

ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS

Behind the Enchanted Door



Arianna Hart

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Behind the Enchanted Door

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BEHIND THE ENCHANTED DOOR

Arianna Hart

Dedication

This book is dedicated with deep appreciation to two marvelous friends and fantastically talented authors, Jewell Mason and Leigh Wyndfield. Without their constant support I'd never have made it through the writing of this book. Thank you so very much for your understanding and kindness when I was losing my mind. I appreciate you talking me back from the ledge.

Also, I wouldn't be able to write a single word without the loving support of my very own "patron of the arts", my husband Paul. Thanks for putting up with fish sticks for supper, a messy house and children running around in their pajamas when you got home from work. I love you in this and every other world.

Last but not least, I'd like to thank my parents, my aunt and my sisters who have had faith in me even when I didn't. There really is nothing stronger than family. Especially one full of Irish chicks. I love you all so very much.

Prologue

Xodo Forest, Zandermer

How could someone who lived for over a thousand years be so stupid? Trella flapped her iridescent wings in a fit of adolescent pique. Just because she was the only fairy born this *century* didn't mean she had to be watched over every single second. Her mother was just so *annoying*. Didn't she understand anything?

Trella slipped between the thinning trees to the edge of the forest and shot a wary look over her shoulder. She didn't see any watchers but that didn't mean they weren't there. With a nervous shake of her wings and a matching flutter in her stomach, she skipped out of the trees and towards the shifters' encampment.

Huge bonfires were already alight and several of the older girls were dancing around them in wild abandon. Trella searched for her friend Leis'al among the dancers but didn't spot her. The flashing of blades caught her gaze and a shiver chased down her spine.

The fae couldn't touch steel but their neighbors, the shape shifters, wielded the deadly metal in a dazzling display that was both lovely and feral. The young men dancing with their swords wore only breeches that left little to the imagination and Trella shivered for an entirely different reason.

"Trella! Over here!" Leis'al waved to her, holding two cups filled to the brim.

Trella flitted over to her friend, trying to appear nonchalant, like she snuck out to shape shifter celebrations all the time.

"Why aren't you dancing with the other girls?" she asked, taking one of the cups and sipping cautiously. Shifter drinks tended to be very potent and if she didn't want to get caught sneaking back into the palace she'd have to stay sober.

"Those ninnies," Leis'al snorted. "The only dancing they're interested in is on their backs. They're just trying to catch the attention of the men and I have better things to do than couple with some oaf who wouldn't know what to do with a breast if he found it."

"Leis'al!" Trella's face flamed at her friend's words. The shifters had few inhibitions—the fae didn't have many either for that matter—but still the words shocked her.

"Oh don't look so mortified. Come on, there's more going on here than watching alphas trying to impress bed partners." Leis'al grabbed her arm and dragged her away from the swaying dancers. Impatient with the delay, she pulled Trella to the back of a woven tent.

Trella wanted to get a better glimpse at some of those alphas but Leis'al was insistent. "I could always tell him what to do with a breast," she muttered to herself.

Her initiation wasn't for a few months yet but that didn't mean she hadn't felt the urge to experiment.

Fat lot of good that urge had done her. She hadn't so much as kissed a man yet and she was almost to her thirtieth birthday! Not that her mother cared. To her Trella was still a baby. Just because the fae aged slower than the mages or shifters didn't mean she had to be treated like an infant!

After she turned thirty and had her initiation ceremony she'd be officially an adult and her parents wouldn't be able to tell her where she could or couldn't go. Trella took another sip of her drink. She didn't know what she looked forward to more – losing her virginity or being able to come and go as she pleased.

"Ah, sweet freedom is only a few months away," she sighed, stumbling along behind her friend.

"Hush! Listen." Leis'al pulled her down in the shadow of a water cask at the back of the tent.

"What's going on?" Trella whispered, crouching down and folding her wings in tightly.

"Some mages came down from the hills. They're meeting with the elders now."

"Mages? They never leave Gastal." Suddenly her complaints seemed very tiny.

"Which is why I want to find out what they're doing here. Now hush so I can listen."

Trella bit back the questions on her tongue and strained her ears to listen too. She'd never seen a mage up close before and wondered if she'd get a glimpse of them before she had to hustle back home. Every once in a while an envoy from Gastal would meet with the Council of shifters and fae but rarely did a mage leave the strongholds set deep in the hills of Gastal.

Leis'al's hearing was much better than Trella's so she held still and waited to ask her questions later. She could hear low murmurs of conversation but couldn't understand any of what was being said.

This was really boring. She'd rather be watching the dancing shifters, especially Don'al. Leis'al's brother was leading the sword dance and Trella wanted a chance to see him in action. Roots and branches but he was handsome. Maybe he'd finally see her as something more than his little sister's friend tonight?

Just as Trella was about to open her mouth to say she was leaving Leis'al let out a gasp.

"What? What is it?" Trella clutched Leis'al's hand.

"No! It can't be!"

"What? What can't be?" Trella didn't know what Leis'al heard, but it was enough to make her normally swarthy skin turn white. A knot of fear formed in her gut.

"Gastal. It's gone."

"What do you mean gone? Hills just can't disappear."

“The mages are saying a terrible force came down from the mountains and wiped out the strongholds. Everyone who couldn’t escape is dead.”

“What force? The only things in the mountains are snow and ice. There’s nothing up there anymore. Not since the mages trapped –”

“Su’are!” Leis’al and Trella said together.

“It can’t be! They trapped him eons ago. He’s just a story now to scare little kids into behaving. He doesn’t exist.” The knot of fear that was in her stomach grew until it almost suffocated her.

“That’s what the elders are telling the mages but something destroyed their homes. They’re asking for shelter and protection. They’re saying something about a prophecy and warning the elders to form an army.”

“I’ve got to go. I need to tell my mother about this. She’ll want to call the Circle together.”

Leis’al nodded absently, her attention focused on the conversation in the tent. Trella ran for the forest. She had to think of a way to convince her mother of the truth of her story without getting into trouble for sneaking out to the shifters’ gathering.

She used her wings to lift herself over the rough ground leading to the edge of the forest. The scent of *pato* needles drifted to her as she reached the first big tree. Her foot had no sooner settled on the rustling underbrush than a thundering shook the ground.

Screams and cries rose up from the encampment. Trella spun around to see a wave of blackness blotting out the bonfires. Everywhere it touched people screamed in agony. Mothers shifted into their animal forms and dragged children away.

The men grabbed the burning brands and threw them into the darkness but even that light was swallowed up by the inky wave.

Full-blown panic surged through Trella and she ran for home as the sounds of metal crashing against stone ran in her ears.

Arianna Hart

*Come Away, O human Child!
To the waters and the wild
With a faery, hand in hand,
For the world's more full of
weeping than you can understand.*
THE STOLEN CHILD, William Butler Yeats

Chapter One

*Elmira, New York,
Present Day*

Kaleen Griffin looked at the little house on the hill and fell in love. It was hers! All hers and no one could take it away. She held the papers in her hot little hands claiming it one hundred percent hers.

So there! Take that, Richard! She didn't need him or his stinking gallery.

Skipping up the hill onto the rickety porch, Kaleen almost giggled in glee. "Thank you, Aunt Lucy – whoever you are."

When she'd gotten the letter from the lawyer's office telling her she'd received an inheritance, she'd thought it was a big joke. She didn't have any relatives except for her anti-establishment parents who'd long since passed away. They'd traveled all over the country in the back of a van for most of her life. Kaleen was sure if there had been a relative her parents would have hit them up for money at some point.

She'd asked some of the folks in town about her mysterious Aunt Lucy but they didn't have much more to say than she was a spinster who minded her own business. Lucy wasn't a member of any women's clubs or church groups and apparently rarely left her house except when she absolutely had to. If she'd had other family no one knew about them. The fact she'd left the house to Kaleen was the biggest stir Lucy had ever caused.

Maybe karma was working in her favor for once. It seemed too good to be true but it was for real. Her name was spelled out in black and white. The house was hers as were the acres of forest behind it and some farmland that her long-lost aunt rented out to local farmers. The taxes and insurance had been paid for the next year and a trust was set up to use the rent money to continue to pay them, unless Kaleen specified otherwise.

Like that was going to happen! Aunt Lucy may have been a recluse but she was one smart cookie. As long as Kaleen swore not to sell the land to developers and not strip the forest, she'd be self-sufficient for the rest of her life. That worked just fine for her.

For the first time ever she could focus on her art and not have to worry about where her next meal was coming from. Or if she'd have a roof over her head the next time it rained.

This was a whole new beginning for her. She could just feel it. Happiness bubbled up inside her, making her almost lightheaded.

"Hey, lady, you wanna sign for this?" The beefy moving guy held out a clipboard to her.

"Sure, hold on." Kaleen stepped carefully off the porch and scrawled her signature at the bottom of the packing slip.

"Thank you," she said cheerfully, handing it back to him.

He grunted something unintelligible and handed her a copy of the form before climbing into the truck and pulling out of the drive.

"And a nice day to you too."

Kaleen ran inside and took another look around. The east side of the house got a ton of natural sunlight while the west remained in the shadows of the forest a hundred yards away. God, she couldn't wait to paint that forest! Maybe she'd do a four-part series of the forest in the different seasons.

And the view from the porch was stunning too! She scurried to the window and looked out over the valley below. Rich green fields bordered by more woods spread out as far as the eye could see.

Like a kid at Christmas, she darted to the room that was going to be her studio and ripped open the boxes of painting supplies. With so much inspiration all around her, she'd have enough pieces for a showing in no time. All she had to do was find a gallery willing to take a chance on her. After Richard had dragged her name through the mud, making her look like a temperamental flake, that might not be easy to do. Maybe she'd get lucky and no one here in the boonies would have heard about her tumultuous break with his gallery.

She'd let her talent speak for itself and if it sold, it sold. And if it didn't she'd paint for the sheer enjoyment of it. No more painting commissions and reproductions and other crap for rich clients who cared nothing for the emotion behind the paintbrush.

"And I'll never paint another snotty college graduate again for as long as I live!" she vowed to herself, taking out her canvases and propping them against the table leg.

It probably made more sense to set up the kitchen or even the bedroom first but she wanted her studio ready to go as soon as possible. She could unpack her clothes any time. Her fingers itched to paint something right now.

"Music! I need my radio." Kaleen went back to the living room and searched until she found the box with her CDs and player in it. She needed some noise in the house besides her own voice. It was so quiet out here in the country she wasn't used to it at all. But she didn't think it would take long to become accustomed to the peace and solitude.

After living in the city where people surrounded her, it was nice to have her nearest neighbor over a mile away. Boom box in hand, she went back to her studio. Man, the natural light in this room was incredible! It was smaller than the other bedroom but had huge windows and more than enough room for her to work.

If this wasn't heaven she didn't know what was. Her own place with no one to bother her and kick-ass natural light. All she needed was an occasional night in bed with some well-endowed stud and she could die a happy woman.

Kaleen laughed out loud. She wouldn't need sex for a while after the emotional wringer Richard put her through. If he was gay, he should have just told her so instead of making her feel inadequate. She wouldn't have left his gallery just because he didn't want her.

Instead, she'd left because he'd lied to her and tried to control her.

No matter. That was in the past. Today started her future. Swirling some paint on her palette, Kaleen let her happiness fill her from the toes up. When the joy filled her completely, she applied brush to canvas and lost herself in the play of light and shadow.

She hummed along with the Celtic folk music playing in the background but didn't really hear it. Her focus was on the world she created on the canvas in front of her. Kaleen forgot about the rest of her belongings that needed to be unpacked as she painted for hours. At one point she needed to unpack the bright lights she used in her studio and hook them up before she could continue. But afterwards she quickly went back to her creation.

Finally, her hands began to cramp and her back to ache. She blinked a few times, coming down to earth. Her clock was still buried with the rest of her belongings and she never wore a watch so she had no idea what time it was. It had to be after midnight if she went by how tired she was.

Maybe she'd make herself a peanut butter and jelly sandwich and go to bed. She cleaned up her brushes with a yawn and headed to the kitchen where she'd stashed a grocery bag of staples. Maybe she'd just have a spoonful of peanut butter and skip the sandwich all together. Man, she was tired.

Looking out the living room window, she could see a tiny sliver of moon lighting up the forest. The soft glow made the leaves look almost silver in the night. Another idea for a painting flashed in her mind and she filed it away for later. If she gave up eating and sleeping completely and painted for the next ten years, she'd still never finish all the ideas she had.

Kaleen looked around at the boxes marked "Kitchen" and shuddered. She'd unpack them tomorrow, now she needed sleep more. A plastic spoon left over from her coffee sat in the sink, and she used that to scoop out a blob of peanut butter. Licking it like a lollipop, she carried it with her to the bedroom where her mattress lay unmade on the floor.

“Later.” She’d make that up later too. Her sleeping bag would work just fine for now. Kicking off her sandals as she finished up her “supper”, Kaleen threw the sleeping bag on the mattress and slipped out of her long cotton skirt. Not even bothering to look for pajamas, she stripped off her paint-spattered T-shirt and climbed into the makeshift bed. As her mind shut down for the night, she could have sworn she heard the faint tinkling of music nearby.

* * * * *

Lips skimmed down Kaleen’s neck and over her collarbone, setting fire to every nerve ending in their path. Blood throbbed in her veins and her pussy pulsed with the force of it. Startling blue eyes looked into hers with a smoldering intensity that only added to the inferno burning inside her body. Tingling bubbles of arousal fizzed through her chest and zeroed in on her nipples. Every breath she took made her breasts feel fuller and heavier and so very needy. She ached for him to move lower and put her out of her misery.

As if sensing her thoughts, her lover nuzzled the underside of her creamy mound and made his way to her pointed nipple. White teeth gleamed in the darkness as he smiled and Kaleen went weak in the knees. She felt lightheaded with anticipation as he ran his teeth over her pearly tip. Her breath came in gasps as he blew warm air over her. God, she wanted his mouth on her!

When she thought she’d go insane for sure, his hot lips captured her nipple and sucked on it hard. Bolts of hot lust speared her core. Her clit swelled and she tried to press her thighs together to still the ache. Her lover spread her legs apart with his and slipped between them, leaving her open to his touch.

And hell yeah, she wanted that touch. She reached down between them to guide his thick, hot cock inside her weeping pussy. The feel of him pushing into her made her groan out loud with pleasure. His length slipped inside her an inch at a time until he filled her completely. Long, slow strokes drew out her pleasure until it was almost unbearable. Strong fingers dug into her hips, urging her on to completion.

Kaleen’s body throbbed with the force of her orgasm. Her eyes flew open as the waves of pleasure crashed over her. She was drenched in sweat and her pussy hummed.

And she was all by herself.

“Holy shit!” She shook her head, as if that would clear things up, and looked around. There was no one in the room, and her panties were still firmly on her body. They were soaking wet now but they obviously hadn’t been moved to make room for a gorgeous specimen of a man with broad shoulders and beautiful blue eyes.

Where the hell had that come from? Wasn’t she a little old to be having wet dreams? The memory of intense blue eyes staring down at her as she came made her pussy quiver and shudder.

Guess not.

Her body felt loose and relaxed and she stretched luxuriously in her sleeping bag. Nope, there was no room for a phantom lover in the sleeping bag with her. Her big 'O' must just be the result of an overactive imagination.

And a damn good imagination it was too. Kaleen tried to remember everything in better detail. She could still see her dream lover as if he were a real person. But he was like no man she'd ever met before. Long blond hair draped over muscular shoulders and tight abs. Blue eyes stared down at her over a patrician nose and full lips.

She shuddered again. No, she didn't know any guys who looked like that. Too bad because if she did, she'd have jumped them immediately.

Chuckling at herself, Kaleen climbed out of bed and stumbled to the bathroom. She'd take a shower and unpack before she even went to the studio today. It wasn't like she had all that much to put away, after all. Some books, artwork, a few knickknacks and some CDs and that was pretty much it. Her living room consisted of a few end tables and the rocking chair she'd recaned all by herself.

Stepping into the shower, Kaleen did a quick itinerary in her head. She didn't have a whole lot of stuff for the kitchen since her cooking skills left something to be desired. Good thing she subsisted mostly on frozen dinners and peanut butter. The kitchen wasn't really a priority. The most important room in the house—her studio—was already set up. Eventually her clothes and linens would need to be unpacked too.

That might be the first order of business, actually. Great time to think of it when she was standing in the shower wet and naked. That dream must have shaken her up more than she realized. She turned off the spray and tried to wipe off as much water as she could.

Using her hands as a squeegee wasn't working. She'd just have to suck it up and make a run for it. Kaleen squeezed some of the water out of her hair and dashed to the bedroom. Digging through T-shirts and cotton skirts of every color imaginable, she finally found the box of towels. Now all she needed was some underwear and she'd be good to go.

As she put her clothes haphazardly in drawers and made the bed, her mind kept going back to her dream. Was she that sexually frustrated that she needed to get release in her dreams? She didn't think so. After her failed relationship with Richard she'd been pretty turned off about sex. Maybe this was her body's way of telling her to get over it.

It sure as hell worked. She couldn't even picture Richard's classic good looks but blazing blue eyes jumped into view every time she closed her eyes. The urge to drop everything and paint her dream man kept distracting her from putting her house in order.

"No! You need to get these things done. The paints aren't going anywhere, Kaleen Maeve Griffin." She'd finish unpacking the bedroom and eat something before she went into the studio. Then she wouldn't have to leave unless she collapsed from exhaustion.

The thought of spending days and days doing nothing but painting felt like playing hooky. Always before, her art had to take a back seat to school, working and Richard. Now she had the freedom from all of that.

“I never met you, Aunt Lucy, but I love you.” Once again, thoughts about her aunt scurried around in her head. Why would someone she’d never met leave her a house? It just didn’t make sense. If she had known about Kaleen enough to include her in her will, why hadn’t she contacted her earlier? How come her mother had never mentioned her? It was plain weird. But then again her entire life was bizarre so why should this be any different?

Kaleen slammed the drawer on the last of her skirts. That took care of the bedroom! Thank God she traveled light and didn’t have a ton of pictures or personal belongings to unpack or she’d never get a chance to paint today. She hustled to the kitchen and grabbed another scoop of peanut butter. Snagging a diet soda and a granola bar, she took her “breakfast” and headed to the studio.

After she slipped on a paint smock, Kaleen picked up her work from yesterday. She turned it toward the windows to get a look at it in the light. A soft landscape depicting the green fields laid out in front of her had started to form on the canvas. It was a happy picture with the sun shining brightly and the clouds far off in the distance.

Not bad, if she did say so herself. But it didn’t draw her today. She had something else in mind to work on. She could always go back to this one later. Maybe she’d give it to the farmer who worked those fields or something.

Gently setting it down on the table, Kaleen picked up a clean canvas and propped it on the easel. Today she was going to do her damndest to re-create her lover from last night. She mixed her paints and brought back the dream.

God, it was so real! She could have sworn she felt the crush of his chest over hers, his fingers caressing her pussy. Just the thought of it got her juices flowing again. If this was a result of not sleeping with anyone for a while she’d gladly remain celibate!

With the music cranked up, Kaleen started outlining the frame of her sexy phantom. Her mind slipped into the zone even as she concentrated on getting the form just right. He was solid but not bulky. It wasn’t like he was one of those overblown body builders. No, he was like a thoroughbred, all lean muscles and subtle strength.

Yeah, that was it. And the hair! He had a long mane of white-blond hair. She didn’t generally go for men with hair longer than hers but in this case it was very sexy. The face was tricky to do with paints. She’d just rough it in then focus on that later. His body was worth many an hour all on its own.

Kaleen worked like a woman possessed. She stopped reluctantly to eat and drink but stayed in the room with her canvas to consider what she’d done so far. When she had to leave the room to use the bathroom she rushed so she could get back to her painting. It still needed work to get it just right. His face was narrower, the cheekbones higher and sharper.

She left her sandwich half eaten and went back to fix his face. It took forever to get his features the way she remembered them. Those eyes of his still weren't right. She didn't have the paints to re-create the startling blue of them. But she was close. A little white starburst around the pupil would help.

Working late into the night, she stopped only when she couldn't physically go on. With a jaw-splitting yawn, she dropped her brushes into the turpentine and stumbled to her bed, falling down face first.

Again, the tinkling notes of an ethereal flute drifted to her as she passed into unconsciousness. She thought wearily that she'd have to check out that sound some time.

"Later. Too tired now," she mumbled into her pillow.

Phantom fingers caressed her breasts, cupping them and teasing the nipples. Her heart pounded as lips covered the pointed tip, sucking it deep into the warm cavern of his mouth. Kaleen arched her back, wanting, needing the contact. Fire burned in her veins and sizzled wherever they touched. His hands kneaded her other mound and plucked at that neglected nipple until Kaleen thought she'd die from the pain and pleasure. She gasped sharply as his teeth nipped her swollen point. His warm chuckle reverberated through her body and sent shock waves of sensation straight to her pussy.

Cream slipped from her slit as she arched her hips against him. She felt so empty and needy for him. His long, hard cock was just out of reach of her grasping fingers. If she could have touched him she'd have pulled him inside her waiting core and ended this torture.

Strong fingers drifted lower over her pussy, parting the curls and teasing her swollen lips. Her hips lifted, silently urging him to enter her. One finger swirled around her clit, sending sparks shooting through her, and another gush of fluid poured from her body. Her legs parted, begging him to touch her deeper.

The tip of his finger probed the slick entrance to her pussy, slipping inside with ease. Each nerve along her channel shouted out in glee as he drove in and out of her, stroking every inch thoroughly. His thumb tapped her clit as he drove her higher and higher, pushing her to the edge of reason. Just when the end was in sight and she was ready to throw herself over the edge into oblivion, he stopped. Kaleen cried in frustration, her muscles straining for one more touch to finish her off but he only chuckled and withdrew.

"No!" He couldn't leave her like this! His hands trailed down her wet thighs and pushed them apart. His torso slid down her over-sensitized body but carefully avoided stroking her clit. Kaleen's head thrashed back and forth on the pillow. If he didn't touch her she'd die from sexual overload.

Her pussy was wide open to his gaze as he ran his lips over her belly and hips. She could feel the heat of his body so damn close to her clit and another surge of lust slammed into her. His thumb pressed against the bundle of nerves near her anus and she almost shot off the bed at the feeling. Hot breath caressed her pussy lips before his tongue speared her center like a branding iron. Heat surged through her body, blooming from her pulsing center like a flower unfurling in the sun.

It was too much! She couldn't take any more. Finally, when she thought she'd go mad if the wondrous torture lasted another minute, his finger drove into her channel and grazed her clit. She gleefully jumped over the edge where she flew to the stars in an explosion of light and heat.

Before she could find her way back to earth, her lover drove his cock into her, hiltling himself with one thrust. More explosions rippled through her and she clenched her vaginal muscles against his rigid length. God, he felt so good inside her! She couldn't get enough of his touch. Wrapping her legs around his waist, Kaleen held him against her as hard as she could. She never wanted to let him go.

He murmured unintelligible words against her throat and slid his hands under her legs. Her hips lifted off the mattress and he pounded inside her like a jackhammer. Unbelievably, she felt the pressure grow inside her again. Desire swirled through her veins, saturating her very pores with need for this man.

A wordless cry broke from her as he plunged in and out and stroked her clit with every thrust. She held onto the barest edge of sanity until he lightly bit her shoulder. The slight pain turned to utmost pleasure as he laved the nip with his tongue and continued to drive into her until she exploded again. His hoarse scream sounded in her ears as he found his own release in her arms.

*Never since the middle summer's spring
Met we on hill, in dale, forest, or mead.
By paved fountain or by rushy brook
Or in the beached margin of the sea
To dance our ringlets to the whistling wind.*
A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM, William Shakespeare

Chapter Two

Three weeks later

Kaleen was possessed. That was the only explanation for what had happened to her. Every day it was the same routine. She'd wake up from dreams of fabulous sex with her mystery lover, choke down some coffee and paint like a mad woman until she collapsed in exhaustion.

On the plus side, she'd done five paintings in three weeks and they were the best work she'd ever done. As she put the finishing touch on her latest creation, she stepped back and surveyed the results.

This one she'd call *Fairy Glen*. Towering trees spread their branches over a circle of gaily-dressed dancing fairies. Shimmering wings looked ready to flutter off the canvas and Kaleen could almost smell the flowers in their hair.

Oh yeah, this was her best stuff yet. Since she completed the picture of her dream lover, she'd done paintings with dragons and wizards, fierce knights and gentle maidens and unicorns and fairies.

She'd never ventured into fantasy art before. Landscapes and seascapes had been her calling with the occasional portrait to make ends meet. It wasn't that she didn't like fairies and whatnot—she'd just enjoyed painting landscapes more. Growing up she'd traveled every inch of the country so she had a lot of ideas to call on.

The painting she'd started her first day here sat unfinished in the corner of the room. Maybe her new surroundings were taking her in a new direction artistically. She wasn't going to complain. Kaleen tried to look at the pictures through an objective eye. It was impossible. It felt like a piece of her soul had been mixed in with the paint for each one.

How could she part with them?

She shook her head and pushed the thought away. It wasn't like she had to make a decision now. Besides, her house was a total disaster and she was out of clean underwear. The compulsion to paint hadn't left any room for housework or laundry. Hell, she'd had to force herself to eat, sleep and shower.

Now that this one was done she could spend a little time cleaning up and eat something more than peanut butter. Her stomach growled at the thought of food. She'd better eat first, then she could clean up a bit. Maybe even take a walk and explore something outside the house.

Kaleen sang along with the music as she popped a frozen pizza into the oven. Damn, only one frozen dinner left. And she was running low on coffee and peanut butter too. She'd better go shopping soon. It probably wouldn't hurt to have some fresh food in the house either. Scooping up dirty clothes and her sheets, she started a load of laundry while her dinner cooked. Every time she passed her studio, she'd see *Dream Lover* out of the corner of her eye.

When she caught herself staring at him for the third time in ten minutes she shut the door to the studio. It had become an obsession with her! She dreamed about him every night and thought about him constantly during the day. If she wasn't getting so much satisfaction out of the dreams she might be worried about it. On the other hand, the dreams kept her from needing to take matters into her own hands so she wasn't complaining. At least she didn't need to buy batteries.

Snickering, she went back to the kitchen to check on the pizza. Her stomach was really grumbling now. She'd been living on coffee, peanut butter and paint fumes. Somehow she didn't think it would be the next diet craze.

Steaming pizza in hand, Kaleen sat at her breakfast nook and dug in. The sun shone through the windows, making the little room comfortably warm and cozy. Man, how had she lucked into this place? Once again she thanked the powers that be for this mysterious Aunt Lucy.

Talk about good timing. Kaleen sat back and sipped her soda, thinking about how things had gone so badly at the gallery. At first it had seemed like things were going to start to go right for a change. She'd put enough money away from her evil day job to hold her over for a while if her art couldn't keep her afloat. A few galleries had been interested in showing her work and she'd found a tiny apartment she could afford.

Yeah, things had been moving along great—then came Richard. He'd breezed into her showing as if he'd been doing her a favor by attending.

"I've heard that you show amazing talent for someone with your background," he'd said as he inspected her pieces.

She hadn't known how to react to his pompousness, so she'd remained quiet behind a polite smile.

"The technique is rough but it shows promise. Bring your supplies tomorrow morning and I'll evaluate you further." He handed her his card and flounced out with a distaining look at the other artists in the tiny gallery.

"Idiot!" She'd been so flattered by his attention and his uptown address that she'd actually listened to him.

Well, she thought as she dug into a gooey bite of pizza, he did know what he was talking about when it came to art. If he hadn't been a lying, backstabbing control freak

she might have been able to say it was a positive experience. He *had* refined her technique and given her a lot of exposure.

He also controlled everything from what she wore to what she ate. But when he used her attraction for him to manipulate her without mentioning the little fact that he was gay, well, that was just too much. She might have even been able to forgive him cheating her out of her commissions if he hadn't beat on her self-esteem so badly. But telling her she was a flop as a lover when she'd been honestly trying to pleasure him, well, that was too much.

"Good riddance." She pitched her napkin in the garbage can and got up. Finding him in his office in a passionate lip lock with the receptionist—the male receptionist—was just the impetus she needed to pack her bags and leave.

Logically she knew that it wasn't her poor performance as a lover that had "turned" him to other men. But deep inside where her demon insecurities festered she still wondered if it had been her fault. Hell, her parents had loved their ideals more than her, how could she have expected Richard to be any different?

Ugh! That was no way to think. She was doing just fine on her own. Kaleen smiled wryly as a shiver of lust shot to her pussy. If nothing else, she pleased her phantom lover just fine. *He* loved her no matter what.

That wasn't exactly reassuring. The only man she managed to perform with didn't exist outside of her imagination. But damn, her imagination was something else!

The dreams were never the same twice. Sometimes she was the aggressor. Other times she was shy and he pursued her. They always they ended with mind-numbing climaxes that left her shuddering even as she awoke.

She wondered if she'd have the same dreams if she took a nap. No, she really did have to clean the house. It was her first real home and she wanted to take care of it. Sure beat the hell out of the back of a van.

Grabbing a dust rag, Kaleen swept through the house like a whirlwind, stirring up dust motes as she went. By the time she reached her bedroom filtered sunlight drifted through the windows. She hadn't been in the room at dusk before and the sunshine through the skylights made the room glow.

A flash out of the corner of her eye caught her attention. What was that? The sun picked up a glint of something on the wall. Kaleen crossed to the wall and took a closer look. What could that be?

The outline of a door about three feet high glowed in the sun's rays. A door? To where? This wall separated her bedroom and her studio. Reaching out, she touched the outline gently. It was warm and very real.

Why hadn't she seen it before? An odd tingling formed in her stomach. Maybe it was some kind of decoration? The door had no handle, just an old-fashioned lock. Kaleen scrambled over to her dresser and pulled out the envelope from the lawyer. The deed to the house was in there, along with copies of the keys to the front door, but nothing that would fit into a lock like that.

Could Aunt Lucy have hidden the key somewhere? Maybe she kept secret treasures behind there? Curiosity burned in her chest. She grabbed a metal nail file and scurried back to the door. Getting down on her knees, she peeked into the keyhole but only saw black.

What could possibly be in a space this small? Jewels? Journals? Kaleen shoved the nail file in the lock. She'd love to see Aunt Lucy's journals, maybe there was something in there explaining how they were related.

She poked and prodded, but no matter what she did she couldn't turn the lock.

"Well, that stinks. Maybe the key is hidden around here some place." Could her mysterious Aunt Lucy have left a secret compartment and not left the key to it? That would be just plain cruel!

Unfortunately it was looking that way because no matter how hard she searched through the tiny house, Kaleen couldn't find the key anywhere. After three hours of exploring every nook and cranny she gave up. It was getting late anyway. She might as well call it a day and try again tomorrow.

Kaleen washed her face and brushed her teeth before climbing into bed. There was nothing like sliding in between fresh sheets with her body slightly worn out from cleaning. It was the first time she'd actually gone to bed without falling asleep as soon as her head hit the pillow.

She rolled over onto her side to figure out the puzzle of the door a bit before she fell asleep.

It was gone!

She couldn't see the door anymore. Kaleen turned the light on and got out of bed. The wall was as smooth and untouched as if it had never been there.

What the hell was going on? She knew there had been a door there earlier today. Was she going insane? Could she possibly have imagined it? Kaleen grabbed the papers from the lawyer describing the property.

Flipping through the pages, she skimmed over the parts that talked about the property and the constraints on selling the forestland. Still reading, she turned the pages until she got to the description of the house.

"Two bedroom, one bathroom, all appliances and window treatments included." That's it. No mention of anything else. Well, she didn't really expect them to include a description of a secret, disappearing door along with the acreage.

Damn it! She knew she'd seen a door. She'd call the lawyer in the morning. Maybe he'd known Aunt Lucy a little better than the other townspeople she'd spoken to. After all, she did choose him to make her will. Maybe he knew about the door. He might even have the key but had just forgotten to give it to her.

Yeah, that's what she'd do. First thing in the morning. But now she'd go to sleep and maybe her dream lover would come again. Would he come when she hadn't passed out from exhaustion? Maybe he only came when she was working?

That was a depressing thought.

Kaleen envisioned her lover and let her fingers drift under her T-shirt and between her legs. Her pussy tingled in anticipation and her lips grew wet as she stroked her clit. She rubbed harder, imagining her lover doing it instead.

A small tingle formed low in her belly and grew as she fantasized about Dream-boy teasing her. She re-created his taste and texture from her dreams and could almost imagine his scent coming to her. The memory of his fingers trailing over her breasts brought her nipples to full attention.

One hand drifted up to pinch her engorged nipple and the slight pain added to the fire burning through her veins. The pressure between her legs built and built but she controlled it. She didn't want to come too soon and end it. A vision of his smoldering blue eyes burning into her own made her gasp as desire flooded her.

She pictured him above her as she shoved a finger inside her pussy and a fresh wave of cream spilled out. Slipping another finger inside her tight channel, she pretended it was him filling her, driving his hard cock into her welcoming body over and over again. When she saw in her mind his blue eyes blazing into hers, it was too much for her body to handle.

Kaleen's hips shot off the bed and her head twisted frantically on the pillow as her pussy pulsed with her orgasm.

Her hands slipped wetly out of her body. No, she definitely didn't need Richard anymore.

"You looked so lovely as you pleased yourself," her phantom lover whispered in her ear as his hand trailed a path of fire over her torso. Her nipples puckered in expectation of those fingers touching her breasts. A wave of heat rolled over her like a nuclear explosion. Ripples of desire continued to expand and grow as she waited for his caress.

"You-you could see me?" How was that possible? Her slit swelled as blood filled the tissues in preparation for him. The idea of him watching her touch herself sent bolts of heat straight to her pussy. Her legs clamped together as she tried to fight the need to straddle him and pull his waiting cock inside her.

"Of course. I'm with you every minute of the day."

Kaleen didn't even want to think about the repercussions of that statement. This was just a dream. Only a dream.

"I thought of you while I was...you know."

"Touching yourself? Why, my love? Couldn't you wait for me to come to you?" His hand drifted down to her pussy, parting the curls and teasing her aching clit. Tongues of flame consumed her and she writhed on the mattress in tortured pleasure. His fingers seemed to know exactly how much pressure to apply to keep her on the very precipice of orgasm.

"I wasn't sure you'd come since I wasn't in my painting trance anymore." Her thoughts scattered as he copied her earlier actions. First one, then a second finger entered her pussy.

"I'll always come to you. Always want you. Only you have the power to keep me away. Should you not want me, then I won't come anymore." He pressed his thumb against her clit and drove his fingers in deeper.

"I don't think that'll be the case," Kaleen gasped as the world spun out of control and her body exploded into a million pieces.

* * * * *

"I'm sorry, Miss Griffin, I didn't know your aunt very well," the lawyer said.

She'd called him first thing in the morning. Well, at nine-thirty when she'd crawled out of bed, which was first thing in the morning to her. He was something less than helpful.

"Did she mention anything about a secret hiding space and a key for it?"

"No, I'm afraid not," he muttered flatly. He didn't sound all that interested in helping her. "I only met with her on a handful of occasions." The sound of rustling papers muffled his words.

"I see." *So sorry to interrupt your busy day, asshole.*

"You know, if there's a door you can't get unlocked you might just want to get a locksmith out there and have it changed. I can recommend someone if you'd like."

"Thanks, I'll think about it." She'd have to find the door first.

"If you have any other questions feel free to contact me again. Have a nice day, Miss Griffin."

"You too," she said absently.

Dropping the phone into her purse, Kaleen went to the bedroom. How could a door just disappear? It made no sense at all. With a sigh she turned her back on the frustrating wall and headed to her studio. Maybe she could finish up the farmland picture today. It annoyed her to leave things half—

What was that? Kaleen spun around and searched the room. She could have sworn she heard a musical snicker coming from behind her.

"Is someone there?"

Oh please. This was insane. If anyone came up the hill she'd have seen or heard them. There was no one there, just her mind playing tricks on her. She wasn't used to being alone out in the country so she was hearing things, that's all.

A sliver of her dream last night flashed in her head.

I'm with you every minute of the day.

Chills chased over her arms and down her back. That had been just a dream. Right?

Kaleen shook her head to clear out the confusion. Of course it had been just a dream. She didn't have a ghost lover who only showed up at night. It just wasn't possible. A shot of heat pulsed between her legs, mocking her. He might not be real but the effects of those dreams sure were.

She mixed up a fresh palette and tried to focus on the uninspiring landscape she'd started weeks ago. After a few minutes, the old magic took over and she fell into the zone.

It wasn't uninspiring. It just needed a fresh look. Kaleen hummed as she added detail to the woods around the fields. Her logical mind stopped contemplating dream lovers and disappearing doors and went to sleep while the artist took over.

By the time she scrawled her name on the corner the painting bore no resemblance to the view out her window. A white horse with a flowing mane ran across the field while fierce birds of prey swooped down from the sky. In the woods slanted eyes stared out from behind branches and the delicate wings of fairies could be seen among the leaves.

Guess her fantasy period wasn't going to end without a fight.

Something about the picture disturbed her. There was something wrong with the horse, but she couldn't put her finger on it. What was missing?

And the birds. They looked like they were attacking the poor horse. That didn't seem right. Granted, zoology wasn't her forte but she didn't think birds generally attacked horses. A cold shiver slithered down her spine.

Okay, maybe it was time to get out of the house for a little bit. Kaleen cleaned her brushes and washed up. Throwing a light jacket over her T-shirt, she slipped her feet into her sneakers and headed outside.

As she neared the forest behind her house, she took a deep breath of air. Lord, it was so different from living in the city! She could smell pine trees and the moist, earthy odor of loam. The only sounds were the buzz of insects, the chirps of birds and off in the distance the hum of the farmer's tractor working the fields.

She'd become so accustomed to the sound of horns honking and taxis driving by it seemed odd to not hear them now. It almost felt like the world was holding its breath waiting for something to happen.

Kaleen jumped as a pinecone dropped to the ground a few yards away. Something scurried in the branches overhead then chattered angrily at her. She held a hand to her frantically beating heart.

"Just a squirrel. That's all." She laughed weakly at her fears. She'd walked all over Manhattan without a care in the world but a tiny squirrel storing nuts for the winter took ten years off her life. Country living was going to take some getting used to.

The ground under the trees was littered with broken branches and rotting trees. Kaleen could see where an animal of some sort had dug at the roots of a half dead tree. She'd have to get a book about the local animals and vegetation so she'd know what she was looking at.

A smile crossed her face as she remembered a time when she and her parents had been in Maine. A moose had stopped right in front of their van blocking the road. At the time they thought it was a deer, deer being the only animal they'd ever seen with antlers.

The locals had laughed hysterically at their story of a seven-foot-tall deer standing in the middle of the road. Growing up with her parents had never been dull.

But it sure got lonely.

The smile faded from Kaleen's face and she headed back to the house. It wasn't that her parents didn't want her to have friends, they just couldn't stay in the same town for more than six months without getting the urge to move again. Kaleen had stopped trying to make friends after a while. It just wasn't worth the heartache.

Old habits died hard too. She was a loner through and through now. Even though she'd gone to college and had lived in the city for a few years she had only a handful of acquaintances and no close friends.

It didn't look like that was going to change much either, considering she was living alone in the boonies.

Maybe she could go to town and meet some folks there? Just the thought of trying to blend in made her queasy. She didn't really need company that badly. They'd only get in the way of her art. And she wasn't real big on commitments anyway.

Yeah, like she'd had *so* much experience with commitment. Richard had been one of her few serious relationships. And she'd done a stellar job with that one, hadn't she?

No, she was fine on her own. It's how she was raised and, right or wrong, it was what she was used to.

Somewhere behind her a twig snapped. The hairs on the back of her neck raised in alarm. It felt like someone was watching her.

Barely daring to breathe, she looked over her shoulder as her heart beat a rapid staccato. The forest was silent as a tomb now, no birds chirped at all. A shiver of fear shook her shoulders but she didn't see anyone.

"Probably just another squirrel," she said, trying to shake the feeling of someone watching her.

It didn't work.

She scrambled as quickly as she dared over the uneven ground until she got to the house. Running up the steps, she scurried into the house and shut the door behind her. Quickly locking the dead bolt, she slumped down in relief.

For the first time in three weeks she felt nervous being alone. Damn it! It was just her imagination. There was no reason for her heart to be pounding in her chest. Sure, something probably was watching her. Another squirrel or an owl or some other animal. She was being ridiculous.

A hot shower and an even hotter cup of tea and she'd be right as rain.

And speaking of rain, it looked like they were going to get some tonight. Dark clouds drifted in, blotting out the sunset. That sucked. It was the first night of the full moon and Kaleen had looked forward to seeing it out here without light pollution.

"Well, there'll be another one next month." She wasn't going anywhere so she'd be able to see it then.

A tiny whisper of doubt in the back of her mind left her unconvinced.

* * * * *

She was outside, under the full moon, dancing in a circle around a bonfire. Muscular men of all shapes and sizes danced together around another fire, skipping and leaping over flashing swords. Eyes and teeth glinted in the shifting firelight as the men showed off their prowess with a blade.

A drum thudded in the background, throbbing through her body like another heartbeat. Only this one went straight between her legs, making her pussy pulse with need. A need that would be taken care of by one of the men dancing nearby.

Higher and higher they leapt, spinning and twirling midair. Sweat beaded on rough-hewn bodies, making them shiny and slick. Kaleen watched in awe as two of the largest men faced off in a competition both dangerous and lovely at the same time.

Feet flew as the drumbeat grew more rapid and the dancers tried to keep up without a misstep. Even one tiny stumble could be disastrous considering the speed of the blades weaving around them. Kaleen sipped at the fiery brew she held without taking her eyes off the pair of dancers.

One dancer captured her attention completely. It was her dream lover and she knew this display was for her. The flickering flames painted his white hair in shades of red as he twirled and spun before her. His muscular legs bunched and rolled with every move and a surge of lust overwhelmed her. She wanted to feel those legs between her own. Wanted to feel the hands that gripped the sword so surely on her breasts and over her clit.

Her breasts grew full and heavy as lust fired her blood. The drums' tempo had grown to a frenzied beat and the blades flew too fast for the eye to follow. Kaleen couldn't imagine the concentration it took for the dancers to avoid the sharp edges of their swords. Tension built in the air until she was almost afraid to breathe for fear it would distract one of them.

Suddenly, the other dancer missed a step and went tumbling toward the fire. Her lover jumped out of the way and grabbed the flailing arm of his opponent, halting him.

Silence filled the air. The only sound the crackling of the fire and the heavy breathing of the dancers. Then wild applause and cheers rent the night and the tension was broken.

Kaleen waited in her seat as the men congratulated the winner, slapping him on the back and offering him cups of the potent drink. He smiled and accepted the praise but his eyes never left hers.

Finally, he pushed his way past the men until he stood in front of her spot by the fire. His huge frame towered over her blocking out the light.

"Congratulations. That was an impressive dance."

"A dance? Was that all it was to you?" His chest rose and fell rapidly as he caught his breath.

She looked up at him through her eyelashes. "What else could it be?"

"If you don't recognize a man claiming his mate maybe I need to show you a little less subtly." He reached down and lifted her over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes.

The crowd cheered and raised their drinks as he stalked away from the fire with his woman across his shoulder.

Kaleen was surrounded by his musky smell. His brawny shoulder dug into her stomach but she didn't care because his big hand rubbed her ass, staking his claim. His possessiveness thrilled her almost as much as it turned her on.

The primitive display of strength should have annoyed her – but it didn't. There was something very sexy about being the object of this much male interest.

That, and she had a great view of buns to die for.

"I can smell your quim, woman."

"That's not surprising since it's inches from your face."

"It's more than that. You're hot and wet for me, only me."

"Yes." His words combined with his wandering hand shot arrows of lust to her pussy. A low rumble vibrated through his chest and his hand pushed higher. Fingers entered her slit and pulsed inside her.

"When we get to my den I'm going to come inside you over and over again until there is no doubt you are mine."

"Promises, promises." She licked his sweat-laden skin and let her hands trail down towards his ass.

He stopped dead in his tracks and pulled her down in front of him. Her rough-spun dress bunched up as she slid along his torso.

"I have never failed to meet a promise yet. This won't be the first."

Kaleen was about to tease him some more when he pushed her behind him.

A wave of oily darkness oozed out of the tall grass towards them. Darker than the surrounding night, it swallowed up everything in its path.

"Run! Back to the others!" He pushed her towards the encampment and defiantly faced the coming menace.

Kaleen scooted back, keeping him in her sight. She wasn't going to leave him alone to face this thing. As she searched frantically for a weapon, a scream pierced the air. Her head jerked up and she saw a winged, gleaming white horse thrashing its legs angrily at the dark wave.

Where did her lover go? And where did that horse come from? The horse let out another scream and turned towards her.

Looking at her with the incredible blue eyes of her lover.

*When the first baby laughed for the first time,
Its laugh broke into a thousand pieces
and they all went skipping about,
and that was the beginning of fairies.*
THE ADVENTURES OF PETER PAN, by J.M. Barrie

Chapter Three

"No!" Kaleen shot up in bed dripping in cold sweat. "A dream, it was just a dream." Her heart beat so fast she thought it was going to jump out of her chest and her hands shook.

It had been so real. The fire, the dance, her lover.

And the darkness.

No! She wouldn't let the darkness get him! She'd think about why her subconscious turned him into a winged horse later.

Throwing off the clammy sheet, she slipped into her jeans and stumbled to the studio. The darkness wasn't going to win. No way, no how.

She almost tripped over a discarded canvas as she rushed to turn on the lights. The glare almost blinded her but she didn't waste time getting used to it. Kaleen slapped a new canvas on her easel and grabbed her palette. She mixed the colors with a vengeance.

A bonfire went in the background and a force of well-armed men stood in front of it. Kaleen painted her lover and put a fierce snarl on his face. In one hand she painted a sword and in the other she added a firebrand. Tears streaked down her face as she painted him fighting back the inky darkness.

Adding white to her brush, she showed the darkness growing smaller and smaller. A sense of urgency propelled her. Something was driving her to paint a new ending to her dream. One where the good guys won.

Paying no attention to technique, she painted the flames burning hotter and brighter to overcome the darkness.

Before she could finish, the wall behind her exploded. Plaster flew across the room, knocking over bottles of turpentine and sending lights crashing. Flames shot up all around her and smoke rolled to the ceiling.

Kaleen grabbed her painting and ran for the door, her bare feet burning as she darted over the flames. She had to get out! Smoke rolled behind her and the heat was overwhelming. Her bedroom windows were big enough for her to climb through. If she

could get to her bedroom she'd be safe. Coughing and choking, she kicked the bedroom door open and bolted for the window and freedom.

She never made it.

Huge tentacles grabbed her and dragged her towards the wall near her bed. Inky darkness spread out from the spot where she had seen the mysterious door before. She gripped the painting tightly, knowing somehow she couldn't lose it.

Kicking and screaming, Kaleen tried to escape the grip of the slithering arms holding her but they were too strong. Her bare feet found no grip on the hardwood floors and the arms drew her closer and closer.

She had no idea what lurked in that blackness but she knew she didn't want to find out.

"Help!" she screamed, knowing no one could hear her but crying out all the same. In desperation she hit the beast with her picture.

It flinched.

She hit it again and again, hoping to weaken it enough to escape. It cringed with each touch of the painting but didn't let go.

"No! You won't have me!" She was not going into that black pit without fighting with everything she had.

Her window burst open with a spray of glass. A huge white horse charged through the window into the room and tore at the tentacles holding her.

A white horse with wings.

A visibly male white horse.

The same male white horse from her dream.

The arms holding her let go and focused on this new threat.

"Get on!" a voice in her head ordered.

This couldn't be happening. She must have completely lost it. Maybe there was a gas leak and she was hallucinating? Pain flared in her foot as she stepped on some broken glass.

So much for the hallucination theory.

Kaleen hobbled to the horse and tried to climb on, but it pranced and pawed, attacking the many-armed beast coming through the wall.

"How the hell can I get on if you keep jumping around?" She danced away from the writhing arms.

She could feel the heat of the fire in her studio spreading to the connecting wall. The paint had already bubbled and peeled from the heat. If she didn't get out of here soon it would be a fight to see which would kill her first. The octopus monster or the fire. Paints and turpentine made great fuel.

A furious whinny distracted her. The horse landed an especially vicious blow on one of the arms and black, smoking blood spurted from the wound. It smelled of sulfur and ash.

"Get on, now!" the horse demanded.

Kaleen ran up to it and grabbed onto the silky white mane. She had no idea how to get on a horse but she'd figure something out. If it meant getting out of here she'd cling to his neck for all she was worth.

The horse took matters into his own hands—hooves—and flipped her onto his back. She had just enough time to cling to his neck before he charged out the broken window.

And took flight!

"Okay, I know I'm hallucinating now. Horses do not fly."

"This one does," he snickered inside her head.

Powerful wings sprouted from the horse's flanks and flapped in the air.

"Drugs. My parents must have done too many drugs in the sixties and they got passed to me. I'm having some weird flashback from an in-utero acid trip." It was the only explanation for the night's events. She'd just ride it out and tomorrow she'd go to the doctor and get tested.

"Why do you deny what is before your very eyes?"

"Because it's not normal! And how do I know what you're saying?"

"I can't explain it. That's not normal either."

"You don't have to get snippy about it. I'm doing my best not to freak out here." And doing a mighty fine job of it too. She hadn't screamed her brains out or collapsed into a quivering mass of gelatin. That should count for something.

"Hold on tightly, things could get a little bumpy here," the horse said to her as it dove for the forest.

He didn't have to tell her twice. Kaleen bent low over his neck and held on for all she was worth. With two forceful beats of his wings, the horse flew straight for the trees at the center of the forest.

"Holy shit! We're going to crash!" Kaleen screamed. Closing her eyes tight, she buried her face in his neck and prayed to high heaven.

"No matter what, don't let go. He'll try to stop you from entering."

"Who will try to stop me?" She opened her eyes and looked over her shoulder.

The horse didn't answer and Kaleen couldn't ask him again because she was too busy dodging branches.

"Hold still!"

Easy for him to say. She'd never ridden a horse in her life and now she was on the back of a flying one, charging straight for huge freaking trees in the middle of a forest! Still, she did as he said and ignored the branches heading her way.

If she stayed down low next to his neck the branches didn't hit her. The horse headed straight for a gigantic tree. It rose up at least twenty stories high. Bigger even than the mammoth Sequoias she'd seen in California.

And he was going to crash smack dab in the middle of it.

Kaleen closed her eyes again. If she was going to be splattered like a bug over the bark of the tree, she didn't want to watch it happen.

"Here we go!"

One second she was squeezing the horse as tightly as she could, the wind pulling her hair out behind her and battering her face. The next second it felt as if she'd been sucked into a black hole.

She dared to open her eyes but quickly closed them again. They were traveling through some sort of whirlpool, only instead of water swirling, colors spun dizzily around them. It was like someone threw her palette into a blender.

Her stomach flipped and dropped as if she was on the mother of all roller coasters. Kaleen swallowed rapidly to hold back the nausea that threatened to overwhelm her.

"Don't you dare get sick on me."

"I'll try not to." Yeah, like she really *wanted* to hurl.

The horse tensed beneath her. His powerful muscles bunched and rolled between her legs, a sensation she found oddly erotic. Before she could analyze this newest assault on her sanity, invisible hands plucked at her arms, trying to pull her from the horse's back.

Kaleen held on tighter as the horse lashed out with his hooves, battling the unseen attackers. Something yanked her hair sharply, snapping her neck back. Another enemy pulled at her T-shirt, tearing it right off her body and raking sharp talons down her back.

Crying out in pain, she dug her fingers in tighter. How much longer could she hold on? She pressed her chest as close as she could to the horse. What was left of her T-shirt slipped lower as she squeezed up against him. His hide felt rough against her nipples but she didn't care. Better a little chafing than getting sucked into the blender.

"Almost there. Once we reach the forest he can't touch you."

The forest? They'd just left the forest, hadn't they?

Whatever. She couldn't think about that now. All she had energy for was holding on to the horse's back. As if sensing their prey's escape, the invisible attackers rallied another offensive.

Sharp claws ripped at her unprotected skin and jean-covered legs. Her scalp ached from the yanks on her hair and she feared she'd be bald before they ever got where they were going.

Just as her fingers began to loosen and she thought for sure she was a goner, they passed through a membrane of some sort. It clung to them, holding them back until the

horse whinnied some command. A slender eye opened in the center and they pushed their way through.

The attackers screamed in fury but couldn't pass through the membrane. They pummeled Kaleen and her horse until his tail made it through the opening.

Cool air blew over her face as the horse landed heavily.

"You're safe now. He can't come here. Yet."

Kaleen opened her eyes and took in her surroundings. They were on the other side of the huge tree. Only it wasn't the same forest she had in her back yard.

"Toto, I don't think we're in Kansas anymore."

Towering trees only slightly smaller than the one they passed through ringed a clearing around their tree. Multicolored mushrooms of giant proportions grew under the circle of trees. She'd never heard of a magenta mushroom before—or emerald or sapphire ones either for that matter. Flowering vines climbed up the trees, filling the air with a sweet scent she couldn't quite place. More flowers grew in profusion along paths under the trees.

The horse knelt down and Kaleen slid from his back. Her legs wobbled and wouldn't hold her up, so she plopped down where he dropped her. The loam under her hands was moist and so very soft. All her senses were swimming in overload and her hands itched to paint all she could see.

She was so caught up in the sights around her, she almost forgot about the winged horse breathing deeply in front of her. Until his hot breath blew over her naked breasts.

"Oh! Do you need to be wiped down or something?" She didn't know anything about caring for a horse but she seemed to recall movie cowboys telling stable hands to rub down the horse after they'd ridden it almost to death.

"If you could, that would be refreshing." He was still breathing very heavily and Kaleen worried he might collapse on her.

"Hold on, let me look for something to do it with." The moss and flower petals would be way too soft. Her shirt was gone, not even a scrap left. What a time to go braless. Kaleen brought her hands up to cover her breasts and took a quick look around. There was no one there but the horse. He wasn't paying any attention to her nakedness. If he didn't care, she wouldn't either.

Her jeans were torn beyond repair but at least she still had them. She could use those to rub down the horse, couldn't she? They'd never be useable again after getting covered in horse sweat but they weren't in such great shape now. Taking a deep breath, Kaleen slipped the tattered jeans off.

She stood in nothing but a pair of neon blue thong panties. This was no different from the nudist colony her family had lived with for a few months she tried to tell herself. Probably better since there weren't any wrinkly old men who wanted her to sit on their laps.

She shuddered at the memory and approached the horse.

"Let me know if I'm doing this wrong. You're the first horse I've ever touched so I'm not quite sure what I'm doing."

He just snorted and pawed at the ground a bit.

"Okay, here goes nothing."

Kaleen wrapped her hand in the denim and rubbed as hard as she could against the stiff hide. Her breasts swung freely as she moved and her nipples kept brushing up against the horse. It was a little too stimulating for her comfort level but there wasn't much she could do about it.

Jo'naz closed his eyes in pleasure as Kaleen pressed against him to rub the spot between his shoulder blades. He could have changed back into his human form but he wanted her to get comfortable with him in this form first.

Would she recognize him as the man from her dreams when he switched back? Or would she deny what they'd shared and dismiss it as just a figment of her imagination? He could feel her logical mind shutting down and blaming everything on a dream. Would she make the connection between her dream world and this one?

He'd had no choice but to bring her to Zandermer after Su'are's monster attacked her in her world. Did she have any idea what role she played in the battle that was raging in his land? And if she did, would she help them or continue to deny this reality?

"There, that should feel better. I don't know what to do about your wings though. I've had even less experience with winged horses."

"Leave them, they will dry. Thank you."

"You're welcome. I wondered if you could still talk to me. I mean, in my head. You were pretty quiet since we got here. Wherever here is."

"The journey wearied me but your care has refreshed me enough to mind-speak. There is a fountain down the blue path. Come, you can wash my sweat off you and I am in sorry need of a drink."

"Is that your way of saying I stink?" She smiled at him and followed as he led the way down the path.

Kaleen smelled of the sweet musk of desire but he didn't think that's what she meant.

"You have my sweat and dried blood on you. I just thought you might like to wash it off before we meet the others."

"Others? What others? I'm not exactly dressed for company here."

Jo'naz could feel her embarrassment and fear and sent a mental command out.

"There is no need to be embarrassed. All you need will be provided for you."

"How? Never mind! Don't answer that. I don't want to know. I'm just going to go along with this until the flashback or hallucination or whatever it is ends. Although if I had to pick a dream to get stuck in, it wouldn't involve getting attacked by a giant octopus."

A fresh rush of heat poured off her and Jo'naz smiled to himself. He knew what dream she thought of and it pleased him. It wouldn't take long for him to make her his in this world too. Jo'naz had to fight down the desire coursing through his body. A stallion in full rut might be hard to explain to her and she'd had enough surprises for one day.

The fountain of water trickled over smooth stones and pooled onto cupped rocks before it sank back to the ground around it. It was refreshingly cool and Jo'naz drank deeply.

"This is freezing!" Kaleen yelped. Her nipples stood straight out at attention and Jo'naz felt another blade of need stab him.

"You don't need to bathe if you don't wish. But there are towels, soap and a change of clothes on the bench."

"How'd those get there? No, don't tell me." She sighed heavily and put her hand back under the flowing water. "I guess it isn't that bad for a quick wash. And if I don't want to put clean clothes on over a dirty body I guess I can suck it up."

He watched as she tried to shield herself from his gaze. It would take a while for her to get used to him again, in either form. As much as he wanted to give her that time he needed to change before the fae arrived. Watching the drops of water slide over her naked breasts and down into her quim, his blood boiled in his veins. His cock hardened painfully. He hoped it wouldn't take too long for her to get used to him again because he couldn't wait much longer to mate with her in the flesh.

"I shall return," he told her, backing towards the shadow of a *pato* tree.

"Where are you going?"

"I need privacy for a moment." Which was the truth but not for the reason she suspected.

"Oh, I get it. Okay." She dried herself off vigorously, making her breasts shake from side to side.

He'd better change soon or he wouldn't be able to hide his need for her. The change was quick and therefore slightly painful. He didn't want to leave Kaleen alone too long. The fae were insatiably curious and they'd be here any second to poke and prod at her.

She stood where he left her, only now she was dressed in a fae-spun shift that emphasized her lush breasts and flaring hips. The iridescent fabric clung to her body like a second skin and trailed paths of shimmering sparkles over all the places his hands wanted to go.

"Kaleen, you look lovely," he said, coming out from the shadows.

She jumped and looked at him warily. "Who are you? And how do you know my name?"

Jo'naz looked into her violet eyes. "I think you know the answer to that."

"My dream. You're the man from my dream." Her hands lifted to her mouth and she blinked rapidly.

He could smell her confusion – and her desire. She remembered his loving her yet hadn't put it together with the horse that carried her to safety.

"How did you get here? Where am I? How are you real?" She sat down heavily, collapsing on the ground. He watched as she worked through everything that had happened thus far. She had to believe it for herself, he couldn't force it on her.

"Your eyes. They're the same as the horse's. Just like in my dream. The blackness was coming and you turned into a horse to fight it." She stared at him with dawning horror. "This is all real? The attack at my house, the octopus monster and you. You're a horse. A flying horse."

"I'm a man too. My name is Jo'naz of the Ara'bini."

"Oh great. So there're more of you. I guess that makes sense. In the dream I had you were at some gathering." She shook her head as if to chase the thoughts out of it. "Those dreams were real? All of them?"

She stood quickly and backed away from him. Her fear plunged a knife in his heart. How could she fear him?

"You had sex with me. I mean we had sex. That was real?"

"Only in your mind. My physical form couldn't cross the barrier to your world but my essence could travel in your dreams. I did not take advantage of you."

"You call sneaking into my mind not taking advantage of me?"

"I could not have entered your mind unless you allowed it. If you had said no in your dreaming state, I would have stopped." He stepped closer so she could get a look at him in person. "But you didn't say no, did you? You let me love you for wondrous hours in many pleasurable ways." He reached out a hand to touch her shimmering black hair but she scooted away from him.

"I thought I was dreaming. I wouldn't have done that if I knew you were real." She held her hands up as if to ward him off. "So you can just back off, buddy, there'll be no picking up where we left off."

"I am more than happy to wait for you to grow accustomed to me and your presence in my world. But make no mistake, you are mine and always will be. There is no escaping me. I promise you."

"We'll just see about that."

Jo'naz let her have the last word. In time she'd see that they belonged together and she was destined to be by his side. For now he'd have patience. Besides, if he wasn't mistaken, he could hear the twittering of the fae delegation coming through the trees.

"So be it. Our hosts shall be arriving momentarily."

"Hosts? Oh Lord, who else is in this place? The munchkin guild?"

"I do not know what these 'munchkins' are but no. Our hosts in the Forest of Xodo are the fae."

"The fae? Fairies? Real live fairies? With wings?" Her eyes had grown to the size of *merda* leaves in full bloom.

“The females have wings, the males do not.”

“Oh, gee. Stupid me. I thought fairies were something out of children’s stories. You know, *fairy tales*. I didn’t realize there were even boy fairies and that they didn’t have wings.”

“Actually, the young male fae do have wings. As they get older and develop more muscle, they lose their wings. They don’t need the power of flight to protect them.”

“I guess that makes sense. Wait a minute! What the hell am I talking about? I’m actually having a conversation about the merits of flight for a mythical species. This is going to cost me millions in therapy.”

Jo’naz held back a chuckle. Her wit was welcome after her fear. She might not believe in the existence of the fae yet she hadn’t stopped craning her neck to try to get a glimpse of them either.

“You can discuss it more with them later. Right now they will want to know why I brought you here and what happened to Su’are’s creature.”

He just hoped he had the answers they wanted or he could very well be exiled while Kaleen was put to death.

*Oh! Where do fairies hide their heads,
When snow lies on the hills,
When frost has spoil'd their mossy beds,
And crystalliz'd their rills?
Beneath the moon they cannot trip
In circles o'er the plain;
And draughts of dew they cannot sip,
Till green leaves come again.*

OH! WHERE DO FAIRIES HIDE THEIR HEADS? By Thomas Haynes Bayly

Chapter Four

Kaleen didn't know what to look at more, her dream lover—Jo'naz, he said his name was—or the path that was supposed to have fairies on it. This whole situation was so far beyond bizarre she'd given up trying to explain it. It wasn't a dream. If it was a hallucination, then it was the most realistic one she'd ever heard of. No wonder so many of the hippies did drugs.

She just didn't know what to think, what to do. The attack had been real. That was one thing she was damn sure of. Her ribs still hurt from where the tentacles had squeezed the breath out of her. If the attack was real, that meant the fire was real. All her paintings. Her house.

Guess someone could take it away from her after all.

A lump formed in her throat and tears threatened to fall but she fought them back. She would not cry in front of strangers. A wrenching pain tried to break through the cushion of shock that had protected her up to this point but Kaleen wouldn't let it. Her brain could only handle so much abuse and trying to assimilate the loss of everything she held dear *and* fairies was too much. Pushing the pain away, she focused on the spectacle coming down the path. She couldn't think about her house now.

But later, oh yes, later she'd get even with the bastard who torched her dreams.

The tinkling of tiny bells distracted her from her thoughts of revenge. Wonder replaced sorrow as lithe men in tight hose and forest-colored jerkins hurried up the path. In their hands they held deadly-looking arrows and had long bows over their shoulders.

Behind the men came several similarly dressed women, only they had wings. Honest to goodness wings. Most were shades of green but a few were yellow or orange and all of them glittered in the light of the full moon.

This must be the advance guard or something. That would make sense. They were dressed to blend in with the forest and were well armed. Were they called scouts? They

surrounded Jo'naz and her silently. Their eyes burned with curiosity but they didn't utter a sound.

The tinkling grew louder and Kaleen peeked over the shoulder of the nearest guard to see a beautiful woman fluttering along the path. She wore a shimmering silver gown that trailed out behind her. Around her neck she wore a choker of emeralds and on her head she had a golden crown set in sapphires perched atop a river of blonde hair. Her wings spread out much wider than the other fairies' and glittered as brightly as the crown on her head.

Kaleen stood there with her mouth open, staring at the petite beauty coming towards her. She was stunning beyond belief. Her features were so delicate and her skin as clear as porcelain. The aura of power that practically glowed around her felt almost palpable. She had to be a queen or royalty of some sort.

She had the ridiculous urge to ask her to hold still so she could grab some paints and a canvas. That probably wouldn't go over very well though. Still, Kaleen's fingers itched to capture the scene forever. As the queen came closer, the scouts went down on one knee. Jo'naz tugged at her hand and she belatedly realized she should kneel too.

"You may rise." The queen inclined her head and gave them a tense smile. "Jo'naz, you grace us with your presence. Why?"

"Queen Nialla, you are looking lovely as always."

"Thank you, young stallion. But flattery will not get you out of the trouble your careless actions have wrought. Who is this you have brought to my glen and why?"

Kaleen's knees went weak at the hardness in the tiny queen's eyes. She wasn't happy with Jo'naz and wasn't making any effort to hide her displeasure. Those arrows looked pretty darn sharp. She so did not want to be a human pincushion. Jo'naz better talk fast.

"I was training in the Ara'bini compound when I received word that Su'are was making a move in the human world. He had opened a portal and was trying to drag Kaleen through it. I used the portal in the *merda* tree to save her from Su'are's creation."

"And brought her here? Into our realm? A human? Have you less sense than the animal you changed into? You know that is forbidden!"

"I know under normal circumstances it is forbidden but the prophecy..."

"Don't talk to me of that blasted prophecy!" The queen planted her hands on her hips and impatiently tapped her slipper-shod foot on the path. "You know the punishment for bringing a human over is death! You fool! What were you thinking?"

Death? For her or for him? She looked at Jo'naz who stood slightly in front of her as if to protect her. Kaleen could feel eyes watching her from the trees. Were there more fairies out there with deadly arrows pointing at them? Boy had this night gone from bad to worse.

"Bringing a full human over is punishable by death *but* bringing one with fae blood into her inheritance is our sacred trust."

Fae blood? He couldn't mean her, could he? This was just his way of keeping her alive, wasn't it? How on earth could she have fairy blood? She didn't even believe they were real until just now. Hell, she *still* wouldn't believe they were real if fairies weren't standing in front of her pointing arrows in her direction.

The queen grunted and focused her gaze on Kaleen. She looked her up and down thoroughly, missing not a single detail of her scraped and bruised body. Kaleen felt like she was a sculpture getting assessed before a showing. Not a detail went unnoticed by the laser-like blue gaze. Resisting the urge to squirm, Kaleen waited for the queen's assessment.

"It's possible. We'll know shortly, anyway. Bring the Chalice!" she ordered.

A soldier scurried away to do her bidding and Kaleen used the distraction to whisper in Jo'naz' ear. "What is she talking about? I don't have any fairy blood. And what's this chalice she's talking about?"

"The Chalice of Shayla. It is one of the magical items the fairies brought with them from their old home."

"Thanks for the history lesson. How is that supposed to prove whether or not I have fairy blood?"

"You'll drink from it and if you have even a drop of fae blood it will awaken the magic within you."

Kaleen snorted. "And if I don't have any fairy blood?" There was no magic in her at all.

"Then it will kill you instantly."

"What? That's it? No trial? No appeal? Don't I even get one last meal? Or a cigarette for crying out loud!" She didn't want to die. "Isn't there any way around this?"

"You could make a run for it but I doubt you could outrun the dozen arrows pointed in your direction."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence."

"Kaleen, my love. I wouldn't have brought you here if I didn't think you'd survive the test of the Chalice. You do have fae blood. I've felt it in your dreams. Trust me." Jo'naz cupped her cheek gently in his callused hand.

"Trust you? I don't even know you! I just met you an hour ago and for most of that time you were a horse!" She refused to acknowledge how his words sent a thrill of pleasure through her body.

"You know me. I've been with you every night for the last moon. I've loved you like no other and you've returned that love tenfold."

Her face burned as she remembered the abandon with which she responded to his lovemaking in her dreams. This was ridiculous! She'd been dreaming. It wasn't real.

"It was real. Not in your world but real nonetheless," he said as if reading her mind.

"Then that dance you did, with the swords? And the bonding thing? And the darkness? All of that was real?" Shock, pleasure and fear twirled around inside her like a tornado. "If we had – you know – had sex after your dance, I would have..."

"Been my mate for life. Which you shall be as soon as I can make it happen."

"Whoa! Slow down there, Trigger. I'm not even sure I'm going to live out the test of this Chalice thingy never mind settle down and get married. Commitment isn't exactly my cup of tea."

"Kaleen, I wanted to introduce all of this to you slowly. Make you aware of your heritage and bring you here when you were ready but there is no time. Su'are is moving faster and faster all the time. He knows who you are now and he'll stop at nothing to keep you from fulfilling the prophecy."

"What is this prophecy you keep talking about?" She felt like Alice in Wonderland. Nothing made sense and there was a mad queen out for her head. If she saw a white rabbit run by she'd sit down on the path and gibber like an idiot.

"Later, the Chalice is here."

The queen took the rather battered cup from the soldier and crossed to the fountain. The Chalice wasn't all that impressive looking. Kaleen had expected a shiny gold number encrusted with twinkling jewels. This was made out of some dark wood that had been worn smooth by countless hands and not a single jewel decorated its surface.

"You will drink from the Chalice of Shayla," the queen ordered.

Kaleen took the cup in shaking hands. There was a palpable aura of power around the humble cup and fear twisted in her gut at the touch of it.

Damn it, she shouldn't be afraid of a freaking cup of water. Queenie had taken the water from the same fountain she'd just cleaned up in a few minutes ago. She'd drink the water, no magic would come forth and they'd have to let her go if she didn't die instantly, wouldn't they?"

"What happens if I don't drink the water?"

"Then my archers will kill you on the spot. No one is immune from the test of the Chalice."

Well then. She had her choice. She could die from drinking from the cup or die from multiple arrows in her body. Talk about being between a rock and hard place! She didn't want to die, damn it.

There's always the chance you really do have fairy blood and will live. A tiny voice whispered in the back of her mind. Where did that come from? Probably her subconscious refusing to give in to the obvious.

Kaleen looked around her one last time. Jo'naz's eyes silently pleaded with her to trust him. Like she had a choice? Her eyes strayed to the arrows again. With a shaky breath, she lifted the Chalice.

"Bottoms up."

Closing her eyes, Kaleen drank the water as fast as she could. If she was going to die from this Chalice, she wanted it over with as quickly and painlessly as possible. She finished the water, dribbling some down her chin in her haste.

When it was all gone, she lowered the cup and looked around. She remained standing. So far so good. "Now what?"

Before Jo'naz could answer, spots swam in front of her eyes. Hundreds and thousands of tiny, glimmering specks swirled around and lifted her off her feet. She grew lightheaded and dizzy as the force of the dots overwhelmed her. Faster and faster they danced, twisting her around with them. It was as if a million fireflies had entered her bloodstream and invaded her body. Her skin felt stretched tight. It was too small to contain the forces growing within her.

Light shot from her fingertips and suddenly, the entire glade pulsed with energy. She could trace the life force of every plant, tree and blade of grass around her. Even the leaves on the trees glowed with their own light.

When she turned to face Jo'naz and the queen, she had to shield her eyes from the blinding light that surrounded them.

"Holy shit!" She looked at her own hands and they glowed and pulsed too. Even her hair seemed to have a life of its own. "What's happening?" Was this how she was going to die? She'd get to see all the life teeming around her before she lost her own life? That was a pretty dirty trick to play on someone you were killing.

"Your fae blood is reacting to the Chalice. The Sight will subside momentarily," the queen told her, taking the cup back.

"What do you mean? I don't have any fairy blood."

"Then you'd be dead. The Chalice's justice is swift. Come, your cuts need to be tended and you'll want to rest when the effects wear off."

Jo'naz moved to follow them but the queen raised her hand to stop him. "She needs rest and care, not the attentions of a stallion in rut. You may come to the palace in the morn."

"Jo'naz?" Kaleen asked with a tremor of fear in her voice. He was the only one she knew in this wacko place and she didn't want to leave without him.

"Go, my love. As much as I dislike it, Queen Nialla is right. You need time to rest and recover from the awakening. I will be at your door at first light though. Have no fear." He said the last with a steely glance toward the queen.

She only smiled slyly and waved to her guards. Two soldiers helped Kaleen, gently supporting her still-wobbly body and easing her down the path. The fireflies still danced in her veins but the dizziness had subsided, some.

Kaleen looked over her shoulder at Jo'naz. He stood in front of the bench where she'd left him. His eyes never left hers and muscles in his arms bulged and bunched as if he held himself back from going after them.

Unease stirred in her chest. Where would he go?

“Don’t worry about the Ara’bini, he’ll be fine. A night away from you will do him good. You should never be too available for any man, my dear. It gives them ideas that they can control you. And the Tree knows that those Ara’bini are possessive enough without encouragement.”

“Where are we going? And why do I feel so funny?” Her skin was on fire! All her nerve endings tingled with energy. She could feel every thread of the dress covering her. And some areas, like her nipples, were even more sensitive.

“We are going to the Flower Palace where you’ll have a real bath and have your injuries attended to. What you are feeling is the fae exploring its newly awakened surroundings.”

“Huh?” What the hell was she talking about?

“You grew up in the human world, yes?”

“Ah, yeah.” That was pretty obvious.

“In order for you to survive, you had to hide your fae blood. Any manifestation of fae magic had to be pushed away and locked up tight. The Chalice unlocked that box and let loose all the magic within you. It’s now merging with your physical self, seeping into every muscle, nerve and cell of your body. Just wait until it merges with your mind. You won’t miss the stallion at all tonight,” she said with a smirk.

What did she mean by that? Great, just what she needed to complete this trippy experience—a fairy queen who spoke in riddles. Perfect. Just freaking perfect.

Any more questions died on her tongue as the palace came into view. It wasn’t what she’d pictured when Nialla had said palace. Kaleen had thought of stone towers, drawbridges and moats. Maybe a few gargoyles and flags thrown in too.

This wasn’t it.

On a small island in the middle of the forest was the biggest freaking tree she’d ever clapped eyes on. With her newly hatched fairy sight, she could see the thing pulsing with life. Every leaf on it was outlined in glittering energy.

“Is it real? I mean, I know it’s real, but...how?” Kaleen was sure her mouth hung open like a landed fish but she couldn’t wrap her mind around what her eyes were seeing. Once again, the urge to grab a brush and capture the image on canvas made her fingers itch.

“Shayla, our old home, was on a peninsula in the Forbidden Sea. No one knows how the tree grew to be there, only that it stood for as long as we had recorded history. When Su’are’s forces overcame Shayla the most powerful mages and magic workers of the fae pulled the Flower Palace from the land and brought it here. They gave their lives to save us and their secrets died with them.” Nialla’s face filled with sorrow but she shook it off.

“So that’s why the Chalice is made of wood, not jewels. On the ocean wood is a precious commodity.” That made sense.

“You are very perceptive, young one.”

"I'm pushing thirty, your Majesty. I'm not exactly young anymore." Kaleen could barely focus on the conversation. Her eyes took in every detail of the tree. As she drew closer, she could see broken branches and small areas of disease. The idea that this magnificent tree could be susceptible to the dangers of regular trees made her sad but Nialla's words distracted her from the thought.

"I am well over ten times that age and only now hitting my prime. To me you are a mere babe."

"What?" That got her mind off the tree. Kaleen turned and looked at the queen. There wasn't a line, age spot or sag anywhere on the diminutive fairy's body. "Bullshit, you're over three hundred years old? There's no way I'm going to believe that."

"You didn't believe you had fae blood either but look how wrong you were about that. Just because your human brain cannot assimilate it doesn't mean it isn't real. If you are indeed the one the prophecy spoke of there will be many more unimaginable trials ahead of you. Best you suspend your disbelief now while you still have the chance." Blue eyes twinkled out at her. Blue eyes that were so not three hundred years old. "Come, they are assembling the bridge as we speak."

Kaleen followed silently. She was afraid to ask what "assembling the bridge" meant. Probably not laying down planks for them to walk across. "Can't you just fly yourself to the palace?"

"I could but my guards could not nor can you."

"Yeah. About that. Ah, will I—you know—sprout wings too?"

"Nay, have no fear. Wings come only to those females of full fae blood. Your magic will manifest differently."

"How?" She wasn't sure if she was disappointed or glad she wouldn't get a set of wings. It would make clothes shopping a bitch but having the power of flight might be pretty cool.

"No one knows."

"Well that's encouraging." Jeez! Before Kaleen's startled eyes, one of the soldiers stepped forward and raised his hands. In a language she couldn't understand he chanted some sort of spell. The next thing she knew a rainbow grew from the edge of the forest to the island.

"That's a bridge?"

"I assure you, it's quite safe. Comor is rather adept at creating bridges."

"I see that. I didn't think you could have a rainbow in a forest. At night. On command." Before her eyes the soldiers strolled over the rainbow in pairs. Their stance was casual but they searched the forest carefully.

Nialla nudged her along until she set foot on the rainbow bridge. Closing her eyes tightly, Kaleen stepped on the insubstantial surface. It was one thing for the queen to say it was safe—she could fly. It was a whole different story if Kaleen went tumbling into the dark waters below.

The bridge held. It felt strangely springy but it didn't disappear under her feet. "So, you're telling me the mages scooped you up and dropped you here?" Kaleen asked.

The queen nodded.

"In that case, is that sea water?"

"Yes. We have a regular supply of fish from it."

"A mini ocean in the middle of a forest. Unreal."

"I assure you, it's very real." The guards parted and formed a corridor for the queen to pass through.

Cool sand moved under Kaleen's feet as she followed the queen. The tree was so big that its branches formed a canopy over the entire island. Built into the tree was the palace itself. Kaleen could see why it was called the Flower Palace. Jewel-toned walls glittered in the moonlight, sparkling throughout the entire tree like flowers. Stairways ran from room to room in a maze far too complicated for her eyes to follow. This close, Kaleen couldn't see the sick parts of the tree.

"There must be over a hundred rooms in this thing."

"Two hundred fifty-two to be exact."

"That's the biggest damn tree house I've ever seen."

The queen smiled and directed her to a door at the base of the tree. "Come, I will introduce you to my chamberlain Ma'ab. She'll make you comfortable."

"Thank you." As they walked through the door into the tree, Kaleen ogled her surrounds. She wished she had more time to take everything in. Carvings of flowers and animals graced the posts of the banisters. Sculpted seashells and sea creatures made up the rungs to the myriad ladders climbing this way and that.

For being inside a tree, it appeared awfully spacious. They must need room for their wings, as well as ways for those without wings to get around. But how could the tree radiate such life if it was almost completely hollow?

Cripes, why was she worried about that now? She was following a fairy queen into a palace on an island in the middle of a forest that she had to cross using a rainbow bridge. And she was worrying about the physics of the tree she was in? *Honey, it's time to just go along for the ride.* From this point on, she'd just take things at face value and worry about the whys and hows of it all when she was sane again.

Nialla led her to a rather plain room on the ground floor of the palace. The smells of something cooking drifted on the air. Now that must be a neat trick. How do you cook in a freaking tree? *Go along for the ride, go along for the ride.*

"Ma'ab? Ma'ab? Are you in the kitchen?" the queen called. "Where are you?"

A tiny fairy who had the sullen expression of an adolescent in the middle of a major pout fluttered over to the doorway. As she drifted across the kitchen, she dried her hands on the front of her dress.

"She's not here. About an hour ago she got a weird expression on her face and flew off." The girl's eyes settled on Kaleen. "What's that? It doesn't smell fae but it's not a shifter either." Her pixie-like face was aglow with curiosity.

"This is Kaleen, a newly awakened fae and our guest. Jo'naz brought her over from the human world, which is why she doesn't smell fae. Kaleen, this insolent snip is my daughter, Trella." She smiled fondly even as she scolded the girl. "Now, did Ma'ab say where she was going?" Nialla put her hands on her hips.

"No, just told me to finish up the dishes before I went to bed. *Mother*, how much longer am I to be punished? My fingers are going to be permanently waterlogged from all this scrubbing."

"Maybe next time you'll think twice about disobeying me and going to the shifters' gatherings without permission. The punishment stands. Tell Ma'ab to meet me in the guest quarters."

"No need, I have returned," a gravelly voice called from the door. "So this is who Jo'naz risked banishment to rescue."

Kaleen's eyes widened as she looked at the owner of the gravelly voice. Everyone she'd met in this world had been drop-dead gorgeous. Until now. Ma'ab was a tiny, gnarly old woman with little, black eyes that reminded her of a hawk. She was short and seemed almost shrunken with age.

If Nialla was over three hundred and still looked like a teenager, this Ma'ab must be older than dirt.

"Aye, I'm old but at least I'm not rude."

A blush heated Kaleen's face. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean any disrespect. I—Hey, wait a minute, I didn't say anything out loud."

"No, but you shouted it in your mind. You've a loud mind-voice." Ma'ab walked slowly but surely into the kitchen and looked in the huge sink full of water. It didn't have a faucet, just an old pump like Kaleen had seen in movies from the pioneer days. "You've some pots to scrub, young one. Better hop to it before the food hardens."

With a great sigh and dramatic rolling of the eyes Trella flitted back to the sink and shoved her hands into the water. Was eye rolling a genetic thing for all kids? Was it part of some universal DNA?

"Daughters are the Tree's way of getting even for the follies of youth," Nialla muttered to Kaleen.

"The mother's curse? My mom used to say she hoped I had a child just like me."

"In your case, Nialla, that is indeed a curse," Ma'ab cackled.

The queen muttered something else under her breath that Kaleen couldn't catch before turning to Ma'ab. "Our guest needs a bath and some night clothes. We'll figure out what to do with her after the Circle gathers tomorrow. Is the guest room prepared?"

"Of course," Ma'ab said indignantly. "I set one of the girls to put on hot water as I was flying back. The water should be hot enough by now. Come, I'll show you to your rooms so my queen can get her sleep."

"I do not need you telling me to go to bed. I can manage that on my own now."

"Yes, my queen. Don't forget to have your elixir before bed. You'll need it to ease your dreams after tonight's goings-on."

Ma'ab obviously felt that she'd lived long enough to have immunity to her queen's anger, because she ignored the fuming fairy and drew a bucket of hot water from a pot over the fire. "Come, I'll show you the way."

Kaleen followed silently, trying to get a better look at the fire in the corner. It didn't smoke or crackle or hiss or do any of the other things a fire was supposed to do. It looked no more real than a painting of a fire yet it heated the huge caldron of water over it. She could see the steam rising from the bucket Ma'ab carried. Very odd.

"It isn't a fire like you or I are used to. It would be too dangerous to have an open flame in the palace."

"Was I shouting again? This whole mind-speech thing is all new to me."

"No but I saw you looking at the fire and could imagine what you were thinking. The shifters use wood for their cook fires but the fae brought their magical flame with them from Shayla. It is how they heat the palace safely." Ma'ab didn't slow down as she told Kaleen about the magical fire but kept trucking along carrying the huge bucket of hot water without spilling so much as a drop.

"Do you want me to carry that for you?" Kaleen offered, suddenly feeling guilty for making the older woman haul it around.

"No. You'd only slosh it all over my clean floors. I can carry this and a load of laundry up four ladders without breathing heavy."

"Sorry. I didn't mean to insult you, just thought I'd be helpful."

Ma'ab chuckled and it sounded like a cross between a bird's cry and a rusty door opening. "Don't worry about me. I've watched over the fae since the transportation and I'll continue to do so until they drive Su'are into the sea."

"You're not a fairy, are you?"

"Of course not. Do you see any wings?"

"No but right now I'm not taking anything for granted."

The creaky laugh came again. "Had a few surprises, have you, young one?"

"Yeah, a few." Only like a million.

"No, I am not fae, although I have lived with them these many centuries. I'm of shifter blood. When the mages of the fae dropped this island into the clearing of the forest, the elders of the shifter clans sent me here as an envoy. I've been here ever since."

That was a long time to be a servant. Kaleen clamped down on her thoughts. She didn't know how this whole mind-speech thing worked but she'd done enough damage with her wayward thoughts for one day. She didn't need to be spouting out any more insults.

They walked along the twisting corridor for a little longer before coming to a door shaped like a leaf. The craftsmanship was incredible. Kaleen could have stayed and looked at it for an hour or more but Ma'ab motioned her into the room.

"These are the guest quarters for the non-fae. There is a ladder alongside your balcony. If you don't wish to have visitors I suggest you stay off it. The fae are insatiably curious and will hound you night and day if you let them."

Oh great. Just what she needed. She'd make sure the drapes to the balcony stayed closed.

"Through here is the bathing chamber. If you want hot water you'll have to go to the kitchens for it but fresh, cold water can be had by pulling this lever." She demonstrated and a flood of water gushed into a shell-shaped tub.

"Where does that come from?" Kaleen asked, looking for any signs of plumbing. Was this more magic?

"Huge vats collect rain water and a system of pipes carries it down to the rooms. Not every room has a bathing chamber, so consider yourself lucky that you don't have to share."

"Ah, thanks." She was so not up for a community bath.

Ma'ab dumped the bucket of hot water into the nearly full tub then laid out clean towels and a cake of what must be soap. "I'll leave you to your peace now. Tree knows you'll have little of it once the Circle convenes tomorrow." She cackled again and slipped out the door.

"Thanks for the reassurance," Kaleen murmured, stripping off the dress and climbing into the tub.

With a sigh, she slipped low until she was up to her neck in warm water. Her cuts and scrapes ached but the bath helped relax her tense muscles. Nothing was going to relax her tangled thoughts though.

"Go with the flow. Just go with the flow." Maybe when she woke up this would all have been just a dream.

Arianna Hart

*The fairy beam upon you,
The stars to glister on you,
A moon of light
In the noon of night,
Till the fire-drake hath o'er-gone you.*

*The wheel of fortune guide you,
The boy with the bow beside you
Run aye in the way
Till the bird of day
And the luckier lot betide you.*
THE FAIRY BEAM UPON YOU, Ben Jonson

Chapter Five

Supple fingers cupped her breasts while a hot, insistent mouth sucked on her nipples.

Nipples? Were there two mouths? Kaleen fought to open her eyes then realized they were open. She was in a dark room wide awake.

“What the hell!” She jumped up but the mouths stayed on her breasts. With shaking hands she fumbled with the magical light thingy on the side of the bed. Damn it, she should have paid attention when Ma’ab explained how it worked. Finally getting it to work, the room flooded with light.

She was all alone yet her body felt full and heavy. It felt like someone stroked her breasts, her abdomen and her pussy.

Oh my God! Her legs shook as she stumbled to the bed and collapsed. Jo’naz had come to her in her dreams before and made love to her but this was completely different. She’d been dreaming then, now she was very much awake.

Groaning at the unseen fingers strumming her clit, Kaleen flopped back against the carved headboard and spread her legs. The feeling of two mouths sucking on her nipples intensified and she had to rip off the long nightgown she’d been given. The sensation of the cloth *and* the mouths was too much.

Her hand slipped between her legs and stroked her wet lips. The sensation had changed to a warm tongue lapping her clit with long, slow strokes. Kaleen’s head whipped back and forth on the bed as she shoved her fingers inside her dripping pussy. Her nipples stood at rigid attention and an unseen breeze teased them even more.

What was happening to her? It was as if a dozen mouths and hands caressed her at the same time. Kaleen squirmed as phantom lips blazed a trail of fire down her spine

and nipped at her ass. She drove her fingers in and out even harder, ready to explode with the force of an atom bomb. It was too much!

Lips kissed the column of her throat and nipped at her earlobe. The mouth on her clit speared a tongue inside her pussy then sucked furiously on her nub again. More lips trailed up the inside of her thighs, teasing her already overwhelmed senses.

A ghostly finger probed her ass, pressing gently inside her opening and sending her nerve endings screaming in pleasure. Teeth bit her nipples but tongues lapped away the pain.

She was in the middle of an otherworldly orgy and didn't know if she wanted it to stop or go on forever. Lifting her hips higher, she pushed another finger inside her weeping pussy and thrust furiously. A wave of pleasure carried her on its crest. Higher and higher she flew, soaring with lust until she exploded in a million pieces.

Every atom of her being vibrated in pleasure, rippling on and on in a never-ending spiral that rocked her already unstable world.

"Holy shit! I think I need a cigarette!" Kaleen gasped for air. With a last ghostly caress, the phantom hands and mouths left her alone. This must have been what Nialla had meant when she talked about not missing Jo'naz tonight. Granted, nothing beat a nice hard cock deep in her pussy but man oh man, a dozen magical mouths came in a close second.

She finally understood the appeal of group sex. Kaleen had never been one to engage in such erotic practices. She was either too busy or too scared. Hell, she didn't even know if this counted as group sex. Could it be an orgy if she was the only person in the room?

On legs almost too weak to hold her, Kaleen stumbled over to the bathroom and splashed water on her face.

Of all the unreal things that had happened to her, this had to be one of the better experiences. What had Nialla said? It was the fae blood exploring its surroundings. Man, talk about going where no man has gone before.

This was so bizarre. How the hell did she have fairy blood? Did it come from her mother or her father? Was that why she got the house? Because her mysterious Aunt Lucy wanted to pass it to someone who had fairy blood too?

For the millionth time she swore at her parents' need to cut all family ties. Would it have killed them to talk a little bit about her background? One night around the campfire say, "Hey, Kaleen, did I ever tell you about your great-grandmother? She had wings and lived in a tree."

Cripes. It wasn't bad enough her parents wouldn't let her have any friends but they had to cut her off from her heritage too. Now here she was in some parallel universe having multiple orgasms with ghosts and a man who turned into a horse.

Okay, so no one could have prepared her for that. That's okay. She could handle this. She'd been on her own for a long time and managed to stay alive, she could do it again.

Once she got a handle on this whole fairy blood thing, she'd find the way home and weld that freaking door shut. She'd block out this whole experience as if it had never happened and go on with her life.

Except she had no house to go back to. Pain stronger than a punch in the gut rocked her. Wails she'd held inside too long tore through her and she ran back to the room and threw herself on the bed. There was no one here for her to hide her sadness from so she let the sobs come. Tears streamed down her face as she cried for the house she'd fallen in love with, for the paintings she'd never be able to reproduce and for her tools that were nothing but piles of smoking ash.

"Here now. What's all this?" Ma'ab walked into the room. A little blob of light floated along behind her. "Why the tears?"

"All gone. They're...all gone." She couldn't catch her breath or stop crying.

"What's all gone, child?" Ma'ab rubbed her back as Kaleen hiccupped and gasped for breath.

"My h-house. My p-paintings. Everything is gone."

"Hush now. Tell me what happened."

"Had a dream. Dark, black cloud came down and just ate everything up." Ma'ab stiffened but didn't say anything. "I woke up and painted it, only I made the cloud lose instead. I couldn't let it kill him." Kaleen clutched Ma'ab's hand and stared at her. "I couldn't just let him die. I loved him. In my dream I mean. In my dream I loved the guy." It was only a dream. She didn't care what Jo'naz said. What happened in dreams didn't count once the sun was up.

"So you painted the darkness losing. Then what happened?" Ma'ab's dark eyes glittered intently.

"I was almost finished and this—octopus thing burst through the door that wasn't there. I mean, it was there then, but when I looked for it before it was gone." Kaleen pulled at her hair, she wasn't making any sense.

"Go on. The monster came through a secret door..."

"And it grabbed at me and knocked everything over. It all happened so fast I can't keep it all straight. It broke a light and started a fire. I ran to my bedroom to get out of the house but it was there too and caught me. Next thing I knew a horse with wings charged through my window and fought it. The horse—Jo'naz—saved me and brought me here through a tree. But all my paintings are gone. My house." A sob welled up in her throat and she fought it back. Tears still dripped from her eyes and her nose ran but she wasn't wailing like a banshee anymore.

"I hadn't even lived in the house a month yet. All my work. Gone. Like so much freaking firewood."

"No, not gone. Once magic is released into the world it is never gone. You can't put the genie back into the bottle."

"I'm not talking about magic. I'm talking about paintings. Artwork."

“Tell me, in your picture did you paint shifters beating back the darkness?”

“Yes.” Where was she going with this?

“On the night you came Su’are sent another wave of darkness to engulf the shifter camps. He’d already destroyed more than one clan with his foul magic. The mages and magic workers of the clans couldn’t find a way to fight him. But that night, for some reason the darkness disappeared.”

“You mean my dream was real?”

“What do you think?”

“I think you’re crazier than a three dollar bill.” Kaleen got to her feet and began to pace. “There’s no way painting a picture can change reality. And there’s no way I’m going to believe what was happening in my dreams was real.”

“Didn’t Jo’naz explain to you about meeting on the dream plane?”

“He said something about it but come on. I mean—Lord, I’m trying to argue the logic of a situation with a million-year-old shape shifter while sitting in a tree surrounded by fairies. It’s going to take years and years of therapy to recover from this.” She leaned against the wall and slowly slid down.

“You’ve had a lot to adjust to but know this, it won’t get easier. Tomorrow you will have to meet with the Circle and they will discuss what to do about you. If you do not believe in your own magic no one else will either. You must show them the way to fight Su’are.”

Ma’ab stood and moved silently to the door.

“I don’t have any magic. Just talent and hard work,” Kaleen insisted from her spot on the floor.

“My child, what else do you think magic is? Use your talent and your fae blood will take care of the rest.”

“Oh great. No pressure there. I’ll just use something I have no idea if I really possess or not. Sure, no problem.”

Ma’ab chuckled and left the room, the blob of light floating along behind her as she went.

* * * * *

Bright sunlight stabbed her eyes and some annoying bird was pecking its brains out on a tree somewhere. Freaking nature. Why the hell had she wanted to live in the country anyway? Kaleen stuffed her head under the pillow and fought to ignore the pounding bird.

“Mistress. Tis time for you to get dressed. The Ara’bini awaits in the hall and you’ll want to look your best.”

What? Hands pulled the pillow off her head and yanked the covers off her body. Scenes from last night flashed through her head like a movie on fast forward.

Blinking her eyes in the blinding light, Kaleen looked up at two twittering girls who were waiting for her. Two twittering girls with wings slowly fluttering behind them.

"Shit. Can you wake up from a dream and still be in a dream?"

The young fairies laughed behind their hands and helped her out of bed. "Tis no dream, this," said the one on the right. She had long, straight hair that fell to her waist in an auburn wave.

"But I'll bet you had plenty last night," snickered the other one. She had curly hair that was as bright red as autumn leaves.

Kaleen let them lead her to the bathroom where they ran a bath and dumped in another bucket of steaming water. Man, what she wouldn't give for a hot shower and a cup of coffee right about now.

"What do you mean, the Ara' whatis is waiting?" Kaleen stepped into the tub and reached for the soap. The one with long hair grabbed it first and lathered up her hands.

"Jo'naz, the Ara'bini. He was here at dawn and has been chomping at the bit to see you. Queen Nialla made him wait until you awoke." She giggled again and began scrubbing Kaleen's back.

"I certainly wouldn't mind having him wake me up," the curly-haired one snickered, dumping water over Kaleen's head as soapy hands brushed against her breasts.

"Hey! Wait a minute," she sputtered. "I can wash myself just fine, thank you. I don't need any help." She snatched the sponge and the soap and clutched them to her chest. It was one thing to be naked in front of strangers. It was a whole different story to have them washing her boobs.

The girls backed up with crestfallen expressions on their faces. "We're sorry, mistress. We were just doing what our queen bade us."

"Nialla told you to wash me like a baby?"

"She told us to prepare you for the Ara'bini and for the meeting of the Circle."

Kaleen felt like she'd kicked a puppy. It wasn't their fault she had hang-ups about people touching her chest without at least a kiss first. "I'm sorry for snapping at you." She took a deep breath. "Look, why don't you tell me about this Circle thing while I wash up? That will help me a lot more than you washing me."

The girls looked uneasily at one another for a minute. This was going to be harder than she thought.

"Or you could tell me more about Jo'naz. I didn't really get a chance to have any meaningful conversation with him last night."

Their eyes lit up at that idea.

"Jo'naz is the leader of his clan, the Ara'bini." The one with long hair gushed.

"That means he had to fight all the men of the clan and win. All in one night! At any time another can challenge him for his position but so far none have dared." Curly Hair said with her eyes shining.

"I've never seen him dance but my sister was at one of the gatherings and saw him and said she almost came on the spot."

"You mean dance with the swords?" Kaleen asked, trying to follow the rapid-fire conversation.

"Yes! Have you seen it?" Long Hair clasped her hands to her chest and sighed.

"Ah, not up close."

"I heard that every female on the plains is chasing him but he doesn't stay with any of them for more than a night. The elders are after him to choose a mate but he said he's waiting."

"Maybe he's waiting for one of us," Curly Hair said, elbowing Long Hair before collapsing in a heap of laughter.

Kaleen bit her tongue before she could say "Over my dead body." She had no business acting jealous over two girls who had a case of hero worship. It wasn't like she had any claim on him anyway.

"Did the queen give you something for me to wear today? All I have is the dress Jo'naz gave me last night." She sounded grouchy but she didn't care. It was bad enough to get up without coffee but having the giggle twins twittering around didn't help her mood any.

"My apologies! We'll get your gown now!" The girls scurried out of the room and Kaleen got out of the tub.

Okay, so she had an attitude this morning. What of it? It had absolutely nothing to do with the fact that Jo'naz had every female in this God-forsaken place panting after him. She wasn't the jealous type. Even when Richard cheated on her with another man she hadn't been jealous. She'd just been hurt that he'd lied to her.

She didn't have a jealous bone in her body!

"At the last gathering, I heard from a friend of a friend that her sister had spent a night in Jo'naz's tent and she was ruined for any other man."

Long Hair was back with a shimmering gown of amethyst that glittered and twinkled with a life of its own. It was made of some stretchy fabric that clung to her every curve. Kaleen wondered how they got a dress to fit her when all the fairies she'd seen were a foot shorter and many pounds lighter. Not her problem, she had enough questions to deal with right now. She plopped down onto a bench and put her face in her hands.

Far too many questions.

"Guess he retains some of his stallion even when he isn't shifting," Curly Hair toweled off Kaleen's hair and ran a silver comb through the snarly strands.

"Hey! Leave some hair on my head, please!"

"Sorry. I'm rushing, I didn't mean to hurt you. I want you to look just right when you go to the hall."

Kaleen closed her eyes in surrender. These girls were so caught up in the idea of Jo'naz being in the palace they weren't paying any attention to her. She'd just let them do their thing and shut up. The sooner she was "prepared" the sooner they'd leave her in peace.

"What are your names, anyway?" She couldn't keep thinking of them as Long Hair and Curly Hair.

"I'm called Ruza," the curly-haired one said.

"And I'm Ryann. We're the queen's lady's maids."

"Oh. Ah, that's great." They seemed awfully proud of the fact, so she guessed it wasn't the same thing as being a maid at home. She was no lady though so she hoped they weren't planning on hanging around her on a regular basis.

"There! You look lovely! The dress matches your eyes perfectly and the curls around your face show off your complexion," Ryann clasped her hands together and smiled at her handiwork.

"You'll make Lartu green with envy. No one has violet eyes anymore. And your hair, black as a raven's wing, will make you stand out among all those wheat-headed ninnies."

"Ruza! That's enough!" Ma'ab walked into the room and clapped her hands. The twitter twins took off like they'd been goosed, grabbing towels and laundry as they went.

Kaleen stood up carefully. She didn't know what Ruza had done to her hair but it was piled up on top of her head. She was afraid one quick move would make it topple.

Ma'ab walked around her, doing a slow inspection. "Impertinent she may be but Ruza has a way with hair. Come, take a look at yourself." The ancient shifter led her to the bathing chamber and waved her hand at one of the walls. The rough, wood wall faded away until it was as smooth and clear as a highly polished mirror.

"Handy trick you have there," Kaleen said. She stared at herself, amazed. She'd never been into "girlie" trappings before. Her mother never took her to a beauty salon and Richard had her wear unrelieved black for all her showings so she wouldn't outshine her artwork. She secretly believed it was because he wanted to draw the attention to himself but she couldn't have cared less what she wore to those dog and pony shows.

In the mirror she saw a statuesque woman in a gorgeous gown more suited to a runway than a forest. Glossy, dark hair looped and curled atop her head and a few strands slipped artfully around her face. Large violet eyes stared back from a delicate face with a porcelain smooth complexion.

When she lifted her hand to scratch her nose and the woman in the mirror did too, Kaleen almost jumped out of her skin. That woman was her!

"You look as if you've seen a ghost," Ma'ab cackled.

"I-I-I've never been made up like this before. I usually wear jeans and T-shirts or comfortable skirts." Did her eyes really look that dewy? And her lips? Did she really have that cupid bow for a mouth? "Are you sure this mirror isn't playing tricks on me? I mean, I've seen myself plenty of times before and I don't ever remember looking like this."

"It's the fae blood. You have always looked like this but the fae in you has been set free. You'll find you age slower now, your hair will grow longer and stronger and your skin will remain soft and smooth well into your second century."

"Second century! Are you out of your mind? How the hell am I going to explain that at home?"

"You are home. Now come, let me see if these shoes fit your feet. The fae don't use shoes for much more than decoration since they rarely walk for any distance. You'll be on your feet much of the day, so you'll need something a bit more substantial than slippers."

"Hold on a minute, sister. What do you mean, I'm home? I can't stay here forever. What about my art? My career?"

"We don't have time to discuss that now. All will become clear in due time. Try these on. The gown is long enough to cover them if you take small steps."

Following Ma'ab in a daze, Kaleen put on the soft-soled shoes. They were like moccasins but dyed to match her dress.

"Perfect. I thought these would work. I'll get you taller ones for riding and for moving about outside later. Now come. You'll need to get something in your stomach before meeting the Circle and that young stud isn't going to wait much longer before tearing the place apart for you."

"Jo'naz? What does he want?" Kaleen tried to push down the thrill that shot straight to her pussy at the mere thought of him. He might like to sleep around with every woman on the planet but that didn't mean she was going to let him charm himself into her pants.

Of course, she wasn't wearing any pants right now.

Ma'ab dragged her back to the kitchen, which was now bustling with activity. Sticking her in the corner with a bowl of what looked like oatmeal and the order to eat, Ma'ab left her there and went to berate some hapless worker who was slacking.

Kaleen eyed the steaming bowl warily. She wasn't one for gruel but her stomach growled with hunger and there wasn't a jar of peanut butter in sight. Taking a tentative sip, she was pleasantly surprised to find it tasted pretty darn good. It had honey and some other sweet flavor to it. Maybe pears? She scooped up some more carefully. With her luck, she'd spill half of it down her dress.

Just as she was scraping the bowl to get the last of it, a bellow echoed through the room. All motion stopped and heads turned towards the noise. Footsteps thundered down the hallway and the kitchen door slammed open.

And there in all his hunky glory stood Jo'naz. A glowering, pissed-off Jo'naz. His nostrils flared and his eyes shot sparks of anger as he looked around the room.

"Ma'ab! I've cooled my heels for half the morn. Where is she?"

All eyes in the kitchen turned to her. Kaleen licked the last of the oatmeal from the corner of her mouth and prayed she didn't have any on her chin. With a shaky breath she stood up.

"Looking for me?"

Laser-blue eyes focused on her. Kaleen could feel the intensity of his gaze from across the room. With just one look, he brought back every mind-blowing orgasm she'd experienced in their dream encounters. Her knees turned to water and her legs wobbled.

"My love, how fared you last night?" His face gentled as he walked towards her.

Everyone watched them like they were performing a play.

"Ah, it was—interesting. What can I do for you?" She was afraid to move away from the support of the wall for fear she'd collapse at his feet.

Liar.

She was afraid if she didn't cling to the wall behind her she'd throw herself at him and fuck him on the kitchen table with everyone looking. How could a man look so damn hot with hair practically down to his ass? Her heart rate picked up as he drew closer and closer to her. His musky scent wafted through her nostrils and into her brain. Heat poured off him, scorching her as he stopped mere inches away.

"I've come to escort you to the meeting with the Circle." One finger lightly traced the curve of her cheek. One stinking finger and she felt like her pussy was going to gush worse than Niagara Falls.

"That's nice. But I think I'm all set. I'm sure someone will be able to show me the way there." He looked at her with way too much possessiveness for her liking. He didn't own her. No one did. After the shit she went through with Richard she'd make damn sure no one tried to control her ever again. Even if he was good enough to eat in three great big bites.

His broad shoulders blocked out the light from the window over the sink. Okay, maybe four big bites.

"You misunderstand. Because I brought you here, I must stand trial with you as well." His hand trailed down her bare arm and captured her fingers. Gently, he lifted her hand to his mouth and kissed her knuckles one by one. His tongue slipped out to tease the web between her fingers and heat shot through her body.

Her hormones had gone into overdrive and all systems were on red alert. She was so befuddled from his tricky tongue she almost missed what he said.

"Trial? What do you mean, trial? Wasn't drinking from the Chalice thingy my trial? I'm not dead. Case closed."

"It's not that simple. There's politics involved. Different factions—"

“Dear God! I don’t know whether to be surprised or relieved that even fairies have politics. That pretty much proves humans don’t corner the market on stupidity.”

“No, they don’t. Come, I will explain somewhere a bit more private.” His eyes scanned the room that suddenly exploded with industry.

Jo’naz led her out of the kitchen to the hall she’d walk through the night before. A few more steps took them to a window carved into the tree. It was taller than Jo’naz and had a cushioned window seat. He sat down and leaned against the embrasure, pulling her between his well-muscled thighs.

Kaleen tried to ignore the sensation of those steely sinews around her and focus on the idea of a trial.

She wasn’t doing a very good job of it.

Her body remembered too well the feel of his around her. Over her. Inside her. The sun shone on his silver-blond head and made it glow like a halo. He was so damn good-looking he took her breath away. Her nipples pebbled beneath the dress and her breasts ached for him to touch them. A fresh flood of cream wet her thighs and her breathing picked up its pace.

His nostrils flared and his pupils dilated as if he knew what was happening to her and liked it.

“So—” She cleared her throat to erase the huskiness in her voice. “So, what do you have to tell me about the trial?”

Focus, focus. Trial, remember that?

“Much. But not right now. First I must taste you again. I was barred from your dreams last night and it drove me mad.” He reached his hand around the back of her neck and pulled her close.

“Then you missed quite a party,” she whispered before her mouth met his.

Soft, his lips were so soft. His teeth nipped at her lower lip, drawing it into his mouth and sucking on it gently. Pure lust shot through her entire body, filling her with need from her fingertips to her achingly empty pussy.

He touched no more than her mouth, not even bringing his tongue into play, and yet she was ready to explode with hunger for him. His kiss was new yet hauntingly familiar. Even if she didn’t believe her dreams, her body did. And it knew what joys he could give her.

“Ahem!”

Kaleen jumped away from Jo’naz like a scalded cat. Nialla stood with her hands on her hips and lips pursed in disapproval.

“This is why you left my hall in disarray? Like a stallion in rut?” Her eyes dropped to his crotch and Kaleen followed her gaze to the enormous bulge sticking out like tent pole.

Ruza wasn’t kidding. Even with pants on, she could see he really was hung like a horse. A very large, well-endowed horse. Kaleen’s knees buckled again.

"If you had let me come last night then I wouldn't have been so impatient to see my love again."

She pushed away the thrill those words gave her and stepped away from him. "Don't get carried away here, buddy. One kiss doesn't mean anything where I come from."

He frowned at her but didn't speak.

"You know the rules. She needed time for the fae blood to settle in her system. She did not need you sniffing around her like a dog in heat."

Jo'naz stiffened at the insult.

"Now, have you told her what to expect at the trial or were you too busy trying to seduce her in my hallway?"

"We—ah, were just getting to that," Kaleen said, squeezing her thighs together under the cover of the purple gown. Her pussy had swelled so much it felt like it had doubled in size.

Jo'naz stood and pulled her close to his side, playing idly with one of the loose curls hanging down her nape. "How much time do we have before the Circle convenes?"

"Not much. I'm going now to try to pave the way. Be very careful. The balance of power is on the verge of toppling in either direction. I won't let anything push it to the other side." Nialla floated off with her wings snapping.

Guess that was the fairy version of storming off in a huff.

"What does she mean the balance of power is tipping? What's going on?" Kaleen tried to ignore the shivery sensation zipping down her spine as his fingers brushed her neck.

"There isn't time to delve into fae politics but the long and the short of it is the Circle is controlled by the representatives of the High Fae. Only pure-blood fae may be on the Circle. The older members will do anything to weed out the half-bloods from Xodo. The younger ones wish to open relations with the clans and mages and bring promising half-bloods into the Circle."

"Cripes, this sounds like civil rights movement. Do half-bloods have to sit at the back of the bus too?" Indignation thrummed through her blood. Prejudice pissed her off in general. Now that she was one of the minorities, it pissed her off even more. "Which side is Nialla on?" If she was against half-bloods, this could go very badly for her.

"Nialla keeps the two factions balanced on a razor's edge and never declares for either side. Although she has opened the Flower Palace to all of fae blood and has increased relations with the clans. She can't land on one side or the other but I'm pretty sure she is on your side," he said with a sly smile.

What did that smile mean? Had he had some sort of relationship with her too? Was that why the queen seemed so irritated to find them kissing in the hall? Cause she was another one of his one-night stands? Oh wonderful. Nothing like pissing off royalty.

Kaleen stepped away from Jo'naz. She didn't need his clever fingers messing with her mind right now. She needed to think for herself. Hadn't she learned anything from depending too much on Richard to take care of everything? "So, what's the plan? Do I have to testify or something? I mean, what's going to happen?"

"Nialla will call the meeting to order and explain why I broke the law by bringing you through the gate. We are not allowed to cross the plane to interfere in the human world unless one of our lost ones is in danger."

"But you didn't know I was one of you when you rescued me, did you?" Did he? Was that why he came to see her in her dreams?

"Your soul called to me. I knew you must have had some fae blood or I wouldn't have been able to meet with you on the dream plane. I didn't know you were the one prophecy spoke of but I knew I had to have you."

"Wait a second here. What prophecy? And what do you mean my soul called to you?"

"Shifters mate for life. We cannot rest until we find the other half of our soul. You're my other half." His hand reached for her but she stepped back before he could touch her.

"You're crazy, you know that? Certifiable. There is no way you can tell me you know I'm your soul mate when I only just met you in the flesh yesterday."

He sighed and dropped his hand. "Why must you deny what is right before your eyes?"

"I-I can't handle the idea of a soul mate right now. Let's table that and go back to the prophecy, okay?"

"The mages told our elders about a prophecy that spoke of the great darkness and Su'are's return. The only thing that could hold back the darkness was the magic of the Chosen One."

"And you think I'm the Chosen One? Now I know you're loony tunes! I could barely pay my rent and eat. If I was some mystic Chosen One, don't you think I would have at least been able to live off more than peanut butter and jelly for most of my adult life?" Cripes. She'd fallen into an episode of *The Twilight Zone*.

"I didn't say I believed it, only that the mages spoke of it. Regardless, we need to make the Blue faction believe it or they could banish you."

"So what, do I have to go on the stand or something?" That would go over big. She didn't know what the hell was going on, didn't believe most of it anyway and she'd have to convince a bunch of narrow-minded assholes that she was some savior of the fairy fucking race.

Why had she gotten out of bed this morning?

"No. You will not be allowed to speak during the proceedings. I can speak on your behalf but you can only observe. Just remember, the in-fighting is more about jockeying

for power than it is about you being here. I had every right to rescue one of the blood. Not only that, Su'are broke the plane first so I could have crossed the barrier anyway."

"Um, okay. But where does that leave me?"

"Don't worry, I'll take care of you."

His words shot a bolt of fear straight to her heart. Richard used to say the same thing. Don't worry, he'd take care of everything. And he did, controlling her every movement.

"Thanks but I like to fight my own battles." Never again would she give up control of her life.

"This time you can't—"

Whatever Jo'naz was going to say got cut off by the thunderous clanging of two huge golden doors.

"The Ara'bini Jo'naz is called to Circle," bellowed a male voice, echoing through the hallway.

"Just trust in me. In yourself. Everything will be fine."

Oh Lord. Trust wasn't something she was very good at. She was in a heap of trouble.

*Come hither my sparrows
My little arrows
If a tear or a smile
Will a man beguile
If an amorous delay
Clouds a sunshiny day
If the step of a foot
Smites the heart to its root
Tis the marriage ring
Makes each fairy a king
THE FAIRY, William Blake*

Chapter Six

Jo'naz put his frustrations—sexual and emotional—out of his mind and concentrated on projecting a confidence he didn't feel. It was true that Kaleen had passed the challenge of the Chalice, but that didn't mean they had to accept her presence in the Flower Palace or in the Forest of Xodo either. If she got banished would he be able to let her go back to the human world?

No!

Whether she wanted to believe it or not, she was his mate, for life and the hereafter. If she were sent back to the human world he'd give up his clan, give up his heritage and follow her there.

But would she want him?

And what would happen to his people should he leave? They couldn't fight Su'are without him.

He couldn't think of that now. First, he had to convince the factious Circle that Kaleen was the answer to Su'are's return. If they believed that he could work her around to his way of thinking. Her body knew she belonged to him. Her heart would soon follow.

"Jo'naz of the Ara'bini, you've been charged with entering the human world through a gate of the fae and bringing a human back with you. How do you answer?" The male fae, Farken, had a long, narrow nose and a pinched mouth that gave him the look of someone who'd just sucked on a lemon. Stepping into the middle of the room, Jo'naz squared his shoulders and tossed his head back. Wouldn't hurt to remind them he was the leader of a small army camped on the edge of the forest.

"I, Jo'naz of the Ara'bini, state I entered the human plane to rescue one of the blood from a minion of Su'are who had warped a gate and attacked her without cause."

A muted roar rose from the assembled fae as they discussed his answer. Several of the women cast sly glances in his direction while the men eyed Kaleen with a mixture of curiosity and appreciation. She stood a head taller than even the tallest fae and her lush curves declared her mixed blood like a beacon.

“Order!” Nialla snapped her wings loudly and commanded the room’s attention. “The Ara’bini has answered the challenge presented by the Circle. Are there any who wish to discuss this before a vote is called?”

He didn’t even pretend to hope that it would get passed without a fight. Every call for a vote was just another way to scramble for position in the precariously balanced gathering. Jo’naz snuck a glance at Kaleen. She stood where he’d left her, her chin held high. Although she looked somewhat aloof, he could see she paid attention to everything that was happening. What was she thinking?

“I have some questions for the Ara’bini,” a nasal voice called from the back of the room.

Jo’naz fought to keep the distaste from showing on his face. Lartu. Ever since he turned down her blatant attempts at seduction she’d done everything she could to punish the clans. If she thought for one minute that he had feelings for Kaleen she would attack like a wolf on a lamb.

“The Circle recognizes Lartu,” Nialla said with a wave of her hand. Her face remained blank but Jo’naz could tell by the set of her head and the way she held her wings tightly together that she was not pleased.

The bird-like fae stepped forward and looked him over from head to toe. Her tongue darted out to wet her lips before she began speaking. “How did you know this human carried any fae blood if you had not already crossed the plane without permission?”

Jo’naz had the unpleasant sensation of being undressed in front of the entire Circle. “My spirit had joined with Kaleen’s several times on the dream plane between the worlds. As clan leader I am allowed to travel that plane.”

“But how did you know she carried the blood?” Lartu pushed.

“When my soul joined with hers I felt her fae blood singing.”

“There is no fae blood in the human world. It is buried so deeply as to be all but gone.”

“Not all the time. In Kaleen’s case, her magic expressed itself through her art and called to me. Otherwise, how could I have met her on the dream plane?”

Lartu grunted and tried a different tack. “You say you joined with her on the dream plane. By your own clan laws, you must either claim her as mate or banish her yourself. Are you prepared to do that in front of this assembly?” Her eyebrow arched in question.

She thought she would trap him with his own laws. Lartu thought him unable to commit to any woman. Little did she realize Kaleen was his heart, his soul. The moment he touched her spirit he knew he would stop at nothing to make her his forever.

As he opened his mouth to respond, Jo'naz felt Kaleen's tension from across the room. Did she fear his answer? Was she afraid to be pushed into a commitment she wasn't prepared for? Or was she afraid he would deny her in front of the assembly?

Anger at Lartu burned in his gut. The spiteful bitch. She didn't care how Kaleen felt having something that was an emotional, spiritual experience thrown out in front of strangers. Lartu fully expected him to balk at the idea of claiming Kaleen as a mate.

If he did, it might make relations with the Circle smoother, the logical part of his mind reminded him.

To Su'are with it! He didn't care how difficult it would make things with the fae or with Kaleen for that matter. She belonged to him body and soul and he would fight to the death and beyond for her.

"Yes. I am fully prepared to claim her as my mate in front of this and any other assembly."

Gasps of shock sounded in more than one corner and excited buzzing exploded in the room.

"Order! Order I say!" Nialla shouted for attention. "This is not about whether or not the Ara'bini is claiming a mate. This is about Kaleen's status as one of the fae. If you have no question about her possession of the blood, stand down."

Jo'naz stole another glance at Kaleen. She held her arms stiffly by her side and her jaw twitched but she hadn't moved or uttered a word.

"I say if she's fae have her show us her magic. That'll prove it one way or the other. If she can't produce enough magic then she doesn't belong on this plane," Farken shouted above the din.

All eyes turned to Kaleen and Jo'naz felt her panic.

"It's too soon. The fae has only just been freed," he stalled.

"You said it was loose on the human plane. Surely after drinking of the Chalice it has had time to meld with her," Lartu said.

Kaleen's eyes had grown wide as *merda* leaves and she looked terrified. He had to help his mate before she said or did something that would damn her future. As his brain scrambled for a way out of this quagmire, the golden doors once again opened with a bang.

Jo'naz smiled to himself as Ma'ab strode into the gathering of fae like she owned the Flower Palace. In her hands she carried a coarsely woven bag and the smell of brimstone trailed behind her.

"I wish to address the Circle," she declared, her raspy voice echoing in the stillness.

"The Circle recognizes Ma'ab of the Dra'gini," Nialla said.

"I object! Is this a fae court or a gathering of shifters?" Lartu protested.

“The call for witnesses is not open to objection, Lartu. Sit down and close your mouth unless you have something of merit to say.” Nialla shot a glare in the fae’s direction.

Ma’ab looked at each of the fae until they could no longer meet her ancient gaze and sat down. The room was so quiet even the birds in the branches were silent.

“I bring the instruments of Kaleen’s magic. She cannot be tested for skill without her tools.”

Kaleen felt a cold drip of sweat slide down her back. She was inches from running out of the room like a gibbering idiot. If they banished her where the hell would she go? And what did that bird-looking bitch mean about taking her as Jo’naz’s mate? The word alone was enough to make her break out in hives.

And what on earth was Ma’ab talking about? She didn’t have any magic and she certainly didn’t have any tools for magic. A tingle shot through her, making her fingers tremble. Whether from nervousness or anticipation, she had no idea.

All eyes were on the elderly shifter as she crossed the floor to where Kaleen stood. With a flourish, Ma’ab pulled out a canvas, brushes, paints and a palette.

Her palette!

“But how? Where?” Kaleen asked in amazement. The house had gone up in flames. She knew it. She’d seen it, felt it. Her studio was the first room hit. How could her palette have escaped the fire?

“I’ll explain later,” Ma’ab whispered softly in her raspy voice. “Paint something for me.” Kaleen’s vision blurred and she could have sworn she saw a dragon where Ma’ab had been standing.

Ma’ab’s eyes burned into Kaleen’s and a shivery feeling exploded in her veins.

It felt as if a swarm of fireflies danced in her bloodstream. The rush of tingles was so intense she couldn’t hear, could barely see. In a daze she took the paints and blended the colors.

Without consciously thinking about what she was doing, Kaleen roughed out a tree. Not any tree but the tree that was the Flower Palace. Her toes curled inside her soft shoes as the energy poured from her head through her body and out the soles of her feet. Sweat dripped down her face and she wiped it out of her eyes absently.

She *had* to paint this picture. Whatever moved in her blood wouldn’t let her stop. A lightning bolt could strike the tree and still she’d stand here and finish the damn painting.

Vibrant greens mingled with muted ones and shadowed leaves formed. The disease she’d seen from across the rainbow bridge was replaced by new growth and limber branches. The carvings she’d wanted to investigate closer sprang to life with a few brush strokes and still the energy flowed.

Mixing up jewel tones, Kaleen made the rooms that glimmered like flowers amongst the branches and set birds and raccoons and squirrels scampering in the upper branches. A crescendo of energy slammed into her and she poured all of it into the picture.

Wispy clouds drifted under a burning sun and the waves around the island practically washed off the canvas. The forest in the background glowed with life and an aura of protection emanated from the tree to encompass everything in the picture.

With a final brush stroke, Kaleen made the path to the island shimmer with all the power and magic she felt inside her.

The brush fell from her nerveless fingers and she collapsed onto a nearby stool. Her back throbbed, and her arms ached from holding them up for so long. She rolled her head back and forth, trying to ease the strain in her neck and shoulders.

Warm hands rubbed her knotted muscles and Kaleen blinked away the haze she'd fallen into.

Jo'naz stood behind her, glowing with pride. Ma'ab had taken the canvas and placed it on a stand in the center of the room. The fairies huddled around it, gasping and muttering amongst themselves. A sliver of fear twisted in her belly. It was always terrifying to her to show her work to strangers. Hopefully the fairies were nicer than some art critics.

"Sorry, I guess I blew it," Kaleen said as Nialla approached her. The queen had a stunned look on her face and her normally unflappable air was definitely flustered.

"Sorry? Blew it?" Her mouth actually hung open in shock.

"Yeah. I don't know what Ma'ab wanted me to do but I'm sure it wasn't paint a pretty picture for your wall."

"Do you not know what you've done, child? Did you not feel the energy? The healing?"

"I felt...something. I don't know if it was magic though. It's what I feel when I get into the zone, you know?"

"The...zone? What is this zone?" Nialla asked, still looking at the picture.

"You know, my...place. I don't know how to describe it. When the muse strikes, I go into this mode and the creativity takes over. My body is just the vessel, the tool for getting the idea out on canvas." One new-age roommate had called it the spirit of the goddess working through her. Kaleen was pretty sure there were no deities involved in her artwork but it was one explanation anyway.

"My child, your zone, as you call it, is nothing more than your fae blood. You have tapped into your fae magic without knowing it."

"Hold on a second, sister. I know I'm good, but I don't think my work is magical." A trickle of fear mixed with excitement tripped down her spine. Could she really have magic in her? She didn't want to get her hopes up and believe it only to have them crash down around her ears when the truth came out that she was boringly normal.

“Not the physical painting, although that is wondrous, the magic is inside you and comes out as you paint. Every fae here felt your healing powers as you painted.”

“What?” Healing powers? Kaleen was obviously missing something here.

“Yes. You healed the palace. Restored it to its former glory and re-invoked the protective spells.”

“I did what? Time out! How do you figure that?” She didn’t know squat about spells, protective or otherwise.

“Come, come.” The queen grabbed her wrist in a vise-like grip and pulled her toward the windows. “All of you! Come! See for yourselves!”

Kaleen looked at Jo’naz who hadn’t said a word since she went into her trance. He shrugged his shoulders and motioned for her to follow the queen. As she stood, Kaleen’s legs wobbled beneath her. The room spun for a minute and she felt lightheaded.

“Tea! Quickly!” Ma’ab shouted and one of the fairies scurried to do her bidding.

“Slowly, my love. You expended a great deal of power to heal the Tree. Now you must regain your strength.” Jo’naz scooped her up into his muscular arms and held her like a child. She felt surrounded by him, protected from the world. It was a very seductive feeling and a dangerous one too. She pushed the temptation away and focused on his words.

“I painted a picture, that’s all. How long was I at it?”

“The sun has moved more than halfway across the sky since you started to paint.”

Another wave of fear and nervousness swamped her. She’d been painting for hours without a break and hadn’t even realized it. She’d been in a zone before but at least she’d stopped to drink some water or go to the bathroom. She’d never gone so many hours straight. No wonder she was such a mess.

“Carry her if you must but come!” Nialla snapped her wings in agitation as she hovered near them.

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

Nialla led the gathering to the large doors at the back of the room. Fairies moved back as Jo’naz carried her by them. Their faces held awe and a little bit of fear.

Oh man, was this for real? What the hell had she done?

The setting sun gilded the forest in shades of amber and gold. Kaleen had to shield her eyes from the glare of the rays on the water around the island. Jo’naz carried her along a narrow terrace while the female fairies fluttered above them.

Nialla flew to the very edge of the terrace where boards blocked the path.

“Look and see for yourself. This section of our tree had been dying a finger width at a time. Disease and decay had overtaken our home and was slowly but surely creeping along even unto the living quarters. Eventually the disease would have destroyed our home while we watched.”

She nodded her head in Jo'naz's direction. Without putting Kaleen on her feet he kicked at the boards, knocking them down like kindling wood.

Gasps and exclamations punctured the air. Strong, supple new branches spread out from the base of the tree, new buds unfurled even as she watched. As each tiny leaf opened, it added its glow of life to the already shimmering tree.

Kaleen felt like the wind had been knocked out of her. It was just like in her painting! The disease and decay were gone!

"What about the path? Show me the path!" She wriggled out of Jo'naz's grasp and almost crumpled when her feet hit the ground. On shaky legs she wobbled back the way she came, trying to remember where the front of the tree was.

"The path?" Nialla looked at her with a questioning expression.

"Yes, the one we walked on to get to the bridge. When I painted it I wanted to make it like a force field. I read in a book once about this haunted forest and as long as you stayed on the path you'd be safe. I kind of had that in mind when I was painting."

"Our forest isn't haunted. And the path is just a path." Jo'naz looked at her like she had two heads.

"I know, I know. But I tried to make it protected." Argh! How could she explain what she'd tried to do? She'd wanted to help them so in her painting she'd made the path a protective one. But how on Earth did she find out if it worked?

The crowd moved around until they could view the path. It looked no different than it had last night. Disappointment rocked her.

"Perhaps your power lies in healing, not in protection?" Ma'ab said kindly, holding a steaming cup of tea out to her.

"Maybe. Hell, I don't know what I was thinking. I didn't even know I was doing magic. I just thought I was painting what was in my heart." Still, she'd really wanted to do something to keep them safe. Kaleen accepted the cup and took a cautious sip. It was slightly bitter but not bad.

They moved back into the chambers where she'd left her picture. Nialla moved to the head of the room and faced the muttering crowd.

"Are there any who deny the worthiness of Kaleen's inclusion into our midst?" She dared anyone to object. A few could not meet her gaze and shuffled their feet but the rest silently nodded their agreement. "Then I declare this issue resolved. Jo'naz of the Ara'bini is absolved of any wrongdoing in crossing the planes and Kaleen shall enjoy the support and protection of the Flower Palace."

The assembly filed out, giving Kaleen looks under their lashes and whispering behind their hands. She forced herself not to hide behind Jo'naz's bulk. It would be too easy to let him take over her battles. She really wasn't much of a fighter. Normally, she avoided confrontation as much as possible, which had made her an easy target for Richard's manipulation.

She'd leaned on him far too often, preferring to believe he'd had her best interests at heart instead of examining closer what he was doing. There was no way she was going to fall into that trap again with Jo'naz. He had "overprotective" written all over him. If she let him "help" her, she'd end up right back where she'd been with Richard.

No, she had to stand up on her own two feet and if that meant his nose got bent out of joint, so be it.

"Thanks for sticking up for me, Jo'naz, I appreciate it. But I think I can handle it from here. I guess I'll see you around," Kaleen said as the last fairy drifted out of the room, followed closely by Nialla and Ma'ab. Her words sounded flippant but she didn't care. She knew if she didn't get out quickly Jo'naz would never let her out.

"You should eat and rest. Ma'ab will bring you more tea to restore your energies."

"Uh, yeah. I'm sure she will." He moved closer to her as she backed away. Couldn't he get the hint? "Well, I better get going." She took a few more steps towards the door.

In a move too fast for her eyes to follow, Jo'naz passed her and pulled the doors closed. Leaning against them, he crossed his arms over his chest and looked at her.

"You will go nowhere without me. We have much to discuss before the joining ceremony."

*Long ago, when snared like thee
By the shee, my harp and I
O'er them wove the slumber spell,
Warbling well its lullaby
Till with dreamy smiles they sank,
Rank on rank, before the strain'
And I rose from out the rath,
And found my path to earth again
MOR OF CLOYNE, by Alfred Perceval Graves*

Chapter Seven

"Joining ceremony? Hold on a second, Trigger. I'm not going to any joining ceremony. I'm taking a bath and going to sleep for a week. Then I'm going to eat my weight in peanut butter." What the hell was he talking about?

"You do indeed need rest and food but first we shall discuss our future."

"Hello! Are you deaf? Have you not heard a word I said? There isn't going to be an 'our' in the future."

"Oh, but there you are wrong, my love."

"*I am not your love!*" A fluttery feeling twisted in her stomach even as she said the words.

"Yes. You are. And even if I wished to give you more time to grow accustomed to the fact, we don't have it. You heard what Lartu said. If I don't take you for my mate you will be banished. And with Su'are on the loose that is tantamount to a death sentence."

Banished? In a world that she didn't know the first thing about. Where fairies flitted all over the place and people changed into animals at the drop of a hat. Cripes. "Isn't there some sort of engagement period? Some time for us to get to know each other before we're joined?" Somehow Kaleen didn't think there was a divorce court anywhere nearby.

"You will have a week to prepare for the ceremony but, my love, we already know each other. Your soul knows we belong together. Your heart knows you belong to me, even if your mind is not yet ready to admit it."

"Pretty damn sure of yourself, aren't you, Trigger?" She belonged to herself, not to any man. Or horse for that matter.

"I am sure of you. Your spirit cannot lie." His eyes burned into hers and tension came off him in waves. It was as if he thought he could force her to believe him by the strength of his will.

Kaleen took a step back. The determination on his face frightened her with its intensity. That it was directed at her was doubly scary. The heat from that searing blue gaze fired her blood and sent her pussy into spasms. How was she supposed to fight him and her body?

"I don't want to be tied with anyone for the rest of my life. I just want to be alone and paint."

"My love, you weren't meant to be alone. You have a passion inside of you that only I can tame. You belong with me."

Jo'naz stepped closer to her so she backed up a few more paces. He was so damn insistent that she was his long-lost mate. It was like arguing with a brick wall. A very sexy, muscular brick wall. In tight, soft pants that showed off every one of his attributes. And showed them off well.

"Ah, can I sleep on it?" she asked, stalling for time. She backed against a table and stopped. Trapped.

"I will no longer be confined to your dreams, Kaleen." Jo'naz lifted her hips onto the table and stepped between her legs.

He pulled her pelvis firmly against his. She felt his cock press against her through the soft fabric of his pants. Her dress hiked to the tops of her thighs and all that separated her core from that steely shaft was the thin barrier of his pants. A wave of longing washed through her, drenching her pussy in juices.

"Jo'naz, I don't think we should be doing this..." her words ended with a gasp as he tipped her face up and kissed her.

His lips grazed hers gently at first, teasing her with their nearness. When she didn't back away he pulled her closer, intensifying the kiss. Jo'naz nibbled on her lower lip, drawing it into his mouth and sucking on it. His tongue darted out and tangled with her more than eager one.

Heat bloomed in her chest and spread out to encompass every atom of her being. A tiny inferno started in her chest and burned through her entire body. Especially between her legs.

The fire grew hotter as Jo'naz stroked her rib cage through her dress. His fingers were so light and teasing she wanted to scream at him to hurry! God, how she ached for the feel of his bare hands on her breasts. They felt so full and heavy with want. Her nipples pebbled up and rubbed against her dress, the friction made her squirm with need. How much more could she take before she spontaneously combusted?

Her agony increased as his rock-hard legs rubbed against her much softer thighs. She could feel his cock so close to her waiting pussy but not nearly close enough. Damn it, she wanted him so badly it ached. One stroke. All it would take was one stroke of those calloused fingers and she'd be out of her misery.

Kaleen scooted closer and tried to rub herself against that deliciously huge cock that stood just out of reach but Jo'naz stopped her. One hand supported her while the other pushed her back onto the table. His mouth covered her pointed nipple and sucked it right through her dress. Kaleen arched her back, trying to get closer to his lips. Her hips bucked in frustration. Too many clothes! They were wearing too many clothes!

"Take off your pants!" she ordered, reaching for the tie that held them up.

"Not until you're my mate." Jo'naz stopped touching her and stepped away, leaving her cold and needy.

"What?!"

"Until I can have all of you, I won't settle for just your body. I want your heart, your soul, everything. Forever."

"Bite me. No one manipulates me like that. Do you hear me? No one." Kaleen hopped off the table and pushed her dress down over her legs. She stalked to the door, frustrated and mad as hell. He had no business working her up only to stop because she wouldn't marry him. She'd die before she let someone screw with her head again.

"One week, Kaleen. We will join in one week."

"Go to hell!" Fucking tease. She'd marry him when pigs sprouted wings and began to fly.

Shit, in this place that probably happened every night.

Kaleen pushed open the doors and stormed back towards the kitchen. Everywhere she went, people looked at her like she was a cross between the second coming of Christ and the carrier of some deadly disease.

Great, like it wasn't enough to be a freak in the human world, now she had to be a freak in the fairy world too. That was just fucking wonderful. She stalked her way into the kitchen, ignoring the stares directed at her.

"Can I get something to eat around here?" she snarled at the first hapless soul to get in her way.

"Yes, mistress. Right away."

"And I want some hot water for a bath. Please." She tried to soften her demand. It wasn't their fault she was horny and miserable. They didn't deserve to be on the receiving end of her anger.

"It's already in your room. Ma'ab said you'd be wanting a bath."

"Well, isn't she just the mind reader?" Okay, now she sounded bitchy even to herself. She took a deep calming breath. Then another. "Please tell her thank you. I'll be in my room. Could someone please bring a tray of whatever smells so good and whatever you have here that passes for wine?"

A little pink winged fairy bobbed her head and Kaleen took that for assent. She grabbed something that looked like a blue apple out of a bowl on the huge kitchen table and walked towards her room. Ryann was just pouring the last bucket of hot water into the tub as she walked in.

“Do you require my aid?” she asked, holding the bucket of water in front of her like a shield.

“No, thank you. Just keep that damn barbarian away from me.”

Ryann bobbed a curtsy and fled, her eyes wide with curiosity and fear. Great, now she had everyone afraid of her too. That was just wonderful. Kaleen whipped off her dress and climbed into the steaming tub. Grabbing the soap and the sponge, she scrubbed the paint off her hands.

She was acting like a brat. She knew it and didn't much like it either. Dropping the sponge, Kaleen sank lower in the tub. Just because things weren't going the way she wanted didn't mean she could take it out on people who couldn't fight back. It wasn't Ryann's fault her body and her brain were at odds.

Okay, time to sort through this whole mess. If she wasn't having the longest, weirdest dream ever then she had to accept that everything was real. If she accepted that this was actually happening to her, then she had to believe that she did have fairy blood and she did have magic.

Maybe if she looked at it like just another part of her instead of this big strange scary thing it would be easier to handle. Yeah, that was it. Some people had athletic ability, some people had musical ability. She knew she had artistic ability. This was just one more talent. She could choose to use it or not. Just like she could choose to paint or never pick up a paintbrush again.

That made sense. It was nothing more than an undiscovered talent that she'd only just found. Hell, Grandma Moses hadn't known she could paint until she was something like eighty years old.

Well, that was one mess sort of figured out. She was part fairy.

“Kaleen Maeve Griffin, the fairy,” she said, trying it on for size.

There, she'd said it and hadn't even busted out in a fit of giggles. She, Kaleen Griffin, had fairy blood and fairy magic zinging through her veins.

Wasn't that a kick in the teeth?

Now, all she needed to do was figure out what to do with this new talent. Oh, and how to get back home. And let's not forget deciding what the hell she was going to do with Stallion-boy. If she could get all that straightened out she'd be sitting pretty.

Ha!

A knock on the door interrupted her thoughts. “Who is it?”

“Trella. I've brought you your supper.”

“Okay, coming!” Kaleen climbed out of the tub and wrapped an absorbent sheet around her like a toga. Waddling over to the door, she opened it and stepped back so the adolescent fairy could come in.

“We didn't know what you liked to eat so we fixed you a plate with a little of everything on it.”

“Cool, thanks.” Kaleen looked at the platter and couldn’t figure out what the hell anything was. There were little piles of fruity-looking things but in no colors she’d ever seen before. Some mound of something that looked vaguely potato-like but it was purple. Who’d ever heard of purple potatoes before? “Ah, do you think you could tell me what some of this stuff is?”

“Sure!” Trella put the platter down on a stool and fluttered over to the bed. “The longer I stay here, the fewer dishes I have to do when I get back. I’ll tell you anything you want to know.”

Kaleen snickered, a girl after her own heart. “So, how come the daughter to the Queen of the Fairies is doing dishes and bringing surly guests their dinner?” she asked, crossing to a chair and pulling it up to the impromptu table.

“I went to one of the shifter gatherings without permission and almost got myself killed when Su’are attacked,” she said matter-of-factly.

“What?” Kaleen spewed the fiery drink she’d taken a sip of. “What do you mean you almost got killed when Su’are attacked?” She cautiously took another sip of the beverage. It was actually pretty good once she got past the initial scorch. It was also vaguely familiar.

“The shifters have these gatherings where the clans mix and mingle and sniff out mates. There’s dancing and drinking and music. They’re a lot more fun than the boring balls we have here. Anyway, Mother said I couldn’t go because I haven’t been initiated yet and she didn’t want me experimenting with any shifters before I had my flower broken—”

“Stop!” Kaleen held up her hand and stopped the flow of words pouring from the girl’s mouth. There was no way she could eat while the girl talked or she’d end up choking to death. “Okay, what’s this initiation and flower breaking you’re talking about?” It couldn’t be what she was thinking it was, could it?

Trella heaved a sigh and helped herself to what looked like a fluorescent green carrot. “Every fae maiden goes through the Rites of Initiation upon her thirtieth year. A great big, boring ball is held while the sacrificial virgin is danced and dined with all the available fae men sniffing after her. At the end of the night she picks one of the men and takes them to her bower and he teaches her about the art of love making.” She didn’t sound too enthusiastic at the idea.

“Holy shit! That kind of takes all the romance out of it, doesn’t it?”

“It’s not about romance, it’s about sex. I guess back when the fae lived on Shayla, the men and women were segregated so this was the only way for them to meet. I think they probably got married before they did it for the first time but no one expects that now. With a few exceptions, the only ones around here who mate for life are the shifters. The mages might too but I’ve never seen a female mage so I don’t know for sure.”

“Okay, I think I get it.” Not really, but she wanted to hear more about what happened when Su’are attacked the shifters. Was this the same night she dreamed

about? "So your mom didn't want you sleeping with any shifter before your big party. She said you couldn't go and you went anyway."

"Yeah. I told her I only wanted to hang out with my friend Leis'al but she wouldn't listen. I wasn't going to sleep with any of the shifters, I just wanted to look at them." A far-off dreamy expression crossed Trella's face and she blushed.

"Right. Okay, so you were at this gathering and then what?"

"Well, Leis'al, that's my best friend, she dragged me behind this tent where the elders were meeting with a group of mages that came down from the hills. See, this is big because the mages never leave their strongholds. So we were really curious to see what was going on. Well, Leis'al was anyway. I kind of wanted to watch the dancing. Her brother Don'al is a really good dancer and he's always been nice to me. In a little sister's friend sort of way." She wrinkled up her nose and grabbed something that looked vaguely like a carrot.

"So, what did you overhear when you were listening to the mages?" Trella might be close to thirty in fairy years but she babbled just like every other teenage girl Kaleen had ever met.

"Well, I couldn't hear anything but Leis'al is part wolf. She heard them say that this black cloud had wiped out Gastal and the mages were fleeing for their lives. They said Su'are was back and the only thing that could stop them was the Chosen One from the prophecy."

"Who is the Chosen One?" Kaleen asked, a cold knot forming in her stomach. She picked at the plate of food in front of her to cover her nervousness.

"I didn't have a chance to find out. I knew I had to tell my mother, even if it meant I'd be punished. I took off for Xodo and as I did...it happened." Her face paled and she looked away.

"What happened?" The knot in her gut doubled in size.

"This cloud thing came down and just snuffed out the fires. Everyone ran away but it just kept coming and coming. All the men tried to fight but there was nothing to fight. I could hear their swords hitting stone but I couldn't see anything. Finally, the elders called for a retreat and the clan ran for the woods. Something beat the cloud back but I don't know what. I brought the shifters to the clearing and got my mom."

"What happened to the men who tried to fight the darkness?"

"We don't know. The ones that were deepest into it never came back. We didn't find any bodies, nothing, they're just gone."

"What about the others?" Kaleen was afraid to ask but had to know.

"Ma'ab was able to heal most of their wounds. It was like the darkness burned their skin. Leis'al's arm is all scarred. And Don'al—" Trella's eyes filled with tears and she swallowed rapidly. "Don'al's beautiful face was burned all on one side and all the way down his chest."

"Oh my God! Is he okay?" How awful for one so young to be marred so badly.

"Physically he is. The men of the shifter clans think scars show how brave you are, like a badge of honor or something. But I can tell it still bothers him. He was the handsomest one of all and all the girls wanted to be his mate. Now they can't look at him without remembering what he was before he got burned."

"Does it bother you?"

"Are you kidding? He's still the best-looking thing on two legs. He makes the fae look like babies. But try to get him to believe that, ha! It's like talking to a stone wall."

"Must be part of their DNA," Kaleen muttered.

Trella shook off her sadness and focused on the plate of food. She obviously didn't want to talk about that night any more. "These are *lavirls*," she said, pointing to the purple potato things. "They're filling and taste best when you take them right out of the fire. These are *fenens*, you can eat them hot or cold." Those were the carrot-looking things. A pile of orange lettuce was called *kelta* and the blue apple things were *pomars*. There was nothing that resembled meat on the plate.

"So tell me something, Trella, how come you're not shaking in your shoes around me like every other person in this freaking tree?"

"What do you mean? Because you healed the palace? I don't know. I guess because I saw you when you first got here and saw how confused you were by everything. And after you've seen a wave of blackness swallow up a gathering, your magic emerging seems pretty normal in comparison." She helped herself to a *fenen* and munched.

"Yeah, I guess that's a tough act to follow."

"Do you have any other questions? If I stay here a little bit longer all the pots should be done."

Kaleen laughed out loud for the first time that day. "Sure, tell me about the joining ceremony of the shifters. What exactly does it entail?"

"Oh! That's right! Lartu was furious when she came out of the chamber today! She's been trying to get Jo'naz to sleep with her since his clan fled to the forest. She thought for sure he'd say he wouldn't join with you because he's been avoiding joining forever."

"So she wasn't telling the truth? I mean about the banishment part? It was just to try to trap Jo'naz?"

"Oh no, that's real. According to shifter law if someone joins with someone on the dream plane it means they're soul mates and have to go through the joining ceremony. I think it's to keep people from getting lost in the dream plane or something. Anyway, once the two souls find each other, the male half has to prove he's worthy of her by right of combat."

"Right of combat? What do you mean?"

"He has to fight all comers."

"Holy shit! Like fist fight or sword fight?" Cripes, and Jo'naz wanted to do this?

"Whatever the challenger wants. But don't worry. Jo'naz is the biggest and strongest of all the shifters. That's how he got to be alpha so quickly. Usually they're much older before they lead a clan."

Jesus. "What does the female half have to do?"

"I'm not real sure about that but I can ask Leis'al about it when I get unpunished. All I know is that the women of the clan take the female into a tent and there's lots of hot rocks and steam and *amoras* and everyone comes out looking all pink and rosy."

"What's *amoras*?"

"That drink," she said, pointing to the cup in Kaleen's hand. "Be careful, it's pretty potent stuff. Ma'ab said we should give you a glass to help you relax after everything that happened today. Usually she guards it like a dragon with its hoard." Trella broke into gales of laughter at that. "Maybe that is her hoard." She laughed even harder.

"Ah, what am I missing here? I'm not seeing the joke."

"Oh, that's right." Trella wiped at her eyes and took a deep breath. "You don't know. Ma'ab's other form is a dragon. She's the last one."

* * * * *

Jo'naz swung his sword at the hanging target over and over again. Dodging out of the way of its flailing wood arms, he hacked at the brightly painted target in time to his furiously beating heart. It was the third target he'd worked with. The other two lay in heaps on the ground beside the tree.

This one wasn't going to last much longer either.

"Do you really think exhausting yourself on practice dummies is going to help you defeat Su'are's minions?" Ma'ab handed him a cup of water and a cloth to dry the sweat off his face.

"No, but it will keep me from charging down the palace doors and knocking some sense into a stubborn female." He drove his sword into the rich loam and accepted the drink and the cloth with a nod of thanks.

"Oh, ho!" Ma'ab cackled in glee. "So this is what has your breeches in a knot. Kaleen isn't falling down at your feet like all those other empty-headed fillies. Tsk, tsk. You might actually have to work to get your soul mate. Poor boy."

"I am not opposed to working hard to get what I want. I just don't understand why she is so blind to what is right before her very eyes." He tossed the cloth to the ground and picked up his sword again. Thinking about Kaleen made his blood throb in his veins.

"Just because that is your vision doesn't mean it is hers."

Jo'naz grunted with effort as he struck the target with a two-handed blow. "How can they be different? Her soul drew me across the dream plane like a beacon and welcomed me with open arms. Now I finally have her in the flesh and she denies me!"

With a final blow the straw exploded from this target too and Jo'naz cut it down from the tree.

"Because she doesn't believe in the dream plane. To you, it's an extension of your own reality. To her it isn't real. For her it truly was a dream."

"But how could she not feel the connection? My heart throbs with it every time I am near her."

"I'm sure she feels it too, young stallion. But remember what you've learned from navigating the human dream plane. In their world feelings are considered a weakness. They don't trust their instincts; they believe only what they can see and touch."

"What will happen if she never believes? How can I lose her?" The thought of losing Kaleen after he'd only just found the other half of his heart sent stabs of pain shooting through his chest.

"I have faith in you. Hidden somewhere under that ego and bluster beats the heart of a courtier. Woo her, romance her. Instead of badgering her into feeling what you do, show her your charming side and draw her to you yet again."

"I have romanced her!" he protested.

"Seducing her is not romancing her. She needs to be gently persuaded, not hunted like a reluctant mare!" Ma'ab snorted, "Men! You're all the same. Seduce her mind, not her body!"

His body ached with the need to fill Kaleen's quim until he was spent. He didn't want to wait for her to see things his way. He wanted her body and soul *right now!*

"If she carries as much fire inside her heart as she does in her mouth, then she is worth fighting for. And she'll need all that fire to face what is ahead." Ma'ab's eyes carried a world of worry in their ancient depths.

Cold fear washed away his lustful thoughts like water on a smoldering ember. "The prophecy. You believe she is the Chosen One?"

Ma'ab nodded sagely. "Yes. The prophecy has been whispered about long before the mages came down from their hills. I recall hearing it when the fae were nothing more than a myth. She is indeed the Chosen One, sent to rid us of Su'are once and for all."

"But how? She's so frail. And she's only now learning of her powers. How can she, who doesn't believe in what is before her face, fight an enemy that cloaks himself in darkness and magic?"

"That I do not know. The future will reveal itself in its own way and in its own time. But that is the least of your worries. First, you must keep her from being banished to the barrens. Once she has joined with you fully and become your sworn mate her strength will be that much greater."

"She will have the backing of the clan, of all the clans. That is good." Jo'naz nodded. Kaleen would need his warriors to protect her in whatever battle was coming.

“She does not need the strength of arms. She needs the strength of the heart. When she joins with you, truly, she will have the one weapon Su’are can neither fight nor understand.”

“You talk in riddles, old dragon. What do you mean? If Kaleen is the Chosen One she will need an army at her back.”

“Kaleen is the Chosen One and an army will do her no good where she has to go. Now clean up, your courting begins in the morn. Take her to the plains and show her our ways. It’s time she escaped the stuffiness of the fae court.” Ma’ab turned and blended with the trees as she left. “And for the Tree’s sake, don’t mate with her until after the joining ceremony!”

“Easy for her to say,” he mumbled to himself, cleaning up the decimated targets and straw. “She hasn’t mated in a millennium.”

“I heard that!”

“I know! That’s why I said it out loud,” Jo’naz laughed. Ma’ab might be older than the hills but she was the wisest shifter of all the clans. And he would do well to heed her wisdom and court Kaleen slowly.

Now, if his body would just follow that advice.

*By the rushy-fringed bank,
Where grows the willow and the osier dank,
My sliding chariot stays,
Thick set with agate, and the azurn sheen
Of turkis blue, and em'rald green
That in the channel strays,
Whilst from off the waters fleet
Thus I set my printless feet
O'er the cowslip's velvet head,
That bends not as I tread,
Gentle swain at thy request
I am here.*

SABRINA FAIR, by John Milton

Chapter Eight

Never again was she drinking that damn shifter drink. Kaleen's head felt like a construction crew had started a demolition job in her brain. The light tapping at the door felt like a jackhammer pounding behind one eye.

"Go away!" she shouted, then winced. The sound reverberated off the walls and thrummed through her aching head.

"Come, mistress." Ryann ignored her order and pulled the sheet to the foot of the bed. Obviously she'd overcome her fears from yesterday.

In an annoyingly chipper voice, completely inappropriate for Kaleen's near-death state, she outlined the day's activities. "Queen Nialla wishes you to break your fast with her this morning. Then you have an appointment with her seamstress to get you properly attired for court. And later this afternoon you have a study session to prepare you for your joining ceremony."

"Bite me." Kaleen stuck her head under the pillow.

"I think the Ara'bini would rather do that," Ruza giggled from the doorway, bringing over something that smelled suspiciously like coffee.

"Ruza, if that's coffee you're carrying I'll love you forever."

"It is *ballarat*, a morning beverage. It is made from the beans of the *ballas* tree and —"

"Does it have caffeine? You know, a stimulant? A pick-me-up?" Kaleen clarified at the girl's blank look.

"Y-yes."

"Then give it to me." Kaleen held her spinning head in her hands and tried to right her world. She accepted the mug from Ruza and blew across the surface carefully. It was a rather pretty blue but other than that it looked and smelled like a mixture of chocolate and dark roast coffee. It tasted even better. "I think I might live after all. This is really good, thank you." Another two, three, five cups of this and she might actually appear human again.

Except she wasn't fully human anymore now, was she? Kaleen pushed the thought aside for another day. Someday far in the future. She'd never get a therapist to believe this one.

"So what was this you were yammering about? I'm having breakfast with the queen this morning?"

"Yes and we must hurry. You need to be properly dressed before you enter the hall. Ma'ab has a dress for you but you'll want to refresh yourself a bit first."

No kidding. Her mouth felt like something crawled inside and died. She stumbled her way into the bathroom and tried to pull her scattered wits together while she cleaned up. The *ballarat* was helping her hangover a great deal. If she could get some breakfast in her she'd be even better.

A knock on her door was quickly answered by one of the girls so Kaleen ignored it. She went back to brushing her teeth with the strange stick they'd given her for that purpose. It left her mouth feeling like she'd just gotten home from the dentist and she hadn't even used toothpaste. This place had some things to recommend it.

The outside door closed again so whoever knocked must have left. Probably Ma'ab with her clothes. Maybe this time she'd be given some underwear. Wearing skintight dresses without anything underneath was a little disconcerting. Did they even have underwear here?

She'd have to ask one of the giggle twins. Tossing the stick back into the basin, Kaleen gathered the sheet around her and waddled out of the bathroom.

"Hey, Ruza, do y'all wear underwear—" The words died in her throat as she spotted Jo'naz's hunky body sprawled across her bed. He looked quite comfortable with his hands folded behind his head and his legs crossed at the ankles.

"I dismissed your attendants. You won't be needing them today."

"Oh, ah, okay. Um, good morning." He was wearing those soft, tight pants again and a matching vest with no shirt underneath. His gorgeous chest and abdomen muscles rippled with every breath he took. Kaleen couldn't take her eyes off them. It didn't escape her that his cock bulged out from between his legs and he made no attempt to hide it. She was finding it damn hard to remember that she was mad at him.

He's controlling and a tease! Her brain tried to remind her but her body couldn't care less. Seeing him lying there all sprawled out like an all-you-can-eat buffet made her mouth water for just a nibble or two. Or eight.

"Good morn, my love. You look beautiful as always." His eyes raked over her frame and sent her pulse skittering.

“Riiight,” she snorted. That was the same thing he’d said to Nialla at the clearing. Hell, she knew she looked like microwaved death but if he wanted to flatter her she wasn’t going to stop him. “So, what’s going on? Why did you send the giggle twins out?” Not that it was a problem. If they were gone it gave her a little more time to pull herself together before she had to face all those people again.

“I thought perhaps you’d enjoy a chance to get out of the palace? Maybe see some more of the forest and the plains where my people are camped. I need to check on them and I’d enjoy the company.”

A chance to get out of the palace? Away from all the curious eyes and rules? Hell yeah! But with him? Kaleen weighed her options. On the one hand she didn’t trust Jo’naz not to try to persuade her to his way of thinking. On the other hand, she really wanted to get out of the palace for a while. Being around all these people made her feel claustrophobic.

Jo’naz or the court.

The thought of all those eyes staring at her again made up her mind.

“Um, sure. That would be great. I just need to find something to wear.” Crap. That could prove difficult. All she had was the long dress from yesterday and there was no way she’d be able to traipse through the woods in that.

“I took the liberty of asking Ma’ab for some appropriate clothing.” He pointed to the foot of the bed where a pair of pants similar to his own lay. A matching vest and some soft knee-high boots completed the outfit. The ensemble didn’t include a shirt, never mind underwear.

“Isn’t there something missing here?” Like half the outfit.

“No, this is shifter garb. We don’t wear the fancy clothes of court. When around camp many of our women wear dresses but for riding breeches are more practical.”

“I meant a shirt.” That vest would barely cover her breasts, never mind offer any support if they were riding around. She’d be bouncing all over the place!

“The vest is sufficient for this warm weather. Come, let us hurry before someone finds something else for you to do.”

Damn. She didn’t want to bounce around with Jo’naz staring at her. But she really didn’t want to get stuck in the palace. Screw it. She’d go buck naked if it meant getting out of here for a while. “Give me five minutes to get dressed and we can leave.” She grabbed the clothes off the bed and scurried to the bathroom to change. If she could live in a nudist colony with wrinkly old men, she could go commando with Jo’naz.

The pants slipped on and clung to her hips like a second skin. They tied at the top instead of having a zipper or a snap. The vest did indeed cover her breasts and there was a little fastening to keep it closed, thank God! It wouldn’t do much against a stiff breeze but at least she’d be covered.

The knee-high boots fit like a glove and were just as soft and comfortable as a pair of slippers. Kaleen laced them up quickly and hurried back to the bedroom. Jo’naz

stood at the door to the balcony and the sunlight picked up golden highlights in his long hair. Her heart flipped over in her chest at the sight. He was absolutely breathtaking and for some reason he wanted her.

There had to be a catch.

"I'm all set. Do you have anything I can use to hold my hair up? It's driving me crazy." She usually wore it in a clip but hadn't seen anything like that at the palace so far.

"Here, take this. Although I'd love to see your beautiful raven tresses flowing in the wind." He handed her a length of leather similar to what she used to lace up her boots.

"Yeah, well, you're not the one who has to comb out the tangles from all that flowing." Kaleen took the string and their fingers brushed innocently. The shock that tiny bit of contact sent through her system was anything but innocent. It felt like she stuck her finger in a light socket, except instead of electrocuting her it sent a pulse of electricity straight to her core.

Jo'naz's nostrils flared and his pupils dilated. She knew he could smell the juice flooding her pussy. He lifted his hand to touch her but dropped it back down to his side and stepped back.

Kaleen didn't know whether to be disappointed or grateful. At least he wasn't trying to manipulate her through sex again.

"Come, we'll leave from your balcony." He turned and opened the doors that lead outside.

"Don't we have to tell someone? How are we going to get across the moat?" She followed him, still pulsing from his slight touch. Her hands shook as she tied her hair back.

"We'll fly, of course." And with that he blurred and shifted until the gleaming white, winged horse stood in front of her.

"Holy shit! When you said riding, I didn't think you meant *riding*."

"Hop aboard, my love. I hear footsteps in the hallway."

"You don't have to tell me twice." Now that she had the chance for a day of freedom, she wasn't going to give it up. Dragging a stool over, she climbed up and heaved herself over Jo'naz's flanks. "I'm up. Not exactly gracefully but I'm onboard."

"Hold on!"

Kaleen gripped his flowing mane as Jo'naz backed up slightly then sprang forward. The ripple of power burst from his strong legs and shimmered straight through her. The crack of his wings spreading out echoed against the tree and the birds and other critters squeaked and squawked in agitation.

Higher and higher they flew, until Kaleen could see the entire Flower Palace from above. It glittered and sparkled with energy. All the dead spots she'd seen her first night there were gone, replaced by new growth that glowed with life. It still boggled

her mind that she was responsible for healing the tree just by painting but the proof was right in front of her face.

As they flew away, Kaleen's clit rubbed against his back, sending bolts of heat to her pussy. Sitting on a horse while not wearing underwear brought new meaning to the phrase "riding bareback". The friction of her nipples brushing against the vest shot sparks to her already needy pussy. Maybe if she rubbed a little harder she'd come and end this torture!

Just as she was sure one more powerful upthrust would send her over the edge, Jo'naz banked left. They headed across the moat with its tiny whitecaps and into the trees of the forest. He landed with a gentle bump and whinnied in glee. The bastard must know he had her on the razor edge of orgasm.

"I always enjoy a flight over the palace. It sets those stuffy fae all aflutter," he laughed, then added, "present company excluded."

Maybe he didn't realize that she was so close to exploding that she was ready to kill him. "Thanks. I'm sure the Circle would love to know that you enjoy pulling their tail feathers. Err, whatever." Back feathers? Their wings didn't really look feathery. She'd have to examine them a little more closely next time. *Think about the stuffy, pinched-faced fairies instead of how badly you want to attack Jo'naz and screw his brains out.*

Jo'naz, oblivious to her dilemma, knelt down so she could get off his back then shimmered back into a man. Cripes! It was enough to make her feel trapped in an episode of *The Twilight Zone*.

"The Circle abides my presence in the palace only because my clan is on their border."

"What do you mean?" Kaleen forced herself to stop staring at the thin line of blond hair that trailed down Jo'naz's abs into his pants and tried to pay attention to what he was saying. His clothes must change with him. She'd have to ask Ma'ab about that.

"Except for Council meetings, the fae and the shifters rarely interacted. Until Su'are returned, the fae stuck close to their trees and the palace. The shifters roamed the plains and the valleys. The mages lived in the hills. There is an unspoken truce among us that keeps the peace and allows us all to live in harmony with our beliefs and traditions. The younglings in both groups mix and mingle before settling down with mates of their own kind but that is all."

"Really? And they never want to settle down in a mixed marriage?" Wouldn't that throw those stuffed shirts in the Circle for a loop!

"The fae do not mate for life so it's a moot point. Shifters are encouraged to experiment before they settle down with the other half of their soul. As long as the fae has been initiated the elders turn a blind eye to the wanderings of the young. It is assumed that when one's mate is found he or she will settle down."

"I see. So, how much experimenting have you done?" She could have bitten her tongue off for saying that out loud. She sounded like a jealous lover! "Never mind. Don't answer that. It was uncalled for." She had no reason to get upset at the thought of

him sleeping with other women. It wasn't like she was a virgin or anything. Still, the thought of him having sex with another woman gave her a sick feeling in her gut.

"My sweet Kaleen, if you have questions about my past you are more than welcome to ask. I have no secrets from you."

Riiiiight.

"Really, it's none of my business. Just forget I asked." God, how embarrassing! She was acting like a jealous toddler. She'd refused to join with him but the thought of him having sex with another woman made her mad as hell. What was wrong with her?

Jo'naz gave her a supremely sexy grin. "I think you might care for me just a little bit more than you're saying." He took her hand in his and brought it to his lips for a hot, sweet kiss. "Much of what is said about me is speculation and wishful thinking. If I truly slept with as many women as is whispered about, I'd have spent the last year doing nothing but hopping from bed to bed. I won't say I've been celibate but I've been discreet." He entwined his fingers with hers and pulled her close to his side.

"Were you discreet with the queen?" Argh! Again, she wished she'd thought before she opened her mouth. What demon had gotten control of her tongue?

"I have only kissed the queen on her hand. I have too much respect for her mate to even suggest more than friendship with her."

"Her mate? I thought the fae didn't marry?" The queen was married? Where was the king then? How come she hadn't met him?

"They don't generally but the queen found her heart-mate in the Captain of the Guard and they've been together for centuries."

"But why wasn't he at the Circle thing? And how come I never met him if he's the king?"

"Because he's not the king. The hierarchy of the fae runs through the female side. There are many more female fae than male, part of the reason they don't mate for life."

"I could see where that would be a problem." Women were very competitive. If there weren't enough men to go around it could get very ugly if one was expected to be monogamous. "Man, let me tell you, the men of my world would be in heaven in such a society."

"If all the females in the human world are as lovely as you, I can't see as they would ever want for beauty." He kissed the inside of her wrist and a shot of pure lust slammed into her.

"Oh my." She could feel her resistance to him dwindle by the second. A part of her—the part between her legs—really wanted to see if he was as good a lover in real life as he was in her dreams.

Jo'naz was having a very hard time keeping his desires under control. Kaleen's scent drifted to him and he knew she wanted him. It was difficult to remember why he couldn't take her now when she looked at him like she wanted to eat him whole.

And he'd be more than happy to let her if he didn't think she'd run away afterwards.

The feel of her hot quim pressed against him as he flew all but made him rear back in agony. And the sight of her bountiful breasts swaying under the vest had him mesmerized. His cock remembered too well the feel of her body and wanted it again. Jo'naz swallowed hard and fought to regain his composure.

Be charming, woo her, romance her. He had to look at the big picture. He didn't just want a quick encounter against a tree. He wanted her as his mate for life. If he gave into the lust that drove him now, she'd never agree to the joining ceremony. The thought of losing her to death by banishment was enough to cool his lust.

Almost.

"We are nearly at the end of the path. From there we shall go through the woods until we get to the edges where my clan is camped."

"I thought you lived on the plains?"

"Until Su'are attacked us, we did. He cannot penetrate the forest's protections so my band has made their home in the very edges. They hunt in the plains during the daylight hours then hide in the woods come nightfall."

"Does Su'are only attack at night?"

"So far. But the mages fear he grows stronger daily."

"You know, I never saw what happened after the darkness came."

Revulsion and sadness washed over him. "You will."

* * * * *

Kaleen followed Jo'naz's lead as they walked through the deep forest. Occasionally she'd see the bright flash of a bird or some other animal but for the most part it was only the two of them. She wasn't quite sure what game he was playing with her by taking her on this little jaunt through the woods. If he wanted to seduce her without interruption, he'd had plenty of chances. She was so hot for him all he'd have to do is crook his little finger and she'd jump his bones.

Hell, when he'd kissed her hand she'd been about ready to melt into a puddle at his feet. But instead of slamming her against a tree and fucking her brains out, he'd only held her hand and taken her through the woods.

Held her hand! Her hormones were doing the cha-cha and he'd suddenly become a gentleman. She should be grateful he wasn't pushing her but her body craved his touch.

It wasn't until he started talking about Su'are that she'd been able to calm her raging lust. The memory of that black cloud swallowing up the fires of the gathering chilled her to the core, effectively killing any thoughts of romance. She was a little nervous to see what was left after the cloud went away.

What if it didn't? What if the blackness just stayed there night and day? A shiver slithered down her spine.

"Are you cold? We're almost to the edge now, it will be warmer in the open."

"I'm fine." Kaleen tried to hide her discomfort. She searched through the thinning trees for any signs of the plains he talked about. All she could see was more woods. How the hell did he know they were getting to the end? "Shouldn't you have sentries or something here? I mean I know you said the forest was protected, but still."

Jo'naz let out a great booming laugh. "My love, we've been under the eyes of my clan since we left the island of the Flower Palace."

"What? Where?" Kaleen craned her neck around to see what he was talking about. She hadn't seen or felt any watchers. But that would explain why he hadn't done more than kiss her hand. Good thing she hadn't tried to slam him against a tree and have her way with him.

"If you'd have seen them they wouldn't have been doing their jobs." Jo'naz stopped in a small clearing and let out a piercing whistle.

A badger, a raccoon, three large hawks and a deer moved into the clearing at his call. The animals bowed down before him then melted back into the woods. They looked like any other forest creatures.

"Wait a minute. You're telling me that all the animals around here are shifters? And that they're part of your clan? I thought you were a horse, err, winged horse. Wouldn't the rest of the clan be the same?"

"Not all the animals, no. And at one time clans kept only to the same species but our numbers began to drop off. Females had stillborns when they could get pregnant. The few babies that did live were sickly. The elders feared bad blood and so declared that we mix the clans. Originally they kept similar species together but as the young grew used to the idea of mating with other shifters, the clans got more and more varied. In my lifetime the clans have always been mixed."

A shrinking gene pool. She could see where that would be a problem.

"Once the clans mixed, the females produced healthy offspring and the clans grew strong again."

"Interesting. But wait a minute. How does that work, mating wise? I mean horses can't mate with wolves, can they?"

"Normally, no but the father's seed breeds true."

"So you're telling me, if a cat and a wolf mate, the cat could give birth to a wolf? Man, talk about your fool-proof paternity tests!"

"We mate as humans and the baby is born human. It isn't until they are six months old that their other form comes forth," he said with an amused smile.

"Well that makes things a little easier, I guess." What would happen if she had Jo'naz's baby? How would she feel about her son or daughter changing into a horse at six months old?

What was she thinking? Why the hell was she even thinking about having a child with Jo'naz? She was not going to get married and settle down like a good little wifey and be ordered about by her husband. She'd find a way to get out of this "mate or banishment" fix he'd gotten her into. There had to be a loophole somewhere.

The dappled light grew stronger and stronger as they made their way out of the woods. When they broke through the last of the scraggly brush, Kaleen got a view of waves and waves of yellow grass. It easily stood up to her chest and rustled in the breeze like an ocean of golden hues.

"Come. The hunting party has just returned and you can have a real meal, finally."

What did he mean by that? She thought about it a bit as Jo'naz led her towards an area of tamped-down grass. They were still a ways away but she could see a small controlled fire crackled inside a circle of large rocks. The carcass of an animal roasted on a spit over top of it.

Children played a game that involved a lot of running and giggling under the watchful eyes of adolescent girls. Gangly boys practiced fighting with sticks while older men looked on and shouted encouragement. Several women dressed in garb similar to Kaleen's worked at various tasks in the clearing. Older women wore roughly woven dresses and stirred pots of what looked like stew over another fire.

It seemed very homey and bucolic but as Kaleen looked closer she could see the wary eyes always watching the horizon. Several real weapons lay close at hand and all the women had knives strapped to their legs or arms. And in some cases both. The children might be running around but at a sharp word from one of the girls they quickly clustered around her.

Their actions reminded her of life in the poorest parts of the inner city. Everyone tried to carry on as normally as possible but no one relaxed for fear they'd get attacked. Another shiver shook her body.

As Jo'naz stepped from behind the covering of the tall grasses, all activity stopped then shouts and laughter filled the air. The men came over and slapped him on the back, women teased him and stared at Kaleen with unabashed curiosity. Children peeked at her behind the safety of their mothers' legs.

Never comfortable being the center of attention, Kaleen tried to shrink down as small as possible. She'd have given anything to have a shirt on instead of just this skimpy vest. It didn't matter that most of the other women were dressed the same way. She felt awkward and uncomfortable underneath all these peering eyes.

"Ho, the traveler returns! Did you get sick of eating fruit and twigs?" said an older man. He laughed and clapped Jo'naz on the shoulder. He had iron gray hair and a scar that ran down one whole side of his face. Liberal laugh lines spread out from his eyes. His chest was well muscled, despite being covered in a pelt of gray hair.

"It has been so long since I've had meat I don't know if my teeth remember how to chew. How fares the hunt?"

The grizzled man shook his head. "We must roam far afield to get anything bigger than a scrawny rabbit. For leagues around the darkness, all is dead and the animals avoid it like fire. Even the bugs won't go there. But my son has brought us down a fine buck so we'll eat well today!"

"Well done, Ma'trk." Jo'naz nodded and put his arm around Kaleen. "Now let us speak of something happier. This is Kaleen, my intended mate and the other half of my soul."

She was going to kill him! He was trying to manipulate her again. By telling all these people she was his mate she'd look like the bad guy if they didn't go through with the joining. Arrogant bastard, she'd get him for this later. "Nothing's been decided yet, Trigger. Don't count your chickens before they hatch," she said just loud enough for him to hear.

Apparently she hadn't taken into consideration the supersensitive hearing of the shifters, because the entire gathering froze then broke out in gales of laughter.

"Oh, ho! No weak-hearted fae is this one! Good. The mate of your heart should have a fire to match your own. Ensures the blood line."

"This is Ma'trk, my second in command and one of the finest swordsmen on the plains."

"He forgot to mention I taught him all I know about women," Ma'trk said, taking her hand from Jo'naz and kissing her knuckles.

"Bet that was a quick lesson," Kaleen said, freeing her hand and giving it back to Jo'naz. It was one thing to argue with Jo'naz about being his mate. It was another to let a guy try to charm her right in front of him.

More laughter rang through the camp. A large woman pushed her way into the circle, wiping her eyes with broad, work-roughened hands. "You'll do, young fae, you'll do. I am Lu'nal, this old wolf's mate. Come, I will get you something to eat and get you away from all the male chest thumping."

Kaleen followed Lu'nal without a backward look for the men. She wasn't sure if being around a group of women was any better but at least they weren't staring at her breasts.

"Ma'ab tells us you're part human. This must be quite an adjustment for you." Lu'nal handed her a wooden bowl filled with a savory stew. Unidentified chunks of meat bobbed in a brown sauce with various vegetables.

Even though she wasn't much of a meat eater it smelled so good Kaleen was willing to try it. Without a constant supply of peanut butter her protein intake was next to nothing. Blowing over a spoonful to cool it, she took a cautious taste.

"This is delicious!" Suddenly ravenous, Kaleen dug into the hearty meal.

"Thank you. My daughter Leis'al made it this morning."

Leis'al, Leis'al? That name sounded familiar for some reason. "Oh! Is this the same Leis'al that's friends with Trella at the palace?"

"You know Trella? How is she? Did she get in trouble? Why hasn't she come to visit?" A young girl, probably around sixteen Earth years or so, popped out of nowhere and peppered her with questions. "Are you really from the human world? Did Jo'naz save you from Su'are? What was it like to travel through a gate?"

"Enough! Let her eat first before you interrogate her, Leis'al. Where are your manners?" Lu'nal planted her hands on her ample hips in exasperation.

"It's okay, I can handle it," Kaleen laughed. Guess it didn't matter what species they belonged to. Young women acted the same on any planet. "One at a time and I'll see what I can tell you."

"Yes, mistress." Leis'al bowed her head in submission but Kaleen saw her eyes burning with curiosity from under her dark hair.

"First, yes, I know Trella. She told me all about the night she snuck out to your gathering. She got busted and is on dish duty until her mother says otherwise. She's stuck washing pots and pans and isn't happy about it at all. That's probably why she hasn't come visiting. If I get a chance, I'll pass on a message for you."

"Oh, thank you! I was supposed to be invited to her initiation ceremony, but now I'm not sure if I can still go." She eyed her mother apprehensively.

"If it is still permissible by the queen then it is okay with me. But you will not be dallying with any of the broken-hearted fae. You have time yet before your own ceremony and no daughter of mine will be shamed."

"Yes, ma'am."

Wow, the shifters had their own little ceremony for losing one's virginity. Probably beat the hell out of losing it in the back seat of Sammy Holdman's old clunker, worrying about getting caught by the cops.

"And yes, I'm really a human and until recently had no idea fairies or shifters even existed. I'm still trying to figure all this stuff out so I don't have a lot of answers. As for going through the gate," she shivered. "That's not something I'd like to do again any time soon."

"If Jo'naz has his way you won't have to." Lu'nal took Kaleen's empty bowl and gave her a mug of water.

"What do you mean?" Kaleen almost choked on her sip of water.

"It's obvious Jo'naz has chosen you to be his mate. Once you are joined you won't have to go back through the gate. You'll stay here and lead by his side."

"Ah, wait a minute. Are you saying if I do go through with this joining ceremony, I'll be here for the rest of my life?"

"Oh yes. If you were to go back to the human world without Jo'naz it would tear him in two. He'd either have to give up the clan and follow you or choose the clan and live as half a man forever."

Shit, shit, shit. "And what if we don't go through with the ceremony?"

Shocked gasps echoed from the women gathered around the fire. "If you do not join you will be banished to the barrens and dead in less than a moon."

*Little thoughtful creatures sit
On the grassy coasts of it;
Little things with lovely eyes
See me sailing with surprise.
Some are clad in armor green –
(These have sure to battle been!) –
Some are pied with ev'ry hue,
Black and crimson, gold and blue;
Some have wings and swift are gone;
But they all look kindly on.
THE LITTLE LAND, by Robert Louis Stevenson*

Chapter Nine

Kaleen's head reeled with the implications of what Lu'nal said. Her brain spun like a hamster on a wheel as she turned it over and over, trying to find some way out of the predicament she was in. Obviously there wasn't a loophole for her to escape through.

She had two choices. Either join with Jo'naz and stay in this oddball world for the rest of her life or not join with him and be killed. They didn't call it being killed but it amounted to the same thing.

She really wasn't equipped to make decisions of this magnitude.

God, she really didn't want to die. But was it fair to marry Jo'naz if she didn't feel the same way he did? Hell, she didn't even know *how* she felt. Everything had happened so fast she hadn't had a chance to figure out what was going on with her emotions. All she knew was that somehow his fate and the fate of his clan had gotten tangled up with hers and she had no idea what to do about it.

Good Lord, she had no clue how to make decisions like this! She'd never had to worry about anyone but herself. How could she balance the needs of an entire clan of people against her bone-deep fear of commitment? What if she chose wrong? What if Jo'naz made a mistake and they weren't meant to be together? Then they'd be stuck together because shifters mated for life—and they lived a damn long time—and then he'd hate her. For eons.

The need to run and hide churned inside her. It was too much! She needed to think or not think! Whatever, she just needed to get away from all these people.

As the sun headed for the horizon the shifters extinguished the fire and began packing up their camp. Everyone had a job to do. Even the children scurried around to help clean up. This was her chance. While Jo'naz was busy packing up the practice dummies Kaleen slipped into the tall grass at the edge of the trees.

When no shout rang out announcing her disappearance she moved deeper into the woods, praying the noise of the workers would mask her escape. She wouldn't be gone for long, she just needed some time and space.

Fuck that, she needed to run!

"Your little sparrow is fleeing the nest, Jo." Ma'trk nudged him in the ribs.

Jo'naz looked up in time to see Kaleen's pale skin flashing between the trees as she ran deeper into the woods.

"Are the scouts out?"

"Of course," Ma'trk snorted, looking deeply offended.

"Call them in. I'll go after her and take her back to the palace. Let's move our camp a little deeper into the woods tonight too."

"Want to be closer to your little bird, heh." Ma'trk nudged him again.

"Let's just say I sense danger afoot and have no wish to be stretched thin trying to protect my mate and my clan."

"I hope you don't have to make the decision between the two."

Jo'naz looked sharply at the old wolf but Ma'trk bent down and picked up his load, avoiding eye contact.

There was no use denying the truth of Ma'trk's words. As much as Jo'naz wanted to pretend he'd always put his clan first, he didn't know if he could give up Kaleen. He knew for sure he couldn't let her die in the barrens.

If Kaleen wouldn't agree to join with him, he would take her back to the human world. It would kill him to watch her die, just as surely as if he was staked out in her stead. He had hoped taking her to visit his people would ease some of her fears. There were several mated couples at the camp. Lu'nal and Ma'trk had been mated for over a hundred years. He'd thought Kaleen would see that it was a good thing.

Instead, she ran away.

He would do anything to ease her fears. But first, he had to find her.

Her trail was easy to follow. Broken twigs and imprints in the loam stood out like a beacon to his sight. As he got nearer, he heard Ma'trk call off the scouts and give them some privacy. The Xodo forest was safe enough for them to be unguarded, even at night.

Kaleen's voice came to him long before he spotted her sitting on the bank of a stream. She threw rocks at a patch of fading sunlight on the water, muttering out loud. Walking softly, he got close enough to hear what she said without alerting her to his presence.

"Why me? Who the hell thought it was a good idea to pair me, a walking freaking dysfunction, with someone like Jo'naz? Fate has a sick sense of humor. I don't even

know if my parents were ever legally married and everyone expects me to just blindly go along with this whole joining thing like it's an everyday occurrence!"

Another rock splashed into the stream. Jo'naz felt the underlying fear in Kaleen's words ripple out like the circles from the stone.

"And this whole 'Chosen One' bullshit. Whose idea was that?" Three more rocks flew into the stream in rapid succession. "Did anyone ask me what I want? What I think? Noooo."

"What do you want, Kaleen?" Jo'naz stepped out from his hiding spot and moved next to her.

She looked up with wide, startled eyes but relaxed when she saw him. "That didn't take long. What? Is that squirrel over there one of your spies?"

"No, that is just what it seems. I called the scouts in. It appeared you needed some privacy." Although it pained him, he forced the words out of his mouth. "If you wish, I will leave you in peace." His heart screamed at him to stay and convince her of her place in his heart. One touch, that is all it would take and she'd be his. Surely she would agree to join with him then!

"You might as well stay. I'm not getting anything figured out anyway." She heaved a heavy sigh and tossed a handful of pebbles into the stream.

"Do you have questions I could answer?"

She turned to him, her eyes full of confusion and maybe some fear too. "Why me? How did you find me out of all the souls out there? I'm not a good person. I'm selfish and absorbed with my art. I have squat to fall back on when it comes to relationships. I can't even keep a fish alive, forget help you lead a clan. How on God's green Earth did you pick me?"

His heart ached for the pain in her words. She thought so little of herself. Someone had hurt her in the past. Hurt her so much all she could see was the bad. Jo'naz held her hand in his but refrained from bringing it to his mouth like he wanted to.

"Why you?" He thought carefully. He was in dangerous waters and his words could do irreparable damage if he wasn't prudent. "Since attaining leadership the elders have pushed me to find a mate. Every female on the plains was paraded in front of me to sample in the hopes maybe I'd find one to my liking."

"Oh, poor baby. Sounds like every man's dream," she scoffed, but didn't pull away.

"I'll admit, at first I sampled quite freely. I enjoyed the pleasures of the flesh and went away from the encounters without another thought. But after a while the appeal dimmed. Something was missing and soon even the most beautiful women couldn't interest me." He pulled her closer to him until her head lay across his thighs and he could run his fingers over her face.

"I began to scour the dream plane, searching for what was missing. At first I stayed within the boundaries of my world but soon I realized the other half of my soul wasn't here. I despaired of ever finding the one that would complete me. Then one night a

voice called to me. I followed its song until I entered the human world. There I found a woman so full of love to give, it exploded through her magic. Her soul was laid open for me to see and I couldn't help but get caught in its spell. Even though it meant crossing the planes, I had to be with her. For there was someone with fire and passion and so beautiful a heart but no one to give it to. I knew that I would move the sun and the moon to be the one to earn her love."

Tears seeped from her eyes and rolled down her face into her hair. "But how? How could you see that in me? I don't see that in me."

He ignored her denials and continued on, stroking away her tears. "I began watching her all the time, even when she wasn't dreaming. I explored her past, wanting to find out more about her. The more I saw, the more I knew she was for me. When she responded to me in ways I could never dream, I was caught fast. I knew, with every fiber of my being, that I would give up everything to be with her. In Zandermer or in her world."

Her frame shook with sobs and she turned her face into his leg. "You can't leave your clan. They need you. The whole freaking world needs you to help save them from Su'are," she hiccupped.

"Then I shall wait until Su'are is destroyed before stepping down as leader of the clan. But I will follow you to the ends of the world. Where you go, I go." He prayed she wouldn't make him choose between her and his clan. But if that's what it took then he would choose her. "If you decide not to join with me I'll return you to your world instead of seeing you banished. I cannot go against the rules of the shifters."

"You-you would do that? For me?" Her eyes were glistening violet pools.

"Without thinking twice. My life is yours."

Kaleen clenched her hands tightly together. How could he just lay himself out there for her to hurt like that? He might as well have handed her his heart and said, "Go ahead, throw it on the ground and stomp it into pieces if you want."

He held nothing back from her. No secret agendas, no bullshit, nothing. All the cards were on the table and it was her turn to ante up or fold.

And it scared her shitless.

She closed her eyes to escape his soul-filled gaze. What did she want? Deep down inside her, where her darkest fears hid and all her insecurities gathered and waited for their turn to spring on her, what did she want?

Kaleen fought to ignore the whispers that warned her to protect herself. The malicious voices from her past that stole her self-confidence and told her she didn't deserve to get what she wanted. She dug down to the tiny, protected core of her heart and searched it for what she truly wanted for herself.

When she stripped away all her defense mechanisms, all the walls she'd built up over the years to protect herself from hurt and disappointment, it became crystal clear.

All she wanted was someone to love her just as much as she loved him.

It's what she'd always wanted. Her parents had loved their ideals more than her. Richard had loved just about everything else more than her. For the first time in her life, someone loved her and she was dithering around about it because she was afraid.

Dear God, was she afraid. What if she screwed it up? What if he realized what a relationship loser she was and left her?

"I could never leave you. You *are* my heart. You fear what you do not understand. I have seen your past. You have never seen love, so you do not know it. I will take you back to your old life but I will never leave you. I cannot," he said softly, reading her mind.

Oh man, here he was doing everything not to push her, dropping the ball in her court and she was frozen in fear. It was very tempting to think about going back to her old life.

But was it really? After meeting Jo'naz in the flesh, could she go back to seeing him only in her dreams? Sure she could paint him but that wouldn't keep her warm at night.

And what about the fairies? Could she just turn her back on her newly awakened heritage? If she stayed here and faced her fears she could have a family with the fairies and the love of a good man.

And, God help her, someday she'd bear his children and have a family of her own.

Her stomach fluttered nervously and her breath caught in her throat as she opened her eyes to look at Jo'naz. She could do this. She could take what she wanted, what was offered and grab it with both hands. All it took was a little faith and trust. And damn it, if Jo'naz could offer both of those in spades, she could scrape up some too.

"Yes."

"Yes? You'll have to be more clear, my love. Forgive me for being an 'idiot man' but what part are you saying yes to?" His hands gripped her clenched ones tightly and his thigh muscles tensed under her cheek.

"Yes, I'll join with you. And yes, I'll stay here with you and help you fight Su'are and be part of your clan. If-if you still want me." It was that easy. As the words left her mouth, a feeling of rightness flowed through her. Like the last puzzle piece clicking into place she knew she'd made the right decision. She'd been his from the first dream. Saying the words out loud only finalized what her heart had known all along.

"Still want you? Woman! If I wanted you any more my shaft could pound tent stakes!"

Waves of heat poured off him, stoking fires inside her pussy that flared hotter than the sun. "I can think of something better for it to pound," she said slyly, turning her face to rub against his growing cock. All her pent-up desires flooded through her, driving her into a painfully engorged state. Her love needed an outlet and she couldn't think of a better one than joining her body with his. Her heart was already there.

"Not until the ceremony –"

“Jo’naz, that’s just a formality. In my heart we’re already joined.” Not counting on her words to convince him, she untied his laces with her teeth. He couldn’t deny her this. She had to show him how she felt. She’d explode from the force of her feelings if she didn’t.

His cock sprung out, hot and huge. It was exactly like she remembered it from her dreams and need slammed into her like a freight train. She didn’t want to hold anything back. She wanted him, all of him. At once if she possibly could.

“Just this once,” he said with a gasp as she stroked his cock.

Kaleen turned until she knelt between his legs and could get better access to his cock. She cupped his balls as she lowered her mouth over his rigid length. Humming in pleasure, she drew her mouth up to tease his pulsing tip. He tasted salty and so good.

The muscles of his torso rippled as he reached down to open her vest. He gently stroked her breasts and her pulse jumped at his touch. Fire ran from his fingers straight to her pussy, soaking through her pants in anticipation.

“I want to touch you, taste you, love you,” he murmured, pinching her nipples then rubbing them.

“Me too. To all the above.” She sucked him deeper into her mouth, relaxing her throat to get more of him inside. He was so big. Long and thick and pulsing with energy. Her pussy throbbed with envy, wanting him inside but she didn’t want to stop tasting him.

Jo’naz took the decision out of her hands, pulling her up over his chest and attacking her mouth. Their tongues dueled, twisting and thrusting in a mock battle that had no loser. He pushed the vest off her shoulders and tugged the pants down her thighs.

At the first touch of his finger on her clit, Kaleen’s body exploded. Spasms shook her to the core and her hips bucked against his torso.

“Jo’naz, I need you inside me,” she sobbed, still shuddering from her reaction.

“But I need to taste the sweetness of your cream first. It’s been too long.”

With inhuman speed, he lifted her higher until her legs straddled his face. His tongue speared her pussy lips and lapped the juices flowing there. Kaleen cried out at the renewed assault as he drew her clit into his mouth and sucked on it.

The fever built again, burning higher and higher inside her. An inferno of desire bubbled from her pussy upward and soon it was going to blow.

“Ah, my love. Come for me.” He drove two fingers inside her weeping core and rapidly licked her clit at the same time.

Kaleen’s scream of release echoed from the trees. Wave after wave of pleasure rolled over her, dragging her down into the whirlpool of sensation and still he licked her.

“No more! I can’t take any more! I want you inside me.”

“As you wish,” Jo’naz growled, rolling over and pulling her on top of him. He slid her hips down until the tip of his cock teased the opening of her pussy. A groan tore from his throat as he pushed himself in to the hilt.

Another orgasm tore through her with a vengeance. She rode his hips, grinding her clit against his body as his cock filled her to her very womb. Kaleen wanted to cry at the beauty and intensity of her feelings. It was as if she’d never made love before. Every sensation was so fresh and different. She felt like a part of the picture had always been missing until this point.

Jo’naz’s fingers clutched the cheeks of her butt and drove her harder and harder as his hips thrust his cock deeper inside her. She couldn’t tell where she left off and he began anymore. They were melded together in a fire of passion and love.

“Kaleen!” Jo’naz’s eyes burned into her own as he pushed them higher and higher into the stratosphere.

It was too much for her to take and hold anything back. Anything—everything she had was his, forever. “Jo’naz! I love you!” she screamed as his semen flooded her womb.

* * * * *

The air was crisp and cool as it blew across Kaleen’s face. Jo’naz was back in his horse form and they flew through the star-spattered night. Her body ached pleasantly as it rubbed against his back. A haze of sated lust cushioned her from the reality but the logical part of her mind fought to rip that comfort away.

Had she really told Jo’naz she loved him? A tingly shiver twisted in her stomach. Whether from fear or some other emotion she wasn’t exactly sure. Her palms felt sweaty and her breath was none to steady. This was some heavy shit and Kaleen didn’t know if she was equipped to handle it.

“*Are you sure you’re ready for this?*” Jo’naz asked.

Was she ready for any of this? Uh, that would be a resounding *No!* “I don’t have much of a choice.”

“*We don’t have to see the battle ground now, it can wait until morning. But in some ways that is worse. The dark of the night hides the devastation better than in the full light of the sun.*”

Oh, he meant to see the place where the darkness had come down from the hills. She’d been so lost in her jumbled emotions she’d forgotten where they were headed. “No, it’s fine. I want to know what we’re dealing with.” Okay, not really but she couldn’t hide her head in the sand about it either.

Kaleen clutched Jo’naz’s mane as he banked sharply and headed towards a bare patch in the plains.

“*We’ll be there shortly. Brace yourself.*”

Somehow she didn’t think he meant brace herself for the landing.

They drew closer and closer to the bare spot in the grass. For some reason that innocuous circle sent tremors of fear through her body. She wanted to hide her head in Jo'naz's mane and tell him to turn around and fly for the palace. Shivers of panic tried to fight their way through the tightness in her throat but Kaleen held them back. If she was going to be part of the fight against Su'are she needed to know what she was up against.

No matter how much she wanted to curl into the fetal position and cry like a baby.

The landscape began to look very familiar. Bits and pieces of her dream drifted back to her. This was the same place as in her dream!

"I keep telling you it wasn't really a dream."

"I hate it when you read my mind like that. You know something? Where I come from all the women talk about how they wish men could see what was going on inside their heads so that they wouldn't have to explain every little detail. Man, do they have it wrong!" Kaleen knew she sounded bitchy but she was scared to death and whenever she got scared she shot her mouth off.

"Do not shout if you do not wish me to listen," he said, the humor in his mental voice coming across loud and clear.

Kaleen said nothing and squashed her mental mumbling too, just in case.

They came closer to the circle. It got bigger and bigger with every wingbeat Jo'naz took.

"Are we going to land?" Kaleen asked with dread. She did *not* want to get any closer than she had to.

"No, if you touch any of the damaged area, it deadens the skin as if frozen by the coldest of ice."

"Gotcha. No touching of the black area." Great. She hated the cold anyway; she didn't need any other encouragement to stay away.

The light from the stars was plenty bright enough for Kaleen to make out the devastation wreaked by the wave of darkness that had descended upon the plains. Everything it touched was withered and black as if scorched. There were no bodies there, no evidence of a battle, just the deadened earth.

Another shiver of fear shook her body. "Trella told me that anyone who got touched by the blackness got burned but you said touching the dead areas freezes you. Why do you think that happens?"

"Trella talks too much. The warriors who fought against the darkness and lived did look burned, but the marks were from the cold."

"It sounds like freezer burn." Kaleen shuddered. For that to happen to a human it had to be really cold. She remembered seeing news footage from some people that had been rescued from an avalanche. Their fingers and toes and faces had been blackened as badly as a burn victim's. Just the thought of something that cold made her shiver. "What are those chunks of stone everywhere?"

The only things left in the area were clumps of stone all over the ground. There was a uniformity to them that made her think they weren't just random fieldstones.

"We are not sure. They are from no stone in this area, and the mages have been unable to identify it either. We cannot test it because it burns too badly. When we fought the darkness there were soldiers in there. Perhaps this is from their armor."

"If they are fighting in a freezing environment metal would probably get cold too fast. So stone armor makes sense in a heavy, clumsy sort of way."

"The mages have stones they use to enlarge their caverns. They gave some of those carving stones to the fae. The fae archers are going to use them for arrow tips in the hopes they can attack from a safe distance. But it is hard to aim at something you cannot see."

"Yeah, I could see where that could be a problem. What about you? What protection do you have?"

"My sword and my clan are all the protection I need."

"Forgive me if I don't share your confidence. Don't you think you could use some armor yourself?" Like a suit of it from head to toe that would keep him safe from freezing soldiers of death.

"Ah, my love, your worry for my safety warms my heart. With you waiting for me, nothing can stop me."

"Right. Have you ever heard of erring on the side of caution?" God, she hoped he wouldn't dive right in the next time there was an attack thinking her love was going to keep him alive. Love was all well and good but wouldn't keep him safe from stone-plated soldiers.

"Now I know you are surely of fae blood. All they do is talk, talk, talk and argue amongst themselves about the best way to proceed. Yet no one takes a step to do anything. They all caution waiting and seeing. Bah!"

"You ever hear the phrase 'look before you leap'? You might want to try it some time."

Jo'naz threw his head back and whinnied but before he could answer her a freezing blast of air blew over them, knocking him off kilter.

"Hold on! It's Su'are! I recognize that smell!"

Kaleen knew she'd never mistake the scent again either. The wind carried a rotting odor of decay. She clenched her legs around Jo'naz's frame and clung to his neck as tightly as she could. He thrust his powerful wings and fought to stay aloft as the wind tried to knock him down.

Invisible hands pulled at Kaleen's clothes, trying to rip her off his back, but she held on. Fear gave her strength even as it made her heart race and her breathing hitch.

"Don't let go!"

"I don't plan on it!" She battled an unseen enemy a hundred feet in the air. Letting go was the last thing on her mind.

A ferocious wind slammed them from the side, sending Jo'naz careening wildly in the air. Kaleen's stomach lurched as he lost altitude. Her body braced for impact with the ground but at the last second Jo'naz pulled up.

An inky black wave rolled over the ground, writhing and twisting like a million jet-black snakes. Kaleen couldn't see anything in the darkness but the sight of it made her nauseous all the same. The smell seemed to emanate from the center of the blackness.

She tried to look away, to close her eyes against the fear, but the darkness captured her gaze and wouldn't let go. Her hands loosened slightly on Jo'naz's mane. A strange lassitude drifted over her and her muscles relaxed against him. She sat up straight and breathed deeply of the frigid air. The smell choked her and the contents of her stomach tried to push out of her body.

With Herculean effort, she forced her head to turn away from the sight of all that roiling black below her. Kaleen stared at Jo'naz's glowing white mane and narrowed her focus to the gleam of his coat. The bile in her throat retreated and she pushed her face into Jo'naz's neck to breathe in his scent.

"If we can get to the woods we'll be safe."

But he wouldn't be able to fly in the forest. The trees were too close together. He'd have to land first. And if he landed, the darkness would have them for sure.

"How close can you get before you have to land?" she asked him

"I can get us to the edge of the woods. Once we are inside, the protections will keep Su'are out. I think."

"You think! What do you mean you think? This isn't something I want to play a guessing game with."

"Su'are has been unable to penetrate Xodo's protection so far. I only pray he hasn't found a way around those defenses."

"No kidding!"

Jo'naz said no more, just fought against the rancid wind buffeting them. For every two lengths he moved forward the wind pushed him back one. Kaleen could tell he was tiring. His chest worked like a bellow between her legs and flecks of foam dotted his coat. The forest seemed so far off. How could they ever make it?

"We'll get there, my love. Do not give up hope."

"Who's giving up? I'm not giving up hope!" In fact, she was praying to any deity who'd listen.

They fought for every inch they gained but slowly the woods got closer. The scent of pine crept towards them, a tiny ray of light against the overpowering darkness.

"Almost there! Just a little farther."

The wind attacked them from all sides now as if sensing their imminent escape. Dirt and rocks flew up and stung her face and arms as they approached the edge of the forest. Jo'naz angled downward and dove for the trees at an alarming rate of speed.

Kaleen clenched her eyes shut tight and prayed they wouldn't escape the wind only to wrap themselves around a tree.

They landed with a thud and thundered for the woods. Jo'naz stumbled a little on the uneven ground but kept moving. He didn't slow down even as they passed the first few scraggly trees.

"Slow down before you trip—" even as she said the words, Jo'naz's hoof struck something and he lurched to his knees.

Kaleen flew over his shoulders, heading straight for the trunk of a blackened tree.

"Kaleen!"

Jo'naz's shout echoed in her head but she couldn't answer him. She didn't have the time to even throw her arms up to protect herself from the impact of bone meeting tree.

But the crash never came.

A fetid wind surrounded her, stealing her oxygen. She blacked out with Jo'naz's angry whinny echoing in her ears.

*I was angry with my friend:
I told my wrath, my wrath did end.
I was angry with my foe:
I told it not, my wrath did grow.*

*And I watered it in fears,
Night & morning with my tears;
And I sunned it with smiles,
And with soft deceitful wiles.
A POISON TREE, by William Blake*

Chapter Ten

Kaleen woke up when her head bounced against something hard and painful. A little voice screamed at her to stay still and fake unconsciousness. Her arms were bound tightly behind her back. She'd lost all feeling in her toes so she had to believe her feet were tied up tightly too. Staying still looked like a good plan for now.

She had to assume Su'are's forces had captured her. Only why hadn't they just killed her outright? Where were they taking her?

Peeking through her lashes, she saw she was in some sort of wagon. The rough floor chafed her cheek and with every rut in the trail her head smacked against it again. No wonder she had a headache the size of Texas. She couldn't see much more than the sides of the wagon unless she sat up and that wasn't going to happen.

The rancid smell was all around her and she swallowed rapidly to keep from puking her brains out. Since she was tied up like a trussed pig she would only end up covering herself with vomit. That idea held absolutely no appeal.

A shiver racked her body. She was freezing! Her nose felt like it was going to fall off and the exposed skin of her arms and torso hurt from the cold. If this was Su'are's form of torture it was working well. Her body ached from the constant banging of the wagon and the frigid air sapped what energy she could muster. Good thing she didn't know any of Jo'naz's battle plans. At this rate she'd sing like a bird if they promised her a cup of tea and a pair of long johns.

A guttural shout rang out and the wagon slowed to a halt. Kaleen shut her eyes quickly and tried to force herself to breathe slowly and evenly, even though panic was making her breath hitch in her chest.

She needn't have bothered faking sleep. Rough hands as cold and hard as ice dragged her out of the wagon and threw her over a shoulder like a sack of potatoes.

Kaleen risked another peek through slit lids and saw she was draped over the back of a walking statue. A walking statue made by a clumsy two-year-old with an evil streak.

Turning her head slightly, she saw more walking statues marching in perfect formation and complete silence. The armor wasn't stone, the *army* was!

The stone soldiers were clunky and as heavy as boulders. Their footsteps thundered up the steep trail, making the ground shake under their feet. Kaleen couldn't see a single plant, animal or bug anywhere in sight. It was as if she were the last living thing.

A bolt of unadulterated fear shot through her body, draining her of any rational thought.

How could she fight against stone men when she was outnumbered so greatly? The urge to gibber in fear almost overpowered her but she fought against it. She didn't know how much these statues could reason or understand, and she didn't want to blow any advantage she could get.

However small and pathetic it might be.

The soldiers stopped at some unseen command and Kaleen waited to see what new nightmare was headed her way. Her stomach ached from being slung over a stone shoulder and the cold had seeped into her very bones. She was shivering so much now, she had no idea if it was from the cold or fear.

A rumble of thunder echoed through the hills and under the feet of the rock soldier that carried her. The sound of huge stones grinding against each other reminded her of fingernails on a chalkboard. She wanted to clamp her hands over her ears to block out the sound.

The stone soldiers moved forward and Kaleen craned her head to see where they were going. The air got even colder – if that was possible – as they walked into a rock passageway.

No longer bothering to pretend unconsciousness, Kaleen tried to get some clues to her surroundings. The walls didn't look chiseled out. They were smooth as glass with no marks on them at all. Almost as if the passageway had been blasted out in one fell swoop.

She didn't know all that much about magic but the force it must have taken to blow a tunnel through solid rock must have been incredible.

Shit.

A tremor of abject terror shook her body like a rag doll when the soldiers stopped as one. She couldn't see what was going on but just knew she wouldn't like it.

"At last. Welcome to my home, Miss Griffin. Or should I say, our home?" The voice had a sibilant hiss to it that made her think of a talking snake.

Kaleen remained silent. Truthfully, she couldn't have spoken if her life depended on it. Her captor heaved her off its shoulder and dropped her on the ground with all the care she'd have given to a bag of potting soil. The air whooshed out of her lungs and she struggled to breathe.

Just as she thought she'd regained some oxygen, she looked at the owner of the snake-like voice and lost her breath all over again.

Even an imagination as vivid as hers could never have conjured up a vision so horrible as the one that appeared before her. It was as if someone took a poll of everyone's worst nightmare and combined it to make one horrifying creature.

"Come now, don't you have something to say to the man who went to so much trouble to bring you here?"

No snappy comeback formed in her mind. No words could deal with the full range of her terror. His eyes were black as a bottomless pit and just as empty. They seemed to draw all the light from the room and trap it there. His skin was deathly pale and belonged on the underside of a fish more than on any human being.

But then again, he wasn't human, was he?

He was bald as a cue ball and had violent markings over his head. The tattoos were as black as his eyes and writhed and coiled in the dim light of the cavern. Kaleen shook as she got an even better look at his face. His cheeks were hallowed out like a cadaver's and his teeth had the same rotted look as one long dead.

Kaleen had never believed in zombies but she'd have sworn on a stack of Bibles that she was looking at one right now. Thank God the black robe he wore covered him from the neck down. She couldn't handle finding out what the rest of his body looked like.

"Still quiet? That isn't what I've come to expect from you, Kaleen. After all, you had no lack of words for that horse you rode on the dream plane. Am I not as deserving of your conversation?"

He wasn't even in the same universe as Jo'naz but Kaleen didn't think that was something she should be saying right about now. She cleared her throat and tried to find her voice. "You're Su'are, I take it?" Her voice was raspy and ended on a squeak. So much for bravado. It sounded like someone stepped on a squeaky toy.

"In this lifetime, yes I'm Su'are."

In this lifetime? What the hell was that supposed to mean? "What do you want with me? I don't know any of Jo'naz's plans or anything." God! Isn't that what every idiot female said in every cop movie she'd ever seen?

"You mistake my intentions, my dear. I have no wish to go to war with the shifters or their insipid allies."

He didn't? Funny, because that wasn't the impression she got.

"I intend to enslave them. And you're going to help me."

"Like hell," she whispered.

"What was that?" he asked in his hissing voice.

"Uh, I don't see how." She was such a coward.

"But you will." With a look from those soulless eyes, the ropes holding her hands and feet untied and dropped to the ground. "My minions will take you to a room and attire you properly. We shall discuss your future over dinner."

Before she could protest that she'd rather eat paint than have dinner with him, one of the rock soldiers hauled her off the floor and threw her back over his shoulder. The circulation returned to her fingers and toes with a vengeance, sending shooting pain through her extremities.

She wanted to protest her treatment but it was all she could do to keep from sobbing in pain. Her ribs ached from being tossed around and she was sure if Rocky set her down she'd fall over from the pain of standing on her throbbing feet. Since he wasn't slowing down any she didn't think it was going to be a problem.

Another rock door slid open with an earsplitting grind and Rocky threw her on a bed of straw. At least it wasn't the ground again. The stone soldier turned and left without a word.

"Thanks for the ride, buddy, but next time don't talk so much," she muttered, shaking her hands until the pins and needles sensation eased some. Her room held a dim globe of light that loomed overhead. On the floor next to the pile of straw lay a red robe with markings similar to the ones on Su'are's head. The thought of wearing anything that had even a remote resemblance to that bastard turned her stomach.

It was so cold in the room she could see her breath puff out in front of her. Her arms were covered in goose bumps and her teeth chattered. How long could she hold out before she did what he wanted?

Chills racked her frame. Her body's feeble attempt at warming itself was no match for the cold of the room. Kaleen stood and paced, hoping the movement would help her warm up. Wrapping her arms around her waist, she tried to control the shakes that threatened to rip her apart.

"Think warm thoughts." Warm thoughts, warm thoughts. Jo'naz's mouth on hers. His hands on her body. His hot damn body covering hers and keeping her from freezing her ass off!

Shit, it wasn't working. It was just too damn cold! Kaleen threw herself on the straw and sobbed. She was so cold!

Maybe if she burrowed under the straw it would act like an insulator? Isn't that what folks on those extreme survival shows did? Hell, she'd try just about anything if it meant she didn't have to wear that robe.

Kaleen looked at the robe again. It reminded her of snakes. Everything about him reminded her of snakes. A shiver of fear added to the ones from the cold and shook her already aching frame. She'd try the straw first.

Digging down with both hands, she ignored the pricks and jabs from the stiff straw and crawled into the little hole she'd made. Leaving space to breathe, Kaleen pulled the stuff all around her and over her head until just a tiny air hole remained. The sticks poked her and irritated her skin but it wasn't too uncomfortable.

She waited, hoping her body heat would kick in any time soon. Crap, this wasn't going to work. They'd find her body frozen like a damn Popsicle. *Think of Jo'naz, just think of Jo'naz.*

Turning her focus inward, Kaleen forced herself to block out all the aches and pains. She went into her zone and mentally painted Jo'naz in all his studly glory. Broad shoulders that tapered to a narrow waist and to-die-for abs. Huge thighs that rippled with muscles and felt like heaven between her own.

A tiny flicker of heat curled in her pussy, thawing her out the tiniest bit. She'd stopped shivering. Which meant she was either warming up or hitting hypothermia and approaching death. *Focus!* She had to get rid of negative thoughts!

Conjuring up the feel of Jo'naz's hands on her breasts warmed up her rigid nipples. More warmth flooded through her, along with a fresh supply of cum. Drowsiness settled over her, dulling her focus.

No! She had to stay awake! Wasn't that what they told people who were stranded in the woods to do? Stay awake or they'd freeze to death in their sleep? Kaleen pinched herself to stay alert.

That worked for a few seconds but then she began to nod off again.

No! She wouldn't give up without a fight!

This would work. The straw held her body heat in and slowly the goose bumps faded and her body stopped shivering. She began to hope that she wouldn't die of hypothermia after all.

Then a little nap wouldn't hurt, would it? She'd just sleep for a few minutes so that she could be fresh and alert when she met up with Su'are next time.

* * * * *

She woke up back in her own bed, in her own house. Had it all been a dream after all? No! Jo'naz was real, he had to be! She'd never felt like that before about anyone. Like she'd found the other half of her soul.

But had she told him that? No. She'd blurted out that she loved him while in the throes of passion but she'd never told him that he completed her. That the reason she ran from him was she was scared to death that she'd lose herself if she let loose with all the love she had for him.

Shit! She had to tell him! Had to let him know how much he meant to her!

Kaleen stood and ran to the spot she knew hid the secret door. There was no sign of a passageway. No sign of the fire she knew had raged there. Nothing. Tears streamed down her face as she stumbled to her studio. All her pictures were of boring, normal landscapes.

Where were her pictures of Jo'naz? Of the forest? What had happened to them?

Damn it! She was not crazy! She knew what happened! She'd been attacked and Jo'naz had saved her by bringing her to the fairy forest. She'd drank from the Chalice and found out she was part fairy. She'd healed the damn tree with her painting!

"Come on now. Don't you think the time for fairy tales is over? It's time you snapped out of this and came back to the studio, Kal," Richard's voice came from the doorway of her studio.

There he stood, perfectly dressed and not a hair out of place.

"Richard? What are you doing here? How did you find me?"

"What? You don't remember calling me to brag about your work? Telling me that it was the best you've ever done? Of course I came right away. I couldn't let you show this drivel without me there. You know my presentation is what sold your art. Do you honestly think people would pay that much for something they could buy at any grocery store?"

"No! I left you. I'm not going back! You can't make me!" This made no sense. She wasn't home, she was in Zandermer. What was going on?

"Of course I can. You know I only have the best interests of your career at heart. You'll come back to the gallery like a good little girl. I'll see that you don't starve out here in the boondocks."

"No! I can't leave! Jo'naz needs me! I'm the only one who can heal the tree!"

"Stop this nonsense! Your silly games are making me weary. You proved your point by leaving, now stop being an idiot. Get your things and come on. I don't have all day to baby your artistic temper."

"No! Go if you want, but I'm staying right here. I don't know what's going on but I'll find out. Without you." Kaleen's heart beat furiously in her chest and her brain spun in circles but she knew she couldn't leave with Richard.

"I said we're leaving. Now come on!" He grabbed her arm with a hand that sprouted talons and dug into her painfully.

"Bite me, asshole!" Kaleen grabbed the table lamp and swung it at Richard's head.

Instantly, black blood poured from a gash over his eyes. Eyes that had turned black and soulless.

"Su'are!" It wasn't really Richard! Kaleen fled to her room and locked the door with shaking hands. The flimsy lock wouldn't hold him for long. She had to find a way out but she didn't know what was real any more. How could she escape from her own mind?

Her sketchpad and a stick of charcoal lay on her nightstand where she'd left them. Almost falling in her eagerness, she picked up the pad and began sketching. First, she drew the huge oak tree that Jo'naz had flown into. On the trunk of the tree she drew a door opening up to the fountain.

"Kaleen!" his voice came from inside the picture.

"Jo'naz?"

"You are in the dream plane."

"Oh God! It's more like a nightmare! Richard was here, and I never told you how much I love you, and – "

"Hush, my love, I know. I've been watching you but I can't touch you. Su'are has closed you off from me somehow. I can only talk to you and it is taking all Ma'ab's strength for me to do that."

The door shook as something heavy smashed against it.

"Oh God, oh God, oh God! What do I do?" Su'are was going to burst through that door any minute and the only thing she had to fight him with was a piece of freaking charcoal.

"Don't panic! Draw a gate."

"In the tree? I'm doing that!"

"No, draw the one that ends at your bedroom. You don't have time to get to the one in the forest."

The walls thundered with the force of Su'are's anger, adding a bit of urgency to Kaleen's drawing. She flipped over to a clean sheet of paper and sketched out the corner of the room. Fighting to control the shakes, she drew the outline of the door she'd seen briefly many nights before.

As she drew the door, an outline appeared on the wall. She drew faster, panting with exertion as she did. With a clap of thunder, the gateway opened and Kaleen dove headfirst into the gaping maw. As she spun into the kaleidoscope of colors, she heard Su'are's cry of rage behind her.

Kaleen woke up dripping with sweat. Apparently the straw idea worked. What a wild dream, this place must be getting to her. Go figure.

Her body felt stiff from being curled up, so she must have slept for more than a few minutes. Pushing the straw out of the way, she stood and stretched her arms over her head.

Her sketchpad and a stick of charcoal dropped to the ground.

"Holy shit, holy shit, holy shit!" She collapsed in a heap. It was real. She'd really been home and it hadn't been burned to a crisp. But what about Richard? And her paintings?

Had that been part of a dream? Okay, she'd had a dream about having a dream about getting caught in a dream. This was going to cost her millions in therapy.

She had no clue what was real anymore. She did know this place stank too badly to be a dream, so it must be real. Right? Ergo, that meant that the whole fairy-challenge-darkness-thing was real too. So, if she went along with that it meant...

It meant she was in a boatload of trouble.

Cripes! She had to fight against someone who could change his form at will and do all sorts of freaky magical things. And all she had was a sketchpad and a piece of charcoal to fight him with. Maybe she could draw herself a door and get the hell out of there.

Picking the pad up, she flipped through the sketches for lack of something better to do. The gate was there and Su'are's furious face screaming behind her. Ugh, even roughly sketched the guy gave her the willies.

Turning the page to escape his empty eyes, she flipped to a clean sheet and began drawing Jo'naz. If she was going to have to sit here for God only knew how long, she'd rather have him to look at than Su'are's ugly mug.

Her hands moved of their own volition, giving Jo'naz a ferocious countenance. With a look like that, he needed his sword, so she drew that in too. Just for laughs, she put him at the head of an army at the base of a hill.

Hmmm. What if what they said was true and her drawing did channel her magic? Could she direct Jo'naz to the hiding place?

Quickly, she started on a clean sheet of paper, trying to remember as much as she could from the ride up. It was damn little. Hoping her attempts wouldn't backfire on her and make matters worse, Kaleen drew a huge comic book type arrow pointing to the entrance to a cave. Who knew if it would help or not? Hell, it was all so farfetched it was like grasping at straws. Still, it gave her something to do.

She started another picture, this time showing the fairies shooting arrows into the joints of the stone soldiers and them falling to pieces. "Take that, you bastard!" Next, she sketched Ma'ab, surrounded by all the shifters she'd met so far. The little dragon lady looked like she could lead an army and make them all tea and scones without breaking a sweat.

"Finally!" Ma'ab's voice rang in her head.

"Holy shit!" Kaleen dropped the pad like it burned her and almost jumped out of her skin. "Ma'ab? Where are you?"

"At the palace, trying to organize an army of upstart fae and thick-headed shifters. Where did you think I was?"

"Ah, here? I mean, I can hear your voice pretty damn clearly, how was I supposed to know you were all the way over there?"

"It's your magic amplifying your mind speech. I've been waiting to hear from you. Took you long enough to figure it out."

"Well excuuuuse me. Hey, if I can hear you because I drew you, why can't I hear Jo'naz?" If she could talk to him just one more time and tell him what was in her heart, she'd be able to die with a clear conscience.

"Because he is tightly shielded, now hush. The longer we talk, the better the chance Su'are will pick up on what we're saying. Listen to me. Do not eat or drink anything he gives you. Anything at all. Don't let him take any of your hair or blood. Nothing. And don't wear anything he gives you. All his clothes are covered in runes that will sap your strength."

"Christ, you don't ask for much, do you? How the hell am I supposed to stop him from taking my hair or my blood if he wants to? I'm slightly outnumbered here."

"Stall him as long as you can. We have a plan in place, but it will mean naught if he can control you."

"Oh great. Thanks for the freaking reassurance. Okay, I'll do my best but hurry!" Kaleen took a shaky breath. "And Ma'ab, would you pass a message to Jo'naz for me? Tell him I love him and always will, no matter what."

"I'll wait and let you tell him yourself. Now rest, child, and know that all of Zandermer depends on you."

Great. The whole freaking world was counting on her to save them from this monster.

Okay, all she had to do was play for time until the army Ma'ab was raising came to save her. Oh, and not let him get any of her blood. And stay alive.

It was that last one that had her knees turning to water. She really wasn't a brave person. When it came to violence she was pretty much a yellow-bellied coward. She didn't handle pain well either. Cripes, the cramps she got with her period practically brought her to her knees. How the hell was she going to keep from spilling her guts if Su'are decided to play dirty?

She'd think of something. Stall, just stall. Hell, she could do that? Couldn't she? Maybe she could offer to paint his portrait?

Her laughter held a hysterical edge to it and she fought to gather her fraying wits. Right now she didn't have to worry about much. She felt too nauseous from the pervading odor of the place to want to eat or drink and she didn't have to pee yet. How long would it take for Ma'ab's army to get there?

She could always draw a tank and a helicopter to help them along. Now wouldn't that send the Circle into a tizzy! Ha! She'd like to see Rocky and his buddies stand up to a freaking grenade launcher!

Kaleen picked up her pad to draw just such a picture to kill some time but before she could open to a clean page her door slid open with a grating rumble. She had just enough time to shove the stub of her charcoal in her boot before Rocky, or one of his buddies, grabbed her arm and dragged her out of the room.

"Hey! You don't have to be so rough! I'm coming along peaceably!"

The soldier neither spoke nor acknowledged he heard her in any way. He just kept walking forward in his strange, halting gait. What made the stone soldiers move? Was it only the force of Su'are's will? Foreboding shook her to the core. What if nothing could stop them? Would hundreds of fairies and shifters die trying to save her? Killed by rock men that couldn't die?

Not if she could help it.

Kaleen stiffened her spine and searched for something she could use for a weapon. If she could get her hands on a knife, she might be able to take Su'are out herself.

Might. She'd never killed so much as a mouse before. She had no idea if she could take a life, sicko or otherwise.

Rocky jerked her arm forward and dragged her through a doorway into a tiny room. In the center sat a table elegantly laid with glittering crystal and china so fine she could practically see through it. The stone soldier pushed her into a chair and stood behind her.

"Aren't you just the courteous one." Kaleen looked closely at him but couldn't see an ounce of humanity in his face. He didn't blink, cough or breathe. If she hadn't seen him move, and still have the bruises on her wrist to prove he'd grabbed her, she'd have sworn he was a statue.

"I hope a family of pigeons makes their home on your head."

"Do you always talk to inanimate objects?" Su'are appeared suddenly in front of her.

She hadn't seen or heard him come into the room, he was just there. "Sometimes, it depends on the company I'm keeping." Asshole. She didn't dare antagonize him too much but man did she want to. If it wasn't for the whole fear factor, she'd give him a piece of her mind for sure.

"Charming as always, I see. Would you care for some *amoras*? It's from one of the better years." He held a carafe up questioningly.

How did he get his hands on the shifter's drink? "Ah, no thanks. I'm trying to cut back."

"I see." He put the carafe back down with a thud of aggravation. "Why aren't you wearing the robe that was left for you? I assure you the temperature here is not going to increase any. You can only battle the cold for so long before it saps your strength." His face took on a smug satisfaction.

"I'm fine. Thanks all the same. Besides, red isn't my color."

The stem of the wine glass he held snapped in his hand. "You think you are so clever with your witty comments. We'll see what you have to say when your lover is strung up by his bullocks!"

Kaleen's face must have shown her shock because he laughed cruelly at her.

"What? Did you think I couldn't enter your dreams with ease? It is I who brought you to the dream plane in the first place! I who killed the old woman in the house. After I convinced her to leave it to you of course. It was I who should have brought you through the gate!"

"What? What are you talking about? I thought you couldn't go to the human plane?" What did he mean? How could he have made some old woman leave the house to her? Oh God! Was she responsible for Aunt Lucy's death? Guilt and fear washed over her in a debilitating way.

"Bah! Those rules are for imbeciles and milksops! I cross the planes at will! I knew you were the key the moment you were born!"

"What? I don't understand." How did he know when she was born? The key to what?

"And here you thought you were so clever. Not as clever as me though! None of you are!" Su'are picked up another glass and filled it with a red liquid that looked way too similar to blood for Kaleen's peace of mind. "I have waited eons for one such as you! Eons! With your bloodline and mine, our offspring will be bound by no laws! He will control all the planes of existence!"

Offspring? He was out of his ever-loving mind. She'd rip her uterus out with a spoon before she got pregnant with his child.

"Don't look so surprised, my bride. I am part mage, part shifter. You are part fae and part human. The child you whelp will contain all four bloodlines."

"How does that help you? It'll be the child who has the power, not you." Kaleen crossed her arms and laid them on the table near the silverware. If she could snag the nice sharp knife he so kindly laid out for her, she would. She didn't know if she'd use it on herself or him but there was no way he was touching her.

"That is where you are wrong. How old do you think I am?"

Where the hell was he going with this? "I don't know. You people age differently here. Maybe three hundred?" She'd play his game and let him talk. She needed to stall for time.

"I am five thousand years old!" he crowed.

"Bullshit!" There was no way he was that old! She didn't care how old people got here, no one lived for five thousand years.

"This body isn't that old but I am."

Oookay.

"When one body wears out, I rip the soul out of a younger one and take it over. So you see, you will give birth to the one being with the blood and intelligence to control every plane of existence ever imagined!" He drank deeply of his drink.

Kaleen shuddered in repugnance. She'd never do it. She'd kill herself first. No, no, no!

"I won't do it! I won't let you." Instead of sounding defiant, her words came out shaky and fearful.

"You will have no choice. We will have the joining ceremony momentarily. When you are my bride in truth, you will mate with me and my seed will fill your womb. Once the child is ready, I will rip it from your body and feed your carcass to the crows."

Fear and nausea rolled over her, and she had all she could do to keep from throwing up. She had to stop this now. She couldn't let the entire universe be enslaved by this psycho.

Without thinking further, Kaleen grabbed the table knife and threw it at Su'are's chest.

No sooner had the blade left her fingers than Rocky clamped a stone hand on her shoulder, crushing her against the chair. The spinning knife flew towards its target. Kaleen prayed her aim was true and it would strike him blade first in his evil heart.

Su'are didn't attempt to move, only kept laughing. With one flick of his finger, the knife stopped dead and hung in midair. It was as if the blade had been frozen solid in a block of ice.

"There is no escape. For you or your lover. He will arrive in time to see me join with you. I will have your body as he watches, helpless. Then I'll kill him before your very eyes.

"No!"

"Oh yes, my dear. Yes."

*Heart cries, "No,
I have not a crumb of comfort, not a grain.
Time can but make her beauty over again:
Because of that great nobleness of hers
The fire that stirs about her, when she stirs,
Burns but more clearly. O she had not these ways
When all the wild summer was in her gaze."
O heart! O heart! If she'd but turn her head,
You'd know the folly of being comforted.*
THE FOLLY OF BEING COMFORTED, by William Butler Yeats

Chapter Eleven

Sweat dripped down Jo'naz's forehead even as he shivered from the cold. The amulet the mages had made kept him from the worst of the cold but nothing could dissipate all of it. He and his small band of trusted warriors had traveled relentlessly through the grayness that pervaded the once green hills.

Kaleen's terror had woken him from a fitful sleep hours earlier. Ever since, he'd driven onward as if possessed. He knew they should slow down and go more cautiously over the rough terrain but he couldn't shake the feeling of urgency that goaded him on.

"Jo'naz. We'll make it. Don't worry so," Ma'trk spoke lowly and soothingly behind him.

Neither Ma'trk nor his son Do'nal had complained about the insane pace they'd kept through the long hours of the night. The band had stopped only briefly for rest and sustenance before moving on again. Jo'naz wasn't worried about losing the trail. The stone soldiers Kaleen had showed him had made no attempt at hiding their tracks.

No, he was worried about losing Kaleen.

Once he'd made contact with her on the dream plane, the connection between them remained. He felt her revulsion, her abject terror and the moment she'd made the decision to act. What actions she'd taken, he couldn't fathom. But he knew by her overwhelming sorrow that it hadn't been successful.

At least she was still alive. And he planned on keeping her that way.

He'd chosen to take Ma'trk and Do'nal with him, not only because they were brave and skillful warriors but because they carried a wolf's endurance. Both men could keep up any pace Jo'naz set indefinitely. They could also blend in with the landscape should they need to.

Jo'naz was sure they would need to before their mission was over.

“Shh!” Ma’trk held up a hand.

Jo’naz froze. The older man’s senses of smell and hearing were far better than his.

“Someone comes. Hide!”

The men bolted for cover under an outcropping of rock. Their mottled gray cloaks blended perfectly with the washed gray of the stone. Jo’naz waited, barely daring to breathe for fear he’d give them away.

He sniffed the air but couldn’t smell anything other than the rancid smell that permeated the land. Still they waited to see who approached. Ma’trk and Do’nal’s bodies were tense and looked ready for battle. Jo’naz reached down his leg for the knife he carried. His sword he’d left behind. It was a great weapon for the battlefield but would be a burden on this trip.

The muscles of his legs protested holding his position for so long. His nerves were frayed and he was ready to move regardless of the possibility of danger. Just as he thought his last ounce of patience had been used, Jo’naz heard the grating of rock on rock.

Thunder rumbled, not from the sky but from the ground below them. As Jo’naz watched in awe, two sides of the mountain separated. An army of grotesque stone soldiers marched out, trampling anything in their path.

They looked neither right nor left. No sentries scouted ahead and there was no apparent leader. The troop moved as one body, with one mind controlling them all. If Ma’ab was right, Su’are was the mind behind the army.

A shiver of dread raced down his spine.

His amazement was so complete, he almost missed the opportunity to slide inside the hidden cavern before the rocks sealed up again. Ma’trk scouted ahead, his eyesight better in the dim light than Jo’naz’s. Do’nal took up the rear guard, watching their backs for signs of enemies.

All was strangely silent.

“Where do you think the soldiers were going?” Do’nal asked, his scarred face betraying a hint of worry.

“If Ma’ab got the Council together, they should be going to fight the attack on their flank.”

“The Council will do Ma’ab’s bidding, or she’ll roast them like *wapiti* on a spit,” Ma’trk joked, although the tension on his face belied the bravado of his words.

“How will we find Kaleen?” Do’nal asked, searching the walls for more passages.

“She’ll let us know where she is. Keep moving forward.”

Please, my love, don't give up hope. I'm so very close. Just hold out a little longer for me. I'm coming for you.

Jo’naz poured all his love for her into the bond that ran between them. If they had completed the joining ceremony, nothing short of death could keep the bond silent.

Instead, he must rely on the feelings he had in his heart and hope those feelings carried over to her and brought her comfort.

“Just a little longer, my love. Don’t give up the fight.”

They plunged deeper into the bleak cavern.

* * * * *

Kaleen clutched the pictures of Ma’ab and Jo’naz close to her chest. A few times she’d tried to give a mental call out to them. Either she wasn’t doing it right, or they weren’t answering her. What she wouldn’t give for a cell phone right now.

She paced the confines of her room, fingering her sketches like worry stones. After her aborted attempt at murdering Su’are, a “listening” look had come across his face. He’d stopped laughing at her despair and made a dismissive wave of his hand.

“I must stop a pitiful rescue attempt. But don’t worry, my dear, when I return we shall be joined.”

Rocky had yanked her to her feet and dragged her back to her room, locking the door behind him. That had been ages ago. Kaleen had lived and died a thousand deaths with every noise in the hallway. At one point the thunder of many stone feet had rumbled by her door but none stopped to haul her in front of Su’are.

Did he know about Jo’naz’s attempt to rescue her? Or about her conversation with Ma’ab?

Kaleen smoothed out the picture of Jo’naz and lightly ran her finger over his image. She wished she could get a handle on her magic. Right now she had no control over it. Sometimes it worked the way she wanted it to, like when she healed the tree. Other times it didn’t work at all, like when she wanted to make a protected path through the forest.

If only she’d had more time to figure out how her new talents worked. With a little more practice maybe she could have found a way to magically paint herself out of this hell.

God, she was so scared. Tears leaked out of her eyes and down her face. She didn’t want Jo’naz to risk his life for her but she really, really didn’t want to go through with Su’are’s plan.

Occasionally she’d get a small sense of Jo’naz’s presence and her worry for him would distract her from her own problems. Then a noise would sound in the hall and the panic would claw at her all over again.

There had to be a way out of this! She refused to believe that her life was going to end before she’d gotten a chance to truly live. The promise of a future with Jo’naz was too damn close for her to give up all hope yet. Somehow, she’d find a way out of this mess. She had to, because if Jo’naz died saving her, her life wouldn’t be worth living.

Sobs tore at her throat, threatening to suffocate her.

"Have faith, my love, I'm coming for you."

Kaleen wasn't sure if she imagined Jo'naz's voice in her head or not but it helped to calm her down some.

Until her door crashed open.

Su'are stood in front of her. Rage flared on his face and sweat made his sallow complexion look even more putrid. "It's time!"

"No!" Kaleen tried to scramble away from him but had no place to hide.

Hands as sharp as knives grabbed her wrist and pulled at her with inhuman strength.

"Your friends are more cunning than I thought. But no matter. Even if they destroy my entire army I can make more. Once we join and I plant my seed in you, my powers will be tenfold. I shall make armies who can think for themselves instead of blindly following." He practically frothed at the mouth, spittle sprayed with every word he uttered.

Kaleen dug her heels into the ground. She used her free hand to grab at the door, but it was no use. His strength was too much for her and he pulled her along without stopping.

Su'are dragged her into a cavernous room filled with rotting carcasses of unidentifiable animals. Kaleen gagged at the smell and bile rose in her throat at the scent. Kicking bones and other body parts out of his way, Su'are hauled Kaleen in front of a table.

This must be where he performed his magic rites. Jars and chalices lay scattered over the table near a book with a red sash draped across it. The spidery writing on the pages seemed to writhe and wriggle as she looked at it. Nausea overwhelmed her and she quickly looked away from the repulsive tome. With a forceful yank, Su'are smashed her hand on the table, narrowly missing a glittering knife that dripped blood onto the scarred surface.

Su'are muttered in a guttural language, all the while tying the blood red sash around her wrists. She tried to pull away, to slip out of the tightening knots he made, but he was too strong.

A strange energy filled the room as he continued to chant. She felt suffocated, like all the oxygen was being sucked out of her lungs. And all her will to resist with it. Kaleen fought to remember why she didn't want this to happen.

Think of Jo'naz! She bit her cheek and the stab of pain shook off the lethargy momentarily. Su'are redoubled his chanting, forming a knot in the sash then winding it around his own hand with a complicated twist. He grabbed the knife and slashed her forearm quickly before she could stop him.

Her arm blazed with pain and her head reeled in panic. Ma'ab had told her not to let him get her blood but how was she supposed to stop him? With his free hand, he grabbed a chalice and caught her dripping blood.

When the cup was half full, he slashed his own hand and squeezed his blacker blood into the cup as well. His voice rose in a growing crescendo of evil.

Kaleen sobbed in fear. There was nothing she could do to stop this. Her hands were lashed so tightly together she was losing circulation in them. Her feet were frozen to the floor. God help her! She had to do something!

Su'are raised the chalice with both hands, stretching the sash between them. With a triumphant shout he lifted the cup to his lips. Kaleen pulled back with all her might, fighting to keep him from drinking her blood.

"No!" From the darkness of the doorway, a shining blade flashed.

End over end it flipped, heading not for Su'are but for the tie that bound Kaleen to him. The blade tore through the cord, sending Kaleen to the ground. She scrambled to her feet and ran for the door.

Jo'naz pushed her behind him and ran for Su'are, who had also fallen to the ground. With a roar, Jo'naz kicked the cup of their mixed blood out of his reach. The contents sizzled as it hit the ground and disappeared in puffs of smoke.

"No!" Su'are screamed, jumping to his feet and charging Jo'naz.

His hands clawed at Jo'naz's chest with nails as sharp as talons. Su'are reached for the ceremonial dagger he'd used to cut Kaleen's arm. Before he could grab it, Ma'trk kicked it out of the way and tossed his knife to Jo'naz.

"Come, we must run while Su'are is distracted." A young shifter Kaleen had seen at the gathering tugged at her arm, but she wouldn't budge.

"I'm not leaving without Jo'naz." She didn't say that if Su'are killed Jo'naz, she'd risk her life to avenge him.

The shifter pulled at her arm again but Kaleen shook him off. Her eyes never left the struggle going on in front of her. She might not be a warrior but she wasn't going to run and hide while her man was in danger.

She had to do something but what? All she was good at was drawing and there wasn't even any paper handy.

Paper! The book!

Kaleen broke free and ran to the book Su'are had been reading from. She searched for another knife or fire or something to destroy it with. If this was where he got his evil spells from, she wanted it burned to ashes.

Screw that, she'd tear it apart with her bare hands! Stumbling over something, she almost knocked the table over before she got to the book. Furiously she tore at the pages of the book, shredding them with her nails but they didn't even tear.

"A knife! Someone give me a goddamn knife!" she shouted in frustration.

With a thunk, a silver blade appeared in the table before her. She grabbed it and hacked away at the book. An evil wind tore through the room, followed by an earsplitting howling. Kaleen ignored the force that tried to rip her away and dug the knife in deeper into the pages.

She could have sworn the book itself screamed in pain but she didn't stop.

Su'are let out an inarticulate scream of rage and muttered a curse that slammed Jo'naz into the wall behind them. Scrambling to his feet, Su'are ran towards her. His eyes blazed wildly and blood dripped down his face.

With another hand gesture an invisible fist punched Kaleen in the gut. She doubled her over in pain.

"This isn't over!" Su'are limped over to the book and disappeared in a puff of smoke.

No sooner had he gone then the ground began to shake.

"Cave-in! Run!" Ma'trk pulled Jo'naz over his shoulder and ran for the door.

Kaleen pulled herself up off the floor and ran too. Stones and dirt rained down on top of them, stinging her eyes and clouding her vision. Huge boulders tumbled behind them, spurring her to run even faster.

She tried to see if Jo'naz was breathing but he was too far away. It was more important for her to keep breathing so she could keep running.

"Where's the exit?" Ma'trk called back to her.

"I have no idea!" Oh great, the whole place was crumpling like a sand castle and they were lost. It wasn't like they had anyone to ask for directions either.

"This way, Da! I feel air." The young shifter raced ahead and up a narrow path.

Kaleen followed him and prayed he was right. Sweat dripped down her back and a stitch stabbed her in the side. Her feet kept slipping on the loose rocks and dirt. She banged her shins on stones she couldn't see in the dark.

Scrambling up a steep incline, Kaleen fought to keep her footing. The ground heaved and shook under her feet dropping more rocks on top of her. A large one slammed into her arm, stunning her with its force.

"My arm!" Oh my God! Was it broken? Pain worse than she'd ever felt before tore through her. She couldn't move her wrist or her hand.

"Can you keep going?" Ma'trk asked from behind her. His breath came in pants from the burden of Jo'naz's weight.

"Yes." She'd keep going as long as they could but every footfall sent hot pokers of searing agony through her.

Damn it! If Ma'trk could keep going, carrying Jo'naz, so could she. Their rescue would not fail because she was too big a wimp to keep going while she still had breath in her body.

They stumbled out into the night air, or at least she thought it was night. The darkness seemed overwhelming. The mountains buckled all around them, throwing up dust and obscuring the sky.

"Which way?" the youth asked.

An answer became unnecessary as the ground beneath their feet fell away. With a scream Kaleen skidded and tumbled to the ravine below.

* * * * *

Kaleen woke up to her arm throbbing in excruciating pain. Agony throbbed through her with every beat of her heart. A crude bandage and splint immobilized it from the shoulder to her wrist. She looked around, trying to remember where she was and how she'd gotten there.

A tiny, sheltered fire burned in a protected circle of stones and Ma'trk warmed his hands in front of it. Ma'trk, Jo'naz! The rescue! They were alive!

She tried to push her way to a sitting position but her balance was thrown off by her injury.

"You're awake! Let me help you," Ma'trk smiled and hurried over to her.

"Thanks, I need it." She looked around the mini camp, searching for Jo'naz. Where was he? Had he made it? What happened to the other shifter?

"How does your arm feel?" he asked, once he had her sitting up.

"It hurts like hell."

"I'm not surprised. I bandaged it the best I could but you should see Ma'ab when we get down. She'll be able to fix it. There's not much we can do about it now though. In the meantime, let me get you something to drink."

"Wait! Tell me what happened." Her throat closed in fear. "Where's Jo'naz?" Tears burned the backs of her eyes but she refused to shed them.

"No fear, Mistress Griffin. He is well, if sporting a mammoth headache. It would take more than mere rock to dent that thick skull of his."

Relief washed over her in waves. He was still alive! And apparently awake too. Thank the Lord. "What about the other man?" she asked, feeling guilty for not thinking about him.

"My son, Do'nal?"

Kaleen nodded.

"He's scouting the trail. The earth shake destroyed the path we used to come up here."

"So we all made it, more or less intact." The tight band that had been constricting her chest lessened somewhat.

"Yes but we are not out of danger yet."

"Honey, after almost getting hitched to Su'are, I'll happily take on an earthquake and trip down a mountainside."

"Let's see if you say that after you see the path we must take," Jo'naz said, coming into the light of the fire.

Kaleen's heart lurched in her throat and the tears she'd been holding back leaked from her eyes. Wordlessly she held her uninjured arm out to him and he gathered her into his embrace.

"I think I'll check up on Do'nal, make sure he's not chasing rabbits or something," Ma'trk said, a smile in his voice.

Jo'naz didn't even look at the gray-haired man. He stroked her cheek, his eyes locked on hers.

"I was so worried, so afraid," she sobbed. It seemed once her tears found the way out, they were going to flow until they were completely done.

"I know. I wanted to talk to you, but I feared Su'are hearing and finding out how close we were. As it was, he laid several traps that delayed us."

"Oh? You mean you didn't time your arrival for its dramatic effect?" She smiled through her tears.

"Well, I always like to make an entrance."

"Next time I'll take a little less drama, thanks." Her stomach fluttered with the wings of a hundred butterflies. She had come so close to losing him and now she couldn't think of anything to say besides smart-ass remarks.

"There will be no next time. I'm never letting you out of my sight again. I am so sorry I failed you." He knelt on the ground and bowed his head. "Please forgive me for my pride. I thought I was strong enough to protect you from Su'are, even at night. I put you in danger. Can you ever forgive me for my vanity?"

Kaleen stroked his hair and his face. "There is nothing to forgive, my love. You couldn't know Su'are's plans for me or when he would attack. I could have told you to turn back to the forest at any time but I didn't."

"You didn't know the extent of Su'are's power. His evil. I did. It is my fault and mine alone. And I will spend the rest of my life making it up to you, if you will let me."

"No, I won't let you."

Jo'naz looked up finally, fear and hurt glittering in his beautiful blue eyes. Resignation and pain filled them and he bowed his head again. "I understand. If you wish, I shall petition the Council to return you to the human world."

"Like hell! I'm more than happy to remain here, to join with you and find out what the future brings. But I want a mate, not a slave. You made a mistake, shit happens. I made plenty too. The first of which was fighting my feelings for you for so long." The butterflies in her stomach turned into seven-forty-sevens but she fought off her nervousness. "I love you, more than I can say. Not just because you're good in bed but because you are the other half of my heart. Without you I feel empty, like part of me is missing."

At his continued silence Kaleen drew in another shaky breath. "I was so afraid I would die never having told you how much you mean to me. How much you changed my world and healed something I didn't even know was broken inside me."

"You are the healer, I just showed you your own strength." His fingers slipped into the hair by her cheek and drew her face up to kiss him.

His lips caressed hers so gently and tenderly she thought her heart might break at the sweetness of it. More tears slipped from her eyes. Only this time they were tears of release and happiness.

"Why do you still cry? Is the thought of bonding with me cause for tears?" He caught one of them on the tip of his finger and brought it to his mouth.

"No, I guess I just have a lot of tears stored up in me." She smiled a bit. "You know, I'm a little nervous about this whole joining thing. I don't have very good examples of marriage to go on and I really don't have any examples of how to lead. My parents were kind of, ah, anti-leader if you get my drift."

"We will work it out. The clans rule by committee and our structure flows according to the best needs of the clan. You won't be required to preside over formal dinners like at the fae court."

"Thank God! I don't even know what half the foods are, the last thing I'd want to do is be responsible for conducting a meal. I'm more of a peanut butter and jelly girl myself."

Jo'naz raised one eyebrow at her but before he could say anything, Ma'trk called out from the gloom.

"Is it safe to come back now?"

"Aye, you won't see anything but a man holding his mate," Jo'naz wrapped his arm around her good side and kissed the top of her head.

"That's all I want to see. It's been a long time since I've been with Lu'nal."

"It's only been one day and one night, Ma'trk," Jo'naz scoffed.

"That's a long time for us." He smiled at the two of them then crossed to the fire to poke at the dying embers. "Do'nal should return shortly. He wanted to explore a trail."

"Have you found a way down?" Kaleen asked, trying to focus on the conversation instead of the pain in her arm. She wasn't sure if it was broken or not but either way she couldn't do anything about it now. It was much more enjoyable to focus on the feel of her thigh pressed tightly against Jo'naz and her breast crushed against his chest. She'd missed his touch. Ma'trk was right, a day and a night was a long time.

"Not an easy one. The trail we followed on the way up was obliterated by the earth shake. Whole sections of the mountain have sheared right off. It's going to be tricky climbing down. Especially with your injured arm." Ma'trk broke a stick into tiny pieces and threw them into the greedy flames.

"Can't you just fly us down, Jo'naz?" she asked.

"Not and keep you safe. The winds are too unpredictable and I can't defend you well enough in my Ara'bini form. I think we've already seen that."

"Would you stop talking like that? Let's focus on what's ahead instead of beating ourselves up over the past."

"Wisely said, Mistress Griffin," Do'nal said, coming in out of the darkness.

His face showed signs of abuse from the falling rocks too. All of them were dirty and battered. Kaleen didn't think things were going to get much better either.

"What did you find?" Jo'naz asked.

"I found one trail that we can take but it will be difficult going. The first part of it is sheer rock. I don't know how she'll get down."

Kaleen watched as the men looked at one another. She could see their minds churning. "I can stay up here and hide until you can come back and get me," she offered. Just the thought of being stuck in this depressing place without Jo'naz made her stomach drop to her toes but she had to make the offer.

"No. I'll not lose you again. We'll find a way to get you down if I have to tie you to my back." Jo'naz's eyes were fierce.

"With what? We lost our rope in the caverns. Can you create twine out of thin air?" Ma'trk asked.

Make twine out of thin air? Maybe she could.

Kaleen dug around inside her boot looking for the charcoal she'd stashed in their before. "Do'nal, can you find me a flat piece of rock? Something that could hold a picture?"

He nodded, looking at her with a questioning expression on his scarred face.

"What are you thinking of, my love?" Jo'naz asked.

"What's the use of having magic if I can't make it work in an emergency? Let's see what I can do."

Finally, she found the stick but when she tried to grip it with her injured hand, it fell from her fingers. She couldn't move them right! Panic grabbed her by the throat.

"I can't draw! Jo'naz, I can't use my right hand!" She couldn't breathe! Fear strangled her. Art was the only thing she knew how to do. It was what defined her. Her artistic ability was as much a part of her makeup as her strands of DNA. What if she lost the use of her arm forever?

Spots danced before her eyes and she realized it was from lack of air.

"Shhh, don't fret my love. You don't need to draw, we'll find some other way."

"You don't understand! My art is me! Everything I am comes from that. Hell, even magic I didn't know I had comes from my art. If I lose that, I've lost everything," she bit her lip to hold back a fresh spate of tears but a sob tore loose anyway.

"Not everything. You'll always have me. I love you for your soul, not your art. It was your heart that called to me, not your pictures."

"But it's all I know. What if I can never use my hand the same way again?"

Ma'trk and Do'nal shuffled their feet uncomfortably. Kaleen was sure they'd rather be anywhere else than watching her fall apart but she couldn't help it. She'd escaped that hellish cavern only to lose the magic she'd just found.

"Can't you heal yourself? I mean, if the magic's inside you, can't you just – make it work?" Do'nal asked.

"The only way I've ever gotten the magic to work was through painting. I have no idea how it happens, it just does." Her arm throbbed even more, almost as a reminder of her dilemma.

"Your art is only one way of channeling your power. Perhaps you could try another way?" Ma'trk ventured.

"I don't know how."

"Just try, my love. Find the focus within you and draw upon it. If it doesn't work, we'll figure something else out."

"I'm scared," she admitted. What if it didn't work? What if the more she tried the worse it got? Insecurity and anxiety bubbled inside her, shaking her confidence.

The urge to curl into a ball and tell Jo'naz she just couldn't do it nearly overwhelmed her. Kaleen opened her mouth to say just that. To tell them all she couldn't do it after all she'd been through but one look at Jo'naz's eyes stopped the words. He'd risked his life to save her, had almost died fighting Su'are, and she was too chicken to even *try* to work her magic without her art?

Damn it, she could at least freaking try. She owed these men that much. Hell, if it didn't work she'd be no worse off than she was now. She took a shaky breath, composing herself. "Okay. I'll try it."

"That's my love. You have the heart of a dragon!" Jo'naz kissed her soundly on the lips.

More like a lily-livered coward. Kaleen closed her eyes and tried to find the hidden well that she tapped into when she painted. Her arm ached, distracting her from her focus. She took another deep breath and concentrated harder.

It wasn't working. When she got into the zone normally, she at least had a vague picture in her head about what she was going to paint. This time she had nothing to focus on.

The rope! She'd draw the rope in her head! Maybe if she started with something little it would help. Stretching her mental fingers, she reached for the joy she usually felt when she painted. She let it fill her up from her toes to her head, pulsing through every fiber of her being.

When she felt as though she'd explode if she took in any more energy, she squeezed her eyes closed even more tightly. As if painting on a canvas in her head, she drew a picture of a huge coil of rope like she'd seen in a sporting goods store. Strong and supple she tried to "paint" every detail of it on her "canvas". While she painted she poured the energy she'd amassed into the mental picture.

One of the men gasped, snapping her concentration. Her eyes flew open to see Ma'trk holding the length of rope she'd created with her magic.

"Holy shit! It worked!"

Jo'naz kissed her again. "I knew you could do it, my love!"

He might sound confident, but Kaleen noticed his hands weren't exactly steady.

"How's your arm? Did you heal it?" Do'nal asked.

Kaleen wiggled her fingers. Her arm still hurt but the ache had lessened a little. The energy-sapping throb was gone and she could almost make a fist with her hand.

"Not all the way but it doesn't hurt as much."

"When we get down, we'll take you to Ma'ab and see what she can do."

She tried to smile bravely but a tiny kernel of fear refused to go away. So what, she could do magic without her art. Jo'naz loved her for herself and didn't care if she ever painted another picture. She should be happy she was alive, not in a panic because she might not ever paint again.

But she was.

It would take some time for her to accept that her only value wasn't her painting, but that didn't mean she wanted to lose it. If she couldn't paint, couldn't express her feelings on canvas, she'd go stark raving mad.

Don't panic, don't panic. We'll see what happens later. Right now we just need to get off the mountain in one piece, then we can worry about the arm.

The mental pep talk wasn't exactly inspiring but it helped keep her from running off into the night.

"Let's set the watches and get some sleep. Do'nal, you take first watch, I'll take the middle and Ma'trk can have the last," Jo'naz directed, giving himself the worst watch.

Do'nal nodded and headed back into the gloom with a container of water in his hand. Ma'trk wrapped his cape around him and curled up on the ground, his back to the fire and to Kaleen.

"Come, I will share my cape with you," Jo'naz's eyes shimmered in the firelight.

"Somehow I don't think I'm going to be very cold tonight," she said.

Jo'naz took his cloak off and draped it over her. With a look over his shoulder, he led her to the edge of the fire and laid her down on her good side.

The rocky ground felt hard and uncomfortable but Kaleen didn't care. She'd missed Jo'naz and if he wanted to make love to her on a bed of hot coals she'd do it.

"Won't Ma'trk hear us?"

"Of course but he'll ignore it. I've had to do the same for him on more than one occasion," he said, unfastening her vest and spreading it wide.

Her freed breasts sprung into his waiting hands and heat shot straight to her pussy. His calloused fingers pinched and teased her nipples making them pebble up.

"I have missed you so, my love." He bent his head and captured one waiting nipple in his mouth.

The feel of him suckling her nipple tugged at something deep inside her. Liquid fire spread from her breast down to her clit, making it pulse with need. She wanted to touch him so badly but she lay on her good arm, and her injured one was splinted straight.

"This isn't fair, I want to touch you too," she groaned.

"Just let me love you now. It's been so long and I was so afraid," he murmured against her breast, trailing kisses to the other nipple.

One of his hands loosened the ties to her pants, grazing her clit as he did so.

"Works for me," she said weakly, her breath coming in panting gasps.

As his lips continued to tease and torment her nipples, he slipped her pants down her hips. He feathered playful touches along her inner thighs, coming so close to her pussy then drifting away.

Kaleen bit her lip to keep her cries from ringing out. Her hips bucked as his hand came close to her clit again. God how she wanted to feel him inside her! Foreplay was a wonderful thing but after coming so close to dying, she wanted a nice life-affirming bout of hot sweaty sex.

"I want you in me," she demanded in a harsh whisper.

"Like this?" His hand cupped her pussy and a finger speared her, reaching deeply into her sheath. As he drove in and out of her, his thumb rubbed her clit pushing her higher and higher.

She couldn't answer him because she was so wrapped up in the fire he built. He slipped another finger inside her, stretching her pussy and making her long for something even bigger than his fingers. As the pressure grew, she had to bite her lip even harder to keep from crying out.

Faster and faster he thrust his fingers. His thumb continued to stroke her clit, sending shots of fire into the already raging inferno burning in her. Just when she thought she'd surely explode into a million pieces, Jo'naz bit down on her nipple and pressed down on her clit at the same time.

He had to clamp his mouth over hers to keep her scream from echoing off the rocks.

Jo'naz rolled onto his back, pulling her limp body over his. The cape shielded them from the night air. "I don't want to hurt you," he said simply, cushioning her from the hard ground below.

"That's fine, I think I could get to like this whole horse riding thing." Her pussy quivered again as he slipped his cock inside her.

She could feel every inch of his rock-hard erection as it slid into her. God! She loved the feeling of him inside her. He gripped her ass and held it still while he thrust up with his hips.

Kaleen leaned over, pressing her breasts into his face. His whiskers abraded the tender skin of them but she didn't care. The sensation only added to the waterfall of feelings flowing through her.

He drew a nipple into his mouth and sucked it hard. Her womb contracted from the tugging and she couldn't hold back her moan. The hands on her ass crept closer to the cleft that ran between her cheeks. One finger lightly probed the opening, shooting sparks of pleasure to her pussy.

"God, I want to kiss you." Sweat trickled off her forehead and down her face.

"I can take care of that," he said, rearing up and capturing her lips in a mind-blowing kiss.

The position shifted his hips so that with each thrust her clit rubbed against him erotically. His tongue dueled with her own, mimicking the movements of his cock inside her. When his thumb pressed lightly into her anus, the combination of sensations was too much for her to handle. Her body spasmed around him, bucking and shuddering harder than the earthquake that had hit the mountain.

Jo'naz lay back and gripped her hips in his hands. With two more sharp thrusts, he spent himself, shooting his cum to her womb. Kaleen collapsed across him, sweaty and sated and very much in love with him.

"Now can we get some sleep?" Ma'trk called from the other side of the fire.

*This palace standth in the air,
By necromancy placed there,
That it no tempests needs to fear,
Which way soe'er it blow it;
And somewhat southward toward the noon,
Whence lies a way up to the moon,
And thence the Fairy can as soon
Pass to the earth below it
.NYMPHIDIA, by Michael Drayton*

Chapter Twelve

The trip down the mountain was not one Kaleen wanted to do ever again. She couldn't believe people actually tied ropes around themselves and climbed crumbling hunks of rock for fun.

Granted, they probably didn't do it in rancid, gloomy air with a broken arm but still! Inch by hellish inch they made their way down the narrow path that was more like climbing down a ladder than a trail. A ladder with several rungs missing.

The men encouraged her and were very patient as she stumbled and almost knocked them off the rock wall. She knew Do'nal and Ma'trk could probably make it down much easier if they shifted into their other forms. But they couldn't help her down in those forms.

And she really didn't believe Jo'naz couldn't fly in this weather, even though the winds did blow wildly about them. She hated feeling like a liability but kept her thoughts to herself. She was already slowing them down, she didn't need to whine too.

As they slowly made their way lower, Kaleen could see the signs of destruction from the earthquake. Piles of rock lay tumbled in enormous heaps all over the place. Some of the piles looked suspiciously like the stone soldiers. Maybe she broke the spell that held them together when she stabbed the book? Yet another question to ask Ma'ab.

The air got noticeably warmer the lower they got. They finally found an actual honest-to-God trail that she could walk on. As they stepped on it, Kaleen felt a warm breeze blow by her face carrying the scent of fresh grasses and flowers instead of rotting meat.

"It appears Su'are's influence on the hills is lessening. Look." Jo'naz pointed to a patch of grass valiantly struggling to grow in a spot of sunlight.

"And there—" Ma'trk pointed to a small brown bird hopping among the jumbled rocks. "The effect of his magic is fading."

“Let’s just hope we stopped him before his army destroyed the plains and the forest.” Jo’naz helped Kaleen over an area of rough ground and she could feel the tension tightening his frame.

“I’m sure Ma’ab rallied the troops before he could do too much damage. She’s a powerful speaker when she wants to be.” Kaleen hated the lines of stress on his face.

“We’ll know soon. A couple more hills and we’ll be in the valley that leads to the plains. Or what was left of them.”

A sinking feeling hit her in the gut. Did he feel guilty because he left his people to rescue her? Kaleen bit her lower lip in worry. Would he blame her if the plains got destroyed? Anxiety traveled through her faster than lightning.

“Shh, my love. I do not blame you. If Su’are had succeeded in joining with you, our whole world would be destroyed. The army was only a diversion so he wouldn’t know that we were coming for you.”

“Yeah but if I had joined with you before then Su’are couldn’t have joined with me, could he? He’d have had to find a different half-fairy, half-human.”

“As you said before, that is in the past. I wouldn’t want you to join with me just because of Su’are. We will join when the time is right. For both of us.”

Her apprehension eased somewhat but she couldn’t escape the fear that all of the plains and forest would be destroyed and it would be her fault.

The group continued to stumble their way home. The path was steep and difficult to navigate and none of them had slept well on the uneven ground. Kaleen’s side ached as they approached the summit of the next hill. Her lungs labored for air and she gasped with every breath. If she survived this hike she’d start a fitness program and get in shape.

“Look!” shouted Do’nal who’d sprinted – damn him – to the top of the hill. His face shone with animation and he practically bounced on his toes.

Jo’naz helped Kaleen up the last few feet until she was able to see what Do’nal was so excited about.

In the valley below them the areas of blackened grasses had dried up and new growth had started to sprout. People milled about, moving jumbled rocks into piles. Kaleen could see the evidence of a battle in the torn earth and bandaged limbs.

The edge of the forest looked like a giant fist had smashed into it, knocking the scrubby trees down like kindling wood.

“I thought the forest was protected! It looks like a bomb went off!”

“Perhaps Su’are’s magic was too much for its protection.”

“Oh God! Your clan! And Nialla and Trella? They could be hurt! We have to find them,” Kaleen started down the hill, Do’nal right behind her.

Jo’naz wrapped a steely arm around her waist, slowing her progress. “We will find out what happened but breaking your neck getting down won’t help you find out any quicker.”

Do'nal looked at his father and a silent communication passed between them. The next thing she knew, there was a strange shimmer in the air and a young wolf stood where Do'nal had been a second ago. Without a backward glance he bounded off down the hillside.

"I think the young pup has the right idea. I'll meet you at the bottom!" Ma'trk called and shimmered into his wolf form as well.

"Do you feel well enough to ride if I go slowly?" Jo'naz asked her.

"Sure as hell beats hiking the rest of the way down the mountain." She'd hold on to him with her teeth if she had to. Her legs were killing her and she didn't want to take another step.

Jo'naz shifted and knelt for her to climb on. It was awkward getting on him using only one hand but with the help of one of the many boulders nearby she managed.

"High ho Silver and away!" she called as Jo'naz ran a few steps and beat his powerful wings.

The roller coaster feeling hit her stomach as they dropped but he quickly evened out and they glided down slowly. Kaleen spotted two wolves scampering over the hillside, running with a grace that was breathtaking. Jo'naz circled over them teasingly before continuing down to the valley.

They landed with a flurry of dirt and pebbles whirling around them. Kaleen climbed off so he could shift back before the mob of people reached them.

"Jo'naz! Kaleen! You made it!" Leis'al barreled over to them, wrapping her arms around Jo'naz's waist. "Where's Da and Do'nal?" she searched over their shoulders with a worried expression around her eyes. "Ma hasn't been able to contact them since you left."

Jo'naz pulled an amulet off his neck and twirled it in his fingers. "They are fine. Ma'ab had the mages make us these tokens to block our thoughts so Su'are wouldn't know of our coming. Your father still has his on but he'll be here soon."

"Thank the Tree! Tell us everything that happened. Did you kill Su'are? Did you see his stone soldiers? Did you have to fight any of them?"

"Leis'al! Let them breathe! I'm sure Jo'naz will tell us all the entire story when he's washed up and had something to eat. In the meantime, you still have stones to move," Lu'nal said with a frown.

"Yes, ma." Leis'al trudged off, looking none too happy.

"Spirits bless us, I'm so glad you're back," Lu'nal said, pulling Kaleen into her embrace.

Kaleen felt tears clog her throat at the woman's gesture. She'd never been welcomed like that before. Like a daughter, or some other precious relative. Her own mother hadn't been one for displays of affection. Or any affection for that matter.

Lu'nal wiped tears of her own off her cheeks with the back of her hand. "Look at me, carrying on when there's work to be done. You two go to the stream and clean up.

I'll keep the rest away from you for a bit. When you've had a bit of time to catch your breath, come back and have some stew."

"Wait! What happened? Are the fairies okay? Did we lose anyone?" Kaleen couldn't make the words come out asking if Nialla and Trella were okay. Even though she'd only just met them she felt closer to them than anyone she'd known her entire life. If they had been hurt because of her she didn't know what she'd do.

"There was a fierce battle and many of both fae and shifter were hurt but Nialla and Trella are fine. Although I don't know how fine Mistress Trella will be after her father gets through with her."

"Oh? What did she do now?" Kaleen could picture the headstrong girl sneaking out to help in the battle.

"Later we'll share our stories. Right now I see my mate loping towards us as if he didn't have a care in the world. If you don't get to the stream now, I might not be able to promise you any privacy."

"We'll take your offer then and clean up," Jo'naz said, stopping Kaleen from asking any more questions. "Come, woman, I'll wash your back." He smiled devilishly.

"And I'll wash your front," Kaleen winked at him in an exaggerated leer.

"Go!" Lu'nal waved them off with a laugh, standing between their escape and the curious folks who had gathered around them.

Jo'naz scooped Kaleen into his arms and bolted for the stream that ran through the forest. He didn't stop until they reached a deeper pool that was shielded by several fallen trees.

"Is this as cold as the water from the fountain?" Kaleen asked with a shiver.

"Yes, it's the same water."

"Great. Haven't you people mastered indoor plumbing yet?" What she wouldn't give for a hot shower right about now.

Jo'naz stripped off his clothes in record time and his cock sprung out at her full and hard.

On the other hand, modern plumbing paled in comparison to Zandermer's other attractions.

Kaleen quickly tore off her filthy clothes and dropped them in a dusty pile next to Jo'naz's. She dipped her toe in the water and shivered again.

"Don't fret so, my love. You'll get used to it quickly."

She looked at him dubiously. "You're sure about that?"

"Very." And he scooped her up and jumped into the shallow pool. She screamed as she hit the icy water. Frigid waves splashed around her, going right up her nose and into her mouth.

"You beast! This is freezing!" Her nipples pebbled up and goose bumps covered her skin. Her bandage was soaked in seconds. Oh well, it needed to be cleaned too.

"It's invigorating!" Jo'naz swam to the bank and snapped off a root from a plant growing there. He rubbed the root briskly between his strong hands and produced a pungent lather. "Come, I'll wash you." The fire in his eyes was hot enough to turn the water to steam.

"If you insist." Kaleen waded over and turned her back to him, pulling her soaking wet hair over her shoulder.

"I do."

His erection pressed against her enticingly and she shivered again for a much better reason. Strong hands rubbed languidly over her back, kneading out the knots of tension that had lodged there.

He didn't slack in his duties. In fact, he paid special attention to her butt and legs, washing them with a thoroughness that left her breathless with anticipation. Every time he grazed her inner thigh she thought she'd crumble from need.

"I think you missed a few parts," Kaleen said with a breathy sigh.

"I'm saving the best for last." His rock-hard cock probed the cleft of her ass, teasing her mercilessly.

The soapy root had a sharp smell that wasn't unpleasant. Jo'naz broke off another piece and lathered up her hair. As she stood after dunking under the water to rinse, she purposely brushed her backside against his cock, teasing the slippery tip of it.

He gasped and pulled her close. Large, soapy hands ran over her stomach and up to caress the undersides of her breasts. Kaleen held her breath in anticipation. She wanted his hands on her nipples so badly!

Slowly, he raised his hands until he kneaded her aching breasts. Her nipples stood out, straight and hard, begging for his touch. Liquid gushed between her legs and her pussy lips felt swollen and full. She rubbed her ass against his cock, hoping to get him to slip inside her but he held back.

Without a word, he ran his hand down until he parted her curls. Her clit throbbed with need for him but he avoided it, instead he slipped the tip of his finger over her plumped pussy lips.

"Jo'naz, please!" Kaleen begged. If he didn't touch her clit soon, she'd die.

Sliding his other hand down to her waist, he bent her forward until she braced her good hand on a nearby rock. With his finger poised over her clit, he pushed his cock deep inside her channel, driving himself in to the hilt. As he filled her he gently tapped her nub.

Oh my God! The position allowed him to go so deeply inside of her, she thought he'd touch her very womb. His strong, hairy chest rubbed against her back and she could feel his balls slap against her with every thrust.

"You're mine, forever," he said, nipping at her shoulder.

"Yes! Oh God yes!"

His finger still teased her clitoris even as he slammed into her pussy. "Jo'naz! Come with me!"

"Always!" His thrusts pushed even harder and she felt a slight sting on her shoulder where he bit her. The combination of sensations was too much to ignore and Kaleen threw her head back with a scream as she shattered like a million tiny drops of water.

* * * * *

Kaleen and Jo'naz sat around a roaring fire, squeaky clean and sated. The entire clan gathered around them listening to the story of their adventures. A shiver of fear chased down Kaleen's spine every time she thought about how close she came to losing Jo'naz forever. She shook her head to rid herself of the image of a life without him. How had she thought that she could ever just go on without part of her soul?

"Now tell us of what happened here? I can see there was a great battle but I don't notice any of our number missing," Jo'naz said, accepting a cup of *amoras* and sharing it with Kaleen.

"You'll hear it all but first let us welcome our guests," Lu'nal stood and gathered more cups of *amoras*. Turning towards the edge of the woods, she held the cups up in welcome.

The air shimmered and Kaleen smelled a whisper of brimstone then Ma'ab stepped into the light, followed by Nialla, Trella, Ruza, Ryann and several other members of the fairy court.

"You're alive!" Trella ran towards Kaleen, who just happened to be sitting next to Do'nal, and tackle hugged both of them. "Mother said you were all right but I didn't believe her."

Trella must have suddenly realized she lay half on top of Do'nal because she blushed furiously and jumped to her feet. "I'm very glad your mission was successful." She stepped back and fluttered her wings nervously.

Do'nal lifted himself up off the ground and eyed Trella from head to toe. Maybe Trella would get her wish and he'd finally see her as more than his sister's best friend.

Ah, young love. Thank God she'd never have to go back there. Kaleen smiled to herself and twined her fingers with Jo'naz's. Queen Nialla flowed forward with her glittering wings fluttering gently.

"I too am glad to see you back among us, little sister," she said with a touch of hauteur. She managed to hold the look for two more seconds before she too flung herself at Kaleen and Jo'naz and they went down in a pile of limbs.

"Nice to see you again too, my Queen," Jo'naz said with a smile, pulling some of her golden strands out of his mouth.

"Don't you ever, ever steal Kaleen out from under my protection again or I'll have your most impressive bullocks as earrings!" She floated off them and brushed the grass

and dust off her dress. "And you, if you ever scare me like that again I'll, I'll, I don't know what I'll do but you won't like it! You two gave me my first gray hair!"

"I'll endeavor not to put my life at risk again. It wasn't all that much fun. Well, until I got rescued. After that, it wasn't all that bad," Kaleen snickered, nudging Jo'naz.

"Oh ho! I see you two have come to terms." Her eyes shined with mirth. "I'll arrange a ball for your joining next moon," Nialla said, knocking back a healthy swallow of *amoras*.

"Fine but we're being joined by the clan tomorrow. I'll not take on the risk of losing her again." Jo'naz pulled her close.

"Impossible! We need at least a week to get her gowned properly."

"A day. No more."

Fairy and shifter stared each other down for a minute and Kaleen feared they'd come to blows over when and how the two of them would get hitched.

"Uh, why don't we talk about it after we've heard about the battle. I'm really curious as to what happened here," Kaleen said, taking Jo'naz by the hand. "Come on, let's have another drink and enjoy the fact that we're all alive and not crushed under ten tons of rock."

They made their way to the fire where the fairies and shifters were laughing and drinking freely. Kaleen saw several heated glances going back and forth between the young fairies and shifters. Hell, even some of the older ones were looking slyly at each other. This could turn into a regular orgy by the time they were done.

Jo'naz stroked a finger alongside her breast, sending lust surging through her. She turned startled eyes to him, only to see a sexy grin on his face.

Nothing wrong with a little orgy between allies.

"Ma'ab, would you be so kind as to tell us the story, since you were involved from the start?" Jo'naz asked politely.

The elderly shifter strode to the center of the circle and accepted a cup of her own before beginning her tale.

"When Su'are attacked, Jo'naz called to me. I flew as fast as I could to help but Su'are's darkness hid too much and I was too late. By the time I arrived, Su'are's magic had spirited Kaleen away and I couldn't follow the trail."

"No one could, you'd have frozen to death," Kaleen said, trying to ease Ma'ab's guilt.

"Exactly, which is where the mages played their part. Ever since Su'are's darkness destroyed their homes in the hills they've been working on a defense for it. They created the amulets that Jo'naz and his band wore to protect them from the cold and from prying mental ears."

"So that's why I couldn't reach him." Kaleen remembered hearing something like that but so much had happened in the last day she hadn't processed the information.

“Exactly. While the Ara’bini rushed to the rescue, the clans, the fae and the mages created an army to distract Su’are. The thought being, he’d pay more attention to an army knocking at his door than three shifters creeping through the window.”

“Luckily for us Ma’ab was able to convince some narrow-minded idiots of the need to arm ourselves instead of hiding behind the walls of the palace,” Nialla said, her eyes looking suspiciously glassy.

“It took some convincing but the fae joined us just in time.” Ma’ab took another sip of her drink. “The picture you drew of the stone soldiers helped us prepare for Su’are’s army and our archers modified their bows accordingly.”

“You saw my picture? But how?”

“Magic, my dear,” Nialla winked at her. The queen was *definitely* feeling no pain.

“When Su’are’s army marched down the hill they trampled all in their path. Huge catapults threw boulders at the forest, knocking down the fae’s protection. The clans were able to use the mages’ amulets to harass Su’are’s flanks while the fae shot their arrows. But still they came. Most of the shifters had run for the trees when suddenly, without a word, the stone soldiers collapsed into piles of lifeless rock.”

“That must have been when Kaleen stabbed Su’are’s book,” Ma’trk said.

“Indeed. It was then we knew Jo’naz must have succeeded in his mission. But before we could celebrate our victory the earth shook fiercely. Great hunks of the mountain fell down and we feared for your safety.”

“So did we,” Kaleen said wryly.

“It wasn’t until we felt your magic healing Su’are’s damage that we knew you had survived.”

“What? Hold on a second. I didn’t heal anything. I made a rope. Hell, I couldn’t even heal my own arm.” She blocked out the fear that she’d never be able to use it again. But she would make a point of having Ma’ab check it out later.

“Your magic flowed into the earth, recharging it from the drain Su’are put upon it. Your arm doesn’t need magic to heal it. Time will take care of that. Do not fear, child.”

She wasn’t wildly reassured but neither was she panicking anymore.

“And that is all there is to tell. Once we knew you had survived, we cleaned up while we waited. Now that Su’are is gone we can move back into the plains and out of the forests,” Leis’al said, sitting next to Trella. “Not that we haven’t appreciated it!” she hurriedly added, blushing.

“But it isn’t your home, I understand,” the queen winked at her.

“I hate to be the bearer of bad news but Su’are isn’t gone for good. We didn’t kill him, he ran away,” Kaleen said, shivering in fear. Somehow she didn’t think he was the type to give up easily.

“But his power is considerably weakened from the loss of his army and the damage to his spell book. When he comes back, we’ll be ready for him,” Ma’ab replied.

"And we shall be joined, so he cannot use you to further his purposes," Jo'naz said, looking meaningfully at Nialla.

"Do not glare at me, young stallion. Contrary to my daughter's belief, I had an army of my own personal guards armed and ready to join the clans *before* she decided to manipulate half the palace guards into joining forces."

Trella had the grace to blush and look down.

"When Su'are attacks again, you'll find the fae ready."

"Let's hope," Kaleen said, not fully convinced. The gathering got silent while they reflected on the events. The only sound was the crackling of the fire and the shifting of the logs.

"Hey! Is this any way to celebrate our victory?" Ma'trk shouted, startling everyone. "Let's have some music and dancing!"

Some of the shifters brought out drums and a few of the fairies put flutes to their lips. Before long the young girls began dancing under the appreciative eyes of the males of both species. Couples paired off and slipped into the tall grasses two by two.

Kaleen saw Trella looking over her shoulder with horror as her father scooped Nialla into his arms and headed off into the darkness. Although, once her parents were out of sight, her eyes searched out Do'nal with determination.

Oh no, this could be trouble. Kaleen took a step towards Trella meaning to warn her not to go too far but Jo'naz stopped her.

"Let them have some fun." Jo'naz hauled her into his arms.

"But her initiation is coming and I don't want her doing something she shouldn't." Kaleen bit her lip in worry. She knew how Trella felt about the young shifter but she didn't want her to do something she might regret.

"Do'nal knows better than to dally with her before her ceremony. You can trust him to stop at a few kisses."

"Unlike you. I thought we weren't supposed to make love until the joining ceremony." She nibbled at the column of his throat in case he had any ideas about actually refusing to have sex now.

"Woman, you turn everything I believe inside out. From the moment my soul met yours I've gone back on my word more times than I can count."

"Hmm, is that a good thing or a bad thing?" She reached inside his vest to stroke his nipples.

"I don't know but I hope it never changes." Jo'naz cradled her in his arms and sprinted to the woods far away from the other couples scattered throughout the grass.

"Me too." Kaleen pulled his lobe between her teeth and licked the shell of his ear.

"Woman! If you keep up this teasing, we won't make it to privacy," he growled.

"Like anyone is going to notice?" She dug her nails into his rock-solid pecs.

Jo'naz ran faster.

Once under the cover of the trees he let her body slide down his until her feet touched the soft loam below. He was so damn hard and sexy it was like a full body caress. Kaleen's pussy swelled and grew wet.

Lord, would she ever get enough of this man? Everything about him drove her crazy. From the way his long hair brushed over her to the way his hands stroked her. He got her hotter faster than she'd ever thought possible.

"How about you let me play for a change?" Kaleen asked, pushing his vest off his delicious chest. "I've wanted to explore this sexy bod of yours forever and paintings just don't cut it."

"Whatever my mate wishes." He leaned his back against a tree and put his hands behind his head.

"You look awfully cocky standing there," she muttered. She'd take care of that!

Slowly, she stripped off her clothes until she was naked in front of him. His face looked serene but his cock bulged from between his legs.

Serene my ass!

Sliding up to him, Kaleen drew his head down for a kiss. Instead of taking control, Jo'naz remained passive under her lips. Oh, no way was he going to hold back on her! She rubbed her breasts against his chest and sucked his lower lip between her teeth.

Releasing his head, she trailed her good hand down his ribs to the waistband of his pants. With just one finger, she ran it back and forth under the very edge. His breathing quickened and his tongue pierced her mouth more fervently.

That's better.

With one last nip to his lip, Kaleen pulled her mouth away from his and trailed tiny kisses down his throat. Slowly she covered every inch of his gorgeous torso, paying extra attention to his nipples.

She tasted the salty tang of sweat on his skin and smiled to herself. Oh yeah, he was unaffected and in control. Ha!

Going to her knees, she untied his pants with her teeth, making sure to graze his cock as often as she could. Once his pants were down, she pressed her breasts together and surrounded his pulsing cock with them. His shaft felt like velvet against her skin and Kaleen's pulse soared with the contact.

A strangled sound came from Jo'naz's throat as she rubbed his cock with her breasts, licking the almost purple tip with every slide. Taking his hands, she placed them on her breasts to keep them in place so she could cup his balls.

His sac was full and heavy and her pussy gushed cream in response. The feel of his hands kneading her breasts and his cock in her mouth only added to the cornucopia of ecstasy. Her mind was overwhelmed by the tastes and textures of lust enveloping her.

"Kaleen! If you keep this up, I won't last much longer."

"Oh, and I thought you were such a stud too." She pretended to pout to hide her smugness.

“Witch! Let’s see how you like the tables turned.” In a move so fast she couldn’t grasp it, Jo’naz pulled her up and planted her naked ass on a tree branch overhead.

The rough bark scraped the delicate skin of her butt but the height put her pussy at mouth level for Jo’naz.

“I’m going to fall off if you make me come!” she squealed.

“Trust me, I won’t let you fall,” he said, his blue eyes blazing at her from between her spread thighs.

Oh no, it was way too late. She’d already fallen for him long ago. Any more thoughts flew out of her head as his hot mouth devoured her clit, stabbing it with his tongue.

Waves of heat rolled over her like an inferno. The coarseness of the bark added a contrast to the delicate stroke of his tongue and set her nerves soaring. His hands held her firmly in place, which was a good thing because all her muscles had turned to melted butter.

As his tongue swirled and licked her all over, the pressure built higher and higher. The softness of his hair brushed against her thighs and his hot breath surrounded her labia and clit.

“Jo’naz!” she screamed, unable to hold back any longer. Waves and waves of pleasure shook her to the core.

Before her body had stopped shuddering, Jo’naz pulled her off the branch and slammed her back against the tree. His huge cock pushed into her waiting pussy, sending even more quakes of lust through her body.

“Come for me! Come with me!” he demanded, pulling her legs around his waist and pressing his finger into the cleft of her ass.

“I don’t think I have a choice!”

His mouth clamped down on hers to muffle her scream of ecstasy. Her body quivered and quaked with aftershocks while Jo’naz strained to reach his own slice of heaven. Almost painfully, his fingers dug into her ass and he thrust his cock deep into her core. His own cry of release echoed through the forest as his orgasm rocked them both.

*I am a spirit of no common rate;
The summer still doth tend upon my state;
And I do love thee. Therefore go with me.
I'll give thee fairies to attend on thee,
And they shall fetch thee jewels from the deep,
And sing while thou on pressed flowers dost sleep.*
A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM, by William Shakespeare

Chapter Thirteen

One week later

Ruza and Ryann had outdone themselves with Kaleen's appearance, if she did say so herself. The queen had gotten a week to prepare for the joining ceremony but it hadn't been easy. Nialla and Jo'naz had fought a major battle but in the end Ma'ab overruled them both and shut them up.

Last night, Jo'naz had taken all comers to defend his right to take her as a mate. It was an exciting display of agility, strength and skill and had sent her pulse racing with lust. Unfortunately, she hadn't been able to jump his sweaty bod in a nearby patch of grass because the fairies had said it was bad luck to see her groom after midnight.

It made for one very frustrating night. On the other hand, she didn't have to worry about Jo'naz leaving her at the altar, because he was just as horny. Maybe those sneaky fairies were onto something.

She'd spent the first part of the morning in a sweat tent listening to the older women give her advice about sex and marriage. She didn't have the heart to tell them she knew most of what they were telling her. Although a few of their ideas were worth exploring.

When they were done giving her their pearls of wisdom and had left the tent one by one, Ma'ab explained how she managed to travel through time to get Kaleen's palette and brushes. It had something to do with being a dragon or the oldest shifter or something. Kaleen's eyes had glassed over after the first five minutes of the explanation.

At least that mystery was solved. Even though she knew she could do magic without her paints it didn't mean she wanted to give them up. It would take a while for her to get used to being loved and appreciated for something other than her art but she'd manage. Jo'naz certainly made a good distraction.

"You look lovely! Just lovely!" Ryann cooed, fussing with the silver veil that draped down Kaleen's back and trailed a good yard behind her. The gown was spun silver that clung to her every curve and sparkled as she moved. The bodice of the dress formed an

intricate web of embroidered flowers that played peek-a-boo with her pale skin underneath.

Jo'naz was going to swallow his tongue when he saw her.

A knock came at the door and Nialla floated in, looking resplendent in her golden gown and coronet. Trella fluttered in behind her, her wings quivering in excitement. She wore a silver tiara and a gown of royal blue.

"Oh! You look gorgeous!!" she gushed. "There hasn't been a joining here in my lifetime! Lartu is going to croak when she sees you!"

"Daughter, that is very unkind," Nialla scolded. "Even if it is true," she snickered. "Come, Comor is waiting to build the bridge for you to meet your stallion. If we make him wait much longer Jo'naz will tear up half my forest."

Kaleen chuckled. She'd expected to be nervous but she wasn't even a little edgy. She knew she loved Jo'naz to the very marrow of her being. They belonged together and she couldn't wait to make it official.

"Come on, ladies, we've got a wedding to go to!" Kaleen laughed, taking her flowers from a grinning Ruza.

The fairies fluttered around her as she walked to the rainbow bridge. It looked like every fairy in the palace had come out to see her join with Jo'naz. The shifters waited in the clearing for her to arrive. Nialla's own honor guard would escort her to the fountain where Ma'ab waited with Jo'naz to officiate the ceremony.

She wasn't really sure exactly how it all worked. All she knew was she and Jo'naz would drink out of the same chalice and their wrists would be bound together with a sash from Nialla and one from Jo'naz's deceased father. It brought a whole new meaning to "tying the knot".

The honor guard stood at attention, dressed in their best uniforms. The sun shined on their golden armor and set their finery aglow. Even the path shimmered and sparkled with a life of its own as she stepped off the rainbow and onto it.

The world seemed to be smiling down on her as she walked slowly along the path. The Flower Palace glittered with life and the trees of the forest shone with their own magic. Kaleen couldn't stop smiling. She'd never been so happy before. Heck, it was all she could do to keep from laughing out loud. Somehow she didn't think that would fit in with the solemnity of the occasion.

Jo'naz waited for her, dressed in black leather breeches and a flowing white shirt. He wore his long, beautiful hair tied back with a silver ribbon that matched her dress. Even Ma'ab had dressed for the occasion, wearing a finely spun shifter dress of emerald green.

Kaleen wanted to run to Jo'naz and fling herself into his arms but she held herself back. They'd be joined soon enough then she could grope him to her heart's content. Just the thought of an entire week alone with him sent a delicious shiver through her.

Less than fifty yards separated them when suddenly the sun hid behind the clouds. Kaleen stopped and looked up just in time to dodge out of the way of a flying beast heading right towards her!

“A cold drake! Run!” Chaos reigned as the assembly scattered, searching for weapons to fight the dragon-like creature.

Kaleen lay frozen on the path. Her brain screamed at her to get up and run for cover but her body was paralyzed. She heard the shouts all around her and saw Jo’naz running through the mob of people towards her but she couldn’t move.

The cold drake flew by again, spitting freezing bursts of frigid air on all who tried to help her. Ma’ab shimmered into her dragon form but the trees were too tight to allow her greater wingspan room to open.

An evil cackle echoed through the forest and Kaleen trembled in fear. She recognized that sound! It was Su’are! Abject terror made her limbs turn to water.

With a burst of air, he landed on the forest floor, shimmering back into his human form. If that’s what you called it.

“You ignorant fools! Did you think I would simply vanish? You cannot stop me! No one can stop me! I’ve lived for thousands of years and no insignificant pests such as you will keep me from my destiny!” His voice thundered through the woods and Kaleen’s gut clenched in fear.

Jo’naz pulled his ceremonial sword free and charged Su’are. With a flick of his wrist, Su’are sent Jo’naz crashing into a tree. Arrows rained down upon the madman but again, his magic protected him.

His soulless eyes pinned Kaleen where she lay. He walked towards her, menace in every step. “It is time for you to play your part in my destiny! And this time there is no one to save you.”

He approached her with a measured tread, each footfall sending her deeper into a panic.

“Kaleen! Use your magic!” Trella shouted from behind her.

She had no idea what to do. Without thinking of anything more than her extreme fear of Su’are, she took all of that emotional energy and shot it at him. But instead of burning Su’are on the spot, it spread along the path.

“That? Is that the best you can do?” Su’are threw his head back and roared with laughter.

Until he set a foot on the path.

As soon as his shoe touched the glittering gold path his body stiffened and jerked like he was being electrocuted. His eyes rolled back in his head and he collapsed to the ground, convulsing and twisting unnaturally.

Kaleen scurried to her feet and ran to where Jo’naz lay against the tree. She didn’t know what she’d done but she didn’t want to be any closer to Su’are than she had to be.

Jo'naz had pushed himself to his knees and was slowly rising to his feet when Kaleen reached him.

"You're okay! I was so worried!" she sobbed, running her fingers over his face and head.

"Yes I am. It seems that you saved me once again. Is there anything you don't turn inside out?" he asked, running his fingers along her cheek.

"We'll take care of each other. Come on, let's make sure he's dead for good this time."

Some of the men dragged Su'are's still-twitching body out of the woods, near the moat of the palace. Ma'ab examined him and shook her head.

"No heart beats, no breath lifts his chest."

"Um, maybe we should cut his head off too, just to make sure," Kaleen said, thinking of old vampire movies.

"Don't worry, young one. I shall dispose of his body in a way no one can recover from."

Everyone scuttled back out of her way. With her wings fully spread she was rather impressive. Her eyes remained the same, only ten times bigger. One of those eyes winked at Kaleen before launching into the air.

After a couple of passes over the palace, Ma'ab hovered over Su'are's body and poured forth a wave of fire that burned the evil bastard to a crisp.

"Let's see him come back from *that!*" Leis'al cried, pumping a fist in the air.

"I believe we have a joining to finish?" Ma'ab said, back in her human form.

Jo'naz took Kaleen's arm in his and they walked with the others back to the fountain.

The ceremony passed in blur for Kaleen. Even the similarities to the rite Su'are had almost performed weren't enough to dim her joy at bonding with Jo'naz. When the last knot was tied and the *amoras* drank, Jo'naz pulled her close for a kiss that curled her toes.

A glow enveloped them, spreading from their bound hands through their bodies and into the forest around them. The damage wrought by Su'are's attack suddenly began repairing itself before their eyes.

All around them, signs of renewed life spread faster than wildfire. Cheers rose from the assembly, finally breaking Jo'naz's and Kaleen's embrace.

"I believe the forest has blessed this union. Are there any who would say nay?" Ma'ab asked, daring anyone to utter a word. At the continued silence she raised her hands, "Then let us feast!"

A shower of sparkles exploded from her hands and the crowd cheered before racing to the tables groaning with food and drink.

"I've got all I want right here," Kaleen said, taking a nip at Jo'naz's chin.

“Oh, I’ll give you plenty more tonight. As long as you think your arm can handle it.”

Kaleen twisted her recently healed wrist. The mages were some handy people to have around. In thanks for rescuing their homes from Su’are, they gave her a very valuable vial of healing potion. A single drop had mended her arm without even a scar to show for it.

“I can handle anything you can dish out. Trust me.” Kaleen’s smug grin dissolved in gales of laughter as Jo’naz swung her up in his arms and ran into the forest.

Epilogue

Trella watched the shifters dance around the fire, their swords shining dangerously in the starlight. Sweat glittered on well-muscled chests and the sight of all that rippling flesh did strange things to her insides.

Her initiation ceremony was coming fast and as much as she wanted to deny it, it scared her silly. What would it be like? She hadn't even kissed anyone before and in a few weeks she'd be losing her flower.

She knew the other girls all giggled and told her she'd enjoy it but what if she didn't? What if there was something wrong with her and instead of liking it, it hurt her? She didn't even like most of the fae men she knew.

That wasn't fair. It wasn't that she didn't like them but she didn't know them. At least not well enough to do *that* with them. The only man she could think of doing *that* with saw her as a little girl.

Kicking a pebble, Trella left the circle of adoring woman and went to get another cup of *amoras*. She might as well enjoy it, her parents certainly were.

Trella sighed as she watched her parents dancing and teasing one another. She knew she'd never get so lucky as to find someone to love her and only her. There just weren't enough fae men for that to happen.

"Hey, why do you look so glum on such a happy occasion?" a deep voice interrupted her mope.

Trella looked up straight into Do'nal's glittering black eyes. He was still so handsome, even with the scars. Too handsome. He took her breath away. And most of her wits too.

"Uh, I was just thinking about something, that's all."

"This is no time for serious thoughts! You should be dancing with all the young bucks out there."

"No thanks." It reminded her too much of the ceremony where she'd be dancing on display.

"Come on, Trell, what's wrong? You can tell me. I'm like the brother you never had," he teased, refilling her cup of *amoras*.

"Thanks." Her nose wrinkled in annoyance. She didn't want to be like a sister to him! She wanted him to see her as a woman. An attractive woman.

"What's wrong with that? I thought you liked me too."

The drink must be loosening her tongue or her brain, because without thinking she blurted out what was in her heart. "I do like you but not like a brother!"

Do'nal looked startled at her announcement and Trella slapped her hands over her mouth, mortified. With her face flaming hotter than the bonfire, she turned to fly off, cringing in embarrassment.

"Wait! Don't run away."

Oh roots and branches! What had she done? "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have said anything." This was humiliating.

"It's not that. It's just I didn't know. The fae value fairness in men and with these scars, I'm anything but fair."

"Like a few marks could make you less gorgeous." Ack! Again she slapped her hands over her mouth. What was in this stuff anyway?

Do'nal looked far too pleased by her comment and grabbed her hand. "Be that as it may, that isn't why you looked so sad a moment ago." His fingers rubbed her hand gently, making strange feelings flutter in her belly.

"I guess I'm just a little nervous." It was hard to think with her body going all fluttery on her.

"About what?"

"My initiation ceremony is coming up, and well... Never mind." It was just too embarrassing to tell him that she'd never been kissed.

"No, tell me. Maybe I can help."

"I've never danced with a man before and I'm afraid I'll make a fool of myself." There, it wasn't the truth, but it was something.

"There's nothing to it. Come, we can practice."

"Right now? Here? With you?" Trella's stomach dropped to her toes like the first time she flew.

"Sure, there's nothing to it. I put my arm around you like this and you place one hand on my shoulder and one in my other hand." He demonstrated and Trella's heart tripped in her chest.

Slowly they glided around the small clearing under the light of the stars. The soft beat of the music floated on the breeze and soon Trella relaxed in Do'nal's arms. Her head lay on his shoulder like it was the most natural thing in the world.

When he pulled her closer, she felt the muscles of his chest rub against her nipples and more swirling went on down *there*. His warm breath caressed her cheek and sent shivers down her spine.

So this is why the girls giggled so much. If this was what breaking her flower felt like then maybe it wouldn't be so bad after all.

Except Do'nal wouldn't be there.

"There, see, you've got the hang of it." His hand rubbed her back just below her wings.

She wished they could go on dancing forever. Wished she never had to face the real world again.

“Ah, Trella, we should probably stop.” His voice sounded husky.

Her heart dropped to her toes in disappointment. “Why?” She looked up into his beautiful eyes and saw something there she couldn’t recognize.

“Because if we don’t, I’m going to do this,” he whispered, dipping his head down and taking hers in a gentle kiss.

Fireflies exploded in Trella’s brain. His lips were so soft! She closed her eyes and lost herself to the feeling of Do’nal touching her in a way she’d only dreamed of.

This was so much better than her dreams.

“Trella! Where are you? Jo’naz and Kaleen are getting ready to leave!” Leis’al called, breaking the spell.

“Come on. I don’t think your mother would be too pleased to see you kissing a shifter before your ceremony,” Do’nal said, his finger grazing her cheek.

“Would you –” She bit her lip uncertainly. “If you could, would you come to my ceremony?”

“That’s a moot point, because we both know it’s impossible.”

“But would you...be interested if you could?” Roots and branches but she sounded pathetic!

“If I could, I’d dance every dance and damn the consequences.”

Heat pooled in her groin and she leaned in for another kiss.

“Oh, there you are. And Do’nal too. Well, come on, we’ll miss throwing the oats at them!” Leis’al gestured impatiently then looked at them a little more closely. “What are you two doing out here anyway?”

“Do’nal was teaching me how to dance with a man to prepare me for my ceremony.”

She appeared to think on it for a moment then shrugged. “Well, you can do that later, they’re leaving now and I don’t want to miss the fertility rite. That’s the best part of the whole gathering!”

Trella had to disagree with her there. She’d already found the best part of the gathering right here.

About the Author

Arianna Hart lives on the East Coast with her husband and three daughters. When not teaching, writing, or chasing after her children and the dog, Ari likes to practice her karate, go for long walks, and read by the pool. She thinks heaven is having a good book, warm sun, and a drink in her hand. Until she can sit down long enough to enjoy all three, she'll settle for the occasional hour of peace and quiet.

Arianna welcomes mail from readers. You can write to her c/o Ellora's Cave Publishing at 1056 Home Avenue, Akron OH 44310-3502.

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