



In
the
Court
of the
Forgotten

J.J. Cassidy

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Love is an Open Road

An M/M Romance series

IN THE COURT OF THE FORGOTTEN

By J.J. Cassidy

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love is an Open Road* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

What Is Love is an Open Road?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what these authors do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love is an Open Road*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, you are in for a delicious treat.

Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

Each year, a dedicated group of Volunteers from the M/M Romance Group work hard behind the scenes to bring these stories to you. Our Editors, Formatters, Proofreaders, and those working on Quality Assurance, spend many long hours over a course of several months so that each Event is a success. As

each and every author also gives freely of their time and talent, it was decided that all edits suggested may be accepted or rejected by the author at any given time. For this reason, some stories will appear to be more tightly edited than others, depending on the choice of the author.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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Photo Description

The faces of two pale young men, obviously twins, are visible against a black background. They are Nordic, or perhaps Eastern European. Both of them wear dark blue, almost military-looking shirts or coveralls. Their blond hair is wild, the long hair on top standing almost straight up, revealing short sides. The one on the left looks down, with no expression, while the other stares at the camera, full lips slightly parted, looking unhappy, almost angry.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

For as long as I can remember the buzz of the fluorescent lights has been a constant in our lives. I awaken to silence and it frightens me. With my brother beside me, I know I must close my eyes and re-enter our dream of The Key to tell him of this change. We have a heated conversation. He is angry and doesn't want to leave because we are so close to seeing The Key. Our dreams have ruled us for so long that it is strange to think this might be real. In haste, we awaken and rise to slowly walk towards the door. We know we are not to be a part of society since The Fall, which is why the door has stayed closed. As we approach the door the air locks disengage and it opens. It really opens.

I would welcome twincest, a twin power struggle, alien love, MMM, BDSM and a dark dystopian or fantasy tale.

Thanks for your consideration,

Book Red

Story Info

Genre: fantasy

Tags: twincest, fae, elves, mythical creatures, magic, ménage, M/M/M, open relationship, interspecies, established couple, prison captivity, memory loss, revenge

Content Warnings: graphic violence, mention of off-page rape

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IN THE COURT OF THE FORGOTTEN

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Chapter One

I dream of darkness the way someone who has lived in a desert all their life might dream of the sea. The strange lights here never ever truly go out, they only dim, and their incessant hum burrows into and under everything, every moment. There are times when that low buzz resonates impossibly deep in my bones, and I am certain I will vibrate apart and shatter like glass. I said as much once—only once—and Ward struck me. I know it was only out of fear, but still, the shock of it kept me silent after.

We are twins, Ward and I, and perfect reflections of each other, at least on the surface. Two parts of a whole, sufficient unto ourselves. Eideard and Aylward—watcher and guardian—the same, only different.

Our entertainment in this prison is limited, and by now we have explored everything there is to see. We have explored each other just as thoroughly—an entertainment older than any other. When all other options are exhausted, we can slip sideways out of this alien world and into our own. That is its own species of frustration, for even there we are confined to a single chamber in a single place rather than being able to wander at will.

It might help things if we knew why we are imprisoned here, but I do not know the reason. Or—perhaps more accurately—we do not remember. Cannot, in truth. Not without bringing on a crippling headache, and afterward nothing changes. We are still here, and there is a black hole in our memories—there is a *before*, and an *after*, but not a *why* or a *how*.

While I love my brother, there is such a thing as being too much in each other's company. Ward slips out of our prison to sulk when he needs to be alone, and so it is when the lights go out.

For a moment the relief of it leaves me stunned—my eyes open wide, the need to squint banished—and I sit and blink at nothing. Gone is the crawling prickle on my skin, the sense of being exposed. We are not creatures of the light, after all, our fair skin and hair notwithstanding. Moonlight and starlight, yes; the bright light of day? Not for us. Finally I stir myself into movement, running swift and sure through the corridor to the main chamber. No need for light, not after all this time.

I slip sideways, taking myself out of joint with this time and place, and come up behind my twin. The light here is soft, gray with a hint of gold, the

distinctive hue of the moment right before sunrise or just after sunset. Ward is naked, sprawled on the wooden floor of a stone room not altogether different than the one I left behind.

“The lights,” I say, and Ward turns to face me.

“What about them?” He stretches, rolling his shoulders and curling his hips forward. His prick lolls on his thigh, plumping until the hood peels back the least bit. The answering flush of heat in my own groin is difficult to resist. I drop to my knees, spreading them because I know how it makes me look.

“They have gone out,” I tell him, and use my hands to push his legs open.

“That has happened before,” he says, shaking his head. “They will come back on.”

I sit back on my heels. “When did they—? I would remember.”

“Once,” he insists. “You were sleeping. It was only for a while.” One of his hands cups my balls, the longest finger stroking behind them. “Wait. They will come back on.” He tugs, just a little, urging me down on top of him. “Stay here with me awhile.”

“No.”

He narrows his eyes at my refusal and removes his hand. Leaning back on his elbows, his face goes hard. Wide cheekbones, narrow chin, full lips—I am not pretty when I pout, and neither is he.

“You need to come with me.” I rock back, getting my feet under me, and he grabs for my hand. As fast as he is, I am that much faster. “Ward.” On my feet, it is easy to avoid another grab, this time for my ankles. “*Do not.*” I immediately step back into our prison, and Ward has no choice but to follow if he wants to talk to me.

Talking is not his first choice. The instant we are both here, Ward lunges, uncoiling from the floor and hitting me at the top of my thighs. His left hand digs in behind my knee as he kneels, trying to take me down. I fall across his shoulders, shoving his head onto his thighs and stretching my legs behind me, out of reach. My chest presses on his bent back, my fingers on the nape of his neck, the other hand catching his upper arm and biting into the muscle, demanding he let go. He grunts and lifts me off my feet, and rather than fall like a sack, I use his shoulders for support as I swing my legs down and forward, around his torso.

I swallow a curse as Ward shoves with his legs until I am on my back. He leans in, straining against the press of my arms, to nip at my chest. His teeth graze a nipple, and the slight sting is enough to send blood rushing to fill my prick. I get a knee between us, giving me room to maneuver, using my other foot to lever myself up. He swings a hand at my face, the heel of his palm driving up into my chin.

I grab his wrist just as my back finds the wall, and hook my left foot behind his right knee. I cannot keep it there, though, and we grapple—hands trying for an advantage, our bodies swinging in a clumsy circle as one and then the other of us hits the wall. And all the while I am aware of the slide of my prick against his thigh, his hip, his balls, and the prod of his stiff cock along my own skin.

We break apart, and I clip the edge of his jaw with my fist. He ducks back, giving me an opening, and I slam my knee into the side of his ribs. His eyes widen as he skips away—that hurt him, exactly as I meant it to. His cock is impossibly hard, standing up along his flat belly, his balls drawn up into a tight bundle. We exchange a flurry of glancing blows, nothing that connects, both of us weaving and ducking. He makes me chase him, hands up to protect his face. My left hand lashes out, knuckles sinking into his belly, at the same time he lands a blow to my upper chest. I am off balance, but I use that—striking his hip sharply with my foot.

Another flurry of punches, and Ward bends from the waist, hits me in the side with his shoulder. His lunge knocks me sideways—I keep my feet, bracing my hands on his shoulders, his back, as he drags at my legs. His head is against my thigh, his shoulder nearly under my balls, so I rock my hips, rubbing my blood-heavy prick on his smooth skin. I smile when he gasps. He tries to stand and I twist around his body, sweeping his feet out from under him until I have him on his back.

He is more aroused than angry now, and I pin his hands above his head with very little effort. I press my brother's wrists against the floor with enough force that he winces—and breathes out in a long shudder when I drive my cock up alongside his.

I go slow, trapping both our cocks between our bodies, enjoying the slippery proof of mutual excitement. We are identical there, too—long and lean to match our frames. Ward is beautiful in this moment, his head thrown back, full lower lip caught between sharp white teeth, and his position—arms over his head—displays the deceptively slight muscles of his arms and shoulders to full

advantage. His chest and belly are a marvel of planes and ridges as he rocks to meet me, his thighs locked tight around my ribs.

Our bellies are slick now, and I lean down, licking at Ward's mouth until he lets me in. He sucks at my tongue, breathing hard against my cheek while he raises his legs higher. I groan as our sacs rub together—he knows what I like. Spreading my knees even wider, I let my weight down and rut faster, my tongue fucking into his mouth, feeling the vibration of his moans. His arms tense, fighting my hold, and I tighten my fingers to the point of pain. Between us, his cock twitches hard, and his hips buck. I use my thumbs to put more pressure on his wrists, yanking his hands the least bit higher.

I stop kissing him, wanting to hear him, and he does not disappoint me. Ward hisses and groans in time to every jerk of his cock, filling the space between us. That slickness is what I need, and I come in one delicious shudder, my heart racing even as my hips slow and stop. Even so, I cannot resist one more stroke, and another, and one more—we are both still half-hard.

At some point, I let go of Ward's wrists, and now I roll off him and onto my back, grunting as we separate. With a happy sigh, my twin gets on all fours and crawls over me, his knees to either side of my head, and applies his clever tongue to the mess on my stomach. I return the favor, licking him clean and idly running a damp finger along his taint, back and forth, up and down. We are both studious about not touching each other's cocks, using our mouths everywhere else we can reach. Ward bathes my balls with his tongue, and my knees fall apart, as wide as they can go. When he sucks one globe into his hot mouth, my hips rock all on their own, my arse clenching in want and my cock rigid and hot with blood. He manages to take the entire sac and sucks hard until I am writhing, thrusting at the air and biting at his belly as I moan.

I want to be filled so badly I shove at his hips until he raises up, and then I swallow him whole. His moan vibrates in my balls and lodges at the base of my cock, almost enough to send me over. He uses one wet finger to tease me, resting it against my hole with just enough pressure to drive me wild. I cannot get that finger inside no matter how I wriggle, and I am unwilling to stop sucking him so I can beg. His spit runs down behind my balls and that single finger gathers it and breaches me, barely—I am frantic to come now, and I reach with both hands and pinch his nipples, tugging them away from his body and rolling them between my fingers. Surprised, his finger drives deeper, almost enough—and then he raises his head, my balls popping free of his lips.

I spit him out, snarling in frustration, and miss what he says. What is impossible to miss is the rumble and screech of metal, audible even here. We scramble apart, and I give my disappointed cock a squeeze, ignoring the sullen throb in my balls. We wait, crouched in the bare chamber, listening hard.

It is not as dark as it was earlier, I realize, and I do not know how much time has passed. Impossible to tell—and it has never mattered before. We share a look, my brother and I, and his gray eyes are dark in the half light, all wide pupil. He shoves his fair hair out of his face, and not for the first time, I wish we had something to tie it back, out of our faces. It grows long on top and stays shorter on the sides and back, and without any way to cut it, we have no choice but to let it be.

We wait, but the rooms and corridor beyond are silent. At last, I nod to Ward, and we pad on bare feet through the doorway and into the hallway. We make one detour, into a storeroom to get the only clothing we are allowed. The fabric is unpleasant to the touch, and the one-piece garment is annoying. Neither of us are willing to venture any further naked, however. All we have are thin-soled canvas shoes, good only for keeping the chill of the floors away from our feet, but we put those on as well.

I lead and he follows, both of us hugging the walls as we skulk closer and closer to the main room. It is where we get our food and supplies, and it is the only room with a real door. We have never heard that door open, but it seems the most likely explanation for the sounds we heard.

I freeze, controlling my breathing with an effort, and just stare at the dark opening.

The door is open.

We both crouch off to the side, in the deeper shadows. Ward moves until his breath tickles my ear. “I want to see what is out there.” I nod, and we both straighten up. There is no sound from beyond this chamber, no sense that anyone is out there at all.

It is almost disappointing. The corridor beyond looks very much like the one we left behind us. The overhead lighting is out, and the only illumination comes from a glowing strip down near the floor. It is more than enough for Ward and me to see that the corridor stretches for quite a ways before it splits. We walk to the end as silently as we can manage—all the while I am expecting

the lights to come on and the door behind us to slide closed. Nothing happens, and we peer down both branches of the new corridor. Ward shrugs when I give him a questioning look—right or left, they both seem the same.

Left, then.

Somewhere around the fourth or fifth turning, it registers that the floor has a definite slope, and we are heading up. For the first time in—well, ever—it occurs to me to wonder where we are. Ward and I slip into an alcove with three sealed doors, and squat on our haunches.

“We are going up,” Ward murmurs. “Do you suppose we are underground?”

I shrug one shoulder. “That is as good an explanation as any.” I gnaw on my lower lip. “Is there a way out, do you think?”

Ward settles his back against the wall, arms dangling between his knees. Sighs. “I suppose so.”

“If there is a door in this place,” I murmur, “I want to go through it. Wherever it leads.” Ward nuzzles my temple, brushes his mouth there in an almost-kiss. His hand finds mine and offers a squeeze. My chest tightens, and for a brief moment I want to go back to our prison, back to what we know. Instead, I slide up the wall and get to my feet, pulling Ward with me.

We walk, and the corridor continues up, one right turn after another. Something obvious, something that should have occurred to me long before this, finally makes me stop in my tracks. “This is not Fae.” I run my fingers over the smooth wall of the corridor. Stone, yes, but not blocks or a carved tunnel. Flattening my palm, I can feel the inner texture—like mortar, lots of it in a solid mass. And beyond that—I snatch my hand back with a hiss. “Feel,” I tell Ward. He lays his hand in almost the same spot, head cocked. Only for a moment, and then he hisses, too.

“Iron.” He stares at the wall. “Woven through it.” He shivers, twitching his shoulders and exhaling sharply. “That explains a great deal.”

It does and it does not, but I do not say that. We never talk about why we are here—or why we have no magic beyond the simplest things. I suspect a compulsion—a *geas*, if you will—was placed on both of us, binding our memories. And until that is broken, all we can do is guess. I was never good at riddles.

We start walking again, and now that I know it is there, the iron all around us grows into an itch I cannot reach. My stomach grumbles; we should have

planned this better and brought food. And water. Four more lengths of corridor go by, and then another four. There is a pattern to them—a door in the corner at every fourth turning, almost unnoticeable in the shadows. No knob or even a lock, no visible way to open it from our side. Four more turnings—my feet ache from the hard floor, and my stomach complains. I ignore them both.

A thud reverberates through the corridor; we flatten ourselves against a wall and wait. It came from ahead of us, at least another four turns. I exchange a single glance with my twin, and we run, silently. One, two, three turns, and the next doorway is in sight.

It stands open most of the way, brighter light spilling out. From where we are, it is impossible to see inside; the angle is all wrong. Crouching, I glide as close as I can without entering the doorway. A scent teases my nose, tangy and bright against the cool mustiness of everything else. And somehow warm—I think of fur, or warm wool. Ward rushes past me to take up position on the hinge side of the door while I am still lost in that scent and what it means.

When he straightens and walks through the opening, I follow, confident there is no danger. The room is white, no decoration at all, and dusty. On the floor there are two metal bottles, and a handful of ration sticks, the same kind we got in our prison. Ward checks the bottles—whatever they are made of, it is not iron—and offers me one.

Water. I drink it all, and regret it immediately, for now I have none left for later. After I eat one of the ration sticks, I prowl the room. There are cabinets stuck on the wall, nothing like proper furnishings at all. I come to a door, and catch the same scent as before. Before I can think better of it, I reach for the latch and push the door open, hard enough that it smashes on the wall and bounces off.

I do not know who is more surprised—me or whoever is crouched in the corner.

Chapter Two

“Please,” they say—and the rumbling voice makes it clear the speaker is male. Or perhaps that is wishful thinking on my part. “I didn’t want to scare you.” He turns his head, not quite meeting my eyes; a good thing because I cannot look away from the curve of the thick neck into broad shoulders and powerful arms. So different from Ward—from me—and my fingers twitch with a need to touch the first other being we have seen here.

Ward brushes by me, reaches out and grabs a handful of that tumbled dark hair. “Were you sent to kill us?” He pulls on the hair in his fist, forcing eye contact.

The face is not like ours, for all that it has two eyes, a nose, and a mouth. A heavier jaw, a bony nose, and amber eyes below thick brows. The pupils widen, almost round—but they are still horizontal ovals.

“You are from the Dark Court,” Ward says, and that earns a growl—a quick flash of teeth sharper than ours, and we are capable of a nasty bite.

“Better to say the Court of the Forgotten.” The amber eyes disappear behind dark lashes for one breath before shifting to look beyond Ward to me, and a hot shiver runs down my back. “I mean you no harm.”

“How should we call you?” I ask, stupidly aware of the way my nipples scrape against the inside of the coveralls.

“Toland. Or... Tolly. Whatever pleases you.” The slight hesitation makes the heat under the words all the more noticeable.

I take a step closer. Those dark pupils flare wider, and his lips part on an indrawn breath. He shifts position, and the strangeness of his legs catches my scattered wits. Other than Satyrs and Fauns, there are not so many races with that extra length and odd angle between knees and hooves—for he does have hooves—although he lacks horns, and is subtly wrong for either.

Ward lets him go, stepping away until we are shoulder to shoulder. “Get up,” I tell Toland.

Standing, he is as tall as we are, with broader shoulders. It does not mean he is stronger, and there are two of us to his one. He wears a sleeveless vest, plain brown leather lined with linen, that covers him down to his hips. His legs are covered in thick hair, matching the color of the curls on his head, and the same

hair rises up, disappearing under the hem of the vest. The skin of his bare arms is pale compared to the dark hair, although still far darker than ours.

I swallow a rush of saliva and drop my gaze lower. Whatever I expect, it is not there. Or rather, what is there makes no sense. He has a generous set of balls, high and round and less furry than his belly and thighs—and that is all. No rod, nor any suggestion of one. Just hair.

“Was it you who opened the doors?” Ward asks while I tell myself that the sourness in the back of my throat is not disappointment.

“Yes.” Toland is watching me when he answers, with no expression on his face that I can read. “I would have done it sooner, but the wires were confusing.”

I frown. “Wires?”

“Yes. To the door panel. If I cut the wrong ones—” He stops, blinking slightly, most likely because Ward and I both wear identical expressions of incomprehension. “Don’t you—? How...” His voice trails off and he sighs. “Perhaps we should find someplace better—more comfortable—and I can explain.”

Toland’s hooves are wrapped in leather, muffling the sound of them on the slick stone floor as we walk, and no doubt offering some purchase as well. That is interesting, but what fascinates me is that he has a tail. A short one, maybe the length of my hand from wrist to fingertips, curving out and hiding the cleft between his buttocks that I cannot keep my eyes away from as we follow him up four more turnings.

Ward and I walk next to one another, and for the first time I can remember, I do not want to look at my twin. *Cannot* look, knowing he will see into my heart and—what? I do not want Toland; why should I when I have Ward? It has always been the two of us, forever, and always will be. This is mere curiosity, nothing more.

We go up four more turns, and the next door we come to is wide open. Inside the room, blankets and pillows are piled against one blank white wall, with a crudely woven basket to one side of them.

“This is where I wanted you to come,” Toland says, crossing over to the blankets. The smell from the basket sends me to my knees, and Ward does the

same. Toland crouches down and flips back the linen covering, offering us a miracle. “Are you hungry? It’s only bread and cheese—”

I tear the loaf and hand half of it to Ward, moaning softly as I cram a crusty piece into my mouth. Warm bread—the taste is nearly enough to make me weep after endless meals of bland ration sticks. The cheese is sharp and richly tangy, aged enough to be crumbly rather than creamy. Toland has his own loaf and portion of cheese, making me feel better about snatching the food he offered us. “We have not had anything so fine since we have been here.”

Toland tosses us each an apple, another miracle. “I tried, but the delivery system wouldn’t let me program anything but the ration bars and water.” He blushes then, and I swallow my bite of apple in a hurry.

“You watched us,” I say, and the duck of his head confirms it. “How?”

“Cameras,” he tells me—the word means nothing. “It took me a while to figure how to work the console.” He stops because I am shaking my head. “I didn’t watch all the time. Just—I needed to know when I could try to open the doors safely.”

Most of what he says is gibberish, so I ask about something else. “I felt the iron in the walls. How—” I cannot explain, and look to Ward for help.

“How do you understand... all of this?” Ward waves a hand. “This is Human made, yes?”

Toland nods. “A military facility. Two Fae lords, Barden and Frewin, brought you here, and—”

There is more, all lost as my head explodes and pain swallows the world.

Chapter Three

I should never have let things get this far, never tried this. Never put the twins in danger. I'm a fool.

At first, I couldn't tell them apart. On the monitor, it was hard to pick out the little differences. I watched them enough, though, and once I figured out how to have audio as well as video it was easier. They rarely used names, not much point when it was just the two of them, so it took longer for me to figure out who was Aylward and who was Eideard.

Aylward—Ward—was the talker, and spent more time invisible than his brother. The first time he did it, I was shocked—I knew better than most that we had no magic anymore, not like that. One moment they were there, and the next, gone. Sometimes they were back in an instant, and sometimes it took far longer—once it was nearly seven days. It didn't make sense, but maybe that was why they'd been shut up in here. With the Bright Court Fae, who the fuck knew what they were thinking.

The twins rarely wore the coveralls, and in the beginning watching them was almost painful, for I was hard all the time. The two of them were impossibly beautiful—how could I not want them? I nearly ruined the keyboard when I first saw Eideard—Ned—reach for Ward and stroke him to hardness, and the image of Eideard on his knees, ass in the air while he swallowed his twin to the root haunted my sleep and brought me awake with spend drying on my belly. That is, when I wasn't sitting in the chair in front of the monitor with my cock in my hand, wishing I could open the doors and join them.

Here and now, with them within reach, I wanted Eideard—I couldn't call him Ned, not even in my head—to touch me so badly my guts cramped. It made no sense. They were identical to look at. Their differences were all intangible—Eideard was quieter, warier, slower to move. Deep water to Ward's quicksilver. When they fought or wrestled, Eideard was always faster, moving with the light grace all the Fae possessed. With the pair of them right in front of me it was stupidly easy to tell them apart, although I think someone seeing them for the first time might have more difficulty.

I answered their questions without a second thought, even while I wondered why they were so clueless about the mountain. I only mentioned Barden and Frewin because I remembered them so clearly—arrogant Fae bastards—and

wanted to see what the twins would say. I never expected Ward's eyes to roll back in his head and for him to flop over in some kind of seizure. Eideard... Eideard *screamed*—howled—the cords standing out in his neck, his face twisted into ugliness, until blood ran out of his nose.

Ward was breathing, so I left him where he was and scrambled over to Eideard—who struck at me as soon as my hands grasped his shoulders. I caught his wrist, nearly letting go when something burned my fingers. Ignoring the pain, I gathered him close, crooning wordlessly. His breath hitched, and instead of another scream all he did was whimper.

What did you do for a nosebleed? It was one thing if you'd been bashed in the face during a brawl, another if it happened like this—or was it? Using my leg, I propped him up and kept one hand on his neck, tipping his head forward, and left him like that while I used my free hand to rummage through the basket for something to clean his face.

A wet linen napkin would do. The front of Eideard's coverall was a mess, and I let that be. The bleeding was mostly stopped, and I wiped Eideard's mouth and chin as gently as possible. He was heavier than he looked, hard and solid rather than soft.

“Give him to me.”

My arm tightened around Eideard at the growled command, so unlike Ward's usual voice. He glared at me, his changeable eyes narrowed almost to slits.

“Toland.” That's all he said—just my name—and only the once, and yet I couldn't refuse. Impossible as it was, power riffled the air in those two syllables. Even so, my hands lingered on Eideard, holding on to him until the last moment. His head flopped sideways as I handed him off to his twin, and I steadied it, startled by the way his hair slid through my fingers.

“Careful,” I snapped, and Ward's eyes shifted color to a chilly blue-gray. He turned his head, body curling around his brother, and I would swear his mouth curved in the hint of smile.

My throat hurts. It is my first thought, and Ward has a cup to my lips before I can try to speak. I sip the water, trying to remember what happened. We were talking, and Toland—

I sit up, pushing until Ward eases his hold on me but not leaving the cradle of his body. “Toland.” My voice is a croak, and I wince. Toland looks up, and there is a wariness in his amber eyes that was not there earlier. “Not your fault,” I tell him.

“Not ours, either,” Ward mutters.

“What’s wrong with your wrist?” Toland asks. “When—before—I touched it, and your wrist was hot.” His hand, callused and broad, circles low on his own muscled forearm in illustration. Until he says it, I am unaware of doing just that—tracing a line around and around just above my left hand. “May I?” Toland puts out a hand and nods at my arm.

When I nod, he scoots closer and takes my left hand in his, turning it over and running a finger over the bones in my wrist. I shiver at the light touch, and know Ward feels it when I do. Toland makes a low sound of frustration and looks up at me, chewing his lip.

“My fingers are no good for this. Could I—” His cheekbones darken, and I nearly smile. “I might be able to feel it better with—” His blush goes darker. “—my tongue.”

My cock leaps against my thigh, and I am so distracted I nearly miss the way Ward wriggles behind me. Not trusting my voice, I nod agreement.

Toland takes a breath, and lets it out against my skin, warm and humid. I concentrate on what he is doing, not the way my coveralls are strangling my hopeful prick. He extends his tongue, pointed and very much hotter than my skin, and draws a line of wet fire over the veins in my wrist. Clenching my teeth helps me stay silent while he goes further, licking around the joint. I hear him hum, and he goes back to just below my thumb. He comes closer—exposes one impressive incisor and scrapes it delicately in the slight bend between my wrist and hand. His tooth snags on something—not my skin—and he carefully, carefully bites through it. The pain is instant, and I have no words to describe it—like dipping my entire arm in molten metal. As fast as it rises, though, the pain subsides. Toland draws back, spitting out a glowing thread that wisps into flame and disappears. My head gives one ominous throb and... nothing. I take that as a good omen.

I twist around to look at Ward. “You, now.”

Ward offers his left hand, and Toland’s blush returns. I can feel what the brush of his tongue on my brother’s skin does—the hardness jabbing my

buttock is difficult to overlook. There is no word for the sluice of icy heat running through my limbs and torso—I want Toland to stop, I want to watch, I want to pleasure Ward with my mouth while Toland—

“Nothing,” Toland says, sitting up. “I don’t feel anything.”

“That is impossible.” Ward and I say it together. “Try his other wrist,” I suggest, pushing into a crouch and pivoting to face my twin.

Toland obliges, frowning in concentration. The arching bulge in Ward’s coveralls captures my attention—do I want him to be that aroused by another’s touch? My brother’s eyes are indigo with excitement when they meet mine, and I am torn by equal parts of yearning and denial. Then Toland hums, a sound that goes right from my ears to the pit of my belly, and bites down on another glowing thread.

A soundless explosion blows through my entire self, a white wave, and Ward echoes my startled cry. My hands hit the floor, Ward’s fingers tangling in my coverall while I wait for my stomach to settle and my lungs to work again. The important thing is that we are both finally free of the geas, and I remember...

Nothing.

Chapter Four

“We are no worse off than we were before,” Ward says, sounding so reasonable I want to hit him.

“That is ever so comforting,” I snarl, and walk faster. It does not help that we are both exhausted and need to sleep. We should have stayed where we were, rested a bit and then moved on, which is what Toland suggested. I was too restless and frustrated to do anything of the kind, so here we all were—walking the endless corridors, turn after turn, up and up and up.

We do know more than before, although some of that came from questioning Toland. I—Ward and I—recall our father’s fall from power in the Bright Court, and the unrest leading to the decision to leave the Human world once and for all. All the Fae withdrew to the Summerlands, shutting every door and gate behind them—closing this world off from magic. We, on the other hand, were bundled up like refuse and left here, in the Human world—we were not pure Fae, and the risk of either of us taking our father’s place at court was too great for the other lords to risk.

I am not even certain why I want to go outside anymore. Anything is better than here, I suppose.

“How far to the surface?” I have asked Toland this at least twice before, and to his credit he does not snap at me.

“We just passed level sixteen, so... sixty more turns? Or so. We—” He slows down and looks at me. “On level ten, there’s a place we can stop and rest.”

“All right.” I nod and walk on, ignoring Ward’s glare. He slows down, choosing to walk with Toland and leaving me to fume in peace. Three more turnings go by before the silence is broken.

“What is this place?” Ward asks. “Did Humans live here, once?” It is a good question, and I slow down to hear the answer.

“They didn’t live here, not the way we would. This was for... war. For their army.”

“Were they so constantly fighting, then?” Ward asks, and I slow down a bit more.

“This place was meant to protect this nation from being attacked by some other one. Or to launch an attack.”

Like a border castle, I suppose.

Ward grunts. Nods. “Did this nation lose, then?” I agree—why else abandon a fortification?

“It’s not like that. Humans built this years ago, and then their—their war machines—changed. So they shut this place down and locked it up. Built something else, I guess. We found it not too long after that and moved the court here. More room for us. More isolated. And then *they* brought you here.”

No need to ask who *they* are—locking me and my twin away was something a long time coming, although it happened quickly enough once our sire fell out of favor. I chew on that puzzle for another twenty-odd turnings of the corridors, until the backs of my legs smolder with the exertion, and all I want is to lie down and stop moving for a little while.

When we reach what must be level ten, Toland takes us through a propped-open door into another hallway, and from there into a room that is pitch-black even to my eyes. He taps something on the wall and the room lightens to gray, enough to see a pile of bedding neatly folded along one wall, and a basket exactly like the one we left behind in the middle of the floor. Toland increases the illumination a bit more, watching me without being obvious about it.

Ward drags a pallet away from the wall and spreads a quilt on it, sinking down with a groan I want to echo. He wrestles the soft shoes off his feet and stretches out, closing his eyes. Some impulse I cannot name sends me to the pile of bedding to drag out another thin mattress and cover that with a folded quilt. “For you,” I tell Toland before I join Ward, sitting down next to him and taking off my own shoes.

The coverall offends my skin; this is the longest I have ever worn one. I undo the fastenings on the top half and shrug the thing off my shoulders, letting it fall to my waist. Toland makes a small sound.

“There’s food and water,” he says when I look at him. The color on his cheekbones was not there a moment ago. He sits, folding his legs under him, blunt fingers checking the ties on the leather wrapping his hooves.

“Water.” Ward sits up, pushing his coverall off his arms and giving an exaggerated shiver. It is not cold in here—when Toland’s eyes track the movement, I know why Ward did it. My own feelings for Toland are

straightforward enough—a physical craving for novelty—easy to guess that Ward feels the same. Granted, it is tempting to assume that we are as alike in our tastes and thoughts as we are to the eye—and that would be a mistake, for we are not. I don't want to think what that means with regard to Toland.

Humming under his breath, Toland uncovers the basket and reaches inside. The improbable scent of warm bread coils around my empty stomach and squeezes until it hurts. There are corked bottles, three of greenish glass and three of amber, plus a little crock that smells of brine. A fat wedge of yellow cheese joins the bottles, followed by three parcels wrapped in parchment and tied with string. Three small loaves of bread, three apples, napkins, a knife—the basket produces a feast.

“There is no magic any longer,” I point out. “So how is it that this”—I wave at the basket—“is possible?”

Toland portions out the basket's largesse before he answers. “Some things are from here—this world—and not your Summer Country.” A shrug. “Like... Satyrs. And Dwarves. We're not like you. So when the Fae left, those things still had their own powers—magic—whatever. Some of it, anyway. The basket's old, I don't know where it came from. I borrow it sometimes, when I come down here.”

The green glass bottles are filled with water, and the amber ones hold cider, tart and heady from the first sip, a hum in my blood like a hive of bees. The parchment parcel turns out to be a rare treat—a cold roast pigeon stuffed with bread and dried fruit. Toland stares at his, seeming confused by the pleased way Ward and I tear into ours. “What is this?” he finally asks, poking at it.

I answer after I swallow. “Pigeon.” When he wrinkles his nose, I sit back, surprised.

“What is wrong with pigeon?” Ward asks.

“They're—” Toland clears his throat and shrugs. “Rats with wings.”

Ward snorts, ripping apart his loaf of bread. “Hardly that. What would you prefer? Pheasant? Venison?”

“I just—I don't get why the basket gave us this. Usually it's normal stuff.” Toland pokes at the pigeon, and I reach over and snatch it out of reach. “Hey.”

“If you do not want it...”

He wraps his fingers around my wrist—oh, they are warm, and the calluses send a rush of heat up my arm, competing with the cider—and uses his other

hand to take the pigeon back, grumbling. “I didn’t say that. I just wanted to know what it was, is all.”

I slice off a wedge of cheese and pass it to Ward. “Are there woods outside of here? Trees?”

Toland nods, his mouth full of pigeon. “Good,” he says after a swallow of water. “The pigeon. Woods—yes. Miles of them. We’re pretty far from Humans here. Some of us—the ones who can pass for Human—go farther, visit the farms and the town.” He shrugs. “Not me, obviously.”

The conversation dies away until the pigeons are nothing but fragile bones, and we’re down to apples and cheese and the last of the bread. The little crock holds tiny pickled onions and curved bumpy green things that Toland says are very small cucumbers—I am not entirely sure what those might be, but they are tasty. What I would like is more cider, and I say as much out loud. From the depth of the basket we all hear the clink of glass, and when Toland checks there are three more bottles of cider—one each.

Toland slants me a sideways look, amber eyes crinkled at the corners, and his mouth twitches into a small lopsided smile. “It likes you.”

Ward takes out two bottles of cider and hands me one. His smile is sly, and I do not imagine the purr in his voice. “Everyone likes Ned.”

The pet name surprises me—it is not something he ever uses if we are not alone. “Not everyone,” I mutter, raising the bottle of cider, all too aware of Toland watching me and of Ward watching him.

Toland finally looks away, busying himself stuffing the remains of our meal back into the basket. Without looking up, he asks, “What will you do once you’re outside?”

“Breathe,” Ward growls, putting an end to that line of inquiry. Toland flinches the least bit, and Ward sighs. “Trees. I miss trees. And earth under my feet rather than stone and iron.”

“We have never been,” I tell him.

There is a beat of silence. “If—” Toland narrows his eyes, head tilting to one side. Through his hair, the tips of his ears are visible, as upswept and pointed as our own. “How do you remember trees, if you’ve never been outside?”

I shrug, and Toland’s eyes fix on my bare shoulder. “There is forest aplenty in the Summerlands.”

That distracts him from my skin. “You’ve been there?” He sits back, looping one muscled arm around his knee—I suppose that is what the joint is called. “I guess you don’t know if it’s different from here. The woods here, I mean.”

My brother and I exchange a glance, and curiosity triumphs over reticence. Ward leans forward. “You have never been, then? To the Summerlands?”

Toland shakes his head, mouth tight, and right then I am overcome by a jaw-cracking yawn. “You need to sleep—we all do,” Toland says briskly, scrambling onto his feet. His wrapped hooves produce an odd echo when he walks to the pile of bedding and pulls out three pillows and more blankets, tossing them over to us. He does something to the light, adjusts it so the room is just short of absolute darkness, and pushes the door almost all the way closed.

Ward and I spread the blankets out and settle under them. I shove my coverall the rest of the way off, unable to stand wearing it while I sleep. Even if someone should surprise us here—although I cannot imagine who would—I can fight naked just as easily as I can clothed. Ward has done the same, and he wraps himself up against my back, his arm around my waist and my arse cradled by his thighs and groin. Not our usual position, but I am too sleepy to wonder why he has switched tonight. Across from us, Toland is a dark hump under his own blankets, and I see the faint shine of his eyes.

I am on the border of sleep, sliding into the dark, when Ward’s hand travels the short path from my navel to my cock. He cups my balls, lifting them and wrapping his thumb around the base of my suddenly interested shaft. A little squeeze down below accompanies his warm breath on my ear, connecting the two with a thin line of heat. His tongue traces the curve of my ear, licks inside and retreats so he can set his teeth to my earlobe and bite down. His fingers wander up and down my cock, teasing the hooded crown until I cannot help but squirm backward, swallowing a frustrated moan.

“Do you want him?” Ward’s voice is more air than words. “Want his hands where mine are? His mouth?” He grips my shaft and tugs, action and words bringing me all the way to the aching edge. “Or do you wish to mount him while he takes me?” My cock leaps in his fist, wetting his fingers. A nudge, and his length—just as hard as mine—is trapped between my thighs, rubbing slowly along my hole and my taint, leaving a slippery trail. “Or maybe both of us pleasuring you—me inside you, and you in his mouth.”

When I buck, he hums, lips vibrating on my neck. Should I deny it? I cannot, not when my body swells and throbs at the images his whisper conjures

up for me, not while it is clear how much the idea of Toland and me together excites Ward. He is moving faster in the vise of my thighs now, his hand pumping me to the same tempo. “I want to watch you.” His breath burns my ear. “I want you to take him, and then mount me while I am covered in his spend—”

My own breath hisses between my clenched teeth as I come, shuddering in helpless reaction to the pictures in my head and Ward’s slick palm. He coats my balls and my thighs with heat and wet, muffling his whimper in my hair. Just before sleep immediately drags me under, Toland makes a noise—a quivery sigh—and then I know nothing more.

Fuck my life.

The twins were fascinating enough on a monitor in all their grainy glory; the reality is so much fucking worse. So far, the only thing that’s kept me from popping wood in front of them is reminding myself what’ll happen if they end up in Sennett’s clutches. I want them outside, away from here, and if that means I won’t ever see them again, well—better that than the alternative.

They haven’t asked me anything about the court, which may or may not be typical Fae arrogance, I don’t know. Then again, if they’ve spent all their time either in the Bright Court or the Summerlands—and if that isn’t a major mind fuck, I don’t know what is—they might not want to end up more or less where they were. Bright or Dark, court life is court life, with all the backstabbing and ass-kissing that goes with it.

On the other hand, I’m pretty sure the Bright Court isn’t as fond of torture, but what do I know?

Stupid to think the twins would be grateful to me for opening the doors to their prison—and by *grateful*, I meant it in an entirely sexual sense. Aylward knows how I feel about his brother—not that I would toss either one out of my bed, I’m not totally stupid—I’m just not sure if his suggestive comment was supposed to be cruel or a come-on. *Everyone likes Ned* could mean a lot of things.

In the dark, under the covers, I heard them take off those ugly coveralls. Now they were naked. *Fuck*. Eideard was facing me, and Aylward was right behind him. His eyes met mine, but I don’t think he sees in the dark as well as I can.

Eideard closed his eyes, his face relaxing, but Aylward was still awake. The covers rustled as he moved his arm, and then I saw him lick along Eideard's ear. My cock shifted inside me, thickening and pushing up along my stomach, damp with anticipation. Aylward bit down on his twin's ear, white teeth in the dark, sending half my blood south. Eideard—Ned—inhaled sharply, and after a moment he moved backward, closer to Aylward. The stifled sound he made tightened my balls and filled my cock until it poked me, hot and heavy against my bare belly.

“Do you want him?” Aylward whispered, and my body didn't care who he was talking to. I wrapped my hand around my cock, not surprised at how wet I was already. Being half-Satyr has its perks. Aylward kept murmuring—“Want his hands where mine are? His mouth?”

By now I was pretty sure Ward was talking to Ned, but I didn't give a shit. Especially not when I imagined what was going on under their blanket. Another whisper—“Or do you wish to mount him while he takes me?” Oh, fuck—my cock arched, spasmed in my grip, and I gritted my teeth until my jaw ached. “Or maybe both of us pleasuring you—me inside you, and you in his mouth.”

Their blankets rippled and heaved, and if Ward wasn't fucking Ned, then he was doing the next best thing. Ned panted, short and shallow, eyes closed, and my hand worked my dripping cock to the rhythm of his breathing. “I want to watch you,” Aylward gasped, and I didn't care who he meant, not with the coiling tension building in my balls and my ass, not while the muscles in my thighs strained with the effort of not moving. “I want you to take him, and then mount me while I am covered in his spend—”

That's it, all it took to roll me over the edge, and I knew when they both came because I could hear Ned's hiss and Aylward's muffled whimper over the roar of blood in my ears while I rutted into my fingers and the blankets. I was so drained I didn't even care about the wet spot, shivering through the aftershocks. Even though it was only my hand, it was still about the best sex I'd ever had; better, even, than the first time I watched the twins, my number one fantasy. Or it was.

It's going to kill me to let them go.

I wake up crusted with spend and needing to piss, an unpleasant combination of conditions. Toland opens his eyes as I crawl out of the bedding.

“I need to piss,” I tell him, in no mood to be nice about it.

He waves a hand off to the right. “First door,” he croaks. “The light switch is on the left.”

All right. I find the door and open it on complete pitch dark. He mentioned light, so I run my hand over the wall to my left, not entirely certain what I am looking for. There is a raised plate, similar to the ones in our prison, but those did nothing. I press on it anyway, and the room blazes with light. I clap one hand over my watering eyes and jab at the plate again.

A hand brushes mine away, and the light level reduces to a bearable level. “Are you okay?” Toland is close enough that the heat of his body warms my back. I lean into him, and he steps around me, into the room.

I wipe my eyes clear. “Yes.” There are four sinks, with mirrors, and the silvery things on the wall are familiar. They are iron, or at least have iron in them—not enough to burn, but I am careful not to touch them with bare skin. Toland stands before one of them, and I hear the distinct sound of liquid hitting metal. I choose the one farthest from him, and manage a sideways glance. Even soft, he is larger than I am, and I look away quickly and release my own stream. What I want next is a bath, or even a shower, but the room does not have anything like that, so a sink will have to suffice.

When I look back at Toland, his shaft has disappeared—and he catches me staring at where it was. Now that I know what to look for, up this close it is obvious that the hair hides an opening. Our eyes meet, his pupils flaring into wider horizontal ovals, and he ducks his head as he turns away.

“I’ll let you wash up,” he mutters and is out the door before I can say a word. Not that I have the least idea what I want to say. Last night... he had to have heard us, and while I did not care then, not with Ward whispering in my ear, now...? I find that it does matter, and I want to know—what, exactly?

The water that comes out of the tap is tepid, not hot at all, and it is beyond awkward finding a way to rinse my thighs and belly. Water is everywhere by the time I am satisfied, and now I am shivering. Back out in the main room, I drag my coveralls out from under the blankets and use them to dry myself. The idea of putting them back on again is repellent, but there is no other option, so for now, I wrap myself in a thin blanket. When I sit down on the pallet, Ward wakes up, grumbling, and staggers to his feet, heading for the garderobe.

I throw the coverall across the room, and hunch my shoulders when Toland raises his eyebrows. “I wish I had something other than that thing to wear—I hate it.” I reach for the basket, hoping for something to break my fast, and flip

back the linen covering. Frowning, I poke at the bundle inside, which smells of leather rather than fresh bread. When I draw the bundle out, I am holding a marvelously soft pair of deerskin chausses and a linen shirt. There is a sleeved hunting vest as well, in a soft brown to go with the pale gold of the chausses, and a wide belt with a silver buckle. Last, there are boots, nearly a match to ones I left behind, with stockings tucked inside.

My throat closes, and I breathe in through my nose, swallowing hard. “This is... more than I ever expected. And far finer than I could imagine.” The basket *sighs*, for lack of a better description, and when I reach inside a second time, there are more clothes—for Ward. “These are quite amazing,” I murmur, ignoring Toland’s wide-eyed startlement.

When I do look over at him, he is scowling. “All I ever got from it was bread and cheese,” he growls.

“Perhaps you should learn to flirt, then,” I growl back. His face loses all expression, all emotion, and before I know what I mean to do I am on my feet, grabbing his wrist to keep him in place. He is off balance, ready to turn and leave, and I hold on until his arm relaxes. “All I meant is that honey is better than vinegar sometimes. And things like to be appreciated.”

Toland breathes out, and I realize my thumb is exploring the bones of his wrist. “I have very little practice,” he says, disengaging from my grip. “It’s never been... necessary.” His voice is flat, and he will not meet my eyes. I want to know why, and take a step closer. Toland’s head comes up like a startled horse, and I do not like the wary look in his eyes, not at all.

“Are those clothes for me?” Ward asks, breaking my tenuous connection with Toland.

“Yes,” I tell him, “and if you speak sweetly perhaps there will be breakfast as well.”

Breakfast, as it happens, is bread and honey and a creamy cheese, with a brown ale to wash it all down. Afterward, full of good food, and dressed in proper clothing, the prospect of walking another forty lengths of corridor is not so dreadful.

Toland has been silent since we broke our fast, other than telling us that the basket will follow us on its own. He is in the lead as we walk, giving me ample opportunity to watch him—or at least the back of him. Ward is also quiet, although his hands are not. His fingers are in almost constant motion, brushing

his sleeves, his vest, the tops of his thighs. I understand why—real clothing somehow makes where we are and where we were even stranger. We do not belong here, and we never have.

Up and up and up we walk. There is no point in counting the turns, for Toland will let us know when we arrive at the proper place. Every corridor is the same. The air is flat and cool, with musty stone underneath. Ward and I smell of leather now, and Toland has his own scent—warmer, and sharp in my nose—so when the air changes, my nose comes up as surely as a hound's.

Nothing familiar—a subtle sourness with a bite behind it, a little stab to the back of my palate—and the scents multiply with every step, some fainter than others. Not Toland, it has been too long for his scent to linger, and what I am catching is wrong, not him at all. Lost in the messages on the air, I fall behind. Not far, but enough that I cannot reach Ward with my hand, and instinct holds my tongue. The double doors are ahead of me, and I follow Toland and Ward, lengthening my steps to catch them. There is something here, perhaps the nest of some animal, and I want to ask if Ward notices anything—

They have crossbows. That is my first thought. They have crossbows, and I have nothing, not even an eating knife.

Chapter Five

Of all the things I thought could happen, being ambushed wasn't one of them. I didn't even have time to yell at the twins to run. Then again, given the crossbows—six of those—running would be a really truly bad idea.

Sennett stood between us and the doors to the outside, grinning. “You're such a good boy, Tolly. Bringing me such pretty presents.” He swaggered over to me and caressed my cheek, grinning even wider when I twitched. Even after all this time, I couldn't help myself—although usually I'm more careful.

“My lord.” The two words were reflex. Sennett patted my cheek and strolled past me, hands on his hips, and I turned—slowly—to keep him in view. He'd brought eight of his bully boys with him, six of them armed with crossbows. I should probably be flattered, but mostly I was flat out terrified. Not for myself—I was way past that.

“You must be Aylward and Eideard.” Sennett sounded congenial enough, and even though his back was to me I could tell he was grinning.

The twins could have been statues for all the expression on their faces. “You have us at a disadvantage,” Ward said after a heartbeat. “Should we know you?”

Sennett stiffened. “I am Earl Sennett. I rule in the Court of the Forgotten, and this”—he waved one hand—“is my domain.” Neither of the twins said a word, although Ward inclined his head and raised his eyebrows. Ned stared at him, unblinking, and Sennett spread his arms. “And you are my subjects.”

“We are sworn to the Bright Court,” Ward said slowly.

“Ah, but they're gone,” Sennett purred, all smug satisfaction. “And they left you behind as a gift—a peace offering. A very pretty peace offering, I must say. Such a shame Tolly has had you to himself all this time. Still, bringing you up here has saved me quite a bit of walking, even though I would have thought Tolly would know better.” He turned his head to look at me directly, and I breathed in to keep the chill out of my lungs. “No matter. We'll all go home now and celebrate.”

Fuck.

“Celebrate.” Ned didn't make it a question.

“Of course.” Sennett smiled at me, full of promises that would end in blood. And screaming. “A proper introduction to my court is in order, after all. Come—the sooner we start, the sooner we can begin.”

Sennett swept past all of us, out the doors, with his two chief toadies behind him. Ward and Ned fell in next, followed by two more. I went after them, the remaining four flanking me. My mind was unhelpfully blank—there was no place to go, and no way to outrun the crossbows. Maybe the twins could go invisible and get away—why the fuck hadn’t I warned them about Sennett?

All this time, going down to check on them—what tipped Sennett off? I hadn’t told anybody what I planned—I knew better. One whiff of my intentions, and Sennett would have anybody close to me in chains right off. Anybody who said they would never squeal, no matter what, obviously hadn’t been tortured.

I never gave all that much thought to the other court—why would I? They are not Fae, and not my concern. Ward and I are only half-Fae, that is true enough, but we were raised in the Bright Court, raised to be our father’s heirs—and were never allowed to forget what a signal honor that was.

The eight lackeys are just that—they are not the danger here, crossbows aside. I cannot pinpoint their races, for like Toland, they are not one thing or another, but a curious blending. Tall, at least my height, and well-armed. Their skin is every color from pale gray all the way to brown and green, and some have hair and some do not. No claws that I can see, and no horns. Their bony heads with sharp cheekbones make me think mostly Goblin blood.

Sennett, though—he is at least part Fae, judging by his fair hair and green eyes. Very little Fae, I would wager, and some generations back. His lean build and attenuated fingers could be from a number of races, and I am loath to guess. If I am wrong, I might under- or overestimate him, so better to wait and watch. The most telling thing—for me, at least—is that Toland fears and hates him in unequal measure. My brother and I had good enough reason for caution among our own kin, but hate never entered into it at all, and we never outright feared them.

It is something to ponder as we walk—up, again—although part of me counts the turnings as we go. I mean to come back this way, and the sooner the better. Sixteen lengths of corridor go by, with open doors at every fourth one, and then one more, ending in a larger set of closed double doors. Two of the

guards—for that is what they are—open the doors and stand by them as we pass. Sennett leads us into a vast space filled with the busy echoes of tools and voices... which all die away when he appears.

“Attend,” he says, waving at Ward and me. “We have guests.”

Every eye in the chamber is on us, and not one of them is a pureblood. I dare not turn, not with Sennett watching, his gaze as cold as a hunting hawk’s. On the edges of the crowd are a few Dwarves who might be full-blooded, and a Brownie or three, but the rest? I could never imagine the interminglings I see—are there so few of them that their only recourse is another race? And are these all that are left, here in this place?

Ward catches my eye, my own caution reflected in his flat expression. In this, we are one—wait and watch before we make good our escape. We have no intention of joining another court, and certainly not this one. Sennett is making a speech, decreeing a feast and a celebration to mark our presence among them. Nothing in his words seem extraordinary, so why does a ripple of unease run through the assembled court, as visible as waves on a lake?

Sennett smiles at us, all teeth and no geniality at all, and bids us welcome. Ward smiles back, one predator to another, and says, “We are unfamiliar with your guesting customs. Are we to be offered a chance to bathe and refresh ourselves before this feast commences? Or is that not your way?” My twin does not curl his lip, not quite, but his disdain is clear.

“If you wish a bath, a bath you shall have.” Sennett manages to imply that bathing is for lesser creatures, softer ones. He claps his hands. “Rilla—” A female with a good dose of Brownie in her heritage sidles out of the crowd. “A bath for them.” To us he adds, “Go with her, she will show you the way.”

An opening in the wall leads to a metal stairway, and the iron sends a faint tingle up through the soles of my boots as we go down a level. We come out in a corridor filled with warmer air and cooking smells, and follow the female—Rilla?—into a tiled room.

“There’s no bath,” she says, hands on her nonexistent hips, “so don’t go getting your hopes up.” Her skin is the brown of a ripe acorn, and her coarse hair is only a shade darker. She barely reaches my breastbone, but her bare arms display ropy muscle below powerful shoulders. Not a house Brownie, then, perhaps she is a *Urisk*—one of those who dwelt alone and only approached farmsteads at harvest time. “There’s showers, though, and plenty of hot water and soap—make yourselves free with that, aye?” Her wide, thin-

lipped mouth flattens as she looks us over. “You’re not expecting me to launder that lot, are you?”

“No,” Ward says firmly. “We will take care of ourselves.”

Rilla snorts. “Right. When you’re done, head back up to the hall—or do you need me to guide you?”

“We can manage on our own,” I tell her, trying not to growl at her impudence.

“Right, then. I’ll be off.” Out she went, leaving the door open. Ward and I exchange glances, eyebrows raised. No doubt someone is listening in—at least that would be true in our court. No need to say that we need to escape, or that we need to be on our guard, for those things are a given.

We strip quickly, and when I look around to find somewhere dry to leave our clothing, the basket is sitting unobtrusively in the corner farthest from the showers. “You are so clever,” I whisper. “Keep these dry for us.” I lay my clothes inside it, and do the same with Ward’s.

The water is deliciously hot. As much as I want to linger under the spray, it would be imprudent and possibly dangerous. We wash our bodies quickly—separately, with no offer of mutual touch—and dry off with towels that are a match for the ones in our prison. I think they are meant to be fluffy, but too much washing and a good bit of age have left them nearly threadbare.

Linen shirt, chausses, soft wool stockings, boots—each layer both comforts me and somehow sharpens my sense of peril. I slip on the vest, smoothing the shirt underneath, and wrap the belt around my waist. There is something inside the vest, on the left side. My fingers tell me it is a blade, snugged into a sheath sewn to the lining of the garment. I fasten the belt, watching Ward as I do, and cannot tell if he has made a similar discovery. Ward nods as he settles his own belt in place, and leaves the room. When I glance back, the basket is gone.

Chapter Six

There were worse things than being whipped. Hot pokers, pincers, pliers, knives, mallets, clubs—burns and broken bones took longer to heal. After a whipping, a wash and a bit of ointment and you were good as new, plus or minus a few scars. The big whip was the worst, but Sennett limited himself to a dozen strokes. Mostly.

The trick with him was to know when to scream. Too soon, and you just pissed him off. No screaming pissed him off, too—and then he'd get creative. I figured out that somewhere between eight or nine strokes was the sweet spot for him—I paid careful attention whenever Sennett strung somebody up, especially after I fucked up the first time it was me chained to the overhead crossbar. A little catch in my breathing after the eighth stroke, a whimper just before the ninth one, some really good noises on nine and ten, and he'd stop at eleven or twelve, hard and panting. If I was lucky, and timed it right, he'd fuck somebody else there and then, maybe finish himself off on my back. I'd even blow him if it meant he left my ass unplowed—he never lasted long, and come washes off, same as blood.

Sennett ignored me after the twins went off to wash, and I made myself relatively scarce. Honestly, I thought he'd have me chained up there and then, as sort of an appetizer. And that way I'd be on view when the twins got back. He didn't though, just went and sat on his so-called throne, and I helped set up the trestle tables and benches for later.

By the time Ward and Ned came back, pitchers of ale and cider were already making the rounds, and most of the court was assembled. Sennett gestured the twins over to him, and I couldn't get closer without making it obvious I wanted to listen in. When I did get a chance to wander over by the dais, all I caught was the end of things.

Ward said—with absolutely no inflection—“We were unaware of any such bargain. Also know that we have some quarrel with our kin in this matter, and will take it up with them when we are able.”

“They're gone,” Sennett said, “and the door is closed behind them. You'll have to open it again—if you can even do that.”

“That may indeed be beyond my ability,” Ward responded, all smooth politeness. Maybe it was just me, but all I heard was a lot of empty bullshit from him. Carefully empty bullshit.

There's a saying about letting a camel into a tent—I've never seen a camel, but I get the general idea. In this case, the Fae were the camel, and the tent was the Summerlands—home to the Elves. The Fae came through from wherever they were from, and battled the Elves more or less to extinction before they found the way here, into the Human world. Elves, Fae—as far as the rest of us were concerned, they were the same, but don't tell them that.

Not that you can tell the Elves anything. They're gone. Dead.

Which left the Fae in control of both the Summerlands and access to it, what we all called *the door*. I'd never seen it, but as far as I knew it had been open more or less forever, allowing the Elves easy passage between this world and theirs, and conveniently letting magic from the Summerlands spill out. Through. Whatever. Anyway, all the other magical creatures could borrow the Elven mojo to increase their own native talents. That was the upside. The downside was that the Elves had been here so long, all the races depended on that borrowed mojo, and what do you know—it turned out that fucker Darwin was right on the money.

A year and a half ago, on Halloween, the Fae packed up and left, headed through the door and shut it after them—leaving the twins behind, locked in their prison. Barden and Frewin, the two Fae lords who'd dumped them here, hadn't exactly promised Sennett that the twins could open the Summerlands again, but they dropped some big-ass hints to that effect. Ever since, Sennett had been absolutely obsessed with the twins and getting some magic back. Granted, his plan involved keeping the twins locked up, no threat to him—if they found a way out and opened the way to the other side, fine—the important part was that we would have our magic back. And—maybe especially—staying in the Summerlands meant you lived more or less forever.

Sure, I wanted access to the Summerlands just as much as anybody else. Before, I could glamour Humans into thinking I looked just like them, and make just about anybody want me—that's what Satyrs do. Now? No hiding what I was, and for the past eighteen months I had no control over who desired me. Sennett being a case in point, and nothing I could do about it short of running away and living like a hermit. Sometimes that seemed like an excellent idea.

Right then the food arrived, platters and bowls thunking down on the tables. Everybody grabbed a seat, me included. Sennett put the twins on his right and left at the high table—better than me. I sat next to a troll with enough bulk

to screen me from view. Two of Sennett's minions, Rigg and Parry, sat across from me, studiously pretending they weren't watching me.

They were Goblins, nearly purebloods, a rarity these days. Rigg was handsome in his own way—his mottled green skin had a pearly sheen, and his dark green hair grew in a spectacular floppy Mohawk, long enough to trail down to his waist in the back. Aside from the coloring, his face could pass as Human, with green eyes, high cheekbones, a sharp nose, and a generous, full-lipped mouth. Parry, on the other hand, was the dark gray of a pencil lead and nearly bald. What hair he did have was shaggy and coarse, a dirty light gray, and his skin looked like it didn't quite fit right. My nickname for him was "Zombie Boy", which he hated. Mostly because I had to explain it to him, and especially after we watched *Night of the Living Dead* and somebody—not me—thought it would be hilarious to serve him sheep's brains for dinner.

I ate without tasting anything, and knew the instant Sennett found me with his eyes. My mouth dried out, my tongue thick and useless even after I drained my ale. We all sat on benches—Sennett was the only one with a chair—and the sound of wooden legs scraping away from the table sent a flash of ice across my skin.

"We have guests," Sennett said as he stood up, projecting his voice over the mumble of conversation. Instantly, everyone went silent—no one wanted to be a target. I could've told them it didn't matter tonight—I was pretty sure I was on the menu as dessert. "Aylward and Eideard, formerly of the Bright Court." The twins watched Sennett with a kind of lazy intensity, and Ward made quick work of filling his and Ned's cups. They raised them in Sennett's direction, and nodded.

Sennett smiled at me, and all of my fingers went numb. "As such, they don't know how things are here, and I wouldn't want them to get the wrong impression. So, Tolly my lad, why don't we give them a demonstration?"

I want this meal to be over. Sennett has tossed out too many shards of information, and I need to hold on to them until there is time to fit them together. I have fallen back into the role of silent observer, playing the waiting hunter while Ward flushes our prey. If I thought Sennett had told us all we needed to know, I would kill him and be done with it—in the scramble for power afterward, Ward and I could slip away, blood-price be damned.

Sennett introduces us to the court with scant courtesy, and it is all I can do not to draw my hidden knife at the not-so-subtle threat that follows. The blank

resignation on Toland's face is clear warning that whatever is to come, it has happened before and will no doubt happen again.

Toland walks around the tables into the open space in the center of the room. He pauses, shoulders slightly hunched, before shedding his vest and tossing it to the side. His back is to me, and the light catches the silvery lines of old scars, a map to somewhere I do not want to go. My breathing never changes, and I make no sound even as my one hand curls around the edge of the table and grips it hard enough that the tendons crackle with pain. I do not dare to look at Ward.

"Let's show them how well you listen, aye? I don't think we'll need the chains." Sennett is enjoying this, if the smoothness of his words is anything to go by. He pushes up the close-fitting sleeves of the odd shirt he wears, displaying lean forearms. His skin has a faint dull bronze cast to it, not quite golden, showing him to be at least part Goblin. Full Fae are the color of pearls, a perfectly pale white with the faintest hint of iridescence in the moonlight.

Toland breathes in, his scars shimmering like a spider's web, and takes another step forward. He raises his arms to grasp a metal bar suspended overhead, and the chains securing it to the ceiling trill sharply.

"Turn around," Sennett says, using his index finger to describe a circle in the air. Toland obeys the order, and now he is facing Ward and me. Facing us, yes, but not seeing anything outside of his own head, I believe. "That's better." Sennett holds out a hand, and a female—another Fae cross—scurries to set a coil of woven leather in his outstretched palm. He shakes it out to its full length, letting it slither along the floor. A whip, but not anything like a huntsman's, with its rigid stock and short lash. This one is fatter where he grips it and as long as my outstretched arms, perhaps longer, tapering to less than the thickness of my little finger at the far end. The popper is leather and very thin, thin enough to match the lines etched on Toland's back.

Toland is stretched to his full length, balanced precariously on his split hooves. His legs from his hips to his knees are nearly vertical, and the same from there to his hocks. If he sways forward or back he will lose his footing.

"Tolly knows better than to question a direct order from me." Sennett flicks the whip along the floor, gauging distance, I suppose, his eyes bouncing from Ward to me and back again. "I rule this court, and every one of my subjects understands what that means." This time, his arm moves faster, purposefully, and the whip curls away from Toland and then back. I hear it crack, and all

Toland does is exhale. “I can give pain, or I can give pleasure.” The whip drags along the floor when Sennett steps in behind Toland, his eyes fixed on Ward for some reason. I do not look to see what it is. I clench my teeth as Sennett draws the whip up between Toland’s legs, rubbing his stones, and gives a snap of his wrist so the rest of the whip dangles in front of Toland in a parody of a limp rod. “So very willing to give me whatever I ask for. Not much good with a female, my Tolly, but happy enough to play one when I want a taste of something tight and hot.”

My hand goes for my knife—and stops. Sennett smirks, misreading the movement. “Tight as a Selkie, and twice as sweet for always being willing. And talented with his mouth—he’s well trained.”

Toland opens his eyes, staring straight at me—or maybe that is a trick of the angle, for his eyes are blank holes. Whatever he sees, it is not anything in this chamber. Sennett steps back and wields the whip again, curling it around and leaving a wheal on Toland’s side. That is two. Twice more, sharp cracks, and Toland does not flinch, does not do anything more than sway forward the merest bit. Two more cracks, and Sennett’s arousal is clear to see, hard and straining against the fabric of his dark trousers. He reaches down, fondles himself, and I see how this will go, what will happen soon.

No. No, no, no—For a moment, I swear I spoke aloud, but it was not me.

“Is there a point to this?” Ward says into the pause between strokes, the menace underneath the bored drawl clear as glass. To me, at least. “If he is as willing as you say, what is the point of using the whip?”

Toland blinks, and his eyes widen. He has lost that strange calmness, and panic seeps in to replace it. “The point,” he says in a hoarse voice, “is that it gives *him* pleasure.”

“There—” Sennett cracks the whip, and Toland grunts. “You see? Tolly understands. And so do you, don’t you?” The last is directed at me, with a meaningful glance at my lap. I know he thinks I am excited by this, and it takes a great deal of effort to keep my face blank and disinterested when what I want to do is far more violent. “Keep me happy, and we are all happy. It’s very simple.”

Ward swings his feet over the bench and stands, strolling over to Toland. “And yet—” From where I sit, I watch my twin cup Toland’s sac in his palm, head tilted while he keeps Sennett in view. “For all your talk of willingness, he does not seem to want you at all. Or does that not matter?”

Sennett's eyes glitter, and dark color mottles his cheekbones. "All that matters is obedience."

"A whipped hound may still hunt, but that is nothing to be proud of." Ward moves until he is between Toland and Sennett, and the purpose behind his movement finally occurs to me. I need to focus on him and not my own disgust and anger. "You are not fit to—"

Sennett raises his arm, and I hear the crack before I see what happens. The end of the whip is around Ward's wrist, and his hand is around the whip. Ward yanks, and I am on my feet and running, knife in my palm. Sennett yells a single word before I get more than two strides, and something big and heavy hits me from the side. My knife draws blood—I can smell it—and then a gray-skinned arm wraps around my throat and cuts off my air. I stab again, and wiry fingers crush my hand. I am not stupid enough to want to struggle after that—dead, I am of no use to anyone, and crippled is not any better.

I cannot hear anything over the roaring in my ears, and I cannot do more than choke on my own breath. My knife is gone, my thumb pulsing in a way that bodes ill for using it in the near future. I go where I am dragged, neither helping nor hindering, vaguely aware of Ward cursing nearby. His curses continue while we are taken out of the main hall and down a side corridor that smells of disuse and chilled stone. I roll when I am shoved, and find myself in darkness.

Sennett had us thrown in the room he used for a cell—I'd been in here a time or two, early on. Ward is still cursing when the door slams, and I just lose it, there in the pitch black.

"*Shut up*—are you fucking stupid?" My voice bounced off the walls, and I faced where I thought Ward was. "Why the fuck did you do that? I was *fine* until you opened your fucking mouth. *Fuck.*" I wanted to kick something. Hit something. "What the fuck were you thinking?" The wheals on my back and the one on my side were nothing compared to the cramp in my gut right now, and I couldn't stop shivering.

Ned's hoarse voice startled me—he was right next to my shoulder. "We were thinking that we would prefer not to watch you whipped and raped. Or were we mistaken—are you nothing more than a willing hole for him to use whenever and however he chooses?"

My fist connected with some part of him, and Ned grunted. I wasn't sorry. At all.

Ward scuffled closer, and his hand trailed briefly down my arm. "Why?"

"Why what?" If he wanted to know something, he'd better spell it out.

"Why you?" Ned asked. "Or does he spread his favors around? And why does no one stop him from abusing you?"

"If anybody speaks up, or tries to stop him, they'll end up taking my place." Neither of them said a word, and I sighed at having to explain the obvious. "Rigg and Parry—the two who dragged you in here—make sure that happens. Not because they give a shit about the rest, or me—It's just—" Ned's hand came to rest on my thigh, and I forgot what I planned to say. I swallowed and ignored the way his thumb ruffled my hair. "I said no once—ran off and hid. So Sennett picked somebody at random, chained them up and flogged them. Benay was... I don't know, Goblin and something else... skinny and wiry. He didn't make a sound, and Sennett kept going. He—Benay's ribs cracked, pierced his lungs. That's why he didn't scream. He died before Sennett stopped."

"And that is why it has to be you?" Ned growled.

"Yes," I hissed. "Better me than someone who can't take it."

Ward cleared his throat. "Better that someone should kill him."

"And who would replace him?" I pointed out. "No one wants to rule here *except* him. Why do you think he's still in charge?" Neither of them said anything, and I explained. "Every year, when it's time for him to step down, everybody else refuses the crown. Once—one time—somebody else did take it, but it was still Sennett calling the shots."

"How long has he ruled here?" Ned sounded shocked.

"Twelve years. Well, eleven years, eleven months, and eleven days. Another month and a day, and we'll all go through the act of pretending to elect someone else." I shuddered—those celebrations were the worst.

Ward leaned in until his shoulder butted mine. "Then we shall have to kill him by then," he said cheerfully.

Chapter Seven

Part of the problem is that we have no weapons. I dropped the knife, and neither Ward nor Toland has anything we can use. Strangling Sennett or snapping his neck is chancy, requiring at least one of us to get in close. Poison is out. Drowning is out. Suffocation takes too long. Every suggestion I make is either impractical or impossible, according to Toland.

“One would think,” I say from between clenched teeth, “that you wish to keep him alive.”

“I don’t want anyone else to get hurt.” Toland is invisible in the dark, but I can feel him moving, rocking slightly, and his breathing is rapid and shallow.

“That is not a valid argument,” Ward points out. “Of course someone is going to get hurt.”

The door opens with a screech. I shield my eyes from the light even as I rise to a crouch. Ward is on his feet, so is Toland, all of us facing the doorway. I recognize the Goblin who took me down and bare my teeth at him. He raises his fist, holding something too small to be a weapon, and grins at me.

“Fuck,” Toland says, right before two silvery wires fly at me. One hits my upper arm, the other bounces off my vest. The pain is instant and sharp—a buzzing bite—and my back hits the wall. From the look of surprise on the Goblin’s face, I am meant to be more bothered by whatever he has shot me with. I rip the little clip off my shirt sleeve, ignoring the vertigo as I straighten up.

The other Goblin is not idle. He slings a loop of chain around Ward’s neck—the links are not big, but they are iron—and Ward hisses through clenched jaws. Without a word, the Goblin drags Ward out the door. The other one follows, slamming it shut in my face, leaving Toland and me in the dark again.

Of all the things Sennett could have done, taking my twin is perhaps the cruelest. I reach out and my hand brushes Toland’s arm. “Where will they take him?”

“No fucking idea.” He moves away from my touch. Using my fingertips for guidance, I follow the wall around until I am across from the door. There, I slide down until I can sit on my haunches, arms around my bent knees.

I wait, thinking of nothing—if I let my mind dwell on where Ward is and what might be happening, I will go mad. We should have stayed where we were, never ventured beyond our prison. Eventually, Ward would have found a way out and we—

I catch myself when the wall supporting me disappears, and open my eyes. The room I am in now is lighter, hewn stone rather than the strangely regular coarse blocks of our prison. I stand, running my hand along the cool stone all the way to the corner. Past that wall, overlapping it in the Human realm, is another wall, and that one is interlaced with iron, allowing no passage. The next wall is the same, iron inside the stone, but the next one... No iron. I put my hand to the door. Not *the* door, this is an ordinary one, a wood counterpart to the gray metal one in the other world. It opens when I ask it to, and the hallway beyond is dim and quiet.

This place is part of the Summerlands. I know that by the trickle of power filling all my empty spaces, and my heart pauses before it breaks into wild flight, wingbeats hitting the inside of my chest. *How* needs to wait; I need to see if these corridors will lead me to Ward.

Slipping back to the Human world, I cast around in the blackness until I find Toland and grab his wrist. Without any ceremony, I slip back through, taking him with me.

“What the—” He stops when I clap my hand over his mouth. His eyes are wide, and his nostrils flare above the edge of my little finger.

“Quiet,” I murmur. “I do not know who can sense us here.” He follows when I cross the room; I do not give him any choice. I open the door, and we both step out into the dim hallway. Toland inhales, jerking his arm out of my grip—and disappears. “*Yn fytyn*—” Biting off the urge to curse, I slip back.

Toland stands in the middle of the hallway, staring at the closed metal door. “How did you do that?”

Wrapping my fingers around his arm, I yank him back to the Summerlands and shove him through the doorway, back into the room. I let go, and his hooves scrape and clatter as he scrambles away from me. “Toland—”

“If you can do that, why the fuck didn’t you try it earlier?”

“We cannot pass through where there is iron in the walls.”

“Iron? There’s no—oh. Rebar.”

I don't know what that is, but his tone suggests agreement. "The wall around the door has no iron. I can go through, and take you with me, but you cannot let go of me. I do not want anyone to know we can do this if I can help it—" I chewed my lip. "Unless you have already told them."

"No. He—knows I watched you. It was his idea, to spy like that. But I never said... anything."

I swear his blush is visible in the dark. "So. Shall we try this again? The big hall should not be far, the problem will be staying hidden once we find it. I can slip halfway, enough to see things, but I cannot do that for long. Not with two of us."

"What if someone comes to check—"

"I cannot stay here while he has Ward." Perhaps my vehemence surprises him, for he does not say another word when I take his wrist and pull us both out of the Human world. I wonder what he sees, if it is the same corridor for him, but we have no time.

I move us as fast as I dare, following the intangible skein binding me to my twin. Down a curving stairway, Toland's hooves echoing as we descend, the smell of chill stone and dust in my nostrils. The great hall is as desolate as the rest of it, and Ward is... there.

Hugging the wall, I slip back through, long enough to see—

This time, Toland claps his hand over my mouth, keeping me silent. His other arm is around my ribs, and good thing, for I had let go of his wrist. His skin is warm against my back as I shudder, eyes squeezed shut while I try fruitlessly for a measure of calm.

Ward is in chains, shirtless, arms stretched up and manacled to that metal crossbar. No blood that I can see—although the iron will raise blisters before long.

I open my eyes, and we are still in the other vacant hall, the veil between the worlds shielding me from Ward. "Tell me what to do," Toland whispers in my ear, freeing my mouth, and I shake my head.

"The chains—" That is as far as I get. Toland wraps his other arm around me and holds me upright while I swallow the urge to scream. When I can breathe again, I say, "I cannot do anything while he is wrapped in iron."

"Then we need to go back and wait," Toland tells me, and that is exactly what we do.

The other plane, world, whatever the fuck it's called, was creepy as all fuck. If that's the Summerlands, why the fuck would anybody want to live there? It's dim, for one thing, stuck somewhere either right before sunrise or right around sunset, and scary-empty.

Ned got us back to the storeroom we'd been locked in earlier, and once we were back inside he retreated out of my reach. I debated leaving him to freak out alone—I was still pissed off. I got it, though, sort of. If Sennett knew they could do *that*, he'd wrap them up in chains and torture them until he got what he wanted from them. I never understood why Sennett sent me down to spy on the twins—and after the first couple of times, I didn't care—because if they actually knew how to open a door to the Summerlands, it made zero sense that the Fae left them on this side of it.

"I mean, if the whole point was to lock the door and throw away the key—metaphorically speaking—then why does Sennett think you two can open it again?" The sound of my own voice startled me.

"Because we can. Or at least Ward can." Ned sighed.

"So why—oh, fuck. The... the binding thing. On your wrists."

"Yes." He almost sounded cheerful. "The geas kept us from remembering, but now...?" He hummed. "Now we should be able to open it easily. But if we do, what will—" He broke off as the door swung open, blinding both of us.

Rigg shoved Ward through the opening and slammed the door behind him. I scrunched my eyes closed, orange and red afterimages floating in the dark. Off to my right, Ned was cursing—not in English—and I could smell blood. And come. The only word I understood from Ned was "Sennett", and something that sounded like "marrow" and "lath".

"I am not broken," Ward snarled, speaking English again, and Ned hissed at him like a cat.

"Near enough." More cursing followed, cut off by a noise I couldn't—*oh*. Someone breathed in sharply, and the odd little click was the end of a kiss.

"So," I said, trying not to imagine anything. "What do we do now?"

Ned's voice was grim. "We leave."

Once Ward could stand, Ned insisted we go right away. "Ward will find the way out, and I will follow you," he told me. "You keep him on his feet, and do not let go—I cannot take you with us and carry him at the same time."

After we started moving, Ward shook off my supporting arm and laced our fingers together, wrapping his other arm across his ribs. His clenched jaw and the way he breathed—sharp and short, through his nose—were the only other signs of pain.

I don't know what I expected—the exit to the outside was several levels down, and I sort of figured the two worlds were parallel. Not so much, it turned out. A spooky corridor, one stone spiral staircase slippery with dust and lacking any kind of handrail, and we came out into a cobbled courtyard. Overhead, the sky glowed an intense blue, that deep indigo you only get right before sunset. The moon hung just in view, and it wasn't the one I was used to. I don't even know how to explain that, except I knew in my gut it wasn't the same moon that shone down on the planet I grew up on. No stars. No clouds.

We all ducked around a corner into a stone passageway—dead end. In front of us was a fence made of metal bars, stretching from the stone ceiling overhead to the cobbled floor. Beyond that was an improbably massive set of wooden doors, with a slightly less massive tree trunk held across them in metal brackets. We weren't getting out that way.

Back into the courtyard. Ned hissed and pointed, and the three of us went to the right, across the courtyard into a narrow open passage between two buildings. At the end of the passage was a small door, small being a relative term. The other doors were big enough for a tank to fit through, while these were maybe car sized. Ned darted around us and put a hand on Ward's chest. He said something too low for me to hear, and Ward shook his head.

“It will take too long,” Ward said. “Someone will notice.”

“Notice what?” Ned's voice dropped to a growl. “They have all the talent of a turnip. I shall be quick about it.”

With that, he pressed up against Ward, hands roaming over the bare skin of his brother's back before settling with one between his shoulder blades and the other resting lightly over his ass. Ned breathed in through parted lips and then out through his nose, slowly. For a moment, nothing happened, except my hand, the one holding on to Ward, got warm. Then it tingled, pins and needles, a line of pinpricks flowing up my arm to my shoulder and exploding into fire when it reached my back.

I yelled and let go of Ward.

Instantly, I was somewhere else—the big hangar that still smelled faintly of diesel. Nobody was there, and I knew for a fact the cameras didn't work here.

We only had so much power to go around, and working the water pumps and lighting took most of it. An instant later, Ward literally stepped into view—he was invisible, then visible, just like that—grabbed my arm and jerked me out of the hangar, back into the passageway.

The small door was open, with Ned propped on the wall next to it, eyes closed. Ward pretty much shoved him through the doorway, dragging me behind them, and let go of me immediately. The world went from indigo twilight to middle-of-the-night darkness, and then I tripped over Ned and nearly broke my fucking neck.

The time between losing my balance and hitting the packed earth stretches out forever, giving me time to twist, tuck my head, and try not to bite my tongue. Once I am down, I open my eyes and stare up at the alien sky while I remember how to breathe. A skein of silver glitter almost obscures the blackness—those are stars, more than I have ever seen, an unimaginable number. So very pretty. Between them and the fat moon, this world is incredibly bright to my dazzled eyes.

I grunt when Toland kicks me, realizing it was an accident only when he falls down next to me. A moment later his hands roam my face, my neck, my chest.

“Ned?” The urgent way he says my name sends a tide of heat along my skin. His hand settles on my belly, and I drag it lower, arching up into his palm. His hand disappears as he scrambles away.

Propping myself on my elbows, I grin up at him, licking my lower lip. “Come back here.”

“Ned.” The flat way Ward says my name is not nearly so pleasurable. “Leave him be.” He offers me a hand, hauling me onto my uncooperative feet. I sway—the ground is vaguely unstable. How very unpleasant. “You are drunk,” he tells me. When I shake my head, he sighs. “You healed me—this is what always happens when you try that.”

“Feels good,” I point out, leaning into his side. He does not smell very nice, but his skin is warm.

“Yes,” Ward agrees, shoving me away before I can lick his neck, “and you would like everyone else to feel good, as well.”

“Yes.” I grin at him and Toland in equal measure. That is it exactly. My twin can be so very clever. Toland is watching me the way a mouse might watch a cat, and I am disappointed. Maybe I should—

Ward pulls me away before I touch Toland, sighing heavily. I try again, and Toland shies away, waves a hand at the trees nearby.

“We should get out of here—I have someplace we can go.” He narrows his eyes at me, and I glare back, frustrated. “Do you need me to—”

“Lead on,” Ward says. “We can manage.” His confidence is touching, although I might have disagreed. And would have, if all my concentration is not taken up by staying on my feet and walking. Perhaps I am a bit muddled. There was a path, of sorts, and Toland walks it with the ease born of familiarity. I want to see the stars again, but when I tip my head back, Ward smacks my cheek.

“Do that again, and I will let you fall.”

“You would never.” I know he would not—Ward is loyal. But I left him in those chains. How could I have done that? “I should have gotten you away from Sennett,” I tell him, needing him to understand. “We made it all the way to the hall, but there were the chains, and I—”

“I did not expect to be rescued.” Ward gives the hand I have draped across his shoulders a squeeze. “Not once I saw the chains. I trusted that you would heal me after, and you did.”

“Sennett needs to die.” I said as much earlier, but it bears repeating.

“Yes, he does. And we shall find a way to do it.”

We are both silent after that, following Toland through the evergreens for what might be miles. The path winds down and then up, wriggling along, and I have no sense of direction at all here, out in the Human world. We step out from under the trees at last, the moonlight turning the broad stream before us into a dappled silver ribbon. The euphoria from earlier is fading, and all I want to do is sit down.

When Toland stops, I think he only means to rest, perhaps drink. Instead, he picks his way across the stream, stepping from one flat rock to the next. I manage the crossing without Ward’s help. Toland pauses again before ascending a low hillside, picking up a medium-sized rock and removing a piece of metal from underneath it. It is only when he stands directly in front of it that I see the door—pitted metal, the flaking paint disguising it admirably. It is set

into the low hillside, very much like the entrance to a Fae mound. The door opens with barely a sound once Toland unlocks it, and he steps aside to wave us inside.

The interior is larger than I expect, and clean. Toland does something to produce light before closing and barring the door. The floor and walls are smooth, the same strange stone as in our prison. Toland unrolls a mattress and tosses blankets on top of it while I look around.

The light comes from a lantern of sorts, and reveals a sturdy wooden table with two benches, along with a metal cupboard. “This is safe for the moment,” Toland says, sitting on one of the benches. “No one knows about this place, so we can lie low while we figure things out.”

“Is this how Humans live, then?” I ask. I do not know why the question is amusing.

“No.” Toland’s mouth twitches, and he is obviously fighting laughter. “Just me. I think the military used it for storage. It’s not great, but it works for when I want to be alone.”

Ward shivers, teeth chattering, and Toland gets him a blanket. Hesitates. “The two of you can share the mattress. I’ll just roll up in a blanket.”

“Why would you do that?” I ask. “There is more than enough room for all of us.”

“Because—” Toland ducks his head, color washing his cheekbones. “I don’t—I mean, you have each other, and I’m...” He trails off, shrugging one shoulder. I don’t understand at all.

Without a word, Ward lets the blanket fall and takes off his boots. Then he stands, undoes the drawstring of his chausses, slipping them down over his hips until he can step out of them. He tosses them on top of his boots. I follow his lead, taking off my vest and shirt and tugging off my own boots.

The faint glow from the lantern is enough to show me Ward, kneeling naked on the pallet. I strip off my chausses and lay them with the rest of my clothes, and he runs a hand down my flank. When I face him, he rises up on his knees so he can rest his cheek on my belly, hands idly petting my buttocks and thighs. I smooth his hair back, enjoying the slow wash of hot blood through my balls and cock. He scrapes his teeth across my hipbone, follows with his tongue. My cock gives a happy bounce as it fills and lifts. I open my eyes when Toland whines, and catch his wrist before he can move out of reach.

Toland shakes his head, eyes wide like a startled horse. “I should—”

“Kiss me,” I suggest instead of whatever excuse he intends to offer. “Or Ward. Or let us kiss you.” When I tug, he takes a stumbling step closer. “Do you not want to taste me?” His pupils widen to perfect huge ovals, and I glance down. His balls tighten, and now I see the space above them swell and curve until a hint of paler smooth flesh appears. Carefully letting go of his wrist, I run the backs of my fingers under those taut globes and up, finding a promising hardness. When I glance at his face, he leans in, hesitating at the last crucial moment.

I close the distance until our mouths brush, and push my tongue out in search of his. Ward chooses that instant to use his tongue on my balls, lifting them in one hand and licking them all over. I moan into Toland’s mouth as his tongue surges forward to meet mine, his breath hissing against my cheek. His hands rise to touch my jaw, my shoulders, hesitant despite the hard thrust of his tongue and the low growl vibrating in his throat.

His taste is cinnamon and honey and smoke, bread fresh from the oven and tart apples, every single good thing I have ever eaten or sipped all together, and his scent is teasingly familiar—the same hot brine and herbs I know from breathing in Ward’s arousal. Toland groans, and I break our kiss to see why.

Ward is still lapping at my balls while using one hand to tease Toland’s half-hidden shaft. Humming in anticipation, I drop to my knees and press my face into the crease of Toland’s thigh. His pelt is silky-rough on my cheek, and so very warm. I know what I want, and rise so I can put my mouth to better use. He groans and shudders as the first swipe of my tongue draws him out all the way, his foreskin peeling back as his shaft curves up from his belly in a fat arc. Ward joins me, and we kiss around Toland’s weeping head, spit and spend mingling to make everything slick. One of Toland’s hands grips my hair, the other does the same to that of my twin, and his hips roll and tilt, sliding his shaft between our sucking mouths.

Ward and I each grasp the other’s cock at the same time, foreskins deliciously slippery. We barely get the chance for a few strokes when Toland drags us off him. Still holding our hair, he looks from one of us to the other, panting. “I want to fuck you,” he says. “Both of you. Who—?”

Ward is on all fours before Toland finishes speaking. “Me.”

Toland kneels—crouches—behind him, his knees spread wide, balanced on his hooves. He rubs his thumb around Ward’s hole, but his eyes are on me. He

offers up the fingers of his other hand, and I suck them eagerly, leaving them sloppy with spit. Ward bows his head and whimpers when those wet fingers pierce him, open him, and Toland nods at me. “Come closer.”

I end up straddling Ward’s shoulders, and Toland dips his head so he can suck me while he rubs his cock along Ward’s arse. His mouth is all heated glory, and I cannot breathe—there has never been anyone for me besides my twin, no other lover I wanted enough. My body is frozen in place, turned to stone, wanting to move, to thrust, so badly. I was the one who initiated this, and yet—

The taste on my tongue is bitter copper, and my shaft loses some of its mindless eagerness. Toland notices—how could he not?—and he tilts his head back to look up at me. I raise my hand, intending to pull him off, and before I can complete the motion, Ward’s strong, warm fingers curl around my ankle, and his thumb strokes across my skin. I breathe out, and my fingers come to rest on Toland’s hair, twining through it until I reach the curve of his skull. He needs no other urging to take me in down to the root, his tongue and lips a sweet vise.

I cannot see the moment Toland enters Ward, but I feel and hear it. Ward’s fingers close like a snare on my ankle at the same instant the air leaves his lungs in a sharp grunt. Toland’s mouth goes slack as he moans, and I draw back, shivering as cool air washes over my slick shaft. I move so I can kneel in front of my brother, sinking down on my heels. His forehead hits my shoulder, his quickened breathing hot and then cold on my skin. “Slower,” I tell Toland, getting a good grip on Ward’s hair with one hand while I slide the other down his chest. Toland does as I ask, and on his next stroke I pinch Ward’s nipple and tug it firmly. Ward jerks against my grip in his hair, and Toland hisses.

“Again,” Toland says, baring his teeth when I comply. His hips swing forward and slide back as I pluck and twist—Ward’s nipples are pointed now, the flesh around them swollen. My own cock bobs and lurches, aching in sympathy, and my arse clenches, hungry for sensation. I bend my neck and bite the curved muscle between his shoulder and neck, closing my teeth around the meat of it. Ward bucks, his mouth opening, licking, sucking at my skin, and one hand flies back to grip Toland’s thigh.

“Fill me,” Ward growls, the words vibrating along my collarbone. Toland smooths his hands up Ward’s sides, adjusts his grip on my twin’s hips before shoving all the way in. He does it again, faster, and again, over and over until Ward’s every breath is a sob. I hold on to him, take his weight as he flies apart,

my jaws aching with the force of my own want. I am rocking, thighs spread, watching Toland as he shudders and pants, needing to touch myself almost as badly as I want someone else to do it for me.

When Toland stops moving, his head hanging down until it nearly rests on Ward's back, Ward lifts his head and kisses me—slow and languid—and all I can do is moan and fuck his open mouth with a frantic tongue. I do not care what happens next, all I want is relief.

“Ned.”

I open my eyes when Toland says my name. He is sitting on the pallet, furred thighs wide, his cock still hard and thick as it rears up along his belly. “We’re not done yet.” The expression on my face makes him smile, a slow, lopsided curve of his mouth. “Being a Satyr isn’t just having furry goat legs, you know.”

I crawl over him, flattening him as I go, aware of Ward right behind me. I want another kiss, and I get it, Ward's taste mingling with Toland's as I plunder Toland's open, eager mouth. The first press of Ward's tongue on my hole makes me jump. Toland holds my hips, keeping me from rutting on his belly while Ward stabs and circles and I moan and hiss. I do match my cock up with Toland's, managing teasing brushes that do nothing but make me more frantic. I lean back, gasping, and reach around to clutch Toland's cock. Ward knocks my hand away and does it for me, nudging my wet hole with the blunt head. I hold my breath and push, mouth wide with the effort, and Toland slides past my opening. The delicious sting spreads, burns, loosens my muscles, and I sink all the way down, my cock stiffening to impossible hardness.

Toland watches me—watches both of us—for Ward is wrapped around me from behind, his hands petting my chest and belly. I raise my hips and begin the dance that will take me where I need to go, and it does not take long for Toland to join in. We move together smoothly, urgently, and I arch my back, leaning into Ward. He rubs my nipples to aching points, running his blunt nails over them. I trail my fingers over my thighs, thumbs nudging my sac, but that is as far as I go, staring at Toland and daring him to take things further. I know he has watched Ward and I together—has he learned anything of what we like? What I like? He runs the back of his hand up my sticky shaft, pinches my foreskin and gives it a little tug. Oh yes. I am balanced between Ward's hands on my chest while his tongue flicks my ear and Toland stretching me, filling me, the heat of his cock competing with the heat of his eyes and the grip of his hand. The edge is there, just beyond my reach; I buck and squirm, losing the rhythm, growling through my clenched teeth.

Toland gasps and grunts, jerks inside me, thicker than before—everything in me tightens around him, wanting him right there when it happens again. His shaft kicks a second time, and I go over, grinding him deep and watching as he loses himself to sensation, his hands gripping my thighs.

It is a mess when we come apart—Toland is covered in my spend, the inside of my thighs are sticky, and Ward is unapologetic over the streaks of come on my back. Not that I care. Ward and I drape ourselves on Toland, one on either side, and I am half-asleep before I know it. Except I find I cannot sleep, after all.

Chapter Eight

I had sex with Ned and Ward. I had sex with Ned. And Ward. I had sex—

Ned patted my chest and rolled away, knocking my brain off the hamster wheel. Not that I've ever seen a hamster wheel, but I understand the concept. His eyes caught the light from the lantern and flared red, an animal's eye, the first time I'd seen it happen with him. With them.

"Is there somewhere to wash?" Ned asked.

I shook my head. "I didn't bring any water in. The stream—"

Ned grunted and patted my chest again. When he stood, my cock plumped in hopeful appreciation of the view. He laughed soundlessly, a flash of sharp teeth, and headed for the door. Ward immediately followed him outside, and I sighed. I might as well brave the stream, especially if more sex was a possibility. Taking a washcloth and some soap, I went out and joined them.

Even in the summer the water was ice-cold here. Downstream, it broadened into a pool about a foot and a half deep, and I used that to bathe on hot afternoons when the sun had a chance to warm it a bit.

Ned was already crouched in the shallows, grimacing as he sluiced water over his ass. I dunked the washcloth in the water and wrung it out, offering it along with the soap. Ned smirked at me over his shoulder. "You could wash my back," he suggested, turning his smirk on his brother. "The spend itches something fierce."

Ward stood up, the water running in silver tracks down his thighs and the moonlight washing all the color from his skin. "I can share you," he said, calm and hoarse, his eyes fixed on Ned. "I *will* share you. But I will not give you up."

Ned rocked as though he'd been struck. "Why would you even think such a thing?" His voice rose, broke, and his hands curled into fists on his thighs. He wobbled upright, facing Ward, and I considered slinking back inside.

"He wants you," Ward said, waving a hand at me. "I am simply..." He trailed off, breathing hard, and I resisted the urge to smack myself in the head.

"Wrong," I snapped, and both of them looked at me. "I've watched you for over a year, and yeah, I wanted Ned. But the two of you together is—is like the

most mind-blowing porn ever. Live. Better than porn, because—” I stopped because Ned was frowning. Ward, too. “What?”

Ned cocked his head. “What is porn?”

By the time I finished explaining—it would have been so much easier if I had a laptop handy—we were all shivering from standing in the water, but clean. I’d settled for washing my cock and balls, mostly because the hair on my lower body took forever to dry.

Honestly, it never occurred to me that Ward would be hurt—I don’t know why, but it hadn’t. Maybe because of the filthy stuff he had teased Ned with, knowing I had to hear him. I closed the door and barred it after we came back inside, trying to think of how to make Ward understand and coming up with absolutely nothing. I only had one towel, and I let them use it first. When we were all as dry as we were going to get, Ward stepped in front of me, looking determined, and I... kissed him.

For all that they looked alike, they didn’t kiss the same at all. Or taste the same. I concentrated on exploring Ward’s mouth, eyes closed and hands on his shoulders, feeling his pulse leap under my thumb. Unlike Ned, who’d fucked my mouth and made me want him to do the same with his cock, Ward wanted to be coaxed, teased. So I did. I gave his lush mouth all my attention, one long kiss after another, licking his lips, nibbling them, and my pheromones, or whatever the fuck they were, did their thing the whole time. Gift, curse—take your pick.

By the time our make-out session ended, Ward’s eyes were all pupil, and his lips were full and shiny. I brushed them with a thumb, curious if they felt swollen, and he flicked his tongue out. “I can’t help wanting Ned,” I told him. “I’d never try to take him away from you—that’s not what I want. At all.” That’s me—Mister Eloquence.

Ward nodded, and I stepped back. Ned immediately came over and hugged his twin, murmuring words I didn’t try to figure out. I decided to get busy making the bed so we could sleep, not wanting to be the one in the crusty spot.

A clean sheet, check the pillows, spread out the quilt and I was out of distractions. After turning down the lantern, I gave up and lay down on my side, trying not to shiver. A moment later the twins were there; Ned fitted himself against my back, and Ward tucked into my chest, my balls snug and warm between his ass cheeks. Ned threw an arm across me to touch Ward, pressing a kiss to my shoulder at the same time. I fell asleep smiling...

...And woke up hungry as a bear, all alone in a chilly bed. I rolled over, pulling the quilt up higher while I rubbed grit out of my eyes.

“The next full moon, I think,” one of the twins said. “Or just before.”

“No. Longer.” That was Ned. “What did he say—?”

“Eleven years, eleven months, eleven days.”

Ned smiled at me when I sat up. “We are planning the best time to kill Sennett. There’s food, if you want to break your fast.”

Everybody always goes on about how violent Goblins are, but I swear the Fae have them beat hands down when it comes to cold-bloodedness. “Can I eat before we plan a murder? And where’d the food come from?” All I kept here was some cans—tuna, baked beans, stuff like that—and I had a hard time picturing Ward or Ned using a can opener.

Ned’s smile turned shy. “The basket followed us.”

“You. Followed *you*,” Ward muttered. He showed me a plate. “What are these?”

I threw back the quilt, already salivating. “Waffles.”

Bacon. Waffles. Real maple syrup. Coffee. I’d be more pissed over the basket liking Ned more than me, but, you know... bacon. It’s hard to hold a grudge when there’s bacon involved. Once I filled up on caffeine and pork product, I was ready to plan a murder.

Best guess, the moon was two days shy of full, meaning Sennett would be recognized as the ruler of the court right around the next full moon—give or take a day, I wasn’t completely sure. The twins wanted to slip in the day or two before, hide out, and then confront Sennett when the whole court was assembled.

“Look,” I said, “I get the whole grand gesture thing, I do, but—What?”

Ned was shaking his head. Ward was the one who explained. “If we do it beforehand, anyone in the court could ask us for a blood-price. We have killed their ruler—they are entitled to that. If we challenge Sennett as part of the ritual—offer one of us to rule in his place—and kill him then, there is no recourse under the law. They must wait the year and a day, and then challenge us. Or kill us after and risk a feud.”

I sincerely doubted anybody in that court would play by the rules, but I could be wrong. I concentrated on the main issue. “But we have no weapons, okay? Forks aren’t really going to help.”

“There are swords, yes?” Ned licked bacon grease off his thumb.

I had to think about that. “I guess. The Goblins probably have them, but I’ve never seen them use one. Tasers—the thing they shot Ned with—and knives, sometimes. If they’re around, I don’t know where they’d be.”

“So we search.” Ned shrugged. “We can slip in and out, and all we need are three swords, in any case.”

Three? “No.” I shook my head. “I have no clue how to use a sword. Never have, never will.” You’d think I’d confessed something truly heinous—loving deep-fried puppies or setting toddlers on fire. “I’m not—”

“Where were you raised?” Ward burst out.

“Idaho.” That obviously didn’t help. “I wasn’t born at court,” I explained. “My father was Human, and he raised me.”

I swear, the look on Ned’s face was exactly the same one my father got studying animals. Used to get, anyway. “Tell us,” he said, so I did.

The condensed version is that my father was a wildlife biologist. He didn’t like people much, so he was the kind of scientist who got a grant to study, say, bighorn sheep habits in winter, which involved living in a cabin somewhere and freezing your ass off in between gathering sheep pellets. Good times. Anyway, my mother had decided to trade the Canadian wilderness for the Pacific Northwest—female Satyrs tended to wander around a lot. She crossed into Glacier National Park and headed west, aiming for the Kaniksu National Forest. The weather caught up with her in late fall, snow and ice, and my dad found her when he was out checking his wildlife cameras. When he told the story, he never said if he was shocked or surprised or what, and by the time it occurred to me that he should have been, I was a teenager and didn’t give a shit—I was all boredom and hormones, and stuck in Idaho.

The thing to know is that male Satyrs can fuck anything and anyone, but there won’t be any offspring unless they do it with a female of their own kind. Females, though, they can cross with any bipedal species—Humans, Goblins, you name it—and the baby will always come out looking like a little Satyr. More or less.

I was born a year after they met, and my father took on a long-term project, tracking elk, which meant we got to stay where we were. Right after I turned five, my mother got pregnant again. I don’t know what went wrong, but she went into labor and just—there was a lot of blood. My father buried her and the

baby, and things were bad after that. I don't think my father said five words in five months, and I pretty much ran wild in the woods that whole year. That next spring, things got better—my father set me up with books and stuff, taught me to read and do math, and I helped him with the elk study. We did okay until I hit puberty—I ran away for a couple of years, and then tracked him down again. I stayed with him until the end—massive heart attack—and then took his body and buried it with my mother's.

Explaining all this to Ned and Ward took forever, and I seriously edited the details to leave out stuff they wouldn't understand. Like homeschooling, and the Internet—sometimes, I swear I'd do just about anything to have a laptop again. Playing with leftover tech in the court is all I have these days.

By the time I finished, Ward was sitting cross-legged on the mattress, and Ned was stretched out with his head on Ward's thigh. "So," Ward said, frowning a little, "that is why you have no horns. Because your father was Human?"

"I think so. I mean, I have buds, here—" I raised my hands and burrowed my fingers into my hair, just above my temples. "They never grew any more than that."

Ned sat up. "How long has the court been here?"

I counted back, thinking hard. "Thirteen—no, fourteen years. I think."

"In that Human place. All that time." When I nodded, Ned propped his elbow on his knee and rested his chin on his fist.

Ward nudged him. "Yes?"

"There are endless places we could have been sent, other halls, and when they closed the door we would have been imprisoned just as securely—more so, perhaps, upon consideration. Why take the risk of leaving us *there*?" Ned made an exasperated noise when all Ward did was stare at him. "Did you not recognize it?"

"How would I? They brought us there—" Ward stopped. Blinked. "Oh."

Ned raised his eyebrows. "Exactly."

I had no clue what they were going on about. "Exactly what?"

Ned took a deep breath. "When we escaped the room Sennett locked us in, we traveled through that other court—the deserted one." He paused, and I nodded. "It is not often that one court is laid atop another in such a way. It

requires time, or power, or—and this is far more likely—the court in the Human world was drawn to that place because the other court was already there. That court—in the Summerlands—it has been deserted since the last battle between the Fae and the Elves.”

“Okay,” I said. “I’m not big on history, but didn’t the last Elf die like a couple hundred years ago?”

The twins shared a dark look. “Not so long as all that,” Ward said slowly. “The last one died right after we were born.”

Ned met my eyes. “Our court held a handful of Elves captive—all that were left. Our father took the only female as his consort, with the promise that if she bore him a daughter, he would release her and the others. She did not conceive for a long time—Fae are not so fertile. Their first child was a daughter—stillborn—and the second daughter lived for only a day. Finally, she bore twins, but they were male.” His mouth curved in something that wasn’t a smile. “Rather than try again, she killed herself, and the others followed her into death.”

I’ll admit, I was a bit slow figuring out the subtext. Or the big picture. Ned sighed and took pity on me. “We are those twins. Our father named us his heirs, and that caused a divide in the Bright Court—there were some who would prefer us dead rather than have us rule over them. Eventually that faction took power, and the price of our father’s life was that Ward and I were to be left behind when the Fae removed themselves from this world.”

Okay, that part made sense, sort of. “So what does all that have to do with that deserted castle?”

“That is Caer Trothwy, the main stronghold of the Elves. They locked it against the Fae—sealed it with magic and blood—and it has been empty since. There was a time some years ago, when our entire court rode up to the gates. We tried, and neither Ward nor I could enter. Everyone believed our half-Elvish blood was not enough, and the Bright Court deemed us useless.” Ned leaned forward. “And yet this time, I did enter. We all did.”

Ward and I do not come to blows, but it is a near thing. My plan is simplicity itself—return to Sennett’s court and enter Caer Trothwy. We can hide there until the moon is full again, spying on Sennett and searching for weapons. I do not believe the Elves stripped the castle bare, despite what we

saw. There will be an armory, things left behind. Two swords, and the element of surprise, should be enough to take Sennett down.

Toland takes Ward's side in this—although his objections are more about practicalities, and the plain fact that taking him with us is almost impossible. One of us would need to touch him at all times, and that will hamper us considerably. I do not like the plan we eventually hammer out over the next day and night, but it is the best we can all agree on.

In all of this, I have not forgotten the pain of Ward's accusation, and it festers around my heart.

Late in the afternoon before we intend to set our plan in motion, we leave Toland asleep indoors and go to the stream to wash. At this hour, the sun is behind the trees, and the stream is shaded and pleasantly dim. We strip out of our clothes, and I force myself to speak. "Do you truly believe I would leave you for another?"

Ward stands there on the bank, watching me without blinking. "I have always known I would not be enough for you."

I gape at him like a fish pulled from a pond. "What have I ever done to make you believe such a thing?"

"You—nothing." His whole face constricts, and my heart does the same. "It is—For so long, all we had was one another. I never thought we would—that you would—" He stops to draw a breath. "I cannot remember us *not* touching, and I cannot stand thinking that—that—"

I kiss him into silence. Were there times I wondered if we should not be lovers as well as brothers? I cannot lie—there were. But that was only when I paid heed to the sidelong glances at court, listened to the ill-wishes of those who tried and failed to lure us to their beds. I might have been happy to take another lover if Ward were with me, but that was never offered.

"If I could not have you, I did not want another," I whisper against his ear, holding his body flush with mine. "Even this—with Toland—it needs must be the three of us, or not at all. If you tell me, I will give him up, I will—"

"No." Now it is Ward's turn to quiet me with kisses. "I said what I did so he would know my feelings, know I will not let you go. I knew it might hurt you—but what binds us is stronger than a little hurt."

That is true, and I hold him tighter, not looking to do more than that as the poison in my chest leaches away. The sun sinks lower, and the air cools; if we

are to wash, we had best do it soon. Ward nips my ear, breaking the mood. “Wash my back,” he suggests, untwining from my body. Once we are both clean—everywhere—we go back indoors and wake Toland so he can appreciate the fact.

Chapter Nine

Back the way we came, save that this time it is nearly dawn, and I am coldly sober. The closer we come to the massive metal doors, the more my skin prickles. Ahead of me, Ward hunches his shoulders, and I know he feels the same anxiety. The roadway is clear, and the trees are filled with birdsong as we approach. Once inside the doors, my stomach cramps; I ignore it, same as I would before any raid or skirmish.

“Take care,” I remind Toland. “We will be back here on the second morning at the latest.” He kisses me and then Ward, his mouth lingering. He takes a deep breath before he steps back, the look in his eyes whipping the cramp in my gut to something near panic. “Do not do anything foolish,” I say sharply, and Toland grins at me.

“Go,” he says. “I will see you when you get back.”

Ward lays his hand on my shoulder, and we step sideways, out of the Human world and into the perpetual half light of the Summerlands. This *is* Caer Trothwy, of that I am certain. We stand in the passage leading to the inner ward, the central courtyard. The walls of the gatehouse rise on either side of us, pale silvery gray, and just behind us is the portcullis—iron, because the Elves had no sensitivity to iron and steel. Beyond that are the great oak gates, bound in bronze and iron, and barred by blood magic as well as a length of oak.

My twin and I turn around and walk into the inner ward, our footsteps the only sound. The cobbles under our feet are clean, no fallen leaves or drifting dirt, as though the years never touched them. Neither of us say a word, unwilling to break the long silence of this place. What we want is the armory, and it could be almost anywhere. We start sunwise, ignoring the stairs leading to the upper floors of the gatehouse.

First we find a warren of cubicles—quarters of some kind—and then we peer into the base of a tower. A guard room, perhaps, going by the cloak hooks and the table. Stairs lead up, but we go on to the next door along the inner ward. The granary, if the faint dust puffing under our feet is any indication. Next to that is an empty hall, with no clue to its use. Kitchen, pantry, buttery—all empty—and then we enter the Great Hall.

Four tables face three more across the width of the bare stone floor. No rushes, no tapestries. No weapons hang from the walls, much to my

disappointment. The central table of the three has three elaborately carved chairs, the centermost gleaming with gold leaf. Back out to the inner ward, then, to a small wooden door to the right of the Great Hall.

Slit windows in the walls let in enough light for us to see a stone slab supported by two stone plinths. The stone has been honed, and it gleams dully. On the slab are two swords. Ward steps forward and I stop him.

“Have a care,” I murmur—and wish I had not. The shadows grow in substance, pool darker in the corners, and my scalp itches with the certainty that we are being watched. Until this moment I would have sworn this place was empty of all life, but now? Whatever the Elves left behind knows we are here, and it is waiting.

Ward straightens his back, squares his shoulders, and strides for the stone slab. I reach it before him. We were given wooden swords when we could barely walk, so it is not idle boasting to say I have handled weapons all my life. And yet—and yet—instead of grasping the wrapped grip, my fingers slide past the guard and curve around the blade. There is no pain, not at first, just the sight of my blood coating the steel. In the span of a heartbeat, Ward picks up the other sword—and then hisses and nearly drops it.

There is no air in the room, no way to fill my lungs, and just as quickly the air turns to stone, crushing my chest, pressing every part of me until I am certain I will burst. My fingers clench the blade until metal grates on bone, my blood running off the blade and pooling on the table. Light explodes behind my eyes, the white-hot center of a forge, and I cry out—but I still do not let go of the sword.

The world cools around me as I blink away tears and relearn the art of breathing. My first thought is of Ward, and I fumble for him with all the skill of the newly blind. My left hand, the one I cut on the sword, does not hurt at all, not even when I grasp Ward’s hand.

He is there, and warm in my arms. “Ned—I am fine. Your hand—?” He uncurls my fingers, uses a forefinger to trace my unmarked—bloody—palm. “I do not understand.”

“I think that was a test. I think—” I swallow past the remnants of panic. “Perhaps it was a trap—we were able to get in because the two places were so close. I do not know.”

“But it let us go,” Ward insists. “Why?”

“I do not know.” Getting to my feet takes more effort than it should, and my chest aches when I draw a deep breath. “We need to see if anything else has changed—if the binding on the gates is broken.”

The air is different, warmer—that is the first thing I notice. The stone around us has lost some of its chill as well. Across the inner ward, near the wall to the kitchen, firewood is neatly stacked where before there was nothing. Without needing to speak, Ward and I immediately go into the Great Hall.

Tapestries line the walls, their colors vivid compared to the pale stone. The tables are free of dust, and even the stone floor is clean. There is a fire laid in the hearth, waiting to be lit. We walk from chamber to chamber, and the hair on my neck lifts—everything is *waiting*, somehow, suspended between one moment and the next, needing the barest push to set everything in motion again. If only we knew how.

I hung by my wrists in the center of the room. I gave up on screaming hours ago—there was no point, and my throat is too raw now, anyway. Sennett is sprawled on his so-called throne, his jeans undone and pulled down, his dick flaccid on his thigh, and two female half Goblins curled at his feet. Right now, about the only thing I’m grateful for is that he hasn’t fucked me, and that Ned and Ward are still out there, free. If they weren’t, I’m sure Sennett would have them strung up next to me as part of the show.

Because the idea was to make this last for a while, the crossbar was set low enough that I could stand, and as long as I didn’t forget and move too much, my shoulders stayed numb. My hands were okay—for now. Instead of the whip, Sennett had used a kind of flogger, and so far I wasn’t bleeding. Just bruised. Next would be the whip, I figured, and after that—I wasn’t thinking that far ahead.

Something rattled, like bones, and Ned was there—here—flicking into sight behind Sennett, wearing the weirdest armor I’d ever seen outside of a video game. He grabbed Sennett by the hair, yanking his head back and holding a wickedly long knife across his throat.

Sennett startled, flailing, and then froze when Ned nicked his skin. The dark-red blood rolled down Sennett’s neck in a thin line, soaking into the neck of his T-shirt. Ned’s grip tightened until he dragged Sennett half out of the seat, the edge of the blade pressing up under his chin. The females cowered where they were, not looking at anything but the floor, and Ned ignored them.

Chains clattered and chimed, and I dropped like an empty sack. My arms and shoulders screamed at the change in position, and I joined in the chorus. Fuck me—I'd have given anything right now to pass out and wake up when the pain was over. Ward crouched next to me, in the same weird-ass armor. Heavy Metal Samurai. Ward opened the shackles, which should have been a relief but wasn't—I tried not to vomit as the pain expanded to fill every cell in my body, grateful that my stomach was empty.

“We are taking what is ours,” Ned snarled from somewhere in the distance. “We shall return for the rest.”

Ward wrapped his arms around my shoulders, and the world slid out from under me, feeling like the instant before you pass out minus the hitting the floor part. Now we were in some sort of medieval kind of hall—tapestries and all—and I concentrated on not dry-heaving while Ward and Ned argued over my head.

“We will take turns,” Ned insisted, “one of us holding him here while—”

Ward stood up, tugging at me. “Help me get him on his feet.”

Oh, fuck no.

“Don't be a fool,” Ned snapped, and I could have kissed him. “He can't—”

“Just to the gatehouse.” Ward shoved a shoulder under my limp arm. Him I wanted to bite, and not in a sexy way. The pain in my shoulders, which had settled into a sullen molten throb, changed into a thousand pissed off scorpions all burrowing into my rotator cuff. Ward ignored my choked-off howl. “Do it—help me get him up.”

The two of them got me upright, standing on my own two feet. Mostly. I stiffened my back and braced my legs, and the three of us staggered into the same dead end passageway I remembered from the last time. What the fuck was the point of that?

“Now,” Ward said, “we go back.” Fuck me sideways—I had no idea where we were now and didn't give a shit, more concerned with not falling down as I gave in and dry-heaved, tears and snot running off my face.

“Get him clear of the gatehouse while I open the door.”

“Toland—” Ned cursed at me, panting. My head hurt, my guts hurt, my shoulders were filled with acid, and right then I hated him with every fiber of my being. I did it, though, I moved when he shoved me, appalled by the low

keening sound I couldn't stop making through my clenched teeth. The ground came up and hit my knees, jarring my entire body—my vision narrowed and grayed out around the edges.

“On his feet again.” Ward sounded grim, and I didn't give a shit. I couldn't do it. Wouldn't.

Ned backhanded me, cracked me across the face, and I growled at him, choking on the urge to hit him back. And I would have, if my arms worked. “Get up,” he snarled, saliva spraying. “You need to walk through on your own—we cannot help you. Just make it through the doorway, and you can lie down again. I swear to it.” His voice broke on the last bit, and my mouth went dry. “Please.”

I got up. No idea how, but I did. Ward backed up in front of me, guiding me—where the fuck had that door come from? It was narrower than it looked, and one of my shoulders hit the jamb—I inhaled so hard it sounded like a scream. I rebounded off the other side, and now my balance was gone, swamped by pain so incredible I needed another word for it. Then I connected with a stone floor, and my brain shorted out.

The last thing I heard was a door slamming. We were safe.

Soft bed. Pillows. Sheets. Not cotton, but not cheap-ass polyester, either. A quilt. I hissed at the ache in my shoulders—right. I knew what that was from. Sennett beating me half to death. I was fuzzy about what came afterward—I'd swear I imagined Ward and Ned popping out of thin air and rescuing me. In armor, which just went to show how out of it I was.

Lips brushed my forehead, and I smelled... chicken soup?

I sat up too fast, a huge mistake, and someone yelped when our heads collided. Fuck—dammit, that hurt. I cradled my head, cursing under my breath. The soft mattress under my butt didn't disappear, and neither did anything else, so I opened my eyes.

I was in a fucking castle. In a bed that made a California King look more like Rhode Island. With Ward sitting in a carved chair straight out of a history book, and Ned holding his head and squinting.

I squinted at Ned. “Sorry. Where the fuck are we?”

“Care Troth We,” Ned muttered, still probing his forehead.

That made no sense, and I said so. Ward spelled it out, which didn't help—and then I remembered the conversation we had before Sennett strung me up. “So how am I here and you're not touching me?”

“Ah.” Ward smiled, all teeth, and came and sat cross-legged on the foot of the bed. “It has been so long, I forgot the rules. Unless you are Fae—”

“—or Elven,” Ned added, joining us on the bed.

Ward nodded. “Just so. In order to stay in the Summerlands unaided, any other race must walk in, through a doorway. I think that once, it was also possible to for them to be carried in, on horseback, but as it was—” He shrugged. “We brought you as close as we could, and then I opened the door for you.”

“Did you—” I raised my eyebrows at Ned. “Were you wearing armor? And did you—you cut Sennett? Held a knife to his throat?”

Maybe the smug look on Ned's face should have worried me, but I didn't give a shit. “Yes to all of that. How do your shoulders feel?”

Shit. My shoulders. They didn't hurt at all now. “They're okay—how long was I asleep?”

“Not so long.” Ned tipped his head to one side, watching me. “Not quite a day. I healed you—”

“I'm sorry I missed that,” I murmured, and Ned almost smiled.

“I healed the worst of it, but you needed to sleep, after. We all did.”

“So—I guess you found weapons?” I asked, thinking about the armor and the really large knife.

“More than that.” Ward leaned forward, his eyes nearly silver. “We are not altogether certain, but whatever binding the Elves put on this place seems to be broken now.” He told me about coming back here, and the swords, and Ned bleeding all over the place. “After that, we could see it as it was—like this.” Ward made a gesture that encompassed the whole room. “We found the armor, and more besides, and then—”

Ned picked up where his twin left off. “Then we found you—or rather, we could not find you—and went looking.” The glint in his gray eyes was cold—and disturbingly hot. “I wanted to kill him.”

“I'll help,” I told him, and I meant it. “What do we do now?”

“We wait for the next full moon,” Ward said.

“In the meantime—” Ned crawled up the bed and kissed me until I nearly melted from the heat. Then Ward did the same. After that, they knelt, one on either side of me, and kissed each other. Ned’s mouth was swollen when he broke their embrace to look at me. “Watch.”

Chapter Ten

The moon disappears, night by night, thinning away to a bright sliver, sharp and curved. That disappears too, goes dark, and then reappears in reverse. I watch as it swells again, full and nearly round. The need to kill Sennett is a fever in me, a sickness, waxing along with the moon—every time I close my eyes, I see Toland in chains, and when I dream, Sennett’s blood flows over my knife in a flood rather than a trickle. I wake up smiling on those nights.

We have spent the days preparing, planning—how to enter, and how to escape if it all goes wrong. Ward and I practice at arms, for we are rusty after our imprisonment. Toland runs, explores the open fields around the castle, and sometimes we join him. The grass makes a fine bed, and lying together in the deep blue of the night is a sweet pleasure.

The only unexpected thing is the appearance of the basket—or what was the basket. The morning of the day after Toland woke from his healing sleep, we all smelled bread baking, and after the night we spent, we were hungry. Down we went, out of the gatehouse—our chambers occupied the upper floors—and across the inner ward to the kitchen.

I stood in the doorway and stared—counted three, four, five maids bustling about. One of them, older than the rest, turned and set her hands on her hips, and stared back. “I suppose you’ll want to break your fast, my lords. Right then—once we finish with the baking, we’ll bring it up to you.” Her smile was the least bit sly. “Will waffles and bacon be all right?”

“Who are you?” Ward asked.

“Well,” she said, “you can call me Basged. Your kin thought it a fine jest to turn me into a bit of wickerwork, but now that there’s a lord here, I’m back in my proper form, and my girls with me. I was that tired of being whisked here and there on whim, I tell you.”

“Our kin?” I frowned at her, and she frowned back.

“Aye, my lord. Your kin—and we’re that glad to have one of you back again.”

“Are you Elves?” Toland was wide-eyed, although part of that might have been the promise of waffles.

Basged hums. “We are, but not High Elves, like these ones. We are of hearth and heath, and not so much inclined to war.” She nods at Ward and me. “Begging your pardons, my lords.”

“We are only half,” I said.

“But on your mother’s side, and that counts for a great deal. If it didn’t, the stones would not have waked, not for all the blood in your body.” She waved us out of her domain. “There are others—but they’ll take a bit longer to come back. You just wait, though—it’ll all come right.”

I was bemused enough to do as she bid, and somehow, her presence in the kitchen took away some of the strangeness of this place. *There are others*—I hold that thought like a talisman, now, something to look forward to after the business with Sennett is finished.

When the time finally comes, I am armed and ready long before Ward and Toland join me by the doors to our Great Hall.

Toland is splendid in a padded tunic and chain armor, with a knife through his broad belt. The mail glitters when he moves, and the silver bosses on the belt shine like moons. He has a crossbow, the only weapon he claims he can wield with any talent. Ward’s armor is a match for mine, bone and metal plates over quilted leather. He understands—shares—my impatience to have this thing done, and wastes no time on pleasantries.

“Let us be off, brother.”

I nod and then glance at Toland. He grins at me, crookedly, and hefts the crossbow. “Let’s do this.”

Ward goes first, taking Toland with him through to the corridor outside the doors to Sennett’s hall. I listen at the doors, and what I hear—

“Something is wrong,” I whisper. Even when I make out what Sennett is saying—screaming—it makes no sense to me.

Before I can stop him, Toland grabs one of the doors, throwing it open. It bounces off the wall, and as one, the crowd gathered inside swing their heads around to stare. They part to let Toland through, and we follow him. For all our planning, this scenario never occurred to any of us.

“There—” Sennett points at us, his eyes bulging, vibrating with rage. “Is that what you would have in my place? I’ve had my cock up his ass so many times—” He never finishes because Toland raises the crossbow and shoots him

through the chest. Sennett crumples, and the startled expression on his face is a fine thing. He is still alive, and I cross the floor and stand by his head, knife in my hand.

“I hereby challenge Sennett’s right to rule this court.” My voice carries easily over the silence in the room. “Will any gainsay me?”

Silence. And then a lone voice says, “Nay. Be done with him.” A murmur rises in the wake of that voice, swirling into one word. *Nay*.

I reach down and lift Sennett by the hair, baring his throat. “And should I grant mercy?” A pause follows, long enough for me to wonder if we shall need those escape plans after all.

A female half Goblin, perhaps one of the ones Sennett had favored, steps out of the crowd, and she is weeping. “There’s no shame in it, not in my eyes,” she says to Toland, and to me she says, “No mercy. Let him have a taste of his own.”

I take a deep breath. “So be it.”

Chapter Eleven

Out in the field beyond the castle gates, the Beltane bonfire is laid and ready, waiting for a spark of magic to set it alight. Off in the distance, the sky is touched with the deep indigo that is our night here, and the full moon hangs overhead.

As the sky darkens, our court gathers by ones and twos, flocking around the pile of seasoned wood that is spicy with lengths of pitch pine and redolent of dried herbs. After Sennett was dead, we took everyone who was willing back through the gate with us that very night. Some stayed, some chose to go back—they know the gate will be open on every fire feast, and that they are welcome here. Most who stayed are those who cannot pass for Human and were weary of hiding; even after a year, the crowd on this eve is still a surprise to me in its infinite variety.

Ward and Toland and I wear what passes for court finery here—long leather waistcoats set with silver bosses worn over linen shirts, and deerskin chausses tucked into high, soft boots for me and my twin. When everyone is gathered, Ward and I mount a sturdy table off to the side, putting us above the crowd. Toland stands guard to one side, hooves firmly on the ground, and happy to not be a part of this ceremony—although his turn will come, much as he hates the thought of it.

“It has been a year and a day,” I call out, and everyone before us settles into silence. “And now it is time for me to pass this crown to another. No one has put forth a claim, and so I hereby declare that Aylward Unfath shall be ruler after me.” I take a deep breath, and lift the simple crown—heavier than it looks—from my head and hold it up for all to see.

“Aylward!” Toland bellows, stamping one hoof. The assembled court takes up the cry, and as they shout my brother’s name, I set the crown on Ward’s blond head. One held breath later the bonfire thumps to life with a voiceless roar, throwing sinuous shadows over us all even as it bathes us in heat and light.

Ward—King Aylward, now—raises his chin, the firelight gilding his skin and finding red sparks in his eyes. He nods to Toland and then takes my hand, grinning. We leap off the table back onto the turf, expecting the musicians to break into the first measure... and hear only surprised murmurs instead.

The crowd parts, revealing four beings I take for Humans. Three males and a female, if I were to guess by their clothing and shapes. One carries an odd gittern, another a drum of some kind. The female has a fiddle, and the third male has a drum as well.

“Is this—” The gittern player steps forward, biting his lip as he views the crowd. “This isn’t the Ren Faire, is it?”

Toland laughs, a sound he makes more often this past year, and bounds toward them. All four Humans take a step back. Toland, though, sweeps into an elaborate bow before them, and I can see by their faces that they are half besotted already. “It isn’t,” he tells them, “but musicians are always welcome here—tonight even more than usual. You’re welcome to play, if you don’t mind playing for your supper. And beer.”

“Well,” one of the drummers says, “I don’t know about them, but sure—I’ll play for beer.”

The female seems uncertain, and Toland takes her hand, pressing a kiss to the backs of her fingers. “What about you, darlin’?” he drawls, and Ward snorts. With his free hand, Toland offers us a rude gesture from behind his back.

“I don’t like beer,” the red-haired fiddler says, blinking. She licks her lips, blue eyes wide now. “What else could I have?”

“Anything you like,” Toland purrs—and with that, we have four new musicians added to our number. The Humans confer with the three Fae-Goblin drummers and the Urisk fiddler, and a moment later they are all smiling. The fiddlers begin, one and then the other, the gittern joins them, and then the drummers—the combined thrumming tugs at my heart and my feet in equal measure, and the night begins.

Ward and I partner each other for the first dance—round and round the blazing fire, our clapping hands and excited yelps adding our own percussion along with our stamping feet. We weave through the other dancers, left hand, right hand, left again, me going deasil while Ward travels sunwise. The crown on his head catches the firelight as he dances, making flames of its own—the old king fades as the new king rises. When the next song starts, Toland snatches my arm, and Ward laughs and leaves us to it.

We dance until we are breathless, and with each pass around the fire, the scent of Toland’s sweat fills my nose and leaves me dizzy with longing. I know

full well that this is his magic, his gift, but it does not make my wanting any less. The pair of us finally spin out of orbit from the dancers, promptly colliding with Ward. The cup of cider he offers cools my throat and heats my blood. I kiss Ward, to the cheers of the crowd, and there is no stopping now.

Toland leads us all off into the blue darkness, away from the fire, out into the green fields. We tumble to the ground like puppies, our hands finding buttons and buckles and ties. I lose my waistcoat to Toland's nimble fingers, and return the favor once I have done the same for Ward. I cannot be bothered to take off my boots, not with Toland's mouth on mine and Ward's lips against my neck. A confusion of kisses follows, breaths mingling, six hands gripping, fondling, urging.

"Take me," Toland growls into my mouth, and I am more than happy to oblige. He drops to his hands and knees, tilting his arse at an irresistible angle. Using one finger, I tease his crease, finding the smooth skin at its depth and tracing up to his entrance. His tail is raised, and I cannot explain why the sight of that one thing makes me moan with helpless lust. With my chausses around my thighs, I slick myself with spit, although I barely need it. As Toland always reminds me, there is more to being a Satyr than hairy goat legs. I breach him with my fingers first, opening him, delaying until he is pushing back shamelessly, begging me with his body. He is tight as a fist and fever hot, taking me to the precipice in a handful of strokes. Ward's hands are everywhere—under my shirt, on my arse—while he nips and licks at my mouth. I pet Toland's hips, my palms tingling as the silky-coarse hair warms my skin, enthralled by the give and take of our bodies and the way I can make his breath catch. This is a gift all unlooked-for, and even as I hover on the very edge, I swear to never take this—the three of us—for granted.

When I cannot resist the coiling pleasure any longer, I pull out, watering the earth of the Summerlands with my seed, knowing by his deep groan that Toland is doing the same. Silently, we both turn on Ward, rolling him onto his back with no ceremony.

"Out with the old, in with the new," Toland says, taking Ward's cock in hand—I cannot help myself, I am laughing. A heartbeat later, my lovers join me.

We celebrate Beltane properly—this place has been barren for far too many years, and it is our responsibility to bring it to life again. Toland leads the red-

haired Human fiddler away from the firelight, and Ward and I do the same with the Human gittern-player. The Human is endearingly shy at first, but we coax him into boldness and leave him boneless and sated in the field.

When Toland rejoins us, we take time to eat, and then we all three lead the next measure of dancing... and go on celebrating until the last embers of the Beltane bonfire are red and orange in the lovely indigo that is our night. Off in the distance, now the sky is touched with gold, and the full moon hangs low overhead. Here and there, a few revelers still dance—some on their feet, and some entwined on the ground.

We make our unsteady way back to the castle, mounting the inner stairs of the gatehouse to reach our quarters. Our bed. Even after the three of us have gone yet another pleasurable round, I am too restless for sleep. Leaving Toland and my brother asleep in our bed, I take another set of stairs up onto the ramparts of the gatehouse and lean on the cool stone, watching the sky fade to gray and gold.

If I try, I can pick out the Human musicians, playing one last tune with our own drummers and fiddler. The wall under my forearms vibrates as the gates below me swing shut, closed now until Midsummer. I sigh and turn away, suddenly, inexplicably sleepy.

In a little while, a few hours, the Humans will wake in a similar field, back in the Human world, with sore heads and strange memories, and write songs about this night, drawing others after them in search of the same magic. The postern door to our castle will be open for them—only a crack—when they come.

Just in case.

The End

Author Bio

J.J. Cassidy is counting the days until retirement, looking forward to being able to write full time without that pesky day job. She is a terrible blogger, and only posts anything when the guilt gets too much. She has two stories available through Dreamspinner Press, Wish List and Not Water Resistant, and two others through Amazon and All Romance eBooks—Handsome Beast and Dark Mirror. Her previous Don't Read in the Closet stories—Hard Dazed Knight, Complicated, and Dreaming of Fire, are all available for free through the M/M Romance Group's anthologies. She is always happy to hear from readers.

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