



Dark
Destinies

*Guardian's
Challenge*

Bronwyn Green

Guardian's Challenge

A Dark Destinies Story

By Bronwyn Green

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Guardian's Challenge
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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and occurrences are a product of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, places or occurrences, is purely coincidental.

To Brynn who kicked my butt non-stop to finish this book.

To Chel who gave me the best advice ever.

To Dakota who whined. Happy Birthday, Baby!

To all of the readers who've asked for Asher's book. This one's for you.

Chapter One

Her breath drifted across his cheek as she whispered his name. Turning toward her, he drew her soft curves against his body. Her lips opened under his, and he groaned at her honeyed warmth. He'd forgotten how good she tasted. He pulled her closer, needing her more than air, only to feel the rough scrape of wool against his skin. His eyes opened, and he stared at the tangled blanket on the empty bed.

Cursing, Asher, Chancellor of Maelgwn, pushed himself from his mattress and stumbled to the window. The waves, crashing on the rocks below, were as restless as he was. By the gods, he couldn't remember when he'd last slept for more than a few hours at a time.

He rubbed his hand across his eyes. That wasn't true. He'd slept when she was here. Grabbing a half empty bottle of mead, he tried to wash away the phantom memories. It didn't work. Just as it hadn't every other time he'd tried it. She'd been gone for nine hellish months, and he still woke with the taste of her on his lips.

Draining the bottle, he sighed as the moon sank lower in the sky. The alcohol didn't do anything to dull the dreams or the almost tactile recollections. He needed only to close his eyes to feel her soft, golden flesh against his. If he gave into the lure of memory, the sensation of her long, silky hair would slide across his arms and chest—inky-black, cool against his skin.

He'd never responded so completely to another woman. Even now, his cock ached with the lack of release only she could give him. His hand drifted to his erection, and he gripped it, stroking upward but quickly abandoned the action. No matter how many times he came, he'd never find the release he sought until he was buried so deeply inside her neither one of them could move.

It wasn't that he didn't have available women—there were plenty. He just didn't have the one he wanted. The one he needed. Since she'd vanished—run away, he amended—he'd been living like a gods' forsaken eunuch.

An insistent knocking pulled him away from the window and his memories. Tugging on his braes, he crossed the room and opened the door. A disheveled temple consort stood with her fist raised, ready to knock again. Dropping her hand, she straightened her slumped shoulders. “The overlord requests your presence to assist the midwife. Lady Elizabeth is having trouble passing the child.”

“What would I know about birthing babies?” But concern gripped him. If any harm came to the overlord's mate, the man would be inconsolable. He wouldn't wish that hell on anyone.

The consort stared at him through sleep-deprived eyes. “The midwife insists that you help.”

Stifling a sigh, he grabbed his shirt from the foot of his bed, tugged it over his head and followed the young woman down the hallway. When the overlord beckoned, it was Asher's duty to go.

A kernel of worry sprouted in his gut. If anything happened to Elizabeth, he didn't know how his friend would cope. It would probably be much the same as Asher coped without Neeve—living a half-life and sleeping very little. He thought again of his dream. The sensations had been so real. For the last week, he'd felt as if he'd find her around every corner of the keep.

He scrubbed his hands over his eyes willing himself to focus on the issue at hand. As Maelgwn's chancellor, he needed to help his overlord, Micah Bleddyn with whatever he required. Normally, it involved anticipating and preparing for the next Caderyn attack. But Micah was his closest friend—more like a brother. Whether it was driving the Caderyn invaders from their shores and making Maelgwn a safe, thriving country or helping to birth the overlord's heir, he'd assist his friend in whatever way he could.

Since Micah had inherited the position of overlord a year ago, Asher's life had been thrown into chaos. Of course, with the changes Micah's rule had wrought, so had everyone else's. The changes were for the best. And they were changes Asher imagined Neeve would approve of—if she knew of them.

It was hard to image she wasn't aware of them. The proclamations had been spread from border to border. Even if some people had a hard time adjusting to the idea of women being allowed to use magic without fear of punishment, they had at least heard the edict. Had she?

Neeve. The woman haunted his dreams and nearly every waking moment. Though she'd run from him, he'd foolishly allowed himself to believe she'd return upon hearing the news of the former chancellor's demise. Bitter amusement twisted his lips. Just because the despot she loathed was dead, it didn't mean she wanted to return. Perhaps, she'd known she'd be unlikely to get away a second time.

Asher sighed. He wouldn't have kept her here against her will—at least, he didn't think he would have. He just wanted the year of companionship she'd promised when she'd first arrived at the temple. Instead, he'd had her for a few weeks. A few days never would have been enough to satisfy his need for her. If events had followed their original course, the novelty of Neeve would have worn off with time, and he would have moved forward with his life. Now, he was trapped in obsessive worry and wondering.

He'd sought her for months, searching every village, every outlying homestead, everywhere he thought she might have gone. He'd even infiltrated as many Caderyn camps as he could find, fearing she'd been captured. He'd found no trace of her. It was as if she'd vanished into the mist.

He'd know if she were dead. He was sure of it. His magic was too powerful for it to be otherwise. So how did she manage to keep her location a secret? Not for the first time, he wondered if she had powers like the overlord's mate. If so, what else had she hidden from him while they'd been together?

Pushing aside the unwelcome thoughts, he followed the consort through the dimly lit stone corridors, stopping in front of the heavy door that led to Micah and Elizabeth's chamber. An anguished cry came from the room beyond. The hair on his nape stood on end, and his stomach twisted with nerves. The consort entered the room, leaving him standing alone in the hallway.

If you're here to help her get in here—if not, leave now! Micah's voice sounded in his head.

Swallowing hard, Asher pushed open the door to find his friend's features pinched with sweat beading his brow. His normally brown skin appeared grayish. Another cry sounded, and Micah turned away from him and crouched by his mate's side.

Asher moved into the room and momentarily froze in place. At the end of the bed, knelt the woman he'd been desperate to find. For the briefest of moments, she met his gaze, her beautiful brown eyes wide. Her sharp gasp hit him in the stomach like a fist. He wanted to cross the room and pull her into his arms. He wanted to breathe her in so deeply she'd fill the gnawing emptiness inside him.

Just as quickly, the moment was over. She turned from him to focus on the task at hand, murmuring encouragements to the laboring woman. Her sweetly husky voice wound around his senses. That same voice haunted his dreams, but instead of soothing whispers, his dreams were filled with memories of her impassioned cries.

Every muscle in his body urged him to spirit her away—to keep her to himself. As if she sensed his thoughts, her gaze darted toward him but slid away just as quickly at her friend's sound of pain. He glanced at Elizabeth. Sweat matted her deep red hair to her head, and her pale body strained with the effort of bringing another life into the world.

For a horrible moment, he imagined Neeve struggling like that. Terror settled like a rock in his gut, and he suspected he looked nearly as pallid as Micah did.

Alinore, Micah's grandmother, shuffled to the doorway and peered up at him. "Either leave, or make yourself useful."

Neeve whirled to face him, her expression frantic. "Can you do anything for her pain?"

He almost laughed at the absurdity of the situation. For months he'd imagined conversing with her—demanding answers for the hell she'd put him through. This was a topic of discussion he'd never considered. Elizabeth's whimper brought him back to the situation at hand, and he stepped inside the room.

"I don't know," he admitted.

Neeve's hopeful expression faded.

Determination gripped him. He moved to the far side of the bed and placed his hands on Elizabeth's heaving belly. This was a far cry from the last time he'd shared this bed with Elizabeth and Micah.

His friend smoothed his mate's hair from her face and whispered reassurances to her. Briefly, his gaze clashed with Asher's. "Help her," he begged.

Asher closed his eyes and tried to focus. He had no healing abilities, but perhaps he could manage something. Power raced along his limbs and centered in his hands. In careful increments, he released it into Elizabeth's body. Under his touch, her breathing slowed and the grimace of pain faded from her face.

"Don't stop," Neeve demanded from the foot of the bed.

He glanced at her in surprise. When he'd last seen her, she'd been so sweet and innocent—eager to please. Now, there was an edge to her he didn't recognize, but it intrigued him nonetheless. She'd grown harder, more sure of herself. She seemed older—not in a haggard, used up sense, but in a more worldly way as if she'd come into her power. And perhaps she had. What had she been doing? What had she been through since she'd been gone?

"We have to turn the babe," Neeve said, returning him to the present.

She motioned him closer. Alinore joined Neeve and together they pushed on the rigid lump under Elizabeth's skin. Her body shuddered under their hands, and he increased the flow of power. Finally, the babe twisted into position, and Neeve returned to her post at the end of the bed.

"Release her," Neeve ordered. "She needs to push."

He withdrew the energy from Elizabeth's body. After what seemed like hours, he watched in horrified awe as the child slipped, wet and howling, into Neeve's hands.

He'd never seen such a beatific smile on her face. The sight of it made his chest ache, and for a moment, he let himself imagine her holding their child. She met his gaze, and her expression faded. Turning from him, she tied and cut the cord, before wiping off the baby.

She'd dismissed him. Well, she'd tried to, but it didn't matter. Now that she was back, he wasn't letting her go again. Not until he'd had his fill of her.

Ignoring Asher's probing gaze, Neeve cleaned the blood and fluid from the crying child. No matter how often she witnessed this miracle, it amazed her each and every time.

Today, more than ever, she thought about the baby she could have borne Asher if she'd stayed.

Guilt clogged her throat. She'd been so stupid. So blinded by her misery over leaving Asher, she hadn't recognized the signs for what they were.

She'd thought she'd gotten over the pain, but his presence today brought back the sharp memories of loss—loss of the child and Asher. Blinking back tears, she wrapped Elizabeth's newborn daughter in a soft blanket and laid her in her mother's grateful arms. The joy in her friend's expression was contagious.

"She's beautiful," Elizabeth whispered, awe tingeing her voice. She met Neeve's gaze. "Thank you."

Micah stared at his daughter and reached to touch her tiny hand. The utter fear in his eyes was almost comical. A fierce warrior brought low by a crying infant. Much like her mother, this little one had no trouble speaking her mind. Neeve couldn't stop the grin that spread over her face. Without meaning to, she sought Asher with her gaze. It was a mistake. He watched her like a hawk circling its prey, making it nearly impossible to look away.

His deep green eyes glittered with frustration, and he dragged his fingers through his long, chestnut-colored hair. Her fingers itched to follow the same path. She'd loved playing with his hair after they'd—

It was best not to think of that. It wouldn't ever happen again.

Busying herself with the afterbirth and cleanup, she kept as far away from him as she could. It wasn't easy. He hovered nearby, clearly waiting for an opportunity to speak with her. She glanced at him beneath her lashes. Judging from his expression, he wanted more than a conversation. A flutter of anticipation fanned through her womb as her body clenched with remembered need. Even now, she had to convince herself not to rush into his arms, though that was the only place she wanted to be.

Unbidden, memories assailed her—his eyes burning with desire as they bored into hers. The play of his warm hands on her body. His firm lips coasting over every inch of her flesh. The nearly unbearable friction of their bodies as he pounded into her.

Desire pooled low in her abdomen, and she bit back a groan.

With a sigh, she reminded herself that she'd done the right thing by leaving. She was nothing more to him than a temporary slave. His consort. A convenient vessel for his seed. And if he had discovered her powers...

She knew that the overlord had changed the laws to protect women with magic, but she hadn't been willing to risk it. It wasn't that she didn't trust Micah—she did. But she didn't trust the other men of Maelgwn to follow the edict. Nor did she trust Asher's response. She doubted that he would have been angry that she'd had the abilities, but he would have been furious that she'd hidden them from him. He'd wanted her body and soul.

To be fair, she'd been content to give him everything he'd wanted. She'd been insatiable for him. But no longer. She was more than a woman with an available womb. Her life was her own. She would no longer be a slave to his passion...or hers. Now, if only she could convince her body of that.

Setting aside her wayward feelings, she looked at Elizabeth. Curled in her mate's embrace, she and her newborn child had fallen asleep under his protective gaze. A pang of sadness and envy closed Neeve's throat. Even if she'd stayed with Asher, they never would have had the love Micah and Elizabeth shared.

Her post as a temple consort had been merely to provide sons for the temple guardians to train in the magical arts. Men in Asher's position didn't mate for life. If she'd learned anything since her flight from Maelgwn, it was that she wanted more than he had to give her.

He'd been a kind and generous lover, but he'd always hidden his emotions behind the stone wall of his will. She knew his body, but she didn't know *him*. It wasn't enough.

She glanced at him from the corner of her eye. This rigidly coiled irritation was the biggest emotional response she'd ever seen from him. She squelched a smile of satisfaction. It was about time something spoiled his composed demeanor.

Turning from him, she gathered her belongings. It had been a long labor, and she wanted to rest before returning to Hafan. Glancing at Asher once more before she left, she saw him push off the wall he'd been leaning against. Determination lit his eyes and tightened his features as he stalked toward her. He was across the room before she could take two steps. The need she'd thought she'd quelled flared to life at the hunger in his gaze. Gripping her wrist, he pulled her out the door.

She gasped at the sensation. It was such simple contact, but his hand on her skin seared her. Perhaps, it was because she'd craved his touch for so long.

"Your duty to the overlord is finished. It's time to fulfill the rest of your obligations."

Neeve tried to tug free of Asher's grasp. He couldn't possibly mean what she thought. Refusing to let her leave, he pinned her against the corridor wall. His hands on either side of her shoulders caged her between his outstretched arms. Leaning forward, he closed the distance between them, his fierce gaze leaving her breathless.

"Where the hell have you been?" he growled.

She swallowed past the lump in her throat and tried to answer. "It doesn't matter."

Anger darkened his eyes, and she could almost feel the desire coursing through his body. "The hell it doesn't."

As difficult as it was to do, she fought the hunger rising within her. "Release me."

A cold smile curved his lips. "No."

"No?" Anger displaced some of her desire. "I am no longer your consort."

"You owe me a year."

Rage burned through her veins. "I owe you nothing!"

He shook his head, and his gaze dropped pointedly to her breasts then returned to her face. "Yes. You do."

She shoved at his solid chest, her effort fruitless. "Go to hell."

"Where do you think I've been?" Without warning, his lips descended, capturing hers with a near growl.

She released the breath she hadn't realized she'd held, and his tongue slipped past her shocked defenses. For a moment, she lost herself in sensation—the remnants of mead on his lips, the rough stubble of hair on his chin, the hard planes of his body against hers. Yes. This was where she wanted to be—in his arms.

His hand splayed through the hair at her nape, loosening the strip of leather that kept it from her face, and his lips trailed an urgent path along the column of her neck. Her fingers fisted in his tunic, and she pulled him closer. How had she lived so long without this? Without him? Just as quickly, she remembered how, and more importantly, why.

She tried to twist from his grasp. Tightening his fingers in her hair, he raised his lips from her skin.

"Let me go," she demanded.

He shook his head.

"I'm not the same person I was when I lived here." She needed him to see reason.

“It doesn’t matter.”

“It does to me.” Anger tightened her muscles. She’d hurt him if she had to. Drawing her knee upward, she prepared to bring her foot down on his instep.

Sensing her intent, he shoved his leg between hers, bringing his thigh to rest against her mound. Her breath left her body on a gasp. More intense than ever, the aching empty sensation clawed through her body, and she fought the urge to beg him to take her here and now.

Hardly daring to lift her eyes, she met his gaze. His mouth curved in predatory satisfaction, and her stomach sank to the hewn stone floor. Her response hadn’t gone unnoticed.

“You still want me,” he murmured, his breath hot against her ear. He let his hand slip from her hair to trail over her shoulder and settle at her waist. His thumb brushed over her ribcage, under the swell of her breast. She tried to squirm from his hold, but the motion only served to heighten her awareness of their intimate position.

“No,” she choked out. “No, I don’t.”

Raising an eyebrow in disbelief, he slid his hand upward and cupped her breast. Her nipple hardened under his palm, and a gratified smile curved his lips.

Neeve fought the shudder of need that coursed through her at his touch. It was heaven to have his hand on her again. She wanted to rip away the cloth that separated their skin, but she refused to give him the pleasure of knowing how he affected her. Pressing her lips together, she glared at him.

What might have been amusement flitted through his eyes before they turned flat again. His hand dropped to her hip, and he began to gather the fabric of her skirt, inching it upward. “If I touched you right now, you’d be wet for me.”

It wasn’t a question—the arrogant lout. The worst part was that he was right. As soon as he’d kissed her, desire had dampened her folds. She wanted nothing more than to have him inside her. “Touch me, and I’ll hurt you.”

His lips twitched, but he kept bunching the fabric, intent on baring her skin.

She struggled harder, not wanting another reminder of the bliss he could give her. She’d spent far too many nights lying awake with nothing but cold memories to comfort her, and she doubted she’d survive leaving him a second time.

His callused fingertips reached her thigh, and she fought the shudder that threatened at the contact. As he crept closer to her core, apprehension twisted her stomach. She couldn't let him touch her. Still trying to break free of his hold, she sank her teeth into his upper arm.

Asher's eyes narrowed, growing darker—more intense. He moved closer and brushed her ear with his lips. "You're going to regret that, *cariad*."

Releasing him, she met his gaze and swallowed thickly. "Probably."

The word ended on a gasp as his hand brushed across her damp curls. He held her gaze with his own. No matter how hard she tried, she couldn't look away from the carnal promises in his eyes. The shudder she'd stifled earlier raced through her as he unerringly found her center, parting her folds with his finger.

"You're so wet," he breathed.

Her hands curled against the heated planes of his chest. She closed her eyes and melted against him as he stroked her needy flesh. He lowered his lips to hers, and she opened willingly beneath him, drawing his tongue into her mouth. He kissed her as if she were the sustenance he needed to survive. All the while, he continued to slide through her wetness, occasionally brushing his thumb across her swollen clitoris. She arched against his hand, powerless to stop the motion of her hips. She wanted him inside her so badly the emptiness hurt.

His mouth left hers to trace the line of her jaw, down the side of her neck. The sensation of his rough cheek against her skin drove her fingers into his hair, and she dragged his lips to her breast.

Tugging the loose fabric of her bodice aside, he bared her left breast. Her nipple puckered under his scrutiny. The tightening flesh throbbed as his breath coasted over her bare skin. Without warning, his mouth closed, hot and insistent, over her aching nipple.

Unable to stop the moan that escaped her lips, she tightened her hands in his hair and pulled him closer. He suckled harder, accommodating her wordless pleas. It was as if she'd never left him. Their bodies remembered each other and strained for more.

Using his free hand, he palmed circles over her other nipple. It pebbled through the fabric, hardening further as he plucked and twisted it. Need pulsed through her creating an invisible line of connection from her breasts to her womb, and she wanted more.

She should push him away. She should fight the drugging pull he had on her. She should, but she couldn't bring herself to do it.

Just when Asher had feared he'd never see Neeve again, she'd reappeared in his life. He sucked harder on her nipple, rage and fear warring with his need for her. Now that he had her back, he wouldn't ever let her forget she belonged to him.

He watched her battle for control of her responses. Her thoughts shone clearly on her beautiful face. Refusing to let her further question the heat between them, he slipped a finger inside her tight channel. Trembling, her breathing harsh, she tightened around his finger, and he fought his own tremors, aching to be inside her. He added a second finger, and she convulsed around him, closing her eyes and biting her lip to keep from crying out.

"You're wishing this was my cock filling you," he rasped, watching her face as he spoke.

Increasing the speed and depth of his thrusts, he slipped his arm around her waist to support her shaking legs. She clung to his chest, her lips parted as she gasped for breath.

She shoved harder, pushing against his hand, seeking the release she so desperately needed. The release they both needed. His cock ached to be inside her, to feel her snug channel gripping him.

"You're so tight," he whispered against her neck. "Have you been saving yourself for me?"

He watched her eyes. Had she missed him as much as he'd missed her? Had she dreamed of him? Had she realized no other man could give her everything she needed?

A sheen of sweat clung to her upper lip as she ground herself against him, refusing to respond to his question.

Though it nearly killed him, he withdrew his hand.

She whimpered at the loss.

"Answer me," he grated. "Have you fucked anyone else?"

"Please," she croaked, her throat raw.

He still wanted her. Her answer wouldn't change anything—anything other than the size of the hole in his heart.

Holding her gaze, he lifted his glistening fingers to his lips and drew her essence into his mouth. He fought the groan that welled in his chest. So much better than he remembered, but he still longed to taste her juices directly from her skin. To hear her scream as he brought her to the edge over and over.

Eyes bright with need, she watched him savor her cream. He traced her trembling lips with his damp finger as he drew her closer, his erection prodding her hip. Dropping his hand, he dragged his fingers over the sensitive crease where her thigh met her torso.

“Has any other man filled you?”

She swallowed hard and shook her head as he skimmed her mound with his knuckles.

“I didn’t hear you.” He lightly pinched her clitoris before withdrawing his hand again.

“No.” The word was ripped from her throat.

Using fingers, thumb and mouth, he took possession of her body and quickly brought her back to the teetering peak of release. Her cunt rippled around his fingers as she caught his rhythm. He suckled her nipple, reveling in her desperate, sobbing gasps as he drew on her.

Her climax seemed to hover just beyond her reach. Her body strained toward it. Strained toward him. He released her breast and pulled back to watch her. It had been too damn long. He wanted to see her face when she came. Tears squeezed from the corners of her eyes, and her lips moved but issued no sound. It looked as if she mouthed, “Only you, only you,” but he couldn’t be sure.

He played his thumb across her throbbing clit, drawing her need higher.

“Come for me, Neeve,” he commanded.

Looking into his eyes, she began to shudder uncontrollably, clutching at his arms. Her keening cry echoed through the empty corridor and his aching body. Only sheer will kept him from spilling in his braes. He wouldn’t allow himself release until he was buried inside her supple body.

Gasping, she slumped against him. Slowly, he withdrew his hand and gathered her in his arms. “No. You don’t want me at all,” he murmured against her hair.

Neeve stiffened and tried again to pull away. He shouldn’t have taunted her, but he couldn’t seem to let the tender moment last. He was too raw—too close to admitting how much he needed her.

Blinking, she straightened her dress, hiding her beautiful breast from his view. He felt her withdrawal in every level of his being, and he refused to let it go any further.

“I have work to do,” she muttered, refusing to look at him.

He lifted her chin and forced her gaze upward. “We’re not finished.”

She stared at him, incredulity coloring her features. “Oh, we’re finished. We’ve been finished for months.”

Chapter Two

Neeve glared at the man with whom she'd once fancied herself in love. She needed to pull herself together and think. She hadn't planned on seeing him again. She certainly hadn't planned on experiencing an earth-shattering orgasm at his hands—and in the hallway of all places. Shaking her head in disgust, she tried to step around him.

Asher blocked her way and gazed at her as if he could read her mind. He had that ability, but she'd always been able to shield her thoughts from him, and she didn't plan on letting her guard down in the future. It wouldn't help her situation if he knew how conflicted she was about seeing him again after all this time.

It was hard enough to think with the warmth of Asher's scent hanging heavy in the air and the aftereffects of release still trembling through her body. Harder still to think, when all she wanted was to feel him pounding into her, over and over.

“Come to my chamber.”

Her body clenched with desire at the edge of command in his voice. She wanted to. She wanted to welcome him into her empty, aching body. Crushing the thought before it fully took root, she frowned at her reaction. She'd worked hard for her independence. She wasn't about to abandon it simply because his dominant stance aroused her. Everything about him aroused her. She shook her head, denying them both.

He opened his mouth to argue when Joseph, one of the temple guardians rushed toward them, his features tight with worry.

Asher locked his fingers around Neeve's wrist, keeping her close when she would have pulled away. “What's the matter?” he asked the young man.

“Messengers from Pryderi. They're begging aid from the overlord's mate.”

Neeve straightened and stared at the guardian. “She just gave birth. She’s in no condition to give aid to anyone.”

Asher’s eyes widened at her pronouncement. She supposed her newfound assertiveness was a huge surprise to him. He would simply have to accustom himself to it. Dismissing his reaction, she turned her attention back to Joseph whose eyes darkened with recognition.

“Neeve,” the other man greeted warmly. “It’s good to see you.”

She smiled, fully aware of Asher’s narrowing gaze as he took in their interaction. “Hello, Joseph.”

The door to the overlord’s chamber eased open, and Asher pulled her aside—away from Joseph—as Micah exited the room looking exhausted.

“What is it?” the overlord asked, looking directly at Asher.

She supposed he’d sent his thoughts to Micah when Joseph had announced the arrival of their guests. He had that ability as well.

The younger guardian bowed slightly, his burnished gold hair glinting in the light of the torches. “My lord, messengers from Pryderi have arrived. They’re begging assistance of your mate.”

Micah bristled. “What sort of aid?”

“The heirs to the throne have taken ill, and their healers haven’t been able to alleviate their suffering.”

The overlord nodded and began walking toward the great hall. “We need their continued goodwill and support against the Caderyn.” He stopped and turned and pinned them with a stony gaze. “But my mate will not go.”

Micah’s fierce love and worry for Elizabeth was an almost visible energy as it vibrated along his tight shoulders and clenched fists.

Neeve stepped from Asher’s side, heedless of his fingers tightening around her wrist. “I will go in her place.”

“No,” Asher practically shouted. “I forbid it.”

She yanked her arm from his grasp and spun to face him. “You *what*?”

His green eyes glittered in the torchlight as he glared at her. “I forbid you to go,” he said evenly.

Micah raised his eyebrows as he glanced between her and Asher. Dismissing his chancellor, he addressed Neeve. “You would travel to Pryderi?”

She swallowed her rising fear. “If need be.”

Micah inclined his head. “I would not send you without protection.”

Nodding, she glanced at Asher from the corner of her eye. She’d heard the stories about Pryderi. Nearly every woman had two mates—whether she wanted them or not. Unescorted women were considered fair prey.

“I will accompany her,” Asher stated.

Before she could open her mouth to protest, Micah nodded then continued toward the great hall as they followed in his wake.

The barely clad Pryderi warriors rose to greet them. Neeve didn’t miss the way their eyes skimmed appreciatively over her body. Judging from Asher’s narrowed gaze, he didn’t miss their admiration either. She focused her attention on Micah.

“I’m told you’ve need of a healer,” the overlord stated, pulling their attention to him.

The dark haired man bowed his head. “We do, milord. The heirs to Pryderi’s throne have fallen ill, and our midwives have been unable to find the cause or the cure.”

Micah nodded while Neeve’s mind raced. She mentally cataloged the herbs she’d brought with her from Hafan. Judging from the warriors’ anxious manner, she didn’t have time to return for more. She’d need to check Elizabeth’s stock and replenish her supplies before they left.

“My mate,” Micah continued, “has just given birth and is unable to attend you.” Turning slightly, he gestured toward Neeve. “However, Neeve has agreed to accompany you back to Pryderi and will travel with her mates.”

She opened her mouth to protest, but Asher’s dark glance silenced her. She wasn’t a fool. It would be stupid to travel unescorted, but it didn’t stop her from balking at the situation. In the last nine months, she’d become accustomed to answering only to herself. Being forced to pretend Asher was her mate chafed at her freedom.

The warriors nodded. “Our thanks to you,” they intoned, bowing slightly to Micah.

Annoyance flared, and her fists tightened. *She* was the one who had agreed to go. *She* would be the one doing the work. And they thanked *Micah*? Not that their attitude was a surprise. It seemed the Pryderi men were no different than the majority of the men of Maelgwn.

Perhaps it was a good thing Asher would be accompanying her. He might be able to keep her from slapping these idiots.

As if he knew her thoughts, Asher smiled at her. His warm, sensual smile never failed to set her insides quivering. Maybe spending this time with him would end her cravings for him once and for all. Their liaison would follow the normal course, ending as such things did, and she would no longer lay awake at night, wishing for him to fill her, fucking her until they were too exhausted to move.

His eyes darkened—an emerald sea of desire awash with carnal promises. He stepped closer to her, and she prayed he hadn't heard her breath quicken. Shielding her emotions, she looked away as Micah sent for food and drink for the exhausted warriors.

Having seen to the needs of his guests, the overlord gently took her arm and led her from the hall, motioning for Asher and Joseph to follow. Once they'd passed through the doors, he met her questioning glance. "Are you sure you want to go through with this?"

"If I don't go, we risk our alliance with the Pryderi."

Micah didn't speak, but approval glimmered in his eyes.

Asher stepped behind her, effectively trapping her between his body and Micah's.

"Asher will travel with you," the other man dictated. "It's best if you allow him to act the role of your mate." He paused, and she felt the moment his gaze connected with Asher's. "It will be safest for Neeve if you allow Joseph...or another man to play the part of her other mate."

Tension shot through Asher's body, and he practically growled. She didn't need to turn around to know the foul expression that twisted his features. A perverse thrill skittered along the edges of her awareness, but she crushed it. It didn't matter that he was jealous. Their relationship was over. Regardless of what had happened earlier, and despite her thoughts of allowing their relationship to take its natural course, she wouldn't allow him to touch her again. She'd barely survived losing him before. She refused to put herself through that anguish again.

"It will keep the overzealous Pryderi at a distance," Micah said, dragging her back to the conversation at hand.

Joseph stepped closer and pointedly stared into her eyes. "I am more than willing to accompany Neeve and protect her."

Asher's hands dropped heavily on her shoulders. "I don't like it," he murmured. "But if it will keep her safe, I agree."

Neeve crossed her arms over her chest and glanced between Micah and Asher. “Is anyone going to ask how I feel about this deception?”

“No,” Asher and Joseph answered together.

Micah’s lips twitched. “I’d ask, but if you disagree then you won’t be leaving Maelgwn at all.”

Pressing her lips together, she narrowed her eyes at the overlord. She didn’t have any doubt that he’d carry out his threat. “I need to gather provisions.”

“You’ll have whatever you require. After you’ve assembled what you need, I’ll meet you at the docks with our guests.”

She nodded before glancing at Asher and Joseph. “I’m going to collect my belongings and the supplies I need. Do you two plan to follow me like trained guard dogs?”

Asher leaned close, his lips brushing her ear. “I plan to follow you like a man who doesn’t trust you not to run away again.”

Anger narrowed her eyes as she glared at him. “I would not promise my aid then refuse to give it.”

He shrugged. “Your promises have been poorly kept in the past. Should I assume this will be any different?”

Her hand clenched in her skirt. The desire to slap him was overwhelming, but with the Pryderi warriors within hearing distance, she turned away and stalked from the room. Asher followed, easily catching up with her angry strides and keeping pace with her.

Ignoring his presence, she left the great hall and walked to the cellar area behind the kitchens. It had been some time since she’d been in the keep, but she doubted that the herbs had been moved elsewhere. Stopping outside the door, she glanced around the area for torches. Finding none, she closed her eyes and visualized a glowing orb of light above her palm. When she felt it materialize, she opened her eyes and pushed open the door of the storeroom. She didn’t miss the expression of amazement on Asher’s face as he studied the bright ball of blue tinged light that hovered above her hand. For a moment, she allowed herself the luxury of imaging his reaction to seeing her pass through a stone wall. However, she doubted that she’d ever trust him enough to share that particular skill. Besides, she’d promised the people Hafan who’d taken her in that she’d never reveal their secrets.

Without speaking, she entered the room and began searching the contents of the shelves. As she made her selections, she laid them on a high table in the center of the room. Since she didn't know what exactly ailed the boys, it was difficult to choose. But it was better to take too many components than too few. Most likely, she'd be using magic, but the right combination of herbs might be helpful in staving off future illness. Nervous worry fluttered through her belly. What would happen to them if she couldn't heal the heirs? Would they be allowed to leave? Resolutely, she pushed the troublesome thoughts aside and focused at her task at hand.

Neeve frowned. Wrapping the individual plants in oilcloth would require the use of both hands, but if she put down the orb, the power would dissipate. She hadn't mastered the ability to keep the power flowing without bodily contact. A thought occurred to her. She'd never tried to pass the orb to anyone else. Perhaps Asher could hold it while she prepared the supplies. She supposed she could have him pack the herbs and oils, but healing had never been one of his gifts. She needed to make sure they had the most potent plants and that they were packed properly.

She turned to him. "I don't know if this will work, but will you hold this?"

He met her gaze, surprise still evident in the brilliant green depths of his eyes. "Have you always been able to do that?" he asked, gesturing at the sphere of light.

She nodded. "My mother taught me. It was one of the reasons she didn't want me to serve in the temple. She was afraid my powers would be discovered and I'd be killed."

Asher stared at Neeve, trying to acclimate himself to the shock of seeing her work magic. He couldn't believe she'd managed to hide it from him while they'd been together. Usually, sensing another's abilities was one of his skills. Had he been so blinded by his lust for her that he hadn't seen beyond it?

Slowly, he held out his hands, waiting to receive the glowing ball of light. He glanced from the orb to her face, watching as the unearthly shimmer emphasized her delicate features when she lowered the sphere into his palms. It faded slightly as it made contact with his skin, but she cupped her hands around it and closed her eyes. The light brightened and a heady vibration traveled along his arms.

"Focus on keeping the light bright," she murmured as she carefully removed her hands.

He visualized the orb's glow remaining steady as he watched Neeve return to the task of bundling up the supplies. The sphere pulsed almost warmly against his skin, and he was struck by the intimacy of the act of holding something she'd created—a part of her.

Cold fear clawed his scalp. What if her power had been discovered while the former chancellor had been alive? Or discovered by someone who chose to ignore Micah's edict? The thought of someone harming her turned his blood icy. Now that she'd revealed her power, she was more likely to become a target of those who longed for the old regime. She could even become a target for someone who sought to use her for their own ends.

Isn't that what you're attempting to do? a little voice in his head prodded.

The light in his hands flickered sharply then went out, plunging the room into darkness. "Asher?"

He closed his eyes at the sound of his name on her lips.

"Are you all right?" she asked. Another blue-white orb materialized in her hands as she stepped closer and peered up at him.

"I'm fine." He motioned for her to give him the second light source.

She passed it to him, unasked questions in her deep brown gaze.

The sensation of power tingled over his skin as he focused on keeping the light bright.

No, he decided. He wasn't trying to use her. It wasn't the same thing at all. She was bound to him for a year. He simply wanted her to fulfill her contract with him—nothing more. He didn't covet her power—just her body.

So why the sudden surge of guilt?

He frowned and pushed the unwelcome feeling away. It wasn't guilt. It was just the shock of not only finding her in the keep but discovering her secret, as well. Studying her profile in the glowing light, he wondered what else she was hiding.

"What else can you do?" he asked, giving voice to his thoughts.

Her hands stilled at the question, and she shrugged. "Not much. Some healing—nothing like Elizabeth, of course," she hastened to say.

He noticed she didn't look at him when she answered. Disappointment tasted bitter. Any trust she'd once had in him was long gone. He watched as she bundled the last of the herbs and oils, placing them in a satchel.

"I need to gather my belongings," she said as she lifted the bag and pulled open the door.

The ball of light dissipated from his hands in a sizzle of energy over his skin, and again, he wondered how many other things she hid from him. He followed her to a room a few doors down from Micah and Elizabeth's bedchamber. Standing in the doorway, he watched as she added a few more things to the satchel over her shoulder, before returning to his side.

She looked up at him. "Is there anything you wish to get before we go to the docks?"

He stared at her. She spoke to him as if they were strangers—as if their moment of intimacy in this very hallway hadn't occurred.

"You're not going to fool anyone into thinking you're my mate if you continue to speak to me as though we've never met," he said as he led her toward his bedchamber.

She scowled at him as he buckled on his sword belt and added several daggers to the bag she carried before slinging it over his own shoulder.

Before she could turn away, he slid an arm around her waist and dragged her flush against his body. Pressed against him, her façade of indifference crumbled. Her cheeks flushed, and her breath caught in her throat. Lifting his free hand, he brushed his thumb back and forth across her lower lip.

"Never forget, *cariad*, for the duration of our time with the Pryderi, you *are* my mate."

Her lips pressed together in a pale line, before she snapped, "I suppose I belong to Joseph then, as well. I'll be sure to let him know when we board the ship."

Anger shot through him, and he slid his fingers into the cool silk of her hair and tugged her head back. He lowered his head, and his mouth hovered a hair's breadth above hers. "He may watch me take you, but you will never be his."

Her gasp stole the breath from his lungs as he crushed her lips with his own, plunging deep into the sweetness of her mouth. Despite the rage that vibrated through her body, she melted against him and gave herself to his kiss, her hands tangling in his hair.

His cock hardened instantly at the press of her body against his. If they weren't expected at the ship immediately, he'd take her now. But he refused to fuck her quickly— not now that he had her in his arms again. He'd love her slowly—at least, the first time. He slid his hands down her ass, cupping her and pulling her more snugly against his erection.

He caught her whimper in his mouth as he rocked against her, thrusting his granite-hard shaft against her mound. Her shiver worked through his body, and he held her tighter. They couldn't board that ship quickly enough.

Despite what he'd said to her about not letting Joseph touch her, he couldn't erase the images parading through his mind. Briefly closing his eyes, he remembered one of their last nights together. He and Neeve had been making love in the temple when Micah and Elizabeth had joined them. When Joseph had entered a short while later, the overlord had encouraged the young guardian to participate. With jealous arousal, he remembered the way Neeve had hungrily sucked Joseph's cock while Asher had thrust mercilessly into her pussy. She'd come so hard that night—they all had.

Now, he couldn't help but envision both of them sucking on her nipples, licking her sweet cunt, filling her pussy and ass, making her scream as she came over and over. His cock jerked in his braes. It wasn't going to happen. Neeve was his and only his. Shoving aside the vivid imaginings, he broke the kiss and rested his forehead against hers. Only his, he repeated to himself. Asher took in her flushed cheeks and kiss-swollen lips. It was impossible not to want to kiss her again, but they both had duties to perform. Thankfully, the trip to Pryderi would take at least two days—possibly longer depending on the weather on the sea. He doubted he would have his fill of her by then, but it would be a good start.

* * * *

As they made their way across the gangplank and onto the ship, Asher noticed that nearly every man on the deck watched Neeve intently. There seemed to be an even mix of wariness and lust in the men. He suspected the wariness stemmed from the fact she was a magic user—or perhaps because she was a woman aboard a seagoing vessel. There were still some sailors who believed a woman onboard a ship brought bad luck to the captain and crew. The lust he saw in their faces was self-explanatory. He and Joseph edged closer to her as the captain made his way toward them from the helm.

The man glanced dismissively at Neeve before making eye contact with Asher. "Your cabin is below deck. It's best if you keep your woman there at all times. There are many who think it folly to bring a woman aboard."

Neeve stiffened at his side, but Joseph laid a protective hand on her shoulder, and she relaxed somewhat. Asher's fists tightened at the sight of the other man freely touching her. Tamping down his proprietary anger, he slipped his arm about her waist and pulled her closer.

"Thank you for your concern," Asher finally managed to say.

The captain nodded and called for the first mate to approach. A young man stepped forward, and the captain addressed him sharply. "Show the healer and her mates below and see that they're settled. The rest of you prepare to set sail."

As the deck erupted in a flurry of activity, the crewman inclined his head and gestured for them to follow him. Descending a steep, narrow ladder, they climbed below. As soon as Asher's feet hit the floor, Neeve clutched his hand tightly. Her grip grew more rigid as they followed the crewman deeper into the dank ship.

"Are you all right?" he murmured into her ear.

She nodded stiffly, never looking at him.

They stopped in front of a heavy oak door, and the first mate produced a key and unlocked it, pushing it open on creaky hinges. Entering the sparsely furnished room, he lit three fat, yellow candles then turned back to them. "Food will be delivered when the crew eats. In the meanwhile, you may want to rest while you're able. We're likely to have a rough passage."

After he left them alone, Neeve shifted away from Asher, withdrawing her hand from his. He glanced at Joseph. "You can leave."

His underling held his gaze in momentary challenge, body tight with annoyance. "I swore to the overlord that I would help protect Neeve."

Asher nodded. "I am sure I can see to her safety in this tiny room. You are to stand watch outside the door."

Joseph frowned and turned his attention to Neeve.

Asher's forced his fists to relax. How dare he look to Neeve for permission? "Need I remind you of your position both on this trip and in the temple?"

Neeve glared at him before smiled wanly at Joseph. "It's all right. I'll be fine."

The other man nodded once before stepping out of the room, yanking the door shut behind him.

The scrape of moisture-swollen wood echoed through Asher's body as he turned to face Neeve. She crossed her arms over her chest and fixed her glare upon him again, shaking her head.

"You're mine, Neeve. Not Joseph's. Never forget that."

She rolled her eyes and moved to turn away, but he caught her by the shoulders and forced her to face him.

“You belong to me,” he breathed.

Uncrossing her arms, she stood with her hands on her hips, glowering at him.

“I belong to no man...least of all you.”

He ignored her outburst and ran a fingertip along her collarbone, loving the way she trembled under his touch. He couldn't wait to taste her again, to feel her shudder beneath his mouth.

“I will protect you,” he murmured. “I will fuck you. I will make you come until you scream my name.”

She shook her head, her lips damp and parted and her eyes wide.

“You can deny it all you want, but you know that every word I speak is the truth.”

Stepping closer, he cupped her face while she watched him. Her eyes dilated, and she fixed her gaze on his mouth.

He watched with fascination as her tongue darted out to moisten her lips as he slipped his hand behind her neck. The warmth of her skin seeped into his flesh, and he tightened his grip slightly, drawing her against his body.

A soft breath escaped her parted lips as she stared up at him. Her brow furrowed as if she was about to speak, but he refused to give her the chance. Lowering his head, he brushed her mouth with his own, taking her lips in a gentle kiss that quickly turned desperate.

Coaxing her mouth open, he plunged inside, tasting her fully. Her tongue stroked his as she returned his kiss, driving her fingers into his hair and holding him tightly to her. His fingers crested over the contours of her back and waist to settle on the swell of her ass. Cupping her, he yanked her close enough for her to feel the arousal that had plagued him since finding her earlier tonight.

She gasped into his mouth as he ground his rock-hard cock into the soft give of her flesh. He needed to be inside her—he couldn't wait any longer. As he continued to plunder the sweet warmth of her mouth, he walked her backward until the backs of her knees hit the bunk built into the wall of the cabin.

Without giving her a chance to protest, he tumbled her onto the wide mattress and plucked at the laces of her dress. She yanked his shirt over his head, forcing him to break the kiss. Before he could capture her lips again, she laid her fingers over his mouth.

“I will submit to you, but it will only be for the duration of this trip. When we return to Maelgwn, my life and my body are my own. I will owe you nothing.”

He opened his mouth to speak, but she pressed her hand firmly against his lips.

“This isn’t negotiable. From now until we return—or not at all.”

Frowning, he studied her face. Her terms were unacceptable, but he refused to ruin the tentative truce—particularly since he was about to experience the wonders of losing himself in her welcoming body. He nodded, knowing full well he lied, and hiked her gown up to expose her silky legs.

He stroked the satin flesh of her thighs before climbing higher to explore the gentle curve of her hip. The heady scent of her arousal drifted to him, and he wanted to taste her, to feel her shatter against his mouth. He stifled a groan as he pulled her dress up and over her head, baring her completely to his gaze.

His gaze traveled over her golden, honey-colored skin to the thatch of glossy black curls between her legs, up over her taut stomach to her dark rose nipples and fixed in horror on the jagged, bright pink scar bisecting her right breast.

His breath stalled in his throat, and icy fear washed over him as the implications of the wound settled in his gut. Someone had tried to kill her. From the look of the brutal injury, someone had nearly succeeded. Rage and terror swirled through him, and his fingers tightened around her upper arms in an effort to keep his hands from shaking.

“Who did this to you?” he demanded.

Chapter Three

“Who did this to you,” Asher repeated, his voice a barely audible growl.

Neeve shifted uncomfortably beneath him, raising a hand to cover the mark, but he caught her wrist, pulling her fingers from the injury.

Until he’d begun stripping her clothes from her body, she’d forgotten about the scar she’d received while escaping from him. She tried to tug free from his grasp, desperate to hide her disfigurement, but he refused to release her.

His shoulders and limbs were stiff with tension as he stared at the puckered skin. With a shaking, callused finger, he traced the fading pink knife mark from her collarbone to the top of her breast.

“A Caderyn warrior,” she murmured, looking away from him.

“When you and Elizabeth ran away,” he guessed.

She nodded. “She saved my life.”

Dragging her gaze to his, she saw the tangle of emotions he didn’t bother trying to hide—fear, anger, shock—all directed at her. Eyes closed, he dropped his forehead to hers and took slow, measured breaths.

“Neeve—” He broke off and inhaled deeply, pulling her into his arms and nearly crushing her against his chest.

Lowering his face to her collarbone, he gently followed the path the knife had taken with his lips—across her chest and over the swell of her breast.

She trembled beneath his barely there caress.

“You could have been killed,” he rasped against her skin.

“But I wasn’t.”

He drew back and glared at her. “If you had stayed at the keep—”

“I couldn’t. The chancellor...the former chancellor,” she amended, “would have killed me, if he’d discovered the truth.”

“I would have protected you.”

Anger stirred in her gut. “How was I to know that? You fucked me, Asher—that was it.”

“Only you,” he gritted, his eyes hard.

She returned his glare. “Sooner or later, the novelty would have worn off. You would have found someone else more interesting and passed me on to someone else.”

His fingers tightened around her arms. “That’s not true.”

She pushed aside the hope that he was telling the truth. His words didn’t matter. She’d known when she’d left that a future with him was impossible. She refused to start wishing for it now. “It’s in the past. There’s no way to know with certainty what you would have done.”

“I know what I’m about to do,” he promised darkly.

Her stomach trembled with nervous anticipation as his lips slowly lowered to hers. There was no gentle give and take in this kiss. There was only Asher taking—taking her breath and her body. She knew he wanted more, but she refused to give him her heart. If she were honest with herself, she’d admit that he already had it, but she’d never let him know that.

Tunneling her fingers through his hair, she pulled him closer, opening beneath the insistent urging of his tongue. He pressed into her mouth, teasing, tasting while his fingers trailed over her body as if learning her for the first time. Her skin heated under his caress, and she pulled at his clothes, eager to touch him, to feel what she’d denied herself these many months.

Asher’s lips trailed along the side of her neck, coaxing her nerve endings to shuddering life as he nipped sharply at her collarbone, soothing it a moment later with the velvet stroke of his tongue. He paused as he moved along the slope of her breast.

She opened her eyes to find him staring again at the shiny scar. She shifted in discomfort beneath him. He wasn’t hurting her, but the longer he stared the more her emotions roiled. She tried to urge his lips back to hers, but he wouldn’t budge.

She glanced at her ruined skin. Until now, she’d seen the mark as a testament to Elizabeth’s healing gifts and her own will to survive. Now, she viewed it as he must—ugly, marred flesh. She was foolish to think he’d want her looking as she did. Freeing her hand from his hair, she covered the hideous scar.

Gently, he pried her fingers from her body. “Don’t hide from me, *cariad*,” he whispered. “Never hide from me.”

Almost reverently he pressed kisses along the damaged tissue, as if he could heal it with the touch of his lips. As he neared her tightening nipple, the sensation became more arousing than comforting.

Trailing a fingertip around her areola, he watched her nipple pebble beneath his eyes. For a moment, his gaze left her breast to clash with hers. He held her gaze and flicked his tongue across the tip of her knotted flesh. Her breath caught in her throat as he blew a puff of air across the damp skin, and it tightened further.

His features were taut with desire, and need glowed brightly in his deep green eyes. What was he waiting for? Why was he torturing them both by delaying the inevitable?

“Please,” she whispered.

“Please what?” His lips brushed her skin as he spoke.

“Please just fuck me already.”

He shook his head, the silky length of his hair trailing over her chest.

Desperately, she tried to pull his head to her nipple, begging him without words to take it between his lips. She needed to feel his mouth on her, feel the pull of his lips and tongue. She needed to feel his cock piercing her, filling her—anything to chase away the emptiness of the last few endless months.

He caught her hands with one of his and pinned them to the mattress above her head. She knew he could restrain her with magic—he’d done it before. She remembered it vividly as a shudder engulfed her body and her pussy clenched with longing, but now, he seemed content to control her physically. That was fine with her. She wanted his hands on her body however she could get them.

With his free hand, he circled her nipple again before pinching it lightly between his finger and thumb. Her breath left her chest on a rush as she pushed upward into his touch.

“Part of me wants to make you wait—to suffer as you made me suffer,” he admitted, rolling the engorged flesh between his thumb and forefinger.

“Do you think you’re the only one who suffered?” she snapped, struggling to free her wrists from his firm grasp.

“You had the power to end both our miseries, and yet, you chose not to.”

“I told you why.”

“Not good enough,” he growled as he lowered his head and rubbed his stubbled cheeks across her breasts before nuzzling the sensitive flesh of her belly. Dragging his eyes back to hers, he held her gaze as he again lowered his head, but this time, he drew the aching peak of her breast between his lips.

As soon as the moist warmth of his mouth engulfed her, her eyes fell closed, and she arched into him, wanting him to take more, suck harder. She writhed against him, turning her lower body, trying to press against him, urging him without words to take her.

Gripping her hip, he pushed her back to the bed, before trailing his fingers over her damp curls. It didn’t matter that he’d made her come just a few short hours earlier. It had only satisfied her momentarily. She pushed against his hand, seeking relief.

With the barest of touches, he drew a single finger along her folds, parting her just slightly. She bit her lip in an attempt to hold back the whimper that threatened. She thrust her hips against him again, desperate for more contact than he seemed willing to give.

He added more force, stroking her slick flesh. “Is this what you want?”

She rocked against him, increasing the pressure. “What I want is to have you inside me.”

He held her gaze for a long moment. “Too bad.” Releasing his grip on her wrists, he shifted to his knees and watched her.

Shock and disappointment mingled, forming an uncomfortable weight in her stomach. He was leaving her like this? Unbearably aroused and frustrated? She reached for her dress. If he wasn’t going to fuck her, she wasn’t going to lay around naked, her neediness obvious.

Before she could close her fingers around the fabric, he leaned forward and dragged open-mouthed kisses over her trembling belly. His lips caressed her skin while his hands stroked along the curve of her waist and over her hips. Sliding to lie between her spread legs, he gazed up the length of her body and met her eyes.

Her stomach fluttered in nervous anticipation. As much as she wanted to feel his mouth on her, she almost dreaded it. She’d thought that perhaps they could both find some sense of peace with one another before they parted again. But, lying before him, vulnerable and quivering, she wondered if she’d made a grave misjudgment. If she didn’t guard against it, she’d easily fall under his spell again.

His warm breath bathed her pussy, and she shivered at the sensation. Attention returned her to the present, and she squirmed under his gaze. Asher spread her legs further and parted her folds. Her breath stalled in her chest at the sight of the raw lust glittering in his eyes. The rest of the world fell away until it was just the two of them suspended on the precipice of need.

He splayed his big hands over her abdomen, and her muscles jumped under his touch. Using his thumbs to spread her lips, he bared her completely. Still holding her gaze, he dragged his tongue along her exposed flesh. Pleasure skated through her body as he repeated the action. She'd almost forgotten what the heaven of his mouth felt like. As much as she might have wanted to completely banish him from her memories, she hadn't been able to. Too many nights she'd dreamt of him—his body possessing hers, making her come against his mouth, plowing through her tender folds, loving her completely. She'd woken hot and needy, gasping for breath, her skin feeling too tight. Now, he was here with his face buried between her thighs.

She drove her hands into his hair and tried to pull him closer. Her nails scraped against his scalp as she twisted her fingers and tugged on him. He circled her clit with the tip of his tongue, and she cried out, shoving her hips against his face. Chuckling, he threw an arm across her abdomen and pressed her to the bed, holding her steady for his carnal assault. A fresh rush of moisture flooded her core. He lapped faster at her sensitive flesh as if trying to capture every drop.

“You taste even better than I remember, *cariad*,” he murmured.

His desire-roughened voice caressed her as surely as his hands and mouth. She wanted him inside her. She wanted his weight, his heat, his cock pounding into her needy body. But knowing him, she wouldn't get any of that until she'd come at least once. She writhed against him, desperate for that extra bit of contact that would push her over the cliff of release and that much closer to what she really wanted.

Asher shifted uncomfortably against the mattress as he savored the honeyed taste of Neeve. His cock was harder than it had ever been, aching to feel her tight, wet heat around it. He flicked his thumb across her swollen clit as he stabbed his tongue in and out of her clenching sheath. Her whimpers turned to moans as he stroked her faster, and the sound of her harsh breathing filled the room. He couldn't keep his eyes off her face, watching as frustration mingled

with the hunger. Her nipples were tight berry-brown peaks begging for his tongue and teeth—at the very least, his hands.

“Touch your breasts,” he murmured against her damp flesh. If he couldn’t touch her, she’d have to do it. He wasn’t about to call in Joseph, despite the fact that he could sense the other man’s arousal from the other side of the door. As soon as the thought of the younger man entered his head, Asher couldn’t help but imagine them both pleasuring Neeve. Both sucking at her sweet flesh, filling her tight body, making her scream her pleasure until she was hoarse.

His cock jerked in his braes at the thought. No. He didn’t want to share Neeve. He didn’t want to see another man’s cock in her mouth, in her cunt, in her ass. She was his. “Touch them, *cariad*,” he said again. “I want to see your hands on your body.”

“Wouldn’t you rather see them on yours?” she groaned.

“Now.”

Sighing, she relaxed her death grip on his hair and slowly slid her fingers over the satiny skin of her stomach to cup the weight of her breasts. “Like this?”

“Show me how you want me to touch you.”

With only a moment’s hesitation, she dampened her forefingers then circled her pebbled nipples. His gut clenched at the sight of her slender fingers drawing the peaks even tighter.

“Pinch them,” he groaned as slid a single finger into her grasping channel. Shuddering, she clamped down on the invading flesh so he added another and began to work them in and out of her slick warmth.

“Pinch them for me,” he demanded as he set a steady rhythm. Unable to tear away his gaze, he watched as she pulled and twisted the swollen nubs. Her eyes closed, and she cried out, thrusting her hips into his hand.

He could keep her on the edge all night if he wanted to, but he took pity on them both and drew her clit between his lips as he continued to pound his fingers into her pussy. Scraping his teeth across the tight bundle of nerves, he watched as her release washed over her. A keening cry filled the air, and she arched off the bed, flooding his hand and mouth with her juices. It was a wonder he didn’t come with her.

He stroked her slowly, caressing her with his lips and tongue until her breathing returned to normal and her eyes fluttered open. Lifting his head from the apex of her thighs, he studied

her. Her golden-brown skin was flushed pink, and her lips were puffy as if she'd been biting them.

"I hope you don't think you're finished," she whispered as she pushed herself up on her elbows and pinned him with her deep brown gaze. "Take off your clothes."

Slipping off the side of the bed, he kicked off his boots heedless of where they fell. Her gaze skimmed over his chest and followed the path of his hand as he released the closure on his braes. He tugged the breeches from his body and let them fall to the floor, as well.

Her eyes fixed on his cock, and her breath caught in her throat, as he returned to the bed and knelt between her legs. Hooking his hands beneath her knees, he yanked her abruptly toward him, startling a gasp from her. He felt the force of her sharp inhalation deep in his gut.

Her ass rested on his lap, and her thighs splayed wide leaving her vulnerable, open to his heated gaze. Glossy black curls framed her glistening folds. He brushed his thumb over the swollen flesh of her clit, and her head fell back on a sweet whimper.

"Please, Asher..."

It had been so long he wanted to savor this moment, to prolong the satisfaction of uniting with her again. Taking his cock in hand, he dragged the head through her gathering cream. Loving the shudders that racked her body, he repeated the motion.

Her head snapped up, and she glared at him. "I swear to the gods of the earth and sky, if you don't fuck me now, I'll find someone who will."

On a growl, he leaned forward and captured her hands, securing them above her head. "You." Shifting, he seated himself in the cradle of her body, the head of his cock resting at her entrance. "Will." He slid home, filling her completely. "Not."

Her eyes fluttered closed, and she groaned, a satisfied smile curving her lips. She'd goaded him into doing what she wanted. So much for taking things slowly, but he still relished the moment of being encased in her welcoming body.

Her pussy gripped him, clenching around his cock. He dropped his lips to the curve of her shoulder, reveling in her velvety warmth caressing his shaft. This was where he belonged, buried balls deep in the only woman he'd ever truly needed.

"Too long," he murmured against her damp neck. "Too fucking long."

Unable to remain still, he pulled back. Neeve locked her ankles at the small of his back as if she were afraid he'd leave her. She needn't have worried. He wasn't going anywhere. Not until

they were finished with one another. If he had his way, that would take considerably longer than the trip to Pryderi and back.

“Release me,” she whispered, her words drifting past his ear. “I want to touch you.”

He surged forward, coming to rest as deeply as possible before loosening his grip on her hands. As soon as he freed her, she drove her fingers through his hair and held him steady for her kiss. Her lips, petal soft but insistent, coaxed his mouth open, and her tongue mimicked the slow rhythmic slide of his cock into the welcoming heat of her body.

Unable to ignore his body’s demands, the speed of his thrusts increased as he lost any semblance of control. He plowed through her seizing muscles, shafting faster as she clenched and unclenched around him.

Lips against his ear, she urged him on with half strangled whispers. “Harder. More.” Her hands slipped from his head to his back, and she planted her feet against the mattress, meeting him stroke for brutal stroke. “Harder,” she moaned out as he lost himself in her silken heat.

With an anguished cry, her entire body went rigid in his arms. Her internal muscles convulsed around his cock, milking him so hard it was nearly impossible for him to move and equally impossible for him not to. Her release trembled through her, pulling him inexorably toward his own. He plowed in and out of her grasping body as her nails scored his back, the pain an enticing contrast to the need tightening his balls. Pleasure streaked along his body to tingle at the base of his spine before shooting forward to twist his balls until he filled her, coming in shuddering gushes.

Asher had no idea how long they lay, limbs entwined and sweat drying on their skin. The only thing he was aware of was the gentle way Neeve stroked her hands across his shoulders, her touch comforting as the ship’s quarters came back into focus. Slowly, he raised his head to gaze at her. Her eyes were closed, and a small smile curved her lips.

“What are you thinking about?” he asked as he trailed kisses along her jaw line.

Her sleepy brown eyes opened, and her smile widened. “Just that I should run away more often if that’s the greeting I get when I return.”

He frowned. “That’s not funny.” He wasn’t about to enrage her again, not while he had her lying warm and naked in his arms, but he had no intention of letting her leave again. Not any time soon, anyway.

As she shifted in his arms, he caught sight of the wicked scar—physical proof of how close he'd nearly come to losing her. Unable to help himself, he smoothed his hand over the puckered flesh. If Neeve had died...

His throat clogged, and he tried to swallow around it. It was one thing to know that she'd gone into hiding, but the idea that death could have taken her from him forever terrified him. He owed Elizabeth a debt of gratitude he wasn't sure he could ever repay. Gathering Neeve in his arms, he focused on the present which involved convincing her she belonged with him in Maelgwn.

Neeve could practically hear Asher's thoughts as he studied her marred flesh. Though he had the ability to communicate his thoughts to others, she happily remained immune. However, it didn't take a scholar to figure out his present opinion. Given his choice in the matter, she'd never return to her adopted home in Hafan.

Dragging his gaze from her wound to her face, he opened his mouth to speak. Unwilling to open the topic for debate, she slipped her hand behind his neck and urged his mouth to hers. Distraction seemed a far better alternative to another argument. Besides, she wanted as many good memories as possible to take with her when she left.

His eyes closed as he melted against her, his tongue stroking the recesses of her mouth as his hands trailed over her suddenly needy flesh. With a start, she realized no amount of memories would ever make up for the reality of his hands on her body. Blinking back the sudden burn of tears, she pushed him onto his back and straddled his thighs.

Asher folded his hands behind his head and watched, curiosity gleaming in his gaze. Leaning forward, she stroked the broad expanse of his muscled chest, dragging her nails over the tight nubs of his nipples and through the sprinkling of hair. The chestnut-brown curls thickened, forming a silky trail to his groin. With teasing nips, she followed the path downward to where his cock began showing signs of life again. Goose bumps rose on her skin at the remembered sensation of his shaft pounding into her. Her attempt at distraction aside, she couldn't wait to experience his mastery over her body again.

Tracing the veins in his thickening erection, she watched as his eyes darkened. His desire, only momentarily sated, grew as rapidly as his cock did. Neeve scooted backward, the crisp hair on his legs abrading her inner thighs and her damp pussy. Wrapping her fingers around his

burgeoning width, she glanced at his face. From under heavy eyelids, he watched—his jaw tight and his gaze hungry.

Gripping him firmly, she bent forward and engulfed as much of his cock as she could take in a single motion. His hips arched sharply upward and his breath hissed through clenched teeth.

“*Cariad.*” The harshly groaned word was more warning than endearment.

Hiding a smile of satisfaction, she slid up and down his length, taking him as far into her throat as she could. He tasted of their combined releases—an almost pleasant salty tang that filled her mouth. Her hair flopped over her face as she took him deeper, sucking hard as she swirled her tongue over every vein and thick ridge.

Asher reached out and brushed her hair from her face, coiling the long strands around his fist. “So fucking beautiful.”

Pleasure burst in her at his compliment. Using hands and mouth, she worked him faster, wanting to give him at least a trace of the pleasure he’d given her. He shuddered under her ministrations, pumping his cock into her mouth. Just as suddenly, his motion stopped, and he tightened his hand in her hair, yanking slightly.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

“Nothing. I just want to be inside your sweet cunt when I come.”

His quietly rasped words fanned her desire higher, making her clench in anticipation. He pulled his legs from between hers and shifted into a kneeling position. Turning her away from him, he pushed her to her hands and knees before smoothing his palms over her bottom and dragging his fingertips between the cleft of her ass.

She shuddered in anticipation of his wide cock filling her again as her juices coated the inside of her thighs. Slicking his thumb with her arousal, he spread it over her anus, gently circling the puckered area and teasing the sensitive flesh as he set the wide head of his cock at the snug opening of her pussy. Carefully, he pushed forward, entering her slowly.

She didn’t want slow. She wanted him to fuck her like he had before—as if he’d lost all control over his body. She wanted to feel his desperation for her, feel every merciless stroke as he plowed into her.

Without warning, she slammed herself backward with such force that his balls slapped against her cunt. They both groaned at the force of it. Clutching her hips with both hands, he

pulled almost all of the way out before lunging forward again. Every forceful plunge pushed a cry from her lips. Need coiled tightly inside her, spiraling tighter with each thrust, with every hard smack of his balls against her clit. As much as she wanted to prolong the pleasure, she knew she wasn't going to last. Meeting every hungry shove, she threw her hips backward, taking him fully inside her.

Sensation coalesced in her womb as his cock plowed through her swollen tissues. Her hunger wound tighter with every pitiless thrust. As she hovered on the edge of release, the door opened and Joseph entered, his gaze fixed on the carnal scene before him. Neeve's rhythm faltered, but Asher's stayed steady.

As if in a trance, Joseph sank into a chair across from the bed, his features tight and his eyes hard with arousal. As he watched, his hand strayed to his braes. He fumbled with the closure and freed his thick erection. Starting at the root, he stroked upward, his eyes never leaving the bed.

A rush of moisture flooded her pussy, bathing Asher's cock as a bead of pre-cum appeared on the head of Joseph's cock.

Asher leaned forward, draping himself over her back. "Do you like that, *cariad*? Do you like knowing he's watching, wishing he was buried in your tight pussy instead of me?"

Chapter Four

Neeve took a shuddering breath, unable to think of a single response. While she'd been at the temple, she and Asher had occasionally had sex while other people occupied the same room, but never had anyone watched with the intensity that Joseph watched them now. Longing brightened the already brilliant blue of his eyes as they fastened on hers.

She couldn't look away as he dragged his clenched fist down over his swollen cock, smearing the bead of pre-cum around the ruddy head. Asher had slowed his strokes to match the speed of Joseph's hand, and it was impossible not to wonder what it would feel like to have both of them loving her at once. Two sets of hands playing over her skin, two mouths kissing and suckling, two cocks filling her...

She stifled a whimper as shivers racked her body and her internal muscles clenched around Asher.

"I was right." He chuckled. The sound vibrated through her body, ratcheting her need higher. "You do like to be watched." Leaning forward, he skimmed his lips along her spine. "Look at how hard he is. That's all for you, *cariad*."

The whimper she'd held back earlier escaped, becoming a sharp cry as it passed her lips.

Joseph's breath caught in his chest, and she felt the impact of it from across the small room. The tight sound echoed in the pit of her belly.

Asher dragged his fingertips along her spine as she continued to stare at Joseph. She arched into her lover's touch, but she couldn't tear her eyes from the other man. Over and over, the thick head of his cock pushed through the circle of his fingers, becoming slicker with each thrust. She remembered what he'd felt like sliding between her lips the night the three of them

had made love with Elizabeth and Micah. Heightened arousal slammed through her at the memory, and she bathed Asher's cock with a fresh rush of fluid.

"Are you remembering that night?" he asked, as he pushed more forcefully into her willing body. She couldn't answer. She couldn't do anything except cry out at the sensation of his balls slapping her clit with every delicious lunge. When she didn't respond, he continued, "I am. I can't forget the sight of your lips wrapped around his cock as he writhed beneath you and I filled your tight cunt. I remember how hard you gripped me as he pumped into your mouth, how hard you came. Do you remember that, Neeve? Do you remember?" he groaned.

Her arms shook with the force of remaining upright as he thrust faster into her body, keeping time with the other man's rough strokes. Asher gripped her hips more tightly, digging his fingertips into her flesh, adding a slight pinch of pain. The pain combined with the sensation of Asher pounding into her and the visual stimulation of Joseph sliding his hand over his cock was too much.

"I remember," she rasped, her voice barely audible over the wet slap of flesh and Joseph's guttural cry as he stiffened, thick spurts of ropery cum covering his hand. His eyes never left hers. The beginnings of release coiled within her abdomen. Her internal muscles rippled and contracted around her lover's girth as wild bliss coalesced in her womb before rippling outward, washing over her.

Asher pumped faster, pushing through her orgasm and headlong into another. Slamming into her, he froze. A harsh groan escaped his lips as he came, hot and heavy, filling her completely.

Seemingly reluctant, he pulled from her body, and they collapsed in a trembling heap onto the mattress. Barely able to keep her eyes open, she noticed Joseph dampen a cloth in a basin of water. He leveled a glance at Asher then smoothed the wet cloth over her face and neck. She sighed in contentment as Asher took the cloth and swiped it over her breasts and belly and between her legs before handing it back to Joseph.

The rustle of clothing hitting the floor reached her as she let her eyes drift closed.

"Move over," Joseph demanded. "There's no way I'm sleeping on the floor."

Asher pulled her closer as the mattress dipped at her side and she felt another hard, warm body stretch out beside her. Sighing, she relaxed and let sleep descend.

* * * *

Darkness had fallen when the pitching and heaving of the waves woke her. Pinned between two hot, heavy bodies, she panicked in the near suffocating blackness. Thick fear clogged her lungs, and she thrashed, trying to escape the stifling press of flesh against her.

“Neeve.” Asher, instantly awake, smoothed his fingers across her cheek. “What is it? What’s wrong?”

A wide, warm hand settled over her hip. “Are you all right?” Joseph asked.

Feeling foolish, she nodded. Then realizing they couldn’t see, she found her voice. “It’s the dark...I just...it’s so...” Embarrassment washed over her, and she fell silent again.

Joseph lifted his hand from her hip and murmured a few hushed words. Suddenly, tiny, golden lights formed in the palm of his hand and floated upward toward the ceiling. Hovering above them, the lights cast a gentle glow over the room. She could make out the shapes of both Asher and Joseph lying on either side of her.

Joseph’s hand settled at her hip again. “Better?” he asked.

She nodded. “Thank you.” Frowning, she sighed. “I’m sorry. It’s stupid. I’m a grown woman afraid of the dark.”

Asher tenderly brushed his thumb across her lips. “You didn’t fear the dark...before.”

She knew what he meant by the pause—before she’d run away. She glanced at the ceiling where the little lights shown like stars. She’d been terrified of close, dark places ever since she’d woken in the caves after the Caderyn warrior had attacked her.

“I know,” she whispered. On more nights than she could count, she’d awoken with the same nightmare—trapped in a tomb of dank stone—excruciating pain ripping through her chest—surrounded on all sides by inky darkness—knowing other people were in the cave, but not knowing who. Terrified, she had been taken prisoner by her attackers, she’d kept quiet, all the while screaming inside her head for Asher to come find her. But he never had.

With controlled effort, she attempted to block the memories and bury the old fear. They were in a ship on the sea, not a rocky grave. Asher and Joseph were with her—not Caderyn warriors. Fidgeting and unable to relax, she stared at the twinkling glow above them. Joseph pressed to her back and Asher against her front. As the worry dissipated, she realized she felt secure in a way she hadn’t experienced since leaving Maelgwn in what seemed a lifetime ago. Frowning, she knew the sense of peace she experienced was due to being with Asher again. She needed to get control of her emotions. This interlude with him wasn’t going to last. Pushing aside

the sensation of comfort she felt, she focused on the expanding restless energy flitting through her body, letting arousal take the place of the fear.

As if both men sensed it, their cocks began to harden. Joseph's pulsed hotly against her ass and the small of her back and Asher's pushed into her belly. She shifted, loving the sensation of the hard, silky flesh gliding over her skin. Right now, she wanted to forget the soul aching loneliness that had plagued her for so long. Right now, she wanted to touch and be touched. By both men.

She didn't worry about losing her heart to Joseph as she had to Asher. She liked him, and she certainly desired him, but she didn't love him. The spark of an idea occurred to her and longing trembled through her middle. Sating her desire with both men might actually serve to protect her and prevent her from losing her heart to Asher again. Joseph might prove helpful in ways she hadn't anticipated.

Asher studied Neeve in the glow of the other man's false starlight. It was as if she'd shoved away the fear that had gripped her and was attempting to replace it with desire. He fought the need to ask her why the dark frightened her, sensing it would only serve to push her farther from him.

Lying in the half-light, he watched the other man trail his hand over the curve of her waist to follow the swell of her hip. It was obvious. Joseph wanted Neeve almost as badly as he did. Neeve's heightened arousal as the other man had watched Asher fucking her had been breathtaking. He sincerely doubted she'd object to being taken by both of them.

Jealousy flared in his gut, but he couldn't erase the images of both of them pleasuring her, taking her together, giving her the ultimate satisfaction. He wasn't sure he'd survive sharing her completely with the other man, but for her fulfillment, he would try. Gently, he pushed on her shoulder until she was flat on her back between them. He glanced at Joseph's hand, now resting possessively on her belly.

"Asher?" she questioned, her tone tentative.

Leaning toward her, he took her lips in a hungry kiss, delving into her mouth and tasting her. She whimpered against his lips as he laid his hand on her stomach next to Joseph's.

Don't think this will be a regular occurrence, he spoke into the other man's mind. She is mine and always will be, but together we can give her a pleasure like no other.

Joseph's acceptance rang loudly in Asher's head.

Lifting his head, Asher stared into Neeve's deep brown eyes. "You wanted us both earlier," he murmured, gauging her reaction. "It's time."

Her eyes widened, and her lips parted. Before she could respond, the other man bent over her and took her mouth. Envy pricked him, but he focused instead on pleasing her. Gently, he nuzzled her neck, dragging his lips over her shoulder and the swell of her breast.

Slowly, he slid his hand up over her ribcage to tease the underside of her breast, noticing that Joseph did the same. A needy sound escaped her only to be swallowed by the press of Joseph's lips. Envy and frustration swirled in his gut. It would be harder to share Neeve than he'd thought. He mentally shook his head at himself. He was being ridiculous—he'd shared plenty of women in the past. He'd lost count of the times he and Micah had together brought a willing woman to her peak. But this...this was different. This was Neeve. It shouldn't matter, but it did.

Refusing to further examine his thoughts, he rolled Neeve's nipple between his thumb and forefinger, watching as the other man did the same. She arched off the mattress, into their touch, wordlessly begging for more. Her golden skin glowed under the magical starlight, a velvet softness he couldn't wait any longer to taste. With slow, deliberate motions, he lowered his lips to the crinkled flesh of her nipple while Joseph did the same. Together, they suckled deeply.

She cried out, the sound filling the small room as she tangled her hands in their hair. Pushing against them, she demanded more, her hips lifting into nothingness, pleading to be filled.

Asher slid his free hand over the trembling muscles of her stomach as Joseph's hand followed close behind. Asher gently separated the silky curls, exposing her slick cunt to the other man who groaned roughly as he stroked her. It was impossible not to hear Joseph's thoughts.

Do you want to taste her? Asher projected into his mind.

Still sucking and biting her nipple, Joseph raised his gaze to Asher's. *Gods, yes.* On the heels of that thought, he sent a fully-formed image into Asher's head. Asher hardened further at the erotic vision.

Shifting, both men dragged themselves away from Neeve's supple body. Confusion and annoyance warred in her expression. Asher settled at the edge of the bed and pulled her onto his lap.

“What are you—?”

Her words faltered as he lifted her slightly, and set the head of his cock at her snug opening. Slowly, he slid inside her pussy. The angle, the tightness and her broken moan nearly sent him over the edge. Black spots peppered his vision as she clenched him.

Asher slipped his hands beneath her supple thighs and lifted them so they rested over his, opening her further. Joseph sank to the floor between their spread legs. Kneeling, he edged closer until he could reach Neeve’s peaked nipples. Pushing her breasts together, he drew on one tight bud after the other, while she writhed, impaled on Asher’s cock.

Stroking the insides of her thighs, Asher kept still, knowing if he moved with her, it would all be over too soon. It might be anyway. He wasn’t sure how much of her agonizing squirming he could take. Her wet heat enveloped him, caressing his aching cock, squeezing every buried inch.

He couldn’t take his eyes off the sight of the other man sucking Neeve’s nipples—of his lips, tongue and teeth plying her soft flesh. How would it be to watch him fuck her? To plunge his shaft into her willing body? Could he do it? Could he stand by and watch her beautiful flesh stretched by another man’s cock?

As if he’d heard Asher’s thoughts, Joseph straightened and stroked his cock from root to tip before dragging the wide head through Neeve’s gathering cream. She cried out and clamped down on Asher as Joseph repeated the action, circling her clit with the now glossy head. Gripping the base of his shaft, he tapped it hard against her clit several times as she screamed so loudly, Asher was sure the ship’s entire crew had heard her.

Unable to look away, he watched as Joseph tapped her clit one last time. The sight of both of their cocks in and on her swollen, wet flesh was almost too much. Closing his eyes, he breathed deeply and willed away his building release. He was not going to come. Not yet.

He forced his eyes open, unwilling to miss a moment of what was occurring between the three of them. Joseph sank to the floor between their spread legs and gently lapped Neeve’s arousal from the inside of her thighs. She shuddered. Her entire body trembled as he crept closer to her slick mound.

“So beautiful,” Joseph murmured as he caught Neeve’s gaze. “So puffy and tight around his cock.” Extending a finger, he traced the spot where they were joined, his fingertip trailing over her pussy, before brushing carelessly over Asher’s cock. His body jerked at the sensation.

He'd never had another man touch him intimately, but Joseph seemed completely unfazed by the action.

Keeping his gaze on Neeve, Joseph dragged the flat of his tongue over her exposed flesh. A harsh cry tore from her throat and she wrapped his hair around her hand and tugged him closer. "More."

"Your will be done," he murmured as he descended on her.

Neeve cried out, but she barely recognized the sound as her own. Never had she felt anything as decadently glorious as having one man buried completely in her needy body and another licking and sucking at her pussy.

Asher worried her nipples, twisting and pulling at them while Joseph swirled his tongue over her dripping flesh, groaning as she canted her hips closer—as close as she could while Asher shoved his cock through her swollen folds. She wanted to move on him, to give him the kind of pleasure he and Joseph were giving her, but she couldn't get any leverage.

Joseph retreated slightly to nuzzle her inner thighs. She looked between her spread legs and watched Asher's cock pulse and flex as it disappeared into her body. Working him with her internal muscles, she was pleased when she heard his breath catch. The satisfaction was short lived as Joseph seduced it away with a flick of his tongue over her clit.

She jerked hard at the sensation, and he did it again, his lips and tongue playing over her weeping mound.

"You taste even sweeter than I thought you would," he whispered against her quivering flesh.

He'd thought about how she'd taste?

Asher kissed the sensitive skin behind her ear. "He's wanted you since you first came to the temple at Maelgwn."

Joseph traced her cleft with the tip of his tongue, before raising his head and grinning at her, his lips shiny with her juices. "Your lover doesn't share well."

"You're mine," Asher breathed.

A denial rose to her lips, but it vanished as soon as he sank his teeth into her earlobe as Joseph scraped his teeth over her swollen clit. Release swelled and washed over her without warning, battering her like the sea battered the boat carrying them. Her body shook almost

violently as both men continued to slowly lick and thrust, gently bringing her back to the reality of the ship's tiny cabin.

Joseph sat back and stared at her as Asher rocked in and out of her sated body. The contented feeling began to fade after several measured thrusts. It was impossible not to notice that he hadn't come yet. She glanced at Joseph's still hard cock. He hadn't either. A thrill of anticipation rippled through her. They weren't finished. Motioning to the man on the floor, she told him to stand.

A smile in his eyes, he complied. As soon as he stepped close enough, she reached out and grasped his cock. Thick and heavily veined, she traced her fingers over every ridge before closing her hand around it.

Asher dragged open-mouthed kisses over her shoulders and neck. "Take him into your mouth, *cariad*. I want to see him take your mouth while I fill your cunt."

She clenched around him at the sound of his dark, rough voice, and he shuddered beneath her. Gently, she tugged the other man closer, letting the tip of his erection hover at the seam of her lips.

Joseph groaned as she flicked her tongue over the silky head. "*Please*."

Tentatively, she engulfed the tip of his cock in her mouth, and he sucked in a harsh breath through clenched teeth.

"Take him deeper," Asher urged as he gripped her hips and lifted her upward then pulled her back down the thick length of his cock. A whimper escaped her lips as he pushed deeper into her body.

"Gods, yes," Joseph groaned as he cupped the back of her head and urged her to take more of him. "Yes, Neeve, just like that."

"So beautiful," Asher rasped as he thrust again. "The way you take us both is so...by the gods, *cariad*, I've never seen anything so...fucking beautiful."

They fell into a desperate rhythm, Joseph thrusting into her mouth and Asher guiding her up and down the length of his own cock. Despite her seemingly helpless position, she'd never felt so powerful. She was the recipient and the source of both men's pleasure. Hunger tangled hot and taut in her belly as she fucked both men. Every pulsing thrust coiled her need tighter, pushing her that much closer to the edge of release.

Sucking harder, she took Joseph deeper. She reveled in the way his muscles bunched and tense beneath her hands. He was close. Very close. He tried to pull back, but she refused to let him.

“Neeve, I’m going to come,” he gritted between clenched teeth.

Unwilling to release him, she took him deeper, hoping he’d understand what she was trying to say. Tangling his fingers in her hair, his thrusts became faster and jerkier. Finally, he stiffened, gasping loudly as he came in shuddering bursts, down the back of her throat.

Barely waiting for the other man to slide free of her mouth, Asher lifted her over and over slamming into her pussy from beneath her. It was too much, the taste of Joseph in her mouth, Asher stretching her tender passage and the sudden pinch of bliss laced pain as he reached around and squeezed her clit.

The taut knot of urgency in her middle snapped. Satisfaction spiraled outward, and the hot rush of orgasm washed over her. Seizing her hips, Asher swore darkly as he ground her against him and spurted heavily within her. Spent, he slumped against her back and wrapped his arms around her.

“Thank you, *cariad*,” he whispered as he pressed tender kisses along her spine. Still breathing heavily, they fell back onto the mattress, and Joseph pulled the sheet over them all as the stars on the ceiling slowly dimmed.

* * * *

Asher woke from a sound sleep as his temple hit the wall of the tiny cabin. A creaking groan resonated along the wood where his head rested, and the frantic shouts of the crew mixed with crashes of thunder drifted to him. He sat up. Joseph had already risen and was pulling on his clothing. Worry tightened Asher’s limbs as he shook Neeve awake.

“*Cariad*, wake up.”

She stirred but burrowed deeper into the blankets.

He shook her more forcefully. “Neeve, wake up!”

Joseph tossed their clothes to Asher before disappearing from the room and presumably up to the deck.

Neeve rubbed blearily at her eyes.

“Get dressed. Quickly.”

“What’s happening?” she asked, fumbling in the dark with her dress before tugging it over her head.

“I don’t kn—”

The door burst open and banged against the wall.

“Rocks.” Joseph gasped. “Storm. We’re going down.” He grabbed Neeve’s hand and tugged her from the tangle of covers that grasped at her feet like tentacles.

Asher yanked the fabric away from her and followed them up the stairs in only his pants, his dagger bumping against his thigh as he climbed.

Heavy sheets of rain soaked them immediately, and a harsh wind tore the sail loose. It flapped wildly, obscuring the tops of the masts and muffling the fearful shouts of the men. The ship listed suddenly to the side, throwing them against the wheelhouse. Breath rushed from Neeve’s body on a rush. Jagged lightning flashed, throwing her features into sharp relief. Wrapping his arm around her waist, he tucked her into the side of his body and pulled her toward where the captain stood shouting orders.

“How far from shore are we?” Asher demanded.

“Maybe a league...” he said, pointing in the distance “Maybe half. It’s too stormy to tell.” The man didn’t bother to look at him.

But the first mate whirled to glare at them. “I told you we shouldn’t have allowed a woman on board.” He lunged at Neeve. “This is your fault!”

Asher pushed Neeve behind him while Joseph pinned the first mate’s arms behind his back.

The ship lurched again as it took on more water and tilted violently toward the portside, and everyone on deck slid toward the side of the ship, many sailors crashing through the damaged wooden barrier and into the water below. The lightning illuminated the figures bobbing in the rough waves as they struggled to keep their heads above the surface. Some climbed onto the rocks that had damaged their vessel only to be washed back into the ruthless sea.

As he and Neeve clung to the side of the ship, Asher scanned the deck for Joseph and something to use to help them stay afloat once they hit the water.

“Can you swim?” he asked her.

She nodded tightly, her hands clenched around the carved wooden railing. Glancing around, he still didn't see Joseph, but he spotted the gangplank. It wasn't much, but it would have to do.

Releasing his hold on the railing, he pointed at the hunk of wood. "Stay here, and don't let go. I'm going to get something to hang onto in the water."

She nodded mutely, her face bloodless and her wide, brown eyes full of fear. He pushed down the terror in his chest. He wouldn't let anything happen to her. Not now when he'd just found her again.

Turning away, he scrambled toward the opposite side of the deck, clinging to warped floorboards and whatever he could grab hold of as the ship listed a little further to port. The heavy ropes holding the cannons in place creaked and groaned as gravity tugged the iron backward. The cannons on the portside had already crashed overboard. He needed to get Neeve off the ship before the ropes gave way and one of the weapons careened into her.

His hand closed around the heavy plank as he pulled it from its place. The sides of the ship groaned loudly, and the unmistakable sounds of rushing water reached him. He turned to Neeve just in time to see a crate of fishing supplies slide across the deck toward her, hitting her in the thighs, pushing her body out into nothingness.

He dropped the plank and threw himself across the deck at her.

"Neeve!" From the other side of the ship, Joseph's voice sliced through the night air.

Her hands clung to the railing, fighting to keep hold of the rain-wet wood as Asher tried to grab her wrist. She slipped away before he could get a hold of her, disappearing into the night with his name on her lips and a muted splash.

* * * *

Dark, icy water closed over Neeve's head. She'd barely had time to get a breath before she'd gone under. One of the sailors from the ship clung to her, pushing her under the surface, attempting to keep himself afloat. Kicking and punching, she tried to free herself from his grasp at least long enough to get another breath of air. She refused to give up. Not when Asher was out there somewhere. And Joseph. She had no idea if he could swim or even where he was. She hadn't seen him since he'd pulled the first mate away from her.

Her head started to spin, and her lungs burned with the lack of oxygen. She fought the urge to breathe in, but she was growing weaker by the second. The sailor pushed her head down

further as his panic heightened, shoving his fingers in her face. Impulsively, she sank her teeth into his wrist, trying not to swallow the sea water that rushed in. The man howled and yanked his hand away from her.

Kicking as hard as she could, she propelled herself away from him, breaking the surface of the water and taking in huge gulps of air. Her lungs still burned and her head throbbed. Black spots floated before her eyes as she did her best to tread water and keep her head above the waterline. Her heart slammed into her ribs doing nothing to alleviate the ache in her chest. Slowly, she spun in a circle, trying to get her bearings. Rocks to her right, the floundering ship behind her and nothing but open sea to her left and in front of her.

“Asher! Joseph!” she choked out, her voice weak and thin.

Lightning continued to brighten the sky, but the wind whipped water into her face obscuring her vision and the thunder stifled her cries.

She heard voices, but all of them sounded far away and none were the ones she’d hoped would answer. She called again. But the only thing she heard was thunder and the sound of wood creaking and snapping under the pressure of the sea.

Heavy waves surrounded her, growing rougher by the minute. Forcing her limbs to move, she set out in the direction that the captain had pointed out earlier. She had no idea if she had the strength to swim a league or even half a league, but she had to try. She knew Asher wouldn’t give up, and she refused to, not when he was still out there. She’d know if something had happened to him. She was sure of it. She continued calling his name as she swam, hoping against hope that he’d answer.

She had no idea how long she struggled against the current—how long the salty waves parched her lips and stung her eyes, but the dawn seemed to lighten the sky. Though it was hard to tell through the clinging mist. Sometime during the night, the storm had given way to a heavy fog that sat thickly above the surface of the sea. Her muscles burned from the constant movement, and she couldn’t tell if she was any closer to shore.

Something heavy and cold bumped against her back, nudging her forward. She turned to look, managing to choke on a sea water-tinged scream. The bloated body of the sailor who had nearly drown her stared sightlessly into the dripping sky. Summoning a burst of energy she would have sworn she didn’t possess, she kicked hard, trying to put as much distance between her and the corpse as possible.

As she swam, the water seemed to grow lighter. If the water was getting lighter, she had to be getting closer to shore. For the first time since losing sight of Asher last night, her chest felt a little less tight as if tiny green leaves of hope were beginning to unfurl within her. Her leaden arms cut through the water, muscles screaming.

As she fought her way forward, she thought she heard her name. Stopping, she treaded water, hoping to hear it again. Though his throat sounded raw, she recognized Asher's voice. And Joseph's.

Relief exploded through her body, warming her slightly as she pushed a response past her shivering lips. She changed direction, swimming toward the sound of their voices as they continued to call her.

A faint glow on the horizon shimmered through the mist, growing larger and brighter as the morning sun burned away the fog. She pushed on, relief turning to euphoria as the tips of her toes scraped the sandy bottom of the seabed. Water up to her neck, she rested for a moment, standing flatfooted as she peered around her, searching for Asher and Joseph.

Several figures, shadowed by the light of the rising sun, moved in the distance, but two ran along the shoreline racing toward her. The hysteria she'd managed to control through the entire ordeal bubbled to the surface within her, and she pushed off, swimming toward the two men as fast as she could, desperate to throw herself into the solid safety of their arms.

As she reached the shallow water, her dress clung to her, hampering her movements as she tried to stand. Her legs were as wobbly as a toddling babe and her body exhausted. Asher wrapped his arms around her, and she collapsed against him, clinging to his broad shoulders in relief as he lifted her from the water.

Asher could barely swallow past the lump in his throat as he crushed Neeve against his body. As the sun rose, he'd feared he'd find her body floating in the waves or crumpled on the shore, lifeless and broken. The relief spiraling through him was greater than anything he'd ever experienced, and for a moment, he could barely breathe.

Lifting his head, he gazed down at her. Her lips were blue tinged and dark crescents marred the skin beneath her bloodshot eyes. Her normally silken hair was a knotted mess with bits of seaweed tangled into the mass and glazed with salt, but he'd never seen a more beautiful

sight. She shivered almost violently in his arms as they left the water, and he didn't miss the longing in her gaze as she spied the fire crackling further down the shore.

Joseph followed her line of vision. "Of those who survived, at least half blame the wreck on having a woman on board. It's best if we stay out of their way."

Asher muttered his agreement.

She nodded mutely, her head slumping against his chest and her eyes dropping closed. He'd almost lost her. They'd searched for hours—diving under the waves and the debris, searching the bodies of those who'd perished. It seemed ridiculous that most sailors couldn't swim, but thank the gods Neeve could. He didn't know what he'd do if he'd lost her.

Still holding her closely, he settled onto a huge piece of driftwood while Joseph gathered smaller pieces to use for a fire. It was unlikely that the remaining crewmen would have enough energy to attack her, but he didn't want to risk it by bringing her over there. They'd have her warm again soon enough. And he'd never let her out of his sight again.

She stirred briefly, before settling against his chest again, her fingers opening and closing against his skin, her breath warming his flesh. Her spirit melted the cold rock his heart had become since she'd left so many months ago. He smoothed a hand over her snarled hair, unable to keep from touching her. He noticed more things as he stared at her. The gash by her hairline, the bruise on her temple. Discolored flesh peeked above the neckline of her dress, and he could only imagine the cuts and bruises that lay beneath her ruined clothing.

Neeve continued to sleep the slumber born of exhaustion while Joseph managed to get a small fire going on the beach. Asher had a moment's guilt for not helping his friend, but he couldn't force himself to let go of her—even for a moment.

Looking up from the woman lying in his arms, Asher recognized the ship's captain trudging toward them, followed by several soldiers on horseback. The colors of the Pryderi warriors were unmistakable. Asher rose, and Neeve woke in his arms. Noticing the approaching riders, she struggled to get to her feet. He reluctantly lowered her to the ground but kept his arm around her.

She seemed so weak, he wasn't sure how long she'd be able to remain standing.

The haggard looking captain gestured to Neeve. "This is the healer Maelgwn sent." The bitterness in the man's voice was unmistakable.

One of the warriors nudged his mount forward and addressed Neeve. “Our lords command your presence. You will return with us now.”

Before Asher could respond, Neeve’s chin rose slightly as she held the other man’s gaze. “Of course. My mates and I would be happy to accompany you. I assume you’ve brought mounts for us?”

Asher bit back a smile at her tone while she watched the man expectantly. They stared at her for a moment before turning to bark out orders to his troops. Two men dismounted and brought their horses to the front of the line.

The warrior who’d been speaking to them nodded toward the animals. “Mount up and follow us.”

Asher helped Neeve onto a horse’s back and climbed up behind her while Joseph smothered the fire. He quickly mounted, and they followed the contingent of Pryderi soldiers up the rocky incline, away from the shore.

* * * *

Neeve bit her lip. The jolting of the horse beneath her jarred every painfully sore muscle in her body. If Asher and Joseph were as miserable as she was, they didn’t give any indication. Asher kept her snugly between the cradle of his thighs while both men scanned the soldiers and the countryside.

She felt the tension in Asher’s body. He wasn’t any happier with their escort than she was. The sooner she healed the rulers’ children, the sooner they could leave this place and the better she’d feel.

“Faster!” the warrior who’d first made contact with them bellowed. He galloped to the rear of the party. “We’ve wasted too much time searching for you. Our lords await the healer.”

“The ship sank,” Joseph began. “That can hardly be considered our—”

“Ride faster.”

Asher took a breath as if he would speak, but she laid a hand on his thigh. “Don’t fight it. The sooner we get there, the quicker we can leave.”

And she’d return to her home among the Hafan people, leaving Asher to his post in Maelgwn. She closed her eyes against the pain that thought brought her. Leaving him the first time had been heartrending. She wasn’t sure she’d survive it a second time. She swallowed past the thick knot in her swollen throat.

Asher snaked an arm around her waist and pulled her to rest against his chest as his lips brushed her ear. "I'm worried about you. You're in no condition to heal anyone."

Truth be told, she was concerned that she might not be able to summon the power as exhausted as she was, but what choice did she have? "I'm fine," she lied. "Just a little tired."

"Close your eyes and rest as best you can. I'll make sure you don't fall."

She doubted it would do any good, but she lay back in his embrace and allowed her eyelids to fall closed. The rhythmic sway of the horse was almost relaxing, lulling her into a near hypnotic state. But the clatter of hooves on stone quickly drove away any sense of rest. The sound grated against her ears, reminding her of what was at stake. The realization that all of her carefully gathered supplies were ruined by seawater and likely lying at the bottom of the ocean hit her. She hoped the keep had a fully stocked storeroom. And plants she recognized.

The party raced under the arch leading to the keep, heedless of the people traveling on foot. The drawbridge had been lowered, and the horses sped across it, the clomping echoing against the stone walls.

Several people paced anxiously in front of the heavy wooden doors that led through the interior wall surrounding the keep. As the horses slowed to a halt, two huge men scanned the riders before heading directly toward her. Worry tightened her belly into a knot.

"Stay on the horse," Asher murmured in her ear as he dismounted, blocking the men's way.

The larger of the two men stepped forward. "This is the healer?" he asked no one in particular.

Before she or Asher could answer, a chorus of, "Yes, m'lord," went up from the warriors surrounding them.

Asher faced the man, meeting his gaze. "I would request some time for my mate to recover before attempting to heal—"

The other man shook his head, interrupting. "There is no time."

With a frown, Asher turned and lifted her from the horse's back as Joseph dismounted as well. With both of her "mates" flanking her, she followed the leaders through a warren of brightly lit passageways into the heart of the keep and a dark, windowless room heavy with the sour scent of sweat and sickness.

She turned to the man who'd first approached them in the courtyard. "My supplies went down with the ship. I'll do what I can now, but later, I'll need to check your storerooms for anything useful. For now, I need fresh water—both hot and cold, clean cloths and more light."

The man barked orders at the attendants in the room, and they scurried to do his bidding as he knelt between the two pallets in the center of the room. Two little boys, maybe nine or ten, lay pale and listless on sweat soaked sheets. He spoke to them in quiet, soothing tones. Her heart ached at the anguish in his voice.

The second man from the courtyard turned to Neeve, blocking her view of the others. "You have to save them."

Nervousness tightened her throat, but she forced herself to speak. "I'll do my best."

He nodded his head toward the other man. "Tyr has barely left their bedside."

Neeve studied the man before her. He looked just as exhausted as Tyr. "I'll do everything I can."

"Thank you," he murmured. "I'll make sure you have everything you need."

Wishing she'd at least had been able to wash, she tried to put aside her discomfort, approached the children and began to examine them. "What can you tell me about their illness?"

Tyr looked at her, his gaze worry-shadowed and weary. "They became ill around the time of the last full moon. Both boys got sick at once. At first, Alarik thought they'd eaten something that had gone bad," he said, nodding toward the other man. "But instead of getting better, they only got worse. It's already taken their mother." He swallowed past his grief. "Please, we can't lose them, too."

As the man talked, Neeve assessed the children. They were both dehydrated and running high fevers. It was hard to see in the dim light, but both boys' skin tone looked almost grayish. Closing her eyes, she laid her hands on the center of each child's chest and expanded her awareness out of her own body and into theirs.

She recoiled immediately at the energy from the poison that permeated their little bodies. "Is anyone else in the household sick?" she whispered to Tyr.

He shook his head.

She closed her eyes and placed her hands over them again. Dropping her guards, she let her energy flow from her body to the boys'. She heard the man next to her gasp. She knew what

he saw—a golden glow flowing from her hands into the children’s chests and spreading along their limbs. The pure healing energy slowly absorbed the toxins eating through their insides.

Pulling it out of the children, she drew it into her own body. She had no idea how long she worked on them. It might have been mere moments or perhaps hours. But eventually, she pulled all of the contaminants from their bodies.

Already weak, the poisons coursing through her veins weakened her further. She placed her hands on the floor and released the toxins into the hewn stone. Slowly, it drained from her body, but the residue left her exhausted and shaky.

Lifting her head, she met the man’s gaze and whispered, “Your children are being poisoned.”

His eyes widened as the realization that his mate had been murdered sank in. He opened his mouth, but before he could speak, she laid her hand on his arm.

“Please don’t say anything yet,” she murmured. “There’s a chance that whoever did this will try again.”

His lips drew together, and he looked as though he might explode in rage, but fear lurked beneath.

“Is there anyone you can think of who’d want to harm your children...and your mate?”

“There are always enemies, but none who would have access to them.”

“The easiest way is through food and drink. You’ll need to be especially vigilant. Only let your most trusted people near their food. You may even want to see to it yourself.”

His expression of shock and disgust told her all she needed to know. He might love his children, but he thought himself above such menial tasks.

Both boys stirred, drawing their attention.

“Papa?” the smaller one asked, his voice wavering.

“I’m here,” Tyr murmured, relief evident in his expression as he smoothed the boy’s sweat-matted hair off his forehead.

Neeve filled a cup with water and held it to the other child’s lips, propping him up to help him drink. “Not too much,” she said as he greedily swallowed the fluid.

Within a few minutes of the healing, both boys were sitting up and looking almost as if they’d never been sick. Only the dark circles below their eyes and their general pallor indicated

they'd ever been anything less than healthy. They certainly didn't look as though they'd been at death's door.

Tyr clasped her hands in both of his. "What can I give to you? You've saved my heirs. Whatever I have is yours."

"Honestly, I just want a bath, dry clothes and sleep." She glanced at Asher and Joseph's haggard faces. "For me and my mates."

Tyr smiled. "It is done."

Chapter Five

Asher pulled Neeve closer as he woke, watching as the late evening sun slanted across the room. He had no idea how long they'd been sleeping, but he was fairly certain she'd fallen asleep before she'd finished lying down on the huge bed Tyr had provided for them. She'd bathed, scrubbing the sea salt from her skin, then collapsed on the bed while he'd quickly washed himself. He'd been so exhausted, he didn't even remember Joseph climbing into bed with them.

Joseph still slept, pressed to Neeve's front, his hand resting possessively on her hip. Asher's cock thickened at the sight of the other man's hand on her skin. She was bruised nearly everywhere. Hell, they all were. Between the sinking ship and floating amid the debris, there wasn't a single place on his body that didn't hurt. But none of that really mattered—not when he had Neeve.

She stirred slightly in her sleep, pushing back into his groin. He closed his eyes at the sensation of her naked warmth sliding against him. When he opened them, he met Joseph's hungry gaze. Need brightened the blue of his eyes as they swept down Neeve's sleeping form. Sighing, Asher rolled onto his back and stared at the ceiling.

He heard the other man's thoughts as clearly as he heard his own.

I know we shouldn't wake her, she's been through so much, but by the gods, it's tempting.

Asher smiled in response. *I understand. My common sense seems to vanish when she's near.*

A subdued knock sounded at the door before it creaked open and several servants entered carrying laden trays. One contained food, and the other looked to bear clothes and some other interesting items. He exchanged a look with Joseph after the other man eyed the small bottle of

oil and jewelry items. After setting their burdens on a table near the bed, the attendants left, the door protesting loudly in their wake.

Neeve stirred at the noise, stretching languorously between them.

Asher knew the moment she felt their erections. Her eyes fluttered open, and a sleepy smile curved her lips. Reaching around her, he cupped her breast. Her nipple immediately beaded into his palm. A breathy murmur escaped her as she arched into his touch and pushed back against his erection. He thrust against her, dragging his cock along the silky cleft of her ass. Joseph thrust against her groin, and a streak of possessiveness shook Asher. If this were a permanent relationship, he might be able to share her fully, but knowing it wasn't—that it never would be—heightened the tight feeling of jealousy in his chest.

I'm not planning to take her from you, or take more than she wants to give. I just want to give her pleasure.

Asher nodded, not sure how much more pleasure giving he could stand. He buried his face in the scented warmth of Neeve's neck, dragging kisses along her sensitive skin while she squirmed between them.

Joseph pushed aside Asher's hand, exposing her breast to the chilly morning air. As he watched, it crinkled tighter. Joseph leaned forward and closed his lips around the peak, drawing it into his mouth.

Asher's cock jerked against her. Despite his misgivings, there was something highly erotic about watching the other man work her body into a frenzy.

Neeve shoved her fingers into Joseph's hair, tugging him closer and whispering, "More. Suck it harder."

Joseph released the flesh with an audible pop and shoved her onto her back. She wasted no time wrapping her arm around Asher's head and pushing him toward her still damp nipple. Ignoring her urging, he trailed his fingertip around the berry-brown areola, watching it contract at his touch. She arched her back, pushing upward into his hand, urging more contact and whimpering in frustration when she didn't get it.

The other man met his gaze, and together they descended, each taking a nipple into their mouths. She sighed in pleasure as they sucked in unison. Her hands convulsed in Asher's hair as he scraped the swollen bud with his teeth.

Continuing to draw on her, Asher trailed his hand along her ribcage and over her stomach, pausing to circle the shallow indentation of her navel. His touch drifted lower as he continued his exploration, carefully avoiding the discolored and raw areas. He skimmed the outer curve of her hip, then her inner thighs eliciting a moan as he avoided her pussy.

Her disappointment was a sharp groan. "Quit teasing and touch me already."

"You're not ready, yet."

She practically growled as she strained between them. "The hell I'm not." She tugged firmly at his hair.

Asher untangled her fingers and pinned her wrist to the bed above her head. He grinned at Joseph. "It seems someone needs to learn a lesson in patience."

The other man returned his smile as he secured her other arm to the bed. "I believe you're right."

Asher transferred Neeve's wrist to Joseph's hold as he shifted to straddle her prone form. His cock bobbed heavily against her rapidly rising and falling chest, leaving a smear of pre-cum across her golden skin. Her breath caught in her chest as he dragged his fingertip through the wetness, tracing patterns over her sternum. Lifting his finger from her breastbone, he brought it to her lips. Opening her mouth, she drew the tip inside and sucked rhythmically at it, holding his gaze—part challenge and part plea.

He pulled his finger free and slid down the length of her body until he was between her legs. Shouldering them farther apart, he bared her cunt to his gaze. Glossy with arousal, her lips were pink and puffy. Drawing a finger along her cleft, he almost groaned as her juices coated his skin.

Asher sank to his elbows and draped her legs over his shoulders, pushing her thighs wider. He spread her silky folds with his thumbs, exposing her swollen clit. She whimpered with need, begging him to fuck her. The kind thing to do would be to suck her clit between his lips and make her come immediately.

He wasn't feeling particularly kind.

Instead, he licked a path around it, tasting every inch of her pussy while carefully avoiding the tiny bundle of nerves that would push her over the edge into orgasm. He wanted to keep her hovering on the brink as long as possible until she was delirious with need for him—for both of them.

Delving lower, he darted his tongue inside her quivering opening, and her body practically arched up off the bed. He splayed a hand over her stomach and held her to the mattress while he gathered her juices with the opposite hand and teased her nether hole with the pads of his fingertips.

A tight, keening cry left her lips as he continued to drive her need higher. Still pinning her wrists to the bed, Joseph used his free hand to torment one of her nipples then the other.

Asher glanced up the length of her body. Her golden skin was tinged pink with arousal as she writhed against their restraint. Her nipples jutted upward, tight crinkled flesh crowning the trembling globes of her breasts. Her eyes were closed, and her lips parted as she whispered his name over and over.

His cock jerked against the sheet at the sound of her pleas. He wanted to be inside her already, losing himself in the tight slickness of her pussy, but he needed her release almost more than he needed his own. When this was over, when they returned home, he wanted there to be no question in her mind that they belonged together. He wanted to imprint himself on her—body and soul—the way she'd done to him.

She opened her eyes, pinning him with her deep brown gaze. He'd been a fool to think he could simply fuck her and get her out of his system. She was written on his heart, carved into his soul. Now, he needed to convince her that they belonged together. Just the two of them. Forever.

He glanced briefly at Joseph, who met his gaze, merriment in his bright eyes.

You're thinking loudly, my friend.

Asher raised his brow at the other man.

I'm not looking to steal your woman from you or be a permanent part of your lives. I know this is temporary.

The tight grip of worry faded, and Asher felt himself relax. His eyes fell to Neeve who watched him anxiously. Holding her gaze, he lowered his head and dragged the flat of his tongue through her folds. Her body arched, but Joseph kept her tightly pinned to the bed.

He bent down to murmur in her ear while Asher continued to lap at her dripping flesh.

"Do you like that?" Joseph asked. "Do you like the feel of his mouth on your pussy?"

Neeve's answer was an unintelligible moan punctuated by the rocking of her hips as she lifted them to meet Asher's lips and tongue. Sliding his hand from her stomach, he traced her

fluttering opening, tapping with the tip of his finger, as she demanded more. But he wasn't ready to let her come yet.

He caught sight of the tray next to the bed. Momentarily ceasing his ministrations, he grabbed everything but the clothes. Keeping the bottle near him, he deposited the tangle of metal on her belly. It quivered as a shiver worked through her.

"Presents?" Joseph asked.

Neeve shivered again as Asher held her still with his gaze.

"I think so," he answered.

She struggled to lift her head and see what they were doing, but Joseph kept her firmly pinned in place. Cool chains were dragged over her skin, feeling like metallic snakes crawling across her over-sensitized body.

"What is that?" she asked. "What are you doing?"

Asher chuckled darkly. "I thought we'd discussed your need to learn patience."

She glared at him, gasping when he pinched her nipple sharply, and the tight squeeze of metal bit into her flesh. Dangly bits hung down, teasing the sensitive curve of the underside of her breast. He repeated the motion on the other side.

"Gorgeous," Joseph breathed, skimming his palm over the abused flesh. The contact was almost more than she could stand. Her nipples throbbed, but the pain quickly blossomed into a harsh kind of pleasure.

"There's a chain to connect them, but I think we'll leave that off for now," Asher murmured.

"Are you sure?" Joseph asked.

Asher held up something, out of her line of sight. "Right now, I'm more interested in this."

A harsh breath escaped Joseph as he stared at whatever it was Asher held. Trembling anxiety mixed with needy desire. She wanted whatever these men were willing to give her. Asher settled back between her legs again, spreading her pussy lips wide. The cool air chilled her heated flesh, but he quickly warmed it with his lips and tongue. He continued to avoid the place she most wanted his touch, circling her clit with the tip of his tongue but never touching it.

Suddenly, he lifted his head. Without warning, he pinched her clit between his thumb and forefinger, and she felt the sharp bite of metal there, too.

She squirmed, trying to get some kind of relief, but the motion only sent more blood rushing to the area. Pain quickly blurred becoming pleasure, and she wanted more of the agonizing mix.

Asher stared at her with an almost reverent expression on his face, but it was overshadowed by raw lust.

“I want to see,” she managed to choke out.

Asher crawled from the bed and lifted a polished metal mirror from the wall. He stood at the foot of the bed reflecting her image back to her. Her breath strangled in her throat as she caught sight of her reflection. Arms pinned above her head and her hair in a wild tangle over the pillow. Dark, engorged nipples sat atop her trembling breasts, decorated by silver wire clips, with tiny garnets dangling at the ends of fine silver chains. She barely noticed the scars around her right breast. For the first time since she’d been attacked, she felt almost beautiful. Of course, it didn’t hurt that both men stared at her with unsuppressed desire. She scanned lower, barely noticing her bruises and scrapes. Her attention was drawn to a matching clip around her straining clit. Whisker burn covered her inner thighs and sent a shiver through her as she recalled the sensation of Asher’s mouth on her.

As she watched, Joseph lowered her head as brushed his lips over a nipple. The barest kiss had become a scorching caress as the clip heightened even the tiniest sensation. The sight of him pleasuring her sent a fresh rush of cream to coat her thighs.

She didn’t love Joseph—not like she loved Asher—but she did care about him. And she desired him. At the moment, she desired him desperately. She wanted them both with a ferocity that shocked her.

Joseph used his free hand to tease her other aching nipple. Lips, fingers, clamps—she couldn’t get enough. Each touch of his lips and fingers made her clench emptily, wishing for a cock to fill her. Wishing for Asher to fill her. For him to pound her into the bed.

Her clit pulsed in its decorative cage as she watched hunger tighten his face. His eyes brightened with need, and his cock brushed his stomach, leaving a trail of pre-cum across the silky soft hair covering his belly. She swallowed hard as her mouth watered with the desire to take him between her lips. She knew better than to try though. He was clearly in charge of this

encounter—and enjoying it immensely. Truth be told, so was she. There was something highly arousing about giving up all control to these two men. Something so raw that she ached with it.

Asher set down the mirror and crawled between her spread legs, prowling toward her. Her belly clenched with anticipation as he dropped his head toward her pussy. His hot breath bathed her swollen flesh, sending shivers through her.

He touched the tip of his tongue to her throbbing clit, and she nearly shot up off the mattress. She couldn't remember it ever feeling as intense as it did now. He traced circles around it, enflaming her further. Tears of frustration squeezed from the corners of her eyes as she writhed. Perspiration dotted her skin as he brought her to the edge repeatedly then stopped, leaving her hanging, unable to find her release.

"I can't take any more," she panted as he continued to stroke her clit.

In lieu of a response, he slid a thick finger inside her, partially filling the emptiness. She clamped down on him as he pulled back.

She couldn't hold back the keening moan as he plunged forward again. At this rate the whole keep would know that she was having the most desperately needed sex of her life. Without warning, a slippery digit slid between her ass cheeks, unerringly finding the tight pucker and teasing it open.

"Relax," he murmured.

Her internal muscles fluttered rapidly, the dark command in his voice shoving her that much closer to release. Slowly, he inserted a finger, gently pushing past the tight ring of muscle as he continued to lick her clit. Joseph caught her scream of surprise in his mouth, sealing his lips to hers.

The sensations twisted within her, threatening to snap like an overly taut rope.

Asher added another finger to her pussy and one to her ass, spreading them apart, no doubt stretching her for what was to come. Her muscles quivered, contracting around him as he pistoned in and out of her. She could feel his fingers thrusting and counterthrusting—working against each other as they pressed into her helpless body.

Joseph trailed kisses from her lips to her ear. "How does it feel knowing we're both going to be inside you? Filling you? Fucking you?"

His harshly whispered words pushed her past the point of no return. The coiling knot of need within her snapped, spinning out of control like a child's toy. Waves of swirling pleasure

washed over her. Joseph pushed them higher, scraping his teeth across her nipple as she cried out her release.

As her shuddering subsided, Joseph lifted his head, and Asher gently withdrew from her quivering body. He shifted, lying on his back and pulling her on top of him. His thick cock trapped between them, she slid along the length of it, spreading her juices over his velvety flesh. His eyes closed, and his breath hissed through his teeth as she repeated the motion.

Just as suddenly, his eyes opened, and he pinned her with his brilliant green gaze. Gripping her hips, he stopped her motion, lifting her slightly as he prodded her tender opening. She took him inside her, the long slide agonizingly slow as she enveloped every inch, unable to look away from him. His face contorted in pleasure as he filled her.

She remembered Joseph's harshly whispered words, and a shiver racked her body. She was going to take both of them inside her. She'd seen it done at the temple, but she'd never imagined she'd be in this position.

Joseph's big, warm hand splayed across her back and gently pushed her to lie against Asher's chest. Her nipples pebbled immediately, and his heart thundered against her. He smoothed his hands up and down her back, pausing every so often to skim over her bottom.

Warm, slick fingers caressed her ass as Joseph finished preparing her to take him inside her. Her body was so full of Asher, she couldn't imagine taking a second cock. Joseph slipped one finger, then another inside her, stroking in and out as he stretched her. His fingers slid against the thin barrier that separated him from the other man.

Joseph added a third finger. She blinked back tears at the sharp sting of stretching muscles. As he worked them in and out of her body, she began to relax somewhat. The pain gave way to taut, sharp pleasure as she began to rock back and forth on Asher's cock in time with the other man's plunging fingers.

Just as tension coiled again in her middle, Joseph withdrew. A few moments later, he was back, his slicked cock nudging at her opening. Slowly, he pressed forward, pushing against the tight ring of muscle. Her breath caught, and she started to panic. They were too big. She'd never be able to take them both.

"*Cariad*," Asher whispered, cupping her face and drawing her attention to him. "It's all right. You can take us. I promise, we're going to make you feel so good. Just focus on my voice and relax."

He slid his hands down her back and over her ass. Gently, he pulled on her cheeks, separating them, easing Joseph's entry. Joseph continued forward, the head of his cock pushing past the opening. The pain dulled, but the pressure was intense. What would it be like when they began to move?

All the while, Asher kept murmuring to her, telling her how good she felt around his cock, how beautiful she was. Finally, both men were lodged within her as deeply as they could go, and all movement ceased. She assumed they were giving her a chance to become accustomed to their invasion. It didn't take long for the discomfort to turn to restlessness, and she began to squirm between them.

Joseph groaned, and she felt him flex within her. She clamped down on his cock, and his groan became a gasp.

"I can't stay still much longer." His words fell in harsh puffs against her back, raising goose bumps on her skin.

For a brief moment, Asher's gaze left hers, and he nodded at the other man. "Gently," was the only thing he said.

Joseph slowly withdrew before carefully pushing back in, his fingertips biting into her hips. The sensuous friction sent shudders through her body, and she wanted more. She wanted Asher moving, too.

Gazing down at him, she looked into his eyes.

"Please." It was the only word she could choke out, but he seemed to understand nonetheless.

Lifting his hips, he pushed into her as the other man withdrew. They fell into a rhythm of advancing and retreating, taking turns filling her passages, one after the other, relentless in their possession of her. She could feel their cocks sliding against each other within her, mercilessly fucking her as their speed increased.

Her release built in her middle as their now sweat-slicked bodies ground against one another. Joseph reached around with one hand and toyed with her nipple, teasing the nearly painfully erect bud with his fingertips. The beads at the ends of the clamps bounced wildly against her breasts as the men pounded into her. With each thrust their speed increased, and their rhythm faltered, becoming more desperate. Now, they were both slamming into her simultaneously.

She loved it. Two cocks plunging in and out of her at once, filling her until she couldn't keep from crying out. Joseph's lips skimmed her back while Asher brushed his thumbs across her nipples, sending bolts of agonized pleasure throughout her body. Helpless to do anything other than feel, she let herself be washed away on a tide of sensation. Raw need coiled within her, the sensation of their cocks sliding against one another, within her, caused her internal muscles to ripple around them.

Asher groaned her name as he continued to shaft her. He dragged a fingertip through the valley of her breasts, down her stomach to tease her clit. It throbbed beneath his touch. "You're so beautiful, *cariad*. So tight around us."

She knew he continued to speak, but the individual words were lost as the men continued to push her up the steep slope toward release. Joseph reached around and cupped her breasts, rolling her nipples. She arched into his touch while Asher stroked her clit. She was so close.

She stared down at Asher, his eyes bright and fixed on hers. The lust there was unmistakable, but for the briefest of moments, there seemed to be something more. Her heart stuttered, and she had to look away. If she thought for a minute that he might feel something more than desire for her, it would be impossible to leave him again.

She glanced back at him. The vulnerable look in his eyes had vanished—if it had ever truly been there in the first place. His gaze shifted, and he looked past her, to Joseph she supposed. Without warning, Joseph removed the clips on her nipples while Asher took the other one off her clit. Blood rushed back, thundering back into the abused areas. A strangled cry escaped her lips, and both men pounded into her faster.

Thought was replaced by sensation as their cocks plunged deeper, taking her faster, fucking her harder. The release that threatened broke free, drowning her in sensation. Her internal muscles contracted hard, pulsing and gripping both men until they could barely move through her spasming tissues.

Still cupping her breasts, Joseph thrust twice more before he groaned and slumped against her back filling her with scalding spurts of cum. Asher pushed into her from beneath, his eyes falling shut as he gasped her name and came in an eruption of hot, thick fluid. She collapsed against his chest, his heartbeat hammering against hers and Joseph's thudding against her back.

Asher smoothed Neeve's sweat-dampened hair off her face as her breath came in shuddering puffs against his chest. Her eyes drifted shut, and for a moment, he thought she might have fallen asleep. But slowly she opened them, pinning him with her warm, brown gaze. How had he ever thought he'd get enough of her? It wouldn't happen. Not in this lifetime. Maybe not even the next. No, Neeve was his.

She flinched as Joseph carefully withdrew then tugged the sheet over them. He washed briefly before pulling on his braes.

"I'm going to see about having another tub of water sent up."

Neeve looked at him and smiled gratefully. "Thank you."

As the other man disappeared from the room, she turned her attention back to Asher.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

"I'm fine. A little sore, but I'm not complaining." She glanced down at a gash on his chest. He must have gotten in during the wreck. The bleeding had long since stopped, but it was red and angry. She placed her hand over it and closed her eyes. A golden glow formed around her hand and tingling warmth seeped into his skin, penetrating his muscle before spreading throughout his body.

He stretched beneath her. He couldn't remember the last time, he'd felt this good. The influx of healing energy seemed to flow to all of his injured spots. Slowly, she lifted her hand to reveal a pink scar. It looked months healed. Not minutes. Lowering her head, she placed a tender kiss on the slightly raised skin before meeting his gaze again.

He lifted her chin and turned her head to the side, inspecting the wicked looking bruise on her temple. It looked even worse in the light of day.

"Can you—" he started to ask, but she shook her head.

"It doesn't work that way—at least not for me. I can't heal myself." She placed another kiss on his chest. "I'm sorry. I should have tended to both you and Joseph last night."

"You were exhausted. Besides, you're here to heal the children—not us."

A sweet smile curved her lips. "And you two distracted me this morning."

He cupped his hand around the back of her neck and drew her forward. He captured her mouth, pouring all of the words he couldn't express into the kiss. She speared her fingers through his hair and swept her tongue into his mouth, tasting him deeply.

He gathered her in his arms and rolled her beneath him. “You’re amazing. I can’t get enough of you.”

Her cheeks colored and she shook her head. “I have a feeling you could find plenty of willing women to fuck you and Joseph.”

“There’s only one I want.”

“Asher—”

The opening door interrupted her, and she turned. Joseph had returned with a tub and an army of servants bearing hot water.

“Tyr and Alarik are preparing a feast in your honor,” he said to Neeve. “We’re expected in the great hall as soon as possible.”

As soon as the servants left the room, Neeve pushed Asher off her and crossed the room to stand in front of Joseph. His gaze softened as he looked at her, and Asher had to tamp down the spurt of jealousy that flared to life in his chest. Taking his forearm between her hands, she closed her eyes and sent healing energy into his body. Joseph watched wide-eyed as his cuts healed and his bruises faded.

“Thank you.” His gaze lifted to hers and he pressed a gentle kiss to her lips. “Now, into the tub with you.”

Though Asher wanted to finish their conversation, he didn’t want to do it with an audience. Telling her the truth about how he felt would have to wait.

Chapter Six

Asher slipped his arm around Neeve's waist as they made their way into the great hall wearing the clothing Tyr and Alarik had provided for them. Neeve smiled as they entered the bustling room, but it didn't reach her eyes.

He lowered his head, his lips brushing her ear. "What is it?"

Her smile faltered as her gaze flitted over the room. "I'm just anxious to get home."

He wanted to ask her if she meant Maelgwn or wherever she'd disappeared to, but he wasn't sure he wanted to hear the answer. And this wasn't the right place to convince her to change her mind.

One of the keep's servants met them at the door and led them to the head table where the rulers sat with their children. Dark smudges still circled the boys' eyes, and it was apparent they'd been ill, but they no longer looked to be hovering within death's grasp.

The younger of the two boys threw his arms around Neeve's legs and clung to her. The wariness in her eyes vanished, replaced by tears as she squatted down to hug him. The older of the two children presented her with three silver bracelets.

Asher watched as she graciously accepted them, slipping them over her slender hand to jingle merrily around her wrist. He thought again of the other jewelry with which the rulers had gifted her along with the clothes. It wouldn't be the last time the trio used those. He started to harden at the memory of her breathless response.

Willing away his reaction, he sank in the chair offered to him beside Neeve. Tyr took the seat next to her, leaving Joseph looking annoyed. Grumbling under his breath, he took the chair on the other side of Asher.

Something isn't right about this, he said into Asher's mind.

The seating arrangement?

Get your head off your woman, and pay attention. Something is off here.

Asher spread his awareness outward. He sensed nothing from Tyr or Alarik, but Joseph was right. There was an undercurrent of unrest and a sensation of malice, but he couldn't tell where it was coming from.

He glanced at Pryderi's rulers. Both bent toward Neeve, and she murmured quietly to them, glancing every so often to where the children sat farther down the table with several slightly younger children. A woman hovered over the children then approached Tyr and Alarik. Laying a proprietary hand on each of their shoulders she stared down at Neeve.

"Thank you for healing the boys," she murmured. "The entire kingdom thanks you." The woman glanced around then leaned forward conspiratorially. "You don't think it'll return, do you?"

Asher felt Neeve stiffen almost imperceptibly. "It shouldn't."

"Oh good. I'm so relieved."

Somehow, Asher had a difficult time believing that. Tyr smiled and patted the woman's hand absently, and she wandered away.

A flurry of servants entered the room bearing trays of steaming food. The dishes were set on the head table first, and Tyr placed the finest pieces before Neeve.

"You have our undying gratitude for the gift you've given us."

She bowed her head in acknowledgement. "You're welcome. I'm so pleased to see how well they're doing."

"Are you sure you wouldn't consider staying with us? We'd give you, and your mates, of course, anything you could possibly want."

Neeve looked up from her trencher. "You're kind to offer, but I must return home. I have people there who are depending on me."

Tyr nodded. "I understand. However, should you change your mind, you'll always have a spot at our table. We'll ready a ship on the morrow to return you to Maelgwn."

"Thank you." Neeve bowed her head at Tyr, more anxious than ever to be out of there. Though there was nothing untoward in her behavior, the woman who'd come over to speak with her unsettled Neeve. She guessed from her behavior that she was Tyr and Alarik's lover. Perhaps

she was hoping to replace their late mate. Glancing down the table, Neeve saw her sitting with the lords' sons and several other children, one of whom sat on her lap...and looked startlingly similar to the boys who'd been ill.

Neeve nodded toward the child the woman held. "Is that your sons' brother?"

The man nodded. "Half brother," he clarified. "He's my son with Brianna. She's been so good with the boys since her sister died."

"Her sister was your mate?" Neeve asked, a horrible sense of clarity settling in the pit of her stomach.

"Brianna cared for our mate constantly. And the boys, too."

Neeve bit her lip to keep from saying anything she'd later regret. There was no sense in accusing the woman without proof. "She seems incredibly kind."

She kept an eye on Brianna during the meal, but the woman did nothing questionable. Perhaps, Neeve was imagining duplicity where there was none.

Though she'd begun doubting her feelings about Brianna, they came rushing to the fore again when she, Asher and Joseph were woken from a sound sleep several hours later by a servant begging her to see to the children who'd fallen ill again.

Quickly pulling on her clothes while Asher and Joseph did the same, she followed the servant to the children's chamber to find the two boys even sicker than before. They thrashed weakly on their beds, fevers claiming them. Brianna tried to spoon what looked like broth down their throats.

Tyr paced the room, dragging his hands through his hair, while Alarik tried to help Brianna by holding the boys' mouths open.

As soon as he spotted Neeve, Tyr grabbed her by the wrist and dragged her toward the beds. Both Asher and Joseph started toward the man, intent clear on their faces, but Neeve shook her head, urging them back. The last thing she needed was to have them dragged from the room while she was stuck in here alone.

Brianna eyed Neeve warily as she approached the children.

"What are you giving them?" Neeve asked.

"Broth with herbs to lower their fevers."

Barely control raging surged through Neeve. This woman was poisoning her nephews and had likely murdered her sister. "Did you make it yourself?"

“Of course,” she replied indignantly.

“Please stop.”

“I will not.” The woman began spooning it faster and faster.

“I need you to stop so I can heal them.”

Brianna ignored her.

“Cease, woman!” Tyr demanded. “Let the healer do her work.”

Glaring at Neeve, the woman rose and stood against the wall watching. Neeve once again laid her hands on the boys’ fragile chests and began to pull the poison from their bodies, replacing it with energy. She let it seep into their tissues until their bodies were filled with a brilliant, golden glow.

Her body grew heavy as it absorbed the toxins. There were even more this time. With as much as she pulled from them, Brianna must have planned on them being dead by morning. Neeve forced herself to stifle her anger and focus on the children. Drawing the last of the poison from their bodies, she released the energy into the floor where it would harmlessly dissipate.

Stumbling to her feet Neeve, stalked toward the other woman and glared at her. “Is this how you killed your sister?”

Brianna’s eyes widened, and she blanched. “What are you talking about?”

“Let me guess, you stayed by her side, tending her faithfully as she grew weaker and weaker.”

She caught a glimpse of Tyr from the corner of her eye. His lips were pressed in a tight, bloodless line, and his eyes were hard as he stared at them. She could feel his rage rolling off him in waves, but she wasn’t sure if it was directed at her or Brianna. It didn’t make a difference though. Neeve refused to let the other woman get away with murder.

“How long did she suffer?” Neeve pressed on. “How long did it take to kill her?”

“I didn’t.” Her gaze flew wildly around the room. “Tyr, Alarik, you don’t believe her, do you?”

Neither man spoke.

“She was my sister,” Brianna screeched. “These are her children.” Tears sprang to her eyes and rolled down her cheeks. “They’re my last connection to her. Why would I kill them?”

Neeve shrugged. “My guess would be to make it easier for your children to ascend the throne once you take your sister’s place as their mate.”

“Is that true, Brianna?” Tyr rumbled dangerously.

“No! I swear it.”

Neeve stared at the large bowl in Brianna’s hands, hoping Tyr would take the hint.

“Then prove it,” Alarik said evenly. “Drink it.”

If possible, the other woman paled further. “What?”

“Drink. It,” he reiterated.

“I don’t understand why you don’t believe me. I can’t believe you’d take the word of this stranger over me. You *know* me.”

Both men stepped closer, flanking Neeve, their arms crossed over their broad chests.

With shaking hands, Brianna lifted the bowl to her lips, but it slipped from her grasp and clattered to the floor, splattering the contents everywhere before she’d had a chance to taste it.

Alarik and Tyr exchanged a wordless glance, and Alarik grabbed Brianna’s arm and pushed her, sobbing, from the room.

Neeve returned to stand between Asher and Joseph who each slid a protective arm around her waist.

Tyr leaned over the bed and laid his hands across his children’s heads, checking their temperature. Though they both slept, they were far more peaceful than they had been when she’d entered.

Neeve’s whole body shook. She couldn’t understand the mindset of someone who’d kill her own sister then stoop to attempting to kill her sister’s children. Impotent rage still swirled through Neeve, and she had to force herself to unclench her fists.

Tyr approached them.

“Thank you,” he murmured, his gaze locked on Neeve’s. “I don’t know what we would have done had we lost them. I just can’t believe Brianna would...” His eyes lost focus for a moment as his thoughts appeared to consume him. But he quickly snapped out of it. “Let me show you back to your room.”

They followed him through the twisting hallways to the center portion of the keep.

“Are you sure you won’t consider staying on? More than ever, we’re in dire need of someone with your skills.”

“I’m sorry, m’lord, but I can’t. We all have duties in our home,” she said as they entered the room.

Tyr smiled sadly, lingering outside the door. "I'll see that your ship sets sail tomorrow." Without warning, he threw a shimmering shield up in the open doorway, trapping them inside. "All aboard will be reported lost at sea. Your overlord will be compensated for his loss."

Angry shouts erupted at once from Asher, Neeve and Joseph.

"I hope you understand. I have no other way to ensure my children's safety," Tyr said.

"That's not true," Neeve shouted over the words of the men trapped with her.

"You can either accept your position with your mates safely at your side or I can take them from you."

He waved his hand, and the door slammed with a resounding crash. The sound reverberated through her chest, and she sank to the floor, her legs too weak to hold her. How dare he? She felt badly for him and his predicament, but she wasn't his to command. Her eyes slid to Asher. She wasn't his either.

Barely controlled fury tightened his features, and he looked as if he'd kill Tyr if he got the chance. Hell, she was ready to do it herself. She couldn't believe he'd done this. Holding them captive? Threatening to do who knew what Asher and Joseph? She knew these were the actions of a desperate man, but they were unacceptable.

Joseph extended his hand toward the shifting energy barrier but quickly pulled back his hand with a curse, the flesh sizzling.

Neeve pulled herself up from the floor and crossed the room. Gently cupping her hands around Joseph's injury, she sent the last of her energy into it, healing the damage. After the blistered skin had been replaced, she turned to Asher who stared intently at the door. Holding his hands several inches apart, he conjured a huge energy ball and hurled it at the doorway. It sizzled as it made contact then rebounded back into the room, careening off the walls and scorching everything it touched. It headed straight for Neeve and Joseph, barely missing their heads as Joseph yanked her down to the floor sheltering her with his body. Finally, its motion slowed then stopped, and eventually the energy dissipated.

Asher ran to them and helped Neeve up from the floor. Running his hands over her body as if checking for injuries, he peered into her face. "I'm so sorry. Are you all right?"

When she nodded, he glanced at Joseph, the same question in his eyes.

Joseph nodded, climbed to his feet and stared at the doorway, "Obviously, force isn't going to work."

Neeve's gaze darted around the room. There were no windows and no other exits—just hewn rock walls. A flicker of hope sputtered to life in her chest as she weighed her options. It *was* possible to get them out, but at what risk to herself and the people who'd taken her in as one of their own—the people she'd come to love as family? Using this particular magic would not only drain her completely, potentially risking her life, but it would also betray the people who'd rescued her. She'd vowed never to reveal the sacred magic they'd taught her, but other options seemed to be rapidly dwindling.

While the men argued about their best course of action, Neeve crept closer to the wall. She had no idea if the magic would even work. The barrier Tyr had placed might interfere with her abilities further thwarting them. Whispering the ancient spell that would transmute solid rock into an interplaner portal, she attempted a small opening. The rock gave way as though it was made of water, and she was able to stick her hand through.

Anxiety-tinged hope spread through her. The people of Hafan would have to forgive her. There was no way she'd risk the life of the man she loved and that of a dear friend when she had the ability to save them. Pulling her hand from the rock, she struggled to her feet and approached the men.

Asher dragged his hands through his hair, frustration clear on his face. “We can't just sit here and wait for them to return. I refuse to leave Neeve to their mercy.”

“Well, I don't really fancy dying either,” Joseph added.

A wry smile curved Asher's lips, and he glanced at Neeve. “Nor do I, my friend. Nor do I.”

Neeve cleared her throat. “I can get us out of here.”

“What?” both men asked at once.

“I can get us someplace safe.”

“What are you talking about?” Asher asked.

The sound of several sets of heavy footsteps sounded outside the doorway, and the unmistakable sensation of a spell being reversed crept through the room. Tyr was back.

Neeve grabbed Asher and Joseph's hands, pulling their attention from the door. “I can get us out of here.”

Both tried to tug their hands from their grasp and take up a defensive stance in front of her, but she refused to let go. "I can get us out of here," she repeated, "but I have to do it now. Do you trust me?"

Both men nodded.

"Then don't let go," she ordered.

Clutching their hands more tightly and doing her best to ignore Tyr's demand that she give him her answer, she walked to the wall. She whispered the incantation, and the rock wall before her began to shift and shimmer, looking like glowing, gray liquid.

Asher's mouth dropped open, and his eyes widened in awe. A quick glance at Joseph showed he wore a nearly identical expression.

"Walk forward," Neeve demanded, "and don't look back." She took several hurried steps forward tugging the men along with her. The altered rock closed around them like a cold embrace. Turning to glance over his shoulder, he saw Tyr and his men burst into the room and skid to a stop, but Asher viewed them through a heavy gray film that grew thicker by the moment.

Neeve quietly chanted as they continued to walk forward through the altered rock. After a few more steps, the wall in front of them started to glow faintly, growing brighter as they moved forward. It was almost like viewing the glow of firelight through curtains. The hazy shapes of furniture and a window took shape, and suddenly he realized he was looking into his own chamber. Just as quickly, they passed through the wall into the room.

Still clutching their hands, Neeve fell to her knees, her head bowed forward and her breathing erratic. He followed her to the ground and scooped her into his arms, directing Joseph to pull back the covers on the bed. Her skin was icy cold, and she'd begun to shiver. Gently, Asher laid her down and pulled her into his arms, tugging the bedding over her chilled body.

He turned to Joseph. "Find Micah. Bring him to me. But don't mention anything to anyone." He glanced at Neeve. "Not yet." One didn't typically order the overlord to attend to them, but Asher knew the other man would understand his reluctance to leave Neeve.

Joseph nodded and squatted down at Neeve's side. "Remind me not to travel with you, again. Trouble follows you." He grinned at her, but his expression quickly sobered. "You're an amazing woman. I'm honored to have been your lover." He smoothed her hair off her forehead

while Asher ignored a small spurt of jealousy. Joseph glanced up at him, merriment twinkling in his gaze before looking at Neeve again. “And remember, if you and Asher are ever looking for an occasional third, all you need to do is ask.”

Neeve smiled wanly at him in response, and Joseph dropped an affectionate kiss on her cheek before he left the room.

Asher pressed a kiss to her forehead, and she shivered.

“Are you all right?” he asked.

She nodded slowly. “Just exhausted.”

“Sleep now. You’ve got plenty of questions to answer after you’ve rested.”

She was asleep before he’d even finished speaking. He’d never seen anything like that—had no idea that kind of magic even existed. How powerful was she? And what other secrets was she hiding?

His chamber door swung open on silent hinges. Micah entered the room and pulled a chair to the side of the bed. “I didn’t expect you back yet. How did it go?”

Asher’s body shook with silent laughter. Quietly, so as not to disturb Neeve, he replayed the events of the past few days to his friend. Micah’s jaw tightened with rage as Asher revealed Tyr’s plan to keep them captive in order to keep Neeve and her healing ability for himself. Judging from the coldness seeping into Micah’s gaze, the Pryderi had just lost their most powerful ally.

“How did you get back so quickly?” the other man finally thought to ask.

Asher glanced at Neeve, unsettled about revealing her secret, but he couldn’t keep it from Micah. Not with everything at stake. When Asher had finished speaking, Micah sat back in his chair, his eyes huge.

“I’ve never even heard of power like that. How is it we never sensed the scope of her abilities?”

“I have no idea,” Asher admitted. Likely, he’d been too busy fucking her to think about anything else. Guilt assailed him, and he drew her more snugly against his body. She’d warmed considerably, but he could feel the exhaustion that had completely sapped her strength. Dark circles marred the skin beneath her eyes, and she sighed in her sleep.

He glanced at Micah, who smiled knowingly at him. Eager to avoid questions he had no intention of answering, he asked one of his own. “How are Elizabeth and the babe?”

The other man's smile, turning from knowing to sappy. "They're resting, but they're fine. Better than fine, really. Mairenn is strong and beautiful—just like her mother. Someday, I hope you know the same joy."

A trickle of unease spread through Asher. He had no trouble imagining Neeve heavy with their child, or their babe nursing at her breast. But did she want that? Did she want him?

The sound of chair legs scraping against the floor drew his attention back to his friend. "You look almost as exhausted as she does. Rest, and when you both wake, bring her to me. I want to discuss this power of hers and compensate her for her actions with the Pryderi."

Somehow, he doubted Neeve would be terribly thrilled about discussing her powers with Micah or anyone else. But he nodded his agreement as his eyes drifted shut.

The last sound he registered was the sound of the door latching as Micah pulled it shut behind him. It seemed his eyes had only been closed for a few minutes when something woke him. Squinting against the late afternoon sunlight streaming through the room, Asher blinked trying to clear his vision. The events of the last few days tumbled through his memory. Neeve was burrowed against him, her arm flung around his waist and her face resting on his chest. Her warm breath puffed against his skin as she breathed deeply. Closing his eyes, he lay back and stroked her hair. He knew the moment she woke. The rhythm of her breathing changed, though her eyes remained closed.

"I know you're awake."

Slowly, her eyes blinked open, the deep brown breathtaking in the sunlight. Bruises still colored her flesh, but they didn't detract from her beauty. If anything, the fact that she'd fought so hard to survive made her even more stunning. There was no doubt about it—he was in love. The thought no longer terrified him as it once had. Instead, the idea that he'd someday be without her was a far more sobering fear.

Pushing up on her elbow, she leaned down and placed a tender kiss on his lips. It was a long, lazy kiss as if she had all the time in the world, but he couldn't shake the feeling that their time was limited—that something bad was coming. Maybe, it was just the aftereffects of all that they'd experienced recently. One crisis after another and, now, he didn't know what to do with the modicum of peace he was experiencing. Well, he definitely had some ideas.

Splaying his fingers through her hair, he tugged her closer, before flipping her onto her back. Lifting his head, he looked into her eyes. "Micah wanted to see you when you woke."

She shrugged, a faint smile curving her lips. “I guess he’ll have to wait. I’m a little busy now.”

Lowering his head, he kissed her again—slowly, deeply, thoroughly tasting her. She sighed into his mouth, and he caught the tiny sound as she tangled her fingers in his hair, demanding more. But he held her at bay—continuing to take his time with her, to savor her. Every time they’d made love since she’d been back had been a hurried, desperate coupling. With Joseph involved, it had been even more frantic. Now, Asher had her to himself, and he wanted to remind her of how good it could be between the two of them. Since they were back from Pryderi, he didn’t plan on sharing her with anyone ever again.

She tugged at his shirt, pulling it up and over his head, forcing him to momentarily break the kiss. Pressing her lips to his shoulders and neck, she trailed kisses wherever she could reach. He’d been aroused as soon as he’d woken with her in his arms, but each touch of her lips hardened his cock further. But he still wouldn’t be hurried.

He plucked at the bodice of her dress, slowly unlacing it and baring her skin to his hungry gaze. Her nipples were gathered in tight, pebbled buds, poking against the soft fabric. Pushing the fabric aside, he exposed her breasts, watching as the cooler air crinkled the areolas and nipples further. He palmed circles over the distended tip, making her squirm and try to push her breast more fully into his hand. But every time she shoved into his touch, he lifted his hand slightly, refusing to give her the contact she wanted. She scowled at him and drew his head down for another kiss, thrusting her tongue into his mouth, demanding more.

Shifting, he spread her legs with his thighs and rubbed against her pussy. Her teeth sank into her lower lip as she lifted her hips to thrust against him. Dropping her hand from his hair, she trailed her fingers down his chest and stomach until she reached the waistband of his pants. Deftly, she quickly unlaced his braes and slid her hand inside. Wrapping her slender hand around his cock, she stroked purposely, up and down the length of him, squeezing firmly as she tried to hurry him along.

He shook his head. “We’re taking it slowly this time. Very, very slowly.”

Frowning, she squeezed his cock again.

“I can always restrain you if that’s what it takes,” he muttered.

Her eyes widened slightly, but she said nothing.

He hadn't missed how hot being held down had made her. "Of course, we don't have Joseph here to hold you down this time, but I'm sure we can improvise."

Using his powers, he pulled her hands from both his hair and his cock and pinned them to the bed on either side of her head, binding her securely with narrow bands of energy—all without physically touching her.

She struggled against him, trying to lift her wrists from the bedding, but she couldn't. Her eyes darkened, and she frowned at him.

He couldn't stop a self-satisfied smile from spreading across his face. Color brightened her cheeks, and she bucked her hips as if she could toss him off her. But he didn't miss the fact that her nipples had hardened even more and stabbed straight up in the air, begging for his lips. Bowing his head, he took the closest one into his mouth. A strangled groan escaped her as he drew hard on the tight peak.

He lifted his head. "I'm sorry, *cariad*... Did you say something?"

Neeve's eyes narrowed as she glared at him.

He couldn't help the chuckle that spilled out. "No? I'll just carry on then." Drawing her other nipple deep in his mouth, he sucked on it, pulling needy little cries from her—cries she tried to hold back, but couldn't.

She continued to lift her hips, rubbing her pussy against his thigh. He knew that if he touched her now, she'd be wet. Reaching down, he grabbed the skirt of her dress and bunched it in his hand, baring her legs as he dragged it upward.

He groaned when he met the soft skin of her thighs, his fingers stroking her tender flesh. She shuddered beneath his hand, spreading her legs, silently demanding more of his touch. Sending out tendrils of power, he tugged and pinched at her nipples, teasing the tight points while she writhed beneath him.

He glanced up her body and met her gaze. "I wish I would have thought to pocket those nipple clamps," he murmured as he inched nearer to her pussy. "I've never seen you so desperate to have your breasts fondled. I think I'll have to have a pair made for you. And one for your clit." He flicked the tiny bundle of nerves with his thumb.

Her rough gasp hit him in the pit of his stomach, and he knew that no matter his good intentions, he'd never be able to take her slowly. Shifting, he lay on his stomach between her

legs and spread her lips, baring her beautiful cunt to him. Slick with arousal, her dewy flesh beckoned him, urging him forward to taste her.

He drew the flat of his tongue from her opening, upward, stopping short of her clit, his lips quirking at her annoyed moan. She lifted her hips as if she could direct his mouth to the proper place, but he ignored her prodding. When she did it again, he released several more bands of power. Two secured her ankles and the other wrapped firmly around her waist, virtually immobilizing her.

There was no mistaking the displeasure in her shriek. There was also no mistaking her pleasure. A fresh rush of cream glistened on her lips. Her body strained against the invisible bindings. Her nipples beaded even further atop her full breasts, her chest flushed with arousal. She enjoyed being at his mercy, and the gods knew he enjoyed having her there.

He traced her opening, pausing every so often to dip his fingertip inside ever so slightly before pulling out again. His lips quirked into a smile as he ignored her demands for more. He kept her on the edge, tormenting her until she was breathless with need. Finally, he plunged his finger inside her, pushing her over the edge. She cried out as her body contracted around his finger. Pulling back, he added a second then he pumped into her spasming channel, prolonging her orgasm until she slumped to the bed, drained.

“I want to touch you,” she whispered.

He wanted it, too. He wanted her hands and mouth on his body. He wanted her laughter, her tears, her joy. He wanted everything about her for the rest of their lives. Peace like he’d never known settled in his soul. The words of joining chased around his mind. He’d said them at the ceremony that had mated Micah and Elizabeth. And he heard them now as he stared at Neeve.

Along with many other outdated laws, Micah had lifted the ban against guardians taking mates. Asher could be joined with Neeve forever. He continued to chant the words in his mind, not quite ready to utter them aloud and give them power.

He kicked off the rest of his clothing and releasing the magical bindings, he helped her remove her garments as well. As soon as they were both free of their clothes, she wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled him down, cradling his body between her thighs. His aching cock brushed her damp folds. It took more restraint than he would have believed not to plunge into her willing body.

She dug her fingertips into his ass and urged him forward. “I want you inside me.”

He wouldn’t budge. Instead, he dropped a gentle kiss on her frowning lips. “I love you, Neeve.”

Her lips parted, and shock darkened her eyes, fear and concern swirling in their brown depths, but she didn’t speak. Instead, she shook her head, tears filling her eyes. They stayed suspended in that moment, frozen in time. Finally, she lifted her hips, begging him without words to take her. His heart ached with her rejection, but he wasn’t about to walk away from her now. Hell, he couldn’t even if he wanted to. Giving in to her urging, he thrust forward sharply, pushing the air from her lungs.

His heart was breaking, but it didn’t matter. He’d give her what she wanted. A hard fucking. He pounded into her, nailing her to the bed as she clung to him—her arms around his neck and her legs around her waist. She clutched him tighter with every thrust. Her body shook with exertion as she gripped him. He pushed aside his pain. She still owed him a year. He’d spend that time convincing her they belonged together.

Neeve closed her eyes against the tears that gathered there. He’d said he loved her. It had been nearly impossible not to respond in kind. She *did* love him. She’d been in love with him since before she’d left Maelgwn with Elizabeth all those long months ago. She couldn’t lie to herself, but she could definitely lie to him. It was the only sane course of action.

After everything they’d been through in the last few days, she wasn’t surprised he was confused. It would be so easy to let herself believe that he meant it—that his feelings were true—but they weren’t. The heady rush of terror and relief were bound to confuse emotions—add breathtaking sex to the mix and his misunderstanding was inevitable.

“Look at me,” he practically growled at her as he stopped moving.

Slowly, she forced open her eyes. Raw pain shone in his deep green gaze. Her heart dropped. She’d done that. She’d made him feel that hurt.

“If this is all you want,” he punctuated his words with a hard thrust, “I want to see your face while I fuck you.”

She swallowed hard around the ache his words caused. It was better this way. He’d realize soon enough that he’d been mistaken. Better that he learn this way than having him send

her away later when he realized he was wrong. Holding his angry gaze, she refused to look anywhere else.

With painstaking slowness, he withdrew, dragging his thick heat through her sheath. Nothing felt as good as having Asher buried inside her—not even Asher and Joseph together. She tightened her thighs around her lover's sides. This was going to be the last time—it had to be—and she didn't want him to hold back.

"You don't want my love, but you want my cock?"

She had no answer to give him. The truth was, she did want his love, but that wasn't going to happen. "Please," she murmured.

"Please, what?"

"Just fuck me." Her voice cracked as she forced out the words.

His eyes glittered dangerously as he stared into hers. He drew his hips back even farther then pushed forward, slamming into her as hard as possible. He thrust into her mercilessly, which was fine with her. She didn't want his mercy. She just wanted to capture this moment, to memorize the feel and scent of him. She never wanted to forget the sensation of him inside her body or experience of his heart hammering against her chest as they moved together. She clenched around his cock, convulsing around him as he drove himself deeper.

Tangling his fingers in the hair at the nape of her neck, he held her still, demanding her mouth in a punishing kiss. He pushed his tongue into her mouth, tasting and stroking her. She loved the masterful way he claimed her. She blinked back another rush of tears as she realized she loved everything about him.

Her body took over, and she stopped thinking. Her hips met his, lifting into every thrust, taking him as deeply as possible. Her over-sensitized nipples tightened further as his chest hair abraded them, and a moan slipped from her lips.

A thin sheen of sweat dotted their skin as their bodies strained together, their movements rough and almost animalistic. A coil of need tightened ominously in her belly, and she tried to ignore it. She didn't want this last time between them to be over so soon. She wanted to savor it, but as the knot of desire twisted tighter and tighter she knew she didn't have a choice but to ride it out.

From Asher's near grimace, she could tell he was close, too. His steady rhythm faltered, and he thrust wildly. The twisting tension inside her snapped, and she was lost. Waves of molten

need crashed over her and threatened to pull her under its tow. She clung to the only solid thing in her world. Asher.

His head dropped forward, his face pressing to his neck. His shuddering breath rasped against her skin as he spilled thick and hot inside of her, branding her completely, whether he knew it or not. Though she'd leave him, likely before the night was through, she'd never be without him. While not in the physical sense, he'd always be part of her.

Slowly, he lifted his head and stared down at her. She pressed kisses to his lips, cheeks and neck. Now that it was over, it was painfully apparent he wasn't about to kiss her back, but what did she expect? She'd told him to just fuck her. She'd rejected him. She'd rejected his love.

Chapter Seven

Neeve and Asher dressed without uttering a sound. The silence stretched between them, growing and breathing like a living thing. Swallowing her impending sense of doom, she tried to finger comb her hair before turning around. She still had to face the overlord. Both he and Asher were waiting for information on how she'd managed to free them from the Pryderi.

Taking a deep breath and schooling her features to what she hoped was a pleasant, if bland expression, she turned to face Asher. Fully clothed now, he leaned against the doorframe and watched her. She wondered if he had any idea how hard it was to not launch herself into his arms and confess her feelings.

"One year."

"Beg your pardon?" she asked.

"You owe me a year. I still intend to collect."

He'd obviously been lying when he'd agreed that their relationship would last no longer than their time in Pryderi. His lie shouldn't have the power to hurt her, but it did. He likely didn't mean half of what he'd said. Including his admission of love. Her heart lurched in her chest, but she pushed past the hurt. She opened her mouth to respond, but thought better of it. Obviously, it would never come to pass, and right now, on the eve of her escape, it wasn't worth arguing about. "We shouldn't keep the overlord waiting any longer."

Asher studied her, suspicion plain in his eyes, but he didn't say anything. Instead, he opened the door and ushered her out into the torch-lit hallway. They walked to the overlord's chambers in silence. The door swung open before they even stopped, and Neeve assumed Asher and Micah had been communicating telepathically and Micah knew they were on their way.

The overlord guided them into a small antechamber and motioned them both into ornately carved wooden chairs. Neeve gratefully sank onto the padded cushion and waited for Micah to speak.

“Firstly, on behalf of the entire kingdom, I want to thank you for your service. You saved the future heirs. And despite the circumstances of your escape, your kindness will not be forgotten and will help maintain peace with the Pryderi.”

She inclined her head. “Thank you, but it was what anyone would have done in my place.”

“I’ve heard the story from Joseph. You deserve the praise.”

She glanced at Asher from the corner of her eye. He nodded his agreement.

“You deserve more than praise,” Micah continued. “I’d like to appoint you to the position of keep healer. I’d like you to train those with potential in the healing arts. We’ve been crippled without these skills. You would, of course, be compensated.”

Neeve’s heart leapt at the offer then promptly fell. As much as she would love to do that, she couldn’t. She didn’t belong here. Not with Asher.

“I’d like some time to think about it,” she murmured.

“Of course.” Micah settled into the chair opposite her. “In the meanwhile, I’d to talk to you about your method of escape.”

Her hands clenched on the arms of the chair, but she forced herself to relax.

“From what Joseph described, you were able to transport through the solid rock wall of their keep, across the water and through the walls of our keep.”

She nodded. She couldn’t very well deny it.

“How?” Asher interrupted. “I’ve never heard of anyone having those powers. How do you do it?”

She met her former lover’s gaze. “I can’t tell you. It isn’t mine to share.” She briefly glanced at Micah to include him in her answer. “The Hafan people took me in, healed me and allowed me to live there with them. I promised to never betray them. The only reason I used the spell in Pryderi was because I feared for Asher and Joseph’s lives.”

Both men exchanged a glance. She wondered what they were saying now.

“Tyr was willing to do just about anything to coerce me to stay on as healer.”

She watched both men intently, wondering if they'd be willing to attempt similar coercion to keep her here.

"At least, tell us how it works," Asher demanded.

She shook her head. "If I were free to, I would." It was a simple enough process. As long as she'd been to the place she was shifting to and that place had large rocks, she could make her way there.

Micah's lips quirked into a small smile. "I'm disappointed, of course. But I understand."

Asher nodded, almost as if he didn't quite believe her.

She looked away from him and focused on the overlord. "Thank you."

After getting more details on the Pryderi, Micah walked them out into the hallway. With a sinking spirit, she knew that she'd likely have no better chance for escape tonight. While the men were discussing sending a message to Tyr about their return to Maelgwn, Neeve almost silently whispered the incantation.

Relief and regret mixed sourly in the pit of her stomach. Asher's lie had sealed her decision. It didn't matter how much she loved him if she couldn't trust him. She stepped through the translucent spot in the wall and turned in time to catch sight of Asher sprinting toward her, his expression full of anguish.

"I love you," she said. "I'm sorry." She had no idea if he'd heard her, but with the stone wall thickening and closing in front of her face, she doubted it.

Asher threw himself at the wall only to find it as solid and unforgiving as ever. Neeve's words echoed in his ears as her image faded as if it had never been there. He wondered if she'd been aware of the tears coursing down her face.

He pressed his head to the stone. She did love him. He hadn't imagined it. He could feel it as surely as he could feel her shifting through layers of rock. Granite. Sandstone. Shale. He had no idea how it was possible, but he felt her moving further away from him by the moment. Until finally the movement stopped, and he could feel nothing but pain and loss.

Pushing off the wall, he whirled to face Micah.

"Go," the other man told him, naked sympathy in his eyes. "Find her."

Neeve had to have returned to Hafan, her adoptive home. Micah's grandmother had taken her in when she'd first escaped Maelgwn, and it made sense for her to go there now. If only he knew where that was.

* * * *

It had been days since she'd left him. Again. He'd searched the length and breadth of Maelgwn and had come up empty. Every once in a while, he'd see a flash of what she was looking at, but none of it was familiar. She wasn't anywhere he'd ever been. He wasn't even sure *why* he was seeing what she was seeing. Then it hit him. The last time they'd been together, the words from the joining ceremony had been tumbling around in his head. Had he unintentionally mated them? It was the only thing he could think of that would explain his sudden ability to see through her mind.

Closing his eyes, he reached out, sending his thoughts to her. Though she'd never been able to hear him before, perhaps she could now. He knew Micah and Elizabeth had experienced something similar after they were joined.

Neeve, where are you?

The landscape he could see in his mind's eye rotated rapidly as if someone spun in a circle, searching for something. Or someone. She *could* hear him. She moved more slowly, and he watched through her eyes as a circle of tall standing stones came into view. Hope leapt in his chest. Finally, a landmark he recognized. A small island barely visible off Maelgwn's western shore. Too far to swim, the only way there was by boat, but with the rough coastal water very few people ever attempted it. Magic was the most reliable way onto the island. He couldn't use rock as a passage, but he had another way.

Turning his focus inward, he transformed, his bones and muscles compressing and reshaping themselves. Down and feathers sprouted from his skin as talons burst from his toes. Flapping his wings, he lifted himself into the air and flew off into the direction of the setting sun. The flight into the headwind was exhausting, but as full dark settled on the island beneath him, he landed at the top of one of the stones opposite of where Neeve sat with her back against another one.

He cocked his avian head to the side and watched her. She stared off into the distance, occasionally brushing the backs of her hands across her cheeks. This close to her, it was impossible not to feel the loneliness and grief that emanated from her. He glided to the ground to

land at her feet. She jerked, startled by the hawk's sudden appearance. Her eyes widened as he shifted back into his rightful form.

Lips parted, she scrambled to the side, stumbling to a standing position.

"How...what...how did you find me?" she finally managed.

He stood and stepped toward her, brushing the tears from her face with his thumbs.

"We're joined, Neeve. We belong together."

"You don't mean that. As soon as the year is up—" Her voice broke, but she pushed on.

"As soon as the year is up, if not before, you'll grow bored, and I'll be cast aside for the next woman who intrigues you."

He shook his head and opened his mouth. "I—"

"It nearly killed me to leave you. I couldn't handle it if you cast me aside. *When* you cast me aside."

He could feel her anguish just as clearly as he felt his own. She truly believed she was nothing more than a contract to be fulfilled. He heard his words in his head. *You owe me a year.* Guilt twisted his gut.

She lifted her hand and cupped his cheek, her eyes glistening with tears. "I know you mean well, but it won't work between us."

"You love me." It sounded like an accusation. "I heard you."

She took a step back, and her arm dropped to her side. "It doesn't mean we belong together."

He shook his head. "That's where you're wrong." He moved closer, pinning her to the stone with his body. "I don't want you as a consort. I want you as my mate. I want you body, soul and mind. And I offer you the same in return. I belong to you." He smiled sadly. "Whether you welcome it or not, I'm yours."

Before she could speak, he slipped an arm around her waist and lifted her chin with his free hand. Her still wary eyes held his gaze. Instead of trying to convince her further, he lowered his mouth to hers, capturing her trembling lips in a breathless, aching kiss.

"I love you." He pressed another kiss to her forehead. As much as he might want to, he couldn't force her to return with him. Pressuring her to come with him was no better than lying to her. If they were going to have any kind of chance together, she'd need to come to him of her

own free will. No contracts. No lies. Nothing but her love and trust. Even if it killed him. “You know where to find me if you decide I’m what you want.”

Stepping away from her, he transformed, lifting himself into the air and away from the woman he wanted more than anything.

* * * *

The sun was setting again, and still Neeve sat in the sacred stone circle, staring out over the sea. The waning light cast elongated shadows that crept along the ground in front of her. Another shadow joined those of the stones. Tamara. Her friend and the sister to the overlord.

She sat down next to Neeve, resting her back against the same rock. “How long are you going to sit here and make him suffer? How long are you going to make yourself suffer?”

Neeve looked at the other woman. “What?”

“You love him.”

“That’s not what matters here.”

The woman raised her eyebrow. “Really. And what does matter here?”

Neeve turned her face away from Tamara unwilling to let the other woman see her gathering tears. But that didn’t stop Tamara from continuing to talk.

“You will always have a home here. That will never change, but your heart belongs with him.”

Neeve stifled a sigh. Her friend was right. It had been his from the moment they’d met.

“Don’t you at least owe it to yourself—to both of you—to try again? To start over?”

Neeve watched her friend walk away. Tamara might be right. Neeve’s heart might belong to Asher, but did it matter? Love without trust wasn’t really love at all. He’d taken a huge risk by leaving her alone to make her decision. He’d finally been honest with her. He was trusting her to come back. She needed to offer him the same trust.

* * * *

It had only been a little over a week since Neeve had left Maelgwn, but it felt more like years. The worry she carried with her was almost as heavy as the hope.

The final barrier of Asher’s chamber wall thinned before her, and she could see him seated at the table, head bowed over piles of maps. A half empty bottle of mead sat in the middle of one of the continents, along with a barely touched plate of food. His shoulders slumped, and she made out the faint sound of his quill scratching against the parchment.

Quietly, she stepped through the wall into the room. Her stomach fluttered nervously as she forced herself to cross the last of the distance separating them. Of course, it wasn't really the last of the distance. He'd said he loved her and wanted her with him, but perhaps he'd changed his mind. After all, she had rejected him. Twice. She winced at the thought.

She must have made a noise, because he whirled around, rising from his chair. The quill dropped to the floor forgotten, and he took a step forward.

"You're actually here?"

Black smudges marred the skin beneath his red-rimmed eyes. He looked awful. And absolutely beautiful.

"I'm here," she forced out.

He was across the room and had her wrapped in his embrace before she could blink. All of the tension drained from her muscles at the sensation of his arms around her and his body pressed to hers. She laid her head against his chest. This was where she belonged. She was foolish to have thought otherwise.

She raised her head and looked into his exhausted eyes. Before she could speak, he covered her lips with his own, stealing both her breath and her thoughts. Finally releasing her mouth, he rested his forehead against hers. "I've dreamt of you constantly. So much so that when I wake I'm surprised to find myself alone," he murmured. "I'm so sorry. You've never owed me anything. I was desperate and willing to say anything to convince you to stay."

She cupped his face, smoothing her thumb over the sharp angle of his cheekbone. "You could have told me that."

"I was stupid." He paused, looking uncomfortable. "And I was afraid that you wouldn't stay if I'd just asked. By that time..." He shrugged. "It was too late."

She met his anguished eyes. "I do love you. I loved you when I left the first time." She shook her head. "I never stopped loving you."

Asher kissed her again, claiming her mouth like he had her heart. "Stay," he whispered between kisses. "Be my mate." He trailed his lips along her neck, sending shivers through her body as she pressed closer to him. Lifting his head, he held her breathless with his gaze. "I love you, *cariad*."

She nodded. "I love you, too." A thought occurred to her. "But guardians are forbidden to take mates."

“Not anymore.” His smile spread, reaching his eyes and brightening the small shadows of doubt until there were none. Only the surety of love and the anticipation of their future together remained.

Asher scooped her into his arms and dropped her on the bed, looming over her and pinning her to the mattress, his rapidly filling cock nudging her mound. Desire flooded her body, tightening her nipples and dampening her pussy. She shifted beneath him, rocking against his erection.

Holding her wrists in one hand, he grabbed a small fabric pouch from the bedside table before deftly unlacing her bodice and baring her breasts to his heated gaze. He pressed tender kisses over the scars marring her flesh before drawing her nipple between his lips. Her back bowed as he scraped his teeth across the aching peak. Without warning, he released her and something clamped down on the swollen tip. Her eyes flew open.

Asher dangled another nipple clamp from the tip of his pinky finger, brilliant green stones glinting in the candlelight.

“I had some presents made for you,” he said, his eyes shining with mischief.

“So you knew I’d be back?” she asked on a gasp as he stroked the captive flesh with his thumb.

His gaze softened, and he shook his head. “No. But I hoped.”

Tears escaped the corners of her eyes. Trusting their love had been the right choice.

Asher brushed away her tears before lowering his head and claiming her lips, still stunned that she was actually here with him. He’d imagined he saw her face in every rock, every stone wall. He’d lost track of the times he’d dozed off only to startle awake, thinking he’d heard her voice. When he had slept, his dreams of her had been so vivid, he’d been surprised to wake alone. But there was no mistaking the reality of her warm body pressed to his. No mistaking the arousal in her shuddering breaths or emotion in her eyes.

“I’m sorry I didn’t believe you,” she choked out. “I’m so sorry.”

He silenced her with another kiss—a slow, languid joining of lips and spirits. Raising his head, he met her still anguished gaze. “It’s all right.”

She didn’t look convinced.

“But no more lies,” he added. “No more running or hiding. Just us. For the rest of our lives.”

She nodded slowly, trust brightening her dark eyes. She slipped her hand around the back of his neck and pulled him down for a kiss. As their mouths clashed, the hurt dissolved leaving nothing behind but love and hunger.

In between kisses, she tugged at his shirt, yanking it over his head and letting it drop to the floor. Her sense of urgency bled into his until they were naked and he was sinking into her slick, welcoming body. Tight, fiery heat engulfed him, and for a moment, and he paused, trying desperately not to come. Then she moved.

Lifting her hips into his, Neeve chased away any ability to stay still that he'd possessed. Pulling back, he dragged his cock through her clasping channel to pound forward again. Her whispered words of encouragement tore through the last remnant of his restraint. He slipped a hand underneath her ass and shafted her faster and harder, and she clung to him, demanding more.

Her body strained against his as she lifted her hips to meet his, wordless cries falling from her lips. Her cunt rippled and pulsed around him as he fought his release, driving her closer to the edge. Finally, she stiffened, her climax tearing from her on a scream. The raw pleasure in her voice drew his balls up tight, and he knew he wouldn't last much longer. Sharp streaks of need raced along his spine before pooling at the small of his back. Unable to hold back as her body milked him, he thrust several more times before he erupted inside her, filling her completely. He dropped his head to her shoulder as aftershocks rolled through his body.

Neeve smoothed her hand up and down his back while their breathing slowly returned to normal. “Promise me that you'll love me like that for the rest of our lives?”

Her tone was teasing, but her dark eyes were serious.

“The rest of our lives and beyond. Our souls are bound together forever.”

A radiant smile curved her lips, reaching all the way to her eyes. “I love you,” she whispered.

Happiness filled his soul. He couldn't have asked for a more perfect mate.

Unwilling to release her for even the barest moment, he kept his arms around her while carefully pulling free of her body. Asher tugged her into shelter of his body and watched as she drifted to sleep, the shadow of a smile still on her face.

He startled awake some time later. Neeve stirred, and he immediately relaxed. She was truly there with him. It hadn't been a dream. A sense of serenity blanketed him as she snuggled closer, and he tightened his arms around her. Closing his eyes, he allowed himself to drift off, holding the woman he loved. Though Maelgwn was still in turmoil, its chancellor was finally at peace.

About the Author

Bronwyn lives in Michigan with her wonderful husband, two amazing sons and six somewhat-psychotic cats. When not tormenting her characters, she can usually be found helping with reading and writing projects in her sons' classrooms as well as being the car pool mom extraordinaire for five teens and a couple of preteens. Besides writing, she also enjoys reading, knitting, sewing, cross stitching, pottery, drawing—basically anything that helps her avoid the tortures of cleaning and cooking.

Bronwyn loves to talk to her readers and can be found at www.bronwyngreen.com.

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Little Red Riding Hood has nothing on Rhys. On his way to his grandmother's house, Rhys' car breaks down in the middle of nowhere. Fortunately for him, there is a big, bad rescuer watching and waiting to sweep him off his feet.

***Just Right* by Bronwyn Green**

When Department of Natural Resources officer, Gwendolyn Locke, hits a black bear on the way home from work one night, her entire view of reality changes. She discovers that shape-shifters exist, and she's just become Goldilocks to three gorgeous, very aroused men who also happen to be werebears. Being snowbound has never been so hot.

***Open Sesame* by Mia Watts**

Alister Baban overheard a business discussion that netted him and his Uncle Cassimer a lot of money. When the Simsim Group stock crashes and declares bankruptcy within weeks, the owners immediately suspect the Babans of playing dirty.

Oz Adamo, one of four brothers who owned Simsim Group, agrees to abduct Alister to obtain information and win back the lost pensions of former employees.

Tied to a bed and lusting after his captor, Alister fights the sexual attraction he has for Oz. They want information and he isn't about to give it. But Oz loves a good challenge, and shrewd, serious, sexy Alister is naked and his—at least for now.

***Heart of Ice* by Brynn Paulin**

Kai is perfectly unhappy with his life. Cast into a role as shop boy and forced into marriage to save his family, he sees nothing good in his future. In fact, his betrothed, Gerda, seems to hate everything he enjoys. Especially winter and his attraction to dominating his partners. His prospects look grim...until the Snow Queen arrives.

Wyn has spent her life alone, living vicariously through those who love winter. When she learns of Kai's predicament, she knows she must save him. If only she could save herself. She craves his dominance, but there's one tiny thing standing in their way. No human can touch her without experiencing chilly agony. And that might bring any relationship to an icy death.

***Also Available from
Resplendence Publishing***

***Overlord's Chosen* by Bronwyn Green**

Dark Destinies Book One

Elizabeth Louden has been chosen to provide Micah Bleddyn, the Overlord of Maelgwn, with an heir. However, she's not interested in the honor. In a land where only men are allowed to use magic, women found to possess supernatural abilities are punished—often by death. She knows it's only a matter of time before her secret is revealed.

Micah has no desire to rule his father's empire, but after his older brother vanishes, he has no choice. Faced with invading forces, treachery among his own people, and now, a mate hell-bent on escape, he's had enough. Realizing they have no allies but each other, Micah and Elizabeth reach a reluctant truce in their bid to stay alive and keep Maelgwn safe.

***Three Ways to Wicked* by Melinda Barron**

Bestselling Author Krisily Carmichael needs a break from her life. Her horrid ex-boyfriend sold naked photos of her, and now she's plastered all over the nation's largest skin magazine. So when an advertisement for a rental cottage near Bath appears in her mailbox, she snatches up the offer.

When she arrives at the remote English cottage, she finds a charming country home with a huge botanical garden...complete with four magical beings trapped inside.

Victim of a wayward spell, the Sorcerer Uriel and his alchemist cousins, Bythos and Acolius, have spent centuries trapped inside their garden with an evil witch who wants their secrets. Krisily's arrival sets off a string of events foretold to bring about the witch's end. Unfortunately, they have to contend with the witch's curse, which took one sense from each of the men.

But the four of them find a way to communicate, and they come together in a blaze of passion that helps them to destroy the witch and meet their destiny.

***Taken by the Pack* by Cheryl Dragon**

Phases: Book One

Danny loves Alaska, but it doesn't seem to love him back. The full Wolf Moon sparkles over Fairbanks, but he's alone for those long nights. He wants to come out of the closet and date, but his frail family might implode. All he wants is the right man in his bed.

Brandon and Justin are lovers and wolf shifters native to Alaska. They're out to protect their way of life, and sometimes that means extreme measures. When Danny's brother proposes aerial wolf hunting, Danny enters their sights. Danny was the closet case in high school, and now, he'll be their sex toy. The shifter pair is ready to do whatever it takes to stop the hunting and maybe add a sexy human man to their pack.

***Coyote Savage* by Kris Norris**

Phases: Book Two

February's full moon is rising, only this year, it's bringing a new brand of hunger...

For coyote shifters Caden and Talon Brady, the upcoming hunger moon has ignited a different kind of appetite. They've been waiting several years for a chance to court their intended mate, and now that she's finally in their sights, they'll stop at nothing to win her over. But when local livestock start disappearing, their coyote refuge is put in the hot seat, and more than just their way of life is suddenly in jeopardy.

Sheriff Rebecca Savage never planned on returning to Becket Falls, or for falling for two handsome men. But fate seems to have different plans for her. Unfortunately not all of them are sexy and look fantastic in jeans. The local mayor is trying to run the Brady boys and their coyote refuge out of town. Nothing seems to make sense, but when she starts digging deeper, a new danger rises with the full moon—one that just might get them all killed.

***Unchaste* by Mia Watts**

Phases: Book Three

The mystical Portal of the Gods transports Flynn Chula, shifter and descendant of the Cahokia Indians, six hundred years in the past. Right into a tribal feud between Amaro and Koda, warriors of the empire. While Flynn finds his new circumstances impossible, Amaro and Koda know exactly what to do. Their culture dictates that shifters have to be tested, proving their place among the people--as priests. Only one high priest can rule the empire at a time, but the current apprentice reigns with blood sacrifice and fear.

As the sexual preparations begin, Koda and Amaro do their duty to rid him of any possible heterosexual leanings...by giving themselves to him wholly. Flynn, who's never wanted a woman in his life, can't believe his luck. Two hunky men can't get enough of him, and their eager to learn all the tricks.

When the blood priest discovers the plot to overthrow him, will Flynn, Koda, and Amaro escape alive, or will more than blood be lost on the altar?

***Glass Slipper* by Abigail Barnette**

Naughtily Ever After, Book One

When Julien Auvrey promises to help his goddaughter snag a prince, he has no idea that the squalling infant he held in his arms nineteen years ago has turned into a beautiful young woman. Once he sees Joséphine, he knows that she's just what the prince wants in a woman...and just the type of woman that Julien wants in his bed. But Julien is a life-long bachelor, and Joséphine deserves more than just a brief affair. With his help, she'll blossom into a wife fit for the prince—in and out of the bedchamber.

Joséphine Thévenet wants nothing more than to be quit of her father's crumbling house, her stepmother's temper, and her two obnoxious stepsisters. Notorious seducer Julien Auvrey appeals to her desire for escape, and plenty of her other desires, as well. When etiquette lessons turn to carnal instruction, Joséphine fears she will lose her heart before she can win the prince.

Julien can't deny the raw heat between him and Joséphine, but he also can't deny the promise he made to her father. To possess Joséphine, Julien must betray his friend, and give up his own life of indulgence. Can he truly ask Joséphine to turn her back on the chance to be princess for nights of endless pleasure? Can he trust himself to love her as she deserves?

***New Orleans* by Demi Alex**

Who makes life-altering decisions based on a fortune cookie?

Sans her family and sans a job, Lilly Marie is completely alone in the world. With only a broken heart in tow, she has nothing to lose by packing it up and starting over in the sultry Big Easy. And after all she's been through the past year, encountering an eccentric woman in Jackson Square and *actually* following her instructions to "step onto Bourbon Street and into her future" doesn't seem so weird. Who is she to question "destiny" when she'd uprooted herself because of a tiny piece of paper tucked inside a cookie?

What Lilly doesn't expect is for a hero to save her from a rampant bicyclist and whisk her away to a place called *El Destino* to meet his family— "family" being four of the handsomest men Lilly has ever seen. Whether it is fate or coincidence, the sizzling and sexy men of *El Destino* take her into their capable hands to prove that there is no such thing as happenstance, and that undeniable passion and true love can cure any ailment, including a broken heart.

***Alpheli Solution* by Anny Cook**

Bootcamp class seems to be the answer to her prayers. In her wildest dreams, she doesn't consider meeting not just one, but two hunky vampires who take her—in the car, in the shower, in the living room, in the hot tub, in hand—as they teach her everything she'll need to know about her new vampire life.

For centuries, Pierre has loved and pursued Julian with no success. After a hostile takeover of Julian's financial assets, Pierre is positive Julian will have nowhere else to turn. Julian, though, chooses to teach the Vampire Bootcamp class rather than surrender to Pierre on unequal terms. When one of Julian's students approaches him for help identifying her sire, Julian is stunned that she is his alpheli—an extremely rare mate whose blood will allow him to subsist on real food. What will that mean to his love-hate relationship with Pierre?

There are just one or two problems. Danamara is descended from Pierre's bloodline. And she's on someone's hit list. Julian and Pierre find unexpected erotic rewards and eternal love when they join together in a brutal war to protect their alpheli's life.

***Oriana and the Three Werebears* by Tia Fanning**

Oriana Ricci has taken over the family business—flying cargo and rich tourists around Alaska's barely inhabited Kodiak Archipelago. When her plane malfunctions and she's forced to make an emergency landing, she finds herself stranded in the middle of a National Wildlife Refuge. With no civilization for miles and no hope of rescue, she thinks all is lost... Until she stumbles upon the entrance to an underground bunker.

Jack, Jordan, and Jonathan McMathan own and operate a secret intelligence firm contracted by the US Government. Hidden away in an old Cold War spy station located the middle of the Kodiak National Wildlife Refuge, the brothers are not only able to do their top secret jobs safely without fear of discovery, but are better to protect their other, more personal secret: They have the ability to shift into Kodiak bears.

Like a fairy tale gone bad, the brothers return home to find their lunch tasted—or eaten, their computer chairs adjusted—or broken, and a beautiful blonde sleeping in one of their beds. This situation poses a big problem for the brothers... Their location is now compromised. But more importantly, what are they to do with the lady?

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