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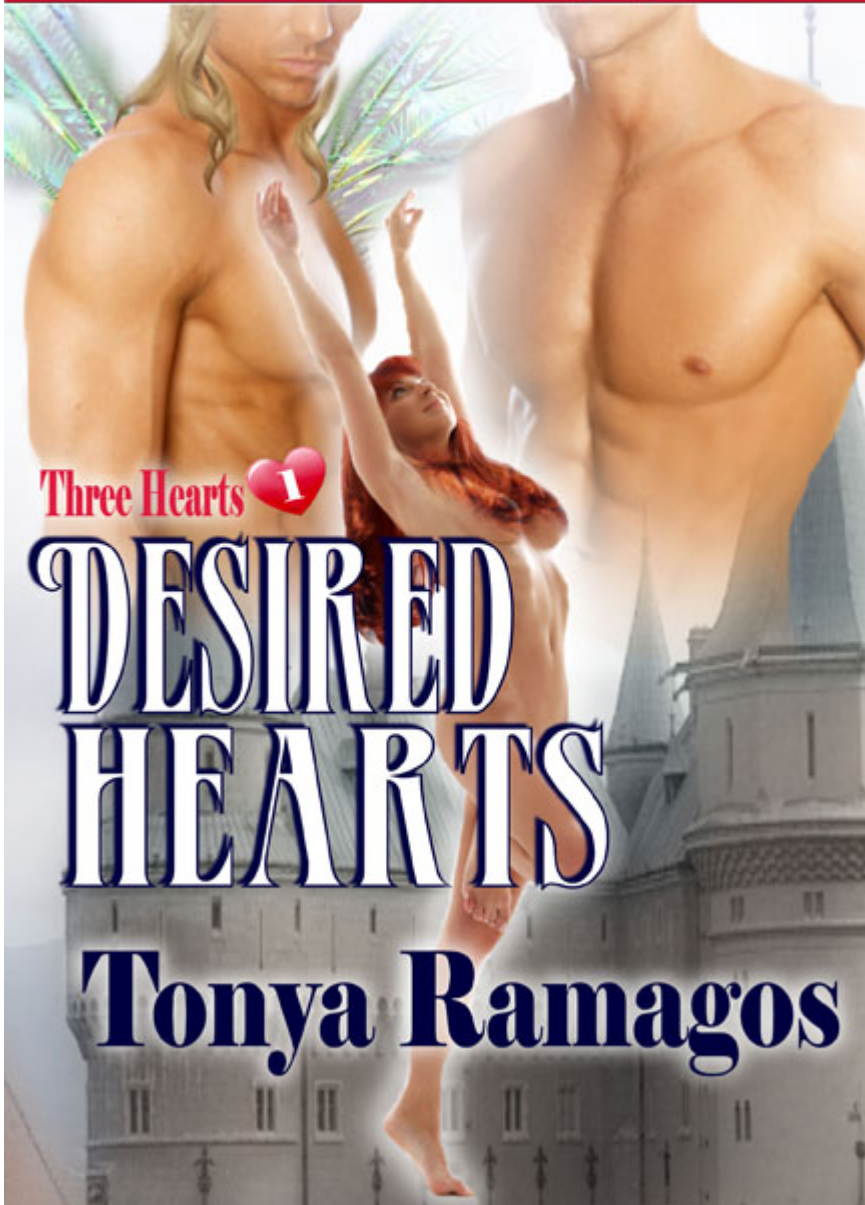
*Ménage Àmour*

Three Hearts



# DESIRED HEARTS

**Tonya Ramagos**



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## *Three Hearts 1*

**Tonya Ramagos**

EROTIC ROMANCE



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DESIRED HEARTS

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# **DEDICATION**

To my family. Thank you for your patience and support. I love you.

# DESIRED HEARTS

## *Three Hearts 1*

**Tonya Ramagos**

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## **Chapter 1**

Aithne studied her reflection and felt the sizzle of excitement as it moved through her, an echo of the wide grin that unfolded on her lips. She would dazzle all this night for tonight was meant for her. As would be the man she found, her intended, her destined.

"I wonder how he shall look." She covered her belly with her hand and could all but feel the fluttering of nervous butterflies through the flesh and thin material of her gown. She looked beyond her own reflection to that of her sisters' behind her in the bedchamber.

"He will be handsome," Calliope stated in a voice of absolute certainty. The youngest and most beautiful of the three sisters rolled onto her stomach on the canopy bed and propped her chin on her balled fists. Her long hair spilled around her trim shoulders, the blond strands encasing a delicate face of smooth angles, a perfect nose and naturally rosy lips. Her eyes the color of cornflowers turned dreamy as she continued. "Tall, I think, for you are not as short as most and a man is meant to be taller than his woman. He will have chestnut hair to match the darker streaks of your own. Or maybe a brilliant yellow instead to blend with your red. The flame to compliment the fire."

Aithne's attention returned to her reflection, to the tumble of fiery strands framing her face. Her own hair was that of reds, browns and gold, some darker while others nearly gleamed. Yes, she thought, a man of chestnut curls or glistening sunflower waves would be her perfect match.

"I was unaware, little sister, that you possessed the power of prophecy or vision." Karan turned from her spot on the far side of the bedchamber to glance at Calliope, one brow raised and an expression of intrigue and sarcasm in her lavender eyes. She wore a dress of pale purple, not quite matching the color in her eyes but close. It fit snugly around her shoulders, her well-rounded breasts, her trim waist.

She looked, Aithne thought, uncomfortable and utterly miserable.

"I do not," Calliope said, a pout in her tone. "We are demigoddesses. We have no powers of which to speak." She sat up, mindful of her own soft pink gown. Where Aithne's and Karan's dresses matched their eyes, Calliope's did not. Though a contrast to her cornflower eyes, the pink far suited Calliope more than any blue. She was the dainty one, delicate and tender of both heart and body.

"But for the power to love," Aithne reminded them and watched herself smile in the mirror once more. Her own gown was the color of grass in the middle of a field with golden flecks of accent much like the sparkles of gold that rimmed the green in her eyes.

"Yes," Calliope agreed with a wistful sigh. She fell back on the bed and stared at the ceiling. "Love, it is the greatest power of all."

Karan scoffed. "Surely there is a power more useful than love."

"Nothing can be better or more useful than love. You will see," Calliope predicted. "When it is the time of your joining celebration, you shall see."

"I will not have a celebration," Karan informed her defiantly. "I do not wish to be joined."

Aithne turned in her seat before the mirror and gazed at her middle sister. Uncomfortable and utterly miserable, she thought again.

That appeared to be an understatement tonight. "Sister, how could you not wish to find your heart's desire?"

"I know my heart's desire, and it is not found with any man," Karan said stubbornly. She held out her hands in front of her and looked down at them. "I wish to design, to build, to create. A man will only take away such pleasures. So I will not have a joining celebration." Her chin jutted into the air, another defiant gesture.

"Mother and father will not agree." Aithne turned back to the mirror but her gaze instantly found Karan's reflection to the side and back of her own. "Such celebrations are the way of our people, our land and now that we have reached our time, I cannot see them allowing either of us to pass it unrealized."

"It has been this way for as long as time. It was such when mother took the throne of Goddess Queen," Calliope chimed in. "And her mother before her. There is no avoiding what must be done. Tonight, this night of the new moon, is for Aithne. You shall have yours in one phase of the moon's time and then at last I shall have mine."

"Tonight is for me," Aithne repeated and felt her heart fill with excited anticipation. "Tonight I will find my handsome protector who will plant the sweetest of kisses upon my lips." She grazed a light finger over her slightly parted lips. "And I shall feel the effects of such a kiss through my body and between my legs."

"Aithne!" Calliope's exclamation was followed by a fit of laughter as she rolled onto her back and stared at the ceiling.

"Go big sister," Karan laughed too.

"Go big sister." Aithne shook her head and grinned. "You say some of the strangest words." Still, she thought about those words, considered them. "However, tonight I shall go straight into my husband's arms, into his bed and we shall dance." She stood, held out her arms as though they were folded around a lover's body and began to spin around the bedchamber.

Karan chuckled. Calliope giggled.

"It is good to see my daughters in such fine spirits this night."

Aithne whirled at the voice, beamed when her gaze landed on Ina, and gracefully glided to her. "Dance with me, Mother, for tonight we celebrate." But something in the goddess queen's face made her stop. Alarm filled her veins, mixed with her blood, and sped her pulse until she heard the rapid beat of it in her ears. "Mother? What is it? Something troubles you."

"Is someone hurt?" Karan rushed to Aithne's side, her shoulders squared, chin high, and eyes piercing and ready for battle. She would have drawn a sword had she had one at her side, Aithne thought in a flash of admiration. "Will someone be hurt?"

"Is it father?" Calliope's velvety soft voice trembled with fear. She had sat up on the bed once more and turned to face their mother, her own beautiful face creased with concern. "Has some harm befallen our father?"

"No," Ina answered quickly. Her tone in that instant was carefully reassuring. "Andrew is well and safe."

"And you, Mother?" Aithne asked, though she knew the answer. It took much to bring such a look of dread, of pain and worry in the eyes of the goddess queen.

Ina reached out, the backs of her knuckles grazing lightly down Aithne's cheek. It was a loving touch, a tender contact, and yet the hand shook almost imperceptibly with it as if she feared it might be her last look upon her daughter's face. "I am frightened, my precious."

"Then something *has* happened." Though Karan spoke more softly, her tone continued to hold the edge of battle. "Tell us, Mother, so we may stop it."

"My warrior." Ina smiled in a way that held both sadness and pride of her daughter. She touched Karan's face with her other hand in the same way she had done Aithne's. "You would have been a warrior no doubt had you been born a son. And a good one too. Of that I am sure."



Karan frowned, a hint of a pout etching its way between her brows. "I still do not see what difference my sex makes. I have strength and skill to rival many man."

"Yes, if you are not watched, you will put that strength and skill to test too, my daughter."

"I will." Karan nodded, a grin tweaking the corner of her lips now. "And pity the man who tries to stand before me."

"But that is not what frightens you, Mother." Calliope scooted on the bed as if to climb off but stopped when Ina's gaze fell on her.

"Tell us, please." Aithne felt the dread, the fear stronger now, like a weight of lead in her bones. "Will you tell us?"

"The time has come. I can avoid the truth no longer." Ina's hands fell to her sides, and she nodded. "Come, my daughters. Sit with me and I shall tell you." She moved to the bed more gracefully than Aithne's dance with fluid steps that shown of a Queen's confidence and control even as her aura spread through the chamber and grew dark, heavy, saddened. They sat together, Aithne on one side of her mother, Calliope on the other, Karan curled on the floor at her feet. "You ask if some harm has befallen Andrew."

Calliope visibly stiffened. "And you said he is well and safe."

"And he is. It is not your father I fear to be harmed."

"Who then?" Aithne asked.

"You, each of you."

"Us?" Karan sat up straighter on the floor, her lavender eyes flashing with the light of battle, her brows arching over them in question. "What harm? How? Why?"

Ina reached for Aithne's hand, laid it to rest on her thigh, and then repeated the gesture with Calliope's and Karan's hands. She covered the three hands in her lap with both of hers and sighed. It was a sound Aithne could never remember hearing from her mother, a sound of indecision, a sound of defeat.

"I cannot say precisely what or how, but I can answer the why." She took a deep breath as if to steady herself, then said, "It is because

of me, because of what I am, because of choices I made, because of love."

"No harm can come to pass because of love." Calliope's words were barely above a whisper though the denial and defiance that laced them sounded clear.

Ina leaned toward her, rested her head on Calliope's shoulder for the briefest of moments. "My precious daughter, I wish that were so."

Aithne watched her mother and felt the weight in her bones grow heavier still. Whatever harm the queen feared was true and dire. Of that, she was confident. Yet, even as she struggled, Aithne could not make sense of her mother's words. "You are the goddess queen. Any in our land who wished to defy your rule could cause us harm. Yet, in all the millennia since you have taken the throne, no one has dared utter a word of protest. Who would go against your rule, your decision, and threaten such a fate for your daughters?"

"Daria." Ina paused as if to allow her daughters time to digest the name before she added, "And it is not simply a threat of harm but a spell she has cast upon you long ago."

"Your mother put a spell on us?" Karan shifted until she sat on her knees before Ina, shock and outrage battling for paramount expression on her face.

"Why would she do such a thing?" Calliope asked. Though her voice remained the soft wave of music upon the air, confusion and surprise rang in her words.

*Because she is Daria, Aithne thought. Because she has never liked us, never wanted us, never wished any of us to rule.*

"Settle back, daughter." Ina put a hand on Karan's shoulder and guided her to sit once more upon the rug beneath their feet. She took a deep breath, closed her eyes as if to gather her thoughts then opened them. "Let me begin at the first for to simply skip about will not help you fully understand the story nor the fate I have put upon you."

"Stop blaming yourself, Mother." The words spilled from Aithne's lips before she could stop them. She reached for Ina, her arm closing

around her mother's shoulders, drawing the queen against her. "I cannot stand this sadness in you, this fear."

"Nor can I," Calliope said, her arm finding its way around Ina's lower back so that both daughters held her tight.

"We do not blame you." Karan laid her cheek on Ina's knee.

"You have every right," Ina said, her voice thick, cracking. "This you will soon understand. Allow me now to tell the tale." She pulled back from their embrace and Aithne eased away, put her hands in her own lap and readied her ears, her mind, and her heart to listen.

"You know of other worlds, other places, other times," Ina began, her voice once again steady, almost as if she were telling them a bedtime story. "Many moons ago, before you or even I, all worlds coexisted not as one but *of* one. As such, beings from all the lands and times mingled. Yet, there was but one governing law. Mating among different races was forbidden." She paused and let out a heavy sigh. "Still, those of a lesser station than ours chose to defy this law. They took as lovers those who were not equal, who were not the same."

"What did they become?" Aithne whispered the question. She had heard stories, more like nightmares, of long ago times, of monsters and darkness, of an Otherworld, even an Underworld. Was this how such worlds came to creation?

"Nothing so hideous as that you fear, daughter." Ina gave her a comforting smile though it failed to reach her worry-rimmed eyes. "It is how our Faeries and Sprites came to be as well as the Fae and others."

"Father is part Fae," Calliope said.

Yes, Aithne remembered. Their father was part Fae. Not a monster, not a being of Underworld, but a handsome god king. She relaxed a bit at her mother's side and continued to listen.

Ina nodded, frowning. "Though it gave us much beauty and many wonderful creations, this defiance of the law brought with it much discourse as well. Wars broke out among the lands. There were battles for power and dominance, for thrones and royal houses. Doors

between worlds were either sealed or destroyed, barring transport between lands and time, trapping people in the land they occupied at that moment."

"But what if it wasn't their true home?" Calliope sounded heartbroken, and when Aithne glanced at her sister she saw the glimmer of tears in her cornflower eyes.

"The land in which they were trapped became their new home," Ina answered. "They learned to thrive and be in their new permanent land and those lands began to grow, to flourish with new lives and happiness. Peace settled over the lands, the worlds once more. Our own land returned to a semblance of what it had been as well. We embraced our new people, new races and the goddess royals' enveloped traditions forgotten for a time. Celebrations in our house had always been anticipated and they were so again. Our mating banquets much like that you will have tonight were attended by all in our land."

"And yours?" Aithne asked. She had found it strange in her life that she heard little of the queen's mating celebration. It was almost as if it were an event not to be talked about or revered in their history. "What of your celebration, Mother? What was it like when you set eyes on father for the first time? What did you feel? How did you know?"

"So many questions," Ina gave a small, quiet laugh. "You are nervous about your own time tonight." She drew Aithne into the curve of her arm, hugged her tight. "And I am here to ruin this blessing, to turn that lovely jitteriness into fear. Forgive me, my precious."

Though it was said as more order than request, Aithne answered. "There is nothing to forgive, Mother. I am not afraid. How could I be? Please continue. Tell us of your banquet so I may know the joy of spotting my true love before it happens this night."

"The mating celebration was not always as it is now."

"How was it different?" Karan asked. She remained on the floor at the queen's feet, on her knees now, sitting back on her heels, her skirt carefully spread around her.

"Celebrations by our court have always been anticipated and the banquet for my joining was no exception. Beings from all our land, full and half-breed, were in attendance to watch as I, their future goddess queen, accepted the hand of Prog of Verhailey."

"Prog?" The daughters spoke in unison.

"But Father's name is Andrew," Aithne said. She had never heard of anyone in their land named Prog.

"It is for he is not the man I was promised to wed."

"Promised to wed?" Karan looked horrified.

"Yes. You see, my daughters, before I took my place as goddess queen, the joining of people in our court was decided upon by the parents. They were arranged with only the good of stature and power in mind."

"But what of love?" Calliope asked. "How can two join who do not share love?"

"It was done, and love mattered not. The banquet held for me on that night was to be the commencement of my union to Prog, a full-blooded and powerful would-be god king. It was a joining meant to see that our courts thrived, to see that our land prospered."

"Yet you did not join with this Prog," Aithne said, trying to make sense of it all. Another man in her mother's life, a man not her father the queen had been promised to without regard to love. Her head spun with it all.

Ina's eyes turned dreamy, reminding Aithne so much of Calliope in that moment when her sister spoke of dreams of her true love. "It was that night, at my banquet, I first saw your father. I knew at that moment I could never join with Prog for it was Andrew the guardians meant for me." She turned slightly to face Aithne and grazed her fingertips down Aithne's cheek. "You ask what it was like, how I knew."

"Yes," Aithne whispered. Her heart thudded in her chest as she lost herself in her mother's powerful gaze. The queen was a goddess of love. How could anyone ever thought to couple her with a man not her true heart?

"It is a feeling in your belly, a pervasive quake. It is a tremble that possesses the heart and the mind. It is a quiver down to your toes of a power the likes of which you have never before felt nor will ever feel in the presence of any other. It hurts and excites, terrifies and pleases. You will know, my precious, when you feel it, you will know, and you will never again want for any other."

Goddess in Summerland! Aithne did not know if she wanted to experience love if it would make her feel all of that. Pain and excitement, a quivering to her toes! She knew of true pleasure, knew of the joys of being a woman. She had dreamt of the wonders of love but to feel all of that, ladies, the idea was truly overwhelming! She splayed a hand over her belly, felt it jump in nervous expectancy. "Wow," she exhaled on a half-laugh.

"Better you than me," Karan muttered.

Ina looked at her, a small grin on her lips. "You have such a strange voice at times, my middle daughter. But you must remember your time will come next."

Aithne caught the spark in her sister's lavender eyes, almost like an explosion of a star. Karan was nothing if not determined in her ways and she had set her mind never to join. Aithne supposed when Karan's time did come her resistance and the battle it would surely cause might be quite entertaining.

"I cannot wait to feel such wonder." Calliope gave a wistful sigh.

"And wonder it is daughter. The moment you feel it and every moment after as it has always been between me and your father."

"What happened to Prog?" Karan wanted to know. "What did everyone say when you chose father instead of him?"

"Prog returned to his land, his people and later married well to a woman both worthy of his heart and his station. Together, they now rule the land of Verhailey."

"King Prog," Aithne gasped. "I know who he is now. You and father have spoken of him, his court, and his people many times."

"We have." Ina nodded. "That night, it came to pass that he wanted our joining no more than I. He wished your father and me the highest of blessings and turned away wearing a smile. His court, his family, his land were disappointed not to be joining with the court of a goddess queen, but it was Daria, my mother and reigning queen, who objected most strongly."

"Why would she object? Did she not wish to see you happy?" Even as Aithne asked, she knew the answer. No. Queen Daria cared of nothing above power, above rule. She cared not for happiness and love.

"She wished for more power to be brought to our court. Nothing more," Ina confirmed what Aithne had been thinking. "Though ours is the most powerful of courts in all the lands, she has never stopped at wanting more."

"What of father's family?" Calliope asked. "Did he not bring some power of his own to our court?"

"My union with Andrew prevented our line to flourish in the ways of Daria's wishes. More than any, our union hindered those wishes."

"How?" Karan asked. She sat so straight now that Aithne saw every ounce of tension in her sister's body.

"Your father is part Fae. You know this, but what you do not know is that he is part mortal as well."

"Mortal!" The sisters gasped in unison.

"He is a half-breed born in our world but in part by another."

"You defied law," Aithne realized, remembering what the queen had explained of the law among races and especially that of the goddess court.

Ina nodded. "We did. Even after the passages between worlds were closed for all time, trapping half-beings not of our land in our land, the court of the goddess was deemed never to mix with a lesser being, a half-being. This was but another reason I was promised to Prog. I feared Daria might slay Andrew in her anger, for I refused to join with any but him. She did not, of course. What she did instead was curse us all." Her voice dropped with the last, and she bowed her head, a gesture done before a queen but rarely *by* a queen.

Aithne sucked in a breath. "Cursed?" she repeated and glanced at Karan and then at Calliope. Both sisters stared at the queen open mouthed, eyes wide.

"What kind of curse?" Calliope finally asked, the words soft and trembling with fear.

"What was the spell, mother?" Karan asked.

"We were never to breed, the king and me," Ina whispered, her head still bowed. "I was to never be with child for to do so would produce beings lesser of our station. Half-breeds like Andrew."

"Like us," Aithne added and felt all that she was and all she had ever been begin to weep in the deepest depths of her soul. To be considered lesser simply because she was not of full royal line, she had never considered how badly it could hurt to know that.

"If we, your father and I, chose to defy this law," Ina continued as though Aithne had not spoken, "grave events would befall our children."

"Daria would rather our court, the reign of our goddess power to end than to be carried on by half-breeds." Karan sounded venomous, the combatant gleam returning like bright swords in her eyes.

"Yet you had us." Aithne pointed out the obvious. "You defied law a second time and bore three daughters."

"Andrew and I resisted. Year, by century, by millennia, we obeyed Daria's law. We ruled as goddess queen and king of our land to never have heirs of our own. Still, I dreamed." She covered her belly with her hand and sighed. "So much I dreamed of you, wanted



you, pined for you." She raised her head, met each daughter's enthralled gaze in turn. "What is a woman, *any* woman, if not a mother? I longed to feel your lives in my womb with such grieving desire that your father could bear to see my pain no longer. It was then that we defied Daria for our final time. We had each of you."

"Is that why you watch us so closely?" Aithne asked, realizing for the first time in her life why her parents had always been so protective over her and her sisters. She had always thought them overprotective, too loving even, to keep her and her sisters under such a watchful eye. She knew now that act had been out of fear.

"Because of the curse," Karan chimed in. "You are afraid a grave harm will befall us because Daria deemed it so."

"It is my greatest fear always," Ina admitted. "Still, I have thought you safe before now, until now. You have been watched, yes, protected, yes, but I have always believed your own celebrations to be the time of true danger. I have thought to delay them, struggled with conscience and mind to postpone them indefinitely but I cannot. I know I cannot."

"It would not bother me at all," Karan stated firmly, almost happily.

"It would. In the end, it would," Ina disagreed.

Calliope lifted her head from where she had let it fall to rest on Ina's shoulder. "You think us to be harmed at our joining celebrations?"

"It is when it all began," Karan said softly, and her words drew a nod from the queen. "Do you not think Daria would find it a fitting thing for the curse to continue at such a time?"

"She thought exactly that, I believe. The spell she cast upon you says as much."

Aithne's blood chilled, causing goose pimples to rise on her flesh. Though her heart began to pound wildly once more she had to ask. She had to know. "What was the spell, mother?"

Ina turned to her, took her hand and held her gaze. "One of you will suffer at the hands of desire so greatly it will bring you death from the inside out. Another shall suffer a heart so divided that fear shall bring her death. Lastly, one shall be engulfed by a world of darkness to reside in terror and face a monster that will bring a death of no end."

## Chapter 2

Brilliant white light bathed the grand staircase, catching flecks of blues, greens, reds and gold in the stone and making them sparkle. Aithne hesitated at the top and let her gaze roam down the staircase, over the crowd of men and women gathered below to watch her descent.

"Would you prefer they come to you, little fire?"

Aithne leaned into her father's side as he joined her and let a small smile curve her lips. Little fire. He had called her that for as long as she could remember. His name for her and she liked it. When he called her little fire, it left no doubt which of his three daughters was on his mind. It calmed the bit of jealousy she so often felt in comparison to her sisters. Karan was the one of strength, the warrior, the one many saw as most like their father. Calliope held the beauty in both body and voice. She was the princess in all definitions of the word, the one most like their mother. And she, Aithne, was little fire.

"I feel silly, Father," she admitted, her tone low as not to be overheard. "Must they stare this way? It is a celebration tonight, a banquet. They should mingle, talk and dance, have fun."

"And they shall, but you are forgetting that you are the center of tonight's gala. They stare because it is you who will find your love this night. It is in your honor they are here."

"As Karan would say, oh joy." Aithne tried for flip but knew she sounded of pure nerves and excitement. Silly or not, this was her night, a night she had waited for, dreamed of, wanted. Though, in truth, she would have much preferred tradition to be finding her love

in a more private setting than surrounded by all of the people of their lands.

"You are frightened." Andrew's arm tightened around her waist, hugging her closer, offering comfort.

"Nervous," Aithne corrected and looked up at her father, met his gaze. His eyes, the same green with golden flakes as her own, seemed darker than normal, troubled. "Not frightened, Father. Nervous, excited, but not frightened. Neither should you be. Tonight is a night of fun and celebration, not one for fears and spells. Push your worries aside and let's enjoy."

A smile bloomed across his face, his eyes softening and lightening once more. "As my little fire wishes." He moved away only enough to offer her his arm. "Shall we get this party started then?"

Aithne laughed and felt a knot inside her belly loosen. She put her hand in the crook of her father's arm and allowed him to escort her down the grand stone staircase to the waiting crowd of their people. They paused on each step, a move that was both a tradition of the royal court and one that caused her nerves to escalate until she felt her body quiver all the way to her toes. All gazes were upon her and she met many of them with a stare of her own, nodding ever so slightly to the women, searching the faces of the men. One of them was her true love, she knew. Yet exactly how would she recognize which one when every ounce of her trembled and jittered so violently her stomach threatened to upend its meager contents?

"Aithne?" Andrew said her name softly, made it a question and she looked up at him, caught the frown between his brows. "You have stopped moving, little fire. Do you wish to remain on this step for the night?"

Aithne blinked and saw they were but four steps from the last. She had stopped there and allowed herself to become lost in thought, in nervousness. "No, of course not, Father." She took the next step, paused only a moment as she should then take another.

"You said you are not frightened," Andrew leaned in to say. "Are you truly this anxious to meet your true love?"

"Mother said it would be a tremble, a feeling of knowing. How do I know such a feeling if I already tremble to my core?"

Andrew laughed, a quietly amused sound. "Oh little fire, it sounds as though you should take your own advice and push your worries and your nerves aside."

\* \* \* \*

"Stop fidgeting." Hakan shook his head but had to bite the inside of his cheek to keep from grinning.

"I cannot. How do you stand to dress in this garb? It is uncomfortable, loose, and it is making me itch," Dustin complained and scratched first at his upper arm and then his thigh as if to prove his point.

"Watch as you do not wish to flash a palace full of guests." Hakan barely hid his chuckle now.

"I would not need to worry about flashing a palace full of guests if I were not dressed like a female," Dustin ground through his teeth.

"I will soon be the reigning king of Tolynn," Hakan reminded. "I am meant to dress in the finest of wear. And a toga such as yours made of the priciest of materials in our lands is not the attire of a female."

"Perhaps, but this is not my toga. It is yours. I am not a king nor will I ever be a king. I am a warrior, a captain of the guard of Tolynn."

"True and by your own choice," Hakan agreed with a regal nod as they moved through the enormous open doors of the goddess palace. He stopped, gave the crowd of some hundred or more onlookers a quick scan then turned to Dustin. Dirty blond curls fell in haphazard and untamable locks around a face that somehow managed to be boyish despite the hard lines and even harder hazel eyes. He stood the

same height as Hakan, had almost the same build, yet even dressed in Hakan's finest clothing, no one in the land would mistake Dustin for any stature of royalty. Though he was, Hakan reminded himself. Most, including himself, often forgot that fact. "You could not very well attend a banquet such as this inside the palace of the goddess queen wearing leathers and skins."

"That is precisely my point. You are heir to the throne of Tolynn. You have a place here. I should not even be here, let alone dressed in garb far above my standing."

Hakan sighed. They had this very argument before riding out of Tolynn. "It is beyond your standing because you choose it so. That is neither here nor there. All should be here tonight. All in our lands, of our world, and especially the men are expected to attend this celebration," he reminded Dustin in a tone of patience even if it was of force. "What if it is you meant for the first daughter of our goddess queen?"

Dustin blinked at Hakan, then laughed so uproariously all who stood near turned to stare. "The guardians would never be so crazy as to form such a pair as that. If it is to be either of us, my friend, it will be you."

"Perhaps." Hakan nodded and thought of the first daughter, Aithne. He had seen her but once. Still, that one time had been enough to permanently char a sketch of her in his memory. She was not the prettiest of the queen's daughters, and yet she possessed a beauty that far surpassed her sisters. A tumble of red and gold curls he could so easily picture spread over his pillow as she gazed up at him with sheer exotic promise in her stunning green-gold eyes. The sensations of pleasure he imagined in her expression when he slammed his long meaty cock inside her sweetly curvy body, as he claimed her saturated core.

The image made his dick hard enough to stretch halfway down his thigh. He shifted his weight on his feet, allowing the material of his toga room as not to stretch too tightly and reveal his sudden state of

arousal. "Our courts would make a fine match. The power each would gain none other could rival." And the power they could build between the sheets... Best not to think of that now, he decided.

"There. See!" Dustin beamed at Hakan. "If it were as the law once was, she would surely belong to you on this night." He began to walk, albeit it awkwardly, in the toga far more giving and roomy than the breeches to which he was accustomed. He stopped only when he reached a bar set along one wall of the great ballroom and snagged two mugs of waiting ale. "Where is the lovely daughter of our goddess queen anyway?"

Hakan took one of the mugs and drank deep, his gaze searching the room over the rim of the glass. Then he spotted her and everything inside him, all things around him stilled. Seconds passed in a way that seemed suspended in time before finally all sound returned to his ears, all movement to his eyes. "There," he said, and the word came out hoarse, low. "She is there on the dance floor with her father, King Andrew."

"She is amazing." Dustin sounded awed, surprised. His voice even quivered slightly. Had he ever set his gaze on the queen's daughters? "And such a contrast to her sisters."

"You have seen her before then." Hakan made it more statement than question. Still, he saw Dustin's nod in his peripheral vision.

"Aye. Though she is beautiful, it is not in the same way as the youngest daughter. Beauty like that which Calliope possesses can blind a man."

Hakan tipped his mug toward the middle sister several feet away from the dance floor. "And Karan?"

Dustin chuckled. "Karan looks about as uncomfortable in her dress as I am in mine. She would likely make a good opponent in a battle were she a man. Yet, even her beauty is somehow less in comparison to her sister's. Aithne's beauty is one of adventure, fire."

"It is said the king calls her little fire," Hakan commented, his gaze returning to the dance floor, to her, before he looked at Dustin once more.

"And does she live up to such a name?" Dustin's brows rose in mischievous intrigue.

The expression on his friend's face made Hakan smile. "I would not mind finding out. Dance with her."

Dustin choked. "Me? You wish for me to dance with her? Why not you?"

"Because I wish to watch for a while longer." What he needed was time to gain control of his senses, more time to feel it pass as it should before all stood still for a second time. Each time he looked at her, it was as if the worlds slowed. What would it be like to actually be near her, to touch her, hold her, more?

"And laugh as I stumble over my own feet," Dustin added.

"There is that." Hakan laughed. "But I know better. You are far too good in battle to be clumsy on your feet, my friend." Besides, he knew Dustin enjoyed dancing far more than he would ever admit.

"Let us hope."

\* \* \* \*

Dustin shook his head, and then downed the remaining ale in his mug before passing it to Hakan. He took a deep breath, sighed it out, and wove his way through the crowd to the dance floor.

He was nervous. The realization had him stopping feet from where Aithne danced with her father. Sweet Gods, when had he last felt such fear? No, not fear, he quickly corrected his thoughts. He was the captain of the guard of Tolynn, a warrior of old. Fear was not an emotion he experienced. But unease, yes, to that he could admit. Silently, at least. Still, when had he last felt even that? Especially in the presence of a woman?



The king met his gaze, and it was only the look in the man's eyes that prevented Dustin's hasty retreat. Instead, he stepped closer as if drawn to the king and his daughter. A wave of knowing washed through the king's eyes, and Dustin wanted to argue but found his throat too dry to speak.

Andrew leaned in, whispered in Aithne's ear, his gaze never faltering from Dustin's. Then the king spun his daughter in a graceful dance move that had her tumble of red hair fanning out, a wide smile appearing on her sultry lips. Dustin saw it in that smile when she spotted him, felt it all the way to the soles of his feet as their eyes locked. It slammed into him with more force than any physical blow he had ever been dealt in battle. Desire, lust, shock, and the promises of pleasure so great it awakened everything inside him from his head to his cock.

Mirrored emotions rushed over her face as the smile slowly faded from her sweet lips. "It is you."

How he heard those softly whispered words over the music of the room and the chatter of the crowd, Dustin did not know. But he did hear them, and he understood. He wanted to tell her she was wrong. He was not the man she sought, not the man she thought him to be. How could he be after all? But as she slowly neared him, as he opened his mouth to speak, it was his name he said instead.

"I am Dustin, my lady." He gave a stately bow that seemed to surprise her as much as himself. A bow? He did not bow! Not even to Hakan who would one day occupy the throne of Tolynn. "Captain of the guard of Tolynn. May I have the next dance?"

\* \* \* \*

Aithne stepped into Dustin's open arms, her head tilted back, unable to take her eyes off his, unwilling to. She let her hands find their way to his shoulders and immediately felt the warmth. It was almost enough to make her moan. There was no nervousness now, no

fear. In their place was the quiver the queen spoke of and more, so much more. Desire so hot it heated her blood, tightened her nipples, awakened places lower in her body and made it almost impossible to think. Yet, above all the lust was the knowing. This was the man. This was *her* man.

His arms closed tightly around her waist as he started to move. Graceful, even steps in time to the music. So easy to follow, such a contradiction to the hint of concentration in his eyes. She puzzled over that concentration and allowed herself a moment to become lost in his hazel eyes. The music reached a tempo that sped up, then slowed again, and he used that moment to twirl her around. She returned to face him laughing, her hands going back to his broad shoulders, his hard body pressed to her softer curves.

"You dance well," she told him and watched his concentration break. Still, his steps did not falter.

"As do you."

His voice was deep with a commanding lilt to the tone that had a dozen erotic images springing to her mind in one orgasmic rush.

Aithne shivered. "Dancing is a passion for me. Is it so for you?"

A smile flirted at the corner of his lips. "In truth, I cannot tell you the last time I danced. I am a warrior, my lady. Such opportunities as this do not present themselves often."

"Ah, but is it not a dance of sorts to spar with a sword?" A look of surprise passed through his eyes, as if he expected her to run from him rather than understand his nature. "You think I should be frightened, perhaps even revolted, by the idea that my true heart lies in the body of a warrior and not a bred king. Tell me then, Dustin, if you believe such to be true, why are you here this night?"

He stared down at her, silent for so long she thought he would not answer. The music changed though the new tempo closely matched the old and they danced on, both oblivious to those around them. It was as if they were alone, Aithne thought, as though no one and nothing existed but her and this man.

"Hakan, son of the king of Tolynn and heir to the throne, bid I come this night," Dustin finally said. He held her against him, his movements still with the ease and grace of which they began, but his arms grew tense around her waist and something dark, a kind of shadow, moved in his eyes.

"You are here because you were ordered to be?" Aithne did not know how she felt about that bit of news. All in the land was supposed to attend tonight's celebration but for him to not have come on his own accord... Did he not feel the same knowing when their gazes locked, when they touched, even now as they danced? "Does your future king fear for his life?"

Dustin laughed again, a low but amused sound that danced over her skin as surely as their feet danced across the floor. Her flesh drank in that sound like liquid sex even as it fed off the feel of his body so tightly pressed to hers, a deliciously exotic meal. It was a sound she would quickly grow to love hearing, and knew she would do all in her power to hear it as often as possible.

"Ours is an odd kinship, Hakan and I. We are friends, raised in and on the same lands. I serve him and the land of Tolynn though that fact is often forgotten between us and our standings as friends." He lifted his gaze and the look in his eyes changed, the shadow giving way to twin swirls of relief and anger mixing in their hazel depths. "Ah, and there he is now."

Dustin stopped dancing and turned Aithne in one arm until she stood at his side, her gaze instantly falling on the approaching figure. He stood as tall as Dustin, his frame one of muscles and lines evident beneath the toga of white and gold, colors befitting the son of a king. His hair was short, a dark brown that put her in mind of freshly turned soil in the gardens, his eyes as equally dark and rich. She looked into those eyes as he neared and felt herself begin to tumble. Sensations bloomed to life inside her as if they had been planted in that garden merely awaiting his attention to thrive.

"Aithne, daughter of our goddess queen, it is truly my pleasure." He reached for her hand, and it did not occur to her to pull away. The kiss he brushed to her wrist, the softest of touches of his lips to her flesh, sent slivers of desire tingling through her bloodstream, milking her center.

She stared at him breathless, confused and so totally aroused she feared orgasm from the next promise of his flesh to hers. It was not right. It could not be right! The thought pushed through the heat in her body, cooled her mind enough as she broke away from his tantalizing gaze. The arm around her waist slowly slid away, and she glanced beside her, looked up at Dustin. He smiled at her, though it did not reach his eyes, and she felt it again, that quiver, that knowing.

*How can this be?*

Hakan squeezed her hand, a gentle gesture but enough to draw her attention back, enough to have the heated desire rushing through her body once more. Standing between the two men, she felt as though she had become a double edged sword. The one side, a hot quivering wake that stole her fears and calmed her nerves. The other side, a tingling rush of powerful promises. In the center lay desire, a desire so great it left her quaking and wanting. It was the same, the knowing and building of needs, and yet different. Neither sensation topped the other, neither stepped forward in her certainty above the other.

Aithne looked from Hakan to Dustin and back again, and knew she felt for them both. But how could that be? She could not have them both. Still, as she hazarded to meet their gazes in turn, dared to feel the presence of their bodies so very near, she knew, with a desire so vicious she felt it all the way to her toes, that she wanted them both.

\* \* \* \*

"No more." Aithne gasped, her laugh breathless. Droplets of sweat trickled down the center of her back, and she suppressed the urge to shiver from the tickle of it. "I cannot dance another song."

Hakan smiled, beads of sweat glittering his upper lip and forehead. With the exception of once when she had coaxed Dustin into another dance—a hard won battle she did not quite understand as he was truly an excellent dancer—she and Hakan had partnered through every song fast and slow for close to an hour. He was a superb dancer with moves clearly learned on the dance floors of other royal banquets in his own land. They made a stately match on the dance floor, and no other attempted to interrupt their union. Still, even a girl who loved to dance as much as Aithne needed a break after a time. Her muscles felt like jelly, her flesh slick with a thin layer of perspiration and her pulse rapid from the exertion.

"Shall we take a walk then?" Hakan suggested. "Perhaps a stroll through the grounds. It is a beautiful night."

Aithne hesitated and took a moment to scan the crowd of guests. Even while thoroughly entertained with dancing and conversation with both Hakan and Dustin, the spreading belief of the crowd of guests had reached her. It was thought by all that Hakan was the guardian's choice for her. He was her true heart. The quiver in her belly, the intense desire that flowed through her each time she faced Dustin, faced Hakan, however, twisted her into a whirlwind of confusion.

"What a wonderful pair they make," one guest had gushed as she danced by at the lead of her companion.

"A perfect union," another guest had declared from the sidelines of the dance floor as Aithne and Hakan whirled by. "The land of our Goddess Queen's uniting with Tolynn, yes, perfect indeed."

"I suppose our disappearance will not cause any alarm," Aithne told Hakan now and accepted the arm he offered, followed as he led her through the crowd. It would be expected, she was sure, for them to look for a bit of time alone.

"Abducting the queen's daughter, Hakan?" Dustin teased as they approached him. "Shall I fend off the guard whom decide to give chase?"

"No," Aithne spoke and extended her free arm. "You should join us." The surprise that passed through Dustin's hazel eyes mirrored that which fluttered in her own belly at her boldness. She had made the offer more out of reflex than thought. The growing confusion so thick in her mind that thinking past it, sorting it out proved to be a task of difficulty she could not explore right now. He took her arm, albeit hesitantly, and a sizzling heat traveled through her at the contact. Indecision or not, she was glad she had asked him along.

A look passed between Hakan and Dustin, one Aithne could not read. Then, with a small nod, they walked toward the large doors of the palace. The air outside was warm, the sky dark but glittered with a dozen glistening stars and as many moons. In the distance, Aithne heard the faint sounds of birds, the low roars of predatory animals, and closer the sounds of wings from the many fairies and winged Fae going to and from the celebration. No one questioned them as they began to move away from the palace, though many exchanged glances and whispers followed in their wake.

It was Aithne who finally broke the silence but only after they were well to the east of the palace nearing the edge of the forest that lined the grounds. "Tell me of the land of Tolynn."

"It is much like your own," Hakan replied, then gave a half laugh. "Not quite as lavish, mind you. But our lands are fruitful. Our people are peaceful, happy."

"Are there mountains, streams, trees?"

"Aye, my lady, there are many mountains as high as the eye can see, stretching far into the clouds that surround our lands. Streams wind free through the villages and forests. Deep lakes flow and caverns of crystals sparkle. Some even choose to live in those caverns rather than reside in the huts of the village proper."

Aithne tilted her head back, gazed up at the night sky, but it was the picture Hakan described that she saw and not the black, not the flicker of stars and moons. What he spoke of was indeed much like her own lands but for the mountains and caverns. The goddess queen's lands were flat, save for the single mountain on which the palace stood overlooking their great land.

"There are open fields as well," Dustin added.

The picture in Aithne's mind changed, miles of grassy open lands rolling and rich with flowers filling her thoughts. Her own lands had become too populated over the millennia for much open spaces to be left uninhabited. She had often longed for such space to run free and explore, had long fantasized of dancing through such grass by the warm light of the sun. As the idea struck, she stopped, caught Dustin's arm. "Horses! Are there many horses to ride those open lands? True horses and not centaurs?"

"Dozens." Dustin smiled at her sudden enthusiasm. "All true horses rather than half man. You like horses, I take it."

"I love them!" Aithne began walking again. "I spend time at our stables regularly but I am always so guarded, not allowed to ride far. Time and again I have even envied the centaurs their half horse bodies, able to go as far and as often as they wish."

Hakan laughed. "I am sure they would be amused to hear that."

"They might even be willing to trade," Dustin added.

"Do not laugh at me." Aithne slapped at both their arms in turn but she too smiled. "It is the horse I envy so. Such free animals with beauty beyond imagination. They move with such grace and to ride them..." She sighed. "It is but a form of dance, do you not agree?"

"There are many forms of dance though I must admit I have never been one to enjoy that of which you speak," Hakan said.

Aithne looked at him, considered. "No, you would not for you have been reared for the throne. You dance for politics and power, stature and vision." She turned to Dustin, found him steadily gazing

down at her. "But you dance for battle. You know the dance I speak on a horse's back."

"I do." Dustin nodded. "But I do not see it the same as you."

"No, you have the soul of a fighter, a warrior. You would not see it the same." She moved through a canopy of trees along the path she had unseeingly led them down and stepped into a cove of jagged rocks and thick brush. A thin stream ran through those rocks, trickling down with a quiet and peaceful, almost musical sound. "Do you have places such as this in your land?" She took a few steps away from the men before stopping to turn in a circle, her arms out, and her palms up as if she held the air in her hands. "This is my favorite spot of our grounds. It is my own special place."

Hakan stepped to her, caught her by the waist and pulled her into his arms. "We have many such places in Tolynn." He started to sway with her much as he had done on the dance floor inside the palace. "But few women in our land would lead a man there alone. You are very brave, Aithne. Do you think this a smart move, bringing Dustin and I to such a secluded place?"

Aithne's heart was in her throat. Not because of fear. No. These sensations surging through her were certainly not ones of fear. Excitement, maybe. Arousal, definitely. And desire. Gods but the desires burning inside her were so hot she thought she might burst into flames. Hakan held her tightly against him, his scent so utterly male tempting her senses, his body hard and firm and vibrating with warmth. It was tricky to think when he held her this way, difficult to do anything more than feel. "Is it not a smart move?" Her voice was barely a breathless whisper. "I am not afraid."

"Are you certain of that?" Dustin took a deliberate step toward them.

"You tremble in my arms, Aithne." As if to prove it, Hakan tightened said arms around her waist. "Why do you tremble if you are not afraid?"



Aithne pushed away from him, and he let her go. No longer with his arms around her, his body pressed to hers, she could think again. Still, the trembling he spoke of did not stop. "You are meant for me." She heard the certainty in her voice as clearly as she felt it in her heart. All breathlessness left her as the confidence built. She turned and faced Dustin who had moved to stand behind her and only then did she feel that conviction waver. "You will not harm me."

"No." Dustin spoke softly, his gaze searching her face for what she was not sure. "We mean you no harm."

"Which one of us is meant for you?" Hakan's question drew her attention back to him.

"I—" She faltered under Hakan's potent stare. "That is what I cannot answer," she finally admitted. "You feel it, do you not?"

"I do." Hakan nodded. Pure conviction and utter truth laced his words. "With everything inside me, all that I am, I feel it."

"And you?" Aithne whirled on Dustin. "Do you feel it as well?"

Dustin's gaze flicked to Hakan then he looked back to her, shrugged. "I am a man, Aithne. You are a striking woman. What I feel..." He gave a short laugh, but it was not like the laughs she had heard from him this night. Rather than the amused, fun sounds of before, this one sounded forced, haughty. He let his gaze slide down her body, and her flesh sizzled under the intensity of it. "Well, that may be too much for the ears of the goddess queen's daughter."

Aithne blinked at him, unsure where this arrogant Dustin had come from. She planted her hands on her hips and leveled her glare at him. "Do you think me some kind of naive princess? I assure you, I am not. And whether or not what you feel is too much for the ears of a goddess queen's daughter," she mimicked his tone as she repeated his words, took a step closer toward him. "The point is that you feel it too."

"Well, now we know why the king calls her little fire," Hakan chuckled. "That is a bit of a temper you have there, Aithne."

"Are you to lie, to deny what you feel?" she demanded of Dustin, completely ignoring Hakan.

"I will not deny that I feel...something in your presence." His hazel eyes flashed with something she could not read. "What is it that you think I feel? Exactly what is it that *you* feel, Aithne? Who is it that you want?"

"I want—" Aithne felt the fight in her die just a little even as her cheeks began to burn with a hint of embarrassment. "I want you both." The admission was barely audible. She breathed deep to steady herself. "I am not sure how that can be, but it is true."

"You feel the same for us both?" Hakan asked and she felt him move in closer at her back.

Aithne spun and found herself once again in Hakan's arms. She reached up, her arms moving around his neck. "It is not the same. What I feel for you, what I feel for Dustin. It is different and yet I have never felt anything like either for another. Truly, I want you both."

"Then have us both." Hakan brushed his lips to hers, a featherlike kiss that drew a small moan from low in her throat.

"Let us both have you." Dustin grazed a soft hand down the back of her shoulder, under the spill of hair that fell down her back, over the bare flesh between her shoulder blades.

Aithne's mind whirled, her body seeming electrified by the almost imperceptible touches of the man who held her, of the man at her back. Their words echoed through her thoughts already beginning to cloud with desires and pleas for the pleasure to satisfy them. Could she truly do it? Dare she take them both, please them both, and give herself to them both? She gazed into Hakan's richly dark eyes gone even darker with his own desires. She felt Dustin close at her back, his lower body pressing against her so there was no mistaking his rigid cock at the small of her back. It was then that she knew her answer. Yes. Yes, she could do it, and yes, she did dare.

## Chapter 3

She was right though, guardians help him, he wished she were wrong. Dustin did feel it too and a whole lot more. The pincer of it all was he had not a clue what to do about it. The arrogance, the leers, had been a ploy. He had used them to convince her that what he felt was simply the needs of any man, tried to convince himself it was merely lust. Yet, if he were right, it felt unlike any lust he had ever known for a woman. Gods, he wanted her, had to have her. Would once be enough? Perhaps. He held onto that thought, that hope, and attempted to push all other inhibitions aside.

"Will you do that, Aithne?" he asked softly. "Will you take us both?" He stared down at the expanse of creamy flesh he had exposed on her neck and most of her back and felt the hunger rise. Intense needs so primal they were almost frightening had him licking suddenly dry lips, his breathing going shallow. "Will you let us take you?" As he asked the last question he let his finger glide down her back, from the nape of her slender neck to the material of her gown midway down. She trembled at the touch and his lips curved into a small smile. So responsive. So enticing.

"Yes." The word was a breathy sigh that wafted over him, through him like a teasing caress. "Yes, I want you. I want both of you. Take me please. Let me have you."

Dustin's hand stilled on her back and he closed his eyes, took a deep breath only to have his senses filled with the scents of fresh flowers and cream. The battle between brain and hands, heart and loins kicked into high speed until he nearly growled from the torment inside him. He should step away now. For the sake of his sanity he

should leave. But he could not. He would be doomed, damned by the needs raging inside him but so be it. He could only pray this one time would render an end to his internal war.

Giving into the impulses of his mind, his body, he leaned in, traced the outline of her shoulder blade with the tip of his tongue. She tasted as delicious as she felt, all smooth and sweet with a light hint of pure wickedness. He felt her quick intake of breath before it shuttered out of her on a quivering, "Ah."

"Is this what you wish, Aithne?" Hakan asked.

Dustin lifted his head to see his friend nip her jaw before licking his way down her throat.

"Yes. No. Oh Gods."

Dustin tightened his grip on her hair, tugged at it just hard enough to have her head falling back farther. Her eyes were closed, her lashes long and thick. Her lips pursed in a silent and sultry moan. "Pick one, little fire. Is this what you wish?" He repeated Hakan's question, adding his own nip to her earlobe. He sucked the thin bit of skin between his teeth until he pulled a breathy and very satisfying gasp from her lips.

"Touch me. Both of you. I want your hands on me, all over me."

Touch her. The words reverberated in Dustin's ears. It was exactly what he wanted to do. It was precisely what he knew he should not do. As if drawn to do so, he lifted his head at the same time as Hakan, met the other man's gaze. Hakan nodded, a nearly imperceptible movement of his head. Hair still fisted in his hand, Dustin used the fingers of his free hand to slide the thin strap of material off her shoulder. Hakan reached up to do the same at her other arm. Dustin let his fingers follow that strap down her arm, leaning in at her neck to brush his lips lightly over the exposed flesh, and then gently sucking that flesh between his teeth. He bit, tenderly but with just enough pressure to draw a gasp from her throat, a brisk intake of breath that teased and tormented his need for more.

Giving into that torment, he tugged at the front of her dress until it fell between hers and Hakan's bodies, leaving her sweetly rounded breasts to tumble free. He caught her breast in his hand, gave it a testing squeeze, but it was Hakan who bent down, sucked that breast into his mouth.

Aithne writhed against him, one arm coming up and snaking around behind her to find the back of his neck, nails digging into flesh at his nape. Her other hand buried itself in Hakan's hair, fisted, pulled as he began what Dustin could only figure was a gentle if vicious assault on her breast. He knew how Hakan liked to work a woman. Though it was he who used the biting edge of force by tugging at her hair, nipping at her flesh, it was Hakan who preferred the rough play. He would ease himself into that with Aithne, Dustin knew and wondered which the goddess queen's daughter favored, dominance or submission or an equal part in both.

"Dustin." She breathed his name in such a way it felt like liquid passion rolling over him. Her head lolled from side to side as if she wanted to fight the pleasure, knew she never could.

"Do you like what he is doing to your breast, Aithne?" Dustin whispered in her ear.

"Yes. Yes!"

"Do you wish for more?"

"Yes. Please."

"Let us finish undressing you, and you shall have more."

\* \* \* \*

Hakan heard Dustin's words to Aithne and, after one final, drawn out suck to her sweetly swollen nipple, lifted his head. Though he might have preferred his first time with Aithne, with the future queen of Tolynn, to be alone, he did not mind so much that Dustin was here to share in the pleasure, to share her. This was not the first time they shared a woman in such a way. Given Aithne's heated response to

their touches, it would not be the last. He wished for a woman strong enough to handle two men, adventurous enough to want them. His wish had been granted.

He straightened before her, letting his gaze fall to her breasts. They were not large by any standard but ample enough for his tastes, enough to form a tantalizing valley between them that would be perfect for fucking. His cock throbbed at the thought and he felt a cool spurt of pre-cum slide down his shaft. Not this night, he told himself as he reached for the material now gathered beneath those lovely breasts, started to tug it down her abdomen, her stomach, to her hips. There would be a chance for pleasures such as that some other time for tonight he would sink his cock into her sweetly wet pussy.

As he peeled the bodice of the gown down her slender body, Dustin kissed her neck. His licks, nips, the slightly forceful tug to her hair had her writhing against him, hips swaying, making it easier for Hakan to pull the gown over them. He let it fall in a pool around her feet and heard himself give a small moan of appreciation at the sight now revealed to him.

"You wear nothing beneath your gown, Aithne. This is truly a wonderful surprise."

Dustin lifted his head at that, one brow raised. "Is this true, little fire?"

"Yes." Her eyes opened and, as Dustin released his hold on her hair, she slowly lifted her head, met Hakan's gaze. A blush rose to her cheeks, traveled down her body until her creamy flesh was a telling shade of pale pink. "It is, well, it was my little secret."

"I like your little secret." Hakan gripped her hips, pulled her hard against him and crushed his mouth to hers. So turned on was he by the discovery of her bare pussy beneath the gown that his cock felt on fire, the last of his resolve to take things slowly shattering to bits. He had intended to treat her like a goddess, at least for this first time. He had intended there to be a delicacy to his lovemaking for he knew not for sure what would be okay with her, what would not. Instead, he

ravaged her mouth, his tongue sinking deeply, tangling with hers. Needs, desires, and the battle for dominance raged inside him until he simply took what he wanted and left the rest to chance. His hands roamed to cup her ass, the softly rounded cheeks molding perfectly to his palms. He squeezed and pulled her closer still.

When he wrenched his mouth from hers moments later, her lips were swollen, her breathing as ragged as his own. His gaze flicked over her shoulder. Dustin stood there watching them, something odd, shadowing and unfamiliar, swirling in his eyes.

"Do you wish to see, my friend?" With his hands back on her hips, Hakan turned Aithne in his arms until she faced Dustin.

\* \* \* \*

Dustin's gaze slid down the length of her naked body in a slow appraisal that had her wanting to squirm from both embarrassment and yearning. The need Aithne saw in his eyes told her he liked what he saw. The shadow that lingered there told her that her nakedness was as much a torment for him as his studying gaze was to her.

Behind her, Hakan's hands skimmed down her hips, one moving around to her thigh, fingertips dancing closer to the heat between her legs with each miniscule of an inch. She arched her lower body back, grinding against him, affording him easier access to reach around her, wanting his hand to reach its destination fast. Still, she needed both their hands on her and, because she did, she reached for Dustin, let him see her desires in her eyes.

He took a small step toward her, just close enough that she could catch his hands in hers. She lifted them, bringing them up to cover her breasts. She held them there until he began to move them on his own. As he started to kneed, squeeze, caress, she let her head fall back on Hakan's shoulder, eyes drifting closed. Her hands itched to touch, to explore their bodies as they were doing to hers, but she held tight to that urge. She would let herself drift on this wave of pleasure for a

few moments before dividing her attention between them to return the favors.

"Hmm." She moaned, loving the way Dustin's large, battle roughened hands covered her breasts so completely. He rolled her nipples between thumb and forefinger lightly at first, then giving them a bit more of a pressured squeeze along with slight tugs. Her right breast was more tender than the left, more sensitive thanks to Hakan's earlier attention. Dustin seemed to know it and applied more of that lightly restrained pressure to her left nipple until it too felt as though zillions of tiny bubbles fizzled beneath the skin. Between her legs, Hakan's hand found its mark but instead of delving a finger through her mound as her body wanted, he cupped it, his hand going still there.

"Please." She wiggled against him, against that hand, both loving the feel of Hakan's stiff cock jabbing into her lower back and burning from the torment of wanting it jabbing elsewhere. She experienced the same combination of emotions when she arched her back, thrusting her breasts out farther into Dustin's touch, both wanting his hands to continue their assault to her nipples and wishing to have his mouth there instead. Needs shot through her like blunt arrows of white-hot passion. Spasms of building electricity ricocheted from side to side, head to toe, seeking a way out, vying for any release possible.

"Please what, little fire?" Hakan's whisper was a warm and impious torment in her ear.

Aithne could not answer, could not find more words than that single and breathless, "Please." The hands on her breasts stilled, retreated and the heat she had felt radiating from Dustin chilled in the absence. Her eyes shot open. She lifted her head and found he had stepped back. The smallest of steps but enough to allow the coolness of the night air between them. That chill drifted over her frenzied flesh, seemed to swirl around her nipples so taut and responsive the breeze gave them another level of pleasured agony.



Aithne opened her mouth to speak, to call him back to her, thought of reaching for his hands again, but before she could do any of that, Hakan pushed a finger between her folds. The rapid, impromptu invasion stole her breath and all ability to move. "Yes." She said the word on a sigh, her head falling back again, eyes slowly closing.

Hakan made an hmmm sound much like she had done moments ago, the hum making his chest vibrate against the back of her head. "So wet. So hot." His finger swiped over her clit before pushing farther, grazing around the opening of her pussy. "So deliciously sticky."

He withdrew his finger so quickly her eyes popped open. A protest was on the tip of her tongue but then, as if to prove his words, he lifted the finger to his mouth. His gaze locked with hers as he licked her liquid heat from his finger. Her pussy throbbed at the sight, the fire burning between her legs blazing with renewed begs for pleasure and release. "Please, Hakan. Gods, please!"

He lifted a brow, one corner of his mouth curving in a grin of mischief and quiet triumph. "You wish to taste yourself?"

Before she could answer he delved that finger through her mound once more, this time not stopping between her folds but sinking inside her sodden channel, a quick plunge in, a brisk retreat. She writhed from that tease of exactly the intrusion she pleaded for. She stood on her tiptoes almost as if her lower body could actually follow that finger as he brought his hand to her mouth.

"Taste yourself, Aithne. Lick your sticky juices from my finger."

She did as he bid, parting her lips with her tongue, circling his finger with just the tip of her tongue before closing her lips over it, drinking it in. There were just enough of her juices on his finger for a good taste...sweet, thick, warm.

"My turn."

At Dustin's words, she let Hakan's finger fall from her mouth, met the gleaming hazel gaze of the man in front of her. His eyes were

bright, hard, full of lust, and a wanting of his own. He had tried to play on that lust, she remembered now, had attempted to blame all he felt on that single carnal emotion. Seeing it consume his eyes now she almost believed it but for the glimmer of something more, something hidden far deeper in those hazel depths amidst the darker shadow.

Aithne tilted her head, the movement drawing Hakan's gaze down. His eyes were dark, soft but for the commanding glint she could just barely see rimming the iris. She would have expected to see such authority in Dustin's eyes but then she decided a future king could be in control as much as any captain of a guard.

Dustin put his hands on her body, starting at her shoulders and framing her curves as he let his hands slide down her breasts, her sides, her hips. He sank to his knees as his hands moved down, then let his hands move between her thighs, gently urging them to part as though spreading a set of drapes to peer outside. And peer he did. When she dared to glance down she saw he had settled back on his heels and was looking at her, studying her pouty lips as though he had never seen a pussy before.

"So beautiful," he whispered and she got the impression he spoke more to himself than either her or Hakan. "So perfect. Look at their shape, their color, the thin layer of curls that attempts to hide them."

Hakan brushed a kiss to the side of her neck. "I believe our warrior has a different idea of tasting in mind." His breath was warm against her flesh, sending corresponding goose pimples to the surface of her skin along every inch of her body.

"Is that a problem for you?" Dustin tipped his head back and it was she he gazed at, she he asked.

"No." Because her voice cracked on the word, she cleared her throat, repeated it. "No. Taste as you will, Dustin."

"Spread your legs for him, little fire," Hakan told her. "He shall need better access for what he has planned."

Aithne eased her legs apart, but standing she wondered if she could spread them enough. The question left her mind as quickly as it

entered when the warmth of Dustin's breath drifted over her mons, a tantalizing warning mere seconds before his tongue met with the softest and wettest of flesh. He began with a quick lick, a teasing taste and retreat that stole her breath and made her mind whirl. When his tongue returned to her body, he wasted no time diving between her folds. He sank deep, finding her clit, swiping it with his tongue. He lapped at it as though it were some sort of delectable candied treat. The sensations that blasted through her left her legs feeling like jelly, her knees buckling, her body going lax in Hakan's arms.

"Whoa." He laughed as he caught her, held her upright. "Do you like what he is doing between your legs, Aithne? Do you wish for more?"

"Yes. Oh please, yes!"

Dustin's hand closed around her ankle. He lifted her leg, bringing it to rest on one broad shoulder, never once breaking from his mind-numbing assault on her clit. When he had her positioned for easier access, legs more widely spread, pussy more exposed, he buried his face in her mound and carried her to the edge of the worlds.

She held on, one arm twisting behind her to grip at Hakan's shoulder, the other finding purchase on the top of Dustin's head. Her legs trembled, from the position, from the man devouring her in the most intimate of ways. His tongue sank inside her aching entrance, wiggled, thrust, lapped and circled. He drew back, only a bit, just enough to draw a feminine lip between his teeth, give the gentlest of bites that had her crying out and flying to the moons above.

"Dustin!" She gasped his name, hand fisting in his hair, nails digging into Hakan's shoulder. Her head rolled back and forth on Hakan's chest as her body, her mind attempted to absorb the exquisite pleasure, to retain sanity as he drove her to the brink of madness.

"Come for him, Aithne," Hakan encouraged in a voice gone thick with his own arousal from the show. "Let him drink your body of the juices he is pulling forth."

"I am close," she admitted. Gods, Hakan's erotic words brought her closer still to that orgasmic bliss her body sought so recklessly. Her body screamed for that release, every fiber of her being reaching, aching, wanting. Hands, she needed hands to accompany Dustin's mouth. Hands on her breasts, her ass, her clit. "Touch me," she pleaded. "I want your hands on me too."

"Where shall I touch you?" Hakan grazed his fingers down her neck, a featherlike caress that succeeded only in angering her.

"No! My...breasts. Touch...my...breasts." Each word came on a labored breath as Dustin sucked at her folds, delved his tongue inside her, and drank at her juices, each action carrying her higher still. But not high enough. Then Hakan reached around her, cupped one breasts in his palm at the same time Dustin found her clit with the pad of his thumb. They caressed, squeezed, worked her, and she soared. Stars exploded before her eyes, the night sky seemingly blinding bright with them as the orgasm burst from her. Her muscles pulsed, threatened to give way and she would have simply folded to the ground had it not been for Hakan's hands on her, his arms tightly around her now just under her breasts, holding her upright.

Dustin eased to his feet, hazel eyes glassy, and a glistening sheen of moisture around his mouth. *Her* moisture. By the guardians, it was such an incredible turn-on!

"You are delicious, Aithne." He stepped in, licked his lips and then captured her mouth in a kiss that only added to the melting of her already dissolving limbs. She tasted herself in that kiss, swallowed her own juices and the hunger for more, to taste another flavor of release rose in her belly.

Somewhere she found the strength to lock her knees, stand on her own without resting even an ounce of her weight on Hakan. Her hands went to Dustin's narrow waist, slid to his hips and began to bunch the material of his toga in her fists. His brow shot up, and she had a second to think it was a sexy expression on such a boyishly hard

face, a warrior's face with an odd trace of softness buried in the features.

"It is my turn," she told him steadily, her tone confident and leaving no room for argument. "To sample. To taste. I want to drink you as you have done me." She shot a glance over her shoulder. "I want you to take me as I feast on him." She caught the quick flash in Hakan's eyes, something akin to surprise and maybe even tinged with anger. Surprise, she figured because she was taking control now, telling them what she wanted from them without question or nudge. Anger perhaps because a man like Hakan, a future king to his own land, was surely more accustomed to giving orders rather than following them.

Hakan nodded, lips thinning for only a moment then curving once more. His hands moved to her shoulders, gave them a little push. "On your knees, little fire."

The authority was back in his voice. No, not a man to follow orders but he would go along with them and turn the situation around to his favor. A part of her recognized a thrill in that, butterflies taking flight in her belly to mix with the hunger she was about to feed. She could make her desires known to Hakan and yet still enjoy the side of submission she was discovering all too quickly tonight that she possessed.

Dustin had thick, muscular calves, knees that were just enough on the knobby side to make her smile, and thighs so large her tiny hands seemed swallowed by them. He wore nothing beneath the toga. Most men did not. She thought to remove the toga, wished to see him as nude as she was kneeling before him. But as she lifted the bottom of his garb to waist height, she was greeted by the glorious sight of thick and large, hard and ready meat and knew she could not wait a moment longer to touch, to taste. His hands moved to brush at hers and she let go of the toga, knew he would hold it for her. There were better places for her own hands, better things for her to grab.

And grab she did. She curled her fingers around his shaft, marveled at how she could barely fit his impressive width inside her fist. Gods, how would he fit inside her mouth, down her throat? Only one way to find out, she decided. But he stopped her with a hand on the top of her head as she started to lean forward, mouth already opening to take in his cock.

"Wait. Allow me to lay down first." His actions mirrored his words as his knees bent. He lowered himself to the ground in front of her, careful not to pull his cock from her hand. Behind her, Hakan lowered to his knees as well. His large hands were on her back, skimming down her arched spine, over her ass, back up to her nape. She felt that hand turn, fingers diving into her hair, fisting. He pulled her head back, a yank that drew a quiet gasp from her throat and had a trickle of alarmed excitement racing through her to dance low in her belly.

Hakan said nothing but crushed his mouth to hers. His kiss was hard and possessive. A claiming of property, she thought as she struggled to keep her wits about her as well as keep up with him. That all too familiar now quivering was back, not that it had gone far since first eyeing either of these men, and she figured he was right to kiss her this way, right to demand what was his.

By the time he pulled back, she was again breathless and on the edge of an unseen force of power held by these men, ruling her mind, her heart and, more specifically at that very moment, her body. For the briefest of instances, she saw his dark eyes lighten marginally with softness, with sensations inside his own heart, she believed. Then that softness was replaced by lust, need, determination, and that quietly thrilling gleam of authority.

"Bend over Dustin," Hakan ordered her. His hands moved to her hips as he urged her over, planted her at the other man's hips where she could easily bend down, capture the rock-hard cock she still held so firmly.

Dustin reached for her, his fingers grazing the side of her face, a wicked smile of anticipation on his lips. It made her smile too and when she flexed her hand on his cock, squeezed and his eyes all but rolled back in his head she gave a little laugh.

"Go ahead, Aithne," Hakan urged. "Take him now. Suck him fast and deep."

She did. Leaning over Dustin, she gave the head of his cock a tentative swipe with her tongue, drew back an inch, the warm salty-sweet taste of pre-cum teasing her taste buds. She glanced down the length of his body to find him watching her. Locking gazes, she opened her mouth, drew his cock inside. Her lips stretched, closed around the engorged head where already another droplet of pre-cum had formed. As she circled the head with her tongue, let her lips slide gingerly down his shaft, his eyes fluttered closed, his lips forming an O as he blew out a pent up breath.

Aithne took it slow at first, coaxing her mouth, her throat to accept first his thickness and then his length. When her throat protested, she pulled back a little. The slight retreat was enough to have a low groan of protest rumbling from his chest. It made her smile and persuaded her to try again. Not that she needed the encouragement. She fully intended to work until she took his cock, every delicious wide inch of him down her throat. Forcing her esophagus to relax, to open, she swallowed his cock down. Though her gag reflex threatened to stop her, she labored past it, refusing to give into that particular demand of her body. Finally, every muscle gave to her determination, going lax, allowing her to take him as she wished.

She sucked, licked, pulled back until his cock nearly fell out of her mouth. She sucked him down her throat again in one quick motion and felt his body tremble beneath her hands. The warm, sticky-sweet taste of him drove her wild, a liquid evidence of his passion that teased her even as it pleased her. She could feel the vein in the underside of his cock pulse beneath her tongue. She moved her hand

from his shaft to his balls, took more of his cock into her mouth, down her throat as she fondled and played with his jewels. She loved the way they tightened in her hand, rolled between her fingers.

"Oh Gods, yes," he moaned as she began to suck him faster, harder. She licked him, used her tongue to trace the underside of his cock and marveled at his quick intake of breath when she let her teeth graze over his tender, sensitized flesh.

She pulled back, let his dick fall from her mouth and bent farther over, angling her head. She found the smooth strip of skin between his cock and balls with her tongue and licked him slowly all the way to the head of his dick and lapped at the beads of pre-cum appearing more quickly now. Then she sucked his cock down her throat once more, and his hips began to move.

His hand tightened in her hair as he started to pump, to fuck her mouth. He held her head still as he thrust into her mouth, rapid and unmeasured strokes that sent his dick impossibly deep down her throat. Then he suddenly tugged at her hair, pulling her head back until his cock dropped from her lips.

"You have to stop," he said on ragged breaths, his eyes glassy and unfocused.

"But I want to—" She began but Hakan's fingers dug into her waist, beckoned her to look at him. She did, glancing over her shoulder to find him possibly glassier eyed than Dustin, but the expression on his face was one of sheer torment, determination, readiness.

"Not until I am inside you." One hand skimmed her back, lightly at first then growing in pressure as it reached the spot at the base of her spine. Her back voluntarily arched with the gentle push, the new position thrusting her ass farther into the air.

She watched him as he had watched her with Dustin, as Dustin had watched her. He scooted closer, hands moving to urge her thighs to part as he positioned to enter her awaiting pussy. He stopped, his rigid cock poised to push inside her, the engorged head brushing the



out rim of her sodden opening. Their gazes locked, held, and he plunged.

Though she had wished to retain that eye contact, to take in the expressions, the emotions that overcame his features as he lost himself inside her, her eyes closed on that initial thrust, head falling forward as a cry spilled from her lips. She had expected him to ease his way inside her, to penetrate her slowly. Instead, he took her in one brisk, even stroke. Every glorious inch of his cock claimed her pussy until she felt the flat of his body meet with her ass. Gods but it felt amazing! Dustin possessed more width but Hakan made up for it in length. So much length she feared he might spear right through her.

He fucked her. She could think of no other word for the vicious, rapid thrusts of his cock into her core. She had been ready for him, wet, hot, throbbing. Still, her body took a moment to adjust to the size of the intrusion. It was a moment he did not give that caused a small inkling of pain before it all reverted to pleasure. Her body rocked with each stroke, each push until she began to move with him. The sound of flesh slapping flesh filled the night air, the smells of sweat and sex rising to tickle her senses.

Everything seemed to disappear around her, all other sounds, all presences until she nearly forgot the man who lay flat on the ground before her, part of him beneath her. Dustin. She remembered him when his hand closed on the back of her head. She did not think to fight or resist when he used that hand to angle her face, his cock tickling her lower lip.

Behind her, Hakan pulled back, nearly slid out of her. The absence was instantaneous and maddening. Aithne tried to rock her hips back, to draw his cock back inside, but he held her still, steady.

"You have forgotten our third, little fire."

She did not understand. Our third? What did he mean? Her mind whirled. Heat, desire, need, the cataclysmic edge of release warred, clouded her thoughts. But then she did understand. Dustin was their third. "No." She had not forgotten him, remembered mere seconds

ago that she had another man to please. Her gaze flicked to him, and she parted her lips, but before she could close her mouth around his girth, Hakan thrust his cock inside her once more.

Aithne gasped and Dustin plunged. He pushed at the back of her head, drove his hips up and his dick sank into her mouth, down her throat. Hakan rammed inside her pussy. He set the rhythm, a cadence that was hard and fast and thoroughly under his control. They fucked her, one in her pussy, the other in her mouth, and all she could do was let them and enjoy. Oh Gods and enjoy!

"Come for us, Aithne," Hakan grunted, the sound winded and forced through tightly clenched teeth. "Come for us so that we may fill you with our seed."

The crude words should not have been so arousing. Yet they were. They fueled the already blazing flame inside her, drove her closer and closer to that edge. When she fell, she screamed around the thick meat in her mouth, her fingers finding purchase in Dustin's thigh, his stomach, nails digging into flesh, nearly breaking skin. Her body convulsed, quaked, spasms controlling her every nerve ending as the orgasm burst from her in a force that left her rocking on the brink of sanity. Then she heard their grunts, Hakan's deeper behind her as he plunged inside her pussy one final thrust before he let go, before he spewed his seed deeply into her body. Dustin's hand fisted on the back of her head so tightly it bordered on pain and nearly brought tears to her eyes. Then he too let go. His seed gushed into her mouth, over her tongue, down her throat so quickly she dared not swallow for fear of drowning. She simply opened her throat more, an easy feat now that every muscle had gone nonexistent with her own release, and let his thick, tasty juices glide down her throat.

## Chapter 4

"Come back with me, with us." Hakan stroked her chest, her collarbone, her shoulder. It was an absent caressing. Not to seduce or arouse. Simply, she supposed, to touch. Perhaps to remind himself of her presence.

Aithne lay on her back, her head using Dustin's waist for a pillow, the ground beneath her cool to her heated flesh. Dustin still lay flat on his back on that same ground, one knee bent, and one hand idly toying with her hair that spilled over his stomach as he gazed seemingly lost in a world of his own into the night sky. Hakan was propped on one arm over her, his body stretched out to one side. It was how they had been since each of them gave into the needs of their bodies, expelled the releases they had built to leave them barely able to move, exhausted, and satisfied.

She stared at Hakan for several heartbeats. Not too long as her heart still pounded pretty rapidly but long enough for her mind to absorb his words. He wished her to go with him to Tolynn, to leave her land for that of his. Hers too, she thought for Tolynn would be her place now as well. She did not think to refuse. It was her time. It was meant. She would miss this land, her home, probably even mourn for it a little, but she would go where she must with no second thoughts or regrets.

But as she tipped her head back to give Dustin a look, she had to wonder who she would be going to Tolynn for, Hakan or Dustin. Even after having them both, giving herself to them both, she still could not be sure.

"Of course," she said finally and reached up, cupped the side of Hakan's face in her hand. "I will go with you to Tolynn."

\* \* \* \*

"You have all you shall need for a short time?" Calliope asked, checking Aithne's sack for what must have been the twentieth time since she helped pack it in the wee hours of the morning. "Servants will deliver everything else for you in the coming days."

Aithne chuckled at her sister. "I have all I will need until they arrive. Stop worrying, little sister. You are worse than Mother." At the mention of her mother, Aithne turned to look at Ina and frowned. She would have expected Ina to fret so over the first of her daughters leaving the palace, but she would not have expected this silence, this grim sense of overwhelming doom coming from the queen. She knew the cause, of course and understood her mother's mood.

"I will be fine, Mother." She moved across the bedchamber toward her, took her hands, held them to her chest and beamed a smile. "Can you not feel how my heart beats on this night? Can you not see the happiness in me?"

"Yes, daughter." Ina's sigh was almost wistful. "I do feel. I do see." She attempted a smile but the comforting effect was ruined when her eyes swam in tears. "Still, I worry so. Are you sure?"

"With all that I am, all that is inside me." Aithne swallowed, her own eyes filling with tears she ruthlessly blinked away. "It is how you said it would be, Mother. Exactly as you said it would feel. It is meant. Th—he is meant."

"They?" Karan angled her head and lifted a brow. "You nearly said they rather than he."

Aithne winced. She had caught her mistake too late.

"Do you truly know your man?" Ina asked, suspicion now in her teary eyes. "Is he truly the man of your heart?"

"One of them, yes," Aithne whispered and felt her cheeks flame.

"One of them?" Karan repeated.

"I feel for them both. Dustin, captain of the guard of Tolynn, and Hakan, future king of Tolynn. I desire them both."

"Desire," Ina whispered, shook her head. Her expression fell, and a single tear spilled over. "One will suffer from the hands of desire so greatly you will die from the inside out."

As the queen repeated the words of the first spell, a bone deep chill swept over Aithne. She had forgotten. How could she have forgotten? "Fear not, Mother," she said quickly though fear was exactly what she now felt. "I will sort this out, and by the next new moon, I will be joined with my true heart."

\* \* \* \*

They flew to Tolynn. Winged Fae flanked Aithne at every angle, on each side. And the strong arms around her... How could she not have realized? Because she had not undressed him, she thought her own answer. It was not something she looked for, not something she expected. Her father was part Fae but he was not of the winged species. Out of those who were, many of them could easily hide all evidence of their wings beneath clothing. Though she had never seen with her own eyes, she had heard tell of some with ridges in their backs. A place in which their wings folded and sank inside their bodies, leaving only thin lines of evidence from shoulder blades to crook of ass. It made them more mysterious than most, this ability to hide their species and many used it to their advantage.

Those in her current company fell into that group. They were the guard of Tolynn, or members of such, at least. Warriors made stronger, quicker, more feared because of the wings they tended to hide much of the time.

Aithne dared a look over her shoulder, took in the guarded yet concentrated expression on Dustin's face as he flew them. He was surely accustomed to being the lead rather than center, but with her in

his arms, the center offered safety, protection. She slid a hand over Dustin's forearm. It pleased her when the move gained her a quick look, a hint of a smile and a slight squeeze. He bent his head, nuzzled his face at her ear.

"Are you frightened?" His breath was warm against her ear and gave a little tickle down her body.

"No, not at all." Excited covered it better. Amazed worked too. She had never had the opportunity to fly through the air this way. She often wished for the power or parts to do so but knew that particular wish could never be. The freedom of it all, she had guessed, would be much like dancing. She had been right. The feel of the wind over her body aroused even as it soothed, the exhilaration of the night satisfied even as it teased. Yes, defiantly a sort of dance only the fewest and luckiest of beings were blessed to experience.

For the briefest of moments, she wished them to be alone. Just herself and Dustin. They would soar through the night sky with no true destination or thought of anything but themselves. Then she glanced over, saw Hakan's keen stare, the slight curve to his lips that could somehow have as easily been a frown as a smile. His eyes sparked just enough for her to think jealousy. Though as her gaze lifted, settled on the female winged Fae who held him, she felt a stirring of jealousy in her own belly.

"We are nearly upon the land of Tolynn." Dustin's voice drew her attention below once more, to the terrain stretched out beneath them. "The palace grounds begin there, over the coming peak."

She felt him gesture with his chin and followed with her gaze. The coming peak to which he referred was a picture in and of itself. It reached far into the sky so that the Fae soared around it rather than over. And then her eyes fixed on more beauty than she ever thought to behold. More so even than her own grounds in the land of the goddess queen. Lush greens, deep browns, vibrant blues, in a riot of combinations stood out even in the palest of early morning light. Rolling lands, the tallest of trees, streams of trickling waters and

tumbling rocks, and still more peaks of varying heights. It all seemed to glitter in the slowly rising sunlight of the coming morning, speckles and blankets of diamonds and gems more rich than any weight of gold.

It was more amazing to take in her first look from so high above, and when her gaze landed on the palace, she gave an involuntary sigh. It was enormous, made of grey stone with a sprinkling of gems, and flags in the bronze and emerald green of the crowned heads that resided within its walls flying high from strategic spots. There were towers and alleys, angles and wings that branched off to many directions. Around it, the land was drizzled with gardens and walks, with tiny streams and shapely ponds.

There would be more, she knew. More that she could not see in the fading dark of night. Like the scatter of what appeared to be cabins or huts or some other type of lodging they flew over as they neared the palace. She started to comment on them, to inquire of their residents, when Dustin and the other winged Fae circled the palace then one by one began their descent.

Aithne braced herself, muscles going tight, unsure what to expect when they landed. How did a person go from horizontal in the air to vertical on the ground without ramming their feet to their brain? When they had taken off back outside the palace of the goddess queen, Dustin had simply pulled her from behind into his strong, capable arms, told her to hold on and they were up. Not quite a levitation, not a jump or even a leap. Definitely a kind of magic, she thought now as she had then. She had watched in silent amazement as her feet left the ground. He and the other winged Fae had simply bent their knees and took to the sky. Now, he surprised her yet again, so much so that she actually let out a girlish squeak as he shuffled her, seemingly effortlessly in his arms, his body turning vertical still several feet in the air. When his feet touched the ground, he held her easily, one arm under her knees, the other around her back as if planning to carry her through the threshold of the palace. Instead, he

slowly let her down. Her body slid down his, front to front, like water in a sensual glide down a solid wall of rock hard muscle. Their gazes met, held and the heat coiled in her center like a lazy snake waiting patiently for a chance to strike. By the time her feet hit stable ground, her legs felt like jelly and she was breathless, light headed and saturated between her legs. None of it had to do with the flight.

"Welcome to Tolynn." Hakan's arm inched around her from behind, pressing against her back so that she felt the rigid outline of his cock at the small of her back. He sandwiched her between his body and Dustin's. She was quickly discovering it was her favorite place to be, between these two men, their hard bodies trapping her, driving her wild with wicked sensations and hopeful desires.

She beamed, excitement dancing in her belly to the exotic beat of a fast paced waltz. She turned between them, arms moving from Dustin's neck to Hakan's, but it was the palace that held her gaze rather than either of the men. "It is beautiful," she said in a whispered awe. "Even more so than the queen's palace, I think."

"My lady!" a shrill voice said from somewhere behind Dustin. Another of the winged Fae, she guessed, though she could not see him, faced as she was toward Hakan and the palace. "Surely you cannot mean such nonsense."

"But I do." Aithne bristled slightly. "The palace, the lands, and all that surrounds them are positively stunning!" She turned her head to Hakan and smiled wider still. "And it is all the more stunning because it shall now be my home."

His lips kicked into a grin that had her heart flipping in her chest. Juices flowed, lust pooled, and her breath tripped. So handsome, she thought, suddenly mesmerized by that smile, those eyes, and the hard lines of authority that softened in his expression as he gazed down at her.

"It pleases you then?" He kissed her, a quick brush of his lips to hers that left her wanting far more than he would surely give in the presence of so much company.



"Oh, very much. So very much." She looked back at the palace, studied the many windows and doors. "Which room will be mine?"

Hakan chuckled. "Such eagerness, little fire. Come then. We will go inside, and I shall show you to your bedchamber."

He stepped back and took her hand in his. It was not until she turned to take Dustin's hand in her other that she realized he had gone. Figures, some taller than others, some still with wings flapping from their backs, were walking away from them, away from the palace and in the lead she was almost certain she spotted Dustin.

\* \* \* \*

Hakan loved watching Aithne. The expressions of sheer pleasure, of elation and deep-rooted excitement that lit her eyes brightened the darkest places of his soul. The unbidden passion in her movements, her voice filled him with more joy than he would have thought possible. It had been long since he had enjoyed the company of a woman, and he found himself hesitating, searching for reasons to prolong their time before he had to leave her alone.

"It is huge!" She stood at the foot of the four-poster bed in the bedchamber reserved for her. Her head was thrown back, her arms out and she spun in a quick circle of obvious delight. "My own bedchamber at home would fit inside this one several times over. What shall I do with all this space?"

Hakan laughed. "Whatever you wish, little fire. It is but for you to decide."

"And your bedchamber?" She stopped spinning to turn to him, one sexy brow raised in question. Erotic images of her bound to the bed in his chamber, legs spread wide awaiting his cock inside her moved through his mind. "Where might it be?"

"It is at the far end of the wing." Was the distance far enough to keep him away this night? When her tongue glided slowly along her bottom lip, he feared the answer to be no. She drew that lip sexily

between her teeth, a tantalizing move that had his dick going stiff and a whimper crawling up his throat. He ruthlessly swallowed it.

"Does something displease you?" Caution warred with violent needs building in his balls, his cock.

"Not displease," she answered slowly, contemplatively. "Confuse, perhaps. I, well, I expected to..."

"You expected to share my bedchamber," he finished for her.

"Well, I..."

Oh but he loved the tinge of pink that rose to her cheeks, loved more the idea that she *wanted* to share his bed. He moved to her and yanked her against him. He crushed his mouth to hers, kissed her until the flush of her skin turned to one of arousal rather than embarrassment. "If it was up to me, little fire, I would take you to my chamber now and never let you leave it again."

"But your parents would not approve. I understand."

"Though they are away for a time, they would know nevertheless. After we are joined, as *soon* as we are wed, your things will be moved down the corridor. I promise." He brushed his lips over her nose, not failing to notice the hesitation that swept through her sultry eyes. A quick blink and it was gone, swiftly hidden behind a radiant smile. Still, he had seen it, and he understood its cause. Though she had expected to share his bed tonight, had thought to have sex with him again, she remained uncertain if it were he or Dustin who was her destined heart.

It mattered not, Hakan silently told himself, for he was certain enough for them both. A little time, a bit of distance and all would become clear to her as well. "Rest now, darling. You had a long day, an even longer night."

"Ah, but a very eventful, immensely exciting night it was." She wiggled her brows and her hands slipped from his shoulders to his ass, gave his cheeks a suggestive squeeze.

Hakan laughed and reached back to capture her wrists. "You are insatiable, little fire." And he would use it to his advantage. He would enjoy it, enjoy her beyond measure for the rest of eternity.

"I am hungry."

He was unsure if she referred to sex or food. He decided on food as the sex was something he could not give her just now. Between his legs, he would have sworn his cock sighed in disappointment at the thought.

"Rest then and we shall dine in the great hall at noon." This time it was her forehead he kissed, a quick brush of his lips. He kept it light as not to arouse before he stepped back and grinned at the pouty expression on her face. He left, hoping it would be he she dreamt of rather than Dustin when she napped, knowing it would be she who filled his own dreams.

\* \* \* \*

Later, Aithne paused in the door of what Hakan had deemed the great hall. In her own palace, the palace of the goddess queen, such a room was referred to as the grand dining room. Still, but for the name, there seemed to be little difference. A table sure to sit at least twenty stretched down the center of a plush rug in emerald green with bronze fringe. The colors of Tolynn, she had noted almost instantly and remembered the flags she had seen outside. The chairs were made of a shiny dark wood she had no name for, massive in size, and she knew from experience would be equally uncomfortable. At each end were two more chairs, both draped in green and bronze cloths, one for the king, the other for the queen and next to the king sat still another curtained with a cloth of solid green.

Hakan's seat, Aithne guessed and wondered which would be meant for her. The one next to Hakan's? Across from his? Or perhaps one clear at the opposite end of the table by the queen? She sighed as she scanned the table and absently noted the golden candles burning

in golden holders, the crystal goblets and places of silverware, carefully folded cloth napkins and finger bowls. So formal. So binding. She had always despised the grand dining room in her own palace, preferring instead to eat with her sisters at the much smaller table they added in the kitchens or, better yet, a table outside.

"A girl has to have powers of the mind to even talk when she has to sit miles from her dinner companion," Karan often complained of the main dining table.

At the first thought of her sisters since departing the goddess queen's land in the wee hours before morning, Aithne felt a sudden rush of guilt with a deep sense of homesickness close at its heels.

"Does something trouble you, little fire?"

Hakan's arms folding around her waist from behind made her jump, and she felt her temper spark. She wished he would stop calling her that. Little fire was her father's name for her, not Hakan's or anyone else. She wished he would not sneak up on her that way either. Did the man not know how to make noise as he approached someone? And why in the guardian's name was she suddenly feeling so bitchy?

"You startled me." Because the words held a bit more bite than she meant, more than was called for, she tampered them by covering his hands at her waist with her own hands. She angled her head back to give him a smile. "Not trouble really. I just feel a little pang of homesickness. As I have never gone away before now, I expect the feeling to come and go for a while."

"You are not unhappy, I hope." There was genuine concern in his voice, worry in his eyes and because of it she felt like a toad. He was so kind, so caring, and doing his absolute best to make her first day in his palace, *her* palace a pleasant one. And she, well, she was being a real shrew.

"No. Of course not. I will be fine. I am fine." And who was she attempting to convince of that fact, herself or him? Gods, what was wrong with her? She stepped forward, her grip on Hakan's hands

pulling him with her. "And I am *starving*. What are we to dine on this day?"

They ate roasted chicken so juicy she nearly moaned in ecstasy with each bite, fresh vegetables rich with flavor and spice, and breads. Less than half way through the meal, Aithne decided if she could be certain of nothing else she could at least know she would be fed well in Tolynn. Not that she had harbored many doubts but for the knowledge that the cooks and servants she had left behind were reputed by all the lands to be the best at their skills. After less than a full meal, however, she quickly decided the staff of Tolynn ran a close second to that of the goddess queen's.

To her immense relief, Hakan had pulled out the seat next to his own. She would have rather he sit across from her, would have liked to study him as they ate but she reasoned at least she would not be forced to yell to keep up conversation. The close proximity of his presence was distracting, the heat that radiated from his body keeping her in a continuous state of arousal. For a time they ate in a companionable silence, feeding appetites long ago worked up by the exertions of the sex they shared, the trip thereafter, fueling in preparation of exertions to come. It was she who broke that silence first, needing to dull the edge of the sexual tension before she tossed him on the table and had her way with him. Though the fantasy had its appeal, she wanted to learn all she could about the man who sat beside her out of bed as well as in.

"The land of Tolynn, the villages, the people. What do you wish for it when it becomes your time to hold the throne?" It was the right question to ask. She saw as much in the brightening of his eyes, the pleased tilt to his lips. So handsome, she thought again, especially now when his expression gleamed with passion and the eagerness to share his desires. She had figured him a man who thought most of his land, of the role as ruler he was expected to take in a short future's time.

"Above all else, I wish for it to thrive, to reach heights it has not seen since the doors between worlds became lost after the great wars."

"Tolynn suffered much then." She picked up her goblet of red wine, sipped, and let herself slide into the demigoddess part of politics and fate of a kingdom.

"Aye, we did." Hakan frowned, a deep sadness swimming into his eyes as he set down his fork. He rested his elbows on the table, laced his fingers over his plate. The posture reminded her of her father, and she felt herself wanting to smile even as another dart of homesickness pierced her gut. Her mother often reprimanded her father for such blatant disregard of manners at the table. Would Hakan's mother do the same if she were present? "We lost much. Lives, property, honor, hope."

"So many did," Aithne said softly. "And they could do nothing but fight to recover. Such despair, such grief, such pain, for what, I ask you? Why? I have yet to see the true point behind it all."

"They fought for power, to rule, to prevent a mixture of races and beings." Hakan shrugged, but it was obviously forced, a tight, jerky move. "It was not right, of course and in the end it was all in vain. The people of Tolynn are many and varied. We have the most of population comprised of different beings, full blooded and half breeds. Because of such, there are many things about our people, many skills in which they can use to make our lands prosper and grow. As king, I intend to see that happen." He paused, expelled a quiet sigh. "So many were injured in the battles. So many divided and lost when the doors closed forever. It has taken millennia to rebuild, to grow once more. There are still many millennia to go, I fear."

"And you feel the pain of it all. Their hopelessness and struggles, the sadness of your people, you feel it too. You feel it for them," Aithne realized, her own throat constricting as her eyes threatened to fill. Not just a ruler, a future king but a man with a heart at the core of it. An honorable man who truly cared for those he would oversee.

"I would be no kind of man if I felt nothing. More, I would be no kind of future king if I did nothing to help my people."

"They are important to you, as they should be." Aithne nodded. "And what will you do to further them, to further yourself and these lands?"

"We lost many between worlds. Some—" He broke off, shook his head. "We have many witches, warlocks, pixies and a sizeable amount of others with varying degrees of magic. They are, even now, working to find a way to reopen the doors between worlds. That is in part their own request to do so, in part as well an order by the king."

"An order you convinced the king to issue. They seek to open the transports between worlds once more," she whispered, let the news sink in. What would it be like? she wondered. To be able to travel through time and place as those so long ago before her were able to do? Would those who lost others in the great divide find their loved ones again?

"They do. *We* do," Hakan corrected. "I admit my reason for that is in part selfishness for I have many friends who were trapped on the other side. Dustin, well, he too lost ones he loved."

Aithne studied him and waited for more that he did not give. Who had Dustin lost? A lover? A friend? "I would do all I can, will do all you wish to help the beings of Tolynn. I want you to know that." She angled her body in her chair, found his thigh with her hand beneath the table. "You should also know that my mother, the goddess queen, has tried as well to no avail to merge the doors between worlds once more."

"Aye, but that does not mean we should give up." He gave her hand a quick squeeze.

"No, it certainly does not."

"I knew you would be one to agree, to understand." He smiled, a gentle curve of his lips that was as much grateful as pleased, and picked up his fork and resumed eating. "But that is enough of that for now. Enough of me. Tell me of yourself, little fire. I believe I have

already discovered the parts of you that inherited such a nickname." He shot her a glance, and the twinkle in his eyes had her chuckling even as slivers of remembered passion teased her pussy to cream. "I know of your love for dance. You mentioned also a love of horses."

"Yes," she said and heard the dreaminess in her own voice. "And you have many of those in Tolynn?" She wanted to rush outside, search the grounds for the most beautiful of all horses, and ride it until the sunset, but squashed the urge. There would be time for that, she assured herself and speared the last morsel of chicken with her fork. It surprised her when she glanced down to see she had nearly cleaned her plate. Conversation and good food, it was but another wonderful way to pass the time. Though she told herself she would have to mind her mouth from this day forward for to continue to eat as she had this day would surely cause her to swell like a cow.

"It is one of Dustin's many tasks. The care of the horses on palace grounds," Hakan clarified. "He too has a fondness for the animal that reaches far beyond that of a weapon to ride into battle. It is a common bond you share."

"So it seems. It would make sense too as he has no need to ride a horse into battle when he can fly instead."

"Not all battles can be fought with wings spread."

"No, I suppose not." Karan would be the one to discuss strategies of battle. Aithne knew little of the true force of captains and war. She lifted her goblet, stole another sip. "And Dustin lives on the palace grounds as well?" Her question sounded casual, even to her own ears, and she supposed it was. Not that she feared Hakan's anger at her asking about another man. Not after the evening the three of them had shared. Still, she had not missed the jealousy that passed through his expression during their flight nor had she forgotten her own tickle of the same.

"He does." Hakan confirmed. "His is the first of the stone cottages scattered about the back lands. He prefers to live there, amongst the other winged Fae warriors and the more open land."



The stone cottages. Yes, she remembered seeing those from the air. So Dustin occupied one of those. She would have to pay him a visit, she supposed, given that he all but disappeared almost the instant they landed this morning.

"Mother and Father will wish a gathering here in the great hall when they return," Hakan's voice broke into her thoughts. "They are sure to love you and I hope you them. My mother shares your love for dance. It will be a relief to my father for her to have someone of like interests to talk with."

"Does your father not dance?"

"Not if he can wiggle his way free." Hakan shot her a grin. "He is a man who finds the act of moving gracefully to a song more of a task than battling a herd of buffalo with no more weapon than a sword."

"Perhaps your mother and I can compare steps then. Maybe put on a show for the men."

Hakan's brows lifted. "You would dance with my mother?"

"Why would I not? My sisters and I often dance together. Did you not notice how most of the men at last night's celebration did more watching than dancing? It is the way of it most of the time. If not for girls dancing together, we would rarely get to show our talents."

"Your talents, yes, something tells me you are full of them." He turned in his seat, took her hand and lifted it to his mouth, brushed his lips over the back of it. "I hope your talent at dance is not the only one I shall have the pleasure of seeing tonight."

## Chapter 5

Aithne's first afternoon in Tolynn became hers to do with as she wished. With matters to handle as heir to the throne, Hakan parted with her after lunch saying only that she should feel free to wander, to explore and familiarize herself with her new home, her new lands.

And explore she did. Because she preferred the fresh air of outdoors to being locked inside the palace, she started with a stroll. She took in the sparse gardens, enormous trees and busy grounds of the front before meandering to the rear. The lands behind the palace were the sight. She followed a pebbled path through a labyrinth of gardens rich with flowers some of which she could name, some she could not. There were plants far taller than she and narrow trickles of spring winding over rocks and natural gems. Bird song accompanied her through her walk, drifting to her ears on a gentle breeze. Had she Calliope's voice, she would have sung along. She figured Karan would have been wringing her hands at the desire to find fallen parts of the trees for whittling or building. She, however, chose to spin through those trees, listening to the song as her feet moved in graceful steps to the melody.

When she reached a low lying waterfall over the boulders and points of quartz crystals, she let the resulting splash sprinkle over her skin, her dress. She resisted the urge to stand beneath the fall. Later, she promised herself, she could lose the dress and go for a dip. She could bring Hakan here, or Dustin. Inspired, she grinned widely. Perhaps she would bring them both.

A giddy excitement bubbled inside her belly and lower places suddenly longing to be touched. She executed a speedy turn that

ended with a quick skip and a laugh. Yes, she could lure them both there by the light of the moon, have them both again. It would be the perfect end to an already fabulous day.

Stimulated by the idea, she stopped and tipped her head back. Though the sun shone bright yellow in an almost cloudless blue sky, in her mind's eye she saw only dark speckled with stars and a sliver of the growing moon. Then again, she supposed as she took a quick look around, perhaps she need not wait for night. She seemed to have found a secluded area of the lands, private and well covered from onlookers. She could hear a hammering sound in the distance, iron or steel meeting wood and rock, she guessed. There were voices too though she was too far away to make out the words, the occasional gleeful cheer of a small child, the rustle of a winged being or insect in the trees. The winged beings of Tolynn would likely get a show were they to come across Aithne with Hakan and Dustin. At the gentle burn that kicked up in her middle, she decided she might not mind strange eyes watching as she pleased her men, as she received such glorious pleasure from them.

The idea had her skipping again, humming along with the birdsong even if a bit off key. "Perfect. Absolutely perfect."

"It is good to see such happiness in a newcomer to our lands."

The voice was small, a bit squeaky and female. Aithne stopped and only then did she feel the hint of weight fall on her right shoulder. She whipped her head around and barely caught her own hand before she slapped at that weight. A girl, or perhaps a woman, though at no more than three inches in height it was difficult to tell. Her hair was a curtain of blond silk as bright as the sun, her skin a light shade of gold. Iridescent wings the colors of a rainbow peeked from behind shapely shoulders. She wore a dress of baby blue that hugged her slender body, stopping at mid-thigh with a dozen or so narrow fringes.

"You are a Faerie."

"I am. My name is Galia." She pursed her lips and glared at Aithne's hand still poised to swat. "Would you hit a tiny creature such as me?"

"No! Of course I would not." Aithne dropped her hand. "You startled me. I am Aithne. It is a pleasure to meet you." She lifted her hand again, this time held out a finger to Galia's hand, an offer of greeting. Instead of shaking her finger, Galia moved to stand on it. Smiling, Aithne slowly turned her hand, letting the Faerie walk over it until she stood in her palm. Then Galia sat. Her legs dangled over the side of Aithne's hand.

"I know who you are. You come from the land of our goddess queen. You will be wed to our future king, Hakan, by next new moon, will you not?"

Aithne hesitated. "Well, I..."

Galia tilted her head. "Are you not sure of your own heart? Was it not Hakan you felt for last night?"

"It was, yes, but..." She trailed off again, unsure how much to say, what to say. "Dustin," she began, but only managed the name before Galia gasped.

"Then it is true! Oh, I so hoped it was not true."

"What is true? What are you talking about?" Aithne narrowed her eyes at the Faerie.

"You felt for them both. Some of my people were there last night. It is said you disappeared with them both for a time." Galia paused then her siren red lips kicked into a wide grin. "Are they good? Who is the best? The women of Tolynn, especially those of us who could never experience the pleasure of either of them beyond our dreams, have often speculated."

"They are magnificent!" Aithne's eyes widened and she felt her face turn the color of Galia's lips. She had not meant to say that.

"I knew it!" Galia slapped her knee.

"I mean...I did not..." Aithne faltered then finally frowned and gave up. "Oh, hell!"

Galia was laughing hysterically now, her tiny head thrown back to the sky. "We always knew as much. The bodies of both, all of those muscles and incredible hands, delicious lips..." She smacked her own lips as if remembering a recent taste. "They could be nothing but fantastic. I am surprised they would let you wander alone this way."

"Hakan had something to do and, well, I have not seen Dustin since shortly after we arrived. They cannot be with me every moment."

"I would expect them to try." Galia sobered and stared at Aithne with wide, worried eyes. "Should they not be afraid to leave you on your own? What of your desires? What of the spell? What of the others who—"

"How do you know about the spell?" Aithne demanded. Her heart pounded against her breastbone. "No one knows of that but my parents and sisters."

"And the very oldest of us who were present when the spell was cast," Galia added, and then sighed. "We are so small we are rarely seen and even more rarely remembered."

"You were there?" Aithne held her hand up higher, closer, the better to see the small woman in her hand. She looked so young but so many of the different lands, the different beings did, as most upon reaching a certain age ceased to grow or change.

"Yes, I was. It is not talked about and those who have spoken of it were not believed. But those such as I who were present in the flesh know."

"It does not trouble me," Aithne said stubbornly and began walking again. Up ahead she could see a clearing now, an end to the labyrinth of gardens. Moments earlier she would have slowed her pace, possibly even backtracked a bit to prolong her walk, but now she headed straight for that opening at an even walk though slightly on the brisk side. She would not admit, to Galia or even to herself, that the mention of the spell had spooked her to her toes. Others knew. Few believed if what Galia spoke was the truth, but others

knew. She did not know why she ever thought it to be a secret. Except that she, one of the three under the weight of the spell, never knew until last night.

"You are not bothered by such a threat to your life?" Galia's squeaky voice rang with surprise and admiration. "You fear not your own desires leading to your death? That is the whole of the spell, is it not?"

"It is. The words of the first part of the spell, at least." Aithne stepped into the clearing. She spotted young boys at the edge of the lands practicing with bows and arrows, workers building on the opposite side, and striding her direction in the center though still a good distance away were Hakan and Dustin.

"Ah yes, I see why the spell troubles you not."

Aithne smiled. She could not help herself. Her pulse eased to an almost normal beat, the slight acceleration that remained now thanks to the men in her sights rather than any fear over a spell. When Hakan lifted his hand in a wave, she waved back and began taking slow steps toward them.

"They are beautiful, are they not?" Galia said appreciatively.

"Every glorious inch," Aithne laughed, gave the Faerie a quick glance and a mischievous grin.

"There is nothing like a pair of brothers to protect a woman from a spell of death."

\* \* \* \*

"Is that not a lovely sight?" Hakan lifted his chin, waved to Aithne and smiled wildly when she waved back.

Dustin watched the exchange and pursed his lips. Maybe his older brother was serious in his feeling for the goddess queen's daughter. His own gaze shifted to Aithne. Even at this distance her radiance was enough to stop his heart. And when she laughed as she was doing now, Gods, it tore his senses apart. Lust, he attempted to remind

himself. It was only lust, this riot of white-hot flames licking the inner walls of his gut, his balls, his cock, his heart. What Hakan felt, what he could see in his brother's eyes, it had to be more. Did it not?

"What is that she is holding?" Hakan had narrowed his gaze to stair at Aithne.

Dustin pushed his confusion aside. There were far more important matters to handle today than this ongoing confusion between his emotions and sexual urges. He walked slowly with Hakan and trained his gaze on the hand Aithne held at almost eye level. Then he grinned. "It appears as though Galia has found a new friend."

*And good for her*, he thought. He had always liked the Faerie even if she did annoy him at times with questions, gossip and her quests for adventure. For a being not quite three inches tall, she managed to get herself in a fair amount of mischief too.

He watched as Aithne said something to Galia, paused, then even her stride toward them took a break as her lips thinned, her expression fell. Less than a second passed before she started walking toward them again.

"Perhaps but do new friends anger so quickly?"

At the edge in Hakan's voice, Dustin caught his arm and stopped him before he charged toward Aithne as he likely would. "You will find out soon enough what Galia said to trouble her. Before she joins us, there are other things you need to know. There was trouble while we were away."

Hakan's head snapped to Dustin and he knew he had the other man's full attention now. "What sort of trouble."

"Thievery. I am surprised the news has not yet reached your ears."

"What was stolen?"

Dustin shrugged. "A couple of blades, a bow, a quiver and arrows."

"Weapons. From the weaponry or the cottages?"

"The weaponry. Slick too as no one saw anything." Dustin pushed an irritated hand through his hair, glanced at Aithne who was nearly

upon them. "I have posted guards. Two per shift, morning and night. I will ask about, of course, question any and all."

"Have you begun searches of the cottages, the persons?"

"I was not sure you would want to go so far. As the king and queen are not present, you are in charge."

"I am." Hakan stopped walking, turned to face Dustin. "Do you not see the oddity of this timing? We have not seen any form of trouble in our lands in many years." His voice had lowered. It was barely above a whisper now as Aithne was mere feet from reaching them. "She is here now less than a day and you tell me that thievery has occurred while we were gone. Knowing all that we do, I cannot simply dismiss this as coincidence. We cannot take any chance that—"

Dustin sensed it, a chill in his blood, a tightening of the muscles in his gut. He lunged for Aithne, his wings releasing to carry him the last remaining feet to reach her as he tackled her. He did his best to brace her body with his, catching the ground with his arm first to absorb much of the blow, and heard the arrow whiz over his head. It lodged into the wheel of a nearby cart as they both went down.

\* \* \* \*

"I am fine. Will you please stop fussing over me? Knocked the breath out of my lungs, that is all."

"We will let the healer determine how fine you are." Hakan sat on the edge of the bed in Aithne's chamber. He brushed his fingers lightly over her forehead, down her neck, her arms, her chest and abdomen. Ordinarily his touch might have made her squirm beneath his fingers. Gods knew he had only to place a hand on most women to have them writhing and begging for more. But just now he had no intent of arousal on his mind. Any sign of a wound was what he looked for. She would be bruised, no doubt as Dustin had taken her down hard. Despite the care his little brother would have used, the



relative ease the help of his wings would have provided, he had seen how hard they had hit and knew her back and probably her shoulders would be stiff for a time.

An arrow, he thought now. Someone had shot an arrow at her, would have likely killed her too had it not been for Dustin's keen senses. So close. They had come so close and right before his very eyes.

"Really Hakan, I do not need a healer." Aithne rose to her elbows, winced at the movement but quickly attempted to hide it with words. "If you will move, I will show you I am okay. Shaken, mind you, but okay."

"I will not move and neither will you."

"I could move you myself."

He nearly smiled at that before he caught himself. "You could try, I suppose. But you would only succeed in injuring yourself further."

"I do not have any injuries to start. That is the point."

"Again, we will let the healer be the judge of that."

"Oh please."

"Do you have healing powers of your own?" He knew she did not. None of the three daughters of the goddess queen held any magical powers despite their mixed blood of goddess, Fae, and even reputed mortality.

Aithne fell back on the bed once more, a sulk on her face, in her tone. "I do not. But even if I did there would be nothing to heal for I. Am. Not. Injured." She said the last as if each word were a sentence of its own.

"You are very beautiful when you are agitated."

"I am working my way beyond agitated and racing toward angry."

"That could be entertaining, little fire." She rolled her eyes at him and turned her head. He caught her cheeks in his palms and turned her head back to face him. "Look at me. I apologize for making you angry. I only wish to protect you. Who would want to kill you, Aithne?"

"K-kill me? Hakan, you cannot be serious! What happened this afternoon was merely an accident. Why would you think it was an attempt on my life?"

"I am not so sure it was accidental." He wanted to believe it, wished he could allow himself to dismiss it as such. Still, he knew of the dangers to her and if not those dangers then someone of his own land, someone among his own people, had attempted to harm her. He thought of his conversation with Dustin just before the attack. A bow had been stolen, a quiver full of arrows.

"Well you should be. You saw the boys training with bows. One of their arrows went astray. A lucky shot." She gave a slight, humorous laugh. "Or rather an almost unlucky shot in my case. Funny though, nearly taken out by an arrow when it is my own desires that are besp—" She broke off abruptly, closed her mouth tight.

"Your own desires that are?" Hakan prompted, but she did not finish the sentence. She did not have to for he could fill in the blank on his own. It was her own desires that are bespelled to cause her death.

"Nothing," she said quickly. "No one is out to harm me. Any one of those boys could have misfired, and I was simply in the wrong path. An accident. That is all. Where is Dustin?"

Hakan let her have the brisk change in subject. He would not argue. Not now. Not until he had proof. And if she was not yet comfortable enough with him to discuss the spell—a spell he still believed to be a complete farce—well, he could give her time. They had, after all, the rest of their lives.

"I have sent Dustin to question any and all about the incident."

"Good. Maybe you should be with him so you can see firsthand it was merely an incident."

"Do you wish me to go?"

\* \* \* \*

Aithne stared into Hakan's eyes and felt everything inside her open as though a lid were being removed from a box. The level of want she saw in him at this moment surprised her though she could not say exactly why. Perhaps her brush with death had heightened his awareness of her. Or perhaps it was her own level of need she could see reflected in his eyes. Whichever it was, her desires for this man at this moment were suddenly so great they were nearly tangible things. She wanted to be touched, desperately needed physical intimacy right now for a myriad of reasons, the greatest of which to simply prove to herself that she still lived.

"Stay with me." She reached for him, and he came without argument, stretching out on the bed at her side. At the close proximity, she could see it now, that slight resemblance between him and Dustin. Only slight though, she saw as she studied his features more closely than she had since they first met. It was as if the defining attributes of both men came from some other place entirely rather than their parents. It reminded her that she was supposed to be angry with him, with both of them. Hakan had said they were friends, Dustin even a servant of a sort to the rulers of Tolynn. It seemed he had failed to mention one important detail in his description of their relationship. How could he, how could *they* not have told her?

Hakan pulled her into his arms, and she waited for the anger to resurface, for the betrayal to tighten her throat as it had when Galia had told her he and Dustin were brothers. Neither came. Instead, what rose inside her was an even greater need of vicious proportions, one that consumed her body in a wave of liquid passion and would not be ignored.

"It seems I lied to you, Hakan." She reached for his hand, brought it to her chest to cover her breast. The instant heat seeped through her flesh, sending slivers of dagger sharp yearning straight to her already slick pussy. "I do need a healer after all."

"Is that so?" He lifted a brow, and the corners of his lips twitched. "I have been given many titles in my years with the promise of more

to come, but healer has never been one of them, little fire." He leaned in, his lips grazing her forehead even as his hand began a sensual massage of her breast.

"That is the title I shall give you this hour. Touch me, Hakan. I want your hands on me. On my breasts, between my legs, inside me. Take me and allow me to give myself to you."

His lips traveled down the bridge of her nose, stopped to nip the tip, then he captured her mouth with his in a kiss that was heated and demanding and far rougher than she would have expected given his fear of her nonexistent injuries. His tongue was like warm velvet gliding over hers in a rapid dance that stole her breath and fueled the flames in her core. His lips created a suction on her mouth that was possessive and bruising, invigorating and ferocious.

Aithne arched her back and let her hands roam. She found purchase in his hair, fingers curling around strands, gripping, tugging, while her other hand almost frantically searched for a way to free him of his clothing. She wanted to feel skin, hard lines and muscles, hot and sweaty and alive. More, she realized, she wanted to see him naked, to have his solid body pressed against hers as she had yet to have without the barrier of some amount of clothing. Still, despite those wants, she could do little more than surrender as his lips and tongue continued their crazed assault on her mouth, claiming her for his, ruling both her and the kiss. When he finally wrenched his mouth from hers, her lips felt bruised and swollen, her nipples hard and sensitive, her pussy wet and randy.

"Stay here." He rolled out of her arms and off the bed, walked out of the chamber before her foggy mind realized his intent to leave. To her immense relief, he returned almost as quickly, sliding the lock on the chamber door and, bless the goddess, stripping off his clothing on his way back to the bed. "I have instructed the healer to arrive in one hour's time. I still wish for him to give you a look over." He let his gaze slide down her body as if to demonstrate, and the intensity of it made her squirm, the breath trembling out of her. A sizzle of electric

heat moved down her flesh, triggering pulse points of pleasure from her breasts to her pussy and up again. "After I get my look, of course. Undress for me, Aithne. I wish to see you now."

The quiet authority in his tone coupled with her first sight of him nude drove her insides to a spasm of excited anticipation. His body was long, sculpted and absolute, royal perfection—head high as he moved to the foot of the bed, posture ramrod straight, all smooth skin and confident muscles. This was the controlling Hakan she had come to know, gentle when he chose, and even tender as he took charge, but demanding in his way. It aroused her in ways she would not have expected, never have dreamed, and because it did, she obeyed without thought or hesitation. She removed her dress without acknowledgement that he watched, and only after she tossed the garment to the floor did it occur to her that she might have teased him first, took her time stripping instead of bearing all without titillation. Perhaps she would remember to try that next time.

But, as her gaze moved over his gloriously naked body, she forgot all about next time and concentrated on now. Any idea of teasing fled as she simply drank in the sight of him as if he were a forbidden tankard of ale. By the time her gaze dropped to the long, hard meat between his legs, she felt almost drunk, giddy and dizzy with need. His cock stood as ramrod straight as his posture, the engorged head purple and a glistening spot of pre-cum on the slit.

"Spread your legs for me."

Though the order made her blanch from the bottoms of her feet clean to the roots of her hair, she followed it. She let her legs fall open until she lay fully exposed and completely vulnerable to his perusal. It felt naughty, having her pussy bared and open this way, and she found the idea more arousing than embarrassing.

"Beautiful." He climbed onto the bed between her parted legs, his gaze transfixed on her pussy. The air in the room was warm, but a shudder traveled through her at such a delicate place of her body being open to the elements. "Are you wet for me, little fire?"

She was, but before she could answer, he swiped a finger between her sodden feminine lips, raked it from the so sensitive strip of skin before her anus up to her clit. The finger he lifted to his mouth was coated with juices that he surreptitiously licked away. Even the sight of him cleaning her juices from his finger with his tongue had her body writhing uncontrollably on the bed. "Hmmm, Dustin was right. You are a tasty one."

He palmed her calves just above her ankles, bent her legs and pulled them up as he scooted closer. She waited for more embarrassment to come as he lifted her legs, draped them over his biceps and slid his hands beneath her bottom but felt her skin heat with only desire. Then without pretense or design, he plunged his cock inside her channel so deep and fast she bucked against him, all but her shoulders and head coming off the bed as a loud cry of glorious pain-laced pleasure tore from her lips.

"That is it, little fire. Scream for me." He held her there, the position allowing him complete control and ample room to bury his cock so deep inside her that his balls slapped her ass with each inward thrust.

And she screamed for him. Her core stretched around his shaft, her channel feeling as though it too stretched within her to accommodate his impressive length in this almost impossible position as his unyielding plunges went deeper still.

"Play with your breasts, Aithne. Pleasure those beautifully dark, hard nipples while I please your wet pussy."

Aithne was not sure how much more pleasure she could take before insanity took hold. Even so, she did as he bid without thought to hesitate or disobey. She cupped her breasts in her palms, using the pad of her thumbs to trace circles around her beaded nipples. Between her legs, he thrashed his cock inside her, long, tempered and brisk movements that rocked her whole body and sent her muscles into a spasm of rioting rapture. Lost in the moment, in the sensations, the demands of both Hakan and her own body, she let one hand dance

down her abs, her stomach, delved a finger into her mound. She groaned as she found her clit, swollen and slick, with her finger, and began a slow pressured massage that had her spiraling closer to an explosive release.

"Yes, little fire. Ah yes. Finger yourself." Hakan ground the words appreciatively through clenched teeth as he continued to pound hard, harder, hardest into her core. "Do you like that, Aithne? Do you like your own touch?"

"Yes!" She flailed on the bed, her head whipping helplessly from side to side, back arching, and finger going wild on her clit.

"As do I. To watch you this way is a fantasy beyond my own imagination. Do not stop. Finger yourself for me as I finger you, as I fuck you."

His words made no sense at first. As he fingered her? Then he lifted her ass an inch higher. He somehow reached beneath her and found her anus with the tip of one finger, and her understanding came on a cry of ecstasy even as every muscle in her body tensed from the anticipated intrusion. He eased just the tip inside, only to the first knuckle but the sensation of light pain crashing with intense pleasure had her screaming. His name bursting from her lips over and over, each time more shrill than the next.

"Hakan! Hakan! I... Please... I cannot... I am going to..." Aithne lost it. She bucked, screamed, and exploded, the force making her thrash about wildly on the bed. Still, he did not stop. He drove his cock inside her with such speed and force that a second orgasm tore through her before the growl of his own release penetrated the roaring in her ears.

\* \* \* \*

"You should have ordered the healer to appear in two hour's time." Aithne lay on her side. She propped her head in her hand and watched Hakan. The man's backside was decidedly as striking and

hormone racing as the front. Flawless, she thought in a bit of awe, as few men managed to live without a scar or so much as a scratch to mar such perfection. She wished he would stay. She longed to cuddle beside him until night fell then spend those hours of darkness with the long length of his cock buried inside her channel.

Hakan shot her a grin over his shoulder that was pure male and full of sex. "I confess the thought has occurred to me as well." He quickly dressed then turned and moved to perch on the edge of the bed at her side. "I would enjoy no pleasure more than to stay with you, little fire, but I have business to see to and a healer on the way to attend to you."

"I believe you have done that well enough yourself." She rolled onto her back and let the sheet that covered her fall away from her breasts. She watched him and reveled in the way his eyes darkened to pitch with tormented desires as she trailed a hand between her breasts, circled one nipple with a finger in a lazy caress meant to tease them both.

"Aye, perhaps." In an almost lightning fast move, he caught her hand and held it in his. "And for that I should apologize."

Aithne gaped at him. "Apologize for giving me two of the best orgasms of my life? I think not!"

He chuckled. "Perhaps not for that but rather for making it so obvious of what we have recently done."

"You do not wish the healer to know we just had hot, screaming sex?" Amused, she could not hide the grin that spread her lips. "Surely you are not embarrassed."

"No, and I see my concerns of your own embarrassment are for not." He chuckled again and shook his head. "You are definitely a woman full of surprises. We are meant. I have no doubt." But his smile fell away as he spoke, and a strange expression came over his handsome face. Uncertainty? Remorse? Confusion? Aithne could not tell, but she never thought to see such a look on his features.



"Something troubles you?" She touched his cheek with her free hand then let it fall back to her side when he nodded.

"I do owe you one apology," he said with a heavy sigh. "It seems word has spread throughout Tolynn of your arrival."

"That is of no great surprise. Many saw us arrive in the first hour of light. Others saw me about the grounds today. Still more would have heard of the accident by now."

"Yes, that is true. Word has also spread that we are to be joined by the new moon. It is said that it is I who is meant for you."

Aithne opened her mouth to speak but, when no words came, she shook her head. It should not surprise her, she realized, any more than the news of her arrival traveling so briskly through the land. Of course it would be assumed by any and all that her heart had chosen Hakan, the son of royalty and future king of Tolynn. Except, was Dustin not of royal blood too?

"I know I was not the only choice of your heart," Hakan said, effectively reading her mind. "I know you said you feel for Dustin as well."

"I have decided nothing yet. I—" She began but he held a finger to her lips to silence her.

"Shall be given the time you need to choose just as we promised," he finished for her. "It is but for you and the powers of the guardians to decide. I only regret that you may feel pressured by our people."

Not by the people of Tolynn, Aithne thought, but by herself, by the words of a spell she dare not speak and the knowledge deep within that she still wanted both men. It was a desire that burned, a desire that tore at her whenever she thought to choose, and a desire that could result in her death.

## Chapter 6

His hair was softer than silk, a shiny black that gleamed in the sunlight and covered his every inch. He had wide, strong shoulders, long sturdy legs and a body of muscles she longed to feel between her thighs. Such beauty, such power. A trembling thrill moved through her at the anticipation.

"You are an amazing creature, are you not?" Aithne stroked the stallion and delighted when he answered with an audible whinny. She laughed. "And a conceited one at that. Would you let me ride you, I wonder?"

"That one is likely to buck you off his back should you try to mount him for a ride."

Aithne whirled at the voice behind her, blinked when the blinding sun of the early afternoon cascaded around Dustin giving him the appearance of a God. A very sexy, very dangerous looking God, she decided as she noted the hard expression on his face, the blade in his hand and the warrior garb that clad his impeccable body. She wondered fleetingly if he would buck her off as he figured the horse would should she attempt to mount him instead. The idea had a blush creeping into her cheeks even as flames ignited to lick at the inner walls of her core.

"What are you doing out here, Aithne?"

"I—" Came to see you, she started to say but could not manage the words around her rapidly beating heart now securely lodged in her throat. He had startled her. It was the unfriendly, almost calculating look in his eyes that caused her trepidation more.

"You should not have come this far alone." He stepped toward her, stopping only to carefully lay aside the blade he carried. "Is Hakan not having you watched? Did he not assign the guards I sent to you?"

"He did, yes, but I—" She faltered again then, feeling a bit of courage return to steady her, plunged on. "There is no need for such guards around me night and day. You know this as well as I."

"Hakan is not so sure of that, Aithne."

"And do you feel the same?" He averted his gaze long enough for her to guess his answer was no. "Did you find any evidence that someone attempted to take my life in the gardens?"

"No." He spoke more softly now, his gaze on her again. "It matters not what I found. Things have been happening of late, things unusual to our land for some time now. I cannot say for certain if the incident in the gardens was deliberate or chance. I can say that I agree with Hakan in that I fear for your safety."

"Is that why you have stayed away from me?" She hated the way her voice suddenly trembled with her question and hoped he would take it as caused by anger rather than hurt or disappointment. But she was hurt, she was disappointed, she reminded herself. She had waited days for him to come to her, had expected him to see about her wellbeing if nothing more. When she tired of waiting she sought him instead and ended up here, outside the stone cottage she knew to be his in the company of a great black stallion she also figured to be his.

Something flickered in his eyes, something she could not name that was gone before she even ventured a guess. He took another step closer and the mere proximity sent her juices flowing in a wild river of expectancy and lust. His expression grew softer.

"There is another horse in the next pasture," he told her as though he had not heard her question. She knew he had. It was her question that caused this change in his temperament. Rather than press the issue, she remained quiet. "It is a mare much more suitable for a ride by someone the likes of you. If you wish to go for that ride now, I

would be honored to give you the grand tour of the back lands on horseback."

\* \* \* \*

He watched her with a growing sense of regret in his gut, and each time she beamed that magnificent smile his way, desire grew with equal force in his chest, his loins. It did me a hell of a lot of good to stay away from her, he thought grumpily. He did not want to admit even to himself how desperately he had needed to see her again, how delighted he had been to find her near his stone cottage.

Because his one time with her had not been enough. Damnit to the guardians, it simply had not! By the light of day since their return to Tolynn, he had come close to convincing himself she was just another striking female in the somewhat long line of females who had graced his bed, in a manner of speaking. He and Aithne had shared great sex, fantastic oral sex so potent he could still taste her sweet essence on his tongue, feel the smooth silky warmth of her tongue and lips around his aching cock. And it was those far too detailed and vivid memories that taunted him in the dark of night. They reminded him that she had not been one of many but *the one* of them all.

Aithne slowed her mare with a gentle command and a surprisingly practiced hand. She shot him another of those brighten-his-world smiles as she waited for him to catch up. He rode the stallion she had wanted to ride. The horse's temperament was so often a mirroring of his own that they got along better than any two creatures in all the lands. The stallion brought him slowly to her side and, with each step of his horse, Dustin knew in her presence he could fool himself no longer. There was no denying these feelings inside him, no transforming them into something less important or powerful than what they were. He wanted her, with every fiber of his being, every inch of his body and soul and not merely for a time. He wanted her forever.

"Are you riding so slowly as to keep watch on me?" Aithne's tone was half serious, half teasing.

"Aye, I am." Dustin angled his head and shot her a glance. "Not in the way that you mean."

Her eyes widened at that, and then a gleam rose in them that had the golden flecks sparkling like tiny jewels. She grinned, a slow, seductive curve of her lips that was so wickedly tempting he actually thought of dragging her off the mare right then and there to toss her to the ground and shove his aching cock deep inside her saturated core. "I believe I prefer it in the way you mean," she said and then gasped. Her gaze transfixed on a point over his shoulder and to his back. "It is magnificent. I have never seen such a wonder in all my life!"

Dustin knew before he even turned what she had spotted. The tree of the Fae, so tall it reached for miles into the sky, its bark a sparkle of gold and jewels, its leaves a green so lush and vivid it was beyond description.

"Come then. We shall have our picnic beneath its shade."

\* \* \* \*

"Tell the truth now, great warrior, you surely did not prepare such a delicious feast yourself and certainly not in the spare time you were given." Aithne sat with Dustin on a blanket he had spread beneath the large tree of the Fae. They were so close their shoulders brushed, both leaning on one arm, his legs stretched out before him, hers curled at her side. In front of them were the containers of food he had brought, surprising her with what she first believed to be an impromptu picnic but quickly realized he had obviously planned. She sipped from a tin of ale and eyed him speculatively over the rim.

"And how do you propose I had someone else put it together and deliver it without your sight though under your nose in that same fraction of time?" Dustin countered, popping a particularly large grape in his mouth.

Aithne let out a playfully resigned sigh. "I know not." She reached for a grape from the sprig he held and laughed when he pulled the fruit out of her reach. "And I am not sure I care at this point. It is fabulous!"

Dustin's gaze dropped to the grapes then lifted to meet her eyes, amusement lacing his expression. "It is but a sprig of grapes. It takes little talent or skill to gather a few fruits, a couple of chunks of cheese."

"And the slices of beef. Let us not forget those. Slices of beef that were prepared by someone."

"Leftovers from my dinner last evening."

"Beef was not served at the palace last evening. Nor was it spread about the various servants quarters and guards."

"I do not wish to eat with the servants or guards each evening, nor do I care for such formal dining as the palace. More often than not, I eat alone and because I do, I have found the need to learn to prepare foods on my own. A strong warrior cannot live forever on mere fruits and cheese, now can he?"

When Aithne's jaw dropped in astonishment, he leaned over, plopped a grape in her opened mouth. "You cook for yourself?"

"Aye, and for you on this day it seems." Cupping her cheek in his large palm, he kissed her, the sweetest brush of his lips to her forehead, her nose, and finally her lips. "I have missed you, Aithne."

Her lips parted on a sigh and his tongue snaked inside. This kiss too was sweet, gentle, and the wonder of it resulted in millions of tiny bubbles tingling beneath her flesh. His hand moved from her cheek to bury inside her hair as he changed the angle of the kiss, deeper yet never yielding from the soft, the placid. He tasted of the fruit and cheese and man, a thoroughly innate taste that she fed upon as though a starving being feasting on her first meal in days.

"Can I touch you?" Dustin whispered against her mouth, the words seemingly wrenched from him as he continued to kiss her so softly, so deeply, and so gently. "Gods, I know that I should not, but

the want inside me is too great. I have to touch you. Please Aithne, let me."

The desperation she heard in his whispers, felt in his kisses and his body surprised an assenting moan and a nod out of her. It was what she wanted as well, what she had wanted since that first night back at the goddess queen's palace. "Touch me, Dustin. I want you to touch me, and I wish to touch you."

He shifted, bracing her with his arms as he eased her down on the blanket so slowly and delicately she felt as though she were the petals of a flower. His lips roamed over her face, featherlike pecks to her temples, her closed eyelids, her cheekbones and lastly her mouth. Where she expected his hands to immediately find her breasts, he surprised her again, touching instead her neck, arms, sides, stomach, anywhere his hands could find that was not a sexual part of her body. Yet those soft caresses to the other places of her body felt far more erotic than any other.

Flames of arousal sparked to life inside her, licking at the walls of her core, her breasts, and far deeper places she had not even known could become excited in such a way. Her arms wound around his shoulders, fingers kneading the nape of his neck, his back. She squirmed uncontrollably under his hand, twisting and arching to his touch, urging him to continue, to visit other places that burned with needs.

Dustin trailed kisses over her jaw, down her neck. Her hands moved to his hair. "Please," she gasped on a strangled cry when his tongue traced the neckline of her dress, dipped beneath the material between her breasts only to quickly retreat and begin a slow, agonizing climb once more.

He lifted his head and gazed down at her, his lips swollen and glistening with moisture. "Please what, Aithne? What would you have of me?"

No orders, no demands, she realized. So much unlike his brother. This was the warrior who hovered over her now. This was the captain

who commanded a guard into battle with, she was nearly positive, a ruthless determination to triumph above all else.

*What would you have of me?* His question echoed in her mind. Her choice, her desires as much as his own. Who would have ever guessed there would be such tenderness, such emotion inside the package of a fighter? The differences between Hakan and Dustin were many and varied. Neither brother was as she would have expected. Both brothers held the ability to stir her every desire.

"I would have your hands on me. Here." She caught his hand in hers, brought it to cover her breast. She let it linger there for a moment, smiled when his fingers began a light massage as if he could not stop himself from pleasuring now that he held such an intimate part of her. "And here." Taking that hand again, she guided it between her legs and held it over her throbbing mound. "I really want to feel you here." She gripped his hand, pulled it back, and watched the intensity of his desires for her flare in his eyes. "But first I would see you without your clothes. I have not been given such pleasure from you as of yet. Undress for me, Dustin. Let me see you."

He closed his eyes and seemed to regain his composure as he took his hand from hers. "As you like, Aithne." He brushed one last kiss to her lips then got to his feet beside her to slowly begin removing his clothes.

It was a torture the likes of which she would have never imagined, she discovered as she pushed herself to her elbows, her head tilted far back to see him clearly, to watch him above her. She had not been given this time to watch Hakan but took it with Dustin now. She greedily scrutinized his chest, her gaze drinking in the many lines and ridges until she felt positively drunk. Her mouth watered and even her teeth seemed to tingle at the idea of sinking into the rippling muscles of his arms, his abs and stomach. Her hands dug into the ground at her back in a reflexive need to touch as he stepped out of the leather breeches he wore.



Then he was at last standing over her naked and absolutely gorgeous! She heard herself let out an involuntary sigh of sheer appreciation. Her heart hammered wilding in her chest, not from fear or even nerves but pure womanly arousal. Her nipples beaded. Sharp slivers of sensitized need rained through her to slice at the excruciating longing in her core.

Dustin was gazing down at her, his expression easy and relaxed. He was, she realized, completely comfortable with his body, unabashed by his state of undress and even pleased by the way she took in his every inch. She loved his face, the smooth and flawless skin deeply tanned in color and so boyish even with the steadily developing lines of battle and age. It was a face she felt certain she could stare at for hours. But she did not have hours. She did not know how long she had but for the now. It was the now she decided to live for, letting her gaze fall from his amazing face once more in a steady descent to his cock. That part of him did not look so easy and relaxed, she mused. It lay impossibly hard and deliciously thick against his wide thigh. Her pussy gave a violent spasm at the sight, and she nearly moaned from the sensation before she caught herself.

Wanting to be flesh on flesh with this man, this gentle warrior, so badly it was almost maddening, Aithne reached for the straps of her dress. She had one easing off her shoulder before he bent over and caught her hand.

"Will you allow me that pleasure instead, Aithne?"

Her mouth suddenly dry when only moments before she had been mere swallows from drooling, she found herself now unable to speak. She nodded then put her hands in his when he offered them and let him pull her to her feet. Her hands remained at her sides as he slid the straps of her dress from her shoulders and gradually lowered the material until it fell from her body, landing in a pool of brightly colored cloth around her feet.

He licked his lips, a slow and tantalizing glide of his tongue that had her pussy creaming in anticipation and yearning as her clothes fell

away. She imagined those lips on her flesh, kissing their way over every highly sensitized inch of her body but he did not kiss her nor did he touch her beyond a light brush of one fingertip down her upper arm. His gaze followed the path of that one finger, and he gulped visibly as though he were suddenly frightened he might be reprimanded for touching something forbidden to him.

It was exhilarating, being looked at in such a way, touched though only in the slightest and lightest of ways. Aithne felt a kind of power sizzle through her, a female power, she knew and recognized as not so much a magical ability but more the lure of a woman to and over a man.

She raised a hand to his shoulder, let one fingernail graze down his arm in a mirroring gesture of his but rather than allow her hand to fall away when she reached his slightly bent elbow, she traveled the path up again. With that same barely there touch, she slowly began to circle him, her fingernail gliding to the back of his broad shoulder, over his shoulder blade, beneath his blonde hair that hung down the center of his back like a long narrow rope of yellowish silk. There were no signs of the wings she knew could appear there, no trace of their existence but for two thin lines that stretched from shoulder to lower back so faintly they nearly blended in with the shade of his flesh.

"Spread them for me." At his glance over one shoulder, eye brow sexily raised in question, she laid her hand flat on his back, smoothed her palm over one of the lines. "I want to see your wings here in the daylight."

"Step back."

She did and watched in gaping fascination as two large yellowish-golden wings unfurled on his back. "They are beautiful," she whispered, lifting a hesitant hand.

The wings were soft to the touch, like gliding her palm over water. At the same time, they held an oddly tough texture. Her gaze slid down, taking in the rest of his backside, the way his flesh was

smooth, unmarred but for the beautiful wings protruding from it. She reveled in the way they seemed to accent his shapely ass. Her hand moved to the base of his spine, just below the spread of his wings, and she let her fingertips dance over his skin as she circled him once more. His wing folded in enough to allow her to move by him before spanning fully again.

"Have I told you," she began, adding a sultry lilt to her tone, "how much I prefer your leather breeches and animal skins to the toga you wore for the celebration?" She licked her lips then leaned in to lay them on the warm flesh of his upper chest. Her hands joined her lips, palms gliding over the hard planes, the taut beaded nipples, the rolling muscles. He tasted faintly of sweat and spice, a teasing combination that caused her hunger to rise in delicious anticipation.

Dustin made a small sound, part growl and part sigh. His arm moved around her waist and he yanked her hard against him. When she tipped her head back to meet his smoldering gaze, her heart did a slow, excited roll in her chest. The intensity in his hold on her, the fierceness in his expression awakened pinpoints of erotic nerves in every ounce of her being.

"Have I told you how crazy you make me?" His voice was husky and sizzled on the air with a heat reminiscent to that which burned between her legs. "Have I told you how badly you make me want you?"

"How bad?" Her mouth had gone dry again and she struggled to swallow as his face neared hers, his lips but a breath from her own. "How badly do you want me, Dustin?"

"I find I can hardly restrain myself. I want to take you, to consume you, to claim you."

"What stops you?"

"Fear."

Aithne's breath caught. Of all the answers she might have expected, that would have never been one of them. For this tall, strong warrior to admit fear of anything seemed unfathomable. She brought a

hand to his face, cupped his stubble-ridden cheek. "What could you possibly fear with me?"

"I worry I might hurt you." He closed his eyes, but not before she saw something pass through them, something shadowy and dark, something that made her think there was more to his answer than he revealed.

"You need not worry about that. I cannot think of a way that being with you could harm me. Not being with you, however..." She let the rest of her words go unspoken, finishing the sentence instead by pressing her body more firmly to his. She curled one leg around him, felt the warm press of his thigh to her pussy. Her hand slid to his nape and she tugged his face that last breath to hers, kissed his lips in a featherlike caress. "I want you, Dustin. My body aches for you. I wish to feel you inside me as I have yet to feel. Give me what you did not give me the night Hakan was with us."

His gaze flicked up then quickly returned to hers. "Wrap your arms and legs around me. Hold on tight."

Aithne gave a surprised staccato laugh as they rose into the air. "Dustin, have you forgotten you are naked? *I* am naked! Someone on the grounds might see."

"I have cast us inside an invisibility spell. No one will see."

"You can do that?" Even more surprised now, she forgot all about the distance quickly multiplying between her and solid ground as she marveled at his powers. Her father was part Fae but not of winged breed as Dustin obviously was, and his powers ran solely to that of divination and battle. She doubted her father would ever know the starting point to make himself invisible.

A small grin played at the corner of Dustin's lips. "How do you think we were not spotted in the gardens outside the goddess queen's palace that night past? Did you not see the elder couple who walked near the trail?"

"There was no elder couple!" Aithne gasped but immediately began to flip through her memories of that night. She had been so

taken with the men in her company, so consumed by her desires to have them that she feared she would not have noticed if there had been someone to see. "Was there?"

Dustin laughed, and his arm around her waist tightened in a playful squeeze. "No. There was only the three of us. Still, I did use my powers to protect us from sight as a precaution just as I am doing now."

They landed slowly, the bottoms of Aithne's feet settling on a pile of cool, crisp soft leaves. Only then did she break her gaze from his to see where he had flown them. A quiet gasp escaped when she realized they now stood on a leaf covered ledge jutting out from the uppermost side of the tallest peak. The mountain, she remembered, that reached so far into the sky the winged Fae had flown around it rather than over it the night of her arrival.

"Wow!" She dared a look over the edge and felt her stomach do a protesting flip that had her straightening again. Her face cooled as the color seeped slowly from it.

"Whoa now, you have not developed a sudden fear of heights, I hope."

She looked back at Dustin, met his gaze that was as concerned as it was amused, and everything inside her righted at once. "No. It just gave me a bit of a jolt. That is all." As if to prove it, she forced herself to loosen her arms around his neck and let her fingers toy with a few strands of his hair that had come free from its binding.

"I thought you would like it up here." His hands framed her body from waist to buttocks and he cupped her cheeks in his palm, held her tight against him.

His cock stood fully erect, long and hard against her stomach. For the first time in her life she recognized a fleeting wish to be taller. Her channel ached to be filled. Her essence slowly seeping out of her until she felt a light trickle down her inner thigh.

"Less chance of discovery, you see. More opportunity for me to have you all to myself." He folded his body around her as he spoke.

His lips grazed hers, tongue snaking out for a quick and tantalizing swipe before beating an all too quick retreat.

"And what would you have of this time with me?" Aithne lifted a finger to trace the outline of his jaw. She arched her brows and bit the inside of her cheek to hold back a smile as she awaited his answer. Teasing could be such fun.

A quick glint sparked in his eyes, and an even quicker grin spread his lips. Still, neither hint of amusement or mischievous lust managed to banish that dark shadow ever present in his incredible eyes. "I will have you, my lady. I will give you your heart's desire."

Her heart's desire. Aithne's stomach churned at the words but it settled in an instant as Dustin's lips captured hers. Arms supporting around her, he slowly lowered her to lie on the bed of leaves covering the rock face. His weight was heavy above her but not unpleasantly so as he kept much of it resting on one hand to the side of her head. Even as he kissed her, he explored her body with his free hand, skimming over her breasts until her nipples were taut and sizzling with wicked fire. Gliding down her side, her waist, her hip, leaving goose pimples in their wake.

"Dustin!" His name came on an exploded gasp as his fingers sank into her wet heat. Two fingers—or was it three?—spread her aching entrance and probed her channel in smooth, measured strokes that made her inner muscles spasm in aroused delight. "Please." As amazing as it felt, she wanted more, *needed* more, and she knew she need not say the words for him to understand.

"You are not yet wet enough to take me," he whispered, his face buried in her hair, lips at her ear. "I am too large for such a delicate part of you. Allow me to ready you first as I do not wish to cause you pain. Only pleasure."

She remembered the difficulty she had when she sucked his cock in the gardens of her own palace home the night of the celebration. He was long, yes, but it was his width that would make his dick a

challenge to take inside her body. Still, surely she was wet enough, open enough. She knew she felt needy enough.

"Please," she said again and thrust her hips upward, driving his fingers deeper within her channel.

Dustin stopped and slowly withdrew. Aithne spread her legs wider and felt, with a rush of anticipated sinful delight, the head of his cock rub at the outer edges of her folds. She waited with baited breath for the intrusion, certain of the pleasure, of the slight hint of pain that would come as he thrust inside her but felt only that microscopic touch of the utmost tip of his cock teasing where she wanted it most. His breath came in ragged spurts, his heart hammering with such speed she felt it in her own chest with their bodies pressed together. Still, he did not enter her.

Aithne opened her eyes. When had she closed them? She did not remember. Dustin stared down at her, his expression one of such mixed emotions she found it impossible to read them all. She saw everything from pure male arousal, to heartfelt sincerity, to trepidation, and many others in between shown in their depths. And the shadow. Always that damned shadow.

"There you are." He smiled, so lovingly and so sweetly it wrapped around her heart. "I wish to watch you as I fill you." His cock eased inside her opening at his words, only the smallest fraction of an inch. It was hardly enough to quench her sweltering needs but an ample amount to have her breath catching as arrows of heady desire rocketed through her. "I wish to see that you know it is I inside you." He gave her another inch and her eyes widened with the sensation, slivers of pure erotic pleasure slicing the inner walls of her channel. "I wish for you to watch me as I take you." Yet another inch, so slowly, so tenderly Aithne wanted to scream.

She clamped her teeth on her bottom lip instead and attempted to lift her hips as she had done moments before when his fingers had been inside her. Her mind whirled in a fog of needs and rapturous

lust, her only clear thought to drive his cock completely and deeply inside her.

"Not yet, little fire." He held her still, prevented her from doing as she tried by the weight of his lower body between her thighs.

Aithne suffered an instant of discomfort, gone as quickly as it came. He had used the name her father called her. More, the name Hakan had taken to using. It sounded strange, she realized, coming from Dustin's lips. But then he gave her another inch of the cock she so desperately craved, and all thoughts of any man but him fled in a lightning bolt of vicious white hot pleasure.

"Say my name. Keep your eyes open and on mine as we become one. Tell me again that you want me, that you want this." Instead of giving her another inch of his cock, he pulled back until he nearly slid out of her.

Her pussy wept at the retreat and she thought she might do the same. The emptiness that washed through her at the absence of even the less than half of his dick inside her was instantaneous and maddening. She caught his face in her hands and stared into his eyes. "Please Dustin," she said softly, his name coming a bit more breathy as, apparently satisfied, he eased into her once more. "Yes! Please. That is what I want. I want you inside me, Dustin. All the way inside me. *Please!*"

It was hard to keep her eyes open, to hold his gaze as he slowly entered her channel deeper and deeper, a small smile playing at the edges of his lips even as his eyes brightened with his own pleasure. He was more than half way inside her when he stopped, threw his head back and let out a low, rumbling growl.

"Gods, you feel so amazing, Aithne!" He looked down at her again, his face twisted in a sort of tormented pleasure that coiled around her heart even as her body convulsed around his cock. His thickness stretched her, but he took her slow, easing inside her to allow her muscles time to contract, to expand until at last his cock



was fully inside her. Every muscle in her body welcomed every wide, long incredible inch.

Watching him, the mixture of agony and bliss that washed through his features was nearly as great a turn-on as having him inside her. A memory, she knew as she studied him, that she would relive nightly in her dreams.

Only when he slowly began to pull his dick out of her, inch it back in again did she allow her eyes to flutter closed. Still, it was Dustin she saw in the darkness. Dustin she felt on top of her, inside her. He lifted his upper body, shifted and then his mouth was on her breast.

Aithne arched her back, her breast rising as he suckled her nipple. He gently nipped the swollen bud with his teeth then tenderly licked away the trace of pleasurable pain that sizzled like a fuse set to burn from breasts to pussy. Her neck bent, head lolling from side-to-side, the colossal exotic sensations driving her to a state of mindlessness. With each inward stroke of his cock into her channel, she raised her hips, meeting his body and taking more. With each outward slide, she let her hips fall back to the ground and experienced a flash of that emptiness before he was filling her again. Each move, each stroke and slide was slow, a tantalizing agony that made her cry out for more even as the pressure mounted for explosion in her center.

"More." The word ground through her teeth. She needed more. More speed, more force, more depth, more! She stretched, barely managing to reach his ass and cupped his cheeks. Her nails dug into flesh, pulling him down at the same time she lifted her hips. She hooked her legs around his waist, the new position blessedly bringing him deeper inside her. Yet, his thrusts stayed the same, long, slow, measured, easy.

"Dustin, *please!*"

He released her breast only to move his attention to the other one. His fingers kneaded, his lips massaged, his dick possessed until she was writhing and begging and mindless with need. The pressure in

her center was excruciating. It continued to build, to burn, a slow progression that would surely leave her insane in the end.

Dustin shifted his lower body, somehow arching until the base of his groin rubbed against her sensitized clit on each inward thrust. The slight roughness of the hairs on his body against her swollen, aching nub put her one step closer to explosion.

"Look at me, Aithne. Open your eyes."

She could hardly focus through the haze of rising pleasure, but she managed to meet his gaze, to hold it as he brought her closer and closer to the fiery depths of pure wicked satisfaction.

"I want to see you as you come for me." He rocked his body against her clit, his cock inside her channel as deeply as he could go. Her body tensed, readying itself. "Go now for me. Keep your eyes on mine and come for me now, Aithne."

She could not have stopped it if she tried. Everything inside her ceased at that moment, rendering her body completely useless as the orgasm took control. She held her eyes open by sheer force alone for as long as she could, her gaze fixated on Dustin's. She saw when he too surrendered to his body's need for release. His handsome face contorted as his own pleasure spilled from him, into her and Aithne closed her eyes.

## Chapter 7

"Why did neither of you tell me?" Aithne lifted her head from where it lay in the crook of Dustin's arm to rest her chin on his chest.

Dustin angled his head and looked into her angelic face. By the guardians, what had he done? "Tell you what?"

"That you and Hakan are brothers." She spoke casually, a lover's conversation after an amazing romp in the early afternoon sun. One of her hands lay near her face, the fingers tracing lazy circles around his right nipple.

"I expected that he had by now." And wondered why he had not. He had expected it to be one of the first things Hakan discussed with her once they were alone.

"No. It was Galia who told me just before the incident in the gardens."

Dustin remembered the smile that lit her face, the obvious laugh at something she had said to the Faerie, though from the distance he had been unable to hear. Then her face had fallen, her eyes growing hard, her lips setting in a thin line. She had been angry, he realized. Angry and likely hurt, betrayed. He saw none of that in her expression now though. There was only a quiet intrigue. He might have preferred the anger. At least then, if she were to be angry with him, she would return to Hakan where she belonged.

Even as he thought it, he tightened his arm around her. He hugged her closer and knew if it were truly up to him, he would never let her be anywhere else. Yet she deserved the truth and likely the truth would be what it took to put an end to it all.

"It was not our intention to keep such a secret from you. Hakan and I, we often forget that we are truly brothers. As do many people in our lands."

"How can you forget you are brothers?"

"It is best that way, often easier for all involved. We are best friends. I am the captain of the guard he will soon rule. The fact that we are brothers by half means little to either of us."

"You are of different parents."

"Aye. You do not sound so surprised."

Aithne shrugged. "It explains why there are little similarities between you. Subtle facial features but that is all."

"Same mother, different fathers."

"But you do not live in the palace. Why?"

"I did until I was old enough to be on my own. Now I live where I am happiest." Inwardly, he cringed at the idea of being back within the palace walls. Servants, plush surroundings, the whole royal atmosphere had never suited him. He was a bastard child, the unwanted who brought ill memories to all who resided in the great palace.

"She cast you out." A hint of outrage washed over Aithne's expression, and she pushed herself to her elbow to glare down at him. "I have heard of it being done but could never imagine. How could a mother turn her back on her own child? She remarried, Hakan was born and you, the son of her past, was cast aside from favor. I do not think I will like your queen very much."

Dustin chuckled. He could not help himself. He thought her positively gorgeous when so indignant. "You should not harbor any ill feelings toward my mother." After all, he could not. He understood her position and never faulted her for it. "The sight of me is not a pleasant reminder for her though she has always done her best on my behalf. She is never unkind."

"Not unkind! Did her best! Casting you out to live with servants is not cruel? It is the best she can do by you? What of your father? Your real father, where is he?"

So many questions, none of which he cared to answer. Still, she deserved the truth no matter the consequences. "Dead, as he should be." He kept his tone cold, grim with no inflection of the pain and hatred that blackened his heart. "He was killed by the king long before my birth."

"The king slayed your father and then married your mother!" Aithne was aghast.

Dustin shifted, nudged her off his arm and chest and sat up. He plucked a leaf from the pile beneath them and idly pinched tiny pieces away to discard in thought. "That was not the way of it. My mother was taken capture in one of the wars spawned shortly after the doors between worlds were sealed. A winged Fae of dishonor to his race and driven by hatred and anger took her while the king joined his people to battle for all good in Tolynn. Mother was savagely treated. Beaten, her virtue taken against her will. When the people of Tolynn at last defeated the opposing Fae, she was rescued but not before I was conceived." He turned to her, carefully keeping his expression blank, emotionless. "So you see, Aithne, I am a bastard son to the royal line of Tolynn. I should not even be, yet I am."

"Do not say such things! That is horrible. What happened was not your fault. How did I not ever hear of this?"

"It is not talked about among our people for obvious reasons." *Just as the spell upon you and your sisters is not talked about among the land of the goddess queen.* A shimmering drop trickled down Aithne's cheek and he brushed it away with his thumb, mesmerized by her reaction. He had expected her to be repulsed not saddened by the life he had been dealt. "Do not cry for me. I am happy. I have a good life. I shall never be king and my mixed blood leaves me lacking by far in the eyes of many despite the truce between races of the lands,

but I am and will remain happy. Hakan will one day take the throne and all will be as it should be."

She stared at him, her eyes full of such grief it made his heart bleed. She did not speak, did not argue but simply drew herself to sit on her knees, leaned into him and kissed his lips.

\* \* \* \*

Aithne guided her horse at a slow paced trot through the forest and away from the tree of the Fae. Dustin rode at her side, silent and seemingly content. How could he be after the story he had told her? Though she tried, she could think of nothing else. Brothers, he and Hakan, yet Dustin had been cast aside, passed over for what would be his by rights as the first born son. It mattered not the true circumstances of his conception.

As she rode, the gentle breeze of the day playing along her flesh and the sun slowly disappearing behind the umbrella of the tallest trees of the east, she tried to picture Dustin occupying the throne of Tolynn. Only when she realized this to be an impossible feat did she truly understand. Dustin might have been born with part royal blood but even full blood would not have made him one for the throne. He was a man for battle and freedom, to rule with a bow or blade and to fight beside the men who protected the land rather than rule all who resided within from a spot of safety.

No longer feeling sorry for the life fate dealt him to live, a sense of peace and happiness washed through her. Dustin was a fascinating, wonderful man who so recently showed her a pleasure like no other. Her day spent at his side had been one to remember always, one she felt certain she would strive to repeat.

When a dart of uncertainty pierced her euphoric mood, she ignored it. She refused to allow the wound it made to ruin these last moments alone with Dustin. It was the knowledge of how amazing

she found both brothers to be, the desire each kindled within her, different in their own way that threatened.

Inspired only by the determination to let nothing cloud the day, Aithne tossed her hair over her shoulder and shot Dustin a wide, challenging grin. "Beat you back to the hut."

Dustin opened his mouth as if to argue then closed it again without a word. He shook his head and gave a little laugh. "Full of confidence, are you not? Okay, but I must warn you that no one in Tolynn can ride as good as I."

Aithne lifted her brows. "Oh really? Now who is full of confidence? Shall we find out?" She did not wait for his reply but dug her heels into the sides of her horse, made a commanding sound for speed and gave a loud whoop as the horse took off at a brisk run.

It was nearly as exhilarating as sex, she decided as the wind whipped through her hair. The horse's hooves made a rhythmic sound as they connected with the ground and she found herself counting them in time as she sometimes did with a new melody before beginning to dance. All too quickly the stone hut came into view, and she toyed briefly with the idea of steering the horse another direction. She was not yet ready for this day to end. Then suddenly, as if in protested agreement of returning to the hut, the horse gave a loud whinny that split the serene atmosphere of the air. It halted on its hind legs, reared up, its front legs kicking wildly.

Aithne yelped, tightened her grips on the reins and held on. She caught a flash of something large, furry, and black streak past. Then the horse stood on all fours, gave another loud cry and sprinted off at break-neck speed.

Aithne had no idea where the horse was going or how to calm it down. Her attempts to tug on the reins, the soft soothing sounds she made, even the gentle caress to the horse's neck that she dared did no good. Whatever the black blur had been had given the horse a spook, and she counted herself lucky to even remain still on its back.

The blur whizzed by again and the horse picked up speed. Faster, more out of control. She was in trouble. Though she knew she should not, she closed her eyes, muttered a quick prayer to the guardians for divine intervention and heard the unmistakable sound of an arrow ripping through the air followed by a shrilling, animalistic, pain-filled cry. An arm snaked around her waist, and her eyes flew open.

"Let go. It is okay. Trust me, Aithne. I will not let you fall." Dustin's voice was strained as he struggled to hold onto her and keep his own horse at the same pace with her out of control one. "I have you. Let go now."

Putting every ounce of trust she possessed in the man, Aithne let go, her arms immediately finding purchase on his shoulders as he pulled her onto his horse in front of him. He began to slow and it was only then that she dared a glance around. They were mere feet from his stone hut. Heart hammering, she tilted her head, gazed up at him and managed a grin. "I won."

He blinked at her, shook his head, then let out a hearty, even if a bit shaky, laugh. "You are truly something else."

\* \* \* \*

Hakan stared into the empty fireplace. His hands perched on the stone mantel above and wished fleetingly for winter. He preferred the cooler months, enjoyed most the time to relax before a fire with a bit of ale. That time would have been welcomed now, a way to ease the stress and relieve a bit of the worry that had befallen him since Aithne's arrival.

He heard the sound of footsteps at his back and knew it would be Dustin entering the room but did not turn to face his brother. Anger bubbled below the surface, a strange emotion when directed at Dustin. Hakan could not remember the last time he had been angry with his brother.



"How is she?" Dustin asked quietly, his tone brisk and oddly vacant of emotion.

"She is resting now. I have stationed a guard outside her chambers. She seemed unharmed and of surprisingly good spirits when I left her."

"The tiger was the same as that kept in the cage on the outer lands. It was set free. Too wild to be left in the open. Because of such I can only believe it was let loose on purpose."

"To harm Aithne." Hakan said it as more statement than question because it was the conclusion to which he had already come. Another attempt on her life as had been the arrow shot in the gardens. He was sure of it.

"I can see no other reason," Dustin agreed with a heavy sigh.

"Who in our land would want to cause her harm?"

"Of that I cannot be certain. I do think you might consider sending her away, perhaps only for a time. Back to the palace of the goddess queen where she will no doubt be safer, I would think."

"Because it is obvious that attempts to protect her here are coming uncomfortably close to failing?" Hakan knew his question hit home when Dustin did not respond. "She was with you today, riding alone. What if she had been less skilled of a rider? Possessed less keen instincts? What if she had been thrown from that horse? She would not have escaped the attack."

"Do you not think I know this? That I have not thought of this already? You think me to blame for what nearly happened this afternoon." Instead of sounding surprised, Dustin's voice was more resigned, accepted. "I suppose it was largely my fault."

"How could you let her get so far away from you?" Hakan whirled, his voice rising, his vision growing red around the edges.

Dustin merely lifted his brows. When he spoke his tone was level, quiet, and very effective. "She wished to race back to my hut. I saw no danger in this, though I will admit to a bit of hesitancy at first. I did allow her to get a distance away from me. Perhaps it was too far.

But tell me, brother, how far away did you allow her to get from you this day?"

"Too damned far." Hakan sighed. He lifted a hand to his head and massaged his temples with his fingertips. He could feel a monster of a headache coming on. He supposed guilt and misdirected anger could do that to a man.

"I have stayed away for well over a week, kept my distance from her," Dustin went on, his voice still quiet even if tight. "My attempts proved to be for not when she showed up at my hut."

"Why have you stayed away?"

"I should think that would be obvious, brother. Aithne is yours. She should be yours. No matter what I feel for her or what she thinks she feels for me. She is meant for you. And the spell..."

"You think to protect her from the spell by making yourself absent in her life?" Hakan dropped his hand and looked at his brother intently.

"I do." Dustin sighed. "I did."

"And you believe it best to send her back home. Is that for her safety from the apparent physical threat or the spell?"

"Gods, Hakan!" Dustin swore and shoved a hand through his hair. He opened his mouth to answer but the voice from the doorway behind him had him stopping, his eyes fluttering closed in exasperation.

"You wish to send me away?"

\* \* \* \*

Aithne stepped into the room on legs that were suddenly shaky. Dustin stood with his back to her, but she caught the slight shake of his head, thought she heard him sigh. Hakan had taken a step away from the fireplace toward her but stopped and rubbed at one temple with his fingers as though his head ached, a frown marring his lips. He was the first to conceal the frustration she sensed from both men at

her presence. Letting his hand fall to his side, he moved to her, the frown morphing to a slight and concerned smile.

"I thought you were resting."

"I did not need to rest," she said a bit more harshly than she intended. Hakan stopped in mid-stride, the frown returning to his lips. "Why do you wish me to leave?"

Hakan shot a glance at Dustin whose back was still to her. "We fear for your safety. That is all. There have been two attempts on your life since you arrived, and we feel you returning to your home within the palace of the goddess queen until we can find out who wishes to harm you would be best."

"Then you agree with Dustin? It is you who brought up the idea, is it not?"

Dustin slowly turned. His face was carefully blank, unreadable. "Aye, sending you away was my idea."

"And is that for my safety of physical danger or the spell?" She crossed her arms under her breasts and glared at him as the question first spoken by Hakan lingered in the air once more. When Dustin did not answer it a second time, she went on. "How do you know of the spell? Why did you not tell me you knew?"

"We know of the spell in the same way you know we are brothers."

Aithne did not miss the surprise that flittered through Hakan's expression at that news. She had not yet told him that she knew.

"Do you truly believe sending me away will break the spell?" She moved toward Dustin, her steps slow and measured, her gaze on him transfixed and imploring. When she reached him, she cupped the side of his face in her hand. She watched as his eyes fluttered closed, as his shoulders rose and fell in a trembling breath. "Do you truly wish me to leave?" She rose to her tiptoes, nipped his bottom lip and heard the quietest of protesting groans rumble in his throat.

Dustin gripped her shoulders and pulled back. "You are in danger here, Aithne. Is that not obvious enough?"

"Accidents," she argued, thinking the only danger presented to her in Tolynn was Hakan and Dustin. "And as for the spell, it speaks nothing of physical danger and only a death by desire. Sending me back home will do little to erase that."

"You do not know that for certain," Hakan argued.

Aithne turned. "And you do not know for certain that it will. You cannot say these so called attempts were not accidents. Hakan, I do not wish to go anywhere. I wish to stay here in Tolynn, in the palace, in my new home. How do you know that forcing me to leave will not add another unfulfilled desire to the spell? I am fated to suffer a desire so great that it shall cause my death after all. How can you say that my desire to be here once I am sent away would not be the cause?"

Hakan stared at her and she could see the thought had not occurred to him. Fear washed through his expression, quick, violent and primal. His gaze flicked over her shoulder to Dustin then back at her. Finally, he nodded. "Fine. I will allow it but only if you agree to remain with your guards at all times until all of these *accidents* cease."

Aithne started to argue—guarded at all times! Please no—but Dustin cut her off.

"Hakan cannot guard you at all hours with such responsibilities of the palace and lands on his shoulders, and I shall not be around."

Aithne spun around, felt her eyes growing wide. "Where are you going?"

"I received word this afternoon that a war has begun in a neighboring land. A war between the people and those of an unknown threat. They desire our help."

"You knew of this?" She shot an exasperated look over her shoulder at Hakan who, for the briefest moment, appeared as taken aback as she.

"I did not, though we do lend a hand when our presence is requested." His gaze moved to Dustin. "You will go then?"

"Aye, at first light."

"When will you return?" Aithne could not help the catch in her voice. Though he did not speak, she read the answer in his eyes. He was going into battle. He could return by sunset the following day, two weeks from now, or not at all.

Two weeks. The reminder made her heart skip a beat. In a little over two weeks the new moon would be upon them. As she stared at Dustin, her eyes burning with an onset of tears, she wondered if fate could be so cruel as to make the decision of her heart's desire for her by taking one of the men away forever.

Aithne's arms drifted to Dustin's shoulders as she raised to her tiptoes, brushed a chaste kiss to his chin, his lips. "Will you leave me without first allowing me one more time to feel the comfort of your arms, the pleasure of your body?"

Though he stiffened against her, his arms circled her waist, his eyes closing. "Aithne, please do not do this," he breathed, but his actions contradicted his words as he yanked her closer, crushing his mouth to hers.

\* \* \* \*

The kiss they shared was savage, desperate, a symbol of both fear and desire. Fear that this moment may never come again and desire for it to come again always. It sparked pinpoints of pleasure in every fiber of his being, punctured at the thin wall of his heart, jabbed at the restraint of his control. Dustin had never known a death such as this, for being with Aithne, holding her close, tasting and touching her was surely a type of slow death. He had pretended to not want her. He kept his distance when his pretenses failed and even hidden the truth from his future king, his best friend, his brother. Despite it all, his sentence to doom followed him.

Leaving, he had decided, seemed to be his only escape for he had proved already that he could not hold himself back when alone with her for even a few hours of daylight. When at last he returned, Hakan

and Aithne would be joined. Then Dustin would be free to move on with his life. A life, he felt certain as his hands began to roam up her back, down to her buttocks, feeling, caressing, tormenting him in the worst of torturous ways, he would spend forever wanting a woman he could not have.

"Feel me, Dustin. Touch me. Give me more than a memory for our time apart."

By the guardians, her breathy words ripped at his heart, his very soul! She writhed in his arms, breasts pressing to his chest, grinding, nipples beading. One leg moved around his, curled behind his knee and he felt her heated essence even through the leg of his breeches. She gyrated against his thigh, pumped her hips as her eyes closed, her head falling back. A soft moan escaped her lips.

"Aithne, please." The words rumbled from his throat, a growl of animalistic agony and pure male desire.

Her head lifted, her gaze finding his. She knew the torment she caused him. He could see it in her eyes, along with a ruthless determination to continue until she got what she wanted. She let one hand move from his shoulder, slid it between their bodies to cup his cock, and all his reservations crumpled with the best laid plans. Her fingers closed around his engorged length through the material of his leathers and his balls tightened, tingling with a fierceness as though a strap had been laid on them. Gods, no woman had ever made him feel this way!

"I want this." She squeezed his cock just enough to have him sucking in a quick breath through his tightly clenched teeth. "Inside me. I'm so hot, Dustin, so wet." Her lips brushed his. "Fuck me, Dustin. Make me come."

Her lips and tongue traced a line over his jaw, and Dustin let his head fall back. His arm tightened around her, his hand gripping her ass, squeezing. When his fingers dug into flesh she gave a low and delicious moan against his neck. She nipped at his throat, her teeth raking over his collarbone. The memory of how it had felt to have that

mouth closed around his erection came rushing back with the force of a blow. But it was the memory of being inside her saturated pussy that he wanted most. The experience of her sticky juices sliding down his cock to drench his balls was like no other. He wished to walk away remembering always the feel of her tight muscles convulsing around his shaft, hearing her sweet little moans while he fucked her as she asked him now to do.

"Sweet Aithne, as you wish. Always as you wish." Resigned, unable to restrain himself a moment longer, he started to lift the skirt of her dress. His hands grazed the smooth flesh of her leg, her thigh. Because he wanted to watch her face—Gods, but he loved the expressions of pure erotic pleasure that came over her beautiful face when he took her—he lifted his eyes. It was Hakan's gaze over her shoulder that he met instead.

Hakan stood behind her watching, his face one of indecision and unrequited lust. Should he stay? Should he go? Dustin could read the torment in his brother's eyes and understood probably more than Hakan would ever know. Though he might have wished to be alone with Aithne this last time, it took only a second for Dustin to decide a third party might be enough to prevent this night from becoming utter suicide to his already aching heart.

Behind Aithne's back, Dustin held out a hand in invitation to his brother.

\* \* \* \*

Hakan held Dustin's gaze as he stepped closer, moving in at Aithne's back. He did not touch her but leaned in to whisper. "Shall I join you?" It should be her choice after all. Dustin was right about that. It should be always as she wished. Hakan found himself waiting strangely with baited breath for her answer. He did not want to walk away, to know he would be leaving her in the arms of another man

even if that man was Dustin. Sharing her, he could handle. Walking away, letting her go, he could not.

Her answer came after only a moment's hesitation. She reached behind her, her slender arm moving around his side to pull him in against her. His arms curled around her waist, his body molding to her back angle for angle, line for line. They fit so perfectly together. Her hips swayed, her pussy grinding on Dustin's thigh still between her legs. The same movement had her doing a delicious grating dance over Hakan's throbbing cock where it rested at the base of her spine.

His brain fizzled, sanity slipping into a realm where sensual longing and systematic passion were all that mattered. The cum built quickly, a river of erotic sensation dammed only by his brutal determination to hold back. His balls tightened from the restraint, the ache passing the line of pleasure and pain and back again.

"Steady, little fire." He caught her hips to stop her incessant gyrations before he lost the last thread of his control. His chin fell to rest on her shoulder as he breathed deep, fought to control the rising hunger to possess, to control.

He met Dustin's gaze and found the other man's eyes to be an odd shade of green, the expression in them so contradictory they were impossible to read. Resignation, confusion, torment, gratitude, desire, they were all there shadowed behind something dark, something primal. So Hakan had been wrong after all in his thinking that Dustin's feelings for Aithne had dimmed. The distance, his decision to accompany his men into battle—for it had been his choice rather than to send his second-in-command—had been vain attempts to control his deepening feelings for the goddess queen's daughter. Could he truly feel the same electric jolt as Hakan felt in Aithne's presence? Was it possible that they both had been chosen as her true destined mate?

Hakan braced himself for the jolt he knew would come and touched Aithne's neck. His fingers grazed lightly beneath her spill of fiery hair. As he expected, the quiver in his belly, never completely



gone when with her, gained in strength. It was a wild ride of sensory vibrations and crashing sexual need. Only when he pulled her hair aside to kiss the smooth flesh at the base of her neck did he realize it felt different somehow. No less potent than before yet somehow different now that Dustin was with them.

Puzzled, he pushed the sudden confusion aside, wondering only fleetingly what it could mean as he began to undress her.

\* \* \* \*

Aithne did not allow herself to think, only to feel. She quickly realized however that feeling with these two men was a danger all its own. They undressed each other with a sort of practiced ease, hands stopping every so often to explore flesh. Mouths joined for a taste, a nip, and tongues for a lick. It was Hakan who brought her shattering and shaking on jellied legs first, his fingers long and persistent inside her weeping channel while his erection pressed against the small of her back as if to remind her of other treasures she could feel inside. Before her, Dustin went wild with her breasts, caressing, kneading, sucking, and nipping until her nipples were so sensitized that the slightest brush sent an arrow of sheer rapturous explosions straight to her core.

Panting, barely holding onto her sanity, Dustin pulled her to the floor, lying beneath her, his hands on her hips to hold her mere inches above his massive, erect cock. She heard herself whimper slightly as for a moment she struggled against his strength. She desperately wanted to feel his cock inside her despite the convulsions that remained in the aftermath of her first orgasm.

"I wish for you to ride my cock," he told her. "Are you ready to feel me inside you once more?"

"Yes. Please Dustin, yes!" Her body flamed with a new furious need almost as though the orgasm that rocked her mere moments ago never happened.

"We will take you together this time, little fire," Hakan's hand slid up and down her back, over her ass then up again. "Can you handle that? Can you take us both at once?"

"Yes." Of course she could. Though it had been nearly two weeks since their first time, she had already felt the immense sensations of having both of these men at once and could not wait to experience it again. "Take me now, please." She had learned rather quickly that Hakan preferred to be in control, to make her beg, to hear her plead. She did so now without coxing, for she wished to waste no more time.

"Give her what she asks, Dustin."

Gazes transfixed, Dustin slowly tugged her down. His enormous cock eased inside her sopping opening inch by gloriously slow inch. Knowing too what would please Dustin, she forced her eyes to remain open and locked with his though the intense pleasure of his cock spearing inside her channel was so wonderful she wanted to close her eyes and concentrate only on the feeling. The look that passed in the depths of his eyes touched her more deeply than his cock as he sank all the way inside her. She thought for a fleeting instant that his eyes even glistened with tears before he blinked. His hands slid from her waist to her sides as he pulled her down to him.

He kissed her with such tenderness it brought tears to her own eyes. Her breath caught in her throat as the thought that this could be their last time together flittered through her mind. His hips began to move beneath her, lifting her body, letting her fall in smooth and measured thrusts that pushed his dick impossibly deep within her. Then he drew it several inches out before plunging in again.

Aithne cried out but the sound was muffled by Dustin's lips on hers. His tongue tangled and caressed the deep recesses of her mouth, exploring, devouring. Her hands fisted on the floor on either side of his head. Her knees dug into the floor on either side of his hips as she aided him in the continuous slow and even thrusts that brought her to a point of blissful ecstasy beyond worlds. Her body soared, her mind

fogged, and she flew on the riot of rapturous clouds made of sensual liquid pleasure.

Behind her, she felt the warm presence of Hakan's body as he lowered to the floor with them. He shifted until it felt as though he straddled Dustin's legs. Then a hand began to knead her ass, another gently spreading her cheeks apart as one strong and lightly calloused finger slipped between them to swipe over her anus.

She stilled. A cold rush of fear mixed with a blazing dart of excitement that caused her pulse to race so fast she heard the beat of her heart in her ears. Every muscle in her body went rigid as the finger returned and eased its way inside. She yanked her head up on a cry of surprised pleasure. At least she thought it might be pleasure, but her sudden move caused her body to rock back against the finger, driving it deeper and a lace of pain shimmered through her. Who knew there could be such a thin line between the two sensations?

"Aithne?" Dustin's quiet voice drew her attention to him. He laid still now too, his cock still buried inside her, his eyes comforting and warm. "Relax, my lady. Let your muscles relax. It shall be easier that way."

"Does it hurt, little fire?" Hakan asked and probed a bit farther into her anus. His finger circled and spread her hole as he entered her, exploring and coaxing, preparing.

"Yes. No. Gods!" What was she saying? More, what was she feeling? Pleasure, more intense and evil than anything she had ever experienced. Pain, more delicious and free than any she thought to exist.

Hakan chuckled. "Relax as Dustin says. The pain will be less if you relax. I told you we would take you together."

Yes he had, but she never thought... Gods, he intended to fuck her ass while she rode Dustin's cock. Both men, both gloriously thick, impossibly long cocks inside her at once. She forced herself to relax, to tamp down the fear, to concentrate on the pleasure. She wanted

that, to feel them both inside her at once. She would have that if only she let them.

"That is it. Relax. Yes. Feel that? You simply need a bit of preparation." Hakan continued to coach her in soothing and encouraging words as his finger probed, wiggled, spread and caressed.

It was an odd sensation, feeling something playing inside her most sensitive hole. Yet the heat that raged inside her from that touch was exquisite pleasure beyond her wildest and most wicked imaginings. She began to move, a slow rock back on his finger at the same time grinding her pussy on Dustin's cock and she felt herself climb. So close. She was so close.

"Yes. I believe you are ready, little fire."

So close. Hakan's words did not penetrate the sexual fog controlling her mind until he withdrew his finger so suddenly she actually heard herself scream in protest. "No! Do not stop. Please!"

"Aithne." Dustin cupped the side of her face in his large hand. "I promise we are not yet done." His eyes glinted so mischievously for a moment that the ever present shadow was even gone from their depths. "I should thank you for letting me be a part of his before I go. To see you experience such pleasure, to do my part in giving you such, is something I will take with me always."

She stared down at him, wanting to say something, but words failed in a cacophony of confused emotions in her mind and body. Desire, needs, love, fear, pleading and so much more she could not sort through. Behind her, Hakan shifted, positioned himself, and his cock brushed over her readied opening. He entered her slowly, only the engorged head at first. Her breath caught. The pain laced pleasure made her head spin. Her body tensed reflexively. Then, remembering Hakan's instructions, she forced herself to relax. He eased in another inch.

"Are you alright?" Dustin whispered. She could only nod in answer with her throat too tight and her mouth too dry for words. "Close your eyes if you need, if it will help."

It did not help. Closing her eyes drew all her focus to the cock entering her anus. While the pain ebbed and the pleasure mounted, she found it best to divide her attention to both cocks inside her, to both men, one beneath and the other behind her.

They had stilled, Dustin's cock lodged balls deep within her pussy. Hakan's in her rear though, due to the slivers of rapturous sensations rippling through her, she could not tell how deeply. However far it was, it was not enough. Flaming now, teetering on the brink of quite possibly the most ferocious orgasm ever, she did not want them still. She no longer wished them to be gentle. She rocked backward, the movement gyrating both cocks in their respective holes and she gasped, her eyes closing now of their own accord. Behind her, Hakan grunted, an animalistic sounding "yes" rumbling from his throat. Under her, Dustin echoed his brother's word but in a far more whispered, husky exhale of air.

Aithne opened her eyes to find Dustin staring up at her through eyes gone dreamy with pleasure. He smiled, a small quirk of his lips, and she smiled too. Arching her back, she placed a hand on his chest, reached back with the other and curved her fingers around Hakan's hairy thigh.

"You wish for more, little fire?"

"Yes." She rocked back again, reveled in the repeated grunts and whispers. "Take me gentlemen. Make me come for you now."

She need not say more. Good thing for her too because the intense waves of ecstasy that overtook her in that moment left her drowning, unable to speak for the surges that crested in her body, her mind. It was Hakan who controlled them. Hakan who set the pace for fast and furious thrusts that drove her forward and down, impaling her on Dustin's rigid cock. Before she knew it was happening, before she could even think to hold it back, the orgasm burst from her on a wail

of elation. It was the most exquisite explosion of lights she had ever seen. Colors lit the darkness behind her tightly closed lids. Blues, gold, greens, reds and the brightest white ever as her body rocked, convulsed, spasms jerking her by way of the spew of juices that flowed out of her. Sounds left, thoughts evaporated, until there was only the feelings of utter satisfaction and complete exhaustion. Only when the spasms finally ebbed and she fell limp over Dustin's chest did she realize both he and Hakan had come with her.

"Are you alright?" Hakan asked, panting. His hands moved caressingly down her back, over her buttocks.

He had slid his cock free, she realized, and was grateful for now that the moment was over, the pleasure had fled and she could feel the low hum of pain. Yes, she would surely be sore for a few days after this night.

"Yes," she whispered. Her head turned on Dustin's chest and she managed to angle a look at him though she could not gather the strength for much more. His cock remained inside her, gone soft now after his own release. The small smile returned to his lips as did the ever present shadow in his eyes.

"Thank you," he said and the kiss he put to her forehead was as soft as his words.

Aithne's eyes filled and she turned her face into his chest. Fear, greater than ever now that she may never be held by him this way again, squeezed her heart.

## Chapter 8

Life without Dustin took on an oddity Aithne had not expected. A week had passed since he rode off with the members of his guard to battle the unknown threat of the neighboring land. It was one of the emptiest weeks of her life. She had known she would miss him, worry after him, even long to be with him. She had not known how utterly lost she would become.

She was not alone, of course for much of her hours were spent in Hakan's presence. That too had become strange of late. It was not that she grew to dislike his company, only that the atmosphere around them felt somehow different. She learned quickly to ignore this oddity and focus instead on the man. In doing so, she found him to be a gracious companion for both fun and serious contemplation. Their time together was spent in conversation over the politics of Tolynn, fabulous dinners in the grand dining room and, of course, incredible nights in bed. He had given her some beautiful gifts as well. The most recent of which was a gown of emerald green the same shade as that which marked the royalty of Tolynn.

Aithne moved to the mirror in her bedchamber to consider her reflection. It was a truly lovely dress. Fitted at the bodice and waist, the skirt flared to her ankles and was made of a soft suede material with patches of satin. As she studied the dress she did a little spin before the mirror. She heard Calliope's softly melodic voice in her mind telling her how absolutely breathtaking she looked. Karan's voice followed with a bit of laughter underlining the tone as she agreed, but added that the color made Aithne look a bit like a Yule tree with her flaming red hair.

It made Aithne laugh aloud, and she covered her belly with her hand, sighed. Tonight she missed her sisters more than ever. More, she missed her mother and father. She would finally meet Hakan's parents on this night. She and Hakan would dinner with the king and queen of Tolynn, as well as the royal family of another nearby kingdom.

Aithne stole one last look at her reflection and resigned herself to pretend even if she could not muster true buoyancy. She would much prefer a quiet meal with Hakan in his bedchamber to the formal dining she would soon endure. The thought of a hushed evening in Hakan's room had the smile returning to her face as she left the bedchamber.

\* \* \* \*

Hakan tried to talk his parents out of the dinner, but they would not be thwarted. If it had to go on, he would have preferred a private evening among family rather than one spent to impress outside guests. More, he feared every time his mother opened her mouth that she might announce a formal joining between himself and Aithne.

To his vast relief, the women seemed to have hit it off from the start. Not that he had doubted much they would with their equal appreciation of music and dance. It had been Aithne's hesitation, her slightly stiff demeanor upon introduction that worried him. He understood this, however, when he realized Dustin must have revealed the completely story of his birth and upbringing to Aithne. Not to be deterred by a bit of disapproval, his mother had quickly won Aithne over, and they now sat across from one another at the grand dining table in deep conversation about some sort of dance.

"She is not as beautiful as I would have thought given that she is the daughter of the goddess queen."

Hakan met the scathing voice of Valda, daughter of the king and queen of the kingdom of Paldar, with a raised eyebrow and a frown.



"Jealously does not become you, Valda. Surely you mean the goddess queen's daughter no disrespect."

Temper flashed in her eyes as black and cold as a winter night. Her equally ebony brows drew together, blood red painted lips pursing menacingly. "I am not jealous. I have made but a simple observation. The fact that she is the goddess queen's daughter does not make her right for you." Beneath the table, her hand slid onto Hakan's thigh. "She is too fragile, too plain to keep a man such as you satisfied, is she not?"

"On the contrary, I find her to be immensely satisfying and equally beautiful." Hakan picked up his mug and sipped to hide the smile he could not quite hold back as Valda's eyes narrowed to the point of mere slits. She huffed an angry breath but before she could speak further he turned his attention to her father across the table in conversation with his own father and pretended to listen.

He would not normally have spoken to a woman so rudely. Especially not one he had spent several quite satisfying nights with in bed. Despite her quickly sparked temper and devious ways, Valda held a beauty to rival many. Even Aithne, he admitted silently with a slanted glance to his opposite side where Aithne sat beaming at something his mother had said. His belly gave a very familiar quiver, stronger tonight than he had felt since first meeting Aithne. Valda had expected to be wed to him. He knew that, had known it for years. But it was Aithne who was perfect on his arm, at his side. It was Aithne who ignited the feelings within him.

Perhaps he had been wrong to think those feelings were beginning to dim, to change. In truth, he had begun to realize he could not fathom life without Aithne. For the first time in his memory, he found himself glad his brother had gone to battle. In one week's time, the new moon would be upon them and Aithne would belong to him.

\* \* \* \*

"We should plan a gala." Gwenore beamed, clearly excited by the thought. "Yes, I am certain that would be perfect. Though we should wait until Dustin's return, of course. We cannot very well have such a party without my eldest son. He loves very much to dance, you know?"

Aithne watched the queen of Tolynn, unable to hide the amusement and surprise on her face. The woman was a jewel. Vivacious and stunningly beautiful with a curtain of dark curly locks that hung to well below her shoulder blades, eyes of a deep chocolate brown as Hakan's, and lips shapely enough to drive a man to his knees. No doubt, they had done so to Hakan's father. And Dustin's, she thought grimly.

There was only a hint of Dustin in Gwenore's features but Aithne had trouble pinpointing exactly what. The shape of the eyes, perhaps though not the color. Or maybe it was the high cheekbones or the squared jaw line. No matter the resemblance, it took only one glance for her to conclude that Dustin looked more like his father than the queen. A fact that surely tore at Gwenore's memories and heart each time she looked upon her eldest son. But when she spoke of him, no shadow of the horror she had lived or the detest Aithne had expected her to feel toward Dustin shown. Only the devoted love of a mother.

"I know Dustin is quite a good dancer." Aithne nodded and immediately wished she had not. The room blurred, a jumble of focus before it righted nearly as quickly. "As is Hakan. I danced with them both at the palace celebration." Did her voice sound as blurry as her vision or was that just her hearing?

Gwenore tilted her head, her eyes examining. "Yes, Hakan dances well too, but it is not a joy for him as it is for Dustin."

Aithne tried to remember her dance with Dustin, being held in his strong, skilled arms as he spun her around the dance floor. The image faded far too quickly in a rim of fuzziness around her vision. "Dustin is a man full of surprises." Her throat suddenly too dry for more

words, she picked up her glass and sipped. Her hand shook as she lowered the glass to the table.

"Honey, is something wrong?" Gwenore put a hand on Aithne's quivering one. "You are shaking and your skin is hot to the touch."

Was it? She thought she was imagining that part. Adrenaline and a twinge of fear causing sweat to trickle down her spine. But no, not her imaginings. Hot. She was suddenly so hot and nauseous. The room started to spin, a slow and dizzying circle that had her swaying. She reached for the goblet again, tried for another sip, but the glass slipped from her hand before she made it to her mouth. Gwenore spoke but Aithne could not make out her words over the roaring in her ears.

The room tilted. No. Not the room, she realized. She swayed again, this time nearly tipping over. Strong hands caught her before she tumbled out of her chair.

"Aithne, are you all right?" Hakan's startled and concerned words sounded distant, muffled.

"I do not feel well," she managed to say and then everything went dark.

\* \* \* \*

The healer of the palace of Tolynn was an elder wizard with a long gray beard, silvery hair that hung in wavy tendrils far down his hunched back and beady ice blue eyes. He had resided in the palace for as long as Hakan could remember, even acted as a bit of a second father to Hakan in the king's absence when Hakan was a boy. Because of this, Hakan shared a deep bond with the man and rarely looked at him with anything other than love and admiration. Neither of those emotions were in his expression now.

"It is poison," Abadorf informed him in a voice gone scratch with his advanced years. "I can do nothing for her. She will die."

"Die," Hakan repeated dumbly. No, that could not be right. This was some trick, a tasteless joke, a horrible nightmare! "What do you mean die? Cure her, Abadorf."

Abadorf sighed, pain and sorrow etched in the deep creases around his eyes. "I cannot. It is ubelious poison, Hakan. There is no cure to be administered by outside hands."

Ubelious poison was a fiery concoction of the worst of killing herbs. Minced to a thin liquid, once ingested, it attacked the inner organs causing a fever that continually rose until the sufferer burned to death.

Hakan stared at the healer for a long moment, disbelief a heavy weight in his gut. Not a joke, not a trick or nightmare. Reality. A horrible, unfathomable reality. No cure? But there had to be a cure. She could not die. "She is the daughter of our goddess queen," he whispered, as if the fact made her beyond any realm of poison, disease, or death. He was only half aware he spoke aloud.

"Yes, she is, and because of such she is only part of goddess blood. Perhaps if Queen Ina had chosen to join a pure blood..." Abadorf shook his head. "What I know of the goddess queen's three daughters, none of them possess any power of their own in which to speak. Is that correct?"

Hakan nodded. He rubbed the back of his neck and felt the tension, the worry, the *fear* mounting in his muscles. "That is what I know as well."

"Then there is nothing to be done." Abadorf sighed. He hung his head, his shoulders slumping so far he nearly bent in half. "Queen Ina did more than open a path for her mother to curse her daughters by marrying a man of a different race. She hindered their chances of being born with power. They are but demigoddesses, born of the blood line but tainted by their lack of purity. We can only make Lady Aithne as comfortable as possible until the poison has run its course."

Until it ran its course. Until it killed her. Hakan bowed his head and closed his eyes. "Comfortable," he whispered, his voice

consumed with derision. "How do you make someone comfortable when they will be burned from the inside out? Tell me that, Abadorf. How!" His shout had the old man wincing.

"Hakan, I—" the healer began, but Hakan did not let him finish.

"I am supposed to simply sit back and watch her die?" Hakan ranted, his voice breaking. "Watch her die!"

He turned from the healer and walked to the side of Aithne's bed. Despite the beads of sweat and the flush to the skin, she looked almost peaceful as though merely asleep. How could she look so peaceful when she was steadily dying?

"It is all you can do," Abadorf said again more softly now. "She has not the power to stop it, and there is no other antidote."

Hakan settled on the bed beside Aithne and reached for her. His hand stopped just before touching her forehead, Abadorf's words sinking in and giving him a jolt. *She has not the power to stop it.* Hakan closed his eyes and let his palm rest tenderly on her sweaty face. Her skin was so warm it nearly scalded his hand. If only she were not born powerless. He understood Abadorf now, remembered what it was about this particular poison that he had forgotten. Only those with the inner power to heal could cure themselves. Had Aithne the power to heal, she could rid herself of the poison, but without such abilities she would surly die.

"Go to my father, Abadorf," Hakan ordered, his voice harsh and trembling with grief. "Request that he send for Dustin. I want Aithne's killer found at once."

\* \* \* \*

Aithne hovered somewhere between life and death, finding herself in and out of conscience and unknowing of the time of day. At times she heard voices, some distant and arguing, some close and whispering. Her own voice, however, seemed to have evaporated in the heat that racked her body. Never before had she felt so ill, unable

to move or speak, barely able to think on anything above the fire and pain that had become her every conscience torment.

A poison. She heard that much during a conversation between a voice she knew to be Hakan's and another she could not discern. Sometime later, though it could have been mere seconds or days as far as she was aware, she heard Hakan once more talking with yet another indiscernible voice, the news this time that her murderer had been caught, though she missed completely the who or the why. Those details mattered not, she supposed, as she would die in any case.

Dreams took her far and deep, beneath the pain, away from the heat. It was there that she found relief, happiness and light. In her most lucid moments she knew Hakan stayed with her. She heard him speak in low, comforting tones though she could not reply. In time, Dustin began to speak too, and she believed this to be her dreams providing yet another respite from the slowly consuming death for she knew he was not in the land of Tolynn but off in another fighting a battle among enemies he knew not. But in that place between reality and dream, she had her men, one at her side, and the other in her feverish mind to carry her through to the end.

As the flames inside her worsened, she turned to those dreams of Dustin. The longing this ensued inside her, however, became nearly as painful as the poison burning up her insides. She would never see him again, never feel his touch, never taste his kiss. Though in her lucid moments, fewer as time progressed, she knew it was Hakan at her side, she wished for Dustin. So much so that had she the strength, she would have cried out for him. It was he, she came to realize, who had been truly meant for her. Dustin who held her heart's desire. Pity for her that it took a death bed revelation for her to decide.

\* \* \* \*

Hakan sat with his eyes closed, one hand holding Aithne's, his thumb lightly caressing her fingers. It was how he sat most hours now, since she had fallen ill from the deadly poison. The waiting was long, excruciating. Some moments, he found himself wishing for a quicker end. Would it not be better for her to die now rather than to continue to suffer until the poison turned her insides to charred dust?

But in the next moment of sanity and grief, he wished to kick his own ass for even considering the thought. How could he wish her to die when now he at least had her presence, her beauty to look upon and remember? In mere days she would be gone in any case, and he would never again see her vibrant smile, feast his eyes on her glorious face. And Dustin, he would be lost forever in a world no longer inhabited by his true mate.

"I believe she is getting cooler," Dustin said with a hopefulness in his voice that tore at Hakan's heart. In the three days since Dustin's return, Hakan had watched his brother with the woman of his heart. Yes, Hakan knew that to be true now. It was Dustin and not himself who had been meant for Aithne. Hakan would have gladly given up his future on the throne of Tolynn for that not to be so for what good did it do a man to find his mate only to lose her to death?

"It is wishful thinking, brother," Hakan said mournfully, feeling the same searing heat in the hand he held as that which remained since she had fallen ill from the poison. If only he could offer Dustin some hope but he knew he could not. Aithne would soon die, and it was he who was to blame. "She does not deserve this fate," he whispered. His eyes burned with tears he refused to shed. Dustin did not deserve this fate.

"No one deserves such a death." Dustin's voice was thick, resonate. "I should never have left her. I should be damned for going away as I did."

"Your staying would not have prevented this." Hakan attempted to console but knew his words likely fell on deaf ears. "You could not have known this would happen."

"Perhaps not, but I knew her to be in danger. Two attempts on her life already and that is to say nothing of the spell."

"You could not have protected her any more than I. Neither of us knew."

"I knew I loved her." Dustin's voice broke, and a single tear leaked down his cheek. He averted his gaze, the muscles in his jaw working as he fought to battle back the tears and lost. "I love her and I left her to be killed."

\* \* \* \*

Aithne heard the words more clearly than anything she had heard since her final dinner in the great dining room. Not a dream. It could not be a dream. They sounded too real, too close to be an imagination. She heard the words and heard the sobs. Gods, Dustin was crying! He was here with her. Not away at battle. Here at her bedside, her strong, tough warrior, and he was crying for her. It wrenched at her heart, a pain like no other she had ever experienced before. Her eyes filled with an echo of his tears behind her closed lids, and she fought harder than she had in days to move, to speak, to see.

So hot. She was still so hot and stiff, her throat dry and tender. Delirium was a double edged sword to her mind, her body. The line between reality and dream was still so very thin and indistinguishable. Did she really feel the odd chill within her blood? Was that truly a bit of brightness shining through all the dark?

It could be the end. This could be what it felt like to finally die. Except she was feeling better, was she not? That much could not be hallucination. She by no means felt normal or anywhere close, but she was certainly more lucid, less pained by the poison and more energized to fight.

Not knowing how that could be, Aithne focused her attention on moving, on opening her eyes, on speaking. She managed a swallow, her throat so parched it drew a groan from deep within her chest.



Dustin's grip on her hand tightened at this, and she sensed more than saw his head jerk up to look at her.

"Aithne?" Surprise and hope spilled with her name.

Aithne swallowed again and forced her eyes to open. Everything was blurred beyond recognition, fuzzy and brighter than it should have been. She blinked once, twice, even that small movement of her eyelids draining at her tiny bit of reserve. Then she opened her mouth and managed a harsh, cracked whisper. "Lucky for us I am not so easy to kill."

The smile that unfolded on Dustin's handsome face shone with more happiness, relief and love than she thought any one person could feel.

\* \* \* \*

"Are you sure you should be sitting upright yet?" Hakan asked disapprovingly as he entered the bed chamber, a tray laden with dishes in his hands. He brought it to the bedside, gingerly placed it over Aithne's lap.

"I am feeling much better this day." It was only half a lie. She did feel better than she had since first waking from her poison induced fever. The much however was up for dueling. Her limbs were stiff, her mind groggy, and her insides often suffered spasms of intense fire, though she could not say for certain if that were simply remembered pains or truly prolonged side effects. She glanced down at the tray, her stomach giving a protesting roll at the mound of food covering the plates. "Have you exchanged your future crown for a place on the servant staff?"

"You need to eat, and I needed to speak with you." He pulled a chair to the bedside and sat. He looked nervous. Aithne could not remember a second in his presence that she had seen him so ill at ease. It would have been amusing had he not appeared so serious. He

leaned forward, rested his forearms on his thighs and laced his hands together. "You are a bit of a medical miracle, it seems."

"If you are asking how it is that I am well now rather than in a grave on the palace grounds, I cannot say." Though she was not at all hungry, she picked up a chunk of bread and began to nibble. She thought for a long moment but when no explanation came, she went for the whole hearted truth. "I do not understand it myself."

"Nor does anyone else. It is my fault that you were poisoned." Hakan bowed his head, his fingers unlacing to run over his face. "Had I known how angry she would be..."

"You speak of Valda." Aithne put down the bread, picked up the goblet of water and sipped. "Yes, Dustin has told me that it was she who wished me dead. I have wondered how she managed to slip me the poison without my noticing."

"It was in your wine during dinner. Valda is a master at the sleight of hand, a true magician. It is believed that she administered the poison during introductions."

"When she reached across you to shake my hand," Aithne said softly, nodding. She remembered the move now, how she had thought it odd for a woman of Valda's stature to shake hands, and exhibit such unsuitable table manners by reaching across ones plate. She also remembered how the other woman had arrived late, ensuring, as it appeared now, the opportunity to act exactly as she had done. "She wished me out of the way so she could have you."

"We have been together on a few occasions, Valda and I." Hakan nodded, a faint tinge of what could only be embarrassment flushing his cheeks. The man was full of amusing surprises this day. "She was incensed by the news that I was your chosen heart." The embarrassment morphed to guilt in an instant. "I did tell you such news had spread through the land even though it was untrue."

"It was half true."

Hakan smiled, and Aithne saw a hint of the controlled man she remembered from their first meeting. "Yes, it was at the time.

However, as it ends, Valda's actions were premature. It is Dustin you have chosen rather than me."

Aithne had sat the water goblet back on the tray and wished now she had not. Her throat had gone dry, and another sip would have made the words easier to speak. Except what was there to say? She could only agree for Hakan obviously already knew the truth. "I have. He is the man of my heart as well as my desires. I realized this when—" When I was barely conscious and dying of a fever from within, she nearly said. Only, had she not begun to realize Dustin was for her long before she became ill? "Well, I am not completely sure exactly when. Hakan, I—" Again, she broke off, unsure now what to say in comfort or explanation.

"You need say no more, little fire. Perhaps I knew the truth all along. Of that, I cannot say for certain. I think deep down I had begun to believe it would end this way."

"You are not angry, not bitter? You have every right to be."

"I am happy." Hakan smiled, a wide and genuine curve of his lips. "I am thrilled for you and for my brother. You will have a great life together."

"Will you marry Valda now?"

"Absolutely not! I shall die a lonely man before I join with the likes of her." Aithne laughed at the indignation in his expression. "I am glad that you will remain in Tolynn, Aithne, even if not in my bed. That is one thing that I realized some time ago, I could not fathom life without you in it. Though you will be with my brother instead of myself, you will still remain in my lands, in my life." He skimmed the backs of his finger down her cheek.

Aithne closed her eyes, absorbed the touch and felt her insides stir. No matter her true heart, the man could still ignite an arousal within her that was primal and fierce. "I cannot imagine life without you in it either, Hakan. Perhaps you can join us at times. I am certain Dustin would not argue."

"As am I." Hakan brushed a kiss to her lips. "I shall look forward to it. I must go now. Your parents and sisters have arrived," he informed her as he headed for the door. "Shall I send them in?"

"Yes, please. And Hakan." She waited until he stopped walking and turned to face her. "Do not blame yourself for what happened. If not for the poison I may have never realized my true heart."

Hakan gave a slight bow of acknowledgement, or maybe it was acceptance, and strode out of the chamber.

\* \* \* \*

"I still do not understand how you are healed." Karan sat in the center of Aithne's bed, her legs folded, her hand splayed on the coverlet as she leaned back on them.

Across the room, Calliope breathed a troubled sigh. "Sister, this is Aithne's most celebrated day. Can we not leave such conversation for another time?"

Aithne's gaze flicked from Calliope's reflection to Karan's. Karan rolled her eyes. Aithne bit back a grin.

"I suppose we could," Karan agreed, her tone snippy. "However, when do you propose we discuss this matter? Aithne will join her heart's desire in mere hours, after which I am quite certain you and I are the last people she will wish to talk to for a while. She will likely have far better things to do then." She waggled her brows suggestively. Aithne laughed. Karan turned her attention back to Calliope. "Do you not wish to know how it is our sister has escaped certain death? Do you not worry about the spell still upon us? Do you not wonder if it has somehow been broken?"

"Of course I wonder. That does not change the fact that today is for Aithne. We should not ruin it with talk of death and curses even if we do fear for our own time." Calliope's voice grew softer as she spoke until her last words were barely above a whisper.

In the mirror before her, Aithne glanced at her mother. She gave Ina an almost imperceptible shake of her head when the queen opened her mouth to speak. It was clear the queen had issued orders to her middle and youngest daughters not to speak of this matter in Aithne's presence. Karan, however, had always been the one to do as she pleased.

Aithne found this time she agreed with her middle sister. She would much prefer to get this conversation out of the way now than to be plagued by it later when all she would wish for then was quiet time with Dustin.

"I do not know how I am to be sitting here now," she said truthfully. "The poison was..." But she trailed off as the memory of the pain, the inevitable death, the burning that consumed her leapt to the forefront of her mind.

"Is it possible that the healer was mistaken about the type of poison?" Calliope suggested. She walked to Aithne and rested a comforting hand on her shoulder. "There are many forms of harmful potions and substances. Perhaps there are some that resemble ubelious in effect and consistency."

"No. He was not wrong." Of that much, Aithne was utterly convinced. No other poison could have duplicated the effect, the symptoms so completely. The fever, the agony she had suffered could have come from only ubelious. "I healed myself." Even as she spoke the words, she knew how odd they would sound. They made no sense. Not even to her. Yet she knew them to be true. She had healed herself of the poison that nearly killed her.

Karan was gaping at her from where she sat in the center of the bed. Calliope's hand on Aithne's shoulder had gone ridged. Ina finally asked the question Aithne saw in each of their expressions. "How?"

"You do not possess the power to heal," Calliope said as though Aithne needed reminding.

"Yet that is what you are saying you did, is it not?" Karan asked.

"I am. I did. I do not understand how myself, but I know it to be true." Aithne paused, remembering. "I have thought much about this, thought about the spell. One of you will suffer at the hands of desire so greatly it will bring your death from the inside out. That was the word of it, was it not mother?"

"It was." The queen nodded.

"I can only believe we interpreted it incorrectly. Perhaps it is not as literal as we took it to be. To suffer at the hands of desire... I was torn between my desires for both Hakan and Dustin. I suppose in a sense that desire was killing me inside."

"But the poison *was* killing you from the inside out," Karan stated.

"Yes, and because of it, because of the burning inside me from both the poison and my desires for Hakan and Dustin, I was forced to a place where only choice and darkness remained. To climb out of the darkness I had to choose. Only when I realized my true desire, when I understood Dustin to be my heart did I begin to heal."

"Your choice broke the spell and rendered you the power to heal," Ina whispered, hope and relief swirling in her eyes.

"It is but the only explanation, Mother."

Ina nodded, looked at each of her daughters in turn, and her lips slowly unfolded into a brilliant smile. "Then there is hope after all."

## Chapter 9

The joining of Dustin, Captain of the Guard of Tolynn, and Aithne, eldest daughter of the goddess queen, turned out to be the largest celebration the lands had seen in many millennia. Certainly the grandest ever held in the land of Tolynn. It was, of course, also the most widely speculated, talked about and attended on any record—a goddess queen's daughter joining with a warrior rather than a future king. Despite the acceptance among the various beings and races of people, that single fact awed many. Though the joining was held in the hours of mid-morning, it was nearly dusk by the time Dustin and Aithne finally broke away.

Aithne lifted a foot, poised to step though the door of Dustin's stone hut—her stone hut now—for the first time when he stopped her. His arm wound around her waist and spun her. She let out a bark of laughter as her body collided front to front with his, her head automatically tipping back to look up at him. "What are you doing?"

"We are joined now," Dustin told her unnecessarily, but the husky tone to his voice sent shivers of anticipatory delight raining through her body. Sweet needs and juicy ecstasy flowed through her bloodstream, drenching her folds and heating her core. "This first entrance into our home shall be done right." He scooped her up, and she let out another chuckle of surprise even as her arms found their way around his neck. He carried her through the doorway, kicking the wooden door closed with his foot and stopping only when he reached the large bed positioned in the center of the room at the rear of the hut.

"Wait! I want to see," Aithne objected though only half-heartedly.

Dustin gazed at her. His eyes twinkled with mischief and a sexy tilt came to his lips. "As do I."

Aithne gave his shoulder a playful slap. "I meant I want to see the hut. I have not been inside before. This is to be my home now too after all."

The sexy tilt flattened at that, a hint of the shadow she had been certain had gone forever returning in his eyes. "It is not much in comparison. It is a hut. Far from the palace and certainly no match for your parent's fortress. I suppose we could move there, of course, to the palace. The east wing there does belong to me if I wish to have it."

"And live under the watchful eye of your king and queen, your brother? To share my time with you even more than I will be forced to already?" Aithne feigned shock. "I think not."

The smile returned to Dustin's lips, this time lighting his whole face, and the shadow fled once more. "Then I shall become your guide in seeing all the rooms of your new home. I thought to begin with this room." Because he still held her, he used his chin, lifting and angling it toward each wall and object around them in turn before gazing back at her.

"Oh you did, did you? It is a likely place to start." Grinning, she pulled his head down and lost herself in a kiss. It was different somehow kissing him now that they were joined. A feeling of eternity washed through her. He tasted warm and sweet. His tongue was unyielding as it plunged inside her mouth, beginning a delicious dance that created accompanying music in her head.

He lowered her to stand before him, angling his head to change the direction of the kiss, and his hands began to move. Before she even knew how he had done it, her dress fell in a pool at her feet, her undergarments following suit and all the while he continued to kiss her. His clothing proved to be far more difficult to remove, however, and after several frustrating minutes, Aithne was forced to pull away from him.



"I cannot get this thing off of you," she growled through gritted teeth. Her fingers twisted in the pins binding a sash in the royal colors of Tolynn to the breasts of his shirt. "What did you wear this for anyway? I thought you loathed royal clothing."

"Would you have had me join my heart in front of all the lands dressed as though I were prepared to go into battle?" he smirked and unfastened the pin for her.

"Yes, I would." She angled a look at him and lifted her eyebrows. "More fitting, I believe. Both because it is what you feel most comfortable and a bit of an omen."

"How do you figure the last?" His hands skimmed her flesh, down the sides of her arms, over to her waist, her hips.

Aithne shivered at the tingling trail his touch left in its wake, as icy as it was blazing and equally arousing. "Do you not expect life with me to be a battle?"

He laughed and yanked her against him, his mouth crushing itself to hers. "I do. A very amusing, constantly challenging battle I am sure." He released her once more, hands returning to the last of the clothing he wore.

When he was at last naked before her, Aithne gave a low, appreciative whistle that had him chuckling even as his face darkened with need. She stepped back, narrowly avoiding another embrace, and turned. The room was small, the space almost completely occupied by the bed. A small chest sat against one wall and a pile of clothing cluttered a long, narrow table alone another.

"What are you doing, wife?"

Aithne's stomach gave an excited flutter at the term. "I am looking at my new home as I said I wished to do. I like this room. It needs a woman's touch, of course, but I shall work on that. I think I will check out the others now." Before Dustin could stop her, she bolted from the room. A bubble of laughter escaped when she heard him uttering a decidedly confused, "You are what?"

A furtive glance over her shoulder confirmed what she had expected. He was chasing her. The hut was not large enough to offer her many options to hide or much challenge for him to catch her. She managed to duck behind a high back chair in the sitting room just before he reached her, his arms falling on the sides of the chair instead of her shoulders.

Laughing, Aithne swiped her hair out of her face and labored a breath. "You missed."

"You are trapped," he countered. His eyes glinted, and everything inside her burned white-hot with arousal. His long blonde hair fell around his face and shoulders, the strands closest to his cheeks darker with sweat. His lips were moist, just a bit swollen and tilted in a grin that was equally amused and challenging.

Aithne shot a glance to her right. There was nothing there but a wall. To her left was the kitchen doorway but she would never make it there without him catching her. At her back was another wall. She looked back at him, licked her lips suggestively and watched his gaze drop to them. His expression took on an almost pained pleading sheen. She was teasing him, she knew and achieving the desired results. She had also sufficiently distracted him. Figuring it was the idea of what she would do to him with her lips that filled his thoughts now, she feigned right then quickly darted left to the kitchen.

Dustin caught her just inside the doorway. His arms closed around her waist, and he yanked her back like a boomerang, whirling her to face him at the same time. Her breath caught as her body came in flush, hard contact with his and remained lodged in her throat as his mouth came down on hers. He pushed against her, his cock at rigid attention between them, and stepped her back until she felt an unmovable object behind her.

Another wall, she realized as his kiss became savage. He ravaged her mouth as he never had before, taking what he wanted from her without awaiting invitation. She supposed it was his right now that she was his wife but, right or not, it was so unlike him it caused a

little ripple of fear in her belly. Fear that briskly mixed with excitement and burning arousal as he lifted her and, without warning or finesse, slid his erect cock deeply inside her.

Her pussy was wet and ready for him. Still, despite her body's eagerness, the intrusion of such a large, wide rod inside her without gentleness or coaxing caused her a moment's discomfort. It was quickly washed away by the largest wave of desire she thought she had ever experienced. He sandwiched her between his body and the wall. His hands gripped her ass to hold her upright as he set a pace so fast and hard with his thrusts that she wondered him possessed. Who was this man and what had happened to the tender, slow Dustin?

Torn between wonder and loving every swift, pounding stroke, Aithne locked her legs around his waist, heels digging into his ass. She cried out, the sound muffled by his mouth on hers, his tongue fighting a dueling match of dominance with her own. Her hand gripped his shoulder, nails sinking into flesh. Her other hand was in his hair, fingers fisted around the satiny strands.

His mouth moved from hers, the kiss still possessive as it slid down her jaw to her neck where he drew the flesh between his teeth and bit. This time when she cried out there was nothing to soften the sound.

"Yes! Dustin, oh Gods!" She was so lost in the riot of pleasures. The biting, the rough graze of the wall at her back, the feeling of being trapped against it with him before her, his cock's relentlessly vicious thrusts. When the orgasm burst through her she was taken completely off guard. Her body stiffened, every muscle tensing before all went lax once more in the convulsions that controlled her. Only when the spasms eased did she open her eyes to find Dustin looking at her, a triumphant expression on his handsome face.

"I did not hurt you, I hope."

"No," Aithne managed, breathless. "Wow! Where did that come from?"

The corners of his lips twitched. He glanced around and then looked back at her. "This is the kitchen. You may have noticed the room before was the sitting room. There is not much more to show you than that, I am afraid."

Aithne stared at him, unable to believe he could return to joking after taking her so forcefully, so completely against the wall mere moments before. "You—" she began, but her words were lost when he pushed his cock inside her balls deep in one measured, brisk thrust. Her head fell back, narrowly missing the wall, and her eyes rolled back in her head as the pleasure wrung yet more spasms and convulsions from her channel. When these too finally subsided, she opened her eyes but could not muster the strength to lift her head. She settled for staring at the ceiling. "You did not come."

"I am not yet though with you."

There was amusement in his tone, though beneath it she heard the strain of control, the need for release he was barely holding in check.

"I did not hurt you, I hope."

"No," she breathed and forced her head upright, her fingers loosening in his hair to toy with the strands. "It was amazing! A bit uncharacteristic for you. You are not usually so rough."

"No. That would be Hakan's style. I tend to be gentler, to make love more slowly, take my time. But I have seen that you like it both ways. I wish to give you what you like, what you want always."

Aithne stared at him, her heart swelling with even more love for him than she already felt. He would do anything for her, give her anything and she would do the same for him. Always. Tears welled in her eyes. She moved her hand to his cheek, her fingers lightly caressing. "I love you."

He seemed to melt around her even as he continued to hold her against the wall, his cock still buried inside her. The shadow so often present vanished completely from his eyes and she knew somehow she would never see it there again. "I love you," he repeated and the words were like velvet music. He stepped back, his arms under her

bottom, easily and fully supporting her weight and danced her in a circle all the while moving across the squared kitchen floor.

"Will you take me your way now?" It amazed her how quickly her body readied itself for him again. The fire inside her so satisfactorily quenched mere moments before roared to life with even greater flames. She flexed her inner muscles around Dustin's cock, pleased to hear the low growl rumble from him.

"Do that much more and I may be forced to take you as my brother would again before I get my way."

Tempting though it was already on the brink of another rising orgasm merely from the feel of his dick inside her and the idea of how he would choose to make love to her next, she forced her muscles to relax. Her arms draped loosely around his neck, the fingers of one hand still playing in his hair. She thought she could stay in this position forever, comfortable as she was, content and consumed with him, with happiness, with love.

Dustin danced her to a rectangular table where he sat her gently on the edge, his cock moving only minutely with the change of position, just enough to add more fuel to the raging flames as he slid in and out of her channel. Sweet guardians, the man had only to hold her, to tease her with his slight movements of his glorious cock to drive her to the brink of mind-numbing desire.

Dustin grazed his hands over her arms to her hands stilled behind his own neck. He gripped them, bringing them down, guiding them to rest on the table behind her. When he leaned in for a kiss, Aithne let her weight rest on her hands and eased back. She half lay on the table now with her ankles locked around his waist.

The kiss he gave her this time left no doubt that the Dustin she had grown to know, the one she married, the one she loved had returned. His lips brushed hers sweetly, teasing and coaxing with the softest of warm breaths, the lightest of licks from his tongue. As his hands released hers, she opened her eyes to find his were open too, an unspoken request in them for her to remain as he put her. When she

made no attempt to touch him, his hands returned to her body. They found her shoulders first, splaying widely over the flesh as they grazed down. Aithne arched her back, thrusting her chest into his touch, her head falling back. Between her legs, he pumped his cock deeper inside, a single quick thrust followed by a set of slow, easy slides in and out, in and out. His hands found her breasts, and she moaned. His fingers circled her beaded nipples until they grew taut and sensitized to every sensation inside and outside her body.

Aithne wanted to move, needed to touch but could do neither in her current position. Were she to move her hands, she would surely fall to the table. It was not the jolt of pain that blow could cause but the break in Dustin's concentration she knew would happen that held her in place. His mouth closed over one breast, his hand closing around the other, manipulating each with fingers and tongue in such a way that drew breathless pants and groans from deep within her.

"Open your eyes, Aithne. Watch as I take you. You, who are now my wife for all eternity."

Aithne was surprised she had closed her eyes, as careful as she was when with Dustin to keep them open as he liked. She opened them now to find him looking down to where their bodies joined. He pulled his hips back, his cock sliding out of her, her shimmering juices covering his shaft. Slowly, he eased back inside. The sight of his cock going in and out of her pussy coupled with the rapturous feel each time his width spread her channel, each time his length impaled her to the end of her womb was so erotic, so arousing. A single breath and she would be there again, creaming around his cock. Her inner muscles tightened, preparing for release. Her toes curled. Her body flexed and seized, and he stopped. No! The orgasm retreated.

"See yourself, my love. Look at how wet you are. Your wetness covers me." He drew his cock out until only the head remained inside her. Thick, white liquid covered his shaft. He wiped a bit of that juice onto his finger, brought it to his mouth and locked his gaze with hers as he licked the finger clean. "Delicious." He smacked his lips.

"Would you care for a taste?" He did not wait for her answer but rather repeated the gesture, bringing his finger to her mouth this time.

Aithne watched him as she licked the finger between her lips and sucked it into her mouth. Her tongue circled it, treating it as she would his cock. He knew what she was doing. His torment was evident in the way his eyes rolled back in his head, in the quiet "Gods" that whispered from his lips. It served him right, she decided. To suffer a bit of teasing when it was he who brought her so close to orgasm only to let it slip away. Only when he withdrew the finger from her mouth did he seem to regain his composure.

"Feel me as I fill you." He entered her with such unbearable slowness she nearly screamed. "Watch as my cock slides inside your pussy. It belongs there, Aithne. Always. Can you feel how perfectly my cock belongs inside you?"

"Yes." Where was this sudden possessiveness coming from? Aithne wondered over it even as she found herself more aroused by it. Each time he spoke of belonging inside her, belonging to her, excited sparks of electricity rained through her. It brought her back to that teetering edge, his words, and the sight of his cock being swallowed by the lips of her sex. Yet, the excruciating pace he set kept her just short of falling over that edge. And when he stopped, buried deep inside her, Gods, she felt her release duck just out of her grasp once more.

"We will be this way always." He brushed his lips to the flesh at the side of her neck, nipped and licked away the tingle of pain. "Say it, Aithne. Tell me you are mine."

"Yes, Dustin, of course. I am yours." Her body screamed. Insurmountable pressure built in her center, pushing for a release that remained only a teasing breath away. Her head thrashed on her shoulders, her body writhing, heels digging into his ass, legs flexing and pulling in a vain attempt to control the pace of his tormenting thrusts. "Please."

"Please what, my love?" He drew back from her, hands going still on her body, kisses retreating, cock pausing midway in her channel.

"No! Dustin, I need to come. Please, allow me to come."

"I am not stopping you." His voice rang with a faked innocence that might have been comical had she not been on the brink of insanity from his tortuous teasing.

"Yes, you are. And if you do not wish to be wed to a babbling, mindless moron, you will fuck me now. Let me come!"

His laughter was contagious. Aithne's own giggles morphed into groans of immense pleasure seconds later as his cock rammed her channel. Aside from that initial thrust, the pace he set was moderate and even, a steady climb of rapturous shivers and spasms until they crested as one, panting and convulsing as they toppled over the edge together.

"Shall I give you another look at the bedchamber now?" Dustin's breath came in short, exhausted sprints against her neck, the warmth of it bringing goose pimples to her flesh.

"Only if you have the strength to carry me. My legs feel like water. I will likely slither to the floor if you stand me upright."

They made it to the bedchamber several minutes later though Aithne could not say precisely who carried whom. Spent and shaky, they collapsed on the bed, neither bothering to turn down the covers. With the last remaining bit of energy left to her muscles, Aithne shifted until she lay beside Dustin, one leg thrown over his, one hand idly toying with the patch of curls on his chest, her head resting in the curve of his shoulder. They lay in a silence of satisfaction and contentment, both dancing along the realm of sleep.

Not yet wishing her wedding night to find its end, Aithne spoke softly into the silence. "What are you thinking?"

Dustin grunted, gulped hard enough she heard the swallow. "Hakan. I wonder if he too is in the arms of his love this night."

Aithne recognized an arrow of relief. She too had been thinking of Hakan, wondering how he would fair now that she and Dustin were



joined. It had not seemed right to bring up another man's name in their bed tonight even if said man had shared a bed with both she and Dustin on two separate occasions. But to wonder if he were in the arms of his love? "Why would you wonder such as that?"

"I believe our celebration this day ended on a happy note for more than us. Did you notice the daughter of Willowsage? I believe her name is Sylvia, brilliant blond hair, golden skin with the glitter of Faerie to her flesh and eyes."

Aithne thought for a moment, a fuzzy memory of a woman with the fragile beauty of the Faerie and the slender, curvaceous body of the wood nymph swimming to mind. She angled her head to look at Dustin. "I did. Yes."

"Hakan did too." Dustin gazed down at her, waggled his brows suggestively.

Aithne chuckled. "Then your brother found happiness after all."

"Aye. So it seems. And what of your sisters?"

Fear curled in her belly like a giant snake waiting to strike. She sighed. "Their time will come, I suppose. If it follows along the ages, it will be Karan's turn to face the curse next. I can only believe she too will find a way to break it."

"You do not believe it is over."

"No, only my part is over. That is the only part I feel for certain." She took a deep breath and let it out slow. "And I still cannot say exactly how that came to be. I know what I feel, what I believe, how I think it happened but even that makes little sense to me. I healed myself." She fisted a hand between her breasts. "The power to do so remains inside me. I can feel it." She rose to her elbow, the better to gaze down at Dustin. "You gave me such power. My decision to love you, to join with you above Hakan or any other gave me that power. I do not clearly understand how, but I wonder who will give such power to Karan if that is to be the way of it."

"Karan will find her own way. She will find him, whoever he is, and break her part of the curse as you have done. She is a strong woman with a will of equal vigor."

"And a head harder than any rock."

Dustin smiled. "The man meant for her will surely find himself amongst a battle of wills to win her over. She will triumph in the end, my love."

Aithne nodded, believing the comfort of his words, needing to hold onto the truth of them.

"Are *you* happy?" His arms folded around her and drew her down for a kiss. "Do you have *your* heart's desire?"

Aithne pretended to think about that for a moment. The obvious answer was yes, of course. Dustin was her heart's desire. In finding him, in choosing him, joining with him, she could want for nothing more. Except... "Almost"

His brows drew together at her answer, eyes turning dark with worry, perhaps even a hint of fear. "What more do you wish? Whatever it is, I shall give it to you."

"Children. I wish for lots of children."

Yes, that was indeed fear in his eyes. There now for an entirely different reason, she suspected and bit the inside of her cheek to suppress a grin.

"Children," he repeated. "Lots of children."

Aithne nodded, swallowed the laughter building in her throat. "Many. I believe five or six shall do. Or should we try for seven? It is the most magical of numbers, is it not?"

"Seven." Dustin looked aghast.

A small chuckle escaped as she rose, shifted and moved to straddle his waist. His cock lay partially limp between her legs, the shaft vertical with her slightly warm, slightly wet pussy. "Seven. Yes, I believe that will do wonderfully. And do you know the greatest part of creating seven children? Apart from the joys of being parents, of course."

Dustin lifted a hand and cupped her cheek in his palm. "Creating them with you."

"Well, you said it much more romantically than I but that would be the whole of it. I was thinking the never ending sex." She felt his cock harden between her legs, smiled as she lifted her hips, and positioned her body to take him inside. "You being inside me. Always."

He flipped her. His hands moved quickly to her hips. Then he rolled them both until she lay on her back, he on top between her wide-spread legs. "Let us make those children, my wife, and you shall finally have all that your heart desires."

With those words he filled her, body, mind, and heart for all eternity.

**THE END**

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## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Bestselling author Tonya Ramagos spends much of her time daydreaming about one plot or another. Give her a cup of hazelnut flavored coffee and a keyboard and she is at her happiest. When she isn't writing, thinking about writing, or plotting what to write, she can be found taking on the mother role with her two boys and the husband, too. She enjoys taking long walks on the nature trails near her home in Chattanooga, TN, playing computer games, swinging on the playground, dancing, and curling up with a good book.



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