

*Miniature
Rose*

Fairy Rose

Love In Shadow



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by

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Dedication

To Robbie, my sunshine.

Lon James gave an exasperated sigh as he attempted to stare down his partner. There she stood; fire in her eyes, fists closed in tight balls, shoulders so tense they almost touched her ears, and an adorable expression of stubbornness all over her delicate features. The slender fairy-woman made an odd sight in her drab brown breeches and far too large men's shirt; hair aflame in a mass of red curls pulled on top of her head.

"Now look here, Shadow," he said with the sternest tone he could muster, "We're taking Shreeve's Hill, not Lyndly Pass."

"You arrogant shit," spat Shadow. "You *know* Lyndly Pass is safer, faster, and easier. You're just picking a fight."

Lon laughed. "Even if Lyndly pass *wasn't* covered in twelve feet of snow, I'd take Shreeve's Hill anyway, just to get your goat." He winked.

Shadow's cheeks flushed deep. How could that have slipped her mind? Winter had been terrible, and the warmer air of spring hadn't yet had the chance to melt the snow away. Shreeve's Hill it would be, and Shadow would just have to let this one go.

He looked at her with that damned twinkle in his eye and the almost smile on his sun-leathered face, just beginning to show lines of experience. His muscular arms were crossed over his chest. If she hadn't been so angry with him she might have felt inclined to kiss him. She sighed, frustrated with herself for entertaining such thoughts about her employer and trusted friend.

"Well...well...fine," Shadow sputtered. "We'll take Shreeve's Hill. But don't blame me when it takes two weeks longer than it otherwise might have!"

Lon chuckled and shook his head.

“Oh, I forgot to mention, we’re both invited to dinner tonight,” he said.

At first, she thought she’d misheard him. Lord Timony, Lon’s father-in-law, owned a large bit of land surrounding Brogdon. It was some of the most beautiful property Shadow had ever seen in all of her years of travel. The rolling hills covered with tall golden grass near the homestead faded gently into a regal, mature forest of hardwoods on the south side, and sloped down to a crystal blue lake on the north. One had to ride for days to get out of “the kingdom of Brogdon,” as Shadow referred to it sarcastically, and Lord Timony was effectively King.

Attending dinner at Lord Timony’s table? She hadn’t supposed she was welcome on his land, let alone at his table. In any case, she wasn’t keen on finding out. Fancy dinners were *not* her idea of a good time. Shadow groaned and collapsed to the ground in a great show of despair.

“I hate you,” she moaned from her prostrate position.

“All the same,” Lon winked. “They’re family.”

“Yours, not mine, and yours not even by blood,” Shadow pointed out. “And they’ll stare at me all night and ask me where my wings are.”

“Oh come on, Shadow,” laughed Lon, dropping to the ground to lie next to her. He tucked his hands beneath his head. “You wouldn’t leave me alone with those ravenous wolves would you?”

Shadow giggled in spite of herself. *Poor Lon*. He was cursed with such good looks that the various nieces, cousins, and sisters-in-law, twice removed and of marriageable age in Lord Timony’s household, would fawn over him all night. Never mind he was the widower of Timony’s third and most beloved daughter. Somehow they *must* keep that charming Lon in the family.

Lon whimpered in response to Shadow’s silence. “Please, please, please?”

Shadow groaned once more and put her hands over her face. “Fine,” she muttered through her fingers.

Lon grinned, ruffled her already rumped top-knot of curls, and then kissed the top of her head, sending a warm flush followed by a shiver through Shadow's whole body.

"Thanks, sunshine," Lon grinned, then stood and ambled off.

Shadow stayed in place on the ground, hands covering her burning face. It wasn't the first time he'd kissed her. Lon had a naturally affectionate nature. She hadn't liked it in the beginning, but now in her sixth year in his employment and after becoming practically his partner in the business, she'd gotten used to his occasional friendly kisses. Unfortunately, it seemed to her, she'd also developed the silly habit of *liking* the damned attention, craving it even; and then withering into a silly, twitterpated heap at his touch.

She cursed herself for being like one of those annoying, stupid, fawning women who surrounded Lon every time they stopped in a town or visited his in-laws. Not that she could blame them. Still, for her, he was off limits, for quite a lot of horrible, complicated reasons.

Shadow rolled to her side, then picked herself up and went about her business as casually as she could manage while his kiss still burned on her forehead.

Though Shadow had hoped to put the idea of dinner out of her head until maybe three minutes beforehand, Lon's mother-in-law had other ideas. As soon as word came back from Lon that he *and* Shadow would be attending, Lady Hannah swept Shadow away to a huge, elegant chamber where she insisted Shadow stay for the duration of their visit.

"Let me see what you've packed so that we can find something for you to wear to dinner tonight," barked Hannah.

Shadow had the decency to look embarrassed.

"I didn't pack any other clothes," she mumbled.

Hannah's lips pursed and she stared at Shadow for a

long moment. Shadow squirmed. When Lon suddenly appeared in the doorway, Shadow seized the opportunity for escape.

“Sorry boss,” she said, not even waiting for Lon to speak. “I’ll be back to work in half a shake. Lady Hannah, pardon me. Duty calls.”

Lon caught her around the waist as she sped toward the hallway and freedom.

“Traitor,” Shadow hissed under her breath.

“Traitor,” accused Hannah simultaneously.

Lon looked amused, the bastard. Shadow sent him a glare.

“I just came to see how things were going,” Lon quipped, the picture of innocence.

Hannah planted her hands on her hips. “We’re going to find Shadow a lovely dress for this evening,” she said. “No thanks to you.” She wheeled on her son-in-law. “It’s brutish to disallow your employees to pack extra clothes. She may be a fairy, but she is still a lady.”

Shadow opened her mouth to respond with righteous indignation, but Lon beat her to it.

“She is a fairy *and* a lady, not one in spite of the other,” he said.

Shadow shut her mouth. Her response wouldn’t have been nearly as polite, but Lon seemed to have gotten the point across without her help.

“And she doesn’t have much need for dresses in her line of work,” he explained.

Hannah snorted, apparently not convinced.

“Well, I suppose we can find a dress for you somewhere. I won’t have time to alter one of Misty’s dresses,” she said, her voice hitching the tiniest bit. She cleared her throat and continued. “You’re a bit too short and round for that.”

Shadow fumed. Honestly, if the woman wasn’t Lon’s dead wife’s mother...

“Be nice,” Lon scolded Hannah mildly, dropping a kiss on her forehead. “I’m sure you’ll find something. And

you,” he said turning to Shadow, “behave yourself, and I will see you at dinner.”

“But the horses—”

“The boys are taking care of everything. Your only job this afternoon is to let Hannah find you a dress.”

Shadow resisted the urge to stick out her bottom lip and instead nodded curtly. Lon laughed and tugged her hair.

“You’ll survive.”

Shadow lurked under the stairwell. She caught sight of herself in the hall mirror, and blushed a deep red at her reflection. She wore a too small pearly green atrocity with ridiculous ruffles sewn in awkward places. Her hair had been left to dangle in silly curls about her face and, worst of all, she felt *naked* even with all the fabric making up the dress.

The dress left her bare from her shoulders up and draped down around her bosoms. God, she looked like a harlot. She attempted to hike up the dress and cursed the pinching shoes, which happened to be the same shade of appalling green. Shadow willed her face to return to a normal hue before stepping into the dining room.

Lon looked up from the crowding throng of lace and perfume surrounding him to the most beautiful sight he’d seen all night; perhaps all year. She shimmered in the dress his mother-in-law had selected. Her sun-warmed cheeks glowed with a fresh scrub and tendrils of her soft red hair absolutely *floated* around her face. The sight left him at a loss for words.

Of course, anyone standing a bit closer to Lon might have guessed his feelings, even without words from him, judging solely by the fast forming bulge in his trousers. The reaction to her surprised him and he cleared his throat and shook his head in an effort to rid himself of such thoughts about Shadow.

Lon managed to break free of the gaggle of giggling girls with a few polite excuse-me-ladies, much to their

disappointment. He headed straight for Shadow, who stood in a corner looking miserable, trying to cover the top third of her torso with her too small hands gloved in white.

Though he approached her from behind, the instant his rough hands wrapped around her shoulders, she knew his identity by the shivering flood that ran through her veins. Lon took her shiver as nervousness and laughed, then planted a friendly kiss on her cheek, which warmed to burning under his lips. She smacked his hands away from her shoulders.

“Don’t touch me. I hate you,” she hissed.

“That wasn’t very lady like,” he said, through a poorly hidden grin.

Shadow shrugged. “Lady like I’m not,” she admitted, as she grabbed a flute of champagne from a passing butler’s tray, “And the only way I’m going to make it through this evening is drunk.”

With that, she swallowed the contents of the glass in one huge gulp, replaced it on the stunned butler’s tray, and reached for another.

Lon led her to the table where they were to sit with Lord Timony and Lady Hannah. He squeezed her hand to give her courage, but she looked ready to faint. That or punch him; he couldn’t quite tell which. Lord Timony sat at the head of the table with Hannah to his right, and Hannah’s brother Elter to her right. Lon took his place at Lord Timony’s left. Grudgingly, a servant pulled out a chair for Shadow next to Lon, in what had been Misty’s assigned seat before...

“How have the twins been, Lon dear?” Hannah asked as the servants brought out the first course.

“Quite well, thank you,” said Lon, brimming with pride as he always did when anyone asked about his children. “Laina loves to teach Jae new songs, if he’ll sit still long enough. They’re both so smart I can’t keep up with them.”

Hannah and Timony smiled the broad smiles of

proud grandparents. Lon moved some of the food around on his plate with a utensil that looked ridiculously tiny in his huge hand. What he wouldn't give for a big hunk of bread to sop everything up with instead of this silly pickle fork.

"Shadow taught them both how to shoot a bow and arrow," he said with a grin, giving up on the fork. "Jae picked it up right away, and Laina is learning fast."

"Misty would have taught little Laina to play the harp by now, I suppose," sighed Hannah. "I'm quite sure the little darling is more suited to music than..." she paused to arch her brow at Shadow, "shooting things."

Lon opened his mouth to respond, but Elter took the short pause as his opportunity to take over. He gestured grandly at the portrait of beautiful, blonde Misty hanging above the fireplace, behind Lon and Shadow.

"She was a fine niece, and a fine woman," he crowed, his old eyes trying hard to focus on the portrait for dramatic effect. "Her death came too soon and she will be missed by all."

"Yes, Elter," said Hannah, patting his hand. "We all miss her very much."

The table sat in silence for a few moments. Timony cleared his throat and took a drink of his water, and Hannah swept a tear from her cheek. Elter shook himself from his reverie and his expression became fiery. Lon held his breath and resisted the urge to wince, knowing what would come next.

"It's the work of the fae," Elter spat.

Shadow and Lon cringed in unison at the derogatory slang, and then Shadow swallowed the entire contents of her champagne glass, which the servants had refilled at least twice already. Lon couldn't say he blamed her.

"Now Elter, let's not use such dirty words," Hannah scolded. "Fairies may be a criminal, filthy people, but we needn't stoop to their level of name calling." She paused and offered Shadow a simpering smile. "Present company excepted, of course."

Lon tensed, ready for a battle, but stopped at the soft touch of Shadow's hand on his arm. He looked down at her pleading expression and she shook her head once. Lon didn't have time for a silent argument with her before another voice interrupted them.

"I heard someone mention fairies," cooed a bubble-headed female third cousin, sitting a few seats down on the long table. "I wonder if it's true that they have wings like a housefly." She giggled.

Lon groaned as Shadow stood to face the girl down the table. This was about to get ugly.

"It would be more likely for me to sprout wings out of my ass than out of my back," Shadow announced.

The entire room silenced. The girl looked stunned for a moment, then recovered.

"*You're a fairy?*" she squealed, delighted. "Oh, how perfectly exciting. And you really don't have wings? I daresay it's a fairly common myth."

"Fostered by idiots like the ones who spend all their time asking stupid questions at dinner parties," retorted Shadow.

"Well I never," the cousin sputtered as Lon led Shadow out of the dining hall, bidding a hasty goodnight to the family.

Once they were safely out of the dining hall, he burst into guffaws. Shadow glared and punched him in the arm, but he just kept on laughing as they made their way down the hallway, away from Misty's horrible relatives.

Lon managed to convince Shadow to go for a walk with him, though she would have rather stayed to beat the tar out of cousin Calla, he was sure. Of course, she insisted on returning to her everyday wear before tromping out in the gardens surrounding the castle. Lon stood outside the door of her room, still chuckling to himself over the exchange at the dinner table.

Presently, Uncle Elter shuffled down the hall.

"Goodnight, Elter," Lon smiled as Elter passed by Shadow's door.

“Goodnight?” Elter laughed. “The night is young, lad.” He glanced around. “Young fellow like you ought to have quite a few more ‘activities’ planned before saying goodnight.” He wheezed out a laugh and poked Lon in the arm. “Take my advice,” he continued. “Hang on to that little spitfire of a fairy. She’s good for you, never mind what Hannah thinks. I haven’t seen you so happy since poor Misty died; and when you get as old as I am, you realize that you have to hang on to the things that make you happy, and damn everything else.”

Lon blinked, stunned by Elter’s candid words, but Elter resumed his long, slow shuffle down the hall.

“Goodnight,” Lon called after him again.

Shadow almost fell into the tepid bathwater from earlier that evening as she stumbled through the room looking for her breeches and shirt in the semi-darkness, lit only with a small candle. She managed, with minimal difficulty, to change finally from the exhausting gown into her trusty day-wear. She popped out of the room, announcing a bit too loudly that she was now properly attired to walk in the gardens. Lon smiled and offered his arm, which Shadow took mostly to steady herself.

They wandered out into the back garden, past the stone wall that wouldn’t have even stopped a determined street urchin from entering the grounds, out into a more open and wild flower garden. The moon lit the open area so well that soon Lon let the lantern swing by his side. Only then did he notice Shadow’s lack of footwear and laughed at what a sight she made sloshing through the wet grass bare-foot and in men’s clothing.

“I’m tired of walking. Sit with me,” demanded Shadow, already on her way to the ground before Lon had a chance to respond.

He laughed as she pulled him down with her, and did all he could to keep from landing on her. In the end, they both fell and wriggled and laughed until Lon wrapped an arm around Shadow to still her. Her giggles subsided and

she cuddled into the crook of his arm. They lay in the grass by a tangled mass of wild roses, side by side, looking up at the stars for nearly ten minutes before either spoke.

“Shadow?” Lon whispered. “Were you ever listening at night when Misty tucked the babies in?”

The question brought Shadow back from the brink of sleep. Of course she’d heard Misty. She couldn’t tear herself away from Lon’s glorious wife singing to the babies one night, when she’d happened to be walking by the nursery at bedtime.

She had lurked in the doorway while Misty gently set first one infant twin, and then the other into their bassinette, singing softly to them. Her heart ached as she watched, though she couldn’t say for sure why it’d hurt her. She shook herself from her memory to reply.

“Once,” she admitted.

“She used to sing them a song about the stars watching over them. She sang it so sincerely, that I almost believed it myself,” he mused. “I wonder if they remember her.”

Shadow doubted it, but didn’t say so. The babies had only been a few months old when Misty was...

“I miss her,” said Lon.

All Shadow knew to do was to stroke the hair back out of Lon’s face and nod. The memory of beautiful Misty’s head cradled in Lon’s arms just after the vicious highway attack made her eyes well up. Damn. She hated to cry, though she knew Lon couldn’t see her face in the dark.

When Lon grasped her in a hug, shame mixed with the familiar heat of desire inside her. How could she want a man whose wife she’d seen die in his arms; a man who was her best friend, her employer, for God’s sake? How dare she, when her own people had killed his beloved Misty? She groaned aloud without really meaning to.

To her surprise, Lon chuckled. He released her from the hug, still laughing.

“Regretting all that champagne now, I suppose?”

Shadow felt a little sick, admittedly, but she guessed

that was rather from the thoughts running through her head than the alcohol running through her veins. But it was easier for Lon to think that she couldn't hold her champagne, so she only nodded and settled back down next to him.

Soon she'd fallen asleep, as only slightly less than sober people can sleep. Lon smiled down at her. Her face still shone from her earlier bath. Her hair still tumbled in wisps around her face. She still looked damn beautiful, but that, of course, never really changed.

He sighed and reached a hand up to move a curl out of her face, at which she murmured quietly. He'd grown to care for her these past few years, though perhaps he hadn't realized just how much until that evening. Sure, he'd always known she was an asset to his team. Their success largely relied on Shadow's knowledge of fairy tricks, as only a fairy could know them. They'd avoided many an attack because of her help.

But that wasn't the whole of it. After Misty's death, Shadow had helped him with the twins, in as much as she could. She'd thrown herself into every task she could take on, to make his life better in those mourning months. He couldn't have made it without her. He missed his wife. He supposed he would always miss her. But now, he found himself wanting Shadow. He tightened his arm around her, though he understood that this sudden wave of possessiveness didn't mean she felt the same way.

Eventually, he fell into a warm doze beside her, blanketed by the scent of roses.

Shadow awoke to the familiar bustle of a transport departure around her. Damn, she must have slept late. She groaned and opened her eyes, which was her first mistake, since the light sent a shooting pain straight into her skull.

"Morning, sunshine," Lon sang out from the corner of the tent.

She sat up and forced her eyes to open. Lon stood at

the basin shaving and with a sinking feeling she realized that meant that this was Lon's tent. She groaned again and flopped back down on the cot. Lon's cot.

"Don't worry," he laughed. "Your virtue is safe."

Shadow snorted in response, unwilling to admit that he'd answered the question she couldn't quite bring herself to ask. Her head ached too much for her to reflect on the unexpected pang of disappointment. As the pain subsided to a dull thump, Lon appeared with a full water canteen.

"Down the hatch," he ordered. "Can't have my lead driver unfit for transport." He winked and then left her in the tent alone.

A splash of water on her face and Shadow flew out of the tent, still barefoot, but ready to tackle her duties. She came face to face with nearly a dozen of the drivers, handlers, and various other employees of Lon James; all wearing grins and smirks.

"Don't you have anything better to do than lurk outside people's goddamn tents?" she shouted.

"Not a thing," grinned the cook, Del, as he stepped forward, took Shadow's cheeks in his old, rough hands, and planted an approving kiss on her forehead. "And let me be the first to offer you congratulations!"

Shadow smirked and folded her arms. "Hardly necessary," she said, raising her voice loud enough for the small crowd to hear, "because nothing happened!"

This brought forth a raucous peal of laughter as the men disbursed. She heard Mark say to Emile on their way past, "I'm sure the boss was whistling for no particular reason this morning."

Shadow growled and stormed about in a foul mood for the remainder of the morning, but even she couldn't maintain a scowl when the wagons were lined up, and the horses were in place, stomping the ground impatiently.

Finally, the goodbyes were said, the cargo, which happened to be supplies for the fort this time, was safely tied down, and they only waited for the go order from Lon.

He mounted his horse and motioned for the start of the journey, hand raised high over his head. Shadow clucked at the horses and off they trotted.

Shadow hadn't meant to brood the entire way. Really, she'd been in a fine mood when they'd left the castle. But with some time alone, she'd begun to think about her situation with Lon.

They'd certainly grown closer over the years. At first, when he'd hired her, he'd been as wary as the rest of the men on the transport. Fairies were not to be trusted, even the trustworthy-looking ones. It wasn't unheard of for a fairy to claim he wanted to help someone, only to rob him blind as soon as the opportunity presented itself. Shadow didn't mind. She knew she'd have to earn his trust.

It had helped, of course, that Misty had loved her from the beginning. It had been Misty's idea to hire her in the first place when they'd found her camping alone in the woods, practically starving and desperate for money and human contact.

"She would have stolen everything already if she'd wanted to," Shadow had overheard Misty tell Lon. "She's practically skin and bones, and she hasn't so much as *touched* a scrap of food that hasn't been specifically offered to her, even when the rest of those brutes were loading up third and fourth helpings. Besides, you need someone like her."

Shadow had worked hard, and proven to be a great asset to the team. Her skill with the horses helped, and her knowledge of fairy tactics became invaluable as attacks on transports became more and more prevalent. As soon as Lon accepted her, which didn't take long under Misty's influence, the other men on the team began to see her as one of their own as well.

She'd never been happier than when she was working for Lon. She'd always respected him a great deal, but they had fun together as well. They kept the men entertained on the road with long jokes, told dueling style.

They spent long hours riding side by side, especially once Misty stayed off most of the transports and at home with the babies.

She had to admit that somewhere down the line they'd moved from an employer-employee relationship to good friends, and now she wasn't sure where they were headed. Last night meant something. But what?

She lifted her face to catch a bit of sun to cheer herself up. Her cheeks warmed, and she opened her eyes.

Shit! Fairies. She called Del over to take her horse's reigns and jumped down from her wagon to find Lon, cursing herself for her lack of attention. If she hadn't wasted all that time wallowing around in her innards, she'd have seen the signs earlier.

The myth about fairies having wings hadn't started without good reason. Gypsy clans of fairies lived throughout the woods in Brogdon and the surrounding provinces, and they preferred to make their livings off of transports like the ones Shadow and Lon carried back and forth, between the fort and the province castles.

They also preferred to attack from above, hence the myth about the wings. The idea was that before the unsuspecting wagoners knew what was happening, dozens of fairies would descend from the trees above. Shadow knew the mistake most people made was to underestimate the power of surprise.

When she found Lon, he grinned down at her from his mount as he rode alongside the wagons.

"How much do you think the twins have grown since we saw them?" he asked.

She smiled. "It's only been three weeks," she said.

"They're five years old," Lon responded. "Three weeks is like forever to them."

She sighed. "I really hate to say it, but I think we're going to have to turn around. Or at least alter our route. Either way we'll lose some time."

Lon's face fell. "Oh?" he said.

Shadow nodded toward the thick canopy of forest

above them. "I've spotted several newly-built platforms and rigs in the last few minutes."

Lon's shoulders drooped, but he nodded. "We can't risk it. We'll go around to Devil Tree and then swing back toward Shreeve's Hill at Dogear."

She looked up at him with an apology already on her lips, but he smiled and reached down to tug her hair.

"Thanks for the warning, sunshine," he said.

Before she could walk the few steps back up to her wagon, the distinctive fairy attack whoop filled her ears. She whirled in time to see the first fairy drop from a tree above Emile. He was about half the size of Emile, but strong. Without much struggle, he managed to push Emile from the wagon and whip the horses to a gallop.

Shadow took off at a run after the wagon. Emile wouldn't be able to catch it, but Shadow had a better chance. That was another reason for the myth about wings; fairies were damn fast. She would have caught it, if another fairy hadn't jumped down from the canopy and dropped on top of her. She paused to admire his aim before she landed a punch to his jaw that sent him sprawling away from her.

Damn, now she'd never catch the wagon. She turned back toward the caravan to see what else she might be able to salvage. Good God, they looked like a bunch of bears being attacked by a swarm of bees. So many fairies! She should have spotted the signs earlier and had them turn back half an hour ago.

She cursed herself as she vaulted over an upturned crate, racing for Lon's wagon. He'd know what to do, how to gather the men.

She found him on the ground, unconscious, a nasty gash over his eyebrow. Flashes of Misty's bloodied face ran through Shadow's mind. No, she would not let this happen again. Lon couldn't die at the hands of her people, like Misty had. She'd save him.

But first she had to get him away from this place. She dragged him off of the wagon trail into the thick

underbrush lining the side of the road.

In a voice she didn't recognize as her own, she began yelling out orders to the wagon team. She shouted warnings, threw punches, and came to the rescue for what seemed like ages. At last, the fairies retreated, leaving Shadow, Lon, and the team alive, but barely.

"Help me!" she barked at Emile as soon as the threat of attack had gone. "Lon is hurt."

Shadow and Emile managed, between them, to drag Lon back out onto the trail and into one of the wagons that hadn't been too damaged by the attack. They'd lost some of their cargo, but most of it had been too big to take without the wagons, and the fairies had only managed to steal one wagon.

"What do you think?" she asked Emile in a strained whisper.

She didn't like the look on his face. His jaw worked for a few seconds before he answered.

"I don't know," he said. "Seems to me, best thing we can do is get him somewhere safe and comfortable."

Shadow nodded. "Get everyone going, then, as best you can. We'll turn around and go back to Brogdon."

Emile jumped down from the wagon, leaving Shadow alone with Lon. She held his head in her lap and mopped at the cut on his head with a rag Emile had found for her.

"I'm sorry," she whispered.

She wanted to apologize for everything; for Misty, for not seeing the fairy signs soon enough, for letting him get hurt, and for loving him when she had no right, but her throat closed and she sat silently holding him.

Snatches of conversation reached Lon's ears, but he couldn't sort it out enough to make any sense of it.

"Head injury," someone said, and then he was jostled around.

A sensation for which he couldn't remember the name shot through his skull and he heard a groan, only later realizing it was his own. A soothing voice broke

through and he felt a cool touch on his brow, brushing back toward his scalp. The voice didn't stop, but he couldn't fit the words together.

Attack...Fairies...Help...Fractions of thoughts and sentences crept through the fog and settled in his brain. Just as he thought he might take hold of something and figure it all out, a shrill shriek suspended everything.

"Out, dirty fae!"

He recognized the voice. He knew, but he couldn't think of the name. The cool touch stopped and he suddenly felt nothing but bereft. He stirred, trying desperately to bring back the touch and the soft, smooth voice.

"Shadow...Shadow," he murmured.

Yes, he wanted Shadow. Shadow was the touch and the voice. Where had she gone? She'd been here before, he was certain. Where had she gone? He only wanted her to be near him, forever. He didn't care about his throbbing skull or the fact that he couldn't think straight or even open his eyes more than enough to let in a tiny slit of light. He only wanted Shadow near him.

He fell again into unconsciousness, still murmuring Shadow's name.

The next few days passed in a blur. Whenever he woke up, he asked for Shadow. He wasn't sure if he wasn't making himself understood or if the servants and relatives were just ignoring him, but no one even acknowledged that he'd mentioned her.

"Where is she?" he asked Hannah once, with as much force as he could manage.

Hannah stared at him for a long moment, and he shivered.

"Worry about you, not her," she said curtly, and that was the most he could ever pry out of anyone about Shadow.

Mostly he slept. He dreamed about being at home again, with Jae and Laina, playing with them on the floor of their little bungalow. He heard movement from the

next room. Not Misty. Misty had always hummed while she worked. Before he saw her, he knew. He recognized the sound of her feet on the floor; the short, efficient movements. Shadow. He went to her and kissed her and held her, and together they watched the twins from the doorway.

“Hang on to her,” said Uncle Elter. “And damn everything else.”

“You need someone like her,” said Misty.

With great effort, Lon opened his eyes. With greater effort, he produced a smile that he knew probably looked more like a grimace; but it was worth it to let Shadow know he was glad to see her.

“Where have you been?” he asked.

She returned his smile, but he noted hers wasn’t much less like a grimace than his.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I tried to see you earlier, but...there were complications.”

She looked so miserable standing there beside his bed; he decided not to press her for the details.

“I’m glad you’re here now,” he said. “I’m so bored I can’t stand it.”

Shadow cracked a grin, much nicer than the grimace smile he’d seen before.

“How can you be bored when you’re sleeping twenty hours a day?” she asked.

“Touché,” Lon said with a painful shrug. “But I’m bored for the four hours I’m awake. I can’t wait until we get back on the road again.”

Shadow perched on the edge of the bed and folded and refolded her hands, then moved on to creasing the sheets.

“Hey.” He nudged her with his leg. “What’s eating you?”

He thought he saw her bottom lip tremble, but he dismissed it as blurred vision. He *had* been hit on the head pretty hard.

"I just came by to tell you goodbye," she said.

"What?"

Lon propped himself up on his elbows. His head swam for a moment, but he didn't care. She turned to look at him, eyes glittering.

"I'm not going on transports with you anymore. I'm going away. I don't belong here."

Lon took a moment to decide if he wanted to respond with anger or sympathy. Anger won.

"Where *do* you belong then, Shadow? You told me yourself you'd never go back to being a dirty gypsy wagon robber. If you don't belong with me, where will you go?"

She turned her face away. "I don't know."

"You at least owe me an explanation."

"No. No I don't," she said. She stood from the bed and stared down at him with an uncharacteristically cold expression. "Goodbye."

And she left the room.

Shadow tied her knapsack tight and slung it across her back. A few of the wagoneers had come to say goodbye, and she hugged each in turn before she headed down the dusty road toward anywhere but there.

Her gut clenched with regret. She should have told Lon why she was leaving. She *did* owe him that much, and so much more. But she couldn't do it...she couldn't tell him that Lady Hannah had blamed the attack on her and had ordered her out. Besides, it would be simpler this way. She was no good for him, and he was certainly no good for her. Perhaps distance would be just the trick to make her stop loving him. In time, she'd forget him.

Except damn if that didn't look like his horse trotting across the field from the manor toward her. But it couldn't be. He wouldn't be riding a horse this soon. He'd looked like hell yesterday. She doubted he could walk, let alone ride. She didn't even believe it when he pulled the horse to a stop in front of her. Not until he slid from the saddle and crumpled as his feet hit the ground did she realize

that yes, it really was Lon.

She ran to help him, cursing and shouting at him all the while.

“What do you think you’re doing? You idiot! What makes you think you can ride a horse when you can’t even stand? How did you get out? Stupid, stubborn, son of a bitch.”

Lon chuckled and allowed her to help him sit up on the grass.

“Guilty as charged,” he said, but then his face grew serious. “Don’t go.”

“Is that what this is all about?” she asked, though she couldn’t think of any other reason he’d risk his damn life riding out here. “I’m leaving and it is better this way, and that’s that, and you can’t give me a good enough reason to stay.” She folded her arms across her chest, daring him.

He leaned forward and kissed her, and not a friendly Lon kiss either; a deep, soulful, gut-twisting, knee-buckling kiss that had Shadow kissing him back before she knew what was happening. But she couldn’t do this. She had to be strong. She pushed away.

“Fine. Give me *two* good reasons to stay.”

“I love you,” Lon said, matter-of-factly.

Shadow felt her jaw drop open. This was a whole new game. If he loved her back, then maybe...

“No!” she shouted and stood. “You can’t love me, I forbid it.”

Lon laughed. “It’s a little late for that.”

“You can’t, you can’t,” Shadow pleaded, shaking her head and fighting back tears. “Your wife, and your head, and your cargo.” She knew she was babbling but she couldn’t seem to stop herself. “How can you love me?”

Lon grabbed her wrists and pulled her back down to sit next to him. He wiped at the tears she hadn’t realized she’d shed.

“Listen to me,” he said. “You do not have to atone for those sins, because they are not yours. I will always love

Misty and miss her, but that doesn't mean I can't love you. You are the person who makes me happy. You are the woman I want my children to love. I love *you*."

He kissed her again. When he released her, he stared at her, searching.

"I don't know what to say," she said.

"Say you love me. Say we'll get out of here and go back to the twins, and never come back."

"But—"

"Come away from here, sunshine, with me."

Shadow paused, just for an instant, to make sure she wasn't dreaming.

"I love you," she said to Lon, finally. "But you knew that."