



# The Golden Bell



Autumn Dawn

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by  
Autumn Dawn

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## CHAPTER 1

It hurt. Rain glanced over her shoulder, crouched on the gritty alley floor. The fall had skinned her palms and knees, and the wounds stung. But they were coming; she could hear them over the sounds of midnight traffic, though she didn't try to peer into the glare of streetlights. She ran.

Breathless, trembling with adrenaline and exhaustion, she forced herself into a stumbling lope. Her sweat-soaked jeans and t-shirt had turned clammy, adding to the misery. She would have loved to ditch her ragged jacket and pack, but didn't dare; they comprised all of her worldly goods, and she needed them in the chill London fog.

Scaling the chain link fence at the end of the alley was easy, evading the snarling Doberman who went for her throat was not. With no time for regret, she gave it a hearty kick, sprinted across the lawn and jumped, grabbing the top of the ornate stone fence. She swung her legs up and slipped over, barely making it before the dog sunk teeth into her.

Another empty alley.

Stink rose to assault her nostrils, and she groaned. Thanks, Fido. If she didn't watch it, her hunters would smell her coming. To add insult to injury, she started to sneeze. Great. Wonderful time for canine allergies to strike.

Trying to catch her breath, she moved cautiously down the white-lit brick canyon, praying she'd lost them. She sneezed again, tried to muffle it. She was so tired. The next time she fell, she might not get up.

Listening, straining her preternaturally keen ears to catch any noise, she searched for sounds of pursuit. Finding none, she slowly relaxed and sank against the chilly wall, ignoring the trash at her feet. She'd made it.

Suddenly light exploded into the alley. Deafened by the shouts of men and barking dogs, blinded by the sudden glow, Rain saw death coming and despaired.

“Wake up!”

A slap accompanied the brutal voice, jerking Rain from the comfort of darkness. Moaning, she pried open her eyes and blinked at the murky cell. She didn't remember coming there, but she did recall being jabbed with something. Cuffs bound her wrists behind her, and her rear was planted on a hard wooden chair. Did they mean to question her? The word torture flitted across her mind, and she shuddered. Please, God, no!

Her tormenter, a scarred blighter in working class clothes, took a narrow-eyed look at her and glanced at the other man in the cell, an older gentleman in a suit. What hair he had left was iron gray, perfectly matching the winter coldness in his faded blue eyes. He looked her over and smiled without humor. “Rain, is it? Daughter of Rian Miller?”

She shivered. “Who are you?”

The smile-that-wasn't curved his lips again. “Taught you some unusual things, didn't he? Lock picking, shooting...how to run and how to hide.”

Nervous now, she felt the cold sweat start again. Her father had been dead for a year; killed by the very people she now suspected held her, but few people had really known him, known what he was. These people were not so blissfully ignorant.

By the chill satisfaction in his eyes, he was enjoying her torment. “I have a few questions for you, my dear. Rory!”

A tall, dark man entered at his command, favoring the gent with a cold look. "I'm not deaf, Trent."

"Mr. Trent," the scarred one said aggressively, stepping toward him.

Mr. Trent held up his hand, stopping his goon. To Rory he said, "Question her."

Rory sent a cold look her way. "Question is all I'll do. I'm getting bloody sick of your games, Mr. Trent."

"Strive to remember what happens when you fail me," Mr. Trent said coldly, "and remember who gets hurt."

His lip curled, but Rory turned to Rain. Softening a little, he asked gently, "What's your name, love?"

Rain hadn't lived twenty-two years without seeing some good-looking men. This one, however, put them all to shame. Black hair, deep green eyes and a face to make an angel weep were temptation enough, but there was something more, something she couldn't place. Did he wear cologne? That had to be it, for a scent of tempting power hung about him, though she'd never known a fragrance to addle her so. Just breathing it made her tired blood stir, and the longer he stood by her, the worse the sensation became. Sex in a bottle, her muddled brain exclaimed, trying dimly for a warning, but whatever it was telling her became lost in his eyes.

The goon said something to Mr. Trent. The haze she was under dulled their words, but she thought she heard the goon say, "This one's got it bad."

Rory smirked at her, but the scent messed with her perceptions, because her heart insisted it was an expression of sympathy. "I don't think we'll be needing these, will we?" he said, moving slowly around her to touch her cuffs. She felt a key slide into the cuffs and they fell away, granting her blessed freedom. Rubbing her aching arms, she felt gratitude swell. "Thank you."

Rory looked her over. "What's a sweet thing like you done to get yourself in this mess? Don't you have mates who will be looking for you?"

In the background, she could hear the goon telling Mr. Trent, "I'll bet he asks for this one when he's done. She'd be a looker if she cleaned up, and our Rory does like to have his fun before you dispose of them."

She heard, but the words meant nothing. So long as she could smell Rory, feel the thunder in her blood from breathing him in, nothing else mattered. "Friends...no, I have no friends."

Rory frowned. "How can that be? A nice girl like you must have lots of friends. What about your father's mates? Won't they help you?"

She thought, very willing to tell him everything she knew. "I...I haven't seen anyone since my father died."

He smiled comfortingly. "But you know where they are, right? Those mates of his?" He glanced at Trent, then moved closer to whisper in her ear, "I can help you. Tell me where to find your father's friends, and I can help them find you."

The touch of his mouth against her ear sent shockwaves down her spine. Longing seized her. Just let him touch her...

"Like animals for him, I hear. Scream and scratch while he's riding him, and beg for more, they say. Makes me wish I were the charmer. Lucky bloke."

"Shut up! And make sure that recorder is working. We want to get every name."

Blocking her view of the men with his body, Rory hunched down to her level, tracing

the skin of her face with one finger. "Tell me the names, sweetheart. Tell me how to find them."

It was too much. Breathless, desperate to please him, she opened her mouth. "My father's cousin used to live in..."

An enormous blast shook the cell, obliterating her words. Screaming, she threw her hands up and ducked her head, instinctively protecting her face. Dust clogged the air and Rory cursed as soldiers in black burst into the room, killing the goon and capturing Mr. Trent.

She didn't spare a thought for Trent, but instantly got in front of Rory, protecting him with her body. She didn't care what happened to her, but she had to save him.

A tall man strode through the dust, and everything stilled. He radiated command, powerful as the desert sun. Not all of his size was in his legs, either; those powerful shoulders gave her pause. His long blond hair was tied back, and though it was too murky to tell the color of his eyes, the expression in them chilled her.

But those eyes were not fixed on her. "Hello, Rory." Cold menace vibrated in every word.

"Fallon. Fancy meeting you here," Rory said flippantly. "Come to shoot the breeze, or is this business?"

Fallon looked at Rain, and she quickly inched back. Rory was directly behind her, but she wasn't taking chances. "Leave him alone!" she warned the stranger.

Rory laughed. "Feisty, ain't she? What can I do, mate? Your women all love me."

"Move out of the way, Rain," Fallon ordered her calmly.

Beyond the point of wondering how he knew her name and why he was here, she tensed to fight. "No! You won't touch him! He was trying to help me." She saw one of the soldiers inching to her left, but was too distracted by the menace in front of her to do anything.

Slowly, Fallon's eyes lifted to Rory. "How many women has it been now, Rory? How many of us have you helped to kill?"

"He's a liar," Rory told her soothingly, when she shot him a quick look. "Don't worry over it, love."

She relaxed and glared at Fallon. "I won't listen to you." There was a game afoot, though she was oblivious to its rules. Somehow she was at the center, though why was elusive. Caring was elusive. In close proximity with Rory's scent teasing her nose, it just didn't matter.

But Rory's distraction had proved fatal. With a sudden roar, the soldier who'd shifted to their left charged, taking Rain down in a flying tackle. Shots were fired, but she was so tangled up she couldn't see. Twisting, the soldier managed to land on the bottom, taking the brunt of the fall, and as they landed, she saw Rory jerk. His gun discharged, the bullet striking stone, and he toppled to the floor on his back.

Rain began to scream.

Fallon's jaw clenched as he watched two of his men trying to subdue the wild woman. Taking Rory down had taken precious time, and they couldn't allow this. Pity she hadn't seen the gun at her head, threatening her life, but he wasn't surprised at her fury. The charmer's pheromone was a dangerous thing, and she'd already been in his power when they'd arrived. A nap would do her a lot of good.

Striding to her side, he evaded her kicking foot and applied pressure to her carotid artery. In seconds she collapsed like a doll.

“Bring her,” he ordered his men. They had to get to the choppers in a hurry, before the Cult figured out their bird had flown and sent reinforcements. They wouldn’t like losing an informant, though to his knowledge the Cult had already killed most of her friends and family, thanks to her cousin’s unwilling help. Fallon was determined that the Black Charmers wouldn’t get another shot at her, even if he had to shift her off-world.

His fellow Haunt, as humans had labeled them long ago, closed in around him and their precious cargo. Females of their species were well protected, and not a man there approved of what had almost happened to her. Rory was Trent’s deviant son, and he’d had a bargain with his father. He’d used his sexual pheromones and suggestive abilities, effective only on female Haunt, to question the women. The names of other Haunt were coaxed from her, his father went on a killing spree, and Rory used the women until he tired of them. The bodies were disposed of when he’d finished.

It was reason enough to take a man’s life, and Fallon had enjoyed doing it.

They made it to the choppers, thankful that the blast had taken out the portion of Trent’s estate that had housed his troops. Fallon’s men picked off the remaining snipers. They needed no night goggles to pierce the inky night, and all of them were expert marksman.

Fallon glanced at Trent and the girl. Trent would be questioned and disposed of like the carrion he was, and Fallon had to find a safe place for the girl. Off-world was best, but he didn’t know how much she knew, or even if she’d be willing to use the gate. It was going to take time to settle her, and there was only one place he would have leisure to do that.

Rain woke in the chopper, but was wise enough to stay silent. She couldn’t have said much over the chopper’s blades, anyway, but she kept her mouth shut until they’d landed and herded her toward a sleek private jet. Dawn was beginning to lighten the horizon and a chill breeze had kicked up when she demanded, “Where are we going?”

The one called Fallon glanced at her. “Home. Wait until we’re in the air and I’ll answer your questions.”

Having no choice, she obeyed him. By his accent, he was an American, so she assumed she was going back to the States. She’d been born there, but had run to the UK when her father had been taken. That gambit hadn’t worked, but it no longer mattered. Whoever these men were, she wasn’t going to get away from them easily.

Fatigue sapped what energy she had. She’d been running for thirty-six hours, and the strain was devastating. Whatever would happen next was beyond her control, and even her first sight of the inside of a private jet gave her little joy. Cold, hungry and parched, she sat where she was told and tried to ignore the smell of stale sweat and the dried dog crap still clinging to her shoe.

“Water?” Fallon handed her a bottle, which she sucked down greedily. He gave her another one.

“Bathroom?” He raised his brows in question, then gestured toward the tail of the plane.

Grateful, she made her way past the half-dozen others settled into roomy leather seats and locked herself in the bathroom. The face in the mirror shocked her. Dirt smeared her

skin, and her greasy hair was half-out of her braid, hanging around her face in shaggy brown hanks. There was nothing she could do about the clothes, but she washed up, pulled her hair back into a proper tail and ignored the shadows under her eyes. It took a bit to scrub the crud off her shoe, and it was a little wet when she finished, but at least it didn't stink. Taking a deep breath, she carried her footgear back up front and sat down.

Dinner was waiting for her. It was hot and she didn't remember the last time she'd eaten, so she attacked it, uncaring at that point whether it was drugged or who served it. Besides, her backpack was gone, and she didn't delude herself that her "rescuers" had come in with explosives and M16's to collect her, only to use her for their amusement. Whatever their agenda, she was safe for the moment. After they got on the ground...she'd deal with that later.

Exhaustion hit hard. She needed to lie down, but a few facts wouldn't kill her. "Why did you come after me?"

Fallon studied her. "We'd heard a rumor about one of our females being hunted. By the time we found your trail, the Cult was a step ahead of us. You know why we broke into the compound; they would have used your information to locate and wipe out others of our kind. Too many have died already."

Sluggish as it was, her mind was still awake enough to connect a few dots. "Rory was a charmer. How? I was taught that only human females had the pheromone, and only one in a million, at that." The Black Charmers had been in existence for a long time, and they were frighteningly competent at wiping out her people. They used the charmers, willing or not, to capture and control the shape shifting Haunt males, using them as informants. To her knowledge, there'd never been a male with the pheromone. Discovering him hadn't been a pleasant experience.

Grimness tightened Fallon's mouth. "Apparently they come in different flavors now. Our friends in the Cult are dabbling with gene splicing."

Oh, joy. Too tired to dwell on it, she grabbed a couple of the pillows that had been laid out for her and arranged them, reclining her seat as much as it would go. She had very little time before sleep snared her. "Where we going?" she slurred, closing her eyes.

"Alaska. That's where I'm based."

November in Alaska, not exactly a thrilling thought. "Am I free to leave?"

He hesitated. "The Council of Elders will want to speak with you first."

No, she wasn't free, he meant. She knew what happened to anyone who was rescued from the Cult's clutches. Once their face was known, they were hustled through the gate to "protect themselves and others". The Cult had a worldwide network of affiliates; shape shifter-hating psychos who'd stop at nothing to see her people dead. Not that she wanted to be captured again, but she wasn't wild about letting the council dictate where she could live. Her father had raised her to take care of herself. She wasn't going to be dragged to an alien world, and good intentions be hanged.

Sleep sucked her down, and she went without a fight. When this thing landed, she wanted to be ready to bolt. Once they got her under formal guard, her chances of escape would sink out of sight.

It was forty below and dark, with a sharp wind blowing. Scratching her idea to run the moment her feet hit pavement, she ducked her head instead and pulled the blanket she'd been given tighter. How did people survive in this frigid climate?

A black Jeep was waiting for them. Fallon opened the door for her and she slid into the passenger side, grateful for the warmth. Had she been thinking faster, she might have thought to hit the auto-lock and attempt to steal the Jeep, but the cold and her awkward blanket distracted her. Just as well; she'd never learned to drive a stick.

Fallon slid into the driver's seat. One look at his big body convinced her that she'd been wise not to try and run. Guys didn't like women messing with their autos. A guy like him...she had a feeling he'd go through the window.

Curiosity made her ask. "What would you have done if I'd driven off?"

He glanced at her mildly. "My insurance premiums would have gone up, but the body shop guy would have been very happy." He looked back at the road. "You're not that stupid."

Annoyed, she sniped, "I thought your type didn't hurt women."

"We practice discipline, especially of our women. If you were mine, you wouldn't tempt me." This time his glance was speculative.

If he was trying to unnerve her, it worked. She didn't want any part of his 'discipline', and she definitely didn't want to date him. A second glance confirmed that he was cute, no surprise she hadn't noticed, considering; but good looks didn't make the firearm at his side disappear.

Frozen scenery and ice fog flowed past her window, along with occasional traffic. It was only four in the afternoon, and already dark. She had no money, no friends, and her last change of underwear had been lost when she'd been seized. Worse, she expected the day to go downhill from there.

She felt tired. A year was a long time to run, and she was beginning to feel like the rope in a tug of war. The bad guys had her, then the...well, she wasn't ready to call Fallon a good guy yet, but at least he hadn't tied her to a chair. She sighed.

"What's wrong?"

"I lost my toothbrush."

He choked, probably on a laugh. "We'll get you another one."

"Are there any banks open? Trent and his buddies didn't bother to check my pockets, and I've got a little money I'd like to exchange." Two shillings was a little money, after all.

"I'll take care of it for you. Wouldn't you rather shower first? You've had a rough day."

Debating the merits of escaping him in a bank while exhausted, nearly penniless, and hampered by freezing weather, she reluctantly grumbled, "Where are we going?"

"My place. I've got good security, and it will make it easy for the council to speak with you."

"About that...I'm not real eager to chat with them."

He looked at her. "You have nothing to fear. You've done nothing wrong."

Her lips tightened and she stared back out the window. He was wrong there, but she wasn't going to argue with a stonewall. Assuming she could refuel and evade him, she was going to run the moment she got the chance.

Not everybody hunting her was human.

## CHAPTER 2

Fallon watched her out of the corner of his eye. Something was scaring her, something other than the obvious. In spite of her attempt at careless chitchat, she was still wound tight. One wrong move on his part and she'd be off at a sprint, never looking back.

Did she fear extradition? The Dark Lands, where many of their people had fled, was a wondrous place, but dangerous as well. It demanded strength from its people, and gave richly to those with the heart to rule it. A spirited girl like her would do well there, but perhaps she didn't know that. The few of them left here were increasingly ignorant of Dark Land lore.

Fallon was a guardian. Together with the Council of Elders, he protected the gate from criminals intent on escaping human justice and regulated the flow of emigrants fleeing the increasing power of the Cult. Only a few families still lingered on Earth. Almost all that remained of their young men had chosen to receive special combat training, protecting their people and the gate until the stragglers could make up their mind to cross over. Fallon hoped it would happen soon. Those that were left couldn't escape the vigilantes for long.

He checked on his passenger out of the corner of his eye. She was cute, in spite of the shadows under her eyes and eye-watering stench. Not that he begrudged her that; she'd had a rough day. A good shower would take care of the grime, and sleep would restore her color. A faint grin played around his mouth as he considered what rest would do for her feisty attitude. She'd be a handful, and he wouldn't mind the distraction. Life had been dull lately. He had a feeling her visit might be just what he needed.

The sound of gravel crunching under the Jeep's wheels woke her from her light doze. Squinting with lingering sleep, she blinked as the motion lights clicked on, illuminating the miniature castle Fallon called home. She stared at the mullioned windows and round tower as one of the three garage doors slid up. He smiled in amusement when her eyes widened at the bad, black, and very expensive Lamborghini Diablo and custom made Harley parked on either side of the Jeep. Women had a thing for sports cars, even if most of them knew little about the specifics. Looked like she was no exception.

"Bachelor," she muttered, eyeing his toys with misgiving. The odds of him having a wife and kids tucked away in here had just drastically diminished. Fighting the urge to squirm at the thought of sharing his house unchaperoned, she paid close attention to his quick tour.

"Laundry room. Toss your clothes out the door when you hop in the shower and I'll throw them in. You can use one of my shirts and my robe until they're dry, but there's no way my pants are going to fit you."

She cleared her throat and suggested uneasily, "Boxers might." Heat rose in her cheeks, but she didn't feel comfortable strutting around without underwear at the best of times, and especially around him.

"Don't wear them," he answered easily. They passed through a spacious kitchen. She glimpsed a large living room with leather couches, overstuffed armchairs and a wide screen TV as he guided her upstairs. He paused before a door and swung it open, revealing a sparkling bathroom with a huge tub, a shower stall and double sinks. The words 'wife' drifted through her brain, but she shook it off. There were no feminine frills,

no soft touches of womanly possession. “You’ve got a housekeeper, right?”

“Right. In that drawer, there should be spare toothbrushes. Soap and shampoo are in the shower and all the towels are clean. Be right back with some clothes.”

Grimacing at her reflection in the mirror, she made good use of the toothbrush, thrilled to have clean teeth again. She’d been running hard for the better part of a week and had scarcely been able to draw a breath before that, so little things like pure water and the prospect of a clean soft bed held the emotional appeal of a vacation at Club Med.

“Here you are. I’ll be in the kitchen working on dinner when you’re done.” Her host deposited a pile of clothes on the counter and left.

Stripping, she gratefully tossed her dirty clothes out the door and locked it, suffering a brief pang for the mess she was about to make of his tiled shower. She stepped in and cranked up the heat. Hot needles of water rained down on her, heavenly forerunners of a hopefully restful evening. It took three shampoos and lots of soap, but finally she felt squeaky enough to leave the shower.

Borrowing his brush, she worked the tangles out of her waist length hair, wishing in vain for a hair dryer. His shirt slid over her bare skin like a caress, making dormant senses prickle uncomfortably. “Stop it,” she muttered, belting on his maroon silk robe. “Quit stalling.” She took a deep breath and opened the door.

True to his word, he was in the kitchen, stirring something in a wok. Ignoring her flash of awareness at the sight of his muscular back, and the way he turned and looked her over slowly, as if surprised, she cleared her throat. “Mind if I borrow this?” At his slight headshake, she took his bottle of olive oil and spread a drop on her palms, rubbing it on her face and hands. “Dry skin,” she explained at his curious look.

Nodding, he gestured to the kitchen island and a plate of raw fruit and veggies. “Help yourself. This will be done in a minute.”

Fallon was surprised. He’s suspected she’d clean up well, but he hadn’t expected sable hair that gently waved down to a trim little waist. Baggy clothes and sweat-streaked grime had disguised a clear complexion and nice curves. Full lips and smoky blue eyes that occasionally glowed green peeked at him warily from a frame of thick lashes. The girl was hot, and he was interested. Her fear was a hurdle, but time would cure that.

A faint whiff of smoke caught his attention. Saving their dinner before it could burn, he tossed a potholder on the island and drew up a stool. He’d already set out plates and sundries, and Rain was making good use of them.

“Care to pray?”

His request caught her off-guard. Guiltily swallowing the bite in her mouth, Rain looked at him expectantly. With a self-deprecating smile, he moved around the island and reached for her shoulders.

She grabbed a fork and spun around, breathing hard, jabbing the utensil threateningly into this stomach. “What are you doing?”

He looked at her strangely. “I was about to bless the meal.” He looked askance at the fork, then up at her. “Do you always react this strongly to displays of religion?”

“You d-don’t have to touch me to pray,” she said warningly. Touchy-feely men had not been a pleasant part of her last year.

“I’m not going to hurt you,” he said slowly, confidently. Never taking his eyes from hers, he carefully reached down and closed his hand over hers, directing it away from his belly. Then, as if she weren’t still quivering with adrenaline, he softly intoned a short

blessing. Releasing her just as leisurely, he moved away and reclaimed his stool.

When he said nothing and simply served himself, she slowly uncoiled. The pattern of the fork was still imprinted on her hand, but she unclenched it with an act of will and returned to her eating, keeping a wary eye on him.

“Wine?” he poured a glass and offered it to her, then filled his own glass.

Rain knew about wine. It had little effect on her kind and went down like water, so she was surprised at the rich flavor and depth of her first sip. Drawing back, she eyed the golden liquid, then the decanter in front of Fallon. “This can’t be wine.”

“Dark Land wine. Careful, it’s stronger than you’re accustomed to.” His green eyes were amused.

Taking the caution to heart, she sipped curiously at the otherworldly liquid. “What’s it made from?”

“Dream flowers. It’s a very rare and special vintage.”

“What’s the occasion?”

“Saving a woman is always an occasion.”

She looked away. “I suppose it was worth it; I might have known some names, caused some needless deaths.”

It disturbed him, the scant belief in her worth. Her expression said death hadn’t been such a fearful thing, and it was very bad when someone looked at death as a release. Maybe he could shake some sense into her. “If we hadn’t come, Rory would have abused you in ways I wouldn’t describe to my least favorite dog. The pheromone would have ensured you got some pleasure out of it...at first. I’ve seen what was left of the women he used. Their minds went long before their bodies go.”

She still wouldn’t look at him. Her voice was hollow. “I know what he was. I’m glad he’s dead.”

“The pheromone really shook you up, didn’t it? That’s normal. Time and a real lover will cure that.”

Her eyes widened in shock. “I’m not...” she sputtered, and seemed flail for words. “What is this, Dr. Fallon’s Rx for love?”

“If you like. I’ve had some experience with female charmers. The only real cure was lengthy separation and...” he trailed off, smiling with fond remembrance. The cure had been intensive, the relationship short. She’d sent him away, claiming affectionately that he’d exhausted her, but there’d been a smile on her lips as she wished him well. The smile grew wicked as he remembered what else she’d said. *Find a woman who can keep up with you, love. I’ll be content with lesser wine from now on; you’ve proven how exhausting it is to drink from your vintage.*

Rain’s presence reminded him that it had been months since he’d last shared pleasure. Interest made his smile grow. “I could help you, if you like.”

“I don’t like,” she snapped, far too quickly. “A cold shower works just as well.”

Judging from the look in her eyes, that wasn’t the whole truth, but some playful flirting might be just what she needed to overcome the fear he read there. The girl needed to lighten up. “What about a massage? I’ve been told I have the magic touch.”

Had she been a porcupine, her quills would have gone up. “Do you understand rejection, or do I need to get you a dictionary? I don’t bedrock with anyone, and definitely not total strangers.”

That made him study her. A virgin? Untouched at twenty-two? Or so battered she

refused to acknowledge want and need, possibly even emotion? His mood grew more serious. "Has someone forced you?"

Anguish flashed in her face. Her jaw tightened as she hid her wounded eyes. "Not exactly."

Protectiveness made his voice darken. "You were attacked."

"Nobody finished what they started," she said quickly, staring at her plate. "I'm not that helpless." She sent him a quick, fierce glance and stabbed a bite of dinner, pushing it around on her plate.

'Nobody' implied more than one attacker, perhaps more than one incident. When had it happened? After her father's death, while she was on the run? She was too tightly wound now to question further, but there would be another time.

It grated that any woman would be attacked, but bit even deeper with this one. She was under his protection now, whether she cared for it or not, and he took that responsibility seriously. She couldn't stay on the edge she was walking, one wrong step, and the knife's edge would cut her in two.

Fortunately, he was a man of many talents. Taking care of women ranked among his best.

They were finishing their meal as the doorbell rang. Excusing himself, he answered it, then returned bearing the delivered packages. He set them on the counter before her. "Your clothes have arrived."

Clearly puzzled, she reached for a bag and stared at the contents. Slowly, she drew out a pair of folded jeans and looked at the tag. "These are in my size."

"I glanced at the tags on your clothes before I tossed them in the wash. We can exchange anything you don't like, but I wanted you to have a selection." He watched her as he casually started clearing the table. She looked overwhelmed.

There was nothing extravagant in the bags, not knowing her tastes, he'd had the sales lady pick up common designs like t-shirts, a clingy knit top and a sweater. The white athletic shoes would do until she could choose her own, and though more personal, the packages of underwear and socks shouldn't embarrass her beyond recall. Annoyed, he realized he'd forgotten to order a coat, but she could wear one of his when they went shopping tomorrow. He glanced at her to say as much, and stilled. Her eyes were wet.

She was staring at a new hairbrush, but didn't seem to be looking at it. "Thank you." The words were strained, almost whispered. "Nobody's ever..." she broke off and swallowed.

Awkward. He didn't do tears well, but Fallon instinctively understood the basics. Moving to her side, he gingerly wrapped an arm around her, carefully patting her shoulder. He was tempted to say, "There, there" like a fool, but resisted the urge.

Rain sucked in a breath and stiffened her spine. "Too much wine," she said a trifle damply, wiping her eyes with the back of her hand. "I need to sleep it off."

Relieved, Fallon stepped back. "Good idea. You've had a rough day. I'll carry this stuff up for you and let you get settled."

She leapt on the idea, padding behind him up the stairs. He entered one of the guest rooms and set the bags on the floor. For a moment they just stared at each other. "There's a lock on the door, but you won't need it. Nothing is going to bother you here." He looked at her gravely, hoping she'd believe him. The girl deserved a little peace.

She wouldn't quite meet his eyes. "Thanks. I mean it. You've been...really nice."

Hm. He'd had more gushing comments made about him, but none quite as warming. The girl was refreshing and he wouldn't mind keeping her around for a while. "You're welcome, and good night." Closing the door softly, he left her to her dreams.

It wasn't that she wasn't grateful. Rain cast a guilty look up the stairs. At 2:00 AM in the morning, it was deathly quiet save for the muted hum of appliances. Stealthily, she lifted the phone from its cradle and dialed the cab company. With great care, she shut the phonebook and tucked it back in its place in the hall secretary.

Leaving this way rankled. She hated taking anything he'd given her because it just drove the guilt deeper, but she'd desperately needed the socks and underwear, so she'd left him the last of her European money with the rest of her new clothes folded on the bed. She'd doubted he'd want the toothbrush back.

It had been a trick to lock her door from the outside, but she was resourceful, and it made the illusion of her sleeping in more real. She had to get away from there before the council found out where she was. If she waited that long, it would be too late. Her father had waited on the council and paid for it with his life.

"You've reached the Artic Cab Company. How can I help you?" A sleepy voice answered on the other line.

Straightening, Rain opened her mouth to give directions...

"Put it back."

Swearing, Rain whipped around at the cold words and stared. Just beyond the reach of the desk light's glow, Fallon stood there in jeans and nothing else, staring at her with a hot golden glow in his normally jade eyes. Shivers chilled her. Even with her sharp ears strained for any sound, she hadn't heard him coming.

"Hello? Is anyone there?"

Fumbling with the phone in her lax hand, Rain quickly said, "Wrong number," and hung up. Guiltily, she shifted, waiting for Fallon to explode.

His eyes narrowed. "Am I such a poor host that it's worth risking frost bite? It's cold as sin out there, and you've got nowhere to go."

She drew a deep breath. "I had a plan."

"So do I. Get back to bed." The lethal words warned of impending retribution unless he was obeyed.

She wasn't stupid enough to attack a full-blooded Haunt in his prime, so she eyed him, wondering if he'd move or force her to slip past him, passing through his personal space as she did. Intimidating thought, and she was already nervous.

Slowly, he moved aside, never taking his eyes off of her.

Giving thanks to his sketchy sense of chivalry, she slid past, holding her breath until she made the stairs.

He stalked after her.

Eyes widening, she hurried along, juggling her lock picks in her haste to get her door unlocked. Difficult become impossible when he paused behind her and stared at her hands.

Giving her a look, he slipped the tools from her damp fingers and did the honors. Blinking in surprise, she slid into the room, unsurprised when he kept her picks.

He drew her door key from his pocket and tossed it on the carpeted floor. "You'll feel better having that, though there's little point, is there?" He looked at the bed and his

brows rose. Moving closer, he frowned at the piles of folded clothes and the foreign currency resting on top. He glanced at her.

"I paid you back," she said defensively. It wasn't much money, but it was all she had.

"Did you put a price on your rescue, too? I could present you with an itemized bill, if you like." Arms folded, he looked at her with an unreadable expression. The posture did sinful things to all that naked muscle.

Tamping down on her hormones and the sudden urge to weep, she looked aside. "I can't pay you back for that. I can only say thank you." A pitiful, inadequate phrase, but all she had.

"That was all I wanted for the clothes, too. If you really want to return the favor, then stay here and get some rest. I'm not in the mood to track you through the ice fog." His tone had softened. Firmly, he reached out and lifted her chin. "If you leave, I will find you...and you won't like my mood when I do." With that final warning, he released her and strode out of her room.

It was a minute before she could breathe normally. Just standing next to him sucked all the air out of her lungs. Standing next to him while he was half-naked...

Groaning, she moved the clothes onto the dresser and threw herself down on the bed. How did he manage to make her feel like an erring child and a hormone-plagued teen at the same time? It confused her, added to the stress in an already stressful moment. Now he thought she was ungrateful. That hurt. Maybe she hadn't stopped mentally running long enough to really consider what he'd done for her, but she didn't have time. He was going to make her speak to the council, and she had to avoid that.

Her father's murderer was on the council. She couldn't prove it, had no idea who it was, but the last time she'd spoken to her father he'd told her he was going to share one of her inventions with his friend on the council. The next thing she'd known, their home was being raided and her father was dead, his workshop ransacked. She'd barely gotten away with her life that time and she wasn't dumb enough to tempt fate twice.

How was she going to escape Fallon? Clearly sneaking away would be bloody difficult. Killing him wasn't an acceptable option, even if she could manage it; a doubtful prospect at best. Incapacitating him might work, but he was wily enough to make that tough. Getting the drugs to make him sleep, let alone getting him to take them, would tax even her sneaky mind, and coshing him on the head... She shuddered, imaging his expression if he weren't knocked out, or worse, his retribution if she tried to bash him and failed. Haunt men made Navy Seals look like babes in nappies, and her pitiful street fighting wouldn't save her. If he wanted to, Fallon could power through her moves like a full throttle locomotive, smashing her in the process. You didn't take on a Haunt male unless you were suicidal, and she hadn't reached that point yet.

She could seduce him. As soon as the notion presented itself, she rejected it. Stupid idea. Bedding him wouldn't relax his guard, especially when she'd flinched from him like a caged sparrow at dinner. Not only would he not believe it, she just couldn't do it.

Men scared her. It wasn't because she'd suffered any hideous hurt at their hands. Her father had been her best friend, but she'd always been shy, not the kind of girl that appealing males coveted. As a result she'd had no boyfriends and had experienced only a couple of forgettable kisses. Flirting aside, someone like Fallon wouldn't even want her, and she didn't need to deal with rejection on top of everything else.

Left with no options, she settled on waiting on opportunity. A distraction would come,

giving her the chance to bolt. As a plan, it sucked, but she'd worked with less on shorter notice. She'd make it work. She couldn't afford not to.

### CHAPTER 3

A blood-curdling roar jerked Fallon out of a deep sleep. Half scream, half battle cry, it had him out of bed, gun in hand before his mind registered why. Tearing open his door, he bolted down the hall to Rain's room. Before he could kick the door open, it flew inward, and a wild-eyed fury burst out. Eyes wide and golden-lit with fear and rage, she snarled at him and converted her charge to a flying kick. Habit made him dodge, surprise made him stomp on his instinctive reaction. She was in her nightshirt, his shirt, and shaking with adrenaline. A nightmare? Flashback?

Kirk, a friend and one of the men who'd helped with her rescue, charged up the stairs, a wicked blade in his hand. He'd arrived on a late flight and his body clock was still set time zones away, so he'd volunteered to guard the TV and fridge while Fallon went to bed. His entrance spooked the girl. Snarling, she ran down the hall, flinging open the door to his study.

"What's up?" Kirk demanded, looking for someone to disembowel.

"Check her room. I think it's a flashback," Fallon supplied, dashing after his houseguest. Peeking around the corner of his study with a great deal more caution than he'd approached her door, he barely saved his face as the small statue of a knight whizzed by his head. Swearing, he slipped into the room, dodging missiles as he went. "Rain!"

No response. Looking around wildly, she noticed the moonlight coming through the diamond paned window and raced for it.

A fleeting prayer ran through his head as he dove for her, tackling her just over the chaise lounge. The velvet cushions broke her fall, but his weight sent a fresh rush of panic through her. Damp with cold sweat, blinded by her loose hair, she fought against his hold, trying to bite.

In the end, she exhausted herself, unable to defeat his superior strength. Only then did he relax his rigid hold, fractionally giving her freedom as he shifted more of his weight off her. "Rain?" He brushed the wet hair from her eyes, careful not to release her wrists yet. "Did you have a bad dream?"

She blinked and drew in a shuddering breath. Slowly she looked around, dawning bewilderment in her eyes.

The study light came on. Kirk stood at the door, gingerly avoiding broken pottery and debris with his stocking feet. "Doozy of temper you've got there, love." He started picking up the mess.

Fallon relaxed a little more as she stared at Kirk, comprehension emerging. Certain she was no longer going to attack, he moved off her, sitting beside her on the chaise. "Bad dreams. What were you dreaming of?"

She slowly sat up, shivering. The borrowed shirt barely covered her thighs, and it was cool by the window. "The night my father died."

Fallon snagged the throw blanket and covered her. "What happened?"

"We were swarmed with Haunt. My father sensed something and made me go down the emergency chute. He didn't have time to follow without being seen. I didn't dare go back because they were watching the house. I saw what happened through the spy hole."

She shivered.

Fallon and Kirk exchanged glances. Carefully, Fallon asked, "Would you recognize anyone?"

She shook her head, still lost in memories. "They were shifted. They looked alike to me."

The strangeness of her statement made him frown. Shifted or not, every Haunt had recognizable and unique characteristics. "Nothing stood out?"

She shook her head again.

"Would you recognize a scent?" All of them had infallible scent memories and sharper than human noses, even without shifting. She should at least be able to do that.

Avoiding his eyes, she muttered, "I couldn't smell anything. My nose isn't very keen."

What did that mean? Even with a stuffed up nose, she should have scented something. Was she suppressing the memories?

The color had leached from her skin. "I-I'd like to go lie down now."

Wincing at his impatience in the face of her distress, he picked her up and headed for her room, grimacing as the shards Kirk had missed cut his feet. They'd heal in a day or two, and she didn't need more injuries.

"I can walk," she said shakily.

"Humor me." The last thing they needed was her playing tough and independent. It wasn't going to hurt her to be cosseted a little. Tomorrow was going to be a rough day for her, and she needed to rest for what remained of the night.

Stiffening when she saw her bed, she actually turned her face to his chest. Brows rising, he paused, realizing that she might fear dreaming again. He thought for a moment. "Would you like me to get a radio for you? The music might help. Either that or you can sleep on the couch. I'll even wrestle the remote away from Kirk for you."

She actually smiled and risked a glance at him. "I'd like that."

Pleased by that small smile, he turned and headed for the stairs. She stiffened when she saw he planned to carry her down.

"Ye of little faith," he chided, not pausing. In moments she was deposited on the couch, the lights on, remote in hand. Raising a brow at the impressive selection of snacks Kirk had lain out, Fallon fetched her a glass of juice and a blanket. "Just yell if he tries to change the channel. I'll bring you a stick." Leaving her smiling wanly, he went to find Kirk.

Kirk raised a brow when he stepped into the study. "Get some clothes on, mate. I'm surprised the girl didn't run screaming at the sight of your tallywacker hanging out."

Fallon actually looked down before he caught Kirk's smirk. "Funny. You know I always wear pants when I'm expecting trouble." Not that he liked the black silk pajama bottoms, but they were cooler than flannel. Besides, any man would feel ridiculous facing down attackers with his better parts hanging out.

Kirk grunted. "Our pigeon remembers nothing and has flashbacks that make my sister's PMS look like a Brady Bunch reunion. I'd say toss her back, but she's a menace to society."

Unamused, Fallon sat down in his office chair and started picking splinters out of his feet. "Someone thinks she remembers something. One of our own had to have tipped her hand to the Cult. She's too good at running."

Kirk laughed. "Bold move, calling a taxi on your phone."

"She's not listed as a genius for nothing. She failed half of her high school classes and made perfect scores on her GED. Intelligence found textbooks on computer hacking, advanced electronics, chemistry and physics in her room, along with a host of gadgets that made the hair stand up on the investigator's heads. If her father hadn't got in their way, whoever had raided their house would have had their own captive prodigy."

No longer amused, Kirk dumped the last of the shards in the trash. "Trying to market her inventions was the dumbest thing her father could have done. Probably would have saved his life if they'd continued to pretend she was nothing special."

"He couldn't have known." Fallon watched the blood run from the cuts on his feet and frowned. It was going to stain the carpet. Tomorrow was going to be busy, and he could use some more rest. Kirk would be up for hours yet. "Keep an eye on her. I'm going back to bed." Answers would come in the morning.

"I fixed your DVD player."

Fallon blinked at his sleepy-eyed guest. The DVD player had been broken for weeks, and he hadn't gotten around to buying a new one. A glance at Kirk revealed him smirking over his breakfast. "Oh?"

"Kirk got me the tools."

Kirk saluted him with his toast. "She knows her way around a Philips and a soldering iron, I'll give her that."

Debating the possible attractions of the Brit's close-cropped black hair and rakish goatee in the eyes of his female guest this early in the morning was beyond him. Fallon put her ease in Kirk's company down to bonding over too much late night TV and junk food and then ignored it. Kirk wasn't interested, and Fallon was too old for childish displays of jealousy. "Thanks."

She smiled at him, and he blinked. The girl was beautiful when she glowed like that.

Hiding his smirk behind his coffee mug, Kirk caught his eye. His expression seemed to say, "Too young, too green, too available, my friend. This one will trip you up yet."

Uncomfortably aware of just how well Kirk knew his usual tastes, his usual liaisons, Fallon frowned and concentrated on eating. He'd seen what a fresh young thing had done to his jaded friends; not that it was a fate to fear, but it certainly wasn't something he had time for. As an ambassador between worlds, he wasn't looking for a young consort, and this one carried a lot of baggage.

Baggage that was going to get publicly rifled through in about fifteen minutes.

He waited until she finished her toast before speaking. "The Council of Elders will be meeting very shortly. It's a video conference via satellite, so we don't have to leave the house."

A sickly shade of gray replaced her normal color. "Why do I have to meet with them? Don't they have something more important to do?"

Fallon studied her. "They have to decide whether to extradite you to the Dark Lands. You're in danger now that the Cult has identified you."

"I won't go."

He let that go. She wasn't going to have a choice, and it was his job to carry out the transplant. Standing up, he offered her his hand. "We need to go."

Ignoring his hand, she pushed her chair out with angry defiance, pointedly keeping

her space from him. With a sigh he led the way, allowing Kirk to bring up the rear, boxing her in. They adjourned to his study. While Fallon raised the wall hiding a wide screen TV, Kirk seated Rain in a leather chair that swallowed her, taking up guard behind her. In moments the screen began to fill with faces, some very old, a couple apparently in their middle ages. In moments seven faces stared at her, studying her with curiosity or dispassion, depending on the Elder.

It was all she could do not to claw her way up the back of her chair and escape.

The most ancient of faces, a man with a white beard and the dignified essence of Sean Connery, looked at Fallon. "Good morning, my lord. Felicitations on your latest mission. I trust all goes smoothly?"

Fallon inclined his head. "As can be expected, Elder Azion." He glanced at Rain. "This is Rain Lilly Zephyr Miller, daughter of the late Rian Miller."

Rain winced. She hadn't known he knew her full name, and thanks to her hippie mother, it was a gruesome mouthful.

Ignoring her reaction, Fallon introduced the seven elders. "Elder Azion, Elder Traforte, Elder Rite..."

Most of the names were quickly forgotten, but Rain remembered Azion and Rite. Azion had the advantage of first introduction, and Rite...the man was creepy. Middle aged like her father would have been, but with night black hair and startling blue eyes, his face was average, but the intensity in his expression was anything but. Against her will, her gaze kept darting to him, and she felt grateful that he wasn't there in person.

Azion's words drew her attention back to the conversation. His gaze steady, he said calmly, "As I'm sure you've been told, we're here to decide on your future, on whether you'd be better off here or installed in the Dark Lands."

Her eyes narrowed with defiance. "I'm an American citizen, and I choose to remain here."

"It's not that simple. You're now a target of the Cult and a danger to the rest of us. How do you propose to defend yourself?"

"I'm skilled at making myself disappear," she said grimly. This time she would stay that way.

Kindly, Azion asked, "But what kind of life is that, running and hiding? Living in fear? Do you feel you'd be happy?"

"I'm happy if I'm free." She tried to ignore the hollowness his words invoked. It had been so long since anyone had cared, so long since she'd had friends. Experience told her that friends would be difficult to make on the run.

"What of a family? Most of our young men have already left. It will be difficult for you to find a mate here on Earth."

Her heart twisted, and she answered harshly, "I choose not to have one."

Her words caused a murmur to go through her audience. Azion's brows rose. "Why is that? You are young, pretty enough to easily attract a husband. Even if you aren't ready for children now, you may be later."

Feeling sick, she looked aside. She wasn't going to win unless she confessed.

Her father had warned her, once she'd finally learned the truth. It had been horrible enough finding out what he was, but he'd warned her that his kind wouldn't take well to knowledge of her. Some of them might be incensed enough to kill her, and he'd loved her too well to let that happen. He'd installed the escape tunnel in the house and secrecy in

her heart. Flinging it away now was ten times worse than giving away her virginity could ever be.

The silence stretched. They were content to wait her out. Clearing her throat, she said hoarsely, "My mother was human."

A flurry of murmurs followed her confession, making her shift in her seat. She almost expected someone to strike her dead on the spot. Her father told her shape shifters hated mixed blood. Little as she knew of the race, she didn't doubt it. Surely this would result in freedom, one way or the other. Personally she hoped Fallon would kick her out; her blood would make an awful mess of his carpet, and he had gone through a lot of trouble to save her hide in the first place.

Her father had told her that mixed-blood children rarely survived the first trimester, as the seed did not mix gracefully. She'd been born two months premature and her mother had never really recovered from the pregnancy. She'd died when Rain was five, leaving a grieving husband and a sad little girl in her wake. Her father had concealed the knowledge of what she was from her when she exhibited little of his race's characteristics, thinking that she'd be happier believing she was fully human. He'd been right, for the day she had learned otherwise had sent her world into a tailspin from which she'd never recovered.

The murmur died down. Azion considered her thoughtfully, and she had the sudden suspicion that he already knew about her mixed blood.

"Interesting revelation, but to my mind it makes little difference. You've got our blood. As rare and impossible as that may seem, when combined with your susceptibility to the male charmer, it makes you our responsibility. I do not believe you will be happy here. Indeed, it's clear that you've been miserable for some time. I move to extradite you to the Dark Lands." One by one, the Elders voted to send her through the gate, sealing her fate.

Her lips parted on a silent protest. They were crazy! She was not about to meekly go along, dumbly complying with their stupid decree. She knew nothing about the Dark Lands, only that it had a creepy name and was inhabited by a race of beings her father had warned her wouldn't appreciate her existence. Gritting her teeth, she fought the urge to tell them where they could shove their verdict. The less she said, the less they would know of her plans.

She wasn't going to the Dark Lands.

Azion's eyes shifted inquiringly to her left.

That brought Rain to her feet. Fists clenched, she gritted, "I'm twenty-two years old and past the need for a guardian."

"I accept the responsibility," Fallon's calm voice cut off her tirade.

She whirled on him, within a fingernail of attacking him. "I don't want you as my keeper!"

Azion said calmly, "Lord Fallon will be protecting you until such a time as you find a mate and he can hand the responsibility over. He will help you to get established and will see to your well being until you are settled. This is the will of the Council. Good luck, and good day."

Mute fury riveted her to the spot as the screen went blank. Ignoring Kirk and her new "guardian", she stalked to the exit, whipped open the door, strode down the hall and slammed into her room. Locking the door, she threw herself on the bed and screamed into

her pillow.

“That went well.”

Fallon shot Kirk an annoyed look and dropped into his office chair. He could see the hallway and Rain’s bedroom through his open study door.

He hadn’t known she was a half-breed. It explained a lot, but made little impact on his decision to protect her, other than to make him more certain that she needed it. Elder Azion was right; she wasn’t happy here. No matter how she felt about the move, she was sure to have a better chance of survival in the Dark Lands.

Retirement had been looming for some time, and he’d be glad to go home. Kirk was ready to replace him, and there few of them left on this side of gate to warrant Fallon’s continued presence. He had lands and duties in the Dark Lands, both of which had suffered his absence for over a decade. Dealing with one small woman wasn’t going to tax him.

Toying with the latch on his laptop, he let his eyes wander over the shelves of books. The sun shown through the window Rain had almost leapt through, reflecting off the snow and illuminating the red velvet couch. Three moons rode the sky in the Dark Lands and the climate was tropical. He’d miss this place, but it had never held his heart like his home.

He pictured Rain there and smiled. She’d probably attack the first shifted soldier she found, and since all males remained in their more powerful, mute form when on duty, she’d see one almost immediately. Growing up around humans might even have made her fearful. Frowning, he considered how long it would take her to become acclimated...

#### CHAPTER 4

It was still dark when Rain woke up, but that wasn’t unusual for Alaska. Sunrise wouldn’t happen until ten-something that morning. Growling at the dark, she flipped back the covers and hunted for her socks.

She wanted to slap herself for her tantrum last night. Granted, for the last year she’d been hunted, sleep-deprived, half-starved and almost seduced by the bad guy, but that didn’t excuse her childish behavior. You’d think the last year would have pistol-whipped the remains of giddy youth out of her.

She was going to the Dark Lands. She hated to admit it, yet there it was. With the entire bloody Council against her, the Cult’s deathwatch waiting for her to show her face and Fallon and Kirk babysitting, there was no way she was going to be able to run. Then there was the little matter of the trinket she carried...

Rain slipped her hand into her frayed leather jacket and pulled out a red rubber ball. A lopsided smirk curved her lips as she peeled it apart at the seams and spilled the contents into her palm. As heavy as gold, the intricately carved metal ball slowly warmed in her palm. Topaz gems winked at her from their settings, inviting her to touch, to wake them from their slumber. Giving in, she held the device next to the bedside lamp, giving it just enough light to operate.

With a hum, the device lifted from her palm and hovered, slowly rotating. The gems lit up, began their opening notes.

Rain shivered as unearthly music, barely heard and intensely felt, vibrated in the air.

Designed to physically pleasure the listener, the sounds shivered with the radiance of the aurora, seductively sweet. Piercing. Addictive.

Rain shivered. She hadn't meant to make the Bell. It was supposed to be a gate key, a door to the Dark Lands that would allow her to take a peek without being trapped. She realized too late that one actually had to go the Dark Lands before it could be set, which was problematic, since she'd had no intention of applying for her green card. By then she'd been addicted, unable to abandon her seductive little toy. The idea of it falling into another's hands put her into a cold sweat.

Her father had been killed for merely hinting that the Bell existed.

Someone on the Council had committed murder to possess it, and if she weren't careful, she'd be next. Stealing was the least a man could do with the gate at his disposal. Murder would child's play if he could learn to set it. Imagine the devastation if the Bell fell in the hands of an assassin. She wasn't blind to the potential disaster.

Unfortunately, she couldn't destroy it; physically couldn't do it. Her nerves went weak every time she thought about smashing it...the thing had become her lover. The resonance bound even as it gave sweet pleasure, and like a puppet, she danced attendance. God forbid a man should ever have such sensual power over her.

Shivering at the final whisper of notes, she closed her hand over the Bell. Breathing deeply, she sealed it in its hiding place and shoved it in her pocket. At least she had an out if things got ugly in the Dark Lands. No one would think to look for her here.

It was time to go and face Fallon, and her future.

"I'd rather drive." Rain eyed the snow machine as Fallon strapped on his saddlebags and duffle. She knew how to drive one, but she had serious misgivings about letting him. He had that look that said he only had one speed; warp velocity. His full-face black helmet hid his face and his winter gear only emphasized his height. Kirk was just as bad, and together they made her feel like a round midget.

Glowing at Kirk, who was strapping on his skis, she grumped, "The machine will bog down." Not that she would mind the delay.

"Not this one, baby." Fallon's eyes crinkled, though his grin was hidden. "We've added a few Dark Lands upgrades. Things are a little more advanced on the other side of the gate. Hop on."

Arms crossed, she eyed him and grudgingly gave in. No doubt his weight on the back would overbalance them should they go up any hills. Settling on back, she lightly grasped his waist, holding on with her legs by habit. She'd spent much of her childhood on snow machines and hated to ride double, preferring to be the one in control. It was no fun staring at the back of someone's head, or in Fallon's case, at his back. It blocked out a huge chunk of scenery, and if he hadn't set the shocks stiff enough, guaranteed a jarring ride.

Fallon took off slowly, and she was relieved he wasn't novice enough to dig a hole by gunning it. The thought had no more crossed her mind when he opened throttle. Rain grunted and held on, rolling her eyes at Kirk's whoop. The blinking idiot was going to find himself wrapped around a tree and he was enjoying it.

Frosted birches and snow cloaked spruce flashed by, giving Rain more enjoyment than she wanted to admit. It had been a long time since she'd rode, and Fallon proved a better driver than she'd suspected. He took jumps like a madman, laughing all the while,

darting off into the powder now and then for the sheer thrill of it. Kirk shouted encouragement, unintelligible over the roar of wind and engine, but understood. Their pleasure caught under her armor, sinking into her blood until it sang, too. Were all men like this in the Dark Lands? Maybe it wouldn't be so bad.

All too soon, the wild ride slowed. Disappointed, she looked around at the unassuming stand of birch, seeing nothing more interesting than a fleeing grouse. Fallon dismounted. Twisting on the seat, she watched Kirk dusting off snow. Fallon took off his helmet, tossing it to his friend, then stripped off his snowsuit, tossing it for sport, too. Kirk laughed and tossed it back. "Feeling the heat already?"

Fallon grinned. "Know it." He turned to Rain. "Take off the helmet and suit and follow me. I promise you'll be more than warm enough in a minute."

Wary of his wicked grin, she slowly obeyed, glowering as the cold bit into her exposed skin.

He unbuckled her duffle and slung it over his shoulder. "Leave the boots and gloves on; Kirk will get them later. There's less for him to carry this way." He held out his hand. "Ready, Dorothy?"

"Careful, Toto. I might just make a coat out of you to keep from freezing out here." Taking his hand so he could help her through the knee-deep snow, she followed, grimacing as powder worked its way down her boots. At least it was growing warmer.

A shadow caught her eye, and she froze, staring at the unusually big tree to her right. Was that a wolf?

Fallon tugged her on, and she noticed the snow thinning under the shadow of the trees. The warmth continued to build, and she looked up as the light dimmed, greened. Well, that explained it. The trees had grown huge, and their leaves blocked the sun...

Rain stiffened and looked around. Redwoods. She was in a redwood forest. Ferns and moss provided a soft cushion on either side of the faint dirt path. Mushrooms the size of ottomans dotted the forest floor, adding splashes of red. A wolf-like creature wove in and out of the trees, a silent watcher to her personal drama. Rain just stood there, looking, ignoring the snow melting into her socks.

Fallon smiled and handed her a pair of shoes, then slowly peeled off her gloves. "Welcome to the Dark Lands. We'll pitch this stuff back through the gate, then I'll take you up to the Citadel and introduce you around."

Dazed, she looked at him, blinked when she noticed him stripping off his sweater. Underneath was a black leather vest that buckled across his chest. A red embroidered Celtic knot decorated his left breast. She recognized the black pants from this morning, but she'd never seen the weapons belt he buckled on, or the gun in the low holster against his right thigh. A silver dagger hilt rode his left hip. She stared.

He grinned. "Standard uniform, you'll be seeing a lot of it. Come on, let's go blow your mind."

He'd originally intended to take her straight to her quarters to settle in, and then slowly introduce her to his world. Seeing the wonder in her eyes changed his mind. Why not build on it? This magic, the mystique of stepping into an alien world that was now her own, this is what she needed. Let her first moments be full of pleasure and the rest of her days would be colored by it. Tossing aside his mental itinerary, he took her hand, threw her a grin, and headed for the path that led to the market.

The path through the woods wasn't long. Rain's eyes lit up when she first caught

sight of the colorful tents and booths nestled against the curve of the Citadel's stonewall, facing the bay. Rows of merchants selling everything from produce and crafts to weapons and livestock greeted shoppers with cheerful invitations to try their wares. Women with baskets did the household shopping, haggling with shopkeepers as their children scurried around, ogling the goods. By the look on her face, Rain couldn't wait to explore.

Fallon grinned, congratulating himself on a great idea. All women loved to shop and this one was no exception.

Rain was in awe of the colorful costumes and elaborate hairstyles of the local women. While the men seemed to prefer darker colors and simple pants and tunics, the women swept around in the full spectrum of the rainbow, in styles ranging from harem pants and cropped vests with tulip or full sleeves, to exotic robes and Grecian style gowns. The crowd wove around them, the packed sand under their feet muffling some of the noise as the scent of baked goods and savory delights filled the air. Butchers with their logs of hanging sausages and crocks of cured meats stood next to vendors with colorful jars of layered dried fruits and nuts, glass cases full of confections and rows of fat-bellied wine bottles. Several stands with steaming kettles and carved wooden boxes full of bread served customers in a pavilion-covered dining area, filling their wooden bowls full of something that smelled good. Dishwashers accepted the bowls and cups, keeping the area clean as diners left.

"Yellow arches, eat your heart out," Rain murmured, her mouth watering. Before she could ask what they were serving, the stall on her left captured her attention. She gasped. A beautiful jacket of wine-red velvet was displayed on a wooden mannequin, complete with matching choker and earrings. Cropped, close-fitted at the bust to hug a woman's body, it fastened with a gold clasp between the breasts. The sleeves were full and made of a sheer, burgundy fabric with ruby and diamond crystal cuffs. At least she assumed the stones were crystal; she wouldn't dare display real stones like that in an open market. A black silk sarong and gorgeous sash were tied around the mannequin's hips, teasing the shopper with visions of trying it on.

Rain took a deep breath and put it out of her head. Where would she wear it, even if she could afford it? Ignoring a tempting, embroidered gold and silver sheath displayed next to it, she lowered her gaze and tried not to drool over the jewelry in the case below. A vine necklace with marquise cut white crystals sparkled next to matching earrings displayed on black velvet. The rest of the jewelry was impressively designed, but nothing, in her opinion, matched that pretty set.

She glanced at Fallon, found him near, yet conversing with another man as she window-shopped. He caught her eye, smiled, and waved her on. Since he seemed content, she was more than happy to keep looking.

"Good morning. Would you like a manicure or a haircut?" an older woman with a hopeful smile greeted her as she moved to the next stall. Before Rain could decline, Fallon stepped forward and paid the woman.

"Pamper her," he told the shopkeeper. "My ward is being very patient with my preoccupation and deserves the reward." Giving Rain a dazzling grin white enough to keep her blinking, he turned away and resumed his conversation.

The shopkeeper's eyes widened at the coins he'd set in her palm, and she beamed. "Come, dear, have a seat. My daughters and I will make you the loveliest girl in the Citadel."

Before Rain knew what was happening, she was seated in a comfortable chair and bombarded with questions about split ends, what color nail polish she preferred and how long it had been since she'd had a pedicure.

"Er, never," she admitted, trying to catch a glimpse of Fallon before the beautician tackled her ragged ends. It had been a long time since she'd been to a salon, and she'd never had three women hovering over her like the personal maids of some pampered duchess. It felt marvelous and novel, and was a far cry from how she'd expected the morning to go. The girls even massaged her hands and feet, which tickled but also felt great. When they finished painting pretty silver and gold designs on her nails, the elder woman handed her a fruit drink, then beckoned in a man with clothing cradled in his arms.

"For you, milady, compliments of Lord Fallon," he said, displaying his wares with a flourish. A midnight blue top similar to the red one she'd admired was draped over his arms. This one had short tulip sleeves and was embroidered with silver and gold and had a silver and crystal butterfly clasp.

Her attendants "oohed".

The man offered an apologetic bow. "We are very sorry the one you admired is not in your size, but we would be happy to have one made for you, or to offer you a look at our other inventory."

"Oh, this one is beautiful, but..." she looked around and tried to catch Fallon's eye. He allowed her to hold it for a moment, smiled slightly, then turned his attention to the man he was speaking to, a different one than last time.

Rolling her eyes at his generosity, she accepted the clothing with shy thanks, going behind the curtain in the back of the tent to change. There were even matching sandals. Wondering what she looked like, for she'd yet to see a mirror, she drew back the curtain.

Fallon glanced at her and froze. Very slowly, he inhaled, his eyes wandering from her head to her feet. By the time they met hers again, they were a glowing, brilliant green.

Beaming, the shopkeeper took her arm and pulled the breathless Rain in front of a full-length mirror. Rain gasped.

That had to be her, but she couldn't believe it. Her hair was prettily braided and swept up from her face in a princess's coronet. She hadn't paid much attention when the shopkeeper had applied makeup, other than enjoying the attention and praying she wouldn't look like a clown when she was done. Instead, the woman had used a light hand to highlight and conceal, achieving an exotic, ethereal effect. Rain touched her rouged lips, startled by the jewel effect of her silver and gold nails. The girl in that mirror was lovely, and this had to be a dream.

Fallon hadn't planned on giving Rain the vine necklace until later, but she was so breathtaking that he couldn't resist. Her lips parted when he removed it from its velvet pouch and clasped it around her neck, and her breath came faster as he slipped in the matching earrings. Then he drew back a few inches and admired her glowing skin and ruby lips. It was her eyes that gave him pause, though. The shining green hinted of tears, an emotion he hadn't meant to invoke.

Slowly, she reached up and closed the distance. A kiss like a soft summer breeze brushed his lips, hesitated, was gone. It shook him more than he expected.

She lowered her eyes. "Thank you," she whispered.

Unable to bear the currents between them, he raised her face. "The least you

deserve.” Vaguely aware of the avid curiosity of the others, he lifted his head and offered his arm. “Are you hungry? There’s a restaurant in the Citadel I think you’d enjoy. I’m starving.” Arranging for her clothes and his other purchases to be sent to her quarters, he led her from the shop, keeping the conversation light until she’d recovered.

He hadn’t been wasting time while she shopped. He’d summoned his personal secretary to him the moment they’d entered the market and caught up on events in his household. He had a suite of rooms next to the vast Citadel gardens, and had arranged for Rain to occupy the room next to him. Security would be easier, and she’d have easy access to a familiar face. The idea that he’d like having her close he ignored.

Rain tensed as they neared the massive Citadel gates, currently raised for the day. It was not the sight of the multiple rows of iron gates or the long tunnel cut from the blue mountain that was the Citadel that made her stomach flip, though. Guards stood at the gate...Haunt guards. Fully shifted, with wolfish faces and bodies covered with hair, they might have come straight from the cast of *Howling III*. Each guard wore black pants, boots, and leather vests similar to Fallon’s, though none had his red insignia. Armed with pistols and wicked looking knives (one Haunt even carried a tomahawk at his side and had a rifle holstered on his back) they gave new meaning to intimidation.

Nausea from the adrenalin dump threatened to embarrass her. Shaking from battle instincts, she shifted her weight to her toes and cursed her new clothes. Stupid fool! How could she have been so easily sweet-talked out of her sturdy jeans and running shoes?

“Easy,” Fallon said, equal parts command and soothing in his voice. He kept moving toward the portal. “They’re not holding the gate against you.”

“The last time I saw these things they were tearing my father apart,” she snarled bitterly, unable to stop the low growl rumbling at the back of her throat. She could feel her canines lengthening, sharpening, the change that came without her bidding when in danger. The guards were looking at her, and she knew her eyes were glinting gold. Not that they’d care, since they made her useless little changes look like costume makeup. Her eyes jumped around, looking for handholds in the smooth rock face, searching for the most likely nightmares to plow over if she had to run.

The Haunt at the gate never took their eyes from her.

“You’ve been surrounded by us for days now. Your father was one of us. You carry our blood,” Fallon said softly. Ever calm, he watched her as if she were no more deadly than a child with monsters in her closet. He kept them moving toward the gate.

Pain made her fingers curl as her fingernails thickened, lengthened. “I’m not one of you,” she rasped, the change making speech almost impossible.

Humor coloring his voice, Fallon glanced at her. “I can see that.”

She didn’t even think. Turning on him, she aimed for his belly with her deadly nails and tried to shove him over backwards, hooking her foot behind his knee. One shove and she could run, race for the forest portal...

It didn’t work. Instead, Fallon crushed her to him, shifting her balance so she was plastered to his chest. Fury and fear had her sinking her nails deep into his back, through the leather of his vest. He grunted, and she felt the warm flow of blood seep from the gouges. Shocked, she released him and backed off. Blood stained her hands. Sickened by the sight, she stared at him in misery.

He grunted again and flexed his back muscles slowly. “We need some ground rules for these arguments of ours, sweetheart.”

Lost, she turned her head and stared blindly at nothing, her mind a careful blank. As shock calmed her, she felt her body change back to normal.

Fallon took her arm in a firm grip and strode for the gate while she was still biddable. Loudly, for the benefit of those watching, he said, "If you're not hungry, all you have to do is say so. I can be dense with women, but even I understand a 'no'."

Heavy with irony, his tone only made her feel lower. Panic attacks with claws could be deadly enough, but she'd never attacked a friend before. Of course, she'd never had a friend to attack, and even now, she wasn't sure that Fallon was one. That didn't stop the sickness tearing up her guts, however.

Fallon didn't need to hear an apology, not with her bowed shoulders and hidden face shouting it out. A surge of pity mixed with lingering irritation. Her half-change was unsettling. Their kind was either-or, not an odd mix of both states, and by the look on her face as she'd changed she had no control over it. Maybe that had contributed to her fright. In human form, Haunt had human senses, except for sharpened hearing. In Haunt form, they had the keen senses of wolves coupled with superior strength, speed and agility, though they sacrificed the power of speech. Rain seemed to be stuck in between, and it had looked painful.

She didn't look up as he guided her up the steps of the citadel and down the stone corridors. Arched windows let in light, showcasing the parquet flooring and colorful castle inhabitants. Five minutes of walking brought them to his private wing and deep into his personal security, security that had been tightened to protect his ward. Briefly wondering what the guards at her door thought of his grim expression and Rain's bowed head, he took her into her room and walked straight through it, exiting out into her private pleasure garden. Once there, he released her. "I find the sunshine calming. I suggest you remain out here until you've settled in." He accompanied the "suggestion" with a fierce look and left to attend to the holes in his back.

Rain closed her eyes. Hideously embarrassing, that emotional display of hers. Bad enough it happened in public, but she was still tense from seeing the Haunt soldiers. Logic told her she'd grow calmer around them, but she'd never love them. Fallon was one of them...

She shivered.

## CHAPTER 5

He'd left her in a garden. Walled, roughly the size of a school bus, it had a winding path that led to a bench set under a shady fruit tree. A small pool provided a place to gaze. Pear trees had been trained against the walls, alternating with a pink flowered vine she couldn't identify. Flowering bushes alternated with herbs and mixed flower clusters, providing washes of color. Well-clipped grass formed a soft carpet between the flowers and the walls.

With a sigh, she slipped off her shoes and padded over to the bench. She was still tired from long months of running, and she'd been too long in the London fog and Alaskan chill. The sun felt good.

To her surprise, she found brilliant blue and gold fish swimming in the small pond.

"Pretty," she murmured. Someone took good care of this place. From what she'd seen, she figured that Fallon could probably afford the best help.

As if summoned by her speculation, a young woman appeared at the door to her apartment. “Mistress?” Her dusky yellow sarong swayed gracefully as she moved closer, giving a glimpse of her straw sandals. Her matching, sleeveless top hung around her neck with a scarlet cord. A sash of the same color decorated her waist as she paused at the pool. Long dark hair flowed free to her waist, and she had an enviable tan. “My name is Malian. Is there anything you would like? A meal, perhaps? The master said you might be hungry.”

Rain sighed. “How is his back?”

Malian was slow to answer, but returned a gentle assurance. “He is fine. In two days, the marks will have healed. But come! The change to the Dark Lands must be difficult. How may I help?”

“I don’t know. I guess I’m a little hungry. What is this fruit above me?” Rain didn’t feel like putting the girl to any trouble.

The girl smiled. “Hairy sugar fruit, but it’s not yet ripe. I took the liberty of bringing you a light meal, if you’re interested.”

Rain sighed again. Well, if the girl was determined to feed her... She followed Malian into the apartment, surprised at the simple elegance. Decorated in ice blue and yellow, with touches of white and plum, it was cool and inviting at once. Two couches faced each other in the sitting area, and a bed with a silken coverlet promised a good night’s sleep. A roomy tub, surrounded by unlit candles, offered a tranquil soak. A mirrored armoire with one glass door showed linens ready for her use.

Malian had set a wide, flat soup bowl on the table. A delicate, wonderful aroma arose from it as Rain took a seat. Malian poured her some juice from a frosty decanter and smiled. “Allow me to put your things away in the wardrobe while you refresh yourself, mistress. Enjoy.”

Rain did. The fish soup was in a clear broth, both tangy and sweet. Whatever it was, she would definitely like it again. The yellow juice was also very good. “What is this called?”

“The juice is nectar from the yellow leaf stalk, mistress, and the soup is called ‘sour pot’. Do you like them?”

“Definitely. This is good stuff.”

“I’ll be sure to share that with the kitchen. Tell me, what things do you most enjoy doing? It will be my pleasure to see if we can duplicate them here.”

Rain thought about it. “I like to take things apart and see how they work. I read science, history and biographies. I do some martial arts, but not really for fun. I like to swim and go fishing...and eating. I always like to eat.”

Malian laughed. “Well, the eating is easy. We have an extensive library here at the Citadel, and excellent fishing on the bay. As for the other, I think something can be arranged. What would you like to do first?”

Rain thought about it, thought about the Haunt outside her room. “Uh, the books sound good. Could you bring me a stack? And if you know anyone with a broken gadget, I’d like to have it. Tools, too, if you can borrow some.” She never had a gofer before, but Rain didn’t hesitate to use her services. If Fallon wanted to pay for a servant, fine. He was part of the reason she was stuck here, anyway.

“Yes, mistress.”

“Thanks.”

Rain went back outside to look at the fish as Malian cleared the table. When she was sure she was gone, she took out the Bell and set it. Now that she was here, she could flash back to Earth anytime, at any of the various points she'd set it for. Unwilling to risk the Bell's music in the garden, she quickly slipped the device back into the casing. She stared at it, considering.

No money. That was that hardest thing on the run, getting money honestly. Whatever passed for money here, she was almost certain it wouldn't fly back home. Basic elements like gold and silver or gems she could cash in, but short of stealing them, she was out of luck. Without them, she would be back where she started, scared, tired and hungry. How could she earn some?

She grimaced. She was going to have to leave her room, see what was in demand, what there was to work with. Her father had believed her inventions would make them rich and now was a good time to test his theory.

She took a deep breath for courage. She was going to have to face the Haunt.

She made it as far as the door before chickening out. Always bad with directions, she told herself she'd probably get lost. Maybe she could wait for Malian.

Unfortunately, it was Fallon who opened the door scant minutes later to find her still dithering. He raised one blond brow. "Going out?"

"Maybe. I haven't made up my mind," she said defensively. She glanced at his midsection, wondering about his back, but her eyes skittered away from his buckled vest. That thing was a subtle form of torture.

"Allow me to escort you, then. I thought you might enjoy a tour of the grounds before dinner."

"Ah...are there a lot of...of Haunt walking around out there?"

"Yes, but I think I can protect you."

She shot him a look for that comment, but maybe he deserved a little revenge. "I'm not a coward."

"Aren't you? Let's see," he murmured. He stepped closer and kissed her.

Stunned, she froze as his mouth brushed hers. More confusing, he stopped there. Lifting his head, he said softly, "Maybe you aren't."

Confounded, she stepped back. "Don't do that!"

"Do what?" he asked innocently.

"That! You know what. Don't do it again." More rattled than she liked to admit, she braced to resist if he tried it.

He shrugged and headed for the door. "You don't have to feel inadequate, you know. I'm sure you might get better at it with practice."

Outrage had her following him, railing as she went. "I don't need practice! If I did need practice, I wouldn't get it from you." Confused, she frowned. That sounded like an admission of some kind.

His smile was cocksure, designed to enrage. He threw it over his shoulder and walked slowly on.

Tripping on her skirt, she hurried after him. "If you can't behave, I want you to stay out of my room. I won't let you in if I can't trust you. You're supposed to be my guardian!"

There was no one in the hall, and Fallon took advantage of it, backing her to the wall. Bracing his hands on either side of her, he said huskily, "You can trust me." His eyes

dropped her lips. "I promise."

She didn't think he was promising what she wanted, not with that look in his eyes. She shook her head, hating the dizziness in her blood.

His head dipped closer until she could feel his breath against her lips. "No?"

She shook her head, realized it wasn't enough. "No." It came out wrong, breathy and weak.

He moved his mouth to her ear and whispered, "Tell me if I change your mind."

She shivered.

Her stomach felt odd as they walked, fluttery and unsettled. Keeping her eyes from his, she placed her hand on her abdomen. Obviously he wasn't good for her; he was making her sick. Distracted, she didn't even realize they were passing by Haunt until about the third one. Terror made her draw a deep breath. Her muscles locked up, tensed to flee.

Fallon slid his arm around her waist and breathed in her ear. She almost jumped out of her skin.

"What are you doing?" she demanded in a strangled whisper.

His hand slid dangerously low on her hip. "Distracting you?" he said in that oh-so-innocent tone.

She grabbed his hand and threw it off, veering right to an archway with the doors flung open. She didn't have to look to feel him sauntering behind her.

It was a bad sign when she could feel a man like that.

They came to a small field enclosed by a low stone fence. Breathing deeply, she gripped the top and stared out over it. Just beyond it, a series of stone and adobe huts began.

She felt Fallon's arms go around her, gripping the wall beside hers. Again, her muscles locked.

He sighed and let go. "We'll work on it."

She grit her teeth, too angry to answer as he straddled the wall to her left.

"As a man and a warrior, I see something I like and pursue it. I think most men are like that," he said reflectively, looking over the field. "The feelings confuse you, don't they?"

"I have no trouble understanding anger," she growled.

He smiled. "You haven't been pursued by anyone with honorable intentions, have you?"

Eyes narrowed, she dared him to lie. "You have no honorable intentions. I doubt you've ever had a lasting relationship in your life. I'm not a plaything, and I'm not a fool."

"No, you're not. You might know that I'm not a liar, though."

"No, I wouldn't know. When in the last few days that I've known you would I have figured that out?"

"Ah. You need time, and I'm rushing you." He didn't apologize.

She breathed deeply for strength. "I've got no interest in a relationship with you, however brief. Don't tell me you're desperate for female companionship. I'm sure there's a few women around here you haven't bedded. Probably a teen or two who came of age while you were away."

"Ouch. I hate to disappoint, but I haven't been as busy as that. I'll bet there's ten

women, at least, who I haven't bedded here."

She walked off.

He hopped off the wall and joined her. "I was joking, you know."

"I don't joke about this kind of stuff. Find some beer buddies to share your gutter humor."

He let out a gusty sigh. "I...watch out!"

She hadn't been watching where she was going as she turned a corner. Unfortunately, she ran right into a Haunt taking the same curve from the opposite direction. Fallon grabbed her arm to steady her, but it was too late. She'd already gotten a deep lungful of his scent.

"Achoo!"

"Rain? Are you okay?" Fallon asked with concern. The Haunt reached for her, perhaps in an effort to help.

She sneezed twice and backpedaled, tripping on her skirt. She would have landed on her bum if Fallon hadn't caught her.

"What is it? Are you allergic to Haunt?"

"Dog fur!" she gasped, then sneezed again mightily. Her eyes were watering.

Fallon choked on a laugh. "You're serious?"

She sneezed in answer. "Within two feet, I...ah..ah..."

He coughed, clearly dying to laugh. "Okay, we'll take you to the medics and get you something for this. We can't have you running around sneezing all the time. You might blow off your nose at this rate."

"You're not funny!" She was really miserable, and it was hard to breath.

He sobered. "Come on. You need medicine."

Rain balked. "I don't like doctors."

One arm behind her back, he moved her relentlessly on. "You're getting one anyway. Get used to it."

"I hate you," she muttered, and sneezed again for good measure. She was getting light-headed from lack of air.

"Do I need to carry you?"

"You do, you die," she promised.

"Feisty, aren't you?"

She made it to the medics on her own. To her disgust, she was too winded to argue with him about the bitter medicine he made her take. It did ease her breathing, though.

The medic looked at her, a smile lurking around his mouth. "An unusual allergy, but one we can treat. Repeated exposure should build up immunity, and we have several herbal mixtures that will help. We'll try the mildest one first and work up to the more powerful doses as needed. Be sure to note any uncomfortable side effects; we want to make sure the medicine isn't worse than the disease."

"That's a first," Rain muttered.

The man smiled. "Is there anything else I can help you with today? No? Then take care, and have a good day."

She sulked all the way back to her room. "I hate medicine. I don't need to take it unless I run into any more walking carpets."

"You'll take it. The doctor said it would help you to build up immunity."

"So he claims."

“And we’re going to test those claims. I’ll watch you take them with every meal if I have to. If I can’t be there, then I’ll make sure Malian sees you do it.”

“You’re awful bossy,” she sniffed. Her eyes were still a little watery.

He opened the door to her room for her. “As you pointed out, I am your guardian. You look tired. Would you like a nap before dinner?”

“I guess.”

“All right, then. I’ll see you after you rest. Pleasant dreams.” He dropped a kiss to her lips and let himself out.

Rain stared at the door, too tired to chase him down and yell at him...as if it did any good the last time. If Fallon wanted to kiss her, he was going to kiss her. Maybe her best defense was not to react.

Pondering her new strategy, she changed into the linen pajamas laid out on the bed and fell asleep.

Someone was stroking her hair. Vaguely annoyed because it tickled, she snuggled deeper into the covers.

A man chuckled. Fallon. The man was always laughing, smiling...you’d think his life was all roses. “Go away.”

“It’s almost dinner time.”

Food. Dinner was a good thing. She sighed sleepily. “Five more minutes.”

He laughed again. “You’ve slept for an hour already. We’re having fresh bread, a roast with herbs, tender young vegetables...I think there’s dessert, too.”

“Okay. You’ve convinced me.” She didn’t move right away, though. She liked to get her brain in gear before she climbed out of bed.

His hand moved deeper into her hair, massaging until she looked at him with sleepy eyes.

“Rain? May I kiss you?”

A ‘no’ hovered on her lips, but the way he looked at her stilled it. It was the first time he’d asked.

Her gaze dropped to his lips. Could it be that bad? Curiosity stirred. “I guess.”

His lips curved at her uncertain answer. Gently, he brushed his mouth against hers, not once, but many times, until she found his light touch a tease and sought his lips, seeking deeper contact. Obliging, he gave her more...but not enough.

She made an impatient sound. While she’d never liked kissing, if he was going to kiss her, he should kiss her. This game was frustrating. Grabbing his head with one hand, she pulled him closer.

This time his mouth opened over hers, gave her full contact. Now his tongue swept inside, surprising her with his controlled passion. This wasn’t like the others; it felt good. Really good. So good, she started to lose her head.

His hand cradled her head, gently holding her steady. When his body joined hers on the bed, she blinked in surprise, but the kisses soon dragged her back down. There were covers between them, after all. One hand curved behind her back, pulling her closer, showing her how good it felt to press against him. She whimpered her encouragement.

Boldly, he swept down the covers and snuggled closer. The kisses alternated on her lips and ears, trailed down her jaw and caressed her neck. The hand on her back slid down to cup the curve of her behind, massaging, pulling her closer.

She should have objected. Should have said no. Instead she gasped, unable to remember why this was a problem. It had just been so long since she'd felt pleasure of any kind, and he was giving her his full attention. Pitiful, but she was starving for his touch...any touch.

If she couldn't have love, then at least she could have this.

Heaven help her, the man was gorgeous, nice, and he wanted her. It was all she could ever hope for, and she would take it.

Her sleeveless linen shirt twisted around her, the soft fabric suddenly chaffing. Fallon sat up and pulled it off her, sinking back down into a kiss before she could object to the exposure. His weight was so good, the sensation of his leather vest on her naked breasts exciting, scary in its newness. She didn't want to stop.

He lifted from her slightly and stared at her breasts, then slowly licked his lips.

She shivered and covered them.

Smiling wickedly, he covered her hands with his and rotated.

Shocked, she yanked hers away and gasped as his hands took over, massaging, pinching her nipples, causing a wicked fire to race through her blood. She arched under his hands.

He kissed her, took his time to deeply explore her mouth and lifted to watch her. "Want it, sweetheart? Need it?" he whispered rakishly. "Have some." His mouth closed around her nipple, gently bit.

Rain's body arched off the bed. She moaned his name and closed her eyes as his hands reached under her to grip her butt.

Bursts of pleasure raced through her, causing white hot flashes of light behind her lids. What was this? It went on and on and ebbed, only to rise again and consume her.

She was so hot. Couldn't get enough, but when she tugged at his vest, wanting closer contact, he slipped down her body instead.

"No, love. Tonight is all about you. You want to invite my pleasure another night, I'll be happy to oblige. For now...just enjoy." His tongue caressed her belly, lapped at her navel, dipped inside. Kissed the skin just above her pants. Taking his time, he untied the bow of her drawstring trousers.

Rain knew what came next, trembled in anticipation. She'd heard about it, wanted it. Wasn't about to tell him no if he wanted to do it. This was better than the Bell, better than...wait! What was she thinking? The Bell was safe, in its way. He wasn't. "Wait! Uh. Oh. Ahhh..." His fingers had slipped below the pants, which he'd inched down. He had her clitoris in between his thumb and fingers and was gently massaging.

"More?" he said suggestively, and lowered them a fraction. "Do you want my kiss there, too, baby? Say it."

"Say what?" She couldn't think.

"Tell me that you're wet, dreaming of my kisses. Tell me that you want my kisses there."

"I can't!"

"Yes, you can. Say, 'Fallon'."

"Fallon."

"I want your kisses."

"I-I want your kisses." She moaned in pleasure as he rewarded her, then squirmed when he stopped.

“Fallon, I’m wet, dreaming of your kisses.” His voice was low, seductive. It was nearly as bad as his stroking fingers.

“That’s embarrass...” she broke off with a squeal as he dipped a fingertip a fraction into her. Sadly, he stopped again.

“Say it. Say it all, or I’ll stop now.”

“No!”

“Say it.”

“F-fallon. I...I’m so wet, dreaming of your kisses there.” Just saying it made a gush of liquid heat wet her thighs.

“That’s my sweet kitten,” he murmured. Deftly, he flipped her onto her stomach and tucked a pillow under her hips, raising her up. He stripped off her pants, leaving her totally exposed, totally naked to his vision.

She tried to sit up. “What...”

He spread her thighs and licked her, right where she’d told him she needed it.

It was too good, but she couldn’t get away, couldn’t stop him with her hands. The more she squirmed against the sheets, the worse the friction teased her. Her butt was high, her thighs clamped in his big hands, spread wide for his pleasure...and hers.

It was such sweet pleasure, such a relief to surrender. She couldn’t fight him, didn’t want to. Could only buck and squirm as his tongue sank deep into her, crying out when his deliberate moan vibrated inside her.

Fallon knew he could have anything he wanted at that moment, but he wasn’t about to take it. She was passionate and hungry, needing a lover who would put her needs first. This first loving was about healing, about teaching her the power of pleasure. It was also a binding, though she wouldn’t recognize his power over her at first. They would have plenty of time for more, and he was a man with self-control. So instead of bringing her higher, driving her mindless, he brought her down easy, left her floating on a plain of pleasure. When she had drifted down enough not to hurt when he stopped, he got off the bed and pulled her up. “Come on. It’s time for dinner.”

She wobbled in his arms. “W-what?”

“Dinner. Oddly enough, having dessert first always whets my appetite.”

She blushed and looked around for her clothes. Happy to keep her off balance, because he didn’t want her to think, it was always a headache when women thought in these situations; he helped her into her dress. Mm, he liked that blue outfit on her. He was tempted to buy her that style in every color of the rainbow.

She still looked dazed when he brought her to his suite and seated her at the long table. Larger than her own apartments, his was furnished in soft greens, bronze and tan leather. It had three bedrooms, suitable for the family he’d one day have. The houseplants were few, but well cared for thanks to his housekeeper. He looked at Rain, but whatever she thought of the place, she seemed too unsettled to comment.

The meal had just been laid out on the table. Content to leave the unfocused expression on her face, he filled her plate and poured her wine before serving himself.

She ate, but kept her eyes on her plate. He let her have silence for a little while, then said casually, “I thought we could fish on the bay in the morning. I’ve arranged to borrow a small sailboat, and the weather promises to be fine. We should enjoy it before the storms come in the fall and we’re forced indoors much of the time.”

She risked a glance at him. “Storms?”

“Fierce electrical storms. How do you like your dinner?”  
She looked down at the half-eaten roast. It’s good.”  
“And did you enjoy making love with me, too?”

## CHAPTER 6

Rain looked at him with a stricken expression. “You’re so casual about it.”  
“Not casual. Frank. I enjoyed it. I don’t want it to be swept under the rug. Preferably, I’ll like to share it again with you...at your invitation, of course.”

She remained silent, her eyes on her plate.

Fallon waited.

“I think you’d better find someone else,” she whispered.

“I’ve no interest in somebody else.”

“Today.” Her voice gained strength.

“You’ve decided I’m some sort of playboy.”

“Aren’t you?”

He considered that. “In the past, I’ve been as wild as any youth. Trust me, the lifestyle pales as a man gets older. I’m thinking differently these days, planning differently. You have nothing to fear from me.”

She met his eyes with apparent difficulty. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means I’m looking for a wife. My friends have settled down and I like what they’ve done with their lives. They’ve got a good thing going.”

“Well, if you’re looking for a wife, we know you won’t choose me,” she said bitterly. “Besides, you barely know me. Like I said, find someone else.”

He continued doggedly, “There’s an appeal to coming home to a house with someone in it. I like the idea of a wife lighting up my home.”

“You want kids,” she accused him.

He shifted uncomfortably. “Not really. Not right now, at least. Don’t misunderstand, I like playing with my cousin’s children, but it’s a relief to know that they’re his at the end of the day.”

She raised a skeptical brow. “You’re going to have a hard time marrying a girl who doesn’t want kids.”

“Do you?”

That caught her off guard. “Well, no. Not really. I mean, I don’t think I’d be a bad mom, I just don’t have the urge, you know? I don’t like the idea of being pregnant, or childbirth, or diapers. I think it would be better to adopt a kid. Someone else has already done the worst stuff, that way.”

“What about the teenage years?”

She shrugged. “I’m not afraid of teens. They’re easy to talk to.”

He smiled. “You see? We’d be perfect, not that anything’s decided now. Here, try these fruit jellies. They’re delicious.”

“Did I tell you I’ve officially retired from my post as ambassador to Earth? Kirk took it over. Not that there’s much traffic these days. There are only a few families left on Earth, most of which are making noise about crossing over. Some of the Elders are retiring, acknowledging that their roles are being phased out. Elders Azion and Traforte should arrive in a couple of days.”

She stiffened. “Really?” That couldn’t be coincidence. She was a sitting duck, nicely boxed in by Fallon’s protective care.

She suddenly realized that Fallon hadn’t asked her any more questions about her father’s death and the Haunt involved. He’d seen how much the experience still affected her. For all she knew, even her allergy to Haunt fur could be psychosomatic.

Granted, he sometimes came off as a flake and a playboy, witness his talk about marrying her...but how much of that was real? Someone had put him in charge of the portal, and that was no position for a fool. He might be easygoing around her, but she remembered her first glimpse of him, wreathed in dust from the bomb. This was a dangerous man. Relaxing around him was hazardous.

Becoming his lover was the act of a madwoman.

“There’s going to be a party for them in a couple of days. We’re invited, of course.”

“Not interested.” She picked up her wine and took a slow sip, just to have something casual to do. She had a poker face when she wanted, and these weren’t thoughts she wished to share.

Her father had talked to both Elders Azion and Traforte within days of each other. Soon after that they were swarmed with murderous Haunt. For a girl who hadn’t known about them until her teens, nor ever seen one transformed, it was a horrific experience. If she hadn’t wanted to be one of them before, she really wasn’t happy about it then.

One of them wanted the Bell, and they wanted to keep quiet about its existence. She wasn’t eager to reveal it, either. It was her ticket out of there...she thought. After all, it hadn’t been tested yet.

“You’re still angry at them for sending you here?”

Fallon’s casual question made her refocus. “I have no use for the council,” she said coolly. “Like I said, I’m a US citizen. I’m here under protest.”

He watched her. “You’ve been very quiet about your protests.”

“Who’s listening to me? I said it to the council and my stance hasn’t changed.”

“You enjoyed the market and seemed to like your new garden.”

Rain shrugged. “I learned a long time ago to make the most of the moment. Yeah, they were cool. I enjoyed parts of Ireland, too, but I wouldn’t want to live there permanently.”

“What would change your mind?”

She looked away, toward the glass patio doors, and blinked. There were three moons in the sky. “Whoa!” Unable to resist, she crossed the room and stepped outside, his question forgotten.

Moonlight bathed Fallon’s private garden, making it almost twilight. Why did they call this place the Dark Lands?

Fallon followed her out, lounging against a tree trunk. “Pretty?”

“Beautiful,” she agreed, soaking it in.

“You didn’t answer my question.”

She sighed. “What would make me stay here? I don’t know. Whatever it is, I haven’t seen it yet.”

His eyes glinted in the moonlight. “Haven’t you?”

She considered a moment, then answered honestly. “You haven’t shown me yourself yet. I don’t really know you. Maybe you really do want a wife, but you’re blowing smoke. Whatever you are, it’s not what you pretend to be. You’re different since we came

here, but I remember what you looked like when you shot Rory.”

He looked down with a slight smile. “They said you were a genius.” When he looked back up, his eyes were smoky, with flashes of hot embers. “So you want to see the real me, do you?”

“No.” She had a feeling that it wasn’t pretty. No one who did the things he had to would be all sweetness and light. “You want to know what I want? A boring, suburban existence. I want to fight with the cable repairman, go grocery shopping early to avoid traffic, pay a mortgage. I’ve lived a life of adventure, and you know what? It’s not all it’s cracked up to be. I want to sleep in the same bed every night with sheets that I’ve washed and not have to worry about bedding down in an alley where a drunk might stumble in to harass me. I don’t want to have to kill anyone else.” She looked away. “I’m tired of them trying to kill me.”

“I can guarantee the man who wants to hurt you is going to find it hard,” Fallon said firmly. “I’m trying to give you what privacy I can, but the security around you is very real, Rain. I’m watching out for you.”

Her eyes narrowed. “Why would you feel the need? After all, without the Cult here, I’m just another penniless immigrant.” She watched him picking his words, wondering what he suspected, what he knew.

“Perhaps I should be questioning you. You never did give me any details about your father’s murder, other than that Haunt were involved. There aren’t that many of us who could have participated. The Earth population is down to hundreds. I know the police investigated the murder and your disappearance. I’ve seen the reports, but by the time we found out and sent our own people to check into it, the scent traces were faint. I can’t guarantee that some of those Haunt haven’t since crossed over. The council knows this and wouldn’t have turned you loose here without a protector.”

“So you’re just being cautious?”

He scanned the moons for a moment. “You know, what happened to your father was overkill. He wasn’t a warrior. One, maybe two Haunt could have taken him out, but estimates are that there were at least four or five.” He considered her. “It seems like they were looking for something. What could that be, Rain?”

She rubbed her right bicep. “Maybe it died with him. What little I saw as I was getting away...” she trailed off. The memories were stark.

Fallon looked more thoughtful than pitying. “Do you know what I think, Rain? I think you do know what they wanted, and you took it with you. I also think you were pursued by more than members of the Cult.” He let that statement hang, then added, “I think whatever this thing was, you either hid it...or you still have it.”

Her eyes widened.

He shook his head slowly. “You’ve got to work on those tells, sweetheart. You’re a book. It’s a weapon, isn’t it?”

“It’s not a...” She could have swallowed her tongue, she was so chagrined by her mistake.

White teeth flashed in a predator’s smile. “Not a weapon. Are you sure? Men do kill for them.”

A growl of vexation vibrated in her throat. “Not your business, Fallon.”

“Things that can be used against my people are my business. So?”

“You’ve been trying to gain my trust. That’s what this has been about. That’s why you

seduced me.” If she couldn’t dodge him, she’d go on the attack.

He shook his head, but remained relaxed. “While I’m not above those kind of tactics, no. I wanted to see what it would be like. Happily, it was all I expected.” His teeth flashed again.

She snarled. “If I wanted to make a weapon, I’d test it on you first. I haven’t made any...yet.”

He shrugged. “Why don’t you just show it to me and end the battle? Why all the secrecy?”

“Because it’s mine. Because it’s none of your business! Not the council’s, not yours. Got it? It’s mine.” She didn’t like his pushing, didn’t want to think about giving up the Bell. It wouldn’t help anything.

Fallon was relentless. “Is the secrecy worth risking your father’s murderers going free?”

“If I knew anything about that, I’d come clean. I don’t. You werewolves all look alike to me.” She was going to lose her temper, so she left. Oddly, he didn’t follow her to her room. Maybe he knew she would be easy enough to find when he was ready to interrogate her again. This reprieve couldn’t last.

Anxiety made her restless, and pacing her small room didn’t help. She needed out, so she threw on some jeans, a navy sports bra and a long sleeved, black shirt. Dressed for success, she scaled her garden wall.

She wasn’t trying to escape the Dark Lands. It was freezing cold on the other side of the gate, assuming she could even find it. Her sense of direction sucked. Even if she could follow the snow machine tracks back, she’d freeze long before she reached civilization.

No, she just needed a break from company, especially Fallon’s. Crossing the grassy spot behind the wall, she took a straight line toward the looming shape of an obstacle course she’d seen in the distance that morning. At the time it had been swarming with Haunt, but now it stood abandoned at the edge of the park.

Rolling her neck, she jumped up and grabbed one of the dangling ropes. Wrapping the rope around one leg and holding it with her heels, she climbed up hand over hand to the top beam. Walking across was easy, she’d always had excellent balance and no fear of heights. She climbed down the cargo net and then sprinted over to the pole at the end, climbing it like a palm tree. The next bit was harder, a series of poles spaced at two-foot intervals, and not in a straight line. Pretending they were stepping stones, she paced across them, her carriage straight and confident. To dismount, she grabbed the hand bar and slid down the line, over an open pit filled with water.

Enjoying the challenge, she slithered, shinnied and hopped at full speed, then sprinted back to the beginning of the course and did it all again.

About the fourth run through, she started to tire. It was late and she’d been running a marathon of sorts for the better part of a year. She turned back toward the garden, and froze. She scented Haunt on the air. There, to her right.

Her nose and ears were keener in human form than when she changed, oddly enough. Unfortunately, it wasn’t keen enough to distinguish individual Haunt scents. She looked in the direction of the smell, but couldn’t see anything, even with her superior night vision. Whoever it was, they hadn’t bothered her yet.

Breathing deeply to ward off panic, paced toward her garden. Now that her senses

were attuned, she could tell there was more than one following her, to her right, left and behind. Brilliant. She'd have to sprint for it if they moved in, and she'd already used up precious adrenaline.

Reaching into her pocket, she casually removed a little toy of hers and closed her eyes as she held it up. A brilliant flash lit up the darkness as she broke the modified glow stick, wiping out the night vision of those following her. Opening her eyes, she sprinted the distance to the garden, leaping obstacles as she ran. Vaulting up, she grabbed the top of the wall and swung over, hitting the ground running. She threw open her patio door and dashed in...and muffled a shriek as the lights turned on.

"You do realize that you just blinded your security detail."

"Fallon," she gasped, blinking at him warily.

"I can tolerate your sneaking out at night if you really must, but not your incapacitating your protection. What did you use on them?"

She looked at her hand dumbly, then recovered and shoved it behind her back. "Just a little glow stick."

"Give it here." He held out his hand.

"No. It's used up, anyway."

One minute she had the stick behind her back, the next he had it, leaving her blinking with his speed. "Hey!"

He examined the glow stick and stuck it in his pocket. "You said you didn't make weapons."

"That's an overgrown flashlight."

"You just blinded three of my men with it. Had they been human, it would have been permanent. As it is, they'll be days healing."

"Lucky them," she said flippantly. "How was I to know I wasn't running for my life?"

He regarded her steadily. "Let's get some ground rules straight. When you want to go out at night, you tell me or my head of security; I'll introduce you. That way we can avoid your panicking and doing something rash. How many of these things do you have?" He raised the hand holding the spent glow stick.

She shrugged. "I can make as many as I want."

Fallon sighed. "If we didn't already have similar technology, I'd tell you to patent it. In another situation, I would applaud your quick thinking. As it is, take care not to hurt the people who care for you. You're not an island anymore." He left.

Disconcerted by his quiet words, she sat down in a chair. Great. Now she felt bad. Well, how was she supposed to know it hadn't been the bad guys chasing her? Those poor sods probably had families.

Disgruntled, knowing she'd sleep poorly anyway, she sat around and tried to think of something to make amends.

Fallon paused in drinking his coffee, one brow raised. Malian had just delivered a piece of paper with a complex schematic. He had to smile as he read the messy handwriting across the top. Rain had designed a night vision goggle to protect his Haunt's eyes from sudden flashes.

So that was how geniuses apologized. A simple 'I'm sorry' would have done. Apparently her mind worked differently. A point to remember.

"Something funny, my lord?"

Fallon smirked at his head of security and handed over the paper.

Rykarr studied it, and laughed. "Interesting apology. I'd hire her, if I were you."

Fallon slanted him a glance and went back to his coffee. "You would, wouldn't you? She's a handful."

"Beauty, though."

That earned him another look. "You're looking for me to fall in love and settle down, aren't you? I plan to take her on, but I'm not in love yet."

"Matter of time with that one." To look at him, you wouldn't think Rykarr was a romantic. He looked like a mercenary with his gunmetal gray hair and black eye patch. Even a Haunt couldn't heal all injuries.

"A bottomless well of interesting turns, I'll admit. That's largely her appeal."

"Not her fetching hazel eyes. I understand. Her mind is exactly what I'd pursue, too." An old veteran who'd served his father and taught Fallon much of what he knew, he got away with a lot of cheek.

Fallon just smiled. Rykarr could fish all he liked, he wasn't going to get a bite. "How are her replacement soldiers doing?"

"Much warier than the last batch. Any idea what tricks she has left?"

"Expect anything." Her room had already been searched, but they hadn't found anything suspicious. After the glow stick experience, he wasn't sure they would recognize trouble if they saw it. She liked to disguise her tricks.

Must have a thing for secret agents.

He did like the way her mind worked. Combined with the British flavored accent, she more than held his interest. While he wouldn't mistake that interest for love, it was growing. It was inevitable, and he planned to take her down with him. Getting her there, though... It would help if she trusted him.

She didn't trust him. Rain unscrewed the housing from a broken communication device and set it down in the clockwise pattern she'd started with the screws. Malian had rustled up an entire laundry basket of defunct and broken devices, plus a rather nice tool kit. If Rain had been the one paying her, she'd have given her a raise. Instead, she'd praised her ingenuity and sent her out for a list of components, chemicals and lunch. She wondered how long it would take before Fallon showed up to comment on her budding lab.

Not that she was cooking up anything dangerous right now. If she had been, she'd have hidden it among the junk pile, fully expecting him to poke around. The best way to hide something was in plain sight, which is why she'd attached the Bell to a flat gold collar she'd had Malian find. Actually, she'd requested that Malian find something inexpensive like beads or leather to hang the pendant from. From the weight of the necklace, she didn't think it was made of gold-plated nickel. It looked good, though she'd had to wear one of the dressier outfits Fallon had purchased for her to make it blend in. At least the amber silk tunic and harem pants were comfortable.

As she was pondering the probability of ruining the hardwood floor if she started messing with chemicals, there came a knock on the door. "It's open."

Fallon walked in and frowned at her table full of junk. "Malian requested a soldering gun for you."

"Yes. I'll pay you back. I'm planning to construct a levitating solar light with some of

these spare parts. It should sell well.”

He waved that off. “This room isn’t meant to be a hobby shop. I’ll get you a proper workroom set up. If nothing else, you’ll need more tables.” He surveyed the spare parts spilling off the table, scattered on the floor and overflowing a basket with a frown. “Make a list of what you’d like to have and I’ll see it set up: books, tools, materials... whatever. I’d rather you had a safe and comfortable working environment than be forced to make do with the kitchen table and a fingernail file.”

Stunned at his generosity, she stared at him. Suspicious moisture burned her eyes, and she had the alarming urge to run over and hug him. He probably had no idea what he’d just done for her. “Really?” she whispered.

Slow and confident, his smile lit up her heart. “I don’t need to stifle your mind, sweetheart. It’s one of the sexiest things about you.”

That did it. She got up and crushed him in a hug. After all, he’d broken the touch barrier when he’d nearly made love to her. Like a little girl suddenly shown affection, she seemed to look for an excuse to touch him. “Thank you,” she said, strangling on the emotion. If he didn’t stop it, she was going to fall in love with him.

He laughed as if surprised, then returned the hug, stroking her back. “Here I thought it would be difficult to convince you to go sailing with me. Will that count as part of your thank you?”

She reached up and pulled his head down for a kiss. There was nothing chaste about it. He took over and seemed to get serious enjoyment from it, then reluctantly raised his head. “Mm. Hold that thought, honey. I promise we’ll get back to it on the boat. Ready?”

The boat turned out to be a thirty-five foot sailboat with blue and gold sails. Rain gaped when she saw it. “Are you sure you know how to drive this thing?”

He laughed and handed her aboard the gleaming white vessel. “It’s called sailing when you’re in a boat. Do you like it?”

“It’s pretty. What are we fishing for today? Tell me it resembles fish.”

He dropped a fast kiss on her lips. “It resembles fish. Ready?”

The waters were calm and they dropped anchor in the bay, within distant sight of the Citadel. Fallon baited his hook and tossed it over the side, fixing his pole in the special holder attached to the rail. “Now then, here comes my favorite part of fishing.” He leaned over and kissed her.

Her hand loosened on the rod. He’d done something to her with his offer of a lab of her own. It wasn’t just the generosity, it was the thoughtfulness of the gesture. He was so easy with his affection, so open handed. If she did ever marry him...

She pulled away, startled by her thoughts. Breathing raggedly, she looked back at her pole.

He brushed a kiss on her temple and worked over to her ear. “So pretty,” he murmured. “You make me burn from the inside out.”

“I think...”

He placed one long finger against her lips. “If you’re about to make a comment about me and another woman, I promise you’ll unleash that hidden side you keep wondering about.”

She shut her mouth.

“Better. Let’s try this again.” This kiss was longer, more satisfying. Hot and restless.

“I got a bite!” She grabbed for the pole. It had almost been jerked out of her hands.

“Throw it back,” he suggested.

“Are you nuts? Quick, get the net!”

He sighed, but helped her haul forty-five pounds of thrashing, slippery fish on board.

“Call it a day?” he asked hopefully after the fish had been stored in the live well.

“No way! I’m on a roll now.”

Unfortunately for him, she was. He let her haul in three more monster fish before declaring she’d caught her legal limit.

She was beginning to think he didn’t have much use for fishing.

She smiled at the wind in her face as he steered them back. “We’ll have to do this again soon.”

Fallon grunted.

“You know what we should do? We should build a fire on the beach and cook the fish over the coals. What leaves do you have that are edible?”

“We could let my cook do it, too. He does a great grilled fish.”

She frowned. “I’ll compromise. We’ll set up a grill in my garden and eat it out there. I’m good at barbeque. I know you have sweet potatoes here, and we’ll cook a couple of those, too. You can have your cook do a side dish and dessert.”

He smirked. “I had no idea you were so domestic.”

“Well, I am letting you contribute something, even if you have to pay someone else to cook it. After all, I did catch all the fish.”

“I provided the boat.”

“Doesn’t count.”

“How do you figure?”

“I’ll think of a reason,” she promised.

He laughed.

## CHAPTER 7

They set up the picnic in her garden. The wok-like grill on the tripod slowly baked their dinner as they lounged on the blanket by the light of the triple moons. Rain considered them as she sipped her dream flower wine. “Can you ever see the stars? There’s all this light.”

“Sometimes. They have different cycles, but we actually have a few days each month with only one moon.”

“Wow. Must be hard to have much of an observatory. Who named this place the Dark Lands, then?”

“Someone with a taste for drama. Did you know the elders arrived early? Their party is tomorrow afternoon.”

She was silent. While she didn’t want to go, it was the best way to get answers.

“Even if you don’t want to celebrate for their sake, you should go for your own. There will be other women there, and it would be good for you to get out of your room once in a while and make friends.”

“I don’t socialize well.”

“Practice helps.”

She waved that off. “You haven’t seen me discuss the wonders of computer hacking or the thrill of magnetics with a room full of bored women before. They don’t care about

science and I don't care about waxing. You see the problem."

His teeth flashed in a grin. "Discuss men. That's always common ground."

"Not when I agree with the man half the time, and say so. Don't look so surprised, I loved my dad. You said he wasn't a 'warrior', but I thought he was something much better. He was a good father."

Fallon grew serious. "I didn't mean to disrespect him. I regret I never had a chance to meet him. He must have been remarkable; after all, he raised you."

A moody sigh was her answer to that. When he looked as if he'd pursue the subject, she got up to check on dinner. "It's done. Get it while it's hot." Perfectly cooked, moist and flaky, the fish went well with the lemon rice pudding and crisp vegetable salad Fallon's cook had contributed. Finished, she lay back on the blanket with a sigh of contentment.

A tactical error.

Fallon's head appeared in less than a minute, blocking out the moons. "Hello."

She turned her head aside to avoid his kiss. It landed on her cheek instead. "Fallon, I'm full."

"Okay. No pressure on your stomach, I promise." He moved her hand up to nibble her fingers.

"I don't think...hey..." He'd popped her pinky into his mouth and was sucking on it. Maybe she'd had too much wine, or was too relaxed, but she didn't feel motivated to put up a serious protest.

He slowly released her finger and started on the next. By the time he was done, she was in a very receptive frame of mind.

"I want to pamper you tonight," he said, reaching for a little box she hadn't noticed before. He opened the top, then set it so she couldn't see inside. When she sat up to look, he kissed her, distracting her with slow, persuasive heat. While she was still dazed, he lifted her tunic off, baring her to the waist. Except for her necklace, of course, but that wasn't hiding anything.

Automatically, her hands rose to hide her breasts.

"No, no. That's not how this game is played. Lie back." He eased her down to the blanket and put her hands by her side, holding them there for a moment. "Keep them there." His gaze was appraising, frankly appreciative, and she had to close her eyes in embarrassment. Why was she letting him do this?

"Now, then." Her eyes popped open as he moved closer, a small brush in his hand.

"Close your eyes again. This is eye shadow."

"You're doing my makeup?" she asked in puzzlement. "Why do I have to be naked for that?"

"Just close them," he said patiently.

He might be calm, but she was ready to jump with sizzling awareness. "Y-you know, I haven't done this before. How 'bout you give me back my shirt?"

"The sensual tension is part of the pleasure," he murmured, stroking her cheek with a soft brush.

"How can you even see what you're doing in the moonlight?"

"I can see. Make a kiss with your lips. Mm. I do love deep red lipstick on you. Such full, sweet lips." He put away the lipstick and got out a nail file. "Give me your hand."

She was beginning to understand this was going to be a slow torture session. Instinct

made her keep her newly polished fingers flat on the ground, even though she desperately wanted to curl them, or use them to shield her breasts. Her nipples were stiff with tension, desperately hoping for his attention. It was all she could do to keep her hips still.

He glanced at them and smiled. "Ready for a little nipple rouge? It will stain them a deep red to match your lips for several days. Hold still, we don't want to stain your pretty white skin." Over her uncertain murmurings, he painted her nipples, taking his time.

By the time he got to the second one, she liked the way he thought.

"Glitter cream," he said, rubbing a new form of torment between his palms. "We need to spread this all over." He started at her neck, thoroughly massaged her breasts and rubbed her belly. By the time he removed her pants, she was ready for them to go. When he filled his hands with her butt and lifted and kneaded it, she felt sure she knew what was coming, and she was ready for that, too.

Instead, he massaged his way down her legs, taking his time with her feet and toes. Then he got out the polish again.

"You've got to be kidding," she muttered, leaning back and closing her eyes. The man would kill her.

A perfectionist, he took his time, then deliberately closed the bottle and put it away.

Here it comes, she thought.

Instead, he took what she thought was a necklace out of the box. "This is a virgin's belt," he said, showing it to her. It had smooth gold links and a string of dangling pearls hanging from it. The first few pearls were medium sized, but there was a large one hanging at the end. "Plant your feet and lift your hips for me."

She obeyed, shuddering with the feel of the night air on her hot, wet center. She was so damp she was dripping, and had been for some time. That had never happened to her before.

First he fastened the links around her waist. While her legs were spread and open, he dangled the pearls between her legs, then popped the big one inside her.

She collapsed on her back in shock and reached for it.

"Leave it!" he ordered her, and she'd never heard that tone from him before. Shocked, she stared at him. "But..."

"Leave it," he said more calmly. "It's getting you ready for me. Close your legs and squeeze. Feel what it does to you? Go ahead and squirm. Feel how the strands tighten against your peak? Feel how they rub? It's pressing against the special spot inside you, is going to make you climax at any minute."

As if to prove his words, she came right then, lifting off the blanket.

He smiled savagely and stripped off his clothes. "Leave it!" he ordered her again when she tried to stop the special torture. He took her hands in his and flattened her body to the ground, holding her legs together with his own. "Do you want me yet?" he snarled in her ear.

This was the side of him she hadn't seen before, the one she'd feared...and wanted. He wasn't playing games now, wasn't blowing smoke.

She knew what it would mean for him to take her virginity. Her father had explained that once Haunt couples joined flesh, it was forever. Fallon really was going to take her to wife...and he had the means to make her desire him. No court would annul a marriage consummated in mutual passion.

The pearl between her legs pressed again on that special spot, making her lift off the

blanket with a hot scream.

Fallon muttered something jealous sounding and pulled it out.

She whimpered at its loss.

“I have something better,” he growled, and spread her legs. Suddenly there was fullness, a sweet hardness.

She decided she liked it. “More.” Her bright red nails flexed on his back.

She felt him smile against her neck. “Anything for the lady.”

It burned, it hurt...but there was just enough pleasure to make her want his invasion. He was big and hard, and at the moment, everything she wanted in the world.

So she let him ride her, let him fill the tight hollow between her legs as he tortured her mouth with kisses. He was sweetly savage, controlled yet dominate until the end, when the control slipped completely and he rode her fiercely, throwing his head back as he roared his own climax.

She lay in bed later that night, tucked in the hollow of Fallon’s arm. He’d carried her limp body inside and bathed her, then taken her again in the tub after crushing the pearl. It was symbolic, he said. Nobody was ever going to enter her body again but him.

She very nearly let him have her a third time, just for that.

Promising to get to it after her body had a chance to heal, he’d kissed her and carried her to the bed. Now she lay there, wondering how she’d ever gotten to this place.

She’d always known the man was dangerous. Exhausted, she slid into sleep. Tomorrow would take care of itself.

Rain awoke to wine and flower petals. Brushing a petal from her cheek, she surveyed the bed strewn with pink and white botanical confetti with sleepy surprise. “Are we having a party?”

Fallon sat on the edge of the bed, clad only in his black pants. “I felt a celebration was in order.” When she blushed, he added mischievously, “Are you very sore?”

Avoiding his eyes as her face got hotter, she brushed the petals from her lap. “If you’re looking for an encore, then yes, I’m pretty sore.”

He smiled. “Good thing I filled the tub, then. I also put some healing herbs in it.”

Risking a glance, she asked dryly, “In a hurry, are you?”

“With you, always.” He held a white silk robe out to her and helped her into it. “Unfortunately, we do have a party to attend later, and I have to introduce you to my mother.” He said it offhand, like an afterthought.

Her eyes snapped to his. “Your mother? I didn’t even know you had one!”

They’d stopped at the tub, and he whisked off her robe with quick efficiency. “Didn’t want to jinx the deal.”

Loathe to stand around naked in front of him, she slid into the water. “Yeah, but you could have dropped a clue! How am I supposed to face the woman, knowing that I just found out about her hours before I met her?” Knowing what she’d just spent the night doing with the woman’s son. Yikes!

“I wouldn’t worry about it. She’s been nagging me for years to marry, so she’ll be delighted about you. Oh, she’ll scold me, but she’ll take to you like a duck to water.” He sat on the edge of the tub and trailed his fingers in the water. “She’ll probably start in about grandchildren right away.”

Rain opened her mouth, then closed it, thinking before she spoke. “We talked about that.”

“We did, and I still feel the same. I’m an expert at circumventing her schemes, so just follow my lead. Direct opposition just strengthens her, I warn you.”

“Great. A controlling mother-in-law,” Rain muttered, sinking further into the water. Whatever herbs he’d put in the bath were invigorating, just the thing for what was sounding like a tough day.

“It’s not that bad. Like I said, she’ll love you. I’ll be the one who will suffer if you two ever join forces against me. I don’t get any sleep as it is.” He sent a smug look her way, and his eyes slid to the clear water.

She sank up to her chin and crossed her arms over her chest. “Go away. Make yourself useful and order some breakfast or something.”

He laughed and dropped a kiss on her hair. “See? It’s started already.”

She wasn’t laughing an hour later as Fallon swept into his mother’s apartment, one arm firmly anchored around Rain as if to prevent her from running. She might have too, but he shut the door too quickly.

Apparently his mother, Lady Portae, had been forewarned. She hurried up to Rain with a cry of delight, enfolding Rain so deeply in her plump arms that Rain felt she was drowning in her mother-in-law’s perfumed bosom. “My dear girl!” Mercifully, Portae released her and held her back at arm’s length, examining her with hungry eyes. “So you’re the clever girl that finally snared my Fallon.” Her eyes teared, and she quickly applied a handkerchief. “Come in and tell me all about it.” Her brilliant purple robe swished against Rain’s side as she linked arms and led Rain to a place of honor on a flowered sofa.

As Fallon joined her on the couch, Lady Portae sank down on the one opposite. A tea set and refreshments were waiting on the table between them. Apparently Fallon’s mother was prepared for a lengthy visit. “Pour us some tea, Fallon. We have so much to talk about.”

Most of the talking consisted of Portae, (she’d insisted on Rain calling her that, since she couldn’t bring herself to call Portae mother) grilling them for the story of how they met, fell in love, and how soon they intended to produce grandchildren.

With frequent glances at Fallon, Rain edited and hedged, leaving out the parts that weren’t fit for company. Eyes sparkling, Fallon supplied the bits where she’d tried to run away, the rat. It was hard to resent him, though. He’d dressed to impress today, and his loose trousers and gold trimmed tunic, cut in the Chinese style, made the gold of his queued hair all the more striking. While she wasn’t one to drool in public, she caught herself dwelling on his beautiful green eyes more than once.

Portae smiled as she sipped her tea. “I’m so grateful you changed her mind, Fallon. I can see you’re looking impatient, though, so I’ll stop interrupting your honeymoon. I can’t wait to speak to my friends! Lady Vectrex will be so jealous! She’s been trying to get her son married off forever.”

Fallon just smiled and kissed his mother’s cheek. “Don’t forget the party this afternoon.”

“As if I could,” Portae said fondly. “It isn’t everyday my son is honored for serving his country. I’m looking forward to it.”

Rain waited until the door had closed behind them before saying, “You didn’t mention that you were being honored.”

He shrugged. “It’s nothing. How about a light lunch before we get ready? There’ll be food there, but I’m starved.”

“How can you be hungry? You just got done eating an entire plate of cookies at your mother’s!”

“You call that food? I need something with meat.”

They passed too close to a pair of Haunt guards, making Rain sneeze.

“You haven’t been taking your medicine, have you?”

She frowned in annoyance, ignoring the guilt his frown triggered. “I’ll take some when we get to my room.”

“Which is now my suite,” Fallon informed her. “I had Malian transfer your clothes over there this morning. We’ll move your tools and such once your workroom is finished.”

She wasn’t sure how she felt about that. Moving in with Fallon was weird, even though she knew that they were married according to his customs. Not only had she not expected to ever marry, she’d certainly never expected to end up with someone like Fallon. While he did listen to her, his tendency to take charge was disconcerting. She had a feeling she’d spend a lot of time in her workshop, distracting herself from the complications of living with someone like him.

The truth was, she hadn’t thought at all. She’d just cruised along, too shell shocked to think anything through. It had just been easier to let someone else do the thinking. At the time that someone had been Fallon. Time would tell if she’d live to regret her complacency, but honestly, she wasn’t together enough to do anything different yet.

They didn’t make love before the party. She told herself she hadn’t been looking forward to it, anyway. Instead, they talked, and Fallon massaged her feet until she fell asleep on the couch. He woke her with a kiss that almost made them late and then hurried her into a striped sarong of olive, burgundy and black. While not what she would have chosen, together with the sleeveless black top, it looked far better than she expected.

“You know, these clothes keep appearing in my closet...” she said tentatively as Fallon helped her dress her hair.

“Do you like them?” He closed a hairclip over the back of her hair and brushed the loose ends off her shoulders.

Feeling her way, she said carefully, “Yes, but I don’t need so many.”

He wrapped his arms around her from behind and breathed in her hair. “It pleases me to give them. Permit me to provide for my wife.”

She frowned and turned around.

He stopped her with a finger to her lips. “We haven’t talked about money, Rain, but I have a lot. If you want to spend the rest of your life lazing on the grass, watching the birds, you may. However, I know you’re both smart and driven, so if you want to turn your talents toward helping others, you may. Spend every dime you make on charity or public works if you like. It’s what I did with the ambassador position, in a way. You’re in the position to do a lot of good, if you so choose.

“However, don’t begrudge me the chance to spoil you if I like. You’re invited to do the same for me.”

She couldn’t help but smile. “You want a closet full of dresses?”

He kissed her nose. "I was thinking along the lines of you being a light in my home, but if buying me dresses makes you happy..." They laughed.

What he'd said about her doing good stuck with her. She'd never thought much about what she'd do if she had the wealth to do anything she chose. She definitely didn't want to spend her days lying around because she'd get fat for sure, but she'd never seen herself as working in the public eye. Maybe she could be an anonymous donor or something. Surely there were worthy causes out there that could use an influx of cash. There always were.

Her thoughts served as a good distraction as they entered the chamber where the party was being held. Once they'd passed between the Haunt guarding the door, she stiffened. The glittering crowd within daunted her, unused as she was to company. Even when Fallon linked arms with her and sent her an encouraging smile, it still took courage to step into the crowd.

Right away a mother and her three young daughters swarmed them. Thanks to the slow aging processes, it took a little observation to tell who was which, for the mother didn't look a lot older than her children. It helped when Fallon introduced them. "Rain, this is Lady Septis and her daughters, Justice, Fleur and, ah...forgive me, I've been gone a long time."

"Jael," Lady Septis said with a smile. "I don't believe you've met before, as she has so recently come of age." She turned the smile, a trifle too bright, on Rain. "And you are Lord Fallon's new wife! Word has traveled fast. Congratulations on your new alliance. But you must find it lonely here in the Dark Lands. You're from away, aren't you? You must come and visit us at your leisure. It's never too late to make new friends."

Rain felt a twinge of suspicion. She wasn't the type to make friends easily, and that overdone smile of Lady S's made her uncomfortable. Peeking at Fallon's easy expression didn't help, either. Sometimes she hated the façade of his.

The next lady who accosted them helped Rain to solidify the sensation she was having of something wrong. Young and bouncing, with a husband in tow, the girl nearly smothered Rain with overtures of friendliness. "Do you like shopping? Oh, but of course you do!" The girl laughed giddily. "We should go together sometime and have lunch. I know this wonderful little shop..."

Rain frowned, her suspicions now knee deep. The girl was social climbing, and while the Rain didn't consider herself of any importance, she did resent friendship offered under false premises. When the girl started to trail off, her face showing uncertainty in the wake of Rain's cool expression, Rain said slowly, "You have something green in your teeth."

Horror widened the girl's eyes. She slammed a hand over her mouth and sent a chagrined glance at her husband, who'd been startled into peering at her.

The unfortunate lady's hand dropped, then flashed back up to her mouth. "Oh, I'm sorry! I didn't realize... Come on, Gari! We have to fix it."

Rain did feel a tiny stab of guilt as the girl rushed off.

Fallon looked at her with reproach, but there was laughter lurking in his eyes.

She shrugged irritably and said in her defense, "She was...well, I'd swear she was brown nosing for some reason."

He shrugged. "Get used to it. That one isn't all that bad once you get past the gushing, though." He lowered his voice and murmured in her ear, "The thing about a sword, love,

is you have to know when to use it. You possess an especially powerful one. Try not to annihilate too many defenseless young things.”

She sighed, feeling too old for this kind of torture. “I’m getting the impression you’re somewhat admired here.” These people surely weren’t sucking up to them to get closer to her.

Fallon laughed.

The laughter attracted his mother. Rain wasn’t sure if that was bad or good, because while she at least knew that Portae liked her for her good sense in marrying her son, she also proceeded to introduce her to everyone in sight, dragging her around the room with dizzying speed. Her traitor husband quickly found a group of friends to hide behind, chatting with them while his mother showed her off, occasionally gesturing to Fallon for emphasis.

To Rain’s relief, she got to sit down at a table reserved for Portae, herself and Fallon while those being honored, including Fallon, took turns making speeches at the head of the room. Grateful to be in the shadows, Rain sat back and studied the two elders who were also retiring.

Elder Azion took his turn at the pulpit, looking more like Sean Connery than ever. Uncertain of his guilt, she sat there torn between hating him and giving him the benefit of the doubt.

Elder Rite was easier to hate, though she could prove nothing yet. Middle aged like her father would have been, a fact that made her bitterly resent him, his hair was still black and his eyes still a piercing blue. He wasn’t handsome, but he was big, even bigger than Fallon, and built like a concrete pylon. That black hair gave her pause. There’d been no black Haunt the night her father was killed, or she didn’t think there’d been; it had been a confusing night.

She was going to have to speak to them. Her guts clenched at the thought, emotion riding high.

Her chance came later, as people were starting to clear out. She’d told Fallon that she wanted to speak to the men, then whiled away the time as best she could with a group of Portae’s friends.

“...so then I made his house glow in the dark,” she related to the amused group of matrons. The story was about a bully who’d teased her about being a geek when she was a kid. The boy had made her life miserable on the bus, and she’d repaid him by making the neighborhood think his house was haunted. “I also made howling noises start up when anyone walked up the drive. He never bothered me again.” She smiled with satisfaction as the ladies laughed.

“I’ll have to mind my manners around you then, young lady,” a gruff voice boomed from behind her. “Obviously you make a dangerous enemy.”

Rain turned and smiled coolly at Elder Rite. Heart pounding, she offered him the barest of nods in respect to his status. “You wouldn’t do that, would you, Elder?”

His heavy brows rose. “Still taunting a bear with a stick, young Rain? I see marriage hasn’t taken care of your recklessness.”

“I learned when to take chances after my father died.” Her heart was in her throat, waiting to see a glimmer of guilt, something that would convict him once and for all.

Instead his face softened. “I am sorry for your loss. Your father was a good man. There should have been something we could have done to find justice for you.”

To her horror, she felt tears prick her eyes. He was making her feel young again, and she hated it. She never wanted to be a child again. "I survived."

He sighed. "You did well to marry Fallon, child. He'll make you happy." With a nod of farewell, he was gone.

Well, that sucked. Disgusted with her emotions and the pitying looks she was getting, she turned her face away while she regained control. Happily, the ladies took pity on her and took up their conversation again.

She'd been aware of Fallon nearby, and no doubt he'd caught their conversation. By the carefully neutral expression on his face as he came up to them with Elder Azion, she'd swear he had.

Azion didn't seem affected by the somber mood. "Lady Rain! I'm happy you seem to have settled so well into your new home. What a pleasure to see that the Dark Lands held something for you after all."

Pompous, she thought. Certain he was right. "So it seems." Remembering her purpose, she bared her teeth at him in imitation of a smile. "Fallon is even helping me to set up a new lab. I plan to jump into my work right where I left off. The first thing I plan to do is build a new Bell."

Azion's eyes gleamed. She would have missed it if she hadn't been looking.

"Really? I hadn't known you were into musical instruments."

She smiled like a wolf. "It also plays music." Almost daring him, she reached up and stroked the Bell pendant at her neck. His eyes followed it, glued themselves to the golden sphere.

Almost strangled, he said, "What a lovely piece of jewelry, my dear. Did you make it?"

She just smiled, that cold, hard smile that said, *I've got you, you murdering bastard*. She could feel that subtle change in her eyes, the one that meant they were glinting gold. For once, she didn't care. She wanted Azion to know she hated him.

Fallon stepped into the silence, taking her arm. "My wife has many talents. If you'll excuse us, Elder, ladies." He steered Rain out of the room at a slow, deliberate pace.

"That was stupid, Rain. Azion is a powerful man," he said once they were alone in the hall. Though his voice was quiet, the anger carried clearly.

"He murdered my father," she hissed, though softly. "It's no accident he's 'retired' now. That bastard followed me to the Dark Lands, and he wants to finish what he started. Keeping my mouth shut won't make me safe."

"You don't know for certain it's not Rite. Just because someone is nice to you, doesn't make him innocent."

"Don't I know it. But tell me, how many Elders who could have been involved just coincidentally arrive here within days of me?"

He was silent for a moment. "We're going to raise the security around you. It's going to be close and visible."

"Telling him you know there's danger? I say we let him try to come after me and pick him off. I've outwitted him before."

"No."

"Reconsider. This is a good opportunity."

He looked at her, and this time his eyes were gleaming gold. "I said no." Slow, deliberate, his words held the weight of finality.

A muscle ticked in her jaw. She was going to have to get creative.

## CHAPTER 7

Fallon wasn't going to give her the chance to do something stupid. The minute they entered his rooms, he summoned Rykarr. Rain listened with interest as Fallon brought his captain up to speed.

Rykarr heard Fallon out and started issuing orders over his com unit.

Rain slouched in her chair and walked a coin through her fingers.

Fallon felt a burst of anger as he watched her. She was willing to put herself at risk for the sake of revenge. Justice, she called it. Maybe it was, and overdue at that, but she didn't need to get herself killed to obtain it. They had plenty of time, and he was patient. They could see this thing resolved easily enough.

"Who's the head honcho around here, Fallon? The guy in charge of justice?"

Surprised out of his plans, Fallon focused on her. "Jayems, Lord of the Haunt."

She considered. "You have an in with him? Seeing as how you were an ambassador for him?"

"He's my cousin," he said cautiously, wondering where she was going with this.

"I'd like to talk to him." She sat up, closed her fingers around the coin. She looked at him expectantly.

The men looked back at her.

"Okay, but why?"

"I want to tell him what's going on...and a few more details you don't know about all this."

Fallon frowned, feeling an unwelcome twinge of jealousy. "You can't tell me first?"

She shrugged. "Two birds, one stone, you know? Introduce me to him and I'll let you in."

Let him in. Interesting phrasing. "Rykarr should be there, too."

"Okay."

Fallon looked at her a moment more. "All right. I'll see if he's available."

Rain was a lot more nervous than she let on. Fallon didn't say much as they walked toward Lord Jayems's suite, an escort of Haunt before and behind. Unfortunately, the combination was making her eyes water with the urge to sneeze. The medicine must be wearing off. The only good thing about it was that it was hard to be fearful in the middle of a sneezing attack.

Fallon looked at her as they approached a set of double doors guarded by still more Haunt. "You didn't take your last dose of medicine, did you?"

She held her finger on her upper lip, trying to fight off another sneeze. Just as the doors opened, she sneezed powerfully, then three more times in succession.

Rykarr chuckled and moved slightly left, out of the line of fire.

Muttering something, Fallon led her to a chair and sat her down. Sniffing, determined not to lose it again, Rain looked up...and sneezed again.

"Excuse me," she said to the dark haired man standing in front of her. "I'm allergic to dog fur."

His stern mouth twitched. "I see. How uncomfortable for you."

"You've no idea," she muttered.

Fallon sighed and introduced them. "Rain, this is my cousin, Lord Jayems, though you'll call him Jayems. All in the family, you know. You probably saw him at the ceremony, though I didn't get a chance to introduce you."

"My apologies," Jayems said gravely. "I was only there a brief time. Our daughter is ill, and I wanted to check on her and my wife."

"Nothing serious, I hope," Rain said politely.

"Just the usual childhood malaise, but she is very uncomfortable," Jayems said. He waved Fallon and Rykarr to seats and took the one behind the massive carved desk. "I was told you had something of interest to tell me?"

Rain took a deep breath. Whatever the man said, his little girl was sick enough to make him cut short his appearance at an important ceremony. He wouldn't like to spend much time dallying with her. "I think Elder Azion killed my father." She gave him the cliff notes version of her life before the murder and after. "During the murder I saw a gray Haunt. Fallon tells me that's rare."

Fallon cut a look her way. "You hadn't told me you'd actually seen the gray Haunt!"

She met his eyes. "We've got a lot of unresolved issues. Listen and you'll hear what else I didn't say." Beyond him, she saw Rykarr wince.

Fallon straightened and his nostrils widened, but he kept his peace.

She looked at Jayems, who regarded her with a curious gleam in his eye, and quoted her conversations with Rite and Azion as closely as possible. "Azion murdered my father," she finished simply.

Jayems regarded her without expression. "You've mentioned that a couple of times. What I don't know is why? What was his motive?"

She drew a deep breath and removed her necklace, slipping the Bell from its clasp. "Meet the Bell." Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Fallon staring at the thing as she passed it over to Jayems. He had to be burning up about now, either with frustration or curiosity.

Jayems examined it. "What does it do?"

She smiled. "I'd heard rumors that you wanted to try to close the gate when all the immigrants crossed over. I'll tell you now, I doubt all of them will. I wouldn't have, if I hadn't been...pushed." Out of the corner of her eye, she saw a muscle jump in Fallon's face. "There's also the problem of how to close the gate. Your site is remote, unmarked, but accidents happen."

"The volti take care of 'accidents'," Jayems said coolly, referring to the wolf-things that prowled the woods around the gate.

She shook her head. "You need a better way. The Bell can lock the gate for you. As a matter of fact, it's a gate in itself." She let the silence build.

Finally Fallon ground out, "Are you saying you could have left at any time?"

"Two problems with that. No money, for one, which slowed me up the first time. I need time and peace to build that up, and I've yet to get either."

"I gave you money this morning!" Fallon sounded as if he were chewing gravel.

"Prismatic silver is not an easy currency to convert, let alone explain," she said tersely.

"Just as well, as you were going to use it to leave me!" Fallon's eyes were glowing

gold.

“Ah...you said there was a second reason?” Jayems said, interrupting a doozy of a brewing quarrel.

A little abashed, she looked at him. “I haven’t tested it yet.”

“Ah.” He set the Bell carefully on his desk.

Fallon picked it up and looked at it. “So this is what I spent so much frustration trying to figure out.”

Rain shrugged. “If it makes you feel better, it frustrated Azion for years.”

The look he sent her throbbed with so much fury that she finally shut up. Taunting him was beginning to seem hazardous to her health.

“So,” Jayems said, drawing out the word to get their attention. “This Bell could be used for escape, theft...even murder.”

“An assassin’s dream,” Rykarr said, speaking up for the first time.

“That’s not why I made it,” Rain said with a frown.

“It’s how it’ll be used,” Rykarr answered. “I’d say it’s best left locked up in Lord Jayems’s safe.”

She smiled without humor. “Nice thought, but it doesn’t eliminate the central problem. Azion knows I can make another one any time I want. Hundreds, if I liked.”

Her words met with deafening silence.

It was almost funny, sharing the irony of her existence with three men who looked as stumped by the problem as she did.

For a moment, anyway.

“Azion will have to die,” Fallon said coldly. “I won’t tolerate his continued threat to my family.”

Surprised by that, she shot a look at him.

Jayems held up a hand. “Peace. We haven’t proved beyond doubt it was him.”

“I can’t afford to wait,” Fallon answered.

Rain let them debate, following her own lines of thought. When she’d traced them somewhere interesting, she voiced them. “What makes an object valuable? It’s rarity. In the case of technology, it’s good only until it becomes obsolete or common. One day a spy is killing for it, the next every guy in America is using it from the comfort of his couch.”

“You can’t put a Bell in every house,” Fallon argued, looking alarmed at the possibilities.

“No, not as it stands. I can modify the technology, though. Think about it,” she said, getting excited. “What have you got for transportation here? Shoe leather and pack animals, some boats. Okay, what if I made Bells for emergency or official transport, limiting their use to on world, secure sites? The Bells could be programmed as single use units, or better, single destination.”

Fallon said slowly, “Azion would still know they could function as off-world destination devices.”

She shook her head. “Not if I published the disappointing results of my off-world attempt, made it very public, stressed the local applications as if I’m trying to save face. Half the appeal of the technology is its secrecy. Once it goes public...” She let them work it out for themselves.

“All of this still leaves you lacking justice,” Jayems pointed out. “While your sighting

of a gray Haunt is incriminating for Azion, I'm told you have no scent memory. Without it, your testimony is still your word against his."

She drooped a little, thinking of that. The world sucked sometimes. "Well, Fallon was against plan A. I compromised by solving his problems instead."

When he spoke again, Jayems's voice had gentled. "You still aren't certain it works." "It'll work," she said gloomily. "I always make these things work."

Jayems looked at Fallon, who still held the Bell. "Well? Do you want to keep charge of it?"

Fallon looked at Rain. "Do you need it?"

She swallowed. She hadn't used the Bell in days, was afraid of what the withdrawal would be like. On the other hand, maybe Fallon's... attentions... would mitigate any lingering problems. Making love to him did seem to give the same sort of pleasure, only deeper and fuller.

She blushed just thinking about it. "No. Better keep it here, just in case."

Fallon studied her color and handed the Bell back to his cousin. "Very well. Are you ready to go, Rain?"

Rykarr stayed behind at Jayems's request as Fallon escorted Rain back to their suite.

She hesitated at her own door. "Would you mind? I'd like some time to myself for a while." She was feeling depressed. She hadn't meant to sacrifice her interests like that, and the backlash of emotion wasn't pleasant.

Fallon looked at her for a long moment. The dynamics had shifted between them in the last twenty minutes. Her sacrifice had done much to allay his anger. "You're certain?"

"Yeah," she said on a sigh. "I want to hang out in my cave for a bit."

A grave smile curved his mouth, but didn't last. He kissed her. "For a little while."

She shut the door to her room, alone at last. She'd meant to work on a plan B while she had the time, but found she really was too disheartened to bother. She'd been stressed for so long, it had been hard to really mourn her father. So much adrenaline and fear was bound up within the last year it was painful to look back, to examine the feelings.

All this time she thought she'd gotten past the worst, and now she discovered she'd yet to really grieve. She was afraid.

Maybe it helped to feel sorry for herself. Maybe it was a kind of letting go, giving up her dream of justice, but something about tonight's mix of emotions let the tears begin to roll. No one was chasing her. She didn't have to muffle her sobs, choke them off. For once the grief didn't hit her on a crowded bus or subway.

Once the tears began, they came in a flood. All the pent up pain came out from a full year of hiding in the dark, fearing what she was, fearing what hunted her in the night. In a way, she had Fallon to thank for that.

She'd hurt him tonight; wanted to hurt him. Part of her was angry with him for making her come here, for railroading her into a relationship she wasn't ready for. They were both going to cross some rough roads to get to a place where this marriage he'd started could work. He'd taken advantage of her, but she was to blame, too.

She hated admitting that, but she was nothing if not fair. Now, they were stuck. She was stuck, because she'd willingly given up her ticket off this planet. For what? To soothe Fallon's fear. Why had she done that?

Maybe it was because she understood fear. He had been kind to her. Maybe the only thing he felt for her was desire, but he'd been generous about sharing that, too. He didn't

make her feel used, just confused. Weak.

Maybe that's what scared her most of all.

Fallon returned an hour after he'd left. Though the lights were out, he had no trouble finding her in the moonlit shadows of the couch. He sat beside her on the cushions and traced the tracks of her tears. "Okay, now we try this my way." He kissed her gently, then scooped her up and headed for the door.

"Where are we going? I can walk," she grumped, trying to sit up. She gave up rather easily when he tightened his arms.

"Humor me. I feel like carrying you." The Haunt guard at his door opened it for them, and this time she remembered to hold her breath so she didn't sneeze.

Fallon set her gently on the bed, then knelt before her, kissed her hand. "Rain? Thank you for laying aside your own desires this once. I promise to remember it, and I hope to return the favor sometime."

She gave him a lopsided smile. "You think you'll find an opportunity? It's a rather large something."

He kissed her other hand. "Maybe I'll go for a series of small somethings." He joined her on the bed and slid his hand behind her head, holding her steady for his kiss. "For now, let me say 'thank you' the best way I can."

"Thank you, huh?" she said dizzily, when he came up for air.

He skimmed his mouth over hers. "Hm. One of the best advantages to being married is that I get to comfort you with my body."

The man knew aid and comfort, she'd give him that. Their first night together had told her to expect wildness in his bed; this night showed her what comfort was. Every caress spoke empathy, every tender kiss, love. Even if he didn't feel it, that's what came across in his touch. Could a man who made love like that feel nothing?

Later, she lay drowsing by his side, thinking nothing in particular. Compelled by a sudden urge, she turned her head and placed a kiss on his bare chest. "I love you."

His body jerked. "Come again?"

Fallon's reaction made her want to laugh. "I must, you know. Mad as you make me, I haven't kicked you out of bed yet."

He peered down at her, his brow furling as her shoulders shook. Reassured that she was laughing, he said gruffly, "Well, I am pretty lovable."

She laughed some more and made the mistake of meeting his gaze. His was serious and tender, a little troubled.

"I've never been in love before."

"You're not now," she stated. "That's all right." It wasn't, but it had to be said. She wasn't going to force him into any admissions he didn't mean.

"You're wrong about that. I'm something, but I'm not sure what yet."

She snorted and settled back down. "Well, wake me up if you figure it out. I've had a hard day."

His chest rumbled as he chuckled, but he let her sleep through the night.

The next morning dawned gloomy, and Rain was out of sorts. Fallon was off doing whatever ex-ambassadors did all day.

What she ought to have been doing was working at dumbing down her technology... er, making it more commonly useful. Saving her hide, as a bonus. Instead she moped

around, staring out the window, dallying over breakfast, taking a long bath.

Fallon hadn't been in bed when she awoke. Had she scared him with her talk of love? Well, too bad. He'd seduced her into his bed, so he could deal with what it had done to her feelings. It wasn't like she planned to get sentimental or try to psychoanalyze him or anything. She had enough problems trying to figure out what drove her.

Motivated by anger, she strolled to her rooms, holding her breath as she walked past the Haunt guarding the hall and the door to her suite. Once inside, she actually got some work done, but she never really settled. Still edgy, she gulped some of the vile allergy medicine and braved the hall. "I'm going for a walk," she said defiantly to the Haunt outside. "I need air." When none of them growled at her, she walked on, trying to ignore the pair of them trailing behind. Once she'd found a way outside, she paused in confusion. She knew that the obstacle course was straight across from her garden wall, but where was she now? She chose a path to her left, hoping it was the right direction.

There were a few people on the stone paths, but her surly expression and the Haunt soldiers trailing her must have discouraged conversation, for nobody tried to talk to her. Just as well; she wasn't in the mood for chitchat.

Once she'd thought it, she suddenly felt lonely. Great. Fallon was mucking with her head now. Fine, it was one more thing to blame on him.

Maybe it was dumb luck, but her ramblings brought her to the obstacle course. To her dismay, it was swarming with soldiers doing exercises. Even if they'd have welcomed her, she didn't want company. Muttering something foul, she stomped off toward the woods across the way. There looked to be a park off to their right and an orchard beyond that. Maybe by the time she'd done the loop she'd have worn out enough to enjoy a solitary lunch.

The park was too crowded, though by no means full. She felt exposed as curious eyes tracked her progress. It was as she entered the orchard and achieved the seclusion she'd hoped for that she began to worry. Something wasn't right. Shouldn't her bodyguards have said something by now, questioned her choice of wandering in the woods? She expected someone to appear, ready to chew her out.

A familiar pain gripped her as the change came over her, lengthening her nails, sharpening her teeth and her senses. This time she rode it out, using her nose to test the wind before the change dulled it, blessing the ears that picked up sound unavailable to mere human ears. She stood still, looking, scenting as shiny red fruit swayed gently in the breeze. Something...

Her guards picked up on her unease and looked around warily. One reached for his dagger... and she saw it. A hilt just like that, one with a pale blue stone, had been raised to smash into her father's face that night long ago. The memories slammed back like a freight train rushing through her mind, triggering the panic. With an animal snarl, she turned on her heels and ran.

She was back in the night, alone, afraid, with blood on the wind. The monsters were chasing her, would kill her like they'd killed her father. They were going to get her.

But nobody ran like Rain. Nobody had ever been able to catch her when she'd started to move; could leap as high, dodge as fast. She might not have all the fur of a full-blood, but she had all the speed, plus some. Even so, she didn't dare look back.

"Trouble! Backup! She just took off like she'd been shot from a gun. Kial's trying to catch her..."

She heard the words and put on a burst of speed. There were more of them coming now.

Ahead, she could hear the thunder of a waterfall. Water had saved her last time. She'd used a canoe to steal away, letting the water mask her scent, then docked at a waterfront restaurant and taken a cab to the bus depot, just like she'd planned with her dad. There'd be no bus today, but the water could still take her away. She ran to the head of the waterfall...

"No!" her guard yelled frantically behind her.

...and jumped without looking at the landing.

Fallon paced slowly along the river's edge, staring out over the foaming water. It was only two miles from the waterfall to the mouth of the ocean, but those two miles were half a mile wide and filled with fast, dark water full of boulders. The falls Rain had jumped from were over four stories tall and the pool at the bottom had rocks the size of Volkswagens. Things that went over that fall did not survive the drop. If by some miracle they did, the river rode over it, dragging away any slim chance for life.

Rain was dead.

They were combing the banks and boats were braving the swift currents at the ocean's mouth, but it was a formality. Nobody expected to find the body.

Her guards didn't know what had gone wrong. Kial had almost grabbed her before she'd jumped and had to be saved from overbalancing. He and his partner, Brack, were searching obsessively, unwilling to give up. They'd never lost a charge before, and to have a woman die on them like this...

Fallon looked away from them.

His companion, Keilor, both Master of Hunt and his cousin, clamped him on the shoulder. "Don't give up yet."

Fallon merely looked at him. Keilor knew the odds. As the commander of Jayems's armies, he'd seen long odds before, and he'd seen death. Today had brought another one.

Fallon hadn't expected it to hurt so much.

"Sir, they've found her!" One of Keilor's soldiers came up, holding a com unit. "One of the fishermen pulled her on board. She's hurt, but alive." News passed rapidly among the men, resulting in a few scattered cheers.

Fallon took the com unit like a sleepwalker and held it to his ear. "Hello?"

"Hello! We've got the lady and we're heading for the docks. We've already got a medic coming to meet us." There was a spate of cursing in the background, breathless and feminine. There was a pause and then the man said uncertainly, "She wants me to tell you she's fine."

"Put her on," Fallon ordered, relief making him terse. She was alive!

"Uh, I would, but she's out again."

Fallon cursed, tossed the unit to the soldier and bolted for his stag beast. The ugly reptile looked like a horse on steroids crossed with an ankylosaur, but it had speed to match its grouchy temperament, and that's what he needed.

He reached the docks in record time and had to shove his way through the crowd that had formed as news of the rescue spread.

The fishermen carefully transferred Rain to the medic's anti-gravity stretcher, wincing as she groaned.

“Watch that knee,” he advised the medics. “It’s the worst.”

“Yes, that one, idiot!” Rain gasped as the medic lightly touched the offender. She dug her nails into his hand and then let go with a groan. She shivered. Her hair was plastered with salt water and her face held a ghastly pallor. She bit her lip, causing bright beads of blood to well as they jostled the pallet.

“Hey, enough of that,” Fallon ordered her, taking her hand as they moved toward the Citadel.

Her eyes flew open to look at him. “It’s not that bad.”

“I see that.”

She tried to smother another groan. “Stupid rocks.” She muttered something incoherent and tossed her head. “That water’s cold.”

“Why did you jump?” Fallon’s throat was tight. He was afraid of the answer. If she’d tried to deliberately take her life...

“There was something wrong.”

“What?”

“Wrong...” she trailed off, breathing shallowly.

“My lord, later,” one of the medics snapped at him. “Let’s make sure she lives first.”

“I’ll live,” Rain muttered, but it was clear she wasn’t fully sensible.

They wouldn’t let him inside the operating room, so Fallon paced. Keilor joined him, keeping silent vigil as they waited for news.

“Maybe a flashback?” Fallon offered, when over half an hour had crawled by. “She has panic attacks around Haunt.”

While Keilor had not yet met Rain, he’d listened just that morning as Fallon had spilled his guts about his wife. “Maybe.”

“I know Kial and Brack are reliable. I wouldn’t have assigned them if they hadn’t been.”

“I know.”

“She’s not going to die. She’s too stubborn to die.” Fallon looked at Keilor, almost begging.

He received a glimmer of a smile. “From your description, that’s true. I’d focus on what you need to do in the future to prevent these panic attacks, if that’s what it was. It’s a dangerous habit in someone who can outrun her guard.”

Fallon blew out a breath, still amazed at that. He’d never heard of a woman being able to outrun a fully changed, adult male. If asked, he’d have sworn it couldn’t be done.

He hated learning things about Rain behindhand. All he wanted was a nice tame married life, yet what he got was fireworks going off under his feet. He certainly couldn’t let her keep jumping off cliffs! Yet he didn’t want to smother her. There had to be a way to achieve some equilibrium.

An hour after they’d taken Rain into the ER, a medic came out to get Fallon. “You can see her now,” the medic advised, “but don’t make her talk too much, and don’t get her upset. She’s lost some blood; not enough for a transfusion, but she’ll be a little weak. There’s a few cuts and bruises, a bump on the back of her head and of course, her knee. Other than that, she’s doing remarkably well, considering.” A touch of awe came into his voice. Apparently, Rain’s stunt was destined to become legend.

“What’s wrong with her knee?” Fallon asked, a little sharply. As far as he was concerned, her behavior was cause for alarm, not admiration.

“Oh, just a bad sprain. It could have been far worse.”

“Yeah? Well, stand by. I’m not done with her.” His cold words aside, Fallon was relieved to find Rain resting quietly. Apparently the painkillers were working fine.

She sent him a glance. “I’m fine. Don’t look so grim.”

He raised a brow as he took the chair next to her. “This is fine?”

She shrugged, then winced as she thought better of it. “Well, I’m not dead.”

“A near thing, but I’m glad.” He tried to hold his tongue, found he couldn’t. “There was nothing chasing you, you know.”

“Maybe,” she said cautiously.

He sighed. “What sent you off?”

She thought about it, looking uneasy. “I don’t know. We were isolated, and the woods...I just got this feeling. Then there was this blue stone in one of the Haunt’s swords, and I...” She trailed off, frustrated.

Fallon tried to contain his temper, knowing it was born of worry. “Blue gems are very, very common in our sword hilts. I could find you a dozen of them in as many minutes. Now if you’d said a red stone, I could have done something with that.”

She grunted and chose not to comment.

Chewing on the inside of his cheek to contain the scalding rebuke he longed to deliver, he took her hand instead and awkwardly stroked it. “I chose the men who guard you very carefully.”

“They’re not men,” she muttered, refusing to look at him.

It took a quick breath to keep from snapping at her. “Would you still feel that way if they took a bullet for you? Would you still despise Kial if he were bleeding out right now? Those men put their lives on the line for you! For that matter, I don’t understand your prejudice. You’re one of us.”

The medic came in just as Rain drew breath to scorch him.

“My lord? You were asked not to excite our patient. For her sake, would you please leave until you can control your temper?”

“A fine idea,” he snapped, flinging a last look at Rain. “We’ll continue this when we’re on equal footing.”

“You won’t win,” Rain said sullenly. A hot red flush rose in her cheeks, making the rest of her face dead white in comparison.

While sympathetic, Fallon also felt frustrated. He’d mistaken her acceptance of them, of their relationship, as an acceptance of who she was and the Haunt in general. Now he knew better, and he couldn’t address the problem the way he wished. When it came to his wife, he had no patience.

Keilor had remained in the waiting room, the familiarity of years perhaps, making him think Fallon would need to talk some more. He took one look at Fallon’s face and smiled sympathetically. After all, he had a wife. “Want to discuss it over a drink?”

An hour and two stouts later, Fallon was beginning to relax. “She’s stubborn, cuz. I never would have thought having a wife would be this taxing.”

“I hear you,” Keilor said, still nursing his first beer.

Fallon sighed. “It doesn’t have to be this hard. She’s just trained herself to run at every opportunity.”

“Sounds like she had reason,” Keilor said reasonably. “I’ve had vets like that. Look at some of the older soldiers, the ones who’ve really seen action. At least we give them a

chance to decompress.”

“She can’t go on like this,” Fallon insisted. “I can’t let her keep running.”

Keilor stretched out a leg, getting comfortable. “So retrain her; it works on the stags. Don’t see why you can’t recondition her to get more at ease around the things she fears.”

Fallon thought about it. Rain wouldn’t appreciate that approach, but it might work. If it kept her from leaping off cliffs, he was all for it.

## CHAPTER 8

Rain opened her eyes and found that she was alone. Lovely. She’d had unpleasant dreams and would have welcomed a distraction, even if it were Fallon’s scowling face. Not that she could blame him. She felt a creeping embarrassment that she’d thrown herself over a four-story waterfall without a good reason. She shifted and winced. She must have hit every rock in that blasted river.

The current had been fast, and she was amazed that she’d survived. There had been a couple of times she’d been sucked under and nearly drowned. Maybe somebody upstairs was watching out for her, because there was no way she should have made it out of that river.

If a higher power had saved her though, she couldn’t fathom why. Fallon was mad at her, for one. You’d think he’d have a little sympathy for his half-drowned wife.

As she lay there feeling sorry for herself, the devil himself popped in. Bearing flowers, he handed the bouquet to her and kissed her on the cheek. “Hello. How did you sleep?”

“Terrible. Why are you so happy?” He looked like a man who’d had good news. Feeling hopeful, she asked, “Did Azion die in his sleep?”

He laughed. “No. But you’re alive, the sun is shining and the medics say you’re allowed to go home. How about it? Would you rather lie on your own couch or here in the hospital?”

“It is a little boring here.”

“Great! Let me get you a chair.” He turned to go.

“Hold it! There’s nothing wrong with my one leg. Crutches will work fine.”

He raised his brows. “They said you strained your shoulder, too.”

He had her there. The stupid shoulder throbbed if she worked it and she could barely raise the thing. It was going to cost her if she insisted on walking with crutches.

However, her left shoulder was fine, and that was her lame side. “One crutch will do it.”

Fallon considered her a moment. “All right. If you want to hobble up three flights of steps, a quarter mile of flagstone paths and another quarter mile of hallways on top of that.”

She sagged into the mattress, exhausted just thinking about it. “Okay, you can bring a chair. Just this once, though.”

“Of course. Let me help you get dressed.”

Thanks to the jarring of the wheelchair, she was feeling grouchy with pain by the time they reached their rooms. The sneezing wasn’t helping, either. She couldn’t help glaring at their Haunt escort, knowing they were the source of her discomfort.

“Let me get you some medicine,” Fallon said as he helped her settle onto their couch.

She sneezed in answer and glared at him just because she could.

He grinned and got the bottle.

Once she'd eaten and napped (amazing how tiring pain could be) he settled down for a discussion. She could tell what was coming when his face got serious. She tried to head him off. "Now's not a good time."

He shook his head. "I'm not going to lose my temper. I've dealt with your near-death experience and I'll be okay now. The important thing is that I help you to cope with your fear."

"I don't need help."

"You're going to be here for a long time. We need to make you more comfortable with your surroundings and your heritage."

"My heritage died back on Earth. I'm an American citizen unlawfully transported. End of story."

"Beginning of story. Your life got more interesting, that's all. It's my job as your husband to help you with the transition."

"Is it now?" she asked sarcastically. She didn't care for his cheerful attitude or the feeling that he was looking forward to this.

"Absolutely. I figured we could work on proximity first."

She quirked a brow, trying to distract him. "I think we've covered that."

He smiled and kissed her. "We'll get back to that later. You need to relax around the Haunt, at least enough so you don't jump out of your skin every other day." He leaned back and looked at her. "Granted, Haunt soldiers are intimidating. We train hard to be... but your fear is beyond what's reasonable. I've thought of a way to fix that." He waited.

Not that she was interested in his cure, of course, but curiosity finally drove her to ask, "What?"

He smiled. "I'm going to let Kial into the room. He's going to hang around for a while until you get used to seeing him."

"He'll get fur on the furniture!" she snapped, reaching for an excuse. "I'll be sneezing all day."

"It's leather. It'll clean," he said confidently, and went to the door.

She drew in a sharp breath as the Haunt came in. Was it her imagination, or did he look equally wary?

"So, Kial. Anything interesting happen to you today?" Fallon asked.

Kial responded with sign language, surprising her. Well, maybe it shouldn't. Normal Haunt lost the ability to speak when they changed. Sign language was one way to solve that.

Fallon gave her an ironic look. "He says 'no, not since yesterday'."

She glowered.

Fallon looked back at Kial. "So, what did the wife have to say about that?"

She blinked. Kial had a wife? It was hard to picture. The idea made her uneasy.

"Really? How old is your son now? Two?"

The unease grew. The werewolf had a son. So? Makes sense that he could reproduce. It didn't mean he had any fatherly feelings. She looked aside, her thoughts making her vaguely ashamed.

With barely a glance at her, Fallon led the Haunt closer. She could feel her nails digging into the couch. A silent growl trembled on her lips.

They reached the armchairs opposite her. Just as she was poised to climb over the back of the couch, they stopped.

“You know how she is about sneezing, so if you don’t mind changing before we sit down...”

Kial did as Fallon directed. The change itself wasn’t dramatic, just a simple melting of form, accomplished in seconds. Underneath all that fur, Kial was an unassuming brunette of average height and looks. His expression was a little hesitant as he addressed her. “Good morning, my lady.”

She stared at him without blinking, wary as a kitten suddenly dropped into a box of pit bull puppies. Her abused muscles were screaming at her to relax, but her mind wasn’t listening. She’d run hurt before.

Fallon gestured for Kial to sit. “So tell me, are you still thinking about getting your red sash? You’re more than eligible.”

“I don’t know if I want it. I’m happy and content where I am, and so is my wife.”

“You know I can’t promote you without it.”

“I’m not worried about it yet.”

Rain found it was difficult to maintain rigid muscles for extended periods, especially when she was hurt. Despite herself, she was also following the conversation. Fallon’s nagging was beginning to wear on her.

“There’s more money for captains. Think what you could do with that,” Fallon urged.

Rain rolled her eyes.

“We have simple needs. The promotion would mean less time with my family. We’re not ready to sacrifice that,” Kial said firmly.

“Yes, but...”

Rain couldn’t take it any longer. “For heaven’s sake, Fallon! Give the man a break. He doesn’t want the promotion.”

The men looked at her, surprised. Fallon even smiled, very slightly. “He’d really make a good addition, hon.”

She scowled and peeled herself from the couch. Reaching for her crutch, she snapped, “He already said no. Why are you so stubborn? Can’t you just take a ‘no’ once in a while?” She hobbled to the bedroom door and slammed it behind her for good measure.

Fallon looked at Kial and smiled. “So, when are you taking the test?”

Kial smiled back. “Next week.”

“Good man! You’re going to make a good right hand for Rykarr.” Fallon grinned. Rain had taken the bait. Now all they had to do was think up a stage two.

Rain was drowsing in her garden, minding her own business, when she heard a low growl. It sounded like a puppy at play, somewhere on the other side of her garden wall. She was about to drift off again when she heard the sound of a grunt, then a pitiful whine.

The hairs rose on the back of her neck as she reached for her crutch and scrambled up on the bench to see over the wall. A circle of three young boys were ganging up on a young...well, he was young. The boys were roughly eight years old, and she guessed that the...kid...on the ground was about the same age. One of the boys was sitting on the furry kid, pummeling him with his fists while his buddies cheered him on. It wasn’t until she spoke that Rain realized that the kid on top was a girl.

A sense of outrage made Rain’s blood boil as she took in the sight. “Hey! Get off him,

you little snot! It's not fair to kick a guy when he's down."

The girl looked up in surprise while the hairy fellow lay there, panting. She was missing her two front teeth. "He was teasing me!"

Rain swung up on top of the wall, grimacing as her knee throbbed. "Yeah? Well he's down now, so get off him before I boot you in the butt. My word! In my day we beat up the boy, but we didn't need our girlfriends helping, too." She raked a scathing look at the boys, making them blush.

A dark-haired boy, also missing a front tooth and sporting silver bracelets, scowled at her. "We weren't helping. That wouldn't be fair."

"Whatever." Rain swung down from the wall and carefully got her balance. She poked the girl with her crutch when the kid just stared at her. "Get off and run along. Go find another girl to beat up." Rain shook her head at her own words, then bent down and gingerly hauled the hairy kid to his feet. "You okay, mate?" Funny how her time in foreign countries came out when she was under stress.

On his feet, the little guy came up to her chin. If he was eight, he was tall for his age. He looked at the girl, who hadn't bothered to leave, and glared.

Rain felt her mouth twitch. Her nervousness toward the miniature werewolf was fading fast. "Not allowed to hit girls, eh?"

The kid hunched his shoulders.

Rain rotated her aching shoulder and made a stab at acting like the adult. "Well, were you teasing her?"

"DJ jumped out and scared her," the boy with the bracelets reported helpfully. "Carri hates it when he does that."

Rain took a closer look at the freckled little girl with the orange bush of hair. Maybe it was a case of puppy love, maybe not. "Whatever, we don't hit people. I should tell your parents."

The girl hung her head.

Yeah, she should, but that would be too much trouble. Rain decided to cut them a deal. "Fine. If you can behave yourselves for the rest of the day, especially when I'm trying to nap in my garden, then I suppose I could let you off the hook. Now, apologize to each other." She poked the hairy kid. "You! Change back so you can speak up."

DJ looked aside and shuffled his feet. He made a few indistinct signs.

Rain frowned and shook her head. "I don't do sign language."

"He said he can't change back," Bracelet kid said. "He has a hard time changing sometimes."

A little slow, was he? Rain felt herself warming to the kid and didn't like it. "Fine. Do your sign language thing, then. It'd better look sincere, though."

DJ made a few quick signs to Carri.

Carri huffed and mumbled, "Okay, I'm sorry."

Relieved to have the whole business over, Rain nodded her head and started hobbling back toward home, going the long way around. She didn't feel like trying to scramble over the wall again.

The kids followed her.

"Whatcha doing?" Bracelet kid asked.

"Going home. You should, too. What's your name, anyway?"

"I'm Malix." He grinned at her, showing off his missing tooth. He nudged the

unknown boy, another red head. “This is Twix. He’s Carri’s older brother.”

Rain grinned. Twix, was it? Did his mama know she’d named him after a candy bar?

“What’s your name?” Malix asked. He really was a cute little thing, with black hair tumbling into his eyes.

“Rain.” She would really rather the kids took off. “Don’t you have somewhere to be?”

“No,” Malix said innocently. “Do you have any toys?”

She shook her head. “I’m too old for toys.”

“You don’t look old,” Carrie said suspiciously. “I bet you know how to make all kinds of toys.”

“Just the exploding kind,” Rain muttered.

“Really! That’s cool! I want to see,” Malix cried.

“Me, too! Me, too!” the others chimed in. All except for DJ, who was looking at her with interest.

Rain sighed. Unable to take the torture, she grouched, “All right! I’ll show you one little thing, but then you’ve got to find something else to do.”

Ahead of them, she could see a couple of Haunt in uniform. By the purposeful way they strode toward her, Rain guessed they were her security detail. They didn’t look happy, but then they rarely did.

The kids quieted down as they saw where she was looking. Rain couldn’t take her eyes off the Haunt and she could feel her breathing accelerate.

Malix tugged on her sleeve. “DJ wants to know why you smell afraid.”

Startled, she cut a look at the half-pint werewolf. “I don’t.” It came out more harshly than she meant.

“Are you afraid of Haunt soldiers?” Malix wanted to know.

“No,” Rain said curtly, but she could feel the tension closing in on her as the soldiers flanked her.

“But DJ says...”

She cut Malix off. “Have you ever seen a Gauss rifle? You use steel balls and magnets to fire them off. I built one the other day while I was bored.”

The inevitable questions helped her to relax. She wasn’t sure if it helped or not to see DJ edging protectively toward her. Or maybe she had it wrong. Maybe he was afraid of the bigger Haunt, too.

Suddenly, she began to sneeze.

“Bless you,” Malix said.

She sneezed again.

“Do you have a cold?” Carri wanted to know.

“Allergies,” Rain said grimly, resigned to the inevitable. “I hate taking my medicine.” Funny, though, she hadn’t sneezed around DJ, and she’d been around him long enough for his fur to affect her.

“What’s an allergy? Is it catching?”

Rain rolled her eyes at the questions and hobbled faster. She couldn’t wait to unload this bunch.

Once in the suite she shared with Fallon, the kids were fascinated by the pile of odds and ends on a corner table. They especially liked the simple version of a Gauss Rifle, a grooved wooden board with four gold plated, neodymium-iron-boron magnets taped to it.

“Cool! What is it?” Carri asked.

“It’s a linear acceleration device for studying high-energy physics.”

They were silent for a moment. Then Malix piped up, “Can I play with it?”

She snorted with amusement. “Sure. Bring it out to the garden. Carri and Twix, you bring the little table there.” She didn’t think Fallon would care if they used the marble topped end table. It wasn’t like they were going to damage it.

She handed a pouch of nickel-plated steel balls to DJ and followed the kids out to the garden. She’d set up a board for a target earlier, but hadn’t used it yet. Once the rifle was set up, she explained its use. “Okay, we point the rifle at our target, then put two steel balls against each magnet, right in the groove. Good. Now we put a ball in the groove and give it a little nudge and…” The kids cheered as the ball struck the magnet, causing a chain reaction that sent the end marble shooting off the end, striking the board with a satisfying “whack!”

Rain grinned, surprised that she was having fun. “Okay, now you try. Youngest to oldest.” Carri started out, then Malix, DJ and Twix. They played for a whole fifteen minutes before the game began to wane.

Rain found herself amused to be playing with four little kids. She’d never enjoyed something like that before. Maybe she was changing.

When she finally told the kids it was time for them to go home, they protested a little, but not too badly.

“Can we come back tomorrow?” Malix pleaded.

She considered and shrugged. “I guess. As long as your parents know where you are. Now run along, and don’t beat up on each other,” she said with a stern look at Carri.

“As long as he doesn’t tease me,” she said pertly, and escaped before she could be reprimanded.

DJ was slow to leave. He didn’t seem to want to abandon the Gauss rifle.

Rain eyed him. “You know, it’s easy to build your own. Ask your mom and dad if it’s okay. I’ll give you a parts list if you like.”

It was the first time she’d seen a werewolf smile. Unfortunately, it wasn’t a pretty sight, even on a kid. She made quick work of the list and sent him on his way.

Fallon found her in the garden later, finishing up her nap. “I heard we had visitors.”

She grunted and sat up. Smothering a yawn, she informed him, “I found this little redhead beating up a boy. I took pity on him.”

“Hm. I heard about it second hand from Malix.” He sat down and began massaging her foot, the one attached to the good leg. “He says you’re pretty cool.”

“Huh.” What he was doing felt pretty good.

He kissed the top of her foot. “His brother gave their parents the parts list. He can’t wait to make his own… Guess rifle, was it?”

“Gauss. Wait. You mean DJ and Malix are brothers?”

“Yes, twins. His dad’s proud of him for not hitting a girl, but he promised to give him pointers about making her stop without hurting her. He also told him to stop teasing girls.”

She smiled at that. “Who’s his father?”

“My cousin, Keilor.” He snuggled up behind her on the wide wooden lawn chair. It was a tight fit, but not claustrophobic. With his hand low on her belly, she lost the desire

to complain.

Clearing her throat, she said, "Oh. So they're related to you...sort of."

"Second cousins. They're related to you, too, through marriage. Nice of you to be kind to them." His hand slid lower.

"Wasn't hard," she said off-hand, distracted.

"Still." His finger began tracing little circles just inside her waistband.

Losing track of the conversation was inevitable, but she made a valiant effort to concentrate. "Kids are okay, as long as they belong to someone else."

His lips feathered over the back of her neck and shoulder, making her melt. "Yes." His hand slid lower, tangling in the curls between her thighs. "If we had kids here now, I couldn't do this." His finger started a slow circle that eased a wordless sigh from her lips. A moment later, he began to lower her pants.

"We can't! My knee."

He chuckled. "I see I need to work harder on your education. Can you think of a position that won't put pressure on it?" To illustrate, he circled an arm around her waist and pulled her bare butt against his front.

"Ah..." she croaked. He was fast taking care of any reluctance she might have felt.

"Mm-hm. I'm afraid you're still over dressed for such a warm day, though." He reached up and popped the clasp on her harem style top. He played his hand around her breasts, inhaling like a man deeply satisfied with life. "Ah, yes. As sweet and tender as I remembered." He squeezed a nipple, surprising a squeal out of her. She shifted under his hands and he admonished her. "Uh-huh. We have to be careful of that knee."

The last thing on her mind was her knee as he took his time playing with her silky breasts, gliding his hand over her stomach. She was whimpering by the time he sat up and pulled off his vest, then opened the front of his pants. He guided himself to her slick opening from behind. "Open up, sweetheart. The doctor wants in."

She still hadn't gotten used to how big he was. Completely vulnerable, she panted as he eased inside, filling her with delicious hardness. No wonder she hadn't missed the Bell's seductive song; Fallon could make a sultana forget her harem.

He was slow but thorough; the man must have been born with self-control. He took his time to tease her, driving her past what she could bear, then easing her down. Nearly insane with desire, she pleaded and begged until he gave in and finished her off. By that time she wouldn't have known she had a knee, much less cared if it ached.

## CHAPTER 9

It was sometime later, after dinner, dessert and more of Fallon, in fact, that she realized that Haunt weren't so different, after all. It couldn't have been more obvious that her lover was proud of his heritage, and look how wonderful he was. She wasn't ready to see it, but she didn't think she'd freak if she saw Fallon change now. She'd try not to at least, because she wasn't a coward. The day would surely come when it would happen, and she figured she could work up to it. Maybe she'd even practice with Kial, watching him change and stuff until the thought of being close to a Haunt didn't put her in a cold sweat. Even hanging with DJ had to help.

What she had with Fallon was worth preserving.

One matter was left undone, however. The man who'd started her terrors was still

alive. As long as he was out there, she'd never feel safe. The man was like a sword dangling by a silk thread, poised over her head.

Azion had to die.

Rain sat in her suite late the next afternoon. Brooding, she lifted her newly constructed short-range Bell and considered it. This model looked like a large ball bearing, etched with a few engravings. It chimed, but she'd modified it to avoid the seductive song. She didn't need to pass on that little trait.

Losing her original wasn't as bad as she'd dreaded. She didn't miss her own Bell's song, having realized that Fallon could give her so much more than it ever could. It had been a beautiful creation, though, and special, and she missed it a little because of that. This Bell was going to serve a higher or lower, purpose. Rykarr had called it the ultimate assassin's toy. It hadn't taken much thought to realize he'd been right.

Rain keyed the Bell and opened a portal to Azion's private rooms. She'd found a way to tune it so she didn't have be exactly where she wanted to open a portal and had walked by his place yesterday. Happily, he was alone at his desk, his back to her.

Allowing him a fighting chance, she said coolly, "You look a lot different when you're not covered in fuzz, Graybeard."

He spun around so fast, he nearly fell out of his seat. "Rain! What the..." he trailed off, apparently realizing he was better off with his mouth shut.

She smirked. "Hello, Azion. I thought I'd show you what you wanted so badly. What do you think?" She rolled the Bell between her palms, walked it through her fingers like a Chinese exercise ball. "Nifty little toy, isn't it?"

Azion stood up and moved closer to the portal. "How are you doing this?" he looked around her room before his gaze settled on her hands. "Is that the device that makes this projection?"

"No projection, old man. See for yourself."

He hesitated. "Why are you doing this?"

She raised a brow, playing it cool. Inside, she burned. "Let's not waste our breath. You killed my father. You were the gray Haunt."

He considered her for a long moment. "It was necessary, you know."

Her answering smile was cold. She played the Bell through her fingers.

The lure of the Bell must have been too much. Azion gave her room one more penetrating look, then reached out to touch the portal.

Rain closed her eyes against the flash. When she opened them, all that remained of him was a pile of rust colored dust. Her hand clenched on the Bell, closing the connection.

Her room was neat and empty. There was no way to trace Azion's death to her.

She felt a little sick. She'd let the man reach out to his own destiny, but knowing he was dead wasn't the sweet relief she'd hoped for. Abruptly, she got up and left the room.

Fallon was in Jayems's study, examining a printout of Azion's rooms. He'd been there most of the morning with Jayems and Keilor, trying to find a workable capture plan. "The man has more safeguards in place than the whole palace put together," he finally muttered, straightening. "You'd think he was king."

"Or planned to be," Keilor said, with a glance at Jayems.

Jayems wasn't saying much. Though physically in the room, his mind was on his little girl and only heir, who was slowly recovering from a nasty bout of poisoning. It had been a close call. If her mother hadn't figured it out, if they hadn't given her charcoal and pumped her stomach as fast as they had...if the medics hadn't been the best...

Fallon's fist curled. He wanted Azion dead. Knowing the man would like to return the favor, especially to Fallon's wife, made his blood burn.

"Your eyes are glowing again, Fallon. Calm down. Cool heads will solve this better," Keilor cautioned. A battle veteran who was far older than he looked, the man knew what he was talking about.

"It's easier when it's not family," Fallon said grimly.

"I hear you. You should be grateful your woman turned her problems over to you and Jayems. I have nightmares thinking of the trouble Jasmine might get into in the same situation. You're a lucky man."

"Believe me, I get down on my knees and give my share of thanks," Fallon said fervently, relieved again that Rain wasn't involving herself. That had to be hard, and he was so thankful. He couldn't stand the idea of her in danger.

Keilor's com unit vibrated, and he answered it. For long moments he said nothing, just listened. "Okay, I'll be there in a moment. Standby." He looked at his closed com for a long moment, then looked at Fallon with wide-eyed sympathy. "You and Jayems had better come, too."

Dread pooled in Fallon's stomach as he followed Keilor, but he kept his mouth shut. Whatever was going on, he knew Keilor would show him soon enough.

To his surprise, Keilor led the way to Azion's rooms. The door was shut and the guards before it looked agitated. Azion's large, heavysset aide fidgeted at the door. When he saw them, his face lit with an odd mix of chagrin, relief and caution. "My lords! I didn't know what to think. The guards didn't see or hear anything, and there is no scent of anyone strange in the room. The elder had been in there alone all morning. No one but us has been in since we discovered...it." He trailed off, strained.

Fallon exchanged looks with Jayems.

Keilor asked calmly, "Who else have you notified?"

"No one! I didn't want to say anything until someone else had confirmed what we thought. Come in and see for yourselves." Dorrn ushered them in and led them through a room of severely plain furnishings made of the most expensive materials. Behind the massive desk, he stopped and stared at a small heap of orange dust. It looked like someone had dumped a bucket of dirt out on the carpet.

Keilor knelt and studied the dust.

Dorrn swallowed. "I'm afraid...I think this might be Azion's remains."

Fallon's brows shot up as he stared at the dust. "How?"

"I'm not sure, but you can see Azion is not here, and this is."

The men exchanged looks. It couldn't be this easy. "I know of nothing that can do this to a body. We don't have any weapons capable of this." Even as he said it, Fallon's brows drew together. He remembered Rain's ingenuity, her inventions. If anyone had motive...

Keilor stood up and looked around, studied the room. After a moment, he changed and wandered around. Baffled, he changed back. "Could he have wanted to disappear for a while? Could this be an effort to do that?"

"Impossible," Dorrn said coldly. "He had plans. He wouldn't just leave, especially

not right now.”

“Really?” Keilor drawled, looking the man over.

Jayems spoke for the first time. “I want tests run on that dust, and I want this room ripped apart. I want to know the truth, Keilor.” His voice was strained, but a thread of relief crept through. “Do whatever you have to, but get answers.”

Keilor nodded and ordered a forensic team over his com unit.

It was half an hour until they were able to return to Jayems’s room. The forensic team had confirmed that the dust contained the base minerals that were in every human’s body, but it would be some time before they broke down exact proportions. It was plausible that Azion really had been turned to dust, however.

Fallon was ready to explode with frustration, desperate to find Rain and shake the story from her. After that he’d just shake her. What was she doing? She could’ve been killed!

Keilor practically dragged him into the study. “Wait! Your Haunt are with her and apprised of the situation. Azion’s supporters are still too baffled to act, and they don’t know what we know.”

“If she did this, I’ll give her the moons,” Jayems said fervently. He was pacing in a fever of anticipation. His personal nightmare was closing.

Fallon’s was just beginning. “What if she’d got hurt? He wouldn’t have hesitated to kill her.” Pacing on the opposite side of the rug from Jayems, he was shouting and didn’t care.

Jayems shot him a look. “Mind the child,” he snapped. “She needs her rest.”

“Sorry.” Fallon clamped his mouth shut. He felt like a caged hawk, and he wanted his wife! Wanted to punish her, shout at her and make sure she was okay.

Keilor got in his way and clamped his hands on his shoulders. “Breathe and stop thinking like a husband for a moment. This is larger than that. If she’d been a trained soldier, you’d be offering her the moons.”

“She’s not!”

“Fine, but she did us a service just the same. Don’t punish her for it. Have you considered that she might be hurting? Killing is never easy. For all you know, she’s afraid of what we’ll do if we find out.”

“We won’t do anything! Well, I might spank her blue, but...”

Keilor actually shook him, smoothly dodging Fallon’s thank-you punch. “Fine, now that you’ve got your aggression out, you’d better plan what you’re really going to say to her,” he snapped, and then his face softened. “I’m trying to help you, cuz.”

Fallon dragged in a shuddering breath. Somebody had better help him, because it was going to kill him to do what he had to do.

DJ and Malix found her brooding by a fishpond. Among other things, her knee ached.

She couldn’t stand to be alone, but wanted to avoid conversation, so she’d chosen to sit by the deserted pond on the edge of the park. For once she’d been glad of the silent company of her guards. As a plus, they even scared off the casual passersby; or maybe it was her expression that did that.

She shouldn’t have been surprised to see the kids, since they seemed to get around. What did surprise her was DJ. “Hey, kid. Where’s your fuzz?”

DJ blinked his dark eyes at her. Black haired with long, thick lashes, he was destined

to break hearts one day. “I didn’t want to scare you.”

She snorted in amusement and tossed another mangled piece of grass on the ground. “Wouldn’t worry about it, buddy. I’m at least as scary as anything running around these woods today.”

The boys sat on either side of her. “You’re sad?” Malix asked, looking at her face.

She sighed. “Just having one of those moments all mad scientists have.”

“You’re not mad,” a deep voice said, surprising her into looking around. A dark haired man about twenty years DJ’s senior stood right behind her shoulder. Handsome in a rugged way, he was looking at her with penetrating sable eyes.

“You must be the father,” she said dryly. “DJ couldn’t look more like you if he tried.”

He shrugged. “Malix takes after his mother. She likes to gloat about it, but DJ and I don’t mind. I’m Keilor, your cousin-by-marriage.”

“Ah. Nice to meet you.” She couldn’t summon much enthusiasm.

Keilor looked at the boys. “Now that you’ve said hello, run over there and play with Kial and Brack. I think I see a tree you haven’t climbed yet.”

Rain raised her brows as he sent her bodyguards off to play nanny. Obviously he had the authority. By the looks of him he was more than capable of defending her...or cutting off her head.

Keilor studied her for a moment. “Has Fallon mentioned what I do? My title is Master of the Hunt. I’m in charge of the Citadel’s military and head of security. Jayems sent me to speak with you.”

She let the shields slam down over her eyes, knowing that he’d pick up on it. “Oh?”

His eyes never left hers. “An interesting thing happened to Elder Azion today.”

She let her interest show, knowing it was expected.

“What we assume are his remains were found in his rooms. We’re still running tests.”

Somewhat strained, she asked, “Why do you assume it’s his remains? Can’t you sniff it out?”

His smile was sardonic. “It’s difficult to do much with a pile of dust. I’m wondering if DNA testing will find anything.”

“Wow. Well, if you expect me to cry at his funeral, you’ll be disappointed.” She looked away, unable to add any color to her voice.

Keilor seemed to chew on that. “Technically, he was murdered. Under the circumstances, there’ll be a lot of pressure to find out who did it. Officially, I have no body, no witnesses. I doubt we’ll ever solve the case.” His smile was slow, admiring. “Someone did a very good job of removing an evolving threat, not only to yourself, but to Jayems and his family.” At her surprise, he added casually, “Jayems’s daughter wasn’t ill, she was poisoned. While we had no proof that Azion ordered it, we had our suspicions. There are a great many people who want what he’s got.” While she digested that, he stood up. He offered her a slight bow. “Welcome to the family, Rain.”

The world was a little rosier after that. Apparently the Haunt here held a different view of justice than the government back home. For once, she was actually glad to be in the Dark Lands. Head held high, she headed back to her home, almost in charity with the two Haunt at her side.

Fallon met her at the door. By the expression in his eyes, he knew. “You’ve had an interesting day.”

She just stood there once he’d closed the door, waiting to see what he’d do.

He studied her a moment, then smiled and handed her a glass of liqueur. "Have a drink. There's more than one toast being made to you today."

By reflex, she took a sip, then had to ask, "You're not mad?"

He looked surprised, then reached behind her head and held her steady for a confirming kiss. "Do I look mad? You wouldn't believe how hard it is to assassinate a man like Azion." He looked into her eyes. "He's a murderer and a child killer, Rain. Not all justice is done in the public eye, nor is it taken lightly. Someone else would have taken him down if we hadn't been beaten to it."

She took a deep breath, then swallowed more liqueur. "Death is an ugly business, Fallon."

He nodded. "Which is why you're a scientist and I'm a politician. With luck, we'll be able to keep bloodshed out of our life from now on." For just a moment, he let her see the depths of worry, and yes, anger, simmering below the surface. He was giving her slack this time, but she could see there would be consequences next time. Somehow, that made her feel better. He wasn't a man who let those he loved walk lightly into danger.

She nodded, hoping he was right and trying not to think about the rest of it. When he put his arm around her, she was more than happy to let him lead her to the garden to unwind.

There were times when she really, really loved that man.

Six months later

Rain took off at the sound of the shot, racing for her life. The Haunt fell behind her; one beat, two. The dirt path was smooth and even under her shoes, giving speed to her flying feet. Redemption was just ahead, the scarlet ribbon a promise of relief to her burning lungs. With a lunge, she broke through the line, slowing gradually into an easy lope, a walk, then a stop.

Fallon, now changed back to normal, finally caught up and swung her into his arms for a panting kiss. "You did it!"

She laughed breathlessly. "You're not supposed to celebrate losing, you know."

He smirked and kissed her again. "Hey, at least I'm still on my feet. Look at them."

Rain looked back and saw the other eight Haunt in the race, some changed back, some not. Most were bent over, panting. One was lying in the middle of the track, spread eagled.

She laughed. "Well, you have been training with me."

Fallon gave her another bear hug, then grunted as two little missiles slammed into them. Malix and DJ almost knocked them over.

"Wow! I've never seen anyone run so fast," Malix exclaimed.

"I'm going to run that fast when I grow up," DJ promised.

"Looks like they have a new hero," their mother Jasmine said. She put an arm around her husband Keilor's waist, giving him a smile.

Keilor kissed the top of her head. "I'm not worried."

Rain looked at her sweaty husband and had to laugh. Finally, for the first time in years, neither was she.

The End

About the author:

I'm a stay at home mom with three kids, a dog and an active imagination. I spent the first 34 years of my life in Alaska, land of the midnight sun, but these days I'm located in Washington, and am enjoying a much warmer sun :)

I'm married to my high school sweetheart, John, who is known to bring me flowers "just because". My leisure time is filled with gardening, crochet, knitting, sewing, art and reading.

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*Ride The Stars*  
*Careful, He Bites*

*Interstellar Lover*

*Under the Bridge*

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## Excerpt from *The Charmer*

### CHAPTER 1

“Wait a minute, Lemming! Let me catch my breath,” Jasmine gasped as she clutched a slender poplar for balance. A shower of bright leaves and water peppered her head and shoulders as the tree swayed. For a moment, her vision blurred and her legs trembled, but she stiffened them to wait out the asthma attack. The painful tightness in her chest nagged at her.

Grumbling, she dug out her inhaler and took a couple puffs. She hated resorting to medicine. Every couple of days it seemed, the TV would announce that people were getting cancer from some drug or another. Her favorite ads were the ones for male impotence that announced in fine print that the side effects included impotence. Next they’d announce that inhalers caused black lung.

She shook her head at her imagination and shoved the inhaler deep in her pocket. There was no sense being morbid.

Lemming trotted over to her, tail wagging, and sat gracefully at her feet. The black and white Border collie was used to such stops, but unlike her companion, she still had energy to burn.

Jasmine inspected a large rock that had washed free of the sticky clay, looking for ants. Satisfied, she shifted the holstered pistol on her hip and sat down gingerly. Cold seeped into her jeans from the lichen covered stone, even with the extra layer of long johns underneath. She ignored it and took in the view.

Densely wooded Alaskan hills rolled away in the distance without a sign of civilization. Autumn had hung her gold coins from every birch and cottonwood as far as the eye could see, and the golden wash of late evening sunlight showed them to their best advantage. Even the dark spruce covering the gentle slopes were sprinkled with the bright leaves.

She glanced at her watch, her breath frosting in the chill air. It was 7:44 P.M., and it would start getting dark soon. This late in September, it could snow at any time. Too bad it wasn’t June. If it were then she wouldn’t have to worry about the darkness at all, since the sun never set during the height of summer.

She stood and hefted her pack, her lungs giving a tired protest. To cheer herself, she counted her blessings. She could have been born allergic to chocolate, or dogs. She glanced at Lemming affectionately.

Come to think of it, if she'd been allergic to dogs, she wouldn't have to be out here.

Suppressing a groan, she pushed herself to her feet and started out again. Wiley better have something hot on the fire, or there would be war. The least her friend could do after coaxing her into the boonies was to make camp.

Rapidly losing steam, she trudged up the trail, really little more than a brushy track, noting the moose nuggets and cloven hoof prints in the soft turf without enthusiasm. She didn't fancy running into an irate cow with a calf. She didn't want to spend the evening stuck in a Mexican standoff while the cow tried to decide if she was worth trampling or better off ignored.

While she was looking down she noticed the bounty of cranberry bushes. It really was a shame she didn't have the energy to stop and pick some. They were plentiful this year and she could use a good batch of cranberry bars.

Hey, while she was dreaming, how about a hot date, an end cut of the Turtle Club's prime rib and a dry pair of socks?

Maybe she should be dreaming about a hot date for Wiley, she thought with disgust. If her friend and roommate paid more attention to her love life, maybe she wouldn't feel the need to run off to the woods at a moment's notice. It was all great and well if Wiley had the itch to commune with nature, as long as she didn't drag her friends into it.

The only itch Jasmine felt were the ones left by the hordes of gnats and mosquitoes. It was almost pointless using repellent—the mosquitoes mistook it for ketchup and came back for seconds.

Lemming barked from somewhere up ahead, signaling that she'd found Wiley's camp. Jasmine's head came up and she eagerly picked up her pace. In a minute she'd be sipping hot cocoa and roasting herself in front of a fire. Wiley would sweet talk her with chili and she'd forget she'd just spent the last hour stomping through the woods.

She entered the mossy clearing where Lemming waited and stopped, confused. It was empty.

Later, as Jasmine nursed a cup of cocoa by a fire she'd had to make herself, she tried to figure out what could have happened. At first she'd circled the area, calling Wiley's name and trying to find evidence as to her recent occupation. It occurred to Jasmine that her friend had played a trick, maybe hid higher on the hill and grinned as she watched Jasmine wade through stickers and brush. It wasn't like her to make Jas worry, though.

As full dark descended, she had known Wiley wasn't playing a game. Something had happened to her friend, and it was too dark to make her way back to the Jeep to get help. If Wiley had tumbled down a hill, it would be no help to her if Jasmine got lost herself. Instead she tried to reason out what might have happened.

Wiley might take off at a moment's notice on her perverse games of hide and seek, but she always left a map, and she never strayed from it. If she said she was going to be forty-five minutes east of the Dalton Highway that's where they'd find her. Or rather, Lemming would find her, and Lemming always found her quarry.

She glanced at the search and rescue dog Wiley had trained from a pup. Lemming rested quietly at Jasmine's side with her chin on her paws, content with a job well done. Jasmine had tried to get her to keep tracking, but she'd only sat down, looked at her in confusion, and thumped her tail once. As far as she was concerned, her job was over.

Jasmine sighed and scratched an itch under her black Road Runner stocking cap.

She was worried, but tried not to dwell on it. It wouldn't help the situation. Besides, there might be a good explanation for this.

She noticed a sticker bush twig in Lemming's fur. Gently, she removed it and flicked it into the coals. So now what? She didn't plan to stay in grizzly and wolf infested woods any longer than she had to. At first light she'd pack up and go for help. Maybe if she kept her eyes open she'd see signs of her friend.

She coughed as smoke suddenly blew into her face and moved around the fire.

Well, there was nothing more she could do right now, and she was tired of having the fire roast her front end while the cold air behind froze her rear. Time to crawl into her tent, shuck down to her long johns and hope she wouldn't have to shiver too long before the down sleeping bag warmed up. Though come to think of it, the night almost seemed to be getting warmer.

Scoffing at her wishful thinking, she stood and kicked dirt over the fire. That's when she saw them.

Eyes.

Freaky, glowing golden eyes. Lots of them.

Lemming growled and pressed so tightly against her that she nearly tripped as the eyes evolved into wolves with eerie, alien faces.

Slowly she reached for the 357 Smith and Wesson revolver strapped to her hip. She'd brought the thing as a bear deterrent, but there was no reason it couldn't take down a wolf.

The fur on the creature directly in front of her hackled and it snarled a warning that made her own hair stand on end. Lemming responded with a vicious bark that made her jump.

"Touch it and they'll rip your throat out," a man's voice said mildly. It came from the dark, behind the wolves.

Jasmine emitted a strangled yell. Her nerves were on the crawl as she thought of someone watching her. She searched the darkness, but couldn't see beyond the animals. "Who's there?"

As if in a nightmare, a man stepped away from the camouflage of dark trees. He stood less than ten feet from her and seemed to study her with faint distaste. Maybe she didn't measure up to his twisted fantasies. Maybe he liked tall girls, like Wiley. What were the odds he knew where she was?

Her jaw hardened. She itched to draw and cock the gun, but the slight movement of her hand brought the snarling beast before her a step closer.

"Call off your dogs," she demanded hoarsely. All the moisture that should have been in her mouth decided to run down her back instead. Who'd turned up the heat?

"Give up your weapon," the stranger ordered, and his words were brushed with an odd accent. "They don't trust you."

"The feeling is mutual, pal, but I'm not doing it. They'll eat me alive if I do." She'd watched TV. She knew what happened to the idiots who dropped the gun.

He glanced at the creatures. "Your choice."

Long moments passed while she held his gaze. Sweat plastered the hair under her hat to her scalp. For all she knew this guy had kidnapped Wiley and was keeping her somewhere nearby...if she was still alive.

It was that thought more than anything that made her give in. Swearing one of

Wiley's favorite words, she gave a curt nod. Careful not to make any sudden moves that might set the wolves off, she unfastened the safety strap of the holster and eased the gun out. Surprisingly, she wasn't snarled at until she hesitated at the last moment.

"You'll never kill them all," the stranger said with a trace of impatience.

Reluctantly, she tossed down the gun.

While she'd been stalling, the heat had turned killer. That was one heck of Chinook blowing, or he'd done something to cause it. There was a faint shimmer in the night behind him, an odd pressure in the air. She'd swear she smelled ozone.

Fearful she'd die of heatstroke at any moment, she yanked off her hat, then unzipped her heavy coat and shrugged it off. If she had to die, at least it wouldn't be from the sudden thaw.

She glanced at the wolves, but they were no longer snarling. In fact, the one she thought of as the leader had backed off. He kept his eyes on her while the others wove in and out of the huge trees.

Huge trees?

Jasmine paused in the act of stripping off her Norwegian sweater, all the fine hairs on her body standing on end. Huge trees? There were no trees like that in Alaska. But there they were, gleaming in the light of the triple moons....

For a bad moment Jasmine's world tilted, threatening the first faint of her life. Just in time, her innate good sense kicked in. Now was not the time for wilting.

As she stared, ferns sprang from the undergrowth and the trees moved closer, as the shimmer behind the stranger seemed to grow, marching forward as if swallowing her world whole. She hadn't moved, but that shimmer behind him, that otherworldly window, had grown to encompass them both. She was afraid to look behind her, afraid to see it consume all the earth.

First things first. The heat was humid and tropical, murderous to blood thickened by a cold climate, and she was overdressed. With a deep breath to calm her jangled nerves, she sent the man a defiant look and pulled off the bulky sweater, tugging the black T-shirt underneath to keep it from riding up. Then she just stood there in the redwood-scented air and tried to make sense of the moment. Sweat rolled down her back, and she wished she could ditch her wool socks and the long underwear. Her feet were sweltering in her heavy boots.

The man shifted restlessly. "Come," he said, melting into the trees before she had a chance to argue.

"Wait!" she called, but he ignored her. She hesitated, wondering if she could possibly retrieve the small flashlight inside her jacket. No way did she want to go blindly charging off through the night with a spooky stranger without at least being able to see what he was doing. She bent a little, and the lead wolf snarled. "Easy, fella, I just need to get a light." His lips pulled even farther back and saliva flecked his muzzle. The other wolves took their cue from the pack master and stalked closer, showing hundreds of teeth.

Stumbling through the darkness following a possibly vicious stranger suddenly held appeal. She picked up her feet and hurried after the man before she found out if the pack had a taste for sweaty hikers.

Besides, who knew what else might come creeping out of the brush?

There might have been three moons in the sky, but none of them were full, and she'd

never had the best night vision. The second time she nearly went sprawling while jogging after the stranger, she decided to call a halt. If she didn't slow down one of the branches hitting her in the face was going to put out an eye, and then where would she be? Besides, Lemming could always track him.

The wolf things had other ideas.

"Look," she tried to explain to one of the creatures that inched slowly closer, growling, while Lemming nearly backed up her leg, "I'm trying, but I can't see where I'm going. Just give me a minute, okay?"

A hand shot out of the dark and gripped her upper arm, making her shriek.

"This way."

She gasped for breath, trying to calm her frantic heart while the stranger hauled her through the woods. "Did you have to do that?" she demanded, but he didn't answer and didn't slow down. She tried again. "Where are we going?" Still no answer. "You're a real jerk, you know that?"

His grip on her arm tightened and he picked up speed. "I will return you to your place come morning."

She dug in her heels and threw every ounce of her weight into it, jolting them to a stop. No way, pal. She didn't know what he planned, but when a strange man without an ounce of courtesy told her he was going to keep her for the night, she panicked.

As he spun to face her, she shot her fist into his nose, snapping his head back, then grabbed his shirt and rammed her knee into his groin with all her strength.

Or tried to.

The next moment he was holding her on her toes with two frighteningly controlled hands around her biceps.

His voice, when it came, was rough with menace. "You think to deny me anything?" His body was very tense, as if he longed to either choke the life from her or hurl her from him. Even so, she tried to kick him. Swearing, he shook her, making Lemming snarl. The stranger snapped something in a language she didn't know and Lemming subsided with a whine.

His eyes bore into hers. "You're fortunate you are a woman, or I would snap your neck and have done with it." As suddenly as he'd grabbed her, he released her, causing her to stumble. "You go back come morning."

Jasmine trembled, not daring to move for a long, sick moment. Never before had she felt so threatened by a man, so completely aware of her inferior size and puny strength. He had her alone, completely at his mercy, and if he decided to hurt her there was nothing she could do to stop him.

Lemming whined and slid up to her, seeking reassurance, and in that seeking, gave Jasmine a measure of strength. She wasn't a coward, and she was smart. There had to be a way out of this. Wiley needed her.

## CHAPTER 2

He was overreacting.

Keilor watched her tremble, chiding himself. The girl was young and scared, barely even a woman by the looks of her, and he was a stranger who deliberately frightened her.

Of course she would lash out. As he watched the girl gather her courage, he remembered that his cousin considered her a friend. He didn't have to like it, but he could refrain from terrorizing her.

He wiped the blood from his battered nose and his anger flared again. Blight that! He would if she would.

Nevertheless, his touch was gentler and his pace slower as he guided her through the darkness. Remorse stabbed him when she shrank a little at his touch. He ruthlessly repressed it. They didn't want her to like it here, nor to feel welcome, no matter what Rihlia thought. She would come to see the wisdom of remaining separate from the human world soon enough. If he and Jayems had their way, the girl would be going back this instant. Only Rihlia's need to reassure this girl that she was fine stayed their hands.

The memory of her stripping off her heavy clothes strobed through his mind, provoking a flash of heat. She glanced at him in surprise and a little fear when his grip tightened on her arm. He forced it to relax.

It was only the unexpectedness of it that had caused his body to react, he reassured himself. He hadn't expected the girl to start stripping. It hadn't helped to discover that her outer wrappings had concealed an exotically pretty woman—girl, he corrected himself firmly—underneath. His cousin had claimed they were of an age, but this female was barely up to his chest, with a youthful face, besides.

Not that it mattered what she looked like; the girl was going back as soon as Rihlia said goodbye. It was time for his cousin to rediscover her real family.

He ducked to avoid a branch, thinking how fortunate they'd been to find the long lost Rihlia at one of the rare gates between worlds. He shook his head in amazement. After years of fruitless searching, only to discover the child she'd been had crossed worlds! But now she was home and it was time for her to take her rightful place among her people and her family.

He glanced at the dark haired girl in irritation, the night no barrier to his keen vision. What Rihlia didn't need was reminders of the past weighing her down while she tried to readjust to her home world. Even if they were sweetly curved and just the right height to

—  
“I cannot see what she could possibly want with you,” he burst out in frustration.

The girl's head snapped up and she stopped. “She? Are you talking about Wiley?”

“Her name is Rihlia,” he corrected stiffly, stopping as well. He was annoyed at his outburst. It wasn't like him to be this edgy around a woman; even a beautiful woman; especially a beautiful woman, and he didn't like it.

“She's my age, very dark hair, looks Asian?”

“I know who she is,” he said coolly, “And her name is Rihlia.”

Her eyes snapped fire as she jerked her arm away, fear apparently forgotten. Really, for such a tiny creature, she was full of passion. Had she been anyone else, he would have relished that knowledge; but she wasn't staying.

“Her name is Wiley, you misbegotten—” she broke off and took a deep breath. “I need to see her.”

“Then come.” He took her arm again and set off. The sooner this chore was accomplished, the better. He had more important matters to attend to.

Apparently she wasn't content to travel in silence, for she said, “What is this place?”

“The Dark Lands,” he answered shortly, hoping she'd be quiet. He glanced off into

the trees and toyed with the idea of having the volti show themselves again to frighten her speechless, but refrained.

“Why is it called that?”

“To frighten off unwanted humans?” he suggested with exasperation. Were all humans this bothersome, or was it just her? She tripped over a plainly visible rock in the path and swore, forcing him to steady her yet again. He added clumsy and unobservant to the list of things he didn’t like about her.

“What do you mean, ‘humans’?” she asked suspiciously.

“What you are, and what I am not. What Rihlia is not,” he informed her with satisfaction. That ought help drive her off. Humans were notoriously fearful of anyone alien, even their own kind. She would be no different.

“Wiley is as human as I am,” she gritted out. “I ought to know. We were raised in the same orphanage.”

The remembrance of how his cousin had been kept in a sterile home for abandoned and orphaned children enraged him anew. “She was raised there, but she wasn’t born there. Your kind put her there.”

“Yeah? Well, she wouldn’t have been there if your kind hadn’t lost her,” she snapped back.

He grabbed her arm and jerked her to him, angry on such a deep level that he could barely verbalize his emotion. “You have no idea what you are saying, creature. Beware lest you test my mercy,” he warned her softly, almost relishing her trembling. Hatred of humans was old and instinctive. Though he could not have named all his reasons, he wanted this one to fear him. He wanted her to leave.

There was something wrong about her.

Before he could identify what his instincts told him, his nose caught her scent, bringing with it a desire that flooded his senses in an entirely alien way. For a moment his mind stalled, and the closest he could come to breaking away was to shift his hand down her arm. Spellbound, the only thing that he wanted in that moment was to let his body speak to her in a language entirely its own.

Lightning traveled up his arms from her frozen body and he let go with a gasp. “Charmer!” he hissed, and gripped the hilt of his blade. It was all he could do not to kill her on the spot. Of all the woman in the world Rihlia had to call friend, why one of them, one of the few guaranteed to be trouble to the males of his kind?

“What?” She looked confused. Could she be ignorant of her curse? It would not save her. He had sworn not to harm her, but it would not stop the others. They would kill her. A charmer was a temptress, a siren, poison.

He needed to get rid of her, fast.

He reached out to tow her along again, thought better of it, and pointed with an unsteady hand. “There is the trail. Follow it.” He thought of prodding her along with his blade for good measure, but perhaps that was going too far. After all, it wasn’t as if she’d leap on him and attempt a seduction right there.

Probably.

Her head turned to follow his pointing finger and she squinted in bewilderment. “Where?”

“Right there,” he repeated, wondering what was wrong with her. Could she really be this helpless in the dark?

The sultry wind ruffled her limp hair as she gave a weary sigh. “Look, I can’t see a thing out here, ok? I can barely see you, so if you plan on getting where we’re going tonight, you’ll have to lead the way.”

It was not worth arguing. The sooner begun... He started walking—not so fast that she couldn’t see him, but far enough ahead to ensure zero contact. One couldn’t be too careful with a charmer.

For thousands of years, her kind had been used by humans to lure and trap the men of the Haunt. The best of their warriors had been enticed by the unique, bewitching scent of the charmer and killed by their masters until there were few of them left. That combined with the unrelenting fear and hatred of humans had driven his kind to seek their own world, free of the hunters.

And now one of them was here.

Jayems would be furious.

As they approached the forest entrance to the hollowed volcanic mountain that served as the Haunt fortress, he kept a wary eye on the female, remembering Rihlia’s unfortunate reaction to her first sight of the warrior Haunt. This girl was no different. The moment she saw the shadowy guards she stumbled back with a gasp, which was at least an improvement over the ear-shattering shriek he’d been braced for. Reaching back, he grabbed a fistful of her shirt and dragged her through the door. Once inside, he propelled her down the hallway with a business-like hand at her back.

“Wh-what...”

Badly shaken, she could barely get the words out. At least she wasn’t hysterical. It had taken much longer to calm Rihlia down enough to make her believe the Haunt were not a danger to her. But then, she belonged to this world.

He would make no such assurances to this human.

“Wait here,” he told the girl sternly, pointing to the cushioned bench set in the alcove opposite his lord’s rooms. She sank limply onto the bench, obeying him without a murmur, but it wasn’t him she was looking at. He turned to the pair of Haunt guards flanking the massive double doors and eyed them wryly. She was unlikely to attempt any mischief while under their baleful stare, but just to be sure...

“Eat her if she moves,” he ordered, and watched with satisfaction as her eyes widened. Hiding his grin at the guards’ puzzled glances, he entered the room.

“She is here,” he reported, stepping into the large room.

Jayems looked up quickly from where he sat at his desk of polished, dark wood. The heavy ledger he’d been reading closed with a muffled thud, but his boots remained crossed on the desktop as he waited for more details.

Rihlia wasn’t nearly as calm. She leapt off the couch where she’d been sitting and demanded breathlessly, “Where?” Her long dark hair had been braided with pearls and topaz, and someone had gotten her into a white silk robe. He wondered who’d worked the miracle. The last time he’d seen her she’d still been stubbornly clinging to her old clothes.

Keilor smiled slightly, amused. For all she looked like a princess, she was as bright-eyed and eager as a much younger girl. It was easy to see in her the child she’d been.

Grimness replaced his amusement as he recalled her friend. “There’s a problem,” he informed his lord darkly. “She’s a charmer.”

Jayems’ feet uncrossed, dropping with unnerving deliberation to the floor. He

slammed his palms down on the desk and leaned forward. “A what?”

Keilor shook his head slowly. “She could be nothing else. I’m certain of it.”

Jayems swore and got to his feet, pacing with barely controlled anger.

His reluctant betrothed looked between them in angry confusion. “What’s the matter? You told me she could—”

Jayems whirled to face her, his dark tunic riffing in the breeze. “I gave permission for you to say goodbye, and I will still allow it, but the minute you are finished, she goes.”

Her eyes flared in temper. “Well, of course, darling,” she agreed acidly. “After all, we wouldn’t want any unsavory humans loitering about, now, would we?”

He stalked her, stopping inches from her to pierce her with his stare. “I’m gratified we understand each other, wife.” Before she could snarl out a denial, he snapped, “Bring her, Keilor. Let’s finish this.”

\* \* \*

Jasmine sat where she’d been ordered and stared at the intricate mosaic patterns in the wood floor. It was hard not to gawk at her guards, and her gaze kept darting up to peek with horrified fascination. Lemming pressed against her leg, whining softly.

They made no bones about staring back.

They had the heads and flattened faces of wolves, and their entire bodies were covered in dark hair. Each guard wore a leather holster with a gun of some sort strapped to his thigh and a long knife sheathed at the hip. Combat boots, pants and buckled leather vests completed the ensemble. They looked frighteningly competent.

Frightening being the key word.

It was a relief when her warden opened the door and ordered her to, “Come.” With forced courage, she got to her feet and edged swiftly past the guards, relaxing only when the door was safely shut behind her. She was going to have nightmares about this place.

Lemming gave a glad bark and charged forward.

Wiley laughed as she knelt down to hug her dog. “Good girl!” she praised the collie and fondled her ears affectionately. “You found me, didn’t you?” She looked up and saw Jasmine, and her eyes glittered with tears. “Aren’t you a sight for sore eyes,” she murmured, and embraced her in a crushing hug. “I thought you’d never get here.”

Jasmine pulled back and gave her a wobbly grin. “Blame it on your map. You forgot to mention that last curve in the road.” Her smile faded as she glanced at the two men who watched them impassively. She looked back at her friend. “What’s going on, Wiley?”

“It’s...” Wiley broke off and looked at the dark haired man Jasmine didn’t know. He was perched on a desk, his feet crossed at the ankles. Her erstwhile escort stood near him, which was also as far from Jasmine as the room allowed.

“I don’t suppose we could have some privacy?” Wiley asked coldly. The handsome stranger inclined his head, indicating that he had heard her, but he didn’t move. She muttered something under her breath and led Jasmine to the far end of the room, sitting down with her on a couch. Lemming came up and nudged Wiley’s hand, and she absently stroked her while she explained.

“We’re on another world,” she began slowly.

Jasmine glanced at the triple moons visible through the window comprising an entire wall and then back at the door. She nodded slowly in agreement. She’d figured that one

out on her own.

Wiley watched her carefully. "I was born here."

Jasmine's eyes unfocused for a moment as she pondered that. "It explains a few things. Go on."

Wiley took a breath. "The guy who brought you here is my cousin, Keilor."

Jasmine's eyes darted in surprise to the man, and for the first time she really looked at him, scrutinizing his features. Black, silken hair framed high cheekbones, reminiscent of a Cherokee warrior, and the faint flare of his nostrils reinforced the impression. She couldn't see the color of his eyes from across the room, but the expression in them of wary distaste was all too clear. She was already far too familiar with the strength of his hands, and the excellent lighting in the room only confirmed that he was in excellent shape.

He raised a dark brow in mocking acknowledgment of the introduction.

"You have my sympathy," she told her friend.

Wiley smiled slightly. She didn't even look at the other man, just jerked her head in his direction. "The other guy is called Jayems." They were both quiet for a moment. Wiley's hands twisted her skirt. At last she said stiffly, "They won't let me go home, and they want you to go back right away and forget you ever saw me."

Jasmine sat back, carefully controlling her anger. Her expression was cold, but a dangerous smile turned up one side of her mouth. "Two words, my friend." She twitched an eyebrow and switched to Pig Latin. "Avyna, Ealsay, anda eytha anca ovesha ita upa eirtha assa." Navy SEALs, and they can shove it up their—

Wiley laughed a little, relieved. She understood that Jasmine wasn't going to just leave her there.

Jasmine smiled slyly, squeezed her hand and stood up. "It's been real, Wiley, and I'm glad to see that you're all right." She turned to the one called Keilor. "I'm ready to go home now."

Keilor looked back at her with a knowing expression. He turned to Jayems and made a few signs with his hands. Jayems glanced at her assessingly and signed back. Keilor moved towards her. "Why so hasty? You just got here. Perhaps it would be best if you waited to return until morning." He watched her closely.

Jasmine felt the panic flash like a neon sign across her face and quickly looked down, doing her best to contain it. She swallowed and said as evenly as possible, "I thought you were in a hurry to get rid of me." She bit the inside of her lip, cursing herself for saying something so revealing, and hastily amended, "Not that I mind staying to talk to a friend or anything, but this place gives me the creeps."

Jayems straightened from the desk and sauntered towards her until both he and Keilor towered over her. She didn't dare look at him. "Friends," he mused. "That's not what Rihlia called you. Sister of her heart, she said. Closer than blood." He paused and looked her up and down with too knowing eyes the color of polished bronze. "Odd that such a one would desert her so quickly." Suddenly he grasped her chin and forced her to look at him. "Would you be planning trouble, little sister?"

She met his eyes with difficulty, and kept them there through force of will. "Who would believe my story?" she evaded and then mentally winced. Why hadn't she just lied? She might as well just blurt out that she intended to bring the entire U.S. Army with her if she could find her way back.

He studied her for a moment and then softly snorted. Releasing her, he told Keilor, "Find her a room down the hall and see that she's comfortable, would you cousin? And post guards at her door." His smile was less than pleasant. "We wouldn't want anything to happen to Rihlia's loyal little sister."

She stiffened as Keilor's hand closed around her arm.

Wiley got in his way at once.

He paused to acknowledge her effort. "Cousin."

Alarmed, Wiley looked around him to rail at Jayems. "What are you doing?"

His eyes narrowed. "Sending her away before I break her neck for lying to me." He glanced at the wide-eyed Jasmine grudgingly. "Though I suppose she can be forgiven, as she does it out of loyalty to you."

His gaze glittered at Wiley. "There is a limit to what I will forgive those who try to deceive me."

"You said she could go home."

His face hardened. "Keilor."

Keilor gently moved the resisting Wiley aside and continued toward the door, leaving Jayems to continue his battle in private.

"You be nice to her!" Wiley shouted after Keilor as they entered the gray stone hall.

### CHAPTER 3

Keilor looked Jasmine assessingly. "Do you want me to be nice to you, Dragonfly?"

She glowered at him. "I doubt you know how." They paused at a set of double doors a short way down the hall.

He flashed her a wicked smile. "I can be very nice when I choose." His hand closed over the door handle, but he didn't open it just yet. He moved a fraction closer to her. Warm breath slid across her skin as he traced the iridescent dragonfly pendant at her throat. She dropped her eyes, shivering just a little as chills rushed through her.

"Be good, my Dragonfly. Be very, very good," he whispered, lifting her chin until their faces were only inches apart. He stroked his fingers lightly down her neck, making her breath catch. A warning glinted in his eyes. "You won't like it if I have to correct you."

Jasmine pulled away and looked pointedly at the carved panels of the door, resenting how he made her feel. He was the enemy. "You get off on trying to scare women, don't you?"

Not really. Keilor paused, considering their uninvited guest. Initially he'd agreed with Jayems that the most efficient way to be rid of the human was to frighten her silly. That plan had failed miserably. But who could have known about her courage? Rihlia had been ready to run, and without provocation. Perhaps it was time to find a new way of dealing with the human.

After all, like it or not, she was going to be here a while.

Opening the door, he gestured her inside with a flourish. "Lights," he called, and the lights came on. "Softer," he ordered, and they dimmed. His eyes swept down her body, noting her tousled hair. She smelled like sweat and fear, and her eyes were shadowed with exhaustion.

“Bath,” he called, and steaming water began to fill a tub at the side of the large room. It was large enough for four people and reached by a series of steps chiseled of blue veined marble. A carved screen, now folded, stood between it and a handsome armoire of red wood and mirrored doors. He gestured toward the armoire. “Towels. The door next to it is a closet, not that you’ll find anything in it at the moment.” He turned slightly on the parquet flooring. “Bed.”

Jasmine glanced at the large bed against the left wall and did a double take. Vines curled around a pair of lovers entwined in a standing position on each post. She rolled her eyes, grateful that she rarely blushed. Heaven help her. It would be a miracle if she could get to sleep in such a bed. She dared a glance at the headboard and quickly looked away, brain burning.

“Don’t you have somewhere else I can sleep?” Her eyes skittered restlessly around the otherwise elegant room, and then up at the ceiling. She groaned. An enormous mirror in a golden frame was mounted above the bed. “I mean...with a less...” She waved her hand at the bed.

“I could,” he answered agreeably. He looked amused. “Though I couldn’t guarantee your bed would be solitary.”

She glared at him. “Fine.” He raised an intrigued eyebrow. “This is fine,” she clarified.

He shrugged. “As you wish. If you need anything—something to eat, for instance—just raise your voice slightly and call for service.”

Jasmine waited a moment after he’d left and then quickly opened the door. Two wolf guards looked down at her inquiringly. She growled in frustration and shut the door, locking it for good measure. Then she slumped against it, done in. Lemming had stayed with Wiley, so nothing disturbed the silence in the room, or her thoughts, such as they were. Her brain felt numb—temporarily shocked into immobility by the events of the evening. Her body ached from her climb up and down the Alaskan hills, and her feet throbbed and sweated unmercifully in her double layer of socks.

A click caused her to roll her head towards the tub. The water had stopped pouring. After a moment of contemplation she gave a fatalistic shrug. Ah, well. What else did she have to do?

Jasmine sighed and stretched luxuriously against the silky sheets, then forced herself to roll over. It took a bit more effort to pry her eyes open long enough to actually see and process her surroundings. She sat up with a start.

“Jas...are you awake yet?” Wiley’s voice sounded from a hidden intercom near the door.

Jasmine groaned and brushed the sleep from her eyes, not certain she was ready to face the day. Remnants of her dreams, something involving mirrors and a dark haired lover, still haunted her mind. Well, she’d known this tacky bed was going to give her nightmares.

“Jasmine!” Wiley sounded impatient.

“Come in.”

“I can’t—it’s locked.”

“Ah, nuts.” Surrendering to the inevitable, she crawled out of bed and covered herself with a soft robe she’d found in the armoire before going to unlock the door.

“About time,” Wiley grouched. Lemming was at her heels. “I was beginning to fear they’d done away with you, even though Jayems insisted you were still in here.” She gestured for the servants behind her to enter while Jasmine stifled a yawn. “I brought breakfast.” She crossed to the wardrobe and set a bundle of folded clothes inside. “You can see if these fit you after we eat, if you want.”

“Great.” Jasmine pushed her shoulder length hair out of her face. A servant in a white and gold tunic and loose trousers set a large covered tray on the dining table and took off the lid. He set the table for two.

“Shutters,” Wiley called out, and the wall directly opposite the door slid open like elevator doors, revealing a wall of clear glass with a breathtaking view.

Jasmine drew in a breath, distracted from the delicious smells of breakfast, and moved closer to stare in awe at the sheer drop below her window.

It was misty outside, the kind of thick fog that was almost rain, but even so she could make out the cove five stories below her room. Towering redwoods rose on every side, to the edges of the shore, though they were half hidden in the haze. Farther out, gray sea met smoky sky in a seamless melding that might have stretched forever, off unto the edge of the world. Or perhaps it was merely the hazy glass curve of the magician’s crystal that held this strange dream world.

“It’s an inlet of the sea—I forget what it’s called. On a clear day you can see the mountains on the other side,” Wiley said. Today she wore a sky blue robe with a long sapphire tunic trimmed in silver embroidery. She stroked a sleeve absently, in a faintly troubled way.

Jasmine shook her head, breaking the spell of the sea. “Beautiful,” she said to Wiley, suitably awed. Then she grinned. “Let’s eat.”

Wiley laughed and moved towards the table. The male servant stood discreetly against the wall while the other made up the bed and collected Jasmine’s clothes, depositing them in a machine hidden behind a wall panel. Jasmine observed that her white uniform didn’t appear to be the best color for a maid as the woman began to clean the tub, and then dismissed the matter. Maybe they had superior methods of stain removal here. At any rate, she had more important things to worry about.

She spread a napkin on her lap and had just opened her mouth to broach those matters when Wiley gasped and began to giggle. “What?”

“You had to sleep there?” Wiley pointed an unsteady finger at the bed.

She glanced at it, and the mirror on the ceiling, annoyed all over again. “Your sweet cousin seemed to think it was funny.” She surveyed the silver chopsticks and wide spoon beside her plate with consternation. Perhaps she should have tried harder to master the wooden ones in the Chinese restaurants back home. Picking up her spoon, she scooped a small taste of what appeared to be a sausage pilaf and nibbled on it experimentally. Satisfied, she took the serving scoop and piled a small mountain onto her china plate. “I won’t be sorry to see the end of him.”

“Here, have some almond milk.” Wiley smiled almost nervously and handed her an insulated silver ewer.

“Almond milk?” She made a face as she accepted it and poured a little in a tall crystal glass. “What is this, planet of the health food junkies?”

Wiley shrugged in apology. “No dairy animals.”

Jasmine’s brows shot up. “What? No whipped cream, no butter?” Frowning, she

took a cautious sip from her cup. “Ok, it’s not bad, but if someone whips out a brick of tofu, I’m leaving.”

Wiley toyed with her spoon. Addressing it, she said, “You can’t.” At Jasmine’s puzzled expression, she clarified, “They won’t let you leave. They think you’re planning to cause trouble if they let you go.”

“Rescuing you, you mean.” She tossed down her spoon. “What right do they have to hold you here, anyway? Seems to me like they gave up on you a long time ago. Why take you back now, when you don’t want to be here?”

Wiley sighed heavily. “It’s worse. Jayems.... He claims he’s my husband.”

“What?” The table rattled as Jasmine shot to her feet. “For crying out loud, why?”

Wiley’s lip began to tremble. “He claims we were ‘joined in a betrothal ceremony’ when we were kids.”

Jasmine shoved her chair away, her robe flapping against her legs as she stood up and paced, the better to rant. “That’s barbaric!” An awful thought occurred to her and she paled. “He hasn’t tried to...”

Wiley’s eyes widened, reading her mind with the ease of long acquaintance. “No! No, nothing like that,” she hastily reassured her friend. “I don’t think he’d...I think he’d rather...” She cleared her throat and blushed. “Anyway, it’s the whole idea.”

“I should say so,” Jasmine agreed indignantly, pacing again. She spotted the male servant watching her. No doubt he was sent to spy on them. Well, two could play that game. “What’s your name?” she demanded.

“Knightin, my lady,” he said with a respectful inclination of his head.

She puzzled for a second over the lady—he made it sound like a title—but let it pass, assuming it was a substitute for ma’am in this neck of the woods. She studied his face for a moment, noting that his long rusty hair was tied back. Long hair appeared to be in fashion on this world. “How do you get a divorce here?”

A gasp came from her right, and she whipped her head around in time to see the maid fumbling for her dropped feather duster. Score one for the home team.

Good, she thought with fierce satisfaction.

Knightin’s expression turned wary. “It is not done, my lady.”

“It’s not done, or it can’t be done?”

He shifted a fraction and took a slight breath. “If a woman can prove she has no desire for her husband, then she may be released from her bond, however—”

Jasmine smiled triumphantly at Wiley and watched her shoulders begin to relax. “There, you see? Nothing to—”

“However,” Knightin interrupted, “in the Lady Rihlia’s case, it would be almost impossible to obtain.” He seemed almost angry, and Jasmine wanted to find out why.

She pretended to be distracted by the view for a moment, letting him stew. She needed to keep her temper down. When she was calmer, she said, “Okay, please explain why Wiley would have trouble divorcing this Jayems.”

He looked like she’d forced a bite of Chinese bitter melon on him. “Lord Jayems,” he emphasized the title like a nanny prompting diction, “Is the successor to Lord Rohmeis, but only through his bond with Lady Rihlia.”

Jasmine winced a little at all the foreign terms and then looked at Wiley significantly. “So without Wiley, the leadership, or whatever it is, goes poof, huh? But would Wiley really be forced to stay with him if she didn’t want to?”

Knightin relaxed and answered with a touch of male arrogance, “Considering the type of bond they share, it’s unlikely that ‘wanting’ could even be an issue.” When they just stared at him, he clarified with satisfaction, “Their marriage was determined by casting lots.”

Jasmine’s temper began to get the better of her again. “Are you telling me...” she paused to control her tone, “that my best friend’s future husband was determined by essentially drawing straws?”

Taken aback, he tried to explain, unconsciously speaking with his hands in his agitation, as well as his voice, “The lots are holy, reliable instruments of—”

“I don’t care about your holy mumbo jumbo!” she shouted. “How could her family do that to her? Where were her parents? Don’t answer that,” she cut him off, raising a hand in warning. “I might get sick.” She glanced at Wiley, who looked worried again, and made herself calm down. Wiley didn’t need her losing her temper. She had it rough enough already.

But it wasn’t fair—none of it. Wiley had already been through too much. Growing up an orphan was tough enough. Suddenly finding an entire family and being snatched by an alien world was more than enough to deal with without watching her friend throw temper tantrums on top of it. What they needed was a plan, and she had just the thing.

She touched Wiley’s hand gently. “Don’t worry about it, Wile E. Coyote,” she teased. “We’ll just treat him like a wart—a little liquid nitrogen, a little discomfort, and poof, he’s gone.” Wiley laughed, as she’d intended.

Knightin turned an unhealthy shade of bing cherry.

She eyed him speculatively. “So, what exactly are your orders? Besides reporting every word we say, that is?” She watched in satisfaction as his jaw clenched, but he didn’t rise to the bait. “Do you have to follow her everywhere she goes, or only when she’s with me?”

Annoyance simmered in his manner, but his answer was straight forward enough. “Only when she’s with you.”

She smirked at Wiley, and said just to see her smile, “I guess you’d better step out while I get dressed. There’s only so much I’d care to have reported about me.”

Wiley chuckled and waved her hand, more like her old self. “Go use the dressing room, brat. I promise not to let anyone follow you.”

Jasmine entered the dressing room and closed the door behind her. She wasn’t nearly as calm as she pretended, but she didn’t want the panic she felt to show. They had to get home!

Well, she’d feel better once she was properly dressed. She took a breath and examined the bundle of clothing Wiley had brought. There was a pair of black leather boots with breathable canvas panels in just her size and several pairs of socks. Comfortable black pants in a material similar to extremely thick silk with a button fly closure and a belt had been included. She set them aside while she searched for underwear.

That was when she hit the first snag.

In disbelief, Jasmine dangled a pair of silky panties up in the air. The material parted at the crotch, forming a butterfly. She’d never owned such a scandalous undergarment in her life, and she couldn’t believe Wiley would actually bring her such a thing. Yet here they were, several pairs of them. Yep, she could choose to be risqué in fire engine red,

pink, black, white or midnight blue.

It got worse.

Jasmine had once seen a picture of some ancient Mediterranean pottery where the women wore a type of short-sleeved bustier/vest that had boosted their breasts. The garments had been cut out around the breast itself, leaving the naked breast lifted up and exposed as if held in two cupped hands, rather like an offering.

If she wasn't holding an exact replica, it was dang close.

"Wiley!" she roared, "Get your butt in here!"

Wiley entered on the run. Jasmine held the offending garment up accusingly, and her friend blushed all the way to the roots of her hair. "Don't blame me," she said defensively. "They're standard issue here."

Jasmine's eyes boggled, dropped to Wiley's chest and then hurriedly away. She was not going to ask. "Fine," she said, her voice strained. "I still can't believe you brought them, though. As if I'm going to wear a bright red..." She dangled the garment on one finger. "What do you call this thing?"

Wiley crossed her arms. "I never actually asked, and for your information, I wasn't the one who picked them out." She paused a moment, letting the horror build. "Keilor got them for you after I mentioned you needed a change of clothes."

There was a long moment of silence. Then, "You let your cousin pick out my underwear?" She ended on a shout.

"He picked out your boots, too, and I don't hear you complaining about them," Wiley pointed out.

Jasmine shut up. Some humiliations in life were best not dwelt upon. Trying not to think about it, she put on some panties, socks and pants. At least the pants were comfortable, she consoled herself. That left the naughty tops to choose from and several long scarves of matching colors.

Still wearing her robe, Jasmine picked up a scarf and scowled at it. "What am I supposed to do with this, wrap it around my head and pretend I'm a pirate?"

Since Wiley didn't know, they called in the maid for a consultation. It turned out that the scarf was made to be worn crossed over the breasts and tied at the back of the neck for a bandeau. Somehow the maid convinced Jasmine to put the bustier thing—which she called an overnji—over the bandeau and at least look at it.

"It's very respectable," the older woman reassured her. "My daughters wear it all the time."

"I look like a harem girl," Jasmine muttered, staring at the midnight blue overnji and white bandeau she'd been conned into.

Wiley smirked and grabbed the dark blue sash. She wound it low about Jasmine's hips and knotted it. "There," she said, putting her hands on her hips and standing back to look over her creation. "Now you look like a harem escapee turned pirate."

"Why, thank you, Wiley," Jasmine sneered, stalking out. "That is so much better." She yanked open the armoire doors and extracted a brush she'd discovered there the night before. As she eyed the top in the mirrored doors while she worked the tangles from her hair, she decided that it wasn't so bad. At least her stomach was flat. Heck, she'd worn crop tops in public that bared about the same amount of skin and never thought twice about it. Of course, none of those had ever been chosen for her by a man.

With effort she chased the image of Keilor holding her new panties in his hands,

perhaps imagining her in them. It was swiftly replaced by the image of him looking over the overniji, trying to guess at the size of her...

She took a deep, deep breath and then expelled it slowly. Keilor wasn't thinking about her breasts, or anything else for that matter. Men who looked like he did didn't need to fantasize. Shoot, for all she knew, he was happily married and had three kids, not that she cared.

What she needed to be thinking about was getting Wiley and herself back home where men were manageable and the local police force didn't look like the cast of Howling III.

They needed a plan.

End sample