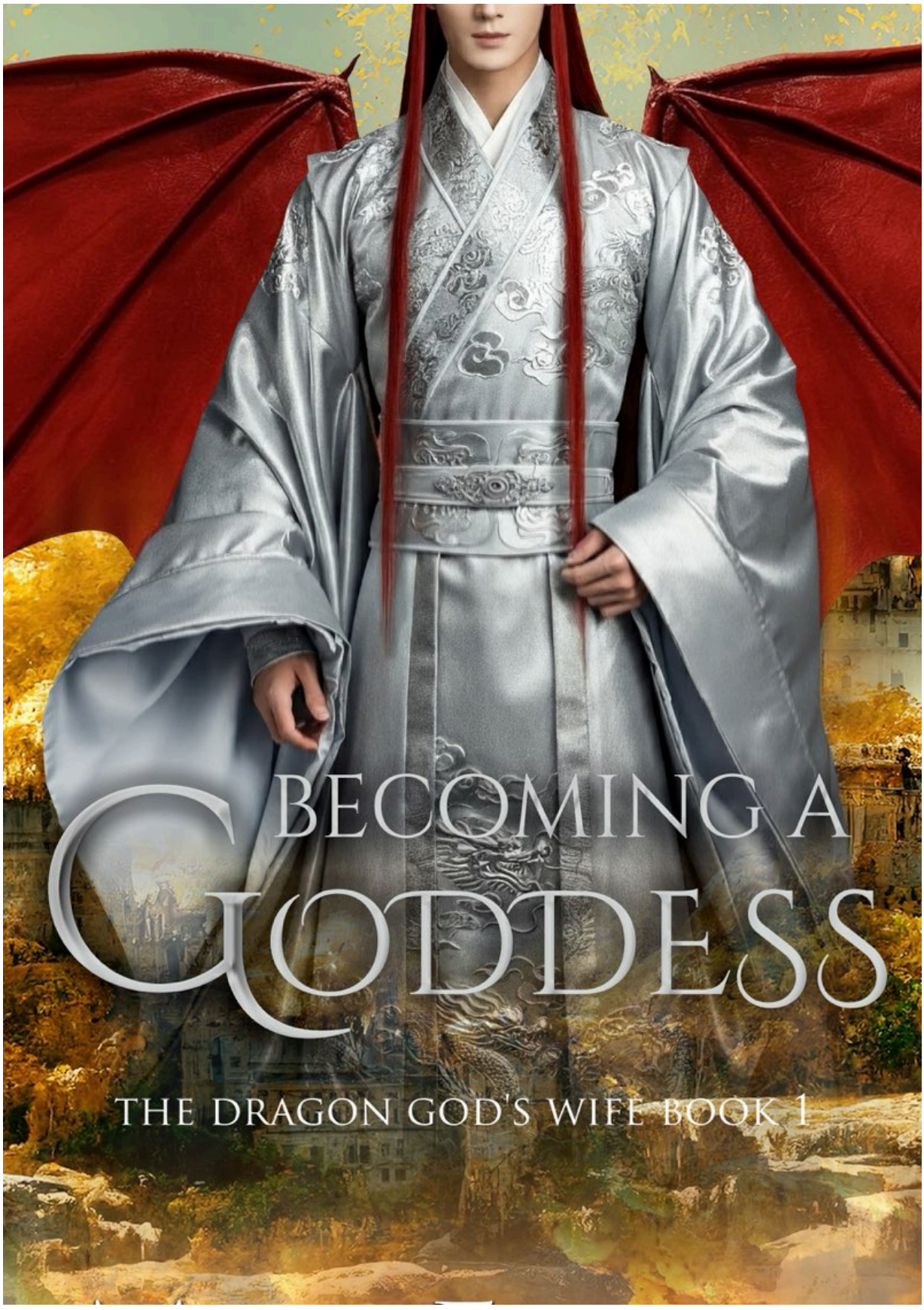

BECOMING A
GODDESS
THE DRAGON GOD'S WIFE BOOK 1
MAC FLYNN


BECOMING A
GODDESS
THE DRAGON GOD'S WIFE BOOK 1


MAC FLYNN

BECOMING A GODDESS

THE DRAGON GOD'S WIFE

BOOK 1

MAC FLYNN

CONTENTS

Copyright
Author's Note

Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Chapter 5
Chapter 6
Chapter 7
Chapter 8
Chapter 9
Chapter 10
Chapter 11
Chapter 12
Chapter 13
Chapter 14
Chapter 15
Chapter 16
Chapter 17
Chapter 18
Chapter 19
Chapter 20
Chapter 21
Chapter 22
Chapter 23
Chapter 24
Chapter 25
Chapter 26
Chapter 27
Chapter 28
Chapter 29
Chapter 30
Chapter 31
Chapter 32
Chapter 33

Chapter 34
Chapter 35
Chapter 36
Chapter 37
Chapter 38
Chapter 39
Chapter 40
Chapter 41
Chapter 42
Chapter 43
Chapter 44
Chapter 45
Chapter 46
Chapter 47
Chapter 48
Chapter 49

Sneak Peek: Guarding a Secret
A Small Favor
When’s the Next Book?
Series by Mac Flynn
About Mac Flynn

COPYRIGHT

Becoming a Goddess (The Dragon God's Wife Book 1). Copyright © 2025 by Mac Flynn.

Published by Crescent Moon Studios, Inc.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, disseminated, or transmitted in any form or by any or for any use, including recording or any information storage and retrieval system, without the prior written consent of the author and/or artist. The only exceptions are excerpts or the cover image in reviews.

This is a work of fiction. All the names, characters, organizations, places and events portrayed in this novel or on the cover are either products of the author's or artist's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental and not intended by the author or artist.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Dear Reader,

THANK YOU SO MUCH for joining me on a journey through my imagination. If you're looking for romance and adventure with a guaranteed Happily Ever After, then you've come to the right place. My books contain paranormal plotting and fantastical action, and I hope you enjoy reading them as much as I enjoy writing them.



You can keep in touch with me by joining my newsletter or checking out my website for the latest updates.

Check out my website
Sign up for my newsletter

Thank you for giving my book a chance, and Happy Reading!

- Mac Flynn

CHAPTER ONE

Gods and monsters, and everything in between. And in the middle of that mess stood a handsome immortal. He opened his arms to me and his smile warmed my heart. A whispered word floated from his elegant lips.

"Anna."

I blushed. He was calling my name.

"Anna? Anna!"

My head snapped backward and my imagination-clouded eyes cleared. The dingy room came back into focus and I found myself seated in my office chair. My desk and I were stuffed into a small dreary cubicle of grays and off-whites. The only benefit was the location. I was too far from the boss' prying eyes to catch his attention.

However, I did have the attention of one very irritated coworker. She sported a long brown ponytail and a very deep frown on her face. "Snap out of it, Anna!" she hissed at me. "Even the boss makes the rounds now and then, and you know how the squealer is."

I sighed. I knew only too well as I partially turned my chair to look at the generic company calendar that was pinned to the gray wall. "I know. That seminar on worker responsibilities is tomorrow."

My coworker put her elbows on my desk and lay her hands in her cupped palms. She studied the calendar and wrinkled her nose. “That’s just not fair. They shouldn’t be able to make you work on a Saturday.”

“It’s either that or I have to take it after work and that won’t fit into my schedule,” I pointed out. “Besides, they are paying me for it.”

“Well, how about you have fun tonight to make up for tomorrow?” she suggested as she tugged on my sleeve. “We could go to that new club and meet some cute guys.”

“I’m busy.”

She rolled her eyes. “Come on, just skip it this once, okay? I mean, you go there every Friday. Couldn’t they give you one night off?”

I smiled at her and shook my head. “I couldn’t do that to them, especially after I promised I’d be there today.”

She sighed and dropped her hand. “It’s really that important that you cook and clean for them?”

I shrugged. “It makes me feel like I’m giving back. I was raised there, after all.”

My friend set a hand on my shoulder and looked me in the eyes. “One day you’re going to make some guy very happy.”

I laughed and shook my head. “Probably not anytime soon unless an unmarried man comes to adopt someone.”

“Fat chance of that,” my coworker mused as she straightened. She still gripped my shoulder and some of her humor faded. “Alright, I give you permission to abandon me to the wilds of stag dating, but you have to promise me you won’t go through that creepy place.”

I cocked my head to one side to look at her. “It’s not creepy. It’s just an empty lot.”

“Yeah, but there’s something creepy about a lot that’s *never* had anything on it,” she countered. She wrapped her arms around herself and shivered. “The rest of that area has buildings except that. It’s just not right.”

“What are you doing over there?” a voice shouted.

My friend’s face turned white. “Gotta go. And remember your promise!” She scooted away to the wilds of the cubicle jungle.

“It’s just a lot. . .” I murmured as I returned to my work. A long strand of hair tickled my nose and I brushed it out of my face. “Gotta get it cut. . .” I muttered as I studied my reflection on the screen of my computer.

A young woman with neck-length mousy brown hair stared back at me with equally mousy brown eyes. My face with thin but not narrow and the rest of me was built pretty much the same. And I was short. Frustratingly short. I was five foot three at best, and those were on my good days. I slouched on my bad days.

“Not exactly marriage material. . .” I murmured.

“Why are you talking, Miss Roberts?” The sharp voice startled me and I whipped my head up. The sharp face of my supervisor glared at me from the opening of my cubicle. “Do you have that report done that I asked you for yesterday?”

I managed a tense smile. “Not yet. I’m just working on it.”

She scoffed. “That isn’t what I saw. If you know what’s good for you you’ll focus on your work and leave the fraternizing for the weekends.”

I had to bite my tongue to keep myself from spitting out what I truly wanted to say. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

“See that you do,” she snapped as she lifted her nose and looked down her beak at me. “And I expect it on my desk before you leave.”

I didn’t look up from my computer screen. “Of course. I’ll definitely have it done before I leave.”

She strolled off to harass one of my coworkers. I settled my fingers atop the keys and sighed. “Where’s that Prince Charming when I need him?”

I shook off those thoughts. No sense in wishing for a dream to come true. I had to make things happen. That’s how the world worked.

I got back to work but my daydreaming meant I was late getting in the report. By the time I stepped out night had begun to fall. The shadows stretched long and deep over everything as I wrapped my scarf tightly around my neck and began my journey through the concrete wilderness. The streets were busy with traffic and pedestrians as everyone tried their best to beat everyone home or to the bars.

I turned off the well-worn paths and into the back residential areas. These had seen better days, what with their crumbling facades of brick and mortar. Only the imperiousness of their four floors gave a hint of their lost grandeur. Many of the windows were broken and replaced by the ever-economical plywood while others were completely neglected, allowing vagrants the opportunity for a nice free rest.

My steps took me past a rusted chainlink fence, and through the diamond designs, I glimpsed the empty lot of my friend's warning. I slowed to a stop and stared at the abandoned property, forgotten by everyone, even the litterbugs. There were no cots or blankets strewn about the place, and what trash tried to get inside was blocked by the tall fence. A loose spot in the far corner of the fence ahead of where I stood tempted me. That was my usual entrance inside when I dared take the shortcut. It saved me two whole blocks of walking.

My friend's pleading words echoed in my head. I sighed and continued onward past the loose links. In my distraction, I didn't see the faint white light that emanated from beneath the ground.

My footsteps took me down that long block and to my destination. The journey's end was a square building some three floors high and a hundred feet wide. A tall stoop denoted its origins as coming from the late nineteenth century when the fog of industry blanketed much of the city. The windows were old but clean and the bricks chipped but washed. Even the stoop had been swept of leaves and picked clean of trash. A single word had been built into the bricks above the door: Orphanage.

Many of the lights were on as I walked up those worn steps. I paused at the top and half-turned to look at the street. All was quiet and empty. Nobody would be coming today.

The front door burst open and a half dozen small bodies threw themselves at me. I didn't stand a chance as they latched onto me, tugging my person in every direction. They were children and ranged in age from three to six. Their faces were clean but their hand-me-down clothes were patched in several places.

"You're here! You're here!" several of them crowed.

"What took you so long, Anna?" another scolded me.

I laughed and grasped two of the hands that so lovingly held me. "I'm not that late."

"Miss Wynn has been looking out the window for you to come for a really, really, really long time!" another chimed in.

"Not too long," a kindly voice spoke up and a woman just shy of fifty stepped out onto the stoop. She wore a plain blouse and faded jeans, and her graying hair was tucked into a tight bun behind her head. "Now all of you inside and don't drag poor Anna with you."

"We were only trying to help her inside," one of the children moped as she shuffled past Miss Wynn.

Miss Wynn laughed and patted her on the head. "I'm sure she can handle the door herself but she'd be glad to have you greet her any time." The girl's face brightened and she nodded before disappearing inside. Miss Wynn turned her attention to me and clasped her hands in front of her. "Thank you for coming. They do really appreciate it."

I grinned as she led me inside. "It's no problem and I'm sure they'll show their appreciation when they eat all my brownies before bedtime."

"Brownies!" The cry came from every nook and cranny of the small foyer. Children rushed out of the woodwork, sprinting out of the wings and down the stairs.

“Easy! No running or you won’t get any brownies!” Miss Wynn warned them.

“You know what to do, troops!” I shouted. The kids scuttled into a line in front of me and gave me crooked but sincere salutes. I walked up and down the line inspecting them. “Dirty hands, dirty face, clean, clean-” I stopped in front of a short boy of five who bowed his head and crossed my arms over my chest. “Jasper, what are you hiding?”

Jasper lifted his face and revealed a large cut on his cheek. “The cat got me.”

I knelt on one knee so we were at eye level. “Did you pull the cat’s tail again?” He bobbed his head. “You know he doesn’t like that.”

“But I was just trying to catch him to brush him,” he whimpered.

I set a hand on his head and ruffled his hair. “The cat doesn’t understand that. That’s why you have to be gentle. Now how about some brownies?”

“Yeah!” the kids shouted.

“After you all clean up,” I added as I stood. Those with dirty digits and faces scurried off to obey.

Miss Wynn smiled at me. “I’ll leave you to it then. Good luck.”

I laughed. “I’ll need as much as I can get.”

CHAPTER TWO

"When will it be done?"

"I want the spoon!"

"I want the spoon! You can have the bowl!"

"Nobody gets the spoon or the bowl," I reminded my little helper as I oversaw the brownie preparations.

The old kitchen of the orphanage was worn but clean, or at least it was before I started my cooking class. Now the place was covered in sugar and cocoa powder. The smell, however, hinted that our efforts were not in vain.

One of the kids stood in front of the oven with his back bent and his face nearly plastered against the glass. "Are they done yet?"

I clapped my hands on his shoulder. "Your nose will be done before them, now scoot over to the table. We'll try them there."

The kids didn't need a second invitation but hurried over and climbed into their chairs. They craned their necks as I opened the oven door and drew out the large pan of chocolate goodies. Steam rose from the batter and the scent wrapped around me. I cut the goodies into even squares and set them on paper towels which I divied out to the eager children. They dove into them like starving wolves and soon not a single crumb remained on their makeshift plates.

Miss Wynn came in with another half dozen kids of various ages in tow. She stopped at the table and sniffed the air. “If the smell tells me anything it’s that you’ve outdone yourself this time.”

I grinned down at the kids and ruffled the head of one of them. “It’s all thanks to my little helpers here.”

A little girl of six tugged on Miss Wynn’s hem. “What about mine?”

“There’s still plenty left,” I promised her as I returned to the pan.

Soon all the kids were at the long table munching away or happily licking the remains from their lips. Miss Wynn stood beside me watching them with a soft smile. She leaned toward me and lowered her voice to a whisper. “Thank you.”

I shook my head. “It’s my pleasure. Really.”

“And theirs,” she added as she looked down at the kids. Half of them were still licking the crumbs off their plates. The other half were fighting over the cake pan.

“Lemme have it!”

“You had it last time!”

Miss Wynn clapped her hands. “That’s enough!” Her tone was gentle but there was an underlying warning. The children dropped the cake pan so fast it clattered to the table. “It’s time to get ready for bed and that means baths and brushing.”

The children slunk off their chairs and shuffled out the door. I smiled and shook my head at their forlorn backs as they disappeared into the foyer and up the stairs.

Miss Wynn’s gentle hand settled on my shoulder and I turned to find her staring curiously at me. “You could go now. They wouldn’t mind.”

I shook my head. “It’s okay. I promised I’d tuck Sarah into bed tonight.”

She sighed. “I know this sounds rather silly of me to say this, but you really do need to get out and see people your own age. There’s more to life than living in the past.”

I wrapped my arms around myself and dropped my contemplative gaze to the floor. “I know, it’s just. . .”

“You don’t think Mr. Right is waiting for you?” she guessed.

I laughed and shook my head. “It’s not that. It’s just, well, I feel like I’m waiting for something.” I grinned up at her. “I know that sounds stupid and it goes against what you taught me about making what I want happen, but that’s just how I feel about this.”

She patted my shoulder. “Well, if you should ever find what you’re waiting for then you bring him here.”

I rolled my eyes. “It might not be a guy I’m waiting for.”

Her eyes twinkled and she slid her hand off my shoulder. “We’ll see.” A crash and a scream came from upstairs.

“Miss Wynn!” a girl shouted. “Benny stole my shampoo!”

The mistress of the orphanage laughed. “Never a dull moment.”

Together we went upstairs to break up the fights and tuck many a bedcloth around a squirming child. I was seated on the edge of Sarah’s bed when the troublesome Benny scurried into the room with something clasped in his small hands.

“Look what Miss Wynn did with the sketch you made for me!” he told me as he thrust his prized possession in my face.

The surprise was a picture frame and tucked into the frame was a sketch of the young boy. I admired the simple but clean frame and nodded. “It’s very good.”

“Benny!” Miss Wynn called. “Time to tuck you in!”

“Coming!” Benny shouted before he raced out of the room.

Sarah stared up at me with those beautiful blue eyes of hers. “Can you draw me next?”

I cupped her cheek in one hand and smiled down at her. “Not tonight. Maybe next week, okay?”

She nodded and snuggled deep into the covers, but a strange expression marred the sweetness in her eyes. “Anna?”

“Yes, sweety?” I returned as I tucked her into bed.

“Will I still get a second name even if I’m not adopted?”

I pulled the covers to just below her chin. “Of course you’ll get a last name. Everyone gets a name when they leave here, even if you’re not adopted.”

“Do I get to pick my name?” she asked me.

“Well, you can, but the kids who leave here usually just take the name of the street,” I told her as I patted the sheets. “But don’t you worry. You’ll definitely get adopted. Now get some sleep.”

She nodded and closed her eyes. I stood and shut off the lamp by the bed before slipping out into the hall. All was quiet and calm from the other dozen or so rooms. Miss Wynn stepped out of Benny’s room across the hall and sighed. “That Benny is so excitable.” She paused and looked me over. “He reminds me of a certain little tomboy that used to hang around here.”

I grinned as we strolled downstairs together. “You’ll have to tell me about her someday.”

Her eyes twinkled as we reached the foyer and I took up my coat and scarf. “Oh, definitely. I have many, many stories about her.”

I laughed. “I hope they’re not too incriminating.”

“Perhaps,” she teased as she opened the door for me. I stepped up to the threshold and she clasped my shoulder in one hand. “Be safe out there and have a good weekend.”

“You, too,” I returned as I zipped up my coat and ventured out into the chilly night.

All was quiet and dark as I trudged down the steps and along the sidewalk to the corner of the block. A tall street sign stood as a guide for lost travelers. I paused and looked up at the sign. Bold black letters spelled out the name of the street I had called home for many years. Roberts Street.

A soft but sad smile crept onto my lips before I stepped off the curb and made my way home. However, the night still had an adventure left for me.

I had gone a block when a car drove by close to the curb. The sewers were as ill-kept as the buildings and the passenger tires crashed into a large puddle close beside where I walked. The water flew up and soaked me to the bone. I heard laughter from inside the car as the occupants drove away.

I stood dripping wet on the sidewalk glaring at the rear taillights. It didn't take long for my nose to detect the putrid odor of the water as it sank into my clothes. I dropped my arms to my sides and sighed.

"Just great. . ." I muttered to myself as I trudged down the road. "Six blocks of this."

However, there was one option and I soon arrived at an impasse. The crossroads led northward the long way to my home, but heading forward to the empty lot would cut off those two blocks. The stench of my clothes decided for me and I hurried forward. There was a loose spot in the fence on this end, courtesy of my past experiences and many a local kid.

I ducked through the fence and into the empty lot. The place had always been a little creepy, being empty for as long as anyone could remember, but now eerie silence seemed to wrap around me. I almost tiptoed across the bare ground and my eyes flickered over the area as if I expected some wild animal to leap out of the shadows.

What I didn't expect was for the ground to cave in.

I stepped into the center of the lot and a cracking sound echoed beneath me. My heart pounded in my chest as I looked down. Huge cracks shot out from beneath my foot and raced in every direction. I had only enough time for my body to tense before the ground gave way completely.

Terror tore a scream from me as I tumbled into the darkness. I landed hard on solid ground and the air was knocked from my lungs. Dust shot up from beneath me and covered me like a dry blanket. The two combined sent me into a coughing fit that didn't clear until the air did.

That’s when I saw the tree.

I froze mid-cough and lifted my gaze to the grotto in which I found myself. The hole was some twenty feet below street level and twice that in width. Modernity had passed by the plant as pipes and electrical conduits slithered through the dirt walls on either side of the hollow space. Standing in the center of the grotto was a short tree but the branches stretched out to the very edges of the hollow, creating an umbrella with its thin and fragile limbs. The branches were covered by purple leaves that looked almost like petals, so bright and soft were they. They even seemed to give off a gentle light that cast the whole area in its gentle glow.

I climbed to my feet and gaped up at the tree. I’d never seen anything like it except in fairytales and legends.

Something shimmered on one of its branches. I squinted my eyes and beheld a small bright purple fruit in the shape of a pear. It clung to the branch by its silver stem and the smooth surface shimmered in the strange light of the tree.

I found myself unable to pull my eyes away from the mysterious fruit. Before I knew what I was doing, my feet moved forward, propelling me across the empty ground and up to the tree. I stretched out my arm and my hand wrapped around the fruit. A strange but soothing warmth emanated from the pear as I wiggled it. The fruit gave so easily that I stumbled back, cradling my treasure in both hands. I opened my cupped palms and watched in wonder as the fruit pulsed with light.

The glow brushed aside all the alarms going off in my head. I raised the fruit to my lips and took a small bite. It didn’t taste anything like a pear, or any other fruit I’d ever had. The outside was soft and sweet but the center was bitter and hard. Still, I couldn’t help myself. I closed my eyes and swallowed.

A strange warmth tickled my toes. I glanced down and my eyes widened. The soft glow of the pear now emanated from my feet and was

climbing up my leg.

I screamed and dropped the fruit as I danced around trying to throw off the light. The glow kept up its steady advance and reached my heart. A sharp pressure struck me and the world began to spin. The light covered my eyes and blurred my vision, adding to the chaos as I began to feel light-headed.

I crumpled to the ground and fell on my side. The last thing I saw was the tree as its light faded and darkness took us both.

CHAPTER THREE

My head felt like I'd taken one too many shots of the bottom-shelf rum. I shifted and it felt as though sharp needles pricked every part of me. A whimper escaped me and I curled into myself to escape the discomfort.

A soft breeze kissed my cheeks and soothed my aching body. I risked opening my eyes and found myself staring at a brilliant blue sky. A few wispy clouds floated past the bright sun.

How long was I out? I wondered as I eased myself onto my arms.

A thick strand of silver cobweb draped itself over my face. The soft touches tickled my nose. I frowned and brushed it away but the cobweb returned and brought friends. Every time I moved more of them appeared until I realized the 'webs' were really strands of silky smooth hair. I cupped a generous handful in my palm and blinked at the unfamiliar fibers. They glistened in the sun like a freshly made web touched with dew. I gave them a pull and winced as pain shot through the top of my head.

"What are you doing in my gardens?"

The deep, even tone came from my right. I whipped my head about and found myself staring at the most beautiful man I'd ever seen. He stood over me and his height was a few inches above six feet. He wore an elegant Asian-style robe with many silver silken layers that glistened in the bright

sun overhead. The edges showed off a brilliant scarlet cloth of such fine silk that it shimmered like water. His hair was as bright as his ‘coat’ and the silky strands reached down to his butt. He had alabaster skin and a set of perfect black eyebrows, one of which was raised as he studied me with his dark eyes.

He also had the most indifferent expression I had ever seen.

My mouth flopped open a couple of times and I was even more dumbstruck when I noticed my surroundings. I lay on a wide terrace that overlooked a set of small stairs and a small square pool was at the end of the platform. The stairs finished at a wide and very white stone path that came to a crossroads some twenty feet away. The path parted in three different directions and each of those led to an arch flanked by high walls of bright stone. Everything was a brilliantly clean white color. Not a speck of dirt was out of place nor was a smidgen of dust to be found.

My heart pounded in my chest as I sat up. The long strands of unfamiliar hair slid over my breasts and pooled in my lap.

My *naked* lap.

I looked down at myself and my mouth fell open. My clothes were nowhere to be found. A rising steam of terror and embarrassment boiled up within me. I screamed and tried to cover myself with the thin strands of hair. They performed about as well as a silken curtain but I couldn’t hide all my assets.

A robe fell over my shoulders and I eagerly wrapped it around myself. A quick tie across my front and some of my modesty was returned to me.

My scream must have been impressive because two guards with spears hurried through one of the arches. They both wore helmets with face guards and sported padded chest and waist armor along with shin guards. The pair stopped at the foot of the stairs and their confused eyes fell on me.

“We heard a noise, sir!” one of them reported to the man who stood over me.

The man turned to them and used a smooth gesture of his arm to indicate me. “This woman screamed.”

One of the guards squinted at me. “Who is she, sir?”

“I do not know.”

The guard’s eyebrows crashed down and he tightened his grip on his spear. “Then she is an intruder, sir? If she is, we must take her with us.”

The handsome man didn’t get a chance to reply before a tall, thin man with a sharp face sauntered into the gardens. He wore a flashy set of purple-colored robes of various hues. There wasn’t a speck of white to ease the eyes as he scurried over to us with curiosity in his eyes and a condescending smile on his lips.

“My dear Emperor Eastwei!” he cooed as he reached the guards. “I heard a commotion as I was passing by and just-my goodness!” His attention had fallen on me and his mouth fell open. “Who is this young woman, My Lord? I have never seen her before. Is she an intruder?” He didn’t wait for a reply but puffed out his weak chest. “Well, if she is I will take her forthwith to His Majesty for judgment! Guards! Seize this woman!”

I couldn’t understand what he was talking about but the tone was far from friendly. The guards marched up the steps and each of them grabbed one of my arms.

“Let go!” I pleaded as I was dragged to my feet and hauled down the path by the pair. “I didn’t do anything wrong! I don’t know how I got here! I don’t even know where here is!”

The man sneered at me. “How can anyone mistake the heavenly realm for anywhere else? Whatever reason you have for invading the emperor’s palace, you will be justly punished! Take her away!”

The guards were far too strong and I could only stumble along in their unbreakable grasp. The skinny man followed behind us with his chin held high and a supreme expression of satisfaction on his face. I was half-

dragged through the completely unfamiliar place. It seemed to have many buildings and paths, all made from the same pristine white stone and dotted with gardens and gazebos. The place was a veritable maze of narrow paths and wide sidewalks, however, and I soon became lost.

My ‘guides’ knew where they were going and led me onto a very wide boulevard. The street itself was lower than either side where a few wide walks followed the main path. Gardens abutted the rear of the walks where the trees shaded the sides. Behind those were thirty-foot walls of the white stone, and beyond those I glimpsed the roofs of many buildings. Wherever I was, it was a massive place.

A few people chatted on the wayside walking path. They, too, were dressed in immaculate robes and all wore their hair long, even the men. None of them featured the same brilliant red as the man I had met.

They ceased their conversation as I was paraded past them. “What news, Pampir?” one of them spoke up.

The pompous leader of my incarceration lifted his chin a little higher. “I have caught an intruder.”

A gasp rose from the group and one of the women shook her head. “Surely not!”

He swept an arm toward me. “As you see. I am taking her to His Majesty to question her about her intentions and seek a harsh punishment.”

Some of the group tagged along while others hurried away, no doubt to spread the false narrative set up by my scrawny accuser. Nearly naked and confused as I was, my indignation arose at the thought of being introduced to these strangers as nothing more than some intruder intent on some horrible deed.

More people assembled on the side paths, no doubt lured by the lurid tales of their companions. They gawked and pointed at me, and I shrank under their attentions. Pampir puffed out his chest and strode to the front of

our little party. He sauntered so leisurely that the guards holding me were forced to slow their own pace lest they crash into the puffed-up peacock.

The chatter among the dozens of people was like the buzzing of bees. Pampir walked through the noise like the queen enjoying the fruits of his fame.

I glanced ahead at where he led me and saw that the avenue led to a large palace. Dozens of wide steps led up to a large portico that covered a pair of closed doors. I was marched up the stairs with the crowd eagerly following on our heels. Another pair of guards stood watch on either side of the entrance and at our coming they stepped into Pampir's path.

"What business do you have here?" a guard questioned my captor.

Pampir stretched to his full height which was barely above my own. "I bring important news to His Majesty and need an audience with him."

"His Majesty is in council at the moment," one of them replied.

Pampir frowned. "But I have brought with me an intruder into the sanctity of His kingdom! She must be judged before him!"

One of the doors opened and a man stepped out. He was nearly six feet tall with flowing silver robes and a warm smile on his ovular face. His long black hair draped down to mid-chest and one of his perfectly-kept fingers sported a ring of intertwining gold and silver coils. His eyes were dark and playful, but they showed a spark of intelligence in their depths that showed he wasn't all games.

He stepped aside and swept his arm toward the interior. "You may allow them to enter."

CHAPTER FOUR

I WAS PULLED THROUGH THE DOORS AND DISCOVERED THE BUILDING was less a home than a council room. The space itself was square but rounded tiers of low stone desks surrounded the center of the floor. A set of wide stairs directly in front and two smaller ones on either side allowed easy access to any seat. The highest of the tiers stood at the end opposite the doors and there was no desk there, only a platform with a single high-backed throne. The chair was carved with raised images of animals, forests, and all manner of life, and seated upon its cushion was a man in glistening white robes lined with red.

The man appeared to be about sixty with long graying hair and a stern expression. He sat erect like an imperious judge and his hands grasped the front of the arms. Rings of various shapes and colors covered his fingers and a necklace about his neck showed off many more precious gems.

I was surprised to see the man referred to as Emperor Eastwei standing at his side. In Pampir's eagerness to show me off the other man had beaten us to the room.

The crowd eagerly followed us inside and the room would have been swamped with spectators if the seated man hadn't raised his voice. "Allow the council and no one else."

The guards nodded and turned to the crowd. The people reluctantly but obediently removed themselves save for about three dozen men and women who hurried to their assigned seats. They stared curiously at me and spoke in hushed whispers.

“Bring her forward,” the seated man commanded.

I was carted to the center of the room and dropped onto the floor. My quick knot partially came undone and the front opened, revealing some of my nakedness. I fought back tears as I clutched the two halves of the robe and shut it, but not before more than one man stared appreciatively at me.

The guards stepped back but Pampir positioned himself at my side like a jailer. “Your Majesty, I bring to you-”

“Lord Eastwei has already told me the circumstances of this woman’s appearance,” His Majesty interrupted him. I was surprised to hear a different title given to the man.

A little bit of Pampir’s wind wheezed out of him. “I-I see. Well, I bring her to you so you might investigate the matter further, Your Majesty.”

The imperial majesty’s dark eyes settled on me. “What is your name?”

I parted my lip to speak but my mouth was so dry that no sound would come out. Pampir glared down at me. “The King of Heaven has commanded you to speak, wench.”

“Can you not see she is terrified?” the man from the door spoke up as he sauntered up to my other side.

“You have nothing to fear if you have done nothing wrong,” the king told me.

I whetted my lips and cleared my throat. “M-my name is Anna. Anna Roberts.”

One of the attendees on my left and near the bottom tier leaned toward his companion. “A most unusual name.”

“What realm do you hail from so we may make inquiries into your lineage?” one of the men spoke up.

I blinked at him. “Realm? I’m not from any realm, I’m from Brookston.”

“Surely this Brookston is located within one of the immortal realms,” the man insisted.

I swept my confused eyes over the room. “Immortal realms?”

Pampir sneered down at me. “You feign ignorance of even the five realms?”

I shook my head. “I don’t know anything about realms or immortals. I come from a city called Brookston and I’m just normal like everyone else.”

A woman turned her nose up and scoffed. “She is quite brazen to lie to us-” The king raised his hand and quieted the room.

His Majesty studied me with deeper curiosity. “You say you are a mortal and yet you share the same immortal aura as us.”

My mouth flapped open a few times before I gathered myself. “I have a what?”

“Your Highness, this woman is obviously trying to waste our time with her disingenuous acting,” Pampir spoke up as he used an arm to gesture down at me. “Perhaps some of our truth serums will convince her to tell us what she truly knows.”

“I don’t think she is acting,” my defender chimed in as he smiled down at me. “His Majesty is correct in saying she shares our aura, but I detect faint hints of mortal dust on her person. If I didn’t know any better, I would say she is newly created.”

A murmur of hushed whispers and stifled gasps rose from the audience. The king raised his hand and all fell silent. He leaned toward me and I shrank beneath his sharp eyes. “You say you were mortal once. How did you come to find immortality?”

I swallowed the lump in my throat but my words still came out raspy. “I don’t know anything about finding immortality, but I can tell you the last

thing I remember before I-" I paused and a faint blush appeared on my cheeks as I recalled my awakening. "Before I got here."

"Then speak and we shall listen."

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. "I. . .I was walking home. It was night and I took a shortcut through an empty lot. I guess the ground wasn't stable and I fell through a hole. There was this small tree with purple leaves just standing there in front of me." My description caused another wave of murmurs to rise from the audience.

His Majesty shot everyone a look of warning that silenced them. "Please continue."

I shook my head. "There isn't much left to tell. The tree had a fruit on it and I. . .I couldn't help myself. I took a bite and the next thing I know I'm here. That's it. That's all that happened."

"What fruit did it bear?" the man with the soft smile asked me.

I bit my lower lip. "I-I don't know. I've never seen it before."

Pampir scoffed. "You expect us to believe you ate a fruit from a mysterious tree and arrived here?"

I frowned at him. "I don't expect you to believe what I'm saying but I'm not lying. That's what really happened."

"What was the color of the fruit?" my defender inquired.

I furrowed my brow as I thought back to that pivotal moment. "It was purple like the tree but with a silver stem." A soft murmur rose from some of the company. I couldn't tell if it was to my advantage or disadvantage.

"And its flavor?" he wondered.

I twisted my face with thought. "I. . .it kind of tasted sweet and bitter at the same time." Another murmur arose from the crowd and the hairs on the back of my neck stood on end. I felt there was something amiss among their hurried whispers. My heart thumped hard in my chest as I looked among them. "What's wrong? Why are you all looking like that?"

“His Majesty will be the one asking the questions here!” Pampir snapped at me.

“Quiet,” the king commanded. The stern tone quieted their outward curiosity and Pampir’s fuming words. The royal turned to his companion, the Eastwei fellow. “You can confirm that you did not see her arrive in your gardens but suddenly felt her presence as if she appeared from nowhere?”

Eastwei barely inclined his head. “Yes.”

His Majesty pursed his lips and returned his attention to me. “I will need to think this matter over. Until then, befitting your status as a sky goddess you will be granted a small hall.” He turned to look behind him at a servant who stood behind and to the side of the throne. “What halls are empty now?”

“The Fanshe Hall is empty at this time, Your Majesty,” the man replied.

“Then you shall have that hall,” His Majesty offered as he returned his focus to me. A sharp look slipped into his eyes and tongue. “However, you will not be allowed to venture beyond its walls until we have confirmed your tale. Should you be discovered beyond its boundaries you will be immediately imprisoned.”

I felt a sudden pressure in my chest and I sat up. “But I don’t want to stay here. Can’t you send me home?”

He closed his eyes and shook his head. “If what you say is true then you no longer belong in the mortal realm. To return there would slowly kill you.”

A cold hand wrapped around my heart, freezing my veins as well. I sat there in a stupor trying to process his words but unable to think or speak.

The man with the soft smile knelt beside me and grasped my shoulders in a gentle grip. “Allow me to assist you up.” I dumbly nodded and he helped me to my feet.

Pampir looked on with disapproval. “I do not think it is a good idea for a prince of heaven to be so kindly toward this unknown goddess. She may

attack him at any moment."

"Do you doubt the swiftness of our guards?" the prince countered.

Pampir scoffed. "It is not doubt in our guards but faith that this woman is not as weak as she appears."

"That will soon be discovered," His Majesty spoke up as he waved a hand at the doors. "Take her to her quarters and disperse the crowd outside. If they desire to gossip then they can do so in their own gardens."

One of the guards grasped my arm and leaned my weight against him. The prince reluctantly released me and stepped back. I was led through the doors and out into the crowd.

"Disperse by order of His Majesty!" one of the guards commanded.

The people glumly removed themselves and I was helped down the lonely stairs. The world was a blur as my jumbled thoughts conjured up a single realization.

I wasn't going home.

CHAPTER FIVE

"I WOULD LIKE TO HEAR FROM YOU ALL YOUR OPINION ON THE woman's story," His Majesty spoke up after the doors had been shut.

A few of the attendees in the council room stared at one another before one of the men stood. "The woman tells a most extraordinary tale, Your Majesty, but I do not think she can be trusted. Her description of the fruit of immortality is too perfect."

"But would it not be if she set her own eyes upon it?" the prince countered.

The man smiled and bowed his head to the other. "That is true, My Prince, but I am merely suggesting that she had read a scroll and learned of its description."

"A pity there is none left of the first generation to confirm her report of the tree," another chimed in as he folded his arms over his chest. "There are so few descriptions of the Diyedi Tree fruit that we cannot even confirm if hers is true without some doubt."

"If we cannot confirm the tale then what about the woman?" His Majesty persisted. "Is she at all familiar to any among us?"

Many in the company shook their heads. One of the men slyly smiled at his neighbor. "She was hardly dressed as a goddess." A tittering of laughter erupted from the others.

A woman of about sixty with a severe face stood and lifted her chin. “Whatever her attire, she is a stranger and an intruder. How did she come to pass through all our guards and our magic without anyone noticing save for Lord Eastwei?”

“How did you come to notice her, My Lord?” a gentleman inquired of the lord. “I believe His Highness mentioned only that you sensed her presence. You noticed nothing else amiss within your gardens?”

“Nothing,” came the reply.

A low, dark murmur rippled through the hall. The prince paced the floor and toyed with the ring on his finger. A smile lay on his face as he looked at each of the members. “I believe we are taking this matter too seriously.”

His Majesty leaned forward and frowned. “What do you mean?”

The prince spun on his heels to face the royal and shook his head. “I mean no disrespect, Your Majesty, but perhaps we should take this young woman at her word. After all, she is merely a goddess and a young one at that.”

“A stranger might cause a lot of trouble if the stories from the land realm are to be believed,” one of the members argued.

Another bobbed her head. “Yes! Their lands are being attacked one after the other and no one has found the culprit! What if this woman is that fiend?”

“Do you believe our defenses so poor that such a creature could worm their way into our midst?” he challenged her.

She frowned. “I believe the matter is still open and all possibilities must be considered.”

“This bickering is getting us nowhere,” the king spoke up as he stood. The others quickly rose and faced him as he caught the eye of the prince. “Since you have such an interest in her, I entrust her care to you. Ingratiate yourself with her and see what you can learn.”

The prince bowed his head. “It would be my pleasure, Your Majesty.”

The king frowned but turned and strode from the room. The buzz of gossip started the moment he disappeared. Many scurried down from their seats to speak with the prince.

“Are you sure this is such a good idea, My Prince?” one of them asked him.

He chuckled. “Should I not be pleased to have such a beautiful charge?”

“But we know nothing about her,” another countered.

He pointed in the direction of the earth beneath their feet. “Many of us know very little of what is below us and yet we still dare to walk among the mortals and land immortals. Should I now be afraid of a single woman who is so defenseless she has not even clothes to protect her?”

“One without clothes is the most dangerous type of woman!” one of the men spoke up. The other male members burst out laughing but the women were less amused.

The woman crossed her arms over her chest and glared at the men. “You may jest about this matter but I see nothing humorous in our magic being breached by a single goddess.”

The prince gave her an appreciative smile and bowed his head. “That is why I swear to you all that I will discover the truth about our new acquaintance.”

The group fell silent and parted as Lord Eastwei made his way through them. The prince inclined his head to the others and hurried after the other god. He joined him halfway down the steps. “I would greatly like to hear what you think of this strange woman’s story, Dadan.”

The god continued his onward journey without missing a stride. “I can make nothing of it.”

A coy smile slipped onto the prince’s lips. “Surely you have some idea as to the authenticity of her account.”

“I do not.”

“Then would you not like to come with me to retrieve your robe?”

Eastwei stared ahead. “I believe you would make more progress without my being there.”

The prince laughed. “Perhaps I will! Wish me luck!” He slipped away and hurried in the direction of Fanshe Hall.

Eastwei hadn’t traveled more than half the distance down the main thoroughfare before a voice called to him. “Dadan!”

He stopped and half-turned in the direction of the feminine shout. An elegant woman of twenty hurried up to him. She wore shimmering robes of soft pink with a white underlayer. Her brown hair shimmered in the sun and a smile lit up her perfectly almond-shaped face.

She grasped his hand in both of his and her brilliant brown eyes searched his face. “There you are, Dadan! Wherever have you been hiding?”

“Did you need something, Lady Shian?” Dadan replied.

She laughed and tugged on his hand. “You are always so formal with me, Dadan! You know you can call me Shian! And must I always need something to wish to see you? Can I not merely enjoy your company?”

“You may.”

She puckered her lips in a pout. “Don’t be that way, Dadan, but if you must ask, I did come to you for a reason.” He stared at her with an unblinking gaze as he inclined his head for her to continue. “Well, I wanted to invite you to a dinner I am putting on for Lady Bidao. She has recently returned from her sojourn into the mortal realm and has some wonderfully amusing stories about them that would be very interesting to hear.”

“I must decline.”

Shian’s face fell. “But it won’t be quite as fun without you there, and I already have Prince Yushir’s promise to come. You would keep him company.”

“He is perfectly fine in his own company,” Dadan countered as he made to move away.

Shian tightened her grip on his hands. “Please, Dadan. Please do this favor for me.” She leaned in and sweetened her smile. “I promise there will be a good surprise for you.”

He stared at her a moment before he sighed. “Very well.”

Shian could barely contain her joy but she settled for stepping back and bowing low to him. “Thank you, Dadan. You do me a great honor.” He slightly inclined his head and moved past her. Shian waited for him to walk out of earshot before she clapped her hands. “He will certainly be pleased by the food I’ll cook for him.” She paused and furrowed her brow as she tapped her lip with one finger. “But I don’t have a surprise for him. What should I do about that?” Her eyes lit up. “I will make him a new dessert! That will certainly will his stomach and then his heart!”

She applauded herself again before she set off to prepare for the feast.

CHAPTER SIX

I was in a beautiful hell. That was what it felt like to be half-dragged through the pristine paths and the beautiful gardens. Trees of every shape and leaf size shaded us as I was led by the guards to the hall mentioned by the king.

And a king. I never expected to meet one but he certainly pulled off the imperious nature of one. And that 'prince' the scrawny Pampir talked so badly to. If anyone was to be my jailer I was glad it was him. Still, I was going to be placed in a jail and the thought sank my heart into my stomach.

The guards guided me through the maze of buildings, walls, and paths to a simple archway. The arch led into a small garden of grass on either side with a white-barked tree on our left. The small plain path led to a porch attached to a building some twenty feet high but with only one floor. A raised covered portico surrounded the building and vines twined around the stone columns to add a nice accent. The building itself had thick screens for walls and a pair of sliding doors in front of us led inside.

The guards led me up the short set of stairs and through the doors. I was presented with a deep but simple room of marble floors without rugs. The room led clear to the back of the building with a bracing wall in the middle as a mild interruption. A low table stood at the back surrounded by mats and a few pillows were tossed into one corner, but otherwise, the room was

empty. Two pairs of sliding doors on the left were open and led into a bedroom with a low bed and a spare storage room.

The guard hefted me over to the table where he set me on one of the low mats. The pair turned and marched back outside, mindful to close the door behind them. I sat in a daze for a while where they had left me, my mind a confused mess of thoughts and indecision. The walls around the enclosure were too straight and tall to climb over, and even if I could escape where would I go? I had no idea where this heaven place was nor did I know how to get back home.

I stirred after a few minutes and looked about me. The quarters were comfortable but sparse and everything was dusted and washed. I wrapped the robe tighter about myself and stood on my shaky legs. The inspection of the place didn't take long and I soon found myself drifting toward the tempting bedroom with its soft-looking bed.

I stepped into the room and something shiny to my right caught my attention. It turned out to be a full-length mirror and my breath caught in my throat as I stared at myself.

I almost didn't recognize the face in the mirror. There were the same cheeks and the same ears, but my eyes were now a soft gray color. My skin, too, was as smooth as silk and without any blemish. The strands of brown short hair were gone, replaced by the long silver locks that framed my unfamiliar face. I reached up and brushed the shaking tips of my fingers over my face.

I jumped when a knock came from the front room. My heart pounded against my chest as I inched over to the doorway and peeked out. The man with the smile stepped over the threshold and his eyes searched the rooms for me.

"Lady Roberts?" he called out before he discovered me. "Good evening. I hope I-" My shaking legs couldn't stand the strain anymore and I

collapsed to my knees. “Lady Roberts!” The man rushed to my side and grasped my arms. “Are you hurt?”

I shook my head. “I-I’m fun, just-” I reached up a trembling hand and brushed my fingers over half my face. Tears sprang into my eyes and my lips quivered. “I don’t recognize myself. Something’s happened to me.”

“Let me assist you to the table,” he soothed as he lifted me to my feet. He leaned me against his arm and helped me to the table where he eased me onto one of the mats. He took up possession of the one on my left that faced the door. “Is there something I can get for you? Some tea, perhaps?”

I set my hands on the top of the table and shook my head. “I-I’m fine. This is just. . .just a little too much.” A bitter snort escaped me. “I keep thinking I’m going to wake up and find myself in some gutter or maybe back in my bed.”

“I assure you this is no dream, Lady Roberts,” he insisted as he set a hand over one of mine. “But should you need anything, do not hesitate to ask for my assistance.”

I shook off some of my shock and looked over my guest. “But who are you?”

His eyes twinkled as he inclined his head toward me. “My apologies. I am so well-known that I often forget to introduce myself. I am Prince Yushir, nephew of the ruler of Heaven.”

“And you. . .you’re a god?” I guessed.

He drew his hand away and nodded. “Just so. Everyone who resides in the Heavens is an immortal.”

I swept my eyes over the spacious room. “But how’d I get here?” I raised my hands and looked over the smooth skin, so unlike the worn typing fingers I knew. “And what happened to me?”

“The change in your appearance isn’t too surprising considering the circumstances,” he mused.

I blinked at him. “What do you mean?”

He leaned back and folded his arms over his chest. A contemplative expression crossed his face as he stared hard at the table. “If memory serves, those who first ate the fruit of the Diyedi Tree also experienced a change in their appearance.”

“The what tree?”

He smiled at me. “My apologies. The Diyedi Tree is, I believe, the tree you discovered in that hole. There has only one such tree in existence and that now resides in the gardens of my uncle here in heaven, though it once stood in the mortal realm many millions of years ago.”

My mouth slowly dropped open. “Wait, millions of years? And the tree is still alive?”

“The tree is as immortal as you and I,” he informed me.

I looked down at myself. “I don’t feel immortal.”

He chuckled. “That is because you have not yet practiced your magic.”

I whipped my head up and my mouth fell open. My lips flapped a few times before I got a hold of myself. “Magic? Real magic?”

“As real as you or I.”

“And I can do it? You’re sure?”

“I see no reason why you should not be able to do so,” he mused as he looked me up and down. “We need only see what element you most relate to and have you practice the gestures to summon it.”

I leaned toward him and studied his face. “You’re really serious about this, aren’t you?”

The corners of his eyes crinkled mischievously as he raised one hand with the palm facing upward. He pressed two fingers together and twisted his wrist. I started back when a large droplet of water formed out of nowhere and floated above his hand. He opened his hand and the droplet lowered onto his palm where it jiggled in place.

My big eyes were reflected in the surface of the rippling water as I leaned in. “Wow.”

He closed his fingers around the droplet and the magic vanished with a soft ‘sploosh.’ I started back and found him smiling at me. “Now it is your turn.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

Yushir stood and offered me his hand. I reluctantly accepted and he pulled me gently to my feet before guiding me out into the warm sun. He gestured to a patch of grass on the opposite side of the walk from the tree. “Please take a seat here and we will begin your first lesson.”

I was more than a little apprehensive as I took a seat on the plush lawn. Sitting was a little awkward with the robe and I kept tugging it down to cover my legs.

Yushir leisurely paced the path in front of me with his brow furrowed and a hand tapping against his cheek. “Now let’s see. What shall we begin with?” He stopped and his eyes widened. “Yes, that should do.” He spun around to face me and my nervousness tripled. The prince stretched out his hand and formed his hand into an ‘okay’ sign. “Mimic what I do.” I performed the task with more ease than I expected and a grin spread across my lips. He swept his arm in a small circle in front of him and thrust his hand out. “Now repeat that gesture.” I tried to make a circle but he shook his head. “No no no. You need to create a perfect circle or the magic will be very weak. It may not even come at all.”

I stiffened my jaw and tried again. And again. And again. I tried so many times my arm began to grow tired.

Yushir finally sighed. “Perhaps we should give it a try anyway.” I dropped my arm into my lap and hung my head. He patted my shoulder. “No need for that. The motions merely coax the magic out of you. The magic inside is the greatest matter.”

I winced. “So how do I do that?”

“Focus your thoughts on the tiny spark inside you and try to imagine drawing out the magic like plucking strings on a ball of thread,” he instructed.

I looked down at myself. “A tiny spark?”

“That is the spark of your element,” he explained as he pointed his ringed finger at my chest. “Every god and goddess has one contained within them at the point of their creation. I doubt the circumstances are any different for you.”

I sat up and nodded. “I’ll try.”

Yushir stepped back and to the side watching me carefully. I breathed out and returned my hand to the starting position. All was still and quiet in the garden as I dug around inside me in search of this fabled ball of thread. There didn’t seem to be anything different on my inside, but I stiffened my jaw and performed the hand maneuver anyway.

Nothing came out. Not a spark nor a sputter of water. I frowned and tried again. The result was the same. I felt nothing and nothing came out.

After a half dozen tries, Yushir stepped up to me with a tense smile on his face. “You are either a very fine actress or the worst magic user I have ever seen.”

I glared up at him. “I’ve never used magic before, okay? I wasn’t lying when I said I was just a normal mortal before I ate that fruit.”

He wagged his finger at me. “For what it’s worth, I believe you.”

I drew my legs up against my chest and wrapped my arms around them before I set my chin atop my knees. “I don’t know what that’s worth. I don’t know what’s going on at all.”

“Then I will find a servant to help you understand the small things and the big ones will be less of a concern,” he promised me as he looked me up and down. “And I will see that she brings you a suitable set of clothes. Lord Eastwei will no doubt be wanting his robe back.”

I furrowed my brow as my thoughts strayed to the impassive man. Anything to take my mind off my most epic of failures. “Is he a lord or an emperor?”

Yushir lifted an eyebrow at me. “That is an unusual question for you to ask.”

I shrugged. “I heard that Pampir guy call him that in the garden.”

My guest rolled his eyes and sighed. “I see. That would explain matters.”

“It does?” I wondered.

Yushir nodded as he paced the ground in front of me. “Pampir is always trying to ingratiate himself with Lord Eastwei and he often does so by using the lord’s old title.”

“Then Eastwei *was* an emperor?” I guessed.

“Many tens of millions of years ago, but he gave up the title and retired to enjoy life in the heavens.”

I choked on my spittle. “Tens of millions of years?”

“Many of us live at least that long,” he mused.

I murmured as I shook my head. “I. . .I can’t imagine living even one percentage of that many years.”

He chuckled. “Nor could I before I hit my first million but those afterward are much easier to manage.”

I gaped at him. “You. . .you’re a million years old?”

He cocked his head to one side and looked up at the sky as he furrowed his brow. “I believe I celebrated my fifteen millionth birthday a few thousand years ago.”

My jaw hit the ground. “You’re joking.”

He shook his head. “Indeed, I am not. Barring injury or illness, immortality is truly living forever.”

I stared at him for a long moment before I snapped out of my stupor. “What do you guys do?”

His eyes twinkled as he winked at me. “There are always pleasures to be had, such as teaching a certain new goddess how to use her magic.”

I snorted. “That’s going to take us another fifteen million years.”

“Perhaps, but I believe victory will come in due time.” He set a hand on my shoulder and I looked up into his gentle eyes. “But you look tired. Rest for a while. I will see to fetching you an attendant.”

I turned my face away but nodded. Yushir slipped away through the arches where I could just make out the guards standing in the shadow of the high walls. My shoulders drooped and I eased myself onto my weary feet. The lesson had taken its toll and I shuffled off to bed.

The furniture turned out to be incredibly comfortable and the blankets were light and airy. I took a seat on the edge and looked down at myself. The robe was so soft but I feared becoming entangled in its silky threads, so I removed it.

I slipped beneath the covers and buried my head in the soft pillow. Sleep took me a few minutes later.

CHAPTER EIGHT

"Your unusual visitor is quite handsome, is she not?"

The speaker was Prince Yushir and his partner in the conversation was the stoic owner of the gardens in which Anna had fallen. The pair sat in those same gardens under the cover of a small pavilion. A round table sat between them and they were seated on rounded stools. A creek gurgled just behind them and slipped past the foundation of the stone pavilion to settle itself into a small pool. Fishes dashed about looking in search of food while the sun glistened overhead.

The master of the gardens held a nearly-finished wooden flute in his hand. The work pouch with the carving tools lay open on the table in front of him. He didn't look up from his inspection to reply.

"I hadn't noticed."

The prince tapped a finger against the table. "Come come, my dear Dadan. Surely you noticed her radiant beauty. I've never seen anything quite like it, though I've crossed the five realms and ventured into the mortal world more than my fair share of times." His companion didn't reply, but Yushir wasn't deterred. He tapped the tip of his finger against the table. "And the more I speak with her the more I believe her tale. She is as incompetent in magic as a newborn." He threw up his arms. "She couldn't even send out a spark!"

“I doubt she holds such an element,” Dadan countered.

Yushir folded his arms over his chest and furrowed his brow. “Yes, I had thought of that. She does have the ethereal quality of we heavenly immortals but there is something-” He paused and furrowed his brow a moment before he shook his head. “No, I cannot describe it. Perhaps when her element appears I will have my answer.” The prince leaned back and sighed. “But she has certainly come at an ill time. A messenger arrived only this morning to inform my uncle that another village in the land’s immortal realm has been attacked.”

Dadan paused in his perusal and looked up with a sharp expression in his eyes. “Where?”

“The realm of the rabbits, I believe,” Yushir mused as he tapped his finger against his other folded arm. “The village was the same as the others. The immortals were dead, drained of their elements, and without a single sign of struggle. I wonder if they even noticed their death before it came.” He shook his head. “But perhaps death is so foreign to so many of us that we would not recognize it even if we did see it. How long has it been since we last went into battle, old friend?”

Dadan returned to carving his flute. “Fifty thousand years.”

Yushir nodded. “Ah, yes. When the wolf and the bear clans last fought. What a terrible war that was. Who knew they hated each other so viciously?” He sighed and stood. “But I must be going. I promised our new friend that I would find her a maid. She is in desperate need of someone to show her the way.” He half-turned away but paused and looked over his shoulder. “By the way, do you wish for her to return your robe?”

“She may do with it as she pleases,” was the offhand reply.

Yushir coyly smiled. “There are many maidens here and below who would give some of their beauty for a mere touch of your mantle. Perhaps she will sell it to one of those desperate maidens.”

“Perhaps.”

Yushir sighed and shook his head. “Someday, old friend, I will see you surprised and it will be a most joyous occasion for me.”

“That will be a day indeed,” Dadan answered without looking up from his craft.

Yushir’s gaze fell on the instrument. “You have been toiling away with that thing for the better part of ten years. Will you never finish?”

Dadan dug out a hair of a sliver from the inside of one of the holes. “It is nearly done.”

The prince’s eyes widened. “Then you will finally play it for me?”

“When I have tested it.”

Yushir grinned and bowed his head. “I look forward to that day. If you will excuse me.” Dadan almost imperceptibly inclined his head.

The prince hurried away from the pavilion and out into the main thoroughfares of the vast kingdom of heaven. His eyes studied the many female servants who hurried hither and thither to obey the words of their mistresses.

“Now where might I find a maid to help Lady Roberts,” he mused as he passed by a pair. One of them whispered to the other and they both giggled. He shook his head. “No. I cannot imagine her being so childish.” Another maid passed by with her nose perpetually stuck in the air. He wrinkled his nose. “I doubt they would be agreeable to one another.”

Many paths fell behind him and Yushir had just about given up when a lonely maid caught his attention. The woman was hardly more than twenty with long brown hair and a brown streak of skin on her cheeks. Her attire was the plain tan clothes of the help but a simple beaded bracelet hung on one wrist.

She sat on her knees in front of one of the more lavish palaces with a soapy brush in her hands and a bucket beside her. A sign hung over the pair of wide wooden doors that read ‘Gonglu Palace.’ She had tears in her eyes as she scrubbed the ground.

Yushir sauntered over to the maiden and stopped at her side where he leaned over to catch her eye. “What worries you, my child?” She started back and whipped her head around. Her eyes were a startlingly bright brown that was familiar to him. “Are you not of the bear clan?”

Her eyes widened with recognition and she scrambled to her feet where she bowed low. “Y-your Highness! My sincerest apologies! I didn’t know you were-”

“No need for any of that,” he assured her as he looked her wet self over. He nodded at the bucket. “What were you doing just now?”

She blushed and twined her fingers together in front of her. “I. . .I was commanded by Lady Shian to wash the floor outside the palace.”

He lifted an eyebrow. “That sounds like quite the task. And you were charged with doing this alone?”

She hung her head. “Yes, Your Highness.”

“Why would she give you such a task?” he inquired.

The young woman stiffened. “I. . .I accidentally dropped her favorite perfume jar. It shattered and as punishment, I was to wash the floor.”

“But surely that was just an accident,” the prince mused.

She nodded. “It was, Your Highness, but I was commanded by my mistress and I must do as she says.”

He studied the thin shaking frame in front of him and a crooked smile slipped onto his lips. “What is your name?”

She fidgeted with her fingers. “It’s Arian Beran, Your Highness.”

“From your markings, I guess you are from the bear clan?”

“Yes, Your Highness.”

“Have you been in the heavens long?”

“About two years, Your Highness.” She risked a tentative look up at him. “Might I. . .may I ask why Your Highness asks such questions?”

“I merely wish to inform your mistress that I have found a place better suited for you.”

Arian's eyes lit up. "Truly?"

He nodded and swept an arm toward the archway. "Shall we tell her now or do you wish to finish the floor?"

Arian lifted her chin and tossed the brush into the bucket with a hard spelunk. The prince led the way through the arch and into the elegant gardens of the Gonglu Palace. Trees lined both sides of the path and flowers bloomed under the care of a half dozen maidens. They stopped their work and bowed low to the prince as he passed, but they cast curious and sometimes sharp looks at Arian who followed on his heels.

They arrived at the grand structure that housed the mistress of the impressive palace. Transparent purple curtains covered much of the main portico in front of the doors from the ever-present sun. A few reclining cushions sat behind that protective covering and Lady Shian lounged in the center of the chattering hens.

They stood at the arrival of His Highness and bowed. Lady Shian smiled mischievously at the prince "Your Highness, you are very early to my party. It is not for a few weeks yet."

"And I look forward to your plentiful table, but other matters have brought me here," he revealed as he used an arm to gesture to Arian. "I wish to assign your maid here to another goddess."

Shian looked over the young girl and frowned. "Another goddess? I fear you have been deceived. This maid is not fit for the heavens as her actions have shown."

The prince smiled. "Still, I wish for your leave to reassign her."

Shian laughed. "You do not need my permission, Your Highness. Do as you wish with her and I wish her future mistress good luck."

Yushir inclined his head to the party. "Thank you and good day."

He turned and caught Arian's eye. The maid eagerly followed him out of the palace and onto the main thoroughfare. The prince was all smiles but the young maid had trepidation written all across her face.

“I do not mean to sound ungrateful, Your Highness, but to whom have I been assigned?”

“You have no doubt heard we have a new goddess among us,” he commented.

She jerked to a stop and her eyes widened. “The one found in Lord Eastwei’s garden?

He half-turned to her with a questioning eyebrow. “Yes. Is that a problem?”

Arian bit her lower lip. “I. . .I do not think Lady Shian will be pleased to hear I have been given to her.”

“And why not?” the prince persisted.

“She. . .she was not pleased to hear the circumstances of her arrival and thinks she is unfit to be among the heavenly gods.”

Yushir smiled. “Then I think this is the perfect post for you. Lady Shian will be certain to keep her distance from our new acquaintance and so you will rarely meet.”

Arian didn’t look completely convinced but she bowed her head. “If you believe so then it must be true, Your Highness.”

“Now let us see you to your new mistress.”

CHAPTER NINE

My rest was long and filled with strange dreams. I was haunted by visions of glowing fruit and disapproving faces shrouded in shadows. A handsome pair of cold eyes appeared out of the darkness and I found myself slightly comforted.

And then I woke up.

I blinked against the bright sunlight as I sat up. I wasn't in my apartment bedroom but in the unfamiliar quarters assigned to me by the king of heaven. My heart sank a little, but I flung aside the covers and swung my legs over the side.

"Good morning, Lady Roberts."

I jumped a foot in the air and crashed onto the floor. A strangled gasp came from the doorway and delicate feet padded across the floor. A strange woman with brown hair hurried up to me and knelt by my side.

"Forgive me, Lady Roberts!" she pleaded as she grasped my arm. "I did not mean to startle you!"

I blinked up at her. "Who are you?"

"My name is Arian. Prince Yushir has assigned me to you as your maid," she explained as she looked me over. "But are you hurt?"

I shook my head. "N-no, I'm fine. I didn't fall very far."

“Please allow me to help you stand,” she begged as she hefted me to my feet with more strength than I gave her slim frame credit for. “I thought you had seen me and only meant to wish you a good morning.”

I sat on the edge of the bed and patted her hand which still grasped my arm. “I’m fine, really. I was just a little startled, that’s all and there’s no harm done.”

Arian stepped back with a face as white as a sheet and her hands grasped in front of her. “Y-you are sure?”

The poor girl looked so terrified that my heart melted for her, as did much of my own insecurities. Here was another soul who felt a little bit like a fish out of water.

I offered her a conciliatory smile. “I’m sure. Now then-” I leaned back on my arms and looked her over, “-what exactly do we do for each other?”

She blinked at me. “Do for each other, Lady Roberts? I am here to serve you and fetch what you may require.”

I stood and she backed up a bit. “Anything I require?”

She bit her lower lip. “Within reason, Lady Roberts.”

“What about if I told you to stop calling me that?”

“Calling you what, Lady Roberts?”

“That,” I told her. “I’m no lady or any other title.”

“But Prince Yushir-”

“Is very nice but my name’s Anna,” I told her as I held out my hand. “And it’s a pleasure to meet you, Arian. I think we’re going to get along just fine.” Her eyes darted between my face and my offered hand, but after a moment she eased her hand out. I gave hers a hearty shake and grinned. “See? Now then, Arian, the prince told me you could help me figure out how to live up here.”

She nodded. “I do have some experience here, Lady-“ I lifted one finger and gave her a look of warning. A ghost of a smile appeared on her face and

she nodded. “That is, I may be able to answer any questions you might have, Anna.”

“That’s better,” I complimented her. “Now where should I start to fit in here?”

She studied my attire. “I would suggest some other clothes.”

I laughed and stretched out my arms. “I don’t look very good in this, do I?”

She shook her head. “Oh, no! On the contrary, you look wonderful!” Her eyes widened and she clapped her hands over her mouth. “My apologies. I did not mean to speak so freely.”

I folded my arms over my chest and looked her over. “I think both of us have a lot of learning to do, but we’ll start with the clothes.”

Arian only too eagerly scooted over to a wardrobe situated in the far corner. She opened the doors and revealed a wide assortment of robes. Some were short and others longer, and their colors were all a becoming creamy tan and white. She sorted through them and picked up a light pink robe.

“I think this will match your eyes very well,” she assured me as she hurried back to the bed.

I took the robe and admired the color. “Really? I don’t think it’ll match my brown hair at all.”

“But your hair is silver, Lady-Anna,” she told me.

I looked down at my long tresses and sheepishly smiled at her. “Right. I forgot about that.” I could see the curiosity in her eyes but she didn’t ask. It would have been a little unbelievable to explain, even to myself.

Arian helped me into the many layers of robes and I was glad for the assistance. The cloth would have strangled me many times over and been a total mess without her help. In a few minutes, I found myself standing in front of the full-length mirror staring in disbelief at my reflection.

I was. . .beautiful. Not just cute, but, well, godly. My silver hair shimmered in the bright sun and my eyes shone against the becoming soft pink and white robes. The adorable slipper shoes on my feet seemed to make me float across the floor.

Arian stood beside me beaming with pride. “You look wonderful, Anna.”

I shook off my shock and smiled at her. “It’s all thanks to you. I would’ve been in a lot of trouble without your help.”

She bowed her head to me. “It was my pleasure.” A soft rumble came from my clothed belly. I sheepishly smiled at her and her eyes twinkled. “Would you like me to fetch breakfast?”

I set a hand on my stomach and nodded. “I think so.”

She half-turned toward the door but paused and nodded at the discarded robe on the foot of the bed. “What do you wish for me to do with the robe?”

I turned toward the bed and took a step. My untrained foot stepped on the front of my long robe and I let out a squeak before crashing to the floor.

“My Lady!” Arian cried out as she rushed to my side.

My other robes had swallowed me up and she was quick to pull them off my head. I sputtered on my hair and spat out some long strands. “I think I’m going to need some practice with this stuff.”

Arian could barely contain her smile as she helped me to my feet. “I am sure you will soon walk as beautifully as you appear.”

I snorted and patted her shoulder which made her eyes widen. “Let’s hope that comes before I kill myself on these robes.”

I brushed out a few wrinkles while Arian worked on those at my back. In a few moments we had me straightened out and looking decent, but my exhilaration was somewhat dampened. There was still the matter of the borrowed garment.

I moved over to the bed and brushed my hand over the silken surface. “I think we should return it. After it’s cleaned, that is.”

She took up the robe and nodded. “I will see to it after breakfast.”

I gingerly followed Arian to the entry room and took a seat at the short table. A quick inspection of the place made me realize something. “Where’s the kitchen?”

“There is a shared kitchen for the palaces,” Arian explained as she nodded at the door. “I will see what is available and fetch it for you.” She bowed and hurried out.

I sighed and stretched my robes around myself. My efforts proved to be hilarious as I soon looked like a puffed-out and squishy umbrella. Still, the clothes were both cool and warm at the same time, and airy enough that I felt like I was sitting on a cloud.

Arian soon returned with a tray and a silver dome covered the plate. She set it before me and lifted the cloche to reveal a scrumptious platter of meats and vegetables all mixed together and spotted with spices. Steam wafted up and I inhaled a scent and spicy scent.

“This smells so good,” I complimented as I picked up the fork and made to dig in. I paused when I noticed a problem. “Aren’t you going to eat?”

Arian stood at my side with empty hands. “I will eat after you.”

I frowned. “I’d rather you eat with me.”

“It is customary for we maids to eat after our mistress.”

I sighed before I set my fork down and folded my arms. The wide bell sleeves meant I could tuck my hands into their soft folds. “I don’t want to be your mistress, I want to be your friend, and that means we eat together or we starve together.”

She bit her lower lip and glanced at the open door. “But I am supposed to-”

“Sit right down here,” I quipped as I grabbed her hand and yanked her down onto the mat beside me. I pushed the plate so it sat between us. “And eat beside me.”

She blushed. “Then, by all means, you eat first, My-” I pointed the fork tongs at her. “Anna.”

I drew my utensil away and a thought struck me that made me sheepishly smile at her. “I guess there is only one fork, isn’t there?”

She nodded. “So you may eat first.”

“And then you finish it off,” I insisted as I dug into the mountain. “Because I can’t eat all this by myself, anyway.”

CHAPTER TEN

I finished my half of the plate and handed Arian the fork. She was reluctant at first, eating only as much as a frightened mouse would risk grabbing. I pushed the plate closer to her and nodded. She took the hint and dug into the delicious meal.

With her preoccupied and me not, I now had a good chance to take a look at my new acquaintance. There was one peculiar aspect of her that caught my attention. "What are those markings on your cheeks?" Arian froze and a heavy blush accented her cheeks. I felt as if someone squeezed my heart. "I'm sorry. I was just asking if they were special."

She set her hand on the table with the fork on the plate and nodded. "They are the mark of my clan."

I cocked my head to one side. "They have clans in heaven?"

She pushed around the food with her utensil. "No. I am from the Land Immortal realm. My clan is the bear clan."

"Bear clan? You worship them?" I guessed.

Arian hung her head so low I could barely see her face. "No. We are able to transform into them."

I sat up in a stupor as I tried to process what she was telling me. The idea of the little short girl before me transforming into a wild beast was too ridiculous to believe. Then again, I was sitting at a table in a hall of heaven.

“Like fangs and claws and fur?” I asked her.

She didn’t dare look at me as she bobbed her head. “Yes. . .”

I stared at her a moment longer before a smile spread across my face. I lunged at her and grabbed her hand so suddenly that the fork in the other hand clattered onto the plate. Arian started back and we found ourselves staring into each other’s eyes. Mine were filled with wonder while hers were very confused.

“That is so neat!” I squealed as I squeezed her hand. “Can you do it any time you want or do you have to wait for a full moon?”

She blinked at me a moment before she cleared her throat. “I-I can change at any moment, but. . .”

A little bit of my joy drained when I watched her bite her lower lip. “What is it?”

She turned her face away from me. “Are you not ashamed to have one such as me serve you? My last mistress was. . .”

I blinked at her. “Why would I be ashamed of that?”

Arian cast a furtive glance in my direction. “I am from a lowly land clan while you are of the heavenly immortals.”

“I’m from Brookston,” I told her as I leaned to one side to capture her gaze. “I’m sure it isn’t any more glamorous than where you’re from and some places look a lot better than a bear den.”

“Oh no!” Arian replied as she shook her head. “We don’t live in dens any longer. We have built a small city around our old caves and we live in houses.”

“I’d like to see that someday,” I mused as I drew my hands into my lap. “It sounds really interesting and reminds me more of home than here.”

“Perhaps when His Majesty allows, you will be able to visit with me,” she suggested.

I grinned. “I’d like that. Now then-” I pushed the plate closer to her, “-how about you finish your meal and we can go enjoy the sunshine?”

Arian smiled and nodded before she dug into the remainder of the food. I couldn't help but stare at her with a new sense of awe. She looked so normal. It made me wonder if anyone I'd met was what they appeared to be.

My new friend cleaned the plate and tried to stand with the empty platter. I snatched the plate and set it on the table before I grabbed her hand and jumped to my feet. "Work later. A breath of fresh air now."

I led her to the door or tried to. The robes were still attempting my murder and I took each step with a small sense of dread. We reached the small porch that covered the front of the hall and I stopped to admire the view. The path that ran from the arch to the porch was in the shape of an uppercase 'L.' The tree took up the empty void inside the letter while grass surrounded the outside of the alphabet shape. The whole space was probably no more than two hundred feet square and was surrounded by a wall some fifteen feet high and half a foot thick.

It was all so inviting so I took an easy stroll down the path to admire the greenery. I stopped in the middle of the garden and lifted an arm over my head before I looked up at the sky. The shadow of my limb protected most of my peering eyes from the bright sun. A thought struck me that made me frown.

"Is something the matter?" Arian asked me.

"Is it just me or does that sun never seem to move?" I wondered.

She shook her head. "It isn't just you. The sun never sets in the land of the heavenly gods. There is no night nor even a morning, but all is sunny every hour."

My face drooped and I dropped my arm to my side before looking at her. "So no stars?"

"None, I'm afraid."

I pursed my lips as I thought back to that beautiful night sky under which I'd been transported here. A sigh escaped me.

Arian set a hand on my sleeve. “Are you sure you’re well? We might go back inside-”

I smiled and shook my head. “I’m fine. I could use some fresh air after that nap.”

We continued our little walk down the lane and soon arrived at the archway. The long, wide road with the paving stones ran past and I couldn’t help but be tempted by what lay on the other side of those imperious walls. I neared the arch and stretched my neck to catch a good view of the thoroughfare.

Arian caught my arm in both her hands and tugged me back. “You mustn’t lean out too far!”

I looked over my shoulder at her. “Why?”

“Because I will sense it.”

I started back as Yushir moved out of his hiding spot on the other side of the wall. A mischievous but stern smile lay on his lips as he walked in front of me, forcing me backward away from the arch.

“Sense it?” I repeated.

He swept an arm over the sky above the grounds. The air rippled like the surface of water and there was even a slight bluish tinge that wasn’t there before. The effect lasted only a moment before it faded back to obscurity. “I have placed a spell around this place that alerts me to anyone entering or leaving.”

My heart fell. “Why?”

“Because my uncle has entrusted you in my care and I take his commands very seriously,” he mused as he set a hand on my shoulder and turned me around to face the hall. We strolled down the garden path as he stared ahead. “But what of your magic practice?”

I winced. “I. . .haven’t really done anything. . .”

He stopped us beside the grassy spot where my last lesson had taken place and clapped his hands on my shoulders. “Then we should get you

started on today's practice. I will watch while you perform the motions I have already taught you."

My face drooped but I plopped down on the green and crossed my legs. I took a deep breath and prepared for the inevitable failure.

I wasn't disappointed. After an hour of attempting even a tiny puff of magic, all I had to show for it were some tired arms and a slightly flustered teacher.

He had his arms crossed and paced the path in front of me. "Surely you must have some gift."

I used my sleeve to wipe away some of the sweat. "Maybe I'm not really a goddess."

Yushir shook his head. "That is impossible. You carry the mantle on your shoulders as we all do."

I looked down at myself. "I don't see anything."

He smiled and tapped the side of his temple with one hand. "One must learn these skills through a training of the mind over many years."

"How many years?"

"Some thirty thousand."

My face drooped. "That's a long time for one trick."

He chuckled. "That 'trick' has helped save me many times in battle. A mortal is much easier to kill than an immortal."

My eyebrows shot up. "You guys go to war?"

"Not for many thousands of years, but yes, we have fought in many battles. Fortunately, most took place a very long time ago, back before the realms were divided up as they are now." His eyes took on a faraway look. "Immortals mingled with mortals then and the beast clans constantly vied for territory. Lord Eastwei had his hands full tamping down one dispute after another."

I cocked my head to one side. "Why would he have done that?"

Yushir smiled and turned to me. “At that time Eastwei was no mere lord but the Emperor of the One Realm. He relinquished his title when they were separated.”

I thought back to that handsome but icy-cold face. “So how did he become the emperor?”

“Through might and wisdom, and because he hailed from another land,” Yushir explained.

I furrowed my brow. “Wouldn’t that last one be bad?”

The prince toyed with his ring as he shook his head. “Not at all. Deep in the very beginnings none of the clans and gods trusted one another. Eastwei, without any such familial or diplomatic ties, was seen as a neutral party, so he was elected emperor.”

“But didn’t he belong to the heaven gods?” I pointed out.

“Oh no. He hailed from the far east and was without kin, or so far as I can get out of him.” Yushir wrinkled his nose. “He is closed-mouth about much, and most especially his past. I can hardly get him to speak about our past battles together.” He shook himself from his reverie and smiled down at me. “But you appear tired and I must make a report to my uncle about your progress. I will return tomorrow and we will continue your training. I am sure you will see some progress after a day or two.” He bowed his head and left.

My heart fell and the muscles in my arms twinged at the coming morrow.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Two weeks dragged by with the same routine. Eating, training, sleeping, and all within the confines of those high walls. Another morning came and I peeked out the door at the gardens. All was peaceful and calm. Birds chirped their merry tune as they had all the mornings before.

Arian came up behind me with an encouraging smile. “You needn’t go out and practice today. Prince Yushir said he would not come until tomorrow.”

I shrugged. “I don’t really have anything else to do.”

Arian stepped up to my side with my half-finished breakfast plate in her hands and studied my face. “You look pale this morning. Perhaps you should rest.”

I offered her a smile. “I’m fine, just a little tired. Maybe some fresh air would help.”

“Perhaps you have been trying too hard to use your magic?” she suggested.

I snorted. “I don’t think there’s any harm in that. I don’t seem to have any.” I paused and looked her over. “You have magic, don’t you?”

She nodded. “Oh, yes. All immortals-” She stopped herself and dropped her gaze to the ground as she fidgeted with her fingers. “That is, many of us have magic.”

I set a hand on her shoulder. “It’s okay. I’ve lived my whole life without magic so I won’t notice if I don’t have it now.”

Arian bit her lower lip. “There. . .there may be a way to reveal your magic.”

Her words piqued my interest. “How?”

She furrowed her brow. “One of my uncles was slow in learning his magic. My grandfather decided he needed only motivation and threw him into a huge snake pit.” My face drooped so far that Arian paled. She held up her hands in front of her and shook her head. “That is, I would never suggest that you place yourself in harm’s way, only that perhaps you, um, lack motivation.”

A snort escaped me and I slid my hand off her shoulder. “You might be right. I don’t exactly feel that motivated to do magic. I mean, what would I use it for?”

“Perhaps you have creation magic,” she suggested.

My eyebrows shot up. “What’s that?”

“The ability to craft items out of nothing with only your thoughts,” she explained as she held up the plate in her hands. “This food is crafted from the thoughts of the cooks in the kitchen.”

“All of it?” I asked her.

She smiled and shook her head. “No. That is, it can be, but the best-tasting food comes from real gardens and meat. A meal as simple as breakfast, though, can be easily made with creation magic. The vegetables and such are created by magic and the rest is fresh.”

I stared at the bits of food with new admiration. “And I might be able to do that?”

“Many of those in the heavens can,” she revealed as she looked me up and down. “And you have all the beauty of those among the clouds.”

I laughed and clapped a hand on her shoulder. “And you’re just as beautiful, and we can stop there at exchanging compliments before we both

get embarrassed. Anyway-" I turned my head to face the gardens and sighed, "-I should try to get some magic going or I won't ever be able to make even an omelet."

We parted ways with Arian tending to the chores and me practicing my magic gestures. I sat cross-legged in the same spot as I had dozens of times before but even with the incentive of practical magic my heart wasn't into the motions. Finally, I dropped my arms into my lap and sighed.

"Is something the matter?" Arian wondered as she came up to me with a tea platter in her hands.

I gave her a sheepish smile. "I. . .I guess I was hoping the life of a goddess would be a little more glamorous, or at least a little more exciting." Who knew I'd start to miss all those invites for a Friday night get-together?

"There are many ways the other goddesses amuse themselves that you haven't seen," she assured me as she knelt and set the platter on the grass beside me.

I leaned toward her. "Like what?"

She paused and furrowed her brow. "There are the magic competitions once a year. Oh, and the parties. They very much enjoy inviting one another to their palaces for a small gathering to enjoy a special tea or a new food."

I drew my legs up against my chest and set my chin on my knees. "A party sounds like a fun idea." Arian froze and a strange expression lit up her face. I cocked my head to one side. "What is it?"

She bit her lip. "There is a party scheduled for today and not too far from here."

My head shot up. "Really? Could we see it from here?"

"I'm afraid not."

My whole body drooped and I dropped my chin back onto my knees. "Oh. . ."

There was some reluctance in her voice and she spoke slowly. "However, we may be able to view it in person."

I lifted an eyebrow. “How?”

“You might leave here with me.”

“But I can’t leave. Yushir would feel it and find me, and then we’d both be in trouble,” I pointed out.

Arian bit her lower lip. “There. . .there may be a way out of the hall grounds.”

My ears perked up at her words. “Really? How?”

My maidservant nodded at the sky. “His Highness has cast a net over the whole of the hall but he may not have cast his magic deep into the ground. We might dig our way under the wall and escape through there.”

I looked around us at the high walls. “That doesn’t sound easy to do. I mean, aren’t these walls thick at the base?”

Arian nodded. “They are but I believe I can dig through under them without issue. I have dug many tree holes near the walls and have found that their foundations only sink a foot or two.”

“I’m not going to let you dig alone,” I insisted as I climbed to my feet and looked about us. “I just need a shovel.”

She smiled and shook her head. “There is no need for that. However, I would ask that you hold my clothes while I dig.”

I froze and blinked at her. “Hold. . .your clothes?”

“Yes. They will be damaged if I transform in them and my clan being from the earth, we do not have creation magic to conjure up a new set.”

I studied her thin physique. “Are you sure about this? I don’t want to get you into trouble just because I have cabin fever.” She blinked at me. “Just because I want to see something other than these four walls.”

She bowed her head to me. “It would be my pleasure to show you around and perhaps a little exploration will darken the paleness on your cheeks.”

I reached up and brushed my fingers against my cheek. “It’s that bad?”

She lifted her gaze to me and pursed her lips. “Your color does make me worry.”

I dropped my hand to my side and sighed. “Alright, but we run at the first sign of trouble, alright?”

She bobbed her head. “Oh yes, now we had better hurry. The party is set to begin at noon at the Gonglu Palace.”

I followed her to the rear of the compound near the wrap-around porch. The corner of the area was decorated with flowerbeds and gravel lining. Arian stopped in front of the wall and began removing her clothes.

My mouth dropped open. “You’re really going to undress?”

“Of course,” she replied as she turned to me holding her outer clothing. “Did you still wish to leave?”

I pursed my lips and swept my eyes over the garden. The beauty was stale. “More than ever.”

She held out her clothes. “Then please hold these.”

I took her garments and she removed the rest of them. A slight blush accented my cheeks as modesty demanded I look away. Still, I couldn’t help but cast a furtive look out of the corner of my eyes as my naked maidservant stepped up to the wall.

She stretched out her arms on either side of her and a soft brown glow surrounded her. My eyes widened as brown fur sprouted from her body and her muscles began to expand. She grew a foot and dropped onto all fours. Her hands and feet transformed into huge paws that ended in sharp claws.

Arian shook her whole body and a few bits of loose fur flew before she went to work. I stepped back and gaped at my companion as she buried her thick long claws into the earth. The dirt didn’t stand a chance as she dug away at the soil two feet down. She soon found the foundation of the wall and dug a little deeper to create a sizeable hole beneath the stone.

After about ten minutes, she wiggled her way into her hole and continued digging. I wondered if she was part gopher, so skillfully did she

claw through the soil. Her short stubby tail soon disappeared and a moment later her human head popped out the other side.

“Hurry!” she whispered to me.

I handed Arian her clothes and slipped into the hole. The tunnel was plenty big enough for me and I soon crawled out and stood. Arian nearly had her clothes back on and hurried to brush off the bits of dirt that clung to me.

I had my first good look at the heavenly kingdom since my kind imprisonment. We stood in front of the long wall that surrounded my compound and another wall joined it and stretched another fifty yards down a plain narrow road. A portico stood on the opposite side of the stone path but there was no access on our side to the building it surrounded. Thick stone columns held up the heavy angled roof which provided shade to the weary walker.

Arian swept an arm toward the row of columns that supported the portico. “It is this-”

“What are you doing there?”

CHAPTER TWELVE

Arian grabbed my arms and pulled me to the nearest pillars which she quickly tucked me behind. She pressed a finger to her lips before she turned to face the man who had yelled at us. It was a guard and he grasped his spear in both hands as he hurried up to her.

"What are you doing here?" he questioned her. His curious eyes inspected the area and invariably discovered the hole. "What is this?" he demanded to know as he stabbed a finger at the tunnel.

Arian grasped her hands behind her and smiled at him. "My sincerest apologies. I thought you had been alerted to the digging today."

The guard frowned at her. "Digging? What digging?"

My companion nodded at the hole even as I noticed one of her hands move. One of her fingers pointed to my left. The party was in that direction.

However, I hesitated. I couldn't just leave her in that situation, not alone.

"Answer me!" the guard snapped.

Arian stabbed her finger that way and turned her head slightly to the left so one eye caught mine. The depths of hers pleaded with me and I understood. Things would get far worse if I was discovered.

I reluctantly slipped away but not before catching Arian's reply. "I noticed a crack in the wall a few days ago and notified Prince Yushir that I

would see if there was structural damage to the wall."

Good one I thought as I scurried down the portico. Nobody would want to ask the prince if he knew about digging out of risk that they had been told and forgotten about the digging themselves. No royal would be happy with a forgetful guard.

Arian had saved us but I dearly wished for her guidance when I reached the end of the shaded porch. I found myself at a four-way intersection with three decisions. Arian's directions, however, had pointed to my right and so I traveled that way, making sure to keep to the shadows of the wrap-around portico. The walking path was wider than the one I just left and the wall opposite where I walked had vines growing over the top. I glimpsed the tall peaks of a luxurious palace set away from the wall, and the tops of trees also poked their branched heads above the barriers.

I was relieved when I came across an archway with words above the door that read 'Gonglu Palace.' Here was my stop. I peeked around the column behind which I hid and inspected the area. The sun was no help at all in telling me the hour, but I heard voices deep within the compound.

I crept across the wide road and tiptoed up the short flight of wide steps to the gate where I peeked inside. The extensive grounds were decked out in carefully arranged grass plots with tall, white-barked trees. A small brook gurgled through the middle and was traversed via a bowed wooden bridge. A palace stood on the other side and was accessed via a set of closed doors. To the left was another portico that ran along the length of the bundle of low buildings connected to the main hall set some thirty yards back from the front.

There was no one around so I slipped down the path and across the bridge. Fish darted away from my shadow and I briefly considered stopping to admire the view, but the same voices as before could be heard, and they were louder. I ducked around the left side of the building toward the portico

and had to hunker low to avoid being seen through a half dozen open windows.

They allowed me to see a long hall that stretched from the front to the portico connection. A few servants stood in the middle of the room but the talking came from the very rear. I reached the portico and tiptoed across the covered path, thankful the door to the hall was closed. I came up to the second row of columns that held up the heavy roof and a row of bushes followed them. I worked my way over them and found a good hiding spot situated beside one of the open windows.

The voices floated out and I gingerly peeked my head above the sill. Four low and small tables were positioned with two opposite the other pair. Yushir and Lord Eastwei were seated on mats opposite the door while I glimpsed the backs of two women at the other seats. A host of servants stood around waiting for orders.

This was my chance at a good look at the former emperor and I was still struck by how handsome he was. There wasn't a single hair out of place nor a wrinkle to be found on his perfectly smooth skin. His dark eyes stared nonchalantly at the table in front of him as one hand lay in his lap. He was the picture of cool serenity. I wondered if those cute lips knew how to laugh.

The young woman who sat opposite the icy lord was a beauty to behold. She also had a slight upward tilt to her nose that told me she was accustomed to getting her way.

"I cannot begin to describe the pleasure I have in serving you today," she cooed as she smiled and bowed her head to the pair.

Prince Yushir shook his head. "The pleasure is all ours, Lady Shian. Your hospitality is legendary."

Shian blushed. "You flatter me, Your Highness." Her attention fell on the lord who draped an arm over an armrest. His listless eyes stared down at

the empty table in front of him. “May I ask how your flute is progressing, Dadan? I do hope to hear you play it soon.”

“Perhaps in a month,” the lord answered without lifting his eyes.

“Then I will wait impatiently for that time,” she assured him as she looked at the empty tables. “But our food should be arriving soon.”

Noise from down the path turned my attention in that direction and I watched four maidens hurry from the far end where another gate led outside the compound. They each carried a tray with covered plates in their hands. The door was opened by a few maids inside and the four slipped in.

They set the trays before the guests and Lady Shian smiled at the two men. “I cooked these steaks especially for your visit today. They are crafted from my own special seasoning which I crafted for you alone.”

The servants lifted the covers and revealed thick hunks of steak. They hadn’t been cooked long as a puddle of blood pooled around the meat. A heavy mountain of spice sat atop the steak and a strong aroma wafted off the food and struck my nostrils. I clapped a hand over my nose to keep from sneezing.

Prince Yushir covered his face but couldn’t stop the small cough that escaped his hand. “A very interesting aroma, Lady Shian.”

She sat up and puffed out her chest a little. “Thank you, Your Highness. I assure you the flavor is even better.”

The prince took up his knife and fork, and he plunged the blade into the meat. Even more blood poured out. He was mindful to keep as far from the mountain of spices as he could manage and managed to cut off a slim bit of food. Yushir lifted the meat to his lips and stared at it for a moment.

I covered my mouth to stifle a laugh. He looked like a prisoner contemplating suicide. The prince took a deep breath and gobbled the whole bit in one go. He chewed quickly but the tension at the corners of his eyes and mouth told the full story.

The man swallowed hard and managed a shaky smile. “An interesting flavor, Lady Shian. I have never tasted anything quite like it.”

Shian bowed her head. “Thank you, Your Highness.” Her eager eyes fell on Eastwei who hadn’t even picked up his utensils. “Will you not try it, Dadan?”

Eastwei picked up his knife and touched a bit of the spice. He lifted the tip to his nose and pressed it lightly against his lips. Yushir looked on with envy. There was a long pause before the lord gave his opinion. “As the prince says, it is quite interesting. You have been working to improve your cooking skills?”

“Oh yes,” Shian confirmed as she cut into her steak. “I remember when I was young you would always humor my failed attempts, but now I no longer have to be humored by you.” She popped a bit of the meat into her mouth and her good humor dropped away like a smile at a funeral.

“Is something the matter, Lady Shian?” Yushir wondered.

The hostess forced herself to swallow and managed a shaky smile. “This is. . .not quite what I expected. My maidservants may have added a touch bit too much spice.”

“Did they assist you in crafting our meal?” he inquired.

“Only in the steak,” she assured them as she set her utensils down. “But perhaps you would like to try a new tea I crafted just for this occasion.”

The prince smiled and bowed his head. “A warm cup of tea would be most delightful.”

“Servant, tea!” Shian called out with a more crisp tone than she intended.

I would have laughed at the scene if the mood hadn’t been so dire. I even felt sorry for the pompous hostess. Her smile was now a stretched fabrication but her eyes showed her worry. The tea was her last chance at saving her party.

I heard footsteps and scooted over to the nearest column which I hid behind. I glimpsed a maidservant hurrying in the direction of the hall. She held a large tray with a tea set on top. Here was the fabled tea that would be Shian's salvation. I hoped it would please everyone.

It was then I felt a strange tingling in my fingers. I glanced down and my heart skipped a beat. A soft silver light filled with sparkling glitter emanated from my palms. I shook my hands wildly trying to dislodge the strange warm glow.

The servant approached me and the light flew up and out onto the walkway. It zipped behind the servant like a bunch of shooting stars, causing a wind in its wake. The servant stiffened and shut her eyes against the sudden gust, and as she did so the light flew around her front and slipped into the teapot.

I clapped my hands over my mouth to stifle my cry of surprise. The maidservant who personally attended Shian hurried out of the hall and noticed the cringing carrier. Her eyebrows crashed down and she stomped over to her compatriot.

"What are you doing?" she hissed as she stabbed a finger at the doorway to the hall. "Stop dallying and carry the tray inside immediately!"

The lowly servant bowed her head and scurried past her superior. The incensed maid recovered her composure and followed the other one into the hall. I crawled over to the window and peeked inside.

The carrier knelt in front of Shian's table and set the platter down. The hostess poured out a few cups of the drink and a sweet scent filled the air. Shian paused and furrowed her brow before her eyes darted up to sharply study the servant in front of her. "Are you sure this is the tea I prepared?"

The servant's face paled and she nodded. "Yes, My Lady. There was no other tea set in the kitchen when I went to fetch it."

"Is there a problem, Lady Shian?" the prince spoke up.

Shian plastered the fake smile back on her face. “Of course not. I was merely confirming this was my tea. Now then-” She stood with a cup and moved over to Lord Eastwei’s table which she knelt in front of and set the cup down. “If My Lord would do me the honors of tasting the tea.”

Eastwei appeared to be completely indifferent to her honors but he picked up the cup and set the rim against his mouth. He tipped the holder just enough that a little bit of the drink touched his lips. He paused for a moment before he drew the cup away to study the contents.

Shian looked to be on the verge of a mental collapse. “What do you think?”

“It is very sweet,” he commented as he licked his lips. “And very delicate. It is a good drink.”

Shian’s whole body softened and she smiled at him. “I’m so glad you like it.”

“Then perhaps I might have a cup?” the prince pleaded.

“Of course,” Shian obliged and she hurriedly offered him a cup.

Yushir took a sip and his eyes widened. “This is delicious!” he proclaimed and the compliment made Shian’s smile widen. “I don’t believe I’ve ever tasted such a sweet flavor before. What are the ingredients?”

Shian laughed. “If I told you then I would not have any way to tempt you both to return.”

The prince lifted his drink and offered her a toast and a smile. “With drinks and company such as these, how could one resist?”

“You are too kind, Your Highness,” she cooed.

Yushir moved to take another sip and his gaze floated in my direction. Our eyes met and the color drained from my face. I ducked down and crawled away, knowing there was no chance he hadn’t seen me.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

How could she have gotten out without my knowing?

That question nagged Prince Yushir as he sat on his mat waiting impatiently for the visitation to end. His tea cup was empty but his plate was only moderately touched, enough to not appear rude. Something caught his attention and he leaned over toward his indifferent companion.

Dadan has finished his tea, as well he mused with more than a little surprise. *When have I ever seen him finish anything at a meal?*

"More tea?" Shian offered as she held up the teapot.

Prince Yushir shook himself from the grasp of his curiosity and drew himself to a straight position. "No, thank you. I am curious to know since you will not divulge the recipe, where you fetched this unique ingredient."

Shian's smile tensed and she gripped the teapot tighter in both hands. She set down the pot and grasped her hands in her lap. "If I were to tell you the location then you may guess the ingredients."

Something is amiss here he commented to himself.

"We should be going," Dadan spoke up as he stood.

Shian's face fell and she scrambled to her feet. "So soon? And you have not yet finished your meal."

Yushir hurried to stand and nodded. "I'm afraid so. I must report to my uncle about our new guest."

“Then surely you might stay a little longer, Dadan,” she pleaded.

“He may add some much-needed advice on handling our guest,” Yushir interjected.

The corners of Shian’s lips twitched downward toward a frown but her upbringing forced her mouth into a smile. She clasped her hands in front of her and bowed her head to them. “Then I thank you for coming to visit me and may you soon return.”

The men inclined their heads in return and left through the main doors, opened to them by a pair of maidservants. Yushir and his companion strolled across the bridge and through the main archway to the road.

Yushir turned to his friend. “I thought the Stewardess of the Palaces was required to have cooking training as well as know how to maintain the grounds and buildings.”

“Her family thought it beneath her,” Dadan replied.

The prince sighed and toyed with his ring. “Such is the benefit of belonging to such an old and distinguished family.” The corners of his friend’s lips twitched upward as he studied him. Yushir laughed. “Of course, I would know of such benefits but I hope they won’t be to the detriment of my guests’ appetites. If you have no other way to scold me then I will take my leave.”

The prince turned and strolled down the road a few steps before he noticed something amiss. He turned and discovered that his companion followed on his heels.

Yushir lifted an eyebrow. “Is there something you need?”

“I am merely following the road,” Dadan replied.

“But your palace is in the other direction,” Yushir reminded him.

“The imperial palace is also in the opposite direction.”

Yushir adjusted his shoulders and cleared his throat. “So it is, but I have a few words to say to our guest before I speak with my uncle.” He turned away and strolled down the path. “If you’ll excuse me-”

“Those words wouldn’t involve the diversion we just attended, would they?”

The prince stiffened and his frantic mind tried to conjure up excuses. He slapped a smile on his face and half-turned to his curious companion. “Of course not. What makes you think that?”

Dadan’s sharp and dark eyes studied him while a smile threatened to dance across his otherwise straight lips. “You have had a rather strange expression on your face since the serving of the tea.”

Yushir shrugged. “Perhaps I was affected by the flavor. It was rather unique. I will have to remember my expression the next time I have some. If you’ll excuse me.”

He bowed and strode off, taking care not to appear to be in too much of a hurry. The prince didn’t stop until he reached the far end of the block where he paused near the portico pillar and glanced over his shoulder. The road was empty.

“That man is frightfully persistent. . .” he murmured to himself before heading off.

A dour task lay before Yushir as he followed the high walls on his right. The prince marched through the archway and into the small garden with its quaint hall. He stomped up the stairs and stopped in the doorway. The strange goddess and her maidservant were seated at the table and both turned to the door at his appearance. Both also had expressions of guilt on their faces.

He pursed his lips and strode over to the table where he stood over the young goddess. “You were very reckless today.”

Lady Roberts bowed her head and nodded. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean any harm.”

He pursed his lips. “Whether you did or not is not the issue. You purposely escaped my ward and could have been seen a dozen times over

by any of the maidservants or even Lady Shian herself. Do you know how unfamiliar you are, even to the residents of heaven?"

Lady Roberts stretched out her arms on either side and looked down at herself. "Do I stand out that much?"

"As greatly as a cat in a hound kennel," he commented as he paced the floor in front of the table. He paused and wagged a finger at her. "You could have ruined all the goodwill your patience has earned regarding my uncle's opinion of you and for what? A chance to see a dinner engagement?"

Lady Roberts turned her face away and her voice was choked up. "It won't happen again."

"A moment, Your Highness," Arian spoke up as she climbed to her feet and bowed low to him. "This is none of my mistress' doing. I was the one to coax her out of the compound with the promise of seeing the party. If anyone is to suffer it should be me."

Lady Roberts reached up and grasped her maid's hand. "It's not your fault. I could have stayed in here but I chose to escape."

Yushir lifted an eyebrow as he looked between the two women. "How did you come to escape my ward?"

Arian blushed and bowed her head. "I dug beneath it."

The prince was taken aback by her confession. "You dug beneath my ward?" She nodded. He cleared his throat. "Yes, well, I must admit I did not foresee that scenario. That was a very ingenious plan." A smile touched Arian's lips and he frowned. "Ingenious but very foolish."

Her good humor vanished and she nodded. "Yes, Your Highness and I carry all the blame. My mistress looked so pale this morning that I thought perhaps a trip outside the compound would help her."

Lady Roberts squeezed her hand. "I won't let you do that."

"Then I decree that both of you carry equal blame," Yushir interrupted them as he gave them both a stern look.

Lady Roberts shut her eyes and nodded, as did her maid. The prince pursed his lips as he stared down at the forlorn woman. *She does look paler than even yesterday.*

He straightened and sighed. “I have an appointment to meet with my uncle tomorrow to give him an update about you. If you can control your curiosity for that short a time then perhaps I may be able to persuade him to allow you the freedom to come and go as you please.”

“Thank you,” Lady Roberts whispered as she looked up and smiled at him. “And thank you for everything you’ve done for me so far, even if I haven’t been the best magic student.”

I wonder he mused as he thought back to the dinner engagement. He cleared his throat. “See that you do not risk all my efforts going to waste and remain in the compound until I come to visit you. Is that understood?”

Lady Roberts nodded. “Completely. And thank you again.”

“Well, don’t thank me just yet,” he warned her as he toyed with his ring. “My uncle will have the final say in your fate.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

"How does the new goddess among us fare? Has she been chosen by one of the elements?"

The question came from His Royal Highness, the king of the heavens. Prince Yushir stood before him in a relatively empty council room. Pampir stood in the circle before the royal throne and, much to Yushir's surprise, Dadan was seated in his customary spot. A few of the other council members were in attendance, mostly those who had spoken out against Lady Roberts.

A difficult audience Yushir commented to himself.

The prince cleared his throat. "Her magic has failed to materialize, Your Highness."

The king frowned. "Why is that?"

Yushir shook his head. "I'm afraid I don't know. However, I wish to discuss with you the matter of your first question in that she fares rather poorly."

The monarch leaned forward. "What do you mean?"

"The confinement is having an ill effect on Your Highness' guest," the prince explained. "Her health is not as good as when she first arrived and I would recommend she be allowed to venture out of the hall."

Pampir sputtered on his spittle. “Venture of the hall!? What a foolish notion! There is no way for certain that she can be trusted!”

The king leaned back in his chair and furrowed his brow. “I am reluctant to agree to your recommendation, Prince Yushir.”

“I stand by my recommendation that she be released from her captivity and allow her to enjoy the entirety of the realm,” Yushir repeated.

“This is undoubtedly a trick of hers!” Pampir snapped as he paced the floor between Yushir and the king. “She is lulling us into a false sense of trust which she will undoubtedly betray!”

“You have observed her more than most,” the king mused as he studied his nephew. “Do you detect any deceit?”

Yushir stood erect and lifted his chin. “None at all, Your Highness. She is a most kind and gentle woman, and her maid would attest to that.”

Pampir skidded to a stop and scoffed. “Of course her maid would attest to what you desire! I have been informed that you gave her the position because she was not happy in her old place!”

The prince frowned at him. “If you mean to infer that the maid is untrustworthy because of my placement then I assure you that is not the case.”

“Enough.” The king’s command echoed over the hall and silenced the bickering pair. He leaned back and grasped the front of the arms. “I am of the mind to side with Lord Pampir.” The pompous man puffed out his chest and cast a triumphant smile at Yushir.

“Then allow me to test our guest,” Yushir pleaded. “If the woman fails then she will remain within the confines of the hall.”

The king lifted a royal eyebrow. “What do you propose to do?”

“I propose to test the moral integrity of our guest,” Yushir explained. “We will see if she is a knave as Pampir suspects or if she is a maiden caught in strange circumstances. In this way, she will help us decide whether she remains in her palace or is allowed her freedom.”

“That doesn’t tell us how you mean to prove her worth!” Pampir snapped.

“I would prefer to keep the details to myself,” Yushir returned as he gave the lord a sharp look. “Otherwise, I fear those who will judge her will be biased in their decision.”

The king furrowed his brow a moment before he nodded. “I grant you permission to test the woman.”

Yushir smiled and bowed his head. “Thank you, Your Majesty. However, I need your assistance in one matter regarding the test.”

“Speak and I shall see what I can do.”

The prince lifted his head. “I need a child of the realm, preferably no older than six.”

Pampir sputtered on his spittle. “A sacrifice to this strange woman?! Your Majesty, I protest this request most vehemently!”

The king nodded. “I must refuse this request unless you reveal the details. Otherwise, I doubt a parent would give their child over to the task.”

Yushir pursed his lips as his mind buzzed with indecision. A cool voice interrupted the proceedings.

“I will be that child.”

All eyes settled on Lord Eastwei. The indifferent lord leaned against the armrest with his other limb draped over a bent leg. He appeared supremely bored as he read a scroll partially unfurled in his hand.

The king lifted an eyebrow at him. “You indeed are the only one among us who is capable of such earthly magic, but would you dare to take on such a risk?”

“It is no risk to me,” Eastwei commented as he lowered the scroll and turned his head to meet the king’s curious gaze. “If she is as Prince Yushir insists then there is nothing to fear. If the woman proves to be faithless then I will deal with her as she deserves.”

His Majesty pursed his lips before he returned his attention to Yushir. “Then I give my permission for you to test the goddess so long as I am able to see the results myself.”

Yushir smiled and bowed his head. “That is just what I have planned, Your Majesty.”

The king stood. “Then I will leave you to the preparations.” Everyone bowed at the waist as he left.

When Yushir straightened his gaze immediately fell on his old friend. Lord Eastwei’s seat, however, was empty and the man’s retreating person disappeared out a side door. The prince hurried to catch up to his friend and met him down the path.

Yushir’s curious eyes studied his friend’s impassive face. “You show an unusual interest in this goddess.”

Eastwei didn’t break his stride. “As do you.”

The prince smiled. “I only want what is best for a beautiful young woman, but your actions are much more difficult to decipher. Is it because you trust this young woman?”

Eastwei stopped and turned to face his companion. “I only help you to ensure the heavens are kept safe from those who cannot be trusted. Nothing more.” He proceeded onward.

Yushir’s eyes followed the lord as a smile lay on his lips. A few whispered words left him. “What a flimsy excuse.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

I SAT AT THE TABLE WITH AN UNTOUCHED LUNCH PLATE IN FRONT OF me. Arian sat at my side with a worried expression on her face.

"You haven't eaten all day," she commented.

I smiled at her. "I guess I'm just nervous. I can't stop wondering what happened yesterday when the prince talked to the king."

Arian bowed her head and sighed. "Yes. We have heard no news from him."

"That doesn't sound like things went right, does it?" I commented.

She shook her head. "I fear not."

I sighed and pushed my plate toward her. "How about you eat that and I'll go out and study my magic. Maybe it'll come to me on an empty stomach."

She offered me a frail smile. "Perhaps."

I stood and strolled out into the warm sun. The unending light made me miss those bright stars which were such strangers to this strange land. Perhaps they were as foreign as I was.

I plopped myself down on the grass as usual but I didn't begin my training. My thoughts wandered back to the day of my escape and the incident with the tea. I lifted my hands and studied the palms. Had I really performed magic or had it all been some trick of the light?

“Help!”

The shout made me jerk my head up. The noise had come from the archway.

“Someone help me!”

“Arian!” I yelled as I scrambled to my feet and raced toward the entrance to the compound.

I reached the arch and grasped the curve of the stone as I looked out. The street was empty but for a small lad of six with shocking red hair. He wore the robes of the realm and lay on the ground with his hands behind him. His face was a picture of terror at what stood before him.

That thing was a monster.

The creature was a massive beast of muscle and sinew wrapped underneath a layer of black stretched flesh. Its body was hairless but for a few wisps underneath its long snout. The thing bore a faint resemblance to a wolf in shape and in the amount of teeth it bared at the young boy.

I made to race forward but my foot hesitated at the border. Yushir had warned me not to step foot outside or I would be in a worse spot than home imprisonment. I would also be revealing my escape to the boy.

“Help!” the lad screamed as he scrambled back. The creature snapped its jaws and stalked toward him. Its red eyes stared hungrily at the boy. His end would come at the tip of those sharp teeth.

He needed my help, the consequences be damned.

I steeled myself and rushed forward out into the open street. The creature caught sight of me and growled before it lunged in my direction. It covered ten feet in a single bound and I had to dive out of the way to avoid its snapping jaws. I rolled across the ground and landed on my knees. A terrible growl behind me warned me I didn’t have much time, if any.

I dashed across the distance between the boy and me and scooped him up in my arms. He latched onto me like a drowning sailor to a life raft. I pressed him close against my chest and spun around to face our foe. The

creature curled its lips back in a hideous snarl as it stalked toward us, its flaming eyes intent on murder. A column of smoke streamed out from either side of its mouth as it stomped forward.

My heart pounded in my chest but strangely I couldn't feel the young boy's thumper against mine. He lay so still, however, that I guessed he was frozen with fear. That was for the best as I backed away from the ferocious beast. The ground around us was open and there was little hope I could dodge the thing now that I had the boy's weight against me.

A horrible idea popped into my head. I stepped back and whispered a few words into the boy's ear. "When I tell you to run, you run, okay?" The boy didn't lift his head but nodded.

I slowly rent a part of my garment, keeping one eye on the beast. The creature growled and leaped at us again with its mouth wide open. I threw the piece of cloth in the creature's face at the last moment. The thing was temporarily blinded and I was able to slip past it and toward the archway. My distraction wasn't long, as I expected, and the thing tore the cloth off with one sharp claw and spun around to face us.

I set the boy on the ground and gave his back a hard push toward the archway. "Run!" I shouted before I spun around to face the monster.

The thing lunged again and I threw up my arms as it descended on top of me. The thing shoved me to the ground and pinned me there with its paws on top of my arms. I thrashed in its hold as it bent its head low and bared its teeth in my face. I shut my eyes and turned my face away waiting for the inevitable.

A clapping sound came before the end. Funny, I always imagined it would be bells or harps. Maybe even an accordion. There had been that one library book I'd never returned.

I felt the weight of the beast lift from me and risked opening one eye. The creature backed up and sat down on its haunches a few feet away from me. Its tongue flopped out and I sat up on my arms and blinked at the thing.

The clapping noise continued and came from behind me. I twisted around to find Yushir standing beside the young lad who, I now saw, had a very impassive expression on his face.

“Excellent!” Yushir complimented me as he clasped his hands together against his front. “I would not have thought you capable of so great a sacrifice, but you have certainly outdone yourself.”

I turned around to sit on my knees and blinked at him. A most dignified answer came out of me. “Huh?”

Movement to my left made me look in that direction and I watched the air shimmer before a magic ruse was dropped. The king and other members of the council including Pampir were revealed to me. The latter didn’t look pleased at all.

His Majesty stepped over to me and panic set in. I was outside the compound. There was no denying I’d broken my promise. I bowed my head and shut my eyes to keep the tears in. My whole body quaked as his shadow fell over me.

His Majesty’s voice was surprisingly soft. “You have done well, Lady Roberts.”

I whipped my head back and blinked at him. My dry mouth wouldn’t loosen the words that bubbled up within me.

“This was a test crafted to prove your moral standing among the heavenly hosts,” Yushir explained as he strolled up to me. “And might I say you passed with high marks.”

My lips moved together like a fish breathing in water before I shook off my shock. “Then. . .I’m not. . .I’m not in trouble?”

Yushir’s eyes twinkled as he shook his head. “Not in the least.”

“But the monster-” I turned my head and watched a young man with dark hair stroll up to the beast’s side. He scratched the creature behind its ear and the beast purred like a cat before rubbing its head eagerly against the man’s hand.

“Merely a pet trained in the art of appearing fierce,” Yushir assured me.

“And the kid?” I asked him as my attention fell on the boy.

My eyes bulged out of my head as red sparkles sprang out of the boy and he grew into the handsome figure of Lord Eastwei.

Yushir chuckled. “Merely my friend here assisting us in testing your moral fortitude.”

Relief and exhaustion flooded over me and I slumped to the ground in a puddle of shaking ooze.

“Lady Roberts!” Yushir cried out as he rushed to my side.

“My Lady!” Arian joined in as she hurried to kneel at my other arm. She grasped my limb and glared up at Yushir. “Must you have been so fierce with her? You nearly frightened her to death!”

Yushir’s reply came in a hushed whisper. “It was quite necessary, I assure you, otherwise His Majesty would not have believed her sincerity.” The prince turned and faced his king. “After such a show of courage, does she have your permission to venture out into the rest of your realm, Your Majesty?”

The king smiled down at me. “She does and she will now be considered an honored guest among us.” He half-turned to the displeased crowd at his back. “I expect everyone to treat her with the dignity she has so bravely earned.”

Pampir pursed his lips but bowed his head, along with the others. “Of course, Your Majesty.”

The king returned his attention to me. “Good day, Lady Roberts.”

I clumsily bowed my head. “Um, good day, Your Majesty.”

The king strolled past me and in the direction of the council hall. His entourage quickly followed him including the animal and its tamer, though Pampir lingered. He cast a sharp look in Yushir and my direction before he left with the others.

I breathed out the breath I hadn't known I'd been holding. Arian looked me over with concern. "Are you well? Did the creature harm you?"

I looked up at her with confused eyes. "You knew this was going to happen?"

She shook her head. "Only just now when Prince Yushir stopped me from helping you against the creature."

Yushir bowed his head. "My sincerest apologies. I hope the outcome makes up for my ruse."

I managed a shaky smile. "I suppose it does." My gaze invariably rested on Lord Eastwei. "You. . .you were the kid all along?"

"Yes," came the bland response.

Yushir grinned at his companion. "Lord Eastwei has quite a talent for transformations. Even I was almost fooled by him."

I bowed my head to the lord. "Thank you for helping me." He slightly inclined his head before he moved off.

Arian wrapped her arms around one of mine. "Let me help you to your bed."

"Indeed, she will need the rest for tomorrow," Yushir mused as he swept an arm over my hall. The air flickered as the ward spell faded. "A new world will open to you."

A new world, and new troubles.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

I WAS FREE.

A bright morning greeted me as Arian and I walked toward the archway. It was the day after my harrowing trial and my entire body trembled with excitement as we approached the entrance. I stopped at the border between nearly all I had known these last two weeks and a bright new world.

Arian looped an arm around mine and gave me an encouraging smile. "You will not be lost with me at your side."

I nodded and took a deep breath before I stepped out onto the walkway. There was no evil monster or savage guard to greet me, only a fresh breeze that blew past. I inhaled deeply and smelled the sweet scents of foreign flowers and trees mixed with fresh water.

"Where would you like to go first?" Arian asked me.

I grinned back at her. "What about the kitchen?"

She blinked in response. "The kitchen?"

"I want to see where all this magical cooking takes place," I explained.

Her face brightened and she nodded. "Then I shall take you there first."

We strolled down the straight streets of the realm and I quickly realized heaven really was huge. Path after path led to one intersection after another, and those ran to cloud-covered hills and floating islands far beyond my sight. Rivers and streams broke the monotony of civilization and were

diverted into pools where fish lazily swam about. Pavilions and gazebos decorated the communal gardens through which the paths wandered. Benches and couches tempted weary wanderers with relaxation and a chance to enjoy the view. Flowers bloomed under shady trees and their sweet smells brought a smile to my lips.

The heavens were also not some vast plain, but a mess of huge islands that floated above the clouds. I strained my neck to catch sight of the edge of the island on which was located my home. The land ended abruptly and one could dive into the clouds a few yards below. “How many islands are there?”

“Dozens though none quite as large as this one,” Arian told me. “They are connected via bridges and many are a wilderness of trees and stones, though Kang does occupy one of them.”

I lifted an eyebrow. “Kang?”

“The owner of the beast whom you met yesterday,” she explained.

“Oh. Right.”

We reached a long, low bridge that stretched over an extra-large pond. I paused in the middle of the bridge and leaned over the railing. Koi and other fish swam toward my shadow and skimmed the surface looking for tasty handouts. The nearby trees were reflected in the crystal-blue water and lilypads glistened in the bright sun.

“I wish I had some paper. . .” I murmured.

“Paper? Do you wish to write something?” Arian asked me.

I sheepishly smiled at her. “I’m not very good at it, but I dabble in drawing sometimes.”

Her face lit up. “Do you? I would love to see some of your work.”

I laughed. “You’ll have to wait for me to make something here since I left all my notebooks back at home.” My heart fell a little at the word. It reminded me that I was still in a foreign land.

Arian bowed her head. “I will be sure to fetch you some paper and a pencil the moment we return to the hall.”

I nodded. “I’d like that very much, but first the kitchen.”

Arian led me onward down the straight path and to the communal kitchen. The space was a single room larger than the whole of my hall and featuring vats, barrels, and canisters filled with all kinds of herbs and spices. Large windows looked into the square building, allowing one to see the many grills, sunken cooking pots, and chopping boards where all the fine cooking took place. There were dozens of workstations where a knife and other utensils sat at the ready for someone to take up the task of cooking.

A half dozen maids were busy working their magic for the coming meal. Some of them were literally doing just that. We entered the building and I stopped to gawk at the wisps of blue magic that flitted in front of each of the spell casters. They conjured fish and steak from the ether and lowered them to the waiting plates on the counters. In this way, they were able to fill several dozen plates in a minute, complete with spices and garnish.

Other maids went about the cooking process the old-fashioned way. They pulled out a variety of fish from coolers filled with ice and set them on the racks over open fires. The meat sizzled and filled the room with a thick juicy scent. Vegetables were chopped, gossip was exchanged, and I was reminded how much I had missed of life in my seclusion.

“What do you think?” Arian asked me.

I smiled at her. “It’s wonderful. And everyone in heaven eats out of here?”

“Occasionally someone will call for a portable grill or will cook outdoors in their gardens but yes,” she confirmed as she watched the proceedings. “These are the maids to Lord Kang. He is the owner of the beast that attacked you.”

My face drooped as I recalled yesterday’s incident. “Oh.”

She smiled at me. “You needn’t worry about the beast again. Lord Kang is a master at taming creatures and he is even able to speak with them. That is how he tamed the monstrous shadow creature.”

“His home wouldn’t happen to be near mine, would it?” I wondered.

Arian laughed and shook her head. “Oh, no. His beasts worry many other of the lords and ladies so he has a stable at the far reaches of the imperial city where he keeps his pets.”

The maidservants finished their preparations and walked out in single file, each bearing with them a covered platter of their delicious results. The room fell silent and so did my interest. Another sound caught my attention that was far more lively than the empty kitchen.

It was the chatter and laughter of children.

I half-turned in the direction of the joyful noise. “Are there kids here?”

“Oh yes,” Arian told me as she nodded in the direction of the bridge we had crossed. “The children often play in a pond at the end of the stream.”

“I’d like to go see that pond,” I told her.

“It’s this way.”

We crossed the bridge again but instead of heading straight we turned a sharp right and followed the stream. The waters were guided by low white walls of stone that led straight to a large patch of grass a hundred yards further south. The large grassy plot surrounded a pond some fifty yards across and the same width. The bank gently rolled into those calm, lilypad-speckled waters but I could see the dark center of the pond was deep.

A dozen children scampered around the grass field chasing one another with cattails pulled from the shore. They tickled and teased one another with the soft brushes and much laughter echoed over the area.

Two elegant women strolled past along the path that wound its way around the grassy area. I recognized one as being Lady Shian and the other was the woman I had seen seated at her side during the banquet. They were in such deep conversation they didn’t notice the children scurrying about.

One of the children in their eagerness to escape one of their friends ran into Shian's lady friend.

The woman nearly lost her balance but fell against her friend who caught her. A fury of anger swept across the stranger's face as she righted herself. The child had fallen to the ground and was only then climbing to her feet when the woman grabbed her shoulders.

"You little brat!" she snapped as she tossed the child onto the grass.

The little girl tumbled down the gentle incline and rolled to a stop in a mess of tears and terror. Her friends scampered back, fearful of the taller women. My eyebrows crashed down and I marched across the green toward the trouble.

"Lady Anna!" Arian hissed.

Her warning didn't even break my stride as I rushed over to the crying child. I knelt beside her and grasped her arms, drawing her against me. "Are you alright?" I whispered.

The child sobbed into my chest and her words came out between her sniffles. "That. . .that mean lady. . .she pushed me!"

The woman lifted her pointed nose and sneered down at the child. "You should have watched where you were going."

I glared up at the woman. "She's just a child and it was an accident."

"Accident or not, she mussed my robes with her dirty hands," the woman snapped as she brushed away the invisible bits of dirt supposedly left by the child.

The child sobbed and I rubbed her back. "It's okay. Why don't we get you back to your friends, alright?" She nodded, so I lifted her in my arms and turned away.

Shian's voice called me back. "You're that new goddess, aren't you?"

I half-turned to the imperious women and nodded. "I am."

"What's your name again?" she wondered.

I had half a mind to not tell her so I told her only half my name. “Anna.”

She wrinkled her nose. “What a strange name. Have you no other?”

“I do, but only my friends know it. If you’ll excuse me.” I turned and strolled down the grassy incline. I was glad when I heard the women move away, chatting in low, angry voices.

The other children backed away from me as I neared them, but one bold boy of eight stepped forward. He was a little shorter than the other kids his age and wore an elegant robe of white trimmed with purple. The boy held his head high and met my gaze with a slightly shaky look.

“Put her down,” he commanded me.

His tone was so comically imperious coming from someone three feet tall that I had to suppress a laugh. However, I did stop and set their friend down. The little girl had other ideas and one of her hands clung to my robe.

“Come here, Lia!” he called to her.

She bit her lower lip and looked up at me. “Thank you for saving me.”

I smiled and shook my head. “It was my pleasure, but you’re sure you’re alright?”

She nodded before she scampered over to her friends. They congregated around her except the master of the group. He inclined his head to me. “Thank you for your help.”

“My pleasure,” I replied.

The boy rejoined the group and they set off, leaving behind their forgotten cattails. I picked one up as Arian came up beside me.

“That was too bold, Lady Anna,” Arian scolded me.

I wagged a cattail at her. “Just Anna, and why was it too bold?”

“Lady Shian is the mistress of all the palaces,” Arian explained as she cast a furtive look in the direction they had gone. “Her family holds a great deal of influence over the court and the king thinks highly of them all.”

“A little too highly if that’s how her friend treats his subjects,” I countered.

Arian looked aghast at me. “You cannot say such things!”

I sighed and the fight left me with the breath. My eyes dropped to the soft cattail that I grasped in one hand. “I know but I just, well, I thought I’d left the cubicle life behind me.”

She cocked her head to one side. “Cubic?”

I laughed and shook my head. “Just a horrible box with a lot of rules and hierarchies. Kind of like around here, I guess.” I tossed the cattail on the ground with the rest of them. “Anyway, who was the woman with Shian?”

“Lady Bidao. She has only just returned from a trip to the mortal realm.”

I lifted an eyebrow. “Is that a big thing?”

Arian nodded. “We immortals may only visit the mortal realm briefly as the living there slowly drains our magic and there is no way to renew our magic without returning to any of the immortal realms.”

“What happens when all of your magic is gone?” I wondered.

“We die.”

My face drooped. “Then you guys really can die?”

My maidservant pursed her lips. “Through that way and sickness and battle.”

A sigh escaped me as we continued on our way. “I guess I’ll have to stay away from there then.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

"The insolence of that woman!"

The speaker was the proud Lady Bidao. Her cheeks were flushed and her arms were crossed over her chest as she strode down the path with her friend at her side. "How dare she speak to us in such a manner!"

Shian nodded. "It was very rude of her. I should speak with His Majesty and see that she is punished."

A little bit of color drained from Bidao's cheeks. "Perhaps we shouldn't. Those brats may side with her, after all, and there was His Majesty's grandson among them."

"I suppose you're right," Shian mused with a deep sigh.

Bidao bumped her elbow against her friend's arm. "Of course I'm right. When have I ever been wrong?"

Shian laughed and looped her arms around one of her companion's limbs to lead her on a righthand path. "There was that time you told me Lord Eastwei liked very salty meat."

"I had that on good authority that he did!" Bidao insisted. "But why ever bring that up?"

"I served him salty meat at my banquet just the other day," Shian told her.

"And?"

“He hardly touched it and even Prince Yushir couldn’t finish the meat.”

Bidao wrinkled her nose. “Yes, well, perhaps his appetite was off that day. You should make it up to him in some way. Perhaps redressing his palace?”

Shian sighed. “If only it was that easy. He seems to loathe things being moved about. I tried to move his desk closer to an open window and he immediately told me to stop.”

“Things will change once you marry him,” Bidao assured her.

The idea perked up her friend. “Do you think so?”

“Don’t you?” Bidao countered.

Shian smiled and squeezed her arm. “There’s only one way to find out. Hurry on now!”

She pulled her down the path and they found their way through the gardens to a shaded corner of a three-way intersection. Stairs led up the center path while the other two were just a continuation of each other. A gurgling brook ran along the left of the path and flowed through a dam of rocks behind which swam a few fish. Shian guided her friend over to a bench that stood near a large boulder and seated them.

Lady Bidao looked around at the simple patches of grass and the flowing brook and wrinkled her nose. “Why have we stopped here in this out-of-the-way place?”

Shian lifted her chin and smiled. “No reason.”

Her companion’s eyes lit up and a smile slipped onto her lips. “Oh, I see. Might I guess that a certain handsome lord passes by here?”

Shian turned her face away but couldn’t hide the upturned corners of her mouth. “Perhaps.”

Bidao laughed. “You are so mischievous, Lady Shian! How did you ever learn that he frequented such a desolate spot? There is hardly a soul to be found around here and all the banquet halls are far away.”

“One of my maids glimpsed him reclining on the couch over there,” Shian revealed as she leaned forward and nodded at a wooden reclining bench situated under a tree. The bench sat only a few feet from the water and was surrounded by a bed of grass and flowers. Their seat was mostly hidden from view by the boulder. “I instructed them to watch over the spot for several months and they discovered that he frequented the bench several times a week.”

“But you have yet to meet him here?” Bidao guessed.

Shian squirmed in her seat. “True, but I brought you here as my good luck charm. After all, you survived the horrors of that mortal realm for a whole week.”

Bidao leaned back and wrinkled her nose. “Yes. I must admit the description of those villages as ‘quaint’ was greatly exaggerated. They were terribly backward. Do you know, each house had its own kitchen?”

Shian lifted an eyebrow. “Why?”

“Because many homes did not have maidservants to cook for them so the woman did it with her little brats racing about her,” Bidao revealed. “It was so common that I was loathe to stay in a town that did not have a reputable inn for fear of eating out of such a-”

“Ssh!” Shian hissed as she ducked back.

They fell silent and could hardly hear the soft pad of boots on the stone walk. A rustle of robes was heard and then all was quiet. Bidao risked leaning forward and glimpsed the great lord reclining on the bench. He leaned his temple against his cupped hand and his eyes were closed.

Shian squirmed in the seat beside her. The elder woman rolled her eyes. “Go on then!” she whispered as she gave her friend a push.

Shian glared at her but reluctantly stood. She brushed out the wrinkles in her robe and lifted her chin before strolling out of their hiding spot. The lord didn’t so much as twitch as she stepped through the flowers and arrived at the bench.

“What a coincidence finding you here, Dadan,” Shian spoke up.

Dadan opened his eyes and looked impassively at her. “Is it?”

She nodded. “Of course, but I must admit I did desire to see you alone.”

His eyes flickered toward the boulder. “Did you?”

Shian’s smile became a little shaky. “Yes. That is-” She took a seat on the bench at his feet and was perturbed when she didn’t find enough room. Her butt was forced to hang over just slightly but she managed to keep a stiff smile on her lips. “I wished to apologize for the banquet. I could see the meat was not up to your standards and I have come to beg you for a chance to make amends.”

His expression didn’t change in his reply. “Oh?”

She nodded. “Yes. I wish to cook you another meal and this time you may enjoy it at your own palace.”

A wonderful idea! Bidao inwardly squealed. *Just the place to capture him!*

Dadan closed his eyes. “There is no need for that.”

“But I insist!” Shian persisted as she turned to the side and bumped against his legs. He opened one eye to stare at her and she blushed before scooting away from his leg. “You must allow me to show you how sincerely sorry I am for serving such terrible food.”

He closed his eye. “The tea was enough compensation.”

Her eyes widened. “Truly? Did you enjoy it that much?”

He nodded. “Very.”

She bit her lower lip. “I-I see.”

“Perhaps you might make some for me another time,” he suggested.

She plastered a smile on her face. “O-of course. I would be only too happy.” She stood and bowed lower to him. “If you’ll excuse me.”

Shian spun on her heels and hurried away around the far side of the boulder. Bidao stood and was just in time to have her hand grabbed by her

friend. She was whisked away from the lord and back down the path from which they'd arrived.

"What is the matter with you?" Bidao whined as she stumbled along behind her quick-footed friend. "You had him in your grasp and you let him go!"

They had traveled far out of earshot of the lord, so Shian stopped with her back to her friend. She grasped the front of her robe. "I cannot grant him his wish."

Bidao lifted an eyebrow. "Why not?"

Shian spun around and revealed her discomforted expression. "Because I did not make the tea."

Her friend shrugged. "Why does that matter? Have it made by your servant again."

Shian shook her head. "You do not understand. *I do not know who made the tea.*"

Bidao blinked at her. "Come again?"

The young goddess paced the path in front of her companion and threw up her arms. "I cannot find the person who made the tea! Whoever it was is not a member of my household nor can I find that anyone was in the kitchen that day to slip in that sweet flavoring!"

"That is most mysterious," Bidao commented as she folded her arms over her chest.

"Mysterious and frustrating!" Shian snapped as she stopped and balled her hands into quivering fists at her sides. She stomped her foot. "It would be all he would desire, too! Just my luck!"

Bidao sheepishly smiled. "I suppose I failed you as your charm."

Shian shut her eyes and let out a long, trembling breath. She opened them and pursed her lips. "I must find who crafted that drink and make them show me how they did it." She grabbed her friend's hand and tugged

her down the walk. “We must hurry before Dadan’s taste for the tea grows cold!”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

"Here you are, Anna," Arian announced as she set a binder and a charcoal pencil on the table in front of me.

It was a few days after the incident with Lady Shian and her friend and I was glad to put those memories behind me. Another warm sunny day shone outside the windows of my quaint hall and my friend stood over me with furtive eyes.

A smile spread across my lips as I opened the binder and revealed a thick stack of papers. Their sizes were slightly mismatched but I brushed a hand gently over the rough edges. "You made this yourself, didn't you?"

I raised my eyes to my friend and found her blushing. "Y-yes. The way you described your old journal I knew nothing like this could be found in the heavens so I thought I would make it by hand." She bit her lower lip. "Is. . .is it alright?"

I stood and wrapped her in a tight hug. She stiffened for a moment before softening. I drew us to arm's length and had trouble keeping tears out of my eyes. "It's perfect."

Her face beamed and her cheeks reddened. "I'm so glad to hear that."

"It's so perfect," I mused as I scooped up pencil and paper and hugged them against myself, "-that I'm going to try them out right now."

"Would you like me to go with you?" she offered.

I laughed and shook my head. “It wouldn’t be very exciting for you to watch me draw but I promise to show you what I come up with. That is if you don’t mind staring at some squiggly lines.”

She shook her head. “I would love to admire your work.”

“Don’t get your hopes up too much,” I warned her as I skipped over to the door. “And don’t worry about lunch. I’ll grab something in the kitchen.”

There was a bounce in my step as I strode down the paths toward the quieter garden spots. Arian and I had explored much of the area within a few miles of my new home and I was mostly acquainted with the roads, though sometimes I did find myself turned around.

This was one of those times.

I traveled up and down the paths and stairs, past many a lovely gazebo and through a few small woods before I stopped at the top of a flight of stairs. My steps had taken me to a place I hadn’t seen before and didn’t quite know how to return to the house from. The steps led down and intersected with a path that followed a small gurgling brook. A cluster of rocks and lilypads formed in front of a painted wooden bench.

My heart leaped at the beautiful scene as did my artistic impulse. I hurried down the steps and past the shading tree to sit on the grass in front of the bench. The cool lawn and sweet-smelling flowers flowed over me and the solitude of the simple garden allowed me to take as much time as I needed. I bent over my paper with my pencil in hand and began sketching the lovely landscape in front of me.

I was so engrossed in my work that I didn’t hear the soft pad of feet nor even the groan of the wood behind me. One spot in particular had my attention, a lovely lilypad nestled among the rocks under which most of the fish were partially hiding. I leaned back and furrowed my brow as I studied my work versus the real thing. There was just something off about it that I couldn’t lay my finger on.

“You are missing the shadow of the lilypad over the water.”

My heart stopped for a moment before it restarted, and now it was in overdrive mode. I whipped my head around and found myself staring up into the indifferent face of Lord Eastwei. He lounged on the bench with his head cradled in one palm and his eyes on my picture.

I hugged the sketch against my chest as the color drained from my face. “P-pardon?”

He nodded at my sketch pad. “You are missing the shadow. That is why your sketch appears incomplete.”

I mechanically jerked my head downward and reluctantly drew my sketch far enough to study the picture myself. He was right. I was missing that obvious bit of detail.

I bent over the picture and immediately began rectifying my error. After a few moments and some well-placed shading, I drew my notebook away and examined my work. It looked perfect, or as perfect as my unskilled hand could offer.

I smiled up at the lord. “Thanks. I would have been beating myself up for a while if you hadn’t told me what was wrong.”

He slightly inclined his head and closed his eyes. I took that as a hint that the conversation was no longer desired. He was so close now that I could see the soft lines of his face and the picture-perfect raise of his eyebrows. My artist’s hand twitched at the thought of drawing something other than plant life.

I cleared my throat but a voice interrupted me.

“Dadan! Dadan!”

Eastwei let out a heavy sigh as Shian made her appearance from the direction of the steps. She had a bright smile on her face until she noticed me. Her good humor dropped off like a rock out a window and she knitted her eyebrows together in a silent fury.

“I’m sorry,” she apologized without any enthusiasm as she looked between us. “I thought you were alone.”

“I was just leaving,” I told her as I climbed to my feet.

Eastwei opened his eyes and they fell on me. “Your sketch is incomplete.”

I smiled and patted the sketchbook. “That’s okay. It’s not very good, anyway.”

“Do you sketch?” Shian wondered as her gaze invariably fell on my book.

“A little,” I admitted as I looked for a way out of there. There was a narrow grassy path between the boulder and the stream.

She held out her hand to me. “Please allow me to see it.”

I clutched the book against my chest and shook my head. “You really don’t have to be so polite. It’s not a very good sketch at all.”

“Allow me to be the judge of that,” Shian insisted as she strode up to me. She tried to grab the book but I tucked it behind my back.

The other goddess tried to snatch it again but ended up pushing her body against mine. I lost my balance and my eyes widened as I fell backward toward the narrow waterway. Injury would have been the only result if a soft red light hadn’t surrounded me. I stiffened and looked about myself in shock.

The light suspended me just above the mouth of the waterway. Bright red sparkles floated around me and a soft warmth enveloped my person. I looked at Eastwei and saw that his unoccupied left hand was raised and the same reddish glow emanated from his two longest fingers. He drew his fingers to his right and the light floated me in that direction.

The magic glided me over to the grass on the opposite side of the bench from Shian and set me on my butt. I stared dumbly with my sketchbook clutched against my chest as the glow vanished and the warmth faded.

“Be more mindful of your surroundings,” Eastwei scolded me.

I eased myself onto my shaky feet and nodded. “Y-yeah. If you’ll excuse me.” I hurried off without waiting for a reply.

I must have still had quite the look on my face when I finally made it back to my little hall because Arian greeted me with a worried expression on hers. “Are you well?” she asked me as she grasped my arm.

I managed a stiff smile. “I’m fine. I just had a-” *You didn’t quite have an accident* my inner thoughts reminded me. “I just had a run-in with Shian and Eastwei, that’s all.”

Her eyebrows shot up. “You did? What happened?”

I laughed. “I almost fell into one of the streams. Fortunately, Eastwei caught me with his magic. At least, I think that’s what he did.”

Arian’s eyes grew as big as my sketchbook. “You witnessed him use his magic?”

I blinked at her. “Yeah, why? Doesn’t he use it as often as anyone else?”

She slowly shook her head. “Not at all. Indeed, it is a very rare occasion to see him use even the slightest hint of magic and he has not used any great strength in tens of thousands of years.”

My mouth slowly dropped open. “That. . .that’s a long time, even for you guys, right?”

“A very long time.”

“Why doesn’t he use his magic?” I wondered.

“He conserves his magic in case an emergency should arise.”

A snort escaped me. “Then I’m glad he used it for my emergency but now that you told me what it’s for I feel a little guilty.”

“Well, it was only a little bit of his magic,” she pointed out. “Perhaps he will not even notice.”

“Yeah,” I agreed as I looked down at myself. “It hardly seemed to even bother him moving me like that.”

“That is because you are very light,” Arian complimented me as she looked down at my book. “But did you get a chance to draw?”

My eyes lit up and I nodded. “Yeah. It’s just a little sketch, though.” I opened to the first page.

Her mouth fell open. “That is wonderful! You have a great talent!”

I blushed and closed the book. “I’m just okay. Anyway, let’s get something to eat. I forgot to grab lunch.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN

"What a reckless girl," Shian scolded the absent Anna as she wrinkled her nose. "And so clumsy, too. She is as graceful as an elephant." Silence was her only reply and she cast a curious look at Eastwei. He had closed his eyes and returned to his meditation. Her gaze dropped to the bench where there was still no room for her. "Would you like some company, Dadan?"

"There is no need to waste your time in entertaining me," he replied.

She laughed. "I would never see it as wasting my time. Anything to do with you is worth the effort." He didn't respond to the flattery and her eagerness was slightly dampened. She rallied her spirits and sidled up to the side of the bench closest to his head. "Dadan, the festival of the harvest is nearing for the mortals. Would you not wish to go with me to see their quaint customs?"

"I have seen the festival."

Her expression fell a little. "But you have not seen it with me. You would surely enjoy it more for that matter alone."

"I would rather remain here."

Shian tightened her hands into fists but managed to control her outward irritation. She smiled and nodded. "Very well. Then I bid you good day." He inclined his head as he had done with Anna.

Shian grasped her hands together in front of her and left him. Her steps were quicker than she intended but she was glad to be away before her temper got the better of her. She rounded a corner of a building further down the path that followed the brook and nearly crashed into another walker.

"My goodness, Lady Shian," Prince Yushir mused as he caught her arms to keep them both steady. "What brings you so swiftly in this direction?"

She plastered a smile on her face and shook her head. "No reason, Your Highness. I was merely lost in thought, that's all."

"What thoughts could bother such a beauty?" he teased.

"Just some matters of the palaces," she lied as she shrugged out of his grip. "If you'll excuse me." She swept past him and soon disappeared down the road.

"Palace matters indeed," he mused as he watched her leave and took a few steps backward to stare down the path she had come. He glimpsed the reclining figure of Dadan on the bench. "Or perhaps other matters."

"Your Highness!" The call came from Yushir's left and he turned to face the oncoming threat. That of Lord Pampir. The pompous man was nearly out of breath when he reached the prince. "I have an urgent matter to discuss with you."

Yushir lifted an eyebrow but nodded. "Very well."

Pampir looked about them and pursed his lips. "Perhaps in some place more private."

Yushir gestured to a gazebo situated in a corner of the corner over a nearby bridge. Pampir nodded and together the pair moved over to the quiet and secluded spot. The nobleman plopped himself down on one of the stools while Yushir calmly took a seat opposite him.

Pampir leaned toward him and lowered his voice to a whisper. "The matter concerns that woman."

Yushir lifted an eyebrow. "Are you referring to Lady Roberts?"

The other man scoffed. “Lady? She is no more a lady than I.”

The corners of the prince’s lips twitched upward. “Would you like your title changed?”

“Certainly not!” Pampir snapped as he leaned away. “And I would prefer that you not take this matter lightly!”

“You would have to tell me the matter so I may know how to take it,” Yushir pointed out.

He lifted his chin. “Then you shall. I have it on good authority that the-that Lady Roberts attempted to start a fight with Lady Shian and Lady Bidao the other day.”

Yushir lifted an eyebrow. “Oh? This is the first I have heard of the matter.”

Pampir bobbed his head. “And yet I tell you it is true. The young prince told me himself that the woman was involved in an altercation with the two ladies.”

“What exactly did he say?” Yushir inquired.

The lord cleared his throat. “The young prince informed me that the ladies had been speaking with one of the children when Lady Roberts came over and swept the child away.”

Yushir lifted an eyebrow. “Lady Shian and Lady Bidao were speaking with a child? That is rather unlike them, is it not? I know for a fact that Lady Bidao herself is not fond of children.”

Pampir sputtered a little. “Y-yes, well, perhaps that is not how the story unfolded but Lady Roberts still argued with the two ladies, and that is unacceptable!”

A sly smile slipped onto Yushir’s lips. “Would you like to be the one to step into the middle of such an argument?”

The color drained from the lord’s face. “W-well, I-I, that is-”

“Perhaps we should let them manage their own affairs unless words should come to blows,” Yushir suggested as he stood.

Pampir grabbed the prince's sleeve. "A moment, Your Highness. I have another concern about the woman."

Yushir reluctantly resumed his seat. "Oh?"

"What shall we do if she discovers the vault and makes off with some of His Majesty's valuables?" Pampir asked him.

The prince chuckled. "We will have no worries about that, Lord Pampir. She has never been able to conjure even the slightest bit of her magic, much less perform a transportation spell. You yourself witnessed her fight against the black beast without using any magic. Does that not prove my point to you?"

Pampir wrinkled his nose. "Not in the least. Does it not strike you as odd that she has not shown her powers after such a time and under your tutelage, no less? Even a child would have shown some promise by now."

Yushir stood again and this time he stepped out of reach of his companion. "Perhaps it is because she has begun her education so late. I myself cannot recall anyone beginning their magic training at such an advanced age, can you?"

The lord shook his head. "No, I cannot."

"Then we are in unchartered territory and should grant her some leeway," the prince insisted as he walked down the path.

Pampir stood and bowed his head. "As you say, Your Highness."

Am I not a little worried myself? Yushir wondered as he left behind the worried man and strolled through the city. *Surely she must have some abilities granted by the fruit. No other but one has been such an exception.*

CHAPTER TWENTY

Another sunny day. Another light breeze tickled my cheeks. Another failed effort at conjuring magic.

"Why won't this work?" I grumbled as I looked down at my hands that lay in my crossed legs. The comfortable grass did little to alleviate my irritation. I waved my hands as I had done that day in Shian's palace but the sparkles didn't pop out. "Come on. You've done it before. Why not now?"

Arian came up to me with a tray and a plate of little cakes. She knelt in front of me and set the tray down. "Perhaps you have not found the purpose to your magic."

I blinked at her. "What do you mean?"

She bowed her head and shrugged. "It is only something my father said as he caught my brother his magic." A smile danced across her lips. "My brother is rather, well, unfocused in his studies. He would always rather go out and play among the forests than sit and meditate. When he did try to train nothing would come out and he gave up altogether."

"So how'd your dad fix that?" I wondered.

She set her hands on top of each other over her bent knees and chuckled. "Well, first he tried beating him."

My face drooped. "And then?"

"Then he tried sealing him in the caves but he escaped."

“Does this story have a happy ending?” I wondered.

Her eyes danced with mirth at the recollection of the fond memories. “Oh, yes. You see, our father realized that my brother needed a purpose for his magic. My brother had no use for magic when he could use his strength to master anyone who tried to fight him, even without being able to transform, so one day our father challenged him to a fight.”

“And?”

She chuckled. “My brother lost very badly. He swore he would best our father in the next bout and my father told him he would never win without magic. My brother challenged my father then and there to a rematch and during the sparring they grew rather violent.” I could just imagine two burly men jousting it out with fists. “My brother was knocked down and my father stood over him to give the winning blow when my brother suddenly transformed.”

“And won?” I guessed.

Arian burst out laughing and shook her head. “Oh, no. Our father thrashed him but my brother could now see the usefulness of his magic and he began his magic training in earnest. Now he is strong enough to almost overcome our father.”

“Usefulness,” I murmured as I looked down at the platter.

Arian noticed where my attention lay and held up the plate. “Would you like some? I just fetched them from the kitchen.”

“What are they?” I asked her as I plucked one from the stack and turned it over in front of my face.

“A sweet cake filled with fruits. I made them myself.”

I stiffened and my eyes lit up as a thought struck me. “That’s it!” I exclaimed as I jumped to my feet.

Arian climbed up after me with a confused expression on her face. “What is?”

I grabbed her hand and tugged her toward the archway. “Maybe I might have found out how I can use my magic!”

We hurried through the streets, catching the attention of many along the way. Most were curious, some snobbish, and others even followed us a short distance before thinking better of it. We passed a few children who stared at us with even greater curiosity before scampering away.

We reached the kitchen and I was glad to find it was empty. I released my friend and hurried over to one of the workstations. All manner of bowls, spoons, spatulas, and more were to be found and I quickly dug out a large bowl and some measuring spoons. I stood over all the supplies and completely ignored them as I focused all my attention on my hands which I held up in front of me.

“Alright, magic, we don’t know each other very well, but you and I both know this is what I want to do.” I wiggled my fingers and waited for that barely familiar spark of warmth that I’d felt that one day. “Come on. I know you can do this. Just work with me this once, please?”

My eyes lit up as a soft twinkle of silver sparkles floated out of my fingertips.

Arian gasped. “You can conjure magic!”

“Let’s hope it’s the right kind,” I replied as I positioned my hands as I had seen the cooks do. I focused all my thoughts on one single, familiar, and delicious object and moved my hands in the same smooth motion.

My silver magic sparkled brighter and danced off my fingers in transparent threads. The wisps danced about one another and sparkled like the stars, crafting something in the very center of their dance. A thin rectangular brown bar appeared in front of me. My heart pounded in my chest as I held out my hands with my palms up. The light faded and the bar dropped into my waiting palms.

Arian leaned in and studied my creation. “It smells sweet. Is it a treat of some kind?”

I smiled as I brushed my hand over the top of the bar. “Not quite the kind you’re thinking about but you’ll see. We just need a few other ingredients to help it taste even better.” I paused and furrowed my brow. “At least, I hope so.”

I snapped off one of the sharp corners and tossed the piece into my mouth. The bit melted in my mouth and filled it with the sweet familiar flavor I didn’t realize I’d missed so much.

“Is it good?” Arian asked me.

“It’s perfect,” I assured her.

I broke the bar into chunks over the bowl while Arian followed my directions. She fetched the rest of the ingredients which I mixed into a wet mixture and poured into a pan. The wood-heated oven was readied by Arian and I slid the pan inside before closing the door. I stepped back with a smile on my face.

In no time at all, the kitchen was filled with the scent of brownies. Arian’s wide eyes showed me her eagerness and I couldn’t help but peek into the oven more times than should have. Finally, I pulled out the oven rack and dipped a knife into the mixture. It came out clean. A perfect success.

I drew out the pan and set it on the counter to cool. The sweet aroma of chocolate wafted across our noses and out the open windows.

Arian stretched her neck over the pan and studied the volcanic surface. “What is it?”

“It’s called brownies,” I told her as I picked up a knife and began cutting the hunk into small squares. “It’s a, um, delicacy where I’m from.” I lifted two squares out of the whole and set them on a pair of napkins set out on the table. Steam rose from them and I was glad to see the inside was perfectly set.

I handed her one of the cooled treats and took up the other for myself. Arian examined the dark interior with some trepidation. I had my

misgivings but one bite told me all would be well. “Try it,” I encouraged her through a mouthful of the treat.

Arian nodded and took a dainty bite. Her eyes lit up and she leaned back to stare incredulously at the food. “This is delicious!”

I swallowed hard and grinned. “We made a perfect batch.”

She shook her head. “I only helped you find the ingredients. It was you who cooked it.”

I swept an arm over the large room filled as it was with all manner of ingredients. “Without you, it would’ve taken me weeks to find everything I needed. We made a good team and the brownie shows that.”

She blushed and nibbled some more on the brownie. That is until she noticed me take another big bite. She dove in and soon both of us were left with empty napkins. Her hungry eyes fell on the remainder of the goodies.

Any plans she had for the brownies, however, were interrupted by a soft giggle. We both froze before we whipped our heads to the nearest window. A few figures ducked out of sight and I heard more giggling.

Arian and I glanced at each other and both smiled. I pressed a finger to my lips before I tiptoed over to the window.

“Gotcha!” I shouted as I flung myself over the sill.

High-pitched screams erupted from the dozen or so kids who hid themselves beneath the window. They scattered in all directions trying to find a new hiding spot.

I laughed and beckoned to them with my hand. “Come on back. We’re not mad at you.”

The kids who had managed to find a hiding spot peeked out. Most had only been able to crash onto the grass outside the window. They sat up and stared at us with wide eyes.

The boy I’d interacted with before slipped from behind a nearby tree and marched over as if he’d never been hiding. “We smelled something funny and thought the kitchen was on fire.”

A stifled snort escaped me. “Does it smell that bad?”

His imperious expression softened and he bit his lower lip. “Well, it-”

“It smells yummy!” the girl whom I’d rescued a few days before spoke up. She scurried up to the window and placed her tiny hands against the wall under the window. Her big eyes stared pleadingly up at me. “Can I have some?”

I laughed and nodded. “You can all have some but you have to come inside for it.”

And thus began a stampede.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

The children raced around the corner of the kitchen, pushing and shoving as they vied for first place. They came crashing through the doors and skidded to a stop in front of Arian and me. We scooted back to avoid being swallowed up in the chaos as they made a haphazard cluster.

The young boy with the hilariously imposing manner caught sight of the brownie pan. He marched up to the food and reached out to grab a square.

I swatted his hand. “Not yet. They’re still too hot.”

He jerked his hand back and glared at me. A gasp arose from the other children and some of them lost a bit of color on their faces. Even Arian appeared shocked.

I blinked at the company. “What?”

The young scamp stepped back and stretched himself up to his full short height. “Nobody has dared touch me like you have. Don’t you know I’m the prince?”

I lifted an eyebrow. “You’re a prince?”

“Not just any prince,” Arian whispered to me. “He is the grandson of His Majesty.”

Bravo, me. I’d just slapped the hand of the heir to the throne.

The color dropped out of my face as I stared into the huffy face of a future king. I swallowed the growing lump in my throat and managed a

shaky smile. “Um, sorry about that, Your, um, Highness. I was just trying to keep you from burning yourself, that’s all. See?” I hurried to remove a square with a spatula and set it on a napkin. Steam rose from the piece. “It’s still hot. You have to wait for it to cool a little before you can eat it or you’ll burn your tongue.”

He wrinkled his nose but some of his ire was deflated. “Very well, but you need to warn me about these things first, and no hitting.”

I tucked my hands behind my back and sheepishly smiled at him. “Of course.”

“Why don’t we get out a square for everyone?” Arian spoke up.

I bobbed my head. “A good idea!”

I jumped at the chance for distraction and together we lifted out a square for each child. That left only a few in the pan. The seconds felt like hours but the steam finally stopped rising from the taken pieces. I picked up the first one and held it out to the little prince.

“I hope you’ll like it,” I told him.

He accepted the gift and eyed the treat with uncertainty.

“Just eat it!” one of his friends insisted.

He scowled at his playmate. “I am! Don’t rush me!” He returned his attention to the food and took a dainty bite. A few crumbles fell from his mouth as his eyes widened. “This is really good!” He dug into his piece while the others clamored for theirs.

Arian and I doled them out and soon we had a crowd of children eagerly munching on their treats. They dribbled crumbs all over the floor and their faces, but their wide smiles made it all worth it.

One of the girls finished before the others and held out her hand. “Can I have another?”

I glanced at the pan and shook my head. “There isn’t enough for everyone to have another so you’ll have to wait for another batch.”

“When will you make it?” another child spoke up.

I smiled and leaned down so I was eye-to-eye with her. “I’ll make one very soon but you have to promise to be nice to each other, okay?” She bobbed her head.

“What about the bowl?” the prince wondered as he pointed at the dirty dish.

I knitted my eyebrows together. “Well, you could each dip a finger-”

That was all the encouragement they needed. The children dove into the bowl like a school of piranhas. Arian and I stood back and watched the show with a mixture of curiosity and horror.

“There seems to be quite a crowd in the kitchen today.”

Arian and I spun around and discovered Prince Yushir standing in the doorway. He strolled over to us with a playful smile on his lips. His twinkling eyes noticed the children and he lifted his eyebrows.

“Are we having cooking lessons today?” he wondered.

I shook my head. “It’s more like taste-testing.”

He lifted his nose to the air. “Something does smell quite delicious.”

“Lady Anna has made a new treat!” Arian chimed in.

Yushir’s attention fell on the nearly-empty pan of brownies and he used a hand to gesture to the treats. “May I?”

My eyes lit up. “Oh! Of course!”

I scooted over to the pan and plopped a square onto a napkin before handing it to him. The prince bowed his head as he accepted the treat. He studied the strange spongy texture before lifting the treat to his nose. “This smells very sweet and bitter. And you made this?”

I nodded at Arian. “Arian and I did.”

“From ingredients in the kitchen?”

I shook my head. “I. . .I used my magic.”

His eyebrows shot up and his smile warmed but I detected a faint strain at the corners of his mouth. “You did? That is wonderful news. It means our

lessons have not only *not* gone to waste but that you truly do belong to the heaven clan."

I blinked at him. "Why's that?"

"Only those granted the gift of creation magic can be counted among that number," he explained as he studied the treat. "However did you think of making such an item?"

I nodded at my companion. "Arian gave me the idea."

She blushed and bowed her head. "It was nothing."

Yushir chuckled. "I applaud your 'nothing' and hope more 'nothings' come from your collaboration. Now then, time for a try." He broke off a tiny piece and took a dainty bite. His eyes lit up and he eagerly swallowed. "This is delicious!" he complimented as he tore another piece off. "What is it?"

"It's called chocolate," I told him as the children ransacked the table for the few crumbs Arian and I had dropped from their pieces. Arian herself held aloft the pan to keep their eager hands from devouring the remainder of the brownies. "It's a treat from my realm."

He smiled at the brownie before his twinkling eyes set on me. "Do you have any other delicacies from your world you wish for me to try?"

"Me first, uncle!" Prince Kean spoke up as he squirmed out of the mess of the other children.

"Me, too!" another child joined in.

"I think you guys need to go out and play off some of that chocolate," I countered as I shooed them toward the door.

The short prince dug his heels into the floor in front of the entrance and stopped my advance. He turned and tugged on the front of my dress. "Won't you play with us?"

My heart lifted at the kind invitation given so sincerely by the young man. I leaned down and used a finger to wipe some brownie from the

corner of his lips. “Not just yet. I need to clean up in here. You go on and start without me, okay?”

Kean nodded. “Very well, but don’t be long!” He scurried away to join his friends in a rousing game of catch with a ball.

Yushir came up beside me and watched the spirited children scamper off. Half the brownie in his hand was already eaten and he held the rest like it was a treasured heirloom. “You seem to have made quite the impression on the young prince.”

I snorted. “I made quite the impression on his hand earlier.”

He lifted an eyebrow. “Oh?”

I hung my head but the truth was bound to come out sooner or later. “I swatted him because he was reaching for the hot food.”

I was relieved and confused when the prince chuckled. “Excellent.”

My head shot up and I blinked at him. “It is?”

His affection-filled eyes watched the young prince scamper with the others. “He has been treated with a light hand his entire life. A little swatting now and again will do him some good.”

I breathed out a breath I hadn’t realized I’d been holding. “Thank God. . .”

The prince’s amused gaze fell on me. “To which one do you pray?”

I shot up and shook my head. “N-no one in particular. It’s just a saying where I’m from.”

“I will have to remember that one,” Yushir mused as he tucked the rest of his treat into his large sleeve.

Worry nagged at my thoughts. “Don’t you like it?”

“Very much and I shall finish it after I have visited with someone,” he assured me as he turned and inclined his head to me. “And I feel I must thank you twice.”

I blinked at him. “Why twice?”

He patted his sleeve where he'd hidden the treat. "Once for the delicious sweet and another for livening up our lives with your interesting offers."

I blushed and shook my head. "I haven't done very much."

Yushir's eyes sparkled as she studied me. "Perhaps you have done more than you would guess but I must leave before the temptation to consume your sweet overwhelms me. Good day."

Arian and I bowed our heads as the prince left. I closed the kitchen doors behind him and leaned my back against the entrance. A heavy sigh escaped me but I found Arian smiling at me. "What?" I asked her.

She grasped her hands in front of her and shook her head. "I was just thinking you were smiling more often."

I laughed and pushed off from the door. "I can't help it. Those kids are too cute. Now then-" I brushed my hands together as I inspected the many crumbs of brownies that dotted the worktable and the floor. "Let's see about getting this cleaned up."

Arian bowed her head to me. "Allow me to do it. You can join the children in their fun."

I clapped a hand on her shoulder and led her toward our workstation. "I'm not letting you deal with all this mess alone, now no more arguing and let's get started."

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Yushir hurried on his way and a wicked smile lay on his lips. His footsteps pointed toward the general direction of the palace of His Majesty but he ran into trouble along the main thoroughfare, or rather, trouble ran into him. The screams ahead of him were the first sign of something amiss.

A half dozen goddesses scurried past him with frightened looks on their faces. They glanced over their shoulders down the street and Yushir followed their gaze. The slim figure of Lord Kang could be seen strolling down the walkway. He had an oblivious smile on his face as he bowed his head to those terrified onlookers who quivered on the sidelines. The beast who had pretended to attack Anna trotted at his side, its tongue lolling out one side of its mouth.

Men and women alike skirted around the pair and one of the gods even marched up to Kang. “What are you doing with that beast here?” he snapped as he stabbed a finger at the animal. “You have your stables in the outskirts where you can walk them!”

Kang’s smile didn’t falter even a fraction of an inch as he patted the top of his animal’s head. “Mew here has grown tired of the view from the stables so I decided to take him for a walk around here. Surely you don’t object.”

“O-of course I object!” the other god sputtered as he swept an arm over the area. “You are frightening everyone with your selfish action!”

“Is there a problem here?” Yushir chimed in as he strolled up to the pair.

The men both bowed their heads to the prince before the irritated one waved a hand at Kang. “This fool has brought his pet to wander the streets without any care for the rest of us.”

Kang draped an arm over his pet’s back and leaned against the creature. “There really is no need to worry. Mew here is completely harmless. Aren’t you, Mew?” The creature opened its mouth in a yawn and revealed its many sharp teeth.

The color drained from the other god’s face before he rallied his courage. “As harmless as a nest of snakes!”

Yushir patted the man’s shoulder. “I will second the comment that this creature is harmless.”

“But I heard it attacked a goddess just the other day!” the god insisted.

The prince laughed. “That was merely a play we were acting out. There was never any danger to the goddess.”

Yushir’s words seemed to soothe some of the god’s shaky nerves but he still cast a suspicious eye at the beast. “Then I leave the care of this beast in your hands, Your Highness.”

The god moved away and the others did likewise, leaving the pair mostly alone. Kang smiled at his compatriot. “I am much obliged for your good opinion of my pet, Your Highness.”

“You were rather lucky I happened to walk by,” Yushir scolded him as he led Kang and his pet away from the heavily trafficked thoroughfare and to a side street. He turned to face the strange duo. “What brings you out here with your pet? You know His Majesty’s opinion on the matter.”

Kang shook his head. “It is because of His Majesty’s opinion that I have brought Mew out here. He is concerned about the recent attacks on the immortal villages in the lower realms and worries that someone may

attempt such an attack on our kingdom, so he has commanded me to walk Mew a few times a week to inspect his lands."

Yushir lifted an eyebrow. "His Majesty has that much concern that he would frighten his subjects?"

His companion pursed his lips and gave an affirmative nod. "Very much so. Rumors are swirling around the courts of the land immortals that a god is behind the attacks."

"Let us hope they remain just that, rumors," Yushir commented.

Mew lifted his snout in the air and his nose twitched. He strolled close to Yushir and tried to stick his snout into the prince's sleeve. Yushir jerked his hand back and frowned at the beast. "What is it doing?"

Kang grinned at him. "You seem to have something hidden in your sleeve that Mew appears to want to eat."

Yushir tucked his arm behind his back and skirted the large beast's curious nose. "I fear I will have to disappoint your pet though I am glad to see his sense of smell is up to the task His Majesty has assigned to you."

Kang clapped his hand on Mew's back and nodded. "You can count on us, Your Highness. If there is trouble we will find it."

Yushir skirted the beast and walked backward toward the main street with one eye on the animal. "Then I will leave you to it."

Kang stood straight and puffed out his chest. "We will bring honor to ourselves, Your Highness!"

The large beast licked its lips at Yushir. The prince spun around and hurried away. *I hope he remembered to feed that thing before he let it out on this walk* he wondered to himself.

Yushir's thoughts didn't linger long on the beast and its tamer as his footsteps led him back on track toward his initial goal. The destination was a palace close to that of His Majesty. The home was surrounded by high walls of pure white and enclosed a large and luxurious garden. A gazebo stood near a gurgling brook and fish swam in a pond on the opposite side of

the main path. The straight stone path traveled up to the low wide steps of the porch which was attached to a long and wide single-floor home. The roof was decked out with many peeks, however, that created an effect of an imperial home.

The sliding doors were open and a single hall led to the very rear of the building. The wide corridor gave an airy quality to the building and windows had been placed at every opportunity to allow natural light to stream inside. Doors on either side of the front half of the hall led into spacious rooms filled with treasures of gold and bedrooms decked out in white silk sheets and curtains. The rear half of the passage was completely open except for a few tall screens and columns that propped up the roof and separated seating areas.

A low reclining couch sat at the very end of the hall and Lord Eastwei propped himself up on the comfortable furniture. The nearly-finished flute sat on the low table in front of him along with a few half-open scrolls. The lord's eyes were closed and his breathing was regular. Yushir wondered if he would have to rouse the lord from his slumber.

"You have come at an irregular hour."

Yushir almost jumped at the other lord's voice but he managed to recover his composure behind a smile. "Am I that late for tea?"

Eastwei opened his eyes and studied his guest. "You are both early and late which means you have come for another purpose."

Yushir took a seat on his favored cushion near his host's position and smiled. "I did have something rather interesting to show you." He reached into his sleeve and drew out the half square of brownie. "This."

Eastwei lifted an eyebrow. "What is it?"

"I believe Lady Roberts called it a 'brownie,'" Yushir mused as he turned the cake over in his hand. "It is a treat she created only this day, and she managed to use creation magic in its design. That is a very clear sign that her training under my tutelage did not go to waste."

“It is rather strange that she should be able to use her magic on a day when she was not under your tutelage,” Eastwei pointed out.

Yushir’s smile faded a little but he cleared his throat. “Yes, well, one must let the bird leave the nest at some point to test its wings, but do you know-” He held aloft the treat so it glistened in the sun, “-this reminds me of something. The flavor calls to mind the tea Shian served us at her party.” He nibbled a bit of the treat and furrowed his brow. “Yes, it does have that sweet and yet bitter flavor.” He cast a sideglance at his companion whose attention lay on the sweet.

“Then you have come to have me taste this treat?” Eastwei guessed.

“I’m afraid not.” Yushir plopped the rest of the treat in his mouth and chewed with satisfaction before swallowing. “There was hardly any of my piece left to share though I do recall seeing more in the pan.”

Yushir plucked a few crumbs from his lap and tossed them into his mouth before looking up. He discovered his companion standing. Eastwei walked past him and toward the door.

Yushir scurried to his feet. “Where are you going?”

Eastwei didn’t break his stride when he replied. “Out.”

Yushir watched him go with a sly smile on his lips as he stroked his chin. *Interesting.*

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

"Who could have guessed they would make such a mess in such a short time?" Arian muttered as she swept a broom across the floor. She stared in disgust at the bits of crumbs that left streaks on the tiles. "Or that this would be so difficult to clean."

I brushed the bits off my damp towel and smiled at her. "It'd be easier if the mess was cool. They turn to rocks if they sit around long enough and that makes it easier to clean up."

Arian paused in her sweeping and sighed. "If only we could wait but the maids will be here to prepare dinner in an-my goodness!"

Her exclamation made me jump and I looked to see my friend ashen-faced and pointing at the door. I turned in that direction and my face drooped. Prince Kean's head peeked inside and his face was a mess of chocolate streaks. His hair and clothes were equally stained and tears pooled in his big eyes.

I shot to my feet and we both hurried over to the boy. "What happened?"

He shuffled over to us and rubbed one of his eyes. "I. . .I only wanted another one so I stuck it in my pocket, but then we started playing and I forgot about it and I fell. Now it's all over me and I don't know how to get

it off-" Any further explanation was interrupted by a loud sniffle as his tears exploded.

I knelt in front of him and grasped his shoulders as I gave him a good look over. "It shouldn't be too much trouble, but you have to wash up or I'm sure your mother will be very cross with you."

His eyes bulged out of his head. "B-but I don't know how to clean it up!"

"Then I'll help you do it," I promised.

"Allow me," Arian spoke up as she grasped the young prince's hand. "The baths are not easy to find."

I nodded. "Then you go do that. We're almost done cleaning here, anyway."

She nodded. "I will return as soon as I am able."

I smiled and shook my head. "It's fine. I'll get this finished in no time and see you at the hall." Arian hesitated but I snatched the broom from her and playfully swept the brushes against the bottom of her robes. "Go on. I'll be there in a few minutes, I promise."

She smiled and nodded before she turned her attention to the little prince. "Come along now, Your Highness. We'll get you cleaned up in no time." He nodded and allowed himself to be led away.

I sighed and shook my head before returning to the task at hand. As I soon discovered, my optimistic words didn't match the chore before me. There really were a lot of crumbs and they had rolled and been kicked in all the tight places. I dropped to my hands and knees and crawled under one of the nearby workstations where I discovered a litter of crumbs.

I had been under there only a few moments when I heard the pitter-patter of small feet. I popped my head up and was just in time to watch a half dozen children escape out the nearest window. Fear struck my heart and I whipped my head about to look at the brownie pan. It was empty. They'd even taken most of the crumbs.

A smile touched my lips as I resumed my work under the table with my trusty rag in hand. “At least that’ll be easy to clean. . .” I murmured. I was deep in my work when I heard another soft step of gentle shoes. A snort escaped me. “You’re too late, it’s all gone.” The footsteps stopped close beside me and I frowned when no response came. I drew my head out from under the table and looked up at my guest. “I said all the-”

I found myself staring into the impassive face of Lord Eastwei. My heart dropped into my stomach and I clutched my rag against myself. I stood there in a dumb stupor, my mouth agape and my eyes as wide as saucers.

He nodded at my chest. “You are soiling yourself.”

I dropped my gaze to my chest and discovered that I’d clutched the wet rag so tightly against myself that the front of my clothing was indeed damp. My cheeks turned a nice shade of red and I wrenched the rag away from me, showing off the damp area it had created. I spun around to face away from him and snatched a dry towel which I furiously patted against myself.

Meanwhile, the lord sauntered over to my workstation with his usual cat-like grace and his eyes settled on the empty pan. “You have no more?”

I blinked at the pan and the man for a moment before I understood his meaning. “N-no, I’m afraid not. That is, not today. I might make more tomorrow.” I detected the faintest hint of emotion. “Did you. . .did you want me to save you one?”

He lifted his eyes to stare straight ahead. “If you feel you must.”

I smiled and shook my head. “It wouldn’t be any problem. Did you want me to have Arian deliver it to you later?”

“No need,” he assured me as he turned away and toward the door. “I will get it myself.”

And with that, he strolled out of the kitchen.

I stood there staring dumbly at where he’d gone. My mind was a flurry of questions. Why had he come here? How did he learn about the brownies?

Was he really coming back tomorrow?

A lump formed in my throat. The former ruler of the world wanted to taste my brownies.

I took a deep breath and let it out. No pressure. He wasn't the ruler of the world anymore and besides, maybe he wouldn't really show up.

Or maybe he would.

The question nagged my thoughts as I finished cleaning up. I walked home in a daze, my mind still abuzz with what had happened at the end of my brownie adventure. My thoughts must have been written in my posture because Arian met me halfway down my garden path with a worried expression on her face.

"Are you well?" she asked me as she looked me over.

I shook myself out of my reverie and smiled at her. "I'm fine. Why?"

She leaned back and looked me over. "You look. . .distracted."

I laughed and shook my head. "It's nothing. Anyway, did you get the prince all cleaned up?"

Arian perked up and bobbed her head. "Oh, yes! The brownie came right off, though the clothes took more cleaning than I had hoped."

I grinned as we strolled down the path together toward the house. "We'll have to remind him not to put it into his pocket tomorrow."

She stopped and lifted an eyebrow. "Tomorrow?"

I turned to face her and nodded. "Yeah. I was going to make some more tomorrow. Why? I something wrong?"

"Tomorrow the kitchen is being used by Lady Fann for her cooking class."

My face fell. "All day?"

She nodded. "All day. We won't have a chance to make anything until the day after." She tilted her head to one side and studied my face. "Is something wrong?"

I cleared my throat and managed a smile. “No, it’s nothing. I guess I was just looking forward to using my magic again.”

She returned my smile with one of her own. “I’m sure you will have a chance the day after.”

But would I have another chance to see Lord Eastwei? And why did I care so much if I did?

“Lady Roberts! Oh, Lady Roberts!”

Arian and I paused and half-turned toward the archway. A pair of elegant goddesses hurried down the path toward us with bright smiles on their faces. They stopped and bowed their heads to me.

“Thank you so much for treating my little girl!” one of the women complimented me.

I blinked at her before realization struck. “Your little girl got a brownie today?”

She straightened and nodded. “Yes, and she was so struck by your kindness and your wonderful cooking skills that she came home with nothing but admiration for you.”

“And my little boy did the same, as well,” the other woman chimed in as she bobbed her head. “He was so thrilled by your wonderful cooking that he begged me to make some of these, um-”

“Brownies?” I suggested.

She nodded. “Yes, that is what he said, but I told him I had no idea how to cook them.”

“You wouldn’t wish to tell us our recipe, would you?” the first parent wondered.

I bit my lower lip. “It’s not that I don’t want to, it’s just that, well-”

“She conjured the main ingredient from magic,” Arian spoke up.

The women’s faces became downcast. “Oh, I see,” the first one replied before she managed a smile again. “Well, then I will have to plead with you to make some more when you have the time.”

I nodded. “I’ll be sure to do that and make sure the kids get some.”

The second one clapped her hands. “Wonderful! Thank you so much and have a good day.” They bowed their heads and scuttled off.

I turned to Arian with surprise written all over my face. “I never thought anyone would care that much about brownies to visit me.”

She smiled and nodded. “Of course they would! They’re delicious! We will have to make a double batch the day after tomorrow.”

I nodded as I followed her into the house. The day after tomorrow.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

"Have you heard of this vulgar new 'treat' that strange mortal has conjured up?"

The question came from Lady Bidao as she lounged on her side under the portico roof of Lady Shian's home. Her hostess sat near her at the low table with a teacup in hand.

Shian paused in her drinking and wrinkled her nose. "You mean what those children are talking about? I am surprised you care what those brats talk about."

Bidao plucked a loose string from the cushion beneath her and scoffed. "I do not care a jot for those brats, but their mothers have done nothing but talk about it since yesterday. I heard that two of them even visited her home yesterday to plead with her for the recipe, and do you know what?"

Shian smiled and shook her head. "I do not know until you tell me."

Bidao sat up with a look of disgust written on her face. "She refused them!"

Her hostess lifted an eyebrow. "Why?"

Bidao fell back on the cushions and shrugged. "Who knows? Perhaps she desires to keep such a prized treat to herself and seek favors from their parents. Even the young prince himself is gushing about the treat."

Shian took a sip of her tea and patted the cushion beside her. “Let them gush. We shall be above the fray and not seek them at all.”

A sly smile slipped onto Bidao’s lips as she slid over to her hostess and took up her cup. “Shall we occupy our time with more pleasant thoughts? Such as those about Lord Eastwei?”

Shian grinned. “A wonderful idea.”

“Perhaps we might go visit him today? It has been some time since you saw him last,” Bidao suggested.

Shian stared ahead and furrowed her brow. “But I have no reason to speak with him.”

“No reason? What about the Twilight Fair that is drawing near?” Bidao suggested. “You are to be in charge of the decorations, are you not?”

Shian nodded. “I am.”

“And should his palace not be properly decorated?”

Shian laughed and set down her cup. “You are as devious as you are beautiful.”

“A wonderful compliment!” Bidao agreed as they both stood and hurried down the path.

Their feet took them to the abode of the great lord but they were greeted not by his stoic face but that of his manservant.

The servant was about thirty years old in appearance with a bright eager face and a lithe form. He wore plain robes of light blue over white and greeted them with a bright smile. “Good afternoon, My Ladies. How may I help you?”

“Good afternoon, Puren,” Shian returned as she looked past him at the closed doors to the palace. “Is your master at home?”

Puren shook his head. “I’m afraid not, Lady Shian. He has just left for the kitchens.”

Bidao snorted. “The kitchens? Has your master taken up the art of cooking as well as flute making?”

Puren shook his head. “I’m not sure, Lady Bidao. I only know he has gone there.”

Bidao grabbed her friend’s hand. “Then we shall see if we might try some of his cooking before the others in Lady Fann’s class get all the good morsels. Good day, Puren.”

He bowed his head. “Good day, My Ladies.”

The pair hurried out of the palace grounds and down the many streets to the kitchen. They found the place a cluster of activity as Lady Fann instructed the maids and a few of the ladies on how to cook a few scrumptious meals. Their target, however, was nowhere to be found.

Bidao hurried up to Lady Fann and bowed her head to the teacher. “Good afternoon and my apologies for disrupting your class, but have you seen Lord Eastwei recently?”

Lady Fann smiled and nodded. “Of course. He was just here not more than a minute ago inquiring as to the students. The lord seemed rather disappointed that someone was missing among the number.”

“Who?” Shian asked her.

“Why, that new goddess who dropped into his garden,” Fann told them with a wink. “If I didn’t know any better I’d say he was slightly smitten with her. Then again, I did hear he found her *naked* atop his favorite resting couch.”

Bidao noticed that her companion’s smile had taken on a stiff quality at the corners and so she quickened the conversation. “I did hear something of the sort. Do you know where he went?”

Lady Fann shook her head. “I’m afraid not.”

Bidao bowed her head. “Thank you and sorry for the trouble.”

“No trouble at all,” Fann assured her as the two women hurried away. “And don’t forget you’re always welcome to join my class, Lady Shian!”

“The impertinence of that old fool. . .” Bidao grumbled as they left the building. She looked to her friend who had a worried expression. “Is

something the matter?"

Shian lifted her chin and her eyebrows crashed down. "What is the quickest route to Fanshe Hall?"

Bidao wrinkled her nose. "Why ever would you want to go there?"

"Never mind, I will find it myself."

Shian rushed off in the direction of the mentioned hall. "Wait a moment!" Bidao shouted as she hurried after her friend.

Shian's heart pounded in her chest as she hurried down the streets toward the hoary hall. A suspicion nagged at her thoughts as her friend caught up to her wheezing out each breath as though it was her last.

"Really," Bidao muttered between gasps. "Must we hurry so?"

"He may have already reached there," Shian snapped.

Bidao blinked at her. "He? Lord Eastwei?" A choked laugh managed to escape her panting lips. "Surely you jest. He was no doubt making inquiries of the girl for his friend Prince Yushir."

Shian didn't look convinced as they rounded a corner and the road in front of Fanshe Hall was presented to them. So was the retreating back of Lord Eastwei.

"My Lord!" Shian shouted as she hurried to catch up to him. "Dadan!"

Eastwei paused only a few steps shy of the archway that led into Fanshe Hall and half-turned to her. Shian trotted up a disheveled mess. Bidao was worse, wheezing and gasping.

Eastwei's dark eyes flitted over her disheveled person. "Is anything the matter?"

Shian pressed her hand against her chest and managed to catch her breath enough to smile at him. "N-nothing at all. I noticed you here and only thought to accompany Your Highness on your walk."

"I have finished my walk," he replied.

She blinked at him. "Pardon?"

He turned his face toward the archway and nodded at the entrance. “This is my destination.”

Her heart cratered into her stomach but she retained some of her composure as she pulled back the wild strains of her hair. “I-I see. Do you visit the-that is, do you visit Lady Roberts on account of your friend, Prince Yushir?”

“No. On account of myself.”

A little color drained from her face. “O-oh. How kind of you to visit her.”

Eastwei didn’t reply but stepped forward and through the archway. Shian grabbed her friend’s hand and tugged her after the lord. The trio strolled down the path toward the small hall. The front doors were open and Anna and Arian sat on the porch enjoying the shade.

The pair noticed the crowd and jumped to their feet. They bowed to the lord and his entourage as they came up to the home.

“G-good afternoon, Lord Eastwei,” Anna stuttered as her hands fidgeted with each other in front of her. She noticed her nervous quirk and quickly tucked her hands behind her. “What are you doing here?”

“You said you would make more of your treats today.”

Anna blushed as Lady Bidao noticed her friend beside her stiffen. Their hostess cleared her throat. “I’m really sorry about that. I didn’t know the kitchen was going to be used today and I didn’t really think. . .” Her voice trailed off.

“Didn’t think what?” Eastwei questioned her.

Anna bowed her head. “I didn’t think you’d really come for some.”

“I am here now,” he pointed out.

She bobbed her head. “I-I know, and I’m really sorry.” Her eyes lit up and she clasped her hands together in front of her with her palms turned up. “But I might be able to make up for no brownies this way.” She squinted her eyes and silver light twinkled over her fingers. Slim threads of magic

wound their way across her palms and in a few moments, a small bar of chocolate had formed. The sweet dropped into her palms and she stepped off the porch to hold out the gift to the lord. “You can have this.”

He studied the brown block with a curious eye. “What is it?”

“It’s the main ingredient for the brownies. It’s called chocolate,” Anna explained as she nodded at the bar. “It won’t taste quite the same but maybe this will do until I can make some more.”

“No need,” Eastwei assured her as he grasped the bar between his fingers and lifted it to his face so he could study the smooth texture. “This will do.”

Anna smiled and bowed her head. “I’m so glad.”

Shian’s face was a mess of red and her body quivered. Bidao noticed her friend’s growing lack of composure and set a hand on her shoulder. “Careful,” she whispered.

Anna noticed the two women and managed to keep a smile on her lips. “Did you two want some chocolate, too?”

Bidao plastered a stiff toothy grin on her face and shook her head. “N-no, not right now. In fact, we just wanted to admire your gardens for a few moments. They’re very pretty.”

Anna swept her eyes over the area and nodded. “It is. I heard you were in charge of the palaces.” Her words were addressed to Lady Shian. “Thank you so much for making such a pretty garden here.”

Shian inclined her head. “It was no trouble.”

Bidao laughed and grasped her friend’s shoulders. “Well, we should be going. Good afternoon.” She only waited long enough for Anna to reply before she whisked her friend out of the compound.

Shian hardly waited for them to be on the other side of the wall before she stomped her foot. “That witch!”

“Keep your voice low!” Bidao hissed as she nodded at the archway only a dozen steps from where they stood. “They might hear you!”

“Let them hear me!” Shian snapped.

“Including Lord Eastwei?”

The mention of the lord dampened some of her ire, but not all of it. Shian’s lips curled into a sneer as she glared ahead of them. “If she thinks she can win his heart with such an ugly thing then she is sorely mistaken. We shall see who he favors most.” And with that proclamation, she stomped off with her friend following behind her.

While Shian cursed her rival Lord Eastwei had remained in the gardens. He studied the chocolate a moment before giving one corner a gentle nibble. The lord drew the candy away and licked his lips. “This is quite good.”

Anna smiled and bowed her head to him. “Thank you, Your Highness. I’m glad you like it. If you need any more or would like some brownies don’t hesitate to ask.”

He inclined his head slightly before he tucked the food into his sleeve and left, leaving behind the curiosity of the occupants.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

"I still cannot believe Lord Eastwei came to see you!"

The squeal came from Arian as she sat at the table with me in my humble abode. I blushed and swatted her arm. "You make it sound like he came to see me. All he wanted was some chocolate."

"But he hardly ever visits anyone!" she insisted.

I lifted an eyebrow. "Why not?"

"Lord Eastwei has few friends and even fewer whom he would consider close," she explained as she squirmed atop her mat. "And he chose *you* to visit!"

I snorted and shook my head. "You're reading too much into this. All he wanted was some food and that was almost a week ago. I doubt he'll ever step foot in my gardens again." I clapped my hands and rubbed them together. "Now then, what's there to do today?"

"You could make more brownies for the children," Arian suggested. "The kitchen shouldn't be used for anything other than the meals."

I furrowed my brow. "I'm not so sure that's a good idea. I don't want the kids to think they need that stuff every other day."

"Lady Roberts! Lady Roberts!" Speaking of the little demons.

Arian and I didn't even have a chance to stand before a herd of a half dozen children scurried through the open doors. The little prince himself

was in the lead and the loudest among them as he ran up to me and grabbed my hand.

"You didn't play with us the other day!" he scolded me as he tugged on my hand. "So you must play with us now!"

I set my hand atop his and laughed. "Why must I play with you now?"

"Because you won't know any of the hiding spots so we'll find you easy," one of the other ones spoke up.

A sly twinkle slipped into my eyes. "So that's the game, huh? Hide and seek? And you want someone to be 'it?'"

"You don't have to be it right away," little Lia assured me.

"But you will have to be 'it' if you're found first," the prince insisted as he tugged on my hand. "Now will you play or not?"

I laughed and stood. "I'll play but you have to give me my arm back."

"After we get to the forest!" he promised as he pulled me out of the house.

The 'forest' was a quaint little grove of trees with a stone path through the center. The buildings that surrounded the acre of trees were larger than the homes and were without walls. I noticed one of them was a bathhouse where Arian undoubtedly would have taken the young prince for his chocolate cleaning.

As promised, Kean released my hand after we arrived and turned to face me. "I will be it the first time and anyone found first will be it the second time and so forth. You can hide anywhere around the grove but you can't go beyond the path around the public buildings. Does everyone understand?" The children bobbed their heads so I did the same, even though I wasn't sure to which path he was referring. "Very well. I will start counting to fifty and you hide."

He skipped over to a nearby tree and closed his eyes before he pressed his forehead against the smooth bark. "One. Two. Three."

The children squealed and scattered in all directions. I hurried along the path searching for a place big enough to hide me. All the little giggles in the area told me the children were well aware of my greater girth. I would be ‘it’ forever unless I could find a really good spot every time.

I rushed past the last of the trees and found myself on a wide path that seemed to make a ring around the grove. This then was the fabled boundary Kean had mentioned. Fortunately for me, he hadn’t said I couldn’t use it to find a good spot around the grove. I hurried onward with one half of my mind trying to count down the seconds until my inevitable doom. There wasn’t a single spot among the benches, tiny bushes, and large boulders where I could hide.

I arrived at an intersection where the path turned all the usual three other ways. My heart pounded in my chest as my panicked feet led me rightward down the boundary line. A deep canal with a stream ran on my right and my left was a single large building with a domed top. The gilded windows and wide stairs with three tiers told me it was something important.

My best chance at a hiding spot.

I hurried up the steps as the countdown in my head reached zero. He would be looking for me soon. I reached the pair of doors and opened one, hurrying inside without giving the interior a thought. I spun around and pushed the door shut with my arms. All I could hear was my heart as I pressed my ear against the wood. Nothing could be heard from outside.

“What are you doing?”

My body froze before I whipped my head around. The building I’d entered was obviously a performing hall with stairs just behind me that led up to the elevated ground floor. The interior was shaped like an amphitheater with curved seating that faced a large open stage on a low platform.

My heart skipped a beat when I beheld the stoic of Lord Eastwei seated cross-legged on the stage. A wooden flute lay in his lap and his hands were tucked into the sleeves of his robe. He stared at me with those intense eyes.

I'd just interrupted his practice.

"I-I'm so sorry," I stuttered as I pawed at the door behind me with both hands and finally found the handle. "I didn't know anyone was in here."

"Why did you come in here?" he wondered.

"I was just playing a game," I told him as I tightened my grip on the handle. I turned my face toward the door as I futilely tried to hide my shaking. "But I'll be going now-"

"Wait a moment." I glanced over my shoulder with confusion in my eyes. He grasped the flute in both hands and held it up to his lips. "I would have your opinion on this instrument."

I shook my head. "I don't really know anything about music."

He lowered the flute and nodded. "Then you are perfect. A trained musician be prejudiced against any other style but their own while a novice would have no such scruples."

My face fell as I tried to decipher his meaning. Had he just insulted or complimented me?

I half-turned and gave him my best inauthentic smile. "Since I'm such a novice I doubt I'd be very helpful to you."

"I will be the judge of that," he countered as he lifted the flute to his lips.

The lord closed his eyes and blew. A sweet melody floated out of the instrument and glided over the room, filling the auditorium with a sweet, romantic sound. I didn't recognize the tune but the melody was like a gentle lullaby.

What was most amazing of all, however, were the butterflies that flew out of the singing air. They formed from the sound itself and were translucent wonders of magic colored with all the hues I could imagine and

then some. The magical figures flitted about the center of the room leaving a trail of stardust behind them. I couldn't help but move up the stairs and step into their midst. They danced around me and I followed them, spinning in circles as laughter burst out of me.

The sweet melody faded and the butterflies also vanished. I turned to the lord and furiously clapped. "That was wonderful!"

He lowered the flute and lifted an eyebrow at me. "The common courtesy would be for you to bow."

Some of the color drained from my face and I clapped my hands against my front before I bowed my head. "I-I'm so sorry!" There was no sudden response and I looked up to find him rising with the flute grasped in one hand. He didn't look irritated but he didn't quite have that indifferent expression I'd come to expect, either. The imperious lord almost looked. . .pleased?

"There you are!"

The noise came from behind me and I spun around to find Prince Yushir and Prince Kean entering through the doors. The elder prince strolled but the younger one was having none of it. He rushed up to me and grabbed my hand.

A frown creased his pouting lips as he tugged on my limb. "You went beyond the bounds! That means you're 'it!'"

I grasped his hand and cast a furtive glance at the imperious lord to see if he wasn't still irritated with me. He had the usual impassive expression. "That's fine. I'll be it all day long if you want."

Kean blinked at me. "Really?"

I bobbed my head. "Really and I'm ready to start the next game right now."

I swept us past the elder prince and made a quick bow of my head. He returned the gesture with a smile playing on his lips. We left the music hall behind us along with my awkward mistake.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Prince Yushir strolled up to his friend as Lord Eastwei reached the center of the room. He nodded down at the instrument. “So it’s finished?”

Eastwei nodded. “It is.”

“And you have tried playing it?”

“I have.”

The prince half-turned toward the closed door. “Was the lovely Lady Roberts in attendance?”

“She happened to come inside,” Eastwei admitted as he strolled toward the door himself.

Yushir quickly followed at his side. “You won’t play it for me?”

“I have tested it. That is all I desired to do,” came the bland reply.

Yushir raced in front of his companion and faced him at the top of the stairs. “And what did your audience of one think of the flute?”

Eastwei stared at him with a face that almost showed the emotion of irritation. “She said it was satisfactory.”

The prince lifted an eyebrow. “Is that all? Surely a flute you have been working on for so long would produce a stronger result from her.”

“Should it?” Eastwei countered.

Yushir shrugged. “She is not very familiar with magic and I thought that any you could perform would most definitely please her.”

“Why do you choose me?” the lord persisted.

Yushir leaned toward his friend and narrowed his eyes in study. “Why do you care?”

Eastwei’s usual indifferent expression reappeared and he strolled around Yushir. “I do not.”

Yushir hurried after him and caught up outside the venue. “Your questions were hardly in line with your usual indifference. Could it be that the Lady Roberts said more than just ‘satisfactory?’”

“That would hardly matter,” Eastwei commented as he turned and followed the path around the grove.

“But it matters to me,” Yushir insisted. “I would most dearly like to hear what she had to say about your music.”

Eastwei paused and turned his head to look down the forest path. The children were scrambling to find their hiding spots and Anna leaned against a tree with her head against her crossed arms.

“One! Two! Three!” she shouted as the kids tucked themselves into every nook and cranny they could find.

Yushir stepped forward to peek around his friend and saw where his gaze lay. A sly smile slipped onto his lips before he covered it with his usual affable one. “Well, it is a relief to know you will be able to play it for the coming festival. My uncle was sorely worried he would have to find another-”

“You may tell your uncle I will keep my promise,” Eastwei assured him as he continued on his way.

“W-wait a moment!” Yushir stuttered as he took a few steps after his friend. Eastwei’s pace, however, told him the conversation was over. He folded his arms over his chest and sighed. “He must enjoy cloaking himself in secrecy.”

Yushir turned his attention back to the grove. Anna had reached fifty and was now tiptoeing over the grove searching for her prey. The prince smiled as she found one of the children who squealed in delight. Anna snatched them as they tried to make an escape and trapped them in a bear hug. She spun them in a circle with both of them laughing before she set the child down.

Yushir smiled but his happiness was short-lived when a god hurried up to him, out of breath and with a frightened expression on his face. “Your Highness,” he wheezed as he clutched his chest and bowed his head. “Urgent news.”

The prince knitted his eyebrows together. “What is it?”

The messenger’s eyes darted over to the children and Anna. “I cannot say just now-”

“Then lead me somewhere where you can say,” Yushir commanded him.

“Then I will lead you to the troubles,” the messenger replied.

Yushir and his guide hurried down the many streets and across one of the wide, long bridges that connected the main island to one of the smaller ones. The prince soon realized their destination. “We are headed to the outskirts of Kang’s farm, are we not?”

His guide turned his head to one side and nodded. “We are, Your Highness. The trouble happened at the edge of the island opposite the bridge.”

The pair crossed the bridge and passed a large farm with dozens of corrals and stables. A variety of animals of all shapes and sizes occupied the paddocks though the one closest to the palace was unoccupied. Yushir knew what that meant. The beast that had ‘attacked’ Anna was out.

They left behind the corrals and a few small fields before arriving at the edge of the island. A thin strip of trees covered the end of the land and a small contingent of guards stood at the edge. They stood erect at the prince’s coming and bowed to him.

“If I knew who it was we would not be standing here?”

The voices came from the other side of the trees and Yushir took the lead with his guide bringing up the rear. The prince discovered Kang and his pet standing a few steps from the edge of the abyss. Pampir faced him and Lord Eastwei stood off to the side with his gaze fixed on the ground. A strange blackened bulb lay on the ground atop scorched earth.

“What has happened?” Yushir spoke up, interrupting their argument.

Pampir shot straight up and bowed his head to the prince. “Your Highness, this fool-” He lifted his head high enough to glare at Kang, “-nearly allowed someone entrance into the heavens.”

“I did no such thing!” Kang objected and Mew made his protests known by growling at the delegate.

Pampir shrank away from the beast but kept his ground. “H-how dare you threaten me! I am a delegate from the king!”

Kang stroked the back of Mew’s head. “You are the one threatening me with worse by falsely accusing me of being lax in my borders.”

“That is enough,” Yushir commanded and the trio fell silent. His eyes darted between the two. “Will someone kindly give me the details?”

Kang nodded. “I will, Your Highness. I was out this afternoon tending to the fields when Mew here sensed something. Didn’t you, girl?” Mew nudged his hand with the top of her head and purred.

“Go on!” Pampir snapped.

Kang scowled at him but an impatient look from the prince held his tongue. “Mew led me in this direction and I saw someone trying to enter through the holy barrier.” He nodded at the edge of the abyss. “Just there. The barrier was making quite a fuss pushing the person back. Sparks flew and everything.”

“Was it a man or a woman?” Yushir asked him.

He shook his head. “I could not say, but they had a strap slung over their shoulder and a large leather bag at their hip. The intruder saw us coming

and dropped backward out of sight. I rushed up here but the clouds had already hidden them if they hadn't teleported away already."

Yushir moved closer to his introspective friend. "What of this thing on the ground?"

"It was dropped by the intruder from their bag and the moment it touched the earth it burned," Kang explained.

Eastwei knelt and stretched out a hand toward the thing. The tip of his finger brushed against the blackened thing and the creation exploded into a powder of dust. The black bits settled onto the ground and disintegrated to nothing, leaving only the scorched earth.

"What do you make of it?" Yushir asked him.

Eastwei frowned and opened his hand so the palm faced the ground. Fire shot out and blasted the marred earth, turning the dirt into a sheen of fine glass that reflected the sun.

"Why did you do that?" Pampir asked the lord as he stood.

"Whatever it was had infected the earth with its sordid magic," Eastwei revealed as he tucked his hands into his sleeves. "We should investigate the rest of the islands to guarantee there are no others."

Kang nodded. "Mew and I will do that right now. Come on, Mew!" The pair turned and rushed off.

"But what was it?" Yushir questioned his old friend.

Eastwei furrowed his brow, a sign that worried the prince more than the baked ground. "I'm not sure."

A chill ran down Yushir's spine. Eastwei stepped forward to the edge and raised one hand toward the abyss. A red glow emanated from his hand and thin threads floated out of his palm. The tendrils brushed against the invisible wall Kang had mentioned and made it visible for a few brief moments. In that time, it thickened the shimmering magic before both magicks faded.

Eastwei lowered his hand. “I have added my own ward to the king’s barrier. If anyone should attempt entrance around this island then I will know.”

“A brilliant idea, Emperor Eastwei!” Pampir lauded as he bobbed his head. “A very good plan! Now nothing shall get through.”

Eastwei didn’t acknowledge the praise but turned and left, leaving his admirer hanging. Yushir inclined his head to the lord and hurried after his friend.

“Do we have nothing to worry about?” Yushir asked him in a quiet voice.

Eastwei stared ahead with his eyebrows knitted together. “I don’t know.”

Yushir pursed his lips as he looked forward. “Two of those in one day from you. This must be serious.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

"I'm going out!" I called into the house as I stood in the open doorway.

Arian popped her head out of her room with her arms full of bundles of dirty bedding. "Would you like me to accompany-oops!"

The bundle decided to make an escape and most of it slid to the floor. I laughed and strode forward to help her gather up the mess. "It's fine. I don't want to get in your way and I was just going to go out and draw, anyway."

She pursed her lips. "Very well, but please be mindful. There was that rumor a few days ago about the barrier almost being breached."

"I promise not to approach that edge," I swore with all my heart as I folded up some of the mess.

We soon got Arian and the bedding straightened and I set out on my journey. My sketch pad was tucked under one arm and my head was filled with possibilities. There was the grove where I had played hide-and-seek with the children, or even the performance hall.

My cheeks blushed a little at the remembrance of the lord's performance. The song had been so soft and sweet, almost the opposite of his icy and stoic nature.

He's not that way.

I cocked my head and glared up at nothing in particular. "Oh really?"

He helped you with your drawing, didn't he?

I glanced down at my pad and had to admit he *had* told me what was wrong and he'd done it without making fun of me. A gentle smile slipped onto my lips before I could tamp it down. Here I was admiring a god who had been around since before the creation of continents. He probably didn't even remember my face.

But he'd remember your cooking.

"Shut it," I growled at myself.

A few passing ladies stared at me with fear. I sheepishly smiled at them and they skirted around me. A sigh escaped my lips as I plodded on. It wasn't easy making friends with the upstanding citizens of the heavens. It was far easier to make enemies, one of which I met on my wandering through the gardens.

"Good morning, Lady Roberts."

I started at the greeting and turned to my left to see Lady Bidao strolling down a narrow side path toward me. She had a wide smile on her lips that didn't quite reach her eyes.

I stiffly bowed my head. "Good morning."

She stopped and studied my person. "You have a very plain set of robes on this day. It suits you."

I tightened my grip on my sketchbook at the back-handed compliment but I managed to keep my smile on my lips. A devilish idea slipped into my mind. "Thank you. Your dark dress is very becoming on you, as well."

"Do you think so?" she mused as she admired her dark blue robes and swished them about.

I nodded. "Very much. Their shadows match the ones under your eyes."

Bidao stiffened before she whipped her head up and glared at me with those accented eyes. "What do you mean by that?"

I feigned ignorance. "I thought perhaps dark eyeshadow was fashionable in the heavens. Did I say something wrong?"

She lifted her chin and looked down her beaked nose at me. “Perhaps in your ignorance you misspoke, but if you will excuse me, I have somewhere I need to be.” And with that, she swished herself away.

I breathed a sigh of relief and continued on my way. The beautiful morning couldn’t be marred by my unexpected companion though I paused and frowned up at the sun. “Can’t you take a night off for once?” I asked it. A cloud floated past and made the sun blink as if in refusal. I shrugged and meandered my way through the gardens.

Nothing piqued my attention until I found myself on the far side of the creek from the huge boulder where I’d made my first drawing. I stepped out from around a building but darted back immediately.

Lord Eastwei was again reclining on the wood bench.

Doesn’t he have anything else to do? I wondered to myself.

Do you? came the snarky reply, especially when I remembered why I was wandering about in the first place.

That gave me a brilliant idea. I knelt on one knee and peeked around the corner. The ancient lord rested his head on his hand and his eyes were closed. If ever I had a chance it would be now.

I tiptoed out of my hiding spot and down the walk toward the edge of the canal. A short row of small bushes decorated the path and I ducked behind them before peering out. He was still asleep.

I pulled out my pencil and flipped through my sketchbook. I’d drawn a few odds and ends since my adventure with the lord but they were mostly of plants and a few birds. Nothing to really inspire me like the human face.

Or the face of a god.

I peeked out from my hiding spot and studied his features before tucking myself behind the bushes. I don’t know how long performed this strange game of peek-a-boo but long enough to get a rough sketch of the handsome lord. I held my work at arm’s length and nodded. Not bad for being so far away.

“There you are.”

I stiffened and curled into myself. Footsteps on the other side of the creek approached the bench. I peeked over the top and watched Prince Yushir join his companion. He admired the area and nodded. “A very restful place. I can see why you would enjoy it here.”

Eastwei didn’t open his eyes when he replied. “Surely you have come for some other reason than to comment on that.”

Yushir nodded. “My uncle wishes to see you about the trouble a few days ago. It seems whatever was found at the point of intrusion may be involved with the attacks on the land immortals.”

The great lord opened his eyes at that revelation and frowned. “What do you mean?”

“One of the people who discovered the ruined villages gave a description to my uncle of something that was found among the desolation,” Yushir explained as he paced the ground in front of the bench, his hands clasped behind his back and one finger fidgeting with his ring. “The description somewhat matches what we found at the intrusion.”

My heart pounded in my chest as I listened to their conversation. I couldn’t follow everything that was said, but the seriousness of their tones told me that they were worried. That part about an intrusion really didn’t sound good.

“My uncle also wishes to discuss with you security details for the coming festival,” Yushir added as the lord sat up. A frown creased the prince’s lips. “You will have extra duties managing the vendors from the land. Pampir has insisted on vetting them himself but I have little faith he will succeed in weeding out any who may be a threat.”

“Kang would be more fitting,” Eastwei commented as he stood.

Yushir turned to him and nodded. “So I thought as well, but my uncle made the promise several weeks ago and could not go back on his word

without insulting the eager lord. That is why my uncle wishes to ask you about setting up another ward over the festival area."

Eastwei nodded. "Very well. I will see him."

Yushir led the way and Eastwei skirted the arm of the bench. However, he paused beside his resting seat and turned his head far enough so one eye fell in my direction. The color drained from my face and I ducked down low. He continued to stare for a few seconds longer before looking away and following his friend.

I slumped down and clutched my hand over my beating heart. Had he known I was here the entire time?

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

I couldn't shake the look in that imperious eye as I returned to my home with my prized sketch in hand. Arian greeted me with a smile but one look at my face made her good humor falter.

"Is something the matter?" she asked me.

I shook my head. "Not really. I just couldn't find anything god-I mean, good to draw."

Her eyes twinkled with a knowing light but she nodded. "What a pity."

I leaned back and looked her over. "Why don't I try drawing you?"

Her eyes widened and she blinked at me. "Me? Why would you want to do that?"

I smiled and shrugged. "Why not? You're very pretty. Even better looking than Lady Bidao."

Arian blushed and lowered her face. "You praise me too highly, Lady-"

"Un-huh," I playfully warned her.

"Anna," she finished.

I set a hand on her shoulder and grinned. "For that mistake, I demand you pose for me."

I led her toward the house where I seated her on the porch steps. She was as pliable as a wood board as I tried to position her in the most becoming way.

“Relax,” I told her as I twined her hands together in her lap. “I’m drawing your picture not forcing you to listen to my singing.”

Her ears perked up. “Do you sing?”

I laughed and shook my head. “Not really.” I scooted back and plopped my butt on the ground a few feet in front of her. I opened my sketchbook, leaned it against my bent knees, and focused on my subject. I was so focused on my work that I didn’t notice the little pitter-patter of feet behind me.

“Lady Anna!”

That was the only warning I had before a pair of tiny arms wrapped around my neck and a small body draped over my back. I twisted my head around and found myself staring into Lia’s adorable face. Prince Kean stood behind her trying to appear imperious with his arms crossed over his chest.

“Hey, guys,” I greeted them as I patted Lia’s arms. “What are you doing here?”

Kean nodded at Lia as she slid off my back. “She wanted to come see you.”

“That’s very sweet of you to do that,” I thanked her as she sat beside me.

Her eyes grew big when she noticed my sketch. “Did you make that?” Even Kean stepped up to my back to take a peek.

I nodded. “I did. Do you like it?”

She bobbed her head. “Oh yes! It looks just like her!”

Arian stretched her neck to catch a view. “Does it?”

I laughed and turned the book around so she could see. “How’s that?”

She studied the picture and her mouth fell open. “That’s wonderful!”

“Lemme try!” Lia pleaded as she hopped up and down.

“Alright, but what do you want to draw?” I asked her as I attempted to flip the page. The oil on my hand had made the page a little sticky and it

stuck to its predecessor. I ended up flipping both pages and revealing my previous sketch.

Lia's eyes widened and she stabbed a finger at the picture. "I like that one even better!"

Kean leaned forward and squinted at the sketch. "Isn't that Lord Eastwei?"

"Is it?" Arian spoke up as she stood.

"It's nothing!" I stuttered as I tried to peel the pages apart.

Arian scurried over and got a look at my sketch before it succeeded in hiding it. Her eyes twinkled and a smile slipped onto her face. "Is that drawn from life?"

I blushed and bowed my head. "Y-yeah."

"You must have had to stare at him a long time to draw him so nicely!" Lia complimented me.

"Well, not too long," I assured her as I handed her my pencil. "Now it's your turn to draw. What do you want to try drawing?"

She pointed the tip of the pencil at Kean. "I want to draw Kean!"

He rolled his eyes but the corners of his lips twitched up. "I guess you can draw me, but I don't want to sit here all day."

His step was quite eager as he took Arian's spot on the steps. I let Lia use her artistic skills and was surprised when it turned out much better than a stick figure. However, she couldn't satisfy Kean's demand about the time and it was a half hour later before she looked up at me.

She held up the picture. "Is this good?"

I smiled and nodded.. "Very good. In fact, we should frame it." A bright smile stretched across her face.

"Let me see," Kean requested as he hurried over. He studied the picture for a moment and nodded. "Not bad." Lia's face was so downcast that he whipped up his hands in front of him and shook his head. "That is, I meant to say it looks great! You did a wonderful job!"

She sniffled a little. “You really mean it?”

He bobbed his head. “Of course I do! It is much better than what I could draw!”

Lia beamed and puffed out her tiny chest a little. “Thank you!”

“Anna, it’s almost time for lunch,” Arian spoke up as she smiled at our two little visitors. “Perhaps His Highness and Lady Lia would like to stay?”

“Would you?” I chimed in as I looked between them.

Lia clapped her hands. “Yes!”

Kean furrowed his brow and puffed himself up to his full short height. “I will dine with you only on one condition.”

I lifted an eyebrow. “What’s that?”

“You will make those nice treats for us.”

I burst into laughter before I nodded. “Alright, but you’ll have to wait until tomorrow. Arian said the kitchen was being cleaned today.”

She nodded. “There will only be simple meals for most of us until the chore is done.”

“Can we eat right now?” Lia pleaded.

“Not on the ground,” I replied as I took the sketchbook and pencil from her and grasped her hand to help her up.

“Then I will fetch the food,” Arian offered.

“I will help you,” Kean offered in his most stiff tone and the pair set off together.

“Why don’t we wait inside for them?” I suggested as I looked down at our dusty attire. “It’s a little cleaner in there than on the path.”

She bobbed her head and together we slipped inside. The cool, shaded interior was a great relief to me and I plopped down with a sigh.

Lia took a seat on the cushion beside me and stared at me with a curious look. “Are you well?”

I set our art supplies on the table and nodded. “Yeah, I’m just not used to the sun being up all the time. Where I’m from we have something called

night when we go to rest."

She nodded. "I know what night is. Lord Eastwei makes it."

I blinked at her. "He does what?"

She stabbed a finger upward. "He makes the night. That's what my mama said. He even made the night on one of the islands. She said it's one of the prettiest things in all of heaven."

"Maybe we're thinking of different things," I told her. "Where I come from nobody makes the night. It's just there."

She puckered her lips in a pout and tears pooled in her eyes. "But that's what my mama said!"

I smiled and nodded. "And I believe you, but why don't we get your picture ready to be framed?"

Her face lit up. "Yeah!"

We managed to pull the page from the notebook without loosening Arian's tight binding. Lia admired her work of art while I studied the room around us. "I don't see a frame around here we could use, do you?"

She perked her head up and looked around. "No, but maybe Grandpa could make one for me."

"Grandpa?" I repeated.

She nodded. "He's the best at crafting things! That's why he's in charge of fixing all the houses when the mean lady tells him to."

"Mean lady? You mean Lady Shian?" I guessed.

She wrinkled her nose. "She isn't very nice to me. Whenever I'm at Grandpa's house and she comes there she never looks at me."

I patted her on the shoulder. "It's alright. Maybe she just doesn't know what to do around kids. Anyway, I think we'll have to let your grandpa make the frame because there isn't anything around here to use."

Her shoulders slumped. "But he's going to be so busy soon, at least that's what he said to Mama yesterday."

“I’m sure whatever your grandpa makes will be worth the wait,” I assured her as I took her hand and helped her up. “But why don’t we search around and see if we can’t find a frame just in case, okay? Maybe your grandpa won’t need to make one after all if we just look really well.”

She smiled and nodded. “Alright!”

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

We were still in the process of looking when Arian and Kean returned with our food. “What are you doing?” Kean asked us as he set the tray he had brought on the table. Two plates of food were on the tray.

“We’re looking for a frame for my pretty picture!” Lia announced as she bounced out of Arian’s bedroom. “But I don’t see one in here.”

“And I don’t see one in here, either,” I piped up as I exited my room.

Arian shook her head. “I cannot recall seeing any around here though I can ask around for one.”

“Oh, no need!” Lia replied as she dropped into her place at the table. “Grandpa will make me a very pretty one!”

“So your grandpa must be pretty important around here to be working with Lady Shian,” I mused as I took a seat at the head of the table.

She bobbed her head. “Oh, yes! He’s the god of carpers!”

I blinked at her but Arian laughed before she caught herself. She cleared her throat and began to dole out the plates from the trays. “Do you mean to say he is the god of carpenters?”

“That’s it!” Lia confirmed.

I lifted an eyebrow. “Specifically the god of carpenters?”

Arian nodded. “Of course. All the most powerful gods have a role which they excelled at the time of their creation or birth.”

Today was the day for confusing words. “Creation?”

She blinked at me. “Has no one told you? The eldest of the gods were created by eating a special fruit from the Diyedi Tree.”

My eyes lit up. “Oh! Yushir told me about that! He said it changed their appearance.”

“Uncle Yushir knows many things,” Prince Kean commented as he plucked a vegetable from his plate and took a bite of his food.

“Did your uncle eat the fruit, too?” I asked him.

He shook his head. “No. Uncle is not so old that he ate the fruit. Even Grandpa isn’t that old.”

“But your great-grandfather tasted the fruit,” Arian reminded him.

He frowned at her. “I was just about to say that.”

“But since your grandfather is the king your great-grandfather isn’t alive anymore?” I guessed.

He shook his head. “No. He died a long time ago.”

“The prince was not yet born before the first king of heaven passed away,” Arian informed me as she took up her seat. “There was a fierce battle between a mighty force and he was killed during the skirmish.”

My eyebrows shot up. “What kind of mighty force could kill a king?”

She shook her head. “There are very few who know the story first-hand. Lord Eastwei is one of them but I believe he does not speak of the battle. As I understand it, he was very close to the old king. His Majesty was the one who found him as a child and brought him to live in the heavens.”

I cocked my head to one side. “His Majesty found him in a foreign land, right?”

“Yes. He had been fending for himself for several millions of years and had just recovered from a terrible fight when His Majesty discovered him and brought him to finish his healing. Lord Eastwei showed his gratitude by fighting for him in many wars against the beasts who tried to attack the gate

to the heavens. His prowess in those battles and his mercy toward the lower gods when they requested a truce is how he was elected the emperor."

"He's been through a lot, hasn't he?" I mused.

"A lot of battles!" Kean piped up as he jumped to his feet and stretched his arm out as though he was holding a sword. "He cut threw countless monsters with his sword Diya and left their corpses to rot on the battlefield."

I grabbed the back of his robes and yanked him down. "That's enough of that talk while we're eating. Anyway, I'm glad all of this is ancient history."

Arian nodded. "Oh yes. There hasn't been any sort of war for fifty thousand years, though Prince Yushir and Lord Eastwei do have to settle matters on the land when the clans come to a disagreement about their lands."

I took a bite to eat and swallowed. "Why them?"

"They are His Majesty's special envoys, being some of the oldest and wisest among the gods," she explained. "And Lord Eastwei is still seen as a very respected leader among the clans."

"You still have to take me to see your clan," I reminded her.

She smiled and nodded. "Of course! I hoped we might go soon if you have nothing else planned."

I laughed. "I don't think I do."

"What about our treats?" Lia spoke up.

I patted her on the head. "Well, other than that."

We laughed and dug into our food. The children ate and, seeing how sleepy Lia had become on an empty stomach, we bid them farewell. By this time it was the afternoon. I looked up at the sky and sighed.

"Is something the matter?" Arian asked me as we stood together in the garden.

I pursed my lips. "I was just thinking about the night sky."

She followed my gaze and nodded. “I, too, miss the stars. My clan has a grand view of some of the most wonderful constellations.”

“That makes me want to go see your home even more,” I told her as I tucked my hands into my robes. “But I think I’ll go for a walk right now.”

“Would you like me to join you?” she offered.

I shook my head. “Not right now. I just feel like walking and thinking.”

She bowed her head. “Then be safe and return soon.”

I grinned and patted her on the shoulder. “Definitely.”

I sauntered out of the gardens and into the crowds that also had the same idea for an evening stroll. Couples walked arm in arm while women and men clustered together laughing and gossiping. It made me regret not bringing Arian along with me, but my thoughts were filled with the stories Kean and she had told about the enigmatic Lord Eastwei.

You’ve been thinking about him a lot lately.

My shoulders slumped and I sighed. “He’s been around a lot lately.”

I could almost hear my inner voice laughing at me. *Are you sure that’s the reason?*

I let out a growl that frightened a pair of older goddesses who quickly and eagerly skirted me. Maybe I needed someplace more secluded so I could shout as angrily as I wanted at my inner monologue. But where?

My wandering feet took me over hill and dale and past palaces grand and as simple as mine. Servants like Arian scurried hither and thither and even the higher tier gods hurried to appointments. I wondered if they were fulfilling their purpose, as Lia’s grandfather did.

I lifted my hands and studied my open palms. Lia had said that the older gods who had eaten the fruit all had their roles to play. I’d eaten a fruit, too, but where did I fit into this crazy magical world?

My fingertips twinkled and I started back. Thin wisps of magic floated out and wrapped around me. I froze and turned my head to try to follow the threads but they spun faster and faster. Their tails left behind faint trails that

thickened the more times they flew and encircled me until I was trapped in a web.

Then the wisps darted forward and tightened the noose. Er, web.

My arms were pinned to my sides and I was yanked forward. I stumbled along down the empty streets with my magic floating to and fro in front of me but keeping to a straight path only it knew.

“Hey!” I shouted as I nearly tripped over my own feet. “I’m supposed to control you, not the other way around!”

I would have been filled with panic but the soft warmth of the threads was soothing. Somehow without words, I knew my magic wouldn’t harm me. Somebody else, maybe, but not me.

My magic tugged me through the city and to the outskirts far to the east. The carefully carved streets changed to rough stones and even those ceased, replaced with plain dirt and rocks. The houses fell away and trees took their place. Bushes and flowers bloomed in the chaotic way decreed by nature. The air smelled fresh and with a faint sweet smell of clear water.

I climbed a gentle incline to the top of a low hill and twisted my head around. The city and its hinterlands lay below us. A small grove of trees stood ahead.

And there was also the sheer drop off the island.

My heart pounded in my chest as the threads pulled me in that direction.

“Hey!” I shouted as I dug my heels into the dirt. That only slowed me down. “Hey! Look ahead! Danger! Danger!”

My magic didn’t heed my warnings but instead increased its speed. I twisted and thrashed in the webbing as my feet were dragged across the ground.

“Stop! Stopstopstopstopstopstop-”

I didn’t get to finish my protests before I was pulled to the abyss. I shut my eyes and waited for the doom wrought by my own magic.

CHAPTER THIRTY

It never came.

That is, it nearly came as my heart practically burst out of my chest with every hard thump. I was pulled up to the very edge of disaster but something snatched me out of certain death. A faint spicy scent tickled my nostrils and a gentle whiff of air brushed against my cheeks. I opened my eyes in time to watch swirling mists of dark red magic fall away behind me. I twisted my head around and beheld a portal large enough to fit me. The view inside the hole showed the hill I'd just left, but I couldn't study anything else before the magic collapsed in on itself and disappeared.

My magic also made a quick exit. I felt the pressure release and the thin strands floated outward, evaporating as they separated from me. I glared at the wisps as they vanished. "Oh sure, run off and leave me, um-"

I looked around and found myself on a small island, but this wasn't like the others in the kingdom of heaven. This one wasn't surrounded by clouds but by an endless sea of water. The brilliant blue water was as bright as the azure sky and as calm as a mirror.

The island itself was separated into two parts with both of them hardly more than a hundred yards square. I stood on the first half which was separated by a shallow stream that divided the two. A small curved wooden bridge some ten feet long crossed the gap and was their only connection.

The bridge led to a large pool in the center of the other island and a round pavilion lay on the far side of the water. Large thick reeds rose from the pool waters near the bank closest to the pavilion and exquisite purple flowered bloomed from the tops of the stems. Lilypads floated on the surface, showing off their soft pink and white blooms.

I stood on a stone path that wandered over the bridge and to the pool where it separated into two. The pair encircled the water, creating a beautiful border. Small square paper lanterns dotted the side of the path ready to be used. A grove of trees stood on my right and several more dotted the path leading to the pond where they were replaced with patches of red and white wildflowers. Emerald-green grass mingled with the flowers and carpeted the bank of the pool and spread outward to the base of the pavilion.

But none of that was the most fantastic part of the area. What really held my attention was the sky in all its darkening brilliance.

My heart skipped a beat when I beheld one of the most beautiful sunsets I had ever seen. The setting sun disappeared below the ocean-lined horizon and darkness spread across the sky. I turned in a slow circle as the heavens filled with countless twinkling stars. Their soft light cast a gentle glow on everything as the lanterns on the path lit up on cue.

My smile warmed me as I walked down the path and to the bridge where I leaned my arms on the curved railing.

A sparkle of light caught my attention and I glanced over at the pond. The smooth surface reflected the sky and was disturbed only by the occasional flip of a fin as a fish swam past. I pushed off the railing and strolled down the curving path to the grass that surrounded the water. I leaned over the waters and my face stared back at me.

“How did you enter here?”

I stiffened before I spun around. Lord Eastwei stood not more than ten feet away from me just on my side of the bridge. His dark eyes studied me

with an expression I couldn't quite figure out. Was that annoyance and amusement?

"W-what are you doing here?" I choked out.

"I could ask the same of you," he mused as he strolled over and passed me. I turned my head to follow him and he stopped at the water's edge a few feet away from me. "I created this area as a place solely for myself."

Oh God. I'd stepped in it. Again.

I fidgeted with my hands in front of myself as I turned my face away. "I-I'm sorry. I didn't mean to get in here. I just, it's-" Should I really tell him that my magic was so out of my control that I'd been dragged here against my will?

He continued to stare into the waters. "You also neglected to bow again."

The color drained from my face. I clapped my arms to my sides and bowed so low at the waist that I lost my balance. A yelp escaped me as I tumbled forward and my foot slipped on the damp water's edge. I fell toward the pool and would have fallen in if Eastwei hadn't acted so quickly.

Before I knew what had happened, I was caught in the man's arms and pulled against his firm chest. My arms came between us and rested on the front of his robes as I stared in bewilderment at his attire. He was a good head taller than me and I had to lift my chin slightly to catch a look at his handsome face.

His dark eyes stared down at me with his customary complete indifference. Or was that a smile teasing the corners of his lips?

"S-sorry," I stuttered as I scurried back out of his grasp. "I really didn't mean to get in here. I just sort of, um, stumbled through whatever that portal thing was. It was just an accident. Really."

He turned his back toward me and faced the pond. "I believe you."

I perked my head up and blinked at him. "You do?"

He gave a curt nod. "Yes."

I swallowed the lump in my throat and backed up. “Well, that’s great, but I think I’ll be going now.” I looked over my shoulder and bit my lower lip. “How do I get out?”

“Walk through the portal again,” he instructed.

I nodded. “Thanks!” I spun around and scurried toward the bridge with all the enthusiasm of a rat escaping a sinking ship.

“What do you think of this place?”

His words cut through my enthusiasm and I skidded to a stop. My heart pounded in my chest as I half-turned to him. “Pardon?”

He turned his head far enough so one sharp eye studied me as he used a hand to gesture to the island. “What do you think of this place?”

I lifted my eyes to the twinkling sky and smiled. “I think it’s beautiful, but how is it night here and nowhere else?”

“I crafted this place within the realm of the heavens. It is both inside and outside of that realm.”

“Oh.” I couldn’t quite grasp what he meant but the results were spectacular.

That dark eye continued to examine me. “It has no memories for you?”

I blinked at him. “No. Should it?”

He stared at me a moment longer before turning his face away. “No. You may leave now.”

I didn’t wait for a second invitation but scurried over the bridge and up to the ‘entrance.’ I approached the edge of the island with some trepidation, but true to his word the portal opened. The city of the heavens was revealed to me. I took one step through the strange gateway, but paused and glanced over my shoulder.

Lord Eastwei remained standing at the edge of the pond staring up at the starry sky. He looked so incredibly lonely. I hesitated. Part of me wanted to go comfort him.

Then I remembered this man in front of me was millions of years old. He was probably used to being alone.

I stepped through the portal and back into the bright sun-filled city.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

I couldn't stop thinking about that night and the expression on Lord Eastwei's face as he stared at me. There had been something in his eyes that I'd never seen before. A kindling of some emotion that he was trying his best to tamp down.

"Anna? Lady Anna?"

I shook myself from my reverie and turned to my walking partner. Arian looked at me with concern as we strolled down the bright streets of the white city. It was a week after my ill-fated meeting with the godly lord and I was no longer wondering how somebody spent eternity entertaining themselves. As a god, the days seemed like hours and the weeks like days.

I smiled at her. "Sorry. I didn't mean to space out."

She blinked at me. "Space. . .out?"

I laughed and shook my head. "It's just a saying from my world. It means I was distracted."

She nodded. "I was concerned you would run into something, so distracted were you."

"There isn't too much to run into in these wide streets," I commented as I swept my eyes over the road. Entrances to luxurious palaces dotted both sides of the street and people strolled to and fro, paying visits to one another and chatting with friends as I did with mine.

“You might become so distracted you fall off the heavens,” she countered.

A little bit of color left my face as I recalled my harrowing entrance into Lord Eastwei’s private realm. “Then I really can fall over the side?”

She nodded. “Of course! And without the ability to fly you would fall to your death!”

Her comment brought a question to mind. “Are there shifters who can fly?”

“Oh yes. There are many who can transform into great birds large enough to carry even us on their backs.”

“Is that how you got up here? By flying?” I guessed.

She laughed and shook her head. “Oh no. The heavens are too high for mere flight. There is a gateway that leads from the land realms to heaven and anyone with permission may use it to travel between the realms.”

I thought about the request. “Permission from the king?”

“Oh, no, not only him. You may come as a guest of another or others may make requests for land gods to come, such as when I arrived at the behest of Lady Shian,” she revealed.

I lifted an eyebrow at her. “She requested you personally?”

Arian shook her head. “No. She advertised maids to assist with maintaining the heavens and I applied. I was accepted and allowed to pass through the portal with others.”

I swept my eyes over those who passed by us, maids and lords and ladies alike. “Are all the maids from the land realms?”

“No, but many are. The heavens are so great that it cannot be maintained by the heavenly gods alone.”

A great sigh escaped me and my shoulders sagged a little. “There’s so much to remember. . .”

She leaned forward to catch my eye with her soft smile. “You need not worry about memorizing every aspect of this life just yet. There are many

years left for you to learn everything."

I looked down at myself and laughed. "Millions, if Prince Yushir wasn't teasing me."

"Not at all," she assured me as we strolled around a corner. "Many gods are as old as he."

I studied my companion with a curious eye. "Are you that old?"

She laughed and shook her head. "No, I am of a younger generation and am only fifty thousand."

"Only fifty thousand. . ." I murmured as we continued down the lane. "Is that all?"

A fervor some fifty yards down the way caught my attention. A crowd of men gathered outside the archway that led into Shian's gardens. Many of them were dressed in worn leather jeans and rough woolen shirts, and some were even without shoes while others showed off thick, heavy boots. They wore their hair long and short, some tied in tails and others barely covering their head. Young and old gathered about the arch with eager eyes on the interior.

I stretched my neck to get a better view of the multitude. "What's going on over there?"

"The workers from the land realms have come to help decorate the heavens for the Twilight Fair," Arian explained as we stopped a few yards away.

One of the workers, a husky young man of twenty, turned at Arian's voice. His eyes fell on her and lit up. "Arian!"

Her hand flew to her mouth and she gasped. "Jin!"

The young man squeezed out of the crowd and raced over to us. He was all smiles as he looked her over. "You are as pretty as ever, Arian."

She put her hands on her hip and playfully glared at him. "And you are as bad a flatterer as the last time we met."

A broad grin stretched across his face. “I would be better at it if you had stayed at home.”

“You’re one to talk about staying at home,” she countered as she nodded at the cluster of workers. “Have you come to help with the decorations?”

He nodded. “Yep. The king put out a request for some extra work to be done on some of the palaces and we’re here to report for duty. We also need to string up all the lights and the streamers before the big event, so that’s why some of the beak mouths are here.”

“Do they really need that much help?” I wondered as I studied the crowd. “I mean, can’t everyone here just use their magic to make all the decorations and things?”

Arian pursed her lips. “They could if they had more time but I believe Lady Shian has neglected her duties of late. Many of the palaces are sorely in need of repair and the magic needed to fix what is necessary would exhaust the residents.”

“Which is good business for the rest of us,” Jin chimed as he put his fisted hands on his hips and puffed out his chest. “We’ll put our good land realm magic to work helping the heaven folk and get a good bag of coins out of it, too.”

A lady of Shian’s palace stepped out and the crowd backed away. Her nose was slightly lifted as she studied the men with an air of moral superiority. “If you will all form an orderly line we will begin giving out your instructions.”

I couldn’t help but notice the shadow of a figure peeking out from the archway. It looked suspiciously like Lady Bidao, but I couldn’t be sure because they disappeared too quickly.

“That’s my cue to get in there,” Jin told us as he sidestepped toward the crowd. He kept one hopeful eye on my companion. “I’ll see you later?”

Arian cast a questioning look at me and I laughed. “Of course we will. Come to my palace and we’ll have lunch.”

The man's face lit up and he bobbed his head. "Thanks a bunch!" He shot off but spared some time to wave over his shoulder at us. "And see you later!"

Arian sighed and shook her head. "He has not changed a bit."

"You haven't seen him in a while?" I guessed as we continued our stroll around the long line.

"Since I arrived here two years ago," she told me as her eyes took on a faraway look that wasn't completely devoid of happiness. "Jin and I grew up together and you could say we were very close."

My eyes twinkled as I nudged her arm with my elbow. "Really close?"

A warm blush on her cheeks was all the answer I needed, but she still stuttered out a few words. "I-I would not describe the relationship as such, but we were very good friends. He was very disappointed when he learned I was to leave home for the heavens."

I furrowed my brow as I contemplated her words. "Was it really that important that you come up here?"

Arian sighed and stared at the long walk ahead of us. "My father thought so. He believed I would learn a great deal of good habits and magic from the gods and goddesses."

"And have you?" I wondered.

She dropped her eyes to the ground and furrowed her brow. "I have learned that the gods and goddess above are as flawed as those below."

Arian's droopy face was a picture of disappointment and regret. My heart twinged at the dark lines on her pretty features. I threw my hand up against my forehead and feigned my own disappointment. "Surely you don't include me in that list?" My friend had such an expression of terror that I burst into laughter.

"Of course not!" she insisted as she shook her head. "I would never think such a thing."

I stopped and spun around to cup her chin in both my hands. “You don’t need to shake your head off. I believe you.”

She breathed out and a mountain of tension slid off her body. There was even a hint of a smile at the corners of her lips. “Though I may not have had such a wonderful beginning here, I am glad I am here now.”

I grinned and nodded. “That’s good to hear, but you haven’t said the words I really want to hear.”

Arian cocked her head to one side and blinked at me. “What words?”

I jerked my head in the direction of the crowd of men. “That you want some time off to see your old friend.”

Arian blushed and her fingers fidgeted together in front of her. “I. . .I would like to speak with him again.”

I spun on my heels to face the same direction as her and we strolled down the walk. “Then you’ll have as much time as you want. I don’t have anything better to do.” The mention of my free time brought a wonderful thought to the forefront of my mind. “Can anyone decorate their palaces or does Shian do all that?”

Arian shook her head. “Shian may offer her services but you are allowed to decorate your home as you please, and when the evening of the fair comes everyone is allowed into the grounds of all the palaces to view the decorations.”

My eyes lit up and I rubbed my hands together. “Then what do you say to us having a fun time decorating our home?”

“The palace belongs to you and you alone, Anna,” she gently reminded me.

I draped my arm over her shoulders and drew her close against my side. “Then as the mistress Fanshe Hall, I deem that the palace belongs to the two of us and we are both in charge of decorating it for the festival.”

Arian blushed a mighty red but I could see the deep joy in her eyes. This was going to be a lot of fun.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

This was going to be harder than I thought.

I stood in the midst of my garden the next morning with my arms folded across my chest and my foot tapping the stone garden path. Everything was green and bright and incredibly bland.

"Arian?" I called to the open doorway of my home.

Arian peeked her head out. Her hands were filled with the laundry basket. "Yes?"

I waved my hand about the place. "You've seen one of these festivals before. What do people usually decorate their homes with?"

Arian set the basket down and walked over to me. "They often hang paper lanterns and streamers."

I cupped my chin in one hand and tapped a loose finger against my face. "That sounds really pretty but I want to do something else, or at least something more than that."

"Perhaps focusing on your magic would help you think of an idea."

The suggestion came not from my friend but from Prince Yushir. He strolled down the path with that teasing smile on his lips. "Have you been practicing in the afternoons as I instructed you?"

I rubbed my arms and winced. "Yeah, but I don't really feel anything special happening."

“Perhaps that is because you have not yet found your element,” he suggested as he reached us and looked me up and down. “Godly children always attain a higher level of magic once they have discovered their element.”

“Element?” I repeated as I looked between the two. “You mentioned that before, didn’t you? Like I would be able to control fire or water?”

“Precisely,” Yushir confirmed as he held up one hand with the palm raised.

A large droplet of water formed out of nowhere and floated above his hand. The teardrop glistened in the bright sun as it slowly spun in a dainty circle like a ballerina. I’d seen him do that trick before but I was still in awe at the majesty of the magic.

Yushir closed his hand and the magic vanished. He tucked both hands behind his back and nodded at me. “Now you try.”

I lifted my hands and stared blankly at the open palms. “Shouldn’t I already know how to use my element? I mean, I can make chocolate.”

The prince’s eyes crinkled at the corners as he leaned toward me to catch my eye. “Do you believe your element is delicious desserts?”

I shrugged. “I can hope.”

“As wonderful as that would be for the realm, I very much doubt you are to be the goddess of sweets.” He swept a hand toward the usual grassy spot where I had meditated countless times before. “Let us see if we cannot find the element that lays hidden inside you.”

My shoulders drooped and dragged my feet over to the spot where I plopped down. Yushir strolled after me and paced the ground in front of where I sat.

He lifted his chin and contemplated the clear sky. “Now let me see. It has been a few years since I taught Prince Kean to harness his element but I am sure I can recall the lesson.”

My face drooped and my voice delved into a flat register. “So I’m being taught what a kid would learn?”

Yushir’s twinkling eyes dropped to me. “In terms of power and experience, you are just above the level of a toddler.”

I slumped in my grassy seat and dropped my hands into my lap. “Thanks. . .”

The prince chuckled as he resumed his back-and-forth pacing. “There is no need to be disappointed. One must start somewhere and you must start by focusing on the air around you.”

I sighed and sat up straight before I closed my eyes. A gentle breeze floated past me, kissing my cheeks as it swept by. The wind tugged at my clothes and ruffled my hair, causing one to tickle my nose.

“Do you feel anything?” Yushir asked me.

I wrinkled my nose. “Yeah. I feel I need to scratch my nose.”

“But do you not feel anything in the air?” he persisted.

I scratched my nose before I shook my head. “Not really.”

“Then open your hand.”

I peeked open one eye and lifted an eyebrow at him. “Why?”

He knelt in front of me. “You will see, now concentrate.”

I pursed my lips but did as he commanded. He took my hand and turned the palm upward. I started back when I felt a wet puddle of water drop into my palm.

“Do you feel anything in the water?” he asked me.

“You mean besides it being wet?”

“Yes.”

“No.”

“Arian?” Yushir called.

“Yes, Your Highness?”

“Please hand me a bit of that dirt.”

My eyes flew open in time to watch my traitorous friend dig at a soft bit of soil in a nearby flower bed. The wet brown earth clotted in her hand as she carried it over and dropped the loose ball into Yushir's waiting palm.

"Am I going to have to touch every element to figure out which one is mine?" I questioned him.

Yushir's eyes twinkled and he had to suppress a mischievous smile. I noticed he kept a tight grip on my upturned hand. "That *is* the easiest way."

"How many elements are there?"

"There are six of them but we might skip one."

My heart slowly sank into my stomach. "Which one?"

"Lightning," he mused as he splattered the ball into my hand. "There is more risk with that one."

I dropped my gaze to the oozing ball in my palm and my face drooped. A sense of foreboding filled every fiber of my body as I imagined myself put through five circles of elemental hell, ending with a literal lightning round of Kentucky Fried Me.

"You appear to have some trepidations, Lady Roberts," Yushir commented.

I swallowed the lump in my throat and wiggled my fingers to make the mud dance about. "I, um, I'm not sure about this."

"Nonsense," he assured me as he waved a finger at the muck. "Merely concentrate on the filth-that is, the dirt, and we will get through each of the elements in a short time."

I took a deep breath and closed my eyes. The slurpy earth dripped through my fingers and plopped onto the ground near one of my bent knees. I wrinkled my brow in my attempts to feel anything even resembling an affinity for the muck.

Needless to say, I felt nothing for the wet, disgusting earth.

Yushir sighed. "It seems you have no affinity for earth magic."

I peeked open one eye. "That means I can drop it?"

“Immediately.”

I gladly tossed it into a nearby flowerbed and brushed my palm against the grass. Yushir strolled over to Arian and whispered something in her ear. She nodded and hurried out through the palace archway. I eyed the interaction with the suspicion it deserved.

“What’s going on now?” I asked my teacher.

“She is merely fetching one of the elements,” Yushir assured me as he looked about himself. His eyes lit up when they fell on a torch that hung on one side of the arch. “There is little chance of this working, but we shall try fire next. Come over here.”

I stood and followed him to the torch tucked in its metal strap holder. Yushir reached into his robes and drew out a pack of roughly made matches. In a world of electricity, I would have asked why he carried such an item, but after several months of using candles, it was all too understandable.

Yushir struck one of the long matches and lit the torch. A soft fire crackled on the top of the burning bundle of sticks and warmed my cheeks. The prince stepped to one side and gestured to the fire. “Please place your hand over the fire.”

My mouth dropped open. I whipped my head between the flames and the expectant prince. My voice came out in a squeaky pitch. “Come again?”

He smiled. “I am not asking you to dip your hand into the fire but to hold it above the flames. The heat alone will surely tell you whether you have an affinity for the element.”

I stuck out my chest and took a deep breath. “Here goes.”

I stretched out my arm and hovered my hand a few inches above the dancing flames. The smoke and heat stained my palm with soot and my skin complained of impending blisters. After a minute of testing, I yanked my hand away.

“I don’t think it’s working,” I mused as I brushed off my hand in my other one.

Yushir held up his hand so the palm hovered above the flame. A small torrent of water formed in his palm and dropped a load into the fire, extinguishing it in seconds. “I did not expect it to. The ability to control fire is a very, very rare talent.”

“Who has it around here?” I wondered

He led me through the arch and shrugged. “Only Lord Eastwei.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

I scooted up to his side and lifted an eyebrow. "Do you mean everybody else who can control it isn't around right now?"

Yushir shook his head. "No. I mean that the only one ever capable of controlling that volatile element is Lord Eastwei. If anyone was ever able to do so, it is not in the records."

A dark thought crept into my mind and I narrowed my eyes at the man. "So if it's really hard to control how come you had me see if I could do it?"

He shrugged. "I thought perhaps your unique circumstances had made you a perfect fit for such a powerful element." The prince stopped in front of my meditation spot and turned to me with a smile. "I am somewhat relieved to know I will not have to try to school you in such a dangerous magic."

I raised my hands in front of myself and studied the plain, somewhat soot-covered palms. "So what elements are left? I've done wind, fire, water, and earth."

"And we will skip lightning, at least for the present," Yushir added as he tucked his hands into his bell-curved sleeves. "That leaves the ice element." He looked past me and at the gate. "And I believe we will be able to perform that test immediately."

I turned around and watched Arian hurry toward us. She grasped the thin handle of a small pale in one hand and her chest moved up and down under the influence of a great deal of exercise. “I. . .I have fetched it, Your Highness.”

“And in very good time,” Yushir complimented her as he took the bucket from her hand. He drew aside the cloth that covered the interior and peeked inside. “This will do nicely.” I craned my neck to catch a glimpse but he covered the mouth back up and beckoned to me with his empty hand. “Give me your palm.”

I frowned but stretched out my hand with the palm up. Yushir lifted the bucket and tipped the mouth over my hand. Something slid down the metal side of the bucket and dumped into my palm.

It was a hunk of very wet and very cold ice.

I yelped and attempted to throw it off, but Yushir clapped the bucket over my hand and pinned the hunk to my palm. “Wait a moment, Lady Roberts,” he scolded as his eyes twinkled at me.

I glared at him. “Wait a moment? You’re trying to freeze my hand off!”

“But do you not feel anything?” he persisted.

“No, because my hand is frozen!”

Yushir sighed and removed the bucket. I flung the ice onto the path where I was glad to see it begin the melting process. My hand was as red as an apple so I tucked my frost-bitten fingers into my sleeve.

Arian hurried up to my side and pulled out my hand which she began to vigorously rub. “I am so sorry, Anna. Prince Yushir made me promise not to tell you what was about to happen.”

I patted her frenzied hand. “It’s okay. I don’t blame you.” I turned my ire on our companion. Prince or no prince, I was pissed. “You could have just told me what you were going to do.”

He sighed. “I had hoped a surprise emulsion would have shocked your element out of you, but I see that I was wrong.”

“Are there any more or are you done torturing me for today?” I wondered as I drew my hand out of Arian’s firm grip.

“We are finished for the moment,” he assured me.

I plopped myself on the grassy ground and stared down at myself. “So what now?”

Yushir stroked his chin as he studied me. I felt like a newly discovered biologic trapped in a petri dish. “I am unsure. Perhaps your elemental gift is delayed due to your unusual creation.”

“But she can use creation magic,” Arian spoke up.

“That is what is so confusing about the matter,” the prince commented as he folded his arms over his chest. “You have quite a knack for that skill but for nothing else.”

I slumped over and hung my head. “Thanks. . .”

Yushir came up and patted my back. “There is no need to be ashamed. Creation magic is quite useful and as I said before, you have livened up the heavens with your food alone.”

I heaved a great sigh and lifted my head. “I guess I’ll have to be happy with baking brownies for a while, huh?”

The prince nodded. “Unfortunately, yes. I have been assigned several tasks for the festival and cannot come for several weeks. We will resume your studies after that.”

“Looking forward to it. . .” I muttered.

“Excellent! Then I will be off. A good day to both of you ladies.”

Arian clasped her hands in front of her and bowed low at the waist. “Good day, Your Highness.”

I climbed to my feet and performed my own bow though with less enthusiasm. Yushir left and my shoulders sagged.

Arian came up to me with worry written all over her face. “Is something the matter?”

I wrapped my arms around myself and shrugged. “I guess I was hoping I’d find a little bit of myself today.”

She blinked at me. “A little bit of yourself? You mean your element?”

“Element, or maybe why I was meant to be here,” I mused as I dropped my eyes to the ground and gave the earth a light kick. “I can’t forget how Lia was telling me about her grandfather and how he was meant to be a carpenter, or how everyone else has a place here but me.” I smiled up at Arian and clapped a hand on her shoulder. “Even you have a purpose while I’m just dead weight.”

She shook her head. “Never say that, Anna! *You* have given me my purpose and you have brought such joy to the children! They would not be so happy without you playing with them and making them those brownies.”

I snorted and slid my hand off her shoulder. “I guess that’s what I’m useful for: making things for the-” I froze and my eyes lit up. “That’s it!” I grasped Arian’s shoulders and danced her around in tight circles. “You’re wonderful! You’re magnificent!”

“I am dizzy,” Arian replied as her head lolled from side to side.

I stopped and sheepishly smiled at her. “Sorry, but you really did give me a great idea for the decorating!”

She cupped her head in one hand to hold herself still and focused her blurry eyes on me. “I am glad I could help. What idea did I give you?”

“This.” I stepped back and cupped my hands together in front of me.

I focused intensely on my palms and imagined that wonderful object that would make my home decorations *feel* like home. My silver strands of light slipped out of the ether between my cupped hands and wound around each other.

“Come on. . .” I murmured as I crinkled my eyes. “You can do this, Anna.”

My heart lifted as I was filled with a soft warmth that gave me as much hope as the shape that emerged from my magic. The light faded and the

object dropped with a soft plop into my palms.

Arian stepped closer and inspected my newest creation. “What is it?”

I held the blue-colored thing up by its ‘tail’ and the rest of the bag hung like a lightbulb beneath it. “This, my dear Arian, is a balloon.”

She squinted at my rubbery invention. “A. . .balloon?”

I proudly grasped the balloon between two fingers on each hand and stretched it out in front of me. “Yep. It’s a toy we give kids during celebrations.”

Arian cocked her head to one side and scrunched her face up. “And they have fun with this?”

I laughed. “Not in this shape, if that’s what you’re thinking. Just watch.”

I put the stem to my mouth and blew. Hard. The balloon exploded into the familiar egg shape I had known since my childhood.

Arian leaped back and let out a terrified cry. I sputtered through a laugh and choked on my own exhalation before I wrenched the mouth away from mine. A laughing fit took me as Arian’s wide eyes stared out from her pale face. She watched as still as a statue as the balloon deflated.

“W-what magic is this?” she choked out as her fearful gaze fell on me. “I thought you could not do any elemental magic!”

I got a hold of myself and held up the balloon by its stem. “I can’t. I’m just breathing into it.” I wiggled the toy and it flopped about like a flap of bluish skin. “Did you want to try?”

A green tinge accented Arian’s features and she placed a hand on her stomach. “I. . .I believe I will watch you breathe into it again.”

“There really isn’t anything to worry about,” I assured her as I placed the mouth of the stem in mine and took in a deep breath.

I took another deep breath and blew. The balloon expanded but this time I was able to pinch the mouth shut before all the air escaped. I held up the balloon and smiled at Arian.

“See?” I mused as I wiggled it. There was no sickly flopping about this time. “It’s a toy. You just blow some air into it and it takes this shape.”

Arian took a cautious step toward me and squinted at the object. “What else can it do?”

“Well, it’s really only good for one thing,” I told her as I tied the mouth into a knot. “This.”

I tossed the balloon into the air and knocked it like it was a volleyball. The toy bounced in an arch and came down in front of Arian. She scuttled back and the balloon landed harmlessly on the ground, bouncing a few times before coming to a rest near her feet.

“Go on,” I encouraged her as I nodded at the balloon. “Do what I did.”

Arian stooped and studied the strange object. She poked it with her finger and the balloon rocked from side to side. My friend took a deep breath and clasped the balloon between both hands. She stood, minding the toy as if it was as perishable as a Chinese vase, and looked it over.

“I merely strike it?” she asked me in such a child-like voice that I had to stifle another laugh.

I stepped back and opened my arms. “It’s tougher than it looks so give it a good whack.”

Arian nodded and tossed it into the air. She swung her hand hard and knocked her fist into the balloon. It shot across the distance between us and slammed into my face. I stumbled back and the balloon floated to the ground where it sat innocently rocking about.

Arian’s expression of pure horror returned. “My Lady!” She scurried over and grasped my arm as I cupped my nose in one hand. “Are you alright?”

I snorted and dropped my hand to reveal a slightly reddened nose. “Nothing a little time won’t fix but it’s my fault. I wasn’t expecting you to have such a good swing.”

She blushed. “Well, I am a bear shifter, My-”

I held up a finger. “Not another mistake like that or you’ll be using that strength to clean out Kang’s stables.”

Arian smiled and bowed her head. “Yes, Anna.”

I slipped past her and scooped up her dangerous weapon. “I’m glad you hit it that hard. Now we now how sturdy I can make them.”

Arian came up to my side and studied the toy. “But what will you do with it?”

I tossed the balloon into the air and caught it on the way down. “Why don’t we go see if the kids like it?”

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

I COULD HARDLY KEEP FROM RUNNING, SO EAGER WAS I TO SEE HOW the children felt about my new 'invention.' Arian hurried along at my side and had to hitch up her dress to keep up. We soon reached the park south of the music hall and I wasn't disappointed. The children scurried about playing a game of tag, and among them were Kean and Lia.

Lia noticed me first and her friendly face brightened. She raced over and I tucked a hand behind my back before she grabbed the other one. "Have you come to play with us?"

"Don't you have enough players?" I wondered as the other children, seeing me, hurried to join us.

Kean shook his head. "That isn't it. None of the other adults will play with us."

"Or cook us sweets!" another chimed in.

"Do you have brownies?" one of them asked.

I could hardly contain myself as I shook my head. "No, but I have something that will last longer than brownies."

Lia's eyes widened into pools of curiosity. "What is it?"

I drew out my hidden hand and opened my fingers to reveal the deflated balloon. "This."

The children huddled close and stared in wonder and confusion at the object.

"What is it?" Kean asked me.

"It's called a balloon," I told him as I extracted myself from the friendly Lia and grasped the mouth. "You blow it up like this."

I applied my mouth to the stem and blew. The children had the same enthusiastic reaction as Arian as they all screamed and scuttled back. Several of them dove behind the nearest bushes and one even climbed into a tree. My laugh sputtered into the balloon and I drew my mouth away. The toy deflated to its flat persona and all was still and silent.

I held up the balloon and wriggled it. "It's alright. It just blows up like a, um, like a-"

"Like a folding lantern," Arian assisted me.

"Yeah, like that," I continued as I stretched the balloon between my hands. It stretched flat and wide in front of me. "See? It just stretches out and pops back in. I just use my breath to control it."

The wide-eyed children crept out of their tree and hiding places and approached me. I held very still, fearful I would frighten the terrified young ones.

Lia hid behind Kean as he approached with a pale face. He stopped a few feet from me and stretched his neck out. "Could you. . .could you show us again?"

I grinned and nodded. "Of course! Just watch."

I performed the same task but slower. The balloon slowly inflated under the influence of my hot air and the children's eyes grew larger.

"Wow," Lia breathed as she slipped out from behind Kean and tiptoed over to me. Her arms were scrunched up against her front and she trembled a little but curiosity ruled her eyes. "Can I try that?"

"Sure thing," I told her as I opened the mouth to let out the air. "You just need to put this against your mouth and blow hard, alright?"

Lia bobbed her head as I handed the balloon to her. She squealed as I set the rubbery toy into her open palms. “It feels funny!”

“Like what?” one of the other kids asked her.

“Like stretchy mud!” she replied as she stretched and pulled the balloon like it was a bunch of Play-Doh.

Her familiar description piqued the curiosity of the kids and they crowded around her. They poked and prodded the poor toy until it was a mess of bumps and scratches.

All that touching made me nervous. “Careful. You might break it,” I warned them.

“Unfold it!” one of the kids pleaded.

“Blow it up!” another chimed in.

Lia put the stem to her lips and blew. The balloon puffed up just a little.

“Bigger!” one of her playmates demanded.

“Blow harder,” I advised my little friend.

Lia took a deep breath and blew in. The balloon exploded and the children erupted in giggling shouts of playful terror. They scooted back and clapped and cheered as Lia continued to blow until her little lungs ran out. She drew her mouth away and the air escaped. A look of pure horror and disappointment covered her face.

“Anna!” she shouted as she spun around and waved the shrinking balloon at me. “It’s getting smaller!”

“You have to close the thin part, like this,” I instructed her as I pinched the stem shut.

Lia copied me and drew the balloon against her. She bowed her head and sniffled. “But now it’s small again. . .”

I set a hand on her shoulder. “That’s alright. You can blow it up and shrink it as many times as you want. Try it.”

Lia nodded and put her mouth to the stem. Her little friends crowded around her and watched as the balloon came back to life. This time when

she pulled her mouth away, she pinched the stem shut and the toy stayed the same size.

She beamed with pride as she waved the balloon at me. “I did it! I did it!”

“And it looks wonderful,” I congratulated her.

“I wanna try!” Kean spoke up.

“So do I!”

“And me!”

Lia bit her lower lip and cast a fearful side glance up at me. “Do you. . .do you have more funny lanterns?”

I knelt on one knee and clasped my hands together in front of myself. “Not yet, but let’s see if I can fix that.”

I focused all my thoughts on ballooning. My imagination ran away with me as my mind’s eye watched pictures of the kids scurrying and playing about. Their bright laughing faces warmed my heart, as did my magic as it flowed out of me. The silver strands formed dozens of balloons that piled up in my hands, creating a small hill of colorful fun.

The kids gave a great shout and snatched their favorite color from me even before my magic had faded. They spared two to their greedy little hands, a purple and a brown one.

I stood and turned to my friend to whom I held up my hand in which they lay. “You want one?”

Her eyes lit up. “Oh yes!”

I grinned. “Then pick a color.”

“Brown is my favorite,” she told me as she chose her favored color.

“A purple is mine,” I mused as I plucked the last one from my palm.

By this time we were surrounded by a bunch of wolves huffing and puffing their balloons up and down. Each success was followed by a squeal of delight from the expert balloon blower. It took them a few more tries to

figure out how to close their toys but we had a colorful forest of rubbery fun in a few minutes.

“Now I’ll show you how to tie them shut so you don’t have to hold them,” I instructed my eager little pupils.

They crowded around me and I gave a demonstration. Their clumsy little hands released a lot of air before they were finally able to tie the knot.

Kean held his balloon in his hands against his chest and wrinkled his nose. “Now what do we do with it?”

A sly Cheshire cat grin spread across my face. “We do this.”

I thwacked his balloon. The ball went flying out of his shocked hands and arched into the air before it landed with a couple of bounces on the grass.

“Hey!” he protested as he scrambled for it.

Some of the kids took on the herd instinct and scurried after him. Others threw their balloons up into the air and giggled as the toys floated on a slight breeze. They chased after them, catching and stumbling past. One small boy dripped over his balloon and the toy exploded with a terrific pop.

Everyone froze and the lad looked in horror at his broken balloon. He burst into tears and pointed at the flat remains of his toy. “It broke!”

I hurried over and knelt beside him. My mothering instincts kicked in and I wrapped my arms around the lad and drew him against my chest. “It’s alright. You just have to be more careful with the next one, okay?”

He bobbed his head. “I will!”

“Then I’ll make one for you,” I told the young lad as I released him and opened one hand.

My silver strands crafted another balloon and the young boy watched in wide-eyed amazement. “That is so pretty!”

I grinned and handed him the balloon. “Thanks, but I’d rather not have to show you again, okay?”

“Oh yes!” he agreed before he hurried off with his prize.

Arian joined me as I stood and we both watched the children play to their hearts' content. Balloons bounced and floated everywhere with children bouncing along behind them giggling and laughing. My heart swelled with happiness and Arian's face beamed.

"You have done it again, Anna," she complimented me with her soft eyes. "You have given the children another moment of happiness they will never forget."

I grinned. "I don't know about that but I don't know how I'm going to top this one."

Lia's balloon floated up to our feet and the little girl scurried after her toy. She wrapped her arms around the rubber toy and hugged it against herself. Her face was a picture of glee as she gave us a big smile. "Thank you so much for making my lantern!"

I didn't have the heart to explain to her it wasn't quite what she thought it was, so I nodded. "You're very welcome but you know you can also use them as decoration for the festival."

Lia stared at her toy with newfound curiosity. "Really?"

"You can hang them from strings or in bushes so they give color to your home," I told her.

Her face lit up as did her beautifully innocent eyes. "Wow! I'm going to take mine to the park?"

"Park?" I repeated as I glanced between my two native friends.

"The Twilight Fair takes place at the largest park in the heavens," Arian explained.

"So what happens during this fair? Are there games and stuff?" I wondered.

Lia bobbed his head. "Oh yes! And a lot of funny people come and try to get my mama and papa to buy their funny things!"

"She is referring to the land realm vendors who are allowed through the gates only for this special occasion," Arian explained as she smiled down at

the lass. “They come to sell their wares to the residents of the heaven realm and their guests who are allowed to pass through the gate.”

I lifted an eyebrow. “Is anyone allowed in?”

She shook her head. “Oh no. There is a stringent application process every vendor must go through before they are given a pass through the gates. I believe Lady Shian will be handling that quite soon.”

My heart sank into my stomach. “Is Shian good at that job?”

“While she can be lax in some of her duties, she does take this one seriously,” Arian assured me.

“Why this one?” I wondered.

“Lord Eastwei plays a pivotal part in the ceremonies and she desires to have everything perfect for him.”

The light of understanding dawned on me. “Ooohh. She really likes him, doesn’t she?”

Arian nodded. “Oh yes. I believe she has shown an interest in him since she was very young.”

I clasped my hands behind my back and smiled up at the bright sky. “I suppose that explains why she’s so angry with me all the time. I keep running into the guy she likes. She really needs to see that there’s nothing between us.”

I didn’t notice the sly smile that appeared on my friend’s lips, nor could I have imagined the maelstrom of intrigue on the horizon.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

The heavens and its great swath of cloud foundations hung high over the earth below. One could easily access the lofty residence only through an impressive stone archway situated at the nexus of the lands controlled by the numerous land immortal clans. A gravel path led up to the huge arch and if one peered through the curved hole they would merely see the other side of the small woods behind the entrance.

The southern half of the plain was edged by a small lazy river that curved southward. Part of the river was diverted into a wide ditch that ran around the area in which stood the arch, creating a small protected island. A small forest covered the northern half of the bit of land but the rest was merely bare plains. A low-arching bridge of huge logs and mud daubing extended across the wild river and was the only man-made edifice within sight of the arch.

A great crowd of over a hundred men and women filled the plain in front of the gate. They chattered away with one another but all of them kept one eye on the arch. A tall table sat a few yards in front of the entrance and was covered with an elegant silken white cloth but was otherwise bare. A small group of half a dozen people stood closest to the table with their faces perfect examples of tense anticipation.

“You think they’ll want more vendors this year?” one of the shorter women wondered.

“I don’t see why. They only have so much space, you know,” her male companion replied.

She put her hands on her hips and glared at him. “No, I *don’t* know. I’ve never been chosen.”

He crossed his arms over his chest and lifted his chin. A crooked, keen smile slipped onto his lips as he shrugged. “I guess you wouldn’t know. I’ve been picked the last two years in a row so take my advice: don’t try to get a bracelet. It’s tough competition and only the best get in.”

The woman looked him up and down. “If they only take the best then how come you got in?”

The other members of their group burst into laughter and the man’s cheeks reddened. “Why you little-” He swung his fist to punch her face but her arm shot up and blocked the blow. The man yelped and stumbled back cradling his trembling arm in his other hand. The limb sported a nice bruise that aspired to be a bright purple. He whipped his head up and glared at his grinning foe. “What the hell was that?”

The woman held up her arm and showed off a nice set of rock-hard green scales. “Never try to tussle against a turtle shifter. We’re as stubborn as we are solid.”

The man curled his lips back in a sneer. “A member of the turtle clan, huh? That explains why you’re so slow to get a vendor spot.”

His words earned another round of applause and guffaws from the group as more coin-seekers crowded about them.

“You tell ‘em!” one of them shouted.

“Don’t take that, turtle!” another yelled in return.

The turtle woman examined the man before she scoffed. “I doubt he could do a round with me. My shell is harder than even the rocks placed by the emperor atop the Shrouded Mountains.”

The gentleman grinned and rolled up his sleeves. “Well, I have my own tricks up my sleeves.” He flexed his arm muscles and short, coarse brown hair sprouted from his skin.

She sneered at him. “A rat? I’m not surprised.”

The man leaned forward and his front teeth elongated into a pair of sharp pincers. His face stretched into a snout and a tail dropped out from beneath the back of his long shirt. “Then you won’t be surprised when you lose.”

The two opponents faced off, one covered in rat hair and the other sporting green scales. The bored onlookers reveled in the chance to watch a sport while they waited and the much-vaunted coins passed hands as bets were placed.

“Come on, turtle! My bet’s on you!”

“Go on, rat! Chew her to bits!”

Only one figure remained aloof from the frenzy. It was an old gentleman who had taken a seat on one of a handful of small boulders that lined the gravel road up to the gate. The man wore a pair of faded gray sandals and plain tan pants with a white shirt. A broad-brimmed straw hat topped his head and covered the few wispy strands of hair time had left to him.

He grasped a wooden cane in both hands which he leaned heavily on. His gaze remained on the gate while everyone else pumped their fists and egged on the contestants.

One of the betters scurried over and nudged the man in the arm with his elbow. “Come on, old man! Join in! It’s a sure thing for the rat to win!”

The old man cocked his head to one side to look at his compatriot from under the brow of his hat. “Is it?”

“Well, yeah! He’s bigger and heavier than the woman! She might have some scales but those can be torn off like flesh!”

The old man returned his gaze to the gate and chuckled. “We shall see.”

His friend waved him off with both hands and hurried back to the action. The two combatants paced the messy circle created by the crowd and kept their sharp eyes on one another.

“I don’t care how hard your scales are. I’m going to chew them off you,” the rat threatened her.

She scoffed. “You won’t get close enough to do that.”

He threw his head back and laughed. “Like you can move fast enough to-”

His grand proclamation was interrupted by her sudden dash forward. He let out a sharp hiss and swung his arms wildly in front of him. She stopped short of his arm’s reach and tilted both her hands. The bright sun reflected off her flesh and the searing brilliance shot into his eyes. He let out a strangled cry and she stepped forward where she delivered her own retort with a sharp swing into his groin. His eyes bulged out of his head and a terrible wheezing noise was shoved out of his mouth. The men in the audience grimaced and a few rubbed the inside of their thighs.

The woman stepped to one side and the man toppled head-first onto the ground. He twitched a few times before laying still.

The winner held up her fisted hands and showed off a mess of smooth green scales. Their glass-like surface reflected the sunlight and showed off the grin on her face. “That’s why speed doesn’t always win.”

The gentleman on the rock chuckled and resumed his oversee of the gate. He wasn’t disappointed as a soft white glow emanated from the frame of the portal. The man straightened and tightened his grip on his cane. “They are coming.”

His soft but clear announcement silenced the chatter and everyone whipped their heads around to inspect the gate. Surprise and hope filled their ranks and they scurried over the fallen man to crowd around the front of the table. The old gentleman stood and shuffled into the middle of the group.

The glow from the frame grew brighter and swallowed the whole of the arch. The center shimmered like the surface of a lake and the white light lifted from the center like a mist to reveal the realm of the heavens. The clear blue sky and soft white clouds glistened, as did the high arches that guarded the main entrance to the palaces and parks of the heavenly residents.

Six heavenly citizens strolled out of the portal and into the land realm. Shian and Pampir were the leaders and guided a small group of scribes and maids out of the gate. The high lady paused on the threshold and sniffed the air. Her nose wrinkled.

Pampir stopped at her side and stared ahead as he stoically nodded. “It is a foul odor, is it not, My Lady?”

“Quite,” she agreed as she set her sights on the crowd. Her mood wasn’t improved by the disheveled appearance of many in the eager mob. “Let us finish this task quickly.”

She sauntered over to the table and one of the maids hurried before her. The heavenly servant crafted a magnificent high-backed chair behind the table where Shian seated herself. A scribe magicked an elegant quill pen and notebook with golden scrawling on the cover which he set before her. The man even opened the book to the first page as Shian callously stared at everything except the duty in front of her.

The opening of the book had an instant effect on the crowd. In a single moment, they had changed from civilized citizens to hostile barbarians. They pushed forward toward the table, elbowing and gnashing their teeth at any who tried to stop them from achieving first place in the contest.

“Create a line in front of the table!” Pampir shouted at them. “Anyone who does not follow these instructions will be immediately removed from consideration!”

The impatient vendors created a long, flimsy line in front of the table. A few of them jostled one another for prime real estate at the head.

“Get off!” a woman snapped at a man as she shoved her shoulder into him.

He stumbled to one side and out of the line. “You get off!”

The man charged and slammed his body into hers. She fell with a hard crash and a loud shriek. The woman clutched one arm and rocked to and fro. “He’s hurt me! He’s bruised my poor body! Somebody help me!”

Everyone looked askance at their neighbor, each weighing the pros and cons of stepping out of line to help the woman. She didn’t have any takers.

The woman fumed and flailed about the ground like a spoiled child told ‘no’ for the first time. “You wretched creatures! You horrible selfish scoundrels!”

“Take it to the emperor!” one of them spoke up. The reply elicited a laugh up and down the line.

Pampir clapped his hands. “That will be enough! Get into line or you will be immediately disqualified!” The woman grumbled under her breath but climbed to her feet and waddled to the end. The pompous man sneered at them a moment longer before he swept his eyes over the others and clapped his hands.

“We will now begin the selection process!”

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

The first person eagerly stepped forward, a man in his thirties with his chin slightly raised and a smile on his lips.

Pampir looked him over with the air of a man who thought he had better things to do with his time than waste it on such people. “What do you have to offer the fair?”

“I sell wooden dolls to the children, My Lord,” the man replied as he dug into his pocket and drew out a tiny doll. Its arms, legs, and torso were cylinders held together with thick wire. The head was round and featured a smiling face. “See?”

Pampir took the doll and turned it over in his hands. “Is that it?”

The man’s face fell and his eyes glistened with fear. “Y-yes, sir.” Pampir looked over the doll and gave the man a look of warning. The merchant’s face turned an unhealthy white. “T-that is, My Lord.”

Pampir tossed the doll back to the man who juggled it before successfully clutching it in both shaking hands. “Stand back and let us see what others have to offer.”

The man bowed his head. “Yes, My Lord.”

He reluctantly shuffled off to the sidelines but he kept one eye on the book. Shian sighed and picked up the pen. She dipped the tip in the inkwell

and wrote a few discerning lines that vanished the moment the words were finished.

The next merchant up to the table was a middle-aged woman who grasped a wooden box in both hands. She glanced at the book and was disappointed to see nothing visible.

“Well?” Pampir snapped. “Your offer.”

The woman nodded. “O-of course, My Lord.” She opened her box and revealed a gleaming pile of sugary baked sweets. The treats were stuck on a stick and shaped into a crescent moon. She pulled one out and held it aloft for viewing. “This is my specialty. Flavored sweets on sticks.”

Pampir stretched out one hand to her. “May I?”

“Of course,” she eagerly confirmed as she handed him one stick.

The lord took one lick and furrowed his brow in thought. “Not bad. A slightly salty tinge to it.”

Shian stirred from her indifference and looked the woman over. “Do you know quite a bit about sweets?”

“As much as the next person, My Lady,” she answered.

“Do you know a treat called ‘chocolate?’”

The chef closed her box and tapped the fingers of one hand against the side. “I don’t believe I’ve heard of that one, My Lady, but I can ask around if you like.”

“Do that and you will be well-rewarded,” Shian replied with a pointed look at the woman.

The merchant’s eyes widened and she bobbed her head. “I most definitely will!”

“Good.” Shian wrote a few invisible scribbles in the book and waved her hand at the sidelines. “Now go.”

The woman scurried away and the next person stepped up. The same sequence was repeated where each seller presented their wares to the judges and Shian made her invisible judgment. A great crowd congregated on the

sidelines with several of them pacing the front like hungry animals waiting for the final verdict.

The old gentleman from the rock shuffled up to the table and set one hand over the other that grasped the cane. He bowed his head and smiled at the group. “Good morning to you, Lord Pampir and Lady Shian.”

His arrival stirred her ladyship into sitting upright and even casting a faint smile at him. “Good morning to you, Leiren. You have come to show us your wares?”

The man waved his empty hand and a fox fur appeared in his palm. The luxurious red coat glistened in the sun and the white tip of the tail was the color of undisturbed snow. “This is but a taste of what I wish to offer the lords and ladies of the realm above.”

“My goodness,” Pampir complimented as Shian stood and accepted the example, cradling it in her upturned palms. The lord examined the fur with a faint nod. “This is a magnificent creature. Wherever did you find it?”

Leiren’s eyes twinkled. “If I told you I would quickly be out of a supply.”

Shian sank her fingers into the velvety-soft fur. “I would ask if you have others but we know you are a master of the hunt.”

The old man bowed his head. “Your compliments warm my heart, Lady Shian.”

Shian reluctantly returned the fur and sat back down. She took up her pen but with more enthusiasm than the others. A few invisible scribbles later and she smiled up at the man. “Thank you for coming today, Leiren.”

“My pleasure, Lady Shian,” he returned as he flicked his wrist and the fur vanished. He shuffled over to the others, many of whom stared at him with a mixture of awe and envy.

The man he had spoken with earlier sidled up to him and nudged the old man with his elbow. “You have it in with the lady, eh?”

Leiren chuckled. “I have known her since she could barely walk.”

The strange leaned toward him and lowered his voice. “Any chance you can get a good word in for me?”

The old man set one hand atop the other and leaned on his cane while his eyes fixated on Lady Shian. “I would consider it, my friend, if it was any task other than this one. Her Ladyship takes this task most seriously and will not be swayed by anyone except one man.”

His companion lifted an eyebrow. “And who’s that?”

Leiren closed his eyes and shook his head. “Best that you did not know lest you be wiped off the lists forever for your insolence.” The old man cracked open one eye and its dark pupil fell on his compatriot. “If you understand my meaning.”

The man’s heart dropped into his stomach and the color faded from his face. He stepped back and bobbed his head so violently his neck cracked. “O-of course! We won’t talk about it again!” He turned and buried himself deep in the crowd.

The two heavenly gods continued their inspection of the wares and goods offered by the merchants until the very last one left the table. The silence was deafening as all eyes fell on the book. Shian wrote her final judgment and, for the final time, set the pen back in its holder. The scribe swept away all the tools except the book.

Pampir caught Shian’s eye and she nodded. He picked up the book and held the tome open in both hands as he turned to the crowd. “Now I will pull out the names of those who will be allowed through the gate. However, there is one last test you must go through before being granted a ribbon. If you fail then you will not be allowed entrance into the heaven realm.”

A murmur rose from the crowd. The boisterous turtle woman stepped forward and asked the question on everyone’s mind. “What kind of test?”

“Merely a formality, I assure you,” Pampir insisted.

“I don’t want no test!” someone shouted from the deep safe depths of the horde.

“Neither do I!” another yelled.

A loud murmur of disapproval rose from the people. Shian set her elbow on the arm of her chair and rolled her eyes. Pampir stretched himself to his full height and glared at the company. He lifted his nose and glared at the people. “Anyone who refuses to take the test will be immediately disqualified!”

The disagreements immediately evaporated and silence fell on the crowd. There were still some dissatisfied faces but they didn’t speak out against the policy.

Pampir nodded. “Excellent. Now let us begin.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

Pampir held aloft the book in front of him in an open palm and waved his empty hand over the pages. A faint white glow emanated from the register pages before strands of snowy white magic flowed upward. The lowing fibers twisted and danced together before they arched into the sky and down into the crowd. The warm strands glided among the crowd and brushed against their wrists. The few lucky ones were gifted with a faint glow around their right wrists. Cries of joy and groans of sorrow mixed into a chorus of life's trials and tribulations.

The strands reached the end of the crowd and faded, but the white ribbons remained. Pampir clapped the book shut and tucked it under one arm. "All those with ribbons may step forward and form yourselves into a line. Everyone else may remain here to see if there are any spots to be filled by those unworthy of being chosen."

A glimmer of vindictive hope appeared in the faces of many of those not chosen. The threaded ones scooted through the crowd of their jealous compatriots and hurried to the forefront where they created a messy line.

Pampir paced the long line of some four dozen vendors and studied each of them. A few smug faces grinned back at him and the smiling Leiren was among the lucky chosen, but the vast majority had glistening sweat on

their brows. A few swallowed hard as the inquisitor strode past them and some even quivered beneath his stern gaze.

Pampir stretched his arm above his head and waved his hand. A soft brown light emanated from his fingers and cascaded down him like rain sliding off an umbrella. The ground beneath him came alive with the same bright magical light and the earth rumbled. A few of the merchants stumbled to and fro and many stared in terror as hairline cracks appeared in the dirt beneath their feet.

Gas emanated from the cracks and floated up. Several of the women, and a few of the men, screamed and scattered. A few of those in line desired to join the herd instinct but Pampir's sharp voice stalled those plans.

"Move from the line and you will be immediately disqualified!"

The would-be panicked froze in place, their faces pictures of terror as the gas crept up over them. The only one who appeared indifferent to the chaos around them was Leiren who continued smiling as the gas flowed over his hips.

"What is this stuff?" one of the women in the line shrieked.

"A gas given to me by Lady Miansha that is capable of learning the true hearts of anyone who breaths in its air," Pampir revealed as he stepped back from the line and inspected them. "You will inhale the gas and be given judgment."

Leiren was the first, and most willing, contestant to breathe in the gas. The soft brown glow could be seen flowing down his throat and into his chest where it focused around his heart. The magical air could be seen wrapping around and moving in time with the thumping of his ticker, and a faint red glow appeared.

"Is that good?" a man questioned their judge.

Pampir nodded. "He has passed."

"And what color is us not passing?" another one asked him.

"I hope you shall not see it."

The merchants reluctantly allowed the gas to slip into their mouths while the crowd of onlookers scurried out of reach of the truth serum, fearful of its judgment. The earthen light set their chests afire with its soft glow and wrapped around their hearts. Even Shian sat up in her chair and watched the magic work its will around the heart of the infected.

Red lights appeared around all but one of the chosen.

The turtle woman glared down at her chest and the gray light that pulsed around her heart. “What is it, some sort of trick? I got nothing to hide!”

Pampir strolled up to her with his glowing hand still raised. He studied the woman with a sharp look. “The gas believes you have something to hide. What is your crime?”

She sneered at him. “My crime is believing you lot could not be assholes.”

The lord lifted his nose high in the air. A jolt of tension twanged between the two as they faced off, but the heavenly god had the upper hand. “State your crime or you will be immediately disqualified!”

The woman crossed her arms over her chest and pressed her lips into a petty pout. “I cheated a bunch of people, okay? It was just some stupid village, anyway.”

Pampir stabbed a finger in the direction of the river. “Then I will not give you the chance to cheat anyone in the heavenly realm. You are disqualified.”

The woman threw up her hands. “Fine. I didn’t want your filthy gold, anyway.”

She marched out of line and past the quiet crowd. They all turned their heads to follow their fallen commercial comrade. She stomped across the bridge and out of sight.

Pampir popped open the book and cleared his throat. “Now I will choose an adequate replacement.”

The fall of the turtle woman was completely forgotten as all the attention fell on Pampir. He repeated the choosing process and another took her place. The gas did its duty and didn't find her wanting, as evidenced by the blazing red glow around her heart.

Pampir shut the book again and for the last time and smiled at the line of people in front of him. "Excellent! You have all been chosen to partake in the fair! Please come to the table to be given your ribbons by Lady Shian herself."

The winners scurried up to the table and the first one stretched out his hand with a beaming smile. Shian frowned at them and pointed at his other arm. "Your right hand."

The man winced and quickly switched limbs. She raised her hand over his arm and a faint light blue element glided like slick ice down to the man's wrist where the light formed a very solid blue bracelet. The merchant lifted his hand and brushed his fingers against the creation.

"Move along!" Shian snapped.

The merchant bowed his head. "Thank you! Thank you so much!"

Pampir waved his hand at the man. "No thanks are necessary. Merely arrive here on the appointed day to set up your stall."

He scurried away and the line moved forward, with everyone receiving their ticket to consumer heaven and skipping off with their prize glistening on their wrists. Many of them petted their trinket as they passed by the vast crowd.

Those who would be left behind in the land realms weren't pleased. A great roar of disappointment and disapproval rose from the fomenting crowd and several shook their fists at the heavenly gods.

"Why didn't I get picked?"

"You're just playing favorites!"

"I have better stuff than her!"

"This is rigged!"

Pampir marched up to the crowd that persisted in staying and held up his hands. “We have no favorites and we cannot be bought at any price. Those chosen had the superior products that fit the best with the aesthetic of the Twilight Fair. You may return here another time and try your luck with another festival.”

“Why don’t we just set up our stalls right now?” someone shouted.

A woman pointed at the open gate. “Yeah! It’s open now! They can let us in!”

One of the men stepped forward and twisted around to catch the eyes of his comrades in anger. The ruddy glow of alcohol tinged his cheeks. “Come on guys!” he shouted as he swung his arm toward the gate. “Let’s decide who gets a spot by seeing who’s the fastest!”

He started the stampede with a stumbling step but the others not chosen rushed past him, toppling the man to the ground. They ran over him to get their chance to enter heaven and reap the riches offered by the divine inhabitants.

Pampir scowled at them and lifted a hand. He snapped his fingers and the sharp crack of bone on bone cut through the shouts and bawling of the aggrieved. The heavenly gate pulsed with a hard glow of ethereal white light. The stampeding vendors skidded to a stop, some crashing into the person in front of them and leading to a pile-up a few feet short of the gate.

The light flashed harder and faster, and a sharp air blew out of the open portal. The people threw their arms up and covered their faces, and those in the rear decided living was the better virtue. They turned and used their magic to vanish in a faint cloud of sparkling light.

The heavenly gate’s wind turned into a gale that touched not a hair on the heads of the heavenly host nor their table but grasped and yanked at the clothes of the land realm peoples. The vendors were dragged and tumbled away from the gate and past the table. Many of the people flopped onto their stomachs and clawed at the ground but their fingernails were no match

for the gale. The aggrieved shopkeepers sailed past the heavenly group and some even reached the edges of the river where they were tossed into the shallow but cold waters.

They came up sputtering in a hot and cold blend of fury and river water. The bedraggled invaders stumbled onto the shore where Pampir greeted them. His arms were crossed over his chest and his narrowed eyes judged them with a sharp, disapproving glare. “Should anyone attempt another invasion again, you will be more than just-”

One of the people decided to test his unfinished promise by charging forward toward the gate. Pampir stomped his foot on the ground. The earth shook and a huge crack appeared in front of the invader. The man fell into the crevice and let out a blood-curdling scream that lasted for several seconds before a horrible thump interrupted him. Then all was silent.

Pampir lowered his hand and the crevice slammed shut. His cold eyes studied the people one by one. “Would anyone else care to make another attempt on the gate?”

The dripping-wet people stared at each other before they turned tail and trampled through the water, tripping over rocks, each other, and their own feet in their urge to escape Pampir’s wrath. They reached the bridge and scurried across where they disappeared, many in faint clouds of magic.

A faint smile accented Pampir’s lips as he turned and sauntered back to the table. Shian stood and her chair vanished along with the table. The pair led their entourage toward the gate and the wonderful home beyond the ripple.

“Excuse me.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

The company paused on the threshold of the gate and turned. A single slightly hunched man stood beside where the table had stood. He wore short pants worn ragged at the hem and brown sandals that had seen better days. His shirt was clean but slightly wrinkled and was also frayed at the end of the long sleeves. His short brown hair was combed into place in a plain bowled hairstyle that suited his thin face. The man carried a slim square hard-leather pack on his back and a short rectangular box hung on the front of his waist with the aid of two strings, one wrapped around his neck and another around his waist. The rectangular box had a slim lid held shut by a flimsy golden clasp on the front. A decoration of a thick green plant growing from a black seed covered the lid.

Pampir stepped in front of the women and stretched himself to his full height. “What do you want?”

The man shuffled toward them with his shoulders stooped and his head slightly bowed. “My sincerest apologies for stopping you, but I was wondering if it wasn’t too late to receive a ribbon?”

Pampir lifted his nose and swept an arm over the empty quarters. “Naturally the hour is too late. The ribbons have already been doled out and everyone has gone.”

“Then I have come at just the right time,” the man insisted as he clasped his hands together above his box. “I didn’t seek to join the others because I have no need of a stall.” He patted the lid with the fingers of one hand. “This is all I need to sell my wares.”

Pampir stretched his neck and examined the lid. “What do you sell? Vegetables?”

The corners of the man’s eyes crinkled together as he shook his head. “Not exactly. I sell seeds. Magical seeds.”

The lord scoffed. “How are they magical?”

The man opened his lid and revealed square compartments and inside each shallow cushioned hole lay a single black seed in the shape of a pinto bean. He pinched one carefully between his index and thumb and lifted it out for viewing. “I guarantee that if you plant a seed in the garden of the one you love they will be bound to your love forever.”

His words caught the attention of Shian who cautiously approached him. “How do you guarantee such a thing?”

“By the strength of the gardener’s magic,” the man explained as he rolled the seed around in his fingers. “The greater the magic the more likely the seed will be to grow and blossom into that promise.”

“And how much do you charge for these seeds?” she inquired.

Pampir’s bushy eyebrows crashed down at his companion. “My Lady, surely you cannot be considering allowing this man to sell his wares at the fair. More to the point, the lots have already been chosen.”

Shian cast a sharp look at her subordinate. “The stalls have been filled but as this man said, he has no need of them.”

The seller bobbed his head. “Very true, My Lady, very true! I need only a wide enough berth through the crowd to sell my wares.”

Shian held out her palm to the man. Her eyes shone with a light that revealed her deep eagerness. “Allow me to see one.”

“Of course,” the man agreed as he set the one in his hand into her palm.

She studied the bean for a long moment and the longer she stared the darker the depths of her eyes became. Her words came out in a hushed whisper as if she were beholding an item of worship. “What a beautiful creation. Wherever did you find it?”

The man’s eyes twinkled with a strangely dark light. “In the starry mists of time, My Lady.”

A shadow fell on Shian’s brow and she grasped the seed tightly in her hand. “That is hardly an answer, sir.”

He bowed his head. “My sincerest apologies, My Lady, but a merchant must never tell the customer where they discovered their merchandise or they may have one less customer and one more competitor.”

“Then we shall not waste our time with you nor yours with us,” Pampir spoke up as he stabbed a finger at the bridge. “The road is that way, sir.”

The stranger’s eyes never left Shian who continued to stroke the bean in her palm. “What do you say, My Lady? Do my wares please you?”

Shian nodded. “Very much.”

“Then you may keep the seed,” he offered her as he held out his right hand. “And I shall take my ribbon and leave.”

Pampir’s mouth dropped open and spittle flew from his mouth at every word. “A-a ribbon! You shall not receive anything of the-”

Shian lifted her hand and the soft glow of her magic fell over the man’s wrist. A ribbon formed itself around his limb. He drew his arm back and admired the shimmering symbol of consent. “Thank you very much, My Lady.” He stepped back and bowed his head to Pampir. “And a good day to you, My Lord.”

A cool smile graced the stranger’s lips as he spun on his heels and sauntered away to the bridge. He disappeared over the gentle curve and all fell silent.

That is until Pampir’s fury exploded.

“What were you thinking, My Lady?” Pampir shrieked as he turned to face Shian. She still held the seed in her open palm and studied it like a child studying a butterfly for the first time. “We have no idea who that man was! He no doubt sells terrible goods and will ruin the fair and-”

“There is no need to worry,” Shian interrupted him as she carefully tucked the seed into her sleeve. She lifted her eyes to her irate companion and lifted her nose slightly. “I have every faith that nothing bad will happen during the fair.”

Pampir’s arms drooped at his sides and his face also sagged. “But My Lady. . .”

“Come,” she commanded the group as she turned toward the gate. “Let us go home. We have been down here quite long enough.”

She strode toward the illuminated gate with their entourage in tow. Pampir pursed his lips but sluggishly followed along behind her with a heavy heart.

Little did he know how much trouble would come of their meeting with the stranger.

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

"It is just a little further down the road."

The speaker was Arian and I strolled by her side taking in the heavenly sights of the unfamiliar neighborhood. She guided me through the myriad of heavenly streets that covered the many floating islands and over bridges where I paused to take in the view far below. The clouds covered much but I occasionally managed to see the earth far below us. No wonder nobody could fly up there.

"How come we haven't been to this park before?" I wondered as I pushed away from the high stone railing and rejoined my companion where she stood a few feet away. The palaces on the other side of the bridge were of an older variety with unvarnished wooden beams and arches that more resembled tori gates than walkways.

My companion's face was a picture of eager excitement and I could hardly keep up with her pace as she kept a step ahead of me. "We are discouraged from visiting the park for two months before the fair so the grass is in its most pristine condition."

I grabbed onto her wrist and slowed my steps. "Then let's not be in a hurry to see it now, or at least tell me when we're supposed to start this sprinting race."

Arian blushed and slowed enough to walk by my side. “I am very sorry. I am eager to see the fair stalls.”

I nudged her arm with my elbow and wagged my eyebrows. “And maybe eager to see a certain handsome carpenter? Jin might be working out here, right?” My companion bowed her head and turned her face away. I stretched my neck to catch her eye. “You know, I should order you to take a few days off and have some fun with him.”

Arian’s fingers fidgeted with each other in front of her. “I. . .I could not ask that of you.”

I grinned and stared ahead to puff out my chest. “You wouldn’t be asking. I’d be ordering you. Now that I know you want to have some fun without babysitting me then you have my permission to have the rest of the time off from here to the end of the fair.”

Arian whipped her head about and her eyes studied my face. “You. . .are you sure you would not need me?”

I laughed and clapped a hand on her shoulder. “Well, I can’t guarantee that but I want you to have fun. Besides, how many days left is there until the fair? Two? And it goes on for how long?”

“Only for a single day,” she reminded me.

I shrugged. “Then you don’t have anything to worry about. How much trouble could I get into in three days?” My own words caused an unpleasant tingle to ring at the back of my mind. These were definitely famous last words and if my time in the heavenly realm had taught me anything it was that I had a knack for finding trouble. I shook out those thoughts and lifted my chin. “Anyway, Jin wants to see you, too.”

She faced forward but her eyes darted up to me. “Do you. . .do you really think so?”

I lifted my chin, tightened my face, and took on an imperious air in my voice. “Of course, I know better than you. I am your mistress, after all.”

Arian stared at me for a moment with wide eyes before she burst into laughter. “You sounded almost exactly like Lady Shian!”

A grin ruined the effect. “Did I?” I paused and flexed my jaw. “I don’t know how she keeps that frowning face all the time. It doesn’t exactly feel nice on the muscles.”

“I believe she has a great deal of practice,” Arian commented as something ahead of us caught her eye. “But I believe I see the opening to the park.”

A wide gap in the houses some quarter of a mile wide signaled the opening to the grand parkland. The pristine walkway stretched into the gap like pulled taffy and glided through a perfect lawn of luxurious green grass. Huge trees dotted the skyline above the estate homes and a scent of fresh water tickled my nose.

Unfortunately, there wasn’t much more than teasing as we reached the entrance to the park. Posts had been planted along the opening and three rows of soft velvety rope stretched between them, blocking off access.

We stopped at the flimsy barrier and I studied the shimmering rope. “Looks like we’re not allowed in.”

Arian’s face fell and she grasped my sleeve. “My sincerest apologies. I thought we would be allowed to enter.”

“You’ve never been here at this time?” I guessed.

She released me and clasped her hands in front of her before she bowed her head. “No. Lady Shian would not give us the time to see the fair during the day and I did not dare venture out at night to the park to see the work.”

I patted her on the shoulder. “Don’t beat yourself up over it.”

Arian whipped her head up and her large frightened eyes stared at me. “Must I do that?”

I laughed and shook my head. “I said for you *not* to beat yourself up and don’t ever do that on my account, okay?” She bit her lower lip but nodded.

I returned my attention to the park and the meandering walking path. The stones curved through the grass and descended toward a huge pond half a mile from where we stood. The path then split into two and curved around the banks of the glistening water where ducks floated lazily along the surface. The trees I had seen before grew out of the earth in various spots, providing refreshing shade between large patches of bright sun. Flowers randomly popped up out of the grass and their petals waved about in a gentle breeze.

What really caught my attention was the space between where we stood and the pond. The pathway straightened out halfway to the glistening water and four neat rows of wooden stalls had been constructed. The booths featured a tabletop with two walls and a slanted roof over the whole thing. The carpenters were finishing up work on a few of the stalls closest to the entrance but they weren't the only ones there.

The vendors had also arrived, or at least I assumed they were the vendors. Their rough attire and wide variety of styles were a dead giveaway. They milled about their stalls hanging trinkets and adjusting boxes on the table.

"I didn't think there'd been that many stalls," I commented.

"There were more last year," Arian commented. "So many that they nearly reached the entrance."

I furrowed my brow. "I wonder why they didn't let in as many people."

"Prince Yushir may know. You might ask him," my companion suggested.

"I wouldn't want to bother him," I countered as I squinted at the stalls. "Can you see what they're selling?"

Arian stood on her tiptoes and shook her head. "I am afraid not."

I strained my neck and frowned. "I don't see Jin anywhere, either."

A heavy sigh came from my friend. "Nor do I."

“Maybe he’s behind the stalls,” I suggested as I turned my attention to the rope. I put my hands on my hips and examined the barrier. “We’ll have to go take a peek around them.”

My foot slipped a little on the wet grass and an evil idea slipped into my mind. I eased myself forward until my waist pressed against the rope and gingerly slid my foot across the invisible line created by the barrier.

It may have been invisible but something was most definitely there. A static shock ran through me and tingled every nerve in my body with a jolt of sharp hot pain. I jumped back with a yelp and fell backward onto the hard stone walkway.

“Anna!” Arian shouted as she hurried to my side and dropped to her knees. “Are you alright?”

I sat up and looked down at my foot. A faint wisp of smoke rose out of my shoe. “I’ve been better.”

Arian’s hands trembled and her voice wavered. Indecision ruled her as she looked ready to both bolt and dress my wound. “Can you stand? Do you want me to call the doctor?”

I held up my hand and shook my head. “I don’t want to make his acquaintance unless I have to. Just give me a minute or two to rest and I’ll be back on my feet.”

A laugh interrupted my self-pity and we looked up to find Lord Kang strolling toward us with his cat at his side. He stopped a few feet away and put his fisted hands on his hips. A great big toothy grin stretched his face to unbelievably happy heights.

“So you tried to get across my barrier, huh?” he teased as he looked from one of us to the other. “Pampir told me to set the pain high.”

“Did he?” I mumbled as I flexed my throbbing foot.

Arian jumped to her feet and wagged a finger at him. “You might kill someone with such magic!”

Kang held up his hands in front of him. “The spell is powerful but not that powerful The most it can do is push someone away.”

“I think it can do a little more than that,” I spoke up as I eased myself onto my feet.

Arian was at my side in an instant with all the care of a worried mother. “You mustn’t stand yet!”

“I’m feeling better already,” I assured her.

“My spell is perfectly safe,” Kang insisted as he strolled past us and stood beside his barrier. He was all grins as he stretched out his arm. “See? Perfectly-”

I got to see the spell from a different angle as dozens of faint yellow lightning bolts shot out and into his wrist. Kang cried out and stumbled back. The scent of burning flesh filled the air again and he cradled his arm in his other hand.

Arian caught his eye and frowned at him. “You were saying?”

He rubbed his hand around his wrist and winced. “Maybe it is a little strong.” His cat friend bobbed its head and he scowled down at the animal. “Traitor.”

“Is there any way you can get us into the park?” I spoke up.

Kang shook his head. “My apologies, but no one except those given a pass are allowed into the park until the morning of the fair. The spell will not lift until then.”

I sighed and turned to Arian. “Well, at least we got a walk out of it and I’ve seen the park.” Arian’s eyes pooled with regret but I patted her arm. “It’s alright. Let’s get home and get a nice cold icepack on my foot.”

I limped home with my thoughts filled with hope for a fun time in two days. Little did I know how eventful that day would be.

CHAPTER FORTY

"When will these stalls be finished? The fair is tomorrow and everything must be completed tonight for the vendors! And will someone please remove those ducks before they cover everything in their filth!"

The final preparations for the fair surrounded Lady Shian in all her inglorious fury. She stood at the head of the four long rows of stalls, each with a wide aisle between them. Her cheeks were red and her eyes flashed with a dangerous blue light.

One of the earthly carpenters hurried up to Her Ladyship and clasped his hands together against his front before he bowed low to her. "Lady Shian, we need more wood to complete the last of the stalls."

She quivered with rage and his words earned him a horrible scowl that marred her beautiful features. "Why is that? You were given a mountain of boards."

The man hardly lifted his head as he gestured to a half dozen half-finished stalls at the far end closest to the pond. Many were missing roofs and a few had only one of two walls. Three workmen were busy finishing them as best they could. "But they weren't enough, as Her Ladyship can see."

She stabbed a finger at a pile of cut wood. "I see nothing but a waste of wood."

He turned his head far enough to understand where she pointed. “Those are the ends of boards we have already cut, Your Ladyship. They aren’t long enough to be used to finish the roofs.”

Her lips twisted about until they settled for a deep frown. “Very well.” She waved her hand and icy blue strands of magic floated out of her palm. They formed a slip of paper which she pushed toward him. The man grasped the floating parchment in both hands and gaped at the created item. “This is a voucher for wood. The woodsman will give you what you need but you must ensure you are given the very best boards.”

The man bobbed his head and walked backward. “Yes, Your Ladyship. I’ll do this right away.” He turned tail and scurried off to fetch the wood.

Shian sneered at his retreating backside. Her fury was interrupted by a sudden soft push against the back of her leg. The goddess’ leg buckled and she stumbled forward, but she caught herself before she landed on the ground. She spun around to face her attacker.

A duck stared back at her. The animal turned its head to one side and let out a quack.

Shian balled her hands into quivering fists and stomped her foot. “Will no one rid me of these horrible creatures?”

“They’re just ducks,” one of the workmen spoke up.

Shian spun around to face the men. They all turned their faces away and resumed their task. She stomped over to them and stabbed a finger at the animal. “Remove that animal immediately!”

The men shrank into themselves and barely dared a sideways look at her. One of them cleared his throat. “I don’t think we can, Your Ladyship.”

“If one of you is bold enough to speak up then you must be bold enough to catch such a creature!” she snapped.

The men looked at each other and their speaker finally held up his hammer. “But if we try to catch the duck then who’ll finish this work?”

Shian wracked her brain for a good reply but she came up empty. “Fine! Then I will do it myself!”

She spun on her heels and marched toward the duck. The men paused in their work and watched the imperious goddess face off against the indifferent creature. The animal hardly gave her a side-eye as it nibbled on some long bits of grass.

Shian raised her arm in front of her and drew her hand back toward her chest. Light blue strands of magic appeared from her hand and swirled about before she pushed them toward the animal. The magic flew underneath the duck and swept across the descending ground to the pond, creating a long slender path of ice that shimmered in the bright sun.

The slick crystals solidified beneath the feet of the duck and its webbed digits couldn’t get a grip on the slick surface. The duck let out a horrified quack as it spread its wings and tap danced on the ice for a few numbers before it lost its balance. The poor creature crashed chin-first onto the ice and slid backward, its beady eyes showing pure terror as the earth slipped away beneath it. The duck was propelled down the slide and flew off the slightly upwardly tilted end. It arced into the air and flapped its wings in a futile attempt to gain its balance before it made a terrific splashdown in the pond.

Shian brushed her hands together and gave a nod toward the water before she turned back to the workmen. They stood there in a stupor, their eyes fixed on the duck as it bobbed up out of the water. The mistress of the fair crossed her arms over her chest and glared at them. “Well? Why have you stopped working?”

The men shook themselves of their shock and tried to make up for lost time by working overtime. Shian clasped her hands behind her and smiled as she sauntered past them toward the entrance and its shocking barrier. The icy slide melted as quickly as if a hairdryer hung over the whole length.

Only a little puddle remained after a few seconds and even that vanished in the blink of one of the workmen's eyes.

"Lady Shian! Lady Shian!"

The shout came from the entrance where Pampir stood on the other side of the barrier. He pressed his hand against the top of one of the ropes and the slender ribbon trembled before all three levels retracted. He slipped through the opening and the ribbons shot back into position quicker than even the shrinking puddle.

Pampir clutched the book of vendors in one hand against his chest and scurried up to her with a slightly pale face. "Lady Shian, I must speak with you about the vendor list."

Lady Shian lifted an eyebrow and her good humor sank away. "Why? Are some of them unable to come?"

He shook his head. "No, but I have spoken with nearly all the other vendors and they know nothing of anyone selling such beans as the, um, gentleman we spoke with at the last."

Shian tensed and she scowled at the man. "You doubt my choice?"

Pampir's eyes widened and he bowed his head. "N-no, Lady Shian! I only wish to inform you of what I have learned so you may make the best possible decision!"

Her voice was as icy as her element. "And that is?"

He risked raising his eyes to her though his head remained bowed. His hand tightened its grip on the book. "That you will remove his ribbon and not allow him entrance."

Shian's left hand twitched at her side and her eyes flashed with blue fury. "I will do no such thing and we will not discuss this matter again. Is that understood?"

Pampir dropped his gaze to the ground and bit his tongue. "Completely."

"Good. Now how are the merchant preparations going?" she inquired.

“Nearly all of them have completed their setup,” he told her as he nodded in the direction of the fairway. “Those left are waiting for the stalls to be finished.”

“Excellent. If that is all then you may leave for the day, but I expect you back here early tomorrow.”

Pampir nodded and reluctantly turned away. He walked back to the entrance with a heavy weight on his shoulders and the book pressed tightly against himself. *What has gotten into Lady Shian? She has been bewitched by that person’s sweet words!*

Shian set a hand over her pocket as she watched him leave. She could feel the slim shape of the bean beneath her fingers. The same tempting thought that had haunted her mind rose once more but she pushed it back down again.

Not yet she thought as she half-turned to cast her gaze over the fair. *Maybe after the fair.*

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

"And done!"

I stepped down from the ladder and admired my work. A long string ran from one wall of my palace to the other and was supported in the middle by the corner of the house. Dozens of colorful balloons hung from the rope and their glossy surfaces glistened in the bright sun.

Arian came out of the house with a tea tray and a smile. She stopped at my side and examined my job with an affirmative air. "You have done a wonderful job. I had no idea such a thing existed."

I clapped a hand on her shoulder and grinned at my companion. "It's all because I have a lot of inspiration from my friends."

She blushed and shrank beneath my kind words. "You are too kind."

"Too kind and too hungry," I teased as I dropped my gaze to the tray. A small plate of cookies complimented the tea. "So is this the final meal before we gorge ourselves on fair sweets?"

Arian nodded. "Yes.

I tilted my head back and drew my arm over my eyes to shield myself from the burning orb in the sky. "What time does it start again?"

"The Twilight Fair lasts from noon to midnight with a ceremony at twilight," she reminded me.

I blinked against the brilliant light that constantly hovered over us. “And what time is it now?”

“A half-hour before noon,” she told me as she moved over to a small table with two stools. She set the tray down and poured the tea. “The crowds will be passing by soon to watch the barrier fall.”

I took a seat on one of the stools and rubbed my foot. “I hope they’re careful around those.”

“Lord Kang will no doubt limit his magic to a warning shock,” she assured me as she set out our filled cups.

I furrowed my brow as my friend took a seat opposite me. “So what’s his element? Electricity?”

Arian tilted her head to one side. “I do not know what ‘electricity’ is, but Lord Kang controls the element of lightning.”

“Those are pretty much the same thing in my world,” I told her as I picked up my cup and blew over the surface. “Is that a common element for someone to control?”

She took a dainty sip of her tea before she clasped the hot cup in her lap. “As common as the others.”

“Except fire?” I guessed.

She nodded. “Oh yes. Only Lord Eastwei can handle such a powerful element. We will-” She stopped herself.

I leaned over the table and lifted an eyebrow. “We will what?”

A light blush accented her cheeks and she turned her face away from me. “N-nothing.”

I scooted to the end of the stool and cocked my head to one side to catch her eye. “You’re hiding something.”

She bit her lower lip and tightened her grip on the cup. “I. . .I would prefer to keep it as a surprise.”

I snorted and straightened. “Just as long as I don’t have to wait too long.”

My friend shook her head. “Oh no. It will happen during the ceremony this evening. I am sure you will be very pleased with my keeping this secret from you.”

I took a sip of the tea and licked my lips. The drink was well-sweetened and warmed me. My eyes twinkled as I looked at her out of the corner of my eyes. “Just as long as it’s the only one you’re keeping from me. I don’t want to learn from the neighbors about you eloping with Jin.”

Her mouth dropped open and her eyes bulged out of her head. “E-elope with Jin! I-I would never do-”

“Don’t make promises you’re tempting not to keep,” I teased before I took another sip. Arian’s mouth flopped open and shut like a fish gasping for breath and I couldn’t help but laugh. “Relax. We’re supposed to have fun today, remember?”

“Lady Anna! Lady Anna!”

The shout came from the palace gate and little Lia scurried into my domain. She grasped her partially inflated balloon in one hand and crashed into my lap. I caught her and held the squirming child as she waved the balloon in my face.

“Look! My lantern is the only one left now!”

I choked on a laugh. “All the others popped?”

She bobbed her head. “Oh yes! Many of them were broken after you left.”

An elegant couple strolled through my arch and Arian shot to her feet. She scooted to one side and bowed her head as the pair reached us. The woman appeared to be slightly older than me with long brown hair tied together and cascading down her back to her waist. She wore a white robe like the tall gentleman at her side and the open expression on her face reminded me of Lia.

The man was of the same age and wore a darker tan attire. One hand grasped the belt around his waist and his brown eyes studied me with

curiosity mingled with doubt.

Lia bowed at the waist to our guests. “Lord Maersong. Lady Maersong. You do us a great honor to visit.”

Oh boy. I jumped to my feet and bowed my head. They returned the gesture and Lady Maersong’s twinkling eyes looked me over. “We have heard so much of you from our daughter that we could not help but come meet you for ourselves.”

“Your daughter?” I wondered as I dropped my gaze to little Lia.

She clutched her balloon to her chest and bobbed her head. “This is my Mother and Father!”

“You have given our daughter a great many gifts of late,” Lord Maersong commented.

The stiffness in his tone made me tense and I shook my head. “It was nothing. I was just, that is, I, um-”

Lady Maersong set her hand over my clasped ones and captured my gaze. Her eyes were of a light soft hazel that reflected her warm heart. “You have nothing to explain. Our daughter and her friends appreciate your kindness more than you know.”

I blushed and bowed my head. “Thank you. That means a lot.”

Lia tugged on my clothes. “Are you coming with us to the fair?”

I leaned down and smiled at her. “After I finish my tea, okay?”

She bobbed her head. “Okay!”

“What strange lanterns you have,” Lord Maersong commented as the string of balloons caught his attention. “They are the same as our daughter’s toy?”

“Yes, I thought they’d look nice for the fair,” I told him.

“Very interesting,” he murmured.

“We should be going, dear,” Lady Maersong reminded them as she took Lia’s hand. Her bright gaze fell on me and her eyes crinkled with her smile. “I hope to see you at the fair.”

“I wouldn’t miss it for the world,” I promised her.

“See you later!” Lia shouted as she was led away.

“Later!” I replied.

I waited for them to leave before I snatched up my tea. “Come on,” I encouraged my companion before I downed the whole cup. “I really want to see what all the fuss is about now.” Arian set her tea on the tray and grasped it, but I noticed she paused in that position. “What is it?”

Arian straightened and turned to me with a disappointed face. “It is just that, well, we have no coins for the merchants.”

My heart sank as reality bit down my enthusiasm and mangled it. “Oh. They. . .they aren’t here for free? Like with the kitchen and the other places?”

She shook her head. “I am afraid not. Many of the lords and ladies here have a stipend from the king.”

“But not me,” I finished for her as my shoulders sagged. Visions of romping through the stalls and buying candies and trinkets faded away. Arian’s disappointed face brought me around, and I rallied my spirits and offered her a weak smile. “Well, that’s alright. We can still enjoy the park and the ceremony, right?”

She put on her own false front and nodded. “Oh yes. Those are completely free.”

I clapped my hands and rubbed them together. “Then let’s go enjoy the sights and not get shocked doing it.”

Arian put the tray away and we were ready for our adventure. Our excursion was interrupted by the appearance of Prince Yushir. He strolled through the arches and met us halfway down the path.

The prince smiled and bowed his head to us. “Good morning, ladies. Are you off to see the fair?”

I nodded. “Yep. Do you want to join us?”

Yushir sighed and had a forlorn glint in his eye. “Alas, that I could, but my duties keep me from enjoying the many stalls. Speaking of those-” He reached into his sleeve and drew out a leather purse with a drawstring. The prince held the purse out to me. “My sincerest apologies for not delivering this sooner, but my duties kept me away.”

I studied the bag and my eyes flitted between the leather and the man. “What is it?”

“A gift for you and Lady Arian,” he told me as he grasped my hand and set the bag in my palm. The contents chinked. “You must enjoy your first festival with us and how can one do that with an empty purse?”

Arian scooted up beside me as I loosened the string and opened the mouth. A stack of silver coins shimmered in the sunlight. I gaped at the wealth as did Arian.

“This is most generous of you, Prince Yushir!” she complimented him.

He chuckled. “It is, is it not? I do hope you enjoy yourselves, especially during the show.”

“Show?” I repeated as I closed the bag.

Yushir opened his mouth but Arian caught his eye and furiously shook his head. He clapped his lips together and cleared his throat. “That is, I hope you enjoy the sights the fair has to offer. This is one of our more special affairs and I am glad you are here to witness it. If you will excuse me, I must attend to my duties.” He bowed his head and hurried off without even waiting for us to return the compliment.

I turned my head to Arian and lifted an eyebrow. “Show?”

“The ceremony at twilight,” she reminded me as she leaned to one side and stretched her neck. “But we should leave right now or we will have to contend with a great deal of people.”

My curiosity was unsatisfied but I heeded her warning and tucked the bag into my pocket. A wave of people flowed past the arch and confirmed her words. We joined that thick excited crowd and followed the flow toward

the island park. I gaped at the transformation a few days and an army of decorators had done to the realm.

The whole realm was decorated with streams, strings of lanterns, and colorful banners that hung outside the gates of the many palaces. The stone guardrails on the bridges were wrapped in fine silken cloth of various shades of purple and more lanterns hung down at various lengths toward the abyss below the realm. The crowd laughed and chatted, and admired the decorations as I was doing.

A group of three people, one woman, and two men, strolled past us.

“Lady Shian has really outdone herself this year,” the woman complimented.

“She better have. She neglected her other duties enough,” one of her companions quipped.

“My gate is finally fixed after nearly a year of being broken,” the other man chimed in.

“Oh hush and enjoy the sights,” the woman scolded them as they moved off.

I swam my way through the crowd and stopped to read one of the banners outside a palace. “Good health. Warm heart. Lucky dragon.” I lifted an eyebrow at the last moniker and I turned to my companion. “Are dragons considered lucky?”

She nodded. “They are.”

Something in her expression caught my attention and I eased toward her with a sly smile on my lips. “Is there something you want to tell me about dragons?”

A shout came from ahead of us and Arian whipped her head in that direction. “I believe they are about to open the ribbons.” She snatched my hand and pulled me into the crowd which had increased its speed. “Let us see the opening ceremony!”

We wormed our way through the people and managed to get ahead of the slower spectators to get close enough to see the mouth of the park. The fairgoers stood a healthy five feet back from the ribbons and Shian and Pampir stood on the other side of the barrier. Kang stood next to them with his head held high and his chest puffed out. The angle was all wrong for me to catch a glimpse of the stalls but a small crowd of merchants lingered fifty feet behind the trio.

Pampir raised his hands and the crowd quieted. “Ladies and lords, thank you for coming to the Twilight Fair, the fifteen-hundredth and sixty-sixth occasion for this event.” I clenched my jaw to keep my mouth from dropping open. “Now here is Lady Shian with her own words before the ribbons are removed.”

Shian stepped forward and smiled at everyone. “Thank you, Lord Pampir.” She lifted her chin and cleared her throat. “Ladies and lords, like Lord Pampir I thank you for attending this Twilight Fair. I hope you enjoy our vendors and take pleasure in the coming Twilight Ceremony which will undoubtedly be the finest one yet. Without further ado, I present Lord Kang who will remove his ward.”

Kang sauntered up to the barrier and put his fisted hands on his hips. He stuck up his chin and grinned at the crowd.

“Lift the ward, you fool!” Shian snapped.

Her sharp voice shook him from his revelry and he nodded. He held his palms close to the ribbons and wrinkled his brow. “Alright, everyone, welcome to the fair.”

A faint yellow light emanated from his hands and the ribbons shuddered before they parted, opening the way to fun.

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

The orderly crowd pushed through the gaps between the posts and nearly trampled the three welcomers. They scooted to one side and allowed the mob to tumble into the park. Many of them aimed straight for the stalls, and Arian and I were two of them. All the merchants were ready with their goods and their vocal chords.

"Come get your lanterns right here! Can't have a Twilight Fair without a lantern!"

"Sweets! Candies! Sugar pops! Everything a kid could want!"

"Lanterns! I have the best lanterns in the whole fair! Come see my selection!"

"Freshly cooked fish! Fish balls! Fish pasta!"

"You won't find finer lanterns than the ones I sell! And cheap, too!"

I cast a questioning look at my companion. "Lanterns?"

Arian kept her gaze focused on everything but me as she nodded. "Yes. Many vendors sell them during the Twilight Fair."

I lifted my eyes to the bright sun and squinted. "But what do we need those for? We can't see them glow."

Arian's eyes held a mischievous twinge as she grabbed my hand and tugged me along. "You will understand soon enough, so choose the one that you like best and I will buy it for you."

“You don’t have to do that,” I assured her.

All my protests died in my throat when I beheld the wide assortment of paper lanterns that the merchants showed off. Hundreds hung in the stalls and from racks out front. Most of the supply was folded for convenience but every style of lantern had one on display. There were square ones, rectangular ones, and cylindrical ones, and all the shapes in between. Some were plain lanterns with nothing but their frame while others showed off Gothic-like buttresses and pagoda designs. A few were even tall enough to be doll houses and featured little people standing on the edges looking out as though pleading for someone to buy them.

“Wow,” I murmured as I brushed my hand over a pagoda-like design. The paper was of a grayish-white hue crescent shapes covered the walls.

“Do you like it?” the merchant inquired as he leaned over his table. “It’s not as fancy as the others but when she sails she’s straight and shimmering like the moon!”

“Then I’ll take this one,” I told him as I grabbed one of its folded counterparts.

“Allow me to buy it,” Arian pleaded as she scooted between the vendor table and me. She slapped down the coins and change was given before I could even blink.

“You and that seller need to go into the banking business,” I teased as we strolled away. “You two exchanged money faster than I could see.”

Arian shrank a little and blushed. “I only wanted to buy your lantern.”

“And you bought the best one in the whole place,” I agreed as I held it out in front of me and studied the mechanism to open it up. “But what was that about these things sailing?”

There was that sly twinkle in her eyes again. “You will understand when the ceremony begins at twilight.”

I dropped my arms to my sides and sighed. “You can be devilishly cruel to me, you know that?”

Arian's face drooped and she furiously shook her head. "That is not what I intended-"

I clapped a hand on her shoulder and grinned. "It's alright. I was only teasing."

"Is that her? The new goddess?" The low, hushed voice caught my attention and I turned to a pair of women huddled close. They were both staring at me but at catching my attention they scurried away.

"Is something the matter?" Arian asked me.

I smiled and shook my head. "Nothing that a little window-shopping couldn't fix."

"A seed for the lovely ladies?"

Arian and I stopped and turned to find ourselves staring at a peddler who stood a few feet away in the middle of the fairway. He carried around an open shallow tray filled with strange seeds. His worn attire didn't lend itself to my opening my coin purse but there was something in his voice that made it difficult to ignore him. His stooping posture meant he was a half-head shorter than even Arian but that didn't stop his presence from overshadowing all the other vendors on either side of us.

"Pardon?" I asked him.

He stepped closer and his sharp black eyes darted between us. "Two young ladies without an escort to the fair? Can it be that your loves are far away?"

Two could play at this con game as I smiled at the man. "Our 'loves' haven't told us where they are yet but I'm sure we'll find them without resorting to a bean soup."

The man looked aghast and wrapped his arms around his box. "Soup! Who would throw away a chance at love for a full stomach?"

"Someone who is very hungry," I quipped as I grasped Arian's arm. "But if you'll excuse us."

“A moment more of your time!” he pleaded as he slipped around us with more agility than I would have given him credit.

His swift action meant he blocked our path. The man plucked a seed from one of the cushioned compartments and held it aloft in front of his face. The black seed was in the shape of a pinto bean and its glassy surface meant its flesh glistened in the many lantern lights that vied for our attention. The man turned it this way and that, allowing the light to shine off the smooth skin.

His voice was low and soft like one admiring a piece of jewelry. “A piece of perfection. Everything contained in a tiny cover of slim skin.”

My creep alarm bells were ringing off the hook. His soft tongue was having a completely different effect on Arian.

My friend leaned forward and squinted at the assortment. “I have never seen a fruit like this. What are they?”

“Seeds of sincerest passion, dearest lady,” the peddler explained as he patted the top of one of them. “You plant this seed in the garden of the one you love and it will bind him to your love forever.” He held the seed out to her with a toothy smile. “Would you like one?”

Arian’s eyes shimmered as she stretched out her hand. There was something in her expression that I didn’t like one bit, so I grabbed her wrist and drew her behind me. I stood as tall as I could manage before the sweet-tongued merchant and plastered a tense smile on my face. “Listen, you’re a great seller and all but we’re not buying anything right now. Maybe later, okay?”

“But I may be out later,” the man countered as he patted the side of the box. “There are but a few choice items here and temptation will drop a coin in my purse and carry them away.”

“Then we’ll be sure to listen to the coin count and come back when you’re almost out,” I quipped as I scooted around him, dragging my reluctant friend behind me.

I scooted us through the crowds and risked a look over my shoulder after a few steps. The man stood in the same spot staring at us with that dark look in his eyes. He wasn't so hunched nor so sweet-looking as before. The change in him made me shudder and I quickened our steps.

"Anna!" Arian pleaded as she stumbled along behind me. "Why are you hurrying so quickly?"

I slowed my step so she could move up to my side. The eerie aura around the man had left a suffocatingly creepy vibe over me and I spoke in a low whisper. "I wanted to get away from that guy as fast as possible."

She blinked at me. "But why? There was no harm in listening to him."

I looked her up and down. "I think he was about to get you to do more than that."

"But there is no harm in the wares anyone sells here," she assured me as she looked about the fairway. "They have all been vetted by Lady Shian and Lord Pampir."

I stared ahead and snorted. "That doesn't give me much comfort, and I still don't want you hanging around that guy, okay?" Arian bowed her head and bit her lower lip. My heart twinged with fear as I recalled the strange look in her eyes. "Arian, I really don't want to have to order you to do something, but I'm serious about this. I want you to stay away from him."

My friend nodded. "Very well. I will do as you say."

I squeezed her hand and grinned with more enthusiasm than I felt. The bad taste of the bean seller remained in my mouth. "Good. Now let's go see about those sucker sweets over there."

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

We scooted over to the stall where sugary decorations had been created on a stick. The merchant had used a syrupy sugar concoction to draw stick figures on the slim bits of wood. The sugary arts shimmered in the bright light and reflected my face as I bent down to study them.

"These are so neat," I complimented as I examined a variety of creatures. There were foxes, bears, eagles, and even a dog.

The merchant pushed out his ample chest and nodded. "Thank you, Your Ladyship! Your praise is a thousand times more sweet coming from someone so beautiful!"

I laughed and shook my head. "I don't think so but thanks for the compliment."

The man looked aghast at me. "Does Your Ladyship not own a mirror?" He stretched out his arms and looked about us at the other lords and ladies. "You are like the moon among stars."

The temperature went up in my cheeks and I waved away his sweet words. "Not so loud," I hissed.

He put his hands on his hips and shook his head. "I say only what I believe, Your Ladyship, and as proof of my words I give you this." He grasped one of his delights and held it out to me. "This is my most prized creation but I will give it to you for free."

The creation was a large twirling dragon with two pairs of wings on its back. The serpentine creature seemed to glide up the stick and had its mouth open in a great silent roar. I was captured by the still scene, but I shook my head and dug into my coin purse.

"I can't let you give that to me," I insisted as I pulled out a few coins.

The man grasped my empty hand and shoved the stick into it before he backed away. He crossed his arms over his chest and shook his head. "I will not accept it back nor will I accept your coins. That is my word and I will keep to it."

My shoulders fell as I found myself holding the bag. Er, dragon. "You have to let me give you something." I turned to my companion who smiled at our interaction. "You want one of them, right?"

Arian shook herself from her humor and nodded. "Very much so."

"Then I'll buy one for you," I insisted as I nodded at the assortment. "Take whichever one you want. Take the whole lot if that means I can pay him back."

The man chuckled. "You are very kind, Your Ladyship, but some of my sweets are very precious. I sold one only a moment ago for a single gold coin."

I looked down at the silver coins in my hand and bit my lip. "That's a lot, right?"

He curtly bowed his head. "Very much so."

Arian pointed at a bear with one claw outstretched as a warning. "I will take that one."

A knowing smile graced my lips as I paid the man the silver coin. "It suits you."

She blushed as she accepted the stick from the merchant. "I thought perhaps I might give it to Jin if we find him."

I stretched my neck and viewed the crowd, but a great many of the people were taller than me so I couldn't see very far. "I don't see him.

Would he be somewhere special?"

Arian scoured the stalls and nodded. "He may be at the-"

"I'll take on any comers! Anybody can try their hand at besting me!"

The crowing came from the center aisle between the middle two rows of stalls. That corridor was twice the width of the other two and featured games like ring tossing, mallet smashing, and other more physical contests. I wasn't surprised there wasn't a balloon-popping event but the games that were there were anything but ordinary. The ducks in the pond came alive when the thrower tossed the ring. Sometimes that was to the advantage of the tosser as the quackers crashed into each other to escape the ring. The mallet smashing allowed elemental magic, and a contestant stepped up to the plate as Arian and I scooted between two stalls.

The man was Kang and he had a broad grin on his face. The merchant pointed at a wheel behind him that featured pictures of the different elements. I noticed that fire wasn't present.

"Which one are ya?" the man asked him.

"Lightning," Kang replied.

The man scoffed. "You sure you want to do this one? You guys don't have much force in you."

Kang cracked his fingers together in front of him and focused his eyes on the button at the bottom of the tall tower. "Really? Then you have never seen me in action."

The vendor beckoned to him. "I'll see you in action after you've paid your fare."

Kang reached into his pocket and tossed a coin to the man. He stepped up to the push mechanism and rolled up his sleeves. The tamer flexed his arm muscles and a faint static charge emanated from his arms. The air came alive with his energy and the ends of my hair stood on end. The crowd laughed at each other as their hair and cotton clothing did the same.

Kang stretched one arm high into the air and a dark cloud gathered in the sunny sky above him. He gave a great cry and swung his hand downward. A huge bolt of lightning shot out of the cloud and slammed into the push button. The metallic bell was ringing before the wooden block on the tower shot up and crashed into it.

Everyone cheered and clapped. Kang turned in a slow circle and waved at the crowd. A great big grin stretched his face as the vendor lurked in the background with a dark shadow on his brow.

"Alright, alright! You've made your point!" the stall master snapped as he dug into his pocket and drew out some coins. "Here's your winnings!"

Kang took the coins and bowed his head. "Thank you, sir. I look forward to next year's bout."

"Not if I can help it. . ." I heard the man mutter.

Kang strolled a few steps before he noticed Arian and me. He puffed out his chest and sauntered over to us. "Good afternoon! Did you see my bout with the bell?"

I hid my bemused smile behind a more impassive expression and nodded. "It was really spectacular. Can every lightning user do that?"

He stretched himself a little higher and broader in the chest. "I and I only have the lightning hammer. Hardly anyone has survived its blow, much less a bell."

"Then I'm glad I got to see it," I commented as I looked about us at the various games.

"How are you enjoying the fair?" Kang wondered as he deflated his ego long enough to remember I wasn't from these parts. "Do you like it?"

I nodded. "Very much. I went to these in my old world but there wasn't any magic to make it as memorable."

He swept into a low bow. "Then I am glad to have shown you the wonder of our fair festival." He straightened and tossed the coins in the air

before catching them in one hand. “Now if you will excuse me, I have some meat to buy.” He bowed his head and strolled away.

I grinned and turned to my friend. “Now what’s next?”

Arian licked her sucker and smiled. “Whatever you wish. The coins Prince Yushir has given us are enough to buy almost anything in the fair.”

He mimicked Kang’s move by tossing the coin purse into the air and catching it. Well, sort of. I juggled it a few times before I got a good grip on it. “Well then, let’s see what we can buy.”

There was so much to see and do that the hours flew past without a moment’s thought to the time. The only thing that marred the wondrous event was the occasional judging pair of eyeballs on me as people recognized me as ‘that new goddess.’

I didn’t notice the thinning of the crowds until a family passed us. The young daughter clung to her dad’s hand and tugged on it. “Can’t we sit on the grass?”

He shook his head. “We have a blanket that will keep us clean from the night dew.”

I turned and watched them stroll through the stalls toward the pond. The grass in front of the pool was already crowded with picnickers, many who munched on food purchased from the stalls and chatted with their neighbors. A steady stream of people now made their way toward the grass and even some of the stalls shuttered shop to join them.

“So what exactly does happen during this twilight ceremony?” I inquired of my more knowledgeable friend as I turned to her.

“Oh my gosh!” Arian yelped as she grabbed my hand. “We must hurry before all the best spots are taken!”

Arian dragged me into the flow and we hurried toward the expansive lawn. The crowds whispered among themselves and many among them cast their eyes to the bright heavens.

“What’s going on?” I asked her as she found us an empty spot on the grass only thirty feet from the edge of the pond.

“His Highness is about to perform the spell of Twilight,” she told me as we took our seats. “We mustn’t miss it!”

CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

I LIFTED AN EYEBROW. "WHAT EXACTLY ARE WE GOING TO MISS?"

Nearly everyone in the park joined us on the grass but I noticed nobody dared sit past the halfway point of the pond. Families and lovers spread out blankets and took their seats, and many hurriedly opened their lanterns. There was soon a forest of paper decorations and a few of the children hopped up and down before their parents tugged them back to the blanket.

Prince Yushir strolled past us and gave me a wink. He took up a position at the edge of the pond and turned to the crowd. Any hint of noise was stifled and the people fell silent.

"A warm greeting to all of you and thank you for coming to this year's Twilight Fair," he spoke as he clasped his hands behind his back. "We hope you enjoyed the wonderful stalls and our lovely park. Now without further ado, I will open the Twilight Ceremony."

He turned away so his back faced us and swept an arm in front of him. A light blue aura surrounded him and dozens of thin tendrils of magic flowed from his person. The magic floated across the pool before it stopped in the center and began a slow, circular dance a few inches above the surface. The water in the pool rose, first in droplets and then in long threads. The threads stretched up in a gentle tornado and created a tower a hundred feet high and twenty feet wide.

Yushir lowered his hands so they were in front of him and he moved them in slow, gentle motions, flicking his wrist as he did so. The threads split and crashed into the droplets, creating a forest of glistening tears. The threads moved faster, colliding with the tears and creating thousands of smaller round balls of water.

That's when I saw it. The frenzy of water created a picture of the sky realm with its countless islands, palaces, and vegetation. Delicate trees stood beside imposing palace archways and bridges glistened as they crossed over the gap between islands. The threads of water created the rivers and the canals that meandered through the walkways.

I had forgotten he was a water user but even if I had remembered I would still be in awe of the wonders he created from the water. Everything glowed with the soft blue light of his element and shimmered against the sunlight overhead. The audience gasped and clapped, creating thunderous applause. The maestro finished his masterpiece and turned to the audience. He smiled and bowed to them.

I leaned toward Arian and lowered my voice to a whisper. "Is this easy to do?"

She shook her head. "Such precision is very difficult."

Yushir raised one hand and snapped his fingers. The whole beautiful picture collapsed into the pool and the crash was deafening. Water sprayed out across the pool and onto the banks where it sprinkled some of the closer spectators.

Yushir's voice cut through the applause. "I am glad you enjoyed the show. Now I will step aside and allow you to see the main event."

I lifted an eyebrow as the prince left the stage. He passed us again and his eyes twinkled with mischief.

I prodded my friend's arm with my finger and could feel the tense excitement in her muscles. "That wasn't the ceremony?"

She pressed a finger to her lips and pointed ahead of us. A hush fell over the crowd as a figure clothed in white materialized out of a wispy red fog on the far side of the pond. It was Lord Eastwei.

I sat up and watched as he took up a position ten feet from the pool. Confusion clouded my mind as I recalled Arian telling me that he used the fire element.

He spread his arms wide and a giant red glow surrounded his body. I recognized the familiar sparkles that had surrounded me when he saved me from the fall into the canal. Those same glints like embers multiplied around him until I could hardly see his person.

And that's when they appeared. A huge pair of bright leathery wings burst from his back stretched out on either side of him. The glow was so bright that the light stretched across the pond and illuminated the crowd. A faint gasp arose from the crowd and myself.

I whipped my head about to face my companion. "Is. . .is he some kind of shifter?"

Arian blinked at me. "Do you not know? His Highness is able to transform into a dragon."

I choked on my spittle. "He can do *what?*"

"He can transform into a large dragon," she repeated as she stared in wonder at me. "Has no one told you?"

I shook my head. "I-I just thought he was, well, that he was just-" I threw up my arms. "I guess I never really thought about him being anything other than what he looked like. And that kid. I knew he could change into that, but I would never have guessed he was a dragon."

"The child form is merely his younger self," Arian explained.

"So can a lot of immortals transform into their younger selves?" I asked her.

She shook her head. "Only Lord Eastwei and a few others have that gift."

Eastwei's magic was so bright around him that he appeared to be a small sun. He focused all of that energy close to his body and flung up his arms. The embers flew high into the air in a tight column, piercing the sky like the blade of a sword. The crowd tilted their heads back to watch the glints leave beautiful glistening trails until they reached high above us where they exploded. The loud noise made me start back, but it wasn't only the noise that surprised me.

The embers spread across the sky in parting waves, and as they did so they peeled back the bright sun and revealed a starry night. My eyes widened and I sat up on my legs to watch the wondrous night fall over everything. More than one child squealed and many others gaped as I did at the darkness above our heads. A crescent moon shone in all its wonder and its soft light caressed the watchers.

The appearance of night wasn't the only wonder. The bursting embers created pictures in the sky like one could do with fireworks. Eagles and bears and countless other images appeared above us, twinkling like constellations before they descended into glittering trails before they vanished completely. He threw up more ember dust and more of the 'fireworks' exploded, crafting more pictures more beautiful than I could have imagined.

I gazed up at the fireworks in awe and wonder. They filled the dark sky with all imaginable colors and designs. Flowers bloomed and dragons slithered across the blackness, leaving behind a trail of glitter that cast a curtain beneath them.

One of the brilliant lights caught my attention. The fireworks had exploded in the very center of the bright colors and the white lights formed themselves into a familiar figure with pointed ears and a long slender tail.

I leaned toward my companion and nodded up at the bewhiskered face. "Is that a small cat?"

Arian looked at where I indicated and nodded. “Oh, yes. His Highness uses that one every year, or at least for the two years I have seen.”

I lifted an eyebrow. “Why does he show a cat?”

She shook her head. “Nobody knows, though I am sure some have asked. I did hear Lady Shian ask Prince Yushir last year if he had convinced Lord Eastwei to tell him but the prince could not get an answer out of him.”

That’s when I noticed something else happen. The embers fell from as small flakes and they vanished the moment they touched the ground. However, many people held out their hands and the embers landed in their palms but didn’t disappear. The catchers had opened their lanterns and now placed the ember inside the paper towers. The embers filled the lanterns with a soft glow, but it was much more than that. The people lifted the lanterns and the paper lamps floated up into the sky, stopping at the same level as the fireworks.

Eastwei crafted a huge slender dragon with two pairs of wings and a long snout with slender horns drawn backward toward its serpentine back. The fire-breathing serpent meandered through the floating lanterns and the glow from its scales rubbed off onto the paper light. They glowed brighter, creating tiny red stars in the sky.

“Hurry before they finish,” Arian advised me as she opened her lantern.

I did the same and we both held out our hands. Embers floated into our palms and I giggled at the gentle heat that emanated from the flakes. We placed the embers in our lanterns and lifted them above us. They floated upward and joined the forest of glowing paper.

It was a wondrous sight to behold, and I was sad when the lights began to fade. Eastwei lowered his arms and tucked his hands into his sleeves. The fireworks stopped and the dragon let loose a roar before it faded. The show was over.

And an unscheduled one was just about to begin.

CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

My heart sank with the last lingering bits of embers. "It's done?"

Arian sighed and nodded. "I am afraid so. Lord Eastwei expends only so much energy for the event, and I have heard tell it takes quite a bit of strength to part the heavens to reveal the night sky."

I studied the shimmering 'stars' created by all the lanterns. "What about the lanterns?"

"Lord Eastwei will keep the lanterns aloft until daybreak when he revokes his magic and they fall to the grass," Arian told me as she sat back down on the grass. "Anyone may fetch theirs for next year, but most allow the vendors to pick them up and restore them to sell again."

"Lady Anna! Lady Anna!"

The shout came from our right where little Lia scurried across grass and blankets to get to us. She was nearly out of breath when she crashed into my lap. I caught her by the arms and smiled down at her as Kean raced up behind her.

"What's wrong? Why are you here and not with your parents?" I asked my young friend as I looked up at Kean.

He set his hands on his bent knees and gasped for breath. "Do not. . .run off like that. . .again!" he scolded her.

Lia shoved her deflated balloon in my face. “But it’s broken! Can you make my lantern fly like the others?”

“Can I-oh.” Realization set in and I plopped my butt on the grass so I was more at level with her. “I’m sorry, sweetie, but your lantern can’t fly without some help.”

She pointed at the other lanterns. “Like that?”

I looked up at the dozens of floating paper lamps and furrowed my brow. “I suppose stuffing one of those flames would work but it wouldn’t be easy to get it into the balloon. You’d really know how to work that fire in there.”

Lia sniffled. “Daddy said he couldn’t figure out how to get it in there, either.”

I grasped her arms and offered her a smile. “Well, why don’t we try to put one of those flames into the lantern, okay?”

Lia’s eyes lit up and she bobbed her head. “Yeah!”

“I fear that will no longer work,” Lia spoke up.

Her eyes were fixed on the starry sky. We followed her gaze upward and my heart sank. The last of the fiery crisps fell to the ground and vanished. The lord himself had left his spot and strolled around the bank of the pool toward the crowd.

“Damn it,” I muttered to myself as I heard another sniffle from my little friend. I smiled down at her. “We’ll figure something out. Maybe somebody has a spare fire around here somewhere. Why don’t we-”

Lia perked up and her eyes widened. She climbed to her feet and shot off down the slope of the park toward the pool.

“Lia!” Kean shouted as he chased after her. “Where are you going now?”

I followed Lia’s trajectory and my heart dropped into my stomach. She was headed straight for Lord Eastwei.

I scrambled to my feet. “We have to stop her!”

Arian followed my lead and we raced after the children. Their legs were shorter but they had a headstart. Lia neared the edge of the pool and turned left toward the tall, handsome figure who strolled along the grassy bank. The little girl ran in front of him and Lord Eastwei was forced to stop.

Lia shoved the balloon up at him and her large pleading eyes stared up into his. “Please make my lantern fly!”

There was such a look of confusion on his face that I had to stifle a laugh. Arian had a look of horror on her face as did the young Kean who reached his little friend a second after her request.

He grabbed her shoulders and bowed his head to the lord. “I-I’m sorry, Lord Eastwei! Please forgive her! She doesn’t know what she’s doing!”

“Nor do I,” Eastwei commented as Arian and I joined the party.

I was a little winded by the excursion but I managed to bow my head. “It’s my fault, My Lord. I gave Lia the balloon and told her fire could make it fly like the other lanterns.”

“Did you?” he mused as he returned his gaze to the little girl. “And you thought I could use my magic to make this thing of yours fly?”

Lia bowed her head and bit her lower lip. She clutched the flat balloon against her chest and nodded. “Yeah. . .”

Eastwei held out his hand to her. “Let me see this ‘balloon.’”

Lia’s head popped up and a smile brightened her face. “Will you make it fly?” she asked him as she eagerly handed it to him.

Eastwei studied the balloon with an impassive expression but the corners of his lips turned down. “We shall see.”

I pointed at the slender part. “The stem can open and you breathe into it.”

The lord pulled at the mouth and it opened slightly before he released it, snapping it back into place. “I see.” He flicked his wrist and held up his palm. Strands of fiery light floated out of his hand and formed themselves into a creature I was familiar with.

It was a tiny salamander.

The ‘animal,’ if you could call a creature made out of shimmering flame such a thing, lifted its slender head and looked around. Its small flat tongue flicked out and tasted the air, and its slender tail flipped to and fro.

Lia let out a gasp and stepped closer. “It is so very pretty.”

“And useful,” Eastwei replied.

He set the mouth of the balloon close to his palm and the creature scampered over to it. Its tongue flicked out and tasted the balloon before it wriggled itself inside. The fire creature’s outline could be seen through the slim skin of the balloon, especially when it lifted its head. The balloon wall stretched and clung to its head, creating a perfect copy of it.

Lia laughed and I couldn’t help but smile at the silly creature. The salamander ducked out and stood still. The faint glow from its body grew brighter and the balloon began to expand. Eastwei lifted his hand and set the balloon adrift above us. The heat from his magical creature lifted the toy into the air where it joined the rest of the lanterns, though the silhouette of the salamander made it stick out from even the most impressive of paper beacons.

Lia hopped up and down and clapped her hands. “It is so pretty! Thank you so very much!”

Kean grabbed her hand and tugged on it. “Come on. I need to get you back to your parents before they worry.” He bowed his head to Eastwei. “Thank you for your help, Lord Eastwei.” The lord inclined his head and the children scampered off up the hill.

“I want to thank you, too,” I spoke up, which caused the lord to turn and face me. I blushed under his unnervingly intense gaze. “Lia came up to you without thinking but you still helped her. That was very kind of you.”

He studied me with that impassive expression before he slightly inclined his head. “No need for thanks. “I was glad to assist you.” He turned and strolled past us.

I breathed out the air I didn't realize I'd been holding in. Arian scooted close to me and lowered her voice. "I had no idea Lord Eastwei liked children!"

I could barely hear what she said. Eastwei's words still rang in my head as I tried to understand their meaning. He hadn't said he liked helping Lia. He said he was glad to assist *me*. Little old freshly-made goddess me.

Arian set a hand on my arm. "Anna? Are you feeling well?"

I finally shook off my thoughts and smiled at her. "Y-yeah, I'm fine. I was just thinking I wanted to take another spin around the stalls and then go home."

My friend pursed her lips as she examined me. "Then let us hurry through them and return home."

Arian handled me like I was a box of expensive China. We walked up the hill through the vendors but my attention couldn't be bought by the shiny bling and baubles. Our tour lasted only a half hour and then we took our first step onto the dark street. Everything was new again as we strolled down the shadowed walkways. The lanterns hung earlier now showed off their brilliant light. They cast their soft glow over everything and created a magical realm of gentle shadows.

I felt a little bad when I recalled my cute little balloons. They were decorations made for the light and now they'd be overshadowed by the lit lanterns.

"Are you sure you are well?" Arian spoke up.

I turned my head to my friend and found her staring incessantly at me. She searched my face for some hope of a positive answer.

I sighed and my shoulders sagged a little. I lifted my eyes to the starry sky and that beautiful crescent moon. "I was just thinking nobody would be able to enjoy our balloons in this light."

"I am sure they will be able to see them enough to admire them," Arian insisted.

I laughed and clapped my hand on her shoulder. “Thanks for the pep talk. I guess we’ll see what the crowds think.”

We ventured down the majestic walkways and soon arrived on our street. A large group of people gathered about one of the arches.

Arian gasped. “Anna, those people are gathered about our home!”

Arian’s eyes hadn’t failed her. The people were indeed crowded about the entrance to our home. Many ventured in but few ventured out, and we arrived at the tight rear. A blade of grass couldn’t have wedged itself into that crowd.

“Excuse me?” I shouted above the murmur. “Could we get through?”

The onlookers noticed us and realization dawned on their faces.

“The owners are here!”

“Let the owners through!”

The crowd parted enough to allow us through and we squeezed through the arch to find the walkway up to the house was equally packed. The visitors were polite enough to stay off the grass except for a few little scamps, and they formed a packed line up to the house. Their gazes were fixed on the balloons.

The *lit* balloons.

My mouth fell open when I beheld the illuminated bladders. A faint reddish light scurried about inside every one of them. The glows were all shaped into different animals. There was a cat, a bear, even a fish.

And there was a salamander.

Arian gasped and wrapped her arms around one of mine. She tugged hard and caught my eyes with her gleaming ones. “This is wonderful! Our lanterns are the most beautiful in the whole of the city!”

I swallowed the lump in my throat and nodded. “Yeah. It does look that way.”

The people thought the same as they oohed and aahed at the silly little animals. The slow line moved down the cord of balloons and flowed back

out, and more than one person smiled and bowed their head to me.

“Your lanterns are so original!”

“You must do this again next year!”

One of the older women stopped and grasped my arm in her wizened hand. Her face was open and friendly and she offered me a gentle though curious smile. “However did you do it?”

I shook my head. “W-we just set them up and hoped they would make people smile.”

“You must be congratulated on a fine showing. And your first year here, too.”

“Yeah. . .”

She moved off, leaving me to my stupor. However, I wasn’t so far gone that I didn’t know I had one god to thank for it all

CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

"I WAS GLAD TO ASSIST YOU."

Those words echoed in the mind of not only Anna but Lady Shian. She stood stock-still amid the crowd of fireworks onlookers, a statue among the greenery. Her eyes were fixed on the small group of people near the edge of the pond. One of them was Lord Eastwei, and the other two were those hateful people from Fanshe Hall.

Shian clutched her hand over her heart and unbidden tears swelled up in her eyes. Lord Eastwei's reply had seared itself into her memory and she couldn't stop it from playing over and over again in her mind. Dadan had never favored her like that before. How could this new goddess earn his gentle words? She had only been among them a few months. What right did she have to his attentions?

Damn her she hissed as she stomped down the sidewalk. She hardly noticed the compliments from sightseers who admired the lights.

"You have done a wonderful job, Lady Shian!"

"I look forward to seeing your plans for the next fair, Lady Shian!"

"My gate has never worked so well, Lady Shian! Thank you for having those men come and repair it!"

Shian smiled and bowed to each of the compliments but her shattered heart wasn't into it. She didn't even realize where she was until someone

grabbed her arm.

“There you are!” Lady Bidao scolded her. It was she who had latched onto her friend’s arm. She leaned down and examined Shian’s face with a wrinkled brow. “What is the matter? You look as if you have lost all purpose in life.”

Shian sniffled. “I. . .I believe that is just what has happened.”

Lady Bidao pursed her lips and looked about them. “Hold your words until I get you somewhere less crowded.”

She scooted her friend through the crowds and onto one of the smaller islands. The earthen plot was just a wilderness of trees and grass. A gazebo had been constructed to give visitors a place to rest. Bidao guided Shian under its refreshing shade and seated them on one of the benches connected to the walls.

Bidao grasped one of her friend’s hands in hers and looked Shian in the eyes. “Now then, tell me what has happened.”

Shian closed her eyes and took a deep breath. “You watched the scene at the pool? Where that brat spoke with Lord Easwei?”

Bidao nodded. “I did, but what of it? And what exactly happened there?”

She hung her head and her thumb brushed against Bidao’s hand. “I cannot say completely, but when he had finished lending his magic to the girl Lord Eastwei, he. . .he. . .” She sniffled. “He said he was glad to assist that woman in helping the girl.”

Bidao leaned back and lifted an eyebrow. “Is that all?”

Shian whipped her head up and glared at her friend. An icy tinge of blue light flashed across her eyes. “Is that all? He has never given me such a favor! I who have known him for thousands of years!”

Her friend pursed her lips and turned her face to one side. “I see. Did he say anything else? And how did the woman reply?”

Shian dropped her gaze to the bench and shook her head. “I cannot say. I was in such a state that I knew little of what happened around me. I do know that Eastwei left her shortly after speaking.”

Soft hurried footsteps caught their attention and a goddess hurried across the bridge. It was the bulky Miss Fann and her swift movements were hampered by her hoarse wheezing. She reached the short steps of the gazebo and grasped one of the uprights.

Bidao stood and frowned at her. “What in the world are you doing?”

“I. . .I have found you at last,” Fann wheezed as she gulped down enough air to fill fifty balloons. “Have. . .have you ventured to look at the lights Lady Roberts set up in Fanshe Hall? There is such a sight as you would not believe!”

Shian’s heart skipped a beat and she stood. “Show us.”

Fann led the group at a much slower pace back to the white streets and to Fanshe Hall. The thickest of the crowds had left but three dozen people still lingered. They noticed Lady Shian approaching and bowed low to her.

“Have you come to see the wondrous lanterns as well, Lady Shian?” one in the crowd asked her.

She plastered a tense smile on her face. “Of course. I have heard they are most unusual.”

“Most unusual and most wondrous!” another chimed in.

“Then how could I not come?” Shian replied as she sped past them before another could compliment her rival.

The trio strolled through the arch and beheld the dancing silhouettes inside the balloons. Shian stopped ten feet from the string and watched the animals hope, slither, and tumble about. Her sharp, dark eyes examined each one in turn until they fell on the salamander. She couldn’t fail to recognize the same creature that Eastwei had crafted for the brat.

“I wonder how she was able to create such magic,” Fann spoke up as she more closely examined the balloons. “If I had to guess I would say it

was fire magic, but that is impossible."

Bidao cast a worried glance at her old friend. Shian stood as stiff as a statue and her smile was frozen in place. "Perhaps she conjured up something from her old world and placed them inside these strange containers."

"Good evening." The greeting came from the house and Anna made her appearance with Arian close behind her. Their hostess stopped and bowed low to her guests. "

"Ah, there you are!" Fann replied as she scurried up to Anna and grasped her hands. She pulled the hapless hostess back to the walk and pointed at the balloons. "However did you make them glow like that?"

Anna managed a shaky smile and stared at the ground. "I, um, that is, I. . .I made them."

Fann nodded her head. "Brilliant! You must show me how to make them for next year!"

Shian was anything but congratulatory to her hostess. A dark, icy look had slipped into her eyes as Fann fawned all over the beautiful lights.

This fresh evidence settled her decision. Shian lifted her chin and stiffened her jaw.

Anna Roberts had to go.

CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN

"I was very surprised to see Lady Shian and Lady Bidao come to see our lights," Arian mused as she swept the walkway of the countless dirty footprints and streamers.

I sighed and pushed my broom along the stones along with her. "So was I."

"Do you believe she may have come to see if she may copy your design for the next fair?" Arian wondered.

I stopped and leaned my body against the handle. A faraway expression slipped onto my face as I recalled the last look Shian had given me. There had been a darkness in her eyes that had frightened me a little. "I wonder what that look was for."

Arian ceased her sweeping and looked up at me with a raised eyebrow. "What look?"

I laughed and shook my head as I resumed my cleaning. "It's nothing. It was probably just my imagination."

How wrong I was.

However, the moment was soon forgotten as life slipped back into its tranquil pace. And back to my lessons.

Prince Yushir stood over me from where I sat atop the grassy knoll. His arms were folded over his chest and he tapped a finger against one of his

limbs. “I cannot understand it.”

My arms were raised in front of me and had been for quite some time. They started to tremble a little from the effort. “Maybe I don’t have an element?”

He shook his head. “You must surely have an element, otherwise you would not be able to conjure the magic necessary to create your wondrous things.” The prince paced the ground in front of me tapping away at his arm. He lifted his eyes to the bright sunny sky and furrowed his brow. “There must be some way to bring out your gift.” He paused and stopped his tapping. A dangerous glint slipped into his eyes and he cast a sidelong look at me. “Perhaps a more forceful approach is necessary.”

My face drooped and my eyes widened. “Um, no?”

“Have you ever been in mortal danger, Lady Roberts?”

“Oh no!” I protested as I scampered to my feet. “I’m not going through that again! You almost gave me a heart attack with that beast test!”

Disappointment showed on the prince’s face. “But it may be the only way to summon your magic.”

My shoulders sagged and I turned my face to one side. “Maybe I’m just not meant to do anything other than make cookies and balloons, or anything else the children might want. Maybe that’s why I was put here.”

The prince tucked his hands into his sleeves and a faint smile ghosted across his lips. “Perhaps it is, Lady Roberts. I know of people who have worse roles in life and many who were even less pleased with the element granted them by fate.”

I cast a suspicious look at him. “Then you won’t be leading me into mortal danger?”

He chuckled and shook his head. “Not at the present. I need to go attend to some duties. We will see each other tomorrow and discuss where we will go from here.” He bowed his head and left me alone with my thoughts.

I folded my arms over my chest and sighed. Cooking for kids and entertaining others was great, but somewhere deep in my heart, I knew I was supposed to be doing something more. There was a reason I was here, I just knew it.

"Anna?"

I started and whipped around to discover Jin on my doorstep. He sauntered over to me with a big grin on his face.

"Hello, Jin! I didn't know you were still around."

"We had to break down the stalls and store the wood away for the next one, but I'm supposed to leave tomorrow," he told me. The young lad leaned to one side and cast a hopeful look at the house. "Is Arian here?"

A sly smile curled onto my lips as I raised my voice. "Arian! Someone's here to see you!"

Arian popped her head out of the house. She grasped a damp sponge in her hand and her eyes widened at her friend. "Jin!" She hurried over to us and looked him over. "Why are you still here?"

Jin laughed. "Is no one happy to see that I am still here?"

She set a hand atop his and squeezed it. "Of course I am, but what are you still doing in the heavenly realm?"

"I missed you at the fair so I wanted to visit with you for a while before I left tomorrow," he informed her.

Arian bit her lower lip. "I am not so sure-"

I noticed she twisted the sponge in her hands. "You really should go," I insisted.

"You. . .it will not be any trouble?" she asked me.

I grinned. "I think I can manage on my own for a day. You go off and have some fun."

"I suppose. . ." Arian murmured.

"Then it is settled!" Jin chimed in as his twinkling eyes and crooked grin ensured I knew Arian would have a good time. "So let us go

immediately!”

I took Arian’s sponge from her and the last excuse fell away. Jin snatched her hand and pulled her toward the gate.

“See you later!” I shouted as they disappeared through the arch.

I tossed the sponge in the air and caught its squishy body in one hand. Cold water dribbled out and down my arm. I yelped and flung my arm about to drain the river.

Yeah, Anna, just fine on your own.

I rolled my eyes upward and glared at the sky. “Quiet, you. I have some cleaning up to do.”

“To whom are you speaking?”

The voice wasn’t my inner thoughts and the suddenness made me jump out of my skin. I landed on shaky legs and spun around toward the arch, half expecting to find my disobedient servant after abandoning her friend.

No such luck. Who I discovered was Lady Shian and her friend whose name I had forgotten.

Lady Shian strolled toward me with a smile on her lips, but there was a coldness in the welcome that almost made me shiver. “Good morning, Lady Roberts. I have come here today to apologize for not admiring your strange decorations with as much joy as I felt.”

Yeah, joy. That’s the word for it.

I tamped down my sarcastic inner self and returned her smile with what I hoped was a warmer one. “There’s no need to do that. I’m sure you were just tired from handling everything.”

“Of course.” I had to resist the urge to step away from this woman. Some dangerous current ran under every word she said. “But I still desire to give a proper apology and I believe I have just the thing.”

I lifted an eyebrow. “You really don’t have to do anything.” *Please don’t.*

Shian looped an arm around mine and pulled me toward the arch. “Nonsense. It is the least I can do after that wonderful display you created. Many of the lords and ladies can talk of nothing else.”

Flattery wasn’t exactly getting her into my good graces but surprise could work the same way. “They said that?”

She nodded as she guided me out onto the walk. “Oh yes. Some have even asked that their palaces be decorated as yours was for next year’s fair.”

“I really don’t think you need to do anything for me,” I insisted as I squirmed in her hold.

She tightened her grip on me and I felt her nails dig into my arms. “Nonsense. This is about more than *my* honor. My family prides itself on being gracious, as is required of those who manage the palaces.” She leaned in close and lowered her voice. “And I would loathe to have my family dishonored due to my lapse.”

A sharp warning lurked in every syllable. I shrank down but she kept a tight grip on me.

She laughed but there was no mirth in the sound. It rang as tinny as an empty tin cup. “You mustn’t look so frightened. You are a guest of His Majesty, after all. No one will come to you in his realm.”

I almost believed her, but perhaps it was more hope than reality. “Y-yeah, I guess I am. . .”

We crossed over a large bridge and onto an island that didn’t hold any palaces. The only structure was a huge gate that stretched from one side of the small island to the other. Two guards with spears stood at attention on either side and I noticed a lone figure beyond the gate. It was Bidao and she looked even more nervous than I felt.

Her breeding and habits forced her to stand straight and bow her head to me. “Good morning, Lady Roberts. I hope you slept well.”

We passed through the gate and I glanced at the guards with a tinge of hope. He continued to stare ahead without even the slightest hint that he

saw me.

“Where exactly are we going?” I asked my guide as we joined the nervous Bidao.

“You have yet to venture out of the heaven realm, have you not?” Shian inquired.

Icy fear wrapped around my heart “Y-yeah, but I really should get back-”

“Nonsense,” Shian insisted as she tightened her grip on my arm. “I have been such a poor friend to you that I wish to show you the beauty of your former home. You did live in the land of the mortals, did you not?”

She guided me toward the bright abyss of the edge of the island. My heart pounded in my chest as the precipice loomed.

“I think I’ll stay here!” I insisted as I dug my heels into the ground.

Shian laughed. “You are so good at jokes! Now I will show you what you have been requesting of me for quite some time.”

I didn’t get a chance to ask her what the hell she was talking about before a dazzle of icy-cold glitter flakes surrounded us. I was reminded of when Eastwei made his appearance at the pool, only this time I was seeing it from the inside rather than out.

We continued walking forward and the dazzling lights lifted to reveal a huge area of solid earth and water. A dirt path led from where we stood and over a bridge that crossed a wide river.

“Is this not beautiful?” Shian commented as she guided me down the road.

I twisted my head around and noticed a portal at our backs. The soft glow around its arches vanished, as did the magic vortex in the middle. My way back was gone.

My guide never stopped her incessant and banal chatter. “Let me show you this wondrous river.”

We walked up the gentle slope of the curved bridge and stopped at the top. I was loath to approach the sides but Shian didn't give me any choice. She practically shoved me against the downstream railing and I felt it groan beneath my weight.

Shian finally released me and stepped back. I spun around to face my two adversaries.

A cruel smile curled onto Shian's lips. "Now you will bother me no longer. Lady Bidao, if you would do the pleasure."

Bidao shoved both hands out toward me. A powerful wind swept out of her body and slammed into my stomach. The air was knocked out of my lungs and I was sent flying into the water. I crashed into the cold current and water shoved itself into my gaping mouth.

I bobbed to the surface and gasped for air. My arms flailed about me as my legs flailed beneath me.

I swallowed another mouthful of river water as the wild current turned me to face the bridge. "I can't swim!"

CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT

Anna flailed about in the waters as the two on the bridge watched her desperate struggles. Bidao gripped the railing and watched in horror as their victim sank into the dark depths.

"Pull her out, Shian!" Bidao shouted as she whipped her head around to her friend. Shian impassively stood there staring into the dark depths of the swift river. Bidao grabbed her friend's arm and shook it. "I cannot pull her out without risking bashing her to death upon the lifted waters, so you must pull her out now! Shian! Now!"

Shian shook herself from her dark thoughts and lifted one hand. A soft icy glow emanated from her hand and a frozen droplet formed in her palm. She swept her arm outward and the droplet shot into the water like a spear. The magic sparkled in the depths some hundred feet downstream from the bridge and the ice popped onto the surface. The droplet had formed itself into a platform large enough to hold a person.

That person was Anna. She lay sprawled face-down out on the ice formation, her face as white as a sheet and her person soaked to the bone. The young goddess didn't move except for the faintest of motions in her breast.

Bidao clutched her chest and sighed. "Thank goodness."

"Sweep her away."

The cold voice jolted Bidao out of her exhausted jubilation. She looked up to find Shian staring at Anna with hard eyes.

“What was that?” Bidao asked her friend.

Shian nodded at Anna. “Sweep her ‘boat’ away. I want to ensure she never troubles us again.”

Bidao pressed her hands against her chest as a horrible sinking feeling touched her conscience. She forced her eyes back on the frail young woman who drifted away from them.

“Did you hear me?” Shian snapped.

Bidao sighed and stretched out one of her hands. A faint green light emanated from her palm and a gust of wind flew out. The breeze dove off the bridge and skipped across the river to Anna’s little ice sheet. Her magic pushed against the icy platform, shoving it faster down the river. The woman and her boat soon disappeared from view.

Shian turned away from her friend and toward the gate. “We shall never speak of this. Do you understand?” Bidao bit her lower lip and couldn’t help but cast a furtive glance at the river. Shian spun around and lifted her chin. Magic flowed out of her bright blue eyes. “Why do you not answer me?”

“Do you. . .were we not too harsh on her?” Bidao squeaked.

Shian’s lip curled up in a sneer. “She did not belong among us. The land realms are where she belongs or even better the mortal realm.” She waved her hand and the gate ahead of them activated. “Now let us forget that she ever existed.”

Bidao scooted in front of her friend and blocked Shian’s path. “But what will we tell the guards?”

Shian scowled at her. “I already told you we will inform them that the woman escaped us and passed into the immortal realms, no doubt to cause mischief.”

“And if she returns?” Bidao persisted.

Her companion rolled her eyes. “Who would everyone believe? The woman who has only been with us for a few months or we who have lived among them all our lives?”

Bidao turned her face away and nodded. “Very well.”

“Good. Now let us home to our soft beds and a clear conscience.”

Shian lifted her chin and sauntered toward the gate. Bidao followed behind with less pride than her friend. A nagging voice at the back of her mind warned her that she wouldn’t soon forget this day.



“Your new mistress looks a lot nicer than your old one,” Jin commented.

The pair strolled down the walkway with the sun shining overhead. A few other couples wandered past, their whispered words like the cooing of doves.

A big smile brightened Arian’s face as she nodded. “She is. I have never been happier here than I am now.”

Jin stretched his arms behind his head and cast a sidelong glance at her. “So I suppose that means you won’t be coming home anytime soon?”

Arian felt a twinge of regret in her heart for being the cause of his forlorn expression. “I’m sorry, but no. I wish to remain here for a while longer. However, she has shown interest in visiting our home with me. I may see you then.”

“In case that doesn’t happen, I’d better give this to you now,” he mused as he dug into his pocket. He drew out a small stiff case and held it out to her. “For all the birthdays of yours I’ve been missing these last two years.”

Arian’s face was a picture of confusion as she accepted the package. She opened the lid and revealed a small ring with a diamond-shaped amber jewel set in its little pocket. “This. . .this is for me?”

He grinned and nodded. “Who else would I give a ring to?”

Arian pinched the ring between two fingers and lifted it out to study the glistening orangish-red jewel. “It is so beautiful. How did you manage to afford it?”

His grin took on a sheepish accent and he rubbed the back of his head, ruffling his hair. “To speak the truth, I hadn’t intended to see you before I returned home but one of the goddesses from here gave me the money to buy this from the merchant as they were closing up shop last night.”

Arian lifted an eyebrow. “Why did she do that?”

He shook his head. “I’m not really sure myself. She only said that I must have wanted it for a sweetheart and such a good intention deserved a reward. The only condition was I had to give it to you before I left so I swore an oath to see you today to give you it.”

Arian’s heart fluttered but not from flattery. A dark inkling rose at the back of her mind. “What did she look like?”

Jin lifted his gaze in contemplation and wrinkled his brow. “I guess she was a generation above ours and with long brown hair.” His eyes widened and he snapped his fingers. “And she was a wind user! I remember because a breeze blew past us and her hair didn’t move a bit, and that told me she knew how to control it!”

Arian stiffened and her wide unfocused eyes stared ahead.

Jin stopped and turned to face her. He grasped her arms and examined her terrified expression. “Arian, what’s the matter? Are you alright?”

She lifted her dread-filled eyes to him and the depths of her fear froze even his seasoned veins. Her voice came out in a hush. “We must return.”

He leaned back and blinked at her. “Return? To the palace? Why?”

Arian grabbed his hand and spun around. She broke into a sprint and yanked him down the walk. “There is no time to explain!”

Jin stumbled behind her and they returned to Fanshe Hall in a short time. Arian released him and raced down the walk to the house.

“Anna! Anna!”

Arian darted room to room searching each one for her friend. Jin joined in the treasure hunt but it only took them a few moments to realize their prize wasn't there.

Arian stumbled out of the last room, her own bedroom, and tears welled up in her eyes. "Where can she be?"

Jin grasped her arms and squeezed them. "There's no need to cry. Maybe she just stepped out for a moment."

Arian bit her lower lip and a loose tear fell down her cheek. "I just know something terrible has happened to her."

Her old friend pursed his lips and he draped a strong arm over her shoulders. "Well, why don't we start asking around then? Somebody is bound to have seen her."

Arian sniffled and nodded. "You are quite right. Perhaps I am overreacting."

He comforted her with a smile as he led her to the arch and out onto the walk. "And we'll have a good laugh about it later-"

"Is there a problem?"

The voice stopped them in their tracks and came from their left. Arian's heart skipped a beat when she saw it was Lord Eastwei who had asked the question.

"I-I am not sure," Arian replied, and she looked to her friend for help.

"Lady Arian's mistress has gone off without telling her where and we're a little worried about her," Jin explained.

Eastwei's perfect eyebrows knitted together. "When did she leave?"

"Within the last half hour," Jin replied as he looked down at his companion. "We weren't gone any longer than that."

Arian slipped out from Jin's gentle hold and stepped close to the impressive lord. "Could you. . .is there any way you could help us find her, Lord Eastwei?"

Eastwei's reply was to sweep his arm toward the ground and his fiery flakes floated onto the earth. They illuminated a set of footprints that led all around the walk and even onto the grassy knoll, but the brightest set left through the arch and turned right.

Eastwei strode forward with only a few curt words to the others. "Come with me."

CHAPTER FORTY-NINE

The trio set off after the illuminated footsteps and they were led toward the large bridge Anna had crossed earlier.

"These footsteps lead to the main gate," Jin spoke up.

Eastwei quickened his steps and they arrived at the impressive structure. The two guards stood at the ready and Eastwei stopped in the middle of them.

"Have either of you seen Lady Roberts?" he questioned them.

One of the men nodded. "We did, sir. She passed through here with Lady Shian and Lady Bidao only a few minutes ago."

Speak of the devil and they will come. Two figures materialized on the other side of the gate close to the edge of the island. They were Bidao and Shian, and one look at the worried company made Bidao blanch.

Arian pushed through the other men and moved to the forefront of their group. "Where is Anna?"

Shian lifted a delicate eyebrow. "Anna?"

"Lady Roberts!" Arian's voice was in a higher pitch and she wrung her hands together in front of her. "She is supposed to be with you! The guards told us you had left with her!"

The imperious lady of the palaces closed her eyes and shook her head. "Then I fear I bring bad tidings for you. Lady Roberts has escaped."

“Escaped?” Jin repeated as he stepped up to Arian’s side. “Was she a prisoner?”

“She was a guest of His Highness but she did not have his permission to leave,” Shian answered him.

Jin’s thoughts were troubled by her words. “Then why did you go with her to the land realms?”

Shian drew her hands into her sleeves and paced the ground in front of them. “I fear we are the victims of her lies. She told us she was allowed to go to the land realm and only needed help to walk through the portal.” She stopped and abruptly turned to the group, her eyes ablaze with fury and disgust. “She lied to us but we did not learn of her treachery until she vanished over the bridge. By that time we could not stop her and the last we saw she was headed south.”

Arian’s eyes widened and a hand flew to her mouth. “It. . .she would not-” Visions of Anna leaving her danced in her head. She shut her eyes and shook her head. “This cannot be! She would not leave so suddenly without a good reason!”

Shian turned her nose up and scoffed. “She needed no other reason than to appease her selfish desire to leave this paradise and return to her mortal people.”

Jin pursed his lips as he grasped Arian’s upper arms. “We must try to find her and hear her explanation for these events.”

Eastwei raised one hand and a faint reddish hue emanated from his palm. “I need only my magic to find her.”

A brief look of panic flashed across Shian’s eyes but she kept her composure. “That will be impossible, will it not, Lady Bidao?” she warned him as she half-turned to her friend. “You used your magic to try to capture her, did you not?”

Bidao bobbed her head. “Y-yes, I fear so. I used my magic to try to grab her and missed.”

“Then the trail is no doubt muddied by Lady Bidao’s magic and cannot be followed with any reliability,” Shian pointed out. A heavy sigh escaped her and she shook her head. “The fiend is no doubt following the river bank to avoid any detection.”

“But she would not do any of what you say!” Arian argued. She trembled in Jin’s grasp and tears streamed down her cheeks. “Something must have happened to her! We must find her!”

Shian scowled at the distraught young woman. “You dare doubt our words?”

Jin leaned down and lowered his voice to a whisper. “She’s right. There’s nothing more you can do. I will report this to His Majesty immediately.” She strode past them and Bidao was only too eager to follow.

Arian broke down into sobs and Jin was forced to hold her up. She clutched onto the front of his shirt and balled into his attire. “It cannot be! Something is wrong!”

Jin noticed movement out of the corner of his eye and lifted his head to watch Eastwei approach the edge of the island. “Where are you going, My Lord?”

Eastwei paused on the threshold but didn’t turn. “I will be back shortly.” He walked forward and vanished in a reddish cloud.

Jin pursed his lips but the wet stains on the front of his shirt were more pressing. “Come on,” he whispered as he leaned Arian against him. “We will wait at the nearest bench for his return.”

While they moved over to their seat, Eastwei strode through the gate and into the huge realm of the land gods. He paused a few steps away from the gate and looked about him. All was quiet and calm.

Eastwei swept his arm out in front of him and red footprints appeared. He followed them to the highest point of the bridge where they vanished. The lord inspected his surroundings but didn’t see any hint of her whereabouts anywhere.

A faint expression of disappointment marred his handsome features. He set a hand on the railing and leaned out over it. His reflection stared back at him from the flowing surface of the river. It looked more than worried.

There was fear in his eyes.

Eastwei shook himself and straightened. He turned and strode down the curve of the bridge.

But not toward the gate.

He reached the end of the bridge and his handsome visage vanished in a soft cloud of red shimmering light.



Cold. So cold.

I stirred from such a slumber as I never recalled having. Every bone in my body felt heavy and numb. I was weighted down with more than just worries, but with an icy chill that sank into my very soul. Fear rode on its coattails, fear of some unknown darkness that lay just beyond my vision.

Then it came. A gentle caressing warmth. It lit up my whole being and left me with a sensation of comfort and love. I breathed out, content for the moment.

That peaceful period was interrupted by the distinct odor of wet fur. I wrinkled my nose and something brushed against my cheek. It was sharp and thin like a needle.

My slumber was permanently disturbed by these mysteries and my eyes fluttered open. I found myself staring at the bank of an unfamiliar river. A thick forest stood only ten feet away, its floor a mess of brambles and wild grass. The breeze carried with it unfamiliar smells and sounds.

It also tickled my body. I wrinkled my nose again and again felt the strange sensation of something brushing against my cheek. Something

forced my butt to move behind me. I twisted around and my mouth fell open.

A silver-furred tail wagged behind me. *My* tail.

I screamed and the sound came out in a loud yowl. The cry startled me ten-fold and I jumped into the air, crashing down atop the cold surface on which I'd been laying. It was a dwindling hunk of ice and my crash landing broke the platform into a few pieces. Half floated off down the river and the rest threatened to do the same.

I lifted my head and stared down at the ice beneath me. The cold liquid reflected my face. My round, bewhiskered face. Short silver fur covered my body from the tips of my pink-padded toes to the top of my sharply pointed ears. My fingers were adorable round digits and my eyes were a brilliant yellow that stared back at me in wide shock.

What the hell happened?

I meant to scream that aloud but the words came out in a hideous yowl.

A sudden jerk beneath me brought me back around to the rest of reality. The ice block upon which I lay shifted as the river's current tugged at its rear edges. I had to get off or I was about to go for another ride.

I stood but only for a moment. My untrained paws couldn't manage the icy surface and I danced about before I fell chin-first back onto the platform. The icy cracked and parts broke away to drift down the river. The remaining part shuddered and slid backward.

I tensed my leg muscles and leaped forward, crashing down a few feet onto solid ground. The last of the ice broke away and drifted onto the river where it soon vanished around a bend.

I lifted my head and looked around me. All was quiet and calm, but that only made the hairs on my back stand on end.

Stop panicking and think!

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. The last thing I remembered was Shian and Bidao tossing me into the river. Shian was an ice user so she must have shoved me downstream. That meant I only had to follow the river to find my way back.

But how long had I been unconscious?

I opened my eyes and lifted myself onto my unsteady four legs. The tail instinctively helped me balance myself and I took one gingerly step forward. My opposite rear leg dragged along and tripped over the uneven bank. I yowled as I toppled forward. A cloud of dust puffed up at my crash and I sneezed. The sound was adorable.

This was going to be a hell of a long hike. There had to be some other way to get back.

My heart quickened as I thought about a rescue party. The guards had seen me leave! They would know I didn't come back!

But who would miss you?

My ears fell flat and my tail drooped. That damned inner voice was right. There was nobody to miss me but my two friends and what could they do to find me? Shian had this planned from the beginning so she undoubtedly had a story to concocted about why I didn't come back with them.

I had to get back on my own, so I stiffened my furry jaw and stood. I flexed my legs and noticed how the opposite limbs moved together. It was just a simple matter of expecting one more leg to move at the same time.

I stepped forward and my back leg followed. There was no tripping this time. One small step for me, one giant leap for getting back and explaining everything. Except for how I became a cat. That I couldn't even explain to myself. Still, hope was kindled within me and I sauntered up the river bank toward the gate.

Little did I know I would have one hell of a diversion before I reached familiar lands.

SNEAK PEEK: GUARDING A SECRET

Epic fantasy woven through a world of the Gods



Now that you've finished one part of the story, here's a little sneak peek at the next book.

~

TWILIGHT. I HAD once missed that hour when the brilliance of the sun was replaced by the softness of the night.

Now I dreaded it.

The shadows had crept up on me shortly after I left my landing spot and now I found myself in a strange land that was about to dissolve into darkness. I could only imagine what animals lurked in the shadows waiting to chomp on little me.

There was also a problem with this mysterious new body of mine. I had dirty paws, dirty fur, and a tail that just wouldn't stop swishing about. And the whiskers! Those poking things that had awoken me on that icy barge were constantly twitching.

The last rays of the sun were disappearing behind a horizon of hills as I slunk under a thick mess of brambles. Tiny stickers on the plant stuck to my fur and trapped me in its harsh web. I twisted around and hissed at the offending bush. It didn't care.

Go figure.

I yanked myself free and tumbled head over four heels to land with a hard thump on a patch of bare earth. My legs ached and my teeth chattered as the chilly night air descended upon me.

What I wouldn't give for a cat coat.

A crack of a stick made me freeze. I whipped my head about and I could feel my eyes dilate. The world turned from night to daylight as if by magic, but the darkest shadows couldn't be penetrated. The sound had come from one of those patches of darkness.

The tip of my tail furiously twitched as I hunkered low to the ground. A faint rustling of leaves came to my large ears and my nose detected. . .something. I couldn't make sense of all the information it was giving me but my brain knew something was wrong. Dangerously wrong.

I crept on my belly forward with the direction of the trouble staying on my right. The darkness was an impenetrable hunk of fallen branches and bushes. A rotting tree ran in one end of the mess and out the other, its moss-covered surface gleaming with twilight dew.

A squealing roar made me freeze and the next moment a pot-bellied creature came crashing out of the darkness. It landed nearly on top of me and I was rolled across the ground, coming to a stop on my back. The thing charged and swung its head down. A pair of thick horns scooped me up and flung me into the air. I yowled and flailed all four legs.

Good thing cats always land on their feet. I landed on my paws but the ground I crashed onto was a spitfire of trouble.

It was the back of my nemesis.

The creature squealed and bucked, tossing me about as my front claws viciously dug between the long bristles and into its rough pelt. I was flung to and fro like a bronco rider until I lost my grip. The wild bucking threw me several yards away where I landed hard and rolled across the rough, prickly ground.

I came to a stop on my side among a mess of stickers and dried leaves. My aching body complained about the rough treatment while my head spun from the hard fling.

A heavy snort shattered my rest. I whipped my head up and my blood froze in my veins.

The creature stepped into my field of vision and I saw it was a huge boar. The heavy tusks curled out of its mouth and up past its face. Its weathered features were mere decorations when I beheld the terrible look in its dark eyes. There was a madness in them that made my heart skip a beat. This creature hungered for blood and I had a fresh supply.

The boar threw its head back and let loose a terrible squeal before it charged. My eyes widened and I rolled out of its way, missing being stomped by its sharp hooves by a mere inches. I scampered to my feet and dug my claws in for grip before I shot off. The boar pursued me, its terrible huffing breathing coming closer and closer to my tail. I ducked and leaped over bushes and fallen trees, but the creature crashed through it all.

One of those fallen trees proved to be more rotten than I predicted. I landed on its bark prepared to vault to the other side when the bark gave way. I yowled as I crashed through into the hollow center. The boar flew over me, snapping its jaws where I had just stood.

I landed hard on my side and a sharp stake stabbed itself into the upper arm of my front leg. Warm blood ran down my fur coat and dripped onto the forest floor.

A shadow stretched over me and I had only a fraction of a second to react. The boar shoved its tusks through the frail walls and I scampered down the slick rotting innards of the tree. It crashed into my little hollow and raced about me, destroying everything in its path. I shot out the far end and dashed through a mess of brush before I stumbled into a small clearing. My wound pounded with pain and I felt a little dizzy as blood gushed from the hole. The world spun around me and the edges were a hazy mess. I could only make it halfway across the clearing before I collapsed onto my side.

The boar slammed through the brush behind me and raced at me, its hungry eyes promising a terrible death. I closed mine and waited for the end.

The boar's hooves skidded along the hard-packed floor a foot shy of where I lay. It let out a terrible squeal before I heard it spin around and stampede back into the forest.

I peeked open my eyes and watched its behind disappear into the brush. Hope was rekindled inside me, but there was also a rising fear. What had caused the boar to take off in such terror?

A strange shuffling noise made me turn my head to the center of the clearing. I creaked my head around and my heart stopped.

A strange slender plant branch slithered toward me. Its black skin shimmered like rotten flesh and tiny spikes covered its surface. I hissed and scrambled back but my lame leg dragged me down. The thing wrapped

around my other front leg and its spikes sank into my flesh. A screeching yowl burst from my mouth and I scrambled back, or tried to. The thing kept its tight grip on me and tugged me toward the shadows at the other end of the clearing. A horrible feeling fell over me as I beheld a strange darkness in those woods. Something terrible awaited me, far more terrible than the end the boar had promised.

I thrashed and dug my heels into the dirt, but nothing worked. The thing dragged me toward the abyss of some hideous unknown nightmare. I was on the precipice of despair when a shimmering light came down from above.

A shadow dropped from on high and sliced the tendril with a flaming weapon. The tendril was cut in twain and my half released me and flopped onto the ground. I limped back but not too far because both my front legs were now wounded. The sliced end shuddered and drooped before it fell into a pile of black ash. The other half slithered backward into the ugly shadows.

My savior straightened and partially turned to me. I hissed in surprise as I beheld the angelic face of Lord Eastwei. He held a flaming sword in his hand which he kept at his side as he strode over to me. I wanted so desperately to lung into his arms but my feeble attempt at a jump ended with me dropping chin-first onto the ground.

Eastwei knelt by my side and inspected both wounds, dirtying his hands with my blood. The blood congealed in my fur and dripped onto the ground. He pursed his lips and examined the rest of me. “You have seen better times.” I could only wag my tail in appreciation. He turned his face about and his eyes fell on the darkness. “Remain here until I return.”

He stood but I was having none of that. No way I wanted to be left alone in this creepy beast-infested forest. I yowled and tried to stand but my shaky front legs collapsed beneath me and I dropped onto the dry dust.

Eastwei studied me for a moment before he stooped and scooped me into one arm. “Stay still.”

I bobbed my head, only too happy to be tucked against him. He strode forward into the woods where the tendril had vanished. My heart pounded in my chest but I felt nothing from the god who carried me. His heart was as impassive as his face as he used his sword to slice his way through the dense forest.

A disgusting squishing sound echoed through the trees and a hideously noxious smell wafted past my nose. I wrinkled my schnoz and pressed closer to Eastwei.

He stopped and studied me. “Do you smell something?”

I nodded and lifted my bloodied paw to point at the way ahead of us.

Eastwei tightened his grip on both me and his sword before he ventured ahead. The odor worsened and I found myself gagging. Even the lord’s impassive expression took a hit as he curled one corner of his lip up in disgust.

The trail of the tendril was easy to follow as the thing had left a black patch of rot in its wake. The path meandered through the woods before those began to thin and finally parted, revealing a small settlement of some dozen homes.

Standing there at the edge of the buildings, I was struck by the eerie silence. The atmosphere was like that of a graveyard. Nothing stirred save for a few bits of clothes on the ground. Eastwei approached the strange pile and used the tip of his sword to burn away the hem of a pant leg.

I screeched as it revealed a shriveled human leg.

Like what you read? You can get it here!

A SMALL FAVOR

Thank you so much for sticking with me until the end! Your support means a lot to me, and I'm grateful to have the opportunity to entertain you with my stories.

Now I have a small favor to ask. I would be eternally grateful if you could let others know what you thought of the book by leaving a review. Many readers often hesitate to try new books or authors. A few reviews can encourage them to take the plunge and give it a read.

If you enjoyed my book and think others will as well, please consider taking a moment and leaving a review at the retailer where you downloaded the book.

Again, thank you so much for giving me the opportunity to welcome you into my imagination. No words can express my gratitude (but I tried).

Much Love,
Mac

WHEN'S THE NEXT BOOK?

Don't you just hate it when you've missed a new release of your favorite series? Or you didn't learn about a giveaway until after the signup window closed?

I can't thank my readers enough for your support, so I want to give as many smiles as I can to your lives.

What's the easiest way to know when my next book is out?

My newsletter.

It's a short read, it goes directly into your inbox without any bothersome websites, and it has everything you're looking for. Just the simple details and the sumptuous giveaways for you to enjoy!

I'm sold, add me to your newsletter!

SERIES BY MAC FLYNN

Contemporary Romance

Being Me

Billionaire Seeking Bride

The Family Business

Loving Places

PALE Series

Trapped In Temptation



Demon Romance

Ensnare: The Librarian's Lover

Ensnare: The Passenger's Pleasure

Incubus Among Us

Lovers of Legend

Office Duties

Sensual Sweets

Unnatural Lover



Dragon Romance

A Court of Passion

A Timeless Affair

Blood Dragon

Death’s Dragon

Dragon Dusk

Dragon Key

Dragon Mother

Dragon Sin

Dragon Thief

Falling For A Dragon

Fated Touch

Feral Dragon

Maiden to the Dragon

Shadow Dragon

The Dragon God's Wife

The Dragon Lord's Bride

The Ravaged Kingdoms

The Songstress and the Pirate



Ghost Romance

Phantom Touch



Vampire Romance

Blood Thief

Blood Treasure

Vampire Dead-tective

Vampire Soul



Urban Fantasy

Death Touched

Oracle of Spirits



Werewolf Romance

Alpha Blood

Alpha Mated

Beast Billionaire

By My Light

Desired By the Wolf

Falling For A Wolf

Garden of the Wolf

Highland Moon

In the Loup

Luna Proxy

The Moon and the Stars

Marked By the Wolf

Moon Chosen

Moon Lovers

Moonlight Among Monsters

Scent of Scotland: Lady of Edinburgh

Scent of Scotland: Lord of Moray

Shadow of the Moon

Sweet & Sour

Wolf Lake

Wolf Mountain Pack

ABOUT MAC FLYNN



A seductress of sensual words and a lover of paranormal plots, Mac Flynn is the alias of a writer on the run from distraction. She lives on the edge of sagebrush and sanity with her many crazy cats, and finds pleasure in writing thrilling paranormal stories filled with naughty fun and hilarious hijinks. She's the author of numerous paranormal and fantasy series that weave suspense, adventure and a good joke into a one-of-a-kind experience. You can learn more about her at MacFlynn.com.

Sign up for my newsletter!