



Banished Witch

by

Anita Philmar

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Dedication

To all my fans,
thank you for your continued support.

PRAISE FOR AUTHOR

Anita Philmar

AND HER BOOKS

BANISHED HERO

“Banished Hero by Anita Philmar is a heart-warming story. I was enamored by the depth of the characters and their plight. When I can fall into a story like I did this one and see it through the characters’ eyes, I find myself captivated and unable to relinquish the story until its ending.”

~Sin, TwoLips Reviews

BANISHED SCOUNDREL

“When I read the blurb of this book, I knew I had to read it! I am so happy I did. The author is very creative with her characters and plot.”

~Holli, You Gotta Read Reviews

“Two thumbs up to Ms. Philmar for providing us with an intense, adventure-driven story that will make your heart beat faster, give you goose bumps from the sexual tension emanating between Jack and Kitty, and make you swoon from the sensual vibes of a scoundrel. I would definitely recommend Banish Scoundrel, the second book in the series, to my friends and can’t wait for the Danella and Omar’s story.”

~Blackraven Reviews

Chapter One

“Omar,” Danni groaned the moment she stepped out into the tavern’s hallway. His unique scent held her captive as forgotten images popped into her head and filled her with unwanted need.

He’d come. Even though she’d read in the cards of his arrival, the dread of facing him and overcoming her past sins tightened her chest. His appearance would play havoc with her plans for the future.

She brushed her hand through the dark curls circling her head. The light tinkling of her cheap bracelets barely reached her ears over the loud chatter from the patrons eating and drinking in the huge dining room below. She walked to the top of the staircase and scanned the crowd. His blond hair stood out like a beacon. She noted the broad width of his shoulders and his lean form, and painful memories sliced through her, and she gripped the handrail.

He won’t know me.

Her blonde hair and blue eyes hidden under a magical spell, she could toy with him without fear. The innocent love of her youth no longer ruled her actions. She now understood the cost of such love and devotion, and no longer wanted the chains that bound one person’s heart to another.

But revenge held a certain appeal.

She savored the idea of making him suffer for all she’d endured. The pressure squeezing her heart eased, and she reviewed her options. Could she finally claim him as a lover and connect with his thoughts? The seductive idea heated her skin and

excited her desires. The plan would help her learn the fate of her family.

But was mind raping really her style?

Keeping him as her personal sex slave, she'd certainly satisfy her curiosity with no repercussions. After she erased his memory, he'd forget the event ever happened.

A few days of heaven or an eternity of hell to have him for such a short time and then have to let him go?

Maybe it would be better to avoid him?

His rich scent tickled her senses again, but the more familiar odors of the place invaded. Sour ale, male sweat, and human filth permeated the place like a petulant wound that refused to heal. For more than a decade, she'd endured the place. Thieves, gamblers, and beggars sat at the scarred tables with a few whores and hags to round out the group.

After walking down the stairs, she wove her way through the tables. Energy raced through her veins as she drew closer. *Tonight, I'll hold Omar Mandor and experience the pleasures of having him explode in my arms.*

Only a step away, she rubbed her hands together to stop her fingers from running through his hair. She edged closer and slid a palm along the rough fabric covering his arm. His crystal blue gaze met hers, and a harsh blade of lust cut through her center.

She smiled.

Now let's see if you're willing to play the game, Omar.

Unfamiliar with a woman's touch, Omar gazed at the mystical witch. Curly raven hair circled a heart-shape face, and dark eyes glared at him questioningly. Awareness tingled through him, and he could almost hear her laughing at his reaction.

He drew away from her caress. "I'm sorry, but do I know you?"

She grinned, then leaned forward and whispered, "Not at the moment, but you will before the night is through."

Drawing closer, she nudged her lush breast into his arm. An alluring fragrance nudged his awareness and a wave of recognition washed over him.

Danella?

He leaned back in his chair and laid his hand on the witch's waist while studying the alluring picture she presented. Dressed in a multi-colored skirt, she wore a black bustier around her thin waist that perfectly framed the white, cotton bounty of her breasts. Her small form didn't stand much taller than his head even with him sitting.

"And why should I be tempted to partake in such rapture?"

He reviewed his assignment. *Bring Danella home.*

How could he best achieve his objective?

"Because you need relief." She eased onto his lap, and the plush pressure of her rear on his legs inflamed his need for sex. She toyed with the drawstrings on his shirt and her fingertips brushed his chest. "Shifting shapes builds a hunger in your loins, and you haven't fed the beast in a while." She wiggled her bottom across his growing erection.

Curious how she knew of his ability to transform, he smoothed a hand over her knee. "And what about you? Do you suffer from the same problem?"

She giggled and widened the space between her legs. "No one could ever accuse me of not taking pleasure wherever I can find it."

"But can you shift forms?" He glided his hand under her skirt and stroked the silky skin of her

inner thighs. A raging fire lit his desires while he judged her reaction to his touch.

“I’m a witch. I can accomplish many things.” She nudged the string on his shirt out of the way and combed her fingers through the hair on his chest. “You’ll find having sex with me is like nothing you’ve ever done before.”

The arousal in her voice sent energy through his system. But if this wasn’t Danella, he should get back to his job and leave the witch alone.

Still, something about her...

“I must say I’m tempted.” He wedged his hand deeper between her legs. The silky texture played against his fingertips and increased his hunger. “But I prefer to have a little more privacy when I stroke a woman.”

“I find that hard to believe. Most men relish the idea of toying with a witch’s pussy while a room full of people surrounded them.” She eased her legs further apart and allowed him access to her moist center. “To show his prowess over the opposite sex.”

He outlined the wet lips of her labia. She rocked her hips, and her heated pussy enraged his animal lust.

She released a low moan and wrapped her arms around his neck. Her breasts hugged his chest, and she nibbled on his ear. “Don’t stop now. We’ve only just begun to have fun.”

After teasing the length of her slit, he withdrew his hand from beneath her skirt and lifted his finger. Her sexy aroma perfumed the air, and he placed his finger in his mouth. The savory flavor caressed his taste buds, and images of young love sped through his mind.

She grabbed his wrist and kept his hand against his mouth. “Just think about lapping and licking that cream until I explode against your mouth.” Her dark eyes bore into his, drawing him into the erotic

fantasy of her orgasm pulsing against his lips.

He shook his head. Didn't Danella's sister, Noelani, warn him Danella wasn't the same innocent girl? But could this witch really be the girl he'd dreamed about in his youth?

"And how much will such enjoyment cost me?"

An angry glint lit the depths of her eyes, and she released his hand. "What's a girl to do? There are certain debts that have to be paid."

He nodded and didn't detain her when she rose to stand beside his chair. "A problem we all share."

A wicked grin graced her lips, and she caught hold of his hands again. "So do you want to head upstairs or would you rather go outside for a stroll?"

The idea of learning more about her fought with his desire to sink deep into her pussy and pound out his frustration.

If she was Danella, why couldn't she just admit it? Didn't she know he yearned for her no matter how she appeared? Of course, if they made love, the mental link between them would provide him the answer.

"A breath of fresh air sounds enticing." He rose, and let her lead him through the crowded room and out the swinging doors. He glanced along the dirt road outlined by tall evergreens. There were no other buildings anywhere nearby. "Which way should we go?"

She stepped off the porch and walked to the edge of the road. "Well, as you can see, there isn't much around here. But we might take one of the trails through the forest."

Again, she led the way and stopped at a narrow foot trail. "Most who visit the Rocky Hills tavern are traveling to somewhere else. Only a few of us live in the area."

Omar judged the route ahead. A day's hike in the opposite direction led them to Ardenia, their

home, and the place where he wanted to return Danella. "So you don't rent a permanent room at the tavern?"

"Oh, I have a room. I just don't spend all my time there." Danella pivoted on her heels, sauntered forward, and laid her hands on his chest. "I can take you to my cabin if you want, but it's rather a long way."

He studied her expression. Why did she suddenly trust him enough to allow him into her private lair? "Can we reach it before dark?"

She slid her arms around his neck and snuggled closer. "We can if you transform into one of your other forms."

The soft cushion of her breasts hit his chest, and her seductive heat caressed his thigh. He clasped his hands over her waist, and the blood rushing from his head to his groin left only one thought on his mind. Was this a trap?

"Are you transforming, too?" He held her close and squashed her attempts to wiggle free.

"Yes, but we don't have time to dawdle. Night is almost upon us, and I need to undress." She stepped out of his arms and back a few paces, laying her hands on the string holding her bustier together. "I discovered a hiding place near here where I stash my clothes."

He followed the quick action of her fingers as she loosened her clothes. His blood raced through his veins in anticipation of viewing her luscious breasts. "And what animal do you usually change into?"

She tugged her blouse from the waistband of her skirt. "It varies. If I'm in a hurry, I usually chose a hawk or falcon and take to the sky. Otherwise, I might choose a coyote or jaguar so I can prowl a little on the way."

When she dropped her shirt to the ground, he marveled at the creamy white swell of her breasts.

The rosy tips drawn in tight peaks spoke not only of her arousal but the cool air surrounding them.

He automatically reached for her, but she avoided his touch by stepping back, then shoved her skirt down her legs. After shedding the multi-colored fabric, she wore only a pair of black, lace-up boots. "If you want to make it to my cabin before the light disappears, you better remove your clothes, too."

The sight of her exquisite body held him prisoner. Full plump breasts lead to a narrow waist then widened into the round curve of her hips. The light bush between her legs revealed her natural blonde hair color. He smiled and grabbed her around the waist. "And what if I can't wait until then to claim you?"

A sly grin kissed her lips before a tiny pop broke the silence between them. The smooth texture of her skin changed into the soft caress of feathers as she shrank. The tantalizing aroma of her transformation filled his loins with a barbaric thirst for sex.

A loud call pulled his gaze skyward as a hawk soared above his head. Words filtered through his head. *Do you know the hawk's waltz?*

He recalled the mating rituals performed above the trees and envisioned the joy of flying.

After a small hop, he flapped his wings and raced after her. With their destination unknown to him, she quickly outdistanced him. He sped through the air and slowly closed the gap between them. *Yes.*

The wind rushing over his feathers fought to cool his carnivorous hunger, but the brief teasing fragrance of her lust continued to feed his desire. The sun, escaping the pursuit of the night beast, fell below the horizon. Red, yellow, and purple lights filled the evening sky.

Why flee? he called.

Her answer stroked his thoughts. *Oh, but if you can't catch me, what kind of pleasure could you*

really give me?

Inflamed by her words and the fire burning through his loins, he soared higher and charted the circles she drew beneath his flight's course.

Marking her position, he took a steep dive through the center of her path and then moved in a sharp angle upwards. He repeated the maneuver several times, coming closer and closer to her until his wing brushed hers. On his climb back to the heavens, he grabbed her talons.

Interlock in a spiraling fall, her hoarse raspy cry echoed around him. The ache in his cock intensified. How much longer would she make him wait?

Seeing the ground rising up at an incredible rate, he released his grip and pumped his wings to rocket back into the endless abyss above.

A screech followed his ascent.

No more games, he echoed back.

After leveling off, he glanced at the ground. Her hawk form contorted and transformed into her human shape.

Don't keep me waiting. She walked toward a log cabin nestled among the trees and disappeared inside.

Chapter Two

Danni whispered a chant to light the kindling in the fireplace. A spark flickered, and the soft glow sent whimsical shadows across the oak walls. She strolled to the bed in the corner of the room.

A bearskin rug covered the top. The rich brown color represented a dark oasis in the night. She ran her hand over the smooth fur and imagined the scene about to unfold in the subdued light.

Would Omar still find her attractive after all these years?

Draping herself across the bed, she rested her head on a square pillow of fluff.

An instant later, her gaze fell on the man at the cabin door. She'd waited endless hours, hoping for the day when she could stroke her hands and mouth over Omar's body. Tonight, she'd finally satisfy her craving for him. Then she could finally kill the dream of being his mate and be free.

Power sizzled through her veins, the drugging wine awakening her lust for sex. She wiggled restlessly over the mattress and stared at the doorway.

The dark colors in the evening sky framed his broad shoulders, full chest, trim waist, and thick thighs. He stepped forward, and shadows played along the long length of his rock-hard erection like a hungry lover.

I can't wait any longer.

She rose to her elbows and drew in a sharp breath. Her clit throbbed with need. "Why did I wait until we arrived here before I seized the opportunity

to taste you?”

She scooted to the edge of the bed, and her feet met the cold wood floor. A shiver sizzled up her spine. Widening her knees, she allowed him a view of her pussy. “Just close the door and come over here. I want to suck on your glorious cock.”

He followed her directions but stopped a few paces from the bed. “Will you tell me your name or do you plan to keep it a secret?”

His sharp glare revealed his longing to learn the truth. The handsome soldier still hoped to find the innocent princess of their youth.

That girl is dead. And in her place is a woman, who'll enjoy every sexy inch of you.

She waved him forward. “What does it matter? By tomorrow you'll have grown tired of me and will leave without a moment's regret.”

“And if I don't?” He stepped closer but remained out of reach.

“Then...” She licked her lips and inspected the smooth skin covering the head of his cock and the dark veins running along its length. “I'll expose the lustful nature of my soul.” She dropped to her knees eager to touch him, hold him in her hands, and savor the flavor of his sex on her tongue.

Danni circled her fingers around the extended length. His unique scent filled her with memories of unfulfilled desires. Tingles of awareness beaded the tips of her breasts, and she dipped her head to lick his cock. The crisp taste of his skin reminded her of a mid-summer breeze off the lake near the palace. Air so hot it heated the tongue and left one thirsting for relief.

She massaged his shaft between her hands and rubbed the tip along the seam of her mouth. A drop of pre-cum coated her lips. Wet need dripped between her legs, and an ache pulsed in her womb.

How can he taste so incredible?

Unable to wait any longer, she wrapped her lips around the head and fluttered her tongue against the crown. Arousing flavors sang through her taste buds, and a deep groan echoed through the room.

Omar drove his hands into her hair and gripped her head. "If only you knew how wonderful that feels."

Pleased by his response, she worked his cock deeper into her mouth and sucked hard. The heavy sound of his breathing excited her as she eased back the length then quickly drove his rod deep again. In, out, she glided her lips up and down his shaft while it stretched and grew harder.

A deep moan vibrated through his body, and he rocked his hips forward. He worked his hands through her hair and caressed her scalp.

Raw, untamed desire coursed through her blood. She increased her pace, working faster and faster, drawing him deeper and deeper until he groaned. Her hands ran across the muscular swell of his ass, and she squeezed the firm muscles.

"Witch, I'm about to come."

Without slowing her movement, she guided her fingers between his legs to toy with his full sacs. He roared, and hot semen shot down her throat.

After licking him dry, she stood and stared into his crystal blue eyes. Lids drooping with contentment, he appeared ready for a nap. But she couldn't let him rest now. He'd be lucky if she allowed him to rest at all.

Easing back onto the bed, she cupped her breasts and watched his slumberous gaze widen. "I guess now that you're satisfied..." She circled her thumb and forefinger around her nipples and flicked the aching peaks. "You expect me to satisfy myself."

He shook his head, and his wet tongue traveled over pale red lips. "No, I'm more than willing to perform the task required to satisfy your desires."

Danni laughed and slid her hands over her belly. The crisp hair on her mound tickled her fingertips, and she dropped her hands to her thighs. Sitting on the bed, she spread her legs wide and reclined. Her fingers once again found the lips of her sex, and she stroked the juicy folds. "And how exactly do you plan to do that?"

His gaze locked on her pussy, and his cock twitched with renewed life. His perusal traveled upward to caress her stomach and then zeroed in on her nipples, "There's not a part of you I don't long to taste. You're absolutely gorgeous."

The heated lust in his eyes heightened hers. Did he have the same dream of finally claiming her body? Or did he hope to read her thoughts?

Her heartbeat increased. What would he learn about her while their minds linked? The gift shape-shifters shared during sex would allow him access to her deepest secrets. She forced a smile. "And where do you plan to begin?"

A wicked grin flashed, and the dimple by the right side of his mouth winked. He dropped to his knees and grabbed her foot. "I'll start here," a teasing finger ran over her ankle, "and work my way up."

His electrifying touch sent energy pulsing along her leg. Need bloomed, and the difference between satisfying a man for money and discovering a man's body for pleasure filtered through her mind. Would he ruin her? Make it impossible for her to enjoy other men?

He stroked his hands over her knees, and tiny spasms quivered along her inner thighs. She wiggled, eager for his touch.

Omar groaned. "You smell like sweet ambrosia." His gaze met hers. "Are you hoping to bewitch me into being your love slave forever?"

I wish. She grabbed his wrists. "No, but I might

hex you if you don't give me some attention soon."

He grinned, freed his hands from hers, and released her ankle. "Then I better get busy."

A wet lick tickled her instep, and she squirmed. "That's not exactly what I'm looking for."

He traced his tongue along her calf. At her knee, he lifted her foot and laid it over his shoulder then continued his journey along her thigh. Again, he paused. "Once I place my mouth on your pussy, I won't stop until you come."

He traced her labia with the tip of his finger and parted the outer lips. She caught the hunger in his eyes before he ducked his head. A brief touch teased her hot flesh, then his tongue ran the length of her slit.

"Oh, my." She groaned as nerve endings lit with erotic sensations and her blood burned with desire.

"You are so incredibly hot." He pressed his finger against her clit and then dipped inside her vagina. She arched her hips, and he pumped his fingers deeper into her core.

"Yes!"

He leaned closer and lapped at her clit. One stroke, two, then he clasped the kernel between his teeth.

A heavenly buzz pulsed through her, and she grabbed his shoulders to hold him in place. "I'm so close."

His tongue, ever busy, circled and licked, and drove her higher and higher into dizzying heights.

"Please."

The excitement coursing through her registered, but she charted his gratification of the moment as well. Tears fell from her eyes and pressure built until a massive explosion ripped through her body in the strongest orgasm of her life.

Gasping for air, she marveled at his hypnotic touch on her belly. Moist lips kissed her navel and

brushed the underside of her breasts.

The hair on his chest grazed the peaking nipples as he moved over her. “Have you ever made love to a shape-shifter before?”

Danni opened her eyes. Crystal blue heat met her gaze. Their minds hadn’t linked. Intense ecstasy, yes—invasion into her past, no.

“Isn’t it the same as making love to any other specie?” She stroked her hands along his back and gripped his firm ass. “Your cock might rival the length of a giant’s, but size isn’t everything.”

He pushed off her, resting his weight on his arms. His stiff rod bobbed between them, and the mushroom head brushed the outer lips of her pussy. “You’re not worried about my cock. It’s my link to your thoughts that has you concerned.”

She smiled and slithered deeper onto the bed. “And what do you hope to learn that you don’t already know?”

“Your name.” He straightened and placed one knee on the bed between her legs. “And if you are who I think you are, you’ll never escape me again.”

“Really. And how do you expect to control a witch?”

He grinned and leaned over her. “Love is powerful magic.”

Love?

You don’t even know the meaning of the word.

Chapter Three

Omar read the fear in Danella's eyes just before it turned into anger. He grabbed her hands and held them against the bed. "You promised your heart to me once, and now I plan to hold you to your word."

She squirmed, and her face contorted with disgust. "Right. I'm a witch, a whore for any man's pleasure. Why would you want more than a quick roll in my bed?"

He studied the voluptuous woman beneath him. No longer an innocent girl, yet she enticed him as no other woman had. "I don't care about the other men you've had sex with. Once I've made love to you, you'll never be satisfied with anyone else."

"So? Do you think that'll keep me from pleasuring other men? I'm a whore."

Unwilling to argue further, he captured a rosy nipple. The tight morsel stabbed his tongue as he licked the sweet berry. Testing the other taut tip, he alternated between the two.

"Quit playing, Omar." She tugged her hands free of his grip, and her fingers tunneled through his hair to pull his head closer.

He wrapped his hands around her breasts, and the lush swells filled his palms. Need drove him as he sucked her plush flesh deeper into his mouth and milked her body for a response.

She circled her legs around his hips, and her wet heat tempted his cock closer. Excitement sizzled through his veins. Every other woman he'd known paled in comparison to Danella. Rapture filled his soul. She was truly his mate. The one he needed to

make his life complete.

She arched into him, and his cock nudged her moist center. The ache to plunge deep raged through him, but he delayed. Instead, he gathered his control and fed on the rich bounty of her breasts until short little cries rang through the room.

“Omar, you have to...”

He shifted, and his eager cock kissed her velvet-soft cunt. She surged upward and swallowed the head. A deep groaned rumbled in his chest, and he slammed forward.

“Yes.” She squeezed her legs around his waist. Pressure enlarged his loins. He drew back and thrust again and again into her heated depths.

“Harder,” sprang from her lips.

He increased his pace and drove deeper. Emotion raced through him, wild ecstatic feelings that mirrored his own. The telepathic link binding them flashed pictures of their homeland in his head, and a warm glow of love spread through his chest.

“Please, don’t stop.” Her words sank into his soul.

Finally, he held the woman he’d waited a lifetime for. He wanted this moment to last forever. Forcing himself to hold back until the pulsing rhythm of her release rode his cock, he set a break-neck pace. Fire lit his groin, igniting an explosion that shot cum deep into her womb.

She moaned as a second orgasm sucked his cock and drained him dry.

The connection between them deepened. Clarity identified the woman in his arms. Peace settled over his uncertainty.

Danella would never escape him again.

He rolled onto his back and arranged her on top of his chest. Exhausted, he relaxed. At last, he’d located his mate, and tomorrow, he’d take her home.

The warm cocoon around Danni confused her for a moment after waking. Then the prior night's events came rushing back. Strong arms held her tight against a muscular chest. She opened her eyes and squinted at Omar's square jaw. He'd confirmed her identity when they made love, and he believed she'd willingly share her life with him.

But he hadn't learned the ugly truth, about how she enjoyed practicing witchcraft and making a man scream while she pleased him. Both had fed her soul and helped relieve the pain of losing her people.

They'd never let me go home after all the things I've done.

He, of course, would argue that her family would welcome her back. All of Ardenia would want her to resume her position as princess and help rule the kingdom with her sisters and mother. But they, like him, didn't have all the facts. She'd worked and conspired with a sworn enemy of the crown. She also knew the evil secrets of the deceiver on the people's council, even if she didn't have proof of his traitorous acts.

An ache grew in her chest. She'd never see her family again or...

Omar's handsome face fell under her gaze, and she slowly eased away so as not to wake him. He might believe himself still in love with her, but after learning of her wicked ways, repulsion would spread and kill his desire.

Keep it together. Right now isn't the time to grow weak.

She had to learn about the events occurring in her homeland. Then, after assessing the danger to her family, she could proceed. Her encounter with Omar would turn into nothing more than a blissful day of exquisite sex.

Later, she'd cast a spell. His memory erased, he'd never recall her true motives.

If I've played my cards wrong, this could be a moot point.

She hadn't told her sister or brother-in-law about the special features of the amulet when she placed it around Jack's neck. Yet the magical item had helped them escape their enemies and return to Ardenia safely. Now, ignorant of how the piece related to their father's death, they could be doing fine, without a worry in the world.

Or...I might have put them in more danger.

Destiny still teased her, offering different paths, but she rejected any plan involving her return to Ardenia. She'd already ruined too many lives. They might appreciate her skills to rescue them from a traitor, but they wouldn't want her living with them on a daily basis.

Danni slid off the bed and turned to Omar. Tears filled her eyes. *You're right. I'll never find the same satisfaction with another man.*

She walked to the fireplace, grabbed the purple robe from a hook, and wrapped it around her shoulders.

Rolling the rug in the middle of the floor to one side, she stood staring at the etched pattern in the floor. After casting a circle, she would read Omar's mind and know the events occurring in Ardenia.

Would he hate her for tapping into his thoughts?
Would he rebel?

Driven to discover the truth, she retrieved a thin cord of rope by the woodpile and walked back to the bed. She fashioned a loop at one end, fed the line over Omar's wrist, then wove the rope through the wrought iron headboard and secured it to his other wrist.

Her movement rocked the bed, but he didn't stir. His eyes remain closed and his breathing even.

She studied his face for a moment and considered just asking him about the things she

wanted to know, but doubt plagued her. Without a spell, she couldn't verify he spoke the truth. She'd lied. Why wouldn't he?

Turning away, Danni gathered her broom from the mantel and stepped to the center of the ceremonial circle, clearing all the debris.

A soft cry whispered through the walls, and she paused. Familiar with the signal, she hurried to the door and opened it to inky blackness. An owl hopped across the threshold then rose and circled the inside of the cabin before flying back out with a low hoot of acknowledgment.

Danni shut the door and guesstimated the time of her benefactor's arrival. He liked it when she entertained other men and would relish the idea of a threesome. But what about Omar?

Would her sexual games provide him with the proof he needed to discard her?

She shook her head and rushed to perform her spell. She wanted answers in advance of Lei's arrival. And before Omar bolted for the door.

After walking back to the fireplace, she laid the broom along the back of the mantel and took down a wooden box. She placed the box in the center of the circle and opened the lid.

Inside lay everything she needed for casting her circle—a long thin twine to mark the edge, a candle in the shape of a hawk, a shell with a small vital of fish oil nestled in the center, a shiny amethyst rock, and a dove's feather. Taking the string from the box first, she placed it along the etched groove on the floor and kneeled inside the circle.

"For my altar I offer these elements.

"A fire hawk to bring its protection.

"Wisdom to come for my amethyst stone.

"Oil from a water creature held in an ocean shell to ease the tide of emotions from swimming in the world of dreams.

“And illumination shall come from the feather of a dove.”

“Danella, what are you doing?” Omar’s voice broke through the silence of the room.

She rose and lifted her knife from the mantel. “Don’t worry about me. Just fall back asleep and enjoy your dreams.”

The bed squeaked. “Why have you tied me to bed? Are you afraid I’ll run away?”

Unable to keep from glancing his way, she met his gaze. For a moment, she allowed herself to bath in the luxury of the past. Fantasies of them finding a future together. If they had married, would they have been happy?

“Or do you want to have your way with me again?” His mischievous smile shot a painful jolt through her heart.

She looked at the items at her feet and grieved for a reality that would never see fulfillment. “No, I’m waiting for my benefactor so he can share in the fun.”

“And who is your benefactor?”

Fighting the desire to untie him and flee from burdens of the past, Danni slammed her fists onto her hips. “He’s a half-breed elf, who likes to fuck my ass during a threesome.”

Omar’s gaze sped down the part in her robe and narrowed in on the knife in her hand. “Then why call him your benefactor?”

“He bought and paid for me a long time ago.” She slashed the blade through the air and walked back into her circle. The four elements on the floor calmed the fury burning through her. Lei lost his ability to rule her anymore. She led her life, and when he visited, she paid him for the cabin.

“Is he the one who purchased you from the dwarves and giants?” The bed groaned again. “Your sisters told us you were captured by a band of

renegades. They were bent on punishing Ardenia for helping the humans back in the war. But your sisters know the truth now. Melvin restored their memories.”

“Then they’re lucky. I learned of my sin years ago and have suffered with the guilt ever since.” Closing her eyes, she lowered her head and let her mind drift. “I only planned to step through the gate and into the other world for a moment. I never...”

“But you were caught under a forget blanket, and all thoughts of your life in Ardenia retreated from your mind. You didn’t know to run.” The deep bass tone of his voice played like a soothing solace against her senses.

“Yes, all ties disappeared.” The reminder of that cursed day attacked her strength, and she swayed on her feet. Digging deep inside herself, she fought to block out her doubts along with his reply.

A low chant whispered from her lips,

“Past you come, past you’ll be, I’ll see the future, open your mind, and reveal your dreams. Now I’ll see the truth.”

Chapter Four

Omar stared at Danella as energy sizzled around her in an elaborate display of light. Her eyes glowed, and she drew him into a swirling vortex of fire. Flames licked at his thoughts. "Danella?"

He blinked and the rural cabin disappeared. Instead, he was by the door of the queen's chamber. Oxford, the queen's personal guard, stood on the other side. The Queen, Melvin, and Jack Avery occupied the elegant chairs in front of the fireplace.

The old memory of Jack's return to Ardenia tickled his senses, and he adjusted his stiff military stance. A light touch on his arm drew his focus back to Danella. She stood beside him. "There is nothing to fear."

"But why take me back to this moment in time?"

A smile flickered across her face. "I want information."

The voices in the room grew in volume, and the door to the queen's suite burst open. Danella's sister, Noelani, rushed in and to her husband's side. "Jack, what are you doing here? Are you all right?"

"I'm fine." Jack rose and slid his arms around her waist. The love visible between the two caused a dull ache in Omar's chest.

"We were just discussing your father." The queen's regal tone echoed through the room.

A shove on his shoulder pushed Omar out of the way. Rodman, the head of the people's council, stepped through the doorway in his normal highhanded manner. "And did he tell you he is the one who killed him?"

“What?” the queen choked out.

“He’s wearing the proof.” Rodman pointed to the pendant around Jack’s neck. “I gave that necklace to King Harris before he left for the human world for the last time. The only way he could have gotten it is if he killed him.”

“Enough.” Danella’s voice propelled the scene ahead.

Melvin, the queen’s wizard spoke. “Would you mind removing the necklace?”

Jack fingered the string and appeared nervous about the request. “I can’t seem to find...” He lowered his head and turned in his seat.

“Just as I suspected. The special properties of the metal bind the jewelry to its owner.” Melvin’s gnarly fingers touched the medallion, and his mystical scrutiny appeared to absorb the enchanted charm of the piece. “I can sense the magic in the metal. Only the person who connects the ends should disconnect them.”

“Witch’s curse. It’s worse than I expected.” Danella’s words jerked Omar back to the present, and the aged wood framing the cabin again greeted him.

“Is that what you wanted to know? That Jack still had on your father’s necklace.” Omar studied the woman before him, but this time she appeared like the girl from his dreams. Her hair back to its original color, the golden locks fell in waves to her shoulders. The purple robe gone, she stood naked with random items scattered at her feet. A musky scent teased lust into a flame that ignited his blood.

“I’m not the innocent maiden of our youth.” She turned her head, and the dark glow of her eyes lightened to their normal blue. “I’ve done things no princess should do.”

Omar caught a brief image of her stabbing a knife deep into a man’s gut. Just as quickly it

dissolved. "I have to say, I've done things I'm not proud of either. During the war, I killed my fair share of the enemy."

Her hollow laugh brushed across his face, indicating her place near him. "Yes, but did you then rob the man of his money and walk away?"

Omar blinked and again focused on her graceful form a few paces from the bed. "Nothing you've done will repulse me. You were thrust into a situation where you had to do whatever you could to survive. I understand and celebrate the fact that you are with me now."

"Really? Even though I've invaded your thoughts? Wouldn't you consider it a breach of ethics to take memories without permission?" She spread her arms wide and rocked back and forth.

"No." Cold terror bloomed in his chest. He sensed her withdrawal, her fear that he'd lambaste her for the terrible things she'd done. "You've shared my joy in making love to your body, and in time you will learn all there is to know about me. From you, I have no secrets. We made that promise a long time ago."

Another vision flashed. Only this time, he experienced the warm glow of the sun on his fur while the pad of his paws raced over the crisp grass of a spring meadow. Danella's words skipped through his head.

"Will you always love me?"

He blinked several times. A reoccurring dream displayed a young lioness a few steps ahead. A granite wall rose behind her, and the moon slid behind a veil of clouds. The familiar setting reminded him of the last place he'd seen her. "You know I will. A day can't pass without me thinking about you."

"But you agreed to travel into the human world and help the humans with their fight against the

dwarves and the giants.” The cat strolled away, her tail waving defiantly in the mounting wind.

A hunger grew in his loins. Her exotic scent excited him, and his dedication to his country wavered. “I’m only doing it to gain favor with your mother. We need her approval for us to get married.”

“Then why not ask her now?”

“Because she’ll say we’re too young.” Omar stood perfectly still while the sleek lioness doubled back and strutted closer. The light in her gaze reflected a hunger that matched his.

With each step she took, his focus narrowed until her eyes alone filled his vision.

“Why didn’t you make love to me that day?” Her words lanced through his body like a bolt of lightning. Blood gathered painfully in his cock. He yanked on the ties around his wrists, and the rope bit into his skin.

“I wanted to, but I knew if I ever touched you I’d never leave.” He closed his eyes and sent the scene to a new place, one they never dared venture in their youth. He’d used the erotic fantasy to keep her close over the years. “I made a promise to follow our government’s directive. But I’ve...”

He dipped his lion head and ran his tongue across the smooth skin of her belly. Her unique flavor rode over his taste buds.

She yowled. “If your tongue ever touched me there, I would beg you to make love to me.”

He worked his way behind her rear legs. Her long tail lay along her back, her body eager for his. Energy flooded his body.

She wiggled on her haunches. “Oh, but I’ve ached to have you deep inside me.”

Unable to stop the fantasy, he whispered, “Not nearly as much as I’ve yearned to fuck you in every form possible.”

“Oh, yes.” A tight squeeze rode along his hard

length.

A sigh heightened his awareness, and the pressure in his groin grew. “Danella, please, let me make love to you for real.”

“Then open your eyes.”

He wrapped his hands around the rope binding his wrists and lifted his head. The wet petals of her cunt met his gaze. Crouched above him and facing the opposite direction, her seductive scent burned through his brain. She wiggled her ass and sucked his cock deep into her mouth.

His endurance at its limits, he pumped his hips upward and strained for the moist flower. Unable to touch her, he treated her inflamed flesh to heated puffs of air.

She nestled closer, and he lapped at her delicate folds. Sensual flavors rained over his tongue. His heart thundered in his chest, ready to explode. Yet he weathered the erotic storm until liquid shot from his cock in a tidal wave of bliss. The link between them deepened, and he absorbed the unique experience of her life mixing with his.

The clouds cleared and the once innocent girl who’d captured his heart disappeared. In her place stood a woman who awoke his passion and thrilled him with sexual encounters he’d only dreamed about. He drifted deeper into her mind and enjoyed each new memory he uncovered.

“Sleep, Omar. I’ll wake you when my benefactor arrives. Then you can learn all about the witch you’re involved with.”

Wanting to deny her statement, Omar fought the seductive lure of sleep.

“You don’t understand, I like...” The words slipped from his mind, and the peaceful scenery of Ardenia filled the gaps.

His muscles relaxed, and Danella slipped away from him.

After storing her sacred items, Danni changed into a short red robe, added a few more logs to the fire, and strolled to her cupboard. Lei, always hungry upon arriving, would expect something to eat.

She set a loaf of bread on the table next to the water pitcher then retrieved a brick of cheese from the cooling box. Her supplies were limited due to the small amount of time she'd spent at the cabin lately.

Done with the chore, she sat on the wooden bench and reviewed what she'd learned. Rodman, in his attempt to kill his nephew, Jack, and her sister, had arranged for their demise before they returned to Ardenia.

Elmer, one of Rodman's thugs, relayed the details of the fight between Jack and Elmer's friend. Thankfully, she'd had the foresight to protect Jack with the amulet or he would have died in the skirmish and her sister would've never made it home.

But now, back in Ardenia, they had to deal with Rodman directly, and the man wouldn't relent. He'd even admitted giving the necklace to her father. After finding the piece, she'd not been able to determine the exact spell attached it. But the chain still held a strong essence of her father.

But why did Rodman give it to him? Did he hope to protect her father or somehow cause his death?

Was his plan to someday become ruler?

As the second most powerful person in Ardenia, he led the people's council and drafted new laws. But her mother had the final decision on all rulings. Why not just kill her?

Or had he manipulated her into doing his will over the years?

As her sisters returned home, they were allowed a say. Did he resent their interference? Is that why

he was plotting to kill them?

A loud banging sounded against the oak threshold. "Open the fucking door, witch. I want in."

A deep groan came from the bed. Danni pushed to her feet just as the door flew open. "Lei, if you'd given me a second, I would've let you in."

"Nay, I figured you'd be casting a spell or cursing some scoundrel." The roguish man slammed the door and dumped his load on the floor. He shrugged off his thick fur coat, revealing his long, lean frame and rippling muscles beneath tight clothing. "Come here and give me a kiss. I haven't touched a woman in days, and I'm horny as hell."

"Yes, and I've heard you like it even better when an extra partner join in on the fun."

Danni turned to Omar lying naked on the bed. He glared at Lei's tight buckskin pants stretched to the limit of their elasticity by his thick cock.

Lifting his hands, Omar indicated the bindings around his wrists. "Maybe you can convince Danella to untie me and we can all enjoy ourselves."

Lei's hand gripped her waist and pulled her into his hard chest. Black velvet eyes scanned her face and a wicked grin curled his lips upwards. "You are such a good bitch. Did you secure this man for my enjoyment or have you been having some fun without me?"

"What do you think?" She shifted, and the silky tie on her robe slipped loose. Lei tossed his raven hair from his eyes and shoved the material out of the way to ogle her breasts.

Determined to show Omar her lustful nature, she slid her hand down the front of Lei's pants and cupped his cock. "Have you ever known me not to take advantage of opportunity when it arose?"

Lei's deep throat groan echoed through the room. "Holy Lucifer, witch, how I love fucking you."

Chapter Five

The thick cock under Lei's pants stirred Danni's lust but not her heart. She'd pleased the man many times and knew he couldn't come close to touching the deep hunger in her soul.

Lei's heated breath caressed her cheek as he leaned closer and rubbed his prickly beard along her jaw. The rough pads of his fingers brushed her nipples, and he squeezed her breasts. "This man sounds like he'd enjoy a few rounds with us?"

Uncertain what Omar would do, she shrugged and the robe slipped down her arms. He'd changed over the years, too, but she couldn't believe he'd want a long-term relationship with a woman who fucked two men at once. "Or maybe he's hoping I'll untie him so he can escape."

Lei shook his head. "A man with his cock that hard wouldn't run far unless it's to a woman." He ran his hands along her waist and stopped at her hipbone. "It'd be an amazing sight to watch you ride him or suck on his rod while I'm pumping into you."

She loosened the string holding his pants together. "Should we ask what he thinks about the idea or just proceed with the adventure without his approval?"

Lei released her and turned to Omar. "We can play this two ways. One, we can keep you tied and I'll have the witch here fulfill her desire where she may. Or...we can untie you and you can join in the fun. The choice is yours."

The heated glare in Omar's eyes held her immobile. She waited for the repulsion. Instead, the

fire burned hotter, and his gaze fell to the apex of her legs. "Bondage is a fun game, but I'd prefer to give as good as I receive."

Lei's laugh echoed off the rafters. "A smart man. This bitch here is not easily satisfied. I've seen her with three men at one time, and she had them screaming for relief after only a few minutes."

Omar's eyes narrowed, his negative assessment of Lei obvious. "And how much money did you make on the event?"

A grin broke over Lei's weathered face as he sat on the wooden bench to remove his boots and then stood to shove down his pants. "A nice sum, and I gather you've already paid for her services?"

"Yes, I've given her all that I have." Omar nodded and beckoned her forward. "Now, if you don't mind, I'd like blood in my hands again."

After checking with Lei, Danni walked to the bed. Omar's words rang in her ears. Could he really accept her sexual past or her need to fulfill her deviant cravings?

His heated gaze rested on her breasts as she leaned closer to untie his hands. A hushed whisper caressed her ears. "Your benefactor better enjoy this, because after today, he'll never touch you again."

She raised an eyebrow. "Really? And what if I enjoy multiple partners?"

With a free hand, he captured her breast and drew her forward. "Then I'll decide who I want to add to the mix."

Shocked but excited by his willingness to comply with her needs, she groaned with pleasure when he sucked her breast into his mouth. Her hands faltered, and she relished the exquisite thrill of his tongue stroking her aching nipple.

"I can see you like his touch, witch." Lei's hands landed on her hips and slid to her thighs to widen the space between her legs. Complying with his

silent demand, she leaned forward and placed her hands on the bed beside Omar's head. He sucked her breast deep into his mouth, awakening a salacious yearning in her blood.

Lei's impatient hands ventured along the seam of her ass, and he toyed with the puckered bud of her anus. His warm breath caressed her pussy.

The moist heat of Omar's mouth freed her. Cold air brushed the taut peak. He burrowed his chin between her breasts before capturing the other nipple between his teeth. She moaned and widened her stance.

A thick finger jetted into her anus, and Lei's moist tongue stroked the seam of her cunt. Fire quivered along her inner thigh and her knees wobbled. She avoided crumbling to the floor by rocking onto her toes and riding along the appendage in her ass.

"You taste sweeter than any woman I've ever fucked." Lei grunted, then lapped enthusiastically as he pumped his finger deeper.

Muscles twitched and jerked at the stimulating abuse. Omar's face appeared in her line of vision, and she read the carnivorous greed in his endless blue gaze. His hands circled her face and he covered her lips, his tongue jabbing wildly into her mouth. Each thrust danced with the erotic sweep of Lei's tongue and finger. Ecstasy pounded through her veins, tempting her higher and higher.

Tearing her mouth away from Omar's, she gulped in air between each word. "I'm...coming."

Lei increased his pace while Omar pinched her nipples, and blissful delirium claimed her. She hurled headlong into a mind-blowing orgasm, raw tantalizing sensations ricocheting through every cell.

She collapsed onto Omar's chest, and he gathered her close. His hands and mind caressed her with soothing strokes.

“Damn,” Lei groaned and tugged on the bed sheet. Danni envisioned him pumping his cock and shooting his release into the smooth cotton. After a moment, he moved away and stood behind her. “You’re hot today. I don’t remember you ever coming so easily.”

Unwilling to admit how much Omar meant to her, she forced her legs to support her weight and struggled off the bed. “That’s because it’s been a long spell since I’ve enjoyed two men at the same time.” She walked to Lei and caressed the curly hairs on his chest and down to his round stomach. “Have I increased your appetite for food or sex?”

A laugh burst from his mouth, and he grabbed her around the waist. “Oh, witch, you know me too well. The rumble in my belly is demanding food, but...” Lei peered around her to stare at Omar. “I still plan to see that man’s cock in your pussy.”

She lowered her hands to his shaft and teased the wet tip with her fingernail.

The bed squeaked behind her just as Omar’s warmth greeted her back and he tugged her away from Lei. “I long to make you scream, but first...” He held out the rope she’d used on him.

“What are you planning to do with this?” Lei grabbed the cord and gathered the length into his hands.

“Well, I did mention I enjoyed a little bondage.” Omar’s hands massaged her belly, and his deep voice caressed her senses. “I thought it might whet our appetite for some more fun.”

Shivers of excitement raced along her spine, and she shimmied against his thick erection. He moaned and tugged her closer.

A smile bloomed on Lei’s mouth, and he captured her hand. “It’s been years since I’ve had a rope on you. Not since I dropped you off with Maris.” He wrapped the rope over her wrist and tied a knot.

“That witch taught you well how to please a man.”

“She taught me many things.” Danni recalled the gentle kindness of her mentor. “I could also whip up one of those herb cocktails you like so well.”

Lei released her other hand, leaving her free. “An excellent idea.”

He dropped the rope and strolled to the bench by the table. “After spilling my seed, I could use something to revive Mr. Pleasure.” He cupped his hands around his cock and sat on the end of the bench.

Danni shifted to follow, but Omar’s grip around her tightened. His lips ventured along her collarbone, and his fingers brushed through the hair covering her mound. “Add something to help him sleep.”

The comment cut through her over-stimulated senses, and she moaned at the path his fingers charted between her legs. “I should really fix Lei’s drink.”

“Watching him play with your pussy has rejuvenated my desire.” Lei spread his legs wider and reached for the bread on the table. “But first, I need some food in my belly.”

Danni stepped forward, and Omar released her. She let the rope trail along the floor on her way to the cupboard. She calculated exactly what she’d need to achieve her dual objectives—exciting Lei’s cock then helping him sleep. With him out of the way, she could talk to Omar and convince him to return to Ardenia and warn her family about Rodman.

“So, Lei, how much would you charge me for exclusive rights to Danella?” Omar studied Lei. Half giant, with elfin good-looks, the man appeared to be a mix-breed of a number of races.

Omar glanced at Danella. Irritation radiated

from her while she mixed a special herbal concoction. Did she care about this man?

With his pretty-boy face, Lei probably had a sex partner in every town. He didn't need Danella.

Lei tore off a chunk of bread and tossed it at Omar. "Can't rightly say. I've owned the bitch for over ten years." He drew his knife from his pocket and grabbed the brick of cheese. "She's taken care of herself for most of that, lived with another witch for a time, then struck out on her own after Maris died. We've reached a compatible arrangement. Haven't we, witch?"

Danni carried several items to the table and set them down, then gathered the rope hanging from her wrist into a pile and placed it on the table. "Yes." Angry blue eyes met his. "I give a portion of my earnings to Lei when he visits." She added a white powder to her potion. "And in return, he provides me with this cabin."

Lei smiled and slapped her on the ass. "And we both enjoy some rowdy fun every time we get together."

Omar nodded and sat on the bench opposite Lei. "Then you wouldn't relinquish your rights to her for any price?"

"Now, I can't say that. If the right deal came along, I might negotiate." Lei cut off a large hunk of cheese and slid it across the table, then sliced another piece. "The woman I would mate with is part of a dwarf community, which is always in need of money. I'd like to stay with her more, but with me being part human, I can't stay long before the other occupants cause a fuss."

"Then you're looking for a way to buy your way in?" Omar refused to help a band of dwarves. Not after the way they slaughtered people back during the war.

"No, I want some place new where we can farm

and live our life in peace. Hunting wild boars and tigers is a young man's job." Lei shook his head and took a bite of bread.

If Omar convinced Danella to return to Ardenia, then Lei wouldn't be a problem. But if she refused, he'd have to find a way to break her connection to the man. His absence from her life would go a long way in helping her forget how she'd inadvertently led her family into danger.

Lei swallowed. "Do you got anything like that to offer?"

Recalling a rundown cabin where he'd camped for a season, Omar shrugged. Havyn, the husband of Danella's youngest sister, might allow a couple to live in the secluded place if it would free his wife's sibling. "I might arrange a deal, but I'll need to confer with a friend first."

"What friend?" Danella demanded.

He read her concern in the thin lines marring her forehead. "Havyn Westmore. He has a place not far from here and might be willing to work out a deal."

"And who said I want freedom?" She dumped the herbs she'd crushed into a mug and poured water over the mixture.

Omar grinned and lifted a hunk of bread. "No one said you'd go free. You'd belong to me."

Chapter Six

Irked by Omar's high-handed manner, Danni placed the mug of mixed herbs in front of Lei. "And what if I don't agree?"

"Oh, now, witch," Lei laid his hand on her waist and drew her closer. "You're just a little cranky because you're," he nuzzled his mouth against her breast, "pussy is still hungry for sex."

"Wrong." She grabbed his head and held him at a distance. "I'm not a piece of property to be bought and sold."

A warm burst of his laughter rushed over her chest, and he gripped her waist. "Don't tell me you're riled, or I might be tempted to give you a spanking." His dark eyes gleamed at the idea. "It may be years since I've lifted my hand to you, but I always enjoyed slapping your ass and seeing it turn red." He glided his hands to her ass and squeezed.

A tug on her hand drew her attention to the rope around her wrist, and Omar as he pulled it. "I believe all this talk has interrupted your meal, Lei. Why don't I appease your witch's needs while you feed your hunger?"

He tugged harder, and her arm stretched to its limit. She leaned farther over the table.

Lei released his grip and directed her to Omar. "Good idea."

Omar used the rope to draw her closer. His lusty gaze slid along her naked form as she stepped next to him and laid her hand on his shoulders.

His strong warrior body might stir her lust, but she wouldn't let him control her entire life. "So how

exactly do you plan on pleasing me?"

A wicked grin bloomed on Omar's face. The inside of his knees caressed her legs, and he held her in place. "Why don't we start with me giving you some attention?"

His hands eased along the outside of her thighs and up to her ribs then cupped her breasts. "You liked it earlier when I sucked on your breasts."

"No, that won't come anywhere near satisfying her. She prefers having a man's mouth on her pussy." Lei picked up his cup and toasted her. "Tell him, witch. Tell him how you're happiest when you have a tongue licking your cunt, a cock in your mouth, and another rod in your ass."

The rough description reminded her how different she was now than when she'd known Omar. Back then she'd barely let him kiss her without blushing with shame. She turned to Lei. "How soon are you joining us?"

He tossed back the mug and drank deeply.

Omar's mouth claimed her breast, and he sucked her nipple deep then released it to flick his tongue against the tip. Energy ignited her core, and she tried to widen her stance but he kept her caged between his legs.

"I'll join the fun before you scream with your first orgasm." Lei tossed a piece of bread into his mouth.

Omar guided his mouth lower and traced his tongue around her navel. Anticipating his ultimate target, Danni wiggled her hips to free the gathering moisture.

He caressed her ass, and in response to the gentle squeeze of his fingers, her intimate muscles engaged and slick cream built a dam of desire against her clit. She groaned and rose onto her toes to facilitate his downward movement. He drew back and blew a stream of warm air onto the crisp hair

between her legs.

She moaned, eager for his wet tongue on her pussy. "Please let me move."

"You have her begging already." Lei stood.

Omar squeezed her ass again, and his tongue licked a teasing trail back to her breasts.

"Omar..."

"Man, she's hot." Lei's dark gaze burned with a ravenous heat, and she glanced at his expanding cock. The herbs were working their spell.

She lifted her gaze to Lei's. "Come, let me suck on your cock since Omar only wants to play?"

Omar's tongue paused on her nipple. "Oh, no, it's time for you to ride."

He released his hold on her legs, and Danni eased them apart. Moisture dripped down her thighs. His hand captured her knee and lifted one leg over his, then repeated the same with her other leg. Straddling him, she moved deeper into his embrace and positioned herself over his extended length.

The large cock-head spread her wider as he filled her. Pleasure shot through her cunt. Omar banded his arms around her and captured her mouth. The deep thrust of both his tongue and cock sent her senses into a frenzy. She placed her feet wider apart and lifted her hips to glide along his thick rod.

He groaned and leaned back on the bench. "So, Lei, is this what you wanted to see?"

Danni absorbed his words and wondered if he'd appreciate having another man involved in the sexual act as much as she did. Her mind formed a connection with his, and the thrill in his blood rushed through hers.

He rocked his hips, and she fell forward. The hard wall of his chest cushioned her breasts. A hard slap landed on her rear. Surprised more than hurt,

she turned.

Lei stood behind her. He struck her again. "Come on, witch, let's have some fun."

Tingles shimmied along her skin, and a storm of energy built in her pussy. Omar lifted her off his chest and braced her hands on his chest. She sank into the blue depth of his eyes, and their unified lust sang through her senses.

No power in the universe could contain her desire. His cock nudged her clit on her slow descent, then she worked her way up and down in a smooth rhythm.

Lei rubbed his fingers between the seam in her ass. "Oh, but you set my cock on fire."

Not a patient lover, he'd demand relief soon. The rough texture of his calloused thumb hit the delicate bud of her anus and dipped inside. She jerked away from the pressure to plunge harder onto Omar's cock.

Omar thrust his hips upward. "Yes. Fuck her ass."

The man behind her didn't require any encouragement as the round head of his cock pushed against her opening.

Danni paused and allowed her muscles to stretch around his rod as he slowly filled her. Impossibly full, she groaned and closed her eyes to enjoy the exquisite sensation of two cocks deep inside her body, thrusting in tandem.

"Oh, fuck." Lei rocked once, twice, and then all too soon released his load.

The sensation drove Danni to her own climax. She screamed, sharing her body's sexual bliss with Omar through their mental connection and accepting the waves of ecstasy coursing through his. Her orgasm crested, and she rode the turbulent tide building in intensity. The crash propelled her to new heights, and she throbbed with glorious rapture.

Omar plowed his cock deeper, and delirium clouded her mind as the incredible feel of his rod playing in conjunction with Lei's prolonged the spasms of her release.

A wail bounced around in her head, but she couldn't determine its origin. Omar? Lei? Her?

The pace increased and drove her to a timeless place where only bliss existed.

"Yes!" Omar's fingers bit into the soft flesh of her breasts, and his labored breath brushed against her cheek.

She tightened her muscles and squeezed the cocks inside her harder. A blast of hot cum surged inside her, and her body convulsed with another jubilant explosion.

For several moments, no one moved. Each fighting for breath, the eerie swishing sound played through her senses while she struggled with the loving compassion present in Omar's thoughts.

I'll never let you go, floated through Danni's mind and she stiffened.

Lei backed away and stumbled across the room to the bed. "I need to lie down."

Sitting up, she glanced over her shoulder. Lei fell face-first onto the mattress. "He'll be out for a while."

Omar's fingers circled her navel. "And when he wakes, we'll be gone."

"And where exactly are we going?" Danni studied his face and read his lust in the twinkle in his eyes. His cock twitched inside her pussy.

To your sister's place here in the human world. Omar slid his hands around her waist and held her steady while he sat forward. "Since I refuse to return to Ardenia without you, we should probably warn your family about the potential danger they're in. Kesia and Havyn are planning a trip back to our homeland to show off their new baby. They can

deliver a message to your mother.”

“How can you read my thoughts?” Danni tried to move off his lap, but he held her in place.

He slid his hands along her sides and enclosed her in a gentle embrace. “With my cock still buried deep inside your pussy and our minds still linked from mind-blowing sex, I’m following your thoughts as if they were my own.” He paused and lowered his head to run kisses along her shoulder. “And I have to tell you, you’re not getting rid of me. I’ve waited a lifetime for you. I’m not losing you now.”

Danni opened her mind and absorbed his love. Joy sang in her heart, and she longed to bask in the thrill of being truly in love. But then pictures of the men she’d had sex with and those she’d killed flashed through her head. “And what about the more lustful side of my personality?”

“It has only ignited my desire to make you mine.” He nibbled on her ear. “I can’t wait to make love to you in every form possible and then add other partners to the mix.”

Images formed of animals mating—lions, wolves, rabbits, and eagles. Each cried with the joy of sexual release. The aromatic scent of their transformation filled her nasal passages, and passion flared again in her core.

“Just the thought of me making love to you has your pussy weeping with insatiable hunger.” He wedged his hand between their bodies and brushed his fingers through the soft hair covering her mound.

A groan escaped before she could stifle it. “Sex is not enough to hold two people together. We also need a common bond.”

“True, but we both hope to preserve the lineage of the royal family. While you plan to expose the culprit that threatens your family, I intend to increase their numbers.” His finger found her clit and applied pressure.

The implication of his words erupted through her head as longing rekindled her lust. “What? You can’t believe I’d bring a child into this crazy world.”

Chapter Seven

Omar woke as light brightened the horizon. After the long journey through the countryside, they stopped to rest for a while before traveling on to Havyn's castle. A movement caught Omar's attention, and he noticed Danella a few paces away in her sleek lioness form. She stepped from the shade of a rock and strolled to the lake's edge.

Throughout their trip, she'd remained quiet, lost in her own thoughts and unwilling to explain her reasons for not wanting children or returning to Ardenia.

Why?

At one point in their youth, she'd wanted the same things he did—a family and a life together where they'd never be alone again. Why couldn't she give him a chance?

Impatient with her reclusive attitude, he lifted his lion tail to brush away a pesky fly and asked her the question that had plagued him throughout the night. *Why do you yearn to spend the rest of your life alone?*

The sleek muscles in her hindquarters tensed, and her thick tail dipped between her legs. Desire twisted in his gut. He squelched his raw craving and shifted his paws under his body to lie in a squatting position.

She glanced at the horizon. *The sun should be rising soon. How do you want to contact Kesia and Havyn?*

I'll answer your question if you'll answer mine.

She glanced over her shoulder, but with him

still in the shade of the rock, he was sure she couldn't see him clearly. *I won't be alone. There'll always be a man who'll gladly pay for the pleasure of my company.*

But he won't stick around for more than a few days.

Her jaw dropped and her tongue hung from her mouth for an instant, then she turned completely toward him. *After everything that's happened, why do you still want me? You might enjoy some rowdy sex, but I'm not someone you'll enjoy having on your arm at an Ardenia cotillion.*

Right. You're a princess, and I'm a lowly guard. Are you sure it's not me you don't want to be seen with?

A flash of shock widened her eyes then her lids dropped. *You don't know what you're talking about. The people of Ardenia won't accept me as a ruler anymore. I've slept with a multitude of men and learned the ways of witchcraft from a traitor to the crown. Don't you remember who Maris was?*

Regret tainted her thoughts. In her animal form, he could distinguish her emotions and absorb the pain associated with her admission.

Yes, she was Jack's mother, and the woman who stole King Petros from the late Queen, your mother's sister. But your mother no longer blames Petros and Maris for Vanessa's death. She allowed Jack to marry Noelani and has accepted him into the family. She'd do the same thing for her own daughter. Omar judged the distance between them and waited for her to step closer. A few more paces, then he'd pounce.

Yes, but I ruined my sisters' lives. The only reason I agreed to visit Kesia is because you won't return to Ardenia without me. Even though you'll eventually—

She jerked her head to the left. *Did you hear*

that?

A rustling noise sounded near an outcrop of trees, and a large black wolf stepped into view.

Omar? Havyn's voice drew Omar to his feet.

Yes, we were just talking about how to approach your house without causing your staff concern. We have a mission for you and Kesia.

A low growl rumbled from Havyn, and his gaze sped quickly over Danella's lean lioness form, then he turned. *Fine, but let's get moving. Someone other than you two is prowling this area.*

The musty straw underfoot failed at the task of masking the savory scent of Omar's transformation. The smell seeped into Danni's blood and ignited her lust.

She diverted her desire by studying the dress Havyn delivered a few moments ago. The rich silk caressed her hand like Omar's cock. Her body heated, and need coursed through her veins. "Havyn didn't have to loan me such an expensive dress."

Omar, dressing in the stall next to her, peered over the partition. "Personally, I'd prefer if you wore nothing at all, but Havyn's servants expect us to act the same as everyone else. You probably know better than I, how much humans enjoy covering their bodies."

She glanced again at the blue silk and lifted the heavy dress above her head. Muffled words reached her ears, but she couldn't decipher their meaning. She tugged on the fabric and wrestled her arms into the sleeves, then pushed her face free. "What did you say?"

Omar stood in front of her, and she noticed the loose fit of his shirt and pants.

"That dress is probably Kesia's while these clothes must belong to Havyn." He stepped forward, and the extra length added to his feet by his

borrowed shoes slapped against the floor. His hands gripped her shoulders, and he drew her long hair from her dress. "As soon as we make it inside we can shed some of these clothes."

She caught the drawstrings at her waist and tightened the corset attached to the mid-section of the dress. "I don't mind clothes. But I don't usually wear expensive silk."

"What are you talking about? In Ardenia, the royal robes are created by magic weavers using silken threads." He brushed his hands through her hair then lifted it to his nose. "As a young man, I loved staring at your sexy body through the thin misty cloth."

Danni shook her head and stiffened her resolve to remain detached. She couldn't allow herself the luxury of falling in love with the man. "You couldn't see anything through that fabric. You just liked staring at me."

He leaned closer. "I still do," he whispered against her lips before his mouth covered hers. In a soft, gentle caress, he played with her bottom lip and then deepened the kiss.

Lust rushed through the center of her body, and she wrapped her arms around his waist. His rich scent increased her desire to strip off his clothes, and her hands gripped the material tucked into his pants.

"Danella!" Her name echoed off the roof of the barn.

She drew away from Omar and turned. In a blinding rush, her sister raced forward.

"Oh, I can't believe he really found you. We were so worried," Kesia exclaimed and her arms circled Danni's neck.

Unable to break free from the jubilant embrace, Danni gathered her sister closer and forgot for a moment the pain she'd caused her sibling.

"Kesia, honey, let me look at you." Danni drew back and stared at the beautiful woman. Rich brown hair stacked in an elegant knot accented her sister's heart-shaped face. Brown eyes twinkled with delight and a broad smile graced her lips. The little girl Danni remembered had disappeared, and in her place stood a confident lady. "I can't believe how much you've changed."

Kesia captured her arm and tugged her forward. "Well, it's been over ten years since you've seen me. I was bound to have changed."

Unable to absorb the difference between the child she'd known and the woman standing beside her, Danni grabbed her sister's hand. For years, she'd kept track of her sister's life and the heartaches she'd endured. "But you must hate me."

A shocked expression stole across Kesia's face. "Why? Because you convinced me to travel into the human world when we were younger?"

"Yes, I ruined your life." Danni back up and bumped into Omar. His hands landed on her waist, and she drew strength from his solid frame. "You should have grown up in Ardenia as a pampered princess, not in the human world where you were a slave to your owner's whims."

"But then I wouldn't have found Havyn." Kesia stepped closer and then slipped her arm around Danni's shoulder. Omar relinquished his hold and moved away. "I don't regret anything that's happened. It's made me a better person, and now I can truly appreciate what it means to be a member of the royal family of Ardenia."

"Come on, ladies, why don't we head into the castle." Omar opened the barn door. "I think we'll find it much more comfortable in there, and I'm dying for a bite to eat."

"Gosh, yes, where are my manners?" Kesia strolled forward, dragging Danni along in her wake.

"I'll have Sadie fix you something right away. Then by the time we've finished breakfast, Flurry will be wake and ready for his feeding."

Danni increased her pace and slid her arm around her sister's waist. "And how do you like being a mother?"

Holding the soft bundle in crook of her arm, Danni stared into her nephew's sweet cherub face. His big, brown eyes charmed, and she stroked her hand lightly over the fuzz on his head before handing the baby to the maid to put down for his nap. "I can't believe you have a baby, Kesia."

"I can't believe it either. Just a few weeks ago, Noelani arrived back in Ardenia and now you show up here. We finally have our family back together again." She wiggled closer to her husband on the sofa and laid her hand on his thigh. "How soon do you think we can leave for home?"

Havyn shrugged.

Danni frowned and glanced around the elegant sitting room of Havyn's castle. In a huge fireplace, full of wood, dry kindling crackled and popped. Expensive tapestry hung from the walls, and thick rugs graced the cold stone floor.

Omar paced the length of the room and stopped at the end of the couch where she sat. "Your sister isn't going back."

"What? Why not?" Kesia pushed to the edge of her seat. "But you have to. Mother is looking forward to seeing you. She's been blaming herself for our disappearance since she learned the reason for us leaving."

Doubts plagued Danni, and she shook her head. "But she's not at fault. I'm the one who convinced you and Noelani to step into the human world. I wanted to find Omar. If anyone is to blame, it's him."

"What? How can you say that?" Omar's shocked

tone rubbed against Danni's nerves. "The only reason I traveled outside our country was to fight in the war. I never dreamed you would follow me."

"But Havyn had just been banished from Ardenia because he crossed the line and let the human's learn of his ability to transform. I needed to warn you." Danni recalled the heart-wrenching pain she'd endured at the time. Her gut burned with regret for all that had happened. "You never should have fought in that stupid war anyway."

"But..." Omar stepped around the end of the couch.

"Now you can understand why mother is condemning herself." Kesia stood and strolled across the room. "She knows that because of her unjust verdict against Havyn, you decided to leave home and travel into the human world."

"But it wasn't her fault. I'm the one who didn't think before I acted." Danni blinked and tears fell. She wrapped her arms around her chest. "I'm the one who placed all our lives in danger and ruined our chances at happiness."

After taking a deep breath, she continued. "Mother wasn't to blame for our disappearance. I was." Danella dug her nails into her biceps. "Because of my mistake, you and Noelani have gone through hell." She pulled her gaze from her sister and stared at Omar. "I don't deserve to be forgiven. Everyone should despise me." She dropped her face into her hands.

The couch beside her dipped, and she swayed to the left. Strong arms circled her, and Omar's broad chest offered a place to rest as well as easing her fears and igniting her lust.

For a brief moment, she allowed herself to absorb his strength. Soothing warmth flowed through her veins. But pride wouldn't allow her to fall under his spell. She stiffened her resolve,

lowered her hands, and opened her eyes. She had to stand *firm*.

Her gaze met her sister's. "I'm not going back. I only came here to warn you about the danger surrounding our mother and Jack. I know Councilman Rodman has plans to kill one or both of them."

Chapter Eight

Omar grabbed Danella by the shoulders and stared into the depths of her eyes. What the hell was she thinking? “Why would Rodman plot to kill the queen?”

“He’s Jack’s uncle and head of the people’s council.” Havyn stepped beside Kesia.

“He has no reason for wanting either of them dead. Why jeopardize his position to carry out such a plan?”

Danella lifted her gaze and wiggled her shoulders. “You wouldn’t understand.”

Omar read the determination in her gaze and loosened his grip to slide his hands down her arms. “Then tell us what you know that we don’t?”

A brief smile lifted the corner of her lips, and she studied his face. For a moment, appreciation glowed in her eyes. Then she faced her sister. “Rodman isn’t all that he seems. He has villainous connections in the human world that have helped him gain power in our world. Maris told me he blackmailed her into creating the necklace he gave our father before he left to fight in the war.”

Omar recalled Rodman’s accusation against Jack for killing the king. Was Rodman really the one at fault? What type of spell had he placed on the king’s necklace?

“Maris Avery? Jack’s mother?” Kesia swayed on her feet. “What does she have to do with anything? Aunt Vanessa kicked her out of Ardenia a long time ago.”

Omar judged Danella’s reaction to her sister’s

questions.

“Along with King Petros.” Her hands fisted in her lap, she sank farther back into the sofa. “But what you’ve forgotten is Rodman was King Petros’ brother.”

“So?” Her sister’s curt reply intensified Danella’s unease and her knuckles turned white.

Hating that she was suffering, Omar covered her knotted grip. “Why is that important?”

Danella rolled her palm over and gripped his hand. “Because Rodman wanted his brother out of the way and encouraged him to become involved with Maris.”

“But our aunt ended up killing herself because of her husband’s infidelity,” Kesia argued. “Did Rodman hope Aunt Vanessa would fall in love with him?”

“Maris didn’t know, but she said Rodman was the one who arranged for Ardenia to enter the war. He promised support and then convinced Mother to send in troops.” Danella’s hand tightened around Omar’s.

The ramifications of Rodman’s influence in the politics of Ardenia filtered through his head. Rodman acquired the position as head of the people’s council right before Queen Vanessa died. How had he gained his appointment?

“But why would Rodman kill Jack or your mother now?” Havyn guided Kesia back to the other sofa and stood behind her, as if on guard. The warrior would not only protect his wife, but her family as well. Omar appreciated the big man’s help.

Danella lowered her chin. “It’s my fault. I placed the necklace Rodman commissioned Maris to make around Jack’s neck to protect him and Noelani from harm. He knows I’m aware of his deceit and is trying to cover his tracks. The only way he can reclaim the necklace is by killing Jack.”

"Then why kill Mom?" Kesia captured her husband's hand and drew him down onto the couch. Omar marveled at the love displayed between the other couple. Would Danella ever turn to him in the same way?

"Because he wants power." Danella worked her hand free of his and pushed to the edge of the couch. "I don't have any hard evidence. But I believe he feels he can push the council into taking control if anything should happen to Mother. Then, as the new leader of Ardenia, he'll make us prove we're worth of the title of queen."

"But that's not how the laws are set up. We each have a voice in the policies of our country now. Mom and the majority vote from the council have the final say." Kesia shook her head. "I don't think he can convince the council to overrule centuries of tradition."

Omar had to agree that the council wouldn't bend the rules for Rodman. Most didn't even like the man.

"Yes, but we don't know for sure. After all, none of us have lived in Ardenia for years." Danella stood and crossed the room to her sister. "That's why you need to return home, so you can warn Mother about what could happen. She has to protect herself from that man."

"But why can't you go with us?" Kesia grabbed her sister's hand. "Mom is aware of your power as a witch, and she'll trust your predictions."

"Yes, but my presence will alert Rodman. And he might act before we can put measures into place to safeguard Mother and Jack."

The two sisters hugged, and Omar met Havyn's dark glare. The frown on the large man's face reflected his own doubts about the situation. Rodman's plan for a coup couldn't work.

Or could it? The man did hold a powerful

position in Ardenia.

Omar tightened his hands into fists.

To succeed, the man would need to make it past every member of the royal family, and that wouldn't be an easy feat.

A teasing caress ran the length of Danella's shoulder.

She wiggled and settled into a more comfortable position against the soft downy mattress. The bed dipped as someone joined her, but she fought the soothing attempts to wake her.

Scenes of her beloved homeland filled her dreams. A light summer's breeze brushed her face. The rich scent of Ardenia enthralled her senses.

"Danella, it's time to wake." The husky voice sent sparks of awareness along her nerve endings, but she didn't want to open her eyes. He's not really there. It's just another erotic dream.

The comforting weight on her chest slid downward, and a warm wet tongue circled her right nipple. She groaned. "Go away. I'm too tired to move."

In answer to her statement, the sucking action over her breast increased. Naughty fingers pinched and plucked at the end of her other nipple, and desire tingled down the center of her body.

She moaned at the alluring torture and worked her legs farther apart. A thick thigh fell into the opened space, and Danella marveled at the hard cock digging into her leg.

A fantasy?

The thought drew her away from sleep, and she cracked her eyelids open to stare into the unfamiliar room. She blinked and her fingers curled into blonde silk.

Blue eyes met her gaze, and she judged the passage of time by the falling light in the room.

“How long have I been asleep?”

“Too long. I’ve been up here several times, and seeing you stretched out naked on this bed finally got the better of me.” He ducked his head again and sent a wet tongue around the aching peak, then sucked the tip greedily into his mouth.

A ravenous hunger raced through her blood, and she rocked her hips to drag the wet lips of her pussy against the crisp hairs sprinkled across his muscular thigh. Her hands fell from his head and ventured down his back. “Omar, please, I need...”

He lifted his head, and the loving glint in his eyes jolted her heart into a fast sprint. How had she lived without his touch?

She shoved at his shoulders. She couldn’t love this man. Yet her heart hammered with the excitement of having him again in her arms.

Sex and love aren’t the same thing.

The weight on top of her eased, and he shifted his body at a right angle to hers on the bed. He glanced at his cock and gathered the engorged staff in his hand. “Feel free to amuse yourself while I’m licking your cunt and fingerfucking your ass.”

“No wait...” She fought the desire his word invoked and tried to come to terms with the emotions racing through her head. If he learned the truth about her feelings, he’d never let her go. He’d demand she return to Ardenia.

He turned his head and placed it on her thigh before directing her other leg over his shoulders. The awkward position forced her onto her side, and then onto her knees. She rose onto her hands and straddled his torso. His cock danced against her mouth.

“Omar.” Tears welling in her eyes, she fought the over-powering need to cry. Loving him had gotten her into trouble all those years ago, and she couldn’t afford to take the same risk again.

“Oh, yes.” He groaned and cupped both hands around her ass then lapped at her intimate flesh. One stroke, two, then he prodded her clit with the tip of his tongue.

Energy spiraled through her, and she moaned at his seductive touch. She gazed at the large purple bulb of his cock.

How much more time did they have together? A few hours? A day? Two at the most?

Unwilling to face the inevitability of losing him, she wrapped her hands around his thick cock and licked the tip. The taste of him reminded her of home, family, and the buried dreams of being his soul mate.

He dug his fingers into her flesh then slid them along the seam in her ass.

A tentative link nudged her thoughts into laving his eager cock. She stared at the mushroom head and worked her hands slowly along the length, fighting the desire to rush.

One taste, a lick. Come on, Danella. You know you want to.

Unable to stop his gentle probing, she circled the ridge at the base of the head with her tongue and drank in the rich flavor of his skin.

A soft bite closed over her sensitive bud, and he sucked hard on her clit. A scream erupted from her throat, and a finger slid deep into her cunt then out to dip inside her anus.

She gulped down a quick breath and covered his cock with her mouth. If he could play, so could she.

A competition started between them. He fluttered his tongue along her pussy while she bobbed up and down on his cock. Each caress he initiated, she matched with one of her own until pleasure spiraled out of control.

His tongue lapped at her convulsing muscles, heightening the delirium already quaking through

her mind. She sucked in a breath around his cock and held her mouth above the end while she labored for air.

"Please." He plunged his hips upward, and the smooth tip of his cock hit the back of her throat.

Her mouth closed around him, and she squeezed her lips into the hard length. She captured the full sacs between his legs and rolled them against the palm of her hand.

"Danella!"

Hot liquid shot into her mouth. She swallowed and swirled her tongue around the base of his cock to capture any of the juices that might have escaped. After the last drop was gone, she released him slowly, forcing herself to acknowledge the pain she'd endure when he left. She toyed with different options of how to save him from the same misery.

A forget spell.

"Danella," Omar groaned from between her legs.

She turned and stared at him across the broad expanse of his chest. The sated smile on his face revealed the satisfaction he'd gained from making love. A slight ache twisted in her chest and she forced out a playful question. "Are you done? Or can I play some more?"

He tugged her around so her body aligned with his. "I'll let you play with me for a lifetime. But are you willing to let me do the same?"

Without waiting for her answer, Omar's lips danced over hers and demanded entrance to her mouth. The salty taste of his cum tightened his taste buds, and he figured she could detect the arousing flavor of her cum on his tongue, too.

He wrapped his arms around her waist and pulled her onto his chest. She might believe they didn't have a future together, but he'd show her the truth.

The crown of his cock knocked at her entrance.

He thrust forward. The head bolted inside, and velvety warmth surrounded the length as intimate muscles squeezed him tight.

He drove deep then eased back to thrust again.

Her mouth broke from his. "Harder."

Following her direction, he rocked back and forward in an ever-increasing pace that accelerated her breathing and had her gasping with need. "Oh, fuck, I'm so close."

He sped to the edge and plunged into the mind-blowing euphoria of finding his perfect mate. Her mind skirted around with the idea of commitment, and a dance of wills drove the insatiable heat between them higher. Fire blazed through his body and mind.

Consumed in the inferno with him, Danella's moans grew louder until the ravaging howls of rapture consumed them both and their bodies convulsed with the same pulsating rhythm of completion.

Totally spent, she collapsed against his chest.

The link between them surged.

Omar groaned and felt the thick wall around her heart crumble. A shot of extreme pleasure bordering on torture hit his senses, and he trembled. Loving emotions flooded his mind, and he realized she finally understood the depth of his devotion. Every cell sang with joy, and peace settled over the years of unrest in his soul.

He drew her deeper into his arms and dropped a kiss on her damp forehead. "I promise we'll never be separated again."

Waving his final farewell to Havyn and Kesia, Omar turned back to the castle and glanced at Danella. All morning she had remained silent, never voicing in words what her heart had promised him last night. Was that normal or had she changed her

mind about taking him as her permanent mate? Or had she concocted some other scheme?

"So what do you have planned for the rest of the afternoon?" He walked a few steps forward, and then paused when she didn't move.

"I..." She hedged and scanned the area. "I feel like a caged animal. I know Kesia will deliver my message, but everything is spiraling out of my control."

Omar gathered her against his chest. She wiggled and squirmed, unwilling to meet his gaze or settle comfortably into his arms. "You're not use to relying on others. It's been years since you've allowed anyone close, and now, you're forced to trust them with something you'd prefer to handle yourself."

"But she's my sister."

"And you've always felt the responsibility of taking care of her. I bet you've been spying on her since the day Maris refreshed your memory." He slid his hands down her back and drew her closer. "Did you also arrange for her to meet Havyn?"

She turned away and stared out at the open meadow that led to the lake they'd rested beside the day before. "I just want to escape, soar through the heavens and allow my mind a chance to clear."

He turned and slipped his arm around her waist. "Then I guess we should head for the barn."

"What? Why?" She balked and didn't step forward.

"Because we'll need to stash our clothes somewhere. We can retrieve them after we return." He pressed his hand in the small of her back and nudged her forward. "You are planning to stay here until Havyn and Kesia come back. Aren't you?"

"Yes, but how will we make our way out of the barn once we transform?"

Omar pointed to the open hayloft door. "If we're

flying, that won't be a problem."

She smiled, the first one he'd seen today, and bolted ahead. "I'll race you."

The gentle sway of her hips captured his attention, and he didn't budge. She glanced back and stuck out her tongue. "Giving me a head start?"

Fire raced through his blood, and a different alternative to flying flashed through his head. He took after her, but the expanding girth of his cock inhibited his quick stride. When she reached the barn door, he grabbed her by the waist and spun her around. Her face was flushed. The bright red color revealed her excitement, and he gazed at her moist lips. "Why don't we try making love in a different form?"

She giggled and slid her hands around his neck. "That's a wonderful idea. Why don't we shift into hawks and fly to a more secluded area where we won't be disturbed? Then we can transform into any form you want."

He imprisoned her against the door and captured her lips. One touch and she allowed him in, her tongue dancing with his in the hot cavity of her mouth. Once past her defenses, he plunged deeper and claimed her as his.

Need inflamed his blood, and his cock throbbed with arousal. The material between them restricted his ability to thrust deep into her willing pussy. He shuffled backward, and she followed him enough so he could wedge the barn door open.

Her lips broke from his. "What are you doing?"

"I'm trying to get you inside the barn so I can strip off your clothes." He tugged the string at her waist free.

She grinned, then turned and stepped inside the barn. He followed and secured the door. A familiar sound sang through his senses. He turned as her dress fell. Her voluptuous body shrank. Snaps and

pops broke the silence as she transformed.

After a moment, a hawk stood on the ground by his feet. A screech echoed off the rafters and she spread her wings. Her flight path led her to the highest crossbeam.

He ripped off his shirt. "You'll pay for this. My cock is so hard I'll be lucky if I can concentrate enough to transform." His shirt landed on her dress, and he unbuckled his pants. "But you've helped me decide exactly what form I want us in when we make love." He dropped his pants and kicked off the oversized shoes. "Have you ever experienced the barbed cock of a tiger?"

A low coo answered his question, He was focused on transforming, but the answer did register.

The desire to change into a tiger tickled his thoughts, but he pushed them aside. Instead, he concentrated on flying—the euphoric rush of wind riding against his feathers, the ability to see the smallest flutter on the ground, and the fun of soaring into the heavens with Danella.

I'm off, blasted through his head and she flew through the hayloft door.

Not without me. He flapped his wings and darted after her.

Upon clearing the barn, he searched the heavens and found her heading toward the mountain range they'd travel through the day before. Was she heading for her cabin? Or did she know of another place to have some fun. He climbed higher and rode the air currents to accelerate his speed.

The scenery below changed. Rolling green hills gave way to a rocky terrain with deep cracks marking the ground like wrinkles on an old man's face. A movement near a sheer cliff ruffled his hawk senses. A group of men stood on the edge.

He lowered his right wing and circled around to

get a better view. *What are those men doing?*

Danella altered her flight path and followed his lead. *Why does it matter?*

Havyn said he'd seen strangers prowling his property. Maybe this is the group. Three men stood on a cliff with their bows drawn. One held a faint resemblance to Councilman Rodman's assistant, Tate.

An arrow whistled through the air toward him. Flapping his wings and rising as quickly as possible, he raced for the heavens.

Omar!

He swiveled his head toward the sound.

Like a leaf falling, Danella's body wavered and teetered in a wild unpredictable pattern. Fear tightened his chest as he altered his course and sped after her. A black hole opened up below her, and she disappeared into the deep cavern.

Chapter Nine

Hidden in the crevice of a boulder, Omar glared down at the men camped on the cliff overlooking the cavern where Danella fell, where they'd fired at him as he continued to circle the area in search of her.

For hours he'd searched, flying in and out of the cavern, calling her name. With no response and with darkness falling, he had taken to the ground to continue his search. But to no avail.

Grief tightened his chest, and he covered his face with his hands. How could the fates be so cruel?

He'd finally found Danella only to have her torn from his grasp. His heart ached with the thought of never seeing her again, and anger burned in his gut.

Those men had shot her. Why? So they could carry out Rodman's orders?

Judging their strength, he assessed their ability to fight. Tate, a scrawny man at best, didn't offer any threat. While the other two appeared stronger, Omar had no doubt of his skill, his ability to best them.

Resentment swelled. Who were they to kill Danella? They didn't even know her.

Fury expanded in his chest with the air he sucked into his lungs. Energy pumped through his muscles, and his body transformed into the white tiger he'd envisioned earlier. Now though, his hunter's strength filled his senses and his roar of rage echoed through the canyons.

"What the..." Tate yelled and bolted.

The other two men jumped to their feet and drew out their knives.

Omar jumped off the boulder. *Now you'll die.*

Blackness surrounded Danni. Pain resonated in every part of her body, and a voice screamed "retribution."

Where am I?

The sweet smell of blood sang through her senses. She turned her head. A light hit her and she gasped for breath. Pain gurgled from her throat, and a low coo escaped.

Her form registered, and the sharp point of an arrow whizzing past her wing sped through her memory.

She struggled to stand. *Omar?*

She'd seen him escape. But why didn't he come back for me?

She peered again at her surroundings and judged the length of the cavern as well as the distance to the top. He'd find it an impossible task to locate her.

He believes I'm dead.

She lowered her head. Just as well. No forget spell would be needed. He could return home and ignore the human world altogether. And with her out of the picture, he could find someone else and start a new life in Ardenia.

Her family would be free of her, too.

Everything had worked out perfectly. They knew about Rodman, and they no longer needed to worry about her. They could get on with their lives.

Energy seeped from her body. But could she live without them? For one brief moment, she'd held the man of her dreams and her sister's forgiveness had lightened her burden. Now the fates had ripped it all away.

Mind numb, she closed her eyes. Pain and heartache mingled within her, and she drifted into a dark vortex where no joy existed.

Maybe she should simply disappear.

Omar studied the carnage at his feet and felt no remorse. He ached from the pain of losing his soul mate. The task ahead was much harder than the one he'd just performed. He needed to tell Danella's family about her death.

The stench of disembodied flesh hit his stomach. He gagged, and his lunch landed at his feet. How had he survived all those years without her?

Tears streaming down his checks, he leaned against a huge boulder. How would he ever forget the time they'd shared?

Misery descended. The bright colors around him blurred to gray. The weight in his chest increased. Nothing mattered anymore.

An unrelenting voice rang through his head, drawing him back, demanding his attention. Duty. He stiffened his resolve and pulled himself from the black pit his soul had once been. He had to return to Ardenia.

Each grueling step reminded him of his part in Danella's death. She hadn't even seen the men on the ground. He'd sent her into harm's way.

Guilt's heavy chains shackled his limbs, and he stumbled into a shallow creek bed. Cool water flowed over his bare feet. He dropped to his knees and washed off the dried blood splattered across his body.

Danella's image played through his head, and he buried his head in his hands. How could he live after losing her again?

An image of Omar flashed through Danni's mind and jolted her awake.

He looked so unhappy.

The dark walls around her drew closer. She hopped forward and stood on the small ledge where

she'd fallen. A bottomless pit lay below her claws. If she'd landed lower in the cavern, she would've never been able to fly out.

She judged the distance to the opposing wall and realized the light from above glowed brighter than earlier. How much time had passed?

She needed to fly out of here while she still had the strength.

She lifted her right wing and assessed the damage. It didn't hurt as much as her head. The fall probably caused more injuries than the glancing blow of the arrow.

A cooling breeze ruffled her feathers.

No time like the present.

Danni spread her wings and glided along the center of cavern. A slight updraft helped her climb. A piercing light lanced through her head. She searched the rough walls but couldn't find a place to land.

Flying blindly, she pumped her wings harder and soared directly into the sunlight. Pain pounded through her skull. She altered her path and landed on an outcrop of rocks above the canyon. Her claws scrapped the hard surface before she slid to a stop.

Shaded from the sun by the boulder above, she drew in a deep breath. A fowl stench greeted her nostrils. She gasped and heaved, the contents of her stomach rebelling against the smell. A bloody mess swam before her vision.

What the hell happened?

On the cliff below, vultures milled around the carcasses, ripping the flesh from human bones. The men who'd shot at me?

A bow lying near a bundle of arrows stashed neatly inside a quiver confirmed the identity of the men.

But who did this? And why?

Omar's strong robust form invaded her

thoughts. He said he'd killed men. But was he really capable of causing such destruction?

She shivered and the advantages of being human invaded her thoughts. Pops and cracks resonated through her system. Muscles expanded, and tendons stretched to their normal length. Gravel bit into her skin, and her headache eased to a tolerable level.

Danni rolled and sat on the side of the boulder. The destructive scene below hit her anew. What possessed Omar to mutilate these men? Could his passion for her be responsible?

Elements she'd missed in her earlier assessment registered. A truth chant sprang from her lips. Who were these men and what was their mission?

The view before her changed. The three men rose into a misty vision where they sat around a campfire talking.

"Tate, I don't understand why we didn't kill Omar and the woman when they left the cabin in the woods." The largest of the three men stabbed at the fire. "You say your boss wanted them dead, right?"

"Yes, but Danella is a witch." Tate held up a round globe. "When the sphere is glowing, it means she has invoked some type of protection spell. We can't harm her."

"But we could've killed Omar," the other man added.

"Yes, but he's not the target. Danella is the oldest daughter and next in line to rule Ardenia. If she returns home with her special abilities, she'll discover Rodman's plan."

"But I don't get it. Melvin hasn't figured out the councilman's scheme, and he's the queen's wizard." The big man added another log to the fire. "What makes her different?"

Tate's mouth widened into a sarcastic grin, and then he grimaced. "She's a crafty bitch who doesn't

trust anyone, and she has a special ability to see into her family's future, a skill that would warn her of Rodman's plans."

The comment tickled Danni, and a smile passed abruptly over her lips to disappear just as quickly. The years of spying on her family's progress gained her a certain knowledge into the forces around them.

"Then when can we kill her?" The larger man rose and paced around the fire. "Because I miss my family."

"Right, you're like every other refugee stuck in this horrible world. What you really want is to return to Ardenia." Tate stood. "If you kill Danella, Rodman will make sure you're allowed back in."

"But rumor has it we can go back now," the other man stated.

"And spend the rest of your days in the dungeon." Tate shrugged. "If that's what you want, be my guest."

A flash of light dissolved the vision and again the greedy vultures occupied the scene. Danni blinked and narrowed in on the magical glow resonating under a scrape of clothing.

She jumped off the rock and wove her way to the item. Nudging it with her foot, a familiar light sparkled to life. *My memory ball.*

Locked to her by magic, the small globe held her memories and revealed her moods by the different colors reflected in its center. She stared at the green flare and squatted to retrieve the mystical sphere.

Her fingers grazed the smooth surface, and she cupped the ball in the palm of her hand. Remembered pleasures from her childhood raced through her mind and love filled her soul. Her father's smiling face, her mother's devotion, and her sisters' trust. All of them cared about her.

They will forgive my sins.

How could she have forgotten their love so

easily?

Regret at all the time she'd wasted broke her heart and tears blurred her vision. She stumbled backward, then slowly turned and walked away from the dismembered bodies.

The desire to return home overwhelmed her, and she toyed with the greeting she'd receive. Her family, she had no doubts, would welcome her back. Kesia had already expressed joy at seeing her again and begged Danella—yes, Danella—to go home.

But what about Omar? Would he forgive her for doubting his love?

The sphere in her hand changed colors and a different set of questions sped through her thoughts. Why steal her memory ball? It might sense her moods and verify her identity. But who had access to it? What purpose did it serve?

Answers filtered through her head, and she smiled.

Finally, she had the proof to nail Rodman.

I have to get home. And without alerting Rodman.

Chapter Ten

The crystal gate leading into Ardenia sparkled with a welcoming glow. Yet Omar felt no joy at returning to his homeland. He'd failed at his mission to bring Danella back. In fact, if it weren't for him, she'd probably still be alive.

"Omar, it's great to see you." The armed guard protecting the gate stepped forward. "Kesia and Havyn arrived yesterday, and I'm sure they'll want to see you."

Not after what I have to tell them.

Omar squared his shoulders and walked through the gate with a simple nod at his comrade. The grim task ahead weighed heavily on his shoulders. His gaze ahead, he marched forward and ignored the people on the street. The queen needed to know of her daughter's death.

Mounting the palace steps, he entered the elegant home of the royal family. The cold granite floor sent ominous chills along his spine. How could he admit his failure to protect Danella? Hell, he wasn't even sure how he continued to take his next breath without her.

Strong ornate pillars rising to the glass dome greeted his gaze, and he studied the rich tapestries gracing the stone walls. One picture boasted Danella's youthful face with her devoted family standing proudly around her.

Pain filled his chest and his foot faltered. He hated that they'd never see her again.

After walking across the foyer, he ascended the wide staircase leading to the second floor. He

scanned the rooms above and found the door to Danella's room. He'd never been allowed in, but he'd passed it on guard duty numerous times.

"Omar, what are you doing here? Where's Danella?" Havyn's voice stopped him, and he turned to address the man standing at the top of the stairs.

"I..." Words failed him, and he peered unblinking at Havyn. After shaking his head, he continued down the hall to the queen's chamber. "I need to see the queen."

"All right, I'll head back with you. Kesia and Noelani are with her at the moment, but I'm sure they'll want to hear your news." Havyn walked along the corridor.

Omar glanced ahead to Oxford, the queen's guard. He opened her chamber door and voices filtered out.

"Mother, I believe we should remove that cursed pendant from Jack's neck. Make Melvin—" Noelani's words halted.

Three sets of eyes landed on him.

Omar straightened and drew on his strict military training to march across the queen's suite. He knelt at her feet and lowered his head.

"My queen, I hate to say I have failed you." He tightened his hands around his thighs and leaned deeper over his knees. "I exposed your daughter to harm, and an enemy's arrow shot her from the sky. She fell into a deep cavern, and I couldn't recover her body." A gasp of horror rang through the room. He lifted his head and met the queen's moist gaze. "I offer my life as retribution for failing to perform your required task."

Death offered payment for his failure, but he also welcomed the relief from the pain of living without Danella.

The queen nodded and glanced over his right shoulder. "Take him to his room and see that he's

given something to eat.” Her gaze met Omar’s again. “We’ll decide on your punishment later. Right now, just try to get some rest.”

The next day, Danella trudged along the unmarked path leading to the back-lands of Ardenia. The invisible dome kept uninvited guests out. Natives teleported from one side to the other so no one would learn of their homeland. Only animals weighing less than fifty pounds could travel through the magic walls unobserved.

The practice was established to safeguard the country. Ardenia’s citizens observed the law and used the portal stone or they risked imprisonment for disobeying the rule.

Energy shimmered like a clear wall beside Danella. Pulling a large reflective cloth over her shoulders, she squatted onto her hands and knees. The magical tarp would conceal her identity and hold the memory ball as well.

She tugged the material over her head and edged forward. A low buzz sizzled through the air when she hit the transparent curtain. She passed through and a warm breeze filtered under the tarp.

Once past the barrier, she crawled a few more yards and then uncovered her head. Pulling the memory ball from a pocket of the tarp, she placed it on the ground before folding the large cloth into a small square. She scanned the area and dumped the tarp in the hollow of a dead tree.

With the palace still a good distance away, she transformed into a dove. The wind caught her sore wing, and she tightened her grip on the memory ball but didn’t alter her course. The lush green countryside played on her heartstrings.

Red, yellow, and orange flowers danced in the light breeze and beckoned her to rest on the white, sandy shore of a lake. Memories washed through her

mind of a picnic with her family, stolen moments away from the palace guards. Tempted, she resisted but promised herself a trip back after she completed her mission.

The thick stone walls of the palace appeared, and she circled the perimeter, looking for a point of entry. The window to her mother's chamber was open, an old habit. Any onlookers could easily mistake Danella for her mother's pet dove.

Dipping her wings, she flew through the window and dropped the round sphere in her claws on her mother's bed. Voices rang from inside her mother's sitting room, and she glided to a stop near the door.

A small group of people stood by the fireplace—Kesia, Havyn, Jack, and Noelani. Danella's heart fluttered in her chest at all the special events in their lives she'd missed.

"I'm not sure if Melvin removing the necklace from Jack's neck will help or not. Danella seemed to think Councilman Rodman wanted Jack dead no matter what." Kesia nudged closer to Hayvn and worried her hands into knots.

Jack slid his arm around his wife's waist. "That's not really a new revelation. My uncle has never held me in high regard. When I first returned with Noelani, he accused me of killing your father."

"You're kidding." Kesia turned. "How did you know he was lying?"

Danella glanced at the woman sitting on the throne. Time stopped. The conversation of the others fell short of her hearing. Dressed in her usual shimmering robes, her mother's long blonde hair lay in a sweeping style around her crown. She sparkled from head to toe. Yet worry lines marred her face.

Her youth gone, life had etched its mark on her beauty.

"But surely, with Jack no longer wearing the wretched necklace, there'll be no reason to want him

dead.” Noelani’s agitated tone drew Danella back to the conversation, and her gaze landed on her sister.

Beautiful, Noelani held herself in the same regal way she had as a child. Her once mouse-brown hair now glowed with vitality. She stared at her husband, the heat in her eyes reflecting her love.

Jack drew her deeper into his embrace, and his dark looks accessed her sister’s fair tone. “There’s no need to worry. Now that we know what Rodman is up to, we’re better prepared.”

“Yes, yes,” a cracking old voice interrupted. “Now, you should all leave. I need to work, if you want me to discover the magic of this piece.”

“But...” Her mother turned but didn’t finish her sentence.

Bodies shifted, and the old man came into view. His gray hair standing on end, he waved one hand through the air in his attempt to hurry the rest of the group from her mother’s chamber. In his other hand glistened her father’s pendant.

“Melvin is right.” Her mother rose. “Let’s give him some time to determine the type of magic that’s locked inside the necklace.”

Melvin must already understand the significance of the necklace. Why demand everyone leave?

Her mother directed the group. “We’ll proceed with our plan. Oxford, if you’ll please, stand guard outside my chamber door and let me know when Jack returns and Councilman Rodman arrives.”

With everyone shuffling toward the exit, Danella hopped back out of sight, then turned and flew to the memory ball in the center of her mother’s bed. She wrapped her claws around it and skimmed across the surface to drop the ball over the side. She executed a sharp turn and landed on the floor. The globe hit the wall and rolled back under her mother’s bed.

The click of the chamber door alerted Danella, and she ducked under a table.

Seconds later, Melvin strolled into the room. "I believe this is the item we've been searching for, Irene."

"Are you sure?" Her mother followed Melvin into the room and paused by the bed. "Does the necklace really hold Harris' essence?"

"Not all of it. Some remains in his dove body." Melvin handed her the pendant and opened the birdcage. "That's why I didn't want to remove it from Jack's neck. I was afraid of damaging a part of Harris in the process."

A low coo whispered through the room.

Melvin drew her mother's pet from its cage.

"Do you really think it'll work?" Her mother's high-pitch tone revealed her anxiety.

"Yes. Now lay the pendant around the dove's neck," Melvin instructed.

With her mother blocking her view, Danella couldn't see the exchange.

Oh, my... Her father's voice whispered through her head. *I haven't felt this good in years.* The rapid whoosh of fluttering wings echoed through the room.

"Wait..." Her mother stepped back, and the dove flew to the windowsill.

Irene, my love, come fly with me, her father beckoned.

"Yes." Her mother threw her arms around Melvin. "You did it, Mel. It's Harris. He's back." She drew away from the old man and strolled to the window. "That wicked curse has finally been lifted, and he wants me to go flying with him."

"Go ahead." Melvin waved his wrinkled hand to usher her along. "I'll keep an eye on everything here until you return. You have fun and enjoy your reunion with your husband."

Doubt rushed through Danella. She'd recognized

the essence attached to the necklace, had even recognized the special spell that protected the wearer from magic. But she never imagined...never even considered...it could hold a part of her father's spirit.

How could she have been so stupid?

The scent of her mother's transformation hit her senses and another dove landed on the windowsill.

"Don't worry about anything here. I have everything under control." Melvin turned as the two birds flew out the window. His dark gray gaze fell on her hiding spot. "Okay, Danella, time to tell me how you got yourself in so much trouble. Because everyone here believes you're dead."

Chapter Eleven

Danella sat on her mother's throne, drinking tea and caressing her memory ball. "Maris told me she removed the necklace to save my father's life."

Melvin stood in front of the fire, stirring his kettle and staring into its depths. "True, but I bet she didn't realize that by removing the item that wouldn't let him transform, she was also removing the part of him that held his spirit intact."

Saddened by the part she'd played in keeping her father from transforming back into his human body, Danella lowered her head. "I should have returned the necklace to Mother as soon as Maris told me it belonged to my father. But I..." Guilt expanded in her chest. Again, she'd caused her family undue pain because of her actions.

"You had no way of knowing the importance of the piece. You were trying to protect your family from Rodman's evil plan." Melvin's calming tone eased her burden, and she lifted her head.

"Then you aware of his desire to kill Jack and my mother?"

"Yes." Melvin dropped a few herbs into the swirling liquid circling inside his pot. "I've been watching him for years. A slippery con-artist, Rodman's evil games are usually centered around gaining more power, but I've thwarted more than one plan to harm the royal family."

"Then everyone is safe?" Danella set down her cup and scooted to the edge of her chair.

"Not really. Rodman's plan has become more aggressive since your sisters returned home. He's

working diligently behind the scene to gain support so he can take over control of the country should anything happen to your mother.”

“But if he kills her, why would anyone want him as their leader?” Danella watched the scene unfolding in the center of Melvin’s kettle. Rodman sat in the chair she now occupied with a gun pointed at her mother while Jack stood before them. “What is going on? Are you seeing the future?”

“One version.” Melvin stirred the silvery liquid and glanced at her. “You’ve already changed the outcome of those events. Your mother and brother-in-law are aware of Rodman’s plans, but he doesn’t know of your return. The future has changed with your presence.”

“Then what’s going to happen?” She stared inside the pot but no pictures formed.

“Can’t say. What are you planning to do about Omar?”

Melvin’s question blindsided her. Omar has nothing to do with this.

She shook her head. “I don’t know. Does it matter?”

“Every action has an effect on the future.” Melvin stepped away from the kettle and touched the round sphere on her lap. The ball glowed bright green, revealing her memories of Omar. Melvin smiled, amused with the information he’d gained.

“You can’t hide from the world.” He shuffled to an empty chair and sat, then lifted his gaze to meet hers. “Memories haunt you with events that can’t be changed. You have to step forward and reclaim your destiny or you will shrivel up and die like Maris.”

“But every decision I make is wrong.” Danella studied the aging face of the man who’d been an important part of her youth. What did he know that she didn’t?

“Oh, but the one you made with your heart led

you home.” A crooked grin lay on his lips, and he scanned her naked form. “You’ve found pleasures in many forms, but only one man has consumed your thoughts. He is the bane of your existence and the source of your deepest joy. You need to come to terms with him.”

Melvin’s shrewd gaze peered into her soul, and she rubbed her hand against her brow to hide her emotions. Omar held a special place in her heart, but so did her family. Shouldn’t she help them first?

“So what are you telling me?”

He stood and leaned over his kettle. “Now, what could I suggest that you haven’t already thought of doing? You know your own mind.” Melvin sank once again into the high-back chair. “Only you can decide what you really want.”

Danella glanced at the door of her mother’s chamber. Should she find Omar and let him know she was alive, or should she wait for her mother’s and father’s return?

The stone walls shifted closer. Omar glanced around the small space and wondered how his soldier’s quarters differed from those of a prison in the dungeon. He shut off the sight.

Yes, he had a lock on the door. One to keep people out, but the small, narrow room held little more than his bed and footlocker. The smooth granite held no pictures or decoration.

Why had he never aspired to acquire more than this meager existence?

Duty? Devotion to the crown?

Or had he hoped Danella would someday return?

He opened his eyes. The gray haze blurring his vision intensified the aching of his heart. She’d consumed his world for so long, what possible future could he have now?

Heavy eyelids demanded closure.

Sleep beckoned.

A sound ruffled his senses. He stretched his foot to the edge of the bed. Dog-tired, he refused the temptation to open his eyes again, but soft footsteps outside his room sparked his interest.

He rolled to his side and stared at Danella's ghost, floating beside his bed. "Danella, can you ever forgive me?"

He moaned and closed his eyes again. Would he be forever tortured by her memory?

A soothing hand cupped his cheek. "Omar, my love, there is nothing to forgive."

Her sweet voice lifted his heavy eyelids and he sank into the crystal blue depths of her eyes. "But I failed in my task to protect you."

"No, there's no way you could have known what those men were up to." She leaned closer and her hip brushed his outer thigh.

He edged over on the narrow mattress to allow her more room. Her face blurred as soft lips greeted his. Light kisses swept across his mouth, soothing his soul and awakening the ever-starving need in his cock. Her palms stroked his shoulders and followed the line of his arms to grasp his wrists. She stood and straddled his waist, then placed his hands on her thighs.

"Forget the past, Omar. For now, let's just make love." She spread her hands over his chest and finger-combed the dark hair.

Unable to resist the plush bounty of her breast, he cupped them and toyed with the rosy tips. "If this is one of your magical spells, I hope I never wake."

A wicked grin spread across her face, and her blonde hair swung forward as she leaned closer. "I didn't have to use witchcraft. As my soul mate, wherever you go, I'll follow."

Desperate for a taste, he lifted his head and

captured a nipple. The hard bud rode against his tongue, inflaming his desire and pulling lust up from his toes. He sucked harder, drawing the tight kernel deeper down his throat. A low purr rumbled through her chest.

“Oh, how you make me burn,” she whispered near his ear and her legs slid along his.

The wet heat of her cunt, dripping on his shaft, fed the carnivorous hunger in his loins. He brushed his hand along her inner thigh and palmed her moist center.

“Yes.” She rocked her hips and begged for the penetration of her needy core.

He probed the delicate petals with fingertips and found the small bud of her desire.

A growl echoed through the room, and she sank sharp nails into his biceps. “Don’t play, Omar. You know I need more.”

She lifted her hips and positioned her pussy over his engorged cock while he teased her clit. Pleasure spread over her face as his shaft speared deep into her wet heat. Closing her eyes, she panted and worked up and down his length.

Fire gathered in his loins, and he slammed his cock deeper with each of her downward thrusts. A connection formed between them. Her thoughts sank into his and answered the question of how she’d survived. Heartaches and pain melted under the combined weight of their love. Peace settled over his troubled thoughts and joy sang through each cell in his body.

He applied more pressure to her clit and lifted his head to clamp his mouth around her rosy nipple.

She screamed and worked her hips faster to ease the fire in her blood until only erotic delirium clouded his mind. Spasms rode along his cock and Danella yowled with her release.

The impending explosion of his loins tightened

his balls, and he arched his ass off the mattress to plunge deeper into her pulsating pussy. His lungs on fire, he tore his mouth away from her succulent breast to gasp for air.

Power surged. His climax demanded release. He poured himself into her, and she responded to the sizzling elixir with a second orgasm, joining him in the passionate abyss where only the two of them existed.

His mind and body exhausted, Omar struggled to stay awake and tightened his arms around Danella, but the endless hours of fighting sleep finally won the battle.

“Rest, Omar, while I go talk to my parents.” Danella’s words drifted through his dreams.

A beautiful vision of her beside his bed, with her long blonde hair streaming over the lush fullness of her breasts, blurred as she stepped away and floated along the corridors of the castle. He smiled at the way she didn’t bother with the royal robes but displayed the beauty of her form for all to see.

A sudden unease filtered through his senses, and he guided his hand to the edge of the bed in his search for her. Gone. In danger.

Omar bolted upright. He’d failed to protect her before. He wouldn’t do so again.

Danella turned the corner that led back into the castle from the barracks, and her gaze fell on Councilman Rodman. His chubby, round face broke into a huge grin.

“Well, look who we have here.” Rodman strode toward her. “I knew the story about you being dead was wrong.” He clamped his big, beefy hand around her wrist. “But I had hoped.”

Repulsion climbed up her spine, and she widened her stance to secure her footing. This man was responsible for so much heartache in her

country. He'd manipulated the people's council into entering the war, and it had thrown her homeland into disarray. If not for her mother's courage, Ardenia would have fallen into anarchy. "Sorry to disappoint you."

"No problem. You're much more useful alive." He jerked on her arm and crowded her back into the entrance of the barracks. "Why don't we take a little walk, and I'll tell you all the plans I've made for your future?"

His putrid breath hit her as she dug in her heels and refused to budge. "Don't worry about my future. Yours is the one that is in danger."

Rodman released her and drew a spiral ball from his robe. "Maybe, but you'll still be my prisoner."

"What? You can't lock me in my memory ball." Danella placed her hands on her hips and squared her shoulders. "You don't know enough magic to accomplish such a task."

"Want to bet?" Magical words exploded around a wall of light and a white fog encircled Danella. Memories floated through her mind. She blinked several times to clear her vision, but a milky partition enclosed her in an eerie prison.

"See, it's not such a hard spell after all, if you say the right words." Rodman's face distorted the crystal walls of her prison, and she fell back onto a soft cushion.

How had he done it?

To lock a person in their memory ball, the conjurer casting the spell needed a special connection to that person and the sphere. She searched through past events for an answer.

A scene of her fifth birthday formed. Everyone invited. Presents lined the table, her memory ball among them.

But Melvin had checked the packages. None

were given in malice. Had Rodman done something to connect himself to the item? Or was the ball a gift from him?

Confused, Danella scanned the data stored in the ball and discovered Rodman, standing in the background of events she didn't remember him attending. How had he gained access to her memories?

Maris?

The answer burned through her like a torch. Her friend and mentor had often apologized for her deeds against Danella's family. But had Maris also been guilty of performing magic against Danella?

Pain gathered in her chest. What choice did Maris have? With her husband dead and her brother-in-law supporting her and her son, she'd been forced to do whatever Rodman wanted. Was there no end to the lies and heartache caused by the man?

The memory of day she decided to step through the portal into the human world resurfaced. Her sister's words echoed through her head.

"Let's leave her behind, Danella. She'll only get in the way." Brown hair waved in the wind as her sister raced to the crystal archway in the distance.

"No, Noelani, we can't. She might tell Mother where we've gone. Then we'll get in trouble for going into the human world. She has to come with us." Danella grabbed her younger sister's hand. "Please, Kesia, let me see Omar for just a moment."

A light flickered. Danella studied the scene closer. Someone lurked by a grove of trees in the distance, an eerie beam highlighting his hands. She narrowed her focus and used her powers to help find the answers that she sought.

The image expanded. For the first time, she understood Rodman's part in her decision to travel into the human world. His lips chanted a control

spell.

Bastard. The burden of guilt she carried for years morphed into a hunger for revenge. A low chant sprang to her lips.

“Powers that be,
Powers that are,
No power can hold me,
If I want to be free.
My captor has wronged me,
Throughout the years,
His secrets weigh heavy on me,
Let his evil return to him
By the power of three.”

Chapter Twelve

“What are you doing here, Omar?” Oxford stood in hallway outside the queen’s chamber. “The queen ordered you to rest.”

“I have. Now I’m looking for Danella.”

The captain of the guard’s face fell. “Omar, don’t you—”

Footsteps sounded farther down the hall, and Oxford straightened. “Stand ready,” he whispered to Omar and then addressed the man walking along the corridor. “I’m sorry, Councilman Rodman. The queen is unable to see you at the moment.”

“But I had an appointment.” The stout man puffed out his chest. “Who’s with her?”

“She’s talking to her son-in-law, Jack Avery.” Oxford answered.

Where was Danella? If she wasn’t with her mother, then where had she disappeared to?

Omar narrowed his focus on the man’s red face and tightened his grip over his weapon. Were the visions in his dream correct? Had Rodman somehow captured her?

Oxford laid a hand on Omar’s arm. “We’ll escort you inside, councilman.”

His commander’s expression told Omar something was up. Oxford usually didn’t reveal the queen’s business so easily.

“Good, Jack is exactly who I want to talk to her about.” Rodman directed a curt nod at Oxford for him to open the door.

After the man entered, Omar followed his commander into the queen’s chamber.

"Your Highest, I'm sorry to interrupt, but I must inform you of what I've discovered." Rodman strolled to the center of the room.

Put on alert by the man's villainous presence, Omar tracked Rodman's progress across the room and shut the door. Rodman stood a few paces from the queen, who sat regally on her throne. Jack, located in the chair beside hers, appeared irritated by his uncle's sudden appearance.

"Councilman Rodman, are you sure this can't wait until later?" The queen glanced apologetically at her son-in-law. "Jack and I won't be too much longer, then I can meet with you if you like."

"No, I need to show my nephew's true nature." Rodman adjusted his stance. "I've warned you many times, Jack has criminal intentions. Now, I have the proof."

Rodman's slid his hand inside his robe and pulled out a gun.

The queen gasped. "What is the meaning of this?"

Oxford drew his sword and raced forward. He'd not fail in his duty to protect the royal family. "Councilman Rodman put down the weapon."

"Why? I don't believe it's even loaded." Rodman waved the gun through the air. "And even if it is, I have no idea how to fire the thing."

Right, and pigs fly. Omar held out his sword and edged closer.

"Then you'd best set it down." Oxford worked his way between the man and the queen.

"No, I believe I should return it to its owner." Rodman offered the gun to Jack.

"I don't know where you got the idea that this gun belongs to me." Jack stood and eased away from his uncle.

Omar noticed the tension between the two men.

Rodman grinned. "Funny, but I found it with the

things you left behind when you last visited Ardenia.”

“That was over twelve years ago.” The queen interjected and gestured for Rodman to lay the gun on the floor.

“Yes, but it proves again how much he doesn’t honor our laws.” Rodman swung back to the queen and pointed the weapon at her.

Omar’s gaze never wavered from the man, looking for an opportunity to strike.

Rodman continued, “He’s a criminal. I’ve told you he killed your husband. And now I’m telling you, he has the means to kill you, too. What more is it going to take for you to see him as a threat to our kingdom?”

“Are you sure it’s Jack who wanted me dead?” A stranger stood at the door of the queen’s bedchamber.

Rodman swiveled to confront the man, and a shocked expression lit his face. The hand holding the gun dropped to his side. “King Harris.”

Rushing forward, Omar grabbed the weapon. With a quick twist of his wrist, he disarmed the councilman and dug the point of his sword into the man’s side. “You’d best step away from the queen.”

Rodman stared at him for a brief moment then turned back to the newcomer. “How did they return you from the dead?”

“First, let’s dispose of your gun.” Oxford held out his hand. Omar relinquished the weapon to his commander, confident the councilman’s plot to *accidentally* kill someone wouldn’t come to fruition.

Rodman blinked and took several steps back. “Oh, but that’s not my gun. I told you it belonged to Jack.”

“Yes, and you also told me the necklace you placed around my neck was to protect me.” The tall, thin, blonde-haired man strode to the queen and

stood beside her chair. "From what Irene has been telling me, you've gained a great deal more power since I've been away."

Omar stepped out of the way, lowered his weapon, and stood to one side of the queen. With the king's return, Rodman had to understand his plan to gain control was in jeopardy.

His captain placed the gun on a low table next to Jack and returned to Rodman.

"I assure you, I've worked for the privileges I now hold." Rodman glanced at his nephew and then studied the couple. Sweat trickled off the man's brow. "I've spent years babysitting your wife and leading her into making the right decisions."

The queen shook her head. "I can't believe how much I trusted you. Your brother, King Petros, and Maris were just pawns in your scheme to take control of Ardenia. Had my sister not killed herself, you would've probably been able to achieve that, too."

Omar marveled at the queen's control. If he were in charge, the man would already have a sword through his chest.

Rodman grinned and drew out a small ball. "Yes, and with your children and husband gone, I had you under my thumb as well. But since Maris died my luck has changed."

"What did you do to her?" Jack stepped forward as if ready to attack his uncle.

"Nothing she didn't deserve." The scorn in Rodman's voice ruffled Omar's feathers, and he stepped closer to the councilman. "As a witch and a whore with a pretty face, she amused me at times. She even taught me a number of useful little tricks."

Rodman lifted the sphere for them to see. "But after she took Danella in, she became less pliable. I had little use for her after that. Silly bitch even thought she could kill me." An evil smile passed over

Rodman's lips. "But now that I have Danella locked in her memory ball, I should reign supreme again."

"What?" the queen screamed.

"But how?" Jack growled.

"Let her go." Omar lifted his sword.

The burst of comments around the room placed a superior smirk on Rodman's face. "Now that I've captured everyone's attention, I believe we might start negotiating a deal."

"Not a chance." Omar darted forward and jabbed his weapon against the man's chest. "Danella wouldn't want her family to bargain for her life."

Rodman shuffled backward. "Then I guess you'd prefer if I just crush her in the palm of my hand." He squeezed the ball, and a low moan rang through the room.

Danella.

"I'll kill you first." Anger boiled through Omar, and he relished the idea of seeing the man bleed.

"Wait. How do we know Danella is even in the ball? It could be anyone." The queen's hand on his shoulder held Omar in place. "You told us she was dead."

Omar shook his head. "I—"

"Well, she's not. I captured her outside Omar's room." Rodman scanned the group, an evil smirk on his face until his gaze met his nephew's.

"Either way, it wouldn't help you now." Jack's words registered in Omar's mind an instant before a bullet pierced the councilman's heart. Blood burst from his body and stained his shirt. Rodman dropped his hand, and the memory ball fell.

Omar dove forward. The sphere a breath away from the floor, he closed his fingers around it and cushioned the impact. His momentum carried him into the pudgy councilman's legs and the man toppled.

Screams echoed around Omar, but none of the

words registered. Only Danella's safety mattered. He lifted the delicate ball and checked for cracks.

"Jack, what the hell were you thinking?" King Harris tugged the gun from his son-in-law's hand.

"He *killed* my mother. Now he'll never hurt anyone else again." Jack sank into his chair and dropped his head into his hands. "If that means I spend the rest of my life in the dungeon, so be it. He got what he deserved."

The door slammed opened, and guards rushed into the room.

Mayhem echoed around Omar as he stared into the memory ball at Danella's tiny figure. Words sang through his head. *I have always loved you, Omar. That will never change.*

The sphere melted into a glistening puddle in the center of his hand. A light mist rose, and before he could comprehend the significance, Danella stood in front of him.

He blinked, and the noise became a silent roar in his ears.

"Oh, Danella, are you all right?" The queen wrapped her arms around her daughter, and Danella turned into her mother's embrace.

Hands circled Omar's forearm and lifted him to his feet. He turned as several guards carried Councilman Rodman's body from the queen's chamber. Retrieving his weapon from another guard, he watched Danella hug her father.

"What's happening in here?" Kesia ran into the queen's chamber. "Daddy? Danella? I thought you both were dead."

Realizing this wasn't the time to profess his love, Omar retreated to the door. He'd done his duty and returned Danella to her family. They'd talk later after her homecoming celebration with her family.

Maybe with Rodman dead, she'd settle down and finally agree to be his wife.

Chapter Thirteen

The crystal blue sky welcomed Danella while the tender green grass under her feet caressed her toes. She savored the pleasure of finally breaking away from her family and spending time alone.

After her rather dramatic return, along with that of her father, and Rodman's death, the whole kingdom was buzzing with activity. Jack, in custody, had to face a jury for killing his uncle. But no court in Ardenia could blame him for murdering the man, not after the abuse he'd caused everyone in the royal family.

Her mother and father, in need of some time alone, had left the responsibility of the kingdom on her and her sisters' shoulders. Noelani and Kesia handled most of the tedious tasks, but Danella still had to attend the council meetings.

Today, though, she'd reserved for herself.

In the last few days, she'd fallen into the life of a princess. Her witchcraft and other skills shelved, she enjoyed relearning the special features of her homeland. She'd placed her personal life on hold and had not spoken more than a few words to Omar. But she felt his stare and knew eventually he'd demand she provide him with a decision. The man was determined they marry.

She grinned and continued her trek across the meadow until she reached the shade of a large oak tree. After laying out the blanket, she settled down to wait for Omar.

Rustling noises rumbled from the underbrush and popping sounds marked the return of his body to

human form. His unique scent inflamed her desire, and she narrowed her gaze on his well-defined muscles. Wide shoulders, narrow hips, and thick thighs, he strolled naked into the shade and dropped to his knees. "Are you ready to talk?"

She grinned and wiggled on the blanket. "I've talked enough already."

His sharp gaze narrowed as she glided her hand along her stomach to brush the curls between her legs. His chest heaved and his cock lengthened.

Exhilarated by his reaction, Danella sat up slowly and rolled to her knees. She guided her hands through the golden hairs on his chest. "I'd prefer a little more action."

"If you needed some attention, you could've called me any time." He cupped her ass and drew her into his embrace. His hard cock rode against her lower belly. "I would've gladly provided you with whatever you required."

"Yes, but..." How could she explain that she had to settle into her role as princess before she could partake of the pleasures Omar offered. "We both had other duties that required our attention. And once we were together, I didn't want to be interrupted." Danella wrapped her hands around his neck, and the hair on his chest teased the tips of her breasts. "No one will bother us here."

"But what about when we return to the castle? Are you planning to deny us a means to satisfy our needs once we return to our jobs?" He smoothed his hands along her sides then released her to place his palms along each side of her face. "Because I'll warn you, a few hours in this meadow will not satisfy me. I like having you in my arms, lying next to me in bed, and best of all, under me while I pound my cock into your pussy."

Danella grinned. "I believe, Sir, you're forgetting I'm a princess."

His gaze locked with hers. "Oh, no, I'm not forgetting anything. You might have the title of princess, but you relish all the love I can give."

She groaned and wove her fingers through his hair to pull him closer. "Again, all you want to do is talk."

"Not all." He lowered his mouth and captured hers. The quick dart of his tongue swept across her lips.

Her future lay in her bond to Omar. The link between them sizzled, and she returned his kiss, her mouth clinging to his.

The gap between them closing, she rubbed her breasts against the hard wall of his chest. The warm stroke of his skin heated her desire, and his scent beckoned her deeper into his embrace. Her body pulsed with renewed life. She understood now why she'd stepped through the gate into the human world. Without him she could never be complete.

His mouth shifted, and Danella gasped for breath, for sanity, for a single thought to fill her head.

Omar covered her breast with his mouth. He sucked the aching peak deep. *Pure pleasure.* Undulating her hips, she ground her pubic bone against the length of his cock. He guided her back onto the blanket and settled at her side. His mouth teased one nipple before traveling to the other. Back and forth, he tortured her not only with his tongue but also with the stroke of his fingers through the hair covering her mound.

"Omar, please." She grabbed his hand and lifted it. "Don't play. I want you deep inside me."

He lifted his head and looked into her eyes. "For how long?"

The love he felt surrounded her, and she knew the question wasn't about today or tomorrow but the lifetime he yearned for them to share.

Need raged through her, kicking desire to a level where air sped from her lungs. She spread her legs and pushed words out of her mouth. "For as long as it takes to satisfy both of us."

He grinned and wedged his body between her legs. The taut head of his cock hit her wet opening, and he thrust his hips forward. "That could require a lifetime because I can never seem to get enough of you."

"Which means you're not willing to share?" The alluring pressure of his cock sliding deeper awoke a hunger in her blood. She arched her back and begged silently for the release only he could give.

Offering her a slow entrance, he reversed his momentum and made an even slower exit. "I have a lot of plans for you. Some of which include multiple partners, but first, I'd like to bask in the feast of trying out a few new forms."

His cock caressed her clit. She groaned and closed her eyes to absorb the connection between them. Using the bond, she funneled her eagerness through his system and spiked his lust.

He drove his hips forward to plunge deep. "I'm still planning to hear you scream when I sink my barbed cock into your pussy while you're in your tigress form." The full length of his staff rode against her intimate flesh, and he started a rhythm that made her gasp.

"Right, but..." Images flashed in her head, and she read his true obsessions—love, family, a lifetime with her. A sense of belonging swelled inside her, and energy exploded through her system.

How had she lived without him?

Omar pounded repeatedly into her as wave after wave of ecstasy crashed over her senses. Emotions raced from him to her, firing a craving so deep she wondered if she could survive.

Envisioning their life together, she marveled at

the opportunity to make her dreams a reality. She could deny him nothing. Not her love or the chance to carry his child.

A deep groan echoed through the tree limbs. His mind-bending tempo increased, and he set a fast, furious pace that drilled its way to her womb. Connected, he demanded she follow him into the alluring bliss in the time-honored way of soul mates. The link that bound them together forever.

Moments later, he rolled over, holding her against his chest as their bodies cooled. "So when do you want to get married?"

Danella rose onto her hands and stared into his face. "Sometime next week. Mother and Father are on a little vacation, but by the time they return, my sisters should have everything arranged for our wedding."

"You were that sure I'd ask again, were you?" He held onto her and the pain he'd experience at the time seeped through her system.

"No, but now I need you too much to live without you." She sat and rubbed her hands over his chest. "Hopefully, I can convince you that my past will only broaden my ability to make you happy." She drew circles around his nipples. "I've talked to Melvin, and he's agreed to let me study under him so I can continue to practice a little of my witchcraft."

"And what about your other skills?" His hands cupped her breasts and drew her forward. "Your lust for sex revives my own. How do you plan to satisfy that hunger?"

She grinned and lowered her aching nipple against his mouth. "Well, I'll have you to satisfy my cravings. And if you tire of me, I'm sure there's a spell or two that will enhance the experience."

Omar shook his head. "No need. With you, I could never get bored."

About the Author

Anita Philmar likes to create stories that push the limit. A writer by day, and a dreamer by night, she wants her readers to see the world in a new way. With the influence of her children's sci-fi programs, she likes to develop a place where anything can happen. She bring erotic moments to life in a great read.

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Anita Philmar

Also Available

Banished Scoundrel

by

Anita Philmar

Known scoundrel Jack Avery must earn the queen's forgiveness by rescuing her missing daughter from the human world. His sources reveal the Princess Noelani is being held by a powerful man who likes a good game of chance. So with twenty borrowed pieces of gold Jack enters the high-stakes game. Only the lady he encounters is no princess. This pretty Kitty makes him want to hear her purr.

Under a memory spell, Kitty recalls nothing before the governor bought her from her parents and offered her protection from those he claims would kill her kind. So what if, in order to control her, he forces Kitty to morph then deprives her of sexual release after transformation. But the crafty card player she is assigned to “entertain” reveals himself as a kindred spirit—a shape shifter—and unravels the lie she’s been forced to live.

Together Jack and Kitty risk it all, for the stakes are high and the prize is worth it...freedom, forgiveness, love.

Chapter One

A brewing adventure to win his ultimate prize.

The phrase pulsed through Jack Avery's system like an incantation. His stomach, a cauldron of excitement, bubbled with nerves. Glancing briefly at the butler by the thick oak door, he shrugged his cloak off and handed it to the man. The timid butler laid Jack's coat over his arm and bowed in an elegant dip of subservience.

Jack turned and dismissed the servant without a nod or word in the time-honored way of the rich. *Best to play the part properly from the beginning.*

Once in the parlor, his gaze darted to the huge stone fireplace and onto the rich fabric framing the windows. The colors shining through displayed the battle of the red brute in the west as it tried to overtake the sun. Bent on escaping, the daylight's glow raced from the sky.

The room designed to entertain Governor Cedric Sloan's wealthy guests held a treasure-trove of expensive artifacts—a silver dwarf's snuffbox, a giant's ale cup, and a wizard's gold-plated wand just to name a few. His fingers itched to pilfer one or two, but Jack squelched the idea. His thieving skills would have to rest for the next few days. Another objective reigned supreme.

A soft laugh rang out, and he turned. Near the fireplace stood a petite, young woman, the top of her head barely reaching the man's shoulder beside her. Yet, her willowy form, encased in a red silky gown, hid none of her curves. The thin straps on her shoulders struggled with the full, rich volume of her

breasts, and her narrow waist flared to hips just wide enough to fill a man's lap as she rode his cock.

The provocative notion of her naked body straddling his eased the tension in the pit of his stomach, and he smiled.

Just part of the benefits of attending this high-priced game. I get to drink expensive wine, eat succulent food, and enjoy the favors of the governor's prize wenches.

A real step up from my normal lifestyle.

The lady's brown eyes met his. Interest sparkled in hers, and he nodded a greeting from across the room. She turned and spoke to the man beside her.

Jack glanced around again. No other women in the room met the description he'd been given of Noelani. His gaze fell again on the elegant tilt of the pretty woman's head, her refined hand gestures, and the graceful sway of her hips as she strolled toward him.

In her early twenties.

Petite with light brown hair.

She could be the princess I'm looking for.

"Can I get you a drink?" The seductive words promised a lot more than a drink, but Jack accepted the words at face value.

"That'd be a welcome treat after the dusty roads I've traveled." He offered his best smile while he studied the lady's perfect features. If she turned out to be Kesia's sister, all his troubles would be over. Nevertheless, the next few moments were crucial. According to his informants, if she selected him as her partner for the duration of the party, his plan for their escape would be made that much easier.

The lady smiled and stepped closer.

The sweet fragrance of honey-suckle filtered through his senses. Did she crush the delicate petals against her skin or sprinkle the pollen in her hair? Moreover, where could she find the springtime

flowers at this time of year?

“Have you dropped off your stipend for the game tomorrow?” She laid her finely, manicured hand on his arm. The dainty touch sent sparks of awareness through him, and his cock swelled. “The governor likes to put all the money in his strongbox for safekeeping before the party begins.”

Jack reined in his desire and reminded himself of his primary objective—to transport the lady back to Ardenia.

However, he liked Sloan’s clever rule. If a man didn’t contribute the required gold coins to the game, the governor shouldn’t waste resources entertaining him. “No, I can’t say that I have. I arrived just a few moments ago.”

“Then let me show you to the study, and I’ll fetch you a drink.” She touched his arm again and stepped into the foyer.

He bowed his head slightly and played the unfamiliar part of a refined gentleman. “And you are?”

She fluttered her hand over her face and brushed a wisp of light brown hair from her brow. “The governor calls me Kitty. It’d probably be best if you did, too.”

“What an alluring name? It makes me think of a cat with its lips covered by a luscious coat of cream.” Jack stared at Kitty’s mouth, and his tongue tingled at the idea of tasting her rich, flavorful lust.

She giggled and wove her hand through the crook in his arm. The soft swell of her breast bumped against his arm. “Oh, you’re naughty, but I love the alluring image.”

“Then, I hope you’ll let me have a taste later.” He didn’t crowd her but allowed her to step back. She led him across the entranceway to a door on the other side.

Remember she’s a princess.

She paused with her hand on the knob. "Maybe, but first let me introduce you to the governor." She opened the door with a flourish and waved her hand gracefully for him to precede her into the room.

Jack crossed the threshold and observed the huge man behind the large oak desk. Dark hair, round face, and shoulders that filled the width of his jacket and demanded more, the governor, as Cedric Sloan liked to be called, glanced up. His gray eyes narrowed on Jack.

A twinge of apprehension shimmied over his skin then dissipated just as quickly. *No man has ever bested me in a game, and none ever will.*

With a slight dip of his head to acknowledge the introduction, he ignored the dangerous glint in the governor's stare. After living with the underbelly of the world, little frightened Jack. He scanned the lavish space. Across the room in front of a stone fireplace sat a large round table. Seven chairs crowded around the edge, and a stool rested near a tall wingback chair. "Nice place. Is this where you're holding the tournament?"

The sound of the governor's chair ground against the stone floor and pulled Jack's attention from the priceless artifacts in the room and back to the man. Tall and wide, the man stood a hand short of a giant's shoulder.

Were the rumors true? Was Sloan's father a Timberland giant? Did that explain the source of the man's wealth? After all, Sloan's estate included all the property that once belonged to giants.

"You must be Jack Avery. I don't believe we've ever met." The governor extended his hand in greeting. "You must be a very good friend of Captain Havyn Westmore. He gave you a glowing endorsement."

Jack smiled and stepped forward to shake the man's hand.

Havyn would probably rather see him dead. Nevertheless, Kesia, Havyn's wife, wanted her sister back, and Jack had arranged to enter the governor's card game so he could make it happen. "Yes, we served in the war together."

"Right. And did you bring along the required stipend?" The man's voice cracked with emotion. Which side had the governor been on in the dispute between the humans and the giants?

Jack tugged his squashed fingers from the governor's grip and dug in his pocket. "I believe the cost to play is twenty gold pieces?"

"Yes. I charge a hefty price as an entrance fee to eliminate the scoundrels of society."

The leather pouch caressed Jack's fingers, and he drew the small sack from his pants. "And when is the game over?"

"Three days or until only one man has won all the money." The governor's gaze shifted to the woman behind Jack. "Kitty, why don't you show our guest to his room and make sure he's comfortable?"

Ignoring the two, Jack opened the small pouch. After counting out twenty pieces, he closed the bag and slid it back into his pocket. "And this will be all I'm allowed to use in the game?"

The governor nodded and indicated a basket on the corner of his desk. "We all start with the same amount. If you run low on funds, you'll not be allowed to contribute more. A handicap we'll all live under."

"Fair enough." Jack trickled the coins into the straw container and enjoyed the sweet music of them clanking together.

Kitty touched his arm. "Then if you're ready, I'll show you to your room."

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