. The passion burning inside me seemed folly, deviance, and insanity and yet, I could not help myself. Everything about Alix, from his silent power to his unpredictable temper, from his blind eyes to his amazingly melodious voice, drew me to him. I wanted to scream at the realization that yet again, I wanted something beyond my reach. But if I couldn't have Alix, I wanted to at least hear him sing again.

"Sing for me." I said before I could change my mind.

He looked taken aback, and I immediately regretted my unreasonable request. He'd told me about his discomfort upon being heard singing, and yet I wanted things to be different between us. I yearned to hear his song again, as much as I yearned for him.

"I'm sorry," I muttered quickly. "You don't have to if you don't want."

He took my hand and shook his head, smiling warmly. I looked into his eyes, and I felt dirty for being thankful for his blindness. If not for his innate handicap, he would see right through me, recognize my unnatural lust for him, my desperate need.

Squeezing my hand, he closed his blue eyes and started to sing. The beautiful notes floated and swirled in the air, surrounding us in a musical cocoon, happy and free. The song no longer held the same tragic feel or the deep loneliness, and that made it all the more beautiful. I could not have guessed something already perfect could become even more special, but I could not deny it anymore than I could deny the emotions in my heart.

As we sat there together in our small interior garden with Alix singing for me, I realized I was utterly and inescapably in love with him. The feeling should have scared me and yet Alix's voice seemed to shroud us in a protective bubble that surrounded us, sheltered us from the world, making everything seem possible. The strength of his voice made me forget, for a while, the impossibility of us being together, the impossibility of my feelings for him, the utterly non-existent chances of him ever sharing these feelings.

When Alix finished his song, he looked in my direction and offered me a radiant smile. I said to myself then, I could never do anything to kill his smile and I thanked the Goddess for being one of the few persons to be granted the chance to see it. He arched a perfectly defined brow at me. "Well?"

"Well what?" I replied, unsure of what he was asking.

He sighed, his tone clearly illustrating the "you're hopeless" attitude he often showed whenever I said or did something incredibly stupid or accidentally rude. "Do you feel better?"

I remembered I had asked him to sing for me under the pretext of a dark mood caused by my incredibly unpleasant breakfast with my family. The request seemed so distant now, so utterly insignificant in front of my epiphany, I almost let out a hysterical laugh. Nevertheless, I forced myself to answer, more for Alix's sake than for my own, knowing he would be concerned if I did not. "Yes, I feel so much better. You have a beautiful voice."

The compliment escaped me before I could stop myself, but fortunately for me, he didn't catch the peculiarity of a male flattering another male in such a manner. He was too busy blushing and turning away, and I fell even deeper into him, simply because of the innocence of that one action. It contrasted his tough image so much and I couldn't help but feel pleased he had allowed himself to show such vulnerability in front of me. Anyone else saw the warrior, the fae soldier hardened by a life of being surrounded by hatred and disdain. But I was privy to the beauty, the vulnerability, and the purity lying beneath; and I loved him even more for it.

He was my friend and I hated myself for desiring him in such a manner. I had

never thought I would find someone genuine and true, here of all places, and yet I trusted him. Although we only knew each other for so little time, something about Alix unavoidably drew me to him. Elven law and mores deemed this attraction inappropriate. Had my father been aware of the feelings I experienced for Alix, the consequences would be dire. I did not fear for myself, since my father could do absolutely nothing to hurt me. Alix was, however, vulnerable. His fragile status in Thralnia didn't provide him with the protection I was lucky to have and if someone found out about the connection between us, the results would be disastrous.

And yet, in that moment, I allowed myself to briefly disregard these concerns. It was as if his voice had given me the power to face the world without fear and to not lose myself in the chaos that surrounded me. I nearly leaned to kiss him, feeling the physical compulsion to touch him in some way. I stopped myself just in time, but not before Alix noticed the change in my demeanor.

He frowned ever so slightly. "Jan? Are you sure you're all right?"

Hearing my name on his lips sent a wave of heat through my body. I barely managed to refrain from taking him into my arms. "I'm fine. Stop worrying so much."

Alix looked like he didn't quite believe me, but he dropped the issue, choosing another topic. "I want you to promise me something."

"Anything," I agreed immediately, not caring how it sounded. "Anything you want."

Alix laughed, giving me one of those looks again. "Wait until you hear it. I could ask you to kill someone for all you know."

"You would never do such a thing," I replied, certainty in my voice. I didn't tell him how I knew. I didn't tell him I could feel his heart echoing my own. Yet again, he turned a blind eye on my slight indiscretion and I wasn't sure exactly how I felt about that. I sometimes wished I could read Alix better. In moments like these, I thought I could see a peculiar shadow on his face, something inscrutable that seemed familiar, yet not. The knowledge lay there, at the bottom of my mind, close but still out of my reach, and I couldn't help but wonder what secrets he had, what he kept from me.

"Anyway, promise me this," Alix said, continuing his previous trail of thought. "Be careful with Alana Windwisp. I don't trust her."

My eyes widened at the suddenness of his remark. So far, other than being slightly amused and sympathetic, Alix had never expressed any opinion on my father's attempts to marry me off. Why this unexpected change? I couldn't understand it.

How had Alana or the count drawn Alix's attention to them? To my knowledge, Alix had no contact with them. It had to be just Alix and his normal suspicious nature with regard to the elven aristocracy.

Having decided on this conclusion, I took his hand and squeezed it, no longer caring about the rudeness of the gesture. "I promise."

Upon hearing my words, he beamed at me. Much to my surprise, he didn't try to pull his hand from mine but breathed a visible sigh of relief. "Thank you."

If only I had kept the promise I had made to Alix that day. If only, in the rush of my emotions for him, I hadn't forgotten his concern. Perhaps both of our fates would have been different. Perhaps we could have both been saved from so much pain and betrayal.

## **Chapter Six**

### **Alix Skyeyes: Confession**

And so, I, Alix Skyeyes, the resident blind elf of the Southern Thralnia royal palace, and Jan'ke Nightbourne, dark elf general of the forces of Northern Thralnia, began a series of strange, clandestine meetings. At the time, I did not see them for what they were, nor did I immediately realize what I felt for him. I do not know exactly the moment this changed, but perhaps it is better to not dwell on such pointless questions too much.

Even if he is but a memory now, he is the one who keeps me alive here, in the hell in which I am buried. As always, it's dark in my world. But the darkness is no longer my friend, nor is it calm, serene, or even welcoming. My wrists are heavy with the weight of silver shackles, the magic metal burning my skin raw. The silence,

broken only by moans and ragged gasps signaling the pain of the dying and lost souls, kills the melody of my heart. I do not know how much time has passed since I've been imprisoned here. Time has no meaning when all you have to fill it is your own dark thoughts. I keep thinking about what I could have done differently, the things I wanted to say on so many different occasions, and yet forever went unsaid.

Even so, in spite of the stench of death surrounding me, I have not lost all hope. I know no one, but not even my captors can be vigilant forever. They will make a mistake and when they do, I will know. There is something inside of me that refuses to give up. Why, I do not know. I am certain, at this point, he has forgotten about me. Perhaps as I sit here in the dark, feeling the poison of the magic metal seep into my veins, slowly bringing with it my demise, he is in his bed, with his beautiful, perfect, and yet so deceitful wife. I remember the dark moments leading to my capture and think perhaps he is thankful for my disappearance, for my imminent death. And yet, a small voice inside of me, a small voice from the past insists that no, Jan would think no such thing of me. I have to fight, because Jan will come for me. He loves me, just like he said that time, so long ago.

\* \* \* \* \*

He was late today. I sat quietly waiting. The garden had quickly become like a refuge feeling more and more oppressing by the minute. Why the delay? Had something happened? Or had he finally become bored with me?

He'd told me his family planned on arranging his wedding with Alana Windwisp. I had mixed feelings about that. On the one hand, my logical side knew a political marriage would probably benefit him most. However, another part of me, the stubborn part, the one I didn't quite want to acknowledge, maintained Alana would never be able to make him happy. I admitted the reasoning held some fallacies. I didn't even know the woman, so passing such judgments made no sense. But how could I know her? She formed part of a world that should have been mine as well, but that I had been denied because of circumstances over which I had no control. Was I jealous? Maybe. If not for my mother's position as an archivist, I

would have never set foot inside this palace. All the while, this Alana Windwisp, a person who had lived all her life in the warm, comfortable cocoon of aristocracy, had everything cut out for her, including a marriage with the man I loved.

Yes, I loved Jan. I was in love with a man. So what? No one but me would ever know, so no one would ever care. My obsession would be my secret, one of the many secrets I would carry to my grave. I could hope only that death would be so kind as to wait a bit longer for me. Immortality meant nothing in front a strategically placed blade, or a discrete drop of poison, but now, more than ever, I had no desire to be one of the examples to illustrate that particular fact of life.

I wondered what his reaction would be if I told him about my feelings for him. Would he be angry? Would he be disappointed? Would he ignore me or scream at me? I think his indifference would hurt me more than his anger. Could I risk it? This question had tormented me for too long now, haunting me constantly, even in my dreams.

Last week, I had sung to him. Other than my mother, he'd been the only person with whom I'd willingly shared my voice. I had been so close to telling him my secret that day, to telling him I loved him, but something had held me back. Maybe the reason had been the knowledge of his arranged relationship with Alana, or the realization of the shameful and unnatural nature of my feelings for him. Or perhaps it had simply been my cowardice. No, I could not risk it. I could not risk losing what little of him I had.

Unbidden, a song weaved its way through my heart, and yet again I allowed it to flow out of me, releasing the anguish and yearning with every note I sang. I found freedom and solace in my music, freedom from the sorrow of my curse, freedom from the anger of knowing the many things I would never have.

For I could not have him. I accepted this knowledge with much sorrow. My Jan . . . . My Jan who was not mine at all, as much as I desired him to be.

Strangely enough, even through my singing, I heard him before he entered the garden. I stopped singing, smiled in greeting, and waved him to my side. "Hello. You're late."

I wanted to bite my tongue at my own careless remark. So far, we actually

had never established a meeting hour or place. From the morning after the party, the time and place of our meetings had become an automatic custom, and something we never spoke of—like a peculiar taboo. It amused me and saddened me at the same time we had to play this game, almost pretending our encounters were every time as random as they'd been in the beginning.

Luckily, he allowed my slip of the tongue to go unnoticed and I heard the air shift as he sat at my side.

"What's the matter?" he asked, concern in his voice. "Is anything wrong?"

It amazed me how he could read my heart so perfectly, how he could delve deep and decipher my songs when no one else seemed able. I wondered sometimes if by any chance he couldn't see my feelings for him but had refused to acknowledge them so we could continue this game we were unwillingly playing.

My eyes filled with tears as I looked in his direction. I didn't understand the gloom filling my heart. I was not an idiotic teenaged female, weeping over the loss of her first crush. I would not let this feeling bring me down, damn it! I refused to do it.

"It's nothing, really." I turned away, hoping he had not seen my incipient tears, for I knew not how to explain them. What excuse could I find for my sudden weakness, this melancholy so out of character for me? While I did have my own bouts of sadness, I never wept, not anymore. My tears had dried a long time ago.

"Alix," he murmured, and my name on his lips unwillingly caused shivers of pleasure to run down my spine. "Alix, please! Talk to me! Why don't you trust me?"

He made no effort in masking the raw hurt in his voice. I could not allow him to misunderstand my reluctance to speak. "I do. I do trust you. It's just that . . . . Goddess, I don't know how to say this."

Jan sighed and wrapped his arm around my shoulders. His warmth seeped into my bones, comforting and yet intimidating. I wanted to lean into him and at the same time, realized I could not. Indulging in such a guilty pleasure would be giving up my secret.

"Is it that bad?" he asked, oblivious to my distress. "You know you can tell me anything."

The fire in my blood awoke, fueled by my anger with myself and with him. I

had never needed anyone in my life. I felt a remote attachment to my mother, but there were so many things separating us, so many lies and secrets and pain. I had grown up resenting her, resenting everyone around me and long ago stopped being a child. I did not need Jan to pity me or comfort me and neither was I a coward. For good or bad, I would stop hiding.

In a flash, I shifted my body and pressed my mouth to his. As I tasted his unmoving lips against mine, I realized the extent of my insanity. This was my friend, damn it! He had no fault in the misery of my life, nor did he have anything to do with my blindness or my complexes. I instantly backed away and nearly fell off the bench in my haste. "Oh, for the Goddess," I started babbling. "I'm sorry, so sorry. I don't know what came over me. I didn't mean to do that."

Jan's voice sounded cool when he answered my pathetic apologies. "Didn't you?" And I didn't understand the meaning of his inquiry, until he expanded on it. "Didn't you mean it?"

Was there really a right answer to his question? I had followed my impulses and effectively made a fool of myself. Why did I want to apologize, anyway? What was the point of retracting my actions, when no matter what I said, my one impulsive kiss would forever remain between us, a wall I had erected with my own hands, through my own selfishness and perversion?

Gathering the remnants of my dignity, I cleared my throat and faced him again. I wished I could see his eyes so that maybe I could guess what thoughts passed through his mind. Like the day after our showdown in the sparring ground, however, I realized my blindness saved me. This way, I would not lose my nerve upon seeing his disdain or his disgust. "I did mean the kiss. I didn't mean to force my desires on you. I shouldn't have —"

I didn't have the time to finish my phrase. My words died in my throat, replaced by a startled gasp, when strong lips crushed against my own. My eyes widened in shock as his taste flooded my senses, and I instinctively wrapped my arms around his neck, drawing him closer. He feasted on my lips, greedily tasting every inch of my mouth, thrusting his tongue against mine, ravaging me.

He kissed just as he lived — intensely, roughly, passionately, taking no

prisoners. I wished this moment would go on forever, that we would never return to reality. When our mouths met for our first true kiss, the world existed for the two of us alone, a world where nothing could ever part us.

Alas, much to my regret, we still needed to breathe. The kiss stopped as abruptly as it began, and for a moment, I struggled to catch my breath, thinking I had dreamt it. "Alix . . . Oh, Goddess! I didn't think you —"

His voice had turned raspy, husky with passion, and I dared to extend my hand in an attempt to touch him. I had never done anything like this before, so I had no inkling of what he looked like. I didn't know if his hair was long or short, soft or rough, if he tied it in a braid and wore it loose like me. I yearned to know all this, to see him somehow, even if my eyes could not.

I reached for his face, suddenly needing to map his features in my head, to trace the lines of his cheeks, his lips with my fingers. Before my fingers could connect with his skin, he backed away as if he'd been slapped. "Don't!" he snapped at me coldly. "Don't touch my face!"

Silence stretched between us again, this time hurtful, awkward and uncomfortable.

"Why not?" I asked, struggling to keep my voice neutral.

"I don't want you to see it," Jan answered. "I don't want you to see me."

My heart constricted as I realized he didn't trust me enough to reveal his face to me. How could he not know his looks made no difference? I had fallen for him without touching him once. How could he believe something so superficial could change my opinion of him?

I turned away, certain at this point I could no longer keep the hurt from my face. An entire life of pretending and keeping my volatile temper in check meant nothing in front of the whirlpool of feelings I guarded inside. I struggled to understand Jan and yet I could not. He claimed to have for me the same affection I did for him and yet, when I tried to reach for him, he pushed me away. Why?

I didn't have to think about the answer to my question. For all the feelings we had for each other, we did not trust one another completely. I myself had not trusted him with my worst secret, the curse I hid from everyone around me. I wanted to tell

him – oh, how I wanted to; but now, more than ever, I feared our fragile relationship would disintegrate under its weight.

How could I, therefore, ask him to share his burden with me when I could still not share my own? I was being unfair and selfish. Jan would let me see him when he was ready. "It's all right," I said, turning toward him. "I understand." And this time, I really did. I reached for his hand and squeezed it comfortingly. I had remarked on the roughness of his palms before, the calluses caused by so many years holding a blade. Despite my own experience in battle, I had somehow been spared of these signs. I wondered if this particularity of mine made him uncomfortable around me. I wondered what other marks war had left on his skin, what other things he feared to show me.

He obviously guessed my feelings in the matter were honest and I nearly let out an embarrassing yelp as he pulled me toward him, hugging me to his strong chest. I still couldn't see his face, but for now, we'd silently reached an acceptable compromise. I could, at least, tell he was a large man, taller, and much more muscular than I was. His masculine scent invaded my nostrils and I buried my face deeper into his shirt, careful to keep my hands from touching his skin. I wanted more and I hated the material that kept me from truly seeing him, but it was all I had for the moment and I needed to be thankful. The simple fact he returned my affections seemed unbelievable enough. How could I possibly protest his reluctance toward showing me his face when my dream had unexpectedly come true?

I did not realize, at the time, that through my acceptance of this quirk of his, I started a vicious circle we would be unable to escape. He did not trust me and I did not trust him; and these lies, this falsehood, eventually separated us.

## **Chapter Seven**

### **Jan'ke Nightbourne: Alliance**

It has always been a surprise for me how absurd sometimes the norms of elven society can be. Prejudice and loathing surround me for no reason other than minor differences, misunderstandings, and family-instilled disdain. Bigotry is the

cause of so many wars and fighting, of so much death and destruction.

Perhaps the weirdest thing about elven society, however, is its view on women. For the elves, women are like beautiful jewelry, valuable assets that increase the standing of those to whom they are associated. Their purpose in life is to be graceful and charming, to obey their husbands, and to produce more beautiful, perfect children.

I am very much aware this is not an entirely uncommon view on the abilities and role of women. Other races seem to treat their women even worse, like slaves whose only purpose is to serve the males' sexual needs. I have the suspicion this logic is, at best, flawed, especially since not all men are interested in women, as my own life has proved. Then again, Alix and I could be the exception to the rule and I could not judge other races based on my own experience. Still, regardless of this issue, the fact remains that a woman is actually the most dangerous weapon a man could acquire. Often, women are the best warriors, the best spies, or even the best assassins.

It is quite curious, though, how I did not see this fact until her plan stole my love from me. As much as I prided myself on my progressive views, I still disregarded women as being inferior to me in intellect. My mother had long ago become a mere attachment to my father's name and I had not seen her in decades. Since she had done her duty to her family, she no longer held any interest in us and had retreated to a reclusive property of the Nightbournes, hoping to at last find some peace. Likewise, I found my sisters superficial and promiscuous. For some reason, even if my brother acted much in the same manner, I accepted Lar, while I avoided striking any sort of conversation with my sisters.

Perhaps this unconscious chauvinism, this intrinsic prejudice specific to the elven male, blinded me to the danger she presented. Alana Windwisp. The daughter of Count Windwisp. It is quite ironic how this girl changed the course of my life. I did not realize at the time, but as I think back, always, there were signs of her hidden intelligence. Even in revealing to me her secret agenda, she had played me with so much ease it is ridiculous to admit. I do not know to this day if malice tainted her intelligence or if she had simply chosen the path that had best served her own

interests. Thinking objectively, I could not blame her for some of her actions. But her plans against me were one thing and her viciousness against my lover, another. For her treatment of Alix, I will never forgive Alana Windwisp. If I ever meet her again, it will not matter that she is a woman. My chauvinism has long ago disappeared and I will be sure to prove it to her – in a more than unpleasant manner.

\* \* \* \* \*

The sparring grounds were close to empty at the early hour of the morning I decided to show up. A mixture of thankfulness and disappointment filled my heart as I realized I did not see Alix around. While I truly ached to see him, it would have to wait until we could be alone. If we met in public, undoubtedly, I would give myself away.

How could I not? Just the day before, Alix and I had shared the most incredible kiss I had ever experienced. I was by no means a shy virgin, but when my lips had touched his, my body had responded as if it had, indeed, experienced my first kiss. Nothing I had ever done with my previous lovers, either male or female, had prepared me for such a moment.

A thousand butterflies fluttered their wings in my belly and my hands itched with the need to touch Alix's soft skin. I wanted to shout my love for him to the world, but I could not. If word spread of such a thing, both my life and his would be in danger. Taking into account my status as a general, I would perhaps be able to escape the punishment of the sodomy laws, but Alix wouldn't be given any leniency.

I also found myself quite annoyed with the fact I had been forced into promising to meet my brother later this morning. This meant I couldn't see Alix all morning and possibly all afternoon. Furthermore, I had to deal with Lar's stupidity instead of enjoying my love's kisses.

Grabbing a practice blade, I started to fight off my excess energy on one of the available dummies in the practice room. Killing the dummy over and over represented a harmless and slightly useless effort, but the mindless exercise served its purpose. I needed the exhaustion to calm my nerves.

I was still attempting to reach this goal more or less an hour later when I heard a presence behind me. Without bothering to look, I immediately identified the arrival as being my brother. "Hello, Lar."

The intended stealth of his footsteps stopped and I could almost hear him curse silently at having failed to take me by surprise.

"How do you do that?" Lar asked in dismay.

I shrugged, feeling uncomfortable at the praise intrinsic in his words. Taking into account Alix's abilities, my own meant nothing. His hearing and senses were so much better than mine, and I couldn't help but feel dismayed at the unfairness of his status in the army. He deserved a much better standing and much more respect than he received. My body responded as I thought about Alix and I immediately forced my mind away, hoping Lar had not caught my embarrassing situation.

"You're early," I told him, instead of answering his question, busying myself with the sparring sword.

Lar gave me an uneasy look. "Yes, well, I need to talk to you about something important."

Inwardly, I grimaced, not at all in the mood to deal with Lar's concerns. I had my own problems to worry over and I doubted anything Lar presented would be serious enough as to qualify as a problem in my book. Nevertheless, in spite of Lar's irritating habits, he remained my brother, after all, and as much as I wanted to, I could not refuse him. I had promised to meet him the day before and I could not go back on my word. He had come early, indeed, and I found it quite unusual that he would awake at this hour just to see me. Considering the effort on his part, I found it improper to refuse him.

Still, I was in no mood to be generous, so instead of going to my brother immediately, I nodded silently and proceeded to arrange the items I had used.

"Give me a second," I said over my shoulder, stalling Lar as much as I could. With that, I retreated to the adjoining cleansing room. The chamber was mostly used by the elves belonging to the aristocracy who were overly arrogant and could not fathom the idea of being seen looking anything but perfect. Normally, I would find such vanity useless, since in truth, elves sweat very little and even after trying to

exhaust myself for an hour, my appearance would seem, to the unpracticed eye, no different than when I had entered the training grounds. If one looked closely enough, one could detect slight imperfections. But in the sea of imperfections of my face, what did a light sheen of sweat matter?

I forced myself not to think about the issue and consciously avoided my reflection in the water. I hated this room for that reason and only decided to go inside then because I loathed dealing with Lar's annoying presence. Perhaps I was better off with my brother though, rather than in this tormenting place that seemed like a hall of mirrors, mocking me constantly with my own image.

I washed away all trace of the morning's activities, no longer feeling so willing to spend time in the cleansing chamber. Finally, I exited the room and headed toward my brother who, much to my disappointment, still waited patiently.

"All right, Lar. What's the problem?" I asked as we left the training grounds. "What did you do, now?"

Lar remained silent for a second, as if considering his words. "Actually, it's not about me, brother. It's about you."

I found myself unable to keep the irritation from my tone. "Excuse me?"

As always, Lar ignored my annoyance completely. "Well, it's come to my attention that you and a certain elf lady have found a lot in common," he replied calmly.

I stared at my brother with what I was sure was a blank expression as he wiggled his eyebrows; I suppressed the urge to groan. Things in common? Right. Alana and I had in common only the curse of being born into idiotic, self-centered families. When your family decided to arrange your sex partners, you knew something about your life was seriously wrong.

Even so, I couldn't smack the idiotic grin off my brother's face simply because the idea that I enjoyed Alana's company had proven to be incredibly convenient. If not for her, my father would have never left me alone long enough for me to make time to meet Alix. He'd also enlisted the help of my beloved siblings in order to fix me up with a pretty and appropriate wife, and this only furthered my conviction that I had to keep Alix a secret at all costs.

I sighed, deciding I would have to go along with Lar's stupidity. "What's your point?"

Lar's grin widened and I couldn't help but feel a bit jealous at the understanding of the difference between us. He could seduce his elven women with but a smile; I had to hide my face from the man I loved out of fear he would reject me.

Inwardly shaking myself, I focused on what my brother had to say.

"I have a plan to help you."

"A plan," I repeated, giving him a suspicious look. "What exactly is this plan of yours?"

"You'll see; you'll see." Lar chuckled, rubbing his hands together in satisfaction.

"Why are you even interested in this?" I inquired, hoping to draw Lar's attention away from whatever he had in mind.

"Well, dear brother, I've seen the Windwisp girl. She's quite beautiful. And besides, you need some variation and color in your life."

I ignored his latter remark, since I had all the color I wanted in my life through Alix. Knowing I needed to keep my mind off my handsome blind elf, I proceeded to give my brother a scathing reply. "You shouldn't make such observations on Alana's looks. After all, you are wooing Lord Flamecloud's daughter. I saw you with her the night of the party."

Lar shrugged, dismissing my observation. "Old news. Besides, I don't woo girls; I sleep with them. You know me better than that, dear brother." He punched my side jokingly. "Why, Jan, are we jealous?"

I rubbed my eyes tiredly, feeling too old for such antics. In different times, tales of Lar's promiscuity would have amused me. In fact, I had once enjoyed the same lifestyle he still too eagerly pursued. Now, however, Lar's exploits were yet another burden in my increasingly complicated life.

"Come on, Jan," he said before I could protest further. "I arranged for you to talk to Alana alone."

I had suspected and feared this outcome and I wanted to kick myself for

agreeing to talk to Lar in the first place. I didn't have a chance to back down and was obligated to go along with Lar's arrangement.

I allowed myself, therefore, to be dragged off by Lar in an unknown direction.

"Here we are," Lar whispered as we reached a room in the western wing of the palace.

I rolled my eyes behind his back. My father could in no way be in the dark regarding my "secret" meeting with Alana. Since appropriate mores forbade him from suggesting something remotely scandalous to his son, he'd asked my younger brother to do so. How so very predictable.

Inwardly, I sighed, hoping she would not try to get me into her bed, not for me, but for her. I had officially declared my libido dead and buried, although lately, that had changed. One person never failed to revive my lust, the one person who was off limits, at least, until we were in private.

With the knowledge I had to hide my liaison with Alix, I agreed to my brother's suggestion. For that reason and that reason alone, I played along with Lar's game. And so, I entered the room where Alana waited. We had never been unaccompanied in a room before, since society rules considered such behavior inappropriate. I wondered what exactly she and Count Windwisp plotted with this new development.

For all I knew, one of my interfering relatives still watched us, so when I kissed her wrist in greeting, my lips lingered a little longer on her skin than would have been considered proper. She reacted with a bit of a startle, but to her credit, she waited until the door clicked shut before snatching her arm from my grasp.

Her shock and horror filled me with a sort of sadistic satisfaction and it must have shown on my face, for a gasp escaped her lips at my expression. I imagined I was quite the sight, with scars marring my face and my apparently polite smile spread into a mocking grimace forming a picture that had to be unsettling to say the least. I mostly forced myself not to dwell on it, but people like Alana never allowed me to forget. For once, I didn't resent it. I hated being coerced into seeing Alana when the only thing I wanted was to meet Alix in the garden I secretly called ours. I suspected my sudden hostility toward her didn't come out as expected, for her

expression turned stony and her emerald eyes narrowed.

"My lord," she started coldly, "I think we need to have a conversation."

The sudden courage and decision in her tone surprised me. I had not expected her to give up so easily on the idea of being wed to the most famous general of Thralnia. I offered her a neutral smile and bowed slightly. "Of course, my lady. I'm all yours."

My polite reply seemed to give her pause and she hesitated for a second, considering her words. Her reluctance bothered me, but I waited politely for her to have her say. After all, speaking out must have been difficult for her. Elven women were taught to be graceful, stoic, obedient, and always lovely, but in the end, only an asset to their fathers, brothers, or husbands.

Alana swallowed nervously and brushed non-existent lint of her dress.

"General Jan'ke," she began again, and the formal address immediately alerted me to what she planned to say. "I understand my father may have led you to believe certain things about me."

She paused, scrutinizing my face, but I kept my features carefully blank.

With a sigh, she met my eyes and continued. "I'm sorry if you believed otherwise, but I cannot be what you seek. I cannot marry you. I am in love with another."

Her words sounded decided, if uncertain, and I could easily read the honesty in her gaze. I wondered whether she realized the weapon she herself had given me through that little piece of information, the way she had exposed herself to a possible vendetta from my part. Luckily for her, I had no interest in such exploits and I arched a brow, having already decided my answer before she'd started speaking. "Congratulations. But don't worry; I had no intention to wed you either."

At first, she said nothing at my calm reply, but when she looked at me again her eyes were inundated with pity. "Of course. But you have to know, I truly am sorry. I—"

In this world there was nothing I despised more than the emotion of pity. I scowled at her and her apology froze on her lips. Probably, she believed I sought to lie, to protect the remnants of my shredded dignity. So what if I still bore the scars of

my life as a warrior? Alix loved me regardless. Arrogant bitch! She thought so highly of herself, as if I considered her some grand princess I could not live without. But I did not need her in the least. Women like her were a dime a dozen and if I wanted to, I could find another elven girl to take her place as my cover, one who didn't mock me with infuriating shows of compassion.

Her attitude irritated me to the point that I did something I wouldn't have normally even considered. I grabbed her hand and before she could escape me, forcibly pressed her palm to my crotch. As expected, my body did not respond in the least to her touch. For all her beauty, I had to force myself to not shy away from my own actions.

"As you can see, I do not feel the slightest attraction for you, *my lady*," I said, sarcastically emphasizing the polite address.

Her eyes widened at the sudden shift in my attitude and at my vulgar gesture and she immediately snatched her hand away. A smirk playing on my lips, I allowed her to escape. The anger burning fiercely in her green eyes amused me. The hard slap she gifted me with only furthered my good humor and I laughed at her fury, enjoying the dismay and hatred in her voice.

"How dare you?" She panted, as if she'd made some great effort. "How dare you treat me like some filthy whore?"

I grinned at her, ignoring the throbbing of my cheek. For a girl, she packed quite a punch. "You have done nothing to earn my respect. You went out of your way to flatter me, showing interest in my person. And then you turn back and say you cannot wed me, for you love another. Tell me, why exactly should I respect you?"

"I faked it, pretended for my father," she screeched. "And who are you to judge me? It's not like you were acting any differently."

Her answer silenced another disdainful reply from my part. She had a point. As she'd been using me, I had been using her to draw attention away from Alix. At my sudden silence, she gave me a cautious look, as if she expected me to attack her for her insulting attitude. I had no such intention. In fact, the more I thought about it, the more I realized how beneficial this arrangement could be for the both of us.

I decided I had to try to make things work, to keep people from finding out about Alix. "It's true. I've been lying for the benefit of appearances as well. Listen, Alana Windwisp, I have a proposition for you."

She sat back on the sofa, and, her eyes analyzing me warily, she asked, "A proposition?"

"Yes." I nodded in assent. "Like you, I have my own reasons for playing this game and wearing this mask. Therefore, I am asking you to continue playing. You do not have to like me, in fact, I am pretty sure that would be impossible at this point and I don't care either way. But it would be useful for both of us if our esteemed parents believed we were involved."

Alana looked down at her hands and she remained silent as she contemplated my words. "Do you have a lover as well?" she asked.

"My love life is none of your business," I answered snappishly. "Make no mistake, we are not friends, and I would not trust you as far as I could throw you."

If she took offense to my remark, she did not show it. Instead, she got up and extended her hand to me. "All right. We have a deal."

Seeing her smile, I understood she'd seen right through my anger and into my heart and realized I did indeed have a secret liaison. I took her hand and squeezed it with more force than necessary, threatening to break the fragile bones.

"Do not dare to double cross me, Alana. You wouldn't like me when I'm angry."

Even to my own ears, my threat sounded like a cliché so her laughter didn't surprise me. For good or bad, my destiny was tied to the destiny of this mysterious woman. I didn't realize then, but I had willingly, in fact, signed an alliance with my worst enemy.

## **Chapter Eight**

### **Alix Skyeyes: Secret Lovers, Secret Enemies**

Growing up, my mother told me to always be wary of women. Always, I had found her words funny, taking into account her gender, but I later learned I should

have valued her advice . . . taken it to heart.

There haven't been a lot of women in my life, simply because none would ever come close to me. Then again, I have no regrets, since the only woman I have any interest in has always been my mother and I don't think my attitude would change any time soon. I, myself, am not sexually inclined toward the female gender in any way.

Perhaps this inattention has been one of the many mistakes I made. I still believe that, had I paid more heed to my mother's advice, had I not left Jan to his own devices, I could have prevented our separation. But I trusted our love. I trusted the fact we were stronger than anything the rest of the world could throw at us, than anything *she* could do.

Indeed, I doubted Alana Windwisp the moment I first heard her name. There was just something about that name, something I couldn't put my finger on, which made me wary of the person bearing it. I had never seen her nor had we met, and I had no reason to think such a thing. In truth, I acted in haste when I warned Jan away from her without even knowing the woman. One must know the enemy before one acts, and I had made him promise me something for which I had no logical basis.

Still, my first instinct had been correct. Even now, as I stand here, in pain, in darkness, and in sorrow, the image constantly haunting me is hers. I almost want to laugh at the irony. I remember her face and yet I do not know the face of the one I love. Perhaps this torment is fitting. Perhaps it is a sign that Jan and I were never meant to be.

The whispers encouraging me start to fade away and I can no longer hear Jan's voice in my head. Only *her* voice and image remain. Alana Windwisp. Her hair fell in golden waves to her waist, shining like I imagined the stars did – and her green eyes made me yearn for the embrace of silent forests. Had I not experienced blindness before, her beauty and perfection would have stolen my eyesight. Most importantly, she was a woman. How could I, a cursed creature of darkness, ever compete with that? I could not, and I would not, ever again. She had everything I had ever wanted, even as her deceptive splendor hid her true nature.

No one would see behind her mask of loveliness to reveal the lies and deceit that lay beneath. Only I knew the truth, but I understood her scheme much too late. I hoped only that Jan would somehow realize it as well and he would not end up drawn into the web of lies this traitorous woman had so skillfully spun.

\* \* \* \* \*

I woke up feeling restless. Unsettling dreams had tortured my sleep the night before and I found it peculiar, especially since I rarely dreamt at all. When I did, the dreams were mere impressions, strong feelings, noises or touches in the darkness. Courtesy of my blindness, not even my dreams could be visual. I did not feel anything missing, because, after all, I had never been blessed with sight. Though last night, my dream had been different. I remembered, vaguely, something resembling my notion of light. It felt strange, though, not quite right, and when I tried to walk toward it, it burned me.

As I dressed for the day, I tried to figure out what could have caused this sudden dream. In all honesty, I'd had visions of color or light before. Sometimes when in battle or when angry, I would experience a strange sensation in my eyes. The darkness shifted, turning a different shape, a different feel, a different color. It seemed as if my eyes were covered by a blind patch, but the binding stopped being black, instead tinted in a shade I thought I recognized as the color red.

Shaking my head, I forced myself not to overanalyze this. It was just a dream, nothing more, perhaps just a memory from battle or from whatever moment this strange phenomenon had last happened to me. At any rate, musing uselessly about my problem wouldn't solve it.

One person alone could give me a hint as to the whys of my flaws and all my mysteries. My mother, Eireene Skyeeyes. But no matter how much I had tried to convince her to reveal to me the truth about my birth and my ancestry, she simply refused, claiming I would be better off not knowing.

Having decided to consult her on the issue of my dream, I left my room in a hurry. My mother and I shared a small living area close to the servants' quarters. She

had long ago lost her position at court due to my birth, but her intelligence, though unrecognized, had made her indispensable for the palace organization, as vital as my fighting skills for the army. She now worked in the archives and her job had allowed us to receive a small place of our own.

As I passed to the minuscule hallway, I realized my mother had still not awakened. Our small home consisted in two cramped bedrooms and another room that served both as a cooking area and a receiving room. Still, it was better than I would have ever gotten on my own. In fact, only because of my mother's efforts had we managed to receive this shelter in the first place.

I allowed myself a moment to regret the distance I had myself placed between us. She would not tell me anything that would solve my problem in any way. Paining her again with my questions would be useless. She had her reasons for hiding the truth and I had to learn to deal with her silence. Blaming her for my curse was no longer an option.

I vowed I would soon talk to her, though, make things right, maybe tell her about Jan. She loved me and would not scorn me for my preference. Perhaps I could keep Jan's name a secret, just in case. I would have to give the issue some thought.

Decision made, I turned on my heel and exited our small abode. The morning silence had started to dissipate as the palace awoke from its slumber and servants began to prepare everything necessary to meet the nobles' demands. I, myself, had no business in the kitchens or the administrative areas so I dodged the incoming servants with ease and went on my way.

Since the end of the war, the army no longer took their duties or training seriously and only the national and imperial guards maintained their posts. With the presence of the dark elves, the guard had been surreptitiously increased, but I had not been included in those who had been honored with this task. I had been quite put out by this fact at the time, because one of the things I hated most in life was feeling useless. In the end, their disdain of me had worked out to my advantage though; I could now afford to spend time with Jan without attracting attention.

I still had some time to kill until the hour I would meet my love. It was usually in the late afternoon or evening that we met, since Jan often had his

mornings busy with dodging whatever plans his family had come up with in their never ceasing creative ways. This particular morning, however, he had been unable to skip a meeting with his brother Lar'an, so unfortunately, we had to delay our meeting until even later in the day.

As I wandered along the palace corridors, I considered going to the sparring grounds. However, I would probably find Jan there and as much as I wanted to be in his presence, our relationship still needed to be kept secreted. If I heard his voice or his laugh, I would give myself away. Anyone, even the most casual of spectators, would recognize my feelings for him.

Instead of going to the training grounds, I decided to head toward the archives. I had not visited the area in quite a while and honestly, I missed the scent of the dusty tomes, the silence and the simplicity of being there. Usually, the offices of the archives were locked but not the adjoining library. Naturally, I could also pick the lock, but what could I possibly find of interest in the offices?

As I walked, the hustle and bustle of running servants started to disappear and I began to feel more comfortable in the solitude. There was no one to look down on me, to make me angry, or to accuse me of being cursed. I wished I could share this majestic silence with Jan.

As I thought about my love, my hearing suddenly caught the sound of running footsteps approaching from somewhere to my right. Now, this fact in itself would be nothing special, but the part of the castle wing housing the archives didn't draw much attention this early in the morning. All the servants were in the kitchens, the nobles had yet to awake, and the guards had already taken their posts. My mother was the only one who could be expected to arrive anytime soon, but even her arrival would be much later, after an hour at least.

Therefore, the mysterious visitor intrigued me. By the sound of her footsteps, the heels clicking across the marble floor, I could conclude she had to be a woman. Carefully, I snuck into the shadows so I would not be seen when she passed. I needn't have worried. She sped past me without even pausing and just like that, I made my decision. Her very presence here seemed tremendously suspicious to me and I found it imperative to follow her and uncover her motive. Since she had been

so close, I could tell easily she belonged to the noble class. I heard the swishing of her delicate robes against the tiles of the palace floor and even in her haste, her footsteps held the grace of the elven ton. I had to find out why a noble woman would be in the archives at this hour, alone and unattended. It could perhaps have something to do with my mother.

Carefully, I followed her through the corridors as she ran. Judging by the way she paused from time to time, I concluded she was looking for something. In the end, she reached her goal and I sneaked inside a hidden alcove as I sensed another presence near.

The unknown lady sighed in relief, but a hint of irritation mixed with panic crept into her voice. "Finally! I thought I had mistaken the meeting place and I wouldn't find you."

I almost snorted, noting she automatically blamed herself for the nearly failed meeting when it could be just as likely the other person had forgotten or come later at the intended spot. Fortunately, I had experience in stealth and I managed to refrain myself from making any noise just in time. I continued to listen, feeling wicked for eavesdropping on the secret meeting of two lovers.

"Not a problem," a man's voice I had never heard before answered. "I would have found you if you were lost."

I rolled my eyes at the corniness, but then again, probably all lovers were corny when together. The Goddess alone knew of my sickeningly sweet thoughts whenever I thought of Jan. Still, the fact this couple had met in this secret place intrigued me and I continued to listen.

I heard them walk away and sneaked from my hiding spot, half fearing I would be caught. I needn't have worried, of course, as the duo soon entered a room. I grimaced as I heard the unmistakable sound of clothes rustling and could picture in my head, in so far as I was capable, at least, two lovers hurrying to remove their expensive outfits. By the moans that followed, I knew also what went on in the room. My hearing soon picked up female pleas and masculine groans, the sound of a creaking bed, gasps, and even some name calling. I thought at some point I heard the woman call the man by his name, but she sounded too incoherent for me to

decipher her words.

At any rate, the acoustic spectacle made me decide I'd had enough of eavesdropping for one day. The thought of hearing them continuing their clandestine fuck held no appeal to me, mostly because their meeting brought to mind the fact I might be interested in doing the same with Jan. The simple idea of comparing us with these two made me feel dirty, like I had sullied our connection somehow.

As I was walking away, however, I heard someone else approach on the corridor. I cursed, realizing it had to be my mother. Why would she arrive early for work? It didn't really matter. If I didn't find a good hiding spot, she would see me and disclose my presence to the duo of lovers inside. My mother had been among the few persons who could feel my approach, so I couldn't risk simply ducking into an alcove like I had done earlier. I chose the safest way out, therefore, hastily picking the lock to the room next to the one the two occupied. The lock yielded quite easily, and in mere seconds I closed the door, relocked it and breathed a sigh of relief when my desperate efforts didn't cause the slightest of noise. Thank the Goddess for elven servants obsessed with keeping hinges well oiled!

Barely a minute later, the couple caught on to my mother's approach as well.

"Did you hear that, Ran?" the woman whispered.

"Shh . . . ." the man hissed. "The door's locked. We'll be fine."

The three of us waited in silence as my mother proceeded past the rooms. She paused for a second in front of my own hiding place and I thought I had been discovered. If anyone could have revealed me, it would be her or Jan, but Jan wouldn't be a problem, unlike my mother.

Luckily, she decided her job was more important than a foolish suspicion and walked away from the rooms, muttering under her breath. "You're being silly. There's no way he'd be here."

The two lovers next door had obviously missed her last remark, because I heard the man say, "It must have been the archivist. She's gone."

"Thank the Goddess. I really thought we'd been caught," the woman replied. After a brief pause, she started saying something else and her tone immediately

drew my attention. "Do you really think the plan will work, Ran? It's not too crazy?"

"It was your idea in the first place," the man said in turn. "Why are you falling into doubt now?"

"What if he finds out?" the woman shot back. "You know him better than I. What would he do?"

The man chuckled, the sound meant to come across as affectionate, but seeming derogatory to me. "He won't be too happy about it. But don't worry, he won't dare to touch you, my love."

"Still, I fear his wrath. He is powerful and his touch is repugnant." The woman groaned, sounding frustrated. "But there really is no other way, is there?"

"Yes, my darling. You know it and I know it. As much as agreeing with this plan pains me, as much as I hate the thought of pushing you into his bed, I can find no other solution. You marrying my son will give us a chance to stay close to one another, without risking anyone finding out. It's a good plan."

That one remark shocked me more than anything I had heard the entire morning. I didn't find anything unusual in an elven noble having an affair. But marrying a younger elf in order to conceal your affair with his father was a whole new level of low.

The woman sighed again, sounding thoughtful and a bit melancholic. "I really wished you weren't married, Ran."

"I know, my love," the man said. "But I can't change my past, as much as I would like."

"True. Oh well . . . . We'll just have to make sure he doesn't find out," the woman concluded. "I don't think he will. He's so self-absorbed, it's unbelievable."

The man chuckled. "Yes, he is. Though make no mistake about it, he is not stupid. Making him believe he wants an alliance with you will be harder than you assume."

The woman laughed. "I have no concerns regarding this part of the plan. I will win this battle today. It is for the war that I am worried."

"Ah, my dear . . . . Always thinking about the future. If only you had been a man, you would have made a wonderful soldier. But then, you wouldn't have been

so beautiful."

The man's compliment ended the conversation and by the new sounds I heard, I could tell they had resumed their previous activities. I wanted to leave the room at once so as to stop hearing them, but I feared I would run into my mother. Such a thing would be disastrous so I resigned myself to being punished for my eavesdropping with another half hour of acoustic torture.

Luckily for me, the couple soon stopped.

"Oh my, I'm going to be late," the woman said, regret deep in her voice.

"Take care, my love," the man replied. "We'll see each other soon."

The two lovers said goodbye, each going their own way, alone as they had come. I listened to them depart and then, when I was sure the coast was clear, exited my own hiding place.

The urge to find out the whole story coursed through me and I felt sorry for the poor fool who would be stuck in a marriage with such a deceitful woman. I wanted to continue to follow her, to find out her identity and reveal her lies. But who would believe me over a lady of the aristocracy? And even if someone did believe me, I would be risking my own life and the life of my mother by drawing this noble's wrath upon us. I could not risk it.

Moreover, the only things I had to go on were an overheard conversation, a nickname, and two voices. That was a poor case, to say the least, even in the absurd situation that I would attempt to find out more about the issue.

Little did I know, the information I had disregarded with such ease could have saved both me and my lover. Little did I know that, in my excessive cautiousness, I had given up my own chance for survival.

## **Chapter Nine**

### **Jan'ke Nightbourne: Decisions**

Choices. Steps that inexorably lead us into directions unknown. I have always believed in the importance of choosing each step carefully, for even the way you dress or drink wine can dramatically, through a strike of fate, influence the course of

your life.

And yet, when the time came for me to make the most important decision of my life, I did not see the implications of that step. I did not see how my actions were going to affect others, how they were going to affect the man I loved. And through my arrogance and selfishness, I doomed us all.

It all started the day I went against the promise I had made Alix. I realize now, he had always had a better feel of malice than I ever had. Even if he didn't have as much interaction with the Windwisps as I had, he'd managed to guess they could, indeed, be my downfall.

I might be inclined to think an exercise of circumstances eventually led me in the wrong direction, into erring so utterly and so completely I am ashamed of myself to this day. I was, after all, just a soldier, and while I had seen the falsehood under which the elven ton hid, I could not fully understand its implications.

This does not excuse my mistakes, however, or my arrogance. If one is stupid or ignorant, he must listen to the ones who know better. But, no, I was not capable of accepting my flaws. I fancied myself so great, so incredibly smart for having managed to fool my father into believing the lies I told him. I acknowledged my own physical shortcomings with reasonable ease for I saw them every time I looked in the mirror. But I did not see the more important ones, my own naiveté — no — my own stupidity.

It didn't occur to me that, maybe, Alana's motives would affect my own, that everything in this world had a price and a connection. Ironically, I trusted in the entirely wrong person, pushing aside the one man who had wanted my wellbeing, considering his opinions and concerns inconsequential.

Alix, Alana, Count Windwisp, Lar, my father, Eireene Skyeyes. Everyone played his or her own part in this tragicomedy . . . but it was I who directed it, I who thought I could see into the hearts of men as easily as I could find the traces of my enemies in the grass. And while eventually I found out Alix's secrets in the worst possible of ways, I could not find it in myself to blame him for hiding them from me. For I am not worthy of his trust, nor am I worthy of his love. I only hope I will somehow, someday, find a way to earn his forgiveness.

\* \* \* \* \*

Several months passed after my agreement to the alliance with Alana. During this time, I continued to meet Alix in secret. We kissed, but I had been afraid to allow him to touch me further, fearing once he realized my true appearance he would reject me.

All the while, Alana and I continued with our plan and all seemed to be going well. I had told Alix about our alliance and while I could see it bothered him to know I spent so much time with her, he had agreed we didn't have a choice. I demanded a lot of him and I promised myself, somehow, I would make things better for him soon.

For my part, I found a measure of relief in this plan we had concocted, not only because it gave me something to shut up my father, but also because otherwise, I could not have explained my continuing presence in the fae elf castle. Many of the dark elves who had come for the celebration had left, returning to Northern Thralnia. Even the royal fae had left for their summer residence. We Nightbournes were among the few families who had lingered.

A downside to this was, however, the fact that my brother had also stayed behind. He seemed to have developed an unusual interest in me. Yet again, today, he had come to bother me with his questions and drag me off to breakfast. I thought I hadn't had such a balanced lifestyle in a century, not since I had lived with my mother. Of course, my annoyance now was probably more due to the company than to the lifestyle.

Lar didn't delay in starting to interrogate me. "So, brother . . . . Tell me, what have you been doing lately?"

I arched a brow at Lar's question. These sessions of interrogation of his had been getting more and more frequent—increasingly bolder on his part. While I didn't particularly mind talking with my brother about harmless topics, discussing my love life with him long ago stopped being so harmless, especially since I suspected his only reason for interfering in my "relationship" with Alana had been a

request from my father.

"Nothing special," I answered noncommittally. "Mostly practicing, sparring, the usual."

Lar grinned, his eyes glittering with mischief, as if he knew something I did not. "Funny you should say that," he replied. "I actually went to the sparring grounds yesterday and the soldiers had told me they had not seen you all day. In fact, they noted you've been coming to spar less and less."

My insides tightened at my brother's remark. Of course, he didn't know of my liaison with Alix. Nevertheless, if my behavior was suspicious enough to draw Lar's attention, clearly I'd been careless in the frequency of my meetings with Alix and my front with Alana would no longer be enough.

I carefully kept my dismay off my face and offered my brother a smile I did not feel. "Well, then. Let's just say I have found other interests."

Lar's grin widened and I knew he suspected my new interests were strongly connected to Alana Windwisp. After all, he had hooked me up with her, not so long ago. Whether he'd acted at my father's command or on his own accord, he obviously believed me infatuated with the fae elf lady. At this point, the only course of action I could take was to encourage this belief.

"Stop looking so surprised!" I said. "After all, you persuaded me into this."

Lar nodded and we walked together side by side in silence for a little while. I hoped he had not seen through my lie, because I truly didn't need a further complication in my life. Much to my dismay, when my brother turned to me again, his eyes looked solemn and his grin had disappeared.

"Are you serious about her, Jan?" he asked, looking concerned.

Suddenly, the lies I told my brother started to choke me. He seemed to genuinely care about my wellbeing and I straight out had deceived him. And yet, I had no other choice. If Lar uncovered the truth, he would hate me, deny the bonds of blood that united us, feel betrayed. We had both spent time with men before the sodomy laws, but falling in love wasn't the same as fucking. Lar had probably forgotten about his days back then. If he discovered my relationship, he could tell my father, therefore compromising Alix's position at court. For me, for Alix, for Lar

himself, I had to lie.

"I'm serious, Lar," I replied, careful to keep my expression unreadable. "I really do want this thing between us to work."

My brother seemed to be convinced by my reply and clapped my back, giving me a pleased smile. I did, indeed, feel serious about a relationship, but that relationship had nothing to do with Alana.

"Your words bring me glee, brother," he said. "I was starting to think you were never going to snap out of whatever phase you were going through."

Just like that, the feeling of guilt I had experienced vanished as if it had never been. I barely restrained myself from kicking him in the face, and only because I heard someone approach from behind us. How dare he belittle me in such a crude way? Did he really have no idea or appreciation for what I had seen or done in the war? Then again, how could he not? He saw my face almost every day.

I wanted to hit myself for yet again falling into this bout of self-pity. Perhaps my brother had a point and I was going through a phase. Either way, I needed to keep my cool and go ahead with the plan. I needed to keep my relationship with Alix secret, at all costs.

Refraining from replying, I ignored Lar's last statement. It seemed appropriate to do, and Lar had, for once, the wisdom to be silent. We continued to walk in silence until we reached the great hall. My father, Alana, and Count Windwisp had been seated and I sighed, beginning to see a pattern.

"Greetings, Father, Count, my lady," I said stiffly.

Everyone greeted me just as enthusiastically and as we sat, the servers began bringing our rich breakfast. I began counting the minutes until this torture would end and I could escape to my meeting with Alix.

Mechanically, I started eating, not even feeling the taste of the elven bread or the honeyed cool of the refreshing drinks. Everything paled when compared to the sweetness of Alix's lips. He was the one luxury I could not live without, my drug, and I needed to see him as soon as possible.

Unfortunately, my absentmindedness caused me to miss the entire conversation taking place at the table. That, in itself, wouldn't have been too much of

a loss. However, since I seemed to have been the topic of discussion, I berated myself for not paying better attention.

I wouldn't even have realized this if not for my brother, who gave me a small nudge under the table, silently telling me to stop phasing out. Indeed, the count had asked me a question and I couldn't help but wonder what in the world I had missed by daydreaming about my sweet love.

Count Windwisp arched an inquisitive brow at me. "So, general . . . I take it you have considered a possible union between our houses?"

"Father, please!" Alana whispered, looking embarrassed. I doubted very much said embarrassment was genuine.

"Don't give me that look, daughter," the count replied. "It's about time he made an honest woman out of you."

Mentally, I rolled my eyes at the count's dramatic behavior. I had not touched his daughter and he knew it. Nevertheless, the conversation had taken a dangerous turn for me. If the count truly believed I had slept with Alana or if word spread of such a rumor, I would be forced to take her as my bride. I couldn't begin to fathom why the count would be bringing this up at the breakfast table, where anyone could hear. Perhaps that was exactly what he intended, to push me into a marriage for which I had no inclination. Yet again, I wondered what I had missed, but I couldn't exactly find out now. Damage control seemed to be in order, and fast.

"Count Windwisp . . . Surely, you would allow your daughter and me some time to know each other a little better," I replied as calmly as possible.

The count grimaced, visibly put out by my answer. "Well, I do not think I appreciate your idea of 'getting to know each other' too much."

"I'm not sure I understand," I answered blankly.

The Count frowned at my less than intelligent reply. "As I said earlier, I am well aware you have been meeting my daughter in secret. I've been told you've expressed interest in her. Therefore, I assume you are planning to ask for her hand."

My mind immediately went to the time Alana had suggested we spend together to keep up the front of our relationship. We had both agreed we needed to simulate this but also that we would keep it a simulation and nothing more. I'd

stressed that neither the count nor my father could push us into a marriage. But now, my little castle of cards started to crumble before my very eyes. I recalled the conversation I had just had with my brother and realized Lar must have known something about the whole thing as well. Otherwise, he wouldn't have shown that peculiar concern about my seriousness regarding Alana.

Something was incredibly wrong. I didn't think Alana would be capable of double-crossing me so utterly since, after all, I had been the one to suggest this alliance in the first place. Besides, she was only a woman. She wouldn't dare go against me in such a manner.

At any rate, for now, it didn't matter who or what had led to this moment. With everyone looking at me for a reply, I couldn't think of any way to get out of the mess. Alana looked at me pleadingly; the Count gave me a disapproving look; Lar seemed confused; and my father, my father simply appeared to be expectant. What could I do?

I yielded, of course.

Even as I nodded and agreed to the proposition, my eyes could only see Alix's trusting face and beautiful blind eyes. I heard my own voice speak and tell the count how thankful and thrilled I felt for this honor, but in my head the voice that echoed loudest belonged to my love, my Alix, who had warned me about Alana, who had been so concerned and told me to be careful. How could I tell him I would have to marry her now?

We finished breakfast in a festive mood and I attempted to keep up an enthusiastic front, although, in reality, each second seemed to kill me a little more on the inside. I wasn't married to her yet, and still, the shame of my betrayal covered me in an invisible filth, which beckoned me to scrub my skin until it fell away from my body. Alix deserved to know. I had to tell him. I needed to tell him. But how?

As I left the room still lost in my thoughts, my brother followed me and clapped me on the back with his usual cheerfulness. "Congratulations."

I walked away from him, feeling betrayed, and offered him my best—or worst—glare. He took a step back, his gesture a clear reminder of his true feelings for me.

"Just fuck off," I growled, pushing him out of my way. I was choking, as if trapped in a den of wild animals with no escape. I needed to see my love. He was my one anchor of sanity in all of this madness.

I barely suppressed the urge to start running toward our meeting place. Drawing attention to us would only complicate matters further and cause yet another disaster.

It seemed to take forever until I finally entered the small garden. He had, indeed, arrived and was waiting for me like I knew he would be.

"I had the strangest dream last night," he said, looking a bit thoughtful as I approached.

"A dream?" I repeated inquiringly, thankful I did not have to immediately broach the subject of my imminent wedding.

"Yes. It was strange, as if I could see." Alix shook his head, as if to dispel a bad memory. "Also, I ran into this couple of nobles having an affair."

I let out a small chuckle, even if I didn't really feel the amusement. "Sounds like you had quite the unusual morning."

Alix saw right through my fake laughter and immediately turned to me.

"What's wrong?" he inquired, concerned. "Anything happen at breakfast?"

I opened my mouth to tell him about what I had been forced to agree to, but the words wouldn't come forth. He looked so amazingly beautiful and his blind eyes, marking him as cursed to all the rest, were, for me, just another part of his perfection. I had been so unfair to him, forcing him to hide our love, not allowing him see my face in his own way. It hurt him that he could not see me normally and still, I'd denied him his wish.

"Alix?" His name on my lips sounded hesitant even to my own ears.

"Yes? What is it, love? You're worrying me, now."

"Do you still want to see me?" I blurted out, suddenly wanting to give him that much of me, at least. I couldn't consider my offer a compensation for what I'd done, for what I was about to confess, but it would make him happy, at least for the moment.

He hesitated and I knew this offer had been the last thing he'd expected. But

then he offered me the most dazzling smile I had ever seen from him and I almost fell apart, knowing if he found out about my engagement with Alana, I would never see his smile again.

A little voice inside of me whispered, *"He doesn't have to find out. He doesn't have much contact with the nobles anyway."*

But no! I had to tell him. I had to find a way. Not today, however. Today had to be for us. I would tell him tomorrow.

Today, I would give Alix this part of me for which he yearned. There were so many people who saw me every day, and yet I had refused to let him see my face. Even when we kissed, I kept the damaged part of my face away from him, carefully avoiding any contact with his skin. It had become so natural to me I didn't even have to think about it. I hoped Alix would not reject me once he knew, once he *saw* the real me.

Somehow, Alix sensed the doubts and fears in my heart.

"Yes. Of course I want to see you," he replied, almost looking afraid. "But are you certain? Are you sure about this?"

It took but his selfless concern to make me take the final step. Even if a part of me still feared his feelings for me would change, I didn't allow it to discourage me. "I'm sure."

As I replied, I took his hand and placed it on my cheek. He blindly felt across my face, my neck, tracing my scars with his fingers and then gasping. My heart fell at his reaction, but then he spoke, "Oh, love. It must have hurt you so. How did it happen?"

"Received a fireball in the face fifteen years ago," I replied, seeing that he did not seem horrified at my looks. "Didn't lose my eyesight by miracle, although I didn't see very well for a number of years."

He remained silent for a while, tracing the scars with his fingers. "It's why you didn't want me to see you," he said.

It wasn't a question, just a statement, a fact, but nevertheless, I nodded tensely, knowing that since we were so close to each other, he would feel my movement.

"Jan . . . ." He let out a sigh and for a second I thought I had made a mistake in showing him, that he would now feel disdain for me, or worse, pity. What he did was so entirely different I berated myself for ever doubting him. He smiled gently and proceeded to press small kisses to every section of my burn-scarred face. I tensed at first, but soon, the feel of his lips on my skin overpowered my discomfort with the thoughtful action. My heart became overcome with emotion and my body responded. My cock hardened, and I yearned for his touch, needing it more than I needed air.

"There's nothing to be ashamed about," he whispered in my ear. "Your scars are part of you, an evidence of your loyalty and courage in battle."

I grabbed his shoulders and pulled his mouth from my burnt skin, crashing our lips together. Now that I knew he would not be repulsed by me, I no longer feared to let him touch me. I wanted him so badly, and with a passion that burned with the same intensity of the fire bolt that had scarred my skin; and he wanted me. I could feel it in the way he returned the kiss with a hunger echoing my own. Our tongues dueled as we fed on each other's mouths, desperate to feel the ecstasy only being with the one you love could give.

Soon, our kisses stopped being enough. I pushed him down on the bench and started placing small kisses on his face. He let out a small giggle as I kissed his neck, but the giggle turned into a gasp when I licked around the tip of one of his pointed ears. I couldn't help but smile, realizing I'd found an erogenous spot. It didn't surprise me exactly, since it had happened to me with other lovers, male and female. As a common fact, elven ears hold a lot of sensitive nerve endings, but I reveled in the knowledge I could give my love thrills he'd never experienced.

"Jan . . . . What . . . ?" he asked almost incoherently.

"Hush," I whispered. "Just enjoy it."

My hand opened his peculiarly embroidered shirt and I reached for his left nipple while still tormenting his ear. His body arched from the bench and he let out another sound of pleasure as I tortured the little nub. He looked even more beautiful in his bliss and the sounds he made were just as wonderful as his singing. I lost myself in that beautiful voice gasping my name and the feel of his skin under my

tongue, forgetting the rest of the world, forgetting everything except giving my love the ecstasy he deserved.

Suddenly, Alix's body tensed beneath me and not because of pleasure. Seconds later, I realized the reason behind the change in his attitude. Someone was coming. Immediately I got off him and cursed, wondering what the chances were of such a thing happening particularly on this day. Could someone have followed me here? If so, we couldn't risk being seen.

Alix must have realized this as well, even if he didn't suspect the real reason. "Jan, we can't do this here. Anyone can show up."

I nodded, knowing he had a point, but feeling reluctant to abandon my love. Still, now more than ever, we needed to be careful. The thought brought to mind my engagement with Alana and the fact that I still needed to tell him about it somehow.

"Alix . . . Meet me outside the castle tomorrow at dawn," I said, trying to not sound too glum.

He nodded and gave me an enthusiastic look. I sighed to myself at the realization that for once, he had missed the sadness in my tone and he had something entirely different in mind than I had. I vowed not to take advantage of him, for what we had between us went way beyond lust. It was also love and respect, and I refused to humiliate him like that.

We split up with one last kiss and carefully went our separate ways. I realized that indeed, the person following me had been my brother and I wanted to choke the life out of him for ruining my meeting with Alix. I did not realize that kiss would be the last one we'd ever share in our small garden.

## **Chapter Ten**

### **Alix Skyeyes: Mending Broken Bridges**

As usual, it's dark and cold in the cell where I am bound. I feel weaker and weaker and I have lost count of the days since I've been locked here. I do know, however, that today, the guards feed us, just a few pieces of hard and rotten elven bread washed down with stale water. By some miracle, they don't skip my cell

today. The only time they release me from my bonds is when they drag me for torture sessions. Or so they used to do. Taking into account my repeated escape attempts and that I may have severely injured several guards while fighting them, they've resorted to keeping me perpetually trapped in this cell.

Their choice of no longer unchaining me doesn't matter much. In the end, attempting to escape is useless. Even if I did find a way out of the cell, more guards await just around the corner, eager for an excuse to slay me. I must survive, even if it means swallowing this nauseating dinner. I chew the bread pushed into my mouth, although all I want to do is to bite the hand of the person feeding me. The taste of the food is bitter on my tongue, nothing like the taste of Jan's lips.

I still remember the last kiss we had in the garden at the fae palace. Perhaps it is because I always considered that place ours, the place where I fell in love for the first and probably, the last time in my life. The small garden meant the world to us, or to me, at least. I no longer know what my love feels. And isn't that ironic, when I could have once sworn he loved me as much as I loved him.

Then again, I do not deserve the love of one such as Jan. Perhaps I truly deserve to die in this place, to rot in this prison, alone and forgotten. I would have liked to, at least, apologize to my love, tell him I never meant to lie to him. I would have wanted to tell him I understand why he lied to me, even if in truth, I do not. I am still so very angry and at the same time, I cannot be. I don't understand my own emotions. My love for him is stronger than my anger, and yet I still feel my blood boil at the thought of him marrying that dreadful woman. This one thought keeps me going — the knowledge someone must warn Jan about Alana and her treachery before it is too late.

I wish I could leave this place and return to the palace if only for one day. I could warn him, tell him not to marry the vile creature. And maybe, just maybe, I could see him.

I still do not know what he looks like. In my heart, I know he is very handsome, in spite of his scars. I have always known that, somehow, and now I wish I had seen him — really seen him. Maybe his face would bring me some comfort. The few visual memories I have are too sad and violent and I almost wish I could forget

them.

But then, I remember something else. Sometimes, the images that appear in front of me aren't of Jan's perfect fiancée but of my mother. She is one of the few whom I remember visually and I am thankful my eyes did not fall only on people I hated. I do not hate my mother, in spite of everything she hid from me. I truly believe she tried her best but, in the end, her best wasn't good enough.

She had suspected something. I had seen her anxiousness that day, when we had finally become mother and son again. I had felt the apprehension in her, and yet I had discarded her fears. I believe she must have known what would happen, but she could not find the way to tell me. She was my mother, after all, and she couldn't bear the thought of hurting me.

I am afraid for her now, as I wait here in this dungeon. What will become of her? Did she manage to escape? So many thoughts pass through my mind, so many wishes . . . so many regrets. I wish I had not allowed my foolish pride to keep me from her for so many years. Perhaps our lives would have been different. But still, I am thankful I managed, before they took me away, to tell her how much I loved her.

\* \* \* \* \*

There had been someone in the corridors adjacent to the garden. As we both abandoned our refuge, we scouted the area carefully to make sure no one would see us leave. It hurt me almost physically to have to interrupt my meeting with Jan so early, but we didn't have a choice, not if we wanted to keep our love a secret.

Despite this sadness and this inconvenience, the time I had spent with Jan in the garden still brought me tremendous happiness. He had allowed me to see him and had been so much more affectionate than before. My heart was bursting with joy and with love and I couldn't stand the thought of further keeping my relationship with Jan from my mother.

I practically ran through the corridors and toward the archives. At this hour, she would be there and not at home. I hoped she didn't have too many tasks, because truly, I needed someone in whom I could confide. My mother was the only

one who had accepted me always, in spite of my blindness. My mother and now Jan. I could scarcely believe he loved me enough to trust me so utterly, in spite of his insecurities, in spite of my curse and my flaws. Yet, I still remembered the feel of his skin against my fingers, and I could not have denied his affection for me if I wanted.

As I entered the archives, I called out to my mother, hoping she would not delay in replying. Sometimes she lost herself in her work so thoroughly she didn't hear me when I came to visit. Then again, perhaps her habits had changed with time. I hadn't come to visit her in a long while. "Mother? Are you in here?" I asked, stepping carefully. Forever the archives were laden with stacks of books and documents, and I had found the place difficult to navigate, mostly because of their ever-changing location. I seemed to be better at it now, as my senses somehow told me how to step and where to go so as not to cause a mess in my mother's work place.

My mother was the only elven woman I knew to work in an official position. She had loved books as a child and she had willingly helped the former archivist keep track of everything. As funny as it would seem, the archivist had been summoned to fight in the Xoz war. He hadn't returned, and in all the chaos, arranging a replacement seemed trivial. Overnight, my mother had ended up the archivist of the palace. She clung to the position with her teeth during my childhood years because as hard as things were for us, her job provided us with a house and sustenance.

I heard her coming from the back hastily and could feel the slight panic in her gait.

"Alix? What are you doing here?" she asked, her voice trembling as if she feared my answer.

"I wanted to see you," I replied simply. In truth, I couldn't actually see her, but my mother knew what I meant.

My calmness must have indicated nothing was wrong, because my mother calmed down. That brought about a whole different issue as she cleared her throat and the awkwardness, yet again, gathered between us, the chasm of the secrets she refused to share, yet again, threatening to keep us apart.

"I needed to talk to you," I said decidedly, more to break the silence than anything else.

She let out a tired sigh and I realized she thought I wanted, yet again, to be told about my birth. "Alix. I told you, I can't—"

"No, Mama. Not about that," I hastily interrupted. I didn't want those secrets to forever haunt me. But no, I no longer cared about the past. I had something in the future in which to look forward. And I wanted to share it with the one person who, in spite of everything, had been there for me.

She froze upon hearing my personal name for her. I hadn't used the endearment in years since we had drifted apart to the extent some days we barely talked to each other.

"Alix?" Her voice trembled a bit again and I inwardly cursed my own stubbornness for all the time I had kept us apart.

"I'm sorry, Mama," I said, a bit shamed by the incipient tears trickling at the corner of my eyes.

"Oh, hush. I'm the one who should be sorry."

She wrapped her arms around me and I closed my eyes, taking in her comforting, familiar scent. Her warmth made me safe and as I leaned into her embrace, I realized how much I had missed it, how much I had missed her.

"Oh, son. I thought I would never hear those words from you."

She pulled me to a nearby couch and led me to sit next to her. Wordlessly, I put my head into her lap, not recognizing the sudden ache in my chest. After all, I had all the reasons to be happy and none to cling to this melancholy.

She caressed my hair for a little while and suddenly asked, "Tell me, what's on your mind? What brought this on?"

For about a second, I debated remaining silent, even if I had told myself on the way here I needed to share my love for Jan with my mother.

Her hand stilled in my hair and she sighed. "You don't have to tell me if you don't want to. It's all right."

Briefly, I hesitated, acknowledging the weight of what I had to reveal. Still, if I truly intended to fix my relationship with my mother, I would have to show her

that, indeed, I wanted us to be like before. There was no other option. "I met someone," I replied simply.

Her body tensed in a clear reaction of surprise. I think she never expected me to fall in love or perhaps she had wished me not to. It made sense, since all the elves in the palace, from the nobles, to the soldiers, and even the servants showed me only disdain.

I lifted my head from her lap and smiled at her. "It's ok. He loves me back," I said, hoping to convey she needn't fear anything from my love. Only when the phrase exited my mouth did I realize what I had said. I had told my mother I had fallen in love with a man and that this man had fallen in love with me. In elven society, such a thing would be a mother's worst nightmare. According to the sodomy laws, a son who lusted after other males shamed the entire family. His name would be erased from the family annals as his very existence tainted the whole clan. I counted on the fact we didn't have that much of a clan to begin with, nor were we particularly important at court. My mother did have noble blood, but her own parents had banished her after my birth. Maybe, taking that into account, she wouldn't have too much of an incentive to go against me.

"Oh," she said simply, obviously in shock. "This person you love is another man, then."

I nodded wordlessly, wondering what thoughts passed through her mind. As she sat there in silence, I could no longer bear the uncertainty. "Mama? Are you angry?"

I hated myself for the vulnerability in my tone. I hadn't allowed myself such an emotion in quite a while, and in one day I had shown myself as vulnerable to two people. And yet, if I could do it all again, I would ask the same questions. Jan and my mother loved me. They simply had to.

"Oh, honey, are you certain? I don't mean to say he doesn't love you. But this is so complicated."

"I know," I replied seriously. "I know it's complicated. But we can make it work. We love each other." There could be no doubt. Not only did he constantly risk his position at court by seeing me, but also he had allowed me to see and touch his

face. He loved me, I could feel it. I had no doubt.

"What's his name?"

At my mother's inquiry, I froze. Telling her about my feelings and revealing my lover's identity were two different issues entirely. The walls in the palace had ears and even if I could hear anyone approaching, I could not risk anyone finding out.

Realizing I seemed reluctant to speak, my mother bluntly remarked, "You're keeping your relationship a secret then."

I assented with a nod, for some reason feeling my mother's disapproval with the situation. "It's safer."

"I take it he is a noble?"

"Yes," I replied almost hesitantly. "What is it, Mama? What are you thinking?"

"Honey . . . Please don't take this the wrong way. I'm happy for you. It's just . . . It's not safe to fall for nobles."

"He isn't my father," I snapped at her coldly.

"Oh, I know." She gave a little bitter laugh. "That would be a little difficult. I just want you to be careful. I don't want to see you get hurt."

I opened my mouth to tell her everything would be all right, but the words wouldn't come. I truly didn't know what would happen. Jan was playing a dangerous game, allying himself with Alana. So many things could still go wrong. Even so, I didn't want to think about complicated court intrigue. Tomorrow, I would meet Jan outside the palace gates and I had a feeling it would be a day we would both enjoy very much. "Don't worry, Mama. He's not like that. You'll see."

"I get to meet him, then?" my mother inquired, a trace of skepticism in her voice. Her distrust of Jan's love for me caused an incipient surge of anger to flow in my veins, but I pushed back my irritation. She didn't know Jan. Maybe if she did, she'd see our love and she would feel calmer about the whole thing. I had to plan everything carefully, though. I needed to discuss it with Jan and see when he could get away from the Alana woman and his nightmarish family.

"Maybe, when it is safe," I replied neutrally. "I will ask him tomorrow."

My mother refrained from any further comment. I remained in the archives a

while longer, enjoying her company and the silence. The peaceful quiet gave me a break from the atmosphere of hostility that usually surrounded me. I hoped I could convince Jan to come visit my mother as well. I was certain he would like it here.

I did feel a bit frustrated at the knowledge he would dine with Alana again, but Jan had told me everything would be all right, he had things under control. As long as he and Alana shared the same interest, to avoid their wedding, we would be safe to see each other. The arrangement kept Lord Nightbourne off Jan's back and allowed Jan to remain at the palace without attracting suspicion.

Before leaving the archives, I threw my mother another smile. I didn't know, at the time, the secrets she was hiding would wipe the smile off my face for good.

## **Chapter Eleven**

### **Jan'ke Nightbourne: Love and Cowardice**

We elves are complex beings. Up to a certain age, we are happy, carefree children, in perfect communion with Mother Nature. Once we grow and we find our sexuality, we become sensual creatures of lust and pleasure. But in truth, underneath it all, there is a coldness that eventually establishes itself. There is only so much one can do and can see, and for us, eternal lives mean, in the end, eternal boredom.

This is why when both kings of the two elven countries agreed to passing sodomy laws, the new legal arrangement caused a great deal of unrest. In whorehouses, male companions had proven to be perhaps even more popular than women and even at court, there were orgies that often admitted only members of a single sex, either male or female. Perhaps this was the reason the kings made such a radical decision in the first place. As a ruler, seeing my country fall slowly more and more into perversion, I would want to stop it.

I do still remember those days, before the sodomy laws, though, since elves have, by nature, insanely good memories. Even back then, I had been mostly attracted to members of my own gender. My preference didn't concern me, though, as both my brother and other youths around me seemed to have similar inclinations.

All that changed after the laws were passed. For a little while, the palace halls

had been silent, everyone living in fear of being brought in front of the king for what they had done. But as time passed and nothing happened, the terror faded, the past was conveniently forgotten, and the parties began again, of course, lacking that one element.

After the war began, I lost sight of politics at the court. My brother later told me the sodomy laws remained in place, and, from time to time, the king would catch one noble or another with his pants down and strip him of all his privileges. We would laugh about it, but we both remembered those days of our youth and we both realized the danger.

Perhaps I should be thankful that in the war, I lost much of the sexual, lustful part of me. Sometimes, soldiers would get desperate and turn to each other in an attempt to find release. As a noble, I had refrained from engaging in similar acts, because if word spread of my indiscretion, the results would have been disastrous for me. In the beginning, my lusts had been satisfied with promiscuous women in villages or even whores. After a while, I became jaded and tired, as if I had become bored with everything around me. I had grown old too quickly.

And yet, once I met Alix, young blood started to flow through me again. Suddenly, I became the naughty elf who trapped servant boys in the stairwell to steal a kiss. Only this time, my sweet Alix brought so much more than a breath of fresh air in the dank prison of immortality. He brought the one thing that could save elves from eternal boredom and despair — he brought, love.

It is why I do not want to believe the moment we spent together then, that perfect moment, was a mistake. Sometimes, I cannot help but wonder what would have happened had I not hesitated, had I told my love about my imminent wedding to Alana. I would have still lost him, but perhaps he would be safe. It's too late now for regrets, and at night, I still recall the feel of his lips on my skin, the way he gave himself to me so selflessly. How could I forget? It was the one moment in my adult life when I thought maybe, in spite of all else, I could be happy.

\* \* \* \* \*

It was a beautiful morning when I awoke the next day. This day, I would meet my love and tell him about my stupidity. How ironic the sky would shine so bright and Mother Nature would greet me so cheerfully when all I could think about was the gloom I would surely cast on my love's heart and mind.

I took my time putting on my clothes, for the first time reluctant to meet Alix. I remembered his eager and passionate expression the day before and I felt like the lowest person in existence for having to crush him in such a way.

As I dressed, my gaze fell on the nightstand. If I opened it, there would be a bottle of clear liquid there, waiting for me, the liquid I used when I pleased myself these days thinking about Alix. Tentacles of temptation urged me to take it with me but as I leaned to open the drawer of the nightstand, I realized the implications of my actions. I had sworn to myself the day before that I would tell Alix about my engagement today. We weren't meeting for sex, damn it!

Decision made, I hastened from my chambers and sneaked out of the palace with ease. At the early hour, few people wandered around. My stealth helped me dodge the guards responsible for palace security and in around fifteen minutes, I had left of the palace.

He waited for me in the woods just outside the gates. There was a town nearby, but the nobles had always been too arrogant to allow the common people too close to them. Some days, they would go out with their dogs to hunt foxes and fawn, although more often than not, they released the caught prey. We were, after all, elves.

Still, taking into the hour we had chosen for our meeting, with the exception of the above-mentioned animals, the woods seemed to be quite empty and therefore safe for us. If any guards happened along, we would hear them. He smiled at me as I approached him and my heart constricted at the sight of that smile.

"Hey, "I greeted hesitantly.

"Hello, Jan," he greeted me back. The next thing I knew, I found myself with an armful of fae elf, although armful was putting it lightly. Alix's build almost equaled my own and I lost my balance at the sudden attack. For a brief moment, I thought he had somehow found out about the wedding without me telling him, but

the idea vanished instantly when Alix pressed his lips to mine. I found with surprise he was already hard, and every notion I had of mentioning anything unpleasant to him evaporated like it had never been.

I gasped when we finally came up for air. "Oh, Goddess, baby."

"Sorry about that," Alix said with a sheepish smile. "I've been dreaming about kissing you since yesterday. I couldn't stand it any longer."

I pulled him away from our current location and into the thicket. Chances of someone showing up seemed low, but I didn't want to risk an interruption, not if we wanted to do what his kiss showed we would soon be doing.

We ended up running as fast as we could through the wood, me pulling Alix along. We ran and ran until our legs gave out and we decided we were finally far enough away from civilization to be safe. We collapsed on the grass, panting hard, and started to laugh.

"I haven't run that much in years," he said, still chuckling.

"It's true. We don't do a lot of running." I grinned at him. As warriors, our resistance was high, but I had taken him far into the woods so that we could be alone without fearing anyone detecting us. Besides, we didn't do a lot of running. Warriors fought, they didn't run. They marched to keep their strength and in battle, held their ground.

My arousal had faded a bit because of the effort. As I looked at him though, at the way he took in the fresh air of the forest with such delight, my cock turned rock hard again. He must have sensed something because he looked in my direction. He could not see me and yet, his blind eyes sometimes seemed to hold so much power, so much mystery and hidden strength I felt drawn to them, and to Alix, like a moth to the flame.

"Now that you've kidnapped me," he began in a husky tone, "tell me, what do you plan to do with me?"

In a flash, I pounced on him and crushed our mouths together. I needed him so badly. I could never get enough of his taste. When we finally parted for breath, I took him in my arms and held him against me, just taking in the scent of his hair. He smelled like fire and ash and I wanted to lose myself in him forever.

"Tell me you want this as much as I do, baby," I panted, hugging him to my chest.

He rubbed against me, his words barely a whisper now. "I do. Goddess, I want you so much."

I pushed him onto the grass again and started to strip him of his clothing, pressing a ghost of a kiss on each inch of skin I revealed. He trembled under my touch and gasped my name from time to time. Knowing his ears were a sensitive spot, I passed my tongue over the tips, massaging the pointed appendages and reveling in the sounds of his pleasure.

Slowly but surely, my mouth made its way down Alix's body, teasing his nipples playfully, laving across his chest, delving inside his navel. With each passing moment, he seemed more aroused, more lost in me, and yet, somehow I knew he had not entirely let go. I wanted him to lose control, to forget about being a soldier, to be simply and utterly nothing but my lover.

I found his member nestled in a swirl of blond curls, hard and thick and as perfect as he was. I tugged on the strands playfully, and, feeling a little lightheaded, I wrapped my lips around his erection and gave his cock a tentative suck. He moaned, and inwardly I grinned as I used my mouth and tongue to torture him sensually. Discovering he had a sensitive spot just under the head, I concentrated my efforts, at the same time rolling his testicles into the palm of my hands. He leaked pre-cum copiously, and I gladly lapped at the clear liquid seeping out of his slit. On impulse, I took the liberty to abandon his member and started sucking on his sack.

"Oh, for the Goddess. Jan! Just . . ."

The sound of his voice dragged me away from my treat. I regretted I could not take the time to make him come with my mouth, but I felt the sudden need to make Alix mine, to claim him as my own, to mark him with my essence.

I remembered then I had forced myself to leave behind any supplies useful in the case of sex, thinking the inconvenience might help me control myself. As if I could possibly hold onto my control with my love beneath me, naked and aroused. The thought I still had to discuss that unpleasant issue remained on my mind, now clouded, distant, as if no longer important. My attempt at ethics annoyed me, since

now I had no lubricant to smooth my way inside my lover's body.

"Do you have what we need?" I asked hopefully.

"I haven't done this before. What do we need?" he replied matter-of-factly, giving me his patented "you're an idiot" look.

It was a funny look to have in such circumstances, but of course, he had a point. With the exception of the war, he had lived most of his life in the palace, with his mother. I doubted Alix would be one to find pleasure in hiring professionals for release and he couldn't have found someone for a relationship, not with the attitude people had toward him everywhere he went. Though I was a mix of emotions, I had to smile at the thought their loss was my gain.

Thankfully, my experience came to my aid. I knew how to give my love pleasure and before the sun set this day, he would feel all the ecstasy love-making could bring. We didn't have lubricant, but perhaps it would be for the best.

I flipped him on all fours, caressing the beautiful globes of his ass. His skin felt soft and warm under my touch and his body trembled as if he were nervous. Smiling to myself, I separated his ass cheeks and took a moment to admire his rosette. His virgin hole looked as alluring as the rest of him and my mouth watered at the thought of tasting it. No longer willing to wait in order to satisfy my lusts, I licked across the crease of his ass, almost moaning as his taste exploded in my mouth. Addictive, dark and sinful, his aroma flooded my entire being like a drug and I wanted to take forever losing myself in this forbidden pleasure. He let out a surprised sound, obviously having not expected such a thing from me. "Jan! Wh—? What are you doing?"

Displeased with his coherent protest, I decided my feast on his ass needed to evolve into something more. I answered his question by thrusting my tongue into his hole, proceeding to fuck him with it until his body yielded to my ministrations and I considered him prepared. By this time, he was reduced to moaning and pleading, and he was so beautiful, a sense of humbled awe showered over me. My hard cock demanded entrance in his exquisite body. If I didn't take him now, I would explode before I even had the chance to make him mine.

He tensed a bit as my cock nudged at his hole, so I pressed my body to his

and kissed his shoulder. "Just relax, love. You'll like it, I promise."

He nodded and turned his head to steal a kiss from me. I wanted to bury my entire length inside of him, but I forced myself to go slowly, painfully aware of the honor he bestowed upon me by allowing me to take his virginity. I pushed inside of him, torn between fucking him until he couldn't walk and keeping him safe. He bit his lip, obviously in pain, and I froze, stilling inside of him to allow his body to adjust to my size.

"No." He moaned, and inwardly I cursed upon knowing I had made my love suffer.

"Hush. I know it hurts. It will get better," I tried to sooth my love. I hadn't entered him fully yet. I considered stopping and taking more time to prepare him. More than anything, I wanted him to experience the same pleasure I did.

However, he didn't appreciate my care. "Goddess, no! Fuck me! Fuck me now!" he growled, impaling himself forcibly on my cock and catching me off guard.

"Alix, love. For the Goddess, stop!" I begged. I didn't think I could restrain myself much longer if he continued his sensual assault on my body.

"Fuck me!" he said, again. "Goddess, do it now!"

He tightened around me as he squeezed his ass muscles purposely and my control broke. Growling, I thrust inside of him, the suddenness of the movement almost making Alix lose his balance. Soon, though, he was thrusting back against me and our bodies collided with such strength and speed it almost hurt. I flipped him over, needing to see his face while I pleased him, needing to know he did indeed feel the same agonizing ecstasy I did. In the process, our bodies separated, but as soon as I had him on his back, I pushed back inside, my need for him so overwhelming it consumed everything else.

Many of my previous lovers, both male and female, had both praised and complained about my size. For someone like Alix, who had never experienced love-making, the penetration had to hurt. And yet, he seemed to enjoy it, begging and pleading for me to fuck him harder.

Even back before the sodomy laws, I had never been much into rough sex. I had my own little perversities, of course, games I liked to play with a lover, things I

enjoyed doing more than others. Even so, I didn't favor inflicting pain in the bedroom. I did enough of that outside of it.

Still, with me and Alix, it somehow worked. His fire and his passion reached for me in a way no other lover had, and my own soul reached for his. We united to the extent we were no longer individual entities, no longer two persons with our own pasts and issues. We had become one. Even as I fucked him harder and faster, I knew it was not really fucking, it was making love.

I angled my thrusts carefully, aiming to hit his special spot every time I entered his body. His blind eyes looked straight at me and I wished more than ever that he could see me, that I could see emotions pass through those beautiful blue orbs and not just a still and clouded sea. For a second, I thought I caught a flash of red, but the distracting light disappeared just as fast as it had appeared and I paid it no heed. My head swam with too much pleasure and I lost myself in my love's body, forgetting the peculiar illusion in a heartbeat.

I did feel something change inside him, like a tension gripping his body suddenly. "Are you all right, baby?" I forced myself to ask and forced myself to stop my pelvic movements. Perhaps I had hurt him in my passion. Perhaps he didn't enjoy this as much as I thought he did.

Alix closed his eyes and moaned my name, his legs wrapped around me. "Jan . . . . My Jan . . . . Please, don't stop!"

He dug his nails into my arms so hard warm blood started to trickle from the wounds. My already fragile control snapped once more, and I thrust into him, over and again, until we both forgot all else but each other. It was raw and passionate and extreme; and I loved it. I loved him, Goddess, I loved him so much. I think I told him as much many times as we coupled, since my heart felt like it would burst at the overflow of emotion. Even beyond our sexual compatibility, the feelings inside me lifted me into the skies, closer and closer to the heavens.

As we fucked, my release approached faster and faster. I did not want to come before my love so I wrapped my hand around his cock and massaged his length. He arched into my touch and croaked my name in a raspy voice. "Jan . . . . Oh . . . ."

In mere seconds, he erupted, warm liquid coating both his chest and mine. His ass tightened around me, squeezing me and milking my shaft of my essence. With another thrust, I came as well, coating his insides with my seed.

I collapsed on top of him, drained, barely managing to move to his side so I wouldn't crush him under my weight.

He cuddled by my side and sighed contentedly, offering me a dreamy smile. "I love you, Jan."

"I love you too, baby."

Beautiful notes started to sound in the air, the melody no longer one of sadness and loss but happy and cheerful, praising our love. I lost myself in Alix's voice, in the scent of his body. We remained like that for the longest time, holding each other, together in the shade, first with Alix singing and then, when his voice tired, in comfortable silence. We even dozed for a bit, like we had not a care in the world.

When we awoke, we coupled again and then later, again. It seemed to me as if the Goddess had smiled upon Alix and I, and we would be together forever; of this, I was sure.

Finally, the time came to leave and we sneaked back into the palace, promising one another we would meet the next day. Only after we shared our last kiss and Alix disappeared in the shadows of the palace did I remember I had forgotten to tell him about Alana and my wedding.

## **Chapter Twelve**

### **Alix Skyeyes: The Happiness before the Sorrow**

As it is well known, barring death in battle or disease, elves are supposed to live forever. The Goddess endowed her children with many things: beauty, strength, and the one most important gift – immortality. We do not age like other races and always preserve our youthful appearance.

Elven biology, however, prevents them from having too many children. There are a few exceptions to the rule, especially among the dark elves. Still, in general,

after bearing a certain number of children, a woman becomes barren.

For my part, by elven standards, I am merely a youngling, almost a child. I had come of age just three decades ago and had seen only fifty-three winters. But if there is one thing I have learned in my short life, though, it is that the extent of a person's capacity of denial is almost limitless. Even faced with the most irrefutable evidence, even when the explanation and the answers lie so close it is ridiculous, one will always deny a fact if said fact will in any way cloud a happy moment or even intrude in one's normal, common existence.

I am the best example of this rule. Of course I understood my abnormality from a very early age. I realized the anger that sometimes seemed to consume me from time to time did not appear naturally in elves. My conscious mind blamed it on my innate blindness, on the bitterness of years spent as the target of hatred and disdain. But a part of me, some deeper inner part, always saw the truth behind the aberration of my existence.

The same thing happened that day, that one day I carry in my heart as my most prized memory. I remember all too well the feel of Jan's arms around me, his skilled touch caressing my skin, his mouth pleasuring my body. I remember the first time he entered me, and how so perfectly complete I felt. But I also remember that, the very same day we coupled, I came close to seeing my Jan with my own eyes. My fear and denial stopped me, fear of what it meant, of what Jan would think, denial so strong I forced myself to turn it into only an illusion.

It was not even a hard thing to do. In spite of the fact I now understand the root cause of everything I am, I am still grateful for my denial. Because of it, in all this sorrow and this pain, I keep the untainted memory of the day I will treasure forever. For even now, as the knowledge of my own unworthiness burns me, along with the poison in my blood, I still dream of that one person so dear to me for whose happiness I would willingly give my own life. I know those few moments of bliss I managed to steal are worth every second of the sorrow I must now withstand.

\* \* \* \* \*

The next day, I woke up feeling eager and more than a little anxious. We would do more than kiss today probably, but I had no experience in the field of sex. I feared I would not be able to give my love pleasure and my inexperience would spoil it for us.

Inwardly shrugging, I decided Jan would teach me the things I didn't know. He was much older than me and although we had never discussed it, I knew he'd had a lot of lovers before the war. He had moments, especially after his meetings with his brother, when he recalled the time they'd spent together before the Xoz demon war, before he had become a soldier in the army. I had been a bit surprised to find out he had seen over two hundred winters, but then again, how else could he have become general?

Hastily, I dressed and sneaked out of my room. My mother had not awoken and the palace still slept as well. I hurried through the shadows, already desperate to get out of those constricting walls and to see my love.

Much to my disappointment, when I reached our meeting point, he had not yet arrived. I hid behind a tall tree in case anyone showed up, and I waited. It was not unusual for him to get caught up with things and I had waited for him before. I did not mind, because he would always show up in the end.

Time flew by as I daydreamed about my Jan. Wildlife started to stir around me, but I could hear no sign of elf activity. My inner senses told me dawn would soon shine upon the world. Since my eyes could not see the sun, life and training had gifted me with an inner watch that helped me tell the time. And so I waited, hoping my love would come to me, eager and at the same time, uncertain.

Finally, after what seemed like forever, I felt him approach from along the path to the castle. I couldn't see him but I knew he'd kept in stealth mode as well and had been shielding himself from view using the trees and the environment. He sensed me as well, and stopped by the tree protecting me from sight.

"Hey," he greeted, sounding a little hesitant, a little shy, as if uncertain of what we were about to do.

"Hello, Jan," I replied. No longer able to contain my excitement, I launched myself toward him and pressed my mouth to his. He froze in surprise for a second,

but then began to respond eagerly.

"Oh, Goddess, baby . . ." he panted when we had to stop kissing.

"Sorry about that," I apologized with a smile, although really, I wasn't sorry. "I've been dreaming about kissing you since yesterday and I couldn't stand it any longer."

He didn't say anything and instead took my hand and pulled me toward the forest. We started running, me holding Jan's hand tightly as we passed through the bushes, startling the critters. At some point, even my developed senses turned a bit confused as to our exact location and I hung on to Jan, hoping I would not lose my composure entirely and end up crashing into a tree.

Still, in spite of this slight fear of humiliation, I was having the time of my life. The wind blew cheerfully, toying with my loose hair and the air smelled like pine and green grass. Everything seemed so alive around me and I thought I could feel the ground pulsing with vitality.

I had never been playful as a child, since everybody refused to play with me. Even if this little run was all we did today, a fact which I doubted, mentally I thanked the Goddess and Jan for it. Nature engulfed me in a safe embrace, and for once, I broke free from the restraints of a society that rejected me.

We collapsed together on the grass and I reveled in the silence of nature and the sound of Jan's breathing. "I haven't run that much in years," I said, leaving aside the fact I had never actually had a reason to do so.

"It's true. We don't do a lot of running," he replied with an answering chuckle. The weird conversation relaxed me even further. I felt better than ever before and I had a feeling the day would only improve.

Suddenly, I found myself in the mood to be coy, so I gave him my best seductive smile. "Now that you've kidnapped me, tell me, what do you plan to do with me?"

I received my reply in an entirely surprising way. With no warning, Jan swept down on me and consumed me in a kiss as passionate as the one I had greeted him with. Our tongues dueled as we feasted on each other's mouths desperately.

"Tell me you want this as much as I do, baby," he panted out when we finally

parted for air.

"I do, Goddess, I want you so much."

I trembled as he started to unclothe me, his fingers deftly working the ties of my shirt and breeches. His lips started to make love to my skin and he dedicated himself to discovering every sensitive spot on my body. Just like in the garden, he spent an ungodly amount of time tormenting my ears, seemingly finding the pointed tips incredibly interesting. I had the sudden urge to jump his bones and touch his ears as well, but I simply couldn't bring myself to stop Jan and what his amazing mouth did to me. Flames licked across my skin; my blood blazed with passion. Wherever Jan touched, I burned and I wanted more and more of it.

I chanted his name, trying to convey my desires. He took his time though, devouring me slowly, licking across my nipples until they obediently became erect. Every touch of his tongue on the little nubs shot bolts of lightning through my body and I felt a bit disappointed when he abandoned them to lick down my abdomen.

All my frustration disappeared when his tongue targeted my cock. As he wrapped his lips around my member, I thought I had died and gone to the heavens. Surely, such sensations were not of this earth. It was sweet and sinful and decadent, better than anything I had ever experienced.

Naturally, I had touched myself before, for how could I live for even fifty winters without doing so? Though I had never even kissed anyone, I remained an elf and after my coming of age, had felt the need to touch, the need to couple. Naturally, I knew better than to try anything with anyone, especially since the females of my kind did not attract me and the males, those who did appeal to me physically, wanted nothing but to kill me.

Even so, I had never expected a coupling to be so wonderful, quite so beautiful and pleasurable. As Jan tortured me with his mouth, laving my member or my testicles with his tongue and playing with my pubic hair, I vowed to learn how to do this and one day give him the same pleasure.

"Do you have what we need?" he inquired, bringing me abruptly down from my cloud of arousal.

I couldn't help but give him my best sarcastic look, and I have to say, being

expressive is much harder when one is blind. "I've never done this before," I explained, as if I was talking to a slow-witted individual. Jan would not take offense, since always he did stuff like this and always I teased him about it. "What do we need?"

Jan didn't reply and for a second, I thought I had pushed him too far and upset him. Much to my surprise, he flipped me and indicated wordlessly for me to remain on all fours. Nervousness pooled in my stomach when he started caressing my buttocks. He seemed fascinated with the feel of my skin, like I myself was fascinated with his touch. He separated my ass cheeks and then an explosion of ecstasy tingled over my nerves. After a moment of surprise, I realized Jan's tongue was the source of the sensation, as his tongue passed over my crease.

How could Jan even think of touching me there, and with his mouth, no less? Surely, the experience had to be unpleasant for him. I did not want anything we did today to be bad for my love, even if it did feel good for me. I tried to protest, but then Jan thrust his tongue into my body, and I forgot what I wanted to say.

I should have felt ashamed of the sensations coursing through me, but I couldn't muster enough reason to do so. My body was afire, going up in flames, beautiful, beautiful flames that caressed me and pleased every nerve. I heard myself moaning wantonly and pleading with Jan. For all I knew, I sounded like a common whore, but I couldn't care less. I wanted more.

Just when I thought I would explode, Jan stopped his torture of my most secret place. I whined in complaint, but my protest stopped at the unmistakable sensation of something hard and thick at my back entrance. In spite of my inexperience, I knew it to be Jan's cock. He was going to fuck me.

Instinctively, I tensed, thoughts starting to pass through my head. What if he didn't enjoy it? What if I wasn't good enough? Slowly, he caressed me, soothing me and driving my fears away. Jan loved me, of course. Everything would be perfect between us.

I held onto the knowledge of our love when he first pushed inside. If I had thought Jan's sucking me had been incredible, this felt so much better. I had never been with anyone so my body rejected the penetration initially. When he first

breached me, I bit my lip to avoid making a sound that may have been identified as pain. It hurt. Goddess, how it hurt, but the pain somehow blended with the pleasure. I could no longer distinguish the two or separate them from each other.

Jan sounded concerned for me and tried to soothe me, stilling inside my body and whispering it would get better. I didn't want him to stop, though. The burn of his invasion in my body echoed to something inside of me, something powerful and deep, and I wanted more of it. I needed more of him. More of that incredible pleasure-pain.

No longer willing to be patient, I impaled myself on his cock, my body swallowing his member greedily. I loved the feeling of fullness, the way his large shaft stretched my passage, the way we seemed to simply connect. Once he ensured himself I truly wanted him, with some persuasion on my part, Jan let go. Flipping me over, he lifted my legs to his shoulders and entered me again, fucking me so fast and so hard I knew I would have grass burns on my back. It was pure energy, lust and passion, and emotion, everything embodied in one sensual act that united us.

The fire inside of me erupted to epic proportions when his thrusts hit a certain spot. Over and again, I cried out in pleasure, the amazing ecstasy escalating until I thought I could not take it any longer.

The sensual assault became too much for my body to withstand. Suddenly, my vision went red and cracked, and I had an image of the shadow of a large man over me. Had the curse followed me even into Jan's embrace? I didn't want to know. Hastily, I closed my eyes, not wanting to deal with this strange occurrence, not now. I wanted to feel Jan, to forget myself for one day and simply be with my lover.

"Are you all right, baby?" he asked, his voice husky, but tinged with concern. How hard had it been for him to stop when he obviously enjoyed fucking me immensely?

"Jan . . . My Jan . . . Please, don't stop!" I begged. I couldn't allow this thing inside of me to ruin my day with Jan. Besides, I needn't be concerned. It had happened to me before and nothing had come of it.

He must have caught onto my desire for him because he started fucking me again and I forgot all about curses and fears and shadows. I remembered only him,

my lover, my handsome dark elf. I dug my nails into Jan's skin, desperately hanging onto him as if he were my only anchor in a world starting to dissipate around me. The feel of his cock inside of me sent me into a frenzy of passion more exquisite than I had even imagined. He was my Jan, my love, my everything, and I wanted this moment to go on forever.

Alas, perfect things could not be everlasting. When Jan wrapped his rough hand around my member, my control broke; I came with a hoarse cry. He followed shortly after, his seed coating my inner walls, filling me with his essence.

We both collapsed on the grass, exhausted and I attached myself to his side, more than ever needing the assurance I had not dreamed the perfect experience. He was there, real and so very amazing; my heart could no longer bear the overflowing emotions. And when he told me he loved me, I could no longer help myself. In the silence of the grove, next to my Jan, feeling so safe and content, I started to sing, a prayer of thanks to the Goddess for giving me this gift and an ode of adoration for my handsome love.

My fire still burned, but its intensity had lessened and it no longer felt all-consuming. Jan took me twice more that afternoon and by the time we were forced to leave, I was pleasantly sore in places I had never hurt before. When we slipped back into the castle, we shared another kiss and a promise that we would meet again the next day, in the gardens. I didn't know then it would be the last kiss I would have from my Jan for a long, long time.

## **Chapter Thirteen**

### **Jan'ke Nightbourne: Consequences**

I still recall the day they took my love from me. How could I forget? I will always blame myself for it, for the fact Alix's identity was discovered. I could have avoided everything had I revealed the truth the day before. I could have told him I didn't want to marry Alana and I did, indeed, love him.

Then again, from the very beginning, I made so many mistakes in my relationship with Alix. The correct course of action had been right there, in front of

me, and I chose to ignore it. Why bother to fake a relationship with Alana? What did I care about what the elven courts thought? Our love went against the law, but I could take us far away from this place, find us a home where no one would care, a shelter away from the intrigue and the hatred and the violence.

I think today, that even as we fell in love with each other, we never fully understood our own emotions. For my part at least, I know I truly never appreciated Alix until I lost him. He was always there when I needed him, always listening to my troubles, understanding yet wise. He didn't complain when I told him I could not see him, even if my absence saddened him. Obviously, it had, for many times I greeted weary eyes. I didn't realize until I lost him that I had treated him like my dirty secret.

In truth, in spite of my disdain for the Xoz war, it made everyone look up to me. I became an authority in military matters, important and respected by all. If they found out about Alix, they would reject me, reject everything I had been or done.

I cannot blame anyone but myself for losing him. Unconsciously, I had not been willing to give everything up to be with him. Even worse, I had lied to him and that lie made the power in him awake.

I do not know how much Alix knew or suspected of his own nature. There were signs, of course. I saw them many times, in the violence he sometimes displayed in the sparring grounds, in the fury that seemed so out of character for him, in his solid build, in the way he smelled, and even in the brief flash of red while we made love. If I had seen them, he couldn't have missed them. I hurt inside with the knowledge that even if he loved me, I made him feel so inadequate he could not share his secret with me.

The fire in his blood does not matter to me. I will find him, no matter what it takes. And if in that moment, he still wishes to kill me, I will gladly die by his hand.

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I spent a night of tossing and turning in the bed, unable to sleep. On the one hand, I remembered and relived the beautiful moments from the day before, on the

other, I berated myself for not being honest with Alix. More than once, I got up from the bed, thinking of going to find him, before realizing I had no idea where in the castle he resided actually. I knew only he lived somewhere in the palace and he shared his lodgings with his mother. Why in the world had I never asked him the most basic of questions?

Barely controlling the urge to punch a hole in the wall, I promised myself the first thing I would do when I saw Alix, after kissing him, of course, would be telling him about the wedding. Eventually, in spite of my restlessness, my eyes drifted shut and I fell asleep.

I awoke in a sour mood. In spite of the incredible moments I had spent with Alix the day before, I had an ominous feeling, like something bad would happen. I decided to skip breakfast and head toward the garden, hoping to find my love there. It was early still, and generally we met a bit later, but he didn't come to the training grounds in the mornings and I didn't know where else I could look for him. Yet again, I felt shamed and frustrated at the realization of how little I knew my lover. Why had I not taken the time to ask him where exactly he lived? True, he avoided talking about his lodgings, but I could have found a way around the awkwardness. I should have shown more interest in his life outside of the time we spent together. After all this was over, if Alix forgave me and understood, I would be a much better lover. Goddess, I hoped he would forgive me. I didn't want to consider a life without him.

Exiting my chambers, I left the wing of the palace that housed the nobles. Silence reigned, since most of them still slumbered. I kept my steps brisk, but not overly hasty so I wouldn't draw attention if anyone saw me. Just as I passed the main gardens, though, a guard intercepted me. He was passing by, probably going to his post. The shift always changed around this hour.

He greeted me respectfully and I greeted him back, feeling irritated for the delay. Just as I dismissed him, the soldier spoke again.

"Oh, I almost forgot. Congratulations, general."

I froze in my tracks and turned toward him. "For what?"

"For your wedding, of course." The soldier smiled. "We heard it this morning

with the messengers. Lady Windwisp will make a fine wife."

Feeling numb inside, I nodded and shook the man's hand. Goddess! If this soldier knew, Alix had heard as well. My fears had been justified. He had found out in the worst way. I had to find him; I had to find him and explain. Perhaps he'd gone to the garden. Perhaps he had not yet heard and I still had time.

Much to my dismay, our garden was empty but for the flowers and trees when I arrived. Taking a deep breath, I wondered where else I could look for him. If Alix was not here, the most logical destination had to be the sparring grounds.

Almost mindless with panic, I ran toward the practice grounds. Already, people had gathered and a sparring match had begun. I experienced a feeling of déjà-vu as I noticed who the opponents were. Alix and the elf from before, the one who had thanked me for humiliating my love.

I missed most of the battle, for as I entered the practice grounds, the other elf lost his grip over his sword and bowed his head, obviously intending to yield. Still, the power of the one blow I witnessed, the blow that had made the elf drop his sword, made me realize Alix had run out of mercy. I could see my love's opponent hadn't had a chance. This sparring match had all the chances of ending in a horrible way as Alix held his blade close to the other elf's neck. I had no doubt he was seconds from killing his opponent.

"Skyeyes!" I called, feeling miserable for calling him by his last name when the day before I had held him in my arms and we had made love.

As he turned toward me, I looked at his face and immediately I knew he had heard about the wedding. His fury surpassed any anger I'd seen that first day, the day after the party. Had I not arrived, he would have killed his opponent.

"Lord Nightbourne," he greeted, smiling at me. But his smile chilled me to the bone as it held nothing of its usual warmth. It was the smile of a killer, of a hunter in front of its prey. Goddess, what had I done to my love?

"Do you have time for a match now?" I inquired as calmly as possible, each word breaking me to pieces inside. Just the sight of the glare my love's beautiful blind eyes directed toward me made me feel small and insignificant, made me realize how stupid and selfish I had been.

"Of course," Alix said, the same chilling smile curling his lips.

I approached him cautiously, knowing I treaded dangerous ground. I had to find a way to reach him, had to clear up this affair. I had to tell him I loved him and somehow make him understand I never meant to lie to him or play with him.

"Whenever you're ready, General."

The signal of the match's beginning resounded and the battle began. Alix fought with abandon, as if the energy he put into his blade could somehow make everything else vanish. I fought back, at the same time trying to reach him with my words. "Please, baby, I can explain."

He gave no indication of having heard me, so I tried again. "I intended to tell you, I swear."

Even as we fought, distantly I acknowledged the presence of the many other elves who had gathered to watch our confrontation. I did not feel particularly fond of the idea of them hearing our little conversation and realizing this was a lovers' spat.

In truth, this went way beyond a mere lovers' spat. Because of my stupidity, I risked losing Alix forever. How could I make him hear me out? How could I make him understand?

"Baby, please listen!" I again attempted, dodging his dangerous sword at the last second. Alix certainly took this fight seriously, that much seemed clear.

"Listen to what?" Finally my love replied. "I've heard enough lies."

"I told you about Alana, baby. Be reasonable. "I cursed myself just as the words left my lips. I had told him about Alana, yes, and Alix had been very understanding. Still, the facts I had presented to him had nothing in common with the present reality, namely, my wedding.

"You told me you were having a mock relationship with her, keeping her as a front so no one would suspect," Alix growled at me, echoing my thoughts. "You failed to mention, however, that you were planning on marrying her!"

I tried to find the words to say, anything that would make things better between us. I had never been good at diplomacy or intrigue and I failed in coming up with the simplest of excuses to placate my love as well. He didn't give me the

time to try to think of something to convince him, as briefly, his eyes flashed red and with a quick and deft movement, he made me lose my grip on my sword.

He had moved so fast I did not realize I had lost my weapon until I heard it clatter to the ground. Much like with his previous opponent, Alix pressed the tip of his sword to my neck. For a second, I truly thought he would kill me. His blade cut into my neck and a warm drop of blood slipped out of the fresh wound and trickled onto my garments.

His entire body tensed and I watched him closely, not wanting to miss even one moment of the time we had together, even if it was with him holding a blade to my neck. I did not wish to die, of course, for there were so many things I still hadn't told my love. Furthermore, if I died by Alix's hand in the midst of a sparring match, his life would be forfeit as well.

It seemed to me like a battle went on inside my love's head and heart. I wished to see into his mind, especially when suddenly, he dropped his own blade like it had burned him. He recovered quickly, though.

"You lose," he said coolly, but I could feel the emotion underneath his mask of indifference.

"Congratulations. It's the first time someone has beaten me, in battle or on the practice field."

While he retrieved his sword and made his way to the exit, I picked myself up from the floor and fought to get a hold of my mess of feelings. I feared the extent of my love's anger, now. Something very bad was going on and I needed to find out what, before Alix got hurt.

I followed him out of the sparring grounds and hugged him to my chest, for once, not caring of who might see. "Are you all right, baby?" I asked, hoping I could get him to hear me out, wishing I could again see the same man in him I had seen yesterday.

"I'm fine." His automatic reply was troubling, but instinctively, he leaned into my caresses and my heart broke at his fear and confusion. "Jan . . . Something's not right. Something's not right with me."

I wanted to tell him everything would be all right, tell him we would discover

the problem and make it better, that he had nothing to be afraid of. Instead, I fumbled my intentions, yet again, and blurted out, "I'm so sorry. I never meant to hurt you or to lie. I swear, the whole thing with Alana is only an arrangement. I never meant to marry her."

It was what I had needed to say the day before, but today, the words could no longer cure Alix's wounded heart. Today, my attempt at an apology had an effect entirely opposite to what I had been hoping. Alix pushed me away violently, as if my touch disgusted him, and spat at me. "Stay away from me, from now on. I never want to see you again."

Having lost my balance when he'd pushed me, I missed his departure. I got to my feet in mere seconds, but even so, when I tried to find my love, he seemed to have melted into thin air. I did not know where to look for him. I glanced around, confused as to how he could have vanished so fast. I doubted he would go to our garden and I didn't want to waste valuable time by returning there. The bad feeling from this morning had become more than an ominous premonition and something told me that if I didn't find Alix soon, I would lose him, maybe forever.

Mindlessly, I scouted the barracks and the training ground facilities, asking a few guards if he had gone this way. I asked the servants, but they shrugged off my questions. No one had seen him, or none had cared enough to register his presence. I was getting desperate and running out of options. I could no longer think coherently and my head swam, over and over, replaying Alix's parting words in my mind. *I never want to see you again.*

I took a deep breath and blocked my feelings of remorse and pain, knowing I would get nowhere in this state. He was not in the barracks or in the servants' quarters. He could not be in the nobles' wing. Where else could he have gone?

I recalled then Alix had once mentioned his mother working in the archives. How could I have forgotten? Of course, panic often makes you do stupid things and forget the issues that could have solved the problem bothering you in the first place. I didn't know exactly where the archives were, but how hard could it be to find out?

I stopped the first servant I ran into and asked her about the location of my destination. She indicated a building situated in an area adjoining the nobles' wing,

giving me elaborate instructions as to how I could find the room. I found the location of the library a bit surprising, but didn't ask for the reason. The nobles' wing lay quite far from the servants' quarters and I didn't have any time to lose. Alix's mother was the only one who could give me some indication as to where I could find my love.

If I had considered, even for a minute, I would have trouble finding the exact location of the archives, I was proven wrong the moment I entered the corridor the servant had indicated. A lot of guards had assembled, talking amongst themselves, looking restless and upset.

Immediately, my presence attracted attention and one of the imperial guards approached me. "General, thank the Goddess you are here," the soldier said.

"What is it? What happened?" I asked, unsettled by his tone.

"A demon infiltrated our ranks. We managed to subdue it, but the men are very upset about the issue."

As I took in the man's words, my thoughts went to my love. Had he been captured by the demon? Had he been injured? Oh, Goddess, had he even survived the demon attack? "Were there any injuries?"

"Some of the men have been injured. Also, your fiancée . . . I'm very sorry, General. She suffered severe burns."

"Alana?" I asked, surprised. "Why did she come here?" In truth, I didn't care if she died. I didn't care about anyone else but my love. But this incoherent man didn't help much and I needed something to make him concentrate on the issue at hand.

"She alerted us to the presence of the demon. We never would have guessed — " The man trailed off, sounding shocked.

"Look, pull yourself together!" I barked at him. "What exactly happened? How did the demon get in?"

"Lady Windwisp came here, to visit the library archives," the man said. "And the demon was here all along. The demon is Alix Skyeyes, the archivist's son."

## **Chapter Fourteen**

Alix Skyeyes: Secrets Revealed

Fate has a funny way of toying with the destinies of men. One day, it convinces you that, in spite of everything, you are loved and you will be able to find happiness and the next it crushes all your dreams.

I have always believed each and every event in our lives has a well determined cause. The problem is more often than not, we are not the ones who determine these events. Our families, our lovers, even our enemies or the fabric of society itself can birth them, inexorably drawing us from the path we would have chosen for ourselves. Everyone is free to believe we make our own fates, but as I see it, such a belief is only self-deception. I have never had a choice. My choice was taken from me with the lies of my loved ones, the sins of my father, and my own tainted blood.

I know now why I am here, rotting in this dungeon. I am here because my mother chose to live a lie, pretending I could be like any other child. I am here because I loved a person so obviously beyond my reach, my soul's blindness became so utterly complete, I did not see the stupidity of my actions until the consequences drove me into this dark, damp hell. I am here as evidence of the fact all the hatred between two nations can never be overcome by the love of an isolated few.

Hate still burns inside of me, but not because of my imprisonment in this Goddess forsaken place. I have long ago gotten used to the stench of death and decay that surrounds me, the putrid air I have to breathe every day, the burning pain of my wrists as I hang from the magical bonds. A different knowledge fuels my hatred, the knowledge that no matter what, I have to find a way out, a way to tell Jan about Alana's deception. Has her plan succeeded? Has she managed to fool him?

These are the thoughts that torture me in the red-tinted darkness of my existence. Will I ever manage to get out? I send my plea out to the Goddess, hoping that even for one like me, she would grant some of her merciful power. One day, one day so I could warn my love, then I can die in peace.

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I woke up with a smile on my face, still a bit sore in places I had never experienced pain before, but reveling in the memory of what had caused my pain. Hastily dressing, I made my way out of my living quarters, seriously considering going in search of Jan. He would, after all, be around the sparring grounds or in the barracks. No one would suspect me if I went there.

The screech of a trumpet ringing out stopped me in my tracks. I covered my ears, hissing in pain as the sharp sound assaulted my senses. Even if strong hearing helped me in battle, it had some disadvantages. I heard everything so much louder than everyone else and if I didn't pay attention, certain sounds could reach a deafening level. I took a deep breath, focusing on eliminating the pain and regulating my senses. It did not take me long, merely an instant, but I'd completed my task, and I realized the trumpet had served the purpose of signaling an announcement. Said announcement was being proclaimed right then and there by the king's messengers. From experience, I guessed it to be just an insignificant thing, like another party or the birth of some child.

I turned to leave when the messenger's words effectively caused me to freeze. "Announcing the wedding of General Jan'ke Nightbourne and Countess Alana Windwisp."

It could not be. I repeated these words to myself over and over again, attempting to make myself believe them. It could not be. Jan loved me, he had told me as much many times. He had kissed me and held me and we had touched each other in ways I had never allowed anyone to touch me before. But the words of the messenger still rang in my ears, loud and mocking, and I couldn't help but wonder. What if our relationship didn't mean more than that, a kiss and a touch, a stolen moment of passion? What if only I had fallen in love, but not Jan? After all, it had been me who had first confessed my feelings.

When the shock dissipated, the anger and the pain emerged – full and stronger than I'd ever felt either. How could I have not seen this coming? True, I was blind, but my handicap had never made me misjudge people so. How could I have fallen for someone who so obviously did not love me in return? And how dare Jan make me his and then throw me away with such blatant disrespect? Yesterday, he

had fucked me until I thought I couldn't walk and all the while, he had been preparing his wedding with the lovely Alana. Had he been sleeping with her as well?

All this time, I had accepted his excuses with a smile, always agreed to keeping our relationship a secret. All this time, he had deceived me and laughed behind my back. Not anymore. I was no one's toy.

I did not know how I managed to get to the sparring grounds. My mind had grown hazy, blurred with the anger – too much anger. A part of me couldn't accept I'd been so utterly and completely deceived. Fury clouded my world and suddenly, I embraced the overwhelming need to destroy something. Perhaps castrate Jan. That would be interesting.

Before I entered the practice grounds, I took a moment to calm my temper, my vision invaded with red again. I couldn't stand the thought of anyone seeing me in such a state. The last thing I wanted was to appear as a jealous lover, or worse. I needed a cool head to enact my revenge.

Unfortunately for him, Sorhel found it wise to challenge me, yet again. "Oh, here you are again, Skyeyes. You up for another match?"

With a growl, I acceded to his proposal, the anger inside my veins still burning to get out. "Bring it on." Even if I seemed cool on the surface, behind the mask, I burned with the desire to destroy.

As soon as the signal to begin rang out, I attacked. The battle was as fierce as it was short. I didn't take the trouble to play with him like I had the last time. I just wanted to kill, to feel the scent of blood filling my nostrils, to calm this torment inside of me. Then I could perhaps hunt the traitor who had humiliated me and give him a lesson he would never forget.

Sorhel tried to oppose me, but he had not realized exactly how superior my skills were to his. Our blades clashed, and he struggled to fight back, but I soon had him cornered and exhausted. He panted and I could feel his tiredness and his fright. I barely could control myself now, and my sanity clung to a thin thread from only the desire to keep the remnants of my dignity intact.

In mere minutes, I'd defeated Sorhel and his blade flew out of his hand to

land somewhere to our right. No longer caring about what the onlookers thought, I pressed my sword to his neck. One second more and he would be dead. One of my enemies out of my way, to join the ranks of the restless dead.

Any thoughts of Sorhel vanished as a different presence appeared behind me.

"Skyeyes!" Jan called out, and I fought to remain calm, even if the sound of him calling me by my last name felt like Sorhel had sent a dagger through my heart.

I turned and offered a brief mock-bow. "Lord Nightbourne," I greeted him with a smile.

"Do you have time for a match, now?" he inquired, his voice trembling just a bit.

If I'd been able to see, I wouldn't have been able to disguise the anger inside of me. But since my eyes couldn't give me away, I schooled my features into a mask of indifference with ease. "Of course, General."

Jan approached as silently as always, but this time he'd run out of luck. I had long been able to hear him and feel him. The air shifted slightly whenever someone moved. Even if the person in question was as silent as the grave, the molecules he bothered during his movement were not. It had taken me a while longer to get used to Jan's peculiar ability, but now, I could hear him.

Unfortunately for him, this cancelled the one advantage he had, the one card he could have played in an attempt to beat me. I could defeat him now, and right then and there, my mind and body ached to do just that, to beat him, shred his arrogant pride to pieces, and choke the life out of his lungs. I was no one's toy, damn it, and I did not enjoy being so blatantly lied to.

"Whenever you're ready, General Nightbourne."

I could practically feel his scowl at my behavior, but he said nothing. Instead, I heard him step toward me as he drew his blade. We circled each other, each of us waiting for the other to strike, waiting to catch the opponent unprepared.

In the end, Jan lifted his blade first. "Please, baby, I can explain," Jan whispered as our blades clashed, cool silver screeching against forged steel. Even if I could not see it, I knew my own blade was not as beautiful, as strong, or as ornate as his, yet another reminder of the difference between our two positions. I should have

realized it earlier, but I had, for once, blinded myself. Still, a sword didn't need to be pretty to be deadly and the veil had fallen from my eyes. Jan would pay for his deception.

"I intended to tell you, I swear," he lied again and I ignored him in favor of swinging my blade toward his chest.

"Baby, please listen!" Jan pleaded as we fought and the sharp edge of my blade swiped dangerously close to his neck. His voice had become barely a whisper, so low, only I could hear him. This fact, the obvious confirmation he found shame in our relationship, in being my lover, worked only to fuel the pain, the fury in my heart. But, no! For all our intimacy and contact, Jan had never been my lover, not really. I had been reluctant to jumping into that kind of intimacy, and rightly so, since in my foolishness, I'd ended up nothing but a plaything for a bored elf general.

"Listen to what? I've heard enough lies," I growled between gritted teeth.

"I told you about Alana, baby," Jan tried, again, increasing my anger tenfold. "Be reasonable."

"You told me you were having a mock relationship with her, keeping her as a front so no one would suspect. You failed to mention, however, that you were planning on marrying her!"

My anger burned with almost palpable intensity and I again felt the familiar desire to draw blood, the necessity to kill surpassing everything else. A surge of instinctual energy boosted my muscles, and with one skillful and strong movement, Jan's blade flew from his hand, falling several feet away with a satisfying clang. The practice room turned silent as I pressed the tip of my blade to Jan's neck. The heavenly scent of blood permeated the air. It would be so easy, so very easy to kill him now. I'd beaten him fair and square. I deserved to take my revenge. I deserved to claim the life of my enemy.

All of the sudden, a flash of reason cleared my fury-clouded mind and I realized what I was doing. I was holding a blade to the throat of the man I loved. Even if he did not love me back, how could I consider hurting him, taking his life? Instantly, my sword clattered to the floor and I suppressed the urge to abandon the room immediately. "You lose," I said, pouring as much icy calm into my voice as I

could muster in my state.

"Congratulations. It's the first time someone has beaten me, in battle or on the practice field," he replied formally.

I didn't bother to answer his final statement. My mind swirled with too much anxiety, too many questions, too much doubt and self-loathing. I picked up the blade and sheathed it at my hip and turned my back on the practice room. Something was terribly wrong with me.

I had always told myself the reason behind my unreasonable fury had a connection to my hatred of the Xoz. That couldn't be the explanation now, for my opponent hadn't been a demon. He hadn't even been some elf who had made my life miserable, in the past. My sparring partner had been Jan. I'd been a hair's breadth away from murdering Jan.

I exited the main sparring room, fighting to calm my racing heart. I was so horrified at my own actions I nearly missed him approach. Completely disregarding the fact that we were no longer in our refuge in the garden, Jan hugged me to his chest impulsively. "Are you all right, baby?"

"I'm fine," I said, trying, but failing to break away from his hold. In the aftermath of our battle, my anger no longer seemed so important. I needed to get out of there, before something worse happened. "Jan . . . Something's not right. Something's not right with me." I knew I contradicted myself but I found myself unable to do anything about it.

He caressed my hair gently, placing soft kisses on my face. "I'm so sorry. I never meant to hurt you or to lie. I swear, the whole thing with Alana is an arrangement only. I never meant to marry her."

At Jan's mentioning of his fiancée's name, the anger and the murderous instinct rushed back into me and I pushed him away. "Stay away from me, from now on. I never want to see you again."

I turned on my heel and abandoned the training area. I could think of only one person who could help me. My mother.

Since we had reconciled just a few days before, I had given my relationship with her a lot of thought. In the many years we'd stayed here, she had also suffered a

lot because of my existence. Not only was I a fatherless child, but also I had a disability marking me as a target for scorn and hatred. Many times, my mother had been told I represented a punishment for her indecency. In consequence, I had decided to no longer breach the subject of her past and my parentage. She may have had her flaws, but she loved me. And what did I care who had been the man contributing his seed to my conception only to abandon my mother shortly thereafter?

But these unanswered questions, I realized now, most likely held the key to my peculiar affliction. I hastened through the courtyard, passing through a throng of busy people with irritating slowness. The archives section was quite far from the barracks, and it seemed to take me forever to get there.

When I reached the silent rooms, I went in search of my mother. She had taken to going to work earlier lately, as she claimed she felt useless and lonely after I left the house.

"Mother, are you in here?" I called out to her, announcing my presence.

My mother emerged from amidst the shelves to the right. She registered my presence with surprise in her voice. "Alix?" I had visited her before, but I never came here so early in the morning. "Is something wrong, darling?"

"You tell me!" I snapped. "Tell me what the hell is wrong with me. I know it isn't normal to revel in the scent of blood, to yearn for destruction, to attack the people you love."

"People you love?" my mother repeated. "Alix, what did you do?" she asked in horror.

"That doesn't matter, Mother. Please, tell me! Help me understand!"

I found myself in a warm flower-scented embrace. "All right, my son," she whispered brokenly. "You really are better off not knowing, but I can't keep it from you any longer. I knew I would have to tell you eventually. You are the son of —"

"Lady Skyeyes?" A woman's voice interrupted our discussion.

The voice sounded familiar, although I didn't recognize it immediately. My emotions were in turmoil and my mind didn't process the information. Before I could react, my mother tapped my hand and pulled me into the office. "Wait here for

a second, all right? Don't come out, no matter what."

I nodded and my mother left to greet the new arrival. "Lady Windwisp. . . . Yes, what can I help you with?"

"Please, call me Alana. And I'm looking for a book," Alana Windwisp said. "A book about potions. I'm interested in love potions specifically."

Those few phrases were enough for me to realize, without a doubt, why the person sounded familiar. I hadn't been certain initially, but now, the answers came to me with ease. It was her, the woman I had overheard with her lover. Of course! It all made sense now! She had been planning to force Jan into marrying her all along, in order to continue her own affair with Jan's father in secret.

And now, she was looking for a book about potions! She planned to cast a spell on my Jan. The fury inside of me exploded and bright red stained my vision, like in my dreams, only burning hotter, brighter. The shadow covering my eyes splintered, somehow like back in the forest, and yet so very different. An entirely different emotion fueled me now, not passion, not love, but a burning hatred and an ultimate desire to kill.

I stepped out of the office and into the main library. Immediately, I realized who my mother was and who my enemy was. Even had I not known my mother so well, I could easily distinguish them by the way they dressed and braided their hair. Everything seemed painted in a peculiar reddish tint, but I didn't care. The voice in my head held my full focus. *Kill her! Kill her! Kill her!* And I intended to do just that. "Hello, Lady Windwisp." I greeted her with a smile.

Alana's eyes widened as she took in my appearance. I didn't know the reason for her reaction, although I had the sneaking suspicion I had guessed my mother's secret. But who cared about past secrets and lies? I would kill this deceitful woman today and I would release Jan from her clutches.

Even as I spoke, a fireball started appearing in my hand. Alana's gaze went to the fiery sphere, but she remained rooted on the spot, as if hypnotized by the sight. Smirking, I aimed the fireball, preparing myself to eliminate my enemy.

It was my mother's sudden scream that saved Alana's life. "No, son! Don't!"

Her voice made me falter and the fireball landed somewhere to Alana's left,

crashing against a bookcase. The explosion snapped Alana out of her horrified trance and she took off toward the door. I cursed and followed in her tracks, but she was faster than I had realized. Maybe her terror urged her forward, giving her the speed she needed to escape my grasp. Either way, by the time I caught up, she had run out the archives' door. I shot another fireball in her direction, missing her by inches and she let out a banshee-like screech. Distantly, I wondered how in the world I even knew to use this kind of magic, but I accepted it, just like I had accepted all the peculiarities of my existence. I could hear my mother's desperate shout.

"No Alix, don't! Run, my son, run!"

As I followed Alana, I made a third attempt at eliminating my target through this newfound magic. I was getting the hang of it so the third shot was successful. The fire bolt hit her in the back, making her collapse with an agonizing sound. I smiled in satisfaction as I watched her beautifully embroidered dress burn while she tried futilely to put out the fire. Alas, in my admiration of this spectacle, temporarily I lost sight of my initial goal and before I could prepare another fire bolt to finish her off, I saw elven imperial guards heading our way.

Alana screeched again, somehow still finding the strength to point out the obvious. "Demon! Demon!"

I realized I had little to no chance of winning this battle. Therefore, I had to get my mother out of there without delay. My mother had a point. I didn't understand fully what was going on, my mind still hazy and my reason having returned only partially. But the soldier in me had long ago learned discretion was the better part of valor. Alana's death would have to wait. We needed to make our escape.

"Thank the Goddess, Alix. You have to run," my mother said in tears.

"Is there another way out?" I asked, focusing on the matter at hand.

She nodded and took a deep breath. "A secret passage. This way."

I followed my mother into her office and watched her press a button next to the bookcase. The bookcase case moved aside and a door opened behind it.

"Here, son!" My mother urged me forward, eyes swimming in tears. "Go through here."

"How come there's a passageway through here?"

"In the ancient palace plans, the architects included several secret passages leading away from the palace into the forest. Originally, this room was used for tactical purposes and its size allowed nobles to gather here and discuss matters of importance." My mother let out a little laugh, realizing she rambled out historical facts. "Anyway, it will get you out of the palace."

"Me? Don't you mean us?" I inquired.

My mother shook her head. "I have to stay behind to stall them and break the entry way so that they can't follow you."

The light in my eyes faded as regret and sorrow replaced anger in my heart. I knew what I had to do, of course. I couldn't possibly make my escape and leave my mother behind. I hugged her to my chest, kissing away her tears. I understood now why she kept my parentage a secret. The blood in my veins was tainted. I was tainted—a demon, like Alana had said. The pieces started to fall into place—the sharpness of my senses, my almost insatiable lust for blood, my harsh temper, the intensity with which I felt everything—from love, to jealousy, to anger. I understood everything now and I couldn't allow my mother to pay the price for having a son like me. "Don't worry, mama," I whispered in her hair. "Everything's going to be fine. I really do love you."

I didn't allow her a moment to reply. The guards would soon be here. I pushed her into the passage and she let out a sound of dismay. "Alix, no!"

Ignoring her protest, I pressed the button, closing the door to the passage, and proceeded to crush it once the door moved in place. I then pushed the bookcase back, hoping nothing looked out of order. As I worked, I thought I could hear my mother's sobs on the other side of the wall as she tried in vain to reach for me. It was too late, much too late. I felt a pang of regret at the knowledge I would never see Jan again, but now, more than ever, I realized we were not meant to be.

Smiling calmly, I exited my mother's office and walked into the main archives section. By now, the whole building had been surrounded by soldiers and a strange wave of relief swept through me at the knowledge my people were finally prepared for an attack. Although they weren't really my people, were they? This day had

proved it beyond any shadow of a doubt.

My eyes had gone blind again, the murderous instinct overwhelmed by the sorrow of parting with my dear mother. So when the guards stormed the room, the only person they found there was the resident blind elf.

"That's him. That's the demon," I heard Alana gasp.

She seemed to be in terrible pain, and I had to admit a part of me admired her for being able to speak so clearly in spite of being hit by a fire bolt.

"My lady," a guard addressed her, "with all due respect, that's Alix Skyeyes."

I did not fool myself. I didn't have a chance of escaping. But maybe, if I played my cards right, I could buy my mother some time, enough time to escape the palace.

"He's a demon, I tell you," Alana insisted, almost choking on her words. "I saw his eyes."

I glanced in her general direction and gave her my best mocking look. "And how would you know what a demon's eyes look like? You've never seen a demon in your life."

I tried to keep my anger in check, knowing losing my temper again would be my undoing. I wouldn't be able to keep calm for much longer, not with *her* there, but just for a little while, until my mother was free — just for a little while, I had to hold on.

"Show more respect for the lady, Skyeyes," another guard barked at me.

I shrugged indifferently, even though my blood boiled with the desire to hurt her. She was no lady. She'd been fucking her fiancé's father behind closed doors for Goddess knew how long. Then again, maybe things like that happened commonly in the elven ton. What did I know? "She has not earned my respect. I have no reason to censor my opinions."

At my statement, Alana simply exploded. "How dare you? Do you know who my fiancé is? Jan will skin you alive for attacking me."

Her mentioning of my lover's name broke the dam holding my fury at bay. I tried to control the surge of jealousy that instantly emerged, but I didn't have a chance. Suddenly, I could see again with the same red-tinted reality that had become

all too familiar. I heard several gasps of surprise, accusing eyes surrounded me, and instantly, I knew all was lost.

## **Part Two**

### **Separation**

*From the Journals of Jan'ke Nightbourne and Alix Skyeyes*

*Late Autumn 11.043– Late Summer 11.044 A.D.G.*

## **Chapter Fifteen**

### **Jan'ke Nightbourne: Backstabbing**

Life has a funny way of paying you back for your mistakes. I should have learned long ago fate offers no free gifts, nor does it make things easy for us. In fact, it seems to have a sort of vendetta against the poor unsuspecting fools who live their lives in the shadow of the gods. More often than not, it's tit for tat, an eye for an eye, a revenge from the universe itself for everything you've ever done—wrong or right.

Often times, one is forced to make decisions that cannot be helped. I traded my youth and my serenity for the safety of my country and I will never regret it. Trading my love, however, for preserving the status I earned during the war is something I will never be able to forget, or forgive.

My quest of finding Alix seems to be drawing to an end. The hope that keeps me going and alive still burns in my chest. Even so, I cannot help but wonder. After all this time, what will I find when I open that door? What has become of my sweet love? So many questions I cannot answer, so many things that keep me up at night. And in the rare opportunities I do sleep, I dream. I dream about that day, the day I realized the extent of my family's treachery and of my own foolishness.

\* \* \* \* \*

The rumor of Alix being a demon spread like wildfire and in a few hours, it became the only thing on everyone's lips. Soon, the gossip insanity made the story

grow to epic proportions. Alana no longer played any part in the tale. Instead, the king himself had been attacked. Some actually said Alix had killed and eaten his own mother. Sorhel, the elf whom Alix had almost killed before my arrival at the sparring grounds that morning, had become the center of attention, since he now claimed he'd suspected Alix's identity all along.

All the while, I attempted to find out how and why my love had been taken away so quickly. I had not wasted so much time in the servants' quarters and by rights, I should have been able to arrive at the scene before that happened. And yet, it was not so. By the time I found out about what had occurred, Alix had already been arrested.

Usually, when a prisoner was captured, the guards took him to the palace dungeons, to await the king's final decision on his fate or for his transfer. That's how things were done in Northern Thralnia at least, and from what I understood, fae elves used a similar process for their own legislative dealings.

Immediately after discovering what had occurred, I made my way to the palace dungeons, my mind set on freeing my love. Once I released Alix from the dungeons, we would decide the following course of action together. I didn't know what would happen afterward, but I could not allow my love to be imprisoned even one second longer.

As I descended the stairs into the underground dungeons, I suppressed a grimace at the stench that started to fill my nostrils. There seemed to be a lot of guards around, more than one would have considered necessary and I concluded that indeed, Alix had been taken there.

Finally, I reached a railed gate guarded by four fae soldiers, one on each side of the gate and two more standing guard near the pillars adjoining it. I passed the first guards and they looked at each other in confusion, obviously uncertain as to whether they should stop me or not.

I ignored them and went directly for the gate. "Open the doors!" I ordered the guard.

Theoretically, the man had no obligation to obey me, since he wasn't actually my subordinate. He followed the orders of the fae general and I myself had no direct

authority over him. Nevertheless, both dark and fae elves acknowledged my accomplishments during the war, so the guard saluted and opened the cell block doors as he'd been bidden.

I could have rescued my love right then. I was so close to him, I could almost hear him, feel his warmth. Alas, in my need to fulfill my quest, I didn't detect the presence behind me. The attack came so unexpectedly I didn't have time to defend myself.

Elves have one severe weak point, located at the back of our skulls. It is one of the reasons we wear our hair long. Many soldiers use special plates in that area which they cover with their long locks. I myself had worn one during the war, but I had discarded it as soon as the fighting ended since it caused a great deal of discomfort. The person who had hit me knew all this, because the hit came directly to that weak spot and I crumbled to the ground, losing consciousness immediately.

I awoke under the caress of a soft hand. For a second, I leaned into it, the touch reminding me of my love's sweet kisses. I then realized the touch was distinctively feminine and I cracked my eyes open only to be met with a blurry silhouette of my younger sister Ta'nelee. "Jan, you're awake."

"Nel? What in the world happened?" Everything looked a little hazy. I remembered being at the dungeons to see . . . . To see Alix! Oh, Goddess! Alix had been accused of being a demon and imprisoned.

I shot up, the urgency of freeing my love eliminating the rest of the dizziness. I wondered how much time had passed as I pushed from the bed not waiting for Nel to answer my question.

"Wait! Wait, Jan!"

"Nel, I don't have time for this no," I snapped at her in irritation.

"But, Jan, Father said I wasn't to let you leave. He said you'd fallen under the demon's spell."

What in the world? How did my father even know about me and Alix being together? I didn't have the time to consider this dilemma. Now, more than ever, I needed to leave this place and release my love from his prison. "And what made him think you could stop me?"

"The fact that I know something you don't want me to know." My father stepped into the room. "Ta'nelee, please go to your chambers."

Immediately, my sister obeyed, retreating and leaving us alone. I frowned at my father, unwilling to listen to whatever he had to say. "I'm busy now, Father. What do you want?"

"What I want is for you to do your duty. What you are thinking of doing is useless. Your demon is gone."

The blood drained from my face; I felt weak at my father's words. His initial remark didn't shock me. I was foolish to think my love could be hidden away like some dirty secret. According to him, however, Alix was gone, maybe even dead. Desperate, I shoved my father out of the way and ran from the room. My destination—yet again, the dungeons.

The familiar gate with its railing was still there, but the guard I had talked to no longer stood beside it. I realized, with horror, I had been unconscious longer than I originally suspected, enough for the shift to change at the very least. I had a feeling I knew who my attacker had been, but my first urgency was finding Alix. "Open the gates!"

The two men obeyed and this time, I managed to enter the dungeons. There were a few unfortunate bastards imprisoned, criminals who had committed different felonies and awaited their judgment or punishment. However, the person I looked for was nowhere to be found.

"Tell me what happened to the demon!" I gruffly ordered after I had inspected all the cells. A burn recoiled in my gut as I called Alix by such a loathsome name, but I had no choice.

"We can't, General. We've been told to keep the information classified," the man replied.

"You will!" I growled at him.

After much effort, I managed to squeeze some information from the imperial guards. They had feared the consequences of following procedure. Alix had lived in the palace his entire life and they suspected other demons could be infiltrated inside. Perhaps Alix had friends or accomplices who would help him escape. Since such a

thing was unacceptable, Alix had been transferred immediately to an unknown destination.

I left the palace dungeons with a single thought passing through my mind. If I hurried, I could track the caravan and free my love. On horseback, I would be much faster than any carriage could be, especially one intended for prisoners' transport that would travel slowly. In spite of my efforts, I couldn't take the time to devise a better plan. In reality, I didn't expect to succeed. Already, night had started to fall and I had no hope of tracking the carriage. As if my shred of hope hadn't soured enough, dark clouds were gathering on the horizon. Rain would soon start falling. If I didn't hurry, any hope of finding them would disappear entirely.

I raced to the stables, desperate to put my plan into motion. My reason had flown out the window the moment I had realized Alix was no longer within the palace grounds. I no longer cared if my idea would be nearly impossible to accomplish.

With the ease of experience, I went through the motions of preparing my steed, Raven, for the voyage. I never got attached to my horses or to animals of any kind. Allowing ephemeral creatures into one's heart guaranteed an eternity of pain. And yet, this particular horse had been by my side in many battles. If anyone could take me to Alix, it would be him.

In under a minute, I'd saddled my horse and mounted him. Just as we were about to exit the stables under the confused and amazed eyes of the servants, my father's silhouette appeared in the doorway. He gestured for the servants to vanish and set himself in front of the stable doors.

"You're not going anywhere, Jan!" Ran'dar said. "If you don't want your shameful liaison to be revealed, you will remain here and go ahead with your engagement with Lady Windwisp."

"I don't love Alana," I snapped at him. "I refuse to marry her."

"You will if you know what's good for you!"

I suppressed the urge to order Raven to ride and maybe crush some of my father's bones in the process. I had fought almost two centuries in the Xoz war. I was not a child to be scolded by his parent. I had tried to please him long enough, but no

longer. He would no longer stand between me and my love.

"Get out of the way, Father," I growled, and Raven stirred impatiently beneath me, feeling my anger.

"No, Jan. You will marry her, if you want your demon to live."

My eyes widened at the threat. Did my father really intend to kill Alix if I didn't wed Windwisp's daughter? Could he even make good on his threat? I didn't know. He was bluffing, he had to be. But in truth, I could not risk it. Not for a vague hope, a dream, a hastily formulated idea that would not help Alix, in the end.

The rattle of thunder outside cemented my decision. Defeated, I dismounted and proceeded to remove the saddle and the reins from my horse. My father smirked at me. "Good boy. I knew you'd come around."

Gritting my teeth, I followed him out of the stable in silence. He had won the battle but not the war.

"Now, son . . . Since we've agreed your marriage to lady Windwisp is the right thing to do, don't you think you should go visit her?"

As my father spoke, I remembered the soldier's words about Alix attacking Alana. I wondered if she was badly injured. I couldn't care less about her fate, but if she died, Alix would suffer the consequences.

Head spinning and heart numb, I nodded in agreement to my father's words. Together we headed toward the healers' area, where my father explained Alana had been taken. This meant she'd been injured severely, since nobles rarely spent time in the healers' area, more often than not choosing to summon the healers to their own quarters.

We entered the healers' area together and were met with the sound of female sobs. The irritating noise came from the third room to the right and its source was, of course, Alana. Judging by her wails, she had to be in terrible pain. And yet, I felt not an inkling of compassion for her.

With my father, I covered the hallway's distance and pushed the door of the room open. Alana lay face down on the bed, her hair to the side, allowing us a view of her back. Our presence here bordered on indecent, but I couldn't care less about societal norms. After all, it had been my father's idea to visit in the first place.

It was clear enough to me Alana had received a fire bolt to the back. The wound reminded me of the scars on my own face. If the rumors did hold a grain of truth and Alix had indeed caused Alana's burns, his ancestry was undeniable.

There were several fae healers trying to cure her. In my experience, though, demon magic didn't work like they thought it did. It acted like a live thing and fought back when challenged. Only very experienced healers could hope to dodge the peculiar side effect, and I didn't trust these guys for a minute. Among the elves gifted with the power to cure, few could hope to accomplish such a difficult procedure.

One of the healers heard my father enter and lifted his head in surprise. "My Lords! You are not allowed in here!"

I looked at him disdainfully and ignored his reprimand. "You do know what you're doing now is only making it worse?"

The fae medic gave me an annoyed look of his own. With a sigh, he walked toward me and ushered me outside. "General, I understand you are concerned, but please let us do our jobs. Our mission is to heal. We can't just leave her like that."

"See this scar on my face? This happened because one of you quacks decided to use me as a good testing ground for his great abilities. So, if you want to cripple her, carry on. But demon magic fights fae magic and she'll end up scarred for life."

The healer hesitated briefly before shaking his head. "You must be mistaken. Magic simply doesn't work like that."

"It's true. Elven skin regenerates in time, but if you try to push her body and fight the demon magic, it will scar her. Do what you want. I don't really care either way."

And I didn't care, indeed. I had come here only to placate my father. But giving in was a mistake. Pretending had been a mistake. This vicious circle of lies kept me prisoner now, but I would get out of it soon. I would get out and find my love if it was the last thing I did.

## **Chapter Sixteen**

### **Alix Skyeyes: Imprisonment**

*Goddess mine  
Dawn of time  
In the shadows you will reach  
Heaven's grace  
Sweet embrace  
Your dear strength to heal us each  
With your heart  
Break apart  
Hatred, sorrow and dismay  
With your light  
Give us might  
Keep us standing come what may.*

My voice yet again rings out in the darkness, a psalm to the Goddess who abandoned me long ago. I do not know why I still cling to her. It is not my elven blood, but my demon power that keeps me safe. Perhaps it is because this elven blood remains my one connection with Jan. I cling to my days as an elf so as not to forget the feel of my lover's rough hands on my body, his soft whispers in my ear, his scarred yet handsome face I have yet to see — that I will probably never see. I wish I could have at least told him goodbye, kissed him one last time before we were separated. Alas, an impassable chasm separated us and perhaps I should be thankful he never saw me succumb to the fire in my blood. At least, this way, my memories of him aren't tainted by his disdain or his hatred, only by sorrow and loss.

\* \* \* \* \*

When I came to, the first thought that passed through my head was, *Where's Jan?* I hurt and hurt badly, and I needed Jan's presence to free me from this nightmare. Then I remembered the events of the day — the news of Jan's wedding, my meeting with Alana, attacking her, my mother's escape, and then the soldiers.

I didn't recall much of what happened shortly after my second fall into madness. Once the soldiers realized my identity and drew their blades, my mind became a red clouded haze and everything turned confusing. Perhaps this mind block helped the people of Xoz to cope with the monster inside of them. I wished only it comforted me as well.

Instead, my sudden amnesia left me horrified and frightened. I imagined killing all those people in the room. I may not have liked them, but some of them had families, children. Of course, I imagined killing Jan, although that couldn't have happened. He hadn't been in the archives when the soldiers subdued me, I was sure of it. Besides, something inside of me told me even in the depths of madness, I couldn't end my love's life. After all, I had stopped in time back at the sparring grounds.

"I think he's come to," someone said to my right. I realized two guards pulled me along a corridor and from the number of footsteps I could hear around me, many more accompanied us on our way.

One of the men, I didn't know exactly who, punched me powerfully in the face. "Filthy demon!"

I couldn't say anything. Even if I hadn't been in so much pain, I could not fight against the truth.

Finally, after a trip punctuated with kicks and hits directed at my person, the guards stopped.

"What's going on?" someone else asked. "What's with all the commotion?"

"This guy here attacked Lady Windwisp. He's a demon."

"Are you serious? I mean . . . He's lived here his whole life," the new voice protested.

"We saw it with our own eyes," one of the soldiers carrying me snapped. "Just open the doors and let us pass."

The gate opened with a grating sound and then the guards returned and we were continuing our little trip. From the sudden change in temperature, I could tell I was being dragged into the palace dungeons. I tried to fight the imperial guards pulling me along, but I couldn't overpower them. Blood seeped out of a wound in

my stomach, and I had other injuries all over my body. The blood loss and pain weakened me, but from the way my head ached, I suspected it had been a strong hit to the back of my skull that had made me lose consciousness. Apparently, despite my demon ancestry, I'd retained some elven features.

As they dragged me along the stairway, distantly I thought about how the luxury of the elven palace did not extend to its dungeons. In spite of my pain, strength started to return to me with each passing second. In truth, my injuries weren't so bad. Not even my most severe wound – the one in the stomach – threatened my life, and I didn't need to fear infection. Elven diseases were a specific sort and I myself had never been one to catch any of them. Finding out why didn't please me so much.

I didn't know how much time had passed since my attack on Alana and my fight with the guards, but I had to try to make a move. I had to escape before something worse happened, perhaps get word to Jan somehow. Even if he hated me for my demon blood, he needed to know the truth about his fiancée. His fiancée . . . I tasted bile in my mouth as I recalled the wedding announcement.

In the end, the memory of Alana Windwisp's satisfied countenance gave me strength and I pulled my arm out of one of the guards' hold, pushing the other one away from me. With a startled sound, the men jumped back, immediately drawing their swords. Despite my dizziness and nausea, I could still hear them sound the alarm, and I heard more soldiers rushing in upon their realization I was free.

Naturally, I soon realized this particular attempt to escape made no sense. There were too many soldiers around and even if I were uninjured and could fight at my full potential, as I had back in the archives, I couldn't defeat them all. I took several of the soldiers down, before I was yet again, immobilized.

My face connected with the grimy floor several times and I tasted blood in my mouth. Inwardly, I cursed, knowing I should have never let them know I had recovered enough to fight. My best hope of escaping would have been when next they got me out of here, either for judgment or for transfer. My reasoning, however, seemed to be working faultily, of late – in the past seven months or so, or better said, since I had met Jan'ke Nightbourne.

For my stupidity, I earned three more bleeding wounds, the deepest ones in my shoulder and thigh. After taking turns in kicking me with various degrees of intensity, the guards proceeded to drag my now unresisting form further into the dungeons.

At some point, they reached their destination and another door opened. Originally, the guards had not been able to cuff my hands, since they didn't have the equipment necessary. Having realized their mistake, the ones carrying me proceeded to bind my wrists and legs with heavy chains, and then drop my bloody and bruised form onto the cold floor of the dungeon.

Directing a few final kicks to my stomach, the soldiers left me be, muttering under their breaths about cursed elves and demon monsters. I remained unmoving on the floor, catching my breath and struggling to think of a way to get out of this predicament.

Having lost myself in thought, I didn't know how much time had passed when I heard another voice coming from the direction of the dungeon gates. "Open the doors!"

Ah, a voice I knew all too well, the one voice my body answered to, the voice belonging to my lover. I strained to better catch the words being spoken. Could it be? Could Jan have come to my aid?

I struggled to hear clearly, to ensure myself I had indeed heard my lover outside. Alas, the person to speak next was not Jan, but the guard.

"My lord . . . Is everything all right?"

"Yes," another man answered. "My son is just very upset about what happened with his fiancée. I wouldn't want him to lose his temper and do something stupid."

I recognized the voice as belonging to the man from before, the man who had been with Alana. It took me a few seconds to process this information, but I managed. If Lord Ran'dar Nightbourne was there and he had mentioned his son, it meant that, indeed, I *had* heard Jan demanding entrance. My love did have a brother, but what were the chances of Lar'an Nightbourne coming to see me, or anyone in the dungeon for that matter? Yes, it had been Jan. He had found out about my

imprisonment.

Everything turned even more confusing. Did Ran'dar's presence mean my relationship with Jan had been discovered? Terror gripped my heart at the thought, overwhelming the anger I still felt over Jan's lie. I didn't think I would ever get over it, but then again, it didn't matter. Jan and I were never meant to be. After all, I now realized my true nature. More importantly, if we had been discovered, Jan would soon join me in this cell. I could not accept the idea of such a terrible fate befalling my lover.

The thought of Jan being so close to me gave me strength and I dragged my body from the corner of the cell, fighting to move in spite of the weight of the heavy chains immobilizing me. My wounds weren't lethal, and if I managed to avoid any significant injuries in the future, I had a chance of escaping. Of course, that would entitle finding a way out, but I decided to take each step one at a time.

I gritted my teeth at the pain I endured with each movement. Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, I reached the bars. With a strength born of agony and anguish, I rattled my chains against the metal. I couldn't think clearly. I didn't want Jan to be thrown in jail, and yet, desperately I wanted to see him. I wanted to know he didn't hate me. I wanted to ask him why he had lied to me.

Of course, none of those wishes came true. I didn't hear Jan's voice or silent gait approaching. Instead, what I did hear was a conversation that chilled me to the bone.

"Can I ask when a decision will be made regarding the demon?" Ran'dar asked.

"I'm not sure, my lord." The other man—whom I recognized as the guard who'd commented on the peculiarity of the situation—hesitated. "We've never encountered such an issue before."

Lord Nightbourne made a noise that sounded both thoughtful and displeased. "You do realize he may have accomplices in the palace? I understand his mother had a certain status once . . . ."

After a brief pause, the other man agreed. "You are right about that, Lord Nightbourne. We will see what our superiors decide."

"Of course," Nightbourne replied. "I take my leave now. Good luck with the demon."

"Thank you, my lord. Worry not, we will solve the problem soon."

The conversation died out and despair clutched at my insides at the realization Jan was no longer out there. How? How had his father realized the truth? Goddess. If only I had been more careful. If only I had discussed these things with Jan. Perhaps together, we would have figured things out before disaster struck.

But regrets wouldn't give me a second chance. I had to compose myself and find the strength to endure and fight what would soon be coming. Taking into account the circumstances, it wouldn't take long for them to decide my fate.

As I had suspected, someone did show up, less than a minute later. It was yet another guard. The man kicked the bars and even without my eyesight, I could see his hatred for me. "Be silent! Don't tell me you're impatient to receive your judgment? Well, don't worry too much about that."

I didn't reply, but the guard didn't lose interest in tormenting me. He posted himself just outside the cell door and proceeded to spit out insults and threats. "Freak demon! You'll be sorry you were ever born! We'll make you pay!" And variations on the same theme followed.

After less than an hour, I heard someone else approach. My hearing detected at least four people coming.

"We are to remove the demon from the palace grounds as soon as possible," one of the new arrivals told my guard.

Goddess . . . . Already? Could Nightbourne really have so much influence in the fae world? I didn't think anyone could have believed I had friends or "accomplices" in the palace. Growing up, I had been the target of the taunts of all the other children and teenagers. Who would want to help me now?

"All the preparations are being made," someone else said, completing the report.

Keys rattled as the guard outside struggled to open my cell door. "Where are we taking him?"

"I have no idea. I understand it's a special dungeon. The general sent a special

courier and we have been instructed to prepare the demon and meet them half way."

I wondered what this preparation entitled for me. Alas, my confusion and curiosity didn't last long. Several soldiers entered my cell, drawing their blades as the door yielded to the guard's efforts. My senses screamed out at the danger, and, in spite of bleeding through half a dozen wounds, in spite of being tied down, I fought them. I fought them with all my might. At some point, I must have fallen into despair, because everything became a red haze and flame emerged at my fingertips, pushing the guards a short distance away. But my battle was lost before it even began. More and more elves appeared and finally exhausted, drained by a magic I didn't yet feel as my own, I surrendered and again, fell into darkness.

Soon after our little *preparation* session, the palace guards proceeded to carry me out of the dungeons. To where, I didn't know, but whatever they had in mind for me couldn't be good. I wanted to struggle, to try and fight my way out of their hands, but every muscle protested against the idea. My limbs felt heavy, as if burdened with a thousand iron weights and tied down with strong bonds. I didn't exclude the explanation that I was indeed tied up and didn't realize it.

It was only after I found myself breathing fresh air again that I realized the preparations for my transfer had been completed. I would now be moved to a safer location, whatever "a safer location" meant. I still didn't know where they planned to take me, but I did know they would take me away from the palace and from my Jan.

Insane with the pain and the thought of separation, I started to struggle again, to fight against the men holding me. My captors had learned something from their mistakes though, and it soon became clear they had indeed bound me with heavy chains and manacles. For my efforts, I earned more insults and hits from their part.

They proceeded to drag me again, and from the low murmurs, I gathered, there were others around, watching and whispering. Someone – a servant, a guard? I couldn't tell – came closer and spat in my face. "Accursed demon!"

The soldiers pushed back the gathering crowd, however, probably because they feared another sudden surge of defiance on my part. They needn't have worried. My entire body hurt and my insides seemed branded with flame. I suspected a large part of the exhaustion and the pain originated from my own

actions, to be more specific, my using of demon magic, both against Alana and against the soldiers. It was too late to fix my mistakes, now. It was too late for many things.

After a trip that seemed to take ages, and at the same time, so very short, the guards carrying me stopped. Still muttering curses under their breaths, they pushed me to my knees. A sharp pain exploded at the back of my skull and then everything vanished, swallowed by unconsciousness.

Falling into a prolonged sleep was not the most recommendable thing to do in such a situation, but alas, I didn't have much choice in the matter. When I awoke, I found myself still bound, but no longer in the courtyard in the palace. Instead, I seemed to be in some sort of carriage. I could hear the trot of the horse and the rattle of the wheels, but as I felt around me, I realized there were also bars everywhere. Since I couldn't see, I had no idea where these elves planned to take me, but I concluded it couldn't be a very good place for my wellbeing.

With a sigh, I leaned against the bars and mentally prepared myself for what would follow. Probably more torture, more beatings, more insults. I had to remain strong though. This was only the beginning and despair would not help me. I had to believe I would find a way out of this mess.

No one can be forever vigilant. No prisons could be impossible to escape. I would find a way, I simply had to. I had to return to the palace and reveal to Jan the truth about Alana Windwisp. Perhaps he would return to me, apologize, and then help me find my mother. Then we could all abandon the castle and find a real home, perhaps a happily ever after, like in fairy tales.

I didn't know how much time I spent lost in hopeful and impossible dreams, but of course, in the end, I was hurled back into the cruel reality. The carriage stopped and I heard the sound of footsteps, then the metallic whisper of chains and the turn of a key inside a lock. Finally, the guards responsible for my transfer entered the carriage and dragged me out of the moving prison.

I would have loved to be able to see in that moment, but my eyes didn't seem to want to obey me. I did, however, gather the prison where they were taking me had somehow been camouflaged, hidden from prying eyes. We walked, or rather,

they walked and I was pulled along, through thick shrubbery and when we stopped, I heard the distinctive sound of rustling leaves and then some sort of mechanism being activated.

The device reminded me the hidden door in my mother's office and when it opened, I was yet again ushered into a moist and cold prison.

"So this is the demon, huh?" someone asked in front of us, yawning as if he'd just awoken.

"Yeah. He's been living in the king's palace for fifty years. Can you believe that?"

Theoretically speaking, half of that period had been spent fighting in the Xoz war, but who would bother with remembering my soldier days, now?

"What can I say? They're like cockroaches. They sneak in everywhere and you can't exterminate them no matter what you do."

The first man, one of those carrying me, laughed. "Stop being so pessimistic. We won the war and caught this one. We'll beat them eventually."

"I doubt it." The other guard, who I now guessed was probably older, snorted.

I agreed with him. Demons were, indeed, resilient and quite persistent. They would come back to strike again, even if I would likely not be around when the next war happened.

"Anyway, let's take this one inside and lock him up. We moved him fast; I'm not sure if the idiots from the palace secured him adequately."

By that, he meant sufficiently beaten and bleeding through a thousand wounds. He needn't have feared. The guards had done a very thorough job there, not taking any chances regarding my possibility of escape. I wouldn't be strong enough to attempt another daring move anytime soon.

I had to admit that as they dragged me farther into the camouflaged prison, doubt started to yet again torment me. How would Jan ever be able to find me here? Did he even have any interest in finding me?

Perhaps he did. He had, after all, come to the palace dungeons before. I didn't know why he hadn't managed to come inside, but I suspected his father might have had something to do with it. Still, Jan was resourceful. He hadn't reached his

position as a general based on his lineage. He would find a way to get me out. He wouldn't forget, he wouldn't give up on me. I had to hang on to that thought, else I'd go mad.

My thoughts went back to his last words to me. He had tried to explain, he had called me "baby," like he always did when we were together, when we kissed, when we made love. Yes, he had been honest. Circumstances had stopped him from telling me about the wedding, but he loved me still.

The soldiers deposited me onto a solid surface. I tensed as they manacled my hands and feet, effectively immobilizing me before I could even utter a word of protest. They removed my bloody shirt and stripped me down to my breeches. My boots had disappeared long ago so I ended up half nude, tied down, and helpless at the mercy of these guards. I didn't like my situation very much.

But of course, as bad as things seem at one particular time, they can only get worse. I cannot say I wasn't prepared for what followed. I heard the distinctive rattle of weapons and the swish of leather around me, then the swish of the whip in the air before it hit my back. The pain that followed didn't take me by surprise. The cruel slash still hurt like hell, though, especially since the other wounds had weakened me. I gritted my teeth and forced myself to withstand the agony without a sound. They would not hear me beg or plead. I refused to give them the satisfaction.

They continued to beat me until the guard's arm tired and I tasted blood in my mouth from keeping myself from crying out. Another guard took over and the ordeal continued. Finally, when I had decided they intended to beat me to death, someone else approached.

"My, my . . . What do we have here? The new arrival?"

The soldier who had been beating me grunted his assent.

"How interesting," the new guard said. "Do me a favor, Thorien, and watch over the corridor for me."

Thorien chuckled a bit and I didn't like the sound of his laughter. It didn't bode well for me if the guards wanted to amuse themselves with torturing the "new arrival." I couldn't help but ask myself what could be so bad it would require the first guard, Thorien, to keep an eye on the corridor.

Alas, I got the answer to my question as soon as Thorien walked away. I found myself being stripped of my breeches, or rather, felt my breeches being torn from me. The new guard laughed as he passed his disgusting hands over my skin.

It didn't take a genius to figure out what he intended to do to me. Since the beating at the palace had been intended to prevent me from thinking of escape, my ass had been spared with only a dozen bruises or so. Quite honestly, I wanted to keep it that way. Even if my worn out and bloodied body could barely sustain my consciousness, I would not allow this grotesque excuse of an elf to rape me. I would not allow him to take what Jan had given to me.

Suddenly, a familiar and yet foreign sensation of heat invaded my body. I didn't understand my new powers completely, but neither did I question them. It hurt to use the demon magic again so soon, but I didn't do it consciously, so I couldn't have stopped it had I tried.

The guard behind me let out a hiss of pain and a curse. "What in the world — ?"

For some reason, his shock and pain relieved some of my own aches, as if they were feeding off a hidden well of energy inside me. I couldn't help but start to laugh hysterically. They had not defeated me yet. I was down but not broken. I would find a way to get out and when I did, all these people, all these bastards who separated me from my love would get more than a slight burn on their hands. I would cut them into little pieces while they still breathed and feed them their fingers and private parts. I would bathe in their blood and feast on their flesh, carbonize their remains, and scatter their ashes in the wind, until not even a memory of them remained. My vengeance would come swift and ruthless, and no one would be able to escape it. I would keep on living, keep on trying, and never would they manage to break me.

## **Chapter Seventeen**

### **Jan'ke Nightbourne: Awakening the Beast**

Foxes chew their paws off when they are caught in hunters' traps. I've always

found that particular fact fascinating, if somewhat gory. However, when I became the trapped fox, I realized the best way out of the trap was destroying it altogether.

The knowledge of how easy betrayal came to me should bother me, but it doesn't. The fact I could turn against my own blood with no remorse should give me pause, but I couldn't care less. I suppose I am not surprised entirely. Over a century of continuous battles can do that to a man.

In hindsight, I cannot help but be thankful for my experience in the war, or even for the war itself. Had it not been for my involvement with the Northern Thralnia armies, I would have never met Alix. In the end, the cruelty and ruthlessness born of years of being a general helped me out a seemingly perfect trap. I suppose no one should ever think their plans fool proof, especially when said plans involve separating two lovers. I could have accepted anything but losing Alix. For their transgression, they had to pay. If, in the end, my actions hastened the destruction of my country, I will atone for it in front of the Goddess – and her, alone. Now, I am so close to Alix I can feel him and I will never regret anything that helped me in achieving my goal.

\* \* \* \* \*

"I'm sorry, General Nightbourne. I can't help you with your request," the fae lieutenant told me again. I'd been trying to get the location of the demon dungeons out of him for ten minutes, now. "This is a fae issue I am not authorized to discuss."

"And Alana is my fiancée. I have the right to know."

"Again, general, I cannot help you. You will have to wait for the official channels to administer justice on your fiancée's attacker."

Feeling anger flow through my veins, I grabbed the other elf and pushed him against the wall, squeezing his windpipe until he started to turn blue.

Choking, the lieutenant clutched at my hand. I took pity on him and released him. After a few seconds of coughing and catching his breath, the man gave me a cautious look.

"I understand you are upset, but the location of our demon dungeons is

secret. There are only a handful of people privy to the information and here at the palace, no one but the general knows the exact place."

I wanted to hurt him, to force out of him all the secrets of the fae, but violence wouldn't help me. "I see," I replied coldly. "Thank you for your time."

I turned my back on the fae lieutenant and walked away. I seemed to be stuck in a situation with no way out. I needed to find Alix, but everywhere I turned, a new obstacle blocked me. My father remained adamant in my marriage with Alana, the fae tightlipped about their stupid secrets. The general had fallen ill and the guards watched me like hawks. I felt useless and stupid and humiliated. I wanted to scream at the sense of helplessness the entire situation brought me.

I needed someone I could trust. If I managed to get a message outside the castle walls, I could find an excuse to leave the palace that would cancel my father's precautions. But who could I ask?

The only person who came to mind was Lar. He had agreed with my father in the past, but he was still my brother. We had shared a lot of things growing up and perhaps he would understand. As risky as it seemed, at this point, I didn't have much choice. I would just have to try, and I'd determine if I could trust him before asking for his help.

Considering this idea, I headed toward the palace main gardens, where my brother often spent his time with his latest conquest. I, indeed, found him there, entertaining three pretty fae women. I gritted my teeth, resigning myself to having to wait. Women were talkative and I didn't want the rumor of my urgent discussion with my brother to somehow reach my father's ears because of their gossiping.

Luckily for me, a tall fae noble I thought I recognized as the father of at least two of the girls arrived in a hurry. I couldn't help a smile when the man started arguing with my brother, claiming Lar had to pay for his indecent behavior. "But we were just chatting . . . Four friends, out for a walk. Isn't that right, ladies?"

The girls giggled and nodded, effectively cutting off any protests the older elf could have had. I had to admire my brother. He'd acquired significant skills in dealing with issues of the court throughout the years I'd spent in the war. Perhaps he could, indeed, help me, if he didn't still believe my father's lies, that is.

After what seemed like an eternity, my brother took his leave, saying goodbye to each of the fae ladies with a kiss on the wrist. Feeling relieved I wouldn't have to witness any more embarrassing scenes, I intercepted my brother as soon as he was out of sight of the group and pulled him away from the main path.

"Jan, what—?"

"Shut up," I barked at him as I pulled him through the labyrinthine gardens. "I need to talk to you."

Lar gave me a suspicious look, agreeing to follow me reluctantly, "Look, Jan . . . What's this about?"

"A personal matter," I replied vaguely. We needed to find a better spot before we had this conversation, someplace more private where we wouldn't risk being seen or overheard.

"Is this connected to the thing the other day with the demon?" he asked, his tone strangely compassionate.

The remark froze me in my tracks. So Lar did know something. To what extent was he involved? Did he know the location of Alix' dungeon? "What are you talking about?"

"Come on, Jan . . . . Father told me all about how the demon seduced you. I understand this is a difficult time for you. So, what can I help you with?"

I couldn't believe my ears. Was my brother serious? Did he actually believe I had been seduced and now suffered because of some sort of self-flagellation? I gave him a look I hoped conveyed only disbelief and not my urge to skin half the castle alive.

"Look, Lar, how many times did we go to parties together when we were young? No, don't answer that. You know who I dallied with and you know the company I kept was often not female. Do you really believe what father is telling you?"

"It's not about me believing him or not, Jan." My brother met my gaze decidedly, determination in his eyes. "But this man, this Alix, he is a demon. That much is clear. You know I do not mind you dallying with men, but demons? Demons, Jan? That is not like you."

"Well, demon or not, unusual or not, I love him. Will you help me?"

"You love him?" my brother repeated, as if trying to understand.

"With all my heart. I never thought I would be able to feel again, but Alix gave me back my emotions. Lar, Father is lying to you."

Lar remained silent for a minute or so, as if trying to process what I'd told him. I don't know to what extent he had realized what the war had done to me, but he knew now. I wondered if I'd made a mistake in revealing the extent of my feelings for Alix.

Finally, my brother looked up at me. "I believe you. You seem serious about this and besides, I owe you for the Alana thing. So what do you need?"

"I need to get out of the castle," I replied vaguely. I wanted to gauge his reactions, see if I could really trust him.

"Hmm . . . . You want to go after your demon and it's hard because of all the guards, right?"

I nodded my assent, although I didn't tell him I could leave if not for our father's blackmail. If he didn't know this, then perhaps he wasn't involved with the whole thing after all. Perhaps father fed him only bits and pieces, enough information to keep him on his side. I hoped our bond as brothers would be enough to shake Ran'dar's control.

"Well, I can help you get out easily enough. I can come up with a distraction for the guards so that you could slip away unseen."

I gave Lar a curious look, wondering what he had in mind exactly.

He shrugged nonchalantly. "It's quite easy, really. The only thing I would have to do is flirt a bit with them, maybe suck a few cocks. More than half a dozen are attracted to me and —"

My fist connected with his cheek, stopping whatever he intended to say next. The strength behind the punch made Lar lose his balance and he fell on the garden grass. "Don't even think about it," I snarled at him. "The sodomy laws are still in place."

Lar blinked owlishly at me as if trying to register my words. For a second, I feared I'd hit him too hard, but thankfully, he recovered rapidly. Rubbing at his hurt

cheek, he got back on his feet. "That might be, brother, but you and I both know it is highly unlikely for someone to punish nobles for such a thing. And besides, it's not like I'm not already known for being a whore."

He smiled bitterly and I realized then I might have misjudged my brother. I'd had a change of heart before, with Alana, but this couldn't compare. He was my blood, my little brother, the same brother I grew up with. I wanted for things to be like they used to, before the war changed us both. Lar bore his own scars, only his were not so visible.

"You are not a whore. Don't say that." He wanted to protest, but I shook my head. "You're my little brother and you're going to help me save my lover. Is that understood?"

Apparently unable to reply, he nodded silently and I felt the need to reassert the seriousness of the situation. "But if you betray me, Lar . . ." My blade went to his neck and nicked him. "I will not have mercy."

Probably, he had expected that much from me, because he nodded, his dark eyes shining with determination. "I won't let you down, brother."

That night, after explaining the general aspects of my plan to Lar, I retreated to my bedroom. I hadn't told him everything, since I didn't want to make another decision based on emotional reasons. I was waiting to see how the events would unfold. If come morning, I recognized any change in the daily routine — not my father, necessarily, since he wouldn't make such a mistake — but the guards, the servants, or other nobles, then I would know not to rely any longer on Lar.

As I contemplated what I would do if such a thing would come to pass, a knock sounded at my door. "Yes?" I barked out, not really in the mood for visitors.

"It's me, Alana," a feminine voice answered.

I froze in shock. What in the world would she be doing here at this hour? Should she be seen in my chambers, she would lose her honor. Even if we were to be wed supposedly, no, more so because of that, we could not meet alone, especially at this time of night.

I cracked the door open and glared at her. "What are you doing here?"

"I just wanted to thank you, Jan," Alana said with a smile. "You were right

about the scarring."

I shrugged, since in truth, I had not intended to help her in the first place. A part of me had wanted her to live with the scarring, to experience the existence of one forever marked. She deserved it for the role she'd played in my love's capture.

"Like I said, I don't really care either way. I didn't want those foolish healers to mutilate others."

She smiled again mysteriously and didn't comment on my callous remark.  
"Can I come in?"

"Actually, I'd rather you didn't." I placed my body strategically so as to block her from entering my chambers.

Not one to give up, she took a few steps forward and placed her hand on my chest, giving me a seductive smile and toying with the material of my shirt. I suspected my father might have mentioned Alix to her. Her behavior seemed peculiar to say the least, especially since she had never once shown sexual interest in me while we were in private.

"You've only just left the infirmary," I said, trying to refuse politely. She didn't deserve my manners, but I didn't want someone to overhear us fighting and see us together.

"It's all right. I feel perfectly fine," she whispered in my ear.

Her small hands descended down my chest and went to the laces of my breeches.

"Wait! We're not supposed to do this!" I caught her before she could do anything more reckless.

She arched a brow at me, as if in disbelief I would refuse her. "Why not? We will be wed soon, anyway."

"But you're in love with someone else!" I remarked, dismayed. Not only that, but we were not in private. Anyone could wander the hall and see her touching me inappropriately.

"I am, but he disappointed me. He didn't come see me once during my sickness. I want to make him jealous."

Her explanation didn't satisfy me one bit. She could be telling the truth, but I

wasn't inclined to believe her words. Initially, she'd been so clear in not wanting to marry me, and now she accepted the option—and wanted to bed me—just to make her lover jealous. It was ridiculous. Why had I believed her in the first place? Had it been the convenience of being able to see Alix without fearing the loss of my position? I hated myself for being so superficial, so untrustworthy. If I could have, I would have spat in my own face.

"Make him jealous? By having sex with me? By marrying me?" I repeated in disbelief. I had been clear from the beginning that I had no intention whatsoever of marrying her. Did she really think I would change my mind so easily?

"Why not?" She shrugged, as if she were discussing the weather.

I could not believe I had even considered she could be helpful for me. I had been such an idiot. She had played me, I could see it all so very clearly now. She had to know about Alix, otherwise she wouldn't conclude I would leave my lover and marry her. Well, she would soon learn my threats were not just words.

"I have my own plans," I answered coolly.

"With whom?" Her mysterious smile turned into a smirk, confirming my suspicions. "I've never once seen you with any girl here at the palace. Is it someone from your homeland?"

I pushed Alana away, wanting to kill her, frustrated because I couldn't afford to. I couldn't draw attention on myself. I still had to figure out what to do about finding my love. "Look, it doesn't matter. Just leave me be."

I shut the door in her face, delighting in the sound of dismayed frustration that escaped her. Still, if she had dared to come to my chambers right after being released from the healers' chambers, she was dangerous. More than anything else, her visit convinced me she knew about Alix. Unknowingly, she'd signed her own sentence.

Mentally, I added her to my growing list of persons who needed to be dealt with. Tomorrow, if everything went well, I would discuss the details with my brother. So many things could go wrong with my incipient plan, but I had to take a chance. It was the only hope I had in finding Alix.

\* \* \* \* \*

Two weeks passed after Alix's disappearance. For me, every day meant another round of useless searching, unbearable hours separated from my love. Visions of him trapped in some filthy dark prison consumed me inside. All my efforts to find him had been futile and I feared I had run out of places to search.

The palace seemed larger than usual, and yet, so small at the same time. All the documents I had so far found had provided no information on my love's location. I feared my increasingly snappish behavior, the hostility I couldn't help but show to everyone around me, would end up giving me away. My family did indeed know about Alix and me. I'd shared certain information with Lar, since I needed his help. Of course, my father knew about it already. Goddess, I hated Ran'dar so for keeping my love from me. But if I wanted to recover Alix, I had to keep a cool head and focus on exploiting all possibilities.

I realized all too well I was getting careless, but I couldn't help it. With each passing moment, Alix slipped farther away from me. I could feel his suffering as my own, every second of every day. Still, even with all my desperate searches, as much as I attempted to interrogate those who had been there that day, my efforts ended in abysmal failure. Everyone told me the same absurd thing—they didn't know where the prisons were and why did I care about such a creature anyway?

While my Alix remained gone, life went on and as always, I found myself forced to sit at the dinner table, facing a smiling Alana. I wanted to squeeze the life out of her, see her die by my hand. At this point, I didn't have a doubt she had somehow planned all of this. I could not allow myself the luxury of revenge, not yet. Me losing my cool wouldn't help Alix.

How did it come to this? How had I yielded so easily to my family's demands? I had been through so much in the war and nothing had broken me and yet it had taken but the intrigues of elven nobility to get me to my knees. Why had I wanted to perpetuate the same situation? Either way, I could not have both my position at court and Alix. I could not be happy with my love and please my family at the same time. Why had I even tried?

I felt so stupid now, so incredibly stupid. In spite of all my skills, I knew nothing of the court and how it worked. Show me a demon and I could think of ten ways of killing him. But put me in front of a smiling woman and I had no idea what she was thinking or how to act. Even now, when I looked at Alana, I still didn't understand exactly why my father had so much interest in my marriage with her or why he'd coerced me into it, in spite of knowing I had no wish to wed her.

Even so, I was not without resources entirely. Yes, I had run out of places to search as the palace clearly could not yield any clues. Given the general and his closest lieutenants had mysteriously fallen ill shortly after my love's disappearance, I had no hope of being able to get any information from them.

I still had friends from the Xoz war, though, and every day I waited in hope to receive news, news that today would be the last day I spend here, useless, while my love remained lost to me. It would take a while until Lar managed to finish his task, but my brother's quest held the key to Alix's possible release. Lar's success had become the thread of hope that kept me going and I could not give up on him.

My father had imprisoned me within the palace walls, ensuring I didn't spend a moment unsupervised. Even with the skills I had acquired during the war, I could not sneak past the overwhelming number of guards he had arranged. He justified the increase in security through Alix's infiltration and the mysterious new disease, but in fact, he'd come up with the elaborate scheme only to keep me here. Of course, I could leave if it was entirely necessary, but I feared the paranoia and hatred would make it easy for my father to make good on his threat to kill Alix.

I fully intended to eliminate my father, but I needed a discrete way to do it. I didn't particularly like the option of killing him in his bed. In spite of my increasing hatred for him, I did not want to become the kind of person my love would reject. There were other, less deadly possibilities, I could choose, but alas, I did not have the resources to make such plans work.

Luckily, Father had overestimated his own skills. I had to admit that by my own means, I could have escaped only at the expense of innocent lives, and perhaps that of my Alix. I had help, however, and as my father would soon see, nothing could keep me from my love.

For now, I sat waiting, pretending all was well and doing my best impersonation of a good, obedient son.

"So, what do you think, Lord Nightbourne? When should we schedule the wedding?"

I offered the count a false smile and considered his question. I had to seem eager, but at the same time allow myself time to fulfill my plan. "I believe if we begin the preparations next week, three months would be sufficient."

"Three months?" Alana repeated with a barely visible frown. "That's too long to wait!"

Immediately, the count turned his attention toward Alana. "Daughter, the general is correct. A wedding like yours needs elaborate preparations. It has to be magnificent! We can't very well throw something together!"

I nodded and opened my mouth to launch myself into an explanation of the necessities of a big wedding. I did not have the chance to even begin my speech.

All of the sudden a servant entered and bowed lowly. "I'm sorry to interrupt. An urgent message for you, General."

I took the piece of paper from the servant and opened the message, reading it carefully. Hope had already blossomed in my chest. I had begun to fear Lar couldn't manage to fulfill the task I had entrusted him with. It would seem I had been unfair in doubting my brother.

"What does it say?" The count inquired neutrally.

I allowed myself a few seconds to reread the message I had myself composed and given to Lar upon his departure before answering the Count. Theatrically, I folded the message and placed on the table, sighing. "I'm afraid I am going to have to delay the rest of the arrangements for the wedding. I've just received a summons for an expedition to the borders in a few days. There has been some unrest and someone with experience needs to check it out."

"But, Jan, the date of the wedding is just ahead!" Alana protested.

The count glared at her, reminding her that, in spite of having received the privilege of dining with us, she was still a woman. I beamed at him and he forced himself to smile in reply. "Of course, General. I see. Don't worry, Alana. I'm certain

the general will be back in time."

As I left the table, I contemplated my new plan. I hated relying on others, but by my own means, I had no chance of freeing Alix.

My sweet love . . . . Dead or alive, I would find him, and if he was dead I would die with him as well!

## **Chapter Eighteen**

### **Alix Skyeyes: Shadows of Flame**

Demons. A filthy, cursed breed, a race that embodies everything sinful and unholy. Hatred, bloodlust, insanity. Murder, fire, obsession. But in each and every dark heart, there must be a thread of light, as in every corner of heaven, betrayal can reside.

Demons and elves are legendary enemies. The neighboring countries of Thralnia and Xoz have been at war since time immemorial, a never-ending, pointless battle for reasons we've all but forgotten. From time to time, there would be a short period of peace and then the war, would, once again, resume.

The Xoz war in which Jan and I fought represented only one installment of a greater conflict. Historical data aside, between elves and demons, there could never be peace. Again, I am the proof of that.

Sometimes I think about how I came to be in the first place. How did my mother get to know a demon anyway? Did one of them force themselves on her? I scream at the daggers that pass through my heart at the suspicion I could be the result of such a heinous act. In spite of it all, in spite of the shame and sorrow, my mother kept me.

Is this the reason behind my imprisonment? Is this the reason why I seemed to be fated to die in this Goddess-forsaken place? Then again, it would be much easier to blame my imminent death on fate than on the true guilty parties. Who could I blame for my current predicament? Jan for lying to me? Maybe. But I loved him too much to hate him. Alana, for disclosing my identity? Maybe. But in truth, I myself had attacked her. My mother, for hiding my parentage for so long? Maybe.

But she had just been trying to protect me.

Still, I cannot help but hate the fact the two people whom I loved most in the world had lied to me. My mother, with hiding my true ancestry, and Jan—Jan with hiding his wedding to Alana. Confusion engulfs me, toys with my feelings—my thoughts. I can't understand what I feel anymore.

In the end, it doesn't matter. The fire in my blood consumes me, fueled by my anger and my pain. And this time there is no one here to help me get over my fury, no one I can hurt or kill. Everything has vanished and I lose myself in the shadows and the flame.

\* \* \* \* \*

I opened my eyes, once again hoping everything that had been happening to me was a nightmare. Immediately, I realized hope had long ago forsaken my prison. I still couldn't see, but instantly my senses were overwhelmed by the now familiar scent of rot, decay, and death.

I sighed, wondering why I had thought, even for a moment, I could be anywhere different. I had been trapped inside this place for so long, one would think I would have grown accustomed to it. I didn't. I couldn't. If I got used to it, then I might as well give up on any thought of freedom entirely.

For this reason, it hurt me to know the exact moment when the guards would come for their regular visits. They didn't feed the prisoners daily, but they did check on them and give them water. For me, the gift of being fed and receiving some water to drink was even rarer.

As expected, I soon hear footsteps outside, on the corridor. Two people, as always. From the sound of the steps, I could tell one of the persons walking had heavier bulk, probably a tall, muscled individual, while the other was more slender, more athletic. Another painful bit of knowledge for me—recognizing each of the guards by the sound of their footsteps. Today had to be one of my many unlucky days because the assigned pair seemed to be formed by Thorien and Delior. And yes, I knew their names as well. Overheard conversations could offer more

information than one might think. Especially in the case of these two, the knowledge of their imminent arrival didn't make me happy.

I heard the two guards open cell doors across the corridor, sometimes greeting the prisoners, other times simply ignoring them. Slowly but surely, they made their way to my own cell.

As the cell door creaked opened, I shut my eyes tightly, forcing myself to remain calm.

"Hello, there," Thorien greeted me mockingly. "And how are you this fine day?"

I ignored him, as I always did. It had become a routine for both of us now. He made a remark regarding me. I pretended I didn't hear it. He made some other disgusting gesture. I ignored it. He gave me some water. I swallowed some and spat the rest in his face. Like I said, routine.

"Answer the question, demon!" Thorien barked at me.

Delior sighed theatrically. "He won't answer you, Thorien. You know you can't get anywhere with these creatures by talking."

Delior approached me. Even if I couldn't see him now, I knew him to be a slender, handsome man. However, he seemed to enjoy the perks of his job a little too much. I believed Thorien did indeed hold genuine hatred for the demon race and perhaps, even loyalty for Thralnia. Delior, on the other hand, used his position strictly for his own benefit.

Finally, Delior came so close his breath tickled my ear in a way that made me nauseous. "It's too bad you're a demon. You really were quite handsome."

My eyes snapped open and I glared at him. From time to time, the guards' routine changed and they became bolder. Delior, specifically, had many times attempted to take liberties with me, but even with me chained and beaten, he hadn't yet accomplished a thing. From my first day here he had tried but with no success.

It didn't help that he needed to keep it a secret from the other guards. Thorien covered for him, as far as I could tell, but others didn't. I thanked the Goddess for the small miracle, because if he had had the cooperation of the other guards, all my efforts would be in vain.

He took a step back and I wondered how I appeared to him, a silent figure in the darkness, just two eyes burning like embers digging into his skin. Perhaps he really did believe the fire in my veins could somehow reach him. I wished my eyes had that power, to physically burn him, to brand him as the filthy pig he was. Maybe I could. I didn't really know. The demon magic was still new to me and my control of it poor at best. At least I could see now, although the environment I saw around me didn't improve my mood any.

"Get the fuck away from me!" I growled at him.

In fact, I felt secretly thankful for Delior's advances, since it gave me the stubbornness and the strength to keep going. If I lost my will and gave up on my dignity entirely, this man would sate his lusts with my body and that was one thing I could not allow. I would not allow anyone to sully the beauty of what I had with Jan.

The reality of this kept me fighting, stopped me from rejecting my legacy. My demon one, because my elven one seemed of little use to me, now. I had found that, with some effort, I could increase my body temperature at will. It had worked once on my first chain cuffs, but my attempts at escape had ended up only with me being recaptured and immobilized with the magical bonds.

"Shut your mouth!" Delior's fist connected with my face, but I was not the one who let out a gasp of pain.

Clutching his burnt hand, Delior staggered back, almost running into Thorien in the process. He knew by now my powers were dangerous, and yet, he returned, every time, like an annoying fly, hoping the pain and exhaustion would drain the fight from me.

Recovering from his shock, Delior directed an ugly glare at me and spat in my face. "Fucking monster!"

The saliva landed on my skin and my lips twisted in a grin as it evaporated with a hiss.

"Let's just get out of here!" Thorien urged Delior, obviously spooked by the sight.

Alas, my defiance of them left me without water for another day. As the

guards closed the door, I smiled bitterly. How long would I be able to withstand abusing my powers like this? Would I break one day and yield to this man's demands? I hoped my Jan would come for me before that happened. I hung onto that thought, allowing my powers to fade and focusing on my momentary triumph on the guards. Jan was my love and my hope. He would not abandon me. I just had to bear the torture and the pain for a little longer. Just a little longer . . .

## **Chapter Nineteen**

### **Jan'ke Nightbourne: Poison**

I first met On'areh Shadowedheart almost ten years ago, while we were still fighting the Xoz war. He was a dark elf, like me, but ironically, he'd been fighting on the demons' side as a mercenary. We had found him out as a spy in one of our most important camps. It had been my choice whether he lived or died, and, in spite of his treachery, I'd been reluctant to kill another elf, to shed more blood when so many lives had been wasted. So, I made him swear on the Goddess he would abandon his ways and never betray his country again.

Many had been critical of my decision, although they didn't have the courage to speak up against it. They thought Shadowedheart was rotten to the core and he would soon break his promise. But Reh had, indeed, kept his promise and we became great friends. Of course, he still worked as a mercenary, but since that time, he chose to stay out of wars and politics. I saw wisdom in this course of action. I didn't realize just how wise until recently, nor did I guess that a decision I then made for no particular reason would later help me so much. I can only be thankful now, that the Goddess guided our paths to meet.

\* \* \* \* \*

Eight days passed since I left the palace, eight days since receiving the coded message from Lar. Lar came through surprisingly fast and I couldn't help but wonder how he'd managed to fulfill his task with so much haste. After all, finding

On'areh Shadowedheart was no easy feat.

Reh had told me when I had last seen him, he would not forget the second chance I had given him back then. If I ever needed help, he was my man. He would even give me a discount. I would be able to find news of him at the inn, *The Rusty Dagger*, in Danenth, a small village halfway to Northern Thralnia. When I gave my brother these indications, I entrusted him with the last chance I had other than killing half the fae elf palace. Since I received my brother's message, continuously I had prayed to the Goddess that Reh could help me find my love.

Leaving behind the rest of the soldiers accompanying me in my supposed expedition, I rode away from Danenth and into the neighboring woods. Lar met me at the edge of the forest. Without bothering to dismount, we greeted each other with a brief, awkward hug.

"Glad you could make it, brother," Lar began.

I sighed and told him in a few words about the situation our father had created at court after his departure. I didn't want to go into much detail, though. I had other things in mind. "So . . . I take it you found On'areh. I have to admit I did not expect you to find him so soon. He is not an easy man to track."

Lar let out a little laugh. "Well, there were certain circumstances involved."

The ambiguous answer intrigued me, but I didn't have time to further delve into the issue. During our discussion, we had progressed on the path quite a bit and now, we had reached our destination.

For our meeting spot, Reh had chosen an entirely innocuous place, with no distinctive markings other than a tree with a hollow. He came out of the thicket and I couldn't help but notice he hadn't changed a bit. He had the same black hair common to most dark elves, including me, the same athletic form and yet, his penetrating eyes and the way he moved gave him a dark alluring aura.

He smiled wryly as we approached. "What a pleasure to see you, general. Although I have to say, I would have enjoyed our reunion more under better circumstances."

I dismounted and we shared a traditional warriors' greeting. Reh and I had never been lovers and I wondered about his sudden flirtatious attitude. One glance

at my brother's tense face revealed the reason. At least someone had some success in his romantic life.

"So, tell me more about this problem La—I mean, your brother mentioned. Have you found out anything at all?"

Of course, I noticed his almost-slip of the tongue, but then again, if he'd wanted to hide it, he would have never mentioned my brother in the first place. I suspected he wanted to test the waters, to see what I would think of his bedding Lar. For some reason, this made me uncomfortable. I was already familiar with my brother's loose morals, but Reh's choice of words suggested their relationship went beyond a mere fuck.

Inwardly sighing, I forced myself to focus on the main problem, vowing I would discuss the issue with both Lar and Reh once I found my love. "As you know, I fell in love, Reh," I replied with confidence. "Unfortunately, my lover, Alix, was accused of being a demon. Before I could do anything to save him, he was taken from me."

We spent the next hour or so with me telling Reh any detail that would be helpful in our search. I had armed Lar upon his departure with information on Alix's aspect, distinctive features, parentage, everything I knew about the day we had been separated. I had felt more than a little guilty and embarrassed telling him about my failure to protect our relationship and my agreement to the wedding with Alana Windwisp, but without this information, Lar and Reh couldn't help me.

"You fucked up, my friend," Reh told me upon hearing the story.

I nodded sadly, already having realized this. I had let my love down, but somehow, I had to fix it.

"I can't believe it." Reh shook his head, looking discontent. "You were always so remarkable in the war."

"Ah, but you fail to realize, Shadowedheart, that love is not war," Lar spoke up for the first time. Since he'd spent almost all his life fighting for this country, Jan cannot know what he has not experienced."

Lar's words almost made me reach for my blade, the irritation of being discussed as if I were some sort of experiment grating on my last nerve. Still, I

realized the problem didn't concern me directly, but my proximity to Reh and our obvious closeness. We were friends and it showed, but for Lar, the image hinted an entirely different notion.

I didn't have time to deal with Lar's jealousy, though. "Lar . . . Please, could we focus here?"

"Yes, of course. I apologize, brother."

He remained silent after that, while Reh proceeded to explain his plan. "At any rate, I have started to ask around, discussing the issue discretely with my contacts. I have to say they're keeping everything very low-key. No one seems to know anything."

I nodded glumly, realizing this would take a while. "I wanted to pull it out of the fae general, but he fell mysteriously ill."

Reh arched a brow at my comment, catching my implication that the general's disease held a darker meaning and purpose. Poison was easy enough to disguise in wine or even in meals. I counted on that particular fact.

"And on this note, I'm afraid I have to ask you for another favor. Lar? Could you give us a moment?"

My brother gave me an irritated look and departed, leaving the two of us alone.

"If you did that on purpose to make him angry . . ." Reh gave me a look that seemed a mix of confusion and amusement.

I shook my head. "I didn't. I really do need a favor and I didn't want him to get involved in this. I need you to get something for me, a very important item. I need to poison my father."

Reh's eyes widened, knowing my request and plan amounted to treason. It was one of the reasons I didn't want Lar to hear, but also the only way I could get past all the obstacles between me and my love. I'd given up on trying to understand court intrigue. Violence was the one thing I could truly identify with and if I had to use it to achieve my goals, I would. I would do whatever it took to find my love.

"Are you sure about this, Jan?" my friend asked.

"Positive. It's the only way. Complications may arise, so it would be best if

you got me the antidote as well."

In spite of his surprise at my decision, Reh didn't try to change my mind. Instead, we made the arrangements necessary for him to supply me with what I needed for this step of my plan. When we said our goodbyes, the sun seemed to shine a bit brighter on my quest to find my love.

When I met my brother again, Lar didn't make any comment regarding my request for privacy. He seemed glum and morose and I felt a twinge of unease and remorse at the knowledge that I may have hurt my brother by suggesting a relationship with his lover.

Alas, I didn't get the chance to clear things up. The hour was late and we needed to return to Danenth. Lar and I went back to meet the guards who had accompanied me in the expedition and we proceeded to our supposed destination. Initially, Lar had invented an excuse of wishing to know the land better, which seemed entirely plausible since it meant he'd gone looking for more debauchery in peasant lands. Father had not prohibited his departure and our meeting now didn't seem peculiar. I could only be thankful for that particular fact. After all, had it not been for Lar, I wouldn't have been able to meet my friend here.

\* \* \* \* \*

Naturally, when we reached the borders, we found there truly wasn't anything out of the ordinary going on. Some bandits causing mischief, a fire, and a small dispute between two land owners. Both Lar and I showed appropriate dismay, and I was very vocal in my irritation regarding the false alarm. Lar seemed to forget about the issue with Reh, although I now knew better than to judge by appearances. I vowed to talk to him as soon as I could find a private moment away from anyone who could hear.

Finally, almost a month after I had left, we were back at the palace. Now more than ever, every passing day tortured me, the constant knowledge of Alix's pain robbing me of my hope and sanity slowly. But our plan was in motion and I had to get rid of those who were in my way. It would take time, time we didn't have, but it

would also allow us to explore Thralnia unchallenged.

As we rode through the palace gates, I noticed something not quite right. Everybody stared at me with accusing eyes. Putting on a straight face, I rode to the stables, trying my best to go through the normal routine.

"Lar, find out what in the world is going on and if I have to take off before someone decides to behead me!" I whispered to my brother as we dismounted.

Before Lar could follow through with my instructions, the crowd parted to reveal my father's approaching figure. "How was your trip to the borders?"

I just grunted. "False alarm. Met Lar on the way."

"Hmm . . . Well, it's good that you're back. We decided to move up the wedding."

"Excuse me?"

Before my father could explain, Count Windwisp appeared, his usually cold and aloof countenance looking distinctly angry. "Why? You dare ask why? My daughter is pregnant, that's why."

For a second, the thought didn't quite compute. Alana pregnant? I remembered the time she'd tried to get into my pants just after leaving the healers. Damn woman! She had probably known about it even then and tried to seduce me, hoping I would take responsibility for a child born out of her own promiscuity.

Well, she could say goodbye to that idea. I had no interest in babysitting someone else's child. In fact, I had no interest in children period. Still, considering the new situation, I had to reevaluate my plan.

"Where is she now?" I inquired, ignoring the Count's fuming.

"Locked up in her room, of course."

I nodded, satisfied with the answer. I couldn't immediately act upon my plan, for it would be suspicious if both Count Windwisp and my father fell mysteriously ill the day of my arrival. I would have to be careful about everything I said and did so I could at the same time leave and meet Reh in three weeks as established. In the meantime, he would try to find a lead we could use in our quest.

"Please, could we discuss this inside?" I gave the Count what I hoped was a pleasant smile. "I am weary and I have no wish to talk about private matters in

public."

Judging by the glares I had received upon my arrival, the matter had long ago ceased being private. For the purpose of my plan, it was adamant that I explain the issue to the count. Accepting the child as my blood was not an option, however. Such a thing would only bring complications when I finally managed to leave, complications with which I had no desire to deal. Alana could take care of the issue on her own and after all, the child did have a father. The man in question needed to come forward and take responsibility, not place the burden on others.

The count agreed to my proposal and the four of us walked inside the palace. The king had left shortly after the party so the nobles from different parts of Thralnia had the huge building at their disposal. The circumstances served perfectly for our plan because it would have been harder to pull off with the king present.

Lar followed us inside, although technically speaking, the issue didn't concern him. Mentally, I thanked him for his silent support, grateful that at least the disaster with Alix had brought us together as brothers.

We entered the first free room we could find and immediately, I found myself punched in the face by a very angry fae noble. I almost smiled at the hypocrisy. He had himself pushed Alana on me. If he didn't want me to sleep with her, he should have been more careful.

"We scheduled the wedding in one week. I'll not have my daughter give birth unwed or marry while visibly with child."

"Well, then you have a problem, Count," I replied coolly. If I had even a doubt about not recognizing the child as mine, the "wedding in one week" demand erased it. I would leave the Southern Thralnia palace in a fortnight and I had no intention of marrying anyone in the meantime. "The child she is carrying is not mine."

The count froze at my reply, and his reaction offered me a sense of temporary satisfaction. "I assure you I did not touch her. You can ask her if you want to."

"I did ask her," he said between gritted teeth. "She said the child is yours."

"Did she?" I repeated nonchalantly. "Well then, she is lying."

The count wasn't given the chance to counter my statement, as my father intervened. "Excuse me, Count, Lar. I need to talk to Jan alone for a bit."

Windwisp gave my father a distinctively disgruntled look, but nevertheless nodded. He opened the door and stepped outside the room. Lar mouthed an encouragement at me and followed him out.

"What in the name of the Goddess do you think you're doing?" my father snapped at me as soon as we were alone.

"Father, I'm not taking responsibility for the child of another." I toyed with the sheathe holding my sword in an apparently random gesture. "Not even you can claim this whole thing is legitimate. I didn't touch her and I don't plan to say I did."

"You will if you want your demon to live."

This time, my father's threats did not surprise me. My only purpose in explaining the situation was delaying the wedding for a sufficient time that I could put my plan into action. I didn't care what happened afterward. Alana could die in childbirth for all I cared. I had to stall, to pretend I had been defeated, changed by my love for Alix. My sweet lover had indeed changed me. I might have been deceived the first time, but I was still a warrior and Father would soon learn this lesson the hard way.

Gritting my teeth visibly, I turned away from him, my nails digging into my skin until my palms were bloody. He would notice the gesture and it would grant veracity to my act. I didn't need to fake my anger or my dismay. Emotions broke through my mask of calm, simply at the thought my love remained trapped somewhere, unreachable, suffering, and for now, I could do nothing to help him.

"Fine," I barked out. "But one week is too soon. I need more time."

Ran'dar considered my request while I fought to find a plausible explanation. In the end, he did not ask, probably assuming I wanted to get used to the idea or some other such nonsense. "Two weeks. But if you try to escape, your demon dies."

"I got it," I snapped at him. "I will not try to leave." *I will succeed*, I continued mentally.

\* \* \* \* \*

The next two weeks flew by in a blur. I saw Alana only a handful of times and

I kept my appearance of cold and polite anger toward her. My father watched me like a hawk, waiting for me to make one false move, to succumb to despair, or attempt to find out more about Alix's location. He asked the soldiers who had accompanied me on the operation, he asked Lar of everything I had told him, he even instructed the servants to supervise me.

I knew all this, not only because of my own experience, but also due to Lar's invaluable help. He had proven to be a great resource, mainly because Father did not expect him to rebel. Father considered Lar a flighty slut with no interest in politics or in anything other than his own pleasure, just like I had before this whole thing happened. My brother remained a mystery to me, and I had yet to fully understand whatever thoughts passed through his mind. If he'd guessed the "poisoning our sire" part of the plan, he didn't mention it, nor did he show a reaction in any way. Either way, I did suspect he had deep feelings for Reh. I still needed to fix Lar's relationship with my friend, and for everything Lar had done for me, I would bring them together soon.

For my part, I had made all the preparations for the plan. Father did not realize that by pushing his minions to watch me so thoroughly, he had given away his own resources. Everything was in place, and soon, I would be able to eliminate all the obstacles standing between Alix and me.

From the very beginning, I had suspected the poison I planned on using on my father was the same one used on the fae general. If my suspicions were correct, perhaps I could wake him from his induced slumber — disease — and inquire as to location of the dungeons. For this reason, I had asked Lar to inquire about the general's state of health. If I tried to find out, it would be suspicious.

Alas, we soon found the general had been conveniently removed from the palace, taken to his estate to recover from the disease that plagued him. The servants whispered of a pestilence that threatened them all and I wanted to laugh, now more than ever sure the cause of Rothin's illness couldn't be natural. At the same time, the knowledge of the imminence of Rothin's death upset me. I didn't hold any peculiar affection for the fae general, but his demise meant I wouldn't be able to obtain the location of the demon prisons from him.

If I couldn't get the answer out of the general, I had to find Alix through other means. My hopes remained with Reh. My friend would not let me down.

In my darkest moments, I feared I wouldn't get to Alix in time. I feared he would be dead by the time I managed to reach him. But even those nightmares turned out to be useful. When the time came for me to poison the wines to be served at our table, my hand did not tremble for one second. And hours before I was supposed to unite my life to Alana's, inwardly I smiled as the poison pushed me into unconsciousness.

## Chapter Twenty

### Alix Skyeyes: Death and Torture

It is a funny thing, how certain days imprint themselves in your memory. Even if you want to forget, the memories come back, again and again, tormenting you. In my feverish mind, they are always nightmares, twisted and scornful, mocking me with my helplessness.

And yet memories are the only thing I have left in this dark place. I am no longer able to fill the silence with my voice, as my throat is dry from days and days of continuous thirst. There is no one I can try to talk to, not even an idiotic guard to keep my fire burning. And so, in my mind, I relive the things that happened back then, imagining, wondering, asking myself, "what if." At this point, the doubts lingering have all but vanished. I am but a step away from embracing the Goddess one final time, and yet the images of the past still haunt me. Ghosts of the past taunt me and I can only ask them, *Why? Why did it have to be this way?*

\* \* \* \* \*

Another day, another *silvain*. That's what the commoners used to say in the village. In their own way, they looked forward to every sunrise, because they knew the result of their labor would bring food to their tables and joy to their children.

For me, the correct expression would be, another day, another torture. I

couldn't even guarantee it *was* another day, though, since the days had started to blend into each other at a certain point. I suspected this temporal displacement wasn't an entirely coincidental occurrence. It hurt to lose track of time, here in this dungeon, to try to figure out whether what seemed like months to you were actually seconds, to forget the beauty of sunlight. For me, the latter didn't represent a problem, but I did miss the chirping of birds, the whisper of the wind, the song of the rivers. In truth, life became meaningless without something to acknowledge the passage of time, an ironic thing given elves were supposed to live eternally young, outside time.

Naturally, I had long ago ceased to see the irony of the situation, if I had ever seen it at all. Still, none of the tortures my jailers had devised could surprise me.

The preferred tortures of the day – the week, the month – seemed to be quite unoriginal. The guards amused themselves by crushing fingers, vertebrae, or kneecaps. They dunked the prisoners in boiling water and impaled their limbs on sharp objects. But since most of the prisoners held in the dungeons were demons, they soon healed, their bones mending, their nails growing back, their wounds closing. It would be pretty much the same thing with elves, only from what I had heard, demons had a stronger resistance to pain.

I had no idea if that notion was correct or not. I had grown up as an elf, unknowingly hiding from my demon powers. Now that they had emerged, I suspected they did protect me somewhat from the attacks of the guards. Blades melted when embedded in my flesh, hot water would not hurt me, my cuts and breaks healed incredibly fast. I could hear the guards comment on it and their awed fright gave me strength to continue the fight.

Many times I had tried to escape, but to no avail. They had stopped altogether untying my chains to move me to a different torture location. The new situation pleased me to a certain extent, because due to my position, they didn't have access to the back of my skull. That way, they couldn't knock me out and render me helpless. At least I had been lucky it hadn't occurred to them to make the attempt before. Probably, they didn't see me as an elf at all, but only as a demon. After all, it made sense. A demon could survive in this place, but an elf didn't stand a chance.

I had decided to conserve my powers, my demon magic keeping me alive in this Goddess-forsaken place. Delior had not managed to touch me, not with his dick at least, though he'd whipped me plenty. I could fight them and hurt them back, but my strength had waned since I'd been fed only enough to keep me alive. I didn't know how I still managed to keep using the demon flame. It burned me inside every time I tried to hurt Delior with my magic, but I had no other choice.

It continued to amaze me these soldiers still thought I had in some way planned to sneak into Thralnia and become a spy in the palace. For crying out loud, I had been born in Thralnia. I had fought in the war against Xoz. I was only fifty three years old and my mother had been a fae noblewoman. When exactly did I become enlisted for this task?

Logical reasoning didn't work for these men, however, and so, I found myself with more guards visiting me, for yet another episode of questioning. Delior and Thorien had brought two more soldiers with them, two elves named Kogan and Ferin. I ranked the other pair second on the scale of cruelty, gaining on the first two.

"I think we should try the saw today," Kogan suggested. "Cutting off some limbs might loosen his tongue and he won't grow those back so easily."

Thorien sighed, sounding put out. "We can't do that. You know the king forbade sawing,"

The king's command didn't hold Delior at bay, as he tried to coax his fellow guards to torture me further. "Oh, come on. An arm or a leg." Since he hadn't registered any success in fucking me, he'd now made it his personal quest to turn my existence even more sorrowful than it had already become. "Or better yet, we could play a bit with his cock. No more producing little demons for him, eh?"

"That's actually not a bad idea," Kogan agreed. "Kill two birds with one stone, right?"

To say I was not frightened at that point would be a lie. I was horrified at the implications of what they intended to do to me. I found the entire conversation highly disturbing. The way they talked about castrating me and mentioned the sawing of limbs and death of animals made me wonder if these elves weren't the ones who should have been imprisoned in the cells. I might have been a demon, but

I had never sawed anyone to death. Apparently, these men had.

Inwardly shaking myself, I struggled to concentrate on my magic. They might have whipped me and cut me and tore my skin and my face, but my cock? No way were they getting anything sharp next to it.

I kept my eyes snapped shut so that they wouldn't see the demon power I had summoned to my aid. I needed all the advantages I could get, and the element of surprise always worked quite nicely. If they realized I intended to retaliate, they would find a way to stop me.

"Are you sure that's safe?" Ferin intervened, sounding more cautious than his three companions. He did indeed seem the smartest of the bunch, but more often than not, he allowed his cruelty to rule over his intelligence.

Delior scoffed. "The torture and the bleeding have drained his magic by now. He can barely keep himself alive and heal his wounds. There's no way he could attack us."

I heard the distinctive noise of a metal tool being retrieved and then Delior's steps closed in on my position. I forced myself to remain still, perpetuating the illusion of helplessness. Perhaps my power could not burn through the magical cuffs, but they could at least help me get rid of an enemy.

Delior got so close I could feel his warm breath on my face. He wasn't sweaty and didn't smell foul, since such a thing would be physically impossible for elves. Still, his proximity made me feel nauseous. Delior had learned his lesson and no longer came close for fear I would burn him again. Whenever they tortured me, they kept their distance, especially since they realized that even imprisoned, I could use magic. With all the time they'd spent breaking my body and yet failing to break the use of my powers, Delior, even now, thought he had me helpless. How stupid could one person be?

The metallic sound of a sharp tool being tested for strength hit my ears and finally, I felt Delior's hand loom over my genitals. My eyes snapped open, the crimson surrounding everything no longer a surprise. I pulled on the cuff holding my hand captive, almost dislocating my shoulder in the process. The pain only gave me more strength, fueling my magic. A fireball emerged from my fingertips and

before Delior could move, it hit him straight in the face. The intensity of the blow catapulted him against the wall and I laughed as I heard his body collide with the solid stone with a satisfying crack.

"What in the name of the Goddess — ?" Ferin gasped out.

"Fuck, Delior."

I saw Thorien rush toward Delior's side, but I knew it would be too late for the damned pervert to be rescued. The right side of his face had been scorched beyond recognition, but he made no sound to acknowledge the pain he should have been in. The reason was quite obvious. The blast had thrown him so powerfully against the wall that his neck now hung in an awkward and unnatural angle. The rigidity of death would soon imprint itself on the features I had mutilated after hating them for so long.

I watched Thorien check his companion, grinning at him as he got up and unsheathed his blade. "You monster freak," he growled at me. "I'll kill you."

I chuckled at his threat. "Come on. I dare you." In truth, even if the magic remained strong within me, I probably wouldn't be able to kill Thorien as well. But he didn't need to know.

Luckily, none of them saw through my bluff. Kogan stopped Thorien, all thoughts of sawing people in two having apparently disappeared from his mind. "No, don't. He'll kill you as well."

"We can't just let him live, not after what he did to Delior," Thorien replied, glaring at Kogan.

"Oh, poor Delior," I mocked. "Are you going to cry? Surely you'll find someone else to fuck you." I had no idea if Delior and Thorien had been fucking, but by the way his eyes flashed at my words, I knew my assumption was correct.

Kogan barely managed to contain Thorien after my insulting words. He turned insane with fury, and I would have thought him a demon if I didn't know better. I would have been in a very bad situation indeed if not for the general belief I was still capable of hurting them.

Luckily for me, Ferin proceeded to immobilize him by hitting Thorien in the back of his skull. "Let's go," he said to Kogan.

The other elf nodded and grabbed Thorien like a sack of potatoes, carrying him outside. Ferin picked up Delior's lifeless body and followed behind his companion.

"I don't know what you are," he said from the cell doorway, "but you aren't leaving this place alive."

Even with the threat in his words, his tone held a fear that couldn't be denied. As the door closed behind them, I laughed again, flooded by a sadistic joy and satisfaction. I could no longer push away the violent energies that flowed through me. Not when this fire burning inside me had managed to keep me alive. Not when the power given to me by my demon blood had killed the man I hated. As much as I loathed the fact that my mixed ancestry kept me away from Jan, I could no longer hate it. This was my fate, and I embraced it fully.

## **Chapter Twenty-One**

### **Jan'ke Nightbourne: Another Meeting**

The plan worked surprisingly well. As expected, Reh came through for me, providing the poison that would eliminate the obstacles my father and his lackeys represented. Many would accuse me of cowardice for using such a weapon, but I've given up on mercy, morals, and honor. They did not deserve my compassion, nor did they deserve a dignified death. They provoked me. They took what I valued most and they had to pay the price.

I do sometimes wonder if my father, in the end, recovered from the poison or if he died. I suppose even if I do hate him for what he did to Alix, a part of me still prefers to think of him as alive and breathing. Committing patricide was never one of my lifetime goals. I don't think my love would appreciate me becoming a monster.

Either way. I have new things to worry about now, new issues, new enemies. This time, I can't eliminate them like I did with my father. My new enemy seems to share my goal, and in spite of my frustration with the situation, I couldn't hurt her if I tried. She is, after all, Alix's mother.

\* \* \* \* \*

Two weeks after my arrival from the expedition, on the day of the wedding and just before the ceremony, the entire Nightbourne clan, including myself, Lar and my sisters who had joined us at our table, fell mysteriously ill. Additionally affected was count Windwisp, also seated at our table, and his son, as well as a few guards and servants. Alana Windwisp didn't catch this peculiar affliction. She'd been unable to drink the strong wines due to her condition and had still been preparing for the ceremony when the entire thing occurred.

Miraculously, Lar and me, as well as my sisters and lady Windwisp, Alana's mother, recovered shortly after the event. The heads of the family, as well as a few guards, remained ill and fell into unconsciousness. As much as the healers tried to wake them, they were unable to find the cause of the disease.

Actually, there was no miracle involved, but just a little bottle of antidote, which I'd been careful to take and to give to Lar before drinking the deadly wine. The poison had pushed us into a coma as well, but the antidote had activated itself a few days after, just as I'd intended to happen. After that, it had been a matter of administering it to my sisters and the rest of the women who, after all, were guilty of nothing.

Shortly after the day in which I was supposed to be wed, Lar and I rode away from the palace, supposedly to go and find a cure for the disease plaguing the castle. Alana was sent away to the Windwisp estate, where she would be safe and cared for. Thankfully, the distance to the Nightbourne estates didn't allow a pregnant elf lady to travel there.

My brother happily agreed to join me in my quest to find Alix. I had been reluctant to leave him behind and found myself quite pleased that he had decided to come with me. His consent may have had something to do with seeing Reh again, but whatever the cause, his presence helped me carry the burden on my soul.

I didn't care much about my sisters. I was deplete of affection. Women had never been to my liking, anyway, and they would find someone to care for them, some fool they would seduce into their clutches. Maybe they had done so already.

It somewhat bothered me that, due to certain circumstances, I had been forced to abandon my original plan regarding Alana. I couldn't help a little laugh upon considering her situation, however. She was now alone, without her father's assistance, facing the public opprobrium, and very much pregnant.

I didn't manage to find out who the child belonged to, but after all, it didn't really matter. I couldn't very well kill an innocent child. Alana had her hands full with her own issues, and I packed her up and sent her to her father's estate before we left. She stopped being a threat. She got what she deserved.

While we'd busied ourselves with poisoning half the fae castle, Reh had kept his word and looked for clues to help us on our search. While he hadn't been able to discover the location of the dungeons, he found out something else, or better said, someone else. He found a certain person who conveniently had disappeared the same day my love was captured.

\* \* \* \* \*

We had arrived into Keria, a medium-sized city, a day away from our previous meeting spot with Reh. My friend had met us in the city outskirts and we'd ridden for a while in silence, with me still lost in my thoughts of what had happened and hopefully, what would happen soon. We'd stopped at an inn and left our horses, after which Reh had proceeded to explain that according to the thieves' guild policy, we needed to be blindfolded.

"I'm sorry about this." Reh held up a piece of dark cloth, again indicating we had to have our eyes covered.

Both Lar and I allowed Reh to tie the dark cloth over our eyes. It occurred to me I could experience now what my love lived through continuously, this darkness that shrouded everything. I decided I didn't like it, but I could understand how Alix had perfected his other senses so. My hearing seemed more focused on my surroundings, taking in what my eyes could not.

Distantly, I wondered if Reh thought I could not find my way back here simply because I'd been blindfolded. I sincerely doubted that, but in the end, he'd

acted according to this "policy" of theirs.

We walked behind Reh who guided our steps so we wouldn't fall or bump into anyone. I shouldn't have worried, especially not about the latter issue. Reh had begun to lead us through some sort of alley, then through what seemed like a secret passageway. Both the walls and the ground were smooth and even, completely uniform, and inwardly I smiled, admiring the precaution and the prudence these people showed. After all, even if a blind man couldn't see, he still had a chance of finding his way through touch. If everything was kept uniform, there would be nothing he could cling to.

As I had expected, Reh led us through a labyrinth of turns – lefts, rights, norths, souths, wests. Only the Goddess knew how many turns he took. Finally, we exited the secret passage and breathed fresh air. I smiled to myself, knowing I could find my way through it again if I really wanted to.

"All right, you can remove the blind folds now," Reh said after we walked away from the passage exit.

I wondered why my friend had allowed us this courtesy, since it would have been more logical to wait until we arrived at our destination. Unwilling to question my good fortune, I took off the dark cloth that had covered my eyes, already taking in my new environment. Holding the thing over my eyes had been uncomfortable and annoying, especially since elves relied so much on sight.

Night had already fallen over the city, and I could see the stars shining down on us from the sky. Darkness reigned over the entire area, a serene, welcoming obscurity giving the place an air of a safe and sleepy neighborhood of homes. Nice. Who would guess the base of operations of the thieves' guild would be in this peaceful spot, where homeowners went to sleep shortly after sundown? I arched a brow at Reh, and he grinned at me, understanding I approved of their chosen location.

My brother, however, looked dazed and slightly nauseous, blinking as if to find his focus after the tortuous trip through the passageway. Reh chuckled at the expression on Lar's face and Lar gave my friend a dark look. Reh seemed to want to say something, but stopped himself. I suspected it had to do with their liaison and

their continuous struggle for discretion. Personally, I thought it was no one's business but their own. I realized then Reh had told us to remove the blindfolds not out of kindness toward me, but due to the effect the trip had on my brother. I suppressed the urge to smile at the small gesture of protectiveness, knowing neither Reh nor my brother would appreciate me pointing it out.

Instead of focusing on his lover as he seemed to want, Reh proceeded to walk down a cobblestone road. "It's here." He gestured toward an innocuous looking building I knew housed the most dangerous thieves' guild in all of Thralnia. "I asked a friend to keep an eye on her while I got you guys here."

I nodded silently and followed behind him as we entered the thieves' guild. The house seemed to have three entrances, the normal one that helped maintain appearances, the servants' entrance and a hidden door that opened for Reh only after my friend whispered a password.

"This way," Reh indicated. "Keep your eyes forward and stay with me."

His words suggested it had taken a lot of convincing for his thief friends to help me with this. Indeed, no one came out to meet us, but I felt eyes watching us from the darkness, scrutinizing our every move. My senses screamed at the hostility I could feel permeating the air. I couldn't say the thieves' attitude surprised me. Technically speaking, as a dark elf, I had no business interfering in fae affairs, like that idiot lieutenant had said. I had no right to intrude on any of the issues regarding the thieves' guild. I did represent an authority, however, so I couldn't expect a warm welcome here.

Ignoring what my senses told me, I continued to walk behind Reh. At some point, my friend had taken hold of my brother's hand and pulled him along. He obviously felt fearful that Lar, in his absentmindedness, would commit some sort of stupid act that would cause the thieves to turn against us.

We went through a dark foyer and I kept my gaze ahead like Reh had instructed. Finally, Reh guided us up a winding staircase ending in a corridor shrouded in shadows.

A woman's voice rang out loudly from across the hallway, sounding both furious and afraid. "Why am I being held here? I don't have time for this. I just

wanted someone to help me across the border."

We slipped through the corridor silently, heading toward the source of the sound. The discrete light sneaking from ahead seemed to cast a peculiar spell on the walls, the silhouettes of three people following us as we moved along. I suppressed a laugh at my own occurrence. The atmosphere of this silent house made me wary of my own shadow. It both irritated and amused me.

When we reached the last closed door, we stopped and Reh gestured me forward. He pulled on Lar's hand, indicating he needed to stay behind us. Again my heart filled with a sad glee at the knowledge that in spite of my own sorrow, my brother had found someone to take care of him.

As I entered the room, I took in the presence of three people waiting, two men and one woman. Even if the woman had her back turned, I recognized her as being Alix's mother. Her hair reminded me of the spun gold of my love's locks. There could be no other person in the world with such perfect hair, although to be quite honest, I thought Alix's hair shone brighter and more beautiful than hers.

I cleared my throat, drawing attention of the room's occupants. Three sets of eyes turned toward us. The men didn't seem surprised to see Lar and Reh, but I did catch a flash of surprise at my presence. I couldn't help but feel a bit smug at the knowledge I still had the ability to sneak in on anyone. But no, I couldn't sneak up on anyone. Alix heard me always. Alix, my lost love.

Focusing on my goal, I gave the woman who had birthed Alix a dark look. She seemed intimidated by my stare.

"General Nightbourne." Her voice almost trembled as she whispered my name. "Greetings."

I leaned down and kissed her wrist according to custom. "Greetings, lady Skyeyes. I apologize for the inconvenience, but we have something to discuss."

She sat, or rather collapsed, on the bed. I realized the reason behind this wasn't necessarily because of my presence, but because of physical and mental exhaustion.

"What do you want?" she asked, almost in tears. "What do you want from me?"

I nodded toward the thieves who had kept Lady Skyeyes company and they departed silently.

"I just have a few questions. If you can answer them, we'll let you go."

Alix's mother lifted her gaze and looked at me. "I'll answer anything. Just tell me where my son is. Just let Alix go. It's not his fault, for any of this."

I shared a look with Reh. Alix's mother didn't know anything about her son's possible location either. I expected this. Still, I couldn't help but feel dismayed at the realization that I would yet again be stuck with no answers. With the fae general sick, I had no idea where to search next. Likely, the king probably knew, but not even I had the resources to attack the fae ruler and make demands. "Why did you want to cross the border?"

"I wanted to go into Xoz," she replied. Shaking her head, she changed her trail of thought. "Please . . . I'll give you whatever you want. Just release my son."

"I don't know where Alix is," I said coldly. "That's what I'm trying to find out. But the fae general has fallen ill and the lower ranks have no clue as to where he might be. "

"Why would you want to find my son?" Eireene asked, sounding skeptical.

I arched a brow, unsure if Alix had told her anything about me. Her eyes widened in realization and she shot to her feet. She launched herself at me, but I caught her easily, restraining her movements.

"Of course!" she screeched. "It all makes sense now! It's your fault, all your fault. Your fault my son is gone."

I couldn't contradict her. The lies I'd told Alix and my betrothal to Alana had been instrumental in the discovery of Alix's identity. However, we had to leave the past behind if we had a chance to save Alix.

I kept my expression blank, not allowing her to see the way her words affected me. "Please, calm down. Tell me, why exactly did you want to go to Xoz?"

Eireene took a deep breath, apparently trying to calm herself. "I wanted to find Alix's father. He is the only who can help my son now."

As I stood there, looking at her, I couldn't help but think maybe she had a point. Perhaps in order to find my love, I would have to ally myself to my worst

enemy. If it gave me some sort of way out of this seemingly inescapable situation, I wouldn't mind. I was certain I would not be accepted by my enemy easily, but at this point, I would do anything to rescue Alix. If finding Alix's father could help, I would be all for it.

## **Chapter Twenty-Two**

### **Alix Skyeyes: War**

In the silent shadows of my prison, I wonder what has become of my beautiful Thralnia. I once fought for my country, killed so many others to protect her. It is ironic that in the end, our struggle will be for naught and our lands will burn at our own hands.

All my questions and dilemmas are pointless. I am helpless and I know it. I hang limply from my chains, my fire long ago extinguished by hunger and exhaustion. My wrists no longer hurt, or perhaps I am in so much pain I've stopped feeling. The memories seem shadowy and distant, the sorrow of my separation from Jan my only everlasting regret. Thralnia is dead to me, just like I am dead to her, just as I will soon be.

\* \* \* \* \*

The dungeons were quiet. I'd caught whispers of a war starting, although I could not understand which armies were the combatants. Perhaps the demons had returned. If so, I could give up all hope of being rescued. My love would have to return to his duty and protect our homeland. I prayed for the Goddess to protect Jan. Even if she did not protect me, Jan still remained one of her children. Her power would shield my love from death.

Footsteps sounded outside the prison cells. I identified the coming guard as Thorien. He'd been persistent in his cruelty toward me since I had killed Delior. In spite of Thorien's persecution, Delior's death brought me some satisfaction in this hell hole. Since that particular event, the other guards had stopped attempting to

come close to me. They'd stopped feeding me as well, but I gladly traded the humiliation and the nauseating touches for slow starvation.

Thorien opened my cell door hastily and stepped toward me. He remained the only one daring enough to approach. "Hello, demon. How do you feel today? You look well."

I summoned all my remaining strength and spat into his face, or I attempted to do so. I was weak, I probably missed my target. I couldn't tell since controlling my demon powers had become more and more difficult. He laughed at my pathetic efforts, but still he didn't come closer. He knew better than to underestimate me at this point.

"A war has started," he said. "I'll bet you're happy, demon. But don't worry, we're going to win. Those dark elves don't stand a chance in front of our strength."

I could barely contain my shock at his words. A war between the two elven lands? But how? True enough, fae elves and dark elves had never gotten along, but civil war? Surely, my people had not reached such a level of hatred for each other.

I berated myself for yet again forgetting the elves were not my people, not anymore. I should not care about what happens to Thralnia. But I couldn't shake my loyalty. In spite of the hostility the fae always showed toward me, Thralnia was my home. I could hate the people, but I could not hate our lands, the beautiful groves and forests the Goddess gifted to us, the clear rivers, the magnificent plains. If war broke out, the groves would burn and the rivers would flow with blood. Even a demon like me could see the absurdity.

And Jan, what fate had befallen Jan in all of this? I hoped he had at least managed to reach his own kind before the conflict started. *Goddess help us all.*

Oblivious to the torment his words had caused, Thorien continued to speak. "But since I have been summoned to fight, I'm afraid this is our goodbye."

A cold chill passed through my bones at his words. Did he intend to finally kill me? As much as I hated this awful place, I did not want to die. Some part of me refused to give up entirely, stubbornly clinging to life. My reason told me that with the impending war, I would be forgotten here, but I could not make myself forsake all hope.

"Don't worry. I've been instructed to let you die slowly, especially since you refused to tell us who helped you into the palace," Thorien said, and I could hear the grin in his voice.

The sound of a blade being unsheathed followed and before I could even try to move away, the blade embedded itself in my body. Unwillingly I gasped, surprised that in spite of all the pain I suffered, it could always get worse. Thorien's blade didn't pierce anything vital, just my shoulder. I suspected Thorien might have aimed for something else, but he wasn't particularly talented at dagger throwing. In any case, at that point I very much doubted the integrity of a lot of my organs or body parts. If I did manage to see Jan again, he would reject me since I long ago lost what attractiveness I once beheld.

Thankfully, the wound satisfied Thorien's lust for my blood and he decided to take his leave. He spat in my face, and unlike me, he didn't miss. "Farewell, demon. I wish you a very long and unpleasant death."

I didn't reply, and his steps led him away, the door once again, locked behind him. My thoughts returned to his words. The whispers from before came back to mind. Could there really be a war between the two elves' nations? Goddess, I hoped not. It could be another torture cleverly designed to tear at my heart, like they had torn at my body.

## **Part Three**

### **Reunion**

*From the Journals of Jan'ke Nightbourne and Alix Skyeyes*

*Late Summer - Early Winter 11.044 A.D.G.*

## **Chapter Twenty-Three**

### **Jan'ke Nightbourne: Revelations**

Eireene Skyeyes, Alix's beautiful mother. I sat in front of the fire and looked at her, no longer knowing what to believe.

Six months have passed since I abandoned the royal palace in Southern

Thralnia, six months of hope, despair, hatred, and longing. In spite of Reh's efficiency in detecting Alix's mother, here we were, still with no news of my love, still hunting for a stranger whose help remained an obscure dream. I hated myself for agreeing with this plan in the first place. I hated her for slowing me down. I hated every damned thing keeping me from Alix.

When we had first decided we should try and find Alix's father, I did not expect the voyage to take so long. Xoz wasn't all that far, after all, and my most pessimistic estimation told me I would be able to locate my love's sire in three months maximum.

I should have tried to find Alix by myself. With Reh's help, eventually, we would have discovered the location of the dungeon. At the time, however, it seemed much wiser to enlist the aid of someone who had the means to scour Thralnia and detect any hidden prison that may exist. Many of the demon prisons became targets of the Xoz during the war. A significant part of those in Northern Thralnia had been destroyed. They didn't have the time to reach into Southern Thralnia and finish the job, but I thought Alix's demon father had an idea of where to find a demon prison. If not, perhaps he could lend me support so we could force the information out of the fae king.

Alas, I did not foresee the difficulties nature threw at me. Winter came, catching us on the slopes of the mountains bordering Xoz. Perhaps I would have been able to withstand the horrible weather, but Eireene fell ill and we ended up forced to wait for her to recover.

From the start, our voyage seemed to be cursed. I thought I did the right thing in telling my brother to stay behind, with Reh. Xoz would not be safe for an elf. The Goddess knew, most likely, I would find my death at the hands of these demons. I did not mind, as long as they helped me find Alix. I wasn't willing to sacrifice Lar for my quest and I told him, back then, to stay in Thralnia, thinking he would be safe. I had also asked Reh to keep asking around, to continue searching.

However, because of my choice, I now found myself alone, with this woman I resented, and worrying my brother might be dead in the civil war that had broken out in Thralnia. Since I had left the army to go in search of my lost love, and Rothin

had not recovered from his mysterious disease, a series of fae nobles took advantage of my absence to secure their own position. Even if we'd been technically at peace when I had left, I had been declared a deserter and a traitor to my kind. The fae nobles, led by some obscure man called Flamecloud, proceeded to attempt a takeover of the dark elf forces.

This, of course, did not sit well with my men. Not because they were particularly loyal to me, mind you. They respected me as their leader and as a warrior, but respect only went so far. No, my men had protested because Flamecloud was a fae elf. Who had ever seen a fae leading a troop of dark elves? Once word of Flamecloud's exploits came to our king's ears, chaos erupted. It was the final straw, the one last thing tipping the scale in favor of conflict.

However, nothing could make me turn back at this point. Even if my hopes of seeing Alix alive had all but died out, I still hung onto a tiny spark that kept telling me I would find him. I needed to keep going. Just a little longer. Not even the knowledge my country had fallen into the trap of petty power struggles could bring me back to her. I could hope only my love and my brother would not become victims of this horrible war.

It was not easy to continue on our way. Eireene Skyeyes resented me just as much as I resented her, maybe more. In fact, she reminded me strangely of Alana. Unlike with my supposed fiancée, though, I found it difficult to truly hate Eireene. Alix resembled her so much it hurt each time I looked at her. Her hair, her eyes, her skin, everything about her reminded me of my love. Sometimes, when the fire cast eerie shadows over her face, I had flashes of my beautiful Alix, kissing me, touching me, giving himself to me. I was losing my mind and I no longer knew what to do. I couldn't help but be thankful for the fact that my body had not betrayed me and like my heart, remained loyal to Alix and Alix alone. Getting hard for Alix's mother would be my undoing.

"He loved you, you know," Eireene said, again striking conversation with me only to torture me.

"Stop referring to him as if he's dead," I snapped at her. "He loves me still. And we'll find him."

Eireene glared at me. "Maybe, maybe not. But either way, you didn't deserve him. You didn't deserve the feelings he had for you."

Her words were like daggers to my heart, but I didn't show it. She was right, but I couldn't let her affect me. Besides, she had greater sins to atone. "That may be but I am quite certain I am not the only one who's lied to him."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Do you think I'm stupid, Eireene? Do you think I didn't see you for who you really are?" I let out a harsh laughter. "Let me put it this way. I suppose you just happened to have an item that could help you find housing and guidance in Xoz. You just happened to know your way through these forests."

She remained frozen and unreadable, but I couldn't stop the words flowing from my mouth. "If your son was half demon, why didn't you retreat to live somewhere far away? Why choose the fae palace? You're a spy, Eireene. Don't go preaching love for Alix. You didn't live at the fae palace for him."

Before she could reply to my accusations, a strange noise reached my ears. Someone was coming.

Immediately, I reached for my weapon, gesturing for Eireene to step back. We had opted not to contract any guides, instead relying on my own knowledge of Xoz, the maps we brought along, and Eireene's suggestions and sense of direction. As luck would have it, in that regard, I had distrusted her for naught. She really did know her way around the demon land, an understandable fact if I took into account what I now realized about her.

Over two dozen demons stepped out of the underbrush, giving me almost identical frustrating smirks. When not on the field of battle, they didn't look so otherworldly or evil. In fact, aside from their hair color, build, and complexion they weren't very different from elves. That is, if you didn't take into account the horns peaking out of their hair and the black wings attached to their backs. The fact I had fallen for a half-demon could have a connection to my suddenly finding the race more appealing. Who knows how elven psyche works?

"What do we have here?" a tall male demon said in a Northern Xoz dialect. "Two stray elves lost in the middle of the demon country."

"Spies?" Another one suggested in a more serious tone.

"Well if they are spies, they're horrible at it," the first demon replied with a chuckle. "I would have expected more from the famous Jan'ke Nightbourne. Elven elites are just as foolish as their rulers."

I met his remark with a disdainful glance of my own. Did he believe recognizing me represented a huge achievement? After all, I did kill a significant number of his companions during the war. How many elves could there be bearing an extremely visible burn scar on the face? Not many.

I wanted to snap at him and make him swallow his insult. Even if they weren't physically repulsive, they still had horrible personalities. Luckily, I didn't get the chance.

"We're not spies," Eireene started, in flawless Xoz. I let her speak, more than aware that in this endeavor, I had the humiliating role of being the hired muscle, protecting the truly important person, the lady having trouble with travelling into faraway lands. In truth, my usefulness had stopped at the borders of Xoz. She was at home here. Anyone could help her reach her destination.

She stepped forward and retrieved a medallion from around her neck. I had seen it many times by now, a beautiful gold piece, its shape representing the sinuous curves of a woman's body. The moon cast its rays on the small, beautiful rubies embedded in what I called the strategic spots of the medallion: the breasts, the juncture of the thighs and the eyes. More importantly, when Eireene touched the medallion with her bare hand, the rubies went ablaze and a strange marking appeared on the jewel.

So many times I'd seen her do this, and yet I found myself still watching, enraptured as the eyes of the little golden pendant turned to flame. I didn't know why, but the flash of red reminded me of Alix, of the time when we had made love in the forest and unknowingly, I'd caught a glimpse of his true nature.

I must admit, when I first saw the pendant, I thought a little trinket couldn't possibly help us to find Alix's father. I'd been very much mistaken, since said trinket had opened a lot of demon doors for us. People still gave me ugly looks, but they seemed to show Eireene respect. Their attitude didn't surprise me, but it did hint to

something else I didn't realize originally. It became clear to me Alix's father had to be some sort of important person. I hoped only he would not hate me as much as Alix's mother did and he would at least allow me to live the sufficient time it took me to find my love.

The demons seemed taken aback when the jewel presented its message to them. They looked at each other in confusion and started talking in hushed voices. Even so, I had no trouble understanding them.

"It can't possibly be the marking of the Cerberi."

If I had any doubt Alix's father belonged to an important family, that comment settled it. The Cerberus was the most preeminent family in all of Xoz, the clan that birthed the future head of the country.

"I don't know. I'm not inclined to risk it," another demon said.

"Do you think we should take them to the camp?"

"I don't think we have much of a choice. You saw the pendant the woman had."

"That won't be necessary," another voice rung out from the darkness. Tension coiled inside me, and I barely managed to stave the wave of unsettlement sweeping through me. I hadn't sensed the new demon's approach as quickly as I had with the other men.

"Taxien . . . ." Eireene breathed out, her eyes wide with surprise and maybe, relief. She launched herself into the arms of the new demon and Taxien caught her, holding her tightly against his chest.

"If you were trying to be stealthy, showing the pendant I gave you to half the demons around wasn't the way to go," he said, sounding amused.

His eyes hardened as they fell on my figure, and I had the time to mentally thank the Goddess for finally finding Alix's father before the tall demon growled, "What were you doing, idiots? Seize him." Apparently, my initial assessment of this plan had been correct. I would not be getting out of Xoz unscathed.

\* \* \* \* \*

The dungeon the demons dragged me into initially seemed to be more or less an improvised pit. I fought them at first, but then I decided it would be pointless and allowed myself to be hurled into the hole in the ground. I didn't know how long I remained there when they returned to get me and loaded me, chained and gagged, into a wagon.

The wagon traveled for many hours and I wanted to kill Eireene and Taxien as every moment seemed another delay from saving Alix. I should have stayed in Thralnia. I should have continued searching on my own. Damn it all!

When we finally reached our destination, the demons proceeded to throw me into yet another dungeon, this one complete with bars made from a special metal and thick chains especially designed to hold elves. I found myself helpless, chained and trapped, cursing my own stupidity and Alix's treacherous mother. At the same time, in some absurd way, the darkness of the dungeon brought me closer to Alix. As crazy as it seemed, I clung to anything I could find these days. Every little hope meant the world to me.

A week passed before something of significance happened. The demons ignored me half the time, only visiting my cell to bring water or sustenance. When I tried to talk to them, they acted as if I wasn't there. Nothing I did drew a reaction out of them and by the end of the seventh day, I thought I would lose my mind if they continued to hold me here with no news of my love.

On the morning of the eighth day, everything changed. When I awoke from the exhaustion-induced lethargy that had become my sleep, I found myself being watched by two sets of blue eyes. I recognized one of the guards as a woman who'd been there when Eireene and I had met Taxien, or rather when she met Taxien and I got thrown in prison. The woman demon gave me a look of barely disguised interest.

"You're very handsome, General Jan," she purred. "I do love how that scar on your face compliments your features."

I glared at her and didn't grace her taunting remark with a reply. Instead of abandoning me to another day of futile wait, she grinned and whispered, "Would you like to have some fun, General? I've been told I'm wicked with my mouth."

"Thanks, but no, thanks," I snapped. "I'm not interested."

"Not even if I let you go from the prison in exchange?"

My gaze immediately went to her face, scanning for any sign of deceit. Even if she was genuinely attracted to me, a fact I doubted, she wouldn't do something so stupid for a fuck. She had a hidden agenda and I intended to find out what she really wanted. The other guard looked unreadable as he watched our exchange as if he were a stone statue.

I felt torn between accepting and refusing the demon woman's offer. Even if it was only for a minute, I loathed the idea of accepting another person's touch. It seemed I didn't have any choice, though. A terrible thought had begun to torment me. What if Eireene had never intended to go after Alix in the first place? What if she used me to escape Thralnia after her identity as a spy had been discovered? After all, she hadn't cared about Alix enough to leave the elven world and protect him from being discovered.

I nodded to the female demon guard and her lips twisted into a smirk. She nodded toward the other guard and the man just shook his head, now looking amused.

"You're hopeless," he murmured. Without another word, he took his leave, seemingly unconcerned about the fact that his fellow guard could cause a lot of trouble for him.

His attitude was even more suspicious than hers, but I decided to take things in stride and find out the reasons behind this whole thing. The woman retrieved a set of keys and inserted one into the strong lock. The cell door opened without a sound as she slipped inside, gliding toward me. "You agree to my proposal, then?"

I got up and stepped forward. "Do I have any other choice?"

With no hesitation, she crossed the distance between us and pressed her lips to mine. They felt surprisingly soft, but then again, I had learned not to judge people according to my previous patterns of thought.

Objectively, I could see a woman's beauty and accept its demonic uniqueness. Her skin looked as smooth and flawless as that of the most delicate elf ladies and her hair smelled exciting, like resin and fire. Still, her attractiveness didn't have any

effect on my body and I pushed her away roughly. In one smooth movement, I stole both the sword she kept strapped at her waist and the keys for the cell.

"I'm sorry about this, but I'm sick of being trapped here with no news," I said as I slipped out of the cell and locked it. For some obscure reason, I didn't feel comfortable with hurting a woman. The elf in me would probably forever see women as pretty, fragile beings and I couldn't help but apologize at having pushed her away so roughly. "You're very beautiful, but I am in love with another."

Much to my surprise, the demon guard laughed. "You really are cute," she said, chuckling.

As she laughed, I felt another presence approaching. I cursed under my breath, realizing my suspicions had been correct. Why would Taxien go to the trouble of staging an escape though? If he wanted me dead he could easily have killed me, no questions asked.

A thousand questions swirling in my mind, I leaned against the wall next to my cell and waited. It didn't take long for Alix's father to appear. He stepped out of the shadows, and I guessed any other elf would have been intimidated by his dark silhouette. His black eyes scrutinized me and obviously found me lacking, but I did some analyzing of my own. Strangely enough, I could see some of my love's features in him, identifying the part of Alix that never did fit with fae patterns. I could see Alix's fire in him, his build, and maybe hear the tenor of his voice. Then again, these days, I looked for Alix wherever I could find him.

It was the first time since the night of my arrival that Taxien had come to see me. Not bothering with an introductory remark, he immediately went into interrogation mode. "What are you to my son?" he asked, although, I was sure, he knew all too well what my answer would be.

"I'm his lover," I replied without missing a beat. Likely, Eireene had told him about my relationship with Alix, or what she thought about it at least.

"You? The dark elf general, my son's lover?" Taxien barked out a laugh. "Is this some kind of joke?"

"No joke. I love Alix."

"Stop this ludicrousness. If you wanted to enlist my help, you have it. Don't

expect me to welcome you into my lands."

I gave Taxien a look of disbelief. If being thrown into a dungeon was his idea of a welcome, I didn't want to dwell on what he did to his enemies. I didn't voice my dismay, however, instead choosing to focus on the important issue at hand.

"You know as well as I do the only reason I came here was for Alix. Surely, Eireene told you as much."

"She did. She also told me you have a fiancée in Thralnia." As those words escaped his lips, his glare turned even fiercer and his eyes flashed red.

"And who are you to judge?" I snapped right back. "You left your own lover and your son alone in an enemy country for fifty years."

Taxien's eyes turned completely crimson and I wondered what thoughts passed through his mind.

"Tell me," I continued to taunt him, "Did you sleep well at night knowing your son risked death with each and every moment he lived in Thralnia?"

"I don't have to explain myself to you," Taxien spat. He took a deep breath, apparently fighting for control. This time, I chose to remain silent. If he'd come here, maybe he did have something to say about Alix.

An awkward silence stretched between us. "Reene tells me you've helped her find her way through Xoz and to me," Taxien said. "She feels you could help us sneak back into Thralnia."

Those words awoke new hope inside of me and I forgot my frustration with Taxien and Eireene. "You found him? You found Alix?"

Taxien gave me another disgusted look but nevertheless, nodded. "We had a contact in the king's entourage and she managed to find out the location of several demon dungeons."

She. Another woman. In that moment, I realized the true problem of the elven kingdoms. We underestimated our women. We thought them to be brainless adornments, when in fact they could be the most powerful weapons in existence. First Alana, then Eireene, and now, this other demon spy who had managed to sneak inside the king's mind, and probably his bed.

Oblivious to my thoughts, Taxien continued to speak. "We're not sure where

exactly Alix is being held, but we'll soon be leaving to investigate."

"I can help," I said eagerly, not caring if my voice sounded pleading or if I humiliated myself in front of the demon. "Take me with you."

"I suppose it can't hurt," Taxien admitted grudgingly. I began to understand he needed to have the last word, to feel superior in everything. He'd probably come here to enlist my aid in the search for Alix. Surely, he knew I would be more than happy to help.

I nodded silently and stole a look to the woman still trapped in my cell. I suspected she'd been a test, perhaps to see my true loyalty toward Alix. I realized with a shudder the demons had rightly guessed the weakness of the elven race—women.

Putting the disturbing revelation out of my mind, I inserted the key back in the lock and opened the cell door. "Well then, since we've established that, there's no point in wasting any more time," I told Taxien.

Alix's father turned his back on me and gestured for me to follow. I gave a mental thanks to the Goddess for her help and sent her another prayer. *Please, let us find Alix before it is too late. Please let my love still be alive.*

## **Chapter Twenty-Four**

### **Alix Skyeyes: Rescue**

I've lost count of the time I've spent locked in this place. I could hear the rats feasting on a dead body in the cell adjoining my own. Distantly I wondered about the identity of the dead person. Had he been a demon, or just an elf unfortunate to cross a noble or sleep with the wrong person? It didn't matter, nothing mattered. I tried desperately to hold on to the memories keeping me alive, but they slipped through my fingers. The beloved features of my mother morphed into Alana's mocking face and Jan . . . I simply couldn't see him. I looked for him everywhere, but he was nowhere to be found.

Sometimes people ask about the strongest feeling in the world. Was it love or was it hatred? What emotion truly made people act the way they do? I didn't know. I

didn't know why I still tried to hang on, even if every cell of my body begged for death. I could surrender to the disease consuming me. I could stop fighting and allow myself to fall asleep and never awake. The clammy fingers of death reached for me, just a breath away. And yet, somehow, for some reason, I pushed the black gloom back and I refused to give in.

No one came to visit me any longer, not even the libidinous guards. They seemed to have forgotten I existed entirely. Everyone had most likely joined the war, too busy to slay their own comrades to think about a demon. In a way, I considered myself lucky for their departure. Without them here, I could conserve the remnants of my dignity. If I died, I would die hanging on to that one beautiful day, no mocking laughter or libidinous touches clouding it.

Everything seemed more silent than ever lately. I wondered if I had started to lose the sharpness of my senses or if the Goddess had given me an omen, a sign something would happen. I wanted to laugh at the thought. What could possibly happen? In this place, every moment, minute, hour, and day was the same — pain, darkness, death. Only the degrees of the torture varied.

I realized at once, something was going on. Even through the haze of numbness that had become my existence, I heard screams and explosions unusual for the dungeons. In the distance, someone shouted in horror but the sound died away before I could grasp it fully. The crashes and explosions came closer. I heard the sound of footsteps, unfamiliar voices, the silent timbers overwhelmed by the sound of pleading moans from the cells nearby. Other prisoners begged to be released, the hope of the hopeless appearing again at the first sign of life in so much time.

I wanted to speak up, but my throat felt dry after being deprived of water for Goddess knew how long.

The footsteps stopped before my cell.

"Here!" someone said.

The door opened and a tall man appeared in my view. He stopped dead as he set his eyes on me. My burning gaze fixed on him and he took a step back, as if startled.

"What?" a feminine voice said from behind the man. "What's wrong?"

A tall, beautiful woman pushed the first man aside and entered the grimy, dark cesspool that had been my home for the past months? Years? I didn't even know how long I had been here.

"By all means, go. Go right ahead," the man muttered and followed her in.

The woman gave me a critical look, tilting her head as she scrutinized my appearance.

"He's so obviously a demon," she concluded. "I don't know how anyone could have thought otherwise. Elves. They're idiots!"

Several other people entered the room and the man from before proceeded to unlock the manacles holding me captive. The sudden freedom was surprising to say the least and after so much time imprisoned, I didn't know if I could trust it.

I glanced at the people who had suddenly invaded my small world, the edge of hysteria slowly shifting into full blown hatred and suspicion as I took in their appearance. The way the woman moved reminds me of something and as realization struck, I croaked out, "Demons . . . ."

Flashes of my past, of the fights in the war suddenly invaded my consciousness. I had fought so many of them back then but I had never truly seen a demon. The sight of them gave me an unexpected and unnatural boost of energy and I attacked the person next to me, the same man who had released me.

"For the gods, we don't have time for this!" the woman growled, and the man I'd immobilized shifted in my hold, dislodging my grip with ease. I found myself thrown against the filthy wall and held up by a strong masculine arm.

"Listen up, little elf freak!" the woman snarled at me. "We're not here because we want to be. Our father, who for some reason is your father as well, sent us here to get your ass out. Now, shut your mouth and come along nicely!"

I remained silent as I struggled to wrap my mind around that notion. My mother had never explained anything to me about my mysterious parentage. Naturally, I had long ago realized demon blood coursed through my veins, but the sudden revelation of having siblings shook me. This woman's words made sense and suddenly, I hated my mother for her secrecy, hated her for allowing me to fight

against the people who were obviously my own kind, for allowing me to live a lie.

I pushed the man away, the anger burning in my veins too strong to permit me to forgive the insult. "Who do you think you are?" I snapped. "I didn't need your fucking help."

The man rolled his eyes and took my hand, pressing something into my palm. "Maybe this will convince you to trust us," he said neutrally.

Immediately, I recognized the object as Jan's blade. I had touched it many times, traced its elegant contours. My own blade clashed against it once. "Jan . . . ."

The man nodded, dutifully ignoring the trembling in my voice. "He's with us. We just split up to cover more ground."

At that phrase, all caution flew out the window. I could focus on one thought alone, the need to see my lover. After all this time, I could finally touch him and feel his embrace again. My Jan . . . . Just like I'd known, he'd come for me.

Thankfully, the woman suppressed any other comments she might have made regarding my sudden willingness to cooperate. I still doubted them. How could I not? I'd been taught all my life to fight against these people. Even so, seeing my lover again was worth any risk I had to take.

I followed them silently out of the cell that had been my residence for so long. Some of the doors in my cell block had been crashed open, and I guessed that had been the noise I had heard earlier. Chains rattled as trapped prisoners tried to reach for the open doors, but failed, the magical bonds defeating their every effort. As we passed, we entered another cell block and my sensitive hearing caught desperate voices pleading for mercy, other prisoners begging to be released. It would have taken but a second to stop and open a door, but how could I choose which door to open? Even if many guards had left, I doubted the prisons had been left completely unmanned. I could not risk my life, nor Jan's, for the freedom of some strangers. For all I knew, their presence in the dungeons could be justified. It was cruel of me, but I continued to walk, ignoring the anxious pleas and the bloody hands that reached out to me through the bars. Distantly, I asked myself why those prisoners were able to reach for me in the first place. I had been chained and bound with magical silver shackles, and the poison of the precious metal still dwelled in my blood. I smiled

bitterly, no longer feeling guilty for leaving them behind.

"This way." The woman who had claimed to be my sister pointed to a corridor shrouded in darkness. The five demons who'd broken into my cell surrounded me and I ignored the feeling of discomfort that being so overpowered gave me. These people would lead me to Jan. Every other feeling faded in front of that promise.

It seemed to take forever, but we reached the end of the corridor. I heard him before I saw him. Finally, Jan stood in front of me, as handsome as I always knew he would be, so perfect even with the scars covering his face, even with the sorrow in his eyes.

In a few steps, I hastened to his side and collapsed into his arms, what little strength I had seeping out of me. Just like that, the light in my eyes died and I buried my face in Jan's chest, feeling lonelier and more inadequate than ever. Jan hugged me tightly to his chest, muttering incomprehensible endearments that soothed my wounded heart. The poison of the magic silver slipped into my bloodstream through my wounded wrists, and as the adrenaline of battle started to wear off, weakness began to take hold of my muscles. Soon, my body went limp in Jan's embrace, to the extent that I could no longer hold myself on my own two feet. My knees buckled, suddenly too weak to hold my weight, but luckily, Jan was there to catch me when I fell.

He lifted me into his arms, pressing a kiss to my sweaty forehead. "Shhh . . . You'll be fine, baby." I heard him whisper.

"Come on! They might summon reinforcements!" someone said to our right.

He did his best not to jostle my wounded body as he ran through the narrow hallways of the cell block. I was distantly aware of the group gathering behind Jan and heading toward the exit of the dungeon. I could still hear moans and pleas behind us and I suddenly wanted to tell Jan to stop and help them. I realized then I could not. My voice was frozen, and my eyes wouldn't open. All thoughts evaporated from my mind as my consciousness faded, and I slipped away into shadow and into memory.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Look at him, he's blind!"

I turned toward the voice, immediately identifying it as Sorhel. "Yes, I am. And what a funny thing it is that I can still kick your ass, in spite of my blindness. Oh, and don't forget, in spite of being so much younger."

"Fucking freaky kid! I'll make you pay for that remark!"

"What's wrong, Alix? What's happened?"

"Nothing, Mama! Just another fight with Sorhel and the older kids."

My mother let out a heartfelt sigh. "I really wish I could save you all that torment, my son."

"You can. You can tell me who my father is."

"Alix . . . I can't, you know this."

"Alix . . . Be reasonable! I've told you a million times! I can't reveal to you the identity of your father!"

"Why not? Is he so damned important, so special? Do you even know who he is?"

"Alix!" My mother let out a gasp at the veiled insult and immediately, I regretted it. Still, I was too angry to take the words back.

"Never mind. I'm out of here."

"Alix, please, don't go! Don't leave me! The war is not for you!"

"Don't be ridiculous, Mother! Sorhel and all the others have gone. Why not I?"

"You're so young! You're still a child. You haven't even come of age yet. Please, son, reconsider."

"No, Mother! I am going and that's final!"

"Skyeyes, you'll be in the front lines!" the general ordered coldly.

I nodded my understanding. "Yes, General, sir."

"Don't disappoint me! And don't think that because of your . . . problem,

you'll be getting any preferential treatment."

"I won't, General. You can count on that."

"Would you look at that? A blind elf!" my future first demon kill for the day said.

The second one chuckled. "They must be running out of soldiers to be sending the disabled to the front lines."

It was the last thing the both of them said and I laughed as the warm blood of my enemies stained my hands.

"We won! We won! The demons have been defeated! The war is over!"

I took a deep breath and suppressed a bitter laugh. Had we really won? So many of us were gone and the demons would just come back to fight again.

"We won . . . . We won . . . ."

"Alix, my son, you're home."

"Hello, Mother."

I hugged her awkwardly as she started showering my face with kisses.

"Come on, let me prepare you a warm bath. You've lost weight . . . . You need to eat more. Don't worry, Mama will take care of you."

Inwardly sighing, I followed after my mother, knowing my next war would begin tomorrow.

"Who are you? I do not know your voice."

"I imagine not. I'm from the Northern armies. My name is Jan'ke NightBourne. I'm here for —"

"The party. How so very interesting! I do hope you're enjoying yourself."

"Actually, no. I'm not enjoying myself. I do not enjoy the company of frivolous and judgmental imbeciles. Good night!"

"I'm sorry, so sorry. I don't know what came over me. I didn't mean to do

that."

"Didn't you? Didn't you mean it?"

"I did mean the kiss. I didn't mean to force it on you like that. I shouldn't have —"

My words were cut off by my first kiss, the lips of the man I loved branding the memory in my heart forever.

"Hush . . . . I know it hurts. It will get better."

"Goddess, no! Fuck me! Fuck me now!"

"Alix, love . . . . For the goddess, stop!"

"I love you, Jan."

"I love you too, baby."

I love you . . . . I love you . . . . I love you . . . . The words repeated over and over in my head until they were no longer comprehensible. Something else appeared in my head, a thousand voices speaking at the same time, all of them shouting —

"Demon, demon!"

"Demon freak!"

"That's him! That's the demon!"

"Freak demon, I'll kill you!"

*Freak! Demon!* Suddenly, it was all I could hear. Love turned to hate, Jan's voice turned vicious and I became nothingness as I surrendered to the darkness.

## **Chapter Twenty-Five**

### **Jan'ke Nightbourne and Alix Skyeyes: Past and Present**

When I first saw my love, I almost didn't recognize him. His eyes were red burning coals and he'd lost so much weight he'd turned almost emaciated. His hair was clotted and dirty and his face undistinguishable under all the grime. And yet, I knew. Somehow I knew the demon launching himself at me and into my arms was

my love.

The sight still haunted me, though. How could it not? The demon medics had told me Alix might not survive, that he'd lasted so long only through sheer will. His body was burned out by the elven torture and the demon magic he'd yielded without proper training.

It was a miracle they told me that much. I waited in front of the door where my love slumbered, having not been allowed into the room. In fact, were we in Xoz, I would have ended up in the dungeon again. It would have been harder to find a dungeon special for elves while in Thralnia, especially if we didn't want to draw attention.

After taking my love out of the demon prisons, we found a temporary shelter in an abandoned house nearby. The medics who came with us from Xoz started to work on Alix immediately. I very much appreciated their zeal, but I couldn't help but feel frustrated I'd been refused entry to Alix's quarters.

I wanted to throw myself at the door and bang at it until it opened. I wanted to say I had the right to see Alix, but in truth, did I really? I had failed him. I had lied to him and I arrived too late to save him. I didn't deserve to say I love him.

A medic cracked open the door and immediately, I prepared to assault him for information. Much to my surprise though, I didn't have to do such a thing. The demon ushered me silently inside the room, muttering something unpleasant under his breath. I couldn't care less. After three days of waiting, I got to see my love.

As I entered the room, the first thing that struck me was the potent smell of healing herbs. After that, everything else blurred and my eyes could see only the slim figure of my beautiful love, still and pale on the bed. His eyes were covered with dark bandages and for a horrible moment, I believed Alix had surrendered to death and I was allowed the small mercy of seeing him before the cold ground forever took him from me.

With a choked sound I didn't recognize as being uttered by my own lips, I hastened to the side of the bed and collapsed next to it, taking my love's hand in my own. I sighed in relief when I realized his skin emanated warmth and Alix's chest still moved as my love took in blessed air. I prayed to the Goddess for her to keep

the chill of death away from Alix, hoping his hand in mine would never get cool.

In that moment, I remembered I was not alone in the room. I lifted my eyes to meet the gaze of Alix's father, the same man who would possibly kill me in the near future, the demon king of Xoz, Taxien. He glared at me, not appreciating my intimacy with Alix.

"I didn't allow you in here to bother my son. Stop touching him or else I will have you thrown out again!"

Eireene lay collapsed in her lover's arms, having succumbed to the exhaustion of a few days of vigil. It would be quite touching really, seeing the demon king care for her in such a way. Somehow, I could tell he also worried about the wellbeing of his son, although we hadn't exchanged more than a few words and those words were spiteful, full of hatred and disdain. And yet, all I could manage to feel for both of them was an overwhelming surge of resentment. Who does he think he is, ordering me around? He bore the same guilt as me for Alix's plight, just as Eireene did. They had no right to tell me to get away from the man I love.

"Alix would want me here," I replied simply. Given that Alix jumped into my arms back in the elven prisons, he could not deny my claim. I took advantage of the fact he himself initiated this conversation to find an answer to my previous dilemma. "Why are his eyes covered?"

Eireene stirred in Taxien's arms at the sound of my voice. Her eyes cracked open and she leaned into her lover's embrace as she listened to our conversation. Taxien caressed her hair absently.

"His eyes have sustained some magical damage," he answered. "We had our healers take care of it."

I scowled at him, taking in his words with skepticism. "I thought his innate blindness didn't have a cure." Handicaps originating from the womb couldn't be healed by any magic I knew of.

"Yes, well, that's not quite so," Taxien replied casually. "Alix's blindness was caused by a spell we put on him to cloak the demon nature of his eyes."

For a brief moment, I did not register the meaning of his words. "Excuse me?" I said when I regained the power of speech. "You blinded him on purpose?"

Taxien shrugged and I wanted to throttle him for his cruelty toward my love. Alas, I was more than ever aware of the guard remaining in the room. If I attacked Taxien, they would remove me from my love's side and that, I could not allow.

"Goddess . . . . How could you?" I turned to Eireene and gave her a disgusted look. "What kind of mother would do something like that to her son?"

Before Eireene could say anything in her defense, my love stirred on the bed. He reached for the bandage across his eyes, and immediately, my focus shifted toward him. I started to whisper softly to him, all the while holding tightly to his hand. "Alix? Can you hear me, baby?"

"Darling? Alix?" Eireene gasped out at the other side of the bed.

Taxien held her back for some reason, and I wondered if he finally understood my situation and my concern. He had, after all, been separated from his own lover for fifty years, give or take. Not that I cared, especially not now that I found out what gruesome things he had done to my love.

No longer willing to allow Taxien and Eireene get to me, I focused on my love's now stirring form and attempted to get him to hear me. My efforts paid off and he seemed to stumble into consciousness.

"Jan," he croaked out, squeezing my hand in a surprisingly strong grip, his other hand reaching out toward me. His entire demeanor screamed need and despair and my heart ached for him.

"I'm here. I'm here, baby." I tried my best to soothe him. "You're all right. You're going to be fine. Don't speak, you're still very sick."

"Jan." He gripped his throat, obviously in pain but trying to speak regardless. "A-la-na . . . ."

That one word leaving his lips sent a dagger through my chest. "It's all right, baby. I didn't marry her. I never intended to," I whispered in his ear.

His relief was practically palpable. He collapsed on the pillows, coughing, and I held him until the fit passed. Looking around, I detected a medicinal kit by Alix's bed. I snatched an immaculate bandage from the kit and wiped the blood, sweat, and saliva from his mouth and face.

He offered me a smile as he once more, struggled for words. "Mama?"

Eireene immediately freed herself from Taxien's grip, took her son's hand, and kissed it. "Here, darling. Mama's here."

He nodded in satisfaction, squeezing my hand and Eireene's as if to confirm our presence at his side. The exhaustion of speaking so soon after his ordeal pushed him into sleep again.

From behind us, a medic said, "He's very strong. It's too soon to tell, but it's important that his loved ones be at his side to help him pull through."

"Will he make it?" Taxien asked.

The doctor didn't reply, obviously, the answer was uncertain.

"He will make it," I said instead. "He will fight for us." I kissed Alix's hand and lay my head next to his body. "It will be all right."

I would not have it any other way, not after everything we'd been through. After the torture of the past months, after Alix almost dying, and me deserting my kind, after my own run in with imprisonment at the hands of the demons, nothing else mattered but remaining together.

\* \* \* \* \*

The first thing I felt as I came to was a peculiar weight, a burn in my eyes. I'd grown accustomed to the fiery sensations, so it didn't surprise me too much. Strangely though, in spite of the burning feeling, my world remained shrouded in darkness. Naturally, I had gotten used to seeing and I didn't feel particularly fond of being blind again.

Instinctively, I reached for my eyes, only to realize they'd been covered by some sort of material. Before I could even think about removing it, everything came back to me. The dungeons. The demons. Then Jan and after that . . . After that I thought I could remember some distant voices talking around me, but my head hurt and I didn't know anything anymore.

I would have thought everything had been a dream, that perhaps the guards had finally managed to knock me out and had pulled my eyes out. However, even in my confused state, I still felt him, a presence so close to my heart it had become a

part of me.

I managed to ensure myself Jan hadn't married Alana and my mother was safe before blacking out again. At that point, I really didn't care how both my mother and Jan could be by my side. I reveled in the knowledge of having the two people I loved close to me and when I fell back into unconsciousness, I had the strength to fight back the nightmares plaguing me.

I didn't know how long I remained out of it, but when I came to again, a heated conversation seemed to be taking place in the room. I could feel both Jan and my mother present and wasn't surprised when I heard my love's voice.

"How long until he recovers?"

"We don't know," an unknown male voice replied. "It depends on his own wish to return to your side."

I heard the sarcastic tone of the two last words and instantly, they put me on guard. Were we still in Thralnia? Had we been accused on breaching the sodomy laws? Why then had I been released from my imprisonment? Why had the demons saved me? I couldn't understand anything anymore.

"Either way." My mother's voice interrupted my musings, "I forbid you to tell him anything about Taxien and the spell. It will hurt him unnecessarily."

The iciness in my mother's voice amazed me. Then again, she was probably angry with Jan because of his lie. She'd come around eventually. But what spell did she want to hide? Who in the world was Taxien?

I got my answer all too soon.

"Hurt him unnecessarily?" Jan spat. "You blinded your son on purpose because you needed to remain a spy for your lover. How is that unnecessary information?"

For a moment, I couldn't quite believe Jan's words. Surely not . . . . My mother wouldn't do such a thing. My mother loved me.

"We will tell him when he recovers," she said, confirming Jan's words.

I found myself unable to continue with my pretended slumber. I sat up, wincing as my muscles and bones protested at the sudden movement. Immediately, my mother and Jan took notice and hastened to the bed.

"Alix, you're awake," my mother noted, half in relief, half in caution.

"Yes, Mother, I'm awake," I replied coldly. "Tell me, what's this business about me being blinded on purpose?"

She paused as if considering her words. The door opened and I heard someone else approach, a man if I had to guess by the sound of the steps. My suspicion was proven correct when the man answered my question.

"We needed to keep you safe from your demon legacy while you lived in Thralnia. We couldn't risk your demon eyes and powers to blow our cover, so we put a spell on you."

"A spell. A spell that blinded me," I repeated in disbelief.

"We had to, Alix," my mother cried. "There was no other way."

"No other way?" Jan growled. "Come on, Eireene. You know as well as I do that's not true."

"Shut up, Nightbourne," she snapped at him venomously. "Stay out of this. It's none of your business."

The poison in her voice made me see for the first time Eireene Skyeyes wasn't the person I had seen and lived with back in the fae palace. I couldn't understand how the mother I had worshipped and loved for so many years could be this same woman, this same treacherous creature. She knew how much my blindness had hurt me and yet she'd remained silent, perpetuating my agony for fifty long years.

Probably realizing their argument wouldn't help my state of mind, Jan turned his attention toward me. "I'm sorry, love," he said, taking my hand and squeezing it. "You don't need this right now. Just rest and we'll deal with this later, okay?"

"The most important thing is that we'll be able to cure your eyes, honey," my mother offered.

I ignored both her and Jan. I didn't want to sleep or rest, or whatever. I wanted to rip the bandage from my eyes and maybe strangle more than a few people in the room. Jan still had many things to answer for and my mother . . . I just didn't know what to do or to say to her.

Still, taking into account my weakened state, I could see no point in straining my body by attacking people who, unfortunately, I cared about. I leaned back on the

pillows and barked, "Get out. All of you."

I felt Jan wanted to protest, but in the end, he obeyed my wishes. Placing a soft kiss on my forehead, he stepped away from the bed. "I love you," he said softly.

"Feel better, honey," my mother said.

Naturally, I didn't reply. They must have found my silence an answer in itself as I heard a door open and my mother, Jan, and the two other men step outside. When the door closed behind them, I couldn't help but breathe a sigh of relief. My mind couldn't yet comprehend all the facts that had been so suddenly thrown at me. Out of all the confusing pieces of information, one stood out—one decision with certainty. I still loved Jan and I would cling to that love. Perhaps that was the only unbreakable, unchangeable thing in my life. I still had many decisions and choices to make, but that knowledge anchored me. Even if my mother's treachery had broken my heart, Jan would be able to fix it.

## **Chapter Twenty-Six**

### **Jan'ke Nightbourne and Alix Skyeyes: Together**

Dawn painted the skies of the demon kingdom in colors that reminded me of blood. I attributed the illusion to my mood, the pressure my love's family put on me, and the knowledge that my brother was still somewhere out there, in a country that had lost itself to civil war. I imagined the blood of the skies as being Lar's and I knew I could no longer linger here.

It hurt me physically to know we had to be separated again, but I had no choice. The war in Thralnia was growing worse. Our passage into the lands of Xoz had been almost impossible. I wanted Alix to be safe, out of harm's way. He had suffered so much already. He needed to rest, to recover. I could not take him away from his family, from those who protected him and yet hated me. The crimson of the demon skies could very well be Alix's blood and I would not allow that. I would rather die than have him suffer again.

With a sigh, I turned toward the wardrobe, mentally preparing myself for what I needed to do. Alix had gone to talk to his mother so I'd been left to my own

devices temporarily. Perhaps it would be better to leave in his absence. I shook my head at the thought, knowing I couldn't do that. I would talk this out with my love, explain why I needed to go. Never again would I hide from him or choose a coward's way out.

I had to force myself to start packing. My heart threatened to break in a million pieces, as if I was taking the final step that would again separate me from my love. Even as I began selecting a few essentials for the trip back, my soul and mind remained on him. What would Alix say? He certainly wouldn't be easy to convince. Even so, he had to admit I didn't belong here and he had to accept that I could not leave my brother to die. I had come here, to Xoz, to ensure his safety. Now that he felt better, my loyalties lay toward Thralnia and Lar. As much as I wanted to stay by Alix's side, I had to look for my brother.

And Goddess, how I wanted to be with my love. The two of us, forever, someplace far away, where divided loyalties could not reach us and the lies of the past could not hurt us. I almost resented Lar for pushing me into returning to Thralnia, although logically, I knew he had no blame in this. The war had taken all our choices away, mine included.

I was so deep in thought I almost missed the sound of the door opening. The time had come for me to face my sweet love.

\* \* \* \* \*

In the bedroom we now shared, Jan was packing. I watched him closely, at first not quite understanding if he truly intended to do what I thought he did. He obviously planned to leave me, but how could he even consider it?

My temper exploded like a volcano and for the first time in many days, I saw Jan through a red-tinted haze.

"Stop right there! Where do you think you're going?"

Jan sighed and turned to look at me. "You're safe here," he whispered. "You're with your family. I can't drag you into war again."

I looked at him, taking in the features that had become so dear to me. The

knowledge I could now truly see him was still so novel to me. And yet, even without my eyes I could have felt the restlessness inside of him. He'd chosen to leave, but not just because he needed to find Lar'an. He didn't belong here and he knew it. We both knew it.

"My family? You know damn well how I feel about my family."

He gave me a sad, guilty look and I could read the thoughts running through his mind. Even if I had forgiven him, I had yet to forgive my mother and my father for the hell they put me through. I still didn't understand why they thought it necessary to blind me, when they could have just as easily allowed me my sight. We could have found a remote location to live, somewhere far away, where we could have been free from elven constraints and hatred. In our little chat today, my mother had claimed they'd agreed such a thing would not be safe for me. Apparently, with the Xoz war starting, the best place for me to live would be in the fae palace. I had my doubts regarding that, and I suspected, in the end, my father did indeed push my mother to work for him as a spy. For that, I could never forgive her. Her betrayal went way beyond Jan's lie. In spite of Jan's deception, he would have come to me, eventually. He would have told me the truth. If not for my fit of anger, we would have never been separated in the first place.

My mother's attempt to coax forgiveness had ended in dismal failure. Quite honestly, I no longer wanted to think about the whole thing. I was done dwelling on the past. The only thing I wanted now was to forge a future, a future at Jan's side. Apparently, Jan didn't want the same thing. His dark eyes pled for understanding, begged me to let him go. But I had run out of understanding long ago. Jan belonged to me. He had been mine since that first day when we met. Perhaps I realized it only recently, but yes, he was mine. No one, not even Jan, would change that. No one would ever get between us again. I would not allow it.

My fist collided with the unburned side of his face. Even in anger, I would never use my magic against him and at any rate, I didn't feel truly angry. I meant only to make a point. He staggered back from the force of the blow and gave me a wide-eyed look.

"Are you an idiot? After everything that's happened, you plan to leave me?" I

snapped at him.

"Love . . . ." He sighed, stepping toward me, ignoring the fact that he risked having his nose broken. My temper had turned more volatile since my rescue from the dungeons and the changes irritated me. Perhaps Jan noticed it as well. Perhaps I was no longer the man he fell for.

"No!" I shrieked, both at my own thoughts and at him. "You won't leave me. You won't leave me ever again."

I didn't try to control the despair and raw need in my voice. He knew I was addicted to him and I would give anything up for him. His nostrils flared and I could sense his arousal responding to my own desperate need.

Our eyes met and the air between us seemed to crackle, our lust and need so strong, it had become electrical.

Jan looked torn and made one last attempt to get through to me. "Alix. Goddess . . . . Alix, love, I should — "

I didn't give him the time to finish his phrase. In a flash, I pounced on him, my mouth covering his, coaxing his agreement to my order. I would not allow him to leave me. He loved me, still. He simply had to.

Our garments flew off our bodies in a flurry of dark cloth. All my somber thoughts disappeared upon feeling Jan's touch on my skin. His calluses had all but vanished. Secretly, I missed the roughness of his palms, the way his touch first felt on my skin. At the same time, though, his touch had become even better, as if his now smooth hands pulsed with new energy. With the calluses gone, our skin could come into contact without any sort of barrier. I couldn't explain it, but then again, I could never fully explain my relationship with Jan.

Everything seemed so very new and incredible every time we coupled. His touch never ceased to amaze me or arouse me, novel and familiar at the same time. He tormented my nipples with his mouth and I could do nothing but gasp and cling to him as he made me writhe in pleasure.

Ever so slowly, he licked down my chest and abdomen. His tongue sent a trail of fire over my skin, awakening the flame in my blood. I didn't try to stop it. I accepted my demon nature as part of me. As long as Jan didn't hate me for it, I didn't

care about anyone else.

I spread my legs, eager to feel everything my love had to offer. "Jan . . . Jan . . . Oh, Goddess, Jan! Fuck me!"

Jan made a clicking sound with his tongue, and I remembered that even in the heat of passion, he refused to do anything that could hurt me. As much as I tried to convince him I didn't mind being fucked raw, he always refused taking me without a proper preparation. Secretly, his refusal made me happy. I reveled in the passion of his touch, but the knowledge that he would restrain himself to make sure he wouldn't hurt me made everything so much better.

"Wrap your legs around me, baby," Jan whispered huskily.

I did, and he lifted us from the floor, my weight apparently negligible for a soldier like him. He walked to our shared bed and deposited me on the soft mattress. Distantly, I thought it would be harder for him to do that once I "found my wings," as Taxien put it, but I shoved the thought from my mind, unwilling to let my idiot parents spoil this moment for me.

Instead, I allowed my eyes to take in the glorious nudity of my lover, unabashedly checking his beautiful body as he rummaged through the nightstand in search of the lubricant. I couldn't help but be grateful for having regained my sight. Everything about Jan was amazing, so utterly perfect. His body boasted the muscles he'd earned through a great degree of effort in the war. He held himself in an almost arrogant stance, which, combined with his impressive height, became intimidating and more than a little arousing.

His wide shoulders taunted his elven ancestry. Elves were naturally slim and athletic, and I myself, in spite of my half-demon legacy, hadn't managed to regain my previous heavier build. Jan seemed, however, an exception to that, and he pulled it off well.

His long black locks reached beyond his shoulders, as beautiful and as soft as I remembered from my touch. Jan's dark eyes seemed to burn with a flame of their own, and if I didn't know any better, I would've said he was part demon. The scars on the right side of his face only complemented his high cheekbones, making him look cruelly handsome.

And his cock . . . Goddess, the sight of it always made me shiver with anticipation. Hard and leaking, proudly jutting out from between his legs. I licked my lips, feeling the sudden urge to swallow my love down, to worship that beautiful cock with my mouth, my hands, my entire being.

Jan stole a look at me, his gaze immediately going to my mouth and his hand stilled for a second in the drawer. "Goddess, you're gorgeous," he whispered almost reverently. Having apparently forgotten about his initial purpose, Jan crawled toward me on the bed. His hand caressed my chest, stopping to tweak a nipple while his tongue began to torture the tips of my ears.

"Jan . . . The lotion," I murmured, amazed at my own strength and power of restraint.

Jan froze above me and let out a small curse. I suppressed a chuckle upon the realization that in spite of everything, my lover had preserved the slight clumsiness and innocence he showed only in my presence. It amused me but at the same time, made my heart swell with love for him.

Faster than I thought possible, he procured the lotion and pounced on me again. This time, his mouth went for mine, and I spread my legs farther, waiting for him to prepare me. Our thoughts became synchronized and immediately, his fingers went to my hole. I tensed just a bit as I felt his touch at my opening. We hadn't been able to be together since that time in the forests outside the fae palace. My recovery went well, but at the same time slowly, and while Jan always remained by my side, he refused to do anything with me that would "strain my body unnecessarily." Even if I did manage to convince Jan of my necessity, we didn't have enough time or adequate privacy for more than a quick hand job.

"It's all right, love," he whispered. "We can stop now if you want to."

"No!" I snapped at him. "Fuck me! Now, Jan, please."

Much to my surprise, he complied, giving me a wicked smile, the same smile I had grown to love in the past few weeks. Yet another reason for which I felt grateful I could now see. My eyes helped me know Jan all over again, see sides of him I had never had the chance, or rather the ability, to see before.

He slicked his shaft with lotion and added more to prepare my hole. I dug my

nails into the skin of his shoulders as he pushed inside, reveling in the burning feeling of his cock stretching me.

"Goddess, baby," he said, groaning. "You feel so good."

I made some sort of inarticulate sound, trying to encourage him. Luckily, he understood me and I didn't have to try and vocalize my feelings. My thoughts disintegrated as Jan started thrusting in and out of my body. My mind became a litany of his beloved name, *JanJanJanJanJanJanJan*, and the only thing that existed for me was him, my handsome dark elf, my battle-scarred general, my gorgeous lover. His cock fucking me, his hands holding me, his lips reaching for mine, his heart connected to my own soul forever.

With each and every thrust, he sent explosions of pleasure through my body. I clung to him desperately as he fucked me, impaling myself on his hard cock. Grunts and groans escaped my love's lips, mostly incoherent ramblings of my name and different attributes of my ass, my body. I enjoyed when he talked dirty to me. The knowledge of the pleasure I could give my lover brought me closer to the edge.

Before long, the ecstasy became too much to bear. Jan came first and the feel of his warm seed filling my passage made me climax as well. He collapsed on top of me, panting in exhaustion and then rolled over so as not to crush me with his weight. I cuddled at his side, reveling in the scent of his sweat. Elves didn't sweat much, but our couplings were always so heated and passionate we both ended up looking as if we'd just showered. I didn't mind, though. It made us even more special.

We remained on the bed in comfortable silence, enjoying the pleasant buzz of the afterglow.

"I really do have to go after Lar," Jan whispered almost apologetically. "He's my brother. I care about him and he helped me when I lost you."

I remained silent for a brief second, and then I climbed on top of him, my body rubbing against his. "I don't mind. The problem can be easily solved. I'll just come with you."

He opened his mouth to protest and I guessed he wanted to launch himself into one of his "you have to stay here where it's safe" speeches.

"I don't want to stay here, Jan," I said. "I don't know if I can ever forgive my family, and even if I do, I am still an elf at heart. I belong in Thralnia. I belong with you."

He smiled at me, relief and love sparkling in his eyes. I thought I could see incipient tears in the corners of his eyes and I knew now more than ever I'd made the right choice. We were meant to be together. As hard as it was for me to forgive, the sight of his smile, the feel of Jan's warmth by my side, and his taste on my tongue made it worth it.

## Epilogue

Jan'ke Nightbourne and Alix Skyeyes: Now and Forever

The lands of Xoz are behind us now. I feel incredibly thankful my love is by my side and he has forgiven me for my lies. The past cannot be forgotten, but we can learn from it and we promised each other never to hide or lie again.

Soon, we will reach the areas most affected by the war. I've heard rumors the fighting has turned worse since my departure and I worry for my brother and Reh. Still, I trust my friend has kept Lar safe. Something tells me soon, we will be able to find them. With Alix by my side, there is nothing I cannot accomplish.

I do not know what the future holds, but what I do know is that, whatever happens, Alix and I will forever be united. Never again will I allow us to be separated. There is still a battle ahead of us, but I promise to myself and to the Goddess that one day, I will give my love the peaceful home and the happiness he deserves.

\* \* \* \* \*

My mother cried upon my departure, trying to convince me to stay. I think Taxien understood why I could not, though. My place is by Jan's side and after all, I still haven't managed to reconcile with my mother, not with knowing she was a spy for the demon country. The knowledge she hurt me willingly for Taxien's benefit

still plagues me as do the memories of my time in the dungeons.

Even so, returning to Thralnia feels strangely liberating, like I'm exorcising the nightmares that have been plaguing my sleep. With Jan by my side, I know no one will ever be able to hurt me. Thralnia has fallen deep into the abyss of death and civil war consumes it day by day, but I cannot help but feel optimistic. Perhaps in the future, when we find Lar'an, we will be able to build a home for ourselves in the beautiful Thralnia forests. Perhaps we will be able to help stop the war. I can only pray to the Goddess and to the fires my father worships for us to be allowed such happiness.

\* \* \* \* \*

In the year 10.862 A.D.G, after only ten years of fighting, the civil war between the twin nations of Thralnia ended. The rivers of the elven countries flowed with blood and the Goddess wept for the fate of her children.

It was through the efforts of Jan'ke Nightbourne and his loyal companion, Alix Skyeyes, that the countries managed to be rebuilt. Together with his brother, Lar'an, and his good friend, On'areh Shadowedheart, General Jan'ke gathered the remaining forces of Thralnia, organizing an incipient form of government until a permanent head of state could be named.

Much to the surprise of the elven nations, the neighboring nation of Xoz offered its aid. Many doubted the good intentions of its king, but the funds and supplies sent were undoubtedly of great aid to Thralnia. And yet, the elves still wondered why the king of Xoz would do such a thing and doubts emerged on the true allegiance of the general and his companions.

In the end, disgusted by the intrigues of court, Jan'ke and Alix left, never to be heard from again, temporarily leaving Lar'an to deal with the organization of the country. Soon after, once the country had started to heal, Lar'an and On'areh also disappeared.

Voices started to whisper about the deaths of the four heroes and many were pained by the realization they had pushed this upon their saviors unwillingly. Even

after a new king was chosen, a king over Greater Thralnia, there were still regrets and deep sighs, old soldiers wishing in secret the king had been one battle-scarred general. As the shadow of death once more fell over our world, they regretted pushing Jan'ke away, knowing that with his leadership, they would have been able to brave the revenge of the Goddess.

However, this chronicler knows that somewhere, in a distant world, far, far away, a dark elf and a half-demon face new challenges fighting a new battle, forging a new home. As for our other two elves in love . . . Theirs is a different story, for another day.

~The End~

### **About the Author**

A native Romanian, Scarlet was born in 1986 and grew up an avid fan of Karl May and Jules Verne, reading fantasy stories and adventure. Later, when she was out of fantasy stories to read, she delved into her mother's collection of book and of course, stumbled onto romance.

As a writer though, Scarlet Hyacinth was born one sunny summer day, when a dear friend of hers - the same friend who introduced her to GLBT fiction - proposed they start writing a story of their own. As it turns out, the two friends never did finish that particular story, but Scarlet discovered she had a knack for writing and ended up starting to write individually. And so, between working on her dissertation, studying for exams and reading yaoi manga, she started writing the Kaldor Saga. Along the way, Scarlet met a lot of wonderful people who supported her, and in the end she found her story a home - and in the process, fulfilled a beautiful dream.

Learn more about Scarlett at <http://scarlethyacinth.webs.com/>