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MASTER OF SHADOWS  
A NOVELLA OF THE DARKYN  
LYNN VIEHL



a penguin group

**eSpecial**

from ONYX

# **Master of Shadows**

*A Novella of the*

*Darkyn*

**By**

**Lynn Viehl**

**For Ken and Karen**  
**Always something there to remind me**

**April 17, 1298**

"Out with ye, crow bait," the pale, sweating guard snarled as he dragged him across the moldering straw of the prison cart's cage. "Yer necklace awaits."

The torn, bloody condition of Liam's back and his battered limbs kept him from walking upright, but still the peasants lining each side of the dirt road leading to the town gibbet pelted him with rotten vegetables, clumps of manure, and their spit. Most of them looked as sickly as the king's guards, which explained their rage. He had given up trying to fathom why they had blamed him, a common poacher, for the plague that had swept through Sherwood. The jailer's whip and cudgel had beaten the caring out of him.

The gibbet, made of four old, toppled druids' stones around a lightning-struck dead oak, stood empty for once. A stained length of rope hung from the thickest of the blackened, twisted branches, and had been knotted into a noose at the very end. Liam had seen bodies of the condemned left to hang for months; they didn't fall until the local crows literally picked them to pieces.

Compared to his fate, that now seemed almost merciful.

Two more guards, armed with short swords, waited on either side of the stones. The horses they held by their bridles were big, bulky shire mares he had seen plowing a field to the north. He had hoped for a pair of swift hunters, but no, they meant to make him suffer until his last breath. Then, when it was finished, they would drop what was left of him in tar before hanging him from the gates of town.

The sun burned his eyes, as he had been imprisoned away from it for three months or better, and no one had given him so much as a candle stub to light his dark cell. They had stopped bringing him food when he had begun coughing, and he had thought the starvation would have finished him off, but no, 'twas just his bitter luck to have survived the sickness so that they might execute him. He didn't feel hungry anymore, not since his last beating, but he would have traded his soul for a drink of cool water.

"Let me through." A thin, dirty girl in a stained over shift and threadbare undergown pushed past the jeering villeins and threw herself to

the ground in front of the guard. "Please, marster, I beg you, give me leave to say a prayer wi' Red."

The guard kicked at her. "Away with ye, wench."

"Please." She looked up, tears making her pale eyes huge. "He were kind to my ma before she passed. He brought soup and chopped wood for her."

Liam swore under his breath. He'd told Clary to keep her distance, but she never listened. At least she hadn't called him by his real name—that would have made everything he'd suffered for naught.

"Let the slut bid her lover farewell," someone yelled, setting off dozens of shouted agreements.

"Pray you fast, wench." The guard picked up Clary by the back of her shift and tossed her toward Liam.

Liam brought up his hands too late to catch her, and his manacles became caught between their faces as she knocked him flat on his back. He almost bit through his tongue, and saw bright red blood streak down her chin.

"Clary, why are you here?" He pressed the shreds of his sleeve against the split in her lower lip. "You promised."

She bent as if to kiss his cheek, and whispered, "Your master is coming for you."

He almost laughed. "The Prince of Trees, rescue me? He cannot even save himself." He glanced down at her overtunic, smelled soot and rot, and his amusement vanished. "My God, girl. What have you done?"

"He needed the silver. The cottage was not mine, nor the mill. I had nothing else to sell." She tried to smile. "'Twill not be forever. You will come back."

She had sold herself into service to pay a madman to save a fool. Were he not so dry, Liam would have wept. "Aye, love. I will come for you." If not in this life, then in the next.

She yanked the cord from around her neck and pressed the small wooden cross hanging from it into his hand. "I will be waiting." She pulled him to his feet. "God bless and keep you, Red."

Liam gripped the tiny cross. At least there was one soul in all the world who didn't despise him—at least, not yet. When she would have drawn back, he held on to her hands and kissed her mouth, and for a long moment the world went away. When he lifted his head, he was almost glad he was about to die, for the look in her wide eyes would have haunted him forever.

The guard took hold of her and shoved her back into the crowd. A moment later she was gone.

"Attend me, all ye here," the bailiff shouted before he read from the scroll in his hands. "The man known as Mad Red has been found guilty of plotting and devising an uprising against his majesty the king, in a felonious and treasonable effort to overthrow the monarchy. In full knowledge of his own wickedness, he arranged for men of mercenary persuasion to act as accomplices, the very same men who came into England sick with the pestilence that has now stricken our land. Therefore, being devoted to the cause of justice, wishing to maintain and defend his gracious majesty, to tear out by the roots such heresies in his kingdom, to the best of our ability, and to inflict a fitting punishment on the convict according to both human and divine law, and to canon law customarily observed in such cases, the aforesaid traitor Mad Red will be hanged, drawn, and quartered within the liberty of the town as a clear example to his majesty's other subjects of how abhorrent is this kind of crime. So ordered by the Sherriff of Nottingham on this day, the seventeenth of April, in the year of our Lord one thousand twelve hundred ninety-eight." He rolled up the scroll and turned to face Liam. "Mad Red, have you any last words before sentence is passed?"

A fist-size stone struck Liam's temple, and his vision blurred as blood streaked down his face. "I'm no traitor or killer. Ask your wife."

The bailiff spit on the ground. "God have mercy on your black soul."

The hooded executioner, a tall, lean, grinning fellow with scarred hands, slipped the noose over Liam's bloodied head. "Red, if you are not too mad," he said in a low, husky voice, "I would beg your forgiveness."

He scowled up at the shadowed face. "Break my neck on the first draw, and you'll have it."

"What, and cheat these fine folk of this spectacle of justice?" The hangman cuffed the back of his head. "Do that and I'll be the next one to dangle." He produced a black hood. "Not to worry. It'll be quick, lad."

Liam closed his eyes. "Be done with it, then."

The black wool hood felt suffocating, especially when the hangman jerked the slipknot tight around his throat. He felt the screams he had fought for three months boiling up inside him, but he would not let them loose, not even if he had to bite through his own tongue to silence them.

The rope bit into his neck as he was yanked off his feet and dangled helplessly. He expected the choking, but not the roar of fury inside his head. Bright spots of eerie light danced on the insides of his eyelids as he felt his heartbeat slow. Just as the thick wool of the hood seemed to swallow his mind, something hissed near his ear and the rope snapped. He fell, landing with a brutal thud facedown in the cold dirt, his wrist snapping under the weight of his body.

The little wooden cross fell from his limp fingers into the dirt.

Next they will slice me open, Liam thought, gasping in precious air and trying to brace himself as rough hands jerked him up. He hoped that Clary had gone, prayed that she had, for she did not have to know this day that she had sold her freedom for nothing. He heard steel sliding from a sheath and went still, but he didn't fear the blades as much as the horses. He realized that his last moments on this earth would be spent in unimaginable agony. Any moment now they would hack into his body, tie it to the horses, and then drive them to pull it apart. His bones would crack and his flesh would tear—slowly—before it was done, and at last he could sleep. As the tip of a blade pressed against his belly, Liam realized something else, something that bewildered him.

He could no longer hear any voices at all.

## CHAPTER ONE

APRIL 17, 2008

"Know what the three greatest pleasures in life are, buddy?"

Will Scarlet glanced at the inebriated mortal and the sweaty, beefy hand he had dropped on his shoulder. "Sobriety, courtesy, and daily attention to one's personal hygiene?"

"Wrong." The drunk grinned. "Blondes, brunettes, and redheads." He leaned over and dropped his voice to a liquor-scented whisper as he pointed past Will. "See that one down there, the one in the pink? I've had my eye on her all night. She's been acting real particular and standoffish, but you know it's an act. She didn't come here to leave alone. She only wants a real man."

Will didn't have to look at the slim, stylish woman on the other side of the bar; he'd been watching her since following her and his master into this place. "Perhaps she's waiting for someone."

"Damn straight she is. Me." The mortal straightened and used his belt to hitch up his trousers. "Now watch and learn something, buddy." He staggered off toward the redhead.

Will followed his progress by watching the mirror behind the bar. During his mortal life, he, too, had pursued his pleasures—wine, women, and song—with the same dogged, oblivious determination. Had he not, he would not be sitting in this noisy, crowded nightclub, surrounded by bountiful measures of all three. He would certainly not be wishing for silence, solitude, and a cup of tea. He would be long gone and forgotten, a layer of dust in an ancient unmarked grave.

The glass of red wine he was neglecting, while of pitifully infantile vintage, was far superior to the thick, sour stuff he had drunk too much of as a youth. For all its clarity and sophistication, however, it had no spine to it. Perfumed water had more character.

Then there were the ladies, in which he generally had a considerable interest. No woman from his village would have dared display as much beauty or skin as the innumerable females milling about this place. Certainly women of this era were prettier and smelled infinitely cleaner, but like the wine, they, too, had little substance.



As for song...

Will turned to eye the three bards playing their electronic instruments with mechanical indifference. They cared nothing for the music they produced; that much was obvious. As for the one singing, had he screeched like that in public during Will's time, he would have been carted off as a madman.

The Bar with a View had only two merits, as far as Will was concerned: It was within walking distance of his master's city home, and it closed at two a.m. Within the next hour he'd see to it that Robin was suitably occupied for the evening and perhaps steal a few hours for himself.

Gilded emerald eyes looked out of memories he should have banished centuries ago. *You could stop. You could stay with me, and take me to wife.*

*It is too late for me now, child.*

*Then take me with you.*

Will rubbed his brow. Claris of Aubury had been dead and buried for centuries, and still not a day went by that he didn't think of her in some fashion. He could recall perfectly every word she had ever spoken in his presence, exactly as she had said them. He could sketch the sweet grace of her countenance in his thoughts whenever he closed his eyes. Sometimes, when he felt most alone, he thought he could smell her skin, and taste again that one, sweet kiss he had stolen from her.

*Take me with you.*

After Clary's mother had died of the coughing sickness, Clary'd had no one else in the world but him. He'd known that. But by the time she was old enough to marry, he'd been branded an outlaw. To save her from sharing his fate he'd left her behind, and in doing so sacrificed her and any hope of happiness. When he had become Kyn, he had gone back for her, only to discover he had lost her again, this time to her own frail mortality. The orphaned girl had died alone and friendless, her body carted away to be burned with the other victims of the plague.

Perhaps that was why she had lingered in his mind for so long. She had no one else to haunt.

"Anyone sitting here?"

A young female dressed in a dark business suit stood indicating the empty bar stool next to Will's, but she addressed another female sitting on the other side. He didn't care for her ignoring him, her dismal garments, or the tight way she'd pinned her honey-colored hair to the top of her head.

"Not anymore," the other woman said. "Go ahead; he's not coming back."

"Thanks." She placed a slim briefcase under the edge of the bar before taking the seat and waving a ringless hand at the bartender. When he came over, she said, "Coffee, black, please."

As she took out a mobile phone and began reading text messages, Will watched her. Cleverly applied eye and lip color and that torturous topknot of hair couldn't disguise how young she was. Her jewelry, a pair of simple gray pearl ear studs and a modest string of the same around her slim throat, seemed too drab.

To add to his annoyance, tonight she had sprayed herself with some expensive scent that women fancied made them seem more alluring. That vexed him more than mannish clothing; he liked the natural smell of a woman's skin.

She reached for the coffee the bartender brought her, causing her sleeve to slide back and reveal a small oval shadow on the inside of her right wrist. No profile had yet been etched in the center of her black cameo tattoo, nor would there be until she pledged her loyalty to the immortal Darkyn lord she chose to serve. Will had been hoping for the last six months that it would be the face of his lord, Robin of Locksley.

As she sipped the vile-smelling brew, she tapped something on the diminutive, slide-out keyboard of her phone—but she still didn't address or look at him.

Amused, Will leaned closer and spoke in an exaggerated American drawl. "Are you angry with me, sweetheart?"

"I'm not your sweetheart." She glanced up, impatient. "And why would I be angry?"

"Any number of reasons, I daresay." He watched as the bartender walked past. "So how shall I get back into your good graces?"

"You were never out of them." She leaned over and gave his cheek a surprisingly chaste kiss. "It's good to see you again, Will."

"You might have seen more of me"—he turned her face so he could return the kiss on her soft mouth—"had you come to my bed last night, as you promised."

"Work takes priority." Something flickered in her eyes, chased away by her smile. "You know how it is."

Officially Reese Carmichael was employed by Archer Enterprises as an advertising executive who promoted the various products and goods produced by the *Atlanta jardin*. Unofficially she served Robin of Locksley as one of his many human servants. Reese knew exactly what he and Will were, because she had been born into a family of *tresori*, mortals who had served and protected the Kyn for more than five hundred years. They had also trained her to do the same.

They had been casual lovers for the last year. All their busy lives permitted was a stolen night together once or twice each month, and most of the time Will was glad of it. Like him, Reese was strong and energetic, in the very prime of her life. Unlike him she would grow older by the year until her time to pass came.

"I do. All the same, I missed you." He picked up her warm hand and kissed the back of it before holding it between his cool palms. "So, what have you been doing that keeps you so damnably busy?"

"There's a regional sales conference going on this week for sporting equipment manufacturers and distributors." She made a face. "I had one of the last presentations of the day, and as usual the program schedule ran insanely late."

As she told him of her work, Will watched her face. Reese did not use the wretched beige-colored paint so many females did that made the face into an anonymous mask; for this he was grateful. She possessed exquisite skin, smooth and golden as warm cream, that took on a slight glow no matter what light played over it. Tonight he noticed it more than he had in the past, perhaps because he wanted so badly to taste every inch of it.

She glanced around him. "Where's his lordship?"

"Off in the shadows." He nodded toward Rob, who was sitting on the other side of the room and trying to intrigue the young red-haired female he

had lured to him. "He's rather occupied this evening." He felt her touch his sleeve. "Do you like my new shirt?"

"I've always loved that color." She smiled. "Not many men would be brave enough to wear as much red as you do."

"What's wrong with red?" Indignant now, he regarded his shirt and trousers. "'Tis a cheerful color. Father Christmas wears it."

"So do prostitutes." She chuckled and tapped his side with her elbow. "I'm just giving you a hard time. I like it; it makes a statement."

"So does your undertaker's suit."

"This, I will have you know, is the latest in unisex professional wear." She made a contemptuous sound. "Someday, when I actually own my soul again and don't have to worry about how I'm perceived by the old boys of advertising, I'm going to burn everything in my closet. Until then, it's nothing but dressing like I don't possess breasts."

"I'd burn now and worry later." In the bar mirror Will saw Robin speaking to the redhead. "I think I'm about to be relieved of my duties for the evening."

"Good. I need to talk to you somewhere quieter." She emptied her cup of coffee before she slid to her feet. "Come on."

Will didn't want to leave the club, but it didn't appear as if Robin needed him, and it was obvious that something was troubling Reese. She spoke and behaved with her usual careless charm, but tonight her smile didn't reach her eyes.

Fortunately he knew how best to chase away her worries.

Will followed her out of the club and into the maze of corridors leading to the elevators, the front desk, and the exercise room. When he saw where she meant to go, he caught her around the waist and guided her in a different direction.

She glanced down the short, empty corridor. "I think we'd be more comfortable in the lobby."

"Too many people." He took the hotel key card from his pocket and unlocked the day manager's office door. "No one will interrupt us in here."

With coy reluctance she went inside. "I'm working on the winter catalog, and I'd like to have the new line of composite bows photographed at Rosethorn." She retreated behind the manager's desk, placed her briefcase on it, and opened it. "I've never been out to the estate, so I'll need to spend some time there, find the most attractive setting for the shoot, that sort of thing. Can you arrange it?"

"Of course." Will secured the latch. "I'll take you on a tour myself."

"That won't be necessary. Why are you bolting the door?"

He turned and crossed the red-and-gold paisley carpet. "Guess."

She again feigned impatience. "I don't have time for this, Will."

"Do you not?" He backed her into the filing cabinet, catching her wrist and bringing her hand against him. She'd never made him this hard this fast, and he could see that it startled her as much as it did him. "What have you time for, then?"

"I need to go to Rosethorn." She shuddered as he kissed her neck. "Tomorrow night would be best."

"But we're here now." The pungent scent on her skin made him draw back and frown. "Christ Almighty, Reese. Did you spill a bottle of that perfume on yourself? 'Tis all over you."

"I was on the phone when I put it on. I probably went a little overboard." She glanced down as he began opening her jacket. "Will, don't."

If he didn't get inside her soon, Will thought he'd go mad. "As you wish, my lady." He dragged her down to the carpet, shoving her skirt up over her hips.

She tried to sit up as he bent down, and their mouths fused together. By the time he broke the kiss he had worked himself free of his trousers and was pressing into her softness.

"Bloody hell." He gritted his teeth as her body resisted him. "Relax, sweetheart. It's just me. Let me in. Let me love you."

Reese began to say something, and then she closed her eyes, her body arching up as he went deeper.

"That's my girl." Will eased into her, forcing himself to go gently rather than hammer into her. "Can you let me...There, yes, like that." He had breached her to the hilt, and held still to feel the faint flutters against his shaft as her body adjusted to him. He had always delighted in her warmth and willingness, but for some reason tonight she was as tense and tight as a new bride. "Easy, sweetheart. It's only me."

Will had enjoyed making love to her dozens of times, but never once had it felt as this did. She clenched around him as he drew out of her, dragging at him as if she meant to keep him buried deep. When he forged in again, tears spilled from the corners of her eyes.

He froze. He'd never forced a woman in his life, and yet here she was, soft and slick and warm around him, and weeping in silence.

"No," she muttered as he disengaged his body from hers. "Do it. Finish it."

"Not with you crying on me like that, sweetheart." He straightened her garments and his before he lifted her from the floor and put her on his lap. "What did I do? Was I too rough? Did I hurt you?"

"It's not you." She wiped the tears from her face with quick fingers. "I'm sorry. It's been a long time."

"Reese. It's been three weeks." He caught her chin in his hand and made her look at him. "You really don't want this. Damn me, but I thought you were jesting."

"It's my fault, not yours," she said, easing out of his grip and standing. "I'm just tired, that's all. I wanted it to be special. Another time, okay?"

Will couldn't tell if she was lying; the perfume she wore kept him from detecting the changes in her scent. "I'll call for a car."

"I brought my own." She tugged at the hem of her skirt. "Would you arrange for me to have access to Rosethorn tomorrow night?"

"On one condition." He took her hand in his, startled to feel how cold she was. "Will you forgive me for behaving like a brute?"

"There's nothing to forgive." She hesitated before she stood on her toes and kissed his mouth, her lips soft and damp. "I'll see you soon." She unlocked the door and fled.

Will considered following her, but the taste of her tears still lingered on his mouth. That and her strange reaction to his lovemaking had him in complete upheaval. She was his friend, his lover—how could his advances have shocked her? Why would she refuse him after they had found pleasure in each other so many times?

Reese's *tresoran* training included a thorough understanding of the ways of his kind. She knew how determined Kyn males became when they were aroused by a human female. Centuries of discipline and self-denial had taught Will to control his instincts and appetites, so she had never been in any real danger. He would rather fall on a bed of copper swords before he hurt a woman, mortal or Kyn, and yet...He suddenly realized something else that had happened, something he barely recalled.

In those stark moments as he had pulled her to the floor and put himself between her soft thighs, his *dents acérées* had stretched into his mouth, fully extended, eager for the hot richness of her blood.

This, when he'd fed well from the stores Robin kept at the penthouse before escorting his master to the club. His need for human blood, the only form of nourishment he could take, should not have returned until he woke tomorrow night. Nor should he have had such a primal reaction to Reese. In all the months they'd been lovers, he'd never once been tempted to feed on her. Tonight he suspected he could have drained her dry.

Had she seen his fangs emerge, and thought he was becoming enthralled? Was that what had frightened her so much? Worse than that, could she have been right?

Unsettled by his thoughts, Will returned to the nightclub, in time to see his master walk to the dance floor and take the red-haired woman into his arms. Rather than moving close to Robin, the female stepped back, deliberately holding him off as if she meant to maintain a respectable distance between them.

*Not for much longer, little mortal.* Will knew that a few humans had the natural ability to resist *l'attrait*, the scent shed by the Darkyn to lure and control those upon whom they fed. But no one could resist Robin of Locksley's talent, which charmed any mortal he touched. In a few moments,

the redhead would succumb to his master's ability and begin clinging to him like a thirsty vine.

"Are you here with anyone?" a hopeful voice asked.

Will barely glanced at the woman. "Yes."

"Oh." She began to pass him, but then turned back. "I'm sorry, I don't mean to bother you, but do you think your date would mind if I asked you to dance?"

Dancing would allow Will to get closer and watch the redhead's defenses crumble. Given Reese's rejection, the urge was a masochistic one, but he was also obliged by duty now to assure that the woman valiantly resisting his master hadn't been trained to do so.

"No, not at all." He grasped her hand and led her to the edge of the open space in front of the band. There he took the woman into his arms and finally looked at her. Her makeup, clothes, and hairstyle were those of an older woman trying rather desperately to appear younger. "What is your name?"

"Rosalyn." She ran the tip of her tongue over her top teeth before she smiled. "What's yours?"

"William." He shed a little scent, just enough to make her pupils expand. "Rest your head on my shoulder, dear lady, follow my lead, and listen to the music."

Rosalyn happily obeyed him.

Will didn't crowd Robin and his partner, but guided Rosalyn close enough so that he could overhear their conversation.

"It's pretty, isn't it?" the redhead was asking his master. "I think it was the only hit Spandau Ballet ever had."

"Spandau Ballet," Rob repeated. "I cannot say that I am familiar with them."

"Before our time," his partner said. "My mother loved this song." Her expression and the tone of her voice changed. "How did you know what I was drinking? Did you ask the waitress or the bartender?"



"Neither." Robin studied her face. "I could smell the ginger ale on your breath."

Will was obliged to lead Rosalyn around another couple, which took him out of earshot. He glanced back and saw his master bend his head, close enough to kiss the woman in his arms, but the mortal reacted by stiffening and drawing back.

"What the devil is wrong with that woman?" he muttered under his breath.

"I don't know." Rosalyn lifted her face. "Do you want me to go and ask her?"

"No, my dear." He knew better than to speak without thinking around a be spelled mortal. "You dance beautifully."

"Do I?" Her eyes brightened. "I come here twice a week, but no one ever asks me to dance. I'm too old for them, you see."

"Then they are fools," he assured her, "for you are lovely and graceful."

She breathed in deeply and turned her head slowly toward Robin. "Do you think he would dance with me?"

Will caught the deep, hot fragrance of bergamot, and turned her around so that he could see Robin's face. His master no longer smiled, but seemed wholly intent on the red-haired woman. As a beam of light flashed across the dance floor, it illuminated Robin's dark violet eyes, which now glowed like polished coins.

The only time Robin of Locksley's eyes turned to copper was when he hunted.

"If this is a practical joke, it's a good one," the mortal was saying to Robin. "Did Hutchins put you up to it?"

Will's master replied in a voice so low it sounded only like a low growl. He saw Robin glance toward the exit leading out to the elevators. He could guess what his master was thinking—he wanted to take the female to the top floor, where all the rooms were kept reserved for their use—but the redhead wasn't acting as if she were be spelled. In fact, she seemed utterly oblivious to Robin's state.

The scent of bergamot grew stronger, spreading out over the dancing couples and enticing their attention away from one another. Soon every mortal within twenty feet was staring openly at Robin and his partner.

"Oh, bloody hell." Will whirled Rosalyn through the bemused gauntlet of dancers to take her to the edge of the dance floor. Scanning the room, he saw an older man with a kind face sitting alone. "Do you see that man there?" When Rosalyn nodded, he said, "Go and join him. Talk to him. If you like him, ask him to dance with you."

"Join. Talk. Dance." She nodded and drifted away.

Will turned to look for Robin. Instead he met the gaze of the redhead, and saw open curiosity in her brandy-colored eyes. She kept watching him as she spoke to Robin, who finally gave Will his attention.

Robin turned until his partner's back faced Will, and made a pointed gesture of dismissal.

Will scowled in return. He didn't want to leave his master surrounded by dozens of be spelled humans, but he knew Robin badly wanted the woman, and doubted he would remain in the club much longer. Patience had never been one of Robin's strengths.

As he wove his way through the crowd gathering around the dance floor, walking toward the exit, Will saw Rosalyn and the older man sitting close together and talking, apparently engrossed in each other. Robin's scent still lingered on the air, and in the past it had often had a curious effect on large groups of humans exposed to it. Tonight it seemed to be having a mild aphrodisiac effect on the patrons, judging by the sudden pairings and hasty departures.

*Everyone will have their lover tonight, Will thought, except me.*

## CHAPTER TWO

Reese waited until Will Scarlet had left the nightclub before she left her observation post and walked out to the parking garage. Everything had gone exactly as it should have, and she had played her part flawlessly. The endless hours she had spent preparing herself had not been wasted.

And, if she kept repeating that, she might even convince herself of it.

Seeing Will tonight had not gone as she had expected it would. Reese tried to think of what had changed since the last time she had seen him. Part of the problem was that he never changed, would never change. Time left its mark on mortals, not the Darkyn. It had been seven hundred years since the poacher of Aubury had escaped a gruesome end and pledged his life and loyalty to Robin of Locksley, who had taken him along on his endless quest to give to the poor by stealing from the rich. By then he had become Darkyn, and that also saved him.

Yet Will Scarlet still had no idea what he had done the day he had escaped the gibbet.

Reese made herself recall Will's image. He'd recently cut his hair himself, judging by the uneven thatch of white-gold strands above his brow. How she'd longed to weave her fingers through the back of it, to feel again that soft thickness where it met the heavy muscles of his neck. His long lashes, still as white as the twin arches of his brows, had veiled the jeweled brilliance of his eyes. She imagined sitting and simply looking into those beloved eyes and listening to his voice for hours. She'd dreamed of that.

Until he'd taken her beyond the dreams.

You can't think about him that way, not now.

Reese knew how important the work she had to do was, and yet despite it all she wished she could run down the street to the Armstrong building, find him, and tell him the truth—warn him of what was coming, and why it had to be done. He would understand. As the temptation to do exactly that grew stronger, her phone, set on silent, buzzed in her pocket.

She didn't want to answer it, even as she did. "You promised that you wouldn't call."

"It's late. I was worried."

"I'm finished here. I've arranged to go in tomorrow night." How calm she sounded, even to her own ears.

"Does he suspect anything?"

"No, Father." If seeing Will tonight hadn't broken her heart, this would. "I deceived him completely. Just as you instructed."

"You know I would not have asked this of you, my child, but there was no one else up to the task." His voice gentled. "It will be over soon, and then we can return home to the family. They miss you terribly."

She hadn't given her family a single thought since leaving home, but she wouldn't tell her father that. He could never know her true feelings, or the secret longing she had kept from him. If he had, he would never let her go within one hundred miles of Rosethorn. He would have left her behind.

"I'll see you soon." Before he could make any more assurances, Reese ended the call.

She walked to the green Jag she had parked in a shadowy corner. After unlocking the passenger door, she reached in and checked the pulse of the woman she had tied up and gagged.

Dark eyes, as deep and confused as her own, fluttered.

"It's done," she told her captive. "I'm taking you to a safe place now. You won't be harmed."

The woman moaned something behind the gag in her mouth.

By the time Reese reached the safe house, her passenger was asleep. She directed the security guards to take her inside before she went to the library to make her report. When she found the room empty, she went to stand by the mantel and look down into the flames. It was too warm in this place for a fire, but he still lit one each night. He claimed he enjoyed the scent of it, but she wondered if he didn't do so for other, less pleasant reasons.

After some time her father came in carrying two glasses of wine.

"The young lady is safely installed in the guesthouse." He placed one glass on a side table and took his own to his favorite chair by the fire. "Marie will take good care of her, child."

"I know she will." It was everything she didn't know that made her wish she were back in England.

He watched her instead of the fire. "Something happened at the club that you did not mention. I could hear it in your voice."

The ache between her thighs had disappeared, but she could still taste Will Scarlet on her lips. For a moment she considered telling him about the interlude—they had never kept secrets from each other, no matter how terrible they might be—and then decided against it. What had happened had meant nothing to Will, and could not change anything for her.

"Seeing him—being with him tonight—was more difficult than I had thought it would be," she said slowly. "I prepared myself for this, I meditated all afternoon before I went there, and I knew how it would be, but..." Her girlish babbling shamed her. "Father, I was not ready for him."

"You could not help falling in love, my child." Ennis stared into the fire. "It is a powerful and enduring emotion. Even hatred bends before its will."

"Will and I can't be together, not like this," she said, more to reassure herself than him. "I know that. I do know what I have to do, Father."

He nodded. "Then why were you not prepared?"

"The mission work troubles me." That much was true. "There are too many unknowns involved. How can we be certain the suzerain will steal this book? What if he decides against it, or fumbles the job?"

"Robin of Locksley does not hesitate or fumble," he said mildly. "He has been pursuing the book since it was stolen from his family centuries ago. He covets it more than any other treasure in the world. Now it has been brought into his territory, and will be on open display at a public gallery. How can the most successful thief in history resist helping himself to such a prize?"

She shook her head. "In his eagerness, he could make a mistake."

Ennis beckoned to her. "Come here to me."

She went to him and sat on the carpet in front of his chair, curling up against his long calves. She was too old to do such a childish thing, she knew, but it gave her a measure of comfort. She closed her eyes as he stroked his hand over her hair.

"This has been so painful for you," he said, his voice gentle. "Your loyalty and goodness rebel against what has to be done. But, my dear, our work sometimes demands such things of us."

"We could go to him," she whispered, and felt his hand still. "He is still a good man at heart, Father. He always has been. We could tell him of the danger. If he knew—"

"We could confide in him," Ennis agreed. "You may have forgotten to whom he has made his oath, but I assure you, Will Scarlet has not. He will in turn go to Locksley. Now, what do you think a Darkyn lord would do with the knowledge that he had obtained such power? What did they do when they discovered it the first time?"

Her heart sank. "Locksley would give the book to Richard." She lifted her face. "But, Father, the high lord has changed. All the reports indicate he is becoming more temperate, more reasonable. More human. He knows too well what could happen, just as we do. What if we used this as an opportunity to forge an alliance with him?"

He sighed. "The Darkyn are not human. They can never be. Even as we speak, Richard has recalled his seigneurs to London. They have suffered great losses over the last three years, and are at this moment deciding whether or not to go to war with the Brethren."

"They can't wage war openly," she protested. "Not without exposing their existence. They have no weapons that can escape mortal detection."

He looked down at her, his eyes sad. "After tonight they will."

"Oh, God." She covered her face with her hands.

"If I could give this task to anyone else, I would," he assured her. "To spare you the suffering, I would do it myself."

"No, Father." She dropped her hands. "They would kill you."

"One cannot say I deserve any less." He stood, drawing her to her feet. The misery on his face struck at her heart. "As long as the book remains in the hands of others, the world will be in peril. We must take it back and destroy it before it is too late." He pressed his dry lips to her brow. "Be brave, child, for just a little longer."

She nodded.

"Now, at great expense and trouble I have obtained the original building plans for Rosethorn." He gestured toward several long rolls of paper on his desk. "You will need to go over them tonight. I also have the names and photographs of every human employed by the estate. Those you must memorize, for once you are inside the house, they will be your only allies."

*I have no allies.* Her shoulders drooped as she went to the desk.

Her father left her alone, and she spent the next several hours reviewing the blueprints of the estate and the dossiers of the mortals who served Robin of Locksley. It was dreary, mind-numbing work, but that didn't matter. Nothing mattered but protecting the innocent.

That was what she had been trained to do; that was what sustained her. For their sake, she would lie, steal, and kidnap. For their sake, if she had no other choice, she would kill anyone who tried to stop her.

Even Will Scarlet, the only man she would ever love.

\* \* \*

A caress scented with violets roused Rebecca of Daven from her slumber. Waning sunlight inched down the bed and away from her skin, replaced by the soothing touch of large, powerful hands. She should have grown accustomed to this by now, so long had they been together, but no, it seemed she never would. Each time she found herself in his arms seemed as great a miracle as the very first.

When she thought on who they had been, and what had happened to them, perhaps it was.

"At last." A deep voice stirred her hair. "The lady awakes."

"You are mistaken." Rebecca smiled against the fingertip tracing the bow of her lips, but kept her eyes closed. "The lady still dreams."

"Then she must talk in her sleep." A lean cheek grazed her chin, and cool breath whispered against her ear. "Does she do anything else, I wonder?"

"Soon she must rise and rouse the other women, break the fast, tend to the animals, begin the washing, clean the south chambers, and finish the carding." She wrinkled her nose. "Unless my lord gives me yet another long list of impossible tasks he wishes me to see to while he plays at being castellan. He delights in such things, you know."

"Hmm. This fellow sounds lazy and uncaring." He nipped her earlobe and shifted his body to cover hers. "You would do better to stay here in bed with me, lovely one."

The delicious weight of him made Rebecca sigh and slide her arms around his waist. "I want nothing more than that, but I think my husband would have some strong objections." She opened her eyes and grinned up into the dark, scowling face of the brute on top of her. "Oh, Sylas. 'Tis you."

"Devious wench." He kissed her hard. "For that I should chain you to this bed for a week."

"Do you promise?" She curled her good leg over his hip, arching against him. "An entire week?"

Her husband's scowl faded as his eyes, black as midnight, took on a faint blue glow. "'Twould not be enough, would it?"

No, it wouldn't. Rebecca sometimes wondered if eternity would be. "I love you, Sylas."

"And I you, wife."

Shadows stretched over the bed, covering the lovers as time and thought slipped silently from the chamber. Later, when the sun had vanished and the night bedecked itself with the glory of a thousand diamond-bright stars, Rebecca kissed her husband's damp shoulder and reluctantly untangled herself from his hold.

He rolled onto his side so that he might watch her bathe and dress. "You should take some time for yourself tonight. Have Lettice organize the women. She is in charge of your ladies; she should do something other than gossip with them."



"I would, but Tish is besotted with the new armorer come last week from the Realm," Rebecca told him. "Until he returns her affections, or sorts out how to discourage them, she will be of little use to any of us." She remembered something. "Oh, that friend of Will's telephoned. I may have to attend to her tonight as well."

His black brows rose. "What friend of Will's?"

She picked up a small square of stiff paper from her vanity table and read it. "She calls herself Reese Carmichael. Apparently she is a senior account executive of Peachtree Marketing, Inc."

"A mortal? Coming here?" When she nodded, he sat up. "Why?"

Her husband disliked strangers coming to Rosethorn for various reasons, not the least of which was preserving their safety. He, Rebecca, and the remainder of the household were Darkyn, immortal beings whose only nourishment was the blood of mortals. Over the centuries the Kyn had learned not to kill for their needs, and had hidden themselves among them, protecting themselves and the human beings upon whom they still depended. Only the Darkyn's mortal enemies, the Brethren, still pursued them with their single-minded determination. A renegade sect of fanatics who posed as Catholic priests, the Brethren had held as their sole mission for centuries to exterminate the Kyn.

Fortunately they had not succeeded, although the secret war between the Darkyn and the Brethren had endured for six centuries. For those reasons, and some their lord paramount had not bothered to explain, Robin of Locksley had chosen to build his stronghold on two thousand acres of land in the sparsely populated Georgia countryside. In the process he had also convinced the few mortals living near Rosethorn's borders to sell their property to him. Most of his *jardin*, made up of some five hundred Darkyn who had pledged their service to him, lived at Rosethorn, while the rest managed more than twenty tenant farms surrounding the stronghold on all sides.

"It seems Miss Carmichael will be fashioning the new advertisements for the weaponry our lord sells to mortals, and wishes to use our home as something called a 'backdrop.' You needn't worry. She's one of the *tresori* from the city, so she won't get into any mischief." Rebecca came over to the bed, lifted her hair, and turned her back toward him. "Are you going back to the city tonight?"

"Aye, the master has need of me again." With the deftness of long practice, Sylas fastened the long row of buttons from her waist to her nape.

As castellan of Rosethorn, Sylas carried duties not limited to supervising the suzerain's stronghold. The safety of the estate was his primary responsibility, which meant constant monitoring, augmenting, and improving of stores, weapons, and defense measures. Through daily training on the proving ground, he ensured the readiness of the garrison to face any threat, from a full-scale attack by Brethren fanatics bent on destroying the *jardin* to the intrusion of a curious mortal unaware of their existence. In Robin's absence, Sylas had complete authority over the *jardin* as well, and performed in his lord's stead by hearing grievances, settling disputes, and granting requests.

Sylas refused to set himself above his men, however, and always took his turn among the suzerain's personal guard, which required him to occasionally accompany their lord whenever he traveled from Rosethorn to his great house in the city.

Rebecca understood why he served as both castellan and warrior, and respected him for it, but that didn't make her like the separation any better. "I wish you didn't have to go."

"Nor do I," he said. "Our lord has been strangely restless of late. Will rarely has a moment of peace. Tell me more about this Carmichael woman."

Rebecca recalled the brief conversation she had had with Reese. "She wishes to be shown through the interior of the house so that she might choose the most favorable spots for the photographs needed. She has never been here, and asked if I would take her on a tour of it."

"She *told* you she wishes to spy upon us? Just like that?"

"Every curious mortal is not a Brethren agent wishing to destroy us all," she told him. "Tish said something about her once. I think she is Will's special friend."

Sylas grunted. "I will speak to the men anyway."

"I thank you, but I have already done so." His indignant look made her chuckle. "You were busy."

"I am castellan. You are chatelaine. The ladies and the household are your charge; the garrison, the weapons, and the fortifications are supposed

to be mine." He thought for a moment. "I will direct Alain to escort you and this mortal while she is here."

"Alain will only wish to use her," Rebecca pointed out.

"Aye, but you may keep him busy fending off anyone else who comes at her." Sylas's hand rasped over the short, tight black curls his constant cropping could never quite disguise. "Attend to this special friend of Will's, but do it quickly, my lady. Strange mortals do not belong at the stronghold. Even those we are told to trust."

While he buttoned her gown, Rebecca twisted her light brown hair into a neat coil, which she pinned against the back of her head before she slid two ivory combs on either side of it. She handed him an airy silk snood and sat down on the edge of the bed while he gathered it over her hair and tied the ribbons. "Do you think you are to stay in the city until the morrow?"

"Tis likely." He kissed the side of her throat. "No longer than a single night, I promise."

Neither of them cared for being apart for longer than a few hours. Rebecca knew it was mostly due to the physical and emotional dependency they had on each other, a rare but enduring bond that had been born when they had risen from the mortal grave where they had been buried together, and walked the night as immortals. When separated from his *sygkenis*, a Darkyn male became uneasy and short-tempered; he could not rest or find pleasure in anything. If the separation was unwilling or extended, both partners would quickly grow unstable and even dangerous.

The bond Rebecca shared with Sylas was rather more than one merely of blood. In the last days of their mortal lives they had been two strangers desperately battling to save the innocent. That hopeless struggle had forged a sudden but deep friendship between them. Rebecca loved her husband, but she also respected and trusted him, as he did her. When death had come for her, he had not run away like the others, but stayed with her, holding her hand in his. She had begged him to go, to save himself, but he said that life without her had no interest or meaning for him anymore. He had not let her die alone and afraid, but went with her into the darkness.

There had been a price for that loyalty, one some might have found heavy or even terrible, but in time they had learned to deal with that, as well as all the other changes that becoming Kyn had wrought.

Rebecca made her way slowly to the full-length mirror on the other side of the room. She turned this way and that, examining her reflection.

"We need a holiday," Sylas said, coming up behind her. "You work as hard now as e'er you did for the church."

"Holiday comes from the words *holy day*," Rebecca reminded him. "'Twas the church that used to give us leave from our duties."

"Aye, so that we might sit and listen to hours and hours of promises of damnation in poorly spoke Latin." He nipped her ear. "If you miss it, we could arrange to spend the day in bed watching the Evangelical Channel."

Rebecca laughed. Her husband despised television above all modern things. "I think I would trade all my jewels to see you do such a thing. If I had jewels."

He turned her around, his expression troubled. "You do not miss it still, do you?"

Rebecca's humor faded a few degrees. She did miss it, her human life. The enjoyment of food, the pleasure of working in the sunlight, the companionship of her friends among the sisters. Few females rose to walk the night; those who belonged to Locksley had been either villeins or gently bred ladies. As chatelaine, she was responsible for them as well, so what friendship she felt toward them was ever tempered by her duty to watch over them.

But Sylas had lost as much as, if not more than, she. The plague had taken every member of his family, including his beloved younger sister, for whom he had sacrificed so much. That loss had nearly destroyed him.

"My only regret in this life and all the others that have been or will be," she said, winding her arms around his waist, "is that I did not find you sooner."

### CHAPTER THREE

Will rose in the early afternoon, tired of staring aimlessly at the ceiling. He'd managed to rest an hour, but thoughts of Reese kept his mind as a dog chasing its tail, ever turning in useless circles.

He dressed, collected the day's mail from the slot in his door, and skimmed through it. Among the various business letters, purchase orders, and reports was a postcard from the county courthouse, stating that Robin Archer was scheduled to appear in court for jury selection in two weeks.

"Not again." He crumpled the postcard and made a mental note to speak once more to their human friends in the Atlanta Police Department about permanently removing Rob's alias from their computers.

Will walked through the connecting door to the penthouse suite. Immediately he smelled the dark ginger scent of the red-haired mortal from the nightclub whom Robin had brought to his bed. Mild irritation set in as he tracked her path and found that she'd been all over the rooms. He'd have to arrange to have the entire suite cleaned to rid it of her scent.

Will didn't understand why his master had brought the woman here. He'd always preserved the privacy of his city home as a refuge, a place of retreat from the mortal world and the responsibilities of the *jardin*. Certainly it hadn't been for convenience' sake; the rooms they kept reserved for their use at the hotel had been closer.

*At least she's gone*, he thought as he straightened a pillow and moved into the kitchen. He'd been obliged to watch the security cameras until she had left the building, which she had done shortly before dawn.

He couldn't see what Robin found so interesting about her. She had been a pretty thing, well dressed and pleasantly mannered, but they hadn't trailed her to the club for her charms. She possessed a great prize, the book Robin had coveted for centuries, and the only true reason Robin had to trifle with her was to help him obtain it—and yet he had brought her here and used her for his pleasure.

Surely there would be complications now. With mortal females, there always were.

Will eased open the door to Robin's bedchamber, saw the surprising fact that his master was still at rest, and silently gathered the glasses left by the bed table. He took them into the adjoining bath in order to dump the dregs left in them in the sink. He should have persuaded Reese to come to his rooms last night. Even holding her in his arms through the long daylight hours would have greatly improved his rest—and his mood.

"Will?" Robin came to stand in the doorway and looked into the room. "Where is Chris?"

"Do you mean the human female from last night? I cannot say, my lord." Will shut off the taps and dried his hands. "I assume that she returned to her home after she departed."

"She left?" His master sounded puzzled. "When? How?"

"'Twas near dawn; I secured the elevator after she used it. I saw no car, so I presume she went on foot. I sorted through the mail, and it seems you were summoned for jury duty again. We can hide from mankind for near a millennia, but try as I may I cannot seem to purge your name from the county courthouse mailing list." Will's wry frustration faded as soon as he turned and saw his master's expression. "What is wrong? Did something happen with the female?"

"Yes. No." Robin walked away.

Will followed him into the bedchamber, where his master paced around the bed, examining the carpet before he went out to the front rooms. He returned muttering under his breath and disoriented, as if someone had clubbed him over the head.

Will set the glasses aside. "Rob? Why do you look that way? Did she take something?"

Robin ignored him, wandering about the room listlessly, as if lost in it.

Whatever had happened between the mortal and his master, it had not left a favorable impression. Will was just about to inquire of him again when Robin focused on him.

"How did she appear to you when she left?" he demanded. "Was she disoriented? Did she seem upset?"

Will thought back to what he had seen the night before. "I watched her through the security monitors only long enough to assure that she left the building, but she seemed well."

"How well?"

"She was tidily dressed and moved with purpose. She did not weep or drag her steps. She did not take anything, and she did not look back." Will didn't like the change in his master's expression. What the bloody hell had that female done to make him like this? "Did you not send her down?"

"No." Robin caught a glimpse of something and moved to the bed, taking from the linens a short length of gold chain. He held it as if it were made of copper—the one metal that could wound the Kyn—and yet examined it as closely as if it were fashioned of priceless diamonds. Then, even stranger, he twined it about his fingers like a lock of a woman's hair. "I never bade her to go."

"You..." Will stopped as Robin's meaning sank in. "I do not understand, my lord. You never allow humans to stay the night."

"This one I did. Or should have." Robin put his hand on the bed, smoothing it over the rumpled silk sheets. "I slept with her, and she left me."

"I'm sure it was for the best. Had she remained and awoken before you—"

"You do not understand me," Robin snarled. "I fell asleep with her. With her in my arms. I slept with that woman and did not wake, did not dream. I slept as I have not since my human lifetime." The golden chain disappeared inside his fist. "How could she go like that?"

He was, Will saw, entirely besotted. Utterly enraged.

"You must have compelled her to leave before dawn," he assured his master. "She would not have departed herself, not while be spelled."

Robin made a contemptuous sound. "I begin to doubt that she was ever under my power."

If the female had been impervious to his scent *and* his charm..."Could she be a Brethren operative?" Will asked. "We have known them to be resistant to *l'attrait*. 'Tis said they are bred that way."

"Why would one of those zealots seduce me," his master countered, "much less leave me alone and sleeping in my bed, when she could kill me or have me taken?"

Will's worry eased. "True."

Robin seemed to notice something, and walked over to the bedside table. He lifted the lamp and removed a small square of paper. He unfolded it slowly and, after staring at it for some time, said, "She wrote a note."

The gingery scent of the woman still radiated from the bed, the strongest concentration of it in the room. Will went over and pulled the coverlet over the sheets to mask some of it. "You would be wise not to contact her again, my lord. A mortal who cannot be compelled is unpredictable, even dangerous."

"She does not offer me her phone number or contact information," Robin said in a blank tone. "She thanks me."

Christ Jesus, she'd used him and left. Will almost laughed at the irony of it—Robin had done the same thing to countless mortal females—until he saw the glitter in his master's eye and instead cleared his throat. "That was very, ah, polite of her."

"Am I *no* one to her, then? Someone she must thank in writing? For what? A mistake she never intends to repeat?" Robin crumpled the paper and tossed it away. "She used me. A mortal. A mortal used *me*."

"The stone-hearted bitch." Will busied himself with tidying the bed pillows. "Shall I track her back to her lair and offer her a sternly worded rebuke, my lord?"

His master kept speaking as if he hadn't heard him. "She did not purchase anything at the auction last night, but she did register as a bidder. She would have had to show her identification and give them a credit card. You will go to the auctioneer's office and obtain whatever information they have for her. I particularly want her full name and where she resides." He frowned. "She told me that she recently transferred here from Chicago. Once you have her full name, call Jaus and ask him to run a background check on her."

Will often performed background checks on the mortals who did business or came in regular contact with his master; it provided a measure of safety for his lord and sometimes identified potential conflicts before they



could happen. But never in all the centuries of serving Robin of Locksley had he investigated one of the females he used for sex. His master's habits had not changed in seven hundred years: He spent one night with a woman, pleased her, and then never saw her again. The females he slept with simply didn't merit any sort of attention from Robin, other than now and then using *l'attrait* on those who became too spellbound, but only to remove their memories and assure that they would not return to bother him.

"Rob." He stepped into his path to stop his master's pacing. "It was ill-mannered of this mortal to leave in such haste, but her actions are hardly worth so much trouble. Forget this."

"No. I was not finished with her." Robin went around him, opened the closet, and ripped a shirt from its hanger, rending a sleeve from it in the process. He tossed the ruined garment aside before taking another.

The display of anger startled Will; he decided to choose his next words with more care.

"You know that women of this time are not like Kyn females. They have much freedom and independence, and they do as they wish. They do not respect men as we expect they should, but that is how things are in this society—"

Robin turned on him. "When have you known me to sleep the day through, from dawn to dusk? With a mortal in my bed?"

"Never."

"Just so." Robin pulled on the second shirt. "She did something to me, this female. I shall learn exactly what it was."

He would not allow that the bloody female had simply taken what she wanted and left satisfied. Robin had never dealt very well with resistance or rejection; both reminded him of Marian, the great love of his life, who had neither wanted nor loved him in return.

"She could not drug you or exhaust you." Will collected the torn shirt from the floor. "Could it be that she made you happy?"

Robin turned on him. "Do I look happy to you now?"

"Not in the least, my lord. Forgive me for suggesting otherwise." A signal came over the radio Will carried, and he answered it. "What is it, Sylas?"

"An Italian lady has arrived to call on our lord," the other man told him. "She gives her name as Contessa Salvatora Borgiana."

Will glanced at his master, who gave him an impatient nod. "Escort her to the reception room," he told Sylas. "Our lord will meet with her shortly."

As far as Will was concerned, the interruption could not have been more timely. His master needed to forget this mortal and return his attention to more important matters. With a little luck, he would put her out of his head and forget the indignity she had caused him to suffer.

He pressed the radio's call switch before he asked Robin, "Were you expecting the contessa to call?"

"I did not know she was in America."

"She may have been driven out of Italy by the Brethren," Will said. "So many have, these last months. Shall I prepare rooms for her and her men?"

"Sylas and Bergen can attend to her needs." Robin continued dressing. "You have work to do. Go. I want to know everything you can learn about this mortal before dawn."

\* \* \*

Reese woke to the sound of a mobile phone ringing, and reached blindly until she found it and brought it in front of her burning eyes. The display showed the time—why had Father allowed her to sleep for so long?—and a pet name: *Lover boy*.

She switched it on and held it to her ear. "Hello."

"Did I wake you?" *Lover boy* had Will Scarlet's voice.

*He is Will, you idiot.* "No." She sat up, dragging the sheet to her chin. He couldn't see her, but she slept naked, and talking to him while she was bare-skinned made her feel exposed. She had to say something, greet him as if nothing had happened.

Nothing had happened. Yet. "How are you?"

"Tired. Somewhat annoyed. Very sorry for behaving like such a jackass last night." Will sounded tentative, as if he were afraid to say more, and then went on. "Reese, I want you to know that I never meant—"

"It's okay. You can make it up to me when I get to Rosethorn." She glanced at her watch; she still had enough time to prepare. "I'll be there in a couple of hours."

"That is the other reason I called. I can't meet you there tonight. Rob is attending a gallery show in town, and I must go with him. We will not be returning to the estate until later, likely after midnight."

He was telling her everything she needed to know, as if he knew what she intended to do. Did he know? "It sounds like a great show."

"You could meet us there," Will suggested. "Rob is escorting an old friend, but I will be on my own. We could talk about what happened last night." When she didn't reply, he added, "Or perhaps not."

"I'd love to be there," she lied. "But it's the catalog. I have so much work to do on it."

He muttered something, and then said, "So the fact that I forced myself on you has nothing to do with the manner in which you're now avoiding me."

"Yes. No. It wasn't—" She stopped and rubbed her hand over her face. "It wasn't like that. I'm not avoiding you."

"Prove it to me, sweetheart." The rough tone became soft and persuasive. "Come to the show."

Trying to think of another excuse that would not further offend him, give away her true intentions, or jeopardize the mission made her head whirl. "You'll be working, and I doubt Lord Locksley wants me distracting you from your duties."

"Hang Rob," he said flatly. "Come anyway."

"Be patient, Will. We can get together later, when we can have more time for ourselves." She would never see him again. Last night was all that they would ever have, and she'd run from him. It made this farce she was

playing out into a cruel form of self-torture. "Wouldn't you rather be alone with me?"

"I've done nothing but think about that, and you," he admitted. "All day, I've had no peace. I barely slept. Reese, I know we agreed in the beginning to be friends only, and that neither of us wanted a serious affair. Somehow last night we strayed beyond that, I think."

She didn't know whether to laugh or scream. She had to know more, though. She couldn't go through with her mission if she didn't. "How do you feel about that?"

"How do I feel?" He laughed. "I want more."

"More of the same?"

"More of you."

He would have her, in a sense, but he would never know—and that was probably the kindest thing she could ever do for him. "You may change your mind before the next time you see me."

"I think not."

"Okay." She got out of bed. "As much as I'd love to chat with you, I have to go and get ready for work now. My boss wants me to stop by the office before I drive out to Rosethorn." She closed her eyes and added a flirtatious lilt to her voice. "Maybe I'll see you later."

"You will wait for me?"

Had she ever done anything else? "Always."

\* \* \*

It took Will only a few hours, a quick trip to the auction house, and a number of phone calls to discover that the mortal female who had seduced and then so angered his master was not, in fact, whom she appeared to be.

The final revelation came down from the Darkyn suzerain of Chicago himself, Valentin Jaus.

"This woman has gone to some length to conceal her true identity," Jaus said after relating what he had discovered about Chris Renshaw. "My

people have been unable to discover any connection she might have with the Brethren, but that, too, is a possibility. Perhaps Robin should consider relocating to the country until your people can deal with her."

Will rubbed his eyes. "I do not think the suzerain will be of the same opinion, my lord."

"I would come to provide my aid directly," Jaus added, "but I have promised my *sygkenis* that I will not travel by plane for some time."

"I must agree with your lady, my lord." Will remembered how desperately they had searched for Jaus when his private jet had been hijacked and forced down by a Brethren agent. Robin, who had originally invited Jaus to fly to Atlanta, had blamed himself for the terrifying incident, and had not quit searching until word of Jaus's rescue had been sent. "I thank you for your assistance with this matter."

"I have never repaid your master for sending my grandfather's sword to me, Will," Jaus said. "Give Robin my compliments, and please call on me if he has further need."

After speaking with Jaus, Will left his office and went to the gallery where Chris Renshaw worked, where he fortunately encountered a mortal who provided him with the reason the woman had created a false identity for herself.

Chris Renshaw was not an art dealer, but a federal agent.

Upon his return to the Armstrong building, Will first checked in with the guards. Robin refused to travel with more than a few men, so Will felt obliged to arrange for the most competent, experienced warriors from the *jardin* to accompany them when they came to the city. He found Sylas and Bergen warily attending to a small group of Italian *cavalieri* in one of the reception rooms on the first floor.

"Seneschal." Sylas came over to him to report. "We have divided the contessa's men into small groups and provided them with stores and beds in the barracks."

Will scanned the faces of the *cavalieri* sitting at the table with Bergen. "What of these men?"

"They are the contessa's bodyguards. They await their mistress." The castellan nodded toward the corridor, and Will followed him out of the

room. Once out of earshot, Sylas said, "These Kyn have no lord with them. Only the lady."

"The contessa is a widow, and a recluse," Will said. "After the *jardin* wars, she would not permit another to take the place of her late husband. It seems she and the master are old friends."

"Old friends or not, a woman cannot control more than seventy Kyn males."

Will shrugged. "Jayr of the Realm has five times that number, and she manages well as *suzeraina*."

"True, but I still cannot like it. 'Tis unnatural, the way they look to her." Sylas paused, searching for words. "Will, I know many have been made to flee the Brethren in Europe, but there is something wrong here. I can feel it."

Will trusted his male instincts, but he needed more than a bad feeling. "Name what it is, and I will go to our lord with it directly."

"I wish I could." The big man sighed. "But no, they conduct themselves as they should, and I have not seen or heard anything that would mark them as a threat."

"You have been on duty too often these last weeks," Will said. "Return to the estate and your *sygkenis*. Send Waltham to take your place."

"I should send more than one guard, if you mean to accommodate the contessa's men here," Sylas said.

"Too many for town." Will hadn't thought about where the contessa and her men would stay while in their territory. Because the cavalieri were not familiar with the United States or the customs of the country, they would need some time and space to adjust and learn how to behave before they were permitted to mingle freely with American mortals. "I expect our lord will send them to Rosethorn. You had best to prepare for that."

"I shall, as soon as I arrive." Sylas bowed and strode off down the corridor.

Will went to the private reception room where Robin was still entertaining the contessa. He stood outside and listened for a break in their conversation before he knocked and went in.

"I beg your pardon, my lord, my lady." Will bowed first to the contessa and then to Robin. "I would not intrude, my lord, but an urgent matter has arisen in regard to last night's business with the mortal female that I must relate to you at once." He could not say more than that in front of the contessa, and gave her a meaningful look.

"The contessa is an old and trusted friend," his master told him. "You may speak in front of her."

"I went to the auction office as you directed, and obtained the information you desired," he said. "The female listed a Chicago address that I verified with our friends in the north. If it existed—which it does not—it would occupy the middle of Lake Michigan."

Robin didn't appear impressed by this news. "Someone must have noted it wrong."

"I thought so as well at first," Will continued, "but the driver's license she provided was not registered with the Chicago Department of Transportation. Also, her credit card was issued by a government-managed credit union in Washington, D.C., but one week ago."

Robin's expression tightened. "What else?"

"I felt I should go to the gallery to question her employer," Will said. "It is closed until the night of the show, but I intercepted one of the humans exiting from the back door—a man named Dennis. Under my influence, he admitted that he did not work for the gallery or any art dealer. He is an electronics expert who specializes in covert monitoring devices. He said that he, the woman, and everyone associated with this show are special agents of the Federal Bureau of Investigation."

The contessa, who was listening closely, pressed her full red lips together.

Robin looked as dumbfounded as he had when he discovered the mortal gone from his bedchamber. "She is an FBI agent."

"Aye, my lord, and that is not all that the man told me." Will wished he could soften the blow somehow for his master's sake, but decided the truth was best. "Agent Renshaw came to Atlanta to work undercover as an art dealer, and set up what they refer to as a 'sting operation.' The FBI wishes to identify and arrest those responsible for transporting to the states the stolen art recovered by the Kyn in France."

Robin fell silent for a time, and then said, "I am the one responsible for that."

"Yes, my lord." Will became uneasy. "According to the man Dennis, the FBI has been interested in your, ah, activities in the art world for some time. The agents have not yet identified you by name or appearance, and they have no witnesses, but they know a great many details about your most, ah, daring exploits. They call you 'the Magician.'"

The contessa produced a tiny laugh. "Most appropriate, my lord, given your skills at making things disappear."

Will didn't care for her fawning or her flattery; it sounded false to his ears. "I do not believe that the female knows that you and the Magician are one and the same," he told Robin. "If she did, she surely would have tried to arrest you last night. But she and her cohorts are staging the gallery show specifically as a trap for you. *The Maiden's Book of Hours* is being used as the bait."

"How could she know that I wanted that manuscript?" Robin sounded angry now. "For that matter, how did they know I live here, in Atlanta?"

Will moved his shoulders. "I cannot say, my lord, but their information is very good."

"Too good." Robin rose and walked from one end of the room to the other. "You are certain that she does not know who I am?"

"My lord, given that your activities date back several decades, the FBI believes you to be an elderly mortal," Will replied. "Even if Agent Renshaw did suspect, you appear too young and affluent to fit what Dennis called their 'profile.'"

"I cannot believe it." Robin shook his head slowly. "First this mortal treats me like a discarded garment, and now she means to entrap and imprison me."

The contessa, who was watching Robin's face with a singular intensity, spoke then. "If I may be so bold as to make a suggestion, my lord?" When Robin faced her, she said, "As I have told you, my talent is persuasion. I could attend this gallery show with you, and easily convince this mortal female to surrender the manuscript to you voluntarily. Would that not be fitting revenge for what she has taken from you?"



Robin swept his hand to one side. "She took nothing from me."

"Perhaps nothing material, my lord," the contessa said. "But your trust has obviously been violated, and by a woman who would gladly do much more harm to you. You are a suzerain; she is but a mortal. If word of this were to spread among our kind..."

It sounded almost as if she were threatening him, Will thought. It certainly looked as if she were relishing every detail.

"No one need know anything about this," Will said, glowering at her. "I'm sure such an old and trusted friend as you, my lady, will keep my lord's confidence."

"You can depend on me to be as silent as a mute," the contessa agreed before she turned to his master. "But what will you do about this mortal who dares to hunt you, my lord?"

"Teach her a lesson," Robin said flatly. "One she will not soon forget."

## CHAPTER FOUR

"Welcome to Rosethorn, Ms. Carmichael," a melodic female voice said. "I hope your journey from the city was a pleasant one."

Reese automatically straightened her jacket as she turned and saw the willowy form of a light brown-haired woman standing just inside the sitting room. At first glance Rebecca of Daven appeared angelic, almost radiant, as if her flawless features had been fashioned in some higher place by an unearthly hand. As accustomed as Reese was to the physical beauty of the Darkyn, this slim goddess just might surpass all of them. For a moment she didn't know whether to offer her hand or go down on her knees.

As Rebecca came toward her, however, one glaring imperfection made itself known. The goddess had a limp—a bad one. She stepped out with her right leg but dragged the left along the floor, as if she couldn't bend the knee or use her hip properly. That explained the heavy material of the floor-length skirt of the dress she wore; she was either covering up a cast or a leg brace.

Chris's envy dwindled. "Very pleasant, my lady." She glanced at the nearest love seat. "Would you care to sit down for a few minutes?"

"No, I'm quite well, thank you. Forgive my ungainliness." She touched the side of her skirt. "I had the crippling sickness when I was a human child. What do you Americans call that disease?"

Reese thought for a moment. "I think you mean polio."

"Yes, that is the word for it." She came a little closer and studied Reese. "You seem quite young to be in service. I had thought *tresori* remained in training until their third decade."

"Most do, but a few of us are permitted to begin serving late in the second." Reese knew she had to change the subject, and quickly. She gestured around the room. "You run this entire household by yourself?"

"I have my ladies to help me, and my husband, Sylas, serves our lord as his castellan," Rebecca said. "Together we are able to cope with most of the domestic crises." She offered an encouraging smile. "Will Scarlet tells me that you have not yet pledged yourself to Lord Locksley. Have you some concern that has not been addressed?"

Reese seized on that. "I know so little about the suzerain or the estate. When I make my choice, it's going to be for life, and I'd like to be sure I've made the right one."

"You might have talked this over with Will," the chatelaine chided. "No one knows Lord Locksley or Rosethorn as well as he."

Rebecca had her there. "There are things you just can't ask Kyn males. They don't always understand what's important to a female *tresora*. They look at Rosethorn and see a well-guarded Darkyn fortress. I see property that, under certain circumstances, can be seized and searched by the authorities." Reese nodded toward the painting hanging between two windows: a delicate portrait of a young woman gazing into a mirror. "I know that is a Vermeer. What I don't know is if it really belongs to Lord Locksley or someone else."

Rebecca eyed the painting. "That once belonged to a mortal who fled to South America from Germany after one of the mortal World Wars. No one knows it still exists." She frowned. "But we would never permit the authorities to see it."

"Unless they came during the day, when all of the *jardin* is at rest," Reese pointed out. "Then I would have to know whether to hide this painting, or let them admire it while I served them coffee."

"Now I see your meaning." The chatelaine gave her a look of approval. "I also understand why they let you serve at so young an age. You are a clever and thoughtful young woman, Reese Carmichael. We would be blessed, I think, to count you among our mortal friends."

A pity she never would. "Thank you, my lady."

"'Tis Rebecca. Come now, I will show you where you might take your photographs." The chatelaine limped out of the room, and Reese followed her toward the double winding staircase. "I think we should begin with our sewing rooms, where we keep the tapestry work. Our ladies are quite industrious."

"They are as busy as they are beautiful," a man drawled from behind Reese. "But they dim before you, my lady."

Reese smelled something warm and green, like a field of sweet herbs, and glanced over her shoulder at the Kyn male standing there. Like

Rebecca, this man had been blessed with extraordinary beauty, although his was more vibrant and earthly. His hair, streaked with all the colors of autumn leaves, hung loose around a face that belonged in an old master's painting. Dark brows and lashes made his amber brown eyes look like polished gems.

Tiger eyes, Reese thought, and then remembered. "I doubt that, my lord."

"I am called Alain." He circled around as he gave her what should have been an insulting personal inspection. "Chatelaine, is it my birthday?"

"You know it is not," Rebecca said, her soft voice suddenly sharp.

"How tragic." He reached out and fingered a strand of Reese's hair. "Is it hers?"

"This is Miss Reese Carmichael, sent from the city by Will Scarlet," Rebecca said. "Reese, this is Alain, captain of the garrison."

"I've always envied Will's eye for beauty, Reese, but never so much as at this moment." He made the single syllable of her name sound like a symphony as he held out his hand. "I am enchanted, my lady."

Reese tried to make the handshake brisk, but as soon as their fingers touched his closed around hers, and he breathed in deeply.

"Alain." Rebecca's tone grew sharp. "Miss Carmichael has come here at Will's invitation. She is *his* guest, and I have assured him that she will be treated with every courtesy while she is here."

"Naturally." Slowly the cool hand withdrew from Reese's, but the tiger eyes kept watching her. "Miss Carmichael, have we met before?"

The chatelaine sighed his name. "Alain, please."

"It is only that she seems somehow familiar to me." He smiled at Reese, transforming his lethal charm into amused resignation. "Forgive my poor manners. Welcome to Rosethorn, Miss Carmichael."

If she could deceive him, she could do the same with the rest of them. "Thank you, my lord. I am very happy to be here."

"Were you sent to entertain our Italian brothers," Alain asked, "or do you prefer more civilized lovers?"

Reese gave Rebecca an uncertain glance. "I'm not here to entertain anyone."

"Alain, we have no Italians here," the chatelaine said.

"We will as soon as introductions have been made." He nodded toward the front of the property. "Our lord has sent more than seventy of them from the city to stay with us, and they have just now arrived."

\* \* \*

When he arrived back at Rosethorn, Sylas had first seen to preparing quarters among the garrison's barracks for the contessa's cavalieri. He had meant to go from there to see his wife and warn her about their possible visitors, but a call from Will Scarlet confirmed that the Italians were already en route to the estate.

"I've only just arrived myself," Sylas told the seneschal. "I will need more time."

"You have none," Will said bluntly. "I am sorry, Sylas, but our lord is not thinking clearly tonight, and I have my hands full with him. Do what you can."

Sylas immediately called for his senior men, relayed the situation, and issued orders. "We are to regard these Italians as guests, but I want the patrols doubled and the interior guards to stand watch day and night."

"You expect some trouble from them?" Bergen asked.

"No. Their mistress is an old friend of the master's." Sylas looked around him at the sober faces of his best warriors. "Regardless, I expect us to be ready for anything."

Word came over the radio a few minutes later from the perimeter guards that several large, chartered passenger vehicles had stopped just beyond the first gate, and that Kyn males walking in presentation formation were approaching the estate. Sylas summoned an equal number from the garrison, ordered them to arm themselves, and sent them to stand ready in the lower courtyard.

The castellan remained behind long enough to call his wife over the radio. "Rebecca, where are you?"

"I am in Ireland, of course," she called back. "I think I shall visit the high lord and ask him how I might rid myself of a husband too busy to properly greet me when he comes home."

Sylas chuckled. "Forgive me, my lady; 'twas something of an emergency. Have you word of our visitors?"

"Yes, Alain brought word to me and my ladies. We should have the main hall ready in a few moments. Did you miss me?"

"Aye." He smiled. "I will show you how much later." He remembered what she had said earlier. "Is that mortal—Will's friend—with you? She will have to go."

"I left her with Alain," Rebecca said. "She needed but a few minutes to take photographs of the workrooms, and then he will escort her from the stronghold."

Having a strange mortal under their roof at the same time strange Kyn were arriving made Sylas uneasy. Still, he had no time to chase after Reese Carmichael, and Alain would assure that she came to no harm. "Very well. I will see you shortly in the hall."

Not for the first time, Sylas was glad of the work he had done to disguise Rosethorn's fortifications from the ever-curious eyes of the mortal world. Flower beds and turf covered the steep inclines of the curtain walls' plinth bases. Trees planted along the inside of the lower courtyard cast shade over the subtle crenellations and hoardings where the Kyn on perimeter patrol stood watch. The plaster veneer of the keep, which had been designed to appear as a large contemporary manor house, concealed five-meter-thick masonry walls.

The decorative casings above the large picture windows housed rolls of steel slats that at the push of a button could be dropped down to form an impenetrable barrier over the glass panes; dual wooden shutters on hidden tracks flanking the windows covered tall, narrow arrow loops. The garages, gardening sheds, generator, and pump houses were actually smaller versions of the old gate towers and were manned by armed guards around the clock. Even the collapsible ramps leading from the lower bailey up to the shield walls had been paved with granite cobblestone and lined with flowering

shrubs to appear to the ignorant eye as nothing more than pleasant, well-landscaped walkways.

Robin had disagreed with his castellan over the need for one last, outmost barrier against invasion. While the modern world had developed formidable means and firepower since the age of castles, water still presented a sizable and difficult obstacle. The suzerain, however, had maintained that nothing could adequately conceal or explain away a wide, water-filled trench encircling the entire property. Sylas had to be content with a series of retention ponds and ditches for which he fashioned collapsible borders and a massive underground system of supply pipes. Should the stronghold come under attack, he could flip a switch and flood the ditches within minutes, creating an almost instantaneous moat.

Knowing the stronghold was well guarded did not relieve all of Sylas's misgivings about their unexpected visitors. If the Brethren had tracked the Italians after they had fled Venice, they might have followed them across the sea to America. Hopefully their mistress had been too clever to lead their mutual enemy directly to Robin of Locksley's door.

Sylas led his personal escort down the ramp to where the Italians were waiting. Their leader, a tall warrior whose dark face gave away none of his thoughts, stepped forward and performed a respectful bow.

"I am Saetta, *maréchal* to Contessa Salvatora Borgiana, sent here by leave of your suzerain, Robin of Locksley." He straightened and met Sylas's gaze with the steadiness of an experienced leader. "We are grateful for the sanctuary you provide."

As castellan, Sylas had considerably more rank than Saetta, whose position in Italy was roughly equal to that of a head groom or stablemaster. Under any other circumstances it would be an insult to have such a member of the contessa's household act as her liaison. Still, Sylas knew that Salvatora Borgiana and her *jardin* had been without proper leadership since the death of her lord paramount and husband, Arno, during the *jardin* wars. That Richard had permitted the situation to persist for so long puzzled him, but was not a matter for him to question or challenge.

"Sylas of Daven, Lord Locksley's castellan." He walked forward a few steps, eliminating most of the space between them before returning the bow. Among the Kyn, it was a gesture of confidence as well as a silent offer of friendship. "You and your men are welcome here, *maréchal*."

"We will endeavor not to create any hardship for you or your men, castellan." Saetta turned and introduced his most senior men, who exchanged the proper greetings while keeping a wary eye on the battlement patrols watching them from above.

All of them, Sylas noticed, had old, faint marks on their faces, hands, or arms that he recognized as burn scars. It was not unusual for Kyn to suffer scarification from fire—burns healed slowly, and the flesh always retained some mark from it—but he had never seen so many afflicted.

Once Sylas had accomplished his turn at introductions, Saetta gestured toward the front gates. "What weapons we managed to bring with us from Italy are stowed on our transport vehicles. I have allowed my men to retain their daggers for personal protection. I ask your permission to permit them to continue to carry them during our stay at Rosethorn."

Seventy men armed with daggers could inflict a great deal of damage. "You are under no threat here," Sylas pointed out.

"True, but to strip a man of all his blades after he's been driven from his homeland and obliged to seek shelter in a strange country, among those who are not blood Kyn..." Saetta made a subtle gesture. "It is a matter of personal dignity."

He would not beg for his men, Sylas thought, but nor would he see them suffer unnecessarily. His respect for Saetta rose another notch.

"It took me fifty years to grow accustomed to not wearing a sword outside our territory. As long as your men conduct themselves appropriately, I will allow it." He raised his voice a degree. "All of the mortals who serve at Rosethorn are *tesori*, and are to be treated as such. Females are given the right of choice, and the right of refusal. All Kyn women here have been claimed or are bonded." He expected to hear a few soft groans, but none of the *cavalieri* made a sound. "We will see to your needs. Rosethorn has ample stores, and I will arrange to provide you with transportation at regular intervals to territory where you may hunt."

"Your generosity will not be forgotten." Saetta turned and issued an order in Italian, repeating it in English. "We are among friends here. You are to speak in their tongue and respect their customs. If you do not know, ask and you shall be told."

The men responded in silent unison by each going down on one knee and crossing an arm over his chest.



"You are welcome here," Sylas said. "Now come—come and meet your American Kyn."

The hard line of Saetta's mouth finally eased. "I have thought of little else since getting off that cursed boat."

Once he had led the Italians to the main hall, Sylas kept watch over the two groups as they came together. Rosethorn had many Kyn visitors over the course of the year, but never had so many of their kind descended at once. He felt proud as he watched his men greet Saetta's and separate them into smaller groups. The ladies appeared with bottles of blood wine and goblets, offering their smiles as they served the cavalieri. Saetta accepted a goblet but remained at Sylas's side.

"The one with the golden brown hair and the face of a Madonna," the *maréchal* said, nodding in her direction. "She is yours?"

"Yes, that is my wife." Sylas eyed him. "How did you know?"

"Her smile changes when she looks upon you. There, now." He gestured with his goblet as Rebecca smiled across the room at Sylas. "She is lovely."

"She is." Sylas didn't like other men complimenting his wife, or even looking at her—such was the price of their bond. "The first time a Kyn male admired her in my presence, I believe I threatened to rip his head from his neck." He glanced at the Italian. "I think I have mellowed in my old age. Now I only wish to tear out his tongue."

"Ah." He nodded. "She is *sygkenis* as well as wife."

Sylas asked Saetta about his journey from Italy, and as they discussed the perpetual hazards of travelling among mortals, the *maréchal* seemed to relax, enough to make Sylas turn the conversation to more delicate matters.

"Your men are too few to make a proper *jardin*, and too many to join another," Sylas said. "How did your mistress prevent them from abandoning her to become rogues?"

"After our suzerain was killed in battle, and our lady refused to accept another in his place, some of the men spoke of leaving Venice. Those of us with wives and blood Kyn needed more protection, and considered pledging

ourselves to another lord paramount." Saetta's tone grew distant as he gazed out at the assembly. "I think we would have, if not for the fire."

Fire had always been a threat to the Kyn, as being burned was one of the few ways they could be killed. "Was it a Brethren attack?"

"Of a kind." All expression left the *maréchal's* countenance. "Our women kept their faith better than we did. They still attended services together in our lord's chapel several days each week. After the *jardin* wars, they decided among themselves to secretly install a priest. They thought they could control him. They discovered they were wrong when he trapped them inside the chapel and set fire to it."

Sylas looked at the faint burn scars on the men's faces and limbs. "The men tried to rescue them."

Saetta inclined his head. "We lost eighteen that day, but none of the women survived. My wife, Francesca, and our daughter, Mariposa, were among them. Then there were the suicides. Another five." He paused, removing his gloves to reveal strong hands and forearms, every inch covered in faint but visible burn scars. "I should have been the sixth, but for the contessa. She tended our wounds herself, never resting, never leaving us until we had healed. She promised us that she would make our lives worth living again. She saved all of us."

Sylas tried to imagine surviving Rebecca. He couldn't think of his life without her in it. "Forgive me for reminding you of your loss."

"You did not know." The Italian looked out over the assembly. "We pledged our lives in service to our lord, and our loyalty to him never wavered once. But I tell you this: Every man here would gladly die for our lady."

## CHAPTER FIVE

Reese felt Alain watching her as she snapped a few more shots of the tapestries hanging from the work frames. "I'm almost done."

"You are depressingly industrious," he informed her. "Are you quite certain you do not wish to see my chambers? I have many things there that might please your eye. The furnishings are especially fine, too."

"I'm flattered, but as Rebecca said, I have to leave soon." Reese moved to another angle, one that brought her closer to Alain. "You're not English, are you?"

"No, I was Irish in my human life. A traveling minstrel with more hot blood than cool sense." He came to stand beside her and looked down at her intently. "Damn me, lady, but I swear I know you."

Reese shut off her camera and tucked it into her purse. "Perhaps we met once in the city."

"I think not. It is not your face, pretty as it is. It is your scent. I never forget a woman's sweetness, and yours..." He bent his head and breathed in. "'Tis like something in the night."

"A field of berries at moonrise," she finished for him.

"Yes. Exactly." He straightened. "How did you know what I was thinking?"

"I didn't." She put her closed hand on his chest. "It's what you said the first time we met."

He gave her a broad grin. "I knew it. When—" He stopped and glanced down at the sharp-ended pressure cartridge sticking out of his shirt. Then his clouding eyes met hers. "Why do you this, girl?"

"I can't leave," she told him. "Not yet."

He stiffened. "I know you now. You came at night. You brought me..."

"I know." She caught him as he staggered and held him until he sagged. "I'm sorry."

It took a few minutes to take what she needed from Alain before she secured him where he would not be immediately found. Once Reese had seen to that, she checked the hall and then left the workrooms. The timing of the Italians' arrival could not have worked out better for her; all she needed to do now was conceal herself in the lord's chamber and wait for him to come to her.

Robin of Locksley occupied the largest suite of rooms at Rosethorn, but the furnishings were unexpectedly plain and the decor uncluttered. A great many plants and small trees had been brought in, enough to make a visitor mistake the chamber for a tidy greenhouse. Among the beauties of nature Reese noted a number of incredibly old artworks, carvings, and tapestries, all dating back to the time when Locksley had been human. He could not return to that forgotten world, Reese thought, but he surrounded himself with constant reminders of it.

She opened a door to another set of rooms, smaller and much less cluttered, and switched on the lights. She knew they belonged to Will from his scent, as dark and rich as bittersweet chocolate, which still lingered in the air.

Instead of the expected red, Robin's seneschal had chosen the blue of ice crystals, the paleness of cream, and a blue-tinged onyx for his colors. Shades of winter, she thought as she wandered about, touching the surface of the old black oak desk where he had neatly sorted piles of estate paperwork and letters.

She picked up a pretty fountain pen, the barrel made of an ivory-streaked dark blue, and removed the end cap. He'd used it so often that he'd worn down one side of the golden nib. "Who taught you to write?" she asked under her breath.

Silence gave her no answer.

She replaced the pen where she had found it, and glanced over at the bed. It was large and placed close to the fire, and she could almost see him sleeping there, warm and safe, dreaming of some adventure with Robin, smiling a little as he remembered those happy times.

Did he ever dream of the nights in Aubury? she wondered. Or had he forgotten?

Her pocket buzzed against her hip, making her jump. With a shaking hand she took out her phone, expecting to see her father's number on the screen.

But no, it was her Lover boy.

She stared at it for a long moment, and then flipped it open. "Hello, Will."

"You are doubtless furious for being made to leave the house," he said, all in a rush, "but let me explain."

"You don't have to," she assured him. "I know the protocol involved with visiting Kyn. Get all the un pledged mortals out of the house, and then break out the bagged blood."

"You sound hoarse. Are you ill?"

"My throat is a little sore." She looked around her. "I had thought you'd do your rooms in red."

"You've been to my chamber?"

*I'm standing in them right now.* "Rebecca was kind enough to show them to me. You need a new fountain pen."

He chuckled. "A pity you cannot sneak back into Rosethorn tonight. I would very much like to see you in my rooms."

"I haven't left the house yet. Maybe...Hold on." Reese heard shouts from the hallway and crossed the room to listen at the door. She opened it a bare inch to peer outside, and saw one of the guards collapse a few feet away. The dark-haired warrior standing over him held a dart gun, and paused long enough to reload it with two cartridges filled with blue liquid before hurrying off.

"Reese?"

"I thought I heard something." Reese carefully closed the door and ran for the bag she had left on the desk. She searched through it until she found the small cigarette case at the bottom. Her hands shook as she opened it.

"You cannot stay at Rosethorn," Will said. "Come to the gallery show. I'll ask Rob to give me a few hours for myself. We can go dancing."

She removed one of the thin glass vials from the case. "I don't think I can do that, Will."

"Why not? With the Italians there, you cannot stay to do your work. What else have you to do but sleep?"

She didn't answer him until she had swallowed the contents of the vial and replaced the case. "I'll call you when I get out of here." She closed her eyes and gritted her teeth against the pain.

"I will be waiting for your call," he warned. "Until then, sweetheart."

"Good-bye, Will." Reese ended the call and started for the door when three men brandishing tranquilizer guns came into the room. She threw the phone at them and ran, but two of them caught her before she could escape and pinned her between them.

"She is no threat to us," the burly one holding her left arm said in Italian. "Only another of their mortal servants."

The third, a tall, lean man with sad eyes, nodded. "Take her down to the tunnels and lock her in the dungeons with the others."

\* \* \*

At the downtown gallery, Will parked the car where it would be easily accessible—long experience serving as Robin's second had taught him to always prepare for a hasty departure—before he opened the rear door and helped the contessa out.

"*Grazie, seneschal.*" She shook out her skirt, spreading the scent of marigolds around her before she surveyed the gallery building. "Are you sure this is the place? It looks too small."

Will didn't like Salvatora Borgiana or her aura of lazy contempt. So far tonight she had complained about the weather, which she considered too humid, the mortals in the city, whom she decided overcrowded it, and even the limousine ride from Robin's building, which she felt had taken too long. She might be a refugee seeking sanctuary, but she conducted herself like a disgruntled queen among peasants.

*You were a peasant,* he reminded himself. "I shall go in first and scout the premises," he told his master.

"That will not be necessary." Robin took Salvatora's arm, but he had eyes only for the gallery. "Check their security measures and then report back to me inside."

Will almost refused—he took his duty to keep Robin safe very seriously—but then saw the glitter of copper in his master's eyes. "Yes, my lord."

A quick and quiet reconnoiter of the building revealed the federal agents strategically posted at the front and back entrances as well as the roof. He noted that the windows and doors had also been wired with sensors, doubtless connected to a monitoring station inside. The mortal authorities had fashioned the entire building into a trap, but their crude methods were no match for Robin of Locksley.

Once he felt satisfied, Will went inside the gallery and looked for Robin. He spotted him with the contessa, but saw no sign of Chris Renshaw.

"That scowl on your face makes me think the woman with the titian locks is your Agent Renshaw," Salvatora was saying to him. "She was staring at you just before she scurried off to hide."

Will was tempted to join them, but decided to watch from a distance. Robin guided his companion away from an eager young girl who had inexplicably dyed her short, spiky hair a glowing shade of pink, and accompanied her to a pedestal case set somewhat apart from the other exhibited artworks.

He had never seen *The Maiden's Book of Hours*, but the ancient manuscript inside the glass case atop the pedestal seemed to match the description Robin had given him. It seemed the thing his master had coveted for so many centuries was finally to be his. The odd thing was, once standing before it, Robin barely spared it a single glance. His gaze, bright with hostility, kept straying toward the closed door to the manager's office on the other side of the room.

"Did we come here for the book, or for her?" Will muttered.

Will moved toward an unoccupied corner, where he stood with his back to the walls and kept watch over his master and the contessa as well as the crowd of mortals surrounding them. Standing guard was, for the most part, boring work, but he usually had no difficulty keeping his mind on his

duties. Nor would he have tonight, if not for the call he'd made to Reese from the car.

He wondered why her voice had sounded so strained. She'd made the excuse of a sore throat, which must have pained her greatly, for when she had first started speaking she'd sounded like a man. But under the hoarseness he'd heard something else—sadness, or perhaps loneliness—exactly as he had before, when they'd met in the club. It made little sense to him, for Reese had always been a happy, energetic woman. It had been the first thing that had drawn him to her.

No, there was more to it than that. Will rarely got involved with mortal women, but from the first time Reese had come to his master's city home, she had made her attraction to him quite transparent. Accustomed to females being immediately drawn to his master, Will had felt both startled and flattered by her attention. He didn't mind standing in Robin of Locksley's shadow, but it had been quite pleasing to step out of it for once.

All of that had changed since last night. Something had happened to Reese, perhaps, something that had persuaded her to think differently of him. But Will would swear that she still cared, even more so than in past. He had felt it in her looks. He had heard it in her voice. It had called forth the same response from him.

He dragged his thoughts back to the present as he saw Robin abandon the contessa and stalk across the room and force his way into the manager's office. Suppressing a groan, he went after him.

By the time Will reached the door, Robin had closed it and jammed the knob. Will had no choice but to stand outside and listen.

"I didn't notice you coming in," he heard Chris Renshaw say.

Robin's response was quick and vicious. "You are a better liar than that, madam."

"I don't know what you're talking about, Rob. I have to get back to the show." Her footsteps came toward the door. "Excuse me."

"No," Robin snapped. "I do not excuse you."

Will put a hand on the knob. He knew his lord was greatly put out by how Chris Renshaw had used and deceived him, but she was still a mortal. In his anger, Robin might forget that.



"I know you saw me," his master continued. "Why did you not come to me?"

The female's light footsteps retreated from the door. "All right, I did catch a glimpse of you and your companion when one of the press asked me about you. I didn't come over because I felt awkward about approaching you."

"Awkward."

"I didn't want to say anything that might embarrass you in front of your date." Chris's voice paused for a long moment. "I didn't mean to be rude. Again, I apologize."

"You were protecting me. I see." Heavier footsteps moved across the room. "Tell me, what did you think would embarrass me most? That you might slip up and mention that you used me for sex? Or perhaps that you never told me your full name? Or that you left my bed this morning without bothering to wake me or say farewell?"

Will winced.

"I wrote you a note—"

"Oh, God, yes, how could I forget? The effusive, affectionate, one-line note of thanks." Like Chris's, Robin's voice came from the back of the office now. "I've not earned such an unstinting amount of gratitude since the last time I held a door open for an elderly woman using a cane."

"Rob."

"Robin. *That* is my name. Say it. Say all of it."

"Robin." Chris's voice grew so soft Will could barely make out her next words. "Listen. I've never done anything like that, and I really didn't know what to do except leave. I told you, I don't pick up guys in bars. I don't have one-night stands."

"There, now, that has a ring of truth to it." His master's tone changed as well, and became deceptively soft. "But technically speaking, I wasn't a one-night stand, was I? You didn't stay the night. By my calculations, love, you owe me two more hours. I'd like to collect."

"Excuse me," the young woman with the pink hair said as she appeared before Will. She eyed the door. "Is there something going on in there?"

"Nothing to concern us." Will guided her away from the office and into the short hall beyond it, where he deliberately shed some scent. When her pupils expanded, he said, "Leave the gallery and return to your home. Think no more of this night." He glanced at her vivid locks. "And please stop putting that color in your hair."

"Leave. Forget. Color." She nodded vaguely and wandered off toward the front entrance.

Will resumed his listening post in time to hear Chris say, "Someone is going to come looking for me any minute."

"Let them try."

"Robin." Garments rustled. "Please stop."

His master's next words came as tentative as the hurt coloring them. "Did it truly mean nothing to you?"

"Maybe it started out that way," Chris told him, "but when I woke up and saw you sleeping next to me, and remembered...I didn't know I would feel like that." She hesitated before she added, "I didn't even think about you, not really. I got dressed as fast as I could, and I ran."

Will understood her actions then. She hadn't used Robin and left him. She'd fallen in love with him, and run.

"You can't regret being with me," his master said, sounding appalled. "Not how we were together." When the woman didn't answer him, he said, "*Chris.*"

"No. No, I don't."

Her voice went too low for Will to hear as she murmured to his master, but he felt a wave of relief. Now that she had explained, surely it would dispel Rob's anger.

"If that is true," Robin said, "why did you run away?"

"Haven't you ever done something amazing and dangerous and exciting," she asked him, "that you later wished you'd never done at all?"

Because you know it could change everything you have, everything you are?"

*Reese*, Will thought, awash in his own regret. If he had let her go two months ago, when he had first sensed that their affair might be coming to its conclusion, she might now be happy. Was that it? Had he held on to her too long?

"So you ran away because you wanted more." Robin uttered a bitter laugh. "Yes, actually, I have done that myself. I believe this is where my severely bruised pride takes a tumble."

"It's not you. It's me. My life. My choices." Chris sounded better now, more sure of herself. "I am glad you understand. I'll never forget you, or the night we spent together."

The bluntness of her rejection made Will rub his eyes.

"Before you send me on my way," Robin told her, "and go back to living your life as it was, there is something else I want you to remember."

The sounds of their embrace compelled Will to reach for the knob again, until another idea occurred to him. As angry as he was, Robin would not disgrace himself in front of his old friend. Will looked across the gallery for the contessa, but she no longer stood by the book. Frowning, he walked away from the office and turned, searching the crowd for her.

A painfully loud screech shattered the air, and icy water showered down over Will, drenching him. As the patrons screamed, his head snapped up to see the streams of water spraying from the overhead metal spout in the ceiling. He blocked the spray from his face with his hand and noticed that every other ceiling spout had activated, and then he felt an icy sensation pass over him.

Across the room, glass shattered.

Frost bloomed over his sodden garments as the cold sank deep and burned against his flesh. Then he couldn't feel his hand, and looked up to see it encased in a spray-shaped sheath of ice. At the same time, the streams of water pouring down instantly froze all around him, crackling as they formed thick bars. The same happened around the gallery, until every one of the patrons had been trapped in a frozen cage.

Only one Kyn had the talent to turn water to ice in a heartbeat—his master's oldest enemy, Guy of Guisbourne.

Will wrenched his hand free of the ice block and kicked his way out of the trap, drawing his dagger as he whirled, looking for the hateful visage of the dark lord. He saw no sign of him, but soon found the source of the shattering sound. The pedestal case in which *The Maiden's Book of Hours* had been displayed now stood empty, the glass smashed by a powerful hand.

Will made the rounds of the rooms. When he felt sure the rogue was not inside the gallery, he intercepted Robin and the mortal woman as they hurried out of the office.

"My lord," Will said, "'twas done by Kyn."

"By one Kyn." Hatred made Robin's voice harsh. "This is Guisbourne's work."

"What are you talking about?" Chris looked from Robin to Will and back again. "Who's Guisbourne?"

"I did not see his face. He set off the water system somehow, and used talent to freeze the streams." Will felt like a fool. "Once the mortals and I were trapped, he smashed the case and helped himself to the book."

Robin surveyed the room in disgust.

"Cyprien banished him at the winter tournament." Will shook his head. "To defy the *seigneur's* order of exile would be signing his own death warrant."

"He has nothing left to go to, Will," Robin said. "His seneschal is dead, his Saracens deserted him, and his *jardin* was burned out. All he has left is his vengeance."

Will couldn't understand it. "Why would he do this instead of challenging you directly?"

"He knows I would kill him." Robin moved to the ruined case and put his hand on the empty velvet base inside. "This is more personal than a duel. He could not have her in life, so he would keep from me the only likeness of her that exists." He drew his hand away and curled it into a fist. "Track him. Now."

Will moved around the gallery until he picked up the dark lord's scent, which led from the case to a side door. Here he had stood watching, Will realized from the heavy odor of aniseed.

The bastard had actually taken a moment to stop and gloat over his work.

He went outside, a dagger in his hand, silently praying to find Guisbourne still near. This time he would finish the work the dark lord's seneschal had begun at the Realm, and deliver his head to his master.

But the scent trail led him only to a deserted alley between the gallery and a neighboring building, where it abruptly vanished. Will knew only one way Guisbourne could have managed that. Frustrated, he turned his attention to the problem at hand—the mortals caught in the attack. He took a moment to disconnect the landlines at the terminal box outside the gallery before returning inside.

"Guisbourne's scent disappeared in the street outside," he reported to his master. "He must have used a car to escape."

"Did you disable the telephone lines?" When Will nodded, Robin's tight expression eased.

"Contact the *jardin*. We will need a dozen men here while we clean up this mess and attend to the humans. Alert our friends at the police department as well."

Will turned and found himself enveloped by the fragrance of marigolds, and facing the contessa and four armed guards.

"I regret to say that your men cannot come to your aid, my lord," Salvatora Borgiana said with a beguiling smile.

Robin studied her face. "You were a part of this?"

"I intended only to take the manuscript from you," she told him. "Unfortunately, it seems that Nottingham had a better plan than I."

Robin's voice grew cold. "Why do you want the book?"

"My family bought it from Nottingham when he came to settle in Italy. My father made a gift of it to my younger sister, Beatrice, when she took her vows. 'Twas the only earthly possession she ever treasured, and upon her

death it was supposed to come to me." Some of the smirk left the contessa's face, and for a moment she looked as enraged as Will felt. "I have waited seven hundred years for this night."

That didn't impress his master. "Obviously, my lady, you will have to wait a little longer. Now, if you will permit me—"

"I have just sent word to all of my warriors to capture your men and take control of your stronghold," the contessa said. "I have also secured your mortal female's partner as another hostage. You will find Nottingham, retrieve the manuscript, and bring it back to me."

"You do not command me, madam." Robin glanced at her men. "If you wish to hunt down my cousin, send your own men after him."

"My men have other responsibilities." Salvatora swept her hand in an elegant motion, and her guards drew their copper swords. "It should be no trouble for you to retrieve the book. But if you need more reason to pursue Nottingham, consider the lives of all the Kyn and humans under your rule. One call from me, and my men will begin executing them, twenty at a time."

Reese was still at Rosethorn. Will's scent sharpened, and his fangs sprang into his mouth.

His master's eyes turned to pure copper. "I thought you named me your friend, Salvatora."

"A woman can have no friends in this world, my lord. Not if she wishes to survive." She flipped a hand toward Will. "You may have your seneschal verify that I speak the truth, if you like."

Robin gave Will a nod. He walked away a short distance before he took out his mobile phone and called the estate.

An unfamiliar voice answered the call. "Name yourself."

"This is Will Scarlet, seneschal to Suzerain Locksley," he said. "Your mistress has given me leave to speak to one of my men. Put Sylas on the line."

"You will wait."

During the interval of silence that followed, Will tried not to think of Reese, captured and helpless, at the mercy of invading Kyn. He knew her

training included how to protect herself during such clashes between his kind; she would do as she had been taught. The fact that she was mortal was some measure of protection in itself. The Italians needed human blood to survive, and they wouldn't be quick to destroy their only sustainable source of it.

Will's thoughts darkened. Reese was his woman. Whatever the outcome, whatever devil's bargain his master struck with the contessa, he would hunt down and gut any Kyn male who had laid a hand on his lover.

"This is Sylas of Daven," a harsh voice said.

"Tis Will," he said. "Tell me what you know."

"The contessa's *cavalieri* attacked us during the welcome gathering," Sylas said. "We engaged them, but they brought out strange pistols that shoot darts of blue liquid. I do not know what it is, but every Kyn they shot fell senseless and unmoving."

Will reined in his temper. "It is a sleeping potion discovered by Lady Alexandra, Cyprien's *sygkenis*. It will not harm them."

"The Italians spread through the stronghold from the main hall, and did the same to the interior guards and household staff. Once they secured the house, they sent out detachments to deal with the patrols."

Whoever had orchestrated this had known exactly what they were doing. "How many have fallen?"

"All but me," Sylas said. "The entire garrison has been imprisoned in the tunnels below. I was kept awake to speak with you."

"Do what you can," Will said. "We will come for you soon."

"Aye, seneschal, I shall. Give my love to Rebecca when next you see her."

Rebecca of Daven never left Rosethorn. By giving him the message, Sylas was telling him that Rebecca had managed to escape. Will had no doubt that the chatelaine had also taken many or all of her ladies with her. "I shall."

Someone snapped something in Italian, and the line went dead.

Will returned to Robin. "They permitted Sylas to speak to me, my lord. It is as she says. Her men have captured the *jardin* and are holding all of our people in the underground tunnels." He looked around for the contessa and her men, but saw they had departed.

The sound of approaching sirens distracted Robin.

"The police." He cursed under his breath in the old tongue, eyeing Chris before he gave Will a meaningful look.

His master didn't have to tell him that before they could rescue their Kyn, they would have to first deal with the humans.

\* \* \*

Rebecca inched along the narrow passage. The walls scraped her shoulders and her breasts, but she knew she was close. Behind her, the women she had led into the impossibly narrow gap also made their way through it, each blindly following her.

At last the wall space widened, becoming a small chamber outside a barred door. Rebecca listened as her ladies crowded in behind her, and then lifted the heavy plank of wood. Carefully she eased the door open and stepped out into darkness, breathing in the air until she felt sure no other occupied the immediate area. She turned back and gestured for the women to come out.

"My lady, there is blood on your gown." Lettice touched the red-stained slash in the material over her left side.

Rebecca covered it with her hand. "Tis nothing." She gazed at the other women. "We will take a moment to collect ourselves and then we will enter the tunnel. Keep watch, and be as quiet as you can while we are here."

She moved a short distance away from her ladies before she checked her side. The Italians had rapidly emptied their guns during the attack in the main hall, and the one who had chased them had made quick use of his sword when she blocked him from following the women into the baths. Fortunately none of her ladies had seen her response, and she had left the body in the heated pool, where the water turned pink as it erased the most telling indication of her attack: the blood that had poured from his eyes, nose, mouth, and ears.



She would not think about him anymore. She couldn't, or she would surely do it again.

Drawing on the talent she shared with Sylas, Rebecca closed her eyes and sent out her heart to seek his. She found he had escaped to their bedchamber and had barricaded himself within.

"The Italians have taken over," Sylas said out loud in the empty room as he felt her heart join with his. Through his eyes, she watched him lock the door and go to the weapons cabinet. "Where are the women?"

"With me on the third level, outside the escape tunnel." Rebecca lowered her voice. "Can you come to us?"

"No." He strapped on his chest protector before choosing a helm. "You must go without me. Warn the suzerain as soon as you are safe."

Now she understood why he was donning his armor. "You cannot fight so many, Sylas. Not alone." When he didn't reply she felt dizzy. "You have to surrender to them. Talk to them. They must want something."

He pulled on his gauntlets. "I do not negotiate with cowards who attack women."

"You must." She closed her eyes for a moment, but that only made the dizziness worse. "Else they will take my life with yours."

"No. It need not be so." Sylas turned his head as something heavy began hammering on the outside of the chamber door. He concentrated until he could see through her eyes. The darkness of the subbasement and the frightened faces of the other women swam inside his head. "You are stronger than that, Rebecca."

Her voice dropped low. "I am nothing without you."

It was harder for her to feel his emotions when distance separated them, but sometimes the strongest came through their heart bond. She felt the tightening of his chest as regret filled his heart. She tasted the sweat on his lip as fear and rage fought for dominion over his head. Finally the love he felt for her, the love that had saved them both so many times, conquered the ugliness. As the door to the chamber began to give way, he calmed and put his swords back in the cabinet.

"I am going into shadows," he told her. "If I stay too long, only your voice will bring me back. Remember."

Rebecca covered her mouth with her hand to stop from crying out.

"I love you, wife." His talent reached across the bond, became the boundaries of a dark dream. "Now hurry into the tunnel, before they find you."

## CHAPTER SIX

Reese didn't resist the guards holding her or give them any reason to think she understood their language. She kept her expression frightened and her demeanor helpless, and deliberately stumbled now and then over her own feet.

"This one is a rabbit," the burly guard observed, his grip loosening a few degrees. "We should keep her to serve us in the hall."

The other guard scowled. "Saetta said the mortals are to be kept in the tunnels with the garrison."

"So they might feed on and take their pleasure of them at their leisure while we choke on bagged blood?" The burly guard spit on the floor. "'Tis a foolish waste of good humans."

"They have not so many," his companion said, as if to console himself. "They will have to ration them."

It disgusted Reese to hear herself spoken of as if she were nothing more than food, but she kept the fear on her face as she surveyed the corridor ahead of them. A fan of short lances displayed beside a window caught her attention before she lowered her gaze and gathered her will.

"At least we are to patrol the house," the burly guard said. "I do not envy our brothers on perimeter patrol. They will be the first to fall."

"This American lord would not dare siege his own stronghold," the other guard replied. "Not if he values the lives of his men."

Reese moaned and curled over, halting the guards in their tracks. She dropped, clutching at her belly.

"What is she about now?" the second guard demanded.

"I don't know their tongue any more than you do," the burly one snarled. When Reese made retching sounds, he released her. "Oh, she is going to puke."

The other guard let go of her arm and stood back. As soon as he did Reese straightened and lunged for the lances, grabbing two and extending her arms so that the copper tips pressed into each guard's chest.

"On your knees," she ordered them in Italian. "Hands behind your heads."

Both men sank carefully down on the stones, folding their fingers over the back of their necks.

"Where is Locksley?" she demanded. When neither man answered, she jabbed them with the lances. "Tell me or die."

"The lord is in the city," the burly one said sullenly.

Reese swallowed against the shriek of frustration that rose in her throat. "You," she said to the scowling guard. "Toss your pistol onto the floor." She turned her head toward the burly one. "You pick it up." When he did so, she added, "Shoot him."

"What?"

She drove the lance an inch into his chest. "Shoot him, or I will skewer your heart."

"You cannot escape the house," the scowling guard told her. "Our men have—" A dart appeared in the side of his neck, and with a grunt of surprise he fell backward.

She placed the tip of the lance she had used on the unconscious guard under the fat chin of the burly one. "Now shoot yourself."

"Saetta will drain you dry." With an ugly look he turned the pistol on himself before he, too, collapsed.

Reese crouched to retrieve the pistol. "Saetta wouldn't like the way I taste."

She took what she needed from the burly guard, retrieved her bag from Will's rooms, and looked for her phone without success. The third guard, she decided, must have taken it with him. From there she made her way downstairs, and, once she located the entrance to the first basement level, she slipped inside.

No one stopped or questioned her as she made her way through the tight warren of passages to the dark stairwell leading to the subbasement level, carefully avoiding the storage tunnels where Locksley's garrison had been imprisoned. After using another vial from her bag, she found a dark corner and rested for a few minutes.

Robin of Locksley had not returned to Rosethorn, so all the months of careful planning were worthless now. There was no hope of completing her mission unless she returned to the city, found Locksley, and retrieved the book. She would have to use Will one last time.

But to leave Rosethorn under siege...

What the Italians and the English did to one another was not her concern, her father would say. These were matters in which they did not become involved. Their duty was to the mortal world, and the threat to innocent lives.

The scent of clover teased her nose.

Slowly she pushed herself up from the floor and silently followed the sweet fragrance, which led her to a third and final set of stairs, these concealed behind a large group of crates. They inclined sharply down to a single, dark tunnel.

This one, Reese knew, had been built under Locksley's land, and would likely be more than a mile in length. It had not been in the building plans, but Father had assured her it would be there.

"After the *jardin* wars, they always installed an escape tunnel," he told her. "It will be at the lowest point of the stronghold. If something goes wrong, find it and it will lead you to a vehicle you may use."

As Reese entered the tunnel, she saw the glimmer of electric torches and smelled other scents blending with that of the clover. The women, she realized, had escaped the house, and even now were hurrying toward freedom.

And Rebecca, who had been so kind to her, was leading them.

\* \* \*

Will worked quickly to manage the humans caught up in the attack on the gallery, aware as he did that Robin had deliberately revealed himself to

Chris in order to separate her from the others. Will didn't approve—unwitting or not, the meddling federal agent had provided both Guisbourne and the contessa with the perfect opportunity to rout his master—but he had no more say in the matter than he suspected she did.

Once he had dealt with the police and the gallery patrons, he used his contacts in the Atlanta Police Department to complete the arrangements and obtain the location of the patrol unit that had taken Robin and Chris away. He took the limousine and caught up with them on a deserted stretch of highway just outside the city.

Will saw Robin holding Chris, both of their garments disheveled, as the policeman escorting them walked back to his unit. He parked behind the patrol and got out.

As he approached, Will saw how furious the mortal female was, and how determined his master looked.

"How did you make him do that?" Chris was demanding.

"I promise you, I shall explain everything when this is over." Robin saw Will and turned to him. "Were you able to deal with all of them?"

"I sent the police back on patrol; they were most obliging. Our friends in the department will see to any records. The guests are locked inside the building. They will sleep until dawn and have no memory of the attack. The ice should be melted by then, and then our friends will go around and finish tidying up." He indicated Chris. "She is the only one left."

The mortal's eyed narrowed. "You're not drugging me." She fought against Robin's grasp.

"Tell me his name," Robin said, "and I shall release you."

So she had been a part of this plot. "Let me have her, my lord," Will said, removing one of his blades. "She will tell me what you wish to know."

Chris eyed Will's dagger and then addressed his master. "His name was Paul Sherwood. Now let go of me."

"I said I would release you," Robin advised her. "I did not say I would do it now." As she began writhing against him, he said to Will, "Be aware that *l'attrait* has no affect on her whatsoever. I am none too sure that our talent does, either."

"I could kill her," he offered. "That would solve the problem."

Robin frowned at him and then saw Chris's expression. "He is only joking," he told her. To Will, he said, "Take us back to the penthouse."

On the journey back to the Armstrong building, Will kept the divider window down and listened, but the mortal female remained silent, and did not try to fight his master or free herself. When he felt sure she had acquiesced—for the moment, anyway—he placed calls to some of their human friends to confirm her claims.

"She told the truth," he said to Robin after finishing his calls. "A Paul Sherwood left Atlanta International on a chartered flight for Rome. The charter was paid for by a Helen Moran. Our people at the airport are examining their security tapes to see if this Sherwood matches Guisbourne's description."

"He will," Chris said, sounding resigned. "Helen Moran manages the clothing shop next to the gallery."

"Thank you," Robin said.

"If he's left the country, there's nothing you can do," she said, changing her manner abruptly. "Let me go, and I'll alert Interpol. They'll arrest him as soon as he steps off the plane in Rome." When his master said nothing, her voice grew sharp. "Robin, that book is priceless."

*So is Reese*, Will thought.

Chris tried once more to run when Will stopped outside the building, but his master seized her up in his arms and carried her struggling form inside. He didn't put her back on her feet until they were in the elevator and traveling up to the penthouse level.

"Were there any of our Kyn who were not at the stronghold when Salva's men took over?" Robin asked as he pried the remains of the policeman's manacles from his wrists and gave them to Will.

"Fazio, Mason, and Sullivan were on guard duty here." The three warriors were good men, but Will would have traded them all for his castellan, who in his human life had besieged dozens of strongholds. "Sylas said to give his love to Rebecca, so I think his wife must have gotten some of the humans and the other women out before they could secure them."

Robin nodded. "Rebecca will bring them to our friends in Marietta before she attempts to contact us. As soon as she reports in, I shall speak to her."

"Should we not call on our allies for assistance, my lord?" Will shoved the twisted steel cuffs into his pocket. "Suzeraina Jayr could have her garrison here in a matter of hours."

Robin's face became a stony mask.

"No. I do not wish the suzeraina involved in this." The elevator stopped and he stepped out into the corridor, frowning when Chris did not. "You cannot stay in the elevator all night, love. There is no place to sit but the floor."

She didn't join him. "You took those cuffs off like they were made of plastic. You can make cops—anyone—do anything. You've got *fangs*." Her gaze skittered to Will's face, and he saw the panic in her eyes. "What *are* you people?"

Had she been a Brethren operative, she would not have wasted her time feigning such innocence. She would save her energies to do whatever it took to kill or escape them.

Some of the ugly suspicion cleared from Will's head as he said to Robin, "I shall prepare some tea."

"Make it strong and sweet. Everything will be all right, Chris. Come." Robin coaxed her out of the elevator and led her into his penthouse.

Will retreated to the kitchen. He stood over the sink, turning on the taps and splashing his face before he filled the kettle and put it on the stove. If they somehow survived this siege, and his master decided to install Chris in his city home, Will would have to look into purchasing a Teasmade.

Two, perhaps, if Reese survived.

Slowly he prepared a tray with a porcelain cup, saucer, cream, and sugar. He had no idea what the American took in her tea; they did so many barbaric things with it in this country that the possibilities were endless. To keep his hands busy, he took a lemon from the bowl of fruit he kept out for the mortal staff.



"There is nothing wrong with peach tea," Reese had said to him one night after she'd raided his small larder to concoct the beverage. "It's traditional."

"No, tea is traditional," he argued. "Squeezing peach juice into it is revolting."

"You're just jealous because I can drink it and you can't," she said, laughing as he took the glass from her. "Don't do it," she warned as he lifted it to his lips. "Remember what happened when you tried my favorite champagne?"

"I beg your pardon," he said as he returned the glass to her hands. "Refresh my memory. Who was it who said champagne was simply fizzy wine?"

"I said to take a sip, like so." She sipped the tea, her eyes smiling at him over the rim. "Not drink half the bottle."

He gathered her against him. "Give me a taste." When she lifted the glass to his lips, he took it and set it aside. "Not like that."

The sharp smell of lemon made Will look down. He had crushed the lemon in his hand, and all that remained of it was a pulpy mess. He discarded the pulverized fruit, took another from the bowl, and sliced it before carrying the tray out to the front rooms.

His master lay on the floor with the mortal female atop him.

"All the way through, love," Robin said. "Half measures don't work on my kind."

"I am through playing this game, Robin."

"So am I."

Will smelled blood and bergamot, and hurried forward. When he saw that Chris held a knife to his master's throat, the tray dropped out of his hands and smashed to the floor. "Bloody hell."

"Stay where you are, Will. Whatever she does to me, you will not touch her." Robin didn't look away from the mortal's reddened face. "Kill me and it will be over. My seneschal will not harm you. But the contessa will see to

it that hundreds will die—humans and Kyn, my entire *jardin*. One of them will be your partner."

Her head turned from side to side. "I don't believe you. I don't believe any of this."

"If I give you proof, will you help me get the book?"

Chris sat up and took the dagger away from Robin's neck. Will caught his breath when he saw the shallow wound on his master's throat, which promptly disappeared. The federal agent held herself rigid, and a strange look came over her face.

Will knew that look, and went to gently remove the blade from her fingers. She didn't try to keep hold of it.

"It can't be real." Chris tottered to her feet, her arms hanging limp at her sides as she stared down at his master. "You can't be." She put out an arm, and her eyes rolled up into her head.

Will got to her before she collapsed, and lifted her into his arms. The paleness of her young face made him sigh. "I'll make more tea."

Robin got up from the floor. "Put her in my bedchamber," he said. "And bolt the door."

Will placed Chris on Robin's bed, removing her heels and covering her with the linens before he straightened. She might be more interested in jailing his master than bedding him, but she was only human. The faint dark half circles under her eyes and a small gnaw mark on her lower lip tugged at his heart.

"Poor girl," he murmured. "You've had a time of it tonight, you have." He tucked the coverlet around her and turned off the bedside lamp before he left, carefully locking the door behind him.

He found Robin on the phone, talking to the contessa. "Nottingham will be landing in Italy in a few hours. He is beyond my reach now. I cannot retrieve the manuscript for you."

Will went to pick up the broken crockery from the tray. As he cleaned up the mess, he listened to his master argue with Salvatora.

"She will be a hindrance to me," Robin said at last, and looked at Will. "I shall leave her here with my seneschal. He will keep her sequestered until my return."

When Will saw him look at the screen on the phone, he came over and saw that the contessa had sent a video of a black mortal being brutally beaten. Will recognized him as one of the federal agents working at the gallery—the one Dennis had called "Hutch."

"I've seen enough," Robin said. "Stop before you kill him."

The image of the contessa's satisfied face appeared on the screen. "I shall see you and your human lover, in Rome, in two days. Be sure you have the manuscript, my lord. If you do not, her partner dies, and you will revisit every one of the happy memories you have of the *jardin* war trials."

The phone's screen turned blank.

"She would not do this thing unless she felt sure she could get away with it," Will said as he realized what she meant to do. "Once she has the manuscript, she will kill you and Agent Renshaw. Then she can blame your deaths on Nottingham, or make up any story she likes."

Robin went over to the cabinet where he stored his personal weapons and removed his bow case. "Contact Jayr and Lucan, and tell them only that I am in Europe, and in my absence refugee Kyn have captured my stronghold. Ask them to send as many warriors as they can spare. Surround the keep, but do nothing for two days. If I do not call you by the end of the second, you must lead them in and save as many as you can."

"While you die alone in Rome." Will would have none of that.

"I have lived seven lifetimes, old friend, and I am certain that death is ready for me. My task is to do whatever I must to protect Chris." Robin came to him and braced a hand against his shoulder. "You helped me build the stronghold; no one knows it as well as you. That gives you an advantage over the contessa's men. Use it. Remember how we routed the king's men in Sherwood. I know you will prevail."

As much as he disliked it, Will knew what his duty was. Robin could not fight a battle on two fronts. "I shall earn you faith in me, but that bitch will not get away with this. As soon as our people are secure, I shall call the high lord and make him aware of her treachery. Then I shall hunt her down and take her head."

"You will be too busy for that." Robin opened his case and adjusted the packing around his bow. "If I am slain, you are to take my place as suzerain."

Will uttered a sour chuckle. "That is as likely as my assuming the throne of England."

"I have already advised Cyprien." His master shut the lid of the case and secured it. "He agreed with my choice. There will be no opposition."

"You are not jesting." Will gaped him before he shoved aside his astonishment. "My lord, if you have forgotten, my father was a smith, and my mother a laundress. The only noble blood in my veins came from the mortal gentry I fed on whenever I could lure one of them into the woods. If not for you, I should have ended dangling from a rope at a crossroads. Pledging myself to you, taking vows, fighting in the Holy Land, surviving death, being made Kyn—it surely saved me, but it did not make me another man. I was an outlaw. A thief."

"So was I." Robin offered the bow case to him. "I am not dead yet, Will. There is still hope." The sound of a knob twisting made him glance toward his bedchamber. "It seems my special agent has awoken. Call the airport and have a plane standing by."

## CHAPTER SEVEN

Rebecca went to the open window of her bedchamber, where the warm April night beckoned to her. She did not miss the old days, when the hunger had compelled Sylas to go out and hunt as soon as the sun set and the mortal world prepared to sleep. Her satisfaction dimmed a little as the stars brightened, making tiny rainbows dance before her eyes. At the same time, her skin began to shed the scent of sweet clover.

Something had stirred her talent. "Sylas."

"I am here, lass." Sylas came to stand behind her and folded his arms around hers. "I will help you fight it."

The memories were returning. Rebecca heard bitter weeping and terrible laughter. "I do not think you can this time."

He turned her to face him and spoke. Although she could no longer hear him, he knew she could see and read his lips. "You must resist it."

The strange voices filling her ears fell abruptly silent, and she drooped, clutching him for a moment as she regained her balance. "I cannot leave you."

"You cannot stay." He rubbed a hand over her back. "You are stronger than you think, wife. Have faith."

She shook her head. She was not strong; she had never been strong. Not since that terrible night, the first night she had woken in Sylas's arms.

"I know you, my lady."

She was his lady. Rebecca held on to that promise. She would do as he wished. She would resist. She would not harm anyone. She was his lady.

*My lady.*

"My lady." Hands were touching her, shaking her. "My lady, please wake up."

Rebecca opened her eyes to see Lettice standing over her. "No," she muttered. "'Twas not enough."

"My lady," the seamstress pleaded, "you must rouse yourself. We dare not wait any longer."

Horrified that she had fallen asleep, she jerked. "Have they found us?"

"No, my lady, but they are searching for us. Come." She bent to put an arm around her.

Rebecca gripped Lettice's hand, gritting her teeth as the movement strained the wound in her side. She was not healing, and that was always the first sign. The next would be the constant shedding of her scent.

"Give me a moment." She gasped the words as she found her feet. The shadows in the tunnel seemed to lengthen and draw close around her, and she nearly wept with relief. "Tish, move away from me." She looked at the others. "Stay beneath the lights."

Lettice drew back, moving away quickly to stand with the other women under the dim glow of the single bulb hanging from the ceiling.

A voice came from the shadows, whispering in the cold, damp stillness. "Rebecca."

Thank God, he knew her. "I am here, my lord."

"Take word," the ghostly voice said. "The one in charge has silver in his hair and a sword scar across his face. The men call him Saetta. He has fortified the barriers and posted guards everywhere."

She tried to see a face in the pool of darkness; sometimes he could come that far. "How many weapons?"

"They each carry a dart gun and extra cartridges. They also wield swords, daggers, the lot." Something blue glittered in the shadows. "They have not found our cache yet. They look for you."

"We will be gone." Rebecca thought frantically. "Even if you could free the men and arm them, you are outnumbered three to one. What about our stores?"

"They were the first thing I destroyed." His voice grew more distant. "They are coming for me now. Find Will, Rebecca, and tell him everything." A hand formed from the darkness and reached out to her. "I love you."

"No." She tried to touch him, but her hand passed through the shadowy fingers and touched only the rough, damp stone. "Sylas."

Rebecca fell forward, caught by the arms of one of her ladies. She held on to the other female until her legs felt steadier.

"You are right, Lettice. They do search for us. We must move quickly." The face of the woman holding her came into focus. "Reese. I did not realize it was you. Forgive me." Rebecca tried to clear her thoughts. "You were not in the main hall when we fled the fighting. How did you find us?"

"Alain sent me down here to use the escape tunnel." The mortal female put an arm around her back. "Who were those men upstairs? Why did they take over Rosethorn?"

"I will explain later." She stumbled forward, gesturing to the other ladies. "Come. We must take the caravan into the city before daybreak. Reese, have you a mobile phone with you?"

"No, I...dropped it."

None of the other women carried phones, Rebecca knew. "We will stop to make use of a pay phone somewhere along the way. Quickly now."

\* \* \*

After Will took Robin and Chris to the airport, he returned to his master's city home and summoned the three men he had left.

"Our lord is sending us to Rosethorn," he told them. "I am to call upon *Suzeraina* Jayr and Suzerain Lucan. For them and their men, we will need everything from the storerooms and whatever you can borrow from our mortal friends."

"How many at the stronghold?" Fazio asked.

"Seventy-three."

Mason gave him an incredulous look. "Seneschal, even seventy-three Mongols could not take Rosethorn from our garrison."

"They used deceit and drugs," Will told him. "Now they hold our Kyn hostage. Our lord has gone to Rome to placate their mistress. In two days' time, if he has not, we attack."

"Can we be prepared for that in but two days?" Sullivan wanted to know.

"We must, or the lives of our brothers and sisters will be forfeit." Will held out his hand. "Unto the last man, we fight."

The other three clapped their hands atop his. "Unto the last man."

Will went to the communications room, which still held maps and plans used during the search for Valentin Jaus. There he placed the calls to his master's allies and told them of the summons to arms.

"We will be there before nightfall," Suzeraina Jayr of the Realm promised, her voice grim. "How many do I bring?"

Too many warriors would strain their resources, and too few would prove ineffective. The old rule had been four to one, but that had allowed for a quarter to starve or be killed by defender fire. "One hundred of your best, if you please, my lady."

The second call to Suzerain Lucan proved even easier.

"A siege? How delightful." The high lord's former chief assassin yawned. "My men are yours. Where and when?"

Will also requested that Lucan bring one hundred of his most experienced warriors. "We are most grateful, my lord."

"I'm sure you are, but I daresay it choked Robin of Locksley to ask for my aid." He chuckled. "Never fear, seneschal. My garrison is filled with Spaniards, and they have never forgiven the Italians for claiming they discovered this country. We will be most happy to dispatch them from it."

Will then placed a call to the sanctuary house in Marietta, to alert them about Rebecca and the other women traveling there.

"We will prepare for them immediately, seneschal," the woman in charge of the house said. "Do you know how many escaped?"



"No, but they may have mortals with them, so be ready for wounded." Will prayed Rebecca had taken Reese out of the stronghold. "Contact me as soon as they reach you."

\* \* \*

The airless, dark escape tunnel extended almost two miles beneath Rosethorn's outlying lands, and by the time they emerged from the other end into a heavily wooded but otherwise vacant lot by the highway, Reese wanted to do nothing more than throw herself down and rub her face in the grass.

"The caravan is over here, beneath this brush." Rebecca waded through the overgrown weeds and pulled a mat of dead pine branches away from the front end of a large truck.

Reese went to help her, and as soon as they uncovered the cab she looked inside. "No keys."

"They are here." Rebecca reached under the front wheel well and groped until she produced a small magnetic box, which she handed to Reese. "I do not wish to impose on you, but we cannot operate the vehicle."

"None of you can drive?" Reese watched the other women shaking their heads. "Well, it's been a while since I've driven a lorry, but I'll give it a go."

"What is a lorry?" Lettice asked.

"What they call a truck in England." Reese forced a smile. "One of my *tresoran* mentors was English. I guess I picked up some of his slang."

Once they had cleared off the camouflaging branches, Reese unlocked the back of the truck and helped the women inside. Rebecca, however, refused to climb in.

"I shall ride up front with you." When Reese began to protest, she said, "I am the only one who knows the way to the sanctuary house in Marietta."

Reese hadn't considered that the women would want to go anywhere else but Atlanta. "I think we should drive to the city instead. Lord Locksley is there, and we'll be safe with him."

"We cannot," Rebecca said. "Our lord's city home may also have been seized by the Italians. If we are ever forced to leave the estate, our instructions are to go to the sanctuary house and wait there for our men."

She couldn't argue with that. "I understand." She'd have to stop at a pay phone along the way and call her father from there. "Let's get rolling."

Reese took a moment to familiarize herself with the truck's instruments before she started the engine and slowly eased the vehicle out across the lot and onto the road. She drove slowly at first—the truck had not been used in some time, and the engine had a tendency to sputter—but soon she increased her speed to just under the road's limit.

"I imagine this is the last thing you thought you would be doing when you came to Rosethorn tonight," Rebecca said as she took a pouch from the glove compartment and tucked it into the pocket of her skirt.

Reese nodded. "This definitely tops the list." She saw the lines of strain around the other woman's mouth. "Are you doing okay?"

"I have not left the estate since we came to America," she said slowly.

"How long ago was that?"

"Two hundred years and better." The chatelaine sighed. "I thought about it from time to time, but when Sherman came and burned the city during that very uncivil mortal war, I decided living at Rosethorn was adventure enough for me." She glanced at Reese. "You must think me a simpleton."

"There is nothing wrong with being happy at home," Reese corrected. "I envy you in some ways."

Rebecca stared out the side window. "You never should."

She must have reminded the woman of something unhappy. Reese knew she was missing her husband—anyone who saw them together could see that they were soul mates—but she wondered how a lovely woman like the chatelaine had fallen in love with a big, dark brute like Sylas. "How did you meet your husband?"

"Whenever he was in England, Sylas came to the convent where I lived to visit his youngest sister," Rebecca said. "She was one of my charges."

Reese's brows arched. "That would make you a nun."

"I was, and Sylas a soldier of fortune." She smiled. "I have shocked you."

"Oh, I don't know. I've met Buddhist advertising executives, vegetarian meatpackers, and one time I sat next to a girl on a plane who swore she was the secret love child of Princess Di and the lead singer of Duran Duran." Reese shifted on the hard vinyl seat. "Getting caught in the siege of a castle during the twenty-first century, that pretty much tops everything, even a nun married to a mercenary."

"We never actually married," Rebecca admitted. "When the sickness began to spread through the county around the convent, Sylas came to take his sister away. Unfortunately, by the time he arrived, she was already sick and too ill to be moved. Everyone fled but me and a few of the older sisters. And Sylas. He would not leave his sister's side."

More bad memories. "I shouldn't have asked—"

"No, my dear, I do not mind speaking of it. We worked together to care for the sick." She closed her eyes. "I came to know him during those long hours in the infirmary. The night his sister died, Sylas and I both began coughing. I knew that it was likely that I would go before him, so I asked my friend, Sister Marian, to bury us together. She honored my last request, bless her soul. Three days later I woke up in the ground. In his arms."

"That's very romantic." Reese frowned. "I can't believe I just said that."

"I was so frightened, but Sylas...he took care of me. He was such a formidable man to look upon, you understand, but I had witnessed myself how gentle he could be. I trusted him." She looked down at her hands, which she held tightly folded in her lap. "Even in the grave we shared."

Reese grimaced. "I hope he got you out of there in a hurry."

"At first I thought perhaps they had buried us alive," Rebecca said. "It happened all too frequently in our time. But Sylas said that no, we had died, for he had held me until my last breath. He thought that somehow God had been persuaded to give us another chance."

The chatelaine told her how her husband had broken through the lid of the coffin they had shared, and pushed away the soil above it.

"We were both so weak by the time we were free, and yet he carried me into the forest and kept me safe with him. Over the next days we discovered the bizarre changes made to us—we could heal from any wound, but we could no longer eat food or drink anything—and tried to make sense of it." Rebecca shook her head. "I do not know what would have happened to us had not the dark Kyn found us and taken us away with them. They told us what we were, and how we could live."

Reese's eyes felt heavy. "Then you fell in love with him."

"Oh, no. I did that when I was a mortal." Rebecca turned her head and sat up suddenly. "Reese, open the window."

"Why?" The air was sweet and warm, and made her feel as if she were breathing in pure honey.

"I am shedding too much scent." Rebecca reached across her to wind down the window, and then did the same on her own side of the cab. "It will be all right. The effect wears off quickly."

"Thank you." Reese's head cleared. "How could that have happened? *L'attrait* has no...it usually has no effect on me."

"Mine is somewhat more potent than that of other Kyn." She looked away. "Forgive me. I will try to better guard myself until we reach Marietta."

What an odd way to put it, Reese thought. She glanced down at the chatelaine's side and saw through a tear in her gown an open wound. "Rebecca, that gash should have healed by now." She looked ahead for an exit. "I'll find a place to stop."

"No, it is not necessary."

"You need blood—"

"I never feed on mortals."

Reese cringed. "You can't be using the blood of animals; it would have made you a changeling. What other..." She gave Rebecca a startled look. "Sylas feeds you. After he hunts."

"Keep your voice down." Rebecca glanced back at the small window between the cab and the back of the truck. "I cannot hunt, not with my talent, so Sylas looks after my needs."

"The only ones who feed from other Kyn are..." Suddenly Reese understood a great deal about the chatelaine. "That's why you never leave Rosethorn. Why Sylas doesn't want anyone touching you. It's too dangerous."

"Yes." Pale eyes closed. "That is why."

Cold dread filled Reese. "Just how powerful is your talent, Rebecca?"

"I have it under control; that is all that matters." She glanced back at the window. "None of my ladies know of this, Reese. Please do not tell them. It will only frighten them."

As she came up on the exit to Marietta, Reese slowed. "There's a truck stop at the end of this ramp. I need to use the phone and contact the suzerain. Will you be okay if I stop for a few minutes?"

"Yes, of course." Rebecca wrapped her arms around her waist and fell silent.

Reese parked the truck between two tractor trailers, and walked across the lot to a pay phone. It wasn't until she lifted the receiver that she realized she had no coins with her, and dialed the number collect.

Her father accepted the charges, his voice frantic as he said, "You are not at Rosethorn. Do you have the book?"

"No, Father." Shame gnawed at her. "The stronghold was attacked by another group of Kyn. Lord Locksley did not return to the estate before they neutralized the guards and took over the house."

"Locksley has gone to Rome after Guisbourne," he said, his voice dull. "He must have taken the book with him, then."

"I do not think he would risk taking it out of the country," Reese said. "He would have left it behind with Will for safekeeping."

"Find Scarlet," her father ordered. "At once."

Now she had to admit to the rest of her failure. "There are some women who escaped the estate with me," she said. "They are sitting in the back of a lorry, waiting for me to deliver them to safety."

"Are they mortals?" When she didn't answer, her father said, "I thought not. Leave them there."

"Not one of them can drive," she argued. "It will be dawn soon. Father, please. I need only an hour to take them to their sanctuary house."

"Save them, my child, and you condemn the world."

Reese pressed her forehead against the edge of the pay phone's stand. "Do not ask this of me."

His voice became a whip. "I am not asking."

"Very well." She hung up the phone and stood for a moment, looking at the vehicles around her. She would have to leave the truck with them, but she saw no cars parked anywhere. She was about to walk to the diner to beg a ride from one of the men inside when Rebecca caught her arm.

"Where are you going?"

Reese thought fast. "Lord Locksley has gone to Rome after an old enemy. I am needed in Atlanta at once."

"You are needed here." Rebecca shook her arm. "My ladies and I cannot go on foot. The sunrise is but an hour away. Reese, do you hear me?"

"Stay in the back of the truck," she said desperately. "I'll send someone to get you. I have to do this. It's a matter of life and death."

"Wait." Rebecca looked at a man walking past them, and stepped into his path. The scent of clover rolled out from her as she smiled at him. "I need you to drive a truck to Marietta, to this address." She told him the house and street number. "Do you know where it is?"

"Sure, honey. My cousin Walker lives in that part of town." He grinned and wiped his hand under his nose. "Where's the truck?"

"Over there." Rebecca held out her hand. "Give me the keys, Reese."

Reese handed them to her, and Rebecca gave them to the trucker, but didn't follow him as he strolled toward the truck.

"You have to go with him," Reese said.

"I can't be near a mortal who has no resistance," Rebecca told her. "He will succumb and run the vehicle off the road. I am coming with you."

Reese shook her head. "You could stay in the back of the truck, away from him."

"It would not make a difference now. Besides that, I have to speak to Will. There is one who can take us." Rebecca limped toward a trucker who had left the diner and was headed for one of the tractor trailers.

Reese caught up with her. "You could make this one crash his truck just as easily."

"I will get into the back. The cargo area is sealed." She took the pouch from the pocket of her skirt and removed a handful of bills from it, which she placed in Reese's hand. "Use this to hire him."

## CHAPTER EIGHT

Saetta recalled his lieutenants to the main hall, where they delivered their reports. The interior guard, along with the courtyard and perimeter patrols, had been taken and imprisoned in the tunnels beneath the stronghold. The mortals they had found among the unconscious Kyn had been separated and placed under close guard. Their scouts kept watch for any approaching attackers, but none so far had appeared.

Not all the news was good. His men had failed to recover the female Kyn who had escaped from the hall during the initial attack. Two guards escorting a female mortal had been discovered unconscious; both had been drugged with their own darts. The body of a third guard, found floating facedown in the water of an enormous bath, had also been found.

Saetta had hoped to take Rosethorn without any deaths. "How was he killed?"

"I cannot say, *maréchal*. He bled out into the water, but we found no wounds on his body." The man crossed himself and then made a much older gesture intended to ward off the evil eye.

Saetta knew the women had likely escaped through an underground passage, but he ordered the stronghold to be searched again to be sure they had not concealed themselves somewhere in the house. "What of Sylas, the castellan?"

The men glanced at one another. "We found him in his rooms, *maréchal*. He lay upon the floor, and we could not rouse him."

"Then he is drugged like the others."

"We found no darts on him." The guard looked unhappy. "His heart is still, his skin is cold, and he does not breathe."

Saetta knew some of their kind could flee their bodies and take refuge in the dreamlands, where the Kyn briefly went sometimes when they rested. There, too, they became trapped when in thrall, a state brought on by feeding on a be spelled human until they were drained of blood. But had Sylas fallen into thrall, he would have had a dying human with him, and his body would have been warmed by the blood he had taken. "Carry him down here to the hall and post guards by him. Have you secured the stores?"



"We found their cold room," one lieutenant admitted, "but one of them got to it first. The bags were slashed, and the pooled blood that leaked from them was strewn with copper coins."

"Deliberately tainted." That effectively rendered the blood worthless to them. "We will have to begin using the mortals tomorrow. Set up—"

A hoarse scream echoed through the hall, followed by shouts for help. Saetta drew his sword and led his lieutenants to the source in the passage outside.

Three guards stood, backs toward one another other, their blades drawn. Their eyes darted around them as they turned, searching for something.

Saetta looked as well, but saw nothing. "What are you about?"

"It attacked Isidro," one of the guards said. "It came out of the wall and took him."

"What came out?"

"A demon." The guard stabbed at the shadows. "A demon made of smoke."

Saetta's heel slid on something wet, and he glanced down at a pistol, a sword, and a pile of garments in a pool of blood. He lifted the garments and found a pair of scarred boots.

"Those belong to Isidro," one of his lieutenants said.

"A man does not disappear and leave behind his clothes. It is a trick." Saetta dropped the garments and went to the wall, running his hand along the stone, feeling for a seam. He found nothing to indicate a hidden passage, but the stone itself was so cold it felt icy. "Search the passages. Find him."

"What of the demon, *maréchal*?" one of the guards asked.

"There are no such things," he said.

"We saw it," another of the guards insisted. "It was not a man. It had no face or body. It was made of black smoke."

"Whatever demon you encountered is but a Kyn using talent." He turned to his second. "Bring one of the English up from the tunnels for questioning. I will know who this 'smoke demon' is, and what he can do."

\* \* \*

"Reese," the trucker said as he drove down the highway. "Ain't that the same name of that gal what played in that dumb-blonde movie?"

"I don't know." She rubbed her tired eyes.

"Yeah, you know, she always dressed in piank 'n' carried around one them li'l dogs. Had a sweet li'l ass on her." He shifted the wad of tobacco from one cheek to the other, and lifted the Coke bottle he kept tucked between his thighs to spit a stream of brown liquid into it. When he caught her watching, he winked. "Gotta say, I'm an ass man."

Reese stared at the road sign they were approaching. Fifteen miles to Atlanta. She could tolerate the ass man for fifteen more minutes.

The trucker continued talking, giving her a rambling synopsis of the movie and his estimation of the star's sexual talents based on her body type, demeanor, and mouth size.

Reese ignored him and stared through the bug-smearred windshield at the dark road ahead. She played out several scenarios in her head, rehearsing what she would say to Will and how she would use Rebecca to keep him occupied long enough for her to retrieve the book.

"Hey." A flannel-covered elbow prodded her. "You ain't heard a word I said, have ya?"

She offered him a meaningless smile. "I'm sorry. I'm a little tired." She frowned as she realized the truck had stopped in a dimly lit rest area. "Where are we?"

"Need to take a piss." He leered at her. "Wanna come hold it for me?"

"No, thank you."

"Suit yerself." He removed the keys from the ignition and climbed down out of the cab.

Reese watched him stroll to the restroom before she climbed out and went around to the back of the truck. Rebecca opened the door as soon as she rapped on it.

"Why have we stopped?"

"The driver needed to use the bathroom." As Rebecca's scent rolled over her, she stepped back. "We'll be in the city in a few minutes. Be ready to get out the next time we stop."

"Here, now," the trucker said, stepping around the side. "You paid me to take you to Atlanta, honey. You didn't say nothing about sneaking your friend in the back. And I know you can read." He jerked a thumb at one of his bumper stickers, which read, *No Free Rides*.

Rebecca jumped down and started toward him, but Reese held out her hand. "Wait, please." She turned to the driver. "I gave you six hundred dollars to make the drive. That should be adequate."

"For you, sure. Not for her."

Reese held on to her temper. "Then I'll get more money for you when we reach the city."

"I heard that before, honey. But I think we can work something out." He stroked the whisker stubble on his chin as he looked both of them over. "Tell you what, I'll take it in trade."

"Trade for what?" Rebecca demanded.

The trucker ignored her and took hold of Reese's arm. "You come on in the back with me now. Got me a nice li'l bunk in there." He pulled her toward the front cab.

She wrenched free. "I am not having sex with you."

"Then you can walk the rest of the way." He spit tobacco juice on the ground between them. "Makes no never mind to me." He glanced behind her. "Might be a bit rough on your girlfriend, there, though."

Reese heard Rebecca's dragging steps coming closer. "You're making a mistake."

"Shit. You bitches think you can get anything you want just by twitching your ass under a man's nose." He grabbed Reese by the hair. "Come on. You do right by me, honey, and maybe I'll be too tired to screw the gimp."

The air filled with burning clover, and a hand shot past Reese's face and clamped around the trucker's neck.

"Release her."

The trucker's eyes bulged, and he let go of Reese's hair to pry at Rebecca's hand, but she kept her hold and backed him up against the truck. He began choking, making thick, liquid sounds.

"Rebecca, stop." Reese tried to go to her but cried out and pressed her hands to her head as something stabbed into her ears. "Don't kill him."

The unconscious driver slid to the ground, and Rebecca crouched over him, intent. "He is a pig."

"You're not."

Rebecca looked down at the trucker's face, and then slowly moved away. The smell of clover became thinner. She turned her head as Reese took a step toward her. "Stay where you are."

Reese saw blood streaming from the trucker's eyes, nose, mouth, and ears. As the pain in her ears vanished, she pulled her hands away, and saw red stains on her palms. "This is your talent?"

Rebecca uttered a laugh like a wail. "My curse, you mean. Yes." She met Reese's gaze levelly. "This is what I do. This is my power over the living world. I make it bleed."

"The living world? You mean—"

"Mortals. Kyn. Animals." Her shoulders hunched. "Anything with blood in its veins."

"But you said you can control it."

"When I am at Rosethorn, with Sylas, among our friends, yes, I can." Rebecca looked down at the trucker. "When I am away from him, alone and angry..."

"Then you need to calm down," Reese said carefully.

Slowly Rebecca moved away from him, her movements lurching and painful to watch. She hesitated, removing the copper dagger from her girdle and turning it over to offer the hilt to Reese.

"I don't need this."

"Take it," Rebecca told her. "If I lose control, I will do whatever I must to return to Sylas. I will kill anything that stands between me and my lord. Should it come to that, you know what you must do."

Reese considered arguing with her, but the horizon was brightening and they were both exhausted. She put the dagger in her bag before she offered Rebecca her arm. "Lean on me, and I'll help you to the cab."

"You have too little regard for your own safety." Rebecca placed a hand on her shoulder, but glanced back. "He is not dead, or even badly hurt. When he wakes, he will report us to the authorities."

"We'll be in the city by then." Reese led her over to the truck's cab, and helped her up inside. "Go into the back of the cab; there aren't any windows so the sun won't bother you there. Try to get some sleep." She went around the cab, climbed up behind the wheel, and, remembering what she'd seen the driver do, started the engine.

Rebecca emerged from the back a moment later. "That mortal has not been sleeping in there. It reeks of body fluids." She pulled the passenger's seat belt over her torso and clipped it in place.

Reese eyed her. "Would you rather go in the trailer? You have to get some rest."

"No. I cannot settle myself, not in this state." She put her head back and closed her eyes against the light from the rising sun. "Keep the windows open and the air cooler set on high, and talk to me, please."

Reese took a moment to remember everything she had watched the trucker do when they had left the diner, and then carefully imitated his actions as she put the truck in gear, checked the side mirrors, and pulled back out onto the highway. Hopefully she wouldn't have to parallel park this monster. "What do you want to talk about?"

"Anything. Tell me about your home."

"There's not a lot to tell," Reese said. "I live with my father in the city. Our house is nothing like Rosethorn, but it's nice, and the neighborhood where we are is quiet. When I'm there I work with him in the garden. He still grows his own vegetables and flowers."

"He is...retired?"

"For the most part." Reese felt a kind of distant wonder at how easily she could lie about Ennis. Maybe she could because the truth about him—about them—was so unbelievable. "He does some work from home. He's also a book collector, so he's always going to auctions and estate sales, and looking for little out-of-the-way shops."

"I love to read. I taught Syllas how, our second year together." Rebecca looked at the empty road ahead of them. "He never learned as a boy, but then, few did in our time. He was so proud that he insisted on reading the Holy Scriptures to me, from start to finish."

"All in one night?"

"No, thank heaven," Rebecca said. "It took him the better part of a year. Then there came the questions. Who was Cain's wife? How could Noah and his small family repopulate the world after the flood by themselves? If the torment of man was Satan's work, then why would God do the same to Job?" She made a helpless gesture. "I thought for a time he would drive me mad. Soon after, happily, he took to reading the Greeks."

The heaviness of Rebecca's scent had retreated, Reese noticed, and she seemed much calmer. "How are you feeling?"

"Tired now." The chatelaine squinted against the sunlight. "Is it much farther?"

Reese saw the Atlanta skyline ahead of them. "We're almost there."

She drove directly to the Armstrong building, parking the stolen truck in the back by the loading platform. As soon as she got out of the cab, a man came out of the receiving office and called to her.

"Ma'am, this is a private building," he said. "You can't park that here."

Her eyes went to the signet ring on his right hand, which had onyx and ivory stones engraved with a cameo of Robin of Locksley's profile. "I am *tresori*," she told the man, and showed him the cameo tattoo on the inside of her wrist. "There is a Kyn female with me. We have to see Will Scarlet at once."

"He is not here, sister," the man told her. "He left at dawn for Rosethorn."

"What?" Reese felt as if she'd been slapped. "Why? He cannot lay siege to the stronghold by himself."

"He won't be alone, sister," the *tresora* said. "Before he left, the seneschal summoned the suzerain from the south. They are bringing two hundred of their best, and will join him there by nightfall."

Reese glanced back at the truck and saw through the windshield that Rebecca had fallen asleep. If Will had left the book behind, she could retrieve it now and be done with this. If he had taken it with him, she would have to return to the stronghold.

"I have to go up to the penthouse to look for something I might have left there," she told the *tresora*. "Will you watch over the lady while I am gone?"

## CHAPTER NINE

Suzeraina Jayr mac Byrne lifted high-powered binoculars to her eyes and surveyed the camp a half mile away. "Will and his people have taken position in the trees."

Her husband and seneschal, Aedan, spoke softly into his handheld radio. "Beau, you and your men hold the road here. Harlech, divide yours and move to the east and west approaches. Farlae, you and yours wait here."

Behind them, one hundred warriors split into four separate groups and silently dispersed.

Jayr turned to her tracker, who was still crouched on the ground, his eyes closed and his face curiously blank. "What can you tell me, Rain?"

"It is colder here than Orlando," the tracker complained. "I should have listened to Farlae and brought my furs."

She pressed her lips together. "I meant, what can you tell me about the Italians who came here?"

"There are seventy or so. They left their vehicle behind and went in on foot, in formation. Wait." He opened his eyes and turned his head, nodding at a thicket. "Five carried a great weight in there and returned lighter."

"A body?" Aedan asked.

The hulking tracker gently touched an almost invisible footprint on the road, pinched a bit of soil from one side of it, and brought it to his nose. "No. Burlap. Twine." He sneezed twice and scowled. "Copper and steel." He looked up at Jayr. "I think they brought many swords, my lady. They had them bundled like potatoes. Then they came back for them."

She held out her hand to Rain and helped him to his feet. "I want you to scout the boundaries of the property. I need to know who has walked through here in the last week."

Farlae, a shorter, slim male with fair hair, joined them. His eye, flawed by an enormous black mote, glittered with malice. "Someone was careless." He offered Jayr a copper dagger of ornate design. "'Twas made in the



fourteenth century. The owner is Kyn, likely female, and recently traveled over seawater."

"Female?" Aedan echoed. "You can see that on the blade?"

Farlae nodded at the blade. "There is sea spray on the hilt, and a chip of pink nail polish near the pommel."

"Whoever she is, she used it last on a mortal," Rain said, disgusted. "The smell of blood still clings to it. Throw it away, my lady."

"We may need it as proof later." She handed the dagger off to one of her guards before she patted the tracker's shoulder. "Stay with Farlae and the others. Aedan and I will walk ahead to the camp."

Although it was customary for a Kyn seneschal to walk behind his lord paramount, Aedan led the way toward the encampment. He served Jayr faithfully as her second, but she was his *sygkenis*, and in dangerous situations protecting her came first. Yet when they arrived at the edge of the camp, Aedan stepped back to stand at her side, and kept silent as she addressed the guards.

"I am Suzeraina Jayr mac Byrne, summoned here by Will Scarlet, seneschal to Robin of Locksley. My men and I await his orders."

The guards bowed and one trotted off, returning a few moments later with a Kyn male dressed in a red mantle.

"Lady mac Byrne." Will bowed deeply before he offered his hand to Aedan. "Lord mac Byrne. I am grateful beyond words for your quick response."

"Stow the gratitude and the speeches, lad," Byrne said as he clasped forearms with Will. "Tell us how we may help."

He nodded. "Come with me and I'll brief you together on the situation."

They followed Will to the largest tent in the center of camp, which he had set up to serve as a command post. Maps and building plans lay spread out atop crates filled with stores and weapons.

"The Italians were sent here to infiltrate the household," Will said. "Their mistress, Contessa Salvatora Borgiana, played the refugee and begged sanctuary for herself and them from Lord Locksley."

"An inventive ruse," Aedan murmured. "How many?"

"Over seventy *cavalieri*, led by a *maréchal* who calls himself Saetta."

"A stablemaster?" Jayr's brows rose. "I think not."

Aedan uttered a grim laugh. "'Twas common once to bring in an experienced war master but call him cook or armorer or even groom. Whoever this Saetta is, I'll wager that he knows siegecraft better than horses."

"The last thing a siege lord does is announce himself on the field of battle," an insolent voice said from the opening of the tent. The big, blond man who stepped inside wore a heavy black cloak over modified battle armor. "It spoils the surprise."

"Suzerain Lucan." Will quickly performed a respectful bow. "Thank for you coming so quickly. You know Suzeraina Jayr, and her seneschal, Aedan mac Byrne."

"I do." Lucan's silver eyes shifted to Byrne's tattooed visage. "Hello, Highlander. When last we met, you were planning to siege my stronghold."

"No, lad." The Scotsman offered him a narrow smile. "I but came to watch Cyprien take your head."

"And now I serve him. Perhaps decapitation would have been kinder." Lucan turned to Jayr. "Suzeraina." He inspected her from head to toe. "My. You've changed."

"Alexandra Keller," she said, as if that explained it all.

"Indeed." Lucan grinned. "I adore that woman."

Will gestured to the table. "We are just assessing the situation, my lord. Will you join us?"

"By all means." He made a languid gesture. "Assess."

Jayr paid close attention as Will Scarlet detailed Rosethorn's fortifications and the layout of the interior areas of the stronghold. She had visited Robin of Locksley's country home many times, and had a general

working knowledge of the property, but the additional, hidden defenses she had not been aware of proved worrisome and rather mystifying.

"Why did Locksley need to make this place into such a fortress?" Byrne said, giving voice to her own thoughts.

"When we dwelled in Sherwood, we had the entire forest at our disposal," Will said. "Our enemies were never able to find us. Here, sitting out in the open, I think my lord felt exposed. He wanted to ensure that if we were attacked, the *jardin* would have every measure of defense possible."

"Which now the Italians will use against us," Lucan said. "In the midst of his paranoia, did Rob ever install more modern security devices? Sensors, cameras?"

"No, my lord."

"If we survive this, I shall have to send my gadgetry people to advise him." The suzerain helped himself to a glass of blood wine. "They have wired every inch of my club. A mortal cannot sneeze within fifty yards of the place that I do not know about it." He glanced at Jayr. "You have said very little, my lady. What are your thoughts?"

"I am thinking that we have two hundred men between us," Jayr said. "When our stores are exhausted, we will have to begin sending off groups to hunt. With no mortals within thirty miles, and only small populations within a hundred, they will have to be gone at least eight hours. If we hold them here too long, some of them will not wait for leave to go."

"Starvation and desertion, the two plagues of the besieger." Lucan studied the wine in his glass. "Locksley should have built his castle somewhere more convenient. I daresay you shall never face these problems in Orlando, *suzeraina*."

"But we face them now." Jayr thought for a moment. "Perhaps we could parley with this Italian. Offer him blood stores for him and his men in exchange for the hostages. At the very least he should agree to release the mortals he holds. In the old days they would often send out children, the sick, and the elderly to cross the lines."

"The mortals are his stores, my lady," Will said bitterly. "He will keep them alive as long as he can."

"We have a two-to-one advantage," Byrne said. "All we need is a way in unseen."

"If they follow the old ways, which I am quite certain they do, they will patrol the battlements and keep snipers at the windows from dusk till dawn," Lucan reminded him. "Once we reveal our presence they will be expecting us."

"We could tunnel in under the curtain wall here," Will said, pointing to the blueprints. "Come up under the middle ward and split the shaft east and west. Our men to the west emerge behind the tower and block the postern there. To the east, they come up in the chapel and enter the tower through the processional passage."

Jayr studied the prints. "You mean to drive them from the tower into the gallery toward the postern."

Will nodded. "There the men sent to the west will be waiting for them."

"The fighting space will be too damned confined," Lucan argued.

"Not for single combat," Will said. "Once we trap them inside, I will challenge Saetta in front of all his men to a duel of three."

Byrne scowled. "What the devil is that?"

"'Tis an English tradition, you tattooed heathen. The combatants are permitted to use against each other but three jabs of the lance, three thrusts of the dagger, and three strokes of the battle-ax. Whoever has a limb left to stand on, wins." Lucan smiled a little. "I do miss the old days. Terribly. So how long do we have to dig this tunnel?"

Will hadn't considered the time involved. "We have to be in position by tomorrow night. If I have not received word from Rob by then, we are to attack."

Byrne studied the map. "Even if we had the equipment, and sent in the miners to work night and day, we'd need at least four days to tunnel through. We need another way in."

"Or someone on the inside." Lucan lifted his glass to stare at its contents. "I have an idea."

\* \* \*

In the place between flesh and spirit, Sylas of Daven walked, aware but not aware, himself and not himself. He had often retreated into the shadows, leaving behind his body as he became one with the darkness. Never had he stayed so long, and as he felt more of himself becoming part of the nothingness, he knew he had to return, at least briefly, to regain his strength and reclaim his soul.

The pain of parting was nothing to that of reunion, and as he sank over his body he felt the cold bite and burn into him like countless needles of copper. His first breath was agony, and he sank his fangs into his lip to keep himself silent.

The warm scent of mortal blood beckoned to him, promising relief, and he opened his eyes to find himself on the floor of a holding cell. He turned over and saw the battered face of a dark mortal over him.

"I thought I heard you move." Strong hands helped him up into a sitting position, and a red-rimmed eye peered at him, the other swollen shut. "Now, would you mind telling me where the hell I am and why I'm here?"

Sylas didn't recognize the man, but he smelled of the city. "We are being held prisoner."

"That much I figured out on my own."

With a grunt Sylas rose, accepting the man's support as he found his footing. "What is your name?"

"Special Agent Raymond Hutchins, Federal Bureau of Investigation." He surveyed Sylas. "You escape from a costume party, Romeo?"

Sylas glanced down at his garments. "Of sorts. I am Sylas. How long have I been unconscious?"

"Couple of hours at least." Hutchins paced around the cell, pausing here and there to test one of the copper bars. "There aren't any cops around, and this isn't like any holding cell I've ever seen. It looks like a damn dungeon."

"It is." Sylas looked up at the light fixture, which barely illuminated the shadows. "Agent Hutchins—"

"It's Hutch."

"Hutch." He pointed to the floor. "I need you to stand here, in the light, and close your eyes."

The mortal scowled. "Why?"

"If you do what I say, I can free both of us." He saw the skepticism in the other man's black eyes. "Or we can wait for our captors to come and do as they like with us."

Muttering under his breath, Hutch came and stood beneath the light.

"Keep your eyes closed."

"You got a welding torch in here I don't know about?" he asked.

"Please."

The mortal closed his eyes. As soon as he did, Sylas went to the bars and reached out to the shadows beyond them. As soon as the darkness covered his hand, he used his talent, shifting from one shadow to the other, until he stood on the other side of the bars.

He found that the wall cabinet where the keys were kept had been emptied, but no one had discovered the copies he had hidden beneath one of the floor stones. He used them to unlock the door to the cell.

"You can open your eyes," he said as the door creaked open.

Hutchins didn't move. "Nice trick, Houdini. How did you squeeze the bars like that?"

"I am quite flexible." Sylas saw that the mortal wasn't going to cooperate. "I am also leaving, Hutch. Come with me or stay here."

Hutchins came out of the cell, checking the area around them before nodding toward the left. "I heard some voices back there. They came and brought out a man in chains."

Sylas breathed in but didn't detect any strange scents. "Stay behind me."

The largest of the detention cells beneath Rosethorn had been designed to hold a small army. Most of the garrison occupied it, all standing in circles

within circles to afford the best opportunity of protection. As soon as the men saw Sylas and the mortal, they broke formation.

"Sylas." Eregen, one of his senior men, came to the bars. "We feared you were dead."

"I am well. Who did they take?"

"Raglan."

Sylas saw that the men had been stripped of their weapons. "How long have the guards been gone?"

"Five minutes at most."

They would be returning soon, and probably not with Raglan. Sylas unlocked the cell door, but held up his hand when Eregen would have pushed it open. "Wait. Send out two men to occupy our cell. Have them sit back in the shadows until the guards come, and then follow them in here. You should be able to take them without trouble or alerting those above."

Eregen nodded. "We need weapons."

"Use the women's passage, and go to the bathhouse. I will send down what I can." He turned and saw the mortal watching them. "This is Agent Hutchins. He was taken by the cavalieri from the city, doubtless as part of this scheme. Unless he throws his lot in with Saetta, he is to be regarded as an ally." He looked at the angry faces of the men of the garrison. "Keep your tempers checked. When we have taken back what is ours, then there will be the time for proper reckoning."

To his credit, Hutchins said nothing until he had followed Sylas out to the stairwell. "Is this some kind of reenactment thing? You boys think you're Knights of the Round Table?"

"There was never a round table." Sylas checked the stairwell before mounting the steps. "Arthur's knights held council on their feet, surrounding their lord. Be quiet."

Sylas waited at the top of the stairs for the patrol guard to pass him before he reached out and grabbed the man, clamping a hand over his mouth. "Take the pistol and sword from him."

Hutchins snatched the gun, but couldn't work the sword free of the sheath. He tried to club the guard over the head with the butt of the pistol.

"That will not work," Sylas said. "You must shoot him."

"I'm not killing this man—"

"It will not kill him." Sylas plucked the pistol from Hutchins's hand, pressed it to the guard's neck, and pulled the trigger. The cartridge of blue liquid lodged halfway into his neck, and the guard fell like a stone.

"That's a tranquilizer gun," the mortal said blankly. His eyes widened when Sylas pulled the empty cartridge from the wound in the guard's flesh, which immediately healed over. Then he looked up. "What kind of drugs did you put in me?"

"None." Sylas handed him the gun and bent to retrieve the man's sword. "You see? The sheath is made to hold the blade secure. You must draw it up before you pull it back. Remember that."

The gun appeared in Sylas's face. "Tell me what this is. What he is, what you are. Now."

"You were taken prisoner by a group of renegades who invaded our stronghold," Sylas said. "We are called Darkyn. We are not human. We cannot be easily killed. I can tell you the rest of our history, but I doubt I will manage more than a few centuries' worth before we are discovered."

Hutchins made a disgusted sound. "They must have pumped you full of drugs, too."

"I will give you proof." Sylas used the copper dagger to slash his palm, and then held it so Hutchins could watch the wound heal. "When there is time, I will explain the rest. For now, I need you to trust me and follow my orders, or we will be captured. If that happens, they will not spare our lives again."

"Right." The mortal regarded him steadily. "You might be crazy as a bedbug, but you got me out of that cell. I'm willing to go on a little faith. What's next?"

"We need to retrieve weapons for my men. It will require us to move through occupied areas of the house. You must go ahead of me, and when you confront anyone, behave as if you are addled."



"Addled?"

"Drugged. Disoriented. Lost." Sylas dragged the guard's body behind some crates. "While you distract the Italians, I will deal with them. Whatever you do, stay in the light."

"Man, I'm not afraid of the dark."

Sylas handed him a dagger. "In this place, you have to be."

## CHAPTER TEN

Reese searched Robin's penthouse, tearing it apart in the process, but the book was nowhere to be found. She knew that Will wouldn't have left it behind unguarded, but she had to be sure. After breaking into Robin's vault room and searching through his most priceless treasures, she went to the phone and called her father.

"It's not here," she said, and explained what had happened since her last report. "Scarlet must have taken it with him to Rosethorn."

"Then that is where you will go."

She sat down on the edge of Robin's bed. "Father, this can't continue. He is already suspicious of me. If I show up there without cause—"

"He cares for you," Ennis reminded her. "You must use that affection. Convince him that you were afraid for him—"

"I *am* afraid for him."

"—and seduce him. When he sleeps, take the book and leave." He waited for her to reply. "Or kill him and take it. Perhaps his death will at last free you from your guilt. He was the one who did this to you, child. Or have you forgotten that?"

"For my sins, I have tried to repent," she said slowly. "I have given my life into your hands. I have done your work. I have never complained. When will it be enough, Father? When will my penance end?"

His voice chilled. "You ask me for your freedom? Now, when we are so close?"

She didn't answer. Without the work—without Father—she had nothing. No one would care what happened to her. Not even Will.

"Bring the book to me," he said, "and I will release you from your vow."

They had never spoken of this, not since the night in the graveyard. Although it was everything that she wanted, she felt a perverse curiosity. "Why free me now?"

"You have earned it."

She took the cigarette case from her bag and opened it. Four vials of blood remained, along with one black vial. The last, filled with poison, she carried in the event she was ever captured by their enemies. Her father carried one just like it.

She had to drag the words out. "I will go to Rosethorn now."

"God watches over you, child."

Reese left the penthouse and returned to the loading platform, but saw no sign of the truck. Instead, a large recreational vehicle stood parked in its place.

"Our friends in the police department warned us that the truck you drove was reported stolen," the tresora told her. "I had my men remove it. The lady is resting in the back of the camper."

Reese eyed the large vehicle. "How is she?"

"Not well," he said. "She wouldn't let anyone come near her. Do you need directions to the sanctuary house?"

"No, thank you." She pulled the strap of her bag over her shoulder. "I know where I'm going."

\* \* \*

Saetta stood at the ravelin atop the main house and looked out at the surrounding property. The stronghold's central observation post offered a commanding view of the outlying lawns, but nothing past the tree lines. By trapping Locksley's *jardin* inside Rosethorn, he had eliminated the immediate threat of a counterattack. However, his lady had warned him that reinforcements were likely to arrive within the first day.

"I have seen not a glimmer of light, *maréchal*," the guard on duty assured him.

"They will not use light, or fire, where it might be seen from the house." He handed the binoculars to the guard. As luck would have it, the wind was coming from the north, blowing from the back of the property to

the front and eradicating any scent they might have otherwise detected. "Signal me if you suspect an approach."

As Saetta returned downstairs to the main hall, a subtle uneasiness crept over him. The house was secure, and no more guards had been attacked by mysterious shadow demons, but something was not right. The silence of the passages seemed too absolute. The air rang with soundless whispers. If he were a superstitious man, he would swear that the house itself watched him with cold, unseen eyes.

"Bernardo, attend me." When the captain of the *cavalieri* came to him, Saetta said, "Change the guard."

"Yes, *maréchal*. Which guard?"

"All."

Bernardo frowned. "We have three hours before the next rotation."

"Anyone who has been watching us will know that," Saetta said. "They will seek to take advantage of it. Change them all, at once."

"Yes, *maréchal*."

Saetta went to an adjoining room, where his two best interrogators were still questioning the Kyn taken from the cells. Spatters of blood stained the floor and the prisoner's clothes, but he remained still and watchful.

"What progress have you made?"

"He says nothing, *maréchal*." Domion pulled off his gauntlets and slipped spiked copper knuckle guards over his fingers. "I think he will soon change his mind."

Saetta crouched in front of the sullen warrior. "One of your *jardin* attacked my guards. He took one of my men. Until he is returned, and the Kyn who did this named, you will suffer in his place." He saw the hatred in the man's eyes. "You cannot prevail."

The warrior smiled, showing bloodied teeth, and then spit in Saetta's face. With a curse Domion slammed his fist into the prisoner's chest, puncturing it with his spiked knuckles. The warrior doubled over as far as his bonds would allow, coughed several times, and then slowly straightened.

"He will take you," the warrior promised in a low, menacing voice. "One by one, you will go. You cannot stop him."

Saetta seized the front of the prisoner's tunic. "Who is he?"

"Master of shadows." His eyes closed, and he sagged, unconscious.

"Give him time to heal," Saetta said as he straightened. "Then begin again, and do not stop until he talks or he dies."

"As you command, *maréchal*."

Saetta went to the kitchens, where he washed the blood and saliva from his face. Darkyn did not eat food, so to him the room was a waste of space, but he imagined the Americans pampered the mortals who served them. He could easily imagine the pretty wife of Sylas, working over a breadboard, her sleeves folded back, her slim hands shaping dough. In his human life, he had loved to watch his wife work in the kitchen. Even when he had been hired by the Medicis, and had more money than he had known how to spend, she had refused to hire a cook. Making food for the family was the work of a wife, she always claimed.

"*Maréchal*," someone said behind him.

Saetta dried his dripping face and turned. "What is it now?"

"'Tis the prisoners we put below," the lieutenant said. "They have escaped."

"Which prisoners?"

"All of them, *maréchal*."

\* \* \*

Reese took the camper to a public underground garage and parked it there. She was exhausted, and if she were going to finish this thing she had to sleep. Cautiously she went into the back to check on Rebecca, who had curled up on one of the camper's bunks and appeared to be in the deep, still state that passed for sleep among the Kyn. But as she turned to make her way back toward the front of the camper, the chatelaine called her name, startling her so much she dropped her bag.

Rebecca looked over the side of the bunk. "Forgive me. I didn't intend to scare you."

"No problem," Reese told her, bending down to pick up her things. "I've found a safe place to park for a while. We're going to stay here until sunset."

The chatelaine reached down and picked up Reese's wallet. "Do you carry photos in here?"

"Just one." Reese took the wallet, unfolded it, and showed her the picture tucked under the clear plastic. "That's my father."

Rebecca frowned. "He's dressed like a priest."

"He was a priest, before he...left the church." She closed the wallet and finished gathering her things. "Rest now. In a few hours we'll be back at Rosethorn, and we'll find Sylas."

"Sylas." Rebecca's eyes closed. "He's in the shadows."

Being in the darkest part of the garage helped block the sunlight and gave an illusion of night, but Reese still couldn't rest. Given Rebecca's uncertain mental state, sleeping close to the chatelaine seemed unwise, so she returned to the front of the camper. She lowered the driver's seat back as far as it would go and turned on her side, trying to make herself comfortable, but her stomach felt shriveled and her head pounded unpleasantly. Finally she grabbed her bag, removed one of the vials, and, with a glance back at Rebecca, drank from it. Only then was she able to close her eyes and fall into a deep sleep.

The dream that came over her took her into a shabby room lit only by candles and the flames from a fireplace. There were two people sitting at a table, one dressed in priest's robes, the other a rude-looking peasant man with a powerful build. A candle and two mugs sat between them.

Reese tried to turn and leave, but the dream held her fast.

"*Pater Noster, que es in calis, sanctificúe nomen tuum,*" the priest said, and then waited for the peasant to respond.

"*Adveniáte regnum tuum,*" the villein muttered. "*Fiat volúntas tua, sicut in caelo et in terra.*"

The priest nodded. "You see, my child? You can remember the words, when you try."

The peasant held his head in his hands. "Remember. Words." He lashed out with his arm, knocking the two mugs from the table. "Forget."

"God wants you to remember words," the priest said. "He wants you never to forget again."

"Look." The peasant gripped his own shirt in his fists. "Not me."

"I would give you back what you have lost, child, but it is not meant to be." He eased the peasant's hands away from the shredded shirt and held them. "God has given you an enormous gift. It is a miracle. You can be anyone you wish to be."

"Me." Tears rolled down the man's face. "I want me."

Reese rushed toward the table. "Kill him," she shouted at the priest. "Kill him now." She passed through the table, her body like that of a ghost. "God, please, don't do this."

"We will find a woman for you," the priest was saying. "One who pleases you. Then we will continue with our work."

"Woman. Work." The peasant swiped at his eyes. "Yes."

Reese was torn from the room and into another, this one lit by electric lights. The priest sat at a table with six other men and one woman, a scroll rolled out before them.

"The prophecy of Beatrice says that the book will remain hidden until just after the turn of this century, when it will be used against the mortal world," one of the men said. "The colonies of the new world where it is said it will reappear must be the United States, and from our calculations, the month will be April of next year. But who is the smiling thief and the dark lord, and which one will take the book?"

"Robin of Locksley and Guy of Guisbourne." The priest rolled up the scroll. "Locksley has been made a lord paramount. Guisbourne fled to America a few months ago. Both of them, in fact, will take the book."

"So it has begun," one of the men murmured. "The end of days, just as she said."

Another of the men leaned back and folded his arms. "Father, how can we trust the predictions made by a demented witch burned at the stake six hundred years ago?" "She was not demented, nor a witch," the priest said. "She was Darkyn, and her talent was foresight." He looked at the faces around him. "The moment is at hand, and the fate of all humanity rests with us."

Reese saw the priest produce a photograph, one of a smiling young woman with laughing dark eyes, and hand it to the woman at the table. Reese shook her head as she watched the woman study the picture.

"Don't do it," she whispered, even though she knew she couldn't hear her. "Tell him no. Say he must choose another."

"I should have no difficulty with her," the woman said.

The priest nodded. "Our investigators say that she works in an advertising agency in the city, she lives alone, and she has no friends outside the *tresori*."

"Convenient." She looked up at the others. "Once I take over, you cannot contact me. I will report only to Father."

"There is something else you should know, my child," the priest said, and touched her arm. "The woman has been seen in the company of Robin of Locksley's seneschal, Will Scarlet."

The photo dropped out of the woman's fingers even as Reese was pushed out of the dream and into the dark. Afraid and alone, she called out for Will. When he came, she tried to reach him, but she couldn't see him. She began to babble, telling him everything she had kept secret, but then she felt him drawing away.

The connection between her and Will snapped, and snapped again, and then a third time, until all she could hear was a sharp rapping.

Reese opened her eyes and turned over to see a security guard tapping the handle of a nightstick against the driver's-side window. She sat up and opened it.

"You can't sleep in here, miss," the man said. "Leave the vehicle or leave the lot, one or the other."



She looked at her watch and saw the time. The sun would be setting in a few minutes. "All right."

She started the engine and backed out of the space.

\* \* \*

Will knew he had to rest. Jayr had admonished him before retiring to her tent with mac Byrne, and even Lucan had advised him that the quickest way to lose a duel was to spend the night before it awake. As the sun rose, he sent his men to their bedrolls, issued orders to the *tresori* who would be standing watching during the day, and at last retreated to his tent.

It had been several years since he had been obliged to sleep on the ground, but he had ordered that the few camp beds available be placed in their allies' tents. The ground was hard and the blankets rough, but as soon as he stretched out on the bedroll his tired body went limp with relief. He would have to rise early and feed before the others woke, he thought, and closed his eyes.

*Red, if you are not too mad, I would beg your forgiveness.*

Will stood before the gibbet and the hangman, but this time they were all alone. That April morning, when his mortal life had ended, had turned to a night of ill wind and cold, distant stars.

"I shouldn't have tormented you that day." Robin of Locksley removed the black hood covering his handsome face. "Have you ever forgiven me for it?"

"You didn't break my neck, master," Will reminded him. "You saved it."

"We still cheated all those fine folk of their spectacle. Or, rather, you did." Rob cuffed the back of his head. "Five hundred mortals you sent to sleep that day, with only a thought."

Will looked over at the empty road, and remembered the shock of seeing all the bodies of the townspeople piled on either side of it. "A pity my talent doesn't work on the Kyn."

Robin produced a black book. "Not to worry. It'll be quick, lad."

The dreamlands often distorted things in the same way mortal dreams did, but always with a purpose. "Why have you come to me, Rob? What am I to do?"

"Look." His master opened the book and showed him the blank pages. "You have served me well, Will Scarlet. You have been my good friend. But in all these years, you have asked for nothing for yourself. You have lived my life, not yours."

"I am your seneschal, my lord. My life is yours." Will didn't know what else to say. "Rob, are you in trouble?"

"I am beyond trouble. I have fallen in love with a mortal." Robin laughed. "So have you."

"Reese and I are friends."

"So you were. Not anymore." He went to the gibbet and tore down the hangman's noose, placing it around his own neck. "I have ever had the luck of a fool, but this time I have the feeling that it has run out. I do not believe I will see you again, Liam of Aubury." He tightened the slipknot. "You will look after Rosethorn and our people for me?"

Will went to him and tried to pull the knot loose, but it held tightly. "You are Robin of the Hood. You are a legend. Legends do not die. Do not call me Liam, and give me this bloody rope."

A black wool hood dropped over his head, shutting out the sight of his master trying to hang himself. He could not speak or move, but he heard Robin take in his last breath. He felt the rope biting into his neck just as it tightened around his master's. This time, the roar of fury inside his head was for the man who had saved him, whom he could no longer save.

Bright spots of eerie light danced on the insides of his eyelids, and Will heard Robin's heart begin to slow. Just as fear and outrage were about to swallow his mind, something hissed into his ear and the hood was torn away. He fell, landing with a brutal thud facedown in the cold dirt, his wrist snapping under the weight of his body.

The little wooden cross fell from his limp fingers into the dirt.

*Rob*, Will thought, gasping in precious air and trying to push himself up onto his feet. He would not see Robin of Locksley cut down the middle and torn to pieces by four horses. He would rather take Robin's place than

allow his master to spend his last moments on this earth in unimaginable agony. But the rope slowly swaying in the wind was empty, and his master was gone.

Instead, Reese stood at the gibbet, dressed in Claris of Aubury's clothes. "Your master is coming for you."

Will knew it was impossible for her to have entered the dreamlands. No mortal could. "Who are you?"

"Everyone. No one. I had nothing else to give." She tried to smile, and for a moment she was Clary. "I will be forever now. You never came back for me."

She might be a ghost of his imagination—a confused one at that—but she was trying to tell him something. Just as Robin had.

He took a step toward her and felt something under his bare foot. He bent down and found the little wooden cross Claris had given to him. He picked it up out of the dirt and brought it to her.

Will pressed it into her hands. "This was your faith in me."

"I found it later." She tugged a chain out from under her ragged overtunic, and the cross vanished from her hands and appeared on the end of the chain. "I kept it for you."

He couldn't tell if her face was Reese's or Clary's; her features kept blurring. "I was the one who made you sick," he told her. "I came back, but not soon enough. They had already buried you in the graves with all the others."

"No, Liam." She smiled and tucked her cross under her collar. "They waited too long to put me in the ground. I woke when they tried to bury me."

Will breathed in and smelled her scent, as sweet and ripe as a field of berries. "You went through the change." Horror sank into him. "You went through the change alone."

"Do you know what they do when a body crawls out of an open grave?" She brushed at her hair, and soil fell from it. "They try to kill it. Do you know what they do when she won't die?"

He backed away from her, shaking his head. "You are not Claris."

"They put her in a cage, like an animal. They toy with her. They try to feed her offal and shit. Days and weeks and months of it." Her clothes disappeared, and her body shrank, becoming little more than skin over bones. Filth bloomed over her, mottling her fairness. "They bleed her and stab her and laugh, oh, Will, they laugh so much, for it is all so amusing, this thing that crawled from the grave, this girl who would not die." Her hair grew long and matted, falling down the front of her body in snarls. "And then, one night, when she has not moved for a week, and they think she is done, they open the cage to drag her out, to burn what's left of her. They do not know that she has gone mad. That in her madness, she is strong again."

Will watched as her body blurred and grew into that of a big, strapping lad in peasant's clothes.

"I was the first." The young man touched the gaping wound in his throat. "But not the last. There were more. The butcher." He body changed into a short, bulky form with heavily muscled arms and a ragged hole in his chest. "The baker." Her body became thin and lanky, her hands white with flour, her face red with blood. "The candlestick maker." Her belly grew, sagging over spindly legs, her neck ending in a stump.

Will had to stop this nightmarish procession of bodies. "Claris, is this you? Have you come to me?"

Her body blurred again, becoming the image of Reese as she had looked when she had come to the bar. "Claris of Aubury died in that cage," she told him. "This is all that's left."

"I cannot understand you," Will said. "What does this mean? What are you telling me?"

"I thought it was Father who saved me." She touched the lump the cross had made under her blouse. "It was always you. I lived for you. I waited for you." Her eyes grew empty. "But you never came for me."

He grabbed her arms and shook her. "Reese, where is Claris? How is she doing this? Tell her I must see her."

"I will tell her whatever you like," Lucan said, "but do stop shouting and shaking me."

Will looked around him. He was standing in the center of camp, with his hands clamped around the arms of the deadliest assassin among the Kyn. He dropped his arms and stepped back. "Forgive me, my lord. I was in the dreamlands, and I..." Ashamed of his loss of control, he went down on his knees.

"Obviously." Lucan brushed at his sleeves. "Someone summoned you from afar. From the hold you were under, I would wager it was blood Kyn. Perhaps this Claris whose name you were yelling in my face." He glanced down. "Oh, get up, man. I am not going to kill you for wrinkling my jacket. I do not even like it that much. Now, my leather long coat, that I would find harder to forgive. My *sygkenis* gave that one to me, and I am extremely fond of it."

Will slowly rose. "You are very kind, my lord."

"I am nothing of the sort, but we will argue that point another time." He nodded toward the east road. "A female mortal has just driven one of those cottages on wheels into camp, and she is asking for you."

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

Reese waited by the camper as the camp guards sent for Will. When he came, he stared at her in open disbelief.

"Sweetheart." He hurried over to her. "I thought you were inside the stronghold. Captured with the others." He looked her over. "Did they harm you? Are you hurt? How did you get away?"

"No one hurt me. Rebecca looked after me. She's inside the camper." When he went to the door, she put herself between him and the vehicle. "You can't go in there."

"Rebecca is one of my oldest friends," he said. "Of course I'm going in there."

"You don't understand, Will. She's sick."

"What? We do not get sick."

"It started as soon as we escaped Rosethorn." She led him away from the camper. "She told me it's because of the bond she has with Sylas. It's stronger with them than with other Kyn. Being apart from him hurts her. It makes her talent harder to control."

"Sylas has always refused to be separated from her for more than a day. Now I see why." Will glanced back at the big vehicle. "How far gone is she?"

"I don't know," Reese admitted. "She pulled the partition shut just before we arrived here. She said I shouldn't let anyone in there but her husband."

"I cannot say whether Sylas is dead or alive." Will thrust a hand through his hair. "We are preparing to move on the Italians tonight."

The door to the camper abruptly opened, startling both of them. Rebecca had changed out of her gown into men's clothing, and she carried a golf club. She didn't look at Will or Reese, but stared directly at Rosethorn.

"They have hurt him," she said, her expression contorted, "but my husband lives."

She looked down at the hand Will put over the fist she had wrapped around the club, and then turned her gaze on him. "The last man who put his hand on me I left lying in a ditch and bleeding from the ears."

"I will not stop you," he said, carefully removing his hand. "You may go in there and get yourself and Sylas killed. If that is your wish."

Rebecca drew in a deep breath and looked at him again, this time making a visible effort to focus on his features. "I beg your pardon, Will. I am not...myself."

"There is naught to forgive." He put his arm around her. "Becca, I know what this is doing to you, and if there were any way I could put an end to it, I would. But Sylas and all our friends are in there, and they are in desperate need of your help."

"My help." Her laugh sounded bitter. "If I use my talent, no one will be safe."

"I know that your bond allows you to see through Sylas's eyes," Will said. "I must know what is happening inside the stronghold."

She dragged herself away from him, her attention once more on Rosethorn.

"Rebecca." Reese started after her.

"Leave her," Will said, tugging her back. "Let her try."

Rebecca's back tensed and her limbs locked as the scent of burning honey grew thick. "He is in the shadows," she said, her words a thin thread of sound. "Near the arsenal below the north terrace. He has hidden a mortal on the fighting platform above. The Moor they brought with them. There are others. He freed the garrison."

Will came around to watch her face. "What is Sylas doing, Rebecca?"

"Walking among them." She smiled a little. "They do not know. They cannot see."

"Can you make yourself known to him? Can you tell him we're here?"

"He knows." Her voice grew dreamy. "He is waiting for the guard to change. When they do, he will give the order." Her eyes, closed until now, flew open. "Reese?"

Reese came to stand beside the chatelaine and put an arm around her. "I'm here, Rebecca."

Rebecca began shaking her head. "You're wrong. It cannot be. No priest would..." She stared down at Reese in horror. "Reese?"

"It's me," she said, and staggered as Rebecca fell against her. "Will, help me with her."

Will lifted Rebecca into his arms and peered at her face. "She's unconscious."

"The strain must have been too much." When he moved as if to carry her to the tents, Reese added, "You should put her back in the camper. Do you have any chains?"

"I am not putting my friend's wife in manacles," he snapped, turning away.

"Do you know what her talent is?" she countered.

Surprised, he stopped. "No. She never uses it or speaks of it to anyone."

"She makes the living bleed." Reese lifted her hair and showed him the thin trail of dried blood on her neck. "Anyone who comes near her. Mortal or Darkyn. Animals. Anything alive. She doesn't have to touch them, either."

Will swore softly. "That is why she never hunts. But how she can live if she does not feed?"

"Sylas has been feeding her from his own veins. She said that her talent doesn't affect him. Sometimes she uses bagged blood." She opened the door to the camper. "I'll stay with her while you go get the chains and some guards."

"I cannot leave you alone with her," Will said after he put Rebecca back in the camper. "She might harm you."



"I think she'll be out for a while, but if she wakes up I'll make a run for the tents." She put her hand to his cheek. "Hurry back."

\* \* \*

Reese watched Will go before she climbed into the camper. Quickly she discarded the empty pressure dart she had tucked in her sleeve before she went to the unconscious woman.

"I'm sorry I had to do that," she told her, smoothing some of the disheveled hair back from the chatelaine's face. "But I can't fail now, not when I'm this close."

She covered Rebecca with the quilt at the end of the tiny bed before she left the camper. She would have to walk out of camp and find a lone guard on patrol. After she used him for what she needed, she'd simply walk back and retrieve the book from Will's tent.

Reese glanced back at the camper before she started down the hill. The pines here had thin, almost fragile-looking trunks, but they had been planted so close together they formed a natural barrier to anything except a person on foot. She was glad she'd taken the time to walk several times through the woods along the outside of the property; otherwise she might have lost her way. She didn't remember smelling jasmine before, though.

Just as she started after a guard who had walked passed her, a glaring beam of white light found her face, blinding her for a moment.

"Now, why," a lazy voice asked, "would Will Scarlet's little mortal lover be skulking about the woods in the midst of a siege?"

She shaded her eyes with her hand. "I had to relieve myself, my lord."

The light beam moved away from her face. "I daresay there are far more adequate facilities for that sort of thing in the back of that monstrosity you just drove into camp." Suzerain Lucan's gray eyes took on a metallic gleam. "Do try again."

She had no choice but to lie. "I don't understand."

"Neither do I," he told her as he took hold of her wrist in a velvet-gloved vise of a hand. "But I expect we'll sort it out." He caught her other arm before she could punch him in the face. "Darling, please don't wave

your delicious-smelling flesh under my nose. I'm in a very bad mood, and I've had nothing to eat all day."

He brought her wrists behind her back, pinned them there with one hand, and clamped his other hand on her shoulder before he marched her out of the woods.

Reese saw Will by the camper and panicked.

*Always try to talk your way out, Father's voice said, ringing in her ears. Do what you must only as a last resort. Remember your vow.*

"I have something that belongs to you," the Kyn male holding her said to Will. "Or, at least, I thought she did."

"Reese?"

"I didn't want to wake Rebecca by using the bathroom in the camper," she said, keeping her tone slightly exasperated. "The suzerain seems to think I was up to no good."

"Please release her, my lord."

"As you wish," Lucan said, releasing her wrists. "Do you always require an audience when you pee?" He looked at Will. "I caught her sneaking up on one of the patrols."

"If you haven't noticed, it's pretty dark out here, and my night vision is lousy." She forced out a small laugh. "I can't believe you're making such a big deal out of this. I just needed to—" She broke off and brought up her hand to grab Lucan's wrist as he attacked her.

He held the dagger an inch from her left eye. "Your night vision may be poor, darling, but your reflexes are magnificent." He tugged his hand free and tossed the dagger to Will. "Whoever sent her trained her well."

"Don't be ridiculous," she snapped. "*Tresori* begin training as soon as they can walk."

"True." Lucan strolled around her. "But a real *tresora* would also know that her scent changes when she lies. Can you smell it now, Will?"

"Aye," Will said, his expression stony. "I did before, but I thought her afraid of Rebecca."

"She is afraid." Lucan loomed over her, his gaze searching her face. "Terribly afraid. But not of Sylas's lady. Or of us."

Reese whirled and tried to run, but a heavy body slammed into hers, knocking her to the ground. Will flipped her over and put a hand to her throat as a hot sweetness flooded her head.

Before Reese could draw another breath, she fell into darkness.

\* \* \*

Sylas followed the mortal from the basement level to the first floor of the house, where the dark man waited and listened before making a hand signal to move forward. They crept down one passage until they heard footsteps, and then Sylas stepped into the shadows.

"Remember," he murmured to the mortal. "Addled."

The dark man hunched over and began to walk in a haphazard fashion, his arms swinging wildly. When two *cavalieri* came into view, they rushed forward, hands on their sword hilts.

"Hold," one of them shouted.

"Somebody hit me over the head," Hutchins complained, slurring the words. "Is this my mama's house?"

Sylas passed from one shadow to another, gathering them with his talent until they writhed in a silent, snarling mass. He sent the emptiness out, casting it over one of the guards, whose cry was swallowed along with his flesh. As his clothes and weapon dropped to the floor, the other guard drew his blade.

"Come out, demon," he demanded, his voice shaking.

"Oh, shut up." Hutchins shot him with a dart.

Sylas emerged from the shadows and recovered their weapons. "You did well."

"You did better." Hutchins looked around. "Where's the other one, and how did you get him out of his clothes?"

"The shadows took him." Sylas handed him an ammunition belt loaded with the drug cartridges. "They will take you as well if you step out of the light."

"Excuse me." The mortal laughed. "You got the bogeyman working for you?"

Sylas never shared his talent with mortals; it frightened them too much. His men knew—they had fought too many battles with him not to know—but talent was not something Kyn discussed. "I said I would explain later. Come."

"That thing brushed against me." Hutchins pulled his sleeve back to reveal a bloody patch on his dark skin. "It burned like fire, but it was so cold. Now I don't feel anything." He touched the wound. "That's why you've been telling me to stay in the light."

"Here." Sylas ran a dagger across his palm, then placed his hand over Hutchins's wound, using his blood to heal it.

The man jerked, wincing, and then frowned. "You'd better not have AIDS, my man."

"I have no diseases." Sylas lifted his hand. "'Tis healed."

"Damn straight, 'tis healed." The mortal touched the dark flesh of his arm. "How the hell did you...I know: You'll explain it later."

"My men will reach the bathhouse soon," Sylas said. "We must go quickly now."

They reached the cache of weapons on the second floor without any further confrontations, thanks to a sudden change of the guard.

"Sweet baby Jesus." Hutchins turned around, staring at the hundreds of swords hanging from the racks. "How are we are going to carry these out of here?"

"We'll use this." Sylas went to the wall and pressed a button on a panel beside a tall steel door, which slid open to reveal a large dumbwaiter. "Help me load them in."

With the mortal's help Sylas loaded as many blades, daggers, and maces as he could fit into the lift, then used the panel to send it to the first

floor. "This goes directly to the bathhouse. The men will unload it and send it back up for more."

Hutchins asked, "You normally wash your swords in the bath?"

"We never use that room for bathing. We only make it appear that we do." Sylas saw the mortal's drowsy eyes, and realized he was shedding too much scent in the small room. "Step outside for a moment, Hutch. Until your head clears."

"Sure." The mortal opened the door and went out, only to come back in almost immediately. "There's a whole gang of them at the other end of the hall. I think they saw me." He shook his head. "I think the drugs are kicking back in, too."

Sylas barred the door and guided the mortal over to the dumbwaiter, which had returned. "Get in."

"Brother, I can't leave you here."

"You must. Tell the men I am going back into the shadows," Sylas said. "I will do what I can. Stay with Eregen and do as he says." He clasped Hutchins's forearm. "Thank you, my friend."

"Anytime." Hutchins grimaced as he climbed into the small space, cramming his body inside. "All right. Hit it."

Sylas watched the door as the dumbwaiter descended. As soon as he heard the pulleys stop, he punched his fist into the control panel, destroying it.

He stepped into the shadows, where the last thing he saw was the *cavalieri* forcing in the door.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

Reese woke up alone, gagged and tied to a tent pole. In the state she was in, she could not break free of her bonds, and even if she could, one of the guards had already searched her and taken away her bag. She was trapped, a mortal at the mercy of the Kyn, and she had run out of lies.

Will came in and removed his cloak, tossing it over the camp table before he came to stand in front of her. "If you scream, I will put you to sleep for a week. Do you understand me?"

She nodded.

He inspected her face before he pulled the gag from her mouth. "How long have you been working for the Brethren?"

She swallowed to ease her dry mouth. "I have nothing to do with them."

"Then who sent you to spy on us?"

She had to be careful not to lie. "No one. I'm not a spy." She tugged at her wrists. "You can untie me. I won't try to run again."

He didn't move. "Was it Guisbourne? Did you pledge yourself to him? Did you come to work some vengeance in his name?"

"No. I've never met Lord Nottingham. Will, please. I'm not here to hurt anyone."

"Then you have failed." He turned his back on her and went back to the table.

"You know I'm telling the truth," she insisted. "You know me, Will. You know I wouldn't betray you."

"Until two nights past, I knew you were a happy, contented woman who enjoyed my company. Who told me that we could never have more than that." He poured a glass of blood wine and drank it down in three swallows. "You are not that woman."

"No, I'm not." She closed her eyes and twisted her wrists, but the ropes only tightened. "What are you going to do? You can't keep me tied up here forever."

"You think not?" He strode over to her, seizing her face with one hand so that she had no choice but to look into his furious eyes. "I can have you taken from here in chains and tossed into a dark cell and kept there for the rest of your life. One call, Reese, is all I need to make, and you will be gone and forgotten."

He meant to frighten her, but no threat could equal that of the book. "Then make the call."

"You dare taunt me." He reached behind her and tore the ropes from her wrists, snapping the cords with one jerk. Before she could bring her arms around he dragged her away from the tent pole and over to the thick blankets spread over the ground.

Reese went limp, but he didn't let go of her. He hauled her under his arm like a sack of grain and tossed her with the same indifference onto his bed.

She rolled away, only to find herself trapped, facedown, beneath his body. "What happened to my right of refusal?"

"You sacrificed all rights the moment you decided to betray me." He lifted his weight enough to turn her over onto her back. "I can do whatever I please with you."

"You always could," she whispered.

"Was this forced upon you? Yes," he said before she could answer. "That is it. That is what they did. I can see it in your eyes. I can smell it on your skin. Why did you not tell me?"

The pain in her heart swelled with bitterness. "I was afraid."

"You could have come to me at any time, sweetheart. I would have listened." Slowly, almost as if he were afraid to touch her, he put his hand on her brow and brushed her hair back.

"I would have put a stop to it. I would have protected you." By telling him, she would be directly disobeying her father's orders, putting her life in danger, and risking exposing the power of the book. "I was sent to avert a

disaster," she said. "If I fail, everyone will die—you, your *jardin*, the Italians, the mortals—and the rest of the world."

"You speak of Armageddon."

She nodded.

He gave her a narrow look. "What could you do to prevent the end of the world?"

"I can't tell you any more than I have," Reese told him. "Give me *The Maiden's Book of Hours*, and I'll go."

He wasn't expecting that. "You betrayed me for a bloody book?"

"I need something inside it," she said. "Once I have it, humanity will be safe again, and you can keep the rest for your master."

He sat up. "I do not have that book, Reese. Neither does Robin. Guisbourne stole it and took it to Rome. Robin has gone to retrieve it. That is why the contessa sent her men to take possession of Rosethorn. If Robin does not deliver the book to her tonight, she vowed to slaughter the *jardin*."

She couldn't fly to Rome to stop Robin of Locksley. Nothing could stop the book from reaching the contessa now. "That's it, then."

"Who sent you?"

"It doesn't matter anymore." Nothing did. She wished she could weep, but no tears came. "I've failed. In a few days we will all be dead."

Will sighed. "I do not know what you were told, but one sodding book cannot bring about the end of the world."

"This one will." There was no hope left, she realized. She had always had hope. "I don't know what to do." She couldn't ask to speak to her father. The news would surely kill him. She looked at Will blindly. "What am I supposed to do now?"

"Come here."

Will took her in his arms and held her, and then she could cry—great, sobbing tears that she had held back for so long, too long. She struck at him with her fists, twisting and fighting against him and the terrible emptiness,



and still he held her, cradling her grief, enduring her despair. He used the edge of his tunic to wipe her face and his fingers to comb back her hair, and when she thought the sorrow would crush the last shards of her heart, he put his mouth on hers.

Reese curled her fists into his tunic, clutching him tightly. He kissed her slowly, gently, coaxing her mouth open and tasting her with mindless absorption. She felt his fangs emerge as his hunger grew, and she took her mouth from his, pressing his face to her throat. He stroked his tongue over her flesh and suckled, but he wouldn't pierce her.

"Please." She would have this much, and finally he would know. "Will, take me."

He drew back. "I do not need your blood, Reese."

Or perhaps it was better that he didn't know. Let him have this last illusion. She would not cheat him of what would be his final moments of happiness.

She reached for the buttons of her blouse and began unfastening them. Will made no move to help her, but watched intently, the pupils of his eyes shrinking to onyx slivers, his mouth set in a hard line. She bared her breasts and then knelt to release the waistband of her skirt, pulling it and her panties down and easing her legs out of them.

He traced a winding line of dried blood that had run down from her right ear. "The last time I touched you like this, you were afraid."

"I was foolish. Now all we may have is this night." She brought his hand to her heart and pressed it there. "I love you. I have always loved you."

His eyes lifted from the sight of their hands. "Not always."

"I am a very good liar." She reached for his shoulder and carefully released the velvet loops holding the front of his tunic in place. His garments took more time to remove than hers had, but she stopped to kiss the skin she revealed, and to breathe in the scent of him, which grew stronger and darker with every touch.

At last they lay together side by side, a small space between them. She reached across it with her hands, her legs, and her feet. She rubbed the bottom of her toes against the arch of his foot, and stroked the outside of his thigh with the inside of hers. Her hands she could not control; they went

everywhere, from the angular bones of his hip to the broad vault of his chest. She felt starved for him, hollowed out by the years of deprivation and denial, and now she wanted to feast.

Will showed no outward reaction until she slipped her hand between them and palmed his erect shaft, and then his big hand wrapped around her wrist. "I will not stop this time. I do not think I could."

She put an arm around his neck and pressed herself full-length against him. "Then don't."

Will spread his hand over her bottom, holding her still as he probed between her legs. Desire had made her silky wet, and she enveloped the head of his penis with her heat, bearing down on him as he pushed in, welcoming him into the narrow recess, catching her breath as he filled it with tender force. When the root of his cock pressed against the flowering folds of her labia, she gripped him from within, squeezing until his brow touched hers and he closed his eyes.

"Do you feel that?" she murmured, her excitement almost unbearable.

"I feel you," he said, surging deeper.

They had been cheated of this simple thing done to give pleasure and create children. For a terrible moment she felt as if she might begin screaming again, for she had never wished for anything but Will, and one night with him was all she would know.

"Look at me." When she did, he kissed her brow and then gazed into her eyes. "The world is ours now. I will not let it end."

He held her that way, watching her face as he moved, sliding out and then gliding in, a slow and elegant dance of advance and retreat. The delicate movements became a forge, his hammer to her heat, and he shaped her with every stroke, bringing her to the edge and then turning her back and working her again. Her mortal body was no match for his strength, but he tempered it, his muscles locking and his jaw setting as he kept at her, until passion blinded her and her hands clawed at him.

"Will."

"Yes, there you are." He whispered that and other things to her, spilling dark words against her hair, his chest stroking the swollen ache in her breasts. He turned her onto her back and wedged himself between her

thighs, burying himself in her before drawing out again and again. She wrapped her legs around his, pinning herself to him, and took everything he gave her, returning it with softness and pleading, wordless sounds, until he pushed her over the edge and she fell, trembling and breathless, into the velvet darkness that spread inside her from the clenching ellipse of her sex to the pounding rhythm of her heart.

Will held her against his chest, soothing her with gentle kisses until she came back to her senses, and then began the dance again.

The sweat from her skin made them both slick by the time he lifted her and put her astride him. Her fingers slipped down his shoulders and dug into the muscles of his arms as she worked her body against his. He took her by the waist and spun her, pushing her to her hands and knees as he knelt behind her, forging so deep inside her she felt him pressing against her womb. He reached around her hip and pressed his hand between her thighs, parting her with the edge of his palm and using that to stroke her there, where the friction made her swell and cry out as she went over again. He kept rubbing at her sex as he fucked her, his shaft a swollen, rigid spike of need, and when she pressed her face into the blankets to muffle her cries he took hold of her hips, pounding himself into her in long, deep strokes, until the last he held himself inside her and groaned as his body spilled into her.

When she could think again, Reese found herself on her side, curled up tightly against him, his arm clamped around her waist. His hand moved over her belly in absentminded circles, his thumb brushing over the dent of her navel, his mouth at her shoulder, kissing the curve between it and her neck. She put a hand to her own cheek and felt the warmth and dampness there, divided by a single cool tear that slid aimlessly across her face.

Will murmured something, and only when he repeated it did she hear the words. "My God, what was that?"

"Love, Will." She entwined her fingers with his. "It was love."

\* \* \*

Rebecca stayed in the camper, drinking some of the blood wine Will Scarlet had sent for her. The rest she had taken in the camper had helped her regain some of her senses, but it had also given her talent time to grow. Without Sylas to help her keep it in check, she didn't know how much longer she could hold on to her sanity.

I can wait. I can reach him through our bond. He can help me.

Concentrating, she tried over and over to reach Sylas. Gradually she became aware of his body, still and unfeeling, strapped to some hard surface. The only sight she saw was the ceiling above him, and the faces of the men shouting questions at him. They wanted to know where the prisoners had gone. They struck him, but he did not respond. He could not; his soul had left his flesh.

She understood that he felt no pain now, but when he returned to his body he would be in agony. Every blow she felt through him did not harm her, but still she flinched, gripping her skirts until she tore great rents in the fabric.

Do not tear your pretty dress, wife, Sylas whispered inside her mind. I am here.

His presence, as thin and insubstantial as smoke, almost slipped away before she could answer. Sylas, you must go back to your body. Tell them what they wish to know, or they will kill you.

I cannot betray my men. A cold, mindless rage lashed around him. The shadows are so deep here. I never realized how deep.

She was losing him to the darkness. Sylas, come back to me.

When I hear your voice call my name, he promised her, I will come back. Only then.

Rebecca opened her eyes but didn't recognize her surroundings. She was somewhere near Sylas but not close enough to call him. Her skin crawled, alive with nerves that writhed and tightened and burned with need. She knew what she needed, and she would have it.

She found a small door and kicked it open. Outside was the night, a small camp of tents, and the woods beyond Rosethorn. She could walk to the stronghold from here, she thought as she climbed down and started toward the house.

Some faceless male came toward her. "My lady Rebecca, you must not..." His voice stopped as he choked out blood and fell to his knees. As she limped past, he fell onto his side, pressing his hands to his face as the blood poured from between his fingers.

Rebecca limped into the trees, tugging at her skirts when they became snagged. Two more males, both holding swords, came at her from different sides. She released her talent and they dropped into the shrubs. All around her small bodies began dropping from the trees and thumping to the ground. She stepped over a robin and a squirrel, and around the twitching death throes of a red fox. As she made her way past the first of the enemy's lines, she left a trail of dead bodies and the scent of clover on fire.

\* \* \*

Reese woke with Will to the sound of men shouting and cries for help. She handed him his trousers before she jerked on her clothes, but when she tried to follow him he shook his head.

"Stay here until I see what has happened." He glanced down at the small pile of ropes he had torn from her wrists.

"I won't try to escape," she told him.

"There will be a guard outside if you do," he said, and then ducked out of the tent.

He had no reason to trust her, but still, it hurt. She had given herself to him. She had told him about the book—violating her pledge to her father in the process—and put herself into his hands. As before, he had abandoned her without a second thought.

She took her case out of her bag and removed one of the vials. As Will came back into the tent, she drank it and slipped the empty vial in her pocket. "Is it Rebecca?"

"Come here." When she did, he pushed her against the tent pole and pulled her arms around behind her to tie her wrists.

"You don't have to tie me up," she said. "I have nowhere to go."

"I would like to keep it that way, sweetheart." He came around and stopped, staring at her face. "Who are you?"

"I'm not your sweetheart." Reese turned her arms, snapping the cords binding her wrists.

"I can see that." Will didn't blink. "You're a man, for one thing." He breathed in. "And you're Kyn."

"For the moment," she agreed.

"The woman in my dreams could change her shape. But how?"

"You know exactly how. You changed me with that kiss." She stepped away from the pole and handed him the torn ropes. "I went back to the kitchens feeling the weight of it on me. Then, that night, I fell sick."

"Clariss."

"I died in the cottage, but no one came to look for me for three days. I woke from death in a cart filled with dead bodies." She pulled her long black hair over one shoulder and began to braid it. "Do you know what it's like to wake up in a pile of corpses, alone and starving? No, of course you don't." She turned her back on him. "You made the change in the jail."

"You lived." He jerked her around. "All this time you were alive, and you came to me only once, in a dream? You never looked?"

"Do you remember what I told you in that dream? What they do with a dead girl who crawls out of a mass grave?" She tilted her head. "No? I can tell you again."

"No." His hands fell away from her. "I remember."

She walked around him and went to look out at the camp. "Through all of it, in that cage, the one thing I could not understand was what I had done to deserve such a wretched fate. I'd always been a good girl, worked hard, looked after my mother. I prayed for forgiveness for my sins, though they were hardly worth confessing. I'd never harmed anyone. It had to be a mistake. I told them that again and again. Whenever I did, they would just hurt me more."

"How long did they torture you?"

"I don't know. Months. A year, perhaps." She let the tent flap slip from her fingers. "Time had no meaning for me. I tried to count the sunsets, but then they put boards over the windows so no one would discover me."

"Everything else you said?"

"That I went mad? That I killed them? All true." Reese rubbed a hand against her cheek, the roughness and strange flatness of it slightly

disturbing. She avoided changing into a male when she could; the physical differences between the genders made it feel uncomfortable and alien. "I escaped and I went into the woods. I lived like the animal they made me. No mortal was safe from me."

"Something made you stop."

She nodded. "Father came for me."

"Clary, your father died before you could walk."

"God was merciful and gave me another one." She finished her braid and used a tie from her bag to bind the end. "He brought me out of hell and cared for me until the madness passed. He taught me that my life, cursed as it is, could have some meaning. I could use what had befallen me to help the world and protect the innocent."

"By betraying your own kind?" Will scowled at her. "I don't know who this man was, but he did you no kindness. He deceived you. He used you."

She smiled. "You know nothing about Father."

"I cannot talk to you like this." He gestured at her. "Take back your real shape."

"I can't, not without blood." She showed him her case of vials, then removed one filled with Reese's blood and drank from it. Immediately her body shifted from that of a Kyn male to the mortal *tresora*.

Lucan stepped into the tent. "Scarlet, do you mean to keep everyone waiting until dawn?" He glanced at Reese. "Shouldn't you be tied to something?"

"Someone has to stop Rebecca," Reese said, ignoring Lucan. "Unlike everyone else, she trusts me. I can do this."

"Her talent will bleed you out before you can get close to her," Will said. "Or Sylas will take you into the shadows with him."

"But I know what to do—"

"Oh, please," Lucan said. "You could not even sneak out of camp without getting caught."

Will's expression turned cold. "The suzerain is right, Claris."

Lucan yawned. "I thought her name was Reese."

"I owe you something, my lord." Reese punched Lucan in the mouth, splitting his lip.

"Claris, don't—" Before Will could finish the warning, she brought her bloodied knuckles to her lips, and her body shifted.

"What the devil?" Staring into his own eyes, Lucan didn't react to the threat of the pressure dart until his duplicate pressed the tip under his chin.

"Rebecca is my friend," Claris said in Lucan's voice. "No one is going to kill her."

"Will," Lucan said pleasantly. "You are not terribly attached to this female, are you?"

"Good night, my lord." Reese emptied the cartridge into him.

Lucan slumped forward against Will, who lowered him to the ground before eyeing Claris. "If you go after Rebecca, you will die."

"We're all going to die anyway. Rebecca and Sylas belong together." She looked down at the unconscious suzerain. "What is his talent?"

He got to his feet. "Why?"

"Because it will be mine as well, for as long as I keep his form. I take on their strengths, their weaknesses, their scent, everything." She glared at him. "What is it?"

"Find out for yourself," he snarled back.

"Damn you, tell me." She flinched as the bottle of bloodwine on the table exploded. "He shatters glass, is that it?"

"Glass. Bone. Flesh. Lives." He advanced on her. "He was Richard's chief assassin. He can kill anything he touches. It's why he wears the gloves."

She backed away, her silver eyes wide. "Stay away from me."



"I cannot permit you to commit suicide," Will told her. "You'll have to use his talent to get past me."

A large, tattooed Scotsman ducked inside the tent. "Scarlet, where the devil...?" He looked from Will to the unconscious Lucan to the one standing. "So Satan does exist, and takes great joy in our misery."

Reese took out her dagger and ran to the back wall of the tent, slicing it open and stepping through the slit. The camp had been thrown into chaos; no one noticed the suzerain who darted across to the woods. Reese almost choked on the thick scent Rebecca had left behind, and as she followed it she saw the dead animals the chatelaine's power had killed.

She knew Rebecca was a gentle woman, but the strain of separation had proven too much. For her to be able to do this with her talent meant nothing living was safe now.

Rebecca had almost reached the front gates when Reese made it to the clearing. Men came out of the stronghold and rushed toward her, but began to drop before they could get within a few feet of her.

The siege of Rosethorn had begun, and it would be fought by one woman—one who had gone mad.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The tide had turned against him, and as Saetta barricaded himself in the main hall, he thought it fitting that the siege should end where it had begun. Here, where they had been made welcome; here, where they had won their first victory. His only regret was that he had not held the place two full days. He had promised his lady that he would.

Beyond the hall, he could hear the cries of his men, and the thuds of their bodies as they fell. He would not have believed that the pretty, gentle-looking creature Syllas called wife could be capable of slaying so many without even touching them, but he had watched her do it himself, from the ravelin.

He went to the table where they had tied Syllas's body. The castellan had lost a great deal of blood during the beatings his men had administered, but never uttered a sound or made any indication that he felt the pain. He stared up at the ceiling blindly, lost in himself or the dreamlands.

"*Maréchal*," Bernardo whispered, and pointed to a long, deep shadow that seemed to be separating itself from the wall and taking on the vague shape of a man. "The demon comes."

Saetta stepped between the shadow warrior and his men. "You have taken enough lives."

"War master," the shadow man said, his voice a mere whisper. "You are defeated now. She is coming. Surrender before more men die."

"We have pledged to hold this place for our lady," Saetta told the creature. "We will die before we surrender."

The dark form swelled as more shadows drifted from the corners and melded with it. "You have been made a fool."

Saetta stiffened. "We serve our lady with honor and loyalty."

"You would have left your lady before the chapel fire," the dark figure murmured. "You know siegecraft, *maréchal*. If your garrison means to abandon you, how do you stop them? Do you command them to stay, or do you destroy their reasons for leaving?"

Saetta frowned. "Our lady would never do such an evil thing. She is good and kind. She saved us."

"She saved you just after your lord and half your *jardin* were slaughtered." The shadow undulated. "You went to her and told her you meant to leave, and she saved you. She needed you to protect her from the Brethren, and she saved you. But not your families. Not your women, not your children. She saved you."

"You lie." Bernardo rushed forward, only to be swallowed whole, so quickly that his clothes and blades slid across the floor.

"Who were the first to be sent out of the stronghold during a siege?" the shadow warrior whispered as it grew larger.

"No." Saetta took a step back. "You are wrong. She would never—"

"You know how it was done. The old, the sick, the children. Expelled from the stronghold because they serve no purpose. They did not protect the lord. They used up the stores. So they were sent out to become trapped between the stronghold and the besiegers' lines. There they were kept, and there they starved until they died."

The *maréchal's* expression grew stricken. "Be silent."

"She could not send them away. She could not easily starve them," the shadow warrior said. "How would you dispatch so many?"

Saetta drew his sword, stabbing it into the dark form. Frost coated the blade as the shadow warrior laughed and then dispersed, the darkness skittering away to the different corners of the hall.

One of his men picked up Bernardo's sword. "How do we fight such a creature?"

"I do not know." Saetta looked over at the motionless form of Syllas of Daven. "But there is only one man here who knew about the fire."

\* \* \*

Rebecca limped up to the barricaded entrance to the main house and stopped, vaguely surprised when it wouldn't open. Until now the strange men had opened all the doors, hurrying out to welcome her home and then

falling asleep. She could feel Sylas within, moving and unmoving, but the door wouldn't budge.

Sylas wouldn't lock her out. Someone was playing a trick. Someone was trying to keep her from him.

Something struck her shoulder and burned in her flesh. She reached back, pulled out the copper bolt, and saw a group of strangers standing at a distance and pointing crossbows and guns at her. They were firing them, the bolts hissing through the air all around her. A small dart pierced her hip, and she pulled it out, holding it up to watch the blue liquid inside it drip out.

Some of the madness cleared from her mind as she remembered. They had used these the first time. In the hall. The last time she had seen Sylas. The thought of her husband, however sent her thoughts back into a confused snarl.

Bewildered, Rebecca sent her talent at them with a flick of her hand, and they stopped shooting bolts at her. They wept their tears of blood for her and then lay down to sleep.

The door remained locked against her.

Rebecca placed her hand on the wood. It was old and dead, but inside its hardened planks she felt life; millions of tiny creatures who wept for her. The wood swelled and then began to splinter, oozing with their tears. She pried away one of the weakened planks, exposing the locking mechanism and tearing that out of the door. When it still would not open, she punched her fist through, reaching in to feel for the bar across the inside, and lifted it out of the way.

The door fell away, and the strangers inside shouted to one another before they ran. Rebecca stepped over the threshold and stopped to take one of the old war shields from the wall. Her shoulder hurt, and she was tired, but she wouldn't let them shoot her again. They didn't understand.

She was home.

\* \* \*

Reese knew it would be too dangerous to approach Rebecca in Lucan's form, so as soon as she reached the stronghold she used another vial. She was almost glad to shift into the body of Reese Carmichael. The big blond

Kyn lord had been powerful, but his talent reminded her too much of Rebecca's.

She followed the bodies that had fallen into the house, but apparently the Italians had realized they couldn't fight the chatelaine and fled, for no more appeared. The house had gone silent, and corridors seemed much darker than they had last night.

Reese stopped to decide which direction to go, and as she turned a cold sensation ran up the side of her arm. As soon as she stepped away from the shadowed wall and into the light, it went away, but now her arm felt numb.

*He is in the shadows*, Rebecca had said.

Reese hurried down the right passage, taking care to stay in the center, under the lights. She heard a man cursing in Italian and then an abrupt silence, and headed in that direction. As she did, she took a pressure dart out of her bag and held it ready in her hand.

She went around a corner to see Rebecca standing at the stairwell leading down to the basement. She was tracking Sylas by his scent, Reese guessed, and took a deep breath before she took a step toward her.

"Rebecca."

The chatelaine looked back at her and smiled. "Reese. You have returned." She glanced at the stairs. "Did you see Sylas go down here?"

"Yes, I did," she lied. "Just a minute ago."

"He is playing hide-and-seek with the strangers." She put a hand to her own shoulder. "I think I will scold him for that. I never liked that game." She started down the stairs.

Reese felt beads of sweat break out on her brow and upper lip as she followed, but when she wiped them away they made a red streak on her fingers. Rebecca wouldn't hurt her, but she had lost control of her talent. Reese knew she would have only one chance to get to her.

The chatelaine limped through the basements until she stopped in front of an empty holding cell. "Sylas was here last." She frowned as she peered inside. "Why is he not here now?"

Reese ran, throwing herself at Rebecca and knocking them both to the floor. As blood stung her eyes and poured from her nose, she jammed the pressure cartridge into Rebecca's neck and emptied it.

Some of the madness cleared from Rebecca's eyes. "Reese. You must kill me. Please. Before I hurt anyone else."

"You won't," she said as she used a blade to cut into Rebecca's wrist. Before the wound closed, she brought it to her mouth. As soon as Rebecca's blood touched her lips, her body began to shift. The blood cleared from her eyes, and long golden brown hair fell in a curtain around her face.

Rebecca's eyes went wide. "What are you?"

"I'm your friend," Reese said in Rebecca's voice. "And I'm going to put an end to this." She groped for her bag, removed another cartridge, and infused Rebecca with a second dose of the drug. "Sleep now."

Heavy eyelids closed over confused eyes, and the chatelaine went limp.

Reese lifted Rebecca over her shoulder and carried her into the cell, placing her gently on the straw-stuffed mattress before she locked her inside. Then she turned and went back to the stairwell.

Along with Rebecca's appearance, Reese discovered too late that she had also taken on her paralyzed leg, which hampered her pace. She had nearly made it to the top of the stairs when one of the *cavalieri* appeared above her. She felt Rebecca's talent writhing inside her, demanding to be released, but clamped down on the power.

"You witch." The Italian drew his dagger, but his hand shook and the blade jittered in his grasp. "You brought this curse upon us."

"If you do not wish me to bleed you, traitor," she told the Italian as she slowly mounted the last of the steps, "then you had better run. Now."

Terrified, he dropped the dagger and fled.

Reese encountered two more of the Italians on her way to the main hall. Both brandished bloody swords, but froze at the sight of her. It took only a smile to send them in the opposite direction.

She had expected to find the hall barricaded, but one of the doors stood open. As she limped into the great room, she saw Saetta and the last

remnants of his guards surrounding a table, upon which lay the unmoving body of Sylas of Daven. The other men backed away as soon as she came into sight, but the *maréchal* only drew his sword and held it poised above Sylas's throat.

"Stay where you are," he told her, "or I will take his head."

"I'm not here for you." She turned until she found the deepest well of shadows in the room, and hobbled over to it. "Sylas."

The darkness swelled, taking on the indistinct shape of the shadow warrior.

"Rebecca." The featureless head turned. "You are in danger. Leave this place."

Abruptly all the shadows in the room began to grow.

"No, my love. I am here with you. I am safe." She hated deceiving him, but if she didn't convince him to return to his body this siege might never end. "The battle is over. You can come home now."

A thin, black tendril drifted out and wrapped around her body, moving as lightly and softly as smoke. "I love you, wife."

Tears spilled from Rebecca's eyes as she told her final lie. "And I you, husband."

The air became electric, and the shadow slowly separated itself from the wall. Although it remained mostly a shapeless cloud, Reese could see the faint shape of a man's legs moving and his arms swinging.

"Remove your blade," she told Saetta as the dark mass approached him. "Let him come back to us now."

"You are insane." The *maréchal* glared at her. "That thing will eat him, like the others."

"*Maréchal*, that thing *is* him."

The drifting shadow rose from the floor and hovered over Sylas's motionless form. It shrank into itself, becoming a dark twin of the unconscious male, before it drifted down and enveloped his body.

"God in heaven," she heard Saetta murmur as the darkness began to sink into Sylas's body. "It is true. He is a demon incarnate."

"No," she said. "He is the master of shadows."

The darkness vanished, and all around the room the shadows thinned until they were once more the places where the light did not reach. Reese went over to Sylas and looked down at his still face. If he didn't wake now, Rebecca would be lost forever.

"Sylas." She put her hand over his. "Open your eyes. Tell me I wasn't too late."

"I will tell you anything you wish, my lady," he said, turning his head and looking at her, "if you will tell me where my wife is."

"This is your wife, man," Saetta said.

"She has my wife's form, and her voice, and her scent." Sylas sat up, holding on to Reese's hand when she would have moved away. "But not her touch."

"She came for you," Reese said. "She was lost in the madness. I had to stop her."

Sylas's grip turned brutal. "What have you done?"

"Rebecca lives," she said quickly, wincing as he eased his hold. "I drugged her and locked her in a cell downstairs."

Sylas pushed himself off the table. "Take me to her." He stopped suddenly, and Reese glanced back to see Saetta holding the tip of his sword against Sylas's neck.

"You can kill his body," Reese said, "but he won't die. He'll only go back into the shadows. Then, when Rebecca wakes up, you can explain it to her. If there's anything left of you."

Her lie made Sylas give her a sideways look. "You should listen to the lady, *maréchal*."

Slowly Saetta withdrew his sword. "She stays here with me."



Reese handed Sylas the keys to the cells. "Hurry. I don't know how much longer the drugs will keep her unconscious."

Once the castellan had left them, Reese turned to face Saetta. "The besiegers will be coming through that door any moment."

"I know that," he said. "But I have you."

"I am no prize, *maréchal*." Reese wearily took the last vial from her pocket, drank it, and resumed the appearance of Will's mortal lover. She had to brace herself against the edge of the table to keep from collapsing. "I suggest you put down your weapons and recall whatever men you have left."

He looked up as they heard the sound of men running toward the hall. "Perhaps you are right."

Reese moved over to the fire and sat on the edge of the hearth. The stone had been warmed by the flames, but she felt so cold she could barely feel it. She had saved Rebecca, but for what? In a few days they would all be dead.

Someone lifted her up, and she opened her eyes to see Will's face. "You can leave me here."

"No, sweetheart," he said as he carried her out of the room. "I'm never doing that again."

\* \* \*

They must have worked him over for hours, Sylas thought, putting a hand to his ribs as he felt them slowly knitting. He could barely walk, and had to take the stairs one step at a time, but he could smell her now, her sweet scent all around him.

When he reached the holding cell, Sylas saw her inside. She looked so pale, so helpless. He had long known about her talent, but she had never set it loose upon the world. This angelic creature, his wife, commanded the power of an army.

He opened the door and stepped inside, feeling the relief of being with her again with every step. Carefully he lowered himself beside her, putting his arm over her and resting his cheek against hers.

"Sylas." Her eyes fluttered. "'Tis you."

"Aye, my lady." He kissed her. "I am here."

"I was looking for you, I think, and then..." She frowned as she tried to focus, and her expression changed. "Why are we in the dungeon?"

"It is a long story." He climbed onto the mattress with her, and held her against his chest.

She cuddled against him and sighed with sleepy contentment. "Is the siege over?"

"Yes, my lady. You are home."

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

It took the rest of the night to carry out the dead, and part of the next day to bury them. The survivors of the siege were removed to the dungeons, and held in the same cell where they had imprisoned the garrison. The men of Rosethorn buried their friends along with their enemies, and while there was talk of justice, no one spoke of revenge.

Will Scarlet held council with his men before he assembled them outside the main hall and sent guards to bring the survivors before him for judgment.

Rebecca's attack had wiped out two-thirds of the contessa's forces, but Saetta still led the small group of *cavalieri*. He came forward slowly, his movements hampered by the copper chains and manacles binding his hands and feet. Someone had torn open his shirt, revealing the old burn scars on his chest.

"You attacked this stronghold without provocation," Will said. "We offered you sanctuary, and you used that against us. You violated our trust and betrayed your duty, and among our kind, there is no greater offense. The last time it happened, an entire *jardin* was put to the blade." He paused and looked into the war master's eyes. "I know. I was there."

"You may do as you wish with me," Saetta told Will. "Make me your slave, imprison me, starve me slowly. I will not resist."

"It would not matter if you did." Will studied the other man's eyes. "You want something in return, I imagine."

With difficulty Saetta dropped down on his knees and bowed his head. "In this, my men but followed my orders. They fought for their lady with dignity and honor. I beg you wield your dagger swiftly, and grant them the coup de grâce."

The coup de grâce, the swift and merciful end by a thin-bladed dagger through a chink in the armor, administered by a brother in arms.

Will stood watching the impassive faces of the *cavalieri*. They stared straight ahead, their features tight with leashed emotion. For a moment he felt as if centuries vanished, and he once again faced his blood Kyn across the field of battle. They had looked exactly the same as they advanced on

Richard's troops, led by Guisbourne in his black and silver battle armor. Walking into hell with their eyes open and their hearts torn to pieces.

He looked down at Saetta. "First, you will tell me who you were."

Saetta lifted his head. "Guiliano da Sangallo."

Not a war master, but a master builder. "If you are da Sangallo, then you built fortresses for princes. Kings. A Kyn building for mortals."

"My family has been masters of siegecraft since the First Crusade," Saetta said. "It was my trade. My mortal patrons never knew what I was."

Will almost believed him. "How do a sculptor and an architect of castles come to serve as *maréchal* to Contessa Borgiana?"

"My wife was her cousin. When the Brethren took control of the Vatican after Alexander died, we knew it was only a matter of time before they discovered us. I took my family out of Rome and offered my service to Lord Arno in exchange for protection for my wife and daughter." His voice changed. "It made no difference in the end. The Brethren still found us and murdered them. If not for the contessa, I would have joined them."

In the terrible gray days after the change, when Will had learned of Claris's death from the plague, he had considered leaving Robin and Sherwood, and ending his miserable life. Then Robin had chosen him as his seneschal, and for some time the constant duty and work of protecting his master had been all that kept him from joining his love in sweet oblivion.

Saetta had no longer had any purpose or interest in life.

"Stand up," Will said. When the Italian got to his feet, Will gestured to the English courier Richard had sent. "Tell them everything you told me."

It took some time for the courier to recount the events that had taken place, beginning with the assassination of Arno during the *jardin* wars. As Saetta listened, his mask of indifference slowly began to fall away. By the time the courier had finished his tale, the master builder's eyes were filled with rage.

"There is proof of what you say?" Will asked the courier.

"Suzerain Geoffrey has footage from his security cameras," the courier said. "The high lord's seigneurs were present and can verify everything I

have told you. Some of the contessa's men survived. I cannot say how much longer they will live, but they, too, can give testimony of her deeds."

"Are you satisfied?" Will asked.

"Her treachery made fools of us all." Saetta glanced back at his men for a moment before facing Will. "We cannot even beg for mercy, not for what she has done. Do as you will with us."

"Hold." Sylas stepped out of the shadows, Rebecca at his side. "I would speak for the captives."

"You would?" Will turned to him. "You suffered more at their hands than anyone, castellan."

"My father once told me that revenge is a hell we build for our enemies, but willingly cast ourselves in." He kissed his wife's temple before reluctantly moving away from her. "Guiliano da Sangallo kept his oath to his lord, and served his lady in good faith. I ask mercy for him and his men, seneschal."

"They killed your second," Will reminded him.

Sylas nodded. "And they lost fifty of their friends."

"If we're not going to kill anyone else," Lucan drawled, "I'm taking my men and going home to my woman."

Rebecca came forward. "I would speak to this man." Without waiting for permission, she went to Saetta. "You could have killed my husband at any time. He was helpless whenever he left his body. You knew in the end that he was in the shadows. Why did you spare his life?"

"I saw you smile at him the first night we came." His eyes met hers. "My wife had the same smile for me."

She looked at him for a long time before she spoke again. "You will be with her again someday." She turned to Will. "I, too, ask mercy for these men."

"There is territory to the north that belongs to Lord Locksley," Will said. "It is rough and overgrown, but the land is good. I have always wished to build a retreat there for the suzerain, but there has never been enough time

to see to it. Twenty men working together with a master builder could make much of it, I think."

Saetta stared at him. "Why would you do this for us?"

"On the contrary, you would do this for your new lord," Will said. "After you pledge him your lives and loyalty, of course. I have good reason to believe you would die before you would betray him."

Saetta's dull eyes came alive. "A retreat, you say?"

"One that demands no quarter," Will said, "and no more blood be spilled." He held out his hand. "Do you agree, master builder?"

Saetta clasped Will's forearm. "With all my heart, seneschal."

\* \* \*

Lucan immediately moved his men into the stronghold, but remained at the camp with Jayr and mac Byrne to help guard the perimeter, this time against any mortal intrusion. Will arranged for more stores to be delivered, and went down that night to assure that the suzeraina and her men had everything they needed.

When he arrived in camp, Will saw Jayr come out of her tent, only to heave something into the forest. The object struck a tree trunk and exploded as she became a blurry streak of motion. By the time Will blinked, she had vanished.

"Cyprien does not need an army," Lucan said as he came to stand beside Will. "He can simply ask Alexandra to phone his enemies."

Will knew of only one thing that could have made the suzeraina so angry. "I will go to her."

The former assassin crouched and prodded the fire with a gnarled branch. "Somehow I doubt she will wish to be comforted by her father's best friend."

Will looked down at him. "You knew."

"I guessed." The suzerain straightened. "Good God, man, she is the very image of Robin, especially when she uses a bow." He studied Will's expression. "You have long been her friend. Why did you never tell her?"

"Until the winter tournament, when she was made lady paramount, I never knew." Will ducked his head. "When we took her and mac Byrne from a pit trap, I saw the mark of her birth for the first time. 'Twas exactly the same as the mark Robin once had. One he cut from his chest after Marian died." He glanced in the direction Jayr had run. "Then I did not know what to think." He saw mac Byrne and the patrol approaching. "Or say."

Lucan followed his gaze. "I will deal with her lord. You go and see to the lady."

Will tracked Jayr for half a mile before he found her standing on a hill overlooking the estate. He kept back and watched her for a time, but she didn't move.

Suddenly she turned and looked at him. "Do you come to apologize or explain?" She didn't wait for his answer as she strode down to him. "How will you make amends for him? Do you mean to tell me more of his lies?"

"I came as your friend."

"My friend." She laughed. "Will Scarlet, second to Robin of Locksley, the eyes at his back, his third blade. Friend to his bastard daughter. It does not have the same ring of honor to it, does it?"

He saw that her eyes had turned the same shade of violet as Robin's, and felt the violence radiating from her like the heat of fever. "He never took me into his confidence about the matter, my lady."

"That makes two of us." She halted and glanced up at the sky. "There is a plane waiting for me in Atlanta. I must depart as soon as I can reach it. Then to England, to have Cyprien's leech punch holes in my bones. All for the thieving liar who fathered me in rape and then made himself my friend. So that I might save his life."

"Robin would never have forced Marian." Will caught her fist before it connected with his jaw. "Jayr, he loved her."

"So proud was he of this love," she said with a sneer, "that he could not wait to claim me as his child. Oh, but I forget—he handed that honor to Guisbourne at the winter tourney."

Will felt miserable, both for her and for his master. "I cannot say why Rob chose to do as he has. I only know that Marian was his sun and moon, and you the stars. Why do you think he came so often to the Realm?"

The rage abruptly left her, and she shook her head. "I cannot understand this. Robin and I have known each other since Bannockburn. He might have told me a thousand times.

"I hold his fate in my hands," Jayr said. "If I do not go to England this night, Alexandra says he will die."

"A dead man can tell you nothing," Will said carefully. "Save him and he will be in your debt. Make your price the answers you seek."

"So that when he tells me I can kill him?" She gave him a jaded look. "I may as well spare myself the journey."

"Whatever Robin has done," he reminded her, "when you lay dying at Bannockburn, he saved you. You owe him for that."

"Is that how you see it? A life for a life?" She threw out her arms. "What of my mother? He raped her. My birth killed her. What does he owe for her life? What do I?"

"All I can tell you is this: When we returned from the Crusades, he left me in Sherwood and went to Scotland," Will told her. "When he finally came back, he looked like a ghost of himself. He wouldn't speak or rest or eat. If anyone came near him, he would draw his sword. Then he went into the forest and challenged every outlaw, murderer, and thief who crossed his path. 'Twas how he became their prince."

Jayr made an impatient gesture. "What of it?"

"There were women in Sherwood Forest, too. Young, old, plain, and beautiful, and none of them could stay away from him. They followed him about like lovesick girls," Will said softly. "He could have taken any of them, but he wouldn't touch them."

"So he spared a few peasants his dubious charms—"

"Rob didn't touch any woman for a hundred years." He saw the shock appear in her eyes. "Does that sound to you like a man who cares nothing for the right of a woman to refuse him?"



She moved away from him, her back rigid, and stood staring down at the lake for a long, silent interval. Finally she turned. "I will go."

"I will come with you, my lady."

"You are needed here." She glanced back toward the camp. "She is awake now, but she will not leave your tent. She awaits you."

"Does she." Will had been avoiding Claris since bringing her to the camp. "I must deal with the Italians first."

"In truth, she is the one who saved Rosethorn," Jayr said. "Remember that, seneschal."

\* \* \*

Claris watched Will follow the suzerain out of camp, and stepped back into the tent. She knew his duties demanded much of him, but each time he came to the camp, he never even bothered to look in on her.

He must hate her now.

Suddenly she couldn't bear to spend another moment among the Kyn, and grabbed her bag. She found that she still had the keys to the camper, and hurried off to it. But where would she go from here? No one wanted her. No one cared.

*I will release you from your vow.*

Father still did not know the truth. She had not found the book, but it had not been here. Guisbourne had stolen it from Locksley, and now Locksley would deliver it into the hands of the contessa. They had assumed the wrong things, had acted on the wrong information. It was her duty to tell her father that she had failed.

Claris drove out of camp, unaware of the vehicle following her. She drove too fast, but she couldn't wait to reach the house where her father waited. She felt as frantic as Rebecca, as determined as Syllas. She ran up the drive and into the house, but came to a halt as she saw that all the furnishings had been draped with white dust cloths.

"Father?"

She hurried to his library, but the chair by the fireplace sat empty. No fire burned; only a thin layer of ash covered the brick. The desk had been cleared of his papers, the books removed from his shelves. The only trace of life she saw was a bottle half-filled with wine that sat on one of the tables. He must have drunk some of it before he had gone.

He had abandoned her.

"Claris."

She turned to see Will and Lucan behind her. "What are you doing here?"

"We had nothing better to do than hare around Atlanta after you." Lucan strolled over to her father's chair and sat down. "I suppose a glass of wine would be utterly out of the question."

"Is this where you were living?" Will asked.

"We leased the house when we came to America." Numbly she went over to the desk and opened one of the drawers. His pens were gone. "My father must have gone back to England."

"My mother tried that once—moving away in the dead of night and not telling me where." Lucan studied his fingernails. "Damned decent of her, I always thought."

A man in a black robe stepped into the room. "I waited for you, child."

"Father."

"This is your father?" Will saw the embroidered red Templar cross on the man's robe and drew his dagger. "A Brethren priest? You did all this for him?"

"It is true. I sent Claris to infiltrate your ranks in order to steal *The Maiden's Book of Hours*," he continued as if Will hadn't spoken. "Everything she has done has been on my orders."

"Reese?" she asked.

"I have returned the young lady to her apartment," he said. "She suffered no ill effects from being our guest, and her new fiancé has also been dealt with."

Will stared at him. "I know you." His expression darkened. "You were the priest sent to Aubury. Ennis of Worcester. The inquisitor." He whipped around toward Claris. "You pledged yourself to this butcher?"

She looked past him. "Father, please."

"She has served me faithfully these seven hundred years," Ennis said. "Almost from the moment I rose from my grave to walk the night."

"A Brethren turned Kyn." Lucan rested his head against his hand. "Dear God. Now I *have* seen everything."

"I was sent to Aubury to capture and interrogate the dark Kyn." Ennis didn't cower or run, but stood calmly as Will approached him. "I was very good at my task, as I am sure you know. A hundred of your kind died in my dungeons."

"You may have my life, Will," Claris pleaded. "Only spare him."

"What?" He turned on her. "Why? Why would you die for him?"

"You do not know our history," Ennis said. "As a mortal I became arrogant. I was no longer satisfied with the Kyn who were captured and brought to me. I began to hunt them on my own. By that time Claris had been seen all over the countryside. I believed the descriptions of her mad behavior would make her easy prey. But I miscalculated. Madness does not equal weakness. I tracked her, and found her. When I cornered her, she did what every wounded thing does."

Will's head spun. "She changed you."

"No." Claris stepped in front of Ennis. "I killed him."

"It was not her fault. Claris had been tortured and starved," Ennis said. "When she escaped from her tormentors, all mortals were her enemies. She killed any human who crossed her path. When I rose from my grave and I realized that I had become as she was, then I knew what I had to do."

Will planted his sword in the ground. "So you lied to her, and made her believe you were her father, and made her your servant?"

"I never deceived her." He walked over to Claris and stood beside her. "I found her living like a beast in the forest. I tamed her and befriended her."

I believe the fact that she was the one who changed me may have had something to do with it. I stayed with her, gentled her, and in time brought her back to her senses. When she understood what she had done, she asked how she could make amends for taking my life and the lives of all the humans she had slain. I asked her to pledge her life to me, and to help me to protect the innocent."

"You took advantage of her guilt," Will snarled.

"On the contrary, I gave her affection and purpose." He gave Will a haughty look. "I kept her from becoming like you and your kind."

"By using her to work for the Brethren."

"From the moment I changed, I knew I could no longer serve the order. Nor could I allow myself or Claris to serve your kind. I realized there was no one to serve the mortals caught between the Kyn and the Brethren." He folded his hands in his sleeves. "I found others, alone and frightened, with no one to guide them. Together we became the guardians of humanity."

"Do you mean you have been running about all this time doing good deeds for mortals?" Lucan drawled. "How exceedingly tedious."

"Father, I could not retrieve the book." Claris hunched her shoulders. "Guisbourne took it to Rome. That is why Lord Locksley pursued him. He is to take it to the Contessa Borgiana."

"Salvatora is dead, and the book rendered harmless," Ennis said. "The threat to the mortal world is over."

"How?"

He glanced at Will. "I think I will leave it to your new friends to explain." He came to Claris and took her hands in his. "I release you from your vow to me, Claris of Aubury. Your life is your own now."

"You are going back to England, I hope?" Lucan asked. "Assuming my friend Will allows you to leave the building alive?"

"I am no threat to you, assassin. Or you," he said to Will. "I trust you will look after her." When Will nodded, Ennis kissed Claris's cheek. "God be with you always, my child."

"Go quickly," Will advised him. "Before I think better of this."

Clariss watched her father withdraw from the room, but it seemed a surreal thing, something out of the dreamlands. She turned slowly toward Will. "I am free now."

"So it would seem."

"I believe I will go for a walk," Lucan announced, rising from the chair. "I saw a lovely little Lotus at the other end of the street. Shouldn't be too terribly difficult to hot-wire." He smiled a little as both Clariss and Will ignored him. "I will see you both back at Rosethorn."

"I understand why you deceived me," Will said. "What I cannot fathom is why you never came to me."

"I did not think you would believe that I was Clariss of Aubury." She looked down at her body. "The only manner in which I can change shape is by taking the blood of the one I wish to mimic. I become that person—appearance, voice, smell, talent, vulnerability—everything an exact copy, down to the very blood in their veins. Then, if I wish to change again, I need blood from a different person, or I remain in the shape I last took."

"What does that matter?"

"I cannot change back to who I was in the beginning," she said. "I have none of my own blood."

Will reached into his pocket and took out the small leather pouch. "I have carried this with me since the day I was to be executed. I kept it at first because of the scent you left upon it." Carefully he drew out a small, rotted bit of fabric, and handed it to her. "'Tis a piece of my sleeve. I used it that day to wipe the blood from your mouth."

"The blood is too old." She cradled it in her palm. "It cannot work."

"You will not know," he said, "unless you try."

"But you love the woman I am now," Clariss said. "If I keep this shape, you can have your Reese forever."

"There is only one woman I have ever loved," he told her, "and her memory is in your hands."

She reached for the bottle of wine on the table, and carefully wet the rag with a few drops before she brought it to her lips.

The shifting of her body happened much slower than before. She felt every inch of her hair as it grew out of her scalp, and every muscle that shrank and tightened. Reese's generous curves became her smaller, more modest form. She lost four inches in height, her spine shortening a fraction at a time.

She walked over to look into the mirror on the library wall. Reese's honey gold hair had turned to her own rich brown, falling over her shoulders to stream down her back. Her face hollowed, the cheekbones sharpening and her oval eyes narrowing and tilting down at the inner corners. Green and gold starbursts swept away the dark chocolate of her irises before a fringe of heavier, dark lashes shadowed them.

She expected it to hurt, but there was no pain. And when it was finished, she felt at ease in her skin for the first time in centuries.

"I forgot how small I was." She turned away from her reflection and held out her thin arms. "And freckles. I had freckles." She looked up at him. "Am I as I was?"

"Clariss," he said, taking her into his arms. "We can never be who we were. We can only be who we are." He frowned. "But as I recall, there were nine freckles on your nose, not eight."

She still felt troubled. "What about Reese?"

"Reese was my friend," he said. "You are my love. And that, sweetheart, will never change."